State of the Internet and Digital Rights in the Republic of Turkey (2019–2026)

In the report “The State of the Internet and Digital Rights in Turkey (2019-2026)” an analysis is given of the development and regulation of the internet sphere in the country. The report examines key aspects, including the growth in the number of internet users, the development of infrastructure, speed and quality of access, as well as the dynamics of the internet service provider market.

Special attention is paid to issues of digital rights and freedoms. Legislation in the field of the internet is analyzed, cases of blocking and censorship, as well as the practice of state surveillance. The document also examines the use of VPN services in the context of ensuring anonymity and access to information.

The report highlights significant events that influenced the digital environment of Turkey, including public protests and the adoption of laws that caused wide resonance.

Disclaimer: This document was partially generated using several large language models (LLM). The information presented in it is based on the analysis and generalization of data from the indicated sources; however, the process of its structuring, generalization, and presentation was performed using artificial intelligence technologies. It is recommended to use this text as a starting point for further research and to critically verify critically important data against primary sources.

The Republic of Turkey is one of the most dynamic and at the same time contradictory digital markets in Eurasia. Located at the intersection of Europe and Asia, the country serves as a natural bridge for data transit, connecting western highways with the markets of the Middle East and the Caucasus.[1] In the period from 2019 to 2026, Turkey has gone from fragmented regulation to the creation of a comprehensive system of state control over digital space, characterized by centralization of infrastructure and tightening of criminal prosecution for online statements.[3] This report analyzes this period through the prism of economic indicators, technical characteristics of the network, and the evolution of legislation limiting citizens' digital freedoms.

1. General Information

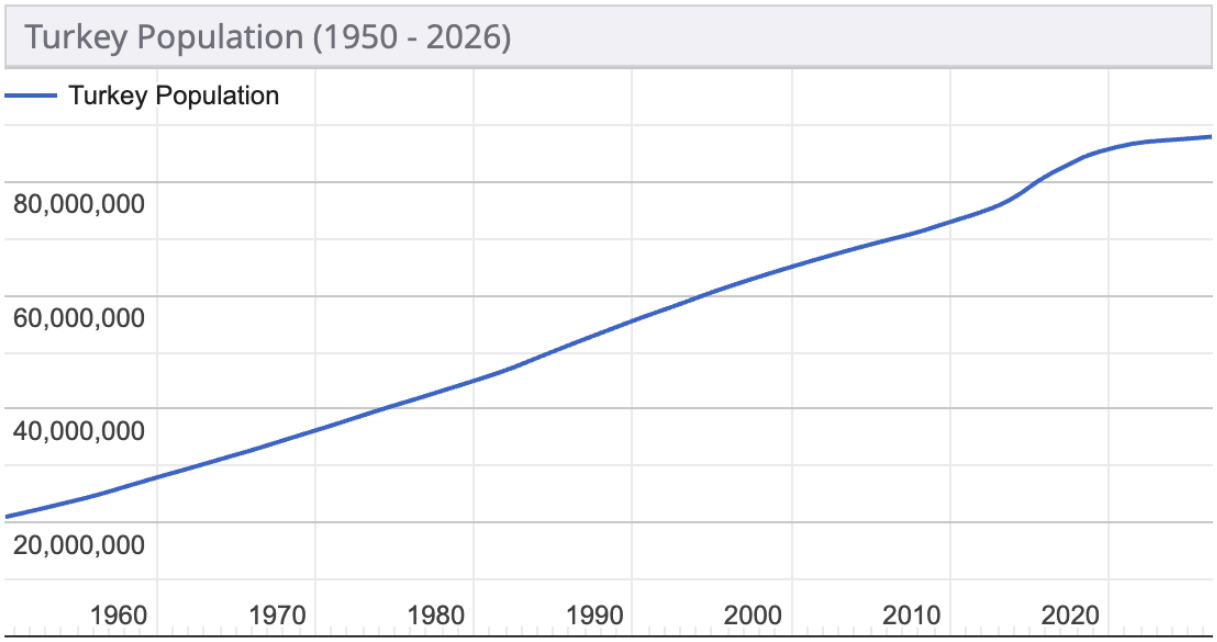
Turkey occupies a strategic position on the Anatolian Peninsula and in Eastern Thrace, controlling the Black Sea straits — the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles. Its geographical proximity to conflict zones and its role as a transit hub for refugees and energy resources leave a deep imprint on state security policy, which is directly translated into the digital sphere.[1]

1.1. Population

Turkey has one of the youngest populations in Europe, which creates high domestic demand for digital technologies and social media. However, the demographic dynamics of recent years indicate a gradual slowdown in growth rates associated with urbanization and changes in the socio-economic behavior patterns of young people.[6] In 2025–2026, the country's population stabilizes at over 86 million people, while the level of urbanization reaches almost 80%.[7]

The young population (average age about 33 years) is the main driver of mobile internet consumption; however, the economic crisis of 2022–2024 led to a decrease in purchasing power, which forced many citizens to limit spending on premium digital services.[3]

Graph 1: Dynamics of Turkey's Population (1950-2026)



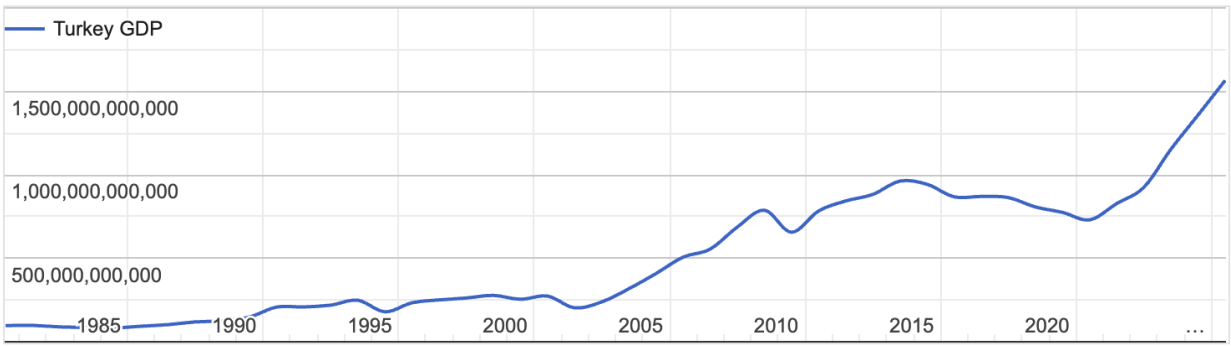
Source: worldometers.info

1.2. Gross Domestic Product

Turkey's economy in the period under review demonstrated a paradoxical combination of high real GDP growth and catastrophic devaluation of the national currency. If in 2019 the lira exchange rate allowed maintaining relative price stability, then by 2024 hyperinflation became the determining factor of life.[1] Nominal GDP in dollar terms shows growth, but this is largely due to the base effect and changes in the methodology for accounting for inflationary expectations.[1]

Despite the growth of dollar indicators, real incomes of the population in liras are under pressure due to inflation, which by the end of 2024 amounted to more than 60%.[1] This directly affects the telecommunications sector: the cost of equipment and licenses, tied to currency, is growing, which forces operators to raise tariffs for end users.[10]

Graph 2: Dynamics of Turkey's Nominal GDP (1985-2026)



Source: worldometers.info

1.3. Main Economic Characteristics

Turkey's economic model relies on a powerful export-oriented industrial sector (auto industry, textiles, steel) and the services sector, including tourism.[13] However, in the period 2021–2025, the country faced serious structural problems: a current account deficit, low levels of foreign reserves, and unorthodox monetary policy, which was changed only in mid-2023.[1]

For the digital sector, the most important is the government's desire for "technological sovereignty." This is expressed in support for national platforms and strict taxation of foreign digital giants (digital services tax at 7.5%).[3] At the same time, the high cost of imported electronics, exacerbated by a special communications tax (Özel İletişim Vergisi), makes Turkey one of the most expensive countries in the region for purchasing smartphones and computers.[10]

1.4. General Political Situation

Turkey is a presidential republic, where after the 2017 constitutional referendum the powers of the head of state — Recep Tayyip Erdoğan — were significantly expanded. The political system is characterized by a high degree of polarization between the ruling "People's Alliance" (AKP and nationalist MHP) and the opposition "National Alliance" led by CHP.[4]

