

## Local government reform in kyrgyzstan: opportunities, challenges, and approaches

### Reforma do governo local no quirguistão: oportunidades, desafios e abordagens

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#### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** This study aims to assess the ongoing reforms in local government within the Kyrgyz Republic, exploring the challenges and opportunities these reforms present, and to propose actionable strategies for enhancing the effectiveness of local governance.

**Methods:** The research methodology integrates a comprehensive review of legislative documents, historical analysis, and current practices within Kyrgyzstan's local government framework. It draws on both primary sources, such as government decrees and laws, and secondary sources including scholarly articles and expert opinions.

**Results:** The analysis identifies significant challenges in the reform process, such as inadequate integration of traditional governance structures with modern administrative requirements and varying degrees of success in implementing decentralization policies. It also highlights opportunities for advancing local governance through strategic reforms that incorporate both international models and local traditions.

**Conclusions:** The study concludes with specific recommendations for strengthening local governance in Kyrgyzstan. These include the establishment of a more structured framework for local self-governance, enhancement of financial autonomy, and greater public participation in the local government process.

**Keywords:** Local government reform. Kyrgyzstan. Decentralization. Public administration. Governance strategies.

## RESUMO

**Objetivo:** Este estudo visa avaliar as reformas em andamento no governo local dentro da República do Quirguistão, explorar os desafios e oportunidades que essas reformas apresentam e propor estratégias acionáveis para aumentar a eficácia da governança local.

**Métodos:** A metodologia de pesquisa integra uma revisão abrangente de documentos legislativos, análise histórica e práticas atuais dentro do quadro de governo local do Quirguistão. Baseia-se tanto em fontes primárias, como decretos governamentais e leis, quanto em fontes secundárias, incluindo artigos acadêmicos e opiniões de especialistas.

**Resultados:** A análise identifica desafios significativos no processo de reforma, como a integração inadequada das estruturas de governança tradicionais com os requisitos administrativos modernos e graus variados de sucesso na implementação de políticas de descentralização. Também destaca oportunidades para avançar na governança local por meio de reformas estratégicas que incorporam modelos internacionais e tradições locais.

**Conclusões:** O estudo conclui com recomendações específicas para fortalecer a governança local no Quirguistão. Estas incluem o estabelecimento de um quadro mais estruturado para a autogovernança local, o aumento da autonomia financeira e uma maior participação pública no processo de governo local.

**Palavras-chave:** Reforma do governo local. Quirguistão. Descentralização. Administração pública. Estratégias de governança.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The topic of local self-government has been actively debated in post-Soviet countries since the declaration of their sovereignty (Decree of the President of the Kyrgyz Republic No. UP-188, 1994; Decree of the President of the Kyrgyz Republic No. UP-190, 1994). Without an effective system of power at all territorial levels, it is impossible to fully govern the country (Rybak et al. 2023). Kyrgyzstan is no exception (Decree of the President of the Kyrgyz Republic No. 246, 1994; Decree of the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic No. 254, 1997; Decree of the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic No. 843, 2001).

Like other former Soviet Republics, the Kyrgyz Republic was guided by the USSR Law “On the General Principles of Local Self-Government and Local Economy in the USSR” of April 9, 1990. The Law of the Republic of Kyrgyzstan “On Local Self-Government” was adopted on its basis on April 19, 1991 (Zakon Respubliki Kyrgyzstan, 1991).

The difficulty for Kyrgyzstan was that this and the following steps in decentralization were experimental since there was no national scientific school of local self-government and no scientific works had been published on local self-government. Even such terms as “municipality”, “municipal”, etc. were missing (Tarasov & Kraytsov, 2023). The first state reformers in Kyrgyzstan had to determine options and models independently.

The theory of local self-government in Kyrgyzstan, including the definition of the final model of public power and its role in the overall social and state structures, had not been fully developed (Encyclopædia Britannica, n.d.). The vector of reforming was constantly changing depending on the political course of the country.

Currently, it is necessary to formulate a national model of local self-government or, at a minimum, to propose mechanisms for its development and implementation.

