Regulating Digital Social Protection in Post-Soviet States: Comparative Institutional Perspectives from Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan

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Abstract. Shared administrative legacies from the Soviet Union are examined in this article and how they shape the development of digital social protection systems when combined with differing institutional arrangements. This paper finds that while there has been research on the digitalisation of welfare services, there has been a shortage of comparative institutional frameworks that explain the differences across post-Soviet countries. Therefore, by applying an institutional analytical framework to the analysis of both the digital social protection systems of Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan, this paper aims to fill that gap. This research uses comparative document and policy analyses to evaluate the governance arrangement, legal and regulatory regime, organisational structure and digital infrastructure underpinning the delivery of welfare services in each country. The findings indicate that although both countries have similar administrative legacies, they have both taken different approaches to digital welfare development as a result of their varying levels of coordination capacities and legal formalisation; furthermore, both have pursued different styles of governance. In particular, Azerbaijan has focused on developing centralised service-based platforms whereas Kazakhstan has adopted a more comprehensive approach to developing its digital governance and welfare system. Overall, this article concludes that the way in which institutions have been organised determines the outcome of digital welfare systems.

1. INTRODUCTION

The current trend of digitalising governments has emerged as a primary aspect of redefining social policy, as the digitisation of social policies has altered how social protections are structured and how social protections work and are administered in various ways and across various political and economic backgrounds. This transformation has been created by a greater reliance on digital platforms, integrated datasets and automatic processing as a means of providing benefits, targeting services more efficiently and maximising administrative efficiencies (World Bank 2022). As technology continues to create ways in which to address long-standing problems in social services delivery, researchers have noted that the effect of the introduction of digital technologies causes a paradigm shift from traditional means of governance to a new model of state-citizen interaction (Dencik et al. 2020; Henman 2019). Research related to digital social protection is providing insight into different aspects of the delivery of digital social protections, specifically related to platform design, the efficiency of the delivery of services and the potential for creating wider coverage and lowering costs through the use of digital tools (Devereux 2021). However, a large part of the literature available has been primarily focused on how to adopt new technologies or the immediate outcomes of policies developed by governments using technological advancements and have not sufficiently addressed the institutional environment in which digital social welfare delivery systems are established. Furthermore, there is a gap in the literature regarding institutional frameworks that allow for comparisons of the evolution of digital social protections across Post-Soviet countries, which have a common historical background yet exhibit very different trajectories in the evolution of digital governance (Knox and Janenova 2019). Post-Soviet contexts provide an instructive example of the effects of institutional design on welfare, because as administrative structures inherited from the Soviet Union are built upon the administrative structures established by the Centralised State Administration and other centralised administrations; thus welfare systems are heavily influenced by these structures and thus shape the design and implementation of welfare systems.
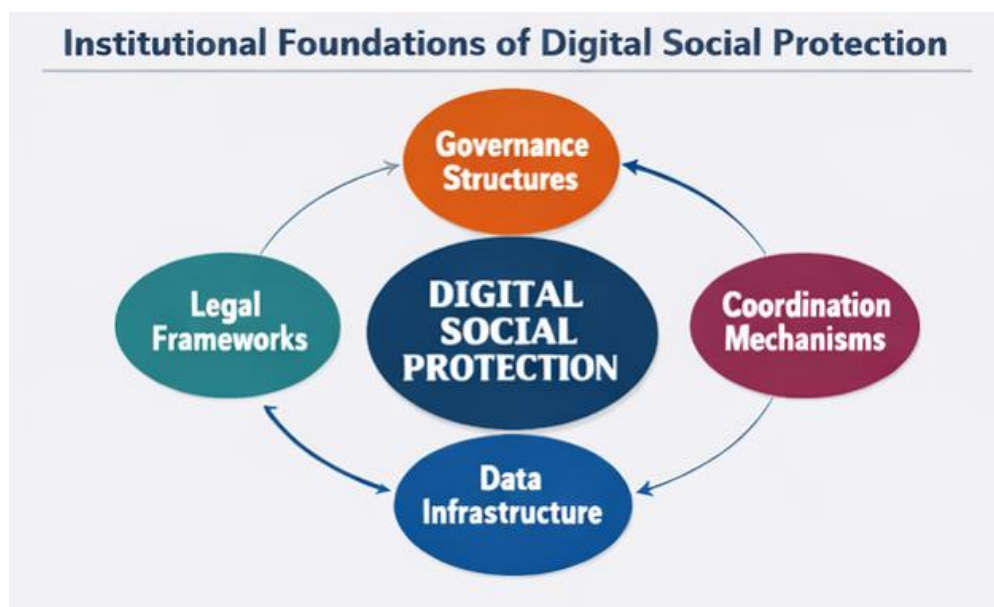
Figure 1. Institutional Foundations of Digital Social Protection.

