

# EUROPE & EURASIA

Vibrant  
Information  
Barometer

2 0 2 2



**USAID**  
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE



VIBRANT INFORMATION BAROMETER 2022

Copyright © 2022 by IREX

IREX

1275 K Street, NW, Suite 600

Washington, DC 20005

E-mail: [info.vibe@irex.org](mailto:info.vibe@irex.org)

Phone: (202) 628-8188

[www.irex.org](http://www.irex.org)

**Managing editor:** Linda Trail

**IREX project and editorial support:** Stephanie Hess and Ben Brewer

**Editorial support:** Alanna Dvorak, Barbara Frye, Elizabeth Granda, and Dayna Kerecman Myers

**Copyeditors:** Melissa Brown Levine, Brown Levine Productions; Carolyn Feola de Rugamas, Carolyn.Ink; Kelly Kramer

**Translation support:** Capital Linguists, LLC; Translated SRL

**Notice of Rights:** Permission is granted to display, copy, and distribute VIBE in whole or in part, provided that: (a) the materials are used with the acknowledgement “The Vibrant Information Barometer (VIBE) is a product of IREX with funding from USAID.”; (b) VIBE is used solely for personal, noncommercial, or informational use; and (c) no modifications of VIBE are made.

**Disclaimer:** This publication is made possible by the support of the American People through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The opinions expressed herein are those of the panelists and other project researchers and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID, the United States Government, or IREX.



USAID leads international development and humanitarian efforts to save lives, reduce poverty, strengthen democratic governance and help people progress beyond assistance.

U.S. foreign assistance has always had the twofold purpose of furthering America's interests while improving lives in the developing world. USAID carries out U.S. foreign policy by promoting broad-scale human progress at the same time it expands stable, free societies, creates markets and trade partners for the United States, and fosters good will abroad.

USAID works in over 100 countries to:

- Promote Global Health
- Support Global Stability
- Provide Humanitarian Assistance
- Catalyze Innovation and Partnership
- Empower Women and Girls

IREX is a nonprofit organization that builds a more just, prosperous, and inclusive world by empowering youth, cultivating leaders, strengthening institutions, and extending access to quality education and information.

IREX delivers value to its beneficiaries, partners, and donors through its holistic, people-centered approach to development. We bring expertise and experience in fields such as education, civil society, gender, media, governance, access to information, and youth employment.

Founded in 1968, IREX has an annual portfolio of over \$80 million, offices in 20 countries, and a global staff of 400. We work in more than 100 countries worldwide.

## IMPLEMENTING PARTNERS

IREX wishes to thank the following organizations that coordinated the fieldwork for and authored a number of the studies herein:

- Mediacentar Sarajevo (Bosnia & Herzegovina)  
<https://www.media.ba/>
- Institute for Advanced Studies GAP (Kosovo)  
<https://www.institutigap.org/home>
- Media Development Center (Macedonia)  
<https://mdc.org.mk>
- Independent Journalism Center (Moldova)  
<http://ijc.md/eng/>
- Media LTD (Montenegro)  
<https://media.co.me/>
- Legal Media Center (Kazakhstan)  
<https://lmc.kz/kk>

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>VIBRANT INFORMATION BAROMETER 2022</b>	<b>2</b>
TABLE OF CONTENTS	4
INTRODUCTION	5
BACKGROUND	6
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	7
METHODOLOGY	16
<b>SOUTHEAST EUROPE</b>	<b>23</b>
ALBANIA	24
BOSNIA & HERZEGOVINA	38
KOSOVO	58
MONTENEGRO	71
NORTH MACEDONIA	87
SERBIA	106
<b>CAUCASUS</b>	<b>125</b>
ARMENIA	126
AZERBAIJAN	143
GEORGIA	161
<b>RUSSIA &amp; WESTERN EURASIA</b>	<b>182</b>
BELARUS	183
MOLDOVA	206
RUSSIA	221
UKRAINE	238
<b>CENTRAL ASIA</b>	<b>259</b>
KAZAKHSTAN	260
KYRGYZSTAN	278
TAJIKISTAN	298
TURKMENISTAN	316
UZBEKISTAN	330

## INTRODUCTION

I am pleased to introduce the 2022 edition of the Vibrant Information Barometer (VIBE) for Europe and Eurasia. While the 2021 VIBE publication explored the way information is produced and utilized in 13 countries from the Balkans to the Caucasus, this year's study incorporates five countries in Central Asia: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.

In its inaugural publication in 2021, the VIBE study discussed the impact of the COVID-19 on the media and information sectors in Europe and Eurasia. This year, we look at the continued effect of the ongoing pandemic but focus in more detail on the deepening politicization and polarization that has become all too common in Europe, Eurasia, and Central Asia; recommendations from VIBE's expert panels to improve their media ecosystems, scoring charts, and more information on VIBE's methodology can be found.

Based on IREX's [Vibrant Information Approach](#) and developed in partnership with USAID, the VIBE methodology better captures and measures the way information is produced and utilized today. In a vibrant information system, quality information should be widely available, editorially independent, based on facts, and not intended to harm. Content production should be sufficiently resourced, inclusive, and diverse. People should have the rights, means, and capacity to access multiple channels of information; they should detect and reject misinformation; and they should be able to make informed choices about their information consumption. People should use quality information to inform their actions, improve their communities, and contribute to public policy decisions. VIBE leverages the expert panel approach, incorporating perspectives from local sector professionals that IREX assembles in each country to serve as panelists.

The 2022 VIBE publication is accompanied by the [Vibrant Information Barometer Explorer](#), a platform that allows users to analyze VIBE data and track over time, including similar elements from the Media Sustainability Index, which IREX published from 2001-2019, with funding from USAID. This Explorer has been expanded to include the countries in



Central Asia that have been added to the VIBE study this year.

IREX would like to thank the more than 240 media, civil society, legal, and other sector professionals from throughout Europe, Eurasia, and Central Asia who took time from their busy schedules to reflect on their own media sector and provide the thoughtful comments. Discussion moderators and authors from each country organize the VIBE chapter narratives and contextualize the panelists' thoughts.

Finally, without Stephanie Hess's and Ben Brewer's dedicated management and logistical support, this year's VIBE would not have been possible to produce. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has been a consistent and enthusiastic supporter of VIBE, funding the project from its inception and ensuring its ongoing implementation.

We hope you will find this report useful, and we welcome any feedback.

Sincerely,

**Linda Trail**  
Managing Editor

## BACKGROUND

## Transition from Media Sustainability to Vibrant Information

From 2001 – 2019, IREX and USAID produced the [Media Sustainability Index](#) (MSI) to measure five key pillars and objectives related to media sustainability: free speech, professional journalism, plurality of news sources, business management, and supporting institutions.

Over the past two decades there have been dramatic changes to the way information is produced, spread, and utilized. However, the growth of digital and social media has dramatically changed how information flows, including:

- Expansion of the volume of information and speed of global transmission (including misinformation and information intended to harm)
- Blurred lines between media producers and media consumers
- Rise of non-professional content producers (such as social media users, bloggers, and influencers)
- New challenges and opportunities in resourcing media production
- Diminishing trust in many forms of content and content producers
- New threats to individual privacy and security
- Increased need for media and digital literacy across all segments of society,
- New forms of censorship as well as new and evolving ways to circumvent censorship, and
- New methods for individuals, civil society, the private sector and corporations, and governments to utilize information for both productive and destructive means.

In recognition of these changes – as well as the way anti-democratic



forces are utilizing those changes to intentionally spread disinformation - IREX undertook a multiple-year review of its approach to working with the information and media sectors, culminating in the [Vibrant Information Approach](#). This outlines new challenges, needs, and frameworks for thinking about information systems in the modern era. This new approach made clear that the MSI – while still effective in evaluating the structural underpinnings of the formal media sector – is limited in its ability to capture some of the more urgent, relevant, or timely aspects of how information is spread or utilized today.

Based on its Vibrant Information Approach, IREX built the **Vibrant Information Barometer (VIBE)** - a new index to track the way information is produced, spread, consumed, and used in the modern era. VIBE was built to respond to lessons learned from many years of implementing the MSI, changes in the media and information spheres, and opportunities to lead the way in measuring and diagnosing the challenges and opportunities that modern media systems create. Through VIBE, IREX aims to capture a modern era when many people around the world are simultaneously producers, transmitters, consumers, and actors of the information that shapes their environments and their lives.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 2022 Europe and Eurasia Vibrant Information Barometer (VIBE) sees the addition of the five countries of Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) to the study, bringing the total number of countries examined to 18. With VIBE, IREX strives to capture a modern and evolving media space where people are simultaneously producers, transmitters, consumers, and actors in the information that influences their lives and environments.

The 2022 publication focuses on the media and information space during calendar year 2021. Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine began in February 2022, this edition of VIBE does not delve into the impact of the current conflict; rather, it provides an overview of the pre-war media environment in the region, including the rise and influence of Kremlin propaganda efforts.

### VIBE Score Overview

VIBE looks at *four principles* of information vibrancy:

- Principle 1: Information Quality
- Principle 2: Multiple Channels: How Information Flows
- Principle 3: Information Consumption and Engagement
- Principle 4: Transformative Action: How Information Drives Behavior

VIBE includes 20 indicators that capture the most important elements of these four principles, and it relies on information from country experts who complete a VIBE questionnaire, provide scores for sub-indicators that support each of the 20 main indicators along with evidence to justify their scores, and then contribute to a panel discussion led by a moderator.

In the 2022 study, of the four VIBE principles, Principles 2 and 4 had generally higher average scores, while Principles 1 and 3 had lower scores.

Additionally, VIBE uses a 10-point scale (0-40) to represent country progression or regression in the country-, principle-, and indicator-level scores. Based on these numerical scores, IREX has also developed descriptive classification as follows: Not Vibrant/Failing Information System (0-10), Slightly Vibrant/Weak Information System (11-20), Somewhat Vibrant/Stable Information System (21-30), and Highly Vibrant/Thriving Information System (31-40). Full descriptive classifications are available in the methodology section.

For countries in Europe and Eurasia (E&E) included in this year's publication, country-level scores were, again, mainly split into two VIBE classifications: Somewhat Vibrant (North Macedonia, Montenegro, Kosovo, Albania, Armenia, Moldova, and Ukraine) and Slightly Vibrant (Belarus<sup>1</sup>, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, and Serbia). Azerbaijan held the lowest score in E&E, putting it in the Not Vibrant classification.

In Central Asia, this year's study put Kyrgyzstan the Somewhat Vibrant category, while Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan were Slightly Vibrant. While Uzbekistan's score characterized it as Slightly Vibrant, Turkmenistan joined Azerbaijan in the Not Vibrant classification.

As in the 2021 study, Principle 1's (Information Quality) lower scores were driven by insufficient resources for content production and harmful information. With rapidly evolving models for financing media, the continued economic impact of the global pandemic further undercut an already declining advertising market. Mal-information, misinformation, disinformation, and hate speech continue to run rampant, which also dragged down the overall principle-level score. On the other hand, the indicators on availability of quality information and inclusive and diverse content tended to have higher scores, reflecting some improvements in the media infrastructure for print, broadcast, and digital media in many countries as well as the availability of information in different languages and of different viewpoints.

Principle 2 (Multiple Channels) scores tended to be higher than those in the other VIBE principles. Better scores were seen in indicators examining adequate access to channels of information, with Armenia

<sup>1</sup> Belarus's scores are somewhat buoyed by media operating in exile outside of the country; the operating environment within the country has worsened for media and civil society.



and Montenegro receiving scores of 31 or above, putting them in the “highly vibrant” VIBE classification. North Macedonia, Kosovo, and Ukraine all received scores of 30 in this indicator, putting them at the top end of the “somewhat vibrant” category. In contrast, lower scores were seen in the indicators examining independence of information channels as well as people’s rights to create, share, and consume information—reflecting political or business interference in editorial content and threats to freedom of speech and journalists’ safety.

Scores for Principle 3 (Information Consumption and Engagement), similar to the 2021 study, were on average the lowest. Albania, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Ukraine all garnered the highest scores for this principle; however, these scores still put them at the lower end of VIBE’s “somewhat vibrant” classification. Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan got single-digit scores in this principle, placing them solidly in the “not vibrant” category. Indicators looking at media’s engagement with audience’s needs, as well as those examining media literacy, generally received lower scores.

In Principle 4 (Transformative Action), higher panelist scores coalesced around civil society’s use of information to improve their communities. For example, a panelist in Moldova noted that the efforts of civil society organizations to combat misinformation and manipulative information are highly valued; additionally, the Tajikistan chapter noted that NGOs provide high-quality and alternative information about certain problems in the country. However, lower scores were seen in the indicators looking at how individuals use quality information to inform their actions as well as information supporting good governance and democratic rights.

**Strength of Evidence (SOE) Ratings.** As noted in the 2021 VIBE publication, IREX has incorporated SOE ratings into the VIBE methodology. These ratings are meant to identify areas that donors or researchers may want to consider for further research and to increase transparency about the potential subjectivity of some indicators—especially those indicators measuring newer concepts or sources of information.

As in the 2021 publication, the highest SOE ratings tended to be for VIBE indicators in Principles 1 and 2, which received mostly “strong” and “somewhat strong” average ratings. Indicators in Principles 3 and 4 largely received “somewhat strong” ratings, since they look at newer and emerging concepts, such as productive engagement with information and how individuals and governments use information to inform their actions and policy decisions.

Across Europe, Eurasia, and Central Asia, indicators examining the availability of quality information, fact-based information, mal-information, inclusive and diverse content, adequate access to information channels, and civil society’s use of quality information received the highest SOE rating, indicating a strong body of comprehensive evidence supporting the panelists’ scoring of these indicators and a high degree of consensus among the panelist scores. The bulk of the remaining indicators received an SOE rating of “somewhat strong,” indicating that panelists and available research provided some reliable evidence to support their scores and that there was mostly consensus among scores.

The lowest panelist confidence or lack of available data was for the indicator examining community media in Principle 3, which continues to be a less-developed element of the information and media ecosystems in Europe, Eurasia, and Central Asia, when compared with other regions such as Africa and Asia.

At the country level, Kyrgyzstan received an overall SOE rating of “somewhat weak,” with consistently low ratings for most indicators in Principles 3 and 4. The rest of the countries in the study received SOE ratings of “strong” and “somewhat strong.”



## What is inside the 2022 VIBE Country Chapters

In addition to uneven government response to the global pandemic and its effect on the media, panelists from across Europe, Eurasia, and Central Asia independently highlighted their media sectors are becoming more polarized and politicized. While the discussion below will focus on the continued impact of the pandemic and this increasing polarization in the media, several other issues re-surfaced with the 2022 VIBE study: declining reporting standards, self-censorship, and increasing Kremlin influence across the region. A number of country chapters provided insight into the effects of these ongoing issues.

- **Declining reporting standards:** Panelists across Europe, Eurasia, and Central noted that professional reporting standards continue to wane. Formal journalism education tends to be more theoretical than practical across the region; while there are some exceptions, university-level journalism courses do not adequately prepare their graduates to pursue their profession. For working journalists, panelists in North Macedonia observed that quality is sacrificed to time pressures, while the Bosnia and Herzegovina chapter noted that many times objectivity is absent. In a number of countries, such as Kyrgyzstan, limited staffing levels in non-state media negatively impact their opportunities for mastering new technologies; moreover, low wages force journalists—especially in the regions—to work simultaneously for several publications, which leads to overwork, inability to produce quality materials for publication, and the need to maneuver between among different editorial and ethical guidelines.
- **Self-censorship:** Another long-standing issue, self-censorship, continues to erode media coverage and undermine journalism ethical standards. In many country studies, self-censorship was driven by the business and political interests of media owners; in other countries, it was attributed to government influence and pressure. In most country studies, it was both. For example, the Kosovo panel noted that journalists are aware of the editorial stance they are expected to support—the company’s political interests. In Tajikistan, media coverage of the president, his relatives, and his close associates is avoided.

The panels in both Moldova and Montenegro observed that, due to their reliance on the government for their existence, public service media serve the state’s interests, curtailing their ability to carry out accountable and professional journalism. Moreover, self-censorship extends to the civil society sector: The Uzbekistan chapter noted that CSOs eschew sensitive topics—including religious extremism, corruption, and human rights—fearing legal repercussions that could curtail their work.

- **Russian influence:** A number of country panels discussed increasing Russian influence on their information space and the detrimental effects of it. Russia has long worked inside Ukraine through formally Ukrainian media, proxy Ukrainian politicians, and influencers among pro-Russian, non-professional content creators. The Georgia study noted that Russian propaganda messages spread via social media, fringe media, political actors, Russian entertainment programs, and far-right groups. In Moldova, the breakaway Transnistria region is inundated with news on Russia, with scarce national and international news available. The Serbia chapter highlighted the influence of the Russian state-funded news website and radio station Sputnik on the country’s media landscape: Sputnik has been broadcasting media reports out of context for years, leading many Serbians to believe that Russia is the country’s most important media partner when, in actuality, Serbia conducts the vast majority of its international trade with the European Union.

IREX has compiled a summary of panelist and chapter author recommendations, organized into several themes: 1) Amplify digital security expertise; 2) Increase and coordinate media literacy education efforts; 3) Support regulations on transparency of media ownership; and 4) Encourage media self-regulation efforts and structures.

IREX hopes these will be useful to VIBE readers.

*Governmental Response to the Pandemic and Impact on the Media:* As can be expected, given its seismic impact on the world since March 2020 and as discussed in the 2021 edition of VIBE, continued effects of the COVID-19 pandemic were evident in calendar year 2021 and are

reflected in the 2022 VIBE study. Effective vaccines began to be rolled out in early 2021, offering hope of saving lives and of people resuming some semblance of “normal” living. However, as in many regions of the world, the countries studied by VIBE in Europe, Eurasia, and Central Asia saw an overall lack of consistent governmental response to the COVID-19 pandemic, including organizing and rolling out vaccination campaigns.

In Tajikistan, the government made it illegal to disseminate unofficial estimates of COVID-19 infections, forcing media to use the health ministry’s information, which reported no or very few cases. In Kazakhstan, COVID-19 exposed 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.

While the Montenegro chapter noted that country’s prime minister was the only PM in Europe who had not received a vaccination, Serbia’s government led COVID Crisis Headquarters advocated vaccination, while one of its members actively and publicly cast doubt on the vaccines. The Bosnia and Herzegovina chapter went further and noted that the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted lack of trust in official information and public institutions, as poor communication from health authorities and lack of a government campaign on the importance of immunization undermined the country’s overall public health response. A panelist in Moldova similarly noted that the government’s ineffective information campaign about the pandemic undermined public trust and fed vaccine skepticism.

Panelists in Uzbekistan observed that the government’s tardy efforts to launch public awareness campaigns led to a rise in fake news about the pandemic. While the country’s Ministry of Health responded late to many rumors on severe side effects and vaccine-related deaths, it did form a working group to study each case and debunk the disinformation.

As an extreme, the government of Turkmenistan was adamant in its insistence that the country did not have a single case of COVID-19, and state media refused to even use the words “coronavirus” or “COVID” in reports. As a whole, the pandemic allowed the government to seal off the

country even further from outside influences or information.

*Deepening Politicization and Polarization within the Media:* The benefactor model of media ownership, though which media outlets are acquired for political gain, has long been an issue in Europe, Eurasia, and Central Asia. With media content across all three regions driven by the interests and influence—often political—of outlet owners, trust in media is declining and constructive debate and discussion on important issues is eroding, giving more ground to disinformation efforts and manipulative content.

The Georgia chapter cited a 2021 survey by the International Republican Institute, which indicated that only 58 percent of the respondents took a positive view of Georgia’s media. This relatively low level of trust could partly stem from the country’s highly factionalized media environment, in which broadcast media in particular are divided into pro-government and pro-opposition camps, producing partisan content and criticizing political entities they dislike.

The panel in Montenegro observed that the public’s media preferences are based on their political leanings, and they can easily identify media outlets as either pro-government or opposition, depending on their editorial content. The Armenia study echoed these sentiments, noting that outlets in the country work mostly in service to their political and entrepreneurial affiliations, representing those narrow interests and sacrificing ethical standards. Similarly, the North Macedonia chapter noted that political affiliations are evident as soon as an article is published.

The panel in Kyrgyzstan also noted that the level of independence a media outlet has is determined by the political interests of its owners, supporting a widespread model where well-known politicians seek to create or buy existing media in order to use them for their political influence. For its part, the Belarus chapter noted that state-aligned outlets spread false information and propaganda about political opponents, independent media, or the situation at the Belarusian border with Europe.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, audiences are largely polarized along

ethnonational and political party lines. While people may consume media and information with different ideological leanings, they trust only those media that support their viewpoints. Likewise, a panelist in Ukraine noted that Ukrainians tend to consume different television channels but do not trust any.

This polarization and declining trust affect people's ability to discuss and debate issues constructively and open the door to manipulation. For example, the panelists in Albania observed that while there are debate programs, the quality of the debate is low and the level of hate speech is worrying; other panelists noted that these programs manipulate public opinion by presenting some elements of disinformation, such as half-truths.

## Recommendations

IREX asked panelists and chapter authors to provide specific recommendations on ways to improve the performance of their media and information sectors. Below are some of this year's recommendations based on a few of the recurring themes, with a designation of the country of origin. However, many of these have broader application.

### Amplify digital security expertise:

Armenia: Support for staff experts on digital security. Journalists are inconsistent with their digital security practices, and while searching for information they catch a computer virus.

Kosovo: Work with media outlets to increase their digital hygiene practices and ensure their websites are digitally secure.

Ukraine: Increase training efforts to increase citizens' digital security skill level and social media network algorithms.

Kazakhstan: Increase public awareness of personal data protection and digital hygiene. People think little about how such information can be misused, which is why banking and cyber-fraud scandals regularly arise. Support adoption of tools and training for digital security among media

outlets, as they are not widely used.

Kyrgyzstan: Support training for media professionals, focusing on both basic and specialized training and including training on digital security and hygiene.

### Increase and coordinate media literacy education efforts:

Albania: Support media literacy initiatives that have a multi-stakeholder approach, including formal, non-formal, and informal education, involving government and public institutions, civil society representatives, media and other relevant businesses, etc.

Bosnia and Herzegovina: Support a strategy for media and information literacy that will provide guidelines and ensure funds to introduce and promote it into formal education. Civil society organizations should be empowered to promote and organize media and information literacy educational activities (including those on disinformation, digital security, algorithms) that would include all age groups, including rural and elderly populations and both professional and non-professional content producers.

North Macedonia: Media literacy needs to be integrated into all levels of education; special attention should be given to digital literacy, in view of ever-growing significance of the online domain and social networks as source of contents, especially news and information.

Serbia: Encourage the Ministry for Culture and Media to reconsider the scope of its media literacy program and to extend education on media literacy to more school topics than is now the case.

Ukraine: Media literacy should reach wider and more vulnerable groups in society.

### Support regulations on transparency of media ownership:

Bosnia and Herzegovina: Support the adoption of laws on the transparency of media ownership and media concentration for all types of media, including online, and all media-related companies--such as advertising.

Montenegro: Address shortcomings in regulations that primarily relate to Internet portals. Some portals operate without information about editors and editorial offices, which is directly related to publishing fake and manipulative news.

Moldova: Promote transparency of media ownership and funding sources as an important factor in securing media credibility.

Armenia: Supporting amendments to the Law on Mass Media, or rather drafting and adopting a new Law on Mass Media, are necessary to address media ownership and other current challenges.

### Encourage media self-regulation efforts and structures:

Albania: The spread of disinformation, fake news, and propaganda clearly indicate that there is need for media to become more active in preventing these phenomena. Efforts to improve media self-regulation should be stronger, both in traditional and online media, and ways of media communicating with the public in this respect can also be helpful.

Montenegro: Support media efforts to commit to the quality of published information, which includes respect for the Code of Ethics and the principles of professional journalism.

North Macedonia: Strengthen media self-regulatory bodies to sanction unprofessional

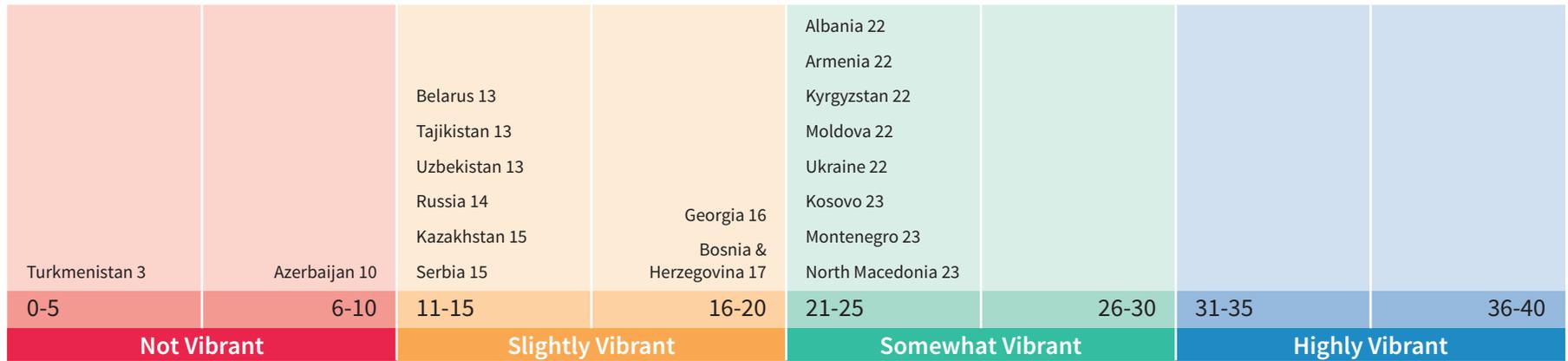
information. Conduct regular reviews to sanction or expel repeat offenders of ethical or professional standards.

Uzbekistan: Consider supporting the launch of an association of bloggers, development of a code of ethics for bloggers, and implement activities to enhance adherence of the bloggers to the code of ethics.

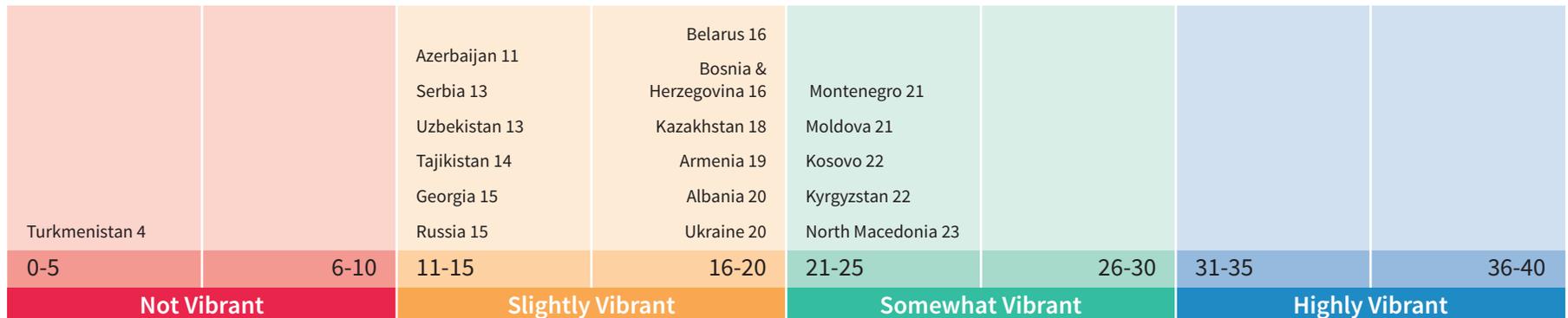
Georgia: Civil society should work with the media to strengthen self-regulatory practices and to help professional journalism move forward.



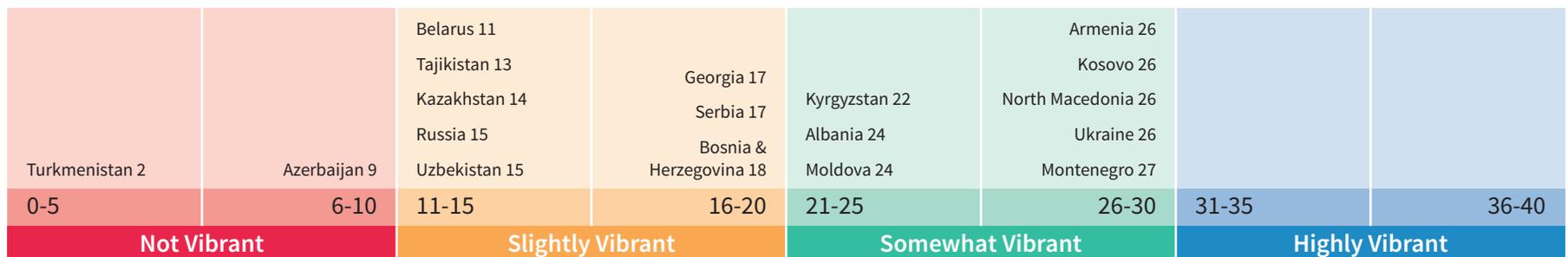
**VIBE 2022: Overall Average Scores**



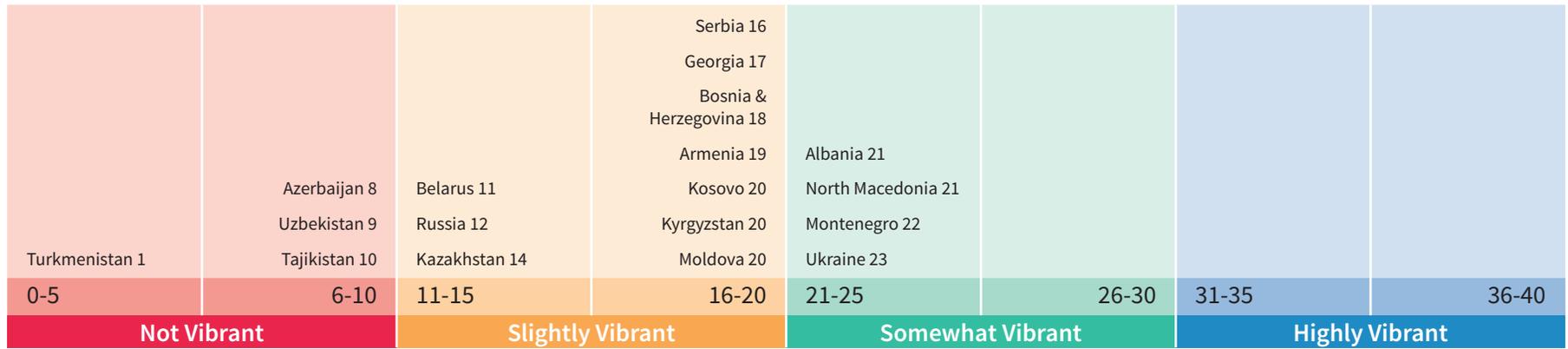
**VIBE 2022: Information Quality**



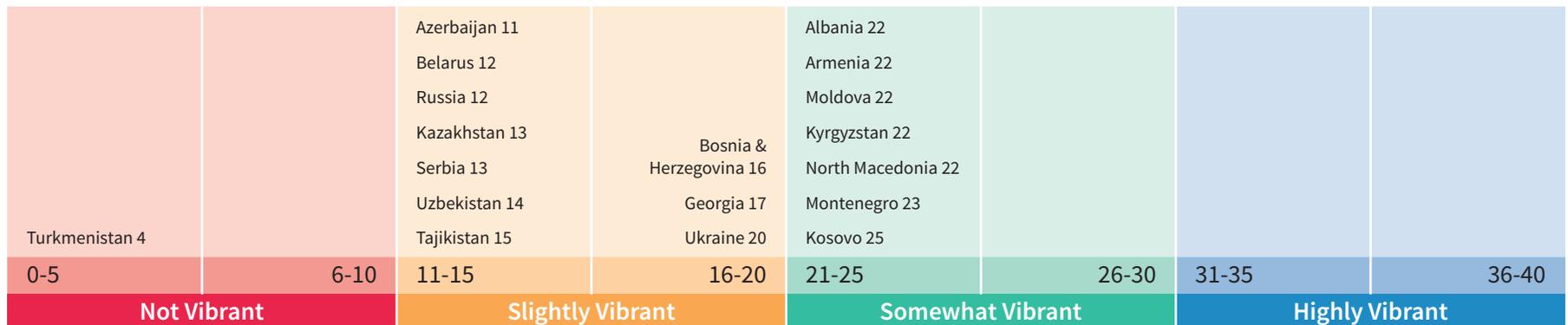
**VIBE 2022: Multiple Channels**



■ VIBE 2022: Information Consumption and Engagement



■ VIBE 2022: Transformative Action



## METHODOLOGY

The emergence of digital and social media has fundamentally disrupted the traditional media model. Today people are simultaneously producers, transmitters, consumers, and users of information. To capture a vastly changed and fluid media environment, IREX and USAID developed the **Vibrant Information Barometer (VIBE)** to better describe and measure the way information is produced and utilized, thus assessing how vibrant countries' information systems are in the modern age.

In a vibrant information system, quality information is widely available, and the vast majority of information is editorially independent, based on facts, and not intended to harm. Sufficient resources for diverse and inclusive content production should exist. People have the rights, means, and capacity to access a wide range of information; have the ability to recognize and reject misinformation; and can make informed choices on the types of information they consume. People use quality information to inform their actions, improve their communities, and weigh in on public policy decisions. Building off almost two decades of experience with the **Media Sustainability Index**, VIBE looks at **four principles** of information vibrancy:

**1) Information Quality:** How information is produced by both professional and nonprofessional producers. This includes content quality, content diversity, and economic resources.

**2) Multiple Channels – How Information Flows:** How information is transmitted or spread by both formal and informal information channels. This includes the legal framework for free speech, protection of journalists, and access to diverse channels and types of information.



**3) Information Consumption and Engagement:** How information is consumed by users. This includes looking at freedom of expression, media and information literacy, digital privacy and security, the relevance of information to consumers, and public trust in media and information.

**4) Transformative Action - How Information Drives Behavior:** How information is used and put into action. This includes how governments, the private sector, and civil society use information to inform decisions and actions; whether information is spread across ideological lines; and whether individuals or groups feel empowered to use information to enact change.

By helping implementers, donors, policymakers, and partner governments improve the resilience and integrity of information systems in developing countries, VIBE aims to ensure that citizens, civil society, and governments have the information they need to increase governments' capacity and commitment to meeting the economic, social, and democratic needs of their people. It is an ideal tool for tracking national and regional information trends over time and informing global understanding of the way information is produced, shared, consumed, and utilized in the digital age.

### Local Panels for Expert Assessment

VIBE aims to describe entire countries' information systems by drawing together experts from the country's media outlets, NGOs, professional associations, polling firms, and academic institutions to participate in panel discussions. This may include editors, reporters, media managers or owners, advertising and marketing specialists, pollsters, lawyers, professors or teachers, or human rights observers. Prior to the panel discussion, Panelists will each complete a VIBE questionnaire made up of **20 indicators (5 per principle)** that capture the most important elements of the four VIBE principles (for more details see **Scoring System** below).

Each panel of up to 15 panelists per country will be conducted by a moderator who will themselves be experts in the media and information

landscape of the country. VIBE moderators will be responsible for ensuring panels include representatives from various types of media, the capital city, and other geographic regions, and that they reflect gender, ethnic, and religious diversity as appropriate. In addition, IREX encourages moderators to select panelists with varying ideological backgrounds, to minimize the chance that only certain political or social views are captured. For consistency from year to year, at least half of the previous year's participants will be included on the following year's panel.

In some cases where conditions on the ground are such that panelists might suffer legal retribution or physical threats as a result of their participation, IREX will allow some or all of the panelists and the moderator to remain anonymous. In severe situations, IREX does not engage panelists as such; rather the study is conducted through research and interviews with those knowledgeable of the media situation in that country. Such cases are appropriately noted in relevant chapters.

VIBE questionnaires are written in a way that explicitly asks for evidence for each indicator. Panelists are encouraged to consider specific laws or policies, examples from media sources, recent events or developments, research data, personal experiences, or observations of the work of colleagues for each indicator. Based on this evidence and the level of consensus achieved in panel discussions, moderators will assign a **Strength of Evidence (SoE)** score to each indicator (see more details below).

To ensure consistency across country scores, IREX's managing editor reviews, analyzes, and finalizes scores for each country. If the managing editor has concerns about the validity or comparability of indicator scores, she or he may review the narrative chapters to see if evidence is provided to support the scores, modify the scores, or remove extreme outlier scores that vary significantly from the average score.

## Scoring System

Each indicator is broken into clear sub-indicators, which panelists will score individually on the VIBE scale. Sub-indicators will be averaged to make the indicator score.

Sub-indicators will be scored using the following scale (0-40):

0 – Disagree

10 – Agree in a few cases but mostly disagree. For example, it may be true for only a minority of content, content-producers, or parts of the country.

20 – Agree in some cases but not others. For example, it may be the case this is true for most professional content but not true for most non-professional content. Or it may be true in some parts of the country but not others.

30 – Agree in most cases. This is the norm, although it may not be true for certain content, content-producers, or parts of the country.

40 – Agree.

N/A - Not Applicable. This will be used for any sub-indicator where a panelist feels the specific concept being assessed is not applicable or relevant to the country.

DK – Don't Know. I do not have sufficient information to answer this at this point. This should be used in cases where panelists do not feel they have adequate information or evidence to assign a score.

Panelists will be allowed to use increments of 5 if they feel the most accurate response is between two of the above options (i.e., scores of 5, 15, 25, or 35). Principle scores are calculated using a straight average of the five expert-opinion indicator scores. Country scores will be calculated as a straight average of the four principle-level Indicators. When a panelist replies N/A or DK on a sub-indicator, that sub-indicator is dropped from both the numerator and denominator for averaging.

The scores will be interpreted per the following categories:

	<b>Principle 1: Information Quality</b>	<b>Principle 2: Multiple Channels</b>	<b>Principle 3: Consumption &amp; Engagement</b>	<b>Principle 4: Transformative Action</b>	<b>Country</b>
<b>Highly Vibrant (31-40)</b>	There is quality information on a variety of topics and geographies available. The norm for information is that it is based on facts and not intended to harm.	People have rights to information and adequate access to channels of information. There are diverse channels for information flow, and most information channels are independent.	People can safely use the internet due to privacy protections and security tools. They have the necessary skills and tools to be media literate.	Information producers and distribution channels enable and encourage information sharing across ideological lines. Individuals use quality information to inform their actions. Information supports good governance and democratic rights.	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.
<b>Somewhat Vibrant (21-30)</b>	There is quality information on some topics and geographies available. Most information is based on facts and not intended to harm, although misinformation, mal-information, and hate speech do have some influence on public discourse.	Most people have rights to information and adequate access to channels of information, although some may be excluded due to economic means or social norms. There are diverse channels for information flow, and most information channels are independent.	Although there are privacy protections and security tools available, only some people actually use them. Some people have the necessary skills and tools to be media literate, whereas others do not.	Information producers and distribution channels enable information sharing across ideological lines but not actively encourage it. Individuals sometimes use quality information to inform their actions. Information sometimes supports good governance and democratic rights.	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.

	<b>Principle 1: Information Quality</b>	<b>Principle 2: Multiple Channels</b>	<b>Principle 3: Consumption &amp; Engagement</b>	<b>Principle 4: Transformative Action</b>	<b>Country</b>
<b>Slightly Vibrant (11-20)</b>	There is quality information on a few topics and geographies available, but many topics or geographies are not covered. Some information is based on facts and not intended to harm, but misinformation, mal-information, and hate speech have significant influence on public discourse.	Many people have either limited rights to information or inadequate access to channels of information. Channels for government information are limited. There are only a few channels for information flow, and many of these channels are not editorially independent from their owners or funders.	Relatively few people are able to use privacy protections and security tools. Relatively few people have the necessary skills and tools to be media literate. Relatively few people engage productively with the information that is available to them.	Information producers and distribution channels do not enable information sharing across ideological lines but also do not actively prevent it. Government occasionally uses quality information to make public policy decisions. However, this is not the norm.	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, mal-information, and hate speech in circulation, and it does influence public discourse. Most people do not recognize or reject misinformation.
<b>Not At All Vibrant (0-10)</b>	There is limited information available and/or it only covers a few topics or geographies. Misinformation, mal-information, and hate speech are widespread and have a significant influence on public discourse. There are limited resources for content production, and only the views and experiences of the dominant few are shared through media.	People do not have rights to information and/or do not have adequate access to channels of information. There are few channels for any information, including government information. The channels of information that do exist are generally not independent.	People cannot safely use the internet due to surveillance. They do not have the necessary skills or tools needed to be media literate. Media and information producers rarely or never engage with their audience or work to build trust.	Information producers and distribution channels discourage information sharing across ideological lines. Individuals cannot or do not use quality information to inform their actions. Information does not support good governance and democratic rights.	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.

## Strength of Evidence (SoE) Score

The **Strength of Evidence** rating is meant to identify areas where further research is needed and to increase transparency about the potential subjectivity of some indicators. For each indicator, moderators will assign a Strength of Evidence rating - Weak, Somewhat weak, Somewhat strong, or Strong - based on the quality of evidence informing each indicator, the confidence of panelists in their scores, the number of N/As or DKs among panelists' scores, and the level of consensus across the panel. A panelist's score that varies by more than 15 points above or below the average indicator score may be removed.

**Strong:** There is a great deal of evidence providing a strong case for scoring this indicator. Panelists are able to provide a great deal of timely, reliable, and comprehensive evidence to justify their scores (through their questionnaires or panel discussions), and there is a high degree of consensus on the score across panelists. There are no (or almost no) N/A or DK sub-indicators among panelists.

**Somewhat strong:** There is some evidence providing a somewhat strong case for scoring this indicator. Panelists are able to provide some timely and reliable evidence to justify their scores (through their questionnaires or panel discussions.) There is mostly consensus on the score across panelists for this indicator. There are a few N/A or DK sub-indicators among panelists.

**Somewhat weak:** Although there is some evidence providing a case for scoring this indicator, it is somewhat weak. Panelists are able to provide only limited timely and reliable evidence to justify their scores (through their questionnaires or panel discussions). There is limited consensus on the score across panelists. There are some N/A or DK sub-indicators among panelists.

**Weak:** Although there is some evidence providing a case for scoring this indicator, it is weak. Panelists are generally not able to provide timely and reliable evidence to justify their scores (through their questionnaires or panel discussions). There is little consensus on the score across panelists. There are many N/A or DK sub-indicators among panelists.

## VIBE Indicators

### Principle 1: Information Quality

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

**Indicator 2:** The norm for information is that it is **based on facts**. Misinformation is minimal.

**Indicator 3:** The norm for information is that it is **not intended to harm**. Mal-information and hate speech are minimal.

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

**Indicator 5:** Content production is **sufficiently resourced**.

### Principle 2: Multiple Channels: How Information Flows

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

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

**Indicator 8:** There are appropriate channels for **government information**.

**Indicator 9:** There are **diverse** channels for information flow.

**Indicator 10:** Information channels are **independent**.

### Principle 3: Information Consumption and Engagement

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

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

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

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

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

#### Principle 4: Transformative Action

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

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

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

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

**Indicator 20:** Information supports **good governance and democratic rights**.

A teal-colored background featuring a white topographic map. The map includes contour lines, a grid of latitude and longitude lines, and various elevation markers such as squares and triangles with numerical values. The text 'SOUTHEAST EUROPE' is centered in a large, bold, white font.

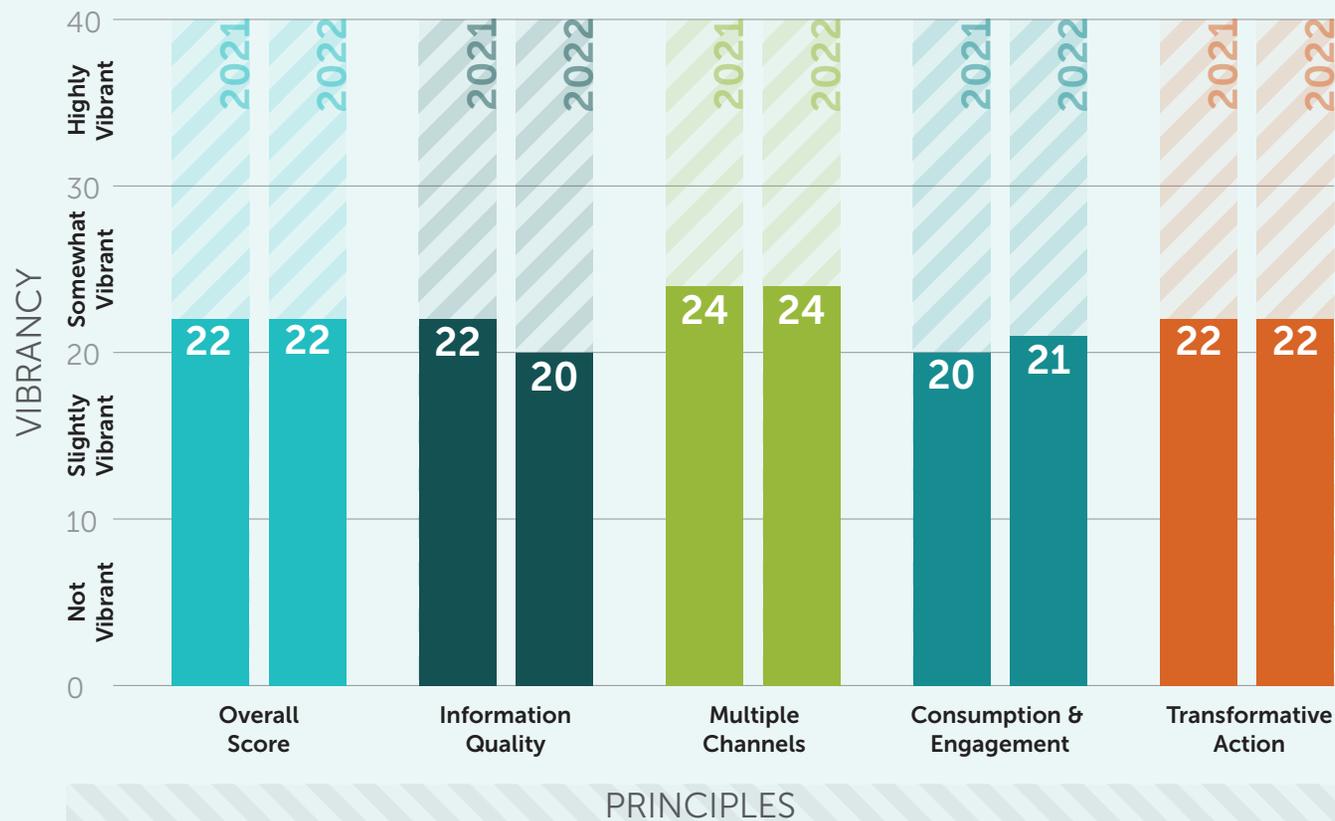
# SOUTHEAST EUROPE

# ALBANIA

# 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

In Albania’s general elections, held on April 2021, the Socialist Party maintained its ruling majority in the parliament and handed Edi Rama his third consecutive term as prime minister. Opposition parties contested the election results, citing claims of attempts to buy votes and misuse of public resources. According to international monitoring reports, media coverage betrayed slight tendencies to present one side more positively than the other, and the practice continued of party-produced broadcasting footage reported as news.

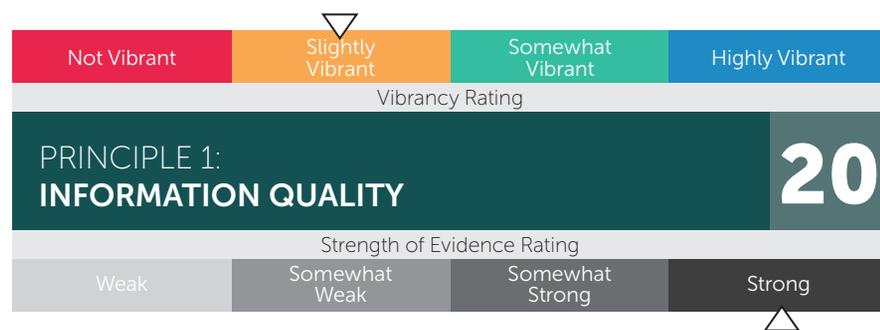
Over 2021, the majority party alleged that Albania’s president, Ilir Meta, overstepped his role, following several statements that he made during the electoral campaign and overstepping his constitutional role. In June 2021, the parliament voted to impeach the president, referring also to undue involvement in the elections. In February 2022, the Constitutional Court decided against the parliamentary impeachment, arguing that the president’s actions did not amount to serious violations of the constitution.

Apart from political changes, developments related to the COVID-19 pandemic also proved important, with implications in the media sphere as well. Although the vaccination process proceeded quickly, a segment of the population was reluctant to get vaccinated against COVID-19. Disinformation and widespread conspiracy theories certainly played a part in this reluctance.

The panel made a clear distinction between the existing infrastructure in the media landscape and the

quality of reporting and information. While access to media, existence of numerous media channels, and infrastructure overall are rather satisfactory, reporting, fact-checking, and verification of information process are not strong. Economic pressure on the media remains, frequently pushing outlets to prioritize commercialism and undermining the quality and independence of their reporting. Albanian legislation does not present any major problems and generally guarantees the right to freedom of media. However, in practice journalists habitually practice self-censorship as a result of both internal and external conditions in the media.

Access to media and existence of multiple media sources are readily available. However, concentration of the media market has increased in recent years, while qualitative and independent reporting is not widespread. In the last years, there has been some progress made regarding initiatives related to media literacy, but this is a long-term process that needs time to show any improvement in the media literacy skills among the population. There is also no evidence that government decision-making is based on quality information or in adequate and serious communication with the citizens. While there is ample opportunity for disseminating information through multiple channels, its quality and independence often remains questionable. Non-profit media, which do not suffer political or economic influence, tend to invest in their journalism and engage more in professional and independent reporting.



Albania has a sufficient infrastructure in place for producing quality information, but this does not necessarily translate into quality coverage. The VIBE panelists most frequently mentioned problems related to political propaganda transferring from social networks to the media space and the overall trend of publishing information without verifying sources, checking facts, or providing necessary context. Online media continue to be especially problematic, tending to emphasize quick publication of news without verification. Their habit of copying/pasting from other outlets further amplifies the veracity problems. In this context, media clearly are not immune to misinformation, and violations bring no professional consequences — leaving little hope for improvement in this regard. The panelists gave a high score to the indicator assessing available information on a broad variety of topics, owing mainly to the information collection infrastructure in place and the existence of multiple information sources. On the other hand, panelists gave the lowest score to the indicator gauging resource sufficiency for content production. The advertising market has stagnated, with most of the ads going to just a handful of media outlets. This disparity puts heavy economic pressure on the rest, which undermines the quality of work and compromises editorial independence.

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

The panelists agreed that the infrastructure in place for producing news and information ranges from satisfactory to highly appropriate for some media outlets. Panelists also highlighted Albania's journalism schools, other training institutions, and media-development nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that offer various media training programs. A few panelists pointed out that access to training opportunities or news infrastructure diminishes once outside the capital.

With regard to assessing the quality of information, specifically its reliability and independence, the panelists agreed that media need to focus much more on this goal. Some panelists drew a distinction between the quality of information offered by non-profit media outlets, which receive donor support, and media outlets with particular political or economic interests. Overall, the panelists have found the editorial independence of information lacking — a trend they said has worsened throughout the years.

Furthermore, the panelists noted, violators of the media profession's ethical norms face no consequences, despite attempts to improve ethical standards. "There is an improvement in ethics, having in mind always the professional media, but there is no accountability in the cases when you do not hold up ethical standards, do not respect accuracy, verification of news, etc.," said Aleksander Cipa, head of the Union of Albanian Journalists.

In general, the panelists agreed that journalists have considerable information sources to draw upon, but the information is not necessarily strong, nor is editorial freedom. "While sources of information are numerous, the problem is in the quality of information conveyed, in the verification of sources, editorial independence, [and] in media failing to hold politics accountable," said Ornela Liperi, director of *Monitor*. Another panelist also noted that pressure — from politicians as well as businesses — often undermines journalist efforts to report objectively.

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

The panelists felt strongly that misinformation continued to proliferate, especially against the background of the COVID-19 pandemic. “This indicator has worsened with the pandemic; the editorial filters have disappeared, and in national television we see all the time proponents of conspiracy theories, which has affected the way the public has reacted towards the vaccination process,” said Aleksandra Bogdani, an investigative journalist with BIRN Albania.

Liperi commented on the trend of spreading purported news, commenting, “Most of the time, we see publication of press statements, notifications, or Facebook statuses served as news, and the media state that this is the responsibility of people publishing these statements, so sometimes there is not even an effort to produce news content.”

Journalists also criticized authorities for failing to make timely updates to information from official websites. One panelist pointed out that media not only fail to hold officials accountable — they also let the government feed information to journalists.

Other panelists agreed that the scope of misinformation is very problematic but emphasized some positive developments to consider. Albania now has a fact-checking organization — even though it is a limited bulwark against the spread of misinformation. Emirjon Senja, editor of the online section of ABC News TV, raised the example of Facebook and other social networks that have imposed stricter rules on misinformation due to the pandemic. “Even though these were global initiatives, many media reflected before posting information, once their information was blocked as unverified by these platforms, and this has been positive,” he said.

Other panelists also noted that a distinction should be drawn when judging the content of news programs compared to current-affairs

debates or entertainment programs. Serious television stations, and some online media run by journalists, have attempted to uphold efforts to verify information. Entertainment programs, however, have abused that standard — often inviting conspiracy theorists to speak and failing to debunk any of the theories they spout.

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

The panelists generally agreed that journalists do not deliberately aim to disinform their audiences or to engage in hate speech. However, mal-information and hate speech make their way into media content through other sources. “Online media [are] a big problem in terms of ethics and hate speech, and social networks are an even bigger problem. However, we cannot claim that Albanian TV stations are serious producers of hate speech, like they are in neighboring countries,” said Remzi Lani, director of Albanian Media Institute.

The panelists identified politicians in particular as major drivers of hate speech, propaganda, and disinformation. While media do not intentionally start or engage in such efforts, they do become vehicles of such phenomena. “We can mention propaganda, which does not aim to educate or inform the population, but also the derogative language used by politicians and government, especially against journalists, women, or other politicians,” Bogdani commented.

Panelists differed on the extent to which foreign governments spread information and propaganda in Albanian media. A few panelists mentioned that several small, peripheral online media are clearly financed by foreign sources and spread propaganda. These outlets are mainly online media, which face no professional consequences for their actions. Their size and non-influential status speaks to the limitations of such attempts to manipulate Albanian media and society.

**“While sources of information are numerous, the problem is in the quality of information conveyed, in the verification of sources, editorial independence, [and] in media failing to hold politics accountable,” said Liperi.**

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

The panel was divided on whether media and informational content produced in 2022 is sufficiently inclusive and diverse. Some panelists claimed that diversity and gender balance are of least concern to media outlets, while other panelists said they have seen no major problems in that respect. “From our data, there is general gender balance in audiovisual media, but female staff is underrepresented at management or top levels. The same is true for the data we have on the percentage of speakers on TV panels, even though that depends greatly on the topic,” said Arben Muka, director of programming at the Audiovisual Media Authority.

Other panelists pointed out the roles that the public broadcaster must play, considering its mission, legal obligations, and responsibility to provide content in sign language and programs on minorities. In addition, while panelists overall agreed that access to media of marginalized groups has continuously improved, they questioned the quality of coverage. “I agree that marginalized groups have enjoyed greater access, but usually it is for soft topics ... leaving out the background or the roots that the person interviewed represents,” said Klementina Cenkollari, editor of MCN TV. Still, most panelists viewed the media sector’s inclusivity in a positive light.

#### Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced.

Again in 2022, Albania’s media market has faced the core challenge of financing content production. The country’s advertising market struggles to sustain the large number of media outlets present. According to data collected by *Monitor*, the advertising market is estimated to be €40 million (\$42 million), with approximately 70 percent going to the three national television stations.

Furthermore, as one panelist noted, advertisers do not invest most

of this money in newsrooms or information but rather entertainment programs. Marketing agencies tend to focus on direct marketing through social media platforms instead of traditional media, further limiting the available sources. “The big television stations have tried to adapt to the context and have started to orient themselves more towards alternative revenue through YouTube ads and Instant Articles on Facebook; however, the revenue generated is negligible compared to the funding needs,” said Senja.

“From our data, there is general gender balance in audiovisual media, but female staff is underrepresented at management or top levels,” said Muka.

Members of the panel also discussed the extent of state advertising distributed for media outlets, and whether it is enough to distort the market. They agreed that the government distributes public funds to media, but funnels the support through specific government projects, rather than earmarking it as advertising. Thus,

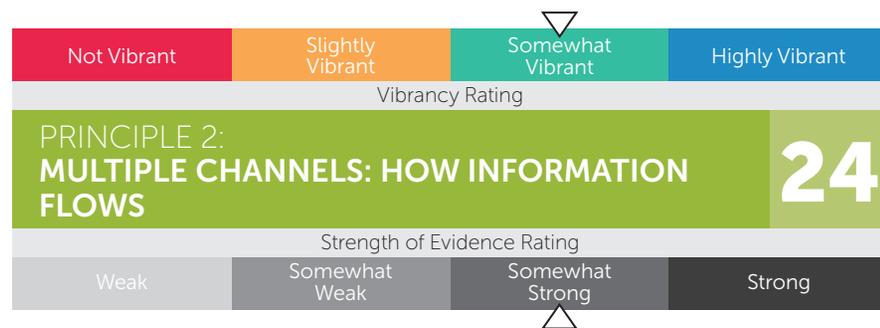
transparency is missing, according to the panelists, as the details are hard to track down, amid multiple projects used to channel funds to media outlets from the public budget. “We notice specific public agencies that buy a lot of advertisements, and no longer distinguish between editorial policy of the media, pro or against government. Rather, the big media get more money, and the smaller get less,” said Anila Basha, director of Newsbomb.

The panel noted that this tendency indicates that the practice of buying ads — from public and private advertisers — is not purely for advertising purposes; it is also a way of buying media silence.

The panel also highlighted new sources of media financing, which have grown stronger in recent years. A particularly positive development is an increase in donor support for investigative and independent journalists. The panelists said this investment has helped improve the quality of reporting and has encouraged journalists to be more active and independent.

However, journalists continue to experience delays in salary distribution and with double books on salaries and contributions. Cipa noted a slight

improvement among the continuing issues. “Twenty percent of media still face delays in disbursing salaries, even though the delays have decreased in duration. The problem where official salary is lower than what you earn, but the social contribution and benefits are also lower than what you deserve as a journalist also remains a huge problem,” he said. The situation is most dramatic for local media journalists, according to the panelists. These journalists sometimes try to take on two or more positions to compensate for the low salaries and payment delays.



Albania has a complex situation with the right to create, share, and consume information. On the one hand, the legislation in place is considered solid; on the other hand, journalists remain vulnerable and often resort to self-censorship. The panelists gave their highest scores to the indicator on the accessibility of multiple sources of information, arguing that citizens have a variety of resources available, and access and use of such sources is free of charge and without hindrances. Panelists noted the high legal standards of the law on public information, but said that its implementation has worsened, while information provided by the government tends to be one-sided. Despite the high number and various choices across the Albanian media landscape, it shows a clear tendency towards monopolies — especially

“Rather than direct forms of threats or fines, we [journalists] deal with indirect or hidden censorship, which appears in the form of benefits media owners are offered from the power and the connections they might have to politicians,” said Liperi.

in the television sector. The panel was most critical regarding the independence of information channels, giving the related indicator the lowest scores under Principle 2. Pressure from politicians, businesses, and the media owners themselves has greatly undermined editorial independence, frequently driving journalists to self-censorship. In this context, the panelists viewed the role of donor-funded media as positive, as they do not suffer the same restrictions on editorial independence.

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

Despite the panelists agreeing that Albania deserves optimal scores for the existing legal framework, real-world implementation of these laws drags down the scores. Some panelists noted the increasing tendency of aggressive behavior towards journalists, including hostility from the police and private citizens. In particular, the panelists described cases involving court and crime reporters, who are especially vulnerable to pressure from organized crime. “There are many journalists who work not only for media outlets, but on particular investigative projects, and I am aware of concrete cases involving numerous and serious threats,” said Bogdani — a view other panelists reinforced. “These threats might not be so visible in Tirana, but if you are in some particular cities, and if you happen to report on some delicate matters, such as organized crime, it is not easy at all,” said Cipa.

The panelists generally agreed that political coercion exists, but they said that it is exerted through media owners, not specifically on the journalists. “Rather than direct forms of threats or fines, we deal with indirect or hidden censorship, which appears in the form of benefits media owners are offered from the power and the connections they might have to politicians,” said Liperi. Another panelist underscored the attempts to politicize journalists’ work. “There is also a tendency to profile journalists as pro or against the power, and this worries me a lot, as it establishes a

kind of climate that leads to self-censorship — you refrain from posting on social networks, or stop from following a specific issue,” said Senja.

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

The Albanian media sphere offers numerous possibilities to access channels of information. The large number of televisions and radio stations, as well as newspapers and online media, create a variety of choices for people seeking information. Consumers face no legal or technical obstacles in accessing the internet, foreign media, or any other information sources. The panelists knew of no cases of the government or any institution blocking access to media.

Internet penetration has been increasing steadily, rising from 60 percent in 2016 to 73% by the end of 2021, according to the regulator of electronic communication. This agency enables the population to access news or other information via the internet. All panelists agreed that this indicator represents a point of strength, given the numerous possibilities for information and the ease of accessing these channels.

### **Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for government information.**

The panelists agreed that the high standards of existing regulations affect access to information and that access to such information has been more and more difficult over time. Global rankings, such as the Global Right to Information’s Rating Map, assess Albania’s law on access to official information as a strength, but this does not mean that its implementation by the institutions is guaranteed. “With each passing year, it seems that public institutions and agencies are increasingly indifferent to proper implementation of this law. Even though the law is very good, they skirt around it by providing information, but not the information

you requested,” Muka said — a tendency confirmed by other panelists. “The willingness to provide the required information often is lacking, and they attempt to provide the information that the institution wants you to have, not what you demanded,” said Liperi.

According to the panelists, spokespersons have done little to improve the situation. Instead of providing information for the media, these staffers’ main roles seem to be acting in the names of their superiors and performing public relations for their employers. “For many years now, spokespersons serve to distribute links and content ready for publication in media, rather than as a bridge between journalists and institutions,” said Senja.

### **Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow.**

In general, Albanian media companies experience no obstacles to establishment, apart from some requirements needed to secure an audio or audiovisual license. On the other hand, the panelists noted that the completion of the digital switchover and the distribution of licenses for digital platforms has rendered the regulation of media ownership almost irrelevant. “Media can be opened freely, and the awarding of licenses seems not to be problematic for the moment, due to digitalization,” said Lani.

However, the panelists noted that the media market shows a clear tendency towards media concentration and attempts to establish monop-

lies, further enabled by a 2016 amendment to ownership criteria for national audiovisual licenses.

On the question of transparency of ownership of media outlets, that information is available and freely accessed through the online register of business companies. However, online media are less transparent. They are not required to register, and there-

fore are not always listed in the business database. Funding for media outlets remains opaque.

“For many years now, spokespersons serve to distribute links and content ready for publication in media, rather than as a bridge between journalists and institutions,” said Senja.

The panelists agreed, generally, that the public service broadcaster has demonstrated steady improvement. It offers a diversity of content, remains editorially independent, and has increased coverage of different cultural and social groups.

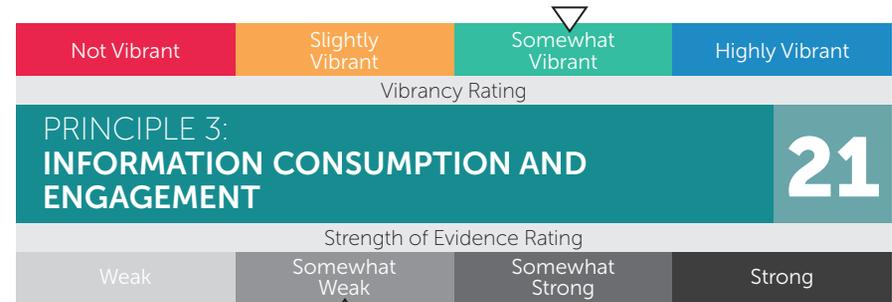
### Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.

The panel wholly agreed on the weak independence of information channels overall. Panelists said they believe that media owners' political and economic interests are clearly influencing coverage. This dynamic is heavily reflected in the lack of separation between newsrooms and marketing departments across the media sector. "Independence has always been problematic and almost does not exist, as the influence of owners is essential in all media," according to Bogdani. The panelists agreed that the lack of advertising revenue, along with the small media market, leave media vulnerable to owner pressure.

In contrast, the public media's financing is guaranteed by law through license fees, advertising, state funding, and other financial sources. According to the panelists, the public media do not enjoy special or privileged access to certain information, and other media experience no discrimination in this regard. Another positive feature is citizens' free access to the internet and other subscriptions.

The panelists were divided on the role of regulatory authorities regarding licenses. Some emphasized that the whole selection process of the regulator's members is politicized. One panelist cited the fact that the current chair used to be the spokesperson of the ruling party, considering that an indication of the level of political influence. Other panelists noted that so far, they have seen no flagrant decisions indicating political influence on license awards—but this is mostly because no licenses are currently available to be awarded.

“Albania is in a situation where public data are protected as if they were personal, while personal data are available for everyone to see, and this has become absurd,” said Bogdani.



The panelists agreed that the population is not highly prepared to assess the quality and truthfulness of information and the media they consume. The existing legal framework provides some protection regarding privacy, but only a small part of the population seems to be aware of the protections or versed in the use of security tools. Recent private-data leaks also exposed the risks inherent in this field. The panel was very critical regarding the media acting according to audience requests and needs and gave the lowest scores to the related indicator. The choice of channels of information is rather rich, and social networks are widely used, but the tendency to reinforce communication bubbles is also very strong. Additionally, Albanian media do not appear to prioritize audience needs or building trust with the public. Although community media is still underdeveloped, this indicator scored highly, along with the indicator of people productively engaging with the platforms at their disposal.

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

Albanian legislation does offer measures and regulations for protecting digital security and data privacy, through several laws and safeguarding institutions. However, 2021 saw two major leaks of the personal data of citizens, including personally identifying information such as salaries, official identification numbers, names, and dates of birth. These episodes

highlighted the importance of needing to protect personal data, and posed a big question mark on the current level of data security. “Albania is in a situation where public data are protected as if they were personal, while personal data are available for everyone to see, and this has become absurd,” said Bogdani.

Another problem, according to the panesplits, is that media companies tend to outsource to agencies or companies for the technical work of securing their platforms. Similarly, panelists noted that some media staff have received digital security training, but only in certain major media outlets.

According to Cipa, approximately 200 complaints on cybercrime have been registered from journalists all over Albania, but the police lack capacity to investigate. In addition, citizen awareness of these risks and the measures they can take for protection seems to be rather low.

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

The government shows little interest in promoting media and information literacy. Panelists agreed that the greatest actors in media literacy are NGOs, which make various efforts to educate the public and youth in particular. Lani noted that in 2021, the Albanian Media Institute forged an agreement with the Minister of Education to offer media literacy as a course in 10 schools, as a pilot project. “Next year, we hope it will be introduced in both high schools and in the lower cycle. At the same time, we are also working with universities in this respect, and all of this has served to promote the concept of media literacy, even though this is just the beginning and much more remains to be done,” he said. In addition, IREX’s Learn to Discern program in Albania, funded by the U.S. Department of State, has authored an online media literacy course that is being promoted in schools and among other target groups.

The panelists agreed that media literacy skills among the population are far from optimal. Media and information literacy indexes, such as the Me-

dia Literacy Index produced by the Open Society Institute, continue to rank Albania among the lowest European countries in terms of prepared-

ness in the media field. The situation with the pandemic, and especially with vaccinations, showed that people were not familiar with the concept of fact checking or critically assessing information, and they had a low protection threshold against fake news or manipulation of content.

“**Even though debate programs are numerous, the quality of the debate leaves much to be desired, and the hate speech is disturbing,” said Dervishi.**

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

Data are lacking on the population’s or journalists’ use of the right to information. While certain media and investigative program newsrooms apply the access law regularly, other journalists report feeling discouraged from using it, when they do not receive the information they require. The population generally exercises the right to free expression without problems, and without incurring any negative consequences. However, no data or other indicators are available on how often the population acts based on objective and factual information.

Albanian citizens have platforms for public debate, but panelists voiced little confidence in the efficiency. “Even though debate programs are numerous, the quality of the debate leaves much to be desired, and the hate speech is disturbing,” said Lutfi Dervishi, a Radio Televizioni Shqiptar journalist. In addition, other panelists noted that these programs manipulate public opinion by presenting some elements of disinformation, such as operating with half-truths. However, when it comes to interaction with the audience, many television or radio programs include communication by phone or through social media profiles, enabling citizens to express themselves, panelists claimed.

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

The situation with audience rating measurements in Albania remains

problematic. The main television media companies measure television ratings, but the data's reliability is disputed, and media outlets do not publicly share the data. "The lack of proper audience measurement is a huge problem. Even when we have such measurement, the companies offer unreliable data, which tend to favor certain media, and this leads to faulty perceptions on audience trends and on the distortion of advertising and the overall market," said Muka.

The panelists largely agreed that media tend to produce sensational, rather than educational, programs. This situation has become even more marked in the last years, with the blooming of reality show formats and more television debates, which occur almost daily on most television stations. "Increasingly, we have seen that there is a trend towards vulgarization of the media product, usually justified by the motto that this is what the public wants, at a time when we need to distinguish between what public wants and what public needs," said Dervishi.

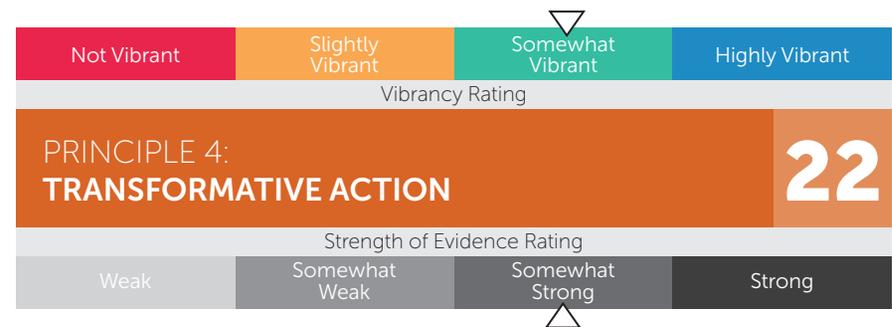
Other participants mentioned the commercial pressure on many media to produce this kind of programming, which is more successful financially. In addition, panelists pointed out that media practices generally do not include engaging with audience needs, or seeking out the particular interests of a target group through continuous research using scientific methods.

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

The concept of community media remains elusive in Albania, and it is often confused with local media — even for some members of the panel, which demonstrates the relative novelty of this kind of media in the country.

According to the panelists, the possibilities to develop community media are rather scarce, despite a great need for this work. However, a few panelists reported some examples of Albanian community media, and see signs that the sector is growing stonger. Four community radio stations — serving the four main religious communities in the country — secured licenses under an audiovisual media law provision that allows communi-

ties to apply. Other panelists pointed to the emergence of other types of community media, mostly related to various ethnic groups. These are often in the realm of online media, given the lower operation costs. "There is an improvement, as now there are about 27 online media belonging to different ethnic communities — even communities that did not have any media outlets a year ago," said Cipa. While information is hard to locate on how these media operate, or how successful they are in their communities, the panelists agreed that they had not seen any instances of spreading disinformation.



The situation with channels of information is complex. While consumers have plenty of choice in terms of different channels, enabled by improved access and technology, information sources are rarely independent. As a result, quality reports are not the norm in Albanian media, and political propaganda easily drifts into the media space.

However, Albania has several civil society organizations that provide qualitative and reliable information. The extent of their influence is questionable. Some media outlets engage in professional and investigative reporting, but politicians or the governments respond only selectively, and sometimes minimize the reports. Furthermore, the quality of information received does not necessarily translate to impacts on the voting process or in curbing corruption. Panelists gave the lowest score to the indicator assessing the government's use of quality information in decision-making, while the highest score went to the indicator examining civil society's use of quality information.

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

Media are often divided along political lines and affiliations, according to the panelists, which contributes to the polarization of society. However, a number of media present different points of view that are easily accessible to the public. The media landscape in Albania is quite vibrant, with a multitude of information channels available. An [IPSOS poll in 2021](#) revealed that television is still the most trusted and followed medium for the population, although social networks and online media have gained significant ground. Social networks, especially Facebook, are quite popular in Albania. Combined with additional channels that allow the public to provide feedback, such as radio and television programs, the public has opportunities to interact with the media and to exchange information.

The panelists claimed that, nonetheless, these forums and channels of interaction do not facilitate the sharing of information as much as serve as vehicles for insults and hate speech. “The exchange of information in social media is unregulated and unmoderated, and it follows the ideological lines of the commenters, who often troll those who do not agree with them,” said Valbona Sulce, a civil society activist.

Regarding the quality and independence of sources of information available, the panelists agreed that Albania has a broad range of sources, but only a few can be considered independent. Muka said that most people tend to rely on the channels that match their own ideological and political views, with little concern over whether the information is factual or independent. In this way, existing bubbles are reinforced — an effect further magnified by social networks.

At the same time, independent sources do exist, the panelists noted. They referred mainly to donor-supported media and projects. Even though these sources may not be widely known or followed by the population,

other media are often republish their stories, which multiplies the audience and eventually reaches a larger number of people.

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

The panel was generally critical vis-a-vis this indicator. Quality information is not easily found, and even when it exists, it must compete with disinformation efforts to gain audiences’ attention. Several panelists emphasized the constant presence of conspiracy theories aired on prime-time national television. “The mass campaign for vaccination against COVID-19 was widely influenced by the media space given to some individuals who do not come from a medical background at all, who have gained increasingly more ground on social networks, but also on main television stations,” said Basha.

The panelists also noted that many individuals follow an emotional rather than rational approach in choosing sources of information, and they also tend to trust sources

within their own circle of friends or relatives. Algorithms are another crucial influence in the choice of information sources, targeting and delivering news to people based on their preferences and history in social platforms. Information bubbles are thus further strengthened, restricting the entry opportunities for different sources of information.

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

The panelists found themselves in agreement on the role of CSOs and NGOs in Albanian society. A large number of NGOs are registered in the country, even though most of them are dormant and are activated only in specific cases. The panelists’ discussion focused only on the NGOs that are continuously active and assessed their roles as important especially in providing qualitative research, engaging in advocacy actions, and

“The exchange of information in social media is unregulated and unmoderated, and it follows the ideological lines of the commenters, who often troll those who do not agree with them,” said Sulce.

monitoring policy implementation. “There is an increase in the number of NGOs that come with concrete proposals and critique, and which are finding even more media space, and this is a good influence on quality media content,” said Muka.

On the other hand, panelists mentioned that certain NGOs have expressed difficulties in finding media space and promoting their work or viewpoints. One of the panelists also highlighted that several NGOs that have their own media and have been influential in informing the public in a qualitative and independent manner. These groups include BIRN Albania, Faktoje.al, Citizens Channel, and the Albanian Center for Quality Journalism. “I want to especially single out the NGO media. They have played a very qualitative role in setting high standards for journalism reporting,” said Dervishi.

CSOs’ contributions in terms of information, activities, monitoring, or advocacy initiatives are constantly shared with the public, thanks also to the high use of social networks in this respect. However, the real impact in influencing policy changes or the mindset of the population might be limited, for various reasons. “Civil society is definitely on the good side, but it is still disputable how much influence or power it has, and we have to be aware of this,” said Lani. To support this argument, the panelists shared examples of citizens being poorly reflected and minimally involved with NGO initiatives and activities.

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

The panelists levied heavy criticism on the government on this point. In theory, the state has different mechanisms to interact with the civil society and the media, such as press conferences, press meetings, and communication in the media space or on social networks. However, the pan-

elists argued that government terms and propaganda, rather than public interest, generally shape such communications. Press conferences, for example, have grown increasingly rare, and they are often reduced to spokespersons reading statements, with no opportunities for reporters to ask follow-up questions. “The political discourse is rarely based on facts, or rarely refers to news or information from media or civil society,” said Cenkollari, “The debate is mainly based on propaganda or interests of political parties.” Further backing this point is that government officials have their own media channels for communicating with the media and the public.

“**The mass campaign for vaccination against COVID-19 was widely influenced by the media space given to some individuals who do not come from a medical background at all, who have gained increasingly more ground on social networks, but also on main television stations,” said Basha.**

The panelists said that they largely consider political parties and government officials to be the biggest sources of disinformation in the country. Furthermore, the panelists agreed that the government mainly ignores serious media investigation reports, apart from a few cases. Some panelists said that at times, government authorities will discredit or ridicule serious journalists. “There have been cases when the government or politicians have attacked media that have delivered quality reporting, saying that this is fake news,” said Sulce.

### **Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic rights**

The panelists did not give the government high marks for its reaction or responsiveness to reporting that exposes corruption. The panelists agreed that authorities tend to react to petty corruption cases, without the same willingness to respond to big affairs. “What we have seen is that the interventions are mainly of a blitz type of operation, and focus on the individual, rather than on the phenomenon,” said Senja.

The panel agreed that the government is typically selective in reacting to reports of media on corruption, and it is guilty of applying double standards. One of the panelists mentioned that in some cases, the govern-

ment tried to minimize or ridicule such media reports, rather than react to the corruption they were exposing. “There is a tendency to deny such reports. The media has exposed corruption or abuse, but there have also been many attempts to undo such reports. And we see this not only in the relations of the government to the people, but also within the parties themselves; they deny the reality instead of opening their eyes and seeing it,” said Dervishi.

The panelists agreed that they have seen no evidence of quality information affecting election results, or reducing or preventing corruption. “Experience so far has shown that disinformation factories did lose in the elections, and people tend to see other factors, too, not just the information,” Lani said, “They are affected by the candidate, by the parties. It is a complex situation and you cannot explain everything through information choices.”

#### LIST OF PANEL PARTICIPANTS

**Anila Basha**, founder of online media, Newsbomb.al, Tirana

**Aleksandra Bogdani**, investigative reporter, BIRN Albania, Tirana

**Klementina Cenkollari**, editor-in-chief, MCN TV, Tirana

**Aleksander Cipa**, chair, Union of Albanian Journalists, Tirana

**Genc Demiraj**, media owner, Amantia TV, Vlora

**Lutfi Dervishi**, journalist, Radio Televizioni Shqiptar, Tirana

**Remzi Lani**, director, Albanian Media Institute, Tirana

**Ornela Liperi**, director, Monitor magazine, Tirana

**Iris Luarasi**, lecturer, Department of Journalism, University of Tirana, Tirana

**Arben Muka**, director of Programming Department, Audiovisual Media Authority, Tirana

**Emirjon Senja**, editor-in-chief of online section, ABC News Albania, Tirana

**Valbona Sulce**, civil society activist, Tirana

#### MODERATOR AND AUTHOR

**Ilda Londo**, research coordinator, Albanian Media Institute, Tirana

Copyright © 2022 by IREX

**Notice of Rights:** Permission is granted to display, copy, and distribute VIBE in whole or in part, provided that: (a) the materials are used with the acknowledgment “The Vibrant Information Barometer (VIBE) is a product of IREX with funding from USAID.”; (b) VIBE is used solely for personal, noncommercial, or informational use; and (c) no modifications of VIBE are made.

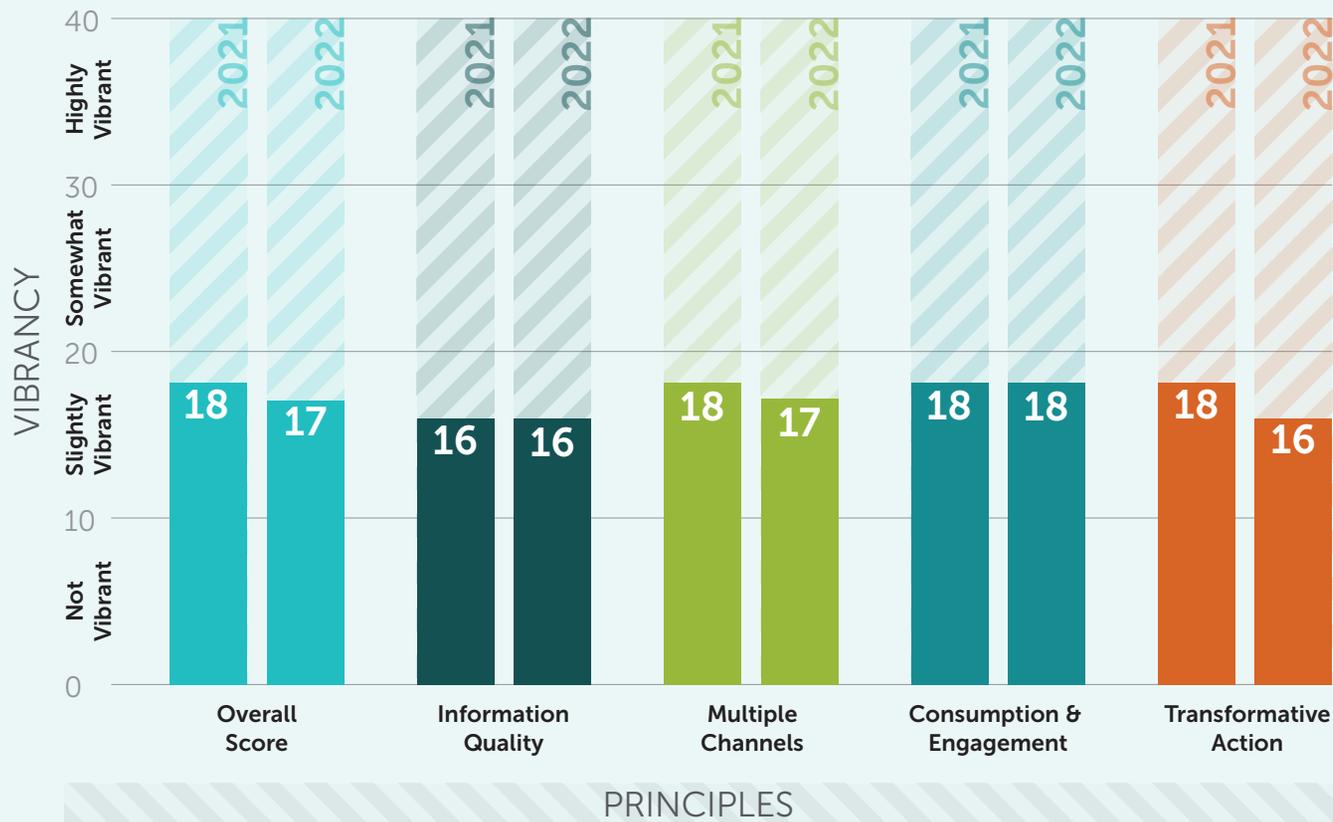
This study is made possible by the support of the American People through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The opinions expressed herein are those of the panelists and other project researchers and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID, the United States Government, or IREX.

# BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

## 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.



OVERALL SCORE  
**17**

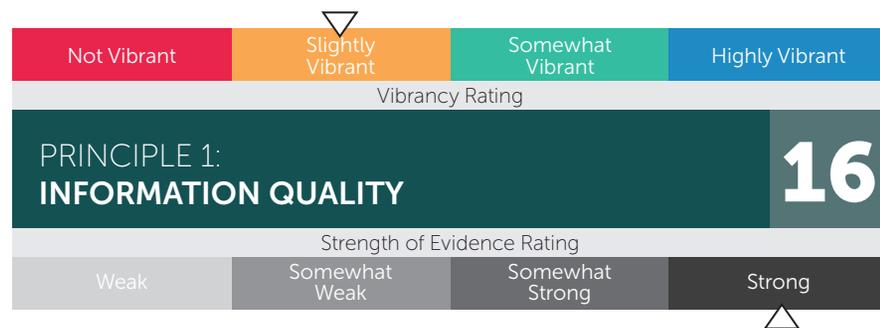
The year 2021 has been so turbulent for Bosnia and Herzegovina (B&H) that local and international media have been reporting about a possible new conflict. In July, the High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina amended the country’s criminal code to prohibit public condonation, denial, gross diminution, or attempts to justify the crimes of genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes established by final judgments. Republika Srpska, one of the two Bosnian and Herzegovinian entities, has called these amendments anti-Serb and has adopted the Law on Nonapplication of the Decision of the High Representative. Representatives of Republika Srpska boycotted the work of central government institutions, halting the administration of the country. The rest of the year was marked by a political stalemate, political skirmishes, and inflammatory statements about a possible secession for Republika Srpska.

The lack of consensus over electoral reform has also been impacting the overall political situation. Only Bosniaks, Serbs, and Croats can run to be a member of the Bosnia and Herzegovina presidency, violating the European Convention on Human Rights. Disagreements among major political parties have halted any progress toward finding a solution for electoral reform before 2022’s general elections.

The year was also marked by COVID-19: surges in the number of cases, delays in the procurement of vaccines, and the small number of vaccinated citizens (29 percent) despite the availability of vaccines. The media have

published inflammatory statements by politicians with no accompanying criticism, while misinformation about COVID-19 vaccines has circulated on the internet and in traditional media. There have been attempts to better regulate online media. The Press and Online Media Code of B&H was amended in late 2021 to include, among other things, disinformation and editorial responsibility for the comments sections of online media. The Communications Regulatory Agency (CRA) has prepared draft amendments to apply their code on audiovisual and radio media services to web pages of radio and television stations. The Ministry of Justice of B&H has prepared a draft law on the freedom to access information, but it has been criticized by civil society organizations for containing many exceptions.

The information system remains slightly vibrant, with the overall score dropping one point to 17 compared with the 2020 VIBE study. Panelists agree that there is still a significant amount of misinformation and hate speech, particularly online; that media outlets struggle financially and are rarely independent; and that journalists and citizens face problems in obtaining information. The media and information literacy skills of citizens are still low, and there is a growing trend of distrust for everything institutional and evidence based. Information does not support good governance, and governments do not use quality information to make their policy decisions.



Professional media produce content on a variety of topics, but the overall quality of information does not meet high professional standards, and there is a lack of specialized and thematic reporting. The media have largely reported on political skirmishes, inflammatory political statements, and talks about a possible armed conflict. The COVID-19 pandemic has generated a lot of misinformation and conspiracy theories, especially from nonprofessional content producers. In a modest media market and under political pressure, journalism remains a hard and unrewarding profession. Panelists give their lowest score to the resources for content production and their highest to the availability of quality information on a variety of topics.

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

Infrastructure for the production of varied content exists, but Velida Kulenović, vice president of the BH Journalists Association, said that—except for some foreign-owned private media—most local media outlets lack the financial, technical, and staff capacity to produce quality content. Even when they have the means, content producers do not have enough skills to use new approaches to content production. Media-related studies at universities do not provide adequate practical training, and there is a lack of courses for nonprofessional content production, even though in 2021 some training opportunities for podcasters and influencers were provided by international and nongovernmental

organizations. The overall body of content covers a variety of topics, but it is mostly focused on daily political events. Understaffed newsrooms publish content with the aim to attract more clicks, overproducing low-quality and copy-pasted articles, and do not have the capacity for specialized and thematic media reporting—such as science journalism or reporting on violations of human rights and violence against women and girls. Lejla Turčilo, a professor at the Faculty of Political Science, University of Sarajevo, noted that in media reporting, “there is very little context. The media mostly cover daily events in which the agenda is being set by the actors of those events.”

Political skirmishes, inflammatory statements by politicians, and talks of a new conflict in B&H have dominated the public discourse in the latter half of the year. Azra Maslo, program standards coordinator at the CRA, said that for the past three years, one of the most frequently breached principles in television and radio station programs has been the principle of fairness and impartiality. “Professional media publish information by consulting relevant sources and stating the facts, although objectivity in the manner of their reporting is not necessarily guaranteed,” Maslo said. Objectivity is often compromised by political influence on the media, along with politically and ethnationally biased media reporting that remain widely present both in traditional and online media.

Professional ramifications for content that violates journalistic standards exist, but their implementation and effects are minimal particularly for online media. The CRA can issue fines and warnings to television and radio stations for the breaches of its codes, but it mostly acts upon citizens’ reports and does not conduct regular monitoring. Moreover, there are growing concerns over its politization as in the past two years it failed to react to politically biased media reporting, particularly regarding the public service broadcaster of Repulika Srpska, RTRS.<sup>1</sup> The Press Council in B&H, on the other hand, has a self-regulatory mechanism for online and print media, but its activities are limited to mediation and non-binding decisions about media content that violates the standards

<sup>1</sup> Mladen Bubonjić, *Otkako je bivši direktor RTRS na poziciji direktora RAK, nema objavljenih kazni za RTRS*, Media.ba, 2022. <https://media.ba/bs/magazin-novinarstvo/otkako-je-bivsi-direktor-rtrs-na-mjestu-direktora-rak-nema-objavljenih-kazni-za>

of the Press and Online Code of B&H. However, there are a number of highly professional media outlets that abide by professional standards, such as the Center for Investigative Reporting, and that mostly report on corruption. Additionally, Detektor.ba of the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network specializes in reporting on war crime trials.

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

Journalistic codes require media outlets to publish accurate information. However, due to low capacity and political and commercial interests that influence content, media outlets in numerous instances have violated those standards.

COVID-19 vaccines and the immunization process have particularly generated a lot of false and misleading information—especially by non-professional content producers. Over the last two years, the fact-checking platform Raskrinkavanje has debunked thousands of pieces of false and manipulative content related to COVID-19 that has been published by media outlets and by users of social media networks.

According to a regional research study published in 2021, most of the debunked content about COVID-19—including false medicaments, vaccine safety and the origin of the virus—was found on Facebook.<sup>2</sup> However, sources of this kind of content were also traced to Serbia-based tabloid media and the major mainstream media in B&H.<sup>3</sup> Lejla Gačanica, an independent legal consultant, said that the pandemic shows how vulnerable

2 Rašid Krupalija et al, *Disinformation During Covid-19 Pandemic*, 2021, Friedrich-Naumann-Stiftung für die Freiheit Bosnien-Herzegowina, 2021. [https://www.freiheit.org/sites/default/files/2021-05/disinformation\\_covid-19\\_march\\_2021.pdf](https://www.freiheit.org/sites/default/files/2021-05/disinformation_covid-19_march_2021.pdf)

3 Rašid Krupalija et al, *Disinformation During Covid-19 Pandemic*, 2021, Friedrich-Naumann-Stiftung für die Freiheit Bosnien-Herzegowina, 2021. [https://www.freiheit.org/sites/default/files/2021-05/disinformation\\_covid-19\\_march\\_2021.pdf](https://www.freiheit.org/sites/default/files/2021-05/disinformation_covid-19_march_2021.pdf)

both professional and non-professional content producers are to misinformation: “The purpose of this content is rarely unintentional but is created and distributed with intents ranging from raising readership/clicks—sensationalism—to creating context suitable for a very specific purpose—fear, political retaliation, slander.” Some of the reasons for such a high number of false and misleading content include copy-pasted content, lack of in-house capacity to fact-check information, and commercial and political interests.

False and misleading information also comes from politicians and government officials. Vanja Stokić, the editor of the online magazine *eTrafika* in Banja Luka, recalled how the prime minister of the Una-Sana Canton—one of 10 cantons in the country—has said that migrants and refugees have committed 3,500 crimes in the Una-Sana Canton. However, data received from the canton’s Ministry of Interior have shown that these people have committed less than 1,000 crimes and minor offenses during a three-year period. “That man stated very malicious

**“Professional media publish information by consulting relevant sources and stating the facts, although objectivity in the manner of their reporting is not necessarily guaranteed,” said Maslo.**

information multiple times at the expense of that group of people, and he will never be held responsible for that,” says Stokić. Nikolija Bjelica Škrivan, a journalist with Direkt Portal in Trebinje, spoke about the “oxygen” affair regarding the use of industrial oxygen to treat COVID-19 patients in Republika Srpska hospitals—something the media has revealed but

public officials have denied: “They twisted the arguments and transferred blame on the journalists. In the end, it looked like journalists lied, and they did not. . . . It was the other way around.” The accuracy of statements of government actors are rarely questioned by journalists, mostly because they lack capacity to fact-check information and face difficulties in obtaining information from public institutions.

Efforts to counter false and misleading information are mainly related to the work of fact-checkers and non-governmental media organizations; there are no initiatives to counter disinformation from authorities and institutions. According to the CRA’s code, fake and misleading programs

are prohibited on television and radio stations, but these provisions are rarely used to sanction media outlets that spread false and misleading information. The Press and Online Media Code of B&H was amended at the end of 2021 to include, among other things, provisions identifying disinformation as a gross violation of the basic rules of professional journalism and re-publishing disinformation from another medium or source does not absolve the responsibility of the editors of the media which transmit it. However, the effect of these amendments is yet to be seen.

Watchdog platforms Media.ba and Analiziraj.ba have showed examples of misleading information and partisan reporting, while the fact-checking platform Raskrinkavanje has debunked thousands of examples of disinformation online. Verification of the credibility of politicians' statements and the fulfilment of election promises of Instinomjer are available online, but mainstream media rarely refer to these reports or overall reports on false and misleading information. In 2020, the fact-checking platform Raskrinkavanje started working in partnership with Facebook: After fact-checkers identify content as fake, Facebook marks it as disputed content and reduces the reach of these posts. Media representatives, however, have complained that such measures drastically reduce their reach.<sup>4</sup> Mechanisms and processes to moderate content with the aim to reduce misinformation mostly have not been developed by media outlets.

### **Indicator 3: The norm for information is that it is not intended to harm.**

Harmful content, such as hate speech or smear campaigns against individuals, is rarely part of the content of professional media; however, it is pervasive in social media networks and in comments sections of online media.

A recent study on media habits of adults in B&H indicated that 35% of

<sup>4</sup> Stokić, Vanja, *Zašto pojedini medijima ne odgovara rad fact-checkera?*, Media.ba, 2021. <https://www.media.ba/bs/magazin-novinarstvo/zasto-pojedinim-medijima-ne-odgovara-rad-fact-checkera>

respondents said that they have been exposed to potentially harmful content in the media and information-communication environment, including hate speech (48%) and discriminatory content (32%), and only a fifth (19%) reported inappropriate content they were exposed to.<sup>5</sup> Another study showed that harmful content often remains on Facebook and Twitter in the Western Balkan countries despite that it being reported. A poll conducted by BIRN showed that according to a survey, 43 per cent of content reported as hate speech and 60 percent of content reported as targeted harassment on Facebook and Twitter remained online.<sup>6</sup>

Hate speech in user-generated content most often targets ethno-national groups, women, migrants, and refugees, and it is often based on conflicting ethno-national narratives. The amended Press Code of the Press Council of B&H expanded the editorial responsibility of the overall content of online media, including user-generated comments. According to the new provisions, editors are obligated to delete user-generated comments that contain hate speech, incitement to violence, harassment, threats, and all other forms of inappropriate and socially unacceptable communication. So far, most of the complaints to the Press Council on user-generated content were related to hate speech. In 2021, the Press Council received 1,073 complaints, out of which 505 refer to user-generated comments, mostly hate speech, in online media. Many complaints (766) have been resolved by self-regulation, and most cases of hate speech have been removed by the media. These numbers demonstrate the effectiveness and reach of the self-regulatory system, according to Maida Bahto Kestendžić, project coordinator at the Press Council in Bosnia and Herzegovina. However, the reach of the Press Council is particularly limited regarding anonymous portals and does not relate to user-generated content on media outlets' accounts on social networks.

<sup>5</sup> Hasanagić, Snježana et al, *Research on Media Habits of Adults in Bosnia and Herzegovina*, Council of Europe and Communications Regulatory Agency, 2021.

<sup>6</sup> Jeremić, Ivana, and Milica Stojanović, *Facebook, Twitter Struggling in Fight against Balkan Content Violations*, Detektor.ba, 2021. <https://detektor.ba/2021/02/16/facebook-twitter-struggling-in-fight-against-balkan-content-violations/?lang=en>

Hate speech is also prohibited by the codes of the Communications Regulatory Agency, which only apply to television and radio stations. The CRA has also made efforts to change its rules and prepared draft amendments to expand its jurisdiction to online content produced under the logos of television and radio stations. The provisions of the code that would apply to this type of online content relate to the prohibition of spreading and inciting hatred, violence, or discrimination; content that could have adverse consequences for human safety and health; rules that pertain to the protection of minors, including the protection of their privacy; and the right of reply. Media representatives support the efforts of the CRA to improve the regulation of online media, but opinions over these draft amendments are divided, especially considering that these changes would not include other online media that are not associated with radio and television stations.

Particular forms of hate speech are prohibited by criminal laws and the Election Law prohibits political candidates from using language which could provoke someone to violence and from spreading of hatred during pre-election campaigns.<sup>7</sup> Cases of hate speech being pursued legally, overall, are rare, particularly for hate speech on the internet, and court decisions are inconsistent. For example, Fatmir Alispahić, the person behind Antimigrant.ba that maliciously targets migrants and refugees, has been acquitted by the Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina of a first-instance verdict on charges of spreading national, racial, and religious hatred and intolerance against migrants and refugees in 2021. Turčilo stated that such a verdict sets a dangerous precedent that anyone can spread hate speech without consequences.

In July, the High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina introduced amendments to the criminal code to prohibit public condonation,

<sup>7</sup> Sokol, Anida, *National Regulatory and Self-Regulatory Framework against Hate Speech and Disinformation*, SEENPM, 2021. <https://seenpm.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Resilience-Factsheet-Bosnia-and-Herzegovina.pdf>

**“I personally think that the influence of China is minor. But I think that the influence of Russia is pretty clear. It is malignant because it creates problems with internal relations,” noted Kontić.**

denial, gross diminution, or attempts to justify the crimes of genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes established by final judgments, and glorification of war criminals. Media monitoring by the Srebrenica Memorial Center has shown that genocide denial has been carried out less explicitly since then, and the number of such acts has decreased. However, genocide denial is still present, especially in the content of the public service broadcaster, Radio Television of Republika Srpska (RTRS), and the public news agency, Srna.<sup>8</sup> High-ranking politicians and government actors also continue to deny war crimes, and their statements are published by the mainstream media without criticism, the database Mapping Hate of the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network Bosnia and Herzegovina (BIRN BiH) shows.

Condonation and denials of genocide are most often uttered by local and foreign politicians in Serbia-based media, which are then copy-pasted in the B&H media. Boro Kontić, director of Mediacentar Sarajevo, stated that Croatia and Serbia have a substantial influence on public discourse, especially in the region of Herzegovina and the entity of Republika Srpska. “I personally think that the influence of China is minor. But I think that the influence of Russia is pretty clear. It is malignant because it creates problems with internal relations,” Kontić noted. Foreign states such as the United States, Russia, China, and Turkey influence public and media discourse in B&H, but further research is needed in this regard.

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

Panelists agreed that marginalized groups are not sufficiently represented in the mainstream media and content for, or dedicated to, minorities and vulnerable groups—and adapted for persons with

<sup>8</sup> Memorijalni Centar Srebrenica, *Memorijalni centar Srebrenica: Smanjen broj slučajeva negiranja genocida u entitetu RS*, September 27, 2021. <https://srebrenicamemorial.org/bs/aktuelnosti/memorijalni-centar-srebrenica-smanjen-broj-slucajeva-negiranja-genocida-u-entitetu-rs/61>.

disabilities—is extremely rare. Mainstream media mostly follow the interests and political leaders of the three constituent groups (Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats) and exclude others. Bjelica Škrivan said that media reports on minority issues are mostly the output of donor-supported project activities or are part of media content on days when no major events are taking place. There are, however, specialized online media and groups on social networks dedicated to human rights and minority groups.

Tijana Cvjetićanin, editor of the fact-checking platform Raskrinkavanje, said that the overall media reporting on the LGBTQ community and women has improved, mainly due to the efforts of civil society organizations, and intense media reporting on the pandemic has decreased the xenophobic and racist discourse toward migrants and refugees that exist in the media. Senad Zaimović, director of the marketing agency Fabrika, says that attitudes toward the LGBTQ community are not consistent across the country, and there are places where reporting on certain issues is considered to be very brave.

Research on media reporting of gender-based violence published in 2021 shows that media reporting on this issue has improved to some extent when compared to 2016: however, examples of sensationalism and tabloid-style reporting on violence against women is still present, especially in cases of femicide. Moreover, the media in general neglect the existence and recognition of gender-based violence against women and girls as a social problem.<sup>9</sup>

CRA data show that women hold fewer managerial positions at television and radio outlets compared to men: 25.6 percent of managerial positions are held by women—5 percent less when compared with the previous year—while 42.2 percent of editors-in-chief are women. Female journalists are worse off than men, and they face more insults. For example, the journalist Zinaida Đelilović of *Žurnal* magazine has

received vulgar insults and threats from a B&H Ministry of Human Rights and Refugees official against whom disciplinary procedures have been initiated. Bjelica Škrivan described how it is more challenging to be a female journalist, especially in a small town where the patriarchy is dominant: “I cannot say that it is simple for a woman journalist in a community like this one because, aside from everyday pressures on us due to our profession, [we are subject to] misogynist comments, which we have to listen to while doing our fieldwork and the ways in which these interlocutors, if they are men, approach us. They do not have that approach toward our male colleagues.”

Public broadcasters are obliged to broadcast programming intended for members of national minorities for at least one hour a week, and the CRA plans to monitor such compliance. Maslo said that the CRA aims to conduct thematic monitoring and analysis on topics related to violence and women, women in sports, portrayal of women in advertising messages, and gender representation in news programs; based on this analysis, it will prepare guidelines for the media on how to report on these topics.

Finally, there is little specialized content for young people and children in the traditional media in B&H, despite CRA rules that oblige public broadcasters and public media to produce content for children and youth. Research shows that young people are not satisfied with the content in traditional media, and they mainly follow different non-professional content producers on the Internet.<sup>10</sup>

### Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced.

Most content producers have very limited financial resources to operate and lack resources to produce high quality content. There are numerous media outlets – 107 television stations, 157 radio stations, seven news agencies, 8 dailies, 181 different publications and magazines – that compete for funds on a very modest advertising market and are mainly

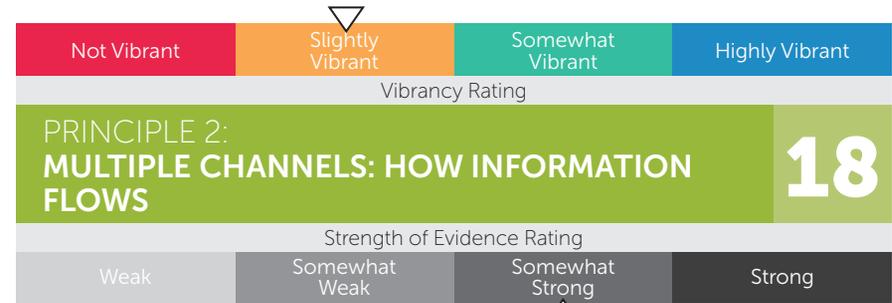
<sup>9</sup> UN Women, *Research on media reporting on gender-based violence against women in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2020, 2021*. <https://www2.unwomen.org/-/media/field%20office%20eca/attachments/publications/2021/9/un%20women%20research%20on%20media%20reporting.pdf?la=en&vs=420>

<sup>10</sup> Sokol, Anida, and Senad Alibegović, *Mladi za bolje medije: Stavovi, navike i potrebe mladih za medijskim sadržajima u BiH*, Mediacentar Sarajevo, 2021. [https://www.media.ba/sites/default/files/mladi\\_za\\_bolje\\_medije\\_dtp\\_05.pdf](https://www.media.ba/sites/default/files/mladi_za_bolje_medije_dtp_05.pdf)

funded through public budgets and/or advertisements. In addition to these, the numbers of non-professional content producers, such as YouTubers, have been rising.

