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საქართველოს პოლიტიკის ინსტიტუტი  
GEORGIAN INSTITUTE OF POLITICS

# What do Georgian Voters Expect: Message for Georgian Political Parties

Inter Party Manifesto

May 2022



## INTER PARTY MANIFESTO

This inter-party manifesto was created within the framework of the project “**Strengthening Sustainable Political Culture Among Georgian Political Parties**” supported by the **Swiss Embassy in Georgia**, which aims at assisting the establishment of a value-based political culture. Within the project, the **Georgian Institute of Politics (GIP)** worked with young members of political parties and civil society representatives to raise their awareness and enhance their skills on consensus-based politics and effective communication with the voters. The project also aims at supporting identification of political issues that reflect voters’ needs. The goal of the project is to assist with internal discussions within parties, as well as inter-party cooperation on strategically important political issues. The inter-party manifesto is a document that offers response strategies to the political parties on how they can plan effective communication with the voters, particularly in the periods between elections, to identify their expectations and needs and provide effective reactions.



Founded in early 2011, the **Georgian Institute of Politics (GIP)** is a non-partisan, research, and analysis organization. GIP strives to strengthen the organizational backbone of democratic institutions and promote good governance and development through policy research and advocacy in Georgia. The organization aims to become a major center for scholarship and policy innovation, not only for Georgia, but for the wider Black Sea region as well and to contribute to the development of regional cooperation and regional stability. Since December 2013 GIP has been a member of the OSCE Network of Think Tanks and Academic Institutions and the Network of Think Tanks on the EU’s Eastern Partnership launched in September 2020 by the German Council of Foreign Relations (DGAP) with the support of the European Commission.



**WHAT DO GEORGIAN VOTERS EXPECT:  
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## Foreword

This inter party manifesto “What do voters expect Message for Georgian political parties” was created within the framework of the project “**Strengthening Sustainable Political Culture Among Georgian Political Parties**”. With the support of the **Swiss Confederation Embassy in Georgia, the Georgian Institute of Politics (GIP)** facilitated the joint work of young members of ten political parties and civil society representatives. Small working groups created the document below based on the findings of field work conducted in different regions of Georgia. The inter party manifesto was created during a two-day workshop, based on the discussions of the participants in small working groups and later on their joint discussions. The document covers ten main findings of the young members of political parties and civil society representatives on what voters expect from political parties in Georgia. For each finding, the participants worked on possible strategies for party responses.

We hope that the precedent of joint work on an inter-party manifesto, as an experience of issue-based cooperation among parties, will support the establishment of a consensus-based political culture in Georgia, which is one of the main objectives of this project. The document, created within the framework of the project, offers political parties in Georgia an action strategy to help them plan activities in the period during elections that will move them closer to voters’ interests and needs. To do so, it is important that field work was conducted by young members of the political parties in cooperation with civil society representatives, which should ensure the trustworthiness of the main findings outlined in the manifesto for the parties themselves. This manifesto presents the results, without any changes, of direct communication - expectations and mechanisms of responses - with voters and joint discussions of the working groups.

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# Introduction

Political parties have a very important role to play in young democracies such as Georgia, where the culture of organized public involvement in political life is less developed. In a successful democratization process, the orderly functioning of political parties ensures the strengthening and consolidating of representative democracy<sup>1</sup>. Strong traditional political parties can withstand the risk to liberal democracies posed by the growing popularity of anti-establishment and populist political groups observed in recent years in a whole set of countries<sup>2</sup>.

To a certain extent, it is the duty of political parties to act as a link between citizens and decision-makers. Political parties ensure that issues important to the public are put forward and voiced. However, political life in Georgia has entered a deep and long-standing political crisis in recent years, which was clearly demonstrated after the 2020 parliamentary elections. Polarization is gradually deepening in the country, which obstructs democratic consolidation and complicates cooperation between the political parties. The main political actors view politics as a zero-sum game, where the winner takes all. A similar flow of events is a hindering factor for the development of a sustainable political culture, since the institutionalization of the entire party system, not only one specific political party, is important for the improvement of a democratic process<sup>3</sup>.

In fact, political parties have a decisive role in establishing and strengthening a sustainable political culture in the country. The ruling party, as well as the political opposition, have a duty to offer voters an issue-based discussion and positive political agenda, which would help to reduce extreme polarization and put the cooperation between political actors on a civilized track.

