

# Isolated Turkmenistan bows to Internet age

July 26 2013, by Anton Lomov

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When Turkmen mother Selbi Dzhafarova wanted to buy a toy car for her son's birthday, he burst into tears. "He asked us to buy him a computer instead," she said.

Her son Arslan's wish was hardly different from the wishes of young boys all over the world except that the nine-year-old lives in the hermit ex-Soviet state of Turkmenistan where Internet access for most private users was banned until just a few years ago.

"We had to do it," Dzhafarova told AFP while shopping at a market in the capital Ashgabat. Needing a computer "is already an everyday reality and not a child's whim", she said.

Turkmenistan, an energy-rich Central Asian nation bordering Afghanistan and Iran, was for two decades ruled by dictator Saparmurat Niyazov, best remembered for his bizarre personality cult complete with gold statues, his own philosophy book and deep suspicion of cyberspace.

Under Niyazov, who claimed that Western novelties were "foreign to the mentality of our people", only a handful of outlets like Western companies, several colleges and hotels were connected to the Internet.

After his death in 2007, the country has taken cautious steps to dismantle his legacy. The first two Internet cafes opened in Ashgabat two days after the inauguration of the new president, Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov.

Soon more cyber cafes opened, each adorned with a portrait of the new leader, while schools and universities started receiving computers.

On September 1, children starting primary school across the country are set to receive over 190,000 Lenovo netbook computers from the education ministry on the president's orders.

"Our experience of conducting classes with the use of digital assistants has shown a significant increase of our young citizens' interest in studies," Berdymukhamedov said in televised remarks.

But for all its purported readiness to embrace the digital age, the government is not planning to loosen its tight grip over the Internet any time soon.

Access is regulated by state firm TurkmenTelekom, which became a monopoly in 2000 when several independent providers lost their licences and the few Internet cafes in existence shut up shop.

Getting online is a pricey affair: the company charges nearly \$7,000 (5,300 euros) per month for unlimited Internet at a zippy 2,048 kilobytes per second.

By comparison, GDP per capita in Turkmenistan is estimated by the US Central Intelligence Agency's latest World Factbook to be \$8,900.

At the country's several dozen cyber cafes, visitors are required to show their passports to use the Internet. An hour-long session costs 6 manats (\$2.1).

Wifi is only available at the few expensive hotels that usually cater to foreigners.

## 'A ray of light in darkness'

Like in other authoritarian countries, the government in Turkmenistan controls the Internet to keep a lid on dissent.

Reporters without Borders' annual list of the "Enemies of the Internet" regularly features the country along with Iran, Syria and North Korea.

Websites of opposition groups and critical media outlets are banned while popular social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook are routinely blocked.

"At our university, computers are connected to the Internet but they are all located in one room and students browse the web under strict supervision from their teachers," said Aigul Yazkuliyeva, a 20-year-old student.

Passionate web surfer Dovran said that despite the government efforts to control access to cyberspace, there were ways to avoid censorship.

"Bans exist so that we can get around them," the 22-year-old told AFP with a smile.

"For me the Internet is like a ray of light in the darkness," said Dovran, who asked that his last name not be published.

"The speed may be low and the glitches constant, but I already cannot live without it."

In Turkmenistan, where the government controls nearly every bit of information, there is no confirmed data on the current number of Internet users.

According to estimates, several hundred thousand people have web access in the country of some 6 million. By contrast, no more than 5,000 people enjoyed that luxury under the late Niyazov.

Observers say that the government will not be able to resist the growing popularity of the Internet for much longer and expanding public web access will inevitably lead to a more open society.

"Having been given a candy, a man will want to eat it all and not just take a bite," a Western diplomat told AFP.

"You can see progress: a large number of private Internet users have appeared and stores are opening up selling computers, smartphones and iPads.

"I think it will lead to a more open society but for that to happen more decisive steps should be taken," the diplomat said on condition of anonymity.

Many pin their hopes on the plans to launch into orbit Turkmenistan's first space communications satellite in 2014.

An agreement to that effect was signed between the country's communications ministry and Franco-Italian company Thales Alenia Space in 2011.

"The existence of our own satellite will speed up the development of communication networks, television and Internet," said a communications ministry spokesman.

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Citation: Isolated Turkmenistan bows to Internet age (2013, July 26) retrieved 26 April 2024

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