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# REVIEW OF TBILISI MAYORAL CANDIDATES ELECTION PLATFORMS FOR THE 2021 LOCAL ELECTIONS

A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

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## INTRODUCTION

It is crucial for democratic development and state building to ensure that the individuals responsible for the nation's governance are held accountable to their citizenry. This is unquestionably guaranteed by free and fair elections, when citizens are entitled and, according to some views, even obligated to evaluate the previous government's activities and decide whether to keep it in power or replace it. To do that, voters should look at the ruling party's political platform from the previous election and what they had promised to carry out after their electoral success. While it is true that after coming to power, the government and state may face a new set of challenges and some areas of the political platform may be excluded from the agenda, these claims require well-grounded substantiation, and voters can still evaluate the ruling team on whether it kept its promises.

Platforms are naturally no less significant for opposition parties since they offer voters different solutions to problems facing the nation and its people. Citizens would support an alternative political force only if they considered its vision more accurate and convincing. Therefore, it's often insufficient for the population to simply be dissatisfied with the current government's policies since this does not translate into support for the opposition if they are deemed an even more unacceptable alternative.

The prevailing view in Georgian political circles is that political platforms are not essential - nobody reads them, and accordingly, only a small number of voters make decisions based on them. It seems that most political parties share this view, and thus most of them do not propose any well-structured platform. Even those who do often create one just a few days before the election. Instead, political leaders bet on other components in their election campaigns.

A voter's free choice is based on three considerations: whether their values and views align with those of a political party or candidate, whether they trust them, and whether they deem a political party or candidate capable of attaining the goals they set out. The election platform basically covers the first component, but it may also focus on the second and third components by demonstrating past achievements and deeds.

Supporting the development of consistent, well-formulated, and thematically relevant election platforms is one of the major objectives in Georgia's democratization effort. The Eastern European Center for Multiparty Democracy (EECMD) is playing a special role in this effort. Since the 2012 parliamentary election, their [www.partiebi.ge](http://www.partiebi.ge) website has been forwarding special questions on topics of public importance to political groups participating in the elections and making their responses easily accessible to voters. On this website, citizens can easily compare competitors' political views and action plans on individual topics. This approach has another advantage – political leaders and their parties must respond to each question whether they discuss a specific topic in their platforms or not.

As expected, the 2021 local elections have become this project's recent focus, this time highlighting the city of Tbilisi. Each mayoral candidate was given a chance to present their own views on city development and, more generally, on the challenges facing the nation.

These elections, with a second round to be held in several districts and cities at the end of October, have been characterized by extremely polarized political confrontation because of special circumstances and the political context. The main opposition parties refusing to accept

the results of the 2020 parliamentary election caused a severe months-long political crisis in the country, a crisis which was only resolved through the engagement of the European Union, the country's main political partner, and its highest-level leadership. Opposition parties demanded that the 2020 parliamentary election results be annulled and a new election announced. A long-term mediation process ended with acceptance of the so-called "Charles Michel Document," which was signed by most opposition parties and the ruling Georgian Dream.<sup>1</sup> The spirit of this document was to reach a consensus among opposing parties with the goal of applying common approaches for long-term cooperation on key issues, including electoral, judicial, and legislative reform. One of the terms that directly affected this year's local elections was the agreement's fifth and final clause, in which Georgian Dream promised to call early parliamentary elections if they failed to get 43% of the proportional votes in local elections.

The main opposition party, the United National Movement (UNM), did not sign the agreement. In addition to its formal, stated reasons, there were likely pragmatic calculations behind this decision. Georgian Dream had already signed the agreement and would be forced to abide by its terms, while the UNM would benefit from this result with no need to explain to its activists the compromise with Georgian Dream or the positive aspects of the deal. None of the parties was fully satisfied with this agreement, and when Georgian Dream decided to withdraw from the agreement on July 28 and cited the main opposition party's boycott of this agreement, the scale and intensity of polarization became even more obvious.<sup>2</sup> Since then, the United National Movement has tried to retake the initiative by signing the deal, but naturally, this made no impact on Georgian Dream's decision, which most likely wasn't even UNM's goal when they decided to sign it. Nevertheless, it was still extremely important for the ruling party to receive at least 43 percent of the proportional votes since otherwise, the issue of a snap parliamentary election would return to the agenda.

