

MOLDOVA



Vibrant Information Barometer

2 0 2 1



Highly Vibrant

Somewhat Vibrant

Slightly Vibrant

Not Vibrant

OVERALL
SCORE

23

In 2020, the Republic of Moldova was rocked by the COVID-19 pandemic and chronic political instability, with inevitable repercussions for the media. A fragile parliamentary majority, a bitter campaign season, and the authorities' inability to manage the pandemic all fueled the sense of crisis. After the first cases of the coronavirus were registered in Moldova, the new governing coalition of the Socialist Party of the Republic of Moldova (SPRM) and the Democratic Party declared a constitutional state of emergency. The coalition gave broad new powers to the Commission for Emergency Situations (CSE) and other executive agencies to fight the pandemic. The ambiguity of these new emergency powers threatened the right of access to information. In addition, officials' persistent refusal to provide complete and timely information resulted in an inaccessible and opaque government.

On March 18, CSE extended the deadline from 15 to 45 days for government agencies to respond to information requests. A few days later, the Security and Intelligence Service blocked access to more than 50 websites for allegedly "promoting fake news about the evolution of the coronavirus and protection and prevention measures." On March 24, the Broadcasting Council (CA) ordered broadcasters to present only the government's official position in their coverage of the pandemic and prohibited journalists from expressing their opinions on related topics. These moves spurred fierce criticism from the media, civil society, and the country's ombudsman.

In the heated contest between the pro-Russia incumbent president, Igor Dodon, and his pro-Europe challenger, Maia Sandu, politically controlled media became little more than echo chambers, cranking out propaganda and misinformation about the election. The authorities worsened the confusion with their reluctance to provide information of public interest regarding the pandemic, creating a vacuum that was rapidly filled with fake news and rumors. Meanwhile, Russian propaganda continued

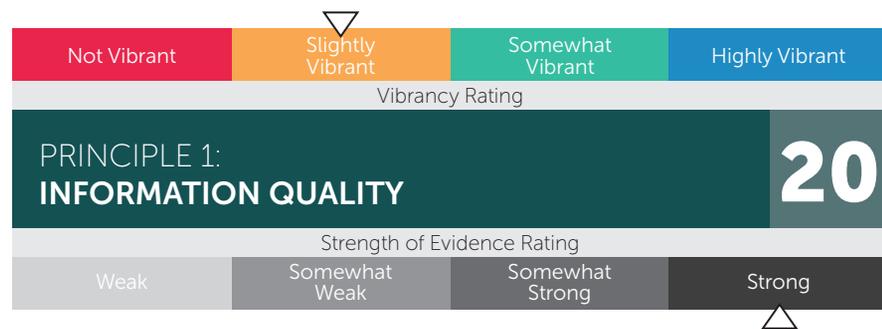
to saturate the country's information space. Although Dodon was defeated in the November voting, his Socialist Party holds a plurality in parliament. These lawmakers and their For Moldova allies quickly passed several controversial laws, including a repeal of provisions curbing television broadcasts from Russia.

In 2020, the VIBE panelists observed that professional and nonprofessional content creators, such as bloggers, social-media users, and influencers, produced information of rather poor quality overall. Moreover, the straitened circumstances of many media organizations have left them vulnerable to takeover or influence by deep-pocketed partisan figures, which in turn has narrowed the views and news in Moldova's media landscape.

The events of 2020 led to unprecedented constraints on the public's access to information. Although Moldovans can access many information sources, not all channels are objective or independent. Moreover, while Moldova has plenty of media spaces where people can share opinions and initiate discussions, the pandemic and the presidential campaign triggered a flood of fake news, misinformation, and mal-information on these platforms.

Generally, Moldova provides a safe reporting environment, and no journalists were imprisoned or killed for doing their jobs in 2020. Some were, however, subject to other abuses, such as penalties for slander, and many journalists have complained of high-ranking public officials threatening them with physical harm or litigation.

Government officials communicated little and poorly with the media and civil society in 2020. For its part, civil society organizations (CSOs) used sound information to inform people about their activities, while the authorities dragged their feet on cases of corruption or human rights violations uncovered by the media. People widely use social media platforms to debate issues, but often without trustworthy or fact-checked information, pointing to a lack of media literacy skills.



The media market in Moldova is diverse and produces varied content on political, economic, and social issues. Inadequate infrastructure, however, limits some people’s access to evidence-based, coherent, and ethical content from editorially independent sources. There are good media and journalism training programs, for students and working professionals, resulting in a number of available training opportunities. Nevertheless, some media continue to flout ethics and the law. Misinformation was common currency among politically affiliated media during the campaign season.

Many content producers make halfhearted efforts to reach marginalized audiences and instead sometimes amplify social disparities among vulnerable minority groups. During 2020, public officials frequently made remarks that amounted to hate speech or discrimination. As evidenced by the low scores of the VIBE indicator measuring sufficiency of resources, financial instability continues to plague most media.

Nearly all the panelists agreed that Moldova’s infrastructure allows them to produce varied media content, including broadcast and digital formats. The overall body of content includes local, national, regional, and international news. Nevertheless, the panelists shared the opinion that media technologies, services, and facilities are outdated or malfunctioning in some regions. “For a lot of the audience who live far from the capital areas, it’s easier to catch foreign radio or TV stations than local or national ones,” said Vadim Șterbate, a reporter for the *Observatorul de Nord* newspaper.

