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## **Factors for the Successful Implementation of ASAN Service in Azerbaijan**

**Ilhama GASIMZADE <sup>1</sup>**

### **Abstract**

This paper examines the success of the Azerbaijan Service Assessment Network (ASAN) using the governance approach. This research has particular importance due to the application of the governance approach to a non-western state which has distinct political characteristics. Employing the textual analysis method and adopting McConnell's definition of policy success, the paper reveals that the ASAN Service has not received any criticism in the literature by researchers and policymakers. The analysis of the political context in Azerbaijan sheds light on the reasons for the successful implementation of the ASAN Service. The paper argues that the ASAN Service has succeeded because of the main characteristics of the political system in the country. The analysis shows that lack of veto players in the policymaking process and the strong political commitment ensured the unhindered establishment of the ASAN Service. The highly centralized management model of the ASAN Service increased its accountability and effectiveness.

**Keywords:** Governance; ASAN Service; Public service; Public Administration.

## **Azerbaycan'da ASAN Hizmetin Başarılı Bir Şekilde Uygulanmasının Faktörleri**

### **Özet**

Bu makale, yönetim yaklaşımını kullanarak Azerbaycan Hizmet ve Değerlendirme Ağı'nın (ASAN) başarısını incelemektedir. Bu araştırma, yönetim yaklaşımının farklı siyasi özelliklere sahip Batılı olmayan bir devlete uygulanması nedeniyle özel bir öneme sahiptir. Metin analizi yöntemini kullanan ve McConnell'in politika başarısı tanımını benimseyen makale, ASAN Hizmetin literatürde araştırmacılar ve politika yapıcılar tarafından herhangi bir eleştiri almadığını ortaya koymaktadır. Azerbaycan'daki siyasi bağlamın analizi, ASAN Hizmetin başarılı bir şekilde uygulanmasının nedenlerine ışık tutuyor. Makale, ASAN Hizmetin ülkedeki siyasi sistemin temel özellikleri nedeniyle başarılı olduğunu savunuyor. Analiz, politika oluşturma sürecindeki veto oyuncularının eksikliğinin ve güçlü siyasi bağlılığın ASAN Hizmetin engelsiz bir şekilde kurulmasını sağladığını göstermektedir. ASAN Hizmetin yüksek düzeyde merkezileştirilmiş yönetim modeli, hesap verebilirliğini ve etkinliğini artırdı.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Yönetişim; ASAN hizmet; Kamu hizmeti; Kamu Yönetimi.

<sup>1</sup> *Independent researcher, post graduate from University of York and Central European University, e-mail: [ilhama.gasimzade@gmail.com](mailto:ilhama.gasimzade@gmail.com), ORCID: 0000-0001-9958-8606.*

**Introduction**

This article critically assesses the ASAN Service and the possible reasons for its successful implementation using the governance approach. Azerbaijan's ASAN Service is an interesting case for studying because it moves beyond the scope of the countries that governance literature often focuses on. Additionally, Azerbaijan represents a distinct governance model with high state capacity. Considering the great impact of the ASAN Service on public administration in Azerbaijan, the analysis of the case is of great importance in terms of its contribution to the governance literature.

The paper argues that the ASAN Service has succeeded because of the main characteristics of the political system in the country. According to the governance literature, Azerbaijan represents the case where the state's role is highly important in governance. The paper reveals that the political nature of the country where the president is a decisive player, strong political will and commitment to the policy and highly centralized management of the ASAN service are the key reasons for its success.

The essay starts with an overview of the academic debate on governance approach. It is followed by a theoretical and conceptual framework. Next section is divided into three subsections. The first part discusses the overall context in Azerbaijan and the foundation of the ASAN Service. The second part presents a ground for defining ASAN as a success. The final part outlines the potential reasons for the successful implementation of the ASAN service in Azerbaijan. The final chapter concludes the essay.