Media financing from public budgets—through grants, subsidies, and commercial contracts—is arbitrary and nontransparent. Local public media outlets—65 radio and 15 TV stations—founded by local assemblies, are highly dependent on local governments for financing, and this impacts their reporting. Kulenović said that local public media outlets receive constant threats that their funds will be reduced if they do not report and produce content that suits them. Slađana Jašarević, a journalist at BN TV, added that not all media outlets have equal access to public funds since, for example, contracts for advertising from institutions and public companies are being allocated to those media that are close to the ruling political party.

Economic consequences of the pandemic have decreased available budgets for media production and advertising from private advertisers, local governments, and public companies. Traditional media has suffered the most, according to Zaimović who warned that the political crisis and talks of a new conflict could also impact investments in the advertising sector. “Money [has been] redirected partly to digital media, but the fact is that the whole market has deteriorated 20–30 percent. If we have previously talked about lack of resources, they are now lacking even more,” said Zaimović. A media fund that would mitigate the financial consequences caused by COVID-19 has not been set up, and the state does not provide funds for the support of media pluralism, said Maslo. Panelists noted that many journalists do not have proper work contracts and health-care insurance. They are underpaid, and according to Jašarević, some earn €200–250 (\$220 - \$270) per month—half the average salary, even though there are differences between locally and foreign-owned media. Employee mobility in the media market is low, and journalism remains a hard and unrewarding profession.



Freedom of speech and the right to information are protected by national laws and international conventions that Bosnia and Herzegovina has ratified, but their implementation remains inadequate. Diverse channels and types of information exist, but the public is polarized and follows the media that portray their group in a positive light. The media’s political dependence is of great concern, and media ownership lacks transparency. Information channels are mostly not independent, impacting the overall quality of information, and panelists gave it their lowest score. Appropriate channels for government information exist, but they are not used adequately.

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

Freedom of expression is guaranteed by the constitution of B&H, along with constitutions of the entities of Federation and Republika Srpska. The B&H constitution stipulates that the country and both entities shall ensure the highest level of internationally recognized human rights and fundamental freedoms, and that the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms and its Protocols shall apply directly and have priority over other law.

Curbs on free speech are, however, widespread across the country, even though there are differences between the Federation of B&H and Republika Srpska. In the latter, attacks on freedom of speech are more direct. The *Western Balkans Journalists’ Safety Index* in 2021 shows that B&H is the second worst-ranked country in the western Balkan region in

terms of security of journalists and freedom of the media.<sup>11</sup> The biggest shortcomings are the lack of urgent protection measures in response to reported attacks and death threats against journalists and distrust regarding institutions; this leads to journalists not reporting attacks and threats. “There is no sufficiently efficient and independent judiciary, and that is why normalization of violence against journalists is so present,” Gačanica said. She also added that there is a worrying trend of strategic lawsuits against public participation as the laws against defamation—instead of protecting both the media and those that the media report about—are being used to silence the press.

According to data provided by the BH Journalists Association, in 2021 there were 70 cases of freedom of expression violations of media workers, including threats, political pressures, censorship, and physical attacks. In October, BN TV journalist Jašarević was publicly insulted and labeled as “a traitor” by a Serb member of the B&H presidency, Milorad Dodik. Dodik said at a press conference that BN TV is “part of the joint criminal enterprise against Republika Srpska” and “the biggest villain in Republika Srpska.”<sup>12</sup> Jašarević said that the state of media freedoms is highly troubling. “Intensive efforts are being made to curb media freedoms. . . . Literally people will physically try to stop you from saying and writing what you think,” Jašarević said. Another method used to curb media freedom is ignoring journalists’ requests for information or only providing partial information. For example, at a hospital press conference in Trebinje, only journalists of trusted media outlets were allowed to pose questions—those who wrote critically about the local government, such as Direkt Portal, were not permitted to speak.

A study by the Press Council in Bosnia and Herzegovina shows that

“There is no sufficiently efficient and independent judiciary, and that is why normalization of violence against journalists is so present,” said Gačanica.

journalists are often targets of disinformation, trolling, doxxing, or harassment on social networks. More than half of the study’s respondents have stated that they have received threats on Facebook through private messages or in comment sections, and only a small number of them have reported those threats to the police.<sup>13</sup> Jasmin Mulahusić, a Luxembourg citizen with Bosnia and Herzegovina heritage, has been targeting journalists and labeling them as traitors on social networks and on his website. The Prosecutor’s Office of Bosnia and Herzegovina opened an investigation, and he was arrested and questioned in September. Such acts are worrying, as Mulahusić is associated with the leading

Bosniak party SDA.<sup>14</sup> Members of the fact-checking platform Raskrinkavanje are also targeted online for their work debunking disinformation, especially about COVID-19. Cvjetičanin states that they have received threats over the phone from a journalist working for a media outlet whose articles

they debunked; there has been no reaction from other journalists and media organizations.

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

Most people can access most information channels, including radio, television, newspapers or magazines, and digital or social media; communities are not precluded from accessing information due to social norms. Television is the most important and most trusted source of information for the general public, but the use of the internet and social media platforms as news sources has been on the rise, particularly among young people. A recent study on media habits of adults shows

11 Radević, Maja, and Borka Rudić, *Western Balkans Journalists’ Safety Index: Bosnia and Herzegovina 2020 Narrative Report*, BH Journalists Association, 2021. <https://bhnovinari.ba/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/BIH-ENG.pdf>.

12 Sokol, Anida, *Nastavlja se targetiranje novinara i biranje podobnih*, Media.ba, 2021. <https://media.ba/bs/magazin-novinarstvo/nastavlja-se-targetiranje-novinar-a-i-biranje-podobnih>

13 Đelilović, Zinaida, *Društvene mreže i novinarstvo u Bosni i Hercegovini*, Vijeće za Štampu u Bosni i Hercegovini, February 2021. [https://www.vzs.ba/images/2021/drustvene\\_mreze\\_i\\_novinarstvo\\_u\\_BiH.pdf](https://www.vzs.ba/images/2021/drustvene_mreze_i_novinarstvo_u_BiH.pdf).

14 Tomić, Slađan, *Slučaj Mulahusić: Hapšenje zbog govora mržnje na društvenim mrežama*, Media.ba, September 7, 2021. <https://media.ba/bs/magazin-novinarstvo/slucaj-mulahusic-hapsenje-zbog-govora-mrznje-na-drustvenim-mrezama>.

that almost nine out of 10 adults use the internet (87 percent)—mostly through smartphones—and the majority (77 percent) are satisfied with their current level of access to media and information communication services. Still, 11 percent of them do not use digital services or the internet and say that the lack of money is what limits their access to media and information communication services.<sup>15</sup>

According to the CRA, the internet usage rate is 94.49 percent, but rural areas are neglected due to the lack of a national broadband strategy. Internet governance and regulation of the digital space provides open and equal access to users and content producers, but websites are largely not adapted for people with disabilities, said Maslo, who works at the CRA. In addition, Gačanica said, that because of digital gaps, minority groups—such as the Romani—are excluded from open digital communications. Panelists reinforced that online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic showed that internet is not available to all the population.

The CRA has introduced obligatory quotas for public broadcasters for content that needs to be adjusted to persons with disabilities, and public broadcasters have submitted their five-year action plans to gradually increase the adaptation of their content to such persons. Analysis from the CRA shows that there are 32 operators of cable distributors of audiovisual and radio media services, among which 10 are larger operators. There are concerns that some of the larger operators have acquired large shares of subscribers. In the event of a disruption to the telecommunications infrastructure, such as television, people have access to alternate information systems, such as the internet and radio. The transition from analog to digital has not yet been finalized, even though it originally had to be finished by 2015.

By order of the CRA and at the request of Croatia (owing to their introduction of the 5G access network and possible interference with the analog signal), the analog signal of 26 public and commercial televisions

with 171 transmitters throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina was turned off in 2021. This move has provoked concerns that people without cable TV in those areas will not have access to different sources of information and sparked accusations from some media outlets that certain decisions in the process were politically motivated. Six TV stations with national coverage have been given access to the multiplex A, a system that can be used for the transmission of multiple digital TV channels. However, it has limited capacities, and the country needs to finalize the digitalization process and provide full operational capacities of all the multiplexes.

### **Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for government information.**

Access to information laws, introduced at the beginning of the 2000s, have been essential to the work of investigative journalists, and they have been used to discover numerous abuses and illegalities in the work of institutions and public officials. However, their implementation remains inadequate, and their legal solutions do not meet international standards, particularly in terms of proactive transparency.

Data from Transparency International Bosnia and Herzegovina show that in 2021 public authorities provided information more often by the legally proscribed deadline compared with previous years, but it is still common that requested information has to be obtained by court order. According to their research, 59 percent of ministries and municipalities have given information about the amounts allocated to citizen associations and foundations within the proscribed deadline of 15 days. This is higher when compared with 2020.<sup>16</sup> “Despite the legal framework guaranteeing the right to free access to information, citizens are still unaware that this is one of their basic human rights and do not use the available mechanisms to exercise this right,” said Bahtjo Kestendžić.

The Ministry of Justice of B&H has prepared a draft law on free access to information for institutions to be in harmony with international

<sup>15</sup> Hasanagić, Snježana, et al, *Media Habits of Adults in BiH*, Council of Europe and the Communications Regulatory Agency, 2021 <https://rm.coe.int/adults-media-habits-eng/1680a454d7>.

<sup>16</sup> Transparency International BiH, *Izveštaj o primjeni Zakona o slobodi pristupa informacijama u 2021*. September 28, 2021, <https://ti-bih.org/izvjestaj-o-primjeni-zakona-o-slobodi-pristupa-informacijama-u-2021-godini/>.

standards. Even though the law, if adopted, would oblige institutions to proactively publish information—including information on the manner of decision-making, financing, public procurement, public tenders, and grants awarded—it has been criticized by civil society organizations, as it provides a wide list of possible exceptions to access information and does not define the test of public interest, thus proving to be problematic in practice.<sup>17</sup>

Journalists face difficulties in obtaining information from public bodies. Panelists said this often depends on personal contacts, the availability and professionalism of spokespersons, and whether journalists are on good terms with them. Journalists from BIRN B&H face difficulties in obtaining information from judicial authorities, particularly from the Prosecutor's Office of Bosnia and Herzegovina. For example, at the end of the year, BIRN BiH sent a petition signed by 5,000 persons to the High Judicial and Prosecutorial Council of Bosnia and Herzegovina, asking for a more transparent judiciary and demanding proactive publication of indictments and judgments. Judicial bodies publish information on the platform *Pravosudje.ba*, but these practices are not uniform—only some publish confirmed indictments; some do not publish judgments, or the judgments are anonymized.<sup>18</sup> *eKonsultacije* is a platform containing information on legislative procedures. The platform is not very user-friendly, and many people do not know about it. “I don't think that people use [the platforms]. I don't know how to use them. Even if they exist, they are made to be very complicated,” said Cvjetičanin.

“Intensive efforts are being made to curb media freedoms....Literally people will physically try to stop you from saying and writing what you think,” said Jašarević.

### Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow.

There is no data on excessive concentration of media ownership, and there are only a few cases where two or three media organizations have the same owner.<sup>19</sup> However, the concentration of the influence of political elites on media content that seriously hampers media pluralism and independence is worrisome. In addition, there are no laws that regulate domestic and foreign ownership concentration in the media and media-related industries, and there are no laws that require transparency in media ownership. The European Commission in its yearly progress

reports for Bosnia and Herzegovina, including 2021, has been emphasizing that the country should adopt legislation on media ownership transparency and criteria on public advertising. The lack of media ownership transparency poses a huge problem, especially in the online sector. A recent study identified 615 online news

media in the country, and only 27 percent of them have an impressum on their websites.<sup>20</sup> Anyone can easily open an online media, but these are usually not registered and mostly remain out of the reach of any legislative and regulatory frameworks.

The process of spectrum allocation so far has been fair and transparent but there are growing concerns over the politicization of the CRA, especially as its current director Draško Milinović is the former director of RTRS. Maslo stated that the issue of ensuring the independence of the CRA has always been present. “At the operational level, there are absolutely no obstacles or pressures on our work,” she said, adding, “We who work in the regulatory body—that is, at the operational level—have

17 Hasečić, Nejra, *Novi ZOSP bi mogao dodatno ograničiti slobodan pristup informacijama u BiH*, Media.ba, March 29, 2021. <https://www.media.ba/bs/magazin-novinarstvo/novi-zospi-bi-mogao-dodatno-ograniciti-slobodan-pristup-informacijama-u-bih>.

18 Sokol, Anida. *Judicial Transparency During the Pandemic: Public and Media Outreach*, The Aire Center, 2021. <https://www.media.ba/sites/default/files/transparency-report-vol-01-eng.pdf>.

19 Petković, Brankica, and Sanela Hodžić, *Sustainability of Professional Journalism in the Media Business Environment of the Western Balkans*, TACSO, 2021. <http://tacso.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Sustainability-of-Professional-Journalism-in-WB-Study-National-Data-Overview-BiH-final.pdf>

20 Osmančević, Enes, et al., *Mapiranje medijskih web portala u BiH*, USAID, CPCD, 2021. [https://2am-objavi-ba.s3.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/17113734/Istrazivanje\\_Mapiranje-medijskih-web-portala-u-BiH-1.pdf](https://2am-objavi-ba.s3.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/17113734/Istrazivanje_Mapiranje-medijskih-web-portala-u-BiH-1.pdf).

absolutely no obstacles in doing this job.”

In recent years, the CRA did not sanction RTRS for biased media reporting despite many instances of such coverage. However, other publicly funded media outlets engage in biased media reporting most often by lack of criticism towards the ruling political parties. Public media and public service broadcasters provide informative and educational news and information, but concerns over their ethno-national and politically biased media reporting remains.

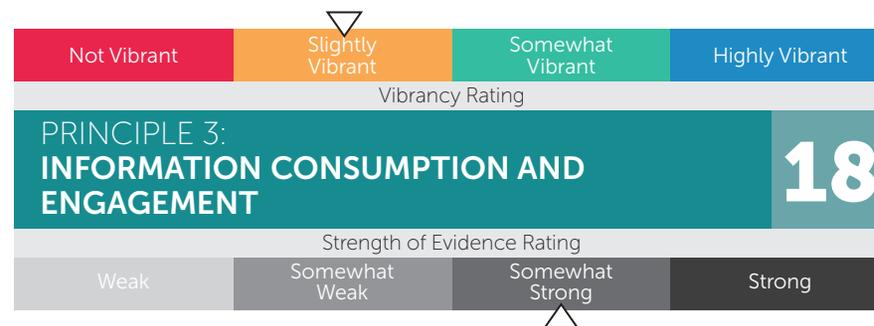
### Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.

Media organizations are highly influenced by ownership, and this remains one of the most problematic issues in the media sector. The media are susceptible to the influences of political and business elites through non-transparent and arbitrary media financing and media ownership.

On a yearly basis, governments at different administrative levels (entities, cantons, cities, municipalities) give grants and subsidies to the media and also make commercial contracts with media outlets to promote activities. In recent years, there has not been any research about the overall amount of such allocations; however, in 2017 research indicated that such spending could amount from BAM 30 million to 100 million annually (\$16 million to \$54 million).<sup>21</sup>

Advertising of public companies in the media is another way that content is influenced, as public companies are mainly held by people close to political parties. In addition to giving grants and subsidies to the media, local governments also make commercial contracts with media outlets to cover the work of mayors and local assemblies, but this is

often used for political promotion and their legitimacy is questionable.<sup>22</sup> Political interference into the editorial content of public media and public service broadcasters is also done through appointments of the members of managerial bodies. “There are no completely independent media. The media are seen as a powerful tool in the hands of politicians and powerful people, and therefore each political option (more or less) has its own media,” said Bjelica Škrivan.



The level of media and information literacy is low, and the efforts of various government institutions and state bodies to promote and include media and information literacy in media and education policies are still at an early stage. The population lacks the knowledge and skills on how to keep themselves digitally secure, and digital training courses are scarce and mostly attended by journalists and representatives of nongovernmental organizations. Denials of war crimes are still present, and there is a trend to equate freedom of speech with theories that are not evidence based and institutional. Panelists give their lowest score to the level of media and information literacy skills of citizens and to the availability of media and information literacy tools; they gave their highest score to the information provided by community media, even though the number of community media is still extremely low.

21 Hodžić, Sanela, and Anida Sokol, *Obrasci finansiranja medija iz javnih budžeta, politički pritisci i finansijska nestabilnost*, Mediacentar Sarajevo, 2017. <https://www.media.ba/bs/publication/obraci-finansiranja-medija-iz-javnih-budzeta-politicki-iritisci-i-finansijska>

22 Arnes Grbešić, *Zagrijavanje za lokalne izbore: Stotine hiljada maraka za medije*, Media.ba, 2021. <https://media.ba/bs/magazin-novinarstvo/zagrijavanje-za-lokalne-izbore-2020-stotine-hiljada-maraka-za-medije>

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

The Law on the Protection of Personal Data prohibits the publication of private data, but provisions are not aligned with international standards and do not apply to companies registered in other countries, such as social networks, or to media that are under the jurisdiction of the CRA. Edin Ibrahimfendić, a lawyer with the Institution of Human Rights Ombudsman of Bosnia and Herzegovina, states that cybercrimes are penalized. For example, in 2021, a group of people were arrested for hacking bank accounts and for bank fraud. Panelists agreed that legal protections are insufficiently enforced, and the population lacks the knowledge and skills to keep themselves digitally secure.

Digital security training courses provided through different donor-supported projects are scarce and are mostly attended by journalists and representatives from niche media and nongovernmental organizations. Journalists from mainstream private and public media mainly do not attend such training courses and lack skills and knowledge about digital security. Jašarević states that she

has never attended such a training course but that her media outlet employs persons who are responsible for digital security. “Whenever we are reporting on an affair, there are attempts to take down our site, but interruptions do not last long—maybe half an hour, an hour maximum—and we manage to restore everything,” Jašarević said.

Other media representatives note that distributed denial-of-service attacks are not frequent but that they face other issues, such as phishing. Stokić said that she has had the opportunity to attend educational activities on digital security, but her media outlet does not have a person responsible for digital hygiene practices, and journalists rarely apply knowledge gained at such training courses. She also stated that many journalists lack digital literacy, including knowledge on how digital

technology and social networks work, even though they actively use them. A study shows that journalists use social networks extensively, even to obtain information, and consider them immensely important for the visibility of their work.<sup>23</sup> Some, however, have had their content removed from social networks or their social media profiles and accounts banned as their posts were mistakenly identified or reported as violating the community guidelines of social networks. Journalists see this as a form of censorship and, in certain cases, as orchestrated efforts to lower the visibility of their content. For example, in 2021 the Facebook account of Direkt Portal, located in Trebinje, was banned; Bjelica Škrivan stated that it could have been the result of efforts to silence their criticism toward the local government.

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

Panelists agreed that the level of media and information literacy is low even though some progress has been made. In the aforementioned

study, only a quarter of the respondents (24 percent) believe in their ability to identify false information in media and information communication services and over half of the respondents who use the internet (56 percent) do not perform any fact-checking of online information. Only half (50 percent) believe that they have sufficient knowledge about how to protect themselves and their family members from the negative effects

of media and information communication technologies, and only a third (32 percent) know how to report content they consider inappropriate in various media and information communication technologies.<sup>24</sup>

“There are no completely independent media. The media are seen as a powerful tool in the hands of politicians and powerful people, and therefore each political option (more or less) has its own media,” said Škrivan.

23 Đelilović, Zinaida, *Društvene mreže i novinarstvo u Bosni i Hercegovini*, Vijeće za Štampu u Bosni i Hercegovini, February 2021, [https://www.vzs.ba/images/2021/drustvene\\_mreze\\_i\\_novinarstvo\\_u\\_BiH.pdf](https://www.vzs.ba/images/2021/drustvene_mreze_i_novinarstvo_u_BiH.pdf).

24 Hasanagić, Snježana, et al., *Media Habits of Adults in BiH*, Council of Europe and Communications Regulatory Agency, 2021. <https://rm.coe.int/adults-media-habits-eng/1680a454d7>.

Citizens are not aware of the algorithms driving social media, the mechanics of advertisement targeting, and other ways in which personal information is utilized to target digital users. These topics are not discussed at school, in the public, or in the media, and there is a lack of expertise and organizations that deal with digital rights. Cvjetićanin said that the number of people who are tricked by fraudulent digital messages designed to hoax people into revealing sensitive information, such as back details and IDs, is significant, especially among the older population: “What I see from our work is really concerning . . . also because I don’t see responses from judicial investigative bodies. Frauds that happen [in] which people probably lose money are completely invisible.”

In recent years regulatory, nongovernmental, and international organizations have continued to work on diverse media and information literacy activities. The informal media and information literacy coalition of media and information experts remains active. The CRA has held a campaign called Days of Media and Information Literacy and a Fair on Media and Information Literacy, and it has opened a website ([medijskapismenost.ba](http://medijskapismenost.ba)) dedicated to media and information literacy. The subject “the digital world” has been introduced in the second grade in primary schools in Republika Srpska; the Republika Srpska government plans to introduce a subject called media literacy in secondary schools in 2022. A national-level strategy on media and information literacy has not been established yet. Efforts by various government institutions and state bodies to promote media and information literacy and include it in media and education policies are still at an early stage.

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

Online platforms for the exchange of information exist, but Gačanica stated that they either assemble like-minded people or are places of insults, hate speech, and violence. People engage with information

but often in a negative way. “We now have a paradox where criticism [shown] toward sources of information is turned completely upside down, and everyone is very critical in the sense that there are some conspiracies. There is currently a trend that equates freedom of opinion . . . with complete denial of anything institutional [and] evidence based,” Cvjetićanin said. She gave an example: on YouTube, people follow what they consider “truth media”—nonprofessional content producers that, according to them, are brave enough to tell the truth but are essentially very professional disinformers.

Trusting noninstitutional and non-evidence-based theories can be explained by the lack of trust in institutions due to high levels of corruption and people’s negative experiences with, for example, health institutions. Lack of trust in official information and public institutions has been particularly visible during the COVID-19 pandemic when poor communication from health authorities and the lack of an official government campaign on the importance of immunization further undermined the public health response. Despite the availability of

vaccines, only 29 percent of citizens got vaccinated. As Denis Džidić, director of BIRN B&H, said, citizens still decline to accept court verdicts on war crimes and genocide, and historical revisionism is still a fact of life. On social networks, people tend to react toward issues such as vaccination

and epidemiological measures, but the public is apathetic toward local politics and air pollution—a source for serious concern in certain towns. Kantić partially blamed the media for this state of affairs since they are mostly reporting on high-level politics; it is almost impossible to obtain information, for example, on local community meetings in which citizens can directly participate.

Representatives of the CRA, the Press Council in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Raskrinkavanje said that people react to problematic media content and send in reports and complaints. Bahtić Kestendžić said that different persons complain over user-generated content, such as hate speech, but that people who are targeted by specific articles are the ones who

**Citizens still decline to accept court verdicts on war crimes and genocide, and historical revisionism is still a fact of life.**

mostly send complaints—usually for defamation—about content in the print and online media. Bahto Kestendžić also said that civil society organizations used to react more to rights violations—such as women’s rights—of the groups whose interests they protect, but this trend has decreased in recent years. Citizens mostly have been sending complaints to the CRA regarding rule breaches over the payment of calls in TV shows and over the protection of minors. Maslo said that people also complain over diverse issues, stating wrongly that it is hate speech: “A citizen [might] complain about the TV appearance of the son of a convicted war criminal . . . with a request to ban the broadcasting of this type of program, . . . or they complain because a certain politician has been criticized in a program, and they see it as an attack on the entire nation from which that politician comes.” Most cases of disinformation that people report to the fact-checking platform Raskrinkavanje are usually debunked as disinformation.

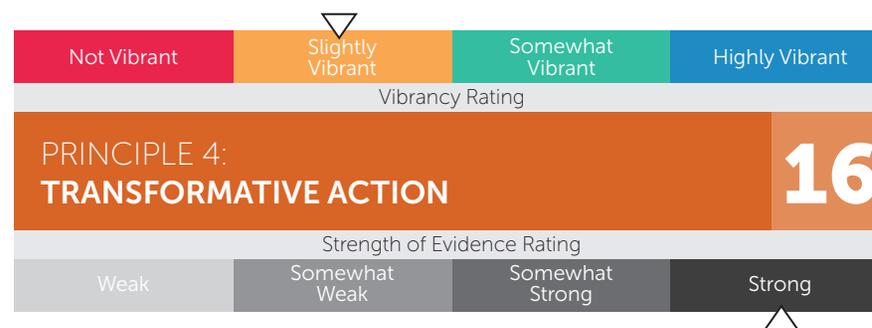
#### Indicator 14: Media and information producers engage with their audience’s needs.

Media and content producers follow statistical data on the most-followed topics and programs and adjust their content to their audience’s needs. Zaimović said that the most popular media content is trivial—such as TV reality shows and online media content on crimes and accidents—and if a media outlet wants to reach a certain number of views to obtain revenue, they have to produce such content. Marketing agencies conduct research on audience and market size but mostly only for their clients; data are not available to the public. There is, however, a lack of qualitative research on the audience’s needs and interests, as media outlets lack financial resources, knowledge, and staff to conduct such analyses. Some research has been done by nongovernmental organizations. For example, research on media consumption habits of young people has shown that they are not satisfied with the overall content in the media and would like to follow more content on diverse

topics, including music, art, science, and ecology.<sup>25</sup> The media receive audience feedback mostly through social networks and user-generated comments, but as Stokić said, their followers also suggest topics by sending emails or during conversations at different events.

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

Community media is still undeveloped, and there is no unanimous consensus about the definition of community media among media experts and representatives. Based on the regulation of the CRA, it is possible to establish a community radio for the specific needs of a certain social group, but so far, only three community radio stations have been set up: Radio Otvorena Mreža, Radio Active, and Radio Marija. Maslo said that these stations provide relevant information to their audiences and give space to marginalized groups to participate in public communication and social debate, but even though the criteria to establish a community radio are simple, so far, there has not been much interest. There is a rise in nonprofessional content production and citizen journalism, but panelists are concerned that these can be used for spreading disinformation and problematic media content.



Audiences are largely polarized along ethnonational and political party lines, and even though people view media with different ideological

<sup>25</sup> Sokol, Anida, and Senad Alibegović, *Stavovi, navike i potrebe mladih za medijskim sadržajima u BiH*, Mediacentar Sarajevo, 2021. <https://media.ba/bs/publication/stavovi-navike-i-potrebe-mladih-za-medijskim-sadrzajima-u-bih>.

leanings, they trust only those media that support their viewpoints. People participate in the exchange of information with others, mostly through social media platforms and in the comments sections of online media, but such discussions are not constructive and are mostly based on insults and derogatory language. Panelists agreed that the quality of information does not support good governance and democratic rights but that some civil society organizations use quality information to improve communities.

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

There are diverse sources of information but information sharing between different ideological lines is limited. Jašarević said that people follow media with different ideological leanings, only to report later regarding negative opinions about that media or about the people who produce the news. A poll on media trust conducted in 2021 by Mediacentar Sarajevo and IPSOS Agency shows that the audience is largely polarized along political and ethnonational lines and that people follow and trust the media that show their group—ethnonational or political—in a positive light. Polarization is most visible regarding public service broadcasters and media that favor different political fractions. For example, according to the poll, 30 percent of Serbs trust RTRS (whose reporting favors the ruling party, the Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD), in Republika Srpska) the most, and 40 percent trust BN TV, which favors the opposition parties in the same area. The poll also shows that the main reasons for distrust are related to the perception that most media outlets are politically influenced and spread disinformation. Such overgeneralizations can harm the work of professional and independent media because of the tendency of the public to consider most media to be under political influence.

Kulenović said that due to the epidemiological measures during the COVID-19 pandemic, discussion on television was limited, but it has also brought the use of new communication tools that allow journalists to

invite guests from different fields and different parts of the world. Despite this, there have not been many constructive discussions on important topics and exchanges of different opinions. “What is crucial and problematic is that, in these debates, people are not actually engaged to hear and understand the views of others but to defend those that they a priori consider theirs,” Turčilo said. Insults, derogatory language, and even hate speech are particularly present online, especially regarding topics such as ethnonationalism, and panelists agree that the culture of dialogue and communication is not at a high level online.

The divisive political and ethnonational discourse of political elites has further intensified with the amendments to the criminal code that prohibit public condonation, denial, gross diminution, or attempts to justify the crimes of genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes established by final judgments—amplifying the already-complex issues of facing a difficult war heritage and of facing the past. In response to these amendments, Republika Srpska has called the amendments anti-Serb and has adopted the Law on Nonapplication of the Decision of the High Representative, deciding to boycott the work of central government institutions. The media also transmit inflammatory and divisive political statements, and talks about a possible armed conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina has further polarized the public. For example, a popular anchor of a TV news program has asked his viewers to answer via televoting—“What they would do if a war started: would they stay or leave?”—while online media has published statements by different actors that a new conflict is possible.

Panelists noted that the media play a role in fomenting division and report on events in diametrically opposite ways. In December 2021, RTRS (the public service broadcaster of Republika Srpska) ran a story in which the reporter and an interviewee falsely claimed that Santa Claus and pork were banned in Sarajevo, serving as proof that the capital city is monocultural and not welcoming for non-Bosniaks. The report provoked numerous reactions in the media and on social networks across the country.

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

People's views on political or social issues are not shaped by quality information, and quality information does not influence election outcomes, panelists agreed. "You have a thousand pieces of information that tell you that society is falling apart, that people are leaving, that dissatisfaction exists," Kontić said. This information, however, does not influence the public's decision regarding their voting choices, as for the past 30 years people have been electing the same political parties that have brought the country to a very poor state, according to Kontić.

Pre-election periods are usually marked by abuses of public resources, different types of fraud, and biased media reporting that promotes certain political parties. Turčilo said that studies that monitor election periods show there is a serious number of media that, during the election campaign, serve exclusively as mouthpieces for certain political parties, and in that context, citizens cannot receive accurate, objective, and fair information. People's voting choices are not being made on the basis of political programs. "I was interested in the educational programs of political parties, and I saw that these programs are almost identical. [Political parties] copy-paste it, but that does not impact for whom people will vote," added Turčilo.

Bahto Kestendžić said that government actors often directly influence the creation of false and inaccurate information, using it either to justify their actions or to make new decisions. "Organized bot armies of ruling structures are beginning to pose a special problem [by] trying to intimidate political rivals and dissidents, both party-active and ordinary citizens," Bahto Kestendžić added.

Panelists agreed that people do not follow fact-based health and safety recommendations—as can be seen by the fact that only 29 percent of citizens have gotten vaccinated for the COVID-19 virus—

and most of them do not follow epidemiological measures. "I have no other explanation [for] why the vaccination rate is so low. There is no other reason [except] that people do not believe that it is safe, do not believe that it is effective, or do not believe that there is a disease at all," Cvjetičanin said. A member of parliament, Lana Prlić, has received over 30,000 comments on Facebook—including numerous threats, hate speech, and calls for violence—for publishing a photo of her receiving her second COVID-19 vaccine and for inviting people to get vaccinated. Panelists agreed that this large number of aggressive comments shows the effect of disinformation regarding COVID-19 vaccines; they are also based on gender, as Prlić's male colleagues have not received the same number of insults and threats for similar acts.

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

**“You have a thousand pieces of information that tell you that society is falling apart, that people are leaving, that dissatisfaction exists,” said Kontić.**

There are numerous and diverse civil society organizations, but panelists questioned the extent of their influence. Cvjetičanin noted that civil society organizations are becoming weaker; there are not enough organized civic actions to influence the issues being faced in society.

Maslo said that civil society activism is present to some extent, but there is a need for more consistent and better communication and cooperation between the media and civil society organizations. The government rarely communicates with civil society organizations, and when they do, the government does it out of formality rather than real interest, Džidić noted.

There are CSOs that have their own online media and through which they inform their followers on issues relevant to their work based on facts and research – such as the Sarajevo Open Center, which is devoted to LGBTIQ rights. Bjelica Škrivan also mentioned citizens and groups on social media networks that base their local activism on quality and accurate information. Bahto Kestendžić said that CSOs are rare bright spots in society when it comes to fighting for true and accurate

information, and developing awareness among citizens about the need to question sources of information. Different civil society organizations have been working on educating citizens to identify disinformation through different media literacy activities, and more research on the media sector was conducted in 2021.

Gaćanica said that in general CSOs are more responsible when using and disseminating information, but there are civil society groups that do not promote democratic values and human rights—such as groups hostile to migrants and refugees, reproductive rights, the LGBTQ community. The issue, however, has not been researched enough, according to Gaćanica.

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

Governments rarely engage with civil society and media, and most political discourse and debate lack references to research and analyses.

Maslo said that there is an established communication between government bodies with citizens and the media through, among other things, press conferences and lately more often communication through social networks. “However, these seem to be mechanisms used by government bodies mainly in cases where certain information is to be transmitted by one-way communication,” she added.

Džidić noted that governments rarely communicate with CSOs, and when they do, it is out of formality. Governments rarely use research prepared by civil society organizations, and as Džidić said, “they mostly have their own facts and proof.”

Despite advocacy efforts, CSOs are rarely able to advance certain legislative and policy changes. For example, Kulenović recalled how media-related CSOs—such as the Association BH Journalists, the Press Council and Mediacentar Sarajevo—prepared draft laws on the transparency of media ownership and of advertisement but these

never entered into the parliamentary procedure. Panelists agreed that government actors search for quality information but use them in the way that suit their interests.

### **Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic rights.**

When information sources reveal human rights violations, the government rarely respond in an appropriate manner. Gaćanica said that revelations of human rights violations and calls for changes are based on individual cases and that various levels of government are mostly unresponsive to demands for change.

Only in rare cases do prosecutors launch inquiries after investigative journalists publish stories on corruption, bribery, and influence peddling, and even when they do, the process is long. For example, in 2020, journalists revealed the case of Srebrena malina (*Silver raspberry*) where

government authorities granted a permit to a fruit grower and processor to procure 100 ventilators from China. The Prosecutor’s Office of Bosnia and Herzegovina charged Prime Minister Fadil Novalić and Fahrudin Solak, the suspended director of the Federal Administration of Civil Protection, with abuse of position or authority, and Deputy Prime Minister Jelka Miličević was

charged with negligent work in the service. However, as Kulenović noted, no one has resigned, and the case has not been concluded.

Bahto Kestendžić said that after journalists reveal cases of corruption, these cases mostly end up having no adequate or timely response, and thus the public loses interest and forgets the case. Džidić pointed to some positive examples media reporting has had on judicial institutions: at the end of 2020, Milan Tegeltija, then president of the High Judicial and Prosecutorial Council of Bosnia and Herzegovina (VSTV), resigned from all positions in the VSTV after accusations of influence peddling, and Gordana Tadić was removed from her position as chief prosecutor of

“**Organized bot armies of ruling structures are beginning to pose a special problem [by] trying to intimidate political rivals and dissidents, both party-active and ordinary citizens,” said Kestendžić.**

the Prosecutor's Office of Bosnia and Herzegovina because of negligence in the performance of official duties. Džidić says that a symbiosis between leak journalists—those who revealed the wrongdoings—and the daily media—which then continuously reported on the affair—had been set up, eventually leading to disciplinary procedures and, finally, resignations by these officials.

## LIST OF PANEL PARTICIPANTS

**Tijana Cvjetičanin**, editor, Raskrinkavanje, Sarajevo

**Denis Džidić**, director, Balkan Investigative Reporting Network Bosnia and Herzegovina, Sarajevo

**Lejla Gačanica**, independent legal adviser, Sarajevo (questionnaire only)

**Edin Ibrahimfendić**, lawyer, Institution of Human Rights Ombudsman of Bosnia and Herzegovina

**Slađana Jašarević**, journalist, BN TV, Bijeljina

**Maida Bahto Kestendžić**, project coordinator, Press Council in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Sarajevo

**Boro Kontić**, journalist and director, Mediacentar Sarajevo

**Velida Kulenović**, journalist and vice president, BH Journalists Association

**Azra Maslo**, program standards coordinator, Communications Regulatory Agency

**Nikolija Bjelica Škrivan**, journalist, Direkt Portal, Trebinje

**Vanja Stokić**, editor in chief, eTrafika, Banja Luka

**Lejla Turčilo**, professor, Faculty of Political Sciences, University of Sarajevo

**Senad Zaimović**, director, Fabrika Advertising Agency, Sarajevo

## MODERATORS AND AUTHORS

**Anida Sokol**, media researcher, Mediacentar Sarajevo

**Elvira Jukić-Mujkić**, editor, Mediacentar Sarajevo

Copyright © 2022 by IREX

**Notice of Rights:** Permission is granted to display, copy, and distribute VIBE in whole or in part, provided that: (a) the materials are used with the acknowledgment “The Vibrant Information Barometer (VIBE) is a product of IREX with funding from USAID.”; (b) VIBE is used solely for personal, noncommercial, or informational use; and (c) no modifications of VIBE are made.

This study is made possible by the support of the American People through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The opinions expressed herein are those of the panelists and other project researchers and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID, the United States Government, or IREX.

# KOSOVO

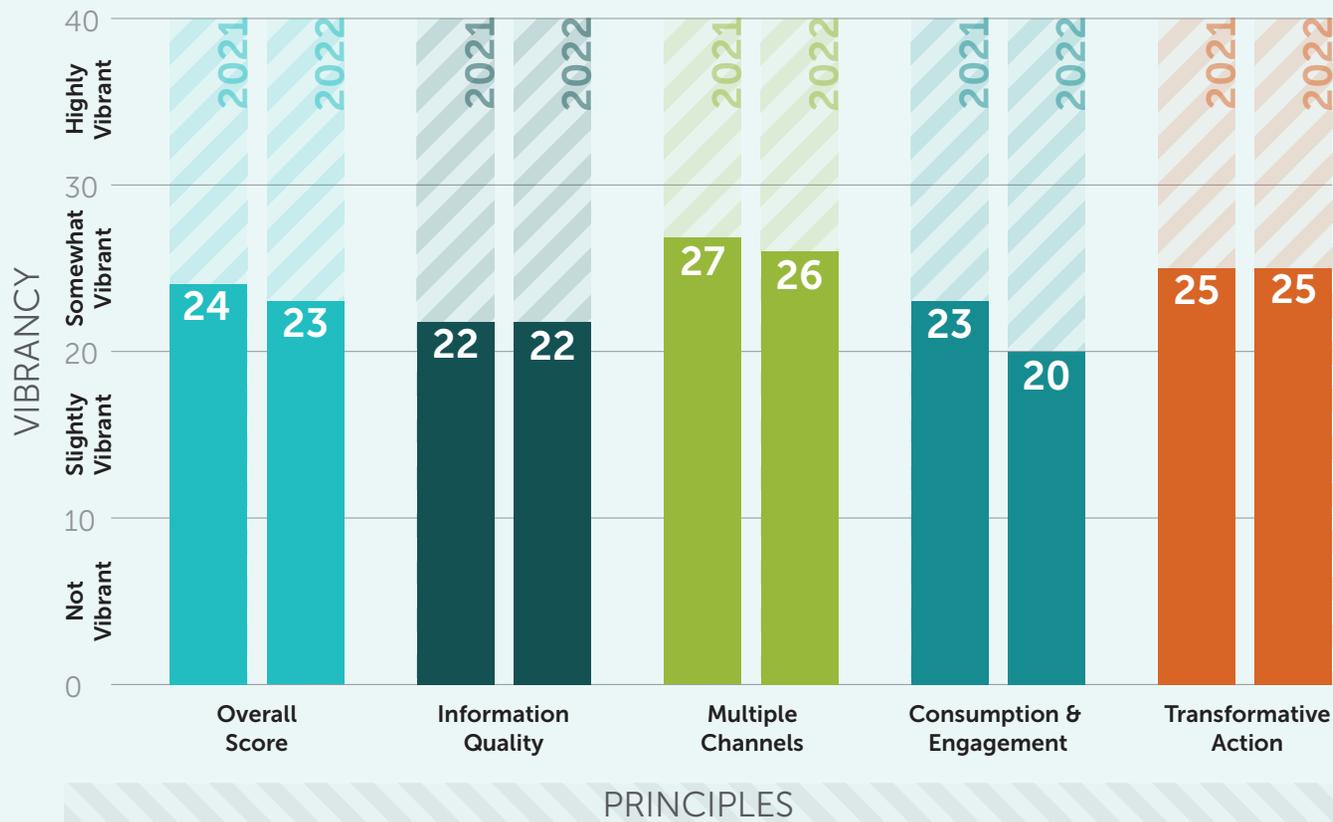
## Vibrant Information Barometer

2 0 2 2



Driton Pacarada





**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

23

Kosovo saw more political upheaval in 2021. On February 14, Prime Minister Albin Kurti clinched power again in the general election. Around the same time in 2020, Kurti’s government was ousted from the parliament in a no-confidence vote, a move he called “a coup.” The new government soon faced problems. The first challenge was securing COVID-19 vaccines and organizing a vaccination campaign; by the end of the year, Kosovo’s vaccination rates were higher than neighboring countries. In the international arena, however, Kosovo has not yet secured membership in the United Nations, INTERPOL, and UNESCO. The European Union (EU) did not grant visa liberalization, and the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue did not produce a concrete agreement between the two countries.

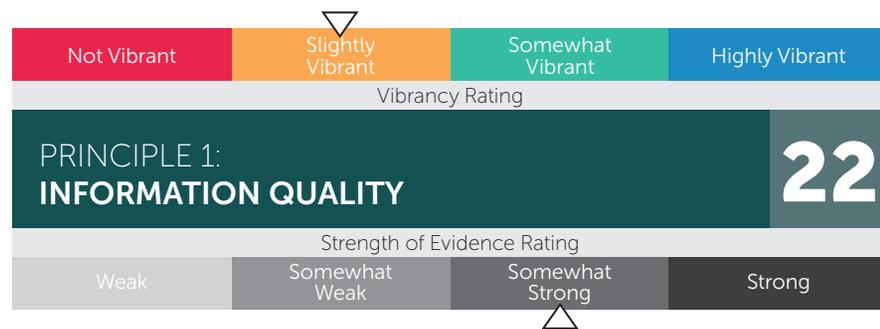
Kosovo citizens headed to voting stations once again at the end of 2021. This time, local elections were organized to elect mayors for 38 Kosovo municipalities and representatives of local assemblies. According to the EU Election Observation Mission, journalists were able to exercise their professional duties, and major television channels covered the elections in news and other formats. The public broadcaster and the main private television channels organized debates among most mayoral candidates, which streamed live on their social media channels.

Some of the biggest changes on the media scene in 2021 involved Radio Television of Kosova (RTK). The Kosovo Assembly dismissed the board of RTK because of allegations of budget mismanagement. However, in December, the assembly elected new board members in a process that civil society observers considered

transparent. However, the EU Election Observation Mission report on local elections concluded that RTK is not fully independent, as it is largely financed by the state.

A public opinion poll organized in March by Ipsos shows that citizens of Kosovo are heavy consumers of media, and they place a lot of trust in it. Despite a rapid increase in online media, television is the main source of information for most people, with 82 percent of respondents claiming to use it daily to get information about political and social events. Social networks are in second place as sources of news and information (65 percent), followed by online news media (45 percent), personal contacts (44 percent), radio (9 percent), and print newspapers/magazines (5 percent). The level of trust in the media is higher (64 percent) than distrust (35 percent), with television appearing to be the most trusted.

However, VIBE 2022 shows that Kosovo’s overall country score of 23 dropped from last year’s score of 24, placing Kosovo close to the midrange of scores when measuring information openness, factuality, professionalism, and economic sustainability. Further analysis of Kosovo’s scores indicates that Principles 1 (information quality) and 3 (information consumption and engagement) received the lowest scores, underlining the media and information sectors’ lack of full adherence to international standards. On the other hand, panelists gave higher scores to Principle 2 (how information flows) and Principle 4 (transformative action), suggesting that consumers have experienced no restrictions, political or otherwise, with creating, sharing, or consuming information.



Out of five key indicators that measure information quality in Kosovo, panelists gave similar scores to Indicators examining the availability of quality information, fact-based information, and inclusivity and diversity. A slightly lower score was given to Indicator 3—which gauges whether the norm for information is that it is not intended to harm.

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

In general, it appears that Kosovo enjoys great media pluralism. However, panelists believe that this is mostly based on quantitative aspects rather than diversity in terms of topics and viewpoints. Most reporting is about politics rather than policies. Individual politicians and their interpretation of developments dominate much of the news.

A variety of content is produced in Kosovo, including broadcast and digital media. However, no print media exist anymore, as all daily newspapers are not digital and publish online. Public and private journalism schools exist, and adequate trainings are offered from local and international organizations on content production, including evidence-based and ethical reporting.

The Code of Ethics for Media Service Providers in Kosovo was adopted in 2016 by the Independent Media Commission (IMC), and the Code of Print Media adopted by the Kosovo Press Council includes specific regulations against hate speech and disinformation. The IMC is a constitutional body that regulates broadcast media in Kosovo, while the Press Council is a

self-regulatory body with members from print and online media. Both bodies uncovered violations of the ethical code by the media throughout 2021. Press Council data show that the number of complaints about journalism standards violations is increasing, along with the number of decisions confirming such violations, signaling that professional standards in journalism are in decline. One panelist observed that standards are in decline due to the lack of newsroom editors, particularly in online media.

The body of content covers a variety of topics; however, political issues tend to dominate media coverage compared to social issue and thematic reporting.

Journalists hold government actors accountable by reporting on their works and actions. There are specialized fact-checking organizations that monitor public claims from the political elites. Due to a high number of online media that operate in the country, information covering local, national, regional, and international development are all available. News content overall is editorially independent.

However, media rarely devote adequate attention to background information, contextualization, and explanation of issues under discussion. There is also a significant lack of coverage of economic and social welfare issues. As one panelist put it, television channels use most of their prime time for political debates, which heavily feature political gossip and analyses by fellow journalists.

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

Most online media publish half-stories, based only on individual statements, typically mined from social networks such as Facebook and Twitter. In most of these cases, there is a lack of background information and failure to include multiple sources. These trends show a general decline in professional standards. Another problem is that many stories are built on anonymous sources. While protection of sources is well regulated by the law, anonymous sources are typical in online reporting. One panelist warns that this will lead to increased skepticism about the

accuracy of reporting.

Printed newspapers no longer exist in Kosovo; the economic crisis fueled by the pandemic forced them to turn online. There are schools for journalism training; however, at least one panelist questioned their quality. Journalism programs typically feature old curricula, focused mostly on theory rather than practical skills. The panelists suggest that journalism programs should add new elements concerning investigative journalism, especially on current issues such as money laundering, offshore companies, and regional organized crime. Moreover, they see an urgent need for more training on identifying fake news and disinformation.

The norm for information is not fact-based and well-sourced. Panelist gave this sub-indicator low score due to the lack of background information usually provided by online media in their stories. Nevertheless, professional content producers, such as televisions, radio and online newspapers, do not intentionally create or disseminate false or misleading information. Yet panelists highlight in their discussion the significant amount of false information that is spread over social networks, mostly by online media. Some fact-checking organizations are also engaged in identifying false information that is spread by online media. However, there is no evidence that the government creates or disseminates false or misleading information.

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

The media's frequent breaches of ethical standards rarely draw any professional ramifications. Hate speech and disinformation are pervasive, especially among online media. However, there are laws and regulations that prohibit hate speech. To begin with, the Criminal Code of the Republic of Kosovo, adopted in 2019, states, "Whoever publicly incites or publicly spreads hatred, discord and intolerance between

national, racial, religious, ethnic and other groups or based on sexual orientation, gender identity and other personal characteristics, in a manner which is likely to disturb the public order shall be punished by a fine or imprisonment of up to five years."

**While protection of sources is well regulated by the law, anonymous sources are typical in online reporting. One panelist warns that this will lead to increased skepticism about the accuracy of reporting.**

The government does not create or disseminate content that is intended to harm. Nevertheless, hate speech is present across online media, especially on the comment sections. Media outlets have a self-regulatory mechanism that identifies hate speech when such complaints are put forward by the public. The Press Council of Kosovo is the only self-regulatory body that deals with audience complaints on

reporting that is biased, untrue and that contain hate speech. Its rulings are only opinions with no legal weight.

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

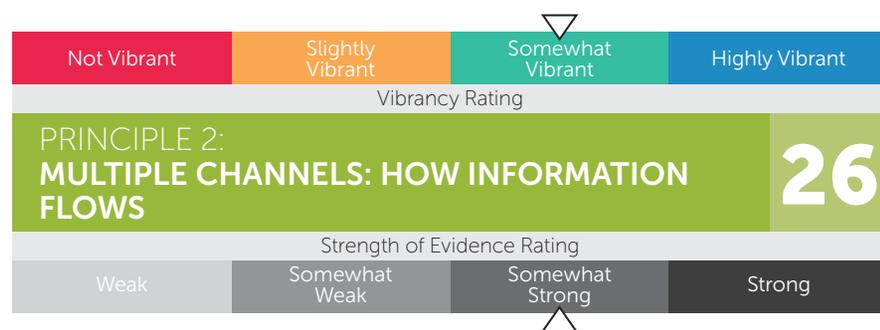
Information is published in many languages and format in which people need it. There are many community media in the country. In addition to Albanian speaking media, there are local media in Serbian language, Turkish, Bosnian and Roma language. Overall, the information produced by these media include different ideologies and perspectives, including gender and religious perspectives, in addition to media that religious content. Marginalized groups have alternative methods and platforms from expressing their views. Media owners, judging based on the size of media outlets, are mostly men, while the editorial staff and journalists are gender balanced.

### **Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced.**

The lowest score for this Principle, however, was given to Indicator 5 on resources for content production, suggesting that media produce a large amount of news without sufficient resourcing. This trend is especially

present in emerging online media that tend to produce single-source news stories.

Overall, professional content producers do not have sufficient financial resources to operate and produce high quality information. Financial crises arising from the global pandemic have negatively affected the wellbeing of smaller media outlets, especially local radio and televisions that rely mostly on advertising from local businesses and funding from international donors. There are no government subsidies for local and community media. The only media with a secure funding is public media that receives the budget from the state. However, most media are adjusting to new technological changes by generating income from YouTube and Google. However, most journalists' salaries are not sufficient, especially across local media.



Principle 2, focused on the plurality and information flow of media, drew the highest scores from the panelists. Freedom of information is guaranteed by the constitution, and several laws exist to protect press freedom, information sources, and whistleblowers, such as the Law on Access to Public Documents, the Law on Protection of Journalism Sources, and the Law on Protection of Whistleblowers.

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

Laws that provide legal protection for freedom of speech are enforced impartially, and the government is not trying to modify them to erode

freedom of speech and freedom of the press. Furthermore, there is no evidence that the government overtly or covertly censors media or pressures ICT providers to censor media.

Although the government does not censor media directly, one panelist noted that the government applies “pressure through organized citizen feedback on journalists.” Self-censorship is quite common, especially when reporting about large companies that own media outlets. Journalists are aware of the editorial stance they are expected to pursue: the media company’s political position. Self-censorship is more or less agreed upon and applied from the moment a journalist joins a media outlet that has certain political leanings; however, self-censorship stems from financial interests rather than political fear.

Sometimes pressure comes the other way around: when the media threatens the public. In a case that triggered a sharp response from many civil society organizations in 2021, the director of the public broadcaster RTK sued a civil society activist, Agron Demi, alleging that Demi’s criticism of RTK’s reporting damaged the outlet’s image. One panelist calls the move a strategic lawsuit against public participation (SLAPP) or an intimidation lawsuit, mainly intended to censor and silence public critique.

RTK is the only public media outlet in Kosovo, financed almost entirely from the public budget. Kosovo’s parliament fired the entire board of directors in June 2021, citing budget mismanagement.

A new board, however, should not be seen as a silver bullet, rather a first step in long-needed reform following years of chronic mismanagement and politicization, according to Boris Bergant, a Slovenian former vice president of the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) and now senior EBU consultant. “Alone, the board of directors cannot change a situation where the interests related to public service media are so political. ... It will be a long run to make some changes,” Bergant told Balkan Insight.<sup>1</sup>

Journalists are not imprisoned, fined or killed for doing their jobs. There

<sup>1</sup> Bami, Xhorxhina. “New Board No Silver Bullet for Troubled Kosovo Broadcaster,” Balkan Insight. December 3, 2021. <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/12/03/new-board-no-silver-bullet-for-troubled-kosovo-broadcaster/>.

are laws that protect the confidentiality of sources, and laws are not used to persecute journalists for their openly expressed opinions or news coverage. Libel and insult are not part of the criminal law.

Access to public information improved in 2021, as citizens and journalists rely more and more on the Agency for Information and Privacy, an independent agency that enforces the implementation of the Law on Access to Public Documents and the Law on the Protection of Personal Data and that serves as an intermediary between the public and government institutions. The head of the agency was elected by the Kosovo parliament in 2021 after many failed attempts in previous years, and the new leadership has already taken steps to improve access to public documents, with most claims for information addressed in a timely manner.

Although the working environment for media practitioners is safe overall, reports of physical attacks and verbal threats continue to be reported—in fact, according to the Association of Journalists of Kosovo (AGK), such incidents are increasing.

A violent attack on Visar Duriqi, an investigative journalist for Insjderi, in February 2021 prompted international media watchdogs to call for an official investigation. Duriqi, who suffered head injuries in an attack by three masked men, suspects that his coverage of alleged political connections to organized crime groups spurred the attack.<sup>2</sup>

AGK has recorded 17 such cases in 2018, 21 cases in 2019, 24 cases in 2020, and 25 cases in 2021. While the association is quick to issue public statements condemning incidents involving verbal and physical attacks on journalists, reporters, or camera operators, state mechanisms for monitoring and gathering data on threats against journalists are missing, although threats against journalists are typically reported to the police and the prosecutor’s office, as well as the AGK. The judiciary,

<sup>2</sup> “Investigative Journalist Visar Duriqi Assaulted in Kosovo,” Committee to Protect Journalists. March 3, 2021. <https://cpj.org/2021/03/investigative-journalist-visar-duriqi-assaulted-in-kosovo/>.

however, slated to introduce a new mechanism in 2022, called SIMR (Online System for Case Management), to create a database of cases and monitor trials related to these cases.

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

Kosovo’s telecommunication and internet infrastructure covers almost all of the country. Cable television has been extended everywhere, including rural places. Cable operators provide different packages, from basic to advanced, that are priced accordingly, allowing most people afford to have internet and cable television in their home. For those families with lower incomes, terrestrial broadcasting is still available. No communities or groups of people are precluded from accessing information due to social norms. Internet governance and regulation of the digital space provides open and equal access to users and content producers.

Internet penetration is above 92 percent, and there are about 40 licensed cable providers. The problem is that some of them have issues with content providers and vice versa. For example, the Basic Court in Prishtina received a demand from the Trade Inspectorate to initiate a lawsuit against IPKO, one of the main cable providers in the country. The lawsuit claims that IPKO violated the Law on Consumer Protection by failing to provide all the channels advertised in their package; the inspectorate claims that it has received over 180 complaints from IPKO customers. Another controversy surrounds two other cable operators, ArtMotion and Kujtesa, which, despite appearing as two separate entities, offer identical cable platforms and pricing, suggesting a hidden agreement between the two operators.

Journalists’ knowledge is generally satisfactory in the field of information and communication technologies, but the infrastructure does not sufficiently meet the information needs of people with disabilities and people who speak nondominant languages. One panelist noted that “a large number of websites of local and central institutions

**Journalists are aware of the editorial stance they are expected to pursue: the media company’s political position.**

do not have information in Serbian, or they are not adequately updated.”

One of IMC’s main responsibilities is to transform the broadcast system from analog to digital transmission. The deadline for doing it was back in 2015. Because of the lack of digital transmission, private television outlets are at the mercy of cable providers to be included in their platforms. Local television stations have been hit the hardest under this system, as many cable providers put local television stations at the bottom of their media channels. The IMC has licensed over 40 cable providers throughout the country. The 2021 arrest of two of IMC’s key personnel by state authorities for corruption charges seriously damaged the organization’s reputation.

#### **Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for government information.**

Kosovo has a good legal infrastructure in terms of guaranteeing freedom of information. These laws conform to international standards and norms. Yet, their implementation sometimes is selective, especially in terms of access to public documents. Therefore, the Agency for Information and Privacy, is a very important mechanism to help the public access governmental policy and decision-making information. Most requests for access come from the media and the non-governmental organizations rather than from ordinary citizens. However, there are no groups that are systematically excluded from exercising their right to information.

Most public institutions have hired a spokesperson; however, their job is mostly administrative rather than answering the inquires of the media and the public. The central government spokesperson is more vocal compared to local governments spokespeople.

“**Although the working environment for media practitioners is safe overall, reports of physical attacks and verbal threats continue to be reported.**”

#### **Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow.**

Editorial and ownership transparency are still not regulated for media outlets in Kosovo. A new attempt was made in 2021 to empower the IMC to regulate media ownership and prevent media monopolies; the suggestions are proposed in the new draft law on the IMC, which the government put under public consultation. However, the IMC’s reputation took a serious hit when the chief executive and the finance director were arrested on corruption charges on June 30, 2021—allegedly for taking bribes to issue a license for a new television station.<sup>3</sup>

The process for spectrum allocation for broadcasting frequencies is fair and transparent since it is done under a public bid. However, the majority of television channels in Kosovo are distributed through cable operators, which must go through licensing procedures. Easy licensing procedures for broadcast media has seen a rapid increase of television channels in recent years. Online media can be freely established and there are no special licensing requirements.

Radio Television of Kosovo is the only public media in the country that provides programming in various languages such as Albanian, Serbian, Turkish, Bosnian and Roma.

Internet governance provides open and equal access to users and content producers. Consumers have a variety of channels for accessing government information. Additionally, media provide live coverage of parliamentary sessions and government cabinet meetings, which also often provide their own livestreams.

The freedom to establish media is guaranteed. License holders usually renew every few years, with IMC managing the licensing procedures. In what is seen as a positive move, the new government is making

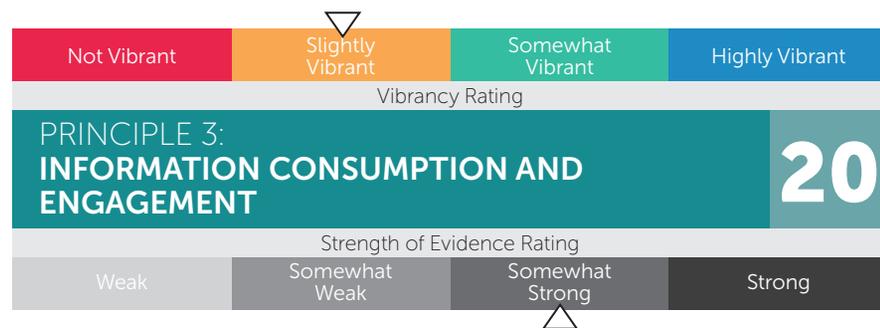
<sup>3</sup> Isufi, Perparim. “Kosovo Court Orders Detention for Media Commission Duo for Bribery,” Balkan Insight. July 1, 2021. <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/07/01/kosovo-court-orders-detention-for-media-commission-duo-for-bribery/>.

the recruitment of members of regulatory bodies more transparent. The panelists hope this may lead to the appointment of professionals in regulatory bodies that oversee frequency allocations and media licensing, as well as offer telecommunications services.

**Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.**

The panelists see no clear division between editorial functions, and the management of most media outlets, and they believe that media owners and managers frequently interfere in newsroom matters and editorial decisions.

Funding sources, especially ownership investments into media outlets, have a great deal of influence over editorial stance during election periods. There are no government subsidies for the media, except for the public media which is entirely funded from the state budget. Over the years, this has created room for political interference into the management and editorial content of public media. The board members of RTK and the members of the Independent Media Commission are elected by the Parliament and are in charge over the management of these institutions.



Overall, the panelists agreed that media literacy skills among Kosovo’s citizens have not improved, which is why panelists gave this indicator the lowest of all scores in this year’s VIBE study. Furthermore, citizens lack proper information on digital security and have a poor understanding of its importance. Trainings for media workers are increasing, some

of which are organized by the AGK itself, while new online tools--such as [verified-kosovo.org](https://verified-kosovo.org) (developed by IREX with funding from the U.S. Embassy in Pristina)--allow users to learn for themselves about media literacy and Kosovo’s media environment. Compared with younger people who are more aware of how algorithms drive social media content, older groups are more prone to fall prey to fake news and misinformation.

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

The panelists feel that there is a lack of awareness on how social networks use personal data to promote certain content. This is important especially during election time, as seen in 2021 with parliamentary and local government elections when a large number of so-called online media were established by groups or individuals close to political parties. As they spread disinformation and launch attacks on political opponents, their content dominates social networks.

Data privacy is protected by law, and the Agency for Information and Privacy handles complaints from people when their privacy is breached. Most frequently, private data are misused for advertising purposes. Digital hygiene practices among media outlets are not very strong, and their websites are not digitally secure. The same goes for public institutions, which are often target of cyber-attacks.

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

Although evidence shows that the Kosovo citizens are heavy consumers of media, media literacy is not the same across people of different education levels. The general public lacks the knowledge to verify the authenticity of online media, such as whether there is editorial, ownership, or contact information available.

The government does not promote media literacy adequately, except for a few cases when the Ministry of Education participated in media literacy events. There is no state curriculum to make it mandatory

in the country's school system. However, in a positive development, websites for fact-checking, debunking, or exposing disinformation are on the rise in Kosovo—both in the Albanian and Serbian languages. Furthermore, more and more media and information literacy and critical thinking training is becoming available for adults, students, and young journalists.

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

Journalists and civil society activists use their freedom of speech and rights to information. The general public also uses other means in addition to social networks to express their views, such as town hall meetings or call-in shows. There are no negative consequences for exercising freedom of speech. Ombudsperson is another institution that deals with such cases when freedom of speech or other human rights are violated. Ex-officio reports from Ombudsperson's institution show cases when people have become target of hate speech and violation of human rights.

In an attempt to curb comments containing hate speech and insults, both of which are prohibited by the law, many websites responded by removing their comment sections. However, as they share the same content over their social network profiles, the debate among users is carried out over Facebook. Hate speech, derogatory language, and insults heavily coat such debates, especially when gender and religious issues are under discussion. Panelists believe that citizens do not make full use of mechanisms available for filing complaints to the IMC or the Press Council. The complaints that are filed, however, reveal how the media deliberately uses hate speech targeting certain individuals. The Press Council is not empowered to issue any fines, just a confirmation of whether a violation of its code of ethics occurred or not. On the other hand, the IMC has the right to issue fines up to €100,000 (\$110,650) for

**“ Digital hygiene practices among media outlets are not very strong, and their websites are not digitally secure. The same goes for public institutions, which are often target of cyber-attacks.**

violations of the code of ethics or other regulations. However, most media escape with just a warning or a notional fine.

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

Most media use using social networks to communicate with their audiences and get their feedback. However, building trust with audiences through sponsoring or organizing community events is not a common practice.

Despite the audiences' needs and interests, most media have their own agendas in terms of content coverage. Panelists draw a comparison between prime-time shows and Public Pulse findings (a yearly national survey that asks citizens to identify their main concerns). While most people cite economic and social welfare as their top concerns, televised prime-time shows primarily present daily political news and statements from politicians.

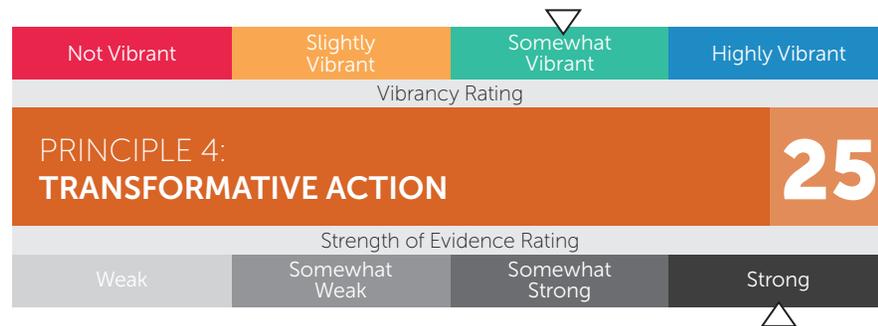
Social networks are the main mechanism Kosovo's media use to interact with the public. Most local media use Facebook and YouTube, less often Twitter and Instagram. They mine their social networks for audience details, such as the number of followers, video and page views, and “likes” and “shares.” Several media use Google Analytics to track traffic to internet portals, but more advanced software tools dedicated to content analysis are extremely rare. However, a general research poll conducted by Ipsos in 2021 shows media consumption habits in Kosovo--including how much citizens use the media on a daily basis--their main sources of information, and how much they trust the media they use.

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

Community media are on the rise in Kosovo, especially those focusing on youth and gender. Such examples include Perspektiva of Foundation 17,

dylberzimi, QIKA, and Grazeta. They combine journalistic and new-media platforms, and they target and respond to the needs of specific societal groups. Their initiatives are filling in a gap in mainstream media, which rarely delve into marginalized communities or their issues.

However, community media in Kosovo does not operate with a mandate that is clearly different from public media and private media. Most local media are also community media, as they have a specific audience in mind. They give voice to marginalized populations and prioritize debate about the issues that concern their communities. Nevertheless, most local media operate with small budgets and the communities rarely support them through volunteering or through donations. Like in other media, local media sometimes spread unverified information.



Panelists agree that despite the decline of journalism standards, nonpartisan news and information exist, and the public read or view multiple types of media. Moreover, panelists agreed that distribution channels enable and encourage information sharing, and this, in turn, supports good governance and democratic rights. The public is also quite active online, through comments, and most do not hesitate to share their opinion publicly. Television debates seem to play a particularly influential role in setting the agenda for public dialogue, though, and these debates tend to feature heavily opinionated or partisan discussions rather than fact-based analysis or commentary. The panelists also noted that the government does not rely enough on quality information to make public policy decisions.

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

Nonpartisan news and information sources exist. Established media, such as main radio and televisions and some online newspapers, have good extensive audiences. There is media diversity, which allows people to access multiple types of information. People participate in the exchange of information with others they disagree with through digital forms such as social media platforms. However, the level of debate is mostly emotional and not evidence-based. These forms of discussions also generate a lot of hate speech among users. There is no evidence to suggest that individuals engage in open and constructive discussions informed by quality news and information.

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

In recent years, political changes through elections show that people’s views on political and social issues are shaped primarily by quality information rather than misinformation. Quality information, produced by the media and civil society organizations, is used by citizens to engage with their elected officials on issues they care about. However, false information about the wealth and private lives of public officials also flows heavily across online media. Panelists see a tendency for citizens to trust such news and respond with their votes at election time; local elections saw many experienced political figures lose their race.

Online media feature false news about COVID-19 vaccines prominently. When politicians share unverified information about the safety of vaccines, the impact is especially pronounced. Although the vaccination rate in 2021 ended up at a satisfactory level (60 percent of the targeted population received the first shot by the end of the year), more than 133,000 AstraZeneca vaccines were reportedly destroyed after they expired in August 2021—refused by citizens who were influenced mainly by media reporting. Television shows gave many people a platform to comment on the safety of vaccines, despite their lack of professional

background. Anti-vaxxers have fueled debates in the media that have further contributed to spreading unverified information about the safety of COVID-19 vaccines. Still, panelists also view quality information as an important element that made the majority of people take the vaccine.

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

Input from CSOs significantly influences decision-making in Kosovo. Many established CSOs produce evidence-based research on various topics, such as sustainable development, rule of law, and good governance. Moreover, some of them also work to reduce the spread of misinformation and mal-information.

Overall, there is solid media coverage of CSO work and activities. However, as one panelist put it, although CSOs touch on the most pressing issues in the society, they are not regularly invited to share their opinions in television debates. Mainstream televisions prefer to invite guests—mostly controversial figures, including former politicians—who “put on a show.” A mix of information and entertainment programs, or infotainment, is also on the rise in prime time.

CSOs and media organizations collaborate regularly for information sharing. For instance, most television debates with mayoral candidates were based on research produced by GAP Institute and other similar CSOs. Media-CSO partnerships in research projects are also common.

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

There are robust mechanisms in place for government to engage with civil society and media, such as press conferences and consultations. Sometimes government actors refer to quality news media or

information from civil society when explaining their decisions. Moreover, there is an online platform called the Public Consultation Platform used by the government to consult with the public on all bills and strategic documents. In most cases, public officials refer to facts and evidence in explaining their decisions.

### **Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic rights.**

Public institutions are quick to react, mostly with statements, when the media uncovers certain scandals. Panelists mentioned a rape case scandal against a minor: The media discovered that the judge had given the alleged rapist a mild sentence of eight months of jail time. After the media covered the case, the judge was suspended from her

work. In such cases, relevant institutions typically issue strong statements; however, concrete actions are rarely taken. Every Kosovo government official professes a commitment to fighting corruption, but the results so far have been poor.

However, when information sources reveal human rights violations, the government responds in an appropriate manner. Quality information has had a positive impact

on reducing the occurrence of human rights violations. There is also evidence that quality information contributes to free and fair elections at the local and national level.

Lastly, the panelists believe that government institutions should increase their interaction with the media. Government officials increasingly rely on social media posts, reducing the number of press conferences. This presents a challenge for media, especially non-Albanian-speaking media.

“People participate in the exchange of information with others they disagree with through digital forms such as social media platforms. However, the level of debate is mostly emotional and not evidence-based.”

**LIST OF PANEL PARTICIPANTS**

**Goran Avramović**, editor in chief, RTV Kim, Čaglavica

**Vesa Bala**, project manager, Association of Kosovo Journalists, Prishtina

**Kreshnik Gashi**, managing editor, [Kallxo.com](https://www.kallxo.com), Prishtina

**Abit Hoxha**, media researcher/consultant, Prishtina

**Violeta Hyseni-Kelmendi**, board member, Independent Media Commission, Prishtina

**Flutura Kusari**, media lawyer, Prishtina

**Besa Luci**, chief editor, Kosovo 2.0, Prishtina

**Albert Spahiu**, journalist, [Telegrafi.com](https://www.telegrafi.com), Prishtina

**Ardita Zejnullahu**, executive director, Association of Kosovo Private Electronic Media, Prishtina

**AUTHOR**

**Jeton Mehmeti**, research director, GAP Institute, Prishtina

**MODERATOR**

**Antigona Berisha-Lucaj**, researcher, GAP Institute, Prishtina

Copyright © 2022 by IREX

**Notice of Rights:** Permission is granted to display, copy, and distribute VIBE in whole or in part, provided that: (a) the materials are used with the acknowledgment “The Vibrant Information Barometer (VIBE) is a product of IREX with funding from USAID.”; (b) VIBE is used solely for personal, noncommercial, or informational use; and (c) no modifications of VIBE are made.

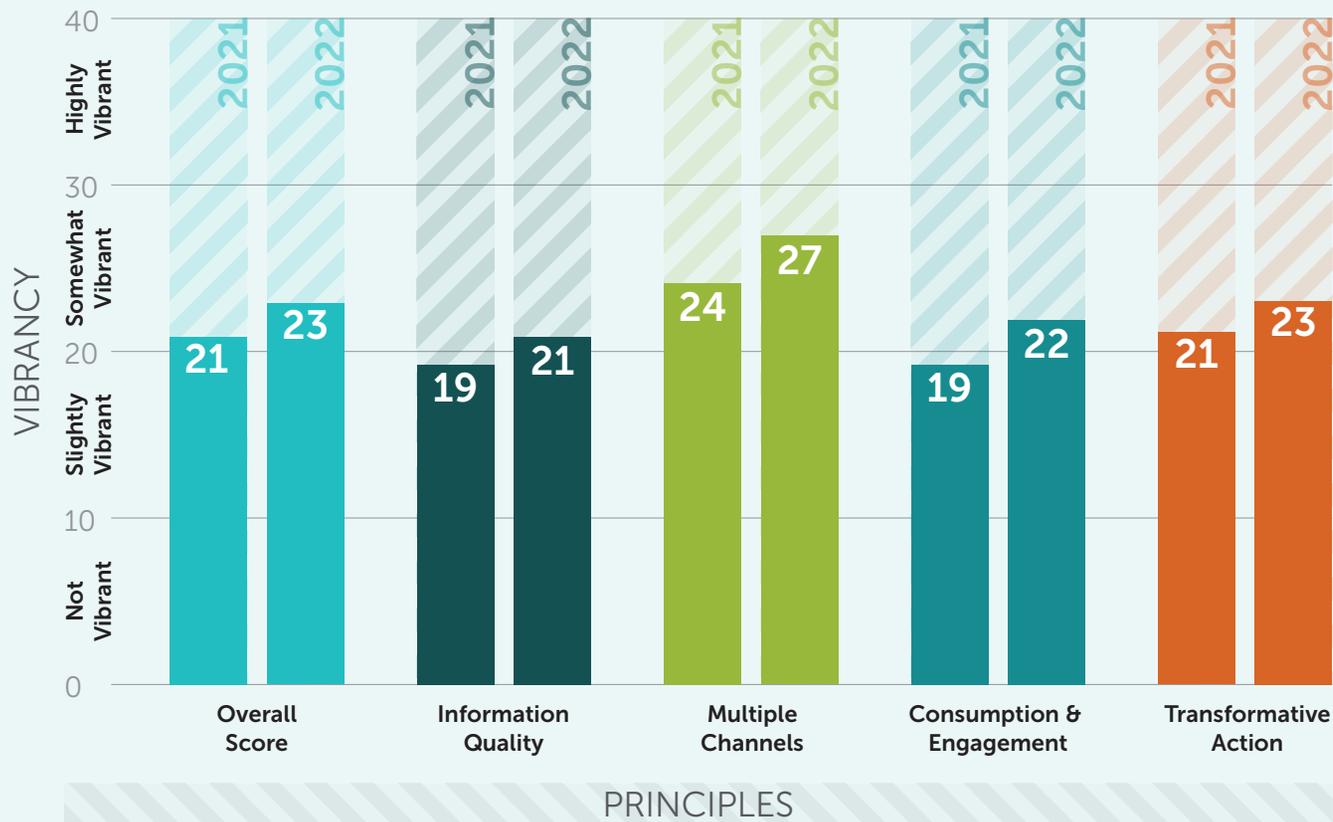
This study is made possible by the support of the American People through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The opinions expressed herein are those of the panelists and other project researchers and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID, the United States Government, or IREX.

# MONTENEGRO

## 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

23

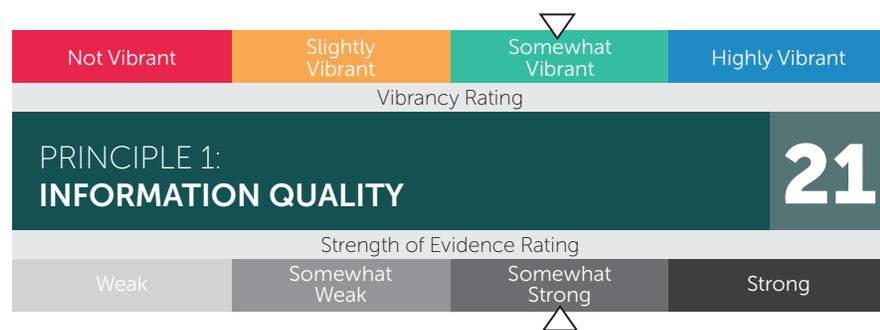
Churning political instability kept the new Montenegro government under constant threat of collapse in 2021. The regime, formed at the end of 2020 under the so-called “expert model” (government of experts rather than politicians), did not garner stable support from the diverse parliamentary majority.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

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

Overall, the media sector remained mostly unchanged, except for the growth of online journalism. Internet media

continue to drown out print media, and web portals experienced a strong push when the pandemic resulted in an overall increase in online activity. The influence of social networks keeps growing: 450,000 Facebook accounts, 35,000 Twitter accounts, and 380,000 Instagram accounts are in use. In addition, media companies intensified their political loyalties amid permanent political crises and inter-party strife, and in the absence of neutral editorial policies.

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



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

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

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

winning over print consumers.

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

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

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

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

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

Regarding the enforcement of media regulations, professor of media

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

#### **Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced.**

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

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

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

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

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

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

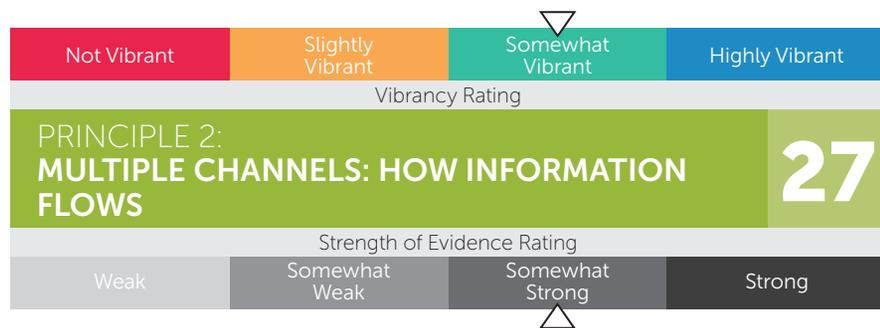
for Protection of Human Rights and Freedoms, as well as to follow the case law of the European Court of Human Rights. However, case law often fails to strike the right balance between the freedom of speech and accountability in media reporting. Despite solid legislation, enforcement remains poor, and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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Citizens enjoy adequate access to information channels. Montenegro has achieved significant technological progress in recent years, and information and communication technology infrastructure generally meet consumers’ needs. Almost the entire territory of Montenegro is covered with these kinds of services, with broad access to cable operators, internet, and mobile telephone services. The law places

no bans on accessing information, and social and vulnerable groups do not face problems accessing these services. The internet is free and open to all citizens in all urban and most rural areas in Montenegro; an estimated 70 percent of citizens at least have internet access. Periodic communication disruptions are sporadic and compensated with access to other communication channels.

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

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

### **Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for government information.**

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

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

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

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

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

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

#### **Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow.**

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

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

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

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

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

#### **Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.**

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

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

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

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

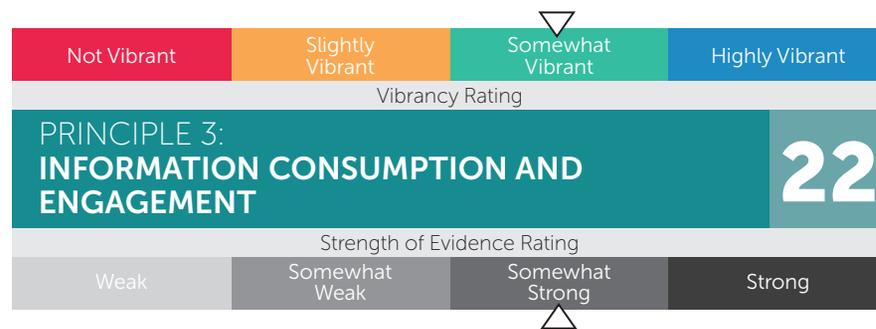
express their views on certain topics, Spaic emphasized. The new Media Law, in Articles 28 and 29, stipulates that a journalist has the right to refuse to produce, write, or participate in shaping media content that is contrary to the law and the Code of Ethics, as long as they supply a written justification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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Panelists agreed that good cooperation between the media and NGOs is

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

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

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

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

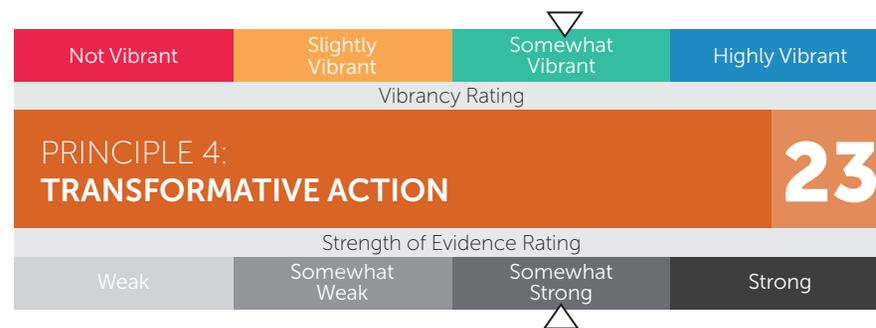
Montenegro does not have a lot of community media as defined by the VIBE methodology, although there are some in regions populated by ethnic minorities. However, the panelists agreed that Montenegro’s numerous local media serve many of the functions that a community media outlet would. Local private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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

surveys, media sector analysis, and human rights protection.

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic rights**

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

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

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

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

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

## LIST OF PANEL PARTICIPANTS

**Sandra Bojaj**, director, TV BOIN, Tuzi

**Marijana Bojanic**, editor-in-chief, TV Vijesti, Podgorica

**Milan Jovanovic**, director, Digital Forensic Center, Podgorica

**Dusko Kovacevic**, freelancer, Podgorica

**Dragan Markesic**, director, DIRECT MEDIA, Podgorica

**Olivera Nikolic**, director, Media Institute, Podgorica

**Jadranka Rabrenovic**, journalist, Pobjeda, Podgorica

**Samir Rastoder**, editor-in-chief, Radio Petnjica, Petnjica

**Aneta Spaic**, Ph.D., dean, University of Montenegro, Faculty of law, Podgorica

**Milutin Stijepovic**, editor-in-chief, Radio & TV Niksic, Niksic

**Marija Tomasevic**, director, TV CG, Podgorica

**Marko Vešovic**, journalist, Dan, Podgorica

## MODERATOR AND AUTHOR

**Rade Bojovic**, director, MEDIA LTD, Podgorica

Copyright © 2022 by IREX

**Notice of Rights:** Permission is granted to display, copy, and distribute VIBE in whole or in part, provided that: (a) the materials are used with the acknowledgment “The Vibrant Information Barometer (VIBE) is a product of IREX with funding from USAID.”; (b) VIBE is used solely for personal, noncommercial, or informational use; and (c) no modifications of VIBE are made.

This study is made possible by the support of the American People through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The opinions expressed herein are those of the panelists and other project researchers and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID, the United States Government, or IREX.

# NORTH MACEDONIA

## 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

23

North Macedonia’s media and information system continues to wait for sectoral reforms. The Ministry of Information Society and Administration invited civil society organizations (CSOs) to nominate members for the proposed Council on Media Reforms, which was envisioned to contribute to the design and adoption of necessary legislative and policy changes.; however, the continued focus on foreign relations and Euro-Atlantic integration, the 2021 population census, the 2021 local elections, and the political crisis that emerged after Prime Minister Zoran Zaev resigned has meant that these media reforms are delayed.

The October 2021 local elections were the first major electoral setback for the Social-Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM)-controlled Government, as it won just 16 mayoral races compared with the 57 it won in 2017. The opposition VMRO-DPMNE recorded major gains, winning 42 mayoral seats. In the Albanian block, all parties recorded similar results as in 2017, but the leading party of Albanians in the country and a partner in the ruling coalition, the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI), lost some Albanian-majority urban centers.

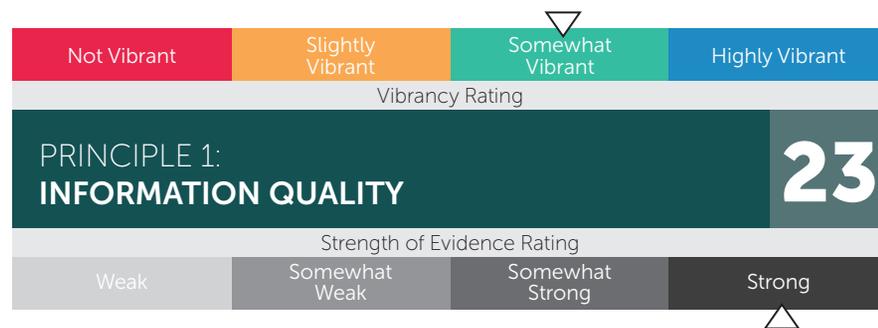
The local election results brought a new political crisis after Prime Minister Zaev resigned over the poor showing of his SDSM party. Traditional media had balanced campaign coverage, while online media and social networks were more prone to partisan reporting and misinformation during the election. For several weeks afterward, there were “new parliamentary majority” announcements from both the government and the opposition—a tug of war that the incumbent ruling coalition won, thereby increasing its majority in parliament.

The COVID-19 pandemic has continued to have a huge effect on all aspects of life. Protection and prevention measures

were softer and more lenient in 2021 than in 2020. North Macedonia has faced challenges with vaccine rollout and has a lower-than-normal vaccination rate. The “infodemic” has continued, especially online and on social networks, with intense debate on mass vaccination and protective measures. Broadcast media’s annual fees for broadcasting permits have been waived, and the government has announced a €1 million (\$1.1 million) interest-free credit line to support broadcasters and continued subsidies for print media’s printing and distribution costs.

The media have heavily covered two huge tragedies: the fire at a COVID-19 field hospital in Tetovo, which killed 14 people, and the deadly bus accident in Bulgaria that killed 45 North Macedonian tourists. The second incident has exposed the low quality of reporting and coverage in low-resourced Macedonian media, compared with their Bulgarian counterparts.

The overall VIBE country score increased to 23, reflecting the panelists’ shared position that the overall situation concerning freedom of speech and media freedoms is improving. Average scores for all four principles are higher than in the 2021 study, with small improvements in all areas. The quality of information principle scored 23, although professionally produced news and information are still unevenly spread between traditional media and new online players, as social networks are on the rise as major sources. The panel concluded that: issues with lack of true pluralism and diversity remain despite the high number of available channels for information flow; information consumption and engagement remain dependent on political actors’ willingness to refrain from manipulating and controlling information; and information may play a growing role in influencing stakeholders’ actions and decisions.



Citizens of North Macedonia have access to quality content. However, the quality is spread unevenly between the mainstream media and those online newspapers that adhere to standards of professional journalism versus those online media—especially social networks and social media—where the quality of the content is much lower. Indicator 4, which looks at inclusivity and diversity, was the highest scored indicator in this principle with a score of 26, while the lowest was Indicator 5 (sufficient resources), with an average score of 18.

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

There is a variety of quality content in North Macedonia. The broadcasting sector, in particular, almost uniformly adheres to the inform-entertain-educate model modeled after public service broadcasting. However, except for the public broadcasting service, Macedonian Radio Television (MRT), which is obligated to provide diverse content on a variety of topics, content diversity is an issue for commercial broadcasting outlets.

Financial constraints have had a negative impact on the quality of content produced. Outlets have much smaller editorial offices and cannot afford developed networks of local correspondents. As a result, local reporting has suffered. “Only when there are local elections [do] we get a chance to learn more about what’s going on in the municipalities,” said Liljana Pecova-Ilievska from the IMPETUS Center for Internet,

Development, and Good Governance.

Smaller newsrooms mean that journalists are asked to cover many tasks on many different topics and rarely have a chance to specialize. Specialized reporting has suffered due to the lack of ability to offer in-house, on-the-job training.

Online media are now largely providing diverse and niche information to smaller audiences with different interests and needs, and some provide more-than-decent local reporting. “The internet has expanded the possibilities for different people with different interests, and their communities, to produce specialist reporters to cover those subjects,” said Bojan Šaševski from RadioMOF, a news-site dedicated to reporting on issues important to youth. Even with its reputation of low-quality content, the internet offers some of the highest-quality news and information content—especially regarding those investigative reporting websites that operate as nonprofits and are funded exclusively by foreign donors.

Commercial broadcasters focus their attention on news and current affairs political talk-shows as a much cheaper option to fill their daytime and prime-time slots. Talk shows, debate, interview, and opinion programs are expected to provide the context, but panelists noted that often information is published with no effort by the media and content producers to put the information in the appropriate context. Public figures frequently complain that their statements have been taken out of context. “We do everything we can to double-check and verify, [but] you have the online portals, who will take a statement, turn it into a bombastic, sensationalist headline, and create the illusion of a problem,” said Nazim Rashidi from TV 21, a national Albanian-language cable television channel.

The media generally act as a watchdog over the government, and the government refrains from putting economic or political pressure on media that criticize it, which is a significant change compared to the reign of previous authoritarian regime. The media mostly maintain independent editorial policies. International news tends to come from foreign media and wire services, but panelists highlighted that copyright

abuses arising international media content is a problem. Panelists note that even national or local political reporting features limited original content. “The media rely far more on reproduction and republishing of material from other sources. Often, especially online, we witness only the so-called ‘copy-paste’ approach. Sometimes even misspelling or grammatical and syntactical mistakes are copied without correction“,,” said Biljana Bejkova, executive director of Info-center, a CSO that specializes in public relations for the civil sector.

For entertainment, outlets mostly rely on imported drama, usually cheap Turkish or old American and European productions.

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

The extent to which information offered to the public is properly sourced, fact-checked, and objective is a matter of debate. Statistics available from the self-regulatory body Council of Media Ethics (SEMM) show that violations of Article 1—on the obligation to publish correct and verified information—and Article 13—on the distinction between “facts and opinions, news, and comments”—are the most common grounds for citizen complaints.

There are frequent accusations of peddling of false information or disinformation across political or ideological lines, especially on social networks. It is unclear how much of the government’s public-relations and propaganda efforts are based on misinformation, although when the government does engage in such behavior, it is promptly and properly covered by the press.

The almost total absence of prepublication fact-checking remains an issue because few media can afford such an investment, although there are several postpublication fact-checking and debunking operations. The Metamorphosis Foundation’s website, Vistinomer.mk, also includes analysis of spin by political actors and serves as Facebook’s fact-checking partner for North

Macedonia. “Often, the material they publish contains ideologically or politically biased positions and analysis,” said Sead Džigal, a lecturer at International Balkan University, a blogger, and an online media researcher.

Traditional media try to avoid publication of false information or misinformation, but it is difficult due to understaffed editorial offices and the 24-hour news cycle. “Quality is sacrificed to the speed of creation of a product that ultimately has very little quality and is the cause of most violations of ethical codes,” said Dimitar Micev, owner and manager of TV Kanal VIS, a regional television station based in Strumica. There is a growing practice among traditional media to correct or remove published information that was later proven to be misleading—something that is absent in the social network profiles of the media.

Responsibility for abuses of the freedom of information lies primarily with the unregulated internet. The situation is especially serious on social networks where a lot of misinformation—especially regarding the COVID-19 pandemic and pro-/anti-vaccination views—is shared and distributed among non-professional content creators (usually adapting material from foreign sources) and the public.

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

Public discourse and public debate are overflowing with insulting, provocative, and outrageous statements. North Macedonia legislates hate speech on various grounds—such as incitement to hatred, violence and discrimination—as well as racist and xenophobic expressions in the Criminal Code. The audiovisual regulator also has power to sanction such content in the broadcasting programs. lists hate speech as a freedom of expression limitation.

The presence of hate speech in the media is a hotly contested issue. Accusations of hate speech, which covers all sorts of offensive,

“**Only when there are local elections [do] we get a chance to learn more about what’s going on in the municipalities,” said Pecova-Ilievska.**

provocative or outrageous language, are often motivated by a strong disagreement between individual's ideology or political views. Some panelists brought up the issue of the difficulty in defining hate speech and the practice of treating every type of speech that may offend someone as a prosecutable offense. Professional media are vigilant and condemn cases of hate speech and other unacceptable speech, including mal-information. This has been evident regarding pandemic-related issues and the behavior of political actors. For example, there was the prominent case of an activist from the leading party of Albanians, DUI, who commented after the opposition's announcement that they had created a new majority in the Parliament (which ultimately did not materialize), that she "kept her war-boots in the attic," effectively threatening a war if DUI is left out of government. All media immediately condemned such language, and DUI was pressured to denounce such statements as unacceptable.

Professional content producers do not engage in hate speech and mal-information, according to the panelists.

However, they agreed that it is hard to expect outlets to invest in staff who will moderate comments and discussions on their profiles on social networks—primarily because no one can afford it. Snežana Trpevska, a media law expert from the RESIS Institute, said, "There is much more disinformation and hate speech on social media than [in] the professional media. The way the issue is addressed differs, too."

Little legal action has been seen on alleged hate speech. Public prosecutors have taken the position held by most countries—for an incident to be prosecutable, there must be an explicit call for violence or discrimination against a person or group. In light of the current dispute with Bulgaria and its resistance to North Macedonia starting negotiations for EU membership, panelists noted that there were serious instances of hate-speech exchanges between the two countries.

There is little actual evidence to show that foreign actors are involved in spreading mal-information in North Macedonia. However, there are

several websites that willingly spread foreign black propaganda against Euro-Atlantic institutions. Private citizens are the main distributors of such information, primarily on social networks.

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

North Macedonians have access to content and media in multiple languages. MRT is widely known, as it produces and airs programs in nine languages. In addition to Macedonian and Albanian, the two official languages in the country, commercial broadcasters also air programs in Romani, Serbian, Bosnian, and Turkish. Print media, dailies and periodicals are published in Macedonian and Albanian, and online, the public has access to content in multiple languages and formats.

periodicals are published in Macedonian and Albanian, and online, the public has access to content in multiple languages and formats.

Mainstream media tend to maintain strong liberal and centrist positions and keep more ardent ideologies at a safe distance.

The internet offers all possible political and

ideological positions. Mainstream media do make an effort to present the views of political parties, both in the government and the opposition; however, they depend on a limited group of pundits and analysts to discuss issues. "Look at the political debate and panel shows on TV. There is a need to invite new people to discuss new issues of interest to the public", said Šaševski.

LGBTQ groups are largely absent from mainstream media, apart from reports on physical attacks on LGBTQ persons and other such incidents. Similar treatment is given to people with disabilities and other vulnerable groups. North Macedonia's public broadcasting service offers regular programming for people with disabilities, but it rarely invites representatives from this and other vulnerable groups to discuss issues other than their socio-economic status. The situation for vulnerable groups in smaller local communities is even worse. "Pluralism is most under threat at the local level. Various vulnerable groups and CSOs active on the local level complain that [they] have almost no

**“Quality is sacrificed to the speed of creation of a product that ultimately has very little quality and is the cause of most violations of ethical codes,” said Micev.**

access to commercial media,” said Trpevska. However, vulnerable and marginalized groups have found that the internet is an alternative channel through which they can communicate their views.

Panelists noted that there is a need to make editorial offices more diverse and representative of society. Women represent a significant majority of all reporters but are seriously underrepresented as media owners, managers, and senior editorial staff. Ethnicity remains the main focus of diversity efforts, with a handful of editorial offices having token representation of reporters from other ethnic groups. “We have never had a member of [another] ethnicity as editor in chief of a Macedonian language media [outlet]. That is something we need to work on in the future. Such a person would offer a new perspective, a different view on the phenomena in society”, said Rashidi.

Panelists differed on whether self-regulation results in professional consequences for those who violate ethical rules and standards of journalistic profession or who use harmful language and mal-information, as well as false facts, unchecked, and unverified information. Panelists believed that content providers do care what kind of assessment their actions and content will get from the self-regulatory body, SEMM. They also noted that the ProMedia Register of Professional Online Media has played a positive role in introducing more ethical and more professional conduct by the online media, especially since Register membership is voluntary.

Some panelists disagreed, however, noting that many members of the professional media who do not observe professional standards and ethics just do not because there are no actual consequences. “I don’t see any consequences suffered by the media that deviate from ethical rules or standards of professional reporting. Some of them actually managed to turn it into a primitive business model to attract audiences through coopting social network users that will bring more readers,” said Dzigal.

#### **Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced.**

North Macedonia’s media market has never been especially lucrative. The emergence of new digital technologies has further undermined

media’s already-low sustainability. While 2021 saw increased paid political advertising related to local elections, in general all print and broadcast media try to survive on a total, but unofficial, estimated advertising budget of around €30–35 million (\$33 million - \$38.4 million, according to advertising industry insiders). While digital media’s share of the total advertising spending grows, all estimates indicate that global technology companies control at least 50 percent of the digital advertising spending in the country.

Given this environment, mainstream and traditional media have been hit hardest, and their ability to invest in high-end production and program offerings have declined, leaving them to focus on cheaper daytime television formats, political talk shows, and newscasts. Few media have the financial means to adequately staff their newsrooms, and most reporters are overworked and underpaid. For example, after a tragic traffic accident in Bulgaria that killed 45 citizens of North Macedonia, the public commented how inadequate the coverage of Macedonian media was in comparison to their Bulgarian counterparts.

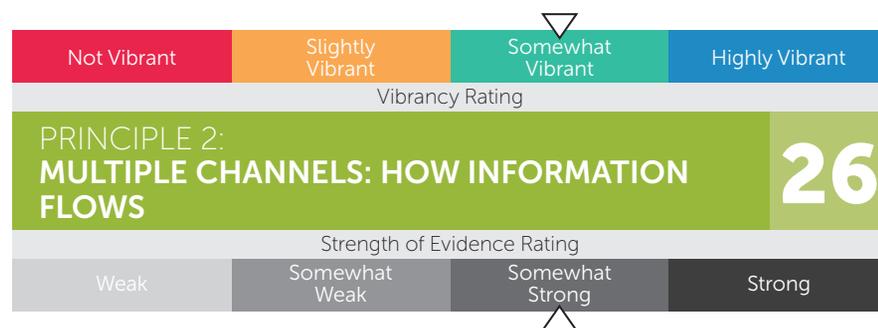
The media continue to rely on sales of advertising time and space as their main business model. Media owned by big companies benefit from internal cross-subsidies and enjoy greater financial freedom. The government runs a subsidy program for print media that covers 50 percent of their printing and distribution costs. Many online media established by experienced journalists have chosen the nonprofit model and rely exclusively on foreign donors for their funding.

Government advertising was abolished in December 2018, but media pressure for the government to start advertising again is growing. Some panelists viewed this as a mistake that deprives the media of a significant share of available advertising, but others cited past abuses and advise caution and strict criteria for budget allocations. “We know what happened in the past and how the previous government was able to abuse public funds to ‘purchase’ the favor of the media,” said Trpevska.

Panelists highlighted efforts by local media to expand their revenue generating activities. “Local media are actively engaging in efforts to

identify new models of funding and revenue generation—subscription models; charging fees for live-streaming of cultural, sports, and other events; and others,” said Pecova-Ilievska. She also noted the British Council’s regional program “Media for All,” which works with local media to improve sustainability.

Journalism has never been a high-paying profession, and the situation is made worse by the ongoing crisis of the media sector. The job is underpaid, job security is low, and journalists are overworked. An Association of Journalists’ survey shows that “over 50 percent of the polled journalists seriously think about leaving the profession for good,” said Džigal.



People in North Macedonia have the right to create and consume information and have the necessary channels for access and distribution of information available. There are some generational and geographical differences in terms of how different groups access information. Major questions remain about the independence of information channels, however.

This principle’s overall average score is 26—the highest of all four principles. Panelists scored the VIBE indicator on independence of information channels the lowest (21), and the indicator assessing adequate access to information channels was scored the highest, with an average score of 30.

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

Freedom of speech and freedom of the press are guaranteed by the constitution (Article 16) and relevant international treaties ratified by North Macedonia. The government regulates broadcasting with its 2013 Law on Audio and Audiovisual Media Services (amended in December 2018), and some aspects of the work and operation of print media are regulated by the same law. The laws are implemented impartially and uniformly. The internet remains completely unregulated, and some panelists suggested that something needs to be done about that, considering the growing importance of online media, including social networks and search engines, as source of news for the general public.

There are no attempts of censorship by the government—a huge improvement from the previous authoritarian regime—and no attempts to pressure information and communication technology providers to censor content; filtering is used only for foreign betting/gambling sites. Political parties and the opposition rely more on their internet “bot armies” and social networks to intimidate or attack any reporting or commentary that is not to their liking. There are growing numbers of journalists—especially women—who report incidents of threats and abuse on social networks. Some risks for journalists cannot be fully eliminated without seriously undermining the freedom of the press. However, reports from the Association of Journalists show that the number of physical/verbal attacks on press members continues to drop, with five reported cases in 2021, compared with 14 in 2010.

After several years of falling numbers of civil defamation actions against journalists, 2021 saw a “surge” with three new cases. The Levica (Left) political party and its president are suing reporters of A1on.mk on charges of failure to publish a reply and unauthorized use of personal communication. Criminal charges for disclosure of state secrets against journalists Goran Momirovski and Dragan Milosavljević, who discussed alleged corruption and abuses in the National Intelligence Agency in an expose in their late-night talk show on the pro-opposition Alfa TV, are more worrisome. The Association of Journalists has demanded that all charges be dropped, advising state institutions to “use the self-

regulatory instruments that are available to them to seek recourse in cases where they view the conduct of journalists as unethical.”

Panelists expressed concerns that attempts to pressure journalists to give up reporting on some issues may continue. Most of these attempts rely on economic pressure as the media sector has gone through a prolonged period of economic pressures.

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

North Macedonia has a well-developed information and communication technology infrastructure. Internet penetration is well over 80 percent, with decent and affordable broadband services. There is a difference between urban and rural areas—citizens in rural areas have far fewer options in terms of internet service or cable providers than those in major urban areas. Mobile services and devices are also well developed, with more than 1 mobile phone per person on average (according to the State Statistical Office).

A large majority of citizens choose to bundle services, where a flat monthly fee covers telephone service, cable television, and internet connection. Although these costs are not insignificant, such services are adapted to the population’s purchasing power.

In addition to the urban-rural divide, there is also a generation gap, with young people increasingly relying on their mobile devices as their main contact point. Older citizens remain loyal to traditional live television due to a lack of access to devices or an unwillingness to adopt new habits. “Some vulnerable groups in society, especially the elderly, lack proper access to new technologies, and some lack the skills to use new technologies for regular information,” said Trpevska.

Financial concerns also define media access in terms of actual

distribution platforms. With increasing costs of living and low salaries, the majority of citizens have little disposable income to spend on media content. The decision of the education authorities to move classes online during the pandemic’s most serious phases has shown that a significant number of children have no access to an internet connection.

Print media have seen huge drops in circulation due to a number of reasons—offering outdated information, providing their content online free of charge, changing habits of the media consumers, and so on. Due to easily available and affordable technical solutions, more producers of content are moving online, including new ventures by print media into video and forms of online television. There have been no complaints about violations of the net neutrality principle (guaranteed by law) by information and communication technology providers.

Some problems may be evident in smaller urban and rural areas where only a single provider may offer bundled services—or at least cable television and internet—at affordable prices. This can be especially problematic in cases of service disruptions

because it is more difficult to transfer to alternative information sources, especially for the older population.

### **Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for government information.**

The 2011 Law on Free Access to Public Information has long been considered one of the best freedom of information laws in Europe. A 2019 amendment to the law changed the nature of the government body that reviews complaints about violations of freedom of information rights to the Commission for Protection of the Right to Free Access to Public Information.

The current government has adopted a policy of radical transparency since it took office in 2017 and has established an online Open Data

“The citizens often are uninformed, that is true. But, many of them lack the knowledge and skills to seek and use government’s data and information. Higher levels of digital literacy would remedy that,” said Šaševski.

portal for publication of all government documents. Some institutions have been less than vigilant in terms of submitting their information to the portal, but it is regularly updated with new documents and information.

In addition, at different levels of government, there are legal obligations to hold public consultations on new legislation and budget forums to collect opinions of stakeholders and citizens in the process of subsequent yearly budget adoptions.

The Commission for Protection of Right to Free Access to Public Information seems to regularly engage in public campaigns to promote freedom of information awareness among citizens, although such campaigns seem to have a limited reach.

“The citizens often are uninformed, that is true. But, many of them lack the knowledge and skills to seek and use government’s data and information. Higher levels of digital literacy would remedy that,” said Šaševski. While most freedom of information requests are submitted by CSOs and journalists, panelists observed that limited citizen engagement in requesting information might stem from skepticism: “I don’t think citizens are afraid to ask for information. Rather, it is conformism and mistrust of institutions that play a role. They don’t think they will get the information if they asked,” said Trpevska. The old practice of institutions to wait for the last possible moment to respond with incomplete information or to fail to respond within the legally prescribed deadlines remains the most common cause for complaints received by the commission.

Journalists prefer to contact government officials or spokespersons when seeking information because freedom of information requests take too long to complete in the 24-hour news cycle. There are complaints that government spokespersons often choose to evade questions, provide incomplete answers, or demand more time to respond to journalists’ questions. Journalists generally have a good rapport with

the spokespersons since most of the people holding these positions are former colleagues. Panelists also noted that spokespersons often seem to give priority to their public relations role and to giving visibility to their respective institutions, at the expense of their duty to provide information to the public.