As for print, Jurnal TV journalist Vitalie Călugăreanu said the number of press kiosks in Chișinău has fallen drastically, and they have vanished from villages. Consequently, print media outlets have fewer channels of distribution, depressing their circulation figures.

Panelists noted that content producers have many opportunities to train on creating ethical, evidence-based, logical and consistent content. But the political agenda of many media organizations make such training moot. “Political influence in the media has led to the fragmentation of the media market and abandonment of ethical standards,” said Olga Gututui, the program director of TV8.

According to Victor Mosneag, the interim editor-in-chief of *Ziarul de Garda* (*Guardian* newspaper), some media aspire to fair and fact-based journalism. But he said that most politically affiliated outlets cover national or even international events through a distorted political lens, favoring or disfavoring certain parties.

Anastasia Nani, deputy director of the Independent Journalism Center, said her organization’s monitoring reports launched during the November 2020 presidential campaign showed that several media organizations controlled by Dodon’s SPRM and the Sor political party favored Dodon at the expense of challenger Sandu.¹

In the breakaway Transnistrian region and the autonomous territory of Gagauzia, content producers are financially dependent on the local governments, which influences what type of information is available there.² Officials have threatened to shut down some media that report fully and truthfully. “Local content producers publish only information that is favorable to authorities,” said a journalist from Gagauzia. Luiza Doroshenko, executive director of the Media Center in Tiraspol, said that the limited training opportunities in Transnistria factor into the poor

1 *Media monitoring during the electoral period and electoral campaign for the presidential elections of November 1, 2020*, Independent Journalism Center: [Report no. 1](#) (September 14-28, 2020); [Report no. 2](#) (September 29-October 6, 2020); [Report no. 3](#) (October 7-14, 2020); [Report no. 4](#) (October 15-22, 2020); [Report no. 5](#) (October 23-31, 2020); [Report no. 6](#) (November 2-14, 2020).

2 A 1994 law decreed that Gagauzia (Gagauz-Yeri) would be “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.

quality of news and information produced in the region.

Political interference in the media continues to fuel the spread of disinformation, as was plainly evident during the presidential election campaign. “False and misleading information created by certain content producers, often those affiliated with SPRM, was widely shared, including by high-ranking officials, such as President Igor Dodon and Moldovan members of parliament,” Mosneag said.³ Shortly before election day, Socialist lawmaker Bogdan Tirdea released a book full of false and defamatory statements about several domestic nongovernmental organizations. Mosneag said that the Socialist-affiliated press widely distributed the book.⁴

Independent media outlets and the few reliable fact-checking resources, such as StopFals.md and Mediacritica.md, were key to fighting misinformation during the election, but they were no match for the fake news and misinformation that reached a mass audience, said Dumitru Ciorici, the development manager for Interact Media. “Russian propaganda continued to saturate the country’s information space and kept a hold on a segment of the national media audience,” said Eugeniu Ribca, a media legislation expert and the executive director of the Mold-Street website, which covers business and corruption issues. He said tensions in the Transnistrian region and Moldova’s presidential elections were the topics most subject to rumor and misinformation in 2020. Nani mentioned that a report by the Independent Journalism Center had chronicled some media’s use of disinformation and techniques of manipulation.⁵

Panelists generally agreed that in 2020, misinformation and fake news focused also on the pandemic, including treatment methods and the

3 Zaharia, Viorela. “FALSE: No human rights NGO representatives have been in prisons in recent years,” StopFals.md. June 25, 2020. <https://stopfals.md/ro/article/fals-in-ultimii-ani-nici-un-reprezentant-al-ong-urilor-in-domeniul-drepturilor-omului-nu-a-fost-in-penitenciare-180360>.

4 Jacot, Mariana. “Fakes and manipulations in the ‘scientific research’ of Bogdan Tirdea,” StopFals.md. October 30, 2020. <https://stopfals.md/ro/article/video-falsuri-si-manipulari-in-cercetarea-stiintifica-a-lui-bogdan-tirdea-180437>.

5 “Elements of Propaganda, Information Manipulation, and Violation of Journalism Ethics in the Local Media Space,” Independent Journalism Center, (May 1-July 31, 2020). <http://media-azi.md/en/monitoring-report-elements-propaganda-disinformation-and-violation-journalism-ethics-local-media-0>.

Information Quality Indicators

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

vaccine. Some public officials felt free to share their misinformed opinions on the topic.⁶ Nina said major culprits were “politically affiliated media outlets and those who practice superficial journalism.” Ribca said officials exacerbated the problem by not regularly providing prompt and complete information of public interest.

At the onset of the pandemic, the Moldovan government declared war on so-called fake news, but in fact it established “the state’s direct control over the flow of information to the public,” said Freedom House’s coordinator

for Moldova, Tatiana Puiu.⁷ “Despite the government’s declared resolve to fight fake news, Moldovan authorities did not provide an official definition for fake news or disinformation that would be subject to state penalties. Consequently, state officials can decide on their own if a piece of news is or isn’t malicious disinformation, and that’s risky.”

Some media outlets and platforms self-regulate, aiming to moderate the content in a way that reduces mal-information or hate speech. Most information that professionals produce does not incite hatred, but Nani said the proliferation of online media “creates a lot of opportunities for

6 “Igor Dodon, about coronavirus: ‘It’s as if you had a problem with your nose, a cold passed through you, you passed the coronavirus, and you didn’t even know about it,’ ” ProTV. March 20, 2020. <https://protv.md/coronavirus/igor-dodon-despre-coronavirus-parca-ai-avut-olecutaca-probleme-cu-nasul-olecutaca-ti-o-trecut-raceala-prin-tine-si-tu-ai-trecut-coronavirusul-nici-nu-ai-stiut-de-lucrul-acesta-video---2522643.html>.