Digital reforms build on top the existing administrative systems, and do not supplant those systems; rather, digital reforms work simultaneously with existing welfare processes, methods, and rules established by the administrative structures inherited from the Soviet Union. Thus, an analysis of digital welfare in a post-Soviet state must occur at an analytic level greater than the platform (e.g. user interface); thus a greater analysis of the administration, structure, and methods of governance that govern digital welfare design, coordination, governance (over time) must occur. In this paper, we develop and apply an institutional analysis of digital welfare in Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan. Using Document Code Comparison methodology, we compare and contrast the governance structure of the digital welfare across both countries. We find that while there are many similarities in the way the two countries inherit their administrative structures; the path taken by Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan has been very different, as Kazakhstan has adopted a model based upon centralisation of the digital welfare bureaucratic structure while Azerbaijan has moved significantly to adopt an agency-based service-oriented model. This study ultimately contributes to the broader literature by demonstrating the critical role of institutional legacies in shaping the "digital welfare state."

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

A comparative qualitative study research design is a method used to compare and contrast how different forms of digital social protection are constructed within an institution, and therefore, has been applied to measure the similarities and differences between two post-Soviet Republics (i.e., Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan). The use of a comparative qualitative research design for digital social protection is advised as the comparison provides systematic insights into the impact that different digital governance paths are having on the historical institutional legacies of same." Rather than a typical narrative on each of the specific digital platforms that have been established in each country, the emphasis of this study is to provide an institutional point of view regarding Digital Governance and the role that governance structures, legal frameworks, coordination models, and data structures/requirements shape the structure and implementation of Digital Governance.

Figure 2. Comparative Document and Policy Analysis Workflow.

2.1. Research Design

Comparative qualitative document and policy analysis serve as the foundation for this research study. This methodology allows researchers to compare the dynamics of public sector organisations (governments & institutions) and how they are represented by formal policies and documents (legal texts). By examining how digital social protection has evolved within these two post-Soviet countries over time (as opposed to looking at one country only), it is possible to identify commonalities and differences, which cannot be fully understood by investigating only one case; rather, the synthesis of multiple cases will reveal a comprehensive understanding of digital social protection governance across these two different settings. The comparative methodology also facilitates the creation and utilisation of an Institutional Analytical Framework that offers guidance to researchers wishing to explore the reasons for differences in models of Digital Welfare Governance between transitional contexts (i.e., Soviet Union vs. Russia).

2.2. Data Sources and Document Selection

The documents examined for this evaluation were identified through a targeted sampling process and were chosen to represent the formal institutional structure of Digital Social Protection Systems in Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan. These documents included:

1. Social Protection Law and Regulation documents, Digital Governance Law and Regulation documents, Data Management Law and Regulation documents, Public Service Delivery Law and Regulation documents;

2. Digital National Strategies that have been issued by both countries and provide an outline of their state priorities, reform pathways, and policy objectives for both Digital National Strategies;

3. Digital Social Protection Platform Documentation that comprises official documents concerning the digital social protection platforms, implementation Guidelines, as well as Technical documentation regarding the Digital Social Protection Systems that have been published and are publicly accessible;

4. Government Ministry Reports and Publications, Public Agency Reports and Publications, Reports & Publications published by International Organizations and the institutions affiliated to them, e.g., the World Bank, OECD, UNDP. Such reports document the Digital Social Protection Reforms and Administrative Practices that both countries have undertaken.

Selection of documents was undertaken using the defined Inclusion Criteria which favoured those sources that had a legal or policy foundation and was directly related to how Digital Welfare Governance is achieved, and had clear implications with respect to Institutional Authority, Coordination, and Data Utilisation.