### **Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow.**

Government policy has always been that everybody is free to create information and to operate media outlets. However, many people have taken up that challenge, resulting in an overcrowded and oversaturated market.

Licensing exists for broadcasting/ audiovisual media services, live television, and video-on-demand services. In general, the regulatory body has recently treated all applications for licenses equally and impartially. Frequency allocation for audiovisual media services is tied to the process of license allocation to broadcast programs and follows the same rules. There are no licensing or comparable requirements for print and online media.

However, print media need to register with the audiovisual regulator, while online media have to register their online domain name with an authorized registrar if they want to use the national extension (.mk).

Media monopolies—addressed in the Law on Audio and Audiovisual Media Services—are restricted, effectively preventing consolidation of the market through mergers or takeovers. The law also prescribes rules for ownership transparency for broadcast and print media. There is no such statutory obligation for online media, but the self-regulatory body SEMM (the Media Ethics Council) has introduced a Register of Professional Online Media as a criteria for membership. SEMM has reacted in a timely manner to violations of ownership transparency for print media, issuing warnings and sanctioning media that have failed to meet these obligations. Panelists noted that in the past, transparency

“I don’t think citizens are afraid to ask for information. Rather, it is conformism and mistrust of institutions that play a role. They don’t think they will get the information if they asked,” said Trpevska.

of ownership provisions were too easily circumvented through proxy owners; there are still questions today about true ownership of a number of media outlets, primarily in online media. “Domain name registers may list the publisher, but it doesn’t mean that another entity may be the actual owner,” said Liljana Pecova Ilievska.

There are no monopolies over distribution channels for media, with the exception of digital terrestrial television broadcasting (DVB-T), where a single entity operates two multiplexes dedicated to commercial television.

After years of neglect and abuse, MRT is slowly getting back on its feet, doing everything it can to inform, educate, and entertain the public. “Its newscasts are neutral and objective. However, it lacks more investigative and critical journalism,” said Trpevska.

Due to historical and practical reasons, MRT has focused mainly on ethnic/ethnolinguistic issues and broadcasts programs in nine languages. For other diverse groups and interests in society, its record is not as good. Some vulnerable and marginalized groups, especially persons with disabilities, are present in programs, but they are absent from MRT’s decision-making.

#### **Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.**

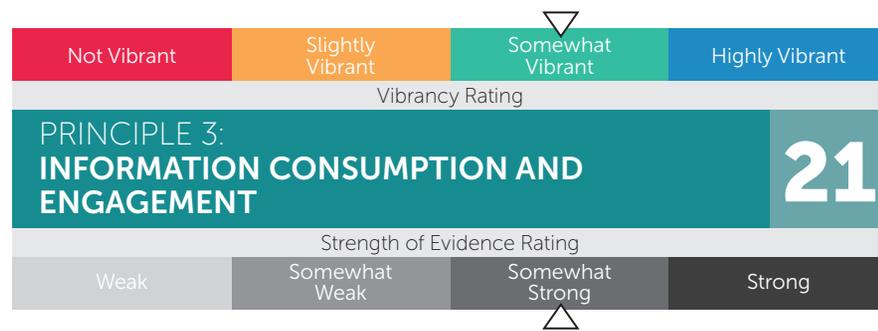
Media owners and their interests are the biggest influence on media outlets’ editorial policies. The most important channels are owned by businessmen with varied business portfolios, and they use their channels to support other business ventures and attack the competition. “As the saying goes, ‘Tie your horse where the boss told you.’ In my view, it totally applies to the media in this country and their independence,” said Urim Hasipi, a journalist from Tetovo and correspondent for several national and local Albanian language media. However, other panelists had a somewhat different opinion. “In my experience, those who want to influence the reporting or public opinion, especially the corporate sector, now bypass ownership or managerial structures and go straight to the journalists,” said Micev.

It is common for one person to hold the positions of both general manager and editor-in-chief in online media and some national broadcasts. Journalists in smaller, local media sell advertising to supplement their extremely low salaries. Insiders from the advertising industry say that major advertisers, especially multinational companies working in North Macedonia, follow a “spread the wealth” approach in their media-buying plans. Panelists pointed out that big companies are rarely subject of interest to the media out of fear that they will not look favorably on any reporting on their operations. Panelists also noted that editorial policies may influence local companies’ media-buying decisions, especially regarding politics. Even media that rely on international donors may have to adapt their editorial policies to their donors’ interests.

Government advertising is legally prohibited in all types of media. However, there is subsidized political advertising during campaign seasons. Political parties distribute their shares of the pot to those media with friendly editorial policies.

The public broadcasting service has been historically underfinanced. Since the abolition of the broadcasting fee, MRT receives 60 cents on the dollar from the budget. However, government neglect also means that it does not meddle in MRT’s editorial decisions—a huge improvement over previous governments. The government has granted special allocations to cover the reporting costs of the 2021 Olympics and the European Football Championship.

Panelists noted that the audiovisual regulatory body has spent last several years as a caretaker body. The changes to the audiovisual media services legislation in 2018 prescribe that new members of its steering body, the Council of AVMS, shall be elected, the first public call for candidates failed and a new one has not been announced. In fact, three years after the changes to the Law, the old Council is still in place, as acting body, although the term in office of its current members has expired. Panelists voiced concerns about the role politics plays in the appointment of the members. “The appointment of new members depends on political actors, and it undermines its (the audiovisual regulator AVMS’s) independence,” said Trpevska.



Content creators and citizens rely on whatever protection and privacy is provided by their service providers, and many do not have the willingness or capacity to use advanced tools and services that are available. Low levels of media and digital literacy certainly do not help, and community media remain an underdeveloped sector. Some positive movement is seen online, where different communities self-organize around websites.

The VIBE indicator on audience engagement was the lowest score of 18, while the indicator on community media received this principle's highest score (25).

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

North Macedonia has good legislation on data and privacy protection that is in line with the EU's General Data Protection Regulation. There is no case law so far to draw any conclusions on this, except for past experiences with subpar implementation of legislation.

There have been two cases of serious violations of privacy and personal data. The first was the renewed operation of the "Public Room" group on the Telegram chat service, with members sharing lewd photos, phone numbers, and other personal information of young women and girls, some of whom might be minors. The other, almost identical in method,

targeted women from the Roma community in Skopje. The government has responded to demands of CSOs to introduce much stricter provisions for online harassment and stalking in the criminal code.

Dimitar Apasiev, the leader of Levica political party, sued the news site A1on.mk for unauthorized publication of personal communication, but panelists agreed that there was no actual violation of privacy. "Politicians have the right to privacy, but if journalists investigate corruption, violations of rights, or similar public-interest matters, it easily trumps privacy," said Trpevska.

There have been several incidents of hacking attacks: hacking of the government of North Macedonia's website in March; the two distributed denial-of-service attacks on State Statistical Office systems during the 2021 census; and other attacks on the national COVID-19 pass system

and a government minister's official Twitter profile. "Security standards are very low, even with government institutions," said Džigal.

Training may be limited, but digital security tools are available to citizens and content producers. A professional or nonprofessional content producer's

financial capabilities may restrict his or her willingness to invest in digital security tools. Most rely on the security measures applied by internet service providers. "We face no legal or other obstacles to improve the security of our website, but we can't afford it," said Ljupčo Murgoski, owner and editor-in-chief of *Zenit*, a local weekly newspaper in Prilep.

Digital literacy is at a low level. "It is not just the generational gap. Young people have superficial literacy. They know how to use Facebook and the social networks, but they lack so many other skills," said Džigal. Similarly, other than specialists in advertising and marketing industries, few people have an in-depth understanding of social-network and search-engine algorithms, targeted advertising, or the ways in which commodified personal data are used. Even among journalists, knowledge about these issues is incomplete.

“At least the government has announced that media literacy will be introduced in the official curriculum [but] nothing has been implemented so far,” said Trpevska.

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

Media literacy has long been the focus of the public, media community, civil society sector, and the government. “At least the government has announced that media literacy will be introduced in the official curriculum [but] nothing has been implemented so far,” said Trpevska. The audiovisual regulator AVMS has legal obligations to promote and develop media literacy and has continued to organize the annual “Media Literacy Days.” The 2021 event was held online due to pandemic restrictions.

Foreign donors have focused their grant-giving operations on media-literacy-related projects. One such project, the YouThink program funded by USAID and implemented by IREX, is a media literacy curriculum in the official education system. Several CSOs

organize media literacy trainings, usually for youth of high-school age, but there are no adult media literacy efforts currently. “There are no trainings or education programs for anybody older than high-school age. We are left to our own devices,” said Lazar Sandev, a lawyer who specializes in freedom of expression cases.

Although there are several fact-checking and debunking sites, the size of their audience is considered quite small. More prepublication fact-checking is needed in the sector.

Media literacy levels among the population are not at healthy levels. The *Media Literacy Index 2021*, prepared by the Open Society Institute—Sofia, ranks North Macedonia last in terms of media literacy and resilience to fake news. There are, of course, dissenting views throughout society, that argue people are well aware of the disinformation, can discern high- from low-quality news and information, and make conscious choices about who and what to trust and believe. “I don’t think the situation is actually that bad. There is a modicum of healthy

skepticism in the citizens . . . but if they don’t trust the media, the citizens will easily turn to alternative sources of information,” said Džigal.

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

Journalists and civil society activists can freely exercise their freedom of expression in the media, online, and in social networks. The current government is more open and prepared to take criticism without attempts at retribution for those who criticize with its policies and actions.

Citizens have much greater freedom to exercise their freedom of expression and join the debate on any issue, especially on social networks. Some panelists disagreed, however. “I don’t know what

**“Yes, freedom of expression may be—and is—abused. But we need law enforcement and the legal system to prosecute and sanction [only] the most extreme instances. Prosecuting every instance of hateful or offensive speech can take us in an unwanted direction,” said Trpevska.**

exactly is happening, but to me it seems that it is more difficult now to make a simple vox pop, even on simple, communal issues. Before, [citizens] were ‘fighting’ to get in front of the microphone or the camera. Now they run away as if they are afraid to express their views. On social networks, they hide behind assumed identities, and they present their views,” Murgoski said.

Panelists reiterated the view that there are complaints of too much freedom of expression. “There is freedom of expression, but the impunity for obvious cases of hate-speech shows that freedom of expression enjoys too much protection,” said Sandev. Some panelists countered that it might be dangerous to overregulate social media speech. “Yes, freedom of expression may be—and is—abused. But we need law enforcement and the legal system to prosecute and sanction [only] the most extreme instances. Prosecuting every instance of hateful or offensive speech can take us in an unwanted direction,” said Trpevska.

There are different digital platforms for public discussion. Town hall

meetings are relatively rare and are usually organized as part of election campaigns. Governments at all levels are legally required to organize public discussions on any proposed new legislation and budgeting process. The primary instruments used by the government and state institutions include digital and internet-based communications: e-mail, online forms, and the ENER.gov.mk platform used for national legislation, etc. Such events are adequately moderated.

Mainstream media, especially DVB-T broadcasters, also offer opportunities for citizens to voice their problems and give their views on a variety of subjects in the form of daytime television call-in shows. Depending on the broadcast, the hosts of such shows try to be neutral and impartial, although there are exceptions, and all intervene in cases of inappropriate or offensive speech. The primary concern is political representation—government versus opposition—and then ethnic representation, while other groups or interests in society are generally an afterthought.

Digital communication, especially in social networks, is the main problem. In a polarized society, discussion is little more than visceral insults, invectives, and inappropriate speech on the verge of prosecutable hate speech. Most panelists believed that moderation is nonexistent, but “even on the internet, there are rules of engagement, and communities that are involved in online discussions quickly react to those who violate those rules,” said Šaševski.

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

Macedonian media do not invest much in audience research to identify audience needs, interests, or opinions. “Commercial media don’t treat the audience as...citizens, but as consumers, and are not interested in their needs. Even the public-service broadcaster fails to do audience research, in spite of the clear legal obligation to do [so],” said Trpevska.

National terrestrial television broadcasters are at an advantage because of their membership in the Joint Industry Committee; having access to ratings enables them to make conclusions about the preferences

of their audience. There is anecdotal evidence that some of them also commission their own audience research and analysis, but panelists noted that the data is not well organized and not useful.

Panelists noted that online media rely almost exclusively on Google Analytics, although they seem to be interested only in the number of clicks and visits, without delving into the more detailed demographic data of their audience. Few media owners are interested or willing to invest in specialist staff for audience analysis.

Print media, and by extension some online media, occasionally publish letters from their readers, mostly under the “right to reply or denial provisions” of the media law. Letters to the editor and similar departments have long disappeared from print media.

Apart from a short-lived attempt by *Sloboden pečat* newspaper several years ago, there is no practice to appoint a readers’ editor or ombudsman within editorial offices. All media delegate complaints from the audience to the self-regulation body. In addition, mainstream media have disabled comments to their online articles because of their inability to properly monitor discussions. They do allow comments to articles on their social network accounts, but moderation is not organized. It is left to reporters to react to any comments, should they notice language or a comment that violates decency rules or moves into hate-speech. Another issue raised by the panelists was the fact that, in many online media, sometimes the authorship of articles cannot even be determined because no byline is published.

Professional networks and personal contacts allow the media, CSOs, and government institutions to organize exchanges of information, regular briefings, and meetings.

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

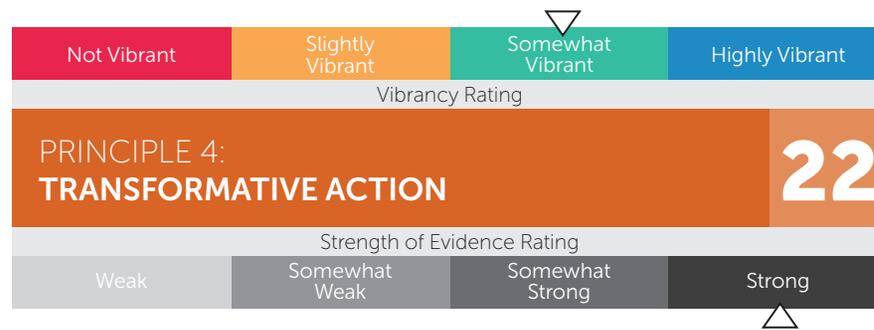
Formally, community media in North Macedonia, in regulatory sense, exist only in the broadcasting sector, specifically in the form of nonprofit radio stations. Currently, there are four nonprofit radio stations—three

student radio stations associated with state universities and Radio Maria, a community station in Strumica, a Catholic community in the southeast. Panelists believe that the opportunity to establish a community or nonprofit radio station is underused due to a lack of adequate policies to promote community media as a viable option.

There is a common misconception to view local commercial radio and television as community media. Some panelists insist that this type of media needs to function as some sort of hybrid of commercial and community media. “When I entered the radio business, I made a conscious decision that I should open myself to the local Macedonian community in Gostivar (the local population is predominantly Albanian, and Macedonians are the minority on the local level), just as the Turkish-language radio in Gostivar does for the Turkish community. In addition to our commercial activities, we do a lot, using local volunteers, to promote Macedonian culture and language in the area,” said Zoran Madžoski from Radio G, a local radio station.

Online sources of information—primarily websites of CSOs working in smaller communities or with vulnerable and marginalized groups—practically operate as community media. Such websites offer quality information and content designed to fit the needs of their specific community and are actively involved in the fight against disinformation and other forms of unacceptable, inappropriate, and offensive speech and reporting.

There has been a trend in recent years for investigative journalists to go nonprofit and rely on donor funding to sustain their operations. The sustainability of this model is questionable in view of the shifting focus and priorities of the donor community and of the almost-nonexistent culture of charitable giving. It is worth noting that such nonprofit investigative reporting and CSO-run community media commonly win top international and local prizes for best investigative reporting.



Traditional and online media in North Macedonia perform their role of reporting news and information, and they serve as forums for discussion of political, economic and ideological issues pertinent to the society. Individuals have quality information at their disposal to inform their decisions, especially at the ballot box, although content and information providers face stiff competition from the well-entrenched views of the citizens. The government and CSOs also have all the information they need to design their policies and actions to improve the lives of the citizens, although those policies and actions are ultimately under the decisive influence of political and ideological considerations.

The indicator examining civil society’s use of quality information scored the highest at 27, while the indicator looking at individuals’ use of quality information scored the lowest at 19.

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

There are no media officially affiliated with individual political parties; however, in the country’s highly polarized society, it is evident that many media have their favorites, and it is difficult to remain nonpartisan in this climate. That is especially true on the internet, although there are media that have been established to provide quality journalism online. “In short, there are nonpartisan sources of news, but they will be politicized, and their political affiliation [is evident] the moment an article is posted on [the media outlets’] social networks. In reality, all media outlets are

labeled as close to one or another political party,” said Micev.

There are concerns about the audience sizes that impartial and nonpartisan media command, especially in such an overcrowded media market. Most panelists believed that citizens choose the media they will trust, and political affiliations play a huge role. Also, panelists noted that people like to discuss and comment on politics. “I don’t know if that was spontaneous, or political parties issued orders to their activists, but in my experience, people like to read across political or ideological lines. During the local elections, there was huge engagement with everything we published that covered the campaigns, on all sides,” said Madžoski.

The June 2021 poll commissioned by the International Republican Institute shows that most people still rely on television, with over 80 percent listing it as the most-used news source of news, followed by internet sources and social media with 37 percent. Print and radio shares are constantly dropping (2 percent and 4 percent, respectively). The poll also showed that 33 percent of the persons polled listed family members and friends as their most used source of news, while 47 percent said internet was their most used and main source of news.

Leading national broadcasters make great efforts, particularly in their political talk shows, to ensure representation of all sides of the political spectrum. Political activists seem very eager to engage in discussion on current affairs and political issues, and mainstream broadcast media have responded with daily call-in shows that allow everybody to present their views and opinions. In a polarized society, any discussion often needs intervention by show hosts to maintain a modicum of decency.

Online, and especially on social networks, most discussion of current affairs and political events and developments is restricted to echo chambers. There are people, usually political activists, who make it their

task to follow the media supporting the opposing side, and they freely engage in online “skirmishes” with opponents, defending the actions of their preferred political actor or attacking the actions of the other side. “We have a new situation where disinformation is ‘debunked’ by counter-disinformation offered by political opponents. ‘Bot armies’ of political parties combat disinformation, real or alleged, of the opponents with counter-disinformation of their own,” said Džigal.

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

Depending on their sources of news and information, citizens will quickly claim that views and decisions—including those involved in voting or on issues related to health and well-being—have been based on quality information.

Information quality is an issue. “During the pandemic, in particular, we didn’t have a consistently credible story line. These measures are valid, then other measures are valid. The media, as a whole, presented [citizens with] positions of official institutions [and] of some online healers as if their validity is the same,” said Pecova-Ilievska.

Whether information is determined as qualitative sometimes depends on whether citizens agree or disagree with the information or perceived credentials of the person presenting the information. The recent public opinion survey conducted by the Institute for Democracy “Societas

Civilis” shows that huge segments of the population are inclined toward conspiracy theories and “alternative facts.” For instance, 72 percent of the persons polled believe that the world is governed by a handful of powerful families; 65 percent take it for granted that the coronavirus was created in a lab; 57 percent believe that mainstream media disseminate lies; and so on. The survey also shows huge mistrust of state institutions, government, political parties, and politics in general.

**“In short, there are nonpartisan sources of news, but they will be politicized, and their political affiliation [is evident] the moment an article is posted on [the media outlets’] social networks. In reality, all media outlets are labeled as close to one or another political party,” said Micev.**

“The inclination toward conspiracy theories demonstrates existence of a huge potential to use the electoral body for a confrontational political process. Conspiracy theories suggest a worldview according to which politics cannot be a democratic process but a result of the work of secretive groups that control historical developments,” Societas Civilis says in the report’s introduction.

This information shows “the lack of trust in the media. . . . Certain skepticism and caution are useful and necessary, [but] where is the line between such skepticism and caution and the irrational tendency to believe things that were scientifically proven to be wrong?” asked Trpevska.

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

CSOs are a bright spot in the country’s otherwise murky public information system, and they are known for using reliable information when explaining their mission or vision or when they publicly present activities. Whether they work in the field of media, human rights, or environmental protection or with vulnerable and marginalized groups, CSOs are the first to step forward in defense of the freedom of expression and information and in the fight against fake news and misinformation, often countering with truthful fact-checked data and information.

CSOs themselves stand behind much of the high-quality investigative journalism available in the country since several investigative reporting operations are actually set up as nongovernmental organizations or nonprofits and rely on donor funding; specialized investigative reporting has very limited (if any) access to advertising money. CSOs also serve as trusted and relevant sources of information, and so content producers use them to secure the best possible coverage in areas in which they have no specialty knowledge

“We have a new situation where disinformation is ‘debunked’ by counter-disinformation offered by political opponents. ‘Bot armies’ of political parties combat disinformation, real or alleged, of the opponents with counter-disinformation of their own,” said Džigal.

and to counter the narratives of political leadership.

Civic participation in policy creation is legislated and mandatory for all types of legislation and in adoption of both national and municipal budgets. There is the common governmental practice to declare bills “European flag” legislation, meaning that the bills are necessary for accession to the European Union and therefore need to be passed in an urgent and time-sensitive manner, thus avoiding proper public consultations and prolonged debate in the parliament. There are common complaints that public consultations on new legislation are often conducted formally to show that it was done, while comments and recommendations presented by the citizens or CSOs representing different interests are outright ignored.

The proposed Council for Media Reforms that the Ministry of Information Society and Administration announced in summer 2021 invited CSOs to nominate members of the council to inform and ensure that media reforms will be conducted with full participation of the stakeholders.

However, no further movement on the initiative was seen in 2021, probably due to the local elections and the subsequent political crisis following the resignation of former Prime Minister Zaev.

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

Panelists note that national and local government institutions use a variety of instruments to engage with the public. In

addition to traditional instruments—such as press conferences, media appearances, press releases, and government websites—the national government and the majority of local governments have invested in news production capacities. They produce high-quality video, audio, and photographic content that they offer to the media as a ready-to-use product. Many media—especially local-level broadcasters that are cash-strapped and understaffed—actually welcome such materials.

“In Prilep . . . we had five spokespersons . . . in the local municipal administration. . . . They would rarely call a press conference. Rather, they would produce the video [and] the text, and they would distribute them among the media,” Murgoski said.

In spite of such robust efforts, results are not always satisfactory. “I do hear from journalists that they have asked questions from the institutions and were never given an answer. No formal instrument will help with that,” said Sandev.

In the political scene, all sides rely on spin and tested public relations and propaganda techniques in public discourse. Accusations of the other side using false facts and misinformation are quite common. “The question is: Is the glass half empty or half full? I would say here that . . . if we get only part of the information, or half-truths, it means that an effort at misinformation is under way,” said Madžoski.

Fact-checking and debunking organizations do find that the opposition engages more in political spin. However, panelists repeated their suspicions about the possible bias of fact checkers in favor of the government, whose liberal policies the checkers seem to share.

The government is also inconsistent in engagement with civil society, doing so only when necessary. One example is the initiative to create a Council for Media Reforms, with CSO representatives participating in the design and drafting legislative and policy solutions from the very beginning. As noted above, there has been little movement on forming this council since the government the CSOs to nominate members of the future council.

### **Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic rights.**

The government has repeatedly pledged its dedication to the fight against corruption. Government officials react promptly to any allegations with promises of action to investigate and sanction those responsible, but only if there is enough pressure from media and civil society. However, panelists pointed out that there is some discrepancy

between the government’s pledges and its actions: “When journalists publish information about corruption, the government takes a defensive stance,” said Pecova-Ilievska.

A case in point is the events surrounding the resignations of then minister of health, Venko Filipče, and his deputy minister, Ilir Hasana, one day after a catastrophic fire in the Tetovo COVID-19 hospital that killed 14 people. After a prolonged wait, the prime minister decided not to accept these resignations, saying that there was no reason to seek political or moral responsibility. In any case, the general perception is that only rarely do corruption cases end in court and the perpetrators adequately sanctioned.

Does reporting corruption have an impact? Some panelists believed that the impact is low, supported by the fact that new corruption cases are constantly exposed. Others believed that there is some significant impact, depending on individual cases. “The reporting of the Investigative Reporting Lab on abuses of heating oil and pollution has shaken the government quite a bit,” commented Trpevska. Similar views were held regarding the government’s reaction to reported human or civil rights violations. However, panelists said that, with the emergence of the internet and social networks, it is impossible to hide such violations from the public.

Panelists were divided on quality information contributing to free and fair elections at the national or local levels. The fact is that elections are always events of special interest for content producers, especially the news media. The permanent debate about the rules and circumstances of national, local, or presidential elections and the increased public attention and reporting on any incidents and other developments during the campaign and on ballot day contribute to improved democratic standards. “I am certain that quality reporting [has] contributed to the fact that the last local elections were free and fair,” said Madžoski.

## LIST OF PANEL PARTICIPANTS

**Biljana Bejkova**, executive director, *NGO Infocentre*, Skopje

**Sead Džigal**, lecturer, *International Balkan University*, Skopje

**Zoran Madžoski**, owner/editor-in-chief, *Radio Kometa*, Gostivar

**Dimitar Micev**, owner/general manager, *VIS TV*, Strumica

**Ljupčo Murgoski**, owner/editor-in-chief, *Zenit weekly newspaper*, Prilep

**Liljana Pecova-Ilievska**, executive director, *IMPETUS Internet Development and Good Governance Centre*, Skopje

**Nazim Rashidi**, editor and political debate show host, *TV21*, Skopje

**Lazar Sandev**, lawyer, *Law Office Filip Medarski*, Skopje

**Bojan Šaševski**, editor, *MOF Radio*, Skopje

**Snežana Trpevska**, expert in media law, *RESIS Insitute on Social Development*, Skopje

The following participant did not attend the panel discussion, but submitted a questionnaire and was interviewed:

**Urim Hasipi**, journalist, *KOHA* daily newspaper, Skopje

## MODERATOR AND AUTHOR

**Dejan Georgievski**, president/executive director, *Media Development Center*, Skopje

Copyright © 2022 by IREX

**Notice of Rights:** Permission is granted to display, copy, and distribute VIBE in whole or in part, provided that: (a) the materials are used with the acknowledgment “The Vibrant Information Barometer (VIBE) is a product of IREX with funding from USAID.”; (b) VIBE is used solely for personal, noncommercial, or informational use; and (c) no modifications of VIBE are made.

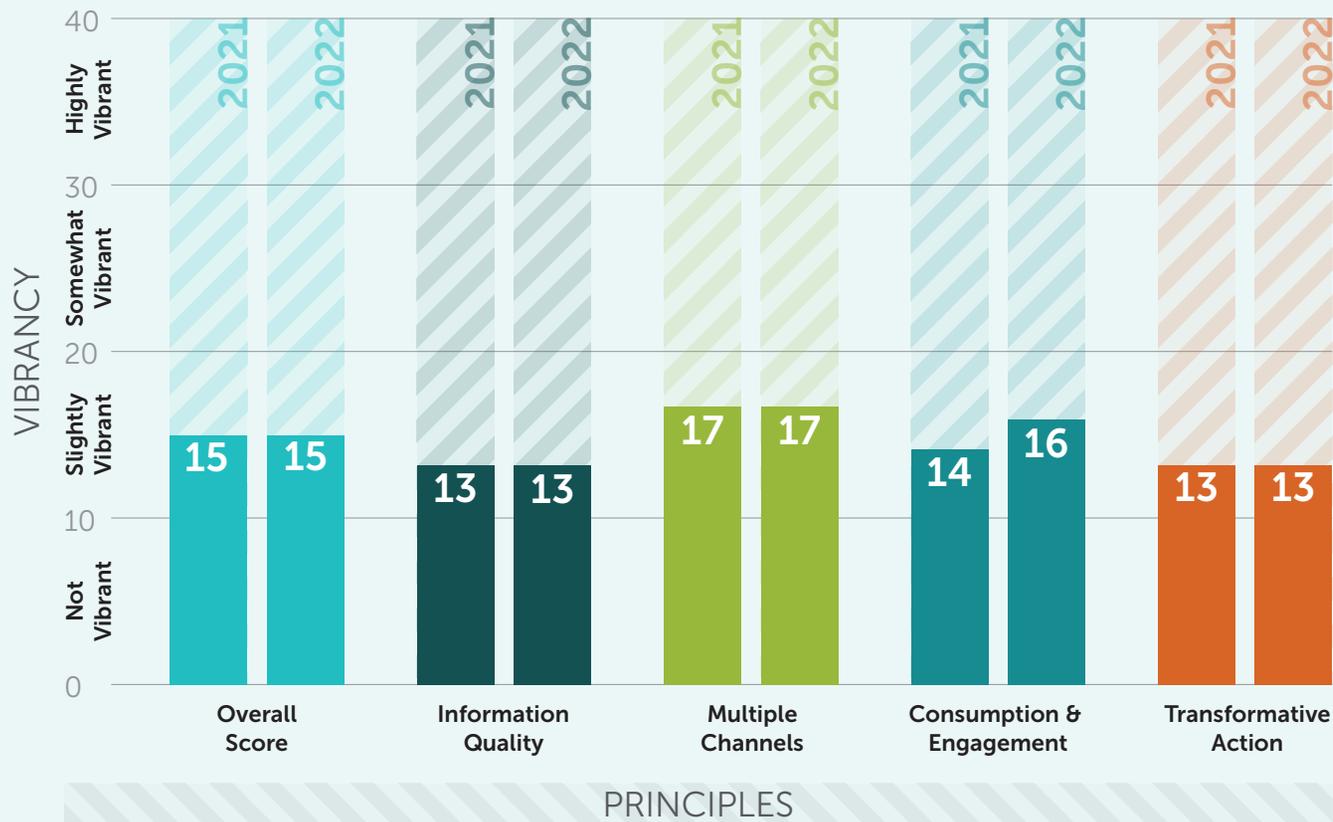
This study is made possible by the support of the American People through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The opinions expressed herein are those of the panelists and other project researchers and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID, the United States Government, or IREX.

# SERBIA

# 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.



OVERALL SCORE  
**15**

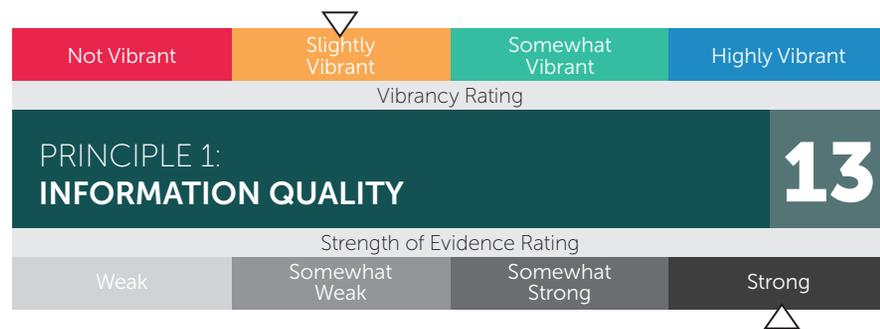
Serbian democracy and rule of law deteriorated further in 2021. The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance reports that Serbia, one of 10 countries with the biggest democratic decline, is no longer in the democracy category but is rather a hybrid regime. In September, [Exit News](#) reported that Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić described the EU’s insistence on strong democratic institutions as the “jihad of the rule of law.” Despite this backslide, the European Commission has decided to open a new cluster in accession negotiations with Serbia.

During the pandemic, the V-Dem Institute has reported that violations of democratic freedoms were recorded at three times higher than the European average. Citizen dissatisfaction flared when thousands of citizens participated in environmental protests in over 50 cities against a Rio Tinto mining project and new legislation on expropriation and referendum. The upheaval came after a protest on November 28 in Šabac, where a group of men attacked protesters with hammers and sticks. The footage of this event has provoked sharp reactions from citizens.

The 2021 Reporters Without Borders World Press Freedom Index shows that Serbia has fallen from 54 in 2014 to 93 (out of 180) in 2020, confirming the long-term trend of media freedom deterioration. According to the Balkan Free Media Initiative’s *The Invisible Hand of Media Censorship in the Balkans*, there is growing evidence of state entities being used strategically to strengthen government control and government-backed media. Twitter is marking each pro-government media post with the following tag: “a media that cooperates with the government of Serbia.” Journalists who criticize the government are exposed to harassment, threats,

violence, and intimidation. Numerous pressures have led to a brutal campaign against the Crime and Corruption Reporting Network (KRIK), an independent investigative center.

The 2021 VIBE overall score is the same as the previous year’s study—15. Most panelists were surprised the score is not lower because they consider 2021 the worst year for freedom and independence of Serbian media. Several things have prevented this: a small number of independent and investigative media have made a breakthrough to the public despite heavy repression from authorities and pro-government media; cooperation with civil society organizations (CSOs) and people’s initiatives on ecology and other social problems has extended dramatically; women journalists have made further professional progress and won almost all the domestic and international awards for Serbian journalists; and the information on the media’s environment has been improved by research. However, higher scores in those areas are offset by low scores in others: independence of information channels, media literacy, individuals’ use of quality information to inform their actions, the government’s use of quality information to make public policy decisions, and information’s support of good governance and democratic rights.



Numerous media and social networks exist, and nearly all topics are more or less represented. However, quality content based on professional and ethical standards is lacking. This principle is one of two principles tied with the low score of the Serbia study. Two indicators in this principle—on information is not intended to harm and on content production is sufficiently resources—received the lowest scores.

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

In Serbia, there is an infrastructure for various content production. Additionally, there are training opportunities for journalists, primarily through non-governmental programs, public and private faculties for journalism, and production professions, as well as informal trainings. However, allocating time for training means fewer people in the newsroom. Investigative journalists have received many international and domestic awards for their coverage and for practicing ethical journalism. However, a large part of the media uses unethical means and violates the Serbian Journalists' Code of Ethics several hundred times a year, and the reach of these media is far greater. "There is no diversity in reporting, especially on local topics," said Vesna Radojević, a project manager for KRIK.

Most Serbian media, including national television stations and public service media, do not provide citizens with the relevant information they need to better understand the sociopolitical context. Moreover, the most popular dailies are a never-ending source of fake news and manipulative

content. There are a dozen media outlets in the country that respect the principles of impartial and professional reporting. "It is new that tabloids have bypassed the typical antiscientific, sensationalist manner they nurtured in the previous year's reporting on vaccination, but it is primarily a reflection of government-friendly editorial policies," said Stefan Janjić, editor-in-chief of FakeNews Tragač.

Tabloid editors and journalists do not respect professional and ethical standards, claiming that such behavior is not sanctioned. In February, President Vučić and Interior Minister Aleksandar Vulin showed explicit photos of mutilated bodies on a show broadcast on 13 television stations, initiating no reaction from the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media (REM) despite the identity protection regulation. "Consequences for nonprofessional journalism practices have been reduced to a minimum," said Milivoje Mihajlović, assistant general manager at the public service media RTS.

While there are professional media that adhere to ethical standards, they do not have the financial capacity for market research to improve their reach and audience engagement. Journalists are not specialists on a number of critical issues, and the number of sector experts is declining. For example, research from the Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia (IJAS) shows that newsrooms are lacking journalists with knowledge of the judiciary, and the quality of information presented on that topic is low, especially in local areas. "The journalism profession in Serbia is deteriorating due to financial reasons and pressures, causing quality to fall in specific topics," said Tamara Filipović Stevanović, the general secretary of IJAS.

There are no obstacles for Serbians to receive international news content. "The variety of topics is ensured, as we have specialized portals," said Bojan Cvejić, the executive director of *Danas*. A Serbian website, Nova.rs, won the traditional Smartocto competition for the best Balkan news portal for the first time. In addition to Nova, two other portals from Serbia are among the top five: N1.rs and *Danas.rs*. It is evident that a significant improvement in the quality of news websites is occurring.

Most media work under direct or indirect government control and therefore produce content that does not meet professional standards with no professional ramifications, as regulatory bodies are also politically controlled. “Independent editors are the exception rather than the rule. The editors of tabloids and tabloid television [channels] directly conduct government campaigns, targeting dissidents and independent media on a daily basis,” said Siniša Isakov, a professor of media technology. Dragan Petković, co-owner and project director at *Južne vesti*, said, “The vast majority of media, including public service [media], are under the direct control of one political option. The quality of information is not a priority—only their propaganda role is. A small number of media, especially local ones, have credible content.”

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

“The state infrastructure for producing decent media content exists, but at the same time the state intentionally prevents equal use of the infrastructure, and as a consequence the differences [among] individual media are huge,” said Tamara Skrozza, a journalist and Press Council Complaints Commission member.

As [reported](#) by Beta News Agency, authorities use spin and manipulation almost every day, and the tabloid media follow them. REM which should react to inappropriate content in electronic media, does not respond. While a small part of the media sector tries to adhere to professional standards, false news is created intentionally, deliberately, and in a very organized way with two main goals: to mislead the public for government gain and to discredit political opponents.

An analysis by the Bureau for Social Research (BIRODI) of media appearances in nationwide television appearances by government ministries shows that all contained advertising and propaganda and presented the government in a positive light. BIRODI has warned that these results prove that the constitutional guarantees of the right of

citizens to have objective, complete, timely, and truthful information is “greatly endangered” because citizens receive propaganda without a critical point of view.

Some tabloids are promoting pseudoscience and disinformation regarding COVID-19, although some are less active in doing so than they were in the first year of the pandemic. Moreover, several national television stations have hosted quasi-specialists on the matter. Panelists agreed that Happy TV is leads in advocating antivaccination attitudes. However, the main source of disinformation on COVID-19 are not the media but social networks. As evidenced by Serbia’s low COVID-19 vaccination rate, a large segment of the country’s citizens make decisions based on their emotions and beliefs.

Misinformation and fake news are an endemic and a ubiquitous part of Serbian politics. “The greatest amount of misinformation actually comes from the political establishment. . . Very few professional media try to explain to citizens what accurate information is and what is false news. Given the amount of “distorted news,” . . . [it] is very difficult to discern what is really true,” said Petković. The public relations departments of local authorities and state-owned enterprises also send manipulative reports on a daily basis. “The authorities also use the tactic of overwhelming [news outlets] with fake events,” said Jovanka Marović, editor-in-chief of Glas Šumadije.

A growing number of organizations are detecting fake news—such as Raskrinkavanje (Disclosure), Istinomer (Truth-O-Meter), and FakeNews Tragač (FakeNews Tracker)—and publishing examples of fake news and misinformation in the media, but they are not enough to cover the enormous amount of such news.

Facebook has entered into partnerships with Agence France-Presse and Istinomer, reducing the visibility of content that has been identified as manipulative. Due to such posts’ reduced reach, several media outlets are suing fact-checking organizations (specifically, Raskrikavanje) for unfair competition.

“Consequences for nonprofessional journalism practices have been reduced to a minimum,” said Mihajlović.

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

The influence of the Russian state-funded news website and radio station Sputnik on the Serbian media landscape and on public opinion has not diminished. Sputnik has been broadcasting media reports without context for years, and as a consequence the majority of Serbs believe that Russia is Serbia's most important economic partner when, in reality, Serbia conducts more than two-thirds of its foreign trade with the European Union. Ultimately, however, malicious information targeting political opponents of the regime is produced by media aligned with the government. From January 18 to February 18, 2021, in 150 issues of five daily newspapers (*Kurir*, *Informer*, *Večernje novosti*, *Alo*, and *Blic*) 232 texts with elements of hate speech were detected, according to the the *Center for Intercultural Communication's* research, supported by IREX's Learn to Discern project, funded by the U.S. Embassy in Serbia.

From March 1 to December 2021, 77 complaints were submitted to the Press Council.

According to the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality, “humiliating statements, spreading of hatred, insults based on ethnicity, attacks on the families of political dissidents, belittling someone's origin, sexism, setting up so-called health diagnoses, all the way to the use of Nazi symbols [has] become an acceptable narrative.” Hate speech and untruths are the standard rather than the exception in tabloids and on tabloid television channels and are aimed against political dissidents and public figures who express critical views.

No effective sanctions for unprofessional behavior for journalists or editors exist. The lack of appropriate sanctions, in fact, further encourages such behavior. “The government openly discriminates

and uses hate speech against opposition party leaders, independent journalists, artist, intellectuals, and activists who criticize the regime. There are no ramifications for the members of the government, nor for the media,” said Skrozza. Toxic discourse is primarily nurtured in the daily press, on national television channels, and on social networks.

A small number of media outlets recognize the self-regulatory body “Press Council” and respect the code. The chapters on truthfulness of reporting and journalistic attention are the ones most often violated. Compliance monitoring with the Serbian Journalists Code of Ethics, as conducted by the Press Council, has shown a drastic increase in violations of professional standards: in September 2021, as many as 993 articles violated at least one provision of the code—much more than in the same month of the previous five years. The trend continued in October, when more than 50 violations a day were recorded several times.

“The government openly discriminates and uses hate speech against opposition party leaders, independent journalists, artist, intellectuals, and activists who criticize the regime. There are no ramifications for the members of the government, nor for the media,” said Skrozza.

Professional media have mechanisms and rules to prevent hate speech and usually document journalists' behavior. On websites, not all content is open for comments, as individual media do not have the capacity to monitor hate speech. “My outlet was forced to cancel comments on our website, as we do not have enough people to edit comments and there is widespread hate speech. But problems on Facebook and other social networks remained,” said Radojević. “We do check comments on our texts, but after that we are accused of censorship,” said Milena Popović, the editor-in-chief at Istinomer.

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

Information content in minority languages is the rule for Vojvodina public service broadcaster RTV and media supported by the National Minority Councils. For decades, RTV has had content on minority languages produced by minority members, but political influence by the

National Minority Councils (by law, defined as minority media founders) is spreading. “We are witnessing that every change of members in any minority council composition directly influences the editing and managing of minority media,” said Isakov.

RTS has only one short daily television show in the Albanian language and one radio program in the Romani language. The reality is that minority media cannot rely on the commercial advertising market due to the small number of potential buyers of minority members for media products.

Most citizens do not have access to information of different ideologies because all television programs with a national frequency are government controlled. “The only ideology that the citizens are subject to are the ones that the government dictates,” said Skrozza.

The global survey “Who Makes the News,” in which the Center for Media Research of the Faculty of Political Science participated, showed that women in Serbia are poorly represented in the news as interlocutors, analysts, and sources of information. The representation of women in the news is 20 percent—less than the world average of 25 percent and the European average of 28 percent. The presence of women in Serbian traditional media is 19 percent and in online media 25 percent, but violence and hostility toward women in online media is on the rise. Moreover, research conducted by the Faculty of Political Sciences at the University of Belgrade in early 2021 showed that the total number of women working in journalism in Serbia (60 percent) is far higher than in most countries—but that only 18 percent of them are in editorial management positions.

Local media outlets are increasingly bringing in teenagers to attract young readers. The initiative was started by the Serbian local media association Local Press, one of [Deutsche Welle Akademie](#)’s partners in the Young Media project. Since 2017, the association has been bringing school students to local newsrooms through workshops that are followed by journalism internships.

The availability of information in the Serbian language from minorities is very rare. One exception is the program “Paleta” on RTV, a daily

television show with Serbian subtitles, with the content selection prepared by the television channel’s editorial offices in the languages of national minorities. All pro-government tabloids and television channels exclusively address the Serb majority community, and the presence of other communities is marginal.

On public service television, research showed that some content is adapted for persons with disabilities (only during a preelection period is there presentation of daily news for deaf people, and only one domestic television series has had closed captioning). No commercial television stations have adapted programs for marginalized persons. Minority views are visible in the content of nonprofessional creators, such as TikTokers, who cover a number of important topics related to the issues of vulnerable groups. TikTok has served as a platform for non-professional content producers to raise awareness about marginalized groups and their issues.

#### **Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced.**

In 2021, 2,608 media outlets were registered. In the first six months, the number of media increased by 6 percent.

Most local media are largely financially dependent on local governments, so they usually broadcast activities of local authorities instead of their own content. Due to financial constraints, the media do not have permanent correspondents, lowering the quality of information. “Only TV stations with high inflows from budgets have enough money for quality productions. All other stations have programs which are obviously produced with limited resources,” said Radojević.

Cofinancing media projects with content of public interest was introduced, with the intention of helping local media and journalists to inform local areas, but it has gone completely awry. Several analysts of Serbia’s cofinancing practices, including IJAS and the Journalists Association of Serbia (JAS), concluded that instead of reaching professional journalists, the funds go to print and television tabloids and sometimes even to new units registered a few days before the bidding deadline. Many times, selection of these co-financing projects does not

reflect the law, and there is no mechanism for control and evaluation.

Although many Serbian citizens are used to getting information at no cost, foreign donors have supported successful crowd-funding campaigns to bring alternative revenue into local media outlets. Testing alternative media revenue models is in its infancy in Serbia and globally; however, USAID’s efforts in this area, through the IREX-implemented Strengthening Media Systems project, have shown that membership programs, audience outreach, online subscription models, and donations are starting to bring in funds to Serbian media outlets.

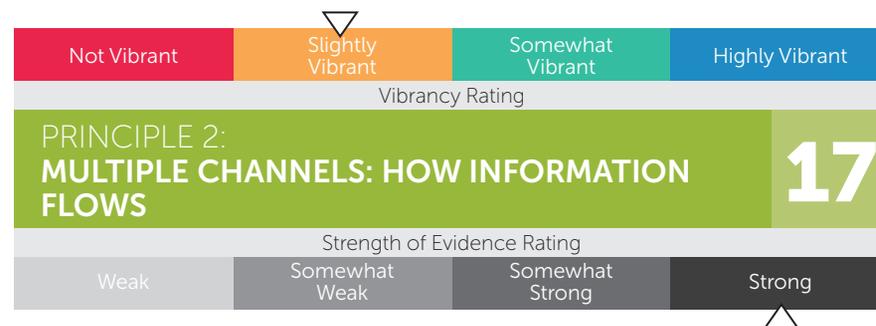
Additionally, media and nongovernmental organizations that engage in investigative journalism, a resource-heavy undertaking, currently rely on foreign donor support. However, there are increasingly popular formats, such as podcasts, that do not require a lot of start-up or operating funds: By the end of 2021, approximately 300 podcasts were available in Serbian.

The advertising market on social networks is not transparent, and it is unknown how much money goes to foreign social networks, such as Facebook and Twitter. Some advertisers still place ads to independent media, but majority of placement goes to media aligned with the government. Advertising in Serbia is highly politicized: Most advertisers are either controlled by or aligned with the ruling party so pro-government media receives a lot of ad placements while independent media are largely shut out.

Production of serials is not determined by the economic interest of financiers but rather political purposes. These serials are turned into hyperproduction (i.e., much more than the market demands or needs) of domestic television series that are financed by state-influenced media and state institutions. “Those patriotic serials are sponsored by local municipalities and often are produced with the intention to ‘beautify’ historical events and developments,” said Marović.

Reliable data on journalist salaries are unknown, but based on recent trends most are under the average Serbian salary: In 2020 the average journalist’s salary was RSD 52,156 a month [\$450], while the average salary in Serbia was RSD 60,169 [\$550]. In local media, journalists have a

minimum salary determined by law. Journalists in foreign-owned media are better off, with higher salaries and better legal protection. “Despite law obligations, employees work in a gray zone, and employers do not fulfill their obligation to pay into journalists’ pension funds. It is not rare for journalists to get much lower pensions than deserved,” said Skrozza.



Principle 2 has the highest score at 17. In this principle, panels were very critical of the indicator that examines people’s rights to create, share and consume information, since related laws are not applied in practice. The indicator studying the independence of information channels received the principle’s lowest score, reflecting the level of saturation present in Serbia’s media market as well as control over information flows.

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

Serbia’s laws relating to the media sector are generally good. Among other things, the criminal code considers endangering the security of “a person performing tasks of public importance in the field of information” a criminal offense. In the second half of 2021, the Ministry of Justice established a working group to amend the criminal code. “There are laws that protect freedom of speech, but at the same time there are constant talks on the possibility of these laws being changed in a way that could harm that freedom and the rights to create and consume information,” said Skrozza.

A research report done by the Slavko Curuvija Foundation and the Centre for Judicial Research (CEPRIS) titled “Protection of Freedom of Speech in the Judicial System of Serbia” states that “only every tenth reported case ends with a final court decision.” Implementation is bad, and journalists are especially affected, as they are persecuted for publishing news. This has happened several times in court—obstructing the right to share information because there is no provision for journalists to be responsible for publishing information. “Proceedings before the courts are delayed and lose the meaning of the verdict. [They] have no impact on long-term protection of journalists and media,” said Mihajlović. IJAS publicly announced that the prosecution is acting selectively: “One of the bigger problems is the narrow interpretation of certain criminal acts, primarily those endangering journalists’ security.”

Targeting certain critical media and journalists by public officials has been particularly pronounced. For example, in 2021 KRIK journalists, who investigate corruption and links between criminal groups and top governmental authorities, were attacked by persons trying to cover up state officials’ involvement in organized crime. The organization Open Parliament has stated that from January 1 to March 10, 2021, members of parliament mentioned certain media and journalists 37 times in a negative context.

Another example of the state’s eroding the right to create information is the case of the cabinet head for Prime Minister Ana Brnabić. He was formally registered as the new president of the supervisory board of *Politika AD*—the oldest Serbian daily, where the larger shareholder is the state. This move belies the rule of law that provides for the full exit of the state from media ownership and is a clear conflict of interest.

The government avoids overtly censoring media or pressuring information and communication technology providers to censor media. However, self-censorship is very present—primarily due to numerous

pressures on journalists. Now there is self-censorship of politicians. “We are often unable to get local information. When the mayor of Kragujevac does not give statements for our portal, all directors of public companies, public utility companies, and party politicians in coalition with the ruling party avoid contact with us. From the moment the mayor accepted the interview for Glas Šumadije, everyone else [came],” said Marovic.

Journalists are targets for death threats on social networks and for online harassment. Harassment campaigns are increasingly a source of concern for journalists’ safety. Online harassment creates deep insecurity and uncertainty among journalists, who fear for their safety and self-censor their behavior because they know that the state does not protect them. According to an IJAS research report titled “Online Attacks on Female Journalists,” women journalists are targeted through specific forms of online harassment or through threats to family members.

Five media associations left the governmental Working Group for Security and Protection of Journalists in March 2021 after members of parliament (along with television and tabloid campaigns) dangerously and brutally endangered the safety of journalists from KRIK. The International Federation of Journalists has stated that ignoring cases of crimes against journalists encourages more attacks on them. “Legislative framework in Serbia sufficiently protects journalists, but it is not fully implemented and very often is selectively implemented. This year the situation is somewhat better,” said Filipović.

There have been many examples of journalists being endangered: two individuals attacked journalist and radio presenter Daško Milinović with sticks and tear gas in Novi Sad; leaflets appeared all over Šabac presenting Isidora Kovačević, the editor-in-chief of *Podrinske*, as the media patron of thugs; and cartoonist Dušan Patričić’s Facebook page was closed after the intervention of “dissatisfied bots.” Moreover, several

“A practice arose where officials were addressing limited social groups that are important as voters: Serbs, orthodox, uneducated, and mainly males. All other social groups are marginalized and are seldom or never addressed by authorities’ statements,” said Isakov.

independent media were targeted through the creation of fake websites with same name and trademark as original media. “There is a huge pressure on independent journalists and media at both the national and local levels. That pressure is reflected through self-censorship, fear, threats, administrative pressures, campaigns, misinformation, fake news and other ways,” said Petković.

The law protects source confidentiality, and there are no publicized cases currently.

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

The highest score in Principle 2 is for this indicator. Serbia’s media infrastructure meets the needs of most people, especially in cities, but it is inaccessible to numerous citizens in rural areas due to insufficient coverage of cable networks or due to lack of financial means. Only the middle and upper classes have sufficient finances to access most information channels. Cable television, internet, and magazines are pricey in comparison with average salaries.

“In most cases, the government or the political structure in power are completely closed to independent media,” said Petković.

The Novi Sad School of Journalism has conducted a survey concluding that only a small part of information content by public media services (RTS and RTV) is adapted for deaf and hard-of-hearing people, while television content is not adapted for blind and partially sighted people. Commercial media do not adapt content at all for people with disabilities.

According to the government’s Statistical Office, 18.5 percent of citizens have no internet access at home. In certain areas in eastern and southern Serbia, there is no internet access; as a result, it is not possible to watch cable channel programs. As a result, citizens in those areas are left with watching the government-funded RTS, which is vulnerable to political influences within the government. Moreover, people with low income do not use the internet; cancellation of internet services has increased because people are no longer able to afford it. According to

the Statistical Office’s latest *Usa of Information and Communication Technologies 2021*, 97 percent of households with an income of over €600 (\$660) have a home internet connection. Only 58 percent of households with an income of less than €300 (\$330) have internet at home—a decrease of 6 percent, compared with 2019. More than 90 percent of middle- to higher-educated people use the internet, versus about 50 percent of lower-educated citizens. “The infrastructure in Serbia is quite good when it comes to mobile telephone, mobile internet, TV, or radio. What appears to be a problem is Telekom Srbija’s financially and politically motivated control of content,” said Petković.

Access for entire communities is not prohibited, but it is limited by the low penetration of communication networks in remote and underdeveloped parts of the country and by the lack of content for people with disabilities. “A practice arose where officials were addressing limited social groups that are important as voters: Serbs, orthodox, uneducated, and mainly males. All other social groups are marginalized and are seldom or never addressed by authorities’ statements,” said Isakov.

At the moment, certain content of Telekom Srbija, such as programming from N1, cannot be viewed on the internet network of Serbia Broadband and vice versa. The open war between the government-backed Telekom Srbija and the United Media group, among other things, has led to providers’ restricting several television programs.

### **Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for government information.**

Although the law for the right to access public information guarantees access, recently government representatives have publicly characterized the laws governing information of public importance as anti-state and harmful. Authorities often avoid answering important questions. The media then try to obtain information through the Commissioner for Information of Public Importance, a practice that prolongs the research process.

A labyrinth of internal regulations prevents journalists from verifying information. Contact names for media are listed for prosecutors' offices and courts, but in practice they do not communicate with the public at all. Financial information on the largest procurements, including those for transport infrastructure construction, are not available. "It is important to talk to people who are directly involved. . . . Very often, in rare press conferences by prosecutors and similar representatives, . . . journalists are forbidden [from asking] questions, especially when those representatives are [discussing] public affairs that shake the whole country," said Radojević.

Most information that independent media in local communities receive is obtained by the Commissioner for Free Access to Information of Public Importance. In some cases, the answer from state institutions is within the legal deadline of 15 days, but often the information is incomplete or declared confidential. The office for this commissioner is overburdened with requests and cannot process them in a timely manner.

All state institutions have persons in charge of answering inquiries from citizens and journalists. However, from year to year the Law on Access to Information of Public Importance is becoming less respected, and recently adopted amendments have reduced these rights because the amendments have expanded the number of institutions that are not obliged to provide information.

State institutions prohibit independent media from receiving important sources of information. They also do not send invitations to independent media members for important events. This is clear discrimination, as the law guarantees equal treatment to all. "In most cases, the government or the political structure in power are completely closed to independent media," said Petković. Skrozza adds, "Journalists of independent media sometimes are not even invited to press conferences or public events and sometimes are not allowed to ask questions." Independent journalists are seen as adversaries, and government personnel acts according to its political party affiliations, not according to state-institution operating criteria.

Spokespeople are practically non-existent in Serbia. Public relations

representatives communicate directly to journalists, and official public statements are done by ministries and officials themselves. Only prosecutors have spokespersons, but they rarely speak in public. Only a few courts have an appointed spokesperson. Government ministries and secretariats, as well as city authorities, usually have a public relations department, but with no names—only phone numbers or email addresses. Top officials have addresses at press conferences or on national television, where they freely expound and occasionally answer preapproved questions. "Spokespeople see their role [as] protecting the public institution they work for and not [providing] information to the public," said Marović.

### **Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow.**

Members of the ruling party own a large number of local media outlets. Although ownership of media is regulated by law, there are numerous abuses that have led to the concentration of individual ownership and influence over the media. Despite a law prohibiting state ownership of media two decades ago, the government owns quite a few media outlets. The distribution channels are monopolized and dominated by a small number of conglomerates, including the government.

Two parallel information systems have been established in an attempt to monopolize distribution channels: Telekom Srbija and Serbia Broadband. Telekom Srbija is the country's largest cable-operating company, which is 58 percent owned by the Serbian state. According to its own reporting, Telekom Srbija provides services to 79 percent of Serbia's fixed-line users, 44 percent of mobile phone users, and 40 percent of internet users. The Center for Media, Data, and Society has published an analysis of media independence that has shown a worrying trend of an increased number of private media in which state powers have editorial control.

Even though there are licensing laws, they are disregarded; the number of registered media has passed 2,600, but this number is no indication of diversity and quality. "All daily newspapers (except two) are published in Belgrade, so a considerable area of the country is not covered with daily print media," said Isakov.

Public media services do not fulfill their basic role of reporting on events and topics of public interest. Although the law prescribes editorial independence and institutional autonomy, there is no such independence in practice. Public service’s political programs are completely under the ruling party’s control. One example, provided by BIRODI, showed that over a six week period (March 15 - April 20, 2021), Serbia’s president was presented on RTS Daily news for more than two hours without any critique or criticism. They rarely produce fake news but often deceive the public by omitting things or giving a different context. However, RTS has made a huge program improvement due to COVID-19. When schools were closed, RTS broadcast 8,000 school lessons for elementary and high schools, reaching between 500,000 and 700,000 viewers. “Public service media . . . don’t report on important issues or events (protests, targeting people, lack of freedom of speech, etc.) . . . [and] there are still blacklists of people not allowed to speak [on it],” said Skrozza.

**Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.**

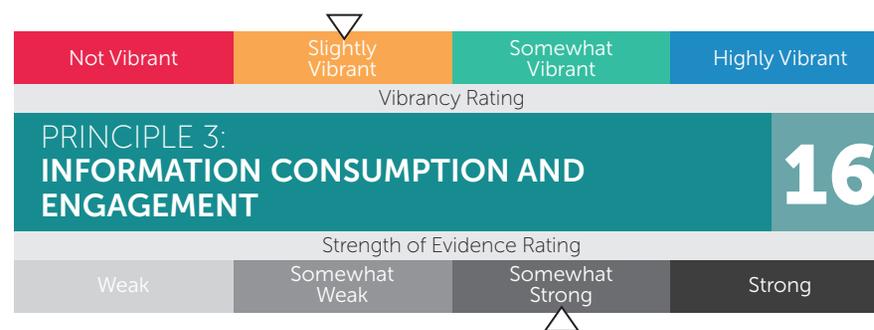
Owners have a dominant influence on the media, dictating editorial attitudes through financial support. According to research done by Media Ownership Monitor Serbia, the eight largest owners in the entire Serbian media sectors have a television and radio audience share of almost 75 percent, and among them are media outlets that strongly support the ruling party. For independent local and regional media, the main sources of income might be budget cofinancing of public interest projects, but the decision process is greatly influenced by authorities on all levels. Authorities also control two vital financial flows for media: public procurement of media services and state advertising. Close links exist among state and party officials and the largest media owners and advertising agencies. “The destiny of media organization depends on their ownership,” said Skrozza.

Independent media are trying to refuse pressure by advertisers and insist on keeping news operations and business operations separate. Mainstream media do not have this problem, as it is their editorial policy to never confront the government and other advertisers.

RTS has two main sources of income: subscriptions and marketing revenues. RTV still has a state budget grant. The RTS budget consists of television subscriptions/fees (80 percent), advertising revenues (15 percent), and program sales (5 percent). During 2021, RTS returned part of the government budget money obtained in the previous year. RTV receives fees for public media service and a budget subsidy due to lower viewership and poor revenues from commercial activities.

In 2021, the independence of REM has further deteriorated and continues with almost complete control of the ruling parties. “Regulatory bodies are directly controlled by the establishment, and their decisions are directly in the interest of one political option,” said Petković.

The Regulatory Agency for Electronic Communications and Postal Services did not react when Telekom Srbija bought several private cable operators and created a monopolistic situation. It also was silent when Telekom and Telenor entered into a contract that was clearly directed against competitor Serbia Broadband, and as a result, Serbia Broadband has been denied access to telecommunication infrastructure and has been exposed to unfair market restrictions. The agency has thus lost the trust of both market operators and end users whose personal data have been misused.



Information consumption and engagement improved somewhat as professional media, together with investigative centers and civil initiatives, succeeded in offering reliable information that has been neglected or forbidden in mainstream media. In the second half of 2021, parallel to citizen protests, consumption of information from

professional media made a breakthrough to those who previously consumed only authority-controlled information.

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

For the first time, the Share Foundation has created and published the Media Privacy Index, which assesses how 50 online media respect the standards of personal data protection. The research concluded that the media have not fully harmonized their online business with the prescribed principles.

The topic of privacy and personal data protection is slowly becoming more relevant for media outlets. All digital attacks are reported to the prosecutor's office for high-tech crime; however, according to the the Share Foundation's monitoring, very few cases receive a final legal epilogue. "Whenever a person is targeted, tabloids find a way to reveal his or her personal data. I am not an expert on the subject, but it is clear that if someone powerful needs your data, they will get it," said Skrozza.

Nineteen organizations from southeast Europe, including Serbia, have established a network that aims to advance digital rights protection and address the growing challenges posed by the widespread use of advanced technologies. Various trainings in the field of digital security are available to journalists, but the quantitative scope of such activities is very limited.

Several panelists believe that media outlets are unable to afford the high costs of sophisticated technology tools that would protect them from digital attacks; other panelists argued that there are good low- or no-cost tools available but their use among the media is unknown. There is not enough protection for websites in practice, and even the emails of many media outlets have been compromised. One of the reasons is that website owners and operators care more about informing users than about protecting data. "We in KRIK have server protection, and every individual journalist has the obligation to use several protection measures of his or her mailbox," said Radojević.

According to research on digital competences by CeSID in late 2021 titled "Support for Data-Based Decision-Making in the Media Labor Market," more than 50 percent of media staff think that there is a need to improve digital literacy. This research indicates that the digital literacy index is a relatively high 11 out of 15, showing that digital technologies are available and that citizens have the necessary knowledge to use them when they have internet availability, the financial capacity, and formal education. Use of technology is widespread, but most users are at a very basic level.

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

Media literacy in Serbian curricula is still in its infancy; the level of media literacy education in schools depends mostly on the teacher's individual engagement. There are no data to testify to the overall level of media literacy.

Media and information literacy is included to some extent in the educational system, but it is implemented through civic education classes as an elective subject and its funding is limited and insufficient. The Ministry of Culture and Information has developed a curriculum for media and information literacy, but it is unknown whether it is being applied in educational institutions. "The authorities do not promote media literacy and at the same time expect unconditional support from citizens for the decisions of infallible members of the government," said Isakov.

With the assistance of IREX under the Learn to Discern project, the Independent Journalists' Association of Vojvodina (IJAV) has developed a resource center for media literacy that provides support to teachers, especially those who teach the media, language, and culture subject in high schools and gymnasiums.

The Press Council has published the *Lexicon of Media Literacy*, which contains basic concepts of media literacy. The Press Council has also trained over 350 young people in several cities in media literacy. The Ministry of Interior has offered training on journalist protection and

security for 12 journalists. IREX has conducted a series of trainings for citizens who wanted to raise their level of media literacy, but the trainings have mostly included young people. “A small number of people who are at all media literate only distinguish media in which the information is published and on that basis draw a conclusion about the relevance of information. The vast majority do not check the content placed on the internet in any way,” said Petković.

Media literacy and the ability to detect false statements and misinformation is, among other things, related to formal education.

According to the Open Society Institute – Sofia’s research, the index of (ordinary) literacy has been declining in recent years. “Serbia has a serious problem with general and functional literacy, so media illiteracy is only a part of the puzzle. Media education within schools actually depends on teachers, their passion, and bravery,” said Skrozza.

According to CeSID’s research, media literacy is in a smaller decline, compared with 2020. Citizens themselves poorly rated their ability to assess whether content corresponds to an article’s title, whether it is true, or whether the information comes from several sources. “Unfortunately, the pandemic has shown that people are prone to believe claims that obviously are not supported with evidence and defy science and common sense,” said Radojević. Janjić adds, “A worrying fact is that 50 percent of staff working in education are not vaccinated, and among them are those teaching media literacy.”

According to the Statistical Office’s latest *Usage of Information and Communication Technologies in the Republic of Serbia*, computer and internet usage is almost equal for secondary- and higher-educated people (around 90 percent), while for lower-educated people it is around 50 percent. Thus, it might be assumed that media literacy is similarly distributed.

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

Despite obstacles imposed by authorities, independent media and professional journalists use their freedom of speech and rights to information. Very often they are exposed to persecution, but their influence has risen dramatically, especially in the last months of 2021 when serious citizen protests expanded throughout the country. The role of CSO activists, social networks, and professional journalists has decisively contributed to the success of demonstrations.

**“The authorities do not promote media literacy and at the same time expect unconditional support from citizens for the decisions of infallible members of the government,” said Isakov.**

According to Ipsos research conducted in 2021, the main sources of information were television (48 percent), online media (25 percent), social networks (15 percent), acquaintances (6 percent), radio (2 percent), print media (2 percent), and none (2 percent).

Due to the huge quantity of misinformation and fake news, people have limited access to reliable information. Fifty percent of citizens have not received the COVID-19 vaccine, and most of them follow conspiracy theories. Although it is possible for people to get qualitative information, it does not mean that they are using it progressively. “Obviously, propaganda influences people; they believe the statements of the president and prime minister. . . . They don’t follow calls for vaccination,” said Cvejić.

Discussion platforms are very rare and are prepared mostly in advance, so they do not allow for pluralism of opinion. “Public debate in Serbia still exists in rare media. Unfortunately, the already-weak practice of involving citizens in decision-making of public interest has been extinguished. It all comes down to political propaganda and an exclusive attitude proclaimed by one political figure,” said Petković.

Debates initiated on social networks have not changed the behavior of the authorities, but they regularly orchestrate attacks by state representatives, tabloids, and members of parliament on anyone who

speaks differently and on media that broadcast alternative views.

Inappropriate speech, hate speech, and misinformation, as well as serious threats, are present. Not everyone exercises their right to report inappropriate content or to report more serious cases to the competent authorities.

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

There are not enough data for reliable ratings except for big television stations, as others do not have the financial resources to pay for expensive research. Most media are far removed from the public interest. The programs they supply are motivated by “remote control competition” to prevent the audience from switching to a non-politically controlled channel. “The audience’s real interest should be to acquire useful information which could be used for some action or decision, as was the case with uprising against Rio Tinto activity in Serbia in 2021,” said Radojević.

There is no press audit, and actual newspaper circulation is unknown. However, the total estimated circulation of all print media in Serbia does not exceed 400,000 copies—a number that decades ago was the circulation of one daily newspaper. Website analyses are followed by all serious media, and recently there have been several support programs (Internews, IREX, etc.) that focus on communication and audience engagement. There is a lack of serious research and mechanisms for measuring audiences and for examining the audiences’ needs. “The media use research to find out the desires and interests of the public, but this research is used in media that support the government as a platform for manipulation,” said Mihajlović.

Few media outlets adhere to high standards of professional ethics prescribed by the Code of Journalists of Serbia, including error correction and fact-based reporting.

**“The inability of the authorities to conduct a constructive dialogue on any topic can best be seen with vaccination and pandemic measures,” said Isakov.**

Members of the United Media group—such as TV N1, Nova S, *Danas* and Nova—three leading political weeklies, and independent local media and websites exchange information and research results with and from NGOs. Only conflicts of opinion take place on social media networks, and sometimes these conflicts expand beyond social media and into real life conflict.

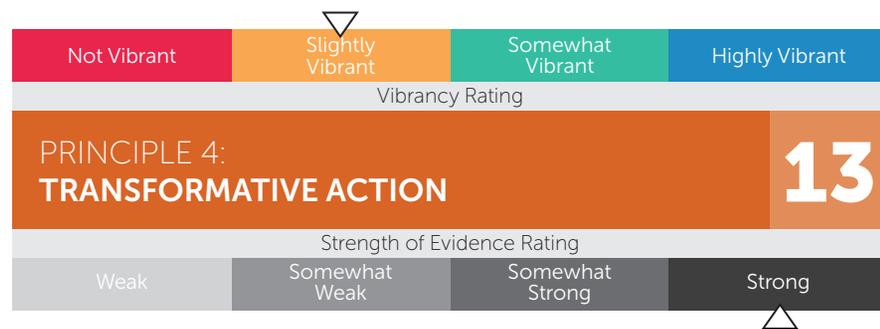
There are procedures for communication with viewers, readers, and listeners that are defined by law; however, media tend not to engage with their audiences in this manner. A small number of credible media strive to establish contact and adapt content to the public interest as much as possible. The same media also cooperate with civil society. “The inability of the authorities to conduct a constructive dialogue on any topic can best be seen with vaccination and pandemic measures,” said Isakov.

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

Media with common characteristics of community media—particularly with respect to being community-based, along with leveraging volunteers and audience donations—do not exist in Serbia. However, most panelists agree that media established by CSOs and private local media that have active, independent roles function in the place of community media. As such, these media play an extraordinary role in local Serbian areas. “Our media Glas Šumadije [Voice of Šumadija region] was founded as a community media unit, in which a significant amount of content is created at the initiative of citizens. There are only a limited number of such media, and for them citizens are the main source of local information. Citizens support them but refuse to help financially,” said Marović. Mihajlović adds, “There are . . . local media but they are dependent on donations or budgets, so their editorial policy is either support for the community or support for the authorities.”

These local media are a small percentage of the 2,600 registered media,

but credible ones exist and are useful for citizens and marginalized populations in local areas. Some podcasts have elements of community media, too. Other numerous local media that are under government control do not cover vital local topics or misinterpret them. The best illustration is the local media in Kragujevac. A new portal was established in Kragujevac that advertises itself as “the first internet tabloid in the country”; the information, even when exclusively local in nature, is unverified and often maliciously inaccurate. “The experience of FakeNews Tracker is that all local media among which we [have] detected misinformation or fake news do not have the characteristics of community media,” said Janjić.



Unfortunately, Serbian society is divided, and the current political leaders are dividing it more deeply to clearly direct the orientation of their supporters and discourage the opposition. There is media polarization expressed in language, style, political affiliations, and a degree of aggression, so a deep gap has been created between regime media and media that are critically oriented toward the government. There is not a robust audience for nonpartisan sources of information.

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

Only a small number of citizens use multiple sources of information. According to the results of the South East European Network for Professionalization of Media’s research, *Polarized Media—Polarized*

*Audience: Serbia*, the country’s media scene is characterized by a polarized audience. The percentage of surveyed citizens who stated that they trust the media (full, accurate, and fair news reporting) only slightly exceeds the percentage of surveyed citizens who say they do not trust the media. The results also indicate that there is a relatively high level of trust in investigative media and fact-checking portals, whose reach is modest. The specific media outlets that respondents have singled out as the most or least trustworthy outlet clearly illustrates audience polarization. “Facts do not form the basis of the attitudes and thinking of the majority of citizens,” said Mihajlović.

*Južne vesti* has researched bot activity in the region of Niš, and it was clear that bots backed by local authorities intentionally disable any constructive discussion on social networks or portals. This is another indication of how authorities understand politics and democracy.

As a rule, debates that take place on social networks are fierce and unconstructive, often targeting dissidents instead of challenging views. According to Simon Kemp’s DataReportal report, “Digital 2021: Serbia,” the average Facebook user leaves three comments a month. Despite these statistics, it is possible to conclude that there are groups of passionate commentators and bots, especially if they are mobilized by a certain idea (political, health) or institution. “There are media outlets that are not biased with political options in the country, but when it comes to debate and exchange of opinions, social networks are the dominant space because in the mainstream media, there is mostly no debate,” said Radojević.

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

Political views and attitudes are formed mainly on the basis of misinformation—not quality information. Systematic distrust in the media is one of the biggest consequences of fake news. The COVID-19 pandemic has shown how low media literacy is and how easily misinformation can deter people from getting COVID-19 vaccinations. For example, psychology professor Mila Aleckovic, who often plants conspiracy theories about the COVID-19 virus, in October 2021

announced on her Twitter account that “no one could prove in court that the virus is isolated.” In March 2021, *Tabloid* published a worrying claim that “two hundred times more deaths are caused by vaccines than the coronavirus,” and that “vaccines are more dangerous than COVID-19.” The tabloid referred to the alleged statement of the director of the French National Health Service, but France’s Ministry of Health of France denied to Raskrikavanje that such a statement exists.

Citizens cannot engage with elected officials due to Serbia’s proportional electoral system at all levels of government. Rather than direct votes to elect representatives, the proportional electoral system means that citizens vote for a ballot named after the party leader and not for specific individuals. This makes communication impossible for citizens. Even if there is communication with such elected officials, it is possible mostly for like-minded people. Fake information is the predominant preelection trump card—where parties make unrealistic or even caricature-like promises—and is used as the main method to influence voters and election outcomes.

The citizens’ behavior is somewhat more reasonable on health problems. The government-led COVID Crisis Headquarters has been advocating vaccination, but it also has a member who is actively casting doubts on vaccinations publicly. As a result, the average citizen does not know how to use crisis headquarters information productively, as it often provides confusing information.

The COVID-19 pandemic and vaccination push has shown that people believe in all types of conspiracy theories, including those not related to health. Misinformation is spread on social networks, other media, and among citizens. Authorities took mild and soft measures to limit the activities of highly visible antivaxxers and disinformers only after September--when Serbia jumped to the top of the world’s list of infected and COVID-related deaths and came under pressure from doctors, CSOs and citizens initiatives. Despite the availability of five different top-level vaccine types at the beginning of the pandemic, more than half of the population has not been vaccinated with even a single dose.

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

Principally speaking, CSOs gladly share their information, but media use of reliable information is polarized. Some use information productively, but government-controlled mainstream media often ignore qualitative information coming from the civil society sector. However, numerous protests have been launched against ore exploration and the opening of new mines. These spontaneous actions of the citizens have been supported by green CSOs, and some of them have already announced that they will form political parties and compete in the 2022 elections. “At the local level this year, there were spontaneously organized initiatives in the cities, some of which were followed by protests,

mostly about environmental protections, excessive construction of certain zones, and waste disposal. These initiatives attract media attention,” said Isakov. Information about these protests was spread almost exclusively through social media networks.

“Facts do not form the basis of the attitudes and thinking of the majority of citizens,” said Mihajlović.

More government-organized nongovernmental organizations (GONGOs) openly support the regime, and they can be part of different governmental working groups claiming to represent the “civil sector.” Skrozza noted that the formation of GONGOs has escalated. These organizations disseminate misinformation and cooperate with tabloids--and they are winning bids for projects of public importance. “Independent CSOs rely on quality information, and GONGOs provide low-quality information to support the authorities,” said Mihajlović.

CSOs and credible media are in the minority and are in an unenviable position; however, their potential to influence public opinion has been growing. People’s initiatives regarding huge ecological problems have grown into political protests with wider implications because of the success in informing citizens on real ecological problems.

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have been key in information verification. The result of research by different NGOs is a valuable media source. “This research has expanded greatly in 2021, providing reliable

information to citizens and media. One of the key examples is the [report on the position of the wards of children's homes](#)," said Janjić.

Citizen involvement in decision-making processes has been somewhat improved because the government invited CSOs to join the process of preparing new legal provisions. Panelists think that CSO involvement serves as a political card for the government due to final decisions being ultimately made by political rulers. Yet progress has been made, as debates between the government and CSO representatives has occurred for the first time. "Very often, the practice of the state was nontransparent [regarding] preparation of new laws, and such drafts, after being published, provoke strong criticism and reasonable remarks. The authorities are [then] forced to withdraw the proposal and include CSOs in the new round of preparation," said Radojević.

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

Consultative mechanisms exist but are misused or ignored. The new practice of government consultation unfortunately is pro forma, rather than a genuine attempt to solicit input. "Government officials refer to media news or information from civil society when explaining decisions but not necessarily in a positive context. Such reviews are often of a predatory, aggressive nature. Sociopolitical agendas are usually created on the basis of spin," said Janjić.

Government ministers and the president often refer to data from police investigations, presenting and publishing evidence based on their own opinion and announcing the actions of the police and the prosecution. This is done with the belief that the "people understand" the decisions of the government.

“There are media outlets that are not biased with political options in the country, but when it comes to debate and exchange of opinions, social networks are the dominant space because in the mainstream media, there is mostly no debate,” said Radojević.

Press conferences are not regularly held by government ministers, municipalities, and city councils. The current practice is to address only the beginning or end of infrastructure works, opening of factories, and similar occasions. Any questions by independent media journalists are either ignored or used as an occasion to discredit the media they work for, their owners, or the journalists themselves. Instead of using

facts and evidence, authorities extensively explain their future moves and overwhelm the audience with unrealistic promises to convince citizens that great economic growth is knocking on Serbia's door.

Indicators of economic growth and data on the number of employees and wages are often deliberately placed in an inappropriate context to reinforce the government's message or to divert attention from the growing number

of corruption scandals in the government. Official representatives selectively use information that supports government propaganda, and they refer to news from government-aligned media. They mostly react critically to information that is not favorable to the government. "The government directly uses misinformation without any empathy for social interest or harm to society and individuals," said Petković. Radojević added, "Press conferences, rare debate shows, and the narrative of politicians on social networks are mainly oriented toward belittling political opponents and collecting political points from voters. Such narratives often abound in hate speech [and] in fake news."

### **Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic rights.**

Panelists agreed that authorities systematically ignore instances of corruption that have been uncovered by the media. Only after very strong pressure from public institutions does the government react, albeit with negative consequences. "The government's response to . . . cases of corruption is devastating and boils down to ignoring [and]

defending suspects or attacking media outlets that have pointed to corruption,” said Janjić.

Independent media and investigative CSO centers publish quality information on corruption cases, but the authorities respond by trivializing every case. The government often obstructs any fight against corruption at both the local and national level.

Participation in government and proximity to government still provide the best protection against corruption. The government covers up, delays proceedings, attacks whistleblowers, and defends its own members at all costs. Investigations, indictments, and lawsuits themselves—if and when they are launched—drag on for months and years. “Stories of investigative journalists are the best example of how immune the authorities are to detecting corruption. Judicial bodies almost never react, and public pressure is not enough to initiate them,” said Radojević.

Authorities are passive when human rights and civil liberties are threatened. They react a little faster to rights and freedom violations if such information is accompanied by reactions from the international community or by citizen protests and public gatherings. There is usually a higher turnout and better control of the election process in local communities after sharing basic information about elections and about local citizens’ problems.

After more than two years of negotiations on election conditions, with and without EU mediation, it is clear that information alone—regardless of how qualitative it is—is not enough for current authorities to organize free and fair elections, especially regarding rules for the periods before campaign announcements and during campaigns. Quality information is suppressed if it can affect the outcome of elections. “Pressures on numerous local media, some of [which] were shut down or taken over by the ruling political party, are proof of the government’s reluctance to provide quality information and their influence on free and fair elections at the local level,” said Marović.

Since the government does not react, victims of corruption and whistleblowers—usually citizens—are turning more often to media and

journalists as a last resort. This process has escalated, especially in local areas where people trust the media more than the local police or authorities. Citizens have no one else to turn to, and in these types of cases, citizens trust the independent and professional media and their journalists.

### LIST OF PANEL PARTICIPANTS

**Bojan Cvejić**, executive director and internet portal and podcast editor-in-chief, *Danas*, Belgrade

**Siniša Isakov**, professor, media technology, *Academy of Art*, Novi Sad

**Stefan Janjić**, editor-in-chief, *FakeNews Tragač (FakeNews Tracker)*; teaching assistant, Novi Sad School of Journalism; faculty of philosophy, Novi Sad

**Jovanka Marović**, editor-in-chief, *Glas Šumadije*, Kragujevac

**Milivoje Mihajlović**, assistant general manager, *RTS*, Belgrade

**Dragan Petković**, program director, *Južne vesti*, Niš

**Milena Popović**, editor-in-chief, *Istinomer (Truth-O-Meter)*, Belgrade

**Vesna Radojević**, manager, *Raskrinkavanje (Disclosure)*, *KRIK Investigative Network*, Belgrade

**Tamara Skrozza**, journalist, *VREME*; Press Council member, Belgrade

**Tamara Filipović Stevanović**, general secretary, *Independent Journalist Association of Serbia*, Belgrade

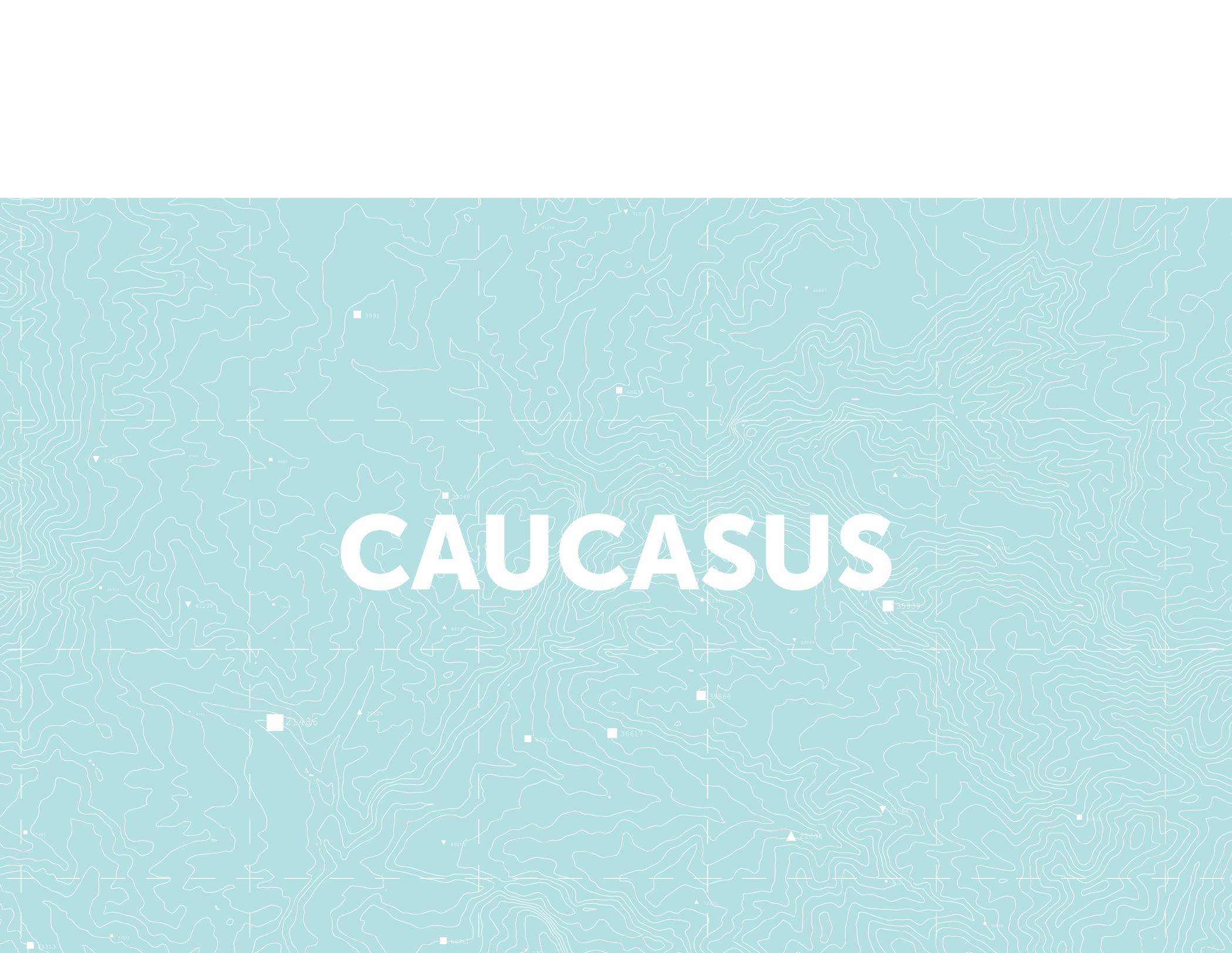
### MODERATOR AND AUTHOR

**Goran Cetinić**, independent media consultant, Belgrade

Copyright © 2022 by IREX

**Notice of Rights:** Permission is granted to display, copy, and distribute VIBE in whole or in part, provided that: (a) the materials are used with the acknowledgment “The Vibrant Information Barometer (VIBE) is a product of IREX with funding from USAID.”; (b) VIBE is used solely for personal, noncommercial, or informational use; and (c) no modifications of VIBE are made.

This study is made possible by the support of the American People through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The opinions expressed herein are those of the panelists and other project researchers and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID, the United States Government, or IREX.

A teal-colored background featuring a white topographic map. The map consists of numerous contour lines of varying thicknesses, representing different elevation levels. Scattered across the map are small white symbols: squares, triangles, and inverted triangles, many of which are accompanied by numerical values such as 3891, 4066, 21486, 36617, and 22634. A faint grid of dashed lines is also visible over the map.

# CAUCASUS

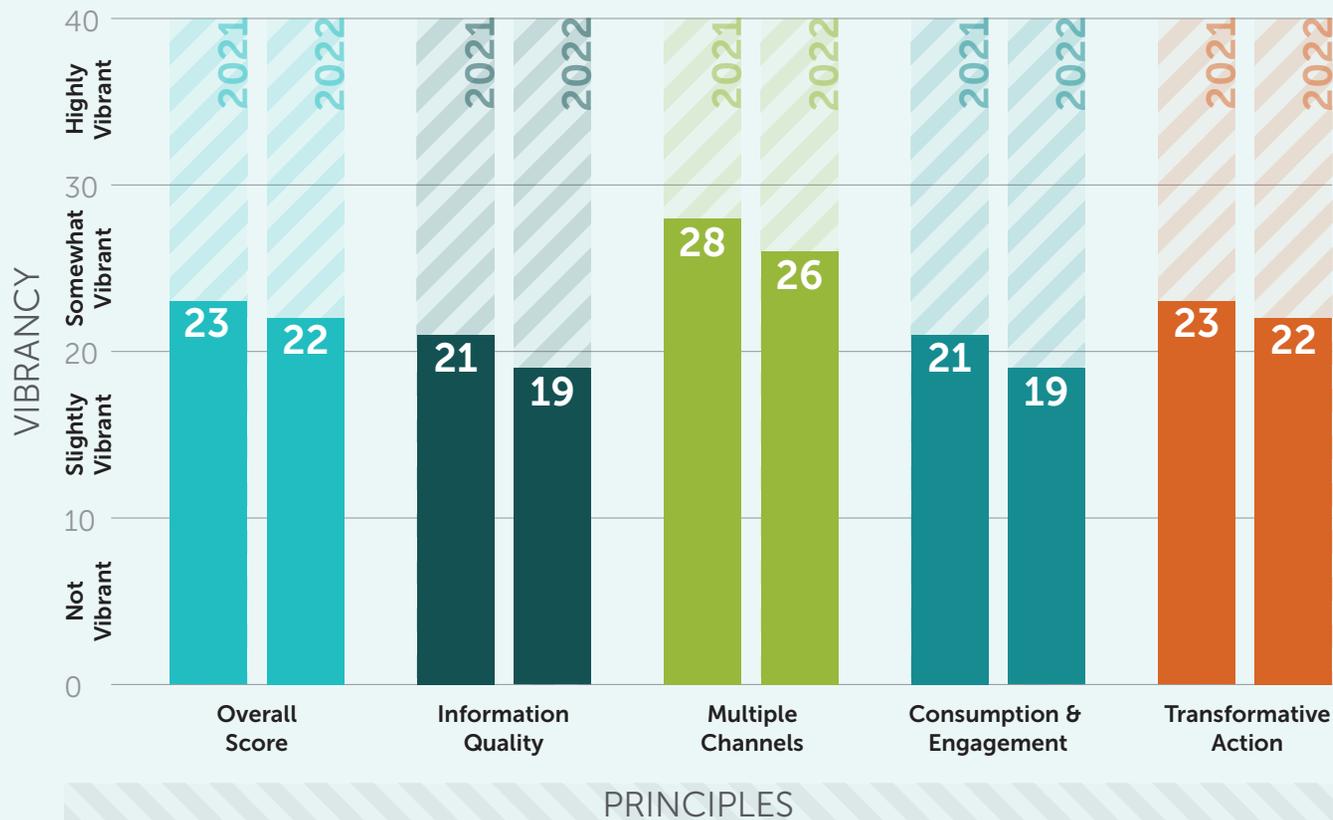
# ARMENIA



## Vibrant Information Barometer

2 0 2 2



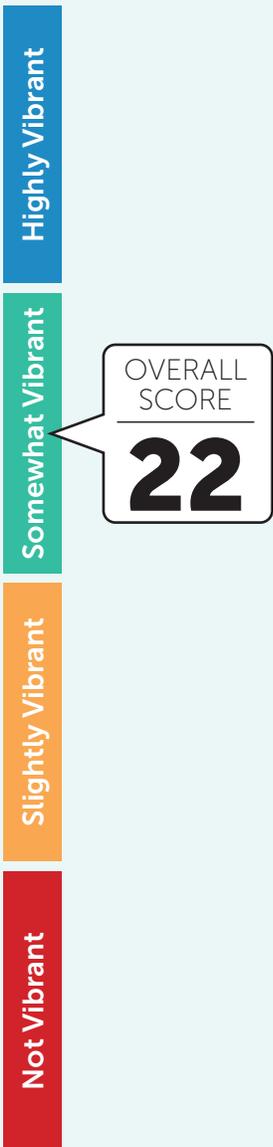


**Highly Vibrant (31-40):** Quality information is widely available in this country. People have the rights, means, and capacity to access a wide range of information; they recognize and reject misinformation.

**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.



The political, social, and economic situations were tense throughout 2021 due to developments after the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war. This conflict led to thousands of residents being displaced and Armenian prisoners of war (POW) not being returned as mandated by the POW provision in the November 9, 2020 cease-fire agreement. The agreement, brokered by Russia and stipulating significant territorial concessions to Azerbaijan, also triggered snap parliamentary elections. In addition, postwar Armenia has been plagued by border issues, while the COVID-19 pandemic and vaccination hurdles remain among the top news stories.

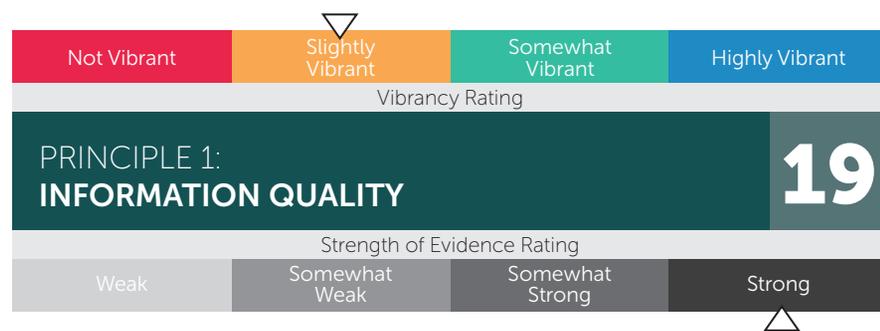
At first Armenians resisted the snap elections, but later the opposition took part, through two major alliances: the Hayastan (Armenia) alliance, led by the second Armenian president Robert Kocharyan; and the Pativ Unem alliance, affiliated with ex-president Serzh Sargsyan. Nikol Pashinyan and his Civil Contract party won with 53.91 percent of the vote, while the two other alliances received parliament seats and 21.9 percent and 5.22 percent of votes, respectively. Observers noted that the elections were well managed but featured intense polarization and inflammatory rhetoric. The Vibrant Information Barometer (VIBE) panelists reaffirmed that Armenians have seen an abundance of misinformation, disinformation, and hate speech, with peaks coming at election periods.

The country’s overall score is slightly lower than last year’s score. Because of the extreme realities imposed by the war and the pandemic during 2020, the country’s media had forgiven government constraints on its overall

freedoms and freedom of expression.

However, the local and international media communities have been flabbergasted by recent legislative changes they consider to be restrictive. Such changes include amendments that threaten to curtail media freedom and freedom of expression by significantly increasing fines for defamation. Article 137.1 of the criminal code, added July 30, 2021, allows fines of “grave insult” to public officials and public figures (including journalists) starting from AMD 500,000 (\$1,016) and includes up to a three-month prison sentence, depending on the circumstances. Amendment opponents have expressed concerns that officials might use the law to stifle criticism of the government.

Transparency of media ownership remains an unsettled issue; and media literacy, digital literacy, media hygiene, and digital hygiene are all still at low levels.



Misinformation, mal-information, and hate speech have not seen any dramatic reductions, which is a major reason that panelists scored this principle low. Little has changed regarding adequate training for content producers on how to create ethical, evidence-based, and coherent material. Although some content producers act with ethics and accountability, respect facts, and strive to represent the truth, these professionals are in the minority.

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

According to political analyst and researcher Edgar Vardanyan, the abundance of professional and nonprofessional news sources indicates that Armenian media have adequate infrastructure to produce varied content. However, he said that he does not “see a variety and diversity of content coming from marzes [administrative regions]. Perhaps because outside of [Yerevan], there are certain problems with infrastructure.”

Armenia lacks quality journalism schools for providing practical, relevant, and up-to-date training to working and aspiring journalists. Attempts to adjust the curricula to modern needs are ongoing but are not sufficient. Schools have too little equipment, labs, instructors, and reporters. “When the new grads come to a media outlet, their knowledge is outdated, and they don’t have enough up-to-date practical skills to start working,” said Anahit Baghdasaryan, a reporter for [Mediapoint.am](http://Mediapoint.am) and program officer at Goris Press Club.

International media organizations provide education that is mostly short-term and dependent on donor funding. International media organizations, journalism schools, and content producers organize many training opportunities outside of Armenia. “Today, if you want to learn—and in most cases that’s free of charge—you can find ample opportunities to do so. The only thing is that you need to know [foreign languages],” Baghdasaryan explained.

Shant TV journalist Artyom Yerkanyan observed that training programs might be good and journalists might return equipped with knowledge of quality journalism and ethics, but these improvements do not matter if editors are not looking for quality journalism. “Often, their enhanced qualifications are not in demand at the news outlet they work for [because of the outlet’s political agenda]. When they want to implement the knowledge they just acquired and say, ‘this is the right way to do this or that,’ their editor says, ‘you know what, just keep whatever you’ve learned to yourself and do as I say or leave,’” he said.

“The media field is highly polarized and politicized,” Vardanyan maintained. “Media outlets are mostly [in service] to their politically [and] entrepreneurially affiliated funders/owners and represent their narrow business/political/clan interests, [overriding] all types of ethical standards.”

According to the panelists, media members face hardly any professional ramifications for producing poor quality content. Nelli Babayan, a reporter for [Aravot.am](http://Aravot.am), said that the journalistic community should be the first to condemn unethical behavior, unprofessional reporting, and mal-information, but unfortunately this is not the case in Armenia.

The media’s overall body of content covers a range of topics—more political and social issues but less specialized and thematic reporting. “There is variety, but it is disproportionate; for example, vulnerable groups, various minorities, don’t get a lot of coverage of their issues,” observed Vardanyan. Some journalists constantly try to hold government actors accountable, but their they are often aligned with opposition circles and their priorities do not include professional journalism practices, panelists said.

Overall, regional, national, and international news are available and accessible. However, consumers have difficulty finding national coverage for regional news, aside from border issues and major elections. News from hot spots—Syunik or Gegharkunik marzes, for example—is often polarized, depending on the political affiliation of certain media outlets. “You can watch stories from the same location, produced by two different outlets, and see completely different pictures—neither of which reflect[s] reality [or includes] multiple viewpoints,” explained Baghdasaryan. He also said that any objective information that competent outlets produce is so scarce that it is often lost in the preponderance of low-quality content. Pap Hayrapetyan, editor-in-chief of *Sevan*, said that newspapers previously stationed local correspondents in different towns and marzes, but since many newspapers have disappeared this kind of local coverage has declined.

International news is still underproduced and comes into the country indirectly—mostly through translations from international sources—and is often taken out of context since it is not presented with background or analysis. Suren Deheryan, chair of Journalists for the Future, said that the translations of quality content and important regional and international issues have given way to clickbait—sensational, “disposable” pieces of news for fast consumption.

News content is seldom editorially independent. Gayane Mkrtchyan, a freelance reporter, expressed the belief that media are controlled by forces that dictate their editorial policies. Nvard Hovhannisyan of Visual Innovation Studio said, “Even in cases where there are no political interests the editors have to ‘accommodate,’ there are certain interests [of the news outlet] of which the reporters are aware.” However, Melik Baghdasaryan, the owner of Photolur, had an example of editorial independence: “I have my own political views, but I never impose those on our photographers, and I never interfere with their content.” Babayan added, “My experience is that I have never been told to cover a story

from a certain angle.”

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

Fact-based, well-sourced, and objective information is a rarity rather than the norm. The reason is that media organizations are unwilling to adhere to professional media standards, and instead follow the specific political agendas that their benefactors endorse. Professional and nonprofessional content producers commonly and intentionally create disseminate false or misleading information. According to Babayan, “Misinformation is prevalent, and unfortunately, our media outlets do

not have this culture of fact-checking [or] checking from multiple sources,” However, Vardanyan expressed optimism: “The outlets with [the biggest] audience are hardly likely to spread misinformation.”

With regard to the government creating false or misleading information, Gegham Vardanyan of the Media Initiatives Center commented, “The mere fact that Taron Chakhoyan—whose merit was in posting

pro-government posts on Facebook, which in some cases [was] manipulative [and] in some, false—was appointed deputy chief of the prime minister’s staff is telling.”

The government also commonly spreads manipulated information. According to the fact-checking platform [fip.am](https://fip.am), to show impressive growth in something like an economic index, authorities have often compared 2021 data with data from 2020 and not with the previous “normal” year of 2019, before the global pandemic. In another instance, Pashinyan claimed that more prisoners of war and captives have been returned to Armenia after November 9, 2020, than in any preceding period since Armenian independence. For a true comparison, [Media.am](https://media.am) collected data from the International Committee of the Red Cross’s database on the repatriation of persons detained in Azerbaijan. Analysis of the data revealed that Pashinyan’s statement was not accurate.

**“You can watch stories from the same location, produced by two different outlets, and see completely different pictures—neither of which reflect[s] reality [or includes] multiple viewpoints,” explained Baghdasaryan.**

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

Hate speech was especially prolific during the pre-election period of this year's parliamentary snap elections. Through its Twitter forum, Freedom House expressed concern over the violent rhetoric that Armenian politicians used during the election. Human Rights Defender (Ombudsman) Arman Tatoyan urged all political forces to refrain from any rhetoric related to hatred and violence. Transparency International's interim report on the elections also recorded hate speech during the pre-election campaign, with the Civil Contract party and the Armenia Alliance standing out. Impolite language, swear words, and degrading and humiliating vocabulary have been used extensively, including by persons holding public office or those running for seats in the National Assembly. In addition to threats against political rivals, the Armenia Alliance has repeatedly disseminated hate speech against nongovernmental organizations, labeling them as "proponents of George Soros" and directly threatening to restrict or ban activities that these international institutions have funded.

Mal-information, spread mostly by nonprofessional content producers, has been especially prevalent regarding COVID-19 and particularly vaccination. Conspiracy theories about vaccination have also been proliferating.

Consumers are benefiting from a new meta fact-checking platform implemented by FactCheck Georgia, in cooperation with its Armenian counterpart Media Initiatives Center. Since June 1, 2021, this third-party watchdog has been operating in Armenia and helps to counteract the spread of misinformation on Facebook and Instagram.

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

Generally, media create information in the languages and formats in

which people need. Although seemingly the media expose the majority of citizens to an array of ideologies and perspectives, Vardanyan maintained that the information quality is often poor and thereby does not provide true diversity.

Traditional mainstream media inadequately cover viewpoints of all genders, according to the panelists. "The media has failed [in] its role of a humanitarian profession as an institution that should educate and support people," said Vardanyan. "But there's a small number of media outlets that present the issues of these groups in an appropriate way so as to correct attitudes and break stereotypes." Deheryan observed, "When creating stories on education, health care, and politics, we journalists tend to [call on] male experts [more] than female experts."

**“Misinformation is prevalent, and unfortunately, our media outlets do not have this culture of fact-checking [or] checking from multiple sources,” said Babayan.**

Marginalized groups that are not represented in the mainstream media have alternate platforms for expressing their views. Public Radio of Armenia airs programs in Assyrian, Greek, Kurdish, Russian, Yezidi, and Georgian. However, mainstream media underreport the pressing issues of these groups. As with

years before, gender balance in media outlets remains mostly the same—the media sector has more journalist women, but at the level of media management, men dominate.

### **Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced.**

Broadcast outlets—TV in particular—find coping with advertising migration increasingly difficult. According to the panelists, each year is worse, with streams of funding already limited, and advertising dollars migrating to social networks. Media companies are becoming more and more challenged to earn adequate revenue from the market. The impacts of this growing revenue shortage range from completely shutting down outlets to producing less content to incorporating more and more clickbait-type content.

“Often, high-quality professional content producers cannot survive

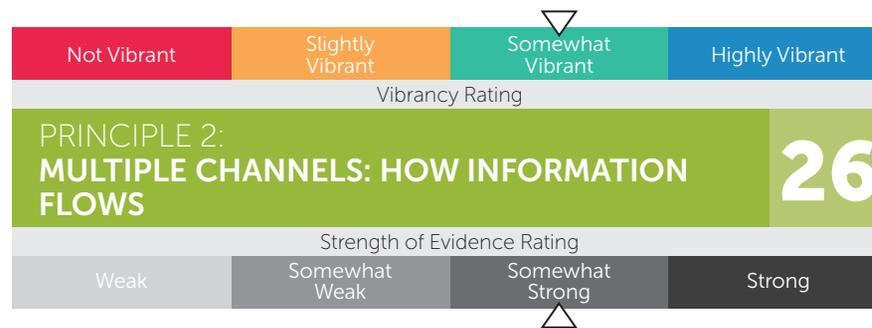
without international donor funding,” Babayan explained. Otherwise, she said, they have to rely on other sources of funding that tend to be politically affiliated.

Babayan also described media outlets that require minimal financial resources to operate. “There are professional content producers—just websites, that employ anywhere from one to four people and they produce content—[where] the same person produces, edits, posts the stories.”

Advertising placement is less politicized. According to the panelists, this aspect of the media market is much better than previously reported.

Government subsidies for regional print media (of around AMD 500,000 or approximately \$1,000) were discontinued in 2019. They, however, were sustained for minority-language print media. The relatively small advertising budgets of the government cannot distort the market dramatically. However, the government advertising that does exist is distributed among top-rated commercial outlets and more recently public television.

Media outlets are trying alternative financing models, but it is tough: while some alternative sources of income (for example, crowdfunding) might work for small online outlets, they are insufficient for resource-heavy broadcast outlets. Subscription-based revenue generation models and or the culture of paying for content is still underdeveloped in Armenia. However, while it can generate some revenue, it cannot support the operations of medium- to large-size outlets. Journalists’ incomes are, at best are stagnant; Newsrooms are cutting back reporting positions, journalists move to other media that can still foot the bills, or they transition to completely unrelated sectors.



Down by two points from last year’s study, this principle has been impacted due to some controversial legislative amendments, most of which have been criticized by local and international media organizations. Armenia has had legal protections for freedom of speech and freedom of the press for decades, since its independence from the Soviet Union.

Armenia has right-to-information laws, and overall they conform to international standards. In many cases, authorities implement laws in a timely and comprehensive manner, but laws are deficient in ways that can affect the quality of produced content.

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

On March 24, the National Assembly adopted “On Making Amendments to the RA [Republic of Armenia] Civil Legislation,” tripling the maximum penalties for insult and defamation. The bill was adopted without regard to the views of the Ministry of Justice and the Human Rights Defender’s Office, and the voiced opposition of civil society organizations (CSOs) and media organizations. The president sent the law to the Constitutional Court for review, but the court ruled in favor of the bill. “[This decision] does not take into consideration the recommendations of the Council of Europe and the requirements of a number of precedent decisions of the European Court of Human Rights [ECHR]. Moreover, this document adopted by the Constitutional Court clearly contradicts several provisions and the general spirit of the November 15, 2011

Decision No. 997 of the same court,” the October 5, 2021, statement from the Freedom of Information Center of Armenia reads.

