

RUSSIA

Vibrant Information Barometer

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Preface

To ensure reliability and comparability of VIBE scores, IREX conducts multiple data quality control checks and investigates any potential inconsistencies in scores. In most cases, score changes can be clearly tied to actual changes in a country’s media or information systems, or their operating environment, over the preceding year(s); in some cases, changes may be tied to revisions in IREX’s assessment methodology. Both factors are extremely relevant in VIBE 2021, as the COVID-19 pandemic occurred in the assessment year (2020), the same window over which the fully redesigned VIBE assessment tool replaced the original MSI methodology.

However, sometimes IREX encounters score changes that cannot be mapped to real change in a given country or to revised methodologies. Despite comprehensive efforts to ensure a clear VIBE questionnaire and scoring methodology, in some cases, panelists’ scores are not fully calibrated to the VIBE methodology or do not align with other peer countries’ scoring.

Based on internal analysis and input from the VIBE Russia chapter moderator/author, IREX believes Russia’s preliminary scores in VIBE 2021 were systematically inflated due to a misunderstanding among the Russian panel on the VIBE scoring scale--specifically that a VIBE score of 20 would be comparable to a MSI score of 1.5. IREX believes that the panelists did not intend to suggest or imply “improvement” in Russia’s media or information systems from the MSI studies. However, mathematically, a MSI score of 1.5 would be comparable to a VIBE score of 15, not 20.

As such, for the purposes of the 2021 VIBE publication IREX is modifying Russia’s VIBE scores downward by 5 points for an overall score of 15 to better align with the intent of the VIBE scoring scale, the evidence provided in the narrative chapter, the lack of improvement over time in Russia, and the scores of other countries with similar information systems and environments (see chart below; adjusted indicator level scores can be found in the [VIBE Explorer dashboard](#).) The scores are modified uniformly at the indicator average level to avoid relitigating or

casting judgment on panelist scores on a case-by-case basis, but rather to focus on aligning top level scores.

Russia VIBE Scores (Original and Modified)

	Overall	Principle 1	Principle 2	Principle 3	Principle 4
Original	20	21	21	18	20
Modified by IREX	15	17	16	14	15

Due to Russia’s operating environment, IREX does not publicly release names of panelists in Russia; however, the original, anonymized indicator-level panel scores are available upon request (info.vibe@irex.org).

In order to mitigate the need to modify scores in future years, IREX will discuss with USAID appropriate revisions to the ways in which VIBE methodology and scoring benchmarks can be normed across all country panels for future studies.

Highly Vibrant

Somewhat Vibrant

Slightly Vibrant

Not Vibrant

OVERALL SCORE

15

The COVID-19 crisis hit Russia’s people and economy hard. The mortality rate soared by 18 percent, while the economy shrank by 3 percent, the biggest contraction in 11 years. A record 88 percent of people said 2020 had been worse than the year before.

The national vote of constitutional amendments on June 25 – July 1, 2020, legitimized changes in the constitution initiated by Vladimir Putin and adopted by the Russian parliament. One of the amendments allows Vladimir Putin whose two consecutive presidential terms are ending in 2024 to run for two more presidential terms and stay in power till 2036. The new constitution also establishes that Russian legislation prevails over international laws and empowers the president to appoint heads of law enforcement agencies. Another block of amendments has established that minimum wage cannot be lower than the subsistence minimum, that there should be a regular indexation of pensions, and that a marriage is a union of one man and one woman.

Restrictions imposed to control COVID-19 gave the authorities an excuse to limit public oversight over the constitutional vote—which proposed changes to term limits for the president, expanded parliamentary powers over forming the new government, and solidified the primacy of Russian law over international law, among other things. These same COVID-19 restrictions were leveraged by the government to make oversight of the regional and local elections held in September difficult. Officials, along with state and state-affiliated media, largely ignored numerous reports of violations during the constitutional vote and September elections, and they were covered only by independent media outlets, NGOs and on social media.

According to a Levada-Centre study, state TV channels that convey the government’s point of view remain people’s main source of information: 65 percent watch TV news almost every day. Yet Internet use is becoming more widespread: About 77 percent of Russian households have Internet access, and 78.1 percent

of Russians use the Internet at least once a month. Thirty-eight percent of Russians use news websites, and 39 percent use social media as information sources. People who prefer traditional media approach information differently than those who get news online: only 47 percent consult several sources of information, compared with 70 percent of online information consumers.

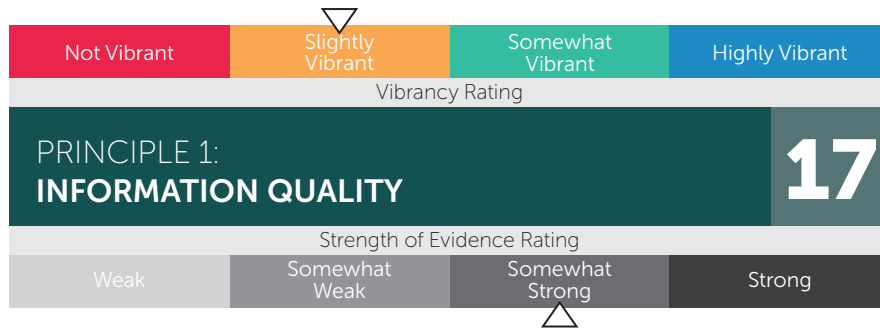
Most traditional media are directly and indirectly controlled, through subsidies and advertising contracts, by the government. Authorities continue trying to control Internet content, and they have a growing list of reasons for blocking sites. However, as long as YouTube and Facebook are still available, independent content producers are able to disseminate quality information and generate advertising revenue.

“Authorities pour billions of dollars into traditional media. Information content is censored via telecommunication providers,” one panelist said. “At the same time, there’s YouTube, where a Navalny can post information for free and even make some money. The authorities have tied up and dried out traditional media, but all kinds of information is available on YouTube.”

“YouTube supports free speech in Russia,” another panelist commented.

Still, because Russians produce and consume relatively little quality information and news, it has little impact on the country’s people, quality of governance, or respect for democratic freedoms.

Overall, Russia’s media and information system falls within the slightly vibrant classification of VIBE. Panelists scored indicators examining information’s impact on good governance and democratic norms, rights to create, share and consume information, and independence of media channels among the lowest. The indicator on adequate access to channels of information received the highest score from the panelists for this study.



