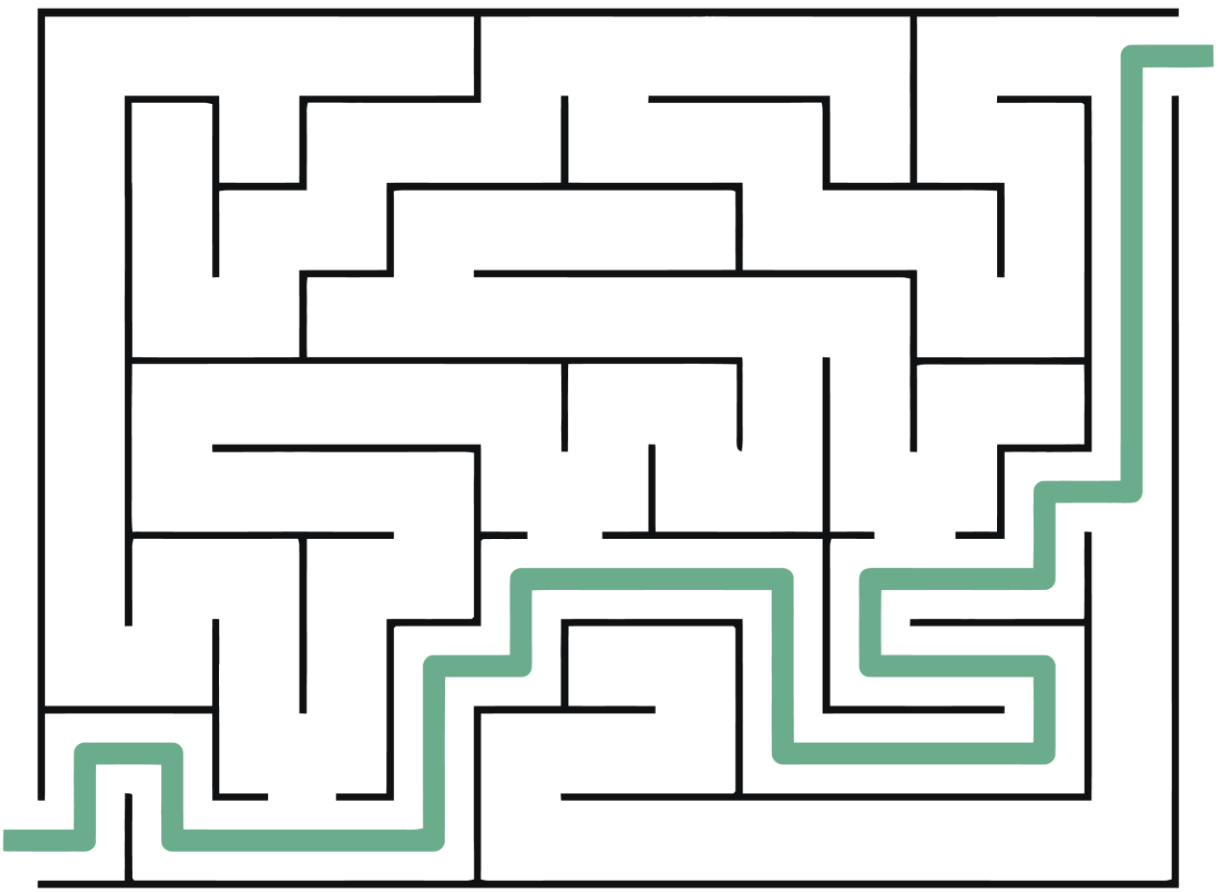
JX FUND

RESEARCH REPORT

MISSION POSSIBLE

Independent Exiled Media Continue Reaching Audiences at Home

AUDIENCE AT HOME



NEWSROOM IN EXILE

Afghanistan • Azerbaijan • Belarus • Iran • Myanmar • Nicaragua • Russia • Syria

Berlin, November 2026

Introductory Note

Authoritarian regimes are afraid of independent press. They violently persecute journalists, force entire newsrooms into exile, and pursue them across borders. They intimidate audiences and try to undermine trust in the independent press while cutting off or shutting down as many distribution channels as they can, so that information no longer reaches people in their countries and government propaganda remains the only offer.

Exiled media therefore have to fight for access to audiences back home while maintaining their trust. Besides, they face the same challenges independent media face everywhere, from fragmented audiences and polarization to dependence on platform algorithms and competition for attention, among many others. In addition, conditions are constantly shifting. Every new tool or platform change brings new opportunities and new risks, and outlets have to rebuild their distribution strategies again and again with limited resources.

That is the focus of this report. The observation rests on monitoring 246 exiled outlets across eight countries and on a survey of 33 outlets. Some of them also serve diaspora audiences or the international public, but all set out to reach audiences in their countries of origin. We looked at how these media work around blocks and pressure, through which channels and under what conditions. One important question remains open: how to reach audiences during and after internet shutdowns. An insight into the full range of strategies, including informal, community-carried, and non-internet channels such as satellite and shortwave, can help to find answers.

The purpose of the report goes beyond a mere description. Our aim is to give those who fund and support exiled media a clearer view of what it takes to reach and keep audiences at home: which communication tools, formats, and distribution systems keep reporting accessible and audiences safe. It is also a deep appreciation for the impressive work of the independent exiled media, who, despite everything, continue to reach millions of people in their home countries.

Maral Jekta, Managing Director, JX Fund

Executive Summary

This report looks at how the independent media in exile communicate with their home audiences, the ways in which they do it and the circumstances under which this is possible. The evidence from 246 outlets in Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Iran, Myanmar, Nicaragua, Russia and Syria shows that they remain closely connected to their home audiences.

Exile does not make the connection to home impossible.

Across all eight countries, EXIM maintain substantial audiences connected to their home-country information spaces. Exile has changed *how* these outlets reach audiences, but the evidence indicates that maintaining connections with audiences at home remains a central objective.

Repression level does not always correlate with technical restriction.

The same "Not Free" designation can coexist with largely open, VPN-free access or with extensive blocking and restrictions. What matters for audience access is not only the overall level of repression, but also which technical pathways are restricted and how consistently those restrictions are enforced.

State propaganda is the most frequently cited threat to audience trust.

Efforts to portray exiled outlets as foreign-controlled occur frequently. Credibility of exiled outlets is challenged by the wider information environment in which governments seek to discredit independent journalism.

Visible engagement is no longer a reliable proxy for actual reach.

Audiences continue to read, forward, and discuss reporting through screenshots, family chats, private messages, and offline sharing, much of which cannot be captured through conventional analytics.

KEY FACTS AND FIGURES

- ~812 million YouTube views a month.
- ~60 million unique website visitors a months.
- ~250 million followers on six platforms*.
- Up to 90% of one Belarusian outlet's TikTok audience is inside Belarus.
- 55%+ of views for several major Nicaraguan outlets come from inside Nicaragua.
- 18 of 33 outlets say reaching audiences at home is their main goal.
- 19 of 33 name state propaganda as the top threat to audience trust.
- 24 of 33 cite censorship and blocking as a key challenge; 27 of 33 name funding as their big-gest gap.

* Facebook, YouTube, Telegram, Instagram, TikTok and X; may include overlapping audiences.

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1 Serving Audiences from Exile: Particularities to Keep in Mind

1a Trajectories of Exile

The pathways into exile differ substantially in scale and character. JX Fund Exiled Media Dashboard currently includes 246 outlets across the eight countries covered by this report that meet our EXIM criteria.[1] Across Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Iran, Myanmar, Nicaragua, Russia and Syria, independent outlets were forced into exile after offices were raided, licenses revoked, journalists imprisoned or the legal conditions for independent reporting dismantled.

Previous JX Fund research identified a recurring sequence in the development of exiled independent media: **initial repression, successive waves of exile, a period of stabilization and organizational consolidation, and, in some cases, stagnation or renewed change**[2]. These phases are not universal, and media may fall back and forth between them as political and security conditions change. The trajectories discussed below illustrate how these phases have unfolded differently across the eight countries covered by this report.

In Afghanistan, 43% of media outlets had closed within three months of the Taliban's return, while subsequent restrictions targeted live political broadcasting and women-focused media.[3] The rapid exodus forced many of these outlets to make dramatic operational changes. Now Afghan outlets are spread across several countries, including Germany and the U.S.

Azerbaijan's independent media underwent two major waves of displacement, first between 2015 and 2017 and again between 2020 and 2021. Over the past decade, this process has pushed much of Azerbaijan's independent media beyond the country's borders, with exiled outlets now operating primarily from Berlin, Tbilisi and the United States.[4]

In Belarus, a major turning point followed the disputed 2020 election, when the authorities imposed shutdowns, blocked websites, and later designated independent outlets and channels as "extremist".[5] The closure and relocation of major independent newsrooms further dismantled the country's independent media ecosystem. Dozens of outlets established operations abroad to continue serving Belarusian audiences.[6] Poland and Lithuania are the main hubs for Belarusian exiled media.

In Iran, exile has no single trigger and predates the Islamic Republic: under the Pahlavi monarchy, broadcasting was a state monopoly that worked closely with the security service SAVAK. Successive crackdowns since then pushed journalists out, from the aftermath of the 1979 Revolution and the disputed 2009 election to the 2022–2023 "Woman, Life, Freedom" protests and the wartime shutdowns of 2025–2026, while other outlets were founded abroad from the outset. Most of the outlets were established abroad rather than relocated, and operate mainly from the UK, the US, Germany, Sweden, Belgium, the Netherlands, Turkey and Iraq.[7]

[1] See more about JX Fund Exiled Media Dashboard and EXIM criteria in Annex 6c and 6d.
[2] JX Fund, Panorama of Independent Exiled Media Amid Global Geopolitical Turbulence in 2026, May 2026.
[3] Committee to Protect Journalists, *Taliban Ban Live Political Broadcasts, Step Up Censorship*, September 2024;
[4] JX Fund, *Azerbaijan: Media in Exile Since 2015*, July 2025;
[5] European Parliamentary Research Service, *Media Environment in Belarus*, February 2022;
[6] JX Fund, *Silenced but Resilient: Belarusian Media Since the Revolution of 2020*, March 2024.
[7] JX Fund, Country Profile: Iran, 2026.

In Myanmar, the 2021 military coup was followed by license revocations, newsroom raids, and the imprisonment of journalists, pushing major independent media into cross-border models of operation.[8, 9] Many outlets have developed cross-border operations while retaining networks of reporters and contributors inside the country. These arrangements allow them to continue reporting from areas where independent journalism is restricted, although communication with local contributors remains vulnerable to shutdowns and military operations.

In Nicaragua, repression against independent media intensified after the 2018 civic uprising, triggering a first wave of exile. Some journalists later returned, but renewed repression ahead of the 2021 elections caused a second, more sustained wave of departures.[10] Exiled outlets now operate primarily from Costa Rica, U.S. and Spain, with their work increasingly dependent on digital distribution to reach audiences inside Nicaragua. Despite the loss of a domestic media infrastructure, several outlets continue to maintain substantial reach inside the country.

