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DIGITAL ASPECTS OF GOOD GOVERNANCE: EXPERIENCE OF THE REPUBLIC OF AZERBAIJAN

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Abstract. This study analyzes the experience of the Republic of Azerbaijan within the framework of digital governance and good governance. The integration of digital technologies into public administration has enabled the implementation of good governance principles such as transparency, accountability, participation, and efficiency in a more effective and inclusive manner. The article presents the conceptual foundations of digital governance based on the theoretical frameworks of international organizations (World Bank, UNDP, OECD) and scholars (Jane Fountain, Manuel Castells, Merilee Grindle, Francis Fukuyama). Azerbaijan's institutional steps in this field – including ASAN Service, the Ministry of Digital Development and Transport, the Electronic Government Development Center, the Digital Trade Hub, and the Cyber Security Service – demonstrate a systematic approach to the digitalization process. Statistical indicators, the ASAN Service Index, and examples of top-rated digital services are used to illustrate the concrete outcomes of digital governance. The article concludes that digitalization is not merely a technological process but a structural reform that brings qualitative change to citizen–government relations. Azerbaijan's experience provides an important example for developing countries in transforming digital governance into a core component of good governance.

Key words: digital governance, good governance, ASAN service index, transparency, e-government.

Introduction. The rapid advancement of digital technologies has fundamentally reshaped the paradigms of governance in the 21st century. As states increasingly integrate digital tools into their administrative and political processes, the concepts of digital governance and good governance have become inextricably linked. While good governance emphasizes transparency, accountability, participation, and effectiveness, digital governance offers the technological infrastructure and innovation necessary to achieve these goals more efficiently and inclusively.

In this regard, the topic of the study is highly relevant in today's rapidly evolving administrative and technological landscape. As digital transformation becomes a global priority for enhancing public sector effectiveness, Azerbaijan's experience offers a compelling case of how digital tools can be leveraged to improve governance quality, promote transparency, and increase citizen participation. The country's systematic adoption of e-government platforms, data-driven decision-making, and innovative public service models like ASAN reflects broader trends toward digital governance reform. Studying Azerbaijan's progress not only sheds light on the practical implications of digitalization in a developing context but also contributes to global discussions on building inclusive, efficient, and accountable governance systems in the digital age.

So, the purpose of the study is to examine how digitalization has contributed to the development of good governance practices in the Republic of Azerbaijan through enhanced transparency, participation, and service delivery. In this direction, this study adopts a qualitative research approach, focusing on document and content analysis of official reports, government strategies, and statistical data. Primary sources include state portals such as e-gov.az and dxr.az, as well as policy documents like the

“Digital Development Concept of the Republic of Azerbaijan.” The analysis is supported by academic literature and theoretical perspectives on digital governance and good governance. Comparative and interpretive methods are also employed to contextualize Azerbaijan’s experience within global digital governance trends.

Conceptual Framework of Digital Governance and Good Governance. Good governance is a normative framework that defines the standards by which public institutions should operate to ensure fairness, accountability, and efficiency in decision-making and public service delivery. The concept gained prominence in the 1990s through the work of international organizations such as the World Bank, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and the OECD, which emphasized governance as a critical component of sustainable development. According to the World Bank, good governance is characterized by features such as transparency, accountability, participation, rule of law, effectiveness, equity, and responsiveness. These principles aim to promote trust in public institutions and ensure that governmental processes serve the needs and rights of citizens (Hu & Zhang, 2023, p. 562).

One of the core elements of good governance is transparency, which refers to the openness and accessibility of information regarding governmental actions and decisions. Transparency is closely tied to accountability, which ensures that public officials are answerable for their conduct and the outcomes of their policies. Equally important is participation, the principle that citizens should have the opportunity to contribute to policy formation and implementation. These attributes are interdependent and mutually reinforcing; for instance, without access to information, meaningful citizen participation becomes limited, and accountability mechanisms are weakened. Thus, good governance requires an integrated and holistic approach that considers the structural, procedural, and normative dimensions of governing (Decuypere & Lewis, 2021).

The academic development of the concept has been shaped by scholars such as Merilee Grindle, who argued that good governance should be context-specific and pragmatically oriented, rather than an idealized checklist. She distinguished between “good enough governance” and ideal models, suggesting that countries at different stages of institutional development may prioritize different governance objectives (Grindle, 2024). Similarly, Francis Fukuyama emphasized the need to balance state capacity with rule-based constraints to achieve governance that is both effective and legitimate (Fukuyama, 2013). These theoretical contributions highlight that good governance is not only a set of abstract ideals but also a practical and evolving model shaped by political culture, institutional capacity, and societal expectations.