The heavy hand of the state in the professional media, combined with the growing number of amateur content producers, creates a fertile environment for producing content that is not ethical, evidence-based, or coherent. While the body of available content is diverse and inclusive, a consumer needs to use multiple sources of information to get a comprehensive picture of the world.

Existing infrastructure allows for the production of varied content, especially digital. Thanks to the proliferation of social media platforms, which 51 percent of the population use daily, millions of Russians have become content producers.¹ In October 2020, for example, 64 million Russian social media users created 1.2 billion posts, according to a study by Brand Analytics, which monitors the use of social and mass media in the countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States.²

Journalists and nonprofessional content producers have plenty of training opportunities. About 150 academic institutions offer journalism education, in addition to various on-the-job training.³ The Alliance of Independent Regional Publishers (hereafter referred to as AIRP), ANRI-Media, and chapters of the Russian Union of Journalists offer educational programs, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)

1 Волков, Денис, Степан Гончаровы. Российский Медиалендскейп 2020, Левада-Центр. <https://www.levada.ru/cp/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Medialandshaft-2020-fin.pdf>.

2 Brand Analytics, *социальные сети в россии. осень 2020*. <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1L51qJJYysVOHig2WaUtKcG1ZvxXPA0ts/view>.

3 Козлов А.В. "О современном состоянии основных элементов медиа-инфраструктуры," *Социально-гуманитарные знания*. No. 4, 2020, pp. 87–95. <https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/k-voprosu-o-sovremennom-sostoyanii-osnovnyh-elementov-infrastruktury-massmedia/viewer>.

such as the Agency for Social Information and Teplitsa Socialnykh Tekhnokogiy (Greenhouse for Social Technologies) hold trainings on content production for NGO staffs and civic activists. Other educational projects, such as the Free Publicity School, GeekBrains, and SkillBox train social media users in content production.

At the same time, training in creating ethical, evidence-based, and coherent content does not always translate into the production of quality information. "We teach students ethics, to use several information sources, and to take an objective approach to journalism, but the result is often just the opposite. A person develops and launches a program or a podcast and just aims to get noticed. Neither young nor not-so-young people differentiate between quality journalism and general communication," one panelist said, adding that it is easier to get hype "with content that violates moral and ethical norms, including journalistic ones."

While content producers often act ethically and strive to represent truth, many times they do not, with few professional consequences. There are professional industry unions, such as the Russian Union of Journalists or local unions of journalists. Additionally, there is a journalism-related NGO called Collegium on Press Complaints, an ethical enforcement commission. However, none of these bodies have a significant impact on Russia's media sector. However, one panelist observed, "There's no professional journalism community, and as a result, journalists face no professional ramifications."

The overall body of content covers local, national, regional, and international news and a variety of topics, including political and social issues. But often, news content is not editorially independent and is heavily colored by media ownership. Given that most Russian media are owned by federal, regional, and local authorities--or by state-affiliated companies--most journalists do not hold government actors accountable with honest coverage of their words and actions. Independent media outlets that perform the watchdog function are few. The most prominent are Ekho Moskv (Echo of Moscow) and the Meduza website in Riga, Latvia.

Professional content producers and government actors claim that fact-based, well-sourced, and objective information is the norm, but the use of facts does not necessarily translate into objective reporting.

Information Quality Indicators

- There is quality information on a variety of topics available.
- The norm for information is that it is based on facts. Misinformation is minimal.
- The norm for information is that it is not intended to harm. Mal-information and hate speech are minimal.
- The body of content overall is inclusive and diverse.
- Content production is sufficiently resourced.

“I’m pretty sure fact-checking is important to all of us, but it’s another matter how the facts are used and interpreted by your editor or producer,” one panelist remarked. “It’s quite common to use only some of the facts, which distorts the picture. And then facts are drowned in emotions, disturbing music, and presentation. I did a story for Vesti 24 on biological labs. When it aired, I didn’t recognize it—all the information about the development of biological weapons in the Russian Federation had been cut.”

Some amateur content producers also create and disseminate false or misleading information, at least in part to get a bigger audience.

Then there are the times when the government disseminates false or misleading information, such as with COVID-19 statistics in 2020. In May, for example, Meduza journalists reported that official rules for registering COVID-19-related deaths differentiated between deaths *from* COVID-19 and deaths *with* COVID-19, and official COVID-19 mortality numbers included only the first category, leading to a significant undercount of COVID-19-related deaths.⁴

More common than disseminating false or misleading information is the practice of manipulating what gets aired, posted, or printed. “If we

judge objectively, everybody sticks to the facts but then manipulates them. And there’s the issue of the information agenda. You can choose just not to report on protests rather than reporting false information. Manipulating the agenda is one of the principal ways of manipulating information,” one panelist commented.

One notable example was the national, state-owned TV channels’ decisions to ignore protests in Khabarovsk after the region’s popular governor was arrested in July 2020 and charged with involvement in murders that took place about 15 years earlier. Another was coverage of the poisoning of opposition politician Alexei Navalny, who state media consistently referred to as a blogger (Navalny is active on social media). They made no mention of his political activities, including having established a party-like network of supporters across Russia.

The growing divide between the pro-government and liberal parts of the media and society translates into a steady stream of intolerance and hate speech. “Journalism wars are quite common in Russian media, both pro-government and liberal. There’s a clear distinction between us and them,” one panelist said. She pointed to Russia-1 anchor Vladimir Solovyov as “a leader in hate speech,” but said the journalists and editors of Meduza, on the other hand, also sometimes attack those with conservative views. Spreading mal-information or using hate speech seldom leads to professional consequences.

Overall, the body of generated content is diverse and inclusive. Thanks to easy access to the Internet and social media, even small social groups can share their experiences and concerns. But to get a diverse and inclusive picture of the world, a consumer needs to use multiple sources of information, which is not feasible for many people.

