



Problem of Cooperation Among Georgian Political Parties: What Do Voters Demand?

Nino Samkharadze¹

Executive Summary

In recent years, discussions about the need for coalition governance have become more prominent. This topic is particularly pressing in the context of the one-party governance experience and the prolonged political crisis that has brought the democratization process in the country to a dead end. However, talking about coalition governance would be unrealistic without the successful precedent of interparty cooperation. Signs of this are still not evident despite the fact that, according to public opinion surveys, voters support interparty cooperation in the country regardless of party affiliation.

This gap between parties' radical agendas and the public's attitudes is determined by several factors. It includes leader-oriented, personalized party strategies, the fear of small parties of being affiliated with the dominant powers and the zero-sum principle of party competition. The mismatch between voters' and parties' views on interparty cooperation creates additional problems for the Georgian political system: the political environment is becoming more radical with no deradicalization prospects in sight. Additionally, parties that are involved in party battles cannot find the resources to provide competent responses to problems that are important for the voters within a specific ideological view. As a result, the public trust in political parties might decrease, which will further limit the legitimisation of a healthy political process by the population.

This policy brief analyses the major factors behind parties' inability or unwillingness to respond to the public demand for interparty cooperation. It also identifies problems caused by the mismatch between party agendas and voter needs. Lastly, the brief offers recommendations for

¹ Junior Policy Analyst (GIP)

political parties to bring their views on interparty cooperation closer to the preferences of the voters and as a result enable the creation of realistic prospects for coalition governance in Georgia.

Key Words: coalition governance, interparty cooperation, political parties, public opinion

Introduction

In recent years, talk about democratic backsliding in Georgia has become frequent, with one of the main reasons behind this being the problem of issue-based cooperation among political parties. The 2018, 2020 and 2021 elections were accompanied by radicalisation of the political environment, uncompromised confrontation among parties and a prolonged political crisis. Developments like these have been leading the country irreversibly towards deadlock, with competent discussion on nationally important issues becoming impossible. In the context of weakened democratic processes, the importance of consensus among parties on further development for Georgia as a democratic state has become obvious. Reaching consensus among parties on common national issues strengthens the prospects for strong coalition governance, which is important for the growth of the country into a mature democracy.

The ongoing long-term political crisis has demonstrated contrasting views on the prospects of interparty cooperation among political parties and their supporters. Political consolidation and interparty cooperation based on consensus among political powers on various topics is a public demand (NDI 2022). However, the political class pays little attention to this and in some cases acts in conflict with voters' demands. Parties' inability or unwillingness to respond to public demand on cooperation based on the consensus creates a confrontation deadlock not only among parties, but also between parties and their voters.

Therefore, on the path to building a stable democratic state, it is important to promote discussion of the reasons behind the mismatch between public opinion and party strategies, the problems that the parties' disregarding of their own voters' views create and the solution.

Why Do Parties Distance Themselves from Voters' Demand on Interparty Cooperation?

In consolidated or transitional democracies one of the key characteristics of a strong political system is the level to which the political parties are responsive to voters' demands and needs (Ibenskas & Polk 2021). Every party, considering their ideological platform, has its own voter pool. However, post-Soviet transitional democracies, such as Georgia, have some peculiar characteristics (Kitchelt 2007), which is the reason why in such countries' party strategies are distanced from public attitudes and fail to meet the voters' expectations. In the case of Georgia, particularly important is the level to which parties respond to their voters' attitudes to interparty cooperation.

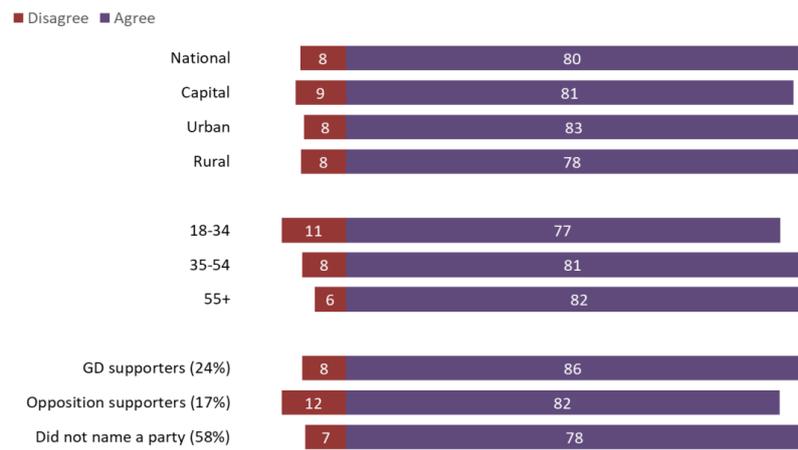
According to the public opinion poll conducted by the National Democratic Institute in December 2021, link between the views of political parties and their voters on a consensus-oriented dialogue is weak (NDI 2022). Regardless of their political views, a significant majority

