

State of Ambivalence: Turkmenistan in the Digital Age

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Abstract: In 2007, the new president of Turkmenistan, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow, resolved to open up the country to new technologies, thereby allowing access to the outside world. This report gauges Berdimuhamedow's new Internet policies and the nature of everyday digital access in Turkmenistan's relatively brief cyber-history. As a case study, Turkmenistan is particularly interesting, both in the post-communist world and more generally. The government runs a few internet cafes and recently 3G spectrum has been made available, holding out the promise of widespread and continuous web connectivity. Yet this is negated by the Internet's limited availability, strict censorship laws, bureaucratic obstacles, prohibitive pricing and the absence of consumer-friendly telecom services. The state's ambivalent policies notwithstanding, there is evidence of vibrant chat rooms and sustained efforts by Turkmenians to utilize the full potential of the Internet. This complex picture of rigorous control and small pockets of web engagement are the focus of this report on Turkmenistan in the digital age.

Keywords: authoritarianism, Internet access, censorship, chat forums, Turkmenistan

Introduction by Sudha Rajagopalan

In early 2010, Digital Icons invited Annasoltan, journalist/blogger at Newseurasia, to submit a detailed report on the nature of digital access in Turkmenistan. By including this account of digital realities in that authoritarian country, the editors of Digital Icons hope to enhance this issue's special focus on the capacity of the Internet to liberate or oppress its publics.

Annasoltan is a pseudonym because this journalist lives and writes in Turkmenistan, in a political context where censorship laws with regard to the media are strictly enforced and where activists who inform people abroad of conditions in their country suffer harsh prison sentences. Annasoltan hesitatingly offers: 'It is—if I may say this myself—a courageous deed to be an outspoken journalist on Turkmenistan'. Indeed. In a country where critics of the government are condemned as 'enemies of the state' and 'traitors to the homeland', her work is commendable. Christopher Schwartz, the managing editor for English language content at

Neweurasia, sums up the value of Annasoltan's work in his following comment: 'Annasoltan is perhaps one of Neweurasia's most intrepid bloggers. Her output is substantial and reliable, and her content is always interesting—the three top qualities of a good blogger. Most of all, in covering a regime known for its relativism, she is not afraid to talk about what is actually happening in Turkmenistan. Her work is of interest to human rights activists, journalists and philosophers alike'.

Few journalists are permitted to travel to Turkmenistan and in Annasoltan's own words, the information available in the international media is clichéd and reductionist. She argues: 'As a reporter on Turkmenistan, conventional journalistic ways of working and thinking through stories do not get results; one needs to be really engaged and patient, always looking for alternative ways to get the story'. Academics also need special permits to do research in Turkmenistan and are disallowed from working in most subject areas. In light of the absence of journalistic reports and the paucity of academic research on new media in Turkmenistan, the editors submit that a richly detailed report such as this one, written by a committed and deeply engaged journalist, can serve as a vital point of departure for future research. Annasoltan's own encounters with the reality of everyday digital access and conversations with other Turkmenet users makes this not only a factual journalistic account of the close supervision and circumscription of digital access in the country, but also a personal narrative about Turkmen's hardships, challenges and even joyful anticipation of the simple act of logging in.

Turkmenistan, a desert country with huge deposits of mineral resources and a population of 5.3 million is known to the outside world for its insularity, isolation and poor human rights record more than anything else, despite recent efforts by the authorities to improve the country's image. In this context, it is of interest to assess the state of the country's information and communication technologies (ICTs). This report is keen on assessing the nature of digital access, specifically the Internet—its short history, its prevalence and its many challenges in Turkmenistan. Accurate figures about Internet usage in the country are hard to obtain and the widespread presence of 'shared' Internet usage further complicates the process of gathering concrete data. What has been established, however, is that Turkmenistan has among the lowest rates of Internet penetration in the world. According to Internetworldstats.com, a website that measures global Internet access, a meagre 1.4 percent of Turkmenistan's population is wired, putting the country in 216th place in a list of 226 countries. In one of the most closed societies in the world, the government keeps Internet communication under tight control through the regulation of access, censorship of Internet content, surveillance of online activities and the maintenance of monopoly conditions in the ICT sector. This report describes the situation on the ground, i.e., the ways in which the state regulates Internet access and the ways in which Turkmen experience these new digital technologies.

