

Youth Manifesto

Encouraging Political Participation
in Georgia: Youth Perspective

September, 2020



საქართველოს პოლიტიკური ინსტიტუცია
GEORGIAN INSTITUTE OF POLITICS





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The Youth Manifesto is based on the ideas of 150 young people who participated in the project **#GEOYOUTH2020 - “Engaging Youth in Politics in Georgia”** (May-September 2020), implemented by the Georgian Institute of Politics (GIP) in partnership with the German grassroots think tank **Polis180** and with financial support from the **German Federal Foreign Office**.

The ideas expressed in this manifesto belong to the project participants and may not represent the opinions of authors and/or implementing organizations.

Georgian Institute of Politics (GIP) is a Tbilisi-based non-profit, non-partisan, research and analysis organization. GIP works to strengthen the organizational backbone of democratic institutions and promote good governance and development through policy research and advocacy in Georgia.

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Preface

The following manifesto was prepared within the framework of the project **#GEOYOUTH2020 - “Engaging Youth in Politics in Georgia”**, which was implemented by the Georgian Institute of Politics (GIP) in partnership with the German grassroots think tank Polis180 and with financial support from the German Federal Foreign Office. The initiative “Engaging Youth in Politics in Georgia” (May-September 2020) brought together over 150 participants across ten regional summits. The project team prepared group exercises for participants to discuss the challenges hindering youth participation in politics, and seek for the solutions to the identified issues. The initiative engaged youth in Tbilisi, Adjara, Guria, Imereti, Shida Kartli, Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti, Samtkhe-Javakheti (Armenian speaking youth), Kakheti, and Kvemo Kartli (both Georgian and Azeri speaking youth). To ensure the inclusivity of the project, involving youth from ethnic minority backgrounds and from the regions which are mostly settled by ethnic minority groups was important.

All information included in the “Youth Manifesto” aims to inform decision-makers about the challenges related to engaging young people in politics. The Manifesto carries additional importance as it comes before the 2020 parliamentary elections and offers an opportunity for political parties to learn about the challenges faced by young people in Georgia.

During the regional summits, nine main challenges were identified which hinder young people’s political participation in Georgia. The challenges include a lack of resources, existing stereotypes in society, the discriminatory treatment of ethnic minorities, the poor quality of education, an absence of youth platforms, a lack of trust in the political parties/nihilism, the closed structure of political parties, and nepotism.

The Manifesto is structured according to the challenges, followed by the solutions suggested by project participants. The Manifesto reflects the discussions held by the youth and their vision for increasing political participation of young people in Georgia.

Introduction

In democratic societies, youth plays a crucial role in the social and economic development of a country. While new innovative forms of civil activism have emerged in Georgia, youth political engagement remains a challenge.

Multiple international studiesⁱ conducted in Georgia suggest that the youth are not actively engaged in civic life. Often, they are politically indifferent and passive in political and civil realms. In most cases, the low political engagement of young people is the result of a lack of awareness about their civil rights and duties. More importantly the existing stereotypes and polarized environment in the country negatively impact youth political engagement. There is a lack of trust among young people towards politicians and political institutions as it is common knowledge is that the state does not adequately perceive the interests of young people.ⁱⁱ

According to the National Statistics of Georgiaⁱⁱⁱ roughly one fourth of Georgia's 3.72 million inhabitants, are youth aged 15-34. As such, it is important that these voices are heard in every area and their opinions be taken into consideration during decision-making processes. However, youth are not a priority target audience for current political parties in Georgia which becomes evident through the absence of youth-oriented policy.

Believing that youth civic participation is an important component for building a modern democracy, the following document aims to discuss the challenges concerning youth political engagement in Georgia and present the solutions suggested by the project participants.

Challenge #1: The Lack of Human and Economic Resources and Limited Access to Information

The first challenge that young people identified as a barrier to their involvement in the political process is a lack of resources. This challenge implies both a shortage of human and economic resources as well as limited access to information. Young people believe that their challenges and needs will be best understood by the decision-makers closest to their age, however, they also shared a belief that there is a lack of competent young people on decision-making positions in the country.

According to the LEPL Civil Service Bureau Activity Report 2019^{iv}, 50.1% of public employees hired in public service positions, (excluding the employees of the Ministry of the Internal Affairs), are aged 26-40. However, the situation changes slightly when it comes to first and second-tier employees – that is, those who have the discretion to make decisions. In this case, only 38.8% of employees are 26-40 years old, while the total number of employees above the age of 56 and reaching retirement age is 22.5%. As for the age group of 18-25 years, they make up 0.3% of the employees in the rank of the first and second tier. The figures explicitly show the lack of young staff in the public service.

