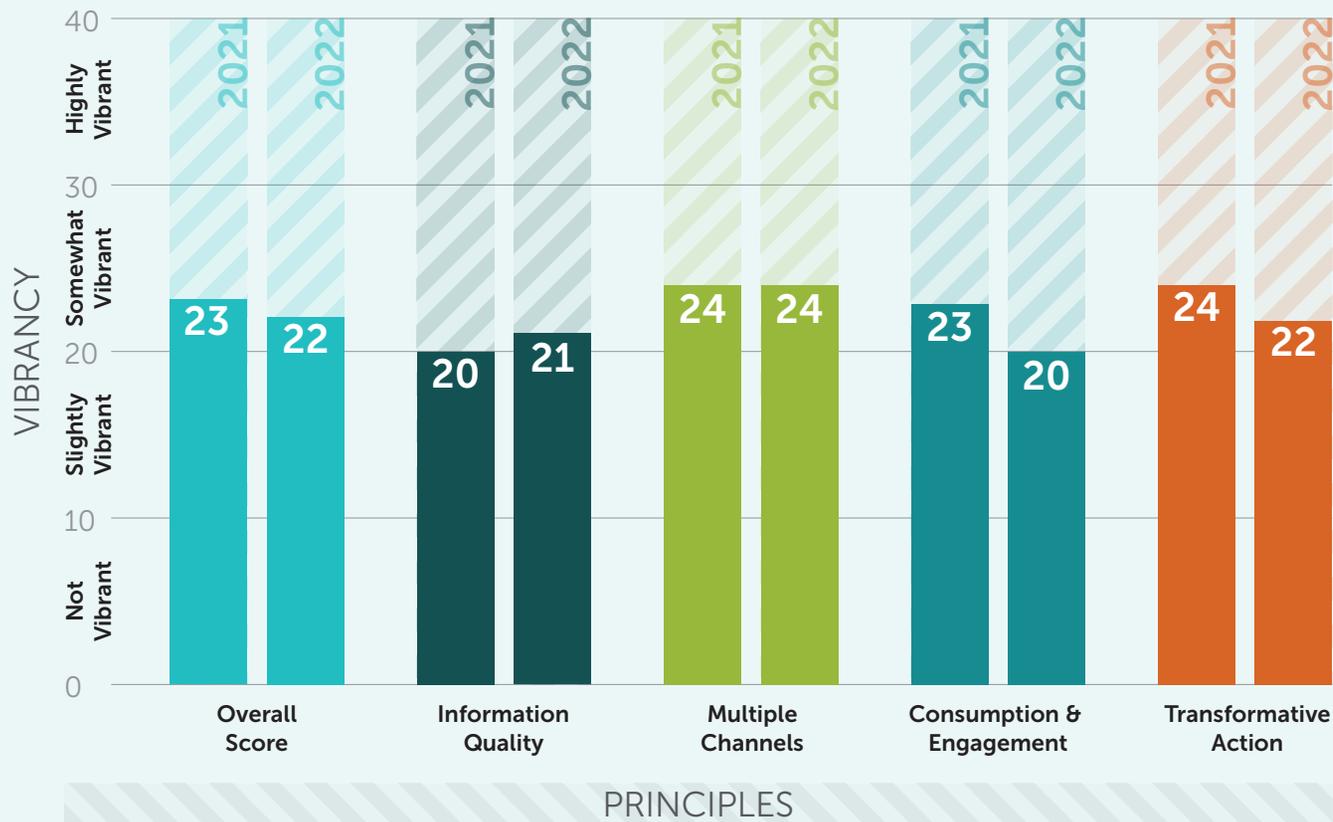


MOLDOVA

Vibrant Information Barometer

2 0 2 2





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

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

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

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

Highly Vibrant

Somewhat Vibrant

Slightly Vibrant

Not Vibrant

OVERALL
SCORE

22

Although the COVID-19 pandemic and the government's handling of it, continued to dominate the news in Moldova last year, political tumult also captured the media's attention. In 2021, Moldova had two governments. In the first part of the year, an interim prime minister and a parliament loyal to former president Igor Dodon led the country. Dodon lost his bid for reelection in November 2020. The new president, Maia Sandu, called a snap parliamentary election in July 2021 to usher in a parliament with which she could work. Sandu's Action and Solidarity Party took more than 50 percent of the votes—nearly double the share of the Electoral Bloc of Communists and Socialists, led by Dodon and another former president, Vladimir Voronin.

In the last few months of 2021, Moldova faced a significant energy crisis, as Russia's gas giant Gazprom hiked the price of gas and threatened to cut off supplies.

With regard to the coronavirus, the government's middling communication strategy left space for the rampant flow of misinformation, resulting in a low vaccination rate.

Moldova's overall country score of 22 is down by 1 point from the previous year. The second principle, measuring how information flows, received the highest score, of 24. Both principles 1 (information quality) and 3 (consumption and engagement) received similar scores (21 and 20, respectively). The fourth principle (transformative action) received a score of 22.

