

PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS 2020

# DIALOGUE WITH THE CONSTITUENTS





# PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS 2020 DIALOGUE WITH THE CONSTITUENTS

**Parliamentary elections are the pivotal moments in the political life of a country, defining the entire policy and legislative framework for the future four years. As the democracy assistance organization, the Eastern European Centre for Multiparty Democracy (EECMD), is actively involved in the process. In the face of a new reality and emerging challenges, our goal is to support electoral subject's active role in a dialogue with their constituents.**

The Parliamentary Elections 2020 occurred amidst the global pandemic and impacted the electoral environment as well as well as the general political life in Georgia. The Covid-19 pandemic caused key changes in many directions. It especially affected the political agenda in the pre-election phase, a critical point for final outcome. For many years, EECMD has been engaged in the political process to aid voters define their political association; and to assist political parties communicate their platforms with citizens. EECMD's pre-election activities were also inspired by this mission.

**Levan Tsutskiridze, EECMD, Executive Director:** *"Though the crisis required some adjustment of our initial plan, major priorities remained intact: primarily, voter information campaign. It is crucial that citizens are informed about their choices before heading to polling stations and making their choice.*

*Electoral programs are also critical for healthy electoral process. Our voter information website [www.partiebi.ge](http://www.partiebi.ge) provides political parties with the opportunity to introduce their electoral programs and priorities in a coherent, organized manner. It is quite a rare opportunity for political parties as the pre-election debates are usually dominated by the populistic discourse and less "vocal" but significant issues don't fall into sphere of greater media attention.*

*Dialogue among politicians and their constituents was especially relevant this year. Pre-election face to face meetings, presentations of electoral programs, discussions on local issues, and just a constructive debate was critically important for both sides.*

*In a current utterly polarized environment, where people with different viewpoints refrain from convening in the same space, discussions are held predominantly either in a monologue format or transforms into a confrontation, civilized political debate is more and more rare. Against this backdrop, we managed to foster a somewhat positive agenda and created a friendly environment either for politicians or for citizens."*

## PRE-ELECTION ENVIRONMENT AND POLITICAL PARTY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

Despite the pandemic-imposed constraints, EECMD Political Party Assistance Program has been actively engaged in the pre-election period and conducted number of online or face-to-face meetings and discussions throughout the country. Within these formats, citizens had opportunity to directly hear politicians' views on local issues and learn about the parties' and candidates' electoral programs. Obviously, the program had to adjust to emerging challenges too.

### **Salome Mukhuradze, EECMD Political Party Assistance Program, Senior Program Officer:**

"In the beginning of 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic made us switch the format of our work and adjust to a new reality. Despite many challenges, we managed to update and successfully launch the voter information website [www.partiebi.ge](http://www.partiebi.ge) - designed to aid political parties formulate their policy proposals and communicate it with their constituents. Moreover, in cooperation with the partner organizations, we enriched the portal with the new project "**Election Compass Georgia**" which also aims at informing voters about the political parties' platforms and assists users to identify which political party stands closest to their political views. Worth noting very successful cooperation with the partner political parties, resulted in the elaboration of some crucial policy documents, including the Covid-19 Response Anti-Crisis Action Plans".

Supported by the Danish Institute of Parties and Democracy (DIPD), creation of **Covid-19 Response Anti-Crisis Plans** has been EECMD's one of the major pre-election efforts. The project engaged 5 political parties: Aleko Elisashvili – Citizens, Lelo for Georgia, For Justice, Free Democrats and the Republican Party of Georgia. Political parties outlined specific measures to address the issues the pandemic has raised in the spheres of health, economics, social security, tourism, agriculture, education, disinformation, foreign threats and others. Consequently, **five Anti-Crisis Plans in Georgian and English languages were produced**, and respective presentation events were held in five cities of Georgia: Batumi, Kutaisi, Tbilisi, Gori and Telavi.

EECMD pre-election initiatives and activities spanned in the following directions:

To inform voters about political parties' programs and priorities, we updated the **voter information website [www.partiebi.ge](http://www.partiebi.ge)**. The project implemented since 2012 with the unwavering support of the Netherlands Embassy to Georgia, the web portal provides with the opportunity to learn about the views of political subjects on number of key thematic areas, such as economy, human rights, social welfare, foreign policy and others. This year, pandemic was the most pressing issue political parties had to address in their programs. In its entirety, political parties answered 35 questions and proposed their policy solutions to the

problems raised in these questions. This resource would have greatly helped voters to make an informed choice.

The following twelve political parties participated in the project: European Georgia – Movement for Liberty, United Georgia – Democratic Movement, United National Movement – United Opposition, Labor Party, Free Georgia, Aleko Elisashvili – Citizens, For Justice, Strategy Aghmashenebeli, New Political Center - Girchi, Georgian Dream – Democratic Georgia and Reformers. Also, David Tchitchinadze – Tribune, Alliance of Patriots of Georgia and Georgian Idea.

