European Democracy Hub

Democracy support in dominant party states

The case of Georgia

2021

The European Democracy Hub is a joint initiative of Carnegie Europe and the European Partnership for Democracy. It acts as a focal point for work on democracy, bringing together analysts and policymakers engaged with EU democracy support and democratic challenges in Europe.

This study was written by Levan Tsutskiridze (Eastern European Centre for Multiparty Democracy).

Design: Lucia Posteraro

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Introduction

Liberated from the Russian Empire in 1918, Georgia enjoyed a short period of vibrant democracy. With its multiparty "Constituent Assembly", elected in 1919, and its democratic constitution, it became one of the most progressive democracies of the time: the first phase of elections were contested by fifteen political parties in a transparent pre-electoral period, and four parties managed to gain enough votes to elect their representatives. Among them were female Georgians, one of them, Kristine Sharashidze, even occupied the top job within the five person "Presidium." Georgia's constitution guaranteed equal political, economic, and social rights, affirmed freedom of religion and established genuine and functioning self-governance. By then, the country seemed to have been poised to lead the democratic wave that was also approaching Europe. History, nevertheless, had other designs. The democratic experiment was forcefully aborted by the Russian invasion in 1921, which was rigorously countered, but the young republic was eventually overwhelmed by the superior numbers of the Red Army. What followed was not only a temporary halt to the democratic process, but the effective erasure of historical memory and democratic political legacy. This was accompanied by the physical extermination of the political and intellectual elite who had spearheaded the creation of the country's democratic foundations. Mass executions, deportations, terror, and propaganda left the country utterly unprepared for the second era of independence which came seventy years later.

The second republic, which emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989, was very different from its democratic predecessor. People voted in large numbers in the first multiparty elections of 1990, but the political class, which was emerging from underground "informal" movements, did not have the faintest understanding of how to govern or what were the rules and norms of democratic governance. Being resistance movements, formed to fight the Communist occupation and to restore Georgian independence, they carried their uncompromising attitudes into Parliament: dissent was seen as betrayal, criticism was labelled intrigue, and consensus was considered a shame as well as an utter sign of weakness. The new era of Georgian independence was thus more akin to the neo-Bolshevik and Stalinist political tradition than to the democratic foundations of 1918. Most of the governments since then have been overthrown through either civil war or a military coup: The first elected President, Zviad Gamskakhurdia, had to flee the capital and then, by official accounts, committed suicide in the forests of western Georgia in 1993. Eduard Shevardnadze, the former Soviet Foreign Minister, was forced to resign in the aftermath of peaceful protests known as the "Rose Revolution" in 2003. The country did not manage to complete a peaceful, procedural transfer of power through the constitutional means and deadlines until 2021: the Government of Mikheil Saakashvili was replaced by the current ruling Georgian Dream Party, at that time led and financially backed by Bidzina Ivanishvili, the richest man in Georgia.

The Georgian political system is almost constantly dominated by the ruling party of the day, which, after coming to power (either through democratic elections, peaceful revolutions, or coups) amasses near total control of all branches of power at national and local levels. This is usually complemented with politically motivated law enforcement and control of the courts. In its almost 30 years of independence, the country has only twice experienced a situation when there was one party in charge of the national government whilst the opposition held power at the local level. While coalition governments have been formally arranged, these coalitions have almost always been dominated by a major party, and their dissolutions have never led to a new election. In Georgia's political history, there has almost always been one major dominant party in full control of all levels of government (with the only

exception of 2002 when the opposition won power in the local council of Tbilisi, which was soon followed by the Rose Revolution in 2003). The 2002 local elections were followed by fraudulent Parliamentary elections in 2003 and, subsequently, the Rose Revolution, which in turn gave birth to the new dominant party in the parliament – the United National Movement. Georgia has never had a true coalition government in place that has been based on a genuine power sharing agreement between political parties. As such, Georgia represents an interesting case study of a dominant party system which has remained strongly entrenched despite a wave of democratic reforms and the generous democracy assistance which it had enjoyed since independence.

Georgian political life is characterised by a high degree of polarisation, the absence of policy-based discussions during or before elections and a closed-off, and a personality-based organisation of political parties. This produces little decision-making or financial transparency and has reduced the role of youth, minorities, women and many other important groups of Georgian citizens in politics. These factors also contribute to the emergence of dominant political parties and radical proposals with one party sweeping into power and the others forced into irrelevance or threatened by political annihilation.