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, however, triggered a mass exodus of dozens of Russian outlets and hundreds of journalists, as the authorities intensified administrative and criminal repression and expanded digital censorship. Their teams are often decentralized and engage collaborators across several countries with hubs in cities such as Riga, Berlin and Tbilisi, while a small number of journalists and outlets continue to operate clandestinely inside Russia.[11,12]

Many Syrian independent outlets spent years operating from exile after repression and conflict made sustained reporting from inside the country impossible.[13] Following the fall of Bashar al-Assad's government in December 2024, some began cautiously rebuilding a physical presence inside Syria while retaining parts of their organizational, legal or financial infrastructure abroad. Thus, they developed hybrid arrangements as political conditions changed.[14]

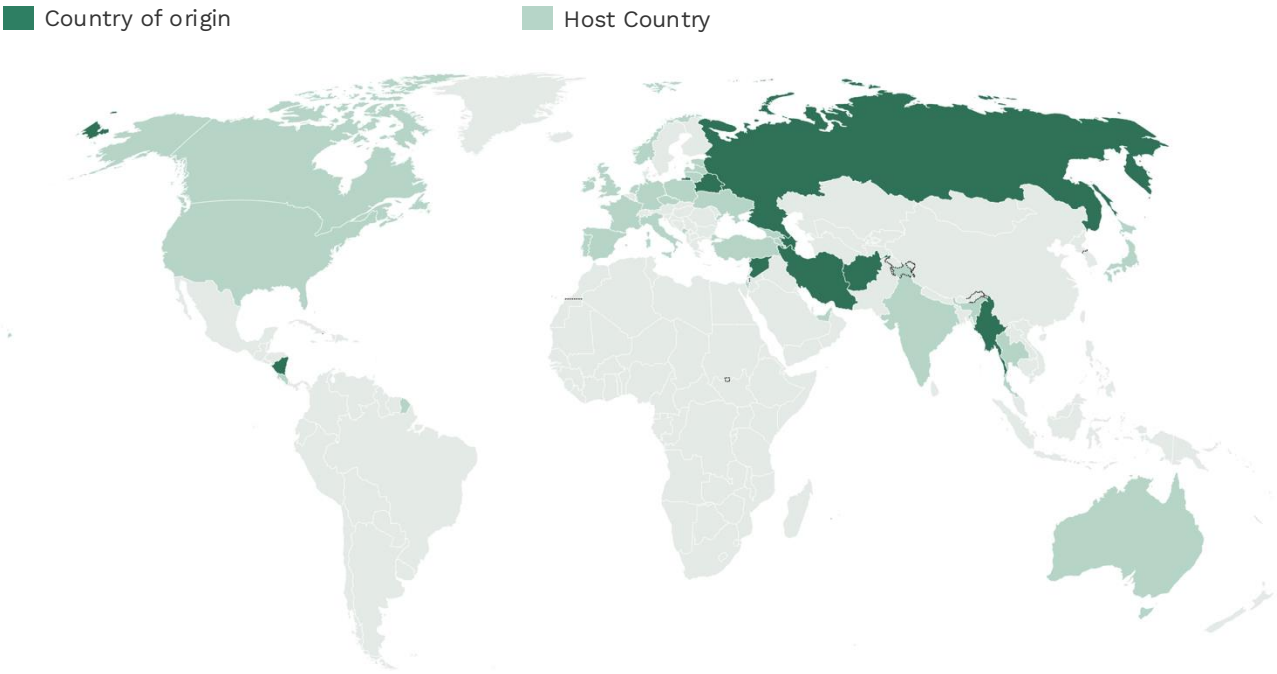
Over the past decade, JX Fund has observed a significant increase in the number of independent media outlets that are forced to operate from exile. At the same time, some contributors, sources, and correspondents may remain inside the country of origin, often working discreetly or intermittently.

Locating exiled teams beyond their core team's location and country of origin, may be challenging. For security reasons, such information is not publicly available; journalists who have fled often have to flee again, and there are periods of high turnover among editorial teams. Exhibit 1 provides the best available mapping of core countries of operation of the eight exiled media sectors tracked on the JX Fund Exiled Media Dashboard.

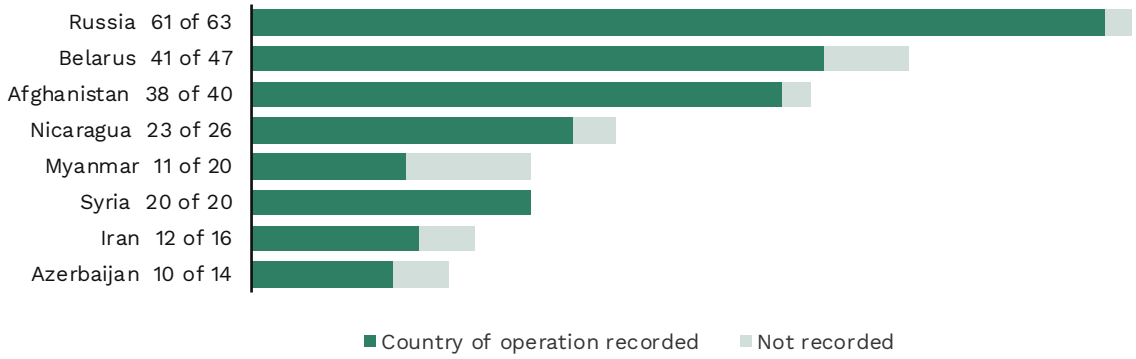
[8] International Press Institute, *Myanmar Junta Cancels Licenses of Five Independent Media Outlets*, March 2021;
[9] International Crisis Group, *From Yangon to the Borderlands: Independent Media on Myanmar's Post-Coup Front Line*, April 2025;
[10] JX Fund, *Country Profile: Nicaragua*, March 2025;
[11] JX Fund, *Locking Down the Windows: A New Phase in the Fight for Press Freedom in Russia*, September 2024;
[12] JX Fund, *Innovation as the Driving Survival Force: The State of Russian Independent Media in Exile*, November 2025.
[13] JX Fund, *Country Profile: Syria,* 2026
[14] RSF, *RSF Calls on Syria's New Authorities to Adopt Seven Priority Measures in Line with Their Promises to Safeguard Press Freedom*, January 2025;

Exhibit 1

Exiled newsrooms origins and operation hubs (N=216)



OUTLETS TRACKED AND LOCATIONS RECORDED



1b Adapted Production Conditions, Audience Trust and Capacity Gaps

Despite operating from abroad, most surveyed EXIM continue to prioritize audiences inside their country of origin. Among the 33 outlets that responded to the survey, 18 said reaching people inside the country was their main goal, while only four identified audiences abroad as their primary target. This goal is successfully fulfilled by the various EXIM despite the challenges posed by the authorities of their countries of origin.

EXIM's ability to reach audiences at home depends on access to distribution infrastructure, including the internet, mobile connectivity, and platforms; access to sources and the ability to verify information from inside the country; and the organizational capacity to sustain reporting and distribution under pressure.

How many people EXIM can actually reach also depends on the portion of the population that is online in the first place. As shown in Exhibit 2, internet access varies considerably across the eight countries covered by this report, from more than 94% of the population in Russia and Belarus to 25.5% in Afghanistan. Estimated audiences on social media are smaller than the overall online population in every country for which data are available. The examples of Iran and Myanmar show that internet access alone does not guarantee that EXIM can reach audiences through the platforms they use. During internet blackouts, even this limited access can disappear, creating an additional challenge for exiled newsrooms.

Iranian journalists described relying on fragmented personal networks, intermittent calls, and repeated cross-checking during the 88-day near-total internet shutdown that began on 28 February 2026 and point out that they may receive isolated videos or testimonies without being able to contact the sender, confirm the location, or determine whether the material is current and representative.

A Myanmar outlet described how this uneven access shapes its distribution strategy:

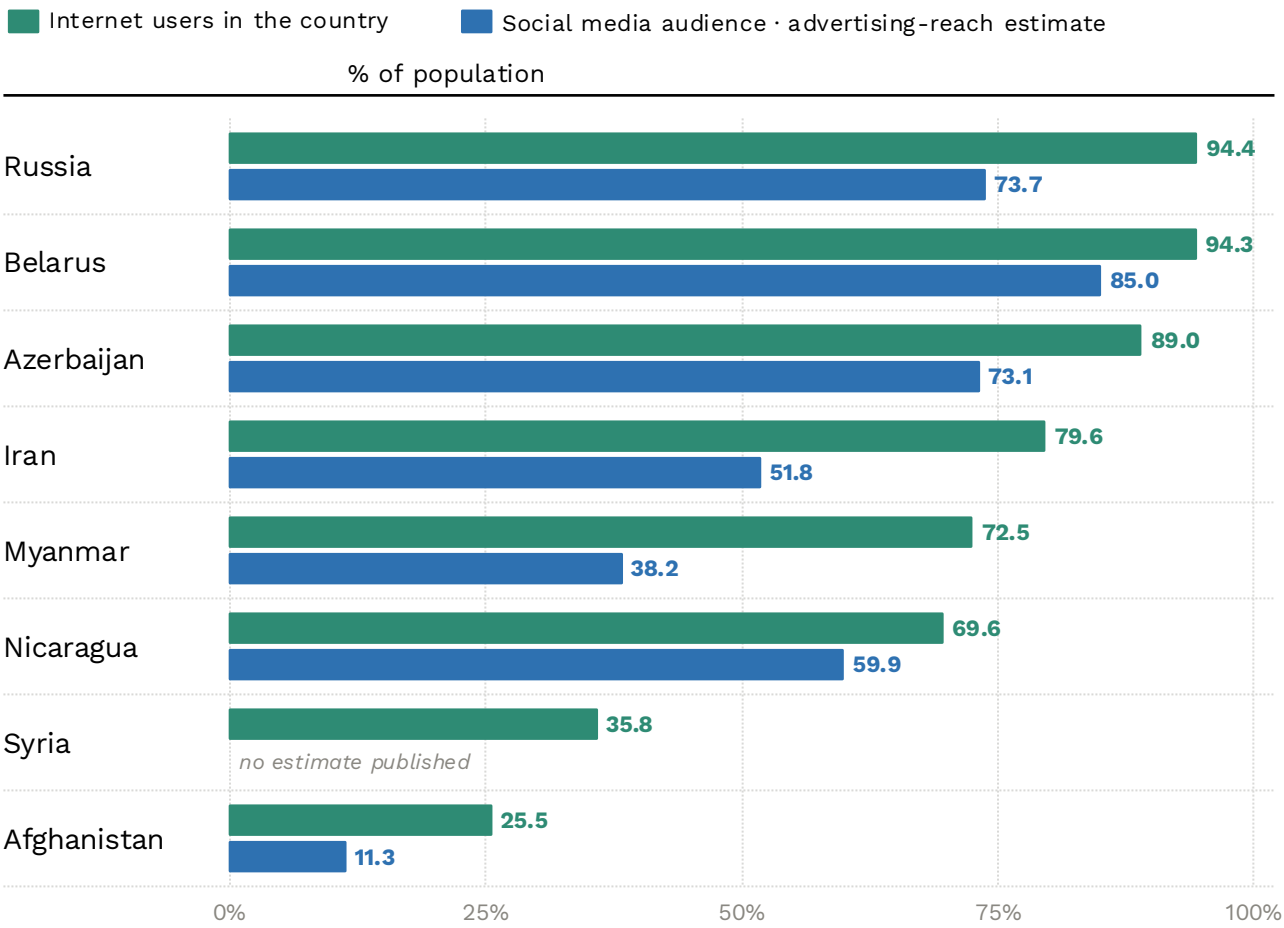
> ***"We use three methods to reach different audiences: online, satellite TV, and print. The online platform is for those who can access the internet. Satellite TV is for those who have no internet access or who don't use the internet. The print version is mainly targeted at people who have no internet access" (Myanmar EXIM)***

This illustrates how national internet penetration figures can obscure substantial differences in access within a country. In conflict-affected and rural areas, reaching audiences may require a combination of digital and non-digital distribution rather than simply expanding access to online platforms.

Exhibit 2

Who can be reached online

Share of the population online and estimated social media audience



Note: The green bars show the share of the population using the internet. The blue bar represents platform-reported advertising reach, expressed as a share of the population. These measures are not directly comparable and are presented together for illustrative purposes. Due to sanctions, Meta does not report advertising reach for Syria; the available TikTok figure is 46,500 users aged 18 and over. Iran may be understated by an unknown margin because advertising reach is attributed according to the country through which users connect.

Population	United Nations, World Population Prospects
Internet users	ITU (UN agency), GSMA Intelligence, national telecom regulators and statistics offices
Social media usage	Kepios estimate from advertising reach reported by Meta, LinkedIn, X and TikTok

Source: DataReportal, Digital 2026; Kepios analysis. Data as of October 2025; published 8 November 2025.

Reaching audiences at home is not only a matter of technology but also a matter of trust. Once newsrooms move abroad, they lose much of the direct access they previously had to events, institutions, and public officials. Information obtained remotely may lack context, making it difficult to establish where or when something happened. Local contributors and trusted intermediaries can help bridge this gap by providing first-hand knowledge, regional context, and access to voices inside the country.

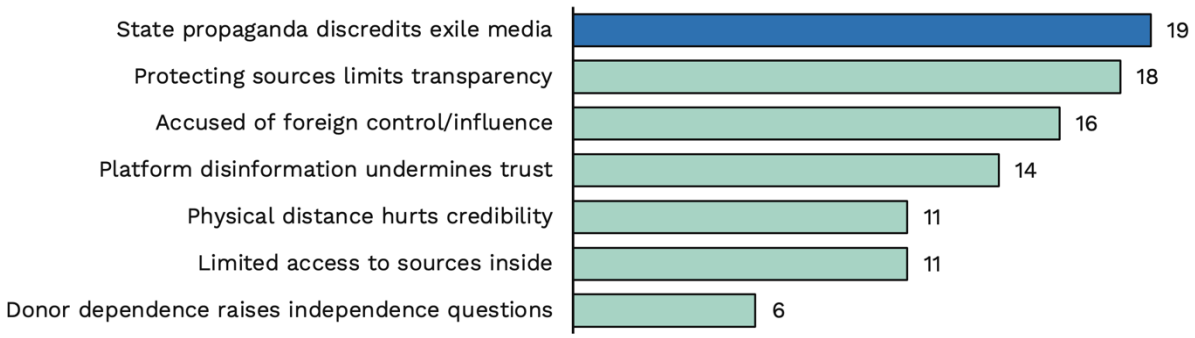
Newsrooms must cross-check information remotely while also protecting the people who provide it. Remote verification also creates risks for sources. Afghan exiled media report that fear of surveillance and retaliation makes people more reluctant to share evidence, while Myanmar outlets must verify material sent from inside the country without exposing those who provided it.

