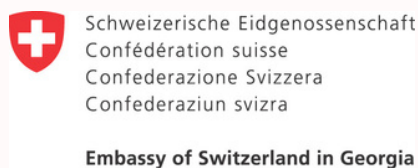


7TH EDITION OF THE ANNUAL DEMOCRACY CONFERENCE



#GEODEM 2022



INTRA-PARTY POLITICS, YOUTH POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND CHALLENGES FOR COALITION GOVERNANCE IN GEORGIA

May - June | 2022



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GEORGIAN INSTITUTE OF POLITICS



Conference Notes N3

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Summary

Since the parliamentary election in 2020, Georgia has been in a deep and protracted political crisis. In the long run this crisis damages Georgia's democratic development and its Euro-Atlantic future. While current geopolitical shifts create a window of opportunity for Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine to further their EU membership prospects, it is vital for Georgia to remain faithful to the principles of democratization and take steps towards depolarization.

Towards this end, political parties have a crucial role to play as they can help reduce polarization and by cooperating with one another, improve the political culture in the country. However, today, neither the ruling party nor opposition parties offer a positive agenda to constituencies. Instead of discussing important topics and presenting sound visions of the country's development, election campaigns are often focused on scandals and negative events, which have an adverse effect on the development and sustainability of the political culture. Radical polarization of the political field is also a factor significantly undermining the prospects of cooperation between the parties as it pushes smaller political parties to "choose either of the sides."

An important aspect to be taken into consideration is that public opinion polls show that despite political polarization, an absolute majority of the population supports the idea of coalition governance and believes that it is vitally important for further consolidation of Georgian democracy. This suggests that there is a huge mismatch between the ambitions of political parties and the desires of voters. Therefore, both the wider society and the political class must start thinking about ways of overcoming these challenges and restoring trust and links between political parties and Georgian society.

These issues were among the key topics discussed by the panels at the seventh annual Democracy Conference. The conference, with three thematic panels, was inaugurated by the Director of the Georgian Institute of Politics, Professor **Korneli Kakachia**. In his welcoming remarks, Professor **Kakachia** placed the emphasis on the need for political parties to effectively communicate among one another as well as with their constituencies, noting that new routes should be sought to this

end. The Ambassador of Switzerland in Georgia, Ms. **Heidi Grau**, also gave welcoming remarks and talked about Georgia's democratic agenda and the need for a meaningful political discussion. She expressed her concern about the destructive tone of political discussion in Georgia today, including verbal attacks on political opponents, and stressed the need for improvement. Describing the Swiss political system, she focused on efforts by the Swiss political class to build bridges in order to achieve success. She also talked about the role of the media and underlined the importance of the freedom of media and, at the same time, the necessity of delivering objective information to the population so as to enable people to make an informed choice in elections.

Panel 1 of the conference discussed the *readiness of Georgian political parties for coalition partnership*. Speakers at the panel were **Dr. Fernando Casal Bertoa** (University of Nottingham), **Giorgi Vashadze** (political party, Strategy Aghmashenebeli), and **Natia Mezvrishvili** (political party, For Georgia) while the discussion was moderated by **David Aprasidze**, Professor at Ilia State University and project manager at Konrad Adenauer Foundation. Panel 2 was dedicated to *interparty democracy and new political leaders*. Speakers at the panel were **David Berdzenishvili** (Republican Party), **Teona Zurabashvili** (Georgian Institute of Politics), **David Shervashidze** (International Republican Institute), and **Zaza Bibilashvili** (The Chavchavadze Center). The discussion was moderated by **Nino Gelashvili**, a journalist at Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. Panel 3 of the conference was dedicated to the presentation of an interparty manifesto - "*What Georgian voters demand: a message to Georgian political parties*" - which was drawn up by members of 10 political parties and representatives of civil society, facilitated by the Georgian Institute of Politics. The project and the methodology of drafting the interparty manifesto were introduced by policy analysts from the Georgian Institute of Politics, **Nino Samkharadze** and **Shota Kakabadze**. Speakers at the panel were **Goga Tchkadua**, a member of the party Girchi - More Freedom, **Elisabed Bregvadze**, a member of the party Strategy Aghmashenebeli, **Mikheil Tsverava**, a member of the party Gakharia for Georgia, and **Tamuna Manvelishvili**, a student at the International Black Sea University. Moderator of the third panel of the conference was **Felix Hett**, the director of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung South Caucasus Office.