This chronic situation of single party dominance leads to extremely dangerous levels of political confrontation and reduced opportunities for the opposition to perform its duties. With both political and financial power being so concentrated, a large part of the opposition as well as civil society groups tend to conclude that elections are no longer a credible or possible avenue for serious political change. In the Georgian case, dominant parties do change (either as a result of protests as in 2003, or elections as in 2012), but their replacement produces yet another hegemonic party, which then conveniently continues to enjoy the benefits of almost total control and abuse of all levels of power. At the same time, dominant parties have never, in the Georgian case, atrophied into full-scale authoritarianism as is the case in neighbouring Azerbaijan or Belarus. There is a strong degree of political pluralism and political change does occur, albeit most often through extra-constitutional means, which since 1989 has on several occasions led to devastating crises (such as the Georgian civil war in 1992-1993), economic malaise, and political instability.

The repercussions of a decades-long dominant party tradition, accompanied by personalised rivalry and bitter partisan infighting, are apparent in public attitudes. Polls show clear disappointment with the existing state of affairs and point to a dangerous disenchantment with democratic practices and institutions. Public trust in the Parliament and political parties has sunk to record low levels (see graphs from the Caucasus Barometer on page 6); an alarmingly high number of Georgian citizens (66%) have never read a political party program ; the majority of the Georgian citizens no longer think that Georgia is even a democracy. In parallel, Georgia's democracy scores have been steadily declining over the past few years and Georgia has become one of the most rapidly deteriorating democracies in the region.

Since November 2020, Georgia has been plunged in a continuous political crisis that emerged as a result of alleged widespread electoral fraud and an opposition boycott. The crisis, exacerbated by COVID-19 and accelerated by political tensions, has led the country towards a historic economic downturn. While some political resolution is currently in sight, due to the energetic EU and the US mediation efforts, the deeply divided Georgian society and political class, decaying governance, and the economic malaise will continue to haunt Georgia for the foreseeable future.

1 Caucasus Barometer Georgia (2020). Available here.

2 National Democratic Institute (2019): Results of December 2018 Public Opinion Polls in Georgia. Available here.

3 National Democratic Institute (2020): Results of August 2020 Opinion Polls in Georgia. Available here.

4 See Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index (here) and the Freedom in the World Index (here) for the 2013-2020 period.

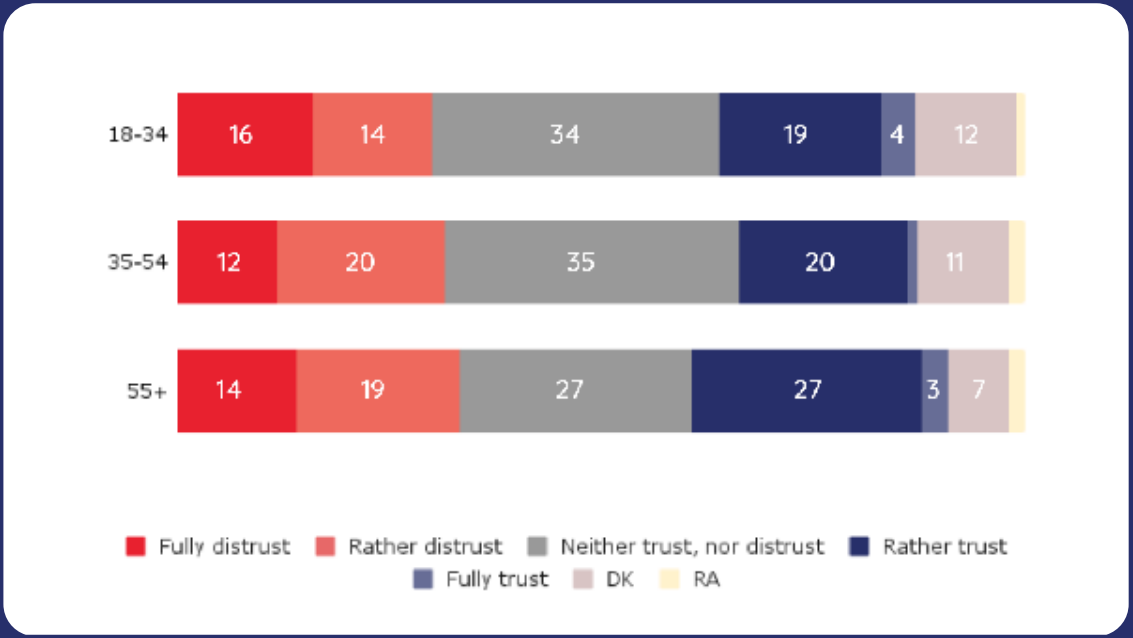

FIGURE 1: *Trust in the Georgian Parliament by age group (%) (Caucasus Barometer, 2020)*