of the population (80%) expects interparty cooperation even if the actions and opinions of other parties are unacceptable for the population (Graph 1). The political elite in Georgia pays scant attention to these attitudes and frequently politicizes the results of surveys (Gillam 2021; GIP 2020). Parties determine their political strategy with “red lines” that may be less important for the population (Samkharadze 2020b). Therefore, it is interesting to see what the reasons behind parties’ avoidance of responding to their voters’ demands are and of being more ready to agree on common national issues.

Graph 1. Public attitudes in Georgia, December 2021

Support for cross-party collaboration is consistent across political affiliation

Imagine there is a political party which you like more than others. Do you agree or disagree with the statement that your favorite political party should cooperate with all other political parties in the parliament, even if the actions/views of some parties might be unacceptable to you? (q24 X Settlement, Age, Party closest to you)



Source: https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20Georgia%20-%20December%202021%20poll_Eng_vf.pdf

One of the first factors is that in Georgia the party system is determined by a zero-sum game mechanism. To illustrate this, when it loses ruling power, the party losing the elections also loses access to significant resources, which is vital for a party’s existence. As Georgia’s recent history demonstrates, similar parties either frequently vanish from the political field completely or are so weakened that they don’t have enough strength to replace the ruling power (Bolkvadze 2021). This unstable political system pushes parties to focus on political survival or maintaining their ruling power at any cost. As a result, meeting actual public demand is beyond them.

The second inhibiting factor may be the character of Georgian politics, in that it is focused on personalities. Parties have a hard time getting away from agendas based on a specific leader, as during elections leaders are focused on themselves (Bertoa 2021; Samkharadze 2021a). The Mikheil Saakashvili and Bidzina Ivanishvili’s factors clearly demonstrate the two poles of the party spectrum: they are considered to be such powerful centres of gravity in Georgian politics that they “hijack parties”, overruling voters’ preferences in party agendas (Enyedi 2021; Sharashenidze 2021). Therefore, this character, based on specific individuals, particularly in

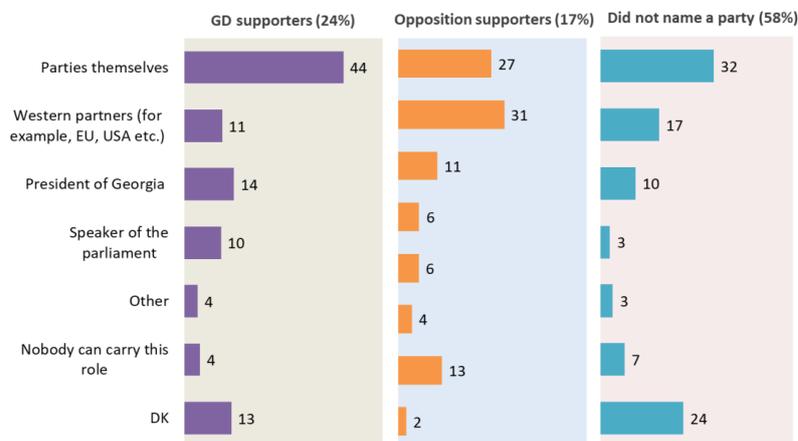
dominant party strategies, obstructs other players from freely getting involved in a consensus-based political process at the cost of certain concessions (Minesashvili 2021; Samkharadze 2021a).