Key takeaways from the #GEODEM2022 conference:

Panel 1: Are Georgian Political Parties Ready for Coalition Partnership?

- A positive correlation between a coalition government and economic development can often be observed in Europe. Consequently, a coalition government may also have a positive impact on the country's economy;
- Political parties lack clear-cut ideologies that would differentiate them from one another. Hence, there is a possibility of coalition partnership;
- A root cause of the problem in cooperation among political parties with different opinions is a perception of seeing each other as enemies, not opponents;
- Political parties come together only because they see a common enemy and try to defeat it. However, after coming to power they do not know what to do because they lack a constructive understanding of democracy;
- It is necessary to create policy-oriented parties that will set up their own think-tanks. Think-tanks will help political parties develop particular types of political programs;
- If the election threshold is decreased from 5% to 2%, the possibility of forming a coalition government will be more realistic for the 2024 parliamentary election;
- A coalition government is the only way to save Georgian democracy and weaken the authoritarian rule.

Panel 2: Interparty Democracy. Why Don't We Have New Leaders?

- A solution is for political parties with smaller electoral support to unite into one or two election alliances. Such parties should not compete but rather cooperate with one another;
- Tackling the problem of differences in party financing and uneven distribution of finances within parties is one of the necessary conditions facilitating the development of the democratic process within political parties;

- People demand not only new faces, but also new politicians, new substance and new views. Public opinion polls suggest that citizens will probably vote for a political party that will have many young nominees in the party list;
- Youth refuses to enter politics because they find it difficult to overcome negative stereotypes about being in politics or associated with political parties. However, as politics is ultimately made by people, youth must make efforts to find a political party that is close to their ideology, or create a new party themselves.

Panel 3: Development of Public Participation and Ways to Encourage it

- There is a demand among voters for cooperation-based interparty communication;
- Political parties must agree on key issues of national importance;
- Voters expect more meaningful, realistic, substantiated and stable platforms, messages and programs from political parties;
- A necessary basis for successful cooperation among political parties is the furtherance of internal democracy, decentralization and forging of identity by parties;
- Various specific reasons characteristic of the country and current radicalization of political environment make it extremely difficult for political parties to adequately respond to voters' demands.

Panel 1: Are Georgian Political Parties Ready for Coalition Partnership?

May 30, 2022

Moderator	Prof. David Aprasidze – Ilia State University, Konrad Adenauer Foundation
Speakers:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dr. Fernando Casal Bertoa – University of Nottingham • Giorgi Tsagareishvili – Georgian Dream – Democratic Georgia • Salome Samadashvili – Lelo for Georgia • Giorgi Vashadze – Strategy Aghmashenebeli • Natia Mezvrishvili – For Georgia

The panel focused on the following key questions:

- Why is it important for parties to understand the need for a coalition government for Georgia's political future? Do parties' political strategies contribute to this process?
- What internal and interparty changes are needed to bring about real change?
- To what extent will parties be able to fulfill the public's expectations for a coalition government?
- How can international experience and international actors help parties strengthen the political culture of coalition in Georgia?

Fernando Casal Bertoa of the University of Nottingham placed the results obtained through the analysis of Eastern European political systems in a broader context. According to him, setting up a coalition government is a normal practice in Europe and since October 2020 two-thirds of the governments in Europe have formed coalitions. However, as in Georgia, governments in Moldova, Ukraine and Armenia are single-party governments. He noted that Georgia has very little experience of forming coalitions, for two main reasons. One of the causes, in his opinion, was the lack of legitimacy of the coalition format following the United National Movement (UNM) government. But, in Casal Bertoa's view, a decisive factor here was the electoral system,