Panelists agreed that Moldovan media offer quality information on a variety of topics, but the content went downhill, mirroring the political reshuffles, the gas crisis, and the government's dismal handling of the pandemic. During the tense campaign season, broadcasters dug in along political lines, and panelists said that voters consumed media

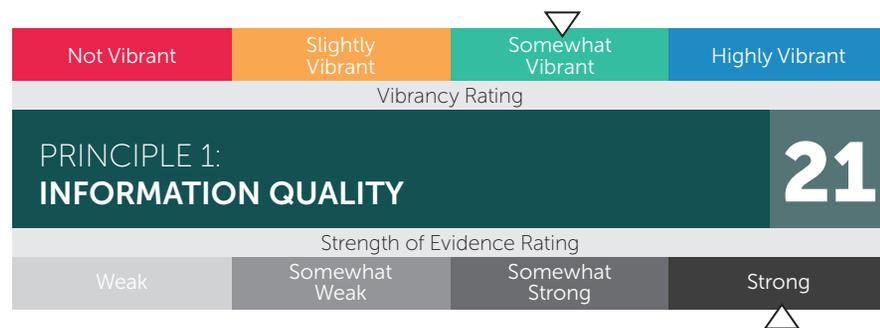
content in line with their ideological leanings. Politicians churned out manipulative stories via social networks and partisan media, which attracted more consumers than fact-checker websites and the independent media that combat disinformation.

Because of poor business prospects for independent media, panelists gave the low scores to the indicator on financial sustainability. On the other hand, laws guaranteeing free speech and press, as well as an adequate media infrastructure, led to higher scores on the principle measuring how information flows. Panelists gave those higher scores even as major issues remain, including difficult access to information and too few laws against mainstream media concentration.

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) constantly seek to help Moldovans, especially the younger age group, develop critical thinking skills. However, NGOs have no help from any state strategic approach, so most people remain media-illiterate. Citizens lack awareness and knowledge of digital security, which poses threats to content producers as well as information consumers.

Moldovan civil society is strong, working to build healthy democratic processes. Government agencies continue to ignore and avoid answering journalists' or citizens' requests for information. Public debates on social media platforms are neither constructive nor healthy. Populism and misinformation usually shape people's views on political issues, but some panelists said the election outcomes showed that Moldovans have begun to think more critically.

The panelists gave high marks to the indicator on civil society operations, while they rated the indicator on individuals' use of information to inform their actions low.



Moldova has good infrastructure for producing information, along with many training opportunities for content producers. Nevertheless, quality content is relatively rare, and it reaches a relatively small audience. The pandemic and the parliamentary campaign created a boom in unethical and irresponsible content. Fact checkers, verification sources, and independent media spent considerable time combating disinformation coming from political media holdings. In the absence of serious professional consequences, unethical content producers freely produce misinformation. The lowest score of all 20 VIBE indicators went to that on resources for content production, suggesting that independent media still stand on shaky financial ground.

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

Moldova's infrastructure allows for the production of varied media content, including in broadcast and digital formats. "The improvement of internet coverage in the country's regions has ensured a higher production capacity for online media," said Irina Ghelbur, development manager of the AGORA news website. Ruslan Mihalevschi, editor-in-chief of the weekly *SP* newspaper in Bălți, said that print media are dwindling as readership declines. He also said that the high fees that Moldova printers charge for low-quality work remain a serious financial burden for independent newspapers.

Ion Bunduchi, executive director of the Association of Electronic Press,

said that journalists and nonprofessional content producers have various opportunities for training in creating ethical and evidence-based content. However, politically linked media in particular do not take advantage of them.

Media researcher Aneta Gonța noted that the specialized training system remains uncoordinated and chaotically divided. The programs are among journalism faculties, civil society entities (such as the Chișinău School of Advanced Journalism, a project of the Independent Journalism Center), or continuous training courses organized by Teleradio-Moldova.

Gonta described traditional academic training as "still anchored in old patterns," and said that alternative training opportunities fill only some of the gaps left by journalism schools. As a result, their graduates are not suited to the labor market and are unprepared for the newsroom.

In the breakaway Transnistria region and the autonomous territory of Gagauzia, content producers have limited training opportunities.¹ "Those who work for the independent press actively participate in the few initiatives implemented by NGOs, while government-controlled media remain isolated," said Luiza Doroshenko, executive director of the Media Center, an NGO in Tiraspol. A journalist from Gagauzia said that local training organizations have long been inactive, so journalists there improve skills by turning to classes that NGOs hold in the capital, Chișinău.

With regard to ethics, standards, and accuracy, Moldovan media fall into two camps. "On the one hand, there are politically controlled media holdings that have abandoned professional standards, and on the other hand, independent media that aspire to fair and fact-based journalism," said Eugeniu Ribca, a media law expert and the executive director of the Mold-Street website, which covers business and corruption issues. While political media knowingly flout professional principles, independent media sometimes embrace sensationalism and choose speed over accuracy, Bunduchi observed.

¹ A 1994 law decreed Gagauzia "an autonomous territorial unit with a special status, which, being a form of self-determination of the Gagauzians, is a component part of the Republic of Moldova." https://www.legis.md/cautare/getResults?doc_id=86684&lang=ro.

Media have little deterrent from publishing unethical and unprofessional content, given Moldova's paltry to nonexistent professional consequences. "This situation encourages bad-faith journalists to continue their informational belligerence," Ghelbur said. Gonța gave specifics on the enactment shortfalls: "The Press Council of Moldova, an ethics enforcement body, issues warnings and statements when media violate professional standards, but in the absence of binding legal force, these sanctions aren't implemented or taken seriously."