Additionally, one of the main impediments to the political participation of young people is a lack of economic resources. Particularly noteworthy is the view of young people that they have limited access to important information such as internships or social programs; while low-paying jobs is the main obstacle which constrains physical mobility, which, in turn translates into passive political participation.

The Youth Vision for Solving this Problem:

It is advised that local self-government budgets more diverse funds for youth activities. Currently, only concerts and sports events are considered as interesting activities for young people, however, it is important to take into account more diverse needs in the process of policy development.

It is necessary for young people to have space where they can exchange ideas and receive new information. For this, it is important that educational institutions and informal spaces be actively engaged and it is necessary for political entities to organize different activities with a purpose to raise awareness on politics and provide civic education in the regions.

Promoting economic empowerment and employment of young people is one of the preconditions for building a strong civil society. An inclusive work environment should be provided which will enable young people, regardless of their gender, ethnicity, religion, or physical abilities to be employed. It is advised to strengthen the practical and career growth

component of state internship programs, while encouraging young people participating in the program to be more active and to diversify available activities.

According to the LEPL Civil Service Bureau Activity Report 2019^v, 1630 people underwent internship programs in public institutions during the year, 27 of whom were later employed. In addition, the state should be promoting social entrepreneurship and providing grants and loans with low-interest rates for youth-initiated businesses to encourage youth initiatives.

Political parties have a key role to play in increasing access to information on the ongoing political processes. It is important that political parties are able to inform young people about the opportunities available through the means of communication favored by young people. Communication with young people requires the use of modern and innovative technologies, as outdated sources of information are conventionally less effective.

It is important to provide information to the general public in the language understandable to them. Every Georgian citizen regardless of his/her ethnic origin or place of residence should be able to receive information in the language they understand.

At the same time, youth expressed their interest to have more direct engagement with political parties, so that they become the primary source of information for their young constituents.

Challenge #2: Gender and Ethnic Stereotypes

One of the main challenges for young people is stereotypes in society towards those who are interested in politics or those involved in the political process, especially when it comes to minorities and women.

Young people who participated in regional summits named several stereotypes which often fuel stigmatization: gender stereotypes, including the perception that “politics is not women’s business” and that female politicians are automatically considered “undesirable” and “masculine”. It was also emphasized that even when a woman is involved in the political processes, she continues to carry a certain stigma from society. This ultimately leads to the alienation of women from political processes and their low representation in the decision-making positions.

According to the LEPL Civil Service Bureau Activity Report 2019^{vi}, the number of female employees in the civil service in the first and second ranks is 43%, and if we include the Ministry of Interior the number decreases to 36%. When looking at the heads of public institutions and their deputies, only 14.8% of institution heads and only 18.1% of deputy heads are women.

It is important to mention stereotypes associated with the ethnic and religious minorities, which hinders their full integration into society. This ultimately leads to the needs of a large part of the population being ignored.

For the young people with ethnic minority background, seeking employment in local self-government bodies remains a challenge, including nominating ethnic minorities for leading political positions. Participants of the youth summits urged political parties to address this challenge and extend opportunities for ethnic minorities youth.

The Youth Vision for Solving this Problem:

To reduce the impacts of prevailing negative stereotypes in society it is recommended that non-governmental sector and political parties carry out awareness raising activities using formal and non-formal educational methods in order to mitigate the misconception about ethnic and religious minority groups. One strategy is to promote representatives of these groups who have been successful in different ways.

The cornerstone of combating gender stereotyping is changing the socio-cultural mentality which is possible by mainstreaming the gender equality issue. It is necessary to empower girls and women economically and increase the level of their involvement in the political process. It is necessary to develop programs and strategies based on the needs of girls and women to establish and strengthen women's political associations at the local level.

Challenge #3: Poor Education Quality on Different Levels: School, University, and Non-Formal Education

According to project participants, the current level of education quality does not meet the requirements for a rapidly developing Georgia and for that, it is crucial to employ an effective, result-oriented approach. Almost every education system component requires strengthening, starting at the high school level, and ending with non-formal education. This issue is even more acute in the regions where access to information is still lower than in the capital cities.

The Youth Vision for Solving this Problem:

According to the youth summit participants, one step to improving the education level would be introducing a political education courses in schools or integrating it in the civic education curriculum.

This will help to broaden the horizon of young people on politics and related processes and, push them to become more actively involved. In addition, teaching political ethics and methods in school will make this more easily comprehensible for future generation and will weaken the perception that politics is a “dirty business”.

