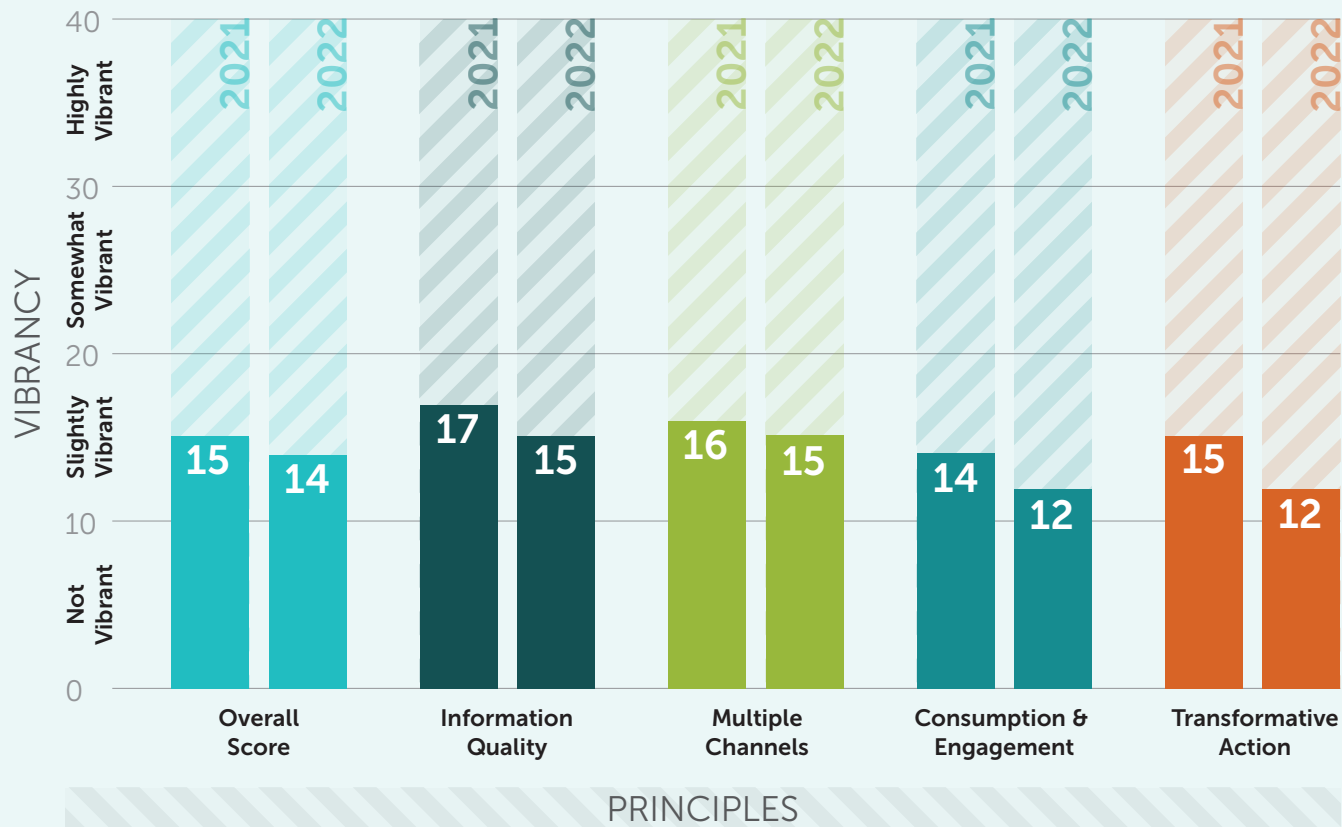


RUSSIA

Vibrant Information Barometer

2 0 2 2





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.

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.

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.

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.

Highly Vibrant

Somewhat Vibrant

Slightly Vibrant

Not Vibrant

OVERALL SCORE

14

Preface: On February 24, 2022, Russia launched a multi-pronged invasion of Ukraine. Since the 2022 VIBE chapter on Russia covers events in the media and information space during 2021, it does not discuss the impact of the current conflict. However, it provides an overview of the pre-war media environment in Russia.

Introduction

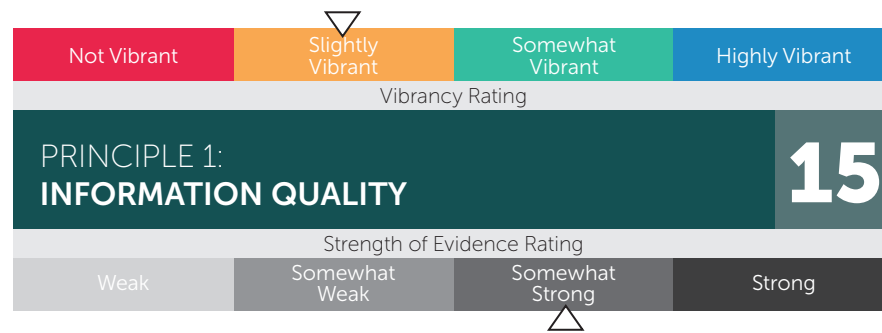
In Russia, 2021 began with dissident politician Alexey Navalny’s return to the country, followed by his immediate detention. Just two days after his arrest, the investigative documentary *Putin’s Palace: The History of the World’s Largest Bribe*, written and directed by Navalny, was released on YouTube. The documentary, based on the investigation conducted by Navalny’s Foundation for Combating Corruption, described a corruption scheme allegedly headed by Russian president Vladimir Putin and claimed that the palace was built for the president’s personal use, allegedly financed through corruption. Within two weeks, according to the Levada Center, the documentary had been watched by one in four Russians.

Following his detention and the release of the investigative documentary, Navalny and his team called on supporters to take to the streets, spurring a series of public protests across Russia. Authorities responded with crackdowns against both protestors and independent media covering the protests. Thousands of protestors were detained by police and dozens of independent media outlets, journalists, and public activists were declared “foreign media agents.”

