



Exploring Worldwide Democratic Innovations - A case study of Georgia

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Introduction

Georgia is a hybrid regime, which means that the political system in Georgia has a combination of features characteristic of both democracies and autocracies.¹ In such contexts, space for democratic innovation is limited. However, a close examination of Georgia's case reveals insightful developments in participation that can be used as learning experiences.

Encouraging citizens to participate is among the primary challenges for Georgia's democratic consolidation. According to the V-Dem Institute, Georgia's lowest score on their index is on participatory democracy, while on other indices such as deliberative, egalitarian, electoral, and liberal democracies, its scores are between 7 and 23 percentage points higher.² This context is exacerbated by the fact that the public in Georgia is not well-informed about what democracy is, how it functions and what benefits it brings to ordinary citizens.³ Consequently, Georgia is in dire need of democratic innovation in the area of citizen participation.

This report discusses three cases. The first two cases involve the analysis of the efforts of the government of Georgia and its international partners, aimed at engaging citizens through deliberative practices and online tools. The third case is an investigation of a Georgian party seeking to decentralise candidate selection processes and increase voter turnout in pursuit of its share of the vote.

Deliberative practices

In 2014, Georgia adopted a new local self-government code, which was innovative for Georgia as it was the first time when regulations specifically targeted citizen participation.⁴ Dedicating a whole chapter to citizen participation, the new code introduced five forms of participation to ensure that citizens exercise the power of local self-government. Two new bodies were introduced:

a deliberative body called the General Assembly of a Settlement, and a consultative body called the Council of Civil Advisors.⁵ Additionally, three other mechanisms give citizens tools for advocacy, monitoring and ensuring accountability of local officials. These include a petition, participation in the sessions of local self-government bodies and the right to hear reports on the performance of local officials.⁶ Two of these mechanisms, in particular, are significant bodies for deliberation and consultancy. The General Assembly of a Settlement, for example, has the power to discuss "the projects to be implemented in the settlement before they are included in the municipal budget, and submit reasonable remarks and proposals to the municipal bodies."⁷ The municipal bodies, in turn, are obliged to discuss these proposals and provide a "reasoned response" to the general assembly.⁸ The self-government code has been positively evaluated as a formal mechanism for encouraging citizen participation but it has been criticised for its implementation.⁹ There is significant variation in terms of how citizens use opportunities for participation across Georgia. A report in 2017 found that over the course of about two years, 20 municipalities had no general assembly meetings, whilst the Rustavi municipality, which is one of the largest cities in Georgia with a population of over 100,000, had 466 meetings of its general assembly.¹⁰ The average number of general assembly meetings held across 53 municipalities, for which data was available, was less than 21.¹¹ Moreover, the share of settlements in all municipalities where a general assembly meeting had been held has not exceeded 10 percent,¹² whereas the procedure stating that a general assembly can only be

1 Mike Smeltzer and Noah Buyon, "Nations in Transit 2022: From Democratic Decline to Authoritarian Aggression" (Freedom House, 2022), https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2022-04/NIT_2022_final_digital.pdf.

2 "Democracy at Dusk? V-Dem Annual Report 2017," Annual Report (V-Dem Institute, 2017), https://www.v-dem.net/static/website/files/dr/dr_2017.pdf.

3 Levan Kakhsishvili and Elene Panchulidze, "Democratization and Europeanization in Georgia: How to Lead the Process?," Georgian Institute of Politics (blog), September 27, 2018, <https://gip.ge/democratization-and-europeanization-in-georgia-how-to-lead-the-process/>.

4 "Organic Law of Georgia: Local Self-Government Code," Pub. L. No. 1958- IIb (2014), <https://matsne.gov.ge/en/document/download/2244429/15/en/pdf>.

5 Organic Law of Georgia: Local Self-Government Code.

6 Organic Law of Georgia: Local Self-Government Code.

7 Organic Law of Georgia: Local Self-Government Code.

8 Organic Law of Georgia: Local Self-Government Code.

9 Saba Buadze, "Assessment of Citizen Engagement Practices in the Municipalities of Batumi, Kutaisi and Akhaltsikhe" (Institute for Development of Freedom of Information, 2017), 7-8, https://idfi.ge/public/upload/IDFI_Photos_2017/idfi_general/Engagement_Practice_Assessment_in_Municipalities_of_Georgia_Final_ENG.pdf.

10 Nino Tvaltvadze, "Georgia. Institutionalised Citizen Participation: Assessment of Existing Mechanisms" (Council of Europe, 2017), <https://rm.coe.int/1680784817>.