In this regard, the digital transformation of the public sector has introduced new paradigms in the theory and practice of governance. As states increasingly adopt information and communication technologies (ICTs) to enhance administrative efficiency and public service delivery, the conceptual convergence between digital governance and good governance becomes more significant. The former is understood as a mechanism or toolset, while the latter refers to normative standards of governing. Scholars such as Jane Fountain, Manuel Castells, and institutions like the World Bank and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) have played foundational roles in shaping these concepts.

The theoretical foundation of digital governance was notably advanced by Jane E. Fountain, whose seminal work *Building the Virtual State: Information Technology and Institutional Change* emphasized the interplay between technological innovation and institutional transformation. Fountain argued that digital governance is not merely the automation of services but a reconfiguration of state-citizen relations and institutional behavior. She introduced the concept of “*technological enactment*,” highlighting how institutional norms and path dependencies shape the use of digital technologies in governance (Fountain, 2001).

Manuel Castells, in his influential trilogy *The Information Age*, particularly emphasized the emergence of the “network society” and its implications for governance. He argued that power in the

digital age is increasingly embedded in networks rather than hierarchical structures. This reconceptualization of power relations implies that digital governance should be understood as a fluid, interactive, and decentralized process – a condition conducive to more transparent and participatory forms of governance (Castells, 1999).

From an institutional perspective, the World Bank's 1992 report on governance laid the groundwork for the modern understanding of good governance by outlining its key components: accountability, transparency, rule of law, participation, responsiveness, and effectiveness (World Bank, 1992). Later, in the digital era, the World Bank incorporated digitalization into its governance agenda, promoting e-government initiatives and digital public sector reforms across developing countries, including Azerbaijan.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has also been instrumental in linking digital tools with governance outcomes. According to UNDP, digital governance supports the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions). The UNDP emphasizes that digital technologies should enhance inclusion, human rights, and public trust, rather than merely serve efficiency goals.

Nonetheless, scholars such as Christopher Hood have warned of potential risks in “*digital-era governance*,” including the rise of surveillance, technocratic decision-making, and the marginalization of digitally excluded groups. Hood emphasizes that while digital tools can improve governance quality, they must be deployed within ethical, legal, and democratic safeguards (Hood, 1991).

To sum up, the conceptual framework linking digital governance with good governance is the result of interdisciplinary theoretical work and institutional reflection. Thinkers such as Jane Fountain and Manuel Castells provided essential paradigms that shifted the focus from technology as an instrument to technology as a structural force in governance. Institutions like the World Bank and UNDP further articulated how digitalization can support normative governance goals. However, the theoretical optimism must be balanced with cautionary insights from scholars like Christopher Hood. A well-grounded understanding of these conceptual contributions is crucial for evaluating and guiding digital governance reforms, especially in transitional democracies like Azerbaijan, where such reforms hold transformative potential.

Digital governance has emerged as a critical enabler of good governance by providing tools and platforms that enhance transparency, accountability, efficiency, and citizen participation. Through the adoption of information and communication technologies (ICTs), governments can streamline administrative processes, reduce bureaucratic inefficiencies, and minimize corruption risks. For example, online service portals, e-payment systems, and digital identity platforms simplify access to public services and reduce the discretionary power of officials, thus reinforcing principles of equity and fairness. In this way, digital governance operationalizes key elements of good governance, making institutions more responsive and citizen-oriented.

Furthermore, digital governance strengthens transparency and accountability by facilitating real-time access to information and enabling data-driven decision-making. Open data initiatives, digital budget tracking, and online performance dashboards allow citizens and civil society organizations to monitor government activities more effectively. These mechanisms not only build public trust but also create feedback loops that can improve policy implementation. Moreover, digital tools support anti-corruption efforts by documenting government transactions and interactions, reducing the space for opaque practices. In countries such as Estonia and South Korea, digital governance has played a transformative role in institutionalizing accountability and improving governance quality.

