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Developing Regional Information and Voter Empowerment for
Democracy in Georgia

FINAL REPORT

[May 12, 2023]



Contract/Agreement Number: 72011419CA00004

Activity Start and End Dates: September 13, 2019 to February 12, 2023

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Submitted on May 12, 2023



EECMD
EASTERN EUROPEAN CENTRE
FOR MULTIPARTY DEMOCRACY

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

CSO – Civil Society Organization
DRIVE Democracy – Developing Regional Information and Voter Empowerment for Democracy
EECMD – Eastern European Centre for Multiparty Democracy
EPRC – Economic Policy Research Centre
EU – European Union
GD – Georgian Dream
IRI – International Republican Institute
MEL- Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning
MoU- Memorandum of Understanding
MP – Member of Parliament
NDI – National Democratic Institute
NGO – Non-governmental Organization
ROADMAP – Citizen Vision Documents, so called Regional Development Roadmaps
TASKFORCE - A group of individuals assigned to collaboratively work towards achieving a defined set of objectives, specifically to engage regularly in political dialogue formats and deliberate on regional problems
UNM – United National Movement
USAID – United States Agency for International Development

LIST OF EXHIBITS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In accordance with Section A.6 of Contract/Agreement Number 72011419CA00004, the following document serves as the Final Report of the “DRIVE Democracy: Developing Regional Information and Voter Empowerment for Democracy in Georgia” project implemented by EECMD in partnership with the EPRC under the program entitled “Georgia Elections and Political Processes Support through Direct Awards to Georgia’s Civil Society Organizations (2019-2023).” This report covers the period of September 13, 2019 through February 12, 2023.

The DRIVE Democracy project was a three-year-and-five-months initiative designed to empower and educate Georgian voters to better understand, represent and advance their legitimate interests. Its overarching goal was pursued through the innovative combination of merging capacity building of voters with policy dialogue between all regional and national stakeholders and reinforcing the process with citizen-led local projects to ensure accountability and responsiveness of elected officials in the six regions of Georgia: Tbilisi, Kakheti, Shida-Kartli, Imereti, Adjara and Samegrelo.

With this effort ensuring fair access of the local population, especially politically underrepresented groups, to the decision-making processes, EECMD worked with the local self-governments and governmental agencies, political parties, field experts, local CSOs, communities, media and other relevant stakeholders to achieve policy impact and produce the multiplying high-level results.

“ Launched in 2019, the DRIVE Democracy project has empowered **312 citizens** in 6 Regions of Georgia with the increased political awareness, voter action capabilities and experience in local civic engagement. The project has examined regular channels and formal mechanisms for dialogue between constituents and elected representatives, holding them accountable for policy implementation and campaign promises; As a result, **6 permanent political dialogue platforms** were established, engaging hundreds of citizens in issue-based discussions with elected officials and political party representatives, leading to **48 agreements** and **25 governance decisions**. Throughout the three years, various political documents were developed, aimed at identifying and proposing solutions to the challenges at the local level. These include **15 expert policy papers, a book compiling 5 academic articles, and 21 regional development roadmaps**, reflecting **133 local problems** and suggesting **237 solutions/recommendations** many of which have been incorporated into the budget priorities of municipalities and the political parties’ pre-election programs. To enhance wider public participation and democratic debates, an innovative approach was taken by integrating modern **decision-making software** into the project framework. Specifically, **5 Consul Websites** were tailored to the project needs, translated into Georgian language and made accessible for use in each of the five initial regions. Furthermore, **15 citizen-led initiatives** were awarded small grants to strengthen the advocacy capacity and pursue mission-driven outcomes at the local level.

”

I. INTRODUCTION

I.1 Project Overview and Background

The project “DRIVE Democracy: Developing Regional Information and Voter Empowerment for Democracy” was launched to strengthen the demand side of democracy at a time when Georgia’s democratic progress has considerably slowed. This decline in democratic standards and democratic institutions is characterized by several factors, including shadow governance, personalized politics, polarized electoral campaigns, distrust of political institutions and widespread apathy towards politics, while the country remains anchored in the “hybrid regime” category. In such a political landscape, promoting voter education, transparency, and accountability are highly significant to substantially alter the status quo and shift to more responsible and healthier policy-making.

The project leveraged EECMD’s extensive experience in democracy education and policy development in Georgia, as well as EPRC’s economic development and policy planning expertise. The rationale of the project was to empower the Georgian voters to effectively articulate and advance their political and economic preferences while promoting accountability and responsiveness of elected officials.

To pursue this goal, a set of planned activities were put in place:

By improving the voters’ capacity to self-organize for the advancement of their legitimate interests, and establishing policy dialogue formats, the project sought to turn Georgian political life from a one-way street in which politicians speak to voters in a top-down manner, to a two-way street where the genuine concerns and voices of voters are heard and considered.

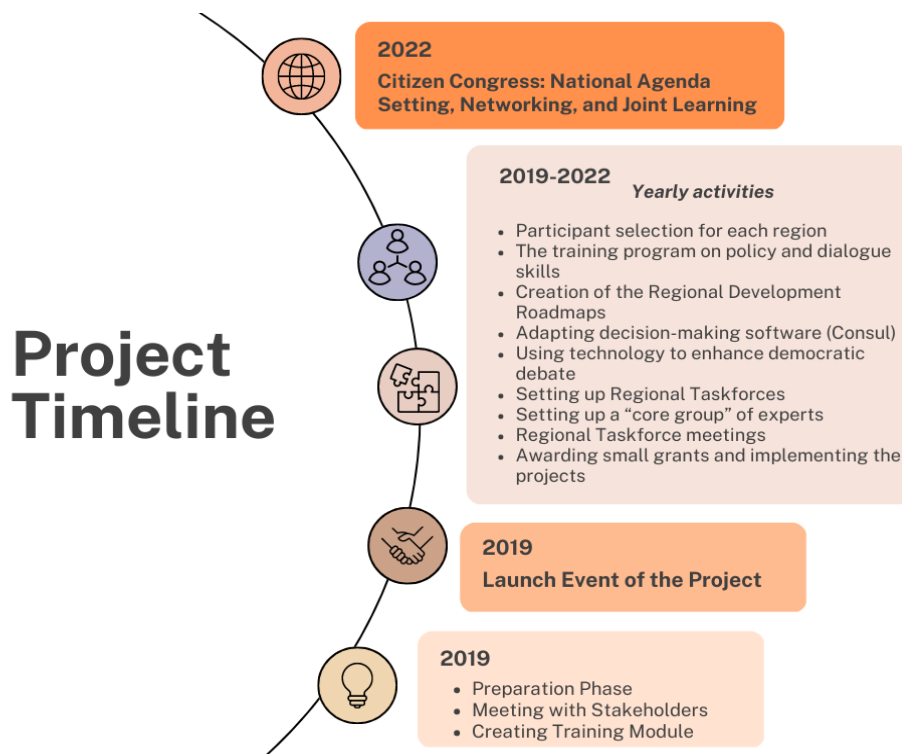


Exhibit I. Project Timeline



Exhibit 2. Geographic Coverage of the Project

The project's initial geographical scope covered five regions- Tbilisi, Shida Kartli, Kakheti, Imereti, Adjara- and expanded to the sixth region for its third year of execution in response to the altered political circumstances. Following the local municipal elections of 2021 in Georgia, Tsalenjikha stood out as a municipality with the only opposition mayor and a multiparty local council, making it a rare exception from the rest of Georgia, remaining dominated by one party. This presented a genuine opening for multiparty governance and increased voter participation in decision-making, thus making it an ideal entry

point for the expansion of the activities of DRIVE Democracy project. Therefore, with the support and flexibility of USAID, EECMD swiftly launched the Democracy Hub in Tsalenjikha and expanded the project activities in the region.