TV and radio stations have stricter standards than online or print media, but the Audiovisual Council, the main regulator, only rarely and selectively applies sanctions for violating broadcasting laws. "The problem became more acute during the parliamentary elections of 2021, when the AC avoided sanctioning broadcasters who, according to its own monitoring, blatantly violated the law," Bunduchi said.

Overall, the media market in Moldova produces diverse content on many topics. Although only about 30 percent of respondents to the 2021 Moldovan Barometer of Public Opinion survey said they were somewhat or very interested in politics, the topic continues to crowd out coverage of other relevant issues.²

Media provide little specialized and thematic reporting. Gonța did single out Zona de Securitate, a website that covers Transnistria and the buffer security zone between it and the rest of Moldova, as a huge leap for Moldovan specialized reporting.³ The few professional content producers that produce reliable information on a fairly wide range of topics do not reach the whole country; they are more concentrated in Chișinău.

Important topics are overlooked, observed Alina Andronache, a

2 Institute of Public Policy. *Barometer of Public Opinion*. June 2021 (Romanian). https://ipp.md/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Raport-BOP-2021_.pdf.

3 Zona de [Securitate.md](https://zonadesecuritate.md/despre-noi/) is the first platform in Moldova created to reflect the situation in the security zone and Transnistria. <https://zonadesecuritate.md/despre-noi/>.

journalist and blogger. Non-professional content producers would have a lot to say on environmental issues, given the resources, she said.

The panelists from Transnistria and Gagauzia said the regions' media lack diversity in the issues they cover and the views and values they represent. "The topic of human rights is covered superficially and rarely, journalistic investigations are not carried out, and there are few analytical pieces," Doroshenko said.

Panelists agreed that various media report on national, international, and local topics, but local coverage is often weaker. "The major media continue to have a big problem dealing with issues in the regions, and the regional press still only sporadically reach the capital," said Vadim Șterbate, a reporter for the *Observatorul de Nord* newspaper, in the northern city of Soroca. Doroshenko said most of the content in Transnistria is news on Russia and that region, with scarce national and international coverage. A journalist from Gagauzia said that most of the media in that region approach the news from an angle favorable to local authorities.

Panelists agreed that journalists generally hold the government accountable for its actions, but their results are not always visible. As Gonța said, so-called constructive criticism of the authorities happens mostly in online and the few independent traditional media outlets. She added that reporters rarely make clear to the public the importance of the information.

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

Panelists criticized the media's performance in countering misinformation. Politically aligned media organizations continued to overshadow those that produce fact-based, well-sourced, and objective content. Gonța said that the Moldovan media landscape is rife with

“On the one hand, there are politically controlled media holdings that have abandoned professional standards, and on the other hand, independent media that aspire to fair and fact-based journalism,” said Eugeniu Rîbca.

misinformation, disinformation, and mal-information, mostly spread by online tabloid media. The situation was especially dire in the run-up to the July parliamentary election, said Olga Guțuțui, a program director at TV8 at the time of the panel, who now leads a media-production company. The government has no efficient tools for sanctioning unprofessional work, Rîbca said. Mihalevschi said misinformation is spread deliberately on behalf of political and oligarchic groups and less so than by producers that lack capacity to check or nail down their own reports.

Regarding the government's role in disseminating content intended to harm, nationwide Jurnal TV journalist Vitalie Călugăreanu said that during the first half of 2021, pro-government media made no pretense of objectivity. He said that politicians from the Socialists Party of the Republic of Moldova freely lied at press conferences, contributing significantly to the spread of fake news and misleading information.

Ghelbur mentioned several investigative agencies and fact-checking websites, such as [Mediacritica](#) and [Stopfals.md](#), that regularly debunk disinformation. However, Șterbate noted that their sites do not reach wide audiences. Independent media spend considerable time combating the disinformation produced by political media holdings, at the expense of their own journalistic investigations, Rîbca said.

Guțuțui noted that the most prominent, sustained disinformation efforts were tied to the pandemic. For example, she said a gusher of conspiracy theories about implanting microchips in people through COVID-19 vaccines greatly undermined the national immunization campaign.

The Intelligence and Security Service (ISS) has introduced a form for people to complete to report fake news about the pandemic. Based on decisions by the National Commission for Emergency Situations and ISS, national internet service provider Orange Moldova has blocked access to two sites as sources of misinformation about the pandemic.

“The topic of human rights is covered superficially and rarely, journalistic investigations are not carried out, and there are few analytical pieces,” Doroshenko said.

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

The panelists agreed that, with one exception, foreign governments or their proxies do not transmit mal-information or propaganda. Several panelists said that much of the content from Russia includes information that can harm or incite intolerance, even hatred, for minority groups. Social media have become efficient alternatives for Russian information channels to disseminate malicious content, said Ghelbur. He mentioned specifically the speculation about Gazprom's price increases and its threats to cut off gas supplies.

The early parliamentary elections of July fueled the trend of high-ranking officials and politicians disseminating mal-information and hate speech. Church leaders, too, disseminated hate speech, but against legislators who voted to ratify the Council of Europe Istanbul Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, Guțuțui said. She added that the government's poor communication on the essence of the document left room for misinformation. Mihalevschi noted the [story](#) of then-Prime Minister Ion Chicu's criticism of a woman who had returned from Italy while suffering from COVID-19 and how his comments generated a wave of hatred against her.