Available data shows disparities in the gender composition of Russian content producers. For example, according to a 2019 study commissioned by the AIRP and the Fojo Media Institute, 75 percent of Russian media managers are male. There are also significant differences in staff gender composition among national, regional, and local media. According to the same study, women make up 10 percent of editors in the national media, 40 percent in the regional media, and 53 percent

⁴ Яппарова, Лилия, Дарья Саркисян, Андрей Перцев. “Просто запрещают умирать от коронавируса Как в России борются с эпидемией COVID-19, манипулируя статистикой. Расследование,” Медузы. Май 14, 2020. <https://meduza.io/feature/2020/05/14/prosto-zapreshayut-umirat-ot-koronavirusa>.

in the local media. There are also differences in gender composition between state media, where most reporters are women, and private media, whose reporting staffs are more gender balanced.⁵

On social media, there are also some gender disparities among content producers. According to the Brand Analytics study, males make up about 60 percent of Russian contributors on Twitter and YouTube, while on VKontakte, TikTok, Facebook, and Instagram, most Russian contributors (54.6 percent to 77.4 percent) are female.⁶

Russian traditional media started losing advertising and other revenues well before 2020, as advertising revenue began moving online. For example, the Association of Russian Communication Agencies (ARCA) estimates that in 2019, TV media lost 6 percent of their advertising revenue, radio 6 percent, and print media 16 percent. Only Internet advertising increased—by 20 percent.⁷ Things only got worse amid the lockdowns and business restrictions of 2020. According to ARCA, from January through September, TV media lost an additional 7 percent of advertising revenue, radio 33 percent, and print media 47 percent, while the volume of Internet advertising did not change.⁸

Regional and local media markets were hit worse than the national ones. The AIRP conducted several surveys on the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on regional media outlets.⁹ In June, the third AIRP survey got responses from 124 media outlets based in 51 regions. Virtually all reported a loss

5 Ажгихина, Надежда, «Стеклоплатформы» и гендерные стереотипы в российских СМИ, журналист. Марта 13, 2017. <https://jrnlst.ru/steklyannyy-potolok-i-gendernye-steriotipy-v-rossijskih-smi>.

6 Brand Analytics, Social Media in Russia. Fall 2020. <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1L51qJJYsVOHig2WaUtKC61ZvxXPA0ts/view>.

7 АССОЦИАЦИЯ КОММУНИКАЦИОННЫХ АГЕНТСТВ РОССИИ, Объем рекламы в средствах ее распространения в 2019 году. https://www.akarussia.ru/knowledge/market_size/id9112.

8 АССОЦИАЦИЯ КОММУНИКАЦИОННЫХ АГЕНТСТВ РОССИИ, Объем рекламы в средствах ее распространения в январе-сентябре 2020 года. https://www.akarussia.ru/knowledge/market_size/id9399.

9 Альянс независимых региональных издателей, Пандемия в России: как чувствуют себя СМИ? <https://anri.org.ru/2020/05/25/pandemija-v-rossii-kak-vezhivajut-smi/>.

of advertising revenue, including 68 percent that reported losing 50 to 80 percent of advertising revenue. Seventy-three percent of media outlets reported a loss of newsstand revenue. As a result, 40 percent of media outlets had to reduce staff salaries, and 14 percent had to cut staff.¹⁰

“Media is one of the poorest markets in Russia. Top managers don’t value the work of journalists and just exploit them. Staff journalists work for 16 hours a day like on a conveyor belt,” one panelist said.

At the end of May 2020, the Russian government officially recognized that the media industry had been hit by the COVID-19 crisis and established support measures, including tax breaks for six months, release from office rent payments, interest-free loans to cover salaries and other operation costs, and low-interest loans for other purposes. But according to the AIRP survey, many media outlets could not get this support because they did not meet the criteria.

Professional content producers, especially independent ones, are actively looking for alternative funding streams. For example, Meduza was one of the Russian pioneers of the use of native advertising. TV Dozhd uses paid subscriptions and collects donations through its social media accounts. VTimes, the 7x7 online magazine, and TV-2 (an independent news agency in Tomsk) use crowdfunding. Some media also organize conferences and ticketed events for audience members.

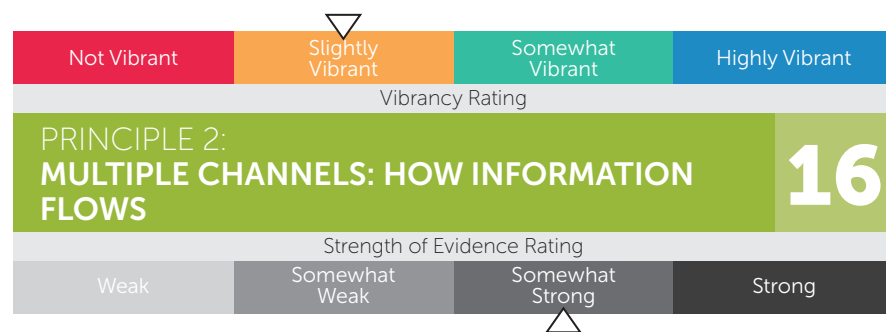
In some cases, government subsidies or advertising contracts are distributed transparently, but they still distort the market. While the operations of state and municipal media are subsidized by the authorities, they compete for advertising with private media. For example, in 2020, Russian national media, including Russia Today, All-Russian State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company, and Russian Public Television, received RUB 101.2 billion (\$1.35 billion) of state

10 Альянс независимых региональных издателей, Итоги опроса “Оценка мер поддержки СМИ” <https://anri.org.ru/2020/07/07/zatjanuli-pojasa-izdateli-ocenili-mery-podderzhki-smi/>.

“There’s no professional journalism community, and as a result, journalists face no professional ramifications,” said one panelist.

subsidies.¹¹ Moscow City Hall allocated RUB 13.9 billion (\$184.8 million) as media subsidies to support the *Vechernya Moskva* newspaper, TVC, and Moscow Media holding company, as well as contracts for favorable coverage of Moscow authorities.¹² Officials in the Moscow region spent RUB 3.9 billion (\$51.8 million) for similar purposes and in Saint Petersburg RUB 3 billion (\$39.9 million).¹³

“To a certain extent, state subsidies are distributed transparently. For example, grant competitions run by the Federal Agency for Press and Mass Communication are rather transparent. But allocation of funds to major state media like Russia Today is done automatically based on the line in the state budget and is not publicly reviewed,” one panelist said.



Broad Internet penetration and limited restrictions on the production of online content allow for a diverse and vibrant independent information sphere in Russia—despite the government’s ongoing efforts to tighten control over Internet infrastructure, online content, and the privacy of communications under the pretext of protecting the common good and repelling hostile foreign influence. Or, as one panelist put it, “YouTube ensures freedom of speech in Russia.”