Administratively, the country is divided into 81 provinces, while governance is highly centralized: governors (vali) are appointed by the president. In the period from 2019 to 2024, there was an strengthening of central government control over municipalities, especially in regions with a Kurdish majority, where elected mayors were often replaced by state-appointed trustees (kayyum).[10]

Turkey's political regime is often classified by experts as "competitive authoritarianism." In the context of digital rights, this means that although the country formally retains democratic institutions and elections, the information field is strictly controlled through state-loyal media holdings and repressive internet legislation, making the digital sphere a key battlefield for political survival.[3]

2. Internet

The development of the internet in Turkey is determined by the contradiction between the state's desire for digital leadership and the simultaneous desire to establish total control over information flows. By 2026, the internet has become an integral part not only of the economy but also of the state administration system through the e-Devlet platform.[4]

2.1. National Domain

The top-level national domain .tr (ccTLD) is a symbol of state control over the country's digital identity. Delegated in 1990, it was long managed by the academic community through the Middle East Technical University (METU).[19] However, in 2019–2022, a large-scale institutional transformation took place: domain management was transferred to the state regulator BTK under the TRABİS system (TR Network Information System).[19]

Brief history and rules for using .tr:

- **1990–2022:** Nic.tr era. Registration required strict documentary evidence (trademarks, official documents). Management was decentralized and academic.[19]
- **September 2022 — present:** Launch of TRABİS. Registration in popular zones such as .com.tr, .net.tr, and .org.tr became available without prior documents on a "first come, first served" basis.[21] This led to an explosive growth in the number of registrations, which by March 2025 exceeded 1.3 million.[19]
- **Restrictions:** Despite liberalization, BTK retains the right to block domain names that "contradict national values," "insult the founder of the republic," or contain financial terms (for example, banka) without the appropriate license.[22]

Key information on TRABİS: *The TRABİS system automated domain distribution, transferring client interaction functions to private registrars, but leaving BTK the role of supreme arbiter and database owner.*[21]

2.2. Number of Users

Turkey demonstrates high rates of internet audience growth. By the end of 2025, the number of internet users reached 77.5 million people, which is 88.3% of the population.[7]

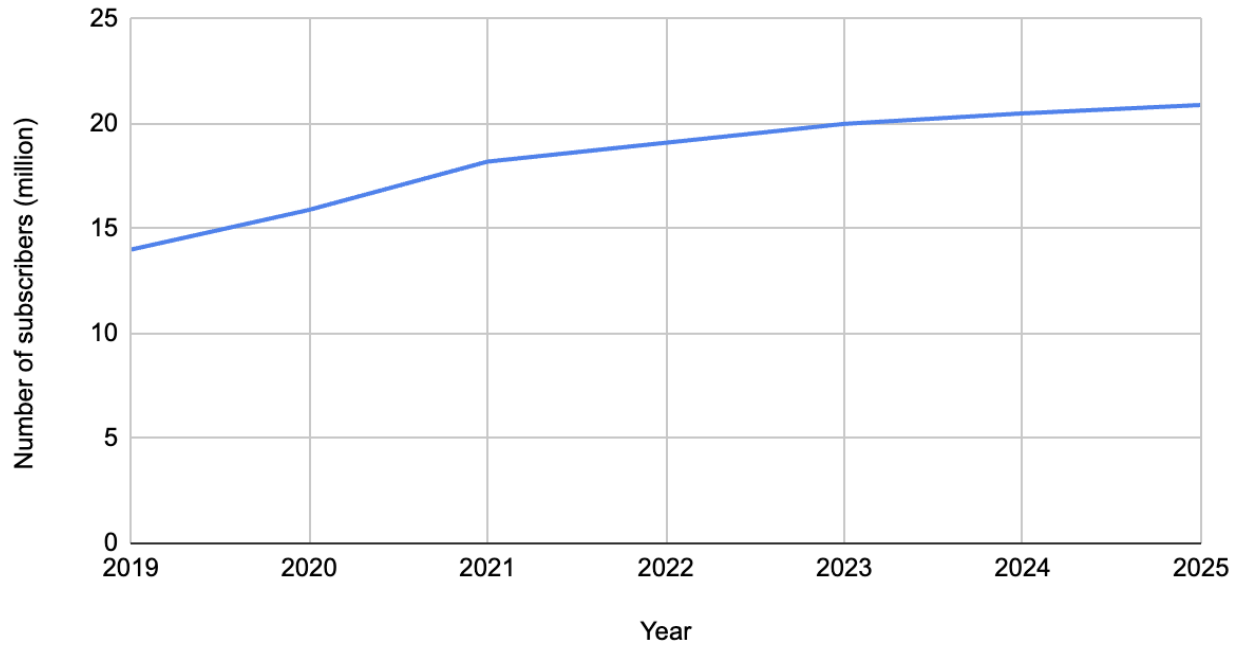
Data sources on users:

1. **Kepios / DataReportal (2025–2026):** 77.5 million users, penetration 88.3%.[7]
2. **Freedom House (2024):** 86.5% of the population uses the internet.[10]
3. **BTK (2024–2025):** Total number of broadband connections (including mobile) — 93.1 million.[10]

2.2.1 Fixed Internet

The fixed internet market in Turkey remains largely inertial and dependent on the infrastructure of the former state monopolist Türk Telekom. The transition to fiber optics (FTTH/FTTB) is proceeding at an accelerated pace in megacities, but rural areas still rely on outdated xDSL technologies.[10]

Graph 3: Dynamics of the Number of Fixed Broadband Subscribers in Turkey (2019-2025)



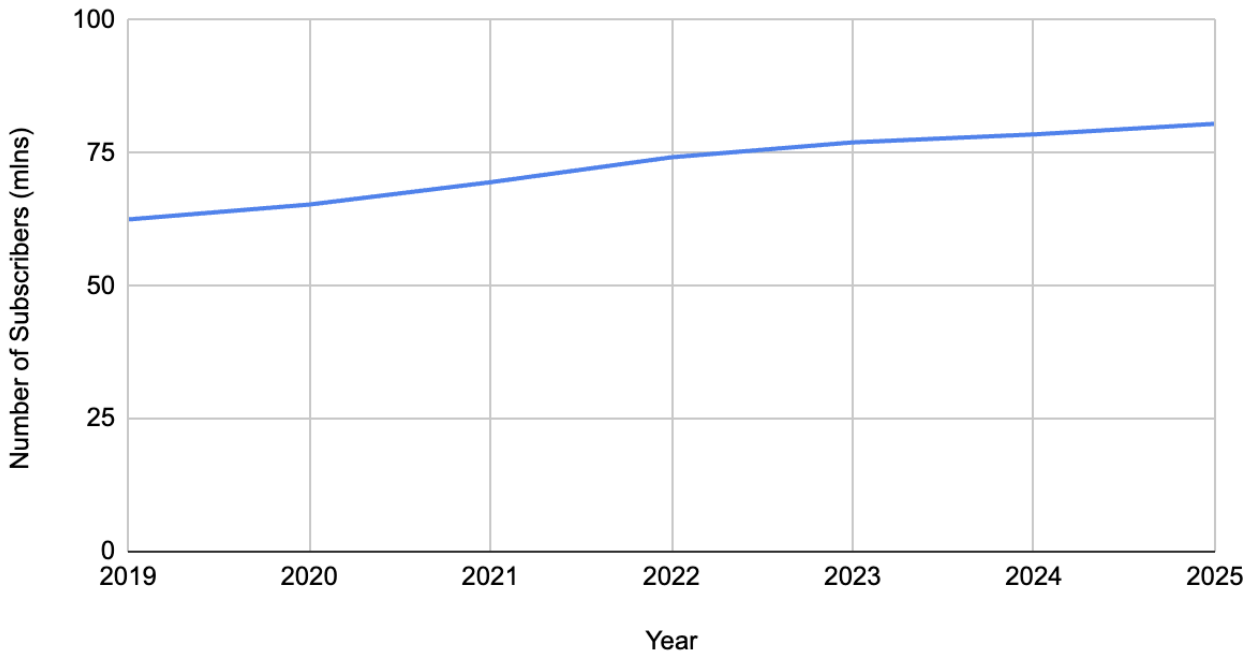
Largest fixed internet providers:

- **Türk Telekom** (turktelekom.com.tr) — Market share about 56.5%. Controls most of the cable ducts.[10]
- **Turkcell Superonline** (superonline.net) — Main competitor in the fiber segment, market share about 19%.[26]
- **Turksat** (turksat.com.tr) — State operator of cable TV and internet.[15]
- **TurkNet** (turknet.turk.net) — Largest independent provider focused on high speed without limits.[25]