2.3. Temporal Scope

From two thousand to now is the period that has been looked at with this kind of analysis that shows how e-government and digital governance have taken root since the end of the USSR in many of those countries and how the evolution of social protection through digital government has grown over time. This view allows us to see the way digitalisation has become normalized over time as part of a longer term series of events in government transformation and the evolution of social protection. We are able to see the way digitalization has ultimately created a level of change in how we think about, operate, and run welfare programs; as opposed to thinking about it merely in terms of a specific or short-term policy change.
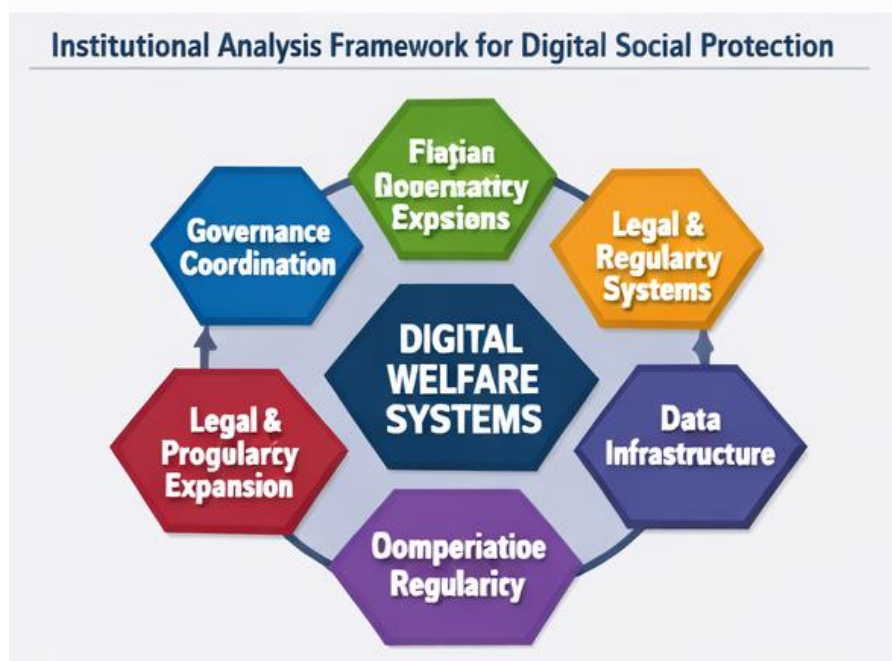

Figure 3. Evolution of Digital Governance and Social Protection (2000–Present).

2.4. Analytical Strategy

The research adopted a well-organized methodology with multiple levels of analysis to increase the credibility and objectivity of the analysis. At the first level, all documents analyzed were assigned codes based on the patterns identified in these documents and used to create a list of themes relevant to institutional design (ie. Governance systems, regulatory frameworks, coordination

structures, and data infrastructure). The coding scheme used was based on an analytical framework developed from institutions rather than predetermined outcome indicators. At the second level, these coded documents were grouped into larger themes according to the focus of the research (ie. Administrative capacity, Political economy, Governance style). This grouping was useful for providing standardized means of comparing cases while at the same time taking into account the different context of each. At the final level, the case study futures were mapped; this consisted of identifying the major players, their roles in the development of digital social protection systems, their legal authority, and their relationship to one another in terms of coordination. The institutional mapping results show how digital social protection platforms are related to other parts of the institutional architecture in which Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan are located and demonstrate how the two cases differ and share similarities in certain areas.

2.5. Scope and Limitations

The primary purpose of this paper is to clarify what a framework is and how it works. This paper does not discuss how effective or successful individual digital welfare programs or policies are nor does it discuss how programs or policies may have had different effects on citizens. This paper focuses on how different factors such as historical legacy, regulation, and website (internet) infrastructure may create a framework that is part of the overall social protection system. Instead of placing more importance on evaluating program and policy outcomes, this study tries to create a better theoretical understanding of the differences among Digital Welfare States through comparisons among them. This framework will allow for theoretically informed analytical comparisons of future research on Digital Welfare Programs through both programmatic evaluation type (impact studies) and people-based (interview) research. The theories produced for future study can be broadly applied to Post-Soviet and other types of transitional governments.

3. RESULTS

This section of the research reveals all of its analytical findings. The results do not merely include quantitative outcomes; it includes the conceptual, institutional and comparative observations identified using the systematic document and policy analysis method. The results are reported in three operational ways, as follows: i) conceptual basis for digital social protection; ii) institutional features of the digital governance framework within the post-Soviet countries' welfare systems; and iii) the Institutional Framework utilized for a comparative analysis of digital social protection system development across different countries.

