



BALANCING REFORM AND STABILITY: POLICE REFORM TRAJECTORIES IN POST-2010 KYRGYZSTAN

REFORM İLE İSTİKRAR ARASINDAKİ DENGE: 2010 SONRASI KIRGIZİSTAN'DA POLİS REFORM SÜREÇLERİ

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the trajectory of police reform in Kyrgyzstan following the 2010 political transition, focusing on the interrelationship among governance practices, institutional change, and mechanisms of public accountability. It asks how police reform in Kyrgyzstan has developed since 2010, and to what extent these reform efforts have strengthened governance, enhanced public accountability, or reproduced existing institutional practices. Based on official records, international evaluation reports, and academic scholarship, this study maps the reform trajectory across three phases: donor-backed engagement from 2010 to 2014, legal and institutional modernization between 2014 and 2016, and the post-2016 phase marked by recentralization and reform fatigue. It demonstrates that while initial reform efforts incorporated participatory mechanisms, such as pilot community policing initiatives, their institutional effects remained modest and susceptible to political change. The analysis is grounded in a governance-centered framework that synthesizes perspectives from security sector reform, norm diffusion theory, and participatory oversight to examine why police reform has stalled. The Kyrgyz case indicates that reform outcomes are driven primarily by political commitment, patterns of state-society interaction, and path-dependent institutional legacies, rather than by technical

ÖZ

Bu makale, 2010 yılındaki siyasal değişim sonrasında Kırgızistan'da yürütülen polis reformunun gelişimini araştırmaktadır. Çalışmada, 2010 sonrasında Kırgızistan'da polis reformunun nasıl şekillendiği ve bu reformların yönetişimi güçlendirme, kamusal hesap verebilirliği artırma ya da mevcut kurumsal pratikleri yeniden üretme düzeyi sorgulanmaktadır. Resmi kurum raporları, uluslararası değerlendirmeler ve akademik literatüre dayanılarak polis reformu süreci üç aşamada ele alınmıştır: uluslararası donör destekli polis reformu (2010-2014), yasal mevzuat ve kurumsal reformlar (2014-2016) ve 2016 sonrasında meydana gelen merkezileşme ve reform yorgunluğu süreci. Polis reformu çabaları kapsamında toplum destekli polis uygulamaları gibi yenilikçi uygulamalar geliştirilmesine rağmen bu girişimlerin kurumsal etkisi sınırlı kalmış ve ülkede yaşanan siyasal gelişmelere bağımlı durumda kalmayı sürdürmüştür. Araştırmada, güvenlik sektörü reformu, norm yayılımı ve katılımcı denetim teorilerinden yararlanılmak suretiyle yönetim temelli bir teorik çerçeve sunulmuştur. Araştırmanın bulguları ise polis reformunun başarısının reformun tasarımından daha çok siyasal irade, devlet ile toplum arasındaki ilişkiler ve ülkedeki kurumsallaşmış yapıların etkisi çerçevesinde belirlendiğine işaret etmektedir. Kırgızistan örneği, polis reformu bağlamında,

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police reform design. This article deepens scholarly understanding of the ways in which hybrid governance environments mediate the adaptation and endurance of internationally diffused reform norms in policing.

Keywords: Police Reform, Governance, Security Sector Reform, Kyrgyzstan, State-Society Relations.

hibrit yönetim koşullarında uluslararası reform normlarının nasıl yerleştirildiğini ve ne ölçüde sürdürülebilir olduğunu anlamaya katkı sunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Polis Reformu, Yönetişim, Güvenlik Sektörü Reformu, Kırgızistan, Devlet-Toplum İlişkileri.

Introduction

Why is police institutional reform widely regarded as a critical pillar of good governance and the rule of law, and under what conditions does it fail to restore public confidence in the state? Within these contexts, policing institutions often serve simultaneously as representations of state power and as instrumental agents in shaping interactions between the state and society.¹²³⁴ Nevertheless, police reform in post-Soviet contexts is marked by specific structural obstacles, especially in environments where inherited institutional practices, limited administrative capacity, and rival governance objectives shape reform trajectories. Kyrgyzstan presents a highly instructive case for the study of police reform in a multifaceted governance context characterized by political instability, vibrant civil society participation, and significant engagement from international stakeholders. In the aftermath of the political disruptions of 2005 and 2010, Kyrgyzstan moved into a period shaped by simultaneous reform-oriented governance efforts and persistent institutional limitations. Long associated with Soviet-era hierarchical command arrangements and minimal community-oriented policing, the police sector became a focal point of reform initiatives promoted by domestic stakeholders and international development actors alike. Reform efforts, particularly in the wake of the 2010 constitutional transition, were designed to improve transparency, enhance responsiveness, and raise levels of professionalism within the Ministry of Internal Affairs, while also seeking to rebuild public trust in policing institutions.⁵

International organizations, including the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), were instrumental in supporting these reform efforts. These efforts included institutional capacity-building, support for legal reform processes, and the advancement of community policing approaches designed to bring local law enforcement into closer conformity with international best

1 Egon Bittner, *The Functions of the Police in Modern Society: A Review of Background Factors, Current Practices, and Possible Role Models*, National Institute of Mental Health Publication No. 2059, U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, Washington, D.C., 1970.