Article 26 of the Turkmen Constitution guarantees citizens 'the right to freedom of conviction, the free expression of those convictions and the right to receive information'. However, in practice, freedom of speech is brutally repressed. The government exercises heavy censorship and the press, TV and radio serve merely as instruments that support and glorify the policies of the new president, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow. Independent media are non-existent. The government has realized that the Internet is critical for the country's econ-

omy and that a blanket ban would only affect the government adversely. Like other authoritarian regimes in the world, the Turkmen government has found that it is better to regulate Internet access than to prohibit it altogether. The promotion of the Internet furthers the goal of official propaganda, which seeks to convey to the outside world that the country's repressive regime is slowly being dismantled. Some think it serves the government's aim of improving foreign trade and economic ties. President Berdimuhamedow and his aides, it seems, want to be part of the world but only on their own terms; they calculate that the huge energy reserves of the country are going to serve their interests.

The outside world lacks the means to monitor the situation of the Internet within Turkmenistan. Only the Turkmen people are aware of the everyday struggles to take advantage of what the Internet has to offer. While millions of people around the world are using new media technology to create their own blogs and websites, broadcast video online and tweet short messages to their fellow citizens, Turkmen are in the early stages of Internet evolution, simply sending/receiving emails and surfing for the Web for content. Despite this embryonic development, Turkmen are eager to embrace the full capacity of the Internet; in short, they want to enjoy Internet freedoms, just like other people in the world.

'New Era of Revival'

Turkmenistan recently underwent a regime change that has brought with it some relief for existing and aspirant Internet users. Under the previous ruler, Saparmurat Niyazov (1991-2006), the country was completely sealed off from the outside world. Internet usage was the privilege of officials and foreign diplomats, and the few Internet cafes functioning in Ashgabat, the capital with 700,000 inhabitants, were shut down in 2002. The current president, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow, took over after Niyazov's sudden death in December 2006. When he took office in February 2007, Berdimuhamedow declared the start of a 'New Era of Revival' that was to serve the new national ideology and ensure Turkmenistan's 'rapid advancement to the heights of progress, humanism and creativity' (Bohr 2009, 539). As part of his modernization efforts and attempts to improve relations with the outside world, Berdimuhamedow stated that private citizens should have access to computers regardless of their profession. He imagined an emerging generation of young and well-educated Turkmen using new technology; he gave instructions to equip new buildings, ministries and schools with computers, while also promising to integrate ICTs into the educational system. In 2008, he authorized private web connections for the first time, marking a turning point in the country's digital history. Such moves were concomitant with Berdimuhamedow's vows to liberalize the economy and establish good ties with the West.

The new government also launched its own website (see Figure 1) titled 'The Golden Age' [Altyn Asr/Zolotoi vek] (http://turkmenistan.gov.tm/_tm), which carries official news in three languages: Turkmen, English and Russian (the Russian version goes live before the English version does). Typically, this website provides reports about inauguration ceremonies of state enterprises chaired by the president, the latest economic achievements, new titles of honour for high-ranking government employees and congratulatory letters to the president, as well providing details on Berdimuhamedow's visits to the provinces and meetings with local officials, workers and elders.

Figure 1. The Turkmen government website, titled ‘The Golden Age’.



Source: http://turkmenistan.gov.tm/_tm/ (accessed 2 June 2010).