This context gives a general idea of why the launch of election campaigns was delayed, and this always benefits the interests of the party in power. However, opposition parties also initiated their own election activities rather late. This partly explains the unprecedentedly low number of published political platforms and responses to questions in the 2021 [www.partiebi.ge](http://www.partiebi.ge) initiative.

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1 Charles Michel Document –The Future Path of Georgia. [https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/mediacia\\_samomavlo\\_gza\\_sakartvelostvis.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/mediacia_samomavlo_gza_sakartvelostvis.pdf)

2 Radio Liberty. Charles Michel Deal Cancelled. <https://rb.gy/ptai2l>

## METHODOLOGY

To assess political-party platforms in several recent election cycles, the EECMD has used an approach focused on three components: **political course** – the platform’s distinct ideological line and its consistency, **competence** – coverage of thematic issues and the quality of analysis of problems found in that coverage, and **action plan** – specific mechanisms and steps to solve a given problem or complete a task. Out of the sixteen individuals registered as Tbilisi mayoral candidates, only four candidates completed the questionnaire. Unfortunately, the ruling Georgian Dream was not among them. With public interest in mind, the EECMD thought it would be useful to use the election platform made public by the Georgian Dream and its candidate running for Tbilisi mayor as a substitute for responses to the questionnaire. This platform had already made the ruling party’s position on most of the questions publicly available anyway.

In all, political parties had to answer 29 questions<sup>3</sup> which we thematically grouped into five categories: **the economy, society, infrastructure, culture and education**, and specific **stand-alone issues**. This classification substantially reduced the overall number of categories compared to the classification published on the website. That’s why regrouping the questions was deemed necessary, and this is reflected in the Appendix. In this regrouping, seven issues were included in the economic development category, ten issues were included in the infrastructure and urban development category, three issues were included in the health care and social affairs category, six issues were included in the culture and education category, and three questions represented specific stand-alone issues. For our analysis, we reviewed the views of the five parties whose responses or views are posted on the [www.partiebi.ge](http://www.partiebi.ge) website: **Gakharia - For Georgia, Lelo for Georgia, Third Force, Georgian Dream**, and the **United National Movement - Strength is in Unity**. We also tried to obtain the election platforms of other candidates and their parties for additional analysis. Unfortunately, the only publications we found were those made by the **Alliance of Patriots**. These did not constitute a platform in the literal sense, but since the party deliberately uses these formats for this purpose, we felt justified in using them.

## THEMATIC REVIEW OF THE PLATFORMS

### ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

We pooled seven questions in this category, and the first one serves as an opener for the entire questionnaire. It asks the candidates and their political groups to share their vision on key priorities for Tbilisi’s development. The format for each question limits the word count of the response to 250 words, which on average would leave room for about ten to twelve sentences. In almost each case, political parties’ responses were short and often did not reach even half of this limit. For example, UNM - Strength is in Unity answers this question, which was supposed to present the candidate’s vision, in two sentences, which in total amounts to only thirty-two words. Sadly, we often encountered such cases on other topics in the responses of other

<sup>3</sup> See Appendix 1.

parties as well. And if we consider Georgian Dream's failure to complete the questionnaire at all, this suggests that parties and candidates consider providing voters with substantial and well formulated election plans of secondary importance. Naturally, a vision on key priorities for city development conveyed in only thirty-two words is of little value by any measure. It is unfortunate that in the case of other political groups, most responses are extremely general and more like wish lists than a structured hierarchy of concrete priorities. Similarly, in these parties' responses, the number of words falls significantly short of the limit. We should, however, note that Lelo for Georgia has the most consistent responses grounded on specific principles.