> ***To bridge the physical distance, we implement a hybrid "one-foot-in, one-foot-out" model. This involves retaining a dedicated, discreet newsroom team inside Myanmar while actively engaging stringers, citizen journalists, and local contributors nationwide. This dual approach allows us to leverage the safety and editorial independence of exile to publish uncensored, critical coverage, while utilizing our ground network to preserve real-time, ground-level reporting. (Myanmar EXIM)***

Exile creates a credibility paradox. Greater freedom to publish is offset by the difficulty of verifying information remotely. Additionally, maintaining trust requires strong domestic source networks, transparent verification methods, and a clear distinction between journalism and political advocacy. In the survey, state propaganda discrediting independent media was the most frequently cited threat to audience trust, followed by concerns about protecting sources while maintaining transparency. Portrayals of exiled outlets as foreign-controlled were also a prominent concern.

Exhibit 3

Challenges to maintaining audience trust from exile (Survey, n=33)



In Myanmar, respondents emphasised the importance of local and ethnic representation in maintaining trust. Some outlets recruit stringers and citizen journalists from ethnic states to ensure that coverage reflects local voices, perspectives, and community nuances.

Myanmar's exiled outlets face an additional challenge because information comes from territories controlled by different armed actors. Newsrooms depend on underground reporters, citizen journalists, and ethnic media partners, but communication can be disrupted during shutdowns or military operations.

Trust is closely tied to long-term local relationships and the ability to explain what can and cannot be verified. The loss of local correspondents through arrest, displacement, or funding cuts can therefore weaken both coverage and credibility within affected communities.

In Nicaragua, fear of retaliation can discourage public engagement even when audiences continue to read and share reporting privately. Survey respondents report that readership can remain stable as visible engagement declines.[15,16]

> ***The greatest challenge to maintaining credibility is a lack of rigor in journalistic work. Every mistake made by an independent exile-led outlet is viewed by much of the public as a flaw in independent journalism as a whole. (Nicaraguan EXIM)***

In Syria, greater openness after December 2024 initially increased audiences for independent media, but the information environment also became more competitive and polarized.[17] Independent outlets compete with state, commercial, and regionally backed media, while social media algorithms may favor emotive or sectarian material. Media managers have also reported bots and non-Syrian traffic inflating audience figures. In this context, large follower count does not necessarily indicate domestic trust or meaningful engagement.[18]

Many EXIM also reach diaspora communities, which can provide feedback, redistribute reporting, and act as a bridge to people inside the country. Diaspora users can engage more openly and may engage in political advocacy, while audiences inside the country may prioritize discreet access, practical information, and careful verification. For EXIM, serving both groups requires balancing these expectations without allowing diaspora debates to displace domestic realities.

Afghan exiled media also rely heavily on WhatsApp and maintain close links with the wider Afghan diaspora. These networks help sustain circulation when public engagement is dangerous, although they may also create a gap between diaspora priorities and the immediate information needs of people inside the country.[19]

> ***Diaspora networks help circulate our content through social media and family connections inside Afghanistan. However, the Afghan diaspora is highly fragmented across communities and along political and ethnic lines. People may be more likely to share content that aligns with or reinforces their existing beliefs. As a result, our reporting may be shared selectively or without its full context, which may not accurately reflect our editorial intent. (Afghan EXIM)***

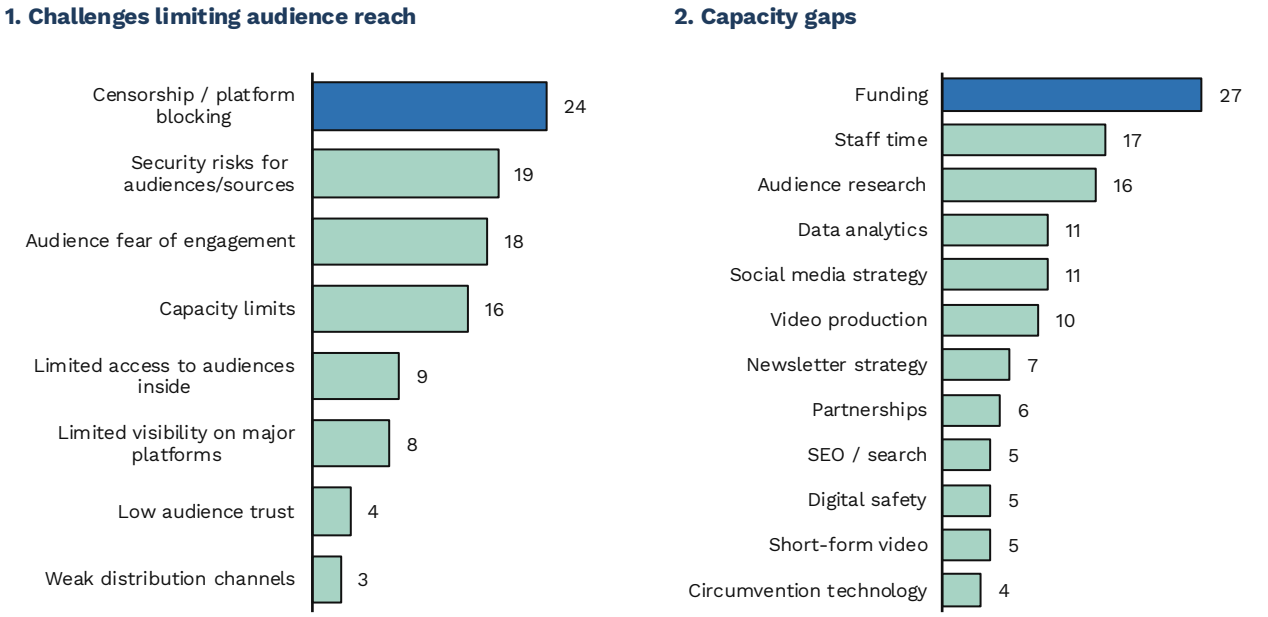
[15] JX Fund, *Country Profile: Nicaragual*, March 2025;
[16] Confidencial, *Audience in Nicaragua Continues to Trust the Press in Exile*, May 2024.
[17] Atlantic Council, *Sectarianism, Social Media, and Syria's Information Blackhole*, May 2025
[18] Enab Baladi, *Syrian Media Institutions Discuss Draft Code of Professional Conduct*, September 2025
[19] JX Fund, *Afghan Journalists in Exile: An Exploratory Study by JX Fund*, December 2023

Some Russian exiled media have encouraged subscribers living abroad to forward reporting to relatives through WhatsApp and family group chats, allowing content to enter Russia through private interpersonal networks rather than through visible subscriptions to blocked or designated outlets.[20]

Legal restrictions can further affect the relationship between outlets and their audiences. Russian EXIM respondents report that “undesirable organization” designations have forced some outlets to stop accepting donations from within Russia and increased the risks associated with reporting, collaboration, and contact with sources. Nevertheless, EXIM can retain substantial domestic audiences even under severe restrictions, while the same conditions that make these audiences difficult to reach also make them harder to observe and measure.

Exhibit 4

Challenges and capacity gaps (Survey, n=33)



Questions asked: "What are the main challenges limiting your audience reach?" (select all) · "What are your biggest capacity gaps in reaching audiences?" (select all that apply)

Beyond censorship and security risks, outlets point to significant capacity gaps (see Exhibit 4). Funding underpins these gaps, determining whether outlets can retain staff, sustain production and distribution, and invest in audience research.

Few EXIM meet all the conditions for maximally effective reporting simultaneously. Some have reliable access to distribution channels but weaker source networks, while others maintain strong sources but lack the resources for consistent coverage and distribution. Although many have adapted their technology and sourcing practices to years of restrictions, their capacity to sustain and evaluate these adaptations remains uneven.

[20] JX Fund, *Locking Down the Windows: A New Phase in the Fight for Press Freedom in Russia*, September 2024

2 Successful Strategies of Digital Diversification

2a Impressive Reach of Exiled Media Worldwide

EXIM devote substantial resources to maintaining audience reach. Exhibit 5 shows aggregate audience activity and cumulative platform following across the eight countries covered by this report in relation to the number of internet users in each country.

Exhibit 5

Aggregate traffic and platform following: country × platform

1 · MONTHLY ACTIVITY

Traffic and views counted over one month. Each figure represents the combined total for all monitored outlets in the country.

	Website visits millions/month	per internet user	YouTube views millions/month	per internet user	Internet users millions
Afghanistan	0.99	0.09	16.2	1.44	11.3
Azerbaijan	0.22	0.02	23	2.47	9.3
Belarus	4.2	**0.50**	**280.6**	**33.01**	8.5
Iran	18.4	**0.25**	85.9	1.16	73.8
Myanmar	0.31	0.01	77.7	1.95	39.8
Nicaragua	0.95	0.19	14.1	**2.87**	4.9
Russia	34.3	**0.25**	**314.7**	2.31	136
Syria	0.34	0.04	0.96	0.10	9.3

Note: In Belarus five YouTube channels account for 96% of the country's monthly views, much of it from short vertical videos that recommendation algorithms distribute far beyond the subscriber base. Views are not broken down by country, so some of this audience may be located outside Belarus. Reference periods differ across the indicators: website visits are from July 2026, YouTube views and platform following from July 2026, and internet users from November 2025. See the Appendix for details. The 'per internet user' figure divides the monthly total by the number of people online in that country. (DataReportal, November 2025); blue shading marks the three highest ratios in each of those columns.

2 · CUMULATIVE FOLLOWING

Cumulative following, in millions

	Facebook	YouTube	Telegram	Instagram	TikTok	X
Afghanistan	13 n=29	1.8 n=30	0.06 n=12	2.9 n=28	0.15 n=8	3.8 n=32
Azerbaijan	2.2 n=14	3.4 n=13	0.01 n=6	1.6 n=12	0.55 n=12	0.05 n=13
Belarus	0.86 n=37	5.4 n=39	0.43 n=44	1.2 n=36	1.9 n=29	2.1 n=35
Iran	3.1 n=13	1.4 n=14	1.6 n=13	23.4 n=15	0.08 n=2	2.8 n=15
Myanmar	53.7 n=19	12.8 n=18	0.27 n=13	0.6 n=12	3.7 n=7	2.8 n=13
Nicaragua	7 n=25	2.1 n=26	0.02 n=6	0.6 n=23	1 n=13	1.1 n=22
Russia	4.5 n=56	39.8 n=54	6.3 n=63	11.7 n=59	4.4 n=34	6.8 n=56
Syria	9.8 n=20	0.5 n=20	0.13 n=9	1 n=18	0.04 n=7	0.51 n=20

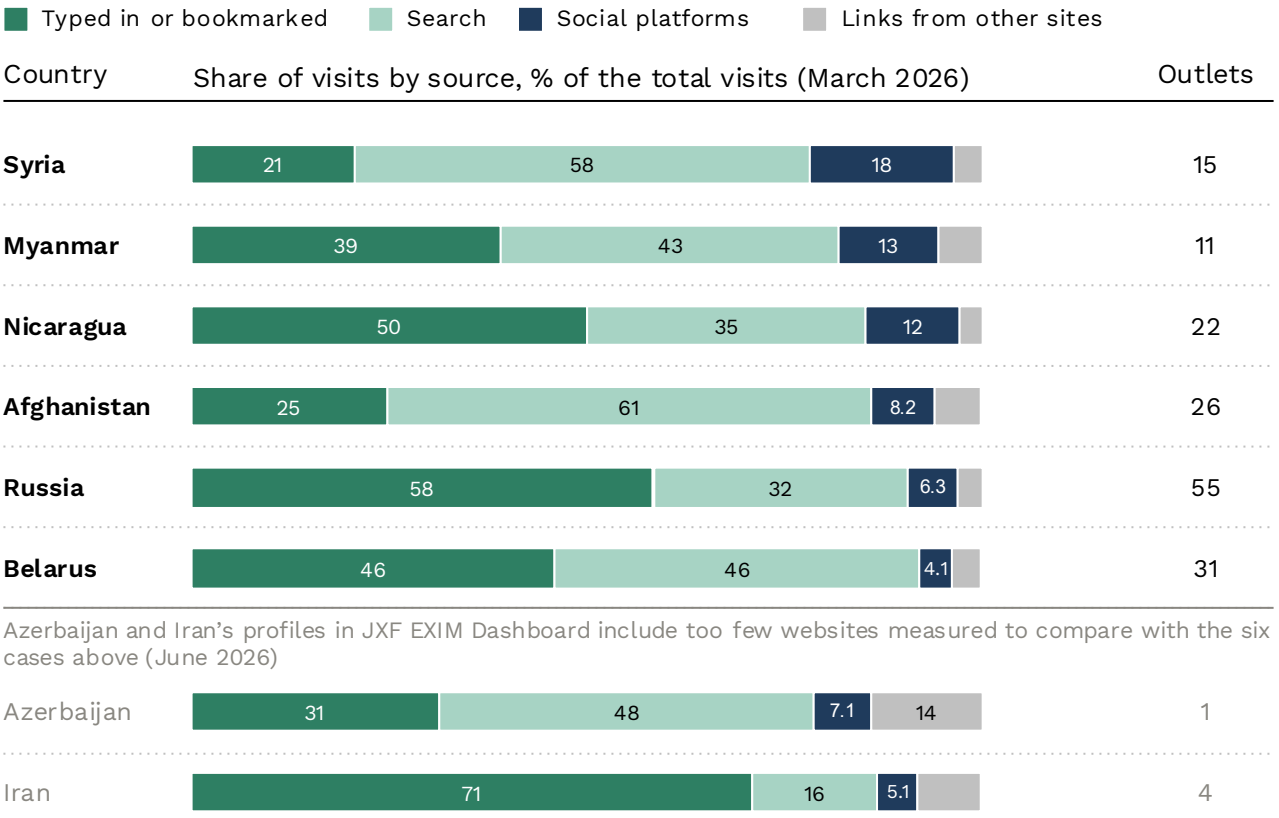
Note: "n" is the number of outlets behind a figure. Facebook is reported as Likes.