The Russian constitution guarantees free speech. The media law supports media freedom and editorial independence, prohibits

11 Соболев, Сергей, Елизавета Ефимович, и Иван Ткачёв. “Власти отказались от снижения господдержки СМИ на фоне пандемии,” РБК. сентябрь 17, 2020. https://www.rbc.ru/technology_and_media/17/09/2020/5f61f7899a7947687f22edc1.

12 Баева, Дарья. “Сколько российские регионы потратили на свой пиар в 2020 году,” МБХ. Декабрь 15, 2020. <https://mbk-news.appspot.com/suzhet/skolko-na-piar/>.

13 Баева

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.

“The main problem is the selective use of laws. Over the past decade, lawmakers established a vast body of restrictions that can be used for arbitrary prosecutions,” one panelist said. “And you can’t predict who will be prosecuted and for what because the antiterrorism laws, the ban on using obscene language in media, the prohibition on offending the feelings of religious people, etc., can be applied in the most benign case.”

The case of Svetlana Prokopieva, a journalist from the city of Pskov, is a good example of arbitrary use of laws against the media. In November 2018, Prokopieva discussed on her radio show the reasons behind a 17-year-old boy blowing himself up in the office of the Arkhangelsk city office of the Russian Federal Security Service. In her analysis, she theorized that he chose this horrible way of protest, because he saw only state repression and did not see any alternative. Later, the full text of the show was published on a website of a Pskov information agency. Reportedly, the text was found by a Roscomnadzor computer system that searches for legal violations, and it was submitted to law enforcement authorities as a suspected case of justification of terrorism which is a criminal offence in Russia.

Both the radio station and the news site received a warning from Roscomnadzor and were fined. Moreover, the Investigative Committee opened a criminal case against Prokopieva for justification of terrorism. In July 2020, Svetlana was found guilty, although several independent expert examinations did not confirm that her material justified terrorism. The prosecutor’s office asked for the maximum possible punishment under this criminal clause: six years in prison. However, the court levied a RUB 500,000 (\$6,800) fine against Prokopieva. Prokopieva’s prosecution was closely followed by independent media and caused indignation among independent journalists.

Some other journalists took the criminal prosecution of Prokopieva as

a warning that they should be careful and exercise self-censorship. An article about Prokopieva's sentence on Meduza.io provided the following comment made by a local journalist in Pskov who was following her case: "Now I'm very careful with using words of people I write about. In the past, I used to publish all they said but obscene words, but now I carefully review what they said. This is especially difficult when I report on the so call extremists and so call justifiers of terrorism in Pskov region"¹⁴.

Multiple Channels Indicators

- People have rights to create, share, and consume information.
- People have adequate access to channels of information.
- There are appropriate channels for government information.
- There are diverse channels for information flow.
- Information channels are independent.

Another important case in 2020 was the prosecution of Yulia Tsvetkova, a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender rights activist and artist from Russia's Far East. In late 2019, Tsvetkova was arrested and charged with distributing pornography for posting drawings of vaginas on social media. While the court case is still pending, if convicted she faces a prison term of two to six years. In addition, Tsvetkova was charged and fined three times for violating a law that prohibits the distribution of "gay propaganda" to minors.

Tsvetkova's prosecution caused a broad public outcry, including protests in her support and coverage in the Wonderzine, Village, Meduza, and Blueprint online media outlets.

In March 2019, Russia banned the dissemination of fake news or information that shows disrespect for society or the government, on pain of fines ranging from RUB 30,000 (\$400) to 1.5 million (\$20,000). In March 2020, the Agora human rights group found that authorities had opened 13 cases for alleged dissemination of fake news over the previous

12 months, but in eight of them, charges were eventually dropped. However, since March 2020 and the beginning of the pandemic, things have been very different: The law has been used to open 157 cases, 46 of which were prosecuted, often against those who disseminated information on COVID-19 that differed from the government's statements and assertions. Agora said many cases were brought against journalists and social and political activists.¹⁵

At the end of 2019, Russia also adopted a law that expanded the definition of foreign-agent media to include individuals. Now individuals who produce and disseminate information via media recognized as foreign agents can be declared foreign-agent media themselves. In late 2020, five people became the first to get this designation: civic activist Daria Apakhonchich; Sergey Markelov, a reporter for *7x7*; Denis Kamalyagin, chief editor of the *Pskovskaya Guberniya* (Pskov Governorate) newspaper; Lyudmila Savitskaya, a journalist for Sever. Realii (Northern Realities), which is a regional reporting project of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty; and Lev Ponomarev, executive director of the Za Prava Cheloveka (For Human Rights) organization, which he has since disbanded. Za Prava Cheloveka and Svobodnoe Slovo (Free Word Association), which publishes *Pskovskaya Guberniya*, were also designated as foreign agent NGOs.

While authorities maintain that the designation is purely technical, several panelists said many Russians see it as the mark of a traitor.

Fines and site blocking give Russian authorities effective tools to curtail media freedom, one panelist said. Many media outlets' fear of ruinous fines feeds a culture of self-censorship. "Why do journalists not cross red lines? Because any editor-in-chief constantly reminds them that it's a matter of survival," a panelist said.

There are cases of harassment and criminal prosecution of journalists and bloggers. In 2020, the Glasnost Defense Foundation registered 49 cases of criminal prosecution of journalists and bloggers, 113 cases of

14 Форма оправдательного приговора. <https://meduza.io/feature/2020/07/06/forma-opravdatelnogo-prigovora>

15 Алехина, Маргарита и Евгения Кузнецова. "Правозащитники нашли 200 случаев преследования за фейки о COVID-19," РБК. июнь 15, 2020. https://www.rbc.ru/society/15/06/2020/5ee2424b9a794758f62d3628?from=from_main.

journalists being detained by police while covering public events, 46 violent attacks against journalists, and 27 cases of threats to journalists and bloggers.¹⁶

Overall, Indicator 6—people have rights to create, share, and consume information—received one of the lowest scores among VIBE indicators.