11 Tvaltvadze.

convened by at least 5 percent of the population of the settlement has repeatedly been violated.¹³

Disparities in how deliberation is practised in local self-government in Georgia are also demonstrated by qualitative data. A recent piece of research, which studied how citizens engaged in deliberative mini-publics (participatory forums) in the framework of the State's Rural Support Program, found that "citizens still refuse to participate in public deliberation."¹⁴ Sultanishvili and Panchulidze divide shortfalls of deliberative practices into two areas: (1) challenges arising during engagement and (2) causes for non-participation.¹⁵ The former is argued to be a result of a range of factors: a lack of awareness about opportunities for participation; the absence of active dialogue, discussions and listening during deliberation; the exclusion of vulnerable groups and their opinions; a lack of information and learning

during the deliberation; unclear procedures for decision-making; and varied implementation of decisions made during deliberation.¹⁶ For non-participation, however, primary factors include a culture of informal decision-making; feelings of powerlessness and exclusion; a lack of diversity at meetings; decisions being changed after meetings without any reasoning provided to the public; and people's perception of participation being an elite-driven form of manipulation.¹⁷ How citizens perceive participation, their ability to participate and the benefits of such activity are key to understanding their motivations. As the majority of Georgians believe they are not qualified enough to participate in politics (see Figure 1), low levels of engagement are unsurprising.

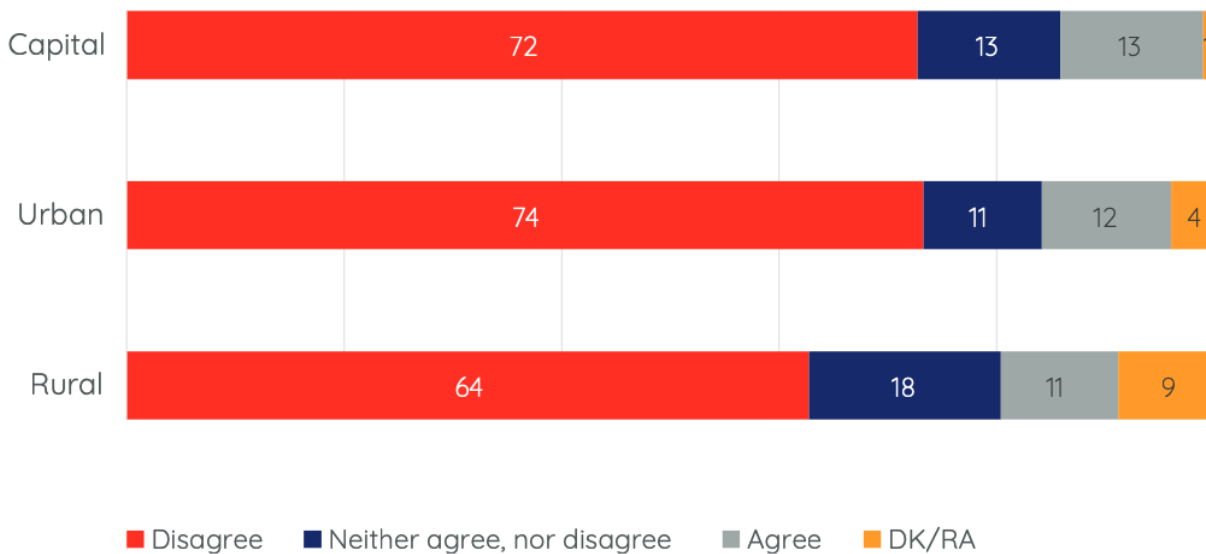


Figure 1. Percentages of responses to the question: "To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? "I consider myself well qualified to participate in politics if I want to do so"; by settlement type.

Adapted from "Caucasus Barometer 2021 Georgia," The Caucasus Research Resource Centers, 2022, <https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2021ge/QUALIF-by-SETTYPE/>.

12 Giorgi Toklikishvili et al., "Local Self-Government Index: Key Findings and Recommendations" (Institute for Development of Freedom of Information, 2019), https://idfi.ge/public/upload/IDFI_2019/General/LSGINDEX_Report_ENG_WEB3.pdf.

13 Tvaltvadze, "Institutionalised Citizen Participation."

14 Tengiz Sultanishvili and Elene Panchulidze, "Shortfalls of Deliberative Democracy in Rural Georgia: Analysis of the General Assembly of a Settlement in Mestia Municipality," Research report (PMC Research Center, 2020), https://pmcresearch.org/policypapers_file/106d5fe1ab0495c42.pdf.