Due to high internet penetration and the existence of a few independent media, Russians have access to quality independent information. At the same time, television that is tightly controlled by authorities remains the main source of information for 62 percent of Russians and is trusted

by 46 percent of people, according to a study conducted by Levada Center, a Russian independent polling and sociological research organization. Only young people born between 1990 and 2003 were different in this regard; according to the same Levada Center study just 36 percent of them used television as their main source of information, with 49 percent relying on online media and 66 percent on social media. “During the years of relative freedom, a small group of people that needed diverse information and was ready to critically reflect on it, formed. This group creates the demand for independent information, which enables the work of independent journalists. High penetration of internet made a significant contribution,” one VIBE panelist remarked. “Young people grew during Putin’s presidency, but they used the internet and as such were exposed to diverse information. As a result, young people are thinking critically, because the internet, even TikTok, removes barriers to information flow and facilitates understanding that there are multiple sources of information.”

Overall, in 2021, the production and consumption of independent information in Russia was limited and had limited impact on the quality of governance and life. Of the four VIBE principles, Principles 1 (Information Quality) and 2 (Multiple Channels) received higher average scores (15 each), driven by stronger scores for issues such as Russia’s infrastructure for media and information, and access to channels of information. These scores, however, were undercut by lack of resources for independent media, independence, and rights to create, share and consume information. Principles 3 (Information Consumption and Engagement) and 4 (Transformative Action) both received low scores (12 each), with weak assessments of media literacy, productive engagement in information, good governance and democratic rights, and government’s use of quality information in public policy decisions.



In 2021, the small sector of independent media continued to produce quality information despite growing pressure from authorities and limited access to financial resources. Indicator 1, measuring the quality of information, received the highest score, while Indicator 2, examining fact-based information, scored the lowest. Russian government subsidies to the media sector profoundly distorts the country's media market, leaving independent media struggling to survive.

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

Russia's existing infrastructure allows for the production of varied content, especially digital content. Print media faces the challenges of dwindling production and growing prices of newsprint paper, combined with declining advertising revenues and subscriptions. Millions of Russian citizens create and disseminate content on social media. For example, according to the October 2021 "Brand Analytics report," 66.4 million active content producers generated 1.1 billion posts, re-posts, and comments on a variety of social media platforms, including VK, Instagram, Odnoklassniki, Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, and TikTok.¹

Journalism training is offered by more than 140 higher education institutions², but this does not correlate with the production of ethical,

1 Brand Analytics. *Социальные сети в России: цифры и тренды, осень 2021*. 18.11.2021. <https://br-analytics.ru/blog/social-media-russia-2021/>

2 <https://vuzoteka.ru>

evidence-based, and coherent content. Training opportunities offered by independent media and NGOs are limited.

Journalists from independent media and some bloggers strive to act in an ethical and accountable manner, respect facts, and represent truth. Content producers affiliated with the state produce a lot of content that does not meet journalistic standards – but without any professional ramifications. "There are no ramifications because the sector of independent media is small, and for other journalists, the opinions of media owners matter more than any professional standards," one panelist said. Another noted that a journalist was more likely to face negative ramifications for striving to represent truth.

The overall body of content covers a variety of topics, including political and social issues. Journalists working for independent media fairly report on the words and actions of government actors, while state media coverage of government actors is mostly complimentary. "If we look at district newspapers funded by local authorities, they present a very positive picture of the situation. Problems exist only in the communal services sector," said one panelist.

Reported stories include information covering local, national, regional, and international news, but the coverage varies by information source. For example, the national state TV channels cover international and national news, but rarely have regional and local news while local media focuses only on local stories. As a result, people often have no information about the situations in nearby regions.

The majority of news content is not editorially independent. In most cases, news and events are contextualized, but in very different ways. Independent media put news in context as a service to the audience to facilitate understanding, while state-affiliated media often use context to manipulate the audience.

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

Fact-based, well-sourced, and objective information is declared a

norm, but in practice this norm is regularly violated in the interests of state propaganda. Professional content producers working at state affiliated media intentionally create and disseminate false or misleading information. “The professional content producers are aware of and at least pay lip service to professional standards. They say that fact-checking is important, that basing information on facts is important,” one panelist said. “All media base their information on facts, but often they omit some important details, making the information misleading. In some cases, this is the result of professional immaturity from who believe that they can fully rely on the information that they get from the government press offices. These are the most unreliable source of information,” another panelist observed.

“Most often, journalists report false information on politics and economics,” another panelist said, “Other topics are covered more objectively.” Situations in which professional content producers unintentionally create or disseminate false or misleading information due to low capacity are rare; false information is in most cases created and distributed intentionally. Another common practice is that state media does not report on some sort of information. Still, it seems that “professional producers of propaganda sincerely believe that they are making the best TV in the world” noted one of the panelists. Non-professional content producers also regularly create and disseminate misleading information.

Government actors also regularly create and disseminate false information. “They deliberately omit or compile facts to support their positions,” one panelist said. Another added, “False information is used when authorities need to hide the low quality of their work, like the inefficient response to the COVID-19 pandemic.”

Professional ramifications for creating or spreading false information are rare. “A journalist is more likely to face ramifications for creating and spreading objective information,” said one panelist.

“Professional producers of propaganda sincerely believe that they are making the best TV in the world” noted one panelists.

Independent media report on cases of misinformation disseminated by government actors. For example, independent media regularly brought up the issue that the state data on COVID-19 prevalence and mortality were significantly underreported. Independent media also provided detailed analysis on how the results of electronic votes during elections for the national legislature were manipulated.

There are few Russian fact-checking resources, and those that do exist are not widely used. For example, Yandex launched a fact-checking scheme on its content aggregating platform, Zen: a team of external experts check the veracity of information upon receiving users’ complaints. Partners that do the fact-checking include information agencies *TASS* and *Interfax*, independent media like *The Bell* and *Vedomosti*, and fact-checking projects *Provero* (Checked) and *FakeCheck*. The outlets also operate as fact-checking platforms. They check information upon individual requests and publish the results on their websites and social media.

