

THE INTERNET IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS

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Internet in Armenia: Slow, Expensive, but Increasingly Important

By Onnik Krikorian, Yerevan

Abstract

Armenia's geopolitical situation in a region where it is in conflict with two of its four neighbors and the troubled privatization of the ArmenTel monopoly in the late 1990s mean that, in regional terms, the country's Internet connection speeds remain the slowest, prices remain the highest, and actual penetration remains the lowest. Nevertheless, Internet coverage is increasing in Armenia, especially with the arrival of three cellular phone companies in the market. Additionally, blogs moved in to fill the information gap when a 20-day state of emergency in the aftermath of the bitterly disputed 2008 presidential election imposed restrictions on the mass media. As a result, international donors, such as the World Bank and USAID, are interested in expanding and improving existing infrastructure, and especially using it to empower marginalized groups and communities in society. Even so, it remains to be seen whether such plans can succeed before Armenia's borders with Azerbaijan and especially Turkey are reopened.

Early Hopes Disappointed

Although Armenia was once known as the "Silicon Valley of the Soviet Union," the situation with the Internet remains the worst in the South Caucasus. Even though the government has prioritized the IT sector for economic growth, Internet penetration remains the lowest in the region. According to the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), it stood at just 6.4 percent as of September 2009, compared to 18 percent in Azerbaijan and 22.2 percent in Georgia. While such figures are open to debate, especially considering what constitutes "penetration" and with other statistics putting Armenia at 5.8 percent, Azerbaijan at 12.7, and Georgia at 8.4, connection speeds nonetheless remain the lowest while costs are the highest.

As an example, according to some statistics, a 1mb/s connection in Armenia costs \$80 a month, while in Azerbaijan and Georgia it costs just \$40 and \$10, respectively. In part this is because Armenia remains blockaded by two of its four neighbors. Locked in a stalemate with Baku over the disputed territory of Nagorno Karabakh, a major obstacle to the country's economic development in general, the common border between Armenia and Azerbaijan remains closed, thus preventing the provision of Internet from the east. The same is true with Turkey to the west, after it closed its border in 1993 in support of Azerbaijan during its war with Armenia in the early 1990s.

Although there has been talk of receiving high speed Internet from Turkey if efforts to normalize relations between Ankara and Yerevan succeed and the border is reopened, most of Armenia's Internet comes from the Trans-Asia-Europe fiber-optic cable system via Georgia, with a very minor part coming from Iran. However, the connection is often vulnerable to damage, faults and disruption on the Georgian side. Although rare, outages of

a few days have been known to occur, but even so, the situation remains erratic with reliability decreasing in recent months as a growing number of subscribers in Armenia take advantage of slowly falling prices.

Making matters worse was the lack of interest among Armenian businessmen in last year's auction of Georgian Railway Telecom, which is responsible for one of the cables bringing the Internet into Armenia. Critics argue that interest in the company would have increased bandwidth and reduced fees. Currently, ArmenTel uses much of the bandwidth coming from the six lines into the country for its own purposes. Indeed, one of the biggest obstacles to the development of the Internet in Armenia, as well as telecommunications in general, was the 1998 privatization of the Soviet-era company.

Granted a 15-year monopoly on telephony and Internet services in the country, ArmenTel did not make the necessary investments in the country's Soviet-era system, setting back development of the sector for years. In particular, the company maintained a monopoly on the provision of Internet services and prices were set too high for re-sellers to offer lower cost Internet services to the population. Despite widespread public criticism, it was not until 2004 that the monopoly was partially lifted and the market opened up to other cell phone companies. In particular, the appearance of VivaCell, which also offered mobile Internet in addition to standard cell phone services, dramatically changed the situation. All aspects of the monopoly, with the exception of domestic landlines, ended in 2007.

Mobile Internet Signals Transition

The arrival of the mobile Internet was an important development given the difficult conditions in the local

economy and the relatively low levels of access to PCs. Indeed, like elsewhere in the world, the number of mobile Internet subscribers should rise significantly in the next few years. Some statistics put the number of Internet-enabled phones in the country at nearly 1.5 million, although it is uncertain how many might use them for going online. Even so, the market is one that is sure to gain more attention, especially with the arrival of the French Orange company in Armenia, increasing the number of cellular phone companies to three, the other two being the Russian Beeline and the domestic VivaCell.

Nevertheless, until two years ago, most Internet subscribers were connected via dialup services, while many more only had access in Internet cafes. Since the breakup of the ArmenTel monopoly, more Internet service providers (ISPs) have entered the market with broadband services such as ADSL, Wifi, Wimax and 3G. According to the latest figures, there are some 70,000–75,000 subscribers connecting in this way, 6–7 times higher than in 2008. For the first time ever, this number exceeded that of dialup subscribers which stood at just 40,000–45,000. Even so, broadband speed remains low with most users connecting at just 256k/s for around \$30 per month. By comparison, subscribers in Georgia can access an unlimited 4mb/s connection for as little as \$19.

There are currently 12,250 domains registered in the .AM zone while the still developing e-commerce market was responsible for AMD 5.5 billion (\$14 million) in online transactions last year. Nevertheless, only AMD 1.6 billion (\$4 million) represented actual commercial purchases. Internet services are available in most major urban centers in Armenia, with around 100 ISPs believed to be offering connections. Wimax is also available in Yerevan and 18 other cities with some anticipating country-wide coverage by the end of the year. 3G connectivity is offered by all of the cellular phone companies, but the number of enabled handsets in circulation remains uncertain.

Additionally, even though the GPRS system allows connection speeds of up to 50 kb/sec, costs remain prohibitive, with 1 mb of data costing approximately 30 cents. As a result, surveys indicate that, as with standard home connections, most users logon mainly to access social networking sites such as Facebook and Odnoklassniki. Indeed, the Armenian Public Services Regulatory Commission reports that 60 percent of all Internet traffic is directed towards Russian domains. According to Alexa.com, Odnoklassniki, mail.ru, yandex.ru, rambler.ru, liveinternet.ru, vkontakte.ru are the most popular sites in Armenia.

