



Media Diversity Institute

**ANONYMITY PROBLEMS IN ARMENIA:
THE EXTENT AND CONSEQUENCES
OF USING VPNS AND
OTHER SIMILAR TOOLS**

Samvel Martirosyan

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Introduction

In the Republic of Armenia, there is no continuous and extensive demand for anonymity tools to bypass blocking such as VPN and TOR. However, the occasional escalation of domestic political struggle and the short-term but periodic blockings of the Internet contribute to a growing interest in these tools.

Despite anonymity, there is no ban on such tools in the country, which are not even regulated by law. At the same time, there have been cases when citizens have been prosecuted for using VPNs.

The use of anonymity and blocking circumvention tools in Armenia

Several cases have been observed in Armenia, when citizens resorted to using circumvention tools, mainly VPNs, as a response to Internet restrictions.

Armenia still lacks a legal framework that addresses blocking, filtering and access restrictions on the Internet. In fact, there are no legal provisions in Armenia allowing for the blocking of any online platform or service. Although there is a proposal developed by the RA Ministry of Justice about blockings during martial law, it is still being discussed.¹

Nevertheless, in its recent history, Armenia has experienced a number of cases of online platform blockage.

The first one was during the state of emergency (which lasted until March 20, 2008) following the bloody events of March 1, 2008. This particular period witnessed explicit censorship within the country, forcing the media to exclusively disseminate official information.

However, online news archives contained content that was deemed undesirable by the authorities. Furthermore, a number of platforms were run from overseas, and were not affected by the state of emergency. These factors compelled the authorities to take an unprecedented step in Armenia's recent history - blocking opposition online news and blog platforms.²

The next Internet blockage in Armenia occurred on July 17, 2016. In the morning of the assault on the Police patrol service regiment, Facebook was blocked for about an hour in Yerevan. Notably, the blockage did not affect all users. Most probably, it was an attempt to make the social network unavailable in specific geographic areas. The fact of blockage was acknowledged by Facebook.³

The next phase of blockings occurred in the fall of 2020, amidst the outbreak of the second Artsakh. The first platform to be affected was TikTok. On October 1, 2020, "Armenpress" state news agency reported that "TikTok application failed operating in Armenia."⁴ Azerbaijani and Turkish news and other websites were also blocked.

During the military aggression of Azerbaijan against Armenia on September 13, 2022, TikTok underwent another blockage that lasted for several days. Interestingly, again, the blocking measures did not encompass all communication operators in the country.⁵

Naturally, the blockage period was marked by a sharp increase in VPN app downloads. However, overall VPN usage in Armenia remains relatively low. The Global VPN Adoption Index report, which presents VPN usage across 85 countries worldwide, traditionally excludes Armenia.⁶

¹ Draft on making amendments and supplements to the Law "On the Legal Regime of Marital Law", 22.12.2022, <https://www.e-draft.am/projects/5186/justification>

² The Impact of March 1st on the Armenian Media Field, Samvel Martirosyan, <https://media.am/en/critique/2018/03/06/9401/>

³ Internet Disruptions, Armenia, Facebook Transparency Report, <https://transparency.fb.com/data/internet-disruptions/country/AM/>

⁴ TikTok fails operating in Armenia, October 1, 2020, <https://armenpress.am/eng/news/1029718.html>

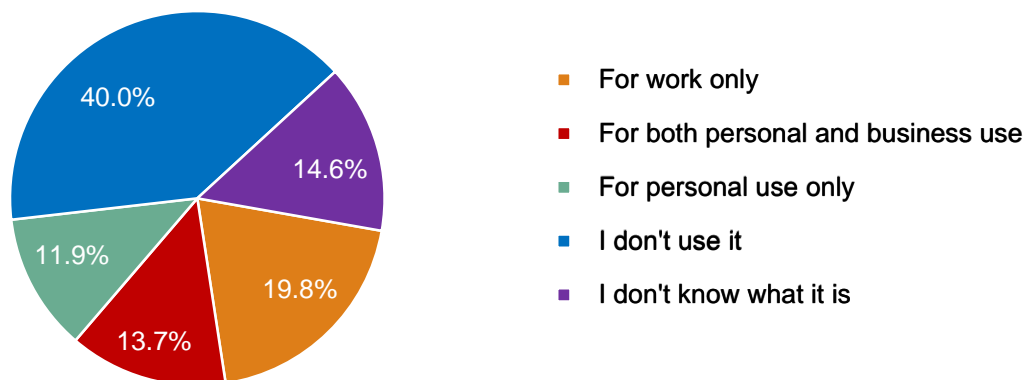
⁵ TikTok's restrictions are aimed at preventing misinformation through old clips and a number of other security reasons: Fip.am, 13.09.2022, <https://medialab.am/236117/>

⁶ Global VPN Adoption Index, <https://atlasvpn.com/vpn-adoption-index>

We conducted an online survey among Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter users from the Republic of Armenia and Artsakh regarding the use of VPN services.⁷ Around five thousand people participated in the survey, and the results provided below reveal that more than half of active social media users do not utilize such tools at all.

