MEDIA EXPERTISE

RUSSIA: BAROMETER OF INFORMATION VIBRANCY

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Abstract: The author follows the methodology developed by the International Research and Exchange Board (IREX, USA) for its annual reports "Vibrant Information Barometer" (VIBE) on the situation in different countries of Europe and Eurasia. The study tracks how information is produced, spread, consumed, and used in the Russian Federation. It follows the four principles that taken together constitute the concept of information vibrancy: information quality, multiple channels, information consumption and engagement, transformative action. A comprehensive assessment of media and information sectors is supported by the group of twelve experts who completed the specific questionnaire and participated in a discussion on their results with the author.
Keywords: information quality, multiple information channels, media consumption, engagement with the media

1. Introduction

This study was originally intended for publication in the annual 2025 report "Vibrant Information Barometer" (VIBE) by the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX), an international nonprofit organization that specializes in global education and development. This global research by the organization was traditionally supported by the USAID, but in late January 2025 it was first suspended and then, in March, terminated by the express decision of the United States Government. By then the chapter on Russia was already ready and provided. Alas, the termination order also means that the dedicated website of VIBE was taken down by IREX, meaning that all previous reports, tables, and data became – at least for now – are not to be found in their usual place. Therefore, the study also reconstructs the key elements of the methodology developed by the IREX researchers.

This methodology is based on the four broad principles that taken together form the concept of information vibrancy: information quality, multiple channels, information consumption and engagement, transformative action. They allow measuring the vibrancy and sustainability of media and information systems. These include:

1) "Information Quality" looks at how (and what types) of information are produced by both professional and non-professional producers, including examining content quality, content diversity, and the economic resources available to produce content.

2) "Multiple Channels" looks at how information is transmitted or spread by both formal and informal information channels, including looking at the legal framework for free speech, protection of journalists, and access to diverse channels and types

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of information.

3) "Information Consumption and Engagement" looks at how information is consumed by users, including looking at freedom of expression, media and information literacy, digital privacy and security, the relevance of information to consumers, as well as public trust in media and information.

4) "Transformative Action" looks at how information is used and put into action, including looking at how individuals, civil society, and governments 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. (Trail, 2023, p. 18-19)

Each principle includes five indicators. To provide a country's VIBE score, invited were Russian experts from media outlets, civil society organizations, professional associations, and academic institutions. They are the core of the study. Prior to the structured interview with the author, these panelists completed a questionnaire made up of all 20 indicators and provided evidence to justify their scoring. Due to laws restricting critical activity in the country, their identity remains anonymous.

According to the IREX methodology, scores of all indicators are averaged to obtain a single, overall score for each principle for the country. IREX interprets the overall scores as follows:

- Highly vibrant (Scores 31-40) – Thriving information system.
- Somewhat vibrant (Scores 21-30) – Stable information system.
- Slightly vibrant (Scores 11-20) – Weak information system.
- Not at all vibrant (Scores 0-10) – Failing information system. (Trail, 2023, p. 21-22)

The use of local experts generally contributes to the success of VIBE as a research tool. Additionally, the author reviewed the latest academic studies and statistic data from 2024 relevant to the discussions with the panelists and the questions brought up in the interviews. Taken together, these allowed the end result being an analysis of the media and information situation that provides the nuance and details only local practitioners and experts can make available.

2. Discussion

Principle 1: Information Quality.
Score: 11

The relatively high score for this principle is the result of panelists noting the developed technical infrastructure of the Russian mainstream audiovisual media that enjoys both significant public

money and raising advertising revenues. In return they demonstrate their loyalty to the Kremlin policies and readiness to spread war propaganda, hate speech towards the West and the "fifth column" within the country. Panelists also noted the difference between the quality of information provided by the media inside Russia and those in exile abroad. The latter, despite significant financial challenges, strive for professional and truthful reporting from within the country and debunking mass disinformation.

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

When answering questions on the quality of information, all panelists agreed on a division that exists and deepens between content producers within Russia and those who went abroad. Since the start of the full-scale aggression in Ukraine, between one and 1.8 thousand journalists and media workers left the country under the threat of legal and extra-legal persecution by the State. While many of them then abandoned their profession for practical reasons, others continue to practice journalism for the audiences in Russia.

Russian media landscape is described as an amalgamation of several categories. The dominating one is official propaganda media directly or indirectly controlled by the authorities. It includes all national TV and radio general interest channels, news agencies, national press and online media. If they do not belong to the State bodies, such as the Ministry of Defense, they are run by affiliated "private" holdings. This pattern is reproduced on the regional level. A panelist explained how it works in the Belgorod region: there a consulting NGO is used by the local authorities to fund and assist municipal print and online media that agree to remain loyal to them. Clearly, there are no professional ramifications for producing content that do not meet criteria of ethics and accountability, respect for facts, and strive to find truth. Although the overall body of content covers a variety of topics, including political and social issues, specialized and thematic reporting, one cannot find therein views or facts that contradict the Kremlin policy or hold it accountable by fairly reporting on its actions. Although today there is still no formal censorship of the Soviet type, editorial decisions as to the news and views content are heavily dependent on self-censorship, based, in its turn, on the fear of crossing the "red lines". Although the overall body of available content in Russia covers a variety of topics and geographies, it is generally focused on the national and international issues.

Most panelists confirmed the availability of an adequate technical infrastructure to produce varied content (including print, broadcast, and digital media) in Russia, though pointing

to a decline of the printed press following the shutdowns of the COVID times. At the same time, the country's media is further and further from being independent, evidence-based, coherent, and ethical. For example, experts noted a complete disappearance of political cartoons from the media coverage of current affairs (Kondratyuk, 2024).