Conversely, Indicator 7—people have adequate access to channels of information—scored the highest. Nearly all Russians, 98.4 percent, have access to free digital television.¹⁷ The rate of Internet penetration, at 76.9 percent of households, is high as well, and 73.6 percent of households have broadband Internet access, according to Rosstat.¹⁸ In 2020, 95.6 million people (78.1 percent of the population) used the Internet on a monthly basis, and 86.6 million people (70.8 percent) went online via mobile devices.¹⁹

At the same time, Russian authorities have established a body of laws and regulations tightening 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 to reroute Internet traffic. Regulations adopted in 2019 require VPNs and search engine operators to promptly block access to the officially banned websites.²⁰

Still, “if a person has a thousand rubles per month to spend on Internet

16 Фонд Защиты Гласности, *Конфликты, зафиксированные ФЗГ в течение 2020 года*. Декабрь 31, 2020. <http://www.gdf.ru/graph/item/1/1724>.

17 РТРС, *ТЕЛЕЗРИТЕЛЯМ ВНЕ ЗОНЫ ОХВАТА ЦИФРОВОГО ЭФИРНОГО ТЕЛЕВЕЩАНИЯ*. <https://moscow.rtrs.ru/tv/offside/>.

18 Костылева, Татьяна. “Росстат опубликовал данные по проникновению ШПД в регионах России,” D-Russia.ru. апреля 2, 2020. <https://d-russia.ru/rosstat-opublikoval-dannye-po-proniknoveniju-shpd-v-regionah-rossii>.

19 Mediascope. *Аудитория интернета в России в 2020 году*. январь 12, 2021. <https://mediascope.net/news/1250827/>.

20 Human Rights Watch. *Russia: Growing Internet Isolation, Control, Censorship*. June 18, 2020. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/06/18/russia-growing-internet-isolation-control-censorship#>.

and mobile and knows how to circumvent site blockages, the person can find any information,” one panelist said.

One effect of the Russian government’s nearly 20-year effort to integrate information technology into government operations is that a lot of government information is available online. “People in the cities use the results of the government’s digitalization efforts to act as watchdogs. You can always use various registries. These days, you can find almost any information,” one panelist said, noting that that is the *modus operandi* of Alexei Navalny’s Anti-Corruption Foundation.

Russian law guarantees citizens access to national and local government information, except for state secrets. Mechanisms that should ensure access to this information include its publication in the mass media, online, and at information stands in government buildings. Citizens also 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.)

Yet the law is often poorly implemented: Authorities ignore information requests, especially from independent media, give useless answers, or deny journalists and bloggers access to official meetings and press conferences. In 2020, for example, the Glasnost Defense Foundation registered 384 cases when journalists were denied access to information.²¹ One panelist also expressed concern about the growing amount of undisclosed or restricted data on registries that are supposed to be public.

Government entities have spokespeople and information offices, which often fully control media access to public officials. Many panelists said government spokespeople do not always tell the truth, and one called the level of their dishonesty “catastrophic.” “Even if they lie only in a few cases, they still think that lying is acceptable,” one panelist said.

21 Фонд Защиты Гласности.

“Why do journalists not cross red lines? Because any editor-in-chief constantly reminds them that it’s a matter of survival,” said a panelist.

“A key situation like the poisoning of Navalny shows that government spokespeople don’t always tell the truth. There are serious doubts that government information about the COVID-19 situation is truthful. Information provided by one agency contradicts information from another,” another panelist said.

People can freely establish media. Online media can operate without registering with the state. At the same time, the traditional media market is highly monopolized, and one panelist estimated that the state owns 70 to 75 percent of media. Those numbers jibe with estimates by the Federal Antimonopoly Service that the share of the state-owned and state-affiliated enterprises in the Russian economy exceeds 60 to 70 percent.²²

Since 2015, in what the government calls a national security measure, foreigners cannot hold more than 20 percent of any media property.²³

State-funded Russian Public Television gives more coverage to Russian civil society and news from Russian regions than major national TV channels. It also offers educational programming, such as *My School Online*, launched in 2020 at the request of the Education Ministry to help 9th- and 11th-grade students prepare for state exams.²⁴

In addition, Russia has a vibrant community of online educators. Projects such as Arzamas.academy and the public lecture hall²⁵ of the Higher School of Economics, as well as many individual scientists offer educational videos, podcasts, and public lectures. In 2020, several members of Parliament introduced a bill, which has since passed, to impose control over these programs. Described by its sponsors as a check on anti-Russian propaganda, the measure requires schools

22 ФАС. ДОКЛАД о состоянии конкуренции в Российской Федерации за 2018 год. сентябрь 27, 2019. <https://fas.gov.ru/documents/685806>.

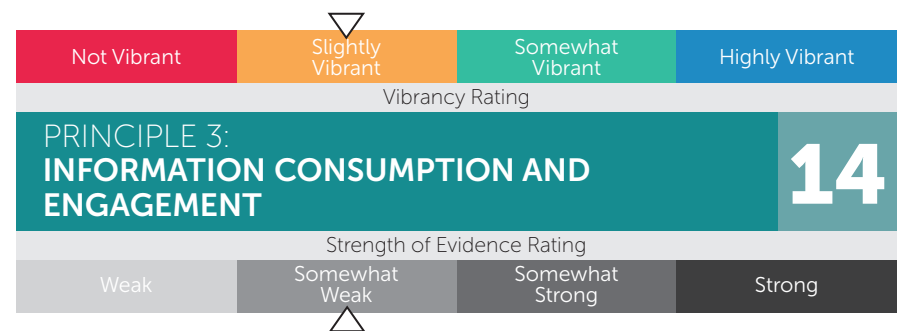
23 Смирнов, Сергей и Анастасия Корня. “Ограничения доли иностранцев в СМИ признаны частично неконституционными,” ведомости. январь 17, 2019. <https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/articles/2019/01/17/791689-ogranicheniya-smi>.

24 Общественное телевидение России. Совет по Общественному телевидению подвел итоги работы ОТР. декабрь 23, 2020. https://otr-online.ru/o-telekanale/press_relizy/sovet-po-obshchestvennomu-televideniyu-podvel-itogi-raboty-otr-91.html.

25 <https://www.hse.ru/lectorian>

and academic institutions to get permission from state authorities to invite outside speakers, including on natural science topics, and to get permission from federal authorities before signing agreements with foreign education partners. Scientists and educators in Russia argued that the law would violate academic freedom and free speech rights, as well as hamper scientific literacy efforts.

