



POLICY BRIEF

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From EU Candidate Status to the “Foreign Agents Law”: What Parties Say On Social Media

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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

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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, 2023³

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
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

³ Note: The most discussed issues are placed first, the second most shared second, and so on.

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

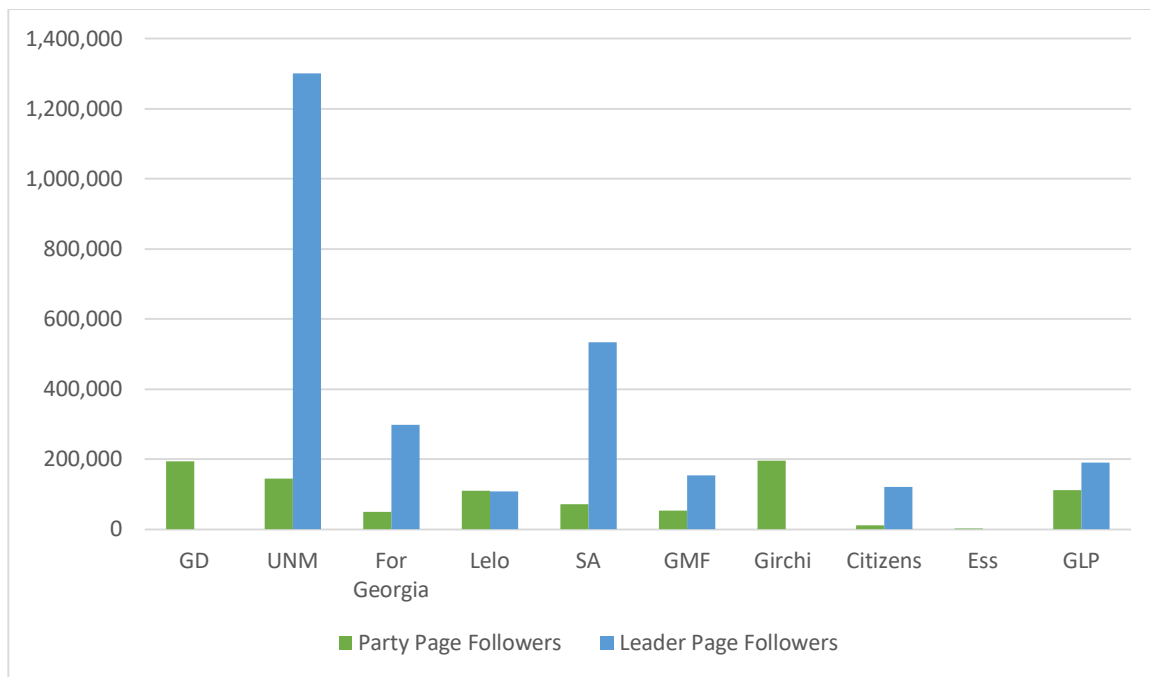
In Georgian politics, political parties are usually considered to be leader-based. This trend is demonstrated by their social media as well. In both monitoring periods, most of the parties demonstrated a large dependency on their leader or group of leaders. Four key indicators of this trend can be distinguished:

- 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 engagement (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 individualism 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 important 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 ⁴	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

⁴ Inclusive: posts about more than two different religious/cultural groups;
 Exclusive: posts about only one religious/cultural group;
 Neutral: no relative posts.

European Socialists	Exclusive	No
Citizens	Neutral	Yes (Pensioners)
Georgian Labour Party	Neutral	No

Source: Monitoring outcomes

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 ensure 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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