Regional Internet Backbone

Despite the serious problems with bandwidth and connection speeds, the Armenian government does at least appear to consider developing the Internet an important priority. The Broadband Armenia project seeks to partner with the private sector in order to put in place the necessary infrastructure for higher speeds and more reliable Internet connectivity throughout the country. The initiative is seen as particularly important for the further development of the country's IT sector, as well as laying the foundations for an electronic society.

The government also hopes to connect all primary and secondary schools in an education network by the end of next year. For now, 624 schools are connected to the Internet as part of a World Bank funded project, although another 750 remain offline.

Internet Security

One area of concern, however, remains Internet security, especially in light of the still unresolved conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the disputed territory of Nagorno Karabakh. A tit-for-tat hacking war of attrition has become as much a part of the continuing hostilities as occasional skirmishes on the frontline. As a result, the National Security Council in Armenia has drawn up provisions for considering Internet security as part of its national security remit. Plans to install equipment ostensibly to monitor and protect against potential attacks have proven particularly controversial because some civil society activists fear that such provisions could also target them.

Blogs and Social Media

The aftermath of the 2008 presidential elections may have triggered quicker growth in the Internet in Armenia. A bitterly disputed vote led to 10 days of street protests led by Armenia's first president Levon Ter-Petrossian, who now is a leader of the extra-parliamentary opposition. Clashes with police and security forces on 1 March 2008 resulted in 10 dead and the state's decision to declare a 20-day state of emergency. During that period, all media were censored and restricted to publishing only official government press releases and news.

However, in a surprise development, blogs were allowed to freely operate and many activists and media outlets published on them instead. Some observers likened their role in the post-election environment to that of samizdat during the Soviet era. Blogs disseminated opposition propaganda, and activists throughout the country as well as members of the Diaspora re-posted them or printed them out for further distri-

bution. Although YouTube was blocked for some days during that time as well as some news sites, the government decided that the best way to counter the information war online was by supporting bloggers sympathetic to the newly elected president, Serge Sargsyan.

As a result, international organizations and donors are now looking to promote blogs as part of their existing media development programs. Moreover, the U.S. Embassy in Armenia last year announced a \$4 million

program to be implemented over the next 4 years to support alternative resources in the media. The project aims to strengthen the regional media, particularly through individuals who serve as content producers using high and low technology solutions. The program also includes resources for the production of alternative video. Its success will be determined by the Internet as a delivery system, and as a result, its speed and cost to end-users.

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The Internet in Azerbaijan

By Alexey Sidorenko, Moscow/Warsaw and Arzu Geybullayeva, Baku

Abstract

Azerbaijan boasts the greatest Internet penetration rates of the three South Caucasus countries thanks to government support. The government, political parties, and civil society organizations are developing their on-line presences, including the use of social media. Especially for some progressive youth, the Internet has become a window to the outside world – an opportunity to learn, share, promote and discuss. In particular, blogs and video blogging have become increasingly popular tools for civil society activism in Azerbaijan.

Internet Leader in the South Caucasus

The third president of Azerbaijan Geidar Aliev considered information technology one of the foundations of the country's future industrialization. His son Ilham approved a strategy for information development when he first came to power in 2003 and the government hopes to turn the country into an information communications technology hub for the Caucasus region. The results of the strategy were more or less successful, though it is not clear whether it was the activities of the government or the needs of business, particularly the oil industry, that drove this progress.

From the quantitative point of view, Azerbaijan has the most extensive Internet development among the three countries of the South Caucasus. According to official statistics, 28 percent of the population used the Internet in 2008, though most likely this number was closer to 20 percent if one takes into account the main trends of the preceding years. In Georgia, the corresponding figure was 16.6 percent and in Armenia 6.2 percent. Overall, the Azeri Internet population is young, urban, and mostly male.

However, the South Caucasus Internet penetration rate is less than the global average of 26 percent. In the technological sense, the entire Caucasus is in the “digital periphery.” Turkey and Iran both have higher Internet penetration rates than Azerbaijan (approximately 31 percent in both cases). In 2007, Azerbaijan occupied 83rd place in the world for Internet penetration.

Ninety percent of Internet users in Azerbaijan access the Internet through a dial-up connection. On one hand, a dial-up connection is convenient because it is accessible to everyone who has a telephone line. But it is important to remember that only 14.8 percent of Azerbaijanis have a home phone. The situation is significantly better with mobile telephones since more than half of Azerbaijanis have them (53.7% in 2007) and there is coverage nearly throughout the country. Most experts think that mobile communications will make it possible for Azerbaijanis to overcome the problems of the digital divide, in which large parts of the population are still not able to have access to the Internet. On the other hand, dial-up and the mobile Internet offer only slow connections, which are not sufficient to support con-

temporary online technologies, in particular the Internet services of Web 2.0, such as Facebook and Youtube, where the user, rather than the provider, generates most of the site content.

In 2006 Azerbaijanis gained the opportunity to connect to ADSL broadband service. More than 95 percent of Internet traffic goes through the satellite Internet service provider AzerSat. Many users face the problem of too much traffic in the cables, which reduces content delivery speeds. According to the Trend Capital Agency, at the end of 2007 the cost for a line with a speed of 1 megabyte/second amounted to between \$900 and \$1,600 a month. Accordingly, they were 30–50 times more expensive than in Warsaw, Moscow or other European cities at that time.

At the beginning of 2009, several providers reduced their fees, but prices are still 12–20 times higher than in Europe. Currently, a typical resident of Baku will pay \$50–60 a month for Internet services with pre-paid usage fees, a large amount given that the average salary in Azerbaijan amounts to about \$370. Increasingly, however, there are cheap ADSL providers that cost as little as 9 manat (\$11) per month.

Internet cafes provide access for users who do not have their own computers or broadband connection. Approximately one-fifth of users access the Internet through such cafes, according to the OpenNet Initiative.