namely, a very high level of disproportionality. According to him, the Georgian electoral system was the second most disproportional system in Europe over the last 180 years. At the same time, he underlined that the constitutional amendments of late, namely those facilitating a gradual transfer to a purely parliamentary system and the introduction of proportional representation, were positive decisions. As he explained, the probability of forming coalitions was much higher in parliamentary systems than in presidential ones. However, an electoral system was essential in this regard and since Georgia has been moving to a proportional system, political parties must be prepared for potential coalition configurations. To give an objective picture, the speaker highlighted advantages and disadvantages of coalition governance. He named duration as one of disadvantages of coalition governance. But he also said that even in a single party system as in Georgia, the duration of the governments was not long, at least, there was no big tradition of that. In his opinion, one of advantages of coalition government was that, as V-Dem data showed, parties with coalition governments had a better quality of democracy than with single party systems. According to him, the analysis of various countries had also showed a positive correlation between a coalition government and economic development. Casal Bertoa drew attention to the will of people, in particular, he cited the results of NDI opinion polls which showed the majority of the country's population favoring a coalition government. He gave his opinion that since the political parties in Georgia were not very different ideologically, cooperation among parties would be achievable. He reminded the audience, including politicians attending the conference, that democracy was not a zero-sum game and that it was very important for political parties to cooperate and reach agreement on national policies. According to him, that was a necessity because, regardless of rivalry, members of various parties were citizens of one country and, all in all, the interests of the country should prevail.

Other speakers of the first panel of the Democracy Conference were leaders of various political parties. The first to take the floor was **Giorgi Vashadze**, the leader of Strategy Aghmashenebeli, who talked about the poor political culture. He particularly focused on poor cooperation among political parties. According to him, the political party, Strategy Aghmashenebeli, remained committed to the 19 April agreement and has a good past experience of honoring agreements. However, he criticized other parties for violating such agreements. According to Vashadze, the existing situation somewhat reflected the real attitudes of society. Agreeing with Dr. Bertoa that

it is possible to win by joining forces he, at the same time, explained that the cause of failure to unite lay in political parties with different opinions that see one another as enemies, not opponents. Although, in Dr. Bertoa's opinion, Georgian parties are ideologically somewhat similar, Vashadze argued that the incompatibility of political parties in terms of values hindered them from building value-based links with supporters of various parties under one format. He also said that after the conduct of election or victory in the election, political parties did not continue consolidation of their forces.

The second politician to speak at the conference was **Natia Mezvrishvili**, a leader of the political party Gakharia for Georgia. The main point of her speech concerned the necessity of forming a coalition as a means of preventing authoritarian rule. She recalled the period after the municipal election in 2021 as a good example of cooperation, when the ruling party was defeated in several municipalities and the opposition parties managed to reach agreement. From the challenges faced by Georgian democracy, Mezvrishvili picked out the three, in her view, most serious problems: the first concerns power sharing. According to her, all power was concentrated in the hands of a single political party. The second challenge for democracy was elections which, in her opinion, still involved illegal money, vote buying and in general, corrupt elements. The third main challenge, according to Mezvrishvili, was the lack of independence of the judiciary and the loyalty of judges to the ruling class. She named power sharing, strong parliamentary governance, and consensus-based decision-making as solutions to these problems. However, as she said, talks about unity and coalition would be futile unless it was possible to reach compromises.

Once the panelists finished their speeches, a few comments were made and questions asked by the audience. Giorgi Kandelaki, one of the leaders of political party European Georgia, was the first to make a comment; he asked to specify the definition of coalition. He said that a coalition government, in its classical sense, never existed in Georgia. According to him, a coalition, in its classical sense, was when several political subjects stood for an election independently and, after the election, they formed a government proportionally to the votes each of them mustered. What happens today, he said, is a deviation from a democratic agenda. He cited the Namokhvani case as a glaring example of that, when several political parties started playing with ethno-nationalist and religious topics; he also recalled the issue of banks and a popular phrase that "banks suck

people's blood," which, in his understanding, are the indications of serious erosion taking place. He raised rhetoric questions, in particular as to whether the Georgian Dream crossed the line of democracy and whether it behaved as a soft satellite of Russia. The second point made by the politician concerned the achievement of national agreement, a topic also touched upon by Dr. Bertoa. According to Giorgi Kandelaki, when a party that holds nothing begs for national agreement another party that holds power and pursues the aim of obliterating everyone, the former, by so doing, provides opportunities to the latter. In his assertion, if this regime is oriented on exploiting weakness, a national agreement will be impossible to achieve. At the end of his comment, Kandelaki touched upon polarization and noted that the term "polarization" must be abandoned once and for all. According to him, polarization implied a certain degree of parity which did not exist in Georgia because what we dealt with now is state capture, a very dangerous trajectory for the country.

In a comment from another participant, lack of awareness among the political elite in terms of voter mobilization was named as the key problem of the political crisis. He supported his statement by recalling that during every election a certain number of people emerged from somewhere to side with the Georgian Dream - they were not mobilized by force but mobilized themselves. According to him, the reason for that was the wrong attitude of political parties towards population and, unless it changed, Georgia would ultimately get Namokhvani-type movements which will include nationalistic-populist groups and thus become confrontational by nature.

