ALL POLITICS IS LOCAL:

Why Further Democratic Change in the Regions of Georgia Is Needed?

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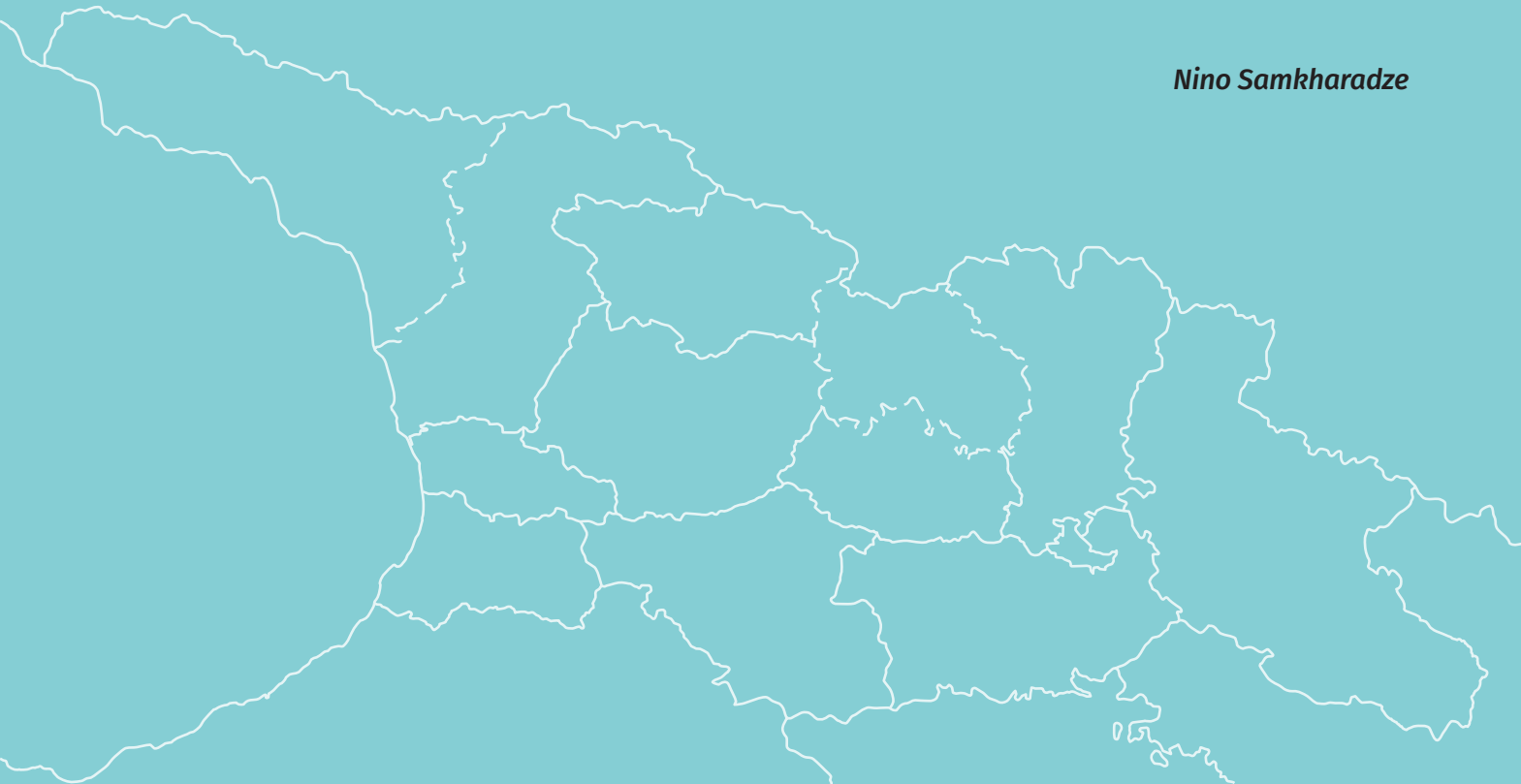
POLICY BRIEF
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Summary

The 2024 parliamentary election in Georgia is viewed effectively as a referendum and thus critical for what lies ahead, defining society's position on the country's European future and integration. Given the accelerated decline in democracy and an imminent threat to the Georgia's European aspirations emerged under the third term of the Georgian Dream government, the vote found to be a referendum to decide the country's existential future. In the 2024 elections Georgian Dream officially registered the highly contested 54% victory. A month after the 2024 parliamentary elections the Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze announced publicly about the decision to take the EU Accession negotiations out of party's agenda. Society has responded strongly to this disturbing escalation in polarization which has been exemplified by the ruling party's adoption, amid widespread public protest, of the controversial law "On the Transparency of Foreign Influence", and imposing multiple of repressive laws and actions against the broad public. Despite weeks of demonstrations on the streets, Georgian Dream has persisted in anti-democratic actions, underscoring the ruling party's determination to consolidate power by any means necessary.