Accompanying this digital reform, government-run Internet cafes were opened in Ashgabat and a few large towns. In its report, 'Attacks on the Press 2007: Turkmenistan', the Committee to Protect Journalists has called the opening of cybercafés 'a landmark for a country whose access to information had long been strangled by the state' (CPJ 2008). Today there are eight such cafes with ADSL connections in Ashgabat; one of the biggest Internet cafes in the capital is near the newly reopened Watan cinema. The other four major cities have between one and three state-run cybercafés.

Berdimuhamedow instituted some changes, mainly in education, health care and the arts. In the education sector, he extended obligatory education from nine to 10 years, prolonged the period of higher education from two to five years and increased teachers' salaries. He reopened hospitals in rural areas. Although he has adopted a number of measures reversing some of his predecessor's most destructive and isolationist acts, he has remained loyal to Niyazov's policy line, has done little to reform the structure of the government and has failed to increase transparency. Tight control over the state-run mass media and severe restrictions on civil liberties have been maintained. Because the Internet allows for the free expression that is absent in Turkmenistan's state media, the authoritarian government remains fearful of the Internet and seeks to curtail both its reach and impact. The government fears that Internet users may become involved in activities that undermine ubiquitous government propaganda about the 'Great Era of Revival' programme and its disinformation policy that carries only good news. Particularly in the wake of the February 2010 uprising in Kyrgyzstan, the Turkmen authorities have been concerned about the capacity of the Internet to 'empower' its users.

ers. The Turkmen government is aware that people-powered protests in Kyrgyzstan brought down President Bakiyev and forced him to flee the country; social media platforms such as blogs and Twitter played a critical role in spreading the word and galvanizing people to come out on to the streets of Bishkek. The Turkmen government is anxious that the brewing resentment among the impoverished local population in some parts of Turkmenistan over the policies of Ashgabat may erupt in similar protests.¹ The authoritarian regime fears that the Internet may lead to more open and public expressions of discontent and ultimately to its own demise.

Logistical obstacles

In February 2007, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty reported that Turkmen authorities had allowed the public to post comments on the official Altyn Asyr website. However, a mere four days later when critical comments were posted related to government policies, interactive communication with the online community was aborted and no further comments were posted.

Such half-hearted and stillborn attempts at openness are common practice; the promise of digital access is frequently undermined by technical difficulties, red-tape and prohibitive costs. Licenses are not handed out to non-government entities to become Internet providers for fear that this will create healthy competition and lower costs. In 2008, the Russian company Mobile TeleSystems (MTS) began offering Internet service to mobile subscribers via GPRS as well as WAP services via mobile phones. In the same year, state-owned Turkmen Telecom began to connect private citizens to the Internet for the first time. Since August 2009, private Internet users have been able to access the Internet via ADSL system. TM Cell or Altyn Asyr (Golden Age), a subsidiary of Turkmen Telecom, launched 3G service in March 2010. Officially 3G was launched on 30 December 2009, with the first customer only receiving access in March 2010. With the news about the arrival of 3G, there was euphoria among net users and one of my acquaintances told me joyfully: 'I cannot believe that this is happening in my country, Turkmenistan'. However, shortly afterwards, reality set in and various complaints were heard among early adopters of 3G services. One major complaint is that the initial speed of 3G has fallen from 3 MB per second in March and April 2010 down to 53 KB per second in May 2010. Users complain that they are unable to watch video materials, when in fact 3G should provide access to high speed Internet and visual communication and improve the quality of communication services. Although people in Ashgabat have said that 3G is relatively easy to procure with the showing of identification, bureaucratic hurdles in getting connected remain the norm. In popular Turkmen chat rooms such as Teswirler (www.teswirler.com) users also complain about poor quality and low connection speed.

