



POLICY BRIEF

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Can the President's National Accord Process Change the Rules of the Game in Georgia's Public-political Life?

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Executive Summary

For several decades now, deep and uncompromising public-political confrontation has been creating new crises that have brought Georgia's democratic development to a dead-end. As a result, objectives and challenges of national importance have been obscured for the wider public. Therefore, it is important to establish the points of national accord among the public and mobilize it to force the political class to return to boundaries set by public demand, move to create a strategy for depolarization and focus on state objectives that are above party politics.

In this context, it has been several months since the start of the President's initiative on a National Accord. The public's trust towards Salome Zourabichvili has increased following her response to the events in Ukraine, so this initiative may have more chance of combating the depolarization and deradicalization. Therefore, this policy brief aims at analyzing the resources of the President's National Accord Process to bring a change in the rules of the game in Georgian public-political life. Also, to determine what controversial issues the Administration of the President needs to focus on to increase the effectiveness of the process. Firstly, this work discusses the context of the National Accord and its importance. Then it is analyzed the essence and the peculiarities, as well as controversial aspects, of this initiative. Lastly, the policy brief offers recommendations that may significantly contribute to strengthening the process of building a national accord and achieving tangible beneficial outcomes for the country.

Key Words: National Accord, President of Georgia, public, parties, crisis

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Introduction

Recent events that are significant for the Georgian public - such as Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the missed opportunity of advancing on the path to European integration, constant internal political crises and confrontations - demonstrate that it is vital for the country to consolidate around issues of national importance. Without this, it will be hard to secure a place alongside Western democracies. On the contrary, the problems of endless political crises, social conflicts and alienation between political and civil segments have been persistent for years. The public is entering a new phase of continual discord. As a result, the country has reached a deadlock of polarization and its transition to a comprehensive democracy has stalled.

In this context, there have been attempts by various actors to consolidate opposing political elites or various groups of society. One of these initiatives is President Zurabichvili's National Accord Process, which advocates discussion among various groups in society and aims to facilitate a national agreement. The idea of a national accord is focused not on inter-party dialogue, but on the consolidation of the views of the wider public. At first sight, in the context of the political deadlock, it is important to analyze the objectives and potential of a National Accord Process, the risks it faces and the chances of the President to change the rules of the game in the extremely polarized environment.

Administration of the President Here and Now: Importance of The National Accord Initiative

The National Accord initiative voiced by Salome Zourabichvili on December 10, 2021 during the US Summit of Democracy (Zourabichvili 2021) envisages an inclusive process that enables "*rethinking of recent past*", as well as wider public agreement "*on what needs to be done in future for Georgia's further development*" (Administration 2022). The process, that has been ongoing for six months already, is characterized by some ambiguity. However, before making an analysis, it is important to discuss the factors that determine the significance of the National Accord initiative.

It is important to highlight what the public demands of the political classes, which may be an important precedent for Georgia's political development. Through this process the opportunities appear to exert positive "bottom up" influences on the political elite's agenda, not vice versa (Abashishvili 2022; Administration 2022; GPB 2022; Pkhaladze 2022). This factor is especially important now, when Georgia has failed to be granted EU candidate status because of its internal political and reform-related flaws. Therefore, highlighting the public's demands to the government and the wider political classes and pressuring them to fulfill EU commitments now becomes especially important.

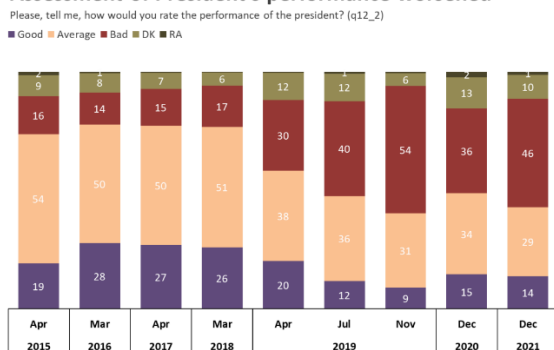
At the same time, it is also important that **Georgia proves that it has enough political-institutional resource to overcome internal crises on its own** and thus becomes closer to achieving Western standards of democracy. The National Accord Process may be one

opportunity in these regards. The public’s view of the President as an intermediary is not that high (11-14%), however, is almost the same across all voters regardless of their party preferences (NDI 2021, December). It may be concluded that this grants the president equal trust among all party supporters. Compared with European mediators, the President of Georgia has more authority to act and exert pressure domestically; therefore, with the National Accord Process she may be in a stronger position from which to voice the public’s expectations to the political classes. (Administration 2022; Pkhaladze 2022). This element is currently missing from the political discourse in Georgia.

