EUROPE & EURASIA

Vibrant
Information
Barometer

2024

VIBRANT INFORMATION BAROMETER 2024

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Founded in 1968, IREX has an annual portfolio of over $150 million, offices in 20 countries, and a global staff of 700. We work in more than 100 countries worldwide.

IMPLEMENTING PARTNERS

IREX wishes to thank the following organizations that coordinated the fieldwork for and authored a number of the studies herein:

- Mediacentar Sarajevo (Bosnia & Herzegovina)
- Institute for Advanced Studies GAP (Kosovo)
- Media Development Center (North Macedonia)
- The Independent Journalism Center (Moldova)
- Media LTD (Montenegro)
- North Kazakhstan Legal Media Center (Kazakhstan)

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INTRODUCTION

On behalf of IREX, I am pleased to introduce the 2024 edition of the Vibrant Information Barometer (VIBE) for Europe and Eurasia, which explores the media and information systems in 18 countries throughout the region, including five countries in Central Asia: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.

Previous editions of VIBE captured the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the media as well as the immediate impacts of the Kremlin's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. This year, significant themes of VIBE county chapters include the continued impact of the war in Ukraine, along with the lack of gender equity within the media profession and concerns with how gender issues are covered.

Based on IREX's Vibrant Information Approach and developed in partnership with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), VIBE captures and measures the way information is produced and utilized today. In a vibrant information system, quality information should be widely available, editorially independent, based on facts, and not intended to harm. Content production should be sufficiently resourced, inclusive, and diverse. People should have the rights, means, and capacity to access multiple channels of information; they should detect and reject misinformation; and they should be able to make informed choices about their information consumption. Individuals should use quality information to inform their actions, improve their communities, and contribute to public policy decisions. VIBE leverages the expert panel approach, incorporating perspectives from sector professionals that IREX assembles in each country to serve as panelists.

The 2024 VIBE publication is accompanied by the Vibrant Information Barometer Explorer, which allows users to analyze VIBE data and track it over time--including comparable elements from the USAID-funded Media Sustainability Index, which IREX published from 2001-2019.

IREX would like to thank the more than 225 media, civil society, legal, and other professionals from throughout Europe, Eurasia, and Central Asia who took time to reflect on their own media and information

ecosystems sector and provide thoughtful comments and insights. The discussion moderators and authors from each country are the core of the VIBE study. They organize the discussion panels, write country chapters that put the panelists' expertise into context, and provide invaluable information about country dynamics that goes beyond simple scores.

Finally, this year's VIBE would have been impossible to produce without Simon Mairson's editorial and technical expertise, as well as Irma Kurtanidze's management and logistical support.

USAID has been a consistent and enthusiastic supporter of VIBE, funding the project from its inception and ensuring its ongoing implementation.

We hope you will find this report useful, and we welcome any feedback.

Sincerely,

Linda Trail
Managing Editor

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 2024 Europe and Eurasia Vibrant Information Barometer (VIBE) covers 18 countries throughout Europe, Eurasia, and Central Asia. With VIBE, IREX strives to capture a modern and evolving media space where people are simultaneously producers, transmitters, consumers, and actors in the information that influences their lives and environments.

This year's edition focuses on the media and information space across the countries in the study during calendar year 2023, capturing the impact of the second year of the Kremlin's full-scale invasion of Ukraine**1**, along with other issues related to the work of media like the lack of gender equity within the media sectors and issues with how gender is covered throughout the region.

The VIBE country chapters are accompanied by expert panelist scores, which helps track where media and information ecosystems are improving or struggling. In the VIBE 2024 study, lowest average scores throughout the region tended to fall in indicators looking at:

- resources for content production,
- harmful information,
- the independence of information channels,
- media literacy,
- individuals' use quality information to inform their actions,
- government's use of quality information to make public policy decisions, and
- information supporting good governance and democratic rights.

Higher scores were seen in indicators that delved into access to information and civil society's use of information.

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1   VIBE country chapter narratives that use the word "Russia" and related terms in reference to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine that started in 2022 refer to actions of the Government of Russia, its proxies, and its cronies; it is not a specific reference to the citizens of Russia. Additionally, country chapter discussions about the war in Ukraine are specifically related to the expanded invasion launched in February 2022, unless indicated otherwise.

Strength of Evidence (SOE) ratings support panelist scores by helping to identify areas where there is weaker data or research, as well as where panelists disagreed with each other.

What is inside the 2024 VIBE Country Chapters

In 2023, the Government of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine entered its second year. The West increased military support to Ukraine; however, neither country gave any signs that it was ready to discuss peace by the end of the year. This conflict continues to have substantial impact on media and information ecosystems, particularly in Ukraine, Russia, and Belarus, given that country's support of the Kremlin's actions in Ukraine. Even though the immediate effects of this conflict throughout the entire region were explored in the 2023 VIBE study, given its scale we are taking an updated look at the continued influence of the war on media with a focus on combatant countries, including Belarus—as well as the struggles of exiled media which have had to relocate from them.

Separately from the ongoing war in Ukraine, a number of country studies highlight the role of women working in the media sector throughout Europe, Eurasia, and Central Asia, the struggles they face, and how gender issues are covered.

While our discussion below will concentrate on the topics mentioned above, a few other issues continued to surface throughout all VIBE 2024 country chapters. Although these concerns have been discussed in previous years' VIBE studies, they remain significant hurdles to the region's media and information environment, with many chapter authors providing additional insight into the effects of these ongoing issues:

- *Information manipulation and propaganda:* Previous VIBE editions delved into the pernicious nature of manipulated information and propaganda throughout the region—first through the lens of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequently through the impact of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. In the 2024 VIBE edition, panelists throughout the region continued to raise the alarm about the deleterious

(Montenegro). These actors leverage wedge issues—such as religion, the LGBTQ+ community, and minority ethic groups—to drive political and social tension and polarization.

● *Media sustainability and financing:* Almost every VIBE panel across all 18 countries included in the study stressed the financial struggles media face. In many countries, media continue to rely on the advertising model for revenue, which began eroding in the wake of the rise of online and social media, along with the 2008 global financial crisis, and which was significantly weakened by the global pandemic and subsequent inflationary pressures. Considerable advertising revenue is siphoned off by international technology companies (for example, Facebook, Google, and Instagram) and by social media influencers (primarily on Instagram and TikTok). Limited advertising markets and revenue pose particularly acute sustainability issues in regions outside the capital and other major cities. Moreover, the advertising revenue that is available is increasingly politicized, with companies avoiding buying advertisements in oppositional media and with journalists self-censoring reporting if it might be critical of an advertiser.

effect of these issues—which focus particularly, but not exclusively, on anti-Western themes. Notably, the Georgia study discusses the Georgian government's spread of manipulated information infused with anti-Western narratives in the run-up to the country's EU candidacy status announcement in December 2023. VIBE panels in Armenia, Moldova, Serbia, Belarus, and others included discussion on anti-Western rhetoric in their countries.

While a number of panels throughout the region held Kremlin-backed sources responsible for manipulated content, several country studies referenced other players, including Azerbaijan (in the Armenia study), Serbia (Montenegro, Kosovo), and China

Panels throughout the region stressed the importance of international donor funding as a lifeline to media, although they acknowledged that it is dwindling. With limited options, some outlets try to survive by pursuing subsidies and grants from their local or national government budgets, which often make them beholden to political parties or figures, setting the stage for political influence in editorial content. Other outlets are experimenting with alternative revenue streams—such as crowdfunding, subscriptions, donation drives, and monetizing video content through social media—with varying results.

Year 2 of the War in Ukraine and the Plight of Exiled Media.
Ukraine retains its pluralistic and diverse media landscape, which has adapted to wartime conditions. The Ukrainian government maintains a unified information policy through the United News telethon, which is produced and broadcasted by six major TV channels. It was launched at the government's behest at the beginning of the full-scale invasion with the intention to support resistance and unity, and to ensure access to reliable information. However, panelists from Ukraine expressed concerns about it, citing that it reinforces state-controlled broadcasting within the country.

For its part, the Russian government continues its years-long campaign to stomp out any vestige of a healthy media and civil society within its borders, including a crackdown on any criticism of the full-scale war in Ukraine. State-run media is an overwhelmingly pervasive force in shaping Russian citizens' view and perspectives. Moreover, any remaining private media that had an editorial line contrasting with the government's position either abandoned political coverage, went into exile outside of Russia, or closed. The Kremlin has instituted strict controls on information from abroad, and it has increasingly branded media and civil society organizations as "foreign agents."

It is difficult to speak about Russia without considering its close ally, Belarus. President Alyaksandr Lukashenka has long been unquestioningly loyal to Russian President Vladimir Putin, pre-dating the invasion of Ukraine. Notably, prior to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Belarus permitted Russian armed forces to perform military drills on its territory, and Belarus allowed Russia to launch part of the full-scale invasion from within its borders. Since the 2022 incursion into Ukraine, there have been persistent rumors that Belarusian forces are fighting in Ukraine, although Lukashenka has waved these away and said Belarus's armed forces will not fight in Ukraine unless the conflict crosses into Belarus' borders. However, Belarus has permitted Russian missile launchers to be stationed on its territory and take aim at Ukrainian targets.

In 2023, President Lukashenka played a critical role in brokering a deal that ended the June 2023 armed rebellion launched by Yevgeny Prigozhin's Wagner Group—a private military company funded by the Russian state and active in the Ukraine war—which had seized the city of Rostov-on-Don in southern Russia and was marching on Moscow.

Lukashenka's Belarus has long been inhospitable to independent media, which has led to a steady exodus of Belarusian media outlets and journalists to Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Ukraine, and Georgia—adding to the cadre of exiled media from Russia, as well as media who have relocated from Ukraine for safety reasons, all of whom are often working from the same country.

Exiled Russian and Belarusian media outlets and professionals strive to produce quality news for audiences in their home country and abroad but face myriad challenges. Their financial situation is uncertain, and they rely on international donor support from governments and foundations to keep them going. Belarusian, Russian, and Ukrainian media operating abroad increasingly pursue the same sorts of international support, which puts additional stress on available funding. Moreover, the Belarus panel noted that living in EU—which comes with its higher taxes and increased cost of living—puts further stress on their financial positions. Ironically, exiled media targeting audiences in Belarus get little interest from advertisers in Poland or Lithuania; however, a shift in content that would attract funding from these advertisers would lose their audience in Belarus, undermining their mission.

While the Russia panel noted that exiled media are producing factual content, along with debunking manipulated information and war propaganda, the Belarus experts observed that exiled journalists have to clear significant hurdles to report the news and maintain standards. Many are cut off from access to sources and statistics from within Belarus, which impacts the ability of exiled media to deliver in-depth analysis, to separate facts and opinions, and to provide comprehensive reporting. Additionally, exiled journalists often leverage a limited pool of experts, which can lead to a narrow breadth of voices and opinions.

Women working in media and coverage of gender issues. A common theme across the VIBE 2024 chapters is the unique challenges that women in media face, ranging from limited career opportunities to outright harassment and threats. In addition, the VIBE chapters highlight pervasive issues of underreporting, unprofessional, and unethical coverage of gender-related topics.

Women make up a significant portion of the media profession throughout Europe, Eurasia, and Central Asia. However, there is striking gender inequality throughout the media sector, with women employed as journalists but experiencing much less representation in management and leadership positions.

The Serbia chapter highlighted that while there are women in senior positions in a handful of media outlets—such as Nova Ekonomija, Glas Šumadije, and InMedia—they are "the exception, rather than the rule." Moreover, the management board of Serbia's national public service broadcaster only has one woman; of the nine members of the country's regional public broadcaster (Radio Television Vojvodine, based in Novi Sad), only three are women. Similarly, the Kosovo study reinforced that while men hold most positions in management, newsrooms, and decision making, journalists and reporters are usually women. The Azerbaijan panel could only point to a few examples of media outlets having had women in leadership positions.

In the same vein, the Russia study noted that although women are historically more represented in Russian journalism, in the words of one panelist, "that does not mean that their voices are equally heard in the newsroom and respected outside of it." Several other chapters--including Azerbaijan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan--echoed this point, with panelists noting that the number of women in the media workforce is a function of the sector's low salaries.

In Central Asia, the Uzbekistan panel observed that although women are present in state and private media, both are dominated by men with content influenced by men's priorities. During a November 2023 discussion with Uzbekistani media officials, OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media Teresa Ribeiro discussed gender balance in the

country's media industry and the safety of female journalists.

Against this backdrop, country studies highlighted the disproportionate representation of male speakers and experts who appear in the media. The Belarus panel referenced a MediaIQ study that showed that men are featured three times more frequently than women; the experts also argued that patriarchal stereotypes are most prominent in state-run media's coverage of government policies. A study by Ukraine's Institute of Mass Information (IMI) likewise found that men comprise 84 percent of expert commentators and are the main actors in 81 percent of publications.

The Kosovo panel observed that political reporting, especially, is dominated by male voices, whether as sources or as analysts in studio discussions. This underrepresentation of women in televised political debates reinforces the outdated stereotype that politics is a men-only space. These practices continue to marginalize women's voices and discount their perspectives on issues pertaining to the economy, security, and justice. The Albania panel highlighted that the lack of female representation in television programming actually violates gender representation requirements under the 2023 amendments to the law on broadcasting.

Furthermore, several country studies noted that female journalists and other public figures are subject to online harassment, disparaging comments, and threats.

In North Macedonia, the panel explained that social media attacks commonly target women journalists, with authorities failing to find and sanction the perpetrators. Female journalists in Serbia are also subjected to sexism and misogyny, but they seldom discuss this publicly.

The Uzbekistan study observed that in the run-up to the country's March 2023 constitutional referendum, female journalists received anonymous blackmail threats. Additionally, the editor of Rost24.uz had to resign her position after a number of threats put her marriage at stake.

In Kosovo, women in the public arena—whether in politics, journalism, or other professions—are attacked based on their appearance, while their expertise and abilities are often overlooked. Furthermore, women, along with members of the LGBTQ+ community, experience negative portrayals, smear campaigns, virtual threats, and cyberbullying.

The VIBE panel in Georgia highlighted the worrisome trend of gendered manipulative information against female politicians and civil activists; after President Salome Zourabichvili pardoned Nika Gvaramia, the founder and former director of the independent news outlet Mtavari Arkhi, a number of manipulated photos were circulated on social networks showing that the president allegedly had a promiscuous past.

In addition to public figures, the Serbia panel noted that ordinary women and girls are also targeted on social media, commonly with AI-generated deepfake videos. Media also play a role in disseminating harmful gender-based content; in Ukraine, an IMI study found that 24 out of 50 online media published materials featuring hate speech, sexism, discrimination, and stereotypes against women.

Along with the professional challenges that women face in media, inadequate and unprofessional coverage of gender-based violence and other gender-sensitive topics was a common theme among the 2024 VIBE chapters. Underreporting on gender-related issues is a systemic problem, with further issues around ethical reporting when these topics are covered.

In Turkmenistan, even publications targeting women routinely ignore topics like gender-based violence, gender equality, and women's health. "The viewpoints of any gender other than male are covered only by online media in exile," said one panelist. In Tajikistan, panelists noted the absence of coverage on transgender issues, with negative consequences for media who do cover these topics.

In Serbia, violence against women is a long-standing issue. However, news reporting on the subject lacks analysis, and the country's tabloids seem to prioritize the perpetrators' back stories and engage in victim blaming. A major issue is that media coverage discloses—directly or indirectly--the identity of the victim and her family members, a clear violation of internationally accepted ethical norms about reporting on the subject.

For its part, the Kosovo panel concluded that reporting and media headlines show an insufficient gender-responsive approach, especially in cases of sexual violence, which perpetuate sexism and discrimination against women. In Moldova, although media have made progress in gender-balanced perspectives, there are similar cases where coverage perpetuates stereotypes.

Although the panel in Bosnia and Herzegovina (B&H) noted an uptick in reporting gender-based violence in 2023 thanks to the combined efforts of CSOs and media outlets, it also highlighted a case when the murder of a woman in Bosnia and Herzegovina was livestreamed on Instagram, remaining available online for three hours, shared on other platforms, and incited hate speech. In response, a group of civil society organizations and experts formed the Coalition for Freedom of Expression and Content Moderation to prevent such harmful content, safeguard freedom of expression, and act as a mediator for social media companies. In addition, in November 2023 more than 50 journalists signed a letter of appeal calling on journalists and media outlets to respect ethical standards in their coverage of femicide and violence against women.

In a positive development, Mediacentar Sarajevo, which conducted the VIBE study in B&H, launched an internship for journalism students that focused on media reporting of gender-based violence, and the organization also published many educational articles on the topic. In Kosovo, intensive training over the past decade has also helped Serbian-language media develop a comprehensive and diverse content strategy, with less discrimination.

In an example of effective gender-based reporting from Uzbekistan, the independent online project Nemolchi.uz shared stories highlighting cases of gender-based violence, including a notable case of sexual abuse at an orphanage and the limited repercussions against two high-ranking officials involved. Public outrage was likely a contributing factor to a new 2023 law criminalizing domestic violence and strengthening protections for women and children.

Recommendations

IREX asked panelists and chapter authors to provide specific recommendations on ways to improve the performance of their media and information sectors. Below are summaries of this year's recommendations that IREX has compiled and organized into recurring themes. IREX hopes these will be useful to VIBE readers.

Increasing digital security

Albania: Training on cybersecurity and cyber hygiene for journalists should be structured to ensure cyber protection and to stay continually abreast of developments that affect media's cyber resilience. Support small, independent, and community media with access to technology and tools to improve cyber security practices.

North Macedonia: Training for media staff, journalists, and other media professionals on digital security and invest in adequate protection from distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) and other types of cyberattacks.

Serbia: Improve the reach of education campaigns and raise awareness about cyber threats and dangers through broadcasting.

Tajikistan: Improve the quality of information security education in the country's universities. To do this, it is necessary to train enough qualified teachers who have practical experience in using media and information security tools and are able to teach others.

Government strategies for media literacy

B&H: The government should adopt a strategy for media and information literacy that will provide guidelines and ensure funds for its promotion and introduction into formal education.

Georgia: The state should formulate a comprehensive strategic vision to promote media literacy in the country, facilitating more in-depth interventions rather than pursuing fragmented, short-term efforts. This overarching vision should recognize and engage all stakeholders as valued partners.

Montenegro: Initiate a media and civil society campaign to make media literacy a mandatory course and integral part of education in primary and secondary schools. Rather than the current superficial and insufficient attitude on the issue, the government should pay much more attention to media literacy.

Serbia: As part of the proposals for education reforms, insist on the introduction of critical thinking in school topics. Media literacy and media critical thinking courses should be intensified.

Ukraine: Media and digital literacy and hygiene should be an integral part of school education.

International partnerships and training opportunities

Armenia: Provide long-term, on-site trainings at international media organizations across media specialties and levels. Support trips for representatives of regional media outlets so that they can adopt the practices of counterpart media outlets abroad that have been able to overcome difficulties and exchange international experience in this field.

Belarus: Support collaborative networks by encouraging partnerships between Belarusian media and prominent international journalistic organizations such as the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP), International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), and Reporters Without Borders. This approach would not only bolster Belarusian media's presence but also integrate them more deeply into the global journalistic community.

Russia: Find ways to strengthen international cooperation with independent Russian media and civil society.

Turkmenistan: Seek ways for experienced journalists from Western and other free societies to work for designated periods alongside local editors in Turkmen newsrooms to provide practical guidelines and hands-on advice, rather than simply offering media training courses whose basic tenets local journalists find difficult to implement.

Uzbekistan: Find opportunities for advanced training, including through international internships and participation in specialized events in other countries.

Diversity and inclusion

Armenia: Provide grants, technical assistance, and trainings to reporters, journalists, professional and non-professional content producers on producing content on gender, health, the environment, and other under-covered topics.

Kosovo: Expand content that reflects a broader range of voices and perspectives that includes marginalized communities. Ensure equitable representation of all communities in media programming.

Moldova: Encourage diversity and inclusion in media representation by supporting initiatives that amplify underrepresented voices and perspectives.

North Macedonia: Media should reconsider their approach to marginalized groups by not treating them as victims and get interested in other aspects of their lives. Expand sign-language translation to other programs, not just main newscasts, and invest more in subtitling for those who are deaf or hard of hearing.

Addressing attacks against media

B&H: Set up specific mechanisms for the protection of journalists, and attacks and threats against journalists, including online, should be processed. These attacks and threats should be publicly condemned by public figures, (self) regulators, CSOs, and government representatives.

Moldova: Denounce any threats or acts of aggression against the media. Monitor and communicate law enforcement bodies' responses to such incidents to the public to ensure accountability and deter future attacks.

Kyrgyzstan: Carry out systematic monitoring of violations of journalists' rights and media freedoms and disseminate the results to the public

through media organization websites and popular media publications in the country. Organize discussion platforms to develop a consolidated strategy for responding to challenges to freedom of speech and violations of journalists' rights, regardless of political affiliations.

realize the need to make a concerted effort to prioritize audience research and integrate it into their production processes, invest in research tools and resources, and adopt a more research-driven approach to content creation.

Building trust and understanding with audiences

Serbia: Professional media should strengthen ties with the public more efficiently, especially in online editions. Donors should concentrate their efforts on developing stable long-term relationships between independent media and their audiences.

Uzbekistan: Work to improve public opinion of professional media. Just as the work of an IT specialist has now become prestigious, including through the efforts of the state, the same should be true for professional journalists.

North Macedonia: Media should improve communication with their audiences and the public to better serve their interests and invest in proper audience measurement and audience research practices.

Armenia: Address quality research challenges, help media and content producers

VIBE Score Overview

VIBE looks at *four principles* of information vibrancy:

- Principle 1: Information Quality
- Principle 2: Multiple Channels: How Information Flows
- Principle 3: Information Consumption and Engagement
- Principle 4: Transformative Action: How Information Drives Behavior

VIBE includes 20 indicators that capture the most important elements of these four principles, and it relies on information from country experts who complete a VIBE questionnaire, provide scores for sub-indicators that support each of the 20 main indicators along with evidence to justify their scores, and then contribute to a panel discussion led by a moderator.

Additionally, VIBE uses a 10-point scale (0-40) to represent country progression or regression in the country-, principle-, and indicator-level scores. Based on these numerical scores, IREX has also developed descriptive classification as follows: Not Vibrant/Failing Information System (0-10), Slightly Vibrant/Weak Information System (11-20), Somewhat Vibrant/Stable Information System (21-30), and Highly Vibrant/Thriving Information System (31-40). Full descriptive classifications are available in the methodology section.

In the 2024 study, of the four VIBE principles, Principle 2 had generally higher average scores, while Principles 1, 3 and 4 had slightly lower scores.

For countries in Europe and Eurasia (E&E) included in this year's publication, country-level scores were mainly split into two VIBE classifications: Somewhat Vibrant (Armenia, Kosovo, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Ukraine) and Slightly Vibrant (Albania, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, and Serbia). Azerbaijan and Russia held the lowest scores in E&E, putting them in the Not Vibrant classification.

In Central Asia, this year's study put Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan in the Slightly Vibrant category. Turkmenistan's score of 3 put it in the Not Vibrant classification.

At the overall score level, some countries—including Belarus[2], Kazakhstan, Kosovo, Montenegro, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan—saw increases in their scores. Others such as Albania, Armenia, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine received the same country-level scores as they did in the 2023 VIBE study. Finally, other countries—including Azerbaijan, B&H, Kyrgyzstan, North Macedonia, Russia, Serbia, and Tajikistan—experienced declines in their country-level scores.

Principle 1's (Information Quality) lowest average scores tend to fall in the indicator examining insufficient resources for content production and harmful information. Many media are reliant on political or business benefactors for livelihood, while others look to international funders for their survival. Two other Principle 1 indicators—information is based on fact and information is not intended to harm—also received lower scores, signaling that manipulated information continues to run rampant and is a danger to media ecosystems throughout the region. The indicators on the availability of quality information and inclusive and diverse content had higher average scores.

Principle 2 (Multiple Channels) scores tended to be slightly higher than those in the other VIBE principles in this year's study. Better scores were seen in indicators examining adequate access to channels of information, reflecting strong or improved infrastructures throughout the region. Armenia, Kosovo, Moldova, Montenegro, and North Macedonia receive scores of 31 or above in this indicator, putting them in the "highly vibrant" category. Lower scores in Principle 2 were seen in the indicators examining independence of information channels, reflecting political or business interests interfering in editorial content.

Principle 3 (Information Consumption and Engagement) had lower scores in the indicator looking at media literacy, with many panels

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2   Although conditions for media and civil society are quite harsh within Belarus and Turkmenistan, these VIBE panels considered media operating in exile in their analysis of the countries' overall media environments.

across the region decrying weak media literacy skills in their countries. Armenia, North Macedonia, Kosovo, Montenegro, and Ukraine all garnered the highest scores for this principle, putting them in VIBE's "somewhat vibrant" classification. Azerbaijan, Russia, and Turkmenistan got single-digit scores in this principle, placing them solidly in the "not vibrant" category. The remaining ten countries fall into VIBE's "slightly vibrant" scoring range.

In Principle 4 (Transformative Action), panelists gave indicators examining civil society's use of information higher scores. However, lower scores were seen in the indicators looking at how individuals use quality information to inform their actions, government's use of quality information to make public policy decisions, and information supporting good governance and democratic rights.

Strength of Evidence (SOE) Ratings.

VIBE SOE ratings help identify areas that donors or researchers may want to consider for further research and offer transparency about the potential subjectivity of some indicators—especially those measuring newer concepts or sources of information. As in previous years, the highest SOE ratings tended to be for VIBE indicators in Principles 1 and 2, which received mostly "strong" and "somewhat strong" average ratings. Ratings for Principles 3 and 4 were slightly lower, receiving mostly "somewhat strong" ratings.

This year, indicators examining the availability of quality information, fact-based information, rights to create, share, and consume information, adequate access to information channels, and appropriation channels for government information received the highest SOE ratings, indicating a strong body of comprehensive evidence supporting the panelists' scoring of these indicators and a high degree of consensus among the panelist scores. All remaining indicators received an average SOE rating of "somewhat strong," indicating that panelists and available research provided some reliable evidence to support scores and that there was mostly consensus among scores.

At the country level, Azerbaijan and Kyrgyzstan received an overall SOE rating of "somewhat weak," with consistently low ratings for most

indicators in Principles 3 and 4. The remaining countries in the study received SOE ratings of "strong" and "somewhat strong," with B&H and Georgia scoring the highest.

◼ VIBE 2024: Overall Average Scores

0-5	6-10	11-15	16-20	21-25	26-30	31-35	36-40
Turkmenistan 3	Azerbaijan 7 Russia 10	Belarus 12 Georgia 13 Serbia 13 Tajikistan 14	Kyrgyzstan 17 Bosnia & Herzegovina 18 Albania 19 Kazakhstan 19 Uzbekistan 19	North Macedonia 22 Armenia 23 Kosovo 24 Moldova 24 Ukraine 24 Montenegro 25			
Not Vibrant		**Slightly Vibrant**		**Somewhat Vibrant**		**Highly Vibrant**	

◼ VIBE 2024: Information Quality

0-5	6-10	11-15	16-20	21-25	26-30	31-35	36-40
Turkmenistan 5	Azerbaijan 9	Georgia 12 Russia 12 Serbia 12	Tajikistan 16 Albania 17 Belarus 17 Bosnia & Herzegovina 17 Kyrgyzstan 17 North Macedonia 19 Kazakhstan 20 Uzbekistan 20	Kosovo 21 Ukraine 21 Armenia 22 Moldova 22 Montenegro 23			
Not Vibrant		**Slightly Vibrant**		**Somewhat Vibrant**		**Highly Vibrant**	

◼ VIBE 2024: Multiple Channels

0-5	6-10	11-15	16-20	21-25	26-30	31-35	36-40
Turkmenistan 3	Azerbaijan 7 Belarus 10	Russia 11 Georgia 13 Serbia 14 Tajikistan 14	Belarus 16 Kazakhstan 17 Kyrgyzstan 17 Bosnia & Herzegovina 19 Uzbekistan 19	Albania 21	North Macedonia 26 Ukraine 26 Kosovo 27 Armenia 28 Montenegro 28 Moldova 29		
Not Vibrant		**Slightly Vibrant**		**Somewhat Vibrant**		**Highly Vibrant**	

VIBE 2024: Information Consumption and Engagement

0-5	6-10	11-15	16-20	21-25	26-30	31-35	36-40
Turkmenistan 2 Azerbaijan 5	Russia 10	Belarus 11 Tajikistan 11 Georgia 13 Serbia 13 Uzbekistan 15	Kazakhstan 17 Albania 18 Armenia 18 Bosnia & Herzegovina 18 Moldova 18 Kyrgyzstan 18	Kosovo 21 North Macedonia 22 Montenegro 23 Ukraine 23			
Not Vibrant		**Slightly Vibrant**		**Somewhat Vibrant**		**Highly Vibrant**	

VIBE 2024: Transformative Action

0-5	6-10	11-15	16-20	21-25	26-30	31-35	36-40
Turkmenistan 2	Azerbaijan 6 Russia 9	Belarus 11 Serbia 13 Georgia 14 Tajikistan 15	Kyrgyzstan 16 Albania 18 Bosnia & Herzegovina 18	Kazakhstan 21 Uzbekistan 21 North Macedonia 23 Ukraine 23 Armenia 24 Montenegro 24 Kosovo 25	Moldova 26		
Not Vibrant		**Slightly Vibrant**		**Somewhat Vibrant**		**Highly Vibrant**	
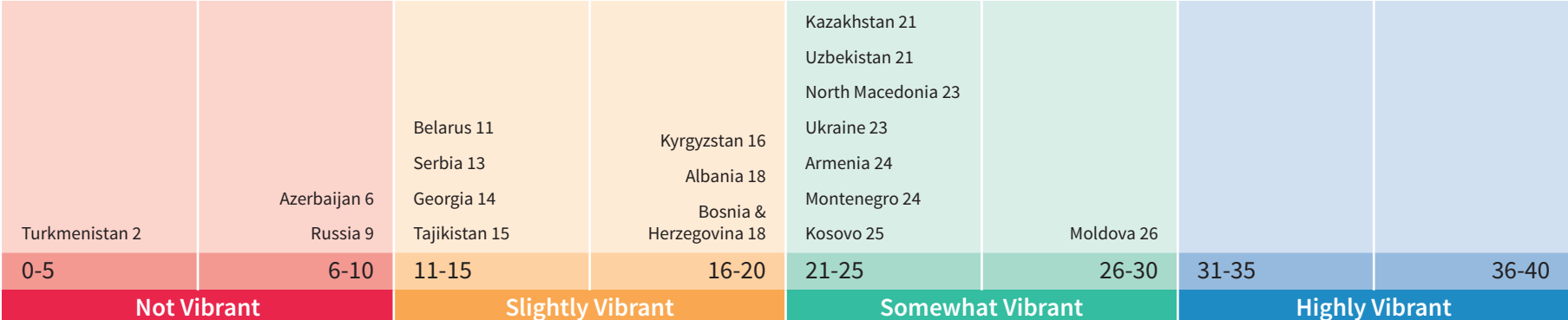
METHODOLOGY

From 2001 – 2019, IREX and USAID produced the Media Sustainability Index (MSI)[1] to measure five key pillars and objectives related to media sustainability: free speech, professional journalism, plurality of news sources, business management, and supporting institutions.

Since the MSI's inception, there were dramatic changes to the way information is produced, spread, and utilized. However, the growth of digital and social media has dramatically changed how information flows, including:

- Expansion of the volume of information and speed of global transmission (including misinformation and information intended to harm)

- Blurred lines between media producers and media consumers

- Rise of non-professional content producers (such as social media users, bloggers, and influencers)

- New challenges and opportunities in resourcing media production

- Diminishing trust in many forms of content and content producers

- New threats to individual privacy and security

- Increased need for media and digital literacy across all segments of society,

- New forms of censorship as well as new and evolving ways to circumvent censorship, and

- New methods for individuals, civil society, the private sector and corporations, and governments to utilize information for both productive and destructive means.

In recognition of these changes – as well as the way anti-democratic forces are utilizing those changes to intentionally spread disinformation - IREX undertook a multiple-year review of its approach to working with the information and media sectors, culminating in the Vibrant Information Approach[2]. This outlines new challenges, needs, and frameworks for thinking about information systems in the modern era.

Based on IREX's Vibrant Information Approach, IREX and USAID built the **Vibrant Information Barometer (VIBE)** - an index to track the way information is produced, spread, consumed, and used in the modern era. With its first edition released in 2021, VIBE to better describes and measures the way information is produced and utilized, assessing how vibrant countries' information systems are in the modern age.

In a vibrant information system, quality information is widely available, and the vast majority of information is editorially independent, based on facts, and not intended to harm. Sufficient resources for diverse and inclusive content production should exist. People have the rights, means, and capacity to access a wide range of information; have the ability to recognize and reject misinformation; and can make informed choices on the types of information they consume. People use quality information to inform their actions, improve their communities, and weigh in on public policy decisions. Building off almost two decades of experience with the **Media Sustainability Index**, VIBE looks at **four principles** of information vibrancy:

> **1) Information Quality:** How information is produced by both professional and nonprofessional producers. This includes content quality, content diversity, and economic resources.

> **2) Multiple Channels – How Information Flows:** How information is transmitted or spread by both formal and informal information channels. This includes the legal framework for free speech, protection of journalists, and access to diverse channels and types of information.

> **3) Information Consumption and Engagement:** How information is consumed by users. This includes looking at freedom of expression, media and information literacy, digital privacy and security, the relevance of information to consumers, and public trust in media and information.

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1   www.irex.org/msi

2   https://www.irex.org/resource/vibrant-information-just-prosperous-and-inclusive-societies

4) Transformative Action - How Information Drives Behavior: How information is used and put into action. This includes how governments, the private sector, and civil society use information to inform decisions and actions; whether information is spread across ideological lines; and whether individuals or groups feel empowered to use information to enact change.

By helping implementers, donors, policymakers, and partner governments improve the resilience and integrity of information systems in developing countries, VIBE aims to ensure that citizens, civil society, and governments have the information they need to increase governments' capacity and commitment to meeting the economic, social, and democratic needs of their people. It is an ideal tool for tracking national and regional information trends over time and informing global understanding of the way information is produced, shared, consumed, and utilized in the digital age.

Local Panels for Expert Assessment

VIBE aims to describe entire countries' information systems by drawing together experts from the country's media outlets, NGOs, professional associations, polling firms, and academic institutions to participate in panel discussions. This may include editors, reporters, media managers or owners, advertising and marketing specialists, pollsters, lawyers, professors or teachers, or human rights observers. Prior to the panel discussion, Panelists will each complete a VIBE questionnaire made up of **20 indicators (5 per principle)** that capture the most important elements of the four VIBE principles (for more details see **Scoring System** below).

Each panel of up to 15 panelists per country will be conducted by a moderator who will themselves be experts in the media and information landscape of the country. VIBE moderators will be responsible for ensuring panels include representatives from various types of media, the capital city, and other geographic regions, and that they reflect gender, ethnic, and religious diversity as appropriate. In addition, IREX encourages moderators to select panelists with varying ideological backgrounds, to minimize the chance that only certain political or social views are captured. For consistency from year to year, at least half of the previous year's participants will be included on the following year's panel.

In some cases where conditions on the ground are such that panelists might suffer legal retribution or physical threats as a result of their participation, IREX will allow some or all of the panelists and the moderator to remain anonymous. In severe situations, IREX does not engage panelists as such; rather the study is conducted through research and interviews with those knowledgeable of the media situation in that country. Such cases are appropriately noted in relevant chapters.

VIBE questionnaires are written in a way that explicitly asks for evidence for each indicator. Panelists are encouraged to consider specific laws or policies, examples from media sources, recent events or developments, research data, personal experiences, or observations of the work of colleagues for each indicator. Based on this evidence and the level of consensus achieved in panel discussions, moderators will assign a **Strength of Evidence (SoE)** score to each indicator (see more details below).

To ensure consistency across country scores, IREX's managing editor reviews, analyzes, and finalizes scores for each country. If the managing editor has concerns about the validity or comparability of indicator scores, she or he may review the narrative chapters to see if evidence is provided to support the scores, modify the scores, or remove extreme outlier scores that vary significantly from the average score.

Scoring System

Each indicator is broken into clear sub-indicators, which panelists will score individually on the VIBE scale. Sub-indicators will be averaged to make the indicator score.

Sub-indicators will be scored using the following scale (0-40):

0 – Disagree

10 – Agree in a few cases but mostly disagree. For example, it may be true for only a minority of content, content-producers, or parts of the country.

20 – Agree in some cases but not others. For example, it may be the case this is true for most professional content but not true for most non-professional content. Or it may be true in some parts of the country but not others.

30 – Agree in most cases. This is the norm, although it may not be true for certain content, content-producers, or parts of the country.

40 – Agree.

N/A - Not **Applicable. This will be used for any sub-indicator where a panelist feels the specific concept being assessed is not applicable or relevant to the country.**

DK – Don't Know. I do not have sufficient information to answer this at this point. This should be used in cases where panelists do not feel they have adequate information or evidence to assign a score.

Panelists will be allowed to use increments of 5 if they feel the most accurate response is between two of the above options (i.e., scores of 5, 15, 25, or 35). Principle scores are calculated using a straight average of the five expert-opinion indicator scores. Country scores will be calculated as a straight average of the four principle-level Indicators. When a panelist replies N/A or DK on a sub-indicator, that sub-indicator is dropped from both the numerator and denominator for averaging.

The scores will be interpreted per the following categories:

	Principle 1: Information Quality	Principle 2: Multiple Channels	Principle 3: Consumption & Engagement	Principle 4: Transformative Action	Country
Highly Vibrant **(31-40)**	There is quality information on a variety of topics and geographies available. The norm for information is that it is based on facts and not intended to harm.	People have rights to information and adequate access to channels of information. There are diverse channels for information flow, and most information channels are independent.	People can safely use the internet due to privacy protections and security tools. They have the necessary skills and tools to be media literate.	Information producers and distribution channels enable and encourage information sharing across ideological lines. Individuals use quality information to inform their actions. Information supports good governance and democratic rights.	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.
Somewhat Vibrant **(21-30)**	There is quality information on some topics and geographies available. Most information is based on facts and not intended to harm, although misinformation, mal-information, and hate speech do have some influence on public discourse.	Most people have rights to information and adequate access to channels of information, although some may be excluded due to economic means or social norms. There are diverse channels for information flow, and most information channels are independent.	Although there are privacy protections and security tools available, only some people actually use them. Some people have the necessary skills and tools to be media literate, whereas others do not.	Information producers and distribution channels enable information sharing across ideological lines but not actively encourage it. Individuals sometimes use quality information to inform their actions. Information sometimes supports good governance and democratic rights.	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.

	Principle 1: Information Quality	Principle 2: Multiple Channels	Principle 3: Consumption & Engagement	Principle 4: Transformative Action	Country
Slightly Vibrant **(11-20)**	There is quality information on a few topics and geographies available, but many topics or geographies are not covered. Some information is based on facts and not intended to harm, but misinformation, mal-information, and hate speech have significant influence on public discourse.	Many people have either limited rights to information or inadequate access to channels of information. Channels for government information are limited. There are only a few channels for information flow, and many of these channels are not editorially independent from their owners or funders.	Relatively few people are able to use privacy protections and security tools. Relatively few people have the necessary skills and tools to be media literate. Relatively few people engage productively with the information that is available to them.	Information producers and distribution channels do not enable information sharing across ideological lines but also do not actively prevent it. Government occasionally uses quality information to make public policy decisions. However, this is not the norm.	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, mal-information, and hate speech in circulation, and it does influence public discourse. Most people do not recognize or reject misinformation.
Not At All Vibrant **(0-10)**	There is limited information available and/or it only covers a few topics or geographies. Misinformation, mal-information, and hate speech are widespread and have a significant influence on public discourse. There are limited resources for content production, and only the views and experiences of the dominant few are shared through media.	People do not have rights to information and/or do not have adequate access to channels of information. There are few channels for any information, including government information. The channels of information that do exist are generally not independent.	People cannot safely use the internet due to surveillance. They do not have the necessary skills or tools needed to be media literate. Media and information producers rarely or never engage with their audience or work to build trust.	Information producers and distribution channels discourage information sharing across ideological lines. Individuals cannot or do not use quality information to inform their actions. Information does not support good governance and democratic rights.	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.

Strength of Evidence (SoE) Score

The **Strength of Evidence** rating is meant to identify areas where further research is needed and to increase transparency about the potential subjectivity of some indicators. For each indicator, moderators will assign a Strength of Evidence rating - Weak, Somewhat weak, Somewhat strong, or Strong - based on the quality of evidence informing each indicator, the confidence of panelists in their scores, the number of N/As or DKs among panelists' scores, and the level of consensus across the panel. A panelist's score that varies by more than 15 points above or below the average indicator score may be removed.

- **Strong**: There is a great deal of evidence providing a strong case for scoring this indicator. Panelists are able to provide a great deal of timely, reliable, and comprehensive evidence to justify their scores (through their questionnaires or panel discussions), and there is a high degree of consensus on the score across panelists. There are no (or almost no) N/A or DK sub-indicators among panelists.

- **Somewhat strong**: There is some evidence providing a somewhat strong case for scoring this indicator. Panelists are able to provide some timely and reliable evidence to justify their scores (through their questionnaires or panel discussions.) There is mostly consensus on the score across panelists for this indicator. There are a few N/A or DK sub-indicators among panelists.

- **Somewhat weak:** Although there is some evidence providing a case for scoring this indicator, it is somewhat weak. Panelists are able to provide only limited timely and reliable evidence to justify their scores (through their questionnaires or panel discussions). There is limited consensus on the score across panelists. There are some N/A or DK sub-indicators among panelists.

- **Weak:** Although there is some evidence providing a case for scoring this indicator, it is weak. Panelists are generally not able to provide timely and reliable evidence to justify their scores (through their questionnaires or panel discussions). There is little consensus on the score across panelists. There are many N/A or DK sub-indicators among panelists.

Principle 1: Information Quality

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

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

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

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

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

Principle 2: Multiple Channels: How Information Flows

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

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

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

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

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

Principle 3: Information Consumption and Engagement

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

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

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

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

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

Principle 4: Transformative Action

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

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

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

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

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

SOUTHEAST EUROPE

ALBANIA

Vibrant
Information
Barometer

2 0 2 4

VIBRANCY

	Overall Score	Information Quality	Multiple Channels	Consumption & Engagement	Transformative Action
2021	22	22	24	20	22
2022	22	20	24	21	22
2023	19	17	21	17	19
2024	19	17	21	18	18

PRINCIPLES

Not Vibrant (0-10): Quality information is extremely limited in this country. The vast majority of it is not editorially independent, not based on facts, or it is intended to harm. People do not have the rights, means, or capacity to access a wide range of information; they do not recognize or reject misinformation; and they cannot or do not make choices on what types of information they want to engage with.

Slightly Vibrant (11-20): Quality information is available on a few topics or geographies in this country, but not all. While some information is editorially independent, there is still a significant amount of misinformation, malinformation, and hate speech in circulation, and it does influence public discourse. Most people do not recognize or reject misinformation.

Somewhat Vibrant (21-30): Quality information is available in this country and most of it is editorially independent, based on facts, and not intended to harm. Most people have the rights, means, and capacity to access a wide range of information, although some do not. Most people recognize and reject misinformation, although some do not.

Highly Vibrant (31-40): Quality information is widely available in this country. People have the rights, means, and capacity to access a wide range of information; they recognize and reject misinformation.

Highly Vibrant

Somewhat Vibrant

Slightly Vibrant

OVERALL
SCORE

19

Not Vibrant

Albania held important local elections in 2023, in which the opposition participated after a boycott in 2019. The voting took place without incident, but observers raised concerns about the misuse of state resources, pressure on public-sector workers and voters, and allegations of vote buying. At the same time, the country wrapped up an initial review of its body of law in preparation for starting the years-long process to join the European Union.
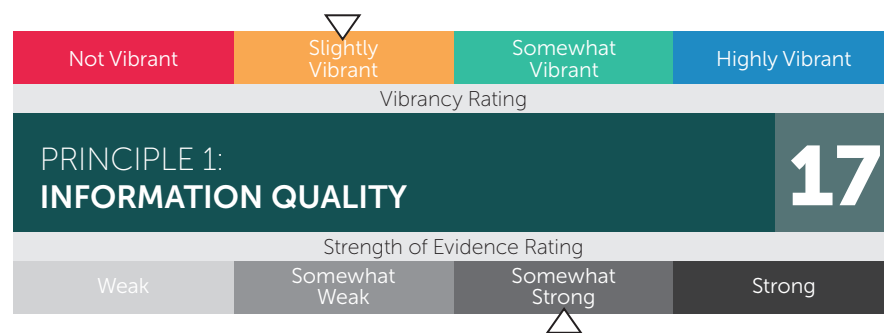
Conflict within the opposition Democratic Party continued in 2023, with its two factions fighting each other instead of exercising any type of watchdog function over the government.

The civic space saw further deterioration, as did the media environment, with cases of physical and verbal attacks on journalists throughout the year. A wave of cyberattacks on public infrastructure continued in 2023, with the parliament and a key anti-corruption agency hit with denial-of-service attacks. Data from public institutions, such as the government of Tirana and the Foreign Ministry, were leaked during the first half of the year.

In this context, Albania's overall VIBE score stayed at 19, the same as in the 2023 VIBE study. Principle 1 (Information Quality) received the same score it did last year. Highest marks went to the public broadcaster's efforts to reach diverse audiences (in Indicator 4), while Indicator 5, on resources for content production, scored the lowest, as sources of financing continue to compromise the independence of Albania's media. The

overall score for Principle 2 (Multiple Channels) also remained unchanged. Indicator 7, on access to channels of information, scored the highest, buoyed by the country's strong communication technology infrastructure; the low score for Indicator 10, on media channels' independence, reflected the panel's view of the malign influence of self-interested media owners.

Principle 3 (Information Consumption and Engagement) gained a point over the 2023 study. The indicator on community media ranked highest, for their responsiveness to their local communities, while the panelists gave low marks to measures to improve media and information literacy. Principle 4 (Transformative Action) lost a point from last year. Civil society's dissemination of quality information got the highest marks, while panelists lamented Albanians' limited civic engagement and decision-making processes tainted by political motives and opacity.

Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant	Somewhat Vibrant	Highly Vibrant

Vibrancy Rating

PRINCIPLE 1:
INFORMATION QUALITY

17

Strength of Evidence Rating

Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong	Strong

The media landscape in Albania faces significant challenges. The infrastructure to produce diverse content exists but is unevenly distributed, as local broadcast media struggle with digitalization and print media decline. Training for media professionals depends on unreliable donor funding. The broadcast market is controlled by a few families with strong political ties, undermining editorial independence and promoting government propaganda. The wider information ecosystem lacks critical journalism and information manipulation is common, especially online. Media content rarely intends to harm but often serves as propaganda and supports nationalistic narratives. Content is not sufficiently inclusive, often ignoring various viewpoints and rarely presenting women and minorities. Media are financially strapped, with most outlets depending heavily on advertising or owner funding, which further compromises their independence and ability to produce quality content. The result is a media environment where financial and editorial pressures lead to a skewed public discourse, lacking in diversity and depth.

Panelists awarded the highest score to Indicator 4 (inclusivity and diversity), driven by the public broadcaster providing information for diverse audiences, in languages and formats that are suitable to

> **The broadcast market is concentrated in the hands of four families who reach most of the audience and are under clear political influence, as their fortunes depend heavily on the government.**

them, such as newscasts in minorities' languages and in sign language. Indicator 5 scored the lowest, as financial struggles persist in the media ecosystem and ultimately compromise editorial independence.

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

Panelists agreed that Albanian media generally have the infrastructure to produce varied content, although local broadcast media lag behind, especially in the digitalization process. Print media have significantly shrunk, and their distribution system is highly flawed.

Formal university training for journalists is adequate. International and Albanian nonprofits offer continuous training and capacity-building on various topics, but changing donor priorities make the trainings less than sustainable.

The broadcast market is concentrated in the hands of four families who reach most of the audience and are under clear political influence, as their fortunes depend heavily on the government. Panelists agreed that editorial decisions at most media outlets are dictated by the owners' political and financial interests. Many outlets churn out government propaganda while their owners benefit from public tenders in infrastructure, public property, or various licenses. A lack of ethics in reporting is widespread. Self-regulating mechanisms, such as the Ethical Media Alliance, call out breaches of ethics, usually to no avail.

The panelists noticed a slight uptick in journalists holding government representatives accountable. With a nod to law enforcement agencies launching corruption investigations and bringing charges against politicians, Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) Albania's Kristina Voko said the "institutions of justice have started working," giving the country's journalists a sense of empowerment.

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

Panelists agreed that content is not fact-based, well-sourced, or objective. Rather, it is essentially reprinted press releases without further analysis or verification. Often, audiences are presented with packaged news or opinion ready-made by the government or political parties. Panelists said politicians disseminate false information about one another, coarsening public discourse and manipulating public opinion.

The government disseminates propaganda, at times larded with manipulated information, with little journalistic pushback. Some panelists took particular aim at online portals, which traffic in false or compromising information, sometimes at the behest of powerful people.

Fact-checking platforms exist, but their impact is limited. Content moderation remains limited, although a fact-checking outlet collaborates with Facebook in flagging disinformation.

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

Panelists said foreign governments do not spread information in Albania with an intent to harm. Rather, they push propaganda or manipulate information, curate their own national narratives, and promote historical ties. A 2022 analysis concluded that "disinformation narratives spread through state-funded media or even through the social media channels of the Russian Embassy in Tirana, did not target Albania."

The government rarely disseminates manipulated information or hate speech, though it faces no consequences for doing so. Traditional media rarely spread manipulated information, while some internet platforms represent themselves as online media with that express intent.

"Nonprofessional content is mostly responsible for hate speech, and there are no ramifications for them," said Lutfi Dervishi, a media

specialist and journalism lecturer. Indeed, in 2023 data from the Office of the Commissioner for the Protection Against Discrimination identified two instances of hate speech, out of six investigated, involving gender and homosexuality.

> **❝ Financial instability severely undermines media independence, and ultimately the reliability of the information they provide.**

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

Prepackaged content that serves the interests of influential groups, passed off as information for the general public, dominates Albania's information space, especially during political campaigns.

The public broadcaster provides information for diverse audiences, in languages and formats that are suitable to them, such as newscasts in minorities' languages, with sign-language interpreters. The public broadcaster also covers minorities, who remain underrepresented in other outlets.

The lack of women's and girls' representation in the media is glaring. Their views are rarely considered, and they are scarce on panel discussions on prime-time television. Panelist Valbona Sulce, a media researcher, said that this absence of women in televised programming constitutes sexism, which is a violation of amendments to the country's broadcasting law passed in 2023 that requires balanced gender representation. The problem extends to the makeup of media leadership, owners, boards, or other executive positions within outlets.

Lastly, panelists agreed that the prevailing ideologies and points of view in Albanian media are not representative of the society but rather reflect the interests of the outlets' owners.

Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced.

The lowest-scoring indicator in Principle 1, financing remains a key challenge for the country's media, with dire implications for editorial independence. Professional content producers cannot afford to produce

quality information. They face grueling work conditions, including long, stressful days, and are not always paid on time.

Large media attract most of the advertising market in Albania, while local outlets rely on funding from their owners and civil-society media depend on donor support.
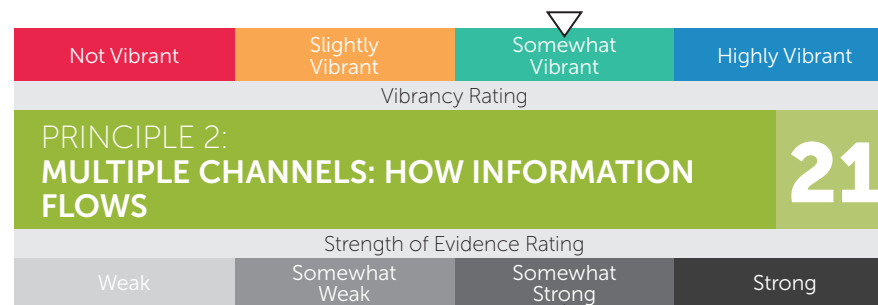
While a small slice of Albania's overall media revenue, panelists said government agencies' process for allocating advertising is opaque. Further, the government does not provide media subsidies, although panelists said it provides indirect support in ways that distort the market, such as renting space to friendly media for token amounts.

Four families control 72 to 84 percent of Albania's TV market, depending on how it is defined, and two owners hold 71 percent of the country's print media.

Most media have not diversified their income streams and continue to rely on advertising as a source of revenue. However, local media, in particular, have limited access to advertising revenue and rely on financing from their owner to continue operation.

Financial instability severely undermines media independence, and ultimately the reliability of the information they provide. Struggling to cover their expenses, some outlets resort to blackmailing public figures, taking payments for quashing unfavorable stories, even on matters of great public interest.

Finally, media owned by the country's non-governmental organizations do quality work, but their dependence on grants from international donors means they also struggle for financial stability.

Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant	Somewhat Vibrant	Highly Vibrant

Vibrancy Rating

PRINCIPLE 2: MULTIPLE CHANNELS: HOW INFORMATION FLOWS	21

Strength of Evidence Rating

Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong	Strong

While Albanian law protects the freedoms of speech and the press, defamation remains a criminal offense, and there is no specific law on assaults of journalists in connection with their work. Media face covert censorship and self-censorship, with instances of harassment and attacks on journalists underreported to law enforcement. People have good technical access to information channels, but marginalized groups face barriers, and digital literacy remains low outside the cities and among marginalized groups. Although the country's freedom-of-information regulations meet international standards, they are poorly enforced, limiting access to vital public information.

Additionally, media ownership is highly concentrated. Most media are controlled by entities with political and business interests, with little appetite for diversity or editorial independence. Public service media are improving, but they are scrutinized for potential biases due to their leadership's ties to the governing party.

Indicator 7 received the highest scores from panelists, with the information and communication technology infrastructure meeting the needs of most people. Indicator 10, which examines the independence of information channels, scored the lowest, reflecting panelists' view that media owners' political and business interests dictate their outlets' editorial lines.

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

Panelists said Albania's legal protections for freedom of speech and press should be strengthened to match those in the European Union. Particularly, they emphasized the need for a specific law against assaults on journalists due to their work. The country's treatment of defamation as a criminal offense, instead of civil, is another chilling factor for free speech.

The government does not overtly censor media, but panelists agreed that journalists are harassed, covertly censored, and driven to self-censorship. Klevin Muka, a journalist and news anchor, said officials censor media covertly by limiting access to information or refusing to appear in reports or otherwise cooperate with news organizations.

Some who freely speak their mind have become the targets of hate speech, smears, or retaliatory lawsuits. One panelist said public employees can risk their jobs for expressing their views publicly.

Albania's media and journalists repeatedly came under attack in 2023, either by officials or private individuals. In March, a security guard died in an armed attack on the Top Channel TV station that remains unsolved. Panelists also cited the detention of journalist Elton Qyno by the special anti-corruption prosecutor, who also seized his laptop and phones in an effort to identify the sources of leaks from the office, in breach of the law on the protection of sources. The mayor of Tirana launched an attack on on journalist Ola Xama, who had covered an investigation by the anti-corruption prosecutor into a waste-management contract in which the mayor played a role.

Blerjana Bino, an expert for the SafeJournalists regional network in Albania, said her group registered 24 attacks on journalists in 2023,

mostly intimidation and threats. By contrast, she said, the state police and public prosecutor's office registered only seven cases, suggesting that journalists are afraid to report cases and ultimately face their attackers in court.

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

> **" The Commissioner on Access to Information and Personal Data Protection received 956 complaints in 2023 about government institutions not providing access to public information, 41 percent of which came from journalists, 38 percent from citizens, and 18 percent from civil society groups, with the rest from attorneys.**

Panelists said people in Albania have adequate access to channels of information. The country's information and communication technology infrastructure ensures access for most people, but it does not necessarily foster inclusivity. In poorer, remote areas, people might face financial and physical barriers, while some marginalized groups lack the money or know-how to access such infrastructure.

Panelists said social norms do not hinder access to information, but they said some groups' low digital and media-literacy skills hamper their ability to properly access information channels. Panelists also said people with disabilities need more help getting access to the country's ITC infrastructure.

Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for government information.

Panelists said Albania's freedom of information law is in line with international standards, but it is poorly enforced.

The Commissioner on Access to Information and Personal Data Protection received 956 complaints in 2023 about government institutions not providing access to public information, 41 percent of which came from journalists, 38 percent from citizens, and 18 percent from civil society groups, with the rest from attorneys, marking a slight decrease from the previous year.

In 2023, lawmakers stiffened penalties for officials who flout the law, but panelists said compliance remains poor.

Officials continue to resist journalists' calls to close the gap between laws on access to public information and how they are implemented, noting that there was further deterioration in implementation in 2023. Decisions by the commissioner on access to information and personal data protection, to whom they can appeal when their information requests are ignored or denied, take some time. Journalists can also turn to the administrative court, but either way, the appeals process takes time and is not always successful, leading many to give up or lose interest.

Panelists expressed particular concern about the unresponsiveness of Albania's institutions of justice to requests for information.

Spokespeople for government institutions are widely considered unreliable, serving more as government mouthpieces than providers of public information. Panelists said they are selective in responding to information requests, particularly ignoring matters of great public interest.

Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow.

Albanian audiovisual media ownership law seeks to limit what percentage of a broadcast entity can be owned by a single person or company by further restricting an investor's stake in multiple broadcasters and to some extent limiting the share of the broadcast media advertising market that a media company might occupy. The law also requires public disclosure of ownership, although some owners sidestep that requirement by using a series of holding companies. As a result, media ownership remains highly concentrated in Albania. BIRN's 2023 edition of its Media Ownership Monitor for Albania noted that "the

free to air TV market has a high audience concentration risk, with four major owners reaching an audience share of 86.94 percent" as of May 2023 and controlling 72 percent of revenues.

Panelists noted that the ownership, transparency, and financing of online media remain unregulated. The spectrum allocation process wrapped up in 2018, with little to no disruption since.

Panelists said the public typically does not know who owns the media they consume, whether because of owners' efforts to remain anonymous or because most people do not know how to use national public databases, such as the Commercial Register and the Beneficial Ownership Register, which provide information on media ownership.
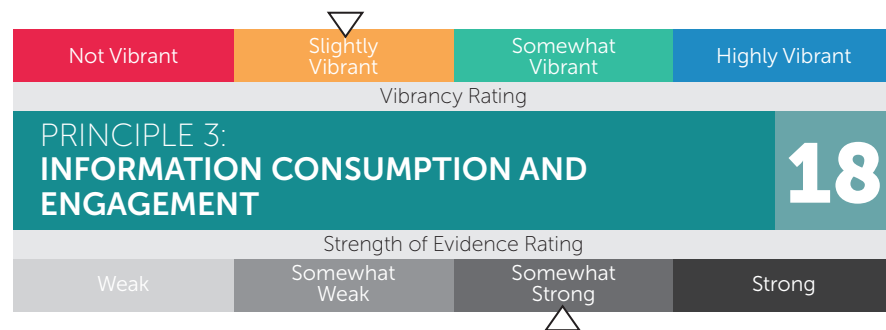
> **Panelists said the public typically does not know who owns the media they consume, whether because of owners' efforts to remain anonymous or because most people do not know how to use national public databases, such as the Commercial Register and the Beneficial Ownership Register, which provide information on media ownership.**

Public service media serves all members of the public. Panelists said in recent years it has become more independent, offering better-quality, educational content. Still, its leadership by a former functionary of the governing Socialist Party of Albania raises concern about its editorial stances, one panelist said. Albanian and European journalists' associations cried foul in July over what they called new director Alfred Peza's "arbitrary" dismissals of 10 members of the public broadcaster's editorial staff.

Internet service providers neither throttle nor give priority to any particular clients or traffic. Some telecommunications companies, however, use zero-rating programs, which provide priority access to certain types of traffic or applications.

Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.

Far from being independent, panelists strongly agreed that media organizations blatantly further the political and financial interests

of their owners, who also operate in various industries, such as construction, real estate, or banking, or in public-private partnerships.

The European Commission concurs. It lamented in its 2023 evaluation of Albania's progress toward EU membership that "the intersection of business and political interests, the lack of transparency of sources of finance, the concentration of media ownership, intimidation, and precarious working conditions continued to hamper media independence, pluralism, and the quality of journalism."

The choice in 2023 of Peza, a former lawmaker and top official from the Socialist Party of Albania, to lead the public Albanian Radio and Television was hotly contested. "In the context of Albania's media landscape, where the struggle for media freedom is ongoing, the impartiality of the public broadcasting service carries significant weight, as in principle it plays a crucial role in strengthening democratic processes," the Safe Journalist Network wrote in an open letter to the leader of a parliamentary committee. The network also questioned the integrity of the process and Peza's eligibility for the job.

Finally, while panelists acknowledged that members of the media-regulatory body are politically appointed, they were split on how neutral and effective it is. Some accused it of foot-dragging, while others said its decisions are not marred by the politicization that pervades most of the country's public life.

Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant ▽	Somewhat Vibrant	Highly Vibrant

Vibrancy Rating

PRINCIPLE 3: INFORMATION CONSUMPTION AND ENGAGEMENT	18

Strength of Evidence Rating

Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong ▲	Strong

Albania has adequate regulations on privacy protections and cybersecurity, but implementation lags. The law on personal data

protection aligns with the EU's General Data Protection Regulation but is not yet in force. Incidents of cybercrime spiked in 2023, while the media are poorly protected and practice poor digital hygiene.

Although the country has taken steps to become more media literate, efforts should be better coordinated and institutionalized to counter a worsening trend. Generally, Albanians can exercise their freedom of speech and right to access information, especially since digital tools allow for the free expression of opinions, independent from structured dialogues.

Media engagement with the audience is lacking, with a focus on metrics rather than a deep dive into the nature and needs of the audience. In this media landscape, sensationalism prevails over substantive, educational content. Community media, while vital for local engagement, struggle to stay afloat and rely primarily on inconsistent donor support.

Panelists gave Indicator 15, on community media, the highest score in Principle 3. They said that, although few, community media serve the needs of locals by producing local content, addressing specific issues pertinent to their audiences. Indicator 12 on media literacy, on the other hand, took the lowest score in Principle 3, with most of the panel saying that measures to address media and information literacy remain poor. They noted the country's dropping down a spot from its already-low ranking in the Open Society Institute's European Media Literacy Index for 2023.

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

Panelists agreed that existing regulations are adequate, but implementation remains an issue. The law on personal data protection aligns with the GDPR, but it has yet to enter into force.

Incidents of cybercrime rose by 40 percent over 2022, according to the Ministry of Interior, which recorded 764 offenses. Investigators could identify the culprits in 54 percent of cases. More than two-thirds of cases involved forgery or computer-tampering, with the others involving fraud

or child pornography. Those numbers are likely an undercount, as most panelists said much cybercrime, particularly targeting the media, goes unreported.

In 2023 banks were a prime target. In addition, a telecommunications operator suffered a major cyberattack and the websites of public institutions, including the parliament and the High Inspectorate of Declaration and Control of Assets and Conflict of Interest, were hit with distributed-denial-of-service attacks.

Panelists said that while some larger media have dedicated IT staff and have taken steps to secure their digital assets, many smaller outlets lack the resources and infrastructure to adequately protect against digital threats.

Still, Bino Blerjana, of SCiDEV and the SafeJournalists Network, said both large and small media organizations need better "cybersecurity cultures," and panelists noted that all types of outlets suffered distributed-denial-of-service attacks in 2023.

"Digital security is the Achille's heel of the new media in Albania," said Lufti Dervishi, the journalism lecturer. "There's a strong need for digital literacy and a growing need for journalists to be trained in digital security."

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

Panelists were divided over the state of media literacy in Albania. Some noted the government's introduction of elective courses on media and information literacy at the university and pre-university levels, although they acknowledge these efforts leave out older Albanians.

Other panelists deemed the government's efforts inadequate and said it had focused more on digital literacy. "The biggest effort in addressing

media and information literacy is being made by civil society," Besar Likmeta, editor-in-chief of Reporter.al, said.

Panelists said there is no data on the use of fact-checking websites in the country, but they believe that most people do not take advantage of those types of digital tools for media literacy. Albania fell back a place on the 2023 European Media Literacy Index, to 38th among 41 countries.

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

Panelists agreed that journalists and activists exercise their freedom of speech and their right to access information. Some also said the general public exercises those same rights, especially as digital tools allow them to freely express opinions, independent of structured dialogues.

There are repercussions for those who exercise their right of speech, who become targeted by hate speech, or end up being subject to strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs).

Television shows that host topical discussions give the misleading impression of an open debate, but participants invariably represent certain groups driven by financial or political interests.

Finally, one panelist complained that academia stays out of the discussion even on issues of great public interest.

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

Panelists agreed that Albanian media do a poor job of trying to understand their audiences. Qualitative research is rare, with outlets focusing rather on the size of their audiences, while quantitative research is overshadowed by numbers rather than content quality.

> **"Digital security is the Achille's heel of the new media in Albania," said Lufti Dervishi, the journalism lecturer. "There's a strong need for digital literacy and a growing need for journalists to be trained in digital security."**

Major broadcast media have the tools to measure viewership, especially of certain prime-time shows. Smart TVs and other integrated devices have helped, said Geri Emiri, founder of Amfora.al, a website focusing on Albanian culture and history.

Online media use analytics tools, which "allow us to measure audience engagement with certain articles, which in turn allows us to adapt our strategies to reach wider audiences and increase the time they spend on our page," said Sami Curri, a freelance journalist and founder of BI Media, which covers a region in the northeast.

Albanian media's main shortcoming, a panelist said, is that they focus on clicks, rather than on educating the public, and are less selective about their content. They are full of daily news updates, entertainment, or political coverage, ignoring the needs of the audiences.

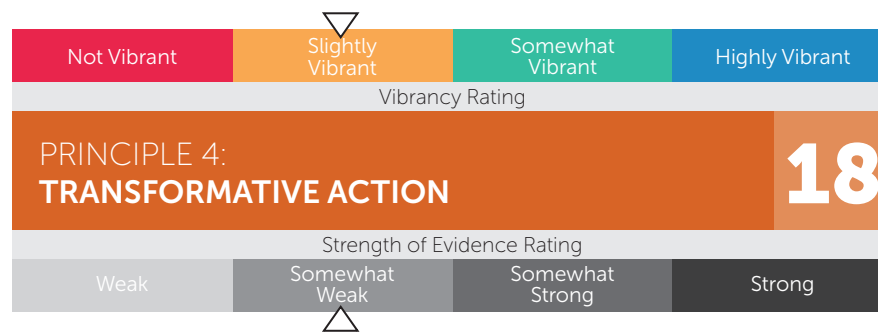Local news gets little to no coverage in national media.

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

Panelists said Albania has community media, but they disagreed about what that meant. Some pointed to the definition of the term in Albanian law to mean the media of religious communities, which have their own radio stations. Others said the country has community media, even under the definition used by VIBE. They pointed to online media that serve specific audiences and cover topics neglected by mainstream media.

Though few, community media serve local needs by producing local content, addressing issues pertinent to their audiences, and serving as watchdogs and advocates for community interests. They rarely disseminate information intended to harm.

Community media's main challenge is funding, as local donations are negligible, and they must rely on donor support.

Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant	Somewhat Vibrant	Highly Vibrant

Vibrancy Rating

PRINCIPLE 4: TRANSFORMATIVE ACTION	18

Strength of Evidence Rating

Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong	Strong

Albania's few nonpartisan news sources are easily swamped by media outlets serving their owners' financial and political interests. As a result, the public's views on political and social issues are rarely shaped by quality information. Mainly, people are confined within information bubbles or echo chambers on digital platforms, relying heavily on television and government or party sources for news, particularly during elections.

Civil society organizations in Albania strive to use and distribute quality information to advance their missions and combat information-manipulation. There's little civic engagement in Albania, and groups with a stake in decisions usually have little chance to provide input. Most activism happens in major cities, despite some active grassroots initiatives.

> **Qualitative research is rare, with outlets focusing rather on the size of their audiences, while quantitative research is overshadowed by numbers rather than content quality.**

The government rarely uses quality information in making policy, which is typically done behind closed doors. Exposes of corruption or rights violations get a tepid reaction from officials, except when heads of agencies respond by attacking the press.

Panelists gave Indicator 18 (civil society's use of information) the highest score in Principle 4, for civil society's dissemination of quality information to the public. Indicator 19 (government's use of information) received the lowest score in Principle 4, for decision-making processes based on political interests and marked by a lack of transparency.

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

Panelists agreed that the influence and political affiliations of mainstream media owners largely determine the quality and variety of information that gets disseminated in Albania. In effect, most people consume a media diet made up largely of propaganda. Only social media offers space for more freewheeling discussions.

While panelists agreed that a small number of nonpartisan media exist, they said there is no data on audience size or engagement for these outlets country's few nonpartisan media. "Our society is a polarized one, where debate is limited and opinions are standard, while facts remain subject to interpretation," Dervishi said.

Panelists said there is a need for research on media consumption habits in the country.

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

Panelists said people's views on political or social issues are not shaped by quality information. In digital platforms, people have segregated into information bubbles or echo chambers.

For most people, television remains the main source of information, while the main sources of news are the government or political parties. Even during elections, people rely on what is disseminated by parties, although, one panelist said, there is a lack of research on what, exactly, sways voting behavior. Notably, some media use live campaign broadcasts, which fall outside regulations for either advertising or news coverage, to showcase their favored candidates, one panelist said.

The lack of media literacy and scarcity of quality information extends to some of the choices people make for their health. Albania has a robust market, propped up by infomercials, for supplements and other substances that fall outside drug regulations. While these products do not necessarily pose a threat to public health, they do pose a threat to people's pocketbooks.

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

Panelists agreed that civil society groups use quality news and information to explain their mission or objectives. They share reliable information with the public and do not pass on bad information. Nevertheless, a panelist pointed out that while ordinary people might work with local grassroots groups, they are less aware of the work of larger civil society organizations in Tirana.

A panelist said civil society organizations generally give sound advice and recommendations. Still, their effectiveness is limited by government agencies' lack of cooperation and resistance to calls for transparency. The European Commission has repeatedly nudged Albanian officials to give civil society more support and more input in policy discussions.

Collaboration is also limited between media and civil society, although research is lacking on the subject, panelists said. Some panelists said advocacy organizations tend to work with the media on issues such as the environment and human rights, often as a condition of donor grants, but another said few civil society activists are vocal about violations of certain groups' rights or about corruption cases.

Civic engagement in Albania is absent in many key government decisions. This, too, is an area where the European Commission has urged the country to do better, calling the landscape for activism

> **" Panelists agreed that the influence and political affiliations of mainstream media owners largely determine the quality and variety of information that gets disseminated in Albania. In effect, most people consume a media diet made up largely of propaganda.**

"fragmented, dependent on donors, and concentrated in the main cities, although grassroots initiatives are active on some community-based issues."

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

Indicator 19 is the lowest ranked of Principle 4, with overall agreement that the government does not use quality information in making policy. Rather, political interests typically drive decision-making, which is done out of the public eye. A recent example was Albania's controversial agreement with Italy to host asylum seekers arriving in Italy while their cases are adjudicated, of which the government released only sections rather than the entire text.

The government uses press conferences to communicate decisions and points of view while reining in journalists to frustrate their attempts to hold officials accountable. Reporters are often limited to asking about predetermined topics rather than about topics of public interest. The prime minister himself often restricts journalists by giving non-answers or refusing to address certain topics. Although government agencies started holding more press conferences in 2023, they are no more enlightening than ever.

Opinions and rumor, rather than facts and evidence, dominate Albania's public discourse. The government uses its own data, interpreted in its own interest, to justify its actions, regardless of the facts. "Government actors rely more on propaganda than on evidence or facts," a panelist said.

The government's interactions with civil society organizations amount to window-dressing rather than sincere attempts at reform or to seek advice or information.

> " **Panelists said that instead of calling for reform, officials target journalists who uncover wrongdoing, such as when the mayor of Tirana verbally attacked journalist Ola Xama or revealed the identities of the owners of two prominent social media accounts, infringing on personal data protection.**

Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic rights

Panelists agreed that the government makes little to no effort to respond to media exposés of corruption or rights violations, resulting in a persistent gap between the issues that are surfaced and subsequent governmental accountability. For example, Geri Emiri, the Amfora.al founder, noted, "When corruption cases are made public, we don't see any public procurement cases suspended."

Panelists said that instead of calling for reform, officials target journalists who uncover wrongdoing, such as when the mayor of Tirana verbally attacked journalist Ola Xama (see Indicator 6) or revealed the identities of the owners of two prominent social media accounts, infringing personal data protection. "There is an antimedia rhetoric in Albania, where each actor tries to legitimize their position," said panelist Valbona Sulce, a media researcher and freelance journalist, "The government has persistently delegitimized any information coming from investigations by attacking journalists, owners, etc."

While panelists did not give much consideration to the question of whether quality information affects election results in Albania, one panelist said election coverage is essentially framed by politicians and parties, in the form of prepackaged reports and press releases, rather than reporters. Emiri added that although there is some serious reporting during elections, it is dwarfed by new online media, boosterish coverage of good news, and reports from campaign events. Civil society groups and independent media provide unbiased content during elections, albeit within the conditions set by their donors.

LIST OF PANEL PARTICIPANTS

Blerjana Bino, executive director, Center Science and Innovation for Development (SCiDEV); expert, SafeJournalists, Tirana

Erjon Curraj, digital transformation expert, Tirana

Sami Curri, freelance journalist and founder of BI Media, Bulqize

Lutfi Dervishi, media specialist and journalism lecturer, Tirana

Geri Emiri, founder, Amfora.al, Durres

Besar Likmeta, editor-in-chief, Reporter.al, Tirana

Ornela Liperi, editor-in-chief, Monitor.al, Tirana

Klevin Muka, journalist and anchor, News34

Valbona Sulce, media researcher and freelance journalist, Tirana

Kristina Voko, executive director, BIRN Albania, Tirana

BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

Vibrant
Information
Barometer

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VIBRANCY

	Overall Score	Information Quality	Multiple Channels	Consumption & Engagement	Transformative Action
2021	18	16	18	18	18
2022	17	16	17	18	16
2023	19	18	21	19	18
2024	18	17	19	18	18

Highly Vibrant — Somewhat Vibrant — Slightly Vibrant — Not Vibrant

PRINCIPLES

Not Vibrant (0-10): Quality information is extremely limited in this country. The vast majority of it is not editorially independent, not based on facts, or it is intended to harm. People do not have the rights, means, or capacity to access a wide range of information; they do not recognize or reject misinformation; and they cannot or do not make choices on what types of information they want to engage with.

Slightly Vibrant (11-20): Quality information is available on a few topics or geographies in this country, but not all. While some information is editorially independent, there is still a significant amount of misinformation, malinformation, and hate speech in circulation, and it does influence public discourse. Most people do not recognize or reject misinformation.

Somewhat Vibrant (21-30): Quality information is available in this country and most of it is editorially independent, based on facts, and not intended to harm. Most people have the rights, means, and capacity to access a wide range of information, although some do not. Most people recognize and reject misinformation, although some do not.

Highly Vibrant (31-40): Quality information is widely available in this country. People have the rights, means, and capacity to access a wide range of information; they recognize and reject misinformation.

OVERALL
SCORE

18

The year 2023 was marked by attempts to enforce increasingly repressive legislation aimed at curtailing media freedoms and stifling freedom of expression in Bosnia and Herzegovina (B&H). In Republika Srpska (RS), one of the two entities in B&H, authorities enacted amendments to the Criminal Code, reinstating libel as a criminal offence, despite the protests from journalists, international organizations, and CSOs urging against such measures. RS authorities adopted a draft law on non-profit organizations that would further discriminate against and stigmatize CSOs receiving foreign funding, while a new Law on Freedom to Access Information regarding B&H Institutions entered into force at the state level.
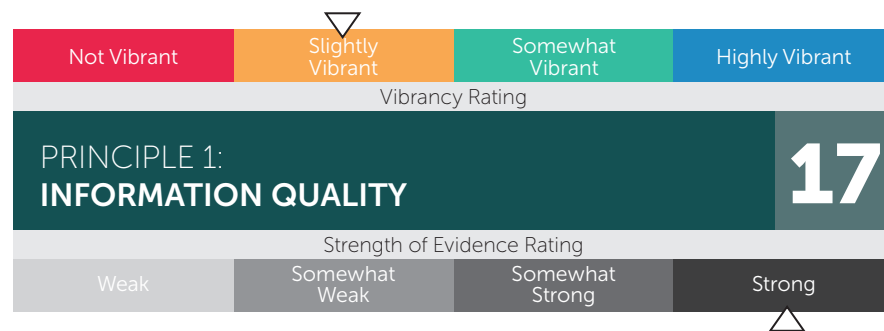
Other challenges facing the media sector include: the severe financial crisis experienced by the state-level public service broadcaster (BHRT) towards the end of the year; the prevalence of aggressive verbal attacks targeting journalists; and a femicide case which shook the nation after it was livestreamed on Instagram, along with a surge in acts of violence against women, which spurred protests in multiple towns.

After the General Elections in 2022, state and entity-level legislative and executive bodies were established by May 2023. The Council of Ministers formed in January 2023, backed by a ruling coalition. The Council began to implement measures to adopt EU reforms following the country's attainment of EU candidate status at the end of 2022.

Politicians from RS frequently resorted to divisive rhetoric and advocated for the secession of the entity from B&H.

The Constitutional Court suspended several legal and political acts by RS, whose leadership was determined to enforce such laws, thereby breaching the constitutional order of the country. The RS Assembly passed legislation permitting the non-publication of decisions made by the High Representative and the non-implementation of Constitutional Court rulings.

B&H's country score dropped a point from the 2023 VIBE study, with decreases in all principles, except for Principle 4 (Transformative Action) which remained at its 2023 level. Panelists expressed the view that media freedoms are under threat and showing signs of deterioration; they also observed increased polarization due to political influence in the media sector. The production, spread, consumption, and use of information is divided along ethno-national and political lines. Media outlets that breach ethical standards do not face any consequences, and there is an urgent need to secure financial and operational independence of the Communication Regulatory Agency (CRA). The advertising market is weak, and journalists are inadequately paid, while high ranking political leaders are increasingly using press conferences and social media accounts to attack journalists and to lower the public's trust in independent media reporting. During 2023, there were numerous online scams, including identity theft for advertising purposes, and media outlets experience regular cyber attacks. The country urgently needs to adopt a media ownership transparency law, a strategic approach to improve media and information literacy, and secure independent and sustainable financing of the public service broadcasters.

Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant	Somewhat Vibrant	Highly Vibrant

Vibrancy Rating

PRINCIPLE 1: INFORMATION QUALITY   **17**

Strength of Evidence Rating

Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong	Strong

The media report on a variety of topics, mostly focusing on current local and regional social and political events. However, the coverage frequently lacks crucial context and background information. Despite numerous breaches of ethical standards and the spread of manipulative information aimed at deceiving the public, the media often operate without facing consequences. Instances of hate speech and smear campaigns online are rarely addressed and are often overlooked, with no indictments initiated by the end of 2023 for the glorification of war criminals or denial of genocide.

Panelists rated Indicator 1, quality of information, with the highest score (21) in the principle, due to the variety of sources and topics and the presence of media outlets dedicated to serving the public interest. Indicator 5 received the lowest score (11) of this principle, due to several factors including poor marketing revenues, low salaries in the media industry and a lack of transparency in media financing from public budgets, where media financing frequently dictates editorial policies. BHRT, the state-level public service broadcaster, continues to be mired, in a dire political situation.

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

Panelists agreed that the infrastructure supporting the production of varied content is adequate; however, access to resources for content production is unequal between urban and rural areas. In addition to over

ten university-level departments offering journalism and communication studies, CSOs provide sporadic short-term professional training courses for journalists. Borka Rudić, secretary general of the BH Journalists Association, highlighted the increase in training courses for journalists compared to previous years, especially after the criminalization of libel in RS led to more foreign funding allocated for journalists' protection.

Elvira Aganović, a journalist from the city of Goražde, affirmed there were adequate trainings for professional journalists, but noted that "larger cities have an advantage over rural areas, which also affects the quality of information." The editor of eTrafika in Banja Luka, Vanja Stokić, noted that professional training courses are mostly attended by the same group of media workers, since most journalists believe that they do not require any further education.

The media in B&H, as in previous years, reports on a variety of topics, mostly focused on current local and regional social and political events. Reporting, however, often lacks in-depth context and background information. This is especially evident in online media coverage of global events, where the contribution of foreign news agencies plays an important role. A recent article published by Mediacentar Sarajevo showed that media coverage of international news, such as the wars in Ukraine and Gaza, is influenced by the foreign news agencies that the media use as sources. Azem Kurtić, a Balkan Insight journalist, noted different stances in the country's media coverage of the war in Gaza: the media in RS affiliated with the leading political party showed more favorable reporting towards Israel, whereas those in the Federation of B&H likened the war in Gaza to the war that occurred in B&H from 1992 to 1995.

In 2023, B&H was struck by numerous femicide cases, as well as other acts of violence against women, and a mass shooting in an elementary school in Belgrade in Serbia in May, which received extensive media coverage throughout the whole region. Online media and anonymous online portals frequently violated ethical standards in their coverage of these cases. They published sensationalistic details and unverified information that were not in the public interest, used inappropriate terms and descriptions, insinuated motives for violence and disclosed

the name of the underage perpetrator in the case of the school mass shooting. According to Tijana Cvjetićanin, editor at the fact-checking platform Raskrinkavanje, these cases "demonstrated a total lack of respect, not only for professional standards, but for the victims involved in situations such as these."

A group of more than fifty journalists signed a letter of appeal, in November 2023, calling journalists and media outlets to respect ethical standards in the media coverage of femicide and violence against women. However, none of the media outlets faced any consequences, such as loss of membership to professional bodies. "The most devastating thing is that journalists who grossly violate professional standards face no sanctions, not even a 'reprimand' from professional associations," expressed Stokić.

> **Journalists report on the words and actions of political representatives, but many do so by publishing their speeches without conducting any research or providing a critique.**

Journalists report on the words and actions of political representatives, but many do so by publishing their speeches without conducting any research or providing a critique. Some panelists felt that political pressure on the media increased in 2023. Damir Đapo, director at television channel RTV Slon from Tuzla, said that independent media outlets are practically non-existent. Media outlets financed through subsidies and grants from public budgets are often beholden to the ruling political parties, and, therefore, according to Đapo, this leads to increasing affiliations between media outlets and specific political agendas. "In the online media space, we note a large number of portals created by parties that only serve political purposes," *Đapo* stated.

N1 television station, a CNN International affiliate, refused to broadcast an investigative TV report on the leader of the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) political party, Dragan Čović, stating that the report did not meet their standards. Panelists believed that this decision was made after the outlet was placed under political pressure. Boro Kontić, director of Mediacentar Sarajevo, said that self-censorship driven by the fear of losing marketing revenue is widespread among media outlets in the country, but this case was particularly significant because N1 is one

of the rare media companies that is financially sustainable. "We never received an honest explanation from that media outlet as to why that film documentary was removed," Rudić explained.

Despite the prevalence of biased reporting, there have been no consequences faced by the media. Azra Maslo-- program standards coordinator at the CRA, B&H's regulator for television and radio broadcasters--said that there are cases in which its rules were not violated but may still raise questions regarding professional and ethical journalism standards. The most frequently violated regulation of the CRA over the past three years was the right to reply. Panelists believed that the regulator, however, should respond and sanction other gross breaches of professional standards, such as violations of fairness and impartiality. Maida Bahto Kestendžić, project coordinator of the Press Council, self-regulatory body for print and online media, said that despite the growing pressure, media still manage to adhere to the main principles of professional standards.

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

Manipulative information is disseminated in the mainstream media and via different types of content producers for commercial interests, and to spread political propaganda, in certain cases. Maslo observed that, while professional content producers typically consult relevant sources and publish verified information, maintaining objectivity in their reporting is not always guaranteed. According to Maslo, false and misleading information spread by professional content producers is not published intentionally but is disseminated because journalists do not evaluate the credibility of their sources and do not fact-check information. Aganović said that due to the fast-paced nature of news production and the pressure to publish exclusive information first, journalists often fail to consult adequate sources or resort to copying and pasting content without verification.

Panelists noted that professional media, notably referring to the RS public service broadcaster Radio Television of Republika Srpska (RTRS), have been intentionally publishing manipulative information to deceive the public. "The public service sector is the biggest concern when it comes to knowingly misleading the audience. Most media outlets do not do that, but the problem is the public service broadcaster's extensive reach", explained Stokić.

The repercussions for spreading such content are minimal. The CRA's Code on Program Content does not include a specific definition of manipulative information but contains provisions emphasizing accurate, unbiased, and fair media reporting, which are rarely applied. The effort to combat manipulative information has mainly relied on self-regulation mechanisms.

The Code of the Press Council stipulates that transmitting manipulative information from another media source does not absolve editors of their responsibility. Journalists and editors, however, justify the publication of manipulative information by citing limited capacities and a small workforce, which hinders their ability to fact-check all content. Maslo states that the level of awareness regarding the principles of self-regulation and responsibility is at an all-time low. A recent study on media self-regulation in B&H showed that self-regulation is especially ineffective when it comes to anonymous online portals, which lack any kind of editorial responsibility. However, according to the same study some journalists are more cautious when publishing content, knowing that manipulative information can reduce the reach of their content on Facebook.

Kurtić emphasized that journalists need to fact-check information coming from official resources as they also sometimes spread manipulative information. Following the recent arrests of the former director of B&H's State Intelligence Agency, Osman Mehmedagić, and the state's court president, Ranko Debevac, for suspected abuse of office, B&H's minister of security, Nenad Nešić, informed the media that lawyer Senka Nožica had also been arrested –which later proved to be false. The fact-checking platform Raskrinkavanje debunks content online, but fact-checking official resources remains a difficult task for journalists due to lack of transparency, difficulty in accessing information and lack of time.

Manipulative information, according to Kurtić, also comes from foreign actors, such as the Russian government that targets the audience in RS. Russia Today, for example, aired a documentary titled "Bosnia and Herzegovina: Rise of the Caliphate," which denies certain facts about the war in 1992-1995. The documentary claims that there has been a push within the country to establish an Islamic caliphate and alleges that foreign states, specifically the US and the UK, have been conspiring against the Serbs. Such claims, according to an analysis by the media outlet Detektor, are similar to those propagated by the leading political parties in RS.

Media outlets do not generally moderate user-generated content that contains manipulative information. Influencer Josip Milanović said that there are examples of manipulative information being disseminated by social media users, bloggers, YouTubers and influences, even though they are requested not to.

The fact-checking platform Raskrinkavanje debunked numerous examples of false and misleading content in 2023, from manipulative information on vaccines to the wars in Ukraine and Gaza. In 2023, numerous fake interviews featuring purportedly real doctors and individuals claiming miraculous recoveries from serious illnesses were published online, aimed at promoting products and drugs. Those who promoted unregistered drugs and products did not face any legal consequences.

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

Despite frequent genocide and war crime denials and instances of glorification of war criminals, 2023 saw no indictments that were initiated based on the amendments to the Criminal Code that were introduced in 2021.

Hate speech trials continue to be very rare, with a large percentage resulting in acquittals, and there have been no indictments against high-ranking politicians. Journalists filed complaints with the prosecutor's office for online smear campaigns against them, but the intimidation of journalists and other individuals, including representatives of certain political parties, has continued. "It is sad that explicit hate speech remains unprosecuted, whether disseminated by the media through statements of politicians or spread by so-called unprofessional content producers on social networks," explained Rudić.

Aganović asserted that mal-information and hate speech are present on social networks and in user-generated comments. Some online media have established better moderation mechanisms for user-generated hate speech, but in many cases such content remains visible online.

In August 2023, the murder of a woman from a town in B&H was livestreamed on Instagram by her partner, inciting hate speech comments and sparking outrage from many women's organizations. The video of the murder remained online for three hours before its removal, subsequently being shared on other platforms and clearly exposing the complete ineffectiveness of content moderation. Aiming to prevent the spread of harmful content and to safeguard freedom of expression, a group of CSOs and experts formed a Coalition for Freedom of Expression and Content Moderation in 2023, which will act as a mediator for social media companies. The Coalition has already established contacts with several social networks.

According to Maslo, professional media outlets do not intend to propagate hate speech. Still, malicious information circulates, sourced from politicians and government representatives. Panelist Bahto Kestendžić agrees the main sources of hate speech are public figures and government representatives, while media reporting strives to adhere to professional standards.

Prominent political leaders--primarily the president of RS, Milorad Dodik, and the mayor of the city of Banja Luka, Draško Stanivuković--spread inflammatory speech against the LGBTQ+ community prior to the physical assault of LGBTQ+ activitists by a group of hooligans in Banja Luka in March 2023. The Organizing Committee of BH Pride said that the attack constituted a hate crime based on sexual orientation and gender indentity and that it was targeted, deliberate, and organized. "The attack was preceded by the media campaign that targeted the LGBTQ+ community, in which RTRS, extremist groups, and politicians actively participated," explained Stokić. During the assault, the police did not protect the activists and, by the end of 2023, no one was found guilty or responsible.

Mersad Gušić, editor at Klix.ba, highlighted that statements claiming Sarajevo is not a safe city for Serbs intensified during the Sarajevo trial that charged Dodik, president of RS, with defying the rulings of the High Representative. Such statements regarding the city's safety are unfounded and, according to Gušić, cultivate a sense of insecurity. Kontić commented that similar sentiments were broadcast prior to the war in 1992 and that he saw these statements as a sign of pre-war tension.

> " **Inclusive media reporting is sporadic and most media cover minority issues only to mark certain anniversaries or special events.**

Rudić claims that the news content of RTRS regularly contains fabricated and malicious information: "It is no longer just an isolated incident, a one-off news report or the mistake of a journalist or editor; it is now part of their editorial policy that is not sanctioned by the CRA".

Dejan Petrović, journalist from BHRT, said that the reactions of the CRA regarding malicious media content are inadequate and that the regulator should be more independent. In 2023, BHRT was criticized for spreading hate speech and slander against Dodik after one of their guests said that the citizens in RS needed to act. The broadcaster was required to send a recording of the show to the regulator. However, no further actions have since been taken. Petrović claims that the regulator is highly selective when it comes to processing cases.

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

There are multiple news sources; however, this abundance stems from general political and ethno-national polarization rather than genuine media diversity. Many traditional media sources broadcast the views of one ethno-national group and the ideologies of their political leaders. These news sources often lack a diversity of views and stances.

According to Kurtić, inclusive media reporting is sporadic and most media cover minority issues only to mark certain anniversaries or special events. More inclusive and in-depth reporting on minorities can be found in specialized media, mainly via online websites of non-profit organizations which advocate for their rights. Stokić commented that the media is willing to mention certain groups while others are ignored: "Everyone readily supports and reports on sick children, pregnant women, their own ethno-national groups, and the socially vulnerable. However, certain groups are only mentioned to be blamed or harmed, such as the LGBTQ+ community and migrants." According to her, homeless people, and the issues they face are rarely reported in the media.

More voices can be heard on social networks and, according to Milanović, there are both positive and negative examples. Kurtić, however, raised concerns about certain podcasts that are led by people who lack sensitivity regarding minority issues and therefore cause more harm than good.

The CRA requires the public service broadcaster to air programs intended for members of national minorities for at least one hour per week, ensuring equal representation is considered. However, Petrović said that the public service broadcaster struggles to meet this mandate due to the lack of financial resources and a shortage of staff with specific expertise. Additionally, while BHRT has started broadcasting national news on weekends with a sign language interpreter, Petrović explained that there are very few sign language interpreters in the country, making it difficult for media to offer them competitive salaries.

In 2023, the public service broadcaster also provided live coverage of the BH Pride March for the first time. However, Petrović highlighted that there were comments of disapproval among the employees. BHRT faced issues persuading representatives of certain institutions to participate in the program but, overall, the initiative of live broadcasting was a step forward for the broadcaster.

According to data provided by the CRA, out of the 266 radio and television stations in the country in 2023, 30.8 percent of directors and 41.7 percent of editors-in-chief are women. Women are directors of 24.1 percent of all television stations and 35.7 percent of all radio stations. These figures remain similar to those of previous years, and the CRA representatives want to see improvements in these statistics.

Due to numerous of femicide cases and acts of gender-based violence, combined with the efforts of CSOs and media organizations, violence against women was a more frequently reported topic in 2023. Research was carried out on topics such as prevention and protection mechanisms, police work, the use of illegal firearms, the role of safe houses, and, together with CSOs more pressure was placed on institutions to provide adequate prevention and protection. Mediacentar Sarajevo, for example, organized an internship for journalist students that focused on media reporting of gender-based violence and the organization also published many educative articles on the topic.

Bahto Kestendžić stated that it is important to back CSOs so they have a greater capacity to report on violations of human rights in the media and also non-professional media reporting, especially since they tend to be more aware of what constitutes human rights violations.

Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced.

The main sources of revenue for the media come from public budgets, marketing, and foreign donors. Panelists stated that subsidies and grants from municipalities and towns, along with commercial contracts with public enterprises, are being allocated to the media but in a non-transparent manner. There is no available information in recent years regarding the sums involved.
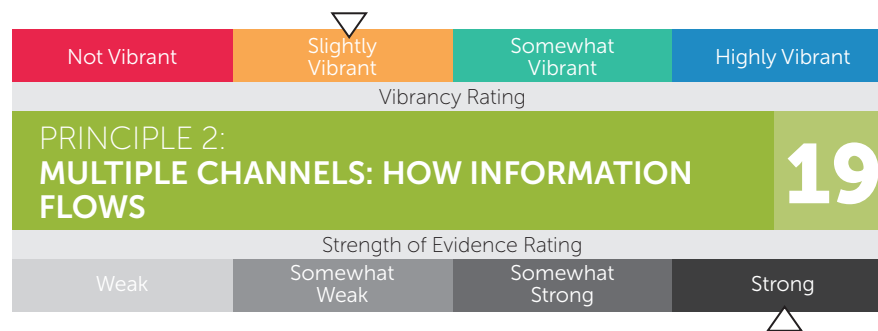
Petrović criticized local governments for their commercial contracts with local media, which are used to ensure favorable reporting on the activities of the mayor and the local assembly. According to Đapo, commercial media outlets are confronted with a poor, instable advertising market, which still suffers the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine. Đapo also stated that marketing revenue had further eroded this year due to inflation and higher prices. Senad Zaimović, director of the marketing agency Fabrika, explained that large companies opt to advertise their products on the television stations of neighboring countries due to the limited reach of B&H TV stations. He also highlighted the issue of inadequate audience measurement data in recent years.

