



TURKEY PROGRAMME

Digital Authoritarianism in Turkey:
The Erosion of Press Freedom and the Weaponization of Technology

Ezgi DARYUREK

*Master's Programme in Media and Migration Flows
National and Capodistrian University of Athens*



July 2026
Policy Paper #211/2026

Digital Authoritarianism in Turkey:

The Erosion of Press Freedom and the Weaponization of Technology

A Policy Analysis Following the March 2025 Saraçhane Protests

Copyright © 2026 | All Rights Reserved

HELLENIC FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN & FOREIGN POLICY (ELIAMEP)

49 Vasilissis Sofias Ave., 10676, Athens, Greece

Tel.: +30 210 7257 110 | Fax: +30 210 7257 114 | www.eliamep.gr | eliamep@eliamep.gr

ELIAMEP encourages open, pluralistic dialogue based on arguments and facts. The views expressed by associates of ELIAMEP are entirely their own and are not binding on the Institution.

Cover photo: *generated with the use of AI tools*

Ezgi DARYUREK

Master's Programme in Media and Migration Flows,
National and Capodistrian University of Athens

Summary

This policy report examines the systematic erosion of press freedom and digital rights in Turkey, focusing particularly on events following the arrest of Istanbul Metropolitan Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu on March 19, 2025. The Sarıyer protests that erupted in response revealed the full dimensions of the Turkish government's digital censorship apparatus: bandwidth throttling, mass social media account suspensions, and the systematic suppression of citizen journalism. Through an analysis of recent policy developments, legal frameworks, and the relationship between the Erdoğan regime and Big Tech companies, this report documents how authoritarian governments leverage digital platforms to silence dissent.

The analysis shows that with 90% of traditional media under government control, journalists have migrated to YouTube and social media platforms only to face expensive licensing requirements, threats of arrest, and platform-level censorship. The report argues that İmamoğlu's case represents a dangerous precedent: his social media accounts remain suspended, despite his legal case maintaining the presumption of innocence, which effectively prevents him from campaigning as a presidential candidate. This systematic destruction of information infrastructure has implications not only for Turkey, but for democratic movements worldwide.

Table of contents

Summary	3
Introduction: The Crisis of Democratic Expression in Turkey	6
The Events of March 19, 2025	6
The Arrest of Ekrem İmamoğlu	6
The Spread of Protests	7
Bandwidth Throttling: The Infrastructure of Digital Censorship	7
Technical and Legal Framework	7
The Political Logic of Throttling	7
Big Tech and Authoritarian Regimes: The Case of Elon Musk	8
Freedom of Speech on X	8
The Suspension of İmamoğlu's Accounts	8
Meta's Strategic Resistance	8
What Determines Compliance: The Political Economy of Platform Censorship	8
The Criminalization of Journalism and Citizen Reporting	9
The Collapse of Independent Media	9
Forced Migration to YouTube	10
Twitter and the Disinformation Law	11
Citizen Journalism	13
The İmamoğlu Precedent: Silencing an Opposition Candidate	15
Censorship Violating the Presumption of Innocence	15
The Resistance Against Censorship and Platform Limitations	15
The Extension of Digital Repression to Opposition Party Infrastructure	15
Google Delisting: The Silent Erasure of Information	17
Delisting as a Censorship Tool	17
Google's Compliance Pattern	17
The Difference Between Formal and Shadow Censorship	17
Targeting the Documentarians	18
Systematic Account Suspensions: Pattern and Practice	18
The Scope of Suspensions	18
Journalist and Media Suspensions	18
Content-Based Targeting	19

The Two-Tiered Information System	19
The Absence of Due Process	19
Civil Society Response: The Open Letter to Tech Companies	20
Background and Context	20
The Market Power Argument.....	21
International Law Obligations	21
Conclusion and Policy Recommendations.....	21
Summary of Findings	21
Comparative Perspective: Turkey Within a Global Pattern	22
Policy Recommendations.....	22

Introduction: The Crisis of Democratic Expression in Turkey

The On March 19, 2025, Turkey's years-long democratic backsliding culminated in an event that could be interpreted as the irreversible suspension of democracy. Istanbul Metropolitan Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu, widely viewed as President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's most formidable political rival, was arrested on charges related to corruption and terrorism investigations. Citizens gathering in front of the municipality building faced harsh police intervention, with protests lasting for days and spreading rapidly beyond the municipality and the Sarıyer district to other Turkish cities.

On social media, anti-government posts and, for the first time in years, calls to boycott pro-government media outlets, were transformed into a nationwide civil disobedience movement. While government-aligned media outlets ran propaganda about İmamoğlu's arrest, they censored and completely ignored the public reaction. In response, CHP Chairman Özgür Özel issued a call for boycotts across various sectors, including mobile phone operators, automotive companies, and food, clothing and coffee chains. The call received massive support on social media, uniting Generation Z and retirees behind a single purpose and rapidly spreading online as boycott lists were compiled. The "boykotyap.com" site was launched in the wake of the call, but access was blocked two days later. Subsequently, "boykotyap.net" was blocked on April 2, while "boykotyap.org", which launched on the same day, was also banned.

The government's response was swift and multifaceted: mass arrests, police violence and pressure, and an unprecedented digital censorship campaign that revealed the entire arsenal of tools available to modern authoritarian regimes.

Istanbul's Sarıyer district became the epicenter of protests as citizens gathered to defend their democratically-elected mayor. The government's digital response was instantaneous. Bandwidth throttling was implemented throughout Istanbul for 42 hours, severely restricting access to social media platforms and messaging applications for more than 15 million people in Istanbul and surrounding areas. This technical measure, combined with court orders for the suspension of hundreds of social media accounts, constituted a turning point in Turkey's approach to information control.