Journalism remains an attractive study discipline in Russia. According to statistics, there are 442 public and private university and college programs that currently provide or can formally provide journalism education throughout the country (Учёба.ру, 2025). Our panelists cited the cases of propagandists taking over the leading journalism schools in major campuses and the new flock of university presidents igniting support of the armed aggression in Ukraine by the students and faculty and firing those who opposed the war. Still, there are several training opportunities for professional and non-professional content producers, established by independent journalists, that attempt to maintain the practice of quality journalism in Russia, such as informal online "Iskra" Media School. At least two foreign-based universities that provided education in humanities for the Russian students were labeled, in 2023, "unwanted organizations" by the Prosecutor-General thus presenting threats of criminal persecution for their faculty and students (Волошинов, 2024).

Indicator 2: The norm for information is that it is based on facts.
While the panelists agreed that the government creates and disseminates false or misleading information through the official propaganda media, they pointed to at least two other groups of media undertakings in Russia. One includes media outlets that focus on economics and, while being loyal to Kremlin, try "to remain relevant" in the coverage of current affairs information (Reporters Without Borders, 2024). They are tolerated by the government for their social service of providing reliable business information. These media aim to provide information that is fact-based, well-sourced, and objective under the restrictive laws that are respected by the editors. As of March 2025, their websites had 57 million (RBC), 17 million (Kommersant), 9 million (Vedomosti), and 5 million (Forbes) hits per month (LiveInternet, 2025). Aside from the business community, such media are reportedly read by those "who do not use VPNs or are wary of following the publications of 'undesirable organisations'" (Luchenko, 2024).

The second category of media which at least partly remained inside Russia also belong to the professional content producers that do not intentionally create or disseminate false or misleading information, including from the authorities. They are small independent local and niche online publications. They report on what is happening in Russian regions (Yuga.ru, Govorit

NeMoskva, Lyudi Baikala, Pskovskaya Guberniya Online, etc.) or in specific areas of life (Mel on education, Takie Dela on charity). These media comply with the law, by properly labelling "foreign agents", and writing "special military operation" instead of "war". Even then they might take the phrase "special operation" in inverted commas and provide a footnote why they write it that way, thus giving a hint to their audiences. These publications often use Aesopian language, figure of silence, or indirectly address information topics. It is important that they put forward their professional standards and do not unintentionally create or disseminate false or misleading information due to low capacity. Some of such media, mentioned in the VIBE-2024, were forced out of existence last year by the governmental media watchdog, Roskomnadzor. Those purges included a successful weekly Sobesednik and its popular website that followed the confiscation of the print copies with the cover story on the death of Alexei Navalny in March (Moscow, 2024). Many other independent media closed as a result of financial difficulties and increased political pressure (Yachmeneva, et.al. 2024).

Still, the only group of Russian media, that hold government accountable by identifying misinformation when it is disseminated by government actors, are the media in exile abroad. The exile media remain reliable and current fact-checking resources. The main one in this category, Provereno.Media, which was reported in the previous VIBE report, is active on social media, although its sub-project, Proverka slukha, with Kommersant-FM radio in Moscow, folded in June 2024. Their fact-checking activity is hosted by an Estonian news media, Delfi, and thanks to the services thyat Provereno.Media provides to the Facebook, it even brings revenue to the hosting company. A panelist also referred to the project "Anti-Fake" by The Insider news outlet, also available as the Telegram channel "Itsreallynot". It debunks disinformation stories spread by the key Russian media. Until 2022, Dozhd-TV, now operating from the Netherlands, also provided a regular program "Fake News". Another exile media, Meduza, occasionally provides factchecks, such as on the falsities in the major President Putin's speech on economics in 2024. Still, several panelists agreed with an opinion that "it would be a significant overstatement to claim that this practice is widespread across the entire media landscape or that such [fact-checking] efforts are recognized nationwide."

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

The question on whether foreign governments or their proxies create or disseminate mal-information or hate speech raised commotion among the panelists based in Russia, who pointed that

even if that would be so, the population has generally no access to the stories from "unfriendly countries", another new official term in the Russian law and political rhetoric. Their list includes 47 states and territories that purportedly aim to "impose ideas to weaken Russian values" and "the unique civilization" often called "Russian world" (Russkiy mir) (Рюмин, 2024).

On the other side, the Russian government produces and uses the media under its control to coordinate dissemination of the content that is intended to harm its opponents. According to a panelist, "media outlets, often at the government's behest, frequently incite hatred, especially in the context of the war in Ukraine, where Ukrainians are derogatorily referred to as 'khokhly'". Following the deadly terrorist attack at Crocus City Hall (near Moscow) in March 2024, reportedly carried out by ethnic Tajiks, the government and the media picked up on this anti-immigrants xenophobic narrative (Bederson et al, 2024), which even brought protests from the authorities of the Central Asian country.

There are no professional ramifications for spreading such hate speech. A panelist cited an example of a gang that used to attack locals in the Belgorod region. The gang was composed of the Russians and headed by an Azerbaijani citizen. The local and Moscow media labeled it an "Azeri's band" that targeted "our people" in "Nazi-style beatings". According to the panelist, the story of Azeri terror in Belgorod further spiraled in the social media groups.

A reason for lack of professional ramifications is the weak state of media self-regulatory mechanisms. On the background of lack of media self-regulation in the provinces, the only national such body, the Public Collegium for Press Complaints (PCPC), reviewed just three complaints in 2023-24, while in 2021-22 it issued 25 decisions. A reason is that the Presidential Fund on development of civil society has stopped, since March 2022, the regular practice of providing grants to sustain the activity of the PCPC.