Following Armenia’s adoption of this article 137.1, Freedom House issued a press release on March 26, 2021, qualifying it as a threat to freedom of the media and freedom of expression. Marc Behrendt of Freedom House wrote: “It is unfortunate that the Armenian government is supporting fines that will stifle free expression and threaten the financial viability of media outlets in the country.” More than 10 established local media organizations issued similar statements.

“At face value, it’s not correct to consider this as restricting freedom of speech,” asserted Vardanyan, “If I speak not as a reporter but as a person who consumes news, I want to understand why media shouldn’t be held responsible for disseminating libel.” However, Vardanyan noted that “criminalizing insult is disturbing, because according to various ECHR verdicts, public officials should be less protected—the threshold of criticism toward them can be higher than toward regular citizens.”

According to article 137.1, seriously insulting a person—cursing or insulting their dignity in an “extremely indecent” way—shall be punishable with a fine up to AMD 500,000 (\$1,016). Serious insult to public figures shall be punishable with a fine up to AMD 1 million (\$2,032). Committing grave insult against the same person regularly shall be punishable with a fine up to AMD 3 million (\$6,097) or by imprisonment for a term of one to three months.

In an October 6, 2021, interview with VOA, Behrendt of Freedom House commented, “This is a big setback. . . A democratic society should have the opportunity to criticize government officials [and] to do so publicly.” On August 2, the opening session of the National Assembly was accompanied by strict restrictions regarding the movement of media representatives. Journalists and photojournalists were not allowed into

the new parliamentary building—among them certain lobbies where reporters would hold interviews and take comments from members of parliament (MPs).

A dozen media advocacy organizations issued a critical joint statement<sup>1</sup> that reads “the above restrictions were imposed in the parliament without any prior discussions and informing the media in advance of the changes in their working conditions. . . We condemn such arbitrariness [as they] are aimed at creating unnecessary obstacles in obstruction of professional journalistic activity.”

Vardanyan had his own, differing perspective: “I don’t think it restricts a journalist specifically working in the National Assembly from doing [their] job.”

**“I think the self-censorship works automatically when a journalist starts working for a certain outlet; [they] know who the owner is [and avoid negative content], even if ownership is not transparent for the public at large,” Babayan observed.**

On August 11, following an intense exchange among MPs, National Assembly Speaker Alen Simonyan ordered a discontinuation of the live broadcast. And on August 24, when heated polemic among MPs turned into a brawl, the security officers forcibly removed media representatives from the parliament, preventing them from continuing to film

the incident. A similar incident was repeated on August 25. Again, media organizations harshly condemned these incidents.

“During the last brawl at the National Assembly, there were no journalists in their designated chambers [they had been taken out by security] to cover what was going on with the MPs elected by the people, and the public could follow the developments only through the MPs’ phones from inside either as live streams or videos posted at a later point. So, is this restriction good or bad? For me it’s bad,” Babayan said.

Self-censorship is evident, for example, when journalists will not produce a negative story about their company’s owners or benefactors. “I think

1 Committee to Protect Freedom of Expression et al., “Statement,” [Khosq.am](https://khosq.am), August 3, 2021, <https://khosq.am/en/2021/08/03/statement-85/>.

the self-censorship works automatically when a journalist starts working for a certain outlet; [they] know who the owner is [and avoid negative content], even if ownership is not transparent for the public at large,” Babayan observed.

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

The panelists agreed that information communication technology infrastructure overall meets most people’s needs. Telecommunication and internet infrastructures extend to all geographic areas—urban as well as rural. According to panelists from the marzes, internet quality, speed, and price are generally acceptable. However, service certainly lags behind that in Yerevan, where consumers have more options in terms of price and quality. Internet governance and regulation of the digital space provides open and equal access to users and content producers.

### **Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for government information.**

Every year, the Freedom of Information Center of Armenia (FOICA) hosts the Golden Key and Rusty Lock awards ceremony to nominate the best and worst institutions based on their openness. According to FOICA President Shushan Doydoyan, the award ceremony is a way to encourage activities that are open to the public and to ensure government transparency and accountability. More than 70 media outlets nominated candidates for the 2021 awards.<sup>2</sup>

In 2021, the Rusty Lock was awarded to the National Assembly (category: a state agency threatening the freedom of information as a result of

developing and adopting new legal regulations restricting the rights of journalists without participatory decision-making processes) and the Ministry of Defense and Yerevan municipality (category: a state agency violating citizens’ right to information).

“Most of the time [agencies] try to provide information in accordance with the provisions of the law; however, [there] are often cases when the answers are not to the point, and you have to go back and forth to get the information you need,” observed Baghdasaryan.

Often, different state bodies violate the right to information access.

Information requests to public officials often get no response, even after months of inquiries, and some public officials refuse to provide information for biographies. Queries to National Assembly deputies regarding the status of legislative initiatives have remained unanswered. Government spokespersons might be untrained for their job, be poor communicators, or be missing the information needed to answer questions. Sometimes these officials disappear when they are needed for their duties.

“Most of the time [agencies] try to provide information in accordance with the provisions of the law; however, [there] are often cases when the answers are not to the point, and you have to go back and forth to get the information you need,” observed Baghdasaryan.

Armenians have tools to help access public governmental policy and decision-making information, but regular citizens rarely use them. Reporters and researchers use the tools more often, while important draft laws deemed essential to regular citizens are widely disseminated through media.

Most panelists agreed that that the trustworthiness of government information has eroded, in particular due to the avalanche of misinformation during 2020, and the effects persist. “Especially after the war, the words of government officials are not perceived as creditworthy,” said Baghdasaryan. Babayan also explained, “When media outlets spread information about border incidents, and government officials [and] spokespeople either are silent or give vague,

<sup>2</sup> Freedom of Information Center of Armenia, “Golden Key and Rusty Lock 2021,” [FOI.com](http://www.foi.am/en/news/item/2104/), October 20, 2021, <http://www.foi.am/en/news/item/2104/>.

blurred answers—or say that it’s false and then, at a later point, this information is proven—it is hard to trust them.”

**Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow.**

Internet service providers treat all communications equally and do not discriminate based on user, content, or source/destination. Media ownership transparency, however, has been a long-standing issue for Armenian media. The owners and directors are mostly known, but the political or business circles with which they are affiliated often remain obscure. “In terms of legislation [on transparency in media ownership that would reveal the owners], Armenia is either moving very slowly or is not moving at all,” Vardanyan observed.

The panelists agreed that over the years, public service media—particularly public television—have significantly improved both in quality and politically. In the past, public television had so-called blacklists, whereby certain figures were supposedly banned from appearing based on their political views, but that has been changing since the 2018 revolution and more varied political voices are heard on public service media.

Public service media provide news and information and informative, educational, and entertaining programming on art, science, music, and sports for different demographic groups. However, stating that it has become nonpartisan and started serving all members of the public would not be completely accurate. It still has a considerable way to go to become free from any political influence, according to the panelists. “If we compare public TV before [the] 2018 [revolution] and today—it’s a lot more ‘public.’ It enables representatives of different political circles to present their viewpoints during prime time without censorship. On the other hand, when something is covered [in the news], the government viewpoint prevails,” Vardanyan maintained.

There are some restrictions on foreign ownership within Armenia’s media sector: under the law on audiovisual media, foreign national shareholdings are limited to less than 50 percent in television and radio companies as well as private multiplexers. People can freely establish

media, just as any other type of commercial companies; however, for broadcast outlets they would need a license, which is within the domain of the Commission on Radio and Television (CTR). This commission awards frequencies and licenses to television and radio stations in Armenia through a competitive process. Previously, half of its eight members were appointed by the president and half were elected by the parliament. At present, the number of members has been reduced to seven, and they are all elected by the parliament, where the “My Step” faction enjoys the majority of seats. The panelists mostly agreed that licensing procedures are applied in a fair and apolitical manner. The private multiplex that would enable all regional outlets to stay on air never became a reality.

**Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.**

Media organizations are heavily influenced by their ownership, and little has changed in this regard over a number of years. Most owners have set up these media outlets solely for serving their political or business needs and interests. News department heads and reporters tend to be chosen for their political or business value rather than on merit.

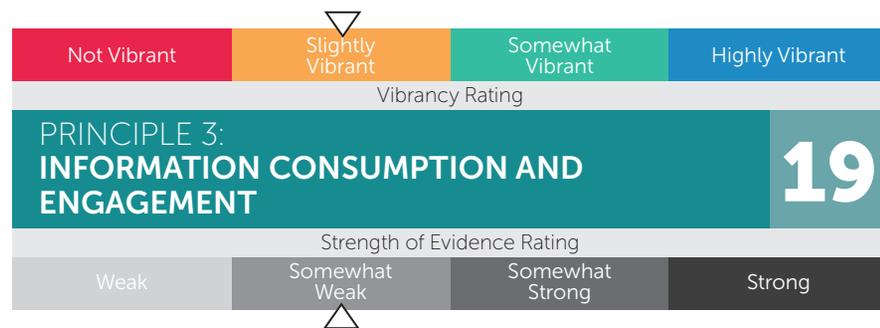
Public television, aside from being funded by the state budget, is again allowed to air commercial advertising. The placements continue despite being abolished by law in 2014 and with opposition from media organizations. These critics consider the ads unacceptable, given how they undermine advertising revenue for private outlets and distort the advertising market. Editorially, panelists expressed concern about the apparent eroding independence of public television. Vardanyan noted that over the course of several months the public television’s news department saw an influx of several former employees of *Haykakan Zhamanak*, which is affiliated with Prime Minister Pashinyan’s family.

The Fact investigation platform, [fip.am](https://fip.am), has identified several such cases,<sup>3</sup> summarizing that public television, and in particular, its “Lurer” (News) daily newscast—covers the incidents that took place in the National Assembly selectively, does not observe the principle of

3 <https://fip.am/16716>

impartiality, and does not provide diversity of opinions. For example, when covering a brawl in the National Assembly between the ruling Civil Contract faction and the opposition, “Lurer” presented the story from an angle favorable to the ruling party. Hovhannisyan stressed that “the director of Public TV is the former head of ‘Public Relations and Information Center’ [state non-commercial organization, or SNCO] operating under the Office of the Prime Minister, which also raises questions.”

Access to the Internet, or subscriptions to international news services, are not lower for state media than for other media. Public media does not have sole access to certain information; however, speed and depth at which public outlets versus commercial outlets get access to government information sources may vary in certain situations in favor of the public outlets.



Overall, media outlets and other professional content producers have access to technology and training in digital security. However, few media members take advantage of these learning opportunities or protections.

The panelists agreed that government leadership seems to advocate media literacy, but specific and systematic steps toward this end are quite sluggish. School instruction only rarely includes civics or media and information literacy; these topics are mostly covered in optional and limited training programs. The population at large has very minimal digital and data literacy skills. Often media consumers have little idea of how digital technology works, or how to keep themselves digitally secure.

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

In Babayan’s view, media professionals have opportunities to use digital security resources to protect themselves. “Of course, content producers [and] journalists have access to digital security training and tools, but the question is: how intensively are they looking for these [trainings and tools], where are they looking for these, and are they finding them or not. We’re in the age of the internet. You can look up and find everything there—read, learn, acquire new skills and tools,” she said.

[Cyberhub.am](http://Cyberhub.am) is one organization that provides information technology support and training to journalists and independent media, human rights defenders, activists, and CSOs. This organization also serves as a computer emergency response team by collecting, analyzing, and (where appropriate) anonymously sharing incident data and indicators with the global threat intelligence community.

“It would be good to have such [digital security] experts on staff on an ongoing basis because it is something that needs constant attention and vigilance,” said Deheryan, “In general, we journalists are shamefully inconsistent—even in the process of searching for information we can catch a [computer] ‘virus.’ It’s a real problem, and one of the [reasons] is we don’t allocate budgets for this purpose, [and] we consider it redundant, whereas it should be among the priorities.” Overall, legal protections are enforced in a way that does not impinge on personal freedoms and in a way that does not prevent the release of public information.

Media outlets’ digital hygiene practices leave much to be desired and are far from being strong. Most outlets have learned how to cope with distributed denial of service (DDOS) attacks.

Individuals can freely access technology-based tools that help protect their privacy and security; however, the majority of them do not have any idea about these tools and very few use them. The population has minimal basic digital and data literacy skills, including the basics of how

digital technology works and how to keep themselves digitally secure. Only the very savvy portion of the population is aware of the algorithms driving social media, the mechanics of advertisement targeting, and other ways in which personal information is utilized to target digital users.

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

Media organizations and CSOs provide much of Armenia's media literacy training and education. One of the most active in this field is the Media Initiatives Center (MIC). MIC's *Media Literacy Teacher's Guide* teaches young people how the media work, how to orient oneself in current information flows, and how to critically consume media. There are a few foreign-donor initiatives that work on media literacy for adults to help combat the effects of disinformation in Armenia. Since 2017, MIC has also organized Media Literacy Week in Armenia, an annual event led by UNESCO. Schools hold open lessons on media literacy; watch videos and films; and organize discussions, educational games, and meetings with journalists and editors. MIC also cooperates with educational organizations, libraries, and museums to spread media literacy skills and to help develop educational programs. Some examples of successful cooperation are the Media Literacy regional branches of the Children of Armenia Foundation, along with World Vision Armenia's and Infotun's regional programs with local partners.

Consumers seldom use tools or websites for fact-checking, debunking, or exposing disinformation. Most people do not even know these tools exist, according to the panelists. Individuals are generally unable to discern high-quality news and information from poor-quality news and information. Babayan described her experience with news consumers.

“When we see what type of news sources are often cited by colleagues [and] friends, by the convenience-store sales assistants, in social networks, I realize that people are more prone to follow the fake [or low quality] sources, perhaps because it's lighter [information to consume],” she said.

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

There are no negative consequences for exercising freedom of speech and right to information. The platforms for public debate--such as town halls, academic discussions about on the government or its policies, or call-in shows--are underutilized and are not part of Armenian culture yet.

Journalists and CSOs are mainly those who use their rights to information, whereas the general population seldom do so by their own initiative. According to the panelists, few people know about their

**“When we see what type of news sources are often cited by colleagues [and] friends, by the convenience-store sales assistants, in social networks, I realize that people are more prone to follow the fake [or low quality] sources, perhaps because it's lighter [information to consume],” Babayan said.**

rights and how to exercise them, and public information authorities often violate these rights. From January to September 2021, the Committee to Protect Freedom of Expression recorded 67 violations of the right to receive information.

Most public debate takes place on Facebook. For example, the Facebook briefing by [Azatutyun.am](https://www.facebook.com/Azatutyun.am), in which anyone can send a question for the host to read to the guest speaker, is similar to a call-in show. However, many Facebook forums are full of hate speech, mal-information, and disinformation.

Regular citizens rarely turn to ombudsmen when they come across misinformation, mal-information, or hate speech. Consumers are more likely to notify platform moderators about such content. But according to Babayan, neither action is common, given that many consumers do not know about reporting mechanisms or are aware that problems exist.

“Very many people cannot even identify the hate speech, let alone report it,” she said.

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

The main tools most media and content producers use to collect quantitative (and sometimes even qualitative) data are Google analytics data, Facebook views, “likes,” “shares,” comments, and YouTube views and comments. These are among the only tools used by most media outlets to understand the size, access, habits, and scope of their audience or market. Community events are less of a culture currently. Journalistic media, content producers, and civil society organizations collaborate and network together for productive information sharing, but it is yet not a common practice for the media at large.

Media outlets rarely hire third-party research organizations to conduct qualitative and quantitative research for their decision making or to understand their potential audience’s needs and interests. This absence of data has persisted for decades, partly due to the prohibitive costs for such research and partly because many outlets follow their own agendas and have no use for audience data. Those who do need to know their audiences’ interests mostly rely on Google Analytics and Facebook data metrics.

Babayan explained her outlet’s responses to consumer input. “We receive letters from readers through Facebook where they share their problems and ask [us] to cover those. [When] appropriate we do so, [and when] not, we direct them to the appropriate places where they can turn to for their problems. This way, we keep the feedback with our audience.”

Yerkanyan commented on his evaluation of tracking data. “I also check the views of the posts with my stories to keep track of the topics which are in higher demand,” he said. “But we should be careful with this, because sometimes the stories with 500,000 views I consider [to be] of less importance and value than those with higher value but garnering, say, 50,000 [views].”

“It would be good to have such [digital security] experts on staff on an ongoing basis because it is something that needs constant attention and vigilance,” said Deheryan, “In general, we journalists are shamefully inconsistent—even in the process of searching for information we can catch a [computer] ‘virus.’”

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

The panelists generally agreed that Armenia does not have community media, as classically defined, and Armenian law makes no special provisions for it. While this type of media is a minimal part of the media sphere, there are local independent, commercial newspapers and radio stations that, according to some panelists, fulfill the

functions of community media outlets.



As described earlier, Armenia does have nonpartisan news and information sources, but they are rare, and often their audiences are limited. People’s views on political or social issues are shaped more by misinformation rather than by quality information, according to the

panelists. Election periods are especially rife with misinformation, hate speech, insults, and threats.

Citizens rarely follow fact-based health and safety recommendations. More commonly, people act in ways detrimental to their health due to misinformation. One such example is the failed COVID-19 vaccination campaign.

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

Vardanyan commented on nonpartisan news sources and the belief that they must have small audiences. “It’s not like these news sources do not exist,” he said. “For example, do we consider [Azatutyun.am](#) as such? It has a large audience, and that’s a fact proven by different research studies. It hasn’t been ‘caught’ spreading explicit misinformation [and] mal-information, so in this case, it’s safe to say that we do have such a radio/TV organization which also enjoys large audience.”

According to the panelists, most consumers do not usually read or view multiple types of media with varied viewpoints. Rather, they stick to those that resonate with already-established beliefs and political views.

Open and constructive discussions informed by quality news and information are quite rare, and are more commonly based on misinformation and mal-information.

Information exchange through debate and discussion is mostly on Facebook. A less used but more aggressive and vulgar discussion can be found in YouTube comments. Comment sections for web-based media are rarely used for debates, with readers instead using the comment sections for the same article on Facebook. Often these discussions, too, deviate from civilized discourse; and as usual, these debates exacerbate the more intense election periods.

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

People are more prone to believe all types of conspiracy theories, misinformation, and mal-information than scientific data. In particular, this tendency has resulted in low vaccination numbers and higher COVID-19 cases and, unfortunately, higher COVID-19 death rates. “Based on what we have already mentioned earlier—that there are outlets with large audiences which provide reliable, quality information free of misinformation—we can state that citizens use quality information for their decision making; on the other hand, the behavior of citizens regarding COVID-19, the low vaccination numbers, [and] their belief in conspiracy theories may indicate that perhaps a big number of people—we cannot say how big—in fact have been guided by mis- and mal-information,” said Vardanyan.

Babayan suggested that this problem is also due to government communication deficiencies, as officials do not actively respond to misinformation. “Mal-information producers probably don’t even sleep at night, and while we [journalists] or the government [are] sleeping peacefully, they are producing mal-information, and when we open our eyes in the morning we see a new piece of mal-information which has already managed to garner hundreds of thousands of views.”

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

CSOs are instrumental in working to reduce the spread of misinformation or mal-information and in shaping the overall landscape of civil liberties. Organizations rely on quality news and information when describing their objectives. They share quality information with the public, and they do not disseminate misinformation or mal-information. In fact, many CSOs actively reduce the spread of misinformation by providing fact-checking tools and resources. Vardanyan described CSO’s efforts and reach. “[Media.am](#), [Boon.tv](#), the Union of Informed Citizens, [Ampop.am](#), and a number of other CSOs are doing this on a daily basis. But unfortunately, this doesn’t influence very large audiences; these have limited coverage and influence on select audiences.”

Media outlets engage with CSOs to cover socially important issues. Civic participation in key discussions—such as policy formation and legislative change—is very instrumental. But as detailed earlier, many such initiatives get minimal integration, or often their recommendations are left out from legislative changes or decision making. Also, CSOs are increasingly not consulted or are even ignored before policy changes are enacted.

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

In August – October 2021, the government introduced restrictions for unvaccinated employees. These staff had to take polymerase chain reaction tests every two weeks and present negative certificates to prove that they could safely report to work. However, the panelists said that many doubted the effectiveness, intentions, and goals of this measure, citing the crowded lines in front of testing centers that favored conditions for spreading the virus.

Moreover, laboratories have become overloaded and backlogged, which defeats the purpose of taking timely tests. Test results were being provided days later, but employees still had to report to work.

The public also resisted the push for test waivers for vaccinated citizens. Although less likely, even the fully vaccinated run the risk of contracting and spreading the virus. Not to mention the issue of those with only the first dose being exempt from the test—these individuals could present the corresponding negative certificate. For these reasons, many citizens viewed the waivers as a formality, as an opportunity for more fines, and as a way for test centers to generate unprecedented proceeds.

The distrust was also fueled by the media’s dissemination of a photograph and video featuring the Armenian president at a crowded reception. Almost none of the attendees were wearing a mask in the closed venue, not even the health minister herself—who days before, amid rising COVID-19 numbers, stressed the importance of wearing masks in confined spaces. In response to this media reproach, the government issued a statement explaining that this was a reception, and that the government has no regulation requiring people to wear masks at that type of gathering. However, the backlash and damage to the public trust was irreparable.

Deheryan lamented, “They [the government] promote vaccination through various information channels [and] awareness programs, but on the other hand, through their public events they demonstrate that the rules that are mandatory for public are not mandatory for members of the government. The fact that they called it a ‘reception’ to legitimize

not wearing masks is manipulation in itself. Let’s organize receptions in the subway, too, and waive the requirement for the passengers. . . Even if they [the authorities] don’t lie, they don’t work in a coordinated manner [so] as to make sure what they say isn’t in contradiction with what they do.”

There are mechanisms in place for government actors to engage with civil society and media, ad-hoc press-conferences, Q&As after government meetings, and so on. Political discourse or debate sometimes includes reference to evidence and facts. However, it is based on mis- and mal-information--sometimes even fake, unverified news—and hearsay as well

as speculation and accusation. Government actors often fail to explain their decisions in a convincing way; sometimes, however, there is little or no explanation at all.

“**Mal-information producers probably don’t even sleep at night, and while we [journalists] or the government [are] sleeping peacefully, they are producing mal-information, and when we open our eyes in the morning we see a new piece of mal-information which has already managed to garner hundreds of thousands of views,” suggested Babayan.**

## Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic rights.

In late 2021, more than 18 CSOs issued a rebuking statement on the violation of citizens' rights to peaceful assembly. The statement was regarding opposition to construction in the area adjacent to the Institute of Physics (the so-called "Fizgorodok"). Residents of the neighborhood had been fighting for months against the allegedly illegal construction in the green area, which would have infringed on their right to live in a healthy living environment. According to area residents and their lawyer, the land was illegally privatized in 2005. It was later resold several times, delaying the planned construction. On July 29, 2021, the current owner received a construction permit from the municipality of Yerevan and immediately started construction of a high-rise building. Adults and children from the neighborhood area came out to protest through a peaceful gathering, trying to draw the attention of the Yerevan municipal government.

According to the statement, on August 20 and 21, 2021, special police units used disproportionate force against citizens, seriously injuring children and elderly people—two of whom were taken to hospital. The police also violated the rights of the detained citizens. Some protesters were forcibly taken to a police station using disproportionate measures and illegal procedures, and a 19-year-old man was beaten in a police precinct. The authorities have initiated several criminal cases against these citizens. "We strongly condemn the brutal behavior and arbitrariness of the [Republic of Armenia] police [whose] its mission should have been to prevent illegalities and protect public order. The ruling political force continues to erode the faith and trust of the people day by day [and] is fraught with highly undesirable consequences," the CSO statement says.<sup>4</sup>

4 "Մի շարք ՀԿ-ների պահանջում են վերանայել «Ֆիզգորոդոկ»-ում հողամասի սեփականաշնորհման և շինթույլտվության որոշումը," [Hetq.am](https://hetq.am/hy/article/134860), August 23, 2021, <https://hetq.am/hy/article/134860>.

Deheryan lamented, "They [the government] promote vaccination through various information channels [and] awareness programs, but on the other hand, through their public events they demonstrate that the rules that are mandatory for public are not mandatory for members of the government."

On November 11, 2021, the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) issued its findings<sup>5</sup> on Armenia. The committee's experts expressed concern about undue legal restrictions on the freedom of peaceful assembly, unjustifiable police interference in peaceful demonstrations, and arbitrary and prolonged detention of demonstrators. They recommended that Armenia reduce police presence at demonstrations and investigate all allegations of excessive use of force, arbitrary arrest, and arbitrary detention by state agents during any protests. The UNHRC also called on Armenia to ensure that domestic laws on the use of force are in full compliance with the UN Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials and the UN Guidance on the Use of Less-Lethal Weapons in Law Enforcement.

"We haven't had clear official responses of the government to such incidents—for example, someone [representing government] could stand up and say that according to this or that article of law, [the] police [were] allowed to apply force," Babayan said. Vardanyan also observed, "The government doesn't provide [any] adequate explanation of its stance on incidents causing public outcry."

The panelists gave an example of media attempting to expose corruption. When journalists have questioned Simonyan, the speaker of the National Assembly, he has said<sup>6</sup> that he does not see any conflict in the fact that companies led by his brother won asphaltting tenders. Simonyan clarified that his brother is not the owner but is the director. The company recently won two government contracts for rural road construction worth a combined \$1.4 million, raising suspicions of a

5 UN Human Rights Council, "UN Human Rights Committee Issues Findings on Germany, Ukraine, Armenia and Botswana," news release, November 11, 2021, <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=27798&LangID=E>.

6 Arshaluys Barseghyan, "Corruption, Nepotism and Alen Simonyan's Definition," [Media.am](https://media.am/en/verified/2021/10/13/30074/), October 13, 2021, <https://media.am/en/verified/2021/10/13/30074/>.

conflict of interest in addition to corruption. Deputy Prime Minister Suren Papikian assured Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's Armenian Service that this was the result of transparent and fair tenders, rather than government connections.<sup>7</sup> Simonyan has often referred to such inquiries as "yellow press."

## LIST OF PANEL PARTICIPANTS

**Nelli Babayan**, reporter, [Aravot.am](https://aravot.am), Yerevan

**Anahit Baghdasaryan**, reporter, [mediapoint.am](https://mediapoint.am); program officer, *Goris Press Club*, Goris

**Melik Baghdasaryan**, owner, *Photolur*, Yerevan

**Suren Deheryan**, chair, *Journalists for the Future*, Yerevan

**Pap Hayrapetyan**, editor-in-chief, *Sevan*, Sevan

**Nvard Hovhannisyan**, cofounder, *Visual Innovation Studio*, Yerevan

**Gayane Mkrtchyan**, reporter, *Jam-news.am*, *lwpr.net*, Yerevan

**Anahit Nahapetyan**, owner and editor-in-chief, *Artiknews.com*, Artik

**Edgar Vardanyan**, political analyst and researcher, Yerevan

**Gegham Vardanyan**, editor, [media.am](https://media.am), *Media Initiatives Center*, Yerevan

**Artyom Yerkanyan**, journalist, *Shant TV*, Yerevan

## MODERATOR AND AUTHOR

**Artashes Parsadanyan**, independent media consultant, Yerevan

Copyright © 2022 by IREX

**Notice of Rights:** Permission is granted to display, copy, and distribute VIBE in whole or in part, provided that: (a) the materials are used with the acknowledgment "The Vibrant Information Barometer (VIBE) is a product of IREX with funding from USAID."; (b) VIBE is used solely for personal, noncommercial, or informational use; and (c) no modifications of VIBE are made.

This study is made possible by the support of the American People through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The opinions expressed herein are those of the panelists and other project researchers and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID, the United States Government, or IREX.

<sup>7</sup> Naira Nalbandian, "More Questions Arise About Firms Run by Armenian Speaker's Brother," [Azatutyun.am](https://www.azatutyun.am/a/31512088.html), October 15, 2021, <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/31512088.html>.

# AZERBAIJAN

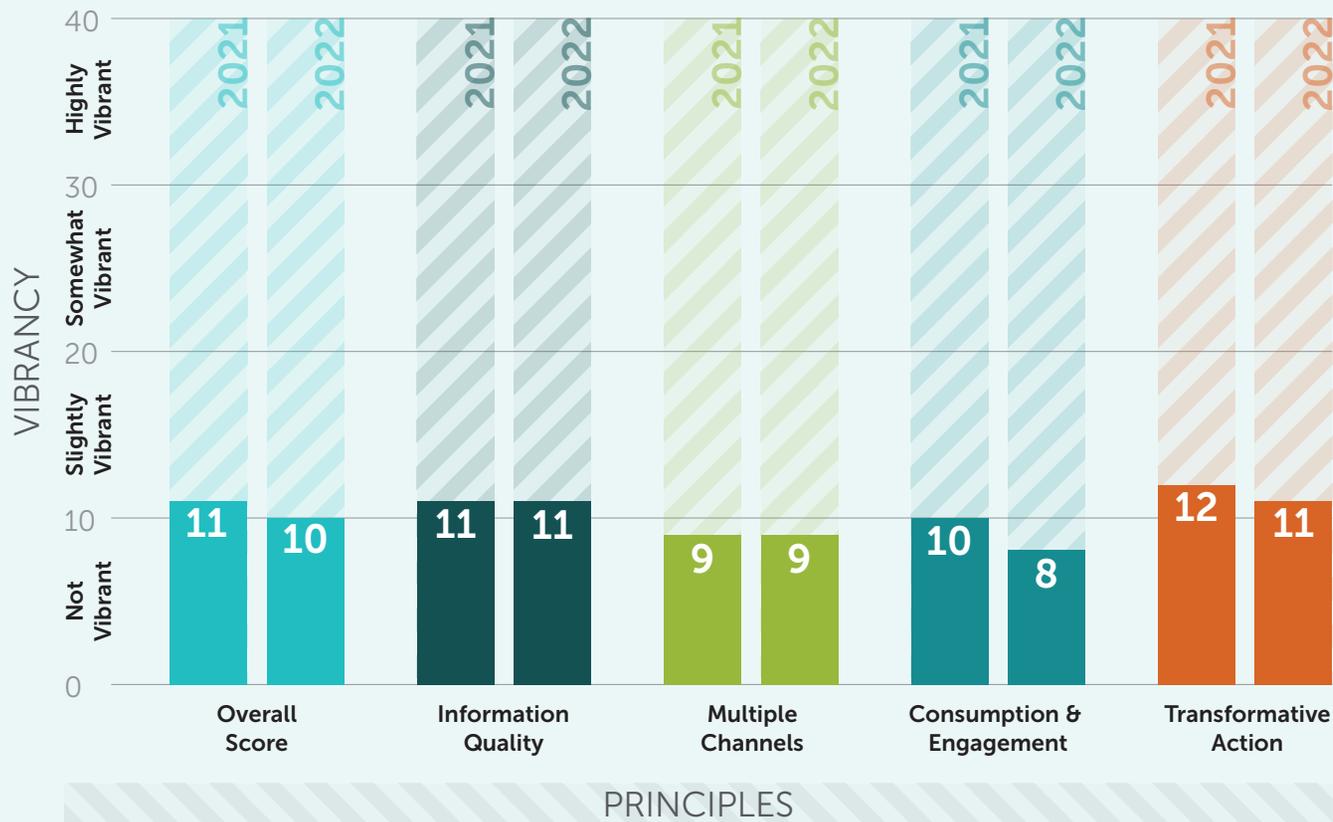
## Vibrant Information Barometer

2 0 2 2



Photo: Fargana Novruzova





**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**10**

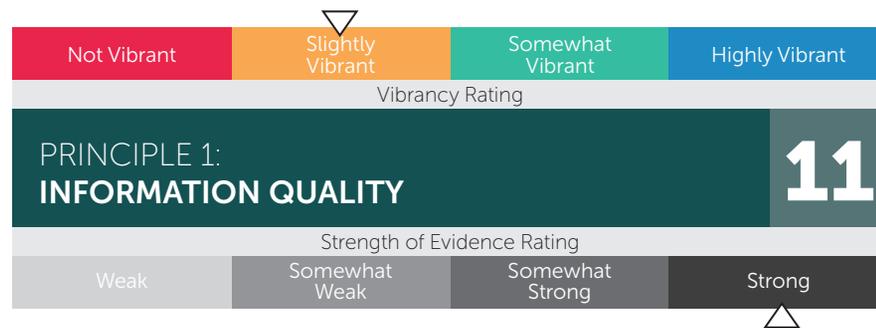
In 2021, Azerbaijan saw ad-hoc persecution of independent media by law enforcement agencies and courts; pandemic-related restrictions; the [revelation](#) that the Azerbaijani government has used “Pegasus,” spyware developed by an Israeli company, NSO Group, to breach the personal information of at least 80 Azerbaijani journalists and civil society leaders; military confrontations at the Armenian-Azerbaijani border; and the introduction of a repressive new media law.

Overall, when discussing media in Azerbaijan, VIBE panelists had to distinguish between two distinct media dichotomies—small independent media—which includes a few websites in the country and few resources outside of it—and mainstream media inside the country, which includes television, radio, print, and online. The panelists agreed that even though independent media are small and constantly need capacity-building for new incoming staff and additional resources to survive, they still sufficiently rival government-ruled media, which have extensive resources, thanks to a rentier state run by a corrupt government.

The government has not fundamentally changed over the years and maintains a strong grip on the media, particularly in terms of coverage. This grasp extends to the issuance of frequencies and licenses for television and radio and results in repressive measures to punish independent outlets that use the Internet for broadcast. The government attempts to control independent media, if not by buying them out or shutting them down, then through legislating restrictive measures. Within a

matter of weeks in December 2021 and January 2022, it introduced a new law on media that aims to control independent online broadcast outlets and journalists by creating a requirement for the nationwide registry of journalists that would further prevent them from accessing information or attending official events. As in previous years, officials continue to try to hide the truth about major events in the country from independent media or manipulate the information in the government’s favor. A few fact-checking organizations attempt to call out this behavior, but they, too, have limited resources. Some journalists or media still attempt to sue the government for not providing them with information, but courts are not independent and do not protect small, free media. Moreover, in fear of persecution, many media outlets self-censor. Independent media still cannot access or benefit from advertising due to official laws and unofficial prohibitions.

Independent civil society organizations have not fully recovered from the persecution of 2013 and subsequent years in order to be able to support or defend independent media. Independent media try to cover sensitive issues, such as LGBTQI topics and other small/minority community challenges, but the resources are far fewer than normal and political repressions are always present. Feminist groups are the only ones that have organized themselves and have online community media, but they have not been particularly successful in preventing daily crimes against women based on “honor killing” and other domestic violence cases.



The panelists unanimously agreed the small number of independent media outlets, which exist entirely online, are the only ones producing quality, ethical content nationwide. They are also the only ones holding officials accountable, both in pursuit of information access and correcting misinformation. Radio, television, and print media remain staunchly nationalist and are dominated by pro-government or government media. They serve the interest of the ruling elites, labeling critics as “foreign agents” who are financed by Western governments and donors. This type of biased media is not limited to traditional media; some independent online media, including YouTube bloggers, also possess nationalist biased views. Experts question whether this issue can be alleviated by capacity-building. While Russia and Iran and their respective proxy media outlets are the main ones to create and disseminate mal-information, their stances do not seem to dominate Azerbaijani society, although the effects of this propaganda have not been measured by independent pollsters and researchers.

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

No major progress regarding infrastructure took place in 2021. Newspaper distribution issues remain unsolved; the only newspapers available in government-controlled kiosks are sports publications, crossword puzzles, or papers such as *Yeni Musavat*, *525-ci qazet*, and *Şərq* (East), which all receive some form of financing from state authorities.

Although some universities teach journalism as part of their curriculum,

the quality is lacking. Those who want to enhance their skills go to private pro-bono courses organized by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). One panelist mentioned observing young journalists in the provinces teaching each other the skills they have. The panelist herself had trained these journalists for five years, demonstrating that generational skill-sharing among independent journalists still exists. The continued existence of small independent media is especially noteworthy given that the state media offer high-tech equipment, better pay, and job stability. The same independent group of journalists take freelance jobs with international media, which helps to pass trustworthy and professional information about Azerbaijan to the outside world. But it also gives the impression, one panelist said, that the same group of people write and read about the problems without any action or changes taking place. Journalists are not able to hold government actors accountable by fairly reporting on their words and actions, and, in fact, journalists get charged for writing the truth. For example, journalist Sakhavat Mammad, who [wrote](#) about corruption in the army and draftee process, was detained and fined for his article. This happened when the newly introduced draft law on media was still at its reading in parliament, meaning the authorities started to implement the law before it was ratified.

There are not enough tools in place to help media outlets create ethical content based on facts. Whether the owners or editors of outlets want such tools is also a question, one panelist said; it remains unknown whether the owners and editors feel they have a responsibility for ethical, fact-based coverage. The selection of local, national, or international news coverage is not handled independently by owners or editors. One panelist thinks that, compared with 2000-2014, content quality has gone down. In 2014, as part of its efforts in political oppression and limiting coverage of injustices, the government drove out projects funded by international donors, including training for journalists.

Professional ramifications that could prevent unethical content are nonexistent. One panelist cited the opening of the “Park of Trophies” in downtown Baku in 2021. The park displays war trophies and wax figures from the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War. Although it was criticized by international journalists and observers, the panelists observed

that Azerbaijani journalists did not question this display but often parroted the authorities' rhetoric. National media at large (except a few independent ones) did not cover the voices of the activists who denounced the display of fallen Armenian soldiers' helmets and caricature mannequins at this exhibition, and many applauded its opening. The government removed these displays only after it was clear a verdict from the International Criminal Court at The Hague is coming.

Public television, despite its name, does not air genuine political debates or discussions about major corruption cases. Lider, an oligarchic television channel notorious for libel and blackmail, dissolved in 2021 after 20 years on air. However, this channel and ANS, another private channel shut down in 2016, were known to create original content, albeit mostly in the nonpolitical sphere. There is some diversity and "freedom" in nonsensitive entertainment programs. Provincial television stations have been eaten by ARB, another oligarchic station. Because laws on ownership have changed in recent years, ownership is more secretive and finding out the true owners of megacorporations is increasingly difficult. As a result, various television "brands" broadcast the same, centrally developed content. All of them seem disconnected from advertisers and look to be surviving only on shady resources. Citizens hear or watch from media outlets established or headquartered abroad who have a crew and broadcast in Azerbaijan. But their numbers and coverage are limited.

However, not all online television stations are polarized, and there are professional ones among them, such as Toplum TV. Its programs attempt to fill in the gaps of traditional media coverage, reporting on daily events, and it even garners interviews from celebrities who generally say no to online media. Other bloggers also cover daily events. Some diaspora media, such as Azad Söz and Düz danışaq, devoted time to cover the torture of military personnel accused in 2017 of conspiring with Armenian secret services, called the "Terter case." Eleven servicemen died as a result of this torture. Online channels, such as Yeni Musavat, invite MPs that independent activists would call "trolls"

**“ The continued existence of small independent media is especially noteworthy given that the state media offer high-tech equipment, better pay, and job stability.**

to its studio, while Xural mostly invites retired opposition politicians who are almost forgotten. The BBC Azeri service has made noticeable progress in its content creation, compared with the previous year, one panelist said. Its lead anchor, Seadet Akifgizi, held a "Hard Talk"-style [interview](#) with a state official on the oppressive draft media law, one of the rare cases in which the BBC used its leverage to approach officials and secure an interview in the public's interest. Still, according to Alexa, the list of [online resources](#) accessed are, after such websites as Google, Facebook, YouTube, and Wikipedia, predominantly local entertainment and car/commodity sales outlets.

Official media and the media under government control are, in principle, tools of agitation, and their news programs are full of propaganda. There are a few independent media outlets, such as Turan Information Agency, that can provide quality, professional content to their audiences.

Print media cannot publish material upsetting to authorities, and electronic media are closely watched. Access to information by independent journalists remains very limited. Therefore, creating quality content is extremely difficult for them. The newly adopted media law would make it even more difficult, as it brings more limitations than freedoms. Online media are relatively free in creating quality content, but if that content falls out of the government's favor, those with larger audiences get punished.

Content produced by provincial media is rampant with silence and "ordered" material from authorities and hierarchical media. "There's almost a new channel on YouTube every day, mostly established and produced in Baku," a panelist said, "But the hosts of these channels are the people who don't know journalism." The shows look like debates, but the propaganda is noticeable. Healthy competition and opportunities created for professionals could help eradicate this problem.

Authorities have not created significant problems for social media; however, it is constantly kept under control through various methods,

such as “troll factories,” the spread of disinformation via WhatsApp, etc. Nevertheless, social media remains a safer option for people to get truthful news than national or local electronic media.

According to the new law, adopted on December 14, 2021, and signed by the president in early 2022, digital and broadcast media and their journalists must be recorded at a common registry and receive a special ID—literally meaning the end of “independent media” and “independent journalist” in Azerbaijan, one panelist said.

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

Currently, media in Azerbaijan can be divided into three branches, one panelist said: government media; independent, but unprofessional, media; and independent and professional media. Government media present only one-sided news; objective and factual newsmaking is not observed. Unprofessional independent media, mostly online and on YouTube, try to produce and air accurate information but can, and do, air false and misleading information both intentionally and unintentionally. The third group of independent and professional media, although the minority, produce and air well-sourced and fact-based information. Unfortunately, even when independent journalists identify illegal government activities, officials are never held accountable by the legal system.

The outcome of the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War (September-November 2020) significantly strengthened the executive power’s propaganda machine. One panelist said that it has become extremely difficult for independent media to attract an audience. Using tools like CrowdTangle, independent media’s reach is measured to be only about 3 percent. Conversely, the pro-government [BakuWS](#) and [Belə-belə işlər](#) (which is said to be linked to the first vice president) post new content daily and almost hourly and boast a high number of visits (sometimes tens of thousands). Independent media outlets are able to get high viewership only on particularly noteworthy days—for example, when there is a protest or turbulence in society due to judicial injustice.

Another panelist asked if it is too hard to judge whether the government creates or disseminates false or misleading information. “Yes and no,” the panelist said, “It is very manipulative.”

The majority of media outlets simply publish or air press releases and statements from the executive government as-is, without any right to change, comment, or question, one panelist said. Outlets ignore the presumption of innocence, and suspects detained for even minor administrative code violations are photographed and/or filmed and shown on prime-time news as criminals; they are forced to apologize to the public, which is then aired on these news outlets. A Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Azeri service investigation revealed that a person named Rovshan Hajiyev, presented as a drug lord by the Ministry of Interior “news,” was acquitted by a local court, and the Ministry never bothered to apologize.

Mainstream news media, which are controlled entirely by the authorities, carefully choose what to air or publish each day based on their political agenda. For example, on June 4, two journalists from state-owned companies, Siraj Abishov of AzTV and Maharram Ibrahimov of Azertag, tragically died in the Kalbajar district when their truck ran onto an anti-tank land mine. Although this news should have been the main story on both outlets, which are two prominent mainstream outlets, it was presented only as ordinary news, one story among many for that day. On the first day, outlets professionally covered the tragedy, not jumping to conclusions before an initial investigation could be completed. But the following day, the outlets accused Armenians of planting the mine without proof of an investigation or citing sources for the information.

On November 30, a military helicopter with the State Border Control (SBC) crashed, killing 14 of the 16 high-ranking officers on board. Right after the tragedy, SBC’s chief, Elchin Guliyev, in a rare appearance given his rank and local political traditions, [came in front of television cameras and microphones and answered](#) questions from journalists, telling them that the cause of the crash was weather conditions and excluding the possibility of external man-made factors. In a way, this served to discourage journalists from investigating further. Politician and opposition party leader Ali Aliyev was arrested after participating in an

interview with a major [YouTube channel host, Sevinj Osmangizi](#); Aliyev said Russia may have had a hand in this crash and that it was impossible for the two to survive given the scale of the crash.

Although the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in senior government officials and spokespersons coming forward to answer questions from journalists and media, as occurs in the West, they did not necessarily provide trustworthy information. Independent media outlets and fact-checkers [occasionally](#) expose the lies and exaggerations in statistics or official statements.

There were no cases when government officials were held responsible for lies, but there were cases when journalists were persecuted for seeking the truth, such as in the case of Sakhavat Mammad. The Prosecutor General's office interrogated Mammad, and then a local court fined him AZN 500 (about \$300) for writing a series of articles on corruption in the army. [FaktYoxla.info](#) (established by Azeri journalists abroad) remains the only major outlet solely dedicated to checking the truthfulness of government servants' statements; however, there have been no instances of measures taken against these officials after the outlet exposed their deceptions. One panelist thinks many of them have limited access to information due to the unofficial bans and sometimes censor themselves on sensitive topics to protect their journalists and sources in the country. With the new repressive media law in place, their professional lives might be further worsened. As one panelist said, "The new media law grants journalists free access to museums, but not to archives." In the meantime, the government has created its own "fact-checking" platform, [FaktYoxla.az](#), and "is pushing its own propaganda and creating confusion," another panelist noted.

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

The professional independent media do not produce mal-information or hate speech. These media often publish balanced materials about those

who practice hate speech, thus contributing to a "cancel culture" of those individuals. On certain topics, social media users do not even wait for professional media reports about hate speech; they start lynching campaigns independently and achieve results. This was demonstrated in a [recent case involving celebrity PanTural](#), who in a short video called on men to rape women who "dress inappropriately." As a result of both pressure from the general public and involvement from law-enforcement agencies, PanTural was forced to publicly apologize.

## **For at least 20 years, businesses have been instructed to not advertise with media that criticize the government.**

Panelists observed that Sputnik, Russia's state-owned news agency, has a local website that periodically publishes anti-Western propaganda in both Azerbaijani and Russian. Other than this site, most panelists said they have not seen many

incidents of harmful content from foreign governments. Cases of disinformation are not rampant. Misinformation remains the main issue, as well as false data and statistics. Many panelists also said that after the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War, most media, with the exception of a few professional, independent, or diaspora outlets, promoted anti-Armenian rhetoric. The same negative rhetoric exists against the LGBTQ community. One former journalist and, at the time, the spokesman for the State Maritime Agency, Tural Museyibov wrote a homophobic Facebook comment about Shaig Kalbiyev, a member of the LGBTQ community who was killed during the Nagorno-Karabakh War. [Anews.az](#) published an editorial about the spokesman without condemning his hate speech, and the Ministry of Digital Development sent a warning and ordered the piece be removed, citing the Law on Information Article 13 on hate speech, which the media outlet obeyed. Otherwise, the site could have been blocked. This was a rare case when hate speech was removed from a media outlet.

There are still cases when hate speech is orchestrated by the using multiple media outlets and celebrities, observed in almost synchronized headlines and social media posts with the same disinformation and hate speech. These posts also bash the government's critics and opposition leaders. The same method was used during the 2020 war to disparage Armenia and Armenians. A new civil society community that emerged

during the war, called “nowarçu” (from “No to War”), also became the target of this orchestrated process.

The law in Azerbaijan, including in the criminal code, prohibits hate speech based on religion and ethnicity, but that law is not applied to those who engage in hate speech on orders from authorities. Additionally, this law does not mention LGBTQ or any other social group, which is what law-enforcement agencies told feminist leader Gulnara Mehdiyeva when she filed a protest regarding the [hate speech](#) against the LGBTQ community from blogger Sevinj Huseynova. One of the victims she targeted, a fellow journalist named Afaz Hafizli, was killed in March 2022 by his relative, likely based on Huseynova’s hate speech. The government took no legal action against Huseynova. The feminist movement itself is small but strong and subsequently attracts hate speech from various users.

LGBTQ is a taboo topic for mainstream Azerbaijani media. They rarely develop an independent story, but if a law-enforcement agency makes a statement, they will publish it without any change. Mainstream media are also hesitant to publish any news about the international criticism against Azerbaijan’s authorities and any activities or rallies of the opposition. The BBC Azeri service was the most objective source about the clashes at the Armenian-Azerbaijani border in November 2021.

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

Given that the majority of the country is composed of ethnic Azerbaijanis, they probably do not face problems in getting the news in Azerbaijani, a panelist noted. However, there is also news and content available in Russian for Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian ethnic minorities and other Slavic groups that speak primarily Russian, given Azerbaijan’s Soviet heritage. However, news and content creation in the languages of other minorities is scarce, particularly independent professional news. Regionally, in the South, where the Talysh minority lives, there is an online television version of the *Cənub Xəbərləri* (Southern News) called [Cənub Xəbər TV](#), which is a small, nascent initiative known only to the local community there, but it broadcasts in Azerbaijani, not Talysh.

As noted earlier, the mainstream media are homophobic, and the LGBTQ community faces discrimination from them. LGBTQ members face hate crimes and feel underrepresented by the media, and many try to leave the country as soon as they can. The same is true for feminist groups, many of whom spent 2021 under continuous pressure from the government, police brutality and unprofessionalism, and orchestrated social media attacks by online trolls. This abuse arose in part because of feminist groups’ protests and outcry over domestic violence. Detractors have falsely told the general public that the main objective of feminists is to encourage divorce.

The groups whose viewpoints are excluded from mainstream media turn to social media or platforms like YouTube to express or defend themselves. Two feminist groups have online channels, the most famous being [Fem-Utopia](#). Diaspora media, like Meydan TV, are the only ones that show sensitivity to the cause and cover taboo or underreported topics around minorities or marginalized groups. They are also the only ones that cover stories about physical attacks and arrests of LGBTQ members objectively.

On television, adequate coverage of the experiences and viewpoints of people from different genders, ideologies, and ethnic, racial, and religious backgrounds does not exist, if at all, a panelist said. As a rule, when oligarchic or state media cover stories about minorities, it is presented as, “There are no problems in this area.” There has been increased interest both in mainstream and online oligarchic media, as well as on social media platforms, about war casualties from the 2020 conflict, as it has become increasingly apparent that many draftees who died were minorities from rural areas.

There are multiple online outlets from religious communities, but the government blocked six of them in 2021 for allegedly not having transparent financial sources and propagating the confessionalism of the Iranian regime. These resources are [deyerler.az](#), [maide.az](#), [ahlibeyt.az](#), [ehlibet.info](#), [shia.az](#), and [islaminsesi.org](#). The editor-in-chief of [Shia.az](#), Sardar Babayev, even got arrested.

Women make up the majority of journalists, but their share in leadership

and ownership roles is miniscule. There is, however, a gender parity among citizen journalists.

### Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced.

As one panelist observed, the portentous nature of the past year, with ongoing court hearings exposing the corruption of the dissolved “State Support Fund to Mass Media,” says a lot about this indicator. The government spends millions to control the media but drowns in its own corruption, she added. Once the government dissolved the state support fund and a new media development agency was created as its successor, there was some hope it would be different, one panelist said, but that hope died quickly. No policy changes were initiated or even suggested to liberalize the advertising market, which could significantly improve the livelihood of media.

For many years, the majority of digital and print media have had only a few financial sources—the state budget, corrupt senior officials represented in various pillars of the government, or businesses that those officials control and instruct to pay. For at least 20 years, businesses have been instructed to not advertise with media that criticize the government. Businesses advertise only with media outlets owned by oligarchs. Even the classifieds that focus on car and property sales earn money from advertising, but not independent news resources. Once the new repressive media law starts to be applied, the life of the independent media will become even more difficult, one panelist said.

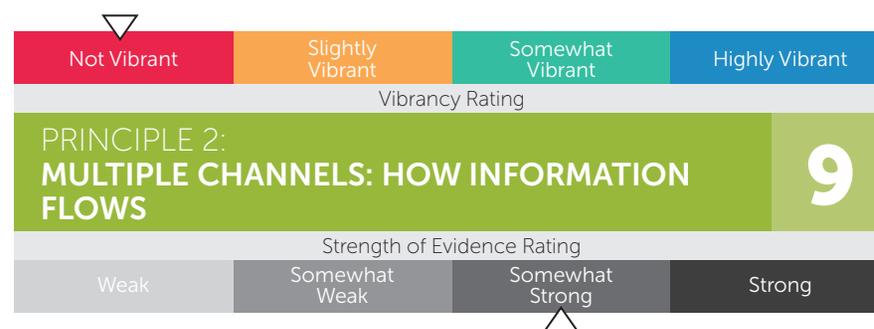
The advertising market itself is not transparent, and there are no local reference points, like the Czech Republic’s [Netmonitor](#), to determine the cost.

When it comes to the quality and professionalism of the content, state- and oligarchy-owned media are significantly worse than small independent media.

The journalists who work at oligarchic media outlets may be paid better than those with independent media, but they lack freedom. They cannot independently decide to create content even on the simplest, least

harmful cases. Censorship at these outlets remains high. Moreover, these salaries are not market-based. Journalists who work at independent media have limited choices if they want to change jobs and remain professional.

Very few media outlets can use subscriptions. State subsidies are allocated only to the propagators of the government’s propaganda, and the list is open. Independent media primarily survive on funding from international donors, though they nearly always remain underfunded. Recently, some outlets have adopted subscription models using the platform Prateon.



All panelists expressed concern regarding the newly introduced repressive media law and its ability to paralyze even the existing minority independent media. Most panelists gave their lowest scores for indicators that evaluate journalists being intimidated, killed, imprisoned, or fined for doing their work, all of which led to self-censorship under the previous, “better” law and never resulted in serious punishment for the perpetrators. Although the previous law was formally more favorable to journalists in theory, if not in practice, panelists are increasingly concerned now that the law is formally in opposition to free press. Internet penetration, especially in urban areas, is probably better than in previous years. However, everything else either did not improve or deteriorated, including the right to information, public-service media providing quality information, the allocation of frequencies and licenses to independent broadcasters, and a lack of support and persecution by law-enforcement agencies.

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

At the time the VIBE panel interviews were held, the [new oppressive law on media](#) had not been signed by the president. Many panelists thought that if signed and enacted, the scores for this indicator could be straight zeros. The law, introduced in Azerbaijan's parliament as a surprise piece of legislation right before the new year and signed by the president in early 2022, includes the introduction of a nation-wide "journalist ID card" that would allow journalists to report. The legislation contradicts Article 10 of the European Convention, which proclaims that "everyone has the right to freedom of expression, including the freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers." The same concept is confirmed by Article 50 of the Azerbaijani constitution, although articles of the country's own constitution are not equitably implemented.

**Panelists observed that year after year, instead of becoming more transparent, the process to access information is becoming even more closed.**

The draft was adopted by the parliament and then signed into law even despite protest from civil society and independent journalists/media. Journalists even brought a [symbolic gravestone](#) for Azerbaijani media to a demonstration, which was dispersed by police. Some panelists hope independent and professional journalists will still find a way to work in spite of the new law.

Currently, the Law on Information, Informatics, and Protection of Information Article 13 on defamation is often used to fine or warn independent and investigative journalists. Defamation cases are also ruled on in the courts. There are defamation articles about the country's president even in the old legislation, although it is likely that journalists will be punished for trumped-up charges, like hooliganism or drugs, rather than for defamation against the president.

Journalists faced [police brutality](#) while broadcasting the feminists' protest in front of a police station and while reporting live on social media. The authorities' physical attacks and a lack of respect for the

media have become so normalized that even government-friendly [Yeni Musavat employee Ilkin Muradov](#) was physically attacked in the courtroom by a relative of an oligarch.

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

In isolated parts of the country, Internet penetration remains low, largely due to both a lack of infrastructure and the economic realities of the residents. Although these areas do not have broadband Wi-Fi, youth in these areas access social media from their smartphones using mobile data. Some parts of the country, like villages in the Tovuz region bordering Armenia, do not even have telephone lines. As such, television remains the main source of news in these areas, and local channels here present only one-sided news. Moreover, if you do not speak the language of the majority, accessibility is further limited. As a result, people do not receive balanced information, which is available primarily online. Internet prices remain high for the low-income rural population, many of whom struggle to make ends meet. This problem was particularly acute in 2021 during pandemic-related lockdowns, as many students were unable to join online classes due to a lack of resources for hardware and/or Internet.

The quality of the provided Internet outside of the capital, Baku, also remains low, but this is not driven by identification with a minority ethnic group; the majority population and ethnic minorities face the same problems with regard to Internet access. However, ethnic minorities do lack sufficient sources in their own native languages, something the government has made no effort to solve. Additionally, without a VPN, a lot of objective news is inaccessible.

The majority of people still get their news from free, antenna-reception television channels. Cable television companies, though relatively affordable, primarily serve large cities, like Baku and Sumgayit. Turkish Fox TV was removed from the list of the channels offered by these cable

companies after it criticized the ruling family of Azerbaijan, one panelist said. “Turkish Kanal-D also faced a similar fate after criticizing the First Lady/First Vice President but was later pardoned,” she added.

### **Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for government information.**

Several journalists on the panel said the situation in 2021 with regard to the right to information was worse than in 2020. One panelist cited an instance in which a media company was creating video materials, and the government refused to answer questions. The Cabinet of Ministers either gave general, short, unrelated answers or referred the questions to lower suboffices, which kicked the request for information amongst themselves, never addressing the questions and discouraging the media company’s questions.

Panelists observed that year after year, instead of becoming more transparent, the process to access information is becoming even more closed. For example, information provided at Tender.gov.az, such as files regarding government contract procurements, has become scarcer than in previous years. The number of “single-source” purchases has drastically increased. Information provided on subsidies and national assistance plans is very general. The information about companies on the national tax registry is becoming more hidden each year, especially for companies that belong to the ruling families.

Although the laws in 2021 (prior to the new media law) say that citizens have a right to information, in practice this is not implemented. One panelist said that spokespeople at the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Defense, and State Border Control Service think that they can respond to inquiries only from pro-government media. If they do respond, then the answers are very general or not germane. Some journalists do take cases to the local courts, but local courts rule against them most of the time. Former minister and current opposition politician Fahmin Hajiyev brought his case of not getting information to the European Court via

the Council of Europe, and the latter ruled in his favor ([Case of Hajiyev v. Azerbaijan](#)). Information primarily related to state policy is kept hidden from the public and media. The state’s information-sharing structure is built to mask corruption. As in the case with the recent repressive media law, the public is kept out of the discussions.

Subsequently, the public has a low level of trust in government officials and what they say or share publicly, though the government rarely shares information and often with delay. This indifference is widely observed when looking at the low turnout in general elections. The distrust is also noticed when state agencies share information on their social media pages about events in the country, like [unsanctioned rallies](#), and some users bravely dispute their statements. In one particular rally, the government attempted to hide the fact that one participant, opposition leader Tofiq Yagublu, [was kidnapped by unclaimed government forces and severely beaten](#).

The same panelist said that many independent journalists contact government spokespeople knowing they will not get any information, but at least they can say they have done their job in attempting to be unbiased and thorough.

“The government strictly controls the allocation of frequencies, and the process has no transparency. As such, no independent television channels have emerged in the past 20 years.”

### **Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow.**

Azerbaijan has public television, called *İctimai TV* in Azerbaijani, established in 2005 to meet the Council of Europe admission commitment. “However, the ‘public’ is in name only,” one panelist said. As a rule, this channel does not highlight the major problems in society, such as corruption, abuse of power, and the low quality of public education. However, from time to time, it may talk about petty corruption cases, which looks performative. Recently, it has also had shows on social norms and traffic rules, which are apolitical but bring some color to its programs. Political debates hosted by this channel mainly serve the government’s propaganda. It very carefully chooses whom to invite to these shows, and truly independent experts

are excluded. In general, its programs do not differ from government-owned or -controlled television channels. The same channels are used to blackmail the opposition or independent activists. Laws allow the real owners of these media outlets to remain hidden from the public. One panelist recalled that a few years ago, independent journalists discovered a person with several media outlets registered under his name. The person looked quite surprised to learn about this from the journalists, but he was a close relative of one official.

The government strictly controls the allocation of frequencies, and the process has no transparency. As such, no independent television channels have emerged in the past 20 years. Although it is easier to formally found a print outlet, it is impossible to own or rent an infrastructure for this media outlet or distribute it without the government's permission. Founding an Internet-based outlet is easy, but the employees do not enjoy the same privileges as officially registered media, and the new law will further limit those privileges.

The new media law came up during discussion of the question related to public service media as well. Many panelists believe it will significantly limit or censor rights—for example, the right to independently found a media outlet not related to a frequency-operated television station, which was not possible even under the previous law. The law says that Internet-based television must have a license to air in the country, which, in turn, contradicts Azerbaijan's own constitution and international instruments to which it is a signatory.

The government also influences Internet service providers--since all of them have to follow orders from the governmental security services and since the internet comes to the country via a government-controlled company--and does not take users' interests into account. For example, it will block a website even before the court's decision, after simply a call from the Telecommunications Ministry. In the case of journalist Khadija Ismayil, [the Internet in her neighborhood was turned off](#) while she was speaking virtually at an international forum.

### **Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.**

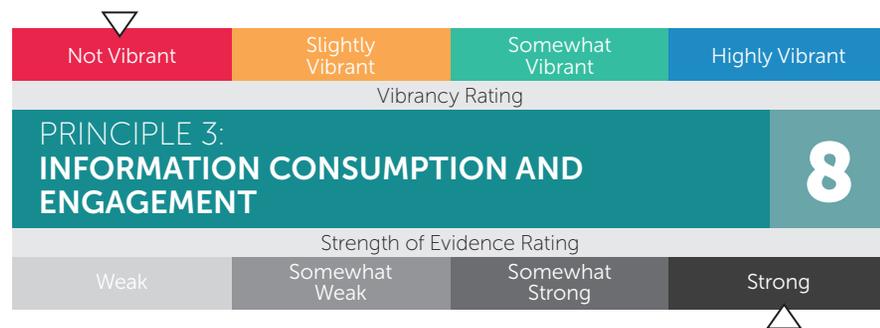
Mainstream media outlets are clearly influenced by their funders or owners. Panelists believe funding of these outlets is entrusted to officials and oligarchs. Each of these officials/oligarchs then promotes himself or herself in the funded channel, and criticism is not permitted. For example, Report.az does not criticize the State Oil Company (SOCAR) and APA does not criticize the Minister of Emergency. These mainstream media outlets also do not criticize government policies or actions. Otherwise, both the editors and leadership would be dismissed. Political interference in the management and editorial content of mainstream media is high.

Government subsidies or advertising contracts widely [influence editorial independence](#).

Pro-government and government journalists did not receive free apartments from the government in 2021, as in previous years, possibly due to lower government spending as a result of low oil prices.

There are now more and more barriers that make it difficult for professional independent media to film in public. Police officers, probably through CCTV cameras, learn about journalists' locations and approach them, trying to prevent journalists' activity and demanding information about the purpose of their filming. Although professional independent journalists are used to this, it interrupts their work and often requires they visit a police station and write a statement about their professional activity.

The presidential administration nominates and appoints members of the Broadcast Council, the regulatory body overseeing frequency allocations. The same goes for the agency that allocates the licenses for frequencies. Subsequently, these groups are dependent on the central government.



In terms of digital security, the country’s media experienced one of its worst years, not only in the number of social media accounts hacked by secretive groups, but also the revelation that journalists were tracked by the spyware “Pegasus,” exposing their personal information. People also fell victim to COVID-19 mis- and disinformation, but there were some gains, thanks to small but active fact-checking resources. Dynamic discussion platforms for public debate exist only online and primarily from diaspora media. VIBE indicators on public discourse and media literacy were scored low. Many panelists were also skeptical that community media exist at all in the country, with some pointing to online media outlets owned or run by feminist groups and the social media channels of a few villages.

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

Media outlets and other professional content producers have access to digital security training and tools; however, panelists trust trainings provided only by international NGOs. Moreover, as one panelist noted, these tools and materials are available only for a small group of people who are aware and have access to them, not all Internet users. The Pegasus scandal proved that many of these security measures were not effective, and the government was able to bypass these protection protocols, with several panelists noting that they were also victims of interference by the government, which used the Pegasus spyware.

The government also used local mobile operators to access journalists’

and civil society leaders’ smartphones, ultimately hacking or gaining control of their social media pages. Using operators, the government can read or capture two-step authentication passwords sent to the smartphone prior to the real owner. Feminist activist Narmin Shahmarzade was among civil society leaders the government hacked. The attackers also used fake images and “conversations” to “prove” her intimate relationship with another political activist, Bakhtiyar Hajiyev. This particular [incident](#) took place right before Shahmarzade’s announcement of a March 8 International Women’s Day rally, which is usually unsanctioned. As a result, some activists try to use mobile numbers from foreign operators to protect their electronic accounts.

OCCRP [published](#) a report on July 18, 2021, highlighting journalists, civic activists, and politicians from 24 countries tracked by the Pegasus software. According to this report, within the past two years, the private information of more than one thousand journalists, opposition leaders, and activists was exposed or followed using the software. More than 74 of them were identified by their phone numbers, retracted by the researchers.

Although the Israeli company later said they sold this software to be used against suspects in grave crimes, the Azerbaijani government used it against civil society and media representatives. Some of these representatives [said](#) they would take this case to court within Azerbaijan and, if not satisfied, to the European Court of Human Rights.

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

Media literacy levels remain low. Academic education for journalists is almost entirely politicized. Students are followed on social media for their comments and reactions and can be punished or warned to refrain from such actions in the future.

Only those who have access to media and social networks have an average media literacy level. Those who do not have this access and live in remote and isolated areas do not have media literacy skills. There are no school or university programs about media literacy. “The state

does everything to isolate or prevent critical thinking at the school or university level and promotes the cult of personality,” one panelist said. The students are trained along the lines of the ruling New Azerbaijan Party ideology. The first pages of textbooks in elementary, middle, and high schools show pictures of the former president, Haydar Aliyev (the father of the current president); the current president, Ilham Aliyev; and his wife, First Vice President Mehriban Aliyeva.

Academic independence is not allowed at universities. Students cannot refer, for example, to the Western-published books of Jamil Hasanli, a historian and former professor at Baku State University who is part of the opposition. The government denies this, but lecturers at these universities who wish to remain anonymous confirm the order.

The number of researchers doing fact-checking is really only a handful. “Fakt Yoxla” and “Yalan-Dogru Teftis” are two platforms that focus on fact-checking and media literacy, though their audiences are still quite narrow.

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

There are journalists and public representatives who use their freedom of speech and right to information. However, as in the case mentioned above, an opposition leader was arrested after he had expressed doubt about the official version of the military helicopter crash to popular YouTube-based channel OsmanqiziTV. This was not the only case in which activists or civic journalists were punished for exercising their rights. Throughout 2021, multiple journalists and bloggers were detained or received prison terms. For example, a blogger from the [Jalilabad](#) district was arrested on November 21 for expressing his views on social media.

In 2021, as in previous years, the government of Azerbaijan prevented peaceful rallies from opposition forces, feminist activists, animal

rights groups, and independent journalists by using police force. As discussed earlier, during a protest asking for the liberation of opposition activist Saleh Rustamly, who was imprisoned on trumped-up charges, opposition leader Tofiq Yagubly was taken from the police station by men with their faces covered and assaulted. Although the prosecutor’s office opened an investigation after Yagubly’s complaint, it was quickly [dropped](#) for being “groundless.”

In another example, animal rights activist Nijat Ismayil received a 15-day administrative sentence for attending or organizing a rally in front of the [Toplan](#) center, which was supposedly taking care of street dogs but was actually discovered to be killing or torturing them.

In May 2017, the president of Azerbaijan signed an executive order obligating the Human Rights Ombudsman to file a claim to the courts about officials who violate the law on access to information. However, to date, no protocols have been filed with regard to the hundreds of officials who have refused to provide information to the public or media.

Despite the difficult political situation, there are a few platforms for public debate that are diverse and inclusive. However, most politicians choose to ignore them rather than accept their offers for interviews. Almost all of these independent platforms are online, using multiple platforms, such as Facebook, YouTube, and Telegram. These are the only places where dynamic and independent debates are happening. Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp also have many troll accounts or real accounts orchestrated by the central government, one panelist said. The same orchestration of thoughts or imitations of debates are happening in the comments sections of YouTube videos of relatively independent online television channels.

The situation with physical spaces allocated for such debates, like municipality or town hall buildings, remains the same as in previous years. There are few truly independent physical locations that will allow

**Both the media and the public are under political pressure, as they are surveilled closely for carrying out any civic initiatives and have a high chance of being punished for these initiatives.**

for such debates to take place, and they are closely watched by the authorities.

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

Since the mainstream media's financing comes from pre-determined sources among the elites and not from quality content or advertising, it does not care about the audience's needs and interests. "They want to steer the audience's needs rather than understand them," a panelist said. Some plan to attract audiences through scandalous or entertaining shows, making quality a low priority. These are the so-called reality shows that are built on manipulating unfortunate human stories.

While television channels compete for audiences with these kinds of shows, the oligarchic news agencies compete to see which organization posts more breaking news stories and how fast they do so. For these outlets, if the online comments sections are not closed or strongly censored, they are monitored, often by law-enforcement agencies' personnel. The media outlets that represent the government's views—such as Yeni Musavat, Haqqin.az, Oxu.az, and Qafqazinfo—are often able to mask it with occasional critical pieces on lower-level problems, and they have their comments sections closed. Except for the BBC's Azeri service, quality independent media such as RFE/RL Azerbaijani have the comments sections open and uncensored. VOA Azerbaijani had a comments section open in 2020 but not anymore, one panelist observed.

Independent media reach out to independent civil society representatives for information-sharing, and pro-government and government media reach out to or interview government-organized NGO (GONGO) representatives. Public opinion polls are rarely conducted by media outlets, be it for independent or pro-government media for different reasons. The former do not have funds for it, and the latter do not want to learn anything, a panelist mentioned.

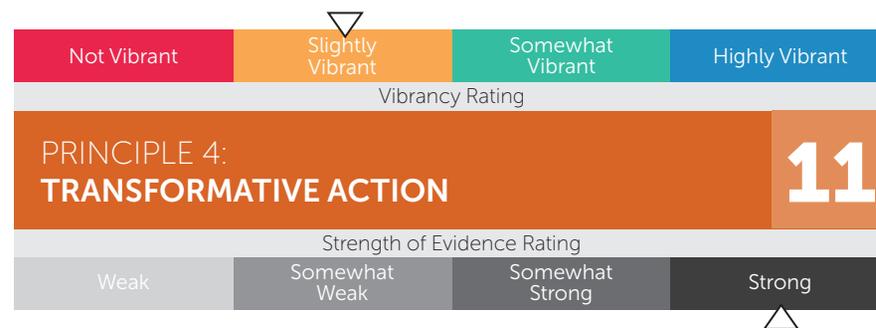
“The state does everything to isolate or prevent critical thinking at the school or university level and promotes the cult of personality,” said one panelist.

Independent media and journalists rarely have opportunities to conduct community events with their audiences or stakeholders. Both the media and the public are under political pressure, as they are surveilled closely for carrying out any civic initiatives and have a high chance of being punished for these initiatives. They would be lucky to find a space for such events, one panelist noted.

#### Indicator 15: Community media provide information relevant for community engagement.

Different sections of the population are slowly beginning to appreciate the concept or importance of community media. In addition to a few that started in previous years, the LGBTQ community has a new journal and YouTube channel. But the majority of panelists agree that there are no community media outlets channels in Azerbaijan, as is traditionally defined.

Under current conditions, the emergence of community media is not feasible.



Panelists mentioned several examples of nonpartisan online media, which includes both professional media and citizen journalism and outlets based in-country and abroad. However, the public largely remains apolitical, even when quality, truthful information surfaces about major issues.

When journalist [Aytan Mammadova](#) was threatened at knifepoint, there was some protest on social media and a rally in Baku attended by a couple hundred people. NGOs, especially those working for or around media freedom, have struggled following a 2013 crackdown by authorities and still function in limbo. Misinformation about the government's policy successes or achievements is widespread. Official press conferences or events are not diverse and only in rare instances does the government invite a small group of independent media to its public events. Some exceptions may exist, depending on the topic and nature of the event--such as a government-organized trip to the territories freed during the 2020 war which may have included independent media.

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

Nonpartisan media outlets exist, but the number is limited. Most of them broadcast from abroad, and their websites have been blocked in the country as of 2017. Their readers and viewers have to use proxies or VPN to access the websites. To circumvent the blocks, these outlets use social media and proxy-linked web addresses to specific articles and materials. However, the majority of potential audiences do not use or know about VPN services. Observers saw an increase in VPN use in 2020, during the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, when authorities reduced Internet speed nationally and limited access to the majority of Western, impartial media.

Nonpartisan media have a huge potential for growth, if allowed. A panelist said that two decades ago, there were nonpartisan media outlets that sold 100,000 to 200,000 newspapers a day.

In the absence of in-person fora, the only opportunities for people to

freely participate in the exchange of information with those with whom they disagree is on social media platforms, such as Facebook and YouTube comments sections. Authorities still use their troll "army" to shatter the trust in independent journalists and attack their critics on social media.

Audiences' primary source of information is the mainstream media from Azerbaijan, Russia, and Turkey. As in past years, the strengthening authoritarianism in Turkey has marginalized or derailed independent media in Turkey, which has further negatively affected Azerbaijan's independent media.

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

Regaining control of once-lost national territories gave the government wide opportunities to push its propaganda while simultaneously reducing the need for news produced according to international best practices and standards.

Given that alternative independent media have been cornered in the country, there is a high likelihood that the population can be easily misled on political and social issues. Additionally, the absence of any democratic processes for more than two decades has caused widespread political apathy. As such, quality information will hardly influence the outcome of nationwide elections. When running for parliament in 2020, popular blogger Mehman Huseynov recorded a bribe offered to him by another candidate from the same precinct, incumbent MP Faraj Guliyev, in return for Huseynov's quitting the race. The recording was widely distributed and caused a huge scandal. Without this recording, Guliyev likely would have won the election, but this time, the outcome of the elections was overruled for violations in the voting process. However, Guliyev was not charged with corruption.

👂👂 **Official press conferences or events are not diverse and only in rare instances does the government invite a small group of independent media to its public events.**

One panelist observed that while the government was not able to effectively manage the pandemic, media coverage, including from outlets owned by oligarchs, did not produce or disseminate disinformation regarding COVID-19 or the vaccination process. Throughout the year, the pandemic and movement of civilians in the mined territories of recent war zones was the primary focus of mainstream media and resulted in very little misinformation from outlets. The same cannot be said about TikTok, WhatsApp, and other social media channels, where disinformation on the pandemic and vaccination remains very high, primarily in the Russian language and from Russian sources.

Disinformation in other topics remains high, and unfortunately there are many people, both in the provinces and in Baku, who do not consume news critically and think national television channels and the officials on them tell the absolute truth. The facts unfortunately show the opposite. For example, when speaking at NATO's meeting in Brussels, President Ilham Aliyev [said](#) that Azerbaijan exports oil to 20 NATO countries. The fact-checking site FaktYoxla researched the statement and [declared](#) the claim untrue. One panelist thought that whether a person believes disinformation or seeks quality information depends on his or her social and political education and knowledge. "The media literacy level is very low," the panelist concluded.

After "hate-speech blogger" Sevinj Huseynova's (mentioned earlier) call "to kill LGBTQ representatives," hostility in society for this group has significantly increased.

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

Despite the rampant attack on independent civil society in 2014, there are still NGOs that criticize authorities and give interviews to independent media. However, one panelist said there are also NGOs that are now under the government's umbrella after these attacks.

**There are thousands of registered NGOs in Azerbaijan, but fewer than one-tenth of them give reactions to the important topics of society," said a panelist.**

Independent NGOs and journalists protested and criticized the new media law when it was in parliament for reading, but their voices were not heard. Just like in other post-Soviet, authoritarian countries, civil society is divided into two groups—real NGOs and government-organized NGOs (GONGOs)—a panelist said. "The latter may use quality information for personal use, but when it comes to statements by them, they are rarely balanced." The government uses GONGOs to push its propaganda and almost never registers real NGOs, thus keeping them in limbo when it comes to fulfilling their missions. Only GONGOs receive state funding through calls for grants.

"There are thousands of registered NGOs in Azerbaijan, but fewer than one-tenth of them give reactions to the important topics of society," said a panelist. Journalists are happy with a few experts and civil society leaders they can always approach for quality data and analyses, particularly on the economy and democracy, like Rovshan Aghayev, Azer Mehdiyev, and the Elections Monitoring and Democracy Studies Center, led by Anar Mammadli.

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

Returning to opposition leader Tofig Yagublu's case, several panelists recalled a situation where police kidnapped and assaulted Yagublu, according to his statements, photos and videos taken immediately following the incident. Police claimed he beat himself up. The same situation happened in 2019 with Ali Karimli, leader of the National Front Party. "Times have changed, but the officials' tactics haven't," a panelist said.

Independent fact-checkers constantly expose untruths. Only "friendly media" are invited to press conferences of the line ministries.

Although there are cases when state officials rely on fake statistics, they rarely make their decisions based on disinformation.

The country lacks normal political dialogue or discussion, and those that do exist rarely rely on science. As a general rule, officials never explain new laws or provide a breakdown for what they entail.

### **Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic rights.**

The panelists noted that the lack of credible government statistics and state agencies' opacity do not allow for a thorough evaluation of this indicator. However, they reiterated that the latest elections, just like previous ones, were fraudulent and that authorities are never influenced by quality information because their decisions are always political.

According to national legislation, even if there is no specific complaint by the victim, the start of a media corruption investigation can result in punishment for the media outlets, including fines or shutting down the outlet. In practice, when the media expose large-scale corruption by senior officials, there is no resulting punishment for the officials. For example, the media repeatedly wrote about a watch worth a million euros [mugged from State Oil Company's chairman's son while he was vacationing in Ibiza, Spain](#), but no formal investigation into how he could afford the watch was ever launched. Media have also written about the murder case linked to the Azerbaijani Army General Rovshan Akbarov some 20 years ago, for which he was never investigated. But when he lost his job in 2020, the prosecutor general's office suddenly remembered the case, and in 2021, Akbarov was arrested for allegedly killing businessman Elchin Aliyev.

The parliament still has several empty seats, and authorities have not rushed to have another set of elections.

A lack of independent courts causes further barriers for the restoration of basic human rights.

*Because of the restrictive media environment, participants in the Azerbaijan study will remain anonymous. An Azerbaijani media expert developed this chapter after a series of structured interviews with colleagues who have firsthand knowledge of the media and information sector.*

Copyright © 2022 by IREX

**Notice of Rights:** Permission is granted to display, copy, and distribute VIBE in whole or in part, provided that: (a) the materials are used with the acknowledgment "The Vibrant Information Barometer (VIBE) is a product of IREX with funding from USAID."; (b) VIBE is used solely for personal, noncommercial, or informational use; and (c) no modifications of VIBE are made.

This study is made possible by the support of the American People through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The opinions expressed herein are those of the panelists and other project researchers and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID, the United States Government, or IREX.

# GEORGIA

## 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

16

The year of 2021 was tempestuous. It included a violent attack on journalists by anti-LGBTQ demonstrators and far-right groups, a political crisis, local government elections, and the national government’s war on critical media. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic continued to corrode the country’s information environment, which has been swamped with COVID-related misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda.

Panelists were especially alarmed about the government’s undisguised use of disinformation and hate-speech accusations to undermine public trust in critical media. This vindictive campaign, coupled with tightened control over journalists’ access to public information, reached a peak in 2021.

The July 5–6 attack on journalists by homophobic and far-right groups was the largest targeted assault on media in years. The demonstrators injured 53 journalists and damaged the equipment of 10 media organizations, laying bare the state’s inability to ensure journalists’ safety. A few months later, local elections were also marred by many cases of abuse of media representatives.

Deepening polarization has degraded the quality of media coverage, with national broadcasters divided along political lines. Still, a few small, mostly online, outlets provided audiences with unbiased and impartial news on various topics.

False and manipulated information continued to proliferate on social media during the election period and other critical political moments. Simultaneously, various

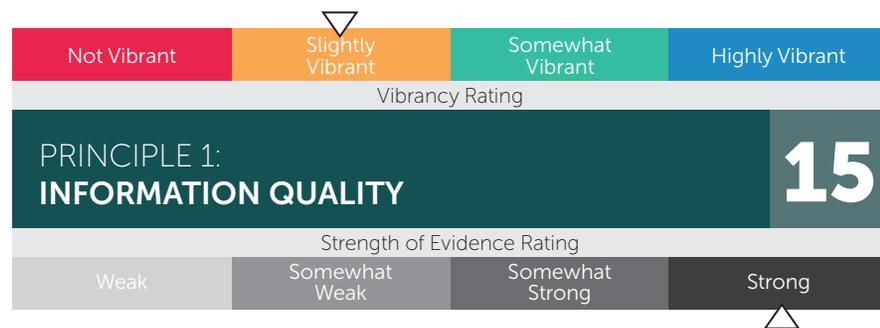
actors, online and off, continued to spread conspiracy theories, fake news, and Kremlin-linked, anti-Western propaganda.

The panel said Georgian society is becoming more media literate and savvy, although too many still lack the digital skills to guard against cyberthreats.

There are few constructive exchanges of information and opinion, a pillar of good governance, between citizens and the government, possibly because of the public’s mistrust of state institutions, the dearth of productive debates on the internet, and a weak civic culture.

Panel members said Georgia’s strong civil society works to promote democratic values and pushes the government toward sound policies.

The first principle, on information quality, received the lowest score of all, 15. Principle 3, on information consumption and engagement, and 4, on transformative action, each received 17, while Principle 2, on multiple channels of information, received a slightly higher score than the other three principles, 17.



Overall, this principle was the most critically assessed, receiving a score of 15. Main trends from the 2021 VIBE study continued, although the scores were lower for the 2022 study. Sub-indicators on mal-information and funding for the media sector received lower scores than the other sub-indicators, and the score for mal-information was the lowest of all. Georgian content producers, both professional and amateur, churned out a sea of information, which included an overabundance of false information, disinformation, mal-information, and hate speech. The government ramped up its disinformation efforts against media that criticize it, and Russian propaganda narratives continued to spread via social media and fringe media, political actors, and far-right groups.

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

Most panelists agreed that the infrastructure for creating and distributing information is more or less adequate for most media. Still, some media struggle to make needed upgrades. Nata Dzvelishvili, director of *Indigo* magazine, said small online outlets usually need equipment similar to that used by TV broadcasters, but it is usually beyond their budgets.

The COVID-19 pandemic continued to play havoc with journalism education in 2021. Although the government relaxed health regulations for higher education institutions and allowed them to conduct classes in hybrid or online formats, most journalism schools remained online only, due mostly to the difficulty of implementing safety measures. Trainings

remained more strictly regulated, with participants required to present either negative test results or proof of full vaccination. This has kept journalism trainings mostly online. About 15 universities offer journalism degrees across the country, and there are no obstacles to enrollment.

As in previous years, a handful of small, independent online outlets continued to produce fact-based, well-sourced content on a variety of topics. They include Netgazeti.ge, Batumelebi.ge, On.ge, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) Georgian Service, and Publika.ge, among others.

Panelists said mainstream media violated professional and ethical standards repeatedly during the year when covering certain contentious issues. A survey of media in the run-up to local elections commissioned by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the European Union (EU) concluded that TV news often violated professional ethics and attempted to manipulate.<sup>1</sup> “Professional standards are violated on all sides,” Nino Jangirashvili, director of TV Kavkasia, said. But she cautioned that there is no equivalence between the pro-government media, which she said spew “vicious propaganda,” and media allied with the opposition, which she called “defensive media.” Khatia Jinjikhadze, director of the Open Society Georgia Foundation’s (OSGF) media program, said pro-government channels are not only propagandistic, but they have also become “more propagandistic than they were last year. ... These channels attack journalists who expose politicians. ... The propaganda machine is more diversified and coordinated than ever.”

Panelists mostly agreed that journalists are held responsible for unethical and unprofessional reporting, via formal procedures and citizen complaints. Mariam Gogosashvili, executive director of the Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics, said her organization always responds to complaints it receives, but media do not always accept its recommendations. In 2021, the Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics reviewed 76 complaints, of which more than a half, 42, came from

<sup>1</sup> Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics. *Study and Research on Election Media Coverage for the 2021 Municipal Elections in Georgia*. 2021. [http://mediamonitor.ge/uploads\\_script/accounts/doc\\_eng/11\\_GSJ\\_TV\\_NEWS\\_ENG\\_09.2021.pdf](http://mediamonitor.ge/uploads_script/accounts/doc_eng/11_GSJ_TV_NEWS_ENG_09.2021.pdf).

citizens.<sup>2</sup> The most common violation (29) concerned inaccuracies in the reporting.

Dzvelishvili argued that the media should not neglect professional standards even when it is under attack; in doing so, it loses public trust and gives an assist to the government to discredit it. She also complained that some journalists have blurred the lines between the professional and the private on social media.

Jangirashvili specifically called out Dito Samkharadze, a ruling party politician, for freely sharing discriminatory and insulting content against political rivals and critical journalists on social media.

The panel gave credit to mainstream television broadcasters that are critical of the government, and to regional media and quality independent online media for their original reporting, unearthing stories that would have otherwise been covered up by government officials. “I would say that it was media, critical online and regional media, too, that worked really well, started asking critical questions about the pandemic promptly, while the leadership was complacent,” Jinjikhadze said. “The regional media were very involved, informing local communities about safety norms and raising awareness about vaccination, while the government’s vaccination campaign was weak. And election coverage was also constructive; the media were able to document irregularities prior to and on the election days,” she added.

The panelists agreed that information on local, national, regional, and international events is available in Georgian media. Regional and local news are predominantly covered by regional and local media, and national media focus primarily on national events. Dzvelishvili said that since the political crisis that followed the 2020 parliamentary elections and bled into 2021—in which opposition parties claimed election

fraud and boycotted the legislature—the media have worked in a state of emergency, focusing on political topics at the expense of some important social issues. She said *Indigo* magazine worked for months on analytical pieces on certain social issues but struggled to find the right moment to present them to the public. For a few years, online Netgazeti.ge has been reporting on the South Caucasus countries. Euronews, a source of independent international news, is available in Georgian. And there are several online outlets with a regional focus, aimed mostly at informing foreign audiences, such as JAMnews, OC Media, Chai Khana, and Eurasianet. Mainstream broadcasters offer a thin trickle of international news, such as Mtavari Arkhi’s program *Mtavari Msoplioshi* (Mtavari in the World).

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

Panel members expressed concern over a surge in misinformation and disinformation online and offline. Panelists were especially alarmed by the government’s explicit campaign against media which criticizes its actions, which they said reached a crescendo in 2021. They cautioned that such behavior jeopardized media freedom and undermined citizens’ trust in media. Nestan Tsetskhladze, chief

editor of Netgazeti.ge, cited the Central Election Commission’s Information Protection Center, which accused RFE/RL’s Radio Tavisupleba, Publika.ge, Netgazeti.ge, On.ge, and Guria News—alongside some other media outlets, including broadcasters critical of the government-- of spreading fake news and disinformation. When Publika, Netgazeti, and On.ge requested an explanation from the center, it blamed a technical mistake, which it said had been corrected, for Netgazeti.ge’s and RFE/RL’s Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty’s designation. In the case of Publika.ge and On.ge, it blamed

“I would say that it was media, critical online and regional media, too, that worked really well, started asking critical questions about the pandemic promptly, while the leadership was complacent,” Jinjikhadze said.

2 Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics. *Annual Report*. 2021. <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1z tqDd5XtJsAVv6tfhRy5kF XuQlB6cHkF/view>.

a since-rectified methodological error.<sup>3</sup> Gogosashvili also criticized as misleading a report from the ruling Georgian Dream party that accused three national broadcasters--Mtavari Arkhi, Formula TV, and TV Pirveli--of airing hate speech, disinformation, and manipulative coverage aimed at discrediting the government.<sup>4</sup> She said the report's methodology was "based on subjective perceptions." Panelists also said preelection monitoring by the Communications Commission, a regulator, provided a biased assessment of critical mainstream broadcasters' performance.

Tamar Kintsurashvili, whose Media Development Foundation monitors disinformation and fake news on social media, said trolls had used the names and logos of mainstream broadcasters critical of the government to spread manipulative and misleading information about some controversial news items. According to the Foundation's Myth Detector project, two days before the municipal election runoffs on October 30, a Facebook user posted a photo of and alleged quote from imprisoned former President Mikheil Saakashvili alongside the logo of Mtavari Arkhi.<sup>5</sup> Panelists said the government peddled disinformation about Saakashvili's detention, imprisonment, treatment, and court hearing. Natia Kuprashvili, chairwoman of the Alliance of Georgian Broadcasters, said the public received "incomplete, confusing, and subjectively selected video footage" on the issue.<sup>6</sup> Jinjikhadze said people would therefore give more credence to the authorities' version of Saakashvili-related stories, which were later supported by video footage. After Saakashvili announced on his Facebook page that he had arrived in Georgia, the government denied these reports, even as Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili called a press briefing that same evening to announce that authorities had arrested Saakashvili and then released

footage of the arrest. On one occasion, the State Inspector's Service, which enforces data protection laws, fined the Ministry of Justice GEL 2,000 (approximately \$650) for distributing video footage as a violation of Saakashvili's privacy and requested removal of the footage from the internet.

According to Myth Detector, after the public defender and her group of experts requested that an ailing Saakashvili be admitted to a hospital, anti-opposition pages and trolls allegedly affiliated with the government emerged on social media and attempted to discredit the public defender and her experts as biased actors supporting the opposition United National Movement.<sup>7</sup> In addition to the anti-opposition pages and government trolls, according to Myth Detector, Georgian Dream leaders and supporters, pro-government media outlets, anti-liberal and pro-Kremlin Facebook pages, media outlets, and other related actors were involved in the campaign. Kintsurashvili cited it as an example of how the Georgian Dream government mimics pro-Russian pages and positions. "State institutions aren't sensitive to professional and ethical standards, and they don't encourage debate," Mamuka Andguladze, a media program manager at Transparency International Georgia, said.

Municipal elections held in October 2021 intensified divisive and discriminatory rhetoric on social media. In a report covering the period from August 2 to November 6, the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy, a leading election watchdog, analyzed election-related pages and posts on Facebook, Instagram, Telegram, and TikTok.<sup>8</sup> Among other findings, the report counted 4,291 posts on 35 anti-ruling-party pages and 2,406 posts on 40 anti-opposition pages. Even more content was aimed at discrediting media outlets critical of the government and their journalists, including Mtavari Arkhi, Formula TV, TV Pirveli, and Kavkasia TV. Fewer posts targeted pro-government broadcasters Imedi TV and POS TV.

3 "Online Media Outlets Slam CEC Over Disinformation Accusations." Civil.ge. September 29, 2021. <https://civil.ge/archives/442573>.

4 Open Society Georgia Foundation. "Smear Campaigns Launched against the Critical Media Aim to Silence Opponents." Georgian Election Spotlight Newsletter. October 1, 2021. <https://cutt.ly/ZG12jOn>.

5 Kistauri, Ani. "Facebook Trolls Discrediting Mikheil Saakashvili in a Coordinated Manner." Myth Detector. November 2, 2021. <https://mythdetector.ge/en/facebook-trolls-discrediting-mikheil-saakashvili-in-a-coordinated-manner/>.

6 "Timeline: Saakashvili Imprisonment & Hunger Strike." Civil.ge. November 30, 2021. <https://civil.ge/archives/455765>.

7 Kistauri, Ani. "Pro-Governmental Trolls, Media and the Government Against the Public Defender." Myth Detector. November 29, 2021. <https://mythdetector.ge/en/myth-pro-governmental-trolls-media-and-government-against-public-defender>.

8 International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy. *Final Report on Social Media Monitoring of the 2021 Municipal Elections*. December 21, 2021. <https://isfed.ge/geo/angarishebi/munitsipalitetis-organota-2021-tslis-archevnebis-sotsialuri-mediis-monitoringis-sabolo-angarishebi>.

Kintsurashvili, whose organization cooperates with Facebook to monitor and report false information on social media, said some media organizations understand the possible advertising ramifications of being blacklisted on Facebook. She recounted that after the Media Development Foundation had reported Mtavari Arkhi, TV Pirveli, and Metronome.ge for spreading false information on Facebook, they immediately corrected the coverage.

Despite the tools available to report false narratives, fake posts about vaccines still appear on social media, panelists said. Alluding to Nino Kuntseva, a business and management professor notorious for her anti-vaxxer posts, media professor Nino Danelia recalled a Facebook user claiming that firefighters, doctors, and others in the United States were leaving their jobs because of vaccination mandates. Danelia said this and similar posts appeared on Facebook as soon as Georgia introduced a COVID-19 passport in November 2021.

Several panelists said media cannot always produce well-rounded stories based on facts because the government deliberately restricts information. For example, Tsetskhladze said Netgazeti had unsuccessfully sought information on Saakashvili's hunger strike from penitentiary officials. Ia Mamaladze, publisher of Guria News, said her journalists could not get statistics about COVID-19 in prisons. "With its actions, the government does everything possible to eliminate the concept of unbiased media, which adhere to high professional and ethical standards," Tsetskhladze said.

Panel members agreed that journalists hold the government accountable for its actions, but they said that has not always translated into change, especially in 2021.

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

Russia and its proxies create and disseminate disinformation, mal-information, and hate speech. According to a report by the European

Values Center for Security Policy, by remaining passive, Georgian authorities have tacitly supported a growing list of Russia-sponsored organizations, as well as radical domestic movements.<sup>9</sup> The report said Georgian clergy buttress Russia's soft power strategy by decrying Western values as incompatible with Orthodox Christianity. The report also cited China's links with Georgian academia, media, and NGOs as an extension of Russian disinformation machinery.

The emergence of far-right national broadcaster Alt-Info sent tremors through Georgia's media landscape. On September 9, the Communications Commission granted the outlet, which received regional and online broadcasting authorization in the fall of 2020, national broadcaster status. Gogosashvili said the channel, whose page previously had been kicked off Facebook because it was suspected of

coordinating with other users in posting misleading information, "violates every possible professional standard."<sup>10</sup> For example, hosts at Alt-Info used violent and hateful language against Tbilisi's Pride event in July, and the host of a talk show on the channel helped organize an attack on Pride Day that left 53 journalists

injured and damaged equipment belonging to more than 10 media organizations.<sup>11</sup> After an investigation, the public defender asked the General Prosecutor's Office to bring criminal charges against the talk show host.

**“State institutions aren't sensitive to professional and ethical standards, and they don't encourage debate,” Andguladze said.**

9 Stulik, David and Kristýna Bagge. *Eastern European Program Report Mapping Research: Comparing Foreign Influence in Georgia*. European Values Centre for Security Policy. 2021. [https://www.europeanvalues.cz/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/MAPPING\\_RESEARCH\\_COMPARING\\_FOREIGN\\_INFLUENCE\\_IN\\_GEORGIA.pdf](https://www.europeanvalues.cz/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/MAPPING_RESEARCH_COMPARING_FOREIGN_INFLUENCE_IN_GEORGIA.pdf).

10 Meta. *October 2020 Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior Report*. November 5, 2020. <https://about.fb.com/news/2020/11/october-2020-cib-report/>.

11 Mgaloblishvili, Basti. "How 5th of July Was Organized and Executed." Publika. Posted August 4, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eSrt4KmDWAQ>; Public Defender of Georgia. "Public Defender Demands Criminal Prosecution of Two Persons for Organizing Group Violence and Calling for Violence on July 5." September 6, 2021. <https://www.ombudsman.ge/eng/akhali-ambebi/sakhalkho-damtsveli-5-ivliss-jgufuri-dzaladobis-organizebisa-da-dzaladobisken-motsodebis-faktebze-2-piris-mimart-siskhlissamartlebrivi-devnis-datsqebas-moitkhovs>.

“Numerous statements about the preparations against Tbilisi Pride were broadcast by the platform Alt-Info with homophobic, xenophobic, sexist, and far-right sentiments,” a report by the Media Advocacy Coalition concluded.<sup>12</sup> Myth Detector also found that Alt-Info’s hosts continued to disseminate pro-Kremlin and anti-Western messages after the July violence

Lekso Lashkarava, a cameraman for TV Pirveli, was badly beaten on July 5 and was found dead on July 11 in his home. The panel members blasted the authorities’ handling of the investigation as manipulative and tainted by mal-information. On the day of Lashkarava’s death, with the cause still unknown, the Interior Ministry released CCTV footage that allegedly showed him buying psychotropic drugs in a pharmacy and illegal drugs from a dealer.<sup>13</sup> “The fact that the release of this footage suggested a connection between Lashkarava’s actions and his death made it manipulative,” Jinjikhadze said. A couple of months later, the State Inspector’s Service ruled that by airing the videos without explicitly explaining their link to the cameraman’s death, the Interior Ministry had violated legal protections on personal data and fined it GEL 2,000 (approximately \$650).<sup>14</sup> Also on the day of Lashkarava’s death, his criminal record was leaked on social media.<sup>15</sup> The official postmortem toxicology report later found that Lashkarava died as a result of a narcotic overdose, but his family, friends, and colleagues rejected these findings and have launched their own investigation.

12 Media Advocacy Coalition. “A Pogrom of the Media: Tbilisi, July 5 and 6, 2021.” Undated. <http://mediacoalition.ge/en/a/9bbdee80>.

13 “Police Say Narcotics Overdose Possibly Behind Journalist’s Death.” Civil.ge. July 12, 2021. <https://civil.ge/archives/431858>.

14 “Interior Ministry Fined over Violating Deceased Cameraman’s Data Privacy.” Civil.ge. September 24, 2021. <https://civil.ge/archives/442481>.

15 “Rally Demanding the Resignation of the Government in Connection with the Death of Cameraman Lekso Lashkarava Underway in Front of the Parliament.” Interpress News. July 11, 2021. <https://www.interpressnews.ge/en/article/114583-rally-demanding-the-resignation-of-the-government-in-connection-with-the-death-of-cameraman-lekso-lashkarava-underway-in-front-of-the-parliament/>; “Hundreds Rally to Demand PM’s Resignation over Georgian Cameraman’s Death.” First Channel. July 12, 2021. <https://1tv.ge/en/news/hundreds-rally-to-demand-pms-resignation-over-georgian-cameramans-death/>.

Lashkarava’s case illustrates how, when faced with a crisis that could reflect badly on it, the government immediately resorts to manipulative and aggressive campaigning, Danelia and TV Kavkasia’s Jangirashvili said. “It tries to manipulate the existing information to create a false perception about events that are directed against it or when there’s a significant risk that the situation will tarnish its image,” Danelia observed.

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

Most panel members said that while mainstream media focus mostly on covering national and political events, regional and small online media produce content that is more reflective of the experiences and viewpoints of people of various ethnic and religious backgrounds. Kuprashvili said the July 5–6 events prompted some members of the media to give more thoughtful coverage to sexual minorities and that some regional media have stepped up their coverage of issues of interest to local ethnic minorities. Kintsurashvili said a lack of diversity in media coverage is sometimes due to a lack of financial and human resources, and media rely on donor funding to report on minorities.

Kuprashvili raised the concern that some small, local online media in Kvemo Kartli, populated mostly by ethnic Azeris, have opaque funding and produce content in local and Russian languages that differs from their Georgian versions. Kamila Mamedova, director of the community radio station Radio Marneuli, which operates in the predominantly Azeri-populated district of Marneuli, added that the content is usually shared from such sources as the Russian-government-controlled Sputnik media. In the neighboring and largely ethnic Armenian Samtskhe-Javakheti region, Kuprashvili said pirate broadcasters operate on analog frequencies rebroadcasting different content, including Russian channels, ultimately reaching more viewers than local media using digital technologies. For years, the Georgian Public Broadcaster (GPB) has been criticized for failing to produce content that reflects the diversity of Georgian society, as it is legally required to do.

Mamedova said the politicization of national media has affected regional

media outlets as well. For example, she noted that members of the United National Movement have accused Radio Marneuli of supporting the Georgian Dream party, even though the station has not aired the ruling party’s announcements. She said the government’s rhetoric is even more bellicose.

Panel members said the field is open equally to men and women, and that women are increasingly taking top managerial posts. The field still lacks ethnic diversity, however, even though Georgia has large populations of ethnic minorities, they said.

**Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced.**

Georgia’s advertising market continued to shrink last year amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Kuprashvili said some regional broadcasters had lost as much as 80 percent of their ad revenues, and that a new election-related law abolishing state funding for political parties’ pre-election campaign advertising wiped out a traditional source of revenue during pre-election campaign seasons. Further, she said that even though a recent effort by Georgia’s economic development agency, Enterprise Georgia, to support small and medium-sized businesses was expanded to include print, radio, online, and broadcast media, allowing them to access to low-interest loans, banks still deem media that produce political programming too risky.

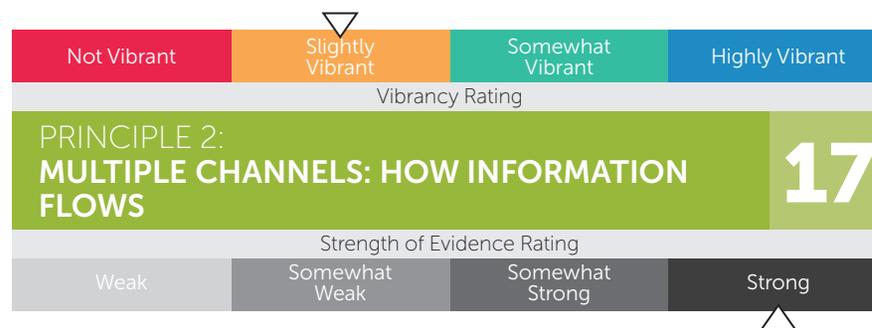
Small, independent media are funded primarily by donors. Dzvelishvili, of *Indigo* magazine, said banks and NGOs that used to contract with media to prepare certain content now produce that content themselves and have become media competitors. Facebook, too, remains a competitor, with businesses taking advantage of its large audience and lower rates. She said *Indigo* is developing a strategy to diversify online revenue sources.

Some media outlets use social media to make money from their multimedia content. Online Mtisambebi.ge and its YouTube channel, RegTV, for instance, produce a lot of such content.

As in previous years, panelists complained that government processes

for buying advertising and information services are opaque. Jangirashvili said it is unclear how funding decisions are made, and Kintsurashvili complained that for years the government has given money to online media that spread hate speech, pro-government narratives, and anti-vaccine and pro-Russian sentiments. For example, among the many platforms financed by the government is STV.ge, which airs pro-government and anti-opposition sentiments in western Georgia.

GPB, which gets most of its money from the government, has the most resources of any outlet in the country. In 2021, it received GEL 69.2 million (\$21.7 million), a GEL 500,000 (\$157,000) increase over its 2020 funding level.<sup>16</sup> Imedi TV has enjoyed the market’s largest advertising revenues for several years. Most national private broadcasters rely largely on their owners’ contributions.<sup>17</sup>



Georgia’s laws on freedom of speech and the press remain the last line of defense against attacks from all sides amid the government’s attempts to more tightly control the media, the panel said. Law enforcement agencies continue to enforce laws according to their agenda. Subindicator 6, on citizens’ rights to create, share, and consume information, and subindicator 10, on the independence of information channels, scored the lowest of all.

16 “Georgian Parliament Confirms 2021 State Budget.” Civil.ge. December 30, 2020. <https://civil.ge/archives/389765>.

17 Andghuladze, Mamuka Salome Tsetskhladze. *Overview of the Broadcasting Advertising Market in 2020*. Undated. Transparency International Georgia. [https://docs.google.com/viewerng/viewer?url=https://transparency.ge/sites/default/files/advertising\\_market\\_2021-e\\_0.pdf](https://docs.google.com/viewerng/viewer?url=https://transparency.ge/sites/default/files/advertising_market_2021-e_0.pdf).

