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# POLICY BRIEF

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## Democratic consolidation in Georgia: Why does consensus matter?

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The lack of democratic consolidation in Georgia has become an increasingly important challenge against the background of rising populism and democratic backsliding in Europe and North America. It is widely believed that the European Union's (EU) policy of conditionality has been the primary driver of Georgia's democratization and advancing its reform agenda. It is vital, however, that the uncertainty in the world today does not harm the process of democratic consolidation in the country, especially as it appears that the EU has already given Georgia the most significant short-term carrots. Consensus among the political elite and Georgian society on the significance of liberal democratic values and democracy for the development of the country is a major factor in the continuation of domestic support for democratic reforms. Such consensus seems to be lacking in Georgia, however, and this dire situation needs to be urgently addressed by key stakeholders, such as political parties, civil society, the EU, etc. Consequently, the present paper addressing this problem, argues that the country's main political parties need to strengthen their commitment and emphasis on democratic values when speaking to the public and civil society should help political parties achieve this goal, as well as use their own channels to contribute to creating a consensus on democracy. The EU can also assist the process by increasing support for value change in the socio-political life of Georgia.

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# Introduction

The transition to democracy has not been a smooth and homogeneous process across post-communist countries. There is still an absence of democratic consolidation in some of these countries, where societies have experienced nearly three decades of fluctuations between democracy and autocracy. The consolidation of democratic achievements is more important today than ever before, however, due to the rise of right-wing populism, characterized by authoritarian tendencies, in Europe and North America. Such established democracies as the USA, UK, Netherlands, Austria, Germany and France have all experienced, to varied degrees, a surge in populism. Consequently, it should not be surprising if post-communist countries such as Poland and Hungary are now experiencing democratic backsliding as a result of rising authoritarian tendencies. Georgia looks even more fragile against the rise of populism and authoritarianism in this context, due to the lack of the consolidation of democracy in the country. Therefore, before Georgia is hit by a strong wave of right-wing authoritarian populism, there is a need to create and consolidate a consensus on liberal democratic values, both in society and the country's political elite, in order to make the political system, as well as Georgian citizens, resilient to future threats.

A high degree of consensus among the political elite and the public about how the country should be governed and what the institutional framework should look like is necessary in order to strengthen political institutions. Therefore, in order to evaluate the process of democratic consolidation, it is necessary to examine the attitudes towards democracy in society as well as among political parties. The data, discussed below, suggests that there is a lack of public consensus about the importance of democratic governance. This puts the process of democratic consolidation in Georgia at risk because citizens who do not understand the value of democracy will easily tolerate authoritarian leadership. On the other hand, while political parties in Georgia recognize the importance of democracy, they do not pay sufficient attention to democratic values in their pre-election programmes. A political party that is not fully committed to democratic values can easily adopt authoritarian tendencies once it obtains some degree of political power. This is especially likely when there is an absence of public consensus on the importance of democracy. Consequently, these two issues can easily threaten Georgia's democratic consolidation as the country moves along the path of democratic consolidation. This situation is further exacerbated by two external conditions: the absence of attractive carrots within the European Union's policy of conditionality<sup>1</sup> as well as the presence of authoritarian neighbours, which appear to be pressuring Tbilisi to submit to their will<sup>2</sup>. As a result, Georgia needs to look inward to build a consensus on the liberal democratic values and, consequently, adhere to the process of democratic consolidation.

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<sup>1</sup> See Lebanidze, B. 2018. "Making Georgia's democracy work: Western political conditionality and domestic agendas of Georgian political parties". [online] Available at: <http://gip.ge/making-georgias-democracy-work-western-political-conditionality-domestic-agendas-georgian-political-parties/>

<sup>2</sup> See Larsen, J. 2018. "Good Fences Make Good Neighbors: How Georgia Can Resist Authoritarian Pressure". [online] Available at: <http://gip.ge/good-fences-make-good-neighbors-georgia-can-resist-authoritarian-pressure/>

## Methodology

As argued above, values and attitudes become more important during the process of democratic consolidation. Therefore, public opinion and party positions need to be examined. To analyze public attitudes and observe the trends that have emerged over the past decade as well as evaluate how the public views democratic governance, survey data from the Caucasus Barometer, produced by the Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRRC) and public opinions polls produced by National Democratic Institute (NDI), have been used.

