



Low Election Threshold: the End of Bipolarity or a New Challenge?

Salome Kandelaki ¹

Executive Summary

The majority of Georgian parliamentary parties support a 2% threshold for the 2024 parliamentary elections, which will take place for the first time per a fully proportional electoral system. It is hoped that this will encourage more political pluralism and less bipolarity. Decreasing the threshold is also a part of the so-called Charles Michel agreement, the fulfillment of which is important for the country's democratization and European integration. Low election threshold is not essential for the ruling and the biggest opposition parties. However, it is detrimental for parliamentary representation of small parties, particularly in the environment, where it will be impossible to create party blocs for the future elections.

This paper discusses the prospects of various parties with regards to the election threshold and analyses the importance of the threshold in the development of a multi-party parliamentary democracy. The paper also discusses the potential positive and negative impacts of the 2% election threshold in the context of Georgia, and offers recommendations to reduce bipolarity and political polarization. Facts and arguments presented in the paper are based on a literature review, official statements of politicians and an analysis of interviews conducted with party leaders.

Key Words: 2% threshold, bipolarity, polarization, parliamentary elections, parties

¹ Junior Policy Analyst (GIP)

Introduction

Two-party governance has become the norm of Georgian politics over the last two decades, while the political landscape has narrowed for new or already existing smaller parties. Dominant political parties try to accomplish their objectives by using polarization strategies such as mobilizing voters through the demonization of the opponent and its exploitation discourse (Mccoy and Somer, 2019). Such an approach and discourse intensified polarization and created a political crisis. Political polarization has a negative impact on liberal democracy and divided the population into two rival camps (Arbatli and Rosenberg 2020). This became particularly evident after the 2020 parliamentary elections when small parties had to partner with the leading opposition party during the boycott of parliament, which threatened the individuality and political identity of these parties.

In order to solve the standoff, according to the Charles Michel agreement, signed on April 19, 2021, the next two elections should be held in a fully-proportional manner with 2% electoral threshold for supporting multi-party parliamentary governance. In July 2021, despite the ruling party annulling the agreement, Georgian Dream (GD) stipulated that they would have a firm position on the implementation of electoral changes and that these changes ensure not only a lower electoral threshold but also better control mechanisms and more accountability (ლაგაბიძე 2021). The Parliament of Georgia approved the constitutional changes to electoral procedures in the first hearing, with one of the provisions setting the threshold for the next parliamentary elections to 2% and proportionally distributing the mandates (რადოს თავისუფლება 2021). However, in total three hearings are needed for final approval of the 2% electoral threshold for the next two parliamentary elections, which agreement has not been achieved yet.

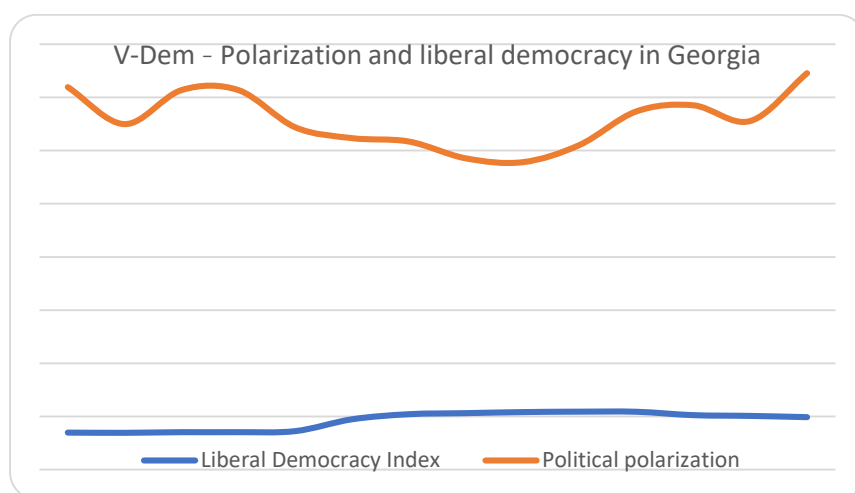
This policy brief analyses what are the challenges of polarization in Georgia and how important it is to decrease the electoral threshold to 2% to decrease polarization, establish multiparty parliamentary democracy and to make sure that the electoral votes will be adequately reflected in the parliament. This paper also compares the perspectives of large and small parties on this matter. The work reviews the extent to which the lowered election threshold is related to reducing polarization and encouraging pluralism.