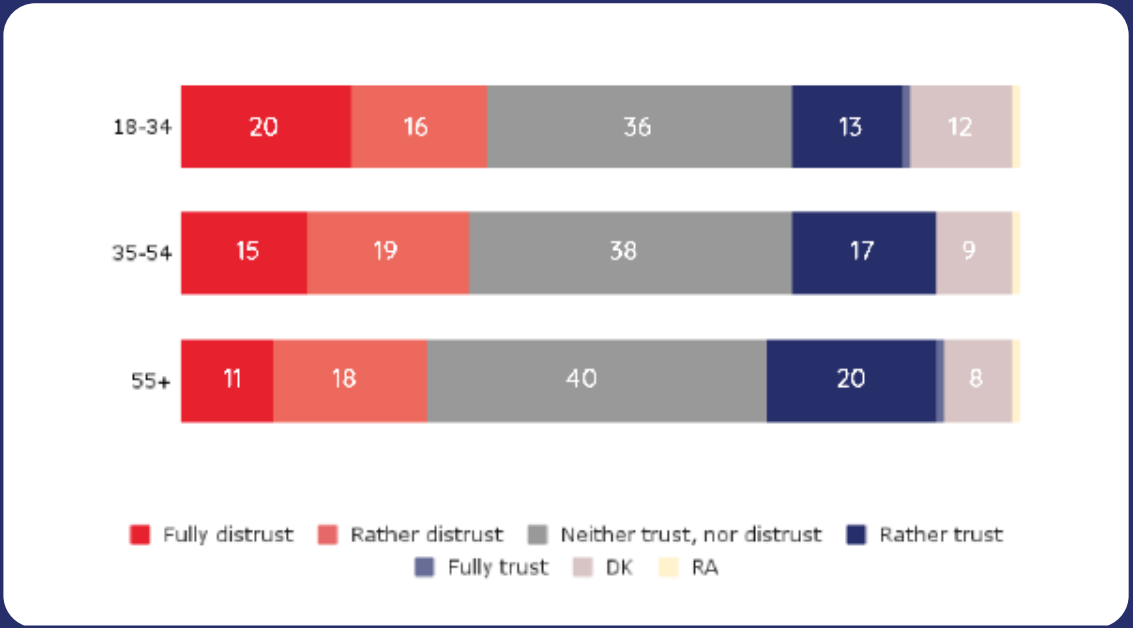

FIGURE 2: *Trust in Georgia's political parties by age group (%) (Caucasus Barometer, 2020)*

There are many variables that contribute to this state of affairs. This article will examine the three pillars of the dominant party system in Georgia: political finance, electoral legislation, and political culture. It will also attempt to shed more light on the contributions of democracy support for Georgia's democratic transformation.

Features of Georgia's dominant party system

Political and campaign finance

According to the last census, the Georgian population is about 3,716,900.[5] Approximately 22% of the population (about 820,000 people) officially live below the extreme poverty line with a daily income of less than USD 2.[6] Only 0.83% of Georgian citizens earn more than GEL 100,000 (roughly USD 30,000) per year and 98% of the population feels that they are not adequately provided with goods and services that meet their basic needs.[7] The majority of Georgian students have below-average math and analytical skills[8] and 3.6 years of schooling out of 12.5 are lost due to the extremely low quality of teaching.[9] Air in Tbilisi is dangerously polluted, the country has more than 400,000 IDPs, 20% of Georgia is occupied and the Russian army is having the capital Tbilisi within the artillery range.

These grim figures, however, do not contribute to a reduction in political spending, which is reaching astonishing levels when compared to the country's overall economic indicators. During the 2020 Parliamentary elections, according to the most recent data from the State Audit Office, Georgian political parties (officially) spent a total of 28,635,134 Lari or roughly USD 10,000,000. Most of these funds were concentrated in the hands of the ruling Georgian Dream Party, which spent GEL 18,278,208 (USD 6,092,000) and thus significantly outspent all the opposition parties combined.