The Events of March 19, 2025

The Arrest of Ekrem İmamoğlu

Ekrem İmamoğlu's arrest must be evaluated within the broader context of Turkey's authoritarian regime. İmamoğlu became Istanbul's mayor in 2019. A crucial detail not to be overlooked is that Erdoğan also served as Istanbul's mayor before governing Turkey. İmamoğlu ended the AKP's 25-year control over Turkey's largest city and its substantial municipal budget. His victory was initially annulled after he was accused of election manipulation, but he won the rerun election by an even larger margin.

After being detained at dawn on March 19, he was arrested, interrogated, imprisoned, and removed from the mayorship within four days. These events unfolded after İmamoğlu announced his candidacy for the

Digital Authoritarianism in Turkey: The Erosion of Press Freedom and the Weaponization of Technology

2028 presidential elections, culminating in his being officially declared a candidate through primaries—in which more than 15 million people participated—shortly after he was taken into custody.

The Spread of Protests

Within hours, hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets. By March 24, police had detained more than 1,133 individuals, and by April 17, 819 people were under investigation. Journalists constituted a significant portion of those detained, who included AFP's Yasin Akgül and World Press Photo winner Bülent Kılıç. On March 24, 11 journalists were arrested in dawn raids. BBC correspondent Mark Lowen was taken from his hotel, held for 17 hours, then deported. The trial of 139 people accused of participating in the Sarayhan protests has been ongoing since December 2025, having been postponed due to missing expert reports. The government utilized both the police force and its technological authority to prevent citizens from organizing through social media.

Bandwidth Throttling: The Infrastructure of Digital Censorship

Technical and Legal Framework

Bandwidth throttling is one of the most powerful yet least visible tools in Turkey's censorship arsenal. It significantly slows internet access to specific platforms without officially blocking them, providing the government with plausible deniability while achieving a less reactive form of censorship. The legal basis of the practice stems from Law No. 5651, which grants the Information and Communication Technologies Authority (BTK) broad powers to restrict internet access for national security or public order reasons. The deliberate vagueness of these terms provides the government with almost unlimited discretion.

When the BTK imposed restrictions in Istanbul on March 19, neither the government nor the affected companies issued statements, thereby creating an atmosphere of uncertainty. For 42 hours, more than 15 million Istanbul residents experienced severely restricted access to YouTube, Instagram, X (formerly Twitter), TikTok, WhatsApp, Telegram, and Signal. Users reported that photos and videos could not be sent or received via messaging platforms, video and voice calls were nearly impossible to make, and feeds on Instagram, X, YouTube, and TikTok failed to load.

The Political Logic of Throttling

The government's preference for throttling rather than complete blocking reveals a sophisticated understanding of digital-age authoritarianism. Complete blocks attract international attention and may provoke a severe backlash from citizens. Throttling achieves similarly effective censorship, while maintaining the illusion of access. Users experience frustration rather than outrage, perceiving technical problems rather than overt political oppression.

This ambiguity works in favor of the government, as it blurs the line between political intervention and technical malfunction. Even when citizens sense deliberate interference, mobilizing a protest becomes challenging when disruptions can be attributed to infrastructure problems or framed as individual device-related issues.

Big Tech and Authoritarian Regimes: The Case of Elon Musk

Freedom of Speech on X

Elon Musk purchased Twitter with a commitment to make it a bastion of free speech. However, when faced with Turkish government demands, X complied extensively. Between March 19 and April 12, access to at least 471 X accounts was blocked in Turkey, affecting a total of 17.2 million followers. Targeted accounts ranged from journalists with 1.2 million followers to grassroots organizations with fewer than 10.

At least 57 of the suspended accounts belonged to university activist groups sharing protest information (with 1.2 million followers in total). Another 22 belonged to women's rights organizations, including the *We Will Stop Femicides* platform (181,000 followers). This indiscriminate purge demonstrates a clear goal: to have a chilling effect on all digital activists and content creators, regardless of their reach.

The Suspension of İmamoğlu's Accounts

The most controversial instance of compliance came on April 24, when X blocked İmamoğlu's Turkish account (9.7 million followers). On May 8, his English-language account was also blocked. In both cases, X announced an intention to challenge the orders, but actually complied with the government's requests immediately. This constitutes performative resistance, designed to preserve the platform's reputation without risking actual conflict with the state.

Meta's Strategic Resistance

Meta has demonstrated comparatively more resistance than X. However, in April 2025, Meta published a case study summarizing its responses to hundreds of BTK demands. While Meta restricted access to content containing government criticism or involving LGBTQ+ communities, feminist organizations, and controversial figures, it explicitly stated that it took no action on multiple court orders to block protest-related content. This resistance came at a significant cost: Politico reported that Meta faced substantial fines as a result. Transparency reports reveal the high rates of platform compliance with Turkish government demands: TikTok complies to 91.8% of demands, X to 85.66%, Instagram to 79.15%, Google to 77.5%, and Facebook to 42%.

What Determines Compliance: The Political Economy of Platform Censorship

The divergent responses of major technology companies to censorship demands made by the Turkish government raise a question that transparency reports alone cannot answer: what actually determines whether a company complies or resists? The answer depends less on legal obligation than on a set of intersecting commercial, structural, and reputational calculations that vary across companies and contexts.

The most immediate structural factor is the local representation requirement Turkey introduced through the 2020 and 2022 amendments to Law No. 5651. Platforms with more than one million daily users from Turkey are required to appoint a local representative registered with the BTK. Though seemingly purely

Digital Authoritarianism in Turkey: The Erosion of Press Freedom and the Weaponization of Technology

administrative, this requirement carries enormous coercive weight: once a company has a legal presence on Turkish soil, its personnel and assets come under Turkish jurisdiction, fundamentally altering the risk calculus of non-compliance. As IFEX and İFÖD have documented, the local entities established by X, Meta, YouTube, and TikTok in Turkey largely function as shell companies managed by legal entities based abroad, yet even a nominal local presence creates enough legal exposure to discipline corporate behavior. The escalating sanctions structure reinforces this: non-compliant platforms face advertising bans and bandwidth reductions that can effectively destroy their commercial viability in the market. The threat alone is often sufficient to ensure compliance.