What are the main features of polarization in Georgia?

Polarization has long been a problem in Georgia, and hampers the democratic development of the country. The political landscape is more an arena of rivalry instead of a space for constructive dialogue among parties. Endless political crises and extreme polarization limit the possibility of establishing multiparty democracy even more and hinders the development of a consolidated democracy in the country.

If we discuss the political polarization originating from the confrontation between the two dominant parties, it is important to note what the quality of democratic development in the country is and how ruling and opposition parties use polarization for constructive or destructive objectives (Somers and McCoy 2018). For most of the already established consolidated democracies like Georgia, the two-party system has become a part of the political culture, where it is used by parties for constructive objectives. Using polarization to mobilize voters is characteristic for transitional, semi-consolidated democracies such as Georgia, frequently accompanied by autocratic tendencies (McCoy and Murat, 2019). In the case of Georgia, polarization is used as a tool to destroy the opponent (Nodia 2022). Based on the data of the Variety of Democracy Institute (V-Dem), in semi-consolidated democracies polarization demonstrates a negative correlation between the level of political polarization and liberal democracy rankings (Somers, McCoy and Luke, 2021). This is relevant for the Georgian case too, where we see the slight tendency that with the growing polarization, it is harder to improve the quality of liberal democracy. Diagram 1 shows that which in fact is decreasing more (Diagram 1).

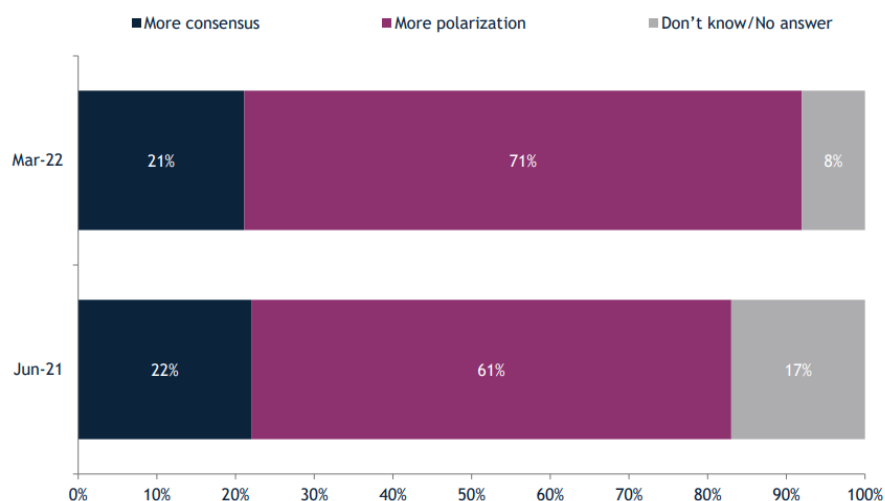
Diagram 1: *The 2008-2021 dynamics of the quality of polarization and liberal democracy in Georgia*



Source: *Variety of Democracy Institute (V-Dem) 2008-2021, political polarization and liberal democracy indicator, Georgia. Available at: https://www.v-dem.net/data_analysis/CountryGraph/*

The same dynamic can be seen in the data of Freedom House report 2022, with Georgia’s overall indicator reducing from 3.18 to 3.07 compared to last year, which happened in parallel with political polarization (Freedom House 2022). IRI public attitude survey also shows that 71% of the population (Diagram 2) thinks that politics in Georgia are directed more towards polarization than consensus (IRI 2021).

