GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2020

Technology, the environment and a sustainable world: Responses from the global South

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TURKEY

GETTING ONLINE DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: A BOOST FOR DIGITAL ACTIVISM

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Introduction

At a time of "on-off" restrictions in daily life due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Turkey has accelerated its digitisation process. However, this process has not followed a comprehensive plan and has led to disruption in services as well as the deliberate violation of some rights. In this period, existing inequalities in society have deepened, primarily with respect to access to communications, which has most obviously impacted on the education rights of the country's 26 million students. The impact of the pandemic is taken into consideration in three aspects in this report: the right to education, environmental activism and the impact on domestic violence and abuse. In the conclusion, we also touch upon the latest social media regulations law that came into effect in Turkey in July 2020.

Environmental legislative texts in Turkey are unclear with regards to their specific application of standards. Moreover, the Turkish government has not ratified the Paris Agreement – or shown any suggestion that it would in the near future. In line with this, it has demonstrated little inclination to develop more realistic targets to meet the Intended Nationally Determined Contributions (INDCs).

Nevertheless, ecology networks have campaigned against destructive environmental policies and government actions through digital campaigns that have had a strong impact. There have been multiple examples in the past year in this regard; however, the most recent developments as a result of COVID-19, which have resurrected the government's will for developing extensive censorship and surveillance mechanisms, are creating a major risk for ecology networks and activists.

As this report suggests, alliances need to be built between civil society activists working on the environment, gender rights and digital rights, among others, to counteract this "lockdown" online.

The state of play: Education, gender and digital rights, and the Paris Agreement, prior to COVID-19

Turkey's governing Justice and Development Party (AKP) has been heavily investing in health care facilities since it came to power in 2002. These investments have resulted in a more positive perception in society regarding the functioning of the government, which is seen as primarily responsible for "development". The government's approval ratings now stand at 57.7%.[1] At the same time, the government has initiated comprehensive education reforms. However, these specific reforms have not received such high public approval ratings, with only 40% seeing them as positive developments, and 42% believing that the education sector has got worse over the past decade.[2]

Even though there have been attempts to improve education, including through a digital agenda, since the mid-1990s, these have been largely unsuccessful. One of the projects initiated in Turkey in order to advance the country's education system and give it a head start through digitisation was called FATIH, which stood for the Movement to Increase Opportunities and Advance Technology. The project had been initiated on 22 November 2010 and was originally scheduled to be completed by 31 December 2015. However, only months before this deadline, the project was only 8% complete.[3]

Another significant development in the past decade in Turkey was the signing of the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence, better known as the Istanbul Convention,[4] in 2011. The Convention came into force in 2014, binding signatory countries to preventing violence and abuse against women and girls, regardless of their age, race, religion, social origin, migrant status or sexual

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1   Turkiye Raporu. (2020, 14 July). 10 yıl öncesine göre neredeyiz? (Where are we compared to 10 years ago?). *Turkiye Raporu*. https://twitter.com/turkiye_raporu/status/1282912509079552001

2   Ibid.

3   Sarp Nebil, F. (2015, 26 May). Bitimine 7 ay kalan Fatih Projesi'nin sadece yüzde 8'i tamamlandı! (Only 8% complete in Fatih Project which ends in 7 months). *T24*. https://t24.com.tr/yazarlar/fusun-sarp-nebil/bitimene-7-ay-kalan-fatih-projesinin-sadece-yuzde-8i-tamamlandi,11975

4   https://www.coe.int/en/web/istanbul-convention/home

orientation. Although the government has signed and ratified this Convention, gender rights movements in Turkey have been reporting an increase in violence and abuse cases against women, girls and LGBTI+ people. The worst of these cases can be seen on the Anıt Sayaç (Monument Counter) digital platform, which lists the names of women and girls that lost their lives in femicides committed by their family members and spouses.[5]

In the field of internet regulations, the country has seen multiple reforms that have worsened the situation, including Law No. 5651, which regulates the digital sphere. It was first passed in the parliament in 2007, and the latest revisions to the law, which expand its scope, were passed on 29 July 2020[6] and came into effect as of 1 October 2020.