15 Sultanishvili and Panchulidze.

16 Sultanishvili and Panchulidze.

17 Sultanishvili and Panchulidze.

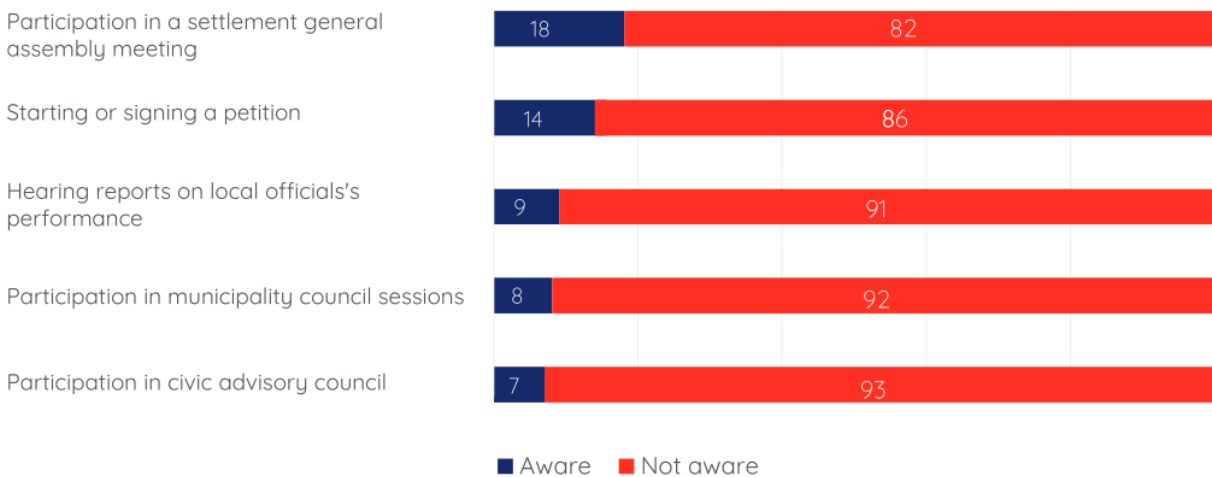


Figure 2. Awareness of the five forms of citizen participation. Adapted from "Study on Citizens' Satisfaction with Public Services in Georgia," Study Report (UNDP Georgia, 2017), https://www1.undp.org/content/dam/georgia/docs/publications/DG/UNDP_GE_DG_citizen_views_public_services_2017_eng.pdf.

Although there are numerous challenges to the implementation of the provisions guaranteeing citizen participation in local self-government, one successful case can be identified. Georgia's Decentralization Strategy 2020-2025 identifies transparency and accountability as one of three strategic objectives, and it sets a target of achieving an average score of 55 percent in Georgia's local self-government index by 2025, which in 2019 was 28 percent – up from 21 percent in 2017.¹⁸ This is an ambitious goal but not impossible, because the four urban municipalities of Batumi, Rustavi, Lagodekhi and Zugdidi had already achieved this score by 2019.¹⁹ The index has revealed that in 11 out of 64 municipalities, a council of civil advisors had not been created even though it is mandatory to do so according to the law, and most of the councils which have been created are not fully functional.²⁰ However, the case of the city of Batumi stands out. It registered the biggest improvement with an increase of 34 percentage points between 2017 and 2019 and has a highly active council of advisors.²¹ The members of the council include nineteen advisors who represent non-governmental organisations, media organisations, businesses, and the 13 districts that make up the Batumi city municipality.²² In these 13 districts, the council has established individual public halls, heads

of which are represented in the council. The public halls are, in turn, made up of residents of respective districts. The council actively works on citizen engagement in the local policy process; reviews initiatives, legal acts and policy proposals; and informs the public about the work of the municipality through its website.²³ As a result, in 2019 the Batumi municipality was the only municipality that had introduced a budgetary programme to support citizen participation.²⁴ In 2019, Zugdidi municipality followed Batumi's lead and successfully implemented a participatory budgeting programme allocating GEL 1 million (over EUR 300,000) for civic initiatives from the 2020 municipal budget.²⁵ This amounted to about 2.9 percent of the total planned expenditure of the municipality.²⁶

Overall, deliberative practices in Georgia are not as successful as they could be. Not only is it necessary to ensure that citizens feel confident enough to be able to engage with decision-makers and influence them to make decisions that serve the interests of the population, but they also need to be informed about what mechanisms they have for doing so.