Market size is the second decisive variable. Turkey's social media penetration rate of 85.5 percent of adults, combined with a young and highly active user base, makes it a commercially significant market that major platforms are reluctant to abandon. This places its government in a position to exert sustained, high-volume pressure on companies with substantial Turkish user bases. It therefore comes as no surprise that ITIF's analysis of Turkey's content moderation regime found that Turkey ranks among the world's top requestors for platform content removal. Clearly, the larger the market, the stronger the incentive to absorb the political costs of compliance rather than risk exclusion.

The third factor is what MERIP has called the "isolation and pressure" strategy: the Turkish government has deliberately avoided confronting all platforms simultaneously, singling out individual companies instead and applying escalating pressure until compliance is achieved. This approach prevents platforms from coordinating resistance and creates a dynamic where each company calculates its response in isolation, typically concluding that accommodation is preferable to exclusion. X's compliance rate of 85.66 percent in the second half of 2024 reflects this dynamic: despite Elon Musk's stated commitment to absolute free speech, the platform's behavior in Turkey has been shaped by market access calculations rather than editorial principle.

Meta's partial resistance is instructive in that it demonstrates that refusal is commercially survivable. The company absorbed substantial fines for declining to comply with multiple court orders targeting protest-related content, but continued operating in Turkey. This suggests that the compliance gap between platforms reflects not legal necessity but differing assessments of reputational risk, regulatory exposure in other jurisdictions—particularly in the context of the European Union's Digital Services Act framework—and internal governance norms. A company deeply embedded in EU regulatory conversations has stronger institutional incentives to resist authoritarian compliance demands than one whose primary accountability structure lies elsewhere. What appears to be a principled distinction between companies is, in significant part, a structural one: the political economy of each company's global regulatory position shapes its appetite for resistance in any given national market.

The Criminalization of Journalism and Citizen Reporting

The Collapse of Independent Media

According to Reporters Without Borders, the Turkish government now controls approximately 90% of the media. Old or new, every mainstream outlet operates within a media environment that is closely aligned with government interests. This transformation has not occurred spontaneously, but rather through a sustained combination of financial pressure, regulatory intervention, and selective legal action. Over time,

Digital Authoritarianism in Turkey: The Erosion of Press Freedom and the Weaponization of Technology

these mechanisms have reshaped ownership structures and editorial lines, significantly narrowing the space for independent journalism.

Opposition-oriented media outlets operate under severe and persistent financial constraints. These include disproportionate tax audits, high regulatory fines, and systematic exclusion from public and private advertising markets. In practice, many private companies refrain from advertising in opposition media due to concerns about political and economic retaliation, further undermining the financial sustainability of outlets critical of the government.

When financial pressure alone proves insufficient, regulatory authorities are able to intervene directly. Broadcast suspensions and license-related sanctions have become increasingly common tools in this regard. In March 2025, for example, the Radio and Television Supreme Council (RTÜK) imposed a ten-day broadcast suspension on Sözcü TV, alleging that it was inciting hatred through its news coverage. The broad and ambiguous nature of such justifications allows similar sanctions to be applied to a wide range of critical content, a practice that has been repeatedly weaponized against multiple television channels.

Forced Migration to YouTube

As traditional media outlets became economically and politically unsustainable, many journalists shifted their work to digital platforms, most notably YouTube. This transition initially created alternative spaces for news production and public debate that were beyond direct government control. Independent journalists were able to reach large audiences without the institutional constraints imposed on television and print media. For instance, the journalist Fatih Altaylı rapidly built a subscriber base in excess of 1.5 million, significantly outperforming many pro-government broadcasters operating within the traditional media system.

However, this relative autonomy proved temporary. In September 2024, the Radio and Television Supreme Council (RTÜK) announced that YouTube channels producing news-related content would be required to obtain official broadcasting licenses. These licenses are identical to those imposed on traditional television channels and involve substantial financial and administrative costs. Through this regulatory expansion, digital journalism was effectively brought within the same supervisory framework as broadcast media, extending RTÜK's authority into online spaces.

In March 2025, this policy was enforced more directly, when RTÜK issued warnings to Altaylı, signaling a similar threat to other popular channels such as Cüneyt Özdemir (1.63 million subscribers), Fatih Portakal (780,000), and Nevşin Mengü (713,000). The agency threatened channel closures if broadcasters failed to comply with licensing requirements. In practice, this regulatory framework leaves digital journalists with a limited set of options: submitting to costly licensing schemes, discontinuing their work, or continuing to operate without authorization under the risk of legal sanctions. Maintaining journalistic activity under these conditions is largely unsustainable, as obtaining licenses subjects their content to ongoing monitoring by the RTÜK council.

According to the Media and Law Studies Association (MLSA), this move is part of a broader effort by Turkish authorities to extend their control to digital platforms, and has severe implications for press

Digital Authoritarianism in Turkey: The Erosion of Press Freedom and the Weaponization of Technology

freedom and independent journalism in the country. Subsequently, an Istanbul court blocked Altaylı's YouTube channel, citing the need to "protect national security and public order" and "prevent crimes".

The case of Fatih Altaylı encapsulates with particular clarity the trajectory of digital journalism under Turkey's authoritarian censorship regime. Altaylı was arrested on June 22, 2025, following the publication of a YouTube video in which he commented on a poll showing 70 percent opposition to Erdoğan holding on to power indefinitely; he was sentenced to four years and two months in prison for "threatening the President." After six months in detention, Altaylı was released and returned to YouTube. In his first broadcast, he stated that he intended going forward to avoid political commentary and confirmed that no conditional deal had been offered for his release.