Institutional mechanisms need to be introduced and strengthened which would activate and strengthen youth councils at the regional and local levels. It is desirable to hold frequent debates and similar activities which will promote political activism for young people. It is essential that a youth policy strategy be developed in each municipality and that young people have access to these resources. In this regard, the establishment of the LEPL “Youth Agency” can be considered as a step forward, as the main purpose of it is to develop a state youth policy strategy.

According to young people, non-formal education plays an important role in promoting youth political involvement, thus it is vital that local governments and NGOs proactively use non-formal education methods and implement more youth projects.

Challenge #4: A Lack of Initiatives and Platforms for Engaging Youth in Political Processes

According to the research conducted by Friedrich-Ebert Stiftung (FES) in 2017^{vii}, young people living in Georgia are characterized by political indifference and show a lack of interest in political and civic involvement. They have less trust in political institutions and feel that the state does not adequately understand their interests.

Youth summits pointed out that political parties perceive young people as an avenue to promoting party values, and often young people feel “used” during the pre-election campaigns to create the image of participation. However, their voices do not carry much weight in the internal decision making. Additionally, the youth wings of the parties are not strong enough to attract more young people and vocalize their needs.

The Youth Vision for Solving this Problem:

Promoting youth employment is one way for young people to become more active and involved. It is desirable to strengthen the state internship program and increase the number of employed successful interns.

Summit participants expressed their interest in pursuing internship programs if the political parties provide that opportunity, which would allow young people the chance to directly interact with politicians and be involved in current processes. It is important that parties

directly express their interest in involving youth in the political process, for which it is suggested that political debate contests to be organized. As an award, the winners will be able to participate in the development of election programs for political parties and will become part of the pre-election process.

Currently Georgian non-governmental and civil sectors are not active enough, which leads to inaction and nihilism among young people. It is suggested to have projects and activities tailored to the interests and needs of more young people. According to the participants, it is necessary that decision-makers emphasize that they are interested in the opinion of young people and are willing to take their needs into account. Building trust will positively change not only the attitudes of different groups of society but also the youth themselves.



“Youth are not taken seriously in Georgia, which discourages us from being actively engaged in the political processes...”

Challenge #5: Discriminatory Treatment of Ethnic Minorities

Within the framework of the project, the participation of young people living in the regions of Georgia populated by ethnic minority groups has made the Manifesto more inclusive as it reflects the challenges of youth residing in all regions of Georgia. Young people involved in the project named the discriminatory treatment of ethnic minorities in society as one obstacle to political participation. As a result, there is a lack of ethnic minority representatives selected for the political parties. Also, the lack of minority-oriented policies in party election programs, and limited ethnic minorities holding political positions are the issues that need to be addressed.

The Youth Vision for Solving this Problem:

According to the project participants, the best way to solve this problem is to strengthen the culture of solidarity within society, especially in the regions populated by ethnic minorities, in which both civil society organizations and political parties should play an active role. The solution is promoting the state language and increasing the accessibility of ethnic minorities to language programs.

Young people think it is necessary to improve the quality of state language lessons in the regions which are populated by ethnic minorities and to develop additional programs while providing monitoring and oversight to teachers and the teaching process as well. It is extremely important to implement Georgian language programs in non-Georgian speaking communities, which will enable the locals to learn the language. The youth believe that by taking these steps all Georgian citizens will equally be able to further engage in the political process.



Challenge #6: A Lack of Trust in Political Parties/Nihilism

Young people living in different regions of Georgia, presented from many different problems and solutions cross a range of subjects, however the low level of trust in political parties was consistently represented at all youth summits. Young people highlighted the undemocratic internal governance and structure of political parties, issues related to transparently selecting members and party operation, and unfulfilled campaign promises as causes for distrust. Additionally, during the recruitment process within the political parties, those who are affiliated with leaders are personally favored and often promoted.

The Youth Vision for Solving this Problem:

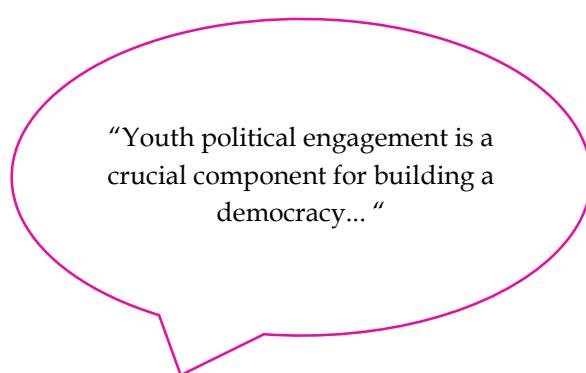
One is for political parties to ensure public and transparent conduct of activities, not only before the elections period but also by holding regular meetings with citizens, while the use of modern technologies should be encouraged as well as the submission of activity reports, including meetings with young people. Another suggestion for increasing political participation was to support youth initiated projects and promote new faces who are competent and experienced enough to take on leading positions within the party.