Government Websites

The main country portal, Azerbaijan.az, is funded by the Geidar Aliev Foundation, which makes promotion of information communications technology one of its key initiatives. Almost every Azerbaijani government office has its own website, but as in most countries of the world the current quality of the material presented could be optimized to better serve citizens' interests. Both the content and the design reflect the lack of quality. The design of most government websites is table-based (HTML 4.0) as was common practice in the early 2000s. However, more than a third (15 out of 40) of government websites present information in more than one language, typically English and Russian. Unfortunately, the English and Russian language options often do not work or do not include full translations of the Azerbaijani version or are not updated as frequently.

While Azerbaijan has certainly made immense progress in terms of putting up government sites, not all ministerial websites function properly. Most of them use a common model of content-filling – copying-and-pasting from various news sources that have some connection with the topic of the ministry. Little information

is presented about government programs. Many agencies do not keep their sites current. The Ministry of Customs site, for example, has not been updated since 2007 (<http://www.az-customs.net/>), the Baku city administration – since 2008 (<http://www.bakucity.az/>) and the website of the Constitutional Court has been closed (<http://www.constitutional-court-az.org/>) and replaced with a SEO-parking site instead.

The situation is much worse at the municipal level. The Qazah district website, for example, displays a PHP-error and a series of Aliev portraits (<http://www.qazah.gov.az/>). The Zaqatala district website is infected with malware (<http://www.zaqatala.az/>). The Imishli district site has not been updated since 2007 (<http://www.imishli.com/home/>), while the Merdekan, Ganja, and Kepez websites are unavailable. In addition, some information provided lacks consistency. Comprehensive statistics can, for example, be found at the site of the Azeri statistical committee (<http://www.azstat.org/>), but there are no region-based statistics on elections at the Central Election Commission website (<http://cec.gov.az/>).

Recently the Azeri government has begun to express an interest in acquiring e-gov capabilities, which it does not currently offer to its citizens. The governmental portal e-government.az (<http://e-government.az/ru/>) regularly publishes news on developments in this field. The first e-government conference is scheduled for April 2010. Despite this progress, government websites in Azerbaijan are in need of improvement if they want to become a means of communication between the public and the administration.

NGOs and Political Parties on the Internet

Almost all non-governmental organizations (NGOs) use the Internet to facilitate their activities. Until 2009 many NGOs used this space in unrestricted ways, while facing information barriers in the official press. As long as “prohibited information” was not attributed to a particular person, it had no legal consequences. Anonymity provided a cover for publishing sensitive information.

However, as a result of “black outs” several sites became inaccessible, ostensibly for technical reasons. In countries like China or Iran such black outs lead to limits on freedom of speech in the Internet. Turkey, for example, has banned Youtube. Another technique in the battle against free thinking is to create clone sites of existing NGOs that duplicate some of the information, but provide misleading data as well.

In Azerbaijan pro-Western political parties rely on a network of bloggers and information websites. Since the

primary audience of these groups is international, the typical language of such websites is English. The defining feature of the Azeri online pro-Western political camp is its network structure: It is essentially a network of interconnected bloggers. However, there are conventional websites as well. Among them, the most influential are: Azerbaijan Network Television (antv.ws), Dalgha Youth Monument (<http://dalga.azeriblog.com/>) and Azeri Report (<http://azerireport.com/>). Like their government counterparts these websites are far from perfect from the design point of view. Their distinctive features are more personalized information, possibilities for commenting, and rich video content which is almost always missing from the government sites.

The Islamist movements in Azerbaijan have almost no online presence since their main activities take place offline and are aimed at social groups less prone to use the Internet.

Azerbaijan's Blogosphere

The blogosphere of Azerbaijan's Internet, or as it is usually called AzNet, is not a united whole. Rather it is divided among the various languages spoken in the country – Russian, Azeri, and English. Azerbaijan is not a big enough country to form its own blogosphere on the basis of a national language. As the Azerbaijani blogger Vladimir Zimin pointed out, “there is too great an influence from the Russian and Turkish parts of the Internet.” Azerbaijan lacks its own popular blogging platform (such as Russia's livejournal) or a social networking site, such as odnoklassniki.ru, although some sites are seeking to fill this void, such as eylence.az and blog.bakililar.az. Effectively, the information sphere is divided into language-based zones of influence and the use of Russian in the virtual world is greater than in actual society.

It is more suitable for bloggers in Azerbaijan to use big and established online blog platforms to promote their ideas. Therefore, most of the English-language blogs are either on the Wordpress or Blogger platforms while the Russian-speaking political movements hosts their blogs at Livejournal. Using these international blogging sites is not only cheaper and quicker, it makes it also easier to post information anonymously. It is important to note that the .az domain names are not popular among bloggers critical of the government, although such semi-independent newspapers as zerkalo.az or forums like mediaforum.az use it.

Azerbaijan's blogosphere is almost entirely based in Baku – more than 92 percent of all blogs are located in the capital. By comparison, only about 55 percent of

Russian blogs are based in Moscow and the number is even lower in European countries.

It is hard to say when the blogosphere in Azerbaijan really came about, because there were, and are, many blogs covering a range of issues, such as art and photography, culture and fashion, music, politics, and religion in all three languages. According to Emin Huseynzade, regional program manager at Transitions Online, there are “different groups of bloggers” but most active are those bloggers who tend to write about politics. Currently there are a number of important blogs in English that describe what they perceive as the declining political and social reality of Azerbaijan (see the blogs by [Nigar Fatali](#), [Ilkin Gambar](#), [Arzu Geybullu](#), [Ali Novruzov](#)). The approximate number of bloggers (both active and inactive) in Azerbaijan today is around 30,000, which is not a lot, but “the figure is increasing,” according to Huseynzade.

The Blogosphere and Politics

An arrest in the summer of 2009 triggered an increase in political blogging and other new social media tools in Azerbaijan. Emin Milli (30) and Adnan Hajizada (26), youth activists who founded the OL and AN networks, were charged with hooliganism and inflicting bodily injury following an incident at a restaurant in Baku.

