

Kyrgyzstan

Recent liberalization of the telecommunications market in Kyrgyzstan has made Internet access affordable for the majority of the population. This access remains largely unfettered. However, an emerging regime shift toward more restrictive policy, dependence upon Russian and Chinese Internet connections, and political instability pose problems for clear and continual access to Internet in Kyrgyzstan.



Background

In 2005 Kurmanbek Bakiev won the presidential elections after the violent downfall of the fourteen-year authoritarian regime of the former president, Askar Akayev. The new head of state vowed to distribute more powers to the parliament, encourage free speech, fight corruption, and tackle poverty. However, this shift in power has yet to result in significant economic improvements in Kyrgyzstan, as two-thirds of the population remain below the poverty line. International observers predict that new civil conflicts may erupt if the country does not adopt urgent economic measures.¹ The Internet is one of the few free outlets for expressing public

criticism in Kyrgyzstan, and has been used as an instrument to assemble people for protest against the government. Kyrgyzstan's U.N. global ranking for e-government (0.4417) has deteriorated; however, it remains in second place on the central Asian list, after Kazakhstan.²

Internet in Kyrgyzstan

Kyrgyzstan has one of the highest Internet penetration rates in Central Asia (5 percent for 2005).³ Some local studies assert that the number of Internet users is two times higher than reported in the official data.⁴ However, personal computers (PCs) remain unaffordable for the vast majority: only 2 percent of the Kyrgyz own a PC.⁵

RESULTS AT A GLANCE

Filtering	No evidence of filtering	Suspected filtering	Selective filtering	Substantial filtering	Pervasive filtering
Political	●				
Social	●				
Conflict/security	●				
Internet tools	●				

Other factors	Low	Medium	High	Not applicable
Transparency				●
Consistency				●

KEY INDICATORS



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

Cybercafés are the main Internet access point in the country (for approximately 51 percent of all users). Other important venues for public access are workplaces (nearly 25 percent) and educational institutions (24 percent). There are approximately 150 public Internet access centers in the country, including cybercafés and free access centers sponsored by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Development of the Internet infrastructure targets only the two largest cities, Bishkek and Osh. There are slightly more female than male users, and 60 percent of all users are aged between fifteen and twenty-five, with an additional 20 percent aged twenty-six to thirty-five. Russian sites remain the most visited among Kyrgyz Internet users (90 percent), compared with only 8 percent in Kyrgyz and 2 percent in English.

The privatization of both telecommunications and services, driven by the foreign investment and financial assistance, has resulted in an increasingly competitive Internet sector. This has caused access fees to decrease to USD0.30/hour, which in turn has made the Internet affordable for the average Kyrgyz. In 2005 the number of ISPs increased to thirty-eight, although only seven of these have an external Internet con-

nection. Two of the seven ISPs—KyrgyzTelecom (KT) and SaimaTelecom—own the infrastructure they use. The others rent lines and cables from the state-controlled top-tier KT. The state has a major stake (50 percent) in Elcat, another top-tier ISP. The majority of ISPs connect by satellite to the Russian portion of the Internet. In addition to its major Russian connection, KyrgyzTelecom has built external connection ports to China and Kazakhstan.

The Internet Traffic Exchange Point (IXP),⁶ shared by the ISPs with external Internet connection, runs the local traffic. The international Internet bandwidth in the country is 76 Mb/s,⁷ and the most popular means for Internet access is through dialup connection. A private company, AsialInfo, controls the country's top-level domain ".kg".⁸ There are around 1,500 top-level domain names registered in the Kyrgyz Internet zone.

Legal and regulatory frameworks

Internet and ISP activities are not directly regulated by sector-specific laws in the communications sphere. Compared with its neighbor Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan does not compel local Internet providers to work with the state-owned provider. Therefore ISPs independently establish

international connections. However, the state telecom continues to enjoy exclusive rights to national long-distance and international services, thus thwarting mobile operators and ISPs from entering the market. A licensing regime exists for providing Voice-over Internet Protocol (VoIP) services. To obtain a license, companies are required to contribute twenty million som (approximately USD517,000) to develop IT infrastructure. Once an applicant obtains the license, it may resell VoIP services to another company.

In 2002 the state declared ICT development to be a priority by way of the National Strategy on Information and Communication Technologies for Development of the Kyrgyz Republic.⁹ Eager to harness Internet capabilities to stimulate economic growth, the government has encouraged e-government, e-education, and the e-economy.¹⁰ For example, under a joint program between the government and international organizations, 95 percent of central government bodies, and 50 percent of local ones, have Internet access and provide online information about their services.¹¹ However, the cyber presence of political opposition is limited. ONI detected only three Kyrgyz Web sites belonging to political parties.¹²

The main institution responsible for the sector is the national ICT Council. The presidential administration has made efforts to introduce restrictive measures to control Internet content. In the spring of 2005 members of the government proposed amendments to the law on mass media that would have led to blocking all “.ru” domain sites containing offensive information on Kyrgyzstan. In turn, this would have limited Kyrgyz access to sources solely on the “.kg” domain, which is regulated by local authorities. Although this proposal was rejected, it revealed a shift in official attitudes toward Internet development in the country.