Campaign finance advantages, usually enjoyed exclusively by the ruling party, represents one pillar upon which the dominant party system rests. There are several distinguishing features of the "tradition" of campaign donations in Georgia that contribute to the emergence and endurance of the dominant party system. One important aspect of this is the tendency of the corporate sector to support the incumbent with large donations while completely disregarding opposition parties. Another recent example is the 2018 Presidential elections, in which the Georgian Dream candidate Salome Zourbalischvbili received GEL 2,127,000 (USD 712,000) while her closest rival Grigol Vashadze was only able to raise GEL 470,000 (USD 156,000).

With high poverty levels playing in favour of the better funded candidates (who often offer material and career benefits in exchange of votes) and with public funding only accounting for a fraction of the overall costs of the electoral campaign, a financial edge provides a considerable electoral advantage to the incumbent. Campaign donations to the ruling party are almost always devoid of any connection with the electoral programs of political parties or the ideological or national interests of the wealthy donors. There is only pragmatism: in the absence of impartial courts and law enforcement, donating to those in power is simply buying insurance. In addition, the ruling parties often reciprocate favours by rewarding their donors with state procurement contracts and preferential access to decision-makers. In 2020 alone the donors of the Georgian Dream party received state contracts amounting to USD 22,000,000.[10]

5 National Statistics Office of Georgia (2020). Available here.

6 World Bank (2019): Poverty & Equity Brief: Georgia, April 2019. Available here.

7 UNICEF (2015): The Well-being of Children and Their Families in Georgia: Georgia Welfare Monitoring Survey Fourth Stage 2021. Available here.

8 OECD (2018): Country note Georgia: Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) Results 2018. Available here.

9 See World Bank's data (here).

10 Transparency International (2021): Georgia's Political Finance in 2020: Revenues and Expenditures of Political Parties and Financial Oversight. Available here.

The combination of concentrated financial power disproportionately benefits the ruling party, the extremely high poverty levels, and the politicisation of justice as an electoral weapon pressurise the wealthy to donate to the dominant party, which provides the incumbent with a considerable political and financial edge that is often highly difficult to overcome with normal electioneering or policy ideas.

Democracy: for the winners only

The electoral system in place for the most part of Georgia's independent history (with different variations) is another factor that contributes heavily to the dominant party situation. Until the recent elections of 2020, which were organised under a relatively more proportional system with reduced number of majoritarian seats, Georgia had used a parallel electoral system. Under this system, 76 seats (out of 150) were allotted to proportional lists and 74 seats to majoritarian seats. This system, heavily influenced by the outcomes of electoral contests in single mandate constituencies, aided the better funded candidates, who usually represented the ruling parties, and contributed to the consolidation of the dominant party system.

The vote allocation mechanism allowed the party with a slight edge over the competition in a nationwide election to obtain a constitutional majority in the parliament. In the parliamentary elections in 2016, for example, the now ruling Georgian Dream party received 48.68% of the popular vote - but as a result of the vote allocation method then in place, it obtained 76% of parliamentary seats. It effectively gave the ruling party the power to unilaterally reform major laws, including the constitution. This is also what happened during the government of the United National Movement in 2002-2012 and under the Georgian Dream in 2012-2020. While the system for the allocation of votes has been revised for the 2020 elections, there still remain other factors that support the rigid dominant party system in Georgia. The design and set-up of the Central Electoral Commission guarantees the effective one-party rule over the electoral process. Under the system currently in place, the 6 members of the Central Electoral Commission are nominated by the political parties that have cleared the electoral threshold and have received the highest volume of public funding (derived from the vote count). The remaining six "independent" members are nominated by the President (as a result of "consultation" with NGOs) and voted on by the Parliament. The vote by the parliamentary majority would then, and has always, guaranteed that additional six members of the CEC represent candidates favourable to the ruling party. Supported by the tie-breaking vote of the Electoral Commission Chair (who is elected by the 12 Commission members themselves), the ruling party is able to wield a disproportionate, insurmountable voting advantage in the decision-making process of this key institution.

The significant financial advantages usually enjoyed by the ruling parties, reinforced by the vote-casting advantages on every level of the electoral administration, represent the two major system-wide factors that have kept the dominant party system in place and compromised the significance of opposition parties.