18 "Decentralization Strategy 2020-2025" (Ministry of Regional Development and Infrastructure, 2020), <https://mrdi.gov.ge/pdf/5e468e292b317.pdf/Decentralization-strategy-ENG.pdf>.

19 Toklikishvili et al., "Local Self-Government Index."

20 Toklikishvili et al.

21 Toklikishvili et al.

22 "სტრუქტურა [Structure]," მართე შენი ქალაქი [Govern your city], No date, <http://marte.ge/ge/sabcho/struktura>.

23 "Georgia Handbook on Open Local Government and Public Ethics," Georgia Handbook (Council of Europe, 2021), <https://rm.coe.int/2021-12-06-handbook-open-government-and-public-ethics-georgia-eng/1680a53f06>.

24 Toklikishvili et al., "Local Self-Government Index."

25 "Georgia Handbook on Open Local Government and Public Ethics."

26 "ზუგდიდის მუნიციპალიტეტის 2020 წლის ბიუჯეტის დამტკიცების შესახებ [On Approving the 2020 Budget of the Municipality of Zugdidi]," Pub. L. No. Order #51 (2019), <https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/4760966>.

Online participation and advocacy

In the increasingly digitalised world, online forms of citizen participation are becoming more important than ever. Georgia joined the Open Government Partnership (OGP) in 2012 and since then various reforms have been introduced. Proactive publishing of public information and data has become a common practice for Georgian state institutions. For example, in 2021, Georgia has topped the 120-country list in terms of budget transparency evaluated through “online availability, timeliness, and comprehensiveness of eight key budget documents.”²⁷ In line with the OGP goals, Georgia has launched several websites to create digital infrastructure to ensure transparency, accountability, participation and accessibility of public services.

One instance of this can be seen on the portal MY.GOV.GE, where it is possible to receive over 400 public services from more than 100 state institutions, which cover 1,139 units and regional representations.²⁸ The launch of the Unified Portal of E-Services has simplified the provision of services to citizens, who can use biometric ID cards. It has been reported that about 75 percent of Georgians have such ID cards but only a fraction of them, namely 16 percent of those who own one (i.e., 12 percent of the total adult population of Georgia), have used them for electronic operations.²⁹ One reason for this low share of ID users may be the lack of access to the Internet in Georgia.

Lack of access to the Internet can also contribute to the low number of signatures for online petitions on the ICHANGE.GOV.GE portal. The Institute for Development of Freedom of Information reported that the most successful petition had only secured 556 signatures, whereas the required threshold is 10,000 signatures within a one-month period of starting a petition.³⁰ Only one petition on gambling has managed to gather the required number of signatures, which triggered the mechanism for consideration, following which a response by a special commission recommended that the Ministry of Finance adopt two changes: preventive measures against gambling and regulations on advertising.³¹

On December 20, 2021, the Georgian parliament passed a law which introduced a whole host of regulations for gambling businesses including the imposition of a 10 percent tax on gambling revenue, banning gambling advertisements and banning Georgia-issued bankcards from being used for gambling services registered outside Georgia.³² This was not an easy decision as there was mounting pressure from gambling businesses, sports teams and media agencies, all of which opposed the bill for fear of losing a significant portion of their revenue. Gambling had been a thriving business in Georgia, and even during the pandemic, gambling business turnover increased by 24 percent.³³ The industry has created about 10,000 jobs in the Georgian economy and generates GEL 300 million (EUR 95 million) in tax revenues for the Georgian budget annually.³⁴ However, the social problems it has caused have been significant. For example, according to some estimates, between 9 and 15 percent of Georgia’s population consists of problem gamblers, meaning they engage in problematic behaviour because of gambling.³⁵ Even among high school students in Georgia, 20 percent are “excessive” gamblers and 12 percent are “problem” gamblers; this is 5 and 7 percentage points higher, respectively, than the average figures for 35 European countries.³⁶

As a result, the petition, its review and recommendations were successful: the government of Georgia amended the legislation even though gambling businesses campaigned against these amendments. This means that the digital infrastructure the government of Georgia is creating is useful for promoting citizen participation. The success story of the anti-gambling petition, however, remains a solitary case, which indicates that Georgia still has a long way ahead in its efforts to improve online participation among its citizens.