Because the Georgian political system has been dominated by two political groups, the Georgian Dream and the United National Movement, for the last ten years, we will start by analyzing these parties' stances on each thematic issue. It is logical to start with the party in power, the **Georgian Dream**. The party in power enjoys a substantial advantage in terms of possessing relevant information and using administrative resources to develop, among other things, a detailed and rational platform. This advantage is even more evident if the party controls all segments of the government hierarchy in legislative, executive, and local branches. We could therefore have expected that the Georgian Dream platform, in comparison with its competitors, would be more consistent and convincing. Unfortunately, this expectation was not met.

In the economic section of the platform, **Georgian Dream's Tbilisi mayoral candidate Kakha Kaladze** has no response to such fundamental issues as the city's long-term economic development plan, budget priorities, and key challenges and opportunities. The Georgian Dream platform does not say anything about these issues. Their vision for development is extremely general, while the plan for attracting investments is limited to COVID response measures. The most specific and well formulated views, in which the Georgian Dream's advantage of being in power is clearly demonstrated, are on environmental measures they would take. In this, we see concise but easy to comprehend points.

On the questions from the economic category, **UNM - Strength is in Unity's Tbilisi mayoral candidate Nika Melia** provided the most elaborate response to the second question related to the city's long-term economic development plan and vision. On the one hand, he seems willing to create an environment conducive to business and investments, but on the other hand, he also seems prepared to delegate a substantially greater role to the state through increased regulation of the economy and social affairs while also supporting significant infrastructure and recreation projects.

Although many of his proposed initiatives are specific in nature, several proposals require further expansion and clarification. For instance, one of the goals is to "transform Tbilisi into an education-exporting city" (see the response to the second question), but nowhere does he lay out the argument why this should be a priority or how this goal could be achieved realistically. The third and fourth questions in this category are related to the challenges and opportunities that affect Tbilisi's development. Here, the mayoral candidate highlights stamping out corruption but does not clarify why he believes that this is a problem or what the scale of that problem is. His solution is also limited to purely political will. The one issue that he addresses in quantitative terms is the bloated workforce at the mayor's office. We would like to emphasize that the shortage of details and arguments in this case, and in the responses of other parties, can by no means be explained by the limit of 250 words set on the website since in responding to this third question, the party reaches only half of its limit and in their response to the fourth question related to the city's development potential, the party only uses two sentences (55 words).

The fifth question is related to city budget priorities, and again, the party manages to present its arguments in three sentences. The major focus, as it was the case in the 2020 election platform, is on reducing the bureaucratic burden and using the money saved by that to implement social and large-scale infrastructure projects. The sixth question requires specific information on what the mayoral candidate and their party would do to improve commercial infrastructure and attract investments. The UNM - Strength is in Unity candidate limits himself to one sentence in his response to this question (15 out of a possible 250 words), and naturally, it does not merit serious discussion. The final and twentieth question in this group informs us about the political party's vision and plan for improving the city's ecological condition, but again it was again difficult for UNM - Strength is in Unity since the party presents its opinion in just two sentences (31 words out of 250).

**Ana Bibilashvili, the Tbilisi mayoral candidate for the Lelo for Georgia party,** takes a more consistent stance on the issue of the city's relatively long-term economic development. In this regard, especially for the fourth question, a specific vision that differs from those of her competitors' is included along with the usual list of nice wishes. On the other hand, questions about the city's budget priorities and investment climate remain unanswered. Lelo's economic stance is right-wing in spirit and focuses primarily on attracting investment. It is therefore unclear why the political party does not use the opportunity to provide a detailed answer to the question on this topic.

**Giorgi Gakharia, the Tbilisi mayoral candidate for the Gakharia - For Georgia party,** also takes a right-wing stance on economic issues, identifying cooperation with the private sector and attracting foreign investment for city development as top priorities. On the other hand, the idea of engaging the population in governance, especially in budgeting, is, to some extent, innovative. Unfortunately, as is the case with other parties, he does not expand his ideas on this issue further. The idea of financing the development and expansion of the subway system through the issuance of municipal securities is also interesting. Unlike the UNM - Strength is in Unity party, For Georgia sees the problem of current city governance not in corruption but in ineffective bureaucracy that slows down projects. Finally, despite the pronounced priority, the party attaches to foreign investments, they answer the sixth question, which addresses this very issue, briefly and in general terms.