Shortly after they were detained and throughout the course of the trial, Azerbaijani youth activists turned to Facebook, personal blogs and Twitter to provide information about what was happening to their colleagues. As one Azerbaijani blogger recalls, “during the four months that Emin and Adnan spent in confinement before and during their trial, their friends turned Facebook into a modern telegraph; their status updates were news dispatches, rather than answers to what-are-you-doing questions [...] countless text messages, phone calls, Facebook status updates, instant messages, e-mails, tweets, and blogposts were flying around.”

According to Media Helping Media, a not-for-profit organization assisting journalists and activists, “it took the traditional news wires at least 24 hours to catch up with the coverage of the arrest of the two youth movement leaders in Azerbaijan. By that time, dozens of blogs had been updated and probably thousands of tweets sent.”

Onnik Krikorian, the Caucasus editor for Global Voices Online, a blogger himself and a journalist, thinks the Azerbaijani blogosphere, which he has been following through [OL's blog](#) and via other local blogs, is something “totally unprecedented for the region and also exemplary for other countries, such as Armenia and Georgia.”

Outlook

Azerbaijan boasts the greatest Internet penetration rates of the three South Caucasus countries thanks to government support. The government, political parties and civil society organizations have extensive on-line presences. As a result the Internet will continue to develop

as an alternative source of information, especially as the use of new social media becomes more popular and user friendly. With that the internet has also become a source of empowerment in the hands of civil society, which employs technical innovation as a way of integrating into global debates and news flows.

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Internet, Society and Democracy in Georgia

By Alexey Sidorenko, Moscow/Warsaw

Abstract

Georgian Internet penetration reached 16.5 percent in 2008 and has been growing rapidly in recent years. Georgian users typically access odnoklassniki.ru as their preferred social networking site, but relatively few are bloggers. For most, the Internet is a source of entertainment rather than a tool for political debate or mobilization. While the government promotes a liberal media policy, encouraging Internet use, it maintains the ability to censor the web, a capacity it used during the 2008 Russian-Georgian war.

Internet Penetration and Usage in Georgia

In 2008 Georgia reached the Internet-penetration rate of 16.5 percent, becoming the second most wired country in the South Caucasus after Azerbaijan. The official Internet-penetration figure cited by the International Telecommunications Union is 23.8 percent but this figure looks doubtful. After several years with a steady annual growth rate of 1–1.5 percent, the country's Internet-penetration rate leaped from 7.8 percent to 23.8 percent. Such a large difference means that there were in theory almost 700,000 new Internet-users in 2007–2008, which is unlikely given the state of communications infrastructure in this country. Taking into account the long-term Internet development trend in Georgia, it makes sense to apply a correction coefficient equal to 0.7 (Figure 1). Even with the correction, the rise of Internet use in recent years is overwhelming. It is evident that in

2006–2008 Georgia experienced the first wave of its Internet boom.

As with many countries experiencing a “late” Internet explosion, usage is mainly concentrated in the capital Tbilisi. The penetration rate in Tbilisi is twice as high as the country average – 38 percent in October 2008. More importantly, the growth rate is overwhelming – according to ACT group, the penetration rate in Tbilisi in January 2008 was 20 percent, while in October it grew to 38 percent. In other cities the penetration rate is lower: 31 percent in Kutaisi and 20 percent in Batumi. The situation is much worse in smaller towns (15 percent) and in the countryside (no data). It's important to note that almost half (47 percent) of the Georgian population is rural.

Several factors sparked the rapid growth of Internet use, including: the increasing accessibility of Internet service provider prices, liberal government policies,

and most importantly, expansion of social networks. A growing number of broadband providers, which was an important factor for expanding Internet use in other countries (such as Poland or Russia), is not the case in Georgia. Broadband use is rare – about 2 percent. The monthly cost of unlimited broadband ranges from \$10 to \$30. In an effort to lower broadband costs, some times several Georgian families pay for one Internet account and share it among three apartments, according to Warsaw University Professor David Kolbaia. This practice, he says, occurs both in multi-storey buildings as well as in single-family house districts.

The limit of growth for Internet usage is about 48–52 percent of the population. This estimate is based on two observations: 1. Computer usage (about 48 percent in August 2009) and 2. Long-term trends in other countries. Typically the penetration rate climbs to 40–50 percent and then stabilizes (due to the age and educational structure of the population).

Social Networks and the Georgian Blogosphere

Georgian Internet users typically flock to Russian social networking sites, but there are relatively few bloggers in the country. The most popular social network in Georgia is Odnoklassniki.ru, the Russian site that helps school classmates reunite, which is used by 91 percent of Georgian Internet-users, according to an ACT Research Group poll. The less popular networks include MySpace (14 percent of Georgian Internet-surfers), Facebook (6 percent), and Hi-5 (6 percent). There are no official statistics on Georgia provided by Facebook since Georgia is not among the countries where Facebook targets advertising. For reasons that remain unclear, the poll results do not include users of the Vkontakte social network (the no. 2 social network in post-Soviet cyberspace). Vkontakte official statistics claim that there are 111,000 VK users in Georgia. Based on my experience with the Vkontakte statistics in Russia (for example, there are more Vkontakte users in the city of Velikiy Novgorod than the official number of inhabitants, including seniors and kids) this figure should be corrected by a coefficient of 0.55. Accordingly, we can speak of about 61,000 Vkontakte users in Georgia. More than a half of them are based in Tbilisi (32,000). Other numerous Vkontakte groups are in Batumi (4,400), Kutaisi (2,750). Each Georgian city has a rather small online community in Vkontakte.

The overwhelmingly high usage of the Russia-based Odnoklassniki.ru might be connected with the mental-

ity of Georgians (especially older ones) since they value conventional social ties (such as connections to old classmates or living in the same neighborhood) and have feelings of nostalgia for the Soviet social order (though not necessarily the political regime). Georgia has not yet developed its own on-line social network due to the lack of resources necessary to produce and advertise such a product (as well as a lack of interest from foreign investors – the Georgian online market still isn't profitable). Nevertheless, it is important to note the Georgian-Estonian project Face.ge, which was launched in November 2008 and is currently #48 in the top.ge rating of most popular Georgian websites.