Indicator 4: The body of content overall is inclusive and diverse.
Information in Russia is not pluralistic, and it is true not just in relation to political content. Nominally Russia remains a federation of equal nations, but the panelists spoke the trend to recognize Russians "as the dominant nation", pointing to a limited use of minority languages in public and the governmental policy of designating NGOs that protect indigenous peoples as "foreign agents". The "regime views any form of minority representation as a threat", explained a panelist. "Currently, these groups can only make their voices heard within a narrow corridor, constrained by

Russian legislation, on platforms like Telegram or YouTube."

The Russian legislation incorporated, in 2024, a ban on "childfree propaganda", including in film and media (Russian Lawmakers, 2024). In addition, fourteen regions in the country introduced, in 2023-24, bans on "propaganda of abortions", and the latter trend gains force (Где запрещены, 2025). This came on top of the earlier introduced restrictions on content deemed to promote LGBTQ+ relationships or gender transition. No wonder, Russian media in exile rightfully say that "homophobia has become official state policy in Russia" (Я — российский, 2024). As to the balance of women and men in editorial offices, the panelists agreed that though it is in favor of women, the leading and administrative positions are still occupied by men. The relative dominance of women among rank-and-file journalists, the panelists explain, is caused by the generally low pay of the profession and the existing wage-gap between women and men. Any voices of other genders, practically marginalized by the state, are prohibited in the media and online.

Among the marginalized communities who are deprived of the right to share information on their experiences and viewpoints to the public are definitely religious groups that the State attributes as "non-traditional" or even "extremist". They are found detrimental in promoting the ideology of the "Russian world" (Russkiy mir). Aside from the language and traditions, its concept includes a clear religious dimension. Researchers say, that Russkiy mir heavily relies on the strengthening of a purportedly shared spiritual common space in the country, where the Moscow Orthodox Patriarchate occupies a dominant position to be followed by the "traditional for Russia" religious faiths of Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism. Weaker groups, which often refuse to be co-opted with the State, such as Scientologists, new Islamic groups, or Jehovah's Witnesses, face campaigns of intimidation, arrests for possessing religious materials or deportation of foreigners for engaging in unregistered religious activities, police raids of the homes and the meeting places of followers, their forced recruitment to the Army, and even demolition of such meeting places. (Topidi, 2024)

Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced.

Like with many other indicators, the panelists pointed to essential differences between the media inside Russia and those in exile. Panelists agreed that while the majority of large general interest media outlets in Russia are not profitable businesses, they are largely funded by the federal budget, which makes them serve the authorities and cater to their interests and needs. These subsidies are indeed significant. Since the start of the full-scale war, the government has spent over RUB 350 billion on state media. In

2025, despite unprecedented military expenses, Russia is slated to increase media spending to historic high of $27 million per week, as the budget allocates for the propaganda purposes RUB 137.2 billion ($1.42 billion at the time of adoption). Compared to 2024, direct spending on media will increase by RUB 15.9 billion, or 13%, bringing the total to more than the annual budgets of average Russian regions. The panelists agreed that growing government subsidies are non-transparent and further solidify the distortion of the market to facilitate the Kremlin's monopoly on information. (2,6 миллиарда, 2024)

Re-election, in 2024, of Vladimir Putin as Russia's President, which has become a routine event, reportedly pumped additional €1.1 billion ($1.2 billion) of public funds to boost the candidate's popularity, mostly through television, cinema and increasingly online. (Sert, 2024)

A panelist noted that in the Russian provinces the media are in dire straits if they do not rely on subsidies from the regional or municipal authorities. She noted that winners of the 2024 contest "10 Best Newspapers in Russia" are all publicly funded. Another panelist brought an example from his region, where a member of the State Duma from the ruling party established a charity that every year provides monetary prizes of 160,000 rubles ($1,550) each to the "best" 60 journalists and editors from his constituency (see also: Ровенских, 2024).

Russian media also gain from the continued growth of the advertising market, even though it is caused by the low start following the market's collapse in 2022, due to an exodus of Western buyers. In the first nine months of 2024 this growth reached 25 percent year-to-year with the total volume of 620 billion rubles. Experts believe that the main driver of the growth is "media inflation" as the rates for advertising placement exorbitantly increased in 2024: in television, for example, they went up 22 to 42 percent, depending on the channel (Марчак, 2024). According to a panelist the main beneficiaries of the growth are the Russian search engines and large online platforms, such as Yandex and Mail.Ru. While advertising placement is generally not politicized, the panelists pointed to the new ban on advertising with the media of "foreign agents", as a political restriction of the market.

Almost all Russian "foreign agent" media are in exile abroad. In addition to the ban on advertising, other legal restrictions, such as on donations or subscriptions, make financial viability for the Russian media in exile a key challenge. As was nicely summed up in a quote provided in the 2024 report by the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression (Khan, 2024, para 89), exiled media "outlets are forced to spend money they do not have to continue to deliver information to audiences who cannot pay." A way out might

be found in switching to serve the Russian-speaking audiences in the host countries, but that is leading to a transformation from "media in exile" to "diaspora media" or "minority media" thus raising questions about the purpose of their existence. So far, they depend on a donor-based funding model, which often emphasizes short-term, results-oriented projects, which traps small editorial teams in a cycle of addressing immediate issues, unable to delve into broader, more diverse topics and projects or in audience research. According to the Berlin-based JX Fund, as of August 2024, there were at least 66 Russian independent news media operating abroad (Locking Down, 2024, p.4).

In 2024, the average gross annual salary of a journalist in Russia has increased compared to 2023 and amounted to RUB 642,000 ($6,240) (Статистика, 2024). Most of the panelists agreed that this is not a sufficiently livable wage.

Principle 2: Multiple Channels: How Information Flows. Score: 11

The panelists pointed to a monopoly of pro-governmental propaganda content in the media inside Russia, strongly supported by the public funds. Any political dissent is openly penalized. On the other hand, there are relatively vibrant Russian information sources abroad. While access to these alternative information channels is still possible, there is certain competition between the "digital censors," locking leaking holes in Kremlin's monopoly on truth (Russian Media, 2024), and the exiled media finding new technological opportunities to reach audiences in Russia (Petrova, 2024).