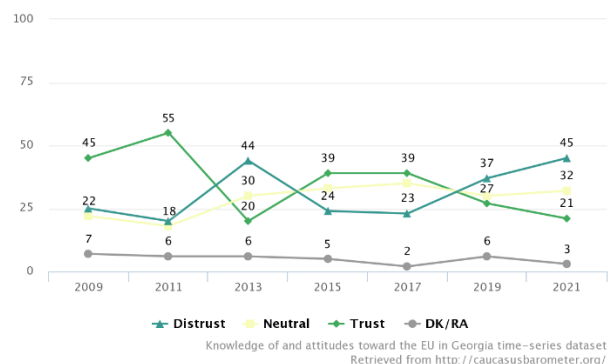
In addition, the National Accord Initiative theoretically **creates a chance to reshape the political scene and** allow the public to focus on issues of national importance, such as the rapidly changing security environment, the challenges of European integration, economic improvement, etc, instead of focusing on internal political battles. For a long time, the problem in the Georgian political environment has been the fact that, against the background of polarization, foreign policy matters vital for the country have remained beyond the focus area of the public and political class, “[we no longer] observe and comprehend the situation unfolding around our country” (Administration 2022).

The National Accord Process is also needed for **the President as an institution to maintain and strengthen the public trust that has already increased over the last couple of months**, and which was granted to her after her response and action to the war in Ukraine. In December 2021 assessment of the President’s work and the public’s trust towards her showed these to be diminishing (Graph 1,2); however, after the President’s response to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, trust towards her has increased - according to the March 2022 data (Graph 3, 4). Incidentally, the Presidency is the only public institution whose assessment improved over this period (NDI 2021, December).

Assessment of President’s performance worsened

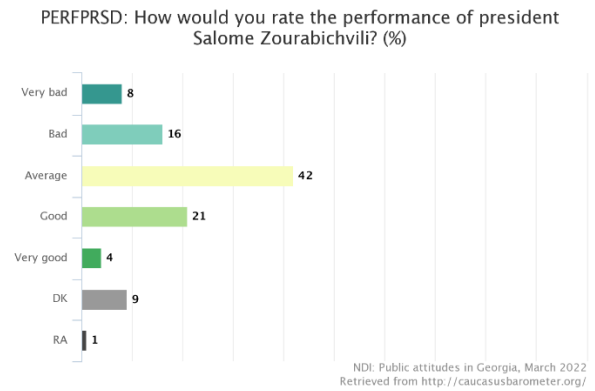
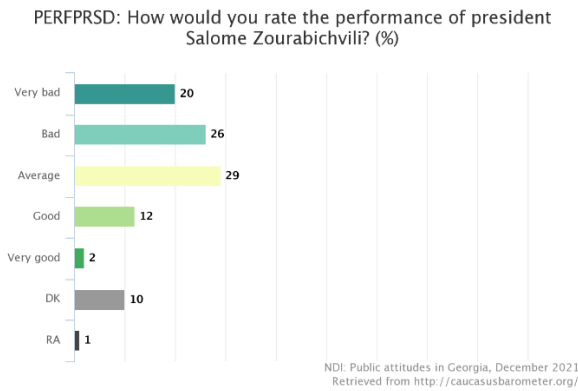


TRUPRES: Trust: President of Georgia (%)



Graph 1. NDI Public Opinion Survey Results, December, 2021.

Graph 2. Timeline: Trust: President of Georgia. Source: https://www.caucasusbarometer.org/en/eu_ge/TRUPRES/



Graph 3: How would you rate the performance of President Salome Zourabichvili? December, 2021.

Source: <https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/nd2021ge/PERFPRSD/>

Graph 4: How would you rate the performance of President Salome Zourabichvili? March 2022

Source: <https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/nm2022ge/PERFPRSD/>

However, there is a risk that the indirect election of the president may harm these indicators (Abashishvili 2022; Pkhaladze 2022). On top of that, the Government has recently been actively trying to delegitimize the President using radical mechanisms, such as filing a constitutional court lawsuit against her.²

National Accord Initiative: What Does It(not) Cover?

Considering the importance of the National Accord idea, it is interesting to clarify what is meant when the administration talks about the “National Accord”, how the process is viewed by the president and what are the questions around this project.

- *The essence of the project*

From the start of the discussions on the National Accord Initiative, there have been questions about its essence that are related topics that need to be agreed upon, as does the way in which these issues will appear on the agenda. As mentioned above, new sources of tension keep appearing, while past disagreements, instead of being resolved, become more prominent and radical, particularly in the political rhetoric.