Following the court-ordered absolute nullity ruling against the CHP leadership in May 2026—one of the most significant developments in Turkish politics—Altaylı returned to explicit political commentary, publishing a YouTube video directly analyzing the CHP court decision, its implications for opposition party leader Özgür Özel, and the prospects of early elections. His trajectory—arrest, imprisonment, release, a declared withdrawal from politics, followed by a rapid return to political commentary when events demanded it—illustrates both the deterrent power and the structural limits of journalist prosecution as a censorship tool. It also demonstrates the degree to which YouTube has become an irreplaceable space for political discourse in Turkey.

Twitter and the Disinformation Law

Turkey's 2022 disinformation law provides for one to three years imprisonment for spreading false information about internal security, public order, and state welfare. Within two years, approximately 1,500 legal proceedings had been initiated under the legislation, including 66 cases against journalists. The vague wording of the law gives prosecutors enormous discretion to characterize journalistic critiques as illegal disinformation.

Journalists who had turned to Twitter as both a newsgathering tool and a publishing platform were left highly vulnerable to platform censorship and state prosecution. For example, the journalist Metin Cihan's account was blocked in Turkey because he had been sharing reports about Turkish companies continuing trade with Israel, despite the official trade ban imposed on Israel due to the ongoing genocide being perpetrated against the Palestinians.

In a message also shared on X, Cihan stated: "There is no court ruling against me. This decision has no legal basis. The government requested it, and X complied. Censorship operates this simply."

As documented in the Freedom of Expression Association's report, hundreds of accounts were blocked in a single day during the protests, regardless of their follower count. Following the detention of Istanbul Metropolitan Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu, over 40 youth organization X accounts sharing information and content about student actions were blocked under Article 8/A of Law No. 5651, with national security and public order protection cited.

The table below details some of the most prominent accounts affected during this sweep.

Digital Authoritarianism in Turkey: The Erosion of Press Freedom and the Weaponization of Technology**Table 1: Selected Blocked Youth Organization Accounts**

Account Name	Account Description	Follower Count
kolektifler	Student Collectives	116,593
solgençbilgi	SOL Youth	55,256
feministkolektf	University Feminist Collective	54,150
tipliogrenciler	Turkish Workers' Party Students	50,501
gnclikdevirecek	Youth Will Overthrow	35,593
KampusCadilari	Campus Witches	34,957
OdtuSavunulmali	METU Must Be Defended	31,144
nocontextytu	Yıldız Technical University Agenda	24,952
ogrencifaaliyeti	Student Activity	20,949
komiteler	Youth Committees	17,643
odtumedya	METU Media Community	14,477
iuogrencidynsma	Istanbul University Student Solidarity	13,846
gencfeministfed	Young Feminists Federation	12,680
tkglise	Turkish Communist Party High School Organizations	10,470
doganncocuklari	Youth's Anti-capitalist Ecology Community	10,197

Source: <https://ifade.org.tr/engelliweb/genclik-orgutlerinin-x-hesaplari-erisime-engellendi/>

In addition to these youth organizations, following the detention of Istanbul Metropolitan Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu, numerous X accounts sharing information and criticism about the events were also blocked under Article 8/A of Law No. 5651, once again on national security and public order grounds.

The table below details the most prominent of these non-Youth Organization accounts.

Table 2: Selected Other Blocked Accounts

Account Name	Account Description	Follower Count
eacarar	Erk Acarer	1,235,275
bianet_org	Bianet – Independent Communication Network	365,083
umberto_eco_	-	324,453
velisacilik	Veli Saçılık	309,016

Digital Authoritarianism in Turkey: The Erosion of Press Freedom and the Weaponization of Technology

Account Name	Account Description	Follower Count
kadincinayeti	We Will Stop Femicides Platform	181,341
baskentpalasi	-	175,343
DavaAdamiHaluk	-	174,623
yukselhos	-	170,106
sonat_isik	-	152,361
ulkucubaskent	-	152,297
bloklandik	-	148,833
Halkevleri	People's Houses	128,769
distastemoment	-	119,477
bandana0061	-	110,993
tengrimiz	-	105,780
cadayinho	-	99,796
BSMKolektif	Independent Cinema Center Workers	94,157
TurkSavun	-	87,277
chdgenelmerkez	Contemporary Lawyers Association	87,252

Source: <https://ifade.org.tr/engelliweb/sokak-eylemleriyle-ilgili-bilgi-ve-icerik-paylasan-x-hesaplari-erisime-engellendi/>

Citizen Journalism

The systematic erosion of professional journalism in Turkey has directly contributed to the rise of citizen journalism—a phenomenon rooted in the structural failure of mainstream media rather than an organic cultural shift. Its origins can be traced to the 2013 Gezi Park protests, the defining moment at which social media displaced traditional outlets as the primary source of political information for millions of Turkish citizens. While police forces were violently dispersing protesters, several mainstream television channels broadcast a penguin documentary, an episode that led to the compliant mainstream being dubbed the "penguin media in the public discourse." This became a symbol of institutional self-censorship so complete that it rendered the press irrelevant at the precise moment Turkey's citizens needed it most. As mainstream channels looked away, ordinary citizens filled the information vacuum, documenting police brutality, coordinating safe zones, directing people to medical assistance, and disseminating real-time updates through Twitter, Facebook, and emerging platforms. Academic research on the Gezi period documents a sharp and sustained acceleration in political social media use. In the first two days of the protests alone, at least two million tweets featuring protest-related hashtags were sent, while the number of Turkish Twitter users soared from 1.8 million to 9.5 million in just two weeks. Citizen journalism in Turkey was not a spontaneous cultural development; it was a structural response to the institutional failure of a media environment controlled by interests aligned with the political establishment.