Some media outlets and platforms have self-regulatory mechanisms and/or processes to moderate content to reduce mal-information or hate speech. However, content producers who put out disinformation and hate speech, intentionally or unintentionally, face no serious consequences.

A 2021 [report](#) by the Promo-LEX nongovernmental organization found an increase in hate speech and a legislative framework inadequate to stop the spread. Mass media, especially online, remain overrun with hateful and intolerant speech. Promo-LEX counted 299 examples during the campaign, spread 317 times by 67 media sources. In the context of the

pandemic, social networks have become a battleground of hate speech between those who choose to be vaccinated and anti-vaxxers.

Some panelists pointed out that voters rejected Dodon, the former president, and his parliament allies partly due to their involvement in spreading mal-information and hate speech.

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

Overall, people have access to content in the language they speak or prefer, as Moldovan media offer news and information sources in Romanian and Russian, the second-most commonly used language. Several panelists said the media include almost no content in other languages. Ukrainian, the mother tongue of Moldova’s largest ethnic minority, is not present except for the fragments broadcast by the Moldova 1 public media service provider. Still, Bunduchi said, local media do present the ideologies and perspectives of Bulgarians, Gagauzians, Ukrainians, and other minority groups. Ghelbur said also that marginalized groups and their organizations have alternative online platforms where they can express their opinions.

Minorities rarely figure in mainstream media coverage and tend to catch the interest of journalists only during controversies or celebrations. This neglect of marginalized groups means that the broader society has little understanding of their issues, experiences, and viewpoints. Andronache said the mainstream media are not sufficiently inclusive in their coverage, particularly of minority religious groups and of LGBT people—who are widely seen as a threat to society, she said.

The panelists agreed that traditionally, women staff newsrooms, but panelists were divided on whether media companies have a gender balance in managerial positions. Some said media leadership is mostly in the hands of men, while others noted an approximate gender equilibrium in those roles. As for gender representation in the mainstream media, Bunduchi said that all monitoring reports of the Audiovisual Council and NGOs, such as the Independent Journalism Center, show a clear gender discrepancy, with males more often cited or

mentioned.⁴

Media content in the Transnistria region and Gagauzia lacks inclusivity and diversity. The Russian language predominates in both regions, although they have other official languages, such as Russian, Moldovan (Romanian), and Ukrainian in Transnistria and Gagauz in Gagauzia.

Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced.

Nearly all panelists agreed that media serving political agendas have no money worries, while independent content producers continue to struggle financially. Alternative sources of funding, such as subscriptions, crowdfunding, or memberships, do not provide sufficient financial sustainability. Most independent media rely on international donor support, panelists said. Most advertising revenue has shifted from print media to online media and social networks. Ghelbur said approximately 65 percent of local advertising revenue goes to Google and Facebook.

Bunduchi said that the law does not prohibit penetrating advertising⁵, nor the possibility of concentrating almost all advertising in Chişinău. Important businesses are generally interested in national or regional mainstream media, and local media fare poorly in the advertising market, Guţuţui said.

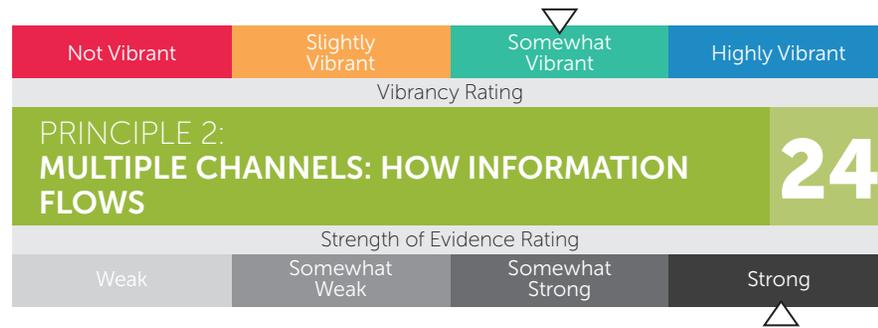
Government subsidies go only to public media service providers, who also soak up money from the advertising market, Bunduchi said. Officially, Moldova has no state advertising, although individual agencies and government-held companies sometimes place advertisements. Some panelists said that advertising contracts for the state-owned Moldtelecom go exclusively to politically affiliated television stations.

Salaries are low for journalists who work at independent media outlets. “Many [journalists] provide additional services or take additional

4 Independent Journalism Center. *Media monitoring in the election campaign for the early parliamentary elections of July 11, 2021*. June 1-10, 2021. <http://alegeri.md/images/5/59/Raport-mass-media-cji-alegeri-parlamentare-2021-1.pdf>.

5 Defined in Moldovan law as advertising that is accessible to Moldovan consumers and for the distribution of which a broadcaster from the Republic of Moldova has not been paid.

jobs, managing in this way to avoid working for other institutions whose editorial policies are not in line with their ideals of professional standards,” Șterbate said.



Moldova has good laws protecting speech and press freedoms, but access to information remains spotty. Independent journalists seeking government information frequently face delays or denials. Generally, public figures use the legal system to retaliate against journalists covering controversial or sensitive topics. At other times, journalists are insulted or harassed for doing their job. Within principle 2, the average score resulted from the significant discrepancy between the highest-scored indicators, which describe the ICT infrastructure, and the lowest-scored indicators, which address the independence and diversity of the channels for information flow.