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

Members of the government and their allies repeatedly complain that existing measures to address alleged media misbehavior—such as slander, abusive language, and disinformation—are insufficient, and they call for new regulations. For example, Kakha Bekauri, head of the Communications Commission, has called for new measures to ensure a just-the-facts approach to news that would bar politically motivated messaging.<sup>18</sup> Gia Gachechiladze, a founder of the public movement known as Ai la and who hosts a show on Maestro TV, has asked parliament to amend the broadcasting law to “prevent the dissemination of slanderous and fabricated, insulting information by journalists.”<sup>19</sup> Parliament Speaker Shalva Papuashvili said existing mechanisms, including self-regulatory councils of media outlets, a charter of journalism ethics, and the courts, have not stemmed the spread of slander and misinformation by the media and that “regulation should be introduced for the things that cannot be solved by self-regulation.”<sup>20</sup>

Panelists saw danger in such rhetoric. They argued that in fragile democracies like Georgia, such tools in the hands of the government will be used to punish the media. While direct censorship is rare, members of the panel said the government and the allegedly pro-governmental Communications Commission interpret laws in such a way as to

“In this politicized environment, any change to the legislation—for instance, enforcement of the law on hate speech—that would give the government room for interpretation would be catastrophic,” said Andguladze.

control media and interfere with editorial policy. “Direct and indirect attempts are ongoing to change liberal laws,” TI Georgia’s Andguladze said, “In this politicized environment, any change to the legislation—for instance, enforcement of the law on hate speech—that would give the government room for interpretation would be catastrophic.” The Media Advocacy Coalition, made up of civil society organizations and media associations, has warned about the tendency of and attempts by the Communications Commission to intervene in media content by sanctioning critical channels such as Mtavari Arkhi under the pretense of policing obscenity.<sup>21</sup> Panelists also said the commission’s Media Critic,

a platform created as a media literacy tool, is used to censor the media that are critical of the government. All of which makes the panelists expect further deterioration in media legislation and enforcement.

Unprecedented physical violence against journalists was recorded in Georgia in 2021. As already mentioned, on July 5–6 journalists covering demonstrations against the Tbilisi Pride March were

attacked by homophobic, far-right groups. The assaults, which took place in various parts of the city simultaneously, lasted for several hours; journalists, cameramen, photographers and—anyone from the media—were targeted to prevent them from doing their jobs. Some were physically assaulted, and those who tried to flee were chased and had their equipment damaged. Members of the media resorted to hiding their press badges and equipment. Ten media outlets reported property damage and 53 media representatives were reportedly injured by the demonstrators; some were hospitalized with serious injuries requiring surgery. Lekso Lashkarava, a cameraman for TV Pirveli who was among the hospitalized, died a few days after the violence. An independent investigation is underway to determine the cause of his death.

The police stood by during the violence, as has been amply documented

18 “Media Advocacy Coalition Responds to Kakha Bekauri’s Statement.” Radio Liberty. December 6, 2021. <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/31596275.html>.

19 Gugulashvili, Magda. “‘Utsnobi’s’ Initiative – Threat to Free Expression.” Media Checker. November 4, 2021. <https://www.mediachecker.ge/ka/mediagaremo/article/90050-ucnobis-iniciativa-gamokhatvis-thavisuflebis-shezghudvis-saftrkhke>.

20 Gugulashvili, Magda. “Whatever the Charter of Ethics Says, the Result Is Zero—Media Through the Eyes of Shalva Papuashvili.” Media Checker. November 22, 2021. <https://www.mediachecker.ge/ka/interviu/article/90287-ethikis-qartiam-rac-unda-thqvas-shedegi-nulia-media-shalva-papuashvilis-thvalith>.

21 Georgian Democratic Initiative. “Tendency to Sanction Mtavari Arkhi Carries the Signs of Censorship.” November 26, 2021. <https://gdi.ge/ge/news/koalicia-media.page>.

in media reports. For instance, TV Pirveli reporter Giorgi Maisuradze said the police did not intervene but instead watched as his cameraman, Levan Bitsadze, was beaten.<sup>22</sup> Many civil and watchdog organizations hold the government responsible for the violence.<sup>23</sup> “The authorities have not taken measures to stop violent groups despite knowing in advance of the risk of aggression and violence on their part,” Transparency International Georgia said in a statement at the time. Prime Minister Irakli Gharibashvili, however, said the opposition was behind the violence.<sup>24</sup> Jeanne Cavelier, the head of Reporters Without Borders’ Eastern Europe and Central Asia desk, called the events a major setback for press freedom in Georgia.<sup>25</sup> “The intensity and coordination of the violence were unprecedented. Journalists must be able to freely cover any demonstration, and the police have a duty to protect them while they are doing their job,” she said in a July 7 statement. According to official reports, 27 people are being investigated in connection with the violence.

Ahead of the events, Gharibashvili urged LGBTQ communities not to march, as “95 percent of our population are against it and we shall [respect] that.”<sup>26</sup> In response, TI Georgia said

**“This year the governments’ propaganda that journalists are enemies directly resulted in assaults on journalists physically. ... Physical retaliation against journalists has become the norm,” Jangirashvili said.**

Gharibashvili’s statement and police inaction had essentially encouraged violence against the media on July 5–6.<sup>27</sup> Panel members were alarmed at the government’s rhetoric discrediting journalists, which they alleged leads to violence. “This year the governments’ propaganda that journalists are enemies directly resulted in assaults on journalists physically. ... Physical retaliation against journalists has become the norm,” Jangirashvili, of TV Kavkasia, said.

Panelists agreed that the events of July 5–6 had worsened the media environment, encouraged violence against media professionals, and turned journalism into an utterly dangerous profession. “Many journalists say that for the first time, they are afraid to go out to cover issues that will offend the majority of the population,” Danelia, the media professor, said. “Such encouragement of violence against the media by official bodies resulted in the abuse and humiliation of media representatives, sometimes even by ordinary people,” Tsetskhladze added. Jangirashvili said

young journalists are especially afraid to carry out their professional duties. “We always struggled to find the right staff in the region, and now, after these events, it has become even more difficult,” said Mamedova of Radio Marneuli. Panelists also noted strong hostility toward journalists trying to cover the municipal elections in October. The Media Advocacy Coalition counted at least 37 cases of obstruction of journalistic activities, including physical and verbal attacks, some of which are being investigated by law enforcement agencies.<sup>28</sup>

There were other instances of violence against journalists throughout the year. Formula TV anchor Vakho Sanaia and a family member were

22 Reporters Without Borders. “Attacks on 53 Journalists Is a Major Setback for Press Freedom in Georgia, RSF Says.” July 7, 2021. <https://rsf.org/en/news/attacks-53-journalists-major-setback-press-freedom-georgia-rsf-says>.

23 Transparency International Georgia. “Prime Minister of Georgia Should Resign Immediately Due to the Severe Consequences of the July 5 Violence.” July 11, 2021. <https://transparency.ge/en/post/prime-minister-georgia-should-resign-immediately-due-severe-consequences-july-5-violence>.

24 “Irakli Gharibashvili: Violence against Media on July 5 Damaged Church-Planned Peaceful Demonstration and Government.” Radio Liberty. July 7, 2021. <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/31345862.html>.

25 Reporters Without Borders. “Attacks on 53 Journalists Is a Major Setback for Press Freedom in Georgia, RSF Says.” July 7, 2021. <https://rsf.org/en/news/attacks-53-journalists-major-setback-press-freedom-georgia-rsf-says>.

26 “Gharibashvili on LGBT Pride: ‘95% Against Propagandistic Parade.’” Civil.ge. July 12, 2021. <https://civil.ge/archives/431658>.

27 Transparency International Georgia. “Government Inaction Encourages Violence by Aggressive Groups against the Media.” July 5, 2021. <https://transparency.ge/en/post/government-inaction-encourages-violence-aggressive-groups-against-media>.

28 Media Advocacy Coalition. *Media Environment Assessment. Local Self-Government Elections in Georgia, 2021. Rounds I&II*. Undated. [https://drive.google.com/file/d/1m\\_eX6jCOx21G0nFTf70tYGlui8PD1ypS/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1m_eX6jCOx21G0nFTf70tYGlui8PD1ypS/view).

assaulted by three drunken men in the center of Tbilisi in early 2021. The men were arrested and six months later were found guilty. They were sentenced to six months in prison, but counting time served, they were released the same day they were convicted.

Late in 2021, the ruling party fast-tracked a package of bills to tighten gambling laws that included a near-complete ban on gambling advertising, upon which some media heavily rely. Some civil society and media organizations warned that the legislation could undermine the already-shaky independence of broadcasters and further shrink the dwindling media market.<sup>29</sup> “The authorities have a very clear political objective to create discomfort for the media,” one leader of the opposition said about the measures, which are set to take effect in early 2022.<sup>30</sup>

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

Panelists said people in Georgia can get information through various channels, but their access depends on geographic, economic, and other factors. According to a September survey by Geostat, the national statistics office, 86.1 percent of households have internet access through fixed lines, and 97.6 percent have it through mobile devices.<sup>31</sup> Freedom House’s *Freedom in the Net 2021* report put Georgia among the “free” countries, the highest category, but cited “slow progress in expanding internet infrastructure” as an obstacle to internet access.<sup>32</sup> Netgazeti’s Tsetskhladze lamented that “the internet is not available to everyone,

despite the promise” of the country’s Universal Internetization Project, launched in 2015 by the Ministry of the Economy and Sustainable Development. The project aims to build a fiber-optic network in areas where high costs or low demand have kept out commercial internet service providers. It was to be up and running by 2020, managed by a nonprofit and funded by a commercial bank. But the program did not start until 2020, and it is being implemented with funding from the World Bank.<sup>33</sup>

Panelists also said access to information channels has become yet another casualty of the pandemic and its attendant economic hardship. “Nowadays, all household devices are used more for educational purposes than for consuming information,” Kuprashvili, of the broadcasters’ alliance, said. The government-mandated switch to online education during the pandemic has exposed the problem of children’s access to TV and online lessons. “The majority of the country’s population is in a difficult socioeconomic situation and does not have appropriate technical equipment and/or internet access to enable them to participate in lessons,” the Georgian Young Lawyer’s Association said in a statement on International Children’s Day.<sup>34</sup> Fixed internet service is of poor quality or unavailable in some rural areas, and mobile internet is comparatively pricey. Access to information channels is also a problem for people with disabilities, especially for the deaf and hard of hearing, said Mamedova, who noted that very few channels, such as the public broadcaster, offer programs with sign-language interpretation.

### **Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for government information.**

Georgia’s public information laws meet international standards, but

29 “We Negatively Assess Expedited Discussion of a Legislative Package on Gambling—Media Advocacy Coalition.” Publika. December 14, 2021. <https://publika.ge/uaryofitad-vafasebt-azartul-tamashebbe-sakanonmdeblo-paketis-dachqarebuli-wesit-gankhilvas-mediakoalicia/>.

30 “Betting on Populism? Draft Gambling Laws Under Scrutiny.” Civil.ge. December 7, 2021. <https://civil.ge/archives/459205>.

31 Geostat. Indicators of Using Information and Communication Technologies in Households. September 10, 2021. <https://www.geostat.ge/en/single-news/2324/indicators-of-using-information-and-communication-technologies-ict-in-households-2021>.

32 Shahbaz, Adrian and Allie Funk. *Freedom on the Net 2021*. Freedom House. Undated. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/georgia/freedom-net/2021>.

33 Tkeshelashvili, Shota. “Universal Internet—Five Years of Promises and Re-Announced Project.” Business Media Georgia. January 13, 2020. <https://bm.ge/ka/article/sayoveltao-internetizacia--dapirebebis-5-weli-da-xelaxla-da-anonsebuli-proeqti-/46896>; Internews. *Georgia: An Information Ecosystem Assessment*. February 20, 2021. [https://internews.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Georgia-Information-Ecosystem-Part\\_1.pdf](https://internews.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Georgia-Information-Ecosystem-Part_1.pdf).

34 Georgian Young Lawyers Association. “GYLA Statement on the International Children’s Day.” June 1, 2021. <https://gyla.ge/en/post/saias-ganckhadeba-bavshvta-dacvis-saertashorisodghestan-dakavshirebit>.

their implementation has seen drastic regression. The panelists said the government’s communication with the media had degenerated in 2021. For instance, they said, officials had cut off critical media from public information by regularly inviting only friendly media, including the public broadcaster, to official briefings and press conferences. “Discrimination against journalists has become more frequent,” the Charter of Journalistic Ethics complained in a December statement. It cited Culture Minister Thea Tsulukiani blocking some media from briefings in November and December and the Ministry of Justice doing the same in November.<sup>35</sup>

Dzvelishvili said press offices of the Ministry of Justice and National Center for Disease Control and Public Health that are “blocking information instead of spreading it” exemplify the overall state policy. The Institute for Development of Freedom of Information said at the end of 2021, it had requested COVID-19 death statistics by different indicators from the Ministry of Health but had received only incomplete and inconsistent data.<sup>36</sup>

Access to public information remains critically limited partially because of the pandemic, but as Tsetskhladze noted, “The media cannot get not only officially requested information, but even an answer to a simple question [like] whether the ex-president Mikheil Saakashvili is on a hunger strike or not.” Government agencies continue to discourage critical questions on problematic issues, whether they be about the pandemic and its management or elections.

The deteriorating communication illustrates how little accountability government officials feel to the media, panelists argued. Officials boycott political talk shows, including preelection debates on critical media, muzzling the media watchdogs and depriving audiences of the

opportunity to learn their positions on issues.<sup>37</sup>

### **Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow.**

Panel members said broadcast licensing and spectrum allocation procedures, which used to be simple, have become complex and unfair. The case of the Communications Commission’s refusal to authorize Radio Lile in 2020, which was appealed in court, exposed how complex the procedure has become. The court ruled that the commission could demand an audit report on the organization’s financial sustainability, but Gogosashvili, of the Ethics Charter, spoke for many when she noted that the law does not obligate media to audit themselves before they have even launched. In that light, she also wondered how the far-right Alt-Info had received the commission’s blessing, doubting its ability to provide an audit report or other valid documents on financial sustainability. Gogosashvili said the commission’s decision against Radio Lile was biased and unfair.

The commission is trying to extend the reach of radio broadcasts into more remote areas. Last year, it expanded the transmission areas permitted to stations, most of which had been licensed to broadcast in bigger cities. In addition to nudging existing broadcasters into neglected regions, the commission hoped to attract new broadcasters.<sup>38</sup> But some radio stations see the expansion as a potential financial burden, just as they are readying to switch from analog to digital broadcasting. The Media Advocacy Coalition criticized the decision, stating, “The task of the Commission should be to extend the term of existing licenses for radio broadcasters until the date of transition to digital broadcasting.” Kuprashvili said broadcasters whose coverage areas have been expanded can be held liable for not fulfilling the obligation to reach their entire transmission zones, opening the door to potentially losing their license due to violating the terms mandated by the regulator.

35 Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics. “It Is Inadmissible to Restrict Media from Attending Sakrebulo Sessions.” December 20, 2021. <https://www.qartia.ge/ka/siakhleebi/article/90639-2021-12-20-14-03-26>.

36 Institute for Development of Freedom of Information. “Limited and Mutually Exclusive Statistics on COVID-19 Death Rate.” December 28, 2021. [https://idfi.ge/ge/limited\\_and\\_mutually\\_exclusive\\_statistics\\_on\\_covid-19\\_deaths](https://idfi.ge/ge/limited_and_mutually_exclusive_statistics_on_covid-19_deaths).

37 Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics. “Threatening Statements and Harassment of Public Broadcaster Journalist Ketu Tutberidze Contain Real Threats.” December 27, 2021. <https://www.qartia.ge/ka/ganckhadebebi>.

38 “Everyone Can Listen to the Radio—Communications Commission Expands Broadcast Area.” Imedi. March 11, 2021. <https://imedinews.ge/ge/sazogadoeba/191117/radios-mosmenis-shesadzlebloba-kvelas-komunikatsiebis-komisiam-samautskeblo-areali-gaapartova>.

### Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.

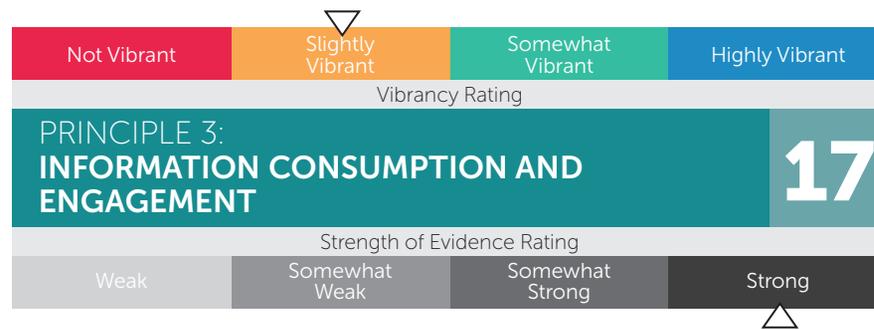
The panelists gave low scores to GPB for failing to provide the public with critical content and being loyal to the government, though they said it still airs some quality programs. Panel members disagreed somewhat on the case of Irakli Absandze, the host of GPB's *Weekly Interview* program, who was fired by the station's general director allegedly for violating its rules on employee use of social media. Absandze himself linked his dismissal to his activities on Facebook and during the events of July 5–6, when he cursed government agencies and used obscenities.<sup>39</sup> Most panelists agreed that his real offense had been to criticize the government and GPB's editorial decisions. "Irakli's obscene statements are a problem, but they're not of the kind and intensity to get him fired," Andguladze said.

Adjara Public TV has stayed the course it set on after a shake-up of leadership and staff in 2019 and 2020, which panelists deemed was due to government intrusion into the broadcaster's editorial policy. Before the election, Iakinte Chkhartishvili, former chairman of the Chamber of Commerce of Adjara, was appointed deputy director, and Nazibrola Kobuladze, a former spokeswoman for the local roads department, was picked to lead the newsroom.<sup>40</sup> Sofia Zhgenti, head of online services at the channel, said dozens of lawsuits have been filed by journalists fired by director Giorgi Kokhleidze accusing him of violating their labor rights.

Most media organizations are subsidized by their owners, whose considerable sway over their editorial policies is obvious in their programming, panelists said. "Some owners give more editorial freedom to their media organizations, some less," Jangirashvili said. Panel members also said that media loyal to the government continue to receive most of the government's advertising contracts.

39 "Media Advocacy Coalition: Absandze's Release from the GPB May Be Linked to Criticism of the Government." Radio Liberty. August 13, 2021. <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/31409195.html>.

40 "Former Chairman of Adjara Chamber of Commerce Has Been Appointed Deputy Director of Adjara Public Television." Radio Liberty. January 8, 2021. <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/31039001.html>.



Georgia has laws and tools that allow its people to use and engage with information. The internet and social media are freely available for anyone to register and use, but data privacy and personal security can be compromised too easily. The state cybersecurity system remains weak, and despite some progress, citizen's media literacy level is low, the panel members noted. The overall score for this principle was 17, down two points from the 2021 VIBE study. Subindicators on privacy protections and security tools and media literacy scored lowest of all.

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

Online privacy is regulated mainly by the 2013 law on personal data protection, which panelists said is frequently misused by state and public bodies. An example of this was when the Interior Ministry was fined for violating cameraman Lekso Lashkarava's privacy after he was beaten in the July protests and subsequently died. In June 2021, Georgia's parliament adopted a controversial amendment to the 2012 law on information security, which among other things defines the rights and responsibilities for public and private actors in the field. Introduced by members of the ruling party, it grants the Operational Technical Agency (OTA), an organization under the State Security Services, direct access to the information systems of the executive, legislative, and judicial branches, as well as telecommunications companies,

and indirect access to individuals' and companies' data.<sup>41</sup> Noting a conflict, Gogosashvili said the OTA determines where information will be obtained, extracts the information itself,—and monitors how the information is obtained. She said that even though the law does not apply to mass media, the fact that the OTA both carries out the law and monitors its own implementation makes it hard to determine whether media representatives are really protected.

There were several leaks of secretly recorded materials in 2021. In March, TV Pirveli aired audio conversations, apparently recorded covertly, in which the son of Georgian Dream party founder Bidzina Ivanishvili, rap singer Bera Ivanishvili, allegedly asks the head of the Special State Protection Service to punish young people who had insulted the Ivanishvili family online.<sup>42</sup> There was speculation that these documents were also recorded by State Security Services. Then in September, several media outlets reported on a leak of tens of thousands of files, including religious leaders' conversations with journalists; diplomats, including US and EU ambassadors; school principals; and representatives of civil society, as well as with one another.<sup>43</sup> Several journalists confirmed the authenticity of their conversations with clerical figures.

In August, the Mtavari Arkhi TV channel aired alleged memos of the State Security Service on journalists, opposition and ruling party politicians,

41 Institute for the Development of Freedom of Information. "The Parliament of the X Convocation Adopted the Problematic Law on Information Security with the III Reading." June 11, 2021. [https://idfi.ge/en/the\\_parliament\\_of\\_the\\_10\\_convocation\\_adopted\\_the\\_problematic\\_draft\\_law\\_on\\_information\\_security](https://idfi.ge/en/the_parliament_of_the_10_convocation_adopted_the_problematic_draft_law_on_information_security).

42 Covert Recordings: Bera Ivanishvili Heard Tasking Security Official with Personal Revenge? Civil.ge. March 6, 2021. <https://civil.ge/archives/403782>.

43 Mandaria, Tornike. "Georgia Flooded with Leaked Surveillance Recordings of Clergy," Eurasianet. September 17, 2021. <https://eurasianet.org/georgia-flooded-with-leaked-surveillance-recordings-of-clergy>.

activists, priests, businesspeople, and other public figures.<sup>44</sup>

The year ended with parliament voting to abolish the State Inspector's Service, over local and international protests, with the aim of splitting it into two agencies.<sup>45</sup> In a statement, the US Embassy said, "The ruling party undermined government accountability by abolishing the State Inspector's Service, which is mandated to investigate police abuse and protect data privacy."<sup>46</sup>

Training programs and open-access resources on digital security and digital hygiene are available to both professional and non-professional

content producers. Some panelists said more organizations have offered trainings and courses during the COVID-19 pandemic but that some groups still have only middling knowledge of digital security tools. IREX's Securing Access to Free Expression (SAFE) initiative is the most frequently mentioned digital-skills training by members of the media and civil society organizations. Lili Pulariani, a digital communications specialist, said trainings are mostly available for media representatives when they are organized by media outlets, but they are less available to

independent bloggers or other nonprofessional content producers, who are left vulnerable to cyberthreats. Pulariani also said schoolteachers are mostly self-taught and are equipped with very basic data literacy or digital security skills. Jinjikhadze said even state organizations struggle to establish rigorous practices and standards to secure critical assets. In

**“Danelia noted that regions populated predominantly by ethnic communities, who are exposed to Russian propaganda through Russian entertainment programs, should not be overlooked by organizations and donors looking to promote media literacy.”**

44 Shoshvashvili, Tata. "Georgian Security Services Accused of Mass-Surveillance of Public Figures," On.ge. August 2, 2021. <https://oc-media.org/georgian-security-services-accused-of-mass-surveillance-of-public-figures/>.

45 "GD Aims to Dissolve Outspoken State Inspector's Service." Civil.ge. December 27, 2021. <https://civil.ge/archives/464400>.

46 US Embassy in Georgia. "US Embassy Statement on the Ruling Party's Rushed, End-of-Year Legislation." January 3, 2022. <https://ge.usembassy.gov/u-s-embassy-statement-on-the-ruling-partys-rushed-end-of-year-legislation/>.

the summer of 2021, the Georgian Research and Educational Networking Association reported a distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attack on its server. As a result, the websites of its clients On.ge and Publika.ge went down. Nino Dolidze, executive director of the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy, said an April cyberattack crashed its website.

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

Georgia's media- and information-literacy policy is determined by laws on education and the broadcast media. According to a Media Development Foundation report, the policy meets UNESCO and EU standards.<sup>47</sup> Since 2017, the Communications Commission has been responsible for implementing the policy by coordinating the work of state and private actors in media literacy and promoting educational projects, conducting research, and developing a media-literacy strategy and action plan.

“At the policy level, the Communications Commission carries out more activities than before, but because of the double standards it applies, its policy becomes incongruous,” the Media Development Foundation's Kintsurashvili said, “On the one hand, it is involved in a campaign against media, and on the other, it is responsible for media literacy.” Media literacy is a teachable skill in secondary schools, but the government needs to help teachers become more media literate. Civil society groups do more than state agencies to boost media literacy in Georgia, and there is little coordination, or even complementarity, between the two sectors, professor Danelia said. She said the level of cooperation might depend on how loyal any given group is to the government. Several panelists said media-literacy programs tend to be targeted at young people and do not reach a demographically or geographically diverse audience. Danelia noted that regions populated predominantly by ethnic communities, who are exposed to Russian propaganda through Russian

entertainment programs, should not be overlooked by organizations and donors looking to promote media literacy.

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

Georgia has various platforms similar to town halls, including public councils within city districts and in regional governments. Some panel members said public councils are generally pro forma, and in practice, the government holds great sway over the process. Some panel members said people who are not activists or members of the media are less engaged in public debates for fear of reprisal from authorities. Mamedova, of Radio Marneuli, said people might feel safer expressing their opinions on certain contentious matters on social media rather than in public forums. She also said language barriers can inhibit some minorities from engaging in open public debates. USAID has set up Civic Engagement Centers that offer a safe space for all to meet and discuss issues.<sup>48</sup>

Panelists noted that open digital communications such as social media are riddled with misinformation, mal-information, and hate speech. Kintsurashvili said pro-government trolls commonly bully influencers on social media, resulting in “a chilling effect on some people.” According to Myth Detector, after TV Pirveli aired audio of a conversation allegedly involving Bera Ivanishvili and Prime Minister Irakli Gharibashvili, two new Facebook pages, “ჟურნალისტი” (Journalist) and “ნოდარ მეზღაპრე” (Nodar the Storyteller), were created to target the channel and the host of the investigative news program airing it, Nodar Meladze.<sup>49</sup> The page Nodar the Storyteller was pushed to people's social media feeds as sponsored content to maximize audience reach.

Tsetskhladze said the social media channels of Netgazeti.ge/Batumelebi.

47 Media Development Foundation and Baltic Centre for Media Excellence. *Media Literacy Sector Mapping in Georgia, Latvia, Moldova and Ukraine. Georgia Country Report*. 2021. [https://mdfgeorgia.ge/uploads//ML\\_Georgia\\_Country\\_Report\\_2021.pdf](https://mdfgeorgia.ge/uploads//ML_Georgia_Country_Report_2021.pdf).

48 Network of Centers for Civic Engagement. “About Us.” <https://cce.ge/ka/about>.

49 Kistauri, Ani and Mariam Dangadze. “Newly Created Facebook Pages and Old Trolls Rush to Protect Bera and Confront Journalists.” Myth Detector. March 15, 2021. <https://www.mythdetector.ge/en/myth/newly-created-facebook-pages-and-old-trolls-rush-protect-bera-and-confront-journalists>.

ge have struggled to moderate comments on Facebook, which requires huge effort during an influx of hate speech and disinformation about some topics. The Facebook pages of Netgazeti.ge/Batumelebi.ge use filtering options to keep comments germane, but they are no match for the many comments that contain disinformation but are nevertheless on topic.

Panelists said media and NGOs make frequent use of their freedom of speech and right to information and are highly experienced in exercising them. Referring to annual reports that public agencies are required to compile on releasing public information, some panelists said relatively few citizens exercise their right to information. All public institutions are obliged to submit these reports to the president, parliament, and the prime minister, and to publish them on the website of the country's official gazette, the *Legislative Herald*.

Tamar Kuratishvili, head of the Sirtskhvilia (Shame) movement's Batumi branch, was detained by police near the State Security Office on November 13 as she and several others tried to lay a protest banner that read, "You cannot arrest everyone" on the sidewalk. Kuratishvili was charged with petty hooliganism and disobeying an order from police but later was acquitted.<sup>50</sup> On another occasion, during the July 5–6 attack, a mob stormed the office of Sirtskhvilia, a civil activists' movement, which supports the country's LGBTQ community and liberalization in general.

Panelists said most people deal with misinformation, mal-information, and hate speech online either by filtering it out or debunking it rather than reporting it to the platforms, but several panelists mentioned organized groups that flag content on Facebook that they find unacceptable.

**“ Mamedova said people might feel safer expressing their opinions on social media rather than in public forums. She also said language barriers can inhibit some minorities from engaging in open public debates.**

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

Some media organizations have done limited research to better understand their audiences, often with support from donors.

Tsetskhladze said Netgazeti.ge/Batumelebi has benefited from a small qualitative audience study, which was funded by a donor in 2021, and Gela Mtvlishvili said a donor has supported several audience focus groups for Mtisambebi.ge, where he is an editor.

Quantitative data is available for national TV broadcasters from Nielsen licensee TVMR GE and Tri Media Intelligence (TMI), which is a licensee of the Kantar Group consulting giant. But some panel members said data from these two companies is sometimes in conflict and affects advertisers' decisions. Some media owners have alleged that Kantar Media (now simply the media division of Kantar), which entered the Georgian market in 2015, has links with some pro-government groups. Jangirashvili said she works with both, because different advertisers want data from different companies. Efforts to bring clarity to the situation have fallen victim to the distrust and partisanship that pervades Georgian public life: a 2021 voluntary audit, proposed by the Communications Commission and conducted by an outside company, was positive for TMI, but TVMR GE, wary of the commission and TMI's perceived links to the government, opted out.

Regional broadcasters' audiences are generally not measured individually. Kuprashvili said TVMR GE measures 10 regional broadcasters and provides aggregate data for all. Panelists representing media outlets said they use free tools, such as Google, Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram analytics. *Indigo* magazine's Dzvelishvili said she and her staff discuss information gleaned from these tools in weekly meetings to see what worked and what did not, and to determine what

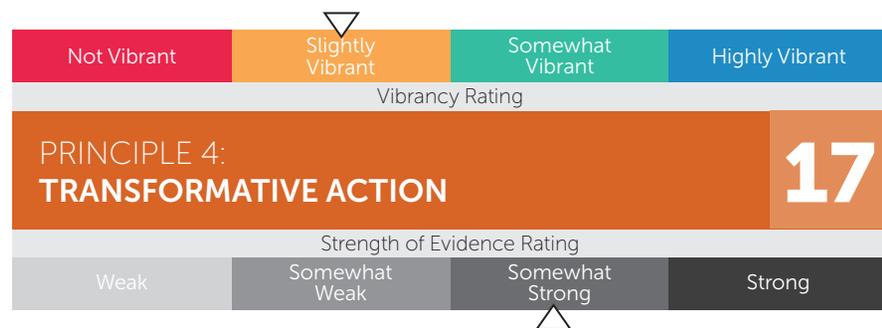
50 "Tamar Kuratishvili, Who Was Detained near the Batumi SSU Building on November 13, Was Acquitted by the Court." On.ge. November 19, 2021. <https://on.ge/story/94090>.

improvements to make.

Print media circulation is not measured, and only a few radio stations manage to carry out occasional audience studies.

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

Three out of four community radio stations in the country broadcast in minority-populated areas. Panelists familiar with these stations said they produce their own content, which upholds professional and ethical standards. Radio Nor broadcasts in the Armenian-populated town of Ninotsminda, Radio Pankisi in the region predominantly populated by Kists, Radio Marneuli operates in the Azeri-populated region of Marneuli, and Radio Mozaika in the town of Gori. Mtvlishvili, whose organization, the Kakheti Information Center, manages Radio Pankisi, said community media produce unique content. He said even in an era of political crisis and deeply polarized national media, Radio Pankisi provides important content to its audience, free from political influences. Mamedova said Radio Marneuli has helped develop a local culture of activism.



The panel gave low marks to the government’s engagement with critical media, civil society groups, and international organizations, and its efforts to support public discourse and informed electoral decisions. Panelists lamented that most of Georgian society has lined up with opposing political sides and partisan media that leave little space for healthy discourse. Subindicators on individuals’ use of quality

information to inform their actions and the government’s use of quality information to make public policy decisions scored the lowest, at 13 and 12, respectively.

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

Georgians increasingly turn to social media for information, but television remains the dominant information source. In a 2021 poll by the US National Democratic Institute and the Caucasus Research Resource Center-Georgia, 57 percent of respondents cited television as their first source of information about politics and current events, compared with 35 percent who named the internet and social media. Young people rely more on the internet and social media for their news: the same survey found that 62 percent of respondents ages 18 to 34 accessed news about Georgian politics and current events online.<sup>51</sup>

In a 2021 survey by the International Republican Institute, only 58 percent of respondents took a positive view of Georgia’s media.<sup>52</sup> Such relatively low trust could stem, at least in part, from the highly polarized and politicized media environment, in which broadcast media, especially, are split into pro-government and pro-opposition camps and produce partisan content criticizing political entities they dislike. For example, the most influential opposition TV channels, Mtavari Arkhi and TV Pirveli, avoided coverage of the ruling party’s electoral campaign in 2021 and supported the opposition parties, especially the United National Movement. Likewise, content on Imedi TV, the leading pro-government channel, steered clear of criticizing the ruling Georgian Dream party while harshly criticizing the opposition parties, including United National Movement, according to a report by the Georgian

51 National Democratic Institute and the Caucasus Research Resource Center-Georgia. *Public Attitudes in Georgia: Results of July 2021 Telephone Survey*. Undated. <https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20Georgia%20-%20Poll%20Results%20-%20July%202021%20Poll%20-%20ENG%20-%20Final.pdf?fbclid=IwAR3KcnyY9FM4Xw8Lj-H85acfuoyI-cWYSwkncUgf8abEkgHeAc8EX2KvI5o>.

52 Afriamashvili, Sophie. “Georgian Media Is in Fifth Place in the Rating of Institutions—IRI.” *Netgazeti*. August 2, 2021. <https://netgazeti.ge/news/557486/>.

Charter of Journalistic Ethics commissioned by the United Nations Development Program and the EU.<sup>53</sup> A similar trend was noted on Rustavi 2.

Panel members noted that Georgia has a few nonpartisan media outlets that operate mostly online but have less influence on public opinion than party-aligned media, as they reach relatively small audiences. Still, these outlets punch above their weight because they are widely deemed credible. For example, Tsetskhladze, of Netgazeti.ge, said the website’s count of demonstrators at an opposition rally received no pushback, as “the figures were published by Netgazeti and not Imedi TV and Mtavari TV.” Kintsurashvili, of the Media Development Foundation, said that in international reports, “We cite information published by these media because of their credibility.”

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

Panelists said Georgians tend to accept and share information uncritically and often have preconceived notions on certain topics, such as the pandemic, that prevent them from properly understanding information. Amid these concerns, panelists deemed media invitations to anti-vaxxers to speak to the public inappropriate and irresponsible, citing specifically Imedi TV’s popular *Prime Show* for inviting antivaxxers like Tina Topuria and giving her the opportunity to spread anti vaccination messages publicly.<sup>54</sup> “It is a crime to invite anti-vaxxers when we are in a pandemic.

**“We say that the government’s response to criticism is inadequate, but it does not mean that media don’t influence the government’s actions,” Jangirashvili said.**

It is not about freedom of speech, as no fact-based information was provided,” Jangirashvili said. The panel also discussed the influence of ultra-right, anti-liberal groups—who consider the pandemic a blessing because it has slowed immigration and isolated Georgia from Europe—on social media. “Sandro Bregadze, a far-right activist, declared that immigration is a punishment for our Western orientation and that the worse our COVID-19 statistics are, the more isolated we’ll become from the West,” Kintsurashvili recounted.

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

Panelists praised the important role of international organizations and domestic civil society in leading healthy democratic processes by providing training for communities and the media, conducting research and campaigns, raising awareness, and engaging with government agencies on various issues. These groups’ influence, however, has diminished, panelists said, as the government seldom cooperates with them anymore and hardly cares about international opinion. “Before, the government used to respond to our findings when they were cited

in reports by the US Department of State,” Kintsurashvili said. “Now they do not care at all.” She noted that the Sinamdvileshi (In Reality) Facebook page set up by the Georgian Dream party frequently criticizes Transparency International and contains misleading information. “The government works against NGOs,” Mamedova said, pointing to the example

of the Social Justice Center, which worked for years in Marneuli. The group ended some of its activities in the Muslim-majority area after the local government incited a backlash against it for advocating that a mosque receive the same public funding given to the Orthodox Church. Government-organized nongovernmental organizations, known as GONGOs, continue to damage the reputation of the sector by creating counteractivities against genuine NGOs.

53 Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics. *Study and Research on Election Media Coverage for the 2021 Municipal Elections in Georgia. TV News Monitoring Preliminary Report.* 2021. [http://mediamonitor.ge/uploads\\_script/accounts/doc\\_eng/11\\_GSJ-TV\\_NEWS\\_ENG\\_09.2021.pdf](http://mediamonitor.ge/uploads_script/accounts/doc_eng/11_GSJ-TV_NEWS_ENG_09.2021.pdf).

54 Gugulashvili, Magda. “False Balance on the Topic of Covid-19 Vaccine on TV Imedi.” Media Checker. April 22, 2021. <https://www.mediachecker.ge/ka/chveni-gundi/87874-dezinformacia-kovid-vaqcinis-shesakheb-qtv-imedzeq?image=>.

Despite these setbacks, panel members said international and watchdog organizations play a key role in strengthening Georgia's democratic institutions. They named several powerful NGOs that operate in the country, including Transparency International, the Georgian Young Lawyers Association, the Georgian Charter for Journalistic Ethics, the Institute for Development of Freedom of Information, the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy, the Georgian Democracy Initiative, and the Media Development Foundation.

“If the media had no influence, then the government would not [be trying] to destroy critical media in Georgia,” Gogosashvili said.

the media crying out about the violence, they would not have detained even those 29 attackers.” Panelists said the government follows media and reacts to it internally but makes no official public response. “If the media had no influence, then the government would not [be trying] to destroy critical media in Georgia,” the

ethics charter's Gogosashvili said.

Mtivlishvili said local government has made changes “mostly of a social character” in response to reporting by his organization, Mtisambebi.ge.

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

The government's engagement with civil society and media has decreased, even as it still maintains press briefings and social media pages. The government conducts fewer debates and press conferences to explain its policy decisions and political discourse, the panel members said. Dolidze said the government used to include civil society in the decision-making process on nonpolitical topics more often. “This year the situation has worsened and when it comes to political topics, civil society's involvement in the process is formal,” she said.

### **Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic rights.**

Panelists said that despite the government's diminished accountability and cooperation with media and civil society, the media and NGOs support good governance by demanding a response from officials. The ruling party ignores critical and neutral media, communicates only with pro-government media, and ignores the recommendations of international organizations and NGOs. “We say that the government's response to criticism is inadequate, but it does not mean that media don't influence the government's actions,” Jangirashvili said. Referring to the July 5–6 violence against journalists, Dzelishvili said, “If not for

## LIST OF PANEL PARTICIPANTS

**Mamuka Andguladze**, program manager, *Transparency International Georgia*; professor, *Caucasus University*, Tbilisi

**Nino Danelia**, media professor, *Ilia State University*, Tbilisi

**Nino Dolidze**, executive director, *International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy*

**Nata Dzvelishvili**, director, *Indigo Publishing*; instructor, *Black Sea University*, Tbilisi

**Mariam Gogosashvili**, executive director, *Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics*, Tbilisi

**Nino Jangirashvili**, director, *Kavkasia TV*, Tbilisi

**Khatia Jinjikhadze**, manager, *Open Society Georgia Foundation media support program*, Tbilisi

**Tamar Kintsurashvili**, executive director, *Media Development Foundation*; associate professor, *Ilia State University*, Tbilisi

**Natia Kuprashvili**, chairwoman, *Journalism Resource Center*; associate professor, *Tbilisi State University*; executive director, *Georgian Association of Regional Broadcasters*

**Ia Mamaladze**, publisher, *Guria News*, Guria

**Kamila Mamedova**, director, *Community Radio Marneuli*, Marneuli

**Lili Pulariani**, digital communications specialist, Tbilisi

**Maia Mikashavidze**, director, *Internews Georgia office*; professor, *Georgian Institute of Public Affairs*, Tbilisi

**Gela Mtvlishvili**, director, *Information Centers Network*; editor, *Mtisambebi.ge* and *Reginfo.ge*, Kakheti

**Nestan Tsetskhladze**, chief editor, *Netgazeti.ge*, Tbilisi

**Sofia Zhgenti**, head of online service, *Adjara Public Broadcaster*, Batumi

## MODERATORS AND AUTHORS

**Ekaterine Basilaia**, researcher, *Georgian Institute of Public Affairs/Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University*, Tbilisi

**Nino Makhviladze**, professor, *Georgian Institute of Public Affairs*, Tbilisi

Copyright © 2022 by IREX

**Notice of Rights:** Permission is granted to display, copy, and distribute VIBE in whole or in part, provided that: (a) the materials are used with the acknowledgment “The Vibrant Information Barometer (VIBE) is a product of IREX with funding from USAID.”; (b) VIBE is used solely for personal, noncommercial, or informational use; and (c) no modifications of VIBE are made.

This study is made possible by the support of the American People through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The opinions expressed herein are those of the panelists and other project researchers and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID, the United States Government, or IREX.

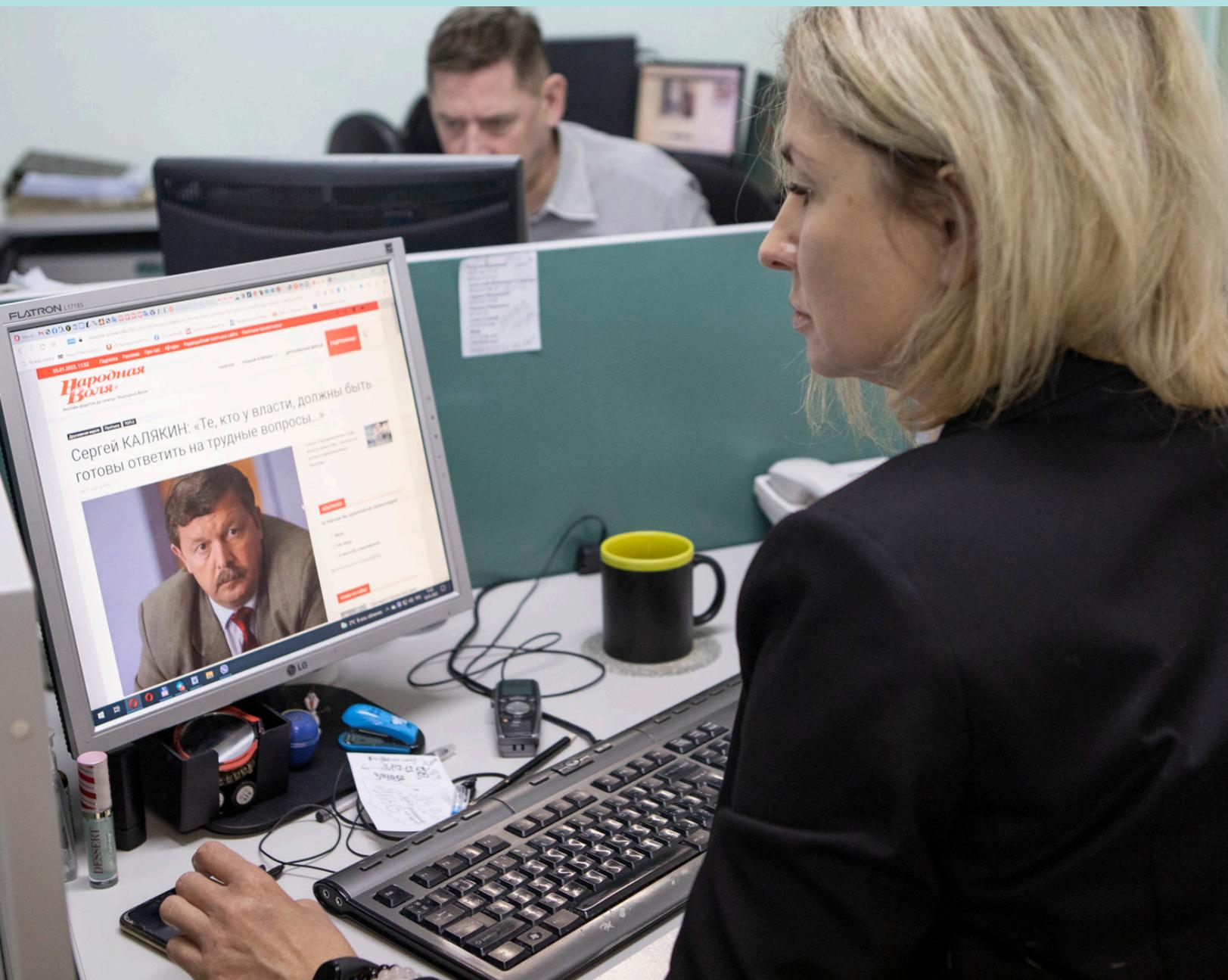


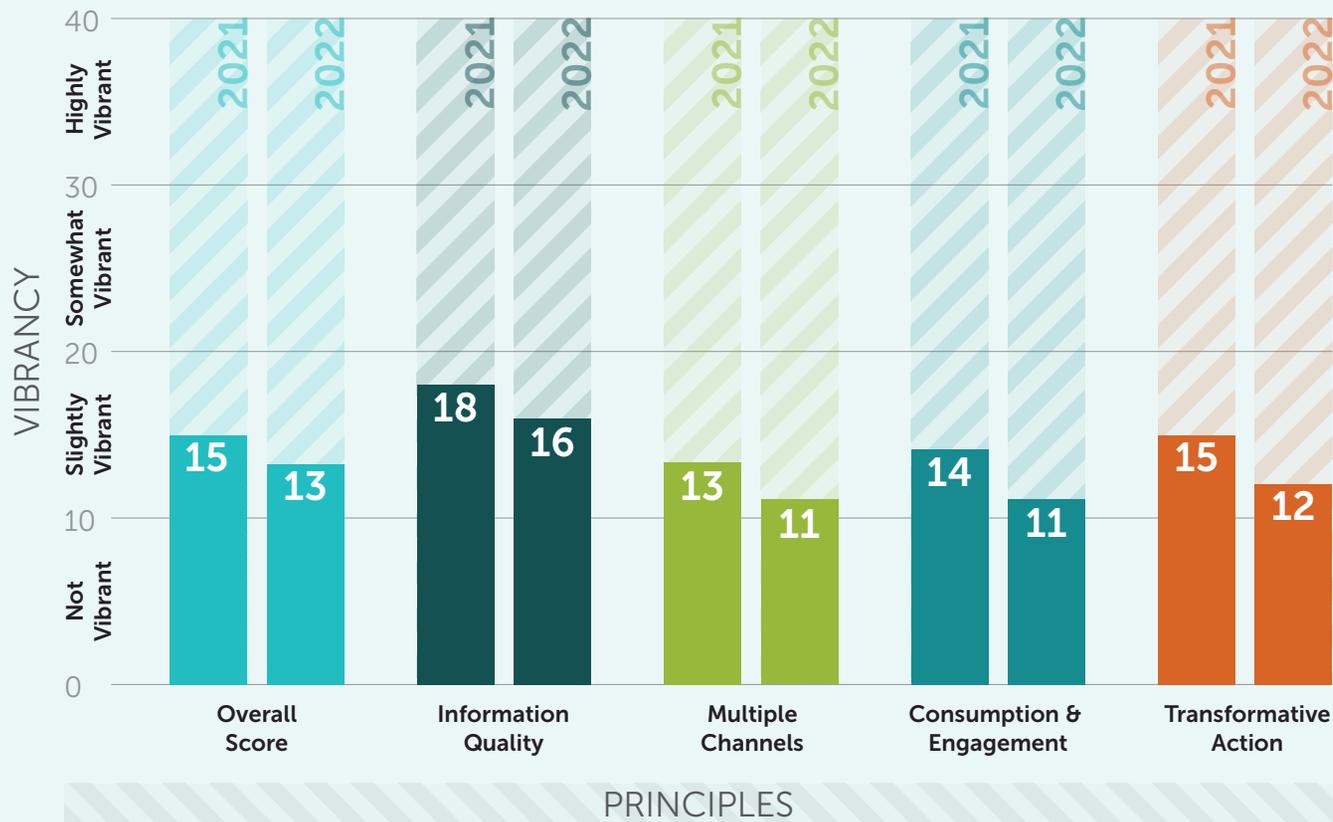
# RUSSIA & WESTERN EURASIA

# BELARUS

## 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**13**

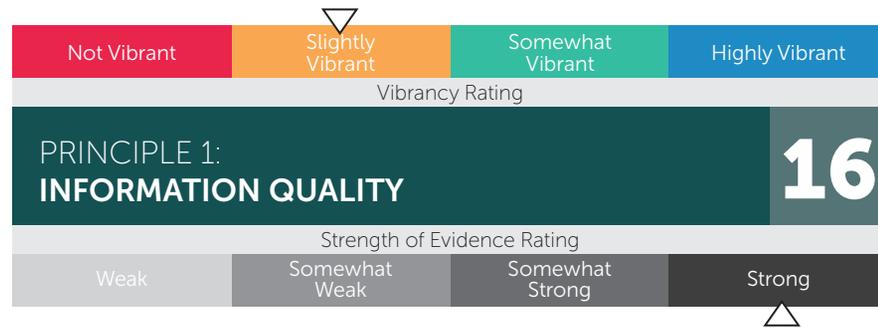
Repressions against journalists and media in Belarus intensified in 2021. The Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ) registered 113 cases of arbitrary detentions of journalists in 2021, 29 cases of administrative arrest, and four journalists received criminal sentences. Police and KGB officers performed 146 searches of journalists' houses, most often while investigating criminal cases under Article 289 ("an act of terrorism") or Article 342 ("organization and preparation of actions that grossly violate public order or active participation in them") of the criminal code. At the end of 2021, 32 journalists and media workers were behind bars either in pretrial detention, serving administrative terms, or serving prison terms on criminal charges.

In spring 2021, amendments to the law "On Counteraction to Extremism" introduced new grounds for making people liable for expressing their opinion. As a result, it became a common practice to recognize independent media as "extremist materials" or, in some cases, recognize media outlets as "extremist groups." Media were blocked or forced into exile through various repression tools.

Media law amendments in force since June 2021 ban live reports from events and hyperlinks to content prohibited by authorities or the mirror websites that host them. More state agencies, including prosecutors and the Interagency Committee on Information Security, got the power to block access to online information sources that disseminate content that the government calls "extremist" or harming national interests. Accreditation of journalists who spread what government officials deem "fake news" can be revoked at any moment.

On May 23, 2021, Belarusian authorities arrested blogger Raman Pratasevich (former coeditor of NEXTA portal) and his girlfriend Sofia Sapega after a forced landing of a Vilnius-bound Ryanair flight in Minsk. This incident led to the suspension of all European and U.S. flights in Minsk and a ban from European airspace for the state monopolist airline Belavia. Pratasevich, who was moved to house arrest later in 2021, appeared at several press conferences and a TV interview where he expressed support for Lukashenka.

While Belarus's VIBE scores have declined across the board since the 2021 VIBE study, Principle 1 (Information Quality) received the highest scores from the panelists, buoyed by indicators around quality information (primarily from online and exiled media) and diversity of content. However, panelists gave lower scores to indicators around harmful information and sufficient resources reflected Russia's role in spreading mal-information, as well as the financial pressures faced by nonstate media, respectively. Principles 2 (Multiple Channels) and 3 (Information Consumption) tied for the lowest scores of the 2022 study for Belarus, with indicators looking at rights to share, create and consume information, channels for information flow, independence of information channels, media literacy, and productive engagement with information receiving low scores. In Principle 4 (Transformative Action), higher scores were seen in indicators looking at individual and civil society use of information, while indicators on government's use of quality information, good governance, and democratic rights received very low scores.



Panelists scored indicators examining quality information and inclusive and diverse content, the highest within this principle. Despite increasing censorship, blocking websites, and pushing independent media into exile, independent actors were able to keep going and covered the news for the Belarusian audiences, both within the country and from abroad. The overall score for this principle is lower than in 2021, as the repressions that started after the 2020 presidential election never receded. At the same time, pervasive governmental and pro-Kremlin propaganda as well as hate speech were widely available and imposed on the Belarusian population, while income streams for nonstate media were even more scarce than before. Thus, indicators looking at fact-based information, information is not intended to harm, and sufficient resources scored lower.

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

Quality information is produced and disseminated first and foremost by nongovernmental media, predominantly online. Strong repression of the independent media sector has negatively impacted content quality and availability. Dozens of media outlets and their social media platforms were added to the list of media with extremist content or, in some cases, labeled extremist groups. Web users and other media quoting their stories were held legally liable even when reposted materials were from before the dates when media was declared extremist. This, combined with the persistent blocking of web resources by the Ministry of

Information, has significantly decreased Belarusians' access to fact-based quality information.

The government heavily regulates the broadcast industry and does not allow any independent broadcaster to get a license in Belarus. The print market has shrunk due to both global trends and post-presidential election repressions against independent publishers. As one expert said, "The infrastructure exists but it is not available to the majority of independent journalists or newsrooms. In that sense, it does not allow for the production of any varied content." Another expert claimed that the infrastructure was "de facto destroyed in 2021." The expert added, "Newspapers cannot publish, and websites are blocked inside and some outside Belarus. Many journalists had to leave and lost access to their sources. So, especially compared to 2020, there is no infrastructure anymore."

The quality of journalism education has further deteriorated, following the decline in academic freedoms all over the country. As Deutsche Welle reported, citing the educational office of Sviatlana Tshikhanouskaya's team, by December 2021, at least 150 professors and scientists were either fired or forced to leave<sup>1</sup> their workplaces because of their support of anti-violence messages back in 2020. In December 2021, Kseniya Martul, a professor at Belarusian State University's Faculty of Journalism, was arrested<sup>2</sup> while giving a lecture to her students and sentenced to 15 days in prison for her Telegram channel dedicated to gender issues. None of her colleagues publicly denounced her detention. Her coauthor, a Ph.D. in philosophy and a long-term professor from the same department, left Belarus.

While opportunities for informal education still exist, they are less accessible to people inside Belarus. After management was arrested, the Belarus Press Club had to move to Poland and did not restart in-

1 "Repressions in Universities lead to 'Degradation of the Academic Sphere' in Belarus," DW.com, December 22, 2021, <https://www.dw.com/ru/repressii-v-vuzah-vedut-k-degradacii-akademicheskoi-sfery-v-belarusii/a-60226744>.

2 "In Minsk, Ksenia Martul, a Lecturer at the Faculty of Journalism of the Belarusian State University, Was Detained Right during the Couple. She Ran a Channel about Gender Issues," The Insider, December 14, 2021, <https://theins.ru/news/247153>.

country until after their release in August 2021. They offer online courses, as well as in-person masterclasses and meetings in Warsaw. Together with the Linking Media Foundation and the Dutch organization Free Press Unlimited, they launched a coworking space and meeting hub for Belarusian journalists in exile.

In August 2021, the court shut down the oldest independent journalism nongovernmental organization, the BAJ. Still, BAJ continued providing online courses for its members and reorganized in Lithuania and Ukraine. These educational efforts serve mostly the community of independent journalists and do not reach a wider population. “Despite having BAJ or regional centers of journalism education, one cannot expect that high school graduates will know about those educational opportunities,” said one expert, “If one goes behind their bubble, there is little information flow in the wider population about that.”

The proliferation of fabricated information, especially in state media, is evident. State-aligned outlets spread false information and propaganda about political opponents, independent media, or the situation at the Belarusian border with Europe. According to one of the experts, “Because the state punished independent media for any reason, without mentioning their possible violations of ethical and moral principles, those principles have become less important for media. Why bother to be always correct if you can be destroyed at any moment on any grounds?”

This lack of attention to standards has led to violations of them, mostly by state propaganda, although there were cases where independent media followed suit. “While pro-state media shared the pro-government Telegram channel ‘Zhelytye Slivy’ (Yellow Plums/Yellow Leaks) and posts with the personal information of pro-democracy actors, some independent media outlets shared the so-called cyber-partisans dump of the personal data of Lukashenka’s supporters. The latter has not caused any discussions, and this is worrisome,” said one expert.

According to the same expert, the main ethical challenge in 2021 was the press conference of detained Roman Protasevich<sup>3</sup> and whether the media had a moral right to be at that press conference and ask questions knowing he may have been forced to speak. There was no consensus. Other experts noted that there were no professional ramifications for both state and nonstate media for posting any unethical content in 2021. The Ethical Commission of the BAJ did not work in 2021, partially because of the repressions against the organization. Another expert mentioned that the informal ramifications, such as loss of trust from audiences, are still present. “We have witnessed a drop in trust in state media while the nonstate media enjoy a higher level of trust,” the expert explained. This is supported by data from several audience surveys.

**“There is a nuance here, but for the majority of citizens, the boundary between high-quality and low-quality sources of information is poorly understood,” explained one expert.**

As a result of heavy repressions, content in the Belarusian media sector was limited mostly to political topics, similar to 2020. When the Belarusian government launched the migration crisis at its borders with the European Union (EU), there was media coverage, but because there were few opportunities for hands-on reporting, independent media often republished

official statements from Polish, Lithuanian, or Latvian authorities. State media, meanwhile, repeated the state narrative, which was far removed from reality.

As one of the experts said, “Throughout the whole barometer, one should bear in mind that nonstate and state media have a totally different approach to reporting in Belarus. State journalists have direct access to state press conferences and comments, while nonstate doesn’t. Yet, state journalists do not report fairly, while nonstate media, which do not have direct access report quite fairly.” But another expert argued, “Nonstate media were also often unfairly, reporting on government actors and were not able to hold them accountable.” These two observations rendered the score even lower.

<sup>3</sup> A Belarusian blogger and political activist who was arrested when his flight from Athens to Vilnius was diverted to Minsk in May 2021 because of a false bomb threat passed on by Belarusian air traffic control.

Nonstate media covers predominantly national current affairs. Initial reporting focused on a follow-up of the 2020 protests, but as the year progressed, the media turned to a wider range of topics. However, the government's gradual inclusion of nonstate media outlets into official lists of "extremist groups" led to a much narrower coverage with less access to sources, particularly evident in comparing December 2021 to January. The inclusion of the country's largest portal [TUT.BY](https://tut.by) into the list of extremists in July 2021 ended the portal's 20 years of operations on the Belarusian market. Its news service launched an alternative, [Zerkalo.io](https://zerkalo.io), which is blocked in Belarus but can be reached through a virtual private network (VPN). According to Similarweb,<sup>4</sup> by December 2021, [Zerkalo.io](https://zerkalo.io) managed to reach five million visitors monthly. As several hundred journalists had to leave the country in fear for their safety, fewer reporters were able to cover local or national news firsthand. Those remaining reporters get fined and searched by authorities for their professional activities. The arrest of Komsomolskaya Pravda v Belarusi's Gennady Mozheiko and the accompanying political pressure led to the closure<sup>5</sup> of the organization's Belarus bureau and the subsequent liquidation of its paper version, which was one of the few remaining independent print outlets. Local media also had to change their coverage in order to report more original national content. "After [TUT.BY](https://tut.by) was closed and several other national media outlets were declared extremist, local media had to start writing national news for the first time in many years," said one expert.

The news content from state media follows the line of the state propaganda, while remaining independent news outlets attempt to keep their editorial independence. Still, there were cases of self-censorship from those journalists who decided to stay in-country.

The news coverage continues to be partially contextualized for Belarusian audiences but both state and nonstate media resort to republishing certain foreign content without adding context. Russian pro-Kremlin sources were republished mostly by state media, while

4 [Zerkalo.io](https://www.similarweb.com/website/zerkalo.io/#overview), <https://www.similarweb.com/website/zerkalo.io/#overview>.

5 "The Kremlin Does Not Protest against the Closure of Komsomolskaya Pravda in Belarus. Is It Weird or Logical?," BBC News, October 6, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-58815121>.

Russian or Baltic nonstate sources by independent outlets.

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

In general, independent journalists have limited access to information from state sources. "Moreover, there were cases of governmental bodies knowingly providing false and deceitful information to journalists. We learned about it from leaked wiretapped conversations of the police," claimed one expert. Journalists also received a draft version of the new Belarusian Constitution that differed from the one that was later published. "We don't know if this is due to the willingness to provide false information or because there were discussions inside the system and the text changed. In any case, the closed nature of the regime and the unwillingness of government institutions to provide information was a huge challenge for independent media," the same expert said. The panel added that the state media have opportunities to ask questions but avoid any uncomfortable moments.

Fact-based and well-sourced, objective information is an exception, mostly promoted by nonstate media and violated by the state outlets. One expert explained that state media used to simply present facts out of context or in a way to obscure the truth. Now, state media completely invents stories. The most notable recent examples include when alleged mass killings of migrants by Polish guards were "reported" (the so-called genocide) or the narrative about the forced landing of the Ryanair flight with Roman Protasevich. Specialized resources such as Media IQ are trying to raise attention to such cases, but they are read mostly by a narrow group of like-minded journalists. Because of the lack of access to information or in a struggle to win clicks, nonstate media often had to present their assumptions as facts.

Creating and disseminating false and misleading information is widespread among state-owned media. The late 2021 migrant crisis was caused by the Belarusian government enabling thousands of nationals from Middle Eastern and African countries to arrive in Belarus and the border with the EU. According to migrants, after unsuccessful attempts to enter the EU, the Belarusian border guards did not allow them to

return to Belarus or their homes but instead pushed them back into the woods. Many migrants fell ill and some died. But the Belarusian state propaganda claimed the state was taking care of migrants and that Poland organized their “genocide,” killing migrants en masse. Low access to information by nonstate media meant also a lower capacity to fact-check news they published. In one case, media published the sentencing of political activist Maryia Kalesnikava and defense lawyer Maksim Znak based on leaks that ended up being false. “In fact, there were still two weeks before the verdict, but for some reason, this news spread even in well-respected nonstate media,” an expert said. In general, the news offerings in the professional media has become narrow; media report on fewer topics due to lack of access to sources. Nonprofessional content providers sometimes used assumptions or rumors to attract more attention to their coverage. For example, NEXTA Telegram channel published the news about the arrest of several migrants in Hrodna, Belarus, writing, “While it is unknown what is the exact reason for that, most probably they robbed and looted the houses of Belarusians.”

In 2021, there were many examples of government agencies creating fake news with the help of state media. The migrant crisis was the one that reached its nexus, with pro-government “human rights defenders” promising to take the case to the International Criminal Court. Nearly every detention or arrest of independent journalists was accompanied by pseudo-investigative infographics about their alleged participation in criminal rings. However, there were no professional ramifications for this misinformation, except for the already mentioned lower trust in state media, though that was not specifically attributed to the false news they spread. However, nonstate media exposed this misinformation and cited data as to why it was false, according to one expert.

There are few fact-checking resources to help journalists or the public understand which news is false. Experts that were more involved in media literacy and fact-checking gave this subindicator a rather high

score but only because information can be verified with sources. “There are many primary sources where one can check facts and there are resources that can be trusted,” an expert said. However, there are not many fact-checking websites; Media IQ is one of the very few. “Formally, there are some resources, but it can be hardly said that they are widely available,” another expert said. A media lawyer among the group of experts noted that the state began limiting access to original sources, for example, statistics limited to foreign trade.

**“Before the 2020 crisis, some independent media received state subsidies and participated in tenders to cover topics ordered by the state. But now one cannot find their titles in the results of such tenders,” said an expert.**

Experts had differing opinions on whether mechanisms in place for moderating content reduced misinformation. Some gave this subindicator a high score, noting that things like content moderation are generally available, even if news outlets do not always use them. Others said they lacked information about how widespread practice of such moderation with the goal of reducing misinformation is; media may use these tools simply to avoid punishment

under the laws that limit freedom of expression, rather than to reduce misinformation.

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

One foreign government actively promoted mal-information: Russia. The experts did not notice attempts from any other governments. Russian disinformation was largely the same as what was used on Russian citizens to prepare them for the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. All major Russian TV programs are available in Belarus as part of the basic “social” package of TV channels, so access to pro-Kremlin propaganda was unlimited.

The Belarusian government engaged in hate speech directly. “The day a special services representative was killed in the flat of IT specialist Andrei Zeltser during a raid, Major General Belokonev, former Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Belarus, suggested killing 100

people in response,”<sup>6</sup> an expert recalled. Malicious information and hate speech often targeted EU countries. “The government and state-controlled media falsely depicted Polish border guards as ‘fascists’ and accused them of genocide of migrants. They also showed how the Belarusian state helps migrants, providing them with warm clothes, food, and a safe environment. But in fact, almost everything was the other way around. Migrants have stated how the Belarusian border guards beat them, confiscated warm things, and disallowed their return to Belarus to repatriate,” another expert said.

Officials were not pressured to apologize or resign based on any harmful content they said or disseminated. “It’s hard to determine whether they are losing trust based on those statements because there are no credible polls to measure it. But essentially, there are no negative public consequences for officials, and when it comes to losing elections, even if the results were fairly counted, we wouldn’t know what impact those statements had,” an expert said. The global tech companies, however, reacted to some state propaganda. Several times, Google removed ads from YouTube videos<sup>7</sup> spread by pro-government sources of forced confessions from protesters or journalists.

State-aligned media often tried to purposefully distribute harmful content. One example cited was the Order of Judas program, hosted by Grigory Azarenok, of STV. “It is not just trying to incite hatred; there are also multiple examples of dehumanizing people who oppose the authorities. All such cases remain unpunished,” an expert said. The hate speech in that particular TV program became the subject of the EU’s East StratCom Task Force’s review about disinformation:<sup>8</sup> “The dissenting Belarusians have been called, amongst others, ‘vile reptiles,’ ‘abominations of the human race,’ ‘inhuman,’ ‘parasites and idlers,’

6 “General Belokonev Offered to Kill a Hundred Belarusians in Response to the Death of a KGB Worker,” Belsat, October 1, 2022, <https://belsat.eu/ru/news/01-10-2021-general-belokonev-predlozhit-ubit-sto-belorusov-v-otvet-na-gibel-rabotnika-kgb/>.

7 “YouTube Removes ‘Confessions of Detained Journalists’ Ad by Belarusian Authorities,” Gigazine, May 31, 2021, [https://gigazine.net/gsc\\_news/en/20210531-youtube-took-down-belarus-hostage-video/](https://gigazine.net/gsc_news/en/20210531-youtube-took-down-belarus-hostage-video/).

8 “Disinformation Fuels Hate on Belarusian TV,” EU vs Disinfo, June 28, 2021, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/disinformation-fuels-hate-on-belarusian-tv/>.

‘macaques,’ ‘rats,’ ‘jellyfish’ ‘corpse-looking witches.’ Disturbingly, such monikers are accompanied with implicit threats of violence: every edition of the ‘Order of Judas’ features a photo of a so-called ‘traitor’ with a noose displayed prominently.”

Although incomparable in scale with state media, nonprofessional content producers on platforms like YouTube, including political bloggers of Anton Motolko or Siarhei Kharytonau and NEXTA, also sometimes spread hate speech content. When a 31-year-old IT specialist Andrei Zeltser was killed in September 2021 during a raid by the State Security Committee of the Republic of Belarus, killing one security official storming his apartment, those platforms demonstrated “outbursts of personal aggression” and “aggressive appeals for action,” according to one expert. The video of the standoff was widely spread by state media, but it was unclear<sup>9</sup> whether it was edited before distribution.

Again, there were no known cases of nonprofessional content creators losing credibility or standing for their content among their core audiences.

Self-regulatory mechanisms to reduce hate speech exist both on social media and on websites. Media disable comments to avoid responsibility for their content, imposed by Belarusian law, and help reduce mal-information and hate speech. Readers inform the platforms about behaviors they find suspicious by using Facebook’s feedback tools against pro-state propagandists.

Some of the pro-governmental Telegram channels aim to humiliate and deter citizens from expressing their views. These channels republish videos of forced admissions of guilt by protesters and add hateful commentary. “It is difficult to judge if all of them are coordinated by the state, as it is also possible that some of those initiatives come from pro-Lukashenka or pro-Putin supporters who coordinate online independently,” an expert said.

9 Furlong, Ray, “Gunfight in Minsk: Doubts Raised About Dramatic Video as Two Killed in KGB Raid,” RFE/RL’s Belarus Service, September 29, 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/minsk-gunfight-kgb-video/31484513.html/>.

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

Media publish in the Russian and Belarusian languages, while nonprofessional content creators mostly use Russian. Formats for news dissemination are limited, with YouTube gaining popularity among nonstate media, as it is harder to block, while the state cannot easily identify the names of viewers of its video content.

In general, the information sphere contains a wide range of opinions and ideological views. “There is a nuance here, but for the majority of citizens, the boundary between high-quality and low-quality sources of information is poorly understood,” one expert explained. There is a huge array of different information, but probably no single outlet that represents this wide variety of views. “Most of the media stick to specific political ideologies,” said an expert.

LGBTIQ topics are rarely presented in Belarusian media, and when they are, the coverage is rather patriarchal or lacks depth. The initiative Journalists for Tolerance<sup>10</sup> aims at uniting media professionals attempting to overcome this trend. According to the initiative’s 2021 research, every fourth publication about LGBTIQ subjects in the 36 samples from Belarusian media had signs of hate speech, while 62 percent of the studied media used correct language. The share of hateful or incorrect content increased with the increase of repression. As per the initiative, in the first half of 2020, this share was 10 percent and 20 percent in the second half, while in the first nine months of 2021, it reached 24 percent.

The migrant crisis of late 2021 was a missed opportunity for Belarusian citizens to learn more about people from different ethnic or religious backgrounds from both nonstate and state media. Nonstate media took a critical stance toward large groups of migrants, spreading stereotypes instead of helping to overcome them, often categorizing these groups as “illegals.” The state media, while demonstrating how the authorities presumably help migrants, demonstrated a lack of knowledge about cultural or religious differences, for example, praising an Orthodox

Christian nun, who is also a staunch supporter of Lukashenka, for giving out presents to Muslim children and “baptizing” them with a large cross.<sup>11</sup>

Underrepresented or vulnerable groups are formally represented in the professional media sector, but the coverage is often overly formal and lacks depth. As one expert pointed out, “An independent media outlet would run a story about people with disabilities and then use it in a report to funders as human rights story, but the quality of this coverage doesn’t give the audience an understanding about real needs or concerns of this group of people.”

Political opposition is the largest marginalized group that is using alternative methods to express its views. It operated a variety of online platforms, including websites, YouTube channels, and Telegram channels. Other groups could use those channels, but they often lack funding, human resources, or political support to become noticed by Belarusian society.

Gender balance is yet to be achieved not only in content but also in the management structure of the media, including nonstate outlets. “Despite us talking about this for a long time, we have a gender composition that favors men in management while women stay in lower positions. No matter how hard we tried, making additional efforts to promote women to leadership positions, this did not change in 2021,” a representative of one of the media associations said. The expert also observed that female employees tend to stay in the independent media, which experience repressions, while many men simply change jobs to more profitable ones.

The situation is even worse among nonprofessional content producers. “The middle-aged Russian-language men have flooded the Belarusian top of nonprofessional platforms,” said one expert, “A typical popular YouTube profile would be a 30- or 40-year-old man broadcasting his opinion or interviewing others.” When it comes to selecting experts, there is a myth about the lack of professional female speakers. There

10 <https://j4t.info/>.

11 “Abbess Gabriel Came to the Migrants with a Cross,” Blog Grodno [S13.RU](https://s13.ru/archives/gavriila-24), November 17, 2021, <https://s13.ru/archives/gavriila-24>.

was a discussion between well-known independent media figures Dzianis Dudzinski and Aksana Zaretskaya<sup>12</sup> on whether sexism is the norm among video bloggers in Belarus. Regarding the nonurban population, there is only one popular blogger, Pan Usialan,<sup>13</sup> who attempts to comment satirically on the daily life of Belarus from the rural perspective.

### Indicator 5. Content production is sufficiently resourced.

Since many nonstate newsrooms were forced to move abroad, or exist in several countries, they have additional expenses, though their in-Belarus incomes were mostly enough to cover operational costs. Many had their media businesses destroyed and were forced to start new projects from scratch, the most salient example being the portal [TUT.BY](https://tut.by). In some cases, like that of [TUT.BY](https://tut.by), [BelaPAN](https://bela.pan.by), or [Nasha Niva](https://nasha-niva.com), the management was arrested and the editorial teams had to learn business operations anew. “This did not allow them to invest into improving the quality of the information they produce,” an expert said. By 2022, it also became clear that the state could not satisfy the appetites of pro-governmental media with lavish subsidies, which had reached an annual figure of around \$60 million in previous years. Thus, a new decree in early 2022 taxed advertising and internet usage to direct these funds to state media.<sup>14</sup>

Public funding continues to be available largely for state media. Private funding in-country that used to support some of the nonstate media has significantly declined with businesses being afraid to fund blocked websites. Foreign donor funding continues to be available for nonstate media, and its share has grown in 2020 and 2021 to compensate for the increase in repressions, but this may change because of the war in

12 “We All Blame the Blue-Fingered, but Ourselves?” As a TV Presenter, His Wife and Ex-Investigator of the Investigative Committee Argued about Harassment Invisible in Belarus,” KYKY, May 6, 2021, <https://kyky.org/pain/my-vse-penyaem-na-sinepalogo-a-sami-kak-televeduschiy-ego-zhena-i-eks-sledovatel-sk-posporili-o-nevidimom-v-belarusi-harrasmente>.

13 Mr. Usyalian, <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCnSq4OAa8hdwAtxUB83ZVFA/videos>.

14 “Aleksandr Lukashenko Signs Decree on Mass Media,” President of the Republic of Belarus (website), May 31, 2022, <https://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:iNFhRP6PWuYJ:https://president.gov.by/en/events/aleksandr-lukashenko-signs-decree-on-mass-media+&cd=1&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=pl>.

Ukraine and a potential redistribution of funds.

Being stripped of traditional advertising channels, some media, like the Village Belarus, have turned to donations via Patreon, a membership platform that provides tools for content creators to earn funds from subscriptions.<sup>15</sup> Other Belarusian media, including Zerkalo (formed by [ex-TUT.BY](https://ex-tut.by) team) and Euroradio, also use Patreon, but it is not enough to cover their monthly costs. There was also a brief period when traditional channels of income grew in significance. For instance, many independent newspapers saw their subscriptions increase in August 2020 after the election. “Belarusians subscribed not only to receive information but also to demonstrate their solidarity with the independent press,” an expert said. This nearly came to an end by late 2021, as the government denied printing or distribution to the majority of formerly print media outlet. “If we evaluate 2021 not as a process, but a result, then we must admit that most print media have simply lost the opportunity to publish. So, there are no more traditional sources of income for them. Those regional newspapers that continue to publish are also losing advertising,” another expert added.

Since October 2021, the government has been regulating<sup>16</sup> the content of display advertising, which has reduced volumes and delayed advertising campaigns. In general, online advertising was the only advertising sector that grew in 2020 (4.6 percent) while ads in all other sectors experienced drops<sup>17</sup> ranging from 7 percent in some to 19 percent in others. The statistics for 2021 are not yet available. The distribution of state subsidies and advertising contracts was transparent but independent media rarely, if ever, receive them. “Before the 2020 crisis, some independent media received state subsidies and participated in tenders to cover topics ordered by the state. But now one cannot find their titles in the results of such tenders,” an expert said.

15 The Village Belarus, <https://www.patreon.com/thevillagebelarus>.

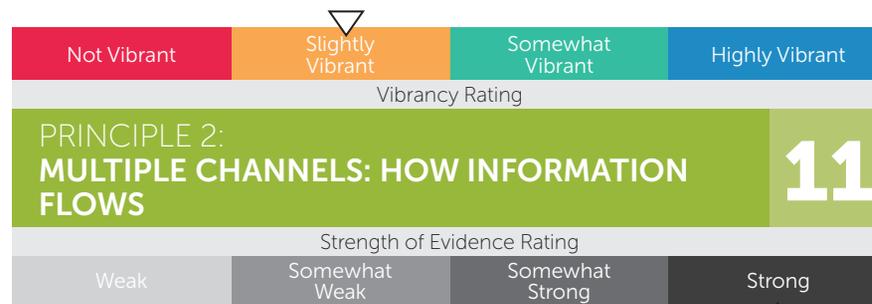
16 “It’s Not Fun in ‘Outdoor Advertising’: The Advertising Market Is Faced with the Consequences of the Introduction of Layout Coordination,” [Marketing.by](https://marketing.by), October 15, 2021, <https://marketing.by/novosti-rynka/v-naruzhke-neveselo-reklamnyy-rynok-stolknuksya-s-posledstviyami-vvedeniya-soglasovaniya-maketov/?mobile=N>.

17 “Global Advertising Spending Is on the Rise. How the Advertising Market Behaves in Belarus,” [etvnet.com](https://etvnet.com), June 20, 2021, <https://belmarket.by/news/news-46175.html>.

The distribution of state subsidies for advertising contracts significantly distorts the market. The state is entitled to publish “social advertising,” which is recognized by law as the governmental one. It was largely used in 2020 and 2021 to advertise against supporters of political change.

For nonstate media, operational conditions have worsened, leading to lower salaries or, if salaries stay the same, lower quality of life for independent journalists. “As many journalists were forced to leave, or, if they stayed in Belarus, to work for a publication that is completely underground and recognized as extremist, there are two problems related to their salaries. If they moved abroad, then their previous salaries are not enough, as their costs of living have increased. So, they have to work at several jobs or for several media outlets to make ends meet,” explained one expert, “For those who stayed in Belarus, there is always a question about safety and transferring funds in the country as the very fact of this income is an opportunity for further persecution.” If someone is caught receiving abroad funding from someone who is considered “extremist” (and most independent media are), the very fact of receiving money from such an actor makes a person “recipient of extremist money” and thus subject to criminal persecution.

Advertising placement is extremely politicized. “State enterprises will place ads in state media, not in nonstate media. Also, with many independent websites being blocked or included in the list of extremist resources, nonstate businesses avoid placing advertising there,” an expert said. Another expert mentioned that the politicization of ad placement is also related to foreign businesses receiving criticism for continuing to sponsor state media in Belarus. “We saw protests near the offices of foreign advertisers who placed ads<sup>18</sup> in Belarusian state media and some of them gave in to public pressure,” he said.



Principle 2’s average score is a result of a significant gap between the more highly scored indicators that describe the information and communications technology (ICT) infrastructure--especially adequate access to channels of information--and those lower scored indicators that describe a lack of equality in access to and the distribution of information between independent and governmental media or limitations in rights to create, share, and consume information.

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

Experts discussed whether any legal protections for freedom of speech or freedom of press continue to exist in Belarus. For one expert, the fact that they “are spelled out in the Constitution, they are actually spelled out in laws” was enough to give a rather high score. But he added that in 2021, a “legal default” took place in Belarus in which protections are not applied, and they are used exclusively to suppress freedom of speech in Belarus. Another expert added, “Let’s leave aside such a philosophical question as to whether those norms that cannot be applied in any way can be called a legal mechanism. Over the past year, even these sluggish legal mechanisms have been very seriously weakened due to changes in legislation, including laws on countering extremism.” The change in legislation allows the government to move straight to blocking access to media at the sign of any criticism of its action, thus effectively censoring media.

All ICT providers have to follow the regulations that prescribe blocking

18 “Rights Group Urges Western Firms to Stop Belarus TV Ads,” AP News, August 4, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/europe-business-belarus-6025a48e2f4baf832058c9de30c992d8>.

access to the media the state considers dangerous.

The new rules influence the editorial choices of nonstate media regarding self-censorship. There is no consensus on whether the titles or links of so-called extremist media can be quoted. Many regular (“nonextremist”) media, while using their information, do not quote them, citing fear that readers could be arrested or fined if caught with such links on their phones. Also, when employees of certain media stay inside Belarus or in jail, those who have fled abroad tend to exercise caution in covering political topics no to worsen the situation. Another example of self-censorship in 2021 was the change to the web portal Onliner’s editorial policy. “One of the most popular news resources remaining in Belarus completely abandoned the sociopolitical agenda and turned off comments on their site. Wanting to save the business, they chose to write about cats and dogs,” said an expert.

“One of the most popular news resources remaining in Belarus completely abandoned the sociopolitical agenda and turned off comments on their site. Wanting to save the business, they chose to write about cats and dogs,” said an expert.

Journalists continue to be harassed for doing their jobs and in a variety of ways, including searches and confiscation of equipment, bullying both online and via telephone, and public hate speech by state media actors. In 2021, Reporters Without Borders labeled Belarus the most dangerous country in Europe<sup>19</sup> for media workers. In research<sup>20</sup> for International Media Support, female journalists shared the harassment they had to endure for their professional activities. Larysa Shchyrakova, a journalist from Homiel, said, “There were various forms of psychological pressure, including via social media, where my appearance was criticized and they used derogatory words. I got threats that my son would be taken away from me. They also discussed my personal life and published a

19 “Belarus,” Reports Without Borders, n.d., <https://rsf.org/en/country/belarus>.

20 “‘Multiple Risk’: The Safety of Women Journalists in the Eastern Neighborhood Belarus, Moldova, Ukraine, Armenia, Georgia, Azerbaijan: A Six-Country Review,” IMS, August 2021, [chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.mediasupport.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/SAFETY-OF-WOMEN-JOURNALISTS-in-Belarus-Moldova-Ukraine-Armenia-Georgia-Azerbaijan\\_RU.pdf](https://www.mediasupport.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/SAFETY-OF-WOMEN-JOURNALISTS-in-Belarus-Moldova-Ukraine-Armenia-Georgia-Azerbaijan_RU.pdf).

lot of untruthful information. ... In 2020, I was detained in presence of my underage son. It was a huge stress for him and now, if I am offline for more than two hours, he is nervous and starts calling everyone.” In 2021 alone, authorities searched Shchyrakova’s house and confiscated her equipment multiple times. She has announced that she is quitting journalism.

According to BAJ, four journalists were convicted of criminal charges in 2021. Katsiaryna Barysevich from [TUT.BY](https://tut.by) received six months in prison for “disclosing medical secrets, which entailed grave consequences,” while Katsiaryna Bakhvalava (Andreeva) and Daria Chultsova from Belsat TV got two years for “arrangement of actions that grossly violated public order.” These convictions were related to their reporting of postelections protests in 2020 and

the death of protester Raman Bandarenka. Later in 2022, Bakhvalava received another eight years for “state treason” in a closed process. Courts sentenced Siarhei Hardzievich of the regional portal [1reg.by](https://1reg.by) to 18 months in prison for “insult to the President of the Republic of Belarus,” “slander,” and “insult to a government official” for his postings on the platform Viber. Criminal trials were also held against opposition bloggers, most of whom were detained during the 2020 presidential election campaign. They received graver<sup>21</sup> sentences than the professional journalists. Uladzimir Niaronski, Siarhei Piatrukhin, Aliaksandr Kabanau, and Vadzim Yermashuk received three years sentences, while courts sentenced Pavel Spirin and Eduard Palchis to 4.5 and 13 years, respectively. A Radio Liberty/Radio Free Europe consultant, Ihar Losik, got 15 years in a maximum security prison.

The level of state repression is so high that other forms of retribution for speaking or writing about potentially controversial or sensitive topics

21 “E-Newsletter ‘Mass Media in Belarus.’ Monitoring Report 2021,” No. 1(67), Belarusian Association of Journalists, February 2, 2022, <https://baj.by/en/analytics/e-newsletter-mass-media-belarus-monitoring-report-2021-0>.

are quite rare, though sometimes occur for things like condemning the violence of police forces. They mostly take the form of nonextension of work contracts at state enterprises.

“The only laws that protect the confidentiality of sources in Belarus are the laws of physics: when data is destroyed on a flash drive, they cannot be intercepted or used by the law enforcement authorities,” an expert claimed. The forced admissions of guilt, published widely by law enforcement agencies on social media, were accompanied by people being forced to give up their passwords and links to the chats and personal data of the members of various online forums and discussions. Authorities used intimidation and torture to force people to give up this info, some accounts of which made it into the media. At his July 2021 trial, political activist and blogger Mikalai Dziadok detailed he was suffocated with a pillow<sup>22</sup> and had a bottle forced into his mouth during his arrest to make him disclose his passwords.

Laws not directly related to media were widely used to persecute journalists and common Belarusians for both news coverage and openly expressing opinions. “For example, the laws related to extremism were amended in April 2021 in order to mostly use them against journalists. The same law that allows you to recognize the whole newsroom as an extremist group. While such laws existed before, they were not used explicitly against media and journalists until 2021,” an expert explained. According to Viasna Human Rights Initiative,<sup>23</sup> in 2021, courts fined people for spreading “extremist” content from independent media outlets at least 43 times while police detained people at least 104 times. More than 450 web pages and social media accounts are banned on “extremist” grounds. Some cases are meant to intimidate the larger population. For example, since July 2021, authorities detained spouses Siarhei Krupenich and Anastasia Krupenich-Kandratsieva nine times in a row for privately messaging each other news from “extremist” Telegram channels. They spent more than three months in prison on

administrative charges. The couple left Belarus in November 2021 shortly after their release.

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

Technically, infrastructure allowing access to information exists and the price of internet access is rather accessible. A 100 megabytes per second WLAN package combined with the TV access costs \$15.35 per month. Unlimited mobile internet by the provider A1<sup>24</sup> costs from \$7 to \$9 per month. “From a technical point of view, in principle, the situation in our country is quite good, and I know that in many countries in Europe, it can be much worse. But the political situation limits our citizens in many ways,” an expert said.

According to the monopolist state provider Beltelecom, socially vulnerable groups can have unlimited access to the internet for one-third of the cost.<sup>25</sup> This includes families with disabled children under 18, families with three or more children, or the elderly population who survived World War II. Other ways of accessing information, such as TV and radio, are available for people who are less literate, but the government does not allow any independent radio or TV stations to broadcast inside the country. Their programs are available either on satellite from abroad (e.g., Belsat TV) or from near-border FM towers (e.g., Euroradio, Radio Racja). After jailing<sup>26</sup> prominent Polish-language journalists and activists, there is even less available information in the Polish language. No Ukrainian sociopolitical TV channels or media are allowed to broadcast in Belarus.

The transition from terrestrial to digital radio and TV services in all

22 “Choked with a Pillow, Put a Bottle in His Mouth. At the Trial, Political Prisoner Dziadok Spoke about Torture and Beatings,” Spring96, January 7, 2021, <https://spring96.org/ru/news/104085>.

23 “Human Rights Situation in Belarus in 2021 Policy Brief,” Spring96, January 5, 2022, <https://spring96.org/ru/news/106328>.

24 A1, <https://www.a1.by/ru/plans/c/b2ctariffs>.

25 “Overview of Beltelecom Internet Tariffs in 2022,” Finbelarus, April 27, 2022, <https://finbelarus.com/tarify-beltelecom-na-internet/>.

26 “Belarus Authorities Bar Polish Diplomats from Seeing Jailed Activists Andzelika Borys, Andrzej Poczobut,” Belsat, September 28, 2021, <https://belsat.eu/en/news/28-09-2021-belarus-authorities-bar-polish-diplomats-from-seeing-jailed-activists-andzelika-borys-andrzej-poczobut/>.

parts of the country finished before 2021. Because not every household reconnected to the state media, the government is trying to stimulate reconnection by offering special programs. The program announced in 2016 that provided people with visual disabilities free radio receivers experienced significant delays. The digital TV boxes were not subsidized.

The prices for access to TV and internet are affordable for Belarusian households. The minimum wage in 2021 amounted to 417 BYN (approximately \$127), while average salary by December 2021 before tax was 1675 BYN<sup>27</sup> (approximately \$513). The interactive TV platform ZALA by state monopolist Beltelecom has 2.2 million<sup>28</sup> subscribers among Belarusian households, while the overall number of households in Belarus is 4.3 million.<sup>29</sup> According to TV ranking company Medialzmeritel, 58 percent of Belarusians<sup>30</sup> watch television daily, while 93 percent watch it at least once a month.

There is nearly no discrimination against specific subgroups in accessing existing channels of information; instead, the limitations are imposed nationally. However, prisoners and people in pretrial detention are a large exception. “Many people in jails used to receive printed versions of the independent newspapers Novy Chas or Belgazeta, but both have been forced to stop publishing,” one expert noted. Multiple witness accounts from political prisoners describe how detention centers or prisons broadcast only government radio or television. Internet access is not allowed, and correspondence with relatives and friends is heavily censored and often disappears on the way to the recipient. “This was very one-sided news, but now I know how the state propaganda works.

27 “Nominal Accrued Average Wages of Employees of the Republic of Belarus,” Belgosstrakh, n.d., <https://bgs.by/insurance/177/7878/>.

28 “Beltelecom Upgraded ZALA Interactive Television Platform and Introduced New Features,” Beltelecom, January 22, 2021, <https://beltelecom.by/en/news/main/beltelecom-upgraded-zala-interactive-television-platform-and-introduced-new-features>.

29 National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus, “Number and Composition of Households in the Republic of Households in the Republic of Belarus: Statistical Bulletin,” CIS STAT, 2021, chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/[http://www.cisstat.org/census/Number\\_house\\_Belarus2020.pdf](http://www.cisstat.org/census/Number_house_Belarus2020.pdf).

30 Shavela, Olga, “How Many TV Viewers Are There in Belarus and What Do They Watch,” Belarussians and the Market, February 11, 2022, <https://belmarket.by/news/news-49575.html>.

It wasn’t just news; there were also different opinion programs running on state TV. And sometimes, the authors of these programs would give up the information about the way things really were, information about real events. So, we also used that to gather information,” said former director of the Belarus Press Club Yulia Slutskaya in an interview<sup>31</sup> with Helsinging Sanomat after her release.

In general, access to information is heavily limited because of both blocking of websites and repressions. “There is no normal access. Belarusians who need to find any information must find creative ways to overcome the blocking of websites that are considered extremist or are under some other kind of crazy repressions. They have to use VPNs and other censorship circumvention tools. And it is not because, as in Europe, they are worried about getting extra advertising or sharing too much personal data. They don’t want authorities to track anything that they read for political reasons,” an expert said.

While systems are in place to provide other information systems or other devices in case of a disruption to telecommunications, not all experts agreed that it was a good solution for Belarus. Since many of the state TV channels’ websites spread false news and hate speech, some argued the interruptions would be good because they would disconnect people from state media. Another expert noted that both state TV and radio stations participate in exercises to prevent a total shutdown in case of natural disasters or war.

### **Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for government information.**

The right to information remains limited. “The right is guaranteed by law, and it is a declaration by law. It is only necessary to say that, unlike practically all European states, in Belarus, there is no special [act] on access to information, and there is a constitutional provision, which limits the right of citizens to access information that does not concern them personally,” an expert said. Since such laws do not exist, the

31 Koskinen, Ronja, “Yuliya Slutskaya Interview: ‘Despite Everything, I’m Optimistic,’” International Press Institute, September 27, 2021, <https://ipi.media/yuliya-slutskaya-interview-despite-everything-im-optimistic/>.

expert said, it is not possible to study their compliance with any norms. Another expert argued that some rules on access to information are embedded in the legislation on mass media or in the activities of the state organizations, but they do not meet international standards.

Mechanisms to access or influence government policy or decision-making became less accessible in 2021. The website [Petitions.by](#), which collected various petitions from Belarusians and sent them to state officials, was declared “extremist” and blocked in August 2021,<sup>32</sup> along with [Change.org](#). At the same time, ministries and state institutions have rubrics on their websites that allow electronic appeals or petitions.

Before [Petitions.by](#) was shut down in August, the website had at least 300,000 registered profiles, indicating that it was widely known by Belarusians. Despite the original address URL being blocked, the website continued working under a new one, [Petitionsby.win](#), and by early 2022 had more than 4,000 petitions, many of which elicit reactions from local or national authorities.

Experts asserted that although there is no available polling data to support it, Belarusians are afraid to interact with authorities on topics that can be classified as political. “I can’t give a specific example, but I have an inner feeling that citizens have become afraid to request information from state organizations,” said one expert.

In general, when it comes to restrictions on access to information, political prisoners stand out. “These people have no opportunity to receive the information they want because they are surrounded by Belarusian state television and cannot subscribe to the newspapers that they want. This is a purposeful restriction of people who became political prisoners,” an expert said. Another expert added that a pretrial detention center changed procedures; while previously a third party

could subscribe a prisoner to a publication, now it can be only done by the prisoner himself.

Government agencies have press secretaries and press centers but getting accredited to attend press conferences is difficult for nonstate media. “More than that, there are rules according to which certain officials do not have the right to provide information without coordinating it either with the head of the respective state bodies or with these same persons responsible for working with information,” an expert said. In this way, press services don’t assist in informing the population but present a certain barrier to receiving official information.

“The work of press secretaries and information officers today is more about limiting the spread of unauthorized information from government agencies than an attempt to improve the awareness of citizens or organizations,” another expert said. Telegram channels like the pro-government “Yellow Plums” sometimes serve as the government’s “spokespeople” but distort and riddle the official information with hate speech. On the other hand, nonpoliticized information is still being delivered by state agencies—mostly through state media.

“The only laws that protect the confidentiality of sources in Belarus are the laws of physics: when data is destroyed on a flash drive, they cannot be intercepted or used by the law enforcement authorities,” claimed an expert.

#### **Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow.**

Laws regulating domestic and foreign ownership of media are in place. Moreover, there is no law that would regulate the concentration of ownership in media companies. “There are a couple of rules, but they do not concern either cross-subsidization or cross-ownership of television broadcasting, newspapers, or the ownership of mass media by state bodies,” an expert said.

Not all state-run competitions that regulate access to the broadcasting market are known to the public, and when the contests happen, there is no clear explanation regarding the choice of winners. Radio frequencies are distributed by the open competition but are never given to those commercial broadcasters that would pursue a different angle than the

32 “[Petitions.by](#) and [Change.org](#) Websites Blocked in Belarus,” Belsat, August 7, 2021, <https://belsat.eu/ru/news/07-08-2021-v-belarusi-zablokirovali-sajt-petitions-by/>.

government's line in their current affairs coverage. "If a competition is held, the competitors must present some kind of concept but we never hear about it," an expert said.

No special laws require transparency in media ownership. Monopolization of channels of media distribution takes place at the state level. While nominally Belarus has more than 1,000 nonstate media, there is no independent broadcaster registered in-country. Belarusian exiled broadcaster European Radio for Belarus (Euroradio) and its content has been declared extremist, while the only external Belarusian TV channel, Belsat, was labeled an "extremist group." Establishing a media outlet requires registration, and there are strict rules for the qualifications the editor-in-chief of a registered media outlet must have.

All experts agreed that there is no public service media in Belarus.

Internet service providers have not changed their approach since 2020 when the connection was cut for several days. They follow the government's rules regarding restricting access to content.

### **Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.**

The ownership influences the editorial content of both state and nonstate media outlets. State media exclusively provide the government's point of view. Nonstate media are dependent on managements' decisions on behavior and publication under government repressions. For example, when authorities declared BelaPAN, the oldest independent news agency, an extremist organization, its owners decided not to issue any new content under its brand. "Another example is two websites, one in Homiel and the other in Mahilou, associated with the same editor," an expert explained, "When the legal entity that founded one of the websites was liquidated, the owner decided to continue updating the social media." According to another expert, "[Some media] have not fundamentally changed their editorial policy, but they have become very restrained. And they were allowed to stay, which shows this is purposeful in order to maintain advertising and keep legal status inside Belarus."

Regarding advertising revenues, experts noted that the government discourages both state and nonstate media from placing advertisements in nonstate outlets. Still, some advertisers continue to place ads in these outlets, especially local ones. "I know at least one media outlet that keeps advertising partners despite being recognized as extremist, as they still serve as an important source for their community," an expert said.

State media receive most of the subsidies. "They are directed not according to any specific principle, but solely with the aim of supporting these media. And it is obvious that they affect the editorial independence of the newsrooms because only those media that express the state policy are supported," said one of the experts. Another expert mentioned that nonstate media had received such subsidies as well, but it has since stopped. "I would say that the picture is complicated," one expert said, "In the past, one of the few but large independent media outlets that used to participate in tenders and received state funding was *Komsomolskaya Pravda*." But, the expert noted, it did not receive funding in either 2020 or 2021, following the political crisis. "Does this affect editorial policy? It is quite possible that it does because there are special projects dedicated to, say, the Brest Fortress, which would otherwise not appear there," the expert continued.

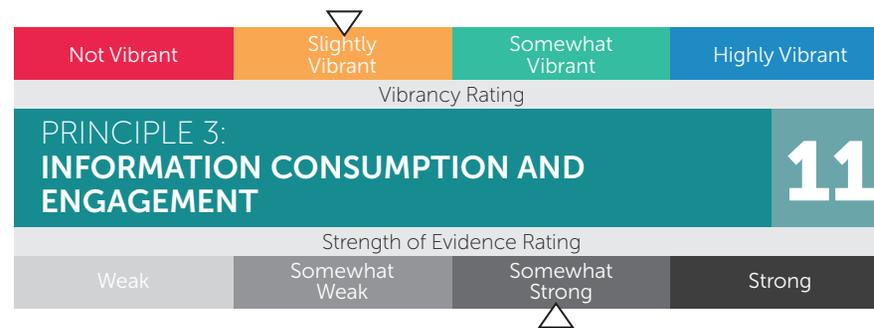
The distinction between newsroom operations and business management is still lacking. Because of shortages in human resources caused by repressions and resulting economic disadvantages, the same person often serves as editor-in-chief and director at the same independent media outlet. This is especially true for smaller regional media. For national outlets, such as [Zerkalo.io](https://www.zerkalo.io) (formerly [TUT.BY](https://www.tut.by)), Nasha Niva, or Euroradio, these roles are separate.

The government agencies overseeing frequency allocation or telecoms are not neutral. The market entry and tax structure for media remain unfair compared with other types of companies, and independent media face more disadvantages than state media. Unlike other businesses, media newsrooms cannot have their offices in residential homes, and individual entrepreneurs are not allowed to publish any media, including online outlets. An editor-in-chief of a media outlet who

applies for registration is required to have at least five years of media management experience. A broadcast media editor-in-chief must pass a special exam on broadcast law knowledge, the technical settings of radio and television broadcasting, and advertising law for his or her outlet to receive a dissemination license. Such licenses are not given to independent broadcasters, like Euroradio, Radio Racja, or the television channel Belsat TV (all of which are run from Poland).

Arbitrary rules are applied to limit access of independent media to information as compared to the access afforded to state outlets. “I personally encountered situations where state media are accredited to attend an event at state bodies, while nonstate media are not accredited. Allegedly, this was because state journalists did not suffer from COVID, while nonstate journalists had to follow all COVID restrictions,” an expert said. Another example of unequal conditions is the exclusive status of the news agency BELTA to exclusively disseminate information about state institutions. “Some state structures, such as the Ministry of Internal Affairs and some law enforcement agencies, simply leak information to certain TV channels or Telegram channels while denying any access to independent media,” another expert added.

The members of regulatory bodies do not act apolitically. On the contrary, they allow themselves to make political statements. The Interagency Commission on Informational Security includes editors of state-owned media who openly denounce independent media and support the government on-air and online. This same commission is allowed to limit access to any media outlet they deem as harmful to state security.



Within Principle 3, panelists scored highly the indicator related to Belarusians’ ability to safely use the internet and circumvent censorship, and they gave a relatively high score to the indicator on engagement with audience needs. The indicators on media literacy and productive engagement with information were scored the lowest. All panelists marked the indicator related to local community media as not applicable.

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

The new law on personal data protection,<sup>33</sup> adopted in May 2021, improves the security of the personal data of Belarusians. However, the behavior of law enforcement against politically active citizens demonstrates the opposite principle. People, particularly activists, are forced to reveal the data of correspondents in chats, their own passwords, contacts, and the private data of email interlocutors.

The list of agencies that can classify information is long in Belarus. According to the “list of state bodies and other organizations entitled to classify information as state secrets” (enforced by the President’s Decree dated February 25, 2011), there are around 60 organizations that can

33 “Belarus,” DLA Piper, February 21, 2022, <https://www.dlapiperdataprotection.com/index.html?t=law&c=BY#:~:text=The%20fundamental%20legal%20act%20regulating,of%20personal%20data%20protection%20issues.>

restrict<sup>34</sup> access to information as a state secret, including the Belarusian State Concern of Food Industry, the State Inspection of Protection of Flora and Fauna, and the National State TV and Radio Company. “The same information may be regarded as classified for nonstate media and later appear publicly in state media,” an expert said.

Digital security training and tools for Belarusian media are mostly available online. Several offline specialists in digital security had to emigrate due to political pressure. “Not all digital knowledge is transferrable online. Before 2021, many local newspapers received individual visits to their newsrooms to have their devices checked. Now it is virtually impossible,” an expert said.

Media outlets’ digital hygiene practices have strengthened since 2020 due to constant pressure from authorities. Many independent news outlets have moved at least one person from their social media and/or web team abroad and secured mirror websites in preparation for eventual disruption of access. They are also connected to international actors, such as “Access Now,” to deal with the consequences of possible distributed denial of service or other types of attacks. “Media that appear on the so-called extremism lists are using dynamic IPs and domain addresses to avoid direct links with the banned content. This is true for Radio Free Europe, Zerkalo, Nasha Niva, and many others,” said one expert.

It is still possible to use VPNs in Belarus, and the government has not applied any punishment for this technology, despite introducing a formal ban back in 2015.<sup>35</sup> Among the most popular applications<sup>36</sup> are Psyphon, Surfshark, Proton, and NordVPN. “Despite initial setbacks in traffic caused by website blocking, we were able to quickly see the return

34 “Access to Information,” Belarusian Association of Journalists, n.d., <https://baj.by/en/content/access-information>.

35 Lokot, Tanya, “Belarus Bans Tor and Other Anonymizers,” Global Voices, February 25, 2015, <https://advoc.globalvoices.org/2015/02/25/belarus-bans-tor-and-other-anonymizers/>.

36 Chester, Dean, “The Complete Guide to Using a VPN in Belarus in 2022,” Cool Tech Zone, January 4, 2022, <https://cooltechzone.com/vpn-belarus>.

of visits to our website,” an editor said.

There is little evidence to indicate Belarusians know well how algorithms work or other ways tech platforms use personal information. However, the government widely spreads information about how it is using such information obtained from people’s devices and chats, and this motivates people to better protect their details. “There are fewer group chats than before. Many Belarusians prefer sharing sensitive information in one-on-one conversations. Even if one person gets caught and arrested, they will be able to disclose only one member of the chat, not the whole list of participants as before,”

said one of the experts.

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

Media literacy is included as an extracurricular activity at schools, but it is not actively promoted by the government. Instead, the government promotes pseudo-fact-checking done by pro-state media actors.

The media and information literacy and critical thinking trainings used to be offered by nonprofit initiatives, most of which had to shut down in 2021 as part of the comprehensive crackdown on civil society.

There is little evidence of people using special tools for fact-checking or debunking disinformation. The nonpublic research that became available for the authors of this study however demonstrates a self-proclaimed willingness to check news from various sources and a low trust in state TV channels.

“One recent poll demonstrated that Belarusians prefer the trustworthiness of journalists when they choose to financially support independent media,” an expert said. This may indirectly demonstrate the ability, or at least the willingness to distinguish high-quality news from poor quality. The limitations that are in place for independent polling do not allow experts to explore this hypothesis in-depth.

“Any platforms for public debate that existed in-country before 2021 cease to exist,” an expert said.

While the data refers to early 2022, Chatham House polling showed that despite massive pro-Kremlin propaganda only 3 percent of Belarusians support the country's involvement in the war with Ukraine. This might be interpreted as a sign of rather strong media literacy when compared to Russia.

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

Freedom of speech and the right to information were severely repressed in 2021. With more than 50 journalists and bloggers behind bars by the end of the year, there was also an unprecedented closure of the state authorities to independent media. "The information requests are not coming through. We are denied access even to Zoom press conferences," an editor said.

The situation is not better for the general population. Belarusians continue getting prison sentences for comments left on social media that could be interpreted as their dissatisfaction with the authorities. In November 2021, a 69-year-old woman was fined €375 (\$380), sentenced to 1.5 years of house arrest, and had her mobile phone confiscated for one comment against a policeman made on the social network [OK.RU](#) in 2020. There were more cases where defamation laws were used against the general population. Between January and November 2021, the human rights organization Viasna recorded 104 cases of criminal punishment for offending authorities and judges (Articles 369 and 391 of the criminal code) and 32 for insulting the president (Article 368). "The pro-government Telegram channels and TV programs make sure to speak publicly about these cases. They want to showcase the punishments so that people stop commenting, even if they are dissatisfied with something," said one of the experts.

