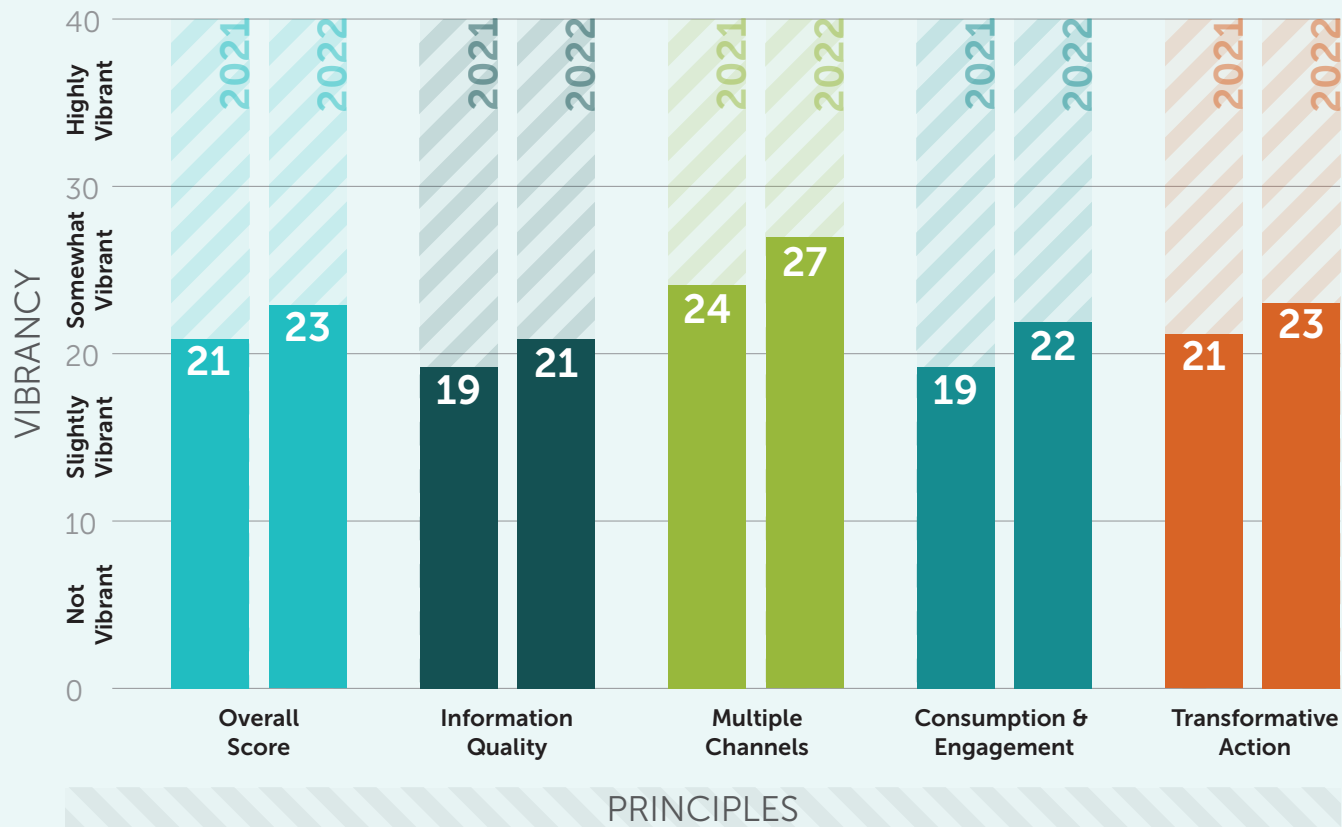


MONTENEGRO

Vibrant Information Barometer

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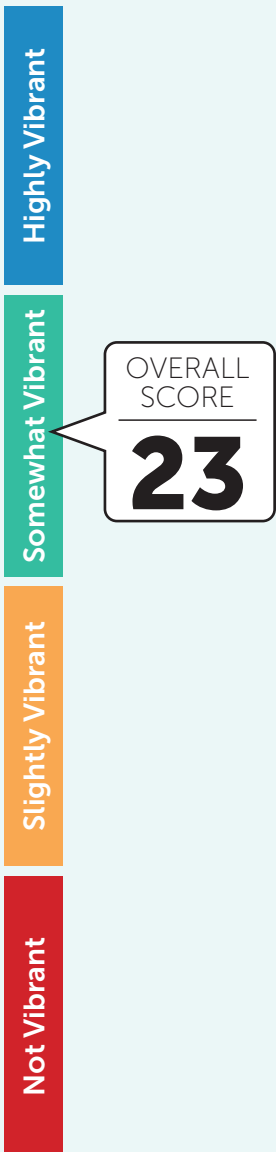


Highly Vibrant (31-40): Quality information is widely available in this country. People have the rights, means, and capacity to access a wide range of information; they recognize and reject misinformation.

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.



