



# Security sector reform keeps failing to address organised crime in security forces. Here are examples of what has worked

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Over the last three decades, Western powers have spent billions of dollars on security sector and governance (SSR/G) reform, yet one of the most fundamental barriers to its success has been largely ignored: security forces in many countries collude with organised crime, often with the protection or involvement of political elites. Not only do international actors supporting SSR/G reform rarely confront this issue, there is also remarkably little evidence on how to address it. Drawing on [research on Colombia, Georgia and South Africa, undertaken for the Serious & Organised Crime Research Programme](#), this piece examines what is required to reduce collusion and what this means for international support to security reform.

## Why collusion matters and why it has been ignored

Collusion between security forces and organised crime takes two main forms. Security personnel may be embedded in criminal networks involved in drug trafficking and racketeering, or they may engage in predatory criminal behaviour themselves. Both corrode governance, fuel insecurity and entrench impunity. Collusion is also extremely difficult to address because it almost always involves political elites who protect security actors, benefit from the proceeds, and have every incentive and means to resist change.

Yet despite its significance, [collusion has received remarkably little attention in SSR/G research and practice](#). Donors have typically focused on training, capacity building, oversight and accountability, and broader democratisation of the security sector. Where corruption has been acknowledged, it has tended to be treated as a byproduct of weak institutions rather than as a strategic problem requiring its own response. Donors have also often avoided trying to address collusion because it means confronting the very political elites with whom they often interact. Nor has the politics of collusion received adequate attention. SSR/G practitioners and researchers have long recognised that politics matters to reform outcomes, and lack of political will is the [most widely recognised limitation](#). But they have paid far less attention to why political will is absent, what might generate it, or how external actors might support it. More fundamentally, the problem is often not the lack of political will but its mirror opposite: the presence of political will to subvert reform. Security actors' collusion with organised crime is a clear manifestation of such [“political won’t”](#).

The result is that SSR/G has largely operated without engaging with the dynamics most likely to determine whether reform succeeds or fails. The [evidence base on what works to reduce collusion is thin](#), and interventions rarely target it directly.

## What successful reform looked like

Our project examined large-scale security reforms in Colombia, Georgia and South Africa which had markedly different outcomes on deep-seated collusion. The project examined what combination of organisational, institutional and political factors led to these differences. In Colombia, reforms from the 1990s onwards [substantially reduced the systematic infiltration of police and judicial institutions](#)

by drug trafficking organisations. In Georgia, reforms after the Rose Revolution of 2003 transformed a deeply predatory police force, with [trust in the police rising to 64 per cent by 2010](#), a remarkable turnaround. In South Africa, by contrast, democratic police reforms in the 1990s did not address police involvement in organised crime, and collusion continued to worsen, particularly under the presidency of Jacob Zuma (2009–2018).

### How political conditions shaped reform

The disruption of existing political arrangements was a prerequisite for reform in each country. In Colombia in the 1980s, [the Liberal-Conservative two-party system](#), that had dominated politics since the 1950s, broke down. This gradually opened space for reform-minded political actors. In Georgia, the Rose Revolution displaced a political establishment under which state institutions and organised crime had become deeply intertwined and brought to power a young government with a strong popular mandate, led by President Mikheil Saakashvili (2004-2013). In South Africa, the end of apartheid and the democratic transition under Nelson Mandela's presidency (1994–1999) created a major opening for restructuring security institutions that had been organised around racial repression and were involved in illicit networks.

Prior political and security conditions also shaped what reform leaders chose to prioritise. Escalating violence from drug trafficking organisations and narco-terrorism in Colombia created public pressure to confront organised crime and the collusion between security forces. For some of the new leaders, such as President César Gaviria (1990-1994), this also presented an opportunity to address the concerns of his support base in urban populations demanding security. In Georgia the Rose Revolution was, in part, a popular rejection of a criminalised regime and the incoming government sought to tackle organised crime and corruption as a means of further bolstering its legitimacy. In South Africa, by contrast, the government's overriding imperatives were racial transformation and democratic governance. Collusion within the police was present but was not a central political issue around which the transition was organised, and the government did not prioritise it.

Successful implementation depended on reformist coalitions consolidating control over key institutions and overcoming entrenched interests. In Colombia, this happened incrementally. The 1991 Constitution set the foundation for judicial and security reforms. Gaviria [centralised authority over the police](#) and expanded prosecutorial autonomy, reducing local political interference in policing. Similar efforts continued through subsequent administrations. In Georgia, consolidation was more rapid. Constitutional changes in 2004 [concentrated executive power](#) in the presidency, enabling Saakashvili's government to swiftly remove officials, restructure institutions, purge regional administrations and override resistance from corruption and organised crime networks. In both cases, reformers were able to confront entrenched interests in part because their political support bases were independent of the old arrangements that had sustained collusion. In South Africa, the Mandela administration had sufficient authority to implement wide-ranging democratic police reforms and made some progress in

doing so. But the African National Congress (ANC)'s dominance of the political system was not matched by effective institutional counterweights, which left security governance vulnerable when political leadership changed. Under subsequent administrations, and especially under Zuma, [state capture deepened across government](#). Political power was used to shield compromised networks, contributing directly to high levels of police involvement in organised crime.

