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საქართველოს პოლიტიკის ინსტიტუტი
GEORGIAN INSTITUTE OF POLITICS

Compendium of Policy Briefs

June 2024

GEORGIA AT A CROSSROADS BETWEEN
AUTHORITARIANISM AND DEMOCRATIC
ASPIRATIONS



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Disclaimer from the author of the illustration: “who are the colorful ants depicted on the canvas? – The colorful ants are your children and grandchildren in the colorful raincoats believing that the goal unachievable for the previous generations despite a hard attempt, bravery and blood, will be achieved by them themselves. With your help they will be able to live in free, united (not occupied) Georgia with strong strategic partners... Colorful ants emerged in darkness and against the darkness are not propaganda of any of the groups. They are allegories of people wearing colorful raincoats”.

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Founded in early 2011, the Georgian Institute of Politics (GIP) is a Tbilisi-based non-profit, non-partisan, research, and analysis organization. GIP strives to strengthen the organizational backbone of democratic institutions and promote good governance and development through policy research and advocacy in Georgia. It also encourages public participation in civil society-building projects and democratic processes. The organization has quickly become a major center for scholarship and policy innovation, not only for Georgia, but for the wider Black sea region as well. To this end, GIP sets itself apart through relevant, incisive research; extensive public outreach; and a brazen spirit of innovation in policy discourse and political conversation. Since December 2013 GIP is a member of the OSCE Network of Think Tanks and Academic Institutions and the Network of Think Tanks on the EU's Eastern Partnership launched in September 2020 by the German Council of Foreign Relations (DGAP) with the support of the European Commission.

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FOREWORD

Georgia is currently at a crossroads of whether or not it will continue to pursue a democratic and European future. According to authoritative international platforms monitoring democracies around the globe, Georgia has begun changing rapidly from a semi-consolidated democracy to a semi-consolidated authoritarian regime.¹ In the lead-up to the 2024 general election, Georgian Dream, the current ruling party, successfully passed the “Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence” (the so-called “Foreign Agents Law”). This law is widely considered to be a serious threat to the strong and vocal civil society in Georgia. With this step, the Georgian government moves away from the country’s traditional Western partners – Washington and Brussels – and grows more isolated from the democratic space at large.² Georgia’s progress towards EU integration is thus at risk of being reversed. As a prelude to the 9th GEODEM2024 Annual Conference, the Georgian Institute of Politics is delighted to present *Compendium 2024*, an annual collection of policy briefs about the ongoing political situation in Georgia.

In light of recent actions by the Georgian government, the upcoming election has become much more important – perhaps the fate of Georgia’s democracy itself at stake – and the political environment has grown quite tense. Concerns have been raised over the

government’s ability to guarantee a fair and transparent election, and risks and vulnerabilities have grown significantly.³ A large turnout is therefore now more important than ever. This compendium looks at how the more inactive segments of the electorate can be attracted to ballot boxes. Young Georgians – particularly members of “Gen Z” – have emerged as the driver of the Georgian people’s protest against the current government’s undemocratic leanings. Youth movements, political parties’ youth wings, and students have all helped revive and sustain the Georgian pro-democratic protest movement. These developments highlight the growing importance of accountability with respect to young people, and the need to address possible impediments to their political participation. At the same time, the growing number of emigrants from Georgia presents a significant challenge to electoral participation. Addressing the barriers faced by Georgian citizens abroad could thus be very important for the 2024 election to be representative and legitimate.

Political parties are of critical importance during moments of turbulence. They should become fixtures of public life, around which members of Georgian society may advance their pro-European visions by voting. Yet, given that trust for political parties has never exceeded 50% in Georgia,⁴ it is clear that

¹ Freedom House. 2024. Nations in Transit 2024, A Region Reordered by Autocracy and Democracy. Available at: <https://shorturl.at/Wp3PJ>

² Kucera, Joshua. 2024. Interview: Georgian Dream Is ‘Isolated’ And The ‘Foreign Agent’ Law Is Just ‘A Way To Maintain Power’. Available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/georgia-foreign-agent-law-stephen-jones-harvard/32948744.html>

³ Thornton, Laura. 2024. Georgia’s 2024 Parliamentary Election: Pre-Election Risk Assessment. Available at: <https://www.gmfus.org/news/georgias-2024-parliamentary-election-pre-election-risk-assessment>

⁴ Caucasus Barometer. 2023. Do you believe that at least one political party in Georgia more or less represents your interests? Available at: <https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/no2023ge/PARTREP/>

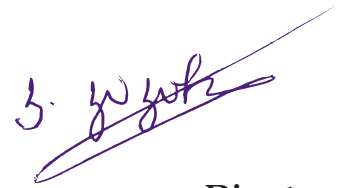
political parties need to reexamine themselves, working to develop more robust internal democratic mechanisms and strategic communication patterns. Meanwhile, electoral clientelism – often considered to be an integral component of Georgian political culture – poses significant challenges to the development of Georgian democracy, and requires urgent attention given the 2024 parliamentary election. The strategic importance of messaging in attracting and retaining voters’ trust is, moreover, something which political parties must inevitably address. Indeed, political parties have an important role to play in overcoming the downward spiral of Georgia’s undemocratic development, and they need to be prepared to play this role effectively.

Once again, the Georgian Institute of Politics is pleased to present a collection of 2024 policy briefs addressing current and actual political processes, challenges, and prospects in Georgia. We hope that this publication will lead to a fruitful discussion in Georgian society. The documents and papers here can be used as resources by political parties, as

well as civil society representatives, industry experts, the academic community, and other stakeholders involved in the democratic development of our country.

This collection, as well as previous publications, could not be published without the generous support of the Embassy of the Netherlands and the Embassy of Switzerland in Georgia. We also express our gratitude to the citizens of Georgia, civil society organizations, and the media for their continuous support of our work, and efforts to develop civil society organizations. We thank them, moreover, for their contribution to strengthening democratic institutions and practices in Georgia, without which the development of democracy in Georgia would be impossible.

Dr. KORNELY KAKACHIA



**Director,
Georgian Institute of Politics**

**ELECTORAL CLIENTELISM: A KEY
BARRIER FOR FAIR AND COMPETITIVE
ELECTIONS IN GEORGIA**

LEVAN KAKHISHVILI

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

How are elections won in Georgia? Is it charismatic political leaders or policy debates that play a decisive role? This policy brief investigates the phenomenon of electoral clientelism in Georgia, which is a form of transactional politics. In other words, the exchange of tangible personal benefits provided by political parties for political support usually facilitated by electoral brokers. Although clientelism and the activities of brokers represent an open secret in Georgian elections,

analysis of clientelism in Georgia has been rather lacking. This brief argues that electoral clientelism plays a crucial role in winning elections in Georgia, which makes it an important challenge for the development of Georgian democracy, and one that requires urgent attention in the context of the upcoming 2024 parliamentary elections.

Key Words: Elections, Electoral clientelism, Political parties, Democracy.

INTRODUCTION

The 2024 parliamentary election in Georgia marks an important milestone for the development of democracy in the country for three main reasons. It will be the first time that all members of parliament are elected using a proportional system (albeit with a 5% electoral threshold) apart from the 2004 elections following the Rose Revolution. Eliminating the single-member plurality, first-past-the-post, constituencies (known in Georgia as the “majoritarian” system) is likely to contribute to less personalization of linkages between voters and parties. Additionally, for the first time, voting will happen using electronic technology, which is expected to increase trust in the vote. Finally, it will be the first election since the European Union granted Georgia candidate status. Therefore, the vote and pre-election developments will be watched closely by all international partners of Georgia. If Tbilisi aims to advance to accession negotiations swiftly, it needs to meet the necessary conditions and give the European Commission solid ground to believe in the future of Georgian democracy.

In this context, every barrier to free, fair, and competitive elections becomes perilous. Electoral clientelism is among these perils. Political parties with sufficient administrative and financial resources to cultivate clientelistic networks prior to elections or over time between elections have an unfair advantage. They establish a type of linkage with voters that is based on providing private goods in exchange for their votes. This violates one of the key conditions for democratic elections: a level playing field among the competitors. Furthermore, clientelism usually works well in underdeveloped societies, where voters find that the marginal utility of small material gifts is high and outweighs the importance of values related to democracy. This creates a condition in which ruling parties have an incentive to keep voters poor to maintain the system of clientelism. However, this creates a trap for the political leadership as the increasing dissatisfaction of voters will eventually result in threat to the government’s security of tenure. Consequently, clientelism is a dangerous phenomenon even for ruling parties

who benefit from it the most. Therefore, the issue of clientelism needs to be addressed immediately and comprehensively by those who wish to advance the cause of Georgian democracy.

This policy brief focuses on three aspects of clientelism. Firstly, the policy brief assesses under what conditions clientelism works in Georgia. This is followed by a description of the structure of clientelist networks and their operation. These analyses allow us to understand the underlying mechanisms and contextual factors that incentivize political

parties to engage in clientelist practices. Finally, the brief investigates the consequences of clientelism for democratic elections in Georgia and long-term stability in party politics. Consequently, the brief shows that clientelism is a problem for Georgian political parties and competition between them, which is a foundation for stable democracy. Based on the analysis, the concluding section of the policy brief presents a set of recommendations on how to eliminate clientelism and what Georgian political parties should pursue as a healthy alternative to clientelist strategies of competition.

UNDER WHAT CONDITIONS DOES CLIENTELISM WORK IN GEORGIA?

Clientelism is a well-documented phenomenon ubiquitous in new democracies and hybrid regimes and is even present in established democracies (see Kitschelt and Kselman 2013; Yıldırım and Kitschelt 2020). It can take various forms, but the simplest form is vote-buying. Furthermore, transactions between parties and voters can have either a positive or negative nature. Positive transactions may include provision of money, small gifts, and access to employment or social services such as healthcare and housing. These are conditional practices, and the targeted private benefits are conditional on the voter's political support. Negative transactions, on the other hand, include limiting or threatening to limit access to employment or social services, including acts or threats of violence and psychological pressure. There is a pattern in terms of how these forms of clientelism are used in Georgia and what kind of reactions they invoke among voters.

Electoral clientelism requires specific so-

cio-economic and political conditions to work. Scholarly literature on the topic is diverse but this brief examines three sets of factors influencing clientelism. Firstly, socio-economic conditions are important – voters of lower social class are more likely to value the marginal utility of even small gifts (see Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2007; Stokes et al. 2013). Secondly, voters respond to different forms of clientelism differently with positive forms punished less compared to negative forms (see Gherghina and Saikonon 2023; Mares and Visconti 2020). Finally, the literature predicts that the extent to which clientelist practices are repeated over and over again is important, as parties and voters can then build trust with each other that they each deliver on their promises (see Gherghina and Tap 2022; Yıldırım and Kitschelt 2020).