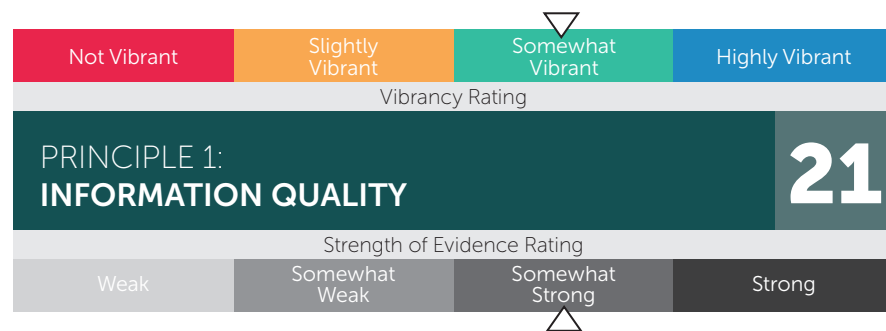
Churning political instability kept the new Montenegro government under constant threat of collapse in 2021. The regime, formed at the end of 2020 under the so-called “expert model” (government of experts rather than politicians), did not garner stable support from the diverse parliamentary majority. The new leaders have clashed with most of the political forces that elected the prime minister, Zdravko Krivokapic. These factions include the Democratic Front, which won about 33 percent in the elections. This group is generally known as a coalition of parties under the control of the Republic of Serbia, with the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Russian government also exerting influence on the coalition. The government has proven itself incompetent, largely pursuing a disoriented, dysfunctional agenda, and prompting the most negative annual membership progress report that the European Union has ever issued to Montenegro.

Montenegro experienced a poorly controlled pandemic that resulted in dire health consequences, amid the instability and under the executive authority. (For example, Krivokapic is the only prime minister in Europe who has not been vaccinated against COVID-19.) From the start of the pandemic up until November 18, 2021, 40 percent of the population had been vaccinated with two doses, 23 percent of the population had been infected, and 2,227 people had died from the virus. The pandemic also damaged the economy, driving up unemployment and public debt and driving away foreign and local investors.

Overall, the media sector remained mostly unchanged, except for the growth of online journalism. Internet media continue to drown out print media, and web portals experienced a strong push when the pandemic resulted in an overall increase in online activity. The influence of social

networks keeps growing: 450,000 Facebook accounts, 35,000 Twitter accounts, and 380,000 Instagram accounts are in use. In addition, media companies intensified their political loyalties amid permanent political crises and inter-party strife, and in the absence of neutral editorial policies.

The VIBE study reveals that media quality falls short of the professional standards and norms that characterize a free press in a liberal democracy. Key reasons include the lingering political bias of newsrooms, misinformation and false news polluting the internet and social networks, the ongoing anti-Montenegrin campaign from neighboring Serbia, and poor investigative and specialized journalism as a result of sparse funding. Although media laws mostly align with European media legislation and standards, the reality on the ground does not measure up. Professional media unions and trade unions provide weak protection for journalists—undermining media freedom and efforts to strengthen the media sector’s standing within society. In practice, just traditional media, some local private media, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) deliver quality information. Political entities and government bodies are prone to manipulating content and suppressing facts—negatively reflecting on the quality of public governance and limiting growth of democratic norms.



The panelists gave middling marks to quality of information in Montenegro. Society is flooded with numerous information streams, and while traditional media try to provide reliable information, a great many media operating on social networks and web sites do not. Political propaganda and business interests further erode the quality of information. Leading electronic and print media outlets have the solid human and technical resources needed to produce higher-quality information, but their founders' interests often have a limiting effect, or their editorial policies are imbued with political ambitions. Still, fake news and hate speech are mostly found on web portals and social networks. The panelists expressed the general opinion that Montenegro has significant room for improvement of information quality, but crucial and long-term limitations persist in areas of funding, media politicization, professional journalism, and corporate influence. Non-professional content producers (social network users, bloggers, influencers) often drive the poor information quality.

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

In Montenegro, all local and foreign media published online are accessible, as the internet is free and not subject to any legal limitations. Furthermore, a wealth of information is broadcasted or published in approximately 120 different media outlets, whether traditional or online. Montenegro still has conventional print media (including four national dailies), but online media (portals, influencers, bloggers) are increasingly

winning over print consumers.

Marko Vešovic, editor-in-chief of the daily *Dan*, summarized the media sector conditions: "...[In] Montenegro, we do have adequate infrastructure for production of different content, including print, broadcast, and digital. The content of some media is highly politicized, aiming to materialize media owner's interests."

Broadcast media with local frequencies and national frequencies still dominate the media market and rank among best-rated local media. The panelists agreed that the media sector has varied professional and non-professional content producers, but the panelists disagreed on content quality. They lamented that Montenegrin media remain under pressure from political and corporate entities, and government bodies still try to influence media content. Existing media have the robust technical infrastructure needed for media production, but they lack funds to secure future infrastructure development or invest in a pool of high-quality journalists.

On the whole, the media sector covers all information of local, national, or international importance. A large number of opposition media are critical of government officials, insisting on their public accountability.

Media outlets try to cover different thematic areas—although investigative or specialized journalism is notably missing. Vešovic said that investigative journalism is being neglected across the board, and Marija Tomasevic, director of the National Public Service—RTV Montenegro agreed, saying, "Investing in their development is of crucial importance for the media." On that point, Marijana Bojanic, director of TV Vijesti, noted that donors prefer to fund investigative projects carried out by local NGOs as media outlets do not have the capacity to do it themselves.

Vešovic said that overall, though, he does not think information quality is poor and pointed out that Montenegro does have media pluralism. He noted also an issue with websites since the government cannot identify their owners (the owner, editor-in-chief, editorial team, etc.).

Regarding the enforcement of media regulations, professor of media

law Aneta Spaic observed that the number of registered media is not indicative of the actual number of active media; she also noted that while the media can carry out quality journalism, many times, “the results are mediocre, often lacking accurate, timely, and complete information, and failing to adhere to the principles of due diligence and ‘hearing the other side.’”