7 Balan, Veaceslav and Vladislav Stegni, “COVID-19 pandemic: Lessons for media freedom in the Republic of Moldova,” Media Forward. June 2020. https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-06/Balan%20and%20Stegniy_FINAL-RO_0.pdf.

spreading different forms of intolerance.” Puiu referenced a 2020 report⁸ by the Promo-LEX NGO that counted 448 incidents of hate speech during last year’s election campaign — more than double those registered during the 2019 elections.

Most panelists noted the unprecedented increase in hate and discriminatory speech coming from public officials. According to Jurnal TV’s Călugăreanu, former public health director Nicolae Furtuna said that COVID-19 took the lives of those who were a burden to themselves and to those around them. Mosneag observed that former President Dodon was one of the most prominent public officials spewing hate in 2020. “The ex-president’s comments inciting hatred got wide coverage by media affiliated with the Socialist Party and were publicly condemned, including by the national ombudsman.”⁹

Panelists agreed that information in Moldova is available in the languages that people need. However, the narrow range of sources available for linguistic minorities limits their options for evidence-based, coherent, and ethical information. “Pro-Russian media outlets, usually SPRM-affiliated, remain the main source of information for the Russian-speaking community. Consequently, this community consumes manipulative and misleading information,” Mosneag said.

Panelists generally agreed that the national media do not properly cover the experiences and viewpoints of people of various ethnic, racial, and religious backgrounds. Nevertheless, Șterbate said that these groups

8 “Hate speech and incitement to discrimination in the public space and in the media of the Republic of Moldova during the electoral campaign for the presidential elections of 1/15 November 2020,” Promo-LEX. https://promolex.md/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Sumar_Raport-DIU_ENG.pdf.

9 Odobescu, Irina. “The ombudsman condemns Igor Dodon’s hate speech: A country’s president who wants to be the president of everyone must unite, not divide.” Anticorruption, May 11, 2020. <https://anticoruptie.md/ro/stiri/avocatul-poporului-condamna-discursul-de-ura-al-lui-igor-dodon-un-presedinte-de-tara-care-se-doreste-a-fi-al-tuturor-trebuie-sa-uneasca-nu-sa-dezbine>.

“Political influence in the media has led to the fragmentation of the media market and abandonment of ethical standards,” said Olga Gututui.

have alternative online platforms to express their opinions, whether as individuals or members of organizations. News reports only superficially cover minority issues, and as a result, many Moldovans know little of minorities’ experiences and viewpoints.

Information is not accessible to people with hearing impairments, panelists observed. Gututui said that some national broadcasters fail to provide at least one newscast subtitled or interpreted in sign language, as required by law. He also acknowledged a national shortage of certified deaf interpreters and said that many broadcasters cannot afford the high fees for the available few.

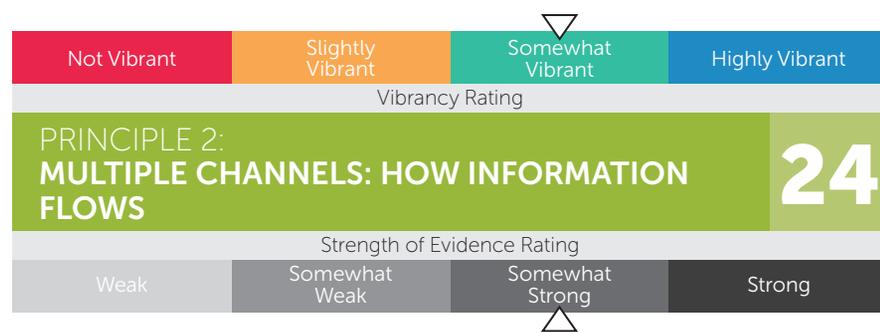
Panelists noted an obvious gender imbalance in the country’s media landscape. While Gututui said the profession of journalism “has become increasingly feminized,” Rîbca noted that most media owners and managers are still men. According to Nani, several reports on media monitoring found that TV news programming cited mostly men and ignored women’s viewpoints.

In the Transnistrian region and Gagauzia, media content is not inclusive and minority groups are covered poorly. Doroshenko said that media publish information and news mostly in the Russian language, even though Transnistria’s official languages are Russian, Moldovan/Romanian, and Ukrainian. The journalist from Gagauzia said content producers there mostly use Russian as the primary language, although the main public broadcaster does provide information in Gagauz and Moldovan.