Promoting electoral turnout

Voter turnout has been gradually decreasing in Georgian elections over the last three decades. Encouraging the electorate to vote is a challenging endeavour. In an attempt to address this problem, Girchi (which literally translates as pinecone), a small libertarian party, managed to come up with a creative way to promote voter turnout.³⁷ Advocating for small

30 “IDFI Will Monitor the Consideration Process of the E-Petition against Gambling,” Institute for Development of Freedom of Information, December 9, 2019, https://idfi.ge/443/en/petition_on_gambling.

31 “კამპანია აზარტული თამაშების წინააღმდეგ [Campaign against Gambling],” ichange.gov.ge, accessed June 3, 2022, <https://ichange.gov.ge/12340>.

32 Shota Khincha, “Georgia Passes Sweeping Gambling Restrictions,” OC Media (blog), December 22, 2021, <https://oc-media.org/georgia-passes-sweeping-gambling-restrictions/>.

33 Khincha.

34 Tornike Mandaria, “Georgian Government Moves to Rein In Gambling,” Eurasianet, January 27, 2022, <https://eurasianet.org/georgian-government-moves-to-rein-in-gambling>.

35 Mandaria.

36 ESPAD Group, “ESPAD Report 2019: Results from the European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs” (European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction, 2020), http://www.espad.org/sites/espad.org/files/2020.3878_EN_04.pdf.

37 In December 2020, the party split into two factions “Girchi” and “Girchi – More Liberty” emerged. This report follows the latter.

government and a limited state, Girchi does not seek state funding. Instead, individual candidates from Girchi can run their own fundraising campaigns before elections, and whoever receives the most donations will be included in the party list or as a candidate in a single-mandate district. For example, in the 2021 local elections, four opposition parties including Girchi – More Liberty, another party with a similar name, agreed on a common mayoral candidate. Girchi – More Liberty was afforded the opportunity to offer a candidate for a vice mayoral position. For this purpose, the party organised online primaries.³⁸ Anyone could register on the party website and pay a monthly membership fee of GEL 5 (less than EUR 2). For each monthly membership fee paid, the person received 100 votes; the party calls these votes “democratic” votes. Additionally, the same person could donate any amount of money they wished. The party calls these votes “meritocratic” votes.³⁹ For every GEL 1 donated, the person would receive about 33 votes, i.e., the same number of votes as GEL 1 could buy at the time of donation.⁴⁰ Donations did not have to be directed towards the favoured candidate.⁴¹ Instead, it was possible to fund various activities of the party including educational or advocacy campaigns, website maintenance, etc. Consequently, a person could vote for one or more candidates by splitting the votes available to them. The system counted “democratic” and “meritocratic” votes separately and calculated the average of the two shares of votes each candidate received; the live feed was available to everyone who entered the website even without registration. A 24-year-old man, who was virtually unknown to Georgian voters, received the highest average share of votes and won the primaries. This young activist, consequently, was picked as the candidate to be the vice mayor.⁴²

Furthermore, the pool of candidates was also democratically drawn. Any registered user of the party website who had paid the membership fee could become a “politician” by clicking a button labelled “I want to be a politician”.⁴³ As a “politician,” each member is eligible to receive direct funding or support, i.e., votes.⁴⁴ By

receiving votes, a “politician” can become a member of the political council and/or run in primaries.⁴⁵ As a result of this innovative scheme of fundraising, in 2020, Girchi decided to “return” its state funding to the taxpayers, using it to encourage them to participate in the elections. For this purpose, they created a lottery, which any voter could register for on the website of the party by election day.⁴⁶ They then could go and vote for a party and a candidate of their choice and all they had to do was to publish a selfie taken in front of the polling station with the number of the station visible in the photo. Following this, they needed to post the photo on Facebook with the hashtag “I was at the elections” and this would constitute valid entrance to the lottery.⁴⁷ Girchi held a live broadcast of the lottery, and one voter won a brand-new Porsche car worth GEL 100,000 (EUR 30,000), which was purchased with the state funding the party received.

This case shows an innovative way of promoting electoral participation, especially among young people who are more likely to be using the Internet.⁴⁸ Approximately 3,800 people participated in the lottery,⁴⁹ while according to Facebook, about 9.1 thousand people have posted on the social network using Girchi’s proposed hashtag. Although these numbers may not seem high, they are respectively 0.2 and 0.5 percent of all voters who participated in the 2020 elections. Alternatively, the figures can be put into a different perspective. Although it is impossible to know for which party these people voted, these numbers would represent 6.8 percent and 16.4 percent of those who voted for Girchi.