Digital Authoritarianism in Turkey: The Erosion of Press Freedom and the Weaponization of Technology

What Gezi inaugurated, a decade of intensifying media suppression has since consolidated. Professional newsrooms have been hollowed out by financial strangulation, RTÜK sanctions, tax inspections, and the ever-present threat of criminal prosecution. As a result, the production of independent political information has migrated to individual citizens publishing from their own accounts. Unable to find institutional platforms and unwilling to self-censor despite the legal risk, journalists and non-journalists alike have turned to live-streaming, first-person reporting, and social commentary via personal social media profiles. This migration has been enabled and amplified by Turkey's markedly young and digitally connected population. According to DataReportal's Digital 2025 report, 85.5 percent of Turkey's adult population uses social media, while Eurostat data confirms that among those aged 16 to 24, social networking is near universal. Turkey's median age of 33.5 years, combined with those exceptionally high youth digital engagement rates, has produced a citizen journalism ecosystem whose scale and political significance is, as the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism has noted, without close parallels in comparable political environments. The phenomenon is at once a consequence of authoritarian media capture and a form of democratic resilience in the face of this capture; it deserves systematic research in its own right, which extends well beyond the scope of the present analysis.

More than a decade after Gezi, citizen journalism remains a permanent and structural component of Turkey's information ecosystem. During the March 2025 protests, citizen journalists played a critical role in documenting police violence, disseminating real-time information, and coordinating protest logistics through digital platforms. Their activities filled an information vacuum left by traditional media outlets that were either unable or unwilling to report on unfolding events. This expansion has, however, been met with increasing state surveillance and repression. The 471 X accounts blocked during the March 2025 protests included a number of ordinary citizens with no professional journalistic affiliation, whose activities were limited to documenting events and sharing information. Digital platforms play an ambiguous role in this context. It has been reported that Twitter in particular has provided user data to Turkish authorities under conditions that lack transparency and clear legal safeguards. This cooperation blurs the boundary between platform governance and state surveillance, further exposing citizen journalists to legal risk.

The criminalization of social media commentary has extended this enforcement well beyond those who identify as journalists. In the immediate aftermath of İmamoğlu's arrest, Turkish authorities detained 37 people specifically for posts they had made on social media about the arrest, before mass street protests had even materialized. Following the CHP Istanbul trustee controversy, Istanbul's governor issued meeting and demonstration bans across six districts, and authorities issued detention orders against 24 social media users accused of making "provocative posts inciting people to take to the streets"—a formulation that effectively criminalizes the act of sharing political information online. Individuals prosecuted for social media posts about the trustee appointment faced charges of "publicly inciting crime," demonstrating that the legal arsenal developed initially to suppress protest journalism is now routinely deployed against ordinary citizens engaged in political commentary.

Perhaps the most revealing illustration of this dynamic is the prosecution of individuals who shared boycott calls on social media. On April 3, 2025, the Istanbul Chief Public Prosecutor's Office issued arrest warrants for 16 people and detained 11 over social media posts promoting a one-day shopping boycott in solidarity with İmamoğlu. Among those detained was actor Cem Yiğit Üzümoğlu, known for his role in a Netflix historical series. The charges of "inciting hatred and discrimination" and "obstructing economic activity" were brought against people whose only identifiable act was sharing a boycott message online.

Digital Authoritarianism in Turkey: The Erosion of Press Freedom and the Weaponization of Technology

By July 2025, no fewer than 21 individuals faced indictment and potential sentences of up to seven and a half years. Turkey's state broadcaster TRT simultaneously fired several actors who expressed solidarity with the boycott on social media and axed an entire television series after its screenwriter publicly declared support for the protesters. The prosecution of a boycott call—a form of expression protected under international human rights standards—as a criminal act of economic sabotage illustrates the degree to which Turkey's digital repression has expanded beyond the journalist class to encompass any online expression deemed inconvenient to political power.

This expansion of enforcement targets confirms a structural shift. Turkey's digital repression apparatus is no longer calibrated primarily against professional or even semi-professional journalists, but against the entire informational ecosystem of the political opposition. The effect is a progressive privatization of the public sphere. Ordinary citizens self-censor, not because they have been individually targeted, but because the conditions of prosecution have become sufficiently unpredictable to render any political social media activity potentially risky.

The İmamoğlu Precedent: Silencing an Opposition Candidate

Censorship Violating the Presumption of Innocence

İmamoğlu's case represents one of the most alarming developments in Turkey's current political landscape: the effective silencing of a leading opposition figure who legally retains the presumption of innocence. Nonetheless, his political voice has been systematically eradicated through the suspension of his social media accounts. Both his Turkish X account, with approximately 9.7 million followers, and his English-language account were suspended on national security and public order grounds—broad and vague legal categories that impose no clear limits on executive power. Notably, on the very day of his detention, İmamoğlu was announced as the Republican People's Party's (CHP) presidential candidate, rendering him simultaneously the country's most prominent opposition contender and a political actor effectively prevented from campaigning.

The Resistance Against Censorship and Platform Limitations

İmamoğlu's communication team attempted workarounds by creating alternative accounts on X; however, these were identified and suspended in short order. Even accounts that temporarily escaped detection faced a structural disadvantage: each new account begins with zero followers and low algorithmic visibility, making it significantly harder to rebuild an audience of the magnitude the original accounts had cultivated over years, which numbered in the millions. The government can block accounts faster than new ones can gain traction, and the constant need to start over consumes resources that should be devoted to political work. The situation requires intervention from international authorities, which could constrain Turkey's digital censorship through diplomatic pressure.

The Extension of Digital Repression to Opposition Party Infrastructure

The digital authoritarian architecture documented in this report has not remained static; it has deepened and extended into new political terrain. A court-appointed trustee (kayyum) was installed at İstanbul's

Digital Authoritarianism in Turkey: The Erosion of Press Freedom and the Weaponization of Technology

CHP provincial headquarters in September 2025. The appointment of trustee Gürsel Tekin coincided with a police siege of CHP Istanbul headquarters, with a fresh round of bandwidth throttling major social media platforms. NetBlocks confirmed that restrictions on X, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, WhatsApp, Telegram, and Signal began at 23:45 on September 7, 2025, and lasted 21 hours.