Economic sustainability continues to be a major challenge for the media. Political control over Moldova’s modest advertising market constrains its development and leaves independent media continuing to struggle financially. “Financial sustainability is a precondition for media independence from the undue influence of others, be they governments, senior politicians, or local authorities,” Puiu said. “For example, the press group controlled by SPRM and, implicitly, President Igor Dodon,

continued to promote the interests of the Socialists, often disregarding ethical standards of journalism,” she said, citing a study on media financing in Moldova.¹⁰

Panelists noted that content producers have no options for apolitical public funding streams to help them resist economic and financial pressure. Most independent media rely on the support of international donors, but these development funds cannot ensure long-term sustainability. “That is why many media outlets, including *Ziarul de Garda*, *Moldova.org*, and *Rise Moldova*, have tried to diversify their funding sources through Patreon subscription services and crowdfunding initiatives,” Mosneag said. According to Rîbca, “During the electoral period, political advertising was one of the most efficient ways for content producers to reduce their financial deficits.” However, Gututui noted that media outlets operating as NGOs have been deprived of this alternative funding stream because of a law prohibiting them from providing services to political candidates. That law was overturned in October 2020.¹¹



Moldova’s laws guarantee freedom of the press, freedom of expression, and the right to information, but sometimes they function more in theory than in practice. No journalists were imprisoned or killed for doing their jobs in 2020, but some were the victims of harsh penalties for

10 Bunduchi, Ion, Valentin Dorogan, Corneliu Rusnac, and Sanda Sandu. “Media financing in the Republic of Moldova,” Soros Foundation Moldova and the Electronic Press Association of Moldova. 2020. http://www.soros.md/files/publications/documents/Studiu_FINANTAREA%20MASS-MEDIEI%20IN%20RM.pdf.

11 The [Law on Nonprofit Organizations](#) went into force on July 27, 2020.

the minor crime of slander. The law on freedom of expression ensures confidentiality of sources, although several Socialist Party legislators attempted to remove this essential guarantee in 2020. The right of access to information was infringed to an unprecedented degree in 2020. Although the law contains sanctions for violations or for harassing journalists, the sanctions are levied so rarely that many journalists do not bother to file complaints. Authorities are reluctant to enforce the law against media ownership concentration, thus undermining broadcaster independence.

In this principle, panelists gave their lowest marks to questions of the independence of information, and their highest to the adequate access to channels of information.

Moldova’s constitution and a 2010 law set out the guarantee of, and limits to, freedom of speech. This framework is mostly in line with international standards, but its application is spotty. Panelists said that despite sound legislation, enforcement is lax and public officials continue to threaten and assault journalists or to intimidate them through litigation.¹²

In 2020, national media NGOs (including watchdog groups, professional associations, and free speech advocates) frequently voiced concern about violations of journalists’ rights and freedoms, as in [the case of a journalist from Ceadir-Liunga](#) who was sanctioned for slander after reporting on poor working conditions in a factory. In addition, members of the State Protection and Guard Service [repeatedly harassed and](#)

12 ‘You are a toxic media institution’ A journalist from Bălți, verbally attacked by a deputy of Renato Usatii,” Nordnews. January 21, 2020. <https://nordnews.md/video-sunteti-o-institutie-media-toxica-o-jurnalista-din-balti-atacata-verbal-de-un-adjunct-de-al-lui-renato-usatii/>; “Chicu counselor’s response to ZdG’s interview request: ‘But he has to consult with you when he goes somewhere?’ ” *Ziarul de Garda*. March 3, 2020. <https://www.zdg.md/stiri/stiri-sociale/audio-raspunsul-consilierului-lui-chicu-la-solicitarea-de-interviu-a-zdg-dar-el-trebuie-sa-se-consulte-cu-tine-cand-merge-undeva/>. “Media NGOs condemn the abusive and unlawful approaches to journalists by the State Protection and Guard Service,” *Media AZI*. November 13, 2020. <http://media-azi.md/en/stiri/media-ngos-condemn-abusive-and-unlawful-approaches-journalists-state-protection-and-guard/>; “Media NGOs Condemn the Abusive Actions of the “Media NGOs Condemn the Illegal Actions of the Military Peacekeepers against Journalists,” *Media AZI*. July 23, 2020. [http://media-azi.md/en/stiri/media-ngos-condemn-illegal-actions-military-peacekeepers-against-journalists-0](http://media-azi.md/en/stiri/media-ngos-condemn-illegal-actions-military-peacekeepers-against-journalists-0;); “

Multiple Channels Indicators

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

obstructed journalists trying to do their jobs.

Public officials were also abusive. For example, Anatolie Labunet, a member of parliament, **used obscenities** when responding to a reporter's question, while the deputy speaker of parliament, Vlad Batrincea, **hurled unfounded accusations** and insults at the press.

No journalists were imprisoned or killed for doing their jobs in 2020. But Victor Mosneag, of *Ziarul de Garda*, brought up the case

of a journalist who was **intimidated and fined** after reporting on illegal activity by a company in Gagauzia. Puiu commented that “the abusive sanctioning of journalists for the misdemeanor of slander ... creates a dangerous precedent that undermines the freedom of press.”

Nani said journalists rarely file complaints, because authorities seldom enforce laws against intentionally obstructing media activity or intimidating critical journalists. In fact, the panelists named several times when officials sought to chip away at the press's rights and freedoms. Rîbca noted that Socialist Party legislators tried unsuccessfully to remove from the broadcast media law a provision for protecting source confidentiality.¹³ Gututui recounted the **decision** by CCA head Dragoş Vicol requiring broadcasters to deliver only the official government position while covering the pandemic during the state of emergency. Journalists were also **prohibited** from expressing their opinions while reporting on the subject. Civil society groups and media workers widely criticized Vicol's edict, which was canceled eventually, Nani said.

In the Transnistrian region and Gagauzia territory, citizens have the right to create, share, and consume information, but some independent journalists practice self-censorship for fear of persecution. “Only a few private media dare to publish information on forbidden topics,” Doroshenko said. The journalist from Gagauzia said the right to free speech is often violated in the territory. “Because of the judiciary's dependence on the authorities, some media don't bother trying to defend their rights in court,” she said.