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

Moldova has sound laws guaranteeing free speech and free media. Most panelists said that the laws are in line with international standards and, in general, applied uniformly. However, Gonța had differing observations of how the Audiovisual Council, which appointed him in December along with fellow panelists Ruslan Mihalevschi and Eugeniu Rîbca, operates. Gonta said that in 2021, the council followed the dictates of political groups and sanctioned or forgave media organizations at will, rarely enforcing the law correctly.

No journalists were jailed or killed for doing their job last year, and the laws that protect the confidentiality of sources are applied fairly, especially in court. Moldova has no criminal laws that can be used to persecute people or journalists for expressing their opinions or covering the news. But Moldovan legislation still classifies slander as a misdemeanor and, as Bunduchi noted, “it is used frequently to discourage criticism.”

Panelists said that the government does not regularly undermine the press, but from time to time, authorities obstruct journalist access to events or information of public interest.⁶ According to public [statements](#) by the Independent Journalism Center (IJC) and seven other national media NGOs, journalists were insulted or intimidated for doing their job at least 27 times in 2021. Most of the time, though, the subjects of unfavorable coverage use the legal system to pursue journalists. Last year, IJC received requests to represent three independent media organizations in at least 12 such lawsuits.

The panelists agreed that the government does not pressure information and communications technology providers to censor media. Ghelbur noted warily, though, that ISS has taken down websites spreading lies, but “there were no announced and clearly defined criteria so as not to allow random decisions in the future against any other content producers.”

In Transnistria and Gagauzia, people have the rights to create, share, and consume information. However, independent professional content producers sometimes self-censor for fear of persecution by the authorities.

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

The VIBE indicator measuring general access to channels of information has held steady over the years and received the highest score of all 20

⁶ “Access to Information//Over 20 Journalists List Institutions Most Closed for the Press,” Media AZI. May 17, 2021. <http://media-azi.md/en/stiri/access-informationover-20-journalists-list-institutions-most-closed-press>.

indicators. Panelists said that a proper ICT infrastructure now covers most of Moldova. Internet penetration is high, and speeds are faster in Moldova than in some EU countries. Access extends to all urban and rural areas, increasing general accessibility to diverse information channels. Șterbate said that in spots in the northern Soroca district, people can catch Russian, Ukrainian, or Transnistrian stations, but not programs broadcast from the capital.

Guțuțui referenced a [report](#) by the National Agency for Regulation of Electronic Communications and Information Technology, showing that the country's electronic communications market grew in the second quarter of 2021 by 3.2 percent over the same period in the previous year, to about MDL 1.5 billion (\$82.5 million). The report also said 2.3 million people have internet access via smartphones.

Moldova has no legal or social norms that preclude groups from access. Nevertheless, people with hearing impairments struggle with accessibility, as the country has too few certified deaf interpreters. Most citizens can afford at least a radio and television, but some still cannot afford internet service. “It became obvious how big the problem is when many children went without lessons when school went online during the pandemic,” Guțuțui observed.

Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for government information.

In general, the national legislation on access to information meets relevant international and European standards. Rîbca noted that Moldova is a party to the Council of Europe Convention on Access to Official Documents, or the Tromsø Convention. The convention has been in effect for a year and sets minimum standards for freedom of information.

Journalists have sometimes had difficulty obtaining information

to produce the news. Some panelists faulted the bureaucracy and obstructionist officials that invoke privacy and data protection laws to

“Most citizens can afford at least a radio and television, but some still cannot afford internet service. “It became obvious how big the problem is when many children went without lessons when school went online during the pandemic,” Guțuțui observed.

restrict access to information of public interest. When they come, responses are often late or incomplete, making it problematic for journalists to do their work. Often, the reports for which the information was sought have already been aired or published by the time the information arrives, Gonța said.

Panelists said that they have found no evidence of spokespersons treating some information-seekers differently, but several panelists said they have seen spokespersons “protect” their superiors from sensitive questions from the press or even ignore the inquiries.

Citizens have means to access governmental policy and decision-making information. But sometimes the format of the information, or how seldom it is updated, do little to help public understanding. The law obliges officials to ensure effective ways of informing the public on the decision-making process. However, no one has conducted research to show how well these mechanisms work, said Natalia Porubin, a journalist and member of the Press Council of Moldova.

Since the start of the pandemic, the Ministry of Health has restricted its communications with the public, and independent media have had very limited direct access to public officials. Under pressure from civil society, the ministry initially agreed to weekly press conferences but ceased them later, citing overwork. At the beginning of 2021, the journalists' crisis cell, launched by the Independent Journalism Center to promote transparency in the pandemic, called on the ministry to honor its public commitment to weekly press conferences and to allow journalists to pose direct questions to decision-makers, Guțuțui said.

Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow.

Panelists agreed that concentration of ownership is a main obstacle to

media pluralism in Moldova. The law requires that final beneficiaries disclose TV media ownership and prohibits a single owner from holding more than two broadcast licenses. In practice, this means little, Rîbca said, as the state has no compliance mechanisms. The Competition Council has failed to address dominant positions in the media market, while members of the Audiovisual Council have said that it lacks the authority to check the veracity of owners’ disclosures.

Moldovan law does not regulate online media or their ownership, and civil society groups have unsuccessfully pushed for regulations on transparency in all media ownership. “There’s a range of self-declared media web portals that don’t disclose their owners or administrators and are a major source of manipulation and misinformation. Their content is quoted by the politically controlled holdings that bear no legal/financial liability for it,” Rîbca said.