3.1. Conceptual Foundations of Digital Social Protection

The global policy frameworks that provide assistance in understanding how to manage and govern the digital provision of welfare benefits indicate that the structure of welfare will be able to change more than just through application of technologies. There is no one definition of Digital Social Protection that has been collectively agreed upon by the organisations that offer them. However, the OECD, World Bank, and United Nations Development Programme have some agreement on certain key aspects regarding the governance of Digital Social Protection Systems. The OECD's definition of Digital Social Protection primarily focuses on using Digital Technology and Digital Data strategically to improve access, efficiency of administration, and service delivery for all beneficiaries in order to create a more modernized form of providing welfare benefits. In their analysis of the implementation of Digital Social Protection Systems, the OECD indicated that it would offer streamlined processes for enlisting as a beneficiary, better identifying beneficiaries for the purpose of not only issuing welfare benefits, but for linking beneficiaries with additional types of aid available to them, and more efficient means of delivering those benefits and linking users with additional financial aid available to them. The digitalization of welfare benefits (Digital Welfare) is considered by the OECD to be intimately related to the sustainability of public finances and the modernization of the systems used by governments to manage all welfare benefits to the public.

Across these international perspectives, digital social protection is consistently presented as extending beyond the adoption of digital tools. Instead, digitalisation reshapes how welfare systems are designed, administered, and legitimised. As welfare governance becomes increasingly data-driven, institutional practices are reconfigured around interoperability, automated decision-making, and cross-organisational information flows (Schou and Pors 2018; Ncube 2023). The layering of digital technologies onto existing institutional arrangements introduces a distinct "digital logic" into public service production, influencing both implementation processes and the exercise of authority (Pedersen and Rendtorff 2016).

The analysis of the analyzed documents demonstrates that the performance of systems is influenced more by the context of the systems where the technology is applied, Why? It can often be defined not just technically but also by legal requirement, agency, and ways that organizations work together to provide Digital Welfare Systems. These are examples of how these factors will influence how digital welfare platforms are created to be used and how the actual operation of those platforms is performed (Lips & Schuppan, 2023; Martinez-Moyano, 2006). Digital Platforms will then be formed and fully operational as a result of the structure or institutional way(s) that they are embedded into. Recent policy-based literature agrees that there is a need to expand on the definition of what a "good" digital welfare state is based on many factors other than just efficiency and/or technological sophistication; these include the areas of organization design, how inclusive is the platform(s), and what type of governance capabilities can be put in place, and they emphasize the need for context-based frameworks for analyzing digital welfare systems (Faith & Hernandez, 2024).

3.2. Digital Governance in Post-Soviet Welfare States

The research has shown that the historical legacy of post-Soviet administrative structures significantly influences how digital social protection systems have developed. In these regions, the way in which social welfare systems are governed today continues to be heavily impacted by the centralization of authority within a hierarchical bureaucratic structure that relies on state-controlled mechanisms of coordination (Åslund 2013). The legacy of these structures not only determines the speed at which digital reforms are implemented but also provides a framework for the way in which digital services will be provided in relation to social welfare services. Research of e-Government within Central and Eastern Europe indicate that within post-Soviet and other transitional states, the existing administrative cultures, institutional fragmentation, and the ability to provide coordination shape the pathway for digital governance reform significantly more so than the mere existence of digital technology (Cecon et al. 2023).

Digital technologies do not replace the current form of governance; instead, digital technologies are integrated, in a selective manner, into the existing institutional framework. Within a post-Soviet context, digitalization often reinforces or restructures current administrative practices rather than completely replacing them. This relationship between digitalization and administrative practice continues to be a point of contention between technological determinism and the social shaping of technology. Digital tools are constrained, adapted and used within the existing rules, norms and power relations embedded within the post-Soviet governance systems (Åslund 2013).

Digital governance related to welfare admin frequently reproduce policies of hierarchy and centralization. Digital platform implementation is often limited in terms of agency horizontal integration as a result of fragmented institutional mandates and rigid coordination structure mechanisms. The post-Soviet welfare systems provide an ideal candidate for the institutional analysis of how digitalization occurs within already established systems of governance and not as an integrated/neutral means of implementing welfare administration. In addition to revealing the differences between how digital initiatives related to social protection are formed in different ways, the findings suggest that the digital-based social protection initiatives in post-Soviet states can best be understood as the result of institutional processes that have been developed or created through the historical path of the country and later developed as the country progressed through its past. The development of these institutions will result in the creation of institutional path dependencies that affect the sequencing of reforms, the governing body of a given welfare system and the degree to which institutional transformation takes place.

3.3. Institutional Framework for Analyzing Digital Social Protection

Based on our study, we have developed a conceptual framework to compare the different types of digital social protection systems. The framework describes digital social protection as an institutional phenomenon, with emphasis placed on how formal and informal rules, organizational mandates, mechanisms of coordination, and power relations influence the governance of digital welfare.