This should be done by solving interrelated tasks, starting with an analysis of completed and planned actions, challenges, and opportunities and ending with specific proposals for further actions in the implementation of the reform.

Thus, the study aims to formulate a set of actions to create a model of local self-government and propose further actions to implement the reform.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

The discourse on local self-governance reform in the post-Soviet states, such as Kyrgyzstan, plays a crucial role in the broader field of political science and public administration (Decree of the President of the Kyrgyz Republic No. 350, 2022; Decree of the President of the Kyrgyz Republic No. 414, 2022). Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union,

these countries have embarked on a challenging path of political and administrative transformation to establish effective governance systems at all territorial levels (Omuraliev, 1997; Decree of the President of the Kyrgyz Republic No. 85, 2023).

All scientific developments were made after the working commissions had planned possible actions and proposed them to management for approval (Kozhoshev & Shadybekov, 2006). The first publications on local self-government in Kyrgyzstan appeared only in 1999, including a monograph by the author of this article. However, they were not applicable since the political decisions had already been made. Moreover, during the political “romanticism” of the 1990s, the main postulate of most scientific works and textbooks was that local self-government was proclaimed as an absolute value that had to be implemented in real life (A.A. Karashev, O.S. Tarbinskii (1999), E. Kozubekov, etc.). Later, we and other scholars proposed to introduce local self-government not because of its liberal attractiveness but as a tool for achieving better local governance, serving the requirements of the local population, and having a resource not only in the form of governing bodies but also local communities.

The variety of ancient communal self-government bodies of the Kyrgyz was studied based on such scientific works as S.M. Abramzon’s “The Kyrgyz and their ethno-genetic and historical-cultural connections” (Abramzon, 1990), N.A. Aristov’s “The Usuns, Kyrgyz or Kara-Kyrgyz” (Aristov, 2001), M. Baidzhiev’s “The Legend of Manas: A poetic adaptation of the first part of the Kyrgyz trilogy ‘Manas’” (Baidzhiev, 2010), and “The history of the Kyrgyz SSR from ancient times to the present day” (Ilyasov, 1986).

After studying the history of the Kyrgyz people (Malikova, 2005), we concluded that there is every reason for the subsequent implementation and organic symbiosis of national traditions and European parliamentarism due to consistent prerequisites.

Recommended international models were studied based on the Russian version of the European Charter of Local Self-Government (Evropeiskaya Khartiya, 1990) and the never adopted IULA World Wide Declaration of Local Self-Government by the IULA Council, Toronto (June 1993). These two documents set the vectors of reforms for countries following along the path of decentralization of public administration but differ in details. The European Charter identifies local self-government with municipal bodies, and the draft World Wide Declaration of Local Self-Government considers local communities as a source of power. In this regard, the draft World Wide Declaration of Local Self-Government is similar to the Declaration on the Principles of Local Self-Government in the Member States of the Commonwealth adopted in 1994 by the Interparliamentary Assembly of Member Nations of

the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) (Interparliamentary Assembly of the CIS Member States, 1997).

In relation to the reform of local self-government in Kyrgyzstan, we believe that local self-government in Kyrgyzstan should be included in the social and governmental structure of the country, not being an autonomous matter separated from national governance structures. Otherwise, given the socio-cultural characteristics of Kyrgyzstan, it will be extremely difficult to maintain the integrity of the Kyrgyz Republic.

At present, the rule that should be followed when defining the concept of decentralization is as follows: no municipality can work effectively and provide services to the population if it does not have a material and technical base corresponding to its tasks and functions, i.e., the resources of the local community (Velikhov, 1996).

A financially dependent municipality cannot provide quality services to local communities and, constantly subsidized by the republican budget, is dependent on the center (Decree of the President of the Kyrgyz Republic No. 370, 2023; Platon & Aristotel, 2003). In other words, it is just an appendage of the same bureaucratic state machine that functions but does not bring results, systematically and automatically transforming budgetary funds into standard management functions. Despite the fact that this management is called local self-government carried out by government bodies elected by the population.