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

The existing legal guarantees for freedom of speech and freedom of the press, once symbolized by the Statute on the Mass Media (1991), remain an empty word (Russia: Repressive, 2024). No wonder that in 2024 a Russian NGO in exile developed a blueprint law on Freedom of Information and Expression, so as to help realize human rights to create, share, and consume information as part of a broader plan for an imminent political transition toward democracy post-Putin. The proposed draft law is based on the need to create in Russia a free media model common in Europe, consisting of public, commercial (private) and community media. State media shall be prohibited by law and abolished in practice (Richter, 2024). The panelists agreed that independent journalists in Russia are harassed for doing their jobs and pushed into self-censorship and abandoning of political coverage whatsoever out of fear of retribution. As of today, the Russian government continues

to trump freedom of speech and freedom of press through legal and extralegal means. According to the RSF, Russia is the fifth largest prison for journalists in the world, with the total of 38 reporters, including 19 Ukrainians, behind bars (RSF's 2024 Round-up). The UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in Russia pointed in her 2024 report to a particular case, when journalists with perceived connections to opposition political figures, including Mr. Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation, have been detained under spurious "extremism and terrorism" charges (Katsarova, 2024, para 46).

There is a growing effort to label the brave journalists inside the country – but also outside it – as extremist "foreign agents", and enemies collaborating with the "undesired organizations", such as with Meduza, the Latvia-based Russian media. The authorities in Moscow are busy imposing new barriers for the "agents", such as slow-down of YouTube to limit the reach of audiences inside the country (Marrow and Stolyarov, 2024), or the introduction of a ban for the Russian businesses to advertize in foreign agents' media outlets, social media channels, blogs and web pages, thus cutting 80 percent of the revenues (Russia Targets, 2024). Also in 2024 the Parliament adopted amendments that practically deprived authors, who are designated "foreign agents," of obtaining royalties and other income streams for them and their families, such as from selling or renting property, selling vehicles, and savings and investment returns (Krupskiy, 2024). These and other hard-hitting restrictions are being done through expanding the law on foreign agents and applying criminal penalties for collaboration with the "undesired organizations" (Расширение, 2024). No wonder that international NGOs name independent media as the primary targets of Kremlin laws against "foreign agents" and "undesirable organizations" (Russia: Independent, 2024). In addition, blogs and social media channels with more than 10,000 followers (subscribers) are now required to be registered with the national authorities, otherwise they are prohibited from earning advertising or subscription (crowdfunding) income, while all social media users will then be banned from sharing content from such "unverified" information channels (Russia has, 2024).

Several independent Russian journalists abroad were investigated, tried without fair procedural guarantees and sentenced to lengthy prison terms in absentia, followed by the pursuit by Moscow of their extradition on trumped up criminal charges. It presents a clear sign of the policy of "transnational repression" widely engaged by Moscow (Russia seeks, 2024). This policy includes also quite successful attempts to instrumentalize Big Tech platforms to increase their pressure on the independent media online, and to deprive the public from access to independent

channels of information (Apple, 2024). It is supplemented by the slow-downs and blockages of YouTube, Telegram, Signal, Viber, Discord and other communication services. Local ICT providers are obliged to execute administrative decisions to block specific resources or media.

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

All respondents are confident that information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructures extend to all geographic areas in Russia, both urban and rural, and generally meet the information needs of most people. Indeed, 88 percent of Russian households have Internet access via a fixed or mobile network (Russian Federation, 2023). As to the information needs of people with disabilities, people who are not literate, and people who speak non-dominant languages, the picture is not so bright. One panelist who recently authored a story on a sight-impaired person noted the lack of books in Braille text, several panelists noted the ongoing replacement of sign language interpretation with the running line by the regional TV stations, apparently for economic reasons.

Most general interest information channels, including radio, television, newspapers or magazines, and digital or social media are primarily sources of pro-governmental information, therefore they are made accessible to the public, as the government is interested in a wider circulation of loyal information. In the opinion of a panelist, a disruption to a telecommunications infrastructure anywhere in Russia can happen only by the decision of the authorities in an emergency situation. The authorities will decide whether the public will have access to another information system or device. In the words of another panelist, "primary limitations on digital access are not economic, but rather stem from censorship." This underlines a general perception of Russia's model of Internet regulation and control as "cyber, or digital authoritarianism" (Terzyan, 2024).

Indeed, a recent report confirmed blocking of at least 279 news media domains in Russia, both domestic and foreign, from September 2023 to September 2024. It is double the number of domains blocked year-to-year (Yachmeneva, et.al. 2024). This figure includes the 81 media outlets of EU member states that were blocked in the summer of 2024, following the Council of the European Union's decision to suspend the broadcasting activities in the EU of 4 Moscow-based media outlets, in addition to the ones, sanctioned earlier (Russia's war, 2024).

A ban on publishing "information on ways to circumvent the blocking established in Russia" came into force in March 2024 (Приказ, 2023). This ban includes VPN services, Tor, anonymizers

and the like. The official reason for introducing such legislation is reportedly the need to ensure "digital sovereignty" and protection against misuse of technologies (Yachmeneva, et.al. 2024).

Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for government information.

While the right of access to information and freedom of information are formally guaranteed in Russian law, which, according to the panelists, does not contradict international standards, the practice is far from being adequate. Interestingly enough, the latest annual report of the national ombudsperson on human rights, Rt. Gen. Tatiana Moskalkova, is void of even mentioning these right and freedom. The chapter on freedom of speech in this report is predominantly about press events with the ombudswoman, purported violations of the rights of Russian journalists by Western governments and "deathly threats" to media freedom in Ukraine. "Whataboutism", the PR strategy of responding to an accusation with a counter-accusation instead of a defense against the original accusation, is indeed widely employed by the government entities and their spokespeople in their interactions with the press and the public.