How do you use a VPN?

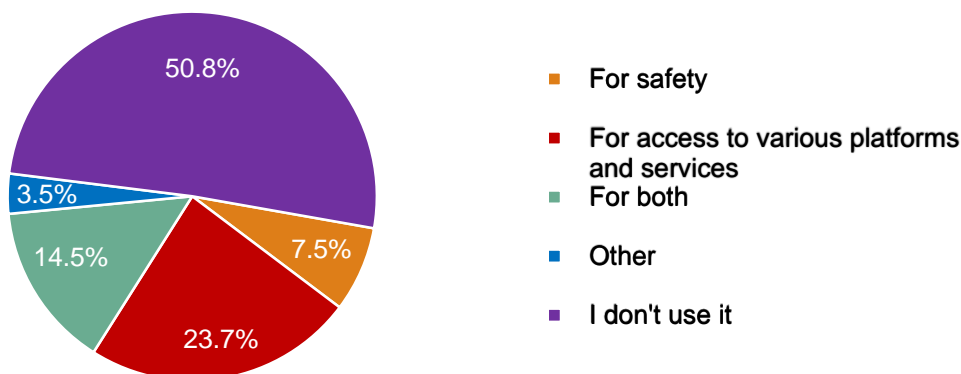
4,980 responses



Security is a primary concern for only 7.5%. For 14.5%, security also solves the issue of accessibility. It is noteworthy that a significant number of individuals use VPNs to get broader access to entertainment services, for example, video streaming platforms, which often offer a much smaller selection for Armenia.

What is a VPN used for?

4,885 responses

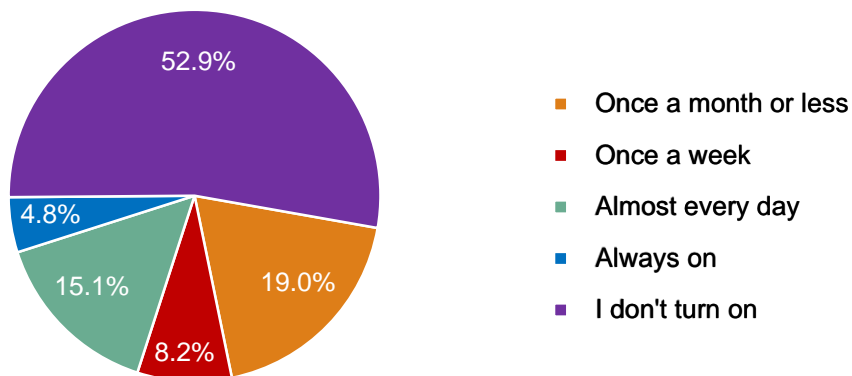


Only about 5% have a VPN always on.

⁷ VPN use in Armenia, survey, <https://forms.gle/27MCBAHcoTfiBhyS6>

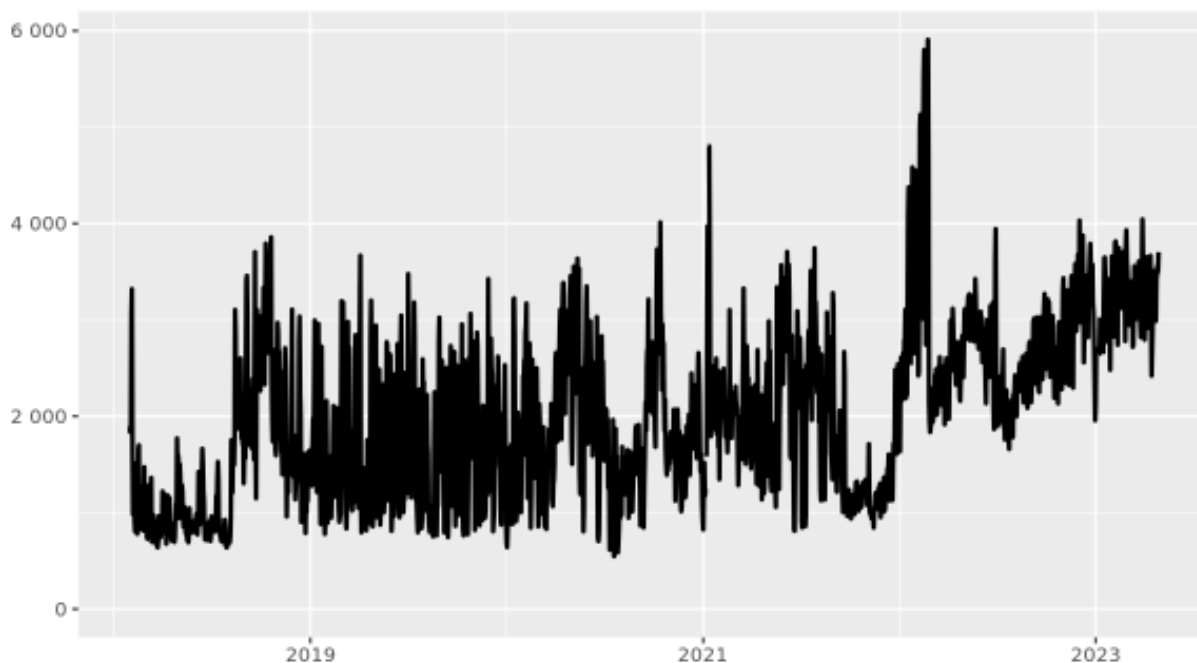
How often do you turn on VPN?