This has been discussed for many years, and proponents of the reform propose to accelerate financial decentralization to the maximum extent possible.

However, central government bodies do not want to share their financial resources, trying in every possible way to maintain their power over municipalities, primarily in the form of accumulating funds for the implementation of sectoral programs in the regions. They strive to distribute funds in the former socialist manner, i.e., to distribute benefits without losing financial power.

Based on reality, another way is proposed to provide municipalities with their resources.

**First**, it is necessary to use strategic management technologies aimed at concentrating and increasing resources based on the laws of synergetics. Strategic planning allows one to more accurately determine the goals of the local community, identify growth points according to the golden lever rule, and invest funds and efforts at a minimum to obtain the maximum result.

**Second**, we can return to the policy of expanding the number of exclusively local taxes. In the early 1990s, local self-government had 16 types of local taxes and fees. A decade later,

their number was reduced to eight. The current Tax Code contains only taxes on movable and immovable property. Over more than two decades of reforms, the number of local taxes has decreased eightfold. Part of the funds from the collection of republican taxes is credited to local budgets, i.e., their size has not decreased. However, the splitting of municipal revenues according to the Government formula is a hidden attempt to interfere with local budgeting issues: few people, except for the Ministry of Economy and Finance, understand the formula. Expanding the number of local taxes will encourage municipalities to increase their collection. Then no formula will be needed since the principle will apply: “The more taxes I collect, the richer the municipality”.

**Third**, the consolidation of municipal territories, which has been carried out since 2023, should not only be based on the idea of unification but should be done comprehensively through changing management practices.

There is another negative subjective factor that significantly hinders the consolidation of territories. This is the remaining tribal division of the Kyrgyz people. However, merging and annexing municipalities aimlessly (for the sake of consolidation) and without achieving the main goal (to create a strong municipal economy) is not only pointless but also harmful. It can lead to unnecessary discontent of the local population and instability in the still fragile socio-political situation in Kyrgyzstan.

Research to determine the boundaries of municipalities should be done, first of all, from the perspective of the economic feasibility of the ongoing transformations. If it is unprofitable to unite municipalities in such a way, they should not be united.

Some experts believe that the unification of territories can lead to inconvenience for the population since there will be longer distances and people will have to travel to the center, where the *aiyl okmotu* is located, at high transport costs.

All reforms should be carried out simultaneously as these actions should complement each other. Therefore, it is necessary to improve the interaction between government and communities by introducing elements of everyday democracy into management practice.

This leads to the creation of an organic model of self-government, in which the key role is played not by municipal authorities but by local communities. Communication between communities and local authorities is the main condition for the development of true self-government.

To this end, it is necessary to ensure the transparency of local government, well-managed actions of local authorities, and the rules of the game for the population. The current



closedness of power does not contribute to this state of affairs. As a result, the government acts in isolation from the population, and society lives according to its own laws. Under these conditions, the population does not see the government as its agent and ally, perceiving the state as a purely bureaucratic structure.

The only way is to increase the transparency of local self-government and its accessibility to the population. The activities of local councils (the main self-government bodies formed by local communities) should become more open and closer to the population. Thus, it is necessary to implement the legally enshrined principle of holding open sessions by local keneshes, if possible, in spacious premises to accommodate a large number of people. Announcements of sessions and meeting agendas should be published in local media or posted in public places.

Local authorities should more often use such forms of notifying the public about the most important decisions made by local self-government bodies as public hearings. Public hearings on the budget issues are held in some cities of the Kyrgyz Republic, and it is necessary to extend this practice to other settlements of Kyrgyzstan.

It is necessary to enrich the democratic aspects of self-government by encouraging such forms of public control as hearing reports from local government officials at qurultays, meetings of local government representatives with the population, etc.

The position of the main constitutional bodies of local self-government (local keneshes), which work on policies for the development of the territory, should become more active. They need to control the implementation of local socio-economic programs on behalf of the population.