Finally, in the area of ecology, Turkey signed the Paris Climate Agreement on 22 April 2016 when it was first opened for signature, but the agreement has never been ratified in the Turkish Parliament, making Turkey one of the seven countries in the world that has not ratified the agreement, and the only G20 country.[7]

Digital platforms become the new progressive public space, and the government responds with a censorship law

Turkey confirmed the first case of COVID-19 on 11 March 2020, when Minister of Health Fahrettin Koca announced that a Turkish citizen arriving from abroad had tested positive.[8] Since then, the country rapidly started implementing measures against the virus,[9] although the nationwide implementation of these measures was not so comprehensive. One of the first measures to be taken was to close schools and send students home for a period of three weeks initially, and then to declare a round-the-clock curfew for anyone below the age of 20 and above the age of 65. This was followed by widespread closures of non-essential businesses and venues where people gather, requiring the public to wear masks and gloves in markets, limiting intercity transport, and declaring quarantine measures including more

curfews.[10] Despite all efforts, Turkey – at the time of writing of this report – had lost 5,955 citizens to the virus, with a total of 248,117 people being infected.[11] During the period of restrictions, the virus was referred to as a "levelling virus", with the secondary impact of the pandemic felt strongly in multiple fields, such as education, gender, domestic abuse and violence, digital rights and freedoms, and even its positive impact on the environment.

While Turkey had been digitising the education sector in the country for over two decades, the pandemic has sped up this process. When schools were closed, one of the primary concerns raised was whether or not the principle of equality in educational opportunity would be respected. Some 88% of households had access to the internet in Turkey as of 2019 and 72.7% of those between the ages of 16 and 74 were regular internet users.[12] However, the country's Education Reform Initiative states that 82.4% of households in Turkey do not have a desktop computer and 51.3% do not have a portable computer,[13] creating disproportionate conditions for access to online classes for students.

The digital divide in society presents a problem, especially for underprivileged students, those experiencing economic hardships, coming from minority backgrounds, children of seasonal worker parents or immigrants, and refugees, among others. Municipalities and various civil society initiatives including the Support for Life Association and Needs Map have initiated campaigns to donate equipment and provide internet connectivity to students in need; however, they have fallen short of meeting demand. As a result, the country's Higher Education Council (YÖK) announced that students who do not have access to the internet or own a computer would be given a chance to suspend their registration and continue their studies the next year.[14] As millions of students had to take national

5   http://anitsayac.com

6   dokuz8HABER. (2020, 29 July). Sosyal Medya Yasası Meclis'te kabul edildi (Social Media Regulations Law passed in the Parliament). *dokuz8HABER*. https://dokuz8haber.net/gundem/sosyal-medya-duzenlemesi-mecliste-kabul-edildi

7   https://treaties.un.org/Pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsg_no=XXVII-7-d&chapter=27&clang=_en

8   TRT Haber. (2020, 11 March). Türkiye'de ilk koronavirüs vakası tespit edildi (The first coronavirus case detected in Turkey). *TRT Haber*. https://www.trthaber.com/haber/turkiyede-ilk-koronavirus-vakasi-tespit-edildi-466216.html

9   Ministry of Health. (2020, 13 March). Kurum ve İşletmelere Yönelik Enfeksiyon Kontrol Önlemleri (Infection Control Measures for Institutions and Businesses). https://covid19bilgi.saglik.gov.tr/tr/alinan-karalar.html

10 Göksedef, E. (2020, 14 May). Koronavirüs: Türkiye'de hangi ilde, ne tür tedbirler uygulanıyor? (Coronavirus: What kind of measures taken in which cities and towns in Turkey?). *BBC*. https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-turkiye-52663160

11 The figures on that date in accordance with the Ministry of Health tracker: https://covid19.saglik.gov.tr

12 Turk-Stat. (2019, 27 August). Hanehalkı Bilişim Teknolojileri Kullanım Araştırması (Household IT Usage Research). *TUIK*. https://data.tuik.gov.tr/Bulten/Index?p=Hanehalki-Bilisim-Teknolojileri-(BT)-Kullanim-Arastirmasi-2019-30574

13 ERG. (2020). Eğitim Yönetişimi ve Finansmanı: Eğitim İzleme Raporu 2020 (Education Governance and Finance: Education Monitoring Report 2020). *ERG*. https://www.egitimreformugirisimi.org/egitim-izleme-raporu-2020-egitim-yonetisimi-ve-finansmani

14 Kasap, S. (2020, 1 April). YÖK'ten üniversite öğrencileri için erteleme ve kayıt dondurma hakkı (YÖK issues right to freeze registration and postponement for university students). *Anadolu News Agency*. https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/egitim/yokten-universite-ogrencileri-icin-erteleme-ve-kayit-dondurma-hakki/1787391

exams and final exams at universities, YÖK made an announcement that final exams could be held digitally in order to lower the risks of the outbreak.[15] Nevertheless, the nationwide exams for placement in high schools and universities took place at physical locations, with the participation of some eight million applicants.