Source: internet users from DataReportal "Digital 2026"; comparison figures from Similarweb

Most outlets in the survey report that their reach has improved over the previous year, even though a majority say that their content is frequently blocked, restricted, or throttled. As shown in Exhibit 6, most EXIM gain their website reach through direct search or website visits, rather than social media referrals.

Exhibit 6

Sources of Website Traffic



Social networking platforms provide EXIM an additional access to communicating with audiences. Their role varies by country. For example, for Syrian exiled and hybrid outlets Facebook is a particularly important channel for reaching people inside Syria. The 20 outlets monitored by JX Fund had a combined Facebook following of approximately 9.8 million as of July 2026. These newsrooms have kept an audience base of that size after years of operating from abroad.

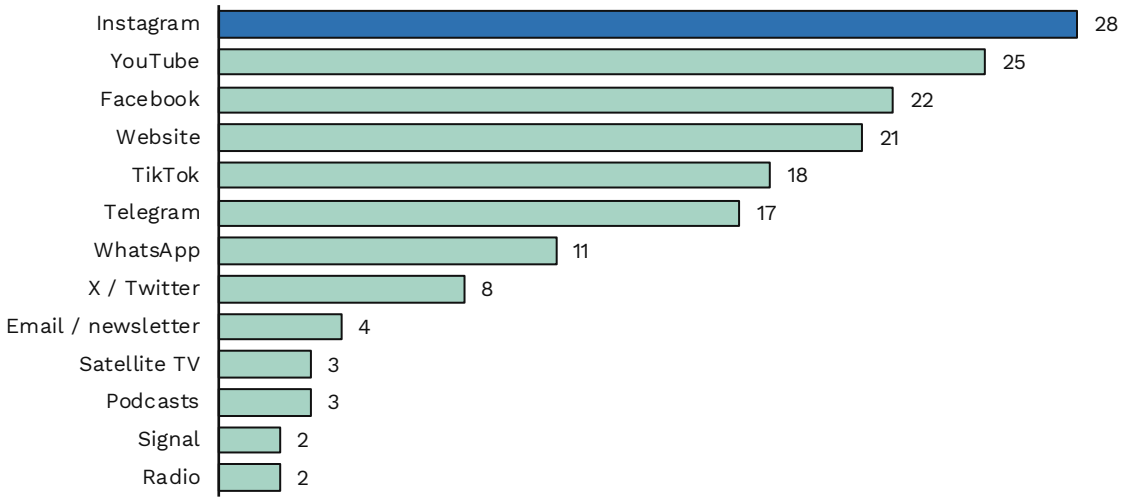
> ***"Facebook gives us the most meaningful reach and engagement inside Syria. It remains the most widely used platform for news, enables broad sharing through pages and community groups, and consistently drives audiences to our investigations and in-depth reporting (Syrian EXIM)."***

Exhibit 7 compares the platforms outlets consider most important with changes in their audiences over time.

Exhibit 7

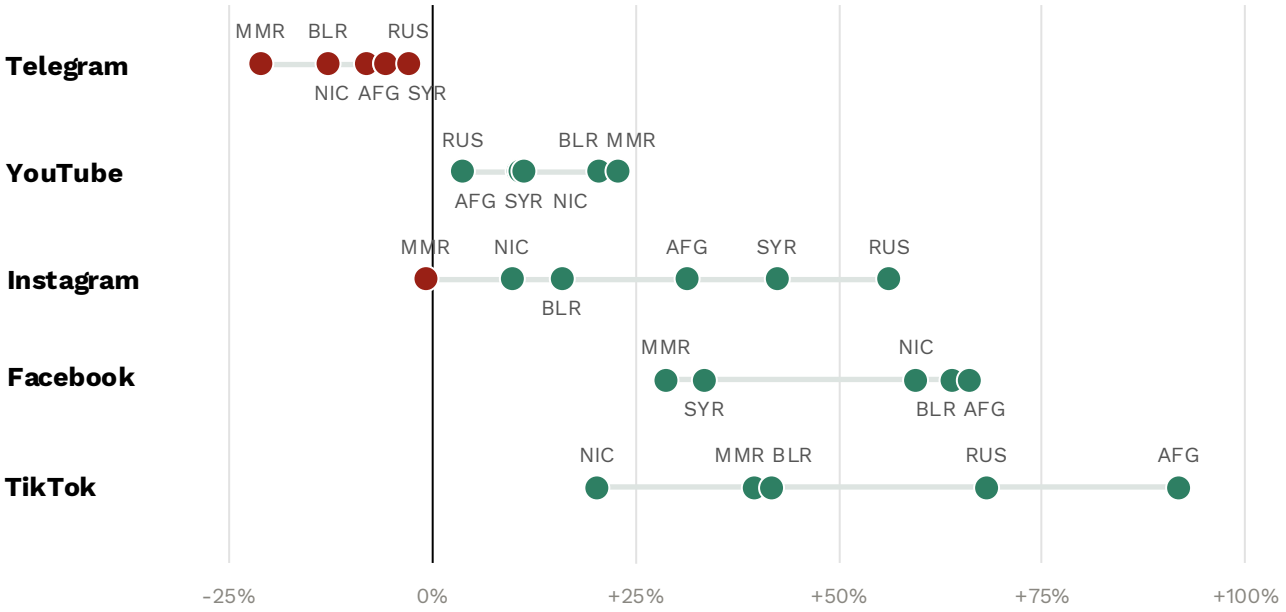
Platforms: importance and change

1. Most important platforms (Survey, n=33)



Question asked: *"Which platforms are currently most important for reaching audiences inside the country? Please select up to five."*

2. Change in Platforms' Audiences from May 2025 to July 2026



Note: Meta's platforms and video lead. Instagram (28), YouTube (25) and Facebook (22) top the list, with outlets' own websites close behind. Facebook dominates in Afghanistan, Myanmar, Syria and Nicaragua; Telegram in Russia and Iran; TikTok and Instagram in Belarus and Azerbaijan. The chart tracks the same accounts from the first month to the last. An account is included only if it has a figure for all 15 months. The chart therefore shows changes among continuously reported accounts rather than changes caused by accounts appearing on the Dashboard later. Each data point represents between 5 and 58 accounts. Iran and Azerbaijan are not shown because their data begins only in 2026.

YouTube is an important distribution channel for exiled media, particularly where access to independent news websites has been reduced by blocking and other internet restrictions. As seen on Exhibit 5, Afghan exiled media recorded more than 16.2 million YouTube views, while Azerbaijani outlets use the platform for longer investigations and discussion programs.

However, severe throttling in Russia, alongside shutdowns, platform restrictions and weak connectivity in Myanmar and Afghanistan, can limit domestic access to video. Exiled media therefore combine YouTube with other social networking platforms, mirror sites, messaging applications such as Telegram, and downloadable formats.

TikTok is also an important distribution channel for some EXIM, particularly in countries where short-form video has a large audience. JX Fund's earlier research on Belarus found TikTok to be one of the country's largest social media, while more recent data show substantial growth in TikTok audiences for Russian exiled media. TikTok stands out in Afghanistan too. Its estimated audience grew by almost 90% between May 2025 and July 2026 (see Exhibit 7).

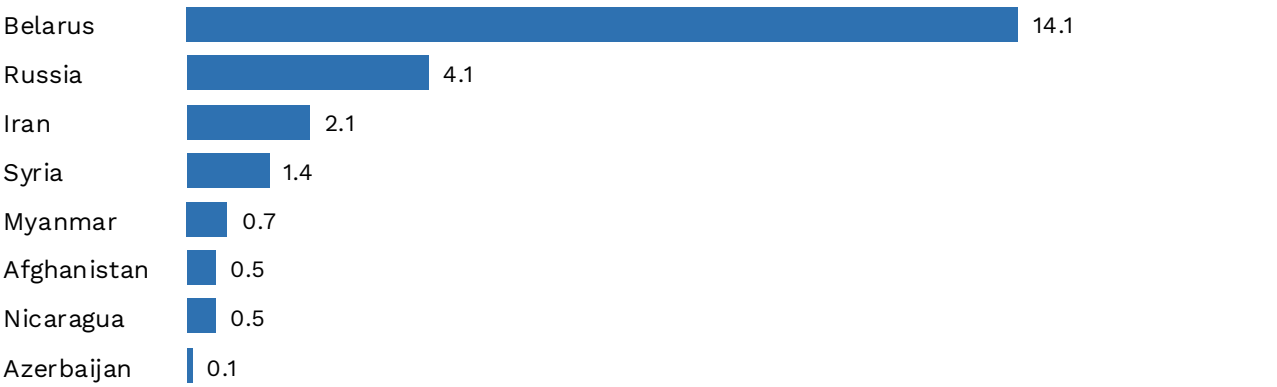
Audio and podcasts offer a supplementary format for longer-form analysis, including through streaming, messaging applications and downloaded files.

> ***"The most effective approaches have been Telegram channels, trusted messaging networks, and audience-driven reposting through personal contacts and community groups. (Iranian EXIM)"***

Exhibit 8

Telegram's popularity across EXIM sector

Telegram subscribers (per July 2026) per 100 internet users in the country



Note: An outlet with no Telegram channel is not counted, and channels are not split by where their subscribers are, so part of each audience sits outside the country. Subscriber counts are the sum of the Telegram channels of that country's exiled outlets in the JX Fund Exiled Media Dashboard, July 2026, divided by the number of people online in the country and expressed per 100 internet users. The online population comes from DataReportal "Digital 2026", data as of October 2025.

Source: JX Fund dashboard; online population from DataReportal "Digital 2026"

Telegram remains an important distribution channel across the eight countries. For audiences in restrictive environments, Telegram can provide direct access to reporting when websites or other services are blocked or restricted.

> ***Telegram provides our most meaningful daily reach inside Russia because it allows audiences to access and share our content without visiting blocked websites. For listeners of our continuous audio stream, the mobile app is equally important, as it provides stable and direct access. (Russian EXIM)***

However, Telegram also comes with its own risks. Ordinary Telegram cloud chats are not end-to-end encrypted by default, and users may face legal or political consequences for subscribing to, sharing, or interacting with media designated as prohibited or “extremist”. Heavy reliance on Telegram therefore leaves outlets and audiences exposed to changes in platform access, regulation and user-level repression.

YouTube metrics show that some exiled media outlets reach audiences at a scale comparable to, or exceeding, selected European national media outlets on individual platforms. For example, SocialBlade’s data shows that in July, the largest Belarusian outlet has almost 258 million monthly YouTube views, equivalent to around 2.5 times of the combined figure for the five European national media channels (Die Welt, Corriere della Sera, Le Monde, Gazeta Wyborcza, Süddeutsche Zeitung). Similarly, in September, TV Rain recorded 92 million YouTube views in September 2026, comparable to Germany’s Die Welt.

2b Important Multipliers: Creators and Influencers

EXIM use a range of distribution strategies to offset the effects of repression and fear. Individual readers help extend their reach by forwarding stories through private messages, family chats and community networks, sharing screenshots and redistributing content in ways that are often invisible to platform analytics.