The National Communications Agency (NCA) is directly responsible to the President. It has taken over most of the responsibilities of the

Ministry of Transportation and Communication in the telecommunication sector. The NCA regulates and supervises postal and electronic communication companies, issues licenses, and monitors the Internet.¹³

Kyrgyz security laws do not explicitly apply to Internet activities. However, the National Security Law of 2003 provides for the creation of specialized communication and information security bodies within the structures of the National Security Service. The Security Council will be *inter alia* responsible for examining internal and external policy questions in the field of information security. In 2005, a government resolution on the Program for Information Security was adopted, but it lacked precise definitions for what constitutes commercial secrets, state secrets, and private information. This absence of clear terminology may lead to variable interpretations, which could create space for potential abuse. Furthermore, the program does not exhaustively list what types of information can be limited, which again can allow for the broadening of the scope of restricted information.

There is no legislation allowing the national security services to organize surveillance over the Internet. In fact, KT itself launched a technical investigation to prevent “gray traffic.” Possible surveillance exercised by state officials may take place at the ISP level. In July 2006, the State Agency for Intellectual Property proposed to create an Inter-Departmental Commission on State Regulation of the Kyrgyz Segment of Internet. This institution, which follows an existing Russian model, would coordinate the activity of the executive power bodies and organizations participating in the Kyrgyz segment of Internet. The implementation of restrictive measures by such an institution would deter further development of Internet in Kyrgyzstan.

ONI testing results

ONI conducted testing from various access points on all seven first tier ISPs: Aknet, AsialInfo,

Elcat, KyrgyzTelecom, SaimaTelecom, Totel, and Transfer. The testing did not detect activity that is indicative of any deliberate or even selective pattern of filtering. Some U.S. military sites were inaccessible, but these are likely the result of "supply side" blocking by U.S. authorities or poor domain name propagation. Kyrgyzstan does not block the sites of religious or extremist groups.

Past work by ONI leads us to suspect that there may be just-in-time or event-based tampering applied during politically sensitive periods. This was the case during the 2005 parliamentary elections, when ONI documented the extensive use of DoS attacks against opposition and media Web sites and Kyrgyz ISPs.¹⁴

Blocking of voice traffic is carried out in order to limit access to non-Kyrgyz providers offering IP-telephony service, to thereby compel the use of local providers. Voice traffic is filtered in all the standard ports on all popular non-Kyrgyz providers of IP-telephony. Allegedly, Cisco (Pix) and Huawei (EuDemon) products are used for blocking voice content. Filtering also exists at the enterprise level (NGOs, corporate clients) in order to block access of content deemed irrelevant and to economize Internet traffic.

Conclusion

Kyrgyzstan does not officially engage in filtering of Internet content. Although the government generally encourages Internet development, a shift toward greater restriction may be emerging. The regime appears to be struggling to find a balance between maintaining control over the ICT sector and allowing the necessary freedom for spurring economic growth. Potential limits in Internet freedom are posed by generally poor access, the possibility of "in-stream filtering" resulting from dependence on Russian and Chinese connections, and the possibility of sporadic targeted filtering triggered by state instability. However, Kyrgyzstan is an aid-dependent country, and is therefore unlikely to pursue open filtering of Internet content.

NOTES

1. International Eurasian Institute for Economic and Political Research, http://www.icas.org/libr_en/kg/libr_06_10_05kg.htm.
2. Department of Economic and Social Affairs; UN Global E-Government Readiness Report 2005, at 56, <http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/un/unpan021888.pdf>.
3. International Telecommunication Union, *World Telecommunication Indicators 2006*.
4. According to the Expert Consulting Agency, the number of Internet users reached 550,000 in 2005, suggesting Internet penetration of more than 10 percent.
5. International Telecommunication Union, *World Telecommunication Indicators 2006*.
6. Telecoms Markets and Statistics, 2006.
7. Ibid.
8. For more information see <http://www.domain.kg/>.
9. http://www.ict.gov.kg/index.php?name=EZCMS&menu=2501&page_id=71.
10. See National ICT Action Plan, http://www.ict.gov.kg/index.php?name=EZCMS&menu=37&page_id=96.
11. The government gate portal is www.govservices.kg.
12. These are: the Moia Strana Party, the Democratic Party Turan, and the Ar-Namys Party, whose previous leader is today's Prime Minister F. Koulov.
13. Paul Budde Communication Pty Ltd., Telecoms Markets and Statistics, 2006.
14. See OpenNet Initiative, Special Report: Kyrgyzstan Election Monitoring in Kyrgyzstan (February 2005), <http://www.opennetinitiative.net/special/kg/>.