



# Turkey's Digital Divides

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# Introduction and summary

Turkey is emblematic of the promise of the digital revolution that is now sweeping through similarly emerging middle-income democracies around the world. Yet its approach to expanding internet penetration is shaped by its own set of political and social conditions. Wider internet access and use could contribute to a more dynamic Turkish economy that is driven by greater online competition and entrepreneurship. Turkey could likewise provide more efficient, responsive government services to more of its citizens by harnessing information and telecommunications technologies. But the efforts to reap these rewards are hindered by wide disparities in internet access and online literacy, as well as by very different customs that divide men and women, the old and the young, and urban and rural citizens.

These divides are evident in the nation's digital disparities and have roots in the country's recent political history and social norms. At first glance, Turkey's rapid but uneven economic development over the past several decades—with all of the accompanying social fissures—is akin to the experiences of other developing nations such as Albania, Chile, or Brazil. And Turkey, like other emerging middle-income democracies, is grappling with the need to privatize the internet and communications industries, which are often powerful political players with deep ties to ruling parties and with little interest in fostering serious online competition.

But Turkey's challenge of providing more internet accessibility at more affordable prices—a key step to becoming a full-fledged developed democratic nation and a new member of the European Union—faces obstacles that are particular to Turkey's political economy. The ruling Justice and Development Party—more commonly referred to by its Turkish acronym, AKP—must calculate the political gains and losses of more widespread internet access, particularly for those conservative working-class rural voters who are the backbone of its political strength.<sup>1</sup>

In some ways, Turkey's digital divide is just fine with the AKP and its de facto leader, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, because it gives the government greater control of the information flowing to its most important constituencies. But in other ways, the government recognizes the costs and consequences of Turkey's

digital divide and is actively seeking to bridge the gaps. The question is whether the nation can achieve this transformation and broaden access to the internet and its associated benefits despite the likelihood that this process would loosen the governing authorities' control over online information that it wants to suppress.

Troublingly, Turkey's state influence over the internet and telecommunications sectors aligns in particular with its efforts to constrain the internet as a space for public access, information, and expression. The country's extensive internet censorship rules take both legal and extralegal forms, with the government relying sometimes on changes implemented through legitimate political channels and sometimes through the selective or delayed implementation of rules and court decisions. These rules limit the degree to which those with minimal or no access to the internet—many of them supporters of the ruling party—can access information. More encouragingly, however, some of Turkey's genuine efforts to boost other aspects of online accessibility and literacy could well lead to a more robust economy and, eventually, a more open and free internet, as is happening among similar economies around the world. This should be the goal of the Turkish government.

This report examines the costs and consequences of this digital divide in Turkey and explores the reasons for the current disparities, the efforts by the government to overcome some of the divisions, and the prospects for success in all of these efforts.

The report begins by detailing the disparities in internet access between Turkish men and women. These disparities are alarming for a high-middle income country that sets its European neighbors as its benchmark. The report details the reasons why Turkey has struggled to develop internet literacy and to deliver content relevant to a wider swath of its population and outlines the ripple effects of these challenges on rural adoption and e-government penetration and effectiveness. It also outlines the consequences of Turkey's failure to develop a healthy privatized market for the advancement of high-quality, low-cost internet and communications services.

The report closes with some recommendations for the Turkish government and its citizens to consider. In particular, the government should take the following measures:

- Expand e-government services to reduce the need for some in-person interactions with the state bureaucracy. This step could entice more individuals who are low-income and less tech-literate to find value in internet usage and improve the efficiency of key government services.

- Develop creative ways to diminish the effects of abiding cultural norms that hamper internet access for women. Public internet access points that are located outside of strict familial control in the home could afford women from conservative families the freedom and anonymity to explore and find useful content on the web.
- Study how other developing democracies are handling their own expansions of online business opportunities for small- and medium-sized businesses, as well as how they are handling access to information online while holding true to their recent democratic gains. Albania, Chile, and Brazil offer useful comparisons for the Turkish government.

These are not trivial goals for Turkey to pursue. Extensive investigations by the World Bank and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, or OECD, into the importance of widespread internet adoption and use among middle-income countries such as Turkey demonstrate the broad economic and political benefits that can accrue to more fully digitized countries.<sup>2</sup> For the nation to achieve its larger sociopolitical and socioeconomic goals, closing the digital divide is of paramount importance.

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