The framework includes six interrelated dimensions:

Governance and Coordination: This first dimension, Governance and Coordination, describes how authority, responsibility and resources are divided between various institutions involved in digital social protection. Our analysis illustrates that effective coordination between institutions is essential to align institutional mandates and operational responsibilities across digital welfare systems (Wehmeier 2024). When there is weak coordination, there is a greater risk of design-reality gaps occurring, where digital solutions do not meet the requirements of administrative or political contexts (Archer 2023; Ncube 2023). In post-Soviet countries studies of digital politics and the relationship between the state and society have demonstrated that digital technologies become part of existing power structures and governance logics, resulting in the way digital reform will be adopted, challenged, and institutionalized (Karatzogianni et al. 2017).

The second dimension, legal and regulatory frameworks, examines the formal rules governing social protection, data protection, digital identity, cybersecurity, and administrative procedures. The findings indicate that legal clarity is central to enabling data sharing and institutional accountability within digital welfare systems (OECD 2021; Lips and Schuppan 2023).

Digital Infrastructure and Platforms (~Tec) provide information and communications technology (ICT) capabilities to enable mobile social support services and to track, manage, and evaluate the use of these services. The findings based on the existing ICT policies indicate that the design and operation of mobile support services, including how they operate, work together, and integrate with existing private-sector data sources, is dependent upon the governmental or non-governmental arrangements governing their respective spaces and how these arrangements dynamically interrelate with and support each other. Therefore, it is the way that governments manage and approve access to mobile support services that are most important to their successful execution. Accountabilities, monitoring, redressing, and oversight in the mobile service and welfare space are determined by how governments and non-profits provide effective oversight over the governance of mobile services and systems. The more that digitized governance consists of automated (data-driven) systems, the greater the need for effective and substantive government oversight as a way of establishing, ensuring, and maintaining public accountability and confidence to safeguard against failure.

3.4. Comparative Results: Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan

In this part of the report, we compare Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan through the lens of the Institutional Framework. The comparative analysis does not offer a traditional country profile as each of them is unique. We analyze how they utilize differing types of Governance Systems to build their respective Digital Social Protection Systems while drawing upon the same post-Soviet polity institutions. The results reveal that although both countries have converged on the Administrative Foundations of Digital Social Protection; there are many divergences between them in areas such as the Institutional Configurations, Coordination Capacities and Governance Styles (see Åslund, 2013; Cook, 2013; Knox & Janenova, 2019).

3.4.1. Institutional Contexts

The evaluation results indicate that, as is evident from the studies referenced above, there are many commonalities in the foundational components of post-Soviet institutions in both Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan, including their reliance on heavily centralized administrative systems with hierarchical bureaucratic structures and their reliance on strong historical traditions of introducing and regulating economic and social planning through the state. The same can be said for the evolution of their current welfare governance models, as well as the manner in which digitalization will be approached in each country. In both situations, the reforms related to digital social protection have been initiated and led primarily by central government authorities and are framed as part of a modernization effort that will enable improved efficiency and build the capacity of the state through digitization (Knox and Janenova 2019). Moreover, the body of research that examines how political-economic factors impact e-government adoption in Central Asian countries notes that the drivers behind digital governance reform efforts may stem from anti-corruption narratives, signaling political will, and providing state control, and therefore leads to variation in both reform priorities and implementation strategies (Keegan 2024).

That being said, even though the two countries began to implement digital social protection reforms in similar ways, the institutional context in which those reforms have grown has developed differently in many significant ways. The differences in both

countries' administrative capacities, regulatory frameworks, and coordination models have led to different digital governance paths and allow for fruitful comparisons across the two case studies (Capano and Toth 2023).

3.4.2. Digital Social Protection in Azerbaijan

- Institutional context.
  In Azerbaijan, due to a centralized governance structure that relies heavily on past administrative systems to develop Digital Social Protection; (Welfare) Governance includes tiers of authority coordinating within an Executive Driven Reform model where e-Government & Digital Initiatives are a part of the larger Government, State-Building agenda (Aasland 2013; Knox and Jananova 2019) that has shaped both how these Digital Welfare systems operate as well as what they are designed to be..
- Key digital social protection initiatives.
  Azerbaijan's digital social protection landscape is anchored by flagship service platforms that function as central hubs for welfare delivery. Initiatives such as ASAN Service Centres and the Agency for Sustainable and Operative Social Security (DO) consolidate access to social services and benefits within integrated service environments. These platforms aim to improve accessibility, streamline administrative procedures, and enhance service efficiency by centralising interactions between citizens and the state (Lips and Schuppan 2023).
- Governance and implementation arrangements.
  In Azerbaijan, digital social protection governance is mostly a hierarchical structure. Hierarchical structures primarily govern coordination between institutions, following the inherited approach of "top down" coordination as opposed to "bottom up" or horizontal coordination (Cook 2013). Digital Platforms have enabled the ability for agencies to integrate services at the point of service delivery, but issues with overall interoperability and agency collaboration continue to exist due to fragmented institutional settings and differences in implementation across institutions (Schou and Pors 2018; Ncube 2023). Accountability and oversight of the administration is facilitated through the traditional hierarchical structures in which agencies exist, and while transparency initiatives focus primarily on providing access to information, independent monitoring and/or redress processes have been limited (Archer 2023).