The consistent implementation of these steps aims at bringing the authorities and the population closer together, increasing the participation of citizens in the management of local affairs and their influence on the development of territorial development policies. Therefore, local communities should be recommended to reflect these conditions in the charters of their cities, towns, and villages for the implementation by local self-government bodies.

The weakness of the reform is the lack of understanding of how to distinguish between the functions and powers of the state and local self-government. This issue has been discussed many times but we offer a completely different approach to solving the issue. For many years, proponents of decentralization have been insisting on a clear delineation of functions but nothing has come of it. They have decided to constantly change the legislation on local self-government, describing legislative norms more clearly from their viewpoint. This also did not

bring any results. There is a specific reason. The fact is that local leaders do not always act from the position of the law. The factors of subjectivity and the desire of the heads of local state administrations to keep everything under control are predominant.

A distorted picture emerges, where the population takes little part in this control mechanism, and control is periodically exercised by government bodies, essentially expanding their powers and going beyond the cases and procedures of intervention established by the law (Habitat & WACLAC, 1998). The level of municipal services remains low, and no one cares about this.

Approaches to state control over the activities of municipalities should be changed. There should be several issues on which the state supervises local governments:

- The implementation of legislation, national and state programs (but only in the case of allocation of republican funds), and non-exceeding of established powers;
- Threat to national security, danger of terrorist acts and riots, etc.;
- Control over public funds, including the use of transfers and targeted allocations;
- Ensuring compliance with the standards for the provision of services by municipal or government services to the population.

These directions are traditional and understandable for Kyrgyzstan and are implemented with greater or lesser success (Zakon Kyrgyzskoi Respubliki №113, 2022).

The most important result of the reform should be the high quality and accessibility of public services. In this regard, there is still an imbalance between the status of services and the localization of their provision. The Register of Public Services of the Kyrgyz Republic lists about 400 services that are provided by government agencies and state enterprises, while there are only 12 municipal services established in the Basic Register of Municipal Services.

A fundamental overhaul of public services is needed. Considering that some of these services are provided in local centers, they should acquire municipal status or all services should be called public services, combining state and municipal services.

The issue of high quality and accessibility of municipal services is complicated by the fact that standards for the provision of municipal services have not been approved yet.

In our opinion, it is possible to expand the number of municipal services provided by local governments but their provision must be subject to state supervision. The state needs to study the timing, completeness, and quality of service delivery. The best indicator is the satisfaction of residents. People have the right to express their opinions on this matter using feedback cards from municipalities and state supervisory authorities.



In case of dissatisfaction with the quality of services provided, the state must take measures up to and including direct intervention in providing services and resolving issues of financing services if the reason for their low quality is insufficient funding.

We believe that local communities have the right to introduce additional functions based on their interests within the budget and other resources available to municipalities.

It has already been argued that the competence of local self-government must be clearly defined. Perhaps it would be rational not to determine what local self-government bodies should do but to set parameters for what they should not do under any circumstances.

On the one hand, municipalities will be free and flexible in their local policies for the development of local communities. On the other hand, the legal boundaries established from above will not allow local governments to violate the law. In this connection, the auditor will be the state.

Another important area of reform is the professionalization of municipal government.

We suggest expanding the issues of **personnel training and incentives**. A unified data bank for state and municipal employees is required. This will allow one to identify promising employees at local institutions and rotate them to higher positions in ministries, departments, and other government bodies. This issue should be considered when improving the Concept of personnel management in state and local self-government bodies which should be unified for both state and municipal employees. There can be contradictions with the legislation on state and municipal service which does not provide for personnel rotation. Nevertheless, all such problems can be solved with desire and strong political will.

This confirms that, in contrast to the previous approaches to the step-by-step implementation of local self-government reforms (including the alternative Concept for the Development of Local Self-Government), it is necessary to conduct many actions in a comprehensive manner and in parallel (even when a lot has already been done).

Only the basic object undergoing transformation is retained from the old concept. The methods of achieving goals and actions are different.