Notably, party programs are available in Georgian, English, Armenian and Azerbaijani Languages. Considering the interests of people of special needs, an audio version of the electoral programs is also integrated into the web page.



**Election Compass Georgia augments [www.partiebi.ge](http://www.partiebi.ge) with the voter advice tool.** It serves as a voter's compass in the complicated political landscape. Election Compass aims at informing citizens about party platforms and assists them in determining which of the political parties stand closest to their viewpoints. Implementation of the Election Compass Georgia engaged the Eastern European Center for Multiparty Democracy (EECMD), International Republican Institute (IRI), Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES), Friedrich Naumann Foundation (FNF), Heinrich Boell Stiftung (HBS) and Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS).

Based on the [www.partiebi.ge](http://www.partiebi.ge) content, EECMD commissioned the **Review of Political Parties' Electoral Programs for 2020 Parliamentary Elections** (authored by Bakur Kvashilava), providing a comparative analysis of political party programs competing in the October elections.

**Bakur Kvashilava, Policy Expert, Dean of School of Law and politics (GIPA)** “Compared to the previous parliamentary elections, the quality of pre-election programs have markedly improved, indicating that political culture is somewhat progressing. The quality of pre-election programs positively correlates with the development of political culture: more political parties have coherent, consistent and well-organized views proposed to their constituents, the higher the quality of political culture is.

This doesn't mean that the quality of party programs are the sole functions of the advanced political culture. Other indicators, such as political participation, the substance of political discourse, rules of the game, the governance style and party organization are no less significant factors in assessing the political culture development. The coherence of political party programs shows that political actors competing for governing power, realize that citizens demand comprehensible, thought out and competent views on the country's future development.”

**Pre-Election Meetings with Female Politicians:** To reach out to various groups of society and deliver party messages to as many people as possible, number of meetings were held in the pre-election period. Women's issues have always been a central theme for EECMD's work. We try to support women's empowerment and engagement in political processes. These elections weren't the exclusion either: in the framework of the project Regional Engagement to Advance the Creation of Hubs for Democracy (REACH for Democracy), EECMD conducted multiparty discussions – **Electoral Programs and Election Environment** – engaging female leaders from six political parties. These meetings aimed at supporting dialogue among women candidates, assessing pre-election environment and giving women politicians an opportunity to present their party programs. The importance of multiparty dialogue and women's role in the process of Georgia's future democratic development have been actively discussed.



**Engaging regions in Georgia's social and political life is one of the core missions of EECMD.**

Our team has been working tirelessly to facilitate the conversation among political parties and constituents in regions so that parties directly speak to them and listen concerns of local citizens.

In the framework of the project Supporting and Enhancing Democratic Political Culture in the Pre-electoral Period, funded by the Open Society Foundation (OSGF), **13 pre-election meetings** were organized in Tbilisi and throughout the regions, engaging political party representatives who introduced their party programs to locals. This cycle of regional meetings was preceded by the commission of **11 Documents of Local Policy Needs**, based on the issues revealed through the focus group discussions conducted in each region. These documents also encompass the discussion on potential development projects aimed at addressing outlined local issues.



In December, EECMD also launched a new book – **Georgia's Political Landscape – 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition**. It builds on excellent earlier work, “The Political Landscape of Georgia: Political Parties: Achievements, Challenges and Prospects”, edited by Ghia Nodia and Alvaro Pinto Scholtbach in 2006.

**Georgia's Political Landscape – 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition** features a number of valuable research articles, such as the Development of Programs of Georgian Political Parties in 2008-2016 (Zviad Barkaia, Bakur Kvashilava); Electoral Systems and Their Influence on Development of Political Parties in Georgia (Bakur Kvashilava); Representation of Women and National Minorities in Georgian Political Life (Nino Gogoladze); Interest Aggregation and Policy Making by Political Parties: Past Decade of the Georgian Party Politics (Irakli Kobalia); Georgia's European Way: Role of the Political Parties (Ivane Chkhikvadze).

Considering the lack of academic research on major political developments of the last decades, the importance of this book is quite invaluable. This bilingual book is a readers' guide to the Georgian political landscape. It will also help political scientists and scholars of Georgia's modern history realistically to assess current political reality.

## DEMOCRACY EDUCATION PROGRAM IN THE PRE-ELECTION PERIOD

In the lead up to the parliamentary elections, Democracy Education Program activities focused on informing and engaging citizens in the electoral process. The most programmatic effort was dedicated to this direction. Despite the pandemic imposed constraints, we still managed to inform voters and facilitated a meaningful exchange between voters and politicians.