Creators and influencers carry reporting beyond an outlet's direct audience. This matters as around 27% of people worldwide now get news from creators every week.[21]

> ***Working with creators and influencers is an effective way to expand our reach and engage audiences who may not otherwise consume independent news. These partnerships help us distribute our content more widely, introduce new audiences to our reporting, and amplify important stories through trusted voices. (Russian EXIM)***

Creators increasingly overlap with professional journalism,[22] making the boundary between an exiled newsroom and an individual creator more difficult to draw. The Reuters Institute describes emerging 'hybrid journalist-creator' models and finds that creators are generally seen as more accessible and engaging, but less trustworthy and impartial than traditional news media.[23] Creator-led projects may develop regular publication schedules, editors, source networks, verification processes, and correction policies, while established media increasingly build products around individual personalities. [24]

To give an example, since the 2021 coup, citizen reporters in Myanmar have increasingly taken on roles once held by professional correspondents, documenting events under pseudonyms and communicating through encrypted channels. Professional newsrooms therefore remain important as verification and editorial structures within decentralized contributor networks.[25]

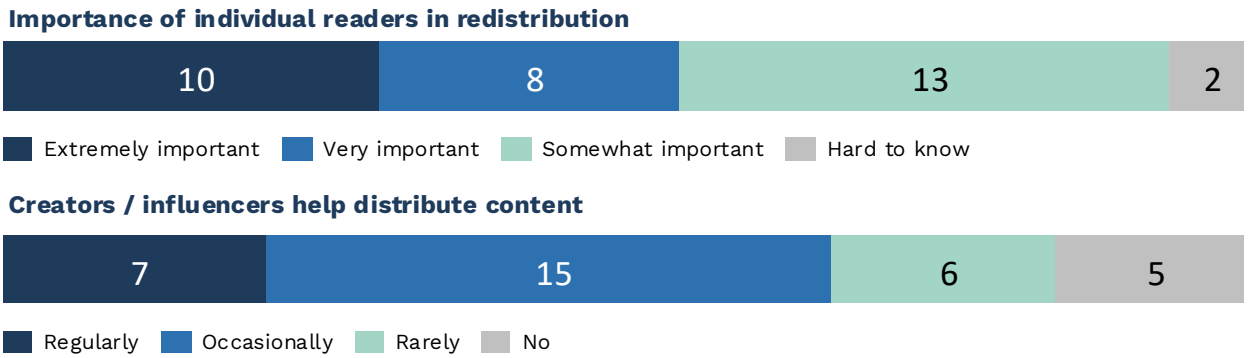
After the Assad government fell, independent journalists rebuilding Syria's information environment have also pointed to the growing role of influencers alongside professional media, particularly in shaping public perceptions.[26]

The survey shows that readers, creators and citizen reporters can extend distribution beyond established newsroom channels, while professional editorial structures remain important for verification.

[21] The Reuters Institute defines news creators as individuals or groups producing primarily through social and video networks who have some impact on public debate. Reuters Institute, Digital News Report 2026
[22] Ibid
[23] Nic Newman, *How News Creators Are Impacting Politics and Media Around the World*, Reuters Digital News Report 2026,
[24] Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA), *An Ecosystem of Truth: Russian Independent Media in Exile*, June 2026;
[25] Thu Thu Aung, *Under the Junta's Shadow: The Rise of Citizen Journalism in Myanmar*, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, July 2024.
[26] Matthew Leake, *The Pioneers Rebuilding Syria's Fragile News Ecosystem: 'The Media Needs to Break These Walls Between People'*, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, March 2025.

Exhibit 9

Readers, creators and offline reach (Survey, n=33)



Questions asked: "How important are individual readers in redistributing your content?" · "Do independent creators, influencers, bloggers, YouTubers, or public figures help distribute your content?"

Reliance on creators, however, creates some editorial risks. When reporting reaches audiences through commentators, activists, or personal accounts, the distinction between journalism and political advocacy may become harder to maintain. These new models of content production do not eliminate exposure to state control.[27]

> ***The main risks are maintaining editorial independence, ensuring accuracy, and protecting the credibility of our reporting if creators share or interpret content inconsistently. (Syrian EXIM)***

Survey responses illustrate how these collaborations work in practice. One Russian outlet invited public figures to read letters from young people about issues affecting them. A video from the initiative received 117,000 views, more than 5,000 likes and around 400 shares. Another outlet described how a video reposted by a popular blogger reached more than six million views. These examples illustrate how creators can bring reporting to wider audiences, although the results depend on the story, format and reach of the person sharing it.

In Azerbaijan, respondents described a different constraint: creators may be reluctant to collaborate with independent media because public association can expose them to government scrutiny, harassment or professional consequences. By contrast, an Afghan outlet reported that influencers based outside the country can help audiences inside Afghanistan discover and access its reporting, illustrating how cross-border partnerships can reduce some of the risks associated with public collaboration at home.

[27] Enab Baladi, *Syrian Media Institutions Discuss Draft Code of Professional Conduct*, September 2025.

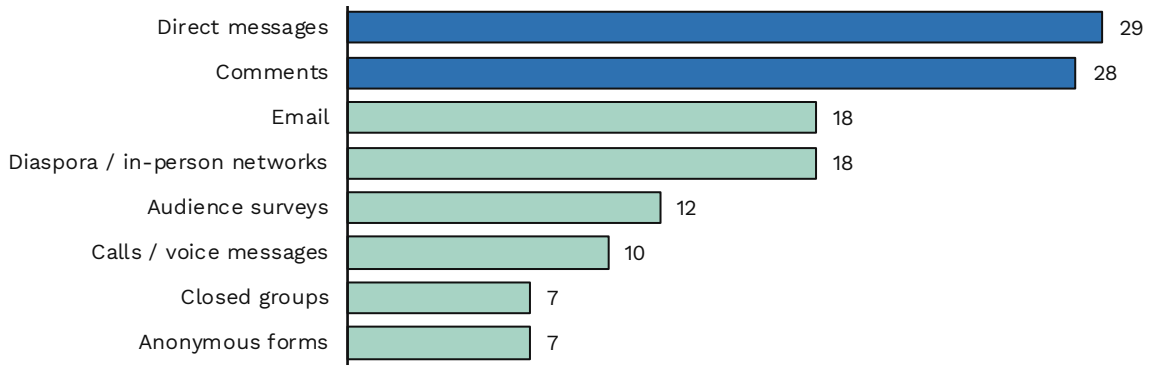
2c Beyond Reach Metrics

The survey indicates that audiences continue to seek independent reporting, but increasingly do so with caution. Public comments, likes, and shares may decline not because audiences have lost interest, but because visible engagement can create risks. Audiences therefore rely more heavily on VPNs and trusted personal networks to access and share information. Visible engagement metrics therefore provide an incomplete picture of audience reach.

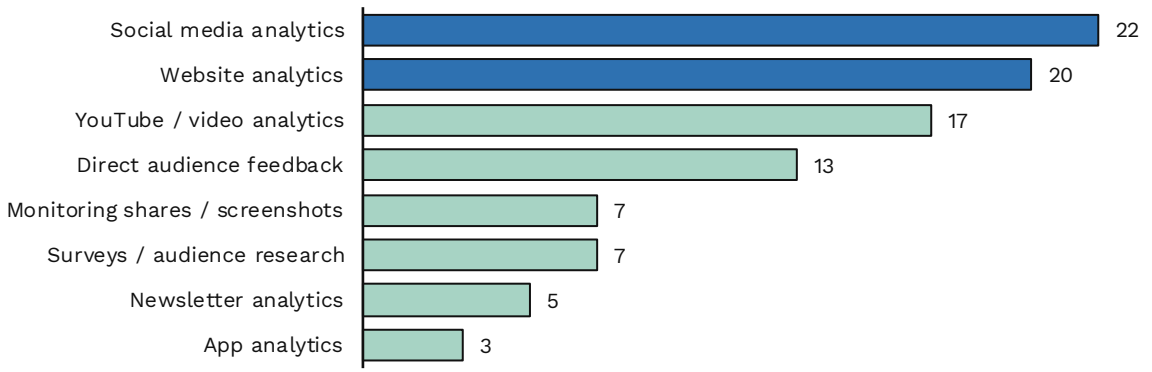
Exhibit 10

How Outlets Receive Audience Feedback (Survey)

1. How outlets receive audience feedback (n=33)



2. How exiled media measure audience reach inside the country (n=24)



Questions asked: "How do you receive feedback from audiences inside the country?" (select all · n=33) · "How do you measure audience reach inside the country?" (select all · n=24)

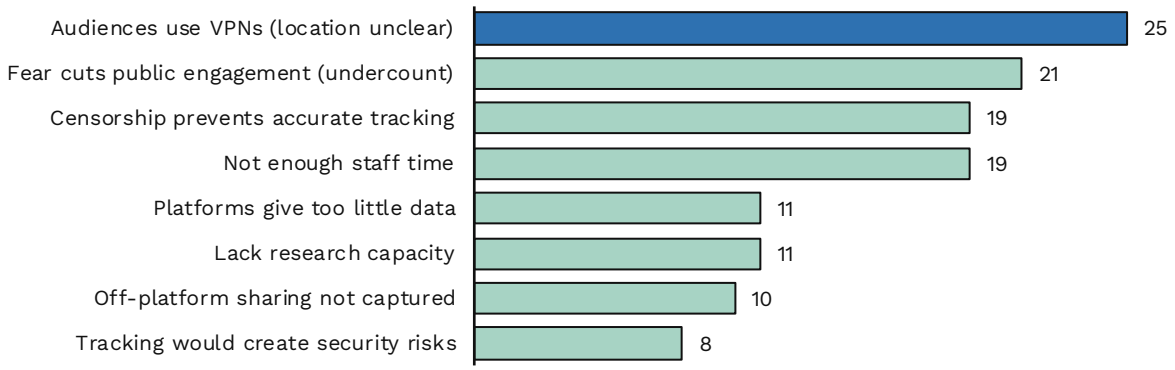
Content may circulate through screenshots, private chats, or family networks without appearing in conventional analytics. These measurement gaps extend beyond private online sharing to low-visibility and offline channels such as radio, satellite television, USB drives, Bluetooth sharing and downloaded files. EXIM and researchers often cannot determine how many people ultimately receive or redistribute this content.

In Belarus, respondents pointed to the rapid growth of Threads as a space where users discuss everyday problems, exchange personal experiences, seek advice and share opinions. For independent media, these conversations can offer qualitative insights into audience concerns and help identify opportunities for community-building beyond the distribution of news content.

VPN use can also distort location data, while shutdowns may make periods of particularly intense demand appear as sudden drops in traffic.

Exhibit 11

Why audience measurement is challenging (Survey, n=33)



Question asked: "What makes audience measurement difficult in your context?" (select all)

Audiences may avoid following or commenting on outlets labeled ‘extremist’ while continuing to access their reporting through unofficial channels. Declining visible engagement may therefore reflect fear rather than declining interest.

> ***Audiences have become cautious. Many users in Belarus have installed VPNs on their devices. People are trying to leave as few digital traces as possible. (Belarusian EXIM)***

For EXIM, these constraints make private feedback, audience research and alternative distribution channels important complements to conventional engagement metrics.

3 Cat-and-mouse Game: Circumvention Tools

3a Repression Level and Technical Restrictions

All eight countries examined are classified as “Not Free” by Freedom House and fall within the most serious category of the World Press Freedom Index (see Exhibit 14). Yet similar levels of political repression do not necessarily translate into similar levels of technical restriction: a highly repressive political environment does not automatically make online audiences the hardest to reach.

VPN usage provides one indication of how audiences respond to restrictions on access to online content, although it does not directly measure access to independent reporting. Reported VPN use varies considerably across the countries examined. Iran stands out, with approximately 86% of internet users reportedly relying on VPNs. In Russia, estimates are lower, at around 25% in 2024 and 36% in 2025. Because these figures come from different sources and use different definitions of VPN use, they should not be treated as directly comparable.

The contrast is also evident when VPN use is considered alongside the accessibility of exiled media websites. In Syria, reliance on VPNs declined after restrictions were relaxed following Bashar al-Assad's fall in December 2024. In Nicaragua, for example, most exiled media websites remain directly accessible despite the country’s highly repressive political environment.

> ***“Unlike in some more heavily censored information environments, like Russia or Cuba, audiences in Nicaragua can (for now) still access independent news websites and social media platforms without using a VPN. Currently, the primary barrier is not access but fear of surveillance and reprisals when it comes to consuming, sharing, donating or engaging with independent news. (Nicaraguan EXIM)”***

Available data on VPN usage shows VPN demand rising immediately after specific events associated with intensified restrictions. As shown in Exhibit 12, the steepest rise occurred in Myanmar, where demand increased more than seventy-fold after the 2021 coup and surged again during a later junta crackdown. Similar spikes were visible in other countries around war, election-related repression, and a 2025 internet block.

