



## CHALLENGES FACED BY WOMEN VOTERS AND POLITICIANS: HOW DO POLITICAL PARTIES RESPOND TO THEIR EXPECTATIONS?



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This interparty manifesto was created as part of the project “Strengthening Sustainable Political Culture Among Georgian Political Parties,” supported by the Embassy of Switzerland in Georgia and aimed at fostering a value-based political culture. In this project, the Georgian Institute of Politics (GIP) worked with women politicians from various political parties and civil society representatives to raise their awareness of consensus-based politics and strengthen their skills to communicate effectively with voters. The project also aims to support them in identifying political issues that reflect the needs of voters. The purpose of the action is to stimulate intra-party discussions as well as interparty cooperation on strategically important policy issues. The interparty manifesto developed within the framework of the project offers response strategies for political parties to plan effective communication with women voters, especially in the periods between elections, in order to correctly identify and respond effectively to their expectations and needs.

Founded in early 2011, the Georgian Institute of Politics (GIP) is a non-partisan, research and analytical organisation. GIP strives to strengthen the organisational backbone of democratic institutions and promote good governance and democratic development through policy research and advocacy in Georgia. The organisation aims to become a leading research and policy innovation center in Georgia and the Black Sea region and to contribute to the development of regional cooperation and the achievement of regional stability. Since December 2013, GIP has been a member of the OSCE Network of Think Tanks and Academic Institutions, as well as a member of the Network of Think Tanks on the EU’s Eastern Partnership launched in September 2020 with the support of the European Commission.

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## FOREWORD

The interparty manifesto, “Bridging the Needs of Women Voters and Women Politicians,” was developed within the framework of the project “Strengthening Sustainable Political Culture Among Georgian Political Parties”. With the support of the Embassy of Switzerland in Georgia, the Georgian Institute of Politics (GIP) facilitated the joint work of seven political parties and representatives of Georgian civil society. The document was developed on the basis of the results of fieldwork conducted in Georgia’s regions by women politicians. Based on small group discussions among project participants and subsequent general discussions during a two-day working meeting, the present interparty manifesto was drafted. The document includes key findings by women politicians from different political parties and civil society representatives on what female voters’ expectations of political parties are, and what challenges and needs female politicians face in Georgia. For each finding, project participants developed possible response strategies for the political parties themselves.

We hope that the precedent of joint work on the inter-party manifesto, as well as meaningful cooperation between political parties, will contribute to the formation of a consensus-based political culture in Georgia, which is one of the main goals of this project. The goal of the document resulting from the project is to offer political parties a strategy of action that will help them properly plan their activities in the periods between elections, one which will better resonate with the interests and needs of Georgian voters. Important for achieving this end is that the fieldwork was conducted by women politicians from different parties in cooperation with civil society representatives, which makes the key findings and action plan formulated in the manifesto convincing for the political parties themselves. In addition, the manifesto reflects, without modification, the results of direct communications with voters and joint working group discussions/expectations, and mechanisms for responding to them.

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## INTRODUCTION

Political parties play a crucial role in relatively young democracies such as Georgia, where the tradition of organized public participation in political life is underdeveloped. The proper functioning of political parties in the process of democratisation ensures the development and strengthening of representative democracy.<sup>1</sup> As anti-establishment and populist political groups have become increasingly popular in recent years, it is the strengthening of traditional political parties that can deal with this threat to liberal democracies.<sup>2</sup> Increased political participation and the active engagement of different groups of voters in political processes are also of crucial importance for the formation of a country's stable political system.

In the case of Georgia, it is significant that the interests of women voters are often not adequately taken into account by political parties and the political process in general, even though women make up 52% of the electorate (Zurabashvili 2023). In addition, women's political participation in Georgia remains a serious problem, which in turn affects women politicians and their activities. Although some progress has been achieved over the past few years, women are still under-represented in political decision-making. This lack of representation somewhat limits the ability of women politicians to effectively advocate for gender equality and address women's specific needs and concerns. The importance of gender equality is emphasised in the European Commission's 12 recommendations for Georgia (European Commission, 2022). By supporting women's political participation, Georgia can create a more inclusive and gender-balanced political landscape, allowing women politicians to have a stronger voice and influence on political and decision-making processes. For its part, this can lead to more equitable and accountable governance that takes into account the needs and aspirations of all citizens, regardless of their gender.