The panelists particularly pointed to further closure of once publicly accessible information on the state of Russian economy and finance, discontinued practice of public hearings with the policymakers, and an orchestrated nature of interaction between the national or regional governmental figures and the press and public. The annual theatrical "hot-line" Q&A sessions of President Vladimir Putin is a blatant example of this negative trend. Those who challenge lies by the authorities through their use of the right of access to information may face the now "popular" accusations of "discreditation" and "high treason" often followed by actual prosecution.

Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow.

Foreign ownership on the media in Russia is effectively forbidden since 2016. At the same time the government owns or controls the national media through various non-transparent enterprises, the largest being the National Media Group and Gazprom Media. Panelists could not remember a case when the antimonopoly authorities intervened in cases of media concentration, although formal media market restrictions are in place.

This system is reproduced in the provinces, typically through a chain of non-commercial "autonomous regional institutions" established by the local public authorities. In the words of a panelist from one of the regions, RIA "Voronezh" runs 90 percent of all general interest news outlets in the Voronezh region, including one

in each administrative district. With total of 69 media outlets, it is present as a blended regional content website, a Telegram channel, and an account in Russian social media. In addition to direct public funding, the regional government provides its journalists with multiple "prizes" for their coverage "of the special military operation [the official term for Russian invasion in Ukraine] and its heroes from the region, consolidation of our society in its support of the Army, advancement of traditional family values and stories about families with many children" (Сотрудники, 2024).

An alternative to such "prize-winning" information flow could be Novaya Vkladka, an online media covering life in the Russian provinces through the eyes of the local journalists, anonymously or under a penname. Through its website and social media channels, it is actively seeking more correspondents and provides a virtual "Workshop on Documentary Stories" to train its future freelancers.

Print distribution in Russia is also monopolized, as reported by a panelist from Belgorod. The press kiosks in the region were bought through a zero-interest credit by the municipal media undertakings that abuse their current position and prevent independent press from being sold through their chain.

Like the year before, opinions of the panel were split over whether the "Public Television of Russia" can indeed be called a public service media. Those in favor noted that it is the only national channel with content produced [by state-run local TV companies] in the regions. Those against commented that "it is dependent on state narratives and does not give balanced news information."

Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.

The panelists pointed again at the existence of two parallel systems of Russian general interest media. Those inside the country are totally dependent on the government, governmental funding and/or perks, permissions to access information, attend press conferences, and generally all sorts of interferences in the editorial process by the authorities.

Despite the fact that "Public Television of Russia" (OTR) bravely claims its freedom "from external and internal censorship" (О телеканале, 2023), the panelists, like last year, questioned its editorial independence as well. The station continues to encounter financial challenges due to the government's reluctance to provide sufficient financial backing for the broadcaster focusing on funding the media that reach broader and less educated audiences. The OTR budget decreases since 2023; as approved by the Federal law for 2025 it stands at mere RUB 2,378 million rubles ($23 million) with further drop to RUB 1,981 million in 2026 (Приложение 24,

2024, ч. 23). As the state and non-state media in Russia implement the same obligations to the government, their competition is superficial and should rather be called complementation. Therefore, said a panelist, there is no discrimination in their ability to access/ import equipment, access to the Internet, favorable tax breaks, or subscriptions to international news services, etc.

The second media line-up – in exile abroad, struggles to achieve financial sustainability, with only limited opportunities to develop viable commercial revenue. An important element of its sustainability is quality of the content. The media in exile cover important topics and alternative perspectives that are hushed up by the pro-governmental propaganda. No wonder, research shows that in 2022-2024 their reach has increased from 24 to 35 million subscribers (Locking Down, 2024, p. 19).

Principle 3: Information Consumption and Engagement
Score: 9

The panelists noted the growing suspicion and even fear in interactions between media, civil society organizations and governmental institutions. The overall level of media literacy in Russia remains low. With the absence of community media, and omnipresence of staged political talk-shows on national television, public use of information is limited. In their turn, media in exile attempt to maintain community links with their audiences, often established above the governmental barriers.

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

Panelists believe that the existing mechanisms of protection of personal data are "quite sufficient". Laws and govermental regulations are in place and are implemented to investigate cases when corporations or public officials do not protect personal data in a proper way and/or purposively sell (leak) it. The government has recently intensified search for those who "transfer" personal information from such databases as flight passenger records, real estate owners, food delivery orders, mobile phone exchanges and their geolocations. The reason is that these personal data have been widely used by the investigative journalists abroad to uncover governmental surveillance and harassment of political opponents, as well as revealing corruption among elites. Joint investigations by the exile media in collaboration with foreign journalists have reportedly led to "the identification and arrest of Russian agents on EU territory" (Locking Down, 2024, p. 25).

Most recently, in November 2024, the Parliament amended the Criminal Code to specifically penalize a transfer of "computer information containing personal data to foreign citizens, foreign organisations or foreign state agencies" (Criminal liability, 2024).

"Such measures hinder journalistic work and the dissemination of information crucial for the public", acknowledged another panelist. Another panelist, said that the laws are "enforced selectively, safeguarding those in power who seek to conceal stolen luxury assets or sensitive war-related information."

In addition to governmental blocks of access to independent information channels, the latter face technical attacks on their resources, such as DDoS attacks. One panelist pointed to a recent report (Yachmeneva, et.al. 2024) which described large-scale cyber-attacks on Meduza, in February and April 2024, that additionally were blocking its mirror websites, attempting to hack journalists' accounts, and disrupting the media's crowdfunding system. In October 2024, Novaya Gazeta Europe reported a similar scale attack. Generally Russian media in exile have access to digital security training and tools.