This leads many to wonder why 3G is provided only by Altyn Asyr, the state-owned Internet provider, and not MTS, a Russian-owned company and the largest mobile phone operator in Russia and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). After all MTS, al-

¹ Both the earlier president Niyazov and the current president are of the Akhal Tekke tribe from the Akhal *welayat* or province; the small political elite that surrounds the president is also predominantly from this tribe. Many resent this 'Akhalization' of power and the government fears this will erupt in protests like those in Kyrgyzstan, which pitted under-represented clans against the central government.

though more expensive, is known for its better quality and fast customer service. For example, MTS was providing Internet at a speed of 480 KB per second and Altyn Asyr at a meagre 32.8 KB. Altyn Asyr is also known for its outdated hardware, slow connections, lack of qualified technicians, unhelpful customer services and a general neglect of consumer needs typical for a state-owned company. It came as a major surprise when Altyn Asyr won the tender to supply 3G, leaving MTS behind without a licenser in a 'competition' that does not correspond to real competition conditions but suggests the government's 'hand' in play. This occurred because MTS is a foreign company operating on its own terms and therefore is more difficult to regulate or constrain. Altyn Asyr or TmCell, on the other hand, is a subsidiary of the state-owned telecommunications company Turkmen Telecom, which is the primary provider of public telephone and Internet services. In this manner, the government attempts to regulate and control consumer behaviour. In response to these developments, MTS has upgraded its normal package from 1 GB to 1.5 GB for 500,000 TMM (USD 35) in February 2010, signalling a price drop since it was charging the same amount for 1GB previously.

However, users complain that MTS's Internet speed hardly exceeds 30 KB per second during daytime, and people have complained that in MTS packages the unused balance is lost once the package validity period expires. People have also criticized the high prices of MTS; according to a website specialist operating in Turkmenistan, these prices may stem from the fact that the government requires MTS to pay for all aspects of the network. Apparently, the government keeps MTS in check because they are not a Turkmen state company. Therefore, Altyn Asyr and MTS are equally inadequate options for the local people. In general, control over most economic activities, and the slow development of the private sector is hampering the improvement of services and the emergence of a genuine consumer-oriented market.

The prohibitive pricing poses a major impediment to widespread public access to the Internet. Firstly, the hardware is expensive. A basic desktop computer equipped with Intel Core 2 Duo, RAM, GeForce video card costs about USD 500-600. People usually procure these parts separately in order to minimize costs. The initial installation is around USD 50. An hour of surfing on the Internet in the state-run Internet café costs USD 5, a considerable amount for a country where the average monthly salary is USD 150-200 and where two-thirds of the population live below the poverty line. Surfing the net at home costs USD 1 per hour, added to a monthly charge of USD 8. TmCell offers 1 GB 3G package at 350,000 TMM (USD 25), about double the cost of a normal Internet package, plus a one-time payment of 50,000 TMM or USD 3.50. If not excessively used, 1 GB can be adequate for two or three months. Some young people turn nights into days in order to be able to use the relatively cheaper packages between 1:00 A.M. and 8:00 A.M. Many login briefly in order to do a quick web search with a specific goal. The connection speed without 3G is quite slow so that checking mailboxes and sending merely one or two emails (the most common use of the Internet here) may take an hour, especially when constantly hampered by freezing screens.

E-commerce and electronic banking are in great demand because they could help evade the worst bureaucratic hurdles and corruption. Online services could ease some of the hardships people face every day, such as waiting for hours in queues. For instance, people have been hoping for online ticket sale options by Turkmenistan Airlines (Turkmenistan Howa Yollary), but they are yet to offer this service. E-commerce and e-banking are simply not an

option at present. Some schools have chosen to have computers in their classroom, but these serve as mere decoration because of the absence of Internet access. Computer trainers and specialists are few and far between, and are unable to meet the increasing demand for Internet in the capital.