2 Jean-Paul Brodeur, "Police," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/police>

3 Robert Reiner, *The Politics of the Police*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2010.

4 Bernardo Zacka, *When the State Meets the Street: Public Service and Moral Agency*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2017.

5 Erica Marat, "Reforming Police in Post-Communist Countries: International Efforts, Domestic Heroes," *Comparative Politics*, vol. 48, no. 3 (2016): pp. 333-352.

practices.⁶ Nevertheless, notwithstanding the extensive support framework, the scope and durability of reform outcomes in Kyrgyzstan continue to be the subject of debate. Findings indicate that although some procedural and institutional reforms were realized, especially in relation to legal frameworks and pilot programs, significant constraints remain, including weak institutional accountability, inconsistent political commitment, and difficulties at the local level of implementation.⁷ The police reform process in Kyrgyzstan has been distinguished by the involvement of civil society actors, who exercised an unusually influential role in the formulation of reform proposals and the oversight of police performance. Instruments including Public Councils and evaluation reports led by civil society actors constituted attempts to embed reform agendas at the local level and strengthen bottom-up accountability mechanisms. The participatory nature of this model represents a marked contrast to the largely top-down reform strategies pursued in neighboring Central Asian states.⁸

Kyrgyzstan consequently represents an instructive case for analyzing the interactions between externally backed reform initiatives, domestic governance agendas, and local institutional constraints. Instead of conceptualizing reform as a linear trajectory toward democratization or liberalization, this study advances a grounded approach that emphasizes the tensions between institutional change and state stability, participatory practices and hierarchical governance, and norm diffusion and local adaptation. This study is guided by the following core research question: How has police reform in Kyrgyzstan developed since 2010, and to what extent has it strengthened governance, enhanced public accountability, or reproduced existing institutional practices? The study addresses this question by employing a qualitative case study design that draws on a diverse range of interpretive and evaluative materials. This study aims not merely to document the trajectory of police reform in Kyrgyzstan, but also to engage with wider debates on security sector reform in transitional political environments. Placing the Kyrgyz case within regional and theoretical perspectives, the article sheds light on the dynamics of reform

6 Philipp Lottholz and Arzuu Sheranova, "Governing, but Not Producing Security? Internationalised Community Security Practices in Kyrgyzstan," *International Quarterly for Asian Studies (IQAS)*, vol. 52, nos. 1-2 (2021), pp. 55-77.

7 David Lewis, "Who's Socialising Whom? Regional Organisations and Contested Norms in Central Asia," *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 64, no. 7 (2012), pp. 1219-1237.

8 Philipp Lottholz, "The Roles and Practices of Civil Society Actors in Police Reform in Kyrgyzstan: Activism, Expertise, Knowledge Production," *International Peacekeeping*, vol. 28, no. 1 (2021), pp. 52-83.

as they are shaped by intersecting logics of modernization, political continuity, and international involvement.

Theoretical Framework

Efforts to reform policing institutions are widely regarded as an essential element of comprehensive security sector reform, notably in countries navigating periods of political change or governance transition.^{9,10,11} While security sector reform was first developed in response to post-conflict challenges, its scope has progressively expanded to include governance enhancement, rule of law consolidation, accountability promotion, and legitimacy building in varied political contexts, including semi-consolidated and hybrid systems.¹² In this context, police reform is not confined to improving operational capacity but also entails redefining the relationship between the state and society by embedding norms of transparency, public responsiveness, and respect for human rights.¹³ The analysis is grounded in a multidimensional theoretical framework that brings together three intersecting strands of scholarship: governance-oriented security sector reform, theories of norm diffusion and localization, and approaches emphasizing institutional co-production and participatory reform.¹⁴

Conventional approaches to security sector reform prioritize institutional reform within the military, police, and intelligence sectors, with the aim of enhancing transparency, accountability, and oversight in line with democratic principles. In countries such as Kyrgyzstan, characterized by political transitions that fall short of full regime consolidation, security sector reform programs frequently face obstacles, including weak institutional capacity,

9 United Nations, *Securing Peace and Development: The Role of the United Nations in Supporting Security Sector Reform*, Report of the Secretary-General, A/62/659-S/2008/39, United Nations, New York, 2008, <https://docs.un.org/en/a/62/659>

10 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), *The OECD DAC Handbook on Security System Reform: Supporting Security and Justice*, OECD Publishing, Paris, 2007, https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2008/02/the-oecd-dac-handbook-on-security-system-reform_g1gh8153/9789264027862-en.pdf

11 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), *Security System Reform and Governance*, OECD Publishing, Paris, 2005, https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2005/05/security-system-reform-and-governance_g1gh4ce3/9789264007888-en.pdf

12 Ursula C. Schroeder ve Fairlie Chappuis, "New Perspectives on Security Sector Reform: The Role of Local Agency and Domestic Politics", *International Peacekeeping*, vol. 21, no. 2 (2014), pp. 133-148.

13 Sarah Detzner, "Modern Post-Conflict Security Sector Reform in Africa: Patterns of Success and Failure," *African Security Review*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2017, pp. 116-142.