2.2.2. Mobile Internet

Mobile internet is the main way for Turkish citizens to access the network. The market is highly concentrated and represented by three main operators. The introduction of 5G in 2026 is expected to radically change the data consumption profile.[2]

Graph 4: Dynamics of the Number of Mobile Broadband Subscribers in Turkey (2019-2025)



Main mobile operators:

- **Turkcell** (turkcell.com.tr) — Market leader, the first to introduce innovative services. Market share >40%.[10]
- **Vodafone Turkey** (vodafone.com.tr) — Second largest operator, actively developing cloud solutions.[28]
- **Türk Telekom (TT Mobil)** (turktelekom.com.tr) — Mobile division of the national giant.[10]

2.3. Internet Access Speed and Quality of Services Provided

The quality of communication in Turkey demonstrates steady growth; however, the country still lags behind leading European states. According to the Ookla Speedtest report for 2025, Turkey occupies average positions in the global ranking.[7]

Main speed indicators (median values, 2025):

- **Mobile internet:** 68.19 Mbit/s (download), growth of 47.1% per year.[7]
- **Fixed internet:** 56.17 Mbit/s (download), growth of 30.9% per year.[7]

Links to studies:

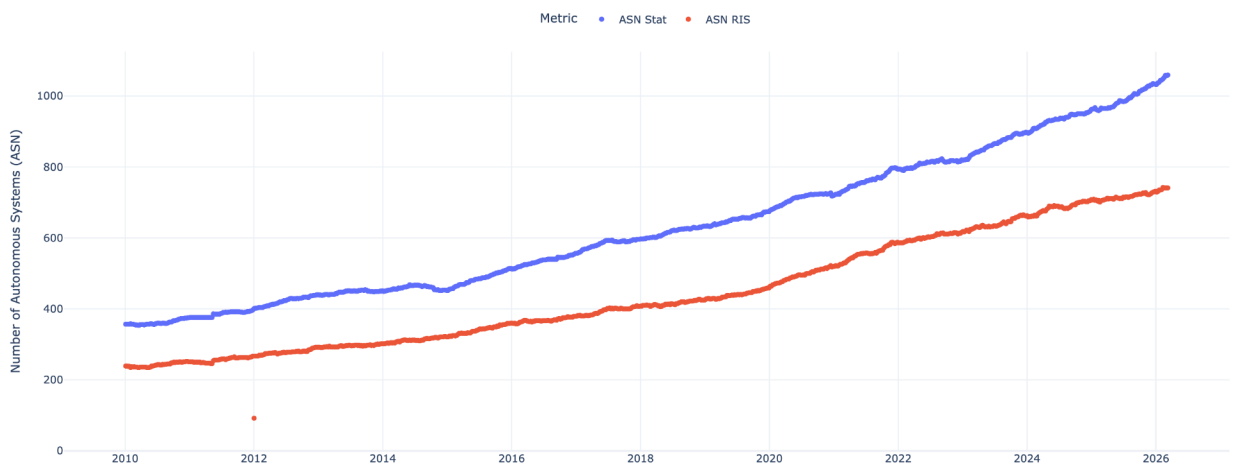
1. **Ookla Speedtest Awards 2025:** TurkNet recognized as the fastest fixed provider with Speed Score 55.11.[25]
2. **Opensignal Mobile Experience Report (June 2025):** Turkcell leads in download speed and coverage, while Vodafone wins in the “Consistent Quality” category.[28]
3. **OONI (2025):** Communication quality study revealed systemic delays (throttling) when accessing social networks during periods of political tension, which negatively affects the overall user experience.[30]

Infrastructure damage after the 2023 earthquake in the southern provinces continues to affect service quality: in cities such as Malatya and Adıyaman, network restoration is complicated by frequent cable thefts and lack of capacity.[10]

2.4. Development of Providers and Autonomous Systems

The number of Autonomous Systems (AS) in Turkey is an important indicator of network maturity and decentralization. According to RIPE Stat, Turkey demonstrates a stable increase in new AS, which is associated with the emergence of local internet providers and corporate networks.[31]

Graph 5: Dynamics of Autonomous Systems in Turkey (2010-2026)



Conclusion: Despite the growth in the number of autonomous systems, backbone connectivity remains under strict control of several large players (Türk Telekom, Turkcell, Vodafone), which facilitates the state's task of filtering and restricting traffic at the national backbone level.[4]

Total number of AS per 1 million inhabitants: (750 AS / 87.9 million) × 1 million ≈ 8.5 AS

Active (routable) AS per 1 million inhabitants: (1040 AS / 87.9 million) × 1 million ≈ 11.8 AS

For a country with a population of almost 88 million, such a relatively modest number of autonomous systems per capita indicates a high degree of concentration in the internet services market.

Despite the large absolute number of AS (more than 1,000 active), the market remains strongly consolidated around several large players ("the big three" — TurkTelekom, Turkcell Superonline, Vodafone — plus TurkNet and several independent transit/CDN operators). Most small and medium-sized providers either depend on them or operate in narrow niches.

Combined with the powerful development of peering infrastructure (DE-CIX Istanbul), Turkey demonstrates a mature but concentrated model of the internet ecosystem: strong national operators and a global hub in Istanbul with a relatively low density of autonomous systems per capita.

Table 1: Top 10 Largest Autonomous Systems of Turkey

#	Number of AS	Name	Web Site	Foreign neighbour count	Local neighbour count	Total neighbour count	Foreign neighbours share
1	12735	TurkNet	https://www.turk.net	331	59	390	85%
2	9121	TurkTelekom	https://www.turktelekom.com.tr/	55	290	345	16%
3	34984	Turkcell Superonline	https://www.superonline.net/	27	230	257	11%
4	15924	Vodafone	https://www.vodafone.com.tr	23	122	145	16%
5	208972	GIBIRNet	https://gibir.net.tr/	39	44	83	47%
6	21245	Medianova	https://www.medianova.com/	66	3	69	96%
7	43391	Netdirekt	https://www.netdirekt.com.tr/	49	18	67	73%
8	57152	Teknet	https://www.teknetbilisim.com/	7	33	40	18%
9	48678	PenDC	https://www.pendc.com/	8	28	36	22%
10	8517	Ulaknet	https://ulakbim.tubitak.gov.tr/en/	3	26	29	10%

The internet connectivity market in Turkey demonstrates a **high degree of decentralization**, but at the same time maintains a clear division of roles between operators.

TurkNet (AS12735) is the absolute leader in the number of peering connections — **390 neighbors**, of which **331 (85%) are foreign**. This makes TurkNet Turkey's **main hub for international connectivity** and a key player in global peering. The company actively participates in European and regional IXPs (DE-CIX Istanbul, NetIX, etc.), which allows it to have extensive foreign connectivity and, probably, to provide transit or peering to many other Turkish and international networks.

TurkTelekom (AS9121) and **Turkcell Superonline (AS34984)** occupy second and third places with 345 and 257 connections respectively. However, their structure is radically different: both operators have a very **strong emphasis on local peering** (290 and 230 respectively, i.e. 84%

and 90% local neighbors). This reflects their role as **dominant providers of end users** (especially in fixed and mobile broadband access), where the main part of traffic is internal, including interaction with a huge number of local networks, corporate clients, and content providers within the country. Their international connectivity is significantly more modest and, most likely, partially relies on transit through players such as TurkNet or direct upstream to Tier-1 operators.

Vodafone (AS15924) follows the same model — 122 local versus 23 foreign neighbors (84% local), confirming the typical strategy of the large integrated operators of the Turkish market "triad" (TurkTelekom, Turkcell, Vodafone).

Other participants in the top 10 are also interesting:

- **Medianova (AS21245)** and **Netdirekt (AS43391)** — vivid examples of CDN/content-oriented or transit players with a predominance of foreign peers (66 out of 69 and 49 out of 67 respectively). This indicates their specialization in international traffic, content caching, and data delivery from abroad.
- **GIBIRNet (AS208972)** — a more balanced player (39 foreign / 44 local).
- **Ulaknet (AS8517)** — an academic network with a minimal number of foreign connections, typical for NREN (National Research and Education Network), which relies on several quality upstream channels.

