



## **International Support to Political Party Development: Reflection on Strategies, Achievements and Challenges<sup>1</sup>**

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Both in the EU and its Eastern neighborhood, the nations are facing a challenging turning point in history. Economic malaise, anti-democratic propaganda, a decline of trust in political parties and institutions, the resurgent threat from authoritarian players, state fragility and corruption have all produced a painful realization of the fact that there is a need for a renewed emphasis and a perhaps a new approach to supporting democracy in the region. The persisting challenges of political party institutionalization, personality-based politics, low levels (or the absence altogether) of intra-party democracy, low numbers of women legislators, intense political polarization, lack of the culture of political dialogue and the practice of informal governance are some of the problems with which political party aid organizations are confronted with.

There are other trends in motion. Generally, political parties represent the institutions - the foundations of which have been laid several centuries ago and were profoundly shaped by the industrial revolution. Much is changing in the age of the technological disruption that we are witnessing today. Digitalization and decentralization of political activism, emergence of new possibilities for political organization, increasing application of software solutions, rising relevance of single issue and semi-organized citizen networks, the renewed attention to “direct democracy,” globalization and free movement of services and citizens, and the shifting cultural and ideological boundaries create new circumstances the political implications of which are only beginning to appear. These represent the new factors to reckon with both for political parties and aid providers as well.

To address these issues On May 11, 2018, Eastern European Centre for Multiparty Democracy (EECMD) with financial support of the Embassy of Kingdom of the Netherlands to Georgia hosted a roundtable where representatives from foreign aid community, political parties, and academia presented their views on the trends of democratization, political party development and evolution both globally and in the wider region.

The discussion touched upon the regional and global context where political parties operate, the inclusion and engagement of women, ethnic minorities and youth in politics, and the challenges associated with building programmatic political parties.

The role of international assistance for ensuring competitive, multiparty environment in developing democracies is of paramount importance. This is particularly true for the formerly socialist countries

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<sup>1</sup> This article is a brief summary of the report on the expert roundtable: “International Support to Political Party Development - Reflection on Strategies, Achievements, and Challenges”, organized on May 11, 2018



of Eastern Europe that had very limited historical experience with democracy and open, multiparty political environment. The parties formed in these countries lack tradition and institutional memory and are doubly challenged by the new global trends where political parties face increased competition from civil society, media, and global resurgence of populism. In the light of these challenges it is of utmost importance that international assistance aiming at developing multiparty democratic environment uses the available resources in the most efficient manner. According to the latest reports by Freedom House regarding their *Freedom in the World* index democracy has been in retreat for more than 10 consecutive years. Over these period of time Armenia, Azerbaijan, Russia, and Turkey have become increasingly authoritarian, and even such established democracies as Hungary and Poland suffer illiberal backlash. Still, against the backdrop of the erosion of democratic values and rising authoritarianism in Russia, Turkey, Azerbaijan and elsewhere, as well as the economic crises pervasive in the developed countries, addressing the challenges of political and economic nature becomes especially arduous. However, certain transformations and reforms witnessed in Georgia, as well as the recent developments in Armenia, raise hope of the possibility of change.

The modern globalized economic system that limits nation-state and curbs political parties as well represents yet another challenge. Income inequality represents an important obstacle for party formation – overall wealth increases however same time the gap between reach and poor strata of society is effectively widening. These obstacles are even more pronounced for the countries caught in transition.

To many skeptical EU citizens, the Union in some ways represents the challenges of political *globalization* where the role of a nation-state is diminished and the rise of supranationalism and technocratic governance by unelected officials makes democratic governance problematic at best. Development of information and communications' technologies and the social media enabled political parties to target an electorate in additional ways, but these changes also lowered the entry barriers for new movements negatively affecting traditional political organizations. Voter alienation is another malady manifested by a reduction of trust in political parties, decreasing voter turnout and political party membership worldwide.

Perhaps the most pervasive challenge for democratic development is the proliferation of political parties with no discernible ideology and programmatic platforms. These parties rely heavily on charismatic leaders for voter mobilization and increasingly use catch-all strategies to garner popular support. These leaves the electorate without effective means to hold their elected representatives accountable undermining the very essence of democratic process. This trend being global is especially prominent in developing democracies as the institutionalized traditional parties had never managed to materialize there before this process even started.

The lack of intra-party democracy, however, is a phenomena intrinsically associated with the developing democracies of the region. Given the lack of institutional memory, the predominance of charismatic personality-based political organizations that also employ clientelistic linkages to voters to receive support logically leads to the formation to political parties that are authoritarian in nature.



This characteristic has a pronounced negative influence on the successful inclusion of youth, women, and ethnic minorities both in the party organization and in the party agenda as well. Women's issues have gotten more attention in Georgia, at least, and it is already a few years that a bonus system is in effect which rewards parties with increased public financial support if they include at least 30% of women in their party lists. There is a wide public support to introduce mandatory quotas in the Parliament as well, though the initiative to do so recently failed. At the same time, the women representatives occupy 16% of all seats in the highest legislative branch of the country, and their presence in local councils is even lower. The situation is more problematic with youth and minorities, the political parties do not see rationale to engage ethnic minorities and they believe it is impossible to focus on youth involvement as the latter seem highly disillusioned with the political processes. In fact, major political parties in Georgia abolished their youth wings, and the international assistance that engages youth in political parties has trouble in implementing its programs as the young people leave their political parties in a relatively short period of time. This can be explained by the absence of meritocratic career development mechanisms in the political parties as their candidate selection is increasingly influenced by financial considerations. The latter is one of the most pressing issues that directly affect the level playing field in transitional countries. For example, in Georgia the incumbent generally receives 5 to 6 times more financial contributions from private sources than the next competitor. It is not infrequent that the opposition party does not receive any financial support from private individuals and organizations and has to depend solely on public financing. Given the enormous additional advantage administrative resources provide in similar countries the playing field is extremely uneven.

The international assistance for transitional countries to consolidate democracy remains essential. In view of persisting and emerging challenges this support should take more focused direction. The aid should go to the political parties that embrace liberal-democratic ideals and play or an important role in their respective countries or have the clear potential to do so in the foreseeable future. The assistance should target the groups within these parties that would benefit from intra-party democracy and improving the meaningful inclusion of women, youth and ethnic minorities in their midst. Regional organizations of the parties are also likely candidates for championing the structural changes that will make meritocratic advancement mechanisms in their organizations. To level the political playing field more attention should be paid to instituting effective election campaign spending caps and promoting of electoral systems that are amenable to multiparty representation.