**Speech by the President on Starting a National Discourse**

(16 December 2021)

*Translation provided by the Communications Division of the Administration of the President of Georgia*

Welcome to everyone, I pay my great respect and I am very glad to have you here.

Many questions have been asked about this event and I would like to say a few words on this. This type of reception is common for the President of any country. These days, I will also have other events for military leaders and NGOs as the regulations do not allow us to invite everyone together. So this is a very common event and I want to wish you all a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year. At the same time, I will not hide the fact that it has a purpose - to change the atmosphere a bit and bring a new mood. We are a people of mood and it is important to change at least a little bit the mood that pressures the country today.

This is at least one step. Even standing together is positive and I think it will be perceived positively by our society, which is already experiencing very badly this endless polarization, the endless tension that has sunk and stopped our country. There is practically not an issue that we can solve today due to this polarization.

So, I think it is timely to start this process and I will tell you why.

On the one hand, because 30 years have passed since gaining independence, we are an adult state and it is time to get out of this youthful trap and move on to more mature politics, new politics.

Except for rare periods, we have gone through very difficult processes with total confrontation, we have been divided in two or more camps. This is what we went through and what probably no one wants to repeat in the country. These sheets of the history books, which we do not yet understand, haunt us today. The people are tired. And on top of this unbearable situation, we have COVID, the current social and economic conditions and there is practically to prospect in the country that we can look at for calm to address the main issues. These issues are development, overcoming poverty, uniting society. Everything is divided. Even the Church is divided. And we can see that we’re forgetting what is happening in the outside world, all around us, the threats and opportunities that we somehow forget.

Now is the time for young people. We know and unless we close our eyes, we see that young people are leaving this country.

They have one aspiration: to get out of here, because if one is young and feels some opportunity in themselves, they will not want to live in a country of hatred and jealousy, a country where they can’t see their future and we are responsible. I feel my responsibility towards them.

Now is the time for the country, if we do not want to lose all the chances we have ahead of us, be it European integration, returning our role in the region, earning our place in a new world that is evolving very fast today. We will go nowhere if we can’t think together, if we all think separately and think ‘I know and you don’t, you’re this and not that.’

Three years have passed. During this period, I have spoken on this topic with many experts and their one common position is that while the crisis continues, this process is necessary but it must continue beyond and ending it while the crisis continues dooms it to failure. We must go to the end, see the abyss, and emerge from it with the joint will of politicians and society.

So I feel the obligation to be responsible for this process in my remaining three years in office and I carry out this responsibility. I have no political ambition after this. I have one ambition, to help this country as much as I can, to help you, to help society, to somehow start to get us out of this situation.

Not everyone is here today. This is very understandable to me because not everyone can come at the very first invitation; this is a normal process. This is neither an insult nor an inconvenience. There will be many other ways for us to start the conversations that are necessary.

I want to tell you now in a few words how I see the process.

This is a very initial process and I want to say first of all that I do not have some formulated, pre-created plan which then is will no longer be subject to change. Rather, it is an open process that should involve everyone and the first stage of this process should be listening.

It is very clear to me that there will be various comments, there will be skepticism, there will be criticism, there will be mistrust, these are all part of our present life and a natural part, so these reactions were also expected and they prove that it is indeed the time. This is relevant to everyone, maybe in different ways (let’s see who sees the ways and means of getting out of this situation) but it is already a fact for society and in political circles that it is time for that.

This process should be based on several main principles. The first is inclusiveness. Today everything is polarized, all areas, all fields and this process must be completely transparent. It will start with consultations, with the participation of all areas at the individual or group level, and all this must take place in the context of very extensive communication, so that the part of the community that is not involved at any point in the process can learn the results and understand the content of the consultations. The beginning of this process cannot be preceded by any form of precondition. I understand different preconditions from different sides and this means that these preconditions will undoubtedly generate new polarization and new controversy and enter a dead end. Reconciliation itself cannot be a precondition - it was misunderstood. Understandably, reconciliation is the result, not the beginning. It begins with reading, exchanging ideas, continuing with telling the truth and understanding the truth (especially if it concerns the past and the present), justice, and then reconciliation can take place, which I prefer to call the process of national accord.

In order for this process to move forward, it is necessary to form a platform of consensus, where we will jointly decide what the next stage of these talks should be, whether it should be with foreigners, or through the Georgian process. No matter the efforts and diligence of our foreign partners, they do not have the understanding from within to manage this difficult, nuanced and long process, because this isn’t about a couple of days – something like that is unrealistic. This has to be a process that we manage.

Obviously, there are many examples, models that have been used in various European and non-European countries. These are just examples from which we can make a comparative analysis, but in the end we have to adapt this process to our needs and it should be a Georgian process, where maybe we will see at some point some form of support from our partners. A process where we decide what process it will be, when we consider a stage accomplished, what format we will move to next, be it the adoption of new legislation, the creation of a commission that could approach the topic in more detail, a public charter or a people’s assembly, or any other format. A lot of options can be thought of, or even seen in history because of our past. No one has the answer.

I'm not going to have my truth today and impose it on anyone. The main thing is what this process will bring us, if we start, if we have successfully taken it to some stage, it allows us to correct our accounts with the past, to evaluate it, to close the pages of the past, which still pressures us today and to see the future more clearly.

It will bring us inner peace, I do not know if we have the ability to calm down completely, it may not even be necessary, but it will bring us to some extent a part that is necessary - the consolidation of democracy. This is one of the first results, democracy no longer being in question if we can lead a process that many countries in the world today cannot.

In fact, what we are experiencing is the disease that has spread throughout the world, even in very old democratic countries. We have seen to what extent confrontation can suddenly arise in our partner countries, and there are numerous examples of that.

In this regard, we can become a kind of example that a small country was able to start a process that many big countries do not even dare to think about. Clearly, this is the proper way – this is the realization of our European integration, the establishment of our new role in the region and in the world, the occupation on which we are practically not talking about anymore. From time to time, we say what is happening on the occupation line is unacceptable, but the real plan on how to overcome this does not exist and cannot exist as long as the country is not internally united and cannot talk about its occupied territories and unification. This is the ABC and we know very well that first and foremost, we should be an example of a strong, united country, a country that knows where it is going and what its perspective is. In order to show this unity and perspective to our Abkhazians and Ossetians and to show that this is the real way that will take them forward and give them perspective. And once again, this is the only way to create that minimal consensus, to understand together what should be the way to solve our very difficult economic and social problems. This is not in the hands of one, it must be a joint vision. It is difficult, very difficult, it also needs united forces.

We can never agree on everything – no country exists where everyone has the same opinion. But we have to be able to agree on something, at least talk together, in order to hear other arguments and see whether we accept it or not.

This national conversation, which is the beginning of my initiative, should also be the end of this situation. We can have these national conversations not only today, but also in the future and thus this country will be what I am deeply convinced we all want it to be.