1.2 Theory of Change



The project objectives were guided by the program's multi-level approach of promoting democracy – the Theory of Change, emphasizing the development of an informed, engaged and resilient electorate as a means to advance and solidify sustainable practices and inclusive political processes together with the government. Consequently, this will promote democratic institutional change, and empower groups across all strata of society to assert their voices and rights as citizens in a democratic society.

The underlying Theory of Change focuses on the need to shift from sporadic citizen action towards proactive, issue-based, and sustainable voter engagement that can hold political leaders, parties, and officials accountable.

To achieve this, three drivers of change need to be implemented:

- *Enhancing voter awareness and articulation of their needs;*
- *Empowering them organizationally and financially;*
- *And creating relevant platforms for political dialogue.*

These drivers will enable voters to demand issues-based political party programs and policies that are responsive to their needs, reinforce the accountability of politicians, and establish more responsible, transparent and accountable politics and governance in Georgia.

Exhibit 3.Theory of Change

1.3 Project Objectives

The project was structured around **three distinct activity components**, each with its own set of objectives.

The first component aimed to cultivate a group of democratic citizens across the regions of Georgia, who undertook an intensive training and workshop series, entailing an active informational component and led by highly qualified experts in areas such as socio-economic development, environment, urban planning, self-governance, policy dialogue and other issues essential for the process of democracy building.

The culmination of this phase was the joint production of citizen vision documents, termed Regional Development Roadmaps, for each region. Within this component, modern decision-making

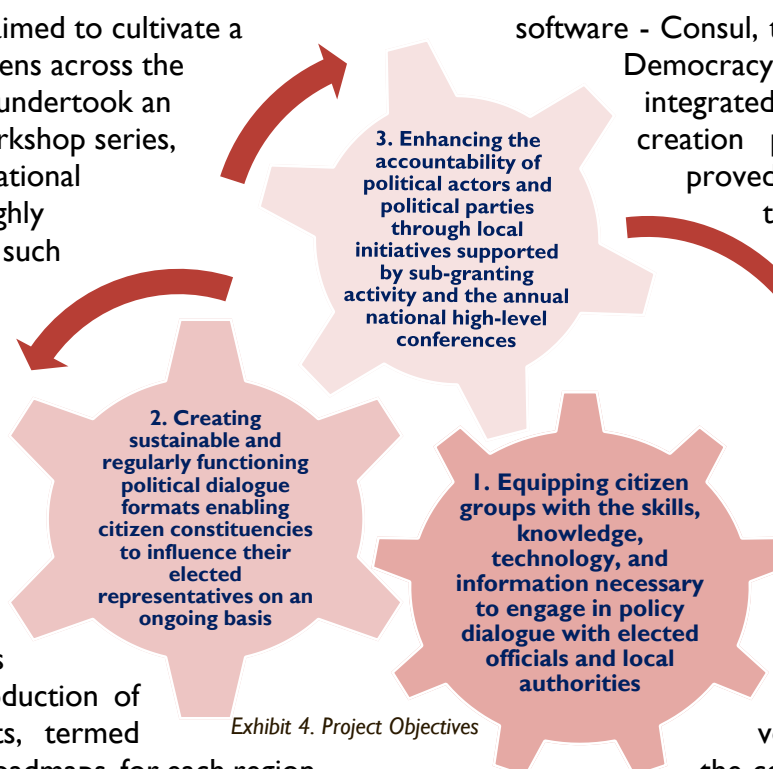


Exhibit 4. Project Objectives

software - Consul, tailored for the DRIVE Democracy project, was integrated into the roadmap creation phase. This platform proved to be an advantageous tool for the project participants during the Roadmap's topic selection and deliberation on identified problems. The project groups debated on their cities' platforms, listed the issues to be voted on and selected the central themes for their

vision documents.

The project's second component was geared towards fostering, facilitating and engaging various actors in multi-stakeholder dialogue processes. For DRIVE Democracy and, in general, EECMD, dialogue is not merely a tool utilized to attain our goals but the very essence of the values that drive our work. Drawing on our experience, dialogue formats allow for effective collaboration and arriving at solutions when utilized in the proper environment and with the correct approaches. Consequently, the accountability of political actors and parties is being enhanced, which is a critical milestone towards the consolidation of democracy.

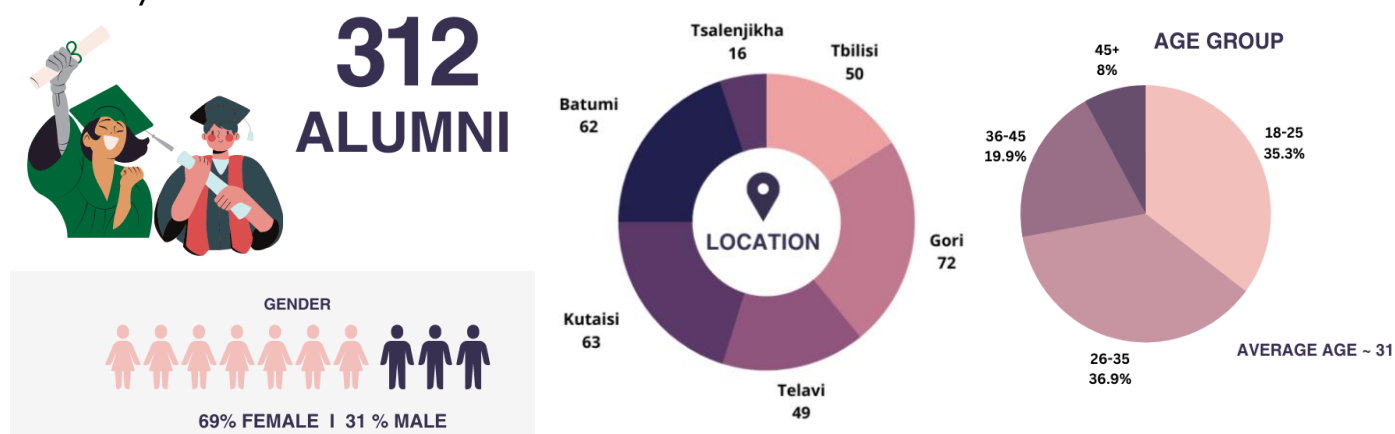


Exhibit 5. Alumni Statistics

The third component was built on the success of the first two objectives and aimed to empower citizens to demand issues-based policies and agendas responsive to their needs through local initiatives and small grants. The latter focused on organizing policy debates, awareness-raising campaigns, and other accountability and monitoring measures in the six project regions, garnering a wider support and engagement of the general public around the ideas outlined in the regional development roadmaps and injecting voter demands into high-level policy debates.

Adding a sub-granting component for the alums to implement initiatives, further strengthened their advocacy capacity, and enhanced the demand side of the democratic equation.



Exhibit 6. Project Outputs

*In addition to the learning module, 18 thematic training sessions were held, totalling **268 Training sessions** throughout the project's 3-year cycle.