General Conclusions

- **Two-tier market structure:** TurkNet plays the role of Turkey's main international gateway and peering hub, while the "big three" (TurkTelekom, Turkcell Superonline, Vodafone) dominate the domestic market and provide connectivity to end users. This model allows efficient traffic distribution: local traffic remains within the country (cheap and fast), while international traffic goes through specialized players with wide foreign peering.
- **Developed local traffic exchange:** The very high number of local neighbors among leading operators indicates a powerful internal peering ecosystem (including Turkish IXPs), which reduces costs and delays on national traffic.
- **Strong international connectivity through independent players:** Unlike Georgia, where one operator (Silknet) holds almost all international connectivity, in Turkey this function is distributed, but with a clear leader in the person of TurkNet. This reduces concentration risks and increases resilience.
- **Potential vulnerability:** Despite the distribution, a failure in TurkNet or key international upstream partners (Cogent, TI Sparkle, etc.) can noticeably affect the quality of access to global content for a significant part of networks that do not have their own powerful foreign peers.

Overall, Turkey's internet connectivity market looks significantly more **mature, distributed, and peering-oriented** than in neighboring countries of the region, with a clear division of roles between "domestic giants" and the "international hub."

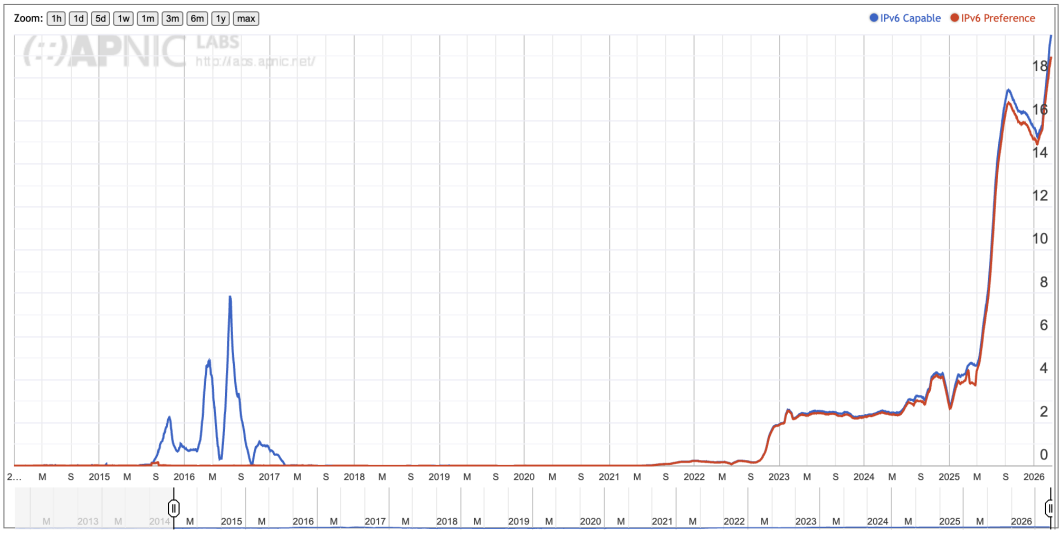
Also, as of 2026, **four active traffic exchange points (IXP)** operate in Turkey, which are included in the Internet Society Pulse list (data based on PeeringDB and taking into account only points with at least three participants):
• **DE-CIX Istanbul** — the largest and most significant IXP in the country (de-cix.net);
• **EURASIA-IX.NET** (eurasia-ix.net);
• **GIBIR Internet Exchange** (GIBIRIX) (ix.gibir.net.tr);
• **TURK Internet eXchange** (TR-IX) (tr-ix.com).

DE-CIX Istanbul plays a dominant role in the ecosystem, providing the overwhelming part of international and national peering. The other three IXPs complement the infrastructure, contributing to the development of local traffic exchange and increasing network resilience.

2.5. IPv6 Penetration

The implementation of the IPv6 protocol in Turkey was in stagnation for a long time; however, in the period 2023–2026, clear progress was outlined, stimulated by state directives and preparation for the launch of 5G and the Internet of Things.[33]

Graph 6: Dynamics of IPv6 Penetration in Turkey (2015-2026)



Source: stats.labs.apnic.net

Conclusion: Turkey is moving from the stage of early testing to mass IPv6 implementation. The main barrier remains the need to upgrade end-user equipment (CPE) and the conservatism of small providers. However, large operators such as Turkcell are already actively using IPv6 in their mobile networks to compensate for the shortage of IPv4 addresses.[31]

2.6. Connectivity Index

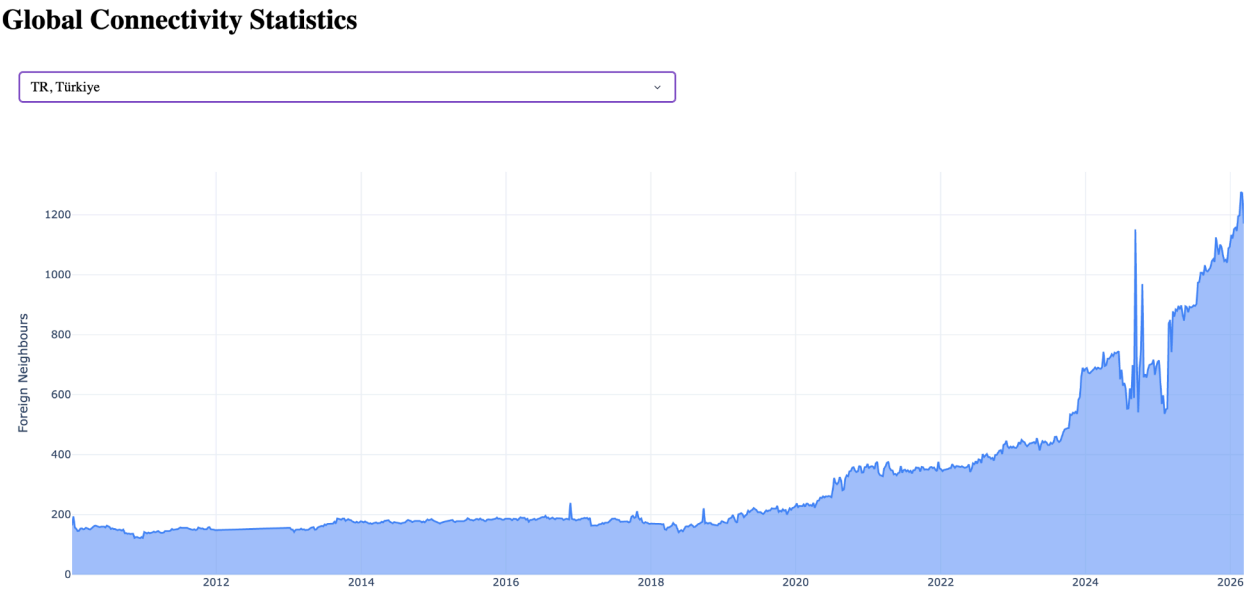
To assess the level of integration of the internet segment, two key indicators are used, based on the analysis of pairwise connections (peerings) between Autonomous Systems (ASN).

Global Connectivity Index: This index represents the total number of unique connections between each Turkish ASN and each external (foreign) ASN. In essence, it measures how widely and diversely the internet segment is connected to the rest of the world. The higher this indicator, the more “windows” the country has into the global network.

Local Connectivity Index: This index is calculated as the total number of unique connections between various local ASNs. It reflects the intensity and complexity of the internal internet market, in particular, the activity at traffic exchange points (IXP). A high indicator indicates a developed internal ecosystem that allows efficient traffic exchange within the country, minimizing delays and dependence on external channels for local data.

The analysis of the ratio of these two indices allows us to understand the strategic orientation of the national network: whether it is predominantly self-sufficient or deeply integrated into the global infrastructure.

Graph 7: Dynamics of Global Connectivity of Turkey's Autonomous Systems (2010-2026)



The graph shows a **steady and accelerating growth** in the international connectivity of Turkish Autonomous Systems throughout the entire period 2010–2026, with a particularly pronounced exponential rise starting from 2022–2023. The indicator of the number of foreign neighbors (foreign neighbours), which for a long time remained at a relatively stable level of 150–200–300, began to grow sharply from mid-2022: by 2024 it exceeded 600–700, and by 2026 reached peak values over 1200 (with individual surges up to 1100+). The growth is accompanied by periodic peaks and declines (probably associated with the addition/removal of peers or traffic migration), but the overall trend is clearly upward, without signs of stabilization or plateau.