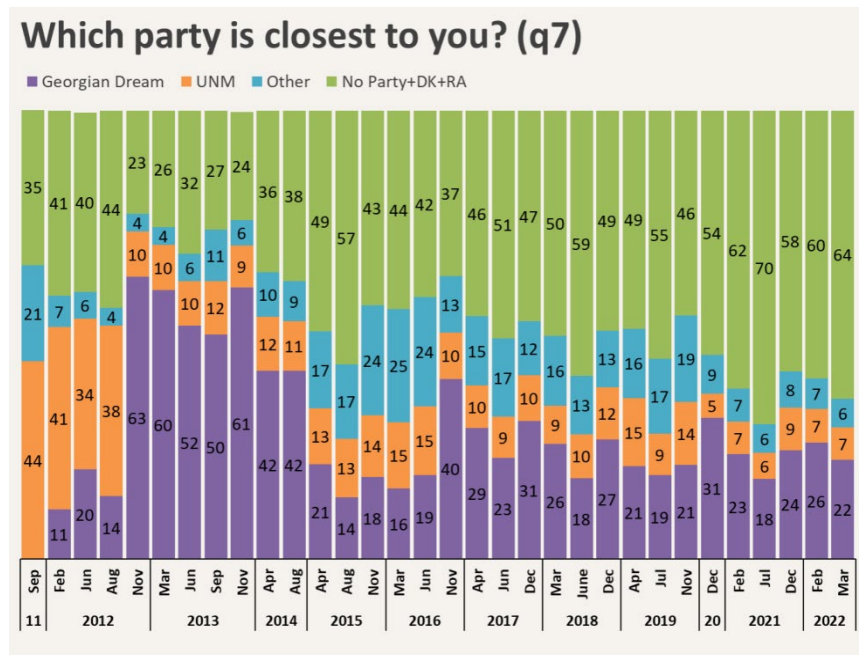
Diagram 2: *Would you say that our country's politics are moving toward consensus or more polarization?*



Source: IRI March, 2022. *Public Opinion Survey, Residents of Georgia*. Available at: https://www.iri.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/IRI-Poll-Presentation-Georgia-March2022_Final.pdf

Georgia, like other transitional democracies, is stuck between democracy and autocracy, at the initial stage of democratization and consolidation, which political scientists refer to as the *gray zone* (Carothers 2002). Georgia may be among the countries that are characterized by imaginary pluralism and dominant, closed politics and its trajectory on the path to democratization is still fragile (Enyedi and Casal Bértoa 2021). The latest NDI survey shows that political polarization and two-party dichotomy, had a negatively impact on the attitudes of the voters. Moreover, the number of undecided voters has increased up to 64% (Diagram 3). This outcome may be used by smaller parties as an opportunity to establish a 'third force.'

Diagram 3: Public attitudes towards parties in Georg



Source: NDI, April 2022. *Public Attitudes in Georgia.* Available at: https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20Georgia_March%202022%20poll_public%20version_GEO_VF.pdf?fbclid=IwAR00JH7vuKrr0_HAARwa57lcYncDI4fO--b8UsAp1K1r2SDcpYM5UBzcY0

2% vs 5% election threshold: opportunities to create coalition

In case of the failure of West’s mediation regarding lowering the election threshold from 5% to 2% for the next election, the opposition will have little opportunity to strengthen its position in the parliament without a coalition, especially considering that in the 2020 parliamentary elections, only the United National Movement was able to pass the 5% threshold (საქართველოს ცენტრალური საარჩევნო კომისია 2020), while in the 2021 municipal elections, only the United National Movement and former PM Gakharia’s party, For Georgia, were able to get more than 5% of the votes (Elections TV1 2021).