3.4.3. Digital Social Protection in Kazakhstan

- Institutional context.
  Kazakhstan's approach to developing its digital social protection system has taken place in a governance context where there is a significantly higher level of administrative and institutional capacity. Even though it retains a high degree of centralization through its governance structures, Kazakhstan has made considerable investments in developing legal, organizational, and technical resources to facilitate and support the delivery of digital public services (Amirova et al. 2025; Uandykova et al. 2025) through coordinated governance at the system level.

- Key digital social protection initiatives.
  Kazakhstan has implemented a comprehensive governance structure that is supported by a system of multiple government entities sharing information electronically in order to provide citizens with digital social services. With this approach, digital services will assist in reducing bureaucratic processes by allowing information to flow freely across agencies and allowing citizens to access services without the requirement of submitting multiple applications. (OECD, 2021; Modernising Access to Social Protection, 2024.).
- Governance and implementation arrangements.
  Kazakhstan has developed a more structured and coordinated system of governance than Azerbaijan. In Kazakhstan, digital social protection initiatives are developed under specific mandates from the government and operate within defined inter-agency structures. These relationships allow agencies to work together in the development of a coordinated delivery model that maximizes services to citizens through data integration and interoperability (United Nations Economic Commission for Europe 2023; OECD 2019). The implementation of mechanisms that oversee the digital governance of social welfare systems encourages and facilitates institutional accountability and supports the development of transparent digital welfare systems (Archer 2023).

3.4.4. Structured Institutional Comparison

The Institutional Analytical Framework was applied to both Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan for the purpose of systematically gathering data to create a comparative analysis. The findings illustrate how pre-existing institutional elements from the former Soviet Union's administration and differences in the countries' respective governance structures, their legal frameworks, their methods of coordinating data collection, and their various types of data infrastructures shape the formation of each country's DSPS. The same six areas of investigation for both the Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan cases highlighted patterns in the institutional elements present that could not be identified from one case alone.

Table 1. Comparative institutional analysis of digital social protection in Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan

Dimension	Azerbaijan	Kazakhstan
Governance and Coordination	Strongly centralised governance with hierarchical, top-down coordination. Digital social protection initiatives are primarily driven by ministerial authority and executive agencies, with limited horizontal coordination across institutions.	Emphasis on integrated governance arrangements supporting inter-agency coordination. Formal mechanisms align mandates and operational responsibilities across digital public services, reflecting higher coordination capacity.
Legal and Regulatory Frameworks	Centrally developed legal frameworks underpin digital social protection, with growing attention to digital identity, cybersecurity, and AI regulation. Legal authority remains concentrated, reinforcing state-led digital governance.	Robust legal and institutional frameworks support digital public services, including explicit mandates for data stewardship, privacy protection, and cybersecurity, enabling institutionalised data sharing.
Digital Infrastructure and Platforms	Digital platforms are embedded within central government systems and serve as administrative modernisation tools. Flagship platforms such as ASAN and DOST function as integrated service hubs within a centralised architecture.	Significant investment in integrated digital platforms designed for system-wide interoperability. Infrastructure development aligns with proactive and composite service delivery models.
Data Integration and Interoperability	Data integration relies on centralised registries and state-defined technical standards. Interoperability exists but remains constrained by hierarchical governance and uneven implementation across agencies.	Strong institutional emphasis on data integration and interoperability. Governance arrangements support cross-agency data exchange necessary for once-only and proactive services.
Eligibility, Access, and Administrative Burdens	Eligibility determination reflects centralised administrative procedures. Digital platforms streamline processes, but digital divides and uneven access remain institutional challenges for vulnerable groups.	Institutional design explicitly aims to reduce administrative burdens through citizen-centred, integrated service models, simplifying eligibility and access processes.
Accountability, Transparency, and Oversight	Oversight mechanisms are embedded within traditional state administrative structures. Transparency initiatives focus on information access, though accountability remains closely tied to executive control.	Formal monitoring and performance frameworks govern national digital programmes, supporting institutionalised accountability and transparency mechanisms.