The exact size of the Georgian blogosphere is unknown. One of the leading Georgian bloggers Giga Paitchadze claims that the Georgian blogosphere is weak, with approximately 1,500 bloggers in Georgia (their overall audience is about 10,000–15,000 readers). They're most focused on "everyday life rather than high politics, and most post either in Georgian or Russian," he adds. According to Paitchadze, the first blogs appeared in Georgia in 2004–2005. Only one third of bloggers – about 500 are very active (write at least one post per day). The most popular blogs are <http://dodka.ge/>, <http://sweet.ge/>, <http://tomushka.blogspot.com/>, <http://linguistuss.wordpress.com/>, and <http://tiny.ge/>, and their popularity accounts for 200–300 users daily, the blogger reports. Bloggers write about their lives, simultaneously reacting to media and political events, but there are also interesting blogs on cuisine and the military.

In contrast to other post-Soviet countries, LiveJournal (LJ) is not very popular in Georgia (there are about a thousand bloggers on the LJ platform currently). There are 26 LJ-communities and only 6 of them are active (updated at least once in a week). The content differs very much of the non-LJ blogosphere. First of all, the LJ-communities are in Russian (most Georgian LJ-bloggers write in Russian, too). Secondly, there are two communities examining the Russian-Georgian war. One of them tends to use Russian propaganda as its main channel of communication, while anti-Kremlin bloggers dominate the other.

Nine of the ten most popular websites in Georgia are connected to entertainment (videos, torrents, movies, music, etc). For most Internet-users in Georgia, the Internet is a source of entertainment, not a political arena. It is important to add that with the existence of a relatively free media, blogs become less politically important (the opposite situation might be observed in Russia). The only politics website is forum.ge (the only

blocked Georgian website in August 2008) with an average audience of 20,000 visitors per month (according to top.ge) (see Table 1).

Democracy and the Internet

The majority of Georgians believe that they live in a democratic country. As ACT research reveals, “democracy awareness” increases each year. In 2007, three years after the Rose Revolution, only 31 percent of Georgians claimed that Georgia was a democratic country, two years later 43 percent confirmed this statement. Of course, perceived democracy does not always match reality (Russia is a good example since almost the same share of the population considers it to be a democratic country). Similarly, democratic regimes are not always perceived as democratic by all of their citizens (For example, in Poland in 2008 only 68 percent of the respondents claimed they lived in a democratic country although experts have no doubts about the democratic character of the country’s political system). But, so far, both foreign and domestic evaluators give Georgia high marks. Although Georgia is labeled a “partly-free country,” the overall level of democracy in Georgia is better than in Russia and Armenia and significantly better than in Azerbaijan.

The Freedom House report “Freedom on the Net” claims that the authorities do not filter Internet content, although “there have been a few cases in which they interfered with internet access on a large scale.” Both cases occurred in 2008, during and after the Russian-Georgian war. In August 2008, the Georgian government blocked access to all Russian (.ru) domains, claiming the need to respond to hacker attacks from Russia on Georgian websites (which evidently took place). The blocking lasted for a couple of days, although it deeply damaged the government’s reputation. As the Freedom House report pointed out:

“The government apparently does possess the capacity to block content on a larger scale, however, as evidenced by its actions in August 2008. While access to some social-networking sites with the .ru country code was restored fairly quickly, the block on Russian news sites stayed in effect until the end of September, and forum.ge, one of Georgia’s biggest discussion forums, was closed down for about five weeks.”

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The other case of content filtering was connected to a dispute between two commercial entities (the ISP Georgian Telecom and the Caucasus Online site) that resulted in a blackout of the site’s 150,000 users (20 percent of all Internet users in the country) for a couple of days. Except for the cases mentioned above, the government did not engage in filtering. Moreover current media freedom laws are liberal, which helps to develop telecommunications infrastructure and rapidly increase penetration (the opposite happened in Armenia, where the government overregulated the Internet sector, which led to stagnation in the penetration rate).

As mentioned before, the blogosphere and social network communities are not very strong. Bloggers and network activists have considerably less influence than “conventional” journalists. However, sometimes bloggers can organize themselves for support campaigns. This happened in November 2009 as a reaction to the sentencing of two Azeri video bloggers to jail terms for their actions. GlobalVoicesOnline reporter Dodka translated the posts of Georgian bloggers on that topic. One of the bloggers wrote:

“Two Azeri bloggers were sentenced to jail today. Georgian traditional media – silence. Good job! Don’t be surprised when others will be silent, when next time you are left without freedom of speech and freedom of expression. Good job, Georgian journalists, good job!”

Conclusions

The Internet is reaching more and more Georgians. Currently it is mainly a source of entertainment not an arena for political debates. The blogosphere is rather weak. There were no documented cases of street or political mobilization with the help of Twitter or Facebook as seen in Iran or Moldova in 2009 (maybe because the Rose Revolution happened before the first wave of the Internet boom in Georgia). Forum.ge is the most influential online political arena with the broadest outreach. The Georgian government promotes a liberal Internet policy and embraces increasing Internet penetration, although it possesses the capacity to filter any online content in the country.