Marketing revenues have also migrated online, where advertisement prices are lower and audiences are larger. Cvjetićanin reminded panelists of the impact social media companies have had on the advertising market and the need to regulate content curation and give precedence to quality media reporting. Kurtić highlighted the support given by foreign donors, embassies, and international organizations that are also directly supporting the media in B&H, with Rudić adding that a large amount of donor support is still being allocated to CSOs and trainings. However, Petrović felt that media outlets lack the expertise that would allow them to participate in certain projects.

Kurtić, conversely, pointed out that media outlets need to diversify their streams of revenue to achieve financial resilience. Only a few media outlets in the country have experimented with crowd funding and subscriptions despite these funding methods gaining popularity.

As the year came to an end, BHRT and the entity-level broadcaster, FTV, refused to sign the yearly agreement with the Public Enterprise Electric Utility of B&H for the collection of citizens fees, due to a disagreement regarding the allocation of funds. The Independent Syndicate of Workers of BHRT held press conferences to communicate the state public service broadcaster's dire financial situation. They emphasized low salaries, outdated equipment, and warned of the imminent risk of the broadcaster shutting down within months. In 2024, the Council of Ministers decided to allocate €2 million ($2.1 million) to the state

broadcaster; however, independent experts believe that this issue requires a sustainable solution. One of the reasons for this struggle that has remained unchanged for years is that entity broadcasters, RTRS and FTV, do not allocate portions of subscription fees and marketing revenue to the state-level broadcaster, as required by law.

Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant	Somewhat Vibrant	Highly Vibrant

Vibrancy Rating

PRINCIPLE 2:
MULTIPLE CHANNELS: HOW INFORMATION FLOWS
19

Strength of Evidence Rating

Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong	Strong

Reinstating libel as a criminal offence and the adoption of other laws in RS will undoubtedly have an impact on media freedoms and freedom of expression. The draft "foreign agents" law that was passed in RS will lead to discrimination against and stigmatization of NGOs receiving foreign funding. The new law on the freedom to access information at the state level has been strongly criticized as it contains numerous exemptions for B&H institutions. During 2023, journalists suffered numerous verbal attacks and threats, including during press conferences.

Panelists rated Indicator 7 covering adequate access to information with the highest score of the principle (26) due to existing laws and some journalists reporting positive experiences regarding the obtention of information. Given that panelists said the media is significantly politically influenced, Indicator 10 on independence of information channels received the lowest score (14) of this principle, highlighting that public service media outlets receive inadequate support from public budgets. Panelists also stressed the need to preserve the financial and operational independence of the CRA.

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

The year of 2023 was marked by the introduction of, and the attempts to enforce, repressive laws likely to curb freedom of expression. Despite the protests of journalists and loud disapproval of international and local organizations, the government of RS amended criminal laws and reintroduced libel as a criminal offence. Panelists considered that these amendments have the potential to further suppress media freedoms and be used against those who criticize the ruling coalition and the political party in RS. Since the introduction of these amendments—which apply to all citizens, not just the media--journalists in RS working on investigative stories struggled to find informants, with many potential sources now fearing retribution.

Moreover, Rudić explained that the prosecutor's office in RS by January 2024 already received 44 complaints for libel. Most of these complaints are lodged against citizens and five are against journalists. One complaint was lodged for publishing information about "personal and family circumstances," another amendment of the Criminal Code which was adopted together with the criminalization of libel. Panelist Bahto Kestendžić expressed her concern that these amendments risk being adopted by the Federation of B&H.

In 2023, the BH Journalists Association free helpline registered 87 violations of journalists' rights, including numerous instances of political pressure, verbal threats, hate speech, death threats, and libel suits against journalists under civil law. Rudić also mentioned that 2023 was marked by an increasing number of cases in which lawyers requested the media to delete articles from their portals and servers, threatening them with lawsuits.

The RS Assembly adopted the Draft Law on Special Registry and Publicity of the Work of Non-Profit Organizations. According to this law, dubbed by the media as the "Foreign Agents Law," non-profit organizations receiving foreign funding would be subject to special financial reporting obligations and would need to include a special NGO mark on the material that they produce. These organizations would not be allowed to conduct political activities, and the government has the power to shut them down should they consider their activities illegal.

Rudić also mentioned the Federation of B&H's worrying attempts to introduce amendments to laws on public order which would make it possible to fine people for publishing manipulated information and fake news online. Targeting dissidents, journalists and representatives of civil society and labeling them as agents of foreign actors is a tactic that has been frequently employed by political leaders to discredit the work of the media and civil society. RS president, Dodik, repeatedly claimed that journalists were traitors, supported by foreign actors conspiring against RS, during press conferences throughout the year. After one press conference in November 2023, he made a phone call to N1 Television journalist, Snežana Mitrović, and continued to harass her with threats.

Rather than providing answers to journalists' legitimate questions, many political figures – such as Elmedin Konaković, minister of foreign affairs; Samir Suljagić , director of the Pazarić Institute; and Adnan Delić, the minister of labor and social policy of the Federation of B&H – opted to verbally attack them at press conferences in the Federation of B&H. Petrović mentioned that politicians also insult journalists during TV shows and guest appearances.

Following the January 2024 final verdict in a court case regarding the purchase and importation of Chinese ventilators during the coronavirus pandemic, former federal prime minister, Fadil Novalić - who was sentenced to four years in prison for abuse of position and authority - repeatedly accused the media of having fabricated the entire case.

Kurtić highlighted that statements made against journalists can yield serious consequences. In March 2023, a day after Dodik described

> " **The year of 2023 was marked by the introduction of, and the attempts to enforce, repressive laws likely to curb freedom of expression.**

journalists using offensive words, the cars of Aleksandar Trifunović, an editor of online portal Buka, and EuroBlic journalist Nikola Morača were vandalized. Research conducted in B&H by the BH Journalists Association in 2023 revealed that one in four citizens believe it is justifiable to attack journalists.

Laws safeguarding the confidentiality of sources are in effect. In 2023, Banja Luka-based journalist Morača was detained and pressured by the police to reveal the source for his story on a rape case. He was accused of breaching the confidentiality of proceedings, leading to the confiscation of his mobile phone for three months. However, investigations against him and another journalist were subsequently dropped.

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

There are currently 109 TV stations, 151 radio stations, 12 on-demand audiovisual media service providers, and 3 public RTV services which are available to the public. In addition to the domestic channels, a large number of foreign channels are available to the public through the distribution system, and there are 29 licensees for content distribution. According to research conducted by Center for the Promotion of Civil Society (CPDC) as part of the USAID-funded Independent Media Empowerment Program, there are 615 online news media.

The internet usage rate in B&H for the last quarter of 2023 is above 100 percent, according to the CRA. The technological infrastructure is not, however, adapted to the needs of people with disabilities. The use of broadband internet in B&H continues to rise, contributing to improving the service offerings available to end users. Panelist Maslo noted that the service packages combining several electronic communication services offered by companies has improved.

Panelist agree that telecommunications and internet infrastructure extend to all geographic areas, both urban and rural. People throughout the country have the means to access most information channels, and various communities or groups of people are not precluded from accessing information due to social norms.

Most online platforms providing access to content are poorly adapted to people with disabilities. Ensuring accessibility to content and programs for people with disabilities stands as a priority issue in the European integration process.

In 2020, certain steps were taken to enhance content accessibility for people with disabilities, including the introduction of mandatory quotas for accessible content in public broadcasting services, aligning with the requirements set by the international legal framework for audiovisual media services. Monitoring carried out by the CRA throughout 2023 showed that some progress had been made in adapting the program content of public service broadcasters to people with disabilities. According to the new regulation regarding the provision of audiovisual media services, adopted in June 2023 – part of the process of harmonizing with the EU regulatory framework – all television stations, both public and private, are obliged to ensure the accessibility of program content to people with disabilities.

In the event of a disruption to a telecommunications infrastructure, such as the internet or television, the population can rely on an alternative information system or device, such as the radio.

Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for government information.

Laws protecting the freedom to access information are in effect and no groups are excluded from accessing information. However, these laws are still not adequately implemented, and citizens and journalists face difficulties in obtaining information.

A new law on the freedom to access information was implemented at state level in B&H in 2023, despite criticism from CSOs. The law contains numerous restrictions on the right to free access to information and insufficiently harsh sanctions. The law designated a body within the Council of Ministers as the body for appeals, which the panelists saw as a conflict of interest and could be used to politicize the whole process. Rudić claimed that the law was adopted as part of a trade within the ruling coalition Troika – an alliance of three political parties: the Social

Democratic Party (SDP), People and Justice Party (NIP), and Our Party (Naša Stranka) – as well as an attempt to demonstrate that B&H is making progress towards European integration.

No research has been conducted investigating to what extent people are aware of the existence of the laws on free access to information. Panelists believed that awareness among the population regarding their right to seek information is low.

Journalists have varying experiences accessing information, depending on the institution and the spokesperson. Đapo commented that in the Canton of Tuzla, journalists do not face difficulties in obtaining information, but the bigger issue is the quality of information. "Sometimes they pretend to not know what we are talking about," he explained.

Kurtić continues to struggle with obtaining information from the courts in B&H and, he added, that one needs to be on good terms with the spokesperson to obtain information. He mentioned that the government of RS improved their communication and sometimes he receives an answer to his queries within 20 minutes. "Sometimes I send an inquiry to the press office of the RS government, which they automatically forward to the relevant ministry, and then a spokesperson from the relevant ministry calls me and provides me with the information I need," Kurtić explained. However, for journalists working for daily news outlets, obtaining information is more of a challenge as they rarely receive responses quickly enough.

Panelist Stokić explained that she rarely had positive experiences trying to obtain information and organize interviews with institutions. Many avoid recorded interviews and prefer to answer questions via e-mail with answers containing very little useful information for a journalist's story. This was the case when she was trying to record interviews for a documentary with the Center for Social Work or the Service for Foreign Affairs.

Communication with some institutions has been improving. Some institutions publish laws and important information on their websites while others do not. Public discussions regarding draft laws are most often held as a formality, with very little impact on the decision-making process.

People in local communities have sought different ways to communicate about local issues. Kurtić described a Facebook group in a village used for communicating about infrastructural projects and other work relevant to that community. "It is a significant change for people to know the amount of money invested in each local community, how much money is available, and how it is allocated--and to be able to offer suggestions during the planning of municipal budgets," Kurtić said.

Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow.

The media sector has a serious issue with the lack of legislation on media ownership transparency and media concentration. According to Maslo from the CRA, a law on media ownership transparency should be part of a legal framework that establishes a detailed register of media ownership to enable systemic insight into ownership structures. This would, therefore, help prevent the risk of hidden media concentration and help determine the media's obligations regarding the disclosure of ownership information. However, a law on media ownership transparency has not been introduced, despite it being one of the requirements for the EU integration process.

At the close of 2023, Minister of Communication and Transport Edin Forto stated that his cabinet would endeavor to adopt the law. However, according to the latest information from the Ministry, they are planning to incorporate provisions on media ownership transparency into the upcoming Law on Electronic Media.

Representatives of the CRA and civil society feel that incorporating a few provisions on media ownership transparency in a law related to electronic media would not solve the complex issue of media concentration and media ownership and that a separate, comprehensive law is needed. Furthermore, as highlighted by Maslo, introducing provisions to a law on electronic media would not include all the different forms of media, especially online media, which is the most problematic in terms of accountability and transparency.

To obtain a permit for radio and television broadcasting, media outlets need to have their company registered with the courts. Those who hold a broadcasting license must report any change in the ownership structure; moreover, they cannot sell the license themselves or transfer it from one owner to another without approval from the CRA.

The CRA maintains a register of license holders in the broadcasting sector, but information on indirect and related owners is not included in those registers. An initiative of the CRA, which aimed to collect this missing data and publish the register of direct and indirect media owners, was halted by the Agency for the Protection of Personal Data of B&H. The government agency referred to the European Convention on Human Rights, which stipulates that state interference regarding the right to privacy and the processing of personal data is permissible only if three prerequisites are met: the existence of a legal regulation, a legitimate goal, and necessity in a democratic society. Maslo highlighted the necessity of introducing legislation on media ownership transparency to disclose information on direct and indirect media owners.

Due to the ongoing transition to digital terrestrial broadcasting, the CRA stopped granting licenses for television broadcasting based on public calls for applications. Licenses for television broadcasting are now only licenses to provide program content, regardless of the way in which the program is delivered to users, so it is a technologically neutral license that is issued on a non-exclusive basis. However, radio broadcasting licenses will continue to be granted based on a public call for applications, given that analogue frequencies are still used for radio broadcasting. The introduction of digital radio (DAB) is included in the CRA's plan for 2024.

As far as cable distribution is concerned, there are 29 audiovisual media service and radio media service distribution operators operating in the country. The CRA has identified eight of the largest operators according to the number of subscribers. Some of them, according to Zaimović, are

acquiring more users in one entity, 40 to 50 percent, but not in the whole country.

There are three public service broadcasters – BHRT, FTV and RTRS – and many public radio and television stations. Public service broadcasters include different programs, and according to Maslo, the agency did not encounter major deviations in terms of meeting the program quotas determined by the license. However, panelists considered that public service broadcasters do not serve all members of the public. This relates specifically to RTRS, which promotes the interests of the ruling coalition in RS and representatives of opposition parties do not get the same level of coverage. "The parties are increasingly trying to influence the public media and control them," Petrović expressed.

Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.

Media organizations are largely influenced by their ownership and funding sources, including advertising revenue and funding from public budgets. Đapo believes the editorial policies of a media outlet are dictated by the needs of its financial backers. Commercial media depend on advertising, and journalists self-censor their reporting in order not to criticize a company that advertises its services and products in the media. Đapo recounted how RTV Slon reported on a strike in a factory owned by a major corporation in Tuzla, after which the corporation ceased to advertise its services in their media. "We may have damaged their reputation, but in reality, we simply reported objectively that there was a strike, and the workers took to the streets," Đapo explained.

> **The media sector has a serious issue with the lack of legislation on media ownership, transparency and media concentration.**

Kurtić said that media supported by foreign funding are also to some extent dependent, despite being considered the most professional and independent media. "Donors from outside the country have their own programs, goals, and reasons for providing those funds", Kurtić stated. Stokić, who works for foreign-funded non-profit eTrafika, claimed that donors never meddle with the editorial content of the media. In her 12 years working for the organization, she encountered only a few instances
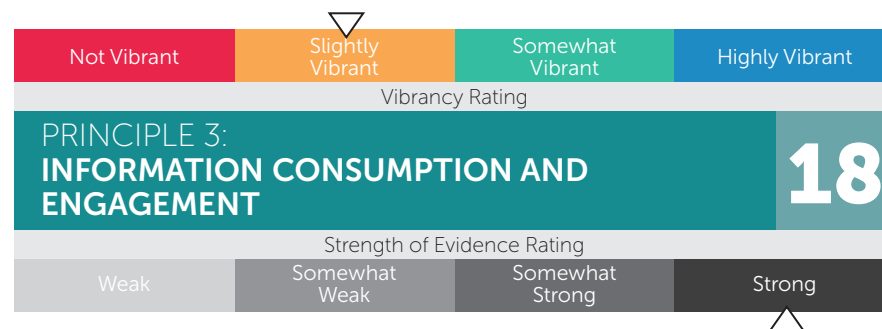
where a funder attempted to influence their content and consequently her media outlet decided to cease collaboration. However, panelists agreed that the extent of interference with editorial affairs also varies depending on the type of media outlet and the nature of their stories; media outlets covering politics and investigative reporting are often subject to greater external influence.

Political interference with the management and the content of media is especially present in public media financed by public budgets, where the mayor and the ruling party assembly determine the amount of funding. Most public media favorably report on the ruling political party in their local community. Panelists stated that public media broadcasters also have better access to information from the public administration in the municipality and town they report on in comparison with commercial ones.

In 2023, the BH Journalists Association responded on numerous occasions to the decisions of Zenica City Council, which declared that only the local public television station could cover and follow the meetings of the city assembly, excluding other journalists and correspondents. Đapo highlighted that in Tuzla the public television station covers all the meetings and gains exclusive access to information, which is later disseminated with the commercial media. Panelist Gušić said that those based in the city do not face issues accessing information, but it is more of a challenge for their correspondents in smaller towns. "The quality of the information provided is another matter," Gušić concluded.

According to the EU progress report on B&H, the CRA is not yet financially independent, and no efforts have been made to improve the process of appointing its leadership to ensure full political independence. Maslo said that it is especially important to secure and protect the financial and operational independence of the agency. The director of the CRA is the former director of RTRS, and panelists felt that he operates in the interest of the ruling party in RS, the Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD). Panelists praised, however, the work of experts working within the Agency. Rudić remarked that the strong integrity of highly professional CRA staff results in an internal struggle to maintain

the agency's credibility. "It becomes very challenging when you are faced with an inactive politicized council that demonstrates opportunistic behavior, along with a director from the RS president's cabinet," Rudić noted. The Council of the CRA remained unchanged for years, and the agency has recently finalized the call for the election of new members.

Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant	Somewhat Vibrant	Highly Vibrant

Vibrancy Rating

PRINCIPLE 3: INFORMATION CONSUMPTION AND ENGAGEMENT	18

Strength of Evidence Rating

Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong	Strong

The country lacks a strategic and legal framework for cyber security, and its institutions, media outlets, and citizens have often been victim to cyberattacks. Distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks are frequent on media outlets, but their staff members often lack the capacity to strengthen their digital security. There have been numerous online scams including identity theft for advertising purposes. Panelists rated Indicator 15 on community media with the highest score of the principle (22). Although there are only two radio community stations in the country, they satisfy the needs of their audience. They rated Indicator 12 with the lowest score of this principle (15) due to the lack of a strategic approach to media literacy and the low media literacy skills of the population.

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

The country does not have a strategic and legal framework for cybersecurity and its citizens, companies and institutions are vulnerable to cyberattacks. More than 15.4 million cyber security threats occurred in the period from January to August 2023, according to the second *Report on Cyber Security Threats in B&H*. The Office for the Audit of B&H

Institutions conducted an audit of the country's institutions regarding cybersecurity activities. Their findings revealed that these institutions were ineffective in implementing activities aimed at ensuring the basic prerequisites for cybersecurity. At the beginning of 2024, there were cyberattacks against the Health Insurance Fund and Tax Administration of RS, and their users' data were sold on the black market. The victims of cyberattacks are often frustrated by the slow response of the authorities.

Panelists agreed that the population lacks digital literacy skills and knowledge regarding the protection of their online data. The past year witnessed the widespread adoption of generative artificial intelligence (AI); however, there is a lack of understanding regarding its ethical implications since there are no established legal and self-regulatory frameworks governing its use. "Artificial intelligence has entered our market so quickly that we are not yet ready for it and have no way of recognizing this content and have not established any ethical standards when it comes to using it," explained Kurtić. Bahto Kestendžić highlighted that it is important to create a set of standards regarding the use of generative AI in newsrooms and in daily work.

Online scams and thefts of personal data through different online games are frequent, but there is very little awareness regarding these offences. Cvjetićanin explained that, in 2023, identity theft was a recurrent problem, especially when used as a marketing ploy. The identities of medical doctors, journalists and actors were all stolen for online advertisements promoting a range of products. Despite these cases being reported to the police, no action has been taken to identify the perpetrators or to prevent such scams from recurring. Another recurrent issue is the so-called pyramid scam in which individuals are promised quick and easy earnings from a fictitious business by completing tasks that involve "clicking" on online advertisements and recruiting new members.

Facebook accounts were hacked, and people faced difficulties regaining access to their accounts. "You get a message that looks like a Facebook security alert, you click on the link, and they hack your profile," Cvjetićanin explained. She added that platforms lack mechanisms to recognize and prevent such occurrences.

Panelist Maslo stated that, to secure personal data, B&H needs to adopt legal solutions akin to those adopted in the EU, primarily the Digital Service Act. Media outlets and other professional content producers have access to digital security training, and there are also numerous training courses online. Some international organizations, such as Internews, are providing digital security training to their media partners. However, some panelists mentioned security training courses such as these are not available to all the media, and small newsrooms have neither the resources nor time to follow the latest trends related to digital security. Rudić said certain media outlets do not recognize digital security as an important component of their work and Bahto Kestendžić added mechanisms need to be introduced; all media outlets should be offered digital security training courses, without discrimination.

> **Panelists agreed that the population lacks digital literacy skills and knowledge regarding the protection of their online data.**

Larger media outlets have better digital hygiene practices as they can invest more resources in their protection. Media outlets often face DDoS attacks. Last year, for example, a popular online portal from Banja Luka, Buka, faced frequent, organized hacker attacks resulting in significant damages. These attacks are often reported to the cybersecurity department in RS, but so far, no perpetrators have been found. "Primarily, critical media outlets that do not align with the government are targeted by DDoS attacks. Unfortunately, their resources are becoming increasingly insufficient to combat them," explained Kurtić.

In a 2023 press conference, RS President Dodik admitted that he employs a service that follows the media closely and targets the media outlets that report critically on him. The BH Journalists Association called investigative authorities to verify these allegations, but no action has been taken so far. In addition, in 2023, Morača was detained and pressured by the police to reveal his journalistic source. Rudić described these violations as "a big problem that we need to tackle more seriously."

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

There is a lack of a strategic approach to the development and promotion of media and information literacy, and no steps have been taken to develop and adopt a media and information literacy strategy at the state level. School curricula do not include formal media literacy courses, but some enthusiastic teachers have tried to teach media literacy as part of their lessons.

Various institutions and organizations carry out numerous activities aimed at developing the country's media literacy skills. The CRA leads an informal network of media literacy experts, and in October 2023 organized a Media Literacy Fair in Sarajevo, in which organizations presented their projects, activities and materials, attended by teachers, pupils and students.

CSOs have been particularly active in media literacy efforts. The Step By Step association continues to educate and work with teachers; Mediacentar Sarajevo has organized youth camps on media and information literacy for young people; and the fact-checking platform Raskrinkavanje created an app on media and information literacy for young people.

Panelists, however, agreed that there is a need for a strategic approach to media literacy and its inclusion in school curricula. Maslo noted that many activities repeat the same topics and that there is a need for monitoring and fresh research on a regular basis. In addition, most of the activities target young people, while are very few workshops for older generations. The last data about audience habits come from a study on the *Media Habits of Adults in B&H*, conducted by the CRA and Council of Europe in 2021. Panelists agreed that there is a need for comprehensive, in-depth research on media literacy skills on an annual basis.

Despite the lack of supporting data, panelists claimed anecdotally that the level of media literacy of the public is low. Đapo believes that many people are unable to discern professional media from a Facebook page. He added that the general lack of media and information literacy skills threatens the professional media as citizens do not value professional media content.

Cvjetićanin said online content creators, who aim to monetize their content or spread conspiracy theories, intentionally brand themselves as truth-tellers which attracts users due to the low levels of trust in official sources. She also explained that the COVID-19 pandemic strongly impacted citizens and conspiracy theories are still very popular: "The negative trends that gained enormous momentum during the pandemic have never gone away. It's a terrible problem. Now we have new ways to spread them, faster and with more ease, using tools such as AI deepfakes."

The fact-checking platform regularly receives reports from their followers regarding problematic content online, which shows that there is a group of citizens that can discern non-reliable sources and fake content. Bahto Kestendžić from the Press Council also added that citizens are increasingly using the mechanism of self-regulation and reporting problematic content to the Press Council. In 2023, the Press Council received 689 complaints, out of which 378 were resolved through the mediation procedure, i.e. journalists complied with the requests of those who complained and published denials, reactions, and removed comments that represent hate speech. The Press Council published a research study towards the end of 2023 on journalists' experiences with manipulative information, where they stated that more training courses should also be provided to journalists.

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

Journalists, civil society activists and the general population exercise their freedoms of speech and rights to information. However, as Maslo highlighted, there is a need to increase the population's awareness about the right to access information and the mechanisms for exercising this right.

Some people face negative consequences and online harassment for openly stating their opinions, especially concerning topics related to

politics and war events. Female journalists are the frequent targets of online harassment. In addition, the criminalization of libel in RS could prevent people from freely expressing their opinions online.

Conferences and academic discussions are organized but often gather like-minded people. Some TV and radio stations have call-in shows, but they rarely focus on political topics. People mostly engage in conversations online; however, as highlighted by Kurtić, the quality of the debate is notably low, and lacking nuance.

Even though Facebook is still the most popular social network in B&H, it is becoming less popular among youth. An increasing number of young people are using Tik Tok, which has been known for problematic content, especially the glorification of war criminals. Cvjetićanin highlighted that the perpetrator of the Serbian mass shooting, a minor, had triggered a personality cult on the social networks. "Without some serious regulation, without the platform making efforts to change it to systematically prevent this situation, literally nothing can be done", Cvjetićanin stated.

In 2023, according to research conducted by the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN), 157 cases of violation of digital rights were registered in B&H, which is 50 percent more than in last year's VIBE study. The most common forms of violation of digital rights are hate speech, discrimination, and posting threatening content and threats to security. Ethno-national groups, women, and the LGBTQ+ community are the main targets of hate speech online.

According to research on the media habits of adults in B&H carried out by the CRA in collaboration with the Council of Europe in 2021, few people use the mechanisms for reporting inappropriate content. Just under one-fifth of B&H residents have ever reported inappropriate content they have encountered when using media or information and communication technologies. Of those, most reported it directly to the content provider,

❝ Some people face negative consequences and online harassment for openly stating their opinions, especially concerning topics related to politics and war events.

and significantly fewer went to law enforcement, the Press Council, or the CRA.

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

Media and content producers do not seek to understand their potential audience's needs and interests through qualitative research. They mostly focus on quantitative data such as Google Analytics and prioritize publishing the most popular content. Stokić confirmed the country's media know little about their public's needs explaining, "They make assumptions about their needs and impose content accordingly. Most of them are satisfied with basing this content on information about the gender and age of the audience, which is not sufficient to understand their habits." Đapo said the media do not research their audience's needs because they lack the resources to produce content tailored to public interest, and many media exist only to satisfy the needs of those in power and to propagate their information.

Most media have fair and open processes for audiences to provide feedback, such as letters to the editor or moderated online comment sections. Bahto Kestendžić commented that audiences can easily react to media content via e-mails or social networks, but that a more proactive approach would increase trust in the media.

Most media service providers have audience contact scheduled into their programs, and contact information is often provided to allow communication between editors and the audience. In accordance with the Code of Program Content of the CRA, media service providers must rectify identified errors regarding the accuracy, fairness and impartiality of the information presented, and publish the natural or legal person's response to the information aired or published in the audiovisual or radio program that violated their rights or interests. Cooperation between the media, content producers, CSOs, and state institutions for

more productive information-sharing exists, but there is need for further improvement. Journalists from different media outlets work together to share contacts and information but cooperation between media outlets, especially commercial ones, is rare.
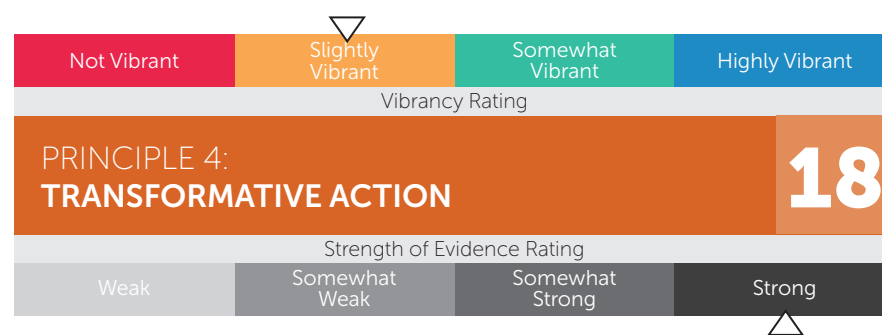
Petrović claimed that BHRT attempts to answer letters and emails received from their followers including those located in rural areas. To engage the public, the public service broadcaster introduced polls with citizens to their central news program, which allows citizens to ask questions via e-mail and the guests on the program are required to answer them. Kurtić said at Balkan Insight they try to adapt complex research on war criminals, for example, or political analyses to make them accessible to young audiences. The regional media outlet where he works publishes a "Letters to Editors" section which details the "netiquette", or rules for online conduct that their followers must respect to avoid hate speech and the spread of manipulative information.

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

Non-profit radio stations are able to operate as a form of "community media" in B&H. The rules of the CRA transparently and clearly define the conditions for issuing a license for non-profit radio for non-profit organizations in order to meet the specific needs of a certain social group on a non-profit basis.

In accordance with the prescribed conditions of the license, their mandate is clearly different from that of public services, public RTV stations, and commercial stations. Maslo from the CRA said, regardless of the minimum conditions for obtaining this license, the number of non-profit radio stations in B&H is low and now only two such radio stations are registered: Radio Active and Radio Marija. These stations provide their listeners with information relevant to them and address their problems, giving marginalized groups the possibility to participate in public communication and social debate. The CRA had no complaints regarding the dissemination of incorrect information by these permit users.

Kontić noted there are numerous public radio and TV stations in B&H that could be considered replacements for community media. Stokić mentioned that there are also several portals dedicated to minorities, the LGBTQ+ community, and the Roma population run by non-profit organizations, yet they are scarce in number.

Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant	Somewhat Vibrant	Highly Vibrant

Vibrancy Rating

PRINCIPLE 4:
TRANSFORMATIVE ACTION   **18**

Strength of Evidence Rating

Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong	Strong

The media and audiences in B&H remain deeply divided along ethno-national and political lines. There are spaces where people can exchange opinions, but online discussions often take the form of insults. The number of TV debates is decreasing as political representatives prefer to participate in one-on-one interviews. Panelists gave their highest score in this principle to Indicator 18 (27), referring to the work of CSOs, especially those dealing with human rights. They advised, however, that some CSOs spread hatred towards other groups. The lowest score in this principle was given to Indicator 20, which indicates that information does not strongly support good governance and democratic rights (13).

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

There are various sources of information, but the media and audiences in B&H continue to be deeply divided along ideological, ethno-national, and political lines. Panelists stated that this polarization has become more pronounced in 2023. Kurtić stated that, in 2023, the media frequently published Dodik's divisive and inflammatory statements

and his calls for secession and that "this has further radicalized media reporting compared to 2022."

Research has shown that the country's audiences often follow only certain channels of communication, especially those that cater to their ideological and political beliefs.

Stokić believes that people do not follow media that may challenge their stance, preferring to follow those that support their views. She noted that discussions online are not exchanges of opinions but are based on humiliation and insults. "I don't see a civilized approach," she explained. Bahto Kestendžić said that a culture of meaningful dialogue is lacking, which is evident on social networks.

The number of TV debates with guests from different ideological and political backgrounds is decreasing. Rudić states that there are no real debates on questions related to the media community, political topics, or social topics. Politicians on TV programs increasingly display aggressive behavior towards journalists, often appearing insolent and inarticulate. "We have a real crisis regarding critical reflection, the willingness to engage in dialogue with those who think differently, and maintaining civil discourse in public spaces," explained Rudić.

Petrović confirmed that guests, mainly political representatives from different parties, refuse to sit side-by-side in the studio, but willingly agree to participate in one-on-one interviews. He said that interviewees demand that concepts and questions be sent prior to the show and added, "It is hard to describe the degree of intolerance among the interlocutors. This intolerance is so disturbing that they can end up cancelling the guest appearance half an hour before the show."

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

Panelists claimed that the quality of information in B&H often has no role in shaping citizens' attitudes or voting habits. Bahto Kestendžić

> **There are various sources of information, but the media and audiences in B&H continue to be deeply divided along ideological, ethno-national, and political lines.**

from the Press Council said that fact-checked and credible information impact the process of decision-making on important topics for only a small number of people, while most citizens are susceptible to political agendas, sensationalist content, and manipulated or unverified information.

Conspiracy theories are very popular, and there were even cases where patients died because they followed alternative medicine advice. For example, in 2023 BIRN published a story about an individual who died because she rejected medical treatment and followed the advice of a guru. An increasing number of parents do not want to vaccinate their children and, consequently, B&H proclaimed a measles epidemic in several of the country's cities at the beginning of 2024. There is a high level of distrust towards institutions, leading people to seek information from other sources. Petrović highlighted that citizens do not check information, meaning they can easily be persuaded by manipulated information.

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

B&H has numerous CSOs. Panelists agreed that people working in CSOs, especially on human rights, are dedicated experts who do not spread manipulated information or problematic content. However, there are also many organizations who are ideologically and politically biased and promote divisive narratives. According to Rudić, these include certain organizations supporting war victims and veterans, as well as sports associations that can be very extreme in their political views.

Stokić elaborated that in Banja Luka there are around 15 organizations that claim to be humanitarian – advocating for family, children and preserving traditions – however, they align with the stances of the ruling political party and mobilize against the LGBTQ+ community at any given opportunity.

She mentioned Duga, a women's humanitarian organization from Banja Luka, which supposedly fights for the improvement of conditions

for women, but it also very actively protested LGBTQ+ activists in 2023. The same association is rallying against the introduction of the term "femicide" in the legal code because they see it as an attack on traditional values.

Media CSOs publish research reports and work to reduce manipulated information in the media and online. Media outlets work and cooperate with CSOs, which are good sources of information on a variety of topics. Petrović confirms that BHRT, the public service broadcaster, has good relations and cooperates regularly with the civil society sector on many different projects and topics. However, panelists agreed that CSOs need to increase their collaboration with the media.

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

There are mechanisms in place for government actors to engage with civil society and media, but these are rarely used. Governments rarely involve experts from civil society to participate in working groups on draft laws. The Law on Electronic Media, for example, is being drafted without the participation of civil society groups, and there is a lack of transparency in the overall procedure.

Public discussions on draft laws are mainly held as a formality, without any impact. However, Stokić highlighted that public discussions regarding the criminalization of libel held in various towns in RS brought about some changes to the amendments, even if this was not enough to prevent the introduction of amendments to the Criminal Code that civil society advised against. Ecology activists and groups have been, according to Stokić, constantly trying to discuss issues with decision makers, without any success.

Government communication with civil society and the media is mostly limited to press conferences or press releases. Following numerous femicide cases, the police tried to organize press conferences to calm the public, but journalists claimed that it was too late considering the large amount of manipulated information that had already been published. Bahto Kestendžić from the Press Council pointed out that government actors often spread manipulated information to justify their actions or to bring about new decisions.

Panelists noted that government officials cite quality news media or information from civil society selectively, when it suits their needs or to discredit their political opponents, and sometimes even use manipulated information when justifying their decisions.

Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic rights.

When information sources reveal corruption or human rights violations, B&H's legal system fails to respond appropriately. Bahto Kestendžić noted that, apart from some rare exceptions, the discovery of corruption by the media most often never ends up being investigated and the public loses interest in the story over time.

The findings of investigative journalists rarely result in indictments. "It is disappointing and demotivating for those who are engaged in serious investigative journalism, when it does not have the impact that it would if the judiciary system were more functional," Cvjetićanin stated. BIRN's report on a group of people claiming to cure cancer using alternative medicine did not provoke any investigation by the prosecutor's office. However, there are some good examples in which journalists' investigative stories brought perpetrators to trial, such as the conviction of Fadil Novalić, former prime minister of the Federation of B&H, regarding the procurement of ventilators from China during the COVID-19 pandemic. Journalistic stories about corrupt practices of certain politicians, however, do not impact election results as people mostly vote based on partisan preferences rather than fulfilment of promises and programs of political candidates during election years.

> " **Conspiracy theories are very popular, and there were even cases where patients died because they followed alternative medicine advice.**

LIST OF PANEL PARTICIPANTS

Elvira Aganović, journalist, Goradže

Maida Bahto Kestendžić, project coordinator, Press Council, Sarajevo

Tijana Cvjetićanin, editor, fact-checking platform Raskrinakvanje, Sarajevo

Damir Đapo, director, RTV Slon, Tuzla

Mersad Gušić, editor, Klix.ba, Sarajevo

Boro Kontić, director, Mediacentar Sarajevo

Azem Kurtić, journalist, Balkan Insight, Sarajevo

Azra Maslo, program standards coordinator, the Regulatory Agency for Communication, Sarajevo

Josip Milanović, influencer, Mostar

Dejan Petrović, editor, BHRT, Sarajevo

Borka Rudić, general secretary, BH Journalists Associations, Sarajevo

Vanja Stokić, editor, eTrafika, Banja Luka

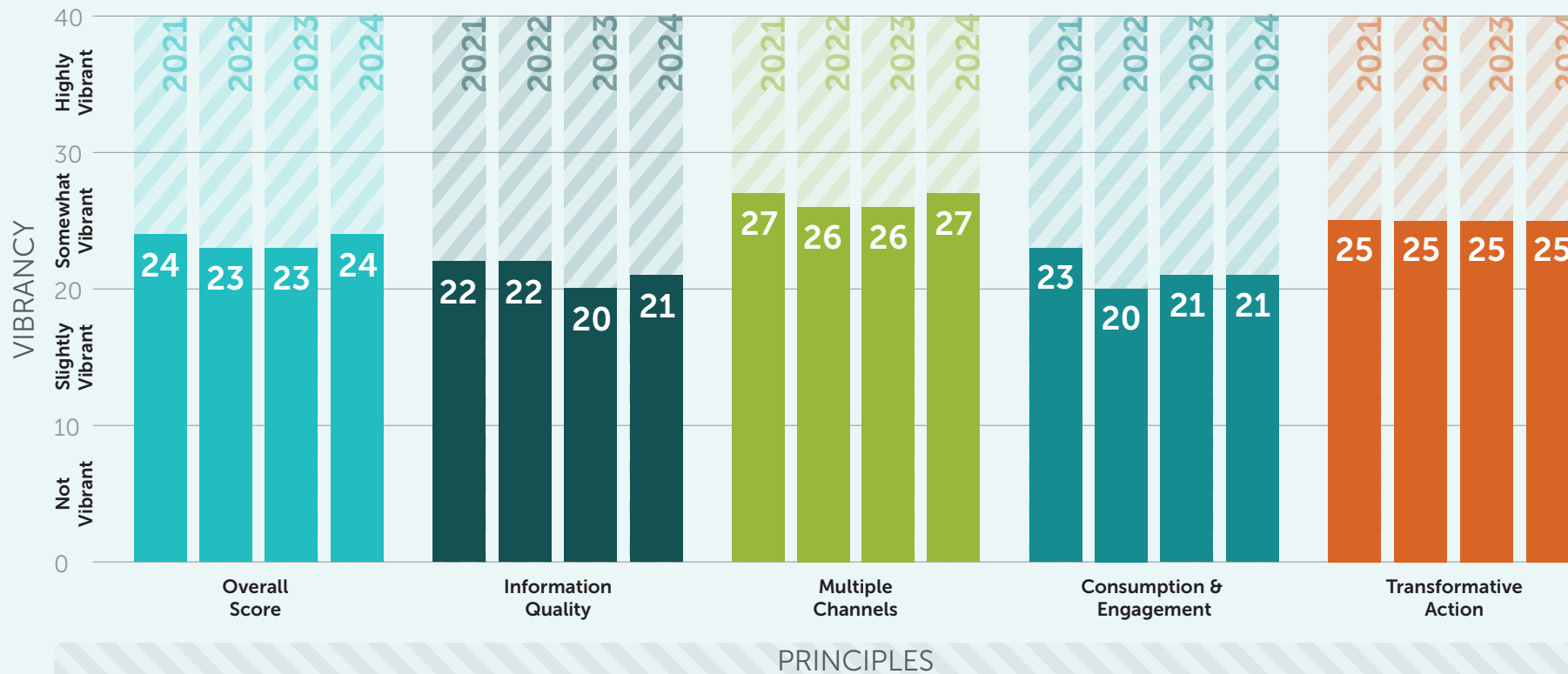**Senad Zaimović,** director, marketing agency Fabrika, Sarajevo

KOSOVO

Vibrant
Information
Barometer

2 0 2 4

VIBRANCY

	Overall Score	Information Quality	Multiple Channels	Consumption & Engagement	Transformative Action
2021	24	22	27	23	25
2022	23	22	26	20	25
2023	23	20	26	21	25
2024	24	21	27	21	25

PRINCIPLES

Not Vibrant (0-10): Quality information is extremely limited in this country. The vast majority of it is not editorially independent, not based on facts, or it is intended to harm. People do not have the rights, means, or capacity to access a wide range of information; they do not recognize or reject misinformation; and they cannot or do not make choices on what types of information they want to engage with.

Slightly Vibrant (11-20): Quality information is available on a few topics or geographies in this country, but not all. While some information is editorially independent, there is still a significant amount of misinformation, malinformation, and hate speech in circulation, and it does influence public discourse. Most people do not recognize or reject misinformation.

Somewhat Vibrant (21-30): Quality information is available in this country and most of it is editorially independent, based on facts, and not intended to harm. Most people have the rights, means, and capacity to access a wide range of information, although some do not. Most people recognize and reject misinformation, although some do not.

Highly Vibrant (31-40): Quality information is widely available in this country. People have the rights, means, and capacity to access a wide range of information; they recognize and reject misinformation.

Highly Vibrant

Somewhat Vibrant
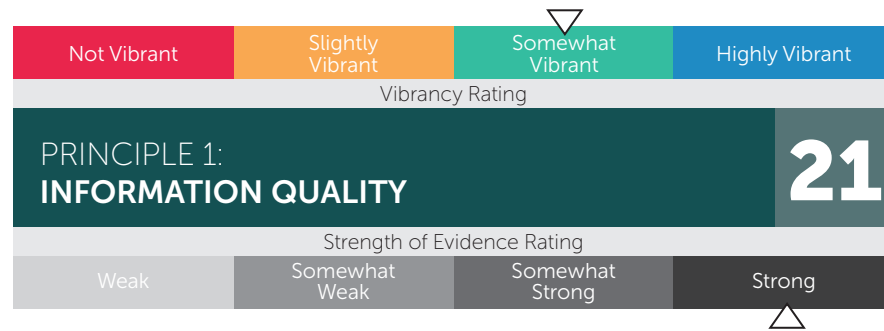
OVERALL
SCORE
24

Slightly Vibrant

Not Vibrant

Kosovo's media is characterized by a legal framework that is largely in line with European standards, demonstrating a commitment to protecting freedom of expression. However, in 2024 Kosovo ranked 75th in Reporters Without Borders' *World Press Freedom Index*, a drop of 19 spots since the 2023 index. In June 2023, the Government of Kosovo suspended the business certificate of one of the main private media broadcasters. This action raised concerns about media freedom and the punitive use of regulatory measures. The courts later reversed the decision, which would have led to the channel terminating operations in Kosovo. Moreover, journalists striving to hold politicians accountable frequently came under attack. Additionally, 2023 saw public broadcaster Radio Television of Kosovo (RTK) appoint a television director affiliated with the ruling political party, sparking doubts about RTK independence.

The northern municipalities of Kosovo are predominantly inhabited by the Serb-majority community. Serbs refused to participate in extraordinary local elections in April 2023, resulting in the election of Albanian mayors. As the mayors attempted to take office, citizens mounted protests that escalated into violence, necessitating intervention by Kosovo police and the peacekeeping Kosovo Force (KFOR). This tumultuous period also saw several incidents of attacks on journalists and other media workers. Even with the increase in violence and despite calls for action from the Association of Journalists of Kosovo (AJK), authorities did not establish safety protocols for journalists.

The media sector in Kosovo faces critical issues concerning transparency in ownership and funding, as well as challenges in achieving financial independence. These conditions leave the media prone to political and financial pressures. While RTK benefits from government funding, private media entities largely depend on advertising revenue. Such a monetary structure introduces its own challenges and influences on media content and independence. Furthermore, journalists at Serbian-language outlets have reported experiencing discrimination in accessing public information, pointing to persistent obstacles with media freedom.

In the VIBE 2024 report, Kosovo's overall score slightly increased (from 23 in 2023 to 24 in 2024). The score for Principle 1, regarding the flow of information, has increased to 21 from last year's score, suggesting a slight positive shift due to a better infrastructure for disseminating quality content. Moreover, Principle 2 has also shown an improvement from last year's VIBE publication, due to an upgraded environment for how information flows within the country. The scores for Principles 3 (Information Consumption and Engagement) and 4 (Transformative Action) remained at 21 and 25, respectively, indicating that that freedom of expression and access to information continue to be exercised without any negative consequence, and that civil society members still produce credible information that supports community improvement.

Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant	Somewhat Vibrant ▽	Highly Vibrant

Vibrancy Rating

PRINCIPLE 1: INFORMATION QUALITY	21

Strength of Evidence Rating

Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong	Strong △

Overall, panelists agreed that Kosovo's citizens have access to quality media content. However, panelists identified a gap between traditional print and broadcast media and new online media regarding information quality and adherence to ethical and professional standards. In 2024, the panelists' scoring for Principle 1 increased by one point, compared to the VIBE 2023 study. Out of five key indicators that measure information quality in Kosovo, panelists gave similar scores to three: the indicators on the availability of quality information, on fact-based information, and on inclusivity and diversity. A slightly lower score was given to Indicator 3, which gauges whether the norm for information is not intending harm. Indicator 5, on content production being sufficiently resourced, received the lowest average panel score of this principle.

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

Kosovo has diverse content offerings from numerous media outlets, including radio, television, online media, and podcasts. According to Kosovo Agency of Statistics, 98.6% of households in Kosovo had internet access in 2023, a figure that exceeds the European Union average of 91%. However, the television broadcasting infrastructure remains limited to analog since the country's digital TV transition process is ongoing. The existing infrastructure is also rendered ineffective by unequal competition in the media market, as the cable television sector is becoming monopolized by only two companies. Kosovo has not had any printed newspapers since 2020. There is only one daily newspaper in the

online format, *KOHA Ditore*, which is subscription-based.

Online media, which are widely called "portals," often do not incorporate ethical reporting on such topics as politics, economy, social issues, etc., and they serve solely as publishing platforms. Treating all online media as portals has resulted in reporting practices with a variety of shortcomings that tend to undermine the integrity, accuracy, and ethical standards of journalism. This approach is primarily driven by the practice of online reporting being short and delivered swiftly.

Media members have many training opportunities available, particularly through civil society organizations (CSOs) and journalist associations such as the AJK and the Press Council of Kosovo (PCK). These entities offer programs aimed at developing and enhancing skills of journalists, albeit with few classes on digital literacy (digital security, safeguarding online resources) and on emerging topics such as mobile journalism. Panelists agreed that a majority of media outlets do not have in-house training departments, so their employees cannot benefit from ongoing professional development.

Although Kosovo has specialized university departments to train journalists, professional producers continue to create misleading content. As video content rises, traditional media often deviate from reporting principles and neglect to meet legal and ethical obligations. The scarcity of professional media outlets commonly results in shortcuts around integrating digital journalism, such as failing to hyperlink cited sources and foregoing illustrative infographics. Information dissemination in fragments further confuses readers, according to the panelists: Most news is reported in pieces without proper analysis or additional context. For example, a news portal will publish up to ten articles about the same issue instead of gathering all the facts and publishing once.

The panelists also voiced concern with the trend of unclear distinction between news content and opinion pieces that are missing factual support, leaving consumers to form mixed and incomplete opinions. Online media, in particular, heavily rely on anonymous sources, undermining journalists' legitimate and fundamental right to protect the

confidentiality of their sources. This practice appears to be on the rise in Kosovo, potentially eroding public trust in journalism. Additionally, local media undermine their credibility by uncritically distributing information from unverified sources.

Content producers face no serious professional consequences for non-compliance with ethical and legal standards. Although an outlet's credibility can be damaged after flouting ethical and legal standards, visibility and readability remain unaffected. Two key mechanisms, the Independent Media Commission (IMC) and the PCK, address monitoring and evaluation of complaints about media coverage, respectively. Nevertheless, a new Strategy of the Judicial Council of Kosovo (JCK) prioritizes defamation cases involving vulnerable individuals who face rising criminal offenses perpetrated against them—including journalists, as well as the LGBTQ+ community and people with disabilities--leading to expedited resolutions.

In the country's current media landscape, political coverage dominates, focusing primarily on government officials and individual figures rather than quality reporting of public policies or in-depth coverage of international events. Moreover, political debates during prime-time television slots seem to increasingly preempt informative and critical journalism. According to the panelists, public discourse is thus dominated with "political rumors" or "political interpretations," and media present ongoing developments through snipped quotes from politicians and public figures. Online platforms rarely offer comprehensive, qualitative, or contextualized reports on national developments.

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

Media content in Kosovo typically relies on facts, albeit not always well sourced. Media outlets regularly produce click-bait stories in hopes of drawing audiences, especially in coverage of crime, politics, and social issues. Panelists agreed that essential reporting is missing in the majority

of online media platforms, which ideally should provide comprehensive clarification and contextualization of developments in the country and beyond. Consequently, the public is often misinformed and misled.

Professional media outlets usually verify information, though oversights in fact verification can occur when journalists feel pressure to be the first to cover a story and thus publish quickly. On the other hand, non-professionals often publish unverified material.

One of the biggest challenges for journalists in Serbian-language newsrooms is limited access to information. Political representatives of the Serbian community in Kosovo have been boycotting the work of independent media for years. Meanwhile, Kosovo central-level institutions fail to ensure consistent and timely cooperation. Often these agencies neglect to fulfill even the fundamental legal and technical requirements to facilitate high-quality Serbian language translation.

> **As video content rises, traditional media often deviate from reporting principles and neglect to meet legal and ethical obligations.**

The government is not involved directly in deliberately creating or distributing false information. However, panelists remained concerned about government officials avoiding accountability and dodging media scrutiny on sensitive topics, such as the education system, visa liberalization, the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue to normalize relations between Kosovo and Serbia, and international recognition of Kosovo[1]. For example, the Minister of Education recently argued that the assessment results for the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) test in December 2023 were due to the pandemic. This was seen as an attempt to downplay low test scores and avoid accountability for Kosovo's low performance.

IMC, Kosovo Press Council, and groups of independent fact-checkers are the primary groups that impose consequences for publishing manipulative information. Social media content falls outside these mechanisms.

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1   International government recognition of Kosovo as a state remains divided since Kosovo's 2008 declaration of independence from Serbia.

Kosovo has two fact-checking platforms, both of which are members of the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN). *Krypometri* operates within kallxo.com and is part of the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network, and hybrid.info is a fact-checking platform. Hybrid.info is also part of the European Fact-Checking Standards Network (EFCSN) and it partners with Facebook in reporting types of misleading and manipulative information. This arrangement is unique, as other social platforms (like Twitter, Instagram, Tiktok, etc.) do not have local partners in reporting informational irregularities for the Albanian language. Most professional media outlets, at least their editorial staff, continually train on fact-checking and other aspects of professional standards for information. However, they do not have separate fact-checking departments.

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

The Kosovar public is exposed to controversial content and narratives that are produced or supported by foreign governments and/or their representatives. These stories dominate the Serbian-language media in particular and likely originate from the governments of Serbia and Russia. Manipulated Albanian-language content comes more from the Chinese government. The governments of these three countries are the main producers of manipulated information about and in Kosovo.

According to University of Prishtina professor Alban Zeneli, within the last year the Serbian government or an affiliated media agency has distributed a large amount of manipulative information of an ethnic nature. The content is aimed at the Serbian population in the north of Kosovo. A Kosovo 2.0 article about this campaign stated that it is an attempt to create the narrative that Kosovo's Serbs live in unbearable conditions due to Albanian and Kosovar state authorities. The results of this information manipulation

were particularly clear after attacks on police in the North of Kosovo in September 2023.

According to hibrid.info's research, in the first six months of 2023, 20 percent of the manipulated information in Kosovo's media content was related to the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue; 12.3 percent to topics related to the north of Kosovo; 5.2 percent to inflation 2.6 percent to social schemes (such as poverty reduction), 1.9 percent to municipalities with a Serbian majority, and 1.4 percent to the war in Ukraine.

As a general rule, media outlets do not deliberately use terms that would be characterized as hate speech. However, many journalistic practices observed in major media speak to a poor understanding of how political context can influence reactions to information. These shortcomings also show up as insensitive language around gender, ethnicity, or any marginalized group, especially related to sexual orientation or persons with disabilities.

The professional media as well as the government are careful not to spread hate speech. However, such language remains on social networks, mainly in the comments sections. In order to drive more engagement on these platforms, writers often produce inflammatory content and prod for feedback.

> **" Media reporting and headlines lack a gender-responsive approach, especially in cases of sexual violence, perpetuating sexist and discriminatory discourse against women.**

As for the consequences for professional and non-professional content producers, Kosovo has two primary institutions associated with this issue. Television, radio, and cable are under the purview of the IMC, which exercises its function quite well. Online media are currently self-regulated through the PCK. Both organizations suffer from a lack of human resources for active monitoring, while PCK operates only on the basis of submitted complaints. These institutions have their own codes of ethics, which are essentially aimed at reporting the truth. Professional consequences, such as an apology or resignation, are not practiced at all in Kosovo. Politicians also rarely face public accountability for misleading citizens.

According to the panelists, media and platforms lack sophisticated mechanisms to reduce manipulative information and hate speech.

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

Most professional media aim to address citizen interests, online portals in particular. The country's minority communities' representation in the media is regulated by Law No. 04/L-046 for the Radio Television of Kosovo (RTK). However, in northern Kosovo, the frequencies of RTK2 are interrupted by Serbian channel frequencies. Pursuant to this law, 30 percent of programming should include content focused on minority groups in Kosovo. Additionally, 30 community radio stations are spread throughout the territory of Kosovo, covering local information needs.

According to Besa Luci, editor-in-chief at Kosovo 2.0, media have little of the coverage that would reflect audiences' diverse needs, interests, and priorities. Although Kosovo has a plurality of media in terms of quantity, this does not translate to an open plurality of voices.

Political reporting in particular is dominated by male voices, whether as sources or as analysts in studio discussions. Media reporting and headlines lack a gender-responsive approach, especially in cases of sexual violence, perpetuating sexist and discriminatory discourse against women. Such editorial policies marginalize women's voices and discount their perspectives on issues pertaining to the economy, security, and justice. The underrepresentation of women in televised political debates also reinforces the stereotype that politics is a domain exclusively for men. Furthermore, women and individuals belonging to the LGBTQ+ community often face repercussions for their media exposure, including negative portrayals, smear campaigns, virtual threats, and cyberbullying.

Serbian-language media demonstrate a comprehensive and diverse content strategy, attributed to the intensive training provided to more experienced journalists and editors in the past decade. This progress is especially evident for television stations. In this sense, media show no discrimination against certain parts of the population. Men hold the majority of positions in management, newsrooms, and decision making,
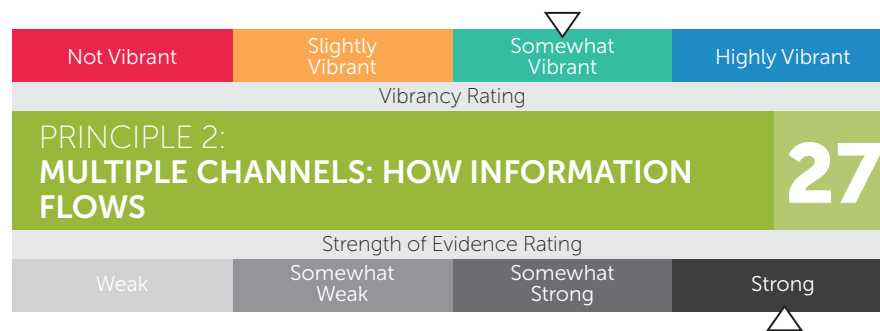
while journalists and reporters are usually women.

Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced.

The financial dynamics of media competition are uneven, due to the disparities in monetary support. Media outlets backed by business support indirectly do not rely on traditional financing methods, and advertising revenues are declining.

Media outlets (excluding the public broadcaster) have relied on advertising for financing since the post-war period, while those registered as CSOs primarily depend on donor financing. Some media attempted to introduce subscriptions to bring in additional revenue, but they were not successful. Many media outlets have turned to monetizing video content through social media as an alternative revenue stream. However, this raises ethical concerns, especially related to reporting in the public interest. Much of the content requested and viewed at large on social networks is devoted to seeking engagement rather than providing news and information.

Aside from RTK funding, the Government of Kosovo has no budget line to support media outlets through financing instruments such as subsidies.

While editorial-level management within media outlets receive satisfactory compensation, journalists still struggle with low salaries.

Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant	Somewhat Vibrant	Highly Vibrant

Vibrancy Rating

PRINCIPLE 2: MULTIPLE CHANNELS: HOW INFORMATION FLOWS	27

Strength of Evidence Rating

Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong	Strong

Principle 2's score increased one point since the VIBE 2023 publication, driven in part by Indicator 7 (adequate access to channels of information), which received the highest score in this principle. Diverse

television channels and high-quality internet services cover most of Kosovo. Indicator 10, on the independence of information channels, remains the lowest-scoring one in this principle, as media ownership and editorial content have no clear separation in many media outlets.

Kosovo media align with international norms on paper, but the actual environment for journalists and media outlets remains tense. This reality is especially clear in the government criticism of journalists and the disparities in access to information channels. Panelists lamented the increasing incidents of hate speech against journalists—a trend that poses a significant risk to journalists' safety and public trust in media.

Additionally, the absence of digital broadcasting frequency limits the resilience and diversity of information access channels, pointing to a need for comprehensive regulatory reforms to ensure equitable media access and transparency.

Concerns about media independence, influenced by financial interests and political affiliations, equal a pressing need to preserve media integrity by separating media ownership and editorial content. Despite the challenges faced, IMC has managed to cultivate public trust, under new leadership at the board level.

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

Kosovo's constitution and laws generally align with international standards on freedom of expression, with legal protections in place for the media. In 2023, no reports were made of journalists being arrested or imprisoned for their work. However, panelists described a concerning environment where journalists face harassment, strategic lawsuits aimed at silencing them, and even physical attacks. Such incidents highlight the need for more robust enforcement of existing laws and protections for journalists. The government, while not directly undermining freedom of speech through legal means, has been criticized for its unfavorable

approach towards the media and journalists. Defamation remains a crime.

Panelists cited reports of various government officials using harsh and denigrating language against journalists. The aim has been to cast doubt on journalists' intentions and label them as unreliable or biased. This rhetoric also reinforces a broader narrative that could affect public trust in journalism as a profession.

Luci argued that rather than engaging in these adversarial tactics, the government could promote media education. Such actions would better serve the public interest and address concerns about information quality. However, the prevailing trend is to discredit media outlets and journalists. This undermining is furthered by government supporters that rail with hate speech against any critics on social media.

The year 2023 has been marked as particularly unsafe for journalists, with 74 incidents reported by the AJK, especially during tensions in the northern part of the country.

The government makes no overt attempt at censorship and does not pressure ICT providers to censor journalists or media content. Self-censorship does remain significant, sometimes due to financial ties or editor fears of discussing controversial subjects.

In 2023, the Assembly of the Republic of Kosovo failed to make amendments to the Law on Protection of Journalism Sources, the Law on Radio Television of Kosovo, and the Law on Independent Media Commission, despite having them on the legislative agenda. Such amendments would align the IMC law with the revised Audiovisual Media Services Directive from the European Commission and permit the RTK law to address financing, reporting, and composition, thereby strengthening its editorial independence and direct accountability to the public.

> 66 **Panelists described a concerning environment where journalists face harassment, strategic lawsuits aimed at silencing them, and even physical attacks.**

Indicator 7: People have adequate access to channels of information

Kosovo has a considerable infrastructure for information dissemination. The infrastructure serves 19 television stations, 89 licensed radio stations (22 Serbian, three Bosnian, two Gorani, and one Turkish), and provides internet access to approximately 96.6 percent of households. Although information is widely available and generally meets the public's needs, panelists identified notable disparities in inclusivity and regulatory oversight. RTK Board Member Albulena Mehmeti said that RTK employs sign language in its news broadcasts, but other media outlets fall short in meeting standards for accessibility—highlighting an area for improvement in ensuring equal access for all communities.

Access is relatively high and stable for internet services as well as for cable and terrestrial television. Consumers across Kosovo, including southern and northern municipalities, have broad access. This reach indicates that most citizens can economically secure various information channels, including radio, television, and digital or social media. Cable companies such as Artmotion and Kujtesa dominate the market, underscoring a critical dependency on these providers for media access.

Kosovo remains unique in Europe for its lack of digital broadcasting, which affects the diversity of information access channels and limits alternatives in the event of terrestrial broadcast disruptions.

The regulatory framework for information channels is urgently in need of reform. Panelists said that cable operators and digital service providers in particular need stronger regulations to ensure competitive fairness, transparency, and wider accessibility.

Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for government information.

The legal framework for the right to public information in Kosovo aligns with international standards. However, the bodies responsible for enforcement, the Agency for Information and Privacy (AIP) and its Commissioner for Information and Privacy, are subject to political influence. AIP has been criticized for dodging certain cases that would implicate members of ruling parties. Civil society members have spoken out on this selective approach to information disclosure—particularly regarding the government's Security Fund, allocated to the Ministry of Defense for the Kosovo Security Forces (KSF), which officials have deemed confidential.

Flutura Kusari, a media lawyer from Prishtina, stated, "The Commissioner refuses to decide on cases that expose her politically, especially in relation to the politicians in the government who come from Vetëvendosje political party."

Panelists argued that communication offices within the government are highly politicized. Media advisors, often political appointees, control the flow of information between public institutions, the media, and civil society. Government spokespersons do not regularly engage with the public and consequently are not well-known.

Journalists have voiced complaints about delays in accessing public documents and, in some cases, not receiving them at all. Often responses are incomplete or fail to directly address the questions at hand. AIP has imposed fines for such violations, highlighting the gap between legal guarantees and their practical application. Public institution spokespersons too are noted for being inconsistent in responding to media inquiries promptly or thoroughly.

Zeneli commented on the right to public information. "From a legal point of view, such a right is guaranteed. However, there are still delays in its implementation," he said.

Government spokespersons generally maintain good relations with the press. However, panelists pointed out the significant problem of officials not providing the necessary content for dissemination, and the subsequent shortfalls in detailed information offered to the press.

The Serbian community faces additional obstacles, including political and institutional barriers to cooperation with independent media as well as challenges in engaging with the Kosovo central institutions.

Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow.

Kosovo's diversity of information flow presents a mixed picture. While the media have seen some regulatory efforts, such as recent regulations against media ownership concentration, enforcement and transparency remain questionable. IMC recently approved regulations against media ownership concentration. However, these regulations essentially legitimized the status quo, in which owners are frequently connected to other media companies and true diversity is missing.

Media distribution channel monopolization is a concern, as is the opacity behind spectrum allocation and the individuals establishing media outlets. The application of licensing procedures or other regulations also is problematic in terms of fairness and transparency.

Internet service providers appear to treat all communications equally, as internet access in Kosovo is widespread, with no discrimination based on user, content, source, or destination address.

The law guarantees freedom to establish media, but panelists expressed persistent concerns over the monopoly of media distribution channels. Panelists emphasized that an accurate assessment of this issue requires legislation that addresses ownership, transparency, and concentration. In the current absence of such regulatory measures, monopolization and its concealment have become widespread challenges.

Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.

Panelists lamented the unclear separation between media ownership and editorial content, and they underscored the risk of financial interests influencing media content. Kusari pointed out specific instances such as the RTK appointment of the director of television for Albanian-language channels and his alleged connections with Vetëvendosje (the ruling political party). The appointment prompted reactions from civil society as well as international stakeholders in Kosovo. The European Federation of Journalists shared its concerns in a public letter sent to the Prime Minister of Kosovo, arguing that such positions should be filled by professionals with no ties to the government or any political party.

Moreover, the insufficient budget allocated to RTK hampers its independence and hinders its development. The RTK budget in 2024 is planned to be approximately $9.5 million (8.9 million euros), marking the third consecutive year of minimal funding from the current government.

Panelists emphasized how media organizations, especially those privately owned, avoid controversial topics which can negatively influence advertising revenue and thus might lead to compromising their editorial independence. However, they acknowledged that some outlets have separated their newsroom operations from business interests. Panelists further noted that government funding affects the neutrality of public broadcasters. Private media do not receive any subsidies or advertisement revenue from the government. Access to information, including internet access and subscriptions to international news, does not favor any media in particular, and RTK does not receive either any tax breaks.
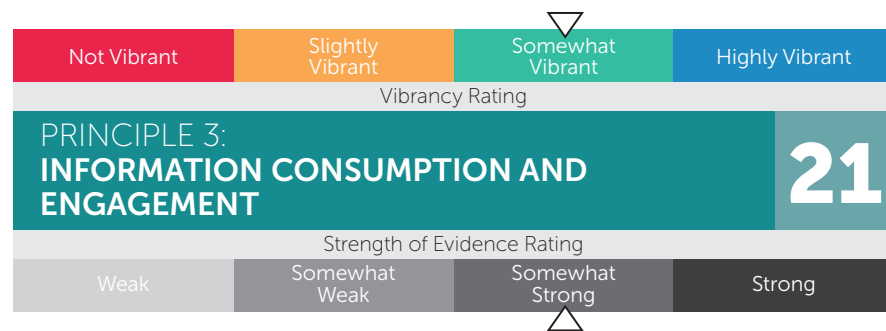
The Kosovo Assembly established the regulatory bodies that oversee frequency allocations, licenses, and telecommunication services. These regulators are legally independent from the government but not entirely free of political influence, as the legislature determines their memberships. The prevailing and persistent practice has been that members are chosen according to political preferences. Despite these challenges, the IMC has gained public trust, particularly under the leadership of its new chair.

Stanko Pevac, program director at RTV Puls, stated that the majority of Serbian-language media in Kosovo maintain independence both in management and editorial practices.

In 2023, the Kosovo government made its first-ever attempt to shut down a private-media broadcaster. The Kosovo Business Registration Agency

> **Kosovo remains unique in Europe for its lack of digital broadcasting, which affects the diversity of information access channels and limits alternatives in the event of terrestrial broadcast disruptions.**

suspended the license of Klan Kosovo, due to suspected irregularities in its registration. The Association of Journalists and civil society activists protested, decrying that decision and its potential impacts on media freedom.

Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant	Somewhat Vibrant ▽	Highly Vibrant

Vibrancy Rating

PRINCIPLE 3: INFORMATION CONSUMPTION AND ENGAGEMENT	**21**

Strength of Evidence Rating

Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong △	Strong

The 2024 score for this principle is the same as it was in the 2023 study. Overall, the panelists agreed that media literacy skills among Kosovo's citizens have not improved, which was reflected in the panel giving the associated indicator its lowest rating out of all indicator-level scores for the country. Furthermore, citizens lack proper information on digital security and have a poor understanding of its importance.

Four out of the remaining five indicators on information consumption and engagement have similar scores to each other. Despite constitutional guarantees of freedom of speech and the right to information, panelists agreed that journalists and activists have been much more silenced and censored than in the 2023 study, due to intimidation and threats from the ruling party and its supporters against those who criticize the government. High quality audience research is lacking. Moreover, apart from televised debates—which tend to exclude women and other marginalized groups--there are few avenues for public debate, such as town halls.

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

While Kosovo law has a solid basis for the protection of privacy and personal data, effective implementation often proves challenging. The

2019 Law on the Protection of Personal Data, 06/L-082 does not ensure digital security. However, the 2021 Law on Electronic Communication regulates electronic communications networks, services, and resources, including radio and terminal equipment, and their use. This law also protects personal data, particularly the right to privacy in processing personal data in the electronic communication sector. Although the current laws align with standards for personal data protection, public awareness of the digital environment in general and data security remains especially low.

In 2023, training initiatives in digital security increased in intensity. Participation is low, even though training organizations offer the courses for free. While media and professional content producers have some use of digital security training and tools, training opportunities need to be increased and security measures need to be implemented more widely, according to the panelists. Most media in Kosovo have been prey to cyber attackers, unable to prevent the breaches due to lack of technical expertise. Although some media outlets have taken steps to secure their websites and mitigate distributed-denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks, many outlets are still at risk. Media companies have digital tools for preventing DDoS and other attacks, but they are expensive, as the panelists explained.

Panelists observed that the public has a prevailing lack of awareness regarding the role of algorithms in determining what individuals see on social media. This unawareness also extends to privacy and security concerns inherent in digital platforms. Few Kosovo citizens possess the tools or knowledge to adequately safeguard their personal data from unauthorized access or exploitation.

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

In general, media literacy in Kosovo is at a very low level. Media literacy training initiatives are conducted on an ad-hoc basis, with short-term training programs organized either for students or teachers, mainly by international organizations operating in Kosovo.

Given students' high level of exposure to the digital world, the limited offerings for this subject are insufficient. Media literacy is not formally integrated into the compulsory curriculum of pre-university education. At the university level, only the Department of Journalism at the public University of Prishtina offers media literacy as an obligatory course. Media literacy remains an elective option at the discretion of teachers with the Municipal Directorates of Education. The subject is included in the core curriculum overseen by the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology (MESTI), although MESTI has not yet approved the Media Education Strategy.

Even in cases where media literacy is part of the curriculum (within another subject or as an elective), it is not comprehensive and has shown minimal positive effect in the workforce. Few qualified professionals are in this field.

The general public lacks the knowledge to verify the veracity of online media, whether or not the editorial, ownership, or contact information is available. CSOs provide media education that is thorough but not enough to reach a wide audience.

Apart from NGO programs, the government does not support initiatives for adults outside of schools to improve their critical thinking about media content.

Few people use fact-checking tools or websites. But according to Ardita Zejnullahu, executive director at the Association of Kosovo Private Electronic Media, Kosovo consumers make good decisions based on qualitative news, especially during the elections and despite poor media education.

Pevac said that media literacy should be strictly distinguished from technical IT literacy. As he explained, "Precisely because media literacy is a condition for understanding civil liberties and human rights, it needs to be legally (re)defined and applied in public discourse, especially when it comes to the education sector and the work of specific professions such as those employed in education, healthcare, and public administration, but also widely in the civil sector."

> ❝ **The general public lacks the knowledge to verify the veracity of online media, whether or not the editorial, ownership, or contact information is available.**

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

Kosovo's constitution guarantees freedom of speech and the right to information. Panelists said that journalists, civil society activists, and the general population clearly exercise their rights to freedom of expression and to information. However, panelists agreed that journalists and activists have been much more silenced and censored in 2023 as compared to 2022. The main reason is the ruling party and its supporters, who intimidate and threaten critics.

Apart from televised debates, there are few other avenues for public debate, such as town halls, and they reach limited audiences. Women and other marginalized groups are often not part of political debates. According to research by Democracy for Development, women in the public arena, whether in politics, journalism, or other professions, are unfairly judged. They frequently hear comments on their appearance—hairstyle, attire, weight, and so on—while their abilities, expertise, and professional capacities are often ignored. Critics might resort to disparaging a woman's physical appearance when they have no counterarguments to her expertise. Kusari, for instance, has been criticized for her hairstyle while acting in her professional role as an advocate for media issues.

People report manipulative information, hate speech, or malicious information to the appropriate authorities; however, responsible bodies do not always address complaints in a systematic and professional manner. According to Zejnullahu, reporting to the IMC or the Press Council has increased due to an awareness increase of the general public on the role and responsibilities of regulatory authorities.

Although Kosovo has a formal legal framework, the mechanisms for exercising freedom of speech and human rights are not sufficiently

developed. Pevac noted that even if some platforms do exist, they are of a "seasonal" character, from project to project, and not systematic and continuous, as is necessary for every community. According to Pevac, the institution of the ombudsperson should be promoted and brought closer to the Serbian community, as should other institutions such as the Office for Communities, the Office of the Commissioner for Languages, etc.

Indicator 14: Media and information producers engage with their audiences needs

In Kosovo, no audience research is available of any quality to be widely accepted by media professionals. According to the panelists, most research is ad-hoc "orders" from certain media to promote their "viewability" and followership. Media conduct audience research mostly for a specific purpose, such as aiding in decisions about program timing or for presentations to potential advertisers.

Radio and television stations are institutionally regulated and consistently transparent in matters of authorship, publishing corrections in cases of complaints, and hosting community events.

Media meet the needs and interests of the audience by publishing daily current events, but qualitative research is scarce. Media coverage is divided between what audiences are drawn to and more substantive topics that are in the public interest. The media often fail to understand broad audience needs and focus on the more popular content, which is often scandal-driven or related to daily politics. Most media neglect to cover social topics, women's rights, the LGBTQ+ community, and other interest groups.

Media and civil society cooperate well, although both have unsatisfactory levels of cooperation with government institutions. The government mostly ignores the reactions of the media and civil society to developments in the country.

> **The biggest challenge for local media outlets is financial sustainability. Both content and staffing are negatively affected by limited advertising budgets.**
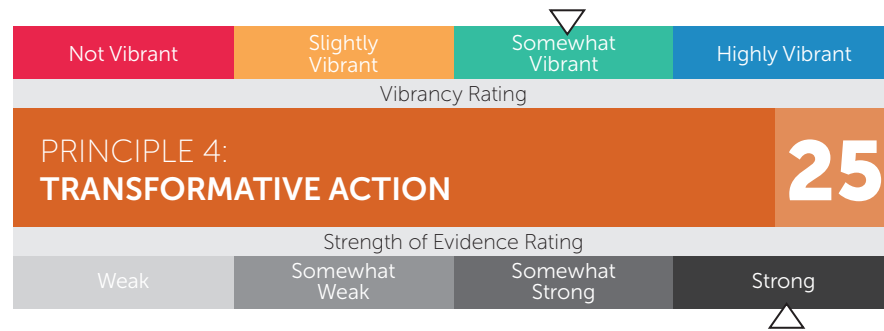
The solidarity and professional cooperation are notable aspects of Serbian-language media in Kosovo. Serbian media are receptive to audience feedback, as most web portals include this feature.

Panelists agreed that Kosovo media need new measurements of television viewership and other quantitative-qualitative research; the last relevant and comprehensive surveys were conducted more than 10 years ago.

Indicator 15: Community media provides information relevant for community engagement

Although they are few in number, Kosovo does have community media with specific content for marginalized groups. These outlets are media organizations that focus on issues of women's rights and equal participation in society, which include the Center for Information, Criticism and Action (QIKA) and Grazeta. Currently, the show "Qika n'ekran" by QIKA airs on a private national broadcaster, T7 Television, providing latest developments in women's rights advancement in Kosovo. Additionally, *Dylberism* is dedicated to advocating for the rights of the LGBTQ+ community. All of these provide essential information targeted to their groups and elaboration that is otherwise lacking in the mainstream media. Their coverage has also facilitated public pressure to include these topics in debate forums.

Local media outlets, in different regions of Kosovo, provide the local public with information relevant to that area and not provided by national media. The biggest challenge for these media is financial sustainability. Both content and staffing are negatively affected by limited (or, in the case of Serbian media, non-existent) advertising budgets. This absence hinders community media's overall ability to produce content in the public interest.

Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant	Somewhat Vibrant	Highly Vibrant

Vibrancy Rating

PRINCIPLE 4: TRANSFORMATIVE ACTION	25

Strength of Evidence Rating

Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong	Strong

The 2024 score for Principle 4 is the same as it was in the 2023 study. As for government use of facts for policy decisions, panelists have seen some evidence of selective fact-sharing and a lack of transparency, which could mislead public perception and debate. In some instances, efforts by media and civil society to expose wrongdoing have led to positive changes. However, significant challenges remain in addressing corruption and ensuring accountability, particularly in politically sensitive contexts. Indicator 18 on civil society's use of quality information received the highest score, though it dropped one point from last year. The lowest-scoring indicator was on government use of quality information.

> **In Kosovo, challenges related to media literacy and manipulative information present significant obstacles that prevent people from making well-informed decisions.**

While Kosovo hosts a variety of media outlets appealing to diverse ideological perspectives, the digital sphere struggles with constructive engagement, and anonymity and hate speech are persistent issues. Despite facing issues with media literacy and manipulative information, people in Kosovo do rely on credible information for significant decisions, such as voting in elections. Civil society's role in using quality information to better the community seems to be positive, focusing on fact-based awareness and combating manipulative information.

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

Several impartial information sources in Kosovo have managed to attract large audiences (such as Radio Free Europe, Kallxo.com, and Telegrafi.com) for their unbiased reporting and more in-depth analysis, thereby helping to strengthen public trust in media. Despite their ideological differences, people read and watch various media types. This diversity in media consumption suggests an openness among the population to gather different viewpoints. Nonpartisan information sources strive to encompass a range of political perspectives within their content. This reflects a foundational effort to provide balanced information, free from bias.

Beyond political debates on television, online debate initiatives and other forums are scarce and often descend into non-constructive exchanges marked by insults or even hate speech. Panelist noted that individuals often hide their identities, driven by self-censorship or fear of repercussions. This tendency indicates a strained environment for open digital discourse.

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

In Kosovo, challenges related to media literacy and manipulative information present significant obstacles that prevent people from making well-informed decisions. Often the attitudes and actions of the public are influenced by the information they receive, which largely remains unverified, not based in fact, and politically motivated. Despite the low level of media literacy education, people use quality information to choose their public officials. An example is the results of the last national and local elections in 2021, where, contrary to the collective euphoria and biased news, people made their decisions based on

quality information and personal judgements. However, the panelists believed that Serbian state media sometimes engage in information manipulation.

The public responds responses to government bodies that demonstrate a commitment to fact-based information with a high level of trust and compliance. For instance, citizens diligently followed warnings against the use of contaminated water sources from the National Institute of Public Health and traffic safety appeals from Kosovo police, showcasing the public's readiness to act on credible information. People utilize published information that is in their best interest.

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

CSOs work towards raising awareness at various societal levels about specific issues, primarily using quality and fact-based information. In addition, CSOs have sought to increase citizen awareness of the forms of manipulative information. The general trend indicates that CSOs have been less active in critiquing the government and public authorities. However, the information they provide is accurate and fact-based. As a general rule, they do not disseminate manipulative information and actively work to reduce its spread.

The media and civil society collaborate effectively to cover various social issues and marginalized groups. Citizen participation in legislative changes is not evident; in fact, it has decreased due to reduced government transparency. Aside from public consultations, which are merely for show, ministries and the government have not made genuine efforts to involve citizens in key decisions.

Pevac commented on the cooperation between CSOs and Serbian media. "Due to political reasons, the work of CSOs within the Serbian community is limited by politics and obstructed by political representatives," he said.

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

In 2023, the Government of Kosovo did, on several occasions, shape public perception by selectively emphasizing certain facts while downplaying others. Although the government did not engage in outright manipulative information or deceit, it fostered a form of informational disarray.

One example involved the passage of the salary law at the beginning of 2023. The government underwrote substantial salary increases for specific groups, such as police officers, framing the legislation as a path towards fixing disparities across various employment sectors. However, the increase in wages was much lower than what the government claimed, since the government had removed danger pay that recognizes, for example, increased personal safety and security threats in certain occupations (such as law enforcement). Thus, after the removal of danger pay, the real increase was much different than what the government originally presented-- negatively affecting the total amount police will receive from salary and allowances.

> **Although the government did not engage in outright misinformation or deceit, it fostered a form of informational disarray.**

Government agencies have been criticized for a lack of transparency, particularly for infrequently holding press conferences. According to Zejnullahu, "In the absence of press conferences, debates in the media often take place, which are more frequently based on unfounded and speculative information rather than evidence and factual data."

Journalists face challenges in holding government leaders accountable, relying on public events for the opportunity to pose questions. As part of their strategy to avoid press conferences, government actors use the social media accounts that they manage. Thus, the provided information is mostly uncritical, and government actors even intentionally use incorrect statistics to shape public opinion about their activities. They refer to media materials primarily when the content is politically advantageous to the government or its officials.

Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic norms.

Quality information, disseminated by civil society and media outlets, plays a crucial role in highlighting and preventing violations and corruption. Notably, public pressure fueled by the exposure of such violations can result in reversal of decisions by governmental entities— underscoring the power of informed citizenry in advocating for justice and transparency. One notable incident from 2023 is the decision of the central government to dissolve a public enterprise (the New Energy Enterprise of Kosovo) after CSOs publicly highlighted that the enterprise was not active due to a cancelled energy project in 2020, but it was still spending public money. Another example involves the job vacancy for the position of director of the Health Insurance Fund, which was canceled and reopened based on the recommendations provided by civil society organizations.

Although Kosovo has seen clear instances where exposés have led to preventive measures and reduced repeat violations, panelists still held significant concerns over the government's inertia on uncovered corruption and other malpractices. For example, major scandals have not seen adequate governmental response, despite public pressure for accountability. For example, the chief executive of the Kosovo Energy Corporation was arrested on allegations of misuse of official authority, exercise of influence, and conflict of interest; additionally, the Ministry of Trade faces suspicions of regarding delays and absences of ordered goods.

Instances of corruption are still not adequately addressed even after being discovered by the media or CSOs. One example includes the Kosovo's ambassador to Croatia, who has been at the center of reports for an alleged financial scandal in Slovenia. Media play a significant role in addressing civil rights and human rights violations. By investigating government officials engaged in corruption or any other irregularity, media in Kosovo are able to share their findings in civil and human rights cases.

On the other hand, findings by Serbian-language media struggle to gain attention or lead to concrete actions in response to the reported issues. This disparity indicates a systemic obstacle to the effective utilization of quality information in governance, particularly in areas with political and ethnic tensions.

Quality information plays a major role in ensuring free and fair elections, at central levels and local levels.

LIST OF PANEL PARTICIPANTS

Flutura Kusari, media lawyer, Prishtina

Besa Luci, editor-in-chief, Kosovo 2.0, Prishtina

Albulena Mehmeti, vice chairman of the board, Radio Television of Kosovo, Prishtina

Stanko Pevac, Programme director, Local radio and TV in Serbian language (community media), Gjilan

Brikenda Rexhepi, editor in chief, Kohavision, Prishtina

Festim Rizanaj, researcher, Hibrid, fact-checking site, Prishtina

Ardita Zejnullahu, executive director, Association of Kosovo Private Electronic Media, Prishtina

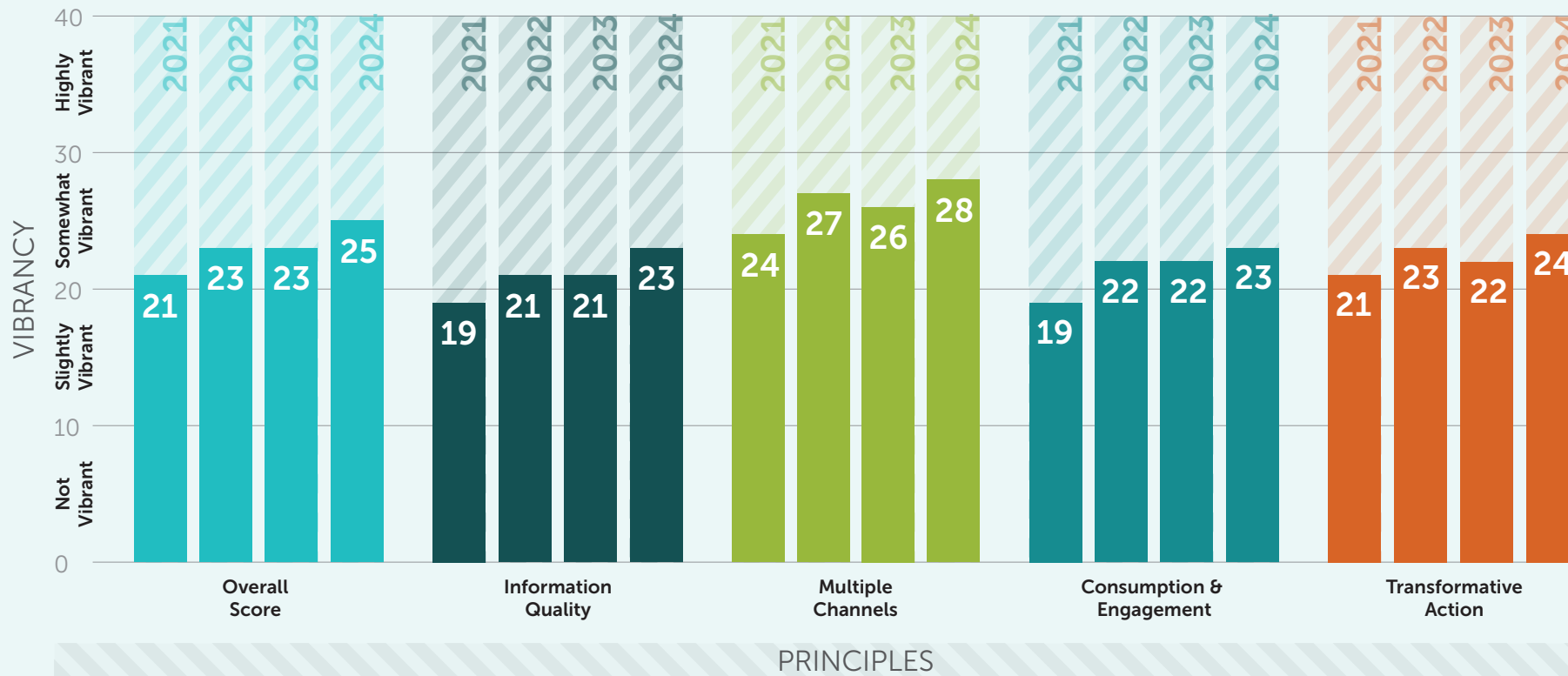**Alban Zeneli,** professor, University of Prishtina, Prishtina

MONTENEGRO

Vibrant
Information
Barometer

2 0 2 4

VIBRANCY

Overall Score
2021: 21
2022: 23
2023: 23
2024: 25

Information Quality
2021: 19
2022: 21
2023: 21
2024: 23

Multiple Channels
2021: 24
2022: 27
2023: 26
2024: 28

Consumption & Engagement
2021: 19
2022: 22
2023: 22
2024: 23

Transformative Action
2021: 21
2022: 23
2023: 22
2024: 24

PRINCIPLES

Not Vibrant (0-10): Quality information is extremely limited in this country. The vast majority of it is not editorially independent, not based on facts, or it is intended to harm. People do not have the rights, means, or capacity to access a wide range of information; they do not recognize or reject misinformation; and they cannot or do not make choices on what types of information they want to engage with.

Slightly Vibrant (11-20): Quality information is available on a few topics or geographies in this country, but not all. While some information is editorially independent, there is still a significant amount of misinformation, malinformation, and hate speech in circulation, and it does influence public discourse. Most people do not recognize or reject misinformation.

Somewhat Vibrant (21-30): Quality information is available in this country and most of it is editorially independent, based on facts, and not intended to harm. Most people have the rights, means, and capacity to access a wide range of information, although some do not. Most people recognize and reject misinformation, although some do not.

Highly Vibrant (31-40): Quality information is widely available in this country. People have the rights, means, and capacity to access a wide range of information; they recognize and reject misinformation.

Highly Vibrant

Somewhat Vibrant

OVERALL
SCORE

25

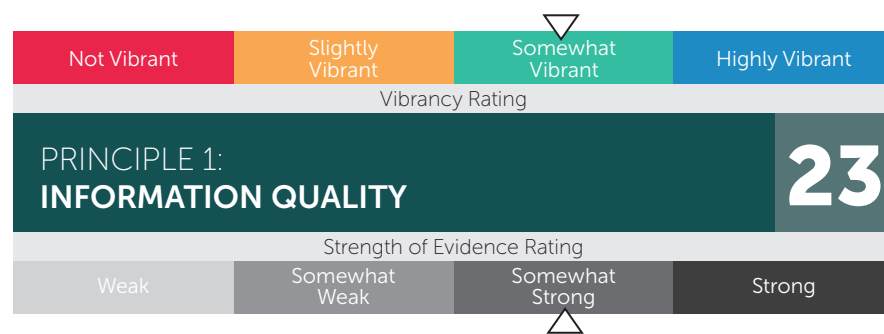Slightly Vibrant

Not Vibrant

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

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

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

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

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

Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant	Somewhat Vibrant	Highly Vibrant

Vibrancy Rating

PRINCIPLE 1: INFORMATION QUALITY	23

Strength of Evidence Rating

Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong	Strong

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Panelists noted that foreign governments, particularly Serbia and Russia, are spreading disinformation and hate speech through media outlets they control, which have editorial policies aimed at undermining Montenegrin sovereignty and its pro-Europe foreign policy. "In Montenegro we are openly talking about China and Russia impacting media content," journalist Predrag Zecevic commented, "China's impact is not visible, but [Russian-influenced outlets are] very visible those media either haven't registered in Montenegro or they have a non-transparent ownership structure."

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

NGOs are the best sources to disprove fake news. For example, the Democratic Transition Center hosts www.raskrinkavanje.me, which works with the International Fact-Checking Network, and the Digital Forensic Center try to detect and publicly debunk fake news and malicious information. "The public space is full of hate speech, and as a rule of the thumb, it goes unsanctioned. Hate speech [occurs on] social networks but sometimes even mainstream print or digital media intentionally publish or broadcast hate speech", explained panelist Samir Rastoder, editor with Radio Petnjica.

Panelists agreed that professional media content producers do not produce information to intentionally harm, but the same cannot be said for unprofessional content producers. The absence of a self-regulatory body of influential media is a great handicap. Self-regulation is decentralized due to decades of disputes among major media companies. "People are concerned about the spreading of mal-information and hate speech in media, because it can result in creating a hostile environment and incitement of intolerance," Nikola Markovic of Radio and Television of Niksic, pointed out, "Professional media has limited impact on the issue." Nikolić noted that sometimes hate speech appears in the comments section, coming from the readers, in mainstream media. This doesn't occur as frequently since the 2020 Law on Media started regulating web portals, which requires outlets to quickly delete disreputable content.

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

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

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

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

> " **Nonprofessional content producers typically do not engage in fact-checking and often produce dubious or outright false reports or politically motivated propaganda.**
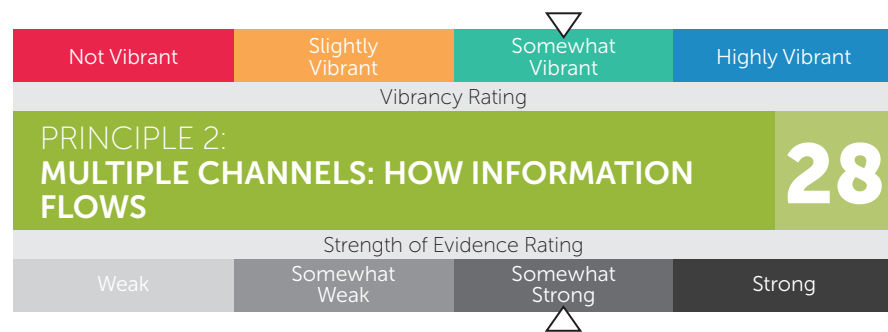
Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced.

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

Montenegro media content does not have subscriptions, and public services are funded by the national or local budgets. For example, this year the national public service, Radio and TV Montenegro-RTCG, received about €18 million ($19 million) from the national budget. Private media rely on the advertising market, which, for years now, ranges between $10.7 million to $12.9 million annually.

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

Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant	Somewhat Vibrant	Highly Vibrant

Vibrancy Rating

PRINCIPLE 2: MULTIPLE CHANNELS: HOW INFORMATION FLOWS	28

Strength of Evidence Rating

Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong	Strong

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for government information.

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

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

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

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

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

Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow.

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

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

Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.

Panelists concurred that news outlets are essentially not editorially independent due to the influence from either politicians or media owners themselves. According to the Media Trade Union report "Socio-Economic Status of Media Professionals," half of the journalists surveyed believe that owners have a certain degree of influence on their reporting, and 36 percent of said owners have no influence over them. In addition, 43 percent of 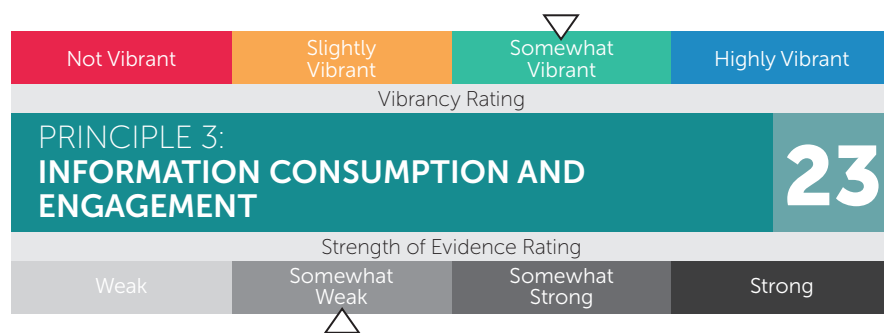the journalists surveyed said that at some point in their professional careers they were forced to censor reporting. The national public service broadcaster, Radio and Television of Montenegro (RTCG), is not independent, which is clearly stated in its editorial policy. The government provides financial support for it with 0.3 percent of the budget, which does affect its pro-government reporting.

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

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

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

Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant	Somewhat Vibrant	Highly Vibrant

Vibrancy Rating

PRINCIPLE 3: INFORMATION CONSUMPTION AND ENGAGEMENT	23

Strength of Evidence Rating

Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong	Strong

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The media have a positive and productive relationship with CSOs. However, most citizens are unaware of what a media ombudsperson is or what they do. On the positive side, some of the more established media outlets--including RTCG, Vijesti, and Pobjeda--do have in-house ombudspersons on staff, offering more objectivity and professional credibility when presenting information. According to Ruzic, Montenegrin citizens are quite passive and do not know how to have constructive dialogues, especially on social networks. Civil society groups point to abuses in different sectors of society. The government's Media Self-Regulatory Council and the Ombudsperson Office work transparently to resolve the complaints of citizens, which appear on the media council's web site.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

are funded by private donations and partially from commercials.

Community media in Montenegro reflect the political, cultural, educational, and health issues of the citizens, that occur in their local communities. Outlets focused on the Albanian community include TV Boin in Tuzi or TV Teuta in Ulcinj, which are dedicated to broader local topics, and provide more comprehensive information to the Albanian ethnic community. Another example is the only radio station in a small, northern municipality, Petnjica, which has a similar role as the Albanian outlets. Petnjica's radio station focuses on local political and economic issues related to U.S. and Western European immigrants who live in this region. Because of its foreign population, the station survives on funding from western sources. According to Samir Rastoder, Radio Petnjica's editor, "Montenegro's community media are, in a broad sense, a very neglected link on a media scene. But these outlets offer consumers real journalism. Their dedication to important local issues means they lack funding, but they fulfill their mission professionally and objectively." Another example of community media is Radio Dux in Kotor, which focuses on the political and cultural needs of the Croatian ethnic community in the region, and mainly operates through volunteer support and donations.