14 Albert Meijer, "Coproduction as a Structural Transformation of the Public Sector", *International Journal of Public Sector Management*, vol. 29, no. 6 (2016), pp. 596-611.

uncertain political commitment, and fragmented oversight arrangements.¹⁵ From a governance-centered perspective, security institutions are embedded in broader systems of authority, governance, and legitimacy, requiring reform efforts to address structural and relational dimensions alongside technical deficiencies.¹⁶ This involves assessing the effectiveness of internal oversight mechanisms, such as disciplinary bodies; external oversight actors, including ombuds institutions, parliamentary bodies, and the media; as well as societal oversight exercised through civil society organizations and community engagement. Security sector reform effectiveness depends less on formal institutional restructuring alone than on the dynamic interplay between state institutions, political elites, and social actors, especially in transitional settings marked by institutional fragility or contestation.¹⁷

Police reform in post-Soviet states has been significantly influenced by international actors, including the OSCE, UNDP, and various bilateral donors, which have supplied technical expertise, capacity-building programs, and internationally informed policy frameworks. Nonetheless, the effectiveness of externally supported reform frequently depends on whether and how global norms are adapted and embedded within domestic political and cultural contexts.¹⁸ Drawing on scholarship in comparative politics and international relations, the theory of norm diffusion provides a useful framework for understanding how globally promoted norms, including accountability, procedural justice, and community policing, are received, modified, or resisted at the local level.¹⁹ In the case of Kyrgyzstan, efforts to advance community policing were adapted to reflect locally embedded understandings of neighborhood security and informal governance arrangements.²⁰ Importantly, localization does not always result in the internalization of international

15 Philipp Lottholz. "Reclaiming Security? Functional Differentiation (and Drawbacks) of Civil Society Actors and State Structures in Kyrgyzstan," *Securitization, Politicization and Social Differentiation in History*, 2025, pp. 87–114.

16 See Seng Tan and Alvin Chew. "Governing Singapore's Security Sector: Problems, Prospects and Paradox," *Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Journal of International and Strategic Affairs*, vol. 30, no. 2, 2008, pp. 241–263.

17 Alex J. Bellamy. "Security Sector Reform: Prospects and Problems," *Global Change, Peace & Security*, vol. 15, no. 2, 2003, pp. 101–119.

18 Robert Egnell and Peter Haldén. "Laudable, Ahistorical and Overambitious: Security Sector Reform Meets State Formation Theory. Analysis," *Conflict, Security & Development*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2009, pp. 27–54.

19 Amitav Acharya. "How Ideas Spread: Whose Norms Matter? Norm Localization and Institutional Change in Asian Regionalism," *International Organization*, vol. 58, no. 2, 2004, pp. 239–275.

20 Markus Mueller and Axel Ostlund. "People's Security—Today's Challenges of a New Approach to Policing: Working Experience of the Community Security Initiative (CSI) Project in Kyrgyzstan 2011," *Security and Human Rights*, vol. 23, no. 1, 2012, pp. 57–63.

norms; rather, it often gives rise to hybrid forms of institutional practice that blend international standards with entrenched domestic practices informed by historical, cultural, and power dynamics.

The final strand of the framework is informed by theories of institutional co-production, highlighting that public service provision, including policing, emerges through collaborative processes involving both state institutions and community-based actors.²¹ Given persistently low levels of public trust in police institutions across post-Soviet settings, the involvement of civil society in both the design and implementation of reforms is frequently seen as essential for strengthening legitimacy and responsiveness to public concerns. Kyrgyzstan represents a significant case of participatory reform, notably through the establishment of Public Councils linked to the Ministry of Internal Affairs, providing civil society actors with institutionalized channels to evaluate police conduct and propose policy reforms.²² Although these mechanisms are frequently linked to greater transparency, their effects on concrete institutional behavior remain the subject of debate. Drawing together perspectives on governance-centered security sector reform, norm diffusion, and participatory co-production, the study seeks to advance a nuanced understanding of police reform in Kyrgyzstan. The objective is not to judge reform in terms of success or failure but to analyze the interaction of institutional, normative, and participatory logics within a dynamic and contested governance context.

Historical and Political Context of Policing in Kyrgyzstan

The organizational configuration, operational practices, and political functions of policing in Kyrgyzstan have been profoundly shaped by its Soviet institutional inheritance, the disjointed trajectory of post-independence state formation, and recurrent episodes of political reconfiguration. An appreciation of these contextual dimensions is essential for assessing both the trajectory and the limitations of police reform initiatives since 2010. In the Soviet era, the policing apparatus in the Kyrgyz SSR, as in other republics, was subordinated to the Ministry of Internal Affairs and functioned as a key mechanism of centralized authority. Within the *militsiya* system, discipline, hierarchy, and

21 Elinor Ostrom. "Crossing the Great Divide: Coproduction, Synergy, and Development," *World Development*, vol. 24, no. 6, 1996, pp. 1073–1087.

