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Reality Check on Donor Expectations: Do GovTech Initiatives Help Autocrats?

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Summary

International donors commit substantial resources to GovTech projects (the application of information and communication technologies to government functions). World Bank GovTech investments alone have exceeded $118 billion over the last three decades. Donor strategy documents consistently frame digital transformation not only as a vehicle for improved effectiveness but also for strengthening democracy.

Autocrats are equally invested in these tools. Globally, at least 88 authoritarian regimes currently operate GovTech projects, and electoral autocracies receive the largest share of GovTech aid (48.6 per cent of commitments). Beyond well-known surveillance applications, autocracies deploy GovTech for service delivery, grievance redress and even citizen engagement. These platforms are deployed to project an image of responsiveness and legitimacy.

Our experimental evidence from Turkey shows how efficiency-enhancing GovTech tools, when paired with sophisticated regime communication, can durably entrench autocratic rule. We designed a survey experiment focused on CIMER, Turkey's widely used citizen petition platform, to examine how citizens respond to the government propaganda surrounding it. The results show that the government's framing of CIMER as an effective tool that "gets things done" significantly increased trust in authoritarian institutions, even among regime opponents. The effect extended beyond attitudes to behaviour: Asked to allocate a hypothetical donation of money among state institutions, independent non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or themselves, anti-government respondents exposed to messages on the platform were significantly more likely to give the money to state institutions. Our recommendations are as follows:

- Donors must take the second-order effects of GovTech initiatives seriously and develop mechanisms to carefully evaluate the risks of unintended consequences. In many cases, support for GovTech projects is overly optimistic regarding their effects on political openness. Adopting a more context-sensitive and realistic approach demands detailed political economy assessments before supporting GovTech projects and developing monitoring metrics that capture potential regime-legitimation effects.
- Donors need to build stronger safety guardrails into these projects. Depending on the political economy assessments, such measures could include the institutional involvement of international organisations or, if feasible, local NGOs (as conditionality) in platform oversight, mandatory independent audits and open data standards by design, among others.
- Finally, donors need to consider actively participating in public communication on these platforms, with visible donor branding, to counter government-controlled propaganda, claim credit for service delivery and strengthen trust in donor countries and organisations.

Donor expectations of GovTech

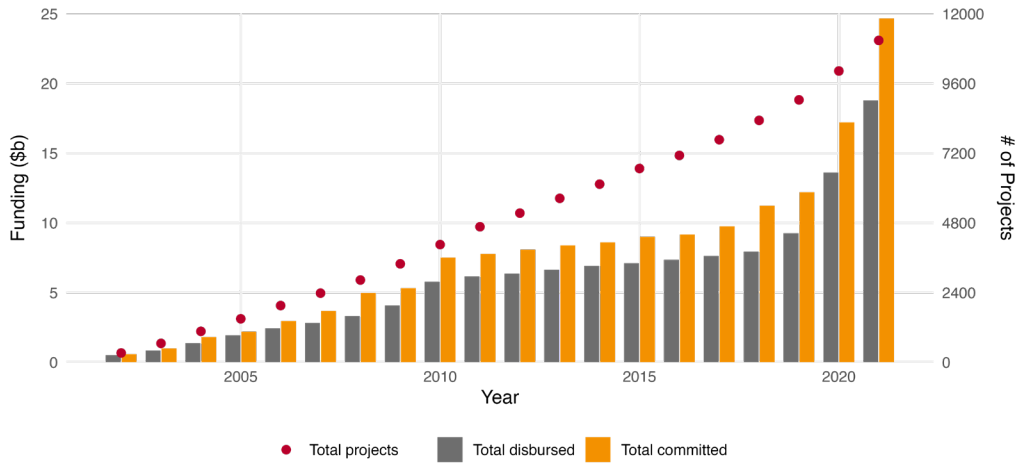
International donors are heavily involved in supporting digitalisation projects. The topic is relatively prominent on the development agenda, as reflected, for example, by the positive trends in World Bank GovTech investments in partner countries over the last three decades: More than $118 billion has been committed through more than 1,400 projects (World Bank, 2025). An analysis of OECD ODA data (including all donors: bilateral, multilateral and private) shows similar upward trends: Around $25 billion was committed across sectors through roughly 11,000 projects in the last two decades (Figure 1).