This multi-year and accelerating growth reflects **Turkey's transformation into one of the key regional and global digital hubs** with powerful integration into the world internet infrastructure. Since 2022–2023, Turkey (especially Istanbul) has been actively positioning itself as a strategic bridge between Europe, the Middle East, Central Asia, and Africa. The main drivers:

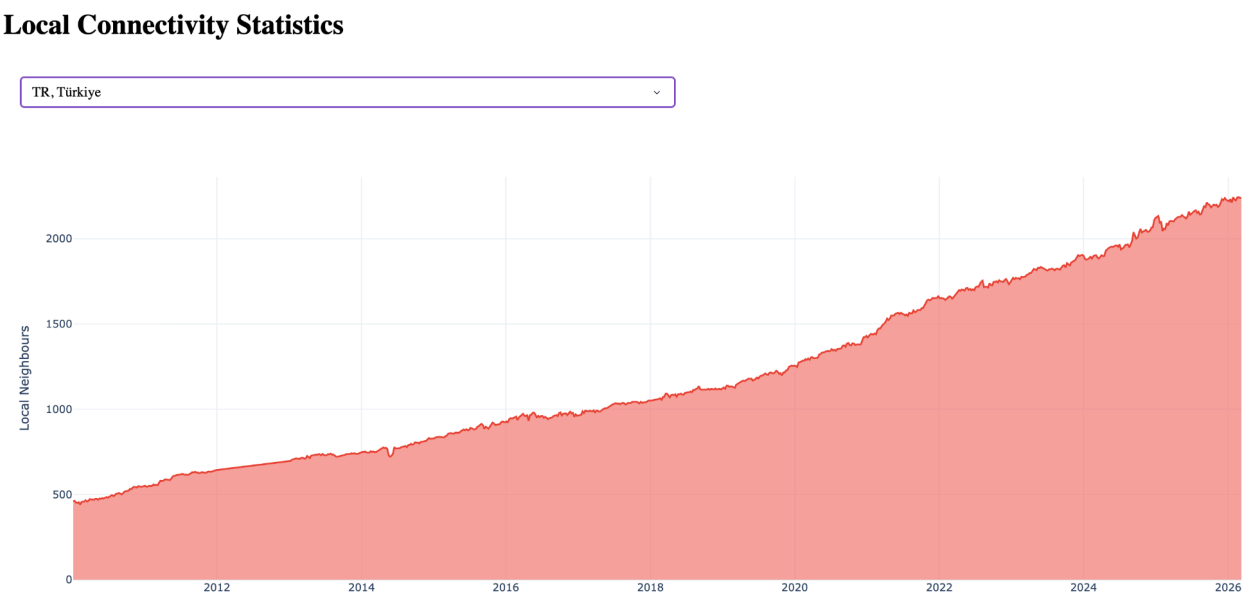
- **Development of neutral traffic exchange points (IXP):** DE-CIX Istanbul (since 2015, but especially rapid growth since 2023–2025) has become the dominant hub — by 2025–2026 it serves 93% of international peering in the country, attracts global operators, CDNs, cloud providers (including AWS on-ramp), and records record traffic (over 500 Gbit/s in 2025). Forecast — doubling of the interconnection market by 2030 (over 150 networks and multi-Tbit/s).

- **Expansion of fiber-optic infrastructure and submarine cables:** The fiber network grew from ~425 thousand km in 2020 to 577 thousand km in 2024; multiple submarine cables in the Mediterranean and Black Seas + land connections with >20 neighbors provide alternative routes and resilience.
- **Geopolitical and economic factors:** Strengthening Turkey's role in the Middle Corridor (Trans-Caspian corridor China–Europe through Central Asia, the Caspian, the Caucasus, and Turkey), Development Road (Turkey–Iraq), Trans-Caspian Green Energy Corridor — all this increases demand for reliable international connectivity. Growth in traffic from 5G deployment (spectrum auction 2025, launch 2026), digitalization of the economy, e-commerce, fintech, and attraction of hyperscalers/CDNs.
- **Attraction of global players:** TurkNet, TurkTelekom, and other operators are actively increasing foreign peering (especially TurkNet as the leader with 300+ foreign peers), which strengthens the overall indicator.

After 2022, growth is no longer abrupt but **gradually accelerating and sustainable**, which indicates a transition from the "catch-up development" phase to the phase of **active positioning as a peering hub.** Volatility (peaks and declines) is explained by the addition of large peers, the launch of new cloud regions, or seasonal/event-driven traffic surges, but does not lead to rollback — each new level becomes the base.

Overall, Turkish internet demonstrates a **long-term structural breakthrough** in global connectivity: from a peripheral role to a central node with high potential for further growth (forecast of doubling the interconnection market by 2030). This contrasts with the more "abrupt" models of neighboring countries and emphasizes the maturity and strategic orientation of the Turkish ecosystem toward international traffic and resilience.

Graph 8: Dynamics of Local Connectivity of Turkey's Autonomous Systems (2010-2026)



Unlike global connectivity, local connectivity demonstrates **planned, sustainable, and accelerating organic growth** throughout the entire period 2010–2026. The number of unique local neighbors (local neighbours) among Turkish autonomous systems consistently increased: from about 500 in the early 2010s to a level of about 2000+ by 2026. The graph shows a smooth upward curve without sharp jumps or rollbacks, with a noticeable acceleration in growth rates starting approximately from 2018–2020 and especially pronounced rise in 2022–2026.

Such dynamics indicate the **maturity and constant complication** of Turkey's internal internet ecosystem. The constant increase in the number of local peerings reflects the active work of national traffic exchange points (primarily DE-CIX Istanbul, as well as GIBIRIX, TR-IX, and others), where by 2026 more than 90 participants are concentrated (including local operators, CDNs, cloud providers, and enterprises). This allows Turkish networks to efficiently exchange huge volumes of internal traffic (including e-commerce, streaming, mobile content, corporate clouds, and 5G traffic), minimizing dependence on expensive international transit channels, reducing delays, and increasing the overall resilience of the national segment.

Growth is fueled by several key factors:

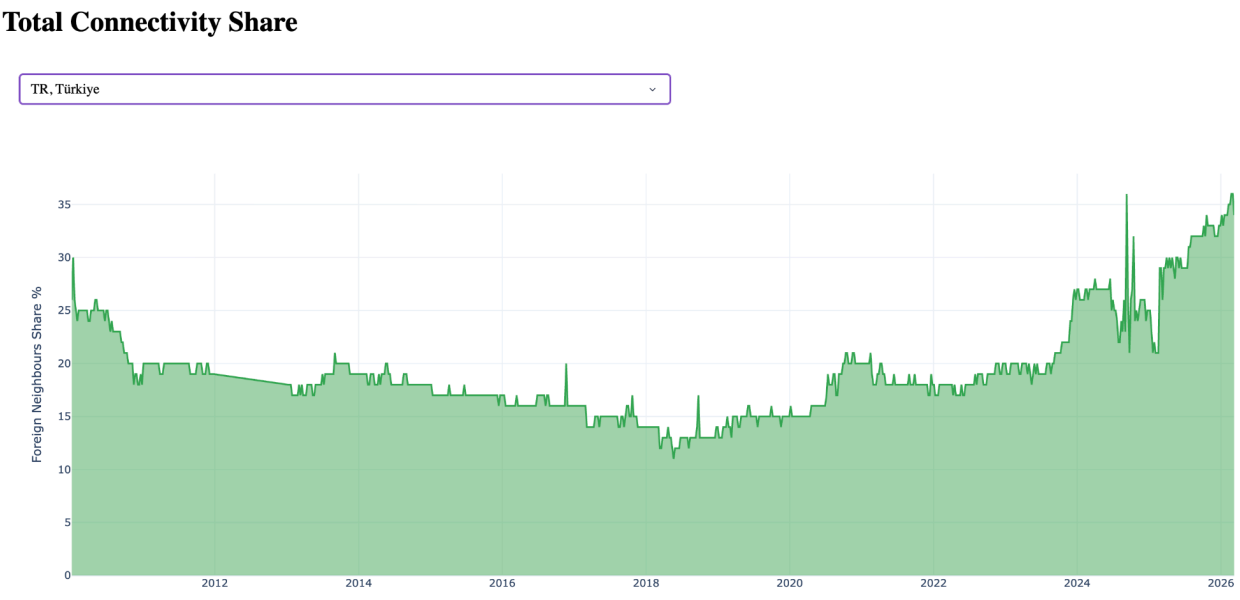
- Rapid development of DE-CIX Istanbul as the dominant hub (growth in the number of connected networks by 18–20% in some years, traffic exceeded 500 Gbit/s in 2025 with a forecast of multi-Tbit/s by 2030), where local peering constitutes a significant share.