Media outlets and digital platforms have mechanisms for content moderation, but these mechanisms are often used to reduce the publication of objective content that may elicit negative reactions from the authorities.

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

In the opinion of panelists, in Russia, foreign governments did not disseminate content that was intended to harm in 2021. However, the Russian government consistently promotes the viewpoint that Western powers were trying to undermine Russian sovereignty and security as well as traditional values. This position was disseminated by professional media outlets and bloggers affiliated with and hired by authorities.

“Online platforms are the only space where people can openly express their views as all other spaces are tightly controlled. The absence of

a culture of constructive discussion often translates into aggression and hate speech online,” one panelist said. Ramifications are rare; for example, in some cases people could be expelled from social media groups by moderators.

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

The panelists expressed concern that formats used by independent media did not meet the needs of ordinary Russian citizens. “Materials produced by quality independent media are too complicated for many people; they don’t understand them,” said one panelist. Another added, “Propaganda outlets, like the show *Pilorama* by Keosayan (on NTV) or the newspaper *Komsomolka* work really well with ordinary people. Independent media are also trying to reach out to them, but their formats are less comprehensible than, for example, programming on the state TV channels.” In terms of accessibility via language, one panelist explained that while there is media in multiple languages, its content is lacking. “The media in the languages of national minorities often don’t cater to people’s needs but presents the authorities’ viewpoint,” the panelist explained.

As a result, though information on a wide array of ideologies and perspectives as well as the experiences or viewpoints of all genders is available in the independent media, the majority of citizens are not exposed to it.

There is little coverage of ethnic issues, even in the independent media. “There is no decolonization discourse or discussion of indigenous people and how they were harmed by the Russian colonial policies. Content is only about their culture and cuisine. Even liberals don’t want to talk about the damage that was done,” said a panelist, “Federal media run only trash content, like crime stories, about the lives of indigenous people.”

“People are largely locked within their social groups and have little idea about other groups,” said a panelist.

Stories from rural areas are also poorly covered. “Rural people think that they are not present in the information space. They feel abandoned and that nobody cares about them. They cannot name a single program made specifically for them,” another panelist said. Coverage of family issues is biased towards traditional full families with children. “The Ministry of Communication is providing grants to media to support coverage of social issues. We looked into the grants; almost all of them were used to cover stories about families with many children. Only one or two projects were addressing issues face by teenage mothers and single mothers,” a panelist explained.

The experiences and viewpoints of minority groups are largely excluded by the professional media sector, mostly because state-affiliated media promote the government position and ignore other viewpoints. Marginalized groups not represented in the mainstream media have their own information platforms, mainly social media. “But these platforms are used mainly to serve the information needs of group members rather than to disseminate information to broader public,” noted one panelist.

In general, an average person has limited information not only about minorities, but about people outside of his or her social circle. “Media audiences have little information about the viewpoints of minorities and not just them. Residents of Moscow don’t know what is happening in the adjacent regions. People are largely locked within their social groups and have little idea about other groups,” said a panelist.

There are significant gender disparities in the composition of professional media. “There are few women among top managers. The lower you go along the professional ranks, the more women you see, especially in local media. The majority of people working in regional media are women, especially the older ones,” said a panelist. Another added, “The key beneficiaries of media businesses are men, while most of employees are women because they are paid poorly.”

There are some disparities in the composition of non-professional

content producers as well. “Representatives from some social groups are not present among non-professional content producers....There are few bloggers older than 40. Non-professional journalism is practiced by people from major cities; people from small cities are left out,” one panelist said. There are also gender disparities among non-professional content producers. According to the Brand Analytics study, men make up more than 60 percent of content producers of Twitter and YouTube, while on VKontakte, Tiktok, Facebook, and Instagram, there are more female content producers.³

Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced.

Government subsidies heavily distort the Russia media market. In 2021, the national budget allocated over 100 billion rubles (\$1.7 billion) to support media outlets.⁴ In comparison, the total estimated advertising revenue in the Russian media sector was 578.3 billion rubles (\$9.7 billion).⁵

State-affiliated content producers have sufficient financial resources to operate, but they produce high-quality propaganda rather than high-quality information. “Propaganda outlets have a lot of resources, while independent media struggle,” one panelist noted.

In 2021, media advertising revenue increased by 22 percent, but advertising budgets were unevenly divided. The majority of advertising money went to national TV (188.1 billion rubles, \$3.1 billion) and internet platforms (313.8 billion rubles, \$5.3 billion). National media absorbs most of the advertising revenue: In 2021, the advertising revenue of regional and local media was just 30.2 billion rubles (\$508.5 million).⁶

3 Brand Analytics. *Социальные сети в России: цифры и тренды, осень 2021*. November 18, 2021. <https://br-analytics.ru/blog/social-media-russia-2021/>

4 TASS. *На финансирование СМИ в 2021-2023 годах направят более 300 млрд рублей*. September 17, 2020. <https://tass.ru/ekonomika/9483669>

5 Russian Association of Communication Agencies. *Объем рекламы в средствах ее распространения в 2021 году*. https://www.akarussia.ru/knowledge/market_size/id10015

6 Russian Association of Communication Agencies. *Объем рекламы в средствах ее распространения в 2021 году*. https://www.akarussia.ru/knowledge/market_size/id10015

“The government was purposefully trying to eradicate all other sources of funding except the politicized state funding,” said one panelist. Another added, “There are few truly apolitical sources of funding.” The case of *Meduza*, an independent Russian online media outlet based in Latvia that was designated a foreign agent by the Russian Ministry of Justice in 2021, is an example of this. As a result, *Meduza* lost nearly all its advertisers and have only managed to continue operating due to the financial support of its audience.

Several independent media outlets use crowdfunding as an alternative source of funding, including *Novaya Gazeta*. Donations from its supporters make up nearly 25 percent of the outlet’s operational expenses.