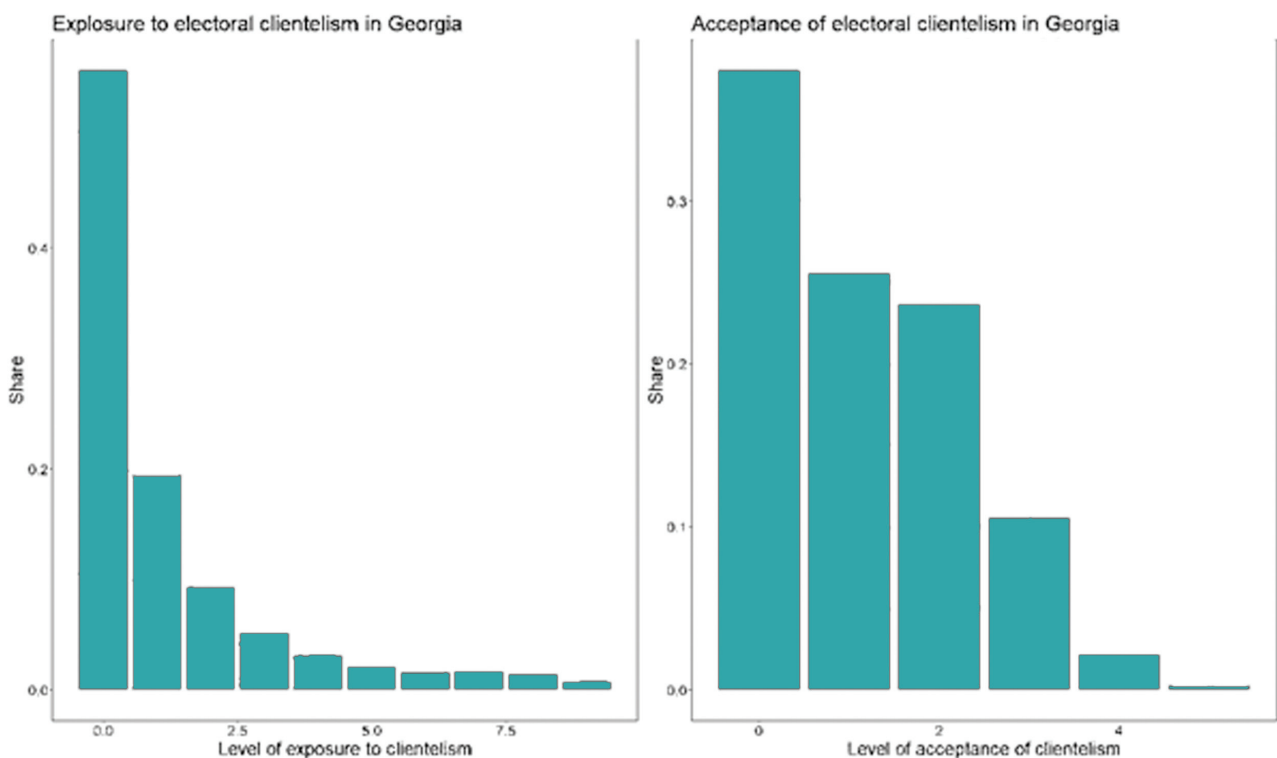
Data on clientelism in Georgia is limited. However, there is a publicly available, nationwide, representative survey on elec-

tion-related processes, commissioned by the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED) and implemented by the Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRRC Georgia). The survey was conducted in 2021 and asked respondents about how elections are conducted in Georgia. The survey can be used to measure to what extent voters in Georgia are exposed to electoral clientelism and to what extent they tolerate it.

In terms of exposure to clientelism, the survey (see CRRC Georgia 2021) asks respondents nine questions, while in terms of acceptance of clientelism, the survey includes six questions. All these questions are about

different forms of clientelism. The data shows, that almost 44 percent of Georgian voters have witnessed at least one form of clientelist practice and 62 percent of voters deem at least one form of clientelism to be acceptable political behavior (see the distribution in Figure 1). These figures are extremely high. For example, in Romania, where clientelism is believed to be widespread, only about a third of respondents report witnessing at least one form of clientelism, and about the same share of respondents tolerate it (Gherghina and Lutai 2024). Consequently, the scale of the problem in Georgia is rather large.

Figure 1. Degrees of exposure to and acceptance of clientelism in Georgia.



Source: Author's illustration based on CRRC Georgia (2021).

Clientelism is notoriously difficult to explain. This is true for Georgia too. The data exhibits some counterintuitive patterns. When exploring what factors influence exposure to clientelism, the regression analy-

sis helps draw three conclusions (see Table 1 in the appendix for the detailed results). The first finding is that different sets of factors are statistically significantly associated with positive forms of vote-buying, such as

the provision of gifts to voters, and negative forms of vote-buying, such as voter intimidation. The second finding shows this difference. Being from a rural area, as opposed to living in the capital, increases the likelihood of being exposed to positive vote-buying by over 30 percent. A similar effect is observed for unemployed voters who are over 32 percent more likely to report that they have witnessed positive vote-buying. On the other hand, negative vote-buying is more likely to be reported by voters who live in Tbilisi compared to other urban areas, as are those who have completed higher education. The increase in likelihood is over 16 percent in each case. The third finding is that wealthier voters in Georgia tend to be more likely to report both forms of vote-buying. This finding is counterintuitive for positive vote-buying but not so much for negative vote-buying. With the latter, it seems that Georgian parties target voters who live in the capital, have a university degree and are wealthier. With positive vote-buying, parties seem to target rural and unemployed voters but also those who tend to be wealthier. Therefore, here the profile of voters is not as consistent as with the other form of clientelism.

On the other hand, previous exposure to clientelism decreases the degree of accep-

tance of clientelism among Georgian voters (see Table 2 in the appendix for the detailed results). The more incidences of clientelism voters witness, the more they tend to reject clientelism. For example, exposure to each form of positive vote-buying decreases the likelihood of tolerance towards clientelism by over 8 percent, while the same figure for exposure to negative vote-buying is almost 14 percent. Therefore, it can be concluded that Georgian voters react to pressure and threats more negatively. This finding runs counter to the idea of clientelism as a trust-building process between parties and voters in which repetition increases acceptance due to mutual trust.

From these results three conclusions can be drawn about clientelism in Georgia. Firstly, socio-economic conditions matter, as voters in Tbilisi with a university degree are more likely to experience intimidation from political parties, while unemployed voters in rural areas are more likely to receive gifts from parties. Secondly, voters' previous experience of clientelism makes them significantly less likely to tolerate such practices. Finally, voters' experience of negative vote-buying makes them less likely to tolerate clientelism compared to exposure to positive vote-buying.

HOW DOES CLIENTELISM OPERATE IN GEORGIA?

Clientelist transactions between parties and voters are usually facilitated by electoral brokers.¹ Brokers are important actors who have high social capital in their immediate environment and can interact with voters with ease. They collect information about

voter preferences and needs and transfer it to the party. In return, they organize the distribution of targeted benefits to voters who promise political support. For this to work, however, on the scale shown with the quantitative data above, it is necessary to oper-

¹ This section of the policy brief is based on a fieldwork conducted by the author in 2021.

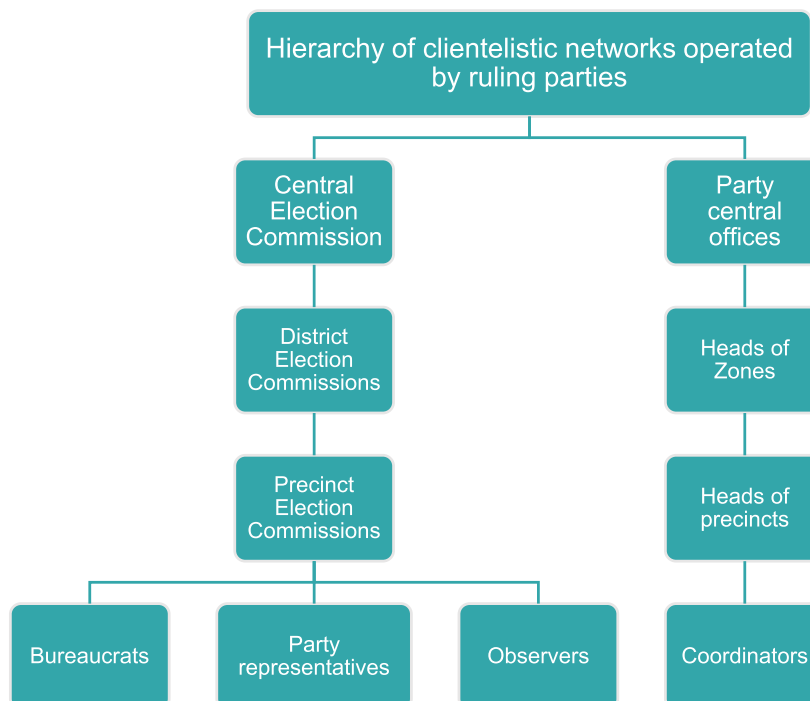
ate vast networks of brokers. This is exactly what Georgian parties strive to do.

It is documented that clientelist networks are maintained by government as well as opposition parties in Georgia. Considering the necessary resources, however, smaller parties do not have the “luxury” of doing so, whereas the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party operates the largest network, which has unique characteristics because it controls state administrative bureaucratic resources. Therefore, this policy brief describes this largest and most comprehensive clientelist network.

The structure of the informal clientelist network managed by GD closely resembles the structure of the Central Election Commission (CEC) (see Figure 2. Structure of clientelistic networks operated by ruling parties. Figure 2), which was divided into 73 districts covering almost 3,800 precincts in 2020. Precinct Election Commissions (PEC) are the unit of

interest as they are the ones conducting elections on the ground. Similarly, the GD informal party network has precinct level brokers who conduct electoral campaigns by going door-to-door in their own neighbourhoods. These people include Coordinators – people Georgian voters are most familiar with, and Precinct Heads, who manage the coordinators. Additionally, several precincts form a zone, and each zone has a Zone Head who manages the Precinct Heads. GD acknowledges that they maintained a network of about 2,000 coordinators during the 2020 parliamentary elections paying them a combined total of 600,000 GEL as compensation for their work (see Transparency International Georgia 2021). However, allegedly the number of coordinators is much higher: depending on the precinct, there can often be 5-6 and, in crucial areas for the GD, up to 20 coordinators in a precinct. Even using conservative assumptions, the cost of maintaining the network of coordinators must be 8 to 10 times higher than the official figure.

Figure 2. *Structure of clientelistic networks operated by ruling parties.*



Source: *Author's own research.*

The goal for the informal party network is to penetrate the formal bureaucracy of the CEC and have loyal people appointed at the level of PEC. These loyal people will be able to facilitate a form of voter fraud called so-called carousel voting – in which an empty ballot paper is taken outside the polling station, filled out, and given to a voter, forcing them to vote for a specific party. This is practiced usually by ruling parties as the opposition lacks the degree of penetration into the bureaucracy of the CEC necessary for the practice. For example, in 2021, Netgazeti reported a case of a member of a PEC in Kutaisi claiming she was pressured by GD representatives to allow a voter not on the list to get a ballot paper.

It must be noted, however, that Georgia is planning to introduce electronic voting technology, which has clear benefits for efficiency and the elimination of human error. According to the CEC, in the 2024 elections, 2,262 precincts including all precincts in Tbilisi will use electronic technologies while 768 precincts will conduct the vote using traditional procedures (see Central Election Commission of Georgia 2024). Considering that Georgia will use a voter-verified paper audit trail method, which leaves paper record that can be easily audited, there will still be a paper ballot, which could in theory be taken outside the polling station. It will probably be more difficult to do so without damaging the ballot and ensuring it remains readable for the voting machine. How this will affect carousel voting remains to be seen.

Although this description refers to ruling parties, opposition parties also operate clientelist networks. However, in these cases, the networks do not have influence over the CEC bureaucratic apparatus and are not nearly as extensive due to the lack of finan-

cial resources. Therefore, the goal of opposition parties is more reminiscent of US-style canvassing, albeit mediated through the informal social capital of electoral brokers. Consequently, the returns of clientelism are more limited for opposition parties but they still engage in the practice and even exhibit predatory behavior, sometimes poaching successful electoral brokers from other parties by offering higher compensation. However, brokers associated with opposition parties often experience psychological violence and suffer from discrimination at the hands of state bureaucracies (see Urchukhishvili 2023).

Furthermore, the administrative resources of the ruling party are not limited to the CEC bureaucracy. According to GeoStat, in 2022, 308,000 people were employed in publicly owned entities, while the number of people receiving an old age pension was 808,300 (see GeoStat 2023a; 2023b). These two groups combined exceed a million people and represent about 31.8 percent of the total number of voters in Georgia – almost every third voter (in 2020, there were a little over 3.5 million voters according to CEC (2020)). This makes it extremely difficult for opposition parties to compete with the GD. To sum up, this analysis shows four main points regarding how clientelism works in Georgia. First, the ruling party can penetrate the electoral administration and the bureaucratic apparatus that needs to remain neutral and unbiased in democratic and competitive elections. Second, parties can anticipate voter behaviour and can accordingly provide positive and/or negative incentives to them to reward or punish this behaviour. Third, Georgian parties compete to gain access to a better network of brokers with higher social capital. Finally, clientelism in Georgia provides opportunities for electoral fraud.

WHAT ARE THE CONSEQUENCES OF CLIENTELISM FOR PARTY POLITICS IN GEORGIA?

Electoral clientelism, especially vote-buying practices, undermines fair and competitive elections by violating the principle of a level playing field. Therefore, clientelist transactions between parties and voters should be urgently eliminated. Instead, political parties must rely on their offer of public goods to attract voters and win their political support. Clientelism has three main negative effects that Georgian parties need to consider: high costs, high uncertainty, and the double contingency problem of clientelism. These effects are directly related to the operations of those parties that engage in clientelist practices and demonstrate that parties will benefit from eliminating such practices. This in its own turn, however, will contribute to healthier competition in the party system and therefore to the advancement of Georgian democracy.