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

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

Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant	Somewhat Vibrant	Highly Vibrant

Vibrancy Rating

PRINCIPLE 4: TRANSFORMATIVE ACTION	24

Strength of Evidence Rating

Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong	Strong

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

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

opinions based on fact-based information, those who primarily get their news and information from social networks or propagandistic media are significantly swayed by manipulated information.
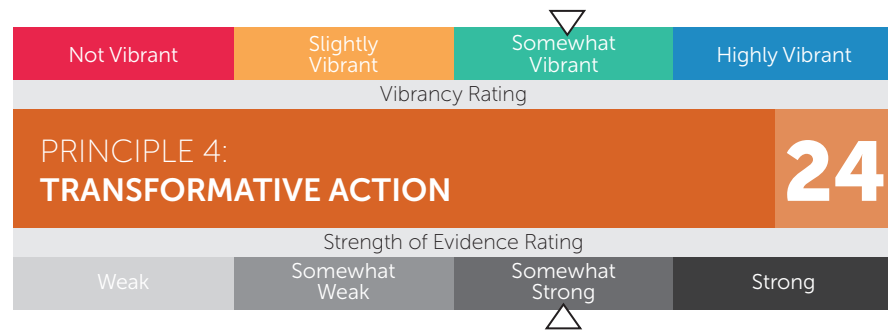
Indicator 16: Information producers and distribution channels enable or encourage information sharing across ideological lines.

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

The panelists agreed that the general public's media choices are typically based on their political leanings. Montenegro is still in the grip of strong ideological and political extremes, which means open public debate between conflicting points of view on TV and social networks is almost non-existent. "On social networks, citizens disseminate hate speech, because they do not know how to have objective debates according to democratic norms," Ruzic noted, "Because of different political views, citizens often insult each other without basing their arguments on facts. The media is politically biased, and their reporting on political and social events reflects that bias. When reporting, they mainly select the information they want the public to focus on and consequently invite interlocutors who agree with their editorial policy.'"

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

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

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

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

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

NGOs and trade unions tend to use quality news and information when presenting their missions, surveys, or positions on public policies. NGOs are also actively engaged in countering manipulative information. CSOs attempt to communicate quality information to the public and base their analyses, public policy studies, and opinion polls on credible media and factual sources. "CSOs play a big role in Montenegrin society, but so far, the media has invested only limited efforts in catching up with CSOs in raising important societal issues," Vesovic said. Panelists concurred that civic participation is quite limited, especially regarding engagement in public consultation sessions on important draft laws. Although CSOs play a role in disseminating information, there is room for improvement to further strengthen their role in reducing the spread of manipulative information and to boost more active civic involvement by citizens.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic rights.

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

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

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

LIST OF PANEL PARTICIPANTS

Milan Jovanovic, senior analyst, Debunk.org, Podgorica

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

Dragan Markešić, CEO, Direct Media International, Podgorica

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

Jelena Martinovic, journalist and editor; Pobjeda, Podgorica

Olja Nikolić, acting director, Montenegro Media Institute, Podgorica

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

Natasa Ruzic, political science professor, University of Montenegro

Neven Stanicic, journalist, Radio Tivat, Tivat

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

Predrag Zecevic, journalist and editor, Business CGl, Podgorica

NORTH MACEDONIA

Vibrant
Information
Barometer

2 0 2 4

VIBRANCY

Overall Score: 2021: 21, 2022: 23, 2023: 23, 2024: 22

Information Quality: 2021: 19, 2022: 23, 2023: 21, 2024: 19

Multiple Channels: 2021: 25, 2022: 26, 2023: 27, 2024: 26

Consumption & Engagement: 2021: 19, 2022: 21, 2023: 22, 2024: 22

Transformative Action: 2021: 21, 2022: 22, 2023: 23, 2024: 23

PRINCIPLES

Not Vibrant (0-10): Quality information is extremely limited in this country. The vast majority of it is not editorially independent, not based on facts, or it is intended to harm. People do not have the rights, means, or capacity to access a wide range of information; they do not recognize or reject misinformation; and they cannot or do not make choices on what types of information they want to engage with.

Slightly Vibrant (11-20): Quality information is available on a few topics or geographies in this country, but not all. While some information is editorially independent, there is still a significant amount of misinformation, malinformation, and hate speech in circulation, and it does influence public discourse. Most people do not recognize or reject misinformation.

Somewhat Vibrant (21-30): Quality information is available in this country and most of it is editorially independent, based on facts, and not intended to harm. Most people have the rights, means, and capacity to access a wide range of information, although some do not. Most people recognize and reject misinformation, although some do not.

Highly Vibrant (31-40): Quality information is widely available in this country. People have the rights, means, and capacity to access a wide range of information; they recognize and reject misinformation.

Highly Vibrant

Somewhat Vibrant

OVERALL
SCORE

22

Slightly Vibrant

Not Vibrant

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.
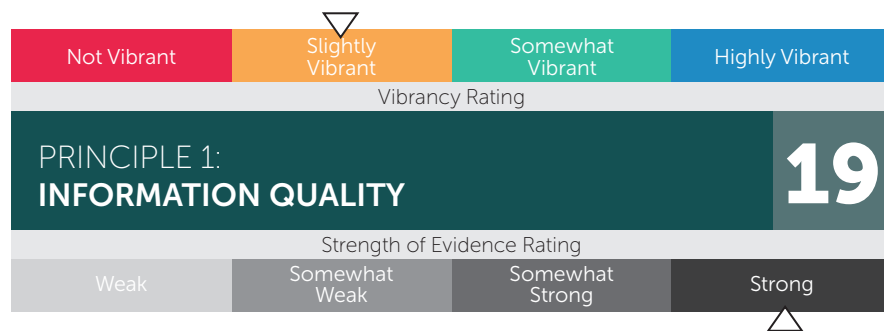
The overcrowded media market has a persistent, longtime problem of low to no sustainability. Although a number of local and regional broadcasters, including radio and TV stations, terminated their operations, the number of active outlets remains well beyond the capacity of the national economy to support. 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.

Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant ▽	Somewhat Vibrant	Highly Vibrant

Vibrancy Rating

PRINCIPLE 1:
INFORMATION QUALITY

19

Strength of Evidence Rating

Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong	Strong △

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.

> " 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.

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.

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.
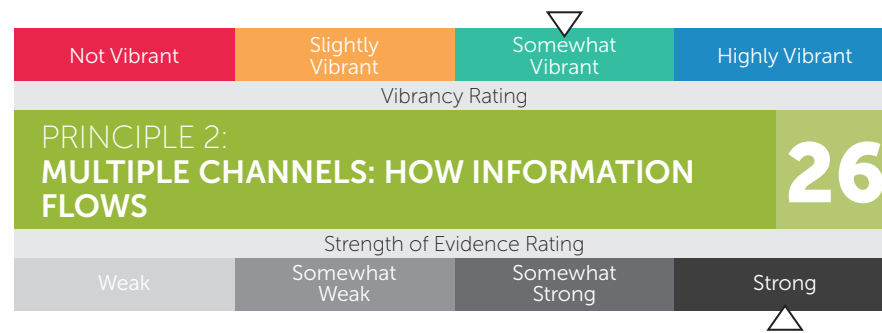
Although the law prohibits the government, state and public bodies, and enterprises from buying advertising space, investigations revealed various methods used to circumvent this ban, especially by local administrations, to fund local media. A recent legislative proposal, prepared by the five national 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.

Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant	Somewhat Vibrant ▽	Highly Vibrant

Vibrancy Rating

PRINCIPLE 2: MULTIPLE CHANNELS: HOW INFORMATION FLOWS	26

Strength of Evidence Rating

Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong	Strong △

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.

> " **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.**

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

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[1] 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

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1   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.
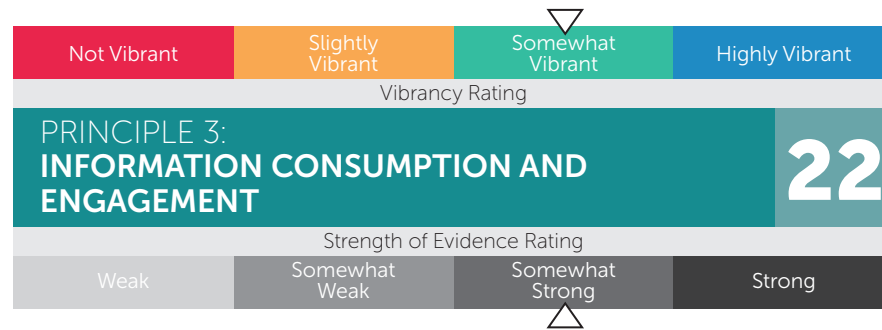
MRT has made strides in reducing political interference in its editorial policies. However, appointing a new Programming Council, the MRT steering body, has been stalled in parliament since 2019 due to political disagreement.

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.

Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant	Somewhat Vibrant	Highly Vibrant

Vibrancy Rating

PRINCIPLE 3: INFORMATION CONSUMPTION AND ENGAGEMENT	22

Strength of Evidence Rating

Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong	Strong

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[2] 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.

> 66 **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.

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2   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.
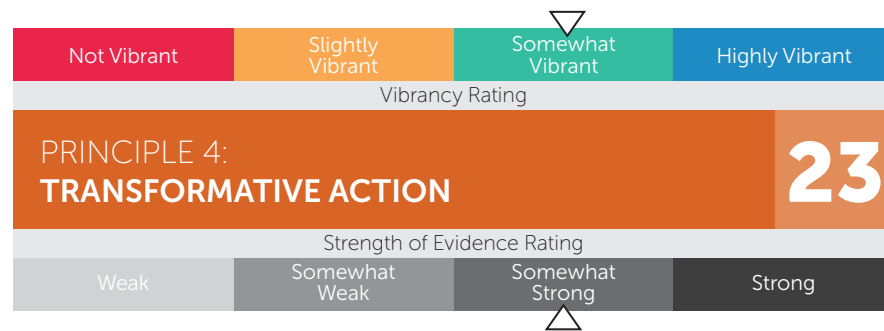
New community media focused on local reporting are emerging. They include LokalAktiv, a website that covers the eastern region of the country for now. A version for the central region is also under preparation.

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.

Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant	Somewhat Vibrant	Highly Vibrant

Vibrancy Rating

PRINCIPLE 4: TRANSFORMATIVE ACTION	23

Strength of Evidence Rating

Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong	Strong

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"[3] 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.

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

"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."

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3   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.

> " 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.

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.

LIST OF PANEL PARTICIPANTS

Stevo Bašurovski, editor, TV Tera, Bitola

Žaklina Cvetkovska, journalist, Kumanovonews.com, Kriva Palanka

Srebra Gjorgjijevska, editor, journalist, Umno.mk, Skopje

Iskra Koroveshovska, editor, Alfa TV, Skopje

Anita Latifi, member of the Programming Council of Public Broadcasting Service MRT; spokesperson of the Albanian Theatre, Skopje

Suzana Miceva, editor, TV VIS, Strumica

Pero Momirovski, journalist, Independent Trade Union of Journalists and Media Workers, Skopje

Xhelal Neziri, president, Balkan Institute for Media and Democracy, Tetovo

Petrit Saracini, president, editor-in-chief, Institute for Media Analytics, Skopje

Bojan Šaševski, editor, Radio MOF, Skopje

Naser Selmani, editor, Shenya TV, Skopje

SERBIA

Vibrant
Information
Barometer
2 0 2 4

VIBRANCY

Highly Vibrant · Somewhat Vibrant · Slightly Vibrant · Not Vibrant

Overall Score — 2021: 15, 2022: 15, 2023: 15, 2024: 13

Information Quality — 2021: 13, 2022: 13, 2023: 14, 2024: 12

Multiple Channels — 2021: 17, 2022: 17, 2023: 16, 2024: 14

Consumption & Engagement — 2021: 14, 2022: 16, 2023: 16, 2024: 13

Transformative Action — 2021: 13, 2022: 13, 2023: 15, 2024: 13

PRINCIPLES

Not Vibrant (0-10): Quality information is extremely limited in this country. The vast majority of it is not editorially independent, not based on facts, or it is intended to harm. People do not have the rights, means, or capacity to access a wide range of information; they do not recognize or reject misinformation; and they cannot or do not make choices on what types of information they want to engage with.

Slightly Vibrant (11-20): Quality information is available on a few topics or geographies in this country, but not all. While some information is editorially independent, there is still a significant amount of misinformation, malinformation, and hate speech in circulation, and it does influence public discourse. Most people do not recognize or reject misinformation.

Somewhat Vibrant (21-30): Quality information is available in this country and most of it is editorially independent, based on facts, and not intended to harm. Most people have the rights, means, and capacity to access a wide range of information, although some do not. Most people recognize and reject misinformation, although some do not.

Highly Vibrant (31-40): Quality information is widely available in this country. People have the rights, means, and capacity to access a wide range of information; they recognize and reject misinformation.

Highly Vibrant

Somewhat Vibrant

Slightly Vibrant
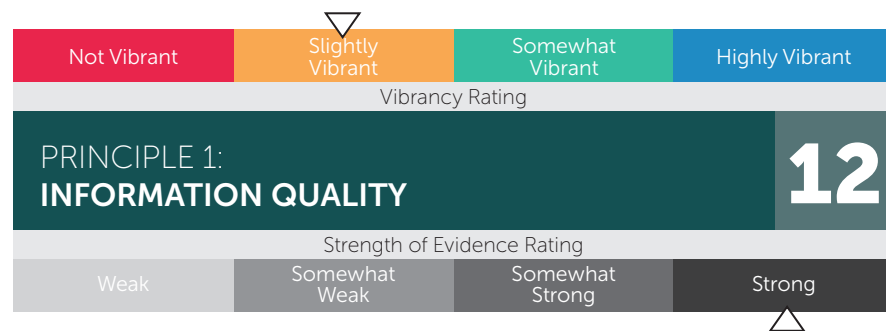
OVERALL SCORE

13

Not Vibrant

In 2023, the persistent disregard for the rule of law remained the biggest obstacle for Serbian democracy. Serbia dropped to the 104th position on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index, marking its lowest placement in the last 11 years, while public debt reached €35.5 billion ($38.8 billion) in 2023, doubling since 2012. In May 2023, two tragic mass shootings deeply shook the country causing a public outcry. The year's end was marked by the fourth extraordinary parliamentary elections since 2012, involving a highly manipulative campaign and innovative "vote-stealing" tactics as outlined in the Center for Research, Transparency, and Accountability's (CRTA) 2023 elections observation report.

Serbia fell 12 places to 98 out of 180 countries, on Reporters without Borders World Index of Media Freedom, representing the biggest drop among EU and Balkan countries. According to Freedom House's 2023 report, Serbia's deterioration in political rights and civil liberties stands as the worst of all European countries.

VIBE panelists gave Serbia an overall country score of 13 in 2023. This all-time low result stems from the uneven division of the Serbian media into two starkly different groups. The first is a small number of professionals that includes CSO investigative centers and dozens of local media that courageously and accurately report on issues in their regions. The second is most media affiliated with the ruling party (Serbian Progressive Party) and current government; this group dominates through sheer numbers and reach, especially via tabloid media, and

routinely seizes the spotlight by broadcasting political slander. The unique situation in Serbia sees leading politicians, including the president and prime minister, attempting to undermine serious journalism.

All four principles received low scores, ranging between 12 and 14, and all of these were lower than the 2023 VIBE study. Principle 1, which looks at information quality, got the lowest average score; this consistency shows the panelists' near-identical perception of media sector realities. For Principle 2 (Multiple Channels of Information), scores ranged from a high of 20 for the indicator on access to information to a low of 9 for the indicator on the independence of information. In Principle 3 (Information Consumption and Engagement), the indicator on media literacy remained the lowest scored of the principle. Principle 4 (Transformative Action) scores on the government's use of quality information in decision making and information supporting good governance and democratic rights were the lowest scored indicators of this principle. The indicator on civil society use of quality information was the most highly scored of this year's VIBE Serbia assessment, reflecting civil society's role in enabling people to act together and exert greater influence on decisions, activities, and public policies.

Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant	Somewhat Vibrant	Highly Vibrant

Vibrancy Rating

PRINCIPLE 1: INFORMATION QUALITY	12

Strength of Evidence Rating

Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong	Strong

The rare dissemination of quality information in the country continues to be eclipsed by the abundance of non-fact-based information circulated by numerous authority-controlled media outlets. Many of the dominant media outlets are turning into "low-quality information factories" with large media houses churning out over 300 stories per day. While Serbia has professional media that stive to publish quality news coverage, government-aligned media spread false claims and publish stories favorable to the government. Panelists strongly agreed on this point.

Indicator 5 tied for this principle's lowest score of 8, as panelists saw a lack of sufficient levels of financing to support content production as the main obstacle for professional media producing quality news and information. Indicator 3 (information is not intended to harm) also received a score of 8, reflecting the rampant hate speech, anti-Western rhetoric, pejorative language that has infected Serbia's information sphere. Svetlana Kojanović, director, Center for Monitoring & Activism (CEMA) in Čačak, highlighted that Serbia has been undergoing media reforms for nearly two decades and noted that "the more we fight for the public interest the less quality information reaches the public. The more we point out the need for citizens to be the center of attention, the more we see information on executive power figures."

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

Adequate infrastructure exists, as do state and private faculties for journalism and content production professions. Numerous informal trainings covering a large range of media topics are organized by journalists' associations, civil society organizations (CSOs), and international donors on a regular basis. However, training for editors at all levels is lacking.

A number of courses geared towards journalists were organized during 2023: health organizations trained journalists on how to manage information regarding health topics; International Journalists' Association of Serbia (IJAS) cooperated with the US Embassy to organize training sessions for journalists on "storytelling on social networks"; an online training focused on investigative journalism techniques was organized by the Center for Investigative Journalism of Serbia (CINS) and Transparency Serbia; the nonprofit Crime and Corruption Reporting Network, KRIK, offered a free workshop on investigative journalism on social networks; and CINS organized investigative journalism training, along with many others.

Everything is polarized in the Serbian media landscape: information, readers, reach and impact. In the minority is the group of professional media, investigative centers and press agencies that respect the journalistic code and produce quality information. However, quality news content reaches a limited number of citizens: For example, no more than 350,000 Serbian TV viewers have access to professional content as it is only disseminated by a single cable provider. Higher quality content is also sometimes published in a few of the low-circulation dailies and magazines and on social networks. In contrast, the majority of Serbia's media sector consists of tabloid-type media which mainly broadcast entertainment and informative programs promoting the government. This content is broadcast on all TV stations with national coverage and by more than a thousand local television and internet-based media.

This media dominance allowed the president of Serbia to appear on national television, 248 times—equivalent for more than 10 hours

of airtime--from December 1, 2022 to October 15, 2023. This is [14 times the airtime](#) given to the opposition in the same period. Tamara Skrozza-- deputy editor-in-chief of FoNet news agency and a member of the Complaints Commission at the Press Council in Belgrade-- described how the government often fabricates events to hinder journalists from covering more important topics, noting that due to time contraints "[journalists are]…allowed to pop out two or three times a week to attend controlled events or constant appearances made by political figures such as the president, prime minister, and opposition representatives."

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

While the Serbian media landscape does have fact-based, well-sourced objective information, sensationalism, the Serbian "Black Chronicles"— or crime-reporting—and reality programs dominate, as media outlets vie for increased clicks and audiences. Moreover, the bulk of manipulated information is disseminated via tabloid newspapers and two tabloid TV stations which are aligned with the authorities. As reported by [Raskrikavanje](#), 2023 saw 1,174 manipulative headlines on the front pages of six daily newspapers (*Informer*, *Srpski Telegraf, Alo*, V*ecernje Novosti*, *Kurir*, and *Politika*), most often in the form of unfounded or biased claims and manipulated facts.

Manipulated information is also spread via social networks. During the 2023 parliamentary campaign and as [published](#) by the Association of Serbian Media (ASMEDI), over 160 manipulative articles were recorded as appearing on the front pages of the nine most widely read editions of the daily press. The same or similar manipulated information was published by the media in their online editions, which is compounded by the lack of effective professional sanctions for unprofessional work. "Manipulation and tendentious reporting are more than simple disinformation," Kojanović explained, "In Serbia, it is a coordinated pattern of behavior in all regime media, which aims to distort social reality and mislead the majority of citizens."

NGOs conduct specialized research, and the results and facts are available to citizens and the media. Investigative CSOs are also devoted to their job and succeed in disseminating their research and monitoring results. Several websites check the truthfulness of statements and published data: Fake News Tracker, Unmasking, Truth-teller, and CRTA, among others. Some local media are also investing ways to identify and address fake news in their areas. Social media that have mechanisms for moderating content and reducing manipulated information are very rare; efforts to reduce manipulated information and misleading content are mainly undertaken by the online editions of a few professional media outlets.

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

Serbian media continue to grapple with the East-West dichotomy, as media coverage persistently reinforce divisions. Anti-Western rhetoric has permeated public discourse and continues to rise throughout the country's media sector. Russia has dominated media coverage, with more than [16,000 mentions in the last 12 months](#). The most influential television channels—RTS1, TV Pink, TV Prva, and Happy TV--had the largest share of pro-Russian and anti-Western media reports. Moreover, Russian media outlets are active in Serbia: Radio Sputnik has been broadcasting in Serbia since 2015, and its programming is aired by numerous local radio stations. In 2023, the Russia Today (RT) office in Belgrade launched an [online news service](#) in the Serbian language. The EU has called upon Serbia to comply with the Council of Europe's decision to suspend the broadcasting activities of RT Balkan and Sputnik; however, the Serbian government took no action.

Hate speech is common in most print media, along with their corresponding online editions, with the use of derogatory names for members of certain nationalities and pejorative labeling of political opponents, critics from civil society, and journalists. Two of the television stations that broadcast nationwide (Happy and Pink) were the most egregious in their calls for violence, normalizing hate speech, giving war criminals space to address the public, and supporting ultra-

right organizations in their programs. They operate without suffering any ramifications. Tabloid media content is synchronized with the media campaigns of government representatives, frequently using the same rhetoric and repeating entire phrases.

In terms of regulation and self-regulation mechanisms, the Press Council is gradually expanding its influence. The Ministry of Information and Telecommunication, which is responsible for media and information, and the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media (REM) are the two institutions which have the capacity to influence the Serbian media sector; however, they are completely dysfunctional, allowing chaos to reign. Tabloid editors and journalists do not respect professional and ethical standards. In a six-month period, from July 1, 2023, until the end of the year, the Press Council noted that the Code of Journalists of Serbia was violated 5,551 times, primarily by tabloid media. The most frequent violations included truthfulness of reporting and respect for privacy.

Unprofessional journalism was observed after two mass shootings in May, one involving a 13-year-old student at a Belgrade elementary school and the second involving a 21-year-old man in the villages around the town of Mladenovac, one of 17 municipalities within Belgrade. The victim's families were further traumatized by numerous speculation and manipulated information throughout the entire media sector, which was compounded by clumsy decisions made by the competent authorities. Provisions in the Code of Serbian Journalists — prohibiting journalists from publishing disturbing content and instilling fear — were frequently violated. The media inflated the number of victims, published the identity of a suspected minor student, circulated unverified information and alleged statements from the suspect, and interviewed school students (minors) with inappropriate questions while disclosing their personal data.

"While the Serbian media landscape does have fact-based, well-sourced objective information, sensationalism, the Serbian "Black Chronicles"—or crime-reporting—and reality programs dominate, as media outlets vie for increased clicks and audiences.

In addition to providing details about the suspect, the head of the police department in Belgrade showed the media a list of children the suspect allegedly planned to kill. These children received death threats weeks later. The president of Serbia spoke at length about the event, disclosing sensitive information about the young perpetrator, his parents, and his sister (also a minor). He presented details from the suspect's medical record. Several laws prohibit this; however, REM did not react. "The way these tragedies were reported is an anthology of disgrace and shame in our media community, " Skrozza stated. The media covered the second shooting, carried out by a 21-year-old the next day, in two villages near Mladenovac equally poorly.

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

In both the pre-election and election periods of 2023, most Serbian were not exposed to diverse and comprehensive content. The citizens get information mostly through television, and all of the six stations with a national frequency (four private and two public service) are biased. The delegation of observers of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) stated that the pre-election campaign was marked by "an unprecedented level of negative campaigning and fearmongering, attacks against the opposition and journalists, and serious issues regarding the media." It was also reported that the delegation was disturbed by the president of Serbia's media dominance during the campaign, the level of inflammatory rhetoric used including by high-ranking officials, and the hate speech. Also, brought under scrutiny was the negative tone and pressure used against members of the opposition, journalists, and civil society activists.

The Vojvodina province is legally required to broadcast content in the minority languages, as is the public RTV service and minority media supported by the National Councils of National Communities. However, the experiences and viewpoints of different racial, ethnic, and religious affiliations are still not sufficiently reported and therefore fail to reach the rest of the population. Information about minorities is lacking in the majority language, leading to widespread prejudices throughout Serbia's citizenry. In February, the trilingual research portal, Transparent Vojvodina (Átlátszó Vajdaság), was launched in Subotica. "All pro-government tabloids and commercial televisions address exclusively the majority community, the Serbs of the Orthodox faith," explained, Siniša Isakov, professor of media technology, University of Novi Sad, "The presence of other communities is marginalized in their programs."

The findings of the Diversity Reporting Network indicate that the LGBTQ+ community is one of the three groups most often exposed to hate speech. The media often contribute to this, instead of educating and informing citizens which would help reduce stigma and prejudice. This is why the IJAS has prepared guidelines that can contribute to better reporting on topics important to the LGBTQ+ community.

Progress is expected regarding increasing accessibility for people with disabilities following the adoption of the new media law, which stipulates that the public broadcaster should adapt its content and that it should include sign language, audio description, and open and closed captioning in its programs.

Despite journalism being a predominantly female profession in Serbia, women continue to be underrepresented or portrayed in discriminatory ways. Female journalists in Serbia are subjected to sexism and misogyny, but they seldom talk publicly about this. There is marked gender inequality in the media sector throughout Serbia. While there are women in leadership positions in media outlets such as Nova Ekonomija, Glas Šumadije, and InMedia, they are the exception, rather than the rule. The management board of public service broadcaster Radio Television Serbia (RTS) only has one woman, and out of the nine members of Radio Television Vojvodine's (RTV) management board, only three are women.

Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced.

There are 2,518 media in Serbia[1] - 1,024 websites, 827 printed publications, 313 radio stations , 219 television stations, and 145 other outlets, that share a total income of €453 million ($495 million) per year.

According to research conducted by Ipsos and IREX[2], digital advertising in Serbia, is at the lowest level in Europe, despite experiencing growth. The 16 largest media companies dominate the media market as they collect 75 percent of current advertising revenue and 88 percent of the media industry profit.

Since 2015, another significant funding source for the Serbian media has been project financing by local governments. Despite the initial intent of providing support for quality public interest media content, this project financing tool has evolved into funding media merely to ensure survival. As a result, the media experience political influence in their content, undermining the original intent of the local government financing instrument. Kojanović noted that, in the city of Čačak, "about 70 percent of the media budget for project financing is received by four media outlets. It's surprising that a significant portion of the local budget even goes to regime tabloids with national coverage located in the capital city."

At the end of 2023, the government of Serbia decided that both public service media, RTS and RTV, would be partly financed by the 2024 state budget, in addition to the mandatory tax paid by households.

Several media houses generate additional revenue by undertaking ancillary activities such as producing multimedia content for clients, renting out space, and opening coffee shops. Some of them have been successful, and this added financial stability has enabled these outlets to publish or air quality media content rather than "competing for clicks." This is the case for panelist Milorad Tadić, owner and editor-in-

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1   The Agency for Economic Registers announced in December that almost a fifth of the registered media outlets (482) did not have all the information prescribed for registry by the new Law on Public Information and Media.

2   IREX implements the USAID-funded *Mediji.Inovacije* project in Serbia.

chief of BOOM 93 radio, who reflected on his 31 years of experience in the industry, highlighting the challenges in audience engagement in Serbia: "Cooperation with the positive aspect of the non-governmental sector [specifically the CSOs which operate completely independently of government influence and which cooperate with media on large investigations financed by international donors] is the only thing that can save professional media from ruin. The audience in Serbia has no money to finance the media."

Mistrust in media, excessive advertisements, clickbait content, and "copy-paste" journalism, all explain why Serbian citizens are reluctant to pay for online media content. They are also dissuaded by misleading and manipulative information, political influence on media reporting, and insufficient quality and originality of media content. There is little awareness that media content should be paid for, apart from buying newspapers. While crowdfunding has been tried by some media outlets in Serbia, panelists were skeptical of it being a significant source of income. In Serbia, no daily news online media currently charges for access to its digital content. Only four percent of respondents to research conducted in 2023 by the Center for Media Professionalization and Media Literacy (CEPROM) have paid for online articles. Due to its investigative activities, KRIK brings in 15 percent of its annual budget from individual donors, mostly from the Serbian diaspora residing abroad.

> **"Hate speech is common in most print media, along with their corresponding online editions, with the use of derogatory names for members of certain nationalities and pejorative labeling of political opponents, critics from civil society, and journalists.**

Governmental subsidies often distort the media market. The government's favorite media often receives tax exemptions and similar market distortion privileges.

While international donor financing of media projects is mainly apolitical, most of the media they support are local with fewer employees. They have to perform basic media functions and undertake compliance with extensive bureaucratic donor requirements, which limits basic activities and renders this funding source problematic for

professional media. Stojan Marković, editor-in-chief of *Čačanske Novine* newspaper and online portal, criticized the bureaucratic reporting requirements that prevents donors from focusing their attention on the quality and impact of the content they are financing and explained, "Days and hours are wasted on detailed bookkeeping and donor reporting, [along with] financial records to the detriment of journalistic work. It must be clear that small media do not have the opportunity to [dedicate] a special person to be a project manager, but larger publications do. After the project is finished, most of the work involves reporting to donors instead of devoting time to quality marketing to reach the largest possible audience with their content."

The Journalists' Association of Serbia's (JAS) research on labor rights revealed that every second journalist or media worker does not have a permanent employment contract. Their labor rights are mostly threatened by the absence of compensation for overtime work, lack of respect for working hours, dismissals, and political pressure. The collective contract, designed to protect the rights of employees, is only followed by four media outlets.[3]

Western companies collect 63 percent of the advertising revenue from advertisements they run in Serbia.[4] Moreover, there is limited interest for major advertisers to advertise in local media. The selectivity in advertisin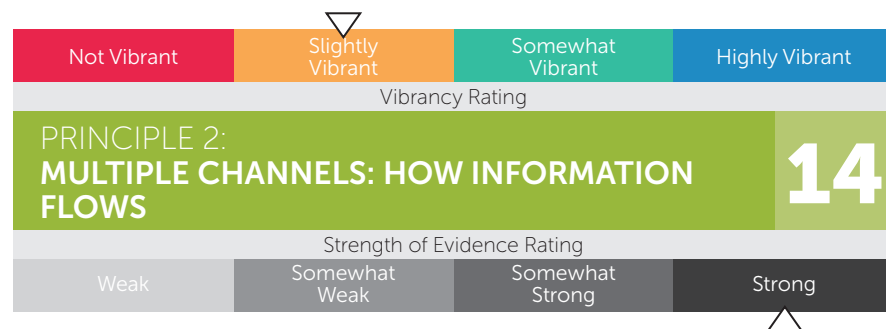g of state companies and institutions is evident. Last year, more than €800,000 ($874,000) were allocated from public budgets to advertise with companies that publish the newspapers *Informer, Srpski telegraf*, *Alo, Večernje novosti* and *Kurir*. These publications collectively featured almost 1,200 articles containing manipulative information on the front pages. This funding from public budgets was channeled

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3   Radio Television of Serbia, Radio Television of Vojvodina, Radio Television of Kragujevac and Magyar So.

4   Deutche Welle Srbija, Mar 15, 2023

through various advertising contracts with state institutions, public companies, and local governments. It is significant that the public broadcaster, RTS, one of the biggest advertisers[5], is primarily advertised in pro-regime tabloids. This underscores the extent to which the advertising market is being controlled.

Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant	Somewhat Vibrant	Highly Vibrant

Vibrancy Rating

PRINCIPLE 2: MULTIPLE CHANNELS: HOW INFORMATION FLOWS	14

Strength of Evidence Rating

Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong	Strong

Panelists had differing opinions on the score given to the legal framework for media, as it is rarely equitably enforced. In practice, the flow of information is severely limited by government-led policies that undermine every voice of truth concerning social and political dynamics. These numerous attacks are a formidable obstacle to free information flow in Serbia. Panelists gave the two indicators examining people's rights to create, share and consume information, and the independence of information channels with their lowest scores.

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

Panelists argued that appropriate laws to protect freedom of speech exist; however, since the laws are not applied, they are largely ineffective. Serbia's legal framework has been harmonized to meet international standards, but the government simply refuses to implement it. For years, political actors and officials from ruling parties and institutions have refused to appear on two TV stations, Nova S and N1, violating Serbians' constitutional right to information as well as the Law on Access to Information of Public Importance.

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5   Under Serbian law, the country's public broadcaster can sell advertising, while also receiving funding from the state budget.

Government officials' attitudes towards professional journalists drastically worsened in the second half of 2023. Prime Minister Ana Brnabić publicly condemned professional media, describing them as "tycoon media that are killing their country." Other statements from the government falsely attempted to link journalists to criminal activities and fascism. At an extraordinary press conference, the prime minister acknowledged she had withheld information from professional media. The president, who divides the media into two groups, does the same. The first group consists of professional media, which he actively avoids. The second larger group is primarily comprised of national television outlets which serve as a platform for publicity. His appearances typically involve monologues, without political opponents, experts or activists invited to join him in the studio. The regulator consistently fails to respond to cases of media which are unlawfully shut out by government officials.

In July, IJAS and BIRN published the report, *Safety of Journalists in the Digital Environment.* In the comments sections on websites and social network profiles, newsrooms and journalists are exposed to threats as well as organized and synchronized bot attacks. The report also states that there is no adequate response to this type of attack and underlines that jeopardizing journalists' safety potentially leads to their self-censorship. The Bureau for Social Research in Belgrade (BIRODI) analyzed the activities of bots created illegally by the government and sent their findings to the prosecutor's office. The response received was that it "was not within their jurisdiction."

There were numerous forms of harassment towards journalists and newsrooms in 2023. Journalists were even attacked by police officers while reporting on citizen demonstrations. Two years after the court decision, the city administration of Vranje has not yet demolished the illegal casino building that walled up the office windows of OK Radio. The bishop and spokesman of the Serbian Orthodox Church accused individuals and groups of "sowing extreme intolerance towards the church, as demonstrated by the CNN affiliate group of digital and print media.

Threats have even forced journalists to flee their homes and several have

been relocated, some outside the country. A video was published by Pink TV calling for the arrest of journalists and editors of the daily newspaper *Danas,* the portal Nova.rs, and TV stations Nova S and N1. Numerous other threats and attacks were registered all over country. The Supreme Public Prosecutor's Office also published official data showing that 73 cases were registered concerning threats to journalists from January 1 to November 30, 2023.

Faced with the authorities' unsatisfactory reaction to the attacks, media associations organized some self-defense tactics. The Independent Journalists' Association of Vojvodina (NDNV) appointed commissioners in 11 cities of Serbia to register cases of attacks and discrimination against journalists. IJAS has launched a platform for the safety of journalists "at the front line" which includes resources and tools to support journalists who fall victim to online violence. In March, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) expressed concern regarding attacks on journalists in Serbia, and the Assembly of the European Federation of Journalists (EFJ) endorsed the plea of the Serbian journalist associations and unions, calling for an end to impunity for crimes against journalists and the targeting of media workers in Serbia.

Among 35 European countries, Serbia ranked eighth highest for the number of strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs) registered, according to the August 2023 report supported by the Coalition Against SLAPPs in Europe (CASE) and prepared by The Daphne Caruana Galizia Foundation. The CASE report states that 28 SLAPPs were registered in Serbia and that the number is increasing. Vesna Radojević, manager of KRIK's Raskrinkavanje (Disclosure) project, stated, "KRIK received 14 lawsuits in 2023, and this trend is now impacting all investigative media, as well as the non-investigative media who refuse to be regime apologists."

In Serbia, there have been no documented instances of repressive demands by the police or the prosecutor's office to reveal journalistic sources.

At the end of December 2023, around a hundred lawsuits were lodged

by victims' families against media outlets that published information that the head of the Belgrade Police Department showed on television--including the list of children's names that the alleged Belgrade school shooter planned to target--instead of pursuing cases against the police for disclosing this information during a live press conference. By the end of 2023, these lawsuits remained active.

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

Serbia's communications infrastructure is relatively good, and the country has widespread coverage. According to the government's Bureau of Statistics, about 85 percent of the population used the internet, while almost nine percent have never used the internet. In the panel's opinion, media polarization is also reflected in the choice between the two main providers of ICT services: Telekom Srbija, which is owned by the government, is aggressively trying to lure SBB (United Media, United Group) users to reduce the influence of the independent channels that only SBB offers.

In Serbia's public service media, programs adapted to people with disabilities are very rare; on commercial television, there are even fewer. Commercial broadcasters mostly adhere to the recommendations regarding these programs only during election campaigns. REM published the last monitoring report on the matter in 2019.

Mainstream media provide inaccurate reporting, young women are not represented, nor are members of the LGBTQ+ community or the Roma community. According to NNS' monitoring of the pre-election campaign, no marginalized group was mentioned.

According to a December 2023 SHARE Foundation report, about 40 percent of internet users in Serbia are not ready to give up anonymity for security reasons. Citizens are aware of the risks, but they also resist control and monitoring measures.

The Regulatory Authority for Electronic Communications and Postal

Services (RATEL) still does not analyze market share, and it can only be assessed based on the number of connections, without the financial indicators of content distribution. In the fourth quarter of 2023, RATEL reported that the market share according to the number of subscribers was: 60 percent for Telekom Srbija, 28 percent for SBB, and 4 percent for the other four providers. Isakov explained that the two leading operators, Telekom Srbija and SBB, have been at war for years and "the regulators side with the state-controlled company and remain silent while local governments prevent the construction, expansion, and improvement of the SBB infrastructure. This has been going on for more than ten years. This bias towards Telekom has led to a sharp increase in the number of its users."

Technology-based violence is a growing issue. Violence against women is a long-standing issue in Serbia, and modern technology appears to worsen the situation. Reports covering violence against women are rarely analytical, and tabloids appear to adhere prioritizing the perpetrator's back stories and engage in victim blaming. The biggest problem is with the media revealing the identity of the victim and her family members, directly or indirectly. Non-progressive media cite that they are presenting "the other side of the story," when they are really giving space to politicians or war criminals and others who show hatred, contempt, and support violence against women.

In the period from July to October 2023, the SHARE Foundation reported that a total of 25 cases regarding the violation of digital rights were recorded in Serbia. In July, a list of almost 15,000 bots — the names and profiles of people accused of belonging to a troll farm controlled by the ruling Serbian Progressive Party — were published on *X* (formerly known as Twitter). Although it was not clear where the list came from or whether all the names on it had been verified, it resulted in numerous anonymous attacks on the individuals listed.

> **There were numerous forms of harassment towards journalists and newsrooms in 2023. Journalists were even attacked by police officers while reporting on citizen demonstrations.**

Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for government information.

A lot of information is unavailable to the public. The latest example is the case of the UAE airline company, Etihad, which in 2023 quit the co-ownership of a Serbian airline with no information made public. "Trust in institutions has completely eroded," Kojanović explained, "and simultaneously, we are flooded with information from various sources, many of which do not undergo any kind of filtering." Ana Lalić Hegediš, Novi Sad-based NDNV executive director, described how a lawsuit was filed against her for 'violating the honor and the reputation of the Clinical Center' in Belgrade after she published an article about the center's investments according to data downloaded from the government's public procurement portal. "The trial is still ongoing," Lalić Hegediš stated, "This is another bizarre lawsuit when you keep in mind that all I did was use official publicly released information."

From February 17, 2022, to July 31, 2023, 788 state bodies and organizations, public companies, and authority institutions, did not publish requested information even after a ruling made by the Commissioner for Information of Public Importance and Personal Data Protection. The Commission is very slow in resolving media complaints and institutions rarely respect its decisions. As a result, it is not a reliable partner for journalists. The panel unanimously felt that the likelihood of obtaining information from some state institutions reduced significantly in 2023.

Some of the courts, such as the High Court in Belgrade, send important announcements and trial schedules to their mailing list; the Higher Public Prosecutor's Office in Belgrade has adopted the approach of sending important announcements via a Viber group that includes journalists. Journalists can track the progress of court cases on the portal of the Serbian judiciary.

Confidential information is occasionally published. Contrary to popular belief that these are isolated incidents or individual cases of data

leakage, the panel agreed that such breaches of confidentiality stem from an organized infrastructure involving a data transfer chain to certain media based on vested interests.

The panelists felt that executive authorities, courts, and prosecutor's offices have spokespeople and offices who often refuse to answer the questions posed by media representatives. The real spokesperson for these authorities is President Vucic who broadcasts messages to the public on an almost daily basis.

Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow.

Although there are no formal obstacles to establish media, concentration within the sector establishes a political and economic monopoly that significantly impacts the dissemination of ideas, information, and opinions in the media space across the whole of Serbia. At the local level, a few individual owners control multiple TV stations and other local media. Radojević noted, "There are a number of portals that serve to permanently attack the opposition, and the owners are hidden in Switzerland." Gavrilović described the controversial nature of media ownership stating, "Two out of four stations with national frequencies are owned by an individual closely associated with a member of the ruling party's main board. Formally, it would appear that ownership diversity exists, but their [editorial] policies create the impression of a unified newsroom".

A new law openly adopts a revisionist approach by reinstating state ownership of the media, contradicting European standards. This law enables state-owned Telekom, to become the central hub for the future state media and propaganda machine, as it now will be allowed to establish specialized and informative channels.

After several years' delay, REM announced a tender at the end of 2022 for the award of the fifth license for terrestrial television broadcasting at the

national level. However, after a year, REM has not announced a decision. Moreover, there is room for more channels in the terrestrial multiplex, but no progress has been made when it comes to granting additional licenses.

> **Serbia's chaotic media environment is characterized by a plethora of minimal regulatory interventions, while media organizations are influenced by various factors including ownership dynamics, funding sources, and a lack of competitive market forces.**

According to the results of a research survey conducted by BIRODI in 2022, *Public Opinion of Serbia and the Media,* 64 percent of respondents noted that RTS was their main source of information. Prva and Pink television followed with 33 percent. Professional television outlets N1 and TV Nova S were the main source of information for 13 and eight percent of respondents, respectively. The main daily news program, Dnevnik RTS, has an estimated audience of 3 million citizens. Monitoring of the central news broadcasts shows that both public services do not pay attention to subjects unrelated to the ruling power. Research conducted by Novi Sad School of Journalism concludes that television stations Pink, Hepi, Prva, and B92 present an idealized picture of reality, promoting daily public appearances of the ruling elite along with continuous criticism of the opposition and their activities.

Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.

Serbia's chaotic media environment is characterized by a plethora of minimal regulatory interventions, while media organizations are influenced by various factors including ownership dynamics, funding sources, and a lack of competitive market forces. Government subsidies are often manipulated, advertising funds remain largely controlled and inaccessible for most media, donor funds are limited and difficult for some media outlets to manage, while regulators and public services are under political control. The result is that the editorial content in the Serbian media is heavily influenced.

Only a few professional content producers, affiliates of foreign media companies, can afford clear division of labor and separate the newsroom

from business operations. Small professional media often operate with few employees juggling multiple roles (journalist, editor, project manager or technical support) simultaneously.
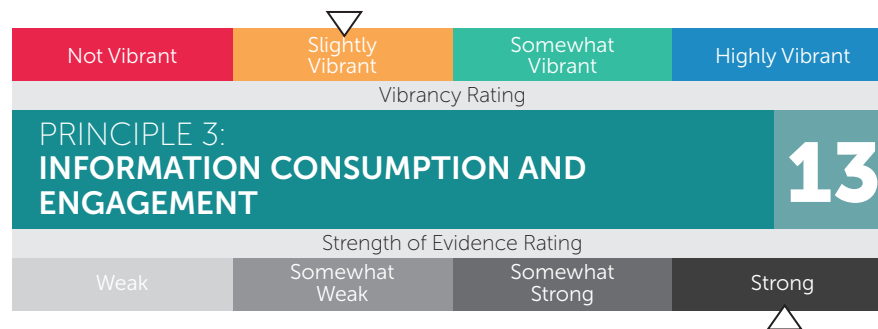
Public service media is funded through a combination of state budget allocations, revenue from advertising sales, and taxes paid by Serbian households. This situation distorts the advertising market as it enjoys a more stable source of funds than all other competitors. There was a positive development for public service broadcaster, RTV: 24 years after its studio was bombed, it has been moved to a new studio. However, the panel argued that political interference into the editorial content of two public service media outlets escalated in 2023, marked by the dissemination of biased programming, misreporting important public events (such as citizen demonstrations), and heavily biased coverage of the country's top political figures and subjects.

Regulatory bodies tasked with overseeing frequency allocations, licenses, and telecommunications services fail to fulfill its functions in Serbia. REM operates entirely to support government-aligned media and the tabloid journalism it produces. It is committed to preserving the interests of the authorities, while conspicuously concealing results that are not favorable to the government. A symbolic action that reveals REM's questionable ethics was carried out by the president of REM's council, who published a photo of herself wearing a Nazi uniform on her Telegram channel. The Jewish municipality in Belgrade and the Coalition for Free Media expressed their outrage.

Because of a delay in finalizing the published bid, at least 10 regional television stations and 20 radio stations are broadcasting without permits. Failing to fulfill its obligation of convening sessions twice a month, the REM Council finally held its "regular" session on November 20, marking the first session in six months. On TV stations with a national frequency, advertising blocks often last up to 16 minutes each, while the Advertising Act set a limit of 12 minutes per hour of programming. TV Pink, which renewed its national coverage broadcasting license for another eight years, has openly continued to violate professional and ethical standards, laws, and regulations.

REM's *Report Assessing the Compliance with Legal and Programmatic Obligations by Commercial Media Service Providers for the period October 2022-March 2023* (provided at the request of the parliament following the mass murders) aimed to help identify the main TV outlets promoting violence. It states that Pink adheres to the law regarding electronic media, which is not supported by Pink's tabloid news coverage.

After the parliamentary elections in December 2023, the president of the REM Council stated that monitoring commercial television coverage during the election campaign was not completed and thus results could not be published. However, IJAS revealed that on December 20, REM experts had completed this work for all television stations. The CINS obtained access to unpublished analyses, revealing that Pink Television, TV Hepi, and TV Prva all allocated a far larger proportion of its airtime to the ruling party's *"Aleksandar Vučić - Serbia Must Not Stop"* ballot. In addition to the discrepancies in airtime, all above-mentioned TV stations consistently reported negatively about the opposition, while portraying the ruling party positively. "Both regulators REM and RATEL did not fulfill either of its two basic missions: they did not ensure fair market competition, nor did they protect communication and media service users," Isakov highlighted.

Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant	Somewhat Vibrant	Highly Vibrant

Vibrancy Rating

PRINCIPLE 3: INFORMATION CONSUMPTION AND ENGAGEMENT	13

Strength of Evidence Rating

Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong	Strong

Despite laws regarding data privacy and digital security existing, they are rarely applied, and information consumption and engagement remain biased along political lines—either pro-government or pro-opposition. Panelists gave this principle a low score of 13 due to numerous cases of compromised privacy, generally low media literacy, restricted access to

truthful political information, and almost total control over information disseminated by media in local areas. The indicator regarding media literacy received a low score since access to alternative sources of information and critical opinions is very limited. These factors contribute to a significant portion of the Serbian population still being influenced by propaganda, and progress to counter this influence is slow.

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

In 2023, the panel cited examples of violations of citizens' privacies, including disseminating the IDs of student protesters, monitoring activists via social media networks, illegally collecting data regarding activists' private lives, and manipulating or disseminating of false information to discredit them. The editor-in-chief of Pink TV aired deepfake videos of several opposition politicians, altering both the context and the words spoken by these individuals.

In 2023, there were 812 digital rights and online violations in Serbia in the third quarter alone, of which 577 were fraud, threats, and manipulation. Out of these 577 violations, the media sector accounted for more than 50 percent of these cases (295). Tamara Filipovic Stevanovic, general secretary of IJAS in Belgrade, explained how the draft of an oppressive law which encroached upon the personal data of citizens and journalists, as well as digital security, was halted twice by citizen protests. She added that the draft still existed and a future attempt to reinstate it was highly likely.

There is no systematic training for digital security, but journalism associations organize and conduct sporadic trainings together with the civil sector. Some newsrooms are very digitally secure. Tadić explained, "Training and advice is available, as well as free tools that enable additional security on the internet; however, user knowledge is not at the desirable level."

In the third quarter of 2023, according to regular SHARE Foundation monitoring of cyber incidents, the most numerous were distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks on media sites, with certain media being repeatedly exposed to DDoS. There were multiple cases of professional media or investigative portals, such as *Južne Vesti, Demostat* and the *Insider,* suffering cyber-attacks.

Almost half of the recorded attacks on networks contained elements of digitally realized gender-based violence. Not only celebrities and politicians, but also ordinary girls and women who are not public figures have been targeted. Videos generated by artificial intelligence, or deepfake videos, which violate the physical identity of these female victims, are also published on social network accounts. Despite numerous reports, submitted to both the authorities, and network owners, response remains inadequate.

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

In 2018, a course on language, media and culture was introduced as an optional subject in Serbia's school system, which included some elements of media literacy education. However, panelists felt this had been ineffective and agreed a better solution would be to incorporate media literacy in every school subject. Nevertheless, Tadić commended the Ministry of Education for including the language, media and culture course in elementary school curriculum as a step towards a more democratic society.

> **❝ Almost half of the recorded attacks on networks contained elements of digitally realized gender-based violence.**

According to research done by the Novi Sad School of Journalism (NNS), the language, media, and culture course is popular among high school students. However, an analysis of the results from this program shows that student presentations on the school websites are full of incorrect information. Those interviewed for this survey emphasize the importance of NGO support in encouraging critical thinking among citizens. Almost all survey respondents point out these subjects must be introduced from pre-school, because children are largely exposed to the media from early childhood. Besides young people, parents need to be educated, as their role in this process is

essential. Tadić also highlighted that the Serbian media needs to face the issue of how to reach 18–35-year-olds. Panelist Gavrilović added, "The media literacy of the elderly is important, because research has shown that they are an equally risky group when it comes to media manipulation."

At the beginning of the year, the Ministry of Information publicly supported the implementation a project aimed at the development and improvement of media, digital, and information literacy in Serbia for 2022-2024. Funded by USAID, Propulsion, a leading supplier of engaged communications and social impact campaigns across Central and Eastern Europe, is leading this project in Belgrade, which includes support from the Center for Free Elections and Democracy (CESID), the Digital Serbia Initiative (DSI), and the Beta News Agency from Belgrade. A national coalition of people dealing with media literacy was established in NNS.

The main challenge of media literacy projects is the absence of long-term funding. This leads to the loss of connections with previously engaged target groups. In the 2022 annual Media Literacy Index, Serbia was placed in the fifth cluster, which means that media literacy was very low. However, in 2023, with 33 points out of 100, Serbia was promoted to Cluster 4, ranking 31st place out of 41 European countries.

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

Political monitoring, surveys, and everyday experiences illustrate that citizens are passive and avoid constructive debates. The public is clearly divided and awareness of a need for dialogue has been lost. Deep divisions exacerbated by polarized media result in unequal access to information, while CSOs and journalistic associations engage in debate topics, but rarely with other political fronts.

> 66 **Deep divisions exacerbated by polarized media result in unequal access to information, while CSOs and journalistic associations engage in debate topics, but rarely with other political fronts.**

The social conditions and atmosphere, especially in small media outlets, is characterized by overtime, low wages, uneducated owners, weak editors, self-censorship, and the influence of politics and advertisers on editorial policy, constraining the journalists' willingness to exercise their freedom of speech. Kojanović observed their fear of retaliation and explained, "This is why, for example, the journalists of three local TV stations in Čačak agree without question to have their programs interrupted to broadcast the president of the State's appearance on national TV. However, dialogue, debate, and public discussion are completely absent, both in the media and public sphere."

A rare series of five debates between the authorities and media was organized by IJAS. The debates included editors, journalists, and judiciary representatives from the Basic and Higher Public Prosecutor's Offices in Niš, Novi Pazar, and Kragujevac. IJAS also organized two meetings in Belgrade with the Higher Public Prosecutor's Office. The topics of the meetings included the safety of journalists and the improvement of communication between journalists and the judiciary. Representatives of both professions highlighted problems in mutual communication, as well as the desire to improve communication and greater mutual trust.

According to the panel, discussions on social networks are often battlegrounds, fostering discord and hate. Comments on social networks and portals are often full of manipulative information, insults, inappropriate content, and hate speech. These comments are often fertile ground for the 'internet bot' activities of certain political actors. Panelists felt, however, that there have been occasional positive examples where such debates or upheavals on the internet prompt the authorities to react.

Platform moderators are rare and address complaints selectively.

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

Most media engage with established topics that editors consider important. There are some media outlets that study their audiences via a detailed analysis of visits and 'feedback' from online platforms to plan and disseminate content.

"Radio Boom93 and several other media supported by IREX use analytical data and analytics in preparing content for their audience," said Tadić. In recent years, there has been a notable increase in the presence of investigative and monitoring CSOs. This increase is a direct response to the professional media audience's desire for quality information. This expansion has led to improved quality and coverage of previously neglected topics and arguments, making them accessible to a wider audience.

There are some media shows and surveys to which viewer phone calls or tweets are allowed. Open conflicts unfold on social networks involving not only citizens, but also politicians and media actors. However, this expression of opinions and attitudes fails to contribute to constructive political discussions on the raised topics and does not fulfill the primary needs of the audience. Ljiljana Stojanović, editor-in- chief of JUGpress regional press agency in Leskovac, criticized the bots that often attack her media outlet, and stated, "If bots are suffocating you and making accusations about the content you publish, it is difficult to engage with a constructive audience."

Print circulation is dwindling, and its impact is declining. Public service media are failing to fulfill their legally prescribed role and mission, increasingly lacking the professional capacity to organize even the most basic debates in the studio with participants who hold divergent views from the regime's propaganda.

Indicator 15: Community media provides information relevant for community engagement.
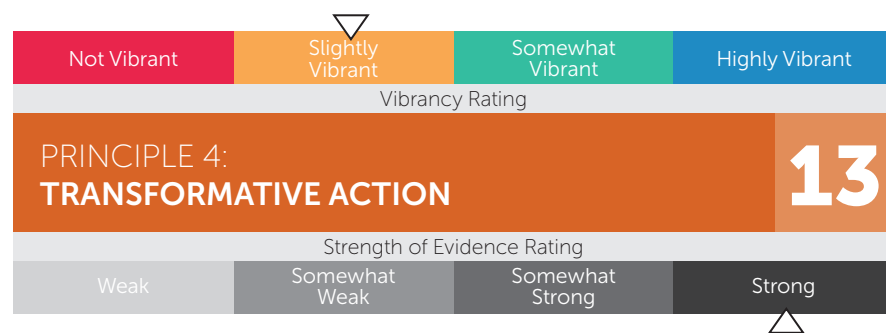
In Serbia, some panelists argued that civil society media often adopts

the functions of community media. There are differences in certain aspects, but civil society media tries to establish closer contact with citizens and address their interests via participatory journalism, in a similar way to community media. Kojanović confirms this idea and commends the excellent cooperation between NGO media and local independent media. "We even use mutual resources," she explained, "When we monitor public procurement with the support of local independent media, citizens become engaged. Through this synergy, we serve the public interest of the local community."

Marković disagreed, saying that community media does not exist in Serbia, as it is commonly understood in other parts of the world. He further explained, "I don't feel that my local media is community media, even though I try to work in the public interest. Perhaps it is only in Serbia that the NGO media "TV Forum" from Prijepolje could come under the definition of community media"[6].

Civil society media is responsible for serving the community, involving its citizens and dealing with local issues. For example, in Novi Pazar, the media was seldom focused on women and, as a result, women rarely voiced their opinions publicly. The establishment of the "Free Media" portal brought about some positive changes. It is a media outlet that adheres to the Code of Journalists of Serbia and the jurisdiction of the Press Council, giving special attention to women. Stojanović noted that citizens recognize the local media's capacity to win battles against local authorities, meaning that the editorial offices are frequently flooded with objections and complaints. "JUGpress maintains its connection with its citizens via the *Readers' Report* column which effectively influences the local self-government and the mayor himself," she explained.

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6   TV Forum has been a trailblazer in since it began. It was the first television with an informative program in Prijepolje, the first civil sector TV station in the Balkans founded by women, the first local media in the Western Balkans to launch and successfully implement a donor campaign. Throughout the years, the station has been committed to objective, timely and truthful journalism despite enduring persistent pressures and attacks.

Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant	Somewhat Vibrant	Highly Vibrant

Vibrancy Rating

PRINCIPLE 4: **TRANSFORMATIVE ACTION**	**13**

Strength of Evidence Rating

Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong	Strong

The overall rating for Principle 4 is low as two indicators received scores lower than ten. Indicator 20, which examines whether information supports good governance and democratic rights, received a low score for two reasons: 1. Limited use of accurate information and 2. Lack of democratic rights and efforts to promote them. Indicator 18 on civil society's use of information scored the highest of all 20 VIBE indicators since panelists perceive these organizations to uphold democracy within society.

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

Non-partisan sources of information are virtually non-existent. The rare examples include student media. The Department of Journalism in Niš has two — Studentski Daily (SDL) supported by the U.S. Embassy and No Limits (Bez Limita). Students studying journalism and communication studies write and edit texts for these two outlets on a voluntary basis. SDL's readership and recognition has continued to grow among Niš students over its 12 years. In the Belgrade Faculty of Political Science, the journalism department houses several student newspapers: *Politikolog*, Žurnalist *portal*, and *Slušaonica 6*. The faculty also has a television newsroom. Novi Sad has a students' media outlet called *Odjek*.

In keeping with global trends, the popularity of print media in Serbia continues to decline. Competition from online media and access to free information are the main challenges for printed publications.

Very few citizens seek information from multiple media sources and rarely from those with ideologies that differ from their own. The past decade has been marked by the absence of public dialogue, and the collapse of some of the rights and freedoms that were previously established. Bearing in mind that 2023 was an election year, this situation appears to be worse than ever before. As a rule, debates conducted on social media networks are unconstructive and heated; they often "cancel" individuals or target dissenters instead of encouraging participants to consider another viewpoint. Individuals on digital platforms are mostly looking for others to back their ideas.

As far as the government is concerned, panelists agreed that the government is primarily only interested in pursuing its own agenda, which is developed without public consultations; unquestioning approval is expected from everyone else, without debate. The government did not show any willingness to hold open forums, even after the May tragedies hit Serbian society hard.

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

Panelists expressed dismay over the media's manipulation of public opinion, highlighting its tendency to portray Serbia variously as a welfare state, an "economic tiger" experiencing rapid economic growth, and putting in place "the best projects in Serbian history, " whether talking about building roads, attracting foreign investment, or modernizing the army. Kojanović stated, "If this situation continues in the mainstream media, and obviously it will, we will end up with 'zombified citizens' living in a virtual world devoid of critical thinking."

At the local level, panelists believed that it is not possible to encourage citizens to participate in constructive dialogues and make critical observations about Serbia's policies or economy, because the fear of retaliation is too strong. Only a small number of NGOs are left to defend civil liberties and fight for human rights. Some panelists felt that 2023 was extremely challenging considering the electoral process and the government's manipulation of the public.

Due to the proportional electoral system at all levels of government, citizens vote for a list bearing the name of the political party leader rather than individual deputies and councilors. This bypasses direct communication between citizens and their elected officials, leaving people without a specific elected representative to contact directly.

An example that illustrates the failure to use quality information in citizens' decision-making is the response to the COVID-19 vaccination during the global pandemic. Vaccination numbers in Serbia were low because of manipulated information and fake news that was disseminated. This skepticism about vaccines bled over into other areas: The level of distrust was so severe that whooping cough —a disease that was almost eradicated long ago — returned in 2023.

Beside manipulative information regarding health issues, people are influenced by their daily exposure to an enormous amount of manipulative information about politics.

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

In Serbia, CSOs represent the voice of the people and provide space for civic activism, enabling people to act together and exert greater influence on decisions, activities, and public policies. Led by the Center for Monitoring and Activism (CEMA), cooperative activities involving citizens, CSOs, and the media, has been monitoring public procurement in the city of Čačak and the region for several years. In a specific case of corrupt public procurement of city budget funding, CEMA identified several criminal acts, and this information was published in the local media. The local portal *Ozonpress. net* continued to investigate the case and discovered additional evidence to support CEMA's claims. The result of this collaborative effort was the withdrawal of the public bid.

At the local level, NGOs almost never receive funding for media projects of public importance, and the ones that do are almost always

> " **Very few citizens seek information from multiple media sources and rarely from those with ideologies that differ from their own.**

a government-organized nongovernmental organization (GONGO). For example, in 2016 the Association of Media and Media Workers of Serbia (UMMRS) was established and is widely seen as a GONGO created to serve the ruling regime in Serbia to support its media policies in Serbia. This association also serves as logistical support for regime-affiliated media when they engage in media project financing bids at the local, provincial, and state level. It nominats eligible members to the commissions responsible for evaluating submitted projects on behalf of the authorities.

The frequency of severe attacks against activists, including environmental activists and others, escalated in 2023. Throughout the election campaign, they were exposed to threats from paid bots.

Before the elections, more than 100 operators called citizens every day and asked them to vote for the ruling party candidates from a large call center in an undisclosed location. Money was paid to participating activists in the headquarters of the GONGO, called the Center for Education and Development of the Youth of Belgrade (CEROB), to initiate these calls to voters. Tadić noted, "Numerous GONGOs abuse, destabilize, and undermine freedom of speech, freedom of organization, and activism."

There are investigative organizations in Serbia that carry out essential analyses of budget spending, corruption, and public opinions. Following the May tragedies and several months of citizen protests in support of the parents of the murdered children, CSOs publicly presented numerous initiatives aimed at implementing a wide range of measures to restore safety in schools and society. However, these initiatives were largely ignored.

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

Rather than relying on high-quality information and verified facts in making policy decisions, the panel felt that the Serbian government

relies on selective information that depicts itself in a positive light, making it difficult for the country's citizens, media, and civil society to hold it accountable. A prime example of this the lack of understanding among Serbians about government spending: In a 2023 survey by the Regional Information Agency JUGpress in the Jablinica and Pčinj districts, 43 percent of respondents indicated that their knowledge of budget spending is at the lowest level. Additionally, the government has used quality information to achieve propagandistic goals: As described in Le Monde Diplomatique, ". . . the average net earnings expressed in euros for the first 11 months of 2023 increased compared to the same average from 2022 by 15%. . . In reality, real wage growth for 11 months is 2%. [The Bureau of] Statistics regularly publishes data on real wage growth, but the government regularly and conscientiously keeps this data silent."

Given this current state of affairs, the ruling party has latitude to adopt laws and policies that are not in line with the public interest. For example, in 2023 the Coalition for Media Freedom expressed concerns that the latest versions of the draft Law on Public Information and Media and the Law on Electronic Media deviated significantly from the 2020 Media Strategy, which reflected key agreements between the Association of Media and Journalists and the Serbian government. As a result, it is possible for the government to continue financing media that often violate the Code of Journalists of Serbia, promote violence, and use hate speech targeting those who disagree with the authorities.

The panel believed that increasingly professional media are not invited to events organized by government representatives or the president. This exclusion is not limited to Serbian media; in 2023, it was expanded to include respected global media and researchers, including international observers of the elections.

Political discourse and public debates are not based on productive arguments, facts, and constructive dialogue, especially in parliament. Rather, discussion and debate turn to attacking political opponents,

> **The government has been unable to suppress ongoing discussions about corruption, thanks largely to investigative organizations, CSOs, and professional media.**

the media, and NGOs. There are numerous examples that illustrate how manipulated information strongly impacts political discourse, particularly after manipulated information is published in the tabloids; the same words are echoed in the Serbian parliament, the national press, and electronic media. In one notable example in 2023, local media reported that someone had vandalized the Church of Saint Sava in Kragujevac with graffiti in the Albanian language. This incident was eventually identified as fake news.

One tragic incident, in the town of Bačka Palanka, was described by panelist Isakov as a "paradigm of inaction" as it is a perfect illustration of the authorities' failure to act. A 13-year-old boy died after he was electrocuted by a loose power cable hanging from an electricity pole, 12 days after a severe storm; this happened just a few days after the boy's grandfather was killed at the same location trying to remove the dangerous cable. After grandfather's death, local citizens had reported the danger, but the relevant services failed to address the danger. Following the two tragic deaths, the local authorities continued to hide those responsible for the oversight, while criticizing the citizens who protested and the media that reported on the tragedies.

When government actors do cite facts, they often use partial statistical data as evidence and rarely present issues in the appropriate context. Most of their decisions are not based on facts and explained using demagogic language.

Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic rights.

The efforts of NGOs and media to combat corruption, both locally and nationally are stifled by the authorities. Nevertheless, the government has been unable to suppress ongoing discussions about corruption, thanks largely to investigative organizations, CSOs, and professional media. Tadić explained that the Government of Serbia mostly ignores media investigations that reveal corruption, abuses, and violations of

the law, and instead invests all its efforts into refuting such claims and discrediting the media in question.

In 2023, there was a noticeable decline in the performance of the so-called independent state institutions, the Commissioner for Information of Public Importance and the Commissioner for Protection of Equality. As highlighted by Tadić, the Anti-corruption Agency, the prosecution, nor other institutions responsible for anti-corruption are effectively functioning. Their lack of response to situations and events within their scope is apparent.

On the day of the multiple murders at the school, on evening prime-time television, the president announced 10 measures for the prevention of future tragic events. These measures were supported by the government, with the prime minister stating that the government would be "strengthening sanctions for media service providers that promote and endorse violence." However, the government has taken no further action on the safeguards put forward by the president, as summarized by Isakov: "Of the 10 proposed measures, most were either implemented sloppily or not at all."

The obligation of state and local authorities to ensure their work is accessible to the public and to provide information regarding their activities is poorly respected. For months, the authorities ignored the demands of civil protestors to address violence in society and rebuild trust in institutions after the May tragedies, opting instead to wait for the protests to subside on their own. The authorities are far more responsive to violations of rights and freedoms if the information is supported by the international community.

During the campaign for the 2023 elections, the government avoided holding public debates to prevent citizens from hearing different views. Media coverage of the elections was either negatively biased or, for some media, completely ignored and neglected. The number of videos of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party was far greater than the sum of all the opposition's, and the video campaign was mostly disseminated via the internet. The president of Serbia was at the helm of the entire campaign— for parliamentary, provincial, and local elections in 66 cities

and municipalities. Stojanović commented, "This election campaign--in which the president unscrupulously leads his party's campaign in the parliament elections, abusing his office and public media resources--is a catastrophic paradigm."

On Election Day, thanks to the efforts of TV N1 journalists, blatant election fraud was broadcast live on-air. Buses from Bosnia and Herzegovina were captured on camera transporting voters to Belgrade whose identity cards listed addresses such as Belgrade electricity substations, abandoned shacks, waterworks, hospitals, and other non-residential locations. As outlined in a CRTA election observation report, these extra voters were intended to save the ruling party from defeat in the capital, as confirmed by this CRTA report.

LIST OF PANEL PARTICIPANTS

Ana Lalić Hegediš, executive director, Independent Journalists' Association of Vojvodina (NDNV), Novi Sad

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Slobodan Kremenjak, lawyer; media law specialist Živković Samardžić Law Office, Belgrade

Mileva Malešić, editor-in-chief, CSO TV Forum, Prijepolje

Stojan Marković, editor-in-chief, Čačanske novine print and portal, Čačak

Vesna Radojević, manager of the "Raskrinkavanje" (Disclosure) project, KRIK Investigative Network, Belgrade

Tamara Skrozza, deputy editor-in-chief, FoNet news agency; Press Council Member, Belgrade

Tamara Filipovic Stevanović, general secretary, Independent Journalist Association of Serbia (IJAS), Belgrade

Ljiljana Stojanović, editor-in-chief, JUGpress regional press agency, Leskovac

Milorad Tadić, owner and editor-in-chief, BOOM 93 radio, Požarevac

Gavrilović Zoran, executive director, Bureau for Social Research (BIRODI), Belgrade

CAUCASUS

ARMENIA

Vibrant
Information
Barometer
2 0 2 4

VIBRANCY

Overall Score

2021: 23
2022: 22
2023: 23
2024: 23

Information Quality

2021: 21
2022: 19
2023: 20
2024: 22

Multiple Channels

2021: 28
2022: 26
2023: 27
2024: 28

Consumption & Engagement

2021: 21
2022: 19
2023: 21
2024: 18

Transformative Action

2021: 23
2022: 22
2023: 22
2024: 24

Highly Vibrant — Somewhat Vibrant — Slightly Vibrant — Not Vibrant

PRINCIPLES

Not Vibrant (0-10): Quality information is extremely limited in this country. The vast majority of it is not editorially independent, not based on facts, or it is intended to harm. People do not have the rights, means, or capacity to access a wide range of information; they do not recognize or reject misinformation; and they cannot or do not make choices on what types of information they want to engage with.

Slightly Vibrant (11-20): Quality information is available on a few topics or geographies in this country, but not all. While some information is editorially independent, there is still a significant amount of misinformation, malinformation, and hate speech in circulation, and it does influence public discourse. Most people do not recognize or reject misinformation.

Somewhat Vibrant (21-30): Quality information is available in this country and most of it is editorially independent, based on facts, and not intended to harm. Most people have the rights, means, and capacity to access a wide range of information, although some do not. Most people recognize and reject misinformation, although some do not.

Highly Vibrant (31-40): Quality information is widely available in this country. People have the rights, means, and capacity to access a wide range of information; they recognize and reject misinformation.

Highly Vibrant

Somewhat Vibrant

OVERALL
SCORE

23

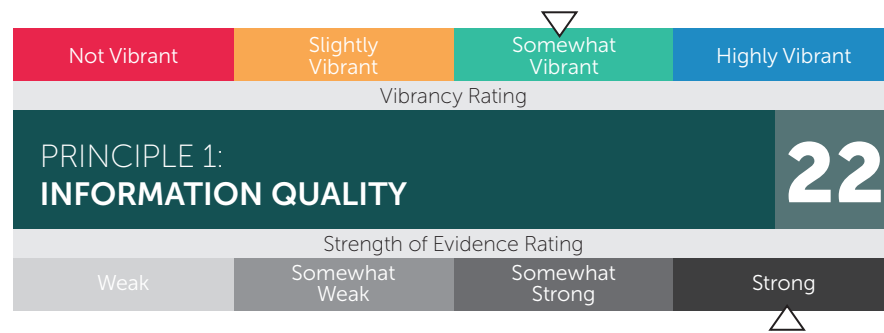**Slightly Vibrant**

Not Vibrant

The ongoing tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan were a key focus for Armenian media in 2023. Pivotal events include a nine-month blockade of Nagorno-Karabakh—an ethnic Armenian region in western Azerbaijan under de facto Armenian governance since 1994—from December 2022 through September 2023. The blockade and subsequent military attacks displaced over 100,000 civilians, which the European Parliament condemned as violations of international law and infringement on earlier ceasefire efforts. The blockade severed the Lachin humanitarian corridor—the only access route to Armenia—resulting in shortages of food, fuel, and medicine. Azerbaijan's government did not heed calls to restore freedom of movement to the area.

In addition to the humanitarian consequences, the blockade of the Lachin corridor limited access to Nagorno-Karabakh for Armenian and international journalists, greatly impeding information gathering and reporting on the ground. Reporters Without Borders noted that only Azerbaijani journalists from state or pro-government media were physically permitted past checkpoints, describing Nagorno-Karabakh as "a news and information black hole." Non-professionals also faced challenges in communicating their experiences. The blockade disrupted communication infrastructure, making it difficult for civilians to connect with loved ones outside the region and share their stories with the world.

The media landscape in Armenia continues to face various challenges, with little progress since last year's VIBE

study. While some areas such as hate speech saw slight improvements, major concerns remain unchanged, which may account for the panelists' overall pessimism despite the improved score. Panelists are uneasy about new legislation that may further restrict access to information. Additionally, both professional and non-professional content creators compound the existing problem of information manipulation in media. While some outlets produce ethical and evidence-based content, their number remains insufficient. Most media outlets lack true independence due to political influence and the loyalties of their ownership. Public media, television, in particular, is still perceived to be under government influence. Insight into the ownership of media outlets is often lacking, and funding sources heavily influence editorial content.

Media literacy remains a major challenge, despite extensive training, seminars, and workshops organized by international organizations and local NGOs. Although the number of nonpartisan outlets has not significantly increased, their audiences have shown a modest climb. Despite this audience growth, there are still major obstacles to influencing public opinion through quality information over manipulated information. Media efforts also have yet to meaningfully deter corruption.

Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant	Somewhat Vibrant	Highly Vibrant

Vibrancy Rating

PRINCIPLE 1: **INFORMATION QUALITY**	22

Strength of Evidence Rating

Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong	Strong

Overall, the number of content producers disseminating ethical, evidence-based, and coherent content remains modest. Panelists agreed that any improvements have been minor, that manipulated information remains widespread, and that both professional and nonprofessional content producers contribute to this problem. While hate speech incidents were perhaps slightly lower this year, panelists attributed this primarily to the lack of major internal political tension rather than organic improvement. The majority of outlets are still not editorially independent due to the nature of their ownership and political or business affiliations. Content production is insufficiently resourced and professional journalists are poorly paid, which impedes their ability to focus on their primary jobs.

Indicator 4, on inclusive and diverse news content, scored highest in this principle again this year, while Indicator 3, on hate speech, scored the lowest as in last year's study and improved by just two points, reflecting the panelists' sense of minimal change.

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

There is adequate infrastructure to produce varied content, including print, broadcast, and digital media. However, university and other professional training in ethical and evidence-based content production remains a weak spot in Armenian journalism and mass media. Both state and private higher education offer many courses in journalism and

mass communication, but the quality varies and most lack an emphasis on hands-on skills. This state of affairs has persisted for decades. The situation outside major cities is worse, with just a few journalism students at local universities. "I don't even know where they are going to do their internships, or when they graduate, where they are going to work," lamented Anahit Harutyunyan, a freelance reporter from Gyumri, the second largest city in Armenia. Donor-funded initiatives, on the other hand, are well-funded and seeking to bridge this gap. Harutyunyan also noted that language barriers remain an issue for aspiring journalists who do not know English well enough to participate in international training opportunities.

A limited number of content producers act in an ethical and accountable manner, respect facts, and strive for accuracy. They are, however, outnumbered by numerous producers of manipulative information. "Anyone publishes whatever they want," noted Nelli Babayan, a journalist with Aravot.am. The professional ramifications for producing content that do not meet ethical criteria are either nonexistent or their impact is not readily observable. "For professional ramifications to work, you have to adhere to/accept certain [quality and ethical] norms," she said.

The overall body of content covers a variety of topics on political and social issues. Specialized and thematic reporting, on the other hand, has traditionally remained under-covered due to associated costs and resources. Gegham Vardanyan, an editor at Media.am, noted that "just as the society is polarized and just as the media field is polarized, so are the topics." He observed that the media is heavily centered on politics and trivial topics for local Armenian consumption only, with minimal attention to the significance of news events. Local events are rarely covered in a way that people outside of Armenia would understand the issues at stake. "I believe, both in terms of exporting and importing [Armenia-based] news events, media is failing its important mission," maintained Vardanyan.

For the most part, journalists try to hold government actors accountable through their reporting. Although some panelists were unsure if these efforts lead any real consequences, political analyst and researcher

Edgar Vardanyan of Boon.tv asserted that "this often has an impact as the public officials then feel obliged to explain away this or that act of theirs." The overall body of content includes information covering local, national, regional, and international news. Regional and international news coverage, however, has been traditionally challenging. Regional news coverage still remains mostly event-based—if there are no major events, news flow is limited. Suren Deheryan, PR & Media Component Director at Project Harmony Armenian Branch, noted that there are very few regional reporters remaining, which negatively impacts coverage. Several journalists have switched fields due to the increasing difficulty in earning a livable income as a reporter in many regions. "There used to be a cadre [of professional journalists] who aren't available now, and the ones that are entering the field just aren't good enough," he lamented.

International news coverage has sustained its traditional flaw: accounts are rarely first-hand and instead rely on translations from Russian-language sources, which are often of dubious origin or reflect the narrow viewpoint of the Russian government's interests and priorities. In one recent case, the Russian state news agency TASS and other pro-government Russian outlets reported on Russian Foreign Ministry's spokesperson Maria Zakharova's Telegram post, where she ridiculed US President Joe Biden for supposedly saying that he was born in Israel. (In reality, Biden had remarked, "The State of Israel was born to be a safe place for the Jewish people of the world.") A variety of outlets with large audience sizes shared the post, including news.am (868,000 Facebook followers and 8 million monthly visitors), lurer.com (245,000 Facebook followers and 2.2 million monthly visitors), and tert.am (634,000 Facebook followers and 358,000 monthly visitors). At best, international news is from reliable sources but lacks contextualization and, here too, language challenges remain. "Even CNN or BBC content sometimes reaches Armenian audiences through the prism of their Russian services [as opposed to the English-language services]," observed Samvel Martirosyan, IT security expert and co-founder of CyberHub. News content, with rare exceptions, is not editorially independent due to ownership and/or political and business affiliations, whether factual or perceived.

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

Well-sourced, objective, and fact-based information is still the exception in Armenia rather than a widespread norm. Both professional and non-professional content producers create or disseminate manipulated information. The broadcast outlets licensed and regulated by the Commission on Television and Radio rarely engage in the intentional creation of explicitly manipulative information, but non-professionals do so frequently and their content is often popular and spreads quickly. The Telegram messaging service, with its numerous channels, is replete with these non-professional content creators, who also spread manipulative information though social networks such as Facebook and YouTube.

Edgar Vardanyan observed that political events have a great impact on the volume of manipulative content and, if nothing intense or conflict-driven occurs, the volume of manipulation and hate speech diminishes during that lull. He maintained that "although the number of outlets spreading misinformation and hate speech is high, in terms of audience size, those outlets that are ethical have larger audiences," citing the examples of Radio Azatutyun (RFE/RL's Armenian service), Public TV of Armenia, and Shant TV. "Compared to 2022, misinformation has decreased, owing to the reduced political demand, which in turn, is due to the lack of major [political] conflicts," explained Martirosyan. "It's not that these outlets have become better, but just that the 'contractors' haven't tasked them to promote specific agenda as much as they used to before."

Professional content creators also produce manipulative or misleading information. 5 TV channel, an outlet usually opposed to the government, did so when covering Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's meeting with the European Parliament President Roberta Metsola in Strasbourg. The coverage reproached her for supposedly falling short of labeling the mass flight of people from Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh) as forced displacement or ethnic cleansing during her opening remarks, but rather calling it "the movement of 100,000 people from Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia," ignoring the rest of her remarks where she actually calls them "forcibly displaced" and "refugees."

There are reliable fact-checking resources such as Fip.am, CivilnetCheck, and media.am. However, professionals use them mostly on an ad hoc basis, with minimal use by the general public. A new initiative by Hetq, a network of fact-checkers, created the Facebook group InFact/Pastatsi for journalists and anyone interested in fact-checking. In another positive development, Civilnet became the first Armenian media organization to join Poynter Institute's International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN).

Media outlets and digital platforms have mechanisms or processes in place for moderating content, though their work is increasingly challenging given the high volume and speed of news events.

The majority of panelists agreed that the government does not create misleading or false information through its official channels. However, the panelists suggested that manipulation sometimes occurs indirectly by individuals who are (or are perceived to be) affiliated with the government, other public officials, government-loyal members of parliament, etc. through social media posts or in interviews. Generally, this coverage uses manipulated data, comparisons, and reports to favor the present government's record. In these cases, journalists usually try to hold the government accountable by identifying manipulated information with the use of fact-checking platforms.

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

Foreign governments, traditionally those of Azerbaijan and Russia, and their proxies create and disseminate content that is intended to harm, both in the form of mal-information and hate speech. In one example, the Azerbaijani state news agency, Azertac, published an interview in several languages with Spanish reporter David López Frías, who had visited the blockaded humanitarian corridor linking Artsakh to Armenia,

in which he was deliberately misquoted as saying: "Vehicles pass here without any problems. You just see people demonstrating to protect nature." When later contacted by Reporters Without Borders (RSF), López explained that he had said the opposite, with RSF's Jeanne Cavelier asserting, "This barefaced lie by a government-controlled media outlet is further evidence of a desire on the part of the Azerbaijani authorities to manipulate national and international public opinion."

> **International news coverage has sustained its traditional flaw: accounts are rarely first-hand and instead rely on translations from Russian-language sources, which are often of dubious origin or reflect the narrow viewpoint of the Russian government's interests and priorities.**

Non-professional content producers are still on the forefront of producing harmful information through their wide presence on Telegram and on various social networks. In one instance, a claim was spread through different channels that Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan refused to accept forcibly displaced refugees from Nagorno-Karabakh, which, despite being a fake statement, was further spread by people with poor media literacy and disseminated through social networks such as Telegram, Facebook, and Instagram. There are generally no consequences for non-professionals who spread harmful content.

Self-regulation of content moderation in Armenian media is in its early stages. Armenia lacks a well-established, industry-wide self-regulatory framework for content moderation, and relies almost solely on media outlets' voluntary adherence to its recommendations. The lack of clear enforcement mechanisms for self-imposed guidelines weakens their effectiveness. Also, the effectiveness of self-regulation varies based on the specific media outlet's commitment to ethical journalism. For many, political influence or owner pressure on the outlet effectively hinders their capacity to self-regulate. Some media outlets have internal guidelines for journalists regarding fact-checking and ethical reporting, however, these are not standardized across the media landscape. Smaller media outlets might lack the resources to invest in robust fact-checking or hire dedicated content moderators.

While social media platforms like Facebook have their own content moderation policies, their effectiveness in Armenia is not yet clear. On the other hand, some social media platforms have much looser control, such as Telegram. Content that would be banned or blocked elsewhere appears frequently, although they claim that "to counter abuse of our public platform, we employ a combination of AI-driven and manual moderation for public content, together with processing user reports."

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

Information exposes the majority of citizens to a wide array of perspectives. However, LGBTQ+ content is still under-covered by traditional mainstream outlets. There are no communities whose experiences or viewpoints are deliberately excluded by the professional media, nor any formal censorship mechanisms. Marginalized groups not represented enough in the mainstream media have alternate methods and/or platforms for expressing their views. Gender composition of professional and non-professional content producers has not changed dramatically during the last ten years. Most reporters are women, and they continue to experience low pay. Outlet owners are mostly men, with gender parity among media managers.

According to Edgar Vardanyan, there is minimal improvement in the diversity of content. There are numerous groups, such as sexual and religious minorities, whose interests, issues, and daily lives are not reflected in mainstream media. "This type of coverage is mainly triggered by events—for example, a homosexual person committed suicide and it was covered, but it doesn't get beyond that," he observed. A relatively new platform set up in 2019, Xirat Media (xirat. com), presents the life and culture of the Yezidis, an ethnic and religious minority living in Armenia and around the world. Through human rights initiatives, particularly focusing on the rights of national minorities, Xirat Media aims to amplify the voices and experiences of Yezidi communities.

Deheryan noted that, overall, information exposing the majority of citizens to the experiences or viewpoints of all genders and various ethnic, racial, and religious backgrounds is made available almost solely through projects with donor funding and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs). Although media outlets generally do not initiate these stories on their own, there are skilled professionals who do so with great results and impact on the intended audience. Larger audiences, however, are more interested in "scandalous and vulgar content," he lamented.

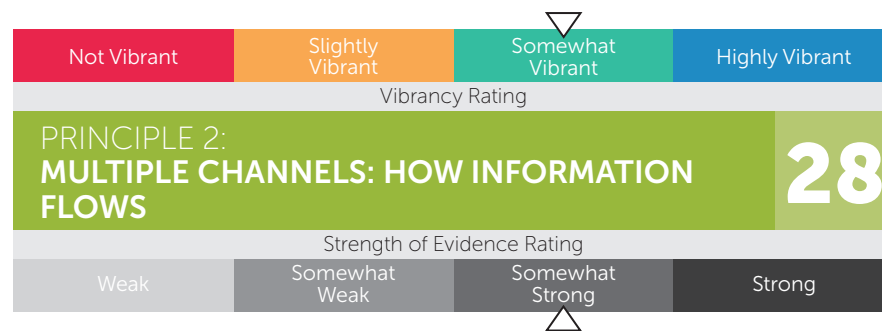**Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced.**

Professional content producers routinely struggle financially as it is becoming increasingly difficult to find secure market-based, non-political funding sources. Significant advertising funds go to international companies such as Facebook, Google, and Instagram, as well as to social media influencers (primarily on Instagram and TikTok).

"The media outlets are not financially independent; if it weren't for grants, the reliable independent outlets would not be able to produce high quality content," observed Babayan. She maintained that because funding is insufficient, those outlets that do have advertising still have to seek additional funding. Anahit Baghdasaryan, a reporter for mediapoint.am and a program officer for Goris Press Club, noted that the regional advertising market is insignificant, and regional media outlets rely on international donor funds to remain independent and financially viable. Harutyunyan confirmed that because social media (primarily Facebook) killed advertising placements, local TV outlets are on the brink of extinction, shrinking from as many as 60-70 employees 10-12 years ago down to 5-6 at present. In general, only those who have been able to take advantage of international donor funding have managed to survive.

> " **Professional content producers routinely struggle financially as it is becoming increasingly difficult to find secure market-based, non-political funding sources.**

Government subsidies have further shrunk; for 2024, they are budgeted at AMD 62 million ($152,000), a significant decrease from the previous 71 million ($183,000). These funds are primarily allotted to minority

language outlets, regional print media, and cultural literary publications. The amount distributed is not significant enough to distort the market, and panelists did not voice concerns about the transparency of distribution.

The panelists agreed that the overwhelming majority of journalists are not paid sufficiently to focus on their primary jobs, forcing them to rely on additional employment or freelancing. Harutyunyan affirmed the dire situation in local regions, where TV outlets newsrooms operate without clear timelines due to a lack of financial resources. "I know of a journalist working at a greenhouse, another one at a local store; there are TV outlets that don't have even one reporter," she said. Pap Hayrapetyan, editor-in-chief of the *Sevan* newspaper, added that demographics reveal the extent of the problem—the younger generation of journalists do not come back to rural regions after training or studying in the capital, therefore only older journalists remain at regional outlets.

Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant	Somewhat Vibrant	Highly Vibrant

Vibrancy Rating

PRINCIPLE 2: MULTIPLE CHANNELS: HOW INFORMATION FLOWS	28

Strength of Evidence Rating

Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong	Strong

While the real ownership of Armenian media outlets is often unclear, ownership and funding sources continue to heavily influence the overall editorial agenda. Public awareness of information access mechanisms is low. The effectiveness of legal mechanisms for protecting freedom of expression remains uncertain and there have been cases of intimidation, online attacks, and legal pressure of journalists for their work. Journalists are concerned with the potential impact of new legislation restricting access to information. Public media are still susceptible to government influence. The US State Department's 2022 Human Rights Report on Armenia also notes that, according to some media watchdogs,

public television continued to present news and political debates from a pro-government standpoint, although it remained accessible to opposition voices. This year, the highest score in this principle was again Indicator 7, confirming that, overall, people have adequate access to channels of information. The lowest score in this principle was, unsurprisingly, Indicator 10, on the independence of information channels.

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

Legal protections for freedom of speech and freedom of the press exist. Deheryan noted that with the constant advancement of technology, the tools available to create, share, and consume information are becoming more accessible, making it increasingly difficult for governments to restrict free speech. On the other hand, governments can also take advantage of these tools to shape informal agendas and attempt to build audience favor. Babayan suggested that before 2018 there was systematic censorship, which is not the case now. Self-censorship, however, is still an issue in Armenia. "By default, a journalist already comes with an inner editor," noted Artyom Yerkanyan of Shant TV. "I am totally free, I do what I want, but I know what to want and what not to want." Edgar Vardanyan suggested that there can be exceptions, too, and that at Boon.tv he does not engage in self-censorship at all.

Journalists experience harassment in the course of their work. According to the October 2023 quarterly report from the Committee to Protect Freedom of Expression, during the first three quarters of 2023, Armenia had three cases of physical violence against journalists, 47 cases of pressure on media outlets and personnel, 106 violations of the right to receive and disseminate information, and 29 cases of lawsuits involving media and journalists.

In September 2023, during initial hearings of the Civil Contract party's lawsuit against the Union of Informed Citizens NGO, the Yerevan Court of General Jurisdiction ruled in favor placing a lien on the claimed amount of AMD 1 million ($2,500), effectively freezing the NGO's account until the final ruling. The lawsuit was filed in response to Fip.am's July 2023

article which alleged that the ruling Civil Contract party, led by Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, had inappropriately used community leaders in the Spitak region to mobilize Yerevan-based relatives and acquaintances of local residents to vote for the party in the upcoming city council elections. Nine media CSOs condemned the practice, saying that the pursuit of security measures against media outlets is a blatant attempt to exert undue pressure and settle scores with editorial teams, and that the courts granting these motions to place liens on media assets disrupts the operation of editorial offices and stifles the free flow of information.

After a July 2023 press conference with Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, news outlets and supporters using fake and real profiles on social media attacked NewDay.am editor Ani Gevorgyan and Aravot.am journalist Hripsime Jebejyan with threats and obscene language. Both reporters filed police reports and legal claims. "The reporters assume that the individuals behind this are connected to the authorities, but perhaps they just favor them [and do this on their own]," suggested Babayan.

Tirayr Muradyan of Hetq.am observed that harassment against journalists has shifted from physical violence to online attacks. Now, critics set up websites dedicated to spewing insults and obscenities at journalists and their outlets, which is also a form of intimidation since journalists' families and friends can encounter the content as well. "Because the current opposition is so weak and vulnerable [due to corruption allegations in the past when they were in power], the media has become the primary challenge [to the government's efforts to silence dissent]," noted Muradyan.

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

Information and communication technology infrastructure generally meets the information needs of most people. Telecommunications and internet infrastructure extends to all geographic areas, both urban and rural. The regional panelists note that regions outside the capital and rural areas also have reliable internet. According to 2022 data from the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), a monthly fixed-line

broadband subscription with 5 gigabytes (GB) of data costs about 4.3% of Armenia's per capita gross national income (GNI). Meanwhile, mobile data plans with at least 2 GB of data per month cost around 0.94% of Armenia's per capita GNI.

Armenian is the dominant language while content in minority languages is accessible. Public Radio of Armenia has programming and news in minority languages, including Russian, Yezidi, Kurdish, Assyrian, and Greek. Armenia has a high 99.8% literacy rate, and for people who are not literate, there are plenty of other sources, including but not limited to radio and television. Media accessibility for people with disabilities is inconsistent; few programs with sign language interpretation or audio descriptions are available. Websites and apps are often inaccessible for visually impaired users. Sign language interpretation is a real challenge because of the limited number of interpreters, while the alternatives are visual news sources, websites and apps, closed captions, real-time closed captions, wherever available, radio, podcasts, etc. The internet is equally accessible to both users and content producers, with no recent problems in this area. If the internet fails, there are TV and radio channels available through free terrestrial broadcasting, although their availability and diversity varies, especially outside larger cities.

Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for government information.

Right to information laws exist and, for the most part, conform to international standards and norms, but are not always implemented in a timely and comprehensive manner. In just the first three quarters of 2023, the Committee to Protect Freedom of Expression recorded a total of 106 violations of the right to receive and disseminate information.

In June 2023, the Investigative Journalists NGO (the publisher of Hetq. am) filed a lawsuit against Armenia's Ministry of High-Tech Industry for refusing to provide the names of IT companies that received government financial aid from a pool of AMD 10 billion ($25,575 million) approved in December 2022. Despite Hetq's repeated requests, the ministry has been reluctant to disclose the identities of the companies receiving this assistance and the amount they received. Administrative Court Judge

Elena Arakelyan set the first hearing date for January 2024 and Hetq predicts that the trial could be postponed indefinitely if the judge or any of the parties involved requests a postponement due to medical reasons.

Anahit Baghdasaryan observed that, especially in smaller towns, people tend to be more reluctant to exercise their rights to information out of perceived, though not necessarily real, fear of social stigmatization. She also noted that readily available information is infrequently accessed, such as an infographic her media outlet published featuring the municipal budget for the town of Goris, which analytics revealed is not actively accessed.

Several media groups in Armenia have expressed concerns about a new bill approved by the National Assembly that would potentially give the government broad authority to restrict access to public information. The media groups say a provision in the bill will add a new category of information called "service information of limited distribution," allowing the government to withhold information deemed to be "state, banking, or commercial secrets," which could be used to deny access to almost any document circulating within a government agency, even if it does not contain any sensitive information.

There are mechanisms to help the public access government policy and decision-making information, but awareness of them is low and even informed members of the public rarely use them. As Babayan noted, citizens rely on the media for information about the government. In addition, as Muradyan explained, "There are government spokespeople who are very responsive, and they would follow up all the inquiries, but then there are also those who are basically busy with the minister's PR and do not fulfill the function of information liaison, and their role is rather to cover, buffer and protect their public official." However, he observed that in general there is a wide range of open data, with minimal restrictions.

> 66 **Harassment against journalists has shifted from physical violence to online attacks. Now, critics set up websites dedicated to spewing insults and obscenities at journalists and their outlets, which is also a form of intimidation since journalists' families and friends can encounter the content as well.**

Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow.

Armenian law does not make a distinction between owning a media company and owning any other commercial outlet, making it relatively simple to start a media company. However, broadcast media still need to go through a licensing process. There are laws that regulate transparency in media ownership which require media outlets to submit a "real beneficiary" declaration every year. The law defines a "real beneficiary" as an individual who owns or oversees the organization. However, transparent identity remains a problem. The official owners and directors are known, but their benefactors and supporters remain largely anonymous. In general, only outlets that function through grants and international donor funding disclose their funding sources, typically when it is a funding requirement.

Gegham Vardanyan maintains that because of the shifts in information consumption patterns, the audience size, impact, and importance of free terrestrial broadcasting has diminished. Likewise, its political importance and competition for terrestrial broadcasting licenses has also decreased. According to the 2023 Media Consumption and Freedom of Expression Research in Armenia, funded by USAID and implemented by Internews, 58 percent of respondents chose social media, blogs, vlogs, and podcasts as their primary source of political and social news. TV is mentioned by 56 percent, however, and includes TV channels accessed through IPTV and online streaming. Internet service providers do not discriminate based on users, content, or destination web addresses.

The Commission on Television and Radio (CTR) is the broadcast media regulatory body of the Republic of Armenia, established in 2001. The CTR awards licenses and allocates frequencies for television and radio stations competitively. While its composition has evolved over time, the National Assembly currently elects all seven CTR members to serve six-

year terms, ensuring gender representation. Finally, the body itself elects a chairperson from among its members through a secret vote.