Olivera Nikolic, director of the Media Institute, shared her observations on the relationship between the media and the consumer public, noting declining trust in the media and adding, “We are witnessing a clear decline of professional standards in Montenegro....Media content often does not correspond to citizens’ needs, and citizens are unable to articulate the topics or needs relevant to them. There are no strong self-regulatory mechanisms, and law enforcement is selective. Media content is often imposed and limited by different power centers.”

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

The panelists held the general view that traditional media are trying to publish information based on facts, but outlets frequently manipulate the facts or interpret them differently. Professional content producers, in principle, produce accurate information and do not intentionally attempt to disseminate false information. Unprofessional content producers, and especially anonymous portals, often produce half-truths, outright false reports, or politically motivated propaganda.

Throughout the year, government bodies drew criticism from the media for producing official information that flouted the facts, was simply self-promotional, or perceived as mere propaganda. The panelists agreed that unregulated online journalism and the expansion of social networks is fueling ever-increasing misinformation in the media market.

“**[In] Montenegro, we do have adequate infrastructure for production of different content, including print, broadcast, and digital. The content of some media is highly politicized, aiming to materialize media owner’s interests,” summarized Vešovic.**

Recent months, however, brought strong NGO activism aimed at exposing misinformation. According to Spaic, “If misinformation is found in traditional, established print or broadcast media, the reaction of the media community and different stakeholders is pretty admonishing. Last year, statistics told us that hate speech towards the LGBTQ population is present mainly on social networks.”

Nikolic also weighed in on the topic of misinformation, noting, “Surveys tell us that established media in Montenegro do not spread misinformation intentionally, but rather that right-wing oriented media, some of which are not even registered in Montenegro, are responsible. ... Questionable content rarely appears in established media; most frequently it is disseminated through online comments or social networks.”

Bojanic’s argued that Montenegro’s media have different editorial policies but lack self-regulation, hindering their professionalism.

With regard to the number of media outlets, advertising agency manager Dragan Markesic said that Montenegro has 117 different media entities (print, broadcast, web portals). Milan Jovanovic, director of the Digital Forensic Center, puts the number at more than 200 media, if influencers are counted as well. He added that there are an increasing number of media outlets finding funding through international media projects, grants, and donations.

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

The panelists evaluated differently the dissemination of information aiming to harm, either as mal-information or as obvious hate speech. All of the panelists have witnessed numerous activities aiming to undermine professional journalistic standards. Over the last two years in particular, they have seen a media campaign orchestrated by the

authoritarian regime of Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic. Under the pretext of protecting the position of the Serbian people and the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro, these media have been waging a nationalistic campaign.

Panelists also noted that the IN4S portal and related nationalistic portals rely on the Russian media network. These outlets are known for anti-NATO propaganda and editorial policies aimed at undermining Montenegro's Euro-Atlantic foreign policy and its autonomous state sovereignty. According to Nikolic, "Montenegro and its media sector, especially in times of crisis or events that are capturing public attention, are subjected to campaigns orchestrated from Serbia, its politicians, and other Serbian stakeholders who produce and disseminate disputable content."

Vešovic added, however, that he has not seen the Montenegro government disseminate harmful content.

Touching on the potential for self-regulation as a path to prevent mal-information, Vešovic said that such controls are only in the initial stages, as the extreme politicization of the Montenegrin media is preventing the creation of an effective self-regulatory framework.

Some respectable NGOs are particularly engaged in exposing foreign media attacks. One organization is the Center for Democratic Transition (Raskrinkavanje.me), which works in collaboration with the International Fact-Checking Network; another is the Digital Forensic Center, operating within the Atlantic Alliance of Montenegro.

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

News sources are generally inclusive and diverse, according to the panelists. Media disseminate information in all languages spoken in

Montenegro. Furthermore, different media are enabling information provision from a broad ideological and political spectrum. Sandra Bojaj, director of the local Albanian-language television service, shared an example from her outlet, TV Boin. She explained that the station has focused on increasing its reporting on issues relevant to Roma community in the municipality of Tuzi, alongside reporting about issues related to Albanian and Bosnian communities in Tuzi and throughout Montenegro.

However, for the most part, marginalized groups (sexual, ethnic, religious) are not sufficiently represented in media, and they cannot easily access information sources. However, these conditions also represent a huge opportunity for improvement. As Spaic explained, Montenegro's government-funded Media Pluralism and Diversity Fund's budget will, starting in 2022, be increased by approximately 1 percent of the country's current national budget, and these funds will be disbursed on a project basis. Sixty percent of funds shall be allocated for commercial and non-profit media, and 40 percent for dailies, weeklies, and online publications.

Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced.

The panelists pointed out numerous resource-related issues. The lack of funds is constant; publications have no subscriptions; and national and local public services depend on government subsidies, subjecting them to political influence.