**Literature review**

New Public Management (NPM) reforms brought about significant challenges and problems to the delivery of public services. Post-NPM reforms have mainly addressed to fragmentation and lack of coordination that emerged as a consequence of horizontal and vertical specialization in NPM. Interorganizational relations were the primary focus of the "governance-inspired" post-NPM reforms through a holistic style of governance, joined-up targets, coordination and centralized control. Post-NPM reforms contain governance elements and networks which supplement former coordination mechanisms such as hierarchy and market. The emergence of joined-up-governments, as well as one-stop-shops, provided new solutions for the problems of coordination and integration (Christensen and Lægreid, 2012, pp. 256–60). Various post-NPM reforms have been initiated in different countries according to their political and administrative culture. However, post-NPM reforms have not supplanted

NPM initiatives, the reforms rebalanced existing systems rather than changing them fundamentally (Christensen and Lægreid, 2012, p. 265).

Governance is of great importance in identifying the reasons for policy failure. As Peters (2015) argues the characteristics of policy are not always the determinant of policy failure. Sometimes lack of coordination and collaboration is the main cause of policy failures which Peter calls “Governance failure 2” (Peters, 2015, p. 263). Thus, governance capacity can also be the reason for policy success.

Governance is being widely used by policymakers. Some view it as “the foundation of a significant political theory” in political science. The concept of governance can provide political science with the necessary ground to explore how the state alone or with other non-state actors can guide and control for the society and the economy (Peters, 2012, p. 20). The term governance is etymologically a Greek word which means “steering a boat”. In political science terms, it is steering society and economy (Peters, 2018, p. 6). For Peters (2018) steering is a very broad conception of governance and does not privilege any state or non-state actors. However, Rhodes, (2012, p. 36) points out policy networks and delineate them as “self-organizing networks”. For him, governance refers to “the changing boundaries between public, private, and voluntary sectors, and to the changing role of the state” (Rhodes, 2012, p. 34). Rhodes’s definition of governance is associated with network governance. The problematic aspect of this approach is that Rhodes sets concrete institutional features which limit the scope of governance. These characteristics include interdependent organizations; interactive relations between network members; repeating interactions under rules agreed by network members; and a greater degree of autonomy. This approach does not recognize the given phenomenon as governance if one of these features is absent (Kjær, 2011, p. 104). Considering that the case under investigation does not exhibit pure governance elements (i.e, the system lacks autonomous network members), this approach may mislead our conclusion.

Kjær (2004) distinguishes the definitions of governance in public administration and public policy, international relations, European Union studies, comparative politics and good governance promoted by the World Bank (cited in Rhodes, 2007, p. 1254). In public policy, governance can be understood as a process that includes goal-setting, policy formulation and implementation and evaluating the success or the failure of those policies (Peters, 2015, p. 267). In this regard, governance has something in common with implementation studies. The problem associated with “hollowing out of the state” thesis and centre’s incapacity to achieve government policy reminds us of the top-down approach to policy implementation.

Additionally, we can relate Rhodes's description of governance as "self-organizing networks" with a bottom-up approach that portrays the policy implementation through "self-selecting clusters" of public and private organizations (Cairney, 2009, pp. 357–58).

The significant part of the literature has been focused on the changing role of state authority in governance. In this respect, three waves of governance are identified: Network governance, metagovernance and interpretive governance. Network governance is characterized by the decrease in the state capacity following the NPM reforms in the 1980s. This wave argues that the capacity of "core executive" has been hollowed out from below by networks and marketization of service delivery, from above by transnational organizations and sideways by new regulatory and coordinating agencies (Rhodes, 2012, p. 36). The first wave was viewed as society-centred and the supporter of self-governance (Matthews, 2012, p. 284). In contrast, the second wave, metagovernance claims that the state is taking the control back through various forms of steering including negotiation and diplomacy. They acknowledge the role of non-state actors in providing services, however, claim that the state steers the networks that govern the society and the economy (Rhodes, 2012, p. 36). In other words, it can be stated as "the governance of government and governance" (Jessop 2000 cited in Rhodes, 2012, p. 38). Unlike other waves, interpretive governance emphasizes the role of beliefs, traditions, practices and dilemmas in the changing nature of the state. According to this wave, governance emerges as a result of actions inspired by the varied beliefs and practices of individual actors (Rhodes, 2012, pp. 42–45).