This is why the parliamentary elections in October were of exceptional significance (Zurabishvili 2024a). The Georgian population was called upon to not only elect a parliament and government, but also to reaffirm, at a fundamental level, commitment to the country's democratic and European development. Similar pressure is expected to be exerted during the snap parliamentary elections, if they take place upon public demand. At this juncture, it is crucial to engender the broadest possible trust in alternative pro-European political parties in order for society to consolidate Georgia's democratic future. It is considered that, traditionally, politics in Georgia are centered mainly in the capital, although more than 70% of the population are registered in the regions and vote outside of Tbilisi. Therefore, political parties must undertake significantly stronger and more effective efforts in the regional areas – big cities, smaller urban and rural settlements of Georgia – beyond their past practice, to safeguard the country's democracy and ensure its European future. Accordingly, this policy brief, based on demographic and analytical data as well as expert interviews, starts by examining the key characteristics of political behavior in the regions. It then outlines three strategies that are essential for regional engagement, analyzed through the "how, who, and what" framework. The essay concludes with pertinent recommendations for political parties.

Key words: parties in regions; elections in the regions; politics in the regions; 2024 elections; 2025 elections
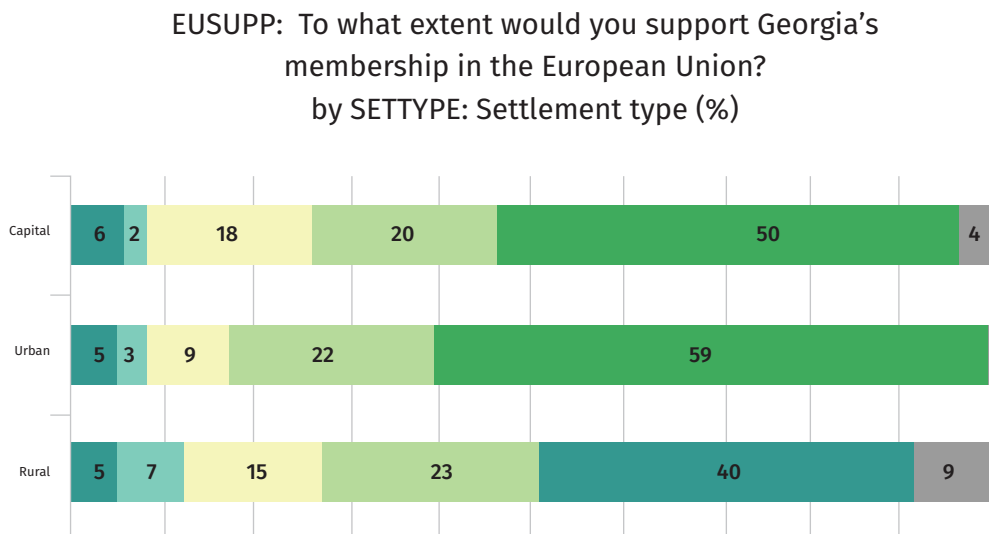
Introduction

The political and public crises that the ruling Georgian Dream party has brought upon its citizens in recent months, following a cascade of anti-democratic laws, sabotaging the European integration and abusing the protesters, inevitably places Georgia's democratic development and its European future at an unprecedented level of risk. Accordingly, after one of the most decisive elections in country's recent history, fighting against the authoritarian threats, Georgian population eventually determines the direction of the state's development – will it be still remaining on the European orbit of democracy or in the club of illiberal regimes? In this process, it is essential to mobilize society throughout the country as widely and strongly as possible. Engagement with the regions and reaching out to the communities living there, is vital. Given that more than 70% of Georgia's population are officially registered as voters in the regions, working with this part of the population before the elections is crucial.