In this context, it is important that geopolitical changes taking place in the region, and the unification of the Western countries against the Russian military aggression in the Eastern Europe, open the window of opportunity for Georgia to solidify its European perspective and embark on an irreversible path towards European integration. Unity within the Georgian political spectrum and its commitment to the process of democratization will be instrumental in this process.

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.1 Nodia Ghia & Scholbach Alvaro Pinto, Introduction. The political landscape of Georgia. eds. Nodia Ghia & Scholbach Alvaro Pinto, (The Netherlands: Eburon Academic Publishers, 2006), 1.

.2 Bertoa Fernando Casal & Rama Jose, The antiestablishment challenge. *Journal of Democracy* (John Hopkins University Press, 32, no. 1, 2021), 37-51.

.3 Bertoa Fernando Casal, Political parties or party systems? Assessing the 'myth of institutionalisation and democracy. *West European Politics*. (Taylor & Francis Online, volume 40, 2017), 402-429.



The manifesto below aims to present to the reader the expectations of Georgian voters of political parties during this complex domestic and regional crisis and offers recommendations to the parties on possible strategies to bring the interests of public and political actors as close as possible.

In order to identify the expectations of the voters and what they look for from the parties, working groups made up of the members of these parties and civil society representatives conducted 19 field trips in different regions of Georgia. The research covered 16 municipalities, including three large cities (Batumi, Kutaisi and Rustavi) in both the Eastern and Western parts of Georgia. Ensuring anonymity and complying with all the relevant norms, the groups conducted focus group meetings and in-depth interviews with potential or identified supporters in these geographic areas. As a result, the working groups established ten main expectations that voters have of political parties. The manifesto offers possible response strategies for each of the expectations (on average 4-6 responses for each of the voter expectations).

**WHAT DO VOTERS EXPECT FROM  
GEORGIAN POLITICAL PARTIES:  
RESPONSE STRATEGY**

## **EXPECTATION #1.**

### **AGREEING ON ISSUES OF NATIONAL IMPORTANCE**

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There is a wide public consensus in Georgia on the country's foreign policy path regardless of the political party or government leader. The majority of the population agrees that Georgia's future is closely intertwined with the country's Euro-Atlantic integration. Russia's invasion of Ukraine united the Western world and opened a window of opportunity for Georgia to get even closer to Europe. However, successful use of this opportunity is dependent on the extent to which the political parties and main actors are able to agree and cooperate on issues of national importance. More specifically, Euro-Atlantic integration requires the support and strengthening of reforms necessary for democratization. Therefore, for the political parties, to be able to agree on matters of national importance and deepen Western integration, it is desirable that they work on the following strategies:

#### **RESPONSE:**

- »» Prioritize issues that have prospects for a consensus, such as the Western foreign policy course, security and democratization during internal and inter party discussions;
- »» Parties must start cooperation on reducing and overcoming the main national security challenges (the Russian occupation and threats);
- »» Ensure active support of the reform process important for European integration and cooperation on issues such as electoral and justice system reform, reorganization of law enforcement and security agencies, etc.;
- »» Make cooperation with parties openly affiliated with Russia a mutually agreed red line.

## **EXPECTATION #2.**

### **STRENGTHENING ACCOUNTABILITY TO THE PEOPLE: USING POLITICAL PLATFORMS AVAILABLE TO PARTIES**

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Another expectation on political parties identified from the communication with voters is the accountability of parties to their supporters as well as to the wider public. More specifically, the public expects that parties will use all the political institutional platforms to hand to advocate for the needs of their voters. This issue is particularly prominent in the context of prolonged political crises, during which some of opposition parties turn to such strategies as boycotting Parliament or city councils. Such decisions limit parties' representation of their voters and therefore, the instrument for advocating their needs on official platforms. At the same time, issues on party accountability to the voters remain – strategies lacking transparency, limited access to information on parties' internal democratic and political processes, limited possibilities of feedback, etc.

#### **RESPONSE:**

- »» Create party action plans: to-do lists with set time-limits, publication of them and provision of reports on a party's progress on short or long-term political objectives, how those objectives are advocated, achieved, etc.;
- »» Parties should start working on software platforms using applications or other alternatives which make the information – such a party's short or long-term objectives, interparty processes and other topics – interesting for the potential voter and accessible to the interested segment of society;
- »» Ensure financial transparency: make donations, budget justifications, reporting, costs of specific project(s) public;
- »» Create an independent strategy on the accountability of party leaders to parties and to voters: such a strategy could include periodical statements, reports and presentations, as well as feedback.