Moldovans' access to information channels has held steady over the years and is not likely to change for the foreseeable future. Panelists scored the VIBE indicator measuring access to information most highly due to the state continually developing information and communication technology that meets the needs of most consumers.

Panelists agreed that public access to the internet is widespread across the country, and that internet service providers do not discriminate based on user, content, or source or destination addresses. Nani remarked that internet speed in Moldova is higher than in some EU countries. Citing the National Agency for Regulation in Electronic Communications and Information Technology, Puiu said about 1.6 million people went online through 4G technology in the third quarter of 2020 — a 2.8 percent increase from the end of 2019. Approximately 44,000 people contracted M2M (machine-to-machine) services, up 1.3 percent from 2019, she said.¹⁴

Gututui said that urban areas have better access to information than rural ones. Şterbate explained that villagers, who tend to be poorer, get their news from television instead of the internet because of the cost of internet service. Rîbca and Călugăreanu noted that, because of financial constraints, some people cannot afford access to diverse information channels.

Panelists agreed that the public's right to access information had been limited in 2020, amid the pandemic, presidential elections, and chronic political volatility. “Since the beginning of the crisis, the authorities have

¹³ Răileanu, Diana. “Media NGOs: Socialist amendments endanger journalism,” Radio Europa Libera. December 9, 2020. <https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/30992409.html>.

¹⁴ The National Regulatory Agency for Electronic Communications and Information Technology (ANRCETI) is the central public authority that regulates activity in electronic communications, information technology and postal communication.

communicated unilaterally and restricted journalists' opportunity to inform people on issues of major importance," Ciorici said.

Nani recounted an effort to counter the state-of-emergency press restrictions by the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Social Protection. The ministry relented only after the Independent Journalism Center, joined by approximately two dozen media organizations, demanded online press conferences.¹⁵

Panelists noted CSE's decision to [triple the length](#) of wait time, from 15 days to 45 days, for journalists requesting state agencies to provide information. Puiu said that CSE offered no rationale for the change, and instead simply invoked the provision for public order contained in the Law on State of Emergency, Siege, and War of 2004.

The panelists shared the general perception that journalists' right to information is systematically denied. Mosneag said that in 2020, officials continued to be selective about what information they gave to journalists, while Șterbate said that many agencies had refused to provide information, using the spurious rationale of protecting private data. The head of the Press Council of Moldova, Viorica Zaharia, said some ministries' press services are hostile to journalists. "For the first time doing this job, in 2020, I had to complain to the police and ask them to fine the Ministry of Education for not providing information," she said.

Since 2019, two somewhat contradictory laws have governed the process of requesting and releasing public information. As a result, national case law contains contradictory judgements regarding violations of the right of access to information. For example, Puiu said, the Supreme Court of Justice declared the Law on Access to Information obsolete and

15 "Petition of the Journalists' Crisis Cell: 'We ask that the media be given access to information of public interest!'" Media AZI. May 3, 2020. <http://media-azi.md/en/stiri/petition-journalists%E2%80%99-crisis-cell-%E2%80%98we-ask-media-be-given-access-information-public-interest%E2%80%99>.

inapplicable.¹⁶ The court's findings alarmed civil society and confused legal experts.¹⁷ "Fortunately, on October 2020, the court remedied the critical situation generated by its own findings and issued another decision reversing the solution," specified Ribca.

Panelists noted that Moldovan legislation allows people to freely establish media. Press law allows foreign individuals and legal entities to be only co-founders of periodicals and press agencies, and to hold a maximum of 49 percent of a company's required capital to register with state agencies. "However, this provision generates confusion, as the current legislation does not [provide such legal form of organization] as news agencies and periodicals," Puiu said.

Existing regulations meant to prevent concentrated or opaque media ownership are applied unevenly, if at all. The Competition Council, legally empowered to conduct annual assessments of Moldova's media market to prevent the possibility of dominance by media conglomerates, does not honor this obligation. Meanwhile, the Broadcasting Council asserts that it does not have legal authority to verify the accuracy of media ownership disclosures. Furthermore, panelists said that CCA is not politically neutral. "The controversial decisions issued by [CCA] and the sanctions selectively applied by the authority showed its lack of transparency and independence," Șterbate said. Taken together, these factors serve to complicate efforts to regulate fairly Moldova's media market.

Panelists scored the VIBE indicator on the independence of information channels quite low. Panelists agreed that politicians continue to dictate editorial policy by working through politically linked media owners.

16 "SCJ: The Law on Access to Information Is Inapplicable. What Consequences Could the Magistrates' Decision Have?" Media AZI. June 26, 2020. <http://media-azi.md/en/stiri/scj-law-access-information-inapplicable-what-consequences-could-magistrates%E2%80%99-decision-have>.

17 "Media NGOs Express Their Concern over the Impact of the SCJ Findings on Right of Access to Information," Media AZI. June 30, 2020. <http://media-azi.md/en/stiri/media-ngos-express-their-concern-over-impact-scj-findings-right-access-information>.