Based on the findings, it appears that in Azerbaijan, the government's digital social protection system is built around centralized control and state provision of services, with digital platforms integrated into existing hierarchical administrative structures. This combination allows for swift implementation of visible service improvement measures; however, it limits the interoperability, horizontal coordination, and institutional accountability of the various pieces in the system (Schou & Pors, 2018; Ncube, 2023). There are continued challenges related to digital inclusion for particular groups who encounter barriers associated with digital literacy and geographic differences (O'Sullivan et al., 2021; Neves, 2017).
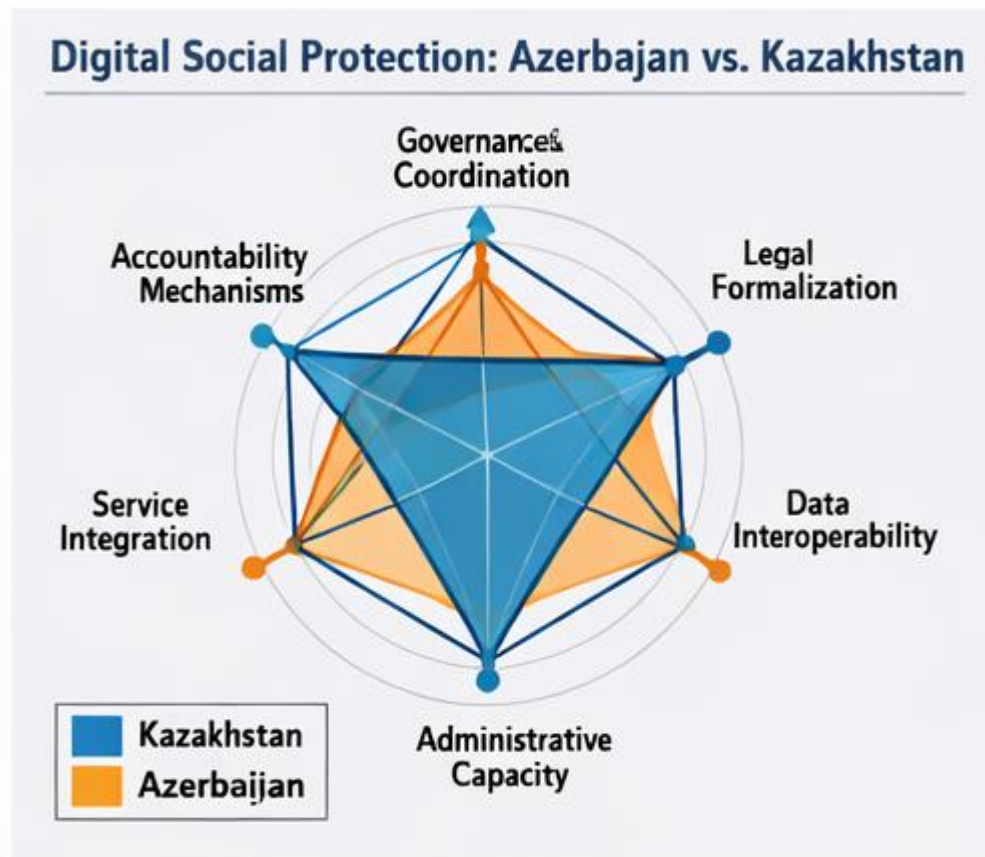
Figure 4. Comparative Institutional Profiles: Azerbaijan vs Kazakhstan.

Kazakhstan's digital social protection system exhibits a significant shift away from centralised control toward coordinated governance and formalisation of laws regulating those services throughout the entire system; this includes investing in establishing data governance, interoperability, and monitoring systems (OECD, 2019; OECD, 2021). Nonetheless, there are still challenges remaining—most notably concerning legacy data systems and continuing consolidation of regulations; however, the institutional structure of the digital social protection system creates opportunities for more integrated and accountable digital welfare systems (Amirova et al., 2025).

Thus, the comparative findings show that digital social protection systems do not develop in a linear fashion across ex-Soviet countries. Instead, they are shaped by how digital technology is selectively incorporated into the existing government structures in place before independence. The level of administrative capacity and coordination, as well as the type of governance structure, will be major determining factors for each country's digital welfare strategies, even when each country shares a common historical background (Thelen and Steinmo, 1992; Skogstad, 2023).

