

Azerbaijan

The Internet in Azerbaijan remains free from restrictions despite the government's (at times) heavy-handed approach to dealing with political opposition. Azerbaijan has a growing Internet population, helped along by a national strategy to develop the country into an information communications technology (ICT) hub for the Caucasus region. Investment in the ICT sector has been prioritized, with ICT being seen as an essential pillar for diversifying the country's oil-dependent economy—an important policy given that Azerbaijan's rich oil and gas reserves are expected to run out in the next twenty to forty years. Azerbaijan's transition under the charismatic former president, Heidar Aliev, from war and instability in the 1990s left the political opposition weak and fragmented and has led to authoritarian tendencies. The Internet is beginning to surface as an important medium and space for political communication, and there are some indications that restrictions on content may emerge in the future.

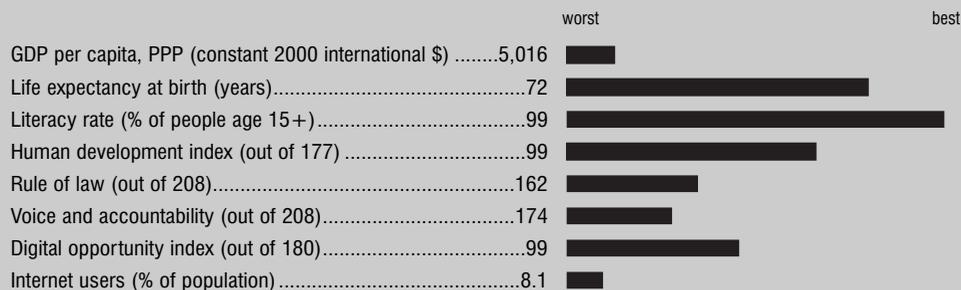


Background

After a decade of civil unrest and a disastrous war over the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh, Azerbaijan recovered and stabilized under the strong hand of former President Heidar Aliev (elected in 1993). Since that time, political development in the country has remained dominated by the presidential apparatus. In 2003 Heidar Aliev was succeeded by his son Ilham Aliev in elections whose fairness was questioned by some observers.¹ The first President Aliev strongly promoted information technology (IT) as a pillar for national development, enacting a national ICT strategy in 2003 that set ambitious targets for the development of Internet in government,

RESULTS AT A GLANCE

Filtering	No evidence of filtering	Suspected filtering	Selective filtering	Substantial filtering	Pervasive filtering
Political			●		
Social	●				
Conflict/security	●				
Internet tools	●				
Other factors	Low	Medium	High	Not applicable	
Transparency	●				
Consistency	●				

KEY INDICATORS

Source (by indicator): World Bank 2005, 2006a, 2006a; UNDP 2006; World Bank 2006c, 2006c; ITU 2006, 2005

education, and the industrial sector.² On a popular level, the Internet plays an increasingly important role in daily life, including politics. Opposition groups as well as individuals voicing discontent are now using the Internet as a communication platform, which has prompted a mild crackdown by authorities. Thus far these control measures have been reversed through legal challenges, although the government's concern for maintaining social and political stability suggests that more restrictive measures may be on the way. Azerbaijani hackers are also involved in a long-standing "cyber war" with Armenian hackers over the unresolved Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. No official sanctions have been placed on Azeri hackers, and the attacks do not appear to be a government-organized campaign but rather the work of individuals acting on their own. Web site defacements and Denial of Service (DoS) attacks have led to disruptions in the Azeri Internet, which may prompt the government to act should these attacks begin to affect critical services.

Internet in Azerbaijan

During the Soviet era, Azerbaijan was a major center for IT development, particularly in the area of process control systems. This legacy left the

country with a reasonably large and well-developed technical infrastructure, including several research institutes and a political leadership that was savvy about the importance of the ICT sector. Internet development is following the pattern typical of many developing countries, with access centered on the major cities, particularly the capital city Baku. Overall—supported by the government ICT strategy as well as the large Azeri diaspora for whom the Internet is increasingly an important channel for maintaining contact with their homeland—Internet penetration is rising. Between 2004 and 2005 the number of Internet subscribers doubled; it now encompasses around 700,000 users. Official statistics state that penetration is 8 percent, but this figure may be misleading as many Azerbaijanis access the Internet from shared connections, such as their place of work or study, or from cybercafés (with the latter providing access for 21.3 percent of users). PC ownership is low (1.5 per 100), homes account for only 27.5 percent of all Internet users, and broadband penetration stands at 6.5 percent. For connectivity, most individual subscribers rely on mobile telephone (53.7 percent) and dialup (38.4 percent) as their primary means. Official survey results indicate that economic and

