

KAZAKHSTAN

Vibrant Information Barometer

2 0 2 2



Highly Vibrant

Somewhat Vibrant

Slightly Vibrant

Not Vibrant

OVERALL
SCORE**15**

The pandemic affected all spheres, including the media, in Kazakhstan over the past couple of years. The government's unpreparedness in its efforts to switch to online work and schools, adopt decisive steps to protect the health of citizens, and roll out a vaccination campaign revealed weak spots in the country's readiness to embrace change. COVID-19 became a litmus test for the strength of the education system, the judiciary, the health-care system, and law enforcement.

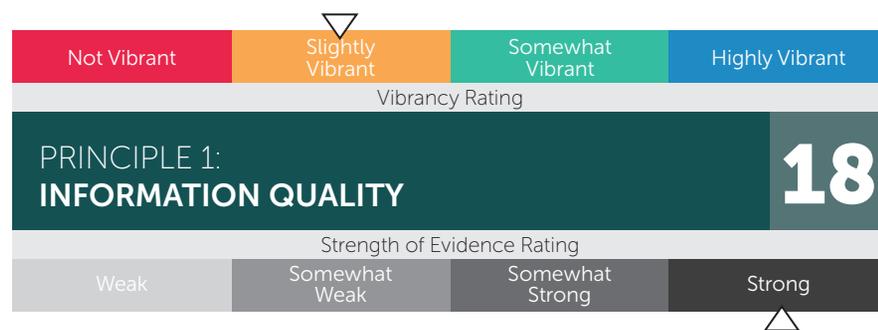
COVID-19 also contributed to a spike in the spread of fake information, exposing government agencies' poor crisis communications skills and difficulty disseminating high-quality public information—and the population's tendency to trust social media and messaging apps more than the media. Journalists and civic activists repeatedly issued open appeals to the country's president, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, protesting restrictions of their rights to access information, physical access to the parliament and the government after the lifting of quarantine restrictions, and the improper classification of information by state bodies.

The state injected a record amount of funding into the media in 2021, further distorting the media market as it became the main advertiser. This also influenced the content and editorial policy of many publications. At the same time, there are many channels of information, including a growing number of independent social media channels and websites gaining popularity for their budget investigations, operational news, and interesting analysis—creating competition for state media.

Government agencies did make some positive strides by developing applications to improve access to public services and helping to ensure Internet availability to most of the population. Accordingly, Kazakhstan inched up two spots over last year's Reporters without Borders report, ranking 155 out of 180, and reached the “advanced” level in the Mobile Connectivity Index rankings, scoring 67.5 points.

Freedom House's Internet Freedom Index still classifies Kazakhstan as a “not free” country, with 33 points out of a possible 100. The government continues to block Internet resources and conceal information from journalists. The panelists agreed that the state's heavy hand in the media market continues to be a negative force on competitive processes and editorial independence.

The VIBE panel agreed that the state still leads the information space, influencing content and supporting self-censorship in the media and the Internet space; this is facilitated by fairly strict media legislation. The level of media literacy is quite low, and people prefer information in social networks to professional media. At the same time, most people in Kazakhstan have access to the Internet, television, and print media. As for the influence of information on the actions of citizens, the state has little interest in this. Press services are weak and lack crisis communication skills. At the same time, however, bloggers and activists publish budget investigations that influence spending decisions. Thus, we can say that public influence in Kazakhstan is growing, and access to open data and information in general plays a significant role in this.



Despite the strong influence of the state on the media and the quality of content, in Kazakhstan there is a nascent emergence and development of independent internet resources (such as Telegram and Instagram channels). At the same time, fake information is distributed frequently and in great volumes, in privately held and official state media. Citizens often prefer dubious messaging app messages over journalistic reports. In general, all indicators in this principle were scored at the higher end of the Somewhat Vibrant classification, with the exception indicator examining the sufficient resources for content productions. This indicator received the lowest score in the principle since the advertising market has contracted while public financing is at its maximum.

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

There are a lot of news resources in Kazakhstan, with Internet sites, Telegram channels, and media pages on social media developing most actively. However, the state still remains the main player in the media market, regulating the information agenda and distorting the presentation of news and analytics to the audience.

The state's media budget reached a record high of about \$150 million in 2021, comparable to the country's advertising market. State media content is not objective, some panelists said, given that the editorial offices depend on the owners of state media, the Ministry of Information and Social Development of the Republic of Kazakhstan, and *akimats* (local executive bodies). Content, as a rule, is not tied to the needs of

the audience but rather to the political agenda of the ruling party and its leader. "There is practically no analysis or investigative journalism, and criticism is only presented against the municipal authorities—almost never against the government, nor, even more so, the president. The main task of the leading media is to 'please' the authorities in order to receive financial support," said Jamilya Maricheva.

The state dominates the broadcasting sector (more than 65 percent of the population turns to television for their news), leaving almost no alternative sources of information on that platform. Furthermore, the editorial offices of state media lack editorial independence; in international surveys,¹ journalists and editors have shared that state media editors are forced to coordinate the materials and position of the editorial board on certain socially significant topics with the ministry.

On the Internet, the situation is slightly different: many new, interesting, independent information and analytical portals have appeared in both Russian and Kazakh languages, with independent editorial policies. These are baribar.kz, vlast.kz, ratel.kz, factcheck.kz, orda.kz, and holanews.kz. According to Yerzhan Suleimenov, these are "reputable media that care about quality and authority."

Social media channels and projects—including QOS live (<https://t.me/AQOSlive>), BES.media (<https://t.me/bessimptomno>), <https://t.me/Zanamiviehali>, PROTENGE (<https://t.me/protenge>), https://t.me/miyat_kashibay, and <https://t.me/rasaitam>—show steady gains in popularity. The fight against the pandemic, quarantines, the vaccination campaign, and the transparency of state procurement and spending emerged as 2021's most-discussed topics. However, the state readily blocks any unwanted content; Zarina Akhmatova, editor-in-chief of HOLA News, suspects that is what happened when her publication's website suddenly became unavailable last October.²

The media community has only recently begun to seriously discuss

1 <https://lmc.kz/map/#/goszakaz>

2 Matveeva, Diana. "Domestic problem – editor-in-chief of HOLA News about blocking the site," Orda. October 7, 2021. <https://orda.kz/problema-vnutri-strany-glavred-hola-news-o-blokirovke-sajta/>.

ethical issues and introduce them within the framework of journalism training courses. Although some panelists said the media mainly try to comply with ethical standards, social media users often publish details of domestic murders, suicides, and domestic violence.