No appetite for liberalism

On the "demand" side of the democratic equation lie the difficult socio-economic factors that contribute to the continued emergence of hegemonic political parties in Georgia. Some of them can be linked to the socio-economic conditions of the country that precipitate the continued linkage of Georgian society towards traditional sources of authority and stability, as opposed to the rule of law or representative institutions.[11] Georgian society is still a transitional, largely patriarchal society. While striving to achieve democratic consolidation and deeper integration into the Euro-Atlantic institutions, it still retains some of the notable features of the Soviet political culture. This is above all represented by the maxim of "winner takes all" and the preference for strongmen who are able to consolidate power around

11 See for example World Values Survey (2020): Joint EVS/WVS 2017-2020 data-set (version 2.0.0). Available here.

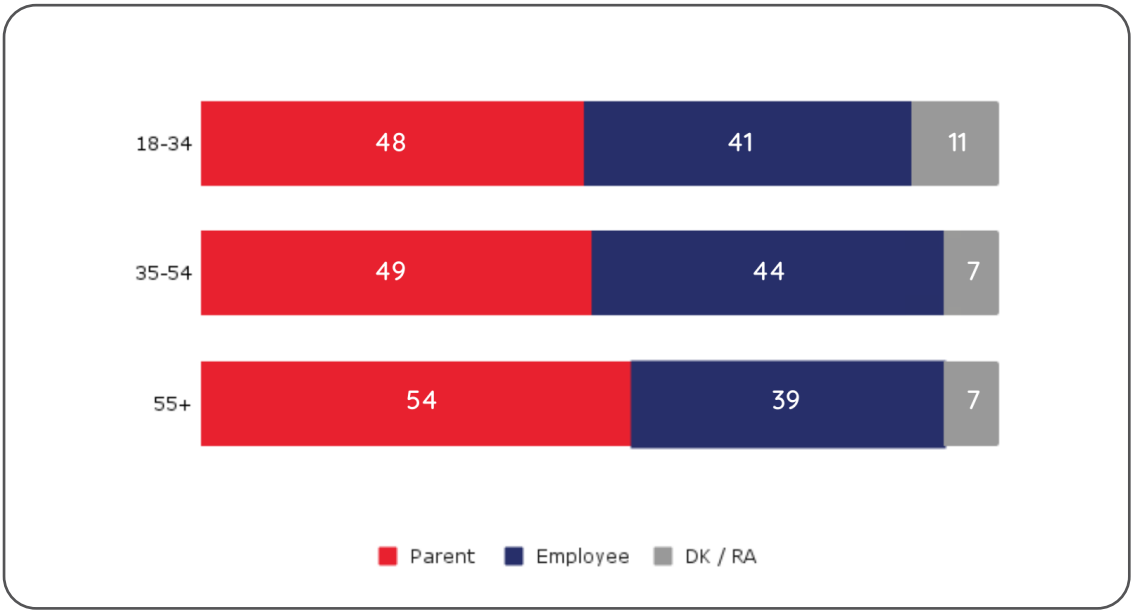

FIGURE 3: *Opinion survey on government control (Caucasus Barometer, 2020)*
"Which of the following statements do you agree with?
Statement 1: People are like children, the government should take care of them like a parent.
Statement 2: Government is like an employee, the people should be the bosses who control the government."

themselves and destroy, if only politically, but also at times physically, their opponents. In this regard Georgia resembles a model of "delegative democracy"[12] in which the population is merely choosing or rather legitimising the position of its new leaders, to whom absolute power is then delegated to rule without accountability or institutional constraints. Although elections are organised and are important, there is little appetite for continuous engagement from civil society at the local level or on different policy issues outside the capital, and little if any trust exists in representative and political institutions.

It is characteristic that in the most recent study of societal attitudes towards political institutions in Georgia, most of those polled exhibit the remarkable tendency to delegate full authority rather than "recruit" or temporarily choose particular political parties and government bureaucrats to govern on their behalf within a strictly defined mandate and terms. When asked by the Caucasus Research Resources Centres whether the government should be like a "parent" or like an "employee", most of those taking part in the survey showed a clear preference for a more paternalistic government. Of particular note is that this picture is uniform across all age groups, including the younger generation who are between the ages of 18-34 (see graph above from the Caucasus Barometer[13]).