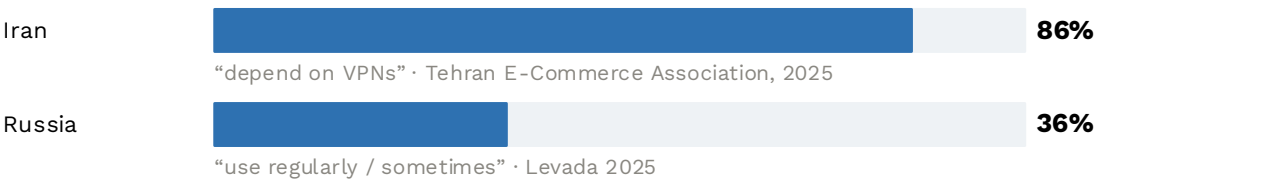
These increases indicate that audiences may seek alternative access routes when restrictions suddenly intensify.[28] At the same time, such spikes can be temporary, and commercial VPN demand does not establish that users successfully circumvented restrictions. A highly repressive government may leave exiled media websites technically accessible, while a sudden blocking measure elsewhere can trigger a large but temporary increase in VPN demand.

[28] JX Fund, *Panorama of Independent Exiled Media Amid Global Geopolitical Turbulence in 2026*, May 2026.

Exhibit 12

VPN penetration and demand surges

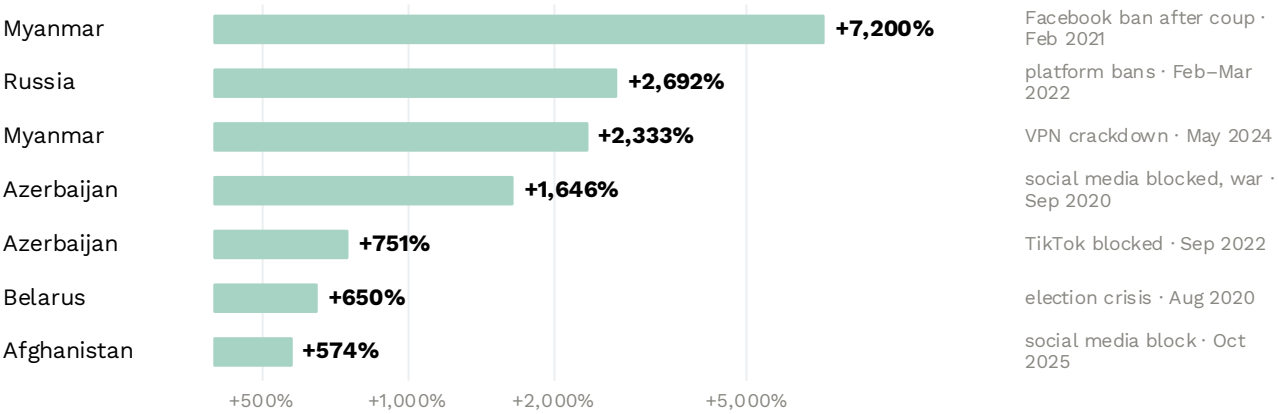
1 - SHARE OF ALL INTERNET USERS



Russia had 25% of VPN usage in 2024; the Russian figures come from different sources and use different methods of analysis. The Iranian estimate comes from an industry-body report with no published sample; state surveys give 81% (2024) and 74% (ISPA, 2026). GAMAAN’s 2026 survey cites about 84% circumvention-tool use and 3–5 million daily Psiphon users.

2 - PEAK RISE IN COMMERCIAL VPN DEMAND AROUND A SINGLE BLOCKING EVENT

per cent above that country’s own 28-day baseline · log scale



Note: Each spike represents the size of a reaction to one event. Top10VPN measures commercial VPN demand only, it excludes Psiphon, Tor and pre-installed services, and demand is not the same as successful circumvention.

Source: Tehran E-Commerce Association 2025 (Iran); Levada 2024–2025 (Russia); Top10VPN (surges); Additional figures cited in the notes: GAMAAN 2026, Iran Parliament Research Center 2024 and ISPA 2026.

Governments are using increasingly varied methods to restrict access to independent reporting. Three forms of restriction recur across the cases: **advanced technical blocking**, **restrictions on circumvention tools**, and **legal or physical pressure on audience** who access or distribute independent reporting.

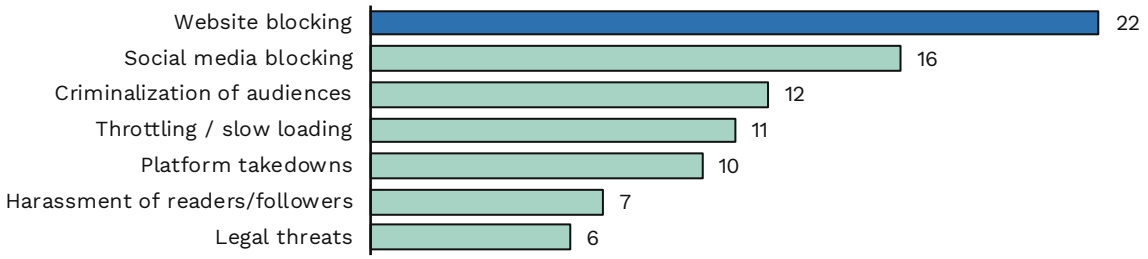
The survey shows that website blocking remains the most frequently reported restriction, while outlets rarely rely on a single circumvention tool (see Exhibit 13). As authorities expand restrictions to messaging services, applications and circumvention tools themselves, newsrooms and audiences must adapt their access strategies.

Iranian authorities use filtering and throttling alongside selective access and large-scale shutdowns, including a 2026 disconnection that left most networks unreachable. In Myanmar, geographically targeted shutdowns and platform restrictions, concentrated particularly in conflict areas, have become part of routine state control. Respondents from Myanmar EXIM describe website blocking, internet blackouts, restrictions on VPN services, and restrictions on Facebook, along with legal provisions that increase the risks associated with online activity.

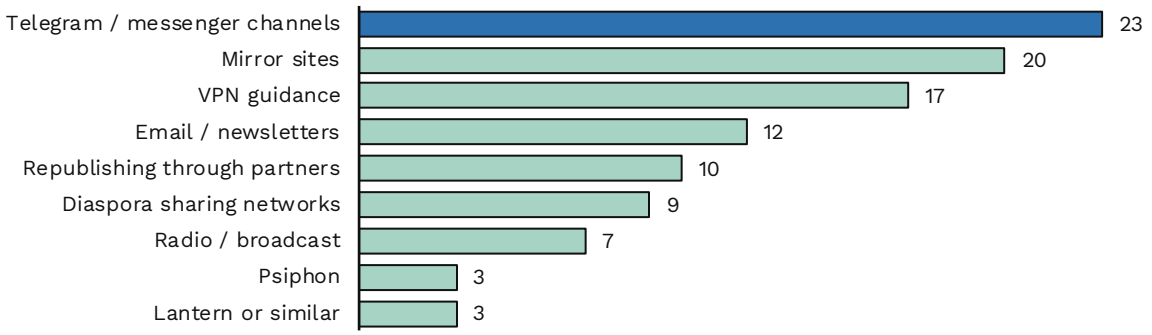
Exhibit 13

Restrictions and the tools against them (Survey, n=33)

1. Types of restriction affecting reach most



2. Tools and tactics used to help audiences reach content



Questions asked: "Which types of restriction affect your reach most?" (select all) · "What tools or tactics do you use to help audiences access your content despite censorship?" (select all)

The authorities in Russia have blocked hundreds of VPN services, while the government of Iran has tightened restrictions on VPNs and app stores and Myanmar has blocked VPN services directly. Audiences also face risks from device searches, phone inspections and legal pressure: Belarusian readers can be exposed through forwarded messages, Myanmar authorities have arrested people for VPN use, and Nicaragua's November 2025 telecommunications law expanded state control over internet infrastructure, user data and online content, granting regulator TELCOR broad surveillance and licensing powers that may also affect exiled media.

Exiled media face further threats from platform governance and coordinated interference linked to repressive governments. Harassment, malicious reporting, copyright complaints, and coordinated mass reporting can trigger the removal of accounts or content.[29,30,31] Because social networking accounts are central distribution channels, takedowns can disrupt access to audiences, particularly where enforcement decisions are difficult to challenge and meaningful human review is limited. These practices form part of transnational repression, through which governments target journalists beyond their borders. [32]

[29] Freedom House, *The Digital Transnational Repression Toolkit and Its Silencing Effects*, 2020;
[30] Tech Global Institute, *From Protection to Suppression: The Weaponization of Copyright Reporting Laws on YouTube in the Global Majority*;
[31] Meta, *Adversarial Threat Report*, December 2021;
[32] Freedom House, *A Light That Cannot Be Extinguished: Exiled Journalism and Transnational Repression*, 2023.

3b How EXIM Maintain Access to Their Audiences

EXIM use several approaches to keep websites accessible when domains are blocked. Reporters Without Borders' Operation Collateral Freedom supports censored media by hosting mirror sites. Some Russian exiled media also use technologies that generate changing access routes, while others rely on mirror domains, browser extensions, and branded VPNs.[33] Belarusian outlets operate mirror websites and proxy projects under less recognizable names.[34] In Afghanistan, exiled media rely on mirror sites mostly, while Nicaraguan outlets move to new domains whenever their original websites are blocked. These approaches help preserve access when an original domain becomes unavailable.

> ***"Our primary focus is ensuring that audiences in Russia can continue accessing independent news safely under any circumstances. We have developed a mobile application with built-in censorship circumvention technology, allowing users to watch our broadcasts without a VPN. The app also enables viewers to download programs for offline viewing, which is particularly valuable during periods of unstable internet connectivity or temporary internet shutdowns. (Russian EXIM)"***

A Belarusian outlet in the survey identified multiplatform distribution as particularly effective at times of website blocks and reported that short-form video performed especially well, with up to 90% of the audience of its main TikTok account located inside Belarus. Mirror sites and VPN guidance remain part of the outlet's strategy, but direct social-media access can reduce the need for users to adopt separate circumvention tools.

In Myanmar, outlets combine alternative domains and encrypted messaging with offline distribution when online access becomes impossible or dangerous.[35] Afghan outlets use compressed audio, short videos, text updates and downloadable files alongside radio, satellite television and WhatsApp. These offline and hybrid distribution practices are discussed further in Chapter 4.[36,37]

> ***"Our website is blocked in Afghanistan, so we have to navigate through social media to reach more people. We also have to teach people how to use VPNs to access our website. (Afghan EXIM)"***

Circumvention is also increasingly linked to the protection of users and sources. Secure messaging, anonymous submissions, and removing identifying metadata become particularly important where contact with exiled media can itself create risk.

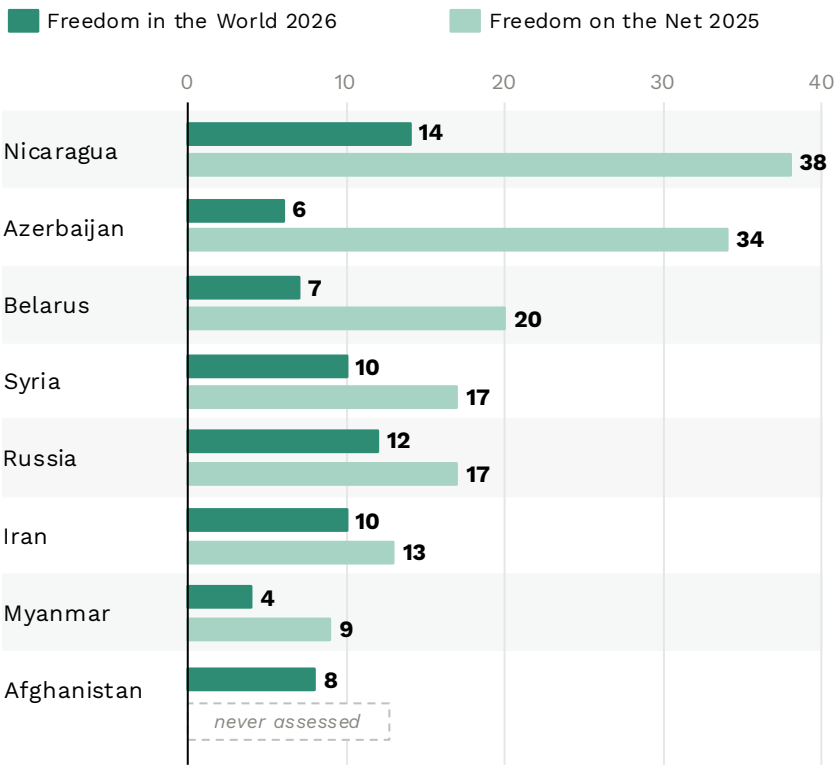
[33] JX Fund, *Innovation as the Driving Survival Force: The State of Russian Independent Media in Exile*, November 2025.
[34] European Parliamentary Research Service, *Media Environment in Belarus*, February 2022.
[35] International Crisis Group, From Yangon to the Borderlands: Independent Media on Myanmar's Post-Coup Front Line, April 2025.
[36] Reporters Without Borders, Behind the Scenes of a Newsroom in Exile: 8AM Media, a Beacon of Light in the Darkness of Kabul, March 2026;
[37] JX Fund, Afghan Journalists in Exile: An Exploratory Study by JX Fund, December 2023.