In May 2026, perhaps the most striking illustration of this trajectory was the judicial intervention made against the Republican People's Party (CHP), Turkey's main opposition. On May 21, 2026, the 36th Civil Chamber of the Ankara Regional Court of Appeal issued an "absolute nullity" (mutlak butlan) ruling against the CHP's 38th Ordinary Congress held in November 2023, at which Özgür Özel had defeated Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu to become party leader. The ruling retroactively voided not only that congress, but all subsequent congresses and every decision taken under the Özel-era leadership, effectively reinstating Kılıçdaroğlu, who had been democratically defeated as party chairman. Freedom House's 2026 report notes that Turkey's democratic freedoms have deteriorated so severely that it now ranks alongside Middle Eastern states such as Iraq on key indicators. A particularly significant long-term consequence of the ruling is that the CHP's nomination of İmamoğlu as its 2028 presidential candidate could also be voided, as it was made under the Özel-era congresses. This occurs in a context in which opinion polls from April 2026 showed İmamoğlu leading Erdoğan 55 to 45 percent in a hypothetical run-off.

After the court decision, on May 24, Turkish police entered the CHP's main offices, firing tear gas and rubber bullets to evict the ousted leadership. The EU Parliament's rapporteur on Turkey described the situation as "a blueprint of a fully authoritarian system." On May 23, authorities detained 13 people in connection with a criminal investigation into the congress itself, signaling that the government was treating the 2023 congress not merely as an administrative irregularity, but as a matter for prosecutors.

The digital dimension of this party-level intervention is particularly significant, and resistance to it proved structurally impossible within Turkey's existing censorship architecture. Following the absolute nullity ruling, CHP provincial headquarters' social media accounts were systematically seized across the country; Ankara, Antalya, Bolu, and eventually Istanbul's provincial branches all reported losing control of their official accounts. CHP Istanbul's official Facebook page was taken over without the knowledge of the elected leadership, who publicly announced that any content subsequently posted from that account would have no institutional validity. Citizens who attempted to document or protest these developments online faced immediate legal consequences: twenty individuals, including journalist Fatoş Erdoğan, faced criminal prosecution for social media posts related to the trustee appointment, charged with "publicly inciting crime." The pattern is by now well-established: account seizures, geolocated invisibility, and the threat of prosecution form a mutually reinforcing system in which no communication channel remains safe for opposition voices. Organizing resistance to judicial coups through digital platforms becomes impossible when those platforms are simultaneously being seized, throttled, and monitored for prosecutable content.

The CHP case demonstrates that Turkey's digital censorship apparatus has evolved from reactive suppression of protest content to proactive capture of opposition communication infrastructure—a development with profound implications for the functioning of democratic competition, and one that the international community has so far failed to meaningfully address.

Google Delisting: The Silent Erasure of Information

Delisting as a Censorship Tool

Beyond platform-level account suspensions, Turkey's digital censorship apparatus has developed another insidious tool: Google delisting. This practice involves the removal of specific content from Google Search results without formally blocking access to the underlying websites. When implemented systematically, delisting serves as a form of invisible censorship: content remains technically accessible but becomes practically undiscoverable for the majority of users, who rely on search engines to navigate the internet.

The Freedom of Expression Association's report "Digital Obedience Regime: Social Media Platforms and the Illusion of Transparency in Türkiye" documents how Google's delisting notifications have become a concrete instrument of censorship. The content of numerous websites, particularly news outlets, is frequently removed from Google Search results. However, these notifications do not reference any court decisions, nor do they explain which local law serves as the legal basis for removal.

Google's Compliance Pattern

Google's notifications to website administrators typically state: "Due to a request under Turkish local law, Google can no longer show one or more pages from your site in Google Search results. (...) Due to legal reasons, we are unable to share with you the details of the legal request received by Google." This formulaic response includes no judicial oversight, cites no court decision, specifies no legal basis, and offers no appeals mechanism for affected parties. The process operates entirely outside formal legal procedures.

Between August 2024 and January 2026, Google sent 37 delisting notifications relating to access-blocking announcements published on ifade.org.tr in the context of the Freedom of Expression Association's EngelliWeb project—a platform dedicated to documenting and tracking digital censorship in Turkey.

The Difference Between Formal and Shadow Censorship

When formal court decisions exist regarding online content, the Information and Communication Technologies Authority (BTK) or the Association of Access Providers (ESB) officially communicates these decisions to website administrators. However, none of the content mentioned in Google's delisting notifications to the Freedom of Expression Association involved any such official access-blocking or takedown decision.

This reveals that Google is implementing delisting on its own initiative, functioning as a private enforcement mechanism for government censorship outside formal judicial processes. The company acts as judge, jury, and executioner, making content determinations without transparency, accountability, or due process.

Targeting the Documentarians

Particularly disturbing is the systematic delisting of the Freedom of Expression Association's own documentation of censorship. By targeting the organization's EngelliWeb project, which exists specifically to track and publicize government censorship, the Turkish government—with Google's cooperation—is attempting to erase evidence of its own censorship activities. This represents meta-censorship: the censorship of censorship documentation.

The implications are profound: if human rights organizations documenting censorship can have their work invisibly removed from search results, the public record of government repression becomes systematically incomplete. Future researchers, journalists, and citizens attempting to understand the scope of digital authoritarianism in Turkey will find crucial evidence missing, not because it doesn't exist, but because it has been deliberately hidden from view.

Systematic Account Suspensions: Pattern and Practice

The Scope of Suspensions

The account suspension campaign following the March 2025 protests represents the most comprehensive assault on digital speech in Turkish history. The 471 suspended X accounts, affecting 17.2 million total followers, encompass several distinct categories, each revealing different aspects of the government's information control strategy.