People can freely establish media. The Audiovisual Council licenses and allocates the radio spectrum to broadcast media. Bunduchi said the processes are transparent, but without precise, clear, or measurable rules. “The applications are analyzed superficially and in a pro forma way. It gives the impression that the winner of the license or airwave frequency is known in advance,” he said. Gonța said that the council has granted radio spectrum segments without seriously checking whether applicants have met licensing requirements.

Some panelists said that public service media have strictly followed the government’s agenda, and very few of their products are truly educational, new, or unique. Laws to bolster the editorial independence of national public media have not worked. In the second half of 2021, parliament amended broadcasting legislation to give itself more control over the Audiovisual Council and management of Teleradio Moldova, the national public service media provider. The measures were decried by civil society groups and European Broadcasting Union, which [called](#) them a “step backward in ensuring the autonomy and independence of Teleradio Moldova.”

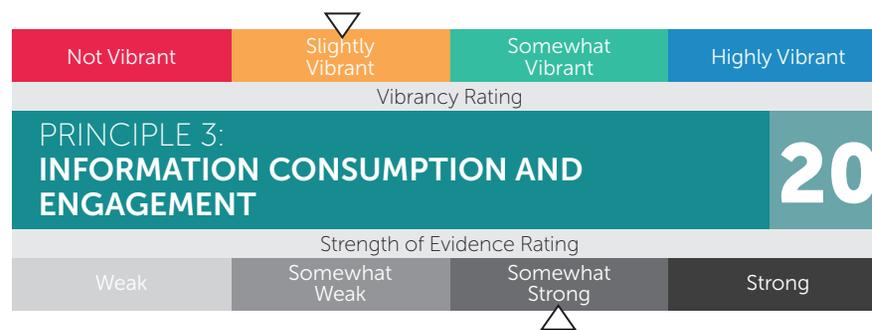
“The public media providers still believe that government subsidies mean they have to serve the government,” Bunduchi said.

Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.

The VIBE indicator measuring independence of information channels scored the lowest in this principle. The panelists were unanimous about the lack of media independence, as media owner’s and advertiser’s political influences are obvious. Not many content producers clearly separate editorial activity from commercial activity to avoid interference in editorial policy, Ghelbur said.

Government subsidies, which are granted only for public media, compromise editorial independence. “The public media providers still believe that government subsidies mean they have to serve the government,” Bunduchi said. In 2021, many Moldovan media NGOs, along with media professionals and the public, blasted the Audiovisual Council as ineffective and vulnerable to outside influence. Several panelists said the council showed itself to be under political control in sanctioning some television stations and sparing others.

Most media in the Transnistria region and Gagauzia are not independent. The media owners and the owners’ relationships with politicians and advertisers influence editorial policy.



The indicator measuring media literacy received the lowest scores of all 20 VIBE indicators, with panelists flagging it as a serious challenge. Civic groups continued to promote media literacy skills through educational projects, but the government has no strategic approach to media

literacy education. The general population is ill-equipped to assess the truth and quality of information. Although Moldova has laws to protect privacy, most people have little information on digital security, and they inadequately understand its importance. Journalists and civil society activists use their freedom of speech, but access to information remains problematic. Moldovans have plenty of platforms for sharing their opinions and initiating discussions. Media outlets work to engage with their consumers' needs and research them to the extent they can afford. Cooperation between content producers and civil society is positive, although government officials seem to want no part of that relationship. Community media remain underdeveloped.

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

Moldovan laws and institutions, such as the Information Technology and Cyber Security Service (ITCSS) and the National Center for Personal Data Protection, aim to ensure data privacy and digital security. “Digital security measures are relatively new for Moldova and the regulatory framework is insufficient,” Bunduchi said. Guțuțui said that officials sometimes use Moldova’s law protecting personal data as an excuse to deny requests for information.

Media outlets and other professional content producers have access to digital security training programs, but the ITCSS charges fees for them, and those organized by NGOs are rare.

Some media outlets take steps to safeguard themselves from digital attacks, but digital hygiene is not widely practiced, several panelists said. Online media organizations’ websites are vulnerable because they lack the know-how and resources to secure them. These shortcomings are why sites “fall” periodically, some panelists said. Ghelbur observed that the general public is missing basic digital and data literacy skills. A very small share of internet users are aware of the algorithms driving social media and the mechanics of targeted advertising.

Moldova has providers with digital tools to help media outlets prevent distributed denial-of-service (DDOS) or other attacks, but they often go unused due to “digital illiteracy, lack of interest, insufficient human and financial resources, low responsibility toward the user, etc.,” Bunduchi said. Independent media in Gagauzia and the Transnistria region have basic digital tools, but too little financial or human resources to defend themselves against DDOS attacks.

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

Civil society organizations sponsor trainings on media literacy are sponsored by civil society, but it has not been among the government’s priorities. Since 2018, the Independent Journalism Center has offered optional media-education training for students in primary, secondary, and high school and has trained instructors to teach the course. In addition, broad digital education begins in primary school. “Students often know more than teachers about media literacy,” Gonța observed.