Thus, the new concept of sustainable municipality we proposed is original due to the following significant innovations:

- Actions are carried out not step by step, but in parallel;
- Target sets of interrelated actions are developed, without which it is impossible to achieve the desired result;
- The achieved results are determined.

### 3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study uses research methods to comprehensively analyze the reform of local self-government in Kyrgyzstan. The approach integrates quantitative data on governance outcomes with qualitative insights from the key stakeholders involved in the reforming process. This facilitates a better understanding of the impact of reforms, as well as allows the examination of both measurable results and subjective experiences of those directly engaged in or affected by these reforms.

We conducted a systematic review of official documents, including laws, regulations, government reports, and program evaluations related to local self-government reforms in Kyrgyzstan.

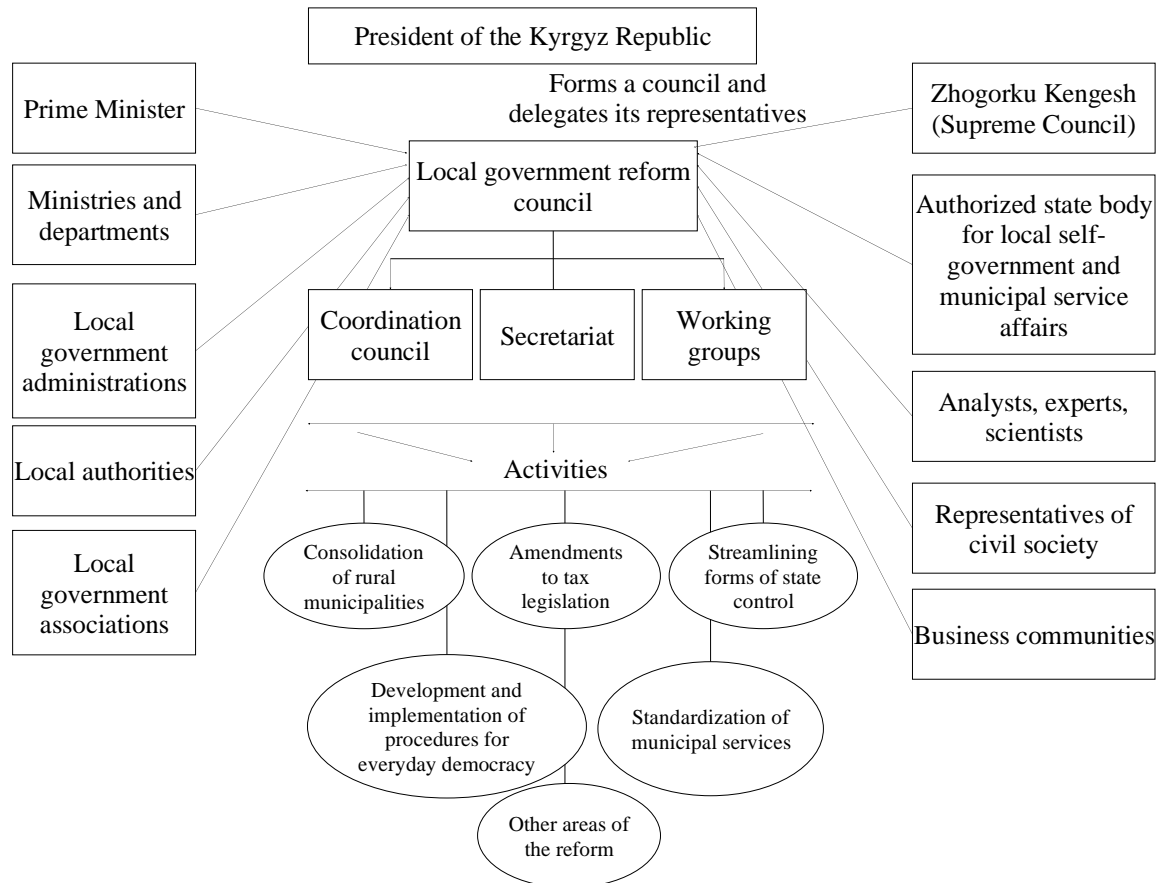
Within the framework of this article, we studied both national and international practices and checked international models and national traditions for their complementarity.

