



POLICY BRIEF

September 2024 / Issue #62

All Politics Is Local: Why Further Democratic Change in the Regions of Georgia Is Needed?

Nino Samkharadze¹

Executive 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. This vote is particularly significant given the accelerated decline in democracy under the Georgian Dream government, which has created an imminent threat to the Georgia's European aspirations. 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". Despite weeks of demonstrations on the streets, Georgian Dream has persisted in anti-democratic actions, underscoring the ruling party's determination to retain power by any means necessary. These developments are threatening not only Georgia's democracy, but its constitutionally declared aspiration to become the member of EU, which, according to the EU officials, is currently the frozen issue (Herczyński 2024).

This is why the parliamentary elections in October have acquired exceptional significance (Zurabishvili 2024a). The Georgian population is 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. At this juncture, it is crucial to engender the broadest

¹ Nino Samkharadze is policy analyst at Georgian Institute of Politics.

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

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, inevitably places Georgia's internal democratic development and its European future at an unprecedented level of risk. Accordingly, the country is preparing for one of the most decisive elections in its recent history, at which the population will eventually determine 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.

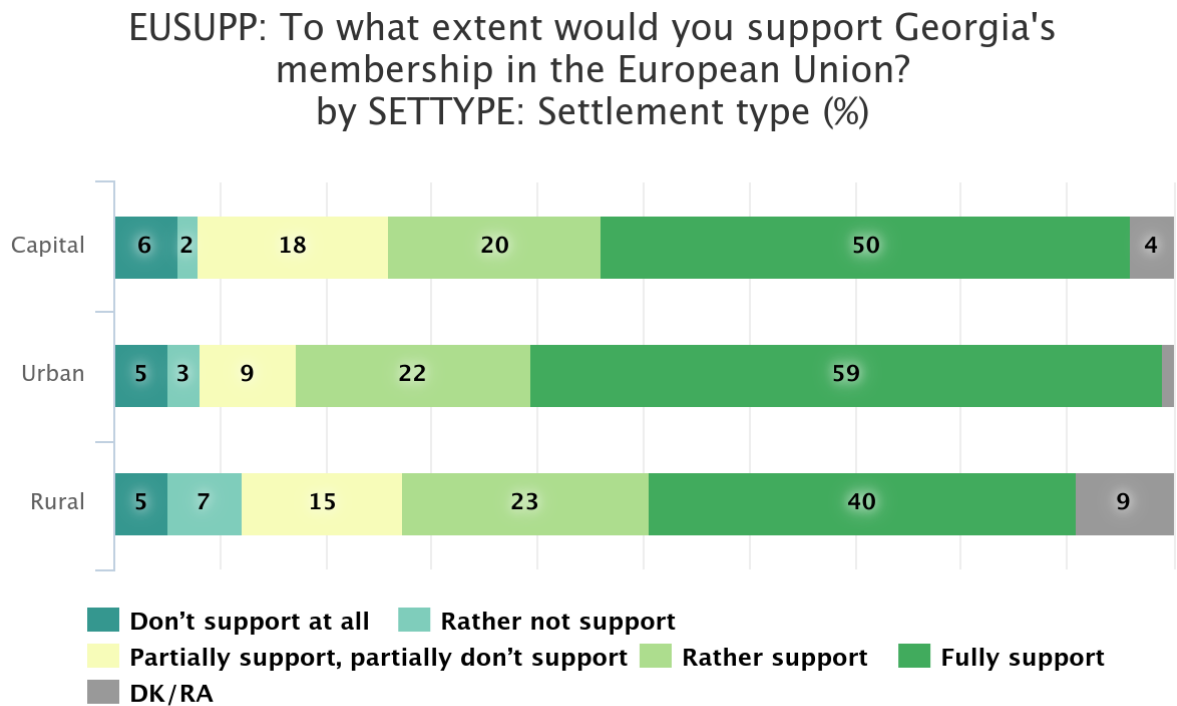
The importance for the pro-European opposition political parties of working in the regions is increasing – even though they don't enjoy high public trust in the country, ultimately, it is the parties that should be the primary drivers of democratic restart throughout the country. To safeguard Georgia's 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 endangers this aspiration, Georgia's leading pro-European opposition flank remains a hope who can challenge the new anti-European vector of the ruling party. Georgian president Salome Zurbishvili, during her Independence Day speech, initiated a Georgian Charter signing of 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!" (Zurbishvili 2024b). Therefore, according to this formula, if people vote for GD, they vote against Europe, and if they vote for another party under the Georgian Charter, this means they choose Europe.