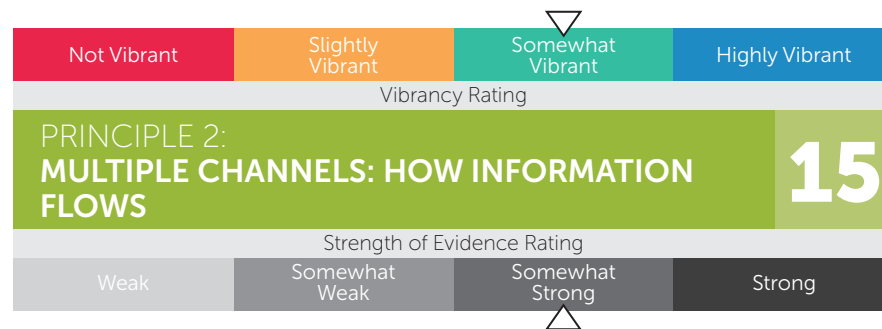
The majority of local advertising budgets are spent on social media advertising, and small local independent media are not able to find alternative funding streams to compensate for the loss of local advertising.

Information on the allocation of government subsidies, advertising contracts, and grants is publicly available. But this is dismissed by panelists as “pseudo-transparency” because the criteria that guide the distribution of these funds is not public. “The majority of the decisions are politically motivated,” one panelist said.

“Federal media are flooded with money, which enables them to pay lavish salaries and lure people,” one panelist said. Disparities in the availability of financial resources translate in the disparity of pay to journalists. In smaller cities, journalists are often paid 10,000 to 15,000 rubles a month (\$140 - \$250), while in regional centers, the salaries are 30,000 to 40,000 rubles a month (\$500 - \$675). As such, journalists often have to look for additional income sources. Meanwhile, state national media are able to pay sufficient salaries and top propagandists are paid lavishly. For example, in 2020, *The Insider* made publicly available the salaries of the top anchors on propaganda TV shows. Olga Skabeeva and Evgeniy Popov, hosts of the political talk show “60 minutes” on the tv channel Russia-1 each make 12.6 million rubles per year (\$212,000). Vladimir Soloviev, who hosts radio shows at the Radio of Russia and TV

shows on Russia-1 makes 52.6 million rubles (\$886,000).⁷

Advertising placement is often politicized. “It is quite common that authorities advise companies not to place their advertising in independent media,” said one panelist.



Russia’s well-developed information and communications technology (ICT) infrastructure supports the flow of information, leading to higher panelist scores for access to channels of information. Moreover, there are regulations and mechanisms that to some extent support public access to government information. At the same time, however, there is a growing body of laws that undermine people’s rights to create, share, and consume information, and most information channels are not independent. Those corresponding indicators scored the lowest.

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

Free speech is guaranteed by the Russian constitution. The Law on Media, adopted in 1991, supports media freedom and editorial independence, prohibits censorship, and protects the confidentiality of sources. Yet a growing number of laws officially meant to control misinformation, mal-information, and hate speech allow authorities to pressure independent media, journalists, bloggers, and regular citizens who express their views on social media.

7 Раскрыты зарплаты Соловьева, Киселева, Скабеевой и других российских телеведущих. September 24, 2020. <https://lenta.ru/news/2020/09/24/dohody/>

In 2021, the government continued to take steps to erode free speech. The government frequently applied the law on “foreign media agents,” adopted in 2019, with the Ministry of Justice giving this designation to 73 media outlets and individuals, including *Meduza*, *TV Dozhd*, *Mediazona*, *Rosbalt* news agency, *VTimes*, as well as journalists from *Novaya Gazeta* and the investigative journalism outlets *Proekt* and *Vazhnye Istorii*. The government also imposed this “foreign media agent” designation on several lawyers, including prominent media lawyer Galina Arapova, head of the Center for Protection of the Rights of Media. Attempts to contest the “foreign media agents” designation in Russian courts were unsuccessful. For media outlets, the “foreign media agent” designation leads to a loss of advertising revenue.

According to one panelist, “Journalists (except for a few independent media outlets) agreed to subjugation from the state.” As such, the government does not really need to censor media; the majority of journalists practice self-censorship or stay away from topics controlled by the authorities.

There are cases of harassment and criminal prosecution of journalists and bloggers. In 2021, the Glasnost Defense Foundation registered 48 cases in which journalists were attacked; 23 cases of legal prosecution of journalists and bloggers; and 402 cases in which journalists and bloggers were detained by police.⁸

The confidentiality of sources is protected by the Law on Media (Article 41): media is not allowed to disclose a source of information that has asked for confidentiality unless such disclosure is mandated by a court decision.

Libel is a criminal offense and can be prosecuted by a fine ranging from 500,000 to 5 million rubles (\$8,400 - \$84,000), public works, or up to five years in prison. There are cases in which libel clauses were used to prosecute opposition politicians and independent journalists. For example, in 2021, the court imposed a fine of 850,000 rubles (\$14,000) to opposition politician Alexey Navalny for libel against a World War II

8 Glasnost Defense Foundation. Результаты мониторинга за 2021 год. January 11, 2022. <https://mediainconflicts.org/posts/9087>

veteran. The libel court case stems from Navalny's criticism on social media of a video broadcast on Russia Today in support of constitutional amendments. The video featured several people, including the 94-year-old veteran.

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

Russia's ICT infrastructure is well developed. An estimated 61 percent of Russian households have access to broadband internet and the cost of both broadband and mobile internet access is among the cheapest in the world.⁹

At the same time, Russian authorities have established a body of laws and regulations to tighten control over internet infrastructure, online content, and the privacy of communications. For example, the "sovereign internet" law, adopted in 2019, requires internet service providers to install equipment that allows authorities to circumvent providers and automatically block content that the government has banned and reroute internet traffic. Regulations adopted in 2019 require VPNs and search engine operators to promptly block access to the officially banned websites. In 2021, Roscomnadzor, Russia's telecommunications regulator, had sufficient capacity to slow down access to Twitter after the social network was accused of failing to remove posts about illegal drug use, child pornography, and suicide messages targeted to minors.