Public service media provide educational news and information. Panelists noted that Public Radio is stronger in this area and does a better job of serving all members of the public in a nonpartisan manner. Panelists noted that Public TV programming has improved somewhat in recent years but does not yet genuinely serve all members of the public without partisanship. "We shouldn't just acknowledge the existence of these programs just to check off a box, but rather we should focus on to what extent this programming changes society's mentality and tolerance towards different minority groups," said Babayan. "In this sense, I don't think they change opinions in our society." As Edgar Vardanyan noted, Public TV still resembles the Soviet era, highlighting the example of a story on the Armenian IT sector which only featured public officials and no industry experts.

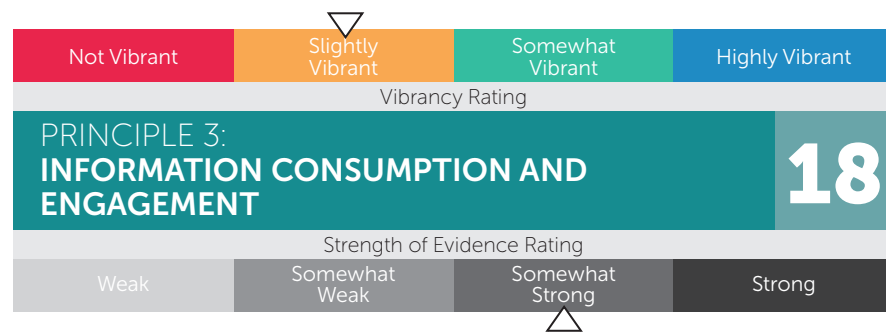**Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.**

Media organizations are still mainly influenced by their ownership, and funding sources still dictate editorial stance, as has been the case for decades."We have outlets that are funded by state/public means, which mainly serve the authorities of the day, we have outlets that are funded by donor funding and do not have political ambitions, and we have outlets that serve this or that political wing/interests," explained Muradyan.

In practice, for professional content producers, there is not a clear distinction between newsroom operations and business operations. Efforts to maintain newsroom integrity through this separation—a crucial factor to ensure that editorial decisions are not unduly influenced by business interests—are not commonplace. Babayan offered an example in which the editor of an outlet received money during a Yerevan municipality elections campaign for providing favorable coverage of a

> **66 Media organizations are still mainly influenced by their ownership, and funding sources still dictate editorial stance, as has been the case for decades.**

candidate; however, the content was not explicitly presented as paid for advertising, but rather as a conventional news story.

The state funds Public TV and Public Radio of Armenia. In 2024, Public TV will receive around AMD 6.42 billion ($15.8 million) in state funding while Public Radio will receive AMD 956 million ($2.36 million). Public TV also sells commercial advertising, which accounts for its status as one of Armenia's better-funded media outlets. Addressing the issue of political interference into the management and editorial content of Public TV, Babayan also noted that its decision-makers are associated with Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, further calling into question the editorial independence and likelihood of self-censorship.

Public TV is more likely to give positive coverage to the government and its policies, while critical coverage is often ignored. The Council of Europe's 2022 Media Sector Needs Assessment report on Armenia found that in many cases, public media refrains from government criticism.

During the inauguration of the newly elected Yerevan Mayor Tigran Avinyan in October 2023, journalists were barred from entering the municipality to partake in the ceremony. Official sources claimed this was due to limited space, while media CSOs were strongly critical of this approach, saying, "The municipality violated not only the right of journalists to freely access and disseminate information, but also infringed upon the public's right to stay informed."

Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant	Somewhat Vibrant	Highly Vibrant

Vibrancy Rating

PRINCIPLE 3: INFORMATION CONSUMPTION AND ENGAGEMENT	18

Strength of Evidence Rating

Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong	Strong

Media literacy remains a major challenge in Armenia's media environment, which accounts for Indicator 12 receiving low scores in this principle. Indicator 13 had the highest score in this principle, as journalists, civil society activists, and the general population use their freedom of speech, while right to information are predominantly claimed by journalists and civil society activists only. In general, Armenian media and content producers often fail to conduct thorough audience research to understand the public's needs, interests, and behaviors. This deficit stems from a variety of factors, including limited resources, a lack of awareness of the benefits of research, and a focus on traditional production methods that prioritize speed and efficiency over analysis of audience needs.

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

Legal protections for privacy protections and digital security exist, and Armenian law incorporates all the basic requirements of the Council of Europe's Convention on Protection of Individuals with regard to Automatic Processing of Personal Data. The Personal Data Protection Agency, overseen by the Ministry of Justice, is responsible for oversight of data protection legislation. However, enforcement is lacking and the general population's awareness of the law and the agency is minimal.

Martirosyan's Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT) organization, Cyberhub.am, remains dedicated to delivering comprehensive information technology support and training services to a diverse range of individuals and entities, including journalists, independent media outlets, human rights defenders, activists, and CSOs. Cyberhub.am plays a pivotal role in enhancing digital security practices by assisting media organizations in fortifying their defenses against cyberattacks. CyberHub.am also assists media outlets, civic groups, and individuals when their social media accounts are hacked or suspended.

In one notable case, hackers hijacked the YouTube channel of Aravot.am and deleted 12 years of video content just hours before the scheduled release of an investigative report exposing a corruption scandal involving the misuse of state funds by key political staff of Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan. Press freedom groups in Armenia condemned the attack, urging law enforcement to identify and punish the perpetrators, citing a troubling pattern where criticism of authorities precedes hacking attacks on online platforms. Earlier in the same year, unknown hackers attacked the YouTube channel of the Union of Informed Citizens, which is the publisher of the fact-checking platform Fip.am. In both cases, the channels were later restored with the help of CyberHub.am.

A collaborative investigation by Access Now, CyberHub.am, the Citizen Lab at the University of Toronto, Amnesty International's Security Lab, and independent mobile security researcher Ruben Muradyan also revealed the extent of the NSO Group's Pegasus spyware between October 2020 and December 2022. Among the victims were a former Human Rights Defender of the Republic of Armenia, two journalists from Radio Azatutyun (RFE/RL's Armenian service), a United Nations official, a former spokesperson of Armenia's Foreign Ministry, and seven other members of Armenian civil society. The findings highlight the concerning use of spyware technology against individuals involved in human rights, journalism, and diplomatic circles in Armenia. "Zero action was taken afterwards on the part of the state in terms of protection [against future attacks]," said Martirosyan, noting that state authorities could have implemented protective and preventive measures such as training, response instructions, and awareness raising activities.

The general population's basic digital and data literacy skills remain inadequate. Cases of digital fraud, scamming, identity theft, and phishing are still commonplace.

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

There are a growing number of media literacy initiatives, predominantly targeting the younger generation of Armenian citizens. Media Literacy Week 2023 in Armenia, for example, focused on media literacy in the digital environment. Several other initiatives were launched, including the Digital Citizen Ambassador Training (DCAT), which aim to empower young Armenians with technology skills and foster a generation of informed decision-makers, as well as training programs on how to combat information manipulation.

Martirosyan, however, said that government involvement should be more consistent in order to produce significant effects. He advocates for public awareness campaigns and enhanced use of social media advertising, as well as improved training for educators who in turn can pass media literacy skills and knowledge to their students. He also thinks that media literacy improvements are more likely if overall literacy across disciplines improves.

It is difficult for individuals to discern high-quality from poor-quality news and information. The aforementioned 2023 Media Consumption and Freedom of Expression Research in Armenia reveals that a mere 18 percent of respondents are proficient in recognizing and fact-checking suspicious information. Individuals with higher and postgraduate education display enhanced recognition and fact-checking skills (25 percent), outperforming those with secondary/high school and vocational education (17 and 14 percent, respectively). Among age groups, younger respondents exhibit stronger fact-checking abilities (27 percent) compared to middle-aged individuals (18 percent) and older adults (12 percent).

Ordinary citizens seldom use tools or websites for fact-checking, debunking, or exposing manipulative information. Gegham Vardanyan pointed out that few readers respond to invitations to send suspicious

> **The general population's basic digital and data literacy skills remain inadequate. Cases of digital fraud, scamming, identity theft, and phishing are still commonplace.**

information for debunking, noting that "in general, we, as a society, are very susceptible to misinformation."

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

Journalists, civil society activists, and the general population use their freedoms of speech and rights to information. The Armenian online environment is generally safe for free speech. The 2023 Media Consumption and Freedom of Expression Research in Armenia found that a substantial majority (76 percent) believe that speech is mainly free for citizens, while 70 percent of respondents believe that speech is mainly free for the press. On the issue of online expression, the study revealed that 56 percent of respondents mostly agree that they can freely express their opinions about any topic online. The study also found that 48 percent of respondents mostly agree that they can freely criticize the government and those in power.

Panelists found that most people rarely engage with fact-based information. While platforms for public debate exist, they are not widely used. For most people, online platforms—including Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, Telegram, and to a lesser degree the comments sections of some online periodicals—are one of the only spaces for public debate. Call-in shows are also available, primarily on radio stations.

Social media platforms are often riddled with manipulative information, obscenities, hate speech, and even calls to violence. The only recourse is reporting the content to platform support teams for policy violations, but moderation varies depending on the platform as well as the particular owner of a page. The majority of reputable professional content producers and media outlets post summaries of their policies regarding inappropriate language in comments sections, while channel owners of non-professional pages are more lax. For example, a popular platform has been Radio Azatutyun's "Facebook Briefing," which allows users to suggest questions for the host

to ask guests through Facebook comments. The platform moderators remove offensive, sarcastic, violent, and hateful content before it reaches the guest. Call-in shows are primarily found on radio stations.

In a notable case from November 2023, the government charged human rights activist Avetik Ishkhanyan, the head of the Helsinki Committee of Armenia, with inciting violence for a Facebook post declaring "death to traitors" and calling the prime minister a traitor for his actions related to the Azerbaijani military offensive in Nagorno-Karabakh. According to local rights advocates, the government's Investigative Committee has selectively prosecuted cases like this one with the goal of self-censorship among critics.

People do not usually report manipulative information and hate speech to public councils, ombudsmen, or platform moderators. The above-mentioned study revealed that 65 percent of respondents answered that they do nothing when faced with false, misleading, or unethical information. At the same time, 84 percent of respondents believe that hate speech is a major problem in Armenia, and 68 percent believe that they often come across hate speech on public online platforms.

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

Limited resources have historically been and remain a major obstacle for Armenian media outlets to conduct rigorous audience research. Outlets and content producers often operate on tight budgets, making it challenging to invest in research or hire specialized research organizations. This lack of financial support can lead to a reliance on outdated or incomplete data, which hinders the creation of effective content that resonates with audiences.
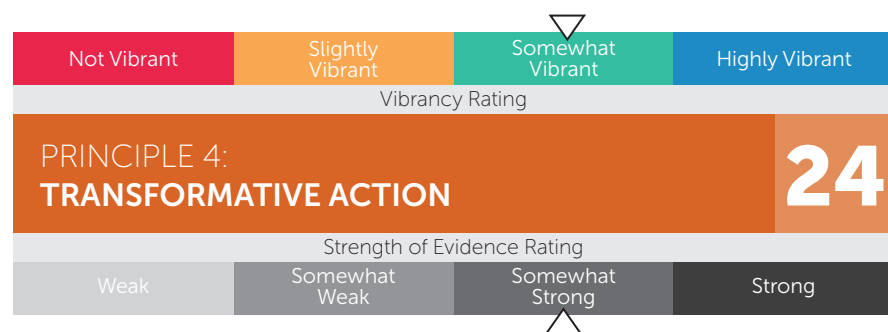
Some media outlets are skeptical of audience research, but it can help them create more relevant and engaging content, attract new audiences, and ultimately improve their business outcomes. "On a regular weekly basis, we analyze our audience data, be it on our website, Facebook, or YouTube presence, to see trends in age demographics," Muradyan said. He further added that as a known investigative platform, readers often provide feedback on areas of interest and suggest possible investigations. Anahit Baghdasaryan mentioned a Facebook survey she used to find out readers' interests and preferred formats of presenting information. Her team later incorporated the findings of approximately 100 responses into content produced for youth. She also mentioned that Google Analytics remains a major tool in helping to understand audience preferences and quantitative data.

> **Many Armenian media outlets and content producers are accustomed to traditional production methods that prioritize speed and efficiency over audience understanding and may rely on their own intuition or gut feelings to guide content creation rather than using data.**

Babayan, on the other hand, explained that politically influenced outlets cannot afford the luxury of producing content that reflects readers' interests, as they are more concerned with the political priorities of their owners. In addition, many Armenian media outlets and content producers are accustomed to traditional production methods that prioritize speed and efficiency over audience understanding and may rely on their own intuition or gut feelings to guide content creation rather than using data.

The majority of ethical and fact-based outlets have fair and open processes for audiences to provide feedback through letters to the editor or moderated online comment sections, as well as comment sections on Facebook and other social media. They also take steps to build trust with audiences through transparency in authorship and reporting methods, as well as publishing corrections. Overall, high quality media outlets and CSOs enjoy mutually beneficial relationships, where CSOs help media produce more accurate, credible, and impactful journalism, and media help CSOs reach wider audiences.

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

As with the 2023 VIBE study, the panelists generally agreed that Armenia does not have community media, as classically defined. Similar types of media outlets occasionally emerge, but they do not last, likely due to inconsistent involvement. Although this type of media is a minimal part of the media sphere, there are local, independent, commercial newspapers and radio stations that, according to some panelists, effectively fulfill the functions of community media outlets.

Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant	Somewhat Vibrant	Highly Vibrant

Vibrancy Rating

PRINCIPLE 4: TRANSFORMATIVE ACTION	24

Strength of Evidence Rating

Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong	Strong

Although nonpartisan news and information sources have not significantly grown in number, their audiences have shown modest, yet steady growth. Despite this, the public's views on political and social issues are still widely shaped by manipulative information and, as with last year, Indicator 17 scored the lowest in this principle. Indicator 18, the highest scored in the principle, reflects the significant benefit of media-CSO partnerships, which build trust and credibility. CSOs are often seen as credible sources of information, and collaborating with them signals to the audience that a media outlet is committed to journalistic integrity and accuracy.

Government officials are not forthcoming about their decision-making, especially in sensitive areas like personnel appointments and terminations. This lack of transparency fuels public debate over the adequacy and sincerity of their explanations, often leaving citizens skeptical of their intentions. While the efforts of the media undoubtedly raise awareness and foster public scrutiny, it is difficult to gauge whether these actions directly deter or lower the incidence or severity of corruption in national or local governments.

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

Nonpartisan news and information sources exist and often have large audiences, which have shown steady growth. Based on information posted on their social media pages, Radio Azatutyun currently has 818,000 YouTube subscribers (up from last year's 763,000) and 1.3 million Facebook followers (up from 1.2 million); Factor TV has 337,000 YouTube subscribers (up from 288,000) and 390,000 Facebook followers (up from 367,000); and CivilNet TV has 255,000 YouTube subscribers (up from 214,000) and 508,000 Facebook followers (up from 478,000).

However, Deheryan noted that low quality information draws in audiences, lamenting that many Armenian citizens and online outlets gravitate towards sources that provide sensationalist rather than well-researched information. This preference seems to be deeply ingrained, making it challenging to persuade audiences to embrace quality journalism. Edgar Vardanyan, on the other hand, shared his optimistic observation that citizens increasingly prefer and seek higher-quality information.

The panelists mostly agreed that few news sources are entirely nonpartisan, and even the most respected news organizations can sometimes have a bias, especially when evaluating people's differing perspectives. Babayan noted that, in her opinion, an outlet can be considered nonpartisan if, in addition to its news reporting, the overall content and editorial policy are nonbiased, which further narrows the scope of outlets that can be considered truly impartial. However, ethical outlets are genuinely committed to providing high-quality, objective journalism.

People's participation in the exchange of information with others they disagree with is still predominantly through digital forms such as social

media platforms like Facebook and YouTube as opposed to town hall meetings or call-in shows.

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

Another noteworthy finding of the 2023 Media Consumption and Freedom of Expression Research in Armenia was that only 39 percent of the respondents have the ability to separate facts from opinions and to identify manipulative strategies, with higher percentages observed among respondents who have more education, are younger, have a higher income, and are from urban areas compared to their counterparts.

In one example, Edgar Vardanyan explained that based on the results of the recent Yerevan municipal elections in September 2023, voters who chose obscure party The Public Voice were likely influenced by manipulative information, which frequently appears during Armenian elections. The party, led by controversial fugitive blogger and former police officer Vardan Ghukasian, won seven seats and later played a determining role in helping the ruling Civil Contract party install one of its senior members as mayor of Yerevan after failing to win a majority. Ghukasian emigrated to the United States and gained a following for his hard-hitting, abundantly profane political commentary, including against Prime Minister Pashinyan and members of his family.

The public is increasingly following fact-based health and safety recommendations, according to panelists. "I don't remember hearing someone say they got a flu shot, say, ten years ago, as opposed to today," observed Edgar Vardanyan. However, there are also cases of individuals following and sharing manipulative health information. Harutyunyan also complained about the proliferation of popular TikTok creators who produce manipulated information detrimental to public health.

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

Media outlets actively engage with CSOs to cover socially important issues. There are times when this collaboration is indispensable given the depth of expertise and insights they offer on specific issues, communities, or regions, which journalists often lack. Their expertise enables media to produce more accurate, comprehensive, and impactful reporting.

CSOs play a critical role in fostering a well-informed citizenry and ground their work in factual, reliable information. When outlining their mission and objectives, CSOs rely on credible sources and data to clearly communicate their goals and the issues they address. They understand the importance of disseminating accurate information to the public and this commitment to truthfulness extends to their advocacy efforts. When calling for policy changes, CSOs leverage high-quality investigative reports and research to build strong arguments supported by evidence.

Anahit Baghdasaryan noted that, especially in rural regions where expertise is strictly limited, CSO representatives are viewed as trusted sources of information and regional media outlets therefore collaborate with them often. Babayan also mentioned that media outlets frequently turn to trusted CSOs for expert opinions on human rights, ecology, and draft legislation with valuable outcomes. Gayane Mkrtchyan, a freelance reporter, cited CSO connections and expertise as essential for identifying and persuading people to be featured in stories on topics such as HIV/AIDS and the LGBTQ+ community. In general, CSOs are often seen as credible sources of information, and collaborating with them positions a media outlet as committed to journalistic integrity and accuracy.

CSOs actively work to reduce the spread of manipulative information through various trainings, workshops, seminars, and other engaging activities. Media Literacy Week 2023, held again in Armenia on November 6th, brought together stakeholders across the country to raise awareness

> **Many Armenian citizens and online outlets gravitate towards sources that provide sensationalist rather than well-researched information.**

and acknowledge advancements This year, it was centered on media literacy in the digital environment and was organized in partnership with the EU-funded "Youth in Action: Youth Empowerment and Leadership Development in Armenia" project. The Digital Citizen Ambassador Training (DCAT), a project sponsored by the U.S. Embassy in Armenia and coordinated by American Councils for International Education in Armenia, aims to equip young Armenians with the skills and knowledge necessary to utilize technology responsibly and ethically.

The Berlin-based NGO CRISP, in collaboration with local CSO Center for Policy Studies (CPS), also concluded the first set of media literacy trainings for youth who work in media and civil society against manipulative information. The training included a simulation game, interactive exercises, and debriefing sessions to help participants understand the disinformation ecosystem in Armenia and develop strategies to counter disinformation.

Martirosyan and Muradyan, however, observed that, because many of the CSO representatives who played an active role before the revolution and previously criticized the state are now either in government or the parliament, they are now more tolerant or willing to justify policies.

Overall, CSOs across different areas are actively involved in discussions on various policy formation issues, and legislative amendments. They provide commentary and expert opinion on a wide range of issues; however, it is hard to assess their degree of influence over ultimate decision-making.

> **" CSOs play a critical role in fostering a well-informed citizenry and ground their work in factual, reliable information.**

In April 2022, the Armenian government and legislative representatives embarked on a collaborative endeavor with CSOs to revamp the country's media development policy. The memorandum of understanding emphasized the need to modernize media regulations to address contemporary challenges and align with international standards and practices. However, CSOs criticized subsequent government attempts to introduce legislative changes, feeling sidelined and their input disregarded. They saw the new law "On State Secret," the draft law

"On Environmental Information," and the draft on making amendments and supplements to the law "On the Legal Regime of Martial Law" as means to restrict access to information. CSO representatives noted that they were not properly discussed prior to their publication or circulation. "We note that it has been almost a year that the authorities have not abided by the agreements stipulated in the Memorandum on multiple occasions," media CSOs said in a joint statement.

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

Traditional press conferences are increasingly less common. In November 2023, Prime Minister Pashinyan employed a new press conference model when he answered more than six dozen WhatsApp video questions previously recorded by the Armenian people and diaspora during a live, eight-hour televised press conference. The Q&A session was aired on Armenian Public Television, the Prime Minister's Facebook page, and the government's official YouTube channel.

The e-draft platform—an initiative of the Ministry of Justice of Armenia as part of the country's ongoing efforts to improve transparency and accountability in its legislative process—is a unified website where draft legal acts are published for public feedback. However, Babayan noted that even with frequent negative feedback, drafts are not significantly modified. Instead, drafts which get wider attention outside of the platform through expert opinions in the media or as a result of protests are more likely to be modified. Martirosyan explained that through e-draft, the government only creates the impression that they work transparently. In reality, they draft bills in a vacuum without public discussions, expert reviews, or CSO involvement, then post those on the platform, set a period for feedback of about two weeks, and present it as having undergone public discussion. "In fact, it's a trap, and a good platform is used for bad purposes," he said.

Overall, manipulated information remains a significant challenge in Armenian political discourse. Many people in Armenia lack the skills to

critically evaluate information online, making them more susceptible to believing manipulated information. Moreover, since many media outlets in Armenia are biased towards certain political parties, it is difficult for people to find objective information. In addition, social media algorithms can create echo chambers where people are only exposed to information that confirms their existing beliefs. During elections, manipulated information campaigns can target specific candidates or parties with fabricated stories or manipulated visuals, online rumors, and conspiracy theories, all of which impact political discourse and social cohesion.

Government officials often fail to provide adequate explanations for their decisions, particularly regarding key personnel changes such as appointments and terminations. Even when explanations are offered, they are not necessarily satisfactory to the public at large, nor offer references to facts and data. In a recent example, the government allocated $6 million to American rapper Snoop Dogg's planned concert in Yerevan, claiming it would raise Armenia's international profile and attract foreign tourists. The concert sparked controversy and criticism from the public and the anti-corruption watchdog Transparency International, particularly due to the choice of the organizing company, Doping Space, which was established only a month prior to its selection with no history in organizing major events and was selected without a tender process.

Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic rights.

Muradyan suggested that when media outlets publish stories that hold government actors accountable, the government may not act upon it right away but rather save it for the future should the political figure fall out of favor. It is therefore unclear if the government's actions actually stem from the reporting or if the media just offers a convenient excuse. "This is not a part of political culture in Armenia yet," he said.

Muradyan also noted that public tolerance towards corruption is high and that quality information does not necessarily prevent corruption risks, although this could change with a different government. "I'm sure

if the government changes, today's articles about corruption risks will be turned into criminal cases by the future government actors, just as today's government uses Hetq's articles on corruption of the previous government actors and turns them into criminal cases," he explained, "At the time, those articles were written under the rule of the previous government and had no political consequences. Today, it is under political circumstances that these articles are being [reexamined]." He added that while the existence of quality information does not prevent or lower the incidence or severity of corruption in national or local governments, it still impacts public opinion.

The government frequently fails to respond in an appropriate manner when information sources reveal corruption. In a previously mentioned case, the Union of Informed Citizens (UIC), an Armenian civic group, accused Prime Minister Pashinyan's Civil Contract party of abusing administrative resources to secure victory for its candidate, Tigran Avinyan, in the 2023 Yerevan municipal elections. The group claimed that officials from a local community were drawing up lists of voters from Yerevan and pressuring them to support Civil Contract's mayoral candidate over others. The UIC's accusations raised concerns about the fairness of the planned elections in Armenia, as Pashinyan himself has previously condemned such practices. The NGO was later sued by the Civil Contract party for revealing the incident and a lien of AMD 1 million ($2,500) to secure the claim was imposed.

Furthermore, the Independent Observer coalition, which consists of the UIC and Helsinki Citizens' Assembly-Vanadzor, received numerous complaints that public sector workers were being forced to attend Civil Contract's final campaign rally, citing reports of Yerevan district administrations ordering their subordinates to leave work early to participate. In another instance, when Avinyan held a smaller event in Nor Nork (one of Yerevan's administrative units) on September 8, civic activists posted footage of the rally on social media, suggesting that the entire staff of schools, kindergartens, and local government bodies participated. Avinyan and Pashinyan denied allegations of forced attendance on all counts. Avinyan further drew criticism for meeting with hundreds of students at the State Engineering University of Armenia on the last day of the campaign, despite a legal ban on campaigning

in educational institutions. The university administration reportedly encouraged students to skip classes to attend the meeting.

Large-scale, mostly peaceful protests erupted in Armenia following the Azerbaijani offensive in Nagorno-Karabakh on September 19, with protestors demanding the resignation of Prime Minister Pashinyan, blaming him for failing to prevent the loss of Nagorno-Karabakh. Riot police detained hundreds of protestors during the demonstrations, although most were released after a few hours, and at least 33 people were injured.

While media outlets and citizen journalists play a crucial role in bringing to light and documenting human rights abuses and potential violations of civil liberties, the impact of their work on preventing or mitigating these transgressions is not evident. However, they remain instrumental in upholding the current state of accountability and panelists suggest any decrease in oversight would make the situation worse.

LIST OF PANEL PARTICIPANTS

Nelli Babayan, reporter, Aravot.am, Yerevan

Anahit Baghdasaryan, reporter, mediapoint.am and program officer, Goris Press Club, Goris

Melik Baghdasaryan, owner, Photolur, Yerevan

Suren Deheryan, PR & Media Component Director, Project Harmony Armenian Branch, Yerevan

Anahit Harutyunyan, freelance reporter, Gyumri

Pap Hayrapetyan, editor-in-chief, Sevan, Sevan

Nvard Hovhannisyan, co-founder, Visual Innovation Studio, Yerevan

Samvel Martirosyan, co-founder, IT security expert, CyberHub, Yerevan

Gayane Mkrtchyan, reporter, Jam-news.am, Iwpr.net, Yerevan

Tirayr Muradyan, reporter, Hetq.am, Investigative Journalists NGO, Yerevan

Edgar Vardanyan, political analyst and researcher, boon.tv, Yerevan

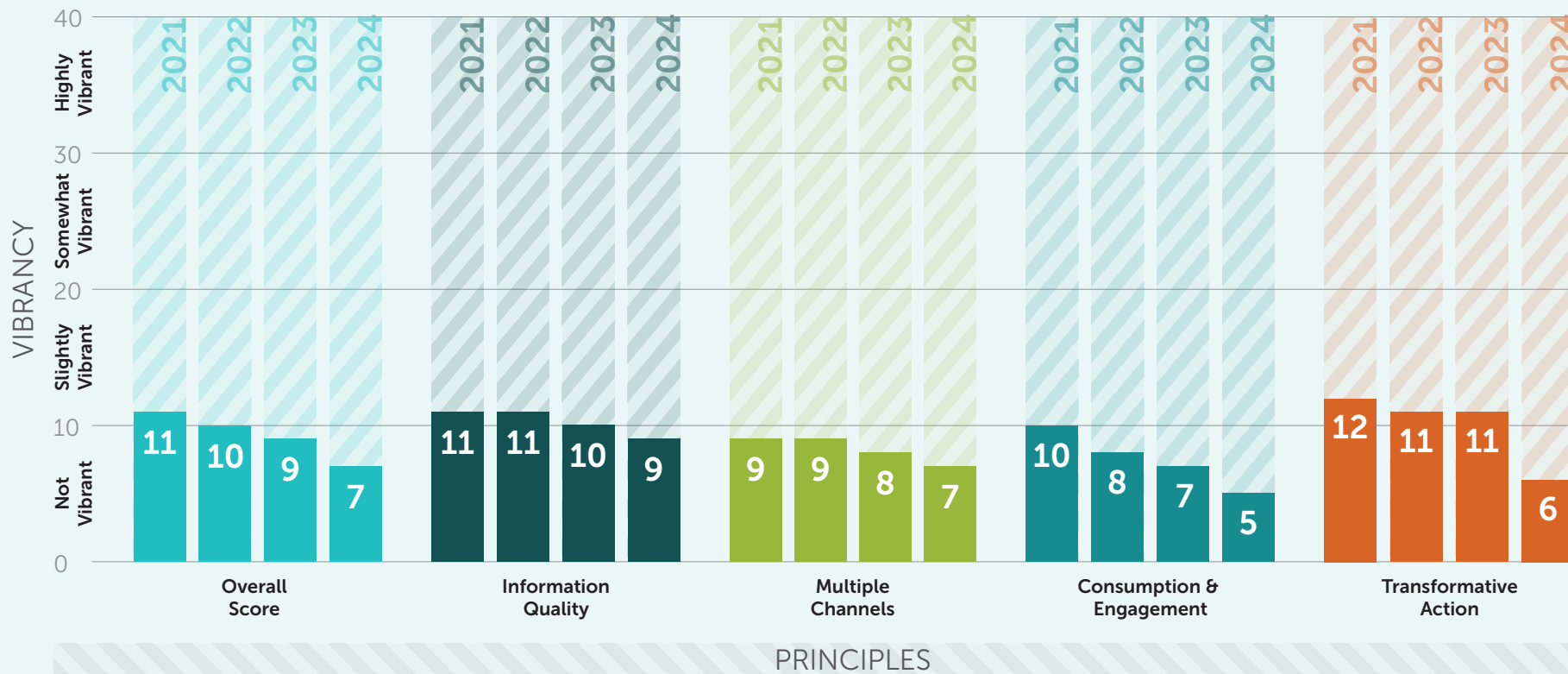**Gegham Vardanyan,** media.am editor, Media Initiatives Center, Yerevan

Artyom Yerkanyan, journalist, Shant TV, Yerevan

AZERBAIJAN

Vibrant
Information
Barometer

2 0 2 4

VIBRANCY (y-axis)

Highly Vibrant — Somewhat Vibrant — Slightly Vibrant — Not Vibrant

Overall Score: 2021: 11, 2022: 10, 2023: 9, 2024: 7

Information Quality: 2021: 11, 2022: 11, 2023: 10, 2024: 9

Multiple Channels: 2021: 9, 2022: 9, 2023: 8, 2024: 7

Consumption & Engagement: 2021: 10, 2022: 8, 2023: 7, 2024: 5

Transformative Action: 2021: 12, 2022: 11, 2023: 11, 2024: 6

PRINCIPLES

Not Vibrant (0-10): Quality information is extremely limited in this country. The vast majority of it is not editorially independent, not based on facts, or it is intended to harm. People do not have the rights, means, or capacity to access a wide range of information; they do not recognize or reject misinformation; and they cannot or do not make choices on what types of information they want to engage with.

Slightly Vibrant (11-20): Quality information is available on a few topics or geographies in this country, but not all. While some information is editorially independent, there is still a significant amount of misinformation, malinformation, and hate speech in circulation, and it does influence public discourse. Most people do not recognize or reject misinformation.

Somewhat Vibrant (21-30): Quality information is available in this country and most of it is editorially independent, based on facts, and not intended to harm. Most people have the rights, means, and capacity to access a wide range of information, although some do not. Most people recognize and reject misinformation, although some do not.

Highly Vibrant (31-40): Quality information is widely available in this country. People have the rights, means, and capacity to access a wide range of information; they recognize and reject misinformation.

Highly Vibrant

Somewhat Vibrant

Slightly Vibrant

Not Vibrant

OVERALL SCORE

7

The situation in the media sector in Azerbaijan worsened in 2023, compared with previous years. After a three-year court case, in February a journalist who had worked for a state-run news agency for many years attempted suicide after claiming the court was pressured from "above" during their trial; later in the year, the court awarded the journalist some compensation. Additionally, the arrest of a journalist's news source served as a stark indicator of deteriorating conditions in the country's media sector in 2023.

In February, freedom of expression was further stifled as a professor who worked for globally-renowned universities, a PhD student, and social activists were arrested simply for speaking the truth about Azerbaijan's political and socio-economic issues. For the first time in decades, a media outlet was sued under Azerbaijan's criminal code and at least 13 independent and investigative journalists were imprisoned after being accused of smuggling in 2023. For the first time in the country's modern history, bank accounts of the family members of imprisoned journalists were frozen, depriving them of financial support for months.
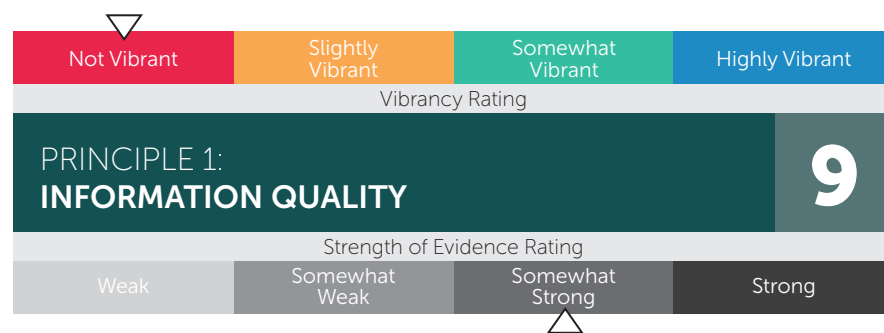
After a day-long military operation, Azerbaijan proclaimed the restoration of its territorial integrity following the recapture of the city of Khankendi within the Nagorno-Karabakh enclave by Azerbaijani security forces. However, this operation led to a crackdown on Tiktok, one of the most widely used social media networks, and many individuals who posted criticisms of the operation on social media were subsequently incarcerated.

While the government still used WhatsApp groups to send a list of daily topics that the local mainstream (government-affiliated) media are allowed to cover, remaining independent media outlets in the country had their principal staff members arrested in 2023 and were operating with limited budgets, as funding is heavily controlled.

The new media law forbidding journalists to work without state registration, which came into force in 2023, culminated in a series of arrests and warnings by the fourth quarter of the year. Furthermore, their media inquiries to government bodies remain unanswered, as they are not registered by the Media Registry Office, which operates under the auspices of the Media Development Agency. In 2023, government-backed trolls were actively working to discredit much of the fact-based content produced by independent media. They persistently labeled the staff of these outlets as journalists "lacking national identity."

The media events that marked 2023 led to a decline in scores across multiple indicators in this year's VIBE report, reflecting a rapidly deteriorating operating environment. All principles scored lower than they did in last year's VIBE study, with the number of media outlets producing high-qulity content shrinking and very few journalists contributing to high-quality content following a series of arrests. Media literacy and digital security skills throughout the country remain extremely low: Due to the lack of media literacy in the country, government-backed trolls described the fact-based and unbiased content produced by independent journalists as "anti-Azerbaijan" articles and accused them of damaging the image of Azerbaijan at the behest of the West. The government, meanwhile, turns a blind eye to corruption, civil liberties, and human rights violations.

Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant	Somewhat Vibrant	Highly Vibrant

Vibrancy Rating

PRINCIPLE 1: INFORMATION QUALITY	9

Strength of Evidence Rating

Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong	Strong

Principle 1 dropped one point in the VIBE 2024 score versus the 2023 VIBE study. The panel was more pessimistic about the media sector's situation compared with the previous year, noting that maintaining quality information on various topics was highly problematic and getting worse. The journalists who continue to work for government-funded media admitted that they still base their work on the official directives that appear in their WhatsApp group. They also observed that the government scrutinizes the information intended for citizens more closely than before, determining when and how it should be disseminated. The indicator on content production being sufficiently resourced was the lowest-scoring indicator in this principle, reflecting the financial pressures that independent media within the country, as well as those media which were forced to exile, face.

Panelists expressed concerns that "soon, there won't be a single journalist producing quality content left in the country." They added that the police criticize journalists for their influence on the people, with one panelist reporting that a policeman openly blamed them for causing public uproar and giving the people a voice.

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

Despite the fact that there are many television, radio, online, and print media outlets in the country, their mission is not to report the truth, nor do they serve to create content on numerous topics. "It's no secret

that independent journalists are bribed with government grants. In our country, information is only disseminated to suit the government's agenda. This is nothing new. Journalists from AbzasMedia are being arrested and accused of smuggling simply because it now aligns with the government's interests," explained one of the panelists.

Several media outlets producing high-quality content on a variety of topics covertly operate in the country. However, the ongoing arrest of journalists progressively undermines their investigative work. In early 2024, one of the presenters of Toplum TV—a local, independent, and professional media outlet—announced live on air that, due to the lack of staff, it could not cover the snap presidential elections in the country. "There is a lack of genuine political and social discussions concerning serious topics in the mainstream media," observed one panelist.

While local pro-government media outlets address only directives from the government, some important news topics or events are deliberately omitted from their daily reports.

When the locals of Soyudlu village in the Gedebey district protested against harmful mining practices near their village, journalists were denied access, and all roads to the village were blocked. The village remains under the blockade to this day, and journalists are still prohibited from visiting. Consequently, there is very little information about the events that unfolded in this location.

Students from the Faculty of Journalism at the Azerbaijan University of Languages protested the absence of English-speaking lecturers with journalistic backgrounds. Despite their demands for English-speaking journalism professors, the university authorities recruited only English-language teachers with no journalism experience. This protest was never covered by the news and received very little attention from the media.

The government does not have the tools to regulate social media, including YouTube. Most information is disseminated through Facebook. Nevertheless, panelists said that those who criticize the government or share something that the government does not like are often blackmailed or face a jail sentence after being accused of resisting police arrest or carrying drugs. In addition, the social media

pages of independent media and bloggers, who create quality content, are attacked by government trolls spreading disinformation and hate speech. Panelists claimed that the targets of their hate speech are increasing in number and attacking a wider range of different profiles.

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

The most trusted information is disseminated by the BBC News Azerbaijani service, Voice of America, and Azadlıq Radiosu (Radio Liberty in Azerbaijan). However, some panelists claimed that more recently, Azadlıq Radiosu took a step back in this regard and became more moderate, compared with dissident media outlet Meydan TV. As for local media outlets Toplum TV and Abzas Media, many of their staff members have been imprisoned, and now their activities are mainly conducted by journalists living outside the country who continue to report fact-based truths.

Panelists divided the country's media into three camps. The first comprises government-controlled media outlets, including state-run media and mass media financed by actors close to the government or receiving subsidies or direct financial support from government institutions. They spread pro-government news and include local television stations (public and online television). The second includes independent local media operating both within or outside the country, albeit in extremely low numbers. This includes Toplum TV, AbzasMedia, and various other small websites striving to retain their independence. The third camp comprises foreign media Azerbaijani services operating independently. One of the panelists observed that "to maintain their presence in the country, foreign media try not to cross the line." There are also YouTube channels belonging to independent media outlets that the Azerbaijani government has yet to restrict.

According to the new media law, signed into law in 2023, it is mandatory for registered local media outlets to produce at least 20 original pieces of news content in a day.This undermines information quality, as journalists have no time to verify the information. In parallel, limited journalism-related education, combined with low media literacy among readers, also negatively affects the quality and accuracy of the news.

In October, local media reported that the assailant responsible for the armed attack on the Azerbaijani embassy in Iran back in January 2023 had been sentenced to execution. Describing it as an act of terrorism, local media, including state television, spread this information, while Iranian state media outlets had not published anything pertaining to an execution and Iranian officials claimed there was no political motivation for the attack. Some time later, in February 2024, public television stations aired the same story once again and conducted interviews with the parents of those who were injured during the incident. However, they did not provide any timeline for the perpetrator's execution and failed to provide a credible source.

> " Panelists said that those who criticize the government or share something that the government does not like are often blackmailed or face a jail sentence after being accused of resisting police arrest or carrying drugs.

It is also difficult for independent journalists to access facts and primary sources for the country's news. The financial reports of many government bodies are not available. Databases that were publicly accessible a few years ago, such as the agricultural subsidies database and records disclosing the owners of companies operating in the country and their home addresses, are now restricted.

According to the new media law, prosecuting or pressuring journalists for their opinions based on information not prohibited by law is not permitted. However, during the Soyudlu protests, representatives of independent media outlets were forcibly removed from the village while pro-government media were allowed to visit the location.

"Government authorities don't respond to [independent} journalists' phone calls or messages and they demand official media inquiries

when caught off guard, but they don't answer media inquiries, either," explained one of the panelists.

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

Neither the government nor unprofessional independent media, including bloggers and government trolls, avoid the use of harmful information and hate speech. Panelists reported that during the day-long Nagorno-Karabakh war in September, terms such as "enemy" were used by local media outlets. When the BBC Azerbaijani service provided comprehensive coverage of Azerbaijan's anti-terror actions in Karabakh, the Press Council labeled the outlet as "a propagator of Armenian separatism."

The media law requires that "racial, religious, ethnic, and other types of discimination should not be propagated" and prohibits open calls for ethnic, racial, and religious enmity. Although the country's criminal code also bans hate speech and all forms of discrimination, the law is not applied to those who express hatred toward people at the behest of the government.

Not a single law was adopted to protect LGBTQ+ rights in the country in 2023. Although the members of the LGBTQ+ community spread information regarding the murder of a transgender woman in 2023, local pro-government media did not cover the crime.

Very few media outlets verify their information using at least two sources. "Most media outlets still don't think to monitor the content they produce or don't have enough resources or technical knowledge to do it. We didn't see any progress toward decreasing the amount of disinformation and hate speech," a panelist added.

> 66 **The politicized nature of the advertising market, combined with the fact that large businesses tend to belong to the ruling Aliyev family or different government officials, means that not many companies risk broadcasting commercial advertisements on independent media outlets.**

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

Although many Azerbaijanis have access to the news in their own language, ethnic minorities continue to receive little to no coverage from pro-government media outlets. Their issues remained unaddressed in 2023 without any visibility in local media.

Panelists argued that the relative dominance of women in the mass media industry should not be mistaken for gender balance, as it primarily stems from the sector's low incomes. In state media, it has been quite some time since women occupied directorial positions, and only two examples come to mind. As for critical media, Abzas Media was once run by a woman, and the editor-in-chief position of Meydan TV has been occupied by a woman for many years.

Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced.

Professional content producers do not have adequate financial resources. "Independent media are deprived of all the financial resources controlled by the government," said one panelist. Furthermore, commercial advertisements receive a share based on which media company they are expected to be disseminated by and towhom the media outlet belongs. It is unclear how subsidies are distributed, databases are not accessible, and the media are not required to be accountable.

Very few companies in Azerbaijan dare to advertise their services or products on media critical of the government. The politicized nature of the advertising market, combined with the fact that large businesses tend to belong to the ruling Aliyev family or different government officials, means that not many companies risk broadcasting commercial advertisements on independent media outlets. In addition, although
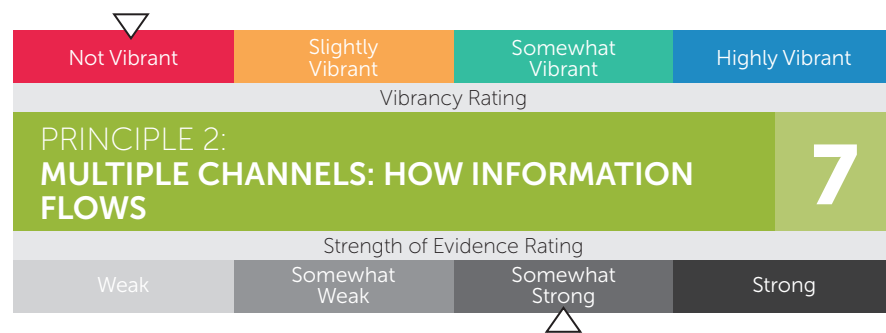
companies were previously allowed to subscribe to any media outlet, they are now limited to certain media.

Panelists recalled that Turan Information Agency and *Ayna-Zerkalo* newspapers used to earn money from commercial advertisements and subscriptions. However, due to politicized advertising and unfair competition, their financial resources have been hugely depleted.

The government's Media Development Agency also allocates funding to news and information websites that are state-owned or affiliated with the Azerbaijani government.

Despite the fact that journalists' monthly salaries in local media are high compared with the officially announced median salary, they are still too low relative to the cost of living when high inflation and their daily activities are taken into account.

For example, a television presenter hosting a live program every day to discuss the political agenda on a local pro-government television channel typically earns around AZN 1,500 or $900 per month.

Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant	Somewhat Vibrant	Highly Vibrant

Vibrancy Rating

PRINCIPLE 2: MULTIPLE CHANNELS: HOW INFORMATION FLOWS	7

Strength of Evidence Rating

Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong	Strong

Principle 2's score dropped by 1 point in comparison to the 2023 VIBE study. There were 13 journalists who were accused of smuggling and consequently arrested, along with dozens of activists with divergent opinions who were imprisoned in November and December of 2023. Pro-government media continued to attack the Azerbaijani language services of foreign media and independent media.

Indicator 7, concerning people's access to information channels, attained the highest score of the principle (14), although the country's internet infrastructure does not cover remote areas and the cost of it in villages is prohibitively high. Panelists gave Indicators 6 (right to create, share, and consume information) and 10 (independence of information channels) scores of 3, the lowest of this principle, reflecting eroding freedom of speech, loss of independent media outlets, and the high number of journalists detained by authorities in 2023.

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

The Azerbaijani government claimed that the right to freedom of expression was protected in 2023. However, six staff members of Abzas Media--including its head, Ulvi Hasannli, Editor-in-Chief Sevinj Vagifgizi, Editor Mohammed Kekalov, Correspondents Nargiz Absalamova and Elnare Gasimova, along with investigative journalist Hafiz Babali, who published his articles on Abzas Media--were all accused of smuggling and subsequently arrested. The Abzas employees denied the accusations against them and said their arrests were a direct consequence of their journalistic activities. The European Union voiced its condemnation in a statement issued in December, highlighting that "Azerbaijan violates its international commitments and takes suppressive steps against the freedom of expression."

Panelists argued that "imprisoning the key staff members of Abzas Media resulted in their website being frozen, rendering it nonfunctional."

The head of the Kanal13 internet television media outlet, Aziz Orujov, and two of his staff members, Rufet Muradli and Shamo Eminov, were also accused of smuggling and were imprisoned. Muradli was issued a 15-day pretrial detention and was released after the completion of his term.

During a series of arrests in 2023, freelance journalist Teymour Karimov was also incarcerated. In addition, those who wrote posts condemning the country's military operations or those who publicly complained about the Karabakh war have also been subject to jail sentences.

Although the constitution and the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, which Azerbaijan ratified, serve to protect freedom of expression and freedom of speech, the government has adopted new legislation in the past couple of years that restricts these freedoms. "The laws are restrictive and they no longer provide protection," one of the panelists claimed.

Under the provisions of the 2023 media law, fines are imposed for the dissemination of prohibited information. Since April 2023, fines totaling around AZN 3,000 ($1,800) were issued to media outlets found violating rebuttal, reply, and correction rules. These fines pose a significant financial burden for media outlets already struggling to survive in a relatively less competitive and smaller market.

One of the new punishments issued by the government is to freeze the bank accounts receiving salary payments and the pension cards of the family members of the incarcerated journalists. "There is self-censorship due to these state-issued fines," a panelist added.

Another event that highlights deteriorating freedom of speech issues in 2023 was when one of the pro-government local television stations targeted an independent media outlet for broadcasting complaints regarding living conditions, employment, and medical care made by local residents from the Baku region and several other national regions. During Sunday evening prime time, a pro-government television station aired the reports to its large audience, describing the journalists who created the video or written content as traitors devoid of any national allegiance.

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

Traditional media outlets in Azerbaijan have already lost their influence. Television and radio stations are only a source of light entertainment, panelists claimed.

Panelists also agreed that people have better access to the news via social media in the past decade, particularly in larger and more populsted cities such as Baku, Sumqayit, Ganja, and Mingachevir.

"Compared to the cities, there is hardly any internet access in more remote villages. There is no infrastructure for Wi-Fi, and mobile internet is too expensive for villagers," one panelist explained. While some locations suffer from poor internet connections, social media is not popular among villagers, especially those in conservative communities who consider its use to be a "harmful habit." Moreover, the government can restrict the internet at any given moment, directly disrupting the flow of information.

> **Despite there being a law protecting the right to information, the government has gradually modified the other laws, converting media law within Azerbaijan to a tool to hinder or restrict journalistic activity.**

One of the panelists recalled that after a day-long military operation in the Karabakh region on September 19, the internet was restricted and totally blocked in the Tartar district and its surrounding villages for over a month.

Some portions of the population living in the cities subscribe to cable television. Television channels from different countries are included in the cable television packages. "But if one of the foreign TV channels criticizes the ruling family, then the channel is removed from the package, an example being FOX TV," observed one of the panelists.

Sign language interpretation is a required condition to provide deaf audience members access to media content. However, television stations in Azerbaijan either completely ignore the need for sign language, or they apply this service only to the major news programs aired in prime time.

Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for government information.

Panelists observed that journalists are unable to provide exclusive stories that include input from the government for their outlets: "You submit a media inquiry, and then you have to wait, and after some timeyou may find that the answers to your questions have already been published by all the news outlets before you receive any answers from the government office."

Despite there being a law protecting the right to information, the government has gradually modified the other laws, converting media law within Azerbaijan to a tool to hinder or restrict journalistic activity.

There is little evidence that citizens get to participate in public-policy and decision-making processes. Governmental press officers either refuse to discuss problems or they provide delayed responses, offering only limited information when compelled to do so.

Numerous lawsuits regarding media inquiries remained unanswered by the end of 2023, and there are also court trials ongoing. Most of the government offices send press releases only to pro-government media, discriminating against other media outlets. "An event occurs in the country and press officers deny the news, but eventually, it becomes clear that a significant event really has taken place," explained one of the panelists.

Panelists unequivocally asserted that there is no evidence to suggest that Azerbaijani citizens trust the spokespeople of government bodies and claimed there are none that can be trusted. People either tend to distrust official information or simply do not pay much attention to it. "Government officials are primarily required to be loyal to the government. It doesn't matter whether the public believe them or not," a representative of one of the pro-government television channels explained.

Even for state media, access to official data depends on the extent to which the government chooses to disclose information. Media funded by the government disseminate the limited information they are allowed to share, while independent journalists strive to obtain data through alternative channels. Moreover, access to some government websites is restricted.

Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow.

Following the adoption of the new media law, panelists affirmed that government control over the media has increased. Furthermore, licensing procedures, which were already biased and lacking in transparency, have become more challenging .

To establish a new television or radio station, it is essential to gain permission from a government official. Demonstrating loyalty to the government is also a key factor. Even if individuals have enough financial resources and technical capabilities, it is impossible for those who are opposition members to obtain a license for television or radio broadcasting.

Not a single independent individual obtained a television broadcasting license in 2023. Only online media can be established without permission.

"The only thing public about İctimai TV [which translates as 'Public TV'] is its name. There is no evidence to suggest that it is an independent or unbiased media outlet," one panelist stated. There are no political debates, corruption cases, or critical socioeconomic topics aired on İctimai TV; however, there is plenty of information promoting the ruling party's agenda. It is difficult to distinguish İctimai TV from any other state-run television station.

İctimai TV also fails to adhere to the guidelines intended to raise public awareness on various issues. Only one program, called "Don't Keep It for
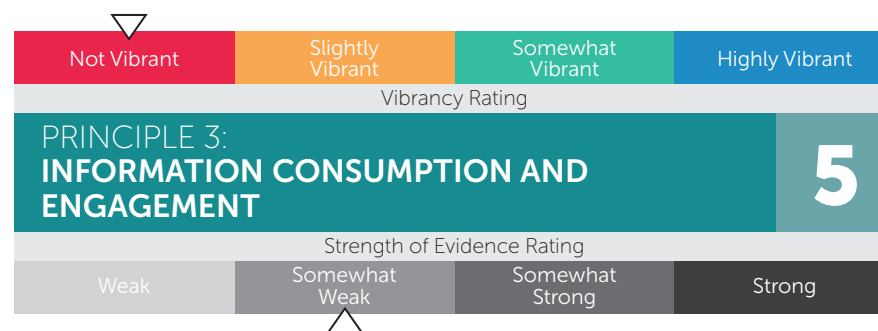
> **" As many media outlets are funded by government grants through the Media Development Agency, commercial advertisement revenue takes a backseat, while media outlet owners exert direct influence over the content produced.**

Tomorrow," very timidly addresses some of the country's social issues, panelists explained. An examination of İctimai TV board of directors and the content of their daily programs underscores that hhe station's activities are highly politically influenced.

As for internet providers, they have the authority to block any website based on political directives, without the need for a court decision.

Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.

The affiliations of a media outlet (to specific people, organizations, or government offices) are apparent in its daily activities, articles, and approaches to issues. For example, a pro-government media outlet would never describe increased product prices as a "price hike." Instead it is more likely to express that the "price has changed."

As many media outlets are funded by government grants through the Media Development Agency, commercial advertisement revenue takes a backseat, while media outlet owners exert direct influence over the content produced. If the owner makes a decision, no one, including the editor-in-chief or any other staff member, has the right to question that decision.

Given that all members appointed to the managing boards of the media outlets are politically motivated individuals, it is unrealistic to expect them to act in accordance with state policies in Azerbaijan.

State media cannot freely obtain statistical data and publish it independently. The agency that distributes television and radio frequencies fails to be politically neutral, and internet providers are also run by those who are either close to the government or controlled by them. "State media outlets directly depend on the government, and their editorial policy is based on the directives received. Not only topics for discussion, but also the pundits invited to appear on the programs, are selected from a list provided by the government," one panelist explained.

When we study the list of media outlets that received a share of the budget allocated by the Media Development Agency, it becomes clear

that they are all "government-approved" media organizations. Websites refrain from publicly crtiticizing the mobile operators with which they have established a commercial advertisement contract. Even specialized media, such as sport websites, avoid criticizing the football teams with which they have signed a contract.

Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant	Somewhat Vibrant	Highly Vibrant
Vibrancy Rating			

PRINCIPLE 3: INFORMATION CONSUMPTION AND ENGAGEMENT	5

Strength of Evidence Rating			
Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong	Strong

Principle 3's rating dropped twopoints in VIBE 2024, compared with its score in the 2023 study. Panelists agreed that a major issue is citizens having extremely limited understanding of digital security; therefore, Indicator 11 on privacy protection and security received a very low score. The score for Indicator 12 on media literacy was the lowest in this principle, despite the newly-formed Media Development Agency announcing that it would provide training courses related to media literacy in Baku and other regions.

Readers, viewers, and listeners do not have enough skills, knowledge, and experience to absorb information. Most viewers do not know how to protect themselves from digital threats. There is little evidence to suggest that journalists are familiar with how to protect themselves. Media literacy is not at the core of education programs provided by schools and universities. Freedom of assembly and freedom of expression was not protected in 2023. In Azerbaijan, news sites and social networks can fall victim to cybercrimes at any given time.

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

Azerbaijan is one of the countries with a high prevalence of distributed denial of service (DDoS) attacks, and digital protection measures in the country are very weak.

Low media literacy in the population results in a lack of knowledge regarding algorithms and security tools. In addition, training courses that would teach citizens how to protect themselves from internet threats are not accessible to most. Internet users in Azerbaijan do not take internet security and confidentiality very seriously.

Some journalists do not understand the seriousness of the problem, while others say they are not afraid. A small number understand how important it is but do not know how to protect themselves. Sometimes, journalists use the unverified free social media apps. Some journalists use the cracked version[1] of Microsoft Office and, in many cases, they do not ensure that the two-step verification is implemented on their social media pages. "Those of us working for state media feel that, whatever kind of security problems we may have, we are just soldiers serving the government," said one panelist.

Government officials claimed measures had been taken to improve digital security. However, panelists are more aware of the activists, representatives of civil societies, and government opponents who complain about falling victim to cyberattacks.

Panelists believed that independent media outlets do not have access to the high-tech digital tools available to state media outlets.

The number of reports of cyberattacks on websites that are critical of the

government and social media users has decreased over the past couple of months, relatively speaking. However, the same cannot be said for journalists who, even if they have implemented a two-step verification system for their e-mail account or social media pages, are confronted with the dissemination of their private information on a regular basis. One of the panelists asserted rumors of mobile operators leaking the confirmation codes to state officials.

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

The Azerbaijani government does nothing toward increasing media literacy in the country. Not only is media literacy low, but so is the overall level of education in the country, one panelist explained. By studying the general reaction to publications on social media, it is possible to gauge to what extent Azerbaijani citizens are skilled enough to verify whether the information is true or false.

All media-related training courses were suspended in 2023 after many journalists were arrested, while in 2022, both public and secret trainings were offered in the country. One of the panelists expressed doubt about when, if ever, media training for young journalists will be available again: "Will they ever return? Or will they abstain from signing up to these programs through fear of government prosecution? I don't know."

The panelists assumed that the functions and responsibilities of the media are of little interest to the majority of the population. People are not armed with the skills to check facts, correct mistakes, or debunk disinformation using online tools and websites in Azerbaijan. Very few can distinguish fake news from truth.

The media's activities, choice of programs, and content reveal low professional standards, as well as the public's low level of media literacy.

> **All media-related training courses were suspended in 2023 after many journalists were arrested, while in 2022, both public and secret trainings were offered in the country. One of the panelists expressed doubt about when, if ever, media training for young journalists will be available again.**

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1   Cracked software has had its copyright protection broken and subsequently exposes the user's personal and financial information to risk, which can result in identity theft.

ADA University in Baku, one of Azerbaijan's most prestigious universities, offers media-related training courses; however, no one from independent media is invited to attend them. Therefore, little is known about these training courses, how effective they are, and what is being taught.

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

Panelists expressed that it is clear that the government aims to eliminate independent media in Azerbaijan. One of the panelists noted that the current situation is so dire that it is comparable with the media sector conditions in 2015, which was also marked by multiple journalist arrests and the government banning NGO activities in the country.

"In this country, where freedom of speech and freedom of expression is punished, information laws hold no validity," one of the panelists stated.

In discussions among Azerbaijani social media users regarding issues such as gender equality, war, and LGBTQ+, there is a high prevalence of hate speech and manipulated information. There are a limited number of spaces and platforms available to the opposition, independent NGOs, and social activists for healthy public debates. Discussions of this kind would never be permitted on local television and radio programs. The Caspian Platform offered Azerbaijanis a limited opportunity; however, its Facebook page was removed shortly after Bakhtiyar Hajiyev, the platform's founder, was arrested.

Public discussions can be held only if they are approved by the authorities and government bodies are not criticized. Political debates are only held regarding foreign policy on state-run television stations. Experts representing all sides in the debates express the same view, and critical opinions are directed only at foreign countries or abstract

> **" One of the panelists noted that the current situation is so dire that it is comparable with the media sector conditions in 2015, which was also marked by multiple journalist arrests and the government banning NGO activities in the country.**

communities. When the public send complaints to the ombudsman, there is often no response.

There are at least 288 political prisoners now in Azerbaijan's prisons.

It is possible to spread fact-based news, but those who do are punished for doing so. Citizen Ruslan Vahabov was imprisoned for four years because he shared a post on his Facebook account after it was officially announced that at least 200 Azerbaijani soldiers had been killed in a day-long anti-terror operation. He was charged with carrying drugs and arrested a day after he shared the following post on Facebook: "Question: What did we gain in 24 hours and 43 minutes? Is it time to start building another "Bravo" supermarket, or not?" This post referred to the Bravo supermarket chain, which is owned by the Aliyev family, implying that capturing territory would expand their business.

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

According to Azerbaijan's law on requesting official information, the relevant institutions must respond to media inquiries in at least 24 hours and no more than seven working days. However, many government agencies rarely observe these timeframes.

Most media do not see any reason for monitoring their audience or conducting comprehensive research to understand the needs and interests of potential audiences. Although the audience is given the opportunity to contact the editors or share their opinion in the comments section, the editorial staff mainly ignore their messages, suggestions, or remarks. The local media mainly disseminate information serving the interests and needs of the government rather than those of the audience.

Even though citizens are given the opportunity to comment on social media and online websites, critical opinions are deleted, hidden, or targeted by trolls or fake accounts. The comments section of the YouTube channels of the president and almost all state media is closed.

Programs aired during prime time on all high-rating television channels either focus on marriage or domestic issues. Local media attempt to attract their audiences with misleading headlines, showbiz news, and crime news. A panelist working for a local television station said that ratings reveal that the majority of their audience members are inclined to watch light entertainment or reality television shows; this is why the stations prefer to air shows of this nature.

Panelists agreed that independent media attempt to exchange views with civil society; however, since independent media and CSOs are disappearing collaboration between the two sectors is challenging.

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

Azerbaijan has only a few examples of community media outlets, such as Fem-Utopia, a feminist YouTube channel, and *Southern News*. Community media report on topics (feminism, the LGBTQ+ community, problems in ethnic communities) that other media outlets do not cover. They do not spread any harmful information targeting individuals, groups, or public interests. However, since media literacy is low and people living in the regions do not understand the importance of community media outlets, there is very little awareness regarding the presence or absence of such media.

There are no community television or radio stations with a government license. Some panelists argue that there is no community media in Azerbaijan at all.

After operating for 14 years in the southern regions of Azerbaijan (Lenkaran, Astara, Masalli etc.), *Southern News* (*Cənub xəbərləri*) newspaper and its website, cenub.az, were forced to shut down on January 10, 2024, due to insufficient funding.

Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant	Somewhat Vibrant	Highly Vibrant

Vibrancy Rating

PRINCIPLE 4: TRANSFORMATIVE ACTION	6

Strength of Evidence Rating

Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong	Strong
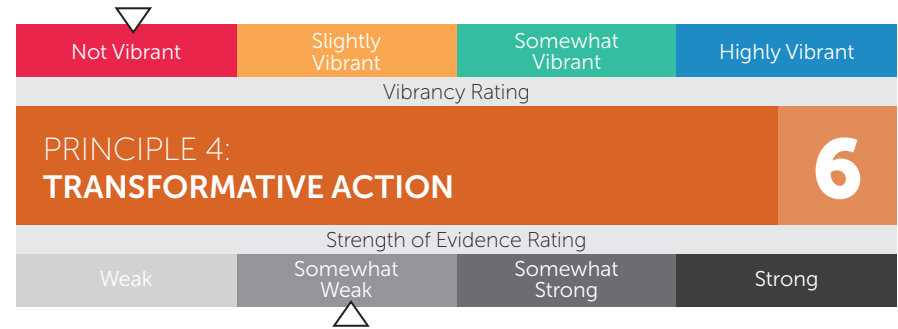
Principle 4's score dropped 5 points from the 2023 VIBE publication. After several NGO representatives were imprisoned for speaking out about social issues, many activists now choose to remain silent in order to protect themselves rather than engage in efforts to advance society. Panelists gave Indicators 19 (government's use of quality information to make public policy decisions) and 20 (good governance and democratic rights) the two lowest scores of this principle—3 and 2, respectively—since government officials do not justify or discuss their decisions with the public and does not address. to corruption, human rights abuses, or civil liberty violations.

Panelists believed that people cannot distinguish fake news from the truth, nor understand political processes to assess the situation. They also felt that the country's socioeconomic problems are what preoccupy the people and prevent them from focusing on other issues.

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

Discussions are rarely seen on social media platforms; moreover, there are no debate programs aired on television stations. Only the program "Don't Keep It for Tomorrow" on İctimai TV could be deemed as some sort of public debate.

Given the lack of platforms and adverse conditions hinder public discussions, they simply do not take place. In addition, many social

media users who actively and openly criticized the government in previous years have been dissuaded from doing so after they received calls from the police. There is a sense that "Big Brother is watching you," and people use self-censorship to avoid police custody.

The Azerbaijani public can get news from different sources based on their foreign-language skills. The majority of the population speaks some Russian or Turkish, so they can read or watch the news in a language they understand.

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

The population's ability to discern between true and false information is also limited. Many do not question official news sources; instead, they tend to believe the information provided by the government. However, people are more inclined to watch reality or light entertainment television shows, rather than serious news programs.

In 2023, protests erupted in the Saatli region over water scarcity and in the village of Soyudlu due to ecological issues. However, the local media covered these protests disparately, with little attention given in other regions. "People are not interested in politics, generally," said one panelist.

There is no direct contact between citizens and government officials, with interactions limited to a level the officials permit. Panelists observed that government officials demonstrate little interest in engaging with everyday people.

The government continues to manipulate the population with its misinformation, seeking to create the illusion of democratic elections.

Only a small fraction of the population can discern and follow fact-based health and safety recommendations.

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

While both government-backed and independent NGOs and CSOs operate in the country, there are far fewer that have maintained their independence. One of these minority NGOs is Eco-front, which differs from other pro-environment NGOs in terms of its accountability and transparency.

In 2023, those who tried to register their NGOs faced artificial barriers. The number of CSOs operating in the country is very small, compared with previous years. Some of them are attempting to remain active, albeit discreetly. NGO representatives, a small number of individuals, strive to raise awareness on environmental, sociopolitical, and economic issues, organize events, and monitor elections.

> **The number of CSOs operating in the country is very small, compared with previous years. Some of them are attempting to remain active, albeit discreetly. NGO representatives, a small number of individuals, strive to raise awareness on environmental, sociopolitical, and economic issues, organize events, and monitor elections.**

According to the panelists, there is a scarcity of CSOs in the country. They encounter limited opportunities to act, and the political environment often poses obstacles to their activities. "There are no real CSOs in the country—only courageous individuals attempting to make a difference," a panelist added.

NGOs and CSOs rarely take part in public debates and decision-making processes in politics. In most cases, political decisions are made by the ruling party or other government bodies. The discussion about the media law took place after it had already been adopted by parliament. Despite the harsh criticism against the new media law and the law on political parties, most of the remarks were hardly considered, and laws were adopted without civic participation.

Panelists consider that the country's femicide issue has worsened, and the situation requires the NGOs supporting feminism to be more proactive. However, as most NGOs are under government control, instead of having real debates on this issue and finding solutions, they mainly avoid addressing the subject.

The country's remaining independent NGOs do not share manipulated information and tend to disseminte the useful results of their research. Independent media also benefit from their research. "Authorities such as the Press Council sould be protecting media and putting pressure on the government to release all the detained journalists, but they choose to remain silent," one panelist stated.

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

There are no standard debates and discussions in the country. The government fails to share the details regarding its decision-making processes. Government officials do not justify their decisions, comment on them, or discuss them with the public. Whenever they do, they rely on the communication of their own media organizations or NGOs, rather than independent ones. In the rare instances they have made public comments regarding their decisions, they often manipulate information.

President Ilham Aliyev often says that Azerbaijan has no political prisoners and that all human rights are protected. "This is disinformation. He says there are 30,000 ethnic Armenians; I couldn't find a single one of those 30,000," one of the panelists added.

Azerbaijan's land borders have been closed since March 2020. Using the COVID-19 pandemic as an excuse, the Azerbaijani government announced that land borders will remain closed until April 2024. The government extends this period every three to four months without providing a valid explanation for the extension.

> **President Aliyev never agrees to being interviewed by independent media outlets and rarely addresses CSOs' topics of interest in his speeches. The president grants interviews only to a select few state-run television stations every three to four months.**

Neither the president nor government officials are in contact with independent media and NGOs. President Aliyev never agrees to being interviewed by independent media outlets and rarely addresses CSOs' topics of interest in his speeches. The president grants interviews only to a select few state-run television stations every three to four months. The journalists hosting these interview are allowed to ask him only the questions that were prepared for them in advance.

Independent journalists are constantly forced to represent the viewpoints of their opponents in their debate programs because government representatives refuse to participate.

Government spokespeople fail to fulfill their functions: they discriminate between journalists and are selective when providing information. They communicate openly with pro-government media. However, pro-government media publish their press releases without questioning them, as they do not have the authority to question state institutions. Panelists believe that Azerbaijani press services often aid the government in concealing information. Accessing accurate statistics is challenging and severely restricted for both state and independent media.

The panelists believe that state media distort information and serve as a mouthpiece for the government.

Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic rights.

The government does not respond to corruption, human rights abuses, or civil liberty violations.

Despite ample evidence pointing to election fraud, government bodies refrain from taking action to address it. For example, polling station results were not annulled, despite numerous violations of the election

code being captured in videos shared by media, social media users, and even live CCTV footage.

"Election mechanisms are totally different in the country. It's as if only one clear candidate was presented to win the election," a panelist said.

After the Karabakh war, Azerbaijan's geopolitical situation shifted. Although panelists acknowledge the country's lack of transparency, they also observe a lack of concern from the West regarding the state of media and civil society in Azerbaijan.

Panelists claimed that despite the decline of freedom of expression and increasing repression, there has been no significant support from Western organizations. One of the panelists recalled an incident at the US Embassy in Azerbaijan when women's rights defenders Narmin Shahmarzade, Gulnara Mehdiyeva, and Sanubar Hedarova held a protest in the embassy building to draw attention to the increasing the number of femicides and acts of domestic violence in the country. A panelist claimed that, not only did the embassy remove them from the building, but it also handed them over to the police.

In Azerbaijan, rather than the media influencing the state, the state influences the media. The panelists highlighted this reality by explaining that state-run media report only on officials involved in corruption or wrongdoing, after they have been dismissed or arrested for some form of betrayal.

Independent journalists are not invited to state events or conferences. Even journalists who find a way to attend these events after learning about their whereabouts are forcibly removed from the premises in many cases.
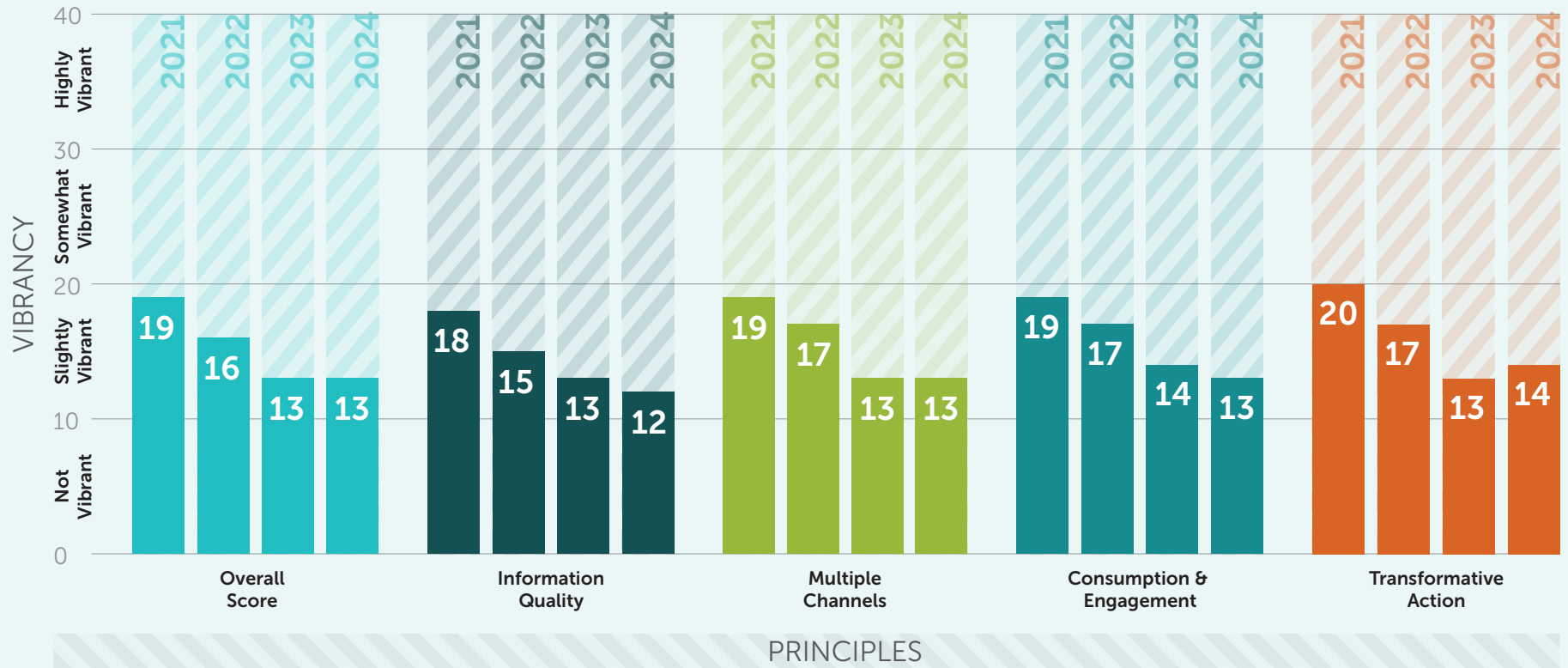
Because of the restrictive media environment, panelists in the Azerbaijan study will remain anonymous. An Azerbaijani journalist developed this chapter after a series of structured interviews with colleagues who have first-hand knowledge of the media and information sector.

GEORGIA

Vibrant
Information
Barometer

2 0 2 4

VIBRANCY

PRINCIPLES

Overall Score
2021: 19, 2022: 16, 2023: 13, 2024: 13

Information Quality
2021: 18, 2022: 15, 2023: 13, 2024: 12

Multiple Channels
2021: 19, 2022: 17, 2023: 13, 2024: 13

Consumption & Engagement
2021: 19, 2022: 17, 2023: 14, 2024: 13

Transformative Action
2021: 20, 2022: 17, 2023: 13, 2024: 14

Y-axis labels: Highly Vibrant (40), Somewhat Vibrant (30), Slightly Vibrant (20), Not Vibrant (10, 0)

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
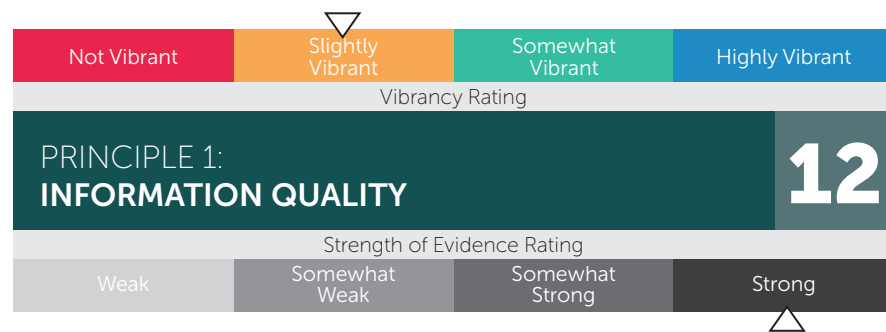
OVERALL
SCORE

13

Not Vibrant

Major events including Georgia's new EU candidate status, the government's attempt to enact a "foreign agents" law, and the incessant flow of manipulative information spread by the government and pro-government media dominated the nation's media environment in 2023. In one positive step, Georgian President Salome Zourabichvili pardoned Nika Gvaramia, the former director of the Georgian pro-opposition TV channel Mtavari Arkhi, as a result of advocacy campaigns by human rights groups along with Gvaramia's family and colleagues, as well as protests against the journalist's detention. In addition, the government did not pass the ruling party's draft law on "foreign agents" due to massive public protests in March 2023.

Throughout the year, authorities detained activists who spoke out against injustices and slandered their funders in an attempt to silence them. Officials used Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPP) to intimidate and censor critical journalists, as well as impact their finances by forcing them to pay legal fees. The government also resorted to smear campaigns and orders to cease coverage to pressure independent media and influence editorial agendas, albeit without much success. The Georgian parliament abolished the advisory board of the Adjara Public Broadcaster, further aggravating threats against media independence ahead of the 2024 parliamentary elections.

Panelists highlighted Georgia's new EU candidate status as one of the few positive political developments in 2023. To fulfill candidacy, Georgia needs to take nine steps to improve democracy, including the need to fight manipulative information, address political polarization, and improve parliamentary oversight of the security services, among others.

Despite these threats to media, the information system remains slightly vibrant on the VIBE scale, with the overall score unchanged from last year at 13. Principle 1 (Information Quality) received the lowest scores on mal-information information and hate speech and on resources for content production due to the Georgian government's spread of manipulative information and severe financial hardships facing independent and pro-opposition media. The score for Principle 2 (Multiple Channels) scored lowest on independence of information channels. The Principle 3 (Information Consumption and Engagement) score decreased slightly from last year, with media literacy scoring the lowest due to the state's deficiency in advancing the nation's media literacy level. In Principle 4 (Transformative Action), panelists gave the lowest scores on the government's use of quality information to make public policy decisions on information that supports good governance and democratic rights, citing the government's disregard of inclusive policymaking and use of manipulative information, while civil society's use of quality information scored the highest.

Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant	Somewhat Vibrant	Highly Vibrant

Vibrancy Rating

PRINCIPLE 1: INFORMATION QUALITY	12

Strength of Evidence Rating

Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong	Strong

Professional and nonprofessional content creators across many platforms produce information on a range of topics. However, the content quality is seriously challenged due to pervasive manipulative information from authorities and other sources. Critical and independent media work under severe financial repercussions and threats to safety and credibility. This principle's score slid from 13 last year to 12 in 2023. Indicator 3 (on manipulative information) and Indicator 5 (on resources for content production) received the lowest scores.

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

While infrastructure for the production and distribution of diverse content (e.g., internet, printing houses, and social networks) is mostly in place, not all media enjoy equal access. Panelists noted that a lack of financial resources results in lowered demand for goods, leading to increased prices on resources and slower distribution as companies hesitate to stock items that are not in high demand.

According to IRI's 2023 opinion survey, television remains the public's most important source of information on current and political affairs. One panelist said that for years their channel has had difficulty updating its equipment. The dwindling newspaper industry further faces a shortage

> **In 2023, pro-government media notably escalated propaganda, offering unethical and manipulative content to the public.**

of high-quality paper and available publishing houses. Another panelist noted that only two publishing houses that can print magazines are functioning in Tbilisi. Panelists highlighted that the availability of resources does not yield more professional and diverse media content nor generate more substantial income due to the politicized distribution of resources.

Some higher education institutions provide journalism education programs. Panelists who represent media organizations observed that the relevance and quality of education does not meet modern journalism demands, making it harder for new graduates to enter the labor market. One panelist mentioned that high achieving students no longer choose journalism as a future profession because it has lost its appeal as a result of being discredited, underpaid, and unsafe. Some panelists noted that training offered to journalists is frequently disconnected from the actual demands of the profession, adding that they would prefer tailor-made training on the topics that align with their editorial and organizational demands.

Panel members underscored that political influence on the mainstream media and polarization undermine quality. Most panelists agreed that in 2023, pro-government media notably escalated propaganda, offering unethical and manipulative content to the public. "The government's instrumentalization of media has increased to unprecedented levels" said a panelist. One of the trends of the year, another panelist observed, is that pro-government broadcasters refrained from airing news that shows the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party and its performance in a negative way. Unlike in the past, when pro-government media prepared stories to obscure critical media news, in 2023, they went a step further and intentionally omitted some of the most important events from public view. In one example, the panelist explained that pro-government broadcasters chose not to air the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) test results because Georgia's secondary students received such low scores. Another panelist noted that hiding the scores is part of the government's strategy to

prevent potentially negative perceptions about academic scores toward the state of secondary education and, consequently, toward the government.

On the positive side, one of the panelists hailed a new plan announced by pro-opposition broadcaster Mtavari Arkhi to separate the channel's editorial agenda from political influence.

Georgian media cover local, national, regional, and international news, with national media focusing on national events and local and regional media covering local and regional events. Some panelists observed that party agendas and political issues overshadow other important topics, even for online media. One of the panelists mentioned that their outlet focuses on issues related to abuses and injustices by the government because they are so common. "We might cover environmental issues through a human-rights lens, which is important from the democratic point of view," the panelist noted, "but we might not have time or resources to report on other environmental themes that are important to educate or raise public awareness."

Panelists agreed that despite numerous challenges, critical national outlets, some regional media, and independent online media do hold the government accountable. The work of independent online media is especially praiseworthy because they create diverse content, inform the public on issues of concern, and consistently maintain high quality, panelists said. This sector also excels in producing investigative stories, according to one panelist. "Even though online media may not compete with national broadcasters in terms of audience reach, their independence is a decisive issue," the panelist noted. They pointed out that their outlet's investigative story on the transfer of forests in Racha-Lechkhumi and Kvemo Svaneti to a partner of a Russian oligarch succeeded in elevating the topic on the political agenda.

Independent media which continue to produce fact-based and ethical content include Netgazeti.ge, Batumelebi.ge, Publika.ge, On.ge,

Mtisambebi.ge, OC Media, JamNews, and Radio Tavisupleba (RFE/RL's Georgian service). Most 2023 journalism prizes were awarded to journalists from quality online media, as well as to regional media outlets.

Journalists are held responsible for unethical and unprofessional reporting through either self-regulating bodies or the Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics (GCJE). From December 1, 2022, to November 30, 2023, the GCJE reviewed 78 cases of ethics complaints. Of these, 42 were submitted by citizens and 30 by organizations. Accuracy topped the list of violations with 64 cases. But some panelists thought that GCJE's work lacked visibility during the year. Others also noted outlets' self-regulation bodies were not that effective in weeding out ethics violations. One panelist observed that when citizens are upset with propagandistic content, they post on social media to complain, holding those who spread this content responsible through their reactions. Another panelist remarked that constructive critique of the content and editorial agenda of media outlets is a challenge because not many media monitoring reports were produced in 2023.

The Georgian government pressures donor organizations as a new way to curb media outlets' editorial independence. Panelists noted that the speaker of parliament, Shalva Papuashvili, tried to pressure independent online news outlet OC Media, which covers news from the North and South Caucasus, and its donors in a bid to punish the outlet after it declined to publish the politician's op-ed. Papuashvili sent a letter to one donor group accusing OC Media of producing "one-sided coverage of Georgian politics," and questioned donors' funding policies. OC Media claimed it received only the title of the op-ed with a small passage and noted that the argument presented "appeared to directly contradict the actions of Georgian Dream's government towards the EU, and the West more broadly, in recent years."

> ❝❝ **The shift in manipulative information strategies adopted by Georgia's far right and pro-Russian groups aligned closely with the narratives promoted by the Georgian government.**

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

The panelists agreed that the government widely spreads manipulative information on a number of issues. A major manipulative narrative of the year concerned the draft "Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence," also known as the "foreign agents law" or "Russian law." In February 2023, People's Power, a political group composed of former MPs of the ruling Georgian Dream party, initiated a draft law backed by the Georgian Dream that required any civil society organizations and media outlets that receive 20 percent of their funding from outside the country to register as "agents of foreign influence." The government claimed the law was in line with US and Western practices.

Local and international organizations, watchdogs, and diplomatic organizations accredited in Georgia, cautioned that the law posed a serious threat to democracy and human rights, freedom of expression, and maintaining a pluralistic media environment. Despite these warnings, 76 Parliament members supported the draft law in the first reading, while 13 opposed it. Thousands of protesters rallied in the streets of Georgia demanding the draft law be revoked. This fierce resistance forced the Georgian Dream party to withdraw the bill. Although the bill failed to pass, panelists expressed concern that the Georgian Dream party damaged the reputations of critical media and civil society organizations. Panel members agreed that the role of smaller, high-quality, online media was pivotal in countering the government's manipulative information regarding the law. "It is because of national and regional media's work that the government's disinformation did not infiltrate public consciousness," a panelist said. They added that media outlets worked hard to provide evidence on the similarities of Georgia's "foreign agents" bill and an identical law the Kremlin initiated several years ago.

In May 2023, Facebook's parent company Meta released its Quarterly Adversarial Effect report, which stated the company removed 80 Facebook accounts, 26 pages, nine groups, and two accounts on Instagram for violating its policy against coordinated, inauthentic behavior in Georgia. The posts allegedly originated from a group with links to the Communications Department of the Government of Georgia. The network used multiple apps, including Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, focusing on domestic audiences to share criticisms of the opposition, particularly during the public protests against the draft law on "foreign agents."

On December 14, the EU granted Georgia candidate status under the condition that the nation take nine steps to solidify its democracy, the first of which is to "fight disinformation and foreign information manipulation and interference against the EU and its values."

Until the EU candidacy status was announced in December, the government spread rampant conspiracy theories, and pro-government media aired a series of stories infused with anti-Western narratives, a panelist explained. Some manipulative information narratives from the previous year recurred and became more sophisticated, panelists said. For example, the Georgian Dream leadership promoted a conspiracy theory that an unidentified group of warmongers wants Georgia to engage in a war with Russia and send fighters to help Ukraine. This manipulative information was used to discredit their critics and confuse the public. According to an article in Netgazeti.ge, Georgia's minister of foreign affairs claimed, "Anyone whose statements and actions threaten our country's economic development, security, European integration, and foreign political priorities can consider themselves representatives of the global war party." While the government has never explicitly stated who is in this fictitious war party, Georgian Dream chair and current Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze referred to the United National Movement (UNM), the largest opposition party, as "a local war party."

Manipulative information and narratives are rampant on social networks, panelists noted. One panelist pointed out that this content is almost impossible to moderate for media outlets. Another panelist added that as soon as their outlet detects that commentary aimed at influencing public opinion are manipulative, or discriminatory, they turn the comments section off. In a concerning trend, Facebook cancels pages based on reports from trolls and bots, a panelist observed, stressing that this hampers media from reaching and engaging audiences. Another panelist said that in 2023, a video and one of their outlet's pages were taken down after bots and trolls reported them.

One panelist mentioned that since 2020, their organization has cooperated with Facebook to track false information. They said that after flagging fake information on Facebook, some users correct their posts accordingly. Some panel members also observed that even though fact-checkers can detect and label manipulative information, no reports or in-depth analysis of the effects of this manipulation are available to the public. Another panelist said no experts or studies exist to measure the level of manipulative information among minority communities, either.

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

The Kremlin influenced the Georgian public during the year through entertainment and marketing pages that carried hidden political agendas. Online outlet Myth Detector uncovered a network spreading anti-Western messages through sponsored posts, according to one panelist. The Facebook pages included memes and were coordinated to disseminate and reinforce stereotypes suggesting that joining the EU would mean rejecting traditional values and would strengthen the rights of the LGBTQ+ community. Myth Detector's research also showed that Twitter accounts from Russian diplomatic missions around the world disseminated Kremlin-based manipulative information regarding Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

The shift in manipulative information strategies adopted by Georgia's far right and pro-Russian groups aligned closely with the narratives promoted by the Georgian government, explained one panelist. With Russian sources losing popularity in Georgia, these groups shifted tactics to lean on narratives from American conservative groups, the panelist said. This tendency also occurred in content produced by pro-government media. For example, the new platform Georgia First of All, which is allegedly affiliated with the government of Georgia, carries content from American right-wing news sites. A report by the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy revealed that Georgia's pro-Kremlin, alt-right groups and some government representatives and affiliated media are running discriminatory social media campaigns against the LGBTQ+ community.

Online and offline, politically motivated smear campaigns against individuals and organizations are common in Georgia. In October, pro-government broadcast media, including Rustavi 2, PosTV, Imedi, and the Georgian Dream leadership, questioned Indigo Magazine's theme issue, "Protest and Resistance in Georgia in the 20th-21st Century," and a coinciding presentation. The TV stations aired reports that discussed the ultimate motives, and subsequent discussion insinuated the event was geared towards possibly training citizens in revolutionary practices. Following the state news coverage, Georgian Dream chair Kobakhidze stated that Indigo Magazine's edition contributed to unrest in the country by "actualizing the revolution." The German Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) foundation, an event sponsor, asked Indigo Magazine to postpone the presentation after Georgia's EU candidate status was granted.

One concerning trend in Georgia is gendered manipulative information against female politicians and civil activists, according to research by the Media Development Foundation. After President Zourabichvili pardoned Nika Gvaramia, the founder and former director of the independent news outlet Mtavari Arkhi, a number of manipulated photos were circulated on social networks showing that the president allegedly had a promiscuous past.

Information shared on Sinamdvileshi (In Reality), a Georgian Dream-run Facebook page, labels the opinions of civil activists, critical media, and opposition politicians as "false" content. One of its posts alleges that Voice of America's Georgian news service disseminates fake news against the Georgian government.

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

Overall, the body of content is diverse, but is far from inclusive. Panelists agreed that national broadcasters provide content that aligns with political parties' agendas. Smaller online media outlets display more diverse topics. Some panelists pointed out that these outlets now cover a broad range of topics, including culture, women and gender equality, ethnic and racial minorities, and other areas that cater to specific

interest groups. A panelist noted that this shift signifies a departure from more politically aligned content and symbolizes the beginning of a more inclusive media landscape. "For example, if mainstream broadcasters covered the protest of cinema industry representatives from a political point of view, these media would represent the topic through the industry's perspective," the panelist said.

One panelist noted that their media outlet invites people to write stories on topics relevant to their backgrounds. As a result, in 2023, the outlet produced many articles on transgender people with the involvement of members of the transgender community. Another panelist added that pro-government media attempt to discredit the LGBTQ+ community and are actively encouraged by the government. An additional panelist remarked that vulnerable groups such as people with disabilities are not always given a voice. Instead, NGOs, donors, and experts tend to speak on their behalf.

Another panelist added that donor funding ensures inclusivity in small media outlets. They also questioned whether the Georgian Public Broadcaster's minority language programming reaches the populations of the Samtskhe Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli regions.

While there are no official statistics on diversity and gender balance across Georgia's media sector, most founders of media organizations are men. A panelist explained that at the operational level, there are more women working as directors, producers, editors, and journalists, while the vast majority of video operators are men.

Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced.

Media funding sources are inconsistent and unsustainable, panelists noted. Income is unequally distributed between pro-government and pro-opposition broadcasters, as well as between national and regional media. According to the Georgian National Communications Commission's report, in 2023, TV broadcasters received GEL 87.4 million ($32.3 million) from commercial advertising revenues, an 18.6 percent increase from 2022. Pro-government outlet Imedi TV had the largest share of commercial advertising revenues, totaling GEL 33.7

million ($12.4 million), up 34 percent from 2022. However, commercial revenues of pro-opposition TV outlet Mtavari Arkhi fell approximately 25 percent, to GEL 7.9 million ($2.9 million). One panelist lamented that the advertising market is dominated by a group of seven pro-government channels, which attract advertisers by providing lower prices on the condition that they refrain from placing advertising in critical media outlets.
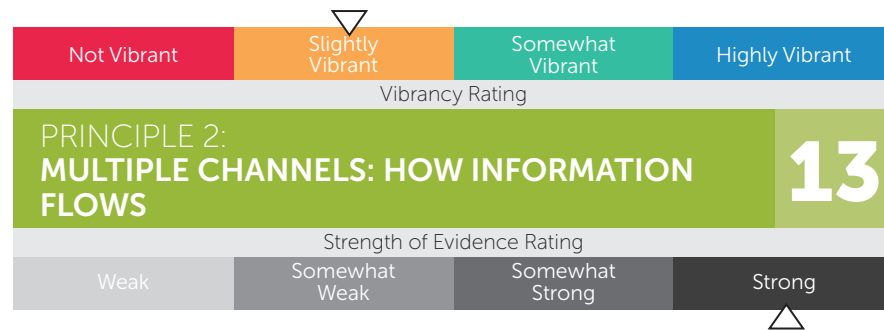
Some panel members expressed concern that strategies employed by donors to strengthen Georgia's independent media need comprehensive reevaluation. "Organizations have different needs," explained a panelist. "For example, I know what I need to strengthen my organization, but instead of doing it, I try to adapt to donor priorities and somehow adjust my needs to fit theirs." Panelists agreed that donors should provide more holistic support for costs associated with media content production. The panelist said that Indigo Magazine's current priority is to build a marketing department, which is crucial for the outlet's long-term financial sustainability, but donors do not support this type of initiative.

Another panelist noted that regional media face difficult financial constraints; of 24 regional broadcasters, only three receive donor support, giving them the ability to produce daily news. An additional panelist said that independent TV stations not affiliated with political forces face significant challenges in accessing sufficient funding.

Following global trends, Georgian media also face fierce competition from social networks, as well as other online content producers that produce and advertise content, while bypassing media outlets. In April, Georgian media took a hit when Meta decided to end support for its Instant Articles feature on Facebook, with referral traffic from Facebook decreasing significantly since then, according to panelists. In addition, donors require media outlets to collect audience and click metrics as the main indicators for success.

The Georgian Public Broadcaster (GPB) is the best-funded media outlet in the country, receiving both public money and advertising revenue, with a budget of GEL 101 million ($37.3 million) in 2023. However, funding rules for the GPB changed at the end of 2023, and the new rules

will start in 2026. Until then, according to law, GPB should receive no less than 0.14 percent of Georgia's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). In 2024 and 2025, GPB will have the same budget as in 2023. Starting in 2026, the public funding model for GPB will be calculated by multiplying the financing coefficient of the public broadcasting's budget by the number of individuals employed in Georgia during the preceding year, but will not be less than the previous budget.

Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant	Somewhat Vibrant	Highly Vibrant

Vibrancy Rating

PRINCIPLE 2: MULTIPLE CHANNELS: HOW INFORMATION FLOWS	13

Strength of Evidence Rating

Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong	Strong

The Principle 2 score was unchanged from last year's study, with persistent challenges including government attempts to restrict freedom of speech, limited access to public information for journalists, the abolition of the board of trustees of Adjara Public Broadcaster, and political interference and financial pressures jeopardizing media independence. As a result, Indicator 10 (information channels are independent) received the lowest score in the principle.

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

On March 10, 2023, the Georgian Parliament introduced a draft law on "foreign agents" backed by the ruling Georgian Dream party. Critics likened it to Kremlin legislation that hampers independent journalism and democracy. According to the 2023 IRI study, more than 50 percent of respondents believed the intent of the draft law was to silence civil society organizations (CSOs) and media in Georgia. However,

lawmakers ultimately withdrew the draft law following public protests. Nevertheless, panelists stressed that parliament's attempt to pass the bill impeded media work, and sources still fear repercussions.

Panelists praised Gvaramia's release from prison in May 2023 following a presidential pardon. However, one panelist noted individuals were still arrested for demonstrating with blank posters to protest ongoing issues with freedom of expression.

The panelists stressed that any assessment of freedom of speech laws should no longer rely solely on legal text. One of them emphasized the crucial role of court precedents in interpreting freedom of speech norms. They noted that flawed court practices have shaped the court system, calling for an evaluation of laws based on current realities.

In October 2023, the parliament hastily adopted amendments to the Broadcasting Law—originally proposed in December 2022 and subsequently revoked—without significant public discussion. This move means that self-regulation of hate speech, obscenity, and terrorism incitement in media is now subject to regulatory oversight. The Georgian National Communications Commission (GNCC) is now authorized to address these issues and impose sanctions, including warnings, fines, and license suspensions. Media experts expressed skepticism regarding legal oversight of hate speech because the government is opposed to critical opinions, it does not have robust independent regulatory bodies, and there is diminished trust in the judicial system. However, panelists highlighted that some of the threats posed by the original December 2022 amendments, such as the immediate enforcement of regulators' decisions, have been partially mitigated by the newer version.