- Large-scale deployment of fiber infrastructure (over 577 thousand km of fiber by 2024–2025), 5G (spectrum auction 2025, launch 2026), and digitalization of the economy, which sharply increases internal traffic.
- Attraction of global players (AWS on-ramp, CDNs, hyperscalers) to Istanbul, which actively peer locally to optimize content delivery within the country.
- Geographical concentration in Istanbul (many colocation sites, carrier-neutral data centers), which creates a powerful scale effect for local exchange.

Turkish local connectivity is growing **gradually and organically**, reflecting the long-term strategy of operators ("the big three" + independent players like TurkNet) to localize traffic and reduce costs. This strengthens the internal ecosystem as one of the most developed in the region, making it resilient to external failures and ready for further growth (forecast of doubling the interconnection market by 2030).

Overall, Turkey's internal internet market demonstrates **maturity of the peering ecosystem**, where constant growth of local connections ensures low delays, high speed of access to national resources, and strategic independence from global transit.

Graph 9: Dynamics of the Ratio of Global and Local Connectivity of Turkey's Autonomous Systems (2010-2026)



This graph shows that the share of global (foreign) connections in the overall structure of connectivity of Turkish autonomous systems has undergone a gradual but steady and accelerating increase, especially noticeable since 2022–2023. Until approximately 2022, the

share of foreign neighbors fluctuated at a relatively low level (on average 12–18%, with a minimum of about 10–12% in 2018–2020), which reflected the predominance of local peering and less dependence on international connections. Starting from 2022, a clear upward trend is observed: the share grew to 20–25% by 2023–2024, and by 2026 reached peak values of about 35% (with individual surges up to 35–37%).

This shift indicates Turkey's strategic transition from a predominantly internal focus to the role of an active global digital hub. The growth in the share of foreign peers is directly related to the rapid development of DE-CIX Istanbul (since 2015, but especially since 2022–2025): the exchange has become dominant (93% of all international peerings in Istanbul), attracted global operators, CDNs, cloud providers (AWS on-ramp, etc.), recorded record traffic (over 500 Gbit/s in 2025, growth of hundreds of percent since 2020), and increased the number of connected networks (growth of 18–20% in some years). Additional factors are the expansion of fiber and submarine cables, the positioning of Istanbul as a bridge between Europe, the Middle East, and Central Asia (Middle Corridor, Development Road), 5G deployment, and the attraction of hyperscalers.

In Turkey, the share of foreign connections continues to grow even against the background of powerful parallel growth in local connectivity (up to 2000+ neighbours). This indicates an asymmetrical but balanced growth: the domestic market remains extremely dense and mature (local peering dominates), but international integration is accelerating faster, turning Turkey into a regional peering center with a high degree of global openness.

Thus, Turkey's internet segment is developing as a highly integrated and export-oriented ecosystem: while maintaining strong internal self-sufficiency (low delays, traffic localization), it simultaneously increases global connectivity, which increases resilience, attracts international traffic, and positions the country as a strategic node in digital corridors between continents. By 2026, the share of foreign peers at the level of ~35% reflects a successful transition from a "local giant" to a "global hub" with a forecast of further growth (doubling of the interconnection market by 2030).

3. Internet Legislation

Turkey's legislative framework in the field of the internet has evolved from the protection of morality to the protection of "national security" and "public order," which in practice has led to the creation of one of the most repressive systems of digital control in the democratic world.[4]

3.1. Principles of Internet Governance

Internet governance in Turkey is based on the principle of "digital sovereignty," where the state reserves the right of preventive intervention in information flows. The main ideology of governance is that digital space is a field of information warfare, where external forces can destabilize the country.[4]

3.1.1. Regulation

Regulation is carried out through a system of licensing providers, mandatory registration of SIM cards tied to legal residence status, and strict requirements for storing user data inside the country (data localization).

In particular, foreign citizens are required to register a SIM card using a passport. Tourist (visitor) SIM cards purchased without a residence permit have a limited validity period: in case of long-term use without official permission for residence (ikamet izni / residence permit), the SIM card may be automatically blocked by the operator. For long-term use of a SIM card and to avoid blocking, a foreigner usually requires a valid residence permit (ikamet tezkeresi) and a Foreigner Identification Number (YKN). In addition, foreign phones (by IMEI) can be used with a Turkish SIM card without registration for no more than 120 days from the first connection to the Turkish network — after that, the device is blocked if it has not undergone official registration with payment of a high fee (about 57,241 TL in 2026), which also requires legal residence status.

The key law is Law No. 5651, which is supplemented by new amendments every two years, expanding the powers of regulators.[5]

3.1.2. Regulatory Agencies and Responsible Persons

- **Information and Communication Technologies Authority (BTK):** The main regulator and executor of censorship decisions.
    - **Ömer Abdullah Karagözoğlu** — President and Chairman of the BTK Board. An experienced engineer who worked in the structures of the Istanbul municipality.[39]
    - **Selamettin Ermiş** — Second President of the BTK Board.[43]

- **Radio and Television Supreme Council (RTÜK):** Regulates content on streaming platforms and YouTube.
    - **Ebubekir Şahin** — Chairman of RTÜK.

3.2. Market Monopolization

Despite the presence of competition in the retail segment, at the infrastructure level the Turkish market remains monopolized. **Türk Telekom** (formerly state-owned, now controlled by the Turkey Wealth Fund — TVF) owns about 80% of the backbone fiber-optic networks.[4] Communications legislation (ECL) formally obliges the monopolist to provide network access (unbundling), but in practice alternative operators face enormous bureaucratic and financial barriers.

The actual monopolist in traffic management is the tandem of BTK and Türk Telekom. Infrastructure management is carried out through a system of "trustees" on the boards of directors of the largest companies, who are appointed from among former or current officials loyal to the ruling party.[3]

3.3. Internet Shutdowns by Order of the Authorities

Turkish legislation (especially Articles 8/A and 10 of Law No. 5651) grants the authorities broad powers to restrict internet access without a prior court decision.

Mechanism and grounds:

- **Reasons:** Threat to national security, protection of public order, prevention of crimes, protection of life and property.[4]
- **Process:** BTK, at the request of the president or ministries, issues an order to operators. Operators are obliged to comply within 4 hours.[4]
- **Order:** Can be given by the president, prime minister (until 2018), or heads of security agencies through BTK.

In practice, Turkey more often uses the "throttling" method (speed limitation up to 90% of traffic for certain services) than a full internet shutdown, as this allows maintaining the operation of state and banking systems while making the use of social networks and messengers impossible.[16]

3.4. Legislation on "Words on the Internet"

In October 2022, Turkey adopted the so-called "Disinformation Law" (Law No. 7418), which became a powerful tool for suppressing dissent.

Main provisions:

1. **Article 217/A of the Criminal Code:** Introduces punishment from 1 to 3 years of imprisonment for public dissemination of "false information" about the country's internal and external security, public order, or public health.[3]
2. **Interpretation:** The definition of "false information" is not given. The decision is made by a judge based on the expertise of state bodies (for example, the Presidential Communications Directorate). If the information is disseminated anonymously, the term is increased by 50%.[17]
3. **Consequences:** The law created a "chilling effect," forcing journalists and ordinary users to resort to self-censorship due to fear of sudden arrest for a post about the exchange rate or the state of the army.[4]

Over two years of the law's operation, more than 1,500 cases were initiated under it, including the persecution of journalists for reports on the consequences of the earthquake.[4]

3.5. Legislation on Internet Blockings

Turkey has developed one of the most advanced and fastest content blocking systems in the world, allowing the removal of unwanted information from global search within hours.[5]

3.5.1. Legislation

The main act is Law No. 5651 ("Internet Law"). The 2020 amendments obliged social networks (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) to appoint a local representative who must fulfill BTK's requirements to remove content within 48 hours, otherwise the platform faces fines and throttling.[5]

In March 2025, against the background of mass protests caused by the arrest of Istanbul Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu (the main political rival of President Erdoğan), Turkish authorities through BTK sent a demand to the X platform (formerly Twitter) to block more than 700 accounts.