Journalist and Media Suspensions

Individual journalist accounts faced systematic targeting. Several high-profile cases illustrate the pattern:

Murat Ongun: The former Chairman of the Board of Directors of Medya A.Ş., arrested in connection with the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality investigation, saw his X account (@Mrt_Ongun) with 874,000 followers blocked on January 2, 2026, under Article 8/A of Law No. 5651, citing national security and public order protection. Ongun's communication team changed his username twice @Mrt_Ogunn and then @Mrt_Ogunnn, before X made the account invisible from Turkey on January 7, 2026.

dusun-think.net

Furkan Karabay: This journalist has faced repeated account suspensions, demonstrating the government's whack-a-mole approach to silencing critics. His accounts were blocked:

May 16, 2025: @FurkannKarabay

Stockholm Center for Freedom

May 26, 2025: @frkarabay

Digital Authoritarianism in Turkey: The Erosion of Press Freedom and the Weaponization of Technology

Expression Interrupted

December 29, 2025: @frknkarabay

Stockholm Center for Freedom

Each time, the account was blocked under Article 8/A, with X complying and making the accounts invisible from Turkey. The pattern reveals the futility of creating new accounts. The government can identify and block replacement accounts faster than journalists can rebuild their audiences.

Stockholm Center for Freedom

Content-Based Targeting

Perhaps the most revealing suspensions target accounts based purely on content. The case of Serdar Akinan is instructive: The journalist's X account, posts, and YouTube channel were all blocked following coverage of Deputy Minister of Culture and Tourism Batuhan Mumcu and his wife Neslihan Mumcu's alleged financial irregularities. The Istanbul 4th Criminal Court of Peace's decision on December 18, 2025 (case no. 2025/13668) ordered the blocking and deletion of 177 pieces of content about the couple and Lydia Investment Holding, in which Neslihan Mumcu is a partner. The decision targeted the news articles which mentioned them by name. Thus, Serdar Akinan's posts, X account, and YouTube channel were blocked (with the X account made invisible from Turkey). This case reveals how courts can weaponize vague "national security" justifications to suppress reporting on corruption and financial irregularities involving government officials.

The Two-Tiered Information System

These suspensions create a bifurcated information ecosystem. Content that remains visible to international audiences disappears for Turkish users. A journalist in Berlin can see İmamoğlu's tweets; a citizen in Istanbul cannot. A researcher in Washington can access Metin Cihan's reporting on Turkey-Israel trade; a resident of Ankara is presented with a blocked account.

This geographic censorship serves multiple government interests:

It limits international awareness of the extent of domestic censorship.

It prevents domestic organizing around censored information.

It maintains plausible deniability (accounts technically still exist, just not for Turkish users).

The Absence of Due Process

Across all these suspensions, several patterns emerge that violate basic principles of due process and free expression:

Digital Authoritarianism in Turkey: The Erosion of Press Freedom and the Weaponization of Technology

Vague Legal Standards: Article 8/A's invocation of "national security and public order protection" provides no meaningful indication on what speech is prohibited. These terms can be stretched to cover virtually any criticism of the government.

No Judicial Review: While courts issue the initial blocking orders, no meaningful appeals process exists. Accounts remain blocked indefinitely without review.

Platform Complicity: X and other platforms comply immediately with blocking requests, implementing technical measures to make accounts invisible from Turkey without substantive review of whether the orders meet international human rights standards.

Collective Punishment: Blocking entire accounts rather than specific posts punishes all speech by an account based on single pieces of content, effectively imposing a comprehensive gag order.

Civil Society Response: The Open Letter to Tech Companies

Background and Context

In May 2025, recognizing the escalating assault on digital rights, the Freedom of Expression Association (İFÖD) coordinated with international civil society organizations to issue a comprehensive open letter to social media companies operating in Turkey. The letter makes several critical demands:

Transparency in Compliance: Tech companies must publicly disclose all government content restriction requests they receive, including the legal basis cited, the content targeted, and their decision to comply or refuse. Current transparency reports provide aggregate statistics, but conceal the details necessary for public accountability.

Human Rights Impact Assessments: Before complying with government censorship demands, platforms should conduct and publish human rights impact assessments examining whether compliance would violate international human rights standards, particularly regarding political speech and journalism.

Meaningful Review Processes: Companies must establish substantive internal review processes that evaluate whether government requests meet legitimate legal standards, rather than automatically complying with orders that invoke vague national security justifications.

Public Interest Exceptions: Content related to political figures, public officials, matters of public debate, and journalistic reporting should receive heightened protection, with companies presumptively refusing censorship requests unless the government demonstrates specific, individualized harm.

Appeals Mechanisms: Affected users must have access to meaningful appeals processes with timely review and the possibility of restoration, along with clear communication about why their content was restricted.

The Market Power Argument

The open letter makes a crucial economic argument: tech companies operating in Turkey have significant market leverage which they choose not to use. Unlike smaller platforms that must comply with every government demand or face total exclusion from the market, major platforms like Meta, X, and Google have established user bases and dominant market positions that provide them with substantial bargaining power. The letter cites Meta's partial resistance as proof that refusal is possible: Meta refused to comply with multiple court orders targeting protest-related content and, despite facing fines, continues to operate in Turkey. This demonstrates that companies can choose to prioritize human rights over complete compliance, accepting limited economic consequences rather than facilitating comprehensive censorship.

International Law Obligations

The open letter grounds its demands in international human rights law, particularly the:

- **International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) Article 19.** This protects freedom of expression, subject only to necessary restrictions for specific, legitimate purposes. The vague "national security" and "public order" justifications used in Turkish blocking orders do not meet the ICCPR's requirement for precise, narrowly-drawn limitations.
- **UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.** These require companies to respect human rights throughout their operations, conduct due diligence to identify and mitigate human rights impacts, and provide remedy when they cause or contribute to adverse impacts. Automatic compliance with overbroad censorship orders violates these principles.
- **European Convention on Human Rights Article 10:** Turkey remains a party to the ECHR despite its democratic backsliding, and the Convention's protections for freedom of expression should guide platform decisions about whether to comply with Turkish government demands.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

Summary of Findings

This analysis has documented the systematic architecture of digital authoritarianism in contemporary Turkey. The March 2025 Sarayane protests revealed:

- Bandwidth throttling affecting 15+ million residents.
- Suspension of 471+ social media accounts reaching 17.2 million followers.
- Criminalization of journalism through vague laws permitting arbitrary prosecution.
- Financial strangulation of independent media, creating an information landscape where 90% of media operate under government control.
- Complete digital silencing of the leading opposition presidential candidate while maintaining his legal presumption of innocence.
- Google delisting creating invisible censorship of human rights documentation.