Another secondary impact of the lockdown period – when millions of girls continued their education from home through online education and watching the Ministry of Education's EBA TV (Education IT Network) channel – has been abuse cases that go unnoticed. Europol announced that during the lockdown, there was an increase in the number of online child abuse cases, and it warned that when schools re-open, more cases might be reported retrospectively as teachers pay attention to their students.[16] While Turkey's Ministry of Interior announced that during the pandemic, domestic violence cases dropped,[17] the We Will Stop Femicides Platform said that at least 133 women were murdered since the confirmation of the first case in Turkey.[18] In the same period, the governing AKP's deputy chair, Numan Kurtulmuş, announced plans to withdraw from the Istanbul Convention,[19] igniting nationwide reactions and protests, including from the women's movement, which had a huge impact through digital activism.

Following strong reactions on social media and street protests that took place throughout July, the original date of withdrawal from the Convention – 5 August – was first postponed to 13 August and eventually the president announced that instead of the Convention, Turkey should have national legislation to prevent violence against women. Later it was announced that Turkey might add an annotation to the clauses in the Convention that are considered as LGBTI+-friendly, such as the notions of "sexual orientation" and "gender identity"[20] in Article 4 of the Convention. While the campaigns by the women's movement cannot be considered a great success – the government is still attempting to act in line with its homophobic tendency, in a way that would damage the Convention – they have definitely helped to raise awareness in society of the Convention. Only 15.7% of the population was aware of the Convention[21] in early July, a number which increased to 63.6% being openly against the government's plans to withdraw from it only weeks later, with a mere 17% approving of the government's plans.[22]

Multiple other achievements by digital activists have also been observed during the COVID-19 pandemic in Turkey. Even though Turkey benefits by far the most from the Green Climate Fund, the country has not, as mentioned, ratified the Paris Agreement,[23] has no climate law, and shows no ambition to build one. Meanwhile, the environmental movement continues growing and demands that the government ratify the Paris Agreement and increase its INDC.

Outside of the climate agreement, the ecology movement has also initiated multiple digital networks in the past year to circulate news of violations in the field of ecology. One such successful example is Polen Ecology, which presents the developments in the field in a concise manner. According to Polen Monthly Newsletters, multiple hunting tenders were opened in Turkey during the pandemic. Prior to the pandemic, a couple from the United States had hunted and killed a protected mountain goat in Adıyaman.[24] Although there were many similar cases in previous years when the Ministry of Environment and Urbanization opened tenders for hunting protected wildlife, it only caused a massive reaction in 2020 due to extensive coverage

15 YÖK. (2020, 11 May). YÖK'ten üniversitelerdeki sınavların yüz yüze gerçekleştirilmeyeceğine ilişkin karar (YÖK decision on not holding face-to-face exams in universities). *YÖK*. https://www.yok.gov.tr/Sayfalar/Haberler/2020/yok-ten-sinavlara-iliskin-karar.aspx

16 Reuters. (2020, 18 May). Online child sex abuse rises with COVID-19 lockdowns: Europol. *Reuters*. https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-eu-crime/online-child-sex-abuse-rises-with-covid-19-lockdowns-europol-idUSKBN22U1XK

17 Erdoğan, M. N. (2020, 26 May). İçişleri Bakanlığı: Kovid-19 döneminde aile içi ve kadına yönelik şiddet olayları azaldı (Ministry of Interior: During Covid-19 period violence in family and against women cases dropped). *Anadolu News Agency*. https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/turkiye/icisleri-bakanligi-kovid-19-doneminde-aile-ici-ve-kadina-yonelik-siddet-olaylari-azaldi/1853933

18 http://kadincinayetlerinidurduracagiz.net/kategori/veriler?sayfa=2

19 Toruntay, M. A., & Işık, E. (2020, 2 July). AK Parti Genel Başkanvekili Kurtulmuş: Usulünü yerine getirerek İstanbul Sözleşmesi'nden çıkılır (AK Party Deputy Chair Kurtulmuş: We can withdraw from the Istanbul Convention by doing what is necessary). *Anadolu News Agency*. https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/politika/ak-parti-genel-baskanvekili-kurtulmus-usulunu-yerine-getirerek-istanbul-sozlesmesinden-cikilir/1897094