Media and information literacy among adults falls outside the scope of government policies. Ghelbur said that some information consumers do not

clearly understand the role of the media in society, nor the distinction between the editorial content produced and other types of content on the internet. “The lack of media literacy among the general population became especially obvious in the context of the elections, the pandemic, and vaccination campaigns,” Șterbate said. “The role of experienced journalists in producing misinformation makes it difficult for consumers to distinguish high-quality news and information from poor-quality news and information,” he added.

In Transnistria and Gagauzia, the authorities do not promote media literacy. School curricula do not include media education or information literacy, nor do any local organizations offer such programs.

“Digital security measures are relatively new for Moldova and the regulatory framework is insufficient,” Bunduchi said.

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

Journalists and civil-society activists make full use of their freedom of speech, but as discussed earlier, those using the right to information remains uneven. As for the general population, most people embrace their freedom-of-speech rights, especially on social networks, but they usually do not exercise their right to information. People in Transnistria and Gagauzia engage little with the information they access, since they avoid discussing forbidden or sensitive issues. Media in those regions steer clear of reporting critical or embarrassing stories about local officials, and of some news from the security zone between Transnistria and the rest of Moldova.

Forty-five percent of respondents to the 2021 Institute of Public Policy's omnibus opinion poll said that people can speak freely in Moldova. The same survey found more than half of the population consumes information almost daily from various information sources. About half of the respondents, 51.1 percent, named television as the most important source of information, followed by the internet (23.3 percent). "If not on TV, there's certainly some objective, fact-based information at least on the internet," Bunduchi said.

Public debates are possible and sometimes present varied perspectives. Some panelists said that TV, online, and radio platforms are open and inclusive. However, some lack substance and feature the same topics, theses, and guests—who are usually men. Guțuțui said that politicians aside from the usual suspects often reject panel invitations. Ribca said these platforms often lack professional voices, with their place taken by “permanent experts.”

Digital platforms were widely used during the pandemic and the elections, but panelists agreed that comments sections were awash in insults, hate speech, and manipulation, rather than healthy debate. Reporting and flagging tools for such content are no match for the

torrent of misinformation, malicious information, and hate speech on digital media networks.

Authorities do not sufficiently publicize platforms through which people can report misinformation, such as [T\(V\)E Privește!](#). Several bodies, such as Moldova's Press Council and Audiovisual Council, deal with complaints from media consumers. Several panelists said that the Audiovisual Council rarely interferes or imposes stiff penalties, and the panelists have seen no evidence that complaints are resolved in a fair and balanced way. Citizens may report hate speech or discrimination to the Council for Prevention and Elimination of Discrimination and Ensuring Equality.

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

Most media organizations do not study of their audiences' needs or interests, although panelists acknowledged that some media outlets, especially online, understand the importance of their consumers' opinions. Traditional media, on the other hand, are anchored in longtime patterns of content production and delivery.

Media research is conducted primarily in-house rather than through a third party. “Qualitative and quantitative research implies serious costs, and some content producers have to focus on the needs of the public by tracking quantitative data from analytics systems,” Ghelbur said. “Quality studies on the requirements and interests of the public is one of the concerns of civil society organizations, whose efforts are very important for the independent media that can't afford research,” Ribca said. External partners help some media outlets organize focus groups to better understand the needs of their audience, Guțuțui said.

Nearly all news portals have open processes for audiences to provide feedback through online comments sections on their social network pages.

“The lack of media literacy among the general population became especially obvious in the context of the elections, the pandemic, and vaccination campaigns,” Șterbate said.

Some independent media, such as the AGORA portal or *Ziarul de Garda* newspaper, take steps to build trust with their consumers, including hosting community events, being transparent about authorship and reporting methods, and publishing corrections. “This practice is new and is just beginning to take root,” Bunduchi said.

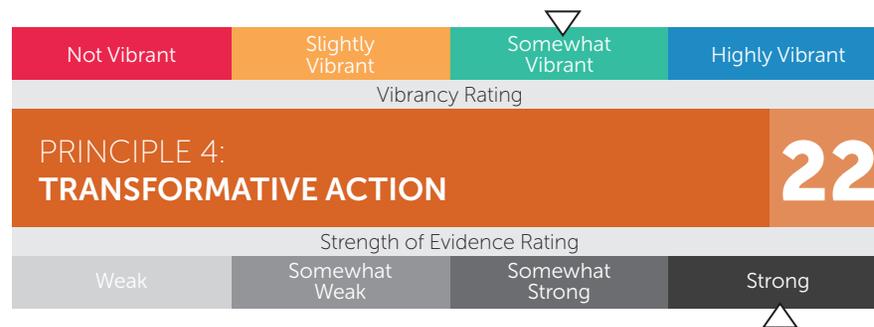
In 2021, partnerships between journalists and NGOs were a great help in sharing information and support, Șterbate said. Cooperation with the authorities remains difficult, and communication remains poor.

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

Moldova’s broadcasting law provides for the concept of community media. Some panelists questioned, however, whether such media exist in practice. Community outlets would not have mandates significantly different from public or private media, those panelists said. Bunduchi, though, said that local media and the newsrooms producing content for minority ethnic groups (Roma, Jews, Bulgarians) clearly count as community media. The mainstream media do not prioritize covering issues relevant to certain marginalized communities, so these smaller outlets play a significant role in targeting and responding to the needs of specific groups.

Panelists said that community media do not receive contributions from their target groups. As Bunduchi observed, though, “Active support of the media through volunteering or donations has never been a tradition in Moldova.”