**Third Force's Tbilisi mayoral candidate Tamar Kekenadze** extensively discusses economic issues, and in many areas, her party's approaches are detailed and specific. Participatory city management and budgeting and the prospects of turning Tbilisi into a knowledge, tourism, and transit hub are not only presented in abstract terms but include the elements of an action plan. Her approaches are more centrist, with the state playing a crucial role in supporting priority development areas. Her initiatives for achieving environmental sustainability are also interesting, even though she presents relevant information in a fragmentary way.

## INFRASTRUCTURE AND URBAN DEVELOPMENT

In this group, we have included ten questions, the highest number of questions per group, which is natural since these topics are the most relevant ones for local-government elections. On the other hand, given the existing political context, it was quite predictable that opposition parties would not, and could not, pay proper attention to these issues. We, therefore, expected

the Georgian Dream to focus on these very topics, especially considering the advantages they have as the party in power, and this should have been especially evident in their discussion.

Indeed, the **Georgian Dream** pays the most attention to infrastructure issues. They list in detail, for example, the streets, bridges, and other buildings that they would restore, the number of buses they would purchase, the subway stations they would renovate, and the sidewalks and curbs they would repair. They also present some exceptionally good and timely initiatives, such as the expansion of the bicycle path network and the introduction of a public transport subscriber system. Georgian Dream's Tbilisi mayoral candidate pays special attention to issues like providing housing for the homeless and addressing unfinished construction projects. The ruling team also focuses on dilapidated buildings. Unfortunately, they only pay superficial attention to ensuring the movement of pedestrians and people with disabilities and addressing problems with stray animals. In addition, they completely ignored the issue of sanitation and garbage collection, which had become a significant challenge for the city government this election year because of the staff strike.<sup>4</sup> They say nothing about potential transport development on the Mtkvari River and the Tbilisi railway bypass project, which had been supported by the current city administration during the 2017 election campaign. It should also be noted that even in areas where the Georgian Dream focuses on specific landmarks, such as in their rehabilitation plans for specific streets or buildings, there is no vision beyond that list that could show voters the overall picture, such as, for example, the reasons for selecting these streets instead of others or how these projects fit into their overall urban development plan. In other words, they don't explain the rationale behind these decisions.

**UNM - Strength is in Unity's Tbilisi mayoral candidate** gives his most detailed attention to the relocation of the railway station away from the city center to the area next to the Tbilisi Sea and presents it as one of his key issues in terms of transportation-infrastructure development. UNM - Strength is in Unity is reasonably competent in discussing this issue, which is probably because they started this idea in the final years of their rule. Also, they pay a great deal of attention to developing electric transport. This political party's approaches to unfinished construction projects and dilapidated buildings are also notably detailed. In this category, although the role of the state is considered important by the party, the involvement of the private sector also plays a significant role.

On these issues, **Lelo for Georgia's Tbilisi mayoral candidate** holds an even more right-wing stance in planning to address key issues by actively involving the private sector. Unfortunately, in terms of content details, their attitudes do not differ much from those of the others. However, they have the most clearly explained vision for managing stray animals. The same can be said about their plans for utilizing the Mtkvari River as a resource.

**For Georgia's mayoral candidate** attaches considerable importance to cooperating with the private sector in implementing infrastructure projects, but in general, the party leans more to the left than Lelo. Their primary focus is on the subway, and their stances on other issues does not go beyond general wording.

Unlike their responses to the economic category, the responses of **Third Force** in this category are limited to stating abstract and general objectives in answers consisting of just a few sentences.