educational barriers remain the major reason for these low figures, with 34 percent blaming the high cost of computer equipment and 24.3 percent indicating a lack of necessary skills.³ Economic reasons are particularly important, because the cost of Internet service remains comparatively high for the average citizen: a DSL connection of 64/64Kbps costs around USD40–50 per month and unlimited access costs USD30–35, while the average salary is slightly over USD100 per month.

The Azeri Internet population is young, urban, and mostly male. Over 55 percent of the users are youth in the age range of sixteen to twenty-four, and approximately 70 percent of the users are male. During the 1990s the official language of Azerbaijan switched from Russian to Azeri, and the script from Cyrillic to Latin. As a result the number of Web sites using the Azerbaijani language increased. Azeri is used today on all official government sites and by the major media and general Internet population.

Legal and regulatory frameworks

Azerbaijan has made telecommunications and the Internet national development priorities. As a result, the state plays a leading role in the ICT sector, with the Ministry of Telecommunications Information Technology acting as both regulator and operator. Most services must be licensed,⁴ including Voice-over Internet Protocol (VoIP).⁵

Internet provision is highly centralized on two state-owned Internet service providers (ISPs)—BakInterNet and AzTelecomNet—which provide national coverage and re-sell connectivity to the remaining twenty registered ISPs. AzerSat, a joint venture between the Ministry of Communications and Information Technologies and Delta Telecom Ltd, supplies international connectivity to over 85–90 percent of all users. Almost all ISPs use AzerSat’s Internet international gateway and only a few possess independent international channels. The exceptions include AzEuroTel, Adanet, AzerOnline, and the nonprofit

AZNET/AZRENA project that provides connectivity to the educational and research community and benefits from a satellite channel provided through NATO’s “Silk Road” project.⁶

Recently the government has taken steps to liberalize the ISP market. Mandatory state licensing for ISPs is being eliminated, and state influence over domain registration is limited.⁷

From a regulatory perspective, the Internet is treated as mass media⁸ and included in the list of telecommunications services regulated by the 2005 Law on Telecommunications. Azeri law does not require mandatory filtering or monitoring of Internet content. However, as Web sites that are critical of unpopular government policies (such as increases in the cost of energy) have emerged, the government has considered introducing a law that will impose restrictions on Web sites with an obscene or antinational character, thereby strengthening existing defamation laws. Content filtering is practiced by AZNET, the education and research ISP, but is regulated by an Accepted Usage Policy and is restricted to filtering out pornographic content. Anecdotal accounts claim that filtering of specific Web sites occurs, which is seemingly the result of informal requests to ISP managers by state officials from the Ministry of National Security, Ministry of Communications and Information Technologies, or the Presidency. These instances have been infrequent, and the resulting public outcry has led to a swift unblocking of the affected sites.

Azerbaijani law does not provide a formal legal foundation requiring Internet surveillance. Nevertheless, surveillance does occur, mainly by sporadic visits of the State Security Services to ISPs. In 2000–01 there was an unsuccessful attempt to adopt the Russian SORM-II model for Internet surveillance, but the project was interrupted because of financial difficulties and opposition from the ISPs and the Internet community.

ONI testing results

ONI tested for content filtering on five ISPs—Adanet, AzerOnline, AzEuroTel, AZnet, and BakInternNet—as well as several end-use locations (such as cybercafés). The results indicate that only AZnet engages in filtering, and that filtering is both limited and backed by an explicit filtering policy. AZnet blocks obscene and erotic content and gay and lesbian sites, as well as certain hacker and dating sites. Some sites with commercial content, such as gambling and drug use, are also inaccessible to users. One religious site was also blocked. Filtering on AZnet is explicit, with the user receiving a blockpage indicating that access is blocked as it violates the network's Accepted Usage Policy. AZnet uses Symantec Gateway Security on a backbone network for virus protection and blocking selected sites. No other instances of persistent filtering were detected on the other ISPs tested, and ONI did not detect the presence of commercial filtering software at any other ISP.

