



Joint Open Letter to Social Media Companies on Censorship in Türkiye

May 8, 2025

To:

Mark Zuckerberg
Chief Executive Officer, Meta

Shou Zi Chew
Chief Executive Officer, TikTok

Neal Mohan
Chief Executive Officer, YouTube

Linda Yaccarino
Chief Executive Officer, X

We the undersigned civil society organizations urge your companies to uphold the right to freedom of expression of your users in Türkiye and resist Turkish state censorship that restricts expression protected under international human rights law. This censorship comes amid nationwide anti-government protests following the detention of Istanbul Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu along with 84 other municipal officials and politicians on March 19, 2025. On May 8, Imamoğlu's Turkish-language X account followed by 9.7 million people became the latest target of state censorship when X complied with a court order to [restrict](#) it.

Social media remains one of the last means through which people have access to independent news and can share their opinions with relative freedom in Türkiye. Heightened state censorship and social media companies' compliance with government pressure risk obliterating this vital space. In light of the broad crackdown on free expression in Türkiye, it is even more

crucial that social media companies take a firm, united stance against pressure to restrict expression protected under international human rights law.

Immediately after the detentions on March 19, internet users in Istanbul experienced bandwidth reduction (internet throttling), restricting access to social media platforms and messaging apps for [42 hours](#). Neither the authorities nor the companies provided any clarification regarding the reasons for these restrictions or the decision to lift them.

Amid growing protests, the Information Technologies Authority (BTK) [started issuing blocking orders](#) for social media accounts of student groups, journalists, civil society organizations, women's rights groups and human rights defenders. The orders, [based on](#) article [8/A of Türkiye's Law No. 5651](#), appear to particularly target accounts that share information and updates on the protest along with those who post content critical of the government. İFÖD's EngelliWeb project documented 471 X accounts blocked from March 19 – April 12, affecting 17.2 million followers - ranging from high-profile figures like journalist Erk Acarer (1.2M followers) to grassroots groups like Kadın Cinayetlerini Durduracağız (181K). The BTK's focus on students (at least 57 accounts, with 1.2M total followers) and women's groups (at least 22, 500K total followers) aims to choke protest coordination and feminist dissent. Some of the accounts suspended had less than 10 followers. Others had no followers at all. Imamoğlu's account was blocked following another 8/A order dated April 24, which cited the protection of 'national security' and 'public order'. The range of accounts suspended indicates the indiscriminate nature of the crackdown.

This is yet [another attempt](#) from Turkish authorities to control social media platforms through use of the restrictive internet law in critical times or times of unrest. We have previously [documented](#) intensifying efforts by [Turkish](#) authorities to control social media platforms through demands that they block content critical of the government, including ahead of [elections](#). We had also issued tailored recommendations to social media companies to navigate the legal pressure, potential human rights impact of government sanctions and increase resilience and transparency. Yet, social media companies' responses have not aligned with these recommendations.

On March 23, X [issued a statement](#) saying that it objected to 'multiple court orders from the BTK to block over 700 accounts of news organizations, journalists, political figures, students, and others within Türkiye.' On March 26, X [announced](#) that it had filed an individual application before the Constitutional Court challenging an order by the BTK to block 126 accounts. However, that order was from early February 2025, and İFÖD lawyers challenged that decision with regards to Artı Gerçek's X account prior to the current wave of protests, rendering X's response inadequate. As noted above, İFÖD documented that at least 471 accounts were blocked post-March 19, with no further appeals reported.

On May 8, X [published](#) the court order they received to block imamoğlu's account, stating that they would challenge it in court, emphasizing their strong disagreement, and explaining their rationale for compliance.

Moreover, in April 2025, Meta published a [case study](#) outlining how the company responded to hundreds of requests from the BTK concerning "content alleged to violate Turkish law." The case study notes that the content was reported under article 8/A of Law No. 5651 but does not specify whether the requests came in the form of a court order. In response, Meta said it restricted access to posts, pages, profiles, and groups on Facebook and Instagram that were critical of the government, or that featured content related to the LGBTQ community, music groups, feminist organizations, and [Sedat Peker](#). The company stated it took no action on multiple court orders to block content related to recent protests. Politico, however, [reported](#) that Meta has been fined a "substantial" amount for not complying with government requests to restrict content.

İFÖD's EngelliWeb project documented that Bluesky restricted access to 13 accounts and one post on Turkey since April 17, 2025. It is not clear which specific content posted by these accounts led to their restriction.