² On June 7, 2022 the Georgian Dream Government filed a lawsuit against President Salome Zourabichvili in the Constitutional Court. The charge states that President obstructed the process of appointing ambassadors, which goes against the constitutional norm and extends beyond the symbolic authority of the President.

In general, the President obscurely and vaguely characterizes specific topics covered by the National Accord Process. Usually, Salome Zourabichvili thematically mentions “*rethinking the past*”, or broader phenomenon, such as “*democracy*”, “*economic development*”, “*European integration*”, etc. (PoG 2022b). According to the President, “*there should be no tabooed topics*”, yet, at the same time she avoids turning the Process into “*political discussions*” (PoG 2022a), or proactively offering a more specific agenda to the public.

Therefore, there is a risk that obscuring and generalizing the content of the National Accord could fail to create solid trust towards the Process either among the public, or within the political class. Even though Salome Zourabichvili’s initiative is mainly a social process and is not exclusively directed to the political class (GPB 2022; Administration 2022), mistrust among the political class was demonstrated during the first public discussion of the Initiative, when two party leaders left the event in protest. According to one, on the motives for his protest, “*assessing the past [as the President’s strategy] is important but no longer relevant*” (Publika 2022), which may be problematic for the true success of the process.

- ***Strategy of the Process***

According to President Zourabichvili, the Process itself is important for the ongoing National Accord Initiative (GPB 2022). She rarely mentions specific details about the strategy of the process in her rhetoric. Even though there is dedicated independent internet platform for the strategy of the process (PoG 2022), at this stage important components of planning, such as an actual role of various segments of society at specific stages of the widening of the Process, the timeframe, measures of the outcomes, agendas, and mechanisms of analysis, etc, are still unclear.

These details, and greater transparency, are important to ensuring that the President’s initiative is not just an endlessly futile process of discussions, but produces a tangible outcome. While discussions are being held with different members of society, the selection criteria, discussion formats and methodology are ambiguous. It is also unclear how regular or long-term the work on the outcomes of the discussions with the public will be (Pkhaladze 2022), raising concern that this initiative should not resemble past vain attempts at reconciliation, mediation and national accord.

In addition, the scale of the Process has an interesting nuance: the talks always revolve around the “*public*”, however, it is unclear what segments and which principles the President means with these terms. “*Segmenting*” the public according to professional or social state and involving them in the Process, according to this principle, is a very sensitive issue. The methods used by the administration to communicate with unofficial or unorganized groups (such as the unemployed, homemakers, etc.) is still unclear (Pkhaladze 2022). In the meantime, while the President plans to cover regions, villages and diasporas with the National Accord Process (GPB 2022, PoG 2022a), it is important that this process is planned effectively and in detail, and does not become superficial.

Lastly, distancing the idea of National Accord from the inter-party-political dialogue process dissociates public demand and political rhetoric, which may be a strategic mistake. In parliamentary systems, one of the important privileges of the President’s initiative is that it can

turn a strong, civil influence, devoid of party interests, into a strong political influence (Bulmer 2017). A scenario, in which the President aims to achieve national accord in the political spectrum through bottom-up public demand may further distance voters and political elites from each other. Therefore, conducting parallel processes at both levels may make the prospects of the National Accord more realistic.

- *President's function in the Process*

In a super-parliamentary model system, which Georgia's has turned into, the President must carry out a strong integrating function for each segment of the society (Erkvania 2020). In this role, she may convey civil leadership more than political, which will enable her to successfully gather non-state actors and engage them in achieving national accord through non-party positioning. This will help to strengthen and increase the appreciation of neutral institutions in Georgia (Abashishvili 2022). Public and political trust will have a determining role in these regards, ensuring that the President as a civil (and not a political) leader, can achieve tangible outcomes in this model.

However, according to President Zourabichvili, "*she does not need trust*" in order to lead the National Accord discussions (GPB 2022), since she is the provider of a technical platform for this process. Considering the peculiarities of Georgian political culture, which is characterized by the demand for a clear leader, the President's similar technocratic approach may prove to be ineffective. The risk increases when the Process is meant for a wider segment of society - people living in regions and the diaspora.

Meanwhile, it is important that Salome Zourabichvili is actively trying to play a neutral and non-party role while mobilizing society. In a Parliamentary system, such as in Georgia, the President must act with as much neutrality towards party politics as possible, distancing from the goals and activism of political parties or other civil groups, which does not necessarily imply the existence of a politically indifferent president (Erkvania 2020, Bulmer 2017). The latter position could damage his/her authority since it could contribute to the perception among the public that the President is an ineffective and unusable institution.