## **EXPECTATION #3.**

### **ESTABLISH PRINCIPLES OF COOPERATION AMONG PARTIES AND WORK ON REDUCING THE POLARIZATION**

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During the last couple of years, Georgia has entered a deep and long-lasting political crisis, the fallout from which are still felt by the Georgian public. Even though constitutional changes and the so-called Charles Michel Agreement were supposed to play an important role in reducing the impact of the crisis and facilitating cooperation between political parties, relations between the ruling party and a significant part of the opposition are far from cooperative. The parties perceive politics as a zero-sum game, which obstructs the prospect of consensus-based relations. Similar attitudes to opponents and the inability to accept different opinions go against the demands of the wider public for inter-party cooperation and healthy political competition. Radical discourse and extreme polarization are a significant challenge and hinder the process of strengthening a sustainable political culture. However, parties with large electoral support bear a larger share of responsibility for reducing the uncompromising political confrontation than smaller political groups.

#### **RESPONSE:**

- »» It is advisable that political parties start agreeing on issues of national importance and acknowledge responsibility, which includes rejection of a zero-sum game approach, and take steps towards more cooperation;
- »» Parties should take the recommendations and advice from international partners more seriously and put them into practice, which would ensure the reduction of polarization and its damaging impacts;
- »» Individual political parties should initiate and encourage multi-party formats and cooperation, analyze their importance and emulate successful international examples;
- »» Parties with relatively small electoral support should use their potential as intermediaries in the extremely polarized environment, work on switching from hate speech to issue-based cooperation and strengthening a consensus-based political culture.

## EXPECTATION #4.

### FORMING AND STRENGTHENING PARTY IDENTITY

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One of the main challenges arising from the strategies of the political parties, as viewed by the voters, is the lack of clearly defined party identities in the political field. They “all look similar” and therefore it is hard to communicate clearly to the public the views of specific parties. This challenge makes it difficult for Georgian political parties to mobilize supporters and voters through issue-based and policy-related offers using their own platforms. There were several problems in the political parties that were identified in these regards: the lack of clear, agreed and homogenous messages in one and the same party and in some cases contradictory narratives that change over time. These issues lead to a sense of instability and confusion in the public’s minds; therefore, voters are not able to identify themselves with any specific party views. Besides, messages voiced by political parties are not usually based on analysis and research, which also causes lack of sustainability in party identities, frequent changes in positions and as a result, instability of supporters. In this perspective, one clearly defined problem is the lack of ideological views among political party platforms.

#### RESPONSE:

- »» It is desirable that parties ensure that there are regular internal discussions for agreeing upon the principles and main issues of their platforms. Organize wider party discussions on these topics among party members to plan and coordinate messages strategically;
- »» Ensure more active work across the parties on communicating agreed fundamental issues to the voters: it is important that parties ensure homogeneity of messages and strategies among party members, as well as with their regional organizations;
- »» Parties must maintain the stability of their main messages and strategies and avoid radical changes and differences in content and strategies;
- »» Party ideas must be based more on analytics and research and Think Tank format work;
- »» In case of each party, political objectives must be clearly defined: for instance, ideological work with the voters, the spreading of ideas, reflecting the attitudes of the voters, etc.;
- »» Parties must focus on the segment of the society for which a party’s views may be ideologically interesting, in order to ensure stability;
- »» New parties must mobilize members with a common ideology and view from the start of their political activities, instead of building party strategies around leaders.

## **EXPECTATION #5.**

### **PROGRAM-ORIENTED POLICIES**

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As the fieldwork demonstrated, voters expect parties to make policy offers focused on thematic programs, specific issues, daily challenges of society and reasonable ways to resolve them. There is an expectation in society that political parties will consistently present sensible ways to solve specific problems and that these will be based on realistic calculations and viable promises. Similar strategies must replace populist narratives, radical language and vague and impossible promises. As a result, parties will strengthen voters trust of their views.

#### **RESPONSE:**

- »» It is desirable that parties plan and conduct regular focus group meetings with voters to identify problems and expectations;
- »» Each party must provide a well-grounded list of goals and objectives; the views must be backed by their viability in the context of the Georgian reality. In order to increase trustworthiness, it is important to explain how the party plans to honor its promises;
- »» Parties must work with experts when working on program and create platforms involving non-party consulting groups;
- »» It is desirable to condense large programs and improve the visual presentation of them to the public;
- »» Parties must work on identifying different needs for each region and as a result, differentiate specific program components - specify parts of the program [as needed] linked to local problems;
- »» It would be desirable to create trained groups of volunteers who will have constant, firsthand and direct communication with voters about the general platform of the party, as well as specific programs.