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<sup>4</sup> Radio Liberty. *The Strike of Some Sanitation Service Employees Continues.* <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/31398164.html>

## CULTURAL AND EDUCATIONAL ISSUES

In this category, we included six questions that deal with both general and specific topics. For example, the first (fourteenth on the list) question of this group asks about the parties' visions for the city's creative and cultural development, while the sixth and final question asks for a reasoned opinion about the possible demolition of the Art Museum, which had been the cause of heated debate during the pre-election period.

While it is perhaps easy to guess that **Georgian Dream** does not express its opinion on this last issue in their platform, the ruling party nevertheless presents the most plausible plan for the category as a whole: restoring numerous cultural sites and creating a fund designed to finance ethnic minority projects that recognize Tbilisi's cosmopolitan past and support the preservation of this characteristic in the future. A plan involving the allocation of GEL 350 million to restore historic sites is also an impressive initiative, although in this case, it is not clear how the sites were selected and how this plan fits into the overall development context and plan. The initiatives aimed at promoting healthy lifestyles as well as the mechanisms for incentivizing youth interest in sports are quite detailed and specific. The platform calls for the expansion of targeted assistance to support education, which should also be welcomed.

**UNM - Strength is in Unity** does not have a detailed and well-grounded position on any of these issues. Out of a total limit of 1,500 words, they considered that only 160 words, much less than the 250-word limit allocated for a single question, would be enough to introduce voters to the party's vision and opinions. Interestingly, the mayoral candidate answers the specific question about improving educational access and quality in Tbilisi in one sentence in which he identifies transforming Tbilisi into "an education-exporting city" as one of his main development priorities but makes no attempt to adequately explain the issue.

**Lelo for Georgia** has a well-formulated vision for the city's cultural development, and their plan to ensure the quality and accessibility of education is quite detailed and specific. They also consider issues such as expanding recreation areas, preserving the city's historic appearance, and promoting sports and healthy lifestyles using measurable benchmarks.

The **For Georgia** party pays the most attention to the preservation of Tbilisi's historical appearance, and in this regard, their position is distinct in terms of content. On the other hand, their vision of cultural development and discussion of educational topics are highly abstract. Sports and healthy-lifestyle development also occupy a relatively large spot, but overall, their initiatives are quite general.

**Third Force** provides a detailed discussion of education, and we can state with confidence that the party's vision in this regard is the most consistent and sound. They pay less attention to the issues of sports, cultural development, and recreation zones. On these issues, the Tbilisi mayoral candidate limits herself to expressing universally acceptable generalities or presenting a fragmentary vision.

## HEALTH CARE AND SOCIAL POLICY

In this category, we posed a total of three questions. Two of these were related to health and social policy, while the third specifically asked political parties to express their views on ways to solve the problem of homelessness.

In terms of social policy, the **ruling Georgian Dream party** emphasizes the problem of homelessness and sets a rather ambitious goal: no homeless families upon implementation of their platform. To improve health indicators, they focus on increasing funding for oncology patients and expanding preventive measures.

**UNM - Strength is in Unity's** vision supports an increase in health and social spending and stresses that these services should be provided to citizens regardless of their political views. Interestingly, just as in other cases, the party does not find it necessary to cite relevant examples that would make this view more plausible. Much as they did during the televised debate, they also highlight the issue of free cafeterias and criticize the inadequacy of the government's COVID efforts in general and the vaccination rate in particular.

**Lelo for Georgia** is also relatively conservative in terms of resolving these issues, but the party does favor increasing some specific services for target groups that are relatively more vulnerable. Lelo is, importantly, the only party to mention the problem of homeless children.

The **For Georgia** party also plans to increase spending to support priority groups and focuses on expanding the network of kindergartens, introducing a home-care program, and strengthening dilapidated houses using the state funds. They also highlight the issues of free cafeterias and housing for the homeless.

**Third Force** may be the only political party that adequately answers the question about improving health care indicators and supports its vision with concrete arguments. Their vision for social issues and solving the problem of homelessness, however, is generalized and fragmented.