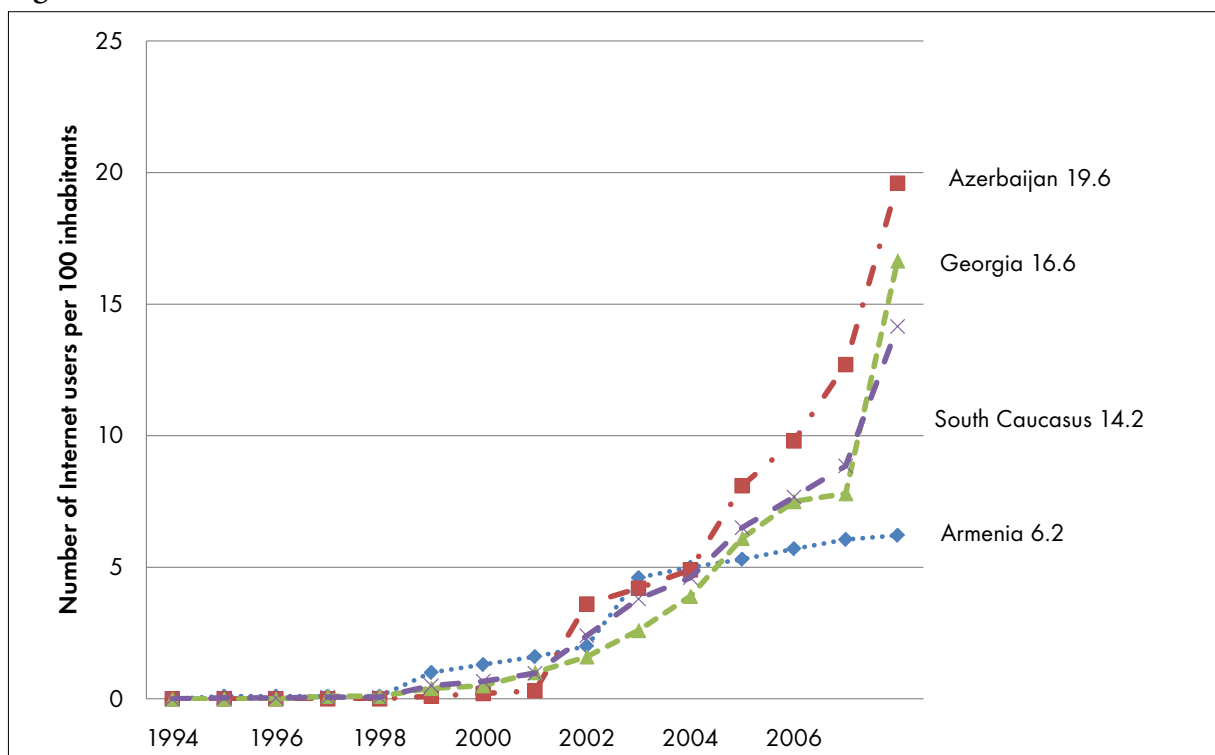
Recommended Reading

- Computer ownership, ACT newsletter #52: http://act.ge/index.php?lang_id=ENG&sec_id=296&info_id=447
- Dodka, “Georgia: Reaction to lack of media attention on Azerbaijan bloggers’ trial,” Global Voices Online, November 15, 2009 <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2009/11/15/georgia-reaction-to-lack-of-attention-on-azerbaijan-bloggers-trial/>
- “Facebook” or “Odnoklassniki”?, ACT newsletter #32 http://act.ge/index.php?lang_id=ENG&sec_id=296&info_id=401
- Freedom House: Freedom on the Net: A Global Assessment of Internet and Digital Media <http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=384&key=207&parent=19&report=79>
- Georgia, country profile. International Telecommunications Union <http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/icteye/DisplayCountry.aspx?countryId=276>
- Georgia Statistics Yearbook, 2009 - <http://statistics.ge/publication.php?plang=1&pform=-562>
- Giga Paitchadze, “Georgia: The Blogosphere Emerges,” Global Voices Online, October 7, 2009 <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2009/10/07/georgia-th-blogosphere-emerges/>
- Paul Goble, “Russian Invasion Energized Georgian Blogosphere,” Window On Eurasia, September 14, 2008 http://georgiandaily.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=7675&Itemid=65
- Guide to the Law of Georgia on Freedom of Speech and Expression, <http://www.article19.org/pdfs/analysis/georgia-foe-guide-april-2005.pdf>
- “Internet Usage in Georgia,” ACT newsletter #21: http://act.ge/index.php?lang_id=ENG&sec_id=296&info_id=369
- Rating of Georgian websites, <http://www.top.ge/>

Data

Internet Use in the South Caucasus

Figure 1: Internet Penetration in the Countries of the South Caucasus 1994–2006



Source: ICT, UN, Alexey Sidorenko’s corrections.

Table 1: Most Popular Georgian Websites in December 2009

#	URL	Main content	Language
1	MyVideo.GE	Videos	Georgian
2	AVOE.GE	no data	
3	TOP.GE	Rating	
4	http://games.jeje.ge/	Games	
5	AllMovies.GE	Movies / Torrents	Georgian, Russian
6	AllShares.GE	Downloads / Torrents	Georgian, English
7	www.MyAuto.ge	Cars	Various
8	TVali.GE	Videos	Various
9	GeoClass.Ge	no data	
10	Forum.GE	Discussion/Politics	Georgian