The importance for the pro-European opposition political parties of working in the regions is increasing – even though they don't enjoy high public trust in the country, ultimately, it is the parties that should be the primary drivers of democratic restart throughout the country. To safeguard Georgia's European future, it is crucial for pro-European political actors to work more intensively, meaningfully, and sympathetically with the population outside of Tbilisi, differently from the previous years when they usually could not receive enough votes to balance the dominance of the ruling party. This effort is essential to communicate clearly what the political parties can offer to the local voters. To plan this effectively, it is necessary to discuss the interests, views, and challenges experienced by the populations living there. Additionally, it is important to identify the key dimensions that political parties should consider when planning their regional election campaigns.

Georgian Regions and Georgian Politics: How Big Is the Gap?

For decades, strong and stable public support of Georgia's EU membership has been existing among different demographic cohorts of Georgian people, registering 70%, 81% and 63% (in the capital, regional urban and rural areas respectively) of approval in spring 2024 (see Figure 1). While the Georgian Dream's recent accelerated democratic backsliding halts this aspiration, Georgia's leading pro-European opposition flank remains a way to challenge the new anti-European vector of the ruling party. Georgian president Salome Zurabishvili, during her 26 May Independence Day speech, initiated a Georgian Charter, which would unite all the pro-European and pro-democratic parties' goals. As the President stated, "when we vote for any under-signatory party of this Charter, we are, in fact, voting for the 'Georgian Charter' and, therefore, for a European future!" (Zurabishvili 2024b).

Figure 1:

Support of Georgia's membership in the EU by the type of settlement, April-May 2024

EUSUPP: To what extent would you support Georgia's
membership in the European Union?
by SETTYPE: Settlement type (%)

	Don't support at all	Rather not support	Partially support, partially don't support	Rather support	Fully support	DK/RA
Capital	6	2	18	20	50	4
Urban	5	3	9	22	59	
Rural	5	7	15	23	40	9

Source:
Caucasus Barometer, available at: https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2024ge/EUSUPP-by-SETTYPE/

- ■ Don't support at all
- ■ Rather not support
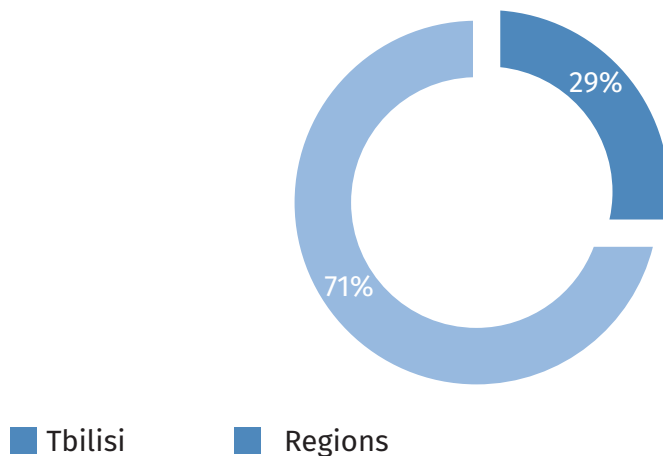- ■ Partially support, partially don't support
- ■ Rather support
- ■ Fully support
- ■ DK/RA

It is widely accepted that the key political processes in Georgia take place in the center, and therefore, the capital is also the main focus of the political parties (Shamugia 2023). This pattern is indicated by evidence coming from the activities of political parties on the ground and is disadvantageous when 71% of the population lives outside the capital, in the regions, in urban or rural settlements (see Figure 2). Although many people from regions conduct business, study, seek temporary work, or improve their living conditions by working in Tbilisi, their problems are often specifically linked to where they live and cannot be addressed solely by political slogans or policies developed in the capital. Given that the share of citizens officially registered outside of Tbilisi is so large, targeting this section of the population with comprehensive campaigns that will build trust may be more critical for the survival of democracy in Georgia than the parties have previously recognized.

Figure 2:
The population of Georgia in Tbilisi and the regions

■ Tbilisi   ■ Regions

Source:
Geostat, available at https://www.geostat.ge/ka/modules/categories/738/mosakhleobis -geografiuli-ganatsileba-da-shida-migratsia

According to public opinion surveys, the population outside the capital is less critical of political processes and the governing actors: in spring 2024, the respondents in the regional settlements registered more "rather trust" or "fully trust" in the existing government (33% and 34% - city / village), while the comparable rate in Tbilisi was 22% (see Figure 3,4).