Equally significant is the role of digital governance in promoting inclusive participation and civic engagement, which are essential pillars of good governance. Online consultations, e-petitions, participatory budgeting platforms, and social media channels empower citizens to express their views and contribute to policymaking beyond traditional forums. These tools lower barriers to participa-

tion, particularly for marginalized groups who may face obstacles in accessing conventional political spaces. However, ensuring digital inclusivity requires addressing challenges such as the digital divide, cybersecurity risks, and data privacy concerns. When effectively designed and ethically managed, digital governance becomes not only a support mechanism for good governance but an integral dimension of it in the digital age.

Institutional Developments in Azerbaijan's Digital Governance. Institutional developments play a pivotal role in shaping the success of digital governance, as they provide the structural and legal foundation necessary for implementing technological reforms in public administration. In Azerbaijan, the transition toward digital governance has been marked by a series of strategic reforms and the establishment of key institutions aimed at modernizing state-citizen relations, improving service delivery, and enhancing transparency. These reforms reflect the government's broader vision to align with global digital transformation trends while addressing national development priorities. By creating specialized agencies, legal frameworks, and integrated platforms, Azerbaijan has laid the groundwork for a more agile, data-driven, and citizen-oriented governance system.

In this regard, the establishment of ASAN Service on July 13, 2012, and the formation of the Ministry of Digital Development and Transport on October 11, 2021, represent two pivotal institutional reforms in Azerbaijan's transition toward digital governance. ASAN Service introduced a new model of citizen-centric public service delivery, consolidating various government functions under a single, transparent, and efficient platform that significantly reduced bureaucratic complexity and corruption (ASAN Xidmət, 2025). It became a symbol of administrative modernization by embedding digital tools and process simplification into everyday governance. The later creation of the Ministry of Digital Development and Transport further institutionalized the digital agenda by centralizing responsibilities related to ICT policy, digital infrastructure, and innovation. Together, these reforms have laid the foundation for a coordinated and systemic approach to e-governance in Azerbaijan, aligning national objectives with global trends in public sector digitalization.

The establishment of the Cyber Security Service (CERT.AZ) on September 26, 2012, marked a critical institutional reform in Azerbaijan's digital governance trajectory, ensuring that the rapid expansion of e-government services was matched with robust cybersecurity infrastructure. As a central coordinating body, the agency plays a key role in protecting national information systems, raising public awareness, and providing methodological support to institutions and private entities (Elektron Təhlükəsizlik Xidməti, 2025).

The formation of the "Electronic Government Development Center" under the State Agency for Public Service and Social Innovations, based on Presidential Decree No. 1885 dated March 14, 2018, constitutes a major institutional reform in Azerbaijan's transition to digital governance. Rooted in earlier initiatives such as the "State Program on the Development of Communication and Information Technologies for 2010–2012 (Electronic Azerbaijan)" and the Presidential Decree of May 23, 2011, on organizing electronic service provision by state bodies, this reform reflects the country's commitment to aligning with international best practices. The Center serves as the key coordinating body in implementing and expanding the e-government ecosystem, working closely with other government institutions to establish the necessary technical and organizational infrastructure. Its mandate includes not only managing digital platforms and services but also ensuring interoperability among state information systems, thereby enabling a more integrated, transparent, and efficient public administration (Elektron Hökumət, 2025a).

The establishment of the Digital Trade Hub (DTH) of Azerbaijan represents a significant milestone in the country's broader strategy to position itself as a regional leader in digital governance and cross-border e-commerce. Initiated by a 2017 presidential decree, DTH functions as a state-private partnership platform aimed at enhancing the infrastructure for electronic trade while expanding the accessibility of digital public and business services to foreign citizens. Through innovative services