The third issue in parties' failure to respond to voters' demand and create an effective cooperative environment is the factor of an authoritative mediator. The problem is that even trustworthy mediators are not able to work successfully with Georgian political parties. During the political crisis that started in the beginning of 2021 this role was taken up by the President of European Council, Charles Michel. At a certain point he achieved some kind of success and political parties signed the so-called April 19 agreement; however, it was annulled in several months. This means that it is hard to find the kind of authority that will succeed in achieving a stable agreement on cooperation among Georgian political parties. If we look at the opinions of Georgian voters in these regards, we will see how opposition and undecided voters view Western partners in the mediating position. For the supporters of the ruling Georgian Dream party, parties themselves should act as leading players (Graph 2).

Graph 2. Public attitudes in Georgia, December 2021.

Majority look inside of the country for a source of facilitation between the opposition and the government

At the moment, opposition parties and the ruling party have difficulty having a dialogue and agreeing on numerous issues. In your opinion, who would make the best moderator and facilitator in this process? (q26 X Party closest to you)



Source: https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20Georgia%20-%20December%202021%20poll_Eng_vf.pdf

The fourth factor specifically concerns small parties, which may fear that after cooperation with any of the dominant powers they will be stigmatized by the voters, which is a pertinent risk in even developed democracies (Rossiter 2021; Zurabashvili 2021). Therefore, achieving agreement among parties on issues such as the parliamentary boycott by the opposition after the 2020 parliamentary elections is often complicated. According to the then-leader of the “European Georgia” party - Gigi Ugulava - “entering parliament today means becoming part of the “Georgian Dream” party (Tskipurishvili 2020). Fearing to lose radical supporters, smaller parties struggle to take decisions that will potentially lead to their affiliation with any of the major powers. Therefore, the space for interparty cooperation becomes limited.

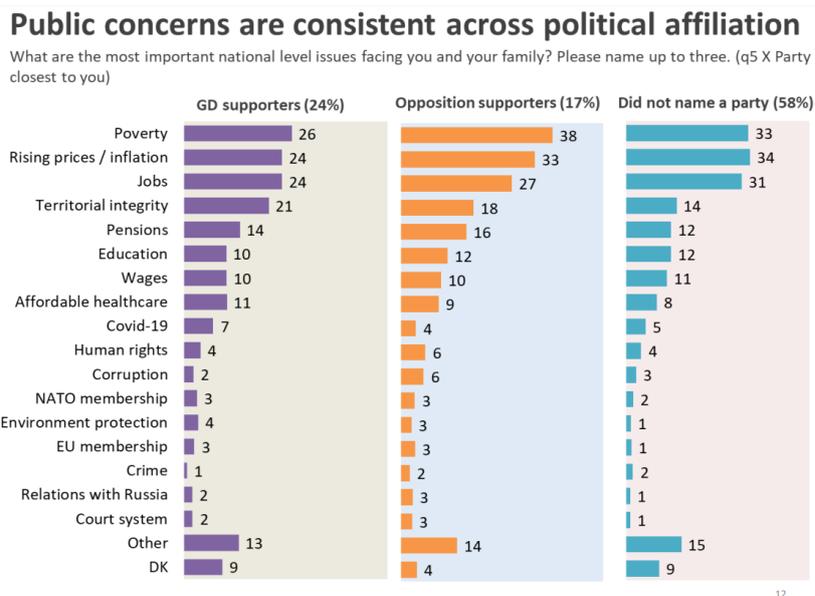
Public Demand Vis-à-vis Political Agenda: What Kind of Problems Does It Create for the State?

This summary points to the fact that the Georgian political system is not yet mature enough to increase the focus on interparty cooperation as demanded by its own voters. As a result, the country faces several critical challenges on its path towards the development of statehood.

One of the main problems caused by the gap between the vision of the parties and the voters is increasing radicalisation in the political field. Parties no longer express willingness to balance their uncompromising rhetoric by starting healthy political competition with other parties. Therefore, the political field always remains radicalized and polarized - this is also the view of international observers (OSCE 2018, 2020, 2021). Parties find it quite comfortable to choose strategies based on revenge and annihilation of a competitor (Tsutskiridze 2021).

The more radicalized and toxic the political environment becomes, the more the political processes become distanced from the real needs of the public and over the years the dichotomy between the parties and voters has increased (Lebanidze 2021). As a result, broad problems, which are considered by the public to be the main challenges facing the country, remain outside the realm of political discussions (Graph 3). Hence, parties are not able to focus on the real national issues and deliver some kind of agreement from Georgia's political processes.

Graph 3. Public Attitudes in Georgia. December 2021.