2. OVERVIEW OF PROJECT OUTCOMES

14 SUB-GRANT PROJECTS



Exhibit 7. Sub-grant Projects

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT ROADMAPS

The project participants created **21 Regional Development Roadmaps**, identifying **133 regional problems** and providing **237 solutions** to the appropriate authorities. The roadmaps focused on various aspects of socio-economic and political development, such as vulnerable group's fundamental rights, infrastructure, urban planning, green policy, cultural heritage protection, citizen participation, and other pertinent topics. The process of creating these extensive documents was demanding, requiring statistical data and public information from relevant agencies, in-depth interviews with field experts, desk research, local opinion polls, and online surveys for all six regions.

2020

- Ensuring the right to vocational education for persons with disabilities to enjoy a full and decent life;
- Improving citizen engagement with Tbilisi Municipality;
- Improving the investment and economic environment of Telavi Municipality;
- Mediatheka - Multifunctional space for community development;
- Promoting the process of entrepreneurship development in Gori Municipality;
- A vision for strengthened economic governance of Kutaisi;
- Analysis of preschool education institution problems of Kutaisi and management strategy;
- Civic involvement for the protection and development of the urban and cultural heritage of Batumi.



2021



- Adapting the road environment for people with disabilities, the elderly, and children;
- Homeless people and ensuring their rights to dignity and a decent life;
- Development of green spaces and recreational areas in Telavi;
- Cultural heritage for regional development;
- Development of local public spaces;
- Development of the system for protection and support of the fundamental rights and freedoms of the children in the Kutaisi Municipality;
- Batumi Central Park and citizen's vision on its development.

2022

- Citizen Participation in the decision-making process;
- Safe road environment for the children, elderly and people with disabilities;
- Cultural heritage monuments in Telavi as an economic resource for the development of the city;
- Development of youth participation policy in Kutaisi;
- Development of local public spaces;
- Publicity of solving the wrecking housing problem in Batumi and facilitating stakeholder engagement;
- Citizen participation in the local governance and information publicity in Tsalenjikha Municipality.

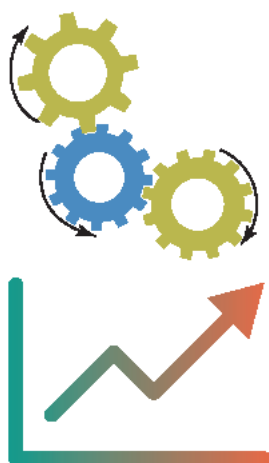


See the documents [here](#).

16 EXPERT POLICY PAPERS AND PUBLICATIONS

2020

- Challenges to Georgia's Health System on the Municipal Level Amidst COVID-19 Pandemic
- Development of the Tbilisi Railway Line – The Importance of Rail Line for Urban Planning: Preserve or Relocate
- Challenges of Gender Budgeting in Georgia at the Municipal Level
- Contemporary Challenges of Citizen Participation in Local Self-Government
- The impact of the COVID-19 on the Georgian economy in a regional context



2021

- Vaccination against COVID-19 in Georgia and the role of the government in defeating the pandemic
- Challenges related to the greening of urban public space in Georgia
- Politics and Local Self-Government
- Problems in cultural heritage management: finding ways to decentralize and the role of us, the citizens in the process of heritage survival
- Challenges related to public financial management at the local self-government level in Georgia

2022

- Medium-term budget planning and its challenges at the local level
- The civic space – its role and importance in Georgia
- Health and social care services and assistance programs in Gori Municipality
- Analysis of Investment Potential of Samegrelo – Zemo Svaneti Region



- Comprehensive Supplementary Manual for Municipalities on Gender Budgeting Issues
- The Fight for Freedom: From the Baltic to the Black Sea- Book compiling 5 articles of Georgian, Ukrainian, Lithuanian, Latvian, and Estonian historians and political scientists

The Core Group of Experts, established annually by EECMD and EPRC, served as a valuable asset for local self-governance and regional development. Consisting of a team of professionals, the group offered feedback and recommendations for the roadmaps, facilitated policy dialogue among stakeholders, created policy papers addressing current challenges, and suggested recommendations to tackle them. A total of 15 expert policy papers, including a comprehensive manual for the municipalities were produced. The documents were published on social media platforms and proactively distributed to taskforce members and other interested groups in both printed and digital form, with English translations also made available.

"THE FIGHT FOR FREEDOM: FROM THE BALTIC TO THE BLACK SEA"



Another valuable product of the project was a book composed of a collection of five articles that critically reflected the centuries-long struggle for freedom in five different countries. The aim of the book was to offer a new perspective on the lessons of history by drawing on the experiences of Russia's small neighboring nations. The book sought to answer fundamental questions about freedom, such as its origins and manifestations while encouraging readers to consider the interconnectedness of these nations' past, present, and future.

See the documents [here](#).

3. MAJOR ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Over the course of the project, several significant milestones have been accomplished, that have yielded favorable outcomes in the project's targeted areas. These achievements are poised to have a lasting impact, as the continued operation and independent expansion of the established activities are anticipated.

The primary accomplishments of the project are outlined and further explained below.



Exhibit 8. Project Accomplishments

The project has introduced the practice of multi-party dialogue into the local political culture.

In light of the prevailing political polarization, this experience holds great importance, as it has facilitated the issue-oriented discussions between the local representatives of both the ruling and opposition parties, as well as helping the latter in finding common ground and forming common visions. These formats have proven to be especially useful for opposition parties, who had difficulty communicating and achieving collective decisions due to different ideologies or self-serving, narrow party interests.

An illustrative case of this challenge occurred after the 2021 local elections in Batumi, when the city council was unable to convene for nearly six months, and political parties resorted to mostly trying to iron out agreements behind the closed doors. The project's proposed format, which involved a multi-party discussion on specific issues, came in as a timely intervention. The opposition parties (Lelo, For Georgia, UNM) began to gather at EECMD Democracy School and to actively discuss the issue/issues that should be addressed in the format of the Sakrebulo. Over time, this led to a gradual convergence of their positions and the establishment of a better culture of dialogue, which **facilitated a well-functioning workflow in light of the absence of a sitting City Council assembly**. Representatives of the "Georgian Dream" also

occasionally participated in the sessions regarding the wrecking houses in Batumi, allowing them to gain a more accurate and comprehensive understanding of the issues, and fostering a collaborative and more respectful environment in which all parties could reach mutually agreed-upon solutions. Furthermore, the DRIVE Democracy project set a precedent by organizing a joint meeting in Telavi, where candidates from various political parties (GD, UNM, Lelo, For Georgia) engaged in constructive dialogue, a first-time occurrence in the pre-election period. This meeting enabled citizens to compare the parties' political plans in detail.

Permanent spaces for open dialogue have been established and sustained across six regions of Georgia by the project, providing an opportunity for the government and civil society, including the politically underrepresented groups, to constructively interact and jointly address issues of social concern.

This practice enhanced citizens' motivation and participation in self-governance, emphasized the significance of their role in the decision-making process, and pushed the officials to be more accountable towards their constituents. Thus, it is anticipated to have a long-term impact on the supply and demand dynamic of politics, resulting in a more inclusive and participatory democracy.



The dialogue formats of the regional taskforces have been established as local platforms that can serve as politically impartial arenas for public discussions, even after the project's completion. Moreover, as part of the DRIVE Democracy project, **EECMD has signed memoranda of cooperation with local self-governments in three municipalities** (City Council of **Telavi** Municipality, the City Hall of **Tsalenjikha** Municipality, and the City Council of **Gori** Municipality).