In 2020, Russia adopted a national standard that regulates the accessibility of internet resources for people with disabilities. According to a 2020 study conducted by the Internet Development Institute, 45 percent of government websites are highly accessible for people with disabilities and 50 percent of people with disabilities surveyed by the institute reported difficulties with accessing government websites.¹⁰

9 Интернет в России в 2020–2021 годах: состояние, тенденции и перспективы развития. Отраслевой доклад. 2021. <https://raec.ru/upload/files/internet-in-rus-21.pdf>

10 Интернет в России в 2020–2021 годах: состояние, тенденции и перспективы развития. Отраслевой доклад. 2021. <https://raec.ru/upload/files/internet-in-rus-21.pdf>

Urban residents still have better access to telecommunications and internet infrastructures. But the government made significant investments in the reduction of digital disparities; by the end of 2020, access to the internet was made available in about 90 percent of settlements with 250 to 500 residents.¹¹

In 2021, 11 percent of Russian citizens lived below the poverty line and could access only free sources of information, which are primarily state resources. In the same year, 85 percent of Russian citizens were using internet, and 67.8 percent were using social media.¹² Still, panelists were concerned that only a few people could afford to pay for quality content.

There are no social norms that preclude any group of people from accessing information. High internet penetration - and mobile internet in particular - ensures that people have access to several communication channels that can substitute for each other in case of disruption.

Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for government information.

Russian law guarantees access to information on the operation of national and local authorities, except for state secrets. Mechanisms that ensure access to this information include publication in the mass media, online, and at information stands in government buildings. Citizens have the right to get information in the offices of state agencies, attend meetings of public officials, and submit oral and written requests for information that should be fulfilled within 30 days. (Information requests from the media should be fulfilled within seven days.)

However, the law is often poorly implemented. Authorities ignore information requests, especially from independent media; give useless

11 Интернет в России в 2020–2021 годах: состояние, тенденции и перспективы развития. Отраслевой доклад. 2021. <https://raec.ru/upload/files/internet-in-rus-21.pdf>

12 Digital 2021: главная статистика по России и всему миру. March 18, 2021, <https://exlibris.ru/news/digital-2021-glavnaya-statistika-po-rossii-i-vsemu-miru/>

answers; or deny journalists and bloggers access to official meetings and press conferences. In 2021, for example, the Glasnost Defense Foundation registered 592 cases in which journalists were denied access to information.¹³ In addition, the government is progressively eliminating access to information that used to be public. “First, restrictions to the access of various registries maintained by the government were imposed in 2018 and 2021 was a turning point in this process,” one panelist said, “The government closed access to information about state procurement, the state registry of legal entities and the registry of property rights. There is critical degradation of access to government information.”

The majority of government agencies have websites that offer citizens the option to provide online feedback and submit requests for information and applications. Agencies and top government executives are also present on social media. “Mechanisms exist, but they are applied formalistically,” one panelist noted. In the opinion of panelists, many people know about these mechanisms and do not seem to fear seeking out government information. According to government statistics, in 2020, 81.1 percent of Russian citizens used government websites and 73.2 percent of them did so to get information.¹⁴

In the opinion of panelists, there are few groups that are systematically excluded from exercising their right to information. Groups that have difficulties with access to information include inmates and military personnel.

Government entities have spokespeople or information offices, which both give information to and take questions from the press. But in many cases, these information officers act as gatekeepers that control access to government executives. In the opinion of panelists, government spokespeople do not always tell the truth, but the public views them

13 Glasnost Defense Foundation. Результаты мониторинга за 2021 год. January 11, 2022. <https://mediacollisions.org/posts/9087>

14 Абдрахманова, Г. И. и другие. *Индикаторы цифровой экономики: 2021*. Высшая школа экономики. <https://issek.hse.ru/mirror/pubs/share/484533334.pdf>

as trustworthy. “Propaganda is based on people’s trust in government spokespeople. But people trust them on the issues of global politics, and not on the issue of vaccination against COVID-19,” said a panelist.

Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow.

There are no laws that regulate domestic ownership concentration in media and media-related industries. “There are barriers to foreign investment in media, which were set to limit access to capital for independent media,” one panelist noted. Since 2015 foreigners cannot hold more than 20 percent of any media property.

Media are required to disclose information about their founders, but not about their owners. “Media ownership is fully transparent to the government but not to the public,” explained one panelist.

Channels of media distribution are dominated by the state. Russian Post is the main operator of press subscriptions, and the state enterprise *Russian TV and Radio Broadcasting Network* delivers 20 national TV channels and three national radio stations to 98.4 percent of Russian citizens. The majority of the mobile market is divided between four service providers – MTS, MegaFon, VEON (Beeline), and Tele2. The concentration of internet service providers has also increased because of the increased costs of complying with data retention requirements under the so called Yarovaya Law,¹⁵ adopted in 2016, and the installation of the Deep Packet Inspection systems under the Sovereign Runet Law, adopted in 2019.

People can freely establish media and online media can operate without registering with the state, enabling Russian independent journalists to launch and run independent online media outlets on social media platforms. However, while people can establish media, the media does

15 The Yarovaya Law requires telecommunication providers to store the content of voice calls, data, images and text messages for 6 months, and their metadata (e.g. time, location and message sender and recipients) for 3 years.

not always have the ability to survive.

Panelists were split on whether there is public service media in Russia. Russian Public TV gives more coverage to Russian civil society and regional news than major national TV channels, but it is fully funded from the state budget – in 2021 it received over 4.8 billion rubles (\$81 million)¹⁶ - and its leadership is appointed by the president.

Internet service providers do not discriminate based on user, content, or source or destination addresses themselves, but abide by the rulings of government bodies, including Roscomnadzor, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and the Prosecutor General's Office, both of which have authority to order the blocking of web content. In 2021, more than 320,000 online resources were included in the Unified Registry of Forbidden Information that should be blocked by internet service providers.¹⁷

Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.

Media organizations are influenced by their ownership. This applies to independent media as well because the majority of Russia independent media outlets were launched by people and organizations that value free speech and editorial independence. For example, the independent online outlet *7X7 Journal* was established by members of the Komi division of the human rights NGO “Memorial.” The online media source *Bumaga* was founded by a group of graduates from Saint Petersburg University who previously worked for a student newspaper. The majority of *Novay Gazeta* an independent newspaper known for its critical and investigative coverage of Russian political and social affairs, is jointly owned by its employees via shares.