A question was also raised about the degree of willingness in the political spectrum to set up a coalition. This question was added to another relevant question from the moderator of the first panel, Davit Aprasidze, about the degree of willingness of the population to really envisage a coalition. Answering the questions, Giorgi Vashadze said that he was not sure about the degree of willingness of the population to see a coalition, adding that it depended on how the population understood the meaning of coalition. Consequently, he believed that this question needed to be further specified in quantitative surveys. According to Vashadze, the country lacked experience in forming post-election coalitions, except for the cooperation after the last municipal elections. However, even that coalition had problems because it had to cooperate with the ruling team and

common national policies often do not make it on to the agenda. According to Vashadze, the opposition must win over the Georgian Dream's pro-Western voters. Partially agreeing with what Vashadze said, Natia Mezvrishvili noted that after the municipal election crises arose in Batumi and Senaki municipal councils and self-governance did not actually work there. She expressed regret that the opposition parties had good initiatives of a social nature, such as the opening of healthcare stations and other similar issues of local importance, but deep polarization completely overshadowed those initiatives and obscured what the opposition parties had been working on at local level.

Questions during the second question-and-answer round largely concerned the role of the election system in facilitating a coalition government as well as the role of media and international actors; in particular, whether mistakes had been made by the media and whether there would have been a greater opportunity of forming coalitions had pro-opposition TV channels created a less hostile environment. Also, a question was raised about the deficit of consensus, the poor culture and problems in interparty communication.

The problem in direct communication with people was also emphasized by one of the participants. Dr. Fernando Casal Bertoa talked about a problem in forming a coalition, in particular, as to why political parties, having come to power as a bloc then dissolve. He also said that in a number of countries, political parties came to power already as a bloc or as a coalition formed before the elections rather than forming a coalition after the election. He named the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Estonia, Croatia among such countries to illustrate that it was possible to form a coalition before an election and continue to work within that format after the election. However, to a question as to why this tactic fails to work in Georgia and why coalitions created by political parties before an election dissolve thereafter, he replied that such parties come together to defeat a common enemy, but when they come into government, they do not know what to do because they do not have a constructive understanding of democracy. Therefore, Dr. Bertoa believes, it is necessary to create policy-oriented political parties which will have their own think tanks that will develop policies - be it social, economic, foreign or other. As for international actors, he thought that they could help improve the legislation, transparency of institutional decision-making process, parliamentary oversight, party regulations, etc. He finished his

response by saying that key for political parties was to act in accordance with what was best and important for the country, not necessarily for their own party.

According to Giorgi Vashadze, if the election threshold was decreased from 5% to 2% for the next parliamentary election, the formation of a coalition government would be a more realistic possibility. But it still depended on which political parties would form a coalition. According to him, in the past, forming a bloc with the UNM was for the smaller political parties tantamount to losing votes, in which case voters preferred to cast their ballots for the UNM which, compared to other opposition parties, had a greater chance of winning. However, now, when blocs cannot be set up, a coalition should be a subject of very serious discussions because there may be incompatibility of values among political parties. With regard to cooperation with international actors, he said that Strategy Aghmashenebeli had become a member of Alde Party, a family of European political parties, which would help them learn about international experience and practices and use this to improve internal party democracy and attract new members.

In Natia Mezvrishvili's opinion, a way out of the crisis was to facilitate parliamentary oversight until the 2024 election and also to work on issues such as the conduct of elections in a free environment; a proper rule of manning election commissions, and the application of international and local levers in the area of the judiciary. In her view, it was possible to rally around national values if political parties united for the independence of the courts to further the cause of Georgia being granted candidate status, and similar issues of national importance. She said that the engagement of youth in the political processes was one of the key priorities of the party and they worked with international partners to increase the engagement of young people. She criticized the media for not providing the opportunity for substantial discussions of thematic issues. However, she also admitted that they were to be blamed, too, if they had failed to present themselves in a better light and show what they rallied around. Finally, she stressed - and members of other parties agreed - that a coalition was the only way to save democracy and undermine authoritarian rule.

Panel 2: Internal Party Democracy. Why Don't We Have New Leaders?