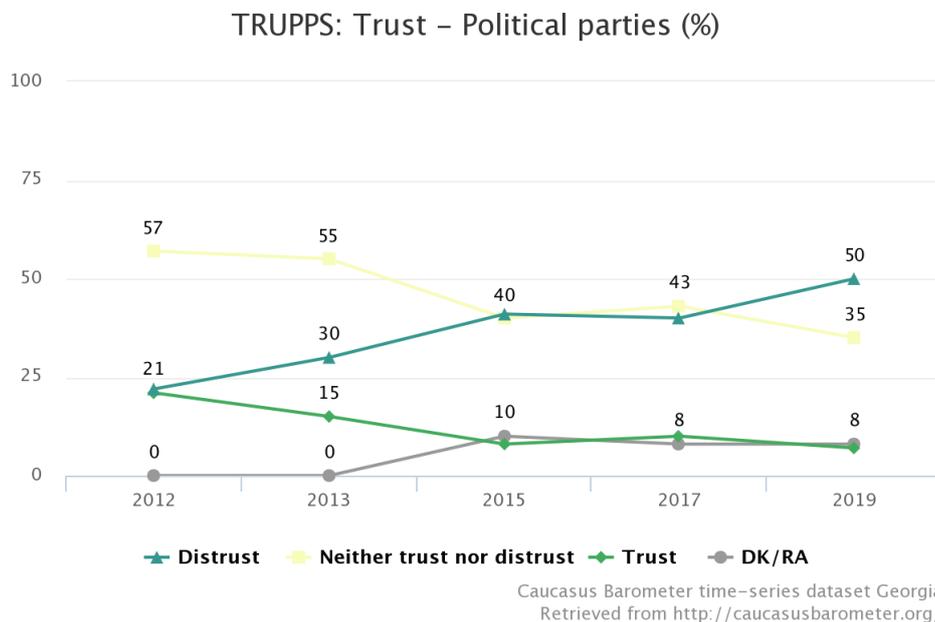


Source: https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20Georgia%20-%20December%202021%20poll_Eng_vf.pdf

At the same time, in parallel with endless toxic and non-thematic political battles, parties do not have sufficient resources and goodwill to put more effort into building ideological identities. A number of research reports confirm that the ideological differences of the parties are slight, with rare exceptions. Parties do not frequently engage in thematic debates publicly (GPB 2021; Radiotavisupleba 2021) and therefore cannot draw clear distinctive lines among themselves in the eyes of the voters. The stated official ideological views of the parties may not match the needs of the voters (FES 2021). In Georgia, parties have little awareness that if their ideological view is in conflict with the voters' needs, they will lose supporters and therefore the chance of electoral success (Tsutskiridze 2021).

It is also important that differences in views in political dialogue may deepen alienation between parties and voters will lead to some sort of polarization of trust, distancing voters from the political processes (Lebanidze 2021). In general, in recent years trust in political parties has decreased, while mistrust has increased (Graph 4). With disappointed voters, parties lose their trust to such an extent that even strong and stable parties are no longer able to change the government in a peaceful way, backed by the confidence of voters. This is a challenge for the building of a consolidated democracy.

Graph 4: Timeline – trust towards political parties



Source: <https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb-ge/TRUPPS/>

Therefore, the differing views on interparty relations create a number of problems for parties and their voters. Among these, of particular importance is the inability of politics to go beyond the boundaries of radicalisation. This is the reason why public needs are re-focused on other areas, which results in a political system devoid of ideology. As a result, there is the risk that the already decreasing level of public trust in the parties is even further diminished and it becomes increasingly challenging to organise a healthy democratic political process.

Why is Rapprochement Between Political Class and Voters Important and How This Can Be Achieved?

As this general picture demonstrates, there is a demand for interparty consensus among voters, however, contrary to the public's wishes, the parties cannot achieve productive and long-term consolidation. Occasionally discussions on interparty consolidation around particular issues and prospects of coalition government emerge. However, in the end, the parties' uncompromising, radical agendas, based on hatred, hinders any co-operation. To change this picture, and to ensure that parties get closer to their voters, it is important that they re-assess their strategies to reflect the views of the public and give much more attention to the demands of the voters.