The pre-election programmes of five Georgian political parties were analyzed using content analysis in order to understand the parties' positions and the degree of their commitment to democratic values. The analysis used five parties' 2016 parliamentary election party manifestos: Georgian Dream (GD); United National Movement (UNM); Alliance of Patriots of Georgia (APG); Labour Party (LP); and Democratic Movement – United Georgia (DMUG). Due to various limitations, other parties were not included in the analysis.

## Consensus on democracy – insights from the public and the political elite

Attitudes and values are important during the process of democratization and, taking into consideration that Georgia is going through this process, public opinion should become more positive about democracy and related values. That has not proved to be the case, however: while the trend is not always entirely conclusive, in some cases public opinion is clearly moving in the opposite direction. Furthermore, while political parties are adopting a discourse on democracy they do not always stress democratic values in their programmes.

### *Public ambivalence on democracy*

In the Caucasus Barometer survey<sup>3</sup>, respondents were asked which statement was closest to their personal beliefs: “Democracy is preferable to any other kind of government”; “In some circumstances a non-democratic government can be preferred”; or “For someone like me it doesn't matter”. Although common sense would suggest that democracy should be increasingly preferable to any other form of government, the data suggests the exact opposite (see figure 1). In 2015 more than half of the respondents did not think that democracy is the most preferable form of government, which is 21 percent lower than in 2012, when the level of support was at its peak.<sup>4</sup> This downwards trend is

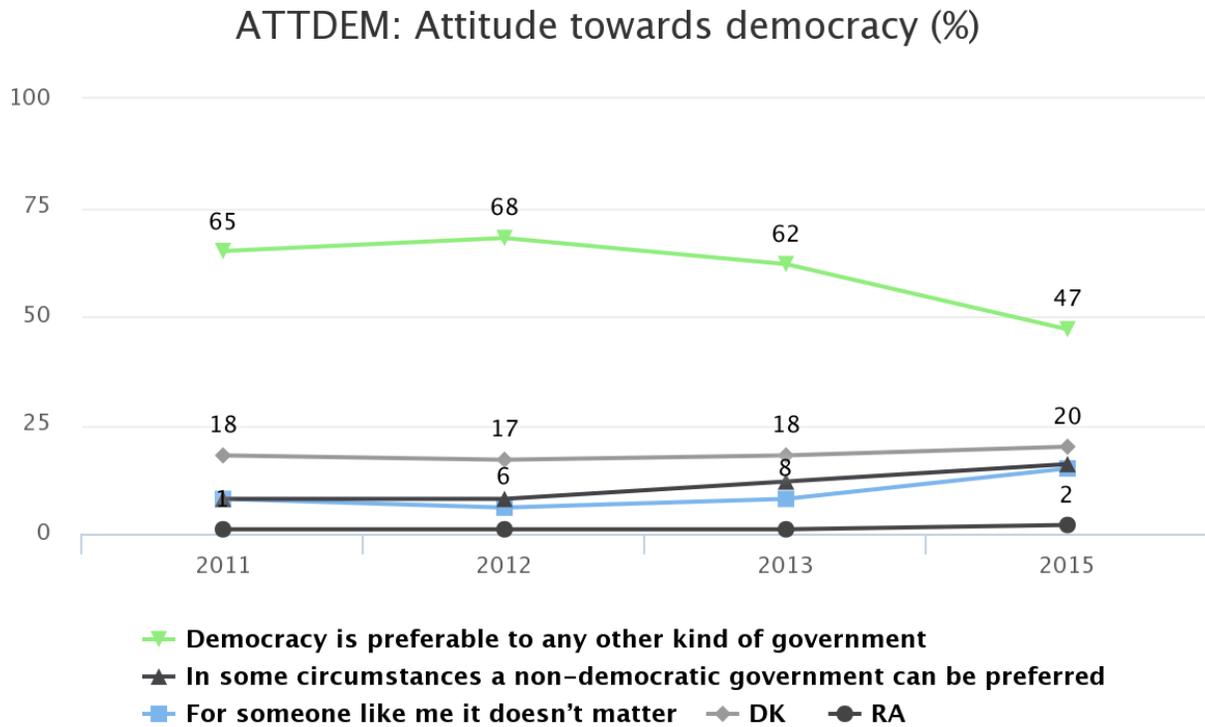
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<sup>3</sup> Caucasus Research Resources Center. 2011-2015. *Time-series dataset Georgia*. [online] Available at: <http://caucasusbarometer.org/>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

alarming and suggests that the Georgian public has a predisposition for authoritarianism, which could be dangerous.