Figure 1: Support of Georgia's membership in the EU by the type of settlement, April-May 2024

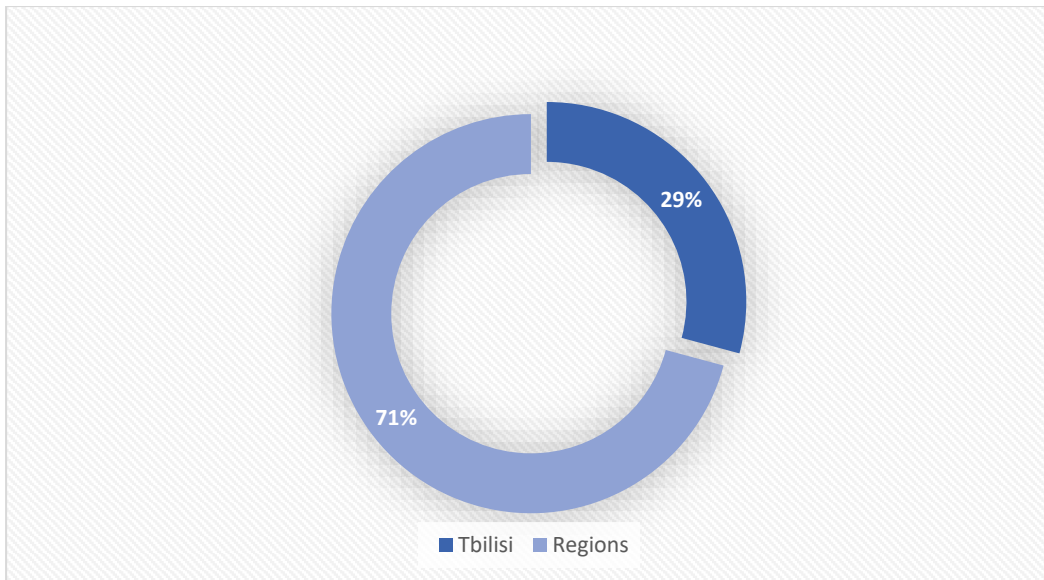


Caucasus Barometer 2024 Georgia
Retrieved from <http://caucasusbarometer.org/>

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

It is widely accepted that the key political processes in Georgia take place in the center, and this is also the main focus of the political parties – in Georgia’s case that is the capital (Shamugia 2023). This pattern is indicated by evidence coming from the activities of political parties on the ground and is disadvantageous when 70% 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.

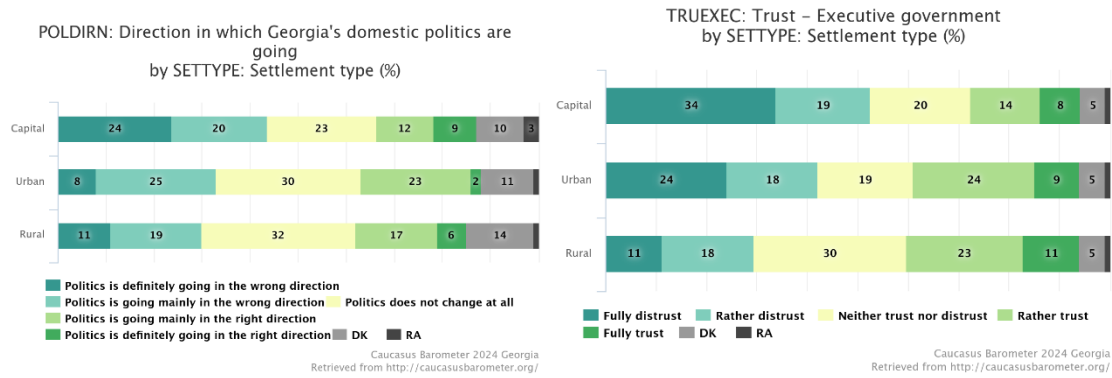
Figure 2: The population of Georgia in Tbilisi and the regions



Source: Geostat, available at <https://www.geostat.ge/ka/modules/categories/738/mosakhleobis-geografiuli-ganatsileba-dashida-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 (31% 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