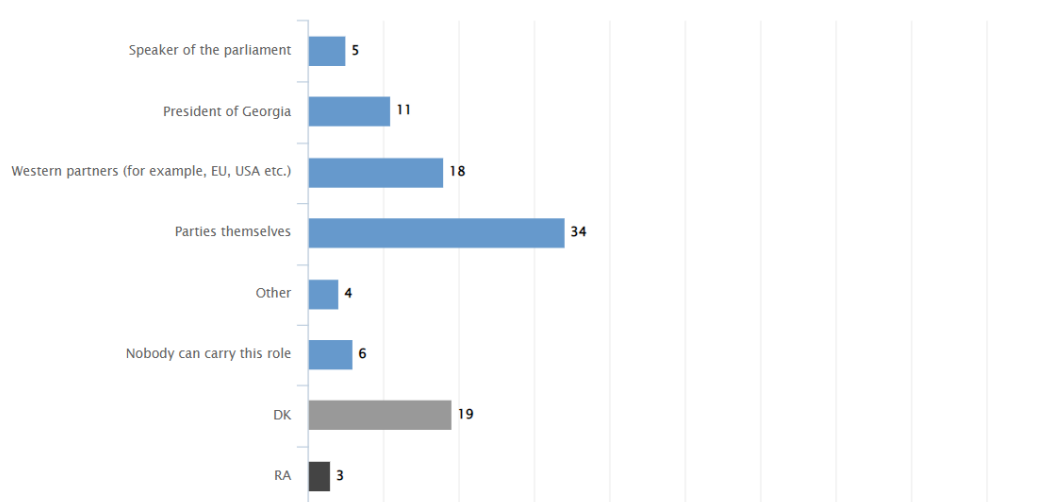
According to the interviews conducted by GIP with the constitutionalists, the election threshold is particularly important for the proportional election system. The general standard, as well as the recommendation of the Venice Commission, is a 3% threshold, however, a lot depends on the specific country and its political realities. According to the interviewed constitutionalists the 2% threshold minimizes the existence of one-party or two-party rule and is advantageous for small parties. In this case, it is not only important to support a multi-party system, but also to ensure the quality of their political influence, which would be more realistic by introducing

a 2% threshold. Respondent claimed that “the lower the threshold is, the less disfigured is the political mosaic in the public.”ⁱ In a fully proportional system with a low threshold, getting 50% of the vote will be difficult for one party. In this case, the vote of every single member of the parliament will be decisive and will require forming a coalition. Therefore, in the view of a number of constitutionalists, “ political life might be directed towards political consensus, not polarization.”ⁱⁱ

If the 2% threshold is not approved by the time of the next parliamentary elections, this will negatively impact the probability of the Charles Michel agreement being implemented, and result in the further deterioration of the international image of Georgia on its path to European integration. Moreover, it will strengthen the opinion that support provided by the West to turn political parties in Georgia into stable democratic political subjects is ineffective due to the political class’ lack of readiness (Bader 2010).

The US Ambassador to Georgia also reminded the ruling party about the importance of the 2% threshold to encourage political pluralism and warned that one-party rule may create the risk of “tyranny by the majority”. Despite this, the fate of a lower electoral threshold is still ambiguous. According to a December 2021 survey conducted by NDI, 34% of the population thinks the best mediator between the opposition and ruling parties should be these parties themselves, while only 18% name Western partners for this role (Diagram 4). This may mean that the public clearly understands the political landscape and that negotiation between the two parties is impossible without the readiness of the political parties themselves.

Diagram 4: *Who would make the best moderator and facilitator in the dialogue between opposition parties and the ruling party? (%)*



Source: NDI, December 2021. *Public Attitudes in Georgia.* Available at: <https://caucasusbarometer.org/ge/nd2021ge/BFACBOPRP/>

On the one hand, the 2% threshold provides realistic opportunities for small parties to encourage genuine pluralist parliamentary governance; on the other hand, if Georgian Dream rejects the initiative on lowering the election threshold, opposition parties will have more motivation to establish a coalition. The question is who will they decide to form a coalition with, whether or not they will be able to unite on their own or try to defeat the ruling party with the largest opposition party, the United National Movement. The second option may seem more beneficial to achieve a common objective, however, there is a risk that in such a coalition, the United National Movement will remain a dominant power; this will not put an end to bipolarity. However, in case 3% and 2% political parties unite, they may be able to pass the 5% threshold and support pluralism in the Parliament. Small parties lost similar opportunities during the 2021 elections (Zurabashvili 2021).