The panelists noted that media maintain a high degree of self-censorship, which is largely fueled by the fear of sanctions and fines. "We often encounter fines, and repeated penalties could result in license confiscation," a panelist noted. The government's use of the justice system to suppress critical media legally and financially in 2023 was extensive, with a rise in lawsuits against journalists and critical media outlets. Georgian officials also used more SLAPP defamation cases to target critical media outlets and journalists. According to the

Georgian Democracy Initiative (GDI)'s 2023 report on human rights in the nation, government officials initiated 39 lawsuits against critical media outlets and human rights advocates, with courts increasingly ruling in the government's favor. Another troubling trend is that officials target journalists knowing that, in some cases, media outlets fail to reimburse journalists' fines, a strategy designed to silence media workers and cause self-censorship.

Journalists' safety remained an issue in 2023. As in previous years, verbal and physical attacks occurred as well as violence against media representatives critical of the ruling party, according to a Transparency International report. In June, agitators assaulted Misha Mshvildadze, an anchor and co-founder of Formula TV, in downtown Tbilisi. One individual was charged in the incident. But a news report by outlet Civil. ge, Mshvildadze alleged government involvement, noting that "one of the participants of the attack may be an investigator of the State Security Service."

> **The Georgian Parliament introduced a draft law on "foreign agents" backed by the ruling Georgian Dream party. Critics likened it to Kremlin legislation that hampers independent journalism and democracy.**

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

In 2023, household internet access reached 89 percent per the National Statistics Office, marking a 0.6 percent increase from last year. Panelists noted that while people can access information through various channels and technologies, urban areas typically have better coverage. Internet has become more affordable in Georgia according to the most recent edition of Surfshark's Digital Quality of Life (DQL) Index, which ranked Georgia's digital wellbeing 65th out of 121 countries globally in 2023. However, panelists stressed that economic factors like inflation and high prices for internet and mobile services continue to affect nationwide access, especially in regions where broadband availability is limited. Georgia remained among the "free" countries in Freedom House's 2023 Freedom on the Net report, although its internet freedom

score declined by two points from the previous year. The country's electronic governance ranks 80th out of 121 countries in the DQL Index.

One panelist stated that persistent challenges to information access still exist for ethnic minorities in Georgia, despite increased internet penetration. The language barrier remains a significant obstacle, as many national broadcasters leave ethnic minority groups underserved. While some local media outlets offer content in local languages, they struggle to compete with larger Russian, Armenian, and Azerbaijani channels. Accessibility for people with disabilities is still limited, with few channels providing sign language interpretation. The panelists also cited diminished print and radio presence as a factor in the lack of diversification of information channels.

Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for government information.

While right to information is guaranteed by law, the actual practice of media access to government information deteriorated in 2023. State agencies frequently withhold public information, including questionable procurement practices and even government decrees. State and regional agencies also avoid engagement with the media. "If a politician doesn't want to propagate his own narrative, he simply refuses to engage with journalists," a panelist remarked.

In 2023, investigative journalism platform Studio Monitor revealed that the Ministry of Health prohibited the National Center for Disease Control and Public Health (NCDC) from releasing public information. Whistleblowers continually face obstacles in obtaining information, citing illegal directives to withhold it, according to panelists. State agency press services systemically prioritize withholding information, a panelist noted.

Panelists also criticized the court system's inefficiency in resolving disputes over public information, often taking months or even years to conclude. "It's been two years since we filed a lawsuit against the Ministry of Culture," a panelist lamented. "We have submitted over 400 administrative complaints and filed 52 lawsuits that entail significant resources and fees."

Additionally, panelists condemned how the government handles crisis situations like the Shovi landslides in August, noting a lack of accountability and transparency. After the crisis, the government targeted Mtsambebi.ge for its reporting from the disaster zone, including information about rescue work and officials' reactions. The speaker of parliament, Shalva Papuashvili, demanded that Mtsambebi.ge delete a post related to the coverage from its Facebook page.

Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow.

Laws and regulations facilitate the operation of a range of distribution channels in the country, but a few privately owned, large-scale companies dominate the market, limiting competition and elevating costs. The telecommunications market remains concentrated, with Magticom and Silknet holding significant shares in the fixed broadband internet market and Celfie (formerly known as Beeline Georgia) in the mobile internet sector. In November 2023, the Georgian National Communications Commission (GNCC) authorized Space X's Starlink to launch a satellite internet service in the country and extend internet access to mountainous regions. However, internet through Starlink is expensive and experts are uncertain if it can compete with local market players at this stage.

The GNCC requires that licensed organizations openly publish ownership documents on its portal to show transparency. Additionally, the Law on Broadcasting prohibits offshore-registered businesses from owning

> 66 **The broadcast media landscape remains deeply divided along pro-government and pro-opposition lines and often show owner-influenced biases. Editorial independence is constrained by media organizations' precarious financial states.**

licenses in Georgia. However, panelists observed that this provision is often overlooked, highlighting a gap between existing laws and their enforcement. The GNCC has also made unfair decisions on authorization and spectrum allocation procedures in recent years, panelists noted, adding that the regulator's decisions are influenced by an undisclosed agenda.

Panelists feared that a recent amendment to the broadcasting law covering audiovisual media might pave the way for regulating online media platforms, which have operated thus far without oversight. "There is a potential within this law to expand its scope to include online media and mandate their authorization," a panelist cautioned. They stressed that the GNCC has already requested Tok TV to register as a video-calling platform, indicating that a similar requirement could be imposed on all online media. Tok TV has challenged this request.

In December 2023, the GPB announced seven programs will be cancelled in 2024, allegedly as part of cost-cutting measures. This decision came as a surprise even to the broadcaster's board of trustees. Two cancelled programs, "Gorgiladze's Autaneli Simsubuke" ("Unbearable Lightness") and "Men," drew particular criticism because these programs's writers were known for fearlessly expressing opinions. "Davit Gorgiladze actively voices his opinions on various issues on social media," Netgazeti.ge reported. "During Parliamentary discussions of the [foreign agents] law, he criticized the authors and supporters of the so-called 'Russian law.'" Some segments of society perceived the broadcaster's decision as censorship and a violation of freedom of expression, panel members said.

Panelists also criticized GPB's overall performance, pointing out deficiencies in its news programs, while also acknowledging its ability to provide quality educational content. Panelists said GPB fails to uphold

journalistic standards and serve as an effective watchdog, despite receiving substantial public funding. This failure is a missed opportunity for significant change in a media landscape perceived as inhospitable to non-partisan, critical viewpoints.

Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.

The broadcast media landscape remains deeply divided along pro-government and pro-opposition lines and often show owner-influenced biases. Editorial independence is constrained by media organizations' precarious financial states, some panelists noted. Even highly regarded TV stations operate at a loss and are largely reliant on owners' financial support, one panelist said. They emphasized that journalists, aware of who pays their salaries, sometimes adjust their behavior accordingly. A few online media outlets uphold journalistic standards, but they have a limited impact since television remains the primary source of news for much of the population (according to IRI's 2023 study, 76 percent of Georgians get their news from TV). Some media outlets strive to maintain ethical boundaries between business and journalism, while others do not.

A 2022 Media Meter report, released in 2024, shows government subsidies and advertising contracts predominantly favor pro-government media organizations.

In June 2023, the ruling party Georgian Dream abolished the Adjara Public Broadcaster's advisory board, which was responsible for crucial functions such as appointing a director, confirming the budget, and defining its programming priorities. Adjara's management was merged into the board of trustees of the Public Broadcaster, headed by Vasil Maglaferidze, a former high-ranking official of the ruling party. This move sparked concerns over political interference, a lack of independence, and jeopardizing the Public Broadcaster's existence.

In November, the government proposed changing GPB's financing from a fixed percentage of the national GDP to an annual allocation from the state budget. Media experts, watchdog organizations, and international entities, including the European Broadcasting Union, point out that this

new measure could compromise the broadcaster's independence since it is now reliant on government funding.

Panelists agreed that the GNCC makes rulings from a biased, pro-government stance, and serves the interests of the ruling party. In January 2023, GNCC members re-elected Kakha Bekauri as chairman for a third consecutive three-year term. Appointed by parliament as a GNCC member in 2014, Bekauri previously served as director of a television channel affiliated with the founder of Georgian Dream, raising concerns about potential conflicts of interest. Before 2019, regulations prohibited the same person from holding the chairmanship for more than one term, but this restriction was lifted during Bekauri's tenure, which experts criticized. "The rotation principle and short-term tenure were a guarantee that the regulator would be independent," one panelist explained. Panelists noted that the commission members are often appointed from within the GNCC, leading to perceptions of insularity. Both local and international non-governmental organizations frequently criticize the GNCC for ruling against critical media and accuse it of serving the ruling party's interests. The European Commission's November 2023 report on Georgia emphasizes the country's need to ensure that the GNCC maintains an independent, impartial approach to regulatory decisions.

Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant	Somewhat Vibrant	Highly Vibrant

Vibrancy Rating

PRINCIPLE 3: INFORMATION CONSUMPTION AND ENGAGEMENT	13

Strength of Evidence Rating

Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong	Strong
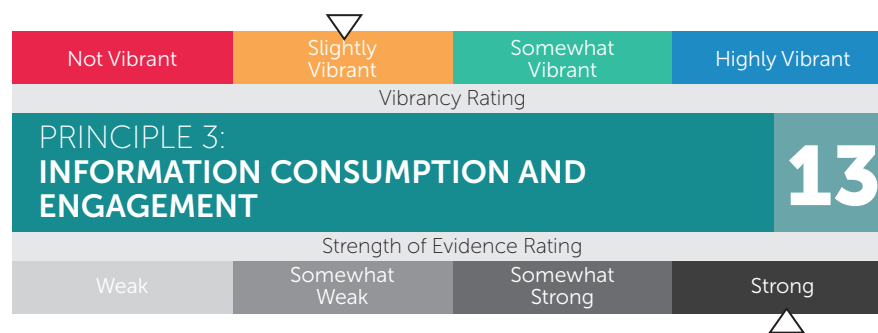
The panelists agreed that the population lacks the skills to assess the quality of the media they consume, and the state does not have a strategy to improve media literacy. The internet and social media are freely available for anyone to register and social networks are widely

used, but engagement can turn toxic and privacy and digital safety concerns persist. In 2023, the government pressured civil activists, threatening their safety and wellbeing to intimidate them. Independent media outlets lack resources and data to engage with the public. As a result, this principle's overall score fell one point to 13, compared with last year's study, with Indicator 12 (on media literacy) and Indicator 14 (on media's engagement with audiences' needs) scoring the lowest.

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

In 2023, there were no publicly disclosed violations of digital privacy rights regarding covert government surveillance, a trend that has endured for years. Nevertheless, panel members are worried about possible surveillance. "The fact that we are moving from one messaging app to another [due to fear of surveillance] means that safety is a serious problem," said one panelist. Legislation such as the Law on Personal Data Protection offers some protective measures and regulations for data privacy and digital security. However, this legal framework gives the State Security Service of Georgia (SSSG)'s Operational-Technical Agency (OTA) the excessive right to monitor private electronic communications because it maintains control over technical infrastructure, a panelist observed. CSOs are concerned about OTA's ineffectiveness, and the Council of Europe's Venice Commission report, released in December 2023, echoed their concerns about privacy disruptions.

Trainings for professional and nonprofessional content producers on digital safety tools exist, along with cyberattack prevention tools. One panelist said that Georgia has open access to privacy and security tools, but the government and consumers cannot effectively use these tools due to a lack of training. Some media outlets and journalists demonstrate a strong awareness of digital safety, but it is not widely practiced. One reason is that understaffed media do not always have personnel responsible for these issues.

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

There are no national studies which assess the Georgian public's media literacy, but panelists agreed that, despite gradual improvements, it is very low. Young people are more digitally competent, but many do not verify online information. Georgia ranked last in a 2023 European Policies Initiative (EUPI) and Open Society Institute (OSI) study, the Expanded Media Literacy Index, measuring the potential resilience of 41 European countries and six countries outside Europe to "fake news" and manipulative information.

The GNCC and CSOs offer media literacy resources and diverse trainings. In 2023, a joint project of the GNCC, Georgia's Ministry of Education and Science, and UNICEF, in partnership with the Teachers' Professional Development Centre, trained hundreds of teachers in media literacy. Media literacy questions are also part of teachers' certification exams.

> **Some media outlets and journalists demonstrate a strong awareness of digital safety, but it is not widely practiced.**

One panelist who works on media literacy issues said that the majority of available training targets younger audiences. In practice, media literacy is not taught in all subjects nor understood as a crosscutting skill at any education level, the panelist explained, stressing the need to measure the effectiveness of diverse training efforts carried out by different stakeholders.

The GNCC, which officially is the main policymaking body on media literacy, does not have a mandate to direct other relevant actors such as the Ministry of Education and Science on media literacy instruction in the country, a panelist stressed. They added that the government does not view media and digital literacy as a comprehensive, overarching vision that should be integrated into education and state security.

The GNCC's Media Academy runs the media criticism platform Mediacritic.ge, which is supposed to be a media literacy tool. CSOs and independent experts, however, have long criticized it as a tool for

government propaganda. Recently, the platform started criticizing Western actors, media, and politicians, a panelist said.

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

Journalists, civil activists, NGOs, and the public have platforms to exercise their freedom of expression offline and online. However, critical journalists and civil activists run the risk of consequences such as slander, smear campaigns, and violence.

In September and October 2023, the SSSG accused an activist organization, the Center for Applied Non-Violent Actions and Strategies (CANVAS) Georgia, of allegedly plotting an organized conspiracy to overthrow the current government after the organization held a USAID-funded training. The SSSG released video footage claiming it depicted incriminating evidence against CANVAS Georgia and its three Serbian partners and subsequently questioned the organization's staff. USAID released a statement in its defense and CANVAS Georgia's official statement claimed the SSSG targeted its director after he participated in protests against the draft law on "foreign agents." High-ranking government officials spoke out against CANVAS Georgia, which one of the panelists believes might have "a chilling effect" on NGO work because it could cause trust issues with trainings supported by Western donors, including USAID.

The Ministry of Internal Affairs reported detaining 146 people during the massive protests against the "foreign agents" law in March, including 21-year-old demonstrator Lasare Grigoriadisi for allegedly assaulting a police officer and destroying property. As of the end of 2023, Grigoriadisi was the only person still in custody in connection with the protests. Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili claimed the protests were started by "satanists" funded by the US.

In June, police arrested well-known NGO representatives and fined them for hooliganism for holding banners and wearing T-shirts with

an altered version of Prime Minister Garibashvili's name to evoke a crude association. The protest was to support Grigoriadisi's case. Watchdog organizations released a statement calling the policy action a "gross interference with the freedom of expression" and a violation of constitutional rights.

People can express themselves more freely on social networks, but these discussions often devolve into insults, while some panelists expressed concerns about the impact of bots and trolls.

> **"Critical journalists and civil activists run the risk of consequences such as slander, smear campaigns, and violence.**

Platforms for public debates such as city councils exist. One panelist said that citizens do not request public information or participate in public discussion in many municipalities. "People understand that the decisions are not made at the local government level but are highly centralized," they explained. "Therefore, they do not feel that their activity will yield any results."

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

Media outlets study online audiences using free resources such as Google and social media analytics, but in a constantly changing and complex information environment, Georgian online media lack access to tools to effectively measure audiences and build models based on user needs.

As in previous years, panelists complained about the two broadcasting audience measurement companies which provide confusing and often contradictory data. Nielsen's licensee TVMR and Kantar Media's licensee Tri Media Intelligence (TMI) offer audience data for national television broadcasters, although for years, media industry representatives have criticized the Kantar Media Group for serving the interest of the ruling party. Last year, TMI decided to stop measuring regional media. One panelist explained that the only regional measurement data available now is for TV 25 in Adjara, which came following a request from the Adjara Public Broadcaster. "This creates a huge gap in knowledge, which
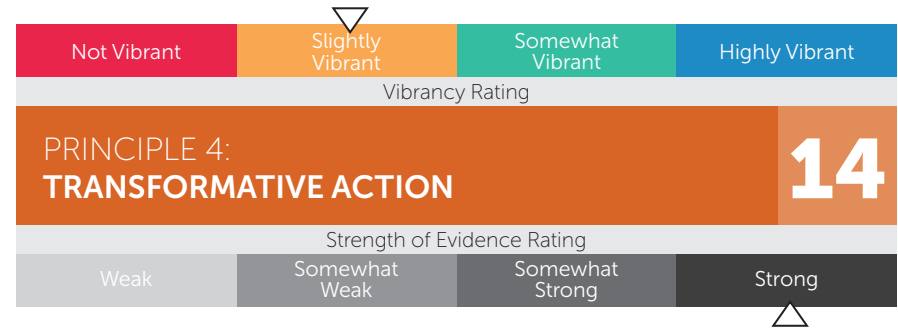
a TV station needs from a client," the panelist said. Print media are not measured, and only a few radio stations carry out audience studies, inconsistently.

Independent, quality media outlets foster audience engagement by ensuring open feedback processes are in place, such as moderated online comment sections and letters to the editor, ensuring the interests of their audiences are heard and considered. Panelists affirmed that these outlets build trust with their audiences by ensuring transparency in authorship and reporting methods and by promptly publishing corrections as needed, which fosters a strong and enduring connection. Indigo Magazine, for example, organizes meetings with its readers to understand their needs and concerns and to gather feedback on its content and make modifications as needed.

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

Two community radio stations function in regions with significant ethnic Armenian and Azerbaijani populations, Radio NOR and Radio Marneuli, which panelists agreed have quality content. A third community radio, Radio Way in Pankisi Gorge, has faced tension between Pankisi Gorge locals and its founder, who threatened to use force against journalists if they continued to air reports critical of the government and State Security Service operations in the region. Radio Way journalists alleged that the Georgian Dream and the SSSG stirred up the turmoil. One panelist believes that the lack of a community radio will impact regional security. "During crises, be it environmental or other types of crises, availability of critical infrastructure, especially in the cross-border region, is crucial," a panelist said. A fourth community broadcaster, Radio Mozaika in Gori, abandoned its license and switched to commercial status in 2023.

One panelist said that their media outlet serves the same purpose and values of community media, but without a formal status. The outlet produces content for their local audience, which includes a significant ethnic minority population.

Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant	Somewhat Vibrant	Highly Vibrant

Vibrancy Rating

PRINCIPLE 4: TRANSFORMATIVE ACTION	14

Strength of Evidence Rating

Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong	Strong

Panelists highlighted the persistent issue of a deeply polarized and politicized environment, which restricts society's access to unbiased information. They also criticized the government's exclusion of media and CSOs from the public policy decision-making process. Indicator 19, on the government's use of quality information to make policy decisions, and Indicator 20, on information supporting good governance and democratic rights, received the lowest scores, signaling an urgent need for attention to government accountability and support for democratic norms.

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

The panelists agreed that while a few unbiased quality media platforms exist online, television remains Georgia's top source of news. However, studies reveal that the public shows little trust in television, especially national broadcast media, which are highly polarized. According to a National Democratic Institute (NDI) poll from March 2023, 51 percent of Georgians say they do not trust any Georgian TV channels, a significant increase from 20 percent in 2019.

One panelist observed that Georgian society is divided into isolated bubbles with little inclination to engage with diverging perspectives. Panelists agreed that heightened media polarization deprives society of quality news and undermines fact-based discussions, as both pro-government and pro-opposition channels disseminate heavily biased content.

In particular, social media platforms are significantly polarized, with minimal exchange of information among people with different viewpoints. Instead of facilitating constructive dialogue, social media often reinforces existing opinions, exacerbated by frequent attacks from political trolls and bots reinforcing the government's narrative. Government trolls target controversial issues like LGBTQ+ rights, leading to distorted narratives, especially on platforms like Facebook, a panelist explained. Panelists agreed that societal polarization limits the exchange of diverse viewpoints, undermines trust in information, and does not foster fact-based societal discourse.

> **Government trolls target controversial issues like LGBTQ+ rights, leading to distorted narratives, especially on platforms like Facebook.**

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

Panelists agreed that when it comes to vitally important issues like Georgia's EU and NATO aspirations, Georgians reply more on quality information than propaganda and other manipulative content. "The March protest rallies [against the 'foreign agents' law] serve as a testament to people's trust in quality media," a panelist emphasized. The significant turnout, with hundreds of thousands of Georgians peacefully protesting against the government's attempt to enact the law, underscores the public's ability to critically evaluate information, recognize its importance for their future, and take decisive action, panelists said.

Despite the public's ability to critically evaluate information during crucial moments such as the March protests, panelists noted that some individuals maintain biases and accept information without criticism, especially across online and social media platforms. Media polarization and a tendency to align with information bubbles obstruct citizens' access to reliable information.

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

The panelists emphasized the crucial role of civil society in fostering robust democratic processes in Georgia by raising awareness of critical issues, providing consultancy, training, and research, and collaborating with government entities. However, panelists acknowledged that the impact of CSOs on democratic processes has weakened amid the government's attempts to discredit the civil society sector, with the draft law on "foreign agents" highlighting this trend.

One panelist noted that the protests against the bill illustrate the extent to which the public is unaware of the contributions of the civil society sector. Consequently, an increase in the circulation of information on democratic achievements in Georgia and the role of CSOs in this process on various platforms signal a significant shift towards bridging the gap between the civil sector and the public.

Panelists highlighted the ongoing collaboration between media and NGOs, particularly in content production, but said that the practice of outlets publishing social advertisements—a type of advertising legally defined as promoting public good and the achievement of charitable goals—for free should be changed to have CSOs provide compensation. Media representatives argued that this move would help the financially struggling critical media outlets. One panelist, however, said this change would be difficult because the law mandates that media provide free social ads.

A number of NGOs work to counter manipulative information in Georgia. The Media Development Foundation, ISFED, and Georgian Reforms Associates, for example, run fact-checking projects. In addition, the Information Integrity Coalition, which includes 17 NGOs, aims to "monitor disinformation sources, actors, and narratives and effectively respond to these challenges."

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

The government's already weak cooperation with the media and civil society sector deteriorated further in 2023, marked by a growing trend of political interference such as not notifying critical media outlets about press briefings, selectively engaging only with pro-government media, avoiding talk shows with critical media, and abstaining from public debates. In addition, in January, the government revised its Procedure for Accrediting Mass Media Representatives, which further restricts government information access for critical media representatives, intensifying the legislature's restrictions on media access. According to a statement from Transparency International Georgia, the government disregards the core values and principles of the international Open Government Partnership (OGP) by frequently harassing critical media and civil society organizations.

Panelists asserted that the government creates an artificial political agenda, driven by manipulative information and tactics. This approach undermines the ability to obtain quality information and sidelines cooperation between the media and the civil society sectors. One of the panelists described a case when the government claimed on its official homepage that a document outlining the state strategy on adopting nine conditions required for EU status was approved even though it was still under review. "When I requested the document through a public information request, each ministry redirected me to one another," the panelist said.

Stakeholders are rarely included in drafting laws or amendments, highlighting a failure in government accountability, according to the panelists. Political discourse and debate rarely include references to evidence and facts, particularly among ruling party representatives whose rhetoric is based on discrediting their opponents.

> **When the media uncovers violations, the government's response often hinges on the political influence of the individuals involved and their position within the political hierarchy.**

Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic norms.

Despite the media's efforts to hold the government accountable for its actions, the state does not respond appropriately. For example, in September, TV Pirveli aired an investigative story revealing that the prime minister was using a state-owned airplane to fly his son from Tbilisi to Munich on his way to a university in the United States. Although the story compelled the prime minister to explain himself and claim that the funding came from his father, some panelists noted that the exposé did not result in his resignation, as might be the norm in a democratic country. As panelists explained, instead of appropriately addressing revelations of corruption, the government resorts to attacking media and its sources in an attempt to discredit them, which shifts the focus away from the issue of corruption.

When the media uncovers violations, the government's response often hinges on the political influence of the individuals involved and their position within the political hierarchy. In one notable case, the government attempted to shield Georgia's former prosecutor general, Otar Partskhaladze, from US sanctions for assisting the Kremlin in exerting "malign influence" in Georgia. Panelists noted that if Partskhaladze had been an ordinary businessman, he would most likely have faced detention, but was instead protected due to his political affiliations. The National Bank of Georgia even altered its compliance rules regarding US sanctions to prevent the freezing of the ex-official's assets.

Despite the availability of quality information, there is no evidence that the government adequately responds to criticism regarding abuse of power by law enforcement. For example, the Public Defender of Georgia's 2023 report emphasized that "unjustified cases of use of force [by law enforcement] became the main reason for the escalation…" during protests against the "foreign agents" law.

The Public Defender also noted the violent disruption of the Tbilisi Pride festival on July 8, 2023, the shortcomings in investigating and prosecuting hate crimes, and the neglect of LGBTQ+ rights in the new national human rights strategy. A few weeks before the incident, the prime minister said in a public address that he "is against the so-called LGBT propaganda in kindergartens and schools…" The report highlighted the violence of far-right groups, both in public and private, against the LGBTQ+ community. Furthermore, violence against media workers during Tbilisi Pride in July 2021 has still not been adequately investigated and the perpetrators not charged, despite reports and investigations conducted by civil society organizations and the Public Defender.

The panelists observed that while quality information in Georgia is important, it is unlikely to independently enhance government accountability. Media activism alone falls short in achieving this objective. Panelists added that the diminishing accountability of the government places greater responsibility on civil society and media. Amid the ruling party's intensive disinformation campaign in 2023, citizens can expect even more aggressive efforts ahead of the 2024 elections. The government disregards critical and independent media, and NGOs, communicates exclusively with pro-government outlets, and ignores recommendations from international organizations and NGOs.

Due to the sensitive media environment, panelists in the Georgia study will remain anonymous.
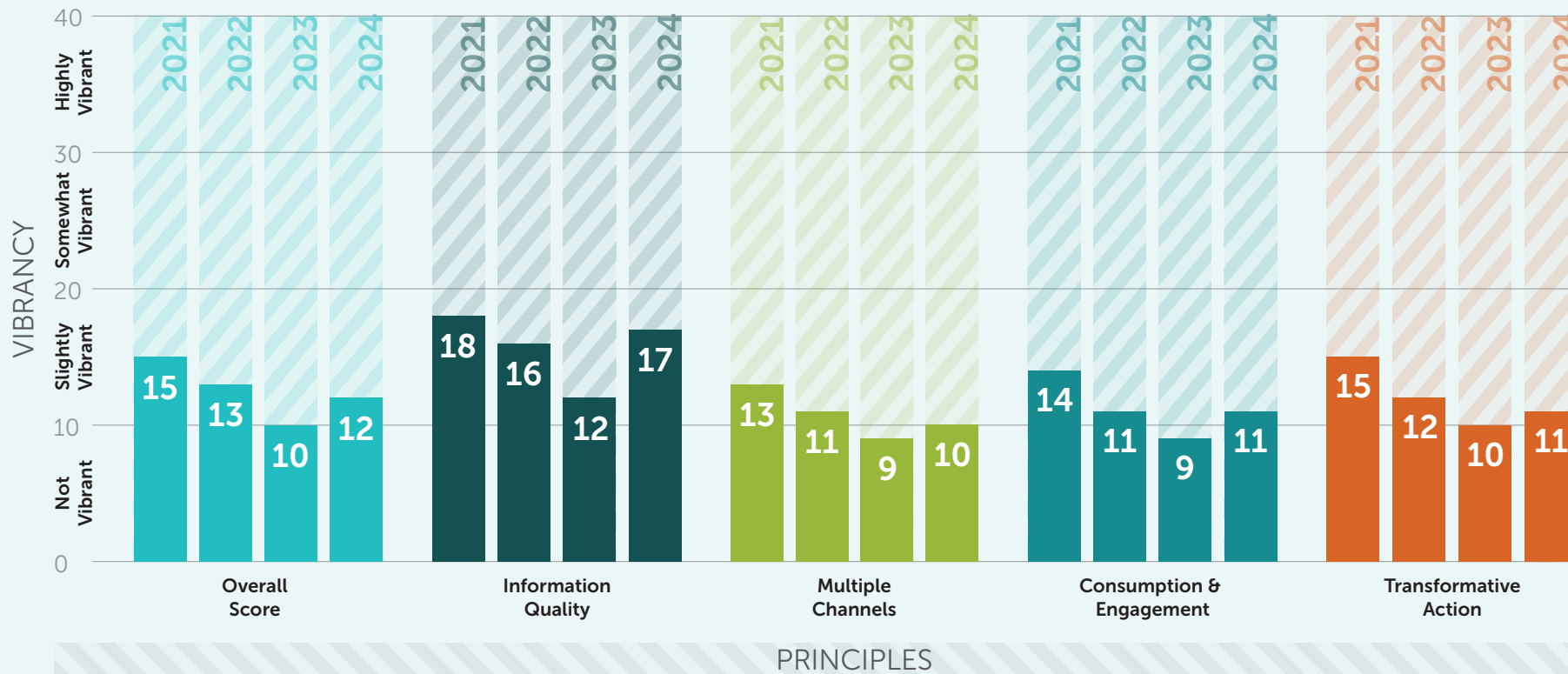
RUSSIA & WESTERN EURASIA

BELARUS

Vibrant
Information
Barometer

2 0 2 4

VIBRANCY

Overall Score
- 2021: 15
- 2022: 13
- 2023: 10
- 2024: 12

Information Quality
- 2021: 18
- 2022: 16
- 2023: 12
- 2024: 17

Multiple Channels
- 2021: 13
- 2022: 11
- 2023: 9
- 2024: 10

Consumption & Engagement
- 2021: 14
- 2022: 11
- 2023: 9
- 2024: 11

Transformative Action
- 2021: 15
- 2022: 12
- 2023: 10
- 2024: 11

PRINCIPLES

Not Vibrant (0-10): Quality information is extremely limited in this country. The vast majority of it is not editorially independent, not based on facts, or it is intended to harm. People do not have the rights, means, or capacity to access a wide range of information; they do not recognize or reject misinformation; and they cannot or do not make choices on what types of information they want to engage with.

Slightly Vibrant (11-20): Quality information is available on a few topics or geographies in this country, but not all. While some information is editorially independent, there is still a significant amount of misinformation, malinformation, and hate speech in circulation, and it does influence public discourse. Most people do not recognize or reject misinformation.

Somewhat Vibrant (21-30): Quality information is available in this country and most of it is editorially independent, based on facts, and not intended to harm. Most people have the rights, means, and capacity to access a wide range of information, although some do not. Most people recognize and reject misinformation, although some do not.

Highly Vibrant (31-40): Quality information is widely available in this country. People have the rights, means, and capacity to access a wide range of information; they recognize and reject misinformation.

Highly Vibrant

Somewhat Vibrant

Slightly Vibrant

Not Vibrant

OVERALL
SCORE

12

In 2023, Belarus experienced a notable decline in media freedoms and an escalation of government repressions. Long recognized as one of Europe's most dangerous countries for journalists, Belarus continued its crackdown on media, which has intensified since the Russian government's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Arbitrary arrests of reporters, bloggers, and activists surged, with many receiving lengthy prison sentences. At the end of 2023, 34 Belarusian journalists and three media workers were detained due to their professional activities. According to the Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ), around 400 journalists have been forced into exile, and those remaining in the country have to work clandestinely.

The Belarusian authorities ramped up suppression of critical online voices by closing independent media outlets and labeling them as "extremist" or "terrorist." The state also bolstered the use of propaganda and disinformation amid the Russian invasion of Ukraine, further manipulating the online information space. New legislation introduced harsh penalties for online activism, criminalizing it as actions "discrediting the army and breaching state secrets," and even extending the death penalty to state officials convicted of high treason. Belarusian security forces conducted raids, employed torture, and released forced confession videos to silence dissent. These measures, along with widespread website blockages, have severely curtailed free expression and alternative information flow in Belarus.

However, heightened repression also made Belarusian independent media more resilient and spurred some notable investigative reporting this year, ironically catalyzing innovation, collaboration, and expanded reach. Belarusian journalists were remarkably adaptable, finding new ways to gather and report information and forging new relationships with international organizations, such as the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) and the International Consortium

of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ). The growing recognition of Belarusian journalists' work on the global stage has likely allowed them increased influence and protection for those operating abroad. At the same time, the proliferation of new media platforms has created more opportunities to engage with audiences in Belarus. Within Belarus, however, genuine journalism is suppressed in favor of propaganda outlets.

The overall score for Belarus improved by two points in this year's study thanks largely to the contributions of Belarusian independent journalism in exile, particularly in Principle 1 (Information Quality), which saw a five-point increase from last year. Principle 2 (Multiple Channels), although improving by one point, scored the lowest in the study, with a disparity between moderate success in access to information via VPN tools and severe limitations in the right to create and share information. Principle 3 (Information Consumption and Engagement) improved by two points, but with a notable difference between reasonable media engagement and poor information engagement, indicating a need for a balanced approach to audience interaction and content production. Principle 4 (Transformative Action) increased by one point but remained relatively low, underscoring the limited impact of exiled media on governance and human rights within Belarus.

This analysis, conducted exclusively by panelists from independent media outside Belarus, underscores the stark contrast between the repressive state-controlled media within the country and the free press operating abroad. The improved scores are a testament to the resilience and integrity of exiled Belarusian journalists, rather than an indication of progress in Belarus's internal media environment. The results also underscore the continued need for external funding and collaborations to enhance Belarusian audience interaction and engagement with alternative information sources.

Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant	Somewhat Vibrant	Highly Vibrant

Vibrancy Rating

PRINCIPLE 1:
INFORMATION QUALITY

17

Strength of Evidence Rating

Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong	Strong
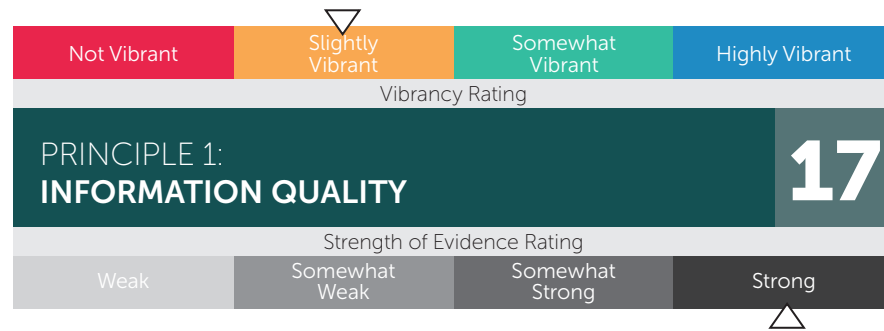
In 2023, Belarusian media in exile registered a modest improvement in the quality of information they provide, leading to a five-point increase increasing from 12 in 2022 to 17. The indicators assessing the availability of quality information and inclusivity and diversity of content scored the highest, a moderate achievement that suggests commendable efforts to produce accurate information and diverse content but also highlights significant ongoing challenges. These scores reflect steady, albeit limited, improvement in the quality and inclusiveness of media content.

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

As Belarusian media adapt to exile in countries including Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, Ukraine, and Georgia, they are constantly looking for ways to produce quality information for audiences back home and abroad. They have embraced a digital-first approach, using online tools for editorial coordination and to overcome the logistical hurdles of not having a central office and managing different time zones. Tools like virtual private networks (VPNs) and mobile apps, which help evade Belarusian censorship, have turned the necessity of going digital into a core strength.

This transition has also involved re-registering media operations and ensuring staff are legally recognized in their new countries, while preparing for potential financial challenges, including periods without pay and seeking new sources of funding. Exiled Belarusian media depend almost entirely on funding from governments and foundations, which has ebbed as they increasingly compete for the same support as their Russian and Ukrainian counterparts.

On the other hand, these exiled outlets have a wealth of training opportunities available to them, typically from international organizations, including a "boot camp" in Prague, the International Press Institute's Local News Accelerator, and training in economics journalism, podcasting, and data analytics, as well as scholarships from various institutions abroad. Meanwhile, Belarusian State University's journalism school has eliminated admissions for paying students in favor of those sponsored by the state, reflecting Information Minister Vladimir Pertsov's characterization of journalism students as "bayonets in the information war."

Independent Belarusian media uphold standards far above those of state-affiliated outlets. With a dedication to professional journalism amid government restrictions and even the criminalization of their content, independent organizations such as Zerkalo, Euroradio, and RFE/RL consistently score well in the respected Media IQ monitoring project, conducted by the Belarusian Press Club working from Poland. In contrast, state-owned channels, such as STV, Belarus One, and ONT, lean heavily into government propaganda.

Media IQ cited confusion between facts and opinions as the most prevalent problem in news reporting, present in 63 percent of cases it reviewed in the first half of 2023, followed by incomplete information at 53 percent. Independent media generally avoided these pitfalls, although Media IQ found that Belsat did not distinguish fact from opinion in more than 45 percent of the reports monitored.

Belarusian journalists are increasingly mounting serious investigations, often in partnership with global organizations such as the Organized Crime and Corruption Project (OCCRP) and the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ). This shift from traditional news reporting is not just a tactical response to the difficulties of reporting from exile and securing financial support, but also a response to an increasing public appetite for a better grasp of the intricate

challenges confronting Belarus. Substantial breaches of government networks by the opposition Cyber Partisans hacktivist collective have given independent journalists a wealth of information, facilitating investigations that were previously impossible. This collaboration between independent journalists and activists is a novel phenomenon in Belarusian media, reflecting the adaptive strategies employed to combat state propaganda and censorship.

Among the exposés that the Belarusian Investigative Center (BIC), working with the OCCRP and ICIJ, published in 2023 were revelations that Alexander Shakutin, an associate of President Alyaksandr Lukashenka, had evaded EU and US import sanctions against Russia, resulting in his inclusion on the US sanctions list; that Ukrainian children were being forcibly taken to Russia and Belarus, prompting the European Parliament to call for Lukashenka's arrest; that the Belarusian Red Cross had engaged in financial misconduct; and that some companies in the EU were importing Belarusian timber in violation of sanctions, prompting Lithuanian authorities to investigate nine businesses.

Simultaneously, 2023 saw vibrant growth in the Belarusian digital media landscape. New YouTube programs such as Plan B, Bureau, Night with Chaly, Para, and Free offer a diverse range of content, from analytical discussions to investigations. Additionally, the rising popularity of entertainment YouTube channels such as Zaraz, Chinchinchannel, and many others indicates a growing demand for varied, nonpolitical content.

Alongside these achievements, however, Belarusian journalists in exile face enormous challenges simply reporting the news and maintaining standards. Panelists said that media deemed "extremist" by the government cannot get information from state agencies. As a result, independent journalists often must use state-run media sources or pose as ordinary Belarusians to interact with government bodies. This restricted access to information complicates fact-checking, potentially resulting in the dissemination of inaccurate content. Without direct access to sources and statistics from within Belarus, exiled media also struggle to deliver in-depth analysis, to separate facts and opinions, and to provide comprehensive, on-the-ground reporting.

Further complicating the media landscape in 2023 was the rise of media outlets such as Tochka.by and Smartpress, which position themselves as neutral sources for those tired of negative, political news, yet reprint items from state media, along with many new amateur media players and bloggers who take a more aggressive stance against the state, often resorting to counterpropaganda tactics. Panelists said this trend has brought down ethical standards throughout the broader alternative Belarusian media.

Additionally, journalists in exile often rely on a limited pool of experts, which can lead to a narrow range of perspectives, compounded by the inability to safely access and include opinions from ordinary people within Belarus. "We used to rely on local experts and ordinary Belarusians for our stories," one panelist said. "But now, we're mostly limited to the voices of those who have left Belarus, as many are afraid of repercussions for their families if they speak out."

A heavy reliance on donors, who have their own priorities, also narrows the scope of coverage for Belarus's independent media, making it difficult to produce entertainment or content for or about women and children.

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

The ferocious crackdown on independent media in Belarus, the third most frequent jailer of journalists worldwide, has driven almost all nonstate media from the country, frustrating their efforts to get accurate information and check facts and making it impossible for them to attend events or interact with officials, experts, and ordinary citizens. Meanwhile, government information is often misleading or withheld.

Panelists said that prior to 2020, verification was more straightforward, with many sources available from various government bodies. Today, however, few want to risk engaging with independent "extremist" media by commenting, subscribing, sharing, or even liking, which are criminal offenses.

"As someone labeled a 'terrorist,' like my colleagues, I have to be cautious with the information I use," an editor on the panel said. "Any outreach to our audience or experts can endanger them in Belarus. Consequently, we often have to rely on unconfirmed data or wait for natural confirmation, given the risks associated with our 'extremist' status."

The editorial teams mostly maintain prior networks of verified observers and contributors to collect information. Panelists from NEXTA, an online outlet operating from Poland, said approximately 80 percent of their audience lives in Belarus, with some individuals actively sending in new information. The team uses a range of verification methods, including online searches for photo and video verification and original sources. Still, they acknowledge the growing difficulty in directly covering stories from Belarus.

Meanwhile, well-funded state media propagate manipulated or misleading information, adding another layer of complexity and leading independent media to inadvertently amplify these falsehoods due to challenges in verification. Despite these hurdles, journalists strive to correct errors once identified.

Journalists struggling with unconfirmed information or delayed verification can turn to Fakeby.org, launched in 2020 by the International Strategic Action Network for Security (iSANS), an expert group that works to counter hybrid threats to democracy or the rule of law in Eurasia. The platform categorizes major instances of manipulated information in Belarusian propaganda, helping journalists to spot and counteract them. iSANS has [identified](#) 25 key propaganda topics, including false portrayals of the war in Ukraine, denigrating Belarus's democratic neighbors, and misrepresenting the US and EU.

The obstacles facing Belarusian independent media are steering them toward a decentralized, network-based model of journalism that relies on technology and community-sourced information while aiming to uphold rigorous journalism standards.

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

Belarusian journalists in exile focus primarily on maintaining quality journalism and professional standards, aiming to use information as a tool for positive change. Meanwhile, state propaganda uses hate speech and threats aiming to [provoke](#) hostility, primarily at critics of the government, European diplomats, independent media, and citizens deemed disloyal, echoing the tactics of the Russian media that are widely broadcast in Belarus. To counter this onslaught, independent media diligently monitor their own social networks, filtering out hostile comments. Social media algorithms aid this process by detecting hate speech and halting the spread of manipulated information.

The state media's biased reporting, particularly on religious, gender, and ethnic issues, often sparks intense criticism from journalists abroad but brings no repercussions within Belarus, as state funding continues to support these channels. Additionally, Telegram channels with ties to the security forces and official propaganda outlets foster animosity toward various groups, including LGBTQ+ people, Poles, so-called "Anglo-Saxons" (the United States and United Kingdom), Catholics, Protestants, and Belarusians abroad.

Media IQ notes that journalists and experts in Belarusian state media consistently use dehumanizing rhetoric and justify violence against dissenters. For instance, a propagandist on the STV state television channel has described law enforcement as "modest, simple guys" who "mercilessly, harshly deal with all traitors of the Motherland," while a political analyst has likened dissidents to "weeds" that need to be "pulled out."

> " **Belarusian journalists in exile face enormous challenges simply reporting the news and maintaining standards. Panelists said that media deemed "extremist" by the government cannot get information from state agencies.**

The Belarusian government also uses information to bolster its power, depicting the deployment of military forces such as Russia's Wagner Group in Belarus as a national security measure. It also exaggerates external threats to build public support for Lukashenka and justify an increasing Russian military presence, including nuclear weapons deployment. In a similar vein, the Belarusian state media's portrayal of Poland oscillates between openness to post-election dialogue, on the one hand, to depicting Polish policies as historically unfriendly on the other.

> " **The state media's biased reporting, particularly on religious, gender, and ethnic issues, often sparks intense criticism from journalists abroad but brings no repercussions within Belarus, as state funding continues to support these channels.**

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

Content in Belarus is becoming narrower and less diverse. With state policies and media so deeply entwined with those in Russia, the Belarusian language itself has long been an embattled signifier of opposition, at risk of marginalization. Further, both independent and state media adopt traditional ideas of gender roles and identity. Aside from the democratic opposition, most marginalized groups in Belarus lack the funding, staffing, or skills to make themselves heard.

Though Russian-language content dominates mainstream media, several YouTube channels, including a particularly popular video blog on Belarusian culture, provide wide-ranging, Belarusian-language content. Independent media are increasingly using the Belarusian language, partly to distance themselves from Russian media since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

On issues of gender, a 2023 Media IQ study of state and independent outlets found little coverage and said both state-affiliated and independent media tend to perpetuate traditional gender stereotypes. Television channels, regardless of their affiliation, displayed a higher interest in gender matters than other media. The study also highlighted a disproportionate representation of male speakers in the media—

men were featured as subjects or experts three times more frequently than women. Male experts were nearly seven times more likely to be portrayed as professionals rather than as individuals sharing personal experiences.

The most pronounced patriarchal stereotypes are found in state-run media's coverage of government policies. Lukashenka has said that nontraditional and childless families threaten state stability and has called male same-sex relationships a "gross perversion." Journalists for Tolerance (J4T), which monitors hate speech, found that 22 of 28 independent and state-owned outlets reported on LGBTQ+ issues at least once from January to October 2023. A narrow majority of those reports, 51 percent, used appropriate language, but even they sometimes veered into inciting hostility.

Coverage of ethnic and religious minorities in state media is limited. In 2023, Belarusian nonstate media's religious content strongly emphasized the country's majority Christian denominations, Orthodox and Catholic. For Orthodox believers, there is priest and vlogger Alexander Kuhta's "Batushka Responds," while Catholics can watch priest Ksiondz Barok's YouTube channel and stream events on Catholic.by's channel, among others. Smaller religious communities such as Judaism and Islam, while not ignored, receive less visibility.
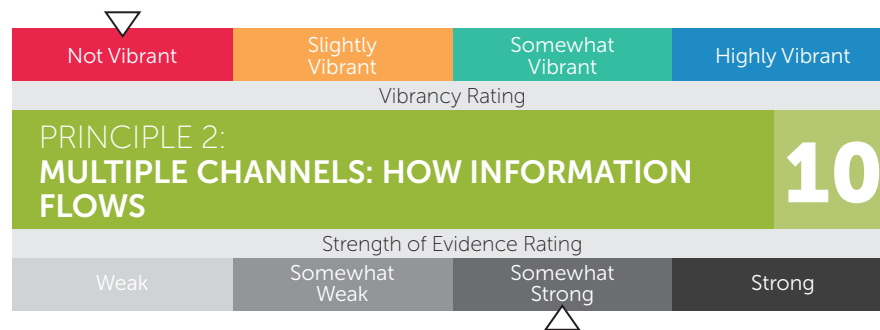
Among other marginalized communities, many Belarusians still seem interested in reports on political prisoners, even as coverage of them declines, according to a Media IQ analysis of Belarusian Telegram channels in the third quarter of 2023. Coverage appears mostly on a few key channels, notably the government-friendly Telegram channels ZhS Premium and Yellow Plums, which disparage the prisoners, as well as independent Belsat TV.

Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced.

In Belarus, state funding goes to pro-government media, while businesses that advertise in exiled independent media risk criminal prosecution. As a result, independent journalists, particularly those abroad serving Belarusian audiences, are heavily reliant on donors, in competition with Ukrainian and Russian liberal media also fleeing repression and war. This predicament forces Belarusian journalists to constantly validate their critical role in countering state propaganda.

Even the most successful of the exiled news organizations are far from financially self-sufficient. Life in the EU, with its higher taxes and cost of living, has compounded these financial challenges. Meanwhile, media targeting audiences in Belarus are in a catch-22: they get little interest from advertisers in Poland or Lithuania, but a shift in focus to secure funding from these advertisers would lead to an audience loss in Belarus, raising questions about the purpose of their existence. In this bind, these media require assistance from the West to keep going.

The donor-based funding model, which often emphasizes short-term, results-oriented projects, further limits these journalists. Small editorial teams are trapped in a cycle of addressing immediate issues, unable to delve into broader, more diverse topics and projects. The challenges became clear last year, as several prominent exiled Belarusian media, notably Radio BA, The Village Belarus, Dzejaslou, and KYKY.org, shut down. By year's end, Reform.by narrowly avoided closure with the help of 17,000 EUR ($18,500) raised by its readers.

Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant	Somewhat Vibrant	Highly Vibrant

Vibrancy Rating

PRINCIPLE 2: MULTIPLE CHANNELS: HOW INFORMATION FLOWS	10

Strength of Evidence Rating

Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong	Strong

The score for this principle rose one point from the previous year, but with notable variation within its indicators. Access to information scored relatively high, while rights to create and share information scored the lowest, emphasizing the government's chokehold over what journalists can report. Although independent media in exile have been adaptable and resilient, especially in the digital realm, the media environment within Belarus remains severely constricted and polarized.

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

In Belarus, the constitution nominally guarantees freedom of speech and the press, but this means little in practice. The government severely restricts these freedoms through legislation broadly defining "extremism" and "terrorism," applying these labels arbitrarily. The resulting harsh penalties include long prison sentences for journalists. In the digital sphere, the government uses extensive surveillance and censorship, all of which forces independent media to either operate in exile or brave severe repression.

In 2023, the country continued its steady slide in global press freedom indexes. An ongoing crackdown saw 46 journalists detained, 34 searches and inspections, and at least 16 administrative arrests, according to the Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ). Officials labeled 21 media organizations and 33 journalists as "extremist" and another 12 journalists as "terrorists." As of December 2023, there were 37 journalists and media workers detained in Belarus.

Further, the BAJ reported approximately 700 pieces of content deemed "extremist" in the first half of 2023 and 18 media outlets—including Belsat TV, RFE/RL, and BelaPAN, along with the BAJ itself and the Belarusian Investigative Center—branded as "extremist" organizations. Simultaneously, the Belarusian government has escalated its online censorship, blocking more than 9,000 websites. Notably, officials cut off access to YouTube on New Year's Eve 2023 during a broadcast by opposition leader Svetlana Tsikhanouskaya and blocked access to the investigative media site Bureau Media shortly after it posted an exposé of wrongdoing by the Belarusian Red Cross's top management.

Wielding its control over the digital infrastructure and the regulatory process, the Belarusian government systematically pressures ICT providers to block "extremist" websites and platforms, severely restricting public access to diverse information sources. Through entities such as Beltelecom, the state-owned provider, and the National Center for Traffic Exchange, the government keeps a tight grip on internet gateways, enabling direct surveillance, content filtering, and personal-data harvesting, effectively isolating independent media.

To foil potential digital blocking, including on YouTube, Belsat has introduced a mobile app and begun broadcasting via Telegram, which has emerged as a key information source, albeit sometimes a conduit for manipulated information, essentially mirroring YouTube's content. The platform's search-friendly nature and use of chatbots for conducting anonymous surveys are effective tools for gathering and disseminating information.

Panelists stressed the importance of being able to work anonymously, as in the case of the animated Sad Kolenka YouTube channel. A common practice is to establish a new digital platform not yet deemed "extremist," although panelists said even this strategy does not guarantee safety.

> **The Belarusian government systematically pressures ICT providers to block "extremist" websites and platforms, severely restricting public access to diverse information sources.**

Prosecutors accused more than 3,500 people of participating in "extremist activities" in 2023.

Among them, Yana Pinchuk received a 12-year prison sentence for her role in managing the Vitebsk97% Telegram channel and blogger Mykola Klimovich faced a year's imprisonment, notably for a social media reaction, before dying in custody under unclear circumstances. Media professionals Maryna Zolatava and Liudmila Chekina each received 12-year sentences for "inciting hatred" and advocating sanctions, among many other examples.

Regional newspapers such as *Intex-press* and *Info-Courier* faced harsh crackdowns in 2023, including detentions and being labeled "extremist," leading to their eventual shutdown, the BAJ reported. In Svetlogorsk, the private television and radio company Ranak was searched and later designated an "extremist" organization. Its staff faced administrative prosecution, and criminal charges were brought against three of its journalists.

Belsat panelists noted a disturbing new development, with some of their former staff journalists being imprisoned for their previous work with the network. As of November 2023, 13 current or former Belsat employees were incarcerated in Belarus due to this association.

This comprehensive crackdown compels journalists in the country to steer clear of topics such as politics, economics, and the war in Ukraine, narrowing the scope for public discourse.

Belarusians speaking or writing on sensitive topics not only face legal repercussions but also social ostracism, professional barriers, and financial penalties, such as fines and account freezing.

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

Belarus boasts high internet penetration and cutting-edge technology. As of late 2022, nearly 90 percent of Belarusians use the internet thanks to extensive coverage, low prices, and advanced mobile connectivity, gradually bridging the digital divide between urban and rural areas. Belarus ranks among the countries with the most affordable internet access, with costs for mobile and fixed broadband data remaining low relative to income. Moreover, 2G and 3G networks blanket almost the entire country, and 4G services reach more than 80 percent of the territory. Trials for 5G networks are also underway.

As of January 2023, 4.27 million people in Belarus, about 45 percent of the population, used social media. Platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, VK, and Telegram have caught on by offering diverse and engaging content, with TikTok particularly popular with young people.

Nevertheless, this easy access to technology falls well short of meeting most people's information needs, given stringent state censorship. This control includes suppression of media in nondominant languages, particularly Belarusian, which the government often links to opposition groups. Moreover, the specific ICT needs of vulnerable groups such as people with disabilities are not adequately met, with essential adaptations such as screen readers or simplified interfaces in scarce supply. Nonliterate individuals also face challenges, as visual and audio content—crucial for their engagement with the digital world—is also subject to censorship. The government's chokehold on media also serves to restrict information for vulnerable or politically sensitive groups, such as the LGBTQ+ community, Catholics (due to association with the West), and ethnic Poles.

Disparities in access also persist. Urban residents are more likely to have internet access than those in rural regions, and women are more likely to go online than men, according to 2022 government statistics. Belarusian women's internet usage rate exceeds the averages of their counterparts in the EU and Commonwealth of Independent States, according to Freedom House.

In the event of disruptions of one form of telecommunications infrastructure, such as television, Belarusians do have alternative means to access information through the internet, which, despite heavy censorship, remains a vital alternative information source, especially given the availability and use of mobile devices. Radio, though not as dominant as the internet, provides an additional layer of redundancy for receiving information, particularly in more remote areas where internet access might be less reliable.

However, these channels can be compromised by government interference such as internet throttling or shutdowns during periods of political tension, making virtual private networks (VPNs) crucial for Belarusians seeking unrestricted internet access. Exiled media use digital tools, including mobile applications and Telegram channels, to navigate around blocked websites.

> **Information that comes via state media is carefully stage-managed. A 2023 presidential decree obliges state-owned outlets to consistently showcase examples of the government solving problems.**

For instance, following the example of Belsat TV, Malanka Media's Telegram channel has introduced an app that allows users in Belarus to access its content without the need for a VPN and is poised to expand its reach through satellite broadcasting this year, thus "overcoming the financial constraints typically associated with servers or streaming," said one panelist, a Malanka representative.

Malanka Media is also spearheading the development of a streaming platform for exiled Belarusian media, particularly in the face of potential shutdowns of platforms such as YouTube. Its offerings will be diverse and will include content from Euroradio, among others. Once launched, Malanka will invite other independent media outlets to join it, the panelist said.

Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for government information.

The constitution and laws of Belarus ostensibly protect freedom of expression and access to public information. In practice, however, these laws are superseded by other, conflicting legislation on the control of information. For instance, officials frequently cite national security, anti-extremism, or data protection laws to restrict access or classify information as state secrets. The information provided is often delayed or incomplete.

Information that comes via state media is carefully stage-managed. A 2023 presidential decree obliges state-owned outlets to consistently showcase examples of the government solving problems. Conversely, when an outlet reports on an outstanding problem or issue, it is required to notify the relevant state agency, essentially allowing the agency to get ahead of the issue.

Belarusian state bodies and officials often shun independent media. A 2023 decree by the Council of Ministers makes it more difficult for independent journalists to get information from Belarusian officials, as it allows officials to ignore anonymous calls and shut down conversations deemed detrimental to the country's image. Revised protocols for direct phone-line communications now require callers to disclose their full name, patronymic (if applicable), and address before officials can respond.

Some panelists said that in seeking data for journalistic investigations, they must rely on indirect sources such as figures released at Lukashenka's meetings, requiring a time-consuming process of piecing together information. This method is necessary even for understanding broader economic trends, such as the impact of global price changes on local Belarusian exports. In a more transparent environment, direct statistical data would suffice, but in Belarus, it can take weeks or months for crucial information, such as the country's reports to international organizations like the WHO or other UN bodies, to be leaked or officially released.

Meanwhile, media struggle to cover other news, including courts and crime, due to limited access to local sources and the government's tight control over information. The result is an information vacuum even on online platforms that previously had abundant content in these areas and significant gaps in the public's knowledge of crime in Belarus.

Many people in Belarus are wary of seeking out government information that might not put the country in the best light, given the government's harsh treatment of its critics. State agencies have press offices and spokespeople, but their function is limited by the government's restrictive approach to information.

Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow.

The Belarusian government's determination to control the flow of information means that the country lacks ready access to diverse media. Although there is no law regulating concentration of media ownership, the state is a de facto monopoly, as government-owned or aligned media are the only outlets that do not face persecution and enjoy plentiful resources. Officials can use administrative methods to shut down media and place stringent controls on launching new outlets. In addition, the regulatory framework severely restricts foreign participation in the media sector, effectively barring foreigners from establishing or operating media outlets.

The advertising industry, too, has come under stricter scrutiny. Since 2022, ad distributors have been required to register with the government, and legislation pending at the end of 2023 would end an exemption for bloggers or influencers in an official attempt to ensure that any content producer who is deemed "extremist" is cut off from ad revenues within Belarus.

Belarus does not require disclosure of media ownership, nor are its broadcasting frequencies allotted through a transparent and fair process. It is also increasingly difficult to launch a new media organization in Belarus, with broader laws on "extremism" excluding more people from the process. License denials are an opaque, administrative process that cannot be challenged in the courts. Meanwhile, media regulations are

enforced as arbitrary tools of oppression against outlets that run afoul of the government.

Panelists lamented the absence of truly public media in Belarus. Although the country has so-called public-service media, they fall far short of international standards for news and information, with these government-controlled outlets functioning more as a propaganda arm. Independent monitoring, including by Media IQ, noted that these media frequently confuse fact with opinion.

Through entities such as the Operations and Analysis Center, which monitors online activity ostensibly for national security purposes, and the National Traffic Exchange Center, the government wields control over both state-owned and private internet service providers (ISPs). It has used "extremist" lists to block more than 9,000 internet identifiers, including websites and digital platforms such as NEXTA, election watchdog platforms Golos and Zubr, and various websites affiliated with human rights groups and opposition political movements, according to the Human Constanta rights organization. ISPs discriminate against some users based on factors including their identity, the type of content they produce, and their address or the addresses of sites they visit, employing methods such as IP filtering, DNS record disabling, and deep packet inspection.

Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.

In 2023, the only independent information channels serving Belarus were operating from abroad, struggling to be heard and stay afloat. Domestically, state media is a hegemon, dominating airtime, the internet, government resources, and advertising revenue. Approximately 60 million EUR ($65.3 million) went to state media in 2023. The government also introduced a special tax on most commercial advertising, with proceeds going to state media.
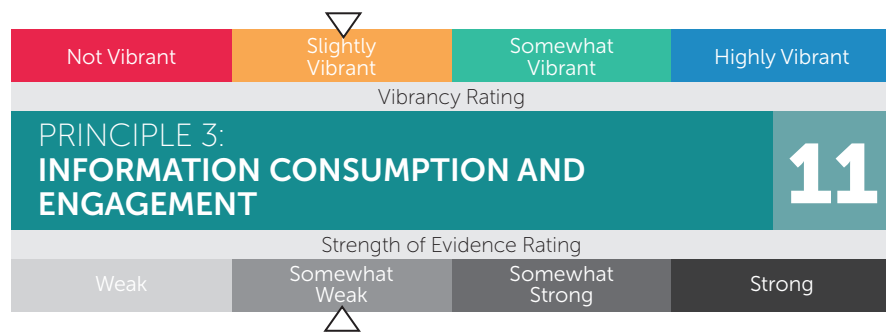
Furthermore, the creation of a single media company for the Union State of Russia and Belarus represents a unified front in the face of Western sanctions and a strategic consolidation of propaganda assets and narratives in the future. Among other results is skewed coverage of

the war in Ukraine and frequent attacks on the United Stations and the European Union as instigators of international crises. Moreover, plans by the official Belarus Telegraphic Agency (BelTA) to strengthen ties with Xinhua, China's state news agency, underscore the growing influence of external actors in supporting Belarusian propaganda content.

In Belarus, the line between newsroom and business operations is increasingly blurred. State-aligned entities exert pressure through strict regulations, subtle censorship, and financial rewards or penalties tied to editorial content. For example, state subsidies and advertising contracts are often used to influence editorial decisions and ensure they align with government narratives. Additionally, government-appointed bodies often dictate which stories are covered and their presentation.

The bodies tasked with overseeing frequency allocations, licenses, and telecommunications services lack the independence and neutrality crucial for fair regulation. Instead, they operate under direct government influence, particularly under the purview of the Ministry of Communications and Informatization and the Operations and Analysis Center, which was formerly a part of the State Security Committee (KGB) and is now under the presidential administration. The OAC holds significant sway over internet service providers, sets information security standards, conducts surveillance online, and manages top-level domains. These tight governmental connections cast doubt on the impartiality of regulatory and licensing decisions.

Although Belarusian media in exile rely heavily on grants, their biggest supporters, including nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and Western governments, are also proponents of democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and free media.

Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant	Somewhat Vibrant	Highly Vibrant

Vibrancy Rating

PRINCIPLE 3: INFORMATION CONSUMPTION AND ENGAGEMENT	**11**

Strength of Evidence Rating

Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong	Strong

The Belarusian digital media landscape proved increasingly resilient amid intensifying repression in 2023, improving by two points from last year's study. Within this principle, however, some indicators fared much better than others. Media's engagement with audience needs scored the highest, while consumer's information engagement scored the lowest. The stark contrast between these scores is likely due to people's fear of engaging in any way with media the government deems "extremist."

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

Legal structures for data privacy and digital security in Belarus nominally exist but are frequently compromised by the government's extensive surveillance capabilities. Officially, legislation such as the law "On Information, Informatization and Protection of Information" aims to protect the personal data of Belarusian citizens. However, these laws also provide broad powers for the government to monitor and intercept communications, often under the guise of national security and with minimal judicial oversight. This discrepancy results in a divergence between the intent of the law and its practical application, with state interests typically overriding individual privacy rights.

Surveillance practices have intensified under a 2022 presidential decree that granted sweeping powers to law enforcement to install monitoring devices and access user data from communications operators, internet providers, and website owners. The government's surveillance techniques include extracting information from personal chats to identify dissenters. Authorities deploy fake links, bots, and websites to capture users' IP addresses and then track their online activity.

Many Belarusians use VPNs to bypass government censorship. Ways of navigating website blocking in Belarus vary. Major corporations like Amazon and Google offer solutions including links for mirror sites, but often with a hefty price tag. For instance, Euroradio's collaboration with VPN provider Psiphon initially attracted one million views monthly, but Psiphon's subsequent monetization model, priced at $16,000 per month, was too much for Euroradio, highlighting the urgent need for sustainable funding strategies for free media.

Notably, more than 200,000 Belarusians unknowingly exposed themselves to surveillance via a fake Telegram bot while signing up for the opposition's Peramoga (Victory) plan for mobilization, leading to numerous arrests. In a concerning incident in November 2022, a KGB officer infiltrated the opposition "Black Book of Belarus" Telegram channel, compromising the personal data of approximately 10,000 Belarusians, potentially leading to their prosecution. Law enforcement agencies further exploit personal accounts to download targets' contact books and private correspondence, building networks based on online interactions.

The routine use of real names in private chats aids the state's pervasive online spying, as does metadata in shared files, revealing device types and user names, and acts as mundane as commenting or subscribing can result in criminal charges. Most detentions for online activity are linked to Instagram use, followed by Facebook, Telegram, and YouTube, in that order. Notoriously, one resident of Hrodno was sentenced to 2.5 years in prison merely for liking a post criticizing Lukashenka.

As a result of these challenges, independent media are compelled to adopt strong encryption and secure communication tools to shield their activities from government eyes. NGOs, media, and the BAJ offer guidance on digital security, emphasizing the importance of VPNs and online activity awareness in Belarus. In a similar vein, developers are creating tools, such as the @FindMessagesBot for Telegram launched in July 2023, that help users identify and delete their past messages

from "extremist" chats. Despite these measures, media still remain susceptible to sophisticated cyber attacks orchestrated by the state, such as phishing and DDoS attacks, designed to disrupt their operations.

Belarus has not ratified the Budapest Convention on Cybercrime and, following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, major cybersecurity providers like DigitCert and Avast, along with other tech companies, halted their operations in Belarus. This withdrawal of critical security services may lead to an increase in hacking, cybercrime, and government surveillance. Thus, even with comprehensive security measures in place, media's defenses against state-sponsored cyberattacks remain tenuous, emphasizing the vulnerability of independent journalistic practices to ongoing state threats.

> 66 **The government's surveillance techniques include extracting information from personal chats to identify dissenters. Authorities deploy fake links, bots, and websites to capture users' IP addresses and then track their online activity.**

thinking. Nonetheless, independent media outlets in exile persist in educating their audiences, promoting fact-based investigative projects to counter information manipulation and propaganda.

Panelists stressed the need to get ahead of propaganda, calling for predictive measures to prepare Belarusian audiences for potential manipulated information in the future. However, they said this goal is complicated by tech companies' algorithms and content moderators—often not Belarusian ones—removing information produced by so-called "extremist" media while propaganda and bad information remain.

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

The government of Belarus has no interest in encouraging media literacy, and there are no well-meaning public campaigns or school lessons on the subject. However, there is no data available on the Belarusian public's level of media literacy.

Media consumption in Belarus is fragmented, according to recent research by Chatham House. 33 percent of respondents said they get their news from television channels owned or linked to the Belarusian or Russian governments. 24 percent turn to nonstate media, while another 25 percent watch the news on state television but also consult independent sources.

Media audiences navigate a range of sources of varying credibility and biases. Many, too, are weary of a relentless stream of reports about crackdowns and repression, and they are consuming less news. This fatigue, coupled with fear or apathy, does not encourage critical

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

Although free speech and free media are enshrined in Belarus's laws and the constitution, the government makes no pretense of tolerating dissenting views. It does, however, sometimes arrange stage-managed issue discussions on state television that inevitably support the official positions. Thus, aside from online discussion areas hosted by independent media in exile, Belarus has no public venues for real debate.

Discussions on state media deploy ostensibly independent commentators who blur the boundaries between journalism and government policymaking. Bloggers and social media influencers are also often recruited to spread government-sanctioned messages, creating an illusion of diverse opinions while keeping a tight grip on the main narrative.

In this ideological desert, some Belarusians turn to alternative platforms to engage in discussions, get information, and express dissenting views, albeit with varying degrees of caution and anonymity. Panelists representing independent Telegram channels said their traffic surges

during critical events, such as the deployment of Wagner troops in Belarus or the outbreak of war, when state media do not provide the full picture. Telegram offers timely and independent information and fosters discussions among diverse communities at these times. The platform's anonymity provides users with a degree of protection, enabling them to participate in discussions without fear of retribution.

Even on Telegram, however, the Belarusian KGB monitors discussions of sensitive topics, and some channel administrators have restricted comments to ensure their users' own safety, underscoring the tension between facilitating free expression and safeguarding individuals from potential harm in a hostile environment.

Despite risks that include being labeled "extremist," having law enforcement surveil or seize their residences in Belarus, losing their citizenship, and even having their friends and families threatened, dissenters abroad continue to use platforms such as Telegram or Signal, in a show of resilience and adaptability.

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

Independent exiled media rely on data from democracy- and media-development organizations such as the National Democratic Institute, Internews, Press Club Belarus, and the BAJ to learn about their audiences' demographics and preferences. They also conduct their own audience surveys on topics of interest and use Google Analytics and Phlanx to delve deeper into audience engagement and interaction patterns.

Independent media also proactively engage with their audiences in Belarus through platforms like Signal and Telegram to deliver real-time updates and cultivate community discussions. These efforts not only facilitate prompt discussions but also help build a sense of community among Belarusian users, united by shared experiences and the exchange of information. As one panelist, an editor, noted, their

Telegram channels use bots to filter specific keywords and prevent new users from posting links for the first 24 hours. Additionally, comments are automatically deleted after one day, enhancing safety. Moreover, during discussions on sensitive topics, they often disable comments at the request of subscribers due to concerns about police surveillance. This cautious approach helps protect users, especially those in Belarus, from potential repercussions in response to their emotional engagement with the news.

The decline in subscriptions, likes, and comments across independent media platforms indicates several key problems: a general turn away from politics among ordinary Belarusians, a genuine fear of imprisonment for subscribing or interacting, and a distance from audiences due to independent journalists' inability to report from within Belarus. Although being labeled as "extremist" can also lead to a drop in subscribers, it does not usually have a significant effect. "Few people have the means to meticulously track which media outlets have been labeled as 'extremist' to then unsubscribe from them," said one panelist. "In the eyes of the audience, independent media are often perceived as 'extremist' regardless of whether they have officially been given that status by the state."

Fear of repercussions, however, does impact groups such as the relatives of political prisoners, who have largely ceased contact with independent journalists. Several panelists said Belarusians often reach out to editorial offices requesting the removal of past articles in which they were mentioned or quoted due to safety concerns. Editorial teams consistently honor such requests, albeit at the expense of content diversity.

> **Both state-owned and independent media struggle to produce nonpolitical content, driving viewers to Russian alternatives.**

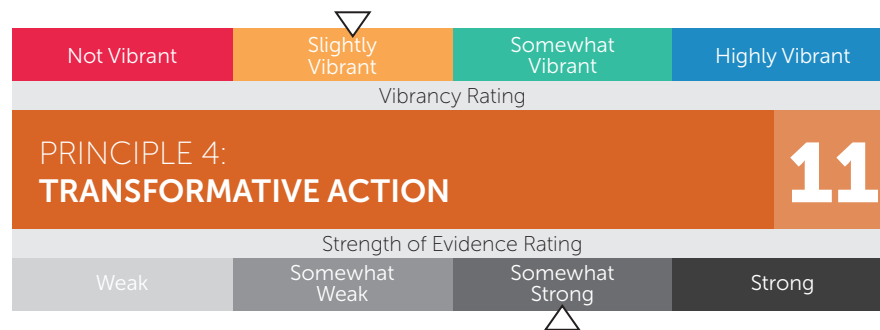Both state-owned and independent media struggle to produce nonpolitical content, driving viewers to Russian alternatives. The absence of successful entertainment projects and prominent personalities exacerbates the issue, potentially leading younger people to gravitate toward content produced by Russian state television. At the same time, some panelists said exiled media's efforts to reach a new,

neutral audiences with nonpolitical content risks alienating their core Belarusian audiences, which seek information and emotional support. It also raises questions about the best use of editorial resources and the fundamental mission of exiled media.

Financial reliance on donors and investors, who may prioritize sociopolitical programming, can also complicate media's efforts to connect with audiences. Funding for children's and women's content is notably more difficult to secure, and some projects beloved by the Belarusian audience, such as Malanka Art, centered on protest art, struggle to attract sponsors, resulting in program closures. As a result, Belarusian independent media operate primarily as mission-driven initiatives rather than businesses, with substantial dependence on donor funding.

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

Panelists largely agreed that community media does not exist in Belarus. However, some panelists viewed local media organizations as fulfilling some functions of community media by providing information not covered by national outlets. These organizations face the same repressive pressures and have largely disappeared from the public sphere. Many have moved instead to more secure and private platforms, such as closed-chat groups, messaging apps, and hidden social networks to evade state control.

Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant	Somewhat Vibrant	Highly Vibrant
		Vibrancy Rating	

PRINCIPLE 4: TRANSFORMATIVE ACTION	11
	Strength of Evidence Rating

Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong	Strong

The score for this principle increased by one point from last year's study but remains relatively low, reflecting the shortcomings of media engagement with civil society. The indicator on civil society's use of quality information for community improvement scored the highest within this principle, while information support for good governance and democratic governance scored the lowest. Despite the resilience and adaptability of Belarusian media in exile, they have little impact on the human rights situation in Belarus and decisions by its leaders.

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

Non-partisan Belarusian media, exemplified by media outlets like Nasha Niva, Zerkalo (the exile successor to TUT.by), and others operate from abroad and still manage to maintain Belarusian audiences across their various social media platforms. Following the government's block of all independent news and analytical websites in the country, Belarusian audiences migrated to social media and messaging app channels of these outlets. As of August 2023, TikTok had emerged as the leading platform with 4.7 million users in Belarus, followed by Instagram with 3.5 million and Vkontakte with 3.4 million.

This data reveals that Belarusians primarily access alternative information through digital platforms, demonstrating a strong demand for it. Although the widespread use of VPNs in Belarus complicates the accurate measurement of audience sizes, the high subscription and

viewership figures on social media platforms suggest a significant and engaged audience for these exiled media outlets. This is consistent with recent research conducted by The Fix and JX Fund, further underscoring the resilience and reach of non- partisan Belarusian media.

These measures facilitate swift discussions and foster a sense of belonging and community through the exchange of information and experiences. Nevertheless, a panel expert mentioned that managing online comments presents significant challenges. On YouTube, NEXTA employs features to filter out aggressive comments and hate speech by using stop words. Telegram poses a greater challenge, however, due to its rapid comment refresh rate and large subscriber base. Despite this, NEXTA's team of moderators diligently manages comments, working to distinguish between bot activity and genuine user opinions. To maintain a respectful and safe environment, the editorial team removes personal attacks and personal data, ensuring that their community remains protected from harassment and abuse. Similarly, most exiled non-partisan media adopt advanced moderation tools and comment management tactics to ensure secure and responsive communication with their audiences.

> **In general, the Belarusian media landscape is marked by "informational tribalism," in which different information sources have spurred Belarusians to not only sort themselves into distinct ideological camps but also to develop a strong sense of identity and belonging within their chosen "tribe."**

In general, the Belarusian media landscape is marked by "informational tribalism," in which different information sources have spurred Belarusians to not only sort themselves into distinct ideological camps but also to develop a strong sense of identity and belonging within their chosen "tribe." This phenomenon extends beyond mere consumption patterns to encompass social interactions, cultural norms, and personal values.

It is difficult for many in Belarus to break out of their information silos, even if they wanted to. The state's tightening grip on independent media, now branded "extremist," has led to a divide within Belarusian society between those who consume predominantly state propaganda and those who rely solely on independent sources. One panelist lamented "a deepening profound gap in societal discourse, with one segment of the population unable to comprehend the perspective of the other."

As noted by the New Belarus Vision think tank, state and nonstate media in Belarus seize on the same topics to foment ideological and political opposition. Their efforts to discredit each other and build support permeate political interactions on Belarusian social networks. The war in Ukraine is a good illustration of this divide. In a December 2023 survey, Chatham House found that attitudes toward the conflict had barely budged over a year and a half, with consumers of state media much more likely than the audience for nonstate media to support Russia's actions. Supporters are typically older and living outside Minsk, while opponents are more likely to live in Minsk, be young or middle-aged, and have a higher education.

Though this generational and ideological divide, partly fueled by the digital literacy and global connectivity of Belarusian youth, may be a harbinger of significant social change, it also thwarts any meaningful political dialogue.

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

Given the deep informational divide in Belarusian society and state media's propaganda role, many people in Belarus are walled off from reliable information. Those who rely on independent media are much more likely to use quality information in forming opinions on social or political issues. For example, the limited support in Belarus for Ukraine in its war with Russia is in part thanks to independent media coverage of the Kremlin's actions long before the full-scale invasion in 2022 and before most of these outlets were forced into exile.

More recently, the new Belarusian Hajun project won significant public trust as a source of uncensored news about the war in Ukraine. With more than 400,000 subscribers on Telegram, down from a peak of over 500,000, it has become a critical source of verified, crowd-sourced content, hosting thousands of photographs and hundreds of videos related to the conflict. As of February 2023, more than 30,000 people had contributed to Belarusian Hajun, and at least six Belarusians had been prosecuted for their involvement with it.

Generally, however, the government's tight grip on information and harsh penalties for dissent have all but stifled civic engagement and encounters with elected officials are inconsequential. The barrage of censorship, extremism charges, online blocking, and state propaganda create widespread fear, distorting political campaigning and people's voting behavior. Official election results are highly suspect.

The state's approach to information has shaken people's confidence in other areas, such as when the government downplayed the severity of the COVID-19 pandemic and strayed from the World Health Organization's guidelines. During the early stages of the outbreak, Lukashenka promoted unscientific remedies such as drinking vodka and using saunas, sowing public confusion and a disregard for essential measures such as social distancing and vaccination. As the crisis receded, so did the government's attempts to manipulate public health information, but there is likely a lingering public distrust of the government's advice on the topic.

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

Within Belarus, quality information cannot lead to citizen activism, by government design. For Belarusians in exile, however, it is a catalyst for action.

The International Accountability Platform for Belarus, operating in exile, is a prime example of data-driven efforts to lay the groundwork for reform and, ultimately, justice. The IAPB includes the Danish Institute Against Torture, the Viasna human rights group, and the Legal Initiative, which advocates for human rights and the rule of law in Belarus. As of March 2023, it had compiled more than 20,000 documents, including witness testimonies and medical reports, that provide a comprehensive view of human rights violations in Belarus.

The success of initiatives like the BYSOL Foundation's crowdfunding campaign, which raised over 1.1 million EUR ($1.2 million) for victims of political repression, relied partly on its ability to inform and mobilize a community abroad. This solidarity extends beyond Belarusian borders, as evidenced by the foundation's success in raising awareness and support for Ukrainian refugees in neighboring countries since 2022.

Furthermore, the engagement of Belarusian civil society with global technology companies, facilitated by independent media and Tsikhanouskaya's cabinet in exile, aims to promote Belarusian counterpropaganda. Efforts to adjust algorithms on platforms like Google and YouTube to favor independent Belarusian media, as well as Tsikhanouskaya's urging Google's vice president to prioritize alternative Belarusian content over propaganda online, reflect a strategic approach to ensuring access to unbiased information.

The Belarusian Investigative Center, whose exposés of corruption and sanction-evasion schemes worth over $3 billion landed Russian oligarch Alexander Shakutin on the US sanctions list in 2023, also demonstrates the power of quality information to effect policy changes internationally.

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

The low score for this indicator reflects the state's practice of using quality information from independent media in a manner that ultimately undermines the media, experts, and the subjects of media reports, to the detriment of its own citizens.

Belarus has government press councils and press centers, ostensibly to foster dialogue among the state, civil society, and the media, but they are little more than mouthpieces. Weekly press conferences at the National Press Center are a venue for disseminating government-

approved narratives rather than a platform for meaningful dialogue with independent media or critical voices—who have been frozen out of public life, in any event.

Government officials and state-controlled media rarely engage deeply with evidence or facts. For example, Belarusian officials have claimed that no country has done as much for the safety and wellbeing of Ukrainian children as Russia and Belarus, a statement that contradicts widespread international reports and lacks verifiable evidence. The discourse often involves attacking or discrediting the opposition rather than engaging with their arguments, further stifling legitimate debate. Even in settings like press conferences, which could allow for more interaction, the discussion is carefully managed to avoid sensitive topics.

> ❝ **The manipulation of information is central to Belarus's political discourse. Leading up to the February 2024 parliamentary elections, for instance, state-run media painted Belarus as a formidable empire, with Lukashenka as a successful leader revered on the international stage.**

The manipulation of information is central to Belarus's political discourse. Leading up to the February 2024 parliamentary elections, for instance, state-run media painted Belarus as a formidable empire, with Lukashenka as a successful leader revered on the international stage.

Belarus's pro-democracy diaspora is branded as fugitives and traitors, while Belarusian propaganda on Ukraine echoes Russian claims that Ukraine is not a sovereign nation and that Ukrainians are merely an extension of the Russian people.

In addition, state media sometimes co-opt information from independent media for propaganda purposes. "The state media … often repurpose our materials, presenting them in a completely different light," a panelist from Belsat said. "They are essentially rebranding our work to fit their narrative. It's intriguing to see how our content hits their sore spots, but it's also a challenge to figure out how to deal with this manipulation."

Belarusian officials rarely incorporate input from independent media or civil society, or even rely on facts, when explaining policy decisions.

For example, they frequently warn of a genocide against the Belarusian people, orchestrated by the West in coordination with the democratic opposition, to justify widespread repression. On typically less controversial issues like public health, sanitation, and infrastructure, the Belarusian government's use of expert advice is inconsistent, such as its early, muted response to the pandemic. The government generally dismisses any independent expertise that differs from its own perspective.

There is occasional evidence that officials pay attention to the independent press, and sometimes even act to rectify problems that it uncovers. Notably, the Health Ministry moved quickly after an article published by Zerkalo in early 2023 about a Minsk woman who blamed doctors at a maternity hospital for the death of her infant daughter. Her Instagram appeal to a modest number of followers had been overlooked or ignored by state media.

Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic rights.

This indicator scored the lowest within this principle, reflecting the dire situation in Belarus where quality information is too scarce to support democratic rights and good governance. Domestically, state-controlled media do not launch serious investigations or uncover rights abuses.

Exiled media, however, continue to cover the topics of corruption, human rights, civil liberties, and elections despite facing significant risks and restrictions. For example, the Belarusian Investigative Center (BIC) has been pivotal in uncovering over $3 billion in corruption and sanctions evasion, revealing deep-seated corruption among high-level Belarusian government officials and their associates. Additionally, organizations like the International Accountability Platform for Belarus have documented extensive human rights abuses, amassing over 21,000 documents as of September 2023.

These efforts do sometimes achieve results. For example, independent Belarusian journalists helped make the case for the EU's targeted sanctions against Belarusian state-sponsored media and propagandists, as well as Ukraine's sanctions against key purveyors of Belarusian state propaganda, such as television hosts Rihor Azaronak and Ihar Tur and political scientist Aliaksandr Shpakouski. TikTok has also banned Minskaya Pravda, an online propaganda outlet with around 70,000 followers. Belarusian independent reporting has also influenced international policies, indirectly resulting in the barring of the Belarusian state television channel from broadcasting the Olympic Games for the next decade.

Due to the sensitive media environment, panelists in the Georgia study will remain anonymous.

MOLDOVA

Vibrant
Information
Barometer
2 0 2 4

VIBRANCY

PRINCIPLES

Overall Score: 2021 = 23, 2022 = 22, 2023 = 24, 2024 = 24

Information Quality: 2021 = 20, 2022 = 21, 2023 = 21, 2024 = 22

Multiple Channels: 2021 = 24, 2022 = 24, 2023 = 27, 2024 = 29

Consumption & Engagement: 2021 = 23, 2022 = 20, 2023 = 22, 2024 = 18

Transformative Action: 2021 = 24, 2022 = 22, 2023 = 25, 2024 = 26

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

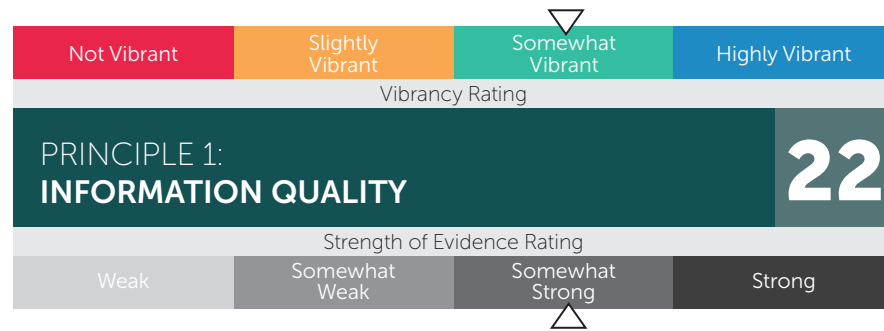OVERALL
SCORE

24

Slightly Vibrant

Not Vibrant

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

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

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

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

Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant	Somewhat Vibrant ▽	Highly Vibrant

Vibrancy Rating

PRINCIPLE 1: INFORMATION QUALITY	22

Strength of Evidence Rating

Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong △	Strong

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Independent media, largely funded or supported by external development partners, predominantly engage in fact-based journalism. Broadcast and print media are less prone to spreading manipulative information compared to online platforms. However, Cristina Pohilenco, vice-director of Jurnal TV in Chişinău, observed a rise in non-professional content creators disseminating false information through various Telegram channels in the past year. The panelists questioned the assertion that professional media disseminate false information due to low capacity, suggesting that intentional violations are more likely, although they acknowledged occasional instances due to oversight or human error.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

politically controlled media institutions employ these malicious techniques and tactics. Non-professional content producers often promote hate speech and incite hateful comments to increase their audience. Hate speech is prevalent in user-generated content on social media, and perpetrators usually elude punishment due to the difficulties in investigating cybercrime. During the 2023 campaign season for Moldovan local elections, political parties, anonymous portals, and occasionally mainstream media affiliated with political parties disseminated content intended to undermine the election process, candidates, or even state institutions. "Among bloggers, the situation is significantly worse, with numerous TikTok videos aimed at spreading hatred, and the creators face no consequences," said Paholnițchi.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced.

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

agreed that limited financial independence remains a significant factor hindering the advancement of media independence in the country. As Bunduchi highlighted, "Only a limited number of professional content producers, including *Ziarul de Gardă*, Rlive TV, Agora, and the national public broadcaster, manage to secure adequate financial resources for their activities." While the public broadcaster relies mostly on state funding, the others mentioned have found success through ad revenue, grants, and subscriptions.
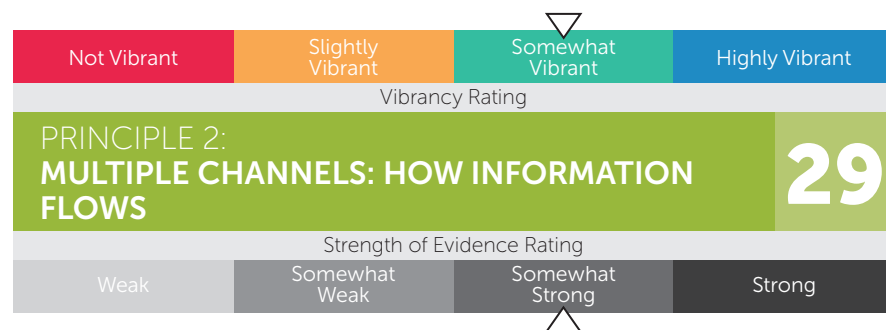
Media outlets face challenges in producing quality content without international funding. An [analysis](#) by the Audiovisual Council revealed that grants constitute 85 percent of the annual budget for two media organizations among the 13 analyzed. A significant hurdle to ensuring the financial sustainability of media is the limited advertising market, particularly in regions outside the capital. This challenge is compounded by the preference of small producers for "word of mouth" advertising, while other companies find it more advantageous to advertise on social media, highlighted Bzovaya.

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

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

> 66 **The traditional mainstream media has demonstrated progress in effectively representing perspectives from all genders, with a notable emphasis on featuring women in press materials.**

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

Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant	Somewhat Vibrant	Highly Vibrant

Vibrancy Rating

PRINCIPLE 2:
MULTIPLE CHANNELS: HOW INFORMATION FLOWS

29

Strength of Evidence Rating

Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong	Strong

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

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

Moldova has an advanced legal framework regulating freedom of the press and expression. Overall, the laws align with international standards, with the exception of 2021 amendments to audiovisual legislation bringing the public broadcaster under parliamentary control and removing the immutability of Broadcasting Council members. The application of laws is generally consistent, except in the Transnistrian region. Zaharia also noted minor lapses in practical implementation, particularly in handling access to information requests, hindering journalists' right to freedom of expression.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Even in the most remote villages, citizens have the necessary technical means and opportunities to stay well-informed. The panelists said that in the event of a disruption to a telecommunications infrastructure, people have access to other information systems or devices.

Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for government information.

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

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

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

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

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

On the other hand, Bzovaya noted that while all ministries and agencies have press services, their quality is sometimes lacking. Zaharia highlighted cases where authorities refuse to provide relevant information, particularly about public procurement contests, opting instead for formal responses devoid of substantive details. "The regions face a more critical situation due to a limited number of public relations specialists in regional and municipal councils," said Cobăsneanu, "In Soroca, for example, only a couple of press conferences are organized in a year, and there are challenges in establishing effective communication channels between state institutions and the media." Bunduchi underscored that Moldova has enacted a new law on access to information of public interest, ratified in June 2023 and operational since January 2024, which he believes has successfully addressed significant procedural shortcomings that were present in the previous law.

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

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

Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The laws enacted by the separatist authorities in the Transnistrian region lack regulations on media ownership and all influential media are under the control of Sheriff LLC, the second-largest company in the region, said the panelist from Transnistria.

Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.

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

decreased recently, according to Gotişan, politicization and the influence of owners on media institutions, especially in terms of editorial aspects, remain among the most significant challenges facing the media sector. "Despite some degree of de-politicization in the Moldovan press, local authorities in various regions, such as Soroca, financially support certain self-proclaimed 'independent' media outlets through 'public procurements,' conducted without legal tenders, thus impacting their independence," Cobăsneanu highlighted.
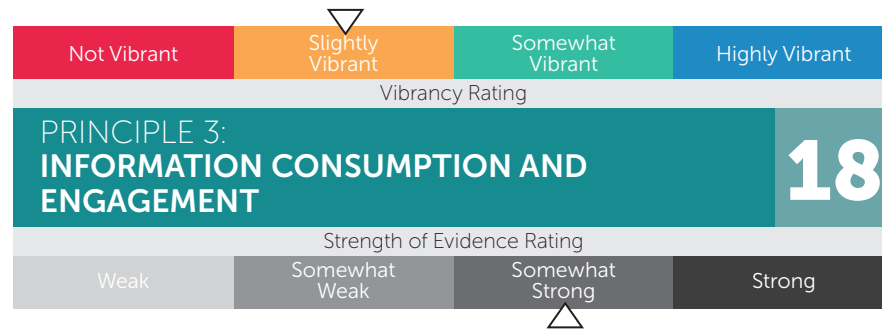
Gotişan noted that in many if not most media organizations, editorial and commercial departments are not clearly separated, posing a continued risk of interference in editorial procedures. Gherciu added that in the case of many independent editorial teams, owners usually serve either as editors-in-chief or as managers, and they are involved in editorial policy. "This involvement is not necessarily negative as long as the ethical code is respected," she noted.

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

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

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

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

Vibrancy Rating			
Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant	Somewhat Vibrant	Highly Vibrant

PRINCIPLE 3:
INFORMATION CONSUMPTION AND ENGAGEMENT

18

Strength of Evidence Rating			
Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong	Strong

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

> 66 **At the state level, there is no strategy for promoting media and information literacy, and the level of media literacy among the general population is low.**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The 2023 Internews Moldova study found that only one-third of respondents know they can file an official complaint if they encounter manipulative information. Gherciu highlighted that people might not report manipulative information or hate speech due to awareness gaps, fear of repercussions, or the perception that reporting will not bring significant changes. "Reporting often occurs on social networks, where the process is more straightforward," she said. Regular citizens rarely turn to the Press Council, Audiovisual Council, the Council for Prevention and Elimination of Discrimination and Ensuring Equality, or ombudsmen when they come across information manipulation or hate speech.

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

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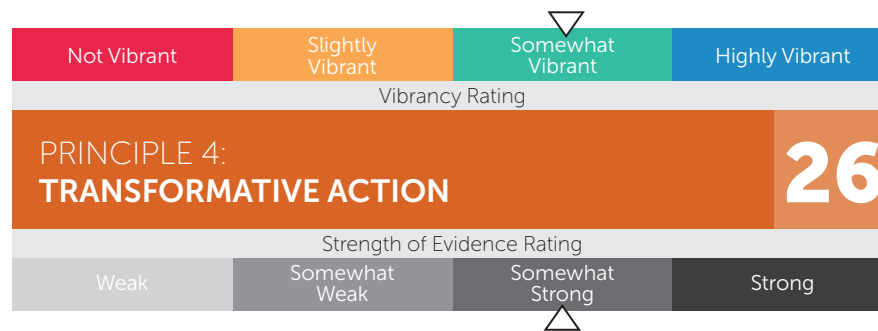
While some media outlets refer to results from sociological surveys such as the POB, this does not necessarily lead to adjustments in editorial policies based on public needs. Paholnițchi noted existing mechanisms for audience research, with online media using global tools like Google Analytics and regional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

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

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

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

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

Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant	Somewhat Vibrant ▽	Highly Vibrant

Vibrancy Rating

PRINCIPLE 4: TRANSFORMATIVE ACTION	26

Strength of Evidence Rating

Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong △	Strong

While Moldova does have nonpartisan news and information sources, the panelists noted that manipulative information, rather than quality information, shapes people's views and informs their actions. This was reflected in the low scores for Indicator 17, on whether individuals use quality information to inform their actions. In contrast, civil society groups predominantly use quality information to improve their communities, so Indicator 18 received a high score from the panelists.

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

Nonpartisan news and information sources exist and have comparatively large audiences in some cases, depending on the topic. Similar to Moldovan society in general, the media landscape grapples with high polarization—a fact underscored by the Press Freedom Index published by Reporters Without Borders—which is essentially a consequence of the low levels of media literacy and critical thinking among the population, explained Nani.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Many individuals struggle to differentiate between propaganda and legitimate news. The 2023 Internews Moldova study found that over half of respondents were uncertain about identifying independent information sources, and 44 percent faced challenges in discerning information manipulation. In some cases, manipulative information has incited individuals to take actions detrimental to the public good, with several panelists citing the protests orchestrated by the Pro-Russian Shor party, which resulted in 42 police reports being issued for violations of public order and security.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Political discourse or debates sporadically include evidence and facts, with infrequent press conferences allowing the press to pose direct questions. Deliberately false information can significantly impact the narrative, especially during election campaigns. Although information manipulation is not pervasive, it is still seen in cases such as an announcement by two politicians that gas would be supplied to the people of Gagauzia for MDL 10 ($0.55) per cubic meter. This claim was dismissed as false and politically motivated by the Minister of Energy.

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

> 66 **The panelists unanimously agreed that a combination of reliable and manipulative information shapes the social and political perspectives of individuals.**

Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic rights.