The categorization of the waves concerned governance is highly concentrated on western states' governance experiences. Rhodes (2007, p. 1258) himself, acknowledges that the UK is the main focus of his studies on governance. The case of ASAN service in Azerbaijan has many differences when it comes to the role of government in governance. Therefore, there is a need to dig a little deeper into the debate on the state's role in governance. As stated earlier, one of the most influential theses in governance literature is "hollowing out of the state" claimed by Rhodes (1994). For Rhodes, one of the main reasons for diminishing state capacity is due to institutional fragmentation in service delivery and this fragmentation makes steering very difficult for governments (Rhodes, 1994, pp. 146–49). Many accounts argue against "hollowing out of the state" thesis. Instrumental accounts of the network governance assert that central government is a quite powerful actor that forms policy networks to implement its policies and be a distribution branch of a national policy which needs inter-organizational collaboration at the local level (Christensen, 2012, p. 7). In other words, they

see networks as a means of greater central control. The networks can be manipulated by the government using proper tools (Rhodes, 2007, p. 1256). Thus, as Matthews (2012, pp. 289–90) argues, it is still states who has ultimate decision-making power on introducing privatization, various tools for depoliticization and reshaping the system through regulation. Many states including Canada, Netherlands and Sweden have been observed as the example of initiators of innovative tools to regain their control over policy implementation (Matthews, 2012, p. 287).

The state has “a new toolkit” to steer other organizations involved in governance. Firstly, the state can decide the rules of game for other participants in governance (Rhodes and Tiernan, 2015, p. 15). Governments are the principal source of law in most societies and have the monopoly of the legitimate use of force according to the Weberian concept of the state (Peters, 2012, p. 22). Second, the state can use the method of storytelling to steer other actors through organizing dialogues, raising particular beliefs and identities among actors, even affecting their thoughts and actions. Third, the state can steer others through allocating resources including money and authority. The state can use different methods or a combination of these methods in different circumstances at different times (Rhodes and Tiernan, 2015, p. 15).

Lacking authority may appear democratic since it enables other actors to bargain for consensus, however, it slows down the policy-making process and may result in poor policy decisions. If all actors involved in governance have veto powers, the policy outcome tends to result in “the lowest common denominator”, thus, extremely innovative policies are more likely to be rejected (Peters, 2012, p. 22). Thus, the number of veto players may be the main cause of failure of the governance system. Obviously, democracy has more veto points than autocracy. However, coherent sets of preference among institutions and across policy areas can solve this problem (Peters, 2015, p. 268).

To sum up, the state still has vital importance in governance despite the increasing role of non-governmental actors. The state delegates power to non-state actors involved in governance. It is also the one who should pick up the pieces and sometimes take the whole responsibility for policy failure. Although states use more indirect forms of governing, as Peters put it “steering at a distance is still steering”. Privileging non-state actors in governance debate may miss the point (Peters, 2018, pp. 7–8).

## **Theoretical and Conceptual Framework**

As Peter (2015) argues, state failure and governance failure can be the cause of eventual policy failure. This paper relies on Peter's argument to identify the reasons for policy success using the governance approach. The paper outlined various definitions of and approaches to governance. Considering the objective of this research, it is not helpful to privilege non-state actors in our governance approach. In contrast, we acknowledge the important role of the central government in governance. Additionally, it does not fit our research objectives to set out specific institutional features which limit the scope of governance as Rhodes does. Thus, I define governance generally as "a process that involves setting goals, formulating program designs, implementing those designs, and evaluating the success or failure of the designs" (Peters, 2015, p. 267).

There is also a need to clarify the term "successful policy" since the paper investigates the reasons for the successful implementation of ASAN Service initiative. Here, the paper combines both rationalist and constructivist approaches through McConnell's approach which defines "successful policy" as a policy that "achieves the goals that proponents set out to achieve and attracts no criticism of any significance and/or support is virtually universal". This definition includes goal-attainment, subjective and objective dimensions of success (McConnell, 2010, pp. 350–51).