Digital Authoritarianism in Turkey: The Erosion of Press Freedom and the Weaponization of Technology

- Systematic account suspensions creating a two-tiered information system in which international audiences see content invisible to Turkish citizens.

Turkey's case demonstrates that contemporary digital authoritarianism operates through the sophisticated coordination of state power, legal frameworks, technical infrastructure, and corporate compliance. This model poses threats that extend far beyond Turkey's borders, providing a replicable blueprint for other authoritarian regimes.

Comparative Perspective: Turkey Within a Global Pattern

Turkey's digital authoritarianism should not be treated as an exceptional or isolated case, but rather as part of a broader global pattern in which states increasingly deploy digital infrastructures to monitor, censor, discipline, and classify populations. Freedom House's *Freedom on the Net 2025* report documents that global internet freedom declined for the fifteenth consecutive year, with governments expanding censorship, surveillance, and offline repression against online expression; in at least 57 of the 72 countries assessed, individuals were arrested or imprisoned for online speech. Turkey represents a distinctive hybrid model within this landscape: unlike the fully closed digital ecosystems of China or Iran, it operates through a layered combination of legal pressure, platform regulation, content removal, bandwidth throttling, online prosecutions, pro-government troll networks, and disinformation laws to discipline the public sphere. Access Now's documentation of 296 internet shutdowns across 54 countries in 2024—the highest number on record—further confirms that such techniques have become a global repertoire of political control rather than exceptional emergency measures.

Freedom House+ 1

Critically, digital authoritarian practices are not confined to formally authoritarian regimes. In the United States—a context not comparable to Turkey, Russia, or China as an authoritarian state—coercive digital governance nonetheless operates on the fringes of citizenship, where migrants, visa applicants, asylum seekers, and international students are subject to expanded forms of data collection and algorithmic risk assessment. U.S. visa applicants are required to disclose social media identifiers used over the previous five years, and civil society organizations, including the Brennan Center for Justice, have raised concerns about the growing use of social media data in high-stakes immigration decisions. This points toward a broader pattern in which the tools of digital governance, even within liberal democratic frameworks, may disproportionately affect the most vulnerable populations. The relationship between state power and platform infrastructure is therefore not reducible to a simple authoritarian or democratic binary: what varies across cases is not the existence of digital coercion, but its legal justification, institutional form, target population, and relationship to private technology companies. These comparative insights directly inform the policy recommendations that follow.

Policy Recommendations

For International Independent Media and Academic Institutions:

With approximately 90 percent of mainstream media operating under direct or indirect government control, content produced by major television channels, newspapers, and state agencies such as the

Digital Authoritarianism in Turkey: The Erosion of Press Freedom and the Weaponization of Technology

Anadolu Agency cannot be treated as neutral sources of information. When international media—especially in neighboring countries such as Greece—reproduce or translate content from these outlets without contextualization or verification, they risk functioning as secondary channels of state propaganda rather than independent observers.

International media organizations should therefore reassess their sourcing practices. Reliance on Turkish mainstream media as primary sources should be avoided, particularly in politically sensitive cases. Instead, coverage should be based on information gathered through independent journalists, human rights advocates, feminist organizations, and digital rights groups. In the context of the İmamoğlu case, reporting should prioritize information from international observers, court documents, defense lawyers, and independent monitoring organizations rather than official government narratives.

Beyond sourcing, international media should invest in direct reporting capacities. This includes sending their own correspondents, developing long-term collaborations with independent Turkish journalists, and supporting transnational journalist networks that operate both inside Turkey and within the diaspora. Establishing verification mechanisms through these networks would allow international outlets to cross-check information before publication and thus reduce the risk of reproducing disinformation and state propaganda.

For Democratic Governments and International Organizations:

Democratic governments should recognize digital censorship as a form of human rights violation that warrants serious diplomatic and economic consequences. Such consequences could include:

Applying targeted sanctions against officials responsible for censorship decisions.

Making trade agreements conditional on meaningful press freedom protections.

Providing technical and financial support for circumvention tools and independent media.

Establishing international standards for digital rights that create reputational costs for violators.

Requiring tech companies to immediately restore İmamoğlu's accounts pending credible evidence of specific violations. The silencing of an opposition presidential candidate who is presumed innocent must be a red line that demands urgent international intervention.

For International Human Rights and Press Freedom Organizations:

İmamoğlu's case represents a critical test: if the international community permits an opposition candidate to be digitally eliminated before he is tried, it will have acknowledged that social media platforms can be weaponized to override electoral democracy.

Consequently, international human rights and press freedom organizations must:

- Document and publicize the full scope of Turkey's digital censorship infrastructure.
- Provide technical assistance to journalists and activists, allowing them to access secure communication and circumvention mechanisms.

Digital Authoritarianism in Turkey: The Erosion of Press Freedom and the Weaponization of Technology

- Build coalitions across borders to maintain international visibility for censored content.
- Advocate for binding international standards regarding the digital platforms' human rights responsibilities.

For International Tech Companies:

Tech companies should develop human–rights–based standards for responding to government censorship demands. These standards must prioritize freedom of expression over legal compliance with authoritarian restrictions, as clearly articulated in the open letter by IFÖD.

This requires:

- Creating clear policies that assume political speech has the highest level of protection.
- Demanding specific, individualized justifications for each blocking request.
- Publicly disclosing censorship orders and the reasoning behind compliance decisions.
- Coordinating across companies to resist excessive censorship demands.
- Acknowledging that meaningful human rights compliance may require forgoing market access in certain authoritarian contexts.