However, in the 2024 parliamentary elections, parties won't be able to unite in one bloc and will have to participate in the election under the umbrella of one party or establish and unite under a new party with values shared by all. The government justified the abolishment of election blocs with the argument that this will strengthen political parties. However, a number of lawyers have criticized this decision and think that abolishing election blocs will further complicate the cooperation among parties, which in the current political context when parties already have a hard time reaching a consensus on issues of national importance, will make it harder for them to cooperate during the campaign period (ტალიური 2017). Taking into account the last election results, cooperating with Gakharia's party may look more beneficial for small opposition parties in order to establish a third force. However, the moral dilemmas these parties have against one another with regard to past experiences and incompatibility of values are important to consider. Particularly when talks will not relate to uniting under one election bloc.

Is decreasing the electoral threshold the only way out of bipolarity?

Decreasing the election threshold and changes already applied to the election code is one among many mechanisms that may improve the pre-election and election process, ensure transparency, accountability, and competition among parties (საერთაშორისო გამჭვირვალობა). However, establishing electoral support for political parties also starts prior to the pre-election period. Prior to voting day, voters most likely support those parties they have more affinity with prior to the election campaign, while during the campaign period parties are merely mobilizing their voters, rather than gaining new supporters (Hansen and Kosiara-Pedersen 2015). Therefore, leading political parties have to gain the support of new voters or retain them using minor incremental measures. This is a lot easier for the ruling party than for the main opposition party since the Georgian Dream has control over administrative resources. Moreover, it is easier for the ruling party to create an enemy out of the United National Movement, completely ignore other opposition parties, and retain polarization this way, which has been advantageous for the Georgian Dream for years.

To overcome polarization, decreasing the threshold is not enough. Opposition parties, particularly small opposition parties, which in reality may gain significant electoral support in case of unity, must work on gaining electoral support in between the elections and try to bring their views closer to the public to gain their support. This is particularly important for newly established parties. Experience shows that even these small parties become the victims of discourse on polarization and do not have time or space to strengthen their party identities. This is why the number of undecided voters increases and public nihilism is best seen during the public attitudes survey between the elections. In order to end the polarization and establish a multi-party democracy, small parties can work on undecided voters and not on those with already determined political preferences. If the small parties use the same discourse of one of the two dominant parties deliberately or undeliberately, they will even lose the votes they had gained before and will only further deepen the polarization in the light of which decreasing the election threshold to 2% won't be enough to have any tangible effect.

The view of big and small parties on 2% election threshold

The majority of the political subjects that passed the lowered 1% threshold for the 2020 parliamentary elections support the 2% threshold for the parliamentary elections in 2024 (Table 1). Out of the nine such parties listed below, seven agree that the election threshold should be decreased to 2%. One considers that 3% threshold is enough, while for the ruling party the topic is still up for discussion.

In addition to these nine parties, leaders from Droa and Girchi – More Freedom as well as Gakharia – For Georgia were also interviewed. Representatives of these parties gained parliamentary mandates in 2021 elections, which some of them rejected. The founder of Droa was the former member of the party European Georgia, the founder of Girchi – More Freedom was the former leader of the party Girchi; While the founder of Gakharia – For Georgia was the former Prime Minister of Georgia from the ruling party - GD. One of the leaders of Droa views the decreased threshold with skepticism, unlike the Girchi – More Freedom leader says that the threshold should be lowered as much as possible. However, one of the leaders of Gakharia's party states that lowering the election threshold will support more pluralism but this will not be principally important for their party.