Challenge #7: The absence of opportunities for youth in party units and young-voter oriented policies

Project participants noted that there are not enough opportunities for youth involvement in the Georgian political space (political parties). Although all political parties in Georgia have youth wings, their participation in the policy-making process is very low and is mainly limited to the party's pre-election activities. Besides, young people do not connect with political parties in Georgia, because young people rarely are the target group for parties.

The Youth Vision for Solving this Problem:

Project participants called for the creation of special learning platforms by political parties, which should include activities such as seminars, debates, and competitions on various issues relevant to young people to ensure their involvement in different volunteering activities. As for the issues of party structure and programs, according to the participants, it is necessary to internally restructure the party, which implies rethinking of the functions and responsibilities of the youth wing, including the implementation of paid internship programs. Apart from that, it is advised that political parties include a youth component and allow young people to be involved in the development of political programs.



Challenge #8: Polarized/Closed Political Environment

Given the radically polarized environment in Georgia, it is no surprise that young people name a closed political space as one of the main obstacles to their political participation. In their opinion, the political parties operating in Georgia do not encourage the involvement of new faces in their party politics, including young people. Moreover, in many cases, new candidates are the victim of deliberate, and targeted negative disinformation. Finally, political activism of any sort for the main political parties is not favored and is deemed inconvenient by young people in general. It reduces the chances of young people to find a decent, well-paid job. Young people think that one of the barriers to political participation is “labeling”, which implies an unconditional connection with a specific political party.

The Youth Vision for Solving this Problem:

According to participants, this problem can be solved by raising the awareness of the issues important to the youth and strengthening the ideological component of political parties. It is advised that parties regularly hold politically neutral meetings to foster better cooperation between the political parties and young people while allowing young people to share their points of view. Young people believe that it is fundamental for political parties and non-governmental organizations to communicate properly, which is essential for the young people to grasp the importance of their involvement in the political processes.

Challenge #9: Nepotism

The project participants identified nepotism as challenge to youth political participation in civil service as well as for recruiting members for political party teams. The youth discussed different cases of nepotism which, in their view, significantly restrict the rights of young people who do not enjoy such privileges in political and civil realms. Personal favoritism is often the case during the party members' recruitment process leading to the promotion of only those members who are affiliated with the leaders. According to the project participants, similar situation is while applying for positions in public sector. They believe that in most cases, the selection commission has a pre-selected candidate and the whole process is often fake.

Youth is the segment of society without the well-established contact and social capital which makes them less competitive comparing to the ones who possess stronger networks. This is the reason why they are more vulnerable towards the threat of nepotism.

The Youth Vision for Solving this Problem:

The participants suggested that one of way of solving this problem is by conducting the recruitment process more transparently and if a case of nepotism is confirmed the punishment should be appropriate. Young people believe that sharing visual materials, such as infographics and videos about corruption can play a crucial role in spreading information about this issue. It should be noted that this information should be available in different languages which any ethnical minority group can understand.

Nepotism particularly against youth can also be addressed by the regular control of platforms where various positions for public service are published, observing the exam and interview processes closer, measuring the proficiency of the selection committees and ensuring the change of its members regularly.

Apart from the public sector, recruitment process within the political parties should also be reassessed. Despite of the fact that no conditional regulation exists regarding the youth engagement in the political parties' activities, civil society can create an environment under which they will observe the process and deliver recommendations regarding youth engagement strategies.



“The widespread fact of nepotism and discrimination triggers a sense of skepticism and leads to an absence of solutions to the challenges young people face...”

Conclusion

The Manifesto presents the challenges to youth participation in the political process and offers a youth formulated vision of problem-solving. According to young people, it is highly recommended that political actors ensure direct communication with young people, conduct transparent and fair selection of members, develop more youth-oriented programs, and provide more youth spaces. Present Manifesto aims to share the vision of youth with representatives of political parties, civil society, and donor organizations to foster discussions around the issue of youth participation in political processes with the goal of increasing the level of youth engagement in politics.

The Manifesto is vitally important in the context of the 2020 parliamentary elections. By developing this document, we invite the political parties partaking in the upcoming elections to get better acquainted with the challenges that young people face and consider the solutions provided within. Manifesto can serve as a supporting document for political parties to develop more effective, youth-friendly pre-election programs; and to encourage youth involvement in their activities and political processes, in general.

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