It is the responsibility of political parties to represent the needs and interests of different societal groups. They should ensure that issues of public concern are raised and voiced. However, in the last few years, Georgia's political life has entered into a deep and prolonged crisis, which has become particularly apparent since the 2020 parliamentary election, and with the approaching election of 2024, it is deepening even more. This makes cooperation between political parties more difficult. The main political actors perceive politics as a zero-sum game in which the winner takes all. This state of affairs is an obstacle to the formation of a sustainable political culture in Georgia, as the institutionalisation of the entire party system rather than a particular political party is necessary to revitalise democratic processes.<sup>3</sup> In the context of a protracted political crisis, the needs and concerns of significant interest groups in society, including women, are further diluted, and as a rule, they remain outside politics.

In response to this challenge, political parties have a decisive role to play in shaping and strengthening a sustainable political culture in the country. Both the ruling and opposition parties must offer voters meaningful debate and a positive political agenda, thus helping to reduce extreme polarisation and civilise cooperation between the political actors. Furthermore, given that the bigger half of Georgian society is female, political parties are obliged to reflect as much as possible in their programs and policies, including the expectations, needs, and interests of women, especially rural women, as well as vulnerable women.

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

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

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

The purpose of this manifesto is to familiarise readers with Georgian female voters' expectations of political parties and to advise parties on possible strategies to bridge the interests of society and the political actors. The second part of the manifesto also emphasises the needs of women politicians and the challenges they face in the Georgian political context.

In order to assess the needs of female voters and what they expect from political parties, working groups composed of women politicians and civil society representatives established within the project carried out 14 field trips to different regions of Georgia. The study covered 10 municipalities and two large cities (Tbilisi and Rustavi) in both eastern and western Georgia. Focus group discussions and in-depth interviews with female voters of political parties were conducted in these regions on the condition of complete anonymity. As a result, 11 expectations of political parties were identified. The paper also used desk research to further analyze the challenges for women's political participation identified during the fieldworks. For each expectation, possible response strategies were proposed for the political parties.

# EXPECTATIONS OF FEMALE VOTERS

## EXPECTATION 1:

### Political advocacy for women's rights by political parties

One of the expectations named by female voters during the fieldworks was political advocacy for women's rights by political parties. Women's rights, which are often linked to gender-related problems, is a particularly important issue for female voters (Muskhelishvili 2020). Accordingly, one of their main expectations of political parties is to be active in this direction. Acute problems, such as domestic violence against women, stereotypical roles in employment, the pay gap, etc., require active political engagement and advocacy by political parties. However, till now women's specific problems have, as a rule, not been prioritised in party platforms (HB 2020). To this end, the following needs to be done:

- 
- Strengthen women's organisations within political parties so that women can more competently and sustainably ensure that existing problems in terms of women's rights are identified and advocated;
- 
- Allow women's organisations to determine their own budgets and have the freedom to spend them, thus giving them more opportunities for fundamental research and advocacy of the acute issues;
- 
- Introduce and/or strengthen women's issues in party programs where these are lacking;
- 
- Develop a joint action plan between the civil sector and political parties with the aim of women's political empowerment.
-

## EXPECTATION 2:

### Security concerns and insecurity among women voters and politicians

Security-related concerns have been among the most-named challenges mentioned by women voters during the field works. According to public opinion polls, women in Georgia feel more insecure than men (Caucasus Barometer 2022). Among the factors contributing to feelings of insecurity, a significant proportion of women in Georgia cite migration of Russian citizens, poor quality health care, emigration of Georgian citizens, high prices for medication, incidents of violence, political instability in Georgia, unemployment, and poverty (Zurabashvili 2023). Domestic violence against women, especially hate speech, are the problems that pose serious security challenges to women. Women voters are more vulnerable to blackmail and political manipulation. Furthermore, women politicians are often the targets of such discrimination, and therefore they cannot adequately defend the security of female voters or promote these issues from a high political platform. To adequately respond to these expectations, political parties need to take the following steps:

- 
- Advocate a tougher legislative response to violence against women;
- 
- Work on the improvement of mechanisms for the prevention of and protection against domestic violence and integrate these issues into the rhetoric and platforms of political parties;
- 
- Advocate that training and retraining programs be introduced for law enforcement officers and social workers;
- 
- Submit initiatives to various local government or civil society organisations on raising awareness from a young age about the identification and prevention of violence;
- 
- Initiate and create a platform that will coordinate the monitoring and recording of hate speech;
- 
- Establish regional centers of non-formal education for female voters to conduct regular information campaigns on their rights.
-