**Figure 1. Public attitudes towards democracy**



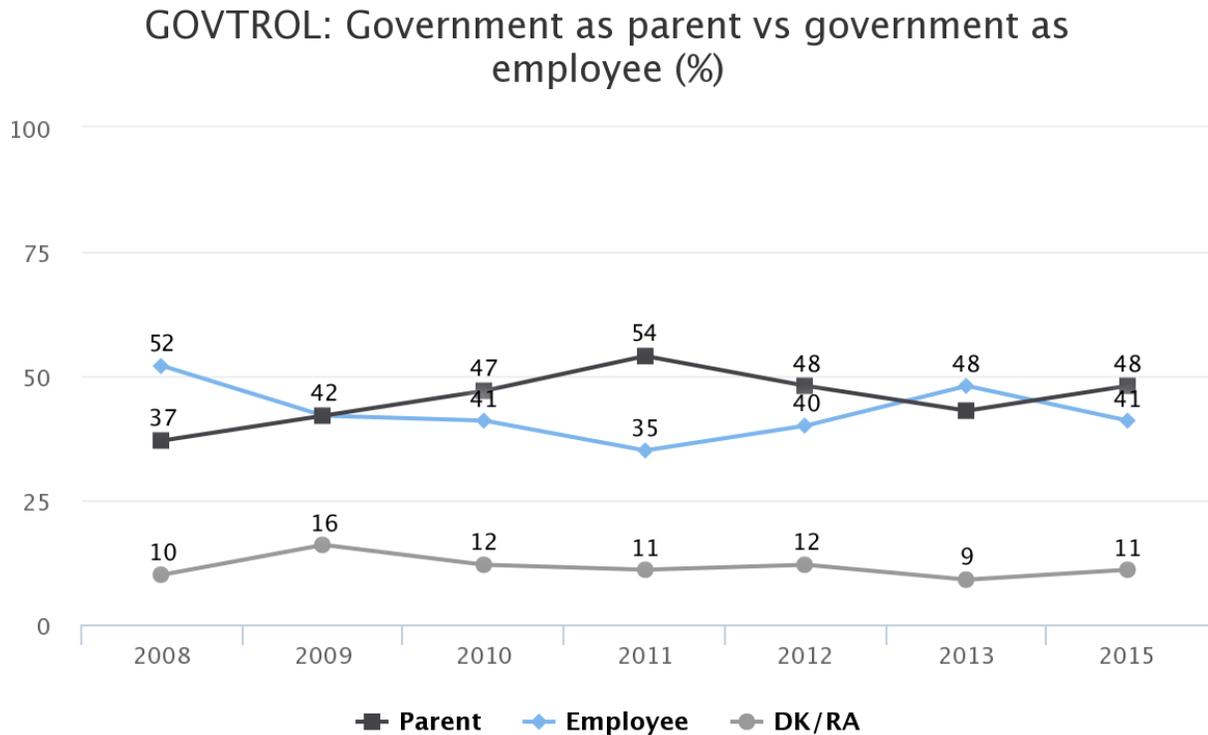
Caucasus Barometer time-series dataset Georgia  
Retrieved from <http://caucasusbarometer.org/>

Data on how the Georgian public views the government and its role also suggest that popular values are not necessarily positively influenced by the process of democratization in Georgia. In 2015, 48 percent of the population agreed with the statement that “People are like children, the government should take care of them like a parent”, while 41 percent thought that the “Government is like an employee, the people should be the bosses who control the government”.<sup>5</sup> Since 2008, these questions have been included in seven surveys and on only two occasions — in 2013 (48 percent) and in 2008 (52 percent) — did most respondents view the government primarily as an employee.<sup>6</sup> This trend indicates that support for parent-like leadership is significant in Georgia which, like the previous trend, demonstrates that a large segment of Georgian citizens expresses an inclination for authoritarian leadership.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