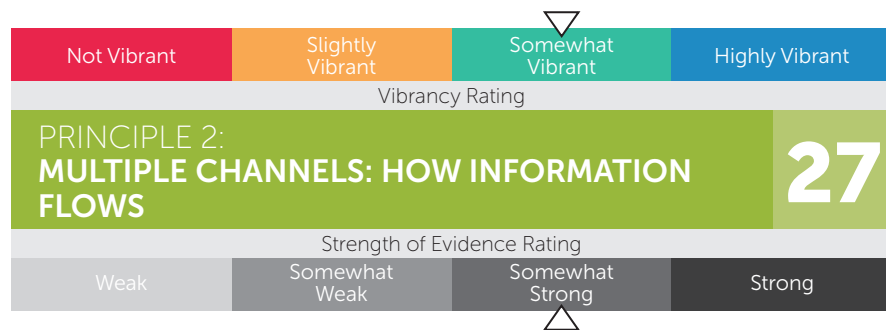
The poor financial status of journalists is particularly problematic, as their salaries on average do not exceed €500 (\$550) a month. These low wages cause journalists to leave the profession, and at the same time discourage younger people interested in becoming journalists. "Vešovic further observed, "First, it is quite clear that Montenegrin media do not have sufficient funds for their operations, and that is an issue they have been facing for decades now. There isn't sufficient money for content

“We are witnessing a clear decline of professional standards in Montenegro....Media content often does not correspond to citizens' needs, and citizens are unable to articulate the topics or needs relevant to them,” shared Nikolic.

production, but traditional media that are very much dependent on government funding have a way of surviving. When it comes to revenues from the local [municipal] advertising market, I think the funds are sufficient. However, government advertising spending so far has been non-transparent. The political favorites of the government get advertising contracts”.

Pobjeda journalist Jadranka Rabrenovic explained that there are a growing number of media outlets funded by the owner, rather than advertising. She also observed that Montenegro’s current advertising market is estimated to be €6 million (\$6.6 million) which is insufficient for the oversaturated sector. Milutin Stijepovic, editor-in-chief of the municipal Radio TV Niksic, added that the station is 80 percent funded from the local municipality’s budget and only 20 percent from the local advertising market.” Editor-in-chief of Radio Petnjica Samir Rastoder described his station’s challenges: “Private local Radio Petnjica, for example, is managing to survive on a mere €240 (\$265) per month. We receive €1500 (\$1700) per year from the local council for broadcasting sessions of the local council. On top of that, we are facing constant political interference.”

In contrast to the commercial media, Tomasevic provided information on Montenegro’s public service media, noting that the National Public Service receives €16 million (\$17.7 million) in annual funding from the state budget.



Media activities in Montenegro are free by law — but politicized. The Montenegrin judiciary is obliged to enforce the European Convention

for Protection of Human Rights and Freedoms, as well as to follow the case law of the European Court of Human Rights. However, case law often fails to strike the right balance between the freedom of speech and accountability in media reporting. Despite solid legislation, enforcement remains poor, and self-censorship continues to undermine journalism.

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

Media regulations largely align with international standards and the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Freedoms. However, the persistence of political interference and self-censorship — particularly on public media — continue to undermine attempts to realize the principles underpinning the laws. In terms of technological progress, however, Montenegro has made significant strides in the last few years.

In 2002, Montenegro adopted two important systemic laws: the Law on Media and the Law on National Public Service. The Law on Media details financial support for the media sector; under Article 17, the government has established the Media Pluralism and Diversity Fund. The government plans to use the money from this fund to support non-commercial media content of public interest in the languages of minorities, as well as non-commercial media content of public interest in the print non-profit media.

Spaic, a professor of media law, provided an analysis of Montenegrin laws related to media members: “Journalists as protectors of the public interest and guardians of democracy must be protected by a legal norm. However, apart from stipulating that the state has a positive obligation to take effective action when there are indications that journalists are at risk, European Union case law on this issue doesn’t say much more. Decriminalized defamation, norms on the protection of journalists’ sources (Article 30 of the Media Law), and the existing criminal offense of causing panic and disorder (Article 398 of the Criminal Code) are the legal framework that protects the work of journalists in Montenegro”.

“In general, the legal framework in Montenegro, when it comes to media freedom, is not bad,” Vešovic commented. However, he added, “Over 70 attacks have been carried out on journalists in recent decades; we still don’t know who killed Dusko Jovanovic, editor-in-chief of Dan. Fear of the authorities and media owners often leads journalists to self-censorship. The President of Montenegro, Milo Đukanovic, has particularly engaged in attacking journalists, using inflammatory and poisonous statements to target politically unsuitable journalists.”

Nikolic noted that the Montenegrin Media Institute is working on the media strategy and changes of the media law. She pointed out some positive examples of convictions in cases of violence against journalists, including the 10-month prison sentence for the attacker of Esad Kocan, editor-in-chief of the weekly *Monitor*, and the three-month sentence for the person who threatened journalist Milka Tadic.

For several years now, a government commission has been monitoring the actions of the authorities in investigating cases of threats and violence against journalists, murders of journalists, and attacks on media property. This commission, composed of representatives of the Ministry of Interior, the Prosecutor’s Office, the police, the National Intelligence Agency, NGOs and the media, has so far not achieved significant results.

According to the panelists, self-censorship is still very much present, especially in publicly owned media. This practice seriously limits the quality of what should be accountable and professional journalism.

Several NGOs have been in long-standing efforts to grant a journalist the status of a public official performing activities in the public interest. According to the panelists, introducing a criminal offense that specifically protects journalists would have several complications. An initial problem would be defining the core elements of the offense, and another the difficult distinction between the private and professional life of a journalist.

“According to the panelists, self-censorship is still very much present, especially in publicly owned media. This practice seriously limits the quality of what should be accountable and professional journalism.”

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

Citizens enjoy adequate access to information channels. Montenegro has achieved significant technological progress in recent years, and information and communication technology infrastructure generally meet consumers’ needs. Almost the entire territory of Montenegro is covered with these kinds of services, with broad access to cable operators, internet, and mobile telephone services. The law places no bans on accessing information, and social and vulnerable groups do not face problems accessing these services. The internet is free and open to all citizens in all urban and most rural areas in Montenegro; an estimated 70 percent of citizens at least have internet access. Periodic communication disruptions are sporadic and compensated with access to other communication channels.