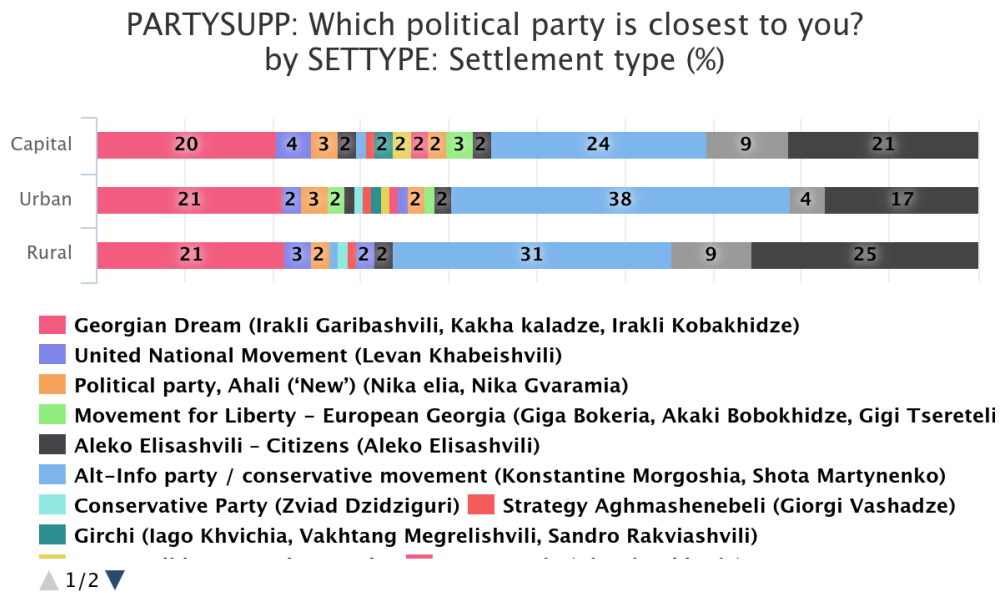


Source 1: Caucasus Barometer, available at: <https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/no2023ge/RATEGOV4-by-SETTYPE/>

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 logical basis for assuming that the population in the regions has limited opportunities to engage in understanding 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 2024²



Caucasus Barometer 2024 Georgia
Retrieved from <http://caucasusbarometer.org/>

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

An even more striking observation is that the turnout rate for the 2020 parliamentary elections was generally higher in the regions than 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. One potential explanation for this difference might be 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.

² Answers “There is no such party” and “Don’t know” are counted jointly.

Table 1: Turnout of 2020 parliamentary elections³

Region	Turnout (%)
Racha-Lechkhumi	63.8
Guria	61.1
Samtskhe-Javakheti	60.8
Mtskheta-Mtianeti	60.6
Kakheti	59.3
Adjara	59.1
Shida Kartli	58
Imereti	56.8
Samegrelo - Zemo Svaneti	54.7
Tbilisi	54
Kvemo Kartli	51

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

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

³ Sorted from highest to lowest

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 that exists in the region. This will require distinct and robust strategies in the months leading up to the 2024 elections.

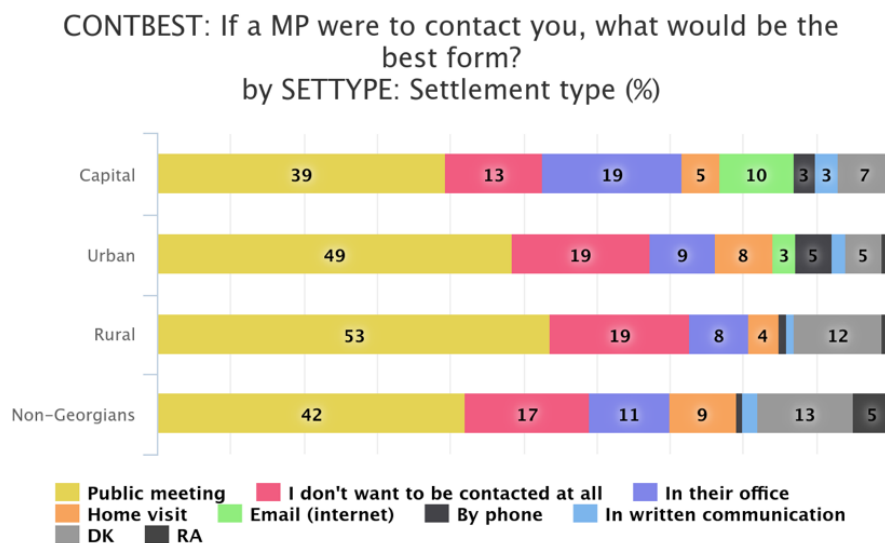
Mobilization of Trust in the Regions - How, Who and About What?

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 2024 elections approach, 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).

Figure 6: Best form of communication for a Member of Parliament, by accommodation, October 2023



NDI: Public attitudes in Georgia, October 2023
Retrieved from <http://caucasusbarometer.org/>

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?

As the upcoming election can be interpreted as an informal referendum about Georgia’s general geopolitical positioning, 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 upcoming elections.

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 and voters before the 2024 elections. 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.

Recommendation 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 the voters 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 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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Georgian Institute of Politics (GIP) is a Tbilisi-based non-profit, non-partisan, research and analysis organization. GIP works to strengthen the organizational backbone of democratic institutions and promote good governance and development through policy research and advocacy in Georgia.

This publication was produced with Institut für Europäische Politik (IEP) e.V. in Berlin in the framework of the project “Georgian Civil Society for EU Integration GEO4EU”, supported by the Federal Foreign Office through the Civil Society Cooperation Programme for the Eastern Partnership countries and Russia.

HOW TO QUOTE THIS DOCUMENT:

Nino Samkharadze “*All Politics Is Local: Why Further Democratic Change in the Regions of Georgia Is Needed?*”, Policy Brief No.62, Georgian Institute of Politics, September 2024.

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13 Aleksandr Pushkin St, 0107 Tbilisi, Georgia

Tel: +995 599 99 02 12

Email: info@gip.ge

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