In the literature review, we discussed that the number of veto plays may affect policy success negatively (Peters, 2015, p. 268). This will help us identify one of the reasons of governance success in case of ASAN service. According to Pérez-Liñán and Rodríguez-Raga (2009, p. 694), "veto players are political actors whose approval is necessary but not sufficient to alter the policy status-quo". In presidential regimes, a president becomes a decisive player with "constitutional decree authority". A president with strong decree powers (decrees are immediately put in force) can change the status quo according to his preferences regardless of the preference of a parliament. In case of strong partisan powers in the parliament, the use of unilateral decree powers is unnecessary to achieve policy change. In this context, it would be easier to issue presidential decrees. This type of presidentialism what Pérez-Liñán and Rodríguez-Raga call "strong presidentialism" fits our case where the president has both strong constitutional and partisan powers (Pérez-Liñán and Rodríguez-Raga, 2009, pp. 696–706).

## **Methodology**

This paper employs textual analysis method for investigating the underlying reasons for the successful implementation of the ASAN Service. Textual analysis has been proven as a useful qualitative method in political science by revealing personal reflections of actors in political institutions, events or processes. The collected data includes both primary (decrees, information collected from official websites of the relevant organizations), secondary and tertiary sources (academic articles, reports of independent research and government organizations, news).

## **The Analysis of ASAN Service**

### *Overall Context and the Establishment of ASAN Service*

After the breakdown of communist regimes, many post-soviet countries experienced fragmentation of their governance systems preventing effective management of public service delivery. Azerbaijan was one of those countries where horizontal cooperation between different government departments was absent and corruption peaked its highest level. In the face of decreasing popular trust, institutional reforms were the cure of these problems. Political and administrative reforms have been part of the development agenda of Azerbaijan since its independence (Valiyev, 2012, p. 2). There have been important attempts in the establishment of one-stop-shops and e-government initiatives. The reforms also included public-private partnership initiatives in delivering effective public services (Knox, 2019, p. 173).

The reform in public service delivery was required by the socio-economic development in the countries. In the prevalence of numerous governance challenges such as corruption, bureaucratic hurdles, incompetence of public servants and low trust to state entities, these reforms were inevitable. Additionally, there were no uniform standards in the provision of public services as well as no unified body which provides for coordination, standardization and electronisation of public services offered by different state entities (Huseynli, 2015).

In the face of these challenges, the ASAN Service was established in 2012 by the Decree of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan No. 685. The ASAN Service is the public structure ensuring the delivery of public services offered by different public and private organizations in “a uniformed and coordinated manner”. The main principles that lead the functioning of the ASAN Service are transparency, operativeness, ethical behaviour, responsibility and comfort. The ASAN Service aims at increasing transparency and

strengthening anti-corruption measures; reducing extra expenses and the loss of the time of the citizens; enforcing ethical rules and kind behaviour with the citizens; improving the level of professionalism of public servants; increasing trust towards the state structures; ensuring the large use of electronic services and fostering effective institutional reforms in this field (“About us - ASAN,” n.d.).

Currently, 17 ASAN service centres are operating across the country. Five of them are located in the capital, Baku. Additionally, 2 “ASAN Kommunal” centres have been created to facilitate communal services (water, gas and electricity) for the citizens (“ASAN service centers,” n.d.). Apart from these, in 2013, Mobile ASAN service initiative started in different regions of Azerbaijan. Mobile buses equipped with the necessary technology are sent to the regions where the ASAN Service centre has not been created yet. Recently, the number of mobile buses has reached eleven. Currently, ASAN Service centres offer more than 320 services from private companies and different state entities including Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Internal Affairs, Ministry of Taxes, State Commission for Property Affairs, Customs Committee, State Migration Service, Social Protection Fund and others (*Hesabat*, 2019, pp. 4–5). Since its foundation, ASAN Service centres and mobile buses have received more than 37 million applications (“ASAN xidmət’in fəaliyyəti ilə bağlı Statistika Portalı,” n.d.).

The principal organization responsible for the work of the ASAN Service is the State Agency for Public Service and Social Innovations. It was also established by the Decree of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan No. 685 in 2012. The State Agency is the central executive power that carries out the unified management of the ASAN Service (*Azərbaycan Respublikasının Prezidentinin Fərmanı*, 2012).

### ***ASAN Service as a Success***

This subsection explains on what grounds the ASAN Service can be perceived as a success. According to the definition of “policy success” mentioned in the theoretical section, I consider several aspects of policy evaluation. Firstly, it is argued that the ASAN Service achieved the objectives that were targeted by stakeholders in the beginning.

