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National and Regional Internet Governance Forum Initiatives (NRIs)

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A special edition of GISWatch, "Internet governance from the edges: NRIs in their own words", is being published
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of NRIs, as recounted by their organisers. It is available at https://www.giswatch.org

Central Asia Internet Governance Forum (CAIGF)

ON ITS WAY TO COLLABORATIVE INTERNET GOVERNANCE

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Introduction

In the context of the sub-regional Internet Governance Forum (IGF), Central Asia includes four countries: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. As they are all post-Soviet countries, they share common approaches to policy, legislation and regulation to different extents. Turkmenistan still remains outside the IGF process, being one of the most oppressive countries in the world with regards to internet restrictions. The need for a discussion forum for internet governance in the region became obvious over recent years when more people came online and access to the internet started to play a significant role in all areas of life. However, there is yet to be a national IGF in any of these countries.

Rural areas in the region face several problems, including a lack of connectivity and digital illiteracy. This together with poverty has led to a growing digital divide. At the same time, those who do have access are confronting new challenges, including cybercrime and the threat of propaganda and online radicalisation. Being post-Soviet countries, restrictive tools and measures are considered by governments as the best way to handle these problems.

Policy and political background

All countries in the region have authoritarian regimes, ranking from the totalitarian Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan to the more democratic Kyrgyzstan. Kyrgyzstan is, however, regarded as politically unstable and has experienced two revolutions over the last 12 years. While from a policy point of view Kyrgyzstan is more balanced in terms of the participation of the private sector and civil society, internet freedom has nevertheless shown a negative trend with a toughening of the internet regulation framework.

Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan regulate the internet in a very authoritarian way without any legal justifications. A similar situation is found in Tajikistan which has started to sporadically block websites, including social networks. Kazakhstan for its part is known to use different, sophisticated techniques for blocking websites and has even attempted to block the Tor network.[1] As mentioned, one of the serious emerging challenges for the region is cybersecurity, and the problem of online radicalisation and the spreading of extremist propaganda. This is a complex problem to solve, and is often used as a pretext for restricting human rights in general, including the right to access information, privacy, and freedom of expression.

Two Central Asia IGFs: Similarities and differences

The first Central Asia IGF (CAIGF) took place in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan on 21 and 22 June 2016. The choice of the country for the event was logically related to the fact that among all Central Asian countries, Kyrgyzstan is considered more democratic, and it is not unusual for the government, private sector and civil society to discuss policy issues. It is worth mentioning that traditionally, civil society has taken strong positions in Kyrgyzstan, including on information and communications technologies (ICTs), which has allowed it to be one of the pivotal groups in IGF-related activities.

The discussions during the two days of the first CAIGF focused on access issues and the balance between security and freedom. As there were a lot of participants and speakers from almost all post-Soviet countries across the region, a range of different views were presented and discussed. These included some of the hottest topics in the region, such as Russia's policy on blocking sites and surveillance, the cyberattacks on Ukrainian energy infrastructure, and the cyberwar between Azerbaijan and Armenia. It should be noted that despite the sensitivity of some topics, given the tension between countries like Armenia and Azerbaijan, and Russia and Ukraine, all discussions were held in a constructive manner, proving that the IGF can be a valuable platform for debating delicate issues.

The event was held with the strong support of the government of the Kyrgyz Republic. It was opened by the first vice prime minister, who oversees ICTs, and had active participation and support from the

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1   https://www.torproject.org

Ministry of Transport and Communication. There was also strong participation from civil society and the private sector from Kazakhstan. In contrast, no government representatives from Uzbekistan attended, despite a presence of civil society organisations from that country.

Another positive factor was the presence of high-level representatives of international organisations, which underscored the importance of internet governance to the region. It also meant that there was an opportunity to conduct bilateral meetings with all stakeholders.