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

After a long period, when the Russian authorities were claiming that media literacy was not a policy priority, situation has changed. The government decided to lead the trend with its own media literacy model. By decree of the Government, all schools must establish a "Media Center" as part of their additional educational offerings for the schoolchildren. As of 2024, 158 thousand children take their courses (Демина, И., Мельникова, Н. 2024, с. 27). A panelist familiar with the practice noted, that the offerings consist of workshops where "Western media are blamed for being biased, while Russian media outlets are not critisized." Another panelist continued: "Media literacy is promoted by the state in schools and for civil society, but the problem is that it is used to serve propaganda and incite hatred… in an authoritarian environment." A yet another panelist added that, typically, "media literacy is understood by the country leaders as upbringing of students into politically loyal citizens."

As both professional and non-professional content producers in Russia are widely used to spread disinformation, fact-cheking does not seem to be a priority for them. Still, some media inside Russia, predominantly those focusing on business information, promote fact-checking among their editorial staff and wider public. For example, online projects SCAN, by the news agency Interfax, and RBC-Trends, by the media company RBC, highlight the technics of verifying facts for the journalists, editors, authors and PR experts, so as to keep trust of their audiences.

Recent research results indicate that "only citizens who are already somewhat skeptical and interested in alternatives might react positively to news literacy education", and they "constitute

a minority in Russia" (Shirikov and Syunyaev, 2024). The same sociological study concludes that even though the respondents clearly discerned that pro-governmental content, that in itself "did not spur skepticism toward this channel," or made them consider it as something overly concerning. In other words, media literacy programs may increase interest in alternative information sources but cannot erode propaganda's influence.

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

The Russian Federation habitually does not provide data on whether and how the general population uses freedom of speech and right to information, e.g. in its official responses to the regular UNESCO Survey on Public Access to Information. It happens, in particular, because of lack of a dedicated to this right oversight institution. Still, the administration of the President regularly reports on the number of requests for information received by him. In 2023, this number totaled 146,736 (including some 20 percent requests from abroad) (Информационно-статистический, 2024).

In the words of a panelist, "ordinary people in Russia tend to express their opinions and practice free speech only in moments of extreme desperation." She gave examples of infrequent video appeals to the authorities by residents of the Kursk Region who lost their homes due to the Ukrainian military's advance, and desperate demands by the mothers and wives of frontline soldiers. But once the relocated residents started to show signs of activism, such as coordination of a rally in the main square of Kursk, their group in the social media was blocked by the government. There is also some occasional room for on-site free political discussions organized by online enthusiasts team Timepad in Moscow, but also in other cities of Russia. The topics include Russia's future, emigration, democracy and fascism, protest poetry, ecological problems, etc.

Although numerous political talk-shows exist on national TV and interactive formats proliferate on social media, these ways of communication, noted a panelist, "do not create real interactions between the authorities and ordinary people." Another panelist commented that monopolization of the media market by the government had led not to canceling of debates in the media, "but rather to a monopolization of the right to discussions." She said that an abundance of talk-shows on TV simply reproduces those with alternative opinions as "marginal individuals". One of the panelists had such personal experience in 2024. Social media, first of all, Russian-based OK.ru and VK.ru, are tightly monitored by both the law-enforcement and loyal users for "disrespectful" statements in regard to the public authorities and the military.

There are serious negative consequences for "improper" exercise of freedom of speech and the right to information with highly disproportionate penalties for discrediting the military and spreading "fake news". For example, journalist Roman Ivanov was sentenced in March 2024 to seven years' imprisonment for posting on social media a United Nations report and a New York Times article about crimes concerning the killing of civilians in Bucha, Ukraine (Russian journalist, 2024).

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

With the current funding model of major national and local media in Russia through public funds, market research and audience research are not important for them. Such research, though, makes sense for purely entertainment media where competition takes place and commercials play their role. Letters to the Editor in general interest media are no more published, online comments are strictly moderated and typically not answered, while the Russian media are not familiar with the routine practice of voluntary publishing corrections. Media engagement with independent NGOs is also problematic, as the latter are suspiciously viewed as candidates for the "foreign agents" status, dangerous for the media that quote them without a specific labeling text attached (including retroactively). Providing feedback may also be dangerous. A panelist with background in the Urals said that in his recent conversations with the journalists working there, they admitted that people became reluctant when asked to be interviewed.

There are also local online communities in the social media that often become very popular. A panelist cited Korocha Naiznanku, which covers events in a town of Korocha with the population of six thousand. In the nine years of existence its subscription passed the figure of 29 thousand.

Independent media seek better interaction with the audiences. A panelist cited the practice of online media for women Kosa, established in 2023. Started by several female journalists, it maintains strong community links with the audience, wherein, for a nominal subscription fee, a person may take part online in weekly yoga classes, or access to the book club sessions, or movie fans' discussions, or general editorial chat. Lyudi Baikala engages its local readers by offering them an opportunity to publish, on its dedicated webpage, obituaries for their friends and relatives who fell in Ukraine during the war. Ccurrently more than 4 thousand obituaries have been provided.

Indicator 15: Community media provides information relevant for community engagement.
The panelists have agreed that community media, as traditionally defined, do not exist in Russia for lack of relevant traditions, suppression of unsanctioned grassroot initiatives and lack of political support.

Principle 4: Transformative Action
Score: 10
Quality information and public pressure currently seem to be ineffective tools in challenging the misdeeds of the authoritarian regime, and even dangerous for those who dare using them. The panelists have agreed that there are no instruments left in the public hands to hold the government to account. This dominating public perception of information bias makes irrelevant quality and factual information, prevents political dialogue between supporters of the regime and those who might have changed their views, effectively trapping citizens in their own bubbles.