A similar preference for more "dominant" forms of political organisation is exhibited when one looks at the trust rankings of public institutions in Georgia. In a telling illustration, a recent survey commissioned by the International Republican Institute in Georgia showed the Georgian Church and the Georgian Army are at the top of the national trust ladder, while political parties came out as one of the most distrusted institutions, together with trade unions. Put differently, the institutions designed for ensuring secular, democratic governance and civilian oversight over the armed forces and law enforcement are seen the least favourably by the Georgian public as opposed to those institutions that require strong parliamentary and political oversight.

12 O' Donell, G.A. (1994): "Delegative Democracy". Journal of Democracy, 5(1), 55-69. doi:10.1353/jod.1994.0010.

13 Caucasus Barometer Georgia (2020). Available here.

Assessing democracy support in Georgia

Democracy support is an interesting and considerable variable in the process of democratic transformation for Georgia. Annual financial support from the EU in Georgia, for example, is approximately EUR 100,000,000[14] and is spread across priorities such as economic development, governance and education, water and energy, human rights, and security. Another major development donor of Georgia, the US Government, is currently funding more than 35 large programs through USAID "to strengthen Georgia's resilience to malign influence, consolidate democratic gains through enhanced citizen responsive governance, and enable high-value employment through increased economic growth".[15]

This aid has played its role in developing Georgia's democratic standards and it has enabled Georgia to achieve important breakthroughs in organising generally free and fair elections, having a pluralistic media, and fostering a competitive political landscape and a vibrant civil society. At the same time, Georgia remains a quasi-democracy, currently overshadowed by an ongoing political crisis and the credible allegations of behind-the-scenes influence by the country's richest oligarch – Bidzina Ivanishvili.

Unlike many of its more authoritarian neighbours, Georgia has been an open and receptive country to democracy aid organisations and has never restricted their work. At the same time, it has remained firmly anchored in the group of partially free countries and has not been able to develop into a full democracy despite ever-increasing levels of support. From an alternative, more optimistic perspective, the fact that the country has managed to remain partially free and did not slide back into the non-free country group during the global democratic recession, could be assessed as a show of democratic resilience.

It is hard to disentangle individual democracy support programs that expressly aim at alleviating the problem of dominant parties in Georgia. However, general aid objectives focused on civil society development, human rights, media pluralism, improvement of electoral legislation, strengthening of democratic political parties, parliament and local governments, all contribute to a more even playing field - and consequently, it is hoped, a more even distribution of political power as well. This support can be grouped into three broad categories: institution building, legislative reforms, and democracy agenda setting. They all, at their core, support the gradual improvement of democratic standards and norms. They in turn, it can be assumed, play a role in eliminating the enabling factors of dominant parties.

On the **institution-building level of democracy assistance,** technical assistance to political parties, parliaments and electoral commissions have been the most widely used tools. The donor community has in the past years focused on supporting the improvement of organisational and policy capacities of political parties and electoral commissions, as well as providing more resources and expertise to women, national minorities, and other politically disadvantaged groups of the Georgian population. These support programs have traditionally been aimed at enhancing the capacities of these important democratic stakeholders to better perform their functions. Of particular importance to the subject matter are the efforts directed at empowering

14 EU Delegation to Georgia Website: "Projects in Georgia". Accessed on 8 July 2021. Available here.

15 USAID: "Georgia: Our programs". Accessed on 8 July 2021. Available here.

democratic political parties to play a more constructive political role and to develop strong institutional capacities so as to better cope with the turbulent and highly unstable political life in Georgia.

The second broad group of assistance efforts has focused on **providing knowledge, global experience, and technical support to drafting legislation.** With regards to the political system, the donor community has concentrated on constitution building, electoral system design, elections administration, and - in recent years - the reform of political and campaign finance. A range of interesting reform initiatives have been developed with the support of the donor community to enhance the transparency of elections, design a more competitive and fairer electoral framework, and improve intra-party democracy in Georgia.

Many of these efforts are aimed, at least implicitly, at reducing the likelihood of the emergence of a dominant party. Support to drafting legislation aimed at creating a more level and fairer political field where political parties can campaign on more equal terms. Efforts directed at reforming the political finance and public funding of political parties have sought to address the issue of huge financial disparities. Efforts have been made to equalise the uneven distribution of airtime during electoral campaigning and to offer fairer promotional schemes to candidates. While some progress has been made in all these directions, some of the underlying problems that contribute to the emergence of dominant parties have remained in place: for example, public funding still accounts for barely 10% of the campaign spending by political parties[16]; electoral commissions are still controlled by one political party, and the electoral system used in the past elections still largely favoured the ruling party and its majoritarian candidates.