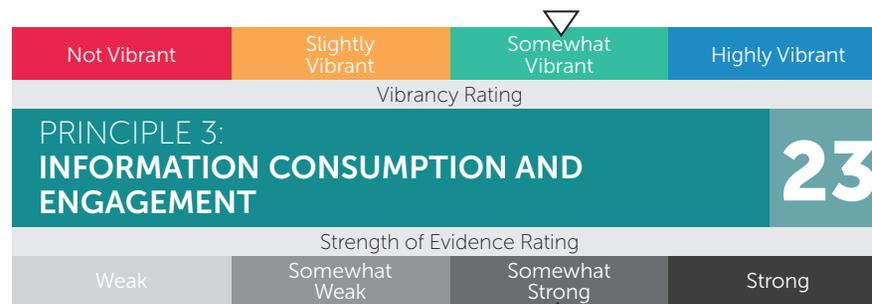
“Since the beginning of the [COVID-19] crisis, the authorities have communicated unilaterally and restricted journalists’ opportunity to inform people on issues of major importance,” said Ciorici.

Additionally, the public broadcasters benefit from a special status and receive public money, and their editorial content often favors the central government. During the time it was a leading political force, the Democratic Party controlled the editorial policy of the national public broadcaster Moldova 1. In 2019, a new government was formed, and the Socialists took the helm.¹⁸

The Independent Journalism Center’s media monitoring reports in 2020 showed that media linked to political parties favored directly and indirectly the politicians and parties that give financial support. “Consequently, the public had access to almost identical, and often manipulative and propagandistic, editorial content” across various outlets, Nani said.

Most panelists agreed that Moldova needs laws to require transparency in online media ownership. Gututui observed that some online platforms seem to be anonymous. Zaharia said that many online content producers do not even disclose their contact details, making it impossible for someone who is the subject of inaccuracies or smears to reply or to request that the information be taken down.

Most media in Transnistria and Gagauzia are not independent and are influenced by owners and sponsors. Doroshenko said authorities in Transnistria exercise control via the media regulators, while the journalist from Gagauzia said that the region’s public media are clearly subjected to political interference in management and editorial content.



Officials sometimes use Moldova’s law protecting personal data as an excuse to deny requests for information. The general population, including journalists and civil society activists, exercise their rights to speak and to get information. Community media are underdeveloped and struggle with unstable finances. Moldova has plenty of platforms where people can share their opinions and initiate discussions, but those outlets churn out excessive fake news, misinformation, or mal-information during the pandemic and election season. Under Principle 3, panelists gave their lowest scores to the indicator measuring media literacy.

Moldova’s laws ensure adequate data protection and digital security, but Gututui said that authorities most frequently cited those protections as pretense for refusing to release public information. Further, Călugăreanu stated that the court’s policy of anonymizing information in records has made it difficult for journalists to investigate and verify facts. Nani noted that the National Center for Personal Data Protection does not balance the right to information against the right to privacy, and courts have repeatedly overturned the agency’s decisions sanctioning journalists.

Media outlets have access to digital security training and tools, and Moldovans can easily access technology that helps protect privacy. Also, most panelists agreed that digital tools are available to prevent distributed denial of service (DDoS) attacks. Still, not all media outlets have protected themselves from cyberattacks. Mosneag gave an example: After *Ziarul de Garda* reported on the president’s lavish vacations, its website went glitchy, and staff there suspected a DDoS attack.

18 “Promo-LEX: The debate organized by Moldova 1 before the second round of elections ‘contradicts good practices,’ TRM comments,” Media AZI. November 13, 2020. <http://media-azi.md/en/stiri/promo-lex-debate-organized-moldova-1-second-round-elections-%E2%80%9Ccontradicts-good-practices%E2%80%9D-trm>.

According to Gututui, Moldovans lack basic digital security and data literacy skills, and Șterbate said that the public seems uninterested in learning them. Rîbca added that consumers show little interest in learning about the algorithms that drive targeted ads on social media or about other ways that personal information is used to target the platforms' users.

The journalist from Gagauzia expressed that journalists there have basic digital skills. Doroshenko said that Transnistrian media controlled by the authorities are digitally secure, while independent media do not have the money to shore up their defenses against DDoS attacks.

Moldovans are not very media-literate, as the presidential campaign and pandemic showed. Puiu said that consumers with low critical-thinking skills shared a lot of incorrect and manipulative information on current events. Mosneag noted that a survey had found that Moldovans were powerfully swayed by false news about the pandemic.¹⁹

Panelists observed that the government is reluctant to promote media literacy among adults, while civil society groups are always trying to build programs on critical thinking and media education. Nani said that the Independent Journalism Center continues to promote optional media-education training for students in primary, secondary, and high school. She further stated the organization offered online training last year for teachers outside Chișinău and for those teaching in Russian-language schools. Gututui held the view that such programs should be available to adults as well as students.

In Transnistria and Gagauzia, the authorities do not promote media literacy. Doroshenko said the schools' curricula do not include media education or information-literacy education, and no organizations are offering programs on media literacy. However, some Gagauzian users

19 "(SURVEY) Moldovans severely affected by false pandemic news," Cotidianul.md. May 21, 2020. <https://cotidianul.md/2020/05/21/sondaj-moldovenii-afectati-puternic-de-stirile-false-legate-de-pandemie/>.

that are active on social media are also media literate, the journalist from that territory said.

The general population, including journalists and civil society activists, exercise their freedom of speech and their right to information without fear of reprisal. Moldova has multiple platforms where people can share opinions and start discussions. Panelists agreed that debates take place mostly on popular social networks. "There are varied call-in shows, YouTube channels, and public discussions organized by NGOs, but Facebook remains the main platform for debates," Nani said.