4,980 responses



An increase in the number of users of TOR project⁸ is observed in Armenia. If in 2018, 500 to 1,000 people used TOR daily, in 2023 this indicator reached 3,000 to 5,000, sometimes a higher number is recorded. The sharp increase started in 2022.⁹

Directly connecting users from Armenia



⁸ TOR Project - <https://www.torproject.org/>

⁹ TOR Metrics, Directly connecting users from Armenia, 2018-2023, <https://metrics.torproject.org/userstats-relay-country.html?start=2018-01-30&end=2023-04-30&country=am&events=off>

Technical restrictions

There is no recorded case of blockage of VPN services in Armenia. However, protocols emerging since 2020 demonstrate that the state is making efforts to achieve such measures through Internet providers.

Another blocking circumvention tool used by more sophisticated users are the private DNS settings. Armenian IT specialists have registered several cases when blockage by Internet providers was carried out at the level of private DNS, for example, through 1.1.1.1 DNS resolver provided by Cloudflare.

Following the Artsakh war, information security expert Ruben Muradyan highlighted the action taken by Internet providers to block private DNS.¹⁰



Ruben Muradyan
@RubenMuradyan



Started collecting network connectivity limitations/issues enforced by/during martial law in 🇦🇲:

1. TikTok was blocked from Sep28 to mid-November
2. Custom DNS is widely blocked on ISP level
3. Some AZ news websites were/are blocked

Will appreciate your contribution guys/gals 😊

10:42 AM · Dec 22, 2020

2 Retweets 1 Quote 6 Likes 3 Bookmarks

Similar blockings were registered in September 2022, after Azerbaijan's military aggression against Armenia. Information technology specialist Artak Gaboyan had registered blockings of Cloudflare and Google DNS.¹¹

¹⁰ Ruben Muradyan's tweet, Twitter, 22.10.2020, <https://twitter.com/RubenMuradyan/status/1341272907692077056>

¹¹ Artak Gaboyan's post, Facebook, 07.10.2022, <https://www.facebook.com/ArtakGaboyan/posts/pfbid06BaFT5CcyXkFGxcH7RwrMKQTZRSH4uNuVrm2sFGa2r8mrQGjtL9xQ5XKLQJsQDZGI>



Արտակ Պաստաֆարիան Գաբրյան

October 7, 2022 · 🌐

Սcom-ը բլոկում ա 8.8.8.8 ու 1.1.1.1-ին գնացող DNS զապառուները:

Եթե դրանցից էիք օգտվում, ուրիշ սերվեր էլ ավելացրեք:

Ես նախըտրում եմ յանդեքսի `77 .88 .8 .8

Samvel Martirosyan, չնայած դու երևի գիտեիր 😊



38 comments

Problems related to VPN usage

The use of VPN or other similar technical tools is not only permitted without any restrictions in Armenia, but is also completely unregulated by law.

In February 2021, a criminal case was initiated against several persons for using Proton VPN. In that period, the RA National Security Service was investigating a fake Facebook user posing as “Gagik Soghomyan”. As part of the case, four people, including former high-ranking official Ara Saghatelyan and former NA Deputy Karen Bekaryan, were charged and subsequently arrested. The main allegation hinged on the fact that the respondents and the individual behind the fake account were using the same Proton VPN with matching outgoing IP addresses. This, of course, could be a coincidence, and alone it could not serve as a basis for allegations. There were no further developments in the criminal case.¹²

Conclusion

In Armenia, VPN, anonymity or other blocking circumvention tools are not yet widespread, except for cases when there is a corporate requirement to use them.

However, repeated cases of blockage, periodically emerging domestic political tensions are driving more people to resort to such services. This trend is particularly noticeable in the case of TOR platform. Consequently, it is likely that the number of VPN users in Armenia will experience a gradual increase.

¹² “Ara Saghatelyan Arrested”. 21.02.2021, <https://www.panorama.am/am/news/2021/02/21/%D4%B1%D6%80%D5%A1-%D5%8D%D5%A1%D5%B2%D5%A1%D5%A9%D5%A5%D5%AC%D5%B5%D5%A1%D5%B6/2455972>