**“There are fewer group chats than before. Many Belarusians prefer sharing sensitive information in one-on-one conversations. Even if one person gets caught and arrested, they will be able to disclose only one member of the chat, not the whole list of participants as before,” said one expert.**

After [TUT.BY](#) was shut down in mid-2021 and its content declared extremist, around four million users in Belarus lost their daily source of independent news. The new resource, [Zerkalo.io](#), set up by the former [TUT.BY](#) team from exile, has yet to reach the same level of popularity. "It is unclear where the audience of [TUT.BY](#) went for news. None of the portals saw a massive increase in daily visits. There were some aggregators that became more popular, including Russian Yandex services," an expert said. Over several months, other independent media noticed a growth in visits on social media, especially on YouTube, which allows certain anonymity for its users. But as YouTube indiscriminately suggests independent news alongside partisan content or propaganda, it is difficult to assess if most Belarusian viewers interact with independent news at least weekly. The same is true for Telegram, where media with editorial values and ethics have to compete with bloggers who often propose an extremely politicized interpretation of events.

"Any platforms for public debate that existed in-country before 2021 cease to exist," an expert said, an opinion shared among all interviewed respondents. While there was an attempt to demonstrate public discussion about the development of a new Constitution (the referendum on the matter took place on February 27, 2022), these were "staged shows in the worst traditions of Soviet propaganda."

The proliferation of disinformation and mal-information, as well as hate speech by state actors and sometimes by their political opponents, on social media was noted already in other indicators. Still, the general public largely adheres to the norms and standards of an online community, and it frequently reports hate speech or misinformation on platforms. "Some media encourage their followers to report any irregularity on social media in order to deprive hate speech and disinformation actors a platform," an expert said. This is supported by political initiatives, such as one from exiled the office of opposition

leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, which took the initiative to work with big tech to remove Belarusian state propaganda from advertised and promoted content. Because of the office's efforts, Google removed advertising from Belarusian law enforcement that distributed videos of tortured protesters.

There are no public councils or ombudsmen to address most of the complaints about the media. "The media are reactive to specific situations. If someone complains, the newsroom can decide to remove the story or write a correction, but they are guided by intuition, not procedures," an expert said.

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

Independent research in Belarus in 2021 is very limited. However, since a lot of research can be done online and from abroad, media are able to access some of the studies, either because the data is public, like Chatham House, or shared confidentially by international media development organizations, such as Internews or Free Press Unlimited.

As the blocking of web access intensified, the reliance on online quantitative data from social media platforms grew. But some of the new platforms provide few tools for in-depth analysis. "Several media outlets made their debut on TikTok in order to attract younger audiences," said one expert. "But TikTok is not too keen to share any significant audience data." Because of sanctions and distrust of investors in the market, it is also challenging to conduct any marketing research.

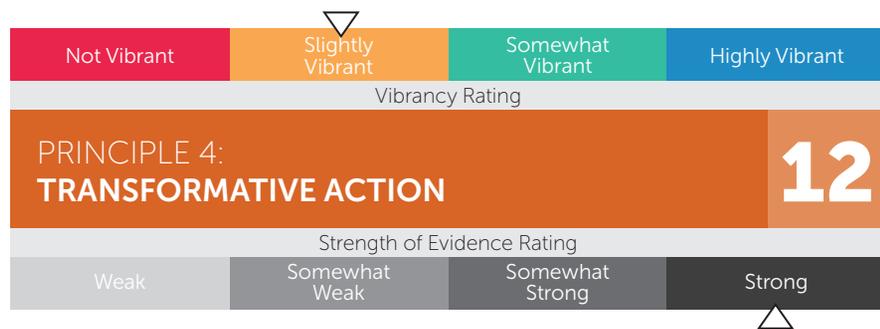
While media accept and publish letters to the editors, many of them had to close their comment sections due to laws making newsrooms liable for content in the comments. Belarusians became more cautious in providing feedback for fear of political repression. "We as media are required to be responsible not only for our staff and sources but also for people who comment in our chats or under our articles. But this is difficult, as there is no technical solution to anonymize everyone," an expert noted.

Before the crackdown, many media actors organized public events in Minsk and regional cities. The most noticeable were from the Belarusian Press Club, but there were also various open lectures, workshops, and meetings between journalists and the public all over the country. Now, these are held in virtual spaces or in exile (e.g., in MediaPort hubs in Warsaw and Bialystok), leaving people inside Belarus with less access to journalists. On top of that, the inclusion of media outlets on lists of extremists has forced the media inside Belarus to anonymize their authors and sources. "There's a tendency to publish fewer and fewer author names, show less information, and have less direct communication and fewer meetings, including readers' clubs," an expert observed. This may play a negative role for the time being. "The trust in independent media that was high after the 2020 election may erode over time, as outlets have to hide their contributors' names, and reporters are not able to ask questions publicly," one of the experts said.

Some common challenges and problems have a positive effect on independent media. "For the first time, we can say that we, independent content producers, do not compete. Newsrooms and journalists work together and promote each other's content. This is something we could not imagine before," an expert said. Another expert noted that while there are good examples of collaboration between independent media, the links between less professional content producers and traditional newsrooms are still weak. "They talk about each other but not with each other, and there is no agreed professional standard," she noted.

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

Community media as commonly understood does not exist in Belarus.



Indicators under Principle 4 are the most polarized in the 2022 study of Belarus. On one hand, the indicators relating to individuals, civil society, and (mostly independent) media, received scores of between 15 and 20. However, indicators relating to government use of quality information to make public policy decisions, along with good governance and democratic rights, received scores of less than 10.

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

There was a discussion between the experts on whether self-censorship and avoidance of political topics in fear of backlash can be considered “nonpartisan news.” According to some, the very lack of political coverage, like the news site Onliner, means that large audiences interact with nonpartisan information. But others argued that Onliner’s decision to preserve its position inside Belarus and limit coverage is a deeply political step. “One does not change overnight into a lifestyle media outlet without a reason,” an expert said. Some regional media outlets also choose to follow the “nonpolitical” approach, concentrating on urban issues or history. The editors of blocked media set up separate lifestyle web pages so that they can continue to engage in journalism.

While there is evidence of the existence of multiple types of media with

“There are so many platforms, so many ways to receive news, that we cannot be sure if the bases for those discussions are trustworthy news sources,” said an expert.

varied ideological leanings, there is little data on whether Belarusians are reading beyond their bubble. Everyone in the country is exposed to state views, as most of the socially important information is delivered through state media. But when it comes to other political views, there is little intersection between the opposition and their sources of information and supporters of the current regime.

Since 2020, there have been no street protests, and there are few opportunities for people of opposing views to directly engage at other meetings. “In the first months of 2021, such events could still happen, but after May, we lost those opportunities,” an expert explained. This is reflected in the digital space as well but to a lesser extent. “There are a lot of critical comments under both pro-government and pro-opposition publications. But it is difficult to judge whether people aim to exchange information or just to attack opponents,” an expert said. The most noteworthy discussions are happening on platforms where people can speak out anonymously like on YouTube channels.

Open and constructive discussions may happen online, but experts were not sure how to measure whether they are informed by quality news and information. “There are so many platforms, so many ways to receive news, that we cannot be sure if the bases for those discussions are trustworthy news sources,” an expert said. Often, the mass exile of the middle class abroad becomes a topic of such discussions, with people trying to weigh the pros and cons of leaving Belarus for more democratic environments.

Media continue to be trusted by most Belarusians, according to available polls. “Nongovernment media have been gaining trust for the last 20 years and still have quite a lot of it, but it can slowly decrease under conditions of censorship,” said one of the experts.

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

There is little evidence about what type of content informs people’s

views on political or social issues. “When it is nearly impossible to get a representative audience survey in Belarus, the scrapes of data we get do not provide enough information,” an expert said.

There are no avenues for direct dialogue with politicians. In 2021, the government decided to delay local elections one year, from 2022 to 2023. This has shrunk the already narrow window of opportunity for citizens to engage with their current or potential deputies, as any such communication beyond the framework of campaigns may be considered too dangerous.

There was also little interaction when it came to verifying the health claims of authorities. The government’s neglect of COVID-19 resulted in the majority of Belarusians ignoring the World Health Organization’s recommendations, something the state sometimes supported. President Alexander Lukashenka personally removed the requirement to wear masks in public spaces in Belarusian cities; subsequently, the announcements the need to wear masks were torn off and disappeared from public display. “Many people are led by emotions in their health-care decisions, and emotions are rarely based on information. With COVID-19, it was also difficult to determine which recommendations were fact-based and which were not, as there was contradictory research data,” an expert said. Still, independent media tried to steer interest to topics like vaccination and disease prevention. “Fifteen regional media outlets engaged in the campaign, discussing pros and cons of various vaccines. They had a lot of engagement from people, which demonstrates the appetite for such information,” another expert said.

False information was actively used by pro-state media to create sentiment against the political opposition in Belarus in 2020 and 2021. But it is unclear whether this inspired a significant number of people. The actions in support of Lukashenka were not numerous, and there were no massive citizen attacks on opposition figures.

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

Many civil society organizations (CSOs) in Belarus had to shut down in

2021 due to repressions. Still, they continue to exist in the informational space. In some cases, they rely on quality news producers; in others, they have transformed into media outlets. For example, the website and social media of [Spring96.org](https://spring96.org) from the human rights center Viasna have become a kind of news agency on political prisoners for many professional media outlets. “There is a deficit of information coming from inside Belarus; therefore, press releases and publications about human rights defenders enjoy high popularity among the remaining independent media,” an expert said.

There were no known incidents of CSOs spreading mis- or mal-information to their constituencies in Belarus in 2021. In general, civil society actors attempt to spread information responsibly.

CSOs’ work to reduce the spread of mis- and mal-information is noticeable but there are doubts about its efficiency. “I gave this subindicator a rather high score because I can see how much effort NGOs make to denounce and address misinformation. But then we see another government source spreading absurd allegations, and it seems that it will never stop,” an expert said.

Media outlets attempt to engage with civil society, but the uncertainty about being included on the list of “extremists” make these collaborations difficult. Topics that do not attract too much attention from authorities are usually apolitical. “In 2021, we ran a contest for the best environmental story, and we realized that real coordination between civil society and media is rare. Media take on the topics themselves. In only two instances did they ask environmentalists for comments. However, there were also positive cases, where a platform was given to an organization that protects animal rights,” an expert said.

Among nonprofessional content producers, the most engaged with civil society is Mikita Melkazorau with his YouTube show, *Zhizn-Malina*. This show, along with human rights defenders, prompted discussion around the topic of capital punishment in Belarus. The think tank community also actively interacts with media, both traditional and nonprofessional. This is especially true of the BEROC initiative, which supports the online media outlet [Thinktanks.by](https://thinktanks.by).

Yet all the efforts of civil society in 2021 did not lead to any policy or legislative changes in Belarus. “Indirectly, we can say that civil society has improved conditions for Belarusians who have moved into exile. Due to the lobbying, volunteer work, and activism of Belarusian CSOs in Poland, the exiles there received special treatment from the Polish government. The situation is similar in Lithuania,” an expert said.

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

Press conferences exist but are mostly open only to pro-governmental media. As one of the experts noted, sometimes organizers quote COVID-19 regulations to limit independent media access, while state media are allowed in.

Political discourse from the state media often uses misinformation and mal-information intentionally. While political opponents attempt to use facts, access to information is increasingly difficult. One of the most striking examples of historical revisionism informing political decisions surrounds the “genocide of the Belarusian people” during World War II, which, according to state officials, is purposefully not recognized by the West. “The government tried to make the map of villages burned during World War II and failed, and it tries to manipulate the facts about who burned those villages. It removes any mentions of guerilla fighters or Soviets igniting villages and leaves only statements about Germans or their supporters. As a result, even villages that were never burned appear on that map,” an expert said.

Government actors refer to state broadcasters and officials when explaining their decisions and ignore content from quality media or information from civil society. They are likely to use misinformation and to misinterpret the facts leading to their decisions. “They stated that people who helped pay fines for victims of repressions who were punished for their participation in peaceful actions were sponsoring terrorism, that journalists who livestreamed protests were coordinating them and therefore have to be punished,” an expert said.

**“Nongovernment media have been gaining trust for the last 20 years and still have quite a lot of it, but it can slowly decrease under conditions of censorship,” said one expert.**

### **Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic rights.**

Most subindicators in this indicator received extremely low scores. The only exception was the subindicator on civil society and media exerting pressure on the government to stop violating civil liberties. This is done through the publication of news, reports for national and international stakeholders, and communication with advocacy groups and international rapporteurs. However, there is no significant evidence of the success of such efforts in 2021. “Perhaps the only exception was the attempt of authorities to declare the white-red-white flag a Nazi symbol. A petition launched in April 2021 against this attempt gathered more than 100,000 signatures, the biggest petition in [Petitions.by](#)’s history. It caused a

huge reaction, and in the end, the flag was not targeted by authorities,” an expert said.

*A partial panel was held virtually, and some experts were interviewed individually. IREX protects the identity of the panelists who agreed to participate in this study. Amendments to the criminal code include an article titled “Discrediting the Republic of Belarus,” which provides for criminal liability for giving international organizations “false information” about the country.*

Copyright © 2022 by IREX

**Notice of Rights:** Permission is granted to display, copy, and distribute VIBE in whole or in part, provided that: (a) the materials are used with the acknowledgment “The Vibrant Information Barometer (VIBE) is a product of IREX with funding from USAID.”; (b) VIBE is used solely for personal, noncommercial, or informational use; and (c) no modifications of VIBE are made.

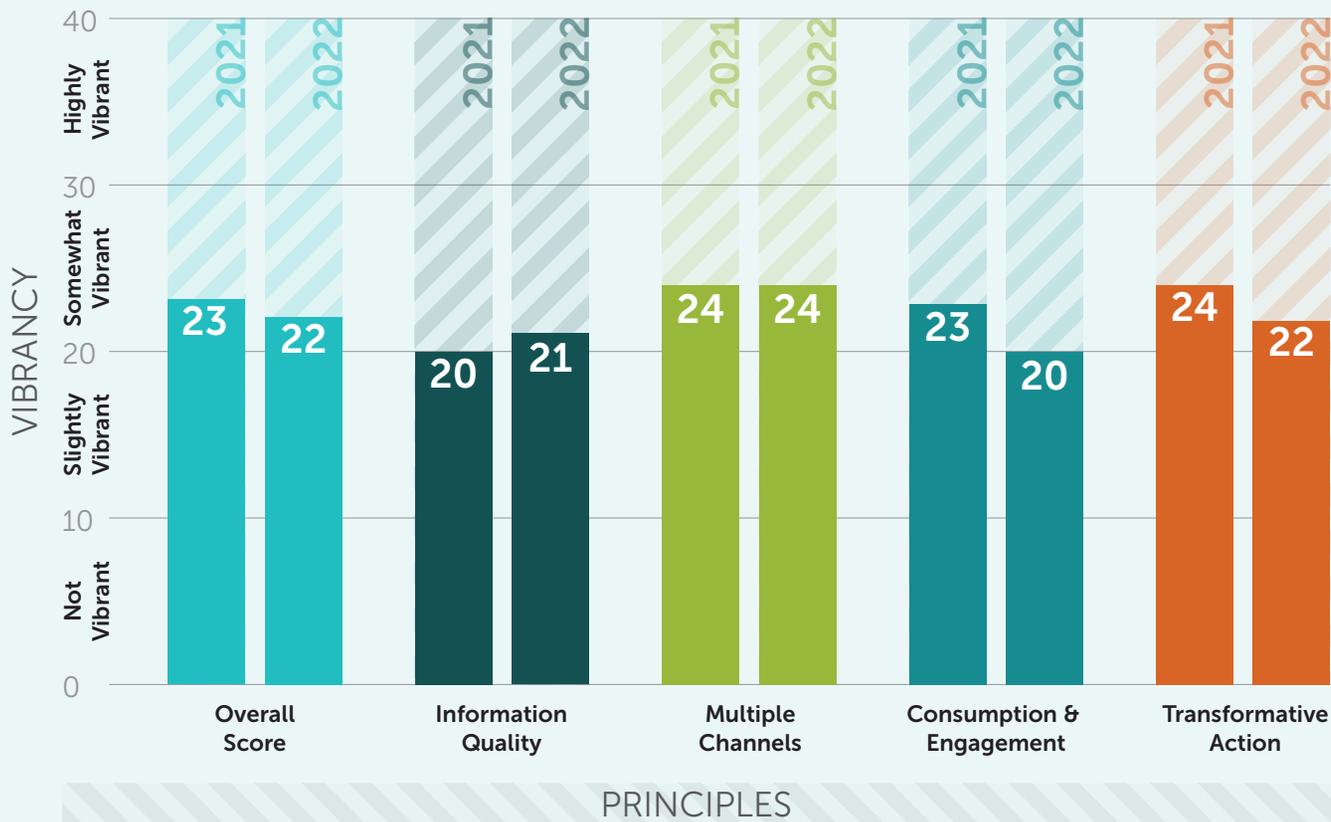
This study is made possible by the support of the American People through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The opinions expressed herein are those of the panelists and other project researchers and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID, the United States Government, or IREX.

# 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

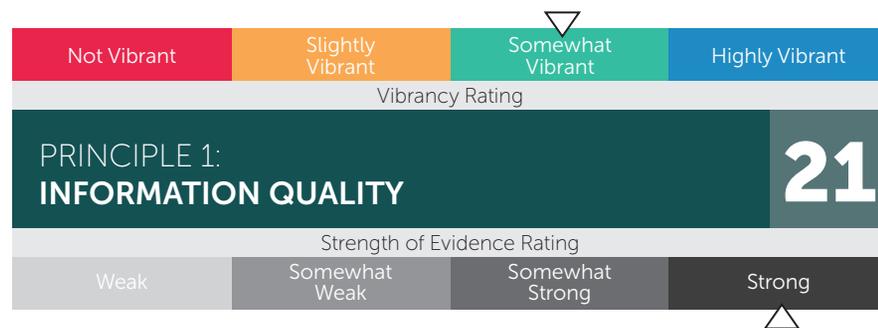
content in line with their ideological leanings. Politicians churned out manipulative stories via social networks and partisan media, which attracted more consumers than fact-checker websites and the independent media that combat disinformation.

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.<sup>1</sup> "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.

<sup>1</sup> 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](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.<sup>2</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup> 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](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.

### **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

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

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.<sup>4</sup>

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 advertising<sup>5</sup>, 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.

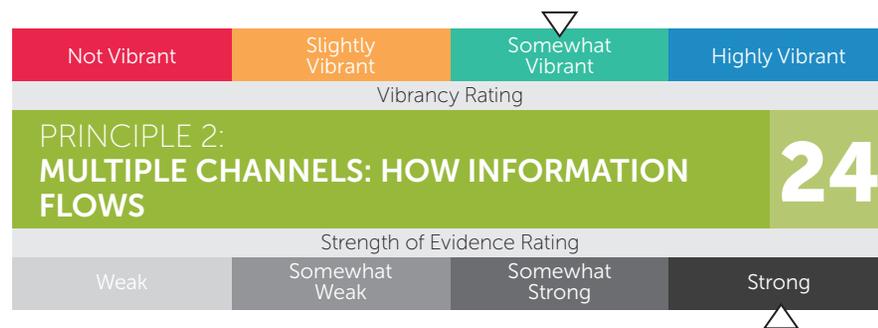
Government subsidies go only to public media service providers, who also soak up money from the advertising market, Bunduchi said. Officially, Moldova has no state advertising, although individual agencies and government-held companies sometimes place advertisements. Some panelists said that advertising 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.<sup>6</sup> 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

<sup>6</sup> “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.”

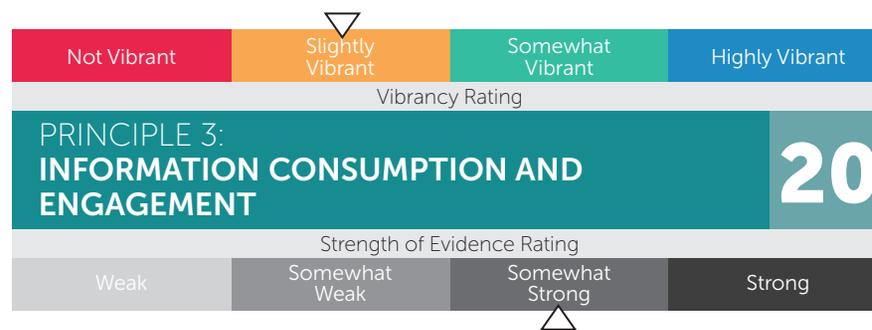
“The public media providers still believe that government subsidies mean they have to serve the government,” Bunduchi said.

**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.<sup>7</sup> 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](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.”

### **LIST OF PANEL PARTICIPANTS**

**Alina Andronache**, journalist, blogger, Chișinău

**Ion Bunduchi**, executive director, Association of Electronic Press, Chișinău

**Vitalie Călugăreanu**, journalist, Jurnal TV, Chișinău

**Luiza Doroshenko**, executive director, Media Center, Tiraspol

**Irina Ghelbur**, development manager, AGORA news portal, Chișinău

**Aneta Gonța**, researcher, freelancer, Chișinău

**Olga Guțuțui**, program director, TV8, Chișinău

**Ruslan Mihalevschi**, interim editor-in-chief, SP newspaper, Bălți

**Natalia Porubin**, journalist, member of the Press Council of Moldova, Chișinău

**Eugeniu Rîbca**, media legislation expert/executive director, Mold-Street, Chișinău

**Vadim Șterbate**, journalist, Observatorul de Nord, Soroca

**Journalist (anonymous)**, Gagauzia

### **MODERATOR AND AUTHOR**

**Cristina Durnea**, media lawyer, Independent Journalism Center, Chișinău

Copyright © 2022 by IREX

**Notice of Rights:** Permission is granted to display, copy, and distribute VIBE in whole or in part, provided that: (a) the materials are used with the acknowledgment “The Vibrant Information Barometer (VIBE) is a product of IREX with funding from USAID.”; (b) VIBE is used solely for personal, noncommercial, or informational use; and (c) no modifications of VIBE are made.

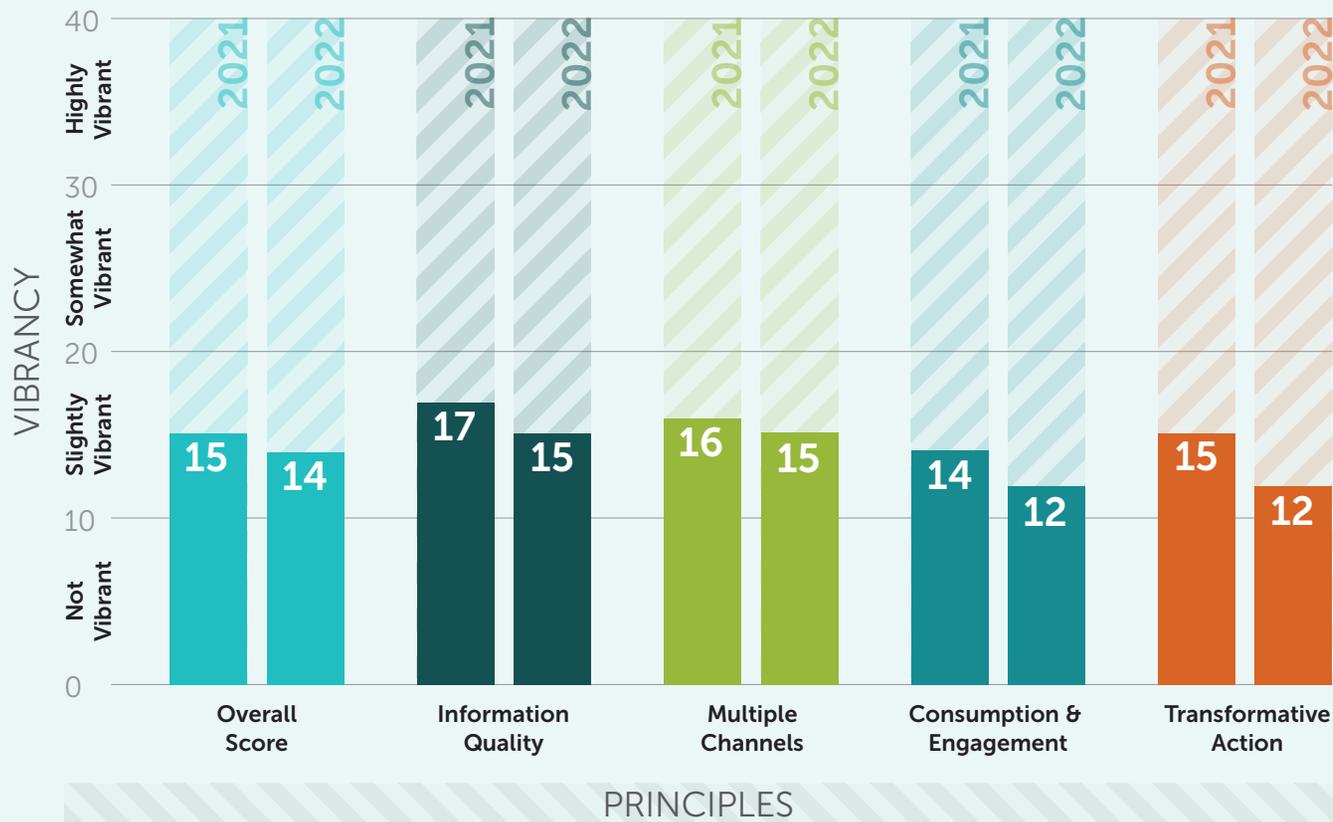
This study is made possible by the support of the American People through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The opinions expressed herein are those of the panelists and other project researchers and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID, the United States Government, or IREX.

# RUSSIA

# Vibrant Information Barometer

2 0 2 2





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

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

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

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

Highly Vibrant

Somewhat Vibrant

Slightly Vibrant

Not Vibrant

OVERALL  
SCORE

14

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

### Introduction

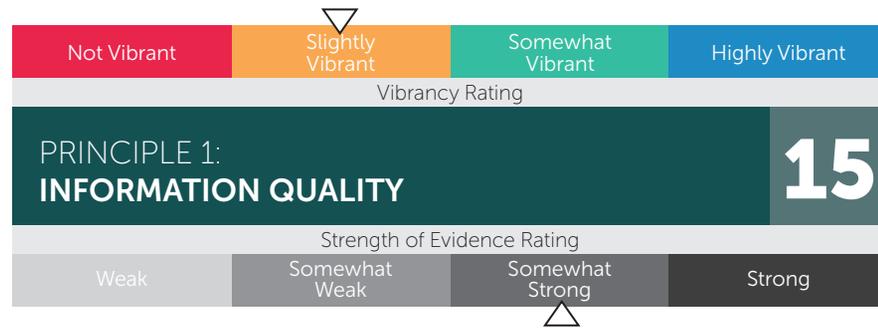
In Russia, 2021 began with dissident politician Alexey Navalny's return to the country, followed by his immediate detention. Just two days after his arrest, the investigative documentary *Putin's Palace: The History of the World's Largest Bribe*, written and directed by Navalny, was released on YouTube.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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

Journalism training is offered by more than 140 higher education institutions<sup>2</sup>, but this does not correlate with the production of ethical,

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

2 <https://vuzoteka.ru>

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

There are few Russian fact-checking resources, and those that do exist are not widely used. For example, Yandex launched a fact-checking scheme on its

content aggregating platform, Zen: a team of external experts check the veracity of information upon receiving users’ complaints. Partners that do the fact-checking include information agencies *TASS* and *Interfax*, independent media like *The Bell* and *Vedomosti*, and fact-checking projects *Provero* (Checked) and *FakeCheck*. The outlets also operate as fact-checking platforms. They check information upon individual requests and publish the results on their websites and social media.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

There are some disparities in the composition of non-professional

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

### Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced.

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

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

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

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

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

5 Russian Association of Communication Agencies. *Объем рекламы в средствах ее распространения в 2021 году*. [https://www.akarussia.ru/knowledge/market\\_size/id10015](https://www.akarussia.ru/knowledge/market_size/id10015)

6 Russian Association of Communication Agencies. *Объем рекламы в средствах ее распространения в 2021 году*. [https://www.akarussia.ru/knowledge/market\\_size/id10015](https://www.akarussia.ru/knowledge/market_size/id10015)

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

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

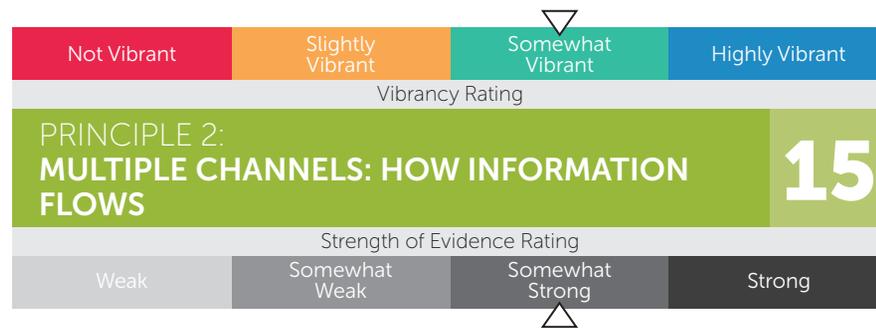
The majority of local advertising budgets are spent on social media advertising, and small local independent media are not able to find alternative funding streams to compensate for the loss of local advertising.

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Russia's ICT infrastructure is well developed. An estimated 61 percent of Russian households have access to broadband internet and the cost of both broadband and mobile internet access is among the cheapest in the world.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, Russian authorities have established a body of laws and regulations to tighten control over internet infrastructure, online content, and the privacy of communications. For example, the "sovereign internet" law, adopted in 2019, requires internet service providers to install equipment that allows authorities to circumvent providers and automatically block content that the government has banned and reroute internet traffic. Regulations adopted in 2019 require VPNs and search engine operators to promptly block access to the officially banned websites. In 2021, Roscomnadzor, Russia's telecommunications regulator, had sufficient capacity to slow down access to Twitter after the social network was accused of failing to remove posts about illegal drug use, child pornography, and suicide messages targeted to minors.

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

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

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

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

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

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

### Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for government information.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow.

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

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

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

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

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

“Media ownership is fully transparent to the government but not to the public,” explained one panelist.

not always have the ability to survive.

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

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

### **Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.**

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

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

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

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

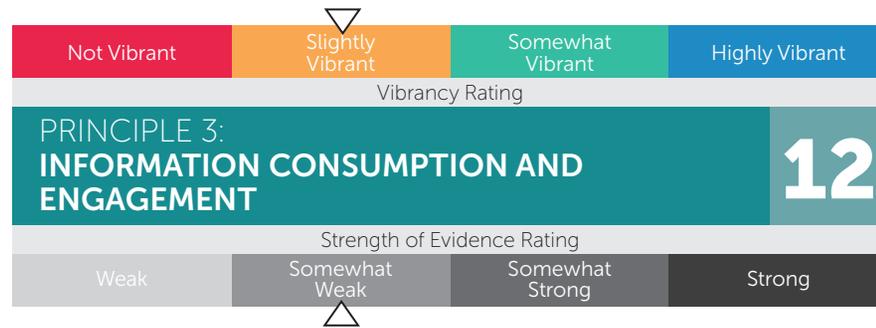
There is no public service media that is adequately and apolitically funded. Russian Public TV is funded by the government and is not independent.

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

“The laws on personal data protection don't protect this data from the government. They are used to limit dissemination of data about government executives,” said one panelist.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

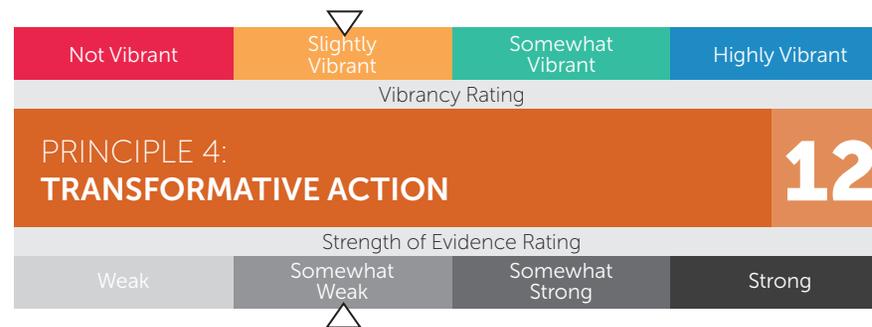
Media and content producers understand importance of analyzing their audiences, but many do not have sufficient resources to commission research. Use of quantitative data collected by specialized media measurement companies is more widespread than the use of qualitative data.

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic rights**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

credibility; and just 17 percent were convinced that the story was true.<sup>29</sup>

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

### List of Panel Participants

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

---

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

#### Copyright © 2022 by IREX

**Notice of Rights:** Permission is granted to display, copy, and distribute VIBE in whole or in part, provided that: (a) the materials are used with the acknowledgment “The Vibrant Information Barometer (VIBE) is a product of IREX with funding from USAID.”; (b) VIBE is used solely for personal, noncommercial, or informational use; and (c) no modifications of VIBE are made.

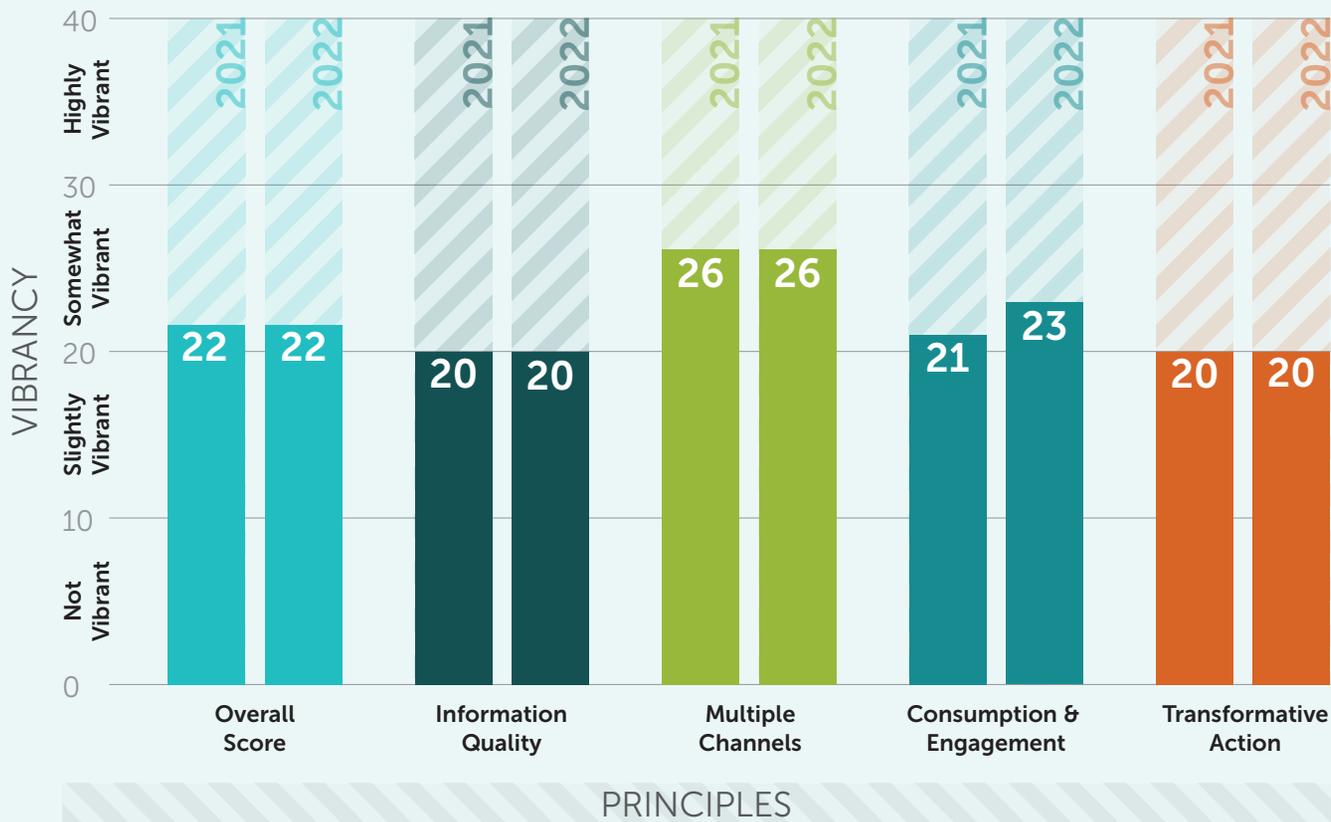
This study is made possible by the support of the American People through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The opinions expressed herein are those of the panelists and other project researchers and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID, the United States Government, or IREX.

# UKRAINE

## 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

**Preface:** On February 24, 2022, Russia launched a multi-pronged invasion of Ukraine. Since the 2022 VIBE chapter on Ukraine covers events in the media and information space during 2021, the war between Russia and Ukraine is mentioned in this chapter as a threat, but it does not discuss the impact of the current conflict. However, it provides an overview of the pre-war media environment in Ukraine, including the rise and influence of Kremlin propaganda efforts.

**Introduction**

In 2021, Ukraine celebrated 30 years of independence — with the threat of a full-fledged invasion looming large in the background, as Russia built up its military along Ukraine’s borders in spring and the end of the year. Moreover, Ukraine proved ill prepared for two waves of COVID-19. Immunization campaigns started late and intensified only in autumn, then were undermined by widespread anti-vaccination sentiments and information space manipulations.

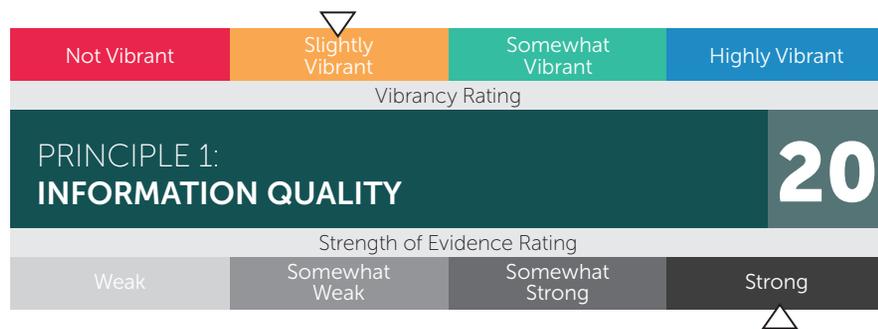
In February 2021, the National Security and Defense Council (NSDC) imposed sanctions on the pro-Kremlin proxy Viktor Medvedchuk and his television channels. The blocked channels claimed to be merely oppositional, but they disseminated the most toxic and influential Russian propaganda narratives in Ukraine.

Aspiring to limit oligarch influence, President Volodymyr Zelensky ensured that the state adopted a populist, anti-oligarch law in September 2021. The law’s passage led the presidential administration into fierce political confrontation with oligarchs — with the exception of Ihor Kolomoyskyi — and other opponents. However, beginning in autumn,

Zelensky’s relations grew tense with media, especially with media controlled by billionaire Ukrainian businessman Rinat Akhmetov. Media experts noticed attempts to build a pool of media loyal to the president, which may have further implications closer to the next elections. The media group includes representatives from private media, but the more threatening trend was the state-owned media gaining strength in the media market. This development included attempts to re-position niche state-owned television channels Dom and Rada for a national audience.

Principle 1 (information quality) tied with Principle 4 (transformative action) both received this year’s study’s lowest score of 20, with mal-information and scarce media business prospects the ongoing major issues. The score for Principle 2 (on plurality of channels) received the highest score of all the principles. Panelists gave press freedom, access to information, and media infrastructure higher scores. Mainstream media owners’ editorial interference continues to be the key challenge.

The score for Principle 3 (information consumption and engagement) increased slightly. However, citizens’ poor media literacy and digital security skills remained a major weakness, along with a lack of evidence-based debates. Although Principle 4 tied for the lowest scored, panelists praising civil society contributions to a robust information flow; while giving their lowest scores to the utilization of information by individuals. Panelists also questioned the government’s reliability in communications and officials’ reactions to media reports exposing violations.



Principle 1's score remains on par with its 2021 VIBE study score. The diversity of mainstream media owners ensures pluralism. The population has shifted to seek news online; however, half of consumers still follow news from oligarch-owned television groups. These conglomerates dominate the narrow advertising market, further constraining business prospects for other media actors. Although the government has substantially reduced mal-information sources by blocking key pro-Russian television channels, Russian narratives still reach and influence Ukrainians.

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

Ukraine has adequate infrastructure to produce abundant, varied, and quality content in all types of media, and technology has grown more affordable. Mainstream media are divided between several oligarch groups of influence, whose aim is to shore up their political and economic interests. The top television groups are Viktor Pinchuk's StarLightMedia (ICTV, STB, and Novyi channels); Ihor Kolomoyskiy's 1+1 Media (six channels, including 1+1 channel; UNIAN news agency; and 1plus1.ua); Rinat Akhmetov's Media Group Ukraine (Ukraina channel, Ukraina 24 channel, and Segodnya.ua); and Inter Media Group, owned by Dmytro Firtash and Serhiy Levochkin.

According to the Media Literacy Index by Detector Media (DM),<sup>1</sup> the

1 *Media Literacy Index of Ukrainians*. Detector Media. March 2021. [https://detector.media/doc/images/news/archive/2021/186437/REPORT\\_MEDIALITERA%D0%A1Y\\_INDEX-DM\\_EN.pdf](https://detector.media/doc/images/news/archive/2021/186437/REPORT_MEDIALITERA%D0%A1Y_INDEX-DM_EN.pdf).

leading sources of information on sociopolitical topics are national entertainment television channels (STB, 1+1, Inter, Ukraina, etc.). Fifty-seven percent of the Ukrainian audience watches them to that end. DM reported that 50 percent of respondents use social networks, 28 percent of respondents watch national news television channels, 24 percent refer to news websites, and 19 percent of the Ukrainian audience learns sociopolitical news from messengers. A mere 12 percent of respondents use public-service channels.

The journalism training sub-indicator scored relatively high, ensured by plenty of informal donor-funded training workshops and internships (often media-supportive NGO programs), on-the-job training options, and some paid opportunities. The academic journalism system is outdated, with the exception of the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy and the Ukrainian Catholic University. Many practitioners in the profession work without any formal journalism education. A panelist involved in higher education for journalists noticed increases in practical skills training, industry practitioners engaging in teaching journalism students, and persecuting journalists for plagiarism.

Panelists noted that monitoring by DM and Institute of Mass Information (IMI)<sup>2</sup>, resolutions of the [Commission of Journalism Ethics](#), and the [Independent Media Council](#) regularly document ethical and other professional journalism standards violations, as well as the many media outlets publishing jeansia (paid content disguised as legitimate news). In September, IMI announced the national online media White List. These outlets are credited for 96 percent compliance with professional standards: [Suspilne](#), [Hromadske](#), [Liga](#), [Ukrainska Pravda \(UP\)](#), [Ukrinform](#), [Radio Liberty](#), [Dzerkalo Tyzhnya](#), [Novoe Vremya \(NV\)](#), [Espresso](#) and [Babel](#).

The media sector has started developing the institution of reputation, one panelist observed. An example is the serious car accident allegedly caused by Oleksandr Trukhin, a member of parliament (MP) from The Servant of the People ruling party. Soon after the accident report

2 *Content of Ukrainian Media in 2021: Monitoring Results*. Institute of Mass Information. January 5, 2022. <https://imi.org.ua/monitorings/kontent-ukrayinskyh-media-u-2021-rotsi-pidsumky-monitoringiv-imi-i43114>.

was initially published, more than 30 media outlets deleted the story. Meanwhile, thousands of Facebook users disseminated lists of outlets which deleted stories about Trukhin's car accident, urging others not to consume these media. Moreover, journalists were the investigators persistently chasing the case, and Trukhin, for months after the incident.

One editor noted that the journalism community expresses more consensus in censuring colleagues who violate professional standards, while non-professional content producers do not face professional ramifications.

A data journalism expert commented that most media are obsessed with covering national political events. National media cover local news only when there are scandals or emergencies, and they do not offer consistent coverage of regional issues or changes. International journalism and economic journalism are also poorly represented, according to a media analyst on the panel.

The panelists agreed that media publications and opinion leaders hold the government to account and force it to respond, and they lamented that more serious consequences happen only rarely. One panelist stated that editorial independence is threatened and said that media feed the audience with what brings bonuses, rather than what consumers need.

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

Fact-based information is the norm for a majority of professional content producers and the government; it is rare for the media and the government to disseminate false information intentionally. A media law expert said that spreading false information is a serious legal infringement for broadcasters, and the National Television and Radio Broadcasting Council (NTRBC) had been reacting forcefully to broadcaster violations. However, courts apply sanctions with varied outcomes. In 2021, a majority of broadcasters complied with

the standards, but several — such as Nash and Maksi TV television channels — continued to systematically disseminate disinformation and hate speech.<sup>3</sup>

Non-professional content producers publish most of the intentionally misleading information, as one panelist who works as an editor observed. Bloggers, influencers, anonymous Telegram channels,

and private interest groups in social networks and messaging apps have long disseminated unverified information and manipulated facts, or they have served as tools of the Russian hybrid war against Ukraine. According to a Radio Liberty report in February 2021, the State Security Service of Ukraine disclosed a network that Russian security services is managing and

that contributes to a dozen anonymous Telegram channels popular in Ukraine.

The panelists pointed to officials in the president's office making odious false statements on Wagnergate (a failed special operation to arrest members of Russia's Wagner mercenary force), and they called out the Ministry of Health for encouraging vaccination through false statements. The panelists reported that while most national and local authorities do not systemically push misinformation, they do tend to obscure information on sensitive issues. Often officials will place information in irrelevant website sections and will not disclose information fully or accurately. They will also manipulate facts or distort them with inappropriate interpretations.

Ukraine has many strong fact-checking agencies that debunk Russian and local disinformation, and simple fact-checking tools and manuals are available online. Since March 2020, [StopFake](#) and [VoxCheck](#)

**“ Russia works inside Ukraine through formally Ukrainian media, proxies among Ukrainian politicians, and influence agents among pro-Russian non-professional content creators.**

<sup>3</sup> “The results of inspections of “Maksi-TV” and “OUR” - a fine and a lawsuit to revoke the license due to the spread of hostility and biased information,” National Council of Ukraine on Television and Radio Broadcasting. November 4, 2021. <https://www.nrada.gov.ua/rezultaty-perevirok-maksi-tv-nash-shtraf-zvernennya-sudu-pro-anulyuvannya-litsenziyi-cherez-poshyrennya-vorozhnechi-neob-yektyvnoyi-informatsiyi/>.

have been the local partners of a Facebook program countering disinformation. However, many initiatives of social networks to moderate content are reactive and ineffective, according to one media researcher on the panel. Another panelist added that Facebook applies moderation mechanisms, but they are not always fair, and Telegram does not have any form of moderation.

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

Consistently and over many years, the Russian Federation has been generating disinformation and hate speech intended to harm Ukraine. Russia works inside Ukraine through formally Ukrainian media, proxies among Ukrainian politicians, and influence agents among pro-Russian non-professional content creators. Russian-imposed narratives traditionally focus on discrediting Ukrainian values and institutions; undermining trust in the Ukrainian government; claiming “external” governance of Ukraine; and criticizing Ukrainian laws, reforms, and aspirations for joining the EU and NATO. Russia enhances anti-Western narratives and uses information for military and diplomatic pressure.

In early February 2021, the president endorsed the NSDC decision to shut down television channels 112 Ukraine, NewsOne, and ZIK. The closures were part of the sanctions imposed on lawmaker Taras Kozak of the Opposition Party for Life (OPFL) for terrorism financing. Kozak’s assets are widely believed to be controlled by Viktor Medvedchuk, an MP of the same party and the Kremlin’s closest ally in Ukraine. Later, NSDC imposed sanctions on Medvedchuk and his wife.

Also in 2021, Ukraine hampered Medvedchuk’s media company in its attempts to reincarnate. About former 100 employees of Medvedchuk’s channels rapidly set up Mediaholding Novyny and quickly bought Pershi Nezalezhnyi, an existing television channel which had a satellite

license. However, the government quickly put a stop to this. In April 2021, YouTube blocked access to three Medvedchuk channels’ regular accounts, but they quickly pivoted to reserve accounts to distribute their content. The Supreme Court of Ukraine refused to cancel the sanctions, and the case is currently being considered at the cassation instance of the Supreme Court.

In 2020, Texty research indicated that 9,200 news stories at clickbait websites with anti-Ukrainian propaganda referred to the source — Medvedchuk channels. Emotional and manipulative quotes from pseudo-experts and virtual sociologists prevailed among the reposts, which Russian media used widely. According to DM research, this content amounted to more than half of all pro-Russian propaganda in the Ukrainian information sphere.

In the panelists’ view, Ukraine has been unable to take any serious action using its media legislation or long democratic procedures. One panelist insisted that NSDC sanctions became the last resort exactly because no other professional ramifications worked. “Those journalists and public figures have not become outcasts in the community,” the same panelist observed. Moreover, with such shaky legal grounds, there is a risk of Medvedchuk media appealing this decision in the European courts in the future.

According to an IMI and DM joint study, the broadcasting share of pro-Russian and anti-Western information campaigns and their audiences decreased considerably. Some of the speakers who pushed these narratives on Medvedchuk channels moved to Nash and Ukraina-24 channels. Upon the Medvedchuk channel closures, Nash TV experienced the largest audience increase — vaulting from seventh to second place in news channels ratings. However, the online audience of all major pro-Russian websites decreased only by 25 percent; these websites had 11 million visits per month, while the other three anti-Ukrainian websites (strana.ua, vesti.ua, and golos.ua) clocked 31 million visits per month.

**“One regional editor on the panel said that most local communities, such as districts and villages, do not have media based in their communities and do not hear their voices presented in the national outlets.”**

In August, the Ukrainian government imposed sanctions on Anatoliy Shariy, a provocative pro-Russian video blogger, and Ihor Guzhva, chief editor of strana.ua, along with their respective websites and YouTube channels.

For nine months of 2021, Medvedchuk's channels broadcast via internet and through a number of regional channels – Odesa's Zdorovie, and Sumy's Akadem TV and TRK Vidikon, which then obtained NTRBC warnings. In the fall, OPFL MP Nestor Shufrych became the major stakeholder of Mediaholding Novyny; and in November, Mediaholding Novyny bought Ukrlive television channel to broadcast Pershyi Nezaleznyi via satellite and cable networks. On December 28, NSDC introduced sanctions against Ukrlive, Pershyi Nezaleznyi, and Mediaholding Novyny.

Texty counted Ukrainians residents' monthly consumption of anti-Ukrainian content. The results showed 118 million visits to websites with anti-Ukrainian content (Russian news sites for Ukraine, Russian mainstream media, and Ukrainian manipulative websites), 2 million subscribers to pro-Russian Telegram channels, more than 120 million views of videos on pro-Russian YouTube channels, 2 anti-Ukrainian websites within the top 10 preferred news websites, and 61 percent of Ukrainian Facebook users reposting “dustbin” media. Analysts stressed that the key principle of Russian propaganda is information flows to an excess, when frequency of a certain message becomes an argument for its truthfulness.

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

Panelists noted an increase in the variety of formats and experiments to boost audience engagement. Online media have no limits on languages for presenting information, while television and radio have to comply with a quota of 75 percent Ukrainian language content.

A panelist who works with an NGO pointed out that diverse content is more available to city dwellers who use the internet frequently, rather than rural inhabitants and the aged, who cannot use the internet easily.

People with disabilities still are not given enough accommodations, but some broadcasters deliver current affairs with sign-language interpretation or subtitles. A panelist involved in media literacy training found a few channels with sign language and even some national internet media streaming services (also known as over-the-top or OTT) offering audio description functions.

Media do not exclude ethnic and social communities, and marginalized groups do not face obstacles in running their own niche or thematic media, given the array of online tools. However, one regional editor on the panel said that most local communities, such as districts and villages, do not have media based in their communities and do not hear their voices presented in the national outlets.

Panelists noted that LGBTQ issues do not garner enough attention in media, and silencing and a certain indifference are widespread. According to journalism students' research, however, Ukrainian society is steadily moving towards tolerance. Ukrainian media are showing positive dynamics with newsrooms, gradually rejecting stereotypes and homophobic slants. Very often, the more progressive publications give rise to intolerant language in their social media comments, especially in the regions with more traditional cultural stances.<sup>4</sup>

Male experts still prevail in media, and female images are stereotyped, said one media education expert on the panel. This panelist pointed to a Vox Ukraine study<sup>5</sup> analyzing the largest online media, which indicated that the share of female experts interviewed fluctuated from 13 to 35 percent.

A UNDP gender expert, Mykola Yabchenko, commented that the research conducted by Vox Ukraine highlighted that, in the newsrooms studied, beat distribution reflects gender bias. Female journalists often cover culture and social topics, while men more frequently get assignments

4 *How Do Ukrainian Media Write about LGBT? Povaha*, December 27, 2021. <https://povaha.org.ua/yak-ukrayinski-zmi-pyshut-pro-lgbt-doslidzhennya/>.

5 “Male World of Experts’ Comments,” VoxUkraine. November 23, 2021 <https://voxukraine.org/cholovichyj-svit-ekspertnyh-komentariv/>.

related politics, economics, and finance.<sup>6</sup> Traditionally, men hold more managerial positions at media outlets, but women outnumber men overall in the media's workforce.

### Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced.

Most Ukrainian media are subsidized by owners, and a relatively small number are self-sustainable. Despite the advertising market's formal growth, its size is not enough to support the number of media outlets operating in Ukraine, one panelist emphasized. Moreover, the transnational tech giants take a substantial part of digital advertising budgets.

The four largest television groups have been monopolizing the television advertising market for decades, uniting into sales cartels that dictate their conditions. Since 2021, the alliances' configuration has changed, but this has only re-distributed revenue between the groups. The advertising company Ocean Media is now a sales house for StarLightMedia, which claims 38 percent of television advertising, and for 1+1 Media, which holds 30 percent of the market. With these companies, Ocean Media now controls more than two-thirds of the market.

Little has changed, one panelist commented, since the VoxUkraine study in 2019 that showed media usually have just one or two main income sources: advertising and media owners' funds.<sup>7</sup>

Since 2020, national and local media outlets have seen a boom in launching various membership models, according to a study by [The Membership Puzzle Project](#). The project's research covered 11 online media outlets and showed that newsroom budgets from membership models might include 1 percent (for large media) to a maximum of 30

percent (for very small media). For many outlets, these funds do not influence the broader market or provide a significant source of income. Rather, the memberships present an opportunity to engage readers in newsroom activities, increase loyalty, and popularize the brand.

According to the annual USAID-funded Internews Media Consumption Survey (MCS),<sup>8</sup> 20 percent of Ukrainians are ready to pay for access to their favorite online news media.

The economic state of local media is worsening, and soon parts of Ukraine might face so-called "news deserts," a media analyst on the panel said. In a positive development, a media growth agency has facilitated the launch of The City, a collective of 50 hyperlocal online publications. About 80 percent of the publications originated from former municipal newspapers, often in strong communities. However, a few members shut down last year, and more can be expected due to the lack of advertising funds.

Budget-funded municipal broadcasters create unfair competition for private media and usually remain loyal to local governments. Meanwhile, so-called "municipal jeans," budget funding to cover government activities, also distorts the market in the regions where the allocations are substantial. A panelist with expertise in political analysis noted that the government splits the funds into smaller sums among departments, in order to avoid competitive tenders through ProZorro, the electronic public procurement system. The government tends to allocate funds to more loyal media in exchange for positive coverage. Often these outlets are former municipal media that were privatized under destatization reform a few years earlier.

Journalists earn low salaries, especially in the regions, keeping them in constant search of additional income. Moreover, media managers are not paid enough to stay in the industry.

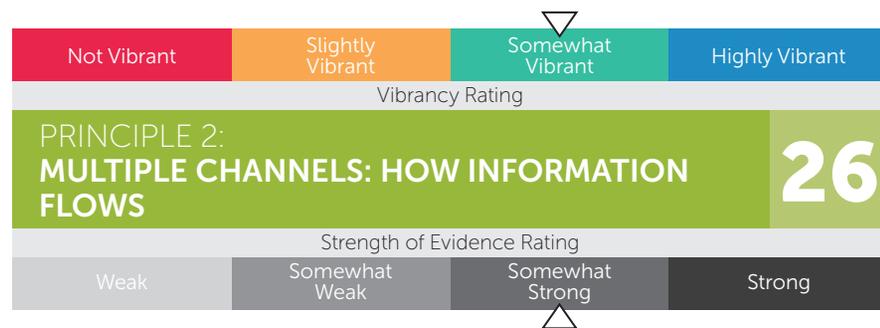
Panelists agreed that major advertisers that form the market are not politicized, instead caring about audiences and the cost effectiveness of

6 Up to 35 Percent of Experts: There Is No Gender Balance in Media – VoxUkraine, Povaha. December 6, 2021 <https://povaha.org.ua/do-35-ekspertok-u-zhodnomu-zmi-nemaye-gendernogo-balansu-voks-ukrayina/>.

7 "How to Improve Business Models: Advice to Ukrainian Media Managers," VoxUkraine. February 26, 2020. <https://voxukraine.org/yak-pokrashhiti-biznes-model-poradi-kerivnikam-ukrayinskih-media/>.

8 2021 Media Consumption Survey, USAID-Internews. November 2021. <https://internews.in.ua/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/USAID-Internews-Media-Consumption-Survey-2021-ENG.pdf>.

their advertising budgets. They noted cases in which advertisers tend to avoid politically odious media outlets, due to risks to brand reputation and image.



Overall, Principle 2's score was the same as its score in the 2021 VIBE study. Indicators 7 (channels of information), 8 (channels of government information) and 9 (diverse channels of information flow) remained well above average, while indicator 10 (independence of information channels) obtained a score of 19. Panelists gave lower scores to issues for some sub-indicators, including: illegal forms of pressure on journalists; perpetrator immunity; low trust in government press offices; the handful of oligarchs with a considerable concentration of the television market; and the politicized process of NTRBC licensing and membership.

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

For many years, Ukrainian legislation protecting free speech and free media has been in line with European norms. As with many other laws in Ukraine, authorities can be selective in media law application and enforcement, and some legal techniques are imperfect. However, one panelist with a law background held the view that the overall legal situation is positive. Ukrainian law protects journalists' sources. Libel law has been a civil law issue since 2001.

Another panelist said that Ukraine does not have systemic pressure on journalists, but pointed to sporadic incidents. They included the still-

unresolved case of the attack on the Skhemy television crew during an interview in the state-owned Ukreximbank; an attempt to disrupt the premiere of the Slidstvo.info investigative film "Offshore 95" about the president's offshore companies; and pressure on the Suspilne talk show, Zvorotniy Vidlik, to invite certain ruling-party representatives.<sup>9</sup>

Another panelist underscored self-censorship, seen with oligarch-owned media with editorial policies in favor of certain political forces. Fear of retribution is more common in the regions; one panelist confirmed a sense of not only self-censorship, but more overt censorship at the urging of regional media owners.

A strategic communications consultant pointed to an increase in cases of certain media not being invited to key events or off-record meetings with top governmental officials. Another panelist said that only 30 media received invitations to a recent presidential press conference; other journalists protested his forming a pool of favorite media.<sup>10</sup>

Although the panelists supported blockage of pro-Russian propagandist media, they viewed NSDC sanctions as riskier tools to restrict freedom of speech than legal methods and court proceedings. Since 2017, Ukraine has also restricted access to Russian television channels, news sites, and social networks through ICT providers.

Panelists agreed that investigating crimes against journalists, and further consideration of the cases in courts, need improvement. In 2021, IMI monitoring documented 197 press-freedom violations in Ukraine, excluding occupied territories, compared to 229 cases in 2020: 99 cases of journalists prevented from carrying out their professional activities, 24 beatings, 18 instances of denied access to public information, 16 cyber-

<sup>9</sup> "Council for Freedom of Speech on the scandal between the OP and the Public: "there was no" direct "pressure, but the interaction between the government and the media should be regulated," Detector Media. November 3, 2021. <https://detector.media/community/article/193475/2021-11-03-rada-zi-svobody-slova-pro-skandal-mizh-op-ta-suspilnym-pryamogo-tysku-ne-bulo-ale-vzaiemodiyu-mizh-vladoyu-ta-zmi-treba-reglamentuvaty/>.

<sup>10</sup> "Journalist comes uninvited": Media outlets not allowed on Zelensky's press marathon went on protest," Public Radio. November 26, 2021. <https://hromadske.radio/news/2021/11/26/zhurnalist-prykhodyt-bez-zaprosyennia-zmi-iaki-ne-pustyly-na-presmarafon-zelens-koho-vyshly-na-aktsiiu-protestu-foto>

crimes, 13 threats, and 27 other violations (property damage, censorship, legal and indirect pressure).<sup>11</sup> According to IMI, 27 cases investigated by law-enforcement bodies were submitted to courts, compared to 16 cases in 2020. IMI counted 10 sentences on crimes against journalists in 2021.

Of the 248 cases involving crimes against journalists initially registered in 2021, 128 were dismissed. IMI regularly reports monitored violations to the general prosecutor's office, which does not investigate the offenses itself but can push other law enforcement authorities to investigate.<sup>12</sup>

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

Ukraine's ICT infrastructure is improving gradually. The infrastructure is more developed in the cities, and internet service is poor in small towns with less than 50,000 inhabitants and in many rural areas. According to Compare the Market, Ukraine enjoys the world's cheapest broadband internet fees.<sup>13</sup>

Panelists noted that the Ministry of Digital Transformation of Ukraine (MDTU) has launched [the Internet Subvention Program](#). Through this program, local communities can obtain government support to procure fixed internet infrastructure in locations that are not lucrative for private

“Fear of retribution is more common in the regions; one panelist confirmed a sense of not only self-censorship, but more overt censorship at the urging of regional media owners.”

providers. More than 6,000 social institutions (hospitals, schools, libraries, etc.) in more than 3,000 villages gained internet connectivity in 2021. 4G is available to 8.4 million Ukrainians in almost 14,000 locations.<sup>14</sup> MDTU has arranged internet access at 1,000 administrative service centers for Ukrainians to overcome digital gaps with governmental e-services and MDTU's Diia governmental services portal and mobile app, launched in 2020.<sup>15</sup>

Internet penetration in Ukraine hit 67 percent, or 30 million people, in early 2021.<sup>16</sup> GlobalLogic estimated an increase in social media audience by 7 million people in 2021, up to 26 million (60 percent of the population).<sup>17</sup> According to Plusone surveys,<sup>18</sup> YouTube had 23.5 Ukrainian users by January 2022; while Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok had 16.8 million, 17.3 million, and 12 million users, respectively.

Meanwhile, many print publications closed, concurrently with a decline in their distribution and delivery infrastructure. The wired radio system is in ruins. Analog television is switched off, with the exception of the Joint Forces Operation zone. Mainstream television channels have encoded their signal at satellite and become paid-for services. Rural inhabitants have limited choice of media. Consumers can receive blocked Russian

11 *Barometer of Freedom of Speech for December 2021*, Institute of Mass Information. December 30, 2021. <https://imi.org.ua/monitorings/barometr-svobody-slova-za-gruden-2021-roku-i43165>.

12 *Reaction of the Government on Violations of Journalists Rights: 2021 Results*, Institute of Mass Information. January 24, 2022. <https://imi.org.ua/monitorings/reaktsiya-vlady-na-porushennya-prav-zhurnalistiv-pidsumky-2021-i43450>.

13 Taras Mishchenko, Taras. “Ukraine has the cheapest leading Internet, Ethiopia - the most expensive,” *Mezha*. March 12, 2021. <https://mezha.media/2021/12/03/ukraina-maie-naydeshevshyy-providnyy-internet/>.

14 “Mincifia: more than 116,000 Ukrainians first received 4G in March,” Ministry and Committee of Digital Transformation of Ukraine. April 9, 2021. [https://thedigital.gov.ua/news/mintsifraponad-116-tis-ukraintsiv-vpershe-otrimali-4g-v-berezni?fbclid=IwAR12n0Sj\\_m\\_8007iXmrVcXewmbFglCVSHGyu4-Ypsf52pSeR7EpO37Aw4hc](https://thedigital.gov.ua/news/mintsifraponad-116-tis-ukraintsiv-vpershe-otrimali-4g-v-berezni?fbclid=IwAR12n0Sj_m_8007iXmrVcXewmbFglCVSHGyu4-Ypsf52pSeR7EpO37Aw4hc)

15 <https://thedigital.gov.ua/news/ukraintsi-yaki-ne-mayut-gadzhetiv-chi-dostupu-do-internetu-zmozhut-otrimati-poslugi-v-dii-u-spetsialno-oblashtovanikh-mistsyakh-tsnap>.

16 “Plus 2 Million Users: What Ukrainians Do Online in 2021,” *Focus*. August 31, 2021 <https://focus.ua/digital/491571-plyus-2-mln-polzovateley-chem-ukraincy-zanimayutsya-v-internete-v-2021-godu-infografika>

17 “Over a Year of Quarantine, the Number of Ukrainian Social Media Users Increased by 7 Million and Reached 60 Percent of Population.” *Global Logic*. <https://www.globallogic.com/ua/about/news/social-media-during-quarantine/>

18 <https://plusone.com.ua/research/>

channels via satellite and access blocked online resources using virtual private networks (VPNs).

Legal or social norms do not preclude any groups from access, but geography can be a challenge. Viewers in the Ukraine border regions mostly access the television channels of neighboring countries — and widely available Russian stations. While one panelist pointed to an improvement to the situation in the districts of the Sumy region, about 5-10 km from Russia, an online journalist in the region reported rising challenges in Bahmut, Donetsk oblast, which borders occupied Donbas territories. With support from donors, the Ukraine government installed transmitters in that area to spread Vilne Radio to the occupied zone. But Russian actors installed more powerful towers that dampen Ukrainian signals and spread Russian broadcasting to Ukrainians in Ukraine.

### **Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for government information.**

Ukraine's 2011 law on access to public information and subsequent amendments is one of the most advanced in the world. Moreover, in 2020 Ukraine ratified the Council of Europe's Tromsø Convention on access to official documents. Ukrainians can submit information requests, appeal denials in courts, attend local government sessions, and find extensive information on governmental websites. The government maintains a [united open-data portal](#), allowing Ukrainians to search in numerous open-data information sets.

Still, citizens and journalists who request access to public information from the government often experience roadblocks, inaccurate or vague replies, or even denials. One journalist on the panel commented that his outlet filed, and lost, a lawsuit to obtain staff salaries and biographies of certain officials. In an IMI poll, 68 percent of 160 editors and journalists named quarantine restrictions as cause to deny access to journalists. Fifty-nine percent cited problems with access to governmental bodies,

obtaining accreditation, and access to public information among the key challenges in 2021.<sup>19</sup>

**Viewers in the Ukraine border regions mostly access the television channels of neighboring countries — and widely available Russian stations.**

Donors support media lawyers who help journalists properly request information and appeal denials. Courts tend to rule in favor of journalists or citizens in cases related to public information. Ukraine has a web service, [Dostup Do Pravdy](#) (Access to Truth), to help people file information requests. According to the panelists, citizens might be reluctant to learn how to file requests, but they do not fear seeking public information. No groups are excluded from exercising this right. CSOs actively exercise their right for public information.

Government bodies have spokespersons and press offices, but usually they function to shield officials from the media, suppress information, and even lie, rather than help journalists. Some panelists confirmed that a number of Kyiv-based authorities systematically ignore journalists. Another panelist added that local government press offices might not invite journalists to briefings, or they might publish an online announcement right before a press conference, to increase the likelihood that only “suitable” journalists attend. The panelists presumed that citizens' trust in government spokespersons is low, judging by their level of trust toward other government authorities.<sup>20</sup> The public has a presumption of distrust in government information, according to an editor on the panel.

### **Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow.**

The four largest oligarch-owned television groups hold more than 75

<sup>19</sup> *Access to State Authorities and Quarantine Restrictions are Key Challenges to Freedom of Speech in 2021*, Institute of Mass Information. December 20, 2021 <https://imi.org.ua/monitorings/dostup-do-derzhavnyh-organiv-ta-karantynni-obmezheniya-osnovni-vykyky-dlya-svobody-slova-u-2021-i42982>.

<sup>20</sup> *Trust in the institutions of society and politicians, electoral orientations of the citizens of Ukraine (July-August 2021)*, Razumkov Center. August 10, 2021. <https://razumkov.org.ua/napriamky-sotsiologichni-doslidzhennia/dovira-do-instytutiv-suspilstva-ta-politykiv-elektoralni-orientatsii-gromadian-ukrainy>.

percent of Ukraine's overall television audience. Online media, which are part of their media holdings, are also among the most popular outlets. Ukrainian lawmakers are helpless to restrict the ownership concentration of television and radio broadcasting. One panelist noted that the Anti-Monopoly Committee of Ukraine admitted that it was unable to measure the television market or relevant shares of television media companies. A law expert on the panel explained that laws foresee monopoly status for a legal entity but cannot regulate its holdings or complicated ownership schemes. Ukrainian anti-monopoly law has no provisions for media other than broadcast.

In 2015 Ukraine adopted very advanced legislation on broadcasting media ownership transparency, but in practice, the law does not work, according to some of the panelists. They explained that establishing and proving specific ownership is difficult if someone wants to hide it; as a result, NSDC has had to intervene with sanctions on media companies. According to a provision entered into force in 2021, other media types must disclose beneficial owners, along with all other legal entities. But anyone can be behind online media, which Ukrainian laws do not regulate.

In autumn 2021, the parliament adopted a law on oligarchs, including those who have substantial influence on media. How the law will work is not yet clear, according to the panelists, but it brings a risk that oligarchs will mask their ownership of media through proxies.

According to the Media Literacy Index by DM,<sup>21</sup> only a third of respondents (34 percent) indicated that knowing a media outlet's ownership is important to them, while 59 percent do not care. A majority of respondents could name the owners of the following television channels: Channel 5, 1+1, Ukraina, and Rada. No more than a quarter could say who controls such television channels as Inter, 112, Priamyi, STB, NewsOne, ICTV and ZIK. Only 21 percent of Ukrainians know that UA:Persnyi channel is a public broadcaster.

Internet providers and cable television operators are not monopolized,

21 *Media Literacy Index of Ukrainians*, Detector Media. March 2021. [https://detector.media/doc/images/news/archive/2021/186437/REPORT\\_MEDIALITERA%D0%A1Y\\_INDEX-DM\\_EN.pdf](https://detector.media/doc/images/news/archive/2021/186437/REPORT_MEDIALITERA%D0%A1Y_INDEX-DM_EN.pdf).

but Zeonbud, a private digital television broadcasting transmitter, remains a monopoly with opaque ownership. Concern RRT, the state monopoly for analog broadcasting, provides Zeonbud with transmitter facilities. A prospective broadcaster could possibly reach a similar audience without a digital license and Zeonbud, one media director commented, but only at a much greater expense.

Rapid growth of OTT into full-fledged competitors of traditional television channels marks a significant trend. OTT services invest in expensive projects and production of television series and programs, buy rights for broadcasting sport events, etc. Netflix has launched a local Ukrainian version. Some Ukrainian viewers have transferred to OTT services, mostly from cable networks.

Certain media, such as web portals and low-cost outlets, can be very easily established in Ukraine. But some panelists held that media find it impossible to freely launch when required to obtain a broadcasting frequency and a license. The process for allocating broadcasting frequencies is not fair or transparent, panelists said. In autumn 2021, after a long quarantine pause, NTRBC conducted three radio competitions and a contest for digital frequencies. The competition nearly completed the transfer of local broadcasters from analog to digital broadcasting, but NTRBC did not allocate all frequencies. One panelist commented that NTRBC decisions do not raise any red flags, but it is hard to interpret why the agency is preferential towards certain broadcasters during competitions.

The public service broadcaster Suspilne – along with its regional affiliates, online platform, and radio service – provides varied formats and content, but it does not enjoy a high rating among viewers. In the Rivne region, Suspilne is the most independent and democratic broadcaster, and the only television channel without jeansa, according to one panelist with knowledge of the region.

### **Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.**

Only a limited number of media outlets in Ukraine operate for the purpose of financing their operations. It is far more common that media

owners have outlets to pursue their political and economic interests. In these cases, media company owners can influence and interfere in editorial policy, with rare exceptions, according to the panelists. IMI proved that political coverage of 10 online media correlated to their owners' political affiliation and current interests,<sup>22</sup> and shared that 1+1 Media silenced a Pandora Papers investigation about President Zelensky's offshore companies.<sup>23</sup> Liga studied how different media covered the risk of rolling blackouts in Ukraine and also identified owners' interests behind the coverage. Most of the negative news came from political opponents' media.<sup>24</sup>

In autumn 2021, Adnan Kivan, the owner of the English-speaking Kyiv Post since 2018, fired the whole newsroom — allegedly because of business losses. Its journalists believed the real reason was their resistance to his interference with editorial policy. Thirty ex-employees launched a new online media newsroom, The Kyiv Independent, within a few weeks.<sup>25</sup>

In the Rivne and Volyn regions, only the Public Broadcasting Company of Ukraine (UA:PBC) and a few local media NGOs avoid owner influence, according to one panelist. If some topics do not relate to owners' or funders' political interests, newsrooms at those institutions can produce such content independently.

The Media Literacy Index by DM<sup>26</sup> found that two thirds of Ukrainians (67 percent) believe that media serve the interests of their owners. Whereas 81 percent of western Ukraine residents think that media owners and investors control media content, only 55 percent in the eastern parts of the country hold this point of view.

Private advertising contracts from businesses and shops rarely influence editorial independence. Few media separate business and content production, and journalists often deal with advertising, help develop campaign ideas, or write advertorials. Local government subsidies or so-called “information coverage contracts” substantially influence editorial policy and may dictate the content and favorable tone of local government coverage.

President Zelensky's actions indicate an investment in renovating and strengthening the state and budget-funded television channels. For example, Parliament's television channel, Rada, relaunched as a national news channel on December 15. The government is also transforming the television channel Dom into a national general interest channel for internally displaced people across Ukraine. In 2021, Dom obtained almost UAH 1 billion (\$33.7 million). Dom is a former foreign-broadcasting outlet that was repositioned into a Russian-language channel for occupied territories.

President Zelensky has made moves to reposition and strengthen state budget-funded television channels. In one example, Dom TV— which used to be Ukraine's foreign broadcasting service and has been repositioned to provide Russian language channel for the occupied territories, is being transformed to the national general interest channel for internally displaced people across Ukraine. Although Russian-language broadcasting contradicts Ukrainian law, in 2021, Dom obtained almost UAH 1 billion (\$33 million) from the state budget. In a second case, parliament's TV channel Rada was re-launched as a national news channel in late 2021. Both have been transformed without relevant

22 “The Pool of Loyal and Disappointed by Zelensky. How Positions of the Owners Influence the Attitudes of the Media to Politicians?” Institute of Mass Information. December 29, 2021. <https://imi.org.ua/monitorings/pul-loyalnyh-ta-rozcharovani-zelenskym-yak-pozytsiya-vlasnykiv-vplyvaye-na-stavlennya-media-do-i43111>.

23 “Which Online Media Have Not Noticed Pandora Papers Investigation about Zelensky.” Institute of Mass Information. October 4, 2021. <https://imi.org.ua/monitorings/hto-z-onlajn-media-ne-pomityv-rozsliduvannya-pandora-papers-pro-zelenskogo-i41627>.

24 “Shufrich and Poroshenko Channels Scare Ukraine with Blackout. Akhmetov Will Save! Research.” Liga. November 23, 2021. <https://biz.liga.net/ua/ekonomika/tek/article/kanaly-shufricha-i-poroshenko-pugayut-ukrainu-blekautom-spaset-ahmetov>.

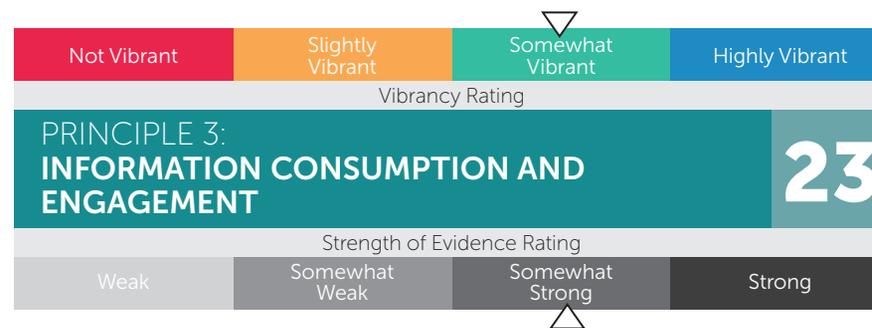
25 “The released Kyiv Post team launches new media, the editorial board will be headed by ex-deputy editor-in-chief Olga Rudenko.” Interfax. November 15, 2021. <https://ua.interfax.com.ua/news/telecom/779838.html>.

26 *Media Literacy Index of Ukrainians*. Detector Media. March 2021. [https://detector.media/doc/images/news/archive/2021/186437/REPORT\\_MEDIALITERA%D0%A1Y\\_INDEX-DM\\_EN.pdf](https://detector.media/doc/images/news/archive/2021/186437/REPORT_MEDIALITERA%D0%A1Y_INDEX-DM_EN.pdf).

legislative authorization.<sup>27</sup>

Since its establishment in 2017, UA:PBC has endured chronic underfunding, below the level set out by law (no less than 0.2 percent of the previous year's state budget spending). In previous years, UA:PBC has never received more than 60 percent of that funding. However, in 2021, it obtained UAH 1.874 billion (\$63,153, or about 82 percent of the legal requirement). The 2022 budget for UA:PBC is expected to be underfunded by UAH 0.5 billion (\$16.8 million).<sup>28</sup>

The parliament appoints four NTRBC members, and the president names another four, without any specific criteria. In December 2021, the parliament re-elected three council members. Access to frequencies — one of the serious barriers for private media — has eased for UA:PBC, one panelist commented, reflecting a sense that NTRBC officially prioritizes its development.<sup>29</sup> One panelist with knowledge of UA:PBC board developments said that members appointed from political party quotas cannot act in their political interests, because so far they are in the minority.



Principle 3's overall score increased modestly, with indicator 12 (media literacy) receiving the lowest score. Overall, media literacy education is progressing but still does not reach many population segments. Some media care little about their digital security and fail to take advantage of training opportunities and available tools. The government began to more obviously promote digital and media literacy efforts, as well as the country's information security. Media companies research their audiences and engage with their needs to the extent they can afford such efforts. Content producers, civil society, and the government do not collaborate systematically. Community media presence is negligible in Ukraine.

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

Ukrainian laws protect data privacy and digital security, criminal code articles cover cyber fraud, and 2021 saw no serious attempts to enhance security provisions that could violate personal freedoms. However, current laws and practices lag behind modern malware challenges, according to a digital security expert on the panel. That panelist added that governmental bodies too often tout personal data protection when requested to provide more detailed or disaggregated public information.

Media members and citizens have access to training and tools, including free online courses. Tools have become less complicated for average people, one panelist claimed. This panelist pointed to the increase in demand for digital security training and tools, which was probably

27 How Does Zelensky Build Media Empire. Detector Media November 13, 2021 <https://detector.media/withoutsection/article/193795/2021-11-13-yak-zelenskyy-buduie-mediaimperiyu/>

28 Komissarov, Alexander. "Shmygal stated that the funding of the Public is in full. But this is not the case," Ukrainian Public Broadcaster News. October 22, 2021. <https://suspilne.media/174029-finansuvanna-suspilnogo-vidbuvaetsa-u-povnomu-obsazi-odnak-e-zapitanna-do-rejtingiv-kmu/>.

29 "According to the results of the competition, three radio programs of the public broadcaster received 55 FM frequencies," National Council of Ukraine on Television and Radio Broadcasting. November 4, 2021. <https://www.nrada.gov.ua/try-radioprogramy-suspilnogo-movnyka-otrymaly-55-fm-chastot-za-rezultatamy-konkursu/>.

forced by the pandemic-related shift to online services. Another panelist voiced skepticism over most media being able to afford to pay charges for cross-cutting digital security services. Some are too anxious about their newsroom secrets to invite external IT support, another added. Panelists were unanimous that most Ukrainians' digital security skill level is quite low, and that algorithms of social networks and various marketing tricks are confusing.

In 2021, the investigative news website Chetverta Vlada came under DDOS attack, after it published an investigation about a Rivne official. The outlet managed to cope with the consequences, thanks donor funding for an IT expert. Other local media also publish critical content that triggers attacks, despite having no such funding. For example, the Mykolayv Center for Investigative Journalism's website was attacked, with hackers replacing some investigative stories with irrelevant content. The center was able to restore original content and filed a case with the police

MDTU is launching more training courses on digital skills for Ukrainians, and [its digital education portal](#) offers 70 video series on digital literacy for various target audiences. According to its 2021 survey, the Ukraine population with digital skills below the basic level fell by 5.2 percent (1.42 million people) over two years, and now stands at 47.8 percent. Since 2019, the number of Ukraine residents who have experienced at least one type of fraud on the internet has increased by 11 percent to 45.7 percent. As in 2019, the most common illegal actions that people currently face are receiving fraudulent messages, redirection to fake websites requesting personal information, and fraudulent use of credit or debit cards.

According to DM's Media Literacy Index,<sup>30</sup> only 15 percent of Ukrainians do not use the internet, while 71 percent are active, everyday users. Its sub-index of Digital Competence shows that 22 percent of respondents

30 *Media Literacy Index of Ukrainians*, Detector Media. March 2021. [https://detector.media/doc/images/news/archive/2021/186437/REPORT\\_MEDIALITERA%D0%A1Y\\_INDEX-DM\\_EN.pdf](https://detector.media/doc/images/news/archive/2021/186437/REPORT_MEDIALITERA%D0%A1Y_INDEX-DM_EN.pdf).

have low-level internet skills; only 11 percent show a high level of skill.

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

Ukraine's government became more active in promoting media literacy in 2021. In March, NSDC established the Center for Countering Disinformation. The center aims to protect the information sphere for the national security of Ukraine, counteract destructive disinformation campaigns, and prevent the manipulation of public opinion. In October, NSDC approved the Information Security Strategy of Ukraine until 2025.

Also in March, the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy of Ukraine launched [the Center for Strategic Communications and Information Security](#). The ministry began "[Filter,](#)" a national project to unite efforts of different stakeholders in popularizing critical reasoning skills. This project marks the first time that media literacy became part of state policy. The project collects available approaches for and research about media literacy.<sup>31</sup> Media literacy courses, including some focused on pandemic disinformation, are available at [the state digital education portal](#), [Prometheus](#), and [EdEra](#) platforms.

Ukraine has benefited from a number of donor-funded media literacy projects since 2010. Launched in 2015 with the support from the Canadian Embassy before getting funding from the US Embassy in Ukraine and the UK's Foreign and Commonwealth Office in 2018, IREX's Learn to Discern initiative on media literacy has involved 1,548 secondary schools, 25 post-graduate institutions for teachers, and 21 higher education institutions. NGOs and media run online courses, fact-checking initiatives, tests, and games. The Ministry of Science and Education runs a number of projects, focusing on people from certain sectors such as

31 *Development of Media Literacy in Ukraine: 2021 Analytical Report*, Ministry of Culture and Information Policy. [https://filter.mkip.gov.ua/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/231121\\_medialiteracy.pdf](https://filter.mkip.gov.ua/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/231121_medialiteracy.pdf).

**Panelists were unanimous that most Ukrainians' digital security skill level is quite low, and that algorithms of social networks and various marketing tricks are confusing.**

education, culture, youth, and business. Although the number of literacy efforts increased, they are not systemic and do not reach a large part of the population. At schools, media literacy has not yet been included in the basic curriculum. It can be taught only as an elective if extra hours are available, or as part of other subjects, such as civic education.

Panelists expressed doubt that in general citizens use tools for fact-checking and disinformation debunking websites or have enough skill to discern high-quality news from poor-quality information. Most of the media literacy courses are presented online, but socially vulnerable groups of people do not have regular internet access.

DM's 2021 Media Literacy Index<sup>32</sup> found that 15 percent of Ukrainians have a low level of media literacy. The study showed that 33 percent are below average in literacy, 44 percent are average level, and just eight percent are deemed to have a high level. Media literacy levels are especially high among young people aged 18-25 (due to their digital competence) and low among older people aged 56-65. The lower the educational status, the lower the level of media literacy, according to the study.

The study also found that rural residents show the least media literacy, while those of cities with a population of over 500,000 have the highest level. Regionally, residents of northern Ukraine have the highest level of media literacy, while those living in the southern part demonstrate the lowest level. Of those with only enough income to cover food, 72 percent show low or below-average levels of media literacy. Results also showed that 75 percent of respondents have never heard of any media literacy training or education, and 23 percent are aware of available means of improving media literacy, while just two percent participated in such training events.

According to the MCS,<sup>33</sup> Ukrainians grew more media literate and resilient to disinformation in 2021 compared to 2020. The biggest progress is in

32 *Media Literacy Index of Ukrainians*, Detector Media. March 2021. [https://detector.media/doc/images/news/archive/2021/186437/REPORT\\_MEDIALITERA%D0%A1Y\\_INDEX-DM\\_EN.pdf](https://detector.media/doc/images/news/archive/2021/186437/REPORT_MEDIALITERA%D0%A1Y_INDEX-DM_EN.pdf).

33 *2021 Media Consumption Survey*, USAID-Internews. November 2021. [https://internews.in.ua/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/USAID\\_Internews-Media-Consumption-Survey-2021\\_ENG.pdf](https://internews.in.ua/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/USAID_Internews-Media-Consumption-Survey-2021_ENG.pdf).

their ability to distinguish a true message from a false one when tested (24 percent, up from 11 percent in 2020).

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

Panelists gave high scores to the efforts of journalists, civil society, and the public to exercise their freedom of speech and rights, apart from attacks against journalists and activists.

Although they could not point to specific research as proof, many panelists expressed the belief that most Ukrainians engage with reliable information on a weekly basis. The panelists speculated that the plentitude and diversity of news sources, as well as consumption patterns, provide such opportunities. Still, many people choose to remain in information bubbles that support their world view and do not seek reliable sources, some panelists observed.

According to Thomson Reuters Foundation – Ukraine research,<sup>34</sup> most adult Ukrainians get their information from online sources. Of the sample of 515 persons, 80 percent of respondents use search engines, 72 percent social networks, and 70 percent information media sites and internet media. The percentage of respondents who turn to television at least once a week is just a little lower, at 67 percent; while only 32 percent listen to radio and 23 percent read print publications.

The study found that almost half of respondents read headlines only. Meanwhile, 73 percent claim to verify television and social media news by checking other sources, and 67 percent tend to select the media that share similar opinions — and believe they consume neutral media, but name bloggers, influencers, or partisan media as examples. In addition, Ukrainians trust specific journalist brands, regardless of the reputations of the media outlets for which they work.

Ukraine has plenty of platforms for debate and exchange of opinion. Although all cannot be called inclusive or independent, they do offer

34 *Ukraine: Media Consumption and Perceptions Research*, Thompson Reuters Foundation. 2021. [https://epim.trust.org/application/velocity/\\_newgen/assets/TRFUkraineReport\\_ENG.pdf](https://epim.trust.org/application/velocity/_newgen/assets/TRFUkraineReport_ENG.pdf).

choices for consumers, some panelists maintained. A panelist who works for an NGO noted that restrictions related to COVID-19 led to citizens reducing their offline interaction—for instance, at public hearings. With the shift to online, many older people no longer participate in debates. Various television talk shows tend to be politically manipulated, featuring preset guests and manageable scenarios — with the exception of “Zvorotnyi Vidlik,” a Suspilne talk show.

Social networks and comments on news, especially political content, are hotbeds for hate speech and manipulation. Panelists noted a lack of adequate content moderation online and in social media platforms. One underscored an increase in hate speech, manipulations, and false information related to vaccination and quarantine measures, with people crushing each other in comments.

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

Quality research is affordable only for the largest media. Exceptions include the Television Industry Committee, a trade association of the key oligarch-owned channels and media agencies that holds a regular television panel, and the Radio Committee, which manages radio measurement.

Smaller national channels, let alone regional broadcasters, do not have access to audience measurement. From 2017 to 2019, the National Association of Media conducted local television audience research for a dozen regional centers, partly with foreign donor support. Since then, due to sinking advertising revenues tied to the pandemic, regional broadcasters have been unable to afford even partial costs.

Online media have a variety of online tools, although the panelists had doubts about the extent to which media take feedback into account. Some panelists working with local media noticed progress in their use of measurement data to improve coverage or engage audience segments. One panelist noted that broadcasting and print media have started

to treat their online audiences more seriously, request search engine optimization for their websites and adapt storytelling, and promote their editors and key journalists as trustworthy ambassadors of the outlet. Still, these media companies lack skills to interpret the data obtained and tend to believe that they know audience needs better.

**“Grassroots media are at a very embryonic level, and Ukrainians are not accustomed to supporting community media through donations or volunteering.”**

Another panelist noticed several success stories from the regional media and an increase in content quality, consumers, and public trust. Chetverta Vlada, for example, conducted online polling of its loyal readers, thanks to a donor’s funding.

Media do interact within readers’ clubs, organize chats with loyal audiences, publish authors’ names, and refer to their sources. Panelists also noted that some media use feedback mechanisms, including live or online voting and quoting viewers’ comments and questions during talk shows. However, sometimes hosts use these vox populi tools to present public opinion with a manipulated filter, and pre-moderation is virtually absent, several panelists agreed.

Regarding corrections, most often media correct text on websites without additional remarks or apologies.

Other panelists called out insufficient strategic collaboration between content producers, civil society, and government. Donor-funded projects encourage productive cooperation between media and civil society, but the connections often end after a short-term project closes. In other cases, the government might announce some reforms, without any further details, and media do not follow up about progress. All stakeholders lack solution-oriented approaches to drive social changes.

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

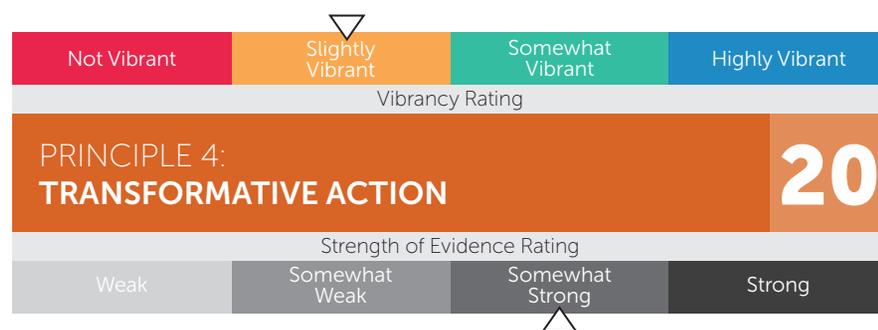
Half of the panelists refrained from scoring this indicator, stating that Ukraine does not have community media as conventionally defined. Moreover, Ukrainian legislation does not define community media.

There are about 50 municipal television stations across the country that continue to depend on local government, which funds their major expenses. Various local or thematic community initiatives in social networks or messengers are not transparent in terms of funding sources or income distribution, and they may lack editorial oversight and policy.

Some panelists said that journalists' initiatives operating like NGOs might be considered community media by their mandates. They include nation-wide Hromadske TV and Hromadske Radio, along with national and regional investigative journalism centers. These entities are primarily supported by donor funding and a certain share of crowdfunding; however, they do not benefit from broad community support.

Ukraine has some media linked to religious and ethnic communities, but they are likely managed differently than standard community media. Grassroots media are at a very embryonic level, and Ukrainians are not accustomed to supporting community media through donations or volunteering.

Those panelists who did score community media assessed their mandate and performance slightly above average and gave below-average scores for the dissemination of false and harmful information, assuming that grassroots organizations are less professional.



The overall score for Principle 4 remained the same as it was in the 2021 VIBE study. The Ukrainian media landscape is diverse and pluralistic, but quality news sources do not attract extensive audiences. People

prefer staying within their information bubbles, consuming content and expressing opinions to prove themselves, making robust discussions rarer than floods of accusations. Panelists gave the lowest score to the utilization of information by individuals. The highest score was given to civil society contributions to vibrant information flows. The panelists were skeptical about the government sufficiently using quality information for decision-making and quality information supporting good governance and democracy. Ruling and opposition politicians frequently manipulate information in the public space.

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

According to the panelists and numerous media monitoring data, Ukraine has many non-partisan and reliable news sources, especially online, some with audiences several-million strong. However, politically engaged media remain more popular. As the MCS findings show, the oligarch-owned 1+1 is both the most popular television channel (66 percent) and the most popular website (24 percent), second only to online news services. The more trustworthy Hromadske TV online and Liga.net each are consumed by just 6 percent. The pro-Kremlin Vesti is consumed online by 5 percent of respondents; its print version, 15 percent.<sup>35</sup>

One panelist commented that people are divided by their electoral preferences and seek news at the biased sources that confirm their prejudices. In this way, the channels solidify their target groups rather than attract new audiences. Another panelist, referring to various surveys, said that Ukrainians tend to consume different television channels but do not trust any.

After the closure of the Medvedchuk channels, its audiences migrated partly to Nash, with a similar pro-Russian posture; partly to Ukraina; and partly to the absolutely contrary Pryamyi channel. According to the

<sup>35</sup> 2021 Media Consumption Survey, USAID-Internews, November 2021 [https://internews.in.ua/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/USAID\\_Internews-Media-Consumption-Survey-2021\\_ENG.pdf](https://internews.in.ua/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/USAID_Internews-Media-Consumption-Survey-2021_ENG.pdf)

panelists, the Pryamyi audience likely watches pro-Kremlin media only out of dissatisfaction with the current government.

One panelist held out hope that information bubbles have not been fully cemented. Another did not see serious ideological confrontation inside Ukraine, maintaining that the hot polarization seen earlier between supporters and opponents of President Zelensky cooled when his approval rating began to decrease, and people seemingly returned to their traditional cynicism and distrusting politicians. The same panelist, however, pointed to more manipulative divides within the Russian propagandist narratives.

With COVID-19 restrictions, people found fewer opportunities for offline communication, but they do feel free to express themselves online, the panelists agreed. Very often debaters do not seek truth but rather stay within their comfortable spaces and express their positions with animosity to opponents. When quarantine restrictions increased, so did the share of virtual communication and sources, one panelist commented — a phenomenon that positively contributed to a higher-quality exchange of information than traditional media allow.

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

Most panelists questioned whether people are guided primarily by quality information. The panelists said that Ukrainians tend to base their decisions on stereotypes and are susceptible to populism based on incorrect data and simple solutions, manipulations, and emotional headlines. One panelist explained that people fail to distinguish between reliable and manipulative information, and, judging by local elections, vote for scandal-prone, corrupt candidates — either because they disregard such information, or just do not care to learn.

The pandemic and controversy over vaccination showed how people easily accept information that could be detrimental to their health.

👂👂 **Another panelist, referring to various surveys, said that Ukrainians tend to consume different television channels but do not trust any.**

As of December 2021, only 37 percent of Ukrainians had obtained two doses of vaccines, which are widely available. Many people support conspiracy theories and trust manipulative news about vaccines and share “secret protocols” on COVID-19 treatment and titles of helpful drugs. An August 2021 poll<sup>36</sup> showed that 56 percent of adults did not plan to get vaccinated in the near future. The respondents primarily cited their beliefs that the vaccines have not been sufficiently examined or do not protect against COVID-19, that they are afraid of side effects, or that they disagree with state vaccination enforcement.

According to MCS,<sup>37</sup> the majority of Ukrainians had encountered the common disinformation narratives tested in the survey, and between a third to a half of respondents gave the ideas some credence. In particular, 68 percent of those surveyed heard that side effects of vaccines are more dangerous than COVID-19 itself, and 49 percent believed this to be true. Focus group participants evaluated narratives from the perspective of their own beliefs (e.g., confirmation bias). Those with “pro-Russian” views showed a greater tendency to find believable the news that criticizes the West and the Ukrainian government.

The participants that favor media critical of the European trajectory of the country indicated more trust in news reports about the “external governance” of the country.

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

Panelists praised genuine civil society organizations, as opposed to Ukraine’s many phony organizations, religious groups, and trade unions. Many influential organizations use and produce quality information,

<sup>36</sup> *At the beginning of “Delta”: what Ukrainians think about the coronavirus epidemic and what they expect from the health care system*, Ilko Kucheriv Foundation for Democratic Initiatives. September 13, 2021. <https://dif.org.ua/article/na-pochatku-delti-shcho-ukraintsi-dumayut-pro-epidemiyu-koronavirusu-ta-chogo-ochikuyut-vid-sistemi-okhoroni-zdorovya>

<sup>37</sup> *2021 Media Consumption Survey*, USAID-Internews. November 2021. [https://internews.in.ua/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/USAID\\_Internews-Media-Consumption-Survey-2021\\_ENG.pdf](https://internews.in.ua/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/USAID_Internews-Media-Consumption-Survey-2021_ENG.pdf)

transparently share their findings and methodology of research, accompany reforms in Ukraine, carry out fact checking and media literacy activities, fight disinformation, and raise public awareness on important social issues. Civic participation in key decisions is evident but not sufficient for change.

According to the 2021 Disinformation Resilience Index for 10 Central and Eastern European countries,<sup>38</sup> which measures three areas of resilience to foreign-led disinformation (societal, legal, and institutional, and media and digital), Ukraine demonstrated the highest level of resilience, especially societal. All 10 countries suffer mostly in their institutional and legal framework fields, which are unable to effectively counter the foreign information threats.

With exception of the largest CSOs, medium-size and local CSOs seem to underestimate the importance of communication and information campaigns about their successful activities. Many lack budgets for media outreach, which is just as important as their project implementations. Moreover, they have to nurture their brand and public “faces” of their organizations, which in the long term will give them greater influence and presence.

Additionally, CSO’s limited public communication efforts undermine their results, as without media coverage, governmental officials tend to ignore their findings. One panelist confirmed that media do report on CSO activities, but large mainstream media prefer to contact politicians rather than civil society experts, even when those people were engaged in joint work with the government.

Regional media pay sufficient attention to leading CSOs, according to one panelist with regional expertise. Regional coalitions of the national Reanimation Package of Reforms Coalitions work effectively in some regions. The Rivne Council of Reforms is influential, providing comments, working with media, and building dialogue with the government.

Local CSOs are highly mistrusting of local municipal broadcasters. The

supervisory councils that local outlets are mandated to convene are often imposters, though this is hard to prove formally.

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

The government engages with civil society and media through press briefings, official websites, and governmental officials’ social media pages. One panelist confirmed some improvement in communications at the national government level, which she credited to regular staff training. She also pointed to the ruling party’s general trend of silencing alternative positions from voices inside the government, which has led to narrowed cooperation with the media.

Nonetheless, civil society experts are more involved in joint activities with the government and often present at the press briefings. The Center for Democracy and the Rule of Law has published a handbook that describes best practices of interaction between the civil society and the government across Ukraine from 2016 to 2020.<sup>39</sup>

Regions have more closed-off authorities, according to one panelist, which drives local media to resort to silence or vague general comments. However, one panelist shared a positive example. Since the start of the pandemic, the Rivne regional state administration has been conducting daily briefings, with questions from journalists collected in advance, and officials replying to them live online. Part of the information from the state bodies may be incomplete or manipulated, though.

Government officials tend to announce their decisions without proper explanation or reference to evidence, and ruling and opposition politicians frequently manipulate information presented in the public space. Political discourse is steered by misinformation, including twisted or commissioned opinion polls, politically motivated statements, false interpretations, pulling facts out of context, and personal accusations.

Slovo I Dilo and VoxCheck fact-check Ukrainian politicians’ statements and promises. VoxCheck analysts also verify the statements that

38 *Disinformation Resilience Index in Central and Eastern Europe in 2021*, East Center. <https://east-center.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/DRI-report-2021.pdf>

39 [https://cedem.org.ua/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/ZBIRNYK\\_ISTORIJA\\_2020.pdf](https://cedem.org.ua/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/ZBIRNYK_ISTORIJA_2020.pdf)

speakers make on Suspilne’s talk show “Zvorotnyi Vidlik.” As one panelist noted, televised debates are the easiest place to manipulate information, because even if the facts are monitored and corrected later, few viewers see such results.

### **Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic rights.**

The government does not respond appropriately to media reports revealing corruption and other violations by officials. Dismissals, policy changes, proper law-enforcement investigations, and court sentences are rare exceptions rather than the rule. The panelists provided several examples of such consequences: in one case, the court ruled to confiscate the illegal income of the opposition MP Illya Kiva; in another incident, the board chair of the Ukreximbank retired after the attack on the Skhemy crew in the bank.

The risk of media publishing violations constrains the number and severity of infractions, but the government does not punish its representatives — at least not publicly. At the time of publication, journalism investigations were raising public attention and indignation, but further attempts to hold the perpetrators accountable had failed.

One panelist said she is certain that media investigations of violations keep the government in check, and she believes journalist efforts are more effective at the national level. However, even at the city level, with Kyiv, she saw that media publications do not imply further consequences for the wrongdoers. The political sympathies of the voters often prevail over the facts of violations. The tension around appointment of a new member of the Suspilne supervisory board proves that politicians feel the influence of independent media. Significant effort went into the dozens of applications submitted from phony CSOs to win the appointment.

**“ Government officials tend to announce their decisions without proper explanation or reference to evidence, and ruling and opposition politicians frequently manipulate information presented in the public space.**

One panelist shared the example of a strong media campaign that managed to stop to development deal at the recreational Sovski Ponds in Kyiv. Another positive is the attention that quality media pay to elections, which does help make the processes more transparent. At the local level, governments have reacted to some local investigations, such as discrepancies in health care institutions and schools, that were more or less corrected. In the words of one panelist, the stronger civil society is, the more quality information publications contribute to positive changes in society. He added, though, that he does not feel that Ukraine’s civil society is strong enough yet to provide sufficient public pressure to drive change.

Another panelist noted that quality information on elections is available; for instance, from the OPORA civic network monitoring. People tend to vote for populists, though, who play on emotions with - unrealistic promises for a brighter future. Quality information on elections is drowned out by the noise of manipulated information and does not influence most

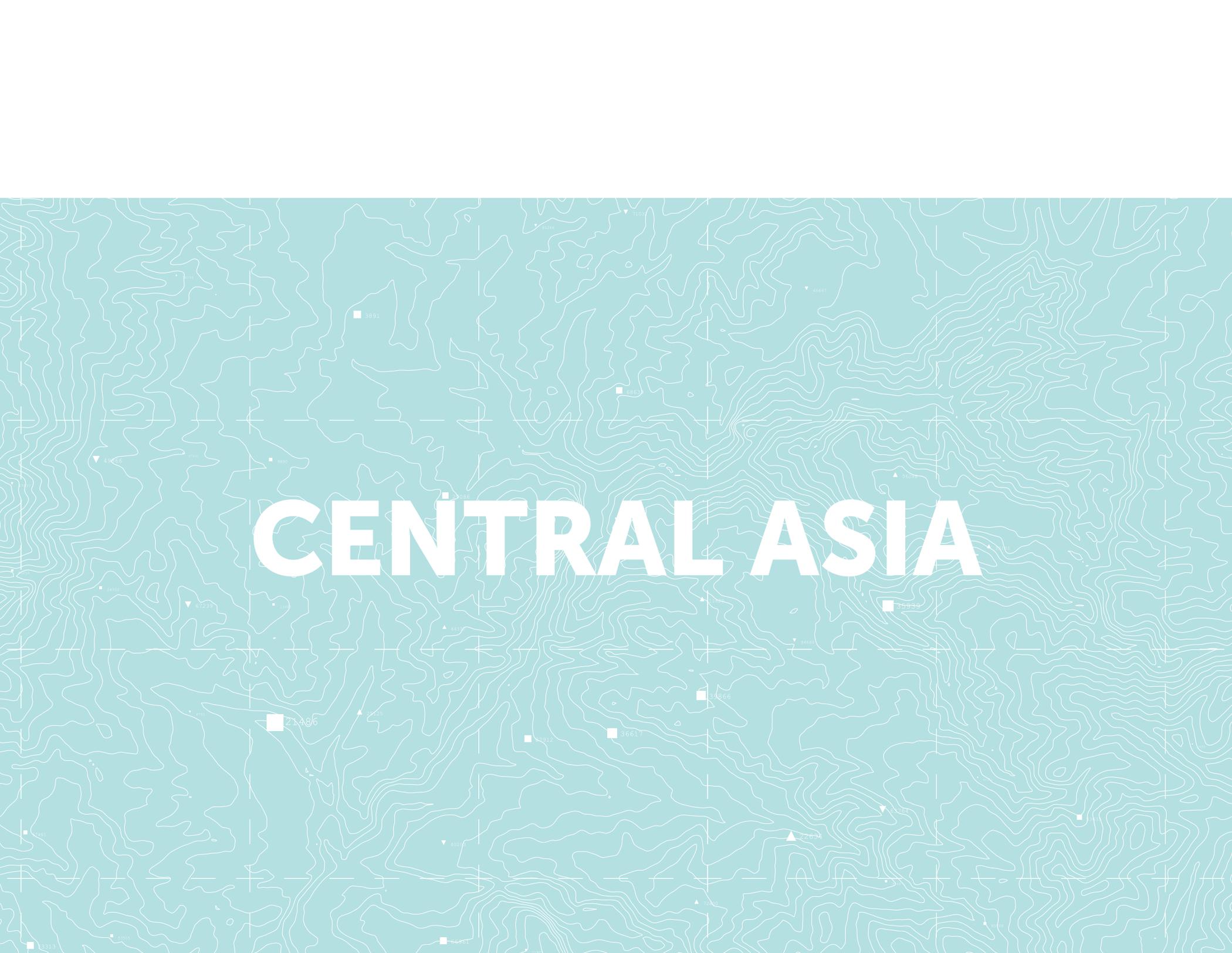
voters’ decisions, another panelist concluded.

