

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.”

About the Author

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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.

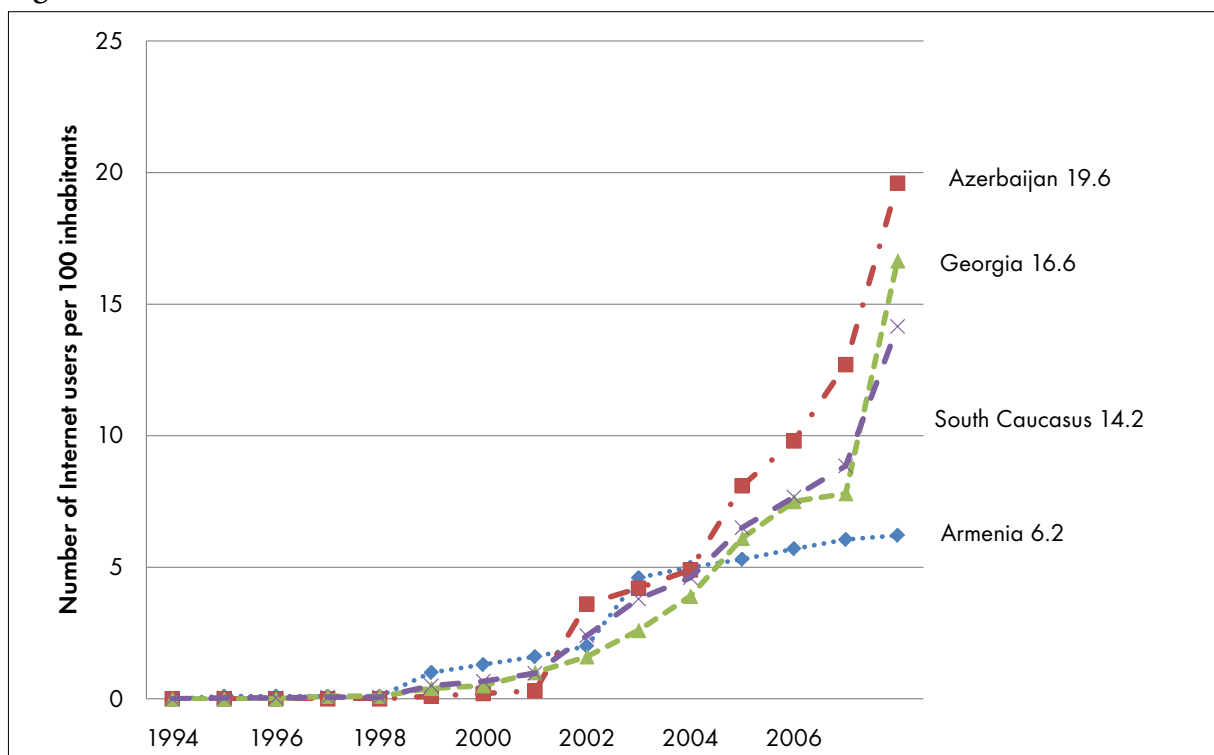
Recommended Reading

- 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.