In this process, it is important to correctly redefine the "red lines". Frequently, parties define their "red lines" at the negotiating table based on narrow party interests and pay less attention or completely ignore the most important national challenges (graph 2). In order for the parties to be able to break the deadlock of the political crisis as soon as possible, it is important that issues considered by the public to be the country's primary challenges become priorities in party agendas instead of narrow party objectives (Tsutskiridze & Kvashilava 2021). The fact that national problems, as perceived by the public, have remained the same for some years (Caucasusbarometer 2022), should indicate to the parties that the public demands that they give a stronger and more substantiated response.

According to the majority of the population, the prolonged disagreement between the parties should be resolved through the efforts of the parties themselves (34%) or with the mediation of any other internal actor (16%). Only 18% expect renewed engagement of Western actors (NDI 2022). This data should signal to the parties that the public demands more from them when it comes to the leading consensus-oriented political processes and less attention should be paid to party affiliations (Graph 4). For this to happen, parties need to acknowledge the existence of their opponents and the legitimacy of their opinions and refuse to take radical attitudes towards each other (Tsutskiridze & Kvashilava 2021) - this remains the demand of voters of every dominant party.

These findings question the assumption that the radical character of Georgian political polarization is the result of public demand. While the focus of disagreement between parties is directed towards constant oppression of competitors and their political destruction, it is important to the voter that this situation eases and the resources of the parties are focused more on cooperation. Therefore, Georgian political parties must soften their radical, uncompromised rhetoric, which is sometimes based on personal hatred. Otherwise, the chances of interparty agreement and consolidation for the Georgian political elite will be further reduced. This will lead to a constant deadlock of polarization and further distancing of the political class from the real needs of their voters.

In conclusion, despite the obstacles Georgia's political elite should undertake a fundamental review of its ideological views and practical strategies as soon as possible, so that these respond

as much as possible to what the public wants (Tsutskiridze & Kvashilava 2021). Otherwise, getting the country out of the deadlock of political crisis will continue to drag on, which will further delay the transition from transitional hybrid regime to a consolidated democracy.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Recent surveys of public attitudes conducted in Georgia indicate that for the voters it is important that a precedent for successful cooperation between parties should be created to help improve the prospects for coalition governance. However, there are several factors that block parties from responding to public demands. These include the zero-sum principle of Georgian politics, the personality driven party agenda, parties disregarding the authority of mediators and the risks regarding voter attitudes for small parties affiliating with big parties.

This environment creates additional risks for the country: the political sphere becomes more radicalized and therefore parties cannot focus on the actual needs of their voters, widening the gap between them. In the end, the trust and confidence of the voters in the parties diminishes. In order for Georgian political parties to avoid the damaging impact of this tendency and to be able to respond to the needs of their voters, it is important that:

- Political parties approach the results of public surveys with more responsibility and based on that **plan qualitative and quantitative research specifically focusing on the demands of their voters;**
- **Use the voters' preferences identified by the internal surveys as the basis for strategies on cooperation with other parties,** which will legitimize the inclusion of voters' demands in the political agenda;
- Political parties should **reduce attempts to discredit public opinion research organizations** as much as possible and think through the damage caused by such actions;
- Based on independent research, parties should identify important aspects that, **according to their voters, will have a major role to play in interparty cooperation;**
- Based on research and effective strategies, **redefine their own "red lines"** and bring them closer to those of voters'; identify the issues voters will accept to compromise on at the negotiating table with competitors;
- Based on the preferences of the voters, actively start **creating ideological identities** to promote thematic discussions, which will create favourable conditions for successful interparty cooperation;

- Carefully study and use **the experiences of established democracies** to create precedents for successful interparty cooperation in Georgia;
- After re-examining international experiences and internationalization, work on identifying **who, according to voters, is an intermediary with the authority to achieve interparty cooperation;**
- **The Ruling Party** plans a possible cooperation strategy with other parties for two reasons: to respond to the demands of its own voters and to respond to the demands of the entire population; understand that it is accountable to the population, as one whole constitutive part of the state;
- **Ruling party** boosts work with those Western parties that are in a coalition government in their own countries, and learn from these practical experiences;
- In the framework of cooperation with the ruling party, **opposition** tries as much as possible to act in accordance with thematic problems and practical needs identified via communication with the voters, which will introduce more or less radicalized positions in the political agenda.