Indicator 16: Information producers and distribution channels enable or encourage information sharing across ideological lines.
A recent journalistic investigation proves that Kremlin readily pumps public money into non-political or seemingly non-partisan content, mostly on TV and through social media channels (such as Telegram), that helps "raising public awareness of the positive changes in the lives of people in Russia". Their aim is the same: shape public sentiments and, by crossing the ideological lines, expand the "bubble" or "echo-chamber" of those under the pro-Putin propaganda influence (Latching, 2024).

A panelist gave an example of Moskvichka, described by its founders as the "post-sanctions glossy magazine". With the exodus of Western franchises in 2022, Moskvichka – with the reported blessing of the Presidential administration, intends to propagate "glossy patriotism" (Рейтер и Жолобова, 2023). The panelist commented that, even when content is not partisan, it can still support specific ideological perspectives: "In Russia, where media is highly influenced by political affiliations, it becomes difficult to separate truly independent content from that influenced by state or political agendas."

Panelists note that "lack of genuine diversity in media and content production ownership" limit the possibilities for a dialogue between supporters of different ideological views. "The media landscape is often one-sided, fostering an environment where only certain narratives are heard, while others are marginalized or suppressed." They also consider that the public in Russia "generally lacks a culture of open discussion". In contrast, "vibrant

discussions often emerge within the so-called opposition circles, addressing a range of critical issues, including those with social relevance." Still, research into the matter confirms, that Russian society is not only closed, it is also disconnected, "discouraging individuals from engaging with those who hold differing views and consuming information from sources that do not align with their own political beliefs" (Alyukov, 2023).

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

Kremlin propaganda has mastered in making the Russians believe that all media are "representing specific political interests, rendering pretences of objectivity unnecessary" (Alyukov, 2023). Therefore, the pro-governmental media tend to openly exhibits their own bias, presented as bias in the "sovereign" interests of Russia. Such "honesty" allows them to maintain the highest level of trust of the public (Институциональное, 2024), called by researchers "trust through belief affirmation" (Shirikov and Syunyaev, 2024).

Research provides evidence that people's views on political or social issues are shaped primarily by misinformation as "state-controlled television news, online news media, and news aggregators form a media ecology with a complicated division of labor: while TV news broadcasts are responsible for spreading political narratives, news aggregators and state-controlled online news media are responsible for reinforcing these narratives" (Alyukov, 2024).

Still, whenever an alternative voice is suddenly heard in the country, the public becomes attentive and follows it. A panelist gave an example of the public rallying behind the anti-war rhetoric of the initially weak and little-known presidential candidate, Boris Nadezhdin. Once he openly called the aggression in Ukraine "a fatal mistake" and called for freedom of speech, his supporters quickly gathered more that 100,000 signatures for his registration. Having seen hundreds of citizens lining in cold weather to put their signatures, the authorities apparently found such public engagement excessive and banned Nadezhdin from the ballot thus sending him back into political oblivion.

Several panelists refused to answer, whether there is evidence that quality information primarily influences election outcomes by saying that there are no fair or transparent elections in Russia, and their outcomes are rigged. As to the whether people follow fact-based health and safety recommendations, several panelists referred to their knee-jerk reactions to the authorities calling to evacuate from unsafe areas, bordering Ukraine, even though little is ready for their relocation.

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

The respondents praised the work of those NGOs that have survived the COVID-19 pandemic and post-2022 political purges for their brave and high-quality work. They rely on research in their practices and provide valuable support to their public. However, they noted, an increased prominence in the media of NGOs that support the military and their families, and serve as an extension of propaganda. They bring the examples of the "Russian Red Cross" active in occupied territories of Ukraine and reportedly just imitating assistance to Ukrainians, or the "League for Safe Internet", that reports to the law-enforcement on dissident artists and musicians so as to ban their performances. None of the NGOs is any more instrumental in key decision-making, such as policy formation and legislative change. Moreover, their broad activism in favor of penalizing home and gender violence was reportedly ridiculed as "promotion of Western values" and jointly used by the State Duma and the Russian Orthodox Church as an argument against this initiative (Матвеева-Мельник, 2024).

On the local level, the NGOs that protect the rights of ethnic minorities have come under threat with the adoption, in June 2024, by the Supreme Court of Russia of a decision to designate a vaguely defined non-existent "anti-Russian separatist movement" an extremist organization (В России, 2024). This legal instrument of basically outlawing ideas, not entities, presents a new type of civil society purges in Russia. For the first time, it was used, in 2023, against "LGBTQ+ movement" effectively banning public display of a rainbow flag even in pins and earrings.

Recent research by the Russian media in exile says that since the start of the full-scale aggression in Ukraine, 2,638 NGOs folded in Russia, mostly in the field of education, but also charities supporting senior people, sports activities, and other socially oriented projects. The reasons are emigration of the activists, problems with cooperation with the international NGOs and fundraising in and outside the country. In the same period, 47 NGOs folded as they were designated "foreign agents", and office of 40 foreign NGOs were shut down by the law-enforcement. (Семенов, 2024)

Russian media in exile sometimes double as NGOs. For example, an online media OVD-Info is also in human rights protection. It provides legal aid to unjustly detained and persecuted activists, collects money for their families, and facilitates moral support of the political prisoners through sending them voluntary correspondence and parcels.

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

Nationwide, it is only the annual President Putin's press conferences, which are widely publicized through TV and known. In 2024 it was combined with the "hot-line" interaction exercise with the public. Provincial governors imitate the Kremlin model by having an annual talk with the public on local issues. "I would not consider these mechanisms effective. More often than not, they serve as a form of public relations rather than genuine dialogue", notes a participant in this regard. Such PR-type activity is typically abundant of utilizing misinformation and empty promises. Participants also note the staged nature of the press events with the country leaders with either questions pre-arranged and/or participants hand-picked. Only media in exile may dare to challenge the words of Russian leaders.