## **EXPECTATION #6.**

### **STRENGTHENING INTERNAL DEMOCRACY WITHIN PARTIES**

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Concentration on leaders and a lack of internal democratic mechanisms is characteristic of Georgian political parties. In general, change in the commanding circles in parties is a rather slow process and political parties struggle to present new faces. This situation is at odds with the expectations identified during field work, according to which voters expect new leaders to come forward. However, the slow pace of generational change in leadership positions obstructs the process of meeting voters' and political parties' expectations. Establishing and/or strengthening the internal democratic mechanisms is important for the latter, which ensures the transparency of a party's work and increases the degree of trust among voters. Moving towards this direction also helps to increase voters' engagement and the creation of a political agenda focused on the interests of the electorate.

#### **RESPONSE:**

- »» Share managing functions among several leaders in parallel to those of the chairman, strengthen the role of the secretariat and political councils as balancing entities;
- »» Improve parties' legal regulations, broadly outline rights and responsibilities that include a clear distinction between the functions and responsibilities of leaders and other party entities;
- »» Ensure that every member of the party respects the rules;
- »» Bring forward regional leaders and grant more independence to local organizations in a move towards regional decentralization;
- »» Establish and strengthen democratic principles for putting together party lists; for instance, hold primary elections among members and supporters, based on which members will be assigned to the leading positions drawing on democratic principles;
- »» Closely cooperating with international partners to share their experience, putting these into practice, as well as actively cooperating with civil society, is important to ensure the implementation of reforms by strengthening internal party democracy.



## **EXPECTATION #7.**

### **INSTITUTIONAL DECENTRALIZATION OF PARTIES**

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Field work conducted in the regions demonstrated that the capital is the policy-planning decision center for the political parties. Concentration of power in Tbilisi is an important challenge when trying to narrow the gap between the interests of voters and parties as there is frequently a mismatch between views in the center and in regions on the needs of the local population. Institutional decentralization of parties and delegation of more power to local organizations would ensure more flexibility among regional representatives and more engagement with the population. More importantly, institutional decentralization contributes to policy planning that is responsive to local context and needs, and therefore increases public trust towards political parties. Voters have the expectation that political parties will strengthen their work in the regions and give consideration to local context or problems.

#### **RESPONSE:**

- »» Political parties must increase their regional representation to cover the population of the entire country and reach out to every populated area to ensure the bringing together of parties and voters on a larger scale;
- »» Increase local organizations' accessibility to resources, use of human resources and regional offices' independent active work on local projects to raise the level of autonomy;
- »» Parties must work with the regional population to identify specific local needs through communication and include them in agendas. Parties must put forward these problems in discussions with local self-government and also communicate them to central offices;
- »» Promote initiatives from citizens and encouraging them at a local level, engage the local population identifying specific local needs in which regional organizations, civil society and local media outlets play an important role;
- »» It is important to increase the accountability of regions to the center to strengthen control over the use of resources;
- »» Parties must research international experiences and put these into practice - studying and sharing the experience of Western states is particularly important;
- »» Introducing/strengthening the elements of direct democracy at local level, which ensures strengthening of the decentralization of political parties.

## **EXPECTATION #8.**

### **INCREASING THE POLITICAL AWARENESS OF VOTERS**

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Naturally, besides political parties, voters and their involvement have a determining role in improving and strengthening the political culture. Active involvement of the population in the political processes strengthens the accountability of political parties to their voters and helps to bring the views of these two actors closer to each other. However, a lack of knowledge of fundamental political issues and processes prevents the voters from making informed decisions. In order for the public to be able to analyze and become more involved in the ongoing political processes in the country, it is important that parties start more active work on increasing voters' political awareness.

#### **RESPONSE:**

- »» Political parties must plan and implement various formats for voter education, acceptable for them, which will focus on increasing and strengthening voters' political awareness;
- »» It is important that political parties go beyond the capital and start intensive meetings and work on forming dialogues with the population at large, which will contribute to improving the level of political education;
- »» Work with students and teenagers on increasing political awareness by organizing youth camps;
- »» It is desirable that political parties start translating and distributing relevant political literature. To this end, it would be important to work with publishing houses who are active in this field;
- »» The work on the strategy to increase political awareness requires political parties to create video materials, translate and actively disseminate them on social networks;
- »» It is desirable that political parties work on podcasts and programs dedicated to fundamental political issues in order to contribute to raising awareness on these matters;
- »» It is important to establish youth clubs that offer creative activities in the ideological prism, such as screening movies, holding discussions and debates.