Some improvements have been made in the months prior to the 2020 Parliamentary Elections and most importantly after the international mediation, in particular by the President of the European Council, which led to the political deal signed by the majority of political parties on 19 April 2021. It was from the political mediation and dialogue support efforts at the highest level of diplomacy that a breakthrough was made possible. The recent deal charts the way forward in addressing some of the fundamental issues that affect the nature of the political landscape in Georgia. It envisages the organisation of all subsequent Parliamentary elections through the proportional system with an electoral threshold between 0 and 2%. The deal also envisages a reform of electoral administration in which nine of the central electoral "commission" members will be appointed by political parties that qualify in the parliament and eight "professional" or "independent" members. Local elections will also be organised with a reduced proportion between the party list candidates and the majoritarian candidates, and reduced to an electoral threshold of 2.5% in the capital and 3% in the rest of the country.

These changes do address some of the fundamental problems contributing to the presence of dominant parties – in particular, the parallel electoral system. By abolishing the majoritarian component of elections and reducing electoral thresholds (something which the currently ruling party, Georgian Dream, was trying to delay till 2024), the opposition and smaller political parties will find themselves on a more equal footing. There are other areas of policy and legislation, however, which need to be further reformed to reduce the likelihood of a hegemonic party emerging in the future. Political and campaign finance laws need significant revision, and the partisan impartiality and effectiveness of the Central Electoral Commission needs to be better ensured.

The third group of democracy assistance efforts in Georgia is focused on **agenda setting for democratic reforms** by advancing work on important issues that have been neglected due to various reasons. In recent years, this has included gender equality related work, improving the participation of national and religious minorities in Georgian political life, and improved civic education. For example, reviews of political parties' work

16 Transparency International (2021): Georgia's Political Finance in 2020: Revenues and Expenditures of Political Parties and Financial Oversight. Available here.

on gender equality and national minority participation in politics[17] found that virtually all programs in this area were funded and supported by national and international NGOs, while political parties have never committed any amount of funds to this valuable goal. In other words, some of the important issues in the democratisation process are completely dependent on the democracy aid community. Support from NGOs, election watchdogs, women's rights and minority groups and funds for democracy and civic education have nurtured the true backbone of Georgia's democracy: its vibrant civil society. In this regard, the role of democracy support organisations remains highly important and relevant.

Despite these notable achievements, the key impediments for the country to break away from the partially free/hybrid regime countries have not been fully removed. The recent announcement of reforms is no guarantee that dominant parties will not emerge because of continuing mergers between political parties and private capital, persistent vote-buying, voter manipulation, and the often complete dependence of large swaths of the population on government subsidies and support, making them extremely vulnerable to political pressure (which COVID has made even more substantial). Political parties remain closed off institutions with little transparency or accountability towards their members or the general public. The concentration of capital and political power in narrow circles and the co-opting of the business elite by the leading political class has further entrenched one party rule. The resulting disenchantment with political parties among the population has opened new opportunities for anti-democratic political forces to operate with more flexibility and vigour. The democracy support community, while capable of helping the country to maintain on a generally democratic course, has been unable to shift fundamental power relations towards a more pluralistic system. This has to do with relatively low levels of energetic diplomatic engagement (excluding the most recent examples cited in this study) in an attempt to avoid political entanglements in the domestic political strife; with overreliance on existing political actors to set up the reform agenda; and relatively little focus, up until the more recent efforts, on the "demand part" of the democratic equation, to help empower larger groups of the Georgian citizens, especially on the local levels to become more active and better organized politically to pursue their interests.

17 Eastern European Centre for Multiparty Democracy (2017): Gender Equality Assessment among Political Parties of Georgia. Available here. Eastern European Centre for Multiparty Democracy (2018): Inclusion of Ethnic Minorities in the Political Process in the Context of 2018 Presidential Elections of Georgia. Available here.

Conclusion and recommendations

From the vantage point of the current status quo in Georgia, and the current political climate in the country, several recommendations can be offered to democracy aid organisations, practitioners, political parties and other democracy stakeholders.