According to Adil Jalilov, however, “Ethical norms are a very abstract concept for the Kazakh media,” and most media and bloggers fail to understand their practical application. Recently, public media established a self-regulation committee to analyze and comment on the most significant cases. However, journalists who violate ethics face no serious consequences.

Kazakhstan’s journalism community offers a number of educational opportunities—journalism programs at universities, seminars, webinars, and trainings—but they are mainly limited to journalists and bloggers living in large cities. Trainings are available in Russian, Kazakh, and English. In addition, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), including Internews, Legal Media Center, and Adil soz, organize short-term thematic training sessions.

Cities provide better infrastructure for content production than rural areas, but digital content can be produced almost anywhere, given the widespread availability of smartphones and the Internet.

According to Askhat Yerkimbay, applicants for Internews Kazakhstan grants grow every year, suggesting that Kazakh media outlets have little money to produce quality content and few opportunities to find advertising and develop financially sustainable content.

Tatyana Trubacheva believes that the vast majority of content producers do not try to find or double-check facts, undercutting the accuracy of the reporting and stirring societal discontent. For example, the well-known telegram channel on finance, [Finance.kz](#), reported that the Unified Accumulative Pension Fund (UAPF) raised the sufficiency threshold for withdrawing pension savings, without any public discussion. However, the channel’s editors did not find the original source—and, in fact, sufficiency thresholds increased automatically when Kazakhstan upped

the minimum wage.

In general, state media write about how well the state apparatus works, while private resources often adopt a more critical stance. However, there are no topics that are totally hushed up in Kazakhstan. International news can be found without difficulty, in a variety of formats and persuasions, and news is generally covered in context.

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

Professional media generally try to follow the facts, cross-checking information, maintaining a balance of opinions, and following the public interest. But this is not always possible, as access to information from official sources can be limited. For example, government agencies repeatedly classify information as “for official use”—a key source of dissatisfaction among journalists.³

For their part, journalists sometimes reprint posts from social media with criticism or accusations against someone without checking the information. State media give only part of the truth, casting the government as a fair actor, or they just conceal information. For example, government agencies often

refuse to release data on budget expenditures if the contract is concluded with a private company, citing confidentiality agreements as the reason.

Sometimes journalists forget or do not take the time to check information, a phenomenon fueling the rise of controversial stories about such topics as Kaspi-Bank transfers, credit amnesties, and questions about the safety of vaccines.

According to Maricheva, the main problem remains the manipulation

“**The main task of the leading media is to ‘please’ the authorities in order to receive financial support,” said Maricheva.**

³ “Dissatisfied MIOR journalists appealed to Tokayev – MIOR ‘answered’ instead of him from Akorda,” ZONAKz. June 24, 2021. <https://zonakz.net/2021/06/24/nedovolnye-mior-zhurnalisty-obratilis-k-tokaevu-vmesto-nego-iz-akordy-otvetilo-mior/>.

of data, rather than the spread of false information: “The state order and the incompetence of editors and journalists are to blame for this. A long-standing state policy to squeeze out journalists who have developed critical thinking has led to the fact that journalism is now unprofessional.”

Timur Gafurov is sure that even professional media often provide biased information and do not state the positions of all parties to a conflict. As a result, the impression naturally arises that the journalist is either unprofessional or biased against one of the parties.

Jalilov, however, says that government agencies, the media, and Instagram communities often spread misinformation. Negative consequences most often concern three spheres: anti-vaxxers, xenophobia, and the theft of state funds. Misinformation is mainly disseminated on social media and messengers, because bloggers do not check the information for accuracy. Very often, before the media publish verified information, information from obscure sources appears on blogs and telegram channels. This is especially true with high-profile corruption cases, detentions, resignations, arrests, etc. In such cases, the police initiate criminal charges for the dissemination of false information, as they did when a politician shared a video on Facebook blamed for spurring a rush of citizens demanding loan amnesties.⁴

Reliable official websites exist for checking information, including egov.kz, goszakup.kz, kgd.kz, and stat.gov.kz, as well as such private websites as www.factcheck.kz and adata.kz. However, no resource exists to verify the facts involving COVID-19 and medical statistics.

As far as the moderation of comments online is concerned, newsrooms are far from prepared to provide a reliable pre-moderation system for comments and user-generated content on their sites. A few years ago, Kazakhstan adopted amendments to the country’s informatization law on the mandatory registration of Internet users who comment

4 Mazorenko, Dmitry. “Almaty police opened a criminal case into the dissemination of false information about the credit amnesty,” Vlast.kz. December 10, 2021. <https://vlast.kz/novosti/47766-policia-almaty-vozbudila-ugolovnoe-delo-po-faktu-rasprostraneniya-loznoj-informacii-o-kreditnoj-amnistii.html>.

on publications. After that, many media outlets refused to support comments and the pre-moderation system on their sites, and all commenting moved to social networks. Accordingly, false information is often spread in the comments, and content pre-moderation systems do not always have time to track and remove such information.

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

Russian politicians periodically make statements about Kazakhstan’s Soviet past and Russian-speaking Kazakhstanis, raising a sensitive national issue. These comments stir heated discussions on social media, but Kazakh authorities do not express any principled positions. Vyacheslav Nikonov, chair of the Committee on Education and Science of the State Duma of the Russian Federation and host of the Big Game program, said on Channel One that “Kazakhstan simply did not exist, [that] northern Kazakhstan was not populated at all.” Later, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Viktorovich Lavrov tried to smooth things over.⁵

Kazakhstani content producers regularly spread hate speech, most often on social networks and often involving anti-vaxxers, Russian politicians, China’s ongoing conflict in Xinjiang, “language raids,” financial pyramid schemes, or the government website’s transition to the Russian Sberbank platform—which would transfer all personal data of Kazakhstan’s citizens to the jurisdiction of another country.