**Figure 2. Public attitudes towards the role of government**



Caucasus Barometer time-series dataset Georgia  
Retrieved from <http://caucasusbarometer.org/>

Such an ambivalent attitude towards democracy could be explained by the possible lack of understanding of what democracy means. In 2014 and 2015 National Democratic Institute (NDI) measured how the Georgian public views democracy. In 2014 respondents were asked to name up to three things that they thought democracy meant<sup>7</sup>, while in 2015 respondents were given a list of seven features to evaluate a degree of their importance for Georgia’s democratic development<sup>8</sup>. The results of the two surveys are drastically different. When respondents are presented specific features, they easily deem them as important. However, when they have to name what features define democracy, there is much less consensus. For example, in 2015, 91 percent of respondents said that free and fair elections are very important (additional 6 percent said free and fair elections are somewhat important) for Georgia’s democratic development.<sup>9</sup> However, in the 2014 survey, only 8 percent of respondents mentioned free and fair elections as something that democracy means.<sup>10</sup> This is a dramatic difference indicating that the Georgian citizens may not be aware of what democracy means.

<sup>7</sup> Exact formulation of the question: “What does democracy mean to you? Please, name up to three things.”

<sup>8</sup> Exact formulation of the question: “For each of the following, please tell me, how important or unimportant is it for Georgia’s democratic development?”

<sup>9</sup> Caucasus Research Resources Center. 2011-2015. *NDI: Public attitudes in Georgia, November 2015*. [online] Available at: <http://caucasusbarometer.org/>

<sup>10</sup> Caucasus Research Resources Center. 2011-2015. *NDI: Public attitudes in Georgia, April 2014*. [online] Available at: <http://caucasusbarometer.org/>

**Table 1: Georgian public opinion and features of democracy<sup>11</sup>**

#	Features	Percentage of respondents mentioning the feature among the list of three features attributed to the meaning of democracy (April 2014 survey)	Percentage of respondents perceiving the feature as important for Georgia's democratic development (November 2015 survey)
1	Freedom of speech	52	96
2	Equality before the law / Rule of law <sup>12</sup>	39	96
3	Protection of human rights	33	97
4	Jobs	18	N.A. <sup>13</sup>
5	Liberty	15	N.A.
6	Free and fair elections	8	97
7	Government responding to citizens' concerns	5	95
8	Ability to buy a variety of products	3	N.A.
9	Instability	1	N.A.
10	Curbing corruption	N.A. <sup>14</sup>	95
11	Citizens' participation in public life	N.A.	95

### *Pre-election promises and democracy in political party programmes*

The Figure 1 shows that almost one fifth of the population does not know what to think about democracy. This is a significant proportion of society and political parties need to work on increasing public awareness about the benefits of a democratic government. However, the second part of the problem is that parties do not stress democratic values sufficiently in their pre-election programmes. This means that there might not be a clear consensus on democracy among Georgian political parties or, at the very least, mixed signals about the democratic form of governance are sent to voters.

The democratic values indicated in Georgian political parties' 2016 pre-election programmes can be classified into three categories (see Table 2). The first category covers issues related to human rights.

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<sup>11</sup> Adapted by the author from Caucasus Research Resources Center. 2011-2015. *NDI: Public attitudes in Georgia, April 2014*. [online] Available at: <http://caucasusbarometer.org/> and Caucasus Research Resources Center. 2011-2015. *NDI: Public attitudes in Georgia, November 2015*. [online] Available at: <http://caucasusbarometer.org/>

<sup>12</sup> In the 2014 survey respondents mentioned equality before the law or protection of justice but in the 2015 survey the list of possible responses included rule of law. The two features have been equated for the purposes of this research.

<sup>13</sup> N.A. – the feature has not been listed for respondents' evaluation.

<sup>14</sup> N.A. – the feature has not been mentioned by respondents.

The second category includes values related to the accountability of the government. The third and final category is related to promises about the political system and institutions. Two major patterns emerged as a result of the analysis. First, there is no apparent consensus among the parties about what constitutes democratic values. Second, large and small parties have different ideas about the meaning of a democratic government in Georgia.