## EXPECTATION #9.

### ENHANCED COMMUNICATION OF POLITICAL PARTIES WITH THE PUBLIC

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During the field work conducted one of the most frequently named topics on what voters expect from the political parties were a change in procedure, intensity of communications and an increase in activity, particularly during the period between elections. Traditionally, the public is disappointed that political parties “only remember [voters] during the elections”. At the same time, there is a feeling that politics “is made only in the center”, and in general, problems in the regions are overlooked and ignored in party narratives, even when the parties are engaged in political competition at local self-government elections. This frustrates the voters and decreases their trust in the parties.

#### RESPONSE:

- »» Parties must start more active meetings with all levels of the population in the following areas: offering the population in the regions periodic direct communication with party leaders. According to the resources and needs of a specific party, outlining the intensity and strategy of similar high-level meetings in the regions;
- »» It is desirable that parties ensure that functioning of the so-called “call-centers” and hotlines works continuously: providing a source of information to the voters on various issues beyond the election period, particularly during crises, such as pandemics, war in Ukraine, etc.;
- »» It is important that parties use the internet more extensively, especially social networks, when planning their communication strategies: it is important to hold creative online events, and enhance the registration of participants on these events;
- »» It is important to simplify a message-box intended for the public: mobilize alternative / additional groups in the party that will be tasked with “translating” the main messages of the party platform to a language that is understandable, acceptable and close to any segment of voters; work on specific principles to direct party communication using non-specific language;
- »» It is important that parties actively discuss creative performances, as a firsthand and memorable communication strategy with the public: periodic involvement of the leaders with youth and in some way “offering oneself” to voters is particularly important in this process.

## **EXPECTATION #10.**

### **SETTING FORTH THE ISSUE ON MINORITIES**

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One of the main needs identified among a certain segment of the voters is to give more attention to the issue of minority communities in political parties' agendas. This topic - protecting the rights of different minority groups and perceiving them as equally important players - is an important factor for improving issue-based internal political debates and Georgia's Euro-Atlantic ambitions. The main problems, as seen by the voters, in the narratives of political parties is the lack, frequency or complete absence of discussions on all types of minority groups. There are several challenges in these regards: in general, political parties start active communication with different minority groups only before the elections, therefore, during the period beyond elections they distance themselves from topics on minorities and their problems. Additionally, political parties are frequently not able to talk openly about minority issues because of the fear of losing a specific segment of voters. Lastly, some of the parties suffer in the regions from a lack of human, as well as financial and other types of resources, on the ground. All these prevent them from researching and reflecting on the issues of minorities in their platforms.

#### **RESPONSE:**

- »» It is important for parties to boost and strengthen party meetings with the inclusion of representatives from different minority groups;
- »» It is important that parties correctly identify specific problems facing different minority groups;
- »» It is desirable for parties to initiate joint public discussion platforms with representatives of different minority groups and field experts with the goals of discussing their individual problems and seeking and advocating professional solutions;
- »» Parties must plan and implement information campaigns on minority issues aimed at the wider public across the country: It is important to organize educational activities and to use information clips and videos in this process;
- »» It is desirable that parties demonstrate active positive response, support, and when needed, participation in important cultural and religious holidays/events of ethnic and religious minorities;
- »» Parties must start by strengthening international experience-sharing with active participation in the OSCE, the Council of Europe or UN development programs and based on that create a Georgian analogue for a strategy to work on minority issues.

## Conclusion

The manifesto “What do Georgian voters expect: Message for Georgian political parties” presents the findings of a joint working group of ten political parties and civil society representatives on voters’ expectations towards political parties in Georgia. Participants explored the alternative action strategies for the parties for every one of the expectations.

The public expects parties to establish realistic program views and identities, as well as to agree on the main principles of fundamental national issues and cooperation - points of convergence and red lines. At the same time, voters expect that parties will strengthen their internal democratic processes and pay more attention to the regions through decentralization. This is also important to enhance effective and constant communication with voters, increase accountability to the public and raise voters’ political awareness. The public expects parties to start more active work on minority issues.

The manifesto presented is particularly important in the context of the prolonged political crisis, at a time when political parties are not able to engage in result-oriented cooperation and to bring their political strategies closer to the voters’ expectations. Therefore, this inter-party document suggests a generalized framework of an action strategy for Georgian political parties. Effective implementation of the framework will help to bring their strategies closer to the ideas of voters. This will, hopefully, produce a significant step forward in creating a political environment based on consensus and issue-based policies and, in the process, improve the political culture.







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