These agreements, which are both verbal and written, aim to facilitate closer collaboration and strategic initiatives on local issues. In particular, the subject of the mutual agreement is to cooperate on issues relevant

to society through the sharing of resources and the implementation of training-educational projects focused on increasing citizen involvement.

The project increased awareness of less popular but pertinent issues and placed them higher on the policy agenda.

Many local problems of public relevance have previously been overlooked or inadequately addressed in general discussions, partly because of political motives, electoral objectives, polarization or politicians' self-absorption. The project has initiated dialogue about issues that have not been given due attention in the agenda-setting process, raised awareness and prompted the public and policymakers' attention, resulting in greater support for the rights of vulnerable groups. For example, the initiative helped to activate discussions on the difficulties that persons with disabilities confront. These views were included in the pre-election campaign and reflected in the platforms of several political parties (Third force, Lelo for Georgia, UNM) with pledges to solve the concerns raised. **This increased focus on neglected issues not only helped the target group have a voice but encouraged a more inclusive and responsive political process, which is paramount for promoting social justice** and improving the lives of disadvantaged citizens.

Thus, DRIVE Democracy project's active advocacy campaign is believed to have contributed directly or indirectly to the inclusion of politically underrepresented groups in election campaigns and policy planning agendas in 2021. A prime illustration of the project's impact is mentioning people with disabilities in election promises, which may have previously given less attention or approached primarily from an infrastructure perspective. This positive change can be observed through a comparison of party programs.

Providing voters with information on election programs, and in doing so, creating better-informed citizenry the project facilitated development of a more responsive and accountable political party manifestos and election programs.

Prior to the 2021 Georgian Municipal Elections, the project participants engaged with electoral stakeholders online and in-person, advocating the roadmaps' key points and discussing election programs. Overall, **12 such meetings have been arranged with 30 electoral candidates, where total of 274 people participated (89 men, 185 women).** If elected, candidates pledged to work with DRIVE groups and lobby these issues. Eight political parties committed to including roadmap proposals in their electoral programs (United National Movement, Georgian Dream, Gakharia for Georgia, Third Force, Lelo for Georgia, European Georgia, Girchi –More Freedom, Anna Dolidze - for People).

FIVE POLITICAL PARTIES HAVE INCLUDED THE FOLLOWING ROADMAP PROPOSALS IN THEIR ELECTION PROGRAMS AND PROMISES:





Another accomplishment of the project is twofold: firstly, it shed light on various aspects of locally significant issues, and secondly, it helped establish a group of capable individuals who have gained knowledge and experience to develop solutions to these problems.

Through an intensive training course and participation in political dialogue formats, the project participants have become well-informed on various topics, conducted research, and proposed solutions. This learning process was ongoing and has continued even after the completion of the project. Participants now advocate for the issues they studied and are often invited to discussions with local political and civil actors, enriching these conversations with their knowledge and experience.

Batumi's case serves as an excellent example, where project participants are regarded as primary stakeholders in urban development, bicycle mobility, central park, and the replacement of

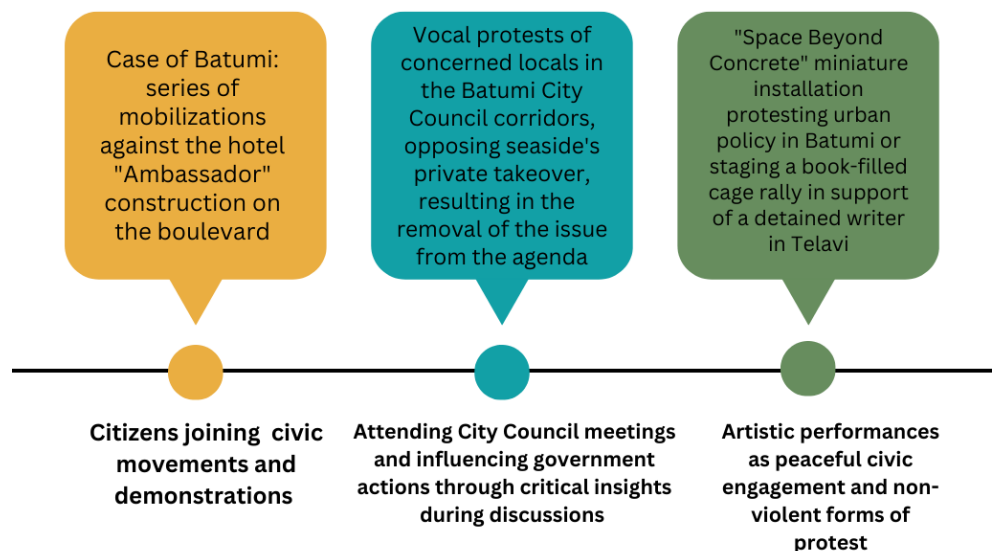
residential buildings at the edge of collapsing. Additionally, the project group has been invited to sectoral commissions of municipal councils to participate in discussions on roadmap topics. The Kutaisi Economic Service has also begun collaborating with CSOs to encourage citizen participation by informing them about upcoming events, distributing questionnaires during economic policy planning, and gathering citizen input on decisions undertaken. The project has thus effectively raised the visibility of the participants and triggered debates and joint decision-making among decision-makers, citizens, and representatives of different political parties.

The project has cultivated a greater sense of civic participation among its participants with an increased self-awareness, and self-organizational skills, encouraging them to become valuable contributors to society and, consequently, strengthening civil activism at the local level.

As a result of the project's transformational impact, participants have become more involved in activism, taking the lead in various external projects, developing partnerships, participating in calls and competitions, exercising their right to civic participation, and raising their voices on matters of concern. This has led to the growth of a cohort of individuals in different cities and regions who actively exercise their civil rights and lead non-violent forms of protest.

With experienced activists mentoring and engaging those who may have less sensitivity or experience to plan successful campaigns and actions on given issues, project participants are committed to continuing their efforts toward local activism and promoting self-sufficiency, acting as catalysts for their community's development even after the project's completion.

SOME EXAMPLES



The project provides valuable data assets for continuous local policy planning and implementation.

On top of creating important documents such as regional development roadmaps and expert policy papers, the project offers a comprehensive statistical database and analytical framework based on the information collected by project participants. In particular, **the project participants accumulated a substantial database in the working process, obtaining data themselves or retrieving existing datasets from sources such as government agencies or research organizations and have combined these materials systematically.** For example, on the project base, the following information has been collected in Telavi's case - List of municipal property; Number of local businesses and breakdown by areas; Income per capita in the

municipality; Number of employees by fields; Number of small and medium businesses; Volume of investments; Number of enterprises financed by state programs; Number of women and young entrepreneurs. **Moreover, Research conducted within the Telavi Regional Development Roadmap in 2020 – "Economic, investments and local self-government of Telavi Municipality: Challenges and Perspectives" was translated into English with financial support from the Governor's office and has been helpful in communication with international donors.** Thus, the project creates added value by assisting local agencies in data collection, analyzing, identifying patterns, and planning policies.