Table 1: Parties' view of 2% threshold on 2024 Parliamentary Elections

Political Party	Supporting 2% threshold	Against 2% threshold	Undecided	2020 Parliamentary Elections results
Georgian Dream Democratic Georgia			Party position is that 5% threshold ensures stability, while 2% threshold enables more pluralism. There is still time to discuss it. Party does not yet have a clear position. ⁱⁱⁱ	48.22% (928 004 vote) 60 of the mandates.
Bloc United National Movement - United Opposition Strength is in Unity	Not essential for the party, but will support it. ^{iv}			27.18% (523 127 votes) – 36 mandates
Bakradze, Ugulava, Bokeria - European Georgia - Movement for Freedom	Party supports lowering the threshold, however considers the discussions on threshold before holding snap elections as an “attempt to legitimize an illegitimate parliament”. However, specifically for this party, lowering the threshold is not among the most important issues. ^v			3.79% (72 986 votes) – 5 mandates
Lelo - Mamuka Khazaradze	There is a risk that no other parties, except for the two parties, will be able to pass the 5% threshold. A lower threshold creates opportunities for new alternatives. ^{vi}			3.15% (60 712 votes) – 4 mandates
Bloc Giorgi Vashadze - Strategy Aghmashenebeli	It is important that people with all kinds of political views have their representative in the Parliament. ^{vii}			3.15% (60 671 votes) – 4 mandates
Droa		In Georgia, where parties are not generally stable and		-

		there is big money involved, 2% is very low. Therefore, the party backs the 3-4% threshold and increasing party support before the elections. ^{viii}		
Davit Tarkhan-Mouravi, Irma Inashvili - Alliance of Patriots of Georgia		Party must be able to pass 3% threshold. (დემოკრატიული 2020).		3.14% (60 480 votes) – 4 mandates
Girchi	Party supports fully proportional and natural threshold (0.67%). Party must be allowed to have at least one member of the parliament. However, they agree on a 2% threshold per Charles Michel Agreement. ^{ix}			2.89% (55 598 votes) – 4 mandates
Girchi - More Freedom	In general, threshold must be natural. However, considering the current political realities, when it is practically impossible to agree on a natural threshold, the party supports lowering the threshold as much as possible. Smaller parties in the Parliament will help to end polarization. ^x			-
Aleko Elisashvili - Citizens	Lowering the threshold to 2% as opposed to having it at 5%, as it currently is according to law, is of utmost importance for the parties. (რადიო თავისუფლება 2021).			1.33% (25 508 votes) – 2 mandates
Shalva Natelashvili - Labour Party of Georgia	In the given situation, this is a mechanism enabling multi-party [system] and pluralism. Lower threshold weakens the high level of polarization in the country. ^{xi}			1.00% (19 314 vote) – 1 mandate

Gakharia – For Georgia	This will promote political pluralism and democracy in Georgia. However, it will not be essential for the party, as they hope to cross the 5% threshold. ^{xii}			
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Source: Data is gathered from written interviews with party leaders and based on the public statements of the party.

Supporters. The arguments of those supporting a lower threshold can be divided into two groups. One group sees a lower electoral threshold as a way to decrease polarization and an enabler of a multi-party system, while also encouraging the representation of diverse voters in the parliament. The second group supports the 2% threshold out of collegiality, however, does not see it as a principally important topic for their party or for improving general political environment.

Opponents. The arguments against the 2% threshold may also be divided into two groups. The first argument concerns obscure sources of funding and general instability of parties; the second argument states that if a party has the ambition of representing a portion of the public, it should be able to pass at least 3% threshold.

On the one hand, it is clear that by lowering the electoral threshold, more political subjects can enter the parliament and smaller parties will have to unite with other larger parties, especially when parties won't be able to form blocs and they will have to unite with other parties at the expense of giving up their identities. While previously voters decided in favor of one party because they did not like the other, by introducing the 2% threshold, voters will make a decision not only based on their dislike of one of the two parties, but because another alternative party better reflects their values and views. However, lowering the threshold to 2% has its downsides too. With a lower threshold, the number of parties wanting to participate in the elections may increase significantly, which may allow destructive forces to participate in the process at the expense of obscure funding. Therefore, lowering the threshold will not be enough. It will also be important to closely control the sources of funding and the extent to which their activities and discourses are compliant with the constitution and whether or not it threatens the sovereignty of the country. As an example, these parties may be Alt Info and a number of ultra-right parties that have close ties with Russia.