The blocked accounts included:
• journalists and independent media,
• opposition political figures,
• student groups,
• human rights and women's organizations,
• ordinary users who disseminated information about the protests and coordinated actions.

The authorities justified the demands by protecting "national security and public order" (Article 8/A of Law No. 5651). X publicly called these demands "illegal" and stated that they limit millions

of Turkish users' access to news and political discussion. The company announced that it would challenge the orders in the Turkish Constitutional Court.

Nevertheless, in some cases the platform still applied restrictions on access to accounts on Turkish territory. Among the most notable examples is the blocking of Ekrem İmamoğlu's own account in May 2025 by court decision.

This incident became one of the largest waves of censorship on X in Turkey in recent years and clearly demonstrated the practice of preventive blocking of accounts at the request of the authorities during periods of political tension.

3.5.2. Blocking Procedures

The blocking of internet resources in Turkey can be initiated in several ways. In most cases, the decision is made by the Criminal Court of Peace (Sulh Ceza Hakimliği, Penal Judgeship of Peace) — upon the application of citizens (usually on the grounds of "violation of personal rights") or upon the request of state bodies.

In emergency cases, the Information and Communication Technologies Authority (BTK) has the right to block a resource independently, after which it is obliged to submit documents to the court within 24 hours for post-factum formal approval.

Special attention should be paid to the institution of Sulh Ceza Hakimliği (Criminal Courts of Peace), created in 2014. These courts have extremely broad powers at the pre-trial stage: they alone issue warrants for search, arrest, detention, interception of messages, and blocking of websites. One judge can single-handedly make decisions on preventive measures and evaluate complaints against the actions of the prosecutor's office and law enforcement agencies.

International organizations, including the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe, Amnesty International, and the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ), have repeatedly criticized this institution for a serious lack of independence and impartiality. These courts are often used as a convenient tool for quick and practically uncontrolled restriction of freedom of speech. Decisions are made in closed session, without the participation of the defense side, which makes the procedure particularly vulnerable to political pressure and abuse.

Thus, the blocking mechanism in Turkey combines both a formal judicial procedure and the possibility of extrajudicial intervention by BTK, while the key role is played by an institution whose independence raises serious doubts among the international expert community.[4]

3.5.3. Registers of Blocked Internet Resources

There is no official open list of all blocked resources. The authorities provide only a tool for checking an individual URL on the BTK website.[18]

3.5.4. Registers of Blocked Resources (Alternative)

Due to the closed nature of official data, civil society has created its own monitoring systems:

- **EngelliWeb (project of the İFÖD association):** The most complete database tracking news and domain blockings. Project website.
- **Free Web Turkey:** Maintains a register of blockings related to corruption and politics. Project website. The work of these resources is based on automated scanning and collection of court decisions published by lawyers.[48]

3.5.5. Development of Blockings

According to **OONI reports (Open Observatory of Network Interference)**, the dynamics of blockings in Turkey in 2019–2025 shows a transition from blocking entire sites (as was the case with Wikipedia in 2017–2020) to targeted URL blocking and throttling of platforms.[4]

Brief OONI digest on Turkey:

- **February 2023:** Throttling of Twitter for 8 hours after the earthquake.[50]
- **August 2024:** Full blocking of Instagram for 9 days due to disputes over moderation of content related to HAMAS.[26]
- **October 2024:** Blocking of Discord and Roblox under the pretext of protecting children from sexualized content.[26]
- **March 2025:** Throttling of social networks during opposition protests.[30]

Conclusion: Blockings have turned from an exceptional measure into an everyday tool of political management used for the instant suppression of any negative agenda.[18]

3.5.6. Practice of Censorship and Content Blocking in 2024–2025

According to the FreeWeb Turkey (MLSA) report “Internet Censorship Report 2024–2025,” in the first seven months of 2025, 105 court decisions on blocking were issued in Turkey, as a result of which 1,306 units of content and 3,330 URLs became unavailable.

The peak of censorship came during the events of March 19, 2025 (detention and subsequent arrest of Istanbul Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu). During this period, the authorities used several **pressure tools** simultaneously:

• Mass blocking of more than 700 accounts on the X platform at the request of BTK;
• 42-hour speed restriction (bandwidth throttling) on major platforms (X, YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, Telegram, Signal, and WhatsApp);
• Targeted and mass blockings of news materials, journalist accounts, student and women's organizations.

The most frequently blocked materials were on the following topics:
• Appointment of government trustees (trustee/kayyum) in municipalities;
• Economic boycotts of companies associated with the authorities;
• Criticism of the actions of the ruling party and its deputies;
• Protests and street actions in support of İmamoğlu.

Independent and Kurdish media (Mezopotamya Agency, JinNews, Yeni Yaşam, Etkin Haber Ajansı, etc.) suffered especially, as well as accounts of individual journalists and youth organizations. In some cases, one court order led to the blocking of dozens and hundreds of URLs at once.

In 2025, censorship went beyond traditional news sites: for the first time, the popular gaming service Roblox was completely blocked, as well as individual accounts and channels not directly related to politics.

Thus, in 2024–2025, blockings and access restrictions turned from an exceptional measure into a systemic tool for operational control over the information space, especially during periods of acute political tension.

4. Human Rights Violations on the Internet

Human rights violations in Turkey's digital environment are systemic in nature. Freedom of expression, the right to access information, and the right to privacy are regularly violated by state bodies in the interests of the ruling elite.[3]

4.1. Internet Shutdowns by Order of the Authorities

The practice of shutdowns (full communication outages) in Turkey is rare; the authorities prefer "throttling" — slowing down social network traffic to a non-working state.

Key cases:
• **Earthquake (February 2023)**: The authorities restricted access to Twitter (X) when thousands of people were under the rubble and used the platform to transmit coordinates. The

restriction lasted 8 hours while negotiations were held with the platform on moderation of "disinformation."[10]

• **Terrorist attack on İstiklal Street (November 2022):** Immediately after the explosion in Istanbul, the speed of access to social networks was reduced by 90% across the country for 10 hours.[16]

• **Protests (March 2025):** During opposition rallies in major cities, throttling was recorded not only of social networks but also of messengers Telegram and WhatsApp on some mobile networks.[26]

4.2. Criminalization of Statements on the Internet

Turkey ranks among the world leaders in the number of criminal cases for posts on social networks.

High-profile cases:

- **Ekrem İmamoğlu (Istanbul Mayor): I**n 2024–2025, new cases were initiated against him, including for "insulting public servants" in an interview that was broadcast online. He faces a prison sentence and a political ban.[26]
- **Fatih Altaylı:** A well-known journalist was subjected to investigation and house arrest in early 2024 for his critical videos on YouTube.[46]
- **Ordinary users: I**n 2024, 20 Kurdish politicians received huge prison sentences (up to 42 years); part of the charges was based on their social media posts from 2014, which were qualified as "propaganda of terrorism."[10]

4.3. Persecution of Media and NGOs

Independent online publications are under constant financial and legal pressure.

Examples of persecution:

- **Kaos GL:** In June 2025, the website of the oldest LGBTQ organization was completely blocked on charges of "propaganda of immorality" and "violation of family values." The authorities used "virtual patrols" to collect evidence, despite the fact that the Constitutional Court had previously declared such practice illegal.[48]
- **Deutsche Welle and Voice of America:** In 2022–2024, their Turkish services were blocked for refusing to obtain an RTÜK license, which would give the council the right to censor their content.[5]
- **Small media:** Regularly receive orders to remove articles about corruption of the president's relatives (for example, investigations into Bilal Erdoğan's business are massively blocked).[4]

5. Civil Society in the Field of Internet Governance

Turkey's civil society in the digital sphere is developed and highly professional. It consists of lawyers, IT specialists, and human rights defenders who have created an ecosystem for monitoring violations and protecting digital boundaries.[45]

5.1. Organizations

1. **Media and Law Studies Association (MLSA):** (mlsaturkey.com) — Provides free legal assistance to journalists, monitors court proceedings and blockings.[37]
2. **İfade Özgürlüğü Derneği (İFÖD):** (ifade.org.tr) — Freedom of Expression Association. Publishes annual reports "Kafkaesque Censorship," which are the standard for censorship analysis in Turkey.[49]
3. **Free Web Turkey:** (freewebturkey.com) — Coalition of NGOs (Altbilişim, TBİD, etc.), tracking internet accessibility and teaching citizens digital security methods.[18]
4. **Toplumsal Bilgi ve İletişim Derneği (TBİD):** Deals with issues of digital literacy and human rights in the algorithmic era.[48]