The media are digitized, including the National Public Service, while mobile telephone networks are omnipresent, with four licensed operators covering most of the territory.

Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for government information.

In Montenegro, regulations on the right to free access to government information have been in force for more than 16 years. The Freedom of Information Act, adopted in 2012, provides access to information held by public authorities. The law is based on the principles of free information access, public authority transparency, the public right to know, and equality. The government enforces the laws in line with standards contained in ratified international treaties on human rights and generally accepted rules of international law. Article 3 of the law affords every national and foreign natural and legal person the right to access information, without any obligation to state their reasons or

explain the interest behind the request. Local NGOs, journalists, lawyers, and ordinary citizens have widely used this law to request government information. As a result, some ministries and other governmental institutions claim that they are overloaded with requests information.

All ministries and most other governmental institutions have special public relations departments and spokespersons who are generally available to the media. Government spokespeople are mostly reliable professionals, and there were no cases of a governmental spokesperson being fired or sanctioned because he/she was not telling the truth.

As Spaic explained, The Freedom of Information Act, adopted in line with Venice Commission recommendations, specifies concepts such as the right of the public to know, public interest, overriding public interest (corruption, endangerment of life, security), proactive access to information, restriction of access to information (protection of privacy, security, defense, monetary and economic policy, prevention of investigation and criminal prosecution, confidentiality of information, and trade and economic policy) as well as a test of the harm in publishing certain material.

Most panelists agreed, however, that access to government information still needs improvement—especially as a large portion of material remains classified.

“The problem,” according to Spaic, “is that in Montenegro there is still no law on business/official secrets that would accurately determine the bodies and institutions to protect business secrets. This legislative omission has been exploited to misinterpret business secrets.”

Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow.

The Broadcast Media Law chapter on pluralism protection and broadcast media diversity regulates ownership transparency and media

concentration into monopolies. The panelists noted that channels do not experience significant information flow restrictions. However, the biggest challenges to ownership transparency are anonymous websites, along with inadequate sanctions or normative obstacles for web portals whose founders and newsroom staff are unknown.

Media distribution channels are not monopolized, and the process for establishing a media outlet is free—essentially depending on financial, technical, and human resources. However, on the topic of media licenses, the panelists objected to the competition in the broadcast media market. They said they consider the presence of foreign media via cable operators problematic and a threat to local television outlets.

Public media services provide news and educational programs, although consumers are always debating the quality and scope of the information provided.

Internet providers do not discriminate based on consumers, content, or destination addresses.

Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.

A number of panelists stated that news channels hardly qualify as independent because of the constant interference from media owners, large advertisers, and political entities. Furthermore, advertising placed by government bodies directly affects media independence. A special problem for public services is their financing from national and local council budgets, which constantly exposes them to political pressures.

Government regulatory bodies endeavor to maintain professional independence but are frequently criticized for their inadequate response to media activities that violate the Code of Ethics or fundamental journalism principles.

According to the Code of Ethics, journalists and editors are free to

““ Online journalism is becoming increasingly influential and poses a strong challenge to traditional media. TV stations cannot cover the events the way people on social networks can, especially on Facebook,” commented Kovacevic.

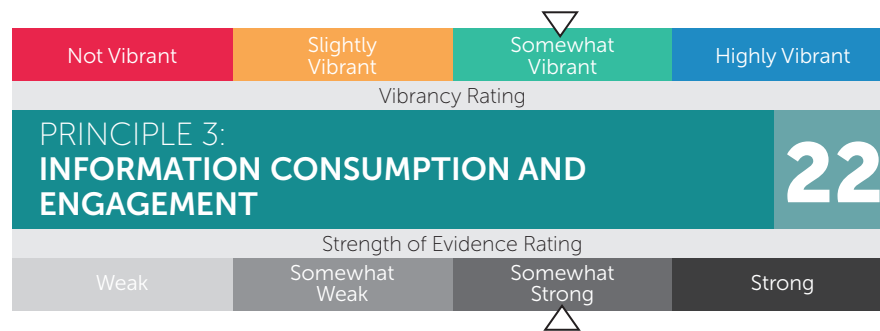
express their views on certain topics, Spaic emphasized. The new Media Law, in Articles 28 and 29, stipulates that a journalist has the right to refuse to produce, write, or participate in shaping media content that is contrary to the law and the Code of Ethics, as long as they supply a written justification to their editor-in-chief. However, Spaic noted, “. . . [N]ot a single case of a journalist refusing to take part in shaping of media content has been reported. Quite the contrary—the impression is that the political orientation and that of the owners is reflected in the outcomes of journalists’ work and their investigative results, both when it comes to the individual journalist and the entire media.”

Dusko Kovacevic, a blogger, commented on the changeover to internet media consumption: “Online journalism is becoming increasingly influential and poses a strong challenge to traditional media. TV stations cannot cover the events the way people on social networks can, especially on Facebook.” He pointed to intelligence officer Luka Bulatovic’s suicide and the posting of the video recording as an example of a case that proved especially challenging for the media.

Panelists also claimed that news channels are not perceived as independent, because these outlets’ editorial policies are seen as either politicized or subjected to owners’ commercial interests. Such policies threaten professional standards and counter the idea that the media operate in the public interest.