Information channels have limited independence, and the score for the corresponding VIBE indicator is one of the lowest. Owners and funding sources, including government subsidies and advertising, often color an outlet’s editorial stance. “Owners are the main source of influence in most cases. When ownership changes, the media changes its editorial policy. In addition, professional journalism requires money—to cover business trip expenses, to check information. And every journalist clearly understands that his or her salary depends on advertising contracts,” one panelist commented.



Russia has legal protections for data privacy and digital security. The constitution guarantees privacy for one’s personal life and personal and family secrets, and protection of one’s honor and reputation. It also bans 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 that companies hold on Russian citizens be stored on servers inside Russia.

The main enforcement agency for data privacy and digital security

regulations and laws is the Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology, and Mass Media (Roskomnadzor). Panelists said these rules usually do not impinge on personal freedoms and do not prevent the release of public information, but some information platforms have been blocked for not complying with them. In 2016, for example, Roskomnadzor lodged a complaint against social network LinkedIn for storing Russians' personal data on servers outside the country and for allegedly violating other data protection laws. A court ordered the site blocked, and in 2020, it remained inaccessible.

Media outlets and other professional content producers have access to digital security training and tools, including digital tools to help media outlets prevent a distributed denial of service (DDoS) or other attacks. According to statistics from the Higher School of Economics, 97.1 percent of companies in the Russian telecommunications industry regularly update antivirus software, 82.5 percent use equipment to prevent unauthorized access to their servers, and 63.5 percent use software that detects hacker attacks.²⁶

Individuals have access to technology that helps protect their privacy and security. According to Rosstat, in 2018, 81.6 percent of Russian Internet users used antivirus software, and 18.1 percent used anti-spam filters.²⁷

There is evidence that the population has basic digital and data literacy skills, although media literacy is usually not taught in public schools or universities. In a 2015 study by the Zircon research group, 61 percent of respondents said they knew that websites and social media platforms collect their personal data, and 72 percent agreed that they could not fully maintain their anonymity online. Sixty-one percent were aware that their online activity could negatively affect their life and reputation.²⁸

26 Абдрахманова, Г. И. и другие. *Индикаторы цифровой экономики: 2020*. Высшая школа экономики. <https://www.hse.ru/primarydata/ice2020>.

27 Абдрахманова.

28 Войнилов, Ю. Л., Д. В. Мальцева, и Л. В. Шубина. "Медиаграмотность в России: картография проблемных зон," *Коммуникации. Медиа. Дизайн*, Том 1, No. 2, 2016. <https://publications.hse.ru/mirror/pubs/share/direct/225292015.pdf>.

In the same study, 51 percent of respondents could differentiate between facts and opinions, and 56 percent reported that they compare information from different sources. Overall, the study concluded that only 30 percent of Russian citizens are highly media literate.

Information Consumption and Engagement Indicators

- People can safely use the internet due to privacy protections and security tools.
- People have the necessary skills and tools to be media literate.
- People engage productively with the information that is available to them.
- Media and information producers engage with their audience's needs.
- Community media provides information relevant for community engagement.

Some organizations are trying to change that. In 2018, the Goethe-Institut and the independent arts and culture website Colta.ru launched *The Earth Is Flat—How to Read Media?*²⁹, which has held workshops with more than 900 Russian teenagers, trained about 300 teachers, and involved about 1,800 people in online conferences.³⁰

Still, one panelist said, most Russians do not take advantage of programs on media literacy.

Nor do they seek out the most trustworthy sources of news and information. In various polls, 65 percent to 74 percent of Russians say television is their main source of national and international news.³¹ Sixty-five percent watch

TV news almost every day.³² That matters because major TV channels are state-owned, and they broadcast only the government's point of view. Thirty-eight percent of Russians get news from news sites and 39

29 <https://howtoreadmedia.ru/en/>

30 Проект "The Earth Is Flat—Как читать медиа?" подводит итоги. октябрь 26, 2020. <https://howtoreadmedia.ru/ru/events/proekt-the-earth-is-flat-kak-chitat-media-podvodit-itogi/>.

31 ФОМ. "Источники информации: телевидение." Января 30, 2020. <https://fom.ru/SMI-i-internet/14337>; Волков, Денис, Степан Гончаровы. *Российский Медиалендскейп 2020*. Левада-Центр. <https://www.levada.ru/2020/05/20/rossijskij-medialandshaft-2020-2/>.

32 ФОМ.

percent from social media.³³

Studies show significant differences in media consumption between younger and older Russians. According to Mediascope, a research and ad-monitoring company, in 2020, 90 percent of people ages 12 to 44 used the Internet, compared with 49.7 percent of people 55 and older. Nearly all those ages 12 to 24 used the Internet.³⁴

Thanks to these habits, “young Russians are less exposed to state TV propaganda,” according to a report on civic activism among Russian youth by the Levada Center research institute. “They are heavily influenced by YouTube, which over the past years has become the most popular internet platform, enabling political and civic activists as well as journalists to get access to millions of young Russians all over the country, and bypassing the TV channels controlled by the state.”³⁵

Platforms for public debate, including town halls and talk shows, fall short. “There are plenty of talk shows, but they’re not inclusive, and they cover a limited number of topics,” a panelist remarked. “And journalists who facilitate them don’t intend to present the full range of opinions. They clearly have a task to protect one specific point of view, most likely the government one.”

Another panelist framed it this way: “In Russia, there are no adequate platforms for public debate. There are echo chambers where opposition-minded audiences flock to opposition media,” while most people watch state TV channels or “read news on Yandex that was forced by the government to present only ‘correct’ sources. These are not platforms for public dialogue. As a result, there’s no dialogue.”

“In Russia, there are no adequate platforms for public debate. There are echo chambers where opposition-minded audiences flock to opposition media,” said one panelist.

Most media and content producers measure the size of their audiences, but the use of qualitative research is less common. “Media outlets are interested only in advertising revenue, so they only use quantitative research. But qualitative studies are rare because media aren’t really interested in learning about the audience’s needs,” a panelist said.

Many media allow for various forms of feedback, including moderated online comment sections and social media groups. Fewer, however, organize community events, are transparent about who their authors are or how they report or publish corrections.

Several bodies facilitate the exchange of information among journalists, media managers, civil society organizations, and government institutions. For example, media representatives sit on the expert council of the State Duma Committee on Informational Policy, Technologies,

and Communications. Media managers also serve on the public councils of the national and regional offices of Roskomnadzor. The president annually meets with chief editors of major media outlets, and regional governors conduct similar meetings with heads of regional media. Despite COVID-19-related restrictions, 2020 saw some public meetings and roundtables on media issues. In December, for example, the Duma’s

informational politics, technologies, and communications committee held a roundtable on legal protections for journalists.