> ***Because of repression and restrictions, our connection with audiences inside Belarus has become more digital and cautious, while audiences in the country remain a key priority for our work. We use social media and warn our audiences that we are designated as an "extremist" organization/media outlet (Belarusian EXIM)***

Redundancy is a common strategy across the EXIM sectors monitored in this report: losing one channel does not necessarily cut off access altogether. Strengthening this resilience requires support for secure communication tools and low-bandwidth formats that allow content to circulate when mainstream platforms or networks are blocked or unavailable.

Exhibit 14

Internet freedom scores



Note:

Freedom House scores run 0–100; every country in focus falls under "Not Free". The graph is sorted by Freedom on the Net 2025, from higher to lower scores.

Freedom on the Net has never assessed Afghanistan. Syria's score is from 2020, before the fall of Assad, and has not been updated.

Source: Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2026 and Freedom on the Net 2025

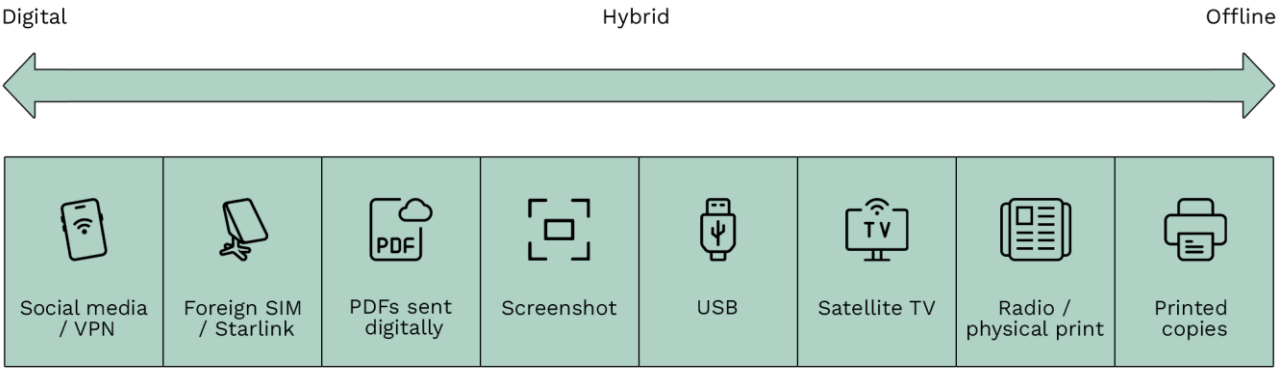
Mirror domains, proxy accounts and platform diversity keep reporting available, but all of them are also targets for attacks. When websites are blocked, accounts are deleted, and physical archives are destroyed, the record of what outlets have published can disappear forever, with painful consequences for public memory and media credibility. Innovative projects like Kronika aim to respond to this new type of political pressure through online archives that preserve decades of work by independent, now exiled newsrooms. As a result, the materials remain accessible for research and documentation, and as a public archive. These archives safeguard the legacy of independent media and preserve historical evidence.[38]

[38] Kronika, *Archives*;
Russian Independent Media Archive (RIMA);
Central America Independent Media Archive (CAIMA)

4 The Post-Digital Era? Offline and Hybrid Distribution

Digital platforms remain central to EXIM distribution, but they are not always accessible or safe to use. Radio, satellite television, downloadable files and interpersonal networks provide alternative ways to reach audiences, particularly during internet shutdowns and in areas with limited connectivity.

In several contexts, these non-digital methods of dissemination impact distribution alongside websites, social media, and messaging applications as parallel parts of a hybrid distribution system. These channels can expand reach, reduce dependence on individual platforms, and provide safer or more accessible ways to receive information.



Radio remains particularly important in Afghanistan and Myanmar. In Afghanistan, it is relatively affordable and can reach rural communities with limited access to education, public life, or personal devices.[39] Maintaining a physical media presence, however, also carries significant risks. In February 2025, Taliban authorities raided the Kabul office of a women-focused radio station, confiscated equipment, suspended broadcasts, and arrested two employees. The station was also accused of supplying content to a foreign-based television channel, illustrating how cooperation between domestic and exiled operations can extend reach while also exposing local staff to retaliation.[40]

Non-digital distribution remains important in Iran despite the country's generally high level of connectivity. Satellite television continues to provide an alternative route for audiences who cannot or do not want to navigate internet filtering. Unlike social media platforms, satellite broadcasting does not depend on domestic internet connectivity or platform recommendation systems, which can make it particularly important during internet shutdowns or periods of intensified filtering.

Access is not risk-free, however. Satellite equipment is formally illegal, authorities have periodically confiscated dishes and receivers, and foreign broadcasters have long faced deliberate signal jamming.[41] This creates a similar cat-and-mouse dynamic to that seen with VPNs, when an alternative access route remains useful but is continually subjected to new forms of restriction.

[39] Reporters Without Borders, *Afghanistan: Radio Begum Suspended and Two Employees Arrested as Tyrannical Media Repression Escalates*, February 2025;
[40] JX Fund, *Afghan Journalists in Exile: An Exploratory Study by JX Fund*, December 2023
[41] Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2025.

> ***Satellite, radio, shortwave, and other non-internet-based channels remain relevant during internet shutdowns, severe censorship, or widespread disruptions to online platforms. They are especially useful for reaching audiences with limited or unreliable internet access and for providing news and information during crises or periods of increased repression. (Iranian EXIM)***

Persian-language broadcasters combine satellite programming with websites, social networking platforms and messaging channels. During shutdowns, international phone calls and diaspora networks can provide additional channels for information to circulate.[42]

Independent Myanmar media have historically used shortwave radio to reach audiences across borders, while international public broadcasters have similarly relied on radio to serve rural communities with limited access to independent domestic news. Since the 2021 coup, some Myanmar outlets have developed broader hybrid distribution systems combining satellite broadcasting, Facebook, YouTube, encrypted messaging, and downloadable audio.[43]

> ***Non-digital or hybrid distribution remains important in conflict-affected and rural areas, especially where internet access is restricted. For example, in some parts of Rakhine, Sagaing and Magway, local media groups distribute pamphlets to share information. Radio also remains important, particularly in rural and conflict-affected areas where people cannot access online news. (Myanmar EXIM)***

Traditional print distribution has largely disappeared in several of the eight countries, but downloadable and printable formats can serve a similar purpose. Some Russian exiled media distribute PDF versions of their reporting that readers can save, forward or print. By 2024, one such model had reportedly reached at least 500,000 people.[44]

In parts of Myanmar, audiences download reporting when connectivity is available and share it offline through USB drives or Bluetooth.[45]

Afghanistan's border with Pakistan also functions as an important reporting and communication corridor because many Afghan journalists are based there. However, police harassment, detention, visa costs, and deportation threats make these border networks unstable and dangerous. A printed article, USB drive, or saved PDF can also become evidence during a device or belongings search.[46]

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[42] GAMAAN. *Iranians' Attitudes Toward Media 2023,* September 2023.
[43] International Crisis Group, *From Yangon to the Borderlands: Independent Media on Myanmar's Post-Coup Front Line,* April 2025.
[44] JX Fund, *Locking Down the Windows: A New Phase in the Fight for Press Freedom in Russia,* September 2024
[45] International Crisis Group, *From Yangon to the Borderlands: Independent Media on Myanmar's Post-Coup Front Line*, April 2025;
[46] Reporters Without Borders, *Police Harassment, Astronomical Visa Fees, Deportation Threats - RSF Warns of the Dire Situation Facing Afghan Journalists Exiled in Pakistan*, January 2025.

> *Nicaragua's independent media outlets were forced into exile, pushing their operations entirely into the digital space. Inside the country, television and radio news outlets still operate, but they practice self-censorship or are directly controlled by the regime. Consequently, many Nicaraguans without internet access can only consume news coverage that avoids critical topics that might displease the dictatorship. Nicaragua also stands as the only country in the Americas where no printed newspapers are currently in circulation. (Nicaraguan EXIM)*

Despite these limitations, Nicaraguan exiled outlets continue to reach audiences at home. Because open correspondent networks would expose journalists and sources to serious risks, their reporting relies on protected contacts, secure communication and remote verification.[47,48]

Reporters and sources face many of the same connectivity problems as the audiences they serve. Weak infrastructure, blackouts, limited equipment and the cost of secure digital tools can disrupt both reporting and distribution.[49]

These conditions also affect how journalists gather and verify information. Sources may need to travel to find a connection, use foreign SIM cards or rely on alternative infrastructure to transmit reports.

> *In Kurdish-populated and border regions, our sources also used SIM cards from neighboring countries and sometimes traveled to areas near the border to obtain an internet connection and send us news and information. In some cases, Starlink satellite internet was also used to maintain communication and transmit reports when conventional internet access was unavailable. Diaspora-based media and informal networks became particularly important for receiving and distributing information during periods of severe internet restrictions. (Iranian EXIM)*

These distribution challenges are closely connected to wider operational and security constraints. Surveillance, the protection of sources and contributors inside countries of origin, the coordination of geographically dispersed teams, and the financial and organizational demands of operating in exile all affect how media can sustain their work. While these issues are beyond the main scope of this report, they shape the conditions under which exiled outlets produce and distribute journalism and maintain connections with audiences at home.

[47] JX Fund, *Country Profile: Nicaragua*, March 2025.
[48] Confidential, *Audience in Nicaragua Continues to Trust the Press in Exile*, May 2024.
[49] Confidential, *Audience in Nicaragua Continues to Trust the Press in Exile*, May 2024.

5 Conclusions

Reaching audiences at home from exile remains difficult and carries significant risks. This report nevertheless shows that sustained audience reach remains possible. Sustaining that reach depends not only on the adaptability of individual newsrooms, but also on the tools, partnerships, and audience networks that allow independent reporting to continue circulating across borders and under pressure. **Support should extend beyond content production** to the communication tools, low-bandwidth formats, and distribution systems that help keep reporting accessible when mainstream platforms or networks are restricted or unavailable and the technical capacity required to maintain and adapt them over time.

A period of declining or stagnant numbers may reflect changing access conditions rather than necessarily indicating a loss of audience reach. Funding approaches that allow for these fluctuations, and assess progress alongside qualitative evidence of audience access, engagement, trust and resilience, may better reflect the conditions in which exiled media operate. This requires funders to **distinguish between audience decline and audience invisibility:** lower public engagement may reflect safer, less visible forms of access rather than reduced use.

Taken together, the needs described in this report point to a holistic approach to support: **technical resilience, organizational stability, audience strategy and distribution infrastructure need to be considered together** rather than funded as isolated interventions. Support organizations can play a convening role by connecting exiled media with circumvention-tool developers, technology providers and major platforms, and by supporting shared infrastructure where individual outlets lack the resources to build or maintain it alone.

Across eight different political contexts, exiled media are adopting approaches that offer opportunities for cross-country learning. Iranian outlets' use of trusted messaging networks, Afghan outlets' reliance on WhatsApp and diaspora networks, Syrian outlets' use of Facebook, and Myanmar outlets' collaboration with local contributors illustrate different ways of maintaining access to audiences at home.

These practices cannot be transferred directly across contexts, as their relevance depends on local restrictions, audience habits and available resources. However, the similarities in these practices create clear opportunities for **learning across the sector**. Donors and media support organizations can facilitate peer exchange, helping outlets identify, adapt and test approaches that may work in their own circumstances.

Diversity also matters. Exiled media outlets can reach different groups of people in their home countries through niche topics, creative formats and distribution channels adapted to their target groups.

Possible strategies for donors and media support organizations

1	Support continuous audience strategy development, implementation, monitoring and adaptation.
2	Set realistic expectations on growing home audience reach and avoid relying on visible reach metrics alone.
3	Support technological innovation in production, distribution and archiving, including hands-on implementation support and long-term technical capacity building by establishing a pooled fund.
4	Connect censorship circumvention tool developers and exiled media, create safe spaces for exchange and support cooperation formats.
5	Invest in shared digital infrastructure at the country level and across countries, where this can reduce duplication and make resilient tools accessible to smaller outlets.
6	Strengthen dialogue between independent exiled media and major technology platforms, while reducing structural dependency on a small number of private platforms and strengthening digital sovereignty.