Just as in previous years, the panelists agreed that political interference in public service media is evident – diminishing the professionalism of the media that should be addressing the public interest – but they differed over how best to ensure the its neutrality. The panelists said that the government is not influencing the National Public Service’s operations, but they are affected by the political parties that make up government bodies.

On a positive note, with regard to the procurement of equipment, tax breaks, and other such subsidies, panelists said that the government does not seem to engage in regulatory favoritism of state media over private media.



Solid laws guard data privacy and digital security in Montenegro – but that has not always translated to safety in practice. In addition, media literacy is relatively poor, leaving citizens vulnerable to manipulated information, especially online and through social media, but a handful of civil society initiatives are working to address this need. Montenegrin media have failed to make any progress, though, in conducting market research, although NGOs do make valuable contributions on that front. The panelists also praised efforts by local media – private local media, at least – to resist political pressure and provide objective, balanced information.

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

The panelists noted that in recent years, legal regulations in the field of information privacy protection, as well as protecting digital communication and online media, have improved significantly.

Montenegrin law regulates the protection of data privacy and digital security. The Law on Personal Data Protection has been in force since 2008 and amended three times. It provides personal data protection to every person regardless of citizenship, residence, race, skin color, gender, language, religion, political and other beliefs, nationality, social origin, property status, education, social status or other personal features. Article 2 of the Law on Information Security, in force since 2010, protects the state of confidentiality, integrity, and availability of data. For the purposes of this law, “data” covers information, messages,

and documents made, sent, received, recorded, stored or displayed by electronic, optical or similar means, including internet transmission and email. Government, administration, and local council bodies, legal entities with public competencies, and other people who gain access to or handle data are obliged to act in accordance with the law.

In order to further protect digital communications in Montenegro, the Law on Electronic Identification and Electronic Signature has been in force since 2017. This law regulates the conditions for the use of electronic signature, electronic seals, electronic time stamps, and electronic registered delivery services in legal transactions, administrative, judicial, and other procedures. The law also covers certification for website authentication, electronic identification systems, and conditions to recognize the electronic identification instruments of other countries. This regulation has significantly contributed to digital security; however, the scope of that security largely depends on the willingness of citizens to privately protect their communication channels.

However, the laws do not always translate to safety in practice. The panelists highlighted the need to better protect citizens' privacy and their internet presence as a particular challenge in need of funding.

On the other hand, most media content producers are committed to digital security and vigilant protection of their websites and portals. An increasing number of companies on the Montenegrin market offer services that include digital tools for protection against malignant digital attacks.

“**The education system should focus much more on media literacy. It is a process that will require a lot of investments. That done, and with general political and legal literacy, citizens will find it easier to resist any misinformation campaign and dissemination of false news,”** observed Vešovic.

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

Panelists agreed that media literacy is vital to protecting the public from false and misleading news and increasingly manipulative political propaganda — but believe that media literacy remains relatively low, reflecting insufficient governmental effort on this front. The biggest problem that the panelists identified is that the government has made no commitment to developing an adequate media literacy strategy or appropriate positive practices within the education system. As a result, poorly educated segments of the population in particular fail to recognize false or misleading information.

Dedicated citizens can check facts and uncover misinformation and false claims, but in practice that rarely happens, panelists said. Nikolic provided an overview of media literacy in the country, “Every year, the Open Society Fund from Sofia conducts surveys for their Media Literacy Index, and according to them Montenegro is at the bottom of the list of European countries—ranking 32 out of 35,” adding that the relatively poor results of high school students in Montenegro on the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) test, which measures the ability of high school students to apply the knowledge acquired in school, underpins the need to strengthen media literacy as well. Montenegro is the only country in the region that teaches media literacy as a subject, but just as an elective, limited to secondary school students.

However, thanks to numerous civil society initiatives, awareness of the need to develop critical thinking in the media environment is growing, Nikolic said. Within the National Coalition for Media Literacy, the Media Institute submitted an initiative to the Ministry of Education to enhance coverage of the subject, proposing the introduction of media literacy

in all secondary schools — even vocational schools, not just grammar schools — and primary schools.

Vešovic called for changes to training program as well, observing that “The education system should focus much more on media literacy. It is a process that will require a lot of investments. That done, and with general political and legal literacy, citizens will find it easier to resist any misinformation campaign and dissemination of false news.”

Milan Jovanovic, director of the Digital Forensic Centre, commented on his organization’s efforts to gather data. The Centre conducted a survey in March 2021 that indicated: 23 percent of respondents were unaware that there is an ombudsperson in Montenegro; 43 percent of respondents do not recognize mal-information or misinformation, and 34 percent do not react to misinformation.

According to Kovacevic, the media remain at odds with the public, with a loss of confidence in the media as they are viewed as mouthpieces for political interests. As Markesic, however, concluded, “The cause of media illiteracy lies in the poor general education. In this regard, media literacy cannot compensate for the lack of broader general knowledge.”

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

As in previous years, opinions were divided regarding citizens’ productive engagement in exercising the freedom of speech and using available information. A significant number of media operate in Montenegro with no legal restrictions on using foreign information channels. The free internet community provides a dynamic platform for public consultations, comments, individual views, and online debates. However, the panelists said that the level of media culture and reasoned public debate is still insufficient and does not reflect the level that would encourage democratic and faster development of society.

The public is resistant to hate speech, primarily due to civil society activists’ efforts along with occasional actions by government groups. However, hate speech on social networks and in the virtual space

continues to be prevalent. Unregulated, anonymous portals are a particular problem, and often are used to spread dirty political propaganda and hate speech. As an example, the panelists pointed to the Serbian Orthodox Church’s negative propaganda on social networks and in the public life, including an increase in hate speech — part of long-running campaign aimed at securing a privileged position.