20 dokuz8HABER. (2020, 15 August). AKP'den 'cinsel yönelim' ve 'toplumsal cinsiyet kimliği' ifadelerine şerh (AKP's note of opposition to 'sexual orientation' and 'gender identity' statements). *dokuz8HABER*. https://dokuz8haber.net/toplumsalcinsiyet/akpden-istanbul-sozlesmesinde-yer-alan-cinsel-yonelim-ve-toplumsal-cinsiyet-kimligi-ifadelerine-serh

21 Sivil Sayfalar. (2020, 10 July). Toplumun Yüzde 55,2'si İstanbul Sözleşmesi'ni Duymamış (55.2% of the society never heard of Istanbul Convention). *Sivil Sayfalar*. https://www.sivilsayfalar.org/2020/07/10/toplumun-yuzde-552si-istanbul-sozlesmesini-duymamis

22 Serdar, Ö. (2020, 25 July). MetroPOLL Istanbul Sözleşmesi Araştırması (MetroPOLL Istanbul Convention Research). https://twitter.com/ozersencar1/status/1286932936458153984

23 https://climateactiontracker.org/countries/turkey

24 Anadolu Agency. (2020, 26 February). US couple hunt, kill mountain goat in Turkey's Adıyaman. *Hürriyet Daily News*. https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/us-couple-hunt-kill-mountain-goat-in-turkeys-adiyaman-152465

of the issue on social media by ecology networks. Following this incident, the nature-life monitors (civil initiatives monitoring the government) have become more sensitive to similar cases. Another tender for 11 endangered mountain goats in Tunceli was opened in May, causing strong reactions that eventually resulted in the cancellation of the tender. Similar cases were also observed involving 18 red deer[25] in Eskişehir and 17 mountain goats in Tunceli,[26] as activists took to digital platforms to protest and the Ministry cancelled tenders. During the 2020-2021 Hunting Tourism Season, a total of 798 protected wild animals will be killed by hunters, according to the Nature Protection and National Parks General Directorate's Hunting Commission of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry.[27]

Another example of a successful digital campaign was the cancellation of the draft law for 15 coal power plants that were privatised in 2013 and were given until 2019 to comply with environmental permits. The draft law allowed the energy companies to operate without air filters for another two years after some did nothing during the six years granted to comply with the standards.[28] Following an extensive social media campaign, a petition was drafted and was handed over to the parliament with 60,000 signatures. After the law was approved at the parliament, the original proposer of the bill, the AKP chairperson, and President Erdoğan vetoed the bill, which resulted in the power plants that did not comply with the rules being shut down on 1 January 2020.[29]

While the activists have campaigned successfully using digital platforms and established new networks online throughout the pandemic, students who could get online and attend online classes reacted to the decisions of the government online as well. As a result, the government's long-time

plans for expanding the scope of Law No. 5651, the internet regulations law, to allow the governing authority to initiate a programme for extensive data localisation[30] and coerce digital platforms to take down content deemed undesirable and penalise citizens for their expressions online,[31] became a reality. The law – which was originally presented by the governing AKP as part of the COVID-19 Economic Relief Package[32] – was passed in parliament and published in the Official Gazette on 31 July 2020. The first implementation of the law has been through issuing court orders to news portals to remove content that would increase social criticism of the government.

Conclusion

The impact of the coronavirus in Turkey has been dire, except for the relatively low impact on the health of citizens, as reported by the Ministry of Health. However, this period has been used as an excuse by the government to stop protests in physical spaces, which has resulted in violation of citizens' rights and freedoms. As a result, the people have followed the path that the Ministry of Education took – but in this case, it has resulted in protests spilling over into the digital spaces. The use of digital platforms for activism is not a new phenomenon; it had started over a decade ago, validated as an effective form of protest through the 2013 Gezi Park popular protests, and between 2016 and 2018 during the State of Emergency Rule, despite all the pressure on the remaining online platforms for voicing dissent, no matter how small the activist networks on digital platforms were.

Seeing the trend that activists have been showing in the past decade, and in line with the digitisation of not only protest movements but also the growing use of digital memory as a means of government criticism, the governing authorities have targeted these platforms instead of going after the activist circles individually.