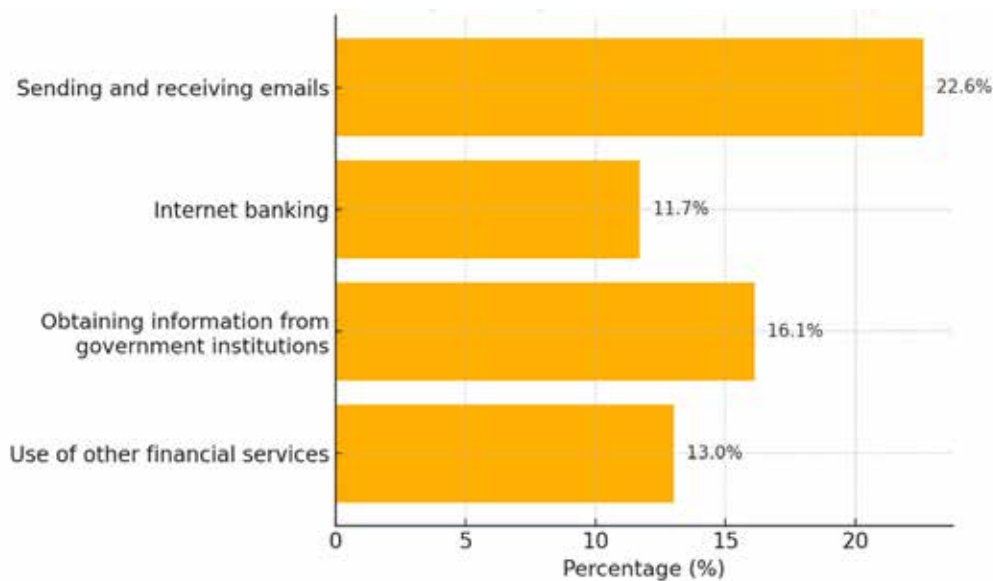
such as m-residency and e-residency – making Azerbaijan the first country globally to offer mobile residency and the second after Estonia to implement e-residency – DTH facilitates digital inclusion for non-residents by providing them with virtual identification numbers, business certificates, and access to government portals. Additionally, the hub streamlines procedures for online company registration, digital signatures, bank account setup, export documentation, and electronic certificates of free sale, thereby reducing bureaucratic barriers and minimizing state-business contact. Backed by a consortium including PASHA Bank, B.EST Solutions, AzerTelecom, and the Center for Analysis of Economic Reforms and Communication, the initiative underscores Azerbaijan's ambition to build a modern digital ecosystem with global outreach. The DTH has already demonstrated tangible outcomes, with over 100 foreign users from 30 countries benefiting from its services between 2018 and 2020, signaling the country's proactive approach to integrating digital innovation into governance and international economic engagement (AR Rəqəmsal İnkişaf və Nəqliyyat Nazirliyi, 2025).

The approval of the “Digital Development Concept of the Republic of Azerbaijan” in January 2025 marks a pivotal step toward institutionalizing digital transformation within the country's public administration. Framing digitalization as the next evolutionary phase beyond traditional e-government, the concept emphasizes the transition toward a full-fledged GovTech model. In this framework, governance is no longer solely about service provision but about creating a dynamic and data-driven system that enables agile, secure, and integrated decision-making processes across state institutions (G2G), public employees (G2E), citizens (G2C), and businesses (G2B). The approach prioritizes interoperability, real-time data analytics, and automation, thereby reducing human discretion in decision-making and enhancing the efficiency, objectivity, and transparency of administrative processes. Central to this transition is the creation of a standardized organizational and technical infrastructure that supports automated data collection, cross-system communication, and algorithm-based decision-making mechanisms (AR Prezidenti, 2025).

Moreover, the Concept advocates for a shift from document-based administration to data-centric governance by promoting advanced digital tools such as artificial intelligence, machine learning, blockchain technologies, cloud computing, and the Internet of Things (Hüseynzadə, 2025). These technologies are not merely seen as operational enhancements but as transformative tools that redefine state-citizen interactions and public service delivery. The model envisions a platform-based architecture that enables multi-agency service provision through unified systems like the Government Cloud (G-Cloud), optimizing resource allocation and ensuring cybersecurity. Notably, citizen satisfaction, private sector participation, and continuous feedback mechanisms are integrated as key quality indicators of digital government. This signals a governance model in which citizens and businesses are not passive recipients but active participants in shaping public services, guided by principles of flexibility, inclusiveness, and evidence-based responsiveness.

Impact of Digitalization on Transparency, Participation, and Service Delivery. The impact of digitalization on transparency, participation, and service delivery has become a central focus in assessing the quality of governance in the digital age. In Azerbaijan, this transformation is not merely reflected in policy declarations but is also supported by measurable progress across key sectors and occupational groups. As digital tools are increasingly integrated into public administration and citizen engagement mechanisms, they contribute to more open, responsive, and efficient governance structures. The country's advancements in digital access – illustrated by rising usage rates among civil servants, professionals, and service sector employees – highlight a practical alignment between digitalization and the core principles of good governance. These figures offer empirical support for the argument that Azerbaijan's digital reforms are yielding tangible outcomes in enhancing state-society interaction.