The material was sampled in such a way as to reflect all aspects of the object under study. The time period for the study was from antiquity to the present day.

### 4. RESULTS

As a result of the study, we became convinced that the modern model of local self-government in Kyrgyzstan may combine international recommendations, especially those outlined in the draft World Declaration on Local Self-Government, and the historical traditions of the Kyrgyz people.

The analysis of the National Strategy “Decentralization of Public Administration and Development of Local Self-Government in the Kyrgyz Republic until 2010” (Decree of the President of the Kyrgyz Republic No. 381, 2002) and decrees of the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic “On the Development Program for Local Self-Government of the Kyrgyz Republic for 2013-2017” of December 18, 2013 No. 678 (Decree of the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic No. 678, 2013) and “On the Program for the Development of Local Self-Government of the Kyrgyz Republic for 2018-2023” of October 31, 2018 No. 513 (Decree of the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic No. 513, 2018) prove that it is necessary not only to identify the ultimate goal of decentralization but also to restore a permanent reform body (i.e., the coordination council) (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Local government reform coordination scheme

In the course of the study, we developed an innovative Action Plan.

First, it is proposed to continue the ongoing administrative-territorial reform to consolidate the territories of *aiyl aimaks*. However, we propose not to simply merge such territories but to change the boundaries of local communities and their financing systems. The proposals on financial decentralization are new. Thus, it is necessary to radically change the system of local financing, transferring the majority of taxes and fees collected at the local level to the category of local ones. At the time of preparing this article, most of the taxes and fees (except for property tax) are republican, although the financial resources of some taxes are sent to local budgets. In general, municipalities are deprived of tax administration rights.

Second, since enlargement may make it difficult for residents of remote villages to apply to the *aiyl okmotus* (village administration) of an administrative-territorial unit with new boundaries, it is necessary to decentralize local self-government bodies. This is possible due to the transfer of some powers to *aiyl bashchy* (village elders), who can issue various certificates locally and resolve other issues.

Third, the service delivery system should be checked at the local level. It is advisable to digitize those services that can be converted to this format. More service delivery centers will likely be required.

Fourth, it is recommended to introduce elements of everyday democracy into local administration. This is a mandatory requirement for the consolidation of administrative-territorial units. The population of the enlarged administrative-territorial unit should feel like a single local community that consists of more settlements. Accordingly, this newly formed local community should be strengthened through more frequent meetings and gatherings, local qurultays (national congresses), and the practice of hearing information from heads of local self-government bodies and deputies of local keneshes (councils).

There are also other actions aimed at improving the life support system of the population at the local level, increasing their well-being and comfort.

## **5. DISCUSSION**

The study considers the further development of local self-government in the Kyrgyz Republic. The study identified several opportunities and challenges for local self-government.

The following recommendations are given:

- Local self-government in Kyrgyzstan should be organically integrated into the social and state structure with a clear distribution of roles for all territorial levels of government;
- Local self-government is not an absolute value but a tool for achieving a better life for residents since all challenges and opportunities are more visible locally, therefore better decisions can be made;
- It is necessary to combine the theory and practice of reforming;
- Financial decentralization is to grant municipalities the right to administer local taxes (at least, half of the total state taxes) rather than get subsidies and excessive budgetary regulation through government financing and transfers. This is the main difference between our views and the policy of the Ministry of Economy and Finance;
- To determine the content of the reform and ensure its implementation and monitoring, a coordination council at the highest level is required, consisting of practitioners, theorists, scientists, experts in state and municipal administration, and public activists.

## **6. CONCLUSIONS**

The study emphasizes that the territorial administration system in the Kyrgyz Republic has been reformed erratically for more than 30 years, without identifying a long-term model.

We propose certain actions to streamline the reform and create a coordination council at the highest level. A recommendation is made to rethink the formats of financial decentralization since there has been budget centralization through the concentration of resources and their subsequent distribution approved by the Government starting with the introduction of the new Tax Code in 2008.

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