Government subsidies and advertising contracts are provided to media either owned or loyal to the government. Because of the small size of the regional advertising markets (in 2021, regional advertising revenues

made up only about 5 percent of the national advertising market), the so-called “state information contracts” became an effective instrument for subjugating journalists and instrumentalizing the media in Russian regions.

Media that make a clear distinction between the newsroom and business operations are not very common. “This distinction is practiced either by independent or by financially sustainable media outlets,” one panelist explained.

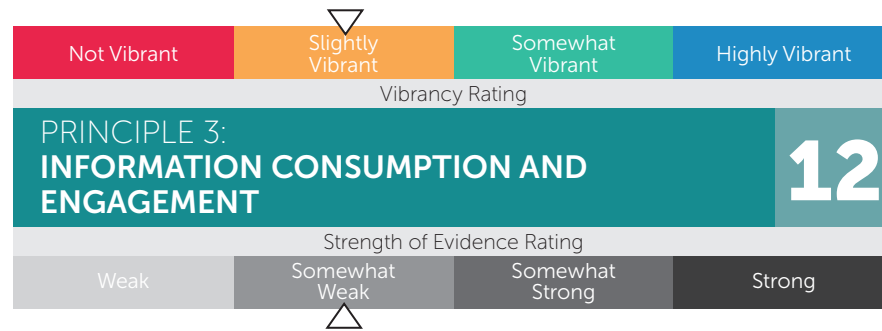
There is no public service media that is adequately and apolitically funded. Russian Public TV is funded by the government and is not independent.

State media outlets do not have any particular benefits in terms of access to equipment, ability to import transmitters, access to the internet, favorable tax breaks, or subscriptions to international news services, but they are better off financially because they get state funding and are able to raise advertising revenue. State media also have better access to government sources, because state officials often refuse to give information to independent media.

Russia's media and ICT sectors are regulated by Roscomnadzor. This agency is subordinate to the Ministry of Digital Development, Communications, and Mass Media and has little to no independence from the government.

16 Journalist. В 2022 году увеличится госфинансирование государственных СМИ. December 23, 2021. <https://jrnlist.ru/v-2022-godu-velichitsya-gosfinansirovanie-gosudarstvennyh-smi>

17 Sostav. Роскомнадзор заблокировал свыше 320 тысяч ссылок на запрещённый контент с начала года. December 8, 2021. <https://www.sostav.ru/publication/v-rossii-vyroslo-kolichestvo-blokirovok-sajtov-iz-za-zapreshch-nnogo-kontenta-51708.html>



The level of media literacy and critical thinking is low in Russia, and the corresponding indicator scored quite low. Personal data is legally protected, but the government has largely unlimited access to it. Many people and media regularly use technology-based tools to protect their privacy and security and that corresponding indicator received the highest score.

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

Russia has legal protections for data privacy and digital security. The constitution guarantees privacy for one's personal life and personal and family secrets, along with the protection of one's honor and reputation. It also bans the collection, storage, use, and distribution of information on someone's private life without their consent. Russia is a signatory to a Council of Europe convention on the protection of personal data and since 2007 has had its own data privacy law. In 2014, a new law came into effect requiring that any personal data from Russian citizens that companies hold on to be stored on servers inside Russia.

"The laws on personal data protection don't protect this data from the government. They are used to limit dissemination of data about government executives," said one panelist. For example, the so-called

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Yarovaya Law adopted in 2016 requires ICT providers to store the content of voice calls, data, images, and text messages for six months, and the metadata (e.g. time, location and message sender and recipients) for three years. Messaging services, email, and social networks that use encrypted data are required to give the Federal Security Service (FSB) access to their encrypted communications. The government mandates ICT companies disclose these communications and metadata to authorities on request and without a court order.

Media outlets have access to digital security training and tools. According to national statistics, 98.9 percent of companies in the telecommunication sector regularly update antivirus software, 87.6 percent use equipment to prevent unauthorized access to their servers, and 69.8 percent use software that detects hacker attacks.¹⁸ “Bigger media are in a better position in terms of access to digital security tools, because they require investment,” said a panelist.

People have access to technology-based tools that help protect their privacy and security. According to national statistics, 78.5 percent of Russians use such tools, including antivirus software and antispam filters.¹⁹

National statistics also indicate that 26.1 percent of the population have basic digital skills and 12.1 percent have advanced digital skills.²⁰

There is no data on the extent of population awareness on the algorithms driving social media and mechanics of advertisement targeting but the majority of panelists believe only few citizens have such awareness.

18 Абдрахманова, Г. И. и другие. *Индикаторы цифровой экономики: 2021*. Высшая школа экономики. <https://issek.hse.ru/mirror/pubs/share/484533334.pdf>

19 Малков П.В. и другие. *Информационное общество в Российской Федерации. 2020* : статистический сборник. <https://rosstat.gov.ru/storage/mediabank/lqv3TORk/info-ob2020.pdf>

20 Абдрахманова, Г. И. и другие. *Индикаторы цифровой экономики: 2021*. Высшая школа экономики. <https://issek.hse.ru/mirror/pubs/share/484533334.pdf>

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

“There is no objective data, but the level of people’s critical perception of information is declining. The state media are getting progressively more manipulative,” explained a panelist. “Media literacy is low. There were sporadic media literacy projects targeting young people, but young people are not the main consumers of mainstream media. Older people, who are the main consumers of state propaganda, have very low levels of media literacy and critical thinking.”

Government leadership promotes media literacy but implies that being media literate means trusting only the government point of view. There are media literacy programs for university students as well as optional media literacy classes in schools, but, according to one panelist, students are often taught to make their own media products rather than critical thinking.

There are few media literacy training opportunities for adults. An average citizen is unlikely to check facts and discern high-quality news and information from poor-quality news and information. “An average person assesses the quality of the information based on its consistency with his or her own position,” one panelist noted.