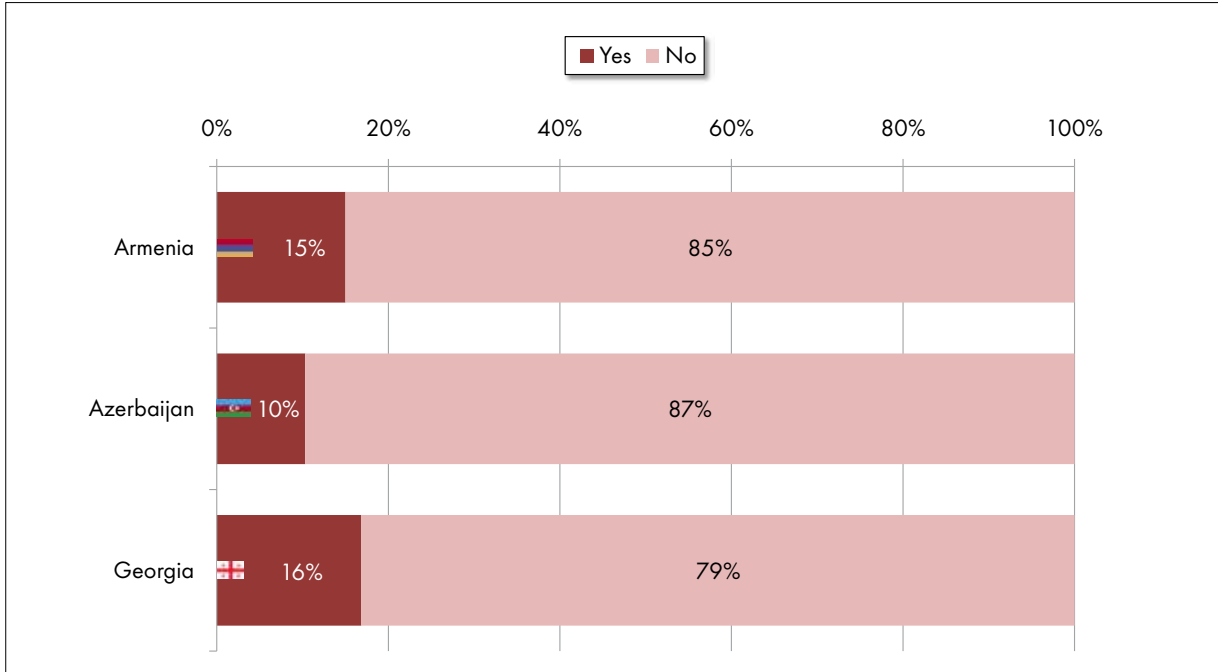
Source: top.ge

Table 2: Comparison of Georgian Democracy Indicators, 2002–2009

Year	Freedom of the Press (score)	Freedom in the World (score)		Reporters without Borders (ranking)
		Rights	Liberties	
2009	60	4	4	81
2008	60	4	4	120
2007	57	3	3	66
2006	57	3	3	89
2005	56	3	4	99
2004	54	4	4	94
2003	54	4	4	73
2002	53	4	4	no data

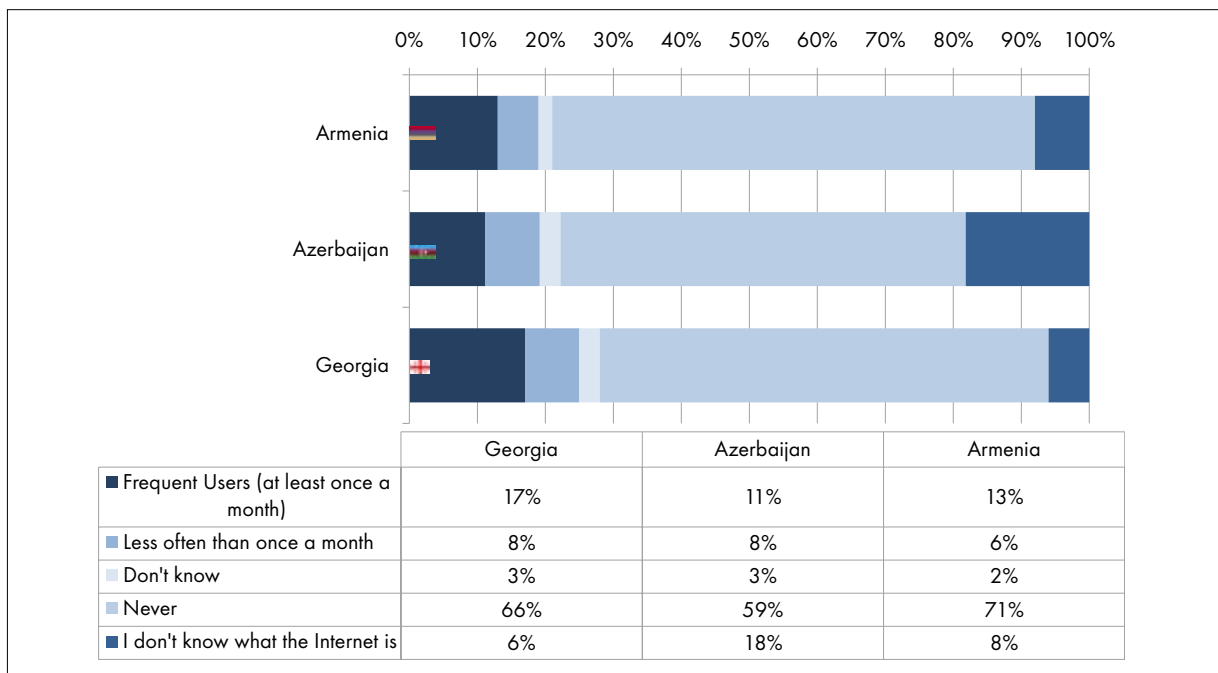
Source: Freedom House, Reporteurs sans Frontiers

Does Your Household Own a Personal Computer?