22 Reina Artur kyzy, *Lessons of the OSCE Police Assistance in Central Asia: With a Case Study of Kyrgyzstan*, Central Asia Security Policy Briefs, no. 18 (OSCE Academy in Bishkek, January 2015), PDF, pp. 16, https://www.osce-academy.net/upload/file/Policy_Brief_18.pdf

allegiance to the Communist Party were central, whereas concerns for citizen-centered policing and accountability remained marginal.²³ Policing practices were predominantly reactive and focused on the preservation of regime security, with limited attention to building public trust or ensuring procedural fairness. It was also characterized by an insular organizational culture, weak mechanisms of external accountability, and dependence on informal ties within the party and state bureaucracy.²⁴ This legacy continued to shape institutional practices throughout much of the post-Soviet era. Despite Kyrgyzstan's independence in 1991, the Soviet policing model's institutional architecture and administrative rationales persisted with limited alteration. Initial attempts at police reform during the 1990s were disjointed, poorly resourced, and devoid of strategic coherence, leaving intact many of the system's coercive and non-transparent features.²⁵

The decade of the 1990s was marked by pronounced political and economic instability, manifested in interethnic clashes, rapid privatization, and a weakening of state capacity. Policing institutions suffered from persistent resource constraints and often relied on clientelistic practices, especially within local jurisdictions.²⁶ Although the Ministry of Internal Affairs continued to wield significant influence within the executive branch, its capacity to enforce the law effectively deteriorated, and it became increasingly linked to corruption, extortion, and human rights violations. Under President Askar Akayev, the government introduced modest reforms aimed at modernizing police operations, such as new legal frameworks governing criminal procedure and public order, but implementation remained weak.²⁷ The Ministry of Internal Affairs functioned with considerable autonomy and weak mechanisms of external accountability. Public confidence in police institutions remained chronically low, a trend that would endure under successive administrations.

Two landmark episodes, the Tulip Revolution of 2005 and the April Revolution of 2010, represented decisive moments in Kyrgyzstan's political

23 Louise I. Shelley, "The Soviet Militiia: Agents of Political and Social Control", *Policing and Society: An International Journal*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1990, pp. 39-56.

24 Liam O'Shea, "Why Democratic Police Reform Mostly Fails and Sometimes Succeeds: Police Reform and Low State Capacity, Authoritarianism and Neo-Patrimonial Politics (in the Former Soviet Union)", *Policing and Society*, vol. 33, no. 3, 2023, pp. 245-263.

25 Mark Galeotti, "Crime in Central Asia: A Regional Problem with Global Implications", *IBRU Boundary and Security Bulletin*, 1995, pp. 1995-1996.

26 Rensselaer W. Lee and Scott B. MacDonald, "Drugs in the East", *Foreign Policy*, no. 90, 1993, pp. 89-107.

27 Erica Marat, "Reforming the Police in Post-Soviet States: Georgia and Kyrgyzstan", *Current Politics and Economics of Russia, Eastern and Central Europe*, vol. 29, no. 5, 2014, p. 595.

development. Both episodes were catalyzed by public anger toward entrenched corruption, pervasive impunity, and abuses of power, with the internal security apparatus commonly regarded as representative of these broader grievances.²⁸ Across both episodes, internal security forces moved early to repress protest activity, yet eventually relinquished control in the face of large-scale mobilization and elite fragmentation. In the aftermath of the 2010 revolution, Kyrgyzstan underwent a constitutional transition toward parliamentarism, accompanied by a renewed focus on governance reform. This period was viewed by international donors as a window of opportunity for deeper institutional reform, extending to the internal security sector. The OSCE initiated a Police Reform Programme in 2010 with the objective of professionalizing policing practices, strengthening accountability mechanisms, and promoting community-oriented engagement.²⁹ The effort signaled the beginning of a more institutionalized reform period, accompanied by increased involvement of civil society and the modernization of legislative frameworks.

The initial optimism of the 2010 political transition was soon undermined by the outbreak of interethnic violence in southern Kyrgyzstan in June 2010, as clashes between Kyrgyz and Uzbek communities led to over 400 fatalities and widespread displacement.³⁰ Reports by human rights groups and independent investigative commissions revealed widespread misconduct by the internal security apparatus during and in the aftermath of the violence, encompassing arbitrary detention, ill-treatment, and ethnic profiling directed primarily at Uzbeks.³¹ The events severely weakened public confidence in policing institutions, especially among minority populations, while revealing enduring deficiencies in accountability within law enforcement agencies. Reform efforts were further complicated as security considerations and concerns over social cohesion assumed a central place in post-crisis political discourse.³²

In the period since 2010, Kyrgyzstan has moved between moments of reform-driven ambition and extended episodes of institutional stagnation.

28 Bekchoro Aliiaskarov, "Police Repression and Trauma in Light of the Revolutions in Kyrgyzstan", *Central Asian Affairs*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2023, pp. 157-182.

29 Cornelius Friesendorf, "Supporting Democratic Policing in Central Asia: Limitations of the OSCE", *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 74, no. 8, 2022, pp. 1433-1458.

30 Andrew R. Bond and Natalie R. Koch, "Interethnic Tensions in Kyrgyzstan: A Political Geographic Perspective", *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, vol. 51, no. 4, 2010, pp. 531-562.

31 Nick Megoran, "Averting Violence in Kyrgyzstan: Understanding and Responding to Nationalism", *Russia and Eurasia Programme Paper*, no. 3, 2012, pp. 971-986.

32 Reuel R. Hanks, "Crisis in Kyrgyzstan: Conundrums of Ethnic Conflict, National Identity and State Cohesion", *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2011, pp. 177-187.