One of the most significant indicators of digitalization's impact on governance in Azerbaijan is the increasing use of digital platforms to obtain information from government institutions, as reflected by



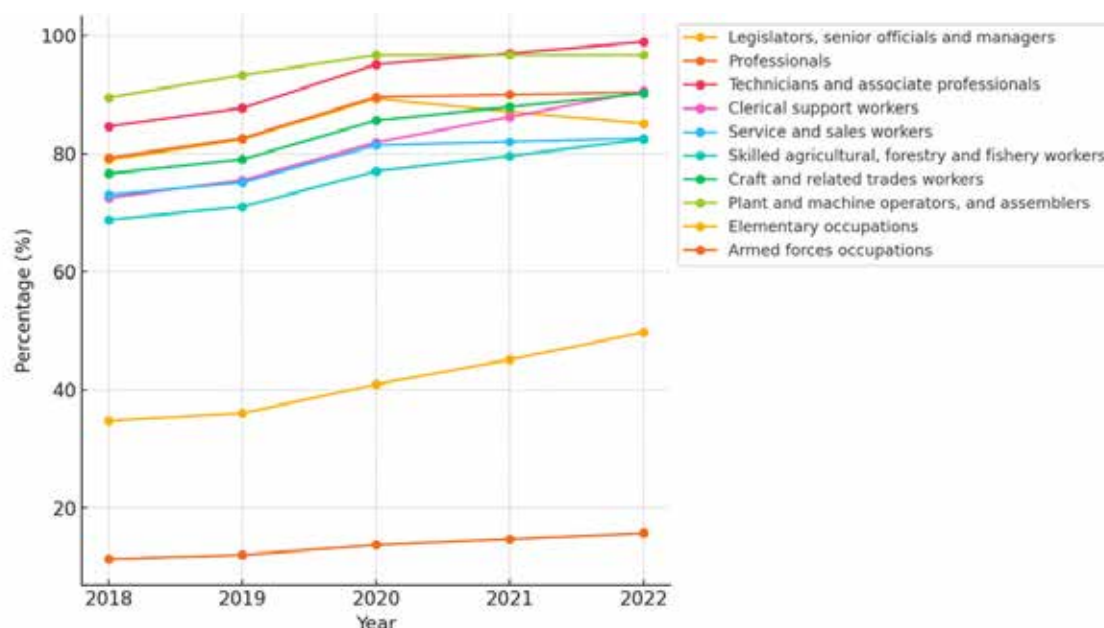
Graph 1. Purposes of enterprises using the internet

Source: (*AR Rəqəmsal İnkişaf və Nəqliyyat Nazirliyi, 2025*)

the 16.1% of users engaging in this activity. Within the framework of transparency, participation, and service delivery, this development illustrates a meaningful shift in state-society relations. The availability of public information through online portals reduces information asymmetry and fosters a culture of openness, where citizens can more readily access laws, decisions, statistics, and administrative procedures. This transparency, in turn, enhances trust in public institutions and lays the groundwork for more informed civic participation. From a service delivery perspective, digital access to government information streamlines bureaucratic processes, minimizes physical interactions, and increases the responsiveness of public administration. By reducing procedural complexity and making institutional data available in real time, digitalization not only democratizes access to information but also reinforces the legitimacy and accountability of state institutions.

The digital access indicators of specific occupational groups in Azerbaijan – namely service sector employees, armed forces personnel, clerical (administrative) support staff, professional specialists, and senior officials or legislators – offer meaningful insights into the broader trajectory of digitalization within the framework of good governance. The rising percentages across these categories reflect not only technological adoption but also institutional efforts to embed digital tools into the core of public administration and service provision. For instance, the steady increase in digital access among clerical support workers (from 72.5% in 2018 to 90.6% in 2022) demonstrates the integration of digital systems into bureaucratic routines, contributing to greater efficiency, transparency, and procedural accountability in everyday governance tasks. Similarly, the high and growing rates among professional specialists and senior officials indicate a top-down commitment to data-driven governance and strategic digital leadership – key pillars of effective, responsive public institutions.

In the service sector, where access rose from 73.0% to 82.6%, digitalization directly enhances citizen-facing functions, improving the delivery of public services, reducing wait times, and enabling feedback mechanisms – all of which align with the participatory and service-delivery dimensions of good governance. On the other end of the spectrum, the armed forces – traditionally slower to digitalize due to structural constraints – have seen modest but steady growth (from 11.3% to 15.7%). This upward trend signifies a cautious yet important shift toward digitized internal processes, training systems, and potentially cyber-defense capacities, thus linking national security to the broader



Graph 2. Internet access and usage indicators

Source: (*AR Rəqəmsal İnkişaf və Nəqliyyat Nazirliyi, 2025*)

digital governance agenda. Collectively, these trends underscore that digitalization in Azerbaijan is not limited to high-level strategy but is increasingly reflected in sector-specific transformations that support the normative goals of good governance: transparency, accountability, inclusiveness, and service efficiency.