The first negative effect of electoral clientelism on party politics is that clientelism is costly for political parties. It requires immense financial, organizational, and human resources. Clientelism turns political competition into a race of the rich. This gives ruling parties an unfair advantage as they control large administrative resources. As shown above, ruling parties can penetrate the bureaucratic apparatus and maintain a double hierarchy of clientelist networks that runs in parallel to official structures. They have sufficient capacity (as reported by GD) to manage thousands if not tens of thousands of electoral brokers. Under clientelist competition, however, even ruling parties are

not immune. For example, in the 2012 parliamentary elections, a large number of the then ruling UNM party's electoral brokers defected from their patron party as it became extremely unpopular with the majority of voters to actively support the UNM. Furthermore, there was a challenger that had sufficient resources to parallel the UNM's capacity. Consequently, the UNM lost votes as a result of the loss of a significant part of its clientelist network. Therefore, offering public goods to win voters' support is significantly cheaper for political parties. Public goods are the result of policies that serve voter interests and solve problems that concern voters. Instead of employing slogan-like language in pre-election promises, political parties need to have comprehensive policy documents elaborated in advance, covering all domains of public policy and to use these documents as guidebooks for electoral campaigning. This will enable political debates to evolve beyond affectively polarized mudslinging to issue-based competition. To this end, it is critically important to maintain permanent engagement with voters, even during times when there are no elections approaching. Although maintaining offices across the whole of Georgia may be too costly for less wealthy parties, attracting enthusiastic activists through value-based ideological party-voter linkages can help smaller parties somewhat compensate for their lack of material resources.

The second negative effect of clientelism is related to uncertainty. Clientelism is usually

used by political parties to increase certainty over the electoral outcome, but it is not very straightforward. Essentially, clientelism relies on the goodwill of voters to deliver on their promise of voting for a party that provided them with private benefits. However, it is virtually impossible to monitor voters' behaviour. Therefore, parties must mostly operate on the assumption that voters will behave as promised until the end of the voting day. This uncertainty of clientelist transaction leads parties to employ practices of electoral fraud and voter pressure. For example, the carousel vote system of electoral fraud is intended to ensure that voters who promise their political support in exchange for personal benefits deliver on their promise. Consequently, clientelism incentivizes illicit behaviour that harms not only Georgian democracy but also trust between voters and parties. As shown in the survey data above, voters who experience such negative forms of clientelism are more likely to resent these practices. Therefore, attempts to monitor voting behaviour, without which parties can never be sure that voters do what they promise, increases voter dissatisfaction. Therefore, to avoid such negative reactions from voters and potential punishment from them, parties need to stop practicing clientelism.

Finally, the third main negative effect of clientelism for political parties is that clientelist party-voter linkages are unstable in the long-term. Clientelism relies on brokers who facilitate transactional politics between

parties and voters. Brokers are prone to defection given that they usually work for a party in exchange for personal benefits and not necessarily because they believe it is the right thing to do. Therefore, vast networks of brokers, without whom clientelism cannot work, can collapse if a new challenger makes a more appealing offer. Furthermore, brokers can act independently or out of self-interest, which can create further complications for political parties. For example, electoral brokers may not work as hard to mobilize voters if they anticipate a second round of elections because in this scenario they will be compensated twice instead of once. Therefore, the future of political parties will be significantly more stable if they attract votes based on their policy offers and form programmatic linkages with their supporters.

Overall, clientelism is associated with high risks for political parties. The costs of such practices are extremely high especially compared to programmatic strategies of competition, and new challengers with more resources can oust the incumbent. Furthermore, it is difficult to monitor the behaviour of voters and brokers and to ensure that they uphold their end of the transaction. Therefore, voters and brokers can defect and punish any political party engaged in clientelism. This means that parties should be wary of clientelism and work more intensively to establish programmatic linkages with voters.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This brief has analyzed electoral clientelism in Georgia and demonstrated that clientelism is rather widespread in Georgia. Parties use positive forms of clientelism, such

as gifts and money, with less wealthy voters such as the rural and unemployed population, while they reserve negative forms of clientelism, such as voter pressure and in-

timidation, for more educated voters from the capital. Furthermore, voters react to clientelism negatively, but they resent coercive practices even more than small gifts. Political parties, especially the ruling GD, operate vast clientelist networks, which in the case of the ruling party, penetrates the election administration and can facilitate electoral fraud. Brokers are crucial to the execution of transactional politics and exchange information and benefits between parties and vot-

ers. However, although this is potentially a high-reward practice, it is one connected to high risks. High financial costs, the difficulty of monitoring voting behavior, and the potential for broker defection are all among the key negative effects of clientelism on parties that engage in it. Therefore, this brief offers a set of recommendations to various stakeholders to eliminate electoral clientelism in Georgia.

To all political parties in Georgia

- **Cease clientelistic practices** – these practices are extremely costly, incentivize electoral fraud, risk defection, inspire resentment among voters, and create an uneven playing field among competing parties. A much cheaper and more stable alternative is the development of programmatic linkages with voters based on parties responding to voter preferences and offering a set of appealing policies.
- **Formalize all transactions** – transactions that happen between parties and electoral brokers are informal and go largely unreported. Parties need to formalize these transactions by signing contracts with coordinators and transferring compensation through the banking system rather than through cash payments.
- **Intensify efforts to create programmatic linkages with voters** – such linkages are more stable in the long-term and make voting behavior more predictable. It helps political parties form a permanent support base, which does not require electoral brokers or charismatic leaders for mobilization. This is achievable through two main mechanisms. Firstly, parties need to consistently prioritize offering solutions to policy problems that voters deem significant. Secondly, parties need to keep voters actively engaged not only during pre-election campaigns but also in the time between elections.
- **Shape your own ideological profile** – inconsistent ideological profiles, such as parties that make mutually exclusive promises such as rises in social welfare benefits as alongside cuts to government spending, make it difficult for voters and other stakeholders to predict the actual policies a party will implement if it comes to power. Instead, parties need to make an institutional choice about their ideological profile and create policy promises in line with this profile. This will help voters form a programmatic attachment with a party.

To think-tanks, media, and other civil society organizations in Georgia

- **Monitor and study electoral clientelism in Georgia** – apart from a few exceptions, there have been no studies conducted about clientelism in Georgia, which remains an open secret in Georgian elections. Understanding the phenomenon and identifying points of intervention to either transform these socio-political practices or eliminate them is a crucial foundation for success.
 - **Educate lowest-level CEC bureaucrats about their rights** – often the lowest level bureaucrats from the election administration are the key to success and failure of any practice. These people who conduct elections on the ground often lack information about how they can react to illicit practices they witness, whether it be electoral fraud or pressure and the threat of violence.
 - **Provide tailored legal assistance for coordinators** – party-employed coordinators often endure pressure and humiliation and lack instruments to protect their own rights. Considering that their work goes unrecognized, their rights may be violated not only by their opponents, but also by their own party
- which may refuse them their promised compensation. If parties do not refrain from relying on the work of coordinators, empowering these people as independent actors could hold the key to combating the practice of electoral clientelism.
- **Analyze and publicize pre-election party programmes** – focusing on pre-election party programmes would contribute to the exchange of information between parties and voters and also foster the proliferation of issue-based political debates. More public analysis of the various policies offered by parties could help voters identify their preferred policy options and help them decide which political party most deserves their vote on a programmatic basis.
 - **Continue the practice of providing voters with voting advice applications (VAA)** – VAAs are an important tool for voters to learn about their own preferences and those of various political parties. Considering the previous success of such applications, the practice should continue, which can also provide a tool for monitoring changes in the policy offers of individual parties over time.

To the international partners of Georgia

- **Promote the transfer of party-political know-how** – Georgian parties often lack institutionalization of various procedures, including those connected to designing and campaigning on a policy package before elections. There is a need for a transfer of knowledge to Georgian political parties on how to collect information about voter preferenc-

es, how be responsive to them, how to create a feasible policy offer, and how to connect with voters through such programmes. This is especially true for those parties which lack material resources compared to the ruling party.

- **Support election-related projects**
 - The more knowledge is created about election-related processes in Georgia, the easier it will be to generate ideas about solving the key challenges in Georgian elections. Therefore, it is crucial to support projects that aim to, for example, provide legal services to coordinators and those who experience pressure in pre-election contexts; create Voting Advice Applications to make party programmes more transparent and accessible for voters; conduct fun-

damental research about elections in Georgia; and promote participation of younger generations in elections.

- **Hold Georgian parties involved in clientelism accountable** – ensuring political parties' accountability and responsiveness to voter preferences is not an easy task. There are few opportunities for conditionality, while coercion and pressure can be counterproductive and lead to resentment. Therefore, finding a balance between effective measures that do not make the situation worse is crucial. One such measure could be persuasion of individual decision-makers within party structures who can impact party behaviour. In this scenario, it is possible to apply pressure on individual leaders to push them to eliminate clientelism practices.

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APPENDIX

Table 1. Regression analysis to explain the degree of exposure to electoral clientelism in Georgia.

	Variables	Aggregated	Positive vote-buying	Negative vote-buying
Main independent variables	Settlement type (urban)	0.905 (0.085)	1.026 (0.336)	0.836* (0.077)
	Settlement type (rural area)	1.038 (0.091)	1.305* (0.388)	0.899 (0.085)
	Higher Education	1.145+ (0.075)	1.089 (0.293)	1.169* (1.021)
	Unemployed	1.180* (0.080)	1.325* (0.347)	1.149+ (0.074)
	Wealth	1.119*** (0.017)	1.103*** (0.082)	1.122*** (0.016)
Control variables	Ethnic minorities	0.682* (0.173)	0.788 (1.051)	0.580** (0.175)
	Voted in the last legislative elections	1.350** (0.102)	1.104 (0.489)	1.399*** (0.094)
	Female	0.807** (0.076)	0.722** (0.360)	0.827** (0.071)
	Age	0.997 (0.002)	0.992* (0.009)	0.899 (0.002)
	Intercept	0.502*** (0.203)	0.201*** (0.988)	0.304*** (0.187)

Note: Results of negative binomial and poisson regression models. All models report incidence rate ratios (IRR) with robust standard errors in parentheses. Reference category for the settlement type variable is the capital.

+ p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001.

Table 2. *Regression analysis to explain tolerance towards electoral clientelism in Georgia.*

Hypotheses	Variables	
Main independent variables	Exposure to positive vote-buying	0.915* (0.035)
	Exposure to negative vote-buying	0.863*** (0.024)
Control variables	Preference for pre-election promises when voting	1.144** (0.041)
	Settlement type (urban)	1.061 (0.047)
	Settlement type (rural area)	1.018 (0.050)
	Higher education	1.033 (0.041)
	Unemployed	0.971 (0.043)
	Wealth	1.025** (0.008)
	Ethnic minorities	1.298*** (0.062)
	Voted in the last legislative elections	1.123* (0.055)
	Female	0.972 (0.041)
	Age	1.001 (0.001)
	Intercept	0.901 (0.102)

Note: Results of negative binomial regression. The model reports incidence rate ratios with robust standard errors in parentheses. Reference category for settlement type is the capital.

+ $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

**“MISSING VOTES” AND HOW TO FIND
THEM: INCREASING ENGAGEMENT OF
GEORGIAN EMIGRANT VOTERS**

SHOTA KAKABADZE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The rising level of emigration from Georgia presents a significant challenge for electoral participation. Lower turnout rates among emigrants, attributed to bureaucratic and geographical barriers, contribute to the substantial number of “missing votes”. With an estimated 18% of the eligible voters residing abroad, these votes could be pivotal in diversifying Georgia’s political landscape and breaking the one-party dominance. Hence, engagement with the diaspora is gaining more and more prominence in the agenda of Georgian political parties, especially the opposition. This policy brief, following the work of Giesing and Schikora (2023), ex-

amines the voting pattern of Georgian emigrants in the last three national elections and argues that “missing votes” pose challenges to the representation and political pluralism of Georgian democracy. Addressing these challenges through policy reforms, increased engagement, and international collaboration can ensure a more inclusive electoral process, reflecting the true political preferences of all Georgian citizens, including those abroad.