Obviously, Girchi’s motivation is self-centred and comes from the goal of gaining more votes and promoting their political agenda. The monetization of participatory mechanisms raises difficult questions. Yet, this is an example of innovative thinking that has increased participation among young people and got them to vote.

38 Girchi - მეტი თავისუფლება [More Liberty], ხმის მიცემა [Voting], 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BZoxD34N3UQ>.

39 Girchi - მეტი თავისუფლება [More Liberty].

40 Girchi - მეტი თავისუფლება [More Liberty].

41 Girchi - მეტი თავისუფლება [More Liberty].

42 “Four Opposition Parties Name Joint Tbilisi Majoritarian Candidates,” Civil Georgia, August 17, 2021, <https://civil.ge/archives/436922>.

43 “გირჩის პორტალი [Girchi’s Webpage],” YouTube, August 11, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLVhk-jGhO26_SoD0Scj_5bvOz2s4wz95x.

44 “გირჩის პორტალი [Girchi’s Webpage].”

45 “გირჩის პორტალი [Girchi’s Webpage].”

46 “გირჩი” მათთვის, ვინც საპარლამენტო არჩევნებში მონაწილეობას მიიღებს, “Tesla“-ს ავტომობილებს გაათამაშებს [For those who participates in the parliamentary elections, Girchi will hold a lottery and give away Tesla cars],” Girchi, 2020, <https://www.girchi.com/ge/media/news/3730-girchi-mattvis-vints-saparlamento-archevnebsi-monacileobas-milghebs-tesla-s>.

47 “გირჩი” “Tesla“-ს ავტომობილებს გაათამაშებს [Girchi will give away Tesla].”

48 According to the GeoStat data, in 2020 Georgians aged between 15-29 were three times more likely to have used the Internet during the past three months than those aged 60 or above. See “მოსახლეობის განაწილება, ინტერნეტის ბოლოს გამოყენების მიხედვით [Population distribution according to the time of the last usage of the Internet],” GeoStat, 2021, https://geostat.ge/media/40382/02_internetis_gamoyenebis_periodi.xlsx.

49 “გირჩის” PORSCHE გაათამაშდა - ვინ გახდა ავტომობილის მფლობელი [Girchi gave away a PORSCHE - who became the owner of the car],” Rustavi2, 2021, <https://rustavi2.ge/ka/news/210652>.

Conclusion

Georgia's experience and its attempts to encourage citizen participation in innovative ways have their failures and success stories. The primary lessons to be learnt are four-fold. First, civic education of the public is important. In Georgia, only a fraction of voters believe they are qualified to participate in politics. This needs to change. Citizens need to be informed about how policies are made, and they should feel confident that they know their needs better than anyone else. This is the key to representation and accountability. Unless citizens have a clear understanding of their preferences and are aware of how to pursue them or hold decision-makers accountable in case they fail to deliver on their promises, participatory and deliberative practices are likely to remain essentially flawed.

Second, even if there can be well-written laws, it is necessary to ensure that there is no difference between formal and informal practices. If informal practices diverge from the formal rules and take precedence over formal procedures, then laws and regulations become irrelevant. In contexts such as Georgia, which has a strong Soviet legacy of informality and bypassing formal rules, it is important to understand why citizens might feel frustrated when they see informal dealings or exertion of influence.

Third, small and niche political parties can sometimes find creative ways of promoting voter turnout or ensuring that their supporters feel they have control over the candidate selection process. However, the Georgian experience shows that this is largely ideologically driven and spreads a particular set of values. Therefore, it is necessary to have balance and alternative options to ensure voters have their agency in politics at all levels.

Finally, although the digitalisation of services and

participation are important steps forward for promoting the accessibility of services and ensuring transparency and accountability of public officials, the persistence of problems in terms of digital literacy and access to the Internet should not be underestimated. Therefore, digitalisation will not realise its full potential unless the public is ready to utilise its benefits.

Overall, the challenges Georgia faces are of course not exclusive to itself. Comparative studies could demonstrate similarities and differences as well as best practices for dealing with such challenges. At the same time, innovations applied in Georgia to promote citizen participation may be valuable for other countries. Such exchanges of experience are likely the optimal way to move forward and learn.

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About the project:

'Exploring Worldwide Democratic Innovations' is a research project supported by Robert Bosch Stiftung, which explores emerging innovations in democratic participation around the world and offering an overview of the lessons learned throughout the application of these innovations. The project highlights policy implications and gives a set of recommendations for European policymakers and practitioners working on the EU's internal democratic renewal. The project brings together researchers, practitioners and policymakers to exchange best practices in democratic political innovations.