5.2. VPN and Means of Bypassing Blockings

In conditions of mass blockings, VPN in Turkey has turned from a technical tool into a necessity for the urban population.[51]

5.2.1. Status of VPN Services

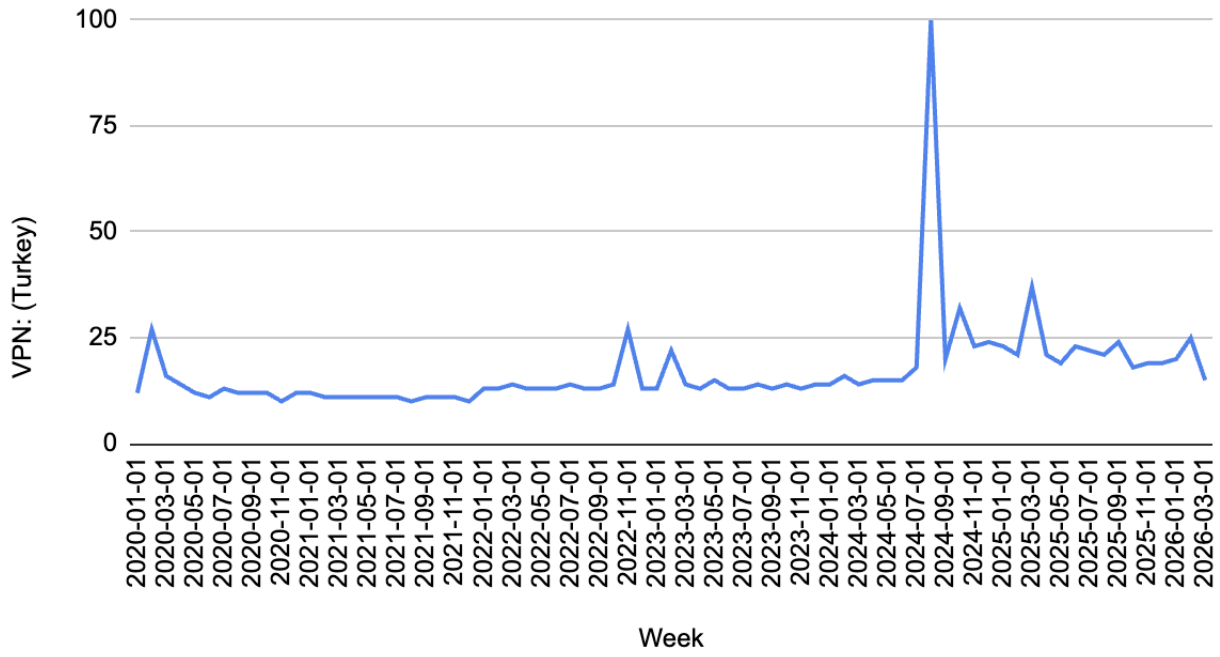
The use of VPN in Turkey is formally not prohibited by law for citizens; however, the authorities are waging a war against service providers.

- **Legislation:** There are no direct laws against VPN, but BTK uses its powers for "protection of national security" for extrajudicial blocking of VPN server IP addresses and their sites.[10]
- **Restrictions:** In December 2023, BTK ordered all ISPs to block access to 17 main VPN services (Proton, TunnelBear, Surfshark, etc.). This is done by blocking domains and attempting traffic analysis (DPI) to detect WireGuard and OpenVPN protocols.[10]

5.2.2. Number of VPN Users

Turkey is one of the world leaders in the share of the population using VPN.

Graph 10: Dynamics of Search Queries about VPN in Turkey (2020-2026)



Source: trends.google.com

Based on the graph, it can be concluded that the events of August 2025 radically and sharply increased interest in VPN services in Turkey, creating a short-term but very powerful surge in demand.

Catalyst of demand: August 2025

A huge peak in VPN search queries (up to 100 units on the Google Trends scale) is directly related to the escalation of the political crisis and mass restrictions on access to social networks and messengers in August 2025. The authorities introduced large-scale throttling and temporary blockings of X (Twitter), Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, Facebook, WhatsApp, and other platforms. This provoked an explosive growth in demand for censorship bypass tools: Proton VPN recorded a surge in registrations of +1100%, Top10VPN — a demand growth of 188% on the first day and 158% on the second, and vpnMentor — peak values up to +10,000% in the first hours. People massively searched for ways to maintain access to information and online services under sudden restrictions.

Absence of the formation of a "new norm"

In Turkey, after the August 2025 shock, interest in VPN quickly returned almost to previous values (in the range of 10–20–25 units, with small fluctuations up to 30–35 in some weeks). The graph shows several small rises in the following months and 2026, but they do not exceed 30–35 and look like a reaction to periodic local restrictions. This indicates that in Turkey the use of VPN remains primarily a situational tool for bypassing temporary blockings, and not a permanent habit for a large part of the population. The basic level of interest before and after the peak remains relatively low and stable.

Blockings and context in Turkey

Turkey has a long history of periodic blockings of social networks (Instagram — August 2024 for several days, Twitter/X at different times, YouTube and Wikipedia earlier) and targeted measures against VPN: in November–December 2023, BTK blocked 16–17 popular VPN services (Proton, TunnelBear, Psiphon, etc.) without a court order, and in 2024–2025 continued to use DPI (deep packet inspection) to hinder VPN operation. Despite this, there is no complete ban on VPN — they remain legal, but their use is complicated, especially during periods of political tension. The March 2025 peak is one of the brightest examples of how political events (arrest of an opposition figure + protests) instantly translate millions of users into "censorship bypass" mode.

General Conclusions

- **Situational nature of demand:** In Turkey, VPN is a "firefighting tool" during acute crises (political blockings, protests). After the lifting of restrictions, interest quickly falls.
- **High sensitivity to censorship:** Even short-term (1–2 days) throttling of social networks causes a multiple increase in VPN searches — this shows how strongly Turkish society depends on these platforms for communication, news, and business.
- **Risks and trend:** Repeated incidents (2023–2025–2026) gradually increase overall awareness of VPN and skills in using them, but without sustainable growth in "basic" demand. If political instability continues, such peaks may become more frequent.

Overall, the Turkish VPN market looks **reactive and crisis-oriented**: surges are huge but short-term, and after each "rollback" they return to a relatively low background level.

5.2.3. Cases of Persecution for Using VPN

Cases of mass arrests for the mere fact of having a VPN have not been recorded. However, the authorities use the presence of VPN applications on the phones of detained activists as "indirect evidence" of their connection with illegal organizations or the desire to hide criminal

activity.[10] Also, in 2024, state religious figures began a campaign to declare the use of VPN "haram" (sinful) if it is used to access "immoral content."[48]

5.2.4. Blocking Monitoring

Monitoring resources:

- **NetBlocks:** Records throttling in real time.
- **OONI Explorer:** Technical data on censorship. Link.
- **EngelliWeb:** Digests of the last 5 years show that 80% of blockings in Turkey are related to "protection of personal rights" of politicians and businessmen associated with the government.[46]

6. Conclusion

The analysis of the state of the internet in Turkey in the period 2019–2026 allows us to conclude that the formation of a system of "digital authoritarianism" in the country has been completed. The technical modernization of networks and the high digital activity of the population were used by the state to create an infrastructure of total monitoring and instant censorship. Human rights in the field of access to information are observed only formally: the authorities have the technical and legislative ability to disable critically important communication channels at any moment.

Forecasts of the development of events:

1. **Neutral scenario:** Preservation of the current "cat and mouse" balance. The authorities will pointwise block new services and imprison people for posts, while civil society will switch to more complex bypass means (V2Ray, Shadowsocks). Social networks will continue to operate in a "forced compromise" mode.
2. **Positive scenario (liberalization):** Possible only if the political regime changes or a deep judicial crisis occurs, when the Constitutional Court can actually block the execution of repressive laws. This will lead to the restoration of BTK's independence and the cancellation of the disinformation law.
3. **Negative scenario (strengthening of censorship):** Transition to a "whitelist" internet model. Introduction of a state national VPN. Ban on the use of any encryption means without BTK certification. Complete displacement of Western platforms by Turkish analogues controlled by special services.

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