Executive Summary

Turkey as a Battleground State for Regulating the Internet

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This report focuses on the Internet in Turkey as it hosts the September 2014 Internet Governance Forum (IGF) in Istanbul. Turkey’s hosting of the IGF is timely because of the country’s critical role as a “swing state”—or, perhaps more fitting, a “battleground state”—on issues of Internet policy.

In the Internet governance discussion, “swing states” have been defined as countries that have the capacity for outsize influence on international processes due to their resources and mixed political orientation.1 Turkey’s mixed orientation is clear at the level of global Internet governance. In 2012, Turkey was one of only three OECD countries to vote in favor of a new set of International Telecommunications Regulations (ITRs) that Russia and China had backed and that argued for expanding the state’s role in Internet governance.2

More recently, however, in June 2014 Turkey was one of a core group of countries along with the United States and Sweden backing a resolution at the UN Human Rights Council to recognize that the same rights people have offline must be respected online.3

At the domestic level, Turkey’s policies have been more one-sided. Even prior to 2013, Turkey had implemented an extensive and untransparent system of website blocking. In the last 15 months, as traditional punitive offline measures restricting freedom of speech have migrated more and more to the online sphere and new legislation has increased the government’s capacity to regulate content, Turkey has moved to the cutting edge of controlling online space. A new Press Law, currently in committee in parliament, would force broadly defined “Internet news sites” to register and name their owners and authors, echoing the law that went into effect August 1 in Russia. After crudely blocking Twitter in March, the government has also now increased its use of court orders to the social media company and is increasingly finding success in getting Twitter to remove content.

A “swing state” is a country that could go either way, as the term applies to the United States’ two-party system. But a more accurate American political metaphor here would be the closely related “battleground state”—meaning a place where the bigger campaign could be won or lost. For Internet governance, Turkey is a battleground state: a place where a young population, improving technology, and international connections could result in a free Internet the world might envy, or where government tactics might provide a model for shutting down a vibrant online sphere.

The Internet, and social media in particular, have become an important part of public life in Turkey. As
As of December 2012, Turkish users spent the second-most amount of time online per capita in Europe, after the UK. More than 90 percent of the population ages 15-24 have a Facebook account, and more than 70 percent are on Twitter. The Boston Consulting Group puts Turkey in the “Straight to Social” group of developing countries, where rapidly expanding ranks of new Internet users are going directly to social media as soon as they start using the Internet.

Turkey is also notable for young people’s use of the Internet for news. A recent Gallup/BBC survey showed that among 15- to 24-year-olds, the Internet had nearly matched television as a source of news (71 percent for Internet versus 75 percent for TV; the comparable split for 25- to 34-year-olds was 56 percent Internet versus 90 percent TV). Forty-seven percent of the 15-to-24 cohort got their news from social media—all despite the fact that fixed broadband and mobile broadband penetration rates are currently only about half of OECD averages.

In this report, Freedom House and Turkish experts examine Turkey’s online sphere from three perspectives: speech restrictions and data collection, infrastructure development, and the emergence of new media. In the first section, Freedom House Program Officer Nate Schenkan describes the government’s tightening restrictions on online speech and expansion of abilities to monitor and intercept data in the last 15 months since the Gezi Park protests. In the second section, Osman Coşkunoğlu, a former member of parliament and professor of industrial engineering, describes the development of Turkey’s telecommunications infrastructure and the policies that support its development. His analysis explains how political influence over the country’s nominally independent regulatory authority, and the close relationship between the government and the country’s dominant telecommunications provider, have prevented infrastructure development from rising to meet demand. Finally, in the third section Aslı Tunç, a professor of communications and head of the Media School at Bilgi University in Istanbul, gives readers a window into one of the most remarkable aspects of Turkey’s Internet growth, namely, the innovative use of social media to create new forms of citizen journalism. Her section concludes on a note of hope that the growth in bottom-up journalism in Turkey can help the country brighten its troubled press freedom picture. But this media revival will depend on the survival of a rights- and rule of law-based model for domestic governance of the Internet, and genuine independence of the institutions responsible for encouraging growth in Internet infrastructure.

Even more than how it votes at international Internet governance forums, Turkey is a battleground state in how it governs the Internet at home. Because of its position as an OECD and G-20 country, not to mention an EU candidate and a member of NATO, the example Turkey sets is one that other countries facing similar challenges from online speech will be watching. Right now, the contradiction between Turkey’s words at the UN and deeds at home only serves to reinforce the belief that international norms can be manipulated in order to curtail domestic freedoms when needed.

There are structural reasons to hope that Turkey will not be able to consolidate control over the Internet as firmly as countries like Russia and Azerbaijan. National institutions, including the Constitutional Court and the constitution itself, are stronger in Turkey than in consolidated autocracies. Civil society is more diverse, vocal, and connected to transnational networks. The state is not yet dominated by an all-powerful executive. Just as important, Turkey cannot count on filling its budget with hydrocarbon revenues. Instead, the country’s economy is heavily reliant on Western investment and trade, especially its customs union with the EU. The EU is Turkey’s number one import and export partner, and provides the overwhelming majority of Turkey’s foreign direct investment. To the extent that Turkey’s European economic partners find the lack of telecommunications infrastructure development and censorship online problematic for their investments, Turkey will face pressure to improve its approach to the online sphere.

These factors are unlikely to produce a sudden reversal in the country’s Internet policies or the broader negative trends in governance that are driven by domestic political dynamics. But they will create a drag on authoritarian consolidation and preserve space in which free and independent voices in traditional media and online continue to develop and thrive. These voices are the ones that can help preserve the liberalism and diversity that have gathered strength in Turkey over the last 20 years. In this way, Freedom House hopes this report contributes to strengthening support from the international community for sustaining the vibrancy of Turkey’s online media and a free Internet.