Media associations and civil society organizations also directly engage with the government. In 2020, the AIRP wrote an open letter to the prime minister requesting support to the media sector, which was badly hit by the pandemic. A similar request came from the All-Russian People’s Front civic movement, a pro-government alliance of NGOs, which at the end of the year launched the Media.onf.ru platform for discussing issues of importance to professional and amateur content producers. Yet panelists said these efforts have not led to any positive outcomes for Russia’s media industry.

³³ Волков

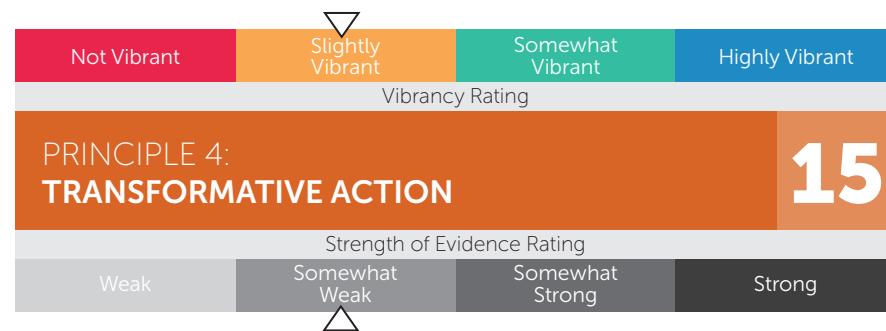
³⁴ Mediascope. *Аудитория интернета в России в 2020 году*. январь 12, 2021. <https://mediascope.net/news/1250827/>.

³⁵ Волков, Денис, Степан Гончаров, и Мария Снеговая. *Гражданский активизм российской молодежи*, Левада-Центр. октябрь 1, 2020. <https://www.levada.ru/2020/10/01/grazhdanskij-aktivizm-rossijskoj-molodezhi/>.

Russia does not have community media, but a growing culture of city and neighborhood online forums, community groups on social media, and group chats on messaging apps support engagement among community members. In a Levada 2020 study, 28 percent of respondents were familiar with messenger-based neighbor groups and 6 percent participated in them. The most common topics are improvements to apartment buildings and surroundings, as well as interaction with building management.³⁶

There are also small local media that serve the interests of their communities. For example, the Taganka-mat Telegram channel covers life in that district of Moscow and supports local businesses. VTochku, run by two journalists and operated as a group on VKontakte and Facebook, serves the city of Vologda in northern Russia.

“In Russia, there are quite a few local initiatives, small sites, community chats, microsites for residential districts, etc. They’re often a more effective tool for disseminating information than municipal and city media controlled by the authorities. The problem is that these media are private initiatives of active individuals, and they operate thanks to the dedication of these activists. Once these activists leave, the media often cease to exist,” one panelist explained.



Quality, nonpartisan information, and news sources are in short supply in Russia, and they, therefore, have limited impact on people or the state

36 Волков, Денис, Степан Гончаровы. *Российский Медиалендскейп 2020*, Левада-Центр. <https://www.levada.ru/cp/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Medialandshaft-2020-fin.pdf>.

of governance or democratic rights. Panelists mentioned the Ekho Moskvyy (Echo of Moscow) radio station, Meduza, *Kommersant*, Business FM, and 7x7 as quality sources of news and information. The AIRP, whose members must adhere to principles of fair reporting, has about 60 members.

The audience for trustworthy and fair information and news is likewise limited. “A huge share of the population (over half) is not a part of the common news space,” Lev Gudkov, director of the Levada Center, wrote in an opinion piece for VTimes in January 2021. In a survey conducted by the Levada Center in December 2020 about the year just past, he wrote, “More than a third of Russians (36 percent) could not name a single memorable event and another 16 percent mentioned only events in their personal lives.”³⁷

Ekho Moskvyy draws 2.8 million listeners each month, and the audience for its website and social media accounts tops 13 million (about 11 percent of Russia’s adult population).³⁸ The audience of Meduza in Russia is about 10 million (about 8 percent of Russian adults).³⁹

According to the Public Opinion Foundation data, most Russians—63 percent—turn to television for news and information, and 42 percent say it is their most trusted information source. The most popular TV channels are state-run Channel One (47 percent of people report watching it), Russia-1 (45 percent), all-news Russia-24 (16 percent), and Gazprom’s NTV (28 percent). They are also the most trusted: 35 percent of people trust Channel One and 35 percent Russia-1.⁴⁰

A significant percentage of people also get news from news sites (45 percent) and social media (23 percent). Twenty-three percent use news sites and 13 percent use social media as their main sources of news.⁴¹ Over half of people (58 percent) report that they use and compare

37 гудков, Лев. “Мнение. Итоги года в общественном мнении России: события и люди,” VTimes. январь 4, 2020. <https://www.vtimes.io/2021/01/04/itogi-goda-v-obschestvennom-mnenii-rossii-sobitiya-i-lyudi-a2363>.

38 <https://echo.msk.ru/about/audience/>.

39 Медуза. продано! (медиакип 2020). <https://meduza.io/static/ads/mediakit-2020.pdf>.

40 фом. *Источники информации*: ТВ. февраль 6, 2021. <https://fom.ru/SMI-i-internet/14536>.

41 фом.

information from several sources, while 34 percent use just one or two sources.⁴²

Media consumption habits vary significantly by age group and education. Those with higher education are less likely to watch TV or use it as a source of information and more likely to use and trust news sites and social media. Among those ages 18 to 30, only 29 percent watch television, while 72 percent consult news sites and 44 percent use social media as a source of information. That compares with 60 percent of those 60 or older who watch television, 22 percent who use news sites, and only 7 percent who use social media. Younger people are also more likely to use several sources of information.

And there is a clear divide between people who prefer traditional media and those who get their news online: In the first group, only 47 percent use several sources of information, compared with 70 percent in the online group.⁴³

Differences in media consumption also coincide with ideological differences. According to the Levada Center, Russians age 25 or younger are more likely to give priority to human rights than to state interests, while older Russians take the opposite view.⁴⁴

People exchange information and views with others they disagree with through digital platforms such as social media and the comment sections of online media, but these discussions are seldom constructive or grounded in fact.