May 30, 2022

Moderator:	Moderator: Nino Gelashvili – Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty
Speakers:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • David Berdzenishvili – Republican Party • Teona Zurabashvili – Georgian Institute of Politics • Zaza Bibilashvili – The Chavchavadze Center • David Shervashidze – International Republican Institute

The panel focused on the following key questions:

- Why do young/new leaders not want to participate in Georgian politics?
- What opportunities do new young leaders have to engage in political parties?
- What strategies do political parties have to attract new leaders?
- What could be the role of the international community to promote youth engagement with Georgian politics?
- What could we learn from international practices/norms?

The first speaker in the second panel at the Conference was a leader of the Republican Party, **David Berdzenishvili**, who shared his vision with the audience about the prospects of evolution of the political elite in the country and cooperation among political parties. As he noted, the Georgian political class, the proto-political elite, includes few individuals from the times of the national movement, who now play an insignificant role in the politics. According to Berdzenishvili, the majority of those leaders have long exited politics. However, the parties that remained in Georgian politics and could still influence it do so owing to several factors: change of generation, loyalty to values, or declaring unpopular positions. In the panelist's view, the proto-political elite included the UNM and some members of its bloc-mates, the Republican Party and the Conservative Party, who remained in politics. A large segment of civil activists coming from the Rose Revolution also remained in the proto-political elite; however, in his assessment, the status of these people was deteriorating rapidly in the eyes of society but that of new faces of the UNM, who have recently appeared, less so. According to Berdzenishvili, the Georgian Dream

is not a political party, it was a government bureaucracy that simply replaced its predecessor; it did not belong in that formal club of the proto-political elite and many from that party would share the fate of Aslan Abashidze and his political party. Berdzenishvili believed that bipolarity was a prerequisite for inevitable success of the government while, with the war fought in Ukraine and the defeat of Russia, the unification of political parties with smaller support in one or two election alliances was a solution. He believed that instead of competing, political parties must cooperate with one another. The panelist particularly emphasized the importance of those voters who did not perceive themselves as supporters of either the UNM or the Georgian Dream. In David Berdzenishvili's view, such voters played an important role in enabling parties with smaller electoral support to clear the threshold.

The next panelist, **Teona Zurabashvili**, presented an analysis of what determined the promotion of youth within political parties and their access to party policy formulation, which was based on interviews with top ten candidates on proportional lists for the 2021 municipal election. According to Teona Zurabashvili, the analysis revealed a certain trend of attracting young leaders to political parties or promoting them within parties. However, that trend may be explained by peculiarities in the development of political parties; for example, a breakaway party or a newly-established party may have a problem with human resources that could rationally be a reason for selecting young leaders for party lists. Zurabashvili named three factors by which political parties differed in terms of promotion of young leader and their access to formulation of party policies:

1. Financial resources – political parties that financially depended on large donors, mainly view young members as activists, compared to those parties whose financial state depends on fundraising;
2. Ideology – financial resources influence a degree of ideologization of a political party. Consequently, rich political parties promoted those young members who were distinguished for their party activism. In less affluent parties, ideological compliance was a decisive factor in promotion within the party;
3. Differences between hierarchical and decentralized parties - according to the panelist, the youth wings of political parties were, in general, seen as a source of human resources and a means of renewal of parties. However, in those Georgian political parties that have youth wings, these young people were mainly used for party activism and tasks were communicated to them top-down, which impeded career advancement of youth within parties. Zurabashvili emphasized the need for tackling the problem

of differences in financing among political parties and the uneven distribution of finances within parties in order to promote intraparty democracy.

The third panelist, **Zaza Bibilashvili**, named conflicts of interest in the political elite as the key cause of the lack of internal democracy within political parties. According to him, Georgian political parties lacked an institutional mechanism to bring ideologies to the forefront; they also lacked a mechanism of promotion, such as primaries and an institute of debates that enabled party supporters to choose who would be a face of their party. Instead, he thinks, promotion within parties mainly depended on personal acquaintance with party leaders and the ability of young people to gain leaders' sympathy. According to him, this is one of the reasons that youth does not enter politics. In Zaza Bibilashvili's view, for internal democratic processes to get going within political parties it was necessary to persuade existing leaders that it was in their interest to be replaced by someone else. However, this was not the case because young party members had either to put up with the conjuncture in the party as a given that cannot be changed or lose motivation of sacrificing their own resources. Bibilashvili named the factors that, in his view, were important for intraparty democracy: 1. Involvement - involvement of members in party management; primaries – to compile lists and select candidates; 2. Transparency – the methods and principles of spending monies; 3. Accountability – leadership must be held accountable for unsuccessful election campaigns and should think about the possibilities that they need to be replaced.

