

Digitalist

Traveling The Digital Silk Road

Belinda McKeon

Governments across the globe are leveraging digital to improve the lives of citizens through highly efficient and targeted approaches to service delivery. An admirable example of a transitional nation keen to adopt a digital agenda is [Kazakhstan](#). In June 2016, an [article in the Astana Times](#) discussed Kazakhstan's aspirations towards establishing a digital economy, stating that "in a bid to reduce its dependence on oil and gas, and to strengthen its international competitiveness, the world's largest landlocked country is investing heavily in digitalizing its economy."

With a population of 18 million people spread across the world's ninth-biggest country by land mass, Kazakhstan sees tangible benefits in moving to a digital economy to help address the challenges of the tyranny of distance and the needs of over 100 diverse ethnic groups.

I recently had the pleasure of speaking with Dr. Saltanat Janenova, assistant professor from the Graduate School of Public Policy at Nazarbayev University in Kazakhstan, to gain insight into the country's emerging digital government agenda, aptly named "Digital Kazakhstan 2020." SAP has a key role in supporting this program, and during my conversation with Dr. Janenova, it was fascinating to see similarities emerge within digital government initiatives in Kazakhstan and Australia.



Digital Kazakhstan 2020

Since 2006, the [number of Internet users in Kazakhstan](#) has increased from 8.3% to 68.1%. Aspiring to be one of the 30 most competitive countries in the world, Kazakhstan has introduced a new program to get there – "Digital Kazakhstan 2020."

The Digital Kazakhstan 2020 program will be implemented in four different ways, including:

- The creation of the "Digital Silk Road" which will involve the development of reliable, affordable, high-speed, and secure digital infrastructure
- A widespread introduction of digital technology to enhance competitiveness in various sectors in the economy
- The formation of a proactive digital government – improving the electronic and mobile government systems, developing open government components, and optimizing the supply of public services
- The establishment of a creative society – developing the competencies and skills required for the digital economy, upgrading digital literacy, and training specialists for industry

Public service delivery reforms began in Kazakhstan in 2004, when President Nursultan Nazarbayev announced the introduction of an ambitious program aimed at merging together one-stop shops and e-government. Over the last decade, Dr. Janenova has been researching one-stop shops and explained that these policies were created with the major objective of "reducing corruption and improving the quality of public services." Her recent paper, "Innovating Public Service Delivery in Transitional Countries: The Case of One-Stop Shops in Kazakhstan," explains the concept of one-stop shops as providing services from a number of different government bodies at one central location, with the introduction of e-government platforms allowing online service delivery, increasing accessibility, and strengthening support of public policies.

Open government

In accordance with the significant increase of computer literacy throughout the Kazakh population, the government has recently introduced an open government initiative following the good practices of OECD countries. According to Dr. Janenova, "Open government initiatives provide citizens with easy access to different legislative drafts, allowing them to discuss legislative drafts in order to increase public participation in the policy decision making."

The [OECD defines the open-government principles](#) as "transparency, accountability, and citizen engagement." They described the [open-government](#) initiative in the following way:

"Several mechanisms have been developed with the objective of enhancing citizens' participation in the policy-making process. These mechanisms range from innovative public governance processes, such as participatory budgeting at the local level, to the use of social media for real-time interaction. More openness could create opportunities for citizens as well as governments to produce better policies and services. In turn, this may enable the development of collaborative and better-tailored channels of service delivery, two-way engagement, and co-production of public services."

Dr. Janenova said, "if Kazakhstan really wants to pursue the ambition of entering the group of 30 developed countries in the world, it needs to promote digital governments and public accountability of the government through IT technologies."

Digital government in Australia

Despite the cultural differences and vast distance between Australia and the Republic of Kazakhstan, both governments interestingly face similar issues, such as the digital divide, delivering services to dispersed populations, and low levels of trust in online systems.

However, Australians increasingly expect government services to be provided online to avoid the in-person or phone system methods of delivery, which often involve long queues and limited opening hours.

According to a 2014 Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) study, "[Australians' Digital Lives](#)," more than 90% of Australians were Internet users during the six-month period when the study was conducted. Additionally, while younger adults were the most digitally active cohort, with 100% of those aged 18-44 going online, 68% of those aged 65 and over were also online participants. The number of Australian Internet users is only going to increase in the future, which will further raise the expectation of digital government services.

To address citizens' needs, the Australian government established the [Digital Transformation Office](#) (DTO) in July 2015, with a mission to "lead the transformation of government services to deliver a better experience for Australians." By working closely with government agencies and private sector partners, the mission of the DTO is achieved and quality public services are created.

Australia has also introduced the Digital Marketplace, assisting in the delivery of digital services in government as part of the National Innovation and Science Agenda. It aims to break down barriers to technology procurement, making it easier for businesses to deliver digital services in government. The online one-stop shop "gov.au" is bringing together services and information across government into one place on a digital platform.

A global project

Although Australia is considered a digitally mature country, there is still progress to be made in establishing a [digital government agenda](#) focused on creating public value through the leveraging of digital data. There remains a need to capture the imagination of Australian citizens to fully embrace digital transformation of government services. Kazakhstan is reaching out to its citizens to support digital government as a national priority to transform the economy away from a dependence on hydrocarbons. The "Digital Silk Road" label is designed to inspire, drawing on a period of history which featured a golden age of trade, commerce, and cultural exchange, framing the digital revolution in Kazakhstan for modern times.

In Dr. Janenova's view, "The Kazakhstani initiatives in terms of promoting digital government are very impressive, and neighboring countries observe with great interest in the progress of Kazakhstan. There are lots of lessons that they can learn from good practices as well as mistakes from the Kazakhstani government in the way of promoting digital government."

There is opportunity for countries to work collaboratively to facilitate the spread of secure, high-quality digital government services. As countries collaborate through free-trade zones and trading blocs, as well as the exchange of ideas and intellectual property, the extent and quality of their digital government services will be a determining factor in the scale of economic and social benefits. As countries and regions invest in improving services and more of the business of government into the digital environment, other countries can watch and learn from the experiences of others. Australia and Kazakhstan are two countries with the potential to learn from each other as they tackle the tyranny of distance, with one traveling along the Digital Silk Road.

Interview with Belinda McKeon in *Digitalist*, *Traveling the Digital Silk Road*, 7 September 2016.

<https://www.digitalistmag.com/>