In the summer, participants in the *Til Maidany* (On the Language Front) movement, which advocates for the development of the Kazakh language, carried out “language raids”: they entered stores, checking vendors’ knowledge of the Kazakh language, as well as government agencies, demanding that they be served in Kazakh.⁶ All raids were recorded on video and posted on YouTube. Publications about pressure

5 “Lavrov commented on scandalous statements against Kazakhstan,” Tengrinews. May 6, 2021. https://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/lavrov-prokommentiroval-skandalnyie-zayavleniya-adres-436647/.

6 “The Kazakh-speaking Pavlodar resident was bullied and lost his film role,” Ratel.kz. December 8, 2021. https://ratel.kz/scandal/kazahskojazychnyj_pavlodarets_podvergsja_travle_i_lishilsja_rolu_v_kino.

on Russians, including statements by State Duma deputies, immediately appeared in the Russian press. Dauren Abayev, an official in the president's administration, noted on the Kazinform program "Open Dialogue-2.0" that such measures are unacceptable and outrageous and would have to answer to the law. He also described the raids as "cave nationalism"—a statement that caused a storm in society, with many accusing Abayev of being unpatriotic.

In another incident, a minister of parliament, Bekbolat Tleukhan, accused Radio Azattyk (RFE/RL's Kazakh language service) journalists of "destruction of the country"—a move that press defenders roundly denounced.⁷

Society often minimizes interethnic conflicts as domestic disputes or hooliganism. Most concerningly, officials frequently react inadequately to such conflicts. The poor reaction of local authorities to an interethnic conflict in October 2021 in the village of Pidzhim, in the Almaty region, clearly demonstrated local authorities' inability to adequately respond to such conflicts. Officials tried to calm the citizens with statements about the privileged status of the Kazakhs, which, in fact, is an unconstitutional justification and legitimization of violence. Such communication and low levels of trust in authorities lead to an escalation of hate speech, increasing the risk of more conflicts in the future.

In addition, media, public figures, and individual deputies regularly make statements or publish information against the LGBTQ community. Also, members of Feminita, a national feminist movement, suffered regular attacks on social networks during the year.

At the same time, article 274 of the criminal code (dissemination of knowingly false information) remains a deterrent, regularly used by government agencies in an attempt to control content on the Internet.

7 "Bekbolat Tleuhan accused Azattyk's journalists of 'destroying the country.' The deputy's act was called unacceptable," Orda. December 8, 2021. <https://orda.kz/bekbolat-tleuhan-nazval-zhurnalystov-azattyka-predateljami-postupok-deputata-nazvali-nedopustimym/>.

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

In general, the media provide a full range of materials in all languages and for all population groups. In addition to Kazakh and Russian, which dominate the media, there are publications in German, Uighur, Uzbek, and Ukrainian, especially for local communities.

Since there is not a lot of high-quality content in the Kazakh language, Russian-speaking readers receive more diverse information. At the same time, there are more materials on religious and ethnic topics in the Kazakh language, topics undesirable in the Russian-language media space. According to Maricheva, two inter-ethnic conflicts in the south of the country⁸ recently demonstrated that ethnic minorities have minimal access to media resources. "As a result, in the media we see only the official position on what happened, but not the real one. In addition, there is

no political or gender plurality of opinions in the media. Of course, minorities and dissidents have access to social networks, but their audience is incomparable to the one that is collectively controlled by the Ministry of Information through a state order:

these are thousands against millions of users," Maricheva said.

The regional print media cover opposition figures poorly; national media, including Azattyk Radio, vlast.kz, minber.kz, and malim.kz, do a much better job reflecting their viewpoints. Regional media also very rarely include representatives of sexual and religious minorities.

Women dominate media editorial offices, especially regional outlets. Men work mainly as editors or operators, or they hold leadership positions.

Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced.

In the last two years of the pandemic, with the decline in the population's

8 Kalmurat, Ayan. "We divide into 'we' and 'they.' Why does Kazakhstan fail to maintain interethnic harmony?" Radio Azattyk. October 29, 2021. <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/31534899.html>.

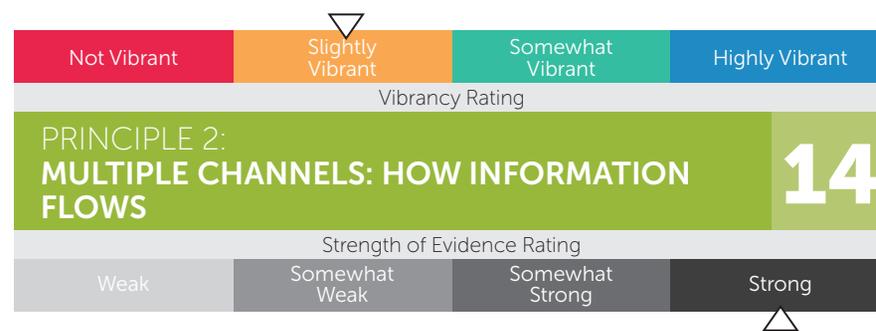
spending power and advertiser budgets, the financial situation of content producers worsened, especially for private and opposition media. State funding of mass-media, advertising, subscriptions, and grants from donor organizations make up the main sources of media funding.

The presence of state media creates unfair competition in the media market; they participate in the advertising market on an equal footing with private media, yet they receive state funding for their activities. Restrictions on advertising many goods and services—such as beer, cigarettes, and breast milk substitutes—in the press and on television in traditional media outlets—also negatively impact the ability of independent media to earn enough advertising income to produce quality content.

According to Maricheva, “Media advertising and media funding are so politicized that the national security and tax authorities carefully monitor the sources of media funding. The state does not tolerate competitors in this market, especially if the media produce materials on social and political topics.” She pointed to the blocking of the news site Holanews.kz as one recent example. The tapping of journalist Serikzhan Mauletbaï’s phone by the Pegasus system became a big scandal as well.

Internews, the US Embassy, and the Justice for Journalists Foundation are the main donors to Kazakh media, supporting content production, investigations, and special projects.

The salaries of journalists vary a great deal. In the capital and large metropolitan areas, they average \$250–\$1,100 per month, while journalists in small cities and districts make barely enough money to last until the next paycheck. Often, salaries depend on the type of media: Those in state media are higher than in private media. Low salaries can tempt journalists to post sponsored material under the guise of news or accept gifts and favors in exchange for covering a topic, conflict, or controversy. Sometimes there are completely distorted situations—for example, when the editors of the media or journalists “ask” to be paid to prevent a story from being published.