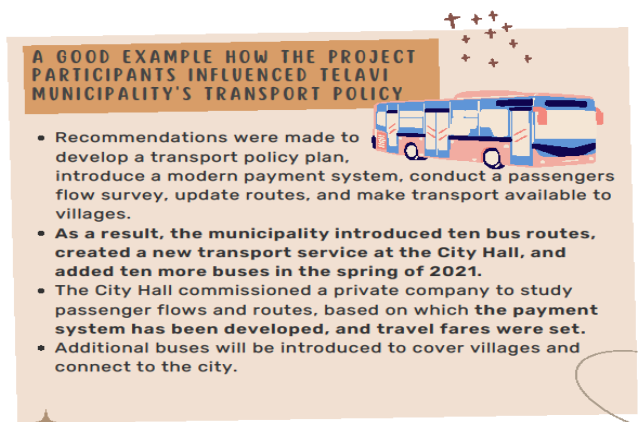
The success of the project lies in its ability to incorporate the recommendations of the project participants into the budget priorities of municipalities while adhering to the directions of regional development roadmaps.

This achievement is noteworthy since many issues that the project groups focused on have already been included in self-government priority documents, so the solutions to these problems can be funded from the budget in the years to come. An excellent illustration of this is the adoption of one of the recommendations outlined in the Gori Regional Development Roadmap. **As a part of the "civic budgeting" initiative in Gori municipality, a multifunctional youth space - media library (mediatheka) will be established in 2023.** The participants of DRIVE Democracy developed the concept for this library, and the required funds to address these issues will be allocated in the municipal budget.

The project's impact spans many different sectors, where short and long-term strategic plans are to be established, such as cultural heritage, public spaces, urban planning, road safety, youth politics, pre-school education, participatory mechanisms, and economic activity facilitation, among others.

For ex. Telavi municipality's economic development plan for 2021-2022 integrated multiple suggestions provided by the DRIVE participants' 2020 Regional Development Roadmap. The strategy was approved by the City Council in 2021.

As noted above, all roadmaps developed and proposals made are geared towards lasting solutions, rather than being limited to the project's life performance.



A GOOD EXAMPLE HOW THE PROJECT PARTICIPANTS INFLUENCED TELAVI MUNICIPALITY'S TRANSPORT POLICY

- Recommendations were made to develop a transport policy plan, introduce a modern payment system, conduct a passengers flow survey, update routes, and make transport available to villages.
- As a result, the municipality introduced ten bus routes, created a new transport service at the City Hall, and added ten more buses in the spring of 2021.
- The City Hall commissioned a private company to study passenger flows and routes, based on which the payment system has been developed, and travel fares were set.
- Additional buses will be introduced to cover villages and connect to the city.

Overall, the project's capacity to translate recommendations into tangible outcomes is a testament to its impact and effectiveness in driving positive changes at the policy level and regional development in general.

The project also established a framework that made it easier for local self-governments to practice participatory democracy and integrate citizens' input in decision-making.

SOME EXAMPLES OF GOVERNANCE DECISIONS

BUDGET INCREASES

- Following the recommendation to increase the budget for maintaining public squares in Telavi and establishment of a structural unit responsible for this issue, there was a significant increase in funding for environmental protection measures compared to 2021 (2.4 times higher).
- The funds for the Development of the culture and youth sphere in Kutaisi increased by 50% in 2023 (approx. 110,000 GEL) in response to the suggestion of raising the budget of the municipality's youth service.



DIGITAL DATABASE CREATION

- The proposal to create a digital database for tangible cultural heritage in the jurisdiction of Telavi municipality with local professionals' participation has been set in motion.
- Information about historical monuments is encoded in QR codes and affixed to them.



PUBLIC SPACES AND TRANSPORTATION INFRASTRUCTURE

- A new public space (recreational zone) was arranged on about 2 hectares of land near Mshvidoba Street in East Telavi.
- Two new green areas were built in Telavi ("Park of Peace" and the park in the vicinity of Telavi State University), and an existing recreational zone near Chokheli and Bakhtioni streets is being renovated to meet the needs of people with disabilities.
- Pedestrian roads were rehabilitated, and bus stop constructions were built at two locations near Gvtaeba and Chokheli-Bakhtioni streets.



NEW PROGRAMS

- The Child Care and Support Department of Kutaisi City Hall constructed two family support and strengthening programs that were officially adopted in 2022.
- The Kutaisi Kindergarten Association re-trained 15 teachers from 37 public kindergartens to obtain a special teacher qualification. Psychologists were also appointed in 12 kindergartens. The process is ongoing.
- The kindergarten association began allocating funds to purchase equipment required for educational purposes for children, following the recommendation to abolish the malpractice of parents buying inventory for kindergartens.

Various activities were undertaken to increase the proximity of local self-governments to citizens, including involving local government representatives in working sessions, roundtable discussions on local issues, developing joint recommendations on specific problems, and committing to their implementation. Moreover, the municipality regularly presented "performance reports" to the general public, which positively impacted the accountability of local self-government.



This practice of collaboration complemented existing participatory mechanisms at the local and regional levels. Through repeated engagement with local stakeholders in person, local self-governments became accustomed to collaborating within the project and involving citizens in local policymaking.

Overall, the project's efforts led to a more transparent and accountable local governance system that actively involves citizens in decision-making, serving as a model for other local self-governments, ultimately benefiting the citizens they serve.



The decision by Kutaisi City Hall to train teachers and establish a team of special educators for children with special needs will enhance the quality of inclusive early and pre-school education services. This will ensure that all students have an equal opportunity to participate in the educational process and access their right to education, which is a fundamental human right.

The recently introduced family support programs in Kutaisi have the goal of facilitating long-term employment opportunities for parents in disadvantaged families. Thus, these initiatives do not have short-term performance but serve to realize fundamental rights better and, as a result, empower individuals.

4. SUMMARY OF MAIN CHALLENGES ENCOUNTERED

Several bottlenecks were encountered throughout the project, requiring specific countermeasures to mitigate their impact, ranging from delayed timelines to the delay and postponement of some activities. These challenges were mainly caused by external factors, Primarily COVID-19 pandemic, which introduces serious impediments to the normal operation that could not have been initially foreseen. Permanent political crises in Georgia often created challenging context for organizing fruitful dialogue sessions and to keep the local citizens and activists focused on issues beyond the immediate matters at hand.

EECMD managed to better anticipate risks by revising the work plans, adjusting the timeline and activities, communicating regularly with the team and enhancing operational proficiency within the organization. Furthermore, throughout the project duration, EECMD maintained close contact with partner organizations and all other regional and national stakeholders. All changes were communicated and agreed upon with the DOC Team of the USAID Georgia, and no substantial delays or cancellations apart from postponing the annual citizen congress were not encountered, as the implementation of the project was in line with the work plan with a few minor alterations in the scheduled dates.

In response to the **COVID-19 pandemic**, most of the outlined activities were shifted to a virtual setting utilizing Zoom as their primary means of communication till safer times. The project closely monitored COVID-19 infection rates in Georgia, adjusting activity and office protocols in accordance with government regulations and CDC's health and safety policies. Also, the foresight to invest in online tools, such as Consul and Zoho proved to be a wise decision, as they greatly aided in streamlining project management during shutdowns and the pandemic. Consul, as a digital platform designed to facilitate citizen participation, enabled the project team to engage with a wider audience and provided a forum for sharing citizen visions. Zoho, on the other hand, provided the project team with a comprehensive suite of project management tools, including task scheduling, progress tracking, and team collaboration. This allowed the team to work together seamlessly, regardless of their physical location and ensured that project deadlines were met despite the challenges posed by COVID-related restrictions.