1. Build the capacity of local change-makers

Supporting the emergence of a truly locally owned democratic reform agenda is important. In recent years, many international democracy support organisations have made sustainability of civil society one of their key objectives. This is important in terms of generating necessary reform potential within the country and ensuring that reform agendas are seen by the wider Georgian population as reflecting the priorities of Georgia, not only of its international partners. This is particularly true when one attempts to reform rigid political systems that directly affect power relations in the country and try to alter the status quo. Very often such efforts can be resisted on the grounds that international groups are foreign actors. Having strong national players that are both credible and competent to lead on reform initiatives will help build more sustained momentum for such important changes.

2. Work on the "demand" side of democracy

Working on the more local, social levels of the country is important to change the calculus of political actors and nudge them towards the creation of a more open system and persuade them to refrain from abusing their political positions. As long as the majority of the Georgian population believes in paternalistic governance and delegates full responsibility to the authorities, without much interest or the capacity to engage and hold them accountable, the temptation for the authorities to amass and then abuse power will remain. Supporting smaller, local level organisations - including those that might be informal or loosely organised such as students' groups, farmers organisations, community centres, religious organisations, and various local initiative groups - will expand democracy support to other groups who normally lack exposure to some basic ideas and principles of democracy and citizenship, as opposed to traditional partners (who remain key actors and should continue to do so). This in turn will help positively reshape public expectations and perceptions and encourage political actors to adjust towards a more democratic modus operandi.

3. Change power relations: build democratic resilience

Whatever the underlying causes, dominant parties are often the result of the inherent distribution of power in countries and the electoral systems which favour the concentration of power within a single party. More assistance is required in working with established political actors, but also with newly emerging political parties and civil movements that show democratic promise. Support for institution building, internal democracy development, candidate training, fundraising

capacity-building, member recruitment and volunteer management training programs will help the emergence of new "democratic power centres" in the country, overall strengthening the ability of political parties and CSOs to counter anti-democratic forces and power monopolies.

4. Build local capacity for democracy aid

Democracy aid has many forms and is implemented on many levels. Georgia has benefitted from the generous support of the international community. However, it has so far lagged significantly behind in committing its own national resources to democracy support. Most of the funding for democratic reforms and initiatives comes from international organisations and donor countries. This is welcome, but to generate a truly genuine national commitment, the Georgian state must build necessary institutions and commit itself to providing support and assistance to those organisations working on political and democratic reforms. While limited efforts have been made to do so by the Central Electoral Commission in recent years, more needs to be done to make the Georgian state itself committed to building its democratic development capacity and committing, in a transparent and impartial way, its own resources to democracy support.

5. Set an ambitious democracy agenda

Finally, Georgia's recent democratic reforms have only been responses to either its international priorities (for example its interest to sign the EU Association and Free Trade Agreement) that made some democratic reforms a necessity, or an attempt to overcome the political crisis (such as the recent mediation by the President of the Council of the EU). The latter was a clear example of how much more can be achieved when ongoing democracy support programs are complemented with more proactive diplomatic engagement. While the EU's highest-level engagement may not be forthcoming at every turn of the internal political conflict in Georgia, it can be highly effective at crucial turning points.

The recent engagement in a Georgian crisis also helped the EU to remain a relevant and positive actor in the region, which is experiencing increased competition for leadership by Russia and Turkey. Georgia remains, by all accounts and population surveys, strongly committed to further cooperation and closer links with the EU and building closer links with it. The Georgian Dream party recently pledged to apply for EU membership by 2024. These ambitions must and can be used by Georgia's democracy stakeholders to encourage and support further opening up of its political system and rising to the group of free countries. Support to and upgrading of Georgia's democracy seems to be a win-win solution both for Georgia as well as its international partners.

Georgia must make a concerted and ambitious attempt to genuinely cooperate and ally with local and international democracy partners to address the many remaining weaknesses of its democracy. It must aim at graduating into a full democracy within several years by fundamentally improving the transparency and accountability of its governance, enhancing electoral processes, establishing free, fair, and independent courts and strengthening its democratic political culture. The international community will have a valuable role to play in support of this transformation, through its mediation, democracy support and other programs. However, and ultimately, it is up to the Georgians themselves to take the key responsibility to lead and champion the democratic consolidation of their country.

Contact:

European Partnership for Democracy
No. d'entreprise: 0648.708.779

Rue Froissart 123-133B-1040
Brussels, Belgium

info@epd.eu | www.epd.eu