The majority of Kazakhstanis have regular and stable access to the Internet, as well as regular access to the free exchange of information. However, in practice there are many legal restrictions that are deterrents for many journalists and bloggers. In most cases, large amounts of open data are often encountered. Due to the total state funding of the media, journalists have a highly developed sense of self-censorship. The indicator examining the independence of information channels received the lowest scores. The panelists noted that everyone is mass media is dependent in some form or another, and only in social networks is there a high degree of freedom in expressing opinions.

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

Formally, the law guarantees the protection of the right to freedom of speech, editorial independence, and protection of the activities of journalists. However, strict rules exist involving administrative punishment for slander, as well as criminal liability for inciting hatred and dissemination of deliberately false information or insulting and honoring the first president. Recently, these laws have been applied to deter journalists from publishing what the government might consider offensive materials. For example, the Ministry of Information demanded the removal of the image of the first president from the village.kz website, saying that it offends his honor.

Censorship, officially prohibited, persists in practice, along with self-censorship. Government media journalists know the taboo topics and

unspoken “rules of the game” and avoid bringing up sensitive topics. Those who do not face heavy pressure—as seen in a significant case involving journalist Islambek Dastan in Taraz, who covered explosions on the territory of a military unit and who subsequently faced interrogation by the authorities and accusations of disseminating deliberately false information.⁹

Kazakhstan maintains a system of total control of the information space, which allows the state to monitor information flows, identify “unwanted” content (the list of which is quite large), and apply restrictive actions (legal and illegal). All media, websites, and social networks are monitored. Content in messenger apps is monitored, and IT providers are forced to comply with the requirements of legislation on storing subscriber data. Extrajudicial blocking of content, often for political reasons, by the decision of the prosecutor, the head of the KNB, or the police occurs as well.

The blocking of the Hola news site after it published coverage of the Pandora Papers, which involved a corruption investigation into Kazakhstani oligarchs, is a key example.¹⁰ In another case, in December, authorities blocked the ng.kz website after it re-posted a Radio Azattyk message about the property of the relatives of Kazakhstan’s president.

Officials also blocked journalists’ rights during the 2021 parliamentary elections. The Committee to Protect Journalists documented examples of the authorities harassing and obstructing the work of journalists covering Kazakhstan’s parliamentary elections.¹¹ In particular, Radio Azattyk reporters encountered various obstacles when covering election-

related events, and vlast.kz was under almost continuous DDoS attack during the elections.

According to Maricheva, “The information policy, which has been practiced by the state for many years, has led to the fact that the media either work according to the rules adopted in the country or they are repressed, and now the situation is such that without censorship and interference from the state it is possible to work only on social networks.”

In one example, [Sotreport.kz](https://sotreport.kz) journalist Tatyana Kovaleva received an order from the court stating that she is biased in covering trials and influencing the court. The Ministry of Information recommended that the outlet remove all materials related to the coverage of trials.¹²

State bodies react differently to violations of journalists’ rights, giving priority to government media. Officials forcibly removed a Khabar TV journalist from the *akimat*, and the minister immediately made a statement. However, it all ended with the dismissal of a security guard for using force against the journalist. In another case, the minister Bekbolat Tleukhan hit a journalist, who took her case to court—but the court ruled against her, saying that the minister had no malicious intent.

Kazakhstani journalists also face problems related to the disclosure of data from pre-trial proceedings (under Article 423 of Kazakhstan’s criminal code), according to Gulmira Birzhanova. At the beginning of last year, after the publication of an investigative piece about a land scandal in Uralsk dealing with document forgery, police interrogated the editor-in-chief of *Uralskaya Nedelya*, Lukpan Akhmedyarov; the prosecutor’s office had initiated an investigation into a case of disclosure of data from pre-trial proceedings, and the journalist was treated as a witness with the right to protection. He was forced to undergo interrogations every day and has already received seven subpoenas. Eventually, the case

9 “Journalists were summoned to the police in the case of ‘dissemination of false information’ after the explosions in Zhambyl region,” Radio Azattyk. September 16, 2021. <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/31462889.html>.

10 “Kazakhstan edition of HOLA News reports the blocking of the website due to the coverage of Pandora Papers,” Committee to Protect Journalists. October 26, 2021. <https://cpj.org/ru/2021/10/казахстанское-издание-hola-news-сообщает-о-бл/>.

11 “CPJ: the authorities persecuted, hindered the work of journalists covering the elections in Kazakhstan,” Radio Azattyk. January 13, 2021. <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/31045078.html>.

12 Mauletbay, Serikzhan. “Theft case in the National Guard: a journalist wants to be punished for reporting from the courtroom,” *inform boro*. October 6, 2021. <https://informburo.kz/novosti/sudi-potrebovali-nakazat-zurnalista-sotreport-za-sozdanie-obshhestvennogo-mneniya-o-pravote-obvinyaemyx>.

ended positively for Akhmedyarov, but the repeated interrogations alone amount to a violation of his rights.¹³

The same article is used to deny journalists access to information, as it contains a rule that data from pre-trial proceedings or a closed trial may be disseminated only with the consent of the prosecutor or the person conducting pre-trial proceedings. In one example, the police department sent out a daily report to the e-mail addresses of the Kazakh media and then threatened the editors with criminal liability for publishing information from the report.

There are no legal provisions on the protection of sources of information. By court request, journalists can be obliged to disclose their sources—with no clear limitation period. Last year, the Ministry of Information and Social Development announced plans to consider making the statute of limitations one year, but so far there has been no change.

In a positive example, the UN Committee on Human Rights declared that the court decision to close *Pravdivaya Gazeta (Truthful Newspaper)* violates international law. In 2015, editor-in-chief Rozlana Taukina (now deceased) appealed to the committee over the court's decision; the Public Foundation “Legal Media Center” represented her interests in the international body. The UN Committee decided that the administrative fines imposed on the first author, the withdrawal of the ability to circulate *Pravdivaya Gazeta*, the suspension of its publication, and termination by court order meant a restriction of their right to disseminate information and ideas in the press, which is incompatible with Article 19 of The Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Although the ruling is currently unenforceable, it sends a message to the state—highlighting clear gaps in law and practice—and underscores the areas that Kazakhstan needs to address to meet international standards on media freedom.