GovTech initiatives originally centred on the promise of improving how governments operate and deliver public services. After lagging behind the digitalisation of private services, public administrations are rapidly catching up. To put things in perspective, the World Economic Forum (2025) estimates that by 2034, GovTech will create a $9.8 trillion opportunity to generate public value through efficiency and transparency gains, though that is likely an underestimation. Generative AI compounds these numbers: In the United Kingdom alone, it is estimated that generative AI will produce up to £38 billion in annual savings by 2030 by automating repetitive, bureaucratic tasks (Public First, 2024).

In this sense, the first expected impact of GovTech is improved policy implementation and more accessible public administration services. Filing tax returns online, renewing passports or drivers' licences through dedicated portals, registering a business, applying for social benefits, booking appointments at public offices and accessing medical records: Activities that once required queuing at a counter are today increasingly handled with a few clicks (e.g. *gov.br* in Brazil, *gob.pe* in Peru). In turn, engaging with such an efficient and accessible public administration is expected to boost citizens' trust in institutions and perceptions of government responsiveness (Ziaja, Geray, Sebudubudu, & von Schiller, 2025).

But donors attach even greater hopes to these initiatives beyond efficiency and effectiveness gains. From the outset, and continuing today, there have been high expectations that the digital transformation of government would affect how politics works, enabling greater transparency, stronger accountability and deeper citizen participation in policymaking. For instance, the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ, 2024) states: "[digital services] can substantially improve inclusive participation in democratic processes". Similar views are reflected in other development strategy documents that state digital transitions will enable "civic and democratic participation" (UK International Development, 2024) and "strengthen democratization processes" (SIDA, 2022).

Figure 1: ODA trends on GovTech



Source: Authors, based on Aid Atlas (Stockholm Environment Institute, 2021)

Indeed, some digital tools aimed at improving citizen engagement go beyond optimising offline processes; they also change how government functions and create new avenues for communicating with citizens**.** The objective is to promote government responsiveness, access to and sharing of information and the redress of grievances (e.g. *Libro de Reclamaciones* in Peru, *SP4N-LAPOR!* in Indonesia, *GovChat* in South Africa). The most ambitious versions move towards participatory models, historically spearheaded by non-profits and grassroots organisations, but also increasingly adopted by governments. The goal is to create digital spaces where citizens can inform themselves, deliberate or simply make their voices heard. Common examples include online participatory budgeting processes and digital petition tools (e.g. *Brasil Participativo*). Even though the available data suggest that such digital citizen engagement tools lag behind other GovTech components by comparison, there have been clear improvements in the adoption of such public participation platforms (World Bank, 2025).

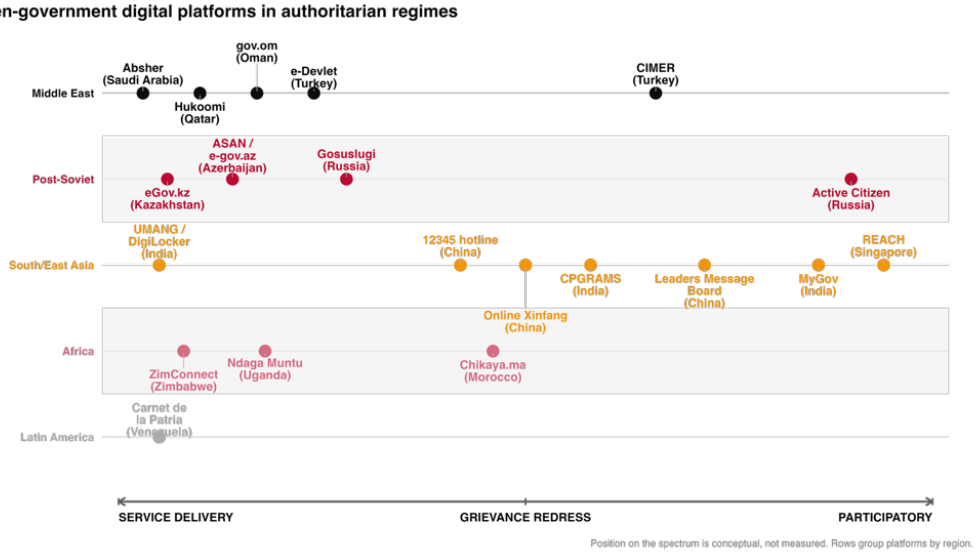
Autocratic investment in GovTech

Despite this optimistic outlook, there is a warning signal for donors: Autocratic governments are just as heavily invested in GovTech, and in some cases, donors are supporting these efforts. Our analysis of the World Bank's Digital Governance Projects Database shows that 88 authoritarian regimes (as of 2025) are running different types of GovTech projects, 34 of which are closed autocracies. Although some of these projects are funded by governments themselves, our initial estimates, based on OECD ODA data, reveal that electoral autocracies receive the largest share of GovTech aid, both by project count (44.7 per cent) and by commitment (48.6 per cent).