Digital divide

This state of affairs changes abruptly from bad to worse just a few kilometres outside the capital, where computers and the Internet are scarce and remain alien concepts to many Turkmen citizens. Here, beyond Ashgabat's megalopolis panorama, the ICT situation remains mostly unchanged from earlier times. In Turkmenistan, 60-70 percent of the population live in rural areas, and the gulf between urban and rural population is growing. Most Turkmens live in these outlying areas, and many of them do not own mobile phones. Their lives have changed little since the country gained its independence upon the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991. Some have landline phones, but connections are generally of poor quality. Television itself is not a widely available commodity. Given such realities, it is very unlikely the Internet will reach them in the near future.

Turkmens from large towns are also routinely disappointed to find that what they covet is not within their reach. In March, a resident of Abadan, a town located near Ashgabat, rushed to a Turkmen Telecom centre to obtain 3G for his mobile phone when he heard the news that 3G is now available in Turkmenistan. However, he returned disappointed, having learned that 3G availability was confined to Ashgabat alone. Annau, another example, is a small town just 8 km southeast of Ashgabat, near the Iranian border, where several services that are available to the population in the capital, including 3G, are not available. Outside the central Akhal province, where the capital Ashgabat is located, Internet registration can be a tiresome process that takes up to several months. Because many cannot afford home computers, they try to access the Internet via mobile phones or in cybercafés. This is just as difficult because mobile phones are not capable of handling downloading, filing, or sharing of video materials in the way that computers can; they are barely capable of sending email. Furthermore, the absence of relevant sign posts, advertising and information makes Internet cafes hard to locate.

This digital divide stems from inadequate infrastructure and lack of development. The government is increasingly inclined to prioritize the capital in its policies. The 'forgotten' periphery that seems to sink into sand is in stark contrast to the white marble covered façade of Ashgabat's rebuilt centre, which has benefited from several multi-billion dollar construction plans in the last decade. In 2010, USD 12 billion has been slated mostly for more 'prestige' construction projects. In contrast, comparable flows of investment into the areas that would directly contribute to better living conditions for the citizens, civil society development and the development of ICT and the industrial base are not planned for the foreseeable future.

Big Brother is watching

Even if Internet access is provided, whether in urban or rural Turkmenistan, censorship and filtering continue to limit Internet usage in the country. While the public use of the Internet is in better shape than two years ago, strict control over the flow of information is still in place. Governments everywhere have cultivated different ways of censoring and blocking the Internet; the same technology that brings new freedoms can also be used for new tyrannies. Recently, the Turkmen government announced that it is upgrading its telecommunications law to incorporate changes in rights and duties of operators and consumers in light of advances in technology. The new law on communication, adopted in April 2010, orders operators to assist with police surveillance and introduces more restrictive rules for contracts between Internet users and the state Internet provider.²

Computer users are subject to interrogations by the secret police national intelligence agency National Security Ministry (DHM). Last year when a few journalists surfing the Internet accidentally ran into sites that had been deliberately blocked, they were called in by the secret service for questioning. Political and civil liberties are severely restricted and human rights monitors have reported of the widespread practice of opening and inspecting instant messages and e-mails. This invasion of privacy is a constant feature of the Turkmen digital landscape. Human Rights Watch has reported: 'The government also interferes with civil society by preventing civic activists and journalists from having unmonitored access to the internet. Activists reported to Human Rights Watch that there was an instruction to relevant ministries and services to identify all correspondents writing for international media and websites, and to limit their internet access. Since April 2008, at least one activist's access to an alternative server was blocked' (UNHCR 2008).

Typically, interrogators pose the following questions to people they suspect are dissidents or government critics: For what purpose do you surf the Internet? What are you looking for? With whom do you communicate? People suspected of anti-government actions or attitudes are barred from using the Internet and in extreme cases are placed under house arrest in isolated corners of the country. Internet cafés operate under the auspices of the state company Turkmen Telecom. Visitors are required to present their passports and register their names on the café's 'users list' and they can easily be monitored while accessing sites. In this intimidating atmosphere, soldiers have been placed at Internet cafe doorways. Reporters without Borders lists Turkmenistan among the world's 'Internet Enemies', and in 2008 the Committee to Protect Journalists identified Turkmenistan among 'The 10 Worst Countries to Be a Blogger'. This explains why bloggers and cyber dissidents have not emerged to date in Turkmenistan's climate of fear.