13 [Danilin, Nikita](https://mediazona.ca/article/2021/02/06/ahmedyarov). “‘The investigator sat stupidly at his desk, and I sat across from him.’ Editor-in-Chief of Uralskaya Nedelya on criminal prosecution and paranoia,” *Mediazona*. Feb. 6, 2021. <https://mediazona.ca/article/2021/02/06/ahmedyarov>.

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

The Ministry of Digital Development regularly trumpets providing Internet to all regions of Kazakhstan. There is a special program, but some remote villages still do not have Internet, including Aktobe in western Kazakhstan and some southern parts of the country. Telecom operators are in no hurry to invest in infrastructure because the industry is unprofitable.

Digital broadcasting does not cover the entire country, just as high-speed Internet is not everywhere. This complicates online schooling for children.

Most of the country's population can afford most information channels, including radio, television, newspapers, and magazines, as well as digital and social media. Access to television and radio is nearly universal. However, the authorities block the Internet at times—for example, during rallies, pre-announced flash mobs, and press conferences—either in certain places or throughout the entire territory.

Furthermore, people with disabilities face obstacles accessing information. State media websites often do not provide versions for visually impaired people, just as sign-language translation on television channels is insufficient.

Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for government information.

The law on access to information and the constitution guarantee everyone free access to information. There are procedures on egov.kz, as well as open sources of data statistics on stat.gov.kz, the e-procurement portal goszakup.gov.kz, and the state register of enterprises (<https://open-base.newreporter.org/>) where one can find information. However, these resources are mostly used by journalists, bloggers, and civic activists. The population has a low interest in databases, and there is no culture or habit of sending requests or receiving and using information.

The panelists reported a number of difficulties, including the groundless classification of information as restricted access “for official use” and disregarding deadlines for providing answers—or saying that official sources ignore requests altogether. The law does not sufficiently detail regulation of some methods of access to information—for example, participation in open meetings of collegiate governing bodies—especially at the level of bylaws, which is why they are poorly used in practice.

Officials who want to refuse information requests turn to other laws for cover as well. Olga Likhogray, a *Nasha Gazeta* weekly journalist, sent several requests in 2021 to Kostanay *akimat* officials to learn how a land plot on territory that used to belong to the children’s regional hospital was transferred to private hands. Every time, officials refused her request, citing the law about personal data.

The online format of briefings and press conferences prove especially problematic for journalists, making it easier for officials to ignore questions, as moderators could simply turn off a journalist asking an unwanted question. As a result, journalists appealed to the president several times, demanding officials respect their right to access information.

At the end of September, Kazakh journalists published [a statement](#) expressing concern about the violation of their professional rights in terms of gaining access to information. Despite the easing of quarantine measures, media workers were still restricted from entering the government and parliament. Within a few days, the appeal—addressed to the president of the country, the prosecutor general, and the prime minister—collected about four hundred signatures. Access to the meetings was open, but journalists claim that members of the government have forgotten how to communicate with the press.

State bodies provide services or people responsible for interacting with the media. They regularly hold briefings and conferences and make statements—but in practice, several problems arise, including

the lack of a unified communication strategy, especially in anti-crisis communications, and a failure to base communication strategies on real survey data. Social networks dominate as communication channels, but this leads to an increase in negative comments regarding the quality of public administration.

As a result, press services often act as bodyguards for their bosses and protect them from journalists, instead of providing quality communication with the media. Sometimes official websites and accounts do not have up-to-date information. For example, during an explosion at a military unit in the Sarysu region, the official website of the Ministry of Defense and social media accounts disseminated information too late.

In addition, according to Gulnar Asanbayeva, representatives of government agencies often manipulate public opinion; in one example, they convinced the population of the need to build a Russian nuclear power plant in Kazakhstan.

According to Galiya Agenova, officials do not know how to communicate with the population; she pointed to a high-profile example where ministers left a parliamentary session hastily to escape from journalists trying to ask questions.

Earlier, in April, an [Informburo.kz](#) journalist was removed from a press conference for questioning Deputy Prime Minister Eraly Tugzhanov about the pandemic. The Central Communications Service said the question was off topic for the press conference.

Such cases cause the population to lose trust in state bodies.

Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow.

Kazakhstan has state-owned and private media—but no true public service media. The state entirely controls television frequencies. Citizens can create and register their own media without bureaucratic red tape. However, with limited budgets, it is difficult for them to compete with the

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leading state-controlled, state-supported media.

This is one of the most problematic areas in Kazakhstan for a number of reasons, including the fact that issues of ownership of media resources are less regulated with respect to private ownership only. Despite the fact that state-linked media dominate in the field of television and radio broadcasting, their status is not written in media law, leaving issues of creation, privatization, financing, participation in the advertising market, editorial independence and accountability, etc. uncertain.

With regard to the concentration of media resources, there are also no legislative provisions in the media law. The general principles of preventing excessive concentration, unfair competition in the market, and anti-monopoly rules, enshrined in the entrepreneurial code, do not work.

There are no provisions in the law of the Republic of Kazakhstan regarding any other form of ownership of the media, except for private and state. Also, the law does not regulate the disclosure of names of media owners. Foreign media participation is limited to 20 percent of the total.

The broadcasting sector is almost entirely owned by the state, especially at the national level, so there are no television channels that create and distribute content as public broadcasters. In addition, Internet service providers (ISPs) may block content as directed by government agencies.

If they have a phone or computer, citizens can create their own Internet resources and open Telegram channels. If the site is not registered, it will not receive any privileges bestowed on media (e.g., to receive government orders, accreditation, or to send requests to government agencies).

Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.

Most information channels are dependent on government policy, the position of the owner, etc. The editorial policy of the state media is completely dependent on the ministry or *akimats*, expressed in the choice of news, their coverage, election campaigning, etc. The state-run mass media enjoy preferential treatment in terms of state financing. Private media that receive state funding try to keep this information secret.