Puiu referenced a 2019 report that found that the most-used social media in Moldova are Facebook, Odnoklasniki.ru, Instagram, and Mail.ru, in order of preference.²⁰ Russian services "Mail.ru and Odnoklassniki.ru are seen [by the public] as tools to spread false news and propaganda in the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine, and Russia," Puiu said.

The campaign season saw a boom in politically connected social media users posting messages designed to incite hatred of some candidates. Rîbca said media

consumers rarely report malicious information or protest hate speech, although this content abounded on various media platforms, especially social networks.

People in Transnistria and Gagauzia do not engage much with information they access, since they avoid discussing forbidden or sensitive issues. Doroshenko said that in Transnistria, people might complain to web platforms about hate speech, but they do not send those complaints to ombudsmen or public bodies.

Panelists shared the opinion that most media seek to use research for understanding the needs and interests of their potential audience. But Nani noted that such research is expensive and, without the backing of foreign donors, beyond the means of the country's independent media.

20 Gramatic Social Media Report. January 2019. <https://gramatic.md/socialmediareport/>.

Rîbca said media consumers rarely report malicious information or protest hate speech, although this content abounded on various media platforms, especially social networks.

Many nationwide content providers have fair and open ways for audiences to give feedback, such as contact information or comments sections. Media and content producers work to build trust with their audiences. For example, Mosneag noted, *Ziarul de Garda* publishes an annual report of its activity and organizes audience meetings (including online meet-ups in 2020). But Zaharia said multiple outlets still operate opaquely and post their content anonymously.

In 2020, journalists and NGOs formed efficient partnerships to share information. But Șterbate lamented that government agencies did not join in, even in the face of a pandemic.

Doroshenko said media in Transnistria generally measure their audience, but “there is no evidence that they use this research to reshape content to meet audience needs and interests.”

The journalist from Gagauzia said there is no evidence that its journalists, content producers, civil society groups, or government agencies partner to cover specific issues.

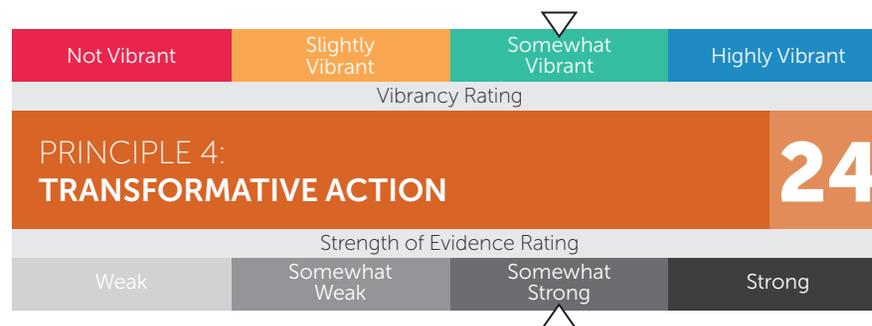
Information Consumption and Engagement Indicators

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

Panelists had different notions of community media. Some referred to local or regional media outlets as community media, while others said community media do not exist in Moldova. “The law defines community media providers as nongovernmental organizations created, managed, and funded by the community,” Gututui said. “We do not have community media providers, but local ones, which similarly operate within a community but are differently structured.”

The panelists concluded that the few local media in Moldova

struggle to survive. “Some of the independent media focused on covering the needs of communities in the regions are on the edge; some try to get grants to survive in the media market without a political affiliation,” Nani said. In Transnistria and Gagauzia, community media are underdeveloped, and the journalist from Gagauzia said that social networks there play the role of community media.



Although the public largely consumes information created by media that share their ideological leanings, some critical thinkers seek out information that challenges their positions. The national media market includes independent content producers, but the audience for quality information channels is dwarfed by the consumers of politically affiliated media. People widely use social media platforms to exchange opinions on specific issues, but debates are not always based on reliable or verified information. Panelists said they see no strong evidence that people are swayed by sound and accurate information, but misinformation does seem to shape people’s views of political topics, social issues, and political candidates. In 2020, the government sporadically engaged with civil society and media through short briefings but avoided press conferences. The authorities have also been slow to act on cases of corruption or human rights violations revealed by media.

In this principle, the panelists evaluated the indicator on civil society the highest, while the indicator assessing the impact of information on the democratic process received the lowest score.

Most of the panelists agreed that the national market has independent and professional content producers that distribute reliable information,

Transformative Action Indicators

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

reaching about half of media consumers. Zaharia named *Ziarul de Garda*, PRO TV, Radio Chişinău, TVR Moldova, and Radio Europa Libera as media institutions that have proven their impartiality. “Although the audience of the independent content producers is extensive, it can’t compete with that of the politically affiliated media,” Rîbca said.

Generally, the public consumes information from media that are in line with their ideological leanings, although some people seek out opposing views, Nani said. Puiu cited a survey from last year in which 18 percent of participants said they consume news only from independent sources, while 38 percent said

they follow the news but are not sure which sources are independent.²¹ “Media consumers, especially those living in urban areas, read diverse sources of information,” Mosneag said. “People throughout the country may engage in discussions through social platforms, but debates are not always based on trustworthy and fact-checked information.”

Several panelists said that the results of the 2020 presidential elections showed that voters had based their views on quality information rather than misinformation. However, some panelists said they see no evidence that sound information shapes people’s views on political issues or candidates.