6 Annex

6a Approach and Methodology

The report uses a mixed-method approach to examine how exiled independent media reach audiences in their countries of origin across eight different political and media contexts. It combines systematic monitoring of 246 exiled media outlets with survey findings from 33 outlets representing eight exiled media sectors. The analysis draws on distribution data, including website traffic, platform following and YouTube views, alongside information on internet access, platform use and restrictions, circumvention tools, and offline and hybrid distribution. These quantitative data are complemented by country-level research, media monitoring and qualitative evidence from exiled media, including their reported experiences of audience reach, trust, distribution challenges and adaptation strategies.

Exhibit 16

Approach to data gathering

Open-source gathering	• Open-source data gathering was a primary input for the JX Fund Exiled Media Dashboard, covering a broad range of topics: media distribution, description, status vis-à-vis legal designation, and various operational metrics; • Sources include media websites, social media accounts, SimilarWeb, SocialBlade, and TGStat, as well as industry research and publications.
Composite metrics	• The available data in the JX Fund Exiled Media Dashboard were used to develop composite indicators and benchmarks for comparing media performance and audience reach, identifying trends and flagging potential data anomalies for verification and validation by researchers.
Surveys	• The survey (N=33) comprises exiled media outlets from each of the eight countries. The sample was designed to provide representation across the eight EXIM sectors, with at least 10% of the outlets in each country included. The sample also includes outlets of different sizes and levels of experience. The survey was distributed to media outlets and completed between 16 July and 23 August 2026. The survey combined closed and open-ended questions.

All country figures aggregate the 246 outlets included in the JX Fund's EXIM list: Russia (63), Belarus (47), Afghanistan (40), Nicaragua (26), Myanmar (20), Syria (20), Iran (16), and Azerbaijan (14). The exhibits drawing on these data cover outlet websites and six platforms: YouTube, Facebook, Telegram, Instagram, TikTok, and X. As outlets are not represented across all sources, each indicator is based on a different number of outlets: 180 have website data, 200 Instagram data, 217 Facebook data, 213 YouTube data, 165 Telegram data, 206 X data, and 111 TikTok data. Website figures refer to July 2026, while platform figures refer to July 2026. The number of outlets underlying each figure is reported as "n."

6b Glossary of Terms used in the Report

Circumvention tools	Technologies or access methods used to reach content that is blocked, throttled or otherwise restricted, including VPNs, Tor, Psiphon, mirror websites, alternative domains and encrypted messaging.
Creators / influencers	Individuals such as YouTubers, bloggers, public figures or presenter-led personalities who help distribute or interpret news content outside a newsroom's institutional channels. They can expand reach but may also reduce editorial control over how reporting is framed.
Deep packet inspection (DPI)	A network-monitoring technique that allows internet traffic to be analyzed in detail and can be used to identify, filter, block or slow specific websites, applications or protocols. In restrictive environments, DPI can be used to enforce censorship or interfere with circumvention tools.
Engagement	Observable audience interaction with media content, such as comments, likes, shares, direct messages or other forms of feedback. In repressive environments, low visible engagement may reflect fear rather than low consumption.
EXIM (exiled independent media)	Independent media outlets that operate wholly or partly outside their country of origin because continued journalistic work there would expose staff to legal, administrative or physical risk. See more in Annex 6d.
Hybrid distribution	A distribution model that combines digital and non-digital channels, for example satellite broadcasting alongside websites and social media, or online publishing alongside radio and downloadable formats.
Low-bandwidth formats	Content designed to remain usable where internet connections are slow, unstable, expensive or interrupted, including compressed audio, short videos, text updates and downloadable files.
Mirror site	An alternative copy or version of a website, often hosted under a different domain, used to maintain access when the original site is blocked. EXIM may operate several mirror sites because any single access point can be shut down.
Multiplatform distribution	Publishing and redistributing journalism across several platforms and formats rather than relying on a single website, social network or messaging service. The report identifies this redundancy as a core strategy for maintaining access.
Offline distribution	The circulation of reporting through non-digital channels such as radio, satellite television, print, USB drives, Bluetooth transfers or downloaded files. These channels remain important where digital access is unreliable, unsafe or unavailable.
Reach	The extent to which EXIM content reaches audiences through websites, social platforms, messaging services, broadcasting or other channels. The report treats reach as broader than visible platform metrics because content may also circulate privately or offline.
Throttling	The deliberate slowing of internet traffic, websites, platforms or specific services without blocking them completely. Throttling can make news content difficult or impractical to access while leaving the service technically available.
Virtual Private Network (VPN)	A tool that can help users bypass some forms of internet filtering or blocking by routing internet traffic through a remote server. The report stresses that VPN use does not necessarily guarantee safe or successful access and is increasingly targeted in some countries.

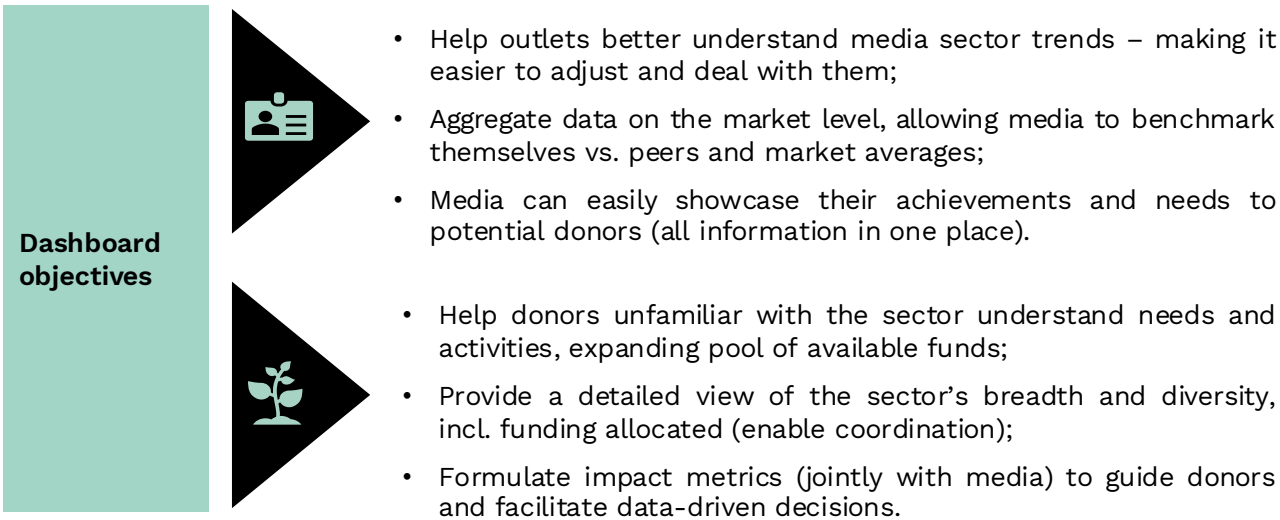
6c Exiled Media Dashboard – Concept Overview

Media in exile play a key role in informing the world about what is happening in some of the world's most oppressive regimes. They counter propaganda and disinformation and sustain a sense of community among those who continue to live under authoritarian regimes and those who have left to be free.

To support their continued existence and operations, JX Fund, and The Fix Research & Advisory, created a database of information needed to understand the situation and needs of exiled media. The JX Fund Exiled Media Dashboard targets verified media professionals, donors, and policymakers.

Exhibit 17

JX Fund Exiled Media Dashboard : Key objectives and features



6d Defining exiled independent media

The definition of exiled independent media remains contested, partly because the phenomenon has evolved alongside communication technologies and changing forms of media. Digital technologies now allow outlets operating from exile to reach audiences inside their countries of origin, while the boundaries of what constitutes a media outlet have expanded to include content creators, satirical programs and other news-related formats. Outlets may also remain unregistered, have fluid organizational structures, or become temporarily dormant. The definition of dormancy here is having no public activity for three months or more.

The definition here combines "hard" and "soft" criteria. The hard criteria are required for inclusion, while the soft criteria are desirable but not mandatory. Overall, included are the projects that regularly produce original or substantially reworked content, reach audiences inside their country of origin, operate from exile because of risks associated with their work, and maintain editorial and financial independence from states, political parties, oligarchs, politically exposed persons and other sources of undue influence.

Exhibit 18

Defining exiled independent media

Logical structure and criteria used to define exiled independent media.

Media	**Self-identification**	• The organization identifies as a media outlet. • It produces its own content or transforms existing content.
	Content	• Published news-based content is not just informational or non-journalistic (e.g., event platform). • New content is published regularly (min. once a month). • The audience exceeds at least 10,000 on one platform.
	Journalistic approach	• Published content does not justify violence, extremism, or terrorism (according to common standards).
	Relevance	• Published content covers current affairs. • Published content has significant social relevance.
	Publisher	• The outlet is not a media arm of a non-media organization.
Exiled	**Self-identification**	• The subject country is seen as the media's place of origin. • It does not identify as primarily focused on the diaspora.
	Risk in the home country	• Conditions in the country of origin make it impossible to work there. • Staff in country of origin are / would be exposed to threats of administrative measures, prison, or physical violence.
	Audience	• The media is able to reach audiences in the country of origin. • Content is published in a native language of the country of origin. • Published content is tied to current affairs in the country of origin.
	Operations	• A meaningful part of the editorial team/ management comes from the country of origin but operates outside it.
Indepen-dent	**Connections**	• The media is or was not seen as having a primary affiliation to a state actor, politically exposed person or political party. • The media was not launched and is not run by a political party or non-media corporation. • The media has not been accused of spreading propaganda.
	Finances	• The media is financially independent of political parties, politically exposed persons, and state funds (over longer periods).

The presented list includes only "hard" criteria that JX Fund uses to determine if the media can be considered an exiled independent media. Additional criteria may be included for more precise classification of media outlets, as the media vary from region to region.

6e Reference Periods in the Report

The figures in this report come from different sources, which are published and updated at different times. The reference period therefore varies by indicator and reflects the latest complete data available for the analysis. For example, website visits refer to June 2026, while YouTube views and platform following refer to July 2026.

Website traffic needs a separate note. March 2026 is used for most countries because it is the latest month for which a complete breakdown by traffic source is available. Later data are incomplete for a substantial number of outlets, although these outlets are still included in the total traffic figures. Iran and Azerbaijan are exceptions, for which June 2026 data were available.

Some indicators are based on annual publications rather than monthly data. Internet-user figures come from DataReportal's Digital 2026 report, based on October 2025 data, while internet freedom scores come from Freedom on the Net 2025 and Freedom in the World 2026. These figures therefore reflect the reference periods used by the original sources.

The figures should not be treated as a single snapshot of the eight countries. This is particularly important for indicators such as platform following and monthly views, which can change quickly. The measures also capture different things: website visits and YouTube views show activity during a particular month, while followers and subscribers are accumulated totals recorded at a specific point in time. They are therefore not directly comparable as measures of audience reach.

The table below summarises the reference period used for each indicator.

REFERENCE PERIOD BY METRIC

Metric	Source	Reference period
Website visits	Similarweb, via the JX Fund Exiled Media Dashboard	**July 2026**
Where website traffic comes from	Similarweb, via the JX Fund Exiled Media Dashboard	**July 2026** **Iran and Azerbaijan: June 2026**
YouTube views	YouTube channel statistics	**July 2026**
Following on six platforms	Platform statistics, via the JX Fund Exiled Media Dashboard	**July 2026**
Internet users per country	DataReportal "Digital 2025", Kepios	**October 2025**
Internet and political freedom scores	Freedom House	**Freedom in the World 2026** **Freedom on the Net 2025**
VPN penetration and VPN demand	Tehran E-Commerce Association; Levada; Top10VPN	**2025; demand surges 2020–2025**

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JX FUND

JX Fund – European Fund for Journalism in Exile
Published in Germany, October 2026

Publisher: JX Fund

JX Fund gGmbH I c/o Publix
Hermannstr. 90
12051 Berlin
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The report publication was led by JX Fund, with support of The Fix Research and Advisory.

The JX Fund helps media workers quickly and flexibly to continue their work after they have fled war and crisis zones. It aims to strengthen independent media in exile beyond a current phase of high attention and to support the building of sustainable media outlets accessible for their home countries. The continued work of journalism in exile will have to provide the independent sources of information that will make future democratic developments in their home countries possible. Without them, censorship wins out. To learn more, reach out to info@jx-fund.org or visit www.jx-fund.org

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