A representative of the International Republican Institute (IRI), **David Shervashidze**, talked about what voters want, based on the results of surveys. According to him, people want to see not only new faces, but new politicians, new substance and opinions. As many as 93% of citizens surveyed (agree and partially agree) were in favor of seeing young people in political parties. According to the speaker, society showed a readiness (which grows from year to year) and even demanded that there should be more young people involved in politics than now. This demand is influenced by the fact that the existing class fails to advance and the political process has stalled. Shervashidze noted that IRI public opinion polls aimed at enabling political parties to correctly understand existing attitudes and their causes and political parties should plan their strategies accordingly. In his opinion, it was likely that citizens would vote for those political parties that

had many young people in their electoral lists. Shervashidze also touched upon the challenges of involving youth in political parties and offered a solution to these problems. His thought that the main problem was that youth found it difficult to overcome negative stereotypes about being in politics or associated with political parties. However, he added, as politics was ultimately made by people, youth must make the effort to find a political party that is close to their ideology or create a new party themselves.

The reports of the panelists were followed by comments and questions from the audience. An attendee commented that the absence of intraparty democracy could be, to some extent, caused by the absence of decentralization and of local politics in the country, which was killing the bottom-up development of the political process. A question was asked from the audience whether any research or data was available that showed trends in youth engagement in politics or political parties in other countries. Answering this question, Teona Zurabashvili said that a decline in young people's engagement in political parties was observed even in consolidated democracies which could be explained, inter alia, by the advancement of technologies which stripped political parties of their traditional role of educating citizens or socializing with them. However, in Zurabashvili's view, the decline in the willingness of youth to join political parties affected political agenda more negatively in Georgia than in consolidated democracies, because party democracy did not exist and renewal of parties did not take place. Another question from the audience concerned an allegation that political parties had stolen the agenda of the movement "Shame" and who should be held responsible for preventing such people from contributing to political processes. The speaker, Davit Shervashidze, disagreed with the allegation that political parties had been misappropriating the vigor of youth. In his opinion, changes could not happen by street demonstrations alone, without political parties and without voting for them; the country needed political parties that would present ideas oriented on changes. Shervashidze also answered a question concerning a degree of interest displayed by the media to cover the issue of youth engagement in political parties. According to Shervashidze, it was a huge problem that media and its viewers were focused on a totally different content and the aforementioned problem was often not covered adequately. In his opinion, political parties must demand the production of youth talk-shows. A comment from the audience concerned challenges that young people who entered politics might face. According to the commentator, politics remained a

sphere of repressions and a person who entered politics could be denied salaried employment or his/her family members may come under threat. Furthermore, politics did not look attractive because there has been talk of election codes, court reform, etc., for the last 20 years, but it was not possible to see any result and that gives rise to nihilism. Yet the most serious among the problems was the authoritarian government that kills every process. At the end of the question-and-answer session, Zaza Bibilashvili gave a summarizing comment. He believed that the involvement of youth in political parties did not automatically mean that the process would improve and that change in the system was the solution. It was necessary to introduce primaries in Georgia and give an opportunity to young people to take part in debates. By so doing, Georgia would gradually adopt a rule of party/leader circulation, much like it is practiced in Western countries.

Panel 3: Development of Public Participation and Ways to Encourage it

May 30, 2022

Moderator:	Felix Hett , Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung
Speakers:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Goga Tchkadua – Girchi - More Freedom • Elisabed Bregvadze – Strategy Aghmashenebeli • Mikheil Tsverava – Gakharia For Georgia • Tamuna Manvelishvili – International Black Sea University

The panel focused on the following key questions:

- What do citizens expect from political parties? What steps can political parties take to encourage more public engagement?
- In what areas could parties cooperate regardless of their ideological/political differences?
- What is the role of civil society actors to promote the public in everyday politics?

An interparty manifesto *“What Do Georgian Voters Expect: A Message for Georgian Political Parties”*, which was drawn up by members of 10 political parties and representatives of civil society and facilitated by the Georgian Institute of Politics, was presented at the conference. Policy analysts from the Georgian Institute of Politics, **Nino Samkharadze** and **Shota Kakabadze**, talked about the project and the methodology of drafting the interparty manifesto.