4. DISCUSSION

The two case studies of Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan demonstrate the importance of governance in determining how digitalization affects welfare states, rather than relying solely on technology. For both nations, due to the post-Soviet legacy, there was a lot of centralization and hierarchy. However, the two countries have developed different ways to provide social welfare digitally, which reinforces how important governance structures are, as well as legal frameworks, mechanisms for coordinating services, and the capacity to administer services. Analyzing the similarities and differences between the two countries provides insights on how institutional arrangements that were inherited have influenced digital welfare reform. Digitalization of welfare has occurred primarily through top-down executive-driven mechanisms, which aligns with post-Soviet governance systems, both in Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan (Åslund 2013, Cook 2013). Kazakhstan has created a more coordinated and formalized approach to integrating digital social protection into governance through the use of legally mandated data stewardship agreements and performance measurement; whereas Azerbaijan has focused on the development of flagship digital welfare services rather than restructuring their entire systems around a coordinated digital social welfare system.

These divergent trajectories illustrate how digital technologies are selectively integrated into existing institutional environments rather than functioning as neutral or transformative forces in their own right. Consistent with institutionalism scholarship, the findings demonstrate that digitalization tends to reinforce or reconfigure established governance practices rather than replace them (Hall and Taylor 1996; Thelen and Steinmo 1992). Where coordination mechanisms and legal frameworks are weak or fragmented, digital reforms risk reproducing institutional silos and limiting interoperability, even when technologically advanced platforms are in place (Schou and Pors 2018; Ncube 2023).

The analysis also reveals important implications for access, administrative burdens, and digital inclusion. Kazakhstan's emphasis on integrated and proactive service delivery reflects an institutional commitment to reducing administrative burdens and simplifying access pathways. In Azerbaijan, while digital platforms such as ASAN and DOST have improved service accessibility for many users, institutional constraints related to coordination, data integration, and digital literacy continue to shape uneven access outcomes. These findings align with broader concerns that digitalisation can reproduce or intensify existing inequalities when institutional safeguards are insufficient (O'Sullivan et al., 2021; Neves, 2017).

Accountability and oversight emerge as another critical dimension differentiating the two cases. Kazakhstan has institutionalised monitoring and performance frameworks within its national digital governance strategy, strengthening

transparency and formal accountability mechanisms. In Azerbaijan, oversight remains more closely tied to traditional administrative hierarchies, with transparency initiatives focused primarily on information provision rather than independent review or redress. This contrast highlights how governance style conditions the extent to which digital welfare systems are subject to institutional scrutiny and ethical oversight (Archer 2023; Ncube 2023).

Taken together, these findings reinforce the analytical value of an institutional approach to digital social protection. They demonstrate that successful digital welfare reform depends less on platform design and more on the coherence of institutional arrangements governing authority, coordination, data use, and accountability. Without such coherence, digitalisation risks generating design–reality gaps in which technological systems fail to align with administrative capacity and social conditions.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Rather than primarily viewing the digital social protection as a technological innovation, this article reframes it as a multifaceted institutional transformation resulting from numerous governance structures, legal frameworks, coordination frameworks and historical legacies. Through the application of an institutional analytical framework to the cases of Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan, the author has demonstrated that using similar post-Soviet administrative foundations could produce several different types of digital welfare trajectories. Additionally, the author's main theoretical contribution has been reframing digital social protection as an institutional phenomenon. Finding from the comparison of both countries showed that the actual meaning, function, and impacts of digital platforms will only result in the existence of prior institutional architectures. When coordination mechanisms are created at the highest level of government, the digital social protection system is most likely to progress in an inclusive and accountable manner. When digital platforms are incorporated into the hierarchical structure or fragmented structures of the government, their potential for transformation is limited. The research does not evaluate the effectiveness of policies or distributional outcomes or reflect on the lived experiences of social welfare recipients, and rather, it presents a useful tool for analyzing the institutional configuration which underpins the design and governance of digital social protection systems.

From a policy perspective, the findings suggest that investments in digital platforms and data infrastructures will yield limited benefits unless accompanied by reforms that strengthen institutional coordination, legal clarity, and accountability mechanisms. For scholars, the study underscores the importance of institutional analysis in explaining variation in digital welfare governance and highlights the need to move beyond platform-centred accounts of digitalisation.

Ultimately, the success of digital social protection depends not on technological advancement alone, but on the institutional coherence that enables digital systems to function inclusively, transparently, and sustainably within welfare states undergoing transformation.

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