However, ONI did detect the selective blocking of Web sites in early 2007 during protests against the government's unpopular decision to raise consumer prices of basic utilities. The affected sites were temporarily inaccessible from ten Azeri ISPs, and the editor of one of the sites was detained by the police for a few hours, but later released without charge.⁹

At the cybercafé level, many owners impose restrictions that prevent users from downloading large attachments and visiting certain pornographic sites. But these policies are not universal, and they are implemented at the discretion of the cybercafé owner.

At the enterprise level, most employers limit access to the Internet through the use of intelligent firewalls that restrict downloads of files with certain extensions (.mp3, .avi, .mpg, .mov, and so on), as well as access to storage file servers and to the servers of instant communication (ICQ, MSN, Skype, and so on).

The ongoing cyber war between Azeri and Armenian hackers has also caused disruptions to some Web sites and ISPs. In early 2007, five Armenian sites were inaccessible. Users viewed a defaced Web page commenting on the political affiliation of the Nagorno-Karabakh region.¹⁰ At the same time the Web site of the Azerbaijani National TV Channel was taken down.¹¹ Since most of the allegedly inaccessible sites contained oppositional political content, there are allegations that the Azerbaijani government was involved in the attacks. However, ONI testing could not confirm these suspicions. ONI did not test for political issues related to the proclaimed independence of the Nagorno-Karabakh region.

Conclusion

Azerbaijan's Internet remains for the most part "free and open" as a result of the government's strong interest in developing the country into an "ICT hub" for the region. With the exception of AZnet (which has a declared filtering policy) and the discretion of certain cybercafé owners, ONI did not detect the presence of any systematic policy of Internet filtering. Instances of just-in-time filtering appear to result from "informal" requests by state officials to ISP operators, and these were limited in duration and scope. Moreover, public pressure led to a swift reversal of these policies. That said, the filtering requests appear to have occurred extrajudicially. Given the prospect of increased use of the Internet by Azerbaijani opposition groups and the government's sensitivity to opposition, we may expect to see some attempts to regulate Internet content and further instances of just-in-time filtering affecting opposition Web sites.

NOTES

1. See Human Rights Watch, Azerbaijan: Presidential Elections 2003, <http://www.hrw.org/background/eca/azerbaijan/index.htm> (accessed April 4, 2007).

2. Decree no.1146 on the Establishment of National Strategy on Information and Communication Technologies aimed at the Development of the Republic Azerbaijan (2003–2012), signed by the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan on February 17, 2003.
3. Transport, Communication, Information and Communication Technologies, The State Statistical Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan, <http://www.azstat.org/statinfo/transport/en/042.shtml> (accessed April 4, 2007).
4. As provided in the Presidential decree no. 861, March 19, 2003.
5. See Day.Az, "Azerbaijani Internet: ISPs can provide VoIP services," January 29, 2007 (in Russian), <http://www.day.az/news/hitech/69561.html> (accessed April 4, 2007).
6. AzEuroTel, AzerOnline started commercial activity as telecommunications companies and thus managed to establish a relatively wide network infrastructure. AzEuroTel and Adanet have additional satellite channels to Russia. AzerOnline has an additional channel to Turkey.
7. The assignment of domain names is controlled by AzNic Ltd, a joint venture between three Azeri firms. Since 2002, the number of registered domain names has rapidly increased, with approximately 3,000 first-level and 5,000 second-level domains registered under the ".az" domain.
8. Under the provisions of the Law on Mass Media adopted on December 7, 1999.
9. Day.Az, "In Azerbaijan: The author of a website protesting price increases is arrested," January 15, 2007 (in Russian), <http://www.day.az/news/politics/68040.html> (accessed April 4, 2007).
10. Day.Az, "Azerbaijan hacker breaks five Armenian websites," January 29, 2007 (in Russian), <http://www.day.az/news/hitech/68996.html> (accessed April 4, 2007).
11. Day.Az, "Azerbaijani public television website defaced by Armenian secret service," January 22, 2007 (in Russian) <http://www.day.az/news/hitech/68493.html> (accessed April 4, 2007).