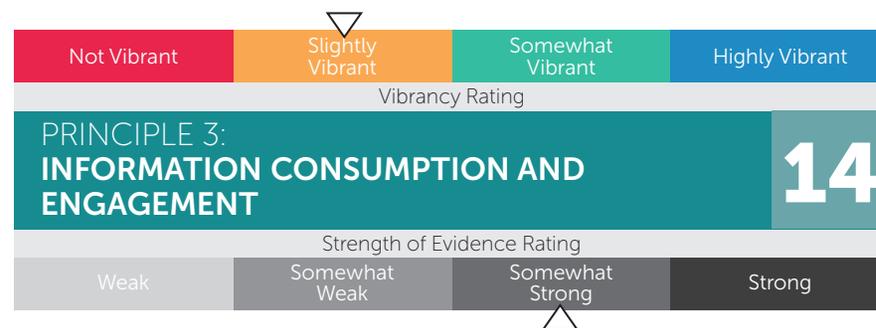
Also, state media have no restrictions on participation in the advertising market, but the support from the state budget allows them to reduce the cost of advertising. That, in turn, creates unfair competition in the media market—putting private media in a difficult position due to restrictions and prohibitions in advertising.

State media also sometimes receive exclusive access to news sources in government parliament and other state bodies. These government bodies “forget” to invite private media or fail to notify them about press conferences.

The distribution of frequencies in the broadcasting sector is not politically neutral, nor is the distribution of state subsidies. Only those media that demonstrate loyalty to the current political agenda can rely on subsidies.

Media organizations are influenced by their owners, who often reveal their interests in the publication of articles on behalf of the state. Journalists from the Ras Aitamyn Telegram channel, for example, found out that *akimats* in the regions of Kazakhstan commissioned favorable articles about themselves.

According to Gafurov, “The concept of ‘an independent and nonpartisan state structure’ for Kazakhstan is an oxymoron,” as the country has a rigid power hierarchy, and almost all officials belong to the ruling party, Nur Otan. “Accordingly, Nur Otan’s editorial influence is very high,” Gafurov noted.



The level of media literacy in Kazakhstan is quite low, as evidenced by

regular scandals in the information space. The protection of personal data is regularly discussed in the government, but data leaks often occur in practice. Recently, the state has been interested in training programs on media literacy, but it does not approach the issue systematically. Citizens have begun to use social networks more actively to get involved in government affairs and influence the decisions of officials, and this is yielding positive results. There are no formal community media in Kazakhstan, which the panel experts noted.

“There are no talk shows that discuss pressing issues; instead, they tend to focus on national traditions, the behavior of girls, the length of women’s skirts, or the creation of a family and relationships.”

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

At the end of 2021, amendments to the legislation on the protection of personal data were adopted, toughening the responsibility of businesses, government agencies, and citizens for the illegal collection and dissemination of personal information. Media experts of the Digital Rights Group actively participated in the discussion of the amendments, which made it possible to abolish some controversial norms—in particular, the responsibility of citizens for the dissemination of information published on the websites of government agencies.

In addition, the draft law drew sharp critiques from citizens, because it would introduce the right to be forgotten (requiring the removal of outdated and irrelevant materials from sources on the Internet). Due to the dissatisfaction of citizens, the minister abandoned this law.

Unfortunately, public awareness of personal data protection and digital hygiene remains low. People seem to care or think little about how such information can be misused, which is why banking and cyber-fraud scandals regularly arise. While there are tools and training for digital security among media outlets, they are not widely used.

The integral index of media literacy in Kazakhstan, compiled by Internews, is 17 out of a maximum 35, indicating a generally insufficient

level of media literacy in general. People often fall prey to unprofessional content producers who deliberately spread misinformation and rely on instant messages rather than official information. For example, people gathered outside the Financial Markets Regulatory Agency after believing a WhatsApp message about a loan amnesty—an incident that led to a criminal investigation.¹⁴

From time to time, lists of citizens with their personal data and postal addresses are uploaded to social networks (Dadumed database, the Central Electoral Commission [CEC], and the Ministry of Health)—including cases when lists of quarantine violators were published.

There are no known cases of explanations or statements by government agencies regarding information leaks, nor any steps taken in response. Most citizens use social networks but have weak information security skills or the ability to avoid ad targeting mechanisms. VPN tools are also not very popular.

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

Media literacy issues have only recently begun to be promoted and developed by the efforts of NGOs, international organizations, and educational institutions. Still, there is no understanding at the highest political level of the importance of teaching media literacy, nor a unified system for promoting media literacy, and the subject has not been introduced into the training cycle. However, universities and private schools conduct classes at a practical level, and the process of training teachers and trainers is underway.

Citizens are largely unaware of the basic principles of media literacy and

¹⁴ Alkhabaev, Shokan. The author of the fake mailing about credit amnesty is searched by the police of Almaty. Tengrinews. December 10, 2021. https://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/avtora-feykovoy-rassyilki-kreditnoy-amnistii-ischet-456292/.

tend to easily trust and spread false information — usually over instant messenger apps and social networks. The most problematic topics include vaccines, the purchase of vaccination passports, and loan amnesties. Due to people's inability to distinguish true from fake news, and their unwillingness to think critically, conflicts often flare up on social networks.

As part of an Internews project, a textbook on media literacy has been developed, which is in demand in private schools. The Ministry of Education has also decided to introduce media literacy as an elective subject for eighth-grade students, but the curriculum for this has not yet been approved.

NGOs—including Medianet, the Legal Media Center, the Institute for War and Peace Reporting, Mediasabaq, and the annual media literacy festival MediaFest—organize various trainings and courses on media literacy for journalists and bloggers.

According to Gafurov, users in the discussions on the newspaper's forum demonstrate fact-checking skills and are most often able to distinguish publications by their level of reliability.

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

The main platforms for discussion include messaging channels and the social media network Facebook. As a rule, these are informal groups and communities where people express their opinions, share information, and debate issues. They became the main ones for discussing environmental issues related to Small Taldykol, Boszhyra, and further participation of citizens in the advocacy of environmental rights.

There are no talk shows that discuss pressing issues; instead, they tend to focus on national traditions, the behavior of girls, the length of women's skirts, or the creation of a family and relationships. Some people expressing opinions or comments are accused of violating the law and are taken

to court. The ombudsman and public councils are rarely approached.