Figure 3 and 4:

Assessment of country's domestic politics development and governance actors by the type of settlement, April-May 2024

RATEGOV4: How would you rate the performance of the current government? by SETTYPE: Settlement type (%)

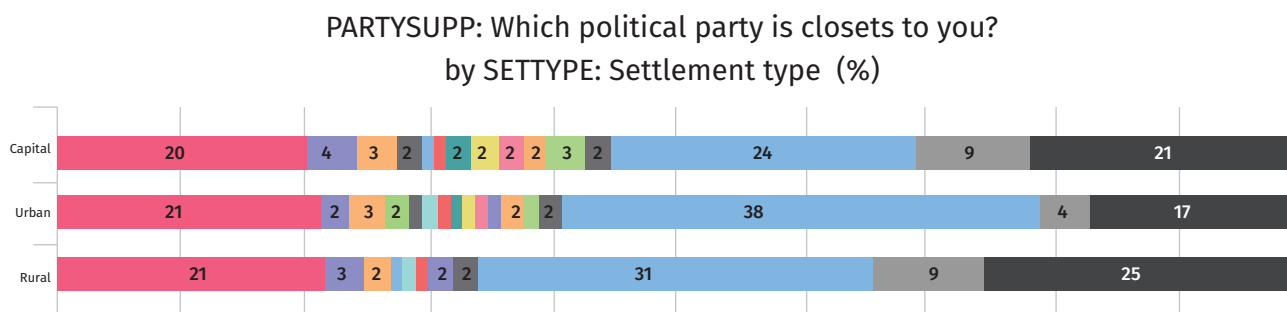|	Very bad	Bad	Good	Very Good	DK	RA
Capital	15	34	38	3	7	3
Urban	9	29	51		7	3
Rural	6	28	58		6	
Non-Georgians	5	19	61	8	5	3

- Very bad
- Bad
- Good
- Very Good
- DK
- RA

TRUEXEC: Trust - Executive government by SETTYPE: Settlement type (%)

	Fully distrust	Rather distrust	Neither trust or distrust	Rather trust	Fully trust	DK	RA
Capital	34	19	20	14	8		5
Urban	24	18	19	24	9		5
Rural	11	18	30	23	11		5

- Fully distrust
- Rather distrust
- Neither trust or distrust
- Rather trust
- Fully trust
- DK
- RA

Source 1: Caucasus Barometer, available at: https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/no2023ge/RATEGOV4-by-SETTYPE/
Source 2: Caucasus Barometer, available at: https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2024ge/TRUEXEC-by-SETTYPE/

Against the backdrop of these lower levels of criticism concerning the country's development, it is also clear that in the regions (both in urban areas – 42%, and in rural areas – 40%), the number of people who cannot identify themselves with any political party is higher than in Tbilisi (33%) (see Figure 5). This data combination provides a basis for assuming that the population in the regions has limited opportunities to understand and engage with the political and social processes. Consequently, it is much more challenging for them to find their political identity.

Figure 5:

Which party is closest to your views? By accommodation, April-May 2024[1]

PARTYSUPP: Which political party is closets to you? by SETTYPE: Settlement type (%)

	Georgian Dream	UNM	Ahali	Movement for Liberty	Aleko Elisashvili					Alt-info		DK	
Capital	20	4	3	2		2	2	2	2	3	2	24	9	21
Urban	21	2	3	2					2	2	38	4	17
Rural	21	3	2					2	2	31	9	25

Source: Caucasus Barometer, available at: https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2024ge/PARTYSUPP-by-SETTYPE/

- Georgian Dream (Irakli Garibashvili, Kakha Kaladze, Irakli Kobakhidze)
- United National Movement (Levan Khabeishvili)
- Political party, Ahali ("New) (Nika Melia, Nika Gvaramia)
- Movement for Liberty - European Georgia (Giga Bokeria, Akaki Bobokhidze, Gigi Tsereteli)
- Aleko Elisashvili - Citizens (Aleko Elisashvili)
- Alt-info party / conservative movement (Konstantine Morgoshia, Shota Martynenko)
- Conservative Party (Zviad Dzidziguri)
- Strategy Aghmashenebeli (Giorgi Vashadze)

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1. Answers "There is no such party" and "Don't know" are counted jointly.