References

- Bertoa, Fernando Casal. 2021. Polarization and Fragmentation of Georgian Political Landscape: Implications for Democracy. Available at: <https://gip.ge/ka/publication-post/polarization-and-fragmentation-of-georgian-political-landscape-implications-for-democracy-expert-interview-with-dr-fernando-casal-bertoa/> Accessed on: 5 April, 2022;
- Bolkvadze, Ket. 2021. In GEODEM 2021 Conference Notes – Public Polls, Elections and Populism: Why Don't We Trust the Political Processes in Georgia? Available at: <https://gip.ge/publication-post/geodem-2021-conference-notes-public-polls-elections-and-populism-why-dont-we-trust-the-political-processes-in-georgia/> Accessed on: 6 April, 2022;
- Caucasusbarometer, 2022. ქვეყანაში არსებული პირველი ყველაზე მნიშვნელოვანი პრობლემა - დროითი შვრივი 2008-2019. Available at: <https://caucasusbarometer.org/ge/cb-ge/IMPISS1/> Accessed on: 6 April, 2022;
- Enyedi, Zholt. 2021. Democratic Deficit in Party Political Systems – Expert Interview with Professor Zsolt Enyedi. Available at: <https://gip.ge/ka/publication-post/democratic-deficit-in-party-political-systems-expert-interview-with-professor-zsolt-enyedi/> Accessed on: 5 April, 2022;
- FES. 2021. საქართველოს პოლიტიკური ლანდშაფტი - მრავალფეროვნება, პოზიციების თანაკვეთა და თავისუფალი სივრცეები. Available at: <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/georgien/18418.pdf> Accessed on: 6 April, 2022;
- Gillam, Adam, 2021. In GEODEM 2021 Conference Notes – Public Polls, Elections and Populism: Why Don't We Trust the Political Processes in Georgia? Available at: <https://gip.ge/publication-post/geodem-2021-conference-notes-public-polls-elections-and-populism-why-dont-we-trust-the-political-processes-in-georgia/> Accessed on: 6 April, 2022;
- GIP, 2020. Polling Wars in Georgia: Can it Undermine Public Trust? Available at: <https://gip.ge/publication-post/polling-wars-in-georgia-can-it-undermine-public-trust/> Accessed on: 6 April, 2022;
- GIP, 2021. GEODEM 2021 Conference Notes – Public Polls, Elections and Populism: Why Don't We Trust the Political Processes in Georgia? Available at: <https://gip.ge/publication-post/geodem-2021-conference-notes-public-polls-elections-and-populism-why-dont-we-trust-the-political-processes-in-georgia/> Accessed on: 6 April, 2022;
- GPB. 2021. დებატები საქართველოს პირველ არხზე. Available at: <https://1tv.ge/video/debatebi-saqartvelos-pirvel-arkhze-10/> Accessed on: 6 April, 2022;
- Ibenskas, Raimondas & Polk, Jonathan. 2021. Party Responsiveness to Public Opinion in Young Democracies. *Political Studies*. pp. 1-20;
- Kitschelt, Herbert. 2007. Party Systems. In: Boix C and Stokes SC (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp.522-555.
- Lebanidze, Bidzina. 2021. Radicalization of Georgian Party Politics: in Search of Long-term Stability. Available at: <https://gip.ge/publication-post/radicalization-of-georgian-party-politics-in-search-of-long-term-stability/> Accessed on: 5 April, 2022;
- Minesashvili, Salome. 2021. Why do Georgian Political Parties Struggle to Negotiate? Structural Disincentives to Compromise-Based Politics. Available at: <https://gip.ge/publication-post/why-do-georgian-political-parties-struggle-to-negotiate-structural-disincentives-to-compromise-based-politics/> Accessed on: 5 April, 2022;
- NDI, 2022. საზოგადოების განწყობა საქართველოში - 2021 წლის დეკემბრის სატელეფონო გამოკითხვის მთავარი მიგნებები. Available at: https://drive.google.com/file/d/1wKcT8fc9QPpAZsMe2foTzeizVEg9wUc7/view?fbclid=IwAR1fuit4N68-grEeyXDZp8qMZEFt_nf-nlmGsH7lix6FOKgWf9v5xEU72M0 Accessed on: 6 April, 2022;
- OSCE, 2018. საქართველო - საპრეზიდენტო არჩევნები 2018 წლის 28 ოქტომბერი და 28 ნოემბერი, ეუთოს/დემოკრატიული ინსტიტუტებისა და ადამიანის უფლებების ოფისის საერთაშორისო საარჩევნო სადამკვირვებლო მისია საბოლოო ანგარიში. Available at: <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/a/c/414827.pdf> Accessed on: 5 April, 2022;

