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TURKEY

SETTING THE STAGE: INTERNET GOVERNANCE FORUMS IN TURKEY

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Introduction

While a culture of discussion and debate, as well as a multistakeholder approach to these discussions, are seen as important in Turkey, there has not been widespread interest in internet governance from groups with different backgrounds and concerns. Although there are numerous activities that address internet governance issues in the country, they generally seem targeted at a niche audience, and do not attract the simultaneous attention of a broad range of stakeholders, including academia, the media, civil society, businesses and government institutions. This limits the potential of these activities for meaningful deliberation. While discussions on internet governance were kick-started by the government in 2014, when Turkey hosted the global Internet Governance Forum (IGF), this has been accompanied by state policies and regulations, as well as – in the past year – a state of emergency, which have incapacitated grassroots organisations and slowed down activities in the field.

Policy and political background

Since the 2013 Gezi Park popular protests, which made efficient use of digital communications, social media has been validated as a critical source of information and news for the public, and as an effective media tool for civil society. As a result of this, internet platforms have increasingly been put under pressure by the government, making Turkey one of the top censors in the world according to the Freedom on the Net index.[1]

Law No. 5651, known as the Internet Regulations Law, which dates back to 4 May 2007, has been at the centre of all discussions related to freedoms on the internet in Turkey. The last update to the law was in September 2014, which further extended state controls over the internet. Although the 2014 changes to the law were nullified by the Turkish Supreme Court, blocking, filtering and the removal of content continue unabated. Turkey single-handedly accounts for more than half of content removal requests globally, according to the Twitter Transparency Report.[2] Moreover, in the past year connectivity has posed a problem in numerous cities in Turkey due to ongoing military operations in the region.[3]

In addition, in the first six months after the 15 July coup attempt in 2016,[4] which precipitated the state of emergency, over 10,000 investigations related to citizens' social media activities were launched, leading to the arrest of 1,656 people – 1,203 were released with judicial control.[5] This clampdown is continuing. People are detained on a daily basis for social media activities, according to weekly data released by the Ministry of Interior.[6] Perhaps because of this clampdown, statistics show a declining use of social media in the country.[7]

The history of internet governance discussions in Turkey does not go far back. While the global IGF has been going on for over a decade, it is only since 2014 that there have been initiatives to discuss issues related to internet governance in Turkey. These discussions have not had widespread participation or resulted in much public debate, despite the fact that Turkey is a country of almost 80 million citizens with a 54% internet penetration.[8]

Discussions on internet governance: Started at the top but growing at the grassroots

Internet governance became a focus of discussions in Turkey after it hosted the ninth global IGF

1 Freedom House. (2016). Freedom on the Net: Country Profile. https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2016/turkey

2 https://transparency.twitter.com/en/removal-requests.html

3 www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/turkiye/650063/Sosyal_medyaya__buyuk_gozalti_..._10_bin_kisiye_sorusturma_acildi.html

4 On the evening of 15 July 2016, a group of commanders in the Turkish military mobilised and attempted a coup to overthrow the government, claiming the lives of 248 people. The coup was suppressed and was followed by a state of emergency rule declared on 20 July 2016.

5 Although released from prison, the suspect is required to report to the police station at regular intervals. www.diken.com.tr/gunde-ortalama-yedi-kisi-sosyal-medya-paylasimlarindan-gozaltina-aliniyor

6 https://www.statista.com/statistics/570098/distribution-of-social-media-used-turkey

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

in Istanbul from 2 to 5 September in 2014. The theme of the event was "Connecting Continents for Enhanced Multistakeholder Internet Governance" and sub-themes included Policies Enabling Access; Content Creation, Dissemination and Use; Internet as Engine for Growth and Development; IGF and the Future of the Internet Ecosystem; Enhancing Digital Trust; Internet and Human Rights; Critical Internet Resources; and Emerging Issues.[9] There was widespread participation in the global IGF meeting; however, the four days did not have as many youth participants from Turkey as had been anticipated.[10] At the same time, despite international participation from global corporations and international authorities, there was a marked lack of interest from the local private sector, NGOs and institutions, among others. There was, however, a presence of state institutions and telecommunication companies.

Although widespread local participation was in reality not that strong, the hosting institution in Turkey, the Information and Communication Technologies Authority,[11] argued that there was credible multistakeholder participation. This was thanks to the efforts of a 15-person organising committee that held meetings with representatives of relevant institutions, the private sector, universities and civil society, while also promoting the event on social media and through conventional media channels.[12] Nevertheless, the lack of local participation has meant that there is no significant change in stakeholder interest in internet governance issues in Turkey. Hosting the global IGF, however, has increased the salience of relevant internet governance issues and led to the creation of numerous platforms to discuss them.