An even more striking observation is that the turnout rate for the 2020 parliamentary elections was generally higher in the regions than in in Tbilisi (see Table 1). Kvemo Kartli was the only region with a lower turnout rate than Tbilisi, and the difference in activity compared to the region with highest turnout, Racha-Lechkhumi, was notably significant. This discrepancy was noticeably changed during the 2024 parliamentary elections and each region but Kvemo Kartli registered a significantly increased turnout. However, voters' turnout in half of the regions exceed the one in Tbilisi (Table 1). A potential explanation for this difference between the regions and Tbilisi might be diversified voting motivations, it can be assumed that the pressure from the executives over the local population to vote for them is more intense and more effective, rather than in Tbilisi, where the population can more successfully avoid voting and express their nihilism towards the political parties in this way. This disparity suggests that electoral units have differing characteristics, conditions, motivations and interest in political involvement. While in Racha-Lechkhumi, it is possible to talk about national threats and challenges, in Kvemo Kartli the premier issue seems to be the importance of motivating people to vote at all.

Table 1: Turnout of 2020 and 2024 parliamentary elections [2]

Region	Turnout (%) 2020	Region	Turnout (%) 2024
Racha-Lechkhumi	63.8	Adjara	66.5
Guria	61.1	Racha-Lechkhumi	65.5
Samtskhe-Javakheti	60.8	Guria	64.4
Mtskheta-Mtianeti	60.6	Samtskhe-Javakheti	63.9
Kakheti	59.3	Imereti	62.2
Adjara	59.1	Tbilisi	61.6
Shida Kartli	58	Mtskheta-Mtianeti	61
Imereti	56.8	Kakheti	60.5
Samegrelo - Zemo Svaneti	54.7	Shida Kartli	60.3
Tbilisi	54	Samegrelo - Zemo Svaneti	59.3
Kvemo Kartli	51	Kvemo Kartli	51

Sources: Central Election Commission of Georgia 2020, available at:
https://cesko.ge/en/archevnebi/2020/october-31-2020-parliamentary-elections-of-georgia/aqtivoba

Central Election Commission of Georgia 2024, available at: https://shorturl.at/eGJfm

2. Sorted from highest to lowest

Spring 2024 was exceptionally turbulent for the mass mobilization against the concrete anti-democratic draft laws initiated by the ruling Georgian Dream in which the population from the regions were involved in an exceptional forms of coordination. For instance, the strong protests in Tbilisi concerning the controversial "Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence" led to the creation of one of the largest online self-organization projects "Daitove" (Facebook group) by the people in Tbilisi, suggesting accommodation options to their compatriots from the regions, who wanted to join the street protests in the capital but did not have the place to stay. Many of them were young (35 and younger), so it is important to give special attention to young people living in the regions as a key demographic when planning regional strategies. This is necessary because a significant portion of society outside of Tbilisi is considered receptive to the influence of the ruling party and the local elites associated with it.

It is logical to assume that in the regions there are strong expectations and demands regarding the political spectrum and processes. However, the ideas and proposals from political parties have not yet met local expectations in either quality or force. Consequently, opposition parties have an opportunity to engage with this segment of the electorate, address the lack of trust in politics and bridge the gap the exists in the region.