Although the traditional learning format is unrivalled in terms of providing an opportunity for social interaction and productivity, and the remote learning format has presented challenges, such as reduced team dynamic, access to technology and connectivity issues, it also offered advantages, such as a safe learning environment, increased number of participants at remote locations and flexible hosting capabilities. Furthermore, distance learning allowed the project participants to compensate for any missed lectures from the intensive training course by attending a virtual session covering the same topic hosted by any other regional group.

Given the diverse demographics, technological literacies, knowledge levels, and experiences of participants from across six distinct regions, the project team implemented several measures to alleviate mentioned issues. These included technical assistance, pre-meeting consultations and supplementary materials to ensure a smooth and inclusive learning experience for as many individuals as possible.

Additional challenge encountered during the project was the gradual decline in the number of participants enrolled, which was attributed to various factors, including work schedules and health conditions. However, the project team anticipated this risk after the initial year and devised a solution by accepting a larger pool of project participants. This approach helped meet the target number outlined by the project.

The pandemic has led EECMD to be adaptive and innovative in addressing novel challenges, assigning additional funds to include emerging needs, and supporting vaccination campaigns via special calls for sub-grants. As a result, several initiatives spearheaded by alumni and financially supported within the project successfully facilitated the positive change of attitudes towards Covid-19 vaccination.

The Covid-19 pandemic nevertheless complicated this complex task of communication with local government representatives to ensure their active participation in constructive political discussions, but also created an opportunity to enhance accountability. The project team modified performance report meetings and introduced a new approach that included a series of virtual meetings with citizens across all regions, allowing them to ask questions and receive activity reports and updates on the municipal work in person.



The main challenge during the implementation of the project was the tense political developments at all levels.

The project coincided with the post-election transition phase when the authority was transferred between old and newly elected municipal administrations. Accordingly, maintaining effective communication with the local officials, especially newly elected ones, in a given situation required additional efforts. However, the project team ensured a high degree of representation, therefore created a platform for meaningful discussions. Difficulty in securing participation and last-minute cancellations and/or replacement with another representative were followed by additional challenge - newcomers needing to familiarize themselves with the scope of the roadmaps and lacking authority to make specific agreements or bear responsibility for commitment.

The highly polarized environment presented a considerable hindrance to the project's capacity of advocating and implementing citizens' visions, as political adversaries were unable to engage in cooperative problem-solving. Due to this limited collaboration, EECMD undertook facilitative efforts to ensure proper representation of different political perspectives and social concerns. This was achieved by positioning itself as the hub for local democracy, amplifying grassroots voices, and fostering constructive discourse among stakeholders.

As part of the observation, the invited politicians frequently lacked policy visions for dealing with local issues. Compared to the general topics imposed by the center, local problems and needs-based talks were less significant to them. Additionally, the government officials sometimes found it difficult to accept the project's recommendations as valid and timely, claiming that the problems were already familiar to them and that they would act upon them. Nevertheless, the matters were only placed on the list of priorities after the roadmap recommendations were presented, and the status of these recommendations was not always communicated to the project team. Therefore, to gather information on the implementation status of proposals, the EECMD had to rely on more taskforce meetings, public sources, or verbal and written communication, resulting in positive developments in getting the process up and running.

5. MONITORING, EVALUATION AND LEARNING

The Project team developed a Project Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Plan designed to monitor and assess project processes, outputs and outcomes across the project, which was based on USAID guidelines. The EECMD team designated a monitoring and learning coordinator, who was responsible for executing internal monitoring and evaluation activities, organizing learning events, and reporting on the outcomes of evaluation meetings. The MEL coordinator was also tasked with developing recommendations to improve the effectiveness of the overall approach to activity implementation in response to progress and changing circumstances in the country.

EECMD used the "outcome harvesting" approach for performance monitoring combined with a more linear and traditional monitoring approach that measures progress from interventions to outcomes. This integrated approach also allowed the team to better document, evidence and illustrate the achievements. Additionally,

EECMD introduced project management software Zoho to the staff used for this specific project to monitor the process better. Zoho Projects is a cloud-based project management solution for small and midsize companies. It offers project scheduling and budgeting, which allows project managers to define project tasks, assign them to their teams, estimate project costs and follow up on in-progress tasks.

The project and MEL Coordinators ensured that all project team members were oriented on data collection and ethics in project management and were aware of the specific nuances of the progress reporting requirements. For this reason, quarterly and annual meetings with the regional coordinators were organized to review and report progress and plan further activities (31 July-2 August 2020; 16-18 December 2021; 30-31 March 2022). The EECMD team identified several activity learning questions to refine implementation during the project, plan subsequent interventions, and follow on objectives. These questions included whether the project's theory of change was valid, which interventions received the most positive feedback from participants, which approaches were most effective in increasing citizens' understanding of their rights, and what barriers or challenges existed to fostering greater demand-side proactive citizen participation.

Furthermore, EECMD monitored external factors and conditions relevant to the activities' implementation. This monitoring involved thoroughly reviewing and including data from the National Democratic Institute's (NDI) and the International Republican Institute's (IRI) polls to measure voters' trust in political parties and their voting preferences based on electoral policies. The EECMD also collaborated regularly with implementers of the Elections and Political Processes initiative. In light of COVID-19, EECMD made necessary changes to the project's implementation. Additionally, the project team reviewed and updated the Indicator Tracking Table and Indicator Summary Table annually.

EECMD utilized various methods to collect data, such as specially developed questionnaires, training evaluation forms, attendance lists, audio and visual materials, and meetings. To review progress and gather a more thorough understanding, the EECMD team organized periodic reflection meetings and focus groups with project beneficiaries to discuss the achievement of targets and challenges. To be more specific, the project team conducted focus group discussions with project participants after the first and second years of execution (On April 14-29, 2021, and May 31- June 8, 2022, respectively), using a pre-designed questionnaire consisting of six components to assess the project's strengths and weaknesses in each phase. The focus group discussions and internal reports generated insightful opinions and valuable suggestions, compiled into findings from the five regions.

Furthermore, the project's performance was assessed by thoroughly examining various reports, assessments, and relevant documents submitted after each event and on a monthly basis. The collected data was carefully scrutinized and evaluated using the MEL Plan as a guide.

More detailed information can be found in the MEL reports for the respective year:

[Activity Monitoring, Learning and Evaluation Report – 2019-2020](#)

[Activity Monitoring, Learning and Evaluation Report – 2021](#)

[Activity Monitoring, Learning and Evaluation Report – 2022](#)

6. LESSONS LEARNED AND FINDINGS

This section of the final report aims to reflect on the project's experiences and identify key takeaways that can aid future project planning and implementation. EECMD has learned that consistency in constructive interaction is crucial. A communication plan should be adjusted to better leverage the political process, ensuring the commitment of politicians to the agreements stipulated. Substantial guidance to project participants and effective advocacy initiatives should be prioritized, and exploring possibilities for involving the broader public in project-related activities is also necessary.