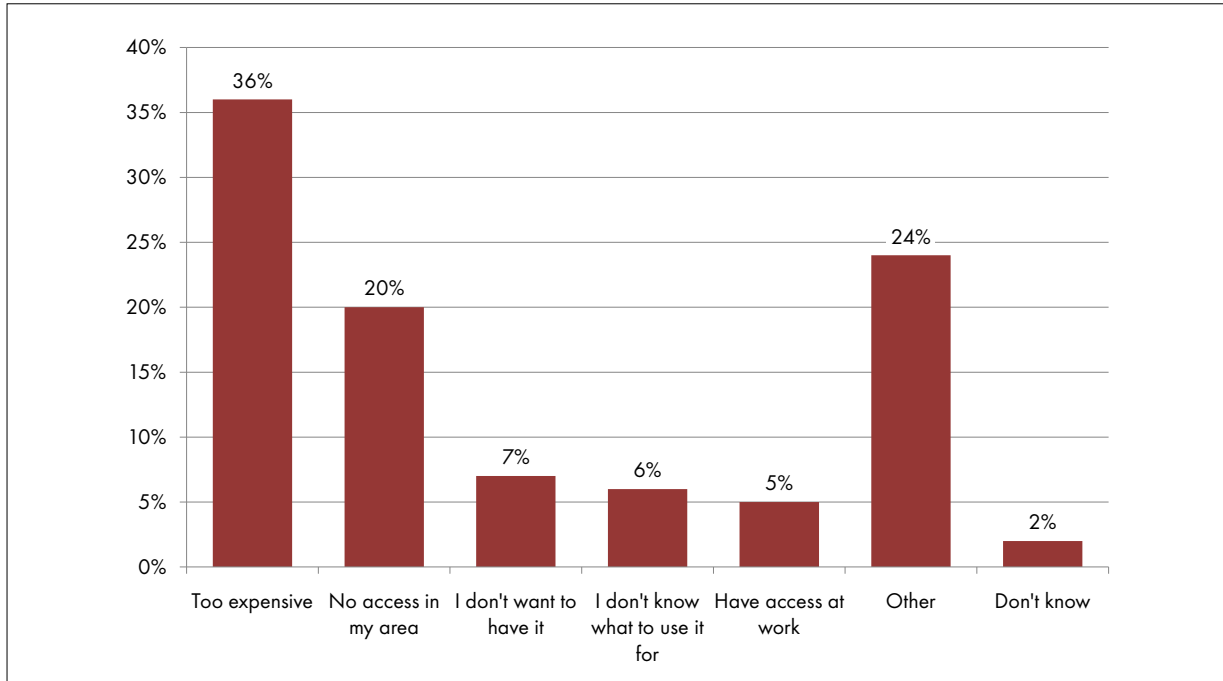
Source: representative opinion poll, Caucasus Research Resource Center Data Initiative 2009, <http://www.crrccenters.org/>

How Frequently Do You Use the Internet? (%)



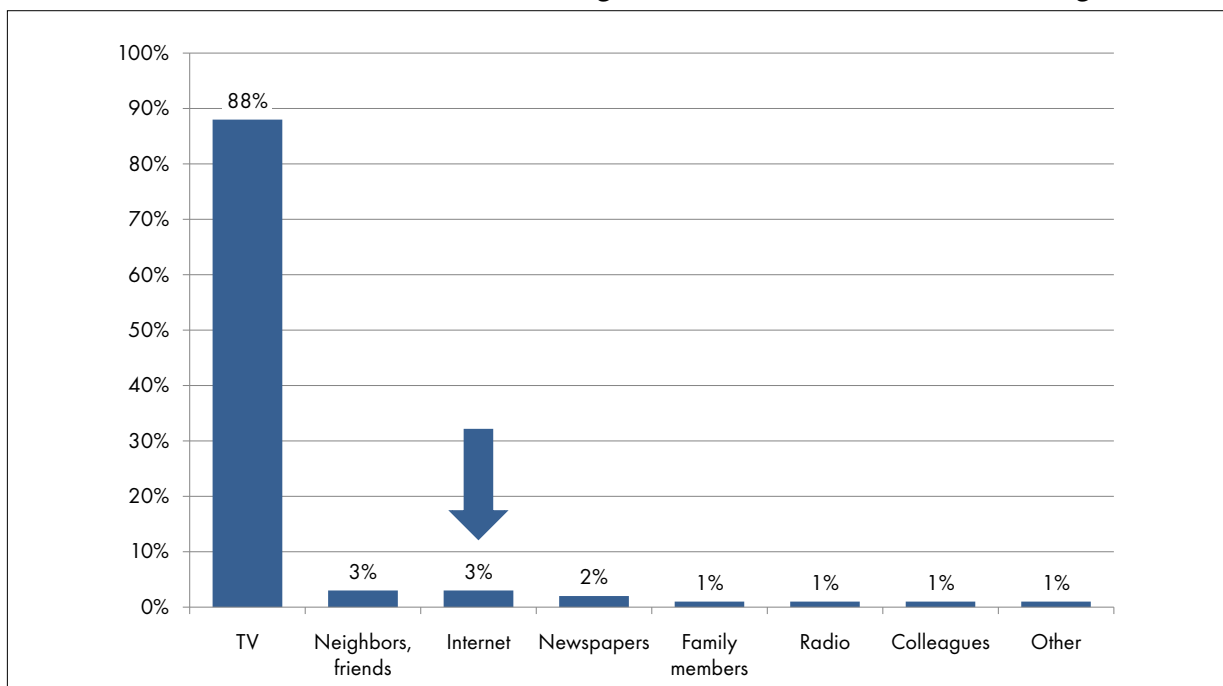
Source: representative opinion poll, Caucasus Research Resource Center Data Initiative 2009, <http://www.crrccenters.org/>

What Is the Main Reason You Do Not Have Internet Access at Home? (Georgia; %)



Source: representative opinion poll, Caucasus Research Resource Center Media Survey, October 2009, <http://www.crrccenters.org/>

First Main Source of Information for Receiving News about Current Events in Georgia (%)



Source: representative opinion poll, Caucasus Research Resource Center Media Survey, October 2009, <http://www.crrccenters.org/>

About the Caucasus Analytical Digest

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The Caucasus Analytical Digest (CAD) is a monthly internet publication jointly produced by the Heinrich Böll Foundation in Tbilisi (www.boell.ge), the Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen (www.forschungsstelle.uni-bremen.de), the Resource Security Institute in Washington, DC (resourcesecurityinstitute.org/) and the Center for Security Studies (CSS) at ETH Zurich (www.css.ethz.ch) with support from the German Association for East European Studies (DGO). The Caucasus Analytical Digest analyzes the political, economic, and social situation in the three South Caucasus states of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia within the context of international and security dimensions of this region's development. CAD is supported by a grant from the Heinrich Boell Foundation.

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Editors: Lili Di Puppò, Iris Kempe, Matthias Neumann, Robert Orttung, Jeronim Perović

Layout: Cengiz Kibaroglu, Matthias Neumann

ISSN 1867 9323 © 2010 by Heinrich Böll Stiftung, Forschungsstelle Osteuropa, Bremen and Center for Security Studies, Zürich

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