### EXPECTATION 3:

### Increased accessibility of health and social services for rural women

The results of segmental fieldwork carried out by women politicians showed that the accessibility of health care and social services is especially important for rural women. The absence of these issues in party programs and public debates is regarded as a serious problem by female voters, as they do not see evidence that political parties understand these problems or represent their needs. Consequently, there is also no specific party vision for how to address these problems. Therefore, in order for political parties to fully fulfill these expectations, the following steps need to be taken:

- 
- Political party leaders at regional level should intensify their activities in communicating with voters on social issues as well as engaging with central party offices;
- 
- Political parties should study the needs of the regions and prepare internal reports;
- 
- Parties should create and monitor an accurate, reliable, and regularly updated database of local population's needs;
- 
- Create appropriate working groups and party political strategies, reflecting the needs of rural women voters;
- 
- Develop appropriate visions that take into account fairness, equal access standards, and uniformity of service provision;
- 
- Information on social services available in a particular municipality and effective access to them should be continually provided to the population.
-

## EXPECTATION 4:

### Economic empowerment of women

It is impossible to raise issues of women voters' empowerment without securing their economic empowerment. The expectations of this voter segment are largely influenced by political parties' provisions of relevant visions, strategies for women's economic empowerment, substantial interparty debates on these issues, and direct communication with female voters. As the parliamentary thematic inquiry on The Accessibility to Financial Resources for Women and Girls says, women in Georgia are facing challenges such as their intensive enagement in non-observed economy (such as informal street trade), salary gaps based on gender, women's absence on the heading positions in the different organizations (Parliament of Georgia 2022). Political analyses, as a rule, prove that economic issues are of higher priority for women than for men in Georgia (Zurabashvili 2023). Women's economic empowerment is an opportunity for women to participate in the economic growth of the country and, at the same time, benefit from it (Diakonidze 2018). Consequently, political parties should be interested in gaining reliable and stable support by advocating for the economic empowerment of women voters. To meet the expectations of female voters, political parties should take the following steps:

- 
- Develop various programs at local (municipal, regional) level for meaningful education, such as in languages, computer literacy, and region-specific sectoral programs;
- 
- Use all possible means to increase interest in, support for, and encouragement of women's initiatives in small and medium businesses;
- 
- Advocate for the development of child-care infrastructure to support employed mothers;
- 
- Work for the economic empowerment of women engaged in politics and party activities;
- 
- Advocate and monitor compliance with the Labour Code.
-

## EXPECTATION 5:

### Mitigating feelings of exclusion among vulnerable groups of women

Special attention should be paid to the integration of vulnerable groups of women which was mentioned by women voters during the field works. Such women could be members of ethnic, religious, cultural, or other minorities, persons with disabilities, or parents of persons with disabilities, etc. Women within this segment embody a dual vulnerability, both as women and as members of various minorities. Accordingly, they have particular reasons to expect political parties to show interest in their problems, to study them, to seek solutions, to share international experience, and to integrate relevant policies into their agenda. To fulfill these expectations, political parties should:

- 
- Process demographic and other statistical data on vulnerable groups and develop appropriate and individualised policy and communications strategies;
- 
- Maintain regular informal contacts with such vulnerable groups;
- 
- Monitor government programs and plan result-oriented programs based on community needs assessments;
- 
- Work to remove language barriers in communication with ethnic minorities;
- 
- Reflect the issues of vulnerable groups in party programs and campaigns;
- 
- Ensure the inclusion of vulnerable groups in party decision-making, for example, create specific group-focused directions within parties and reflect these in party structures;
- 
- Work to raise awareness of vulnerable groups among party supporters using media and other available platforms.
-

## EXPECTATION 6:

### Gender-based assessment of the central and local budgets

3An important issue that women voters raise with women politicians is gender mainstreaming in budget planning. Self-government policies affect the well-being of women and men living in municipalities, and this cannot be achieved if municipalities do not pay due attention to gender budgeting i.e., gender-sensitive or gender-oriented budgeting that will balance the needs and interests of different social and gender groups (Natriashvili 2022; Kakhidze 2020). Gender budgeting is a necessary mechanism for the implementation of gender equality policies, but it has not been realised at a central and a local level. In order for political parties to meet the expectations of female voters, they must:

- 
- Advocate for gender mainstreaming in budgeting at all levels of governance;
- 
- Ensure ongoing monitoring and publicity on local budget discussions;
- 
- Inform female voters about local budgets and share with them their party visions;
- 
- Advocate for incorporation of gender-sensitive party programs at a central and a local level programs;
- 
- Advocate for the retraining of civil servants in relevant entities in gender-sensitive budgeting.
-

## EXPECTATION 7:

### Increased visibility of women politicians for women voters in both non-election and pre-election periods

One of the main expectations that female voters have of political parties is greater visibility of women politicians in the media, as well as in direct interactions and during election campaigns. A number of surveys show that most of the expectations of female voters are more adequately met by women politicians (Kakabadze 2023; Zurabashvili 2023). Consequently, it is logical that this segment of the electorate expects more intensive activity from women politicians, both in regular political communication strategies of political parties and in election campaigns. Public opinion polls also show that the demand for women politicians is high, as more than 80% of society wants more than 50% of members of parliament to be women (Caucasus Barometer 2023a). Fieldwork carried out by political parties has confirmed this to be the case with women voters, too. In order for political parties to adequately respond to this expectation, the following needs to be done:

- 
- Adopt a specific strategy on how to present women leaders and their visions to the public;
- 
- Strengthen participation of women party members in discussions and decision-making through enhancing intraparty democracy ;
- 
- Parties should provide public discussions to ensure the participation of citizens in decision-making processes;
- 
- Women politicians should proactively work with female voters through meetings, conferences, and talks to disseminate information about the activities, successes, competences, and visions of women politicians;
- 
- Support local women leaders in the regions by mobilising financial and human resources to increase their visibility and make their activities known to the masses;
- 
- Along with the party leader, other party members should be actively represented in the media, including women politicians;
- 
- Special attention in the media should be given to women politicians who can bring focus to issue-based discussions;
- 
- Regional media should be actively involved in familiarising the local communities with the activities of local women leaders and politically active women;
- 
- Mutual solidarity among women politicians should be enhanced.
-

## EXPECTATION 8:

### Depolarisation of the political environment

In field research conducted with different groups of women voters, women politicians have identified another expectation that exists in this part of the electorate - the depolarisation of the political spectrum. The demand for depolarisation among part of the electorate arises because of the fact that, in a polarised political environment, there is limited space for addressing their concerns and engaging in meaningful discussions about the practical challenges faced by ordinary citizens. This issue is of particular concern to women voters, who do not usually see issues relevant to them in party programmes or party discussions (HBS 2020). In addition, a large part of the electorate generally favours interparty cooperation (NDI 2021). This may mean that the public itself sees depolarisation as a solution. In response to this expectation, it is important that political parties take the following actions:

- 
- On the parties' initiative, create interparty formats with different sectoral focuses to explore specific constituency concerns and advocate solutions;
- 
- Organise informal interparty discussions on specific thematic issues with the involvement of neutral actors;
- 
- Work within each party individually to discuss the harmful effects of polarisation, and find solutions;
- 
- Prioritise content-driven and issue-specific discussion in both the media and on other public platforms;
- 
- Work on efficient concepts and mechanisms of de-oligarchisation in both individual parties' and interparty formats.
- 
- Cultivate a more diverse party landscape by actively attracting competent and professional individuals who bring new perspectives. Strive for gender balance within the party, creating an inclusive environment that reflects a broad range of talents and experiences.
- 
- Work to increase voter awareness of issue-based debates and promote healthy political discussion.
-

## EXPECTATION 9:

### Enhancing meaningful issues in party platforms

An important issue that particularly concerns women voters, as confirmed by the conducted fieldwork and a number of studies, is that they do not see meaningful proposals in the platforms of political parties, especially on gender issues (HBF 2020). Against the background of increased polarisation, it is important for politicians to make voters realise how a particular party sees ways to address their specific needs and the key problems in the country. Lack of substantive and meaningful proposals by political parties ultimately lead to voter nihilism and frustration and further widens the gap between voters and parties (Caucasus Barometer 2023c). In light of the upcoming 2024 parliamentary elections, it is particularly important to address this challenge and restore voter confidence in political parties. In order for parties to respond to this expectation, the following recommendations should be taken into consideration:

- 
- Reflect on strategies for sharing expertise within parties and establishing consultative platforms with experts in the field;
- 
- Improve communication of the party's vision, including by offering more detailed information in the programme on how to address different challenges;
- 
- Organise joint or intraparty discussion meetings with experts and CSOs to share party ideology and long-term action plans, receive feedback from the professionals, and improve the action plans;
- 
- Strengthen internal thematic structures or consultative platforms to redistribute the human and financial resources and focus on intra-sectoral work within parties;
- 
- Conduct regular research and exploration activities by parties and, as a consequence, competently propose solutions to problems identified in the election programme;
- 
- Staff management or sectoral party units, party lists and electoral teams should be based on the principles of meritocracy, competence and professionalism.
-

## EXPECTATION 10:

### Agreement between the parties on a pro-Western foreign policy

Along with depolarisation, it is important for women voters that the entire political spectrum should agree on common national interests. On the basis of field research, it can be said that women voters expect their parties to rigorously maintain the pro-Western foreign policy vector, which is the constitutionally declared national task of the country (Legislative Bulletin 1995) and which traditionally enjoys stable support from over 80 per cent of the voters (Caucasian Barometer, n.d.). Most Georgian political parties declare a pro-Western stance, but in this respect the party spectrum is particularly polarised and characterised by different, in some cases contradictory, strategies which is unacceptable to female voters. It should be taken into account that a significant proportion of female voters are in favour of European integration (Caucasus Barometer 2023b). In order for parties to respond appropriately to this specific expectation of female voters, it is advisable to take into account the following recommendations:

- 
- Reach an agreement between the parties on the need to develop a joint agenda on major foreign policy issues;
- 
- Formulate the main points of the agreement into a nationwide concept paper, and clearly communicate them to the general public;
- 
- Create an inter-party memorandum for rigorous compliance with Article 78 of the Constitution;
- 
- Establish a joint regular working platform on foreign policy, preferably involving the third sector and international actors.
-

Field research carried out in various regions unveiled the distinct expectation among female voters for increased decentralization in Georgian party politics. Additionally, they called for expansion of the political debate focus to encompass regional issues. Centralised party politics often does not reflect local sensitivities, causing concerns for women voters. The main platforms of Georgian political debate are inaccessible to them as these tend to be concentrated in the centre; and they are not able to talk about their issues with political leaders. Consequently, women's voices are rarely heard in active political debates. In this process, political parties are a medium for women voters to represent issues relevant to them in active politics, and this requires the decentralisation of Georgian politics. To this end, political parties should take the following steps:

- 
- Develop mechanisms for party activities at local levels or strengthen existing mechanisms;
- 
- Ease financial control from the party centres and strengthen this function in local organisations;
- 
- Increase party funding for regional offices and activists to boost research about local needs, challenges and region-specific solutions;
- 
- Increase the degree of independence of local party units from central party authorities;
- 
- Work on strengthening youth in the regions and, as a consequence, encourage the formation of a new generation of fully-fledged, competent politicians.
-

# NEEDS OF FEMALE POLITICIANS

A mandatory gender quota was established by the Election Code of Georgia as part of the 2020 electoral reform, and by adopting this mechanism Georgia has taken an important step towards promoting gender equality in politics. In parallel to the expectations of women voters, field research and workshops also identified the needs of women politicians and the challenges they face in responding fully to the expectations of voters, especially of women voters.

In particular, women politicians in Georgia face a number of challenges. An important one is the lack of democracy in political parties. Women often face visible and invisible barriers when seeking leadership positions in party structures. In addition, the centralisation of parties and the concentration of all power at the centre further limit the mechanisms and opportunities for women politicians to influence policy-making processes. This is exacerbated by a lack of political and civic education among voters, which hinders the appreciation of women's political participation and creates additional barriers for women politicians. In addition, apathy and distrust of politics is on the rise among the electorate as a whole, and this can disproportionately affect women politicians. To overcome these challenges, concerted efforts are needed to promote gender equality in the parties, strengthen political education, and build trust and participation in the political process among all citizens. The following are the six main challenges identified through field research, and recommendations for the parties developed by women politicians.