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

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

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

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

LIST OF PANEL PARTICIPANTS

Ion Bunduchi, executive director, Association of Electronic Press, Chișinău

Marina Bzovaya, editor-in-chief, Nokta, Gagauzia, Comrat

Vitor Cobăsneanu, editor-in-chief, *Observatorul de Nord*, Soroca

Ana Gherciu, editor-in-chief, Moldova.org, Chișinău

Victor Gotișan, media researcher, Chișinău

Anastasia Nani, vice-director, Independent Journalism Center, Chișinău

Nicolai Paholnițchi, journalist, Newsmaker, Chișinău

Cristina Pohilenco, vice-director, Jurnal TV, Chișinău

Dumitru Țîra, executive director, Realitatea TV/realitatea.md, Chișinău

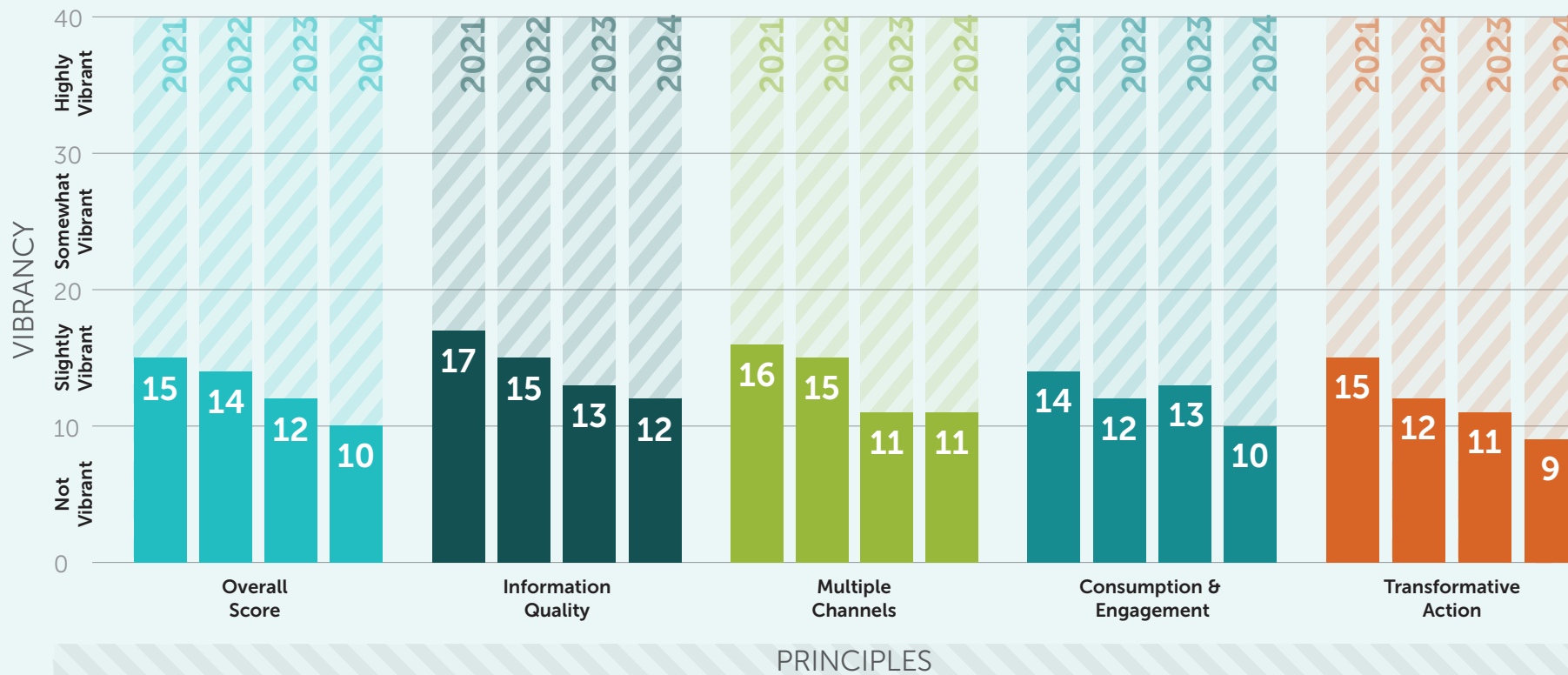**Viorica Zaharia,** journalist, member of the Press Council of Moldova, Chișinău

Journalist (anonymous), Transnistrian region, Tiraspol

RUSSIA

Vibrant
Information
Barometer

2 0 2 4

VIBRANCY

	Highly Vibrant	Somewhat Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant	Not Vibrant

Overall Score: 2021: 15, 2022: 14, 2023: 12, 2024: 10

Information Quality: 2021: 17, 2022: 15, 2023: 13, 2024: 12

Multiple Channels: 2021: 16, 2022: 15, 2023: 11, 2024: 11

Consumption & Engagement: 2021: 14, 2022: 12, 2023: 13, 2024: 10

Transformative Action: 2021: 15, 2022: 12, 2023: 11, 2024: 9

PRINCIPLES

Not Vibrant (0-10): Quality information is extremely limited in this country. The vast majority of it is not editorially independent, not based on facts, or it is intended to harm. People do not have the rights, means, or capacity to access a wide range of information; they do not recognize or reject misinformation; and they cannot or do not make choices on what types of information they want to engage with.

Slightly Vibrant (11-20): Quality information is available on a few topics or geographies in this country, but not all. While some information is editorially independent, there is still a significant amount of misinformation, malinformation, and hate speech in circulation, and it does influence public discourse. Most people do not recognize or reject misinformation.

Somewhat Vibrant (21-30): Quality information is available in this country and most of it is editorially independent, based on facts, and not intended to harm. Most people have the rights, means, and capacity to access a wide range of information, although some do not. Most people recognize and reject misinformation, although some do not.

Highly Vibrant (31-40): Quality information is widely available in this country. People have the rights, means, and capacity to access a wide range of information; they recognize and reject misinformation.

Highly Vibrant

Somewhat Vibrant
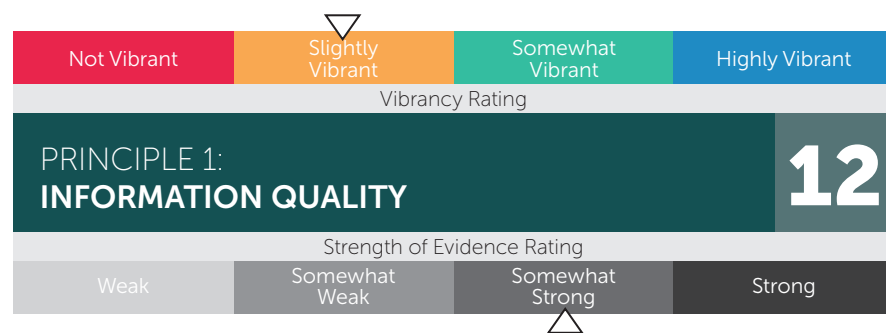
Slightly Vibrant

Not Vibrant

OVERALL
SCORE

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.

Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant	Somewhat Vibrant	Highly Vibrant

Vibrancy Rating

PRINCIPLE 1: INFORMATION QUALITY	12

Strength of Evidence Rating

Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong	Strong

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 Guberniya 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."

> **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."**

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."

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.
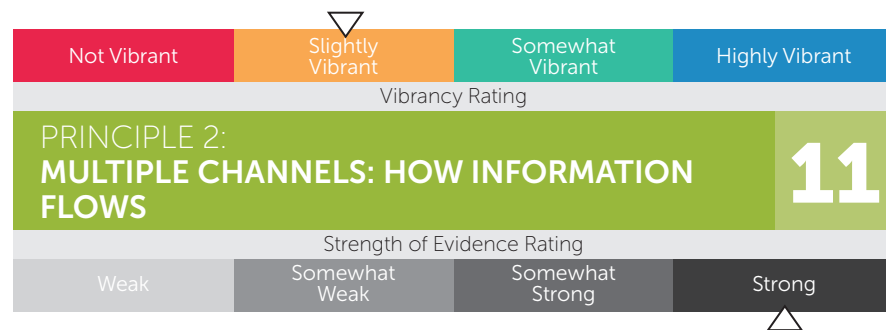
In the shadow of the state-run ecosystem, private media outlets try to scratch out an existence by looking into niche topics, possible staff and budget cuts, and alternative revenues. Local outlets are in particularly dire straits, one panelist pointed out, as they face a shortage of financial and other 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."

Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant	Somewhat Vibrant	Highly Vibrant

Vibrancy Rating

PRINCIPLE 2: MULTIPLE CHANNELS: HOW INFORMATION FLOWS	11

Strength of Evidence Rating

Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong	Strong

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[1] 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

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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."

> " **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.**

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.

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."

Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant	Somewhat Vibrant	Highly Vibrant

Vibrancy Rating

PRINCIPLE 3: **INFORMATION CONSUMPTION AND ENGAGEMENT**	**10**

Strength of Evidence Rating

Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong	Strong
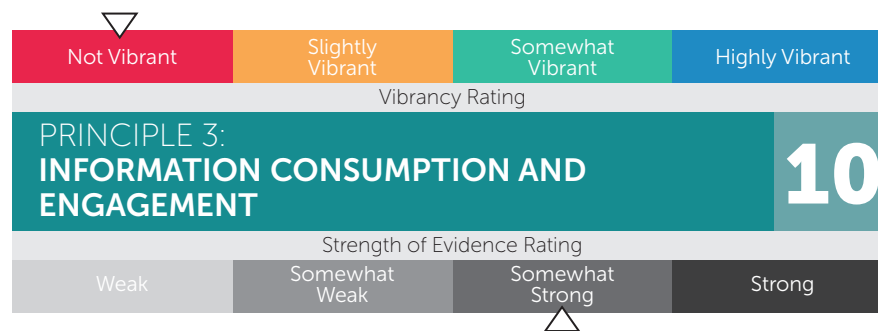
The panelists doubted the overall level of media literacy in Russia and possibilities for the public to proactively engage with available information, giving low scores to these indicators. They also questioned whether the concept of community media is applicable to Russia, although many shared respect 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.

> **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.**

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.

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."

> ❝ Media and information producers may cater to their audiences' entertainment needs but cannot engage on politically sensitive content.

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.

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.

Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant	Somewhat Vibrant	Highly Vibrant

Vibrancy Rating

PRINCIPLE 4: **TRANSFORMATIVE ACTION**	9

Strength of Evidence Rating

Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong	Strong
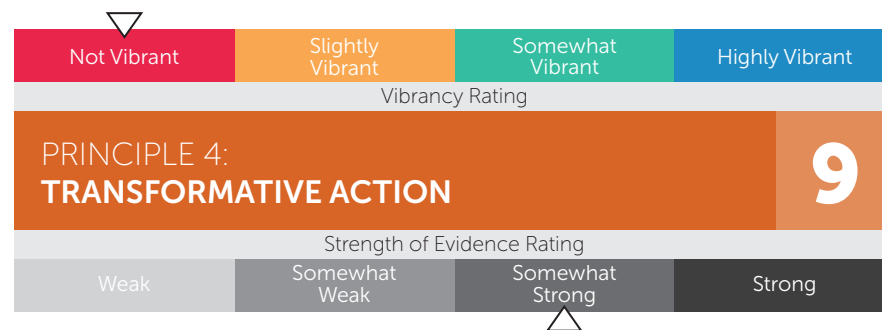
Principle 4 scored the lowest among all the principles. Still, the indicators on information sharing across ideological lines and civil society using quality information to improve communities scored relatively high, mostly thanks to discussion of the few remaining bona fide CSOs and independent media 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 is 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 agreed that government spokespeople are responsible for propaganda, hide information from the public, and repeat "lies on the record."**

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

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.

> **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.**

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

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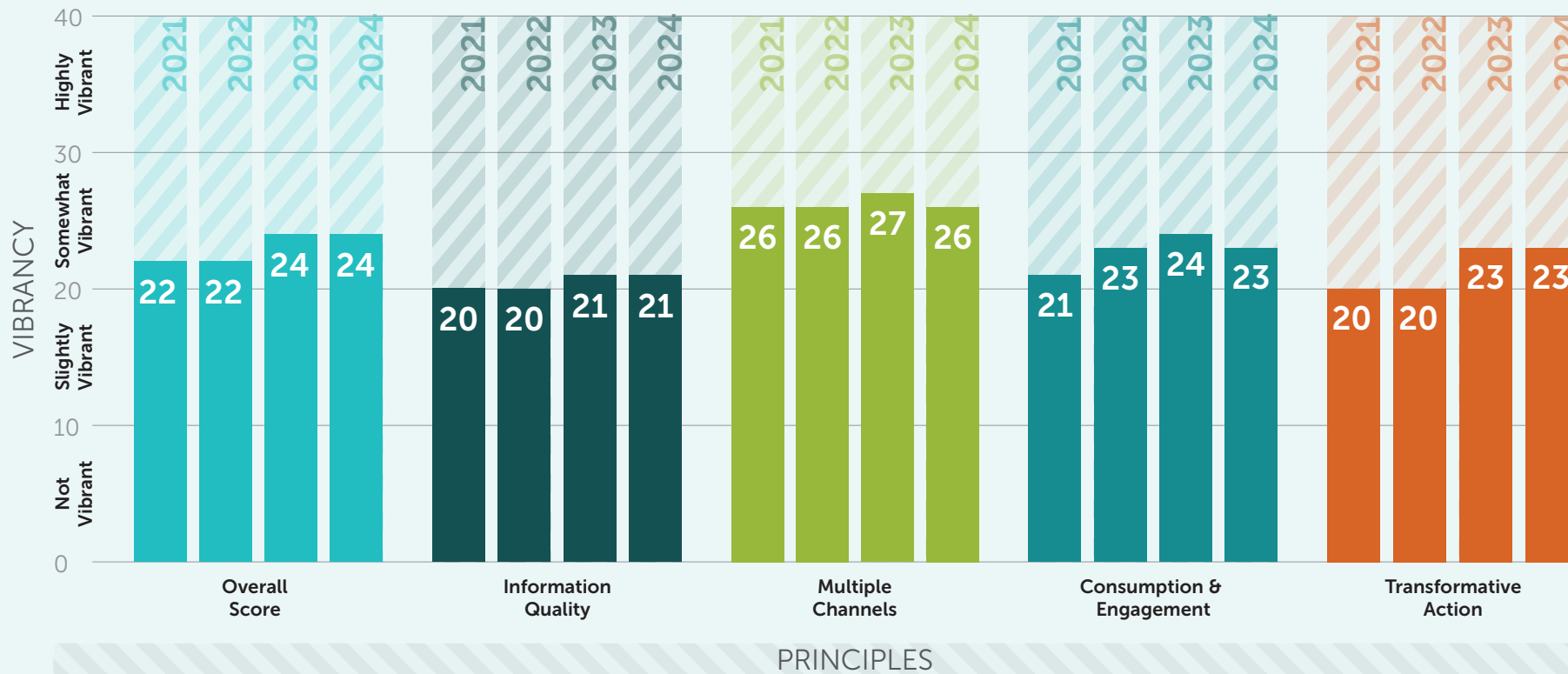
Due to laws restricting NGO activity and contacts with US-based NGOs, the panelists in the Russia study will remain anonymous. This chapter was written after a series of 15 structured interviews with professionals and experts in the media and information field.

UKRAINE

Vibrant
Information
Barometer

2 0 2 4

VIBRANCY

PRINCIPLES

	Overall Score	Information Quality	Multiple Channels	Consumption & Engagement	Transformative Action
2021	22	20	26	21	20
2022	22	20	26	23	20
2023	24	21	27	24	23
2024	24	21	26	23	23

Not Vibrant (0-10): Quality information is extremely limited in this country. The vast majority of it is not editorially independent, not based on facts, or it is intended to harm. People do not have the rights, means, or capacity to access a wide range of information; they do not recognize or reject misinformation; and they cannot or do not make choices on what types of information they want to engage with.

Slightly Vibrant (11-20): Quality information is available on a few topics or geographies in this country, but not all. While some information is editorially independent, there is still a significant amount of misinformation, malinformation, and hate speech in circulation, and it does influence public discourse. Most people do not recognize or reject misinformation.

Somewhat Vibrant (21-30): Quality information is available in this country and most of it is editorially independent, based on facts, and not intended to harm. Most people have the rights, means, and capacity to access a wide range of information, although some do not. Most people recognize and reject misinformation, although some do not.

Highly Vibrant (31-40): Quality information is widely available in this country. People have the rights, means, and capacity to access a wide range of information; they recognize and reject misinformation.

Highly Vibrant

Somewhat Vibrant

Slightly Vibrant

Not Vibrant

OVERALL
SCORE

24

In 2023, Ukrainians showed remarkable resilience and unity resisting the ongoing war. The Russian government's full-scale invasion in February 2022 caused devastating repercussions: the loss of tens of thousands of lives, undermined livelihoods, millions of relocated citizens, massive breakdown of infrastructure, and further occupation of Ukrainian territories.

Throughout the year, the information space was filled with exaggerated expectations of Ukraine's counteroffensive and an imminent end to the war, but the lack of victorious progress led to a sense of exhaustion and confusion.

The scope and speed of vital news consumption have decreased compared to 2022. People now prefer "fast news media"—brief items delivered quickly, and short video formats.

Ukraine has retained its pluralistic and diverse media landscape, which has adapted to wartime conditions. However, the round-the-clock United News telethon forum, which tends to ignore topics uncomfortable for those in power, damages the balance, as does the budget funding of a growing number of state channels. Ukrainians are increasingly turning to social media, especially anonymous Telegram channels with unverified information and space for pro-Kremlin narratives.

Ukraine's government imposed certain justified restrictions in 2022 in the aftermath of the full-scale invasion. However, civil society and the media are increasingly impatient about the prolonged, decreased access to public information, especially when the war is overused as a

reason. In autumn 2023, disturbances emerged: smear campaigns and law enforcement bodies using intimidation tactics to silence critical journalists and anticorruption activists.

VIBE principle scores did not see any significant change this year. Principle 1 (Information Quality) remained 21 and is the lowest score, as it was in the 2023 VIBE study. Ukrainian media and other content producers have adapted to the war and provided important content. Kremlin information manipulation through social media remains an issue. Media independence based on economics is extremely scarce. Principle 2 (Multiple Channels) received the highest principle-level score of 26. However, panelists stated concern over increased systemic pressure on journalists critical of the government and corruption, decreased access to public information and frontline reporting, and strengthening state broadcasting via the United News telethon and other government-controlled media.

The score of Principle 3 (Information Consumption and Engagement) decreased slightly to 23. Amidst the war, information security and digital hygiene have become even more important, yet media literacy and digital security levels among Ukrainians are still not sufficient for resilience. General society is missing in-depth discourse of the crucial issues. Principle 4 (Transformative Action) maintained a score of 23 from last year. Civil society remains the driver of positive changes, while individuals' use of information remains weak. In 2023, the government's communication and its responses to violations disclosed by the media were inadequate.

Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant	Somewhat Vibrant	Highly Vibrant

Vibrancy Rating

PRINCIPLE 1: **INFORMATION QUALITY**	**21**

Strength of Evidence Rating

Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong	Strong
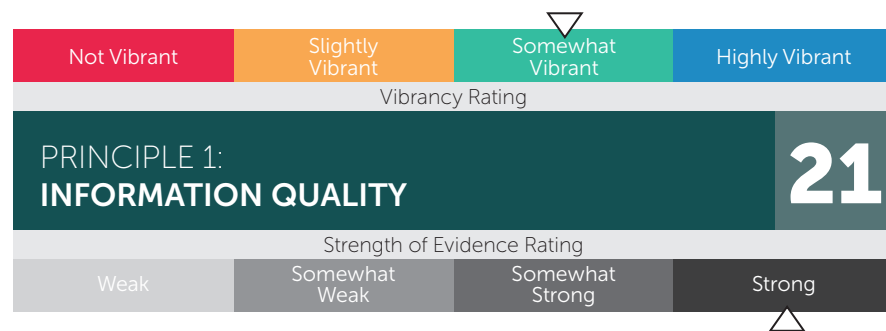
Principle 1's score remained the same as the 2023 VIBE study, with the indicator on sufficiently resourced content production receiving the lowest average score of this principle. The Ukraine media infrastructure survived and has adjusted to the war environment. The government maintains a unified information policy through the United News telethon, which is produced and broadcasted by six major TV channels. It was launched at the government's behest at the beginning of the full-scale invasion with the intention to support resistance and unity, and to ensure access to reliable information.

Despite the pool of quality professional media, more than 76 percent of Ukrainians consume news from social media. Consumers favor Telegram channels, which often disseminate unverified content and fall prey to information manipulation by the Kremlin. According to the panelists, the media advertising market is recovering, but media are unlikely to develop an economic model free from owner financing, the state budget, or donor funding.

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

Despite the damage, disruptions, economic tolls, and demographic crises, Ukraine retained its adequate media infrastructure. Broadcast and online media in particular still deliver quality content, and the media sector overall functioned better than in 2022. However, print media have experienced a constant decline in circulation, a drastic shift

of the advertising market to online platforms, and a decay of distribution systems. Additionally, television is losing some prominence as a news source: In 2015, 85 percent of Ukrainians said they used television as an important source of news, but in 2023 this number has dropped to 30 percent.

While some companies established new media outlets and others obtained donor support and diversified content production, some outlets had drops in external funding and subsequent operational cutbacks. De-occupied and frontline regions suffer the most, due to security risks.

An editor on the panel praised the media sector for its persistence: "Evaluating journalism in a war-torn country, which has long grappled with institutional issues in the media sector, some of which have [gotten worse] or faded out amid the war, I would say it performed so incredibly well compared to how terrible it could have been." This is partly due to the tremendous amount of rapidly mobilized donor support to the media, the panelist added.

According to the annual USAID-funded Internews Media Consumption survey, 76 percent of adult Ukrainians relied on social media for news in 2023, while concurrent use of TV and social media dropped to 21 percent. Online news websites are the second-most important source for 40 percent of respondents. The survey showed that 47 percent access news from multiple media types, with social networks the primary choice for single-source users. Fifty-three percent of respondents trust the media, while 31 percent do not. Telegram's popularity rose as a news source, with its user base skyrocketing from 20 percent in 2021 to 72 percent in 2023.

Ukraine has 31 state and eight private universities that offer journalism education, but only a few institutions provide the practical training and up-to-date skills that the industry requires. These schools include the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, the Ukrainian Catholic University in Lviv, and the Institute of Journalism at Taras Shevchenko Kyiv National University. Donors have increased offerings of informal, short-term courses since 2022, but such programs cannot offset an absent modern academic

infrastructure. No one offers the types of training in media management or media-tailored communication that could educate search engine optimization (SEO) experts, IT support specialists, social media marketing, advertising, or product managers. Commercial departments within media outlets have few options to build sustainability.

Panelists agreed that professional media outlets are more likely to adhere to ethical standards and correct factual errors, compared to unprofessional players. Ethical violations particularly damage reputations of independent, quality media. Ukraine's scant legal remedies and self-regulatory bodies, such as media watchdogs and the Commission for Journalism Ethics, are ineffective for professional media, and have no impact on unprofessional content producers.

Content diversity has narrowed due to the war and its implications. Media now focus on mainstream, war-related topics, front line reports, human stories, mobilization, taxes, political scandals, and corruption. Many other important issues remain overlooked by the media. Political journalism has decreased, but media are increasing stories on Ukrainian history. Media sufficiently contextualize the importance of news and events for relevant audiences; however, sometimes they optimize for search engines, one panelist revealed.

Unlike in 2022, many journalists resumed anticorruption investigations related to public procurement, reconstruction projects, and assets of officials. "The government became more accountable—it is rare that there is no reaction on publications," noted a representative of a national investigative journalism center.

The news content of the public broadcaster Suspilne and the most reputable private media is editorially independent. Still, the round-the-clock telethon primarily reflects government positions, with pro-presidential speakers dominating interviews. News content on anonymous Telegram channels does not adhere to classic editorial standards, a data journalist said.

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

Misinformation remains an issue in Ukraine, but it is under some control and is not spread massively. In recent years, quality media have progressed well in fact-checking and combating disinformation. Low-quality popular media, social media, and anonymous Telegram channels often spread misleading information. According to a data journalist, many media reports are based on social media posts and Telegram channels, and emotionally charged videos gain viral popularity.

During the war, journalists face challenges in verifying data and government statements. Officials are restricting journalist access to public information and certain areas requiring military accreditation. For the sake of defeating the enemy, journalists often tend to apply a do-no-harm approach, even when suspecting government disinformation.

According to a fact-checker, non-professional content producers, bloggers, and influencers sometimes provide reliable information, but also mix objective reporting with commissioned content. In addition, government spokespersons, politicians, and business owners are "the weakest links who may intentionally disseminate misleading information," a television journalist said.

On platforms such as YouTube, content creators vie for advertising revenue by resorting to clickbait headlines and producing low-quality videos attractive to viewers. Some social media producers, particularly on anonymous Telegram channels, capitalize on trending topics by disseminating distorted and unverified information.

Panelists acknowledged that during wartime, the government and armed forces have the right to engage in counterpropaganda, withhold certain information, or even lie to support military strategies. However, a regional civil society representative offered a dissenting opinion, arguing that the government often uses the war as a pretext to conceal its negligence, incompetence, and corruption, thereby exacerbating societal tensions.

The Institute of Mass Information (IMI) released its annual [Whitelist](#) of national online media, crediting nine outlets out of the 50 most popular for 95 percent compliance with professional standards. IMI monitoring of 22 national online media [documented](#) a growth of *jeansa* (commissioned stories published as editorial content), with 13 percent of journalists polled [admitting](#) involvement. IMI monitoring of jeansa in online media across 20 regions of Ukraine [found](#) that it makes up one to six percent of published content, while improperly marked advertising constitutes one to three percent of publications.

Ukraine law grants the rights to reply and refutation. Civil law also allows any person or entity to file a defamation lawsuit against a registered content producer that directly affects the plaintiff. Otherwise, professional consequences for media are minimal.

According to a [Telemetrio survey](#), Ukraine has 33,000 active Telegram accounts, totaling 282 million subscribers. Ukraine ranks sixth globally in channel count (13) with over 1 million subscribers. Almost 81 percent of users prefer Telegram as news source, with 76 percent trusting its content. In addition, Telegram is the [most popular](#) news source for 89 percent of Ukrainian respondents abroad. Telegram channels operate outside Ukrainian media regulations, and the platform's management remains unresponsive to this concern.

IMI [analyzed](#) ten popular Telegram channels, noting seven as anonymous, two linked to Russian propagandists, and all lacking professional journalism standards. An [investigation](#) by NGL.media, an anti-corruption center, revealed the vast audience and influence of Trukha, the most popular Telegram channel. Trukha lacks accountability and factual rigor, relies on reposts, lacks proper sourcing, publishes anonymously, and hosts jeansa and unmarked advertising. The channel also could generate significant revenue and obtain it through cryptocurrency and registered entrepreneurs, which could be leveraged to hide income from taxes.

Numerous fact-checking tools, manuals, and initiatives--such as [StopFake](#), [VoxCheck](#), [NotaEnota](#), [Po Toi Bik Novyn](#), [Bez Brekhni--](#)are available online, yet their impact remains limited.

Content moderation mechanisms are imperfect on YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and X (formerly Twitter), and absent on Telegram and other messengers, often restricted to censorship of violent images. Social networks, particularly Meta's Facebook and Instagram, frequently block sensitive content from challenging Ukrainian media and bloggers. These content producers complain about limited feedback from user platforms, changes in host policies, and poor functionality.

The Centre for Democracy and Rule of Law (CEDEM), an advocate for Ukrainians on Meta, [submitted](#) 500 cases of unjustified post blocking or account deletions in 2022, and 300 cases in the first half of 2023. Many Ukrainian media outlets have yellow or red status on Facebook, which restricts monetization and organic reach. With social media traffic constituting 30 percent of their audiences, this substantially affects media businesses, and may encourage self-censorship. Regional media reporting from the frontline zones suffer the most limitations.

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

Russian and pro-Russian media are not allowed to operate in Ukraine. Authorities blocked Russian media outlets and social networks in 2017, followed by the shutdown of pro-Kremlin media channels in 2021. However, controversial pro-Russian websites, such as strana.ua and vesti.ua, are available without VPN. Pro-Russian narratives spread via social networks and messengers, where moderators struggle to fully contain them. Exploiting sensitive issues, Russian propagandists employ factual distortions, manipulations, and lies, and they also use AI algorithms. "They amplify anti-corruption investigations, distorting them to foster internal distrust within Ukraine," a fact-checker said.

According to Ukrainian intelligence [reports](#), the latest and ongoing Kremlin special operation is aimed at inflaming internal tensions in Ukraine, destabilizing the country, and instilling panic among its citizens. The campaign costs $1.5 billion, with $250 million spent on Telegram alone, making it the most expensive since the campaign aimed at discrediting the 2014 revolution.

Detector Media reported that since the start of the invasion, the scale of Kremlin "agitational propaganda machine production" and information manipulation has continually grown and evolved, and become more disturbing, focusing on exploiting the war-traumatized and weary Ukrainian society. "Using Telegram, agitational propaganda tries to make Ukrainians lose hope in the further struggle by hyperbolizing existing problems and provoking sensitive topics, such as Western support, mobilization, or economic issues."

Panelists agreed that the Ukrainian government generally does not create manipulative information, but they were skeptical about any significant professional ramifications.

Most media do not moderate comments, allowing hate speech to spread. Hate speech by Ukrainians, even state officials towards the Russian Federation, is often tolerated and justified as a natural response to the war.

The new media law, which went into force in March 2023, imposes fines and distribution bans on registered and anonymous content producers for severe violations. Such content has included hate speech, support for the Russian government's aggression, and propaganda. However, these measures will be fully enacted only from March 2024.

Manipulative information is spread covertly on platforms where detection and removal are challenging. According to BBC Verify, even verified accounts disseminate manipulative information on X. "Moderation in X worsened globally, and TikTok is also harmful for Ukraine, but there has been successful communication with Meta to improve moderation and remove coordinated Russian campaigns," a data journalist said.

A research report by Texty revealed that YouTube recommendation algorithms fail to consider "Russia's war against Ukraine while offering personalized recommendations to Ukrainians." The analysts suggested that algorithms should be trained to identify and omit pro-Russian content from recommendations in Ukraine and other countries, and that YouTube should consider Ukraine's ban on disseminating content from individuals deemed national security threats.

Ukrainian law enforcement continues to identify and prosecute the most harmful Telegram channels with clear Kremlin propaganda, as well as bloggers spreading such content or disclosing sensitive military information. Government authorities admit that Telegram represents a serious threat to cyber and information security, as it is a non-transparent platform with unknown funding sources and data security protocols. Concerns also persist regarding potential collaboration with Russian government security services. Efforts to enforce regulations on Telegram have been unsuccessful thus far, but the government is not yet ready for a complete ban. Telegram remains very popular among state authorities, who have built extensive networks of channels and bots with thousands of subscribers. Quality media have also turned to Telegram to keep their audiences.

> **As a result of the war and its implications, media now focus on mainstream war-related topics such as front line reports, human stories, mobilization, taxes, political scandals, and corruption, overlooking many other important issues.**

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

According to a survey by the Razumkov Center, Ukrainian is the native language for 78 percent of the population. The government established high quotas for broadcast content in Ukrainian language several years ago. Starting in 2022, online media were required by law to maintain their primary website versions in Ukrainian. In 2023, media complied with this requirement at a factual rate of 99 percent, with Ukrainian songs accounting for 57 percent of radio station playlists. The government funds Russian-language TV channels FreeDom and Dom, targeting Russian-speaking audiences in the occupied territories and abroad. Ukraine law does not set language quotas for social media.

Content producers reach the majority of citizens with viewpoints representing a diversity of genders, ethnic identities, and religious backgrounds. However, with television news unified by the telethon group, media have not presented an array of ideologies or perspectives during the war. Non-professional content producers do offer a variety of alternatives on social media platforms.

In general, the panelists denied any discrimination or exclusion of certain groups from media coverage. Marginalized groups might be absent from mainstream media due to perceived low audience interest, but these citizens have alternative platforms to express themselves. IMI reports that without regular partnerships with relevant organizations, coverage of LGBTQ+ is poor.

IMI's monitoring showed that men dominate as expert commentators in media, comprising 84 percent, and they are the main actors in publications in 81 percent of cases. Woman experts most often comment on topics related to economics, business, foreign affairs, and weather. Texty's survey of the most popular YouTube interviewees found only two Russian women among the top 30 experts discussing socio-political issues. In addition, IMI's monitoring of the 50 most popular online media outlets showed that almost half of them contained hate speech, sexism, discriminatory language, and stereotypes towards women.

Communities in occupied territories are excluded from coverage. Ukrainian media do not have access to these areas and using local residents as sources risks exposing them to persecution by Russian occupying forces. Media outlets and journalists have relocated from insecure frontline territories, resulting in certain communities being underreported.

A survey conducted by the regulatory body National Television and Radio Broadcasting Council (NTRBC), showed that of 206 media outlets with 4,800 employees, women hold 77 percent of journalism positions

and 52 percent of managerial positions. Women are predominant in creative roles such as journalists, anchors, marketing, or public relations. They constitute the majority in the youngest age group (under 35), but in the oldest age group (61+), they are a minority at only six percent. In the largest middle-age segment, men and women are almost equally represented. Men dominate in technical positions and in media operations, both in television and radio.

Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced.

According to the All-Ukrainian Advertising Coalition, the advertising market saw a 77 percent increase in 2023, after a 63 percent decline in 2022, and the coalition forecasts a further 28 percent growth in 2024. Radio and internet advertising levels have rebounded to pre-war levels. Television advertising grew by 49 percent to UAH 3.87 billion ($100.9 million). Digital advertising on streaming platforms has become a new category with UAH 450 million ($11.7 million). Print advertising saw a modest four percent increase, primarily in national press, totaling UAH 235 million ($6.1 million). Radio advertising surged by 160 percent to UAH 865 million ($22.6 million). Internet advertising grew by 78 percent to UAH 12.81 billion ($334 million).

Despite these optimistic figures, all socio-political media have experienced a substantial decrease in advertising and other traditional revenues since the full-

> **According to Ukrainian intelligence reports, the latest and ongoing Kremlin special operation is aimed at inflaming internal tensions in Ukraine, destabilizing the country, and instilling panic among its citizens.**

scale invasion. People prefer to donate to military or humanitarian purposes rather than pay for media content. Consequently, numerous media outlets have been forced to downsize their operations and reduce staff, particularly in the regions. International donors provide grants—a lifeline for many media organizations—but this type of funding is insufficient and steadily drying up.

Nonetheless, all major media outlets have managed to avoid shutdown from financial problems. Some diversified their profile: two of the largest groups, Starlight Media and 1+1 Media, launched their non-news

channels and resumed entertainment productions. As Ukrainska Pravda CEO Andrii Boborykin told Detector Media, most media still have higher audience levels than before the full-scale invasion, and businesses are restoring advertising budgets. Even so, the decline in traffic to pre-invasion levels is outpacing the return of advertisers.
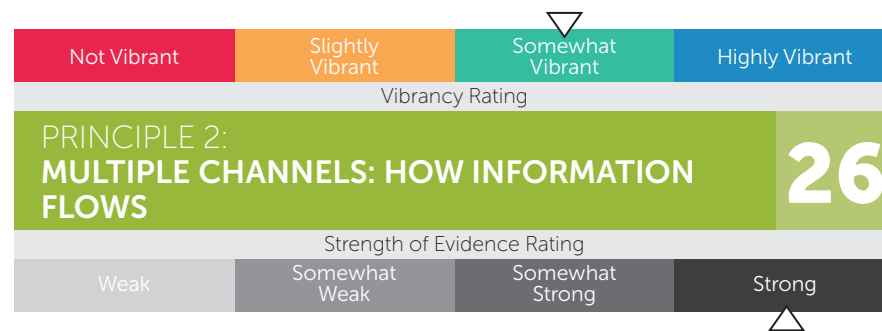
YouTube news and information channels are experiencing remarkable growth, providing revenues that support other newsroom operations. An analysis of the most popular Telegram channels suggests that it is now one of the most lucrative media businesses, with a wide range of monetization opportunities, but it operates within a shadow economy. A regional publisher noted that national advertising agencies have scaled back their activities in the regions, thus leaving more money locally. However, local advertisers have turned to Google, Instagram, and Telegram for advertising, diverting revenues away from traditional media.

State funding for the United News telethon, state TV channels Rada and Armiya TB, and Russian-language international broadcasting distorts the media market and undermines editorial independence. The government has spent UAH 1.12 billion ($27.7 million) on the telethon since its launch, allocating UAH 1.7 billion ($44.3 million) in 2024, while the public broadcaster will be underfunded again. In 2023, the government allocated UAH 60 million ($1.6 million) for The Gaze, a new English-language news site, that has yet to achieve significant audience reach.

Local governments can pay media outlets to cover their activities—an outdated and contradictory practice that media experts believe needs to change in the future. Some local media members reported that their communities either lack funds for media coverage or are non-transparent and inefficient in spending on loyal outlets, said a panelist developing hyperlocal newsrooms.

The mobilization of men and relocation of women undermined the labor market, leading to a severe shortage of qualified workers in the media and various industries. Many media organizations had to reduce costs, including journalists' salaries, which has led to a decrease in content quality. While a journalist's salary in the capital might be sufficient to support a family, it might only amount to two times the subsistence minimum in regions. Consequently, many journalists had to leave the profession, a fact-checker said.

Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant	Somewhat Vibrant	Highly Vibrant

Vibrancy Rating

PRINCIPLE 2: MULTIPLE CHANNELS: HOW INFORMATION FLOWS	26

Strength of Evidence Rating

Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong	Strong

Principle 2 was the highest-scoring principle of this year's Ukraine study, buoyed by higher scores for indicators on access to information channels, channels for government information, and diverse channels for information. Scores for the remaining indicators slightly decreased. Panelists noted a trend of increased pressure on anti-corruption journalists and other voices critical of the government. Intimidation tactics were accompanied by social media discreditation campaigns, especially in anonymous Telegram channels.

This year, panelists were more critical of restrictions on access to public information, citing issues such as closed registers, vague replies or unjustified denials regarding information requests, challenges in reporting from the front line, and restricted access to parliamentary sessions and their broadcasts. A key concern is the continuation of the United News telethon, despite its diminishing relevance and viewership, which reinforces the strength of state-controlled broadcasting. The panelists also lamented the funds allocation to an increasing number of state-controlled channels and observed that controlling editorial policy is easier at state channels compared to the public broadcaster.

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

Ukraine continues to demonstrate strong legislation protecting freedom of speech and press, in line with European norms, a media lawyer on the panel said. Restrictions--such as limited access to frontline zones, accreditation requirements with armed forces, and bans of publishing information on defense and national security--are justified derogations of Article 10 (Freedom of Expression) of the European Convention on Human Rights. Court practice with defamation cases remains in favor of diligent journalists, but some government criticism has led to pressure on the press. Overall, citizens have enough opportunities for information collection, publication, and discussion. The proper implementation of the new media law, enacted in March 2023, will be crucial for shaping future perspectives and addressing concerns, a lawyer added.

Libel has been a civil law issue since 2011, and previous attempts to criminalize it have failed. Ukrainian law protects journalistic sources, and the precedent set by the case *Sedletska versus Ukraine,* which was decided in 2021 in the European Court of Human Rights, has positively influenced similar cases in Ukrainian courts. However, issues remain with properly investigating and prosecuting perpetrators that hinder journalists in their professional activities.

The panelists noted that the ongoing telethon can be viewed as a form of partial censorship or media requisition. The illegal shutdowns of Priamyi, 5 Kanal, and Espreso TV channels from the digital broadcasting network in 2022 were major violations but are the only examples of how the government pressured media distribution systems to censor media that year. An editor on the panel stressed that the government has not introduced total war censorship during the two years of conflict; however, the government has significantly eroded the trust it once held.

Journalists exercise self-censorship when covering defense issues,

> **"Journalists exercise self-censorship when covering defense issues, fearing they might inadvertently jeopardize national security.**

fearing they might inadvertently jeopardize national security. In addition, they tend to refrain from criticizing the government or investigating misconduct, as it could ignite public outrage and censure towards them.

In 2023, IMI documented 150 freedom-of-speech violations in Ukraine. Russian armed forces committed 67 of them during the full-scale invasion. They killed 27 media workers, two of whom were reporting. The Russian military targeted at least 12 filming crews and journalists, and their shelling damaged eight media offices. Four journalists were reported kidnapped by Russian forces, and 26 Ukrainian media professionals remain imprisoned by them.

As for Ukrainian perpetrators, IMI recorded 83 freedom of speech violations—a slight decrease from 2022. The main types include obstruction of legal journalistic work (29 cases), denial of access to public information (20 cases), cybercrime, and death threats (11 cases each).

While Ukraine had only a few cases in the first months of the year, autumn was marked by a series of smear campaigns. The targets were anti-corruption activists, as well as prominent media figures that had criticized the government at the National Media Talk conference. Discreditations were especially prevalent on anonymous Telegram channels and even appeared in some media outlets and YouTube channels. The most notorious incidents involved the attack on the apartment of Yurii Nikolov, an investigative journalist at NashiGroshi, and the surveillance and phone tapping of the investigative team of Bihus.Info in late December 2023.

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

While legal and social norms do not prevent any groups from access to media, Ukraine outlets continue to fall short in providing services for people with hearing and vision disabilities. Digital communication

regulations do not explicitly restrict users or content producers. Ukraine has been blocking Russian media and social networks since 2017, with 16 media outlets added to the blockage in 2023, but they are available via VPN. In a poll of 10 frontline and de-occupied territories, 16 percent of the respondents said they consume Russian news sources weekly.

Panelists agreed that information channels are accessible across Ukraine, except in the frontline and occupied territories. The war accelerated the decline of print media distribution and delivery systems. Before the invasion, Ukraine's ICT infrastructure was adequate—better developed in larger cities than in smaller towns, rural areas, and regions near the borders, where the media landscape is narrower. The Russian military attacks partially damaged existing infrastructure in many areas, forcing numerous people to relocate.

Since spring 2023, Ukrainians have experienced fewer successful attacks on energy infrastructure. However, frontline territories continue to face interruptions due to frequent shelling, which in turn has increased economic challenges. Business entities and residents have become better prepared for electricity outages and communications interruptions with portable generators, power banks, and other reserve devices. Mobile operators ensure roaming access between their networks nationwide for both calls and internet access. Most people have the economic means to access a variety of media channels, especially online. Ukraine ranks 16th among countries with the lowest mobile data costs.

Panelists could only assume that people in occupied territories have limited access to internet and radio, as they are otherwise cut off from Ukrainian media sources.

Kyivstar, one of the largest mobile operators, serving 25 million users, faced a massive cyberattack in December 2023. Originating from Russia, the attack demonstrated the vulnerability of operators; the threat of personal data theft; and the potential to disrupt to other services, such as payment terminals, ATMs, alarm security systems, and all forms of communication. Residents in larger cities were able to quickly switch to other operators, albeit at inflated prices, but others remained without connectivity and access to digital media.

Smartphones are the primary vehicle for news content for most Ukrainians, with usage by 87 percent overall. Research by Kantar indicates a significant digital shift, with a doubling of Ukrainian-language internet searches from January 2022 to August 2023. Television remains popular, with 85 percent tuning in monthly and showing a 10 percent rise in people who increased their consumption time from 2022. In social media, Telegram leads with 88 percent usage, followed by Viber (77 percent), Facebook (67 percent), Instagram (57 percent), TikTok (40 percent), WhatsApp (19 percent), X (11 percent), and Threads (six percent). Messaging apps are popular, with 70 percent of the population using them, according to a Gradus Research survey. Ukrainians spend more than four hours online daily, with the most active users up to eight hours.

Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for government information.

Ukraine's 2011 law on access to public information, considered one of the most advanced globally, has remained unchanged despite the invasion. However, martial law has hindered its implementation, a media lawyer argued. Panelists provided plenty of examples of national and local authorities exploiting the state of war as justification for withholding information. At the end of 2023, a parliamentary working group started the process of adapting the law to wartime conditions.

Another significant achievement for civil society was the establishment of numerous public registers and open data sets. By 2023, Ukraine rose to third place in the European Open Data Maturity ranking, with high scores for open data policy, the functionality of the open data portal, and the impact and quality of open data.

Ukraine has a united open data portal, and a public spending portal, while the private Opendatabot offers a free basic version to facilitate public access to open data. Furthermore, the Clarity Project, a private company, launched the Open Data Watchdog service to monitor actions with open data sets on the state portal, with the intent of uncovering any data administrator abuses.

Despite these achievements, the majority of public registers that were closed after the full-scale invasion remain inaccessible. State statistics, reports, and many decisions by state bodies became confidential. Some authorities stopped updating their websites and open registers properly, said a freelance investigative reporter. The government limits citizen access to government sessions and discussions, with the exception of certain public events. Panelists observed a decrease in transparency regarding budgets of public interest.

In December 2023, thanks to a parliamentary vote, the register of asset declarations of public officials became accessible. Only some declarations, primarily those of officials in the armed forces and security services, remain undisclosed. The invasion prompted the suspension of public official e-declarations, but the process resumed in September 2023. In August, the Asset Recovery and Management Agency unveiled the register of arrested assets.

Since the full-scale invasion, journalists have been denied access to the parliament for security reasons, with live broadcast of plenary sessions banned and only available on YouTube with delays. A poll shows that 65 percent of Ukrainians believe that journalists must attend parliamentary sessions during martial law, and 57 percent said that live broadcasts should be required.

Civil society has also called for greater transparency in parliamentary committees. The committee for freedom of speech, led by pro-Russian politician Nestor Shufrych, was ranked in a poll as one of the least transparent. Following his arrest on suspicion of treason, Yaroslav Yurchyshyn, a respected civil society leader, assumed the committee's leadership, and announced efforts to re-accredit journalists for the parliament.

Civil society and media have repeatedly urged the government to open public registers and grant access to public information, including allowing citizens access to parliamentary committees. The government referred to security reasons, but some deputies regularly publish information about the sessions live on their social media accounts.

Since March 2023, Ukrainian war correspondents and the Committee to Protect Journalists have pushed the Ukrainian government to establish clear accreditation rules, and halt pressure on journalists for their reporting. Authorities heavily regulate and limit journalists' access to frontline and neighboring areas marked as "color zones[1]." Accreditation from the armed forces can be revoked for alleged misbehavior. Journalists continue to complain about the complexity of reporting from these areas, where their access is often blocked despite local civilians being able to move around with mobile phones. Some journalists said that working in southern regions is totally blocked, and military personnel are banned from speaking to journalists. These obstacles prompt foreign media to reduce staff and lose interest, even aside from the effects on Ukrainian journalists.

According to the panelists, the general population is likely less aware of the peculiarities of accessing public information. Citizens are not intimidated so much as disinterested compared to activists and journalists. The government does not exclude any groups from exercising this right.

Most government agencies employ press officers who will suppress or manipulate information, ignore information requests, and complicate the process of receiving comments. These spokespersons play key roles in preventing officials from disclosing unfavorable information to journalists.

Each state agency has a website and accounts in social media, and staff are obliged to publish numerous public data. Nevertheless, as a fact-checker noted, some media and Telegram channels loyal to the government have exclusive access to information. Even telethon member journalists complain that "courtier bloggers and channels" have priority access to insider information.

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1   Red zones are categorized as the most dangerous areas, and journalists could not access these areas at all in 2023. In 2023, yellow zones were less dangerous but required a military press officer escort; journalists could work freely in green zones.

Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow.

Ukraine has legislation against monopoly ownership of broadcast media, but enforcement was inadequate even before the full-scale invasion, as authorities struggled to identify television market shares and potential monopolies. Internet providers and cable TV operators are not monopolized.

Before the 2022 invasion, the television market was dominated by four major oligarch-owned groups. Since then, many media holdings have undergone changes. In July 2022, Rinat Akhmetov shut down his media business, leading former employees to launch My-Ukraina TV channel. The channel rapidly obtained a digital license and joined the United News telethon. The Inter Media Group is under new management, Dmytro Firtash increased his ownership in the group, and Serhii Levochkin relinquished his key shareholder position. Ihor Kolomoyskyi, owner of 1+1 Media, was arrested in a fraud investigation. Its holding corporate rights were transferred to management personnel, leading to the establishment of new legal entities no longer under his control. Viktor Pinchuk's Starlight Media remains unchanged in ownership.

Since 2021, Ukraine law has required disclosure of beneficiary owners of any legal entity, although issues persist with unmasking owners hiding behind proxies. IMI found that transparency of the most popular online media outlets increased to 68 percent, up from 38 percent in 2022. However, only 36 percent publish their editorial policies, 28 percent disclose their beneficiary owners, and 92 percent provide contact information.

The new media law, a prerequisite for Ukraine's EU accession, was enacted in April 2023. It cancelled six outdated laws, and its full implementation will span several years. The law granted the NTRBC extended authority to oversee all types of media, introduced

> **The most concerning trend in recent years is the state returning to be the dominant media owner, an editor on the panel highlighted. The government establishes media outlets, issues licenses, and indirectly controls content production in major media through state subsidies.**

regulations for online media, and simplified broadcast licensing. The NTRBC has adopted relevant bylaws and initiated print and online media registrations, requiring even existing outlets to re-register. While normally voluntary, registration is mandatory for print media during times of martial law. For online media, registration reduces liability for violations and allows them to participate in co-regulatory bodies. The law simplified the registration process for broadcasters and allowed channels or programs originating from the EU to broadcast without registration. Other foreign media are required to register, while audiovisual content from Russia is blocked.

An estimated 10 new TV channels obtained licenses and digital airwaves in 2023, including the new Armiya TB, run by the Ministry of Defense. Many digital frequencies became available following closures in 2022, and no disputes arose over the NTRBC allocation of frequencies. However, the illegal removal of three oppositional digital channels in 2022 raises concerns that a government decision can arbitrarily exclude any media entity from broadcasting.

The public broadcaster UA: PBC, with national and regional TV channels, radio stations, and social media, is regarded as one of the best in complying with professional standards and contributes to informative and educational coverage. It stands out as the only media entity within the telethon presenting all political parties proportionally, according to their representation in the current parliament.

Internet service providers do not discriminate based on user, content, or source or destination addresses.

Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.

The overall influence of major media oligarch owners has decreased, as their political ambitions have diminished in the absence of elections

in 2023 and probably for the foreseeable future. Therefore, they no longer feel the need to promote their interests, and are constrained from economic control by reduced financial resources, an editor on the panel explained. On the other hand, media with owner support or state subsidies have become more dependent on these funding sources. Many regional media organizations need to establish a clear distinction between newsroom operations and business operations, a panelist argued.

The telethon members unified wartime newscasts and eroded the influence of owners on editorial stances. Still, other channels, online platforms, and social media pages of telethon-producing media groups keep promoting owners' agendas. According to the panelists, most consumers believe that the telethon presents the position of the government, and tends to present optimistic perspectives, provoking disputes in the society.

The most concerning trend in recent years is the state returning to be the dominant media owner, an editor on the panel highlighted. The government establishes media outlets, issues licenses, and indirectly controls content production in major media through state subsidies. United News' inception of the telethon in 2022 was justifiable for consolidating wartime information dissemination, but the government's adherence to this policy contradicts its international obligations. The merging runs counter to the trend of liberalization and destatization reforms pursued before 2020. "It will be difficult to reverse this menacing trend," the editor warned.

The European Commission's report on Ukraine's progress towards EU integration stressed the need to restore an independent media landscape. The report specifically refers to the launch of the telethon following the invasion, and the shutdown of three oppositional channels from digital broadcasting.

Throughout 2023, the telethon experienced a gradual decline in viewership as well as public trust. While in May 2022, 69 percent of respondents trusted the telethon, by February 2024, only 36 percent did, and 47 percent expressed distrust. Across all regions in Ukraine, trust in
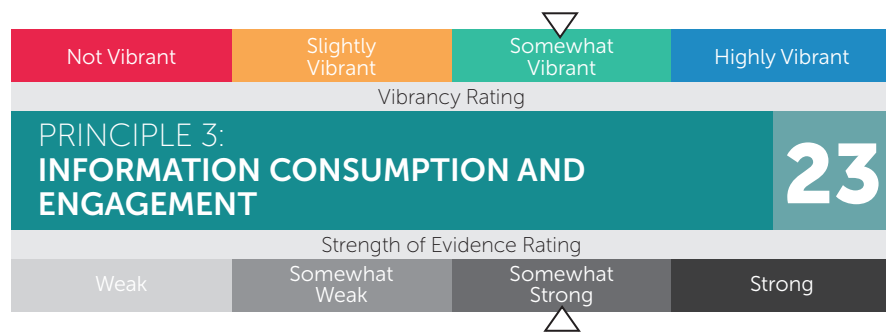
the telethon does not exceed 40 percent. Its viewership decreased from 40 percent in March 2022 to 14 percent by the end of 2022; at the end of 2023, it was down to 10 percent.

Since its launch in 2017, the public broadcaster, Suspilne, has grappled with underfunding. In 2023, the state budget allocated UAH 1.5 billion ($39.1 million). That amount is only 30 percent of the legally required funding (a minimum of two percent of expenditures in the previous year's budget). One of its channels, – UA Pershyi, continues to produce and broadcast the telethon. According to media expert Ihor Kulias, Suspilne is a rare example of a channel with an independent editorial line, inviting critics of President Zelensky as guests and challenging official statements.

Panelists noted that non-professional content producers and anonymous Telegram channels have significant informational influence, comparable to professional media.

Panelists saw no evidence during 2023 of political influence on NTRBC; in previous decades, government officials and oligarchs often meddled in its affairs. The new media law has significantly increased NTRBC authority and independence. While its structure remains largely unchanged—four members appointed by the president, four by the parliament—candidates are now nominated by the industry and selected competitively. The law also guarantees funding to ensure NTRBC stays independent. However, constitutional amendments are needed to further improve the appointment procedure and ensure an odd number of members. Such amendments will only be possible after martial law ends.

State media do not enjoy lower barriers to access infrastructure, resources, or sole access to the public information.

Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant	Somewhat Vibrant	Highly Vibrant

Vibrancy Rating

PRINCIPLE 3: **INFORMATION CONSUMPTION AND ENGAGEMENT**	**23**

Strength of Evidence Rating

Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong	Strong

Principle 3's overall score decreased slightly over the 2022 VIBE study. The ongoing war increased the risks to information security and digital hygiene. Donor-funded projects and government agencies provide numerous training courses on digital security and media literacy tools, but a relatively small number of people show interest in developing these skills. While cyberattacks and cyberfraud are becoming more sophisticated, responses to them also improve. The related indicator received one of the higher scores for this principle, although it also decreased slightly in comparison with the 2023 VIBE Ukraine study. The media literacy indicator received one of the lowest scores in this principle, indicating that societal resilience to the challenges of war remains insufficient. Although Ukrainians are increasingly aware of Kremlin propaganda and tactics, many people still lack adequate critical thinking and understanding of journalism standards and media quality. Amid the war, social media debates are often low-level discourse.

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

Legal protections for data privacy and digital security are in place, along with provisions in the criminal code addressing cyber-fraud, and they do not impinge on personal freedoms. However, some panelists noted that these laws do not address large tech platforms or social media.

Often users must agree to non-negotiable terms of service to use apps or social media platforms, automatically allowing processing their personal data beyond the users' control.

A panelist flagged the growing trend of the state accumulating personal data, which might threaten personal freedoms soon. Due to the war, the government has presented numerous initiatives seeking to combine state registries, consolidate individual data, and expand video surveillance for security reasons.

Also, under the pretext of national security, the government restricts most official registries and the majority of city data portals. According to Transparency International Ukraine, only 25 percent of cities published data in 2022—a trend that continued in 2023.

The Cyber Protection Center of the State Service for Special Connections and Information Security reported 1,105 cyber incidents in 2023, which is a 62.5 percent increase from 2022. A digital security expert on the panel revealed security threats of a deeper extent than expected, in particular for media websites. Well-qualified security experts are scarce and expensive, making them out of reach for many media organizations to strengthen digital security audits and responsive protection measures. Some outlets might benefit from donor-funded digital security services, which are expanding in number and scope. Access remains limited, however.

> **The Cyber Protection Center of the State Service for Special Connections and Information Security reported 1,105 cyber incidents in 2023, which is a 62.5 percent increase from 2022.**

Digital tools to counter DDOS attacks are available for media outlets, and such attacks are handled. While cyberattacks have become more sophisticated, the methods to scrub them are just as effective. The attack on Kyivstar highlighted the importance of digital and data security, although at a significant cost.

A regional media expert emphasized the limited digital security measures in local media, citing a tendency for newsrooms to neglect proper maintenance after initial introduction. The panelists said local

outlets often do not have relevant in-house experts and they fail to prioritize these issues.

A communication manager on the panel noted a concerning trend among media professionals: Many do not use two-step authentication or other protective measures, indicating an even lower level of public awareness. A fact-checker highlighted successful hacking attempts on social media accounts of media outlets and initiatives through phishing, due to poor digital literacy among their staff.

The government and civil society organizations (CSOs) provide digital literacy training. Various online courses on digital and information security are available to the public through the governmental portal Diia. Digital Education, and educational platforms like Prometheus, VUM, and EdEra.

According to a survey by the Ministry of Digital Transformation, 59.6 percent of the population have at least basic digital literacy skills, which is a 12.6 percent increase over the last four years. Of these respondents, 38 percent have high-level digital skills. Approximately 91 percent of respondents agreed that internet access is a basic need, with 94 percent having internet access at home, and 50 percent adapt and find alternative internet sources in case of a power outage. Sixty percent of Ukrainians faced at least one case of data security violation in the last year. Among the adults in the survey, 42 percent use digital security tools, with five percent using paid services. The study shows a clear correlation between the level of digital literacy and the use of digital security tools.

The survey also indicates that the digitalization of state services simplifies usage, but some users, especially in higher age brackets, are concerned about the security of personal data. This may become an obstacle to expand state electronic tools. In 2022, Ukrainians lost UAH 1 billion ($27 million) due to cyberfraud, primarily involving fake schemes that promise payments as prizes from the state, charity funds, and banks.

A digital-security expert highlighted the confusion surrounding social media algorithms, exacerbated by the boom of AI-powered tools that conduct deeper analysis of audience behavior. Even some developers struggle to explain the results of AI-assisted algorithms.

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

Media literacy is a prominent topic in Ukraine. Debunking manipulative information and fact-checking is widespread and popular in the media. Although some panelists criticized the government for its insufficient, inefficient, or non-strategic efforts, the state does support many activities and agencies focused on media literacy. Since 2021, the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy has run Filter, the national media literacy project, while the ministry's Center for Strategic Communications and Information Security runs Spravdi, aimed at identifying and debunking Kremlin information attacks. The Ministry of Science and Education runs projects targeting various demographics. The Ministry of Digital Transformation runs courses and video tutorials at its Diia. Digital Education platform, and there is the state Center for Countering Disinformation under the National Security and Defense Council.

While media literacy can be taught as elective subject in schools, the complexities arising from the war present a challenge in allocating paid hours and securing qualified teachers. However, the recently adopted basic education standard integrates media literacy across all subjects.

For more than a decade, foreign donors have supported media literacy projects, including IREX's Learn to Discern initiative since 2015. The Academy of Ukrainian Press also contributes to media literacy integration. Most media literacy projects target specific demographics rather than the general population. Many run online courses, fact-check, monitor, and debunk information manipulation, such as NotaEnota, Po Toi Bik Novyn, and How Not to Become a Vegetable. Still, according to an Internews survey, only 33 percent of respondents are aware of fact-checking services, and of those, only 33 percent use them.

In 2022 and earlier, "significant efforts were made to convince society that media can be toxic and dangerous, leading to a general loss of trust,

leading to wartime calls for relying only on official sources," an editor on the panel said. Now, the challenge is to restore trust in quality media, cease labeling anything disliked as "fake," and avoid blindly accepting government statements, especially when they are driven by self-interest, the editor added.

Despite the promotion of media literacy, changes in media consumption habits made the efforts almost obsolete, a panelist with editorial background noted. Teaching people to critically engage with television has been undermined by an unexpected surge among the older population consuming content through platforms like TikTok, Viber, and Telegram—which is not covered in media literacy handbooks.

The Media Literacy Index, published by Detector Media in April 2023, showed a significant increase in the general media literacy of Ukrainians between 2020 and 2022. The percentage of the population with above-average media literacy levels increased from 55 to 81 percent, while the average value of the indicator rose from 4.8 to 5.9 points. The index revealed a correlation between higher education levels and increased media literacy.

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

Journalists and citizens exercise their right to free speech and information. The diversity of news sources, consumption patterns, and the relatively high media literacy index score suggest that people regularly engage with objective information.

In a January 2024 study by the Razumkov Center, 51 percent of respondents reported no change in the level of freedom of speech since the beginning of 2023, while 30 percent perceived a decline. An IMI poll of 164 journalists across Ukraine found that 41 percent believed that the

> **" Teaching people to critically engage with television has been undermined by an unexpected surge among the older population consuming content through platforms like TikTok, Viber, and Telegram—which is not covered in media literacy handbooks.**

status of freedom of speech worsened, while 33.6 percent thought that it remained unchanged.

Martial law imposes tighter restrictions on governmental buildings, so some public discussions and hearings required by law are held in public spaces or online. The events appear most frequently on YouTube, on radio stations, or in social media. These discussions typically involve hosts interviewing experts, sometimes live.

Since United News introduced the telethon, traditional talk shows have mostly ceased airing on television. Some exceptions include the talk show *New Count*, available since March 2023 on Suspilne local channels; YouTube presenters; Ukrainske Radio; and a talk show of Ukrainska Pravda launched in October. Another example is the oppositional Priamyi channel, which was removed from airwaves in 2022, but launched the show *Already Well-Timed* on YouTube. Analysts noted that it marks the return of a classic pre-war talk show— bringing back political PR, imbalance, and manipulations, but also providing the type of platform for critical viewpoints that is absent from the telethon's complacent commentaries.

Ukrainian media interact with their audiences through blogs, streams, and comments.　These platforms are also avenues to disseminate unverified information, as moderators often fail to delete such content even after complaints are lodged, a television journalist on the panel said. Online discussions tend to be emotionally charged, not constructive, and full of manipulations, hate speech, personal insults, trolls, and bot activities. Debates in social media are not satisfactory, a fact-checker concluded.

Citizens and journalists may complain about information manipulation online. The Commission of Journalism Ethics, the Independent Media Council, MediaCheck, and NTRBC address relevant complaints, but self-

regulatory bodies lack legal power over media outlets or journalists. Moreover, social media platforms respond less effectively to complaints.

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

Major professional media outlets actively survey their audience, have tools for providing feedback, publish corrections and refutations, and build audience trust through clubs and events. A regional publisher confirmed that online media outlets can use numerous tools or audience research, including monitoring reactions to each publication. While the state of marketing is weak among Ukrainian media, most innovative outlets research their audience, a television journalist added.

Following the full-scale invasion in 2022, the television ratings panel was temporarily suspended and then re-launched at the beginning of 2023. The Television Industry Committee, a trade association representing the largest TV companies, commissioned Nielsen to oversee the panel. Market players are confident that data provided by the panel are sufficient for advertising sales and strategic decision-making. Still, these media members criticized the panel for not being able to capture data for smaller channels and short advertisements, and not accounting for the growing segment of IPTV and streaming.

Radio stations have also resumed audience research conducted by Kantar, revealing growth in audience reach, which has contributed to a rapid increase in advertising revenue.

According to a data journalist on the panel, technical tools for audience analysis on online platforms have improved and become more affordable for media outlets. Feedback from the audience has also become more accessible, although its effectiveness depends on platform policies regarding moderation, removal of bots, and the presence of Russian bots which lodge complaints that can influence the availability of a post.
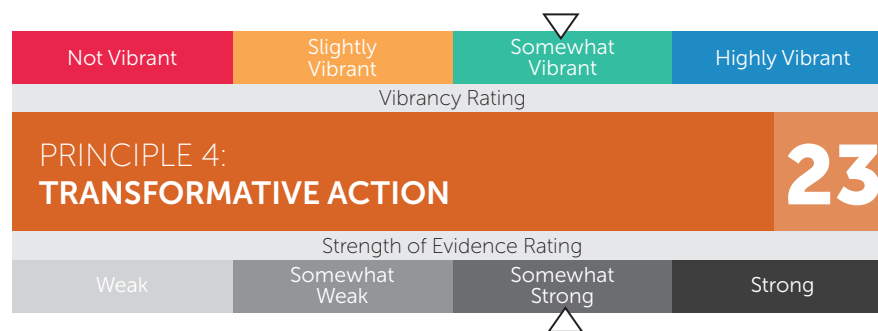
Media organizations are increasingly cooperating with NGOs rather than with the government, a communication expert noted. The panelists agreed that donor-funded initiatives often foster collaboration and interaction among media, CSOs, and the government, with some stable coalitions based on mutual interests regardless of donor funding. However, some panelists complained about the difficulty in finding media partners in the regions, while others noted that cooperation between CSOs and media is more feasible when CSOs have budgets for media-related activities.

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

Only three of 15 panelists acknowledged the existence of community media—seeing various non-profit media organizations or grassroots media at embryonic stages, often found on social media, as serving community interests. However, other panelists reasoned that since Ukrainian legislation does not define community media, the country has no such sector.

An estimated 82 municipal television and radio broadcasters belong to local governmental bodies. According to the new media law, these outlets are required to undergo transformation into independent community broadcasters. The reform must be completed within six months after the cancellation of the martial law. Currently, only a few media companies are piloting this process.

Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant	Somewhat Vibrant	Highly Vibrant

Vibrancy Rating

PRINCIPLE 4: **TRANSFORMATIVE ACTION**	**23**

Strength of Evidence Rating

Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong	Strong

Principle 4's score is the same as in 2022, although its four of its indicators slightly fluctuated. The panelists expressed concerns over the relatively lower consumption rates of independent and reliable news

sources compared to the telethon forum and Telegram channels, as well as the lack of in-depth discourse. The lowest score in this principle, assessing individuals' use of information, increased by two points from the 2023 VIBE Ukraine study, but the panelists did not elaborate significantly upon the reasons for the change. The indicator examining civil society's contribution to robust information flows remained the highest scoring, but it decreased slightly. The change is likely due to lower-than-desired civic participation in key decisions, and content producers insufficiently engaging with civil society on covering socially important issues. The government's use of quality information remains consistent with the 2023 study, but officials continue to struggle with effectively communicating and justifying important decisions to the public. While the government has somewhat increased reactions to misconduct uncovered by media, its responses remain selective and, at times, inadequate.

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

Various non-partisan and reliable news sources are available in Ukraine, mostly online, and some with audiences numbering in the millions. IMI's whitelist of online media upholding high professional standards has remained largely consistent over the past few years. Panelists even recommended promoting this list to the public in an effort to increase media literacy and counter information manipulation. In 2023, IMI and Detector Media identified trustworthy media across Ukraine, but the published map sparked discussions and objections from regional journalists that contested choices.

The Internews survey shows that quality media tend to attract smaller audiences. Notably, almost half of the population relies on multiple news sources.

Panelists agreed that most opinions are exchanged on social media platforms and in the comments sections of media outlets, but the discussions are usually not constructive. Many newsrooms have

established online channels for communicating with their audiences, and some large media outlets organize meetings with their readers.

Discussion in social media can never replace in-depth discourse within traditional media platforms, an editor on the panel argued. The ongoing war limits such discussions due to self-censorship, calls for unity and solidarity, and government resistance to heated political debates or exposing its misconduct. Although the president's decision on the united information policy effectively banned political talk shows and discussion programs, the law has no explicit prohibition. "Nonetheless, if the war and martial law persist for several years, the society has to return to inclusive and comprehensive discussions on pressing issues," the editor added.

"Ukrainians are often confined within information bubbles, choosing media that reinforce their pre-existing views," a television journalist on the panel said. Despite these silos people still find platforms for engaging with opposing viewpoints. Such debates are not restricted, although pro-Russian narratives are largely excluded from this context, and the majority of society generally does not tolerate them, another panelist added.

The panelists had no evidence on whether people usually form their perspectives around fact-based information. "People base their analysis on information they trust, which is not necessarily reliable," one panelist said.

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

Several panelists acknowledged the absence of systematic research providing evidence on the information citizens use for their decisions, leading many to rely on assumptions for their scores and comments. Some panelists held the view that the information sphere contains quality and reliable sources as well as manipulative and false information. People might unwittingly use unreliable information to their personal detriment or to the detriment of the public good, panelists concluded.

Professional media do not always provide quality information, and gaps are filled by non-professional content creators that often disseminate manipulative information, a television journalist said. A fact-checker noted the rapid spread of false and harmful information, influencing decision-making processes, with many examples during the pandemic and previous elections. In 2023, topics rife with Russian government propaganda and populism, such as war, mobilization, corruption, refugees, and internally displaced people, were particularly susceptible to manipulation, panelists claimed.

Despite frequent anti-vaccination campaigns by various groups, a survey cited by a media literacy expert showed that 88 percent of respondents exhibited a positive or neutral attitude to vaccination, with 52 percent never having refused vaccination.

VoxCheck, a fact-checking project, documented approximately 1,900 cases of information manipulation between June 2022 and June 2023. The topics focused on chemical and nuclear threats to Ukrainians, US biolaboratories, humanitarian and food crises, grain export, claims of civil hospitals being overloaded with military patients, epidemic infections, and attempts to discredit the Ukrainian healthcare system in general. "These materials would usually refer to certain facts from reputable sources, then add a few false facts, and manipulate all of them to be able to present as evidence," an investigative reporter commented.

IMI analyzed how the Ministry of Health and major media outlets unintentionally misinformed the public about the implementation of electronic prescriptions for medicine that had previously required written prescriptions. This reporting led to long lines of panicking people at pharmacies buying numerous medications. Other IMI articles revealed how Ukrainian media outlets manipulated, fabricated or copy-pasted from foreign sources dubious medical or everyday advice with no scientific basis. Tsn.ua even created a fictional doctor character, presenting statements or "folk medicine" advice without any evidence.

66 **Access to public information worsened during the war. Press conferences have become less frequent, and officials often delay or deny requests for comments.**

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

The panelists unanimously acknowledged that Ukraine possesses a robust and professional civil society that uses reliable information, is open to media, and communicates with the public through websites and social media platforms. CSOs are active in the development and implementation of various reforms. They conduct surveys, use quality information for these endeavors, and engage media. However, the government does not always hold genuine consultations with civil society, often resorting to imitating such discussions, a television journalist noted.

The panelists admitted that there could be some exceptions among quality CSOs-- organizations that might enlist unreliable information or promote their agendas by exaggerating or manipulating certain issues. Furthermore, the panelists did not praise the various marginal groups, trade unions, religious organizations, or quasi-NGOs set up by political interests. Moreover, some CSOs promote conspiracy theories or pro-Russian agenda, a fact-checker said. A data journalist highlighted the trend of politicians promoting themselves through various charity organizations and funds bearing their names, leveraging these platforms to bolster their public images.

Many CSOs are involved in training and supporting media outlets, conducting media analysis and monitoring, countering information manipulation, checking facts, promoting media literacy activities, and providing legal defense and education for media members.

An editor on the panel highlighted the phenomenon of certain media outlets transitioning into CSOs, undertaking various civic functions, and managing donor-funded projects with additional activities beyond their media mission. Conversely, some CSOs develop strong communication arms and investigative journalism capabilities. An editor of a regional investigative reporting center emphasized its reliance on comments from

competent CSOs, and the benefits of employing a public procurement expert to increase the quality of its investigations.

Panelists offered many examples of media outlets and other content producers actively working with civil society to cover socially important issues, seek expert commentary, sometimes co-produce content, and engage CSOs to spur public engagement on an issue. A communication manager on the panel gave the positive example of a petition prompted by civil society and media to disclose e-declarations of officials. The petition forced the government to change its decision.

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

Access to public information worsened during the war. Press conferences have become less frequent, and officials often delay or deny requests for comments. According to a director of a national CSO on the panel, the quality of dialogue among the government, public, and media is disputable. Interactions between government officials and civil society members varies from region to region, a data journalist added. Panelists reported that in the capital of Kyiv, consumers perceive the municipal government as offering weak communication.

Local media face problems with local authorities, noted a local media developer on the panel. Local governments often ignore outlets that systemically cover community issues and that demand accountability. Officials rarely invite these journalists to events; often delay or withhold sharing announcements; and refuse to provide additional comments, claiming that all information has been published online.

President Zelensky held three press conferences in 2023: on the first anniversary of the full-scale invasion in February, on Journalist's Day in June and a year-end wrap up in December. Authorities accredited

> ❝ **An editor on the panel highlighted the phenomenon of certain media outlets transitioning into CSOs, undertaking various civic functions, and managing donor-funded projects with additional activities beyond their media mission.**

approximately 120 media outlets for the last conference, with 15 foreign and 17 Ukrainian journalists asking questions. Officials did not accredit Censor.net, due to a past argument between its editor-in-chief, Yurii Butusov, and the president. However, Telegram channels Trukha and Ukraina Segodnya were accredited. In October 2023, the president held an off-the-record meeting with journalists, including the owner of Trukha. Panelists perceived this as an encouraging sign from the president's office.

Due to the war, political debates or serious discussions are rare, and elections appear unlikely in the near future. Despite the parliamentary majority by The Servant of The People, the president's party, the opposition actively engages in debates, and attempts to influence political processes.

According to a TV journalist on the panel, the political culture is low quality, with politicians often exploiting stereotypes and social fears. Consequently, they often spread economic and other myths, prod the emotions of audiences, and use populist slogans.

The Ukraine government shows no indications of its actors relying on evidence-based information for decision making or properly explaining their decisions to the public. Instead, authorities often fail to properly justify and explain their decisions publicly, a media lawyer said.

Journalists from Bihus.info investigated dozens of state-commissioned reports on regular media and social monitoring. They concluded that positive news items about the government exceed negative ones, and the reports often misinterpret criticism from unspecified "oppositional media" as mere "attacks" and "populism," without clear definition. In addition, critics of the telethon were labeled as *porokhobots*, bots of Poroshenko, a former president of Ukraine. In 2023, the Ministry of Culture allocated UAH 10 million ($261,000) for reports to the Mediateka company, owned by a deputy of the ruling party.

Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic rights

In contrast to 2022, in 2023 journalists resumed anticorruption investigations, focusing on public asset management, public procurement, and the lifestyle of public officials.

Ukrainian society has a strong demand for publicizing revealed corruption cases, with 84 percent of respondents preferring to expose them rather than silence them until the end of the war. According to the panelists, Ukrainians fear that suppressing such cases could lead to losing unity, Western support, and eventually the war, according to a survey by the Razumkov Center, commissioned by zn.ua.

Propaganda tactics include exploiting the topic of corruption to undermine Ukraine: When Ukrainian reporters publish stories on corruption, it is amplified by numerous channels, actors, and bots. On the other hand, "The argument that all of these [corruption cases] are Russian government propaganda and special operations is used to protect corrupt officials," an editor on the panel said.

Most panelists agreed that corruption cases, when revealed, started to cause a stronger response, with increased public attention and higher-quality investigations. However, proper law enforcement investigations and court sentences are exceptions rather than norms. Journalists often exert more pressure on corruption perpetrators than law enforcement and anticorruption bodies, a leader of a national CSO argued. Another panelist noted that out of 64 investigations in 2023, 16 led to audits, criminal cases, or dismissals—marking an increase compared to previous years. A panelist working with local media provided many examples of how critical media publications forced local authorities to address the issues raised.

A television journalist noted that corruption scandals and mobilization issues have highlighted the media's limited influence in shaping state policy. The outcomes are very much dependent on the involved public figure and the societal response to each case. Despite a series of quality media investigations of the president's office, its chief of staff, and other

top officials, the public saw no reactions from officials, a fact-checker added. According to a media lawyer on the panel, the government might be forced to face journalists' findings, but its reactions often do not include the strategic depth needed to address and prevent violations in the future.

Panelists did not offer enough evidence to assess whether publications on human rights violations and civil liberties prevent or reduce such cases. However, a data journalist provided several examples of publications sparking public outcry and prompting authorities to react, which resulted in the causal events gradually improving.

The panelists refrained from speculating on the impact of quality information on fair elections, as no elections are planned while Ukraine is under martial law. According to a Razumkov Center survey conducted in October 2023, 64 percent of respondents do not support holding national elections in Ukraine before the end of the war, compared to 15 percent who are in support.

Given the ongoing conflict, IREX is treating this year's study of Ukraine as a sensitive country and, for security reasons, is not publishing panelists' names.

CENTRAL ASIA

KAZAKHSTAN

Vibrant
Information
Barometer

2 0 2 4

VIBRANCY

PRINCIPLES

	2022	2023	2024
Overall Score	15	18	19
Information Quality	18	18	20
Multiple Channels	14	16	17
Consumption & Engagement	14	20	17
Transformative Action	13	20	21

Not Vibrant (0-10): Quality information is extremely limited in this country. The vast majority of it is not editorially independent, not based on facts, or it is intended to harm. People do not have the rights, means, or capacity to access a wide range of information; they do not recognize or reject misinformation; and they cannot or do not make choices on what types of information they want to engage with.

Slightly Vibrant (11-20): Quality information is available on a few topics or geographies in this country, but not all. While some information is editorially independent, there is still a significant amount of misinformation, malinformation, and hate speech in circulation, and it does influence public discourse. Most people do not recognize or reject misinformation.

Somewhat Vibrant (21-30): Quality information is available in this country and most of it is editorially independent, based on facts, and not intended to harm. Most people have the rights, means, and capacity to access a wide range of information, although some do not. Most people recognize and reject misinformation, although some do not.

Highly Vibrant (31-40): Quality information is widely available in this country. People have the rights, means, and capacity to access a wide range of information; they recognize and reject misinformation.

Highly Vibrant

Somewhat Vibrant

Slightly Vibrant

Not Vibrant

OVERALL
SCORE

19

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

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

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

After the January 2022 unrest due to rising gas prices, the government arrested more than 9,000 activists and sentenced many to six to 10 years in prison for organizing mass riots, accepting bribes, and joining a banned extremist group.
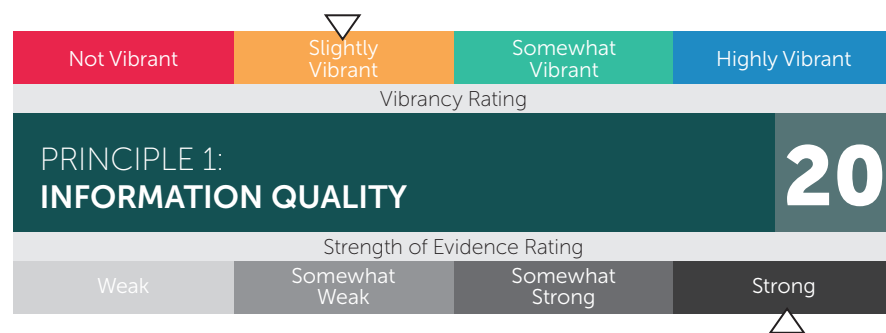
In 2023, journalists faced a slew of hacking and physical attacks, including office break-ins and damage to apartments and property. Officials promised an independent investigation, but instead, a show trial occurred. The nephew of a well-known oligarch was held accountable for these attacks at the trial, but the court found him insane and sent him for compulsory treatment at a psychiatric hospital instead of to prison. His accomplices received suspended sentences, which caused outrage in the journalism community, as essentially no one was held accountable and received adequate punishment.

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

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

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

Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant	Somewhat Vibrant	Highly Vibrant

Vibrancy Rating

PRINCIPLE 1: **INFORMATION QUALITY**	**20**

Strength of Evidence Rating

Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong	Strong

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Independent publications are increasingly working with state documents and the government procurement website, as well as conducting investigations, to draw public attention to the problems of government corruption. Some cases lead to changes in legislation. For example, after a series of investigations into government officials using luxury good that had been seized, in 2023 the Ministry of Finance changed the rules for luxury items confiscated by the state. Journalist Askhat Niyazov and his YouTube channel Obozhau became the scourge of *akims,* heads of local governments, this year. He gained renown for reporting on regional *akims* by interviewing them and asking uncomfortable questions.

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

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

> " **In state media, editorial offices and journalists are under government control, and officials check and approve editorial materials before publication.**

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

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

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

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

Unfortunately, both professional and nonprofessional content distributors, as well as officials, periodically disseminate inaccurate information. For example, Kazakhstan's Minister of Digital Development, Bagdat Batyrbekuly Musin, publicly stated that Astana's internet connection quality is higher than Tokyo's. Journalists fact-checked his statement and proved the opposite was true. Additionally, former Finance Minister Yerulan Zhamaubayev, when talking about state assets, commented on a hotel in Turkey, while different media mentioned different names for the hotel. As a result, it was unclear which hotel the minister was referencing. One extreme example of the public receiving incorrect information occurred in September when the government released a list of individuals receiving foreign funding. Journalists referred to them as "foreign agents," even though this term does not legally exist in Kazakhstan. This served as a trigger for comments with hate speech about foreign agents.

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

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

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

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

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

Fact-checking resources exist, but their reach is small. As a result, in the majority of cases, most citizens do not find out about debunked fake and false information. According to Assel Karaulova, president of the Kazakhstan Press Club, only one website, www.factcheck.kz, is operational, but ordinary consumers know little about it.

Some editorial staff moderate content, but it is easier to disable comments on websites, move them to social media pages, and shift responsibility to social media administrators. For example, the Nasha Gazeta website has two moderators, but the editor must constantly deal with user complaints about other commenters and what they perceive as unfair moderation. However, news outlets still have problems surrounding publishing comments, and lawsuits against media editorial offices alleging defamation, libel, dissemination of personal data, and violation of state secrets are common.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced.

The financial situation of private media and journalists who work for them is unstable and unsustainable. The advertising market is not very big. At the same time, approximately the same amount of public

money is spent on state media, loyal private media, and Telegram channels, which creates unfair competition. Private media, which do not take money from the government in principle, are forced to look for additional sources of income. According to the Advertising Association of Central Asia, the Kazakh advertising market is shifting increasingly away from traditional print and broadcast media to the internet.
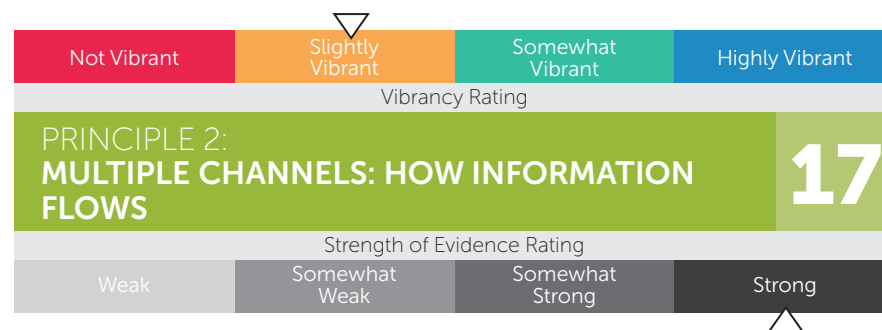
Funding sources are limited, and panelists said the finances of regional media outlets are deteriorating. Revenues allow them to stay afloat but do not allow for access to and maintenance of technical equipment and salary increases. Grants from international donors still help: Media outlets can use them to purchase mobile phones, cameras, and other equipment.

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

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

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

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

Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant	Somewhat Vibrant	Highly Vibrant

Vibrancy Rating

PRINCIPLE 2: MULTIPLE CHANNELS: HOW INFORMATION FLOWS — **17**

Strength of Evidence Rating

Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong	Strong

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

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

Kazakhstan's constitution, along with additional codes and laws, guarantees the right to freedom of speech and access to information. In practice, however, journalists regularly face violations of their rights.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A 2021 Internews study shows the internet remains the most popular way for Kazakhstanis to receive information. In 2019, television was the main source of information, but it now ranks third (30.4 percent) after social networks (45.7 percent) and internet sites (42.8 percent). Overall, the cost of the internet is reasonably affordable, but in the middle of 2023, mobile operators began significantly raising prices for services.

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

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

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

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

Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for government information.

The changes to the legislation on access to information in 2022 specified what information should be posted on the websites of state bodies, but problems obtaining information persist. In 2023, work on amendments to the law on access to information to ensure access to information for persons with disabilities; expand opportunities for obtaining information in the fields of education, health, and ecology; and strengthen civic participation in public discussion of draft bills.

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

> **Extrajudicial blocking of websites is extremely common and reaches paradoxical situations when websites of international organizations are blocked by district courts and district prosecutors' lawsuits.**

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

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

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

In October, President Tokayev signed a new law that says the government will consider petitions with more than 50,000 signatures to accelerate changes in the nation. However, panelists note that the law has many restrictions. Kazakhs will not be able to remove *akims* and ministers from office through petitions, and petitions will not be considered on issues such as changing the form of government, changing the administrative-territorial structure and borders of the republic, justice, amnesty, and national security.

Karaulova believes citizens do not trust government authorities and structures, and information from government structures is often silenced or presented in a way that is advantageous to them, as evidenced by a report from the Kazakhstan Institute of Economic Research.

Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow.

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

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

Extrajudicial blocking of websites is extremely common and reaches paradoxical situations when websites of international organizations are blocked by district courts and district prosecutors' lawsuits.

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

Assanbayeva noted that most large nongovernmental internet publications in Kazakhstan are operated by officials or businesspeople affiliated with the government, who follow government orders.
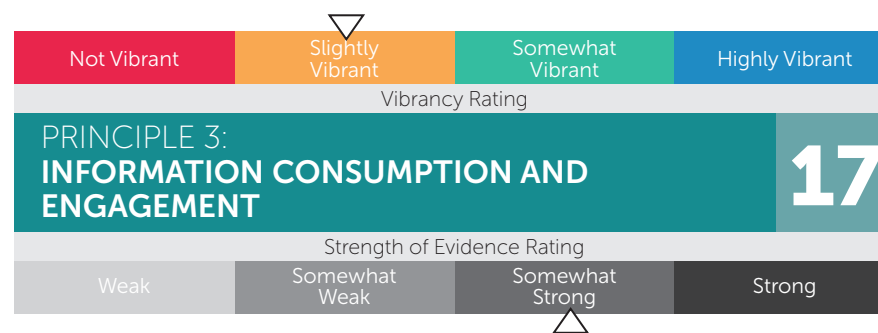
Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.

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

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

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

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

Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant	Somewhat Vibrant	Highly Vibrant

Vibrancy Rating

PRINCIPLE 3: INFORMATION CONSUMPTION AND ENGAGEMENT	**17**

Strength of Evidence Rating

Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong	Strong

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

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

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

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

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

The government does not provide protection against cyberattacks on websites.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Karaulova believes the level of digital literacy among citizens is extremely low, which is evidenced by the spread of manipulated information and a lack of critical thinking. In December, a scandal rocked the nation when the so-called "Aika list" was leaked online, containing the names and personal information of wealthy clients who paid for high-priced escorts in Almaty. Panelists note that people were keen to know who was on this list, but few were outraged by the illegal dissemination of personal data.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Public discussions are not very common. In November 2023, blogger Askhat Niyazov invited all candidates for Rudny's *akim* to an open discussion with residents who work in nearby mines, which is unusual in Kazakhstan. However, only the current *akim* of Rudny, Viktor Ionenko, came, while the other two candidates claimed they were unavailable. In August 2023, local government held public hearings on the possible construction of a nuclear power plant in Kazakhstan. Despite the fact that many are concerned about the plant, the hearings were not broadcast live and took place hundreds of kilometers from the city.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Outlets such as Factcheck, vlast.kz, and Vadim Boreyko's "Biz Birgemiz" project actively collaborate with audiences. Many media outlets receive feedback from Telegram chatbots and through comments on social media. Readers of the "Nasha Gazeta" news site regularly report errors on the website—both grammatical and factual. The editorial team corrects mistakes and informs the audience about them.
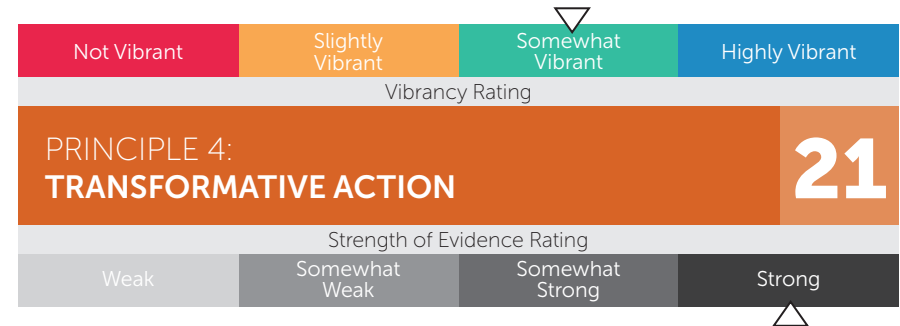
Karaulova believes that only independent media engage in open interaction with consumers. "In state media, there is no such thing. The audience is not studied; content is based on state orders and the preferences of founders, not consumers," she said.

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

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

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

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

Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant	Somewhat Vibrant	Highly Vibrant

Vibrancy Rating

PRINCIPLE 4: TRANSFORMATIVE ACTION	21

Strength of Evidence Rating

Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong	Strong

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic rights.

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

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

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

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

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

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

LIST OF PANEL PARTICIPANTS

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Elzhan Kabyshev, director, Digital Paradigm, Almaty

Assel Karaulova, president, Kazakhstan Press Club, Almaty

Ainur Koskina, journalist, QOS-live, Astana

Jamilya Maricheva, director, Protenge, Almaty

Ruslan Nikonovich, owner, Novoe TV, Karaganda

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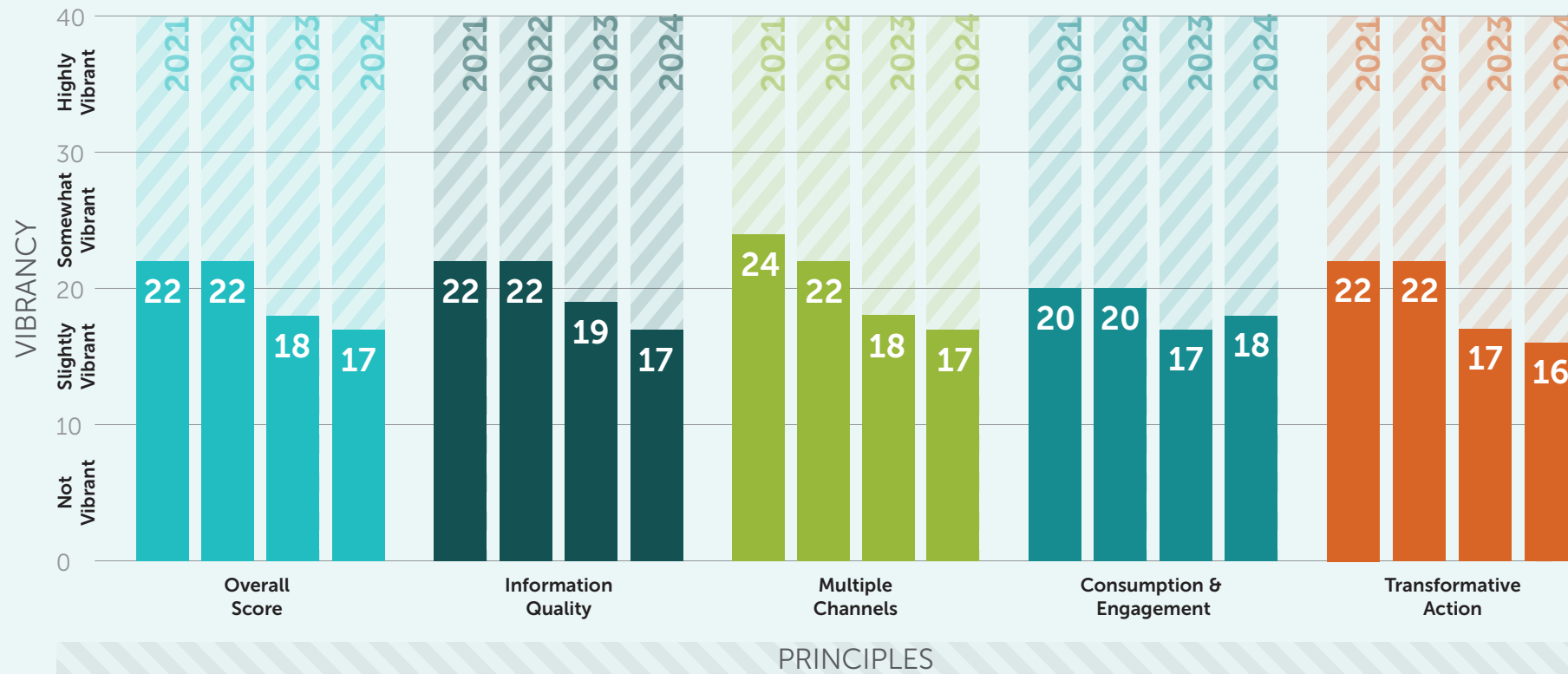
KYRGYZSTAN

Vibrant
Information
Barometer

2 0 2 4

VIBRANCY

PRINCIPLES

40 — Highly Vibrant
30 — Somewhat Vibrant
20 — Slightly Vibrant
10 — Not Vibrant
0

Overall Score: 2021: 22, 2022: 22, 2023: 18, 2024: 17

Information Quality: 2021: 22, 2022: 22, 2023: 19, 2024: 17

Multiple Channels: 2021: 24, 2022: 22, 2023: 18, 2024: 17

Consumption & Engagement: 2021: 20, 2022: 20, 2023: 17, 2024: 18

Transformative Action: 2021: 22, 2022: 22, 2023: 17, 2024: 16

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

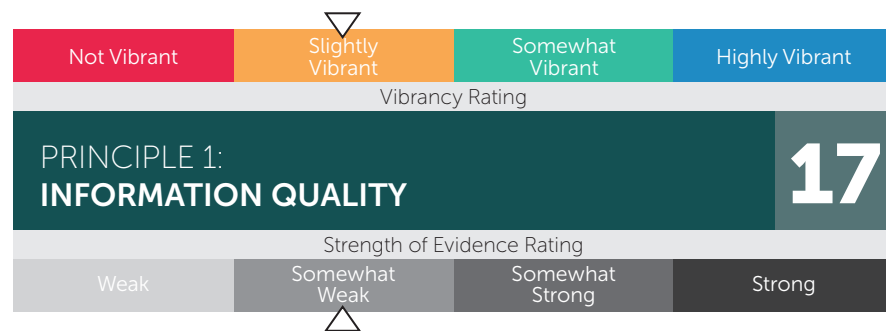Slightly Vibrant

Not Vibrant

OVERALL
SCORE

17

In 2023, Kyrgyzstan media professionals experienced an overall decline in political freedoms, while authorities curtailed the rights of ordinary citizens. Intense political events included legislation and other prohibitions aimed at stripping political freedoms and citizen rights such as freedom of speech, assembly, and civil participation.

New legislation was key to the erosion of democracy in the Kyrgyz Republic, including bills "On Mass Media" (presented to parliament in December 2023) and "On NGOs" (presented in May and passed in the first reading in October 2023). Media members, civil society, activists, and human rights groups resisted these efforts, but parliamentarians gave citizens little opportunity to participate in discussions of the draft laws. The shift towards authoritarianism can also be seen in the passage of the law "On the Constitutional Court," which undermines the rule of law and guarantees of justice. Additionally, law enforcement practices in 2023 normalized persecutions of "inconvenient" citizens, disregarding all procedural aspects and applying punishment without trial or investigation.

As one panelist noted, the country has entered an "era of half-truths in action," as journalists and media increasingly self-censor under the threat of repression. Journalists either refrain from raising urgent issues or are forced to toe the government line. Pro-government media outlets also propagandize rather than inform, disregarding professional and ethical standards. Through this diminishing of the value of facts, social values erode and trust declines in media and all authority figures.