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

According to a study conducted in 2021 by the Levada Center, a Russian independent polling and sociological research organization, 91 percent of journalists felt that over the past five to seven years, the professional risks faced by Russian journalists increased, with 75 percent saying the risks increased significantly.²¹ This pressure limits the ability of

journalists, as well as civil society activists, to use their freedoms of speech and rights to information.

Another poll by the Levada Center found that in 2021, 61 percent of Russians ranked free speech as one of their most important rights. The right to information was prioritized by 39 percent. At the same time, 84 percent of people said that they would not discuss forthcoming elections and express their opinion in public.²²

Television news that is tightly controlled by the government remains the main source of information: 62 percent of Russians usually get their news from TV and 74 percent watch news on TV at least once a week (including 34 percent that watch news on TV several times a day). Additionally,

46 percent say that TV is the most trusted source of news and information, while online news and social media are the most trusted sources of information for 23 and 21 percent of people respectively. The share of people who get news online at least once a week is 70 percent. But this does

not necessarily mean these consumers are exposed to a broad range of viewpoints as many people tend to stay within their “information bubbles.”²³

There are platforms for public debate, but many of them are not inclusive and independent. “The law requires municipal authorities to conduct public hearings and to announce them broadly, so they are rather open and inclusive. Other platforms are tightly controlled,” one panelist said.

There are cases of misinformation, mal-information, and hate speech on open digital communications. Russian authorities use paid commentators, trolls, and automated “bot” accounts to influence online content, including to smear opponents.

“An average person assesses the quality of the information based on its consistency with his or her own position,” one panelist noted.

21 Levada Center. Преследование журналистов в России. Взгляд сообщества журналистов независимых российских СМИ. July 1, 2021. <https://www.levada.ru/2021/07/01/presledovanie-zhurnalistov-v-rossii-vzglyad-soobshhestva-zhurnalistov-nezavisimyh-rossijskih-smi/>

22 Levada Center. Права и свободы. November 22, 2021. <https://www.levada.ru/2021/11/22/prava-i-svobody-2/>

23 Levada Center. Медиаляндшафт-2021: использования и доверие. <https://www.levada.ru/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/medialandshaft2021.pdf>

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

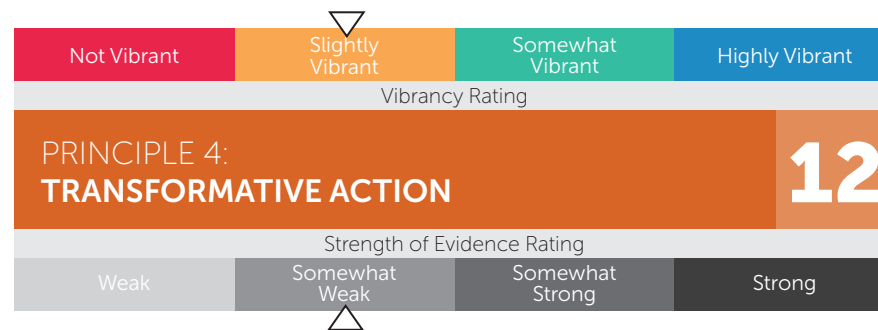
Media and content producers understand importance of analyzing their audiences, but many do not have sufficient resources to commission research. Use of quantitative data collected by specialized media measurement companies is more widespread than the use of qualitative data.

Many media outlets closed the comment sections on their websites to minimize the risks of site blocking, but they engage with audience members on social media. A small number of media outlets take steps to build trust with audiences, including through transparency in authorship and publishing corrections.

In 2021 media and government actors, including legislators, engaged in discussions about the foreign media agent designation, leading to some hopes that the corresponding law could be amended.

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

There is no community media in Russia. Members of local communities use social media and messengers to exchange news and information. In many cities the so-called “public groups” on social media, especially the Russian *VK*, become important actors in local communication. Being non-registered and grassroots initiatives, these media enjoy higher freedom in comparison to local media that is usually closely affiliated with local authorities. Some of these social media groups produce their own content, while others rely on user-generated content.



There is little sharing of information across ideological lines. People’s views on political or social issues are shaped more by the sources they trust rather than quality information. Civil society organizations (CSOs) actively produce and use information to address social issues, and the corresponding indicator received the highest score. Government decisions are driven by political interests rather than empirical data. Information does not support good governance and democratic rights, and panelists scored the corresponding indicator the lowest for this principle.

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

There are few nonpartisan news and information sources. “Independent media are also politicized. Government officials refuse to give them comments and answer their questions,” a panelist explained, “As a result, the news coverage produced by independent media does not include government viewpoints. Independent media are being pushed out of the neutral stance.”

Nonpartisan news and information sources have large audiences, though significantly less than state-affiliated ones. “There are few independent media, but their cumulative reach was quite significant. In 2021, *Syndicate-100*, established by *Novaya Gazeta*, had 35 members, including national and regional independent media and media that provide fair coverage on a limited number of topics,” said one panelist,

“In May 2021, the ten most popular member sites from the Syndicate had 110 million views. This is significant, though much less than the audience of propaganda sources.”

There is little evidence that people read or view multiple types of media with varied ideological leanings or exchange information with others they disagree, either face-to-face or digitally. There is evidence, however, that people’s opinion of public interest matters is affected by the media they consume. For example, in July 2021, the Levada Center conducted a poll on public attitudes toward the foreign agent legislation. While 11 percent reported they were well informed about this legislation and 31 percent said they have heard something, 57 percent reported having never heard about the law. The survey also demonstrated remarkable differences in levels of awareness as it related to the type of media consumed by respondents. Among people who were getting their news mainly from television, 7 percent were well-aware, 29 percent had heard something, and 63 percent had never heard about the foreign agent legislation. Meanwhile, among those who were getting news mainly from online media, 16 percent were well-aware, 42 percent had heard something, and 42 percent had never heard about this legislation. People’s opinions of the foreign agent legislation were also influenced by the news sources they consumed. The view that the foreign agent law aimed to limit negative influence of Western powers on Russia was shared by 46 percent of TV audience compared to 36 percent of online media audience, while 30 percent of people getting news from TV hold the opinion that the foreign agent law is designed to pressure independent media, as opposed to the 46 percent of online media consumers.²⁴

“Independent media are also politicized. Government officials refuse to give them comments and answer their questions,” a panelist explained.