Fewer than anticipated academics, journalists, NGO representatives, and activists were informed about the meeting on time and because of this missed the opportunity to register for panel discussions. There was also a lack of widespread national media coverage. But while weak media coverage running up to the event – despite the efforts of the organising committee – meant that many could not register in time to attend, there were side events and alternative forums that welcomed broad participation. Events such as DiscoTech and ThinkTwice invited notable internet personalities to give talks on contemporary problems of internet governance, while an alternative forum was organised under the banner of the Internet UnGovernance Forum (IUF) at Istanbul Bilgi University.[13] Participation at the IUF mainly came from civil society and academia, with only some crossover in participation with the main event.

Unfortunately, despite there being two parallel events in the same city, there was a marked lack of interaction between the participants attending the two forums. While the presence of state-run institutes and institutions, bureaucrats, and private sector representatives could be felt at the IGF, civil society, media and academia showed up in greater numbers at the IUF. The divide between the two events reflected the different interests of the two groups. While the focus at the IGF was mainly on issues related to security, development, e-commerce and a brief discussion of human rights on the internet, the agenda of the IUF focused on more critical issues such as copyright, citizen journalism, data protection, surveillance, drones, encryption, transparency and digital activism. Although the issues at hand were discussed thoroughly at both events, the lack of interaction between these groups prevented a more productive discussion.

Bringing in the youth

Following the global IGF meeting in Istanbul, the Turkey Europe Foundation (TAV)[14] – a non-profit organisation based in Istanbul and focusing on projects addressing the needs of the youth in Europe – signed a memorandum with the Network of European Digital Youth – an Austria-based organisation focusing on internet governance – establishing a partnership for starting a local Youth Internet Governance Forum.

On 5 September 2015 the first Youth IGF was held in Turkey at Istanbul Bilgi University's Social Incubation Centre.[15] Eighteen young people, from a group of 30 applicants[16] selected in an open call, participated. Eleven of the 18 participants were female, and seven of them were male. The group mainly consisted of students, but IT specialists, lawyers, academics, researchers and writers were also among the group. During the one-day event, there were four main topics for discussion: Internet Governance, Mass Data, Media Literacy, and Anonymity, with sub-topics focusing on government e-services, sustainability on the net, centralisation and security, the right to

9 www.intgovforum.org/cms/component/content/article/127-workshop-proposals/1583-main-theme-and-sub-themes

10 t24.com.tr/yazarlar/fusun-sarp-nebil/igf-elestirilerimize-btkdan-gelen-cevap-yazisini-yayinliyoruz,10095

11 www.btk.gov.tr/en-US

12 www.iuf.alternatifbilisim.org

13 www.turkiyeavrupavakfi.org/?p=1676&lang=en

14 www.turkiyeavrupavakfi.org

15 IGF Turkey. (2015, 6 September). Youth IGF Turkey has been held for the first time in Istanbul. https://igfturkey.wordpress.com/2015/09/06/youth-igf-turkey-has-been-held-for-the-first-time-in-istanbul

16 Due to space limitations, and to ensure fruitful discussions, the number of participants is set at 30.

information, data safety, privacy, disinformation, the right to life on the net, cyberbullying, and information leaks such as WikiLeaks.

With a boost to capacity as a result of the first Youth IGF meeting, the local IGF organising committee initiated a more extensive plan to include a wider number of participants and stakeholders. The planned 2016 Youth IGF was to take place in September 2016, but the coup attempt on 15 July of that year delayed it, and the meeting could only take place on 3 December 2016 at the TAV headquarters in Kadıköy, Istanbul. Sixteen participants gathered to discuss three main topics: e-Investment, Data, and Rights on the Net, with subtopics including e-solutions, start-ups, mass-data collection, data safety, social identities on the web, sexual rights online, children online, the right to information, media freedom, and fake news.

Although the open call for participation in the 2016 Youth IGF was circulated more widely compared to 2015, the number of applications dropped significantly. While there were 77 applicants in 2015, 20 fewer applied in 2016. Ten invitations were sent to young professionals, businesspeople from the private sector and telecom specialists. However, young people responded with concerns, fearing investigation or interruption of their businesses by authorities under the State of Emergency Rule for participating in a meeting on internet governance. Several participants who joined the meeting also asked to be excluded from lists, photographs and records of the meeting for similar reasons, dropping the official participant number to 16. However, in 2016 there was a wider diversity among participants and in this regard it can be considered more successful in terms of the multistakeholder principle.