The President's administration must be ready with more proactive ideas for the transition from the "introductory stage" of the National Accord Process (GPB 2022), which will lead to more public involvement, since otherwise there is a risk that the public will not understand the process of agreeing on certain narratives or won't accept them. For this, the President needs the resources of trust and goodwill, which, as public opinion surveys demonstrate, are increasing, but are still low.

Controversial Circumstances for the National Accord Process

According to the 2013 amendments to the Constitution of Georgia, the authority of the President has been reduced in favor of the Prime Minister and the Government, and Georgia has started to transition from a super-presidential model to a super-parliamentary model (Matsaberidze 2019; Scrivener 2016; Nodia & Aprasidze 2013). This process ended with the new edition of the Constitution in 2017, according to which, instead of being directly elected the President will be appointed by the election board (Legislative Herald of Georgia 2017). In the existing model of governance, considering the peculiarities of the political culture in Georgia, limiting the President's constitutional authority and responsibilities and turning the role into a non-elected institution, may weaken the legitimacy of the institution of presidency and may interfere with her abilities to effectively end the long-term wider-public accord process.

The indirect election of the President does not contradict the main principles of parliamentary constitutionalism. However, in terms of public legitimacy, the authorities of a directly elected president are more important with regard to the control of the government, as well as in the National Accord Process (Abashishvili 2022; Pkhaladze 2022; IDFI 2017; ISFED 2017). If Zourabichvili wishes to end this process with tangible outcomes, the need to do it during her term also increases. Therefore, the current administration faces additional pressure for a quick end to a potentially very complicated and long-term process.

Another contradictory circumstance around this specific National Accord Process is the inconsistent political context around President Zourabichvili. In 2018 she campaigned as a non-party candidate, and her electoral success was mainly derived from the support of the ruling party, which led to mistrust among some segments of society (Fras 2018). Meanwhile, the so-called "bloody banners" first appeared during Salome Zourabichvili's pre-election campaign, which became an instrument for a political battle for the Georgian Dream on numerous occasions, and it may be noted that they became one of the clear illustrations of radicalization.

Therefore, the constitutional and political context around the President draws questions on the extent to which the President has the resources to change the "rules of the game" in the public-political life of Georgia and what means there are to strengthen the initiative at this stage. Therefore, it is important that questions continue to be asked about the administration of the National Accord Process and that work continues on increasing the effectiveness and the potential of the process.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In a rapidly changing geopolitical environment, Georgia must secure its place among civilized democracies. In this process, the success of the president to prove that Georgia has the resources and potential to build a healthy political culture based on a national accord is of utmost importance. Georgia particularly needs to resolve its domestic problems and crises by itself, which will positively impact the international image of the country and contribute to a successful positioning of Georgia internationally. At the same time, there is a direct or indirect chance in sight that the President can play a part in resolving the endless political crisis in Georgia at a time when the country is at the crucial point to prove and strengthen its democratic aspirations.

Despite numerous challenges around the National Accord Process, this policy memo offers recommendations to the President's Administration, as well as to other important actors, that can strengthen the potential of the National Accord Process.

Recommendations to the President's Administration and the President:

- It is important to **focus more on the essence of the National Accord Process** and clarify those specific topics proactively that are considered to be important for discussions and future agreements within the framework of the President's initiative;
- It is important to specify and publicize the **timeline of the National Accord Process** that determines the possible outcome or the result of each stage of the process.
- Clarify the **involvement strategy of various public groups** - define the term "public" in the context of this particular Process and ensure consistent planning of the specific roles of various groups, considering their peculiarities;
- In order to find points of convergence and to disseminate ideas among various groups of the population, to include unofficial and unorganized groups of society (unemployed, homemakers, socially disadvantaged and others) and **thoroughly plan their representation and thematic discussions**;
- **Lead discussions and generate ideas within the framework of the National Accord using mixed methods**: individual and small focus groups; as well as the representation of homogenous and multidisciplinary groups.
- It is desirable to plan and publicize the **sustainability** (regularity and accountability) **strategy of public communication within the framework of the National Accord Process**;

- It is important that politically **radically opposed parties** are involved in the process - direct competitors of the President, as well as former presidents, to ensure that the current administration is indeed inclusive while leading the Process.
- The President **must avoid distancing party or inter-party dialogue process from the National Accord Process**, which will contribute to the reduction of nihilism towards it;
- The President must be ready to explain to the public the **contradictory and inconsistent political circumstances** associated with her presidential campaign and the political context;
- Create an independent strategy to **strengthen public and political trust towards the Administration of the President** and plan this in parallel to the National Accord Process.

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