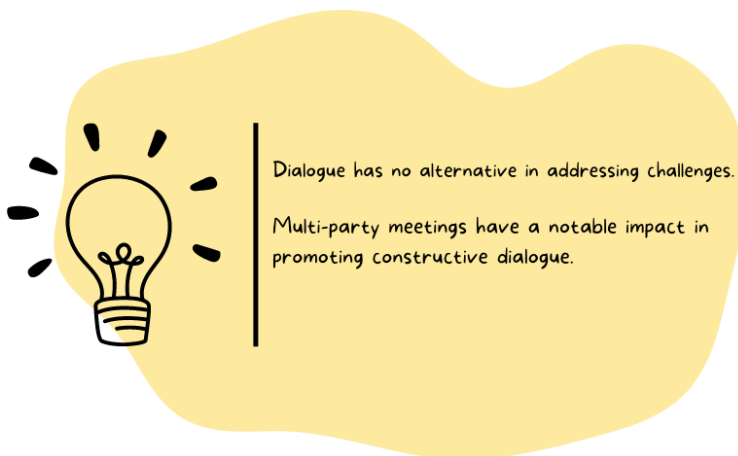
regional congresses to reinforce agreements made within the project framework. The discussions focused on methods for ensuring successful long-term cooperation and the usefulness of the DRIVE Democracy project approach.

[See the report, agenda, attendance list and photos of the event](#)

To summarize main observations and lessons learned:

- **A longer timeframe for the advocacy campaign would have been more effective.**

To enhance the effectiveness of the advocacy campaign, a more extended timeframe is desirable so the participants have more time to advocate for their issues actively. However, the activity's timing towards the end of the annual work plan, after which a new group of participants emerges, makes it challenging to keep initial participants actively on board to oversee the progress and finalize agreements made in meetings. Once the new participants start training and follow the same path as their predecessors, the initial ones become less active and may not have the same level of involvement or investment in the project. This highlights the need for a longer timeframe to ensure the sustainability and effectiveness of the advocacy campaign, as well as the need to develop mechanisms to continue monitoring its progress.



- **In the long run, multi-party meetings demonstrate how people with different views or political platforms can collaborate** and make necessary decisions for their region or cities through shared understanding and constructive dialogue. This is particularly important in today's polarized political environment, where it can be challenging to find common ground.

To elaborate further, multi-party meetings help individuals to find solutions that may have yet to be apparent through individual efforts.

By engaging in them and sharing perspectives,

individuals can consider alternative viewpoints, which leads to a more comprehensive understanding of the issues at hand and can aid in developing more effective and sustainable solutions.

- **Less politicized issues are more likely to promote cooperation.**

As a general observation, less politicized issues tend to encourage collaboration and cooperation. In the case of Batumi, a relatively non-politicized matter related to a park led to successful meetings with decision-makers. At the same time, issues related to cultural heritage and wrecking houses where specific interests intersected were challenging to address. It is easier to address infrastructural problems that require a one-time response. However, social issues requiring policy changes are more difficult to manage in the environments with low level of decentralization and high dependence on the central government.

- **Taskforce communication and coordination challenges need addressing.**

The Taskforce meetings on occasion suffered from inconsistent participation from local authorities. However, inadequate communication and coordination have been endemic in local self-government and are not unique to Taskforce activities. To avoid the inconvenience of unreliable Taskforce members who cancel attendance at the last minute or send substitutes, several steps can be taken:

- Set clear expectations at the outset of the project about Taskforce members' roles, attendance and participation; (taskforce members should be given a clear outline of the project's expected outcomes in each phase; It might be helpful in the process if the project design had included capacity building training and orientation components for the stakeholders to understand the project goals during implementation better)
- Develop a clear communication plan and a reminder system of the project activities;
- Follow-ups of the meetings should be sent to absent members until feedback or a response is received.

The strategy that proved to be the most successful in ensuring participation was resorting to personal connections.

- **Changes in local officials' positions cause disruptions in the taskforces' work and need addressing.**

To prevent these disruptions, it is essential to formalize the agreements reached within the framework of the project. There have been cases where Taskforce members from the local self-government, due to their job change, were replaced by others who needed to be made aware of the accords, leading to a need to restart negotiations and potentially impacting results. Therefore, having these agreements formalized in writing with a signature or any other appropriate measure would be beneficial to ensure their validity and continuity.

Local government representatives may not always be genuinely interested in citizen involvement, using it only to demonstrate the commitment to community engagement rather than seeing it as a valuable resource and thus creating a sense of facade. That they rarely initiate to solicit ideas from actively engaged citizens indicates their indifference to the process, which can lead to a lack of progress and missed opportunities for community development. Therefore, it is essential to assess local government representatives' commitment and genuine interest towards citizen involvement before starting any engagement activities.



LESSONS LEARNED

The evolution of political culture and recent developments in Georgian politics indicate that there is a shift in the role of citizens and civil society, highlighting the need for more effective means to express themselves and participate in democratic processes. There is a growing demand for citizens to be heard by their elected officials and to have a say in policy-making, not just during elections, but in between them as well, at the local, regional, or national level.

The success of democracy heavily relies on the active involvement of citizens, which local authorities play a critical role in promoting. To achieve this, it is imperative to exert pressure on political actors, utilizing flexible communication strategies and robust advocacy campaigns, to ensure their unwavering commitment to given pledges and reached agreements.







7. SNAPSHOTS / SUCCESS STORIES



Success stories play a significant role in fostering the public's confidence in and demand for participatory practices.

The project participants in Gori conducted an extensive study of the municipality's budgetary priorities and analyzed the actual needs of the citizens, successfully advocating for them. Examples of their achievements include:

-  - The municipality included **entrepreneurship development as a separate priority in its budget**, based on the citizens' vision, separating it from infrastructure development;
-  - The project team identified critical locations with unsafe road and pedestrian infrastructure and notified the City Hall, leading to **rehabilitation works** in those areas;
-  - One of the recommendations presented in the budgetary priority study was **establishing a social cafe**, which was subsequently **included in the Gori City Hall's 2023 budget**;
-  - The study recommended the creation of appropriate spaces and educational/entertainment activities for young people, which were presented to the municipality. **The City Hall sponsored two camps in 2022, in which a total of 800 young people participated.**



The project promoting bicycle mobility in Batumi proved successful, **forming an independent non-governmental organization** known as Batumi Cycling Network (BCN). The BCN continues to organize various activities related to bicycle mobility, such as webinars, seminars, and film screenings and has established local and international partnerships. The organization is actively planning and participating in various events, including European Mobility Week and Streets for Life. Additionally, the BCN has participated in the NACTO's Street for Children project, along with the Tbilisi City Hall and the "Partnership for Road Safety" Foundation, aiming to encourage innovative projects and policies for safer and more human-centered cities. **The BCN**

members have played an essential role in developing Batumi's cycling plan and continue collaborating with Batumi City Hall. The organization's project, "Batumi - Bicycle City," won the competition organized by the Batumi City Hall called "Your Idea for Batumi." As part of this project, **70 bicycle parking locations will be established throughout the city.** The BCN has also launched an **annual spring bicycle marathon.** The organization actively updates its Facebook page to inform its followers about its activities.

As part of the "Letter to the Consul" initiative, **the locals of Gulgula village reached an agreement with the local self-government to establish a sports gym** through the village support program. The youth took the lead in proposing the project, and **the municipality provided funding of 35,000 GEL.** Following the successful completion of the project, the participants continue their advocacy efforts by **suggesting new initiatives to the local authorities,**



such as rehabilitating the local culture house and transforming it into a cinema. They have already received a verbal agreement from the self-government for these proposals.

As part of the "Accessible environment for all" project, the participants carried out an effective advocacy campaign in Tbilisi, utilizing photo and video materials, as well as enhanced communication with the Tbilisi City Hall. Their efforts resulted in the **establishment of infrastructure, including ramps and zebra crossings**, in specific locations.