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

Evidence suggests that people’s views on political or social issues are shaped more by the sources they trust rather than quality information. For example, in the aforementioned Lavada Center poll, the viewpoint that the foreign agent law aimed to limit negative influence from Western powers on Russia was shared by 47 percent of people who approve of the president Putin and by just 20 percent of people who disapprove of him.²⁵

There is little evidence that citizens use quality information to engage with their elected officials. Elections are tightly controlled, and their results are not influenced by any information. An investigation by *Meduza* suggests that the total number of stuffed ballots in the 2021 State Duma elections could be 17.1 million — out of 56.5 ballots cast.

The high resistance of Russian citizens to receive vaccinations against COVID-19 illustrates that many people do not follow fact-based health and safety recommendations. For example, according to Lavada Center polls, in February 2021, 62 percent of Russians did not want to get vaccinated; in August 2021, 56 percent did not. Only in November did the share of people resisting vaccination drop to 45 percent.²⁶

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

The media produces little coverage of the issues addressed by CSOs, so CSOs have to produce content themselves. “The more competent a CSO is in content production, the better the quality of news and information it produces and disseminates,” said one panelist.

24 Levada Center. Закон об иностранных агентах. August 2, 2021. <https://www.levada.ru/2021/08/02/zakon-ob-inostrannyh-agentah/>

25 Levada Center. Закон об иностранных агентах. August 2, 2021. <https://www.levada.ru/2021/08/02/zakon-ob-inostrannyh-agentah/>

26 Levada Center. Коронавирус, вакцина и меры. November 1, 2021.

Media outlets, especially independent ones, regularly engage with CSOs to cover socially important issues, such as domestic violence, HIV, and disabilities. Government executives also regularly engage with CSOs and use their expertise, though the CSOs' positions are not always integrated in the policy formation and legislative changes. For example, CSOs played a key role in the development of the draft Law of Distributed Custody, which strives to improve the living arrangements for people with mental disabilities. The law passed the first reading in the State Duma in 2016 but was stopped because of government resistance. The dialogue between policymakers and CSOs on this law continued, including in 2021, but without any progress. The dialogue between policymakers and civil society on the draft law against domestic violence has been taking place since 2019, but the law was still not introduced to the parliament.

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

Government actors use several mechanisms to engage with media and civil society, including press conferences, public hearings, round tables, working groups, and public advisory councils. For example, CSO representatives serve on the National Social Sector Guardianship Council under the Russian government and its regional equivalents. The national and regional public chambers act as platforms for engagement between the government and civil society. At the same time, these opportunities are available mostly for non-confrontational CSOs.

Political discourse or debate includes references to evidence and facts, but in many cases, facts are manipulated to support political interests. Few government actors refer to facts and evidence in explaining their decisions. Government entities that base their decisions on evidence include the Central Bank, the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Economic Development, and the Chamber of Auditors. In other agencies, the decisions are largely driven by political interests.

Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic rights

When information sources reveal corruption or human rights violations at the local level, in some cases it attracts public attention and results in remedial actions by the government. Disclosure of corruption and human right violations by national-level authorities does not lead to their prosecution and has no effect on their occurrences.

“The more competent a CSO is in content production, the better the quality of news and information it produces and disseminates,” said one panelist.

For example, on January 19, 2021, Alexey Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation released the investigative documentary “Putin's Palace: The history of the world's largest bribe” on YouTube. The film described a corruption scheme allegedly

headed by Russian president Vladimir Putin to build a residence near Gelendzhik and claimed that the palace was built for the president's personal use and cost more than 100 billion rubles. A poll by the Levada Center conducted between January 29 and February 2, 2021, found that 26 percent of Russians saw this documentary, 10 percent did not watch it but were familiar with the content, and another 32 percent heard about the film but did not know the details of the documentary.²⁷

“Public reaction to such publication and documentary evidence is not just disproportionately weak and contradictory, but, as the polls reveal, there is strong resistance to presented information,” wrote Lev Gudkov, the head of the Levada Center, in his book, “Illusion of Choice: 30 years of Post-Soviet Russia.”²⁸ According the Levada Center poll mentioned above, 33 percent of people who saw the documentary or at least heard about it thought that the presented information was false; 38 percent thought that the information seemed true but it was difficult to access its

27 Levada Center. Фильм “Дворец для Путина”. February 2, 2021. <https://www.levada.ru/2021/02/08/film-dvorets-dlya-putina/>

28 Levada Center. «Иллюзии выбора: 30 лет постсоветской России». Новая книга Льва Гудкова. March 6, 2022. <https://www.levada.ru/2022/03/06/illyuzii-vybora-30-let-postsovetskoj-rossii-novaya-kniga-lva-gudkova/>

credibility; and just 17 percent were convinced that the story was true.²⁹

There is little evidence that quality information contributes to free and fair elections at the local and national level. “Independent media have no influence on society. They influence decision-makers. In 2021, the influence of independent media was very limited – they had some impact only on problems in the media sector. There are some super local cases of positive impact on social matters, but national-level stories don’t lead to any change. Media have no influence on public activity as well,” said a panelist, “Why do we need them? There are some people who have a different perspective on the future of this country. Authorities want them to feel they’re a minority. Independent media are necessary to help these people not to feel alone.”

List of Panel Participants

Due to laws restricting NGO activity and contacts with US-based NGOs, the participants in the Russia study will remain anonymous. This chapter was developed by a Russian journalist after a series of structured interviews with colleagues in the media and information sector.

²⁹ Levada Center. Фильм “Дворец для Путина”. February 2, 2021. <https://www.levada.ru/2021/02/08/film-dvoretz-dlya-putina/>

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