Meta, TikTok, YouTube and X have all faced pressure in Türkiye. In 2021, these companies appointed legal entities in Türkiye to comply with Law No. 5651. The pressure significantly intensified with legal amendments to the same law in 2022, which increased the sanctions companies can face for failure to comply with content removal and account blocking requests.

While companies' compliance with these requests during and after the March 2025 protests are unclear, the companies' most recent transparency reports indicate high compliance rate with removal requests. [Meta's January-June 2024 and July-December 2024 transparency reports](#) shows Instagram complied with 79.15% and Facebook complied with 42% of content removal requests from Turkish judicial and administrative authorities. The nature of the content is not specified in the reports. [TikTok's January-June 2024 transparency report](#) shows it complied with 91.8% of Turkish removal requests. Google does not report on its compliance rate for YouTube specifically, but its overall compliance rate with BTK requests for all Google products for [July-December 2024](#) was 77.5%. X [reported](#) an 85.66% compliance rate with government requests from Türkiye in the second half of 2024, up from 68% in the first half of 2024. These numbers are worrying at the very least.

Recommendations

Under the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs), social media companies have a responsibility to respect human rights, which includes resisting

government pressure to restrict freedom of expression in ways that violate international human rights law. The undersigned organizations call on your companies to review all ongoing responses to ensure all the following measures are integrated and robustly implemented and monitored:

- Require that any requests to block content are presented by the Turkish authorities in written form so that they can be assessed against international legal standards on freedom of expression, company policy, and local law.
- Require that Turkish authorities provide the reasoning and evidence supporting any blocking request under article 8/A of the Law no 5651, including an explanation of why the content in question poses a clear, serious and imminent danger to the right to life, public health, national security, prevention of crime, public order and other reasons listed in the law.
- Assess blocking orders against international freedom of expression standards, considering in particular that political speech enjoys the highest level of protection.
- Resist complying with blocking orders that restrict access to protected expression, including by challenging them in court and limiting the scope and duration of implementation.
- Be transparent about government requests for censorship. This includes notifying users immediately that content is not available at the URL where the content was hosted, the reason for its blocking (e.g., a government or court order) and publishing the order (including through the Lumens database) and case studies, when relevant. Publicizing these actions expeditiously is key to holding governments accountable and mitigating isolated, informal pressure.
- Engage with other companies to share information about formal and informal government pressure and commit to taking a united stance against particularly excessive censorship demands, particularly during periods of political protest.
- Engage with Turkish civil society for a better understanding of the implications of company policy and practices, the relevance of content or accounts that are subject to blocking orders, as well as the actual threat and implications of sanctions.

Background on the protests

The crackdown on social media is part of a broader effort to quell peaceful protest and dissent. Immediately after the detentions on March 19, hundreds of thousands of people have taken to the streets across the country. Authorities responded with blanket protest bans in Istanbul and followed by bans in Izmir and Ankara on March 21. İmamoğlu was [remanded in pre-trial detention](#) on 23 March, the same day his Republican People's Party (CHP) nominated him as their presidential candidate.

The mass protests continued in the face of heavy-handed government response including the use of unlawful and indiscriminate force by the police during the arrest of protestors and a dozen journalists who were later released. At the time of writing, [819 people](#) are facing prosecution in the scope of 20 criminal investigations into protests.

As part of the protests, opposition parties and student groups called for economic boycotts of businesses with ties to the government, as well as a one-day shopping boycott on April 2. On April 3, Istanbul Chief Public Prosecutor's Office [issued arrest warrants for 16 people](#), including actors, over social media posts supporting a one-day shopping boycott, based on allegations of promoting “hatred and discrimination” and “inciting hatred and hostility.” All were released but face criminal charges.

Turkey's Internet Law

Türkiye's government has amassed a vast arsenal of digital censorship tools to control the internet and silence opposing voices. The [2020](#) and [2022 amendments](#) to Türkiye's Law on the Regulation of Internet Broadcasts and Prevention of Crimes Committed through such Broadcasts (law no. 5651) imposes heavy fines and possible bandwidth reduction for social media companies for failure to comply with takedown requests.

In August 2024, Turkish authorities arbitrarily blocked Instagram for eight days without an official explanation. Türkiye has previously blocked access in the country to Twitter, YouTube, Wikipedia, Google Sites. In July and August 2024, the authorities also blocked access to the popular Wattpad, Roblox and Discord platforms.

In the face of heightened pressure, social media companies have been showing greater willingness to succumb to government demands. In the lead-up to the 2023 presidential elections, [X](#) and [Meta](#) admitted they complied with government requests to block content, in response to throttling threats from Turkish authorities.

Signatories:

- ARTICLE 19
- Freedom of Expression Association (İFÖD)
- Human Rights Watch