Key Words: Elections, Emigrants, Democracy, Representation

INTRODUCTION

With their increasing international mobility and the importance of their repatriated financial transfers to the economy of Georgia, the need to facilitate and support the wider engagement of emigrants into national elections becomes ever more urgent. Statistics suggest that the wave of emigration¹ from Georgia is continuing to rise (Arabuli 2023), and this is leading to increases in the share that remittances contribute to the country’s overall GDP. Data shows that in 2022 the share of the money transferred by emigrants had increased to almost 16% of the country’s GDP (Varadashvili 2023). What is even more interesting is that on the basis of the experience of Central and Eastern European countries (CEE), as Georgia advances on its European integration path, the issue of immigration and the position of citizens living outside their country of origin is going to become even more apparent. Since the 2004-

2007 enlargement of the European Union, the migration rate from the CEE states varies from 5% (the Czech Republic), 12.5% (Poland), to almost 20% (Lithuania) of the population living abroad (Giesing and Schikora 2023, 2; Szulecki et al. 2022, 1).

Voting in the national elections is a fundamental right of every citizen and hence it should be the priority of the relevant stakeholders in Georgia to work on addressing challenges that are becoming more dire with every coming year. This policy brief, following the work of Giesing and Schikora (2023), examines why the inclusion of emigrant voters in the election process could be decisive for strengthening liberal democracy in Georgia and gives recommendations to relevant stakeholders on how to address the issue of the “missing votes”.

¹ Except 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted travel.

“MISSING VOTES” AND WHY THEY MATTER?

As Georgia moves closer to European Union membership, the experience of CEE countries becomes especially relevant for the policymakers in Tbilisi. As in those states that joined the European Union in 2004, it has led to a dramatic increase in emigration to the Western, economically more well-off, EU members. According to Giesing and Schikora (2023) mass emigration from Poland after 2004 led to the increase in the share of votes for right-wing parties, as emigrant’s left-leaning votes became “missing votes”. Similarly, Szulecki et al. (2023) have demonstrated that emigrant voters in CEE countries tend to support more liberal and economically right-leaning parties than the voters in their home countries. The case of Moldova also illustrates the role emigrants could play in national elections. In the 2020 presidential elections, pro-reform and pro-EU Maia Sandu’s victory against pro-Russian incumbent Dodon was largely due to the diaspora’s votes (Hernandez 2020).

To study whether those “missing votes” have an impact on election outcomes in emigrants’ countries of origin, Giesing and Schikora (2023, 4) argue that there are at least three conditions that need to be in place. These conditions are: 1. emigrants need to be selected in terms of political preferences; 2. emigrants need to have lower turnout rates in elections in their origin country compared to a hypothetical scenario in which they did not emigrate; and 3. the number of emigrants needs to be sizeable compared to the home country population in order to have a substantial effect.

This policy brief applies this model to the Georgian emigrant voters and illustrates that these three conditions are present in this case, more specifically, as will be demonstrated, Georgian emigrants who vote abroad have very strong political preferences and these are different to the trends among the voters in Georgia itself. Furthermore, the turnout, due to some administrative, bureaucratic or geographical barriers, is considerably lower abroad than in their country of origin (CESKO 2016, 2018, 2020), leading to the substantial size of “missing votes”. These “missing votes” could play decisive roles in breaking the vicious circle of one-party dominance and create preconditions for a long-awaited multiparty coalition government in Georgia. And lastly, official statistics show that net immigration is considerably negative and continues to be on the rise (National Statistics Office of Georgia, 2024). Some estimates even suggest that the number of voters abroad could reach almost 18% of all those eligible to vote (Tsutskiridze 2024). This also explains why engaging with the diaspora and the issue of facilitating voting process abroad have started to gain more prominence in the agenda of Georgian political parties. This is especially the case with the opposition parties which are seeking to reach out to more voters and increase their potential electorate.

Subsequently, it can be argued that these emigrant “missing voters” significantly affect the distribution of political preferences in the election results. Facilitating and easing access for emigrants to exercise their fundamental right to vote is going to qualitatively

improve representation and distribution of political forces in the governing institutions. Furthermore, in the context of a fully proportional electoral system, inclusion of as

many emigration votes as possible is going to produce more adequate and balanced representations of the electorate's political preferences in the legislative body.

THE POTENTIAL IMPACT OF GEORGIAN EMIGRANTS' "MISSING VOTES"

To analyse the voting behavior of Georgian emigrants and the challenges that they are facing while exercising their fundamental right, this policy brief looks at the three most recent elections. These were the 2016 Parliamentary, 2018 Presidential, and 2020 Parliamentary elections. Furthermore, only the proportional results have been taken into consideration when comparing polling sta-

tions' results abroad, since majoritarian districts are not applicable in the elections held outside Georgia itself. This part of the paper applies the model of Giesing and Schikora (2023) to the case of Georgia and illustrates that the votes of Georgian emigrants are indeed "missing votes" that could potentially have a significant impact on election outcomes in the country.

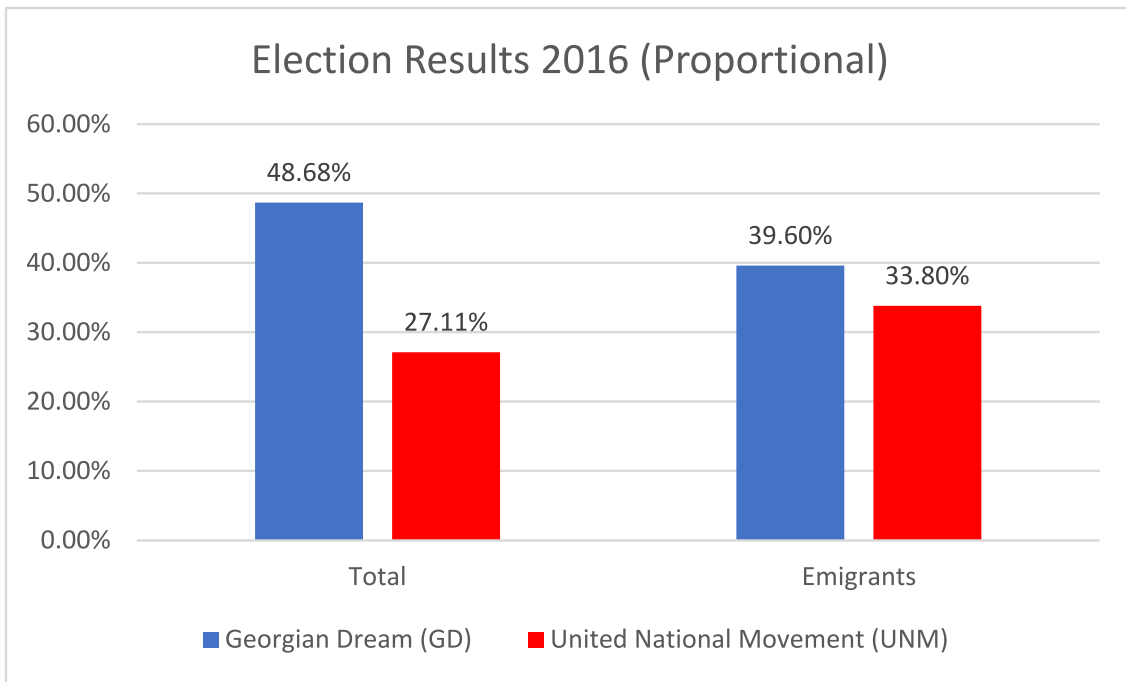
1. Emigrants' political preferences

Election results from the polling stations that were functioning abroad suggest that Georgian emigrants are more prone to vote for the opposition party. Except in 2016, but in both the 2018 presidential and 2020 parliamentary elections, opposition candidates and parties, respectively, got more votes than the ruling Georgian Dream. The graphs below were compiled based on the data of

the Election Administration of Georgia and illustrate the trend among voters registered abroad.

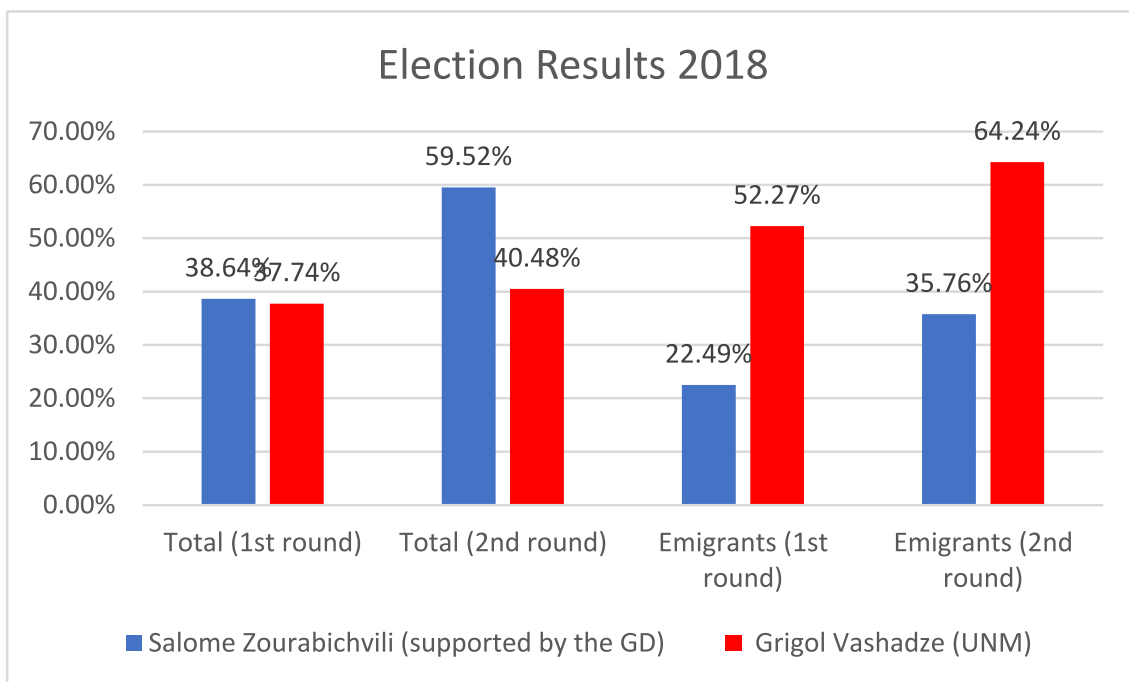
The 2016 result for parliamentary elections² (Figure 1) suggest that there is a contrast between emigrants votes and votes cast in Georgia itself.

² Only proportional, since emigrants are not eligible to vote for the majoritarian representation.