The first panelist, **Goga Chkadua** of the political party Girchi – More Freedom, discussed two findings of the study, which reflected the expectations of society towards political parties: achieving a broad consensus on national issues within parties and among parties, and strengthening the accountability of parties to population. To respond to these expectations, the speaker proposed strategies which political parties may use in order to plan activities during periods between elections and to establish closer links with constituencies. Those strategies include focusing on those issues that have a higher degree of potential to be agreed among political parties, discussing concrete red lines, devising particular action plans and periodically

reporting on the progress in the implementation to constituencies, improving financial transparency, outlining a strategy for accountability of party leaders, etc.

The second panelist, **Elisabed Bregvadze** of the political party Strategy Aghmashebeli talked about voter expectations for developing principles of interparty cooperation, forging party identities and strengthening the focus on programmatic issues. Among strategies proposed for political parties, the speaker placed emphasis on reconsidering a zero-sum-game approach to politics by political parties, honoring international recommendations, initiating multiparty formats, etc. Measures needed to reach intraparty agreements were also suggested, such as regular and broad internal discussions, analysis- and evidence-based actions, stronger focus on ideologies, improvement of programs by making them more specific and presenting them in a language that was comprehensible and acceptable for constituencies, etc.

The next speaker, **Mikheil Tsverava**, a member of Gakharia for Georgia party, underlined voter expectations for strengthening intraparty democracy, undertaking institutional decentralization and working on the political awareness of voters. To respond to these expectations, the speaker proposed strategies such as distribution of management functions among leaders by amending a relevant statute, making a principle of compiling election list more democratic, adjusting international experience to Georgian reality. At the same time, political parties should strengthen regional representations by granting them a higher degree of independence and a greater freedom of action; also, political parties should accelerate their work in the area of production, translation and circulation of political content – texts, films, podcasts, etc., as well as the attraction of voters to various voter education formats – schools, banks, discussions and debates.

The final part of the manifesto was presented by **Tamuna Manvelishvili**, a student at the International Black Sea University, who summed up expectations identified in the document for communication by political parties with constituencies and the promotion of minority issues. In her opinion, to respond to these two voter expectations, political parties, in the light of resources available to them, must develop independent strategies of communication during the periods between elections, especially in the regions where political communication is particularly scarce. At the same time, political parties needed to apply the Internet in a more proper, intensive and

creative manner. They also needed to set up common platforms for talks about various minorities in order to understand their needs and put these on party agendas. The speaker also underlined the importance of work on interparty manifesto-like projects and products for the establishment of a healthy political culture in Georgia.

After the reports the moderator, **Felix Hett**, opened the panel for discussion. He identified decentralization and sharing of international experience by political parties as two key issues. However, he noted that it was paradoxical to see such a high voter demand for depolarization when identities of political parties were not clear-cut and parties looked similar. The reports were followed by comments of attendees from political parties, in which they assessed the substance as well as importance of the manifesto for parties, and at the same time identified the difficulties in integrating such proposals into action strategies by political parties, in particular opposition parties.

According to a member of the Labor Party, **Mikheil Kumsishvili**, the document presented by the panel contained significant findings and was a good guidebook for political parties. However, he doubted that it was possible to take important steps for the improvement of political systems. This skepticism stemmed from the existing model of stiff vertical governance which was not comfortable for political parties to change, inter alia, because the parties lacked sufficient human and financial resources, while additional measures always require money. According to Kumsishvili, political awareness has been gradually formed in accordance with Western values and shortcomings of the system are understood accordingly. However, overcoming those shortcomings requires a greater decision-making possibility within political parties as well as within the political spectrum, which brought additional difficulties. Mikheil Kumsishvili also recalled his personal experience of running for the Tbilisi mayorship, saying that a high demand for young faces alone, as shown by public opinion surveys, was not sufficient to achieve success. Although the Labor Party nominated young candidates in nine out of ten districts, without access to greater resources they found it difficult to convince people of the reliability of the party. Consequently, nihilism increased and young people exited politics for good. Hence, fundraising measures, including inside the country, would be beneficial in this regard. When talking about

Western standards, the involvement of business was necessary, but this process was distorted in Georgia as the business was controlled by one political party.