**Table 2. Democratic values in pre-election party programmes<sup>15</sup>**

#	Pre-election promises	Political parties				
		GD	UNM	APG	LP	DMUG
<b>1</b>	<b>Human rights</b>					
1.1	Equality, civic integration, and social justice (women, children, minorities, people with disabilities)	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓
1.2	Criminal justice / Restoration of justice	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓
1.3	Rule of law, and law enforcement	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗
1.4	Property rights	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗
1.5	Freedom of speech, expression, and media	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗
1.6	Freedom of assembly	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗
1.7	Protection of personal data, and private life	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗
1.8	Fighting trafficking	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗
<b>2</b>	<b>Accountability</b>					
2.1	Political accountability	✗	✗	✓	✓	✗
2.2	Financial accountability	✗	✗	✓	✓	✗
2.3	Promoting responsiveness of public officials	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗
2.4	Development of civil society	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗
2.5	People's rule, power to people	✗	✗	✓	✓	✗
2.6	Elimination of oligarchy	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗
<b>3</b>	<b>Political system and institutions</b>					
3.1	Division of power, judiciary, and courts	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓
3.2	Prosecutor's office	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗
3.3	MIA and State Security Service	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗
3.4	Public Defender	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗
3.5	Local governance	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗

<sup>15</sup> The table is prepared on the basis of author's analysis of pre-election programmes of the indicated five parties. The programmes have been retrieved from the official websites of the respective party.

3.6	Public service	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗
3.7	Political system	✓	✗	✗	✓	✗
3.8	Electoral system, and free and fair elections	✓	✗	✗	✓	✗

✓ - The promise is present in the pre-election programme of the respective party

✗ - The promise is absent in the pre-election programme of the respective party

There are 22 different priorities related to democracy in the five pre-election programmes analyzed for this paper; 12 out of 22 are proposed by a single party. This means that more often than not parties do not share the same priorities. In addition, no single priority is mentioned by all programmes. Only one priority, equality, civic integration, and social justice (women, children, minorities, people with disabilities), comes close; it is mentioned by four out of five parties. Three parties promote the same two priorities, criminal justice or restoration of justice, and the division of power, judiciary, and courts.

Moreover, there is a division between larger and smaller parties. Although GD seems to be the only party that supports the majority of the priorities listed in the Table 1, it is worth noting that GD’s programme is not concerned with issues related with accountability. Additionally, ensuring accountability does not appear to be a priority for the UNM, either. The priorities outlined by the APG and LP mostly focus on issues related to accountability, however. This might be explained by the fact that larger parties, which have a chance to win an election, are not interested in accountability. Rather, they appear to desire unchecked power once in office. Consequently, it is possible to argue that these parties are not fully interested in democracy per se.

It has to be noted that the limitation of the content analysis of pre-election programmes is that it is designed to appeal to the voters and give them what they are interested in, which might not always be more democracy. However, party manifestos are still one of the primary sources of information for identifying party stances on various issues. Therefore, as a result of the discussion above, it can be argued that even though all Georgian political parties mention democracy (although APG only mentioned it once in the entire programme), a consensus among the parties on what democracy is and how it should work appears to be lacking. This puts the consolidation of Georgia’s young democracy at risk.

## Implications of the lack of consensus on democracy

As a result of the analysis of the public opinion polls and pre-election party programmes, it can be concluded that there is a lack of consensus on democracy and democratic values, not only in society but also among political parties. This is problematic and requires immediate action; if it is not addressed, Georgia could easily lose the democratic achievements that have not yet been consolidated. Almost half of the public is ready to follow, or at the very least not oppose, authoritarian leadership, which means that if the balance of bargaining power among political parties tilts significantly towards one actor, this actor might emerge as an authoritarian leader.