Panelists captured these circumstances in their VIBE assessments, with the overall score for Kyrgyzstan falling by one point from last year's study. Principle 1 (Information Quality) decreased by two points, reflecting the increased flow of false and misleading information from propaganda sources, while independent media are hampered by economic limitations due to government pressure. Principle 2 (Multiple Channels) fell by one point due to increased censorship of media, both through overt blocking of popular outlets like Kloop and through lawsuits against media outlets filed by the government over allegations such as "moral damages." The risks of repression are worsening, with journalists investigating corruption imprisoned or driven abroad, while fewer and fewer are willing to cover acute problems.

Principle 3 (Information Consumption and Engagement) increased by one point and scored the highest within the study, largely thanks to Kyrgyzstan's strong community media. However, audiences also showed decreased demand for high quality content, with the majority getting information from Kremlin, pro-government, and/or state TV, radio, news agencies, and print media. Principle 4 (Transformative Action) decreased by one point and scored the lowest within the study, with the government practicing selective interaction with journalists and media and repressing or ignoring investigations of corruption and violations of human rights and civil liberties.

Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant	Somewhat Vibrant	Highly Vibrant

Vibrancy Rating

PRINCIPLE 1: INFORMATION QUALITY	17

Strength of Evidence Rating

Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong	Strong

Recent media trends in Kyrgyzstan demonstrate increasing restrictions on freedom of expression as well as lacking financial resources. More and more topics are considered unsafe to discuss for both online and traditional media, reducing ideological diversity and promoting self-censorship. Non-state media have lost more revenue as state-owned companies are now banned from advertising with them. As a result, Principle 1 decreased by two points from last year's study, with the indicator on sufficient resourcing of content production scoring the lowest. These scores emphasize how revenue shortfalls are limiting editorial independence and driving journalists out of the profession. Risks to personal freedom are high while resources and salaries remain low.

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

In early 2023, the print version of *Evening Bishkek*, one of the country's oldest newspapers, ceased publication. The closure epitomizes the decline of Kyrgyz print media, with newspaper circulations exceeding 100,000 copies now a thing of the past. According to a 2023 M-Vector study on media consumption research in Kyrgyzstan, no more than 2% of respondents use print media as information sources. The crisis in print media has affected infrastructure for producing print content. According to one panelist, the publishing house Media Support Center is on the verge of closure after two decades of active operation.

"In 2023, society underwent complete polarization," said another panelist. "Each faction [pro-government and independent media] uses only those facts that are convenient to them to prove their righteousness." Coverage of international politics reflects the stance of the Russian government, while state media focus on propagandistic attacks against independent media and civil society organizations (CSOs). This includes more than a year of pro-government coverage denigrating civil society as part of discussions on the repressive draft law "On NGOs" (informally dubbed the "foreign agents" law) and "On Mass Media."

Media organizations from Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Mongolia, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan responded to the negative trends in the media sphere by initiating MediaNetwork CA. Members met in Bishkek to sign a memorandum, which states the organization's goal "to uphold compliance with journalistic standards and professional ethical norms in the profession and contribute to the formation of competent media organizations." As of the end of 2023, panelists were unable to say whether MediaNetwork CA has achieved its goals.

Journalism education has remained largely unchanged, despite media stakeholders' history of calling for schools to adapt to media industry changes. Though organizations offer short-term professional training, few of these programs are taught by Kyrgyz speakers, and they provide no coherent system for professional development. Various organizations hold a diversity of seminars and training sessions for journalists, bloggers, and other media producers, but panelists identified a greater need to address the basics and realities of the media sphere. Seminars are mostly specialized and do not include key skills required for newcomers to the profession, given the high rate of turnover in the field, panelists observed.

According to the panelists, state officials and key politicians have been the main newsmakers for decades, so political topics dominate the media space. Outlets offer limited international news and occasional stories on social, cultural, and economic topics, and there are few specialized or niche media. To a greater extent, social networks and the blogosphere present information on these subjects. Overall, national-

level news makes up the information flow; only select outlets report local news. One panelist said that journalists often present news without reference to context in pursuit of efficiency. Readers cannot understand the meaning of this news without contextualization, she concluded.

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

In 2023, state bodies and key state policymakers often knowingly provided false and misleading views in the media. Notable examples include Kyrgyz Republic President Sadyr Japarov accusing NGOs of tax evasion and Deputy Prime Minister Edil Baisalov on more than one occasion manipulating data on national salaries and claiming that only children from affluent families attend kindergarten while nationwide taxes subsidize their school lunches.

Another problem is that state bodies and officials increasingly avoid supplying information. Representatives of the Kyrgyz Republic Government have reduced their public appearances in the media and restricted access to information from their departments. Thus, journalists often cannot objectively judge whether the information they receive and disseminate from government officials is true or false.

Panelists noted the impact of the 2023 law "On Access to Information Under the Jurisdiction of State Bodies and Local Self-Governments." Citizens cannot easily verify the data received from politicians and officials, as the law has closed public access to a range of state sources of information. A panelist provided examples of the increasing opacity of public information: "There is no data on who was the director and founder of a legal entity—the Ministry of Justice website only lists current directors and owners. It has become more difficult to find tax payment data. The Ministry of Finance website was redesigned in 2023, but much information was not uploaded there. The financial reporting of the mayor's office has not been updated since 2022."

State-owned media outlets praise the current authorities and key politicians while engaging in open criticism of independent media and civil activists. Often, their own violations of ethical and professional standards are driven not by political motives but by an absence of ethical norms and professional expectations. For example, in one of the broadcasts of the news channel Ala-Too 24, footage from a movie was passed off as "consequences" of an earthquake in Turkey. Even journalists in independent media, despite meticulous fact-checking work, sometimes provide inaccurate information. When this occurs, political authorities often argue that it demonstrates how independent journalists are unreliable.

> **State-owned media outlets praise the current authorities and key politicians while engaging in open criticism of independent media and civil activists. Often, their own violations of ethical and professional standards are driven not by political motives but by an absence of ethical norms and professional expectations.**

Regional media have an even greater problem ensuring accuracy of information. Local officials often cite the need to obtain permission from the capital to communicate with the press. Publications are also unchecked and inaccurate due to the shallow pool of experts. In the capital as well as in the regions, producers cannot easily find professionals to provide expert opinions on current events. Since 2022, only a few self-identifying experts sometimes dare to comment on political events. At the same time, unprofessional content producers with a pro-government stance, as well as numerous troll factories, circulate manipulative information. Most members of the population have limited ability to distinguish between manipulative information and reliable sources.

The Kyrgyz Republic has some online tools for checking the accuracy and reliability of information, such as Factcheck.kg and 24.kg's regular section #JustFacts. In addition, in 2023, the professional media community, represented by seven founding groups (April, Bulak, Mediahub, PolitClinic, Tmedia, BashtanBashta, Factcheck), created the platform Checkit Media to counter manipulative information. The editors

of these resources (Factcheck and Checkit) organize training programs on media literacy. According to the panelists, however, only a small number of citizens know about the presence of these resources and even fewer make requests to verify information.

Content moderation on social platforms is not keeping pace with demand, due to the large flow of information products and the number of users becoming content creators. According to panelists, the opinion among experts is that moderation of Kyrgyz-language content is especially weak, although hate-speech researchers and fact checkers find just as much false information on Russian-language resources.

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

According to a Checkit Media [investigation](), authorities rely on troll factories and adhere to a language of enmity and hatred. Politicians, including President Japarov, use hate speech on their own social media pages, and disseminate their comments on state-owned and state-affiliated media. Meanwhile, a government-funded troll factory [operates]() on the country's main television channel.

Authorities work not only to damage independent media but also to suppress dissent and civic activity. Channel One Russia (ORT) and Russian Television and Radio Broadcasting Company (RTR), popular channels in the Kyrgyz Republic, take stances that echo Russian government positions and are supported by pro-Russian amateur content producers. Websites such as Two Points of View, Tentek Kyz, Salam Kyrgyzstan, and PolitLombard stand out in denigrating NGOs and independent media. "Pro-Russian representatives strongly adhere to the policy of Kremlin propaganda, engaging in disinformation, manipulation, and criticism of independent media and journalists," emphasized one panelist.

The Kyrgyz Republic has no regulatory framework nor effective mechanisms to combat information manipulation and hate speech. For its part, the media community has no self-regulation system for content producers. The Commission for Complaints against Media did not consider any cases of ethical norms violations in 2023, while media professionals characterized the situation in the media community as an information war between state/pro-government media and independent media.

Attacks on independent journalists have profoundly negative consequences in their personal and professional lives. One panelist faced a massive online attack—with threats and hate speech from individual users, including anonymous trolls—after speaking at an OSCE event on issues of freedom of expression, media freedom, and journalist safety. In another case, a Kyrgyz athlete whose Facebook post criticizing the government's decision to change the country's flag was picked up by the media [faced backlash]() from a government official.

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

For the first time in post-Soviet history, Kyrgyz-language content [has become dominant]() for consumers in all regions except the capital, Bishkek. The production of quality Kyrgyz-language content is therefore an especially acute problem. Viewers of entertainment programs, series, and international news have [practically no alternatives]() to Russian content, while the government pays Russian TV channels over $1 million each year to broadcast their content.

While Kyrgyz-language media consumption is expanding, media outlets are further reducing production of media content in minority languages. The Uzbek-language media segment, already limited, continues to diminish. One panelist affirmed that the state neglects the Uzbek-speaking population, which in the absence of alternatives "listens to the information agenda of neighboring countries."

Throughout the year, publications critical of the government on any topic intensified political and legal pressure on journalists and editors. In August 2023, the Bishkek prosecutor [filed a lawsuit]() in court to liquidate the publicly funded Kloop Media, accusing the outlet of "negative character" and "hidden manipulations." This lawsuit followed the publication of [a journalistic investigation]() into the involvement

of relatives of the president and the head of the State Committee for National Security in the construction of the Barcelona Football Academy in Kyrgyzstan, which the president responded to by saying that websites like Kloop "bring harm rather than benefit to Kyrgyzstanis." In September, after publishing an article on the alleged torture of opposition politician Ravshan Dzhenbekov, the editorial office received a letter from the Ministry of Culture and Information demanding that Kloop remove the article within 48 hours. Within two days, several internet providers blocked users from the Kloop website.

Every year, the thematic diversity and representation of various social groups in media are narrowing. Government officials directly state that it is time to stop presenting negative information, and they reproach independent media for an ostensibly negative focus. Representatives of the president's administration even commented on publications about domestic violence, asserting that those who write about the increase in violence are interested in "constantly repeating such negative cases, bringing them up for discussion and propagating them as general statistics" while claiming that instances of violence are extremely rare. State media have shifted to a monotonous practice of praising the current government and its imagined successes.

These repressive conditions explain why media mostly prefer not to cover issues concerning marginalized groups such as the LGBTQ+ community, people with disabilities, and those living with HIV/AIDS or tuberculosis. After a journalist from IA 24.kg came out in a personal blog, a year-long reaction followed, with pro-government and pro-Russian public pages unleashing a barrage of criticism. The topic of sex education is also considered taboo.

The majority of journalists in the Kyrgyz Republic are women, partly due to low wages. According to a 2013 study, women are predominant in television and radio, as well as in online news publications. Male journalists are significantly represented only in investigative journalism and in international media. As media ownership is rarely transparent, it is difficult to know whether gender representation is balanced among owners.

Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced.

The distribution of state subsidies and advertising contracts became a political matter in 2023. Traditional advertisers are forced to refuse cooperation with independent media, under pressure from the authorities. "I stopped this [access to advertising] because people's state money must work for the people," said President Japarov in an August 2023 interview.

> " The distribution of state subsidies and advertising contracts became a political matter in 2023. Traditional advertisers are forced to refuse cooperation with independent media, under pressure from the authorities.

Advertising practices are also changing for non-political reasons. One panelist noted that advertisers are now working directly with social media platforms because it is more profitable, as well as working with influencers. "Traditional media outlets have not learned to earn money from advertisers in the new changed conditions, and most importantly, have not learned to produce content according to the changed consumption habits of the audience," said another panelist. "In this regard, bloggers and non-professional content makers have proven to be more flexible and are capturing the advertising market."
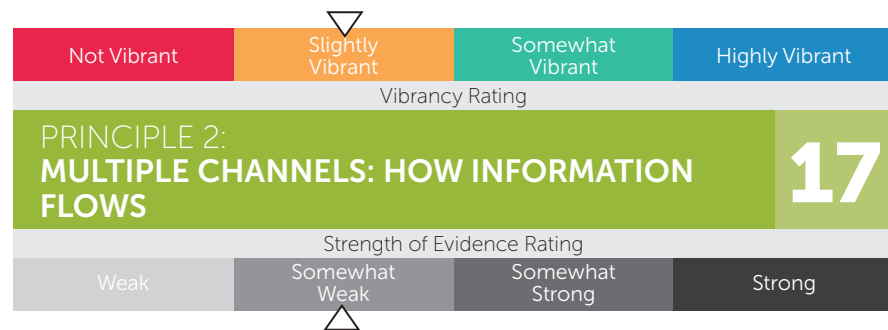
Another panelist observed that editorial offices put little effort into engaging with audiences' needs. Alternative sources of funding such as crowdfunding are therefore limited practices for independent media, with only Kloop, MediaHub, and Temirov Live raising small amounts. Independent media are heavily reliant on grants, which would become virtually inaccessible under the "foreign agents" law.

Independent media are also subject to lawsuits and bank freezes which affect their financial standing. Kaktus Media, for example, was ordered to pay KGS 600,000 ($6,700) to the editorial office of *Evening Bishkek*

for "moral damages." Authorities also froze the bank accounts of Radio Azattyk (the Kyrgyz service of RFE/RL) and blocked its website in Kyrgyzstan for nine months until a settlement was reached in July 2023. In addition, throughout the year, the accounts of Bolot Temirov (editor of Temirov Live and "Ayt ayt dese") were repeatedly blocked in the payment system Mbank.

Media employees are frequently forced to work multiple jobs, and editorial offices also function as outsourced production studios. One panelist noted that talented journalists often leave either for higher-paying, pro-government media, switch to blogging, or leave the profession altogether. Another panelist observed that regional journalists in state media have significantly lower salaries than journalists in Bishkek, amounting to KGS 15,000-17,000 (less than $200). Regional journalists in non-state media have relatively higher salaries due to participation in grant projects, but their incomes are not stable.

Overall, the economy of the media sector remains opaque and it is impossible to accurately evaluate market distortions due to political factors. One panelist did note that the official government budget allocated KGS 1.1 billion ($12 million) for state radio and TV broadcasting and publishing, while the Ministry of Culture and Information provided KGS 490.6 million ($5.5 million) to newspapers and KGS 625.6 million ($6.9 million) to state TV, but highlighted that these subsidies are not transparent.

Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant	Somewhat Vibrant	Highly Vibrant

Vibrancy Rating

PRINCIPLE 2: MULTIPLE CHANNELS: HOW INFORMATION FLOWS	17

Strength of Evidence Rating

Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong	Strong

In 2023, pressure on freedom of speech intensified, with numerous civil activists, public figures, politicians, journalists, and bloggers detained and charged with crimes. Panelists characterized the past year as one of authorities gaslighting and intensifying censorship in society. The score for Principle 2 fell by one point from last year's study, with the lowest scores given to people's rights to produce, distribute, and consume information and to the independence of information channels. The VIBE indicator on adequate access to information scored the highest in this principle: Kyrgyzstan has Central Asia's second-highest internet speed (Kazakhstan was in first place) and has affordable mobile data.

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

Kyrgyzstan dropped 50 positions in the 2023 World Press Freedom Index from the previous year, losing points in all five categories: political context, legal framework, economic context, socio-cultural context, and security. Although legal mechanisms for protecting freedom of speech nominally exist, enforcement of laws is selective and court decisions frequently indicate the decline of the judicial system and the rule of law. One panelist cited the *Evening Bishkek* case against Kaktus Media, explaining that it is an example of a Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation (SLAPP) case designed for "censorship, intimidation, and abuse of the judicial process."

2023 also saw the continued effects of the 2021 law "On Protection from Inaccurate (False) Information"—as predicted by the media community, it serves as a means for censorship rather than combatting manipulative information—which was used as a basis for blocking the Kloop website in August and the Radio Azattyk (the Kyrgyz service of RFE/RL) website for nine months. According to analysis from the Adilet Legal Clinic, the law contains provisions that grossly violate fundamental principles of equality of parties and proportionality of punishment.

Citizens are afraid to speak out against specific government decisions. Users cannot express their opinions on social media or even repost information about current political events without risk of being arrested or fined, as was the case for bloggers Irys Zhekshenaliyev and Adilet Baltabaev and journalist/writer Olzhobay Shakir, among others. Meanwhile, 50 media workers faced various attacks in 2023, including

judicial summons for interrogation, police arrests, pretrial detentions, threats, and blocks.

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

In the Kyrgyz Republic, the telecommunications sector is non-competitive in terms of fixed broadband access but relatively competitive with regards to wireless access. In the retail market for fixed broadband access, the Kyrgyztelecom company dominates, accounting for approximately 65% of the market share, and it owns the largest fiber-optic network in the country.

Regarding the speed of mobile internet, Kyrgyzstan ranks 88th out of 141 countries worldwide in mobile internet speed and is among the top ten countries for most affordable mobile data. At the same time, internet access varies across the country, with residents in some villages having only low-speed internet or no access at all. There is limited access to alternative information sources if the internet goes down.

According to M-Vector research, people are increasingly relying on internet TV (increasing from 5% to 17% since 2017) and cable TV (increasing from 2% to 8%). The penetration rate of over-the-air TV has fallen from 88% to 65%, while satellite TV is rarely used.

Kyrgyz culture generally has no social norms that restrict access to media for any social groups, but one panelist noted the situation in regions outside the capital, where women and girls are restricted in their rights to access the internet. No data is available on access to information or on digital technologies among vulnerable groups. However, another panelist noted an apparent "lack of special news and information resources in sign language and other languages used by people with disabilities; [or] special technical devices to enable people with special needs to access information, such as sign language computers and screen-reading programs."

> **Citizens are afraid to speak out against specific government decisions. Users cannot express their opinions on social media or even repost information about current political events without risk of being arrested or fined.**

Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for government information.

In 2023, amendments to the law "On measures to prevent harm to the health, physical, intellectual, mental, spiritual, and moral development of children" were adopted, along with subsequent amendments to several legal acts, including the law "On Mass Media." The purported purpose of the amendments is to protect children from "harmful" information and to regulate the obligations of entities involved in the production and dissemination of information. However, according to legal analysis published by Kaktus Media, these changes "pose risks to democratic values of the rule of law, including issues related to the proper observance of the right to freedom of beliefs and their free expression," with internet operators required to bear the economic costs of implementation.

In addition, amendments to the law "On access to information held by state bodies and local self-government bodies" came into effect in 2023. The previous version of the law, adopted in 2006, fully complied with international standards for government transparency and rights to information. The current amendments appeared without prior discussions in the media community.

These legislative changes allow state bodies to officially block access to socially significant information. In 2022, authorities closed public access to declarations of officials and canceled the tender mechanism for government procurement, which previously facilitated citizen monitoring. In 2023, the state classified as secret the presidential decrees on granting Kyrgyz citizenship, the expenses for maintaining the country's leadership, information about sponsors and investors, and many other topics. The government also classified data on high-profile

criminal cases, including 22 activists who protested demarcation of the Kempir-Abad reservoir and politician Adakhan Madumarov.

In addition, journalists have a more difficult time obtaining interviews or comments from government officials. This issue is most evident with President Japarov, who has not held a traditional end-of-year press conference in more than two years. In 2023, the president said that he would answer all questions at the meeting of the second People's Kurultai—a new state assembly gathering hundreds of people selected by local authorities—in December, but authorities were selective in accrediting journalists and media for this event, as well as in choosing participants.

The press services of state and municipal authorities provide limited information. State officials are difficult to contact, do not respond to inquiries, and provide press releases on events without guaranteeing the accuracy and completeness of the provided information. One panelist noted that Govori TV made more than 20 requests to the State Committee for National Security (GKNB) and the presidential administration regarding the criminal case of the Aurora + sanatorium but did not receive an official response to any of these.

The case involved the illegal privatization of expensive real estate in the Issyk-Kul region belonging to administrative members and associates of ex-President Kurmanbek Bakiyev, who fled the country in 2010. According to information leaked to the media, in May 2010, a 10-hectare land plot on the territory of the Aurora sanatorium was nationalized but only one-fifth of property built on the site was taken into state ownership. Among those whom the State Committee for National Security arrested on charges of organizing a corruption scheme was Aleksei Shirshov—a former partner of Maxim Bakiyev, the son of the ex-president—but he was released and corruption charges dropped after President Japarov spoke in his defense. Panelists said that statements by high-level politicians now need particular scrutiny.

> **State officials are difficult to contact, do not respond to inquiries, and provide press releases on events without guaranteeing the accuracy and completeness of the provided information.**

Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow.

Kyrgyz legislation is designed to guarantee free enterprise and media competition, but state monopolies continue to grow. In 2022, all seven regional TV channels became part of the structure of KTRK—a digital family of five channels, previously called the Public National Television and Radio Channel. With the most significant audience for media consumption, KTRK has traditionally remained a powerful tool for the authorities to combat any political opponents; broadcast content has never been independent or balanced.

In recent years, the private multiplex Digital Technologies LLC—the primary alternative to Kyrgyztelecom, which is majority state-owned—has experienced significant difficulties. Some TV channel owners are unable to pay contributions for signal distribution, leading to legal disputes, and future prospects for the multiplex are unclear. "One channel has already dropped out of the package a year ago," explained a panelist. "If Next TV, APRIL TV channels are 'nationalized,' i.e., the number of social multiplex channels continues to decrease, the remaining channels will not be able to finance the functioning of the multiplex. The end of the [multiplex] will come, and complete monopoly of pro-government media will set in."

According to Article 5 of the current law "On Mass Media," foreign shares in broadcasting enterprises cannot exceed 35% of the authorized capital of a media outlet's founding legal entity. Kyrgyzstan has no laws that require full information disclosure on media holdings and owner identities.

Management of broadcasting frequencies is not transparent, but since 2020, there have been no scandals regarding allocation. In 2023, the website of the licensing authority, the State Communications Agency, announced three auctions and three sessions of the State Radio Frequency Commission.
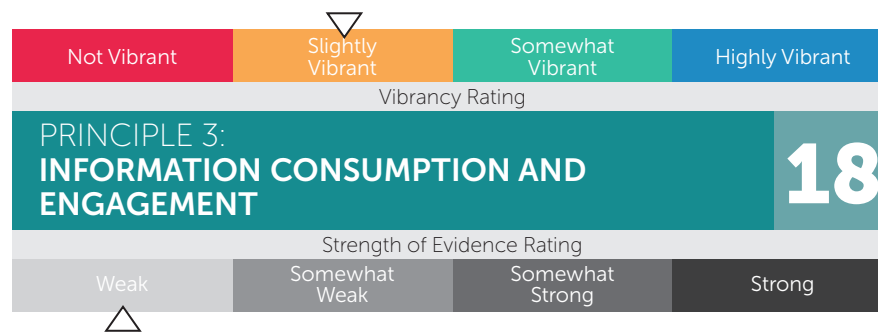
Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.

State-owned media and media affiliated with the authorities have undeniable preferences. Access to information and to top officials for interviews are the prerogative of KTRK and state information agency Kabar. These main state-owned media outlets have become exclusive information platforms for the president. For example, KTRK has a special weekly program, "President Japarov," which is a local equivalent of the Russian TV show "Moscow. Kremlin. Putin." Kamchybek Tashiev—the head of the GKNB and arguably the second-most influential figure in Kyrgyzstan—has his own channel, Region TV, where he and his family members are widely covered.

State-owned media also have the advantage of receiving funding from the state budget. In addition, political pressure forces major advertisers to only place ads in state-owned media and some media affiliated with the top political leadership. Beyond these informational advantages for state media, laws and government decrees are exclusively published in state newspapers. The media market is thus rife with unequal conditions and distortion.

Nonstate media outlets, which are dismissed for being "independent" and/or "oppositional," have limited revenue opportunities, and these sources significantly dwindled in 2023. Advertisers undoubtedly deprive media of their editorial independence, with journalists on the panel noting that working with advertisers is becoming more problematic. Conflicts often arise within the editorial team when the commercial department attracts advertisers and then journalists publish investigations or critical material about this enterprise. The advertiser in turn terminates the contract.

State media in the regions are very poorly equipped in comparison to some independent outlets, which purchase equipment for their editorial offices through grants from foreign donors. Likewise, salaries for regional state journalists are usually lower because independent editorial offices often work on grant-funded projects and can pay their journalists more. Not all independent media are successful in securing grants, however.

Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant	Somewhat Vibrant	Highly Vibrant

Vibrancy Rating

PRINCIPLE 3: INFORMATION CONSUMPTION AND ENGAGEMENT — **18**

Strength of Evidence Rating

Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong	Strong

Principle 3 improved by one point from last year's study, largely due to strengthening cooperation between media and NGOs, with the work of community media scoring the highest in this principle. Although community media is a small component of Kyrgyzstan's media ecosystem, these outlets have a strong audience, provide information on topics such as ecology and migration, and adhere to professional standards. However, most panelists are only vaguely aware or are uninformed about media activity in local communities. The indicator on media literacy scored the lowest, highlighting problems among the general population and even professional content producers with digital hygiene, digital security, and data protection.

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

Kyrgyz legislation guarantees the right to privacy, protection of honor and dignity, and protection of personal data, and the State Agency for Personal Data Protection oversees issues related to privacy and safeguarding personal data. Despite these institutional mechanisms, citizens rarely seek protection of their personal data. "In 2022, the Agency considered 20 citizens' appeals on issues of personal information protection, and in the first nine months of 2023, the number of appeals reached 130," explained one panelist. "Such a negligible number of appeals indicates that society lacks information about data leaks, as well as a general understanding of their rights related to personal data and the risks of unauthorized use of personal data by third parties for their interests."

According to another panelist, training in media literacy and digital security does not often result in practicing these skills—whether among consumers or even media professionals. "Unfortunately, the situation is dire even in the journalistic community, although many colleagues regularly undergo training in digital security," she said.

Some donors provide financial support for software products related to digital security after training sessions on the topic. However, as one panelist noted, many outlets outsource IT to specialists who may not have expertise in digital security. Only a few media, with the support of grants, have been able to bring digital security specialists on board.

In 2023, authorities rarely resorted to DDoS attacks against unfavorable media outlets and attempts to hack journalists' personal correspondence were relatively rare. Authorities consider website blocking to be a more convenient tool, panelists observed. The majority of the population has poor knowledge of VPN services and cannot bypass these blocks.

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

The State Agency for Personal Data Protection has a training center that offers programs on personal data protection and cybersecurity for government officials and business representatives. In addition, several other entities, mostly NGOs and media organizations, conduct media literacy trainings for journalists and citizens. One panelist highlighted examples such as the media and digital literacy schools run by the Media Development Center and Factcheck.kg; the national media literacy campaign "Teksherdim" (I Checked) run by Internews; and the first European Summer Festival in Bishkek, which included events on media literacy.

However, the government does not promote these trainings, media literacy courses are not integrated with the education system, and

non-systemic efforts to promote digital security technologies are insufficient. According to a 2023 European Neighbourhood Council report, the level of media literacy among citizens in Central Asia is low, particularly among the elderly, youth, people with low education, and people who live in rural areas. Older people do not have the technical skills to verify information, youth simply do not bother to do so, and rural groups are particularly vulnerable to disinformation. The research found that awareness of fake news is very high across all age groups, and media consumers in general know that fact-checking as the only way to determine whether or not news is accurate. However, the comprehension of fact-checking varies widely, and almost no one is aware of Kyrgyzstan's specialized websites or fact-checking services.

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

Exercising the right to freedom of speech and access to information has become increasingly unsafe for civil activists and casual social media users. Law enforcement agencies target activists and closely monitor opinion leaders, although ordinary users have also been persecuted for their statements. The Kyrgyz criminal code includes vague concepts subject to excessively broad interpretation and serves as a useful tool for pressuring citizens; anyone criticizing state authorities can, for example, be accused of inciting mass riots. Expertise for verifying and assessing statements also tends to have a bias toward the prosecution.

> **Law enforcement agencies target activists and closely monitor opinion leaders, although ordinary users have also been persecuted for their statements.**

An episode involving two-time world Greco-Roman wrestling champion Zholaman Sharshenbekov exemplifies recent trends. In an Instagram post, he spoke out against changing the state flag and declared his intention to compete under the old flag, drawing immediate backlash from several prominent officials. A few days later, Sharshenbekov clarified that he does not mix politics with professional sports and simply believes that all citizens have the right to express their opinion.

The ruling elite rejects the very idea of civic participation and accountability. "In theory, citizens have access to various platforms to express their opinions and information," said one panelist. "But in practice, the consequences of such open statements—faced not only by journalists but also by all citizens today—have led to self-censorship and further withdrawal from public life."

Existing platforms for public discussions have become less powerful, as evidenced by the formal parliamentary hearings on relevant draft laws on foreign agents and media. Government representatives openly declared to the public that, despite mass objections and disagreements, the draft laws would be adopted. The People's Kurultai also did not become a platform for public discussions. In 2023, authorities abolished the public councils of state agencies, which previously provided a channel of communication between citizens and top state officials.

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

For several years, the United (Industrial) Media Committee, established with the support of international organizations, has focused on organizing media owners to systematically commission studies on media consumption and audience needs. The committee hopes to base its strategic planning for the media sector on such information. However, media owners have never acknowledged the need for research on media consumption or implemented studies. In 2023, after a six-year hiatus, Internews and USAID also funded research on media consumption in Kyrgyzstan.

Media structures traditionally use consumer statistics programs, most often Google Analytics or Yandex Metrica, building KPIs of employees on the basis of statistical data and forming an understanding of the demand and needs of audiences. However, as one panelist observed, "Literal adherence to analytical systems brings the risk that media outlets will focus on audience demand rather than public interest."

> **Local community media outlets reached 141,000 residents in 2023, increasing the diversity of information sources for 27 rural communities in Kyrgyzstan.**

Another panelist explained that the precarious environment of media enterprises does not allow them to strategize based on data. With the constant pressure on media, it is too great a risk to invest financial and staff resources into new developments. "If the site could be blocked tomorrow, why invest in it?" she said.

Formally, media outlets provide opportunities for audiences to reach out through online letters, questions, and calls. However, journalists do not use this mechanism as a source for understanding audience needs. In addition, most editors have closed comment sections on their publications because they are afraid that authorities could use responses which have hate speech or political opinions as pretext to block or close the outlet.

In 2023, there was an increase in collaboration between media and NGOs amid government pressure and threats of repressive laws, with one example the Media Action Platform. In addition, civil society organizations are actively advocating for journalists and help them develop strategies for further work.

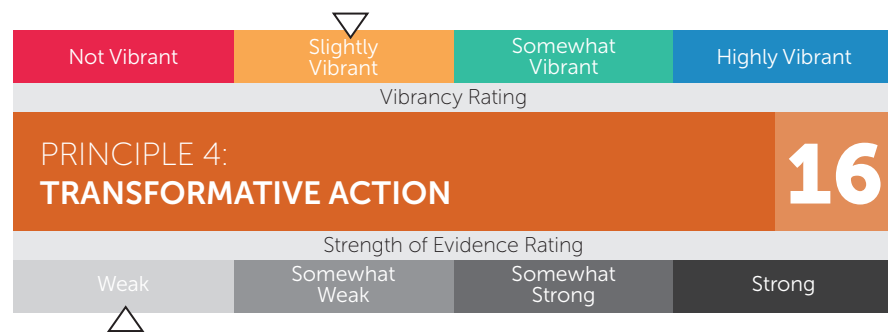**Indicator 15: Community media provides information relevant for community engagement.**

Not all panelists, especially those from independent national media, are aware of the influence of local community media, and cannot say whether these media raise serious issues to positively impact local development. The work of community media is not widely known, except when journalists have prior history collaborating with the Association of Community Media. Nevertheless, according to statistics from the Association of Community Media—which hosts material produced by 20 community multimedia centers and five community radio stations— these local community media outlets reached 141,000 residents in 2023, increasing the diversity of information sources for 27 rural communities in Kyrgyzstan.

Community media rely on grants from international organizations and local volunteers. Non-professional content producers from local communities cover important community topics such as ecology and migration, food prices, and issues affecting vulnerable groups. Thanks to systematic training, community media adhere to professional standards. The efforts of the Association of Community Media in 2023 were recognized by the media community and its director awarded a special prize in a professional competition.

Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant	Somewhat Vibrant	Highly Vibrant

Vibrancy Rating

PRINCIPLE 4: TRANSFORMATIVE ACTION — 16

Strength of Evidence Rating

Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong	Strong

The score for Principle 4 fell by one point from last year's study. Panelists struggled to assess how information influences people's behavior in the absence of reliable studies on this topic. The indicator on how civil society uses quality information to improve communities scored the highest within this principle, showing the solidarity of journalists with civil activists and NGOs, which is a relatively new trend. Conversely, the indicators on how the government uses information and how information supports good governance and democratic rights scored the lowest.

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

According to the results of the 2023 M-Vector survey, 79% of respondents were interested in news, with politics, weather, the economy, and crime topping the consumption agenda, while TV, radio, and the internet are dominated by movies, series, news, and music.

The Kyrgyzstan media space has non-politicized content producers with their own audiences, mostly on blogs and social media. These producers often cover topics such as ecology, tourism, and travel. Media also present non-politicized content by opinion leaders from social networks, with artists and athletes among the contributors. In a country with increasing authoritarian rule, however, any topic risks becoming political.

Due to low demand, access to analytical and niche media remains limited. Kyrgyzstan still has specialized media on economics, such as Economist.kg and Akchabar. Many public and online platforms with religious orientation (for example, Nasaat media) have extensive audiences. The country has regional variation: with reduced use of the Russian language in the southern regions, domestic TV in the Kyrgyz language is now dominating, along with the Kyrgyz blogosphere. In contrast, in the capital and some northern regions, consumers still primarily watch Kremlin channels and read media in Russian.

Kyrgyz society has a high level of intolerance towards differing opinions, which contributes to reduced information diversity. "Due to aggression, the media try not to speak out on religious, national, or language-related topics," said one panelist. "Previously, there was more diversity; for example, they discussed the loud *azan* [Islamic call to prayer] in mosques, but now they are afraid to discuss such topics because there will be hate, and people will receive threats in private messages. Similarly, if the issue of the quality of teaching the Kyrgyz language or problems with dictionaries, teacher training, etc., is raised, such content is perceived as attacks on the Kyrgyz language itself and a reluctance to learn it."

Another panelist observed that the media sphere is less diverse now, with fewer open discussions featuring people with varied viewpoints. Open platforms with talk shows are limited to Azattyk Media and Govori TV, along with T-Media in the regions, while state channels do not invite people whose opinions differ from the government's line. "In November

2023, I asked to broadcast a video about the contribution of NGOs to solving social problems in the region on regional Osh TV and Intymak TV," the panelist said. "They refused and said there would be negative consequences for their leaders."

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

There is very little research or data on how information influences the behavior of Kyrgyz citizens in various spheres. The journalists on the panel reported that citizens are guided by unreliable, poor-quality information regarding electoral processes, health and safety issues, and current social and political problems. A striking example of this is the question of vaccinating children. In 2023, more than 17,000 Kyrgyzstanis refused routine vaccinations, and the end of the year was marked by a measles outbreak. Almost half of those who refused to vaccinate their children are guided by "religious" considerations, while another 40% do not trust the effectiveness and safety of vaccines.

Social media platforms play significant roles in electoral processes. By using administrative resources and employing troll factories, the authorities discredit unwanted candidates. "Given that the authorities systematically and massively use troll factories to shape public opinion on various political events or to deliberately influence individuals to damage their public image, people's opinions on political and social issues are formed based on unreliable information," observed a panelist.

> **Social media platforms play significant roles in electoral processes. By using administrative resources and employing troll factories, the authorities discredit unwanted candidates.**

Audio and video recordings of election procedures can be effective only if the authorities are not interested in "pushing through" a specific candidate. For example, in 2023, the election results in a single-member district in the capital were declared invalid, largely due to recordings circulating on social media about voter bribery and vote falsification.

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

As of June 2023, the Unified Database of Legal Entities of the Ministry of Justice had registered 29,130 NGOs in the Kyrgyz Republic. Among them, some do not function, and various organizations pursue different goals and have diverse values and missions. For example, according to one panelist, the government uses some NGOs for manipulation and to support repressive legislative initiatives. However, these organizations are a distinct minority, as most NGOs provide fact-based and expert opinions.

NGOs founded on values of human rights and democratic principles typically strive to provide Kyrgyz society and their target groups with high quality and reliable information. For instance, the NGO MoveGreen engages in civic monitoring of air quality, offers expertise and analysis, promotes measures to reduce pollution levels in Bishkek, and provides environmental education for citizens and decision-makers. The legal clinic Adilet provides legal expertise on legislative drafts. A significant number of gender-focused NGOs provide expertise on gender equality issues, combating violence, and engaging in advocacy activities.

Government agencies often lack the capacity to provide expertise, and NGOs are reliable partners in this aspect. Media outlets also actively collaborate with NGOs, especially on issues requiring specialized knowledge.

However, in 2023, the relationship between NGOs and government bodies deteriorated. "During the reform of the media law, the Media Initiative Group prepared five comments on five versions of the draft law presented by the Administration of the President of the Kyrgyz Republic," said one panelist. "However, all suggestions and remarks provided by representatives of the media community regarding provisions that create unreasonable, excessive risks for the activities of independent media outlets were not taken into account by the initiators."

According to the panelists, the NGO sector continues to perform effectively in the face of government pressure. For example, despite political manipulation by certain parliamentarians, civil society activists worked to submit a funding application for the fight against tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS in the Kyrgyz Republic. The UN Global Fund approved the application.

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

The quality of information at state press conferences has significantly deteriorated. "Speakers are poorly prepared to answer questions," said a panelist, while also acknowledging that "journalists themselves are not practically prepared for press conferences, often writing from the office, listening to speakers online."

Government officials have a limited understanding of the role of journalists and the media. Prime Minister Akylbek Japarov, for instance, urged bloggers and journalists to "contribute to the development of the republic" by highlighting the achievements of the current administration. Officials at all levels do not shy away from unreliable information to present their "achievements," sometimes resorting to deliberately false information. For example, the Kyrgyz White House claimed that replacing the national flag would cost nothing to the state budget. Journalists and citizens were unaware of the reasons behind the flag replacement, leading to the proliferation of rumors.

President Japarov and his team, while showing disdain for civil activists and NGOs, nonetheless try to strengthen the public perception that he is supported by the majority of citizens and that he is guided by their advice. To achieve this, "dutiful delegates" were carefully selected for the second People's Kurultai, and the president held secret meetings with activists, bloggers, and journalists selected by his press service based on unclear criteria. Panelists noted that the meeting with bloggers and journalists was not officially covered; only leaked information from the meeting participants revealed that this was not the first closed meeting with the president.

Despite the deteriorating interactions between NGOs and the government, the panelists cited examples of effective and productive cooperation. One panelist explained how the Constitutional Court responded to a complaint from the non-profit Media Policy Institute regarding Article 167 of the criminal code, which relates to non-disclosure agreements. The court agreed that the article in question had legal uncertainty and the Cabinet of Ministers ultimately amended it.

Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic rights

> **" The authorities seem immune to criticism regarding public information about human rights violations, and any criticism of the activities of government agencies is used as a pretext for persecuting them as political opponents.**

According to Transparency International's 2023 Corruption Perceptions Index, Kyrgyzstan scored 26 out of 100 points and dropped one position compared to the previous year, now ranking 141st out of 180 countries. While the head of the State Committee for National Security claimed Kyrgyzstan has entered the "second stage" of the fight against corruption, the report noted "a significant decrease in the transparency of government activities and an increase in corruption risks."

One panelist described the attempts of independent outlets to affect change through quality reporting. "Independent media help the leadership of national security agencies with journalistic investigations, identify shortcomings in transparency and accountability mechanisms, leadership and management systems, and provide their platforms for information exchange and discussion of security issues involving all parties," she said. "Unfortunately, instead of adequately responding to investigations and publications on corruption, the authorities do everything to destroy independent media and restrict freedom of

speech. Moreover, the authorities do not acknowledge these violations, calling for punishment of content producers for expressing their opinions."

The authorities seem immune to criticism regarding public information about human rights violations, and any criticism of the activities of government agencies is used as a pretext for persecuting them as political opponents. For example, the media extensively covered the story of a criminal case against a 72-year-old pensioner who used social media to address the president and the head of the State Committee for National Security. The woman complained about rising prices and the unfair arrest of the leader of the Butun Kyrgyzstan party and parliament deputy Adakhan Madumarov. As a result, authorities charged her under the criminal code statue "public calls for violent seizure of power," fining and detaining her for one month.

Panelists pointed to another dismissive state response, when public accusations arose against the head of the State Intelligence Service and their use of torture on detainees in the Kempir-Abad case. The department denied the allegations of torture and reminded the detainees that knowingly false reporting of a crime carries criminal liability.

Because of the restrictive media environment, panelists in the Kyrgyzstan study will remain anonymous.

TAJIKISTAN

Vibrant
Information
Barometer

2 0 2 4

VIBRANCY

40 — Highly Vibrant
30 — Somewhat Vibrant
20 — Slightly Vibrant
10 — Not Vibrant
0

Overall Score: 2022: 13, 2023: 15, 2024: 14

Information Quality: 2022: 14, 2023: 16, 2024: 16

Multiple Channels: 2022: 13, 2023: 15, 2024: 14

Consumption & Engagement: 2022: 10, 2023: 12, 2024: 11

Transformative Action: 2022: 15, 2023: 17, 2024: 15

PRINCIPLES

Not Vibrant (0-10): Quality information is extremely limited in this country. The vast majority of it is not editorially independent, not based on facts, or it is intended to harm. People do not have the rights, means, or capacity to access a wide range of information; they do not recognize or reject misinformation; and they cannot or do not make choices on what types of information they want to engage with.

Slightly Vibrant (11-20): Quality information is available on a few topics or geographies in this country, but not all. While some information is editorially independent, there is still a significant amount of misinformation, malinformation, and hate speech in circulation, and it does influence public discourse. Most people do not recognize or reject misinformation.

Somewhat Vibrant (21-30): Quality information is available in this country and most of it is editorially independent, based on facts, and not intended to harm. Most people have the rights, means, and capacity to access a wide range of information, although some do not. Most people recognize and reject misinformation, although some do not.

Highly Vibrant (31-40): Quality information is widely available in this country. People have the rights, means, and capacity to access a wide range of information; they recognize and reject misinformation.

Highly Vibrant

Somewhat Vibrant

Slightly Vibrant

OVERALL
SCORE

14

Not Vibrant

Ten years ago, Tajikistan's media played a more active role and enjoyed relative freedom, although criticism of President Emomali Rahmon and his family was unofficially prohibited. In recent years, however, the country's media environment has deteriorated, and now, according to the panelists, the media are in the worst state since Tajikistan's civil war in the 1990s.

The quality of information has not improved and remains poor. Some professional media dispense questionable content based on speculation in hopes of reaching large audiences. Many journalists use unnamed sources, which undermines credibility but is often necessary to protect people from inquiries from authorities. Manipulative information is the norm.

In 2023, Tajikistan authorities increased pressure on independent media, critical journalists, bloggers, and on representatives of civil society. Over the past year and a half, pressure from officials closed more than 700 nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) , including media groups that were closed voluntarily or by court decisions.
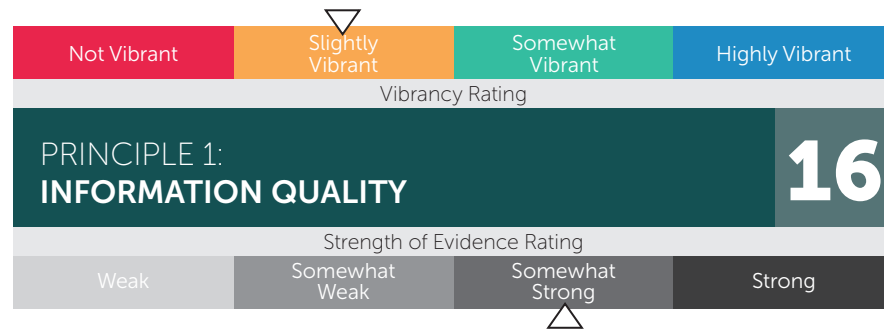
The repression of journalists, public figures, and human rights defenders by Tajikistan authorities continues. In March 2023, the State Committee for National Security arrested independent journalist Khurshed Fozilov on charges of participating in banned extremist groups. A district court sentenced him to seven years in prison. The detention and arrest in August of the author of the memoir Events of My Life, Abdukhalil Kholikzoda, and his editor, Abdukodir Rustam, represented an even higher-profile case. Kholikzoda is a well-known Tajik entrepreneur whose book includes details about two top officials. Both the author and

his editor are accused of inciting interethnic and religious hatred.

Access to official information also remained a problem in 2023. Officials continued to hinder journalists by scheduling 10 to 13 press conferences each day, which represents the only opportunities for journalists to ask questions of interest. Due to the logistical chaos this caused, independent media's small editorial offices were unable to send reporters to all the events.

Tajikistan's overall country score dropped one point this year in comparison with the 2023 VIBE study, with moderate score decreases in Principle 2 (Multiple Channels), Principle 3 (Information Consumption and Engagement, and Principle 4 (Transformative Action). Media organizations continued to have difficulty obtaining licenses to produce broadcast products or to gain frequency allocation and journalist accreditations. In 2023, the Communications Service reduced the period for television frequency use from five years to just one. The government also reduced the length of journalists' accreditation, sometimes to just three months, and some panelists said this shows Tajikistan wants to "keep journalists on a leash." Additionally, authorities attempted to take control of bloggers' activities by creating the Association of Bloggers of Tajikistan, which was initiated by the Committee for Youth and Tourism Affairs.

Throughout the year, there were signs of cooperation between the media community and the state. Some members of the country's parliament joined with media NGOs and prepared an Information Code, which aims to improve journalists' lives.

Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant	Somewhat Vibrant	Highly Vibrant

Vibrancy Rating

PRINCIPLE 1:
INFORMATION QUALITY   **16**

Strength of Evidence Rating

Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong	Strong

The score of this principle remained the same as in 2023. The lowest score occurred in Indicator 5, which deals with the assessment of independent content producers, who, in 2023, were even more constrained due to reduced funding from international organizations. This indicator was also influenced by the lack of state support and additional fees charged for television companies, which weakened the industry. This led to a deterioration in the quality of content produced and a limitation in the timeliness of covering events in the country.

A significant number of media outlets continued to operate in Tajikistan throughout the year, including print media, television and radio stations, and online news agencies. However, the quality of the content produced remains a problem, especially by state media. Despite a decrease in the number of arrests of journalists and bloggers in 2023 compared with 2022, their activities continued to be influenced by pressures that cropped up during 2023 that affected the independence of media outlets and the quality of information produced. For example, panelists noted a rise in self-censorship by journalists and bloggers that coincided with an increase in the government's attempts to control their activities, such as by creating the Association of Bloggers of Tajikistan. They also pointed out a low level of professionalism by journalists, the domination of opinions over facts in the media, a lack of fact-checking, and the dissemination of incorrect, false information, especially by state media.

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

In Tajikistan in 2023, there were about 300 print publications, including 165 newspapers (99 state-owned and 66 private), 149 magazines (121 state-owned and 28 private), six news agencies (one state-owned and five private), approximately 20 online outlets, 33 television companies (15 state-owned and 18 private), 16 cable television companies, and four internet protocol (IP) television companies, 24 private radio stations, and 14 production houses. All of them produced a variety of audio/video and print products in various formats and on various topics. Independent media, in particular Asia Plus and Oila, have been particularly successful in producing multi-format content for various platforms. Although all state television companies are equipped with very high-quality video equipment, the content they produce does not meet consumer needs.

Umed Babakhanov, the owner of Asia Plus, says that their existing infrastructure does not help produce quality content. "People want to produce good content, but they cannot get a license for the production of audio or video content," Babakhanov said, "To open a newspaper or renew its license, the government requires a certificate from the State Committee for National Security, which is very difficult for truly independent publications to obtain."

Expensive equipment and fees for renting digital frequencies also affect the production of quality content. "You have to pay for every hour of airtime, from 16 somoni (SM) to 40 somoni ($1.50 to $3.70), depending on the power of the signal," noted Habib Maqbulov, director of TV Regar, whose company pays SM4,350 per month ($398) for seven hours of broadcasting per day, which is unaffordable for most private television companies.

According to panelists, high-quality materials on a wide range of topics in Tajikistan are mostly produced by independent publications, foreign media outlet correspondents, or freelancers.

Censorship and self-censorship strongly influence the quality of the content produced. Although most state media practice censorship,

a large number of private media journalists who produce analytical materials practice self-censorship. The events of 2022 and 2023, when Tajikistan's government imprisoned seven journalists and bloggers who criticized the regime's corruption, triggered increased self-censorship among content producers.

For years, Tajikistan authorities blocked opposition websites, including Radio Ozodi, the Tajik service of Radio Free Europe/RL, the social media account Bomdod, and the Islokh news portal, depriving the population of the right to access alternative information. According to blogger Rustam Gulov, "By restricting the population's access to truthful information within the country, the authorities are pushing citizens toward foreign sources of information, which are not always reliable."

Panelists agreed that despite the existence of Tajikistan's Media Council, which includes more than 70 private and state media outlets and has developed a Journalist Code of Ethics, local journalists and bloggers do not follow democratic norms of journalism. They noted that state authorities react differently to producers who do not comply with ethical standards: Some are allowed, while others are punished. According to Nouriddin Karshiboev, the head of the National Association of Independent Media of Tajikistan (NANSMIT), "The problem is that officials have double standards: they allow leeway to some and punish others for small infractions." Karshiboev said the memoir of Abdukhalil Kholikzoda, *Pages of My Life* serves as an example: "Its author and editor were accused of inciting interethnic, interregional, and religious discord and were imprisoned. However, independent experts claim the book does nothing of the sort."

Tajikistan has five universities with faculties or departments of journalism where journalists can receive training to produce quality materials. However, panelists note the level of teaching in these universities is very low, and the curriculum lags far behind modern requirements. In addition, NGOs and international organizations offer many free and paid short-term courses to train citizens interested in content production. However, journalists lack motivation and clear professional goals, which prevents them from upgrading their skills on a continuous basis in the long term, according to Vera Kulakova-

Brannerud, the owner of Radio Vatan. Moreover, Tajikistani journalists, for the most part, do not speak languages other than their native one, which severely limits their ability to acquire higher-quality knowledge online and in training.

Almost all media outlets, especially in rural areas, are financially dependent on service contracts with local authorities to cover government activities, which makes it difficult for them to maintain editorial independence.

Journalists have always complained that government officials are inaccessible. Babakhanov noted that this makes it difficult for journalists to cover the work of many government agencies, especially the executive office of the president and law enforcement agencies. In recent years, officials have completely stopped responding to journalists' inquiries. Press conferences, which are very rare, have mostly turned into monologues where heads of state institutions read out prepared information, leaving very little time for questions. The lack of access led the journalism community to send a collective letter to President Rahmon's administration and the General Prosecutor's Office at the beginning of summer 2023, which slightly improved the situation for a short time.

Although many local, regional, and international media outlets operate in Tajikistan, few of them have the courage to criticize the president, his close relatives, and high-ranking officials. One exception is Radio Ozodi, which provides a platform for opponents of President Rahmon. Because it airs opinions of opposition leaders, state authorities limit the outlet's journalists' accreditation period, sometimes to three months.

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

In 2023, there was a troubling trend of media outlets reporting unverified and low-quality information. Panelists pointed out that this is due to journalists' low level of education and professional qualifications, which leads to the spread of fake news and speculation-based information. Media present a lack of distinction between facts and opinions, where

for many content creators, subjective opinions become more important than objective facts, especially in state media.

International and some local publications conduct fact-checking, while other outlets do not due to the lack of information written in Tajik—most young journalists in the country speak only Tajik. Resources for fact-checking are virtually nonexistent except for the platform https://factcheck.tj/, which offers Tajik- and Russian-language versions. This platform operates on a voluntary basis and does not consistently publish materials on current topics. Tajikistani journalists do not check government officials' statements because it is considered dangerous, and journalists and their editorial offices often face threats as a result, according to the panelists. This leads to the production of a large amount of unverified, low-quality content containing false or incorrect information. State media often disseminate information prepared by law enforcement agencies or "troll factories" aimed at defaming political opponents, especially those who are in exile in Europe.

Nonprofessional content producers are the main disseminators of inaccurate and unverified information, especially video bloggers, "who sometimes don't even try to ensure that their product complies with legislation, regulatory acts, or accepted professional standards, rules, or the code of ethics," said Nabi Yusupov, head of the Media Consulting NGO. He said this was especially evident during the 2022 border conflict between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan "information war," when authorities gave tacit consent and sometimes support to bloggers and other social media activists who spread unverified, one-sided, and sometimes false information about the situation. He noted, however, that Kyrgyz professional and nonprofessional content producers spread the same information but more of it.

The production and dissemination of manipulative information has varying consequences. If false information is aimed at denigrating

> **" Almost all media outlets, especially in rural areas, are financially dependent on service contracts with local authorities to cover government activities, which makes it difficult for them to maintain editorial independence.**

opponents or critics of the authorities and disseminated by state media, officials make no claims against them. However, when independent media criticize authorities, then authorities will definitely punish the journalist, blogger, or outlet. The Media Council used to act as an arbitrator in such disputes, but in the past few years, it has stopped participating.

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

The Russian government's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has divided Tajikistan's society into two opposing camps—those who support the actions of the Russian government and those who consider it an aggressor. Although Tajikistan's government remains neutral in this war, some content producers became tools of its propaganda and continue to incite hatred toward Ukraine and Western values.

Foreign governments and their representatives leverage the political tension between the Russian government and the West, as well as the conflict in the Middle East, to spread manipulative information and hatred. In Tajikistan, sources have funded channels, including one by photographer Olim Shirinov, and profiles on social networks that spread manipulative information about Ukrainians. Content creators have also produced antisemitic material with suspected support from the Russian government.

Because the government has not communicated a clear position on the Ukrainian conflict, panelists noted that creators of false information and materials inciting hatred remain unpunished. The state media continue their practice of blackening political opponents and spreading false information, and do not face punishment.

Unprofessional content producers and bloggers often rely on "hot" topics for content, based solely on their opinions, and ignore fact-

checking. This creates a fertile ground for the spread of manipulative and hateful information. The activities of these content producers, especially on social media networks, remain unregulated and unpunished, which complicates the fight against manipulative information and incitement to hatred in general.

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

In Tajikistan, publications appear in Tajik, Russian, and, to a much lesser extent, Uzbek. However, there is little quality news and information content in Tajik, which is the only language most people speak. The lack of media in the languages of national minorities limits their access to diverse information, so many of them turn to the internet and Russian-language television channels for information.

Although the constitution guarantees freedom of speech and opinion, the diversity of opinions and ideological views remains limited: Professional media, except for Radio Ozodi, rarely provide a platform for opposition politicians to express their beliefs. In addition, the government controls both official media and social media networks, pursuing even small expressions of criticism toward the president or government structures. These actions place Tajikistan among countries actively persecuting their political opponents abroad.

"Representatives of some religious, political, and ethnic groups in Tajikistan face restrictions on publishing their content," Babakhanov pointed out. National media, especially state-owned outlets, do not reflect a wide range of ethnic groups, creating the illusion that only Tajiks live in the country. National minorities without their own media in their native language are forced to seek platforms to express their views and discuss issues on social networks.

The vast majority of Tajikistan's population practices Islam and coverage of religious issues, including the views of "unofficial" religious figures whose appointments the government never approved, often leads to negative consequences. Journalists can write about other religions, but they avoid serious discussions of religious rights violations, due to self-censorship. Bloggers and opposition journalists outside Tajikistan can openly criticize the government for human rights violations, including ones based on religious grounds, but their relatives and friends inside the country may suffer as a result.

> **❝❞ The Russian government's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has divided Tajikistan's society into two opposing camps—those who support the actions of the Russian government and those who consider it an aggressor.**

Traditional notions of male and female gender limit discussions of gender and gender-sensitive issues. Experts note the complete absence of discussions about transgender women and men in Tajikistan's media. "Gender minorities and marginalized groups are voiceless in the media and face condemnation and accusations of propaganda when they try to discuss their issues," noted Lola Olimova, editor of the Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR) news outlet, "They rarely come out publicly with information about their gender due to possible negative consequences."

Some panelists pointed out that more opportunities exist for women in journalism than for men, largely because of financial considerations and because female journalists face fewer risks and less pressure than men.

Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced.

Journalism in Tajikistan faces serious challenges, such as mass exodus from the profession due to low wages, especially in rural areas. Resources, such as grants from international organizations which used to support independent media, are dwindling, and local programs that once brought in some income are ceasing to exist. According to Zebo Tajibayeva, owner of online media site Your.TJ, journalism in Tajikistan is seen as an unprofitable business, and for independent outlets, the only way to earn income is through grants and advertising. Subscriptions and
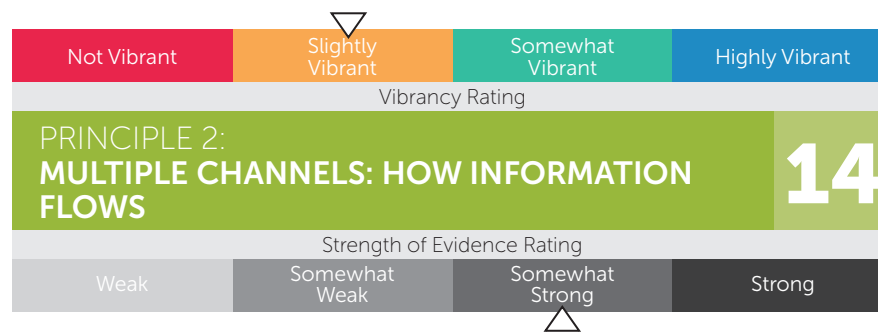
crowdfunding do not bring in significant revenue due to the peculiarities of local markets.

Independent television stations in Tajikistan face serious difficulties competing with state television channels, which receive over 70 percent of the advertising market and subsidies from the state, although they do not use these funds for content development. The remaining 30 percent of the market is divided among internet publications, radio stations, newspapers, and social media, increasing competition for independent outlets. The lack of media profitability also affects the salaries of ordinary journalists.

Not only does the government fund state television channels, which distorts the media market, but the State Committee for Television and Radio, Gosteleradio, also charges private television companies an additional 1 percent fee on their income for supposed "staff training." This is in addition to the fee private companies pay for each hour of connection to the state multiplex, which can amount to up to SM40 (approximately $3.70), which is a significant burden for many financially strapped media companies.

Professional content producers currently lack sufficient financial resources to cover operational expenses to create high-quality content. Nematullo Mirsaidov, freelance journalist, notes that despite the majority of journalists having the necessary technical skills, they face a lack of funds for financing creative tasks. This hinders the creation of quality analytical material and slows down the timely coverage of important events in the country.

Gulnora Amirshoeva, owner of online news site "Vecherka," points out that journalists' salaries are quite low, ranging from 1,100 to 3,300 somoni (SM) per month, which is equivalent to $100 to $300. They face significant differences in payment from different publications: Outlets that actively compete for audiences and monitor new trends are willing to pay significantly more than those interested only in survival. Journalists from both types seek additional sources of income by joining NGO and international organizations' projects, as well as participating in various competitions those groups organize.

Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant	Somewhat Vibrant	Highly Vibrant

Vibrancy Rating

PRINCIPLE 2:
MULTIPLE CHANNELS: HOW INFORMATION FLOWS

14

Strength of Evidence Rating

Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong	Strong

This principle scored one point lower than last year's VIBE report, dropping from 15 to 14. The number of journalist arrests decreased in 2023, and attacks on them, including cyberattacks and the use of legal mechanisms, intensified. Self-censorship rose not only among journalists but also among experts and analysts, impacting the quality of content produced in the country. Authorities blocked websites without warning, creating a tense environment for freedom of speech and access to information. National minorities faced difficulties accessing information due to the lack of television channels in their languages, and access for people with disabilities was also limited. The internet infrastructure covers most of the country, but low speed and high cost prevent consumers from fully utilizing its benefits in everyday life. State control over the internet and media restricts the population's access to it, hindering exposure to alternative information. Panelists also noted that state media agencies' information dissemination were ineffective and inadequate—deadlines for providing information are not met, and access to state agencies' official websites is restricted. The state monopolizes the main channels for offering information, including television, radio, and the internet, leaving little space for the activities of independent information channels.

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

The freedoms of speech and press are protected by law in Tajikistan, but the government does not enforce them adequately. The parliament has been working on a new Information Code for two years, which is

supposed to protect the interests of journalists and media workers. But by the end of 2023, it had not yet been adopted.

In 2023, the number of journalists arrested, along with the number of attacks against them, has significantly decreased in comparison with 2022, commonly seen as the worst year for Tajik journalists since the civil war in the 1990s. However, Justice for Journalists tracked about 31 attacks against journalists in 2023, with about 60% of them perpetrated by government officials involving legal mechanisms. Journalist Khurshed Fozilov, 37 years old, received a court sentence for collaborating with banned organizations. Authorities detained businessman and memoirist Abdughalil Kholikzod and his editor, Abdukodir Rustam, for allegedly "inciting social, racial, national, regional, and religious discord," related to Kholikzod's memoir.

The Tajikistan government is taking measures to control the activities of independent media. Zinnatullo Ismoilzoda, chairman of Tajikistan's Union of Journalists, stated that the State Committee for Radio and Television requires private television companies to pre-approve all contracts with foreign organizations. Additionally, the Unified Information Center for the Prevention of Extremism, Terrorism, and Cybercrime in the nation's capital, Dushanbe, officially opened, which analyzes and collects data on cybercrimes. The panelists expressed concerns about the possible restriction of freedom of speech due to the activities of this agency, which monitors and analyzes citizens' online comments and statements for possible interpretation as extremist.

The arrests of journalists in 2022 significantly influenced self-censorship among media representatives and analysts who provide commentary on specialized topics, especially those who have ties to or depend on state institutions. Many experts who work for the government avoid expressing opinions without prior approval from management, even on issues within their area of expertise. This reduces the quality and diversity of content.

Mirsaidov pointed out that access to information was significantly restricted throughout 2023, especially news concerning the border conflict with Kyrgyzstan. State officials have given unofficial instructions to journalists not to provide information, and journalists now find it difficult to enter this region without coordination with the authorities. Residents of border areas fear retribution from authorities and avoid contact with the media. Panelists believe that coverage of potentially controversial and sensitive topics has become very rare in Tajikistan because outlets and journalists are concerned about possible consequences, as defamation is punishable by criminal penalties. State institutions can openly instruct the media to exclude certain topics from their agenda.

Some websites continue to be blocked in the country without warning or explanation of the reasons.

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

Tajikistan's information and communication infrastructure meets the information needs of citizens, although not all users are always satisfied with the topics covered and the formats of information delivery. The lack of interesting and quality content forces many consumers to turn to foreign sources, which can influence their worldview. "The development of quality media content within the country is an important task to meet the information needs of citizens and give them media education," said Yusupov with Media Consulting.

In Tajikistan, no television channels offer programming in the nation's minority languages, so these population groups have limited news offerings. There are only news broadcasts in Russian, Uzbek, Arabic, and English on a few national channels, as well as various programs in Uzbek on two private channels. People with disabilities also have limited access to news because only two state channels, TVT and Jahonnamo, occasionally use sign-language interpreters during coverage of important events.

The telecommunications and internet infrastructure covers almost all regions of the country and are available both in urban areas and in large rural areas, although according to some data access is only available to about 40 percent of the population.

Tajikistan's internet ranks among the slowest and most expensive in the world; according to the Speedtest Global Index, the country ranks 139th out of 145 countries. This is primarily due to the government's creation of the Unified Communication Center at Tajik Telecom in 2016, which granted it exclusive rights to internet traffic. In just one year after this institution was established, the speed of the incoming data decreased from 10 Gbps to 4.15 Gbps. At the end of November 2023, the government allowed two private companies to directly import internet from China and signed an agreement with Huawei for the supply and installation of base stations for 5G networks. However, Olimova is concerned that using a Chinese internet provider might subject Tajik users to the Chinese government's internet restrictions. Moreover, the complete dependence on Chinese high-tech suppliers increases the risk of losing control over important information infrastructure, panelists agreed.

The majority of Tajikistan's population has access to various information channels, including social media, which helps satisfy their information needs. With the emergence of instant messengers and social networks, access to information has improved, allowing users to choose content according to their preferences.

The population has access to nationwide state television and radio channels, as well as alternative sources of information, such as mobile internet, internet radio, and IP-TV. However, print media are suffering: the culture of reading newspapers and magazines is declining, and the number of readers decreases year by year. But state media still have state employees subscribe to their publications.

Social norms do not restrict access to information for any social groups, including women; however, according to Olimova, some more religiously conservative men do not want women in their families to actively use phones and the internet, believing it could impact their moral values.

> **In 2023, the number of journalists arrested, along with the number of attacks against them, has significantly decreased in comparison with 2022, commonly seen as the worst year for Tajik journalists since the civil war in the 1990s.**

The government's State Committee for Television and Radio Broadcasting and the Communications Service regulate the country's internet and media, including digital broadcasting. These agencies provide advantages to state companies and limit the capabilities of private internet providers and broadcasters. High prices for renting digital frequencies and connecting to the state multiplex make it difficult for independent television companies to access the airwaves, leading to limited access to alternative information for citizens.

Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for government information.

In Tajikistan, laws provide the right to access information from the government, and media outlets are supposed to receive information within three days of a request, which corresponds to international standards. However, this often does not happen in practice, especially when it comes to meeting news deadlines. Karshiboev emphasized that "requests are often ignored, and even if information is provided, it often comes too late when it has lost its relevance." Mirsaidov pointed out that information is provided more quickly if it is in the interests of government institutions, but difficulties arise if the information is not in their favor.

Tajikistan citizens have the right to receive information about the work of government bureaus and the decisions they make, but in practice, they rarely use this because many do not know how to obtain government information. Few people use official requests via email because it takes too long to receive a response. Even if citizens know how to request information, they rarely turn to government agencies, fearing they will be targeted: Government officials often perceive requests from citizens and journalists as a threat to their power.

Government bodies can disseminate information through different platforms, but state media tend to spread undemocratic propaganda.

Social media networks are the main source of information for Tajikistan citizens—it is where they go to find official information and to air their grievances to authorities. Sometimes public outcry on these platforms stimulates government agencies into action to correct issues of complaints.

Press conferences remain the main and most effective way for journalists to obtain government information, but their frequency decreased over the past few years from quarterly to just twice a year. "They often boil down to a formal reading of press releases, leaving little time for journalists' questions of interest," said independent journalist Rajabi Mirzo.

> **Press conferences remain the main and most effective way for journalists to obtain government information, but their frequency decreased over the past few years from quarterly to just twice a year.**

Access to information through government agency websites is important, but unfortunately, not all of them maintain up-to-date information. Press secretaries and information services play a key role in ensuring accessibility, but panelists believed their work is often limited by internal department rules and employee professionalism, which does not always meet democratic standards of information accessibility and responsibility.

Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow.

The state monopolizes the main channels for relaying official information—radio and television—although the law prohibits monopolization in any form. Radio and television frequencies are entirely controlled by Tajikistan's Communications Service, and the right to issue licenses belongs solely to the Committee on Radio and Television Broadcasting. The creation of private electronic media faces significant difficulties, because the process of issuing licenses and frequencies is nontransparent. There are no public broadcast media in Tajikistan because there is no law on it, despite years of efforts by civil society.

Conditions exist for developing online media, but regulations are often not followed. The Ministry of Culture requires individuals who want to create their own internet media to register with the department, provide annual updates, and obtain a certificate from the State Committee on National Security, which many publications find difficult to do.

Establishing radio and television outlets in Tajikistan is challenging since owners must obtain three licenses at once: for content production, broadcasting, and the use of a specific frequency. The Broadcasting Committee controls the licensing process, which often leads to arbitrary distribution. "This system breeds corrupt schemes and is used as a means of rigidly censoring media content," said Gulov. Panelists agreed that loyalty to the authorities determines whether an outlet can register and get a license.

Foreigners and foreign companies are not allowed to own media outlets, according to Tajikistan laws, although there are no such restrictions in other media areas, such as advertising, public relations, or production studios. The country does not have a significant influx of foreign investment even in media areas outside of journalism because of its weak economy and limited advertising market. When registering or accounting for media outlets with the Ministry of Culture, outlets are required to give full information about the owners.

In the north Sughd region, many private radio and television channels operate that are mainly focused on entertainment content without political bias in their news. Sughd's IPTV channels broadcast programs from Russia, Iran, Uzbek, and India.
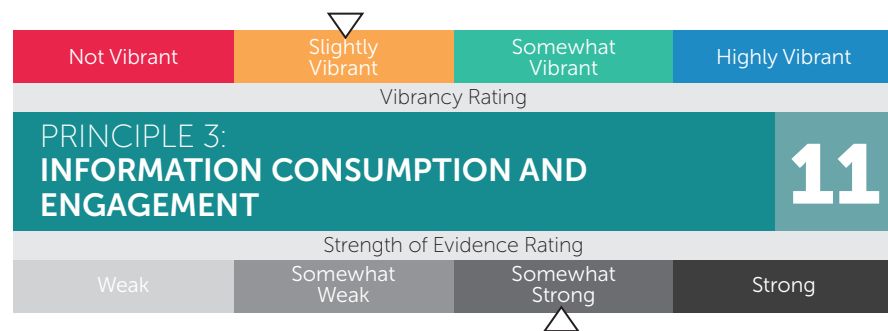
Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.

Owners manage most media outlets in Tajikistan. Often, they are professional journalists who seek profit and aim to influence information policy. The outlets are usually small and do not have separate business departments. "Often journalists, in addition to their main materials, also write advertising and PR material, which later strongly affects their activities and objectivity," said Tajibayeva. Most publications lack sales

departments, and sales are handled by the founders or the editorial board, undermining the independence of editorial policy.

Panelists believe that because media outlets have trouble finding financing, owners often influence editorial policy based on funder preferences and make their own rules of what should and should not be discussed, disregarding journalism standards and ethics. The Committee on Television and Radio Broadcasting, together with the Communication Service, controls the process of allocating frequencies for broadcasting, thereby influencing the information policy of television and radio companies.

Interference from security agencies means both state-owned and private media face difficulties in maintaining independent editorial policies. State media have an advantage over private media because they can import equipment and be exempt from customs taxes. They also have more direct access to government officials, unlike private media, whose information requests are often ignored. State-owned media receive subsidies from the state and, therefore, comply with its editorial policies. Although advertising influences content somewhat, it is not a determining factor. State-owned media also have better access to information and statistics, which boosts the quality of their content.

Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant	Somewhat Vibrant	Highly Vibrant

Vibrancy Rating

PRINCIPLE 3: INFORMATION CONSUMPTION AND ENGAGEMENT	11

Strength of Evidence Rating

Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong	Strong

This principle scored the lowest of all in this year's VIBE report just as last year, showing information consumption and engagement has not improved. Despite Tajikistan's fairly advanced legislation on freedom of speech and its Law on Citizens' Rights for Access to Information, the country still faces severe restrictions on obtaining news that is critical

of the regime, as evidenced by the arrests of journalists and bloggers. Although the journalism community attempts to collectively appeal to state structures to improve the situation, such efforts have limited effect. Journalists and social media content creators often practice self-censorship out of fear for their safety, which limits opportunities for open dialogue between a range of opinions. State structures sometimes react to media content about human rights violations, but these responses address only minor offenses, ignoring serious issues. Overall, more productive interaction with information and solving complex societal problems requires improved critical thinking of the population and increased trust between them and the government.

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

Tajikistan passed a law in 2018 that provides citizens protection of their personal data. But Tajiks say the law is not followed. For example, when calling a transportation company, representatives often address citizens by their first and middle name, which raises questions. "How did the company get my personal data? I never gave consent for my information to be transferred to third parties," said Shahlo Akobirova, director of Khoma, a local media development NGO.

Panelists agreed that journalists and ordinary people in the country have a low level of literacy on digital security. Most media outlets and journalists lack the desire to self-educate, despite the availability of online educational resources in Tajik, such as the website rushnoi.org.

Only a small part of society has basic knowledge of digital literacy. Journalists regularly attend seminars and training sessions, but their digital literacy remains insufficient. Journalism professor Rano Bobojoniyon noted more universities, such as the Institute of Arts, are including additional courses on information security.

Panelists pointed out that many state agencies--such as the State Committee for National Security, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and the Prosecutor General's Office--constantly monitor journalists' and activists' internet activity, including on social media networks, and

eavesdrop on their phone conversations under the pretext of ensuring national security. Akobirova noted that most journalists and media owners believe their information on the internet and social networks is available and under the full control of government agencies, and there is no escape from this.

Tajikistan's social networks are actively developing and attract more and more digital content producers, which increases government surveillance. Yet, the majority of the population still does not fully understand the importance of digital security. In 2023, Justice for Journalists reported that that the number of non-physical and cyberattacks (or threats) on Tajik journalists significantly decreased to 13 from the previous year. While some independent media outlets have moved their domains abroad for protection, many of Tajikistan's media outlets are unaware that the international organization, Access Now, provides free website protection options and free assistance in crisis situations.

Tajikistan has a significant shortage of internet security specialists, and the state's Unified Communication Center does not have any protections, posing a national threat to digital security: One cyberattack on this center could lead to the entire system collapsing, including airports, banks, and other key facilities. Nosirjon Mamurzoda, editor-in-chief of the regional newspaper *Khatlon*, noted that media sites outside cities are completely unprotected from hackers or other attacks. A recent analysis of the official websites of local executive authorities in 12 districts of the Khatlon region found that none of them are protected against possible cyberattacks, according to Mamurzoda.

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

Whether by omission or design, the country's leaders do not promote media literacy, which is higher among educated people in Tajikistan. The

term "media literacy" has been used in Tajikistan for a long time, but many, especially government bureaucrats, do not fully understand its meaning. Panelists noted that government officials warn young people against using the internet thoughtlessly, but they are not interested in increasing citizens' media literacy.

Some computer science courses in Tajikistan schools offer some media literacy lessons, but more education is needed. The Russian-Tajik (Slavonic) University, Khujand State University, the Institute of Arts, and the Tajik National University offer courses on media literacy. Donor organizations have attempted to introduce these lessons into the national school curriculum, but beyond pilot projects, progress has not been made due to a lack of qualified personnel.

The website www.factcheck.tj helps citizens verify the accuracy of information, but its content is limited due to a lack of funds and volunteers. There are no government information resources for fact-checking.

Several years ago, the international organization Internews created a textbook on media literacy in Tajik, but its circulation was limited.

Adults have the opportunity to independently take online or offline courses on media literacy and critical thinking. "But only a small percentage of citizens show interest in this topic," Yusupov pointed out, "For most, several local media and Radio Ozodi remain the main sources of news."

The level of media literacy among both ordinary citizens and journalists leaves much to be desired. The amount of fake news in Tajik on the internet increased dramatically since the pandemic. The panelists noted that the low level of media literacy is especially noticeable on social media, where people often repost fake news and propaganda.

Although most people in Tajikistan are not media literate, educated city dwellers who have access to the internet and social media are somewhat

> " **Tajikistan's social networks are actively developing and attract more and more digital content producers, which increases government surveillance. Yet, the majority of the population still does not fully understand the importance of digital security.**

informed about fakes and fact-checks. However, most people believe everything they see on the internet, especially on social networks, according to Internews' 2021 report on Tajikistan.

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

Laws on freedom of speech formally provide opportunities for freedom of expression and access to information. However, in practice, journalists, activists, and ordinary citizens have been intimidated into largely ceding their rights to free speech and access to information. The arrests of journalists in 2022 and 2023 provide a striking example, as several journalists and bloggers were sentenced to lengthy prison terms.

Tajibayeva, the editor-in-chief of Your.Tj, believes journalists do not sufficiently defend their rights to access information, which leads to a deficit of fact-based information for the population, ultimately harming society. Panelists agreed that journalists need to unite to get authorities to give out information, which could improve access. For example, a collective appeal in 2023 by journalists and media managers to the presidential administration and the General Prosecutor's Office regarding the poor quality of government press conferences yielded results: Subsequent events were more productive, allowing journalists to directly ask questions to leaders rather than their deputies or other representatives.

The establishment in 2023 of the Department of Legal Support for Law Enforcement and Interaction within the Public in the General Prosecutor's Office represents an important development to ensure access to quality information—the department will be responsible for cooperation with journalists and the media.

Panelists noted citizens do not believe in Tajikistan's legal system and have become apathetic, believing that the fight for their rights is futile. In addition, many lack the strength and patience to overcome bureaucratic

> **"Panelists noted citizens do not believe in Tajikistan's legal system and have become apathetic, believing that the fight for their rights is futile.**

barriers and resolve issues through legislative means. "Despite de jure guaranteed civil rights, including freedom of expression, many Tajiks doubt their safety after openly criticizing the authorities," emphasized Gulov.

Certain opportunities exist for public discussions, but they are limited in scope. Citizens talk about various social issues on traditional and new media platforms and avoid political topics and issues related to the president and his circle. Political issues are usually discussed on social networks, especially by anonymous users or those outside the country.

On state television and radio channels, young people often deliberate over family issues, professional development, migration trends, and more. However, moderators of these discussions strictly control the content to avoid controversial topics. Social network participants who use their real names often limit their statements, because openly talking about problems can have negative consequences.

A lack of critical thinking means citizens have a difficult time separating truth from lies to form their own opinions.

Panelists noted that authorities can have inconsistent reactions to various media outlet reports. On one hand, they promptly respond to minor issues raised on social media networks, such as cases of hooliganism, violations of the law, or rude behavior. Offenders in such cases are quickly punished. On the other hand, officials often have no reaction to serious issues, even when they are brought to the attention of the public council at the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Mirsaidov says that, for example, when a soldier is beaten in a military unit, no one pays attention to it until the incident receives wide publicity on social networks, such as Facebook. Only after that does the military prosecutor's office start an investigation and punish the guilty.

Panelists agreed that social media platforms are more independent and dynamic than other media platforms, which allows for a variety of topics to be discussed, including criticism of the authorities. Official platforms, such as public councils, often resemble official meetings of ministries

and departments where formality prevails, and the influence of the meeting's chairperson often suppresses open dialogue. These platforms exist more for official show than for effective discussion and decision-making.

Both traditional media in Tajikistan and social media pages published material in 2023 that incited animosity. One website excerpting details from a memoir led to the arrest and imprisonment of businessman and writer Abdulhalil Kholikzoda, along with the editor of Kholikzoda's book *Pages of My Life*, Rustam Abdugodir, and the publisher of the book. The authorities accused them of inciting social, racial, national, regional, and religious enmity, and some panelists found this decision controversial.

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

There is virtually no serious audience research in Tajikistan, especially for radio and television audiences, due to a lack of resources to fund it and the lack of necessary tools, such as people meters. The rare survey of people's media preferences, last conducted in 2022, was funded by foreign donors such as the US Embassy in Tajikistan. However, the panelists were not sure that these studies fully reflect the real picture. As reported in RFE/RL, television is still the main information source for the majority of the country's adult population, although young people are more inclined to the Internet.

According to the panelists, media and content producers with presences on the Internet try to study their audience, satisfy their needs, and communicate with them using digital technologies. On social networks, these media allow their audiences to openly comment on content, which helps build trust. However, other forms of media (TV, radio, newspapers) have virtually no opportunities to study and understand their audiences.

The panelists believed that all online media have the opportunity to conduct research on their audience using available free tools. However, state media are not interested in this at all and have virtually no feedback from their audience. The panelists concluded that state media do not need to consider their audience, given their dominance in

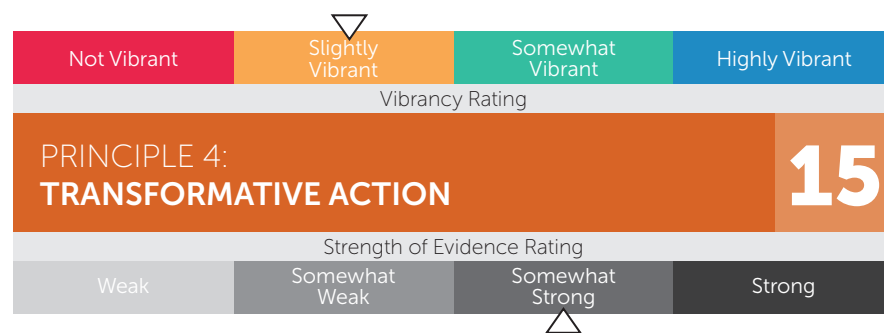Tajikistan's media market and financial support from the government.

According to Mamurzoda, the Khatlon region's print media still influence the information consumed by the people who live there. He claimed that the results of the 2021 research conducted by Internews showed that about 30% of respondents read the state *Khatlon* newspaper. However, the Khatlon regional state media themselves are not very interested in conducting such research on their own, since their high circulation is maintained through compulsory subscription.

The panelists believed that there is contact between representatives of civil society and independent media and that they regularly exchange information. However, their ability to have productive exchanges with government agencies and officials is quite low. Nuriddin Karshiboev, chairman of NANSMIT, claimed that government agencies treat representatives of civil society and independent media with great caution and distrust out of fear. These agencies do not have a constructive dialogue even with state media; there is a one-sided monologue, and state media are simply fulfilling the orders of government agencies.

This year, the Committee for Youth Affairs and Sports created the Tajikistan Bloggers Association, which officials claimed was established to contact bloggers. However, panelists believe the main goal of this initiative is actually to control bloggers and use their online capabilities to promote the state's ideology.

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

There are no community media outlets in Tajikistan.

| Not Vibrant | Slightly Vibrant | Somewhat Vibrant | Highly Vibrant |

Vibrancy Rating

PRINCIPLE 4:
TRANSFORMATIVE ACTION

15

Strength of Evidence Rating

| Weak | Somewhat Weak | Somewhat Strong | Strong |

Principle 4 dropped two points, from 17 in 2023 to 15 in 2024, signaling that the situation in Tajikistan concerning transformative action and press freedoms has not dramatically changed. Although news does not significantly influence people's behavior and the formation of public opinion, the dominance of state media limits access to diverse ideas and opinions, depriving citizens of democratic pluralism. As a result, youths' opinions, especially labor migrants, are heavily influenced by Russian and other foreign media. Although social media networks provide access to diverse information, low media and information literacy exacerbate the problem of spreading manipulative information and propaganda.

NGOs and independent media conduct training events on fact-checking and how to recognize manipulative information. But these groups need to strengthen mechanisms to protect freedom of speech, expand access to quality information, and support civil society in its interaction with government bodies to further develop democratic processes.

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

State-owned media—especially television, which is available in 96 percent of the country--dominate the information space. In print media, state newspapers and magazines that require mandatory subscriptions dominate. These publications present information from a single government perspective, leaving no room for neutral discussion.

There are not many nonpartisan producers of news and information in Tajikistan, but enough neutral media outlets exist that people can be exposed to different political orientations. Radio Ozodi--which represents alternative viewpoints, including those of opposition politicians--offers some choice in media. Among the progressive media inside the country, Asia Plus stands out, which publishes analytical and sometimes critical news reports, although with certain limitations that prevent criticism of President Rahmon and his family. Other content producers, both formal and informal, avoid political topics, sticking to entertainment or social issues.

Tajik media try to avoid politics to retain their audience, as content consumers have developed an immunity to political news and prefer lighter topics like what is found on the internet, according to Tajibayeva. Social media also helps create more open discussions because it provides the opportunity to remain anonymous.

Babakhanov notes Tajikistan has extremely limited opportunities for public discussions. Talk shows have almost disappeared from local media, especially on television. Local television channel programs, including on privately owned channels, primarily discuss social problems from a pro-government position.

Radio Ozodi produces the only serious talk show in Tajikistan that features alternative viewpoints on various issues, "Gapi Ozod" (Free Conversation). However, even here, there are unspoken rules that participants who are inside the country observe.

Tajikistan society as a whole has become more apolitical, which is reflected in the absence of political discussions on various offline and online platforms, and the pluralism of opinions has practically disappeared, Bobojoniyon noted. Yusupov observed that private television and radio companies also display this apolitical approach due to the strict control of the Committee for Television and Radio Broadcasting, which issues broadcasting licenses and controls the use of frequencies, especially in other languages.

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

In Tajikistan, people get most of their information from television, primarily from 14 state channels and numerous mass-circulation print publications with mandatory subscriptions that presumably form the basis of their opinions on political, economic, and social issues. Additionally, Russian television channels, including major state channels, are freely broadcast in the country, which panelists said provide heavily biased news. With a dearth of other sources, it is difficult for viewers to know whether the content they present is factual and reliable. With no incentive to become politically engaged, most people focus instead on their daily lives.

Social media is increasingly popular in Tajikistan as another source of current events. However, risks exist: insufficient critical thinking among the majority of the population can lead to opinions formed based on low-quality information spread on these platforms. Tadjibayeva noted that the active use of social media by troll factories significantly influences the opinions of citizens who do not have proper media and information literacy.

Panelists agreed that the media do not influence election results as evidenced by citizens' low level of political activity and the absence of alternative candidates. News outlets also do not contribute to helping people interact with their elected officials, as most officials become practically invisible immediately after the elections, they noted. "In addition, parliamentarians in the country are practically voiceless, as they were not elected through fair elections," said Mirsaidov.

Bobojoniyon believed that officials still try to solve some problems of their constituents if they are approached

The lack of critical thinking often leads people to not be able to see the difference between facts and manipulative information. For example,

Tajikistanis commonly believe that corruption exists everywhere, even in the most democratic states, and that fighting it is pointless, which leads most citizens unwilling to fight it.

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

In late 2022 and throughout 2023, Tajikistan's NGOs faced a historically difficult period. Authorities closed down more than 700 nongovernmental organizations, claiming they were "self-liquidations." However, many NGOs complained that authorities put pressure on them to voluntarily cease their activities. Some NGO leaders, including journalist Ulfatkhonim Mamadshoeva, were arrested and sentenced to long prison terms for organizing protests in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region (GBAO), which experienced periods of unrest. Under threat of arrest, some civil activists from GBAO left the country.

Officials favor NGOs that work with children and people with disabilities and try to control the activities of human rights organizations. This forces many NGOs to coordinate their programs with local authorities and sometimes seek the services of consultants from state structures to be able to implement the activities. To continue working, these NGOs must act very cautiously and use only the most reliable sources when publishing information materials such as reports and research; otherwise, authorities may accuse them of incompetence, which can affect the NGO's image, especially with donor organizations. NGOs have a good amount of high-quality information about the specifics of their work, and they share it with the media and the public.

> **Government agencies often use press conferences as a platform to disseminate information about their supposed achievements rather than to create a dialogue with the media.**

In 2023, several local and international media NGOs conducted training sessions on fact-checking and identifying manipulative information and propaganda. However, these events mainly targeted media representatives, without including other citizens. But the website www.factcheck.tj increasingly published more exposé materials during 2023.

With donor organization support, NGOs are able to conduct high-quality research in their areas of expertise, which they willingly share with journalists through presentations and press releases. In addition, NGOs often collaborate with independent media to create materials on socially significant topics. For example, the Civil Freedom Office employees often act as experts on issues such as the illegal capture of young people of military age for their forced conscription into the army or so-called raids.

In contrast with independent media, state media avoid collaborating with NGOs and consider them "agents of Western donors" that have hidden agendas. Even when state media are paid to create information material, they avoid highlighting the NGOs' roles in the project and do not display their logos or those of foreign sponsors.

Civil society groups also collaborate with bloggers to create content; however, according to blogger Gulov, in these cases, NGOs are more interested in spreading their values through bloggers than bloggers are in receiving information from the NGOs.

The panelists said that one of the rare examples of cooperation between NGOs and the government is the joint project of the United Nations and the European Union called "Ray of Light," which aims to end sexual and gender-based violence against women and girls in Tajikistan. Although a few panelists also mentioned that their organizations cooperate with parliament in drafting media legislation, they noted that NGOs, rather than legislative authorities, often initiate the cooperation.

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

Tajikistan is an authoritarian state, and the government rarely considers citizens' opinions when making decisions, although officials take steps to create the illusion of conducting dialogue with society. The main tool for this illusion is state and ministry institution press conferences, where journalists have the opportunity to ask questions. However, government agencies often use press conferences as a platform to disseminate information about their supposed achievements rather than to create a dialogue with the media. Panelists agreed that both officials and journalists are to blame in this case. Journalists often do not adequately prepare for these events, and representatives, particularly of state-owned outlets, try to use press conferences to address personal issues, leaving less time for truly important topics.

Public councils--under the president, governors of regions, and the leadership of various ministries and departments--offer another method of dialogue exchanges with citizens. Authorities are supposed to "consult" with citizens during these sessions to help make important decisions. However, the authoritarian nature of the meetings does not allow participants to openly express their views, which makes them ineffective.

> **Journalistic investigations in Tajikistan have become rare in the past few years, especially after the government repression against journalists in 2022.**

Tajikistan does not have open debates between political parties and movements in the traditional sense, although political disputes between supporters and opponents of the current government do occur on social media. However, during these online discussions, neither side adheres to rules of procedure or presents reasoned arguments in support of their point of view, limiting themselves to expressing only opinions.

No open data on the work of government agencies exist that could be used to assess the effectiveness of departmental activities. Furthermore, independent organizations do not have much alternative data, which means it is difficult to verify the accuracy of official information. Tajibayeva said that Tajik journalists are unable to analyze available data due to their low qualifications and inability to work with databases.

State authorities rarely provide the public with explanations for government decisions. As Babakhanov noted, officials have destroyed virtually all historical buildings in the city, despite protests from residents who want to preserve some as historical monuments. "The authorities did not consult with historians, architects, or the population," he emphasized.

Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic rights.

Over the past four years, Tajikistan's ranking dropped from 149 to 162 in Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index, signaling a high level of bribery, embezzlement of public funds, and nepotism in appointments. The level of corruption prevents democratic standards from taking root. News about corruption scandals often appears in the media, sometimes even at the government's initiative. However, such cases are often closed to the public and to media, and accused officials avoid serious punishment limited to fines or short prison terms.

When information about corruption cases appears on the internet, state authorities react to it in a peculiar way: Often, officials accused of corruption are not punished, but those who report it are accused of lack of evidence. This reaction strongly demotivates journalists, bloggers, and activists from continuing investigations.

"For example, the Tajik service of Radio Liberty published an article directly accusing the mayor of Kulob of corruption and abuse of office," noted Mirza, "However, no measures were taken against him." Other panelists mentioned similar cases—such as when media publications reported on the systematic violation of construction rules by the president's close relatives and the head of the Communication Service, Bek Sabur, but no authorized agency, including the Prosecutor General's office, took any action to punish the guilty.

Tajikistan declared 2024 the Year of Legal Enlightenment in honor of the 30th anniversary of the adoption of its national constitution, but few citizens believe in the sincerity of the government's intentions. Government agencies still quickly react to minor human rights violations reported in traditional or social media, such as inappropriate behavior by drivers or domestic violence, and find and punish offenders. However, when the media report serious human rights violations by the government, such as restrictions on journalists' rights or the use of torture in detention centers, officials' responses are limited to a formal investigation without serious consequences for the violators. State media rarely cover these topics.

Journalistic investigations in Tajikistan have become rare in the past few years, especially after the government repression against journalists in 2022.

Government agencies not only face no repercussions for human rights violations but can themselves exert pressure on those who defend their rights, although there are exceptions. For example, Abdurasul Hojiev, a doctor at an emergency hospital in Dushanbe, was sentenced to six years in prison for a medical error that led to the death of a 17-year-old girl. The conviction came only after widespread discussion on social media, which, according to panelists, made the outcome possible.

Panelists noted that quality information about election violations in the country did not affect results. As in recent years, the elections were not conducted freely, and there are almost no real opposition forces and politicians left in the country.

PANELISTS:

Shahlo Akobirova, director, Khoma, Dushanbe

Gulnora Amirshoeva, owner, Vecherka, Dushanbe

Umed Babakhanov, owner, Asia Plus Media Group, Dushanbe

Rano Bobojoniyon, professor, Institute of Arts, Dushanbe

Rustam Gulov, blogger, independent expert, Dushanbe

Zinnatullo Ismoilzoda, chairman, Union of Journalists of Tajikistan, Dushanbe

Nuriddin Karshiboev, chairman, NANSMIT, Dushanbe

Vera Kulakova-Brannerud, owner, Radio Vatan, Dushanbe

Nosirjon Mamurzoda, editor-in-chief, *Khatlon*, Bokhtar

Habib Maqbulov, owner, TV Regar, Tursunzadeh

Nematullo Mirsaidov, freelance journalist, Khujand

Rajabi Mirzo, freelance journalist, Dushanbe

Khurshed Niyozov, director, Center for Investigative Journalism, Dushanbe

Lola Olimova, editor, IWPR, Dushanbe

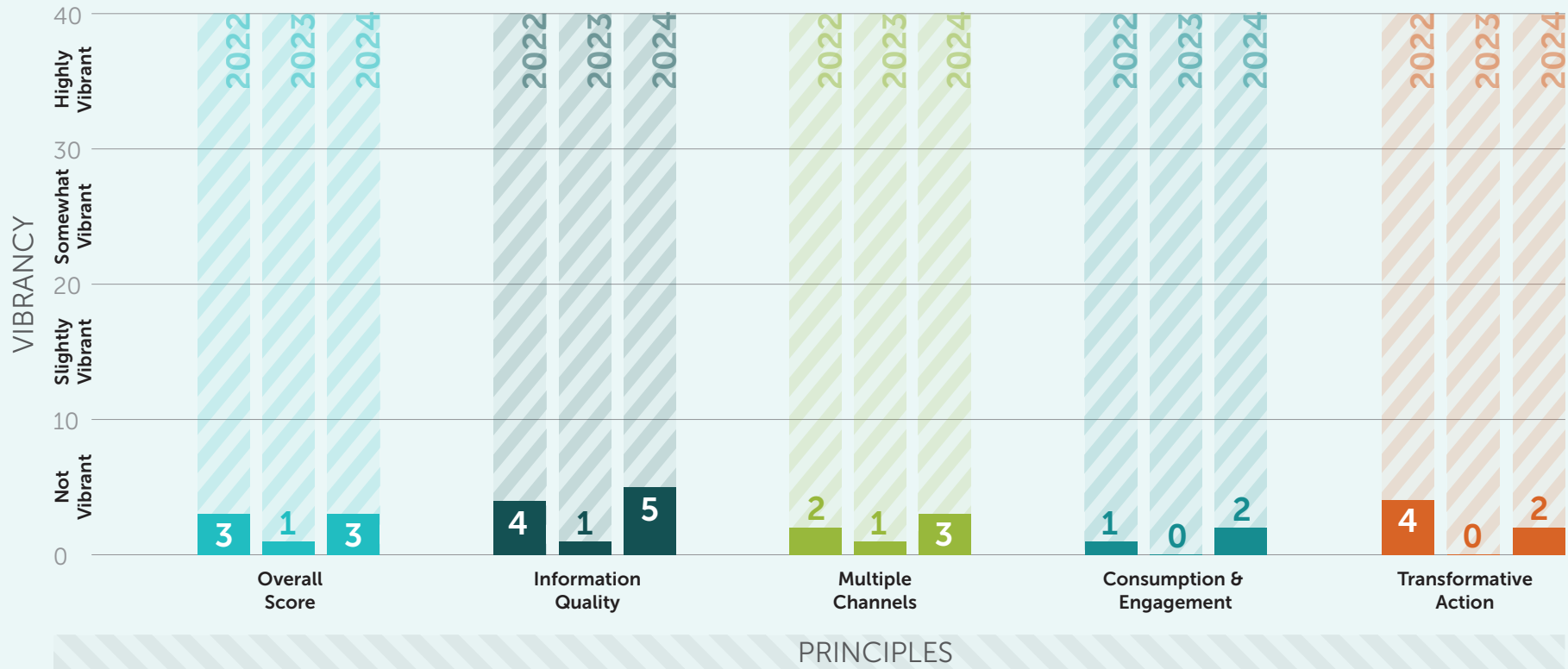**Zebo Tajibayeva,** owner, Your.TJ, Dushanbe

Nabi Yusupov, director, Media Consulting, Dushanbe

TURKMENISTAN

Vibrant
Information
Barometer

2 0 2 4

VIBRANCY

	Overall Score	Information Quality	Multiple Channels	Consumption & Engagement	Transformative Action
2022	3	4	2	1	4
2023	1	1	1	0	0
2024	3	5	3	2	2

PRINCIPLES

Not Vibrant (0-10): Quality information is extremely limited in this country. The vast majority of it is not editorially independent, not based on facts, or it is intended to harm. People do not have the rights, means, or capacity to access a wide range of information; they do not recognize or reject misinformation; and they cannot or do not make choices on what types of information they want to engage with.