Mobilization of Trust in the Regions – How, Who and About What?
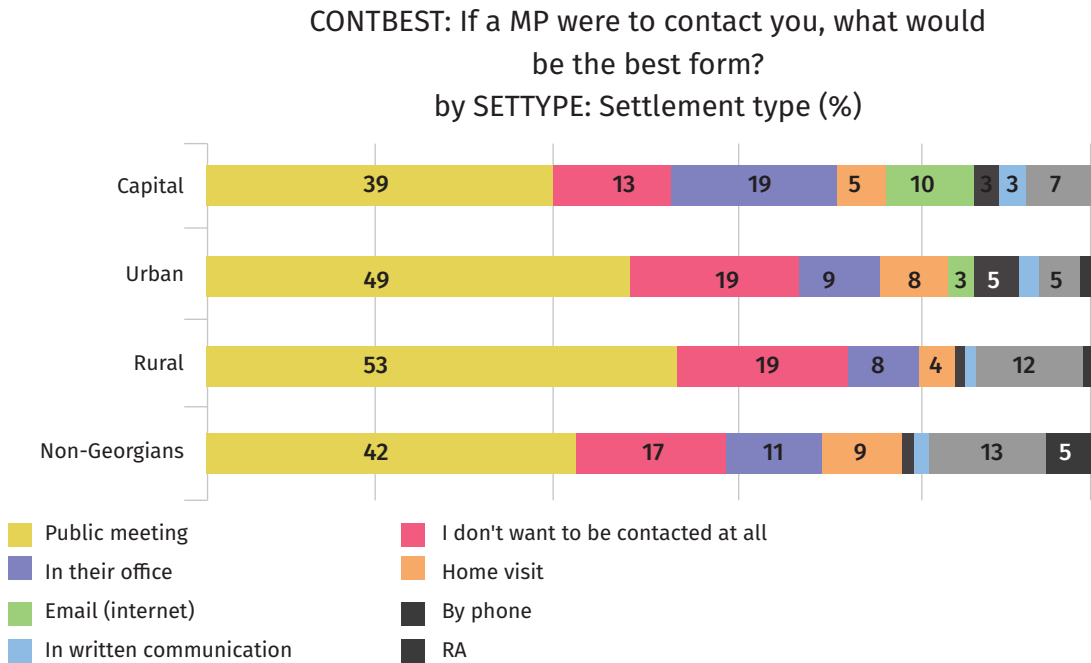
In light of the statistical data presented above, it is evident that past pre-election campaigning outside Tbilisi in the regions has not succeeded in building local relationships or trust for the political parties. Moreover, the campaigns have not reduced the influence of the ruling elites on regional society. It is not easy to contend with a political culture in which there are strong local ties that have been established over decades with the ruling Georgian elites of various past regimes. This creates a challenge which is particularly pronounced given the limited resources that parties can mobilize in the regions (Kalandadze et al). Nevertheless, as the crucial social and political events are taking place in the country since 2024 elections, political parties must undertake much deeper and more intensive engagement in these regions.

How?

In order to build the trust and increase support towards pro-European opposition political parties in the regions, personal communication is crucial, principally for two reasons: firstly, unlike in Tbilisi, local citizens often do not feel that parties and politicians are consistently concerned about them or attentive to their issues. They observe that politicians engage with them primarily during election periods, but give them limited attention between elections. Secondly, regions, particularly villages, are often less connected to the internet and have fewer computer users, making digital tools of direct democracy, such as social media, less accessible or even inaccessible for them. From a communication perspective, it is particularly important for the regional population (both urban and rural) that politicians engage with them through public meetings. Other alternative mechanisms are less popular (see Figure 6).

Best form of communication for a Member of Parliament, by accommodation, October 2023

CONTBEST: If a MP were to contact you, what would
be the best form?
by SETTYPE: Settlement type (%)

	Public meeting	I don't want to be contacted at all	In their office	Home visit	Email (internet)	By phone	In written communication	RA
Capital	39	13	19	5	10	3	3	7
Urban	49	19	9	8	3	5		5
Rural	53	19	8	4				12
Non-Georgians	42	17	11	9			13	5

Legend:
- Public meeting
- In their office
- Email (internet)
- In written communication
- I don't want to be contacted at all
- Home visit
- By phone
- RA

Source: Caucasus Barometer, available at: https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/no2023ge/CONTBEST-by-SETTYPE/

Traditionally, political parties choose public meetings as their primary format for engaging with the people of the regions, which is not necessarily different to campaigning strategies in Tbilisi though it is obvious that opposition parties are still less successful in the regions. However, now, more than ever, it is crucial to take creative approach, regularly incorporating them, even within face-to-face meetings. Additionally, although this type of campaign requires particularly strong mobilization of human and financial resources, it is vital that at least two meetings are held in approximately the same area. The first meeting would identify problems, and the second would present concrete solutions. Such an approach would be more effective in building trust between locals and political parties.

Who?

While the face-to-face meeting format is considered the most acceptable and effective, it is important to carefully balance different approaches and to deploy different personalities. Political leaders who operate primarily in the capital, represent authority for the regional population. For the regional population, direct meetings with such leaders can be very appealing and bring credibility to the campaigns. However, the role of the local authorities should not be ignored. Social ties in regions are close and rural society is interdependent (Eder et al., 2015). Regional identity in Georgia tends to be specific, and strong connections to local politicians, even lesser-known figures, play a significant role in shaping local sentiment. Accordingly, the positioning of a local leader in tandem with a central leader in rural campaigning would seriously boost regional trust in the parties (Eder et al 2015). This approach will instill greater confidence among the local populace that central leaders are aware of their specific regional problems and that they have a local ally who will be consistently accountable until the next election for addressing promises.