Although public councils, legal reforms, and international training programmes represented important steps forward, their impact has been limited by persistent structural obstacles, including deficient judicial oversight, politicization within the security sector, and poor enforcement of accountability procedures.³³ In the period that followed, executive authority was reasserted amid increasing concerns about the contraction of civil society space, constraining prospects for participatory police reform. The Kyrgyzstani case illustrates the ways in which historical legacies, crisis-induced political dynamics, and state-building constraints jointly influence the trajectory and outcomes of police reform. A careful consideration of these factors is essential to evaluating the scope and constraints of ongoing reform initiatives.

From Participatory Reform to Administrative Recentralization: Police Reform Dynamics in Kyrgyzstan

Rather than providing a comprehensive historical account, this section identifies recurring patterns and critical turning points in Kyrgyzstan's post-2010 police reform, highlighting the interaction between external support, institutional design, and domestic political priorities. In the wake of the 2010 revolution, Kyrgyzstan entered a renewed and reconfigured stage of police reform. Underpinned by external donor assistance and facilitated by a constitutional reorientation toward parliamentary governance, the post-2010 period produced the most coordinated and participatory initiatives aimed at restructuring the police. This section maps three interconnected reform trajectories: internationally supported initiatives between 2010 and 2014, the establishment of institutional and legal architectures for modernization, and the post-2015 turn toward stagnation and administrative recentralization.

In the aftermath of the revolution, conditions emerged that facilitated greater international engagement in police reform efforts. The launch of the OSCE's Police Reform Programme in Kyrgyzstan in 2010 marked the beginning of a reform effort that persisted through 2015. Its stated goals were to advance police professionalization, reinforce internal accountability structures, and introduce community-policing models designed to foster closer relations between the police and the public.³⁴ The key pattern in this phase is

33 Erica Marat, "Policing Public Protest in Central Asia", *Central Asian Affairs*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2014, pp. 5-23.

34 Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, "OSCE Support to Kyrgyzstan's Police Reform Essential, Interior Minister Says," OSCE Permanent Council Press Release, Vienna, 24 September 2009, <https://www.osce.org/pc/51357>, Accessed: 1 January 2026.

that external support expanded the menu of reform instruments, strategies, training, pilot initiatives, and oversight forums, yet these instruments operated within an unstable political environment where high-level ownership remained intermittent. Central elements of the OSCE programme encompassed the formulation of a national police reform strategy, the creation of public councils to institutionalize civil society oversight, the rollout of community safety partnerships in selected regions, and training-based capacity building in human rights and procedural justice. Concurrently, UNDP, the European Union, and bilateral actors including the United States and Germany contributed to police reform through technical assistance, capacity-building training, and access to justice programmes.³⁵ However, the plurality of external actors also produced a coordination problem given that reform agendas were dispersed across projects and administrative units, while the government lacked a sufficiently authoritative steering mechanism to consolidate priorities, align incentives, and enforce compliance across the policing hierarchy. A defining characteristic of this period was the formal institutionalization of civil society participation. At the national and regional levels, the Ministry of Internal Affairs created public councils composed of NGO representatives and independent experts responsible for assessing police performance and contributing policy recommendations.³⁶ This institutional arrangement may be understood as an innovative form of participatory governance in the security sector. Notwithstanding these developments, reform efforts were dispersed among multiple donors, marked by insufficient coordination within government, and undermined by the absence of strong political ownership at the highest level.³⁷

During the 2013–2016 period, the Kyrgyz authorities introduced multiple legal and procedural reforms intended to bring policing practices into closer conformity with rule of law principles. These initiatives encompassed revisions to the law on police, the consolidation of investigative units within the ministry of internal affairs, the introduction of internal disciplinary mechanisms, and

35 Jos Boonstra, Erica Marat, and Vera Axyonova, "Security Sector Reform in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan: What Role for Europe," Europe-Central Asia Monitoring (EUCAM) Working Paper No. 14, Madrid, 2013, pp. 1–20.

36 Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, "OSCE supports national forum on police reform in Kyrgyzstan," OSCE Programme Office in Bishkek Press Release, Bishkek, 12 October 2011, <https://bishkek.osce.org/bishkek/83881>, Accessed: 1 January 2026.

37 Liam O'Shea, "Why Democratic Police Reform Mostly Fails and Sometimes Succeeds: Police Reform and Low State Capacity, Authoritarianism and Neo-Patrimonial Politics (in the Former Soviet Union)", *Policing and Society*, vol. 33, no. 3, 2023, pp. 245–263.

the implementation of pilot community-policing schemes in urban and rural areas. According to a 2016 UNDP/OSCE evaluation, formal accountability structures showed measurable improvement, especially in the areas of complaint procedures and public access to policing services.³⁸ The central pattern here is institutional form without institutional force as legal changes and pilot schemes generated visible outputs, but enforcement capacity, managerial incentives, and local resourcing were insufficient to translate reforms into routine practice across the organization. Nonetheless, the practical implementation of these reforms remained uneven. Survey evidence indicated only marginal improvements in public trust in the police, alongside the continued prevalence of complaints related to extortion, abuse, and professional misconduct.³⁹ One of the principal obstacles to reform was the endurance of informal practices, such as patronage-based recruitment and internal protection networks within the police.⁴⁰ In addition, financial limitations, especially at the local level, constrained regional police departments' ability to fully carry out reform mandates.