**Nino Khitarishvili, EECMD Democracy Education Program, Senior Program Officer:**  
*"2020 Parliamentary Elections were special for many reasons. Pandemic created many challenges, however, despite its detrimental effect on every sphere of life, we haven't stopped informing citizens and conducting dialogues between voters and political parties.*

*Democracy Schools still hosted traditional regional meetings. Apart from learning about party programs and views, participants had an excellent opportunity to raise those salient local issues, they have themselves worked to identify. These issues are reflected in the Citizens' Vision documents too.*

*Such formats are important for both sides, as it encourages the dialogue between politicians and their constituents; supports the formation such a policy dialogue that meets citizens needs and interests."*

### **EECMD Democracy Education Program implemented number of important projects:**

In the framework of the USAID-funded project Developing Regional Information and Voter Empowerment for Democracy (DRIVE Democracy), beneficiaries in **five cities of Georgia created Regional Development Roadmaps**, encompassing most salient issues for each region. Based on these roadmaps, later **8 policy interest documents** have been created. Launch of these policy interest documents were preceded by the months long, intensive training course in Tbilisi, Gori, Telavi, Kutaisi and Batumi. Local community groups engaged in creating policy interest documents also proposed their policy recommendations, later presented to political parties as well.

**Nino Khitarishvili, EECMD Democracy Education Program, Senior Program Officer:**  
*"Citizens' Vision Documents 2020 were prepared for the first time for these parliamentary elections. If previously Democracy School alumni were engaged in traditional pre-election meetings, where mostly political parties were talking about their views, this time citizens were empowered to voice their needs and challenges and place them higher on the political agenda."*



**The citizen participation too “Consul” – an innovative platform for citizen engagement** is another important resource, launched before the elections with the USAID’s financial support. Consul is a digital platform, enhancing citizen participation in democratic processes and encouraging dialogue between citizens and politicians.

Consul allows users/voters to participate in discussions on political or socio-economic issues of their interest, submit their own proposals, and engage in surveys initiated by other participants, including voting on specific projects. **Translated in Georgian Language, Consul was launched in five cities of Georgia.** The initiative gained utmost importance due to the pandemic: in the time of limited communication opportunities, offered digital platform enabled citizens to maintain effective communication between each other, and freely raise and discuss issues of their concern.

**DRIVE Democracy** supports civic activism in the regions of Georgia. It's important that beneficiaries are able to independently raise the issue of local importance and try to address it themselves. **The small grants award mechanism** served exactly this purpose. It prioritized the ideas oriented to the development of local democracy through supporting innovative ways of civic engagement. **Project proposal from Kutaisi, Informed Citizen = Conscious Choice** was selected as one of the winners from the range of applications. The aim of this project was to raise the awareness of the residents of the Imereti region on election issues.

In order to make party programs more comprehensible for voters, **we actively facilitated dialogue between political parties and their constituents**. In the framework of the project funded by the Dutch Embassy, **online and face to face meetings with the representatives of political parties and their majoritarian candidates engaged Democracy Schools alumni and DRIVE Democracy project participants.**

For many years, this type of series of meetings used to be organized in a format where political party representatives introduce their views hear from local community about their concerns. In this case, series of meetings conducted in five regions of Georgia, were more issue-driven and focused on the themes such as local self-governance and economic growth, security concerns over IDPs and social wellbeing, women, youth and ethnic minorities engagement in political life and many more. **In total, 16 regional meetings conducted throughout the country provided with clearer picture of pressing public issues.**

## ASSESSING THE POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT IN GEORGIA AND UKRAINE

**Maia Machavariani, Senior Programs Coordinator:** “Covid-19 crisis imposed extraordinary challenges on Georgia’s Parliamentary and local self-government elections in Ukraine. For both countries, these elections were critical juncture for their democratic development and political transformation. Ahead of these pivotal elections, we tried to connect Georgia and Ukraine’s programmatic activities through online panel discussions on the issues of importance for both countries.”

To this purpose, EECMD conducted online conference **Assessing Pre-election Political Environment in Georgia and Ukraine**, engaging foremost political experts and civil society leaders from both countries. They analyzed the political landscape ahead of the elections, discussed major challenges and contextualized the planned elections in the broader democratic development context of the country.

**Ultimately, events conducted by EECMD's both programs were productive and successful for all engaged sides.** Party representatives heard about issues directly from citizens and committed to reflect their views in the party programs. For citizens and voters, it was important to meet politicians – potential lobbyists of their interests and trusted representatives of their voice. Informing citizens and aiding them to make an informed choice has been the major vector of EECMD's programmatic efforts in 2020.

**Levan Tsutskiridze, EECMD Executive Director:** “2020 has been quite a special year for us. Despite the tough epidemiological environment, we managed to massively reach out to citizens. Created various formats of dialogue and discussion either in face to face or in online format.

Despite hardships, starting from healthcare crisis, ended with deep political crisis and extremely polarized electoral environment, we managed to maintain policy focused discussions, kept political parties working on their programs and assisted in communicating them with their voters. I am delighted that EECMD team decently face and successfully overcame all the emerging challenges.”



**Eastern European Centre for Multiparty  
Democracy (EECMD)**

Sharashidze 70179, Tbilisi Georgia

Tel.: +995 32 291 56 50/51

E-mail: contact@eecdmd.org