In the regions, platforms for public discussions are a rather rare phenomenon. For example, the People's Party of Kazakhstan regularly holds roundtables, but other parties are passive in this respect. Utility providers are required by law to hold public hearings on their applications, but this is also not enforced.

Tagging officials and government agencies on social networks has become an effective mechanism. They tend to respond promptly to such posts, especially when there are complaints about dubious public procurement and other possible offenses.

The creation of the independent Public Committee for Media Self-Regulation in Kazakhstan in July 2021, which includes well-known journalists and media experts, provides a forum to address the most serious ethics violation cases. The body—whose members are transparently selected and nominated by journalists—makes public statements urging journalists and bloggers to be more careful about publishing sensitive information.

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

Over the past few years, media have begun to better understand the needs of the audience (with more frequent research and audience surveys, as well as measurements of media consumption) and have begun to involve audiences more in content creation. Traditionally, media measurements are handled by TNS (television surveys), while websites use free metrics, such as Google Analytics, liveinternet.ru, alexa.com, Yandex, and others. Polls conducted by the Ministry of Information and Public Accord are not available to the public.

Editorial offices do not allocate funds to study audience needs. Many media websites have disabled commenting features to avoid legal liability for the content of comments, and open meetings with consumers or

Due to the lack of community media and the lack of information from local community news, residents often receive false information.

readers are not practiced. Experts speak about the needs of the audience on social networks and in the print media, and NGOs do so through research; however, there are taboos on social and political topics, and these experts are carefully selected to speak on the air.

Some sites have a feedback function to send a message or complaint, but not many people use it.

One of the forms of cooperation and feedback is the creation of the Public Committee for Media Self-Regulation, which issues statements on ethical issues such as publishing identifying information—such as videos or photos--of people who attempt suicide.

According to Gafurov, serious studies of the quality of the audience are not affordable for many regional media, not to mention rural ones. Website editors, however, widely use quantitative research. Not all advertisers understand what exactly they need to pay attention to in these numbers; they mainly look at the number of subscribers.

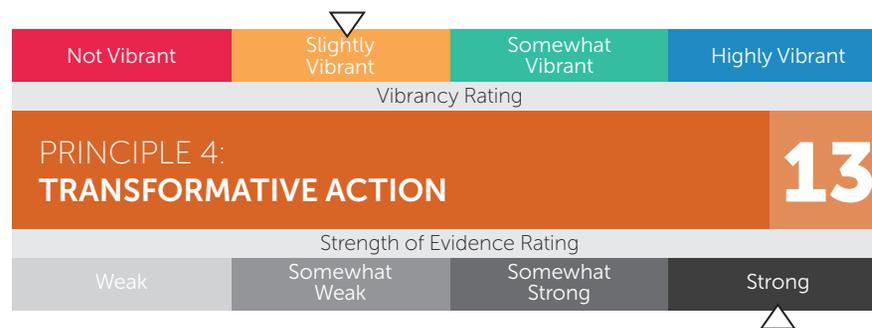
Jalilov believes that measurements are made mainly for advertisers and in the search for topics, but hardly to meet public demand and interest.

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

In Kazakhstan, there is no concept of community media; it is not in Kazakhstan’s mass media law, and, accordingly, there is no legal regulation of such media. In practice, local community media outlets are created in the form of public pages on social networks, and they are very successful because local news is always a priority over national news. Public pages are very popular in the regions and especially in remote villages, where it is difficult to deliver printed newspapers. However, there is a problem of plagiarism of news from media sites and the flow of illegal advertising income.

Due to the lack of community media and the lack of information from local community news, residents often receive false information. This is a big problem for a country where life is divided into centers and regions; society is also very divided.

According to Jalilov, the state funds newspapers of national diasporas (Uighur Ayvazi, DAZ, Kore Ilbo, etc.). They represent the interests of local national minorities—but are more called upon to pursue an ideological policy, since they are dependent on state funds to operate.



This principle received the lowest score of this year’s VIBE study. This is due to the fact that the state has little interest in improving its interaction with society and disseminating high-quality information. Citizens communicate sparingly with deputies and have little trust in political parties. Information about human rights violations is often misrepresented or hidden. The Internet community tends to believe conspiracy theories and dubious opinion leaders, as there is little quality official information. At the same time, bloggers and experts have become more active in legislative activities, analyzing public procurement, which allows them to influence the situation in the country.

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

Formally, there are several political parties in Kazakhstan, but only one has an influential media holding, which is also financed from the budget—leaving very little ideological pluralism of opinions in the media. Politics is presented almost exclusively from the official point of view, and citizens with alternative points of view on politics and development trends have limited opportunities to convey their point of view and dis-

cuss these topics. The discussion develops mainly on social networks, such as Instagram, Facebook, VK (previously known as VKontakte), and OK (previously known as Odnoklassniki), and is not always high-quality.

Opinion leaders include many stars, *aqyns* (improvising poets and singers in the Kazakh and Kyrgyz cultures), and politicians. Among them are

Dosym Satpaev, Baizakova, Krivosheev, Elikbaev, Shuraev, Lyazzat Akhatova, and Aigul Orynbeke. Often, they pose questions that turn into heated discussions; the most controversial discussion topics include COVID-19 vaccinations, mistakes by health-care workers, corruption, and crimes.

According to Yerkimbay, only [Azattyq.org](https://azattyq.org) can be called a neutral source of information in the Kazakh language; Asanbayeva commented that the only platform that features discussion of professional development and media market issues is still Mediakurultay.

Thanks to the availability of the Internet, people can read and watch media of different ideological orientations, for example, in English and Russian.

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

Unfortunately, a fairly large part of the population relies heavily on WhatsApp messages—which are often unreliable—and on social networks, rather than information from government websites and other official sources of information. Although many do listen to opinion leaders who offer good information, some people continue to believe in conspiracy theories and support anti-vaxxers.

As for health issues, people often rely on the opinions of famous people and believe in nontraditional methods and pseudo-psychology. For this reason, the COVID-19 anti-vaccination movement has been very active and featured heavily on social media, leading to angry exchanges that often border on insult.

“An independent civil society, in practice, is not allowed to resolve issues. It is only intended to create the illusion of a democratic country.” said Jalilov

Evidence of officials communicating directly with citizens is extremely scarce. The few meetings that do take place serve to ensure that deputies explain the bills being adopted—often limiting their remarks to prepared inquiries—rather than answering voters’ questions. Deputies are often provided with prepared inquiries.