The "Batumi Park-a Place for Your Rest" project **resolved two issues** in Batumi central park related to outdoor lighting and recreational branches. **The cost of almost a million GEL was incurred for the latter, which was not initially allocated in the Batumi budget.** The funds were made available in the city budget for one of the roadmap's recommendation-arrangement of soil drainage system. The City Hall representatives mentioned that

the funds were redirected to this project due to the increasing interest and demand from the community, which was a direct result of the Drive participants' actions and the sub-grant initiative. The heightened public attention generated by the project's advocacy efforts, including media coverage, fostered greater public awareness and a stronger sense of civic responsibility, which drove the local government to be more responsive to the citizens' demands.

The participants' connection to the project after completing their cycle of activities is noteworthy. They still engage in dialogue platforms, familiarize themselves with new roadmaps, and derive inspiration from these topics. This is evidenced by the "Digital Past" project, inspired by the Gori 2021 Roadmap, particularly the recommendation for an interactive digital map featuring cultural heritage sites in the region. The project was initiated by one of the program alums and was funded through the Culture Promotion Program by the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Youth of Georgia. **Over 250 cultural heritage monuments were photographed, catalogued, and a unified database and module for a virtual exhibition of 20 monuments were created, which can be accessed on a dedicated website.**

➤ **Success of the DRIVE Democracy project in strengthening local leaders: 2021 Municipal Elections in Georgia**

The DRIVE Democracy project had a high number of participants running in the local self-government elections, with **15 out of 35 EECMD Democracy School graduates being elected** and presenting a unique opportunity for stronger cooperation at the local government level. Having alums who are well-aware of the project's objectives and have been at the forefront of civil activism as public servants increase the chances of successful collaboration. For this purpose, shortly after the elections EECMD organized an online meeting of these graduates to foster communication and prepare the grounds for partnership in the post-electoral period, despite the partisan differences.



The project has created a more enabling environment for a dialogue between civil society and local authorities, leading to more substantive democratic practices and setting expectations for further development. These expectations are even more promising with project participants on both sides of the

discussions, as they expressed a desire to advocate for the issues of the project's roadmaps and promote better citizen engagement.

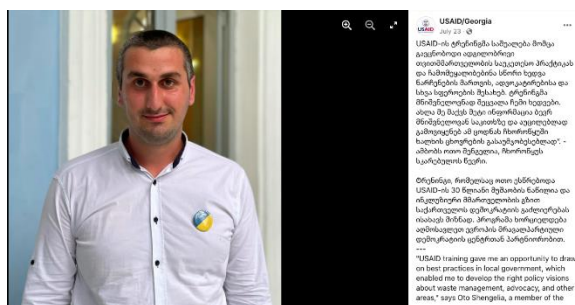


At the 2022 Citizen Congress, a panel of three **elected alumni from different political parties demonstrated a rare example of constructive dialogue in Georgia's polarized political climate**. Participants agreed that the DRIVE Democracy project provided a valuable framework for discussing issues and stressed the importance of political support to sustain such initiatives. **Problem-oriented discussions between political parties are typically not the norm in Georgia, but the Citizen Congress showcased a different reality**. The speakers engaged

in a fruitful discussion on national interests, not narrow party interests, displaying self-criticism, sincerity in their assessments and visions, and a willingness to cooperate on real problems without resorting to populism.

Overall, the high number of DRIVE project participants running for office in the local self-government elections shows that the project is successfully achieving its objective of strengthening leaders at the local level to become catalysts for regional development.

Some of the Snapshots/Alumni Human Stories:



[Oto Shengelia](#) - "USAID training gave me an opportunity to draw on best practices in local government, which enabled me to develop the right policy visions about waste management, advocacy, and other areas," says Oto Shengelia, **a member of the Chkhorotsku Skarebulo**.

"The training significantly changed my policy visions. Now I have more awareness about many issues, and I will definitely use this knowledge to improve people's lives in Chkhorotsku."

Our first success story was about [Tiniko Khanjilashvili](#) from Telavi. In her story, Tiniko emphasizes that the practical skills, knowledge and experience that she gained during the program are very important when working in a representative body and she uses them in daily activities. **As a member of the Telavi Municipality Council, Tiniko intends to implement the recommendations of the regional development guide created under the program and advocate for the issues listed there.**

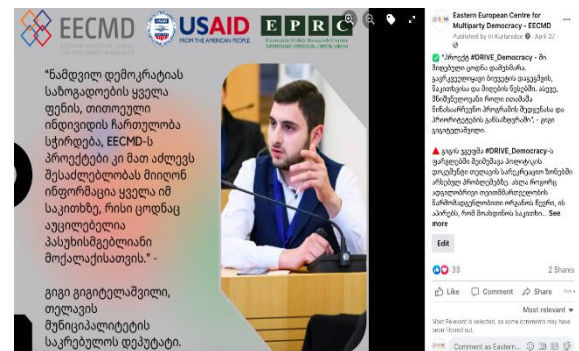




Aza Gabunia - "USAID gave me an opportunity to attend very interesting training about politics and economics. This project gave us a chance to have meetings and discussions with local government and political parties. Their doors were open for us, just ordinary citizens!"

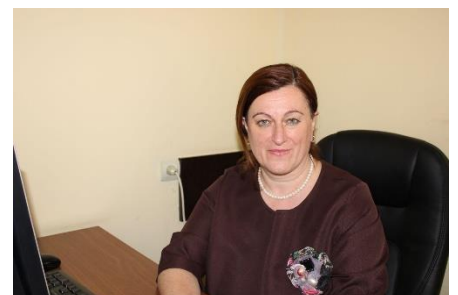
"We were able to advocate for many initiatives and as a result those initiatives were included in political party election programs. This was very important for our region—and USAID made it possible for us!"

Gigi Gigitelashvili, Gigi emphasizes that the practical skills, knowledge, and experience he gained during the program are essential when working in a representative body, and he uses them daily. "The knowledge acquired through the project **#DRIVE_Democracy has helped me to understand the rules of planning, reading, and implementing a budget.** It has also played a significant role in the creation of pre-election programs and priority setting," says Gigi.



Sofo Zhgenti: "Within the Drive Democracy project, each team selects a topic to research and prepare a policy document. Our group chose - Involvement of the society in protecting Batumi's urban development and cultural heritage. **We researched the topic, prepared a policy document, and simultaneously lobbied the issue in the self-government bodies.** The information and knowledge acquired throughout the project helped me develop a successful communication plan. We planned the advocacy process in two stages and for two different target groups – decision-makers and citizens.

Marine Didebulidze: "As a member of the City Council, I have **started to address the issues that are the prerogative of the cultural sphere** - changes in the library and museum field - implementation of projects and programs, register and care of the tangible and intangible monuments and preparation of the proposals for the objects to grant the monument's status", - Marine Didebulidze.



Marine is the chairperson of the Mandate, Procedural and Ethics Committee of the Khashuri Municipality and a participant in the USAID-supported Drive Democracy project. Within the Drive Democracy project framework, Marine, among other topics, has also studied socio-economic development and protection of cultural heritage monuments issues in Shida Karti. She has also prepared an action plan with other participants that proposes creating a record system and a joint cultural heritage database.

8. ANNEXES

The annexes provide additional information and supporting documents for the final report, consolidated within a single **folder** and organized into separate subfolders corresponding to each project year:

- [2019-2020 Annual Report Folder](#)
- [2021 Annual Report Folder](#)
- [2022 Annual Report Folder](#)