Figure 1: Election Results for 2016 Parliamentary Elections

Source: CESKO. Available at: <https://cesko.ge/>

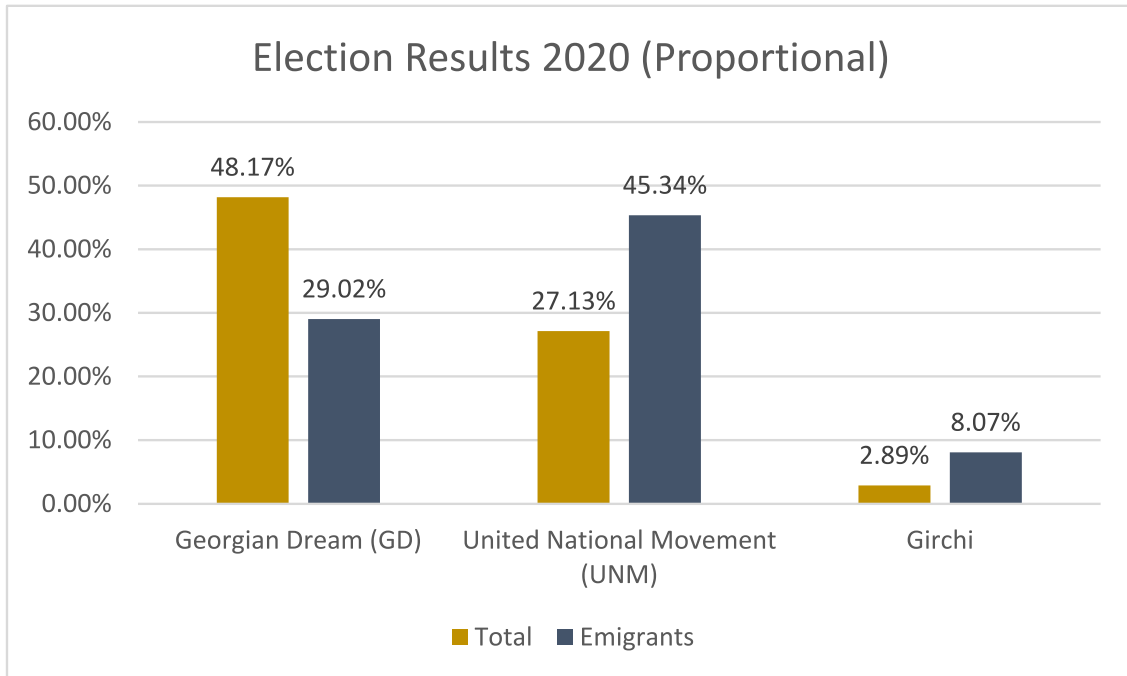
During the 2018 presidential elections, this contrast was even more stark, with the opposition candidate ending up winning both rounds among the electorate registered abroad (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Election Results for 2018 Presidential Elections

Source: CESKO. Available at: <https://cesko.ge/>

Similarly, most of the votes abroad went to the opposition in the 2020 Parliamentary elections (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Election Results for 2020 Parliamentary Elections

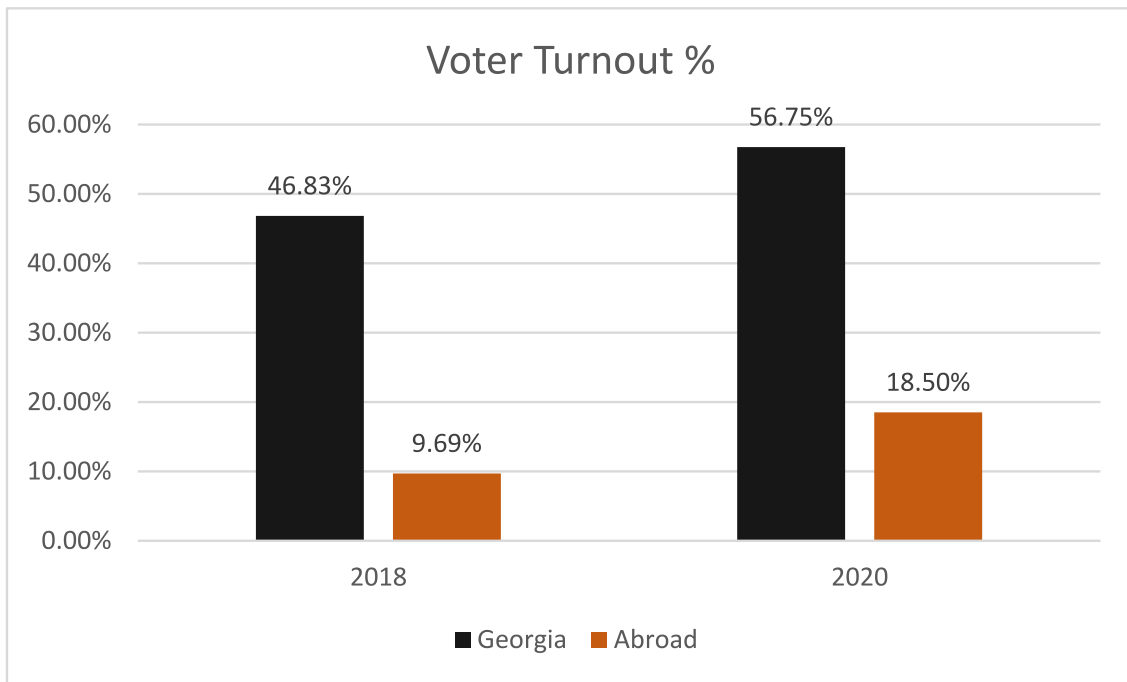


Source: CESKO. Available at: <https://cesko.ge/>

2. Turnout rates among emigrants are considerably lower compared to their country of origin

The second condition that needs to be in place, in order to be able to argue that external votes have the potential to impact the overall results of elections, is lower turnout rates in comparison to a scenario in which

those voters have not emigrated. Statistical data from the Election Administration of Georgia demonstrate that election turnout among emigrants is considerably lower than the overall level of the turnout (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Voter Turnout for 2018 and 2020 Elections³

Source: CESKO. Available at: <https://cesko.ge/>

These stark differences between the turnout numbers for Georgia overall and voters registered abroad, suggests that the second condition of the model is also present in this case. Lower turnout could be attributed to several factors, such as distance to the near-

est polling station, work commitments, not wanting to be registered in the embassy or the consulate, etc. These impediments, and how to address them, are discussed in the final part of this paper.

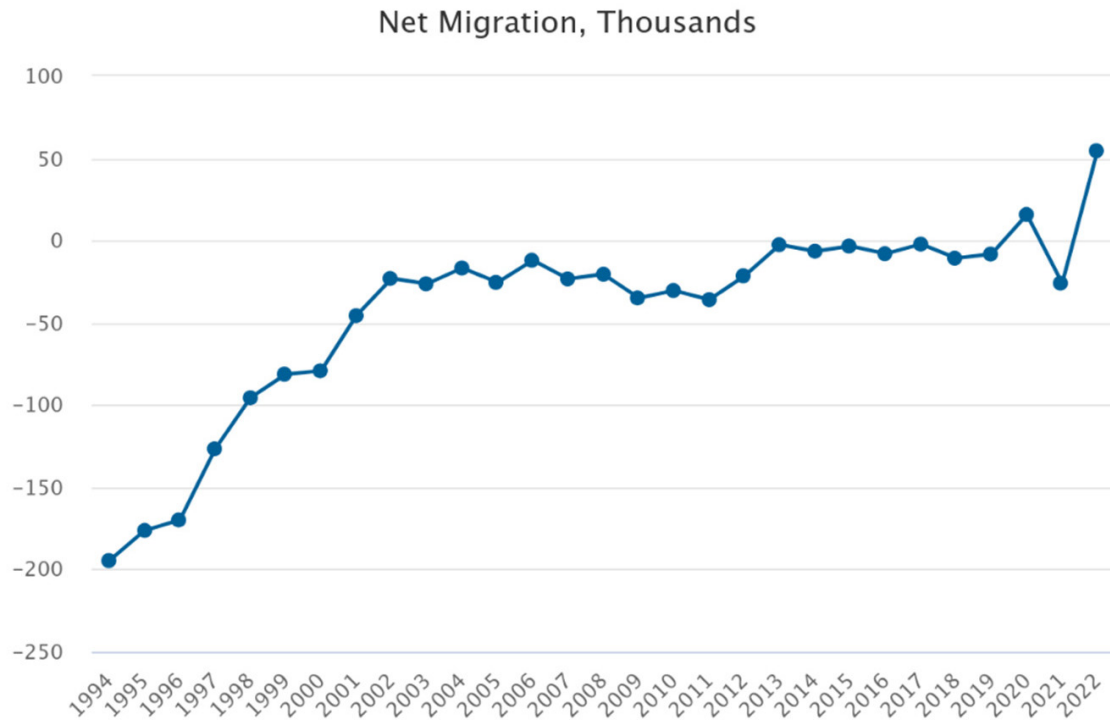
3. The number of emigrants is sizeable compared to the home country population

Statistics from the National Statistics Office of Georgia continuously demonstrate that net migration (the difference between the number of people leaving and those moving back to the country) remains negative. This reflects the dozens of thousands of Georgian citizens immigrating abroad annually. More

specifically, as figure 1 illustrates, negative net migration has been consistently on the rise except in 2020 and 2022 (National Statistics Office of Georgia, 2024). These two exceptions are related to the global Covid-19 pandemic and the influx of Russian immigrants after the invasion of Ukraine.

³ This information is not available for 2016 parliamentary elections.

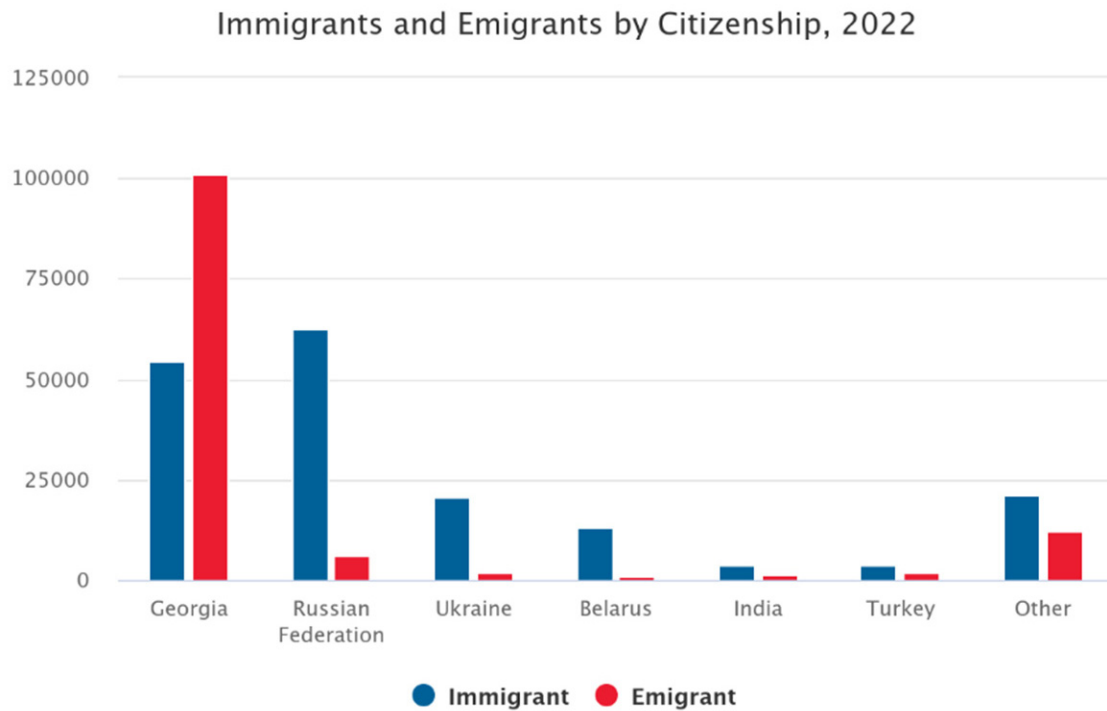
Figure 5: *Net Migration, Thousands*



Source: National Statistics Office of Georgia 2024, available at: <https://www.geostat.ge/en/modules/categories/322/migration>

The latest numbers that are available, as of writing this paper, are from the year 2022. This data suggests that in that year alone the number of Georgian citizens leaving

the country was 100,80, while those moving back numbered 54,405 (figure 6) (National Statistics Office of Georgia 2024).

Figure 6: Immigrants and Emigrants by Citizenship, 2022

Source: National Statistics Office of Georgia 2024, available at: <https://www.geostat.ge/en/modules/categories/322/migration>

In other words, almost twice as many Georgian citizens left the country, as came back. Furthermore, the majority of those emigrants are in the 15-64 age group – the group that should be politically and socially most active. This age group is also the segment

of society that contributes the most in terms of paying taxes, workforce, etc. Therefore, it should be of the utmost priority for all the relevant stakeholders in Georgia to work on guaranteeing their fundamental right to vote.

CHALLENGES THAT INHIBIT EMIGRANTS FROM VOTING

There are several challenges that inhibit Georgian emigrants from voting, and which lead to the effect of the “missing votes”. These barriers are related first of all to distance. In most cases, especially in large countries like the United States or Germany, registered voters wishing to cast their ballot need to travel far from their place of residence. As polling stations are only available in the consulates

and embassies, this makes it either difficult or not worth the travel from other towns and cities, unless they are passionate enough about any political party or an issue.

Similarly, while election day is a holiday in Georgia, this is not the case abroad, and emigrants living far from the location of the embassy, or the consulate cannot afford take

leave of absence from their work.

Another source of reluctance for Georgians abroad to go and vote is connected with potential legal troubles among those who are living illegally in their country of residence. There are several options on how to address challenges that are related to distance. If at least 50 Georgian citizens are registered in the embassy database as living in that specific country, a polling station can be requested in their town/city of residence. However, in places where there are a high number of Georgian emigrants, a single polling station in the consulate would not be capable of dealing with several thousands of voters. Hence, especially in the cities with large Georgian emigrant populations, the Georgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in coordination with its foreign partners and diaspora, needs to start working on the possibilities of opening polling stations outside the consulates.