Civil society instruments once established to facilitate the government in obtaining independent quality information malfunction. For example, Valery Fadeev, the controversial head of the Human Rights Council at the President of the Russian Federation and former magazine editor, is busy spreading misinformation on immigrants, calling to remove the memorial to the victims of Stalin-era purges from the vicinity of the FSB headquarters in Moscow, naming the current restrictions on civil society activists "minimal sanitary measures", supporting a freeze social spending until Russia overcomes Ukraine, etc.

Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic rights.

On this indicator of information vibrancy, panelists highlight the gap between the availability of quality information and the government's response to it. Here, they observed that it is the governing political elite which decides when and whether punish corruption in governing ranks. Their decisions are based on informal reasons and the need to protect the elite's own interests, and not the public interests. In the words of a panelist, "they can use civil society's information sources, but information from those sources about certain facts of corruption is never the real reason for punishment." Examples of such situation were provided by the events in 2024, when several corruption cases among high-ranking officials and contractors of the Ministry of Defence became prominent, following the political demise of Minister Sergei Shoigu.

Another panelist explained the situation with the story of Alexei Navalny: "The main anti-corruption figure was killed this year in a Russian prison, where he had been incarcerated for exposing corruption and his political ambitions."

The national branch of Transparency International, a leading anti-corruption global NGO, is a good example of the government's reaction to what it does. It was first designated in Russia as "foreign agent", in 2015, and then, in 2023, an "undesirable organization", effectively ceasing its operations in the country and following the independent media to exile abroad. Then, in 2024, "Transparency International – Russia in exile" was also designated a "foreign agent".

Similar observations were provided on the effects of reports of human rights violations and widespread election misconduct: "Instead of addressing these issues, the government often silences those who raise them, undermining the role of quality information in promoting transparency and accountability in governance," commented a panelist. "Any criticism of the authorities is considered to be unpatriotic", added another. In their words, "State is the key human rights violator in Russia."

3. Conclusions

Russia's overall country score stagnates year-to-year and remains at 10 points for VIBE-2025. The score for Principle 1 (Information Quality) went down one point from last year's study, mostly due to panelists' concerns as to the ongoing deterioration of professional journalism in Russia. The scores for Principle 2 (Multiple Channels) remained at the low mark of 11 points, reflecting panelists' rejection of the idea that the country's media outlets have any independence from the State and their skepticism towards Russians having freedom to create, share, and consume socially significant information. The score for Principle 3 (Information Consumption and Engagement) also went one point down from the previous year, apparently due to the lack of evidence and general pessimistic attitude of the panelists as to whether citizens inside the country have the necessary skills and tools to be media literate or access to opportunities to engage productively with the information. Still, the scores for Principle 4 (Transformative Action) increased, as some panelists believe that available information potentially supports a degree of good governance and human rights in the country.

Meanwhile, over the last year, Russia has increasingly become a closed country, a trend which intensified with the start, in 2022, of the full-scale aggression in Ukraine. Information on Russia and on Russians is becoming harder to obtain abroad, but also inside the country. The reason is a growing fear among those who produce, disseminate and consume fair information on public affairs, that what they do today might be detrimental to their safety and liberty tomorrow. The State has got rid of probably all nationally relevant and popular independent media by making them fold or forcing abroad. Today it purges the remaining local daring voices.

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РОССИЯ: БАРОМЕТР ИНФОРМАЦИОННОЙ АКТИВНОСТИ

Аннотация: Автор придерживается методологии, разработанной Международным советом по исследованиям и обмену (IREX, США) для своих ежегодных отчетов “Динамичный информационный барометр” (VIBE) о ситуации в различных странах Европы и Евразии. В исследовании рассматривается, как информация производится, распространяется, потребляется и используется в Российской Федерации. Оно основывается на четырех принципах, которые в совокупности составляют концепцию информационной динамичности: качество информации, множество каналов, потребление информации и вовлечение в нее, преобразующие действия. Всесторонняя оценка медиа и информационного сектора проводится при поддержке группы из двенадцати экспертов, которые заполнили специальную анкету и приняли участие в обсуждении результатов с автором.

Ключевые слова: качество информации, множество информационных каналов, медиапотребление, взаимодействие со СМИ

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ROSSIYA: AXBOROT FAOLIYATI BAROMETRI

Annotatsiya: Muallif Yevropa va Yevroosiyoning turli mamlakatlaridagi vaziyatni tahlil qiluvchi "Dinamik axborot barometri" (VIBE) yillik hisobotlari uchun Xalqaro tadqiqotlar va almashinuv kengashi (IREX, AQSH) tomonidan ishlab chiqilgan uslubiyatga tayanadi. Tadqiqot Rossiya Federatsiyasida axborotning ishlab chiqarilishi, tarqatilishi, iste’mol qilinishi va foydalanilishi jarayonlarini o‘rganadi. U axborot dinamikasi tushunchasini tashkil etuvchi to‘rtta asosiy tamoyilga asoslanadi: axborot sifati, kanallar xilma-xilligi, axborotni iste’mol qilish va unga jalb etilish hamda o‘zgarishlarga olib keluvchi harakatlar. Ommaviy axborot vositalari va axborot sohasini har tomonlama baholash maxsus so‘rovnomani to‘ldirgan va natijalarni muallif bilan muhokama qilishda qatnashgan o‘n ikki nafar mutaxassisdan iborat guruh yordamida amalga oshiriladi.

Kalit so‘zlar: axborot sifati, ko'plab axborot kanallari, media iste'moli, ommaviy axborot vositalari bilan o'zaro aloqalar.

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