*The panel was convened on December 6-7, 2021. Given the ongoing conflict, IREX is treating this year’s study of Ukraine as a sensitive country and for security reasons is not publishing panelists’ names.*

Copyright © 2022 by IREX

**Notice of Rights:** Permission is granted to display, copy, and distribute VIBE in whole or in part, provided that: (a) the materials are used with the acknowledgment “The Vibrant Information Barometer (VIBE) is a product of IREX with funding from USAID.”; (b) VIBE is used solely for personal, noncommercial, or informational use; and (c) no modifications of VIBE are made.

This study is made possible by the support of the American People through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The opinions expressed herein are those of the panelists and other project researchers and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID, the United States Government, or IREX.

A teal-colored background featuring a white topographic map. The map includes contour lines, a grid of latitude and longitude lines, and various elevation markers such as triangles and squares with numerical values. The text 'CENTRAL ASIA' is centered in a large, white, bold, sans-serif font.

# CENTRAL ASIA

# 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.

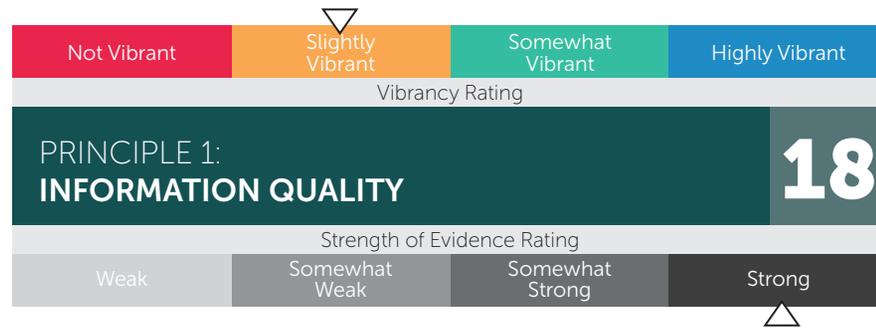
COVID-19 also contributed to a spike in the spread of fake information, exposing government agencies' poor crisis communications skills and difficulty disseminating high-quality public information—and the population's tendency to trust social media and messaging apps more than the media. Journalists 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,<sup>1</sup> 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](http://baribar.kz), [vlast.kz](http://vlast.kz), [ratel.kz](http://ratel.kz), [factcheck.kz](http://factcheck.kz), [orda.kz](http://orda.kz), and [holanews.kz](http://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](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.<sup>2</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup>

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.**

<sup>3</sup> “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.<sup>4</sup>

Reliable official websites exist for checking information, including [egov.kz](http://egov.kz), [goszakup.kz](http://goszakup.kz), [kgd.kz](http://kgd.kz), and [stat.gov.kz](http://stat.gov.kz), as well as such private websites as [www.factcheck.kz](http://www.factcheck.kz) and [adata.kz](http://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.<sup>5</sup>

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.<sup>6</sup> 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-skandalnye-zayavleniya-adres-436647/](https://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/lavrov-prokommentiroval-skandalnye-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-lishijsja-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.<sup>7</sup>

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 country<sup>8</sup> 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](http://vlast.kz), [minber.kz](http://minber.kz), and [malim.kz](http://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>.

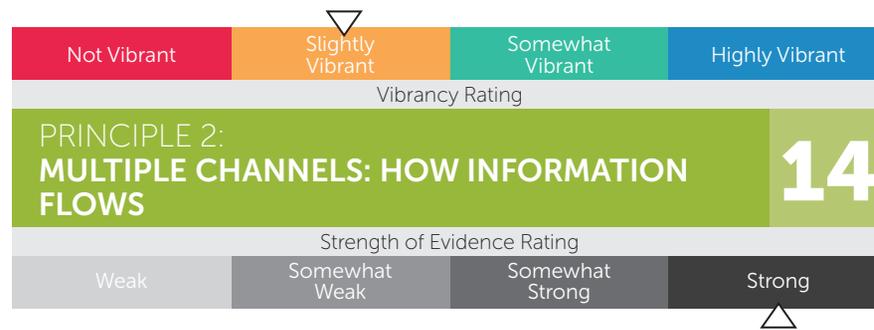
spending power and advertiser budgets, the financial situation of content producers worsened, especially for private and opposition media. State funding of mass-media, advertising, subscriptions, and grants from donor organizations make up the main sources of media funding.

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](http://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](http://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.<sup>9</sup>

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.<sup>10</sup> In another case, in December, authorities blocked the [ng.kz](https://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.<sup>11</sup> In particular, Radio Azattyk reporters encountered various obstacles when covering election-

related events, and [vlast.kz](https://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.<sup>12</sup>

### **Government media journalists know the taboo topics and unspoken “rules of the game” and avoid bringing up sensitive topics.**

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.<sup>13</sup>

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.

<sup>13</sup> Danilin, Nikita. “‘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](http://egov.kz), as well as open sources of data statistics on [stat.gov.kz](http://stat.gov.kz), the e-procurement portal [goszakup.gov.kz](http://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

“Now the situation is such that without censorship and interference from the state it is possible to work only on social networks.” said Maricheva

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.

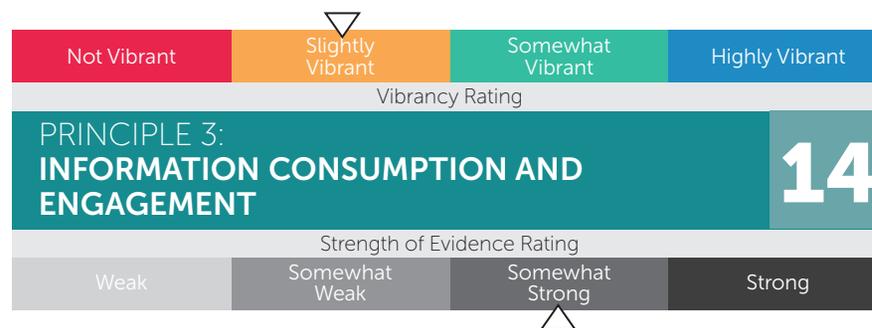
Also, state media have no restrictions on participation in the advertising market, but the support from the state budget allows them to reduce the cost of advertising. That, in turn, creates unfair competition in the media market—putting private media in a difficult position due to restrictions and prohibitions 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.<sup>14</sup>

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

<sup>14</sup> 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/](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

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

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](http://liveinternet.ru), [alexa.com](http://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

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.

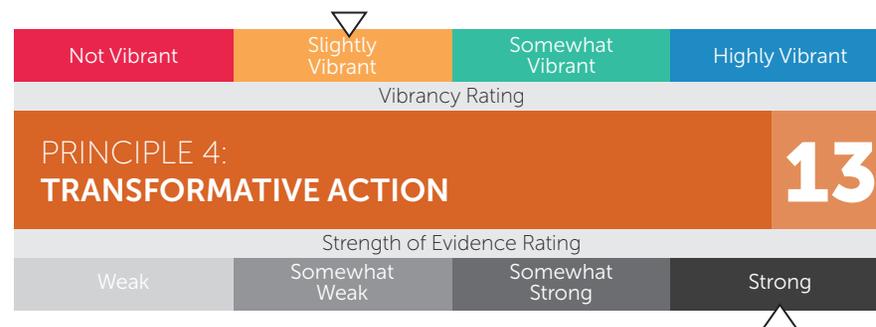
Jalilov believes that measurements are made mainly for advertisers and in the search for topics, but hardly to meet public demand and interest.

### **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.

**LIST OF PANEL PARTICIPANTS**

**Zhuldiz Abdilda**, editor-in-chief, Ulan, Almaty

**Gulnar Assanbayeva**, teacher, independent media expert, Ph.D, KIMEP, Almaty

**Galiya Azhenova**, lawyer, Adil soz, Almaty

**Gulmira Birzhanova**, media lawyer, Legal Media Center, Astana

**Vadim Boreiko**, journalist, GyperBorey

**Bakhtygul Burbayeva**, KazMediaNetwork, director, Media Self-Regulation Committee

**Olga Didenko**, media lawyer, Internews-Kazakhstan, Almaty

**Timur Gafurov**, editor, [www.ng.kz](http://www.ng.kz), Kostanay

**Adil Jalilov**, director, Medianet, Almaty

**Serikzhan Mauletbay**, freelancer, Almaty

**Djamilya Maricheva**, [protenge.kz](http://protenge.kz), Almaty

**Talgat Nurlybayev**, IT specialist, MUIT, Almaty

**Erzhan Suleimenov**, media expert, Almaty

**Tatiana Trubacheva**, kursiv.kz, journalist

**Askhat Yerkimbay**, NGO Minber, Almaty

**MODERATOR AND AUTHOR**

**Diana Medvednikova**, director, Legal Media Center, Astana

Copyright © 2022 by IREX

**Notice of Rights:** Permission is granted to display, copy, and distribute VIBE in whole or in part, provided that: (a) the materials are used with the acknowledgment “The Vibrant Information Barometer (VIBE) is a product of IREX with funding from USAID.”; (b) VIBE is used solely for personal, noncommercial, or informational use; and (c) no modifications of VIBE are made.

This study is made possible by the support of the American People through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The opinions expressed herein are those of the panelists and other project researchers and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID, the United States Government, or IREX.

# KYRGYZSTAN

## Vibrant Information Barometer

2 0 2 2



Highly Vibrant

Somewhat Vibrant

Slightly Vibrant

Not Vibrant

OVERALL SCORE

22

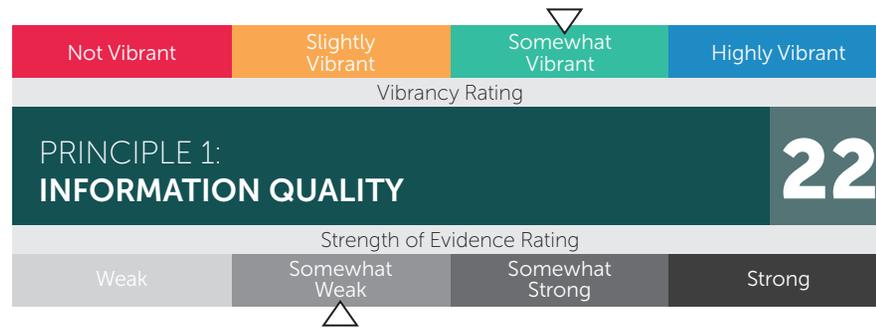
In 2021, Kyrgyzstan held many political events: two referendums regarding the form of government; parliamentary elections and local elections; and the adoption of a new constitution, among other events. Foreign policy also deteriorated as there were repeated armed clashes at the border of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Domestically, despite very modest growth after the economic shock from the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, inflation has grown three times faster than the economy.

These trends have had a negative impact on the country’s information space. In Freedom House’s *Freedom in the World 2021* report, Kyrgyzstan is included in the “not free” category of countries after 11 years of being defined as “partly free.” While Reporters Without Borders’ *2021 World Press Freedom Index* shows that the Kyrgyzstan’s rating has improved (ranking 79 out of 180 countries), Kyrgyzstan remains a “problem country.”

VIBE panelists noted that freedom of speech and other civil liberties have been overshadowed by the Parliament’s adoption of the law “On Protection from Inaccurate (False) Information,” signed by the president despite public protests. A detailed analysis provided by the Media Policy Institute indicates that this law’s provisions contradict the constitution and international treaties to which Kyrgyzstan is a signatory, as well as restrict human rights and freedom. The nongovernmental organization “Journalists” monitors rights violations against journalists and media, including attacks on journalists; the obstruction of professional activities;

threats and harassment; and numerous spurious lawsuits demanding the protection of honor, dignity, and business reputation for investigative pieces on corruption.

Despite many criticisms about the country and its development in the past year, the overall country score places Kyrgyzstan in the Somewhat Vibrant classification, indicating a stable information system. Principle 3 (Information Consumption and Engagement) received the lowest overall score for this year’s study, largely due to panelist assessments of the level of media literacy throughout the country. Principles 1 (Information Quality), 2 (Multiple Channels), and 4 (Transformative Action) all received average scores of 22, which are reflective of factors including affordable internet costs, weak adherence to journalism ethics, declining advertising revenue for independent media, continually rising levels of misinformation and fake news.



In Principle 1, panelists gave their lowest average scores to the indicator examining sufficient resources. For independent media, traditional sources of income have dried up, as advertising money migrates to social networks. As with much of the rest of the world, print media is fading; however, television remains the dominant medium in Kyrgyzstan. Regardless of whether they are print or broadcast, however, newsrooms throughout the country suffer from lack of resources, leading to low-quality news coverage as well as weak adherence to professional journalism ethics. Russia's influence is felt throughout Kyrgyzstan as Russian broadcasters are active in the country and press a pro-Kremlin agenda.

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

The accessibility of high-quality information for the population in Kyrgyzstan is variable and determined by several factors: finance, technology, information, and working conditions.

Regional and local media have fewer opportunities to purchase the necessary equipment and software to produce quality content, and there is often inequality among regions (e.g., in the Naryn and Issyk-Kul regions, there are no independent television outlets). Print media are in a more difficult situation due to the high cost of production of newspapers and magazines. Advertisers are concentrated in Bishkek and do not allocate money to regional and local media. In general, the

under-resourced newsrooms and the advertising market means that the news media tends to offer a news feed with a lot of low-quality news. Moreover, it is rare to have access to high-quality regional, local, and international news; in general, the media, regardless of their status, focus on national news.

Access to high-quality, non-monopolized printing services is limited for regional print media. All technical support and communication centers, media distribution, and advertising agencies are concentrated in Bishkek, and interaction with these centers from the regions is difficult. Additionally, access to broadband internet varies geographically..

Regional media have less access to professional development since such training is held mainly in Bishkek. For example, since the Internews office in Osh closed, local media in the country's regions have fewer opportunities to receive professional developmental assistance, so finding professional personnel is difficult. Due to the limited staffing resources in nonstate media editorial offices, the opportunities for mastering new technologies and participation in training programs outside of editorial activities are limited.

Low wages force journalists—especially regional ones—to work simultaneously for several publications, leading to work overload, the inability to prepare quality material, and the need to maneuver among different editorial ethical guidelines.

The main news subjects in Kyrgyzstan are still (and have always been) the president, the government, and the parliament. Access restrictions for independent media regarding governmental activities (in the form of media selection for accreditation in elections or in parliament, the possibility of obtaining interviews or comments, and so on) reduce the ability of the media to provide consumers with high-quality and diverse political reporting.

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

In the information space, news primarily focuses on politics and

subtopics about politics; specialized and niche media are very rare. As Almaz Ismanov, founder of Prevention Media, said, among print media, the only niche publication is *Autoguide*; TV and radio niche markets do not exist. There are specialized online publications that are not classified as mass media under the law.

The editor-in-chief of 24.kg, Makhinur Niyazova, said, “The topics that are most often covered in the media are politics, economics, and incidents. [There is] less content about social policy and more generally about the lives of socially vulnerable segments of the population. There is little regional news (in the capital’s media); [the capital-based media] mainly cover what is happening in Bishkek and, to a lesser extent, in Osh and some other large cities. International news is updated only during major events.”

The underrepresentation of wide-ranging international news in the media is “compensated” by a significant share of unrestricted Russian media broadcasting. Accordingly, being under the informational influence of official Russian media, citizens share the “picture of the world” as promoted by Russian media. As the chairperson of the Investigative Journalism Foundation, Adel Laisheva, said, “Our country is under a great informational influence from Russia; therefore, Ukraine is our number one enemy.” Bektur Iskander, the founder of Kloop Media, concurred: “The main instigators of hate from the outside are the Russian media operating in Kyrgyzstan. Few people have been able to kindle [such] hatred, for example, toward Ukraine.”

At certain moments in recent history—for example, during the Kyrgyz-Tajik conflict in the summer of 2021—some Russian media have provided biased coverage. The amount of fake information produced in the media of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan during the conflict at the border was so significant that fact-checking teams in both countries simply did not have time to check and refute false information.<sup>1</sup>

1 CABAR.asia, “How Did the Media and Social Media Cover the Conflict on the Kyrgyz-Tajik Border?” Central Asian Bureau for Analytical Reporting, August 5, 2021, <https://cabar.asia/ru/kak-smi-i-sotsseti-osveshchali-konflikt-na-granitse-kyrgyzstana-i-tadzhikistana>.

Professional content producers value their reputations and strive to provide truthful information by double-checking the information they receive. However, for many journalists, fact-checking methods are unknown, and they often cannot double-check information due to a lack of knowledge and skills<sup>2</sup>. There are also serious problems that are often beyond the control of journalists, making it difficult even for professionals to verify information. High-ranking officials have been engaging in misinformation and often spread outright lies. For example, in 2021, the Minister of Health announced on national TV that aconite—a toxin—is a “folk remedy” for the treatment of COVID-19. The president’s personal page on social networks has also become a source of fake information.

It is important to note that fact-checking practices are actively spreading:

In 2020, only a few Russian-language publications engaged in fact-checking, while in 2021 a significant number of Kyrgyz-speaking professional and nonprofessional content producers have already begun to practice fact-checking. Iskender, said, “There are very few media

outlets in Kyrgyzstan that would carefully check published information for accuracy, although in recent years there have been more publications that work according to higher standards of fact-checking.”

Journalists rarely disseminate deliberately false information. “The most common problem is the manipulation of facts by state bodies in order to appear in a more favorable perspective,” said Dina Maslova, founder and editor-in-chief of Kaktus.media. An example of this approach is the statement made in March 2021 by the president’s press secretary, Galina Baiterek, following negotiations between the presidents of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan on disputed border territories. The official press release stated that “the Uzbek side is ready to give the Ungar-Too area to Kyrgyzstan,” although Unkur-Too (as it is spelled in Kyrgyz)

2 <https://journalist.kg/ru/news/okutuular-zhmk-kyzmatkerlerininkesipk%D3%A9jl%D2%AFg%D2%AFn-arttyrat/>

already belongs to Kyrgyzstan.<sup>3</sup> Fact-checking allowed the population to learn about this manipulation, and the press secretary had to explain and clarify that Uzbekistan no longer claims this area. Ismanov said, “All these reservations occurred against the backdrop of confident statements by the country’s top officials that they have completely resolved all border issues with neighboring countries that have not been resolved for years.” Fact-checking tools do have an impact: in this example, the president’s press secretary had to delete previously published information.

Compliance with ethical standards is one of the most problematic areas in producing quality information. The founder of T-Media Group, Daniyar Sadiyev, believes that the most malicious violators of journalistic ethics are mainly content producers in social networks. However, Semetei Karypkulov, the editor-in-chief of Bulak.kg, asserted that “Kyrgyz-language media often violate ethical standards by disseminating unreliable information, which sometimes defames the honor and dignity of a person.” Laisheva and Almaz Ismanov, founder of Prevention Media, believe that “ethical norms are violated everywhere,” and in traditional media, the main news is often publications of social networks that do not follow any kind of ethics.

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

The consequences of violating ethical standards are quite serious. For journalists and the media, there are risks of growing consumer distrust. The population does not distinguish between professional and nonprofessional content producers, and bloggers and YouTubers often present themselves as journalists. Professional media are losing

<sup>3</sup> В. Кудайаров, “Заявление пресс-секретаря Жапарова вызвало негодование. Она внесла разъяснение,” Kaktus.media, March 13, 2021, [https://kaktus.media/doc/433603\\_zaiavlenie\\_press\\_sekretaria\\_japarova\\_vyzvalo\\_negodovanie\\_ona\\_vnesla\\_raziasnenie.html](https://kaktus.media/doc/433603_zaiavlenie_press_sekretaria_japarova_vyzvalo_negodovanie_ona_vnesla_raziasnenie.html).

**“All civic activists, nongovernmental organizations, and media who disagree with the authorities’ point of view are stigmatized as defenders of LGBTQ rights,” explained Karypkulov.**

audiences and risking closure. Critical discussion in a professional environment needs to take place within the framework of the Media Complaints Commission. For individual nonprofessional content producers, there may be drastic consequences, including criminal charges, as was the case with Instagram blogger Elmir Sydyman whose trial for inciting interregional discord lasted more than a year. The decision – acquittal - was made in March 2021.

The reason for noncompliance with ethical standards may be due to the low quality of professional training and the inaccessibility of modern training on journalistic ethics. Only a few media outlets base their editorial policies on ethical principles and monitor the ethical practices in their activities. Such independent media includes factcheck.kg, 24.kg, Temirov Live,

T-Media Group, bulak.kg, and Azattyk.

Often, the media violate ethics in publications about gender-based violence and religious views regarding gender. Usually, such publications present the position of some side without an editorial comment or explanation attached to a video containing scenes of violence or violent speeches.

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

According to Karypkulov, government officials use controlled media to disseminate information that sows enmity and hatred toward certain groups of citizens who disagree with the policies and practices of the ruling elites. “All civic activists, nongovernmental organizations, and media who disagree with the authorities’ point of view are stigmatized as defenders of LGBTQ rights,” Karypkulov explained. Iskender added the state and government officials have a role in inciting hatred. “Hatred toward the [LGBTQ] community, women, or certain ethnic minorities (in the case of Kyrgyzstan, mostly Uzbeks) has inflamed the state, part of the

media, and nonprofessional media,” he said, “There is a lot of hatred in Kyrgyzstan, and no one bears any responsibility for it.”

**Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced.**

Limited financial resources are especially characteristic of independent media since traditional sources of funding for media activities no longer allow them to survive. Subscriptions for print media have practically disappeared and paying for online publication has not yet become standard practice.

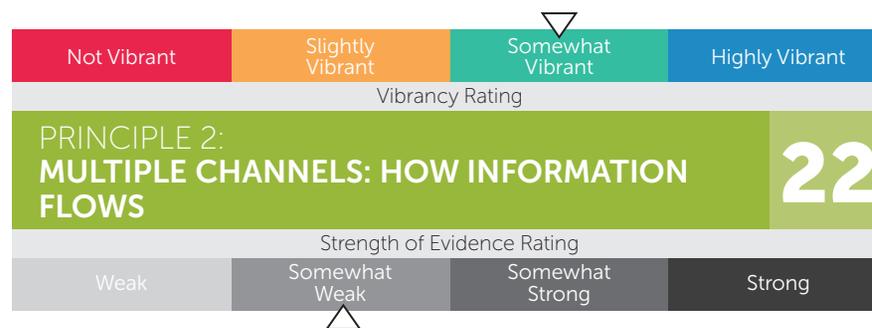
Advertising revenues for all traditional media have decreased significantly as advertisers have shifted their focus to social networks, wanting to reach the audiences of Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook. Grant opportunities for the media are limited in terms of the amount of funding, the time frame for the implementation of grant projects, and the skills of media staff in developing grant applications. They may also be limited by the specific target group for which grant programs are opened: For example, grants can be directed only to local community media or, conversely, to national media; they can only be open to independent media but not to state ones, even if these state media do not actually receive funding from the state budget.

This lack of financial resources prevents many editorial offices from developing content in the Kyrgyz language, despite legislative requirements mandating the share of content in the state language<sup>4</sup> and in the language of national minorities. The law also mandates allocating funds to make content available for persons with disabilities (closed captioning, sign language interpretation, etc.). Representatives from the media say, “The media do not have enough qualified personnel and funding to create high-quality content in the Kyrgyz language or to translate existing foreign programs.”

The level of income for journalists and other media professionals is generally low, and the lowest salaries are among employees of state-owned media. Even taking into account the high costs of professional

activity in the form of risks of pressure from government or other interest groups, the lack of prestige of the profession, and low public confidence, the low income for journalists has resulted in larger numbers of women as professional journalists as well as the depletion of human resources for media in the languages of national minorities.

Ismanov said, “All the heads of leading media are men, with the exception of Kaktus.media, Azattyk, 24.kg, and a few Kyrgyz-language newspapers. Among the heads of regional media centers, only the head of the Naryn Oblast Media Center is a woman—Kanykei Junusova.” Laisheva clarified the consequences of the depletion of journalistic personnel in minority languages: “The multilingual radio Dostuk disappeared from the state air, but broadcasting in Uzbek has remained on Yntymak. City FM radio broadcasts religious programs every day for two to three hours. But I don’t think that all religious movements are represented.”



While freedom of speech and freedom of the press are protected in Kyrgyzstan’s constitution and buttressed by specific media legislation, the government took steps in 2021 to undermine those protections by passing a law that ostensibly is meant to curb false information, but in practice opens the door to censorship. It is increasingly difficult for journalists to collect and disseminate information, and despite Kyrgyzstan signing the Open Government Partnership, in the late 2010s government departments have been less and less forthcoming with public information and data.

4 [https://kaktus.media/doc/449957\\_tv\\_kompanii\\_ispolniat\\_zakon\\_o\\_gosiazyke\\_kachestvennoe\\_polychitsia\\_net\\_deneg\\_i\\_sil.html](https://kaktus.media/doc/449957_tv_kompanii_ispolniat_zakon_o_gosiazyke_kachestvennoe_polychitsia_net_deneg_i_sil.html)

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

The Constitution of Kyrgyzstan, adopted by a referendum in April 2021 and replacing the 2010 Constitution, contains provisions guaranteeing freedom of speech, freedom of expression, and freedom of the press. Moreover, the constitution guarantees the right to receive information from state bodies and local self-government entities. The constitution further prohibits censorship and forbids passing laws that restrict the freedom of speech, the press, and mass media.

In addition to the constitution, a number of laws form the basis of media legislation: two specialized laws, “On Mass Media” (adopted in 1992) and “On Television and Radio Broadcasting” (adopted in 2008); relevant articles of the Criminal Code of the Kyrgyz Republic (for example, “Obstruction of the legitimate professional activities of a journalist by forcing him to disseminate or to refuse to disseminate information, committed by a person using his official position” or “Incitement of national, religious, interethnic hatred”); relevant articles of the Civil Code of the Kyrgyz Republic (e.g., Article 18); and the Law of the Kyrgyz Republic, “On access to information held by state bodies and local self-government bodies of the Kyrgyz Republic.”

Despite these protections, there have been repeated attempts in years past by authorities to revise media legislation, the media community and human rights advocates managed to defend it until 2021. However, in 2021, Parliament, in violation of regulations, adopted the Law of the Kyrgyz Republic “On protection from inaccurate (false) information,”<sup>5</sup> commonly known as the “Law on Fakes,” which provides authorities with the opportunity to censor the media. There were other attempts by authorities to introduce other legislative regulations and censorship;

5 <http://cbd.minjust.gov.kg/act/view/ru-ru/112282?cl=ru-ru>

for example, the Criminal Code of the Kyrgyz Republic initiated the introduction of the concept of “political hostility” and provides punishment for such activities<sup>6</sup>.

Commenting on the adoption of the fake news law, Makhinur Niyazova wrote, referencing an article by the 24.kg portal, “To justify their initiatives, the authorities often use data of a manipulative nature. In particular, examples of countries or states where there is a proposed rule are given, but specificity and other factors are not considered.”

In describing media legislation, Iskander explained, “...One of the laws passed in the first year of [Sadyr Japarov’s] presidency was the controversial anti-fake law, which will actually be used to combat the truth. There is no reason to hope that this attempt to silence the free media will end with the current government.”

“...One of the laws passed in the first year of [Sadyr Japarov’s] presidency was the controversial anti-fake law, which will actually be used to combat the truth. There is no reason to hope that this attempt to silence the free media will end with the current government,” explained Iskander.

Journalists working in state or pro-government media have significant advantages in their professional activities compared to journalists working in independent media. Despite democratic legislation, in practice, there are many examples of law enforcement opposing the activities of independent journalists, only selectively protecting the media and

journalists. For independent journalists and nonprofessional content producers, there are a number of challenges in their daily professional activities.

Other difficulties for journalists include the obstruction of legitimate professional activities and persecution as producers of news content. Increasingly, employees of independent media are faced with an official ban on access to the collection and dissemination of information. For example, journalists from local and independent media, as well as

6 [https://kaktus.media/doc/436543\\_v\\_yk\\_hotiat\\_vnesti\\_nakazanie\\_za\\_politicheskyu\\_vrajdy\\_urist\\_y\\_prosiat\\_otklonit\\_proekt.html](https://kaktus.media/doc/436543_v_yk_hotiat_vnesti_nakazanie_za_politicheskyu_vrajdy_urist_y_prosiat_otklonit_proekt.html)

local residents, were barred from taking photos and videos during the meeting of the president of the country with local residents of the Batken region<sup>7</sup>. Additionally, journalist Zulfiya Turgunova was attacked at an official event - a meeting of the head of the State Committee for National Security with the residents of Batken. Numerous law enforcement officers and high-ranking politicians present did not stop the violence against the journalist, who was carrying out her professional activities.

In 2021, there were several cases of journalists and bloggers persecuted for their professional activities, including bloggers and civil activists Ulan Usoyun, Meerim Asanova, Nurzada Toktogulova, Yulia Barabina, Tilekmat Kurenov (Kudaibergen uulu), Orozaiym Narmatova and journalists - Kanat Kanimetov<sup>8</sup>, Ali Toktakunov<sup>9</sup>, Aslanbek Sartbaev<sup>10</sup>, and Ydyrys Isakov<sup>11</sup>.

According to Kyrgyzstan's Prosecutor's Office, over the span of five-and-a-half years - from January 2015 to July 2021, 42 cases of illegal actions against journalists were officially recorded. To date, only five reached court, and 28 cases were dismissed because "no corpus delicti found."<sup>12</sup> Countering the law enforcement statistics, Kloop's data department collected news reports about attacks, threats, pressure and obstruction of journalistic activities and found there were at least 75 such incidents. Representatives of the international nongovernmental organization

7 <https://kloop.kg/blog/2021/05/07/ne-hochet-piara-i-lichnaya-vstrecha-press-sluzhba-zhaparova-obyasnila-pochemu-on-poehal-v-batken-bez-smi/>

8 <https://kloop.kg/blog/2021/05/07/na-zhurnalista-kanata-kanimetov-zavedeno-ugolovnoe-delo-zamelkoe-huliganstvo/> ; <https://kloop.kg/blog/2021/05/05/vlasti-kyrgyzstana-dolzhen-prekratit-presledovanie-kanata-kanimetova-komitet-zashchity-zhurnalistov/>

9 [https://24.kg/obschestvo/198614\\_besporyadki\\_vbishkeke\\_jurnalist\\_ali\\_toktakunov\\_rasskazal\\_odoprose\\_vmvd/](https://24.kg/obschestvo/198614_besporyadki_vbishkeke_jurnalist_ali_toktakunov_rasskazal_odoprose_vmvd/)

10 <https://rus.azattyk.org/a/31402138.html>

11 <https://kloop.kg/blog/2021/01/28/zhurnalista-rassledovatelya-ydyrysa-isakova-vyzvali-na-dopros-v-gknb>

12 <https://kloop.kg/blog/2022/02/19/zhurnalistov-v-kyrgyzstane-postoyanno-izbivayut-presleduyut-i-sudyat-data-analiz-kloopa/> ; Допросы и задержания активистов: зачем власть опять наступает на грабли » Власть » www.24.kg - КЫРГЫЗСТАН; <https://kloop.kg/blog/2021/05/03/zhurnalisty-v-kyrgyzstane-stalkivayutsya-s-bespretsedentnymurovnenm-zapugivaniya-i-presledovaniya-obrashhenie-mediasoobs>

Reporters Without Borders expressed concern about the deterioration of the situation in the field of freedom of speech and the safety of journalists in the country.

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

As reported in [24.kg](https://www.24.kg) which referenced a study from the British portal cable.co.uk, Kyrgyzstan became one of the top three countries with the cheapest internet. The affordable price of the internet connection contributes to the increase in the number of users of online platforms. The high level of labor migration in the country also contributes to an increase in the number of users of social networks; the internet allows families to keep in touch with each other through instant messengers. However, it should be noted that in terms of mobile internet speed, Kyrgyzstan places 96th in the world ranking, and in a number of hard-to-reach, high-mountainous areas in the country, the internet is not available at all<sup>13</sup>.

Media legislation in Kyrgyzstan has been relatively liberal and democratic, and it allows the population to have adequate access to information dissemination channels. First, every citizen can become a producer and distributor of information content --it is easy for citizens to open their own media because online publications are not subject to mandatory licensing. As panelist Daniyar Sadiyev clarified, "In the country as a whole, there are no problems with creating your own media; after switching to digital broadcasting, you must obtain permission to broadcast from the Ministry of Culture and Information. The permission is declarative in nature, and there are no artificial barriers to obtaining it."

Second, in the process of transitioning to digital broadcasting, the media community and the public managed to achieve access for non-state television and radio companies to national broadcasting. In other countries of Central Asia, the state has a monopoly ownership

13 [https://kaktus.media/doc/442616\\_vne\\_zony\\_dostypa\\_v\\_kakih\\_regionah\\_kyrgyzstana\\_plohoj\\_internet\\_i\\_kak\\_jivyt\\_ludi\\_bez\\_nego.html](https://kaktus.media/doc/442616_vne_zony_dostypa_v_kakih_regionah_kyrgyzstana_plohoj_internet_i_kak_jivyt_ludi_bez_nego.html)

of the multiplex (multiplexes). In the Kyrgyz Republic, along with the state communications operator Kyrgyztelecom OJSC, there is Digital Technologies LLC, the operator of the so-called social digital package of TV channels for private broadcasters. Despite the high cost of digital broadcasting services, the social package (now multiplex 1 and multiplex 2) is available to the country's population free of charge. This is all the more valuable because, according to the Media Policy Institute, television remains the leading medium for disseminating information to the population, despite the growing role of internet information channels. This view of media consumption is also supported by the findings of a study on media consumption<sup>14</sup> in the Kyrgyz Republic among children and adolescents from 7 to 17 years old, conducted in 2021.

#### **Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for government information.**

Although the Law “On Access to Information held by State Bodies and Local Self-Government Bodies” protects the right to access publicly significant information about the activities of state bodies and local self-government bodies on paper, in practice<sup>15</sup>, the processes for providing information are used by authorities extremely rarely.

In her comments, panelist Dilbar Alimova shared her experience of working with state bodies and noted the difficulty of working with them. “According to the law, authorities must provide a response to a request within 14 working days. They do not fit into this timeline and are often

14 Children and media consumption in Kyrgyzstan. Republican Library named after K. Bayalinov, Public Fund “Door” and Public Association “Information Resource Centers, 2021 [https://edu.gov.kg/media/ДЕТИ\\_И\\_МЕДИАПОТРЕБЛЕНИЕ\\_FINAL.pdf](https://edu.gov.kg/media/ДЕТИ_И_МЕДИАПОТРЕБЛЕНИЕ_FINAL.pdf)

15 Закон КР от 28 декабря 2006 года № 213 “О доступе к информации, находящейся в ведении государственных органов и органов местного самоуправления Кыргызской Республики” ([minjust.gov.kg](http://minjust.gov.kg))

late with the answer, or they keep this letter for 14 days and then write two useless sentences in response.”

“According to the law, authorities must provide a response to a request within 14 working days. They do not fit into this timeline and are often late with the answer, or they keep this letter for 14 days and then write two useless sentences in response,” shared Alimova.

At the same time, it is important to note that in certain cases, media representatives are able to use the law to access and disseminate information. An example is the legal proceedings between the Ministry of Justice and Kloop Media. In this case, department officials refused to provide the publication's journalists with data on legal business entities that the highest officials of the country are involved in. The department's refusal was justified by the provisions of the Law “On Personal Information.” Representatives of Kloop Media went through a long procedural path

for the claim - from the administrative court and the Bishkek City Court to the Supreme Court, where in May 2021 “a judicial panel decided that it was necessary to uphold the decision of the Bishkek Administrative Court, which invalidated the order of the Ministry of Justice to restrict access to information.”<sup>16</sup>

In 2017 and 2019, Kyrgyzstan joined the Open Governance Partnership (OGP), with the goal of increasing the transparency of government activities and actively promoting the availability of data to the public. However, the situation with access to publicly significant data held by state bodies began to worsen in 2020, intensifying in 2021. Unfortunately, the OGP secretariat no longer functions in Kyrgyzstan, and government policies have tacitly changed. Government departments have again ceased to provide open data. For example, in the database on the website of the Ministry of Justice, the texts of newly adopted laws are no longer published in a timely manner, the parliamentary website does not even publish bills put up for discussion, and the website of the Supreme Court, now only uses initials to identify people involved in trials, making

16 Минюст против «Клоопа»: Верховный суд оставил за журналистами право на доступ к информации ([kloop.kg](http://kloop.kg))

it difficult for investigative journalists and other citizens to find the right court verdicts<sup>17</sup>.

In more rural areas, access to information is even more difficult. “Now the press services have become PR departments in a bad sense of the word,” Sadiev said, “They are only engaged in promotion and laudatory posts and content their leaders force them to post. This is especially true of local authorities. The press services for the mayors of Osh Sarbashev, Mambetov, and Jalalabad do not provide two-way communication, but simply promote the media image of their leaders.”

### **Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow.**

The lack of open data on the affiliation of certain media to political groups makes their audience vulnerable, because it does not allow them to know what interests these media serve.

As evidence of the violation by the authorities of the right of journalists to access information, panelists cited the case of authorities misleading journalists with information about the property of the convicted ex-customs officer Raim Matraimov, which the Kloop publishing house encountered when developing a study.

### **Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.**

One of the concerns that all panelists named was the information broadcast by the public broadcasting corporation of Kyrgyzstan, KTRK. This information is politicized and broadcasts the interests of the ruling elites, not the public interest; for example, in January 2021, it held a debate among presidential candidates and confused the public with questions that had notes of propaganda regarding the introduction of a presidential form of government in the country<sup>18</sup>.

The financing of state-owned media from the state budget leads to control by the government. This funding has a number of negative

consequences: it creates unequal conditions in the market and thereby distorts the media market of the country; it turns state-owned media into instruments of political struggle, depriving them of the ability to compete and create high-quality information content propagating the perception of journalists as unscrupulous and corrupt; and it hinders technological development and the introduction of innovative approaches in media activities due to the lack of competition within the state media, limited resources, and fixed earnings of information content producers.

Factcheck.kg journalists, under the heading “Media Criticism,” also found that KTRK uses such manipulation, misinformation, and mislabeling in its investigations. Authorities have currently developed a new draft law “On the Kyrgyz Broadcasting Corporation,” which plans to return the status of a National State Institution to the public TV channel, abolish the Public Supervisory Board of KTRK, and allow the president of the country to appoint the broadcaster’s general director, essentially institutionalizing unlimited political interference in the activities of the TV channel and depriving the public of the possibility of nonstate control. The Committee to Protect Journalists called on authorities to withdraw the bill on strengthening state control over the broadcaster<sup>19</sup>. Panelist Daniyar Sadiev explained the reason for this systematic control, “The only public channel directly depends financially on the state budget, and people in power use it.”

Speaking about nonstate media, panelists observed that a media outlet’s level of independence is determined by the political interests of the owners. There is a widespread model in the country in which well-known politicians seek to create or buy existing media in order to use them for their political influence.

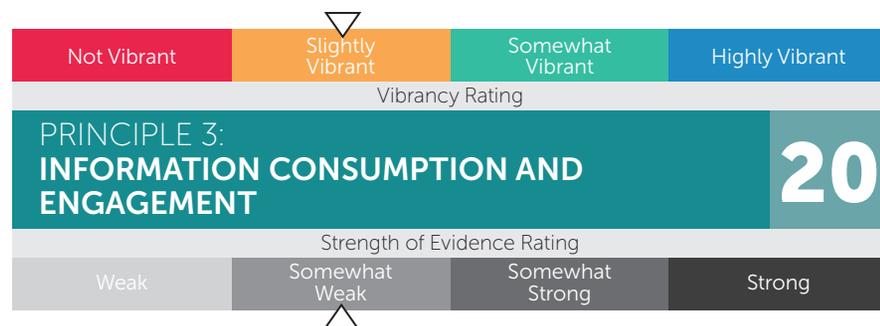
Among the politicians who have in the past, and continue to own the media, are Almazbek Atambaev--former president of Kyrgyzstan (he is credited with owning a TV channel, now an online Aprel news agency)--and Omurbek Tekebaev the leader of the ATa-Meken political party,

17 [https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story\\_fbid=1898515256999048&id=100005217763129](https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=1898515256999048&id=100005217763129)

18 [https://kaktus.media/doc/429355\\_eto\\_ne\\_obshestvennyy\\_kanal\\_socseti\\_otreagirovali\\_na\\_voprosy\\_vedyshiv\\_ktrk\\_na\\_debatah.html](https://kaktus.media/doc/429355_eto_ne_obshestvennyy_kanal_socseti_otreagirovali_na_voprosy_vedyshiv_ktrk_na_debatah.html)

19 [https://24.kg/obschestvo/213068\\_CPJ\\_prizyivaet\\_otozvat\\_zakonoproekt\\_ovo\\_vraschenii\\_otrk\\_statusa\\_gosudarstvennogo/](https://24.kg/obschestvo/213068_CPJ_prizyivaet_otozvat_zakonoproekt_ovo_vraschenii_otrk_statusa_gosudarstvennogo/) ; <https://cpj.org/2021/11/kyrgyzstan-drafts-law-to-bring-state-funded-broadcaster-under-closer-presidential-control/>

deputy of the 6th Parliamentary convocation, and now Kyrgyzstan's ambassador to Germany. There are also several media platforms owned by people close to the key leaders of the country. Among such "affiliated" media is Channel 7, which, according to the electronic database of the Ministry of Justice, belongs to Kazybek Tashiev, the brother of the current head of the State Committee for National Security, Kamchybek Tashiev.



Principle 3 received the lowest average score of all the principles in the Kyrgyzstan study, with the indicator on media literacy receiving the lowest scores. While the country has passed laws geared toward protecting personal data and enacted a strategy to build its digital security capacity, enforcement of these laws has been weak, leaving citizen data vulnerable and independent media open to cyberattacks. While journalists, activists, and civil society try to exercise their right to freedom of speech, ordinary citizens are not well-versed in their human and civil rights and do not know how to protect them. For the most part, media in the country do not study the needs and interests of their audience.

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

The rapid development of internet communications and the promotion of the digital economy in Kyrgyzstan require the development of mechanisms for protecting the personal information of citizens and ensuring cybersecurity. To solve these problems, in 2008 the government

passed a law on personal information aimed at protecting human rights and freedoms related to the collection, processing and use of personal data; it was the first country in the region to adopt this kind of law<sup>20</sup>. The Law was updated in 2017, and a number of legal acts were adopted to ensure implementation of the law. The government also adopted the "Cybersecurity Strategy of the Kyrgyz Republic for 2019-2023," aimed at "forming a domestic cybersecurity system and policy to ensure an appropriate level of security for citizens, businesses and the state, allowing them to protect their vital interests in cyberspace."<sup>21</sup>

Unfortunately, enforcement of these laws on cybersecurity and protection of digital rights of citizens is still weak due to a number of factors:

- 1) Until 2021, the country did not have an authorized body responsible for monitoring the use of personal data and taking preventive measures to prevent violation of the law<sup>22</sup>. In December 2021, the State Agency for the Protection of Personal Data was established under the Cabinet of Ministers of the Kyrgyz Republic<sup>23</sup>, which is currently working on the development of "rules, instructions and requirements for the protection of personal data before direct supervision and inspection of holders of an array of personal data."<sup>24</sup>

Meanwhile, research on personal data in the commercial sector, conducted in 2021 by the Kyrgyzstan Chapter of the Internet Society (supported by the Soros Foundation of Kyrgyzstan)

<sup>20</sup> [Закон КР от 14 апреля 2008 года № 58 "Об информации персонального характера" \(minjust.gov.kg\)](http://minjust.gov.kg)

<sup>21</sup> [СТРАТЕГИЯ кибербезопасности Кыргызской Республики на 2019-2023 годы \(к постановлению Правительства Кыргызской Республики от 24 июля 2019 года N 369\) \(minjust.gov.kg\)](http://minjust.gov.kg)

<sup>22</sup> N. Arzymbaev, T. Sultanov, A. Bozoeva, J. Zuridinova, Research on personal data in the commercial sector of the Kyrgyz Republic, [Microsoft Word - Personal Data Protection KR Final.docx \(isoc.kg\)](http://isoc.kg)

<sup>23</sup> [В Кыргызстане создали Государственное агентство по защите персональных данных \(kaktus.media\)](http://kaktus.media)

<sup>24</sup> <https://dpa.gov.kg/>

revealed that “the vast majority of the studied commercial companies illegally collect personal data, do not familiarize users with the list of personal data collected, the purposes of their collection and processing, rights, storage periods and their protection. Among other things, researchers have recorded cases of the collection of personal data in a variety of categories, including ethnic origin, political views, religious or philosophical beliefs, as well as data relating to health and sexual inclinations, and the collection of personal data that does not correspond to the text of the consents received.”<sup>25</sup>

- 2) At the regulatory level, sufficient mechanisms for guaranteeing the protection of personal data have not been developed. For example, there are no regulations on the notification of leaks, resulting in no confidence among citizens in the security of their personal data. According to a survey conducted by Kloop in the cities of Bishkek and Osh, almost 80 percent of citizens are afraid that their data could be stolen and used by third parties.<sup>26</sup> Panelist Akmat Alagushev stated, “Issues regarding digital rights are not regulated and are not supported by additional rules.”
- 3) The low level of digital literacy among the population and producers of information content limits citizens’ abilities to protect themselves and their data on the internet, as well as to exercise their rights to freedom of speech.

From the point of view of the panelists, all these aspects indicate a

<sup>25</sup> <https://prevention.kg/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Personal-Data-Protection-KR-correct-v-2022.pdf> The study was conducted by the public foundation “Kyrgyz branch of the Internet society ISOC Kyrgyzstan Chapter” with the support of the Soros Foundation Kyrgyzstan within the framework of the project “My digital rights,” 2021

<sup>26</sup> [Почти 80% опрошенных в Бишкеке и Оше опасаются утечки персональных данных — отчет проекта «Безопасного города» \(kloop.kg\)](#)

weak interest from the state in ensuring the digital rights of citizens and cybersecurity. “Cyber security is very poorly provided in Kyrgyzstan. In 2019-2020, a number of media outlets, including Factchek.kg, 24.kg, economist.kg, Kaktus, Kloop Media, Politklinika, Speak-TV, April TV, and medialaw.kg, were subjected to DDOS attacks. Most of these attacks were related to the coverage of investigations into customs corruption,” said panelist Sanjar Eraliev. “The media community then expressed serious concern about the inaction on the part of state bodies, which, in accordance with the law, should have taken an active position in ensuring the constitutional right of citizens to freedom of speech.”

Panelist Makhinur Niyazova also noted, “The law on the protection of personal data is mainly declarative in nature, but in a selective way it can become an obstacle in the access of publicly significant information for investigative journalists.”

**“The law on the protection of personal data is mainly declarative in nature, but in a selective way it can become an obstacle in the access of publicly significant information for investigative journalists,” noted Niyazova.**

According to the panelists, the state is not just demonstrating inaction, but a number of key state leaders “with their posts on social networks, contribute to the dissemination of low-quality information.”

For example, fact checkers have established several cases when the president of the country produced or distributed unverified, false information in his account. Numerous dedicated social media and troll groups spread these fake messages further on social media.

Sadiev believed that most media outlets function without tools and mechanisms for protecting themselves against DDOS attacks. In assessing the unprecedented number of social media hacks of public figures and activists, as well as online publications in 2021, panelist Almaz Ismanov explained the vulnerability of the media and other professional content producers. Because not only do they have limited access to educational programs on digital security, but also to the necessary digital security tools. Expensive cyber-attack protection programs are out of reach for many media organizations. Not all media even have a licensed base package from Microsoft or other professional

licensed programs.

Panelist Gulbarchyn Amirova believes that not only the media, but also government agencies themselves need to ensure digital hygiene and cybersecurity. “Everyone knows about the attacks on the websites of state bodies, the failures of the CEC information system during the last parliamentary elections,” Amirova specified.

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

The monitoring of social networks during the 2021 pre-election period (local and presidential elections), conducted by the Center for Media Development Public Foundation together with the NGO MEMO 98, revealed manipulations and misinformation in the campaign activities of key candidates and their supporters<sup>27</sup> and demonstrated how the “troll factories” of criminal and corrupt clans worked for an individual candidate for president. In such a campaign environment, a population that does not have critical thinking and lacks media literacy skills easily becomes a victim of false information.

Panelist Kubanych Zhusanov said, “Many yellow presses have a factory of trolls and fakes. And with their help, they artificially create false public opinion. And ordinary users willingly believe them. They don’t know how to double-check information.”

The population’s low level of media literacy is due to the lack of systematic education and development of critical thinking. In discussing this indicator, panelists noted that the state is not taking any significant

27 <https://medialaw.kg/2021/02/08/monitoring-socialnyh-setej-v-predvybornyj-period-2021-60-tysyach-postov-v-podderzhku-zhaparova-tolko-v-odnoj-gruppe-facebook/>

**Panelist Akmat Alagushev said, “The authorities do not need a media literate citizen, and they do not even need a literate person at all. Media literacy issues are dealt with only by NGOs and the media, funded by grants from Western countries. People in our country are media illiterate to a large extent. Even educated people are not all media literate,” said Alagushev.**

steps to improve the media literacy of the population. The school curriculum and the system of vocational education does not provide for courses to increase the media awareness of students. Because of this lack of media literacy and critical thinking skills, young people and adults are often victims of fake information. An illustrative example of this is how the population, guided by misinformation about the dangers of vaccination from social networks, avoid vaccination: Factcheck.kg published an article refuting the claim that a computer chip is inserted into the human body along with the COVID-19 vaccine. Despite attempts to disseminate material about the benefits of vaccination as a protection against contracting the virus, the percentage of vaccinated citizens in the country does not exceed 50 percent. According to the statistics from the E-Health Center under the Ministry of Health of the Kyrgyz Republic, only 40 percent of Kyrgyz are vaccinated with one dose of the vaccine, and only 17 percent of citizens received two doses of the vaccine.<sup>28</sup>

Panelist Akmat Alagushev said, “The authorities do not need a media literate citizen, and they do not even need a literate person at all. Media literacy issues are dealt with only by NGOs and the media, funded by grants from Western countries. People in our country are media illiterate to a large extent. Even educated people are not all media literate.”

Citizens with low media literacy are susceptible to fake information in the field of politics, and many have suffered economically by trusting fraudulent information on social networks, like citizens who shared their personal data in response to a fake mailing list about a raffle in honor of the 29th anniversary of the National Bank of Kyrgyzstan<sup>29</sup>.

28 [Главная страница - Vaccine \(emed.gov.kg\)](#)

29 [https://24.kg/ekonomika/217696\\_rozyigryish\\_vchest\\_29-letiya\\_natsbanka\\_moshennichestvo/](https://24.kg/ekonomika/217696_rozyigryish_vchest_29-letiya_natsbanka_moshennichestvo/)

“There is a stereotypical opinion that media literacy is exclusively within the competence of media organizations and journalists.,” observed Ismanov. International organizations primarily carry out efforts to improve media literacy, generally as part of the implementation of short-term projects. For example, helping journalists protect themselves from cyberattacks is part of the Media-K project to develop independent media in Kyrgyzstan.

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

Journalists, activists, and NGO representatives actively use information available to them, and they exercise their rights to freedom of speech. However, ordinary citizens do not know about their human and civil rights and do not know how to protect them. Residents of remote villages are especially vulnerable in terms of protecting their rights: They have fewer chances to receive legal training and fewer opportunities to participate in civil public hearings and discussion platforms, since these activities are mainly concentrated in big cities. They also have fewer resources to speak up publicly for their rights in a way that could influence decision-making.

Digitization of governance could expand the ability of the country’s citizens to participate in governance and increase public oversight in decision-making. The state has created special public online platforms for discussing bills or government initiatives, for example, the Koom Talkuu portal. However, the algorithm for expressing citizens’ opinions and the lack of explanatory documents--plus the need to be familiar with legal language and poor information about the existence of such platforms--make this opportunity for involvement in civic participation impossible for most citizens.

In this context, journalists and other professional content producers are the only alternatives who could objectively and promptly inform the population about important events taking place in the country. However, even professional content producers are increasingly deprived of access to information sources. Niyazova said, “Only accredited journalists or pre-registered activists and citizens can get into the parliament for

discussion. There is no free access.” Maslova added that the initiators of the bills conduct public discussions, they only invite participants loyal to them so that there is less criticism. Representatives don’t want to actually listen to citizens, just promoted the appearance civic dialogue.

Alternative public platforms are social networks or political protests and rallies. However, the level of discussion often consists of hateful language and enmity; furthermore, public discussions are often poorly moderated and do not allow people to effectively participate in discussions on socially significant issues. Moreover, researchers of political mobilization in Kyrgyzstan have noted a deterioration in the quality of mass actions in recent years<sup>30</sup>. Most citizens, especially from rural areas, cannot exercise their digital rights or the rights to freedom of opinion. “Most people in Batken Oblast prefer to remain silent about their problems. People have a deep-rooted belief that the problem will not be solved anyway,” Amirova said.

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

Most of the media have no idea about their audience and its information needs, and media professionals do not often have the opportunity to study their audience. The country’s online publications are in a better position because they can track statistics about their audience and their preferences through Google Analytics. However, Bektur Iskender noted, “Online publications, as a rule, do not have the resources for qualitative research of the audience and are limited to quantitative data.”

For traditional media, the situation regarding the study of consumers is difficult. For more than four years, no research has been conducted on media consumption in Kyrgyzstan, with the exception of a study on the consumption of information by children and adolescents from 7 to 17 years old<sup>31</sup>.

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.caa-network.org/archives/8823>

<sup>31</sup> Conducted in 2021 under the auspices of the K. Bayalinov Republic Library by Public Fund “Door” and Public Association “Information Resource Centers.”

Internews in Kyrgyzstan, together with USAID and the Industrial Media Committee Association, has been working to introduce permanent measurements of television audiences using people meters<sup>32</sup>. A pilot study was launched in 2019 to implement people meters in 250 households across three cities: Bishkek, Osh, and Jalalabad<sup>33</sup>. Despite the limited sampling of the measurement, covering only urban populations and only measuring television, as well as the desire and ability of television companies to buy audience measurement results, there is a lot of hope associated with this program. In the meantime, in the absence of access to objective information about the consumers of content produced, television and radio companies have to conduct their analyses based on comments and support on social media pages for the channels. Even small media outlets are trying to understand the media preferences of their audience, each using different strategies. “We conducted a Google survey among radio listeners. Every day, we track the statistics on the consumption of the YouTube version - which videos were viewed more, what is the reach, etc,” explained Amirova.

The distrust of the population towards the authorities, as well as towards professional content producers, is due to several factors, the most important of which is the lack of effort from media to actively engage with their audience. The most successful example of audience interaction is from Kloop Media. Ismanov explained that representatives of this publishing house are trying to earn the trust of their audience by openly talking about their authors and methods of preparing materials, including publishing corrections.

Sadiev said, “There is no work to organize feedback from audiences, especially among regional media. Currently, T-Media, with the support of the US Embassy, has started a project to provide feedback to the audience through the production of user-generated content (UGC). Other media, in addition to comments on social networks, do not have much feedback and do not analyze what they do have. Moreover, they don’t

hold meetings or events with the audience to strengthen communication with them.”

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

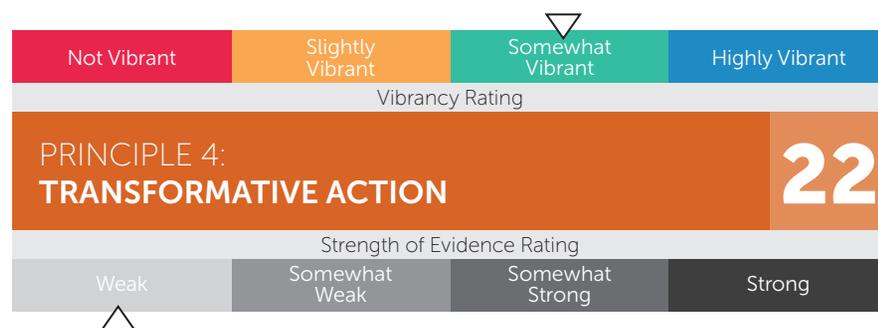
The indicator on the functioning of the media in local communities and the information needs of local communities turned out to be the most difficult for many panelists. Leading media managers, journalists, bloggers, media NGO employees, and journalism teachers, with rare exceptions, did not have sufficient information about the state of community media in the country. While community media do exist, colleagues from regional and national media know little about their activities.

Content produced by community media is available on the website of the Community Media Association, which unites four community radio stations and 21 community multimedia centers<sup>34</sup>. According to the panelists who are familiar with the activities of community media, the site rarely contains targeted news that could not be found on regional or national outlets. Adela Laisheva said content for these outlets is compiled by high school students from local schools, noting also that the amount of donations to sustain community media is decreasing every year, making it difficult for these outlets to compete.

32 [USAID и Интерьюс поддержали первый этап внедрения пиплметрии в Кыргызстане : Internews in Kyrgyz Republic](#)

33 <https://internews.kg/glavnye-novosti/proekt-po-izmereniyu-televizionnoj-auditorii-startuet-v-kyrgyzstane/>

34 <https://ru.kyrgyzmedia.kg/ob-assotsiatsii/>



While analytical and niche media is limited in Kyrgyzstan, the country's media landscape does enjoy varied media content ranging from economic to educational, with political coverage popular. Fake news and misinformation about the COVID-19 pandemic ran rampant, including promotion of home remedies and amplification of conspiracy theories about vaccines containing computer chips. As a result, Kyrgyzstan's vaccination rate has remained low. While there is some cooperation between media outlets and civil society, it is still an area with untapped potential. There are few methods or platforms through which the government interacts with citizens, and the government largely ignores instances of corruption, human rights violations, and elections irregularities.

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

There is a variety of media with a range of content: political, economic, educational and entertainment. Niyazova noted that due to the politicization of society, content on political topics is considered popular and in demand. Participants in the expert discussion unanimously agreed that there is practically no nonpoliticized news in Kyrgyzstan.

Among information agencies (Akipress, 24.kg, K-News, Kaktus Media, etc.), only Kaktus.media gives an opportunity to post comments. Most users comment on their position on the social media pages of the above media.

In general, while recognizing that the media landscape in Kyrgyzstan is diverse in terms of ownership and political ideologies represented, panelists noted the limited ability of the population to access analytical information flows and specialized niche media. Moreover, panelists observed that the presence of a pluralistic ideological media environment does not mean that different political positions can be held on the same platform and presented on equal footing. As a rule, supporters of a certain ideology cannot present it on a media outlet if the owners of said outlet hold different political views.

"In the entire country, there is a media that reflects different political views and positions, although at the moment pro-government media dominate quantitatively," Sadiev said. He further explained that this can largely be attributed to the number of media funded by pro-government politicians, as well as state-owned media that traditionally cover the perspective of officials and people in power.

While there are not many independent media, they try to objectively cover and produce nonpoliticized, high-quality information. Their audience is comparable to the audience of state channels and politicized media, despite the smaller number. Unfortunately, access to politicized and state media is limited for dissidents and people who have different opinions, and their positions are not reflected. At the same time, government officials do not always cooperate with politically neutral media.

Representatives of various ideological views use social networks as platforms for collecting information, because people share their opinions through posts, comments, or their own content. Instagram and Facebook are particularly popular. "People with different political views actively participate in discussions on social networks, especially on Facebook," Semetey Karypkulov said. But often the culture of these discussions leaves much to be desired. Eraliev explained, "Any political event gives rise to wide circles of discussion on Facebook. But these discussions cannot be described as constructive. Most of the political discussions on Facebook are hostile groups of users who represent irreconcilable poles of opinion."

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

Individuals are influenced by mis- and disinformation. Iskander explained, “The role of fakes and trolls in shaping the agenda can be quite high. Fake news played a particularly large role in 2021 in the continued stigmatization of the LGBT community, as well as human rights organizations.” Sadiev added that during elections and political campaign seasons, voters do not receive quality and reliable information; it is either embellished or uncomfortable facts about the candidates are buried. He also noted one example of fake information that was circulated on social media platforms about members of the opposition political party Ata-Meken. In order for the information to appear reliable, posts were accompanied by the logos of popular publications such as Kloop, Azattyk, and Next TV.

A large number of citizens were also influenced by all sorts of fake mailings on social networks and instant messengers, which promoted “treatment protocols” for COVID-19. Despite public health information content discouraging citizens from self-medicating to treat the virus, the situation has worsened. The World Health Organization expressed concern the situation could result in increasing antibiotic resistance: “There is an unfavorable situation in Kyrgyzstan due to the excessive use of antibiotics, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.”<sup>35</sup>

Commenting on these and other patterns of citizen behavior, Alimova doubted that high-quality, factual information could prevent the negative impact of fake news streams. “Even when we presented materials based on flashy facts, there were many people who did not accept this information,” she explained, “We saw this at the beginning

“Any political event gives rise to wide circles of discussion on Facebook. But these discussions cannot be described as constructive. Most of the political discussions on Facebook are hostile groups of users who represent irreconcilable poles of opinion,” explained Eraliev.

of the coronavirus pandemic. No matter how we provide reliable information, there were those who fell for the misleading messages distributed via messengers and followed their recipes: they treated the virus by gargling soda, they used aconite tinctures, etc.”

Moreover, according to some panelists, such false information continues to flow. Fake messages on platforms report “miraculous” folk remedies for the treatment of COVID-19, or they “reveal secrets” about vaccinations as a campaign to exterminate or zombify people. A significant proportion of citizens accept such information as objective and follow its recommendations, rather than receiving the vaccine. According to the Ministry of Health, at the end of December 2021, just 15 percent of the adult population of the country were vaccinated<sup>36</sup>.

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

Panelists were divided in their assessments of the role of civil society in Kyrgyz life —some asserted that the NGO sector in the county is very influential and progressive, while others believe that the civil society sector is significantly fragmented, and the proportion of truly influential and active organizations is very small. Some panelists also observed there are pro-government NGOs (state NGOs) that only imitate civic activity. However, most panelists admitted that were it not for civil society activists and a number of NGOs, tendencies towards authoritarianism and the power grabs by key politicians would be much more frightening.

Although Iskender gave an example of his own cooperation with NGOs to monitor the situation of Kyrgyz people detained by Tajikistan during

35 [Кыргызстан и Дания договорились о совместных исследованиях по устойчивости к антибиотикам \(kaktus.media\)](#)

36 <https://kloop.kg/blog/2021/12/27/respublikanskij-shtab-polnyj-kurs-vaktsinatsii-ot-covid-19-proshli-bolee-1-mln-kyrgyzstantsev/>

the border conflict, the collaboration between NGOs and the media is mostly fragmented, and in general, there are still problems with high-quality interaction between the two. NGOs are interested in cooperation with the media only at the beginning of the project--to disseminate information and start work--or at the end to announce the results achieved. Sadiev commented that media do not seek out partnerships with NGOs, and they are not aware that NGOs have expert information on social issues. The mechanisms for building effective communication between representatives of civil society and the media industry remain a problem area that requires efforts from both sides.

The manipulation of public opinion and disinformation from authorities in order to hide corruption and abuse of power limits civil society's access to quality information. Because of their corruption, authorities seek to hide information and restrict access to avoid accountability and transparency. State bodies rarely practice information campaigns to clarify the essence of ongoing or upcoming political, socio-economic or cultural events.

NGOs are actively involved in discussions of legislative initiatives and prepare high-quality analytical content. Sadiev cited the Media Policy Institute as an example, which “prepared a legal analysis of the most important issues related to the activities of the media, holding public debates and campaigning within the framework of the electoral legislation.” However, in her assessment, Niyzaova argued that the quality of content produced by representatives of NGOs and civil society groups leaves much to be desired. Moreover, their efforts remain unsuccessful. As an example, she cited the introduction of amendments to the law “On nonprofit organizations.”<sup>37</sup> These amendments caused a storm of public outcry among representatives of civil society, because they obligate all NGOs to make details of their work public, including accounting documents and property records, as well as personal data of

employees. “This step was perceived by civil society as a retreat from the principles of democracy<sup>38</sup>,” the analytical portal CABAR.asia reported. Despite protests and rallies, amendments to the law were nevertheless adopted in 2021.

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

For the most part, the government of Kyrgyzstan does not seem interested in communicating with the population or explaining the policies and decisions being made. As a rule, the authorities use only a few methods or formats to interact with citizens. “In general, the country has mechanisms for the interaction of representatives of state bodies with representatives of civil society and the media. But, unfortunately, things like press conference, briefings, press cafes, and press tours are used less and less by government agencies to interact with the media and journalists,” Ismanov said.

Due to the low levels of media literacy in the country, the presence of fake and misinformation had dramatic consequences for the life and health of people during the pandemic, with even senior government officials such as the president and minister of health advising people to drink a tincture of the poisonous aconite plant to treat COVID-19. As a result, the media received isolated reports of fatal poisoning of individual citizens with aconite.

### **Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic rights**

The ability of citizens to effectively communicate with politicians, deputies and other officials is often limited to short periods of pre-

**“The role of fakes and trolls in shaping the agenda can be quite high. Fake news played a particularly large role in 2021 in the continued stigmatization of the LGBT community, as well as human rights organizations,” explained Iskander.**

37 [Закон КР от 15 октября 1999 года № 111 “О некоммерческих организациях” \(minjust.gov.kg\)](#)

38 [Поправки в закон об НКО: В Кыргызстане сужают гражданское пространство - CABAR.asia](#)

election campaign meetings and discussions on media platforms. However, it is during the pre-election periods that the volume and frequency of unscrupulous and unreliable information increases, and the population is bombarded with fake information produced by special troll farms.

Kloop Media journalists and specialists from the Media Policy Institute investigated how politicians and political parties used trolls and fake information on the eve of the Parliamentary elections on October 4, 2020, and the presidential elections on January 10, 2021. This study resulted in a database of 425 accounts, which the researchers provided to Facebook, where they were subsequently removed from the social network<sup>39</sup>.

Some organizations and individuals, using fake accounts and troll groups on social networks and false information and manipulation techniques, are trying to discredit democratic institutions, including the Parliament, public organizations, and independent media. In 2021 and 2020, these efforts were particularly impactful. As a result, value orientations have changed among a certain part of the population: an opinion is being formed that NGOs = LGBT, and this is a threat to national identity and values.

Analyzing the impact of unreliable, and sometimes blatantly false, information on the population and their behavior in the election processes of 2021, Ismanov came to the same conclusion. “Disinformation practically discredited the idea of parliamentary governance and democratic institutions,” he said. “Due to the bias and inability of individual politicians, there was a strong discrediting of parliament as an institution of power.”

When assessing how the government handles corruption and other legal infractions, Iskander said, “The state most often covers up corruption, human rights violations, and election violations. While media pressure has made officials generally more fearful of corruption, it has not gone

<sup>39</sup> <https://kloop.kg/blog/2021/01/14/kyrgyzskaya-fejk-ferma-fejsbuk-i-instagram-udalili-sotni-akkauntov-za-manipulyatsii-na-vyborah/>; <https://kloop.kg/blog/2020/12/31/pozharnaya-komanda-vlasti-kak-legko-sozdat-fabriku-fejkov-v-kyrgyzstane/>; <https://kloop.kg/blog/2020/02/12/ferma-trollej-po-kyrgyzski-kak-fejki-pytayutsya-vliyat-na-vashe-mnenie/>

away, and there are indications that newly elected officials have used 2021 to plot their own enrichment schemes. There is less bribery in the elections, as a result of pressure from the media and civil society. However, authorities are simply trying to find new ways to manipulate the results that will be less visible to society.”

While acknowledging the low impact of quality journalism on power, panelists remain convinced of the importance of providing and scaling up quality content. As Niyazova said, “The availability of quality information contributes to a better understanding of the processes of society... In some areas, repeat elections are scheduled due to the announced information. Quality content needs be produced. People need it, and it will gradually develop media literacy and critical thinking.”

## LIST OF PANEL PARTICIPANTS

**Akmat Alagushev**, media ombudsman, Institute of Media Policy, Bishkek

**Dilbar Alimova**, editor-in-chief, PolitClinic (PolitKlinika), Bishkek

**Gulbarchyn Amirova**, deputy director, Radio Salam, Batken

**Sanjar Eraliev**, journalist, Azattyk Media, Bishkek

**Bektur Iskender**, founder, Kloop Media, Bishkek

**Almaz Ismanov**, founder, Prevention Media, Bishkek

**Semetey Karypkulov**, editor-in-chief, Bulak.kg, Bishkek

**Adelya Laisheva**, chairperson, Investigative Journalism Foundation, Bishkek

**Zarina Mamatzhanova**, instructor, Department of Journalism, Osh State University, Osh

**Dina Maslova**, founder and editor-in-chief, Kaktus.media, Bishkek

**Makhinur Niyazova**, editor-in-chief, 24.kg, Bishkek

**Daniyar Sadiyev**, founder, T-Media Group, Osh

**Bolot Temirov**, journalist, Temirov Live (YouTube channel), Bishkek

**Marat Tokoev**, deputy director, Journalists (public association), Bishkek

**Kubanychbek Zhusanov**, freelance journalist, Osh

#### **MODERATOR AND AUTHOR**

**Gulnara Ibraeva**, cofounder, PIL Research Company, Bishkek

Copyright © 2022 by IREX

**Notice of Rights:** Permission is granted to display, copy, and distribute VIBE in whole or in part, provided that: (a) the materials are used with the acknowledgment “The Vibrant Information Barometer (VIBE) is a product of IREX with funding from USAID.”; (b) VIBE is used solely for personal, noncommercial, or informational use; and (c) no modifications of VIBE are made.

This study is made possible by the support of the American People through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The opinions expressed herein are those of the panelists and other project researchers and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID, the United States Government, or IREX.

# TAJIKISTAN



## Vibrant Information Barometer

2 0 2 2



Highly Vibrant

Somewhat Vibrant

Slightly Vibrant

Not Vibrant

OVERALL  
SCORE

13

As in many countries, the COVID-19 pandemic drove many of Tajikistan's social and political events in 2021, even though the government closed the borders and officially claims the lowest death and illness rates in Central Asia.

While many of the trials of Tajikistan's media last year were ongoing, the pandemic turned the screws a bit tighter: As incomes fell, so did purchases of print media, and some publications went online to survive. That was a natural choice, considering that audiences in Tajikistan tend to favor online information and social media. New websites--such as YOUR.tj, Tochka Zreniya (Point of View) at nuqta.tj, Zira Media, and Halva (halva.tj)--launched in 2019–2020 with funding from donors USAID and Internews and have quickly caught on. They cover cultural and social topics, including stories about celebrities and successful businesspeople.

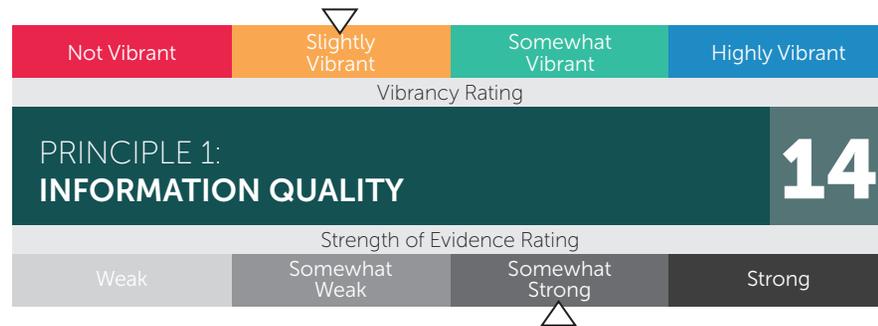
Despite a relatively stable economy, last year put the country's professed democratic values—freedom of speech, movement, choice, and religion—to the test, as journalists, human rights defenders, lawyers, and members of opposition political parties were persecuted.

Tajikistan's security services, represented by the State Committee for National Security (SCNS), constantly monitor the phones, email, and social media profiles of independent journalists and accredited foreign journalists. Social media users can be prosecuted for extremism for liking posts by opposition politicians, especially those who are abroad (the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan and Group-24 are both banned in Tajikistan as terrorists and extremists). In addition to the SCNS, the Interior

Ministry's directorate for combating organized crime (UBOP) has been prosecuting "undesirables." It regularly summons journalists who cover the news truthfully, or it talks to their editors. Fearing retaliation, lawyers have become reluctant to represent journalists, newspapers, and media (or media professionals) accused of tax fraud.

Middle-aged and older people favor serious publications for their news and economic and political analyses, while young people gravitate toward the so-called yellow press, the internet, and social networks, the most popular of which are Instagram and TikTok. Social media have become an effective way for people to raise issues and prod officials to take action.

Panelists gave Principle 3 (information consumption and engagement) the lowest score of all VIBE principles (10), driven by the pressure that journalists and media face from the government and Tajikistan's overall worsening operating environment. Principle 4 (transformative action) received the highest score of 15, bolstered by the work of civil society organizations; however, the indicator on information supporting good governance and democratic rights received one of the lowest scores of this year's country study, reflecting the significant role corruption plays. Panelists gave Principles 1 (information quality) and 2 (multiple channels) scores of 14 and 13, respectively--driven in part by stronger assessments of the quality of information; access to information; and channels for government information. However, the panelists gave indicators on sufficient resources and independence of information channels lower scores.



In Tajikistan, journalists and media executives are under increasing pressure from the authorities. State-owned media print no critical material, except at the behest of the government itself. There are professional ramifications for producing content that does not meet these criteria. Every year, it becomes more difficult for independent media to get broadcasting licenses from the state-controlled commission that issues them. It is also difficult to obtain information about the activities of the government, even upon official request.

Information quality in Tajikistan is undermined by journalists who pursue sensational stories often violating the code of ethics.

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

The existing infrastructure allows journalists to produce a variety of content (print, broadcast, and digital), but some media outlets' technical facilities and their employees' production skills leave much to be desired, said Nuriddin Karshiboev, director of the National Association of Independent Media of Tajikistan (NANSMIT), who also complained of a surfeit of flattering coverage of government figures and programs.

"The content has expanded, there's a lot of information, there's a lot of it in social networks, but it's not always of high quality," said Lola Khalikjanova, an editor for the Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR), "There are new media formats, for example, podcasts."

Zinatullo Ismoilzoda, chairman of the country's journalists' union, said Tajikistan formally has suitable conditions for content production, but independent TV and radio stations face significant hurdles in getting a broadcast license, as do their print and online counterparts in getting cleared by the SCNS, so they then can do the required registration with the Ministry of Culture. In addition, licenses given to independent broadcast and print media usually expire sooner than those given to government-controlled media, so the frequent renewals become "a permanent lever of pressure on independent publications," Ismoilzoda said.

As for quality of content, Zebo Tadjibayeva, a blogger and director of the YOUR.tj news website observed that journalists' sins are many, ranging from calling people in their articles insulting names to treating them as criminals before they have been tried to publishing photos of children or graphic scenes to revealing the names of harassment victims.

"Because of this often deliberately false or biased information, the relatives of these people have been subjected to harassment by relatives, neighbors, and acquaintances, and child victims of violence have been bullied by classmates and peers," said Rano Babadjanova, a journalism lecturer at Tajik National University.

Such infractions carry no consequences, and they bring little protest from other journalists or the general public, although Khurshed Niyozov, director of the Center for Journalistic Investigations and editor-in-chief of the *Faraj* newspaper, said it has undermined the public's trust in many media. Nabi Yusupov, director and editor-in-chief of the nuqta.tj website, observed that Tajikistan's media code of ethics is under review.

Journalists in Tajikistan can get quality training, but not at universities, where the facilities and the teachers' qualifications are obsolete. Instead, nongovernmental or international organizations provide instruction that meets the demands of the times, Karshiboev said.

All panelists said the government is largely unaccountable. Journalists cover the work of state bodies rather poorly, primarily because they have virtually no access to information. "News outlets are few, and they broadcast news often based on press releases that they use verbatim. No

one thinks about how it's written, whether it's understandable to readers. They just want to fill space," Jamila Huseynova, editor of the independent *USSR* newspaper, said. The state media usually rely on information published by the only state-run news agency, Khovar.

Panelists agreed that the media cover a narrow range of issues because they enjoy little editorial independence. "Topics are significantly narrowed due to the constant pressure on independent media; there's a certain circle of topics that almost everyone tries to avoid, in particular about the president, his relatives, and those close to him," Tadjibayeva said. In addition, Niyozov said coverage of Tajikistani dissidents living abroad is also tacitly banned.

Many journalists self-censor, and journalism lecturer Nosirjon Mamurzoda said privately held outlets cover what is in their owners' business interests, regardless of its news value.

In much of the country, local news is also lacking. Panelists observed that the media audience knows more about events in Africa, for example, than what is happening around Tajikistan, which Bakhtiyor Rakhmonov, a correspondent for the *Hakikati Kulob* newspaper in Kulyab, blamed on a lack of regional reporters. Compounding the problem, he said, is that newspapers in Dushanbe rarely reprint pieces from their regional counterparts. Independent journalist and blogger Negmatullo Mirsaidov said little information from the eastern Garm district and Gorno-Badakhshan, an autonomous region also in the east, reaches the capital. Mirsaidov, who is from the northern city of Khujand, said the only news from the east that gets reported elsewhere is usually about political events, such as a visit by the president.

“**Topics are significantly narrowed due to the constant pressure on independent media; there's a certain circle of topics that almost everyone tries to avoid, in particular about the president, his relatives, and those close to him," said Tadjibayeva.**

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

Panelists said many journalists in Tajikistan have been trained in fact-checking, but publishers have continued to spread unverified information, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. The government also disseminates false information, which independent publishers almost never take the trouble to verify.

Some journalists are schooled in fact-checking methods, and Tajikistan has two websites that teach them.<sup>1</sup> "Not all journalists have been trained, although most local media are very cautious about disseminating information in general," Tadjibayeva said

Khalikjanova, of IWPR, said Tajikistan has no domestic resources, including online, to verify facts, and "almost no one uses foreign resources. That was especially obvious with the spread of the coronavirus pandemic, when journalists repeatedly reprinted unverified assertions about the disease itself and about vaccines, despite the fact that it was quite simple to verify the data in the original source."

Even though disseminating false information is illegal, government agencies sometimes use a mix of propaganda and defamation to smear opposition leaders, Karshiboev said. Huseynova stated that agents of the special services or the Interior Ministry's organized crime division often come to independent newsrooms and

demand publication of articles they have written that defame opposition politicians and journalists. "If you refuse, they can make it so that there will be inspections by the tax authorities, revocation of your license, and other repressive measures," she said.

Yusupov said no publication in Tajikistan has adequate management and moderation to prevent the spread of false information. "The only link that

<sup>1</sup> <https://factcheck.tj/ru/glavnaya/>.

moderates what will be published is the editor, and everything depends on the level of their professionalism and vigilance," he said.

In some cases, such as the armed conflicts on the border with Kyrgyzstan, the authorities provide no information at all. As a result, losses on the Tajikistan side last year were reported by foreign media.<sup>2</sup>

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

Tajikistan's strict laws against inciting hatred have helped keep digital platforms largely free of erroneous or deliberately false and inflammatory content aimed at specific groups. In the rare instances when professional content producers create or disseminate disinformation or hate speech, it is usually the work of an errant employee and not editorial policy. Any such content that pops up on high-profile sites usually gets reported to law enforcement. Moreover, panelists said government media do not create content aimed at inciting ethnic hatred, even during the recent border conflicts. "Those events weren't covered on television at all, and the Khovar state news agency only printed press releases from the Tajik Border Service," Huseynova said. But Khalikjanova said the government instead turned to independent media to write critical articles about Kyrgyzstan's security forces and authorities.

The government does, however, pressure media to vilify opposition figures living outside Tajikistan. All government websites, including those of universities and social networking groups, publish false, defamatory, and degrading material about specific people or groups at odds with the security forces. Almost no one in the country's media can opt out, lest they lose their job or have their outlet shut down.

Most foreign media do not disseminate disinformation, and they report the facts. No foreign diplomatic missions or plenipotentiaries have deliberately disseminated false information to incite national hatred, although other governments have given misinformation to the press or

2 Central Asian Bureau for Political Reporting. "How the Media and Social Networks Covered the Conflict on the Border of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan." May 8, 2021. <https://cabar.asia/ru/kak-smi-i-sotsseti-osveshali-konflikt-na-granitse-kyrgyzstana-i-tadzhikistana>.

politicians have made inaccurate statements.

Among social media, meaningful content moderation happens only on Facebook, where a complaint can get content deleted or an author blocked. The online Asia-Plus news agency also moderates comments, Niyozov said.

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

Panelists said Tajikistan's media scene is not ideologically diverse. The only ideology, some said, is whatever the state says, and the media, including independent publications, must embrace it. Departures are treated as dissent.

There is some ethnic diversity, however: Publications in Tajikistan come out in Russian, Tajik, and, much less often, Uzbek. The dominant language is Tajik, mirroring the country's ethnic makeup, which is 84 percent Tajik.

Despite the fact that more than 98 percent of the population in Tajikistan follows Islam, the media often write about various religious denominations, such as Orthodox Christians, Jehovah's Witnesses, Baha'is, Adventists, and Hare Krishnas. "But lately, they write only about the Christian Church, as they have official registration, six churches, and a metropolitan in Tajikistan," Babadjanova said. The other faiths, Rakhmonov said, get press mainly when they get banned from the country for activities that do not correspond to the goals and objectives they indicated when registering.

Niyozov said coverage of marginalized groups--such as homeless people, substance abusers, sexual minorities, and sex workers--is absent from traditional or alternative media.

Fearing an audience backlash, the media generally avoid covering sexual minorities, Karshiboev said. As for gender issues, Babadjanova said Tajikistan technically welcomes women into public and political life, with, for example, a quota for the number of women legislators. But Tadjibayeva, the YOUR.tj director, said government agencies usually send

the message that women should be in the kitchen or raising children. As an example, Huseynova said the Interior Ministry's press releases on the detention of women use blatantly sexist epithets, such as a "cuckoo woman," meaning one who has abandoned her child. She said almost all publications in Tajikistan, including independent media, follow suit.

Citizens get a variety of information from social networks and the internet, but there is no diversity in the state media. Only a few media organizations broadcast or publish in Russian, Uzbek, or Kyrgyz, along

with niche media, such as the *Din va Chomea* (Religion and Society), *Zan va Oila* (Women and Family), *Bonuvoni Tojikiston* (Women of Tajikistan), and *Firuz* (Turquoise) magazines, and publications by cultural centers and communities of Uzbeks, Russians, Kazakhs, Turkmen, and Karluks, Mamurzoda said. But he said these media and organizations do not reflect the lives and views of these ethnic groups in a comprehensive way.

Panelists said more women than men work in the media, especially at state-run outlets, which Babadjanova attributed to state media's "stable salary, various bonuses, and stable eight-hour workday." Khalikjanova said only four women in Tajikistan own media outlets. In addition to Tadjibayeva, with YOUR.tj, there is Mukhae Nozimova (Zira Media), Nargis Kasimova (Dast ba dast), and Gulnora Amiroshva (Vecherka.tj).

Nonprofessional content producers tend to be men, but they have a variety of backgrounds, including workers, students, the unemployed, and nonprofit staff. Tadjibayeva said Tajikistan has very few women bloggers, who tend to prefer TikTok and Instagram.

Mirsaidov, the blogger in Khujand, said the language of information materials mostly meets people's needs. However, he noted that many of the two million Uzbeks who, by official statistics, live in Tajikistan think there is not enough broadcast and print media in their language. At the same time, the Russian-language space is shrinking, to the dismay of not only ethnic Russians but also Tajiks and Uzbeks who speak that language.

### Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced.

Tajikistan's independent media have always relied on grants from international donors—such as the European Union, the OSCE, and USAID—to survive, and the pandemic made matters worse, as economic pressures caused businesses to cut their advertising spending.

Even in better times, however, the "advertising market is monopolized and politicized," with contracts typically going to publications loyal to

the government or powerful groups, said Ismoilzoda, the union leader. In addition, government agencies advertise only in state-owned media. That leaves mostly just international organizations or branches of international banks to advertise in private, independent media.

In general, business owners do not want to advertise. Small- and medium-sized companies in Tajikistan largely ignore local publications and opt to advertise on social networks. As a result, while state media receive subsidies and other government support, Huseynova observed that independent media "are on the verge of bankruptcy."

Mamurzoda said that of the 50-plus print and electronic media in the southwestern Khatlon region, only three—the Kurgonteppa and Mavchi Ozod television channels and the *Paik* newspaper—are considered independent. The rest get government subsidies.

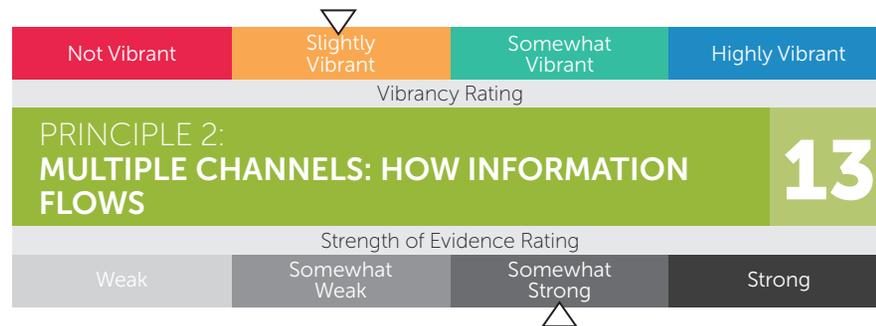
Scarce resources keep journalists' pay low and make it difficult to produce quality content. In Dushanbe, journalists at private media earn an average of 1,500 to 3,500 somoni (\$132 to \$307), and in the regions, they earn 650 to 1,000 somoni (\$57 to \$88) per month. At the same time, reporters and editors get paltry expense reimbursements, and they often pay out of their own pockets to replace obsolete newsroom equipment. Ismoilzoda said the state TV and radio company is standardizing its journalists' patchwork of salaries, but Babadjanova noted that even they are expected to travel to the remotest areas of this sprawling country with puny travel allowances.

“The only link that moderates what will be published is the editor, and everything depends on the level of their professionalism and vigilance,” said Yusupov.

“Independent publishers very often have to skimp on content creation, so there are no investigative, data-journalism articles, and there are very few videos or illustrations, which are considered costly formats,” Yusupov said.

In this environment, many journalists work multiple jobs or leave the profession, and finding skilled ones to replace them is challenging. Khalikjanova cited a study by IWPR that found that university applicants in Tajikistan who do not make the cut for more prestigious programs, such as medicine, law, and economics, turn to journalism departments.

Panelists said some publishers have begun covering only topics funded by grants from international donors, while other struggling outlets are vulnerable in other ways. “Virtually no independent publishers in Tajikistan have their own premises. They have to rent, and this is one way of putting pressure on the media,” Tadjibayeva said. She cited the case of the respected Asia-Plus news agency, which was evicted from the floor it rented in a building owned by the president’s office to another floor that was ill-suited for running a news operation.



Journalists in Tajikistan can become the targets of the security services and big businesses, which can exploit the country’s frequently invoked law on terrorism against them.

Panelists agreed that pressure has increased both on the media as a whole and on individual journalists. Domains are confiscated, and journalists’ online activities are monitored, their emails and messages are hacked, and sometimes their phones are tapped. In such circumstances,

there is no real freedom of speech. The lowest scores in this principle were given to access to the internet for the media, lack of freedom to comment on social networks, and print media’s access to printing houses.

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

Tajikistan has laws on freedom of speech and media that meet international standards, but they are poorly implemented. In addition, journalists themselves do not actively exercise their professional rights, Karshi-boev said. New legislation that its sponsors say will protect the rights and interests of journalists and media employees is under discussion, Babadjanova said.

In June 2020, Tajikistan’s parliament established significant fines for spreading “inaccurate” and “false” information about the pandemic in the media and on social media, or “untrustworthy” information via mobile messaging apps.<sup>3</sup> The legislation also gave law enforcement agencies the power to examine private correspondence, including emails and messages. Those who claimed on social media to have contracted COVID-19 were required to have a doctor certify their diagnosis or face prosecution for spreading false information. These measures led almost all media to stop reporting information about the coronavirus that differed from the official line.

The legislation also allows 13 government agencies to request that the Communications Service, which controls internet access throughout Tajikistan, block websites, bypassing judicial review. The result has had a chilling effect on content producers, Yusupov said.

Aside from legal repercussions, Tadjibayeva said journalists are targeted in other ways, “though they’ve diminished and become less obvious and more sophisticated. They can take such forms as a ‘preventive conversa-

3 Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. “RSF Warns New Tajik Legislation Could Hamper Coronavirus Coverage.” June 14, 2020. <https://www.rferl.org/a/rsf-warns-new-tajik-legislation-could-hamper-coronavirus-coverage/30669825.html>.

tion,' with a summons to the prosecutor's office, physical assault by unknown attackers, and damage to property by the police."

Authorities view any attempt to hold them accountable for their actions as an attempt to smear them in the international arena, and they come down hard on the offending media, said Rajab Mirzo, director of the Akhbor baroi afkor (Food for Thought) Facebook group.<sup>4</sup>

Dissident journalists' names go on a list of people involved in terrorism or extremism that is posted on the website of the national bank. Some news organizations that have covered extremism or terrorism have suddenly found unexplained cash transfers in their accounts from countries where vocal government critics live, which the bank uses as a pretext to shut down the outlets.

Karshiboev said the special services constantly pressure journalists to denounce their colleagues as security threats. He said NANSMIT sees a steady stream of journalists who complain that they have been threatened indirectly with dismissal if they do not comply, and the result is increasing self-censorship. At the same time, Karshiboev said the security services "take advantage of the fact that journalists attend receptions at embassies, participate in international conferences, seminars, and training sessions, and require them to report what happened there, what was said, who was present—that is, they make the journalists do their job for them."

Karshiboev said journalists deemed troublesome can be imprisoned. For example, as reported on nansmit.tj, independent journalist Daler Sharifi served about a year in prison on an extremism conviction after publishing an analysis of Islamic theology that included quotes from the Muslim Brotherhood, which is banned in Tajikistan.

Mirzo said government critics are tracked down via their IP addresses and punished, citing the case of Junaidullo Khudoyorov, a blogger who had criticized local officials on social media and in 2018 was sentenced

to five years in prison on specious charges of belonging to a banned religious group. He has since been released.

In another example, in June, lawyer and human rights activist Abdulmajid Rizoev was sentenced to five-and-a-half years in prison for posting on Facebook what prosecutors said were "hidden public calls for extremist activities that could destabilize the national security," his lawyer told reporters. Prosecutors specifically cited an aphorism Rizoev had posted: "A wise government fights the roots of protest, an ignorant government fights the protesters."<sup>5</sup>

Organized crime investigators have begun to interfere in the media, reminding journalists of what they can and cannot cover, Huseynova said. Panelists said many journalists summoned by UBOP, the Interior Ministry's organized crime division, have said their phones were confiscated for several days.

To avoid such harassment and punishment, activists, journalists, and members of civic organizations increasingly hold their tongues, even in personal social networks. For example, as reported on nansmit.tj, Abduljamid Rizoev, a lawyer who has worked in the human rights field and has provided legal advice to citizens, was sentenced to five-and-a-half years in prison under allegations of hiding public calls for extremist activities on his Facebook page.

Panelists said officials use accreditation renewal as leverage against foreign journalists, checking on their coverage of government figures before making a decision. The Foreign Ministry has repeatedly revoked accreditations from Radio Free Europe's Radio Ozodi journalists, or granted only three-month credentials, in retaliation for their coverage of opposition activists abroad.

One panelist said the SCNS pressured Radio Ozodi correspondent Masum Mukhammadrajab in Sughd Province, first revoking his accreditation

4 Mamadshoev, Marat. "Freedom of Speech in Tajikistan: Don't Seek, Don't Ask, Don't Tell," Central Asian Bureau for Analytic Reporting. December 20, 2019. <https://cabar.asia/ru/svoboda-slova-v-tadzhikistane-ne-ishhi-ne-sprashivaj-ne-govori>.

5 Ruhullo, Sarvinoz and Shahlo Abdullo. "Released Activist: 'The Authorities Put Me Behind Bars Instead of Fixing the Problems,'" Radio Ozodi. November 9, 2019. <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/30253633.html>.

from the Foreign Ministry, then threatening mistreatment of his mentally ill, incapacitated son. UBOP told another Ozodi correspondent, Farzon Mukhammadi, that if he worked for that outlet, he would receive no information, or his credentials would be revoked.

Another lever of control, Ismoilzoda said, is the requirement that printers, like publishers, get permission from the State Committee on National Security to register. Those that buck law enforcement decrees on coverage can see that permission denied in the future.

Panelists said the government no longer needs to go through internet service providers to block sites, doing it instead at the Unified Switching Center, which is subordinate to the Communications Service and through which all independent providers work. For example, Ahbor.com, run out of Prague by journalist Mirzo Salimpur, was blocked in 2020, although it is still accessible via virtual private networks. Internet service providers must buy internet traffic only from the state provider, Tajiktelecom, Niyozov said.

The Asia-Plus news organization has been a particular target. Its multiple websites have been blocked and unblocked, and its domain name system was sabotaged to send users to an error page, all with no legal basis and no claim of responsibility from the government. It now operates online via a domain registered in Russia.<sup>6</sup>

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

In recent years, Tajikistan has built a decent information and communications infrastructure that serves most people's needs. However, telephone communication, both mobile and landline, frequently fails, and the internet can be unstable and slow, especially

outside the cities.

Most people in Tajikistan can afford radios and televisions. "Things are more difficult for newspapers, which are less in demand because they don't appear as often," and by the time they reach the farther-flung regions, they are often out of date, Yusupov observed, further saying, "Those who can afford modern gadgets can also use the internet."

But even the internet can be an unreliable channel of information, given the government's control of the central communications center and its ability to block websites or even shut down the internet.<sup>7</sup>

“There are no TV channels in minority languages in Tajikistan, only news in Russian, Uzbek, Arabic, and English,” said Ismoilzoda.

Mamurzoda noted that regular fall and winter power rationing means cell towers sometimes go dark, playing havoc with mobile phone signals. In addition, the country has the most expensive internet service in Central Asia, putting it out of reach for some. "In rural areas, when the

power isn't cut off, the only sources of information are the state TV channels and radio. There are no national public television channels in Tajikistan," Rakhmonov said.

Mirsaidov said there are independent internet publications and private TV and radio companies in northern Tajikistan. The south, where the vast majority of the country's residents live, and the east have no independent radio and TV stations, but residents there can use the internet for alternative sources of information.

Babadjanova said the mobile network is widely available, and mobile versions of social networks are nearly universally used for communication, as "every family has someone who is a labor migrant." On the other hand, she said, TV still does not fully cover the regions, in particular in the border areas with Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, where stations lack the equipment needed for the country's switch to digital broadcasting.

6 Mamadshoev, "Freedom of Speech." <https://cabar.asia/ru/svoboda-slova-v-tadzhikistane-ne-ishhi-ne-sprashivaj-ne-govori>.

7 Nadirov, Bahmaner. "Access to Social Networks Is Again Restricted in Tajikistan," Asia-Plus. April 24, 2019. <https://asiaplustj.info/ru/news/tajikistan/society/20190424/v-tadzhikistane-vnov-ogranichen-dostup-k-sotsialnim-setyam>.

Ismoilzoda said residents of the regions bordering Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Afghanistan watch those countries' TV channels. "There are no TV channels in minority languages in Tajikistan, only news in Russian, Uzbek, Arabic, and English," he said.

Television stations were required to make the expensive switch from analog to digital broadcasting in 2021, which panelists said could drive some strapped private regional stations out of business. State television, on the other hand, gets public funds and will easily manage the transition, Ismoilzoda said.

People with hearing disabilities can turn to only one channel, the state-run Jahonnamo, for programming with sign-language interpreters.

### **Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for government information.**

The right of access to public information is enshrined in several laws and regulations, but in practice, access is limited. Media representatives rarely push their right to information, lest they spoil relationships with government agencies and sources.

Every year, monitoring services count hundreds of information requests from journalists that are denied or delayed beyond the legally required three-day response time. The responses that do come contain little useful information or data, Tadjibayeva said. Departments and ministries often incorrectly cite regulations that conflict with freedom-of-information laws to justify their refusal to give out information.

In their struggle for information, journalists often "use personal connections in ministries and departments," Yusupov said and added, "There is prejudice and subjectivity in the presentation of information from government agencies. Some media outlets and journalists are answered quickly, some aren't answered at all, especially if they've ever published critical material about them."

"In addition, there are no public hearings, with the exception of several draft laws that have been discussed recently, such as the new tax code," Karshiboev said. But even those discussions included only

"representatives of public organizations loyal to the authorities," who refused to comment on the proceedings to the media, he observed.

Press secretaries often avoid answering questions, including at the Ministry of Health during the pandemic, Huseynova said.

Virtually all ministries and departments have websites, but they are rarely updated, and then only with press releases that "don't cover the real activities of government agencies," Mirzo said.

Babadjanova said government agencies have recently taken a more professional attitude toward media representatives, adding specialists in journalism and public relations to their press offices, but the quality of the information provided is still lacking. "Officials are often afraid to provide information, either because they're not competent or they're afraid to say too much. The media often use anonymous sources in government agencies. But citizens still think the information provided by officials is trustworthy," Mamurzoda said.

Once every six months, all government agencies in Tajikistan must report on their activities at press conferences, which are practically the only chance for journalists to see the leadership of ministries and departments and ask questions. Usually, however, these officials read out a statement and then, citing a heavy workload, ignore journalists' questions and leave. Journalists who ask tough questions risk being banned from these events. Despite their shortcomings, these press conferences can be a useful tool for interaction among government agencies, civil society, and the media, some journalists say.

During the border clashes that resulted in fatalities, officials in Tajikistan held no press conferences, even as their counterparts in Kyrgyzstan regularly met with the press. As a result, journalists in Tajikistan were forced to cite information from unofficial sources that could not be verified, while officials blamed them for losing the information war to Kyrgyzstan.

Whatever limited success journalists have with getting information or reporting truthfully, civic activists have less, as most officials are not particularly informed about citizens' rights to access to information and

ignore their requests.

Niyozov said civil society groups and the media sometimes exchange information, usually at the impetus of civil society, but government officials almost never join in.

Few citizens seem to know how to get information on the work of government agencies, but even if they did, Niyozov said, most people “have little interest in the activities of government agencies.”

### **Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow.**

No laws forbid a concentration in media ownership in Tajikistan, nor do they require the disclosure of media owners. However, foreign companies cannot own media properties in the country.

“As far as independent media, distribution channels aren’t monopolized and don’t belong to a small number of media conglomerates,” Tadjibayeva said.

Ismoilzoda said all TV and radio frequencies are distributed by the state-run Teleradiocom.

“The procedure for obtaining a TV license is quite complicated,” Khalikjanova said. She noted that in the past five years, no independent or public television station has been able to get a license from the State Committee for Television and Radio Broadcasting, “which is essentially a competitor.”

Yusupov said license terms for radio stations are very short, plus beginning in 2021, all radio stations are made to “work within the state information policy” and coordinate with the broadcasting committee on all content not in the Tajik language. Private broadcasters must also give 1 percent of their profits to the committee in addition to taxes. Meanwhile, Tajik authorities have raised the cost of a broadcasting license by as much as 20 times—up to about \$1,200 per year.

“**No media outlet in Tajikistan has a division between the commercial department and the editorial office,” Huseynova said.**

Launching a private media outlet is complex and costly, and permits mostly go to those who are loyal to the government or pose no political threat.

There is no law on public media in Tajikistan, and no public media has ever existed in the country. Although the government is prohibited from holding more than half of any media outlet, it fully owns six television channels and five radio stations.

New online media and printing houses must be approved by the SCNS, which can throw up obstacles, and then registered with the Culture Ministry, Tadjibayeva said.

Several independent cable and internet protocol television (IPTV) channels broadcast Russian-, Uzbek-, and Persian-language stations; however, they do not create their own content.

There are no independent internet service providers. Mirzo noted that during a September summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in Dushanbe, officials unblocked “undesirable” sites, such as Asia-Plus, the Avesta information agency, and Radio Ozodi, only to bring the curtain back down afterward.

Citizens have the right to start their own media, but in practice, security checks, registration, short licensing periods, an opaque licensing process, unpredictable journalist accreditation, onerous paperwork, and corruption create a high barrier.

### **Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.**

Panelists said Tajikistan has few serious media outlets left. Media owners, including the state, control editorial policy. Even international donors sometimes demand final approval of articles about projects they fund, Khalikjanova said.

Journalists quickly come to know which topics to avoid. Niyozov said

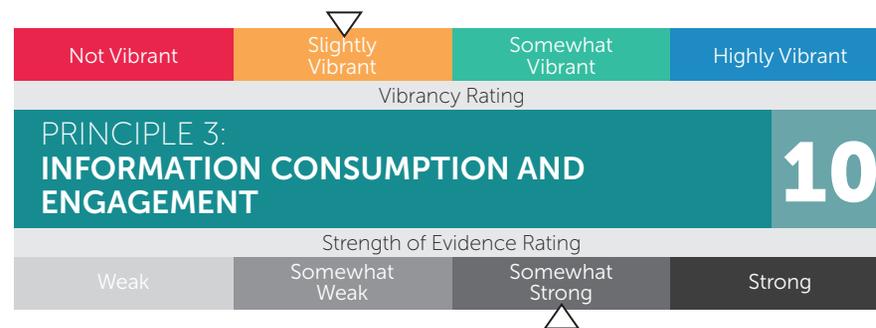
journalists are given a list of so-called forbidden issues, presumably by their supervisors, but reporters can also be summoned by the security services for a reminder—or they can simply choose to stick with “safe” topics.

At the same time, because private media depend heavily on their advertisers, Mirzo said they do not run critical articles about advertisers, and they carefully filter readers’ comments. However, Yusupov said such behavior depends on the size of the advertising contract. Additionally, companies dictate ad placement and seek to quash simultaneous spots in the same publication from competitors.

“No media outlet in Tajikistan has a division between the commercial department and the editorial office,” Huseynova said, “Journalists who write editorial materials also prepare commercial materials.” She said journalists get commissions for attracting advertisers “so their content often depends on advertisers, too. There are many cases of hidden advertising.”

The government bodies responsible for frequency allocation, media licensing, and telecommunications services are appointed by the SCNS, and they reward loyal media. Ismoilzoda said the heads of regulatory bodies who supervise media or distribution channels rarely treat independent media objectively.

Independent media in Tajikistan receive no financial support from the government, while state media get subsidies, a monopoly on government advertising, favorable rent terms, help with utilities, assistance with subscriptions, exclusive access to officials, and more, Niyozov said.