Beyond the existing legal framework, issues

related to distance could be overcome by allowing a wider range of options for casting votes for citizens living abroad. These options, as is the case in several European countries, could be allowing voting via regular post, or letting citizens living abroad cast their votes at the embassies and consulates a couple of days earlier than the election day. These options address problems related to distance and work commitments.

Another important reform that could considerably boost emigrants' participation, is following the example of Estonia and allowing internet voting (Kakabadze 2021). Internet voting is going to remove another major impediment related to illegal emigrants who would not want to be registered in any overseas database. Allowing distant voting solves this by giving the possibility of casting their vote online, which allows them to participate in the elections and exercise their fundamental right without any potential legal implications.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Negative net migration continues to be on the rise in Georgia as more and more citizens, whether legally or illegally, leave the country. This massive departure of voters to go abroad, is likely to lead to the increase of so-called "missing votes" and this could impact the election results. Subsequently, the composition of parliament and the government end up not representing the actual preferences of citizens – the discrepancy of the turnout numbers between emigrants and Georgians living in Georgia is substantial.

Analysis of the last three elections shows that most of the voters living abroad that cast votes are opposition-leaning. This could

be explained by the motivation and enthusiasm of those citizens who feel passionate about politics. Nonetheless, most of the emigrant votes are "missing votes" that could have impacted election outcomes. Active involvement by these voters in the elections is going to contribute to increased representation and political pluralism – one of the key challenges that Georgia's young democracy is facing today.

In order to facilitate participation in the voting by Georgian emigrants, and decrease the number of "missing votes", this policy paper proposes following these short- and long-term recommendations:

To the government of Georgia and the CEC

- Start active information campaigns among Georgian citizens living abroad on how to formally request additional polling stations in their city of residence and on how to register as a voter;
- Work closely with emigrants and diaspora communities abroad to coordinate the diffusion of information and promote higher turnout;
- Work closely with the Georgian diaspora on possibilities of opening additional polling stations in cities with large immigrant population;
- Increase the period that is needed for registration as a voter without prior consular registration;
- Conduct studies to assess the readiness of the infrastructure and software for the introduction electronic voting;
- Study the possibility of mail voting for citizens living abroad;
- Introduce the possibility of voting over several days in Georgian consulates and embassies;
- Recruit temporary staff who would work in foreign representations during the pre-election and election period;

To political parties

- Increase campaigning and engagement with the Georgian diaspora in order to incentivise their participation in elections;
- Work together with relevant stakeholders on developing legal and technical frameworks that would allow emigrants to vote without a physical presence at the embassy or the consulate;
- Go beyond narrow party-interests and work together to address these challenges that emigrants are facing;

To the non-governmental sector and media

- Actively cooperate with the Georgian diaspora on information campaigns regarding voter procedures on voting abroad;
- Provide legal and bureaucratic assistance to emigrants in the process of registration as a voter abroad;
- Work closely with international partners to share their experience with distant voting;
- Conduct studies to examine existing legislations and procedures in other countries regarding emigrant voters;
- Work on policy recommendations for relevant stakeholders in Georgia.

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**THE VOICE OF YOUNG GEORGIAN
VOTERS IN POLITICS: EXPECTATIONS,
DEMANDS, AND POLITICAL
RESPONSES**

SALOME KANDELAKI

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

To increase political participation and confidence among Georgian youth, it is crucial for political parties to effectively communicate therewith, be sincere, and offer concrete action plans that address their needs, as borne out by interviews conducted with both young people and political parties. Prior to 2023, civic and political activity among young people was relatively low, but events of 2023 and 2024, particularly mass protests against the “Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence” (the so-called “Foreign Agents Law”), highlighted the growing importance of accountability with respect to young people.

This policy brief analyzes the challenges

and expectations that young people have of political parties and political parties’ vision and strategy of attracting young voters and involving them in political life. The analysis is based on official documents, reports, statistics, public opinion polls, and data from nine interviews with political party leaders and focus groups with young people. The brief concludes with recommendations for Georgian political parties on how better to engage with and attract youth as a voting demographic, as well as suggestions for Georgian youth to enhance their political participation in democratic processes.

Keywords: Youth, demographic, political parties, elections, programs

INTRODUCTION

The participation of young people in democratic processes in Georgia has increased over the last two years, but their level of engagement with party politics and the political class remains low, consistent with previous years. Young people constitute approximately 18% of Georgia’s population (Cheishvili and Gogoladze, 2020), yet only 18.8% participated in the last parliamentary elections (Polis180, 2021). Individuals aged 18 to 29 make up one-fifth of Georgian voters (Georgian Central Electoral Commission, 2020). If the majority of this demographic continues to abstain from elections, the youth vote may be effectively marginalized. Despite an increased street-level presence of the youth, if the political class fails to earn their trust, there is a significant risk that young people will not participate in the upcoming parliamentary elections. In

2020, only 38% of young people were familiar with the electoral environment and the election programs of political parties prior to the elections (IRI Georgia, 2020). This weak familiarity was partly caused by political parties publishing their programs only a few weeks before the elections, failing to communicate them effectively, or not making the programs accessible to the public. A basic lack of interest in political involvement among young people also contributed to this situation. But the pre-election period of 2024 presents a different political landscape compared to previous parliamentary elections. Young people are now closely and critically observing the actions of political parties and are actively involved in civic processes.

Until 2023, Georgian youth were largely neglected by the political elite, but follow-

ing the significant events of March 2023 (Samkharadze & Lebanidze, 2023) and 2024 (Boffey, 2024), when “Generation Z” exhibited strong resistance to the “Transparency of Foreign Influence” law, the Georgian political spectrum began engaging more actively with young people. Despite this increased communication, political parties often remain unaware of specific expectations among youth. Consequently, the strategies employed by politicians to attract and recruit young people are frequently misaligned with youth expectations.

With the 2024 parliamentary elections approaching, attracting young voters has become a top priority for politicians to ensure

high voter turnout. Thus it is crucial to understand the needs of young people and develop political programs that address those needs. This policy brief aims to analyze what young Georgian voters expect from political parties and how political parties can ensure youth political participation in the 2024 elections. The analysis presented in this policy brief is based on existing literature and reports, youth manifestos, public opinion polls, statistical data, focus groups with youth (particularly Generation Z), and interviews and consultations with leaders of nine political parties. Overall, this paper attempts to provide a comprehensive overview of the perspectives of the youth and the readiness of political parties to meet their expectations.

WHAT ARE YOUNG PEOPLE’S VIEWS AND EXPECTATIONS OF POLITICAL PARTIES?

The majority of young people in Georgia do not find anything in common with any political party and do not believe that any party is pursuing their interests. According to last year’s public opinion poll results, 80% of youth aged 18 to 34 do not find any party close to them (NDI Georgia 2023). Moreover, 74% of young people either did not intend to vote for any existing political party or were undecided (NDI Georgia 2023). While the reintroduction of the “Foreign Agents’ Law” in 2024 has made the youth more politically mobilized and their votes are likely to shift to the opposition flank, due to yet unformed political configurations and distrust of the political class in general, a large number of young people remain undecided, which is evinced by focus groups with students from different universities (FG with students).

The biggest obstacles for young people with regard to politicians are populism, insin-

cerity, and lack of a consistent program or strategic plan. According to the youth focus group results, the basic criteria that political parties need to meet to attract young voters are strong ideological positioning and concrete solutions to specific problems. In conversation with Gen Z, it was revealed that the political party member competence is crucial to most of them. The competence of representatives of political parties should be demonstrated by having an objective view of our country’s recent history — not be bound by the past, but an objective perception of modernity and not a focus on political revenge.

Gen Z believes that politicians should have the ability to initiate issue-based discussions themselves and not merely focus on hot-button issues among the populace, and they should have the ability to convince the pub-

lic of the importance of certain issues that are not already popular.

As the study shows, to deserve the youth's attention, a political party should offer very concrete action plans and solutions to existing problems. Apart from this, the parties must have a strategy concerning national and regional security and economic stability.

The criteria that will motivate young people to go to the voting booths, and those that will make them want to participate in party political life, also differ from each other. As young people say, to be motivated to go to the elections, political parties should first explain why the youth's voice is important. Second, parties should write detailed manifestos to clearly explain their promises and convince young people – election slogans are not enough for them. And third, parties should have direct communication with people, with personal meetings having a positive effect.

As for motivation to join any political party, the young people interviewed believe it important to convey ideas to people in simple language. They also believe that the parties should be able to ensure that the voice of

youth is understood, with political programs created specifically therefor. This could be done by establishing youth councils and clubs to attract more young people as both voters and party members. One focus group participant recalled an American example in which young people are involved in decision-making at the local level under the wings of Republican and Democrat political parties' youth organizations.

It can be seen from this that young people in Georgia have a desire to contribute to decentralization and the decision-making process at the municipal level, but are rarely allowed to do so.

For political parties to understand what attracts young voters, they were also asked what the positive aspects of the political class in Georgia are today. In response, participants spoke positively about the ruling party's attempt to emphasize stability. Regarding the political opposition, they named a few aspects – an established Western perspective and corresponding narratives; strong support for Ukraine; close cooperation with academia, independent think tanks; and respect for the recommendations of international organizations.

WHAT ARE THE MAJOR CHALLENGES OF THE GEORGIAN YOUTH?

There is a huge gap between the youth demographics' needs and political parties' programs regarding youth-related issues. Among many problems, the fundamental challenges of youth are poor quality education, lack of opportunity, and socio-economic inequality (GIP and Polis180 2020). Young people argue that political parties do not ad-

dress these problems adequately (FG with students, respondents 1,2,5).

Starting with educational challenges, according to the latest study on youth, approximately 31% of young people aged 14-29 are neither educated, trained, or employed (Shubitidze, Sichinava & Khoshtaria 2023).

Young people are also concerned that the educational system does not respond to international or even domestic requirements. Thus, they argue, the demands of the labor market are not in line with the quality of education provided by the Georgian system (FG with students, respondents 2,5,6). The study by the Youth Agency and focus group results revealed that there are not enough vocational or professional programs, and those that exist are not of a quality high enough to enable young people to advance in their career (FG with students; Youth Agency & FES). This is why, to improve their qualifications, young people try to participate in competitions to be enrolled in professional programs and free courses offered by international organizations and the NGO sector (FG with students 2024).

On the subject of the lack of opportunity and socioeconomic inequality, young people appear to mean unemployment. The reason for this is the mismatch of skills of young people with the market, and the absence of career services in universities (UNAG 2021). Young people also emphasize that both in the public and private sectors young people are used as free labor, especially in unpaid

internship programs. Those who do have jobs complain of inadequate wages (GIP & Polis180; FG with students 2024).

Although young people are well aware of the causes of their problems, they do not have adequate spaces or formats with which to lobby for their needs at local and national levels (GIP & Polis180). They know that it is possible to participate in the political decision-making process from several platforms, be it local councils, youth centers, or youth wings of political parties, but they do not believe any of these formats effective (FG with students, respondents 3,4,7 2024). As for joining political parties and promoting their vision from political platforms, according to their observation, young people are rarely allowed to play a tangible role in the majority of political parties, and they argue that their role in the majority of cases is mostly symbolic, which is why most young people avoid involvement in party politics altogether (FG with students, respondents 1,3,4,5,6). If the political parties do not make efforts to include them and determine what is important to them only from their point of view, the political elite will not be able to gain the trust of the youth.

WHAT IS THE POLITICAL PARTIES' APPROACH TOWARDS THE GEORGIAN YOUTH?

In Georgian politics, traditionally, the involvement of young people in party politics was mainly auxiliary – distributing election program brochures, carrying flags, and appearing in crowds for pictures. This happened because the political leaders did not properly appreciate the role of the youth in party politics, which is why most youth

did not want to affiliate themselves with the parties. But since 2023, when so-called Gen Z emerged in society as a key player in mass protests, parties were obliged to rethink their strategies towards the young demographic and youth involvement in party politics.