As people have limited access to quality information, it has little role in shaping their views on political or social issues. For example, thanks

42 фом.

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44 Волков, Денис, Степан Гончаров, и Мария Снеговая. *Гражданский активизм российской молодежи*, Левада-Центр. октябрь 1, 2020. <https://www.levada.ru/2020/10/01/grazhdanskij-aktivizm-rossijskoj-molodezhi/>.

to the pandemic, Russians were exposed to much more health and safety information than usual in 2020, but the year-end survey by the Levada Center suggests that their attitudes toward vaccination with the Russian vaccine Sputnik-V depends largely on their preferred sources of information and even their political orientation. Those age 40 and older for whom TV was the primary source of information were more likely to

be ready to get vaccinated than average.

People of all ages who got news online were more reluctant to be vaccinated.⁴⁵

Many Russian NGOs produce news and information themselves, and several organizations, such as the Agency for Social Information and Teplitsa Socialnykh Tekhnology, train NGOs and civic activists in how to produce content. Others promote

transparency and the development of quality information products; the Russian Donor's Forum runs a competition of NGOs' annual reports.

A survey by the Russian Donor's Forum found that amid COVID-19 restrictions in 2020, many NGOs moved their communications online. In addition, the focus of their content shifted from news about their activities to presentations of their accomplishments, reportedly in response to the audience demand.⁴⁶

Responsible NGOs do not disseminate misinformation or mal-information, and some NGO initiatives work to limit the spread of and damage from misinformation or mal-information. For example, the Joining Forces for Intelligent Charity project⁴⁷ works against the use of misinformation to attract donations.

Yet one of the panelists said many Russian NGOs are “decorative

“Parties to the discussion don't use facts at all—everything is based on opinions. Nobody even tries to discuss empirical evidence. We can't even agree on facts,” said a panelist.

45 Левада-Центр. *КОРОНАВИРУС: СТРАХИ И ВАКЦИНА*. декабрь 28, 2020. <https://www.levada.ru/2020/12/28/koronavirus-strahi-i-vaktsina/>.

46 Форум Доноров. *Результаты пятого мониторинга в рамках проекта «Барометр Форума Доноров»*. сентябрь 9, 2020. <https://www.donorsforum.ru/reports/rezultaty-pyatogo-monitoringa-v-ramkakh-proekta-barometr-foruma-donorov/>.

47 «Все вместе за разумную помощь». <https://wse-vmeste.ru/projects/vse-vmeste-za-razumnuyu-pomoshh/>.

institutions established by authorities to imitate civil society” and that these NGOs do not work to reduce the spread of misinformation or mal-information.

There is growing interest in NGO work from media. Independent media like Ekho Moskvyy Business FM, *Novaya Gazette*, RBC, Rosbalt, Fontanka.ru, and 7x7 regularly cover NGO activities and quote NGO professionals as experts.

Transformative Action Indicators

- Information producers and distribution channels enable or encourage information sharing across ideological lines.
- Individuals use quality information to inform their actions.
- Civil society uses quality information to improve communities.
- Government uses quality information to make public policy decisions.
- Information supports good governance and democratic rights.

“NGOs are becoming media themselves,” one panelist said. “On the other hand, many media turn to NGOs in search of heroes for news stories. From searching for lost children to protecting human rights, many important stories develop in the NGO sector.... I’m worried a bit that NGOs are trying to be media themselves because the journalism they do is activist journalism. NGOs are about promoting some point of view.”

NGOs are involved in some key decisions, especially in the social sector. Many monitor proposed legislation through the regulation.gov.ru portal and submit their comments. Russia’s Public Chamber, part of whose role is to be a government

watchdog and safeguard citizens’ rights, organizes public hearings and collects feedback from NGOs on proposed legislation and regulations. NGOs also engage with government executives through roundtables, public councils established by state agencies, and other forums.

Government actors use a range of ways to engage with civil society

and media, including press conferences, roundtables, expert meetings, and public forums. But facts and evidence still have a limited effect on political discourse. “It’s common to refer to facts. One can manipulate facts, but there should be some evidence as the basis for discussion,” one panelist said.

“Parties to the discussion don’t use facts at all—everything is based on opinions. Nobody even tries to discuss empirical evidence. We can’t even agree on facts,” another panelist lamented.

That is partly because evidence that should be available simply is not. A study by the federal accounts watchdog found that it could not assess the effectiveness of 87 percent of government programs with a price tag above RUB 10 trillion (\$132.9 billion) that were plugged into budgets for 2019 to 2024 because of a lack of data and consensus on how to measure their impact.⁴⁸

There is little evidence that information supports good governance and democratic rights. For example, independent media, bloggers, and civic activists reported widely on irregularities in the 2020 vote on constitutional amendments, including the one allowing Putin to stay in power for two additional terms (until 2036). Yet no corrective measures have been taken. Similarly, the same people reported on violations during September’s elections of governors, mayors, and regional and city councils—and, again, authorities maintained that there were no serious violations and that the elections were fair and transparent. Authorities also used COVID-19 restrictions to limit public oversight during both the vote on constitutional amendments and September’s elections. In the case of the vote on constitutional amendments, COVID-19 was used as an excuse to extend the voting period to seven days – to limit the number of people present at a voting site at any given time. This allegedly facilitated manipulation of voting results.

“Elections are a sensitive topic for our government, so information is hardly going to influence the results. Votes aren’t counted fairly—the results are predetermined by higher authorities. The authorities don’t

48 Цыганков, Максим. “Мнение. Доходы и бедность—игра вслепую,” *VTimes*. январь 18, 2021. <https://www.vtimes.io/2021/01/18/dohodi-i-bednost-igra-vslepuyu-a2538>.

admit to violations, and the government isn't interested in running fair and open elections. No information, no efforts of journalists are going to change this," one panelist commented. The corresponding indicator received the lowest score among all VIBE indicators.

There is little evidence that information prevents or lowers incidence of corruption, as well as civil liberty and human rights violations. State and state-affiliated media channels cover only corruption cases that were launched by state law enforcement agencies. Investigative reports on corruption published by independent media are ignored. Civil liberty and human rights violations that take place in Russia are covered only by independent media, while state and state affiliated media focus on violations that take place abroad.

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.

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