The leader of Girchi – More Freedom, **Zurab Japaridze**, focused on problematic factors in the document presented at the conference, which, in his view, would not work for the Georgian parties. Some of the issues were less problematic for his party, for example, the internal democracy, but resources for improvement should always be available. The reality, however, was that at the end of the day a large segment of voters in Georgia took decisions that were not in accordance with the principles presented in the document. A program, vision, etc. could be important, but what citizens actually choose was a separate issue. According to Japaridze, the factor of the leader is important in Georgia. At the same time, no matter how often a particular political force or group of people changed their minds, voters continued to depend on one and the same force. Another factor, in his view, was that, regardless of how they responded to survey questions, voters choose those political subjects which they perceived as powerful. Yet another problem was that, for example, although the political spectrum reached and signed some agreements in which many parties participated, in reality those parties used that for PR purposes rather than meaningful discussions. Zurab Japaridze believed that the main aim of youth must not be to find their way into the political spectrum but to fight broader barriers that impede their engagement, for example, age limits, etc. At the same time, party financing must not become a political business, in other words, granting guaranteed financing to political parties after they obtain a certain status. Japaridze gave an example of his political party whose financing depended on supporters and hence, the party leadership was motivated to be constantly active.

Pikria Chikhradze of the political party Lelo also made a comment, saying that many topics mentioned at the conference were discussed within parties, including within Lelo, on a daily basis. In Ms. Chikhradze's view, a shortcoming of such surveys was that respondents answered that they favored parties with good programs, measured leaders, etc. However, the reality shows that society is also oriented on power as well as leaders. This was some kind of voter pragmatism - to invest in the force that has the ability to change something. Chikhradze recalled the experience of 2012 when, after Bidzina Ivanishvili stepped onto the political scene, "those in-between disappeared". This was because the force holding powerful political levers could be opposed only

by a force that also had much power and corresponding resources to enable it to seize authority. In Chikhradze's assessment, this scheme of "sweeping away everyone in-between" has been pursued by the Georgian Dream to date and only nationals [UNM supporters] should remain on the political arena and anyone else who was different should also be regarded as a national. In such a setting it was difficult to talk about the issues that were presented in the study. The commentator, however, agreed that political parties need self-identification "even if only 10 people read their programs." According to Chikhradze, regardless of how much a political spectrum supports agreement on fundamental issues, we were faced with a force that openly opposed the European choice which is enshrined in the constitution of the country. In such a state of affairs, general agreements lose force. Internal party processes, the existing situation and oligarchic rule represented a serious problem and obstacle to Georgia. According to her, even today the government continues to blame the political opposition for hindering this process, while the polarization within the opposition and media creates a reality in which a substantial segment of voters very much believe in those bad tales.

In her comment, **Teona Chalidze** of Strategy Aghmashenebeli expressed regret that youth involvement was rarely emphasized from a gender perspective; she said that it was important to raise the issue of how difficult it was for young women to engage in political activity. She also offered a recommendation: she cited an ISFED survey which showed that 40% of voters believed that it was possible to find out who they voted for in a voting booth. When even a single vote may be decisive in elections, such perception affects the choice that citizens made in a voting booth.

After the comments of the invitees from political parties, the wider audience engaged in discussions. From the comments of attendees the view was that when such studies were presented to political parties they always say that they know better what people want. However, even when voters may not fully understand the meaning of a "coalition," they demanded the substance of a coalition. Therefore, this demand truly existed in society. A comment was also made about the necessity to build the civil awareness of voters, at least to make them capable of adequately protesting about various problematic issues. A good example of that was the failure related to the proportional system, which was met with such a weak protest on the part of society

that it became apparent that when people cannot understand a problem, their response is not adequate. From the discussion these following suggestions and opinions were outlined: it would be beneficial if such documents were more broadly publicized because the population needed to learn about political issues in a language that they understand and to get information from local sources; it was a mistake by political parties to talk only with their supporters; sometimes political parties fail to see nuances while civil society captures and highlights those nuances in a better way, and vice versa, civil society learns much from parties too.

The moderator, Felix Hett, closed the discussion and the panel by saying that education and awareness was an issue that always arises wherever political debates took place. According to him, the situation was objectively difficult in Georgia as well as outside it. However, at the end of the day, things must be done and aims achieved by political parties. From the document presented at the conference, Felix Hett singled out the issue of intraparty democracy as a very important aspect that should facilitate the formation of true politicians in Georgia, which implied the development of strategies on how a party forms its ideas, how it wins people over, how it builds coalition, etc.