## SPECIFIC ISSUES

We asked three questions that reflect issues that had been publicly debated over recent months: proposals on how to fight and prevent crime within the capacity of the mayor's office, attitudes toward July's large-scale violence, and more generally, attitudes towards freedom of expression and the right to assembly.

**Georgian Dream** does not address these questions in its platform, and this is not surprising - when the party does not need to enter a discussion that involves a commitment to answering questions, it does not voluntarily choose to speak on issues that may be problematic for its constituents. Therefore, the questions about freedom of expression, crime prevention, and violence against sexual minorities and journalists on July 5 of this year remain unanswered.

In fairness, it should be noted that other parties also limit themselves to short answers to these questions. Naturally, each party condemns the violence, but it is noteworthy that only **Third Force** clearly notes this issue and directly mentions sexual minorities as a harassed group. Other parties and candidates simply emphasize that harassment on any grounds is unacceptable, and the **For Georgia** party only focuses on ensuring freedom of assembly and expression, without mentioning the anti-discrimination law and oppression based on characteristics the law mentions. The **Georgian Dream** platform does not take a stance on any of these issues. It seems that they did not think it wise to focus on these topics.

We do not think it is appropriate to discuss the positions of the Georgian Dream and the Alliance of Patriots in this format since neither has completed the questionnaire. Therefore, we will try to present their views on these topics in a generalized way. Here, we must bear in mind that several issues that the other parties discuss are ignored by the Georgian Dream and the Alliance of Patriots.

## SUMMARY

The 2021 local elections were held in a unique political context. The crisis that began after the 2020 parliamentary elections is still ongoing today. The arrival and arrest of Mikheil Saakashvili, Georgia's third president, further exacerbated political tensions. Both the opposition and the government are preparing for a principled confrontation ahead of the second round of elections, and their election campaigns often try to dehumanize their opponents. Against this backdrop, political parties' election platforms remain out of focus, even though citizens' choices will, in large part, be made based on them.

In this short essay, we have tried to analyze the views presented by significant political actors on key challenges faced by both our capital and our country. The fact is that the platforms these parties present often lack details and specificity. They do not consider it important to present well-structured and consistent platforms. Nevertheless, it is important to pay attention to platforms that might not be ideal but still offer insight into the views of important actors. We have developed this essay for this purpose, and we hope it gives our citizens at least some sense of our political parties' key priorities.

# APPENDIX 1: QUESTIONNAIRE FOR MAYORAL CANDIDATES OF TBILISI

Please answer the following questions in no more than 250 words each. You can leave some questions unanswered if you believe they do not merit being addressed by a separate policy or if you do not have specific positions on those issues.

## GENERAL VIEWS / POLITICAL PLATFORM SUMMARY

1. What do you think are the main priorities for the city's development?

## DEVELOPMENT AND ECONOMY

2. Please provide a concise description of your vision or plan, if you have one, for Tbilisi's long-term economic development.
3. In your view, what are the main problems impeding Tbilisi's economic development?
4. In your view, what advantages or capabilities does Tbilisi have that you could utilize to promote its economic and urban development?
5. What are your budgetary priorities? Please provide a concise description of your budgetary policy.
6. What are your plans for improving Tbilisi's business and commercial infrastructure and attracting investments to the city?

## URBAN DEVELOPMENT / CITY PLANNING / HOME CONSTRUCTION

7. What measures would you take to create better housing conditions for the city's residents?
8. What are your plans for ensuring the cleanliness of the city's streets?

## INFRASTRUCTURE AND TRANSPORTATION

9. What measures would you take to improve the safety and comfort of pedestrians in the city?
10. What measures would you take to improve the public transportation system?
11. What measures would you take to improve road safety conditions in the city?
12. What measures would you take to improve mobility within the city for people with disabilities?
13. What measures would you take to address problems related to stray animals?

## CULTURE AND EDUCATION

14. What programs would you implement to enhance Tbilisi's cultural life?
15. What measures would you take in your capacity as mayor to improve the quality of education and make it more affordable?





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