Within the framework of Impact of Digitalization on Transparency, Participation, and Service Delivery, the foundational principles and significance of Azerbaijan's "Electronic Government" (e-Government) initiative illustrate a deliberate and structured approach to modernizing governance. Rooted in compliance with national legislation and oriented toward safeguarding state and public interests, the e-Government system prioritizes accessibility, authenticity, and security of public information while clearly delineating responsibilities among state institutions. These principles support transparency by ensuring that citizens can access accurate and up-to-date data through streamlined and secure platforms (Elektron Hökumət, 2025a). Moreover, the emphasis on simplifying procedures and enhancing the efficiency of state and municipal bodies directly contributes to improved service delivery, enabling users to complete administrative tasks more quickly and reliably, regardless of their geographic location. By facilitating access to services through a virtual environment and leveraging modern ICT infrastructure, Azerbaijan's e-Government also enhances participation, empowering citizens to engage with public institutions remotely and effectively. The ability to request and receive verified information, track service procedures, and interact with the government from anywhere in the country reflects a deepened commitment to inclusive, citizen-centric governance. This digital infrastructure not only optimizes bureaucratic workflows but also reinforces public trust in the state's capacity to deliver transparent, responsive, and efficient services in line with the core values of good governance.

The availability of approximately 150 electronic services for citizens and over 100 services for entrepreneurs on the e-gov.az portal exemplifies Azerbaijan's practical commitment to good governance through digital means (Elektron Hökumət, 2025b). By centralizing a wide range of public services in a user-friendly online platform, the state enhances accessibility, efficiency, and accountability in service delivery. This broad service coverage empowers both individuals and businesses to

interact with government institutions transparently and conveniently, reducing bureaucratic burden and geographic limitations. Ultimately, such digital inclusion strengthens citizen participation, promotes responsive governance, and reinforces the principles of openness and effectiveness at the core of good governance.

The implementation of digital signature solutions such as “Elektron imza,” “Asan imza,” and the SİMA system has significantly enhanced the convenience and security of digital interactions between citizens and the state in Azerbaijan. These tools allow individuals to authenticate their identity and sign documents electronically, enabling seamless access to e-services without the need for physical presence.

Table 1

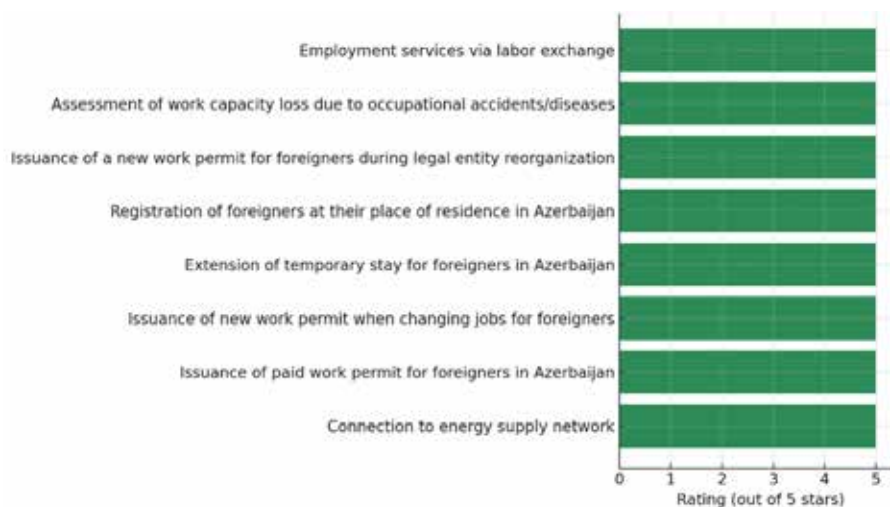
ASAN Service Index

| Indicator | Value | Description |
|----------------------------|-----------|---|
| Service Providers | 76 | Number of institutions offering services |
| Services | 315 | Total number of services available |
| Citizen Evaluations | 1,025,539 | Total number of citizen evaluations submitted |
| Services Rated by Citizens | 1,017,019 | Number of services evaluated by citizens |