By 2016, reform dynamics had weakened, reflecting a loss of momentum. As major donors reduced or concluded their engagement, the government reoriented its focus toward public order, crime control, and state stability in response to perceived threats of political instability and extremism. This period was characterized by reduced external funding for policing reform, a weakening role for civil society oversight mechanisms, and increased presidential consolidation of authority over security institutions under centralized administration. The turning point is not merely donor exit, but the political redefinition of reform as administrative management rather than institutional transformation, privileging control, hierarchy, and order over participatory accountability. While reform activity continued in limited form, such as through the introduction of digital monitoring tools, these interventions were primarily technocratic and did not address underlying institutional problems related to politicization or deficient accountability mechanisms.⁴¹ Recent

38 United Nations Development Programme and Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, *Joint Police Reform Impact Assessment Report*, UNDP/OSCE, 2016.

39 Reina Artur kyzy, *Lessons of the OSCE Police Assistance in Central Asia: With a Case Study of Kyrgyzstan*, Central Asia Security Policy Briefs, no. 18 (OSCE Academy in Bishkek, January 2015), PDF, pp. 17, https://www.osce-academy.net/upload/file/Policy_Brief_18.pdf

40 Erica Marat, "OSCE Police Reform Programmes in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan: Past Constraints and Future Opportunities," *Europe-Central Asia Monitoring (EUCAM)*, 2012.

41 Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, "OSCE Programme Office in Bishkek hands over video surveillance equipment to State Committee for National Security of Kyrgyzstan," OSCE Programme Office in Bishkek News Release,

evaluations suggest that initial improvements in transparency and participatory mechanisms have failed to produce durable institutional change. Levels of public trust remain limited, especially in the south, where ongoing ethnic tensions influence perceptions of discriminatory practices and impunity.⁴² Taken together, these developments call into question the sustainability of participatory police reform mechanisms and the independence of internal accountability arrangements.

Comparative Analysis and Key Findings

The post-2010 reform path of Kyrgyzstan's policing sector illustrates a complex configuration of international engagement, national political contingencies, and historically embedded institutional structures. This complexity stems from the interaction of multiple reform actors, including international donors, executive authorities, police leadership, and civil society, overlapping governance levels, and the coexistence of formal reform frameworks with entrenched informal practices.^{43,44} Although reform efforts initially elicited broad optimism and experimented with novel forms of participation, their long-term effectiveness has been circumscribed by structural impediments and political dynamics. By contrasting reform ambitions with their realized effects, this section identifies central findings that embed the Kyrgyzstan case within broader analytical conversations on governance-driven police reform in transitional environments. Rather than reflecting the normative paradigms commonly applied to post-conflict security sector reform, policing reform in Kyrgyzstan has been driven largely by governance-focused objectives, including institutional capacity-building, transparency enhancement, and improved interaction between the state and society. Although some donor programs tacitly framed reform in democratizing terms, the dominant policy rationale emphasized institutional stabilization, corruption reduction, and improvements in service provision.⁴⁵ Such a pragmatic orientation reflects

Bishkek, 30 October 2017, <https://bishkek.osce.org/programme-office-in-bishkek/353066>, Accessed: 1 January 2026.

42 International Crisis Group, *Kyrgyzstan: Widening Ethnic Divisions in the South*, Asia Report No. 222, 29 March 2012, p. 2, which highlights ongoing ethnic tensions and unresolved divisions in southern Kyrgyzstan; <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/kyrgyzstan/222-kyrgyzstan-widening-ethnic-divisions-south>. Accessed 1 January 2026.

43 DCAF, *Almanac 2012: Governing and Reforming Kyrgyzstan's Security Sector (Civil Society Monitoring and Reform Dynamics)*, DCAF, Geneva, 2012.

44 Saferworld, *Community Policing in Central Asia: Kyrgyzstan (Formal Reforms vs Informal Practices; Implementation Constraints)*, Saferworld, London, 2021.

45 Erica Marat, "Reforming Police in Post-Communist Countries: International Efforts, Domestic Heroes", *Comparative Politics*, vol. 48, no. 3, 2016, pp. 333–352.

both the constraints imposed by Kyrgyzstan's hybrid political order and the strategic calculations of international actors, who placed greater emphasis on security and administrative modernization than on comprehensive political change. In this respect, the Kyrgyz case aligns with strands of the literature that treat police reform as a technocratic exercise, often separated from broader democratization trajectories.⁴⁶

A defining characteristic of Kyrgyzstan's reform initiative was the integration of civil society via local councils, monitoring institutions, and participatory forms of evaluation. Nevertheless, their influence was predominantly advisory, and relatively few of their recommendations were translated into formal police practices or policy agendas. The durability of these innovations was undermined by multiple factors, including recurrent political leadership turnover that eroded policy continuity; the lack of formal legal embedding of participatory bodies; reliance on donor funding that restricted autonomous operational capacity; and the narrowing of civic space in recent years, which curtailed critical oversight. Consequently, the reforms were susceptible to rollback, especially in periods characterized by heightened administrative centralization. Although internationally endorsed reform norms emphasized community policing, gender sensitivity, and rights-based accountability, their internalization remained partial and selective. Although community policing initiatives showed early promise in pilot districts, they did not expand nationwide, largely because of hierarchical resistance within the police and limited material resources.⁴⁷ This pattern is indicative of broader dynamics of norm localization, whereby international templates are reshaped in accordance with domestic institutional cultures and incentive structures. In the Kyrgyz context, adaptation occurred in a partial and uneven manner, resulting in hybrid policing practices that fused formal procedural frameworks with long-standing informal logics, including patronage and informal conflict resolution mechanisms.