As for elections, administrative resources tend to influence results. When it comes to local elections, teachers and doctors are forced to vote for whoever the local administrators support. At the same time, electoral activity is very low. According to Jalilov, most of the audience is still focused on

emotions, rather than on logic and quality media.

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

The civil society sector in Kazakhstan is one of the few interested in promoting democracy, freedom of speech, respect for ethics, development of the media industry, and media-literate consumers.

In 2021, many initiatives related to the wide involvement of NGOs in the process of government decision-making were introduced, but in practice, they have not yet been implemented. For example, the development and consideration of the draft law “On Public Control,” which involves the introduction of new forms of civil society participation, such as online petitions, began; citizens were invited to express their opinion and vote for it. In addition, the Digital Rights Group was actively involved in the development of amendments to the law on the protection of personal data and insisted on the implementation of some progressive norms.

Another example is the law on cruelty to animals, passed at the end of the year following active participation of NGOs in parliamentary discussions.

However, according to Jalilov, “An independent civil society, in practice, is not allowed to resolve issues. It is only intended to create the illusion

of a democratic country.”

NGOs use quality information for their research and proposals, so they are often invited as experts to government bodies. NGOs offer quality research, analysis, and National Adaptation Plan (NAP) drafts for government review.

However, it should be noted that despite a noticeable increase in civic activism, many fundamental and political issues remain out of reach: For example, despite many years of media coverage of reforming the state financing system, nothing has changed.

At the same time, government-organized NGOs, or GONGOs (NGOs that receive state funding), are more prevalent than independent NGOs. Independent NGOs, in turn, are often accused of having links with the West and labeled foreign agents; such materials appear both in the press and on social networks.

Unfortunately, far from all NGOs can competently inform the public about their work, and they are unable to “sell” their work.

The media, however, quite often rely on the expertise of NGOs to prepare their materials. As a rule, this applies only to traditional registered publications, not blogs.

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

In the absence of real political competition, decisions, actions, and processes are not always based on reliable, high-quality information. Conversely, to justify unpopular decisions, government propaganda often replaces research data. A good example is the country’s anti-corruption strategy, which was valid until 2021. Despite rampant corruption in the country, the strategy did not take into account the level of business involvement, for example, in corruption schemes. The drive to maintain the

dominance of the current political regime outweighs any effort to follow real data and qualitative sociological research.

The incumbent president put forward the concept of a “hearing state,” which means that government agencies listen to the society and the needs and problems of individual citizens. Yet in practice, access to certain categories of information is still limited.

Another problematic point is the inefficient communication of government agencies with society and the media. Due to the lack of real political competition and the artificial dominance of one political party, the

civil service in Kazakhstan is not based on public trust and professionalism, but protectionism. Despite recent amendments adopted to the country’s law on civil service, patronage, protectionism, and nepotism still take place.

In this regard, official communications are structured not to supply the society with prompt and reliable information, but to enable government agencies to share only

favorable information. Therefore, press events are often formal, and journalists do not always have the opportunity to ask questions.

At the beginning of the year, new accreditation rules were adopted containing a controversial clause that allows moderators of press conferences to “keep track of the order in which they are held”—in practice, allowing them to disconnect journalists who might ask unwanted questions from online press conferences.

Similarly, meetings of *akims* with citizens are held annually but are not very popular.

According to Maricheva, the government does not directly share information known to be false, but it often deploys information manipulatively. Gafurov believes that officials are rarely caught in deliberate lies, but rather, they hide information that does not serve their interests. “I don’t even remember cases when officials referred to

“ Due to the lack of real political competition and the artificial dominance of one political party, the civil service in Kazakhstan is not based on public trust and professionalism, but protectionism.”

the media in their arguments. Basically, these are references to statistics and laws, as well as to messages from the president,” he said.

Government representatives rarely offer clear explanations of the reasoning behind their decisions. For example, the transfer of the country’s electronic government platform to a Russian company alarmed many citizens, but state agencies rebuffed questions on why they allowed the move.

Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic rights.

The panelists highlighted two trends in reporting corruption. On the one hand, despite the fact that Kazakhstan has ratified the UN Convention against Corruption and is obliged to provide access to information about facts of corruption, the government delays or refuses to disclose official information and limits access, including for the media, under the pretext of preserving the secrecy of the investigation. Thus, in cases involving high-profile detentions, for example, media do not get enough facts to understand the whole picture—who is detained and why, what actions will be taken next, etc.

On the other hand, social networks and Telegram channels overflow with information and facts, including confirmations from government agencies, without any delays or setbacks. For example, after civil society activists publish details about controversial public procurements, tenders are regularly canceled—including a [contract for the creation of books](#) about the first president and a [contract for the maintenance of a university building](#) with a price tag of \$25 million—saving public funds. In another example, the [director of the House of Culture, Saken Maygaziev, resigned](#) when social media posts revealed that he allocated \$1.3 million from the budget for Nauryz celebrations, stirring societal outrage and leading to the cancelation of the project.

In another positive development, journalists gained access to court hearings on corruption crimes. Now, details from the latest high-profile trials, such as the case involving a Supreme Court of the Republic of Kazakhstan judge accused of taking bribes, are [available online](#).

Information regarding human rights cases is also often withheld, especially when it comes to torture, again explained by a need to preserve the secrecy of the investigation. Often journalists cannot get answers to inquiries about the details of violent criminal cases.

Journalists cover electoral processes quite discreetly and cautiously. The CEC adopted a number of resolutions to restrict the activities of observers and journalists during the voting process and the counting of votes at polling stations. Until the moment of voting and counting of votes, journalists had limited access to open collegial meetings of the CEC. Officials also placed restrictions on the publication of public opinion polls in the media. Restrictions on attendance at polling stations were introduced for bloggers, and this did not affect journalists. However, this negatively impacted the election observation process, reducing its coverage and quality.

During each election, independent media publish data on committed violations, but, as a rule, election commissions, including the CEC, react to these publications with one phrase: “The observed violations did not have a significant impact on the election result,” or they ignore these reports altogether.

According to Vadim Boreyko, the last fair elections were held in Kazakhstan in 1990.

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