Source: (*Dövlət Xidmətləri Portalı, 2025b*)

The data presented in the "ASAN Service Index" – including 76 service providers, 315 distinct services, over 1 million citizen evaluations, and more than 10 million individual service ratings – serves as a compelling indicator of Azerbaijan’s progress in digital governance. These figures reflect not only the breadth of services integrated into a unified digital platform but also the active participation of citizens in evaluating service quality. This two-way interaction between the state and the public reinforces transparency and accountability, key pillars of good governance, by allowing real-time feedback loops and evidence-based service improvement. The institutionalization of citizen evaluations on such a scale signifies a mature stage of e-governance where data-driven insights guide policy responsiveness and administrative performance.

The consistently high ratings of these government services can be attributed to their practical relevance, streamlined digital accessibility, and the efficiency with which they address citizens' and residents' essential needs. Services such as employment assistance, work permit issuance, residence

**Graph 3. Top-rated government services by citizens**

Source: (*Dövlət Xidmətləri Portalı, 2025a*)

registration for foreigners, and energy connection are directly tied to individuals' livelihoods and legal status, making their reliability and speed critically important. The digitalization of these services through platforms like ASAN has minimized bureaucratic delays, reduced face-to-face contact, and enhanced user experience, particularly for foreign nationals navigating legal procedures. The ability to complete complex administrative tasks online with transparency, clarity, and support has likely fostered high satisfaction, reinforcing public trust in the digital governance system.

To sum up, the impact of digitalization on transparency, participation, and service delivery in Azerbaijan reflects a broader commitment to building a modern, citizen-oriented governance system. Through the integration of digital platforms, streamlined services, and institutional reforms, the country has significantly improved public access to information, enhanced citizen engagement, and increased the efficiency of governmental operations. While challenges remain in ensuring inclusivity and digital literacy, the overall trajectory demonstrates that digital transformation has become a vital driver of good governance in Azerbaijan, fostering greater accountability, responsiveness, and trust between the state and society.

Conclusion. As a conclusion, the digital transformation of governance in Azerbaijan represents a strategic and multifaceted effort to enhance the principles of good governance through the adoption of modern technologies and institutional innovation. As demonstrated throughout this study, Azerbaijan has systematically integrated digital tools into public administration, aiming to strengthen transparency, accountability, participation, and service efficiency. These developments not only align with global trends but also reflect a country-specific response to the challenges of governance in a rapidly evolving technological landscape.

The conceptual convergence between digital governance and good governance, grounded in the work of prominent scholars and international institutions, has guided Azerbaijan's reform agenda. Drawing on the insights of theorists such as Jane Fountain and Manuel Castells, and institutions like the World Bank and UNDP, the country has framed digitalization not merely as a technical upgrade but as a redefinition of state-society interaction. This has enabled Azerbaijan to establish governance mechanisms that are more open, responsive, and citizen-centric, in line with international best practices.

Institutionally, Azerbaijan's journey has been marked by significant milestones including the creation of ASAN Service, the Ministry of Digital Development and Transport, the Cyber Security Service, and the Digital Trade Hub. These reforms have established a comprehensive framework for digital governance, supported by robust legal and technical infrastructure. The recent adoption of the Digital Development Concept reinforces the government's long-term commitment to transitioning toward a GovTech model – where real-time data, artificial intelligence, and integrated platforms form the backbone of agile, secure, and inclusive decision-making processes.

Empirical data from public service platforms such as e-gov.az and dxr.az, as well as performance metrics like the ASAN Service Index, demonstrate measurable progress in digital service delivery. Citizens and businesses are increasingly engaging with the government through digital channels, benefiting from streamlined administrative procedures and enhanced access to information. The high satisfaction ratings for key services validate the effectiveness of these digital platforms and signal public trust in the evolving digital governance ecosystem.

In summary, Azerbaijan's experience illustrates how digitalization, when strategically planned and ethically implemented, can serve as a powerful instrument for advancing good governance. By embedding digital tools within institutional structures and aligning them with core governance values, Azerbaijan is gradually transforming its public administration into a more transparent, accountable, and inclusive system. The country's ongoing digital reforms not only provide a model for other developing nations but also underscore the critical role of digital governance in shaping the future of democratic, citizen-oriented governance in the 21st century.

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