One of the most significant findings is that the trajectory of police reform in Kyrgyzstan depended heavily on political will and elite-level interests. Political openings, exemplified by the period following 2010, allowed for the advancement of reform efforts characterized by greater participation and

46 David Lewis, "Security Sector Reform in Authoritarian Regimes: The OSCE Experience of Police Assistance Programming in Central Asia", *Security and Human Rights*, vol. 22, no. 2, 2011, pp. 103-117.

47 Philipp Lottholz and Arzuu Sheranova, "Governing, but Not Producing Security? Internationalised Community Security Practices in Kyrgyzstan", *International Quarterly for Asian Studies (IQAS)*, vol. 52, no. 1-2, 2021, pp. 55-77.

transparency. By contrast, the consolidation of political authority in recent years strengthened executive oversight of the security apparatus and narrowed the room for independent reform actors. This finding implies that political conditions, rather than technical design features or donor contributions, were decisive in determining the depth and longevity of reform. Repeated political crises, alongside elite reliance on security services, incentivized the maintenance of centralized policing arrangements over the implementation of structural accountability reforms. Notwithstanding reform-oriented discourse, confidence in the police continues to be tenuous, especially among ethnic minority communities and in southern areas shaped by the legacy of the 2010 interethnic violence. Despite pilot efforts to enhance community engagement in urban settings, concerns over corruption, abuse, and impunity remain pervasive, particularly with respect to pre-trial detention. These dynamics suggest a gap between formal reform outputs and public perceptions, highlighting the importance of translating reforms into concrete changes in service provision and accountability. In the absence of tangible improvements in day-to-day policing practices, reform initiatives are unlikely to be perceived as legitimate by society.

Discussion

An examination of police reform in Kyrgyzstan since 2010 points to a reform process characterized by multiple layers, political contingency, and normative complexity. Although initial reform initiatives conformed to international rule-of-law and participatory governance frameworks, the long-term evolution of reform reveals the persistent influence of political incentives, historically embedded institutional arrangements, and the partial internalization of internationally promoted norms. Drawing on the Kyrgyz experience, this section engages with broader theoretical debates on security sector governance, processes of norm diffusion, and state-society relations in transitional environments. The Kyrgyz case demonstrates the shortcomings of technocratic reform models in contexts lacking political and institutional incentives for deep structural change. Despite significant investment in legislative reform, accountability frameworks, and civil society oversight mechanisms, police reform largely failed to move beyond surface-level change and remained vulnerable to reversal. This pattern is indicative of a governance-focused reform paradigm emphasizing efficiency and service delivery, rather

than a transformational model oriented toward deep democratic restructuring.⁴⁸ In line with security sector reform scholarship on fragile states, the Kyrgyz experience demonstrates that police reforms are often limited by wider political economy structures, particularly elite interests in preserving discretionary authority over security institutions.⁴⁹ Consequently, reform efforts may lead to improvements in administrative procedures, including complaint systems and transparency platforms, while leaving intact the core logic of centralized authority and the political use of policing institutions.

The Kyrgyz reform process was marked by a significant innovation in the form of civil society participation and the establishment of local oversight mechanisms. Such efforts aligned with internationally endorsed best practices promoting bottom-up accountability and collaborative approaches to public security provision.⁵⁰ Nonetheless, the restricted formal mandate and fragile institutionalization of these mechanisms call into question their capacity to generate substantive impact. From a co-production perspective, these initiatives tend to be most effective when supported by strong institutional arrangements and clearly delineated roles between state and non-state actors.⁵¹ While initial momentum in Kyrgyzstan suggested a turn toward participatory governance, subsequent changes in the political context over the last decade limited these platforms' ability to shape policy outcomes or resist reversal. These dynamics indicate that symbolic participation, absent meaningful enforcement authority, is inadequate for maintaining reforms in politically volatile contexts.

International reform agendas emphasized citizen-focused policing, principles of procedural fairness, inclusive gender representation, and transparency-oriented accountability, yet their implementation remained fragmented and context-specific. The logic of norm localization, especially in hybrid political systems, illuminates why reform norms were unevenly adopted, modified, or attenuated in accordance with domestic preferences.⁵²

48 Diane E. Davis, "Undermining the Rule of Law: Democratization and the Dark Side of Police Reform in Mexico," *Latin American Politics and Society*, vol. 48, no. 1, 2006, pp. 55-86.

49 Alex J. Bellamy, "Security Sector Reform: Prospects and Problems," *Global Change, Peace & Security*, vol. 15, no. 2, 2003, pp. 101-119.

50 Kent Eaton, "Paradoxes of Police Reform: Federalism, Parties, and Civil Society in Argentina's Public Security Crisis," *Latin American Research Review*, vol. 43, no. 3, 2008, pp. 5-32.

51 Elinor Ostrom, "Crossing the Great Divide: Coproduction, Synergy, and Development," *World Development*, vol. 24, no. 6, 1996, pp. 1073-1087.