Welcoming addresses were made by Raúl Echeberría, Vice President of Global Engagement for the Internet Society (ISOC); Mikhail Yakushev, the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) Vice-President for Eastern Europe, Russia and Central Asia; and Nuridin Mukhitdinov, the Director General of the Regional Commonwealth in the field of Communications (RCC) Executive Committee.[2] The common message in their speeches was that a balanced approach to internet governance is a necessary condition for the economic and social development of countries. All of them mentioned the multistakeholder approach as the only way to achieve this balance. This was particularly important for a region where government often takes all decisions without discussing them with other interested parties.

The important question about access for people with disabilities was raised in one plenary session by representatives of the Kyrgyz association for blind and deaf people. They pointed out that there is a lack of support for the Kyrgyz language in existing software that reads websites for blind people. They also pointed out that government websites for blind people, which are a public service, do not comply with international standards like the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines.[3] The director of the e-Government Centre in Kyrgyzstan confirmed that they would, as a result, include accessibility requirements in their project documents, and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) representatives promised to consider supporting the development of localised software for blind people.

The second CAIGF was held in Dushanbe, Tajikistan on 22 and 23 June 2017. It was quite similar in form, but very different in content compared to the first regional IGF, given the very different environment in Tajikistan. The CAIGF marked the first time in five years that the government had sat down with civil society to discuss ICT issues, and the event can be considered a great success in paving the way to building better dialogue between governments and other stakeholders in the region. With all the same organisations who participated in the first regional meeting attending the Tajikistan CAIGF (ISOC,[4] ICANN,[5] RIPE NCC,[6] RCC), representatives of the World Bank and Facebook also joined the discussions.

It is worth mentioning that all web platforms blocked in Tajikistan, including Facebook, were unblocked just before the CAIGF, and that they remained unblocked at the time of writing, two months after the forum. This is a tangible output of holding the event in Tajikistan, and creating a forum for meetings between government representatives and Facebook. Another valuable output was the interest shown by the Tajikistan government in participating in the World Bank project Digital CASA, which aims to connect landlocked countries in Central Asia to the global internet backbone and thereby improve access. Earlier, the Tajikistan government had refused to participate, but after the CAIGF they reconsidered their decision and decided to look closely at the project.

A pleasant surprise at the second CAIGF was a video message from the "father of internet", Vint Cerf, specifically recorded for the participants attending the CAIGF, which demonstrated attention to and awareness of regional problems.

One of the main focuses on the agenda at the second CAIGF was online extremism, the problem of growing radicalisation, and ways to combat this. This showed the local influence of the host country on the regional agenda. Although all countries in the region face problems of extremism, for Tajikistan they are of paramount concern. Many decisions – very wrong from the development point of view – are made under the pretext of countering and preventing violent extremism. Finding the right balance when dealing with extremism is of great importance. Kazakhstan presented its experience of authorities working successfully with civil society in its efforts to prevent violent extremism. Facebook shared its experience in taking down extremist online content and how it worked together with intermediaries like Google, and shared ways in which law enforcement agencies could cooperate with them. It emphasised respect for human rights and its efforts to minimise abuses on its platform.

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2 www.en.rcc.org.ru

3 https://www.w3.org/WAI/intro/wcag

4 https://www.internetsociety.org

5 https://www.icann.org

6 RIPE Network Coordination Centre, one of the five Regional Internet Registries. https://www.ripe.net

There was also quite a lot of bilateral information sharing. For example, the Tajikistan government showed strong interest in the session on the digital economy where the Kyrgyzstan Digital Transformation Programme 2040 was presented. This is considered a citizen-centric approach to providing access to information and public services. It is expected that Tajikistan, which is at a similar level of economic development as Kyrgyzstan, will develop a comparable strategy.

As in the previous CAIGF, a lot of attention was paid to the question of cybersecurity, especially when it comes to secure public services, the protection of state information systems, and the protection of personal data. For example, many government websites in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have been hacked. In response, Kazakhstan launched the state programme "Киберщит" (CyberShield), which was presented at a session on cybersecurity, and later served as a basis for a Kyrgyzstan draft outlining a similar programme to be implemented in that country.