Nikolic noted that there is a considerable increase of hate speech online, especially in comments sections of websites and on social networks. The Media Law provides for the removal of controversial comments in a short period of time, but this mechanism has not taken root and has not been sufficiently promoted.

During the pandemic, Nikolic added, citizens were subjected to government repression due to posts on social networks or comments in online media. In the first nine months of 2020, 11 freedom of expression violations related to posts on social networks were registered, and proceedings in those cases were initiated against different people for criminal offenses such as causing panic and disorder, violating the reputation of Montenegro, and making insults as defined by the country’s Law on Public Peace and Order. “The divided media sector results in the absence of social dialogue on important social issues, and therefore citizens usually opt for the media that reflect their viewpoints,” Nikolic concluded.

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

Media companies have made no progress in their ability to conduct market surveys and positioning themselves to target their audiences. Although the media are aware of the importance of researching the needs of their audiences, follow-through is difficult due to insufficient funds. Instead, many media companies rely on public opinion surveys, research, and analysis conducted by NGOs. Centre for Democracy and Human Rights (CEDEM), Centre for Civic Education (CGO), Action for Human Rights, Institute Alternativa, and Network for Affirmation of the NGO Sector (MANS) are key players conducting these surveys.

Panelists agreed that good cooperation between the media and NGOs is

crucial for civil society development, and quantitative data are needed to enable the media to develop realistic strategies and understand the needs and interests of potential audiences.

Most media have specific ways for their audiences to provide feedback on their coverage, mainly through internet links. Major media outlets—such as the National Public Service and newspapers such as *Vijesti*, *Pobjeda*, and *Dan*--have created their own media ombudsman positions who review claims on violations of professional or ethical standards.

In order to build trust with their audiences, local media outlets have launched humanitarian initiatives, along with sporting and other community similar events. However, there is no widespread practice yet for news media, content producers, civil society organizations, and government institutions to collaborate and network together for productive information sharing.

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

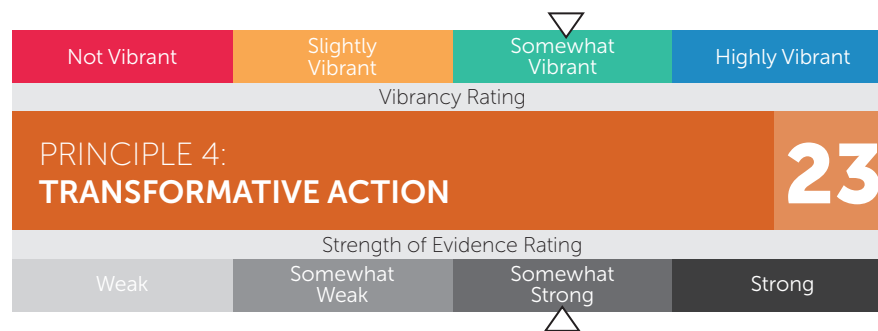
Montenegro does not have a lot of community media as defined by the VIBE methodology, although there are some in regions populated by ethnic minorities. However, the panelists agreed that Montenegro’s numerous local media serve many of the functions that a community media outlet would. Local private media, specifically, are more objective when informing the local community, although local public services with municipal budget funding often cave to political pressure.

Most of Montenegro’s 24 municipalities have private media (portals, radio and television stations), while richer and larger municipalities have local public services. This year, the capital of Podgorica launched a public service (web portal, radio, and City TV), which is expanding and strengthening the network of public services in Montenegro.

Bojaj described the efforts of her outlet, TV Boin, a private station that broadcasts in the Albanian language and effectively functions as a community media outlet, as it is supported by local donations and grants from the Montenegrin government and international donors.

“We serve the Albanian population, providing information on both local events and the region on a daily basis. However, community media, such as TV Boin, face financial issues on a daily basis, as well as a challenge to find adequate staff able to cover social topics of importance for local population, i.e. Albanians in Montenegro.”

Local media, to a much greater extent than regional or national media, are able to meet the informational, cultural, entertainment or identity needs of the local population. This leads their communities to develop greater trust in local media than national outlets. Panelists agreed that local media are often closer to the interests and needs of citizens, which is why their overall work is viewed with affection and trust. Bojaj pointed to Tuzi’s coronavirus lockdown as a good illustration of the importance of community media; the local authorities communicated daily with citizens through TV Boin, keeping them informed of measures and efforts to help them feel safe in their homes. The local community, according to Bojaj, supports TV Boin as much as possible.



Information sharing across ideological lines has increased significantly in the last year, credited to multiple factors including the change of power in Montenegro and external political interference. However, despite media’s attempts to position themselves as nonpartisan, the public perceives most media as politically biased. Furthermore, much of the population succumbs to misinformation and false news — a problem that intensified during the pandemic. Montenegro’s strong civil society sector, though, plays an important role, prominently flagging fake news and critiquing poor policies.

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

Although the media sector has nonpartisan sources of information, and media often present themselves as independent or professional sources of information, all Montenegrin media are strongly politicized. The general public's media preferences are typically based on their political affinities, and they clearly recognize media outlets as either pro-government or opposition, depending on their editorial policies.