Over the course of this study, interviews

were conducted with the leaders of the nine opposition political parties.¹ Of those nine parties, the responses of Droa and Girchi-More Freedom were merged, based on their decision. The ruling party was also officially approached, but the research team did not receive a response. The graph below illustrates the youth-oriented action priorities of the political parties surveyed and their strategies for attracting young people to their parties.

Among action priorities, education for six parties and employment for five parties are the most important with regard to young people (Graph II). It can thus be said that the needs of young people and the priorities of these parties align with each other. In spite of this, information about these programs is not reaching the youth, and so this problem likely arises from the communication problem mentioned by focus group participants. The parties' strategies and solutions are quite different. Concerning education, for example, Strategy Aghmashenebeli, Labor Party, Droa & Girchi-More Freedom mainly find the need for educational reform (Vashadze, Kumsishvili, Khoshtaria 2024), while Lelo for Georgia focuses on the need for vocational education (Khazaradze 2024), and the Party for the People focuses on tuition fees and housing problems (Dolidze 2024). Four parties stressed the importance of paid internships (Lelo for Georgia, For Georgia, For the People, Strategy Aghmashenebeli) and two professional development in general (UNM, Citizens). Regarding the difference

in priorities between the parties, one can highlight Lelo for Georgia's and Strategy Sghmashenebeli's sharp positions on youth migration, Lelo's efforts to encourage sports and cultural programs, the Labor Party's lobbying of the need to create youth infrastructure, and Citizens' active engagement in discussions regarding defense issues and the Defense Code in particular.

Five political parties are trying to recruit youth via youth wings and youth organizations; the United National Movement and Lelo for Georgia even have separate youth offices. Most of these parties use face-to-face communication and social networks to involve young people in party life. The strategy of both Aghmashenebeli and the United National Movement of involving young people in thematic discussions and debates is distinct from the other parties' strategies (Vashadze 2024).

The approach of Droa and Girchi-More Freedom is also interesting, in that they believe it important for the parties themselves to offer a vision and values to youth and not to deviate from party principles (Khoshtaria 2024). Almost all party leaders agree that you should talk to Gen Z in understandable, simple language and a friendly environment. Thus, none of the parties is apparently aware of young people's preference for detailed, measurable action plans and a demonstration of sincerity (FG with students 2024).

¹ United National Movement (UNM), Lelo for Georgia, Georgian Labour Party, For Georgia, For the People, Conservative Party of Georgia, Citizens, Strategy Aghmashenebeli, Gorchi - More Freedom & Droa (interviewed together).

Graph II: Political parties' youth-oriented priorities, approaches to youth engagement in party politics, and strategies for attracting young voters

Parties	Youth-oriented thematic priorities	Approaches to involve young people in party activities	Strategies to attract young voters
United National Movement (UNM)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Employment *Professional development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Face-to-face meetings *Debates *Youth organization *Youth office 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Fund for youth initiatives *Public discussions
Lelo for Georgia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Paid internships *Employment *Vocational education *Sport *Culture *Youth migration 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Youth organization *Youth office *Political Academy *Engagement in creative work *Friendly environment and horizontal approach *Events *Youth in political council 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Communication in youth-friendly language *Short and visually effective messages *Explanatory social media posts *Engagement in party activities where there is no hierarchy *Party internships
Georgian Labour Party	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Employment *Youth-oriented infrastructure *Education 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Youth engagement in intellectual forums *Friendly communication 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Adapting the program to the interests of young people *Spreading party messages on social platforms
For Georgia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Paid internships² 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Communicating party vision and ideas regarding youth issues *Offering places on municipal election lists *Calls for recruiting new members via online application *Events 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Spreading messages via social media *Showing youth that there are many young leaders in the party

² The youth-oriented program of the political party For Georgia is being created in cooperation with IRI.

For the People	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Students' dormitories *Employment, *Paid internships *Tuition fee in HEI 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Internships in the party and Tbilisi City Municipal Assembly *Offering training with the support of NGOs *Suggesting participation in decision-making 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Face-to-face communication *Putting youth problems on the political agenda *Social media communication
Conservative Party of Georgia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Education³ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Creating a new youth wing, to replace the previous one 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Creating a new youth-oriented program
Strategy Aghmashenebeli	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Education on school and university levels *Financial stability *Internships *Youth Migration 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Thematic discussions *Space for asking critical questions *Internships in the party 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Face-to-face communication *Field meetings *Communication with migrants
Citizens	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Professional development *Defence Code⁴ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Field meetings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Thematic meetings *Communication in social media
Girchi - More Freedom & Droa (interviewed together)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Educational reform *Workplaces *Russia and the EU *Values 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Meetings in a friendly environment *Engagement with youth in youth-friendly environments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Youth-friendly communication language *Offering ready-made visions and not acting based on the views of the youth *Video messages on social media

³ The Conservative Party of Georgia is meanwhile developing the the program.

⁴ The Citizens party is holding field works and developing the program.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Young people are now more politically active in Georgia, and so their demands upon politicians are more clear and specific. Even though political parties are aware of the fundamental needs of young people in the areas of education and employment, the parties are still unable to respond to the needs of young people because their approaches are superficial. Before the active and massive involvement of youth in civic activism, political parties saw the role of youth in political party life as auxiliary, rather than as a primary component of success. Now parties have slowly realized that there is no alternative to involving young people in decision-making

processes, and that their participation only in pre-election agitation has lost relevance. Thus, most political parties are trying to find a simple and friendly language to communicate with youth in order to understand them better. But the parties still lack sincerity and detailed, measurable action plans. Accordingly, if political parties take into account the visions and demands of young people and become more sincere regarding their values and plans, there is a good chance that turnout among still-undecided young voters will increase dramatically in the 2024 parliamentary elections.

Recommendations to political parties:

- In cooperation with experts and international organizations working on election techniques and campaigns, study the **best practices for communicating with young voters including digital tools**, and apply them in practice.
- **Develop detailed election programs with action plans** by indicating realistic and tangible solutions to each fundamental problem for youth, and by distinguishing key people to be held accountable by youth to raise trust.
- **Outline an ideological niche and basic values** to allow young voters to quickly and clearly identify your party's positions.
- During the elaboration of election programs, **hold intensive consultations with various social segments of young people**, both in the center and on the periphery.

Recommendations to Georgian youth:

- **Transform their civil activism into political actions** by identifying the political parties closest to their views and values and getting involved in political party life.
- Exercise their basic civic rights and responsibilities, and **participate in elections** by making their preferred political choices.
- Take on the responsibility of becoming

ing the guardians of democracy and **mass-register as election observers** to ensure fair and transparent elections.

- **Put youth's needs on the political agenda** during the 2024 election by writing manifestos and joint statements, and advocating directly with the political parties.

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 - Respondent 5. 2024. Georgian Institute of Public Affairs (GIPA). Online FG.
 - Respondent 6. 2024. Ilia State University (IliaUni). Online FG.
 - Respondent 7. 2024. Caucasus University (CU). Online FG.
 - Respondent 8. 2024. International Black Sea University (IBSU). Online FG.
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**FROM EU CANDIDATE STATUS TO
THE “FOREIGN AGENTS LAW”: WHAT
PARTIES SAY ON SOCIAL MEDIA**

**NINO SAMKHARADZE
NINO KVIRIKASHVILI**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This policy brief examines the role of political parties in Georgia's young democracy, focusing on their use of social media (SM) to engage with voters. It highlights the strategic importance of messaging in attracting and retaining the electorate's trust. The brief notes a significant public trust deficit regarding Georgian political parties, with over 50% of the population expressing no affiliation or declining to answer survey questions about party preference. The upcoming 2024 election is seen as critical to Georgia's return to democratic progress, with recent mass protests underscoring the public's aspiration to join the European Union. The study

analyzes the social media communication of the ten largest parliamentary parties, monitoring their Facebook pages in two time periods: December 2023 and April 2024, exploring the extent to which parties' content is issue-based, personalized, and targeted, and identifies creative methods to engage with the public online. The brief concludes with recommendations to address communication gaps and enhance parties' digital engagement strategies.

Keywords: political parties; Georgian politics; strategic communication, social media communication

INTRODUCTION

Being the main actors in politics, political parties play a crucial role in consolidating young democracies such as Georgia. Party competition is a significant part of democracy – a broad market of policy ideas creates a diversified environment for the electorate within which each citizen may pursue their interests. Strategic messaging is an important tool in the hands of parties to attract more voters and increase the level of trust and legitimization of their policy ideas (Stromer-Galley 2021). In Georgia, political parties often experience a crisis related to public trust. According to public surveys, more than 50% of the Georgian population regularly say either that no party speaks to them, or they refuse to answer the question (CRRC 2023). After the ruling Georgian Dream party successfully had the controversial "Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence" adopted, the upcoming election of October 2024 is projected to be a benchmark in the country back on the democratic track.

Mass protests taking place for more than two months in the streets of Tbilisi demonstrate the Georgian people's will to join the EU.

The present policy brief investigates how the main political parties in Georgia communicate with their voters through on social media, the form, content and general principles of their messaging, and what is needed to connect parties' policy visions and voters via digital media. Thus, the brief starts with methodological comments, followed by key trends discussed in the following order: (1) How issue-based parties' social media communication is; (2) how personalized the parties' pages are; (3) how political parties in Georgia target voters through their official pages; and (4) what are tools and creative methods they use to attract viewership. In the last part, recommendations are made to the parties to address the weaknesses identified in the policy brief.

METHODOLOGICAL AND THEORETICAL COMMENTS

Social media have revolutionized political communication by providing a direct, immediate, and interactive platform for political parties to engage with voters. Considering the increasing role of social media in political communication across the world (Subekti et al., 2023, p.299), monitoring and analyzing social media networks, including the use of social media by political actors, have become essential tools for researchers in understanding key political and social issues (Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2012). A similar trend can be observed in Georgia, exemplified by the active presence of Georgian citizens and political parties on social media. Social media platforms are also actively used in election campaigning and, after television, the internet and social media are the most important sources of information about elections for Georgian voters (ISFED 2022). Social media monitoring is thus a valuable research tool for gaining valuable insight into the political communication strategies of Georgian political parties. Monitoring has the potential to reveal not only the strategies of political actors, but also subtler dynamics of political communication.

However, the theoretical framework of this analysis is grounded in the understanding that social media, while offering an increasingly dynamic platform for political engagement, also presents challenges in terms of subjectivity, manipulation, and the potential for biased reactions (Subekti et al., 2023; Stromer-Galley 2021). The study acknowledges these limitations and calls for more extensive research to assess the role of social

media in political party communication in Georgia.

In terms of methodology, the ten largest parliamentary parties have been selected, with their official Facebook pages being monitored in the months of December 2023 and April 2024. These parties are: Georgian Dream, United National Movement, For Georgia, Lelo, European Georgia, Girchi, Girchi More Freedom, Citizens, Labour Party, Strategy Aghmashenebeli (Appendix 1). December 2023 and April 2024 were selected as the monitoring time periods since those two months saw very significant events—Georgia receiving EU membership candidate status and the re-introduction of the so-called “Foreign Agents Law” by Georgian Dream.

The current study anticipates two critical challenges: first, parties might have alternative accounts on social media, such as the party leadership’s personal pages, with confounds pertaining to individual communication strategies. Second, social media are a subjective and manipulative tool to measure party engagement with the electorate — assessing how targeted the parties’ communication strategies are might be confounded by factors such as motivation for reacting to posts; only part of society using social media is engaged with posts, and a lot comes down to the parties’ “reach” for their posts and what they are doing to increase it. These limitations demonstrate the complexity of the issue and further need for investigation with increasingly diversified methods

Trend I: A lack of issue-based platforms in party SM content

It is important to emphasize the extent to which political parties respond to voters' expectations and this is reflected in their communication. Given the demand for issue-based discussions among political parties from voters (Interparty Manifesto 2022; Interparty Manifesto 2023), a key objective of the parties' content should be to engage more actively and strategically in issue-based communication, especially during an election year. Increased demand for more cooperation between political parties and a demand for a coalition government can also be observed through the President's Georgian Charter initiative, which was largely supported by most political parties and the public (Civil.Ge 2024). But monitoring

shows that parties lack issue-based content on social media.

While political parties have their own priority issues which they discuss on the various platforms, as demonstrated in Table 1, it can also be observed that the largest part of social media communication is occupied by current issues, exemplified by EU candidacy status in December and the draft law on foreign agents in April. While it does not come as a surprise that most parties capitalized on these issues, it still hints at the reactive nature of the parties' content and messaging rather than a proactive, issue-based strategy of political engagement.