- Regarding the transparency and anti-corruption measures, The National Integrity Assessment Report of the Transparency International praised the contribution of the ASAN Service to “the modest progress” that has been made in the reduction of corruption recent years (Sultanova, 2014).

- The ASAN Service made the service delivery easier through eliminating extra expenses since all necessary conditions are in one place, through the online queue taking and the electronic services (*Anti-Corruption Reforms in Azerbaijan*, 2016, p. 17).
- According to the 2014 national survey carried out in Azerbaijan, the ASAN Service is named as one of the three institutions with the highest public trust (*Anti-Corruption Reforms in Azerbaijan*, 2016, p. 17).
- The organization of staff trainings on various topics such as effective communication, conflict management, time management and emotional stability enforced ethical rules and professionalism in the ASAN Service (Huseynova, 2014, p. 729).
- According to the E-development index, the ASAN Service ranked the first with the highest result. The ASAN Service has been completely electronised all of its services (Azvision, 2016).
- Most importantly, according to the State Agency report, customer satisfaction in the ASAN Service is 99.25% (*Hesabat*, 2019).

Secondly, the reports, news and other materials investigated for this paper show that the ASAN Service has received no criticism. Although some reports analyzed its limitations, it has been praised for its positive impact. The study carried out by the University of Oxford lists some achievements of the ASAN Service: combating bribery in the delivery of public services; increased efficiency and reduction of bureaucratic procedures; increased transparency; stimulating competition with traditional state entities and serving as a brand of new reforms; increase in the confidence of people towards government agencies; slight progress on Corruption Perception Index (*Curbing corruption in Azerbaijan*, 2017, p.8). The ASAN Service has also become a reference point to the innovative initiatives and other services included in the services provided ASAN. For instance, “ASAN pay”, “ASAN visa”, “ASAN Train” and “ASAN” Education and Training Centre (“Activities of ‘ASAN Service’ in 2016,” 2017).

Apart from these, the successful work of the ASAN Service has been recognized by international organizations such as the United Nations and the European Union. The ASAN Service received the UN Public Service Award 2015. This award which aims at discovering and disseminating successful practices in public governance is the most reputable recognition of excellence in public service (Azernews, 2015). Azerbaijan hosted the UN Public Service Forum in 2019 owing to the successful activity of the ASAN Service and its nomination to the

UN Public Service Award (Press release, 2019). Additionally, The State Agency and the ASAN Service became the winner of the competition organized by the British Safety Council in 2015 in the field of “establishment of safe working conditions in the organization of public services” (Press release, 2015). The ASAN Service has also been reported as “the successful model of Public-Private Partnership” by South-South Cooperation (South-South World, 2016). Finally, the ASAN Service has been a model of innovative public service delivery for other countries. Afghanistan benefited from the experience of Azerbaijan’s ASAN Service and developed the concept of ASAN Khedmat through policy transfer (Azernews, 2016).

### ***The Factors Facilitated ASAN’s Success***

Several factors may have affected the successful implementation of the institutional reform resulted in the foundation and operation of the ASAN Service in Azerbaijan. This paper identifies three reasons using the governance approach discussed above. These factors are significantly linked to each other.

The first reason is related to the general political characteristic of Azerbaijan: lack of veto players in policymaking. According to the Constitution, the president can issue decrees without the confirmation of the Parliament (Milli Majlis) excluding the decrees on the declaration of emergency and military situation. The president can issue decrees on the institutional reforms or policy change and these decrees come into force right after being signed by the president (*Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan*, 1995). Accordingly, the president of the Republic of Azerbaijan has constitutional decree authority. Additionally, the president’s party New Azerbaijan Party has the majority (71 MPs out of 125) in the Milli Majlis (“Milli Məclis,” n.d.). Thus, the political regime in Azerbaijan can be considered as strong presidentialism. As stated before, the more veto players are in the policy-making, the more difficult the policy change is. ASAN service and the State Agency was established on the initiative of the president, Ilham Aliyev without official involvement of other institutions. He is the key stakeholder of this institutional change (Centre for Public Impact, 2016).