- OSCE, 2020. GEORGIA PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS 31 October 2020 ODIHR Limited Election Observation Mission Final Report. Available at: <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/1/4/480500.pdf> Accessed on: 5 April, 2022;
- OSCE, 2021. INTERNATIONAL ELECTION OBSERVATION MISSION Georgia – Local Elections, Second Round, 30 October 2021. Available at: <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/8/c/502704.pdf> Accessed on: 5 April, 2022;
- Radiotavisupleba. 2021. კალამე უარს ამბობს ოთხი ტელევიზიის შეთავაზებაზე, მელიასა და გახარიასთან დებატებში მონაწილეობაზე. Available at: <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/31455383.html> Accessed on: 6 April, 2022;
- Rossiter, Erin. 2021. The Consequences of Interparty Conversation on Outparty Affect and Stereotypes. Available at: <https://erossiter.com/files/conversations.pdf> Accessed on: 5 April, 2022;
- Samkharadze, Nino. 2020a. Inter-party Negotiations in a Time of Crisis: What Hinders an Effective Dialogue? Available at: <https://gip.ge/inter-party-negotiations-in-a-time-of-crisis-what-hinders-an-effective-dialogue/> Accessed on: 6 April, 2022;
- Samkharadze, Nino. 2020b. A Look Beyond the Red Lines in Georgian Politics: 5 Major Risks Following the Annulment of the April 19 Agreement. Available at: <https://gip.ge/a-look-beyond-the-red-lines-in-georgian-politics-5-major-risks-following-the-annulment-of-the-april-19-agreement/> Accessed on: 6 April, 2022;
- Sharashenidze, Kartlos. 2021. „საკავშირი და ივანიშვილი პოლარიზებას უწყობენ ხელს“ - კრამერი. Available at: <https://www.amerikiskhma.com/a/for-the-opposition-saakashvili-remains-a-powerful-figure-but-he-s-also-a-very-polarizing-figure-as-is-mr-ivanishvili/6250602.html> Accessed on: 6 April, 2022;
- Tskipurishvil, Natia. 2020. დღეს პარლამენტში შესვლა პირდაპირ “ქართულ ოცნებაში” შესვლას ნიშნავს – უგულავა. Available at: <https://netgazeti.ge/news/494552/> Accessed on: 5 April, 2022;
- Tsutskiridze, Levan. 2021. ეს არის პოლიტიკური რევანშისა და გადარჩენის ცხოველური ინსტიქტი – ლევან ცუცქერიძე. Available at: <https://netgazeti.ge/news/521572/> Accessed on: 5 April, 2022;
- Tsutskiridze, Levan & Kvashilava, Bakur. 2022. Available at: <https://netgazeti.ge/opinion/586940/> Accessed on: 6 April, 2022;
- Zurabashvili, Teona. 2020. Party Identity as the Basis for Splinter Party Electoral Success. Available at: <https://gip.ge/publication-post/party-identity-as-the-basis-for-splinter-party-electoral-success/> Accessed on: 5 April, 2022.



საქართველოს პოლიტიკის ინსტიტუტი
GEORGIAN INSTITUTE OF POLITICS

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.

The contents of this publication are the sole responsibility of the author and can in no way be taken to reflect the views of the Georgian Institute of Politics.

The Georgian Institute of Politics do not determine, nor do they necessarily endorse or advocate for, any of this report's conclusions.

HOW TO QUOTE THIS DOCUMENT:

Nino Samkharadze, *“Problem of Cooperation Among Georgian Political Parties: What Do Voters Demand?”*, Policy Brief No. 38, Georgian Institute of Politics, April 2022.

© Georgian Institute of Politics, 2022
13 Aleksandr Pushkin St, 0107 Tbilisi, Georgia
Tel: +995 599 99 02 12
Email: info@gip.ge
For more information, please visit
www.gip.ge