Looking at the approach of the government towards rights and freedoms defenders working on the issues discussed in this report, it is possible to conclude that the path ahead will be harder than

25 dokuz8HABER. (2020, 17 July). 18 kızıl geyiği avlatmak için açılan ihale durduruldu (Tender opened to hunt 18 red deer stopped). dokuz8HABER. https://dokuz8haber.net/ekoloji-cevre/18-kizil-geyigi-avlatmak-icin-acilan-ihale-durduruldu

26 Bianet. (2020, 12 July). Dersim'deki dağ keçisi avı ihalesi iptal edildi (Mountain goat hunting tender in Dersim cancelled). *Bianet*. http://bianet.org/bianet/ekoloji/227292-dersim-deki-dag-kecisi-avi-ihalesi-iptal-edildi

27 https://www.tarimorman.gov.tr/DKMP/Duyuru/218/2020-2021-Av-Sezonu-Duyurusu

28 TMMOB. (2020, 17 January). MMO: ÇALIŞTIRILMASINA İZİN VERİLEN KÖMÜR SANTRALLERİ İLE İLGİLİ KUŞKU VEREN KARAR VE UYGULAMALAR! (MMO: Suspicious decision and applications about the coal power plants allowed to operate). *TMMOB*. http://www.tmmob.org.tr/icerik/mmo-calistirilmasina-izin-verilen-komur-santralleri-ile-ilgili-kusku-veren-karar-ve

29 Yeşil Gazete. (2019, 15 February). Madde 45 geri çekildi: Termik santraller filtresiz çalışamayacak (Article 45 withdrawn: Coal power plants will not operate without filters). *Yeşil Gazete*. https://yesilgazete.org/madde-45-geri-cekildi-termik-santraller-filtresiz-calisamayacak

30 Through the data localisation bill – which is now part of Law 5651 – the government is trying to coerce digital platforms into moving their databases to Turkey.

31 Öztürk, F. (2020, 30 July). Sosyal medya yasası: Kullanıcılar yeni düzenlemeden nasıl etkilenecek? (Social media law: How will users be affected by the new regulation?). *BBC*. https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-turkiye-53596674

32 dokuz8NEWS. (2020, 9 April). Turkish Government proposes censorship against Coronavirus. *dokuz8NEWS*. https://dokuz8haber.net/english/science-technology/turkish-government-proposes-censorship-against-coronavirus

it used to be. The government does not show any incentive to be more inclusive in the decision-making process or more respectful of international agreements other than those that Turkey is already a signatory of. At the moment, it seems that the final free space of public discussion and platform for activists has been taken over by the governing authority; yet in light of all the historic developments when platforms are being censored and blocked, it is possible to conclude that new methods will emerge in the future. Nevertheless, in order to initiate those new methods, members of civil society initiatives will need to ally themselves with each other's causes and discuss collective strategies, since standing alone they all seem to be losing ground gradually, despite taking small, progressive steps.

Action steps

The following action steps can be suggested for Turkey:

- Activist circles and rights and freedoms defenders need to establish transnational networks for digital campaigns to help raise united voices.

- Intersectional activism among the ecology networks, gender rights networks, and digital rights and freedoms networks must be strengthened. This is important to prevent the government's authoritarian tendencies to single out certain forms of activity and divide human rights activists, and in this way restrict rights and freedoms.

- Activists from these networks need to participate in digital training sessions, including in digital security, in order to support their online activities.

- Digital rights and freedoms activists need to establish relationships with politicians to increase the presence of digitally literate representation in politics and in parliament.

- In order to minimise the impact of the new social media regulations on the country's news media, and not to lose digital social memory, a news portal needs to be set up outside of Turkey which archives reports that are subject to the government's take-down notices.

Technology, the environment and a sustainable world: Responses from the global South

The world is facing an unprecedented climate and environmental emergency. Scientists have identified human activity as primarily responsible for the climate crisis, which together with rampant environmental pollution, and the unbridled activities of the extractive and agricultural industries, pose a direct threat to the sustainability of life on this planet.

This edition of Global Information Society Watch (GISWatch) seeks to understand the constructive role that technology can play in confronting the crises. It disrupts the normative understanding of technology being an easy panacea to the planet's environmental challenges and suggests that a nuanced and contextual use of technology is necessary for real sustainability to be achieved. A series of thematic reports frame different aspects of the relationship between digital technology and environmental sustainability from a human rights and social justice perspective, while 46 country and regional reports explore the diverse frontiers where technology meets the needs of both the environment and communities, and where technology itself becomes a challenge to a sustainable future.

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