Foreign media do not interfere in the foreign policy and internal actions of the government of Tajikistan because they know that they can be deprived of accreditation by the country’s Foreign Ministry and, therefore, the opportunity to work. Accreditation, as an instrument of pressure, is used in relation to the journalists of Radio Liberty, who sometimes dare to criticize the authorities and give the floor to the position living in the West.

It is very rare for professional content producers to allow the creation and dissemination of disinformation or hate speech. This happens, of course, due to lack of capacity among employees, and not because of intentional policy of the editorial board. At the same time, among non-professional content producers, there are often individuals (usually writing under pseudonyms) who create and disseminate misinformation or information aimed at inciting hatred.

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

Tajikistan has a law on the protection of personal data, but it is largely toothless.

Panelists said that since Tajikistan established the Unified Switching Center, government officials control and monitor all internet traffic on the pretext of fighting terrorism and extremism. “But in fact, all dissent and criticism of the authorities are suppressed,” Karshiboev noted, adding that there is evidence that officials are wiretapping and surveilling personal data online.

Babadjanova said people in Tajikistan have no digital literacy. They do not know how to secure their personal data, and they are easily fooled by fake news on social media. Fraud cases with electronic wallets and bank cards have become more common as users have unwittingly handed over sensitive information, Mirsaidov said.

Tadjibayeva said distributed denial of service attacks on the media have stopped since the government gained full control over internet access through the universal switching center, but given the lack of IT staff, media outlets remain vulnerable. Panelists said journalists' personal accounts on social media continue to be hacked, with disinformation posted under the target's name or personal correspondence released. Attackers also post surreptitious video recordings of activists, including intimate footage of a woman who had petitioned the president not to raise internet costs. The police were no help to her. "[This] practice is used very often against activists," Karshiboev said.

Not all media and other professional content producers have access to digital security education programs and digital security tools. "There are not many such educational programs, and not all members of the media understand how necessary it is to participate in them, so the media often neglect reliable ways to ensure digital hygiene and reliable site protection," Yusupov said. Even the media that offer donor-funded training for their employees cannot afford to hire specialists in information security, Khalikjanova observed. Rakhmonov said many regional media sites are not protected because founders and editors in chief do not take protection seriously, and they do not want to spend money on it. Moreover, ordinary citizens also lack an understanding of the need for free access to technology and tools that help protect their personal data and security.

"Unfortunately, from what we've seen, not only the population of the republic but also a lot of professional journalists know little about digital security," Mamurzoda said.

**“Unfortunately, from what we've seen, not only the population of the republic but also a lot of professional journalists know little about digital security,” said Mamurzoda.**

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

While government officials in Tajikistan do not talk to citizens about the importance of media literacy, some members of parliament have had courses in it that they deemed useful, Babadjanova said.

Recent research has shown an abysmal level of basic information and digital literacy among the public, including knowledge and skills in digital and information security. "The level of media literacy depends heavily on the level of education; an educated person easily navigates social networks in search of the content he or she needs and can distinguish the level of its objectivity and accuracy," Mirsaidov said. About one-quarter of Tajikistan's population has graduated from high school and has some higher education.

City dwellers with access to the internet and social networks are more or less informed about fake news and fact-checking, but most in Tajikistan believe anything posted on the internet. "It's easy to post [doctored images or falsified text] on social networks, and the users of social networks often repost fake information," Tadjibayeva said.

Panelists said that far from inviting any backlash, unprofessional and harmful content, especially when posted online, attracts an audience. "On the contrary, the number of clicks increases; there are reposts. Consumers have stopped thinking critically. They literally swallow everything

that's published, especially on social networks," Mirzo said.

"Improving people's media literacy is a pressing matter," Mamurzoda said. The little media literacy training offered—by outlets themselves or, usually, by Internews and Tajikistan's association of independent media, NANSMIT—have made no discernible headway among the general

public or even among journalists.<sup>8</sup> Schoolchildren get no instruction in thinking critically about the journalism or social media posts they see. Khalikjanova said two well-known journalists have written a textbook on teaching media literacy, which will be incorporated into the curriculum of university journalism departments.

Journalists also often broadcast false information, because they are unable to verify it.

On the other hand, Yusupov said people can find any online course or content and learn if they want.

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

The only venues in Tajikistan where citizens can relatively freely express their opinions are social media platforms, which are practically unmoderated and circumvent a cautious and censored media scene. However, genuine discussions on these forums are rare, and only debates on social issues that steer clear of politics tend to get results from the government, Karshiboev said. On political issues, a public outcry is mostly useless, he said, and criticism of the authorities comes only from Tajikistanis who live abroad. For people living within the country, speaking out on political issues can be met with arrest and potential imprisonment.

Niyozov said platforms for public discussions, such as roundtables, conferences, or talk shows, have been kept to a minimum during the pandemic, and they have avoided particularly sensitive topics.

Aside from social media, Tajikistan has no forum for public debate.

8 Asia-Plus, Media Literacy School Special Project, <https://asiaplustj.info/projects/shkolamediamotnosti>; Mediasavod.tj, <http://mediasavod.tj/>.

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

Panelists said Tajikistan media have made little effort to research audience needs, especially in television and radio, and lack the tools to do so.<sup>9</sup> Leading media and content producers use qualitative research to get a picture of their audiences' size, geographic reach, access to media, ethnicity, gender, age, and wealth.

Tadjibayeva noted that online media have their own methods of measuring their audiences and gauging their engagement and interests, but she said only a few use them. "Whenever possible, independent online publications try to meet the needs of their audiences, but, of course, not all media and producers have access to this kind of research and have to rely on personal surveys of their consumers." Even free Google Analytics is available only to those organizations with reliable high-speed internet service.

Mamurzoda said regional media cannot afford to conduct sociological research and to sound out their audiences. Additionally, even less-ambitious outreach efforts are rare. "There are no open meetings of readers, subscribers with authors, with editorial boards in Tajikistan," Huseynova said, "But print media actively publish their readers' letters."

Similarly, Rakhmonov said online publications offer comments sections, but all comments are carefully screened.

"Tajikistan's media still use marketing poorly, most often not knowing who their target audiences are, and poorly tracking feedback," Tadjibayeva said. She further observed that only two or three media organizations actively use social media marketing and monitor feedback, al-

**It's easy to post [doctored images or falsified text] on social networks, and the users of social networks often repost fake information," said Tadjibayeva.**

9 Gaisina, Lilia. "Media in Tajikistan Have Parted Ways with Their Audience," New Reporter. July 15, 2019, <https://newreporter.org/2019/07/15/media-v-tadzhikistane-razoshlis-so-svoej-auditoriej/>; Zerkalo Center, Media Audiences in Tajikistan 2019, <http://zerkalo.tj/news/105-auditorii-smi-tadzhikistana-2019.html>.

though Karshiboev said media outlets present on social media do monitor feedback.

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

Although current media laws allow for it, there is no local community media in Tajikistan. A plan to create private local radio stations 10 to 15 years ago in areas outside the cities failed when officials said there were not enough frequencies and refused to issue broadcasting licenses.



Except for a few independent outlets, media in Tajikistan do not offer a wide range of opinions and ideologies. Because state media have the largest reach, the government’s viewpoint dominates the information space. There is no exchange of information between state and independent media, because the level of reporting is too different and state media is completely under the control of the government, only expressing official opinions and policies.

Despite the government’s insistence to the contrary, there is gender inequality in Tajikistan. In addition, the media avoid covering the issues of sexual minorities, who face scorn and discrimination. There is also little coverage of ethnic, racial, and religious minorities, which the media assume would not interest their audience. Women are well represented among media workers, although nonprofessional content producers tend to be men.

With the exception of a few independent media, the Tajik media do not

offer a wide range of opinions and ideologies. Civil society certainly uses quality information to develop and raise awareness. The government uses information from independent media when it comes to high-profile crimes involving murder, violence, independent reporting on human rights and freedom of speech.

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

Tajikistan’s ideological spectrum is narrow, as panelists said only the ruling and pro-government parties remain. Pro-government parties rarely speak out openly in the media, on social networks, or on TV, and then they support the position of the authorities.

Most media in Tajikistan concentrate on social and economic issues and avoid politics. “Everyone in the country is used to the idea that covering political issues is dangerous, both for the media and for readers,” Yusupov said. Those who criticize, or even air criticism of, powerful politicians can be charged under articles on overthrowing the constitutional order or aiding and abetting terrorism, he added.

A few new news and information sites—including Limu.tj, Halva.tj, and Zira Media—have declared that they will not cover politics to avoid tangling with the authorities, Yusupov said.

There is evidence that people consume a variety of media with political content, albeit in limited quantities, Karshiboev said. People participate in general discussions on social media but speaking out against government officials can get them into trouble.

However, Rakhmonov said, “People participate in an open and constructive discussion of quality news and information, at both offline events and social networks.”

Khalikjanova said apolitical print media seem content with a limited audience. For online news sources, the situation is reversed, with apolitical media, blogs, and social media pages enjoying larger audiences than those that cover politics. Most independent radio

stations in the country broadcast infotainment and among the most popular newspapers are tabloids that focus on entertainment news, such as *Oila* (Family), *Mukhabbat va Oila* (Love and Family), and *Crosswords*.

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

In Tajikistan, almost all media have stopped producing quality content that can shape public opinion, and newsrooms routinely self-censor. This problem was especially obvious during the pandemic, when it became illegal to disseminate unofficial estimates of COVID-19 infections, on pain of fines. Instead, media were forced to use the Health Ministry's information, which reported no or very few cases.

On the basis of this false information, Babadjanova said, people "exposed their own lives and their loved ones to the risk of infection." Others who were skeptical of government information sought treatments that were ineffective or potentially dangerous, Khalikjanova added.

Although some publications did try to use alternative statistics, Tadjibayeva said many editors began to censor their own content significantly.

Most people in Tajikistan are not politically active, but they use quality information to form their opinions on political and social issues and in meetings with their elected members of parliament. Unfortunately, that's of little use, as parliamentary elections "mostly go the way the authorities want them to, thanks largely to administrative resources," Mirzo said.

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

Panelists said the government in Tajikistan is strangling and sidelining civil society. From 2015, when the government began requiring non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to register with the Justice Ministry, until 2020, 228 groups shut down, Karshiboev said, and in 2020, these

remaining organizations received a fraction of the funding they got in 2013.

Yusupov said the media and NGOs cooperate on issues that pose no risk for the organizations and the media, which are selective in their coverage of human rights violations.

"At the same time, the bits of alternative and objective information published by Tajikistan's media can be used by NGOs to develop their strategic plans," Niyozov said.

Panelists mentioned the Coalition Against Torture among the NGOs that have journalists on their staff, actively work with the media, and produce high-quality, investigative materials. "Over the past 10 years, NGOs have learned how to interact with the media, and they include a media component in their projects. This is very useful because in NGOs, you can get high-quality and alternative information about certain problems in the country," IWPR's Khalikjanova said.

“Everyone in the country is used to the idea that covering political issues is dangerous, both for the media and for readers,” said Yusupov.

Government agencies hold tightly controlled press conferences for media and civil society groups that amount to a report on their latest work. Huseynova said they are somewhat useful.

Yusupov said civil society groups, especially those with public relations specialists, use quality news and information materials that communicate their mission or goals. He said he has never witnessed an NGO in Tajikistan disseminate inaccurate or deliberately false information. "On the contrary, more often than not, NGOs try to combat the dissemination of inaccurate and deliberately false information, for example, on human rights, domestic violence, and corruption," he said.<sup>10</sup> For their part, the media actively work with NGOs on projects on socially important topics.

<sup>10</sup> At least two media NGOs, Ravzana and RasonanigoR, have emerged in Tajikistan to counter the spread of false and inaccurate information.

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

Tadjibayeva noted that there is no evidence that government agencies consult the work or research of NGOs when making decisions. Instead, they typically rely on their own data or, as in the pandemic, on data from international organizations. On the rare occasions that NGOs are involved, they are those loyal to the government.

Government officials often take into account content from the media or social networks when making decisions, except in matters of human rights. And, of course, they have their own empirical data. However, when weighing decisions that benefit the authorities or lobbyists, officials usually put aside facts and data. Widespread corruption, cronyism, and regionalism impose their own unique decision-making criteria on government agencies.

### Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic rights.

Tajikistan's endemic corruption is a major obstacle to better governance and more robust democratic rights.<sup>11</sup> But in covering malfeasance, journalists rely on information from government agencies, particularly the anti-corruption agency.

Investigative journalism is rare, with almost none done in the past year. Investigations are conducted only by individual journalists and are published in international forums, such as the website of Radio Ozodi. But there is no reaction from the authorities or the public.

When an instance of wrongdoing makes headlines, officials usually hide

or fudge the facts, and in particularly important cases, they do not even hold press conferences.

“Over the past 10 years, NGOs have learned how to interact with the media, and they include a media component in their projects. This is very useful because in NGOs, you can get high-quality and alternative information about certain problems in the country,” said Khalikjanov.

People in Tajikistan usually turn to social media to post about violations of their rights. The authorities react only to minor violations, such as insults on the street or harassment of girls. On larger issues, such as harassment in the workplace, they turn a blind eye.

In Tajikistan's most recent parliamentary and presidential elections, in 2020, candidates put out no literature, held no major public events, and placed no ads in print

media. The population also showed no interest.

<sup>11</sup> Transparency International Tajikistan page, <https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/tajikistan>.

**LIST OF PANEL PARTICIPANTS**

- Rano Babadjanova**, lecturer, Tajik National University, Dushanbe
- Jamila Huseynova**, editor, USSR newspaper, Dushanbe
- Zinatullo Ismoilzoda**, chairman, *Union of Journalists of Tajikistan*, Dushanbe
- Nuriddin Karshiboev**, director, *National Association of Independent Media of Tajikistan*, Dushanbe
- Lola Khalikjanova**, editor, Institute for War and Peace Reporting, Dushanbe
- Nosirjon Mamurzoda**, journalism lecturer, Bokhtar State University
- Negmatullo Mirsaidov**, independent journalist, blogger, Khujand
- Rajab Mirzo**, director, Akhbor baroi afkor (Food for Thought) Facebook group, Dushanbe
- Khurshed Niyozov**, director, Center for Journalistic Investigations; editor-in-chief, Faraj newspaper, Dushanbe
- Bakhtiyor Rakhmonov**, correspondent, Hakikati Kulob newspaper, Kulyab
- Zebo Tadjibayeva**, blogger and director, *YOUR.tj*, Dushanbe
- Nabi Yusupov**, director, *Media Consulting public organization*; director and editor-in-chief, *nuqta.tj*, Dushanbe

**MODERATOR AND AUTHOR**

- Lidiya Isamova**, journalist, analyst, and researcher, Dushanbe

Copyright © 2022 by IREX

**Notice of Rights:** Permission is granted to display, copy, and distribute VIBE in whole or in part, provided that: (a) the materials are used with the acknowledgment “The Vibrant Information Barometer (VIBE) is a product of IREX with funding from USAID.”; (b) VIBE is used solely for personal, noncommercial, or informational use; and (c) no modifications of VIBE are made.

This study is made possible by the support of the American People through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The opinions expressed herein are those of the panelists and other project researchers and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID, the United States Government, or IREX.

# TURKMENISTAN

## Vibrant Information Barometer

2 0 2 2



Photo: Turkmen Service RFE/RL.



Highly Vibrant

Somewhat Vibrant

Slightly Vibrant

Not Vibrant

OVERALL  
SCORE

3

The pandemic thrust new hardships on Turkmenistan's people in 2021. No media employees inside the country were in a position to report to the citizens about the global pandemic, nor the toll COVID was taking on Turkmenistan's population, nor the reasons for the nation's prolonged economic crisis, ongoing for some six years now. The isolated country's state media avoids any mention of problems, and the Ministry for National Security (MNB) works to block all websites that might provide people with information that counters the state narrative.

The country's president continues to dominate state media coverage, the panelists noted—something that has held true since the early days after the country secured independence in 1991. “In all the (official) sources of information in Turkmenistan, the only topic is the president of the country,” one panelist said.

The bizarre cult of personality developed by the first president of Turkmenistan, Saparmurat Niyazov, has continued and become even more peculiar under his successor, Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov. State media refers to Berdymukammedov as “Arkadag” (the Protector)—and according to reports on Turkmen television, radio, print media, and state websites, he is infallible.

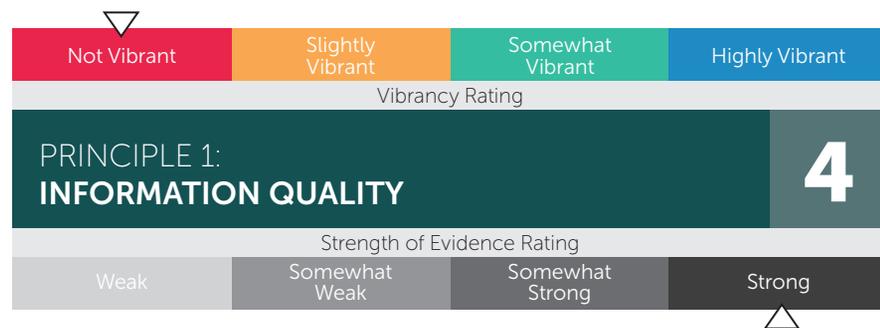
The panelists all agreed the state of media in Turkmenistan remains dismal. Several mentioned the Turkmen government's inexplicable insistence that the country never had even one case of COVID-19 and state media's

refusal to even use the words “coronavirus” or “COVID” in reports.

The pandemic allowed the government to seal off the country from outside influences or information even further. International flights were canceled in 2020 as the pandemic spread, without any official explanation from Turkmen authorities.

However, while Turkmenistan's internet access is among the worst in the world, many people have been downloading virtual private networks (VPNs) on their mobile phones in recent years to connect with websites outside the country. Panelists noted that some people inside Turkmenistan were accessing Turkmen opposition websites, mainly based in Europe, and reading or watching opposition programming on YouTube. Turkmen authorities responded by purchasing equipment to block VPNs to the greatest extent possible, and police reportedly were checking people's phones. A “like” on a Turkmen opposition YouTube channel is enough to be accused of treason.

All of Turkmenistan's principle-level scores were in the “not vibrant” VIBE scoring classification, signifying a failing information system, due to the government's stranglehold on media and coverage within the country.



The quality of information inside Turkmenistan remains low due to the state media’s commitment to disseminate distorted views of events inside and outside the country. The state media did not cover major topics of interest to the public, such as the spread of the COVID-19 or the Taliban returning to power in neighboring Afghanistan. Instead, coverage of the president and the country’s alleged achievements under his rule continues to dominate state media. Turkmen opposition groups outside the country ramped up their activities on the internet and offered alternative views of events in Turkmenistan that conflicted with state media’s coverage. However, Turkmenistan’s Ministry of National Security continued to block websites from outside the country, leaving only people with VPNs able to access information from foreign sources. In response, Turkmen authorities reinvigorated their campaign to eliminate the use of VPNs.

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

The panelists agreed that the infrastructure to produce varied content exists. Television and radio broadcasting stations and publishing houses are supplied with needed material, and state media has websites. In addition, there are journalism schools. Some journalists have been able to attend seminars on journalism and media given inside Turkmenistan by organizations such as the OSCE or USAID. One panelist said many of those who receive this training are employed at Turkmen state websites designed for an audience outside Turkmenistan, such as Turkmenistan.

ru, Orient.tm, Turkmenportal.com—which all offer information in Turkmen, Russian, and English. Another, Arzuw.news, is Russian-language only.

All the panelists emphasized that neither equipment nor training is the primary stumbling block to providing coverage. Rather, as one panelist stated, “Only those facts that are permitted by the security service and censors are used.”

An article by the Central Asian Bureau for Analytical Reporting about Turkmenistan’s media offers a telling example: “According to journalists with experience in the Turkmen state media, this censorship committee decides everything from the size of photos to the names of fruits. It can also ban the use of certain words, photos, or entire topics.” The article also noted that, while no detailed information exists about the committee’s makeup, documents available on the finance ministry’s website show that the state budget covers its expenses.<sup>1</sup>

Content producers are not able to act in an ethical and accountable manner, because the information they are responsible for disseminating is propaganda. A law on radio and television broadcasting passed in January 2018 obliges stations to report on Turkmenistan’s advances and show programs that create a positive image of the country.<sup>2</sup>

State media did not report on the recent COVID-19 pandemic, which, according to anecdotal evidence, took a severe toll on the country. Media reports, as a rule, avoid using the words “coronavirus” and “COVID.”

The only way for media employees to keep their jobs is to participate in the embellishment, manipulation, or falsification of facts. They only face any ramifications if they fail to fabricate information to the satisfaction of the MNB or president.

Most of the information disseminated by Turkmen media centers on

1 Jomartov, Derya. “How Turkmenistan’s Media Works (or Doesn’t),” Central Asian Bureau for Analytical Reporting. December 7, 2021. <https://cabar.asia/en/how-turkmenistan-s-media-works-or-doesn-t>

2 Yusufi, Farruh. “Turkmenistan Bans Sex and Bad Habits on TV,” RFERL Turkmen Service. January 16, 2018. <https://rus.azathabar.com/a/28978583.html>

the president, though in 2021, the president's son, Serdar, received increasing attention as the time approached for him to take over as president from his father.

Turkmen state media slavishly covers President Berdymukhammedov's activities, whether he's speaking to ministers via videoconference, inspecting stores of farmlands, engaging in recreational pursuits such as playing musical instruments—often accompanied by his grandson Kerim—or driving through the desert in an off-road vehicle, lifting weights, shooting guns, or his favorite pastimes, riding a bicycle or a horse.

Crowds are organized for all Berdymukhammedov's carefully staged public appearances, usually chanting words of praise for “Arkadag.”

The large portion of coverage focusing on the president leaves little time to cover other topics. State media reports about the successes and achievements of Turkmenistan, such as abundant harvests, happy workers, and the rapid pace of economic growth. None of it is true, the panelists noted.

Media present no programs on political or social issues except those highlighting the president's views on these topics. There are no programs on the different ethnic groups or different Turkmen tribes living in Turkmenistan. There are no reports on international or domestic politics, or science, or travel, or history.

It is impossible for journalists to challenge or contradict the actions of officials. The degree of censorship exercised over media ensures that no negative reporting of the government will ever be disseminated. Even when journalists understand that the economic situation in the country, for example, is dismal, they still report verbatim the glowing assessments and forecasts offered by the president or ministers.

News content is not editorially independent. As one panelist said, at every newspaper, there is a “curator” who works with journalists to ensure their articles and reports conform with state narratives. This is

true also for state television and radio, and for state news websites.

The importance of news and events covered is not contextualized for audiences, and given the content of news reports, there is no need. The message is simple: Turkmenistan has a great president who cares for his people and the country is doing well, constantly reaching new heights, and is the envy of the world outside Turkmenistan. There is no attempt to compare Turkmenistan to other countries or systems of government to support state media's assertions of the greatness of the Turkmen president and the country.

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

Misinformation is the norm for Turkmen state media.

Information presented by state media is not fact-based, well-sourced, or objective. Often, state media presents information that is pure fiction or, at best, a highly distorted version of events with government officials or state agencies as the only sources used for information.

As an example, after the global outbreak of COVID-19, Turkmen media—without mentioning the words “coronavirus” or “COVID”—actively promoted burning harmala (wild rue) to ward off infectious diseases based on information found in a book on herbal medicines written by Berdymukhammedov.

In a rare use of the word “coronavirus,” Turkmen media reported on Berdymukhammedov's assertion in December 2020 that licorice root “stops the coronavirus from developing” and that “even weak concentrations of the water-based extract has a neutralizing effect.”<sup>3</sup> Foreign media reports about the president's recommended remedies for COVID-19 regularly noted the lack of scientific evidence to support the claims that wild rue or licorice could effectively prevent or treat

**“Only those facts that are permitted by the security service and censors are used,” stated one panelist.**

<sup>3</sup> Kirapoidze, Mariam. “Turkmenistan Looks to Squeeze a Covid-19 Cure from Licorice,” Coda Story. January 21, 2021. [https://www.codastory.com/waronscience/turkmenistan\\_licorice/](https://www.codastory.com/waronscience/turkmenistan_licorice/)

COVID-19, but Turkmen state media did not share such reports.

The Turkmen government's primary news agency, Turkmenistanyň Dowlet Habarlar (Turkmen State News), distorted comments by the World Health Organization's regional director for Europe, Hans Kluge, during his October 2021 visit to Turkmenistan. The report claimed that Kluge expressed his thanks to Turkmenistan's president "for the proactive approach to building a multilateral partnership and great contribution to the common efforts to combat the spread of a new type of coronavirus infection" and said Turkmenistan occupied a "leading position" in the world in combating COVID-19.<sup>4</sup> Questioned later about this assessment by the U.S.-based media outlet Eurasianet, the WHO said Turkmen media had misquoted Kluge,<sup>5</sup> but Turkmen state media never issued a correction or retraction.

Professional content producers regularly disseminate news about ample supplies of food or gross domestic product (GDP) growth that they must be aware are false. However, this reporting has nothing to do with low capacity: They are following orders and working within the guidelines dictated to them by the MNB and its censors.

It is difficult to be a nonprofessional content producer in Turkmenistan. Turkmen authorities would consider anything posted, printed, or broadcast that criticized the government to be false or misleading information, and those responsible would face legal consequences. Therefore, Turkmenistan citizens who use social networks--such as Telegram, Instagram, or the domestic social network BizBarda--are cautious about what they say or write. In any case, these social network chat groups are not large.

4 "The President of Turkmenistan received the Director of the WHO Regional Office for Europe," Turkmenistanyň Dowlet Habarlar. October 8, 2021. <https://tdh.gov.tm/ru/post/28991/prezident-turkmenistana-prinyal-direktora-evropejskogo-regionalnogo-byuro-voz>

5 "Turkmenistan: Good for Some," Eurasianet. October 19, 2021. <https://eurasianet.org/turkmenistan-good-for-some>

The restrictions on nonprofessional content producers are particularly unfortunate since the government knowingly creates and disseminates false or misleading information constantly.

The denial that the country has ever registered any COVID-19 cases is one example of the Turkmen authorities deliberately falsifying information. The misleading economic growth figures the government releases are another.

Despite overwhelming evidence of economic problems inside Turkmenistan, the government continues to report GDP growth while preventing any independent verification of these claims. In 2020, the World Bank "discontinued inclusion of (Turkmenistan's) GDP data in its global and regional analytical reports, due to lack of reliable official statistics on national accounts," and the International Monetary Fund did the same in 2021 after years of Turkmenistan reporting suspect GDP growth figures.<sup>6</sup>

State media face no professional ramifications for creating or spreading false information about the government; creating or spreading true information that would expose the government's fictitious portrayal of Turkmenistan would lead to consequences.

Journalists have no opportunity to hold the government accountable by identifying misinformation when it is disseminated by government actors. On the contrary, journalists are forced to report misinformation about government actors as fact. MNB censors would notice any attempt to do otherwise, leading to the report's cancellation and repercussions for the journalist. Such actions range from lecturing the journalist about their responsibility to the state, dismissal, or, if the information were deemed sufficiently damaging to a member of the government, the journalist could face trumped-up charges.

6 Leonard, Peter. "Turkmenistan: End of the Road for the Roaring Growth Myth?," Eurasianet. April 7, 2021. <https://eurasianet.org/turkmenistan-end-of-the-road-for-the-roaring-growth-myth>

**State media reports about the successes and achievements of Turkmenistan, such as abundant harvests, happy workers, and the rapid pace of economic growth. None of it is true, noted the panelists.**

There are no reliable fact-checking resources, such as websites, that are widely available and current. Turkmen authorities do not permit such domestic websites and block foreign-based fact-checking websites.

Media outlets and digital platforms do not have mechanisms or processes in place for moderating content in order to reduce misinformation. State media is usually the source of misinformation. The MNB monitors social media channels available in Turkmenistan, and the MNB is only concerned with locating any hints of anti-government sentiment.

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

The restrictions on foreign media presence inside Turkmenistan and blocking foreign-based websites mitigates the ability of any foreign government to create or disseminate content that is intended to harm. It would be difficult to do so given the close watch the MNB keeps over information. It should be noted that foreign governments and their proxies do not seem to have any reason to disseminate content that includes mal-information or hate speech inside Turkmenistan.

The government does not create or disseminate content that could be termed hate speech, though it does vaguely target traitors to the state. State media vilifies such people, not only for their alleged misdeeds but usually for their alleged low moral character—for example, those caught embezzling from the state are also accused of being addicted to drugs or having, in the case of male officials, more than one wife. However, the government does not target ethnic groups, religious groups, tribes, or other states with hate speech.

The government did, however, disseminate mal-information by denying the presence of COVID-19 in Turkmenistan, which they must have known would harm people and lead to needless contagion and deaths. It seems there will be no ramifications for this since authorities continue to claim there is no COVID-19 in Turkmenistan.

Professional content producers only disseminate information cleared

by the MNB and its censors. Content producers are not sufficiently independent to create or disseminate anything on their own, and so there are no ramifications for the content they disseminate so long as their content complies with the orders of the authorities.

Nonprofessional content producers do not have access to television, radio, or print media. They are active on social networks, which are monitored by the MNB. The MNB looks for anti-government content, but it also has an interest in preventing the spread of mal-information or hate speech that could spark unrest. Since it is widely known inside Turkmenistan that social networks are monitored, users exercise self-censorship in their comments.

Non-government actors have no means to spread mal-information or hate speech inside Turkmenistan. The internet is sufficiently monitored to prevent such content from remaining available to the public for long should it manage to penetrate through the state's mechanisms for blocking websites.

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

Turkmen language is used by the majority of state media outlets, but there are some print media, including state websites, that use Russian. Other languages are not used by domestic media, and state media does not report on the situations of ethnic minorities. However, Turkmenistan started international broadcasts in English, Russian, French, Chinese, Arabic, and Persian (Farsi) after launching its first satellite in 2015.

As the panelists said, information in Turkmenistan is all propaganda. No alternative opinions or points of view are presented by state media. Information conforms to the state narrative without questioning the wisdom or logic of decisions.

Information does not expose citizens to the experiences or viewpoints of all genders. Information is presented from the traditional patriarchal point of view, and there is no attempt to explore the unique characteristics, challenges, or problems of other genders.

Information from state media in Turkmenistan does not include reporting on ethnic, racial, and/or religious backgrounds. The media portrays the country as a homogenous society with an accent on ethnic Turkmen and their traditions, so-called *turkmencilik*, which roughly translates to “Turkmenness.” The majority of the population, some 85 percent, is ethnic Turkmen. Other Central Asian groups living in Turkmenistan, mainly Uzbeks and Kazakhs, are made to dress in Turkmen traditional garb and study in the Turkmen language in schools, though the small population of ethnic Russians remaining in the country seems to be excluded from *turkmencilik* policies.

The viewpoints of all non-Turkmen communities are excluded from media coverage, and there are no alternative methods or special platforms for them, save for small social networks that can discuss nonpolitical issues of minority communities.

There is no data on the ethnicity of owners, management, editorial staff, journalists, or other content producers involved in media, but they seem to be nearly all ethnic Turkmen. There are no special efforts to include employees from other ethnic groups. Women are employed in the media, though there is no data to say whether there is a gender quota.

**Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced.**

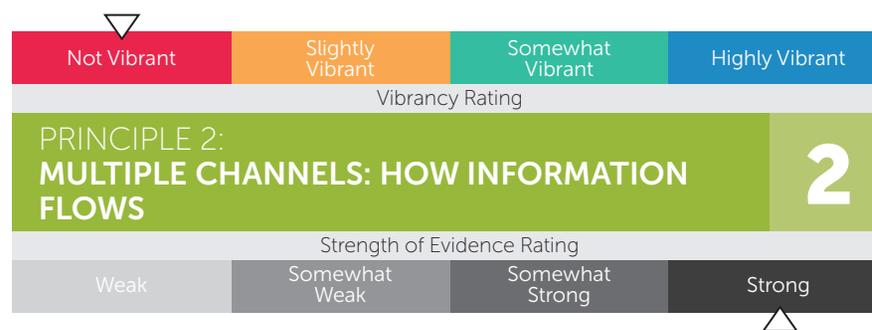
Professional content producers have sufficient financial resources to operate. Television and radio are state funded. Print media also receive funding from the state budget, but newspapers and magazines additionally receive some revenue from subscriptions—though it is unclear if they receive this money directly or whether, as is more likely, the funds go to the state budget and are distributed among all media outlets. Some citizens complain of being forced to subscribe to newspapers and magazines, and that managers often simply withhold money from paychecks as money toward subscriptions.

The problem for professional content producers is the restrictions they work under in trying to produce quality information. The resources are available, but the information must promote a positive image of the government.

With the exception of subscriptions garnished from state employees for newspapers and magazines, the government provides all funding for media outlets. There is no possibility for private funding. Professional content producers have nowhere else to turn for funding apart from the government.

There is advertising on Turkmen television, all for domestically produced household products, but it is unclear if the advertiser pays money to the television station or to the state, or if the state selects which products to advertise and orders channels to run the spots. It is certainly not possible for media outlets to solicit money from nongovernment parties. There does not appear to be any politicization of advertising, but merely an effort to promote domestically made goods, which jibes with the government’s import substitution policies.

None of the panelists could say whether journalists are sufficiently paid, but since unofficial estimates put the unemployment rate at more than 60 percent (Turkmen authorities do not provide unemployment figures), simply having a steady job might be sufficient for media employees. Many people in Turkmenistan do try to find outside work to augment their income, usually by driving a taxi, though in these hard times, there are already many taxi drivers.



There is only state media in Turkmenistan. Reporting by television, radio, print media, and state websites is coordinated and harmonized to consistently support government narratives of the country’s alleged successes and progress. Citizens are afraid to share any information that authorities could perceive as criticism of the state, as the

consequences for doing so are often severe. Citizens are also wary of accessing or sharing information from sources outside the country, as everyone knows internet use is closely monitored by the MNB. Domestic information sources are not accountable to anyone but the authorities.

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

The legal basis exists for citizens to create, share, and consume information. Article 42, paragraph 3, of the constitution reads, “[E]veryone shall have the right to free search of information and to receive and disseminate information in ways not prohibited by law, if it is not a state or secret protected by law.”

Moreover, the law on media adopted in 2013 says, “No one may ban or prevent the media from disseminating information of public interest except under the provisions of this law (...) citizens have the right to use all media forms to express their opinions and beliefs, and to seek, receive and impart information.” The article also forbids “media censorship,” “interfering in the activities of the media,” and “monopolization of the media by persons or entities.”

Panelists noted that these laws are completely ignored; even Reporters Without Borders called the 2013 media law a “dead letter.”<sup>7</sup> MNB censors continue to pour over domestically produced content before it is disseminated to filter anything that hints at straying from the government narrative of a prosperous country inhabited by happy people. Authorities do not respect freedom of speech, and people who openly challenge the government narrative or criticize the state risk losing their jobs or being fined or imprisoned.

All the panelists agreed the government overtly censors media. “All information is subjected to strict censorship,” one panelist said. In any case, 30 years of watching over the media to ensure state-approved

7 “Country’s First Media Law Starts Life as Dead Letter,” Reporters Without Borders. January 9, 2013. <https://rsf.org/en/countrys-first-media-law-starts-life-dead-letter>

messages are being broadcast have accustomed journalists to self-censorship. Media workers know what the government expects and what will not be tolerated. Journalists work within those guidelines, knowing that any attempt to stray from reporting state propaganda would mean, at the least, dismissal.

The few journalists who work for foreign-based information websites have faced retribution. For example, in the past Correspondent Saparmamed Nepeskuliev—who worked for RFERL’s Turkmen service, Azatlyk and Alternative Turkmenistan News (now called Turkmen.news)—was detained in the Caspian resort area of Avaza in July 2015 as he was taking photographs as part of preparations for a report on luxury homes owned by government officials. Nepeskuliev’s family was not informed of his detention and had to make inquiries at police stations around the country before finding him at the end of the month. Nepeskuliev was charged with illegal narcotics possession, convicted in a closed-door

trial, and sentenced to three years in prison. Nepeskuliev was released after he served his sentence and later left the country.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, Ogulsapar Muradova worked for Azatlyk reporting about rights abuses

until she was imprisoned in August 2006 after damaging Turkmenistan’s reputation. Muradova was 58 years old at the time. She died from torture less than a month after being imprisoned.<sup>9</sup>

Other journalists working for foreign-based outlets have also been fined and/or imprisoned. Their family members are sometimes unexplainably dismissed from their jobs as well.

Additionally, authorities regularly hunt down these journalists’ sources of information. A few Turkmen citizens occasionally do speak to journalists working for foreign-based media. The more damaging the information is to the Turkmen government, the more intense the hunt

8 “Saparmamed Nepeskuliev Released,” RFERL Turkmen Service. May 16, 2018. <https://rus.azathabar.com/a/29252031.html>

9 “Ogulsapar Muradova: After 15 Years, Still No Probe of Turkmen Journalist’s Death in Custody,” RFERL Turkmen Service. June 27, 2021. <https://www.rferl.org/a/turkmenistan-muradova-death-15-years-unexplained-rferl-hrw/31328294.html>

for the sources of the information. People who are caught providing such information can be charged with treason.

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

While state television, radio, and print media are widely available throughout Turkmenistan, the number of people with access to the internet remains low—possibly less than one-third of the population.<sup>10</sup>

Those who do have internet access still face challenges, as internet speeds rank among the world’s slowest, and many websites outside the country remain blocked in Turkmenistan.

There is no information available that would suggest any special measures taken to ensure information and technology infrastructure meets the needs of people with disabilities or to make any information in languages other than Turkmen, and to a lesser extent Russian, available. Rural areas in general are poorly connected to the telecommunications and internet infrastructure, and with salaries generally lower in the hinterland, the costs of internet access, or even cable television, are more than most families can afford—especially given the increasing cost of basic goods in recent years.

Finances are generally a problem. Cable packages are offered, and citizens can receive television programming in Russian and sometimes Turkish. Censors first review the material before releasing it for viewing. Internet cafes exist in the cities, but the cost is prohibitively high for most people; users must show their documents, and all sites they access during the sessions are monitored and recorded.

While there are no diverse channels for information flow inside

<sup>10</sup> World Bank, “Individuals Using the Internet (% of Population)—Turkmenistan,” Accessed on June 24, 2022, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.NET.USER.ZS?locations=TM>; Zhyrmon, Anastasiya. “What Turkmenistan Internet Shutdowns Tell Us about Digital Repression in Central Asia,” accessnow. December 7, 2021. <https://www.accessnow.org/turkmenistan-internet-shutdowns/>

Turkmenistan, there are a growing number of opposition outlets outside Turkmenistan that try to get their information into the country. Several YouTube channels run by Turkmenistani exiles—such as Erkin Turkmenistan, TurkmenYurt, and the Democratic Movement of Turkmenistan—are banned in Turkmenistan, and those accessing these programs using VPNs are subject to threats and harassment. For example, in February 2021, police in Lebap arrested dozens of people for watching the YouTube channel of the Democratic Choice of Turkmenistan. Radio Azatlyk reported those who “like” any of the videos are accused of supporting the opposition and charged with violating Article 171 of the Criminal Code—treason.<sup>11</sup>

Evidence would suggest that people do not have access to another information system or device in the event there is a disruption to the telecommunications infrastructure. People were not warned ahead of time

about the heavy winds and rain that caused extensive damage in Lebap Province in March 2021 and had difficulties establishing contact with the capital for several days after that.

### **Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for government information.**

The right to information exists in Turkmenistan’s constitution and in the media law, which, on paper, conform to international standards and norms. However, these rights are not respected.

Citizens can visit state websites to learn about government policy, but with the slow speed of the internet and the high costs at internet cafes, few seem willing to spend the time and money necessary to access them. The decision-making process for government policies is not transparent, and there are no means for the public to question authorities about decisions. One panelist said, “There are no mechanisms in place to

<sup>11</sup> “Authorities Concerned about Opposition Speeches on YouTube,” RFERL Turkmen Service. February 24, 2021. <https://rus.azathabar.com/a/31118229.html>

challenge or access further information than [that] fed by the state media.”

Turkmenistan’s citizens generally fear any dealings with the authorities, and asking questions or seeking answers or clarifications about government decisions would accomplish nothing except draw the attention of the authorities toward any citizen bold enough to approach officials.

Government officials do not hold press conferences, although occasionally if there is a head of state or other high-level dignitary visiting, the president will hold carefully scripted press conferences. Government officials do not always tell the truth to the press and public, and few in Turkmenistan trust any information from government sources.

#### Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow.

There are 27 newspapers, only one of which, the weekly *Zaman*, is registered as a private company. The other 26 newspapers are state entities, including 15 founded by the cabinet of ministers and the rest connected to unions or ministries. There are three state websites, two founded by the State News Agency and the third by the State Publishing Service. There are seven television channels and four radio stations that are all overseen by the State Committee of Turkmenistan for Television, Radio Broadcasting and Cinematography. The state company Turkmen Telecom is the sole provider of the internet for Turkmenistan.

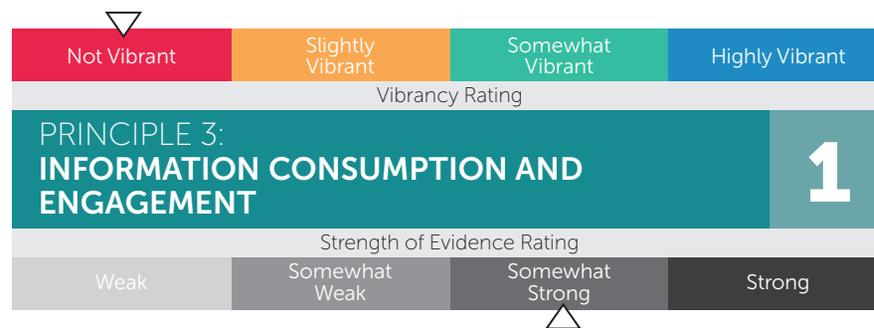
There is no possibility for domestic or foreign ownership of media outlets or media-related industries. “All media outlets inside the country are controlled by the state,” one panelist said. Another added, “There is no possibility for anyone to establish an independent media; there is also no transparency in the process of giving licenses.”

There is no public service media as such. State media does inform the public of new rules, such as the obligation to wear masks in public during the COVID-19 pandemic, though without mentioning there was a pandemic.

#### Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.

Virtually all media outlets are state-owned, and all decisions on content are made by the MNB and the ministry’s censors. One panelist summed up the situation, saying, “All media outlets are funded by the state and for the state.”

Political interference in media management and editorial content is pervasive and constant.



Article 37 of Turkmenistan’s constitution states, “Everyone shall have the right to private liberty, personal and family secrets and their protection from arbitrary interference in the privacy, as well as infringement of the rules of secrecy of correspondence, telephone and other means of communication.” The responses of the participants showed that privacy is not protected, and Turkmenistan’s citizens expect the security service will likely track any communications made through electronic devices. In the meantime, few believe the information they receive from state media sources.

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

A panelist said laws on privacy exist but are ignored.

Some 70 percent of Turkmen citizens are not connected to the internet. For those who are, the selection of available websites is limited, as the authorities block many foreign websites. Security services monitor the

internet use of those with connections at work or home and of people who visit internet cafes in the cities.

VPNs have become popular in Turkmenistan, but along with hunting for people who have downloaded VPNs on their computers or mobile phones, the government has been purchasing technology to block VPNs.

Turkmenistan's citizens using the internet enjoy no legal protection. One panelist emphasized that the "internet in Turkmenistan is under the control of the special services (MNB)." Another panelist said, "Individuals have no privacy rights, with authorities even known for going through citizens' mobile phones and also for monitoring their conversations, text messages, and browser history."

It is unclear if media outlets and other professional content producers have access to digital security training and tools. The responsibility for digital security seems to lie with the MNB, and digital tools to prevent distributed denial-of-service or other attacks would be part of their responsibility. Despite Turkmenistan being incredibly secretive about most of what happens inside the country, it is significant that no individual or group has ever claimed to have carried out an attack on websites inside Turkmenistan. The country's authorities have purchased advanced technology from China to block websites and prevent hacker attacks.

The level of digital literacy of Turkmen citizens is unknown. Since 70 percent of the population does not have access to the internet, there is no need for education on digital security. Most of the panelists believed people in Turkmenistan do not receive instruction in the use of digital technology.

“Individuals have no privacy rights, with authorities even known for going through citizens' mobile phones and also for monitoring their conversations, text messages, and browser history,” said a panelist.

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

Government leadership does not promote media literacy at all levels. Authorities seem to prefer that all citizens be satisfied with the distorted versions of events offered by state media and not make any attempt to seek information to balance what they have seen or heard from state media sources.

School systems do not include civics and media and information literacy in the curricula. Instead, some of Berdymukhammedov's books are included in course materials. The president has presented laptop computers as gifts to first-grade students at the start of school years in the past. These computers have educational programs installed on them already but do not connect to the internet, so while children learn how to use computers and access data from available programs already installed on these computers, they do not know how to search

the World Wide Web for information or learn how to avoid the numerous scams and false information on the internet.

Few people have access to the internet, and so many websites are blocked that it would be very difficult for the average citizen to use tools or websites for fact-checking, debunking, or exposing disinformation. Furthermore, given the MNB's prevalent monitoring of internet use, it would also be potentially dangerous to do so.

People who have VPNs downloaded on their phones can access information from outside the country to check on facts, but they could face severe consequences if they are caught with VPNs on their phones. Even without access to VPNs, the country's citizens are aware that most of the information they receive from government sources is not entirely true and, in many cases, outright false. State tales of bountiful harvests are difficult to believe when there is rationing for bread and long lines outside state stores where basic goods are subsidized, and so cheaper to

purchase, but often unavailable because of widespread shortages.

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

Panelist responses to the activities of journalists and civil society activists varied, but they make a clear distinction between journalists and activists inside and outside Turkmenistan. Turkmen journalists and activists outside Turkmenistan have increased their presence on the internet, and more of their information is making its way into Turkmenistan than ever before.

Inside Turkmenistan, the situation for journalists and activists is different. One panelist said, “There is no freedom of speech and rights to information in the country. If those rights are exercised, there are severe consequences...from harassment and fines to imprisonment.”

Citizens of Turkmenistan are accustomed to the consequences of speaking freely. Authorities do not tolerate complaints and criticisms.

There are no platforms for public debate in Turkmenistan. The authorities quickly break up any public assembly not organized by the government and detain the organizers and participants. Open digital communications take place under the watchful eye of the MNB, and so the topics of discussion are usually innocuous, although one panelist noted there are sometimes misogynistic comments that authorities do nothing to curb.

The average Turkmen citizen has no figure or organization to turn to for assistance with any matters of concern. In desperate circumstances, people do resort to visiting local officials to air concerns, but this is a risky venture and requires great diplomacy so as not to incur consequences.

**“There is no freedom of speech and rights to information in the country. If those rights are exercised, there are severe consequences...from harassment and fines to imprisonment,” said a panelist.**

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

Turkmen state media make almost no attempt to connect with its audience or meet their needs. The security service selects the topics to be reported—and rarely are these issues helpful for Turkmenistan’s citizens trying to understand the situation in their country and make informed choices about their futures. One panelist said, “There is no free press, and there is no need to engage with the public.”

Since all media is state media and its purpose is propaganda, there is also no need to have data about the audience. The audience, fearing possible retribution from the authorities, does not provide feedback, and media does not solicit it.

Media and content producers are completely disconnected from their audience, save only connections to the president and his family members.

The extent to which journalistic media, content producers, and government institutions collaborate and network together is unclear, but they work together to produce reporting that conforms with the government’s wishes.

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

There is no community media in Turkmenistan. State newspapers have correspondents in all five of the country’s provinces, but their coverage is dictated by managers in the capital and confined usually to reports on planting and harvest, celebrations of national holidays, and the occasional visits by the president. Local issues are not covered.

One survey participant said there are Telegram and Instagram groups that formed primarily to exchange information about local matters, again, avoiding any political topics in their discussions.



Since state media has a monopoly on the dissemination of information inside Turkmenistan and the main topic is the president, the information presented offers no hint of disagreement or alternative points of view. Information supports government policies, which, under the state media's definitions, constitutes good governance. People are told their system is democratic, and they have no alternative domestic sources of information that would suggest a different view. Only state-sponsored civil societies organizations exist inside Turkmenistan, and they do not lend themselves to sparking or promoting debate on any issues.

“People are subject to misinformation from the authorities...(and) therefore, rumors spread widely, and it is unclear for many what actions they should take,” said a panelist.

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

In terms of state media, there are no sources of nonpartisan news and information. One panelist said many people in Turkmenistan get their information from Russian or Turkish channels that are available as part of cable packages offered by state companies, but these, as noted earlier, are subject to prior review by state censors who remove any material deemed harmful or in conflict with the state narrative, so most of the content is entertainment.

There is no evidence to suggest that the majority of the population read

or view any types of media with varied ideological leanings, and it is the MNB's job to ensure no such opportunities exist.

While some light debate and disagreement on nonpolitical topics take place on social networks, such debate is absent from state television, radio, and newspapers. There is no evidence that individuals can engage in open and constructive discussions, nor that they can access quality news and information.

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

The information officials and state media provide to people about political or social issues is nothing more than propaganda. One panelist said, “People are subject to misinformation from the authorities...(and) therefore, rumors spread widely, and it is unclear for many what actions they should take.”

The public has no say in government policy and learns of government decisions only after these decisions have been made. The public is not privy to how these decisions are reached and has no means to voice concerns to government officials.

Elections, particularly presidential elections, are perfunctory events. When Berdymukhammedov sought a third term in office in 2017, state media did not cover his opponents' campaigns. Similarly, with parliamentary elections, nearly all constituents do not know of—and probably have never even heard of—candidates contesting seats.

The COVID-19 pandemic illustrated how hapless Turkmen authorities can be. Authorities promoted local remedies with no scientifically proven value in preventing or curing COVID-19. Some people and state facilities, such as medical clinics, were forced to heed state advice to burn rue, purportedly to sterilize the air of diseases. During the first months when COVID-19 began spreading, Turkmenistan's people were discouraged

from wearing masks and could even be fined for wearing masks in public if spotted by police. Authorities said it could create a panic. Later, people were forced to wear masks and fined if they failed to, but not told exactly the reason beyond authorities' claims that dust from neighboring countries could carry contagions.

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

Civil society organizations (CSO) do not exist in Turkmenistan. There are government-sponsored organizations, such as women's or youth groups, but there are no independent CSOs. Without such organizations, there is no forum for engaging with the public to discuss or debate policy decisions. One panelist said informal CSOs do exist on social networks such as Instagram and Telegram, and they do post or cite information from recognized authoritative sources, such as United Nations agencies.

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

There is no civil society in Turkmenistan. Government actors only engage with the media to parrot state policies. The only time press conferences take place is when top foreign officials or business executives make state visits and meet with the president, and this does not always happen. Such press conferences are characterized by questions that only address positive aspects of foreign relations or trade.

Misinformation abounds from government actors, and there is no need for them to include any evidence or facts to support their claims. Government actors bear responsibility, for example, for disseminating dubious or false information about the spread of COVID-19, but they face no consequences, as they were conforming to the state narrative.

### Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic rights.

One panelist commented, "As there are no independent media, there are no corruption or human rights violation cases uncovered by media." Another panelist added that there are "no tools to measure the level of widespread corruption."

“One panelist commented, “As there are no independent media, there are no corruption or human rights violation cases uncovered by media,” commented a panelist.

State propaganda has provided fertile soil for rights violations and ensured the electorate is uninformed, but after years of the same propaganda, the electorate is now generally apathetic to the political process as it exists in Turkmenistan.

*IREX did not conduct an in-country panel discussion because of Turkmenistan's repressive environment. This chapter represents desk research, interviews, and the result of questionnaires filled out by several people familiar with the state of media in the country.*

Copyright © 2022 by IREX

**Notice of Rights:** Permission is granted to display, copy, and distribute VIBE in whole or in part, provided that: (a) the materials are used with the acknowledgment "The Vibrant Information Barometer (VIBE) is a product of IREX with funding from USAID."; (b) VIBE is used solely for personal, noncommercial, or informational use; and (c) no modifications of VIBE are made.

This study is made possible by the support of the American People through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The opinions expressed herein are those of the panelists and other project researchers and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID, the United States Government, or IREX.

# UZBEKISTAN

## Vibrant Information Barometer

2 0 2 2



Highly Vibrant

Somewhat Vibrant

Slightly Vibrant

Not Vibrant

OVERALL SCORE

**13**

**Preface**

To ensure reliability and comparability of VIBE scores, IREX conducts multiple data quality control checks and investigates any potential inconsistencies in scores. In most cases, score changes can be clearly tied to actual changes in a country’s media or information systems, or their operating environment, over the preceding year(s); in some cases, changes may be tied to revisions in IREX’s assessment methodology.

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

Based on internal analysis and input from the VIBE Uzbekistan chapter moderator/author, IREX believes Uzbekistan’s preliminary scores in VIBE 2022 were inflated due to misunderstanding among the Uzbekistan panel on the VIBE scoring scale, complicated by a perception of an open society in the continued aftermath of the repressive Karimov regime.

As such, for the purposes of the 2022 VIBE publication IREX is modifying Uzbekistan’s VIBE scores downward by 8 points for an overall score of 13 to better align with the intent of the VIBE scoring scale, the evidence provided in the narrative chapter, some small improvements over time in Uzbekistan, and the scores of other countries with similar information systems and environments (see chart below;

adjusted indicator level scores can be found in the VIBE Explorer dashboard.) The scores are modified uniformly at the indicator average level to avoid relitigating or casting judgment on panelist scores on a case-by-case basis, but rather to focus on aligning top level scores.

Uzbekistan VIBE Scores (Original and Modified)

	Overall	Principle 1	Principle 2	Principle 3	Principle 4
Original	21	21	23	16	22
Modified by IREX	13	13	15	9	14

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

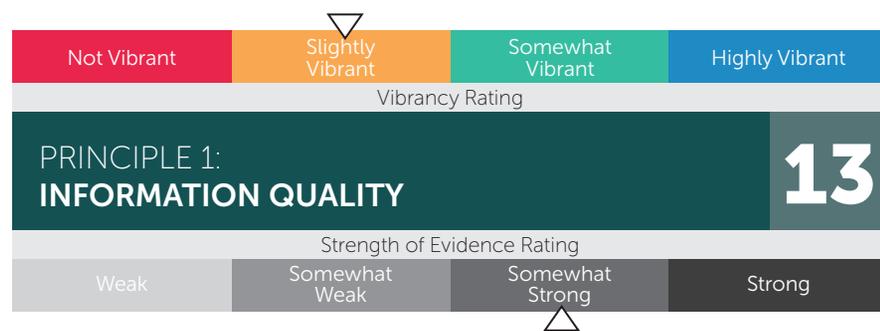
The year of 2021 began with high hopes among many in Uzbekistan that the country's wide-ranging reforms would continue, in a break from its authoritarian post-Soviet history. In July, for example, Komil Allamjonov, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev's former press secretary and now chairman of a national media development fund, reiterated the president's assurances that the press in Uzbekistan is free and "there is no going back." Additionally, improvements to Uzbekistan's telecommunications infrastructure sent prices down and speeds up for internet users, whose numbers swelled in turn. The improved technology fostered content production and information flow, bringing the number of media outlets to 1,916 (736 state and 1,180 independent) and enabling 655 of these media organizations to have an online presence. However, over the course of the year, the government once again tightened up media and religious freedoms.

President Mirziyoyev won a second term in a flawed election that was rescheduled from late December to October 24. Arrests and threats to bloggers and reporters increased in the run-up to presidential elections. Dozens of posts from anonymous accounts threatening RFE/RL's Uzbek Service reporters bombarded their Telegram channel on October 16. Months ahead of the vote, and shortly after an embarrassing reporting on a luxury resort allegedly built for Mirziyoyev, slandering or insulting the president online became a criminal offense. Other newly criminalized behaviors include disrespecting the state, calling for unsanctioned meetings, threatening the public order, and humiliating top officials and law enforcement officers in the media. The law requires website owners and social media users to remove comments on their pages deemed to violate any of its prohibitions. In addition, a July decree authorized the State Security Service to block the dissemination of content that would dishonor or sully the image and dignity of officials under its protection.

The Interior Ministry detained alleged followers of illegal religious organizations on charges of propagating extremist ideas and disseminating extremist literature. Even though a law signed in July

lifted a ban on wearing religious attire in public, social media reports persisted of men with beards and women in hijabs being singled out for harassment or persecution. Two popular news platforms, KUN.UZ and AZON.UZ, were suspended and fined for posting stories on religious topics without approval from the Committee for Religious Affairs, which, among other things, monitors writings on faith-related matters. Additionally, several media professionals and bloggers received prison sentences because of their work, and at least one foreign reporter was expelled from the country for questioning the government's progress on promised democratic reforms.

Uzbekistan scored 21 in the 2021 VIBE study, for its somewhat vibrant media scene. Panelists gave relatively high scores to Principle 1 (information quality) and Principle 2 (multiple information sources)--21 and 23, respectively--crediting the state for affordable technology and high-speed internet, as well as professional and nonprofessional content producers for timely, and at times fearless, reporting. Panelists gave Principle 4 (transformative action) a score of 22 and noted cases when content producers, including GAZETA.UZ, KUN.UZ and individual bloggers, held authorities accountable. Principle 3 (information consumption and engagement) received the lowest overall score (16), noting that content producers lack the knowledge and privacy protection tools to secure their outlets and the public lacks the media literacy to safely navigate media platforms. For fear of prosecution, people in Uzbekistan avoid liking or leaving comments on posts critical of the government.



Panelists scored indicators examining the level of quality information, the level of mal-information and hate speech, and inclusive and diverse content higher. They credited both professional and non-professional content producers for voicing the concerns of underprivileged people in remote communities. Thanks to timely coverage of community issues by bloggers and reporters, considerable numbers of government officials quit their jobs. “The media are still awake and trying to hold officials accountable,” one panelist responded to another’s comment that edutainment is eclipsing coverage of political and social issues. “Journalists feel pressured and practice self-censorship. Therefore, they do not try to seek evidence and tell the truth,” the panelist added. Panelists agreed that most media are under-resourced and understaffed. Yet independent media have it better than state-owned media, reflected in faster internet, reporters with defined beats, and higher advertising revenues.

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

The national media offer information on diverse topics, though the quality varies from outlet to outlet, with the diverse content coming from independent media and nonprofessional content producers. Bloggers tend to quickly take the lead on a variety of issues and spread the word via social media users. They work in various formats, including photo, video, and audio.

Students can receive formal media education at journalism departments of seven universities, including the National University of Uzbekistan, Karakalpak State University, and the Uzbekistan State World Languages University. There is also the Journalism and Mass Communications University of Uzbekistan, and last year marked the launch of journalism departments in Bukhara State University, Samarkand State University, and the Samarkand Foreign Languages University. These universities struggle with limited access to computers and high-speed internet, and a dearth of Uzbek-language textbooks and professional faculty. Many university courses fail to teach coherent, research-based, ethical reporting skills or soft skills to enable graduates to compete in the local media market. In recent years, the Journalism and Mass Communications University of Uzbekistan has received donor-funded media equipment and started exchange programs with 14 foreign universities and media agencies. “There has been a vacuum between an academic education and newsrooms,” one panelist said, “New reporters who join unscrupulous newsrooms get used to their environment and news reporting habits or switch to PR or advertising.”

Working media professionals depend heavily on donor support to get professional training and improve their qualifications. Tashkent-based media NGOs—including the In-service Training Center for Journalists, Media Data Lab, Modern Journalism Development Center (MJDC), and New Media Education Center—get foreign funding and conduct short-term trainings.

Lacking formal journalism education, bloggers sometimes do not take time to verify facts, provide context and evidence, and interview alternative sources; they leave the research and in-depth analysis to reporters. “The majority of nonprofessional content producers are financially motivated,” said a panelist who is himself a blogger, “Consumers take the content of influential bloggers for granted and trust it.” Another panelist, who owns a media nonprofit, called for a code of ethics and said the public does not demand balanced and independent media. “Media do not want to come out of their comfort zone, go against [editorial norms], and create problems for themselves,” she argued. Although media content is diverse and covers opposition political parties and developments, as well as environmental and social issues, reporting

usually appeals to the emotions. “Fact-based reporting is still on the horizon,” a panelist said.

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

In 2021, professional and nonprofessional content producers enjoyed technological advancements but limited media freedom, often letting fake news and misinformation filter into the mainstream media. In an effort to gain likes and subscribers, amateur bloggers disseminated misinformation about the illnesses and deaths of some entertainment media celebrities.

Although the government had criminalized the dissemination of false information about the coronavirus in March 2020, panelists complained that both professional and nonprofessional content producers continued spreading misinformation on vaccine safety before and after the country rolled out mass vaccinations last April. “Because the authorities launched public-awareness campaigns late, amateur content producers filled the information vacuum with fake news,” a panelist said, “They should have delivered COVID-related quality content to consumers.” The Ministry of Health responded late to many rumors on severe side effects and vaccine-related deaths, and it formed a working group to study each case and debunk the disinformation. “The public sought vaccine information on social networks where people shared personal stories of vaccine side effects,” one panelist said. In August, the Ministry of Health, Yuksalish, a government-supported NGO, WHO, and UNICEF joined efforts and facilitated nation-wide public dialogues to build local communities’ trust in the COVID vaccination. The panelists noted that media practitioners contributed to countering disinformation and reinforcing vaccination messages through televised dialogues with public health experts.

In 2021, Modern Journalism Development Center (MJDC) conducted content analysis of the COVID-related coverage in national media

and noted the shift from information on coronavirus treatment and management to official posts on COVID vaccines, less information from local subject matter experts and increased inquiry by online consumers for information on types and availability of vaccines, PCR and imaging tests (to detect potential lung damage) at reasonable prices. Preceding to the MJDC study, in 2020, Internews studied the impact of COVID-19 on media consumption of labor migrants, refugees, and ethnic minorities in four Central Asian countries as part of its project, “Strengthening Resilience to Radicalisation and Disinformation in Central Asia through Independent Media.” Published in March 2021, the survey findings revealed the increase in media and information consumption by ethnic minorities and labor migrants who most acutely felt the economic impact of COVID-19. Media reported on domestic violence and gender inequality in vulnerable communities and provided a wide coverage on labor migrants. The survey found that vulnerable groups had limited information access that was associated with unstable internet connection, government censorship, and blocked websites. Media and information consumers were divided into two camps: One which has trust in traditional media, viewing social media as a source of fake news, and the other which has higher trust in social media, expressing distrust of traditional media.

Panelists noted another surge in misinformation during a November sand-and-dust storm that caused poor visibility and hundreds of hospitalizations in several districts of Uzbekistan. The state’s delay in reacting to the natural disaster allowed a rumor to spread that the country’s sweeping construction projects had exacerbated the situation. “Timely delivery of quality content could have prevented misinformation,” a panelist concluded. Poor quality of care, health inequity, and embedded corruption exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis and its economic impact impeded the planned reforms in the shattered health sector. In the second half of 2021, the state started a helpline through social networks to get feedback from the public and medical professionals to resume and scale up the reform process.

**“New reporters who join unscrupulous newsrooms get used to their environment and news reporting habits or switch to PR or advertising,” said one panelist.**

Panelists said content producers lack the knowledge, skills, and resources to verify information and manage disinformation. In collaboration with UNESCO, the National Association of Electronic Mass Media and the University of Journalism and Mass Communication created a video and a handbook on fake news and disinformation for the public and journalism students in 2020. With funding from USAID, Internews has conducted the second annual 2021 MediaCAMP Eduthon on media and digital literacy for Central Asian media professionals and educators and complemented with online trainings on misinformation management. “These trainings aren’t sustainable unless newsrooms develop and apply fact-checking mechanisms, such as policies and codes of ethics, and train new reporters to verify facts and avoid producing misinformation,” one panelist said, noting that money is usually a barrier to these efforts.

“Media do not want to come out of their comfort zone, go against [editorial norms], and create problems for themselves,” a panelist argued.

Newsrooms rely on internal practices, such as having several staffers read over news articles before publishing or posting them online. Media outlets and digital platforms receive phone calls from external censors and correct or remove content that contradicts state narratives. A December 2020 decree gave the Information and Mass Communications Agency the authority to order that online pornography and content inciting extremism, war, a violent government overthrow, terrorism, or other types of threats be taken down, on penalty of legal action.

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

Media outlets and authorities do not engage in creating and disseminating mal-information and hate speech. However, nonprofessional content producers may use different types and degrees of hate speech targeting migrants inside the country, victims of gender-based violence and trafficking in persons, and individuals detained on charges of religious extremism.

A panelist noted that hate speech also surfaces in online discussions

of pan-Turkism and Iranism, religious topics between moderate and conservative believers, and disputes around ethnic conflicts between Azerbaijanis and Armenians or Uzbeks and Tajiks. Panelists said that when covering these issues and in response to incidents, content producers may unknowingly use hate speech and stereotypes toward target groups, including retired individuals, people with disabilities, internal migrants, and residents of other provinces. With USAID funding, Internews trained content producers to identify and avoid citing hate

speech in reporting as well as practice peacebuilding journalism and ethics when covering diverse topics in December 2020. The same year, the MJDC issued a manual on the gender dimensions of hate speech in the media with support from UNESCO. In 2021, MJDC conducted its second annual study on hate speech as part of the EU-funded BRYCA project, which promotes

media literacy to counter mal-information and hate speech among Central Asian youth. The study found that hate speech mainly revolved around ‘nationalism’ and ‘sexism’ among selected 12 categories.

Hate speech calling for discrimination against victims of gender-based violence can often be found in comments to media publications and posts in social networks. In 2021, social media users heavily discussed, and some blamed, a third-year, Tashkent university student who accused a deputy dean of trying to rape her and of hurting her by pushing out of the university’s second-floor window in October. Two months later, in December, NEMOLCHI.UZ (Do Not Be Silent), an independent digital project, called for a legal action against those in charge of social media dissemination of the student’s intimate video that had leaked from her cell phone seized during the investigation. Launched in 2017 by journalist and gender activist Irina Matvienko, NEMOLCHI.UZ publishes stories of survivors of gender-based violence and domestic abuse on its Facebook, Instagram, and Telegram channels. The contributors are mainly urban residents with proficient computer and Russian language skills, yet the project’s reach to rural women is challenged with unstable internet connection and a language barrier. The same year, NEMOLCHI.

UZ and Equality Now, a U.S.-based NGO, published a report highlighting the gaps in sexual violence laws and the lack of access to justice for survivors in Uzbekistan.

In 2021, out of 39,343 cases filed to local law enforcement offices by women who experienced some type of gender-based violence, 87 percent took place in families. Forty-eight percent of these cases were documented as psycho-emotional violence and 35 percent as physical violence. Physical and sexual violence is correlated with female suicide and has been widely reported in the country where both men and women recognize it as a social norm and a private matter. In June 2021, pro-government imam and blogger Abror Abduazimov, who is known by the pseudonym Abror Muhtor Ali to his half-million-plus followers on Instagram and Telegram, followed up earlier statements in support of wife-beating with staged raids on Tashkent bookstores to denounce famous books and paintings as counter to Islam. “Illustrations of naked people in paintings by Leonardo da Vinci and Rembrandt, which some call art, destroy the nation’s traditional values,” he declared in a video statement that went viral. Afterward, a street-art portrait of the Mona Lisa on a Tashkent building was defaced. Noting Muhtor Ali’s huge popularity, panelists said his antics and rhetoric pose risks for the young people who believe in him.

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

As of October 2021, according to Uzbekistan’s State Statistics Committee, the population of the country exceeds 35 million people, and half of them (54%) have had internet access. Professional content producers are diverse, and women are strongly represented throughout the media sector, although there is no gender-specific official data on media practitioners. The gender balance of nonprofessional content producers varies based on their defined beats. For instance, religious bloggers are mostly men, whereas environmental reporters and bloggers are primarily represented by women.

Uzbekistan’s media landscape is homogeneous, with most of its content in Uzbek, along with a few state and independent media outlets that

produce content in Russian. Ethnic groups engage in open conversations about social and political issues in Uzbek, Russian, and their local languages on social networks and messaging services.

In 2021, a few nationalist media and public personalities ginned up language-related controversies, demanding public officials respond to questions in Uzbek. Several times, journalists for nationwide media criticized officials for making remarks in Russian during press conferences and senators for posting in both Uzbek and Russian on their social media pages. One journalist caused a ruckus during a Hydro Meteorological Service Center press conference, demanding that an ethnic-Russian senator who is a climate-change expert present the 2030 national strategy on climate change in Uzbek.

In January 2021, the director of the State Language Development Department Abdugaffor Kirgizboyev, criticized Uzbek officials who still use Russian in business correspondence, revealing the government’s failure to raise the status of the country’s official language in the 30 years since independence. A new law, which took effect in 2021, mandates compulsory testing of Uzbek language proficiency of all candidates for government positions. Additionally, in February 2021 the state approved a plan to transition the Uzbek language from Cyrillic to a Latin-based alphabet by January 2023. Switching content in national and electronic mass media and websites from Cyrillic to the Latin-based Uzbek alphabet could leave behind the older population and other subscribers of national news platforms who cannot read Latin-based letters.

National media outlets represent voices and experiences of all minority and marginalized groups, which increasingly use social networks and Telegram messenger for information consumption and communication in local languages. Although media coverage of viewpoints of minority ethnic groups is scarce, these groups feel safe practicing their cultures and languages. For example, many Afghan minorities live next door to Uzbek families; their children attend the same schools and extensively learn Russian and English in the Surkhandarya region on the border with Afghanistan. These minority groups consume local news and use social networks for information consumption and communication. There have been no reports of inter-ethnic clashes between the Uzbeks in

Surkhandarya region and Afghan immigrants, whose numbers have risen since the Taliban takeover of the Afghan government in August 2021.

Uzbekistan supported the repatriation and reintegration of more than 530 Uzbek nationals, including 381 children, who returned from Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq during 2019-2021. These processes entailed coordination and collaboration efforts among state and nongovernment institutions, including justice and security sectors, health, education and employment services, civil society actors and receiving communities. The repatriation of the Uzbeks from war zones received polarized responses on social media with some users criticizing the government for ignoring needs of local citizens and providing housing, banking, and other legal and social services to the repatriates. Largely positive public perceptions amplified by the media contributed to the smooth rehabilitation and resocialization of the returnees. Media outlets regularly shared experiences of the repatriates by protecting their identities and news on social support services provided to them by the state and communities.

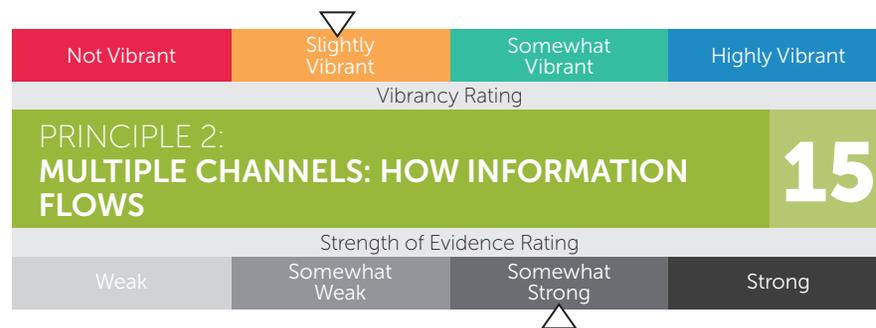
**Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced.**

Independent media have broadband internet and adequate human and financial resources to cover a variety of beats. They tend to operate online, with news stories reposted on social media to attract more internet and mobile users. For instance, KUN.UZ, one of the privately owned popular news platforms, shares news via Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Odnoklassniki, and Telegram. The outlet’s Telegram channel has 1.14 million followers, the most of any media outlet in the country, and comes in third after second-ranked FUTBOL.TV with 1.2 million soccer fans, and first place Netflix with 1.6 million subscribers.

Large state-owned print media publicize government decrees and information about national policies, and they count regional and district governments, libraries, archives, and other state entities among their subscribers. “Until recently, 98% of newspapers in Uzbekistan lived only on compulsory subscriptions, because they were so boring that people couldn’t buy them on their own,” remarked Komil Allamjonov at an event in Geneva in April 2022.

The government regulates state media and provides direct subsidies and advertising revenues. State media outlets have launched their own social media pages to compete with independent media for advertising revenues and subscribers. District-level, state-owned print media tend to have limited internet access, one editor, and a few reporters whose salaries depend on local government funding and subscriptions. Underpaid and unmotivated media professionals in state and private newsrooms often work for various outlets, and similar content with little analysis gets published across several news outlets. The overall body of content lacks quality, diversity, context, and multimedia formatting.

Since being adopted on 25 December 1998, the advertising law has been amended more than 15 times. A new bill is expected to be signed into a law in 2022. The national media development fund has lobbied to extend a newly proposed advertising length in 30-minute TV and radio programs from three to five minutes, and to reconsider the ban on advertising hygiene products, medical services, and infant nutrition products given social needs of consumers.



People in Uzbekistan have the legal right to produce and disseminate information, but officials sought to narrow that right last year. A failed government attempt to block popular social networks resulted in a surge in the use of proxies and virtual private networks.

Authorities also plan to launch a messaging platform similar to MULOQOT.UZ, which they launched in 2011 but killed in June 2018 for technical reasons. Storing user data with the state-owned Uztelecom, the national messenger would make it easier for officials to get access to

user data and ultimately control social media content. In July, the Senate set up a committee made up of senators, lawyers, media professionals, and subject-matter experts to hear, among other reports, updates on the public's free access to information on social networks and efforts to speed up the country's internet.

Panelists scored indicators examining access to information, channels for government information, and diverse channels higher than the indicator looking at the independence of information channels. Panelists also argued that private media enjoy some independence and freedom. However, new restrictive laws and the imprisonment of bloggers and journalists for content in privately owned media in 2021 show how vulnerable independent media professionals remain to government persecution.

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

Uzbekistan's constitution guarantees people's right to free speech and "the right to seek, obtain, and disseminate any information except that which is directed against the existing constitutional system and some other instances specified by law."

The public, including journalists and civil society activists, exercises these rights to varying extents. Most citizens lack knowledge of the law and avoid questioning or criticizing the authorities for fear of ending up like bloggers or others who have been imprisoned after sharing anti-government, or even just iconoclastic, views.

At a February 2021 meeting with media professionals, Mirziyoyev reaffirmed his support and solidarity with journalists: "You are my comrades-in-arms; I count on your help," the president declared, "I see you as a force that fairly reports on our achievements and shortcomings to our people. ... The president is behind you." However, a month later, he signed a law providing for prison sentences for online content that insults the president or disrespects society and the state. The legislation, which also bans public calls for mass riots and violence, came a few days after an attack on Miraziz Bazarov, who blogs about LGBT rights.

Bazarov's calls for LGBT gatherings in front of a Tashkent mosque angered social media users and triggered riots in March.

In January 2022, Bazarov was sentenced to three years of restricted freedom, akin to probation, for slander. The same law was used against Otabek Sattoriy, a blogger and citizen journalist known for fearless reporting under constant pressure from authorities in the southeastern Surkhandarya region. In May 2021, Sattoriy was sentenced to six-and-a-half years in prison for extortion and slander. His trial and an ensuing community outcry and petition in his support received widespread media coverage. In the Kashkadarya region, also in the southeast, three journalists from EFFECT.UZ were sentenced to up to three years in prison for libel, insult, and disruption of court proceedings. These cases of imprisoned journalists raise questions about Mirziyoyev's commitment to freedom of the press and expression in Uzbekistan.

In 2021, journalists faced pressure and legal action for covering religious issues, which the government tries to control in an effort to stem what it deems creeping Islamic radicalism. In June, for example, the widely read KUN.UZ news website suspended posting for a day to protest a \$1,200 fine for a reporter who had written stories found to violate the law on religious extremism. The religious affairs committee found that photos published in one of these stories of female police officers in New Zealand wearing hijabs could model religious attire for local policewomen and, therefore, should not be disseminated to avoid provoking public discourse. In another case, four editors at AZON.UZ, a news platform on religious topics, were fined on the same charges and temporarily ceased posting news stories. To avoid such legal penalties, many media self-censor and stick to topics discussed by authorities and state news media.

Throughout 2021, the media reposted the Interior Ministry's official reports on detention of alleged members of illegal religious organizations propagating extremism. A new law raises hurdles for small religious organizations to do the required registration and imposes restrictions on education, literature, and sharing of religious beliefs. The government also expanded a list of terrorist organizations posted on social media from 40 in 2019 to 166 in December 2021. These groups cannot operate in Uzbekistan, and people cannot engage with or

disseminate their information and print materials. Eight of them have presences on Telegram and Facebook, and three are on Instagram.

There were social media reports of men forcibly shaved at police stations and girls and women in hijabs pressured by law enforcement officers, community leaders and educators. Stories of the state's anti-beard and hijab raids appeared on Islamic social networks, predominantly on Telegram channels, yet the campaigns received little coverage in popular news media. In May, KUN.UZ posted a news report of an audio clip apparently instructing police officers at a station in the eastern Namangan region to detain men with beards and take photos of them before and after being shaved. The story included a disavowal from the Interior Ministry, which said it investigated who gave the instruction and took measures accordingly. Private television channels, such as ZOR TV and MY5, regularly blurred the faces of men with beards.

The state went after Fozilkhodja Arifkhodjayev, a 41-year-old religious blogger who openly criticized the government and religious leaders. Arifkhodjayev was initially detained in June for quarreling with a government-appointed imam and was denied needed medical attention while in custody. While he was detained, authorities said they found fundamentalist content on his phone, for which he was sentenced to more than seven years in prison on charges of creating, storing, or distributing via the media materials containing a threat to public safety.

While some panelists criticized the government's strict measures to control religious expression, others pointed to the high risks of violent extremism implicit in the many social media reports of people being arrested for allegedly belonging to illegal religious organizations. Panelists voiced their worry that prosecuting bloggers who criticize state policies on religion could fuel violent extremism recruiting, especially given that more than half of Central Asian social media content on violent extremism is in Uzbek. Existing Uzbek-language social media channels of extremist organizations tend to appeal to a broader audience with messages that do more than seek recruits or call for violence.

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

While television remains the dominant medium in Uzbekistan, most people follow news on Telegram on their mobile phones. Panelists said residents of remote areas do not have access to alternative content often delivered by independent media. "Residents can't access the technology and high-speed internet connections due to the cost, poor infrastructure, and frequent power outages," a panelist observed, "They mostly engage with nonprofessional blogger content." Another panelist said reliable information "often comes in foreign languages, including Russian and English," leaving it out of reach to those who do not speak those languages.

Officials are working to make the internet more accessible. In 2021, Uztelecom cut the cost of internet services to providers by 42.9 percent and connected 67 percent of the country's villages, towns, and cities to high-speed internet. Expanded communication lines that

**Panelists voiced their worry that prosecuting bloggers who criticize state policies on religion could fuel violent extremism recruiting.**

connected major districts in 12 regions and the Republic of Karakalpakstan to broadband internet boosted the number of internet users from 16.38 million in 2020 to more than 27 million. Additionally, the Ministry of Information Technologies and Communications reported that 95 percent

of the population, or 25 million people, use mobile internet. As part of an effort launched in November 2021 to further develop Uzbekistan's telecommunications infrastructure, the government committed to increase international data transmission capacity by 3.5 times and provide 80 percent of households with broadband wired internet access by 2023, via three routes: Uzbekistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan, Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan-China, and Uzbekistan-Turkmenistan-Azerbaijan-Turkey.

In July, the government of the country blocked Twitter, TikTok, WeChat, Skype, and VK messaging and social media platforms for not complying with a new requirement to collect and store users' personal data in Uzbekistan, instead of abroad, and to register data in the state registry of personal databases. The legislation went into effect in April, and

parliament passed tougher penalties for violations in October. Then in November, the State Inspectorate for Control over the Sphere of IT and Communications (Uzkomnazorat) blocked Telegram, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and Russia's Odnoklassniki on the same charges. After only three hours, however, the president lifted that blackout. Telegram, Odnoklassniki, and Facebook dominate other social networks, with 18 million, 16.7 million, and 4.7 million subscribers, respectively.

Following that incident, the minister in charge of ICT resigned and was replaced by a former education minister. Mirziyoyev fired Uzkomnazorat's director for "erroneous and uncoordinated actions." The ban on social networks caused a surge in the use of VPNs, just as it had at times in 2018, 2019, and 2020 when Facebook and YouTube were inaccessible in Uzbekistan. In a 2019 interview on the Alter Ego blog, Komil Allamjonov, director of the national media development fund, warned the use of VPNs would open access to uncensored content and undermine the security of IT systems.

The cancellation of the TikTok Fest, a concert featuring Russian and Ukrainian bloggers scheduled for December 25 in Tashkent, disappointed the same young fans that it was meant to protect from the nefarious influence of an emerging youth culture. The Culture Ministry did not take responsibility for the event, which had been organized by a private company, but supported blocking the app.

The Milliy Tiklanish (National Revival) Democratic Party urged the government to block TikTok after two 16-year-old female students used offensive language on the app while in class. Access to TikTok without a VPN was restored in December following talks between Allamjonov and TikTok Vice President Theo Bertram. A month after the app was unblocked, another uproar ensued over video posted on it of a teenager kicking the face of a middle-aged man in Samarkand. The Adolat Party found support for its call for a ban on the app in Uzbekistan. The youth's parents were fined, while the blogger, who had kicked the man, and the person who recorded the incident were detained by the police.

### **Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for government information.**

Uzbekistan's constitution guarantees citizens' right to information outlined in the country's Right to Information Law, the Law on Appeals of Individuals and Legal Entities, and the Law on Public Control. These laws conform to international standards and norms. However, low levels of legal and digital literacy among citizens prevents them from exercising their right to information and fully engaging in information exchange with local and national authorities.

Government services, such as the Single Interactive Portal of Government Services (<https://my.gov.uz/>), the Open Data Portal (<https://data.gov.uz/en>), onsite People's Receptions with regional and district offices, and the President's Virtual Public Reception (<https://pm.gov.uz/uz>) are founded to create direct dialogues with citizens and review and responds to their individual needs and appeals in a timely and comprehensive manner. These mechanisms allow people to monitor the processing of citizens' appeals by state-run organizations and hold government institutions and officials accountable to the public.

Citizens know about these mechanisms. In the past five years, both the President's Virtual Reception and the People's Reception offices have received more than 5.78 million appeals and satisfied 3,288,000 of them. Citizens' complaints and appeals address issues on the transfer of pensions and other social benefits to bank debit cards, housing, and citizenship among many others. However, e-government services require basic computer literacy. If citizens are computer illiterate, they can file appeals in municipal, district, or regional offices of People's Reception offices and/or receive needs-based information in the closest Public Services Center (<https://davxizmat.uz/uz/map>). Founded on the "one-stop-shop" principle in 2017, there are 205 public service centers and 115 remote branches that have raised the public service delivery to a relatively new level and met the population needs for information and services. Although the number of public services has increased in 2021, issues related to improving electronic digital signatures, upgrading mobile applications of interactive state services, and introducing discounts for persons with disabilities are to be addressed.

Lately, it has become a common practice for state agencies to engage with consumers in information sharing and exchange through press conferences to comment on incidents and provide updates on activities and funding. Government spokespeople reliably tell the truth to the press and public, which generally perceive their information as trustworthy with educated citizens going further and seeking alternative sources of information.

Although television is a primary source of government information, both television and radio deliver heavy government content that is less critical of policies and authorities. The National TV and Radio Company of Uzbekistan (NTRC) consists of 14 national and 12 regional channels and stations. Last year, the state marked the 65th anniversary of national television and NTRC signed a contract with Russia's SPB TV to air 12 NTRC channels in Russia and the CIS enabling over 2 million Uzbekistanis in Russia and elsewhere to watch Uzbek-language news, sports, and entertainment channels.

### **Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow.**

In Uzbekistan, legal entities and individuals can freely register a media outlet by submitting both a media charter and a founding agreement per Uzbekistan Mass Media Law. Even though Chapter 3 of the draft law regulates relations and formally establishes a separation between an editorial office and a founder, it risks imposing unnecessary administrative obligations on media outlets and interfering with their editorial freedom to organize news production and reporting. Reporters are financially motivated or encouraged to engage in revenue generating activities by seeking advertisers and private sponsors.

In 2021, OSCE assessed the compliance of the draft Law on Mass Media in Uzbekistan with international human rights standards on freedom of expression and freedom of the media. On the positive side, the legal analysis revealed that the draft Law prohibits censorship, bans media monopolization, and guarantees some media freedom. Among many recommendations, OSCE suggests that the draft law clearly defines the

status and roles of authorities regarding media regulation and upholding editorial freedom and independence in Articles 17 to 19. The state should avoid limiting media content on the grounds of broad terms such as 'extremism' and 'fundamentalism.' OSCE also recommends registering

print and online media on a voluntary basis and minimizing state interference with the internal organization of media business operations.

A media outlet's charter specifies its location, name, type, language, production frequency, and funding sources, and any changes to these provisions requires re-

registration with a consent of the founder. The Open Data Portal contains a list of the banned extremist organizations, but it has no registrar of all mass media with specifications.

Uzbekistan tries to prevent media monopolies with laws limiting foreign or domestic ownership. The media monopolization law limits foreign ownership of any given outlet to 30 percent; additionally, it specifies that domestic legal entities or private individuals can hold or control, directly or indirectly, up to 25 percent of the mass media market. The law does not deal with mono- or multimedia concentrations or vertical monopolies that could include production, distribution, advertising, or if an individual or a group can control production and distribution of information and related activities, such as advertising or telecommunications. A story by a news organization in Kazakhstan, reposted by KUN.UZ in September, reported that nine media outlets in Uzbekistan are held by a handful of conglomerates controlled by government officials. Specifically, the story alleged that Komil Allamjonov owns the Milliy TV channel and that Suren Sapov, the son-in-law of a high-ranking senator, manages GAZETA.UZ. New legislation is in the pipeline to ban public officials from owning media.

Last year, International Media Service Uzbekistan (IMS), an independent regional media seller, joined EGTA, a Brussels-based non-profit association that represents the interests of television and radio sales houses. The membership of Uzbekistan in EGTA enables the sale of

“Residents can't access the technology and high-speed internet connections due to the cost, poor infrastructure, and frequent power outages,” a panelist observed.

advertising of state and private television and radio channels in Europe and beyond. IMS Marketing Director Elena Pivovarova noted that revenue in the digital media market was projected to exceed 600 billion UZS (US\$53.5 million) in 2021.

The demand for television advertising is due to television having the largest audience in Uzbekistan, low advertising costs, and a high return on investment. Pivovarova forecasted the growth in the digital media market in coming years in light of the increased numbers of new, foreign advertisers. State television channels, such as Uzbekistan 24 and Toshkent, provide state narratives of ongoing developments. Private TV channels, including ZOR TV, Sevimli, Milliy, and Mening Yurtim, are popular for entertainment programming, movies, and soap operas. Russian speaking residents prefer to watch Russian television channels via paid cables or antenna.

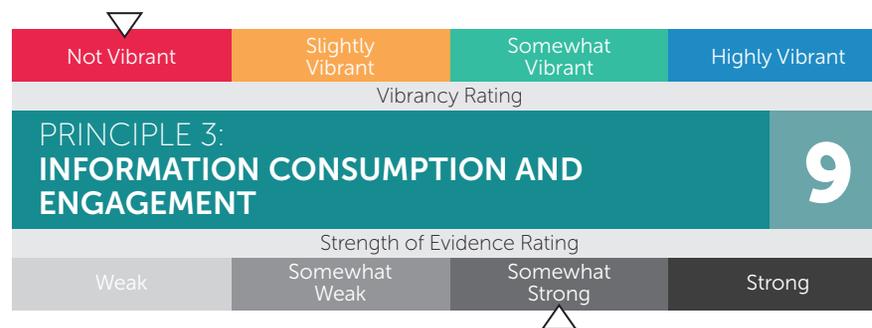
Since the broadcasting spectrum is a limited public resource, the government must ensure that the process for spectrum allocation is fair and transparent. However, Uzbekistan’s licensing procedures do not outline the rules and conditions for license tenders, allowing the state to set conditions favorable to certain bidders. The telecommunications law contains vague language about procedures of allocating licenses, which are not fair or transparent and lack oversight by the justice system and civil society. This makes it vulnerable to powerful individuals and corrupt transactions. Governmental regulatory bodies that oversee frequency allocations, licenses, and telecommunications services are not independent or free from the state interference and control.

**Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.**

The press lacks freedom and independence from the state in Uzbekistan where media organizations avoid criticizing their owners, which are either government owned or private companies run by the wealthy and powerful, including government officials. Advertising revenues and ownership investments into media outlets influence newsroom stance as content producers sell advertising and are directly involved in securing government subsidies, blurring the lines between media outlets’ business operations and editorial independence. In one

panelist’s radio station, he complained that the process for awarding frequencies is opaque. The panelist added that he had never seen the State Commission on Radio Frequency announce a competition for frequencies, as required by law. The commission includes government officials and a representative from the nonprofit National Electronic Media Association. Mostly state-run and private media outlets favorable to the government can receive government subsidies or advertising contracts that make them reinforce state narratives.

Uzbekistan does not have public service media, and the government has not made any movement towards transitioning state media to a public service media model.



Panelists scored indicators examining engagement with information and engagement with audiences’ needs higher for news sources operating in two local languages. Content is predominantly in Uzbek, but other ethnic groups speak Russian and get information from popular Russian-language platforms GAZETA.UZ and PODROBNO.UZ, which also have pages in Uzbek.

The indicator on media literacy received the lowest score in this principle due to its low levels among information producers and consumers. Although all content producers are expected to be media literate, reporters in remote locations can rarely take time off from work for trainings offered mostly by international agencies such as UNESCO, Internews, and others. In 2021, trainings covered topics including misinformation management, media and legal literacy, and multimedia content development, most of which were held in Russian, one panelist

noted. “Reporters from the regions may not fully understand Russian and be aware of these trainings, which are often attended by the same group of journalists,” the panelist said.

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

Major national media have the money and IT specialists to help secure their news platforms, but smaller news organizations may be more vulnerable to external threats and attacks. A panelist who edits a news website said he had to be trained in privacy protection and security tools. Panelists agreed that most citizens and content producers are not aware of personal data and privacy protection issues and may not feel safe navigating internet and mobile resources for fear of government censorship or hackers.

In April and May, KUN.UZ reported on repeated attempts by unknown individuals to access Telegram accounts of the company’s employees, and in two cases these attempts were successful. The company could not assess the extent to which personal and corporate information was stolen because of these attacks. KUN.

UZ interviewed IT experts who said that the hackers may have used an unknown program or changed IP addresses. In January 2021, the Surkhandarya regional administration reported on the hacked websites of the region, cities, and districts.

“Hire professionals for the ICT department, not those who graduated from the university through corruption,” a hacked message read in Uzbek (reported by KUN.UZ), “If you don’t pay enough attention to professionals and spare your precious time for them, your undisclosed decisions and orders will be disseminated all over the internet.”

There were social media reports of consumers sharing personal data on trading platforms and falling victim to scammers. “There are no training courses on privacy and security on the internet for content producers and the public,” one panelist said. For example, there are few news articles on internet fraud and theft due to a scarcity of expert

views on these topics. New legislation on personal data protection warned content producers to monitor content on social networks and messengers and obligated them to remove content flagged by the Information and Mass Communications Agency.

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

Government leadership has committed to promoting media literacy at all levels, especially in school systems. However, the country is still in early stages of step-by-step integration of media and information literacy in school curricula. In 2021, DW Akademie supported MJDC to conduct series of trainings in media literacy for educators at pilot schools and sensitization seminars for officials from the Committee for Science, Education, Culture and Sports and the Information Technologies Development Committee. With the support of international donor organizations, MDJC launched an effort to promote media literacy among content producers in 2015; however, over time it recognized the need to introduce the concept to the public, state, and civil society to enable them to respond and prevent the spread of disinformation and fake news.

Civil society groups counted hundreds of reports of people lacking basic digital and media literacy who were defrauded, sucked into money laundering or human trafficking, or radicalized via social media

last year. One panelist observed, “The public engages with information on informal and doubtful news platforms and social networks, such as TROLL.UZ, that describes itself as providing ‘bitter truth mixed with laughter,’ has 94,800 subscribers on Telegram, and reposts content on three other social networks.”

There are too few studies of public opinion and media analyses to assess how media literate Uzbekistan’s content producers and consumers are, but one panelist said, “The Uzbek public is vulnerable to fake news because they lack knowledge, skills, and tools to become more media literate.” He lamented the popularity of “informal and dubious” social

**“There are no training courses on privacy and security on the internet for content producers and the public,” said a panelist.**

networks with tens of thousands of subscribers and nearly ubiquitous posts. In February, USAID supported a five-day seminar on media and digital literacy for academics, bloggers, and trainers from Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Webster University in Tashkent held a second round of English-language classes for media professionals to help them more easily access content in English-language news sources.

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

The public, including journalists and civil society activists, exercise their rights to information and use freedom of speech to a lesser or fuller extent depending on information sought. The public perceives national decrees and policies as trustworthy and does not question them, which may infringe their constitutional rights.

Citizens avoid questioning authorities out of fear, having seen the imprisonment of individuals and bloggers who have voiced views alternative/opposing to conventional thoughts, social norms, and state narratives. People engage with information presented by national television channels and turn to alternative sources of information on social media, which increasingly serve as platforms for public debates on recent legislation, social injustices, and infringements of various rights. Public debates in town halls take place in the capital, academic settings, and call-in shows, which are attended by the same group of people. Platforms for public debate typically attract the educated who have mobile internet, moderate levels of media and digital literacy, and who are bilingual in Russian and Uzbek.

Typically absent from the public square are elderly, disabled, or poor people, who get their information from national television. Although misinformation is not commonplace, people unknowingly spread it on their social networks. Additionally, non-professional content producers and information consumers unintentionally reinforce misinformation in their social media networks. Hate speech usually involves religious

content, such as producers and consumers with radical views who get embroiled in heated and corrosive debates.

Increasingly, local, and national authorities try to address issues raised by bloggers and social media in a somewhat fair and balanced way. In Uzbekistan, Facebook groups serve as convenient platforms for public discussions on political and social developments. For instance, government efforts to repatriate women and children from Afghanistan and Syria caused heated public discussions.

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

Media outlets provide tools and opportunities for their audiences to submit feedback through letters to the editor or online comment sections. With fewer tools and resources for information and media consumer analysis, content producers make efforts to build trust with audiences through community events, reporting methods, and publishing corrections. Content producers, community members, and state and civil society actors collaborated and networked together for productive information sharing and coordination of fundraising and volunteer activities to provide disadvantaged families with clothing and food products in the early stages of the COVID epidemic.

Although media outlets acknowledge the importance of studying their audiences' content preferences, they do not have sufficient resources to fund experts who can conduct annual media monitoring and evaluation surveys. The Information and Mass Communications Agency and NGO Public Opinion Research Center occasionally conduct research on media and communications. An analysis last year by the Public Opinion Research Center team found that most coverage of youth issues in national media focused on tolerance, civic education, patriotism, healthy living, and youth interest in education and science. The liberties and rights of young people, youth and religion, and youth and the internet received less attention. Popular news networks acknowledge that they

**“The Uzbek public is vulnerable to fake news because they lack knowledge, skills, and tools to become more media literate,” said a panelist.**

educate consumers and try to meet the demand for quality news and information with in-depth, analytical content, including interviews with subject-matter experts and Uzbek researchers living and studying abroad.

One panelist said some bloggers and journalists serve the interests of those in power or use sensational and inaccurate content to attract an audience.

**Indicator 15: Community media provide information relevant for community engagement.**

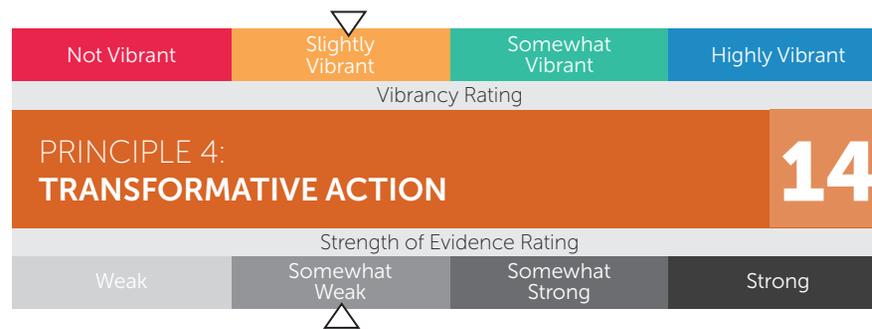
This indicator received a lower score and was supported by weaker evidence because of the polarized scores from the panelists. Most panelists argued that Uzbekistan has no community media, with media consolidated in the hands of the government or a few rich and powerful owners.

Bloggers and social media fill the role that would traditionally belong to community media. A few panelists, for example, pointed to closed online communities formed according to geography. Notably, residents of Tashkent have a Telegram channel with 618,798 followers; similarly, residents of Samarkand and other cities and regions also have their own channels and groups.

Bloggers have become increasingly vocal in criticizing policies that limit free speech and religious expression, and in voicing concerns of marginalized and oppressed groups and individuals. “The public doesn’t have a tribune; they have mobile phones, which they use to create, disseminate, and consume content,” one panelist said, “Social networks serve as a source of information for state and private media outlets, raising community issues, and people’s problems.”

In 2021, people posted video and audio evidence of violations of citizens’ rights or of local officials’ neglect of community issues, including physical and sexual violence against women and minors, and confiscation of traders’ goods and people’s properties. Because many people do not know the law or fear retribution, they surreptitiously record such

violations and turn to bloggers and news organizations to post on social media instead of filing formal complaints. And they sometimes get results. For example, two posts about poor classroom conditions last year led to a gym renovation and a shipment of new desks.



Panelists said quality information and the exchange of information helped inform the actions of individuals, civil society organizations, and the government. The indicator examining good governance and democratic rights received the lowest score in this principle because there is scant evidence that existing laws ensure citizens’ democratic rights.

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

The public consumes nonpartisan news content on independent media platforms, and information producers put out content of all political stripes. Few people use the comments sections of online media to give feedback or engage in dialogues, preferring forums such as social media to engage in open and constructive discussions informed by quality news and information. The social media channels of extremist organizations tend to shift public narratives and appeal to a broader audience with messages that do more than seek recruits or call for violence. While these narratives portray Afghanistan as the country winning the war over the Western world, they use stories of persecution of religious citizens in Uzbekistan as evidence for the need to establish an Islamic society.

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

People's views on political or social issues are shaped primarily by quality information they consume on national television rather than misinformation. Citizens use quality information on e-government services and Telegram-based official government channels to engage with officials on social issues and individual needs. However, when it comes to election outcomes in the 2021 presidential elections, OSCE observed no meaningful engagement between candidates and a genuinely pluralistic environment. In the run-up to the election, journalists and bloggers experienced prosecution from authorities and pressure from new media restrictions. The election outcomes for many in Uzbekistan were obvious with no real alternatives to choose among the five candidates.

The COVID crisis has stagnated reforms in the health system, and people consumed fact-based health information and public health safety recommendations on television and the Ministry of Health's official Telegram messaging channel. The year began with students returning to schools and labor migrants fleeing to Russia and other countries in search of jobs after a long COVID quarantine, waiting period.

People act in a cautious way when it comes to their health needs. Lately, people tend to seek health information and recommendation from fellow citizens on social networks about choosing a doctor or a clinic, and when looking for lab tests at reasonable prices. Healthcare has improved in recent years, yet people still experience health inequity and poor medical services that the state has committed to transform in coming years.

“Lately, people tend to seek health information and recommendations from fellow citizens on social networks about choosing a doctor or a clinic, and when looking for lab tests at reasonable prices.”

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

Ongoing reforms focus mainly on the economy leaving behind political and civil reforms and hindering civil society development in Uzbekistan. The legal and political position of civil society organizations in Uzbekistan continues to limit the effectiveness and impact of socially important projects.

Fundamental legal frameworks adopted by May 2018 and March 2021 presidential decrees have slightly improved the legal environment for civil society. Yet, they have also introduced unnecessary regulation and bureaucratic control measures that, taken as a whole, impede civil society development. For instance, the March 2021 decree outlines civil society development strategies for 2021—2025 that seek to strengthen the organizational capacity of CSOs and increase state subsidies among other efforts. These strategies aim to tighten state control over CSOs through the increase in government subsidies for social projects, the involvement civil society in state programs, and their membership in the National Association of NGOs, which allows its members to receive state subsidies.

Since civil society organizations are closely involved in pressing issues—ranging from protecting the children left behind by labor migrants to helping victims of domestic violence to countering violent extremism to reintegrating labor migrants and other expatriates back into society—they have access to reliable information, and they act on it within the legal and political confines outlined above. Prior to project implementation, civil society must navigate government sensitivities and policies and need approval from local officials for their work, so they tread lightly or even adopt the government's stance on sensitive topics. These groups must be flexible when government agencies ask for last-minute changes to programs and agendas, and their reliance on government or foreign funding typically gives them less control over

which projects they can pursue. CSOs self-censor on sensitive topics, including religious extremism, media, corruption, and human rights, for fear of legal repercussions that could hinder their work and tend to follow government narratives in their programming.

Civil society organizations rely on trusted news to explain their mission and engage with quality information on CSO policies, regulations, and grants on *A Database of NGOs in Uzbekistan*, a Telegram group that has over 1000 subscribers, and *Democracy in Uzbekistan*, a monthly newsletter published on the website of Yuksalish, a pro-government NGO with support from the U.S. Department of State and a Slovenia-based nonprofit, Regional Dialogue. International donor agencies use Telegram to disseminate information on their project updates and grant announcements.

Nongovernmental organizations share quality information with the public and do not disseminate misinformation. They reference well-informed research studies funded by either or both the government and international development agencies when they design their programs and/or call for policy changes. In 2021, several nonprofit organizations managed hotlines and continued implementing domestic violence, migrant assistance, forced labor, countering trafficking in persons, and violent extremism projects. For increased impact and reporting on their projects, civil society groups collaborated with local media outlets, which covered state policies regarding labor migration and challenges faced by thousands of migrants primarily in Kazakhstan and Russia, along with news stories about reintegrated families who had returned from Afghanistan and Syria.

Lack of funding as well as lack of effective communication, policy advocacy and monitoring skills lead to low engagement of CSO with their audiences and low involvement in systematically analyzing and addressing the issues that concern the public.

**CSOs self-censor on sensitive topics, including religious extremism, media, corruption, and human rights, for fear of legal repercussions that could hinder their work and tend to follow government narratives in their programming.**

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

The Uzbek government considers reliable information and substantive public feedback in its political and social reforms and public policy decisions.

For example, in late 2021, the government launched Vision Zero, an effort to make the country's roads safer, based on accident statistics but also taking into account social media reports on issues of road safety, road construction, and phony drivers' licenses. The government fired top public safety officials in some regions and set up a pilot program in the densely populated Ferghana region, which leads the country in traffic accidents. In the future, officials plan to go nationwide with the program, which will include improved road safety/driving regulations, better driver education and introduce road safety instruction in schools, among other things.

In another example, journalists and bloggers amplified the voices of ordinary people concerned about wholesale tree felling by municipalities to clear space for construction work. In response, the president extended a moratorium on tree cutting and raised the penalty for violations, established environmental police units, and promised cash rewards for whistleblowers.

### **Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic rights.**

Panelists scored this indicator the lowest in this principle, because they do not believe that quality information in Uzbekistan contributes to free and fair elections and societal reforms, including uncovering corruption and violations of human and civil rights. Social media recorded several instances of violations of human rights, as well as religious and media freedoms, that were either committed or ignored by the authorities.

*This chapter represents desk research, interviews, and the results from questionnaires filled out by people familiar with the state of media and information in the country. Participants will remain anonymous because of Uzbekistan's evolving environment.*

**Copyright © 2022 by IREX**

**Notice of Rights:** Permission is granted to display, copy, and distribute VIBE in whole or in part, provided that: (a) the materials are used with the acknowledgment “The Vibrant Information Barometer (VIBE) is a product of IREX with funding from USAID.”; (b) VIBE is used solely for personal, noncommercial, or informational use; and (c) no modifications of VIBE are made.

This study is made possible by the support of the American People through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The opinions expressed herein are those of the panelists and other project researchers and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID, the United States Government, or IREX.