Conclusion and Recommendations

For the next two parliamentary elections, lowering the electoral threshold is clearly important for small parties, particularly given it will be impossible to create election blocs. While for the larger parties that do not have a problem passing the threshold, this decision will not be detrimental. However, considering the fact that deepening polarization is accompanied by

endless political crises, diverse parliamentary governance should likewise be important for the bigger parties. At this stage of democratization, Georgia is stuck between democracy and autocracy, which is normally characteristic of transitional, semi-consolidated democracies. However, the longer the polarization drags on, the country will experience more backsliding in terms of democratic development. If we consider the perspectives of the majority of political parties and constitutionalists, lowering the threshold during the next two parliamentary elections will bring more benefits than negative impacts. Yet it comes with challenges that may be balanced by comprehensive improvement of electoral legislation and a transparent election process. Lowering the threshold alone will not change the situation to enable multi-party parliamentary governance. For this to happen, it is crucial that parties start proactively communicating with voters, negotiating with other political parties and maintaining close ties with Georgia's western partners.

Recommendations for the ruling party:

- Approach the provision in the Charles Michel document with responsibility, including through the **approval of the 2% threshold** in the next two parliamentary elections, **reducing political polarization and maintaining a positive international image.**
- Take **responsibility to start a constructive dialogue with opponents and reduce negative discourse** used for gaining electoral support, which deepens polarization and decreases the quality of the country's democracy.
- **Monitor the effective implementation of the changes applied to the election code** with Western partners and civil society and ensure a **legal or political response** for every transgression, which will reduce the criticism of opposition parties, public mistrust and enable the **build-up of a consensus-based democracy** while creating space among parties for **thematic discussions.**

Recommendations for the largest opposition party, the United National Movement:

- Support renewal of parliamentary **discussions for the introduction of the 2% threshold** in order to **improve the political field and establish a competitive political environment.**
- For the next election, start a radical **renewal** of the party, reduce **negative discourse** towards the opponent and establish a **positive agenda** between the elections to create the **opportunity to unite the opposition.**

Recommendations for smaller opposition parties:

- In order to gain electoral support, smaller opposition parties should distance themselves from the **space of confrontation created by the two opposing poles**, highlight **party identity and values**, determine **party priorities** by close communication with voters and **formulate long-term action plans** that will help the population of Georgia make informed and comprehensive choices in the future.
- Closely **cooperate with opposition parties with the closest value base** and in case joint [opposition] efforts become inevitable in the 2024 elections, determine in advance who it would be **more profitable to cooperate with**, considering the attitudes of the voters.
- Focus on the **growing indicator/tendency of undecided voters** and identify the **reason behind this dynamic**; put special effort in **attaining the support of these voters** and mobilizing them between elections.

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ⁱ Constitutionalists, written interview, April 11 2022.

ⁱⁱ Constitutionalists, written interview, April 10 2022.

ⁱⁱⁱ Georgian Dream – Democratic Georgia, one of the leaders of the party, written interview, April 29, 2022.

^{iv} United National Movement, one of the leaders of the party, April 22 2022.

^v European Georgia, one of the leaders of the party, written interview, April 22 2022.

^{vi} Lelo for Georgia, one of the leaders of the party, April 12 2022.

^{vii} Strategy Aghmashenebeli, one of the leaders of the party, April 18 2022.

^{viii} Droa, one of the leaders of the party, April 17 2022.

^{ix} Girchi, one of the leaders of the party, April 22 2022.

^x Girchi – More Freedom, one of the leaders of the party, April 18 2022.

^{xi} Georgian Labour Party, one of the leaders of the party, April 21 2022.

^{xii} Gakharia – For Georgia, one of the leaders of the party, written interview, May 9 2022.



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This publication has been produced from the resources provided by the “Embassy of Switzerland in Georgia”. The opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the “Georgian Institute of Politics” and the “Embassy of Switzerland in Georgia”.

HOW TO QUOTE THIS DOCUMENT:

Salome Kandelaki, *“Low Election Threshold: the End of Bipolarity or a New Challenge?”*, Policy Brief No. 39, Georgian Institute of Politics, May 2022.

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13 Aleksandr Pushkin St, 0107 Tbilisi, Georgia

Tel: +995 599 99 02 12

Email: info@gip.ge

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www.gip.ge