52 Lisbeth Zimmermann, "Same Same or Different? Norm Diffusion between Resistance, Compliance, and Localization in Post-Conflict States," *International Studies Perspectives*, vol. 17, no. 1, 2016, pp. 98-115.

Community-based policing was comparatively easier to implement in donor-backed pilot districts; however, it met resistance in regions where informal social networks shaped police-community interactions. Rather than leading to comprehensive convergence with international norms, the reform process in Kyrgyzstan resulted in hybrid practices that fused formal procedures with entrenched informal governance patterns. These dynamics manifested in forms of discretionary enforcement, clientelistic networks, and elite involvement in police personnel appointments. Such an outcome reflects the logic of hybrid regimes, where reform adoption serves external legitimation purposes without necessarily translating into full implementation when domestic power relations are at stake.

Significantly, Kyrgyzstan's police reform trajectory provides insight into the wider configuration of state-society relations. The police occupy a dual role as enforcers of state authority and as frontline actors mediating daily interactions between citizens and public institutions. The disjuncture between reform discourse and everyday citizen experiences, particularly regarding mistrust, ethnic discrimination, and selective enforcement, reveals the constraints of top-down reform approaches in remedying entrenched legitimacy deficits. Available evidence indicates that reforms have failed to significantly transform how policing is experienced by communities, particularly in the south and among ethnic minorities. Without comprehensive safeguards, police reform initiatives may inadvertently reinforce hierarchical social structures rather than challenging them. Accordingly, the Kyrgyz case highlights the importance of connecting institutional reform with wider agendas of societal inclusion, conflict-sensitive approaches, and accountable governance, especially in post-crisis contexts. Efforts to reform policing are inextricably linked to political processes, interethnic relations, and the structural characteristics of the state.

Conclusion

This qualitative study has examined how police reform in Kyrgyzstan has developed since 2010 and assessed the extent. To which these reforms have strengthened governance, enhanced public accountability, or reproduced existing institutional practices. Building on evidence from bureaucratic, normative, and participatory domains, the analysis shows that reform initiatives generated notable advances, including non-state monitoring arrangements, experimental participatory policing models, and legal framework revisions;

however, these measures were uneven in practice, only shallowly entrenched, and constrained by overarching political and structural forces. The findings allow for a systematic response to the study's central research question, namely whether police reform in Kyrgyzstan has translated into meaningful and durable improvements in governance and accountability. First, police reform contributed incrementally to improvements in institutional transparency and procedural coherence, especially between 2010 and 2015, when international involvement and civil society engagement were at their peak. Nevertheless, the depth and breadth of these gains were constrained, as they often lacked the enforcement capacity and political support necessary to endure. Second, while participatory arrangements enabled forms of civic involvement in security governance, their effect on substantive decision-making and accountability was largely symbolic, especially during the last decade's turn toward political centralization. Third, rather than dismantling existing patterns, the reform process has predominantly reproduced hybrid institutional practices, combining formal legal change with persistent informal governance logics, including clientelism and politicized staffing. Such hybridization is indicative of selective norm transmission combined with institutional adaptation and resistance within policing organizations. Finally, levels of public confidence in policing continue to be tenuous, especially among communities that have long experienced marginalization. Absent concrete improvements in routine police-citizen engagement, reform initiatives are likely to remain technocratic in character rather than genuinely transformative.

These findings can be applied to future studies in at least four ways. First, comparative research should test whether the three-phase trajectory identified here, donor-backed engagement, legal-institutional modernization, and post-reform recentralization, is observable in other regional and hybrid governance settings, or whether Kyrgyzstan represents a distinct pathway shaped by unusually resilient civic space. Second, future studies should operationalize and measure political commitment more precisely by tracing how executive preferences and budgetary allocations translate into compliance with or circumvention of reform mandates over time. Third, micro-level research, especially ethnographic and survey-based work on routine police-citizen encounters, should examine whether participatory oversight mechanisms generate perceptible changes in everyday policing and whether such changes correlate with shifts in public trust, particularly among marginalized communities. Fourth, longitudinal assessments of participatory institutions

should evaluate the institutional conditions under which civic input becomes binding rather than symbolic, including the legal authority of oversight bodies, protection from political interference, and organizational responsiveness within the police.

Taken together, the Kyrgyz case demonstrates how police reform in transitional political contexts is conditioned by domestic power arrangements, inherited institutional structures, and the resilience of civic space. Although international actors can offer technical resources and standardized reform models, meaningful and durable reform depends on the convergence of political commitment, legal empowerment, and societal participation at the local level. The Kyrgyz case presents a set of valuable lessons for policymakers as well as scholars concerned with police reform and governance. Reform initiatives frequently lose momentum unless they are anchored in legal mandates, sustained by dedicated resources, and monitored through effective oversight. The inclusion of civil society cannot remain merely consultative; it requires decision-making authority, safeguards against political pressure, and institutional responsiveness. Externally derived reform models require careful adaptation to local contexts, particularly with respect to legitimacy frameworks and power dynamics. Building trust is a critical prerequisite, requiring reforms to translate into visible changes in routine police-citizen encounters, especially in ethnically plural and politically sensitive areas. In sum, police reform in Kyrgyzstan has not collapsed but has stagnated, underscoring the importance of sustained, flexible strategies that reconcile reform ambitions with the political constraints shaping implementation.

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