Targeting collusion and building prosecutorial capacity

Colombia and Georgia were also able to implement relatively successful reforms because they explicitly targeted collusion. Both governments made dismantling security actors' involvement in organised crime a stated priority, which shaped the design and sequencing of reform. They purged compromised personnel on a large scale: [over 8,000 police officers were removed in Colombia](#) between 1992 and 1997, and in Georgia the government [dismissed some 27,000 police](#) after taking power, replacing them with new recruits. Both governments also targeted criminal, and, in the case of Georgia, corruption networks and the political connections that sustained them. In South Africa, by contrast, there was no major political direction to tackle collusion and the reforms failed to address it.

Targeting collusion was necessary but not sufficient. Success also depended on combining organisational reforms (restructuring, professionalisation, improved pay) with reforms that strengthened investigative and prosecutorial capacity. Governments in both Colombia and Georgia introduced legislation that criminalised organised crime ties, enabled asset seizures and created tools such as plea bargaining. In Colombia, the creation of the Fiscalía General de la Nación in 1991, an independent public prosecutor's office with national authority, reduced local political interference and enabled prosecution of senior officials. In Georgia, the government used prosecutorial tools to dismantle organised crime networks and target prominent criminal figures. [Roughly 1,000 public officials also faced corruption charges](#) between 2003 and 2010. This combination gave reforms teeth: it raised the costs of collusion and provided the means to confront spoilers directly.

The reforms were not a total success. Problems such as police brutality and routine corruption have persisted in Colombia. Police corruption has not returned at scale in Georgia, but the police have become [increasingly complicit in the state capture](#) of the Georgian Dream government, which has been in power since it was elected in 2012. The Georgian case shows how the behaviour of security actors shifts with that of their political masters. But the reforms in both countries were markedly successful in reducing police, and, in Colombia, also military, involvement in organised crime -- and they both offer rare examples of how this can be achieved.

### What donors need to do, and what they can't

Several implications follow for governments and external actors seeking to support reform.

First, **collusion needs to be an explicit target of SSR/G**. Reforms were most effective when organisational measures targeting collusion were combined with strengthened prosecutorial capacity. Yet SSR/G initiatives rarely offer either. The case for such an approach is strengthened by considering the alternative: where corrupt personnel and leaders remain in place and there are no meaningful consequences for involvement in organised crime, capacity building and institutional reform are likely to be undermined by the very networks they are meant to address.

Second, **external actors** cannot create the political conditions that successful reforms depend on, but they **may be able to play a catalytic role**. In both Colombia and Georgia, domestic political disruptions opened space for reform and local reformers drove the process. Donors' influence was secondary. But in Colombia, external actors helped build prosecutorial capacity and shield them from backlashes when they confronted powerful networks. For example, the US helped ensure that the Police Director remained in post despite domestic political pressure to halt his efforts to root out collusion within the police. In Georgia, external influence was more indirect: the government frequently ignored Western advice on how to implement reforms, preferring swift and top-down action, but its aspiration for European integration provided a framework that helped legitimise the reform agenda domestically and internationally. Where conditions are not conducive, however, donors need to be honest about the limits of what can be achieved rather than delivering programmes that avoid the core problem. The cases do not provide a clear model for how external actors can anticipate or respond to political openings. But they do suggest that **understanding what generates political openings and how to act on them** is more important than the technical design of interventions themselves.

SSR/G's relevance in the current landscape depends on the extent to which reforms confront these realities. With aid budgets shrinking and geopolitical competition intensifying, there is a risk that debates on SSR/G's future settle into a hard versus soft security framing: whether it needs to adapt to hard security priorities such as countering hybrid threats and organised crime, or retain its focus on governance, accountability and inclusion. But this misses the more fundamental point. Whether security assistance is framed through a hard security lens or a governance one, it is unlikely to succeed where corruption, collusion and the political dynamics that sustain them are treated as secondary concerns. The evidence from these cases suggests they are at the centre.

### About the author

Dr Liam O'Shea is a specialist in security sector reform, anti-corruption, and the politics of institutional change. His work focuses on understanding why reforms succeed or fail, and on identifying what donors and governments can realistically do to counter corruption and serious and organised crime, including within security institutions. He has particular regional expertise in Eurasia.

He recently completed a SOC-ACE project examining what reforms have been effective at reducing police and military involvement in organised crime, and he is the founder of the Anti-Corruption and Building Integrity in Defence and Security Network, which brings together donors and independent experts to develop politically grounded strategies for security sector integrity.

Liam has previously held positions as a Governance Adviser at the UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, as a Senior Research Fellow at the Royal United Services Institute and at the London School of Economics. He now runs SGI Research, a specialist consultancy providing research and advisory services on security, governance and integrity.

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