Autocrats also invest in GovTech to strengthen their grip on power. One way in which authoritarian governments prominently use these tools is for surveillance and digital repression: tracking and excluding dissidents, monitoring opposition, controlling information, and manipulating or misrepresenting reality. One prominent example is the *Integrated Joint Operations Platform* in China, a mass-surveillance app used by police in Xinjiang to collect vast amounts of personal information and link that data to a person's national ID number (Human Rights Watch, 2019).

Although there are overlaps, most platforms tend to emphasise different aspects (Figure 2). In some contexts, they also serve as a condition for accessing services and often favour government supporters, as criticisms of Venezuela's *Carnet de la Patria* show (Berwick, 2018).

Figure 2: Illustrative cases of digital platform types in authoritarian countries



Source: Authors

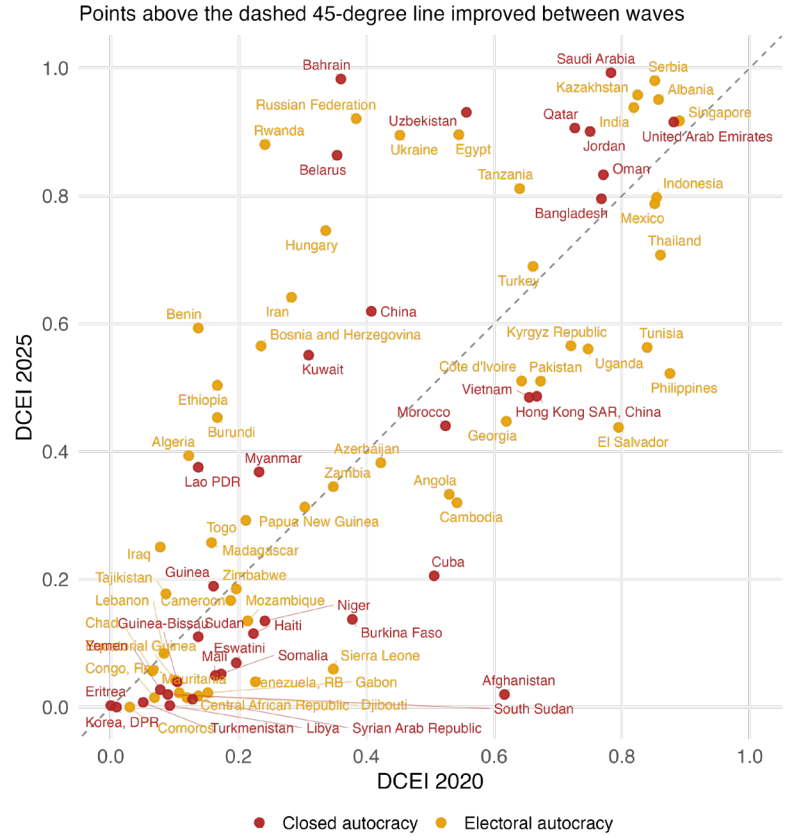
That said, these tools serve purposes beyond surveillance and repression, in ways that are far less publicly discussed. Autocracies are also investing in increasing government effectiveness and projecting the impression of their responsiveness through digital service delivery (e.g. *Absher* in Saudi Arabia, *ASAN* in Azerbaijan), and in offering channels to communicate grievances (e.g. *12345 hotline* and *Online Xinfang* in China, *CPGRAMS* in India, *Chikaya* in Morocco).

Contrary to what many assume, authoritarian regimes, on average, have shown little hesitation in adopting tools geared towards greater citizen engagement in the digital space. One example is India's *MyGov*, launched under the Modi government, which hosts open consultations and organises micro-volunteering opportunities. The World Bank's Digital Citizen Engagement Index illustrates that, even though most autocracies cluster on the lower end of the spectrum, some authoritarian regimes (not just electoral but also closed ones), exhibit comparatively high levels of digital citizen engagement, and this has increased over the last five years (Figure 3). As a large body of scholarly work on the "deliberative turn" in authoritarian regimes underscores, such digital tools are used to cement public trust and improve satisfaction with the regime, and they appear to do so to some extent. They are also deployed as propaganda instruments to project an image of responsiveness.