News and information are not readily available and only a few newspapers have Internet editions. Even in state-controlled media organizations Internet access is restricted for journalists. Employees of Turkmen state TV have to obtain a special permit from the directors to use the computers that are installed in their offices. Several sites, including those providing uncensored news or critical information about Turkmenistan (e.g., sites of human rights groups, Turkmen political refugee groups and independent news sites), sites about religions that are not officially sanctioned, as well as those sites which spread information about education op-

² This information is gleaned from the government website, but little else is known about these laws at this moment.

portunities for Turkmen students abroad are all blocked. It also appears that Turkmen authorities are ready to resort to new and more sophisticated techniques of censorship. In May 2010, a month after the arrival of 3G in Turkmenistan, Ashgabat residents reported the blocking of social networking site Facebook and the video-sharing service YouTube provided by the Turkmen Telecom.³ It is noteworthy that Facebook had not been blocked earlier, but is now subject to controls given that the quality of Internet services has improved. Facebook is also unavailable through proxy servers, which are used by some web users in order to access blocked sites. Currently Facebook is only available on mobile phones that use MTS as a service provider. But sceptics ask how long it will before this option too is taken off the table.

Faced with increased filtering and monitoring, many Internet users refrain from accessing even some of the unblocked sites carrying critical content for fear that their Internet access might be cut off or that they might be persecuted. Some have computers at home but do not use them frequently or to the full extent of the capabilities. The deep fear that pervades society hinders Internet users from freely using the applications that are available to them. Pseudonyms are widely used and quickly changed and political discussions that dig deep, question the regime and call for a regime change are generally avoided. There seems to be an unwritten rule about 'politically correct' and 'socially accepted' behavior on the Internet, by which almost all net users abide. In Turkmenistan, people police their own actions and thoughts.

Hopeful die-hards

Despite these hardships, Turkmens have learned to be patient and hopeful. Technology's advance does not necessarily lead here to a quick change in consumer habits or unrealistic expectations and people are thankful for the new freedoms they enjoy. A young entrepreneur from Ashgabat, who asked not to be named, explained:

We can live without YouTube and the like. We have not got used to watch them. In fact, we do not feel that we miss anything. That may be different from people in foreign countries. But we are hoping for the Chinese Huawei optical computers to arrive soon which would lead to a dramatic increase in Internet access from homes. It was negotiated when our president participated at the 2010 Shanghai EXPO.

He continued:

Two years ago, I used to commute every day to the library for an hour of Internet access. Now while driving to work in a taxi I can sit comfortably and read the digital news. I use the computer at work and at home through a dial up system. Hey, that's a big difference.

³ On the other hand, the Russian-language social media platform Vkontakte.ru is accessible. However, the role of the Russian networking sites is gradually shrinking because the generation that is born after 1985 does not speak or write Russian (either not at all or not very well). Today, young Turkmens write in Latin script, while Russians use Cyrillic. Secondly, most ethnic Russians emigrated from Turkmenistan during Niyazov's years because of his de-Russification policy. This involved, among other aspects, the promotion of the Turkmen language at the cost of the Russian language.

In fact, some believe that the Internet is one sphere where the cautious winds of change can be noted. As in self-help groups, a few people get together in chat rooms to share experiences and learn about the tools and Internet packages that would optimize their Internet use. Many find ways to circumvent censorship by using proxy servers. They try to outsmart the government by using new software that allows them to several steps ahead of the authorities. In their practices, the phrase 'information means power' acquires real significance.