Likewise, the panelists noted that with regard to COVID-19, people

²¹ Magenta Consulting, “Population perception of the media and media skills in the Republic of Moldova.” November 2020. <http://media-azi.md/en/national-study-population-perception-media-and-media-skills-republic-moldova>.

repeatedly turned to bad information while paying little heed to fact-based health and safety recommendations. “During the pandemic, the authorities failed to provide complete and consistent information and created a vacuum that various actors, both foreign and domestic, rushed to fill with false information,” Puiu said. “Russian media have been actively involved in spreading anti-Western and pro-Russian information, including conspiracy theories about the use of the virus in U.S.-funded secret laboratories and alarmist statements that the EU has lost the fight against the pandemic.”

The VIBE indicator on the use of information by civil society received the highest score from the panelists. They agreed that most CSOs produce and share quality information when explaining their objectives and when interacting with their mission beneficiaries. No local CSOs disseminated misinformation or mal-information in 2020.

Nani said that independent media often use NGOs’ research, studies, and reports as reliable sources. In fact, some large CSOs have worked to stop the spread of fake news and propaganda, the panelists agreed. Zaharia mentioned efforts by the Association of Independent Press, the Independent Journalism Center, and the Youth Media Center to help people identify and avoid false information. “National and international CSOs react every time human rights are violated, urging the authorities to react,” Mosneag said.

Although CSOs are eager to participate in key decisions, such as policymaking and legislative change, politicians are reluctant to include them in discussions. Generally, the authorities avoid cooperating with CSOs that condemn the government’s infringements of democratic norms.

In Transnistria and Gagauzia, civil society groups provide reliable information, but they have little opportunity for cooperation with the media or public officials. The journalist from Gagauzia said journalists and CSOs have collaborated on projects covering important social issues, such as migration and domestic violence. Doroshenko said that the few cases of civil society groups engaging in the legislative process in Transnistria had limited results.

Panelists said Moldovan government officials occasionally engaged with civil society and media through short briefings and avoided press conferences in 2020. Nani said that authorities would not take the initiative to inform the public during the pandemic, and the Health Ministry began holding weekly press conferences only after media NGOs made repeated requests.²² Mosneag noted that politicians hide behind official briefings and often refuse to give interviews to media in order to duck inconvenient questions. Mosneag said that although *Ziarul de Garda* is one of Moldova's most-read newspapers, the then-prime minister, Ion Chicu, "refused to give us an interview in 2020, relaying through an adviser that he interacts only with media that have an impact."²³

Șterbate said that politicians do not always draw on facts and evidence in their discourse, especially during campaigns. "Sometimes statistics are twisted in order to accumulate political capital, to denigrate opponents, or to explain some populist decision," Gututui added.

Panelists agreed that politicians frequently generated misinformation that was extensively shared online. For example, Nani noted that while president, Dodon launched a webcast program that was widely distributed on social networks and "that he used to spread hate speech and misinformation." Puiu also named populist politician Renato Usatii, who held frequent live streams on social networks that spread information from anonymous sources. Rîbca said politicians do not operate with facts when making decisions.

The panelists scored the VIBE indicator on information supporting good

22 Stratan, Maxim. "The Ministry of Health will organize online press conferences, during which journalists will have the opportunity to ask questions," NewsMaker. April 30, 2020. <https://newsmaker.md/ro/ministerul-sanatatii-va-organiza-conferinta-de-presa-online-in-cadrul-carora-jurnalistii-vor-avea-possibilitatea-de-a-adresa-intrebari/>.

23 "Chicu counselor's response to ZdG's interview request: 'But he has to consult with you when he goes somewhere?'" *Ziarul de Garda*. March 3, 2020. <https://www.zdg.md/stiri/stiri-sociale/audio-raspunsul-consilierului-lui-chicu-la-solicitarea-de-interviu-a-zdg-dar-el-trebuie-sa-se-consulte-cu-tine-cand-merge-unde-va/>.

governance and democratic rights the lowest for this principle. They agreed that officials do not respond properly when media uncover corruption or human rights violations. "Often the authorities react only to the cases of corruption that promote their political interests and ignore situations involving people affiliated with the government," Mosneag said. For example, he recounted a *Ziarul de Garda* exposé revealing that the leader of the largest party faction in parliament, Corneliu Furculita of the Socialists, lives in a house that is not reflected in his declaration of assets and interests. In response, the National Integrity Authority (ANI) and the Prosecutor-General's Office [found a lack of reasonable suspicion of violating the law](#), Mosneag said.²⁴ Nani pointed out, however, that the [ANI formally recognized](#) *Ziarul de Garda* and three other outlets for investigations that led to more oversight.

Puiu said that criminal proceedings resulting from media investigations frequently end up closed, without explanation. Still, public pressure from CSOs and Moldova's international development partners remains highly effective for pushing authorities to investigate and punish wrongdoers.

Panelists agreed that no one produces data on whether the quality of information contributes to free and fair elections in Moldova. But Mosneag said that media investigations of Dodon's shady campaign practices might have contributed to his loss. Mosneag noted specifically the articles revealing that Dodon [spread fake news](#) about his rival, Sandu, and had used a government printing house to [produce his election leaflets](#).

The panelists said they have no evidence that quality information prevents or reduces human-rights violations or cases of corruption.

24 [The National Integrity Authority \(ANI\)](#) is an autonomous administrative specialized in verifying wealth, as well as the legal regime of conflicts of interests and incompatibilities.

“National and international CSOs react every time human rights are violated, urging the authorities to react,” said Mosneag.

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