The political and ideological bias of media limits the quality of public debate and does not contribute to the development of productive democratic dialogue. For example, Vijesti (daily, web portal, television) is clearly positioned as a pro-government outlet, as opposed to the daily Pobjeda or the radio station Antena M, both known as strong critics of the current government. The national public broadcaster RTV Montenegro, which is financed from the state budget, is not yet positioned as neutral and serving the public interest. Rather, since the change of power, it has adopted an editorial policy favoring the current government—meaning that the service's old problem of politicization very much persists.

Even minimal media solidarity is missing between media with different political affiliations. The political and ideological bias of media limits the quality of public debate and does not contribute to the development of productive democratic dialogue between conflicting political and ideological viewpoints.

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

The dominant opinion of the panelists was that citizens do not make good use of quality information and that a significant segment of the

population succumbs to misinformation and false news. The pandemic has further exposed this trend, and in that sense Montenegro is no exception to global trends.

COVID-19 has revealed the extent to which people will act to the detriment of their health, based on trust in misinformation and false online theories. Even obvious facts are not acceptable to a certain portion of the public, due to misguided personal beliefs. Online communication channels are abused to deceive the suspicious or naïve public, propagating anti-vaccination attitudes and spreading numerous misinformation and meaningless claims regarding the origin of COVID-19 and on vaccine efficacy, content, and safety. Citizens are not sufficiently using quality information, nor are many educated enough to recognize or question malicious or false information.

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

An important counterweight is Montenegro's very strong civil society sector, with more than 5,000 registered NGOs. The panelists' prevailing view was that NGOs rely on quality news, analysis, or research when explaining their missions and positions on public policies. The civil society sector does predominantly share quality information with the public, and it counters mal-information and misinformation. The media regularly publish NGO reports, and in that sense civil society has a level of good cooperation.

Many NGOs—including MANS, CGO, Center for Democratic Transition (CDT), CEDEM, Atlantic Council, Institute Alternative, Civic Alliance, Human Rights Action, Media Centre, Montenegro Media Institute, Young Roma, and Fund for Active Citizenship—are quite influential in social and political arenas. Some (MANS, CEDEM, CGO, CDT, among others) are also very present in the public discourse and recognized for their criticism of political structures and poor public practices. These groups offer reputable public opinion

“ The general public's media preferences are typically based on their political affinities, and they clearly recognize media outlets as either pro-government or opposition, depending on their editorial policies.

surveys, media sector analysis, and human rights protection.

Several NGOs also take an active role in exposing fake news (CDT and platform Raskrinkavanje.me, Digital Forensic Center), and NGOs are committed to using quality information and publishing expert reports when criticizing or advocating the change of public policies.

The panelists were convinced that the government generally does not base its policymaking on quality information. The former government was largely confronted by some powerful NGOs and influential media, while the current government has managed to include representatives from MANS and the Institute Alternative in its structures (e.g., government anti-corruption body). At the same time, the current government has been strongly criticized by a large number of media (e.g., Pobjeda, Radio Antena M, and the online outlets CDM, Analitika, and Luca). According to the panelists, the general public's shared feeling is that the current government is not sufficiently transparent.

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

Most panelists agreed that the previous government's practices were negative in terms of cooperation with the civil society and its management of general political discourse. The current government has already been criticized for its poor communication with the media and civil society. One serious step backwards that the current government has made is its clerical discourse, de-secularization of society, and obvious bias towards the Orthodox Church, which is under the political control of the Serbian Orthodox Church. Further evidence of the government's discrimination is its position towards the Montenegrin Orthodox Church and its tendency to marginalize this religious community, contrary to the Law on Religious Freedoms.

“The previous government reacted catastrophically ... covering up the corruption instead of sanctioning it. There is evidence of a number of government officials involved in corruption. With respect to electoral abuse, the pressure from the NGO sector and the media, both then and now, must be maximal,” said Vešovic.

Evaluating the relationship between the government and quality of information, Kovacevic said, “Poor quality information does not have a significant impact on corruption or violations of minority rights,” adding that officials have credible information, but choose not to pay much attention to truthful or fact-checked information, succumbing instead to political influences.

Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic rights

The prevailing view of the panelists was that quality information is used neither for the purpose of holding the government accountable, nor to contribute to developing democratic norms. Panelists gave numerous examples of the competent government bodies reacting to media information related to corruption or human; they cited the Pandora Papers allegation that the president of Montenegro allegedly had hidden bank accounts. While the president denied this accusation, the state prosecutor opened a case to investigate. However, the panelists also stated that the government reacts more rhetorically and in a politicized manner rather than offering concrete actions.

According to the panelists, the need to defame political opponents in public is often more important than taking appropriate anti-corruption measures and actions. As Vešovic described, “The previous government reacted catastrophically ... covering up the corruption instead of sanctioning it. There is evidence of a number of government officials involved in corruption. With respect to electoral abuse, the pressure from the NGO sector and the media, both then and now, must be maximal.”

Markesic emphasized that the lack of funds also limits the effectiveness of the media sector. He provided figures from his advertising agency on media finance: “The [total estimated media advertising budget for

Montenegro] in 2020 was circa €8.5 million (\$9.2 million), plus €2 million (\$2.2 million) spent on advertising during the political campaign. In 2021, this budget should be around €10 million (\$10.9 million), out of which 11 percent goes to print media, 6 percent to radio stations, 45 percent to television, 22 percent to billboards and about 16 percent to social networks.”

Civil society members strive to consume quality information, to prevent violations of civil liberties, and to ensure that elections are free and fair. The roles of Montenegrin media and NGOs are positive and corrective in reaction to politicized public institutions and biased political structures.

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