Secondly, the foundation and the successful governance of the ASAN Service is related to the political will and commitment of the government. The president has had a strong political commitment for the work of the ASAN Service since its creation. The possible reasons for the strong political will of the government are the concerns of the government for its international reputation (particularly in the UN and the Council of Europe), “a warning sign” of external events such as Arab spring in 2011 and rising social activism in the country (*Curbing corruption in Azerbaijan*, 2017, pp. 9–11). The creation of the ASAN Service also coincided

with the 2013 presidential elections. The re-election intention of the president Ilham Aliyev could be the political motive for his commitment to the institutional reforms.

The strong political commitment of the government also helped them mobilize a wide range of resources for the creation and operation of the ASAN Service. The ASAN Service has legal force since it was established under the presidential decree. Necessary financial resources have been enabled for the usage of the ASAN Service (Centre for Public Impact, 2016). 28 million AZN (around 15,3 million Euro) was allocated to the ASAN from the state budget in 2018 (Azertag, 2018) and this amount is increasing year by year (Report, 2016). Additionally, TASAN Service centres are also equipped with highly skilled public servants who are between 18-35 and more than half studied abroad (Jafarov, 2013). Thus, the successful creation and operation of the ASAN Service are highly dependent on the political will and commitment of the government. The strong government was able to balance the various interest of elite groups without endangering the initiative (*Curbing corruption in Azerbaijan*, 2017, p. 12).

The third reason for the success is the management model of the ASAN Service. The management of ASAN Service centres is highly centralized and is directly managed by executive power (*Curbing corruption in Azerbaijan*, 2017, p. 5). The chairman of ASAN is appointed by the president. The administrative stakeholder, the State Agency is also a subordinate institution to the President (Centre for Public Impact, 2016). The State Agency facilitates the establishment of a partnership between ASAN and government bodies and controls the transfer of some competences in public service delivery from other government bodies to the ASAN Service. The State Agency is also responsible for the management of all ASAN Service centres, organizing monitoring and evaluation and ensuring the integration of databases. As mentioned, the State Agency is directly accountable to the president (*Curbing corruption in Azerbaijan*, 2017, p. 5). At the lower level of management, “right public servants” have been assigned to the ASAN Service centres. The directors of ASAN Service centres are regularly reporting to the chairman of ASAN Service. Figure 1 illustrates the vertical accountability in the centralized management model of the ASAN Service. Additionally, since all the payments are made online or through pay-point kiosks, there is no cash-flow in ASAN Service centers and it reduces the risk of petty corruption and increase transparency at the local level (Jafarov, 2013). The highly centralized management model of ASAN was very important for balancing the interests of elite groups as well as ensuring

necessary resources for the operation of the ASAN Service (*Curbing corruption in Azerbaijan*, 2017, p. 12).



**Figure 1. The Centralised Management Model of ASAN<sup>2</sup>**

### Conclusion

This essay provides some crucial insights about the governance debate and the policy success of the ASAN Service using a governance approach. Firstly, the analysis has shown that the argument about the decline in the state capacity is not applicable to the governance process in Azerbaijan. This argument is based on the empirical evidence from western countries. Rhodes (2007, p. 1258) honestly, acknowledges that its “grand narrative of governance” is based on the UK. Thus, we need to employ a broader concept of governance in order to use it in different contexts. Secondly, the involvement of fewer actors in the policy-making process as well as strong centralization may sound undemocratic, but the case has shown that it led to the successful creation of the ASAN Service. Finally, it should be mentioned that besides governance-related factors, some other factors may have facilitated the success of ASAN Service such as recent economic development and active civil society which is capable to hold public officials accountable. However, these factors themselves were not sufficient for the creation and operation of ASAN. As argued above, in the political context of Azerbaijan, the president as a decisive actor in the policy-making process limited other actors’ potential threat to the success of ASAN. The strong political will and commitment of the government and the application of the highly centralized management model facilitated the success of the ASAN Service.

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<sup>2</sup> Figure 1 has been created according to the official information provided in [www.asan.gov.az](http://www.asan.gov.az) and [www.vxsida.gov.az](http://www.vxsida.gov.az)

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