“Discussions about sensitive political issues or vaccination are seldom a civilized, intellectual exchange of opinions, but are rather exchanges of hatred, insults, and expletives,” Călugăreanu lamented.



Moldova’s nonpartisan news and information sources can hardly compete with the politically controlled media and their large audiences. Social networks are becoming increasingly powerful platforms for free exchange of opinions, even as the public debates there are seldom constructive or healthy. Populism and misinformation usually shape people’s views on political issues, but some panelists said that the elections’ outcomes showed that people in Moldova are thinking more critically. In this principle, panelists gave the indicator on civil society operations the highest score, and the lowest score to the indicator on the way individuals use information to inform their actions.

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

Panelists agreed that the media sector has a broad range of sources, generally divided into independent content producers and those with political agendas. Although some independent outlets have large audiences, they lose out to the widely consumed, politically affiliated media. Partisan media flood Moldova with fake news, which political trolls share widely and social media writers discuss broadly.

People read or view multiple types of media with varied ideological content, but some seek out opposing views. According to the Public Policy Institute opinion survey, media that produce quality journalism as well as media that manipulate or misinform enjoy the trust of almost 50 percent of Moldovans. As for the type of media, people most prefer television (18 percent), the internet (12 percent), and social networks (12 percent).

Gonța said that people generally consume information from media that are in line with their ideological leanings. Technological developments have made social networks more powerful platforms for the exchange of opinions. PPI's [report](#) found that 54.6 percent of the population accesses Facebook at least once a week. Online dialogue tends to be fueled by assumptions, rather than data and evidence. "Discussions about sensitive political issues or vaccination are seldom a civilized, intellectual exchange of opinions, but are rather exchanges of hatred, insults, and expletives," Călugăreanu lamented.

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

Panelists had no consensus on whether quality information or misinformation, populism, and demagoguery shape people's views on political or social issues. Some panelists said that the victory of the reformist, pro-Western Action and Solidarity Party in the 2021 elections shows that people are paying less attention to misinformation. On the other hand, additional panelists pointed out that the populist ȘOR party gained six seats in parliament. ȘOR is named for and led by a politician who was convicted in 2014 in a notorious [bank fraud case](#).

Panelists did agree that the country's low vaccination rate is clear evidence that Moldovans are susceptible to rumors and conspiracy theories, and barely follow fact-based health and safety recommendations. Gonța said that the combination of a huge wave of Russian propaganda on Western-produced vaccines, domestic misinformation from politically controlled media, and the government's

stuttering information campaign about the pandemic has undermined public trust and fed vaccine agnosticism.

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

The panelists agreed that NGOs play active roles in building healthy democratic processes in the country by carrying out research, fighting disinformation, offering public training programs to raise awareness, and engaging with the government on various matters. "The efforts of civil society organizations in combating misinformation and manipulative information are highly valued," Ribca said.

Generally, civil society groups provide quality reports when they call for reforms. Although they are not always heard, their expertise is appreciated and important, especially for foreign strategic partners. "In 2021, many civil society representatives became public officeholders, and the opinion of NGOs seems to be taking on more weight," Gonța said.

“The efforts of civil society organizations in combating misinformation and manipulative information are highly valued,” Ribca said.

Independent media outlets actively engage with civil society to cover socially important issues. Șterbate said that the independent press often cite NGOs' research, studies, and reports as reliable sources.

In Transnistria and Gagauzia, civil society groups provide reliable information, but they have little chance to cooperate with the media or public officials.

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

In meeting their legal requirement to be transparent in decision making, government officials interact with civil society via press conferences, press meetings, or public consultations.⁷ Several panelists, however, scoffed at the idea that any are done in the interest of the public, or that

7 Law on transparency in decision-making. 2008. https://www.legis.md/cautare/getResults?doc_id=106638&lang=ro.

they produce any visible results. “As a rule, government officials resort to arguments and facts that politically suit them the best. Their information is one-sided and isn’t aimed at informing,” Bunduchi said.

The two governments in place during 2021 had different styles of engaging with civil society and media, the panelists noted. “While the former government often resorted to speculation and unconfirmed facts, the current government seems to exclude misinformation from its public discourse,” Gonța said. “However, they still have major problems communicating with the media and civil society.”

Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic rights.

Independent media have repeatedly uncovered corruption or wrongdoing. Stories have included fraud in public contracts for pandemic-related medical supplies, forgery of immunization certificates, smuggling, and the organized transportation and corruption of voters in Transnistria. Sometimes these reports gain the authorities’ attention. For example, after *Ziarul de Garda* reported in the spring that the interior minister had put his lavish home on the market, the National Integrity Authority investigated and found a substantial difference between wealth acquired and income earned.

Overall, though, panelists have seen little evidence that information helps prevent corruption or violations of civil liberties or human rights. No data is available to confirm that quality of information contributes to free and fair elections, and panelists said that the government usually drags its feet in response to reports, taking little or no action.

Several panelists said that media’s exposure of the Socialists Party buying votes likely galvanized Moldova’s large, and largely anti-socialist, diaspora to vote them out.

Bunduchi mentioned the steady [stream](#) of cases from Moldova to the European Court of Human Rights. Moldovans apply at three times the European average, which Bunduchi said is evidence that “uncovering human-rights violations does not lead to changes in government practices.”

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