Slightly Vibrant (11-20): Quality information is available on a few topics or geographies in this country, but not all. While some information is editorially independent, there is still a significant amount of misinformation, malinformation, and hate speech in circulation, and it does influence public discourse. Most people do not recognize or reject misinformation.

Somewhat Vibrant (21-30): Quality information is available in this country and most of it is editorially independent, based on facts, and not intended to harm. Most people have the rights, means, and capacity to access a wide range of information, although some do not. Most people recognize and reject misinformation, although some do not.

Highly Vibrant (31-40): Quality information is widely available in this country. People have the rights, means, and capacity to access a wide range of information; they recognize and reject misinformation.

Highly Vibrant

Somewhat Vibrant

Slightly Vibrant

Not Vibrant

OVERALL
SCORE

3

With its repressive political system and pervasive cult of the leader, Turkmenistan ranks among the most closed and least free countries in the world. It has no freedom of speech or press, let alone independent media, and some of the harshest censorship on Earth. Reporters Without Borders noted continued censorship and surveillance of journalists in its 2024 survey of press freedom, which placed Turkmenistan 175th of 180 countries, echoing assessments by Freedom House, which deems it "not free."

President Serdar Berdymukhammedov took office in March 2022, succeeding his father, Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov, via a widely derided election. Berdymukhammedov senior became the chairman of the new People's Council (Halk Maslahaty), the country's highest body. He remains the ultimate decision-maker and the most powerful figure in the country.
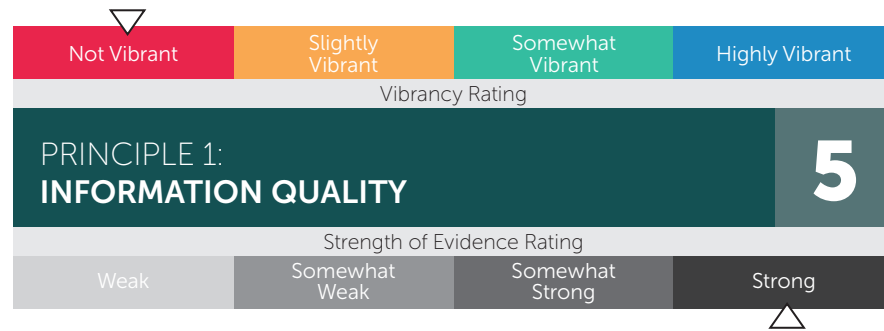
State-controlled media focus on both leaders' activities and achievements, ignoring a yearslong decline in living standards. The official narrative of "happy people, prosperous land, and wise leadership" fundamentally shirks the principal duty of the media to inform, expose wrongdoing, and help people make informed decisions by presenting facts and alternative views.

Turkmenistan's authorities closely monitor citizens' social media activities to ensure that only content that hails official policies and puts the country in a positive light gets posted. The government tightly controls mass media, heavily restricts internet access, and blocks social networks, opposition websites, and general news websites. A recent study found that more than 120,000 domains are blocked in Turkmenistan.

As in last year's VIBE study, panelists deemed each of the four principles in this year's VIBE report on Turkmenistan "not vibrant," with no signs of light in the black hole of the country's system of state-controlled media and censorship. The overall country average is 3, up two points from the year before.

Panelists gave higher scores for minor bright spots, including at least the existence of a liberal media law and the lack of hate speech in the domestic media, but they conferred scores of 0 on indicators on the use of the media for propaganda, the flow of important information to the public, internet censorship, and government surveillance of social media users.

Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant	Somewhat Vibrant	Highly Vibrant

Vibrancy Rating

PRINCIPLE 1: INFORMATION QUALITY	5

Strength of Evidence Rating

Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong	Strong

The country's eight television channels, five radio stations, 25 newspapers, 26 magazines, and more than a dozen news websites are state-controlled. They lack diversity and often repeat one another, and there are no truly independent media to counter them. The persistently low-quality content, heavy censorship, and government control over journalists translated into low scores particularly for indicators on media ethics, fact-based reporting, and the diversity and inclusivity of information.

In Principle 1, average scores on indicators ranged from 4 to 7. Indicator 3 (information is not intended to harm) fared the best, with a score of 7, since the level of control the government exercises over information in Turkmenistan prohibits hate speech. Panelists scored Indicators 1 (quality information), 2 (fact-based information), 4 (inclusive and diverse content), and 5 (sufficient resources) with 4s, reflecting the efforts of exile Turkmenistani media operating from abroad.

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

Panelists noted that almost all content created within the country comes from state media, which must parrot state ideology, praise the government, and avoid sensitive issues and words on a government blacklist. Reports contain only one or two official sources. Prior to release, content must be approved by government censors.

Given that content producers are state-controlled, most panelists agreed that they have adequate infrastructure for gathering, producing, and distributing varied content, considering the government's resources. A state news agency exists, but it produces only state propaganda, so those resources are squandered on low-quality information. A typical evening news program on state television begins with the presenter intoning, "In the revival period of the new era of stable state, our country's achievements are reaching a new level."

Panelists cited internet censorship, blockages, and slowdowns as fundamental shortcomings of the infrastructure.

Every print or online newspaper features large, doctored images of the president and his father, widely called the chairman, with messages of thanks and congratulations to the country's top leaders. Although these digital platforms also offer content in Russian, English, and Turkish, it is repetitive across all platforms, presenting Turkmenistan as a country of peace, happiness, and stability.

Panelists said a few online media outlets operating from abroad stand out for covering a variety of topics and attempting to meet ethical standards. Relying on stringers inside the country, exile media offer informative stories of public interest and alternative perspectives under very difficult conditions, constantly in fear of retaliation from the government. They struggle, however, to double-check news for accuracy, and, as one panelist noted, internet blockages limit their reach inside Turkmenistan. The reach, and therefore influence, of the ubiquitous government-loyal media is much greater, the panelist said.

Turkmenistan's media consumers are stuck with content from state-controlled media that does not report realities on the ground, cover regional and local events, carry alternative views, or differentiate fact from fiction.

The country offers some journalism training, including at the faculty of international journalism of the Institute of International Relations, the International University for Humanities and Development, and Magtymguly State University. Panelists noted, though, that these are state institutions, lacking in academic freedom.

"The journalism training that exists in Turkmenistan can't be considered an adequate means of training content producers on how to create ethical, evidence-based, and coherent content," a panelist said. While the government occasionally permits OSCE to hold media training in the capital, participants tend to be carefully selected state officials being trained as the next generation of propagandists.

"Content-producer training mainly relies on entertainment and commercial productions, which include only hands-on experience rather than conceptual training," one panelist said, "The lack of high-quality journalism and education results in a poor understanding of how to tell stories."

Moreover, one panelist observed that journalism within Turkmenistan completely lacks storytelling about individuals, since the overwhelming emphasis is on popular support for the government.

Far from suffering consequences if they do not function ethically, content producers risk consequences if they do. Their primary concerns are to please the authorities, keep their jobs, or make money. To do otherwise could trigger a rebuke, penalty, dismissal, arrest, imprisonment, or torture.

"None of the training and workshops being offered matters, as the primary task of journalists is to present a positive image of life in Turkmenistan, and all of the country's journalists understand that is their role," one panelist said.

At a media roundtable on fake news and social media, held in Ashgabat in April 2023, Deputy Foreign Minister Mahri Bashimova decried what she called "the illegal use of information technology, the implantation from the outside of ideas and attitudes that run counter to the historical traditions of the peoples of Central Asia."

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

In this indicator, panelists described missing, manipulated, or distorted information, and fiction in reporting, as the norm.

Instead of sticking to facts, content creators in Turkmenistan are expected to find the good and hide the bad. Instead of resisting financial and political pressure, delving into events happening inside the country, exercising creativity, or offering alternative or opposing views, they accept uniformity and conformity. Journalists' remit to put the country in a positive light and continuously hail the government for its alleged achievements often leads them to resort to baseless fiction.

"Mostly exaggerated or even completely false information has become the norm in Turkmenistan," one panelist said. Even natural disasters, such as dust storms, droughts, and mudslides, as well as corruption, domestic violence, and infectious diseases, which could cloud the image of a perfect country, are taboo. The government has also denied that a single case of COVID-19 has occurred in the country.

> ❝ **Almost all content created within the country comes from state media, which must parrot state ideology, praise the government, and avoid sensitive issues and words on a government blacklist.**

"At least Turkmenistan state media could inform the public about events that the government can't be blamed for," the same panelist observed, "If they can't report bad things happening that the people can clearly see, that hurts everybody and discredits the media as a source of information."

In a show of omission, shortly after Turkey canceled visa-free travel for visitors from Turkmenistan in September 2022, the pro-government salamnews.tm published a list of 13 countries that Turkmenistanis could visit, mostly irrelevant as destinations, while failing to mention that citizens would now need a visa for traveling to Turkey, where more than 100,000 workers from Turkmenistan already lived.

"Media focus on the achievements and the progress the country is making under its reportedly capable leadership. The reality of the

country, however—lines forming outside state stores hours before opening time, children begging, people rummaging through the garbage for something to sell or, in dire cases, eat—don't receive any coverage at all. Misinformation is the norm," one panelist said.

Widely disseminated, misleading information includes rosy economic news, such as growth figures reported unquestioningly; reports that the woeful parliamentary elections in March 2023 were free and fair; reports that citizens around the country are living in plenty, with no mention of food shortages or skyrocketing inflation and the resulting food protests; and praise of the deteriorating health-care system.

Social media, which only a tiny share of Turkmenistanis use, is not much of a factor. Domestic sites have come and gone, while foreign sites are accessible only via a virtual private network, or VPN, the use of which is subject to large fines or other penalties. Rare dissenting posts do surface, and critical content may appear on Instagram or the IMO messenger couched in humor or irony, but, as one panelist noted, "There are severe consequences for posting alternative information." Criticism of the government on social media can lead to prison sentences.

One panelist said he doubted that professional content producers intentionally distort information but that some local news outlets publish reports to counter reporting by exile Turkmen media. For example, the panelist said, "The opposition media may report that women are not allowed to drive, while local news media may produce reportage with women drivers to discredit such sources." Sometimes, he added, nonprofessional content producers unintentionally spread bad information because they can neither spot it nor verify it.

State employees in Turkmenistan are forced to subscribe to official newspapers; teachers must pay for new equipment, books, and repairs at schools; students are regularly summoned to participate in mass public events; villagers are forced to pick cotton; and medical workers must deny deteriorating public health conditions. Meanwhile, the government reports rich harvests each year, a carryover of Soviet practice, without any figures made public, although exiled independent news outlets azathabar.com, Turkmen.news, hronikatm.com, and gundogar.org report a different picture on the ground.

One panelist cited Turkmen Owazy TV channel's promotion of medicinal herbs as a remedy for female infertility, based on a book by Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov, as an example of false information.

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

The government's strict control of information makes it difficult for foreign governments or news agencies, which are loath to lose their accreditation, to gather and disseminate information inside the country.

> ❝ **The government's strict control of information makes it difficult for foreign governments or news agencies, which are loath to lose their accreditation, to gather and disseminate information inside the country.**

Russia and China enjoy close relations with the government of Turkmenistan, with plans to expand cooperation on key areas such as cybersecurity. So far, there is no evidence that they spread information within Turkmenistan that is intended to harm, as they have no interest in destabilizing the country.

Hate speech is not an issue in Turkmenistan, as no journalist or social media user would dare to engage in it unless it was government sanctioned. The government does not allow hate speech on state media, lest it provoke unrest and taint the image of national harmony and unity.

As one panelist put it, there are no ramifications for creating or disseminating false news as long as it is government sanctioned. There are consequences only for not promoting the government's narrative of events or image of Turkmenistan.

The government generally does not target relatively small ethnic minorities or religious groups, nor does it address pressing issues of concern to them.

One panelist criticized the lack of self-regulation in place to prevent, regulate, control, or monitor hate speech and bad information.

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

This indicator earned a low score for the lack of information in most minority languages and the media's neglect of issues of concern to women or minority groups.

Almost all information is in the Turkmen language, although the country has a few Russian-language newspapers, including *Neytralny Turkmenistan,* and websites with Russian-language content. There are no news outlets in Uzbek, a small language minority, and no regional press in Russian. Due to the relative scarcity of other nationalities, the government has been able to virtually seal off the country from outside influence.

The government released only basic data from the December 2022 census, excluding any information on the country's ethnic composition, although Turkmens form the large majority of the population.

"There is limited information for non-Turkmen speakers, all devoid of actual content and information," one panelist said. The state media do not cover ethnic minorities, although independent media in exile do. Similarly, domestic media never mention the large Turkmenistani diaspora in exile, while international media or independent exiled media do. Religious groups are altogether ignored in the domestic media.

Magazines in Turkmenistan that are geared to women ignore substantive issues such as domestic violence, gender equality, and women's health, while the independent diaspora website saglyk.org (Health) regularly raises awareness of women's health issues. In 2023, Turkmenistan's media continued to ignore new restrictions on women's appearance and conduct, which include bans on some salon services and cosmetic procedures, and limits on freedom of movement.

The constitution grants women equality with men in all spheres of life, but women face routine political and societal discrimination. "The viewpoints of any gender other than male are covered only by online media in exile, which cover stories related to infringements of women's rights in Turkmenistan," one panelist said.

Media management, journalists, and other content producers are mostly ethnically Turkmen men. Media staff are typically hired for their connections to the government and their command of the Turkmen language. "Regardless of whether there is diversity in newsrooms and among professional content producers, all publicly disseminated content complies with a government-approved agenda. It doesn't include a variety of ideologies," one panelist said.

Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced.

Since almost all media are officially state media in Turkmenistan, television, radio, print, and online outlets receive funding from the government. Professional content producers likely have sufficient financial resources and state-of-the-art equipment to accomplish their mission of portraying the country in a positive light and presenting the government's point of view. Additionally, newspapers and magazines benefit from compulsory subscriptions by state workers.

As one panelist remarked, a narrow circle of ruling elites spends seemingly unlimited resources on propaganda where and how it sees fit, even as the state media uniformly produce repetitive, stilted information.
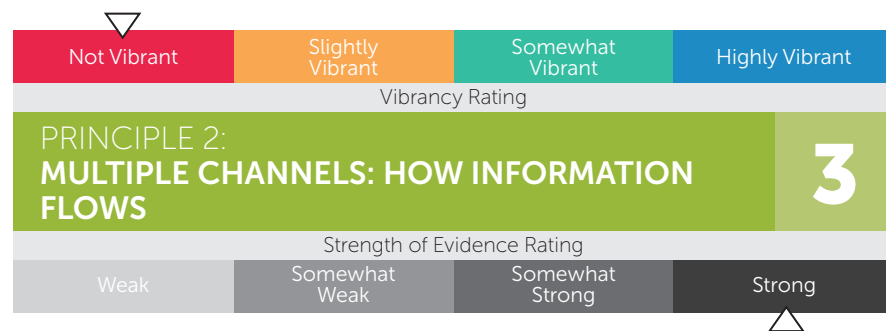
All of the country's scant advertising goes into state media. Advertising placement and content is treated much the same way as news content, heavily politicized—not every company can advertise as it wishes—and often managing to glorify the president.

Because Turkmenistan's state budget is opaque, one panelist noted it is unclear if advertisers pay media outlets directly or if the money goes

to the state and is redistributed among media outlets. The process of selecting which companies are allowed to advertise is also opaque, though presumably some government body, not the media themselves, make these decisions. Media outlets cannot seek funding on their own from sources other than the state.

The salaries of state journalists are not public information, but the government treats state-controlled journalists simply as mouthpieces used to ensure a pliant population. The relationship between government officials and state journalists can be described as boss and servant. Media workers' salaries are likely in line with those of other state employees, although selected journalists may receive state subsidies. One panelist said salaries are not high and journalists usually work for several media outlets to make their living or try to find side hustles.

Younger content creators seem drawn to public relations, where they can hope to work in a less oppressive atmosphere and earn more money.

Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant	Somewhat Vibrant	Highly Vibrant

Vibrancy Rating

PRINCIPLE 2: MULTIPLE CHANNELS: HOW INFORMATION FLOWS	3

Strength of Evidence Rating

Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong	Strong

A 2013 law forbids censorship and interference in the activities of the media and allows practically anyone to open a media outlet. However, that is only on paper. Censorship is extensive, and not a single independent media outlet has been legally registered in the country. Freedom of expression is severely curtailed, and the secret services surveil journalists and social media users.

In this principle, Indicator 7 (adequate access to channels of information) and Indicator 8 (appropriate channels for information) each received a score of 5, reflecting the existence of minimal norms, such as media

laws, and the availability of outlets throughout the country. Indicator 10 (information channels are independent) received a score of 0, due to the government's domination of the media sector, the absence of nongovernmental media and public service media and the role of state media as a propaganda tool.

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

Turkmenistan's constitution and laws profess the rights to freedom of speech and the press, but with all publications controlled by the government, those rights do not really exist. "In Turkmenistan, [laws are largely meaningless], and they're arbitrarily enforced in an authoritarian manner," a panelist said.

The authorities persecute reporters, journalists, and bloggers inside Turkmenistan for alternative thoughts and expressions, while international groups have also noted pressure on Turkmenistani activists who live abroad.

Because government censors review all content before it is released, journalists routinely self-censor. "Anyone working in the media knows the rules," one panelist said, "Consequences can be severe for those who air views that run contrary to the state's version of events," including being reprimanded, fined, fired, or imprisoned.

All known prosecutions of journalists have been against those working with Turkmen media abroad. For example, Soltan Achilova, an independent journalist for the Vienna-based hronikatm.com news service of the Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights, has faced threats, attacks, and harassment. Reporting on key issues such as food shortages, COVID-19, forced evictions and confiscations of property, inadequate health care, and water shortages, she was prevented from boarding a plane for Switzerland to attend a human rights meeting in November 2023. In another case, Nurgeldi Halykov, a correspondent for the Netherlands-based Turkmen.news, is serving a four-year prison sentence for failing to repay a debt, following his arrest in September 2020 on false charges. The prosecution is likely retaliation for Halykov's

having earlier that year shared someone else's photo of a visiting WHO delegation to Ashgabat with Turkmen.news, as officials were insisting that the country was free of COVID-19. That investigation likely turned up evidence of Halykov's previous anonymous work for the outlet.

Most journalists reporting for foreign media have been forced to stop working or have fled the country. A few independent journalists remain, working under very harsh conditions. For example, former Radio Azatlyk (RFE/RL's Turkmen Service) correspondent Hudayberdi Allashov was arrested in northern Turkmenistan in December 2023 for an unspecified reason. He was taken to a police station, where he was beaten and tortured, seven years after enduring a similar ordeal.

> 66 **Most journalists reporting for foreign media have been forced to stop working or have fled the country. A few independent journalists remain, working under very harsh conditions.**

One panelist said that users of social media, which the security service heavily monitors, are careful. Otherwise, they risk becoming targets of harassment and abuse by law enforcement or ending up in the government-controlled court system.

The Ministry of Communications is the country's only internet service provider, making control and surveillance simpler for the authorities.

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

Access to the internet is severely restricted in Turkmenistan, cutting its people off from the rest of the world and promoting an apolitical society. Recent research found that more than 122,000 domains are blocked in the country.

"Controls on access, high prices, and low internet speeds are severe barriers to citizens accessing information, particularly independent information that's not disseminated through state-controlled media," a panelist said. Indeed, Turkmenistan has one of the world's most expensive and slowest internet services. Internetwordstats.com (July

2022) put the number of internet users in Turkmenistan at more than 1.5 million, or 25.3 percent of the population. Another estimate, by the Kepios digital advisory firm, put the number in January 2023 at 2.47 million, or 38.2 percent of the population. Kepios also estimated that 184,4000 people in Turkmenistan, or 2.8 percent of the population, use social media.

The quality of the information and telecommunications infrastructure is poor in rural areas, and some corners of the country have no internet at all. The government shuts down the internet, sometimes for days, in reaction to events such as protests, natural disasters, and accidents. It also sometimes throttles services, making the popular VPNs practically unusable.

Although authorities technically allow the use of the internet for "elementary educational purposes," supporting businesses and a tiny academic community, Turkmenistan's internet is so blocked and censored that it is hardly a useful tool for the public, let alone scholars and researchers.

Authorities have tried to build a digital moat around Turkmenistan, with the Ministry of Communications the only authorized internet provider and state-controlled media the primary, if not only, source of information for most people. Many news sites, social media platforms, instant messenger apps, and VPNs are blocked.

In April 2023, the government's Altyn Asyr (Golden Age) website reported on an official meeting in Ashgabat to discuss "actual problems of the media space," at which there was proposed cooperation with other Central Asian leaders to combat the use of communications technology to introduce perspectives that the government sees as undermining traditional values.

Television is the most popular medium, and those with satellite dishes can access content from Russia and Turkey, including international news

programs. Not surprisingly, satellite dishes have been targeted by a so-called beautification campaign in Ashgabat that deems them unsightly, but people have found innovative ways to keep their dishes.

Paid cable television is offered in Ashgabat with carefully filtered content, aimed at limiting people's free access to foreign television and radio stations. For example, the popular Russian series *The Boy's Word* has been removed from the list of offerings because of its "street language," deemed inappropriate for Turkmenistan's youth.

Recently, Turkmen.news reported that almost half of the world's internet addresses are banned in Turkmenistan. Those who can afford them use VPNs to surf the internet freely, but many cannot. It is not known how many people use VPNs, which are recommended by word of mouth. Telephone workers sometimes charge a "special fee" for downloading VPN apps onto people's phones illegally, RFE/RL reported several years ago. Authorities block VPNs as soon as they discover them, and the security service has stepped up checks on people's connections. Some reports say that police or security officials randomly check people's phones on the street or even pay unannounced visits to schools to check students' phones for VPNs.

To get a home internet connection, residents must swear on the Quran that they will not use VPNs, and students are required to pledge not to use the internet to access banned sites. While internet cafes exist in Turkmenistan, people are required to present identification to access the web.

Teachers have faced charges for not preventing students from using them. Those caught with VPNs receive a warning for a first offense but face fines or jail for a repeat offense.

Many people in Turkmenistan have mobile phones, although the service is poor. Additionally, a number of people use two mobile phones, one with a VPN and one without, to evade the authorities, one panelist noted.

> **To get a home internet connection, residents must swear on the Quran that they will not use VPNs, and students are required to pledge not to use the internet to access banned sites.**

Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for government information.

A law that grants citizens the right to receive and impart information is violated daily and exists "for external public relations purposes," one panelist remarked, to meet international norms and standards. Another panelist said the law in reality guarantees "the" right to information that is approved by government."

Another panelist noted that people can consult government websites to learn about public policies, but given how expensive and slow internet access is, most people do not. And usually, the panelist said, "What the state says or writes differs from everyday reality anyway."

If people wish to watch reporters covering every move of the president and his father, or mass celebrations on special days to glorify the state, there is plenty of that available in television coverage. On the other hand, when foreign media report on people waiting in line in front of stores selling state-subsidized goods, state television reports an abundance of food in the country.

People will also not see "natural disasters such as dust storms, extreme drought, flooding, or earthquakes," a panelist said. The only means people have to check the news for accuracy is to see what is happening around them every day. Over the years, Turkmenistani viewers have learned to run state-controlled news through a kind of internal translator. For example, since the creation of an anti-corruption agency in 2017, when state media report on the president firing a top official for corruption, more skeptical viewers wonder about the real reason for the ouster.

Government bodies do not have spokespeople or information offices. There are no press conferences except at key international events, such as oil and gas forums. People do not seek out information, for fear of

repercussions, and government officials are not visible or accessible to the media or the public, and they do not convey reliable information.

Although the government insists that it works for the people, ordinary citizens are not in a position to approach authorities to ask questions about government decisions. Doing so would immediately arouse suspicion and lead to various forms of persecution.

Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow.

There is no foreign ownership of media outlets in Turkmenistan, nor laws governing concentration or transparency of media ownership. There are no public service media, as the government controls all outlets, and the public is poorly served by partisan media representing only government interests. Standards are low, as the media's role is to create an apathetic, apolitical society.

No laws in Turkmenistan prohibit the establishment of nonstate, private media, but as one panelist said, numerous obstacles to registration ensure that nothing but state media can exist. "It's impossible for a private citizen to open a media outlet," the panelist said. Any attempt would likely backfire and arouse the suspicion of the authorities.

Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.

Virtually all domestic media are state-controlled, directly or indirectly, and state-funded. A few newer websites claim to be privately held, but their ownership is unclear, and they post the same pro-government content as all other outlets.
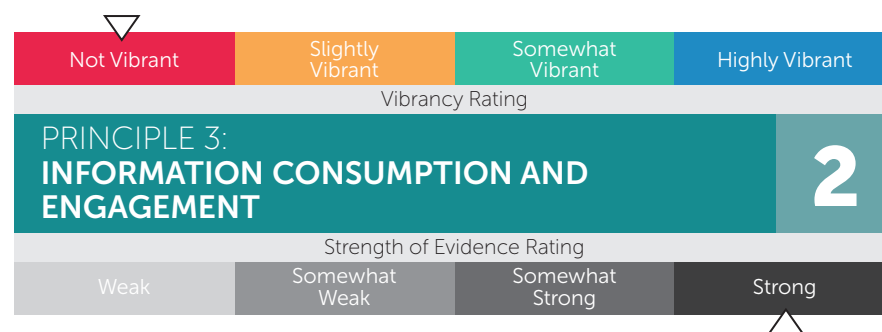
The licensing process virtually bars outlets that do not reflect pro-government views. Political interference is rife: chief editors are hired and fired by presidential decree, and the Ministry of National Security and state censors make virtually all editorial decisions. There are no avenues for private funding, and there is no editorial independence.

The state has a literal monopoly on information. "Only the government has access to statistical data, and the government's public claims, faithfully reported by the media, of record harvests, or more recently, the

population census showing Turkmenistan's population is more than 7 million people, are clearly untrue," one panelist said.

Although a 2013 law allows Turkmenistan's citizens access to foreign media, the internet is tightly controlled and censored. Authorities have never made public a list of banned sites, but they include foreign news outlets, the websites of human rights organizations, YouTube, and social media and messaging platforms Facebook, Instagram, X, Telegram, VKontakte, Odnoklassniki, TikTok, WeChat, ICQ, Line, and WhatsApp.

IMO, an online messenger that had become popular for not requiring a VPN, became unusable in summer 2023 due to a particularly serious internet slowdown. Link Messenger is accessible, but that could change at a moment's notice.

Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant	Somewhat Vibrant	Highly Vibrant

Vibrancy Rating

PRINCIPLE 3: INFORMATION CONSUMPTION AND ENGAGEMENT — 2

Strength of Evidence Rating

Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong	Strong

Panelists said people's privacy is uniformly violated, access to the internet severely restricted, and websites and VPNs blocked. As noted earlier, there have been reports of security agents tracking down those with VPNs, summoning people caught using them to discuss their online activities, and paying random visits to schools to check on people's phones. Surveillance cameras monitor public places.

In this principle, individual indicator scores ranged from 1 to 3. Indicator 11 (on privacy protections and security tools) and Indicator 14 (media engagement with audience needs) each scored a 3, as panelists said people cannot safely use the internet due to lack of privacy protections and security tools. Likewise, media and information producers do not engage with their audiences' needs. Indicators 12 (media literacy), 13

(productive engagement with information), and 15 (community media) each scored a 1 for a widespread lack of basic media literacy, low levels of public debate or discourse, absence of community media, or any attempt by content creators to engage with the public.

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

Although the right to privacy exists, it is widely ignored. Turkmenistan's intelligence agency, the Ministry of National Security (MNS), routinely monitors media workers' and private citizens' activities.

Digital security training, if any, may target only a handful of people who need it to spread government propaganda.

Limited data protection exists in law, but a subservient court system does not enforce it, one panelist said. "The pervasive state doesn't observe or protect citizens' digital rights and uses technology to infringe those rights. The public is poorly informed about their online rights, digital protections, and issues such as the algorithms driving social media and the mechanics of advertisement targeting," the panelist said.

To intensify cyber-policing, Turkmenistani officials are planning more cooperation with China in the near future. At the same time, the security service employs a combination of online and offline methods to spy on citizens.

The MNS and the government agency for cybersecurity closely monitor internet activity. Security agents make random checks on people's mobile phones looking for VPNs, and teachers warn their pupils to avoid "harmful" sites operating outside the country. People caught using VPNs, and specialists offering those services privately, can be warned, fined, or prosecuted.

Ordinary people lack a concept of cybersecurity; as such, information and training are extremely difficult to obtain and risky. Turkmenistan's

punishingly slow, expensive internet is mostly used for basic needs, such as email and messaging and "news to use," but not primarily for finding or verifying information. The fact that an estimated 70 percent of the population has no internet access makes digital literacy a pipe dream.

Politically active, online Turkmenistanis, especially activists, dissidents, and critics of government policies, are under constant threat of distributed denial-of-service attacks.

Exile media appear to have acquired a certain degree of cybersecurity protection and proficiency.

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

Media literacy, meaning the ability to critically assess, engage with, and create media, is scarce in Turkmenistan.

> **Politically active, online Turkmenistanis, especially activists, dissidents, and critics of government policies, are under constant threat of distributed denial-of-service attacks.**

The OSCE organized a training course on the topic in October 2023 in Ashgabat, but generally, journalists and citizens alike are not trained to use media literacy tools, nor is there even much awareness of the concept. Schools do not offer such lessons.

"The government has a vested interest in not promoting media literacy so that most citizens swallow state propaganda without question," a panelist said.

Media training in Turkmenistan is different from in other Central Asian countries. State universities place more importance on courses such as "Treasury of the Wisdom of Magtymguly Pyragy," a formative 18th-century literary and spiritual figure. Indeed, considering that journalists for state media and social media users must tread carefully and regularly self-censor, media literacy in Turkmenistan is more about knowing what topics not to touch.

"State media is very much 'what you see is what you get,'" another panelist said, "Since no other media are available, it's difficult, if not

impossible, for Turkmenistan's citizens to distinguish between high-quality and poor-quality news, though most people probably assume that state media news is poor quality."

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

There is no freedom of speech in Turkmenistan. Panelists agreed that true and open debate in public spaces is rare to nonexistent. As a previous VIBE report noted, the authorities quickly break up any public assembly not organized by the government and detain the organizers and participants.

"To organize a public debate, there need to be public statements that contradict each other, but there's no such thing in the country," a panelist observed, "People may think and share their disagreements and ideas within a closed circle, but they're hesitant to share publicly, which shows that no one dares to use their freedom of speech."

"Turkmenistan's people understand they're not being told the truth, but complaining about misinformation to an official is likely to get the complainer into trouble," another panelist said.

One panelist suggested that an informal type of public debate, such as in-person exchanges of ideas and information among a few trusted people, still happen. This panelist said tea houses, *sadaka*—traditional charity gatherings in connection with family events, such as a marriage or the birth of a child—or mosques are the likely scenes for such conversations. However, they remain a risky thing to do, as security agents watch all public gatherings. The quality of these discussions depends on the limited information available to people.

Although laws do not ban reporting incidents of manipulated information or hate speech, it is not clear who would receive the

> **The media see the country's rulers as their audience, leading to decades of uplifting reports of abundance, dazzling economic achievements, free and fair elections, and a happy, prosperous nation led by a wise and visionary president.**

complaints. In any event, reports would have to be carefully worded to be in line with the state ideology. More likely, the complaint would be ignored while the person who made it could face unpleasant consequences.

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

Turkmenistan's state-run media do not connect with the people and are out of touch with the realities on the ground. Here, again, the media serve as an arm of the government. "The needs of the audience are never taken into consideration, and their opinion isn't needed," a panelist observed.

The media see the country's rulers as their audience, leading to decades of uplifting reports of abundance, dazzling economic achievements, free and fair elections, and a happy, prosperous nation led by a wise and visionary president. "Their purpose is to glorify the regime, first and foremost the president and the chairman, or the former president," a panelist said.

Whereas in many countries, civil society, the media, and government might collaborate on public-service projects, a panelist said that in Turkmenistan, government-organized nongovernmental organizations, or GONGOs, content producers, and government institutions might collaborate to follow orders from top officials.

Under what circumstances journalists, content producers, pro-government activists, and government institutes come together and to what extent they can collaborate is unclear, as is what public good would come of it.

People do not have faith in media that make no effort to build trust. Instead, they tend to believe what they hear from their relatives, friends, and neighbors, which they then spread.
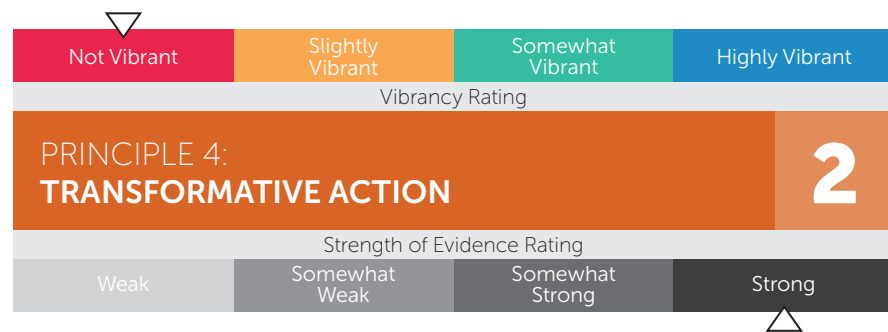
Indicator 15: Community media provide information relevant for community engagement.

No community media exist in Turkmenistan. There is also no community news where NGOs or minorities would find a voice to express their grievances or criticisms of local officials.

"There is simply no space for community media in Turkmenistan, where the government controls all media outlets," one panelist said.

During special events, the government uses GONGOs to stage-manage the appearance of broad-based support for it among the public.

Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant	Somewhat Vibrant	Highly Vibrant

Vibrancy Rating

PRINCIPLE 4: TRANSFORMATIVE ACTION	2

Strength of Evidence Rating

Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong	Strong

In Turkmenistan's repressive political climate, individuals, local media, and the government are not sources of reliable information. Individuals fear retribution from the authorities for saying something that does not jibe with government messaging, and journalists for state media do not engage with the public for fear of losing their jobs or some other punishment.

The government is unaccountable and makes no effort to engage with the public or explain its decisions. Accordingly, scores for indicators in this principle scraped the bottom of the VIBE scale. A comparatively high score of 3 was for Indicator 18 (civil society uses quality information), due to the fact that some activists or small civil society groups abroad, such as the

Turkmenistan Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, rely on quality information. Indicator 20 (information supports good governance and democratic rights), on the other hand, received a score of 0 because state-controlled media are used rather for anti-corruption show trials than for genuine attempts to deal with this national scourge.

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

Public nonpartisan news and unbiased information sources do not exist in Turkmenistan, where all mass media are state-controlled. Every institution, organization, association, or body reports to, and is paid by, the state.

People with VPNs can access blocked sites at risk of prosecution or harassment, but there is no data on what people access via banned VPNs. The Security Ministry, which controls digital content, chokes off discussion in online platforms among young people, by intimidation and blocking. "The only platforms where young people in Turkmenisan can exchange information are the websites that VPNs allow them to access," a panelist said.

The panelists agreed that any online conversation must be strictly apolitical.

Privately, people still manage to meet and exchange ideas and criticism. "Nonpartisan news and information sources exist in the form of so-called kitchen debates among friends, relatives, or colleagues. . . on topics that might be too sensitive or dangerous to discuss in public," a panelist said.

Another panelist said a few online news outlets and social media platforms based abroad are Turkmenistanis' only nonpartisan news and information sources, but their reach is limited by the country's poor internet access, website blocking, and fear of reprisal for accessing

> **With so little access to quality information, people in Turkmenistan cannot make informed decisions on political and social issues.**

blocked sites using VPNs. In addition, many Turkmenistanis face a language barrier trying to access foreign content.

"News or information provided by exile media can be decent quality, but it's constrained by the difficulty of having and communicating with domestic sources, which must, by definition, be secret," a panelist said. "And Turkmenistan's citizens' access to exile media is very limited."

Nevertheless, when some key information somehow reaches Turkmenistan from the outside, it becomes the "people's news" and quickly spreads via word of mouth.

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

With so little access to quality information, people in Turkmenistan cannot make informed decisions on political and social issues. Moreover, with no meaningful elections or other ways to hold their leaders accountable, their judgments hold little sway in any event.

Nor can people get fact-based health and safety recommendations from state media, which do not acknowledge the country's numerous public health problems.

Doctors and others with firsthand, critical information about serious public health issues are muzzled. Local participants in international events and conferences are warned beforehand not to betray the homeland in front of foreign visitors. Only the handful of independent-minded journalists who report critically for exiled media outlets dare to share accurate and reliable information in spite of intimidation, harassment, and attacks by the authorities.

> **Domestic media cover only positive events, ignoring human rights violations or corruption, except when the head of state gives the order to cover specific corruption cases.**

"People have acted in ways that are detrimental to their health based on misinformation from the government, including, for example, because they have been told that Turkmenistan has never registered a case of COVID-19," a panelist said.

Another panelist noted that some people with internet access can get fact-based health and safety recommendations from, for example, the Turkmen-language Saglykgram Instagram account of the saglyk.org website. It has 17,900 followers and is a project of the US-based Progres Foundation.

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

Turkmenistan has had no independent civil society organizations since the last ones were shut down under constant pressure and interference from the authorities in the late 1990s. Only GONGOs, trade unions, and foundations are allowed to operate.

One panelist noted that some GONGOs are engaged in nonpolitical issues, such as climate and environmental protection, and have digital platforms. "For example, Nature helpertm has an Instagram account with 2,375 followers. A content analysis of its posts shows the group's engagement with society based on quality information sources. But, in general, CSOs are under government control and exercise self-censorship," the panelist said.

Civil society groups and GONGOs inside Turkmenistan stick to the government's agenda.

"It can't be ruled out that they disseminate misinformation," a panelist said, "They won't share or comment on anything that's not approved by government. For example, a registered CSO won't call for action to stop the spread of COVID if the government deliberately misinforms the public, saying, 'no COVID cases detected.'"

A few civil society groups outside the country do use quality information and share it with the relatively few in Turkmenistan who are able to access it online.

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

Panelists agreed that government officials rarely communicate their decisions to the public or engage at all with the public or the media. State media are merely a funnel for government propaganda from the president and the former president. There is no real public debate or discourse.

"Interaction between government actors and the media is, by and large, restricted to scripted performances by the president and the former president," a panelist said.

Another panelist said that officials other than the president and the former president rarely appear in media reports. "Much of what state media broadcast about government accomplishments or programs is embellished or outright false, and it's clear that they're not [consulting] quality media sources outside the country," the panelist said.

The national security, interior and defense ministries likely play important roles in the president's decision-making, but those decisions are kept secret.

Authorities also mislead the public in explaining their actions, such as when they moved to dismantle household satellite dishes in Ashgabat in 2015, ostensibly on aesthetic grounds, but more likely to block access to international broadcasts and to seal off the population.

Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic rights.

Freedom House deems corruption systemic and widespread in Turkmenistan, which has no independent anti-corruption institutions. Domestic media cover only positive events, ignoring human rights violations or corruption, except when the head of state gives the order to cover specific corruption cases. Although the problem is widespread, state media have never covered corruption as a national issue.

When an official is unmasked as corrupt, people usually wonder about the real reason behind the revelation, as such crimes are typically kept quiet. Many believe such selected televised confessions are staged so that the government can pretend to fight wrongdoing. When foreign media, on the other hand, uncover corruption, the government usually ignores or denies it.

"When it's clear that there are chronic shortages—of food, heating, or electricity, for example—the president announces that some unlucky allegedly corrupt official or officials are responsible at state meetings," one panelist said, "The dismissals, and usually subsequent charges, against these scapegoats are meant to give citizens the idea the government feels the people's pain and punishes those responsible."

Turkmenistan has no free and fair elections. "During the presidential election campaign, the incumbent receives coverage, but not any of the challengers, and the domestic media environment only enables that situation by falsely reporting elections as free and fair," a panelist said.

IREX did not conduct an in-country panel discussion because of Turkmenistan's repressive environment. This chapter represents desk research, interviews, and the result of questionnaires filled out by several people familiar with the state of media in the country.
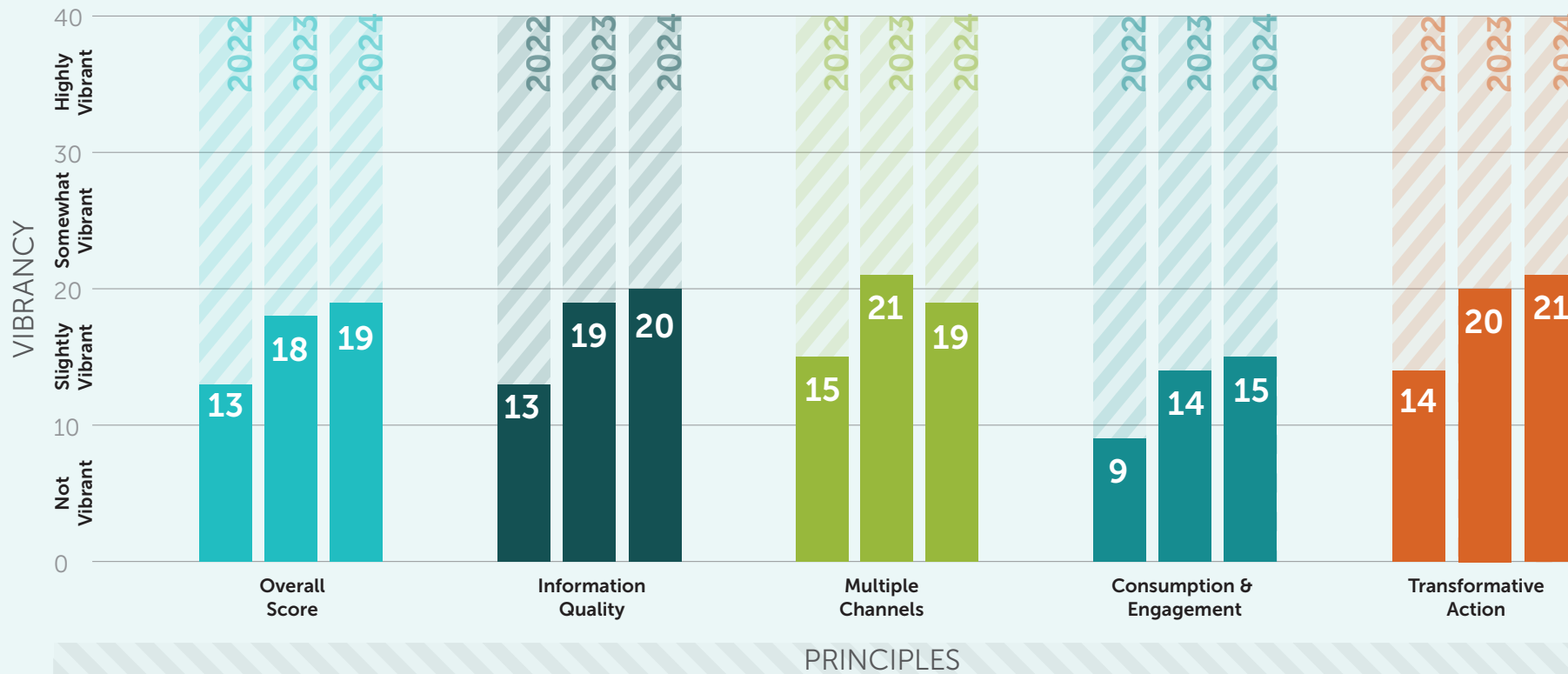
UZBEKISTAN

Vibrant
Information
Barometer

2 0 2 4

VIBRANCY

	Overall Score	Information Quality	Multiple Channels	Consumption & Engagement	Transformative Action
2024	19	20	19	15	21
2023	18	19	21	14	20
2022	13	13	15	9	14

PRINCIPLES

Not Vibrant (0-10): Quality information is extremely limited in this country. The vast majority of it is not editorially independent, not based on facts, or it is intended to harm. People do not have the rights, means, or capacity to access a wide range of information; they do not recognize or reject misinformation; and they cannot or do not make choices on what types of information they want to engage with.

Slightly Vibrant (11-20): Quality information is available on a few topics or geographies in this country, but not all. While some information is editorially independent, there is still a significant amount of misinformation, malinformation, and hate speech in circulation, and it does influence public discourse. Most people do not recognize or reject misinformation.

Somewhat Vibrant (21-30): Quality information is available in this country and most of it is editorially independent, based on facts, and not intended to harm. Most people have the rights, means, and capacity to access a wide range of information, although some do not. Most people recognize and reject misinformation, although some do not.

Highly Vibrant (31-40): Quality information is widely available in this country. People have the rights, means, and capacity to access a wide range of information; they recognize and reject misinformation.

Highly Vibrant

Somewhat Vibrant

Slightly Vibrant

OVERALL SCORE

19

Not Vibrant

In 2023, significant sociopolitical and media developments shaped the flow of information as Uzbekistan continues to come to grips with what it might mean to have a truly free press. The year began with the detentions of several journalists and one civilian, accused of defamation, extortion, and tax evasion, involving alleged threats to post compromising material about government officials on social media unless the officials paid up. The case, which ended in convictions and was closed to the public, was a fitting lesson on the state of press freedom and standards in Uzbekistan: some saw it as an illustration of the limits of the state's tolerance for a free press while others saw in it the natural consequences of many Uzbekistani journalists' loose grasp of professional ethics.

More broadly, 40 Uzbekistani journalists publicly complained to President Shavkat Mirziyoyev in March that an unnamed "state body responsible for controlling information continues to apply pressure on editorial staff and bloggers, so they have to change the tone, format, and nature of information or they do not publish that information at all." Mirziyoyev, who has publicly supported media freedom, did not respond, but the state-backed Union of Journalists dismissed the complaint and said the real problem was journalists' ethical lapses.
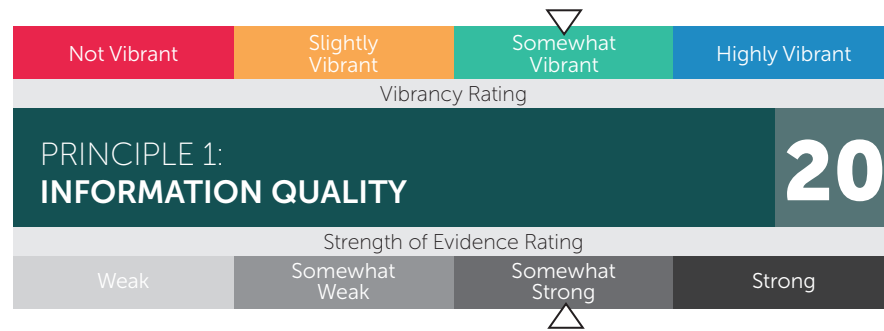
The president initiated constitutional amendments in 2022, which voters approved in an April 2023 referendum that was deemed flawed by international observers. In addition to adding more terms to a president's possible time in office, the new constitution introduces the vague concept of "social morality" among the reasons the rights to speak out or obtain information can be infringed.

The new constitution guarantees freedom of the press yet makes the mass media responsible for the reliability of information they provide, essentially transforming journalism ethics to an issue that the government can pursue legally. It also bans censorship, although the country has no law stipulating penalties for obstructing media activity.

Shortly after winning a snap election in the summer, Mirziyoyev elevated two top aides, including his elder daughter. Both had worked credibly on the regulation and development of the country's mass media, and content producers had high hopes for their appointments. Even so, last year saw a resurgence of persecutions of journalists and bloggers, and suspensions of online media and blogs.

Uzbekistan's overall score slightly improved, thanks to minor improvements in Principle 1 (Information Quality), Principle 3 (Information Consumption and Engagement), and Principle 4 (Transformative Action), as people closely watched environmental and health news on air quality and the trial of 23 defendants over the deaths of 68 children linked to contaminated cough syrup. The score for Principle 2 (Multiple Channels) dropped a bit from the 2023 VIBE study. Panelists said the new constitution could encourage more self-censorship, influence editorial content, and restrain people's right to seek and engage with information.

Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant	Somewhat Vibrant	Highly Vibrant

Vibrancy Rating

PRINCIPLE 1:
INFORMATION QUALITY

20

Strength of Evidence Rating

Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong	Strong

The country's developing information infrastructure and improved mobile connectivity enabled journalists and bloggers to produce diverse content of varying quality. Video and audio podcasts multiplied, as did online hate speech in response to the conflicts in the Middle East. A lack of quality national content and news analysis made Uzbekistanis vulnerable to foreign propaganda and disinformation. Indicator 5, which assesses resources for content production, scored the lowest in this principle, with panelists noting the media's financial challenges strained operating environment. Despite an increase in online hate speech in comments sections and on social media networks, Indicator 3, which examines harmful information, received the highest score of this principle, reflecting that the government and content producers do not create or disseminate content that is intended to harm, for fear of legal repercussions and loss of credibility.

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

According to [official data](#) from the Agency for Information and Mass Communications, Uzbekistan has 2,000-plus media outlets: 623 magazines; 745 online publications, mostly in the capital, Tashkent; 631 print newspapers, a drop from previous years; and 84 TV channels. These outlets produce varied, but not always quality content.

Uzbekistan's media cover local, national, regional, and international news. Some online outlets publish lengthy interviews with one or several experts, allowing consumers to form their own views on the topics discussed. Among them, Kun.uz, Daryo.uz, and Gazeta.uz stand out for their analyses and investigations.

The Creative Union of Journalists of Uzbekistan is a state-backed entity that has more than 2,000 members and commits to protect the rights and legal interests of media workers. However, it selectively addresses some of the many cases of pressure and physical harassment against journalists and never follows up on unanswered appeals by state entities. In one notable incident, when more than 40 journalists and activists appealed to the president about "hidden but severe censorship," the Union, commenting on the journalists' appeal, noted that it "did not observe any pressure on editorial offices and independent journalists and bloggers." Instead, it reported cases of abuse of freedom of speech by content producers. As a result, the union has not built trust with journalists.

There are no legal repercussions for obstructing journalists' activities, even though journalists are constantly under threat. Journalists do not feel empowered, supported, or protected by law to call out official misbehavior. Moreover, media coverage of alleged official misdeeds varies depending on the power an official holds and exercises to pursue a journalist for what they write.

The most popular content in Uzbekistan is entertainment and hard news coverage is generally identical across online media and devoid of coherent research, data-driven analysis, and ethical and balanced reporting. The quality of media content suffers from editorial dependence on owners and advertisers and unethical practices. Some content producers lack skills to identify conflicts of interest in the topics and to distinguish among news, opinion, and analysis. Poorly resourced newsrooms give priority to commercial or political considerations over professional ones.

With such poor content on offer and with investigative and thematic journalism beyond the country's mostly unprepared and underfunded journalists, consumers turn to Russian news sources for analytical reporting. Although a handful of online media outlets in Uzbekistan—

such as Kun.uz, Daryo.uz and Gazeta.uz--stand out in investigative and analytical reporting, in January 2024 Mirziyoyev called for more domestic content to minimize the influence of foreign news sources. "If we don't meet our people's needs for news and analysis, outsiders will. This is unacceptable," he said.

The halting reform of journalism education has been hampered by a restricted media environment, poorly resourced news labs, a scarcity of teaching materials, and a shortage of qualified instructors. As a result, journalism schools lag behind modern journalistic standards. Non-governmental media organizations retrain journalists and bloggers through foreign-funded projects. In 2023, UNESCO supported content producers to develop new formats for quality non-news programming. OSCE and the National Media Public Fund conducted a roundtable for journalists, civil society, IT specialists, and officials on the use of artificial intelligence in journalism and its implications for media freedom, and major trends in regulating harmful content. The Ministry of Ecology taught journalists about climate change, water, desertification, and drought issues. However, only a limited number of content producers have the time or inclination to take part.

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

Professional content producers strive to produce and deliver fact-based news and information. They do not intentionally create or disseminate false information, which became a crime in 2018.

Media outlets moderate content on digital platforms to stem the spread of manipulated information, and panelists said online media with thousands of subscribers struggle to rein in comments. The Kun.uz and Daryo.uz Telegram channels, for instance, have disabled their comments sections; Gazeta.uz has disabled comments on Telegram platforms but allows users to post reaction emojis; and Effect.uz allows its 17,000-plus followers to both comment and use emojis on Telegram. Online media enable users to post comments on Facebook pages, which they regularly clean up to avoid liability.

Some content producers sensationalize content, neglect to check facts, or even extort money from people and businesses. There were conflicting reports in 2023 of journalists and bloggers demanding money and threatening to publish damaging information about their subjects. Sof.uz had to pay Anorbank $324,000 in compensation for publishing a video that allegedly damaged the bank's reputation. A court sentenced Abduqodir Muminov, who blogged on the justice system, to seven years and three months in prison on charges of fraud and extortion, although the blogger's supporters said the sentence was really retaliation for his critical reporting.

Among the reliable fact-checking websites in Russian and Uzbek administered by journalists and experts is Factchecking.uz, which has limited original content and republishes fact-checking tips and articles from Russian and foreign sources. In 2023, the Modern Journalism Development Center, a domestic non-governmental organization (NGO), launched the bilingual https://factchecknet.uz/ platform with support from the Equal Rights and Independent Media (ERIM) NGO and funding from the European Union. The center trains fact-checkers and encourages content producers to receive training.

Generally, the government neither intentionally creates nor spreads false information. Rather, government officials or agencies withhold important information or delay releasing it to avoid public outcry.

> **"Some content producers sensationalize content, neglect to check facts, or even extort money from people and businesses.**

Journalists hold government officials accountable by publicly calling out instances of manipulated information. In one notable example from September 2023, online media reported on the emergency hospitalization of more than 400 children in the Andijan and Namangan regions. Doctors and parents linked the children's illness to the consumption of Antistrumin, a domestically produced potassium iodide, following the launch of the government's iodization campaign. Media investigations

revealed that the Health Ministry had signed a no-bid, $2 million contract with domestic company Samo to supply Antistrumin to schools and kindergartens. Bloggers and media reported that one of the founders of Samo, Nodir Yunusov, was wanted by the US and Interpol in connection with human trafficking, forced labor, fraud, racketeering, and other corruption.

The public learned about the children's poisoning from the social media channels of online media and not from the Ministry of Health, which tried to deny and obscure the facts. At a press conference, Deputy Health Minister Elmira Basitkhanova misleadingly suggested the children might have contracted acute respiratory viral infections, although Radio Ozodlik, the Uzbek service of RFE/RL, published a letter from Basitkhanova to the heads of local health departments ordering a ban on the drug. Social media users appealed to the ministry to reveal how many children had been affected by the iodization campaign, but it never did.

At a meeting with journalists, Health Minister Amrillo Inoyatov advised journalists "to the extent possible not to delve into this topic," and added, "There are organizations that deal with it."

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

The government and content producers do not create or disseminate content that is intended to harm, for fear of legal repercussions and loss of credibility, but Uzbekistan recorded an increase in online hate speech in comments sections and on social networks in 2023.

Hate speech narratives targeting citizens from outside Tashkent who have moved there or do business in the city have been rampant online and offline since Mirziyoyev lifted a ban on them purchasing apartments or taking jobs in Tashkent. People have posted online rants blaming the newcomers for rising housing prices, litter, and traffic congestion, fueling verbal confrontations between them and residents of Tashkent. Drivers with license plates from elsewhere complain of harassment on the streets of Tashkent.

Social media users posted hate comments in reaction to news stories on the war in Gaza and denounced the US and Israel for killing Palestinian women and children. Antisemitic messages surged online, sometimes from public figures, bloggers, journalists, and religious leaders. Singer Yulduz Usmonova's video call to boycott Israeli products exceeded 1 million views on social networks, and it received the blessing of popular religious scholar Mubashshir Ahmad on Telegram. Online hate speech spilled over to two incidents in Tashkent. Radio Ozodlik reported on an attack on two members of the Jewish movement Habad in October. A month later, pro-Palestinian slogans, "Free Gaza" and "Free Palestine," appeared on the walls of a synagogue. Other media did not cover the incidents, which were not reported by the Jewish community.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken highlighted the need for strong, vibrant, and well-resourced domestic media. Speaking at a March press conference in Tashkent, Blinken urged "governments to create the right environment in which media can grow, flourish, and bring a diversity of voices and views to the public."

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

Content producers create information in various languages and formats to satisfy the needs of their audiences. People commonly use smartphones to get news and entertainment, mainly from Telegram and YouTube. Online media Kun.uz, Daryo.uz, and Gazeta.uz deliver high-quality and engaging content and lead in Telegram followers. They have a presence on several social networks and distribute news in Uzbek Cyrillic, Uzbek Latin, Russian, and English. Gazeta.uz is the most popular Russian-language media. Daryo.uz disseminates information and news on lifestyle, sports, Central Asia, and the world through separate Telegram channels. Telegram-based online media deliver news in the form of a lead sentence with a photo or a photo collage and a link to the full story.

Uzbek-language online media cover diverse topics and tend not to specialize in thematic reporting. Uzbek-language content includes a lot of international news translated from foreign news sources. Russian-

language media primarily cover domestic news and rarely publish international news. Some Russian-language online media, such as Spot.uz and PR.uz, specialize in business, technology, public relations, or communications.

Even though national media expose most citizens to a variety of viewpoints, the perspectives and experiences of marginalized groups rarely appear in the mainstream media. The country's estimated 845,300 people with disabilities are socially isolated and receive poor and biased coverage in national media. Discrimination and a lack of assistive mobility devices and accessible public infrastructure hinder their access to information, political participation, and use of public services. The mainstream media do not sufficiently reflect their rights, needs, or lived experiences, rarely showing them as successful individuals integrated into society.

In 2023, online media reported on videos of disabled children being abused by adults, but the coverage lacked important details and never received follow up or analysis. In June, the National Agency of Social Protection began operations to support underserved audiences, including people with disabilities. Additionally, under public pressure, the government discussed a bill that defines six types of child abuse; however, at the end of 2023 the draft law had not moved forward.

Social media were flooded with videos and media accounts of domestic violence cases in 2023, with comments sections rife with misogyny and victim-blaming. Of 363 murders committed in Uzbekistan in 2023, 141, or nearly 40 percent, were rooted in family disputes.

In Uzbekistan, women have to compete for jobs in both state and private media, both of which are dominated by men, and content is shaped in accordance with men's priorities. During a November meeting with Uzbek media officials, the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media Teresa Ribeiro discussed gender balance in the country's media industry

> **Even though national media expose most citizens to a variety of viewpoints, the perspectives and experiences of marginalized groups rarely appear in the mainstream media.**

and the safety of female journalists. In 2023, several content producers, including female journalists, received anonymous blackmail threats in March ahead of the referendum. Additionally, the editor of Rost24.uz had to quit the publication after numerous threats that put her marriage at stake.

Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced.

The state owns the most popular print, broadcast, and online media outlets and indirectly controls many others via their owners, often government officials or businesses with links to the government.

Larger private media are in a stronger financial position, buoyed by their popularity, credibility, and their subscriber base. However, small to medium-sized media outlets struggle for financial stability. Notably, after a century of operations, the venerable satirical magazine *Mushtum* (Fist) suspended its print version due to money woes. The magazine was able to secure funding to reinstate its print version in 2024.
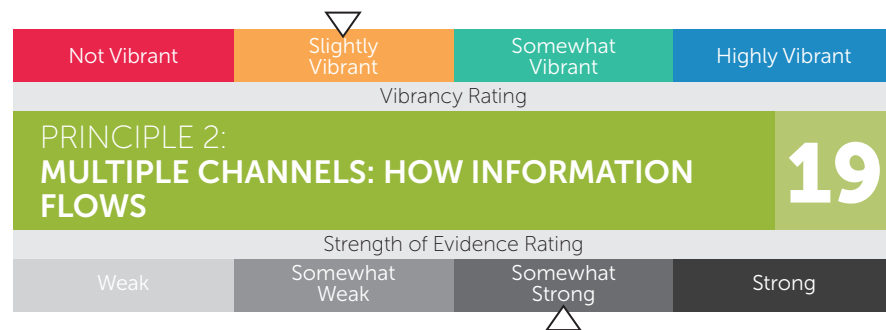
The lack of funding forces media outlets to turn to government, businesses, and political parties for support, undermining editorial independence and leading to an opaque allocation of government subsidies and advertising. Cash-strapped media are seeking new ways to maintain their audiences and attract new ones. The *New Uzbekistan* newspaper, for example, has started putting audio recordings of selected print articles on its website and social media pages. Owned by the government, the newspaper has more than 166,000 subscribers.

On Press and Media Workers Day in Uzbekistan, June 27, Mirziyoyev said he envisioned creating a "new journalism in New Uzbekistan . . . to study the experiences of developed countries, strengthen cooperation with leading foreign universities in the field of media, international media organizations, and media industries."

In July 2023, the Union of Journalists published its first report on a strategy for advancing journalism in Uzbekistan to 2030, which it prepared at the behest of the president. This report calls for higher salaries for media professionals, a media development strategy, innovations in reporting, and training for 60 journalists abroad, among other recommendations.

Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant	Somewhat Vibrant	Highly Vibrant

Vibrancy Rating

PRINCIPLE 2: MULTIPLE CHANNELS: HOW INFORMATION FLOWS	19

Strength of Evidence Rating

Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong	Strong

Authorities took steps to improve information and communications technologies in 2023, including hiring foreign companies for technical work and discussing giving private internet providers direct access to the international network in the hopes of increasing mobile speed and cutting connectivity fees. As a result, panelists scored the related indicators highly, noting improvements in access to diverse channels of government information. The indicators on the independence of information channels and the rights to produce content received the lowest scores of this principle. In 2023, the government persecuted journalists and bloggers, resulting in increased self-censorship and suspension of media outlets and blogs.

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

In August 2023 Mirziyoyev once again declared his support for free speech and free media, but added, "At the same time, honesty and impartiality should be the main criteria in the information space." The president also insisted that Uzbekistan guarantees unconditionally the freedom of conscience and belief, even as officials continue to persecute religious activists, journalists, and bloggers.

Courts in Uzbekistan are not independent and have largely failed to protect individuals, including journalists, against government retaliation for exercising free speech. Courts also operate without transparency, depriving the public of access to legal decisions, although a 2020 Supreme Court resolution clarified the media's right to attend and report on legal proceedings. Rampant corruption, particularly within law enforcement agencies and courts, as well as weak legislative and judicial bodies, continue to threaten these rights, online and offline.

Early in 2023, journalist and lawyer Dauletmurat Tadjimuratov was sentenced to 16 years in prison for allegedly organizing riots and seeking to overthrow the local government. His was the longest of dozens of sentences handed down in connection with protests in the northwestern region of Karakalpakstan in 2022, spurred by an official proposal to end the region's autonomous status.

The government of Uzbekistan continues to see the growing presence of religious online content as a threat, instead of addressing the relative scarcity of other types of content in the Uzbek language. In May 2023, authorities published a list of approximately 500 websites, books, social media channels, and social media accounts it deemed radical. In separate cases, courts convicted two people of distributing material that posed a threat to public security and order for sharing a religious song with friends on Telegram. Jahongir Ulugmurodov was sentenced to three years in prison and Sardor Rakhmonkulov to five, but the sentences were reduced to probation for three and two years, respectively, after a domestic and international outcry.

In April, a Tashkent court sentenced blogger and activist Hojiakbar Nosirov to 15 days in jail after he warned that several brands of yogurt contain an ingredient that he said is forbidden to eat in Islam. Authorities, who disputed his conclusion, said he had violated the rights of the stores selling the yogurt and that he had failed, as required by law, to have his conclusion validated by the country's religious authorities. With more than 880,000 subscribers on YouTube, Nosirov monitors the

quality of food products in stores and exposes examples of expired goods that he says could harm consumers.

A month later, a court fined activist and former imam Shavkat Hasan for speaking about family matters on social networks without obtaining permission from the Religious Affairs Committee. Hasan, who has served on various commissions on family matters, addressed issues on reforming marital relations, raising the status of women, and preserving families. In an interview with Kun.uz, Hasan said, "I think it wouldn't have hurt this much if the expert commission found my videos to be an incitement to some kind of evil, but they decided to fine me just for not consulting them before publishing. It is unfair," Hasan said.

In May, Umid Karimov and fellow blogger Maksud Muzaffarov were convicted of insulting two police officers and were jailed for five days. In an interview with Kun.uz, the bloggers complained that the judge had refused to hear their evidence. The following month, Karimov suspended the Nasafnews.uz website, which covered news from the southeastern Kashkadarya region and of which he was editor-in-chief, and ended his "Kapitan Karimov" blog on Telegram. Additionally, three other bloggers--Otabek Artikov, Azizbek Yazdurdiyev, and Uroljon Kamolov--ended their blogs after witnessing the case of Karimov and Muzaffarov. "I felt in danger," Artikov said, "It's clear that I'll end up playing with fire in a society where courts act blindly in matters affecting the lives of citizens."

> **The government of Uzbekistan continues to see the growing presence of religious online content as a threat instead of addressing the relative scarcity of other types of content in the Uzbek language.**

Kun.uz published a series of analytical articles in 2023 on incompetence and instances of apparent corruption in the Foreign Labor Migration Agency, which sends labor migrants to South Korea, Russia, and other countries. Instead of addressing these issues, the newly appointed head of the agency, Jakhongir Khudoykhodjaev, filed a complaint against Kun.uz to the Agency for Information and Mass Communications, which did not respond.

In 2023, the government continued to work on a draft information code governing the management and release of information to align it with international legal standards, in concert with the OSCE.

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

Of Uzbekistan's nearly 35.43 million people, 80 percent, or about 29.52 million, used the internet in 2023. Only about a quarter of the population, 8.7 million people, used social media, according to Datareportal, a project of the Kepios digital advisory firm. However, according to Admixer Advertising, an official Meta vendor in Uzbekistan, the total number of Meta users is actually 9.1 million, and the total number of Instagram users is 7.9 million people.

Internet connectivity and mobile coverage in Uzbekistan are patchy. In 2023, the government continued efforts to improve the telecommunications infrastructure and expand mobile coverage as part of a 10-year strategy launched in 2020. In part to help close the urban-rural digital divide, the state-owned Uztelecom monopoly contracted with four Japanese companies to provide telecommunications equipment and services for new data centers. The government also plans to work with US officials to engage young people and women in technology and link US and Uzbekistani universities on IT initiatives.

The government plans to end Uztelecom's monopoly on access to the international internet channel, which experts have blamed for slow speeds and high prices, and to set up an independent telecommunications regulator.

In 2023, Uzbekistan increased mobile internet speed by expanding the information infrastructure and amplifying the total bandwidth of the international internet network by 260% to 3,200 Gbit/s. In 2023, the country climbed to the 131st place, marking a significant improvement

of 24 points compared to the 2022 year's rating (155th) in wired internet speed.

However, this improvement in mobile and fixed internet connection speed did not widen access to information for marginalized groups, including people with limited digital skills such as women, seniors, and people with disabilities. According to the UNDP gender digital divide assessment published in March 2023, woman lag behind in digital skills by 24 percent compared to men. Additionally, people with disabilities experience a greater-than-average digital divide in the population. Their basic digital skills gap stands at 32 percent. Internet coverage, relevant national content, device ownership, affordability, digital literacy, and social norms hinder their access to information and civic participation.

Despite the reduction in mass media registration from 15 to 10 days with a law in December 2023, content producers are wary of having a blog or streaming content on social, political and religious issues.

Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for government information.

Uzbekistan's laws provide for access to government information, and, from the top-down, the government has made technical strides toward openness.

Despite the regulations requiring government agencies to regularly update online information, publish reports on past activities and expenditures and facilitate press-conferences, most government offices fail to comply. Moreover, while government agencies do not openly refuse to provide government information to journalists, they use various excuses to delay providing requested information or they provide raw data, which may confuse journalists or require additional time for analysis. Bloggers and journalists reported on incidents when government agencies and local governments intentionally concealed public information concerning procurements or expenditures.

In April 2023, Gazeta.uz conducted an analysis of data appearing on the E-Qaror (E-Decision) portal, which publishes decisions made by governors. The media outlet learned that the acting mayor of Tashkent Shavkat Umurzakov signed 35 decisions, with nearly 50% of them concealed from the public. Additionally, four of the 14 decrees that were adopted remained inaccessible online. Gazeta.uz sent an enquiry about the missing decrees and decisions to the press services of the Ministry of Justice and the Tashkent city administration. The Justice Ministry noted that mayors/governors had the discretion to determine which documents should be made public and which should remain undisclosed. The city administration occasionally refrains from disclosing certain economic decisions to the public.

As the country worked to bring its economy, public administration, and educational systems online nationwide, authorities made improvements to the portal for interactive government services and introduced the Face ID payment system in 2023. It now offers voice-enabled assistance, biometric identification, feedback and comments sections and help for visually impaired users. Access to government information remains impeded, however, by the public's wariness of digital technologies and online services, the digital exclusion of marginalized groups, unstable internet connectivity, frequent power outages, and people's limited awareness of services and digital literacy skills.

Another important step toward reform is a three-year project launched in 2023 with UNESCO and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation to refine a draft law on information, study internet use and access to information, and help ministries better manage public communication. It will also identify gaps in media and information literacy and develop a national strategy, as well as mount a media campaign to educate citizens on accessing government information on various platforms.

Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow.

Uzbekistan's domestic media ownership environment is characterized by the concentration of media ownership in the hands of political and business elites. The state directly owns major television and radio channels that provide service to the entire country. State-backed local officials and businesses own private TV and radio channels that

broadcast to local markets. Television continues to attract the highest audiences, with Channel One and Uzbekistan 24 being the main sources of government news.

Online media outlets have more diverse ownership than traditional media outlets, but they still experience some level of independence of government influence. The state uses informal levers of control to exert pressure on editors who have the potential to influence editorial content.

Even though a mass media law prohibits media monopoly and requires that media owners are disclosed publicly, shareholder information is not public. In August 2023, the government cancelled the popular "Minbar" program, the only critical and analytical show on Uzbek television that had been on-air for almost three years. This program, which covered societal issues, was cancelled following criticisms of how the government managed social service funds. When commenting on cancelling the show, former deputy of Uzbekistan's parliament, Rasul Kusherbaev, noted, "As a result, there are no critical programs left on state television that are far from praiseworthy and do not work with state order, one might even say: everything is beautiful and clean."

> " While government agencies do not openly refuse to provide government information to journalists, they use various excuses to delay providing requested information or they provide raw data, which may confuse journalists or require additional time for analysis.

In 2023, the government established rules for obtaining broadcasting licenses, which are granted jointly by the Ministry of Digital Technologies, the Defense Ministry and the State Security Service. However, licensing procedures lack transparent rules in how frequencies are allocated, and the allocation of broadcasting frequencies is subject to political influence.

State-owned Uzbektelecom holds a monopoly on internet access and sells internet traffic to domestic internet service providers, which are prohibited from connecting to the international internet and maintaining satellites. Like Uzbektelecom, private internet service providers can filter

and block websites.

In 2022, the government granted the right to distribute television and radio products of foreign media in Uzbekistan. However, since July 2023 foreign advertising on these television and radio channels has been restricted.

Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.

The government's ownership of the most popular broadcast, print, and online media leaves little room for independent information channels. In addition to the nine major outlets it owns, the state indirectly controls private media owned by officials and businesses with close ties to the government. For instance, the state owns the second-most popular online media outlet, Daryo.uz, through Uztelecom, and in 2023 ownership of Gazeta.uz was reportedly transferred to Komil Allamjonov, the head of the president's Information Policy Department.

Several private TV and radio channels experience indirect government influence, through calls from government officials questioning certain stories.

Online media remain relatively independent of direct government ownership, highlighting their role in promoting diverse content. However, they remain vulnerable to indirect government influence when government officials pressure owners to delete or scrub unfavorable content and force journalists to write neutral content. In 2023, four prominent journalists, including Ilyos Safarov, who is known for asking top officials tough questions, left Kun.uz, a major online news outlet.

A 2022 study by USAID found that independent media are stymied by regulations that compel them to register with the authorities, restrict funding sources, limit data privacy protections, and vaguely define illegal
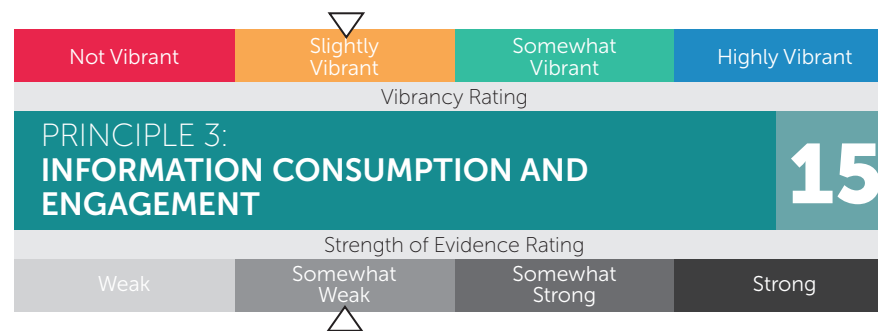
content, leaving them open to legal action. The government can block information sources with content deemed illegal without a court order. In 2023, the Senate moved to speed up the registration process for new media.

The National Television and Radio Company, which operates multiple national and regional broadcast networks, is the largest mass media conglomerate. In early 2024, it welcomed a new boss from the prime minister's office, replacing the longtime former director, but panelists predicted the leadership change would not eliminate the state monopoly and free up TV and radio channels.

In a commentary for Kun.uz on the state of television in Uzbekistan over the past two decades, political analyst Kamoliddin Rabbimov wrote that the government perceives a free and vibrant television scene as destabilizing. "There are engaging talk shows, debates, analytical programs on TV channels [worldwide]. But Uzbekistan is not able to implement this process yet. We cannot imagine free and vibrant TV channels because we [lack the] imagination. We cannot even imagine what we are missing," he wrote.

Daily broadcasts of major Russian state-owned media in Uzbekistan augment propaganda from the government of Uzbekistan. Online media indirectly amplify Russian propaganda and information manipulation by translating and republishing news stories from Russian media. The lack of independent information channels and the state's control of the media and information open a door for Russian influence over Uzbekistan's mass media and journalists.

Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant ▽	Somewhat Vibrant	Highly Vibrant

Vibrancy Rating

PRINCIPLE 3: INFORMATION CONSUMPTION AND ENGAGEMENT	**15**

Strength of Evidence Rating

Weak	Somewhat Weak △	Somewhat Strong	Strong

Principle 3 received the lowest average score of all VIBE principles in this year's Uzbekistan study, due to the public's limited media and information literacy and the absence of community media in Uzbekistan. Panelists gave high marks to the indicator on digital privacy protections and security, even as government agencies had frequent online security lapses. Panelists also credited media efforts to engage with their audiences' needs despite a restrictive media environment.

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

The public has little grasp of personal data rights and protections, cybersecurity threats, online safety, and information manipulation. The government, media, and civil society offer training in digital and media literacy through schools and regional IT Parks, set up to foster IT entrepreneurship. Further, USAID has supported several digital literacy and IT courses for women and girls to help them overcome gender-based barriers to entry into the field.

In 2023, the government established security and encryption requirements for those who hold people's personal information or biometric or genetic data.

Commercial banks registered several incidents of personal data theft, which the central bank initially denied, that revealed security lapses and unaccountable and opaque banking practices.

While the central bank concealed information about cyberattacks on payment systems and argued that banks met all security requirements, Gazeta.uz interviewed at least 16 people who had had money drained from their accounts via a mobile app owned by Universal Bank. The central bank chairman then confirmed hacks and data breaches at two banks due to faults in their mobile apps. Fraudsters managed to withdraw about $24,000 in local currency from bank cards during 2 a.m.-6 a.m., when the victims were asleep.

Of the 5,500 cybercrimes committed in Uzbekistan through November 2023, 70 percent involved fraud and theft associated with people's bank cards. Most of the country's 50 payment systems did not meet cybersecurity requirements. Online media also experienced numerous denial-of-service attacks. Even though the state lifted taxes on imported media equipment, media outlets struggled to import and upgrade their security systems.

The Interior Ministry's Cybersecurity Center reported more than 11.2 million cyberattacks on national web resources, traced mainly to IP addresses in the Netherlands, the US, and Russia. Attempted breaches of government web resources were caused by the lack of verification and filtering of user content, faulty coding, and weak password protection, among other deficiencies.

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

The government took steps in 2023 to promote media and information literacy, including a setting up a media and information literacy department in the presidential administration and starting a multiyear project with UNESCO to develop a national strategy on the issue.

State- and donor-funded projects continued engaging groups of citizens in media literacy. Among those efforts, the OSCE, government agencies, and national and international NGOs held sessions for educators, seniors, prosecutors, young people with disabilities, and medical and other professionals on cybersecurity issues, social networking algorithms, the use of fact-checking platforms to counter fakes, and critical-thinking skills for assessing the reliability of information.

A 2023 Internews study found that Uzbekistanis consume less news and political content than their counterparts elsewhere in Central Asia. Government information dominates television, as there is little other content available in the Uzbek language. Television enjoys only moderate public trust. Private television is underdeveloped, and blogs are most people's preferred news sources. About half of Uzbekistan's people live in the countryside, and they get their domestic news in their local language from television. For entertainment or sports content, they turn to smartphones. Better-educated, better-off city dwellers tend to consume all sorts of media and more frequently get their news in Russian through paid network providers. Even though citizens widely speak Uzbek at home and work, they prefer Russian-language media, which offers more diverse and more in-depth content.

> **" The public has little grasp of personal data rights and protections, cybersecurity threats, online safety, and information manipulation.**

The study found that people of various ages are generally aware of fake news on politics and the economy, though particularly old or young, less-educated, or rural residents are more likely to lack the critical-thinking skills or know-how to verify information.

In 2023, the Cybersecurity Center registered a rise in photos, videos, and voices falsified using artificial intelligence programs. Scammers circulated videos of Mirziyoyev, businessman Alisher Usmanov, and Prime Minister Abdulla Aripov with falsified audio tracks on major social networks, aiming to influence public opinion, spread false content, and steal people's money. The Cybersecurity Center asked users to consult official sources to verify what they see online.

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

People exercise caution about issues they engage with, prioritizing topics that will not raise issues with the government. Sensitive topics include the president and his family, security services and other top-level officials, religious topics. Moreover, there is a thin line between what religious content people are allowed to share/like/comment on.

Political and social debates get mired in hate speech. These debates cover topics on religious garb, and target people from the provinces who have come to work in Tashkent. Population growth in the capital city has led to heavy traffic on roads, crowding in public places and transportation, and higher prices for rent and purchase of apartments in Tashkent.

Common topics widely debated in 2023 were traffic accidents, especially those leading to death of children; growing suicide rates among women and youth; and domestic violence cases leading to deaths of women and children often committed by spouses or in-laws. Individuals whose video posts involved hatred toward provincial residents, which sparked widespread public outrage on social media, prompted police to take legal action.

Throughout 2023, most people in Uzbekistan were intensely interested in information on health issues. Air pollution, which caused respiratory distress nationwide, was a huge topic. There was a run, and price hikes, on air purifiers and humidifiers, which people rated and reviewed on the 294,000-member Potrebiteli.uz (Consumers.uz) group on Facebook. Podrobno.uz and other online media gave daily updates on the increase in harmful inhalable particles outdoors. People blamed frequent dust storms and air pollution on ongoing construction, tree cutting by developers, and car and industry emissions. Authorities responded with proposals to abandon low-quality gasoline, install dust and gas cleaning equipment in industries that pollute the environment, limit operations of heavy polluters and move them to less-populated areas, and inspect thermal power plants. Other measures included purchasing air pollution monitors, holding monthly "Car-Free Day" events, and restricting the movement of heavy trucks in Tashkent.

Bloggers spurred public discussion on road safety and public transport, leading to a lower speed limit in Uzbekistan's cities, installation of traffic lights at many unregulated crosswalks, and the purchase of 1,000 natural-gas-powered and electric buses. The media and bloggers also addressed cases of animal abuse and violence against women and children. Distressing videos on social media and lenient penalties sparked public outrage and calls for stricter laws and punishments for animal abusers. The government vowed to open animal shelters around the country by September 2024.

Facebook and Telegram remain popular platforms for public debate and collective action. People use both social media for news, marketing, serious political discussion, activism, and community organizing. In 2023, for example, people, organizations, and businesses went online to organize humanitarian aid to victims of the earthquake in Turkey; sent clothing and school supplies to displaced people in Ukraine; and collected donations of money, blood, medications, and household items for poor, disabled, or sick people in Uzbekistan. After a massive warehouse explosion killed one person and injured 162 in September, people shared photos and videos of their shattered windows, flames, and smoke in the night sky on social media. Support groups sprung up on Telegram and elsewhere, where people donated money and goods and volunteered to help renovate damaged apartments.

> **" Bloggers spurred public discussion on road safety and public transport, leading to a lower speed limit in Uzbekistan's cities, installation of traffic lights at many unregulated crosswalks, and the purchase of 1,000 natural-gas-powered and electric buses.**

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

Community events, transparency in authorship, and publishing corrections are not established practices of Uzbekistan's media community. Rather, media seeks to build trust with audiences through fair and analytical reporting and by receiving letters to the editor. While media monitors online comments sections for posts critical of the president and his policies, they do not respond to individual posts in the comments sections.

In 2023, there was marked engagement and productive information sharing among media, content producers, civil society, and government agencies on the long-overdue law on criminalization of domestic violence. Productive information sharing on air quality and child abuse cases forced the government to draft legislation and take action.

Efforts to measure audience size and engagement have become more sophisticated and effective in Uzbekistan.

The nonprofit Uzbekistan Association of Information Technology Enterprises and Organizations, which includes 11 domestic IT companies, initiated studies to measure the TV and radio audiences. With support from International Media Service (IMS), a California-based ad agency that has been working in Uzbekistan since 2017, Kantar Media conducted a survey in 2023 that found that radio broadcasts from 12 stations in and around Tashkent reached 63 percent of those aged 15 to 64. This study's information highlighted the potential market for radio advertisers, which helped develop the wider advertising market.

According to IMS, more people trust advertising on the more-established media of television and radio than on social networks. In any event, digital advertising's reach is limited, as many people do not use social media. Most advertisers with sufficient budgets buy spots on television, which enjoys the largest share of the advertising market.
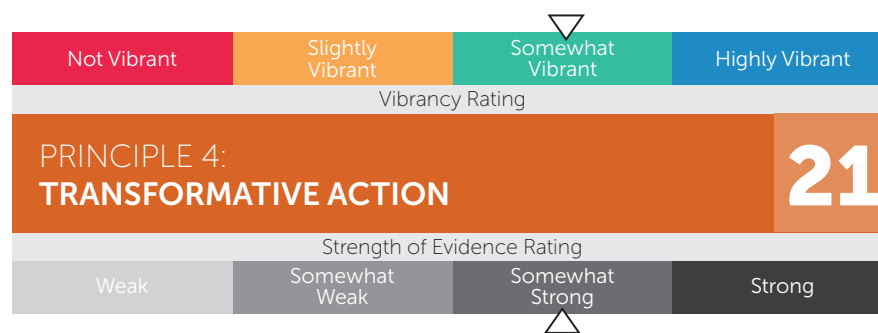
The 2023 survey by IMS of Uzbekistanis aged 6 to 54 found that they spent an average of four hours daily watching television, slightly more than in 2022. Most viewers were women, who favored soap operas and

films, which made up 39 percent of all content. Music, entertainment, educational, and news programs were also popular. IMS concluded that a rise in quality and diversity in Uzbekistani television is spurring the development of new broadcast formats, audience growth, increased demand for advertising, and general advancement of the TV industry.

ITCOMMS, a public relations agency that opened an office in Uzbekistan in 2022, works closely with specialized media to develop analytics, audience segmentation, and tailored communications. In 2023 it launched a service for generating instant press releases, now in Russian and English, using artificial intelligence.

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

There is no community media in Uzbekistan.

Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant	Somewhat Vibrant ▽	Highly Vibrant

Vibrancy Rating

PRINCIPLE 4: TRANSFORMATIVE ACTION	**21**

Strength of Evidence Rating

Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong △	Strong

Principle 4 scored the highest of all the principles, as the government, civil society, and the media share information that leads to reforms and roots out corruption; while this cooperation is still imperfect, it shows marked improvement from previous years. As a result, the VIBE indicator examining civil society's use of quality information received the highest score in this principle.

In 2023, media and other content producers uncovered corruption in government agencies, especially in health and education. The public and media held government officials accountable for the deaths of 68 children and for shortcomings in public education. Media accounts

and public outrage over abuse cases prompted the government to criminalize violence against women and children, improving Uzbekistan's score in the World Bank's gender index.

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

Uzbekistan has the largest number of information consumers in the region who read and watch multiple types of media. The advances in information technologies and social networks have allowed people to share information, learn about diverse topics, and form opinions. At least one prominent political analyst lamented in 2023 that these technological changes have not replaced authoritarian thinking across state and political institutions. Writing for Kun.uz in March, Kamoliddin Rabbimov called for new parties and space in parliament for parties and lawmakers free of government control.

People in Uzbekistan struggle to engage in constructive discussions or dialogues about social issues that affect their lives due to fear of reprisals, limited critical thinking skills, and an inability to take these issues to leaders and advocate for positive change.

There is general distrust in the government and media, while consumption of entertainment content outpaces quality news and information.

The country's new constitution decrees that "public life shall develop on the basis of a diversity of political institutions, ideologies, and opinions. No ideology shall be established as the state ideology." But most citizens see no difference among the country's five political parties. All keep a low profile and promote political agendas that align with the government's. Observers from the OSCE deemed the April constitutional referendum "short of genuine

political pluralism and competition." Based on an OSCE report, monitors also found that "the media did not provide impartial and balanced information, undermining voters' ability to make an informed choice." Panelists noted cases of harassment of content producers in the run-up to the referendum. Some journalists reported receiving threats and phone calls about what they could and could not publish regarding the amendments and referendum. Others were summoned by the police and threatened with prosecution.

In the July presidential elections, no candidate challenged the incumbent's stances or meaningfully engaged with voters.

Town hall-style meetings are rare. Instead, people hold discussions and air their differences on social media, mainly Facebook, where exchanges often degenerate into personal attacks, insults, and stereotypes that moderators are compelled to cut off and clean up.

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

Throughout 2023, most people did not engage with quality information because there was relatively little to be had.

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Heading into the constitutional referendum and presidential elections, most Uzbekistanis viewed the results as a foregone conclusion. Media were full of aggressive propaganda but no in-depth analysis that would have helped the public make informed decisions. Except for a few that ventured modest criticism, news outlets did not discuss the amendments to the constitution. Television aired propaganda videos and reports from outdoor campaigns calling for "yes" votes. The stars of popular arts and talk shows said the constitutional reforms would help the country move on from the injustices of the previous regime.

People's trust in health authorities was severely shaken by the deaths of 68 children and serious illness of 18 others linked to contaminated cough syrup from India. The resulting trial of approximately 20 Uzbekistanis and one Indian revealed a network of individuals and entities involved in bribery, negligence, and dangerous medical practices within Uzbekistan's pharmaceutical industry, Daryo.uz reported.

Evidence suggests health authorities were not forthcoming about measles outbreaks linked to migration flows and vaccine skepticism. In April 2023, the Health Ministry responded to social media posts about measles by confirming 37 cases in the first quarter and calling the situation "under control." But in November, the ministry confirmed 735 cases of measles among children younger than 3 in the Namangan region alone during the first 10 months of the year.

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

The constitution safeguards media freedoms and the rights and interests of NGOs. The country's Uzbekistan-2030 development strategy, adopted in February 2024, includes plans for "developing a civil society, with an active role for mahallas, non-governmental organizations, and free and impartial mass media." In practice, however, authorities rarely engage with civil society and media in making laws and policies.

CSOs rely on donor support and funding for building capacity, along with conducting assessments and research studies. In 2023, Nemolchi. uz, an independent online project, continued sharing stories of gender-based violence and drawing public attending to cases of violence against women and youth. The media subsequently picked up those stories, conducting their own investigations and producing news stories.

CSOs invite media outlets to cover major events such as project launches or end of program roundtables as part of their project activities. Similar to the media, CSOs also struggle to operate in a restrictive environment. Collaboration between the media and CSOs is limited to covering major activities involving public officials and donor representatives.

> **The government's limited engagement with the media and civil society makes for opaque law-making and unaccountable agencies, often feeding corruption and hampering reforms. However, 2023 was notable due to more engagement between the government and civil society, showing improvement from previous years.**

Authorities simplified procedures for civil society organizations to register foreign grants with the Ministry of Justice in 2023, but they did not include those groups in their discussions. In May, the president emphasized the need to build capacity and guarantee the rights of civil society, while July saw the government committed to double state subsidies and grants for civil society groups.

Despite these steps forward, stringent requirements on non-profits remain. Civil society must notify the ministry of planned events, obtain concurrence on grants, and register foreign staff. Foreign non-profits must have "partnerships" with state agencies to implement donor-funded projects.

Further, a government reshuffle in December 2022 complicated life for non-profits in ways that are still being felt. Ministries were consolidated and officials moved around. Two key agencies for civil society, the Committee on Women and Family and the Youth Affairs Agency, moved from one government entity to another a few times. With new officials in place throughout government, CSOs needed to obtain concurrence on grants from the new leaders who were often reluctant to commit. Organizations had to postpone some activities while they worked to build trust with the new officials.

One panelist said the shakeup was launched without a thorough analysis or strategic vision about the intended goals. Reforms lagged due to the changes in staff, an unstable operating environment, and inconsistencies in direction. Panelists said civil society organizations still compete over

funding and they lack the capacity to implement projects and do not seek to form coalitions with other non-profits. Limited coordination among the government, civil society, mass media, and donors makes it challenging to advocate and seek solutions for thorny social issues.

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

The government's limited engagement with the media and civil society makes for opaque law-making and unaccountable agencies, often feeding corruption and hampering reforms. However, 2023 was notable due to more engagement between the government and civil society, showing improvement from previous years.

Officials use traditional and social media as well as online new media to keep abreast of people's concerns. They also use online platforms for state services and social networks to engage and solicit feedback.

In 2023, Mirziyoyev lamented his predecessor's hostility to the media. He said he consumes media every day, including online, and vowed to let outlets operate freely, even though some of his allies urge otherwise. "Let them speak but speak fairly. Let them criticize, but criticize fairly. If they help a village, a school and education, then it will be even better," the president said.

Bloggers have been at the forefront of raising people's voices and facilitating important public discussions. Typically, they spot social issues first and bring them to the public's attention, at which point mainstream media pick them up and give them more analytical treatment. The media, civil society, and bloggers exchange information by republishing and commenting on one another's posts.

In 2023, after years of foot-dragging, Uzbekistan criminalized domestic violence and strengthened protections for women and children, capping a collaborative effort among government officials, gender-focused NGOs, journalists, bloggers, and other activists. International observers, including Amnesty International and the World Bank, applauded the efforts and the resulting law.

The law's adoption came at a time of public outrage over the prolonged sexual abuse of three teenage girls at an orphanage—revealed by the Nemolchi.uz (Speak Up) project, which focuses on gender issues—and the light sentences meted out to two perpetrators who were high-ranking local officials.

Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic rights

The new constitution safeguards the freedom of speech and the right to access and distribute information, with some limits to protect, for instance, national security, the constitutional order, social morality, and public order.

That has not prevented many human rights violations and the persecution of journalists and bloggers. In its annual report for 2024 (which covered calendar year 2023), Human Rights Watch decried a deteriorating human rights situation in Uzbekistan. In separate trials, courts gave sentences of up to 16 years in prison to 61 people who had taken part in protests over the sovereign status of the western Karakalpakstan region, although some of the sentences were later reduced to probation. Authorities did not hold law enforcement accountable for 21 deaths and more than 200 injuries during the protests.

The constitution also guarantees the right to form political parties and "other public associations," and to participate in mass movements, but in practice, authorities restrict the right to form independent political parties and an organized political opposition. In 2023, the Justice Ministry refused to register the Haqiqat, Taraqqiyot va Birdamlik (Truth, Development, and Unity) democratic party for the third time, saying it had not gathered the required number of signatures, even as unidentified people repeatedly disrupted the nascent party's signature drives.

The media reported on a dozen cases of torture and death in penal institutions. In the first half of 2023, the Ombudsman received 125 complaints about psychological, physical, or other coercion of people

detained in prisons. In June, a 36-year-old man died after being beaten and strangled by police officers in the Tashkent region. The same month, a court gave 12 police officers three- and four-year prison sentences for beating a prisoner to death in the Andijan region.

In November, as part of a periodic review, the UN Human Rights Council made 244 recommendations to Uzbekistan, including ending impunity for perpetrators of torture and working to protect journalists and activists from harassment and intimidation.

This chapter represents desk research, interviews, and the results from questionnaires filled out by people familiar with the state of media and information in the country. Participants will remain anonymous because of Uzbekistan's evolving environment.