Among the 16 participants in 2016, six were female and ten were male; there were students, academics, researchers, journalists, young professionals, young entrepreneurs, young businesspeople, NGO representatives and activists among them.

Regional reflection

One of the participants of the first Youth IGF in Turkey – Su Sonia Herring – was selected due to her outstanding performance during discussions to represent the Youth IGF initiative internationally. Herring has become an integral part of the local Youth IGF organising committee and has participated in various regional, European and global events focusing on internet governance.[17] Among those meetings, she was welcomed as youth member session organiser at the South Eastern European Dialogue on Internet Governance (SEEDIG) in April 2016; as a facilitator at the New Media Summer School in Brussels in June 2016; as a keynote speaker at the Netherlands Youth IGF in the Hague in October 2016; and as an Internet Society IGF 2016 Ambassador in Mexico in December 2016. In addition, the Turkish Youth IGF initiative has been represented at European Dialogue on Internet Governance (EuroDIG) meetings as well as various other regional and international meetings, voicing local concerns regarding internet governance in Turkey and Europe. For example, Ali İhsan Akbaş, after participating in the 2016 Youth IGF in Turkey, represented the initiative at the 2017 Middle East and Adjoining Countries School of Internet Governance (MEAC-SIG) in Ankara.

Since the issues facing internet users in many countries are similar, the creative solutions proposed in Turkey have been shared with others across the multiple regional and global internet governance spaces. As there are many challenges in Turkey, the perspectives of local Youth IGF participants offer a valuable source of experience for regional and international initiatives. Topics that have been discussed for a long time in Turkey – such as surveillance and profiling citizens – are now becoming more visible on the international agenda.

Although participants from Turkey have showed some reluctance to sign up for events or even to speak up during regional and global discussions for fear of possible repercussions from Turkish authorities, there is a growing number of people showing a willingness to take the necessary risks and become part of organising committees to expand the scope of the internet governance debate in Turkey.

Conclusions

Both the 2015 and 2016 Youth IGF meetings called for a national IGF in Turkey. While steps were taken to set up a national IGF in early 2016, these were disrupted by the attempted coup. At the time of writing in 2017, preparations were slow. Current efforts therefore should continue to be focused on strengthening the Youth IGF. The biggest challenge here is increasing the number of participants, and security fears and fears of state harassment need to be addressed as well. In the meantime, contact with ISOC Turkey[18] has been established, and new members from among ISOC interns have been included in the Youth IGF organising committee. These are positive signs.

17 https://www.intgovforum.org/multilingual/content/youth-initiatives

18 www.isoc.org.tr

Action steps

Civil society in Turkey should:

- Put emphasis on digital security in their annual advocacy plans. They should offer training on digital security to their networks and include topics related to surveillance, privacy, anonymity and data storage. They should make any training modules available on e-learning platforms to maximise the availability and impact of their interventions.
- Build capacity and awareness of internet governance and digital rights and freedoms generally. Besides working with civil society organisations and the media, these efforts could involve school visits to attract the attention of future leaders in Turkey.
- Encourage citizens to become more vocal in matters related to digital rights and freedoms and internet governance matters by initiating non-political campaigns against repressive internet regulations, censorship and surveillance, and conducting creative disobedience actions[19] online and offline.
- Establish a multistakeholder network to organise future IGF meetings and internet governance-related discussions in Turkey. Initiate regular discussion events where participants can freely express themselves and get accustomed to a culture of democratic discussion and problem solving. This network should include a range of stakeholders including academia, unions, entrepreneurs, businesspeople and government representatives, among others.
- Avoid letting matters concerning citizens' use of the internet be solely decided upon by a single stakeholder, the government. Engage supporters of repressive policies to initiate public discussion and elaborate calmly on the impact of these laws without using antagonising or accusative language.
- Increase the salience of digital rights and freedoms by initiating discussions, holding panels, drafting reports, publishing articles, and showing more presence in deliberations related to this field.
- Establish new techno-social networks to share information, news and developments related to the field of internet governance, and use a neutral language and rhetoric that does not antagonise the supporters of the current regime. Translate news and information into English to reach an international community.

19 Creative disobedience is a form of non-acceptance of the rules and regulations imposed by the governing authority, and involves engaging in multiple layers of activism such as media activism, Twitter hashtag campaigns, intersectional events dealing with digital rights and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender identities and performance, etc. These actions do not have any direct relation to any political party but merely rely on the collective interest of fellow citizens.

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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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