The constitutional reform process demonstrates why the lack of consensus is important<sup>16</sup>. It can be argued that a significant change, i.e. amendments to the political system and taking away the right of citizens to elect their president, has failed to secure broad public support. Consequently, it should not be surprising that some Georgians believe that it does not matter if the country is democratic or not (see Figure 1 above). The failure to secure a consensus was so apparent that it led some analysts to argue that “[t]he parliament, which led the entire reform process, failed to include all interested political parties and, importantly, to reassure the president ... that the amendments were not targeted at him personally.”<sup>17</sup> Such a situation can only lead to one outcome — unstable institutions, which is the primary barrier for democratic consolidation. It is very likely that an unpopular constitution will be amended over and over again as political leaders are replaced, leading to instability and regime fluctuations based on personalities, not ideals. This high degree of volatility in the primary institution of the political system implies policy discontinuity — a situation where the trajectory of democratization becomes a roller coaster and the only permanent trend is change to the political system.

This leaves the question of what drives Georgia’s democratization. There are two likely answers: the high degree of uncertainty about the relative bargaining power among political actors and/or EU’s policy of conditionality. However, if Georgia wants to consolidate its democracy, it should not depend on a degree of uncertainty, which can be easily and unexpectedly altered, or on external pressure to democratize, especially after nearly all significant and foreseeable short-term carrots in the process of Europeanization have been exhausted. Therefore, Georgian political parties should develop a common vision of Georgian democracy and work closely with the public to promote democratic values among society. Such a consensus across parties and voters would create favourable conditions for the consolidation of Georgian democracy.

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<sup>16</sup> See Zurabashvili, T. 2017. “The end of direct presidential elections – the constitutional reform process in Georgia”. [online] Available at: <http://gip.ge/6738/>

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

## Concluding remarks and recommendations

Taking into consideration the public's weak preference for democracy, Georgia needs democratizers in order to consolidate its achievements. Institutional actors, i.e. political parties that believe and are interested in making Georgian democracy work, would contribute greatly to the development of the Georgian political system. To this end, Georgian political parties, the EU and international as well as local civil society organizations should follow the recommendations elaborated below.

### *For Georgian political parties*

- **Make democracy a clear priority and commit to democratic values** – according to the analysis of party pre-election programmes, it appears that Georgian political parties do not always articulate their commitment to democratic values. There is also a distinction between larger and smaller parties concerning the values stressed during elections. Therefore, it is important that there is agreement across the political spectrum about why it is important for Georgia to consolidate its democratic achievements.
- **Find internal drive to push forward democratic reforms** – during this uncertain transitional period of EU conditionality policy, it is important that Georgia identifies an internal driving force for its democratic consolidation. The reform agenda does not necessarily require an external force to provide carrots to be implemented. Therefore, it is vital to continue democratic consolidation even without external conditionality.
- **Treat democracy as an issue that stands above political competition** – if an internal drive to push democratic reforms forward can be found, political parties in Georgia need to form a solid consensus on the significance of the democratic form of government. This should stand above political competition as an issue of national interest.
- **Intensify promoting democratic values to the public to build wider consensus** – it is not only important for parties to form a consensus on democracy; it is necessary to actively work on building a wider consensus on democratic values in Georgian society. This is necessary to mitigate the possibility of Georgian voters succumbing to populist promises.

### *For the European Union*

- **Create a new vision for Eastern Partnership countries to support democratic reforms** – after signing the Association Agreement and visa liberalization, Georgia is in limbo, which means that a new vision is needed to maintain support for democratic reforms. This implies the need for new “carrots” through the policy of conditionality, which will keep Georgia and its government attracted to the EU and committed to the reforms agenda.
- **Intensify support of civil society organizations (CSOs) that promote democratic values** – Georgia needs assistance in implementing democratic reforms to improve public policies and services, so it is necessary to support civil society, which promotes democratic values among society and within the Georgian political spectrum.

### *For civil society organizations working in/on Georgia*

- **Conduct public educational campaigns on what constitutes democracy and why it is important for Georgia** – in addition to the efforts of political actors, it also is important that CSOs intensify their activities to educate the public about democracy. The data shows that significant parts of Georgian society do not think that the form of government makes any notable difference in their lives. This public indifference towards political regimes needs to change.
- **Create an inter-party steering group to create a common vision of democratic consolidation** – CSOs have the potential to assist political parties in creating a common vision for Georgia’s democratic consolidation. Consequently, initiating the creation of an inter-party steering group that includes civil society representative can contribute to establishing and strengthening political consensus around democracy and democratic values. The declaration of this type of inter-party vision will also send a clear message to the voters that democracy is above political competition.



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