Regional reflection

If you compare the internet governance topics that emerged during the two CAIGFs to the topics discussed at the global IGFs, it is important to mention several things. First of all, many topics discussed at the CAIGFs matched the global agenda, such as access issues, the digital divide, and cybersecurity. This reflects the influence of global trends on regional and national contexts. On the other hand, topics such as gender issues were not reflected in the regional agenda, though a gender balance among participants was encouraged.

Given the global relevance of the issues confronted regionally, the Central Asian regional context is not reflected well enough in the global agenda. The problems of online extremism and radicalisation and their influence on internet governance across the world have not taken up much space on the global IGF schedule. This could reflect a tendency to not take regional issues seriously at the global level, or an imbalance of power in the global IGF structure that results in certain issues receiving more attention. IGF National and Regional Initiatives (NRIs) only received a slot among the main session panels at the last IGF, in 2016, where NRI representatives were able to make their voices heard. A particularly negative factor worth noting is the limited participation and input from Uzbekistan[7] and Turkmenistan. Both remain very closed-off countries, including on issues to do with internet regulation.

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7   At the first CAIGF there were only civil society representatives from Uzbekistan; at the second there were none at all.

Conclusion

Internet governance issues are fairly new for the Central Asia region, and awareness about them leaves much to be desired. This applies not only to governments but, unfortunately, to the private sector and civil society too. Few of them actively participate in internet governance discussions and the CAIGF is no exception. This means that the success of such events greatly depends on the few civil society activists who are already engaged in internet governance issues.

There is a lot of room for capacity building in internet governance for all stakeholders. The IGF is only an annual event, yet actions that respond to the demands of sustainable and dynamic internet governance require constant effort, debate, and advocacy activities. Work at the regional level requires more awareness raising to attract more stakeholders – especially from authoritarian countries like Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. The participation of the private sector is an important multistakeholder requirement, but its involvement was low in both regional IGFs. Marginalised groups, such as people with disabilities and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people, were also absent, whether as panellists or participants.

There is no doubt that the regional IGFs have raised awareness about internet governance issues in the region, and created some kind of useful forum for participation. Many issues raised at the global level were reflected in the regional IGF agendas. A number of these received attention from regional governments, which provides a basis for future work. There is still some doubt about what exactly will result in concrete action, despite the declarations made by governments. However, many are optimistic.

Action steps

The following action steps are suggested for the Central Asian region:

- Organising a regional IGF is hard work. The more people involved, the easier the process.

- The IGF has proven to be an efficient platform for discussing many internet governance-related issues. Regional civil society organisations need to leverage this opportunity, and pay more attention to their advocacy activities and internet governance impacts on them.

- The experience of the regional and global IGFs should be drawn on to promote and encourage national IGFs in countries in Central Asia.

- Capacity building in internet governance on all levels for all stakeholders is important to advance internet governance in the region and bring the region more in line with the global agenda.

National and Regional Internet Governance Forum Initiatives (NRIs)

National and Regional Internet Governance Forum Initiatives (NRIs) are now widely recognised as a vital element of the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) process. In fact, they are seen to be the key to the sustainability and ongoing evolution of collaborative, inclusive and multistakeholder approaches to internet policy development and implementation.

A total of 54 reports on NRIs are gathered in this year's Global Information Society Watch (GISWatch). These include 40 country reports from contexts as diverse as the United States, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Italy, Pakistan, the Republic of Korea and Colombia.

The country reports are rich in approach and style and highlight several challenges faced by activists organising and participating in national IGFs, including broadening stakeholder participation, capacity building, the unsettled role of governments, and impact.

Seven regional reports analyse the impact of regional IGFs, their evolution and challenges, and the risks they still need to take to shift governance to the next level, while seven thematic reports offer critical perspectives on NRIs as well as mapping initiatives globally.

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