Several strategic steps can be taken in this direction. Given Georgia's political culture, local or tribal relationships play a significant role in shaping public opinion, particularly regarding the political process and political power. Villages are characterized by strong authority figures, such as elders and informal village leaders. Thus, close engagement with these individuals, and conveying the main message through them, would be an effective part of the strategy. For regional populations, a party becomes more attractive when there is the possibility of local leaders rising to prominent positions in it. This would significantly enhance the perception that "one of our own" is an authentic part of the party, thereby increasing the likelihood that local interests will be considered and addressed.

About what?

When communicating with the population of regions, political parties must consider how to balance universal issues and vital local issues while relating them to specific regional sentiments and needs. Broad and fundamental issues, such as democracy versus autocracy or West versus Russia, could significantly contribute to mobilizing the regional population in favor of a particular party. However, as the communities living in the regions are generally poorer and more burdened with daily hardships (Pertaia 2023), focusing solely on existential choices might not interest them. On the other hand, pressing on exclusively narrow issues could be counterproductive, as it risks causing voters outside of Tbilisi to overlook the fundamental significance of the ongoing fight for country's European future.

Therefore, an appropriate approach should follow the "inverted pyramid" principle. According to this, parties should balance their communication by starting with universal issues and progressively narrow down to specific problems tailored to the region's characteristics. Emphasis should be placed on highlighting what particular benefits a municipality might lose regarding its specific challenges in case of dispatching from the EU-integration aspiration. This approach is particularly challenging given the diverse and complex nature of Georgian society. What is relevant for mountainous regions may not be applicable to areas populated by ethnic minorities, agricultural regions, those focused on animal husbandry, or tourist destinations. Similarly, the needs of small versus large settlements (villages as well as towns) can vary significantly. Due to this fragmentation, parties may struggle to address specific issues effectively because of limited human and on-the-ground resources, where they might struggle to find local candidates to campaign for them. Generalized messages can cause parties to become indistinguishable from one another, potentially leading to a loss of unique party identities.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Given the critical need for a political reset in Georgia and the country's imperative to return to democratic principles, it is crucial to achieve the broadest possible consolidation of society during the post-electoral turmoil in favor of pro-European political flank. With over 70% of the population registered in Georgia's regions, achieving wide consolidation and reducing fragmentation of political views before the elections is likely to be of decisive importance. This is particularly significant given that the regional population often exhibits greater vulnerability in dealings with the different types of pressure implemented by the ruling power and has less critical awareness of the country's democratic decline.

In Georgia there is noticeable dissimilarity between the capital and the regions in terms of participation in the political processes and the drive for change. The gap between these areas is significant, each having differing expectations and needs. Political parties often struggle to address regional challenges in detail within their programs, which hampers their ability to build trust among the regional population and gain support for the country's democratic and European future. This disconnection poses a serious risk to the preservation of Georgia's democracy, as citizens perceive the political and public processes in Tbilisi and elsewhere in fundamentally different ways. It is therefore crucial for political parties to reflect these differences in their communication strategies. Consequently, several distinct recommendations can be made.

Recommendations to political parties:

Applying the principle of the inverted pyramid in campaign strategy: For the population living in the regions, while the general direction of the country's development is important, it is essential to frame specific and localized issues within the broader context of global and national challenges. It is crucial to balance general and specific narratives carefully, tailoring them to each region's unique conditions and needs;

During the campaign in the regions, it is essential to discuss issues and problems that resonate with specific segments of the local population, including both those who may be for or against the ruling party;

It is crucial to study local customs, traditions and relationships, so that a party can identify what works in a specific community and what does not when it comes to political communication and convincing voters and building trust;

Combine central and local leaders in interactions with locals to demonstrate that the voices of regional communities are both heard and valued at all levels by the political party;

Conduct a study dedicated to the needs and concerns of young people living in the regions, and develop a tailored communication strategy for them so that they become the transmitters of the messages in their own communities;

Demonstrate trust in civil society organizations, particularly those operating in the regions, by engaging in regular thematic consultations on specific issues;

Create a strategy to attract and involve new leaders from the regions in decision-making processes at the central level;

Regularity of regional visits: recurring visits, at least twice, to show the voters before and after the elections that the party and its politicians have for some time been working on their specific region and have real solutions for local problems;

To enhance credibility and foster a distinct sense of identity with a particular political party, create sub-programs tailored to specific regions, identifying relevant local problems and offering targeted solutions.

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