Experimental findings from Turkey

Is the propaganda surrounding GovTech effective? We conducted an experiment in Turkey, an electoral autocracy with a shrinking civic space, a high degree of personalisation and power centralisation. We assessed the effectiveness of the government propaganda surrounding the CIMER platform (*Presidency Communication Centre*; see Sinanoglu & von Schiller, 2025). This digital system allows citizens to submit petitions and track their status as they are processed and forwarded to the relevant public institutions. Citizens

Figure 3: Digital Citizen Engagement Index: autocracies 2020 vs 2025



Source: Authors, based on World Bank (2025)

often use the system to report local issues (ranging from infrastructure problems to security concerns), demand information, and request social assistance and service delivery. The regime invests heavily in its public communication about CIMER. It has been packaged as an effective system that is popular with the public. The most recently reported number of petitions, according to the government, was 5.5 million in 2025, indicating widespread use. On pro-government media outlets, the government showcases stories of how people's problems have been addressed in multiple cities and across a variety of issues, as a result of petitions sent to CIMER.

But the system is more than just a petition dashboard. It also includes action buttons labelled "take part in government" to solicit visionary input (such as for future development projects). The regime's propaganda also portrays CIMER as fostering individual-level connections between citizens and the Presidency. It showcases emotional and personalised messages sent to the President, such as people expressing their gratitude and admiration for him, explaining that they saw him in their dreams and long to meet him in person one day.

Our vignette-based survey experiment runs on a quota-representative sample of Turkish voters, examines the effectiveness of different types of propaganda messages about CIMER.

Our results show that this propaganda is largely effective; it works even on opposition voters. Messages framing CIMER as an effective tool for service delivery that "gets things done" significantly increased trust in authoritarian institutions, even among regime opponents. More importantly, the propaganda seems to influence not only attitudes but also behaviour: When asked to allocate a hypothetical $1,000 to state institutions, independent NGOs or themselves, anti-government respondents exposed to propaganda were significantly more likely to allocate the money to CIMER and other state institutions. This is a surprising finding in the context of Turkey's protracted financial crisis and the public perception of government mismanagement. In other words, the propaganda surrounding the effectiveness of these tools for digital service delivery can elicit behavioural compliance even among regime opponents.

Another headline finding is that propaganda boosted trust in regime institutions rather than in personal support for President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Among government supporters, some propaganda messages even suggested that the President may be less popular than assumed. One potential implication of this finding is that GovTech initiatives may cultivate long-term institutional support for authoritarian regimes rather than boost the leader's popularity.

Implications and recommendations

Someone has to be wrong. While international donors allocate millions of dollars every year to GovTech projects expecting a democratisation dividend, autocratic regimes (with or without donor support) invest in the same technologies themselves to consolidate their control and harness legitimacy.

We call for a more explicit and honest discussion of the "digital development dilemma" rather than defaulting to technological optimism. In this sense, our analysis should not be read as an argument against supporting digitalisation, but as a call to heed the risks and second-order effects of GovTech investments. Instead, donors should adopt a more realistic and context-sensitive approach, keeping in mind that these tools may just as well strengthen the position of whoever holds power.

Our main recommendations are as follows:

First, invest in capacities to conduct detailed political economy assessments before supporting digital initiatives in autocratic contexts. These assessments should identify stakeholders and veto players. In addition, donors could create monitoring systems explicitly designed to capture potential regime legitimation and other second-order effects beyond pure service-efficiency indicators. The evidence gathered should then inform

the discussion on whether the effects are such that donor support should be discontinued, or whether there is a realistic scope to introduce mitigating measures along the lines of the following recommendations.

Second, especially for investments in authoritarian countries, donors need to build stronger safety guardrails into these projects. Based on the context, these measures could include the systematic and institutional involvement of international organisations, or, if feasible, local NGOs (as conditionality) in the oversight of these digital technologies, and mandatory audits by independent bodies involving local and international actors. Donors may also require that these platforms be built on publicly auditable, open-source code and use open data standards to minimise the risk of propaganda and repression.

Finally, international donors have to consider actively participating in public communication on these platforms. This could be one strategy for reducing the effectiveness of government propaganda (Sinanoglu, 2025). Donors should claim credit for it, ensure clear donor branding to avoid attribution problems, and strengthen trust in donor countries and organisations.

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