Table 1: Thematic priorities of the parties on SM in December, 2023¹

Political Party	Issues
Georgian Dream	Climate change, scientific opportunities, medical reform, budget, Hungary, education reform, sport projects, Mukhrovani military base, candidacy status
UNM	2024 Elections; EU candidacy status; occupation; corruption; immigration; education system; regional problems; traffic jams; stray dogs; hybrid war
For Georgia	Corruption; EU; Bitchvinta and Russia; local governance; increasing prices
Lelo for Georgia	Fireworks; pensions; diaspora; EU candidacy status; electoral reform; construction at Laguna Vere; women's economic enhancement; security and parliament; animals in the streets; Bitchvinta and Russia
Strategy Aghmashenebeli	EU candidacy status; Georgia as a transit country; traffic problems; bank loans; 2024 elections; education reform; economic problems

¹ Note: The most discussed issues are placed first, the second most shared second, and so on.

Girchi More Freedom	Diaspora; state fundings; EU; corruption, ideologies, taxes, occupation
Girchi	Compulsory military service; 2024 elections; conflict resolution; education system; EU; drug policy, infrastructure, inflation; privatization
Citizens	Socio Economic problems (bank loans, increasing prices, water systems); EU candidacy status; de-oligarchization, corruption; fireworks
Labor party	N/A
European Socialists	Old IDs in elections, occupation

Source: Monitoring outcomes

Trend II: Parties' social media show them to be mostly leader-based and individualistic

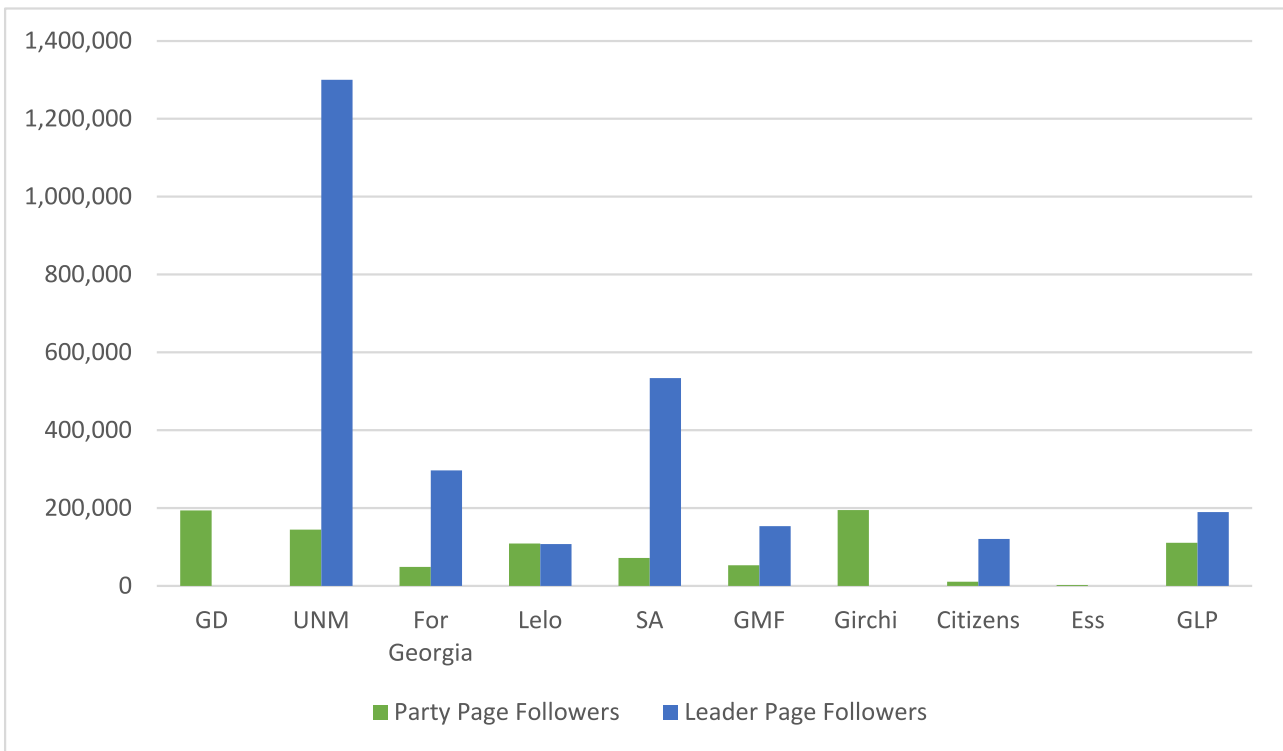
In Georgian politics, political parties are usually considered to be leader-based. This trend is demonstrated by their social media as well. In both monitoring periods, most of the parties demonstrated a large dependency on their leader or group of leaders. Four key indicators of this trend can be distinguished:

- Official page of party leader has more followers than corresponding party page;
- Mostly the party leader speaks through the party page;
- Concrete posts depicting the party leader show the significance of the leader in decision-making in the party;
- Posts about leaders secure more en-

gagement (likes, comments, shares) than other content

The two largest parties by number of voters – Georgian Dream (GD) and United National Movement (UNM) – are exceptional in that they openly admit that their leaders, Bidzina Ivanishvili and Mikhail Saakashvili, respectively, are the axes of their parties. The prime minister and then head of GD, Irakli Kobakhidze, stressed the “political charity” of Bidzina Ivanishvili in a social media statement, while UNM content has a number of posts about the “heroism” of Mikhail Saakashvili.

In six parties out of ten, the number of followers of the party leader exceeds that of the party page itself. For GD and European Socialists, a page for the leader was not found. For the Girchi party there is no distinct leader running their own page (Figure 1; Appendix 2).

Figure 1: Official SM pages and their followers: Parties / Leaders

Source: *Monitoring outcomes*

Nonetheless, the larger parties have the ability to diversify the speakers in their social media content. A high degree of individual-

ism in social media content is illustrated by post engagement in the four largest parties (Table 2).

Table 2: Posts with the largest engagement for GD, UNM, FG, Lelo

Party	Content of the post	Engagement of the post
GD	“Appeal to the Nation” by Bidzina Ivanishvili	18K
UNM	“Georgian Emigrants” by Mikhail Saakashvili	2,2K
FG	Giorgi Gakharia’s meeting with the population in the Village of Obuji	1K
Lelo	Mamuka Khazaradze elected as a Head of the party	1,3K

Source: *Monitoring outcomes*

Thus, political parties' pages are not invested fully in "de-individualizing" communication with voters. In some cases, party pages even encourage more engagement with a specific leader. Social media can be an im-

portant instrument to promote the party's team itself, with its own expertise and specific background, and in this way build trust not towards a person but towards the party as a whole.

Trend III: Target groups not diversified

An important goal for the social media of the political parties should be to reach as many demographics as possible. Georgian political parties demonstrate that their communication strategies are not targeted, i.e. rarely apply to specific groups of society or speak to their specific needs and interests. Based on observation of political parties' official pages, several patterns can be identified.

Some of the parties' official pages do not demonstrate an interest in specific social groups, meaning that they have posted fewer than five times per month regarding a specific issue; religious and cultural inclusivity is missing from some of parties' SM agendas; party messaging with regard to current events (e.g. the "Foreign Agents Law") is mainly reactive.

Table 3: Political parties' SM and diversity of their target groups

Party	Religious/Cultural Inclusivity ²	Posting about specific target group min. five times per month
Georgian Dream	Exclusive	No
United National Movement	Inclusive	No
For Georgia	Exclusive	No
Lelo	Inclusive	No
Strategy Aghmashenebeli	Neutral	No
Girchi More Freedom	Neutral	Yes (Diaspora)
Girchi	Neutral	No
European Socialists	Exclusive	No
Citizens	Neutral	Yes (Pensioners)
Georgian Labour Party	Neutral	No

Source: *Monitoring outcomes*

² Inclusive: posts about more than two different religious/cultural groups; Exclusive: posts about only one religious/cultural group; Neutral: no relative posts.

During the April 2024 monitoring period, the faces of youth were promoted heavily in most of the political parties' social media content. This changing dynamic was brought on by the branding of the anti "Russian law" protests as mainly a Gen Z-led process. Thus many political parties publicized their youth as key speakers during this

period. So, targeting particular demographic groups seems to be more a reactive rather than proactive tactic in the political parties' playbook. Diversification of speakers with specific backgrounds and professional qualifications should be the important step diversifying target groups within the electorate whom the parties wish to engage with.

Trend IV: Parties' SM tools are not diversified, creative or catchy

Most of the political parties' social media content lacks creativity in the sense that they basically recycle content from traditional media. Parties rarely create original content - videos, infographics or other types of posts

informing users about the party platform. The problem with this approach is that parties waste their engagement by sharing their responses on TV media questions and their agenda, rather than suggesting their own.

Table 4: Unique tools of parties' communication in the SM

Political Party	Tools oriented to catch the user
Georgian Dream	Hashtags
UNM	Posters; Reels, Graphics
For Georgia	Short videos, Posters
Lelo for Georgia	Original content - informing videos, infographics
Strategy Aghmashenebeli	N/A
Girchi More Freedom	Campaigning slogans - "voting booth in your city", Humor, Thematic Albums
Girchi	Live, Animations, Articles, Reels
Citizens	Original content - informing videos, Live
Labor party	N/A
European Socialists	N/A

Source: *Monitoring outcomes*

The dimension of creativity should be one of the most important social media strategies for political parties if they want to catch

the attention of potential voters. Humor, hashtags, immediate interaction through livestreaming, and slogan-based content

are among the wide range of tools used by a very small number of political parties, whilst usually such posts demonstrate more

engagement on the SM official pages. Original content not only attracts more people but makes the party platforms more understandable.

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As the findings of the present policy brief demonstrate, political parties in Georgia need to dedicate more expertise, human and financial resources to improve the content of their social media to ensure more positive and intensive engagement from voters. Parties frequently misuse the tools available on social media, and rarely create their own original content. This analysis indicates a

high level of leader-based strategy, low level of creativity, and a lack of targeted strategies when communicating with the digital users. While political parties in Georgia need to work on building trust in society, the efficient application of social media tools is of crucial importance. Thus, based on the findings of the current policy brief, we make the following recommendations:

Recommendations for political parties in Georgia:

- Political parties should work on a specific strategy to make party communications less individualistic, i.e. leader-based;
- Increase content depicting party members' involvement in the decision-making of the party;
- Suggest the content about the political party members through which the awareness about individuals should increase and trust towards the party as a whole should be built;
- Identify concrete social and demographic groups within electorate, stratify priority social groups and prepare specific content therefor;
- Engage with specific electoral groups regularly, at least once a week, through targeted live formats or other creative tools available on social media
- Suggest specific policies of interest to these specific groups through differentiated content, e.g. simplification of the platform via infographics
- Proactively offer issue-based political communication through social media engage with the public and encourage more political debate around platform issues;
- Political parties should more proactively cooperate with each other on issues of common interest and engage with the voters in different ways on social media to increase public trust and meet voters' expectations;
- Create short-term, mid-term, and long-term communication strategies built around various issues to en-

sure more direct and honest online communication with voters;

- Diversify content according to different religious or cultural groups in Georgia;
- Dedicate separate resources to work

on their own original content to share on their social media pages rather than re-share other sources of their interviews;

- Creativity of content needs to be improved to grab attention amid the welter of choices online.



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APPENDIXES

Appendix 1: *Parties and their abbreviations (suggested by authors)*

Party	Abbreviation
Georgian Dream	GD
United National Movement	UNM
For Georgia	FG
Lelo	Lelo
Strategy Aghmashenebeli	SA
Girchi More Freedom	GMF
Girchi	Girchi
European Socialists	ESs
Citizens	Citizens
Georgian Labour Party	GLP

Appendix 2: *Official SM pages and their followers: Parties / Leaders*

Party	Party page followers	Leader page followers
Georgian Dream	194K	N/A
United National Movement	145K	1,3M
For Georgia	49K	397K
Lelo	109K	108K
Strategy Aghmashenebeli	72K	534K
Girchi More Freedom	53K	154K
Girchi	195K	N/A
European Socialists	2,4K	N/A
Citizens	11K	121K
Georgian Labour Party	111K	198K

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