Winning voters' attention and interesting them in party politics are the main challenges for politicians. Although a significant part of population is politicised, this does not translate into their direct involvement in politics. A large part of the population does not trust the existing political class (NDI 2023), and therefore for many any affiliation with politics is problematic. This problem manifests itself primarily during communication between politicians and voters, when politicians cannot communicate openly and productively with people due to the population's distrust and the deepening political polarisation. The problem was also clearly identified in field research conducted in different regions of Georgia by women politicians. The nihilistic attitudes of the population are partly explained by the fact that politicians meet with voters mainly before election campaigns, focused on garnering maximum votes. Outside of these campaign periods, there is minimal direct communication between politicians and the public, contributing to a perception that expressing their views and concerns is not essential. In order to gain the trust of the population and increase its interest in party politics, it is recommended that political parties take the following steps:

- 
- Carry out direct informal communication with voters and direct proactive work with citizens both in the pre-election and non-election period;
- 
- Form regional branches and appoint permanent party representatives, in as many regions as possible, who will be directly involved in researching local needs and advocating them at the central level;
- 
- Conduct door-to-door communication in the regions during the non-election period;
- 
- Reduce polarisation and enhance meaningful discussion, especially with regard to regional needs and challenges;
- 
- Set realistic initiatives that will increase the sense of trust among the population.
-

The lack of internal party democracy is one of the key problems in the Georgian political sphere (Kvashilava 2021), that further deepens the existing political crisis and creates a serious challenge for women politicians. The lack of internal party democracy significantly hinders women's effective participation and representation in politics. Decision-making is often dominated by the same individuals, making it even more difficult for new individuals to actively engage in politics, including women leaders. This environment reinforces gender inequalities and impedes progress. To address this problem, it is important to promote transparency, inclusiveness, and equal participation in political parties, which will enable women politicians to actively participate in policy-making and shape Georgia's democratic landscape. Field research has shown that female voters expect that women politicians should be more active in the public realm of politics and that their voices should be heard more. Accordingly, in order to strengthen internal party democracy and establish a tradition of meritocratic career development within parties, parties need to take the following steps:

- 
- Define intraparty structures;
  - Revise and improve a party's visions from election to election;
  - Select candidates within parties on a meritocratic basis;
  - Promote the political growth of young people and increase their visibility within the party;
  - Ensure that a code of ethics exists and is adhered to by all parties;
  - Involve women and other vulnerable groups in decision-making;
  - Involve citizens in the decision-making process;
  - Develop transparent mechanisms for advancement in the party;
  - Rank priorities in party strategy planning when communicating with public.
-

In Georgia, the issue of the centralisation of politics and the full involvement of the regions in the political processes is an important challenge for parties and creates additional barriers for women politicians. The concentration of political power and processes in the capital often leads to the neglect and marginalisation of regional interests and voters living in the regions. Field research, much of which was conducted in the regions, clearly reflected this problem. In addition, as a result, regional women politicians face additional barriers to accessing political opportunities, resources and communication networks. To address this issue, it is important to promote decentralisation, strengthen regional governance structures, and ensure the meaningful participation of women politicians living in the regions. By encouraging inclusive and regionally representative political processes, Georgian political parties can create a more equitable and inclusive political landscape for women politicians. To achieve this, they need to consider the following recommendations:

- 
- Utilise all available internal as well as media platforms for communication;
- 
- Improve party structures, reflecting the interests of the regional communities in them;
- 
- Decentralise budgets of the political parties to encourage and enable local politicians, including women politicians, to mobilise more resources and reflect the needs and interests of voters living in regions more efficiently;
- 
- Hold frequent meetings with the population to make their voices heard;
- 
- Develop an effective communication strategy on the region's problems together with the local population spearheaded by local politicians, including women.
-

Emigration in Georgia continues to be a growing trend. According to recent EU reports, the number of people willing to be accepted as refugees from Georgia to EU countries has also increased significantly (Radio Liberty, 2023). In order to support their families, it is mostly women who leave Georgia to work abroad. This is also evidenced by the growing share of emigrants' remittances to Georgia (National Bank of Georgia, 2023). The problem of employment is particularly acute in the regions, which is caused by the absence or lack of local employment opportunities, particularly businesses.

Internal migration from regions to central cities is due to poor local services, lack of skills development opportunities, as well as lack of a mechanism to equip locals with region-specific knowledge that would help them find local employment and facilitate their initiatives. Therefore, there is a growing tendency to leave the regions and settle in big cities in order to get education and employment. This is detrimental to the local development potential of the regions, due to the brain and labour drain from the periphery to the centre. This problem was also identified as a result of the fieldwork. Regional depopulation makes it even more difficult for political parties, especially women politicians, who already have limited resources, to mobilise local financial and human resources, and further exacerbates the problem of centralisation. In response to the above-mentioned challenge, political parties are encouraged to include in their election programmes and advocate the following issues:

- 
- Create jobs at the local level;
  - Provide support to local small and medium-sized businesses;
  - Increase accessibility of public services in the regions (healthcare, social services);
  - Provide public services and open branches of higher education institutions in the regions;
  - Promote vocational education in the regions;
  - Create better basic conditions in the regions (water, natural gas, kindergarten, etc. in each village);
  - Organise meeting and recreation places in the regions.
-

The lack of an effectively inclusive approach in the education system remains a challenge throughout Georgia. Equal access to education is not fully possible for different ethnic groups due to the language barrier (IDFI 2022). In addition, the problem for residents of different regions is the lack of equal opportunities to participate in non-formal education activities, including trainings and workshops. Conducted fieldworks also identified cases of politicization of the selection process of Participants in those activities. Lack of access to quality education and opportunities for professional development remain a problem. This is a significant challenge not only for voters but also for women politicians, especially in regions where access to educational programmes and resources for personal and professional development is even more limited. In response to these challenges, political parties should take the following steps:

- 
- Plan a results-oriented non-formal education activities in regions in consultation with target groups;
- 
- Propose steps to decentralise, depoliticise, and modernise education and target the distribution of financial resources;
- 
- Reduce language barriers for ethnic minority groups, including providing access to party platforms and communication in minority languages;
- 
- Provide language training courses for ethnic minorities;
- 
- Advocate for educational reform in regions, which are populated by ethnic minorities;
-

The lack of political awareness and civic education among voters in Georgia poses a serious challenge for political parties, especially women politicians. Field research has shown that a significant proportion of women voters lack sufficient information about their rights, the political processes, and institutions. When the population lacks knowledge in this area, it becomes difficult for women politicians to effectively engage with voters and win their support. Lack of political awareness among voters enhances biases, stereotypes, and misconceptions, which in some cases hinders the acceptance and credibility of women politicians. Moreover, without a well-informed electorate, it becomes difficult to gain public support for new politicians and initiatives. Political education and civic awareness programmes that equip citizens, including women, with the necessary knowledge and skills to actively participate in political processes and make informed decisions are critical to addressing this challenge. Promoting political awareness and civic education will, in the long term, create an informed and active electorate that, among other things, supports and values the contributions of women politicians. To achieve this, political parties need to take the following steps:

- 
- Promote and improve the quality and scope of non-formal education in the regions and organise activities in this direction;
- 
- Increase the visibility of regions, especially women in regions, in media ;
- 
- Organise regular meetings and discussions between community groups and representatives of political parties to bridge gaps and increase political awareness among both sides;
- 
- Advocate for and support openness and transparency in political institutions;
- 
- Provide paid internship opportunities for youth in political institutions and political parties.
-

## CONCLUSION

The "Bridging the Needs of Women Voters and Women Politicians" manifesto presents the findings of joint working groups of women politicians from seven political parties and civil society representatives on women voters' expectations regarding political parties in Georgia. For each expectation, the manifesto coauthors developed alternative strategies of action for parties.

The women voters expect of parties to politically advocate for women's rights, promote access to social services, women's economic empowerment, the advancement of vulnerable groups, gender balanced budgets, greater visibility of women politicians, and the reflection of meaningful issues in party policies. There is also an anticipation among voters that the political parties will put efforts to depolarize political environment and seek for agreement on major national issues, particularly on pro-Western foreign policy. Both female voters and women politicians also expect more decentralisation both at national level and within party structures.

In addition to the expectations of women voters, the research also identified the challenges faced by women politicians, which are closely related to the expectations of their electorate. The main barriers for women politicians are the indifferent and nihilistic attitude of the electorate towards politics, the lack of intra-party democracy, the alienation of regions from the centre, and the depopulation of regions as well as the lack of equal access to education and low civic awareness.

This manifesto takes on even greater significance for political parties, stakeholders and the general public in the context of the 2024 parliamentary elections and the 9 recommendations presented by the European Commission for Georgia to obtain candidate status. In a context where political parties struggle to collaborate effectively and align their political strategies with the expectations of voters, the interparty document provides a broad framework for an action strategy for Georgian political parties. If parties use it effectively, they will contribute significantly to bringing their strategies and ideas closer to voters, especially women voters. Aligning with voter expectations will be an important step forward in the process of creating a political environment based on consensus and meaningful politics in Georgia, as well as in the process of improving political culture. Also, in the long term, it will contribute significantly to increasing women's political participation and reflecting the interests of women voters in politics.

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