There have been some instances of Internet users directly challenging official behaviour. In 2009, when the government denied the possibility of a swine flu epidemic, a small online community took to the Internet looking for answers. They pulled disparate information together to create a picture for themselves of what was going on. People were furious about the government being more concerned about fighting the spread of news than fighting the virus itself. This became evident on one of Turkmenistan's most popular chat sites, teswirler. On teswirler people sign in as members and can open discussion topics about any issue that may invoke interest. Figure 2 displays the main page of the chat forum which shows the topics opened by members in bold. On the right side are the discussion categories such as General Conversation, Love, Literature, News and Technology among other topics. All members use nicknames or their first names. The site has now more than 1,500 registered users and membership is only growing. It was on this site that one forum member wrote during the swine flu crisis: 'The government cannot be blamed for causing the outbreak, but the government is to be blamed for denying it'. In stark contrast, traditional media was mostly silent about the issue. On television, in the press and on radio, issues are not dealt with in a timely manner, and authors of those traditional media reports are not journalists but propagandists of the government. Usually people are not interested in accessing traditional media because they always praise the policies of the president and attempt to keep the public ill-informed and passive. When Internet chat forums like teswirler.com erupted in debate about the spread of swine flu, the Turkmen government first appeared to ignore these reactions and then attempted to quell panic by making more frequent announcements about safety measures taken. The government was unwilling to conduct an open dialogue and communication with its populace, instead resorting to silence or monologues on the critical issue. In a matter of weeks the Turkmenet became the average Turkmen's primary tool in the crisis and it brought many people closer together. Here, too, the Internet's power to become a tool for advancing freedom and challenging abuse was clearly demonstrated.

Figure 2. Screenshot of the homepage of the popular chat forum teswirler.com.



Source: <http://www.teswirler.com/> (accessed 10 June 2010).

Even as recently as May 2010, a group of Turkmens on teswirler.com openly and critically discussed the president's recent announcement that necessary legal changes would be made soon to allow the formation of a second political party, an agrarian party.⁴ Many posts questioned the sincerity of the president in allowing opposition parties to emerge while his Democratic Party (the former Communist Party) maintains its monopoly on power. Referring to the lack of democratic traditions, absence of interest groups and the dominant top-down approach in politics, members of the chat forum wondered how people could form an agrarian party unless the president handpicked its members. One of the participants even went so far as to suggest setting up an online version of a Liberal Democratic party constituting members of the chat forum (in addition to the agrarian party that Berdimuhamedow had suggested). 'Let us send a press release to news agencies and related organizations about our decision', the poster said. Another participant in the forum suggested forming a centre-right party and others pointed to the futility of the idea, saying they may not have enough members to register as a party in any case. Outside of cyberspace, however, no one (not even ministers and supporters) dared to utter a single comment about the president's suggestion in their pub-

⁴ The country is ruled by a single party, the Democratic Party of Turkmenistan, whose members form the government.

lic speeches, keeping with the prevalent political culture. The fact that the open Internet discussion about forming a political party was not matched by similar developments offline shows the wide chasm between the digital and real world in Turkmenistan.

Aside from chat forums such as teswirler.com, on rare occasions Turkmenians participate in discussions on the English-language Internet. In November 2009, the *Independent* published an article about Turkmenistan in which the author called it the 'most bizarre country in the world' (Walker 2009). The article generated several comments from readers in Turkmenistan, debating the accuracies and inaccuracies in the author's observations about their country. Imagine the Turkmen people, isolated from the rest of the world, posting comments to the *Independent*'s website and taking active part in a global online discussion!

Thus, despite the ambivalent, often discouraging political climate, there are instances of Turkmenians who use the Internet to their own benefit in order to engage with the state or with others about the state. In fact, when asked whether the glass is half full or half empty many Internet optimists say 'half full'. Among this tiny group of people, I have met many who believe and hope that the slow and steady development of the Internet in Turkmenistan will make change inevitable and eventually bring an end to the current reluctance of the state to expand the range of liberties Turkmen Internet users enjoy.

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