

Reporting Progress: Maximizing Opportunities Within the President's Press Office

- DRAFT -

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The information contained in this report is for internal use only, and is presented to
The Head of Administration of the President of Georgia.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Terms of Reference and Scope of Report

The information contained within this report is for internal use only.

The author of this report was contracted by the United Nations Development Program in Tblisi, Georgia, to conduct an assessment and evaluation of the Press Office within the Administration of the President of Georgia.

A two-week consultancy mission was undertaken, from June 16 to June 30, 2007.

This report is submitted directly to Ms. Ekatrina Sharashidze, Head of the President's Administration (Chief of Staff to the President). Ms. Sharashidze was the author's main contact within the Administration of the President. There also existed close co-operation with the Deputy Head of Administration, the Head of the Press Office, the Deputy Head of the Press Office and the Special Advisor to the Head of the Administration.

The overall purpose of the mission was to advise the Head of Administration of the President and to share first-hand knowledge, best practices and insights into the management of an effective, modern political press service. The end goal is to apply the principles of modern media relations to the President's Press Office, while developing a more strategic and meaningful function in conducting media relations and overall communications.

A full assessment of the current management and organization of the Press Office was conducted. Its public information products and services were analyzed. This assessment has resulted in the development of a prioritization of the major issues and opportunities within the Press Office. The overall and underlying goals and mission of the Press Office has been determined, with the roles and functions of each individual team member has now been more clearly defined.

The basis for a strategic communications and media relations plan has been initiated, with the full and final results to be determined during an implementation phase in mid-July, 2007. A practical strategy in determining the way ahead has also been developed. This, together with the identification of required resources, will enable the Press Office to meet its needs and fulfill its true potential.

The purpose of this report is to clearly outline the assessment of the Press Office, as well as to describe, *and critique*, the work methods, activities performed and products developed on behalf of the President. Developing the capacity of the Press Office, employing an efficient use of resources to enhance the visibility and impact of the media operations and activities of the President will be critically important to the President's Administration in the months to follow.

"Nothing in life is more important than the ability to communicate effectively."
- Gerald Ford

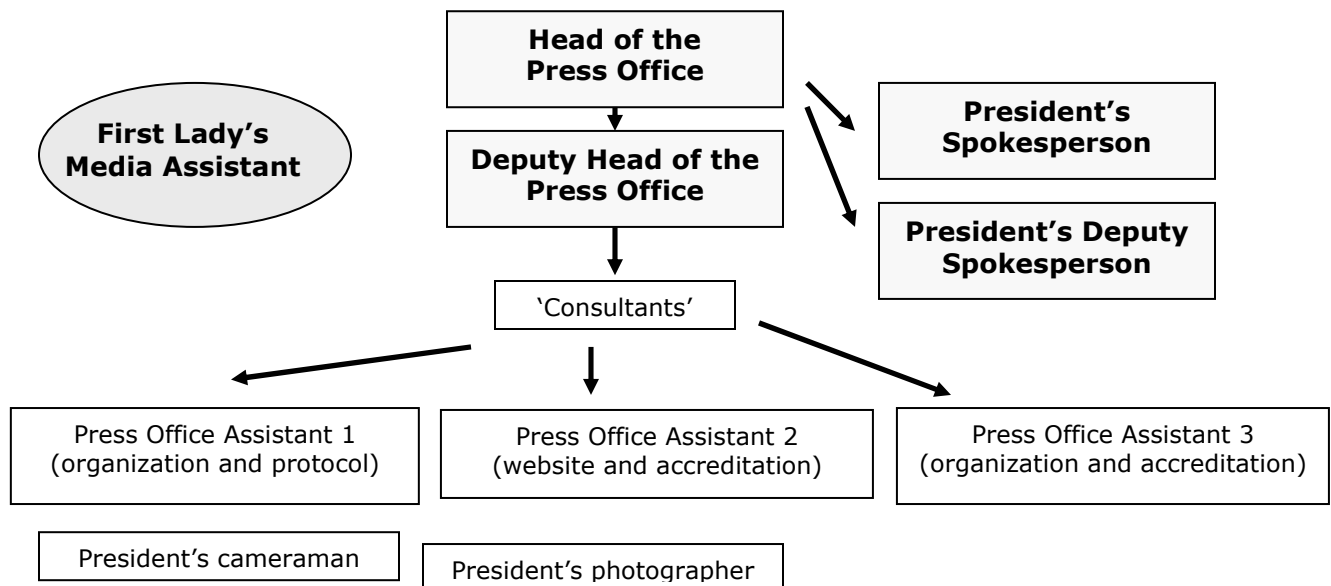
2. ABSTRACT

In a free and democratic nation, the work and functions of the media relations department of *any* public institution or organization should be considered to be among its top public relations and communications priorities.

Information should be routinely shared and easily accessed by all relevant and authorized parties involved. The internal, and external, communications of an organization should be considered as everyone's business, and communication should always travel on a two-way street.

It is the responsibility, mandate (and principle "*raison d'être*") of any press office to perform the vital functions of providing excellence in service to its main client: the media. This fosters good faith and stronger working relationships with media organizations, who in turn, in theory and in principle, will conduct their business of news coverage with a positive, fair and balanced approach.

The organizational structure illustrated below should be the ideal for the President's Press office, where every team member is well aware of who is in the position of being a direct superior. (In this scenario, the Head of the Press Office is just that: the Head, the Boss.)



It is certainly understood and recognized that it is not the obligation of the President's Press Office to do the work of the Georgian media. Ideally, however, (and recent studies of the Georgian media environment have determined) the following conditions are deemed as being ideal to ensure the press may operate freely and fairly:

- Reporting must be fair, objective, and well sourced.
- Journalists must follow recognized and accepted ethical standards.
- Journalists and editors must not practice self-censorship.
- Journalists must cover key events and issues.
- Pay levels for journalists and other media professionals must be sufficiently high to discourage corruption.
- Entertainment programming must not eclipse news and information programming.
- Technical facilities and equipment for gathering, producing, and distributing news must be modern and efficient.

If and when these conditions are firmly in place within Georgian media, it becomes the responsibility of the Press Office to respond to these realities and to deliver the very best service and communications products possible to the media.

At present, there exists a huge potential to work constructively with the Georgian media, in terms of shaping and delivering the President's political message, as well as informing the public of the President's work on behalf of the Georgian people.

In fact, the present opportunities regarding the media would only be considered as a gift in any developed, Western nation. The media is at present, seemingly and for the most part, supportive of many of the President's politics and policies.

- The media remains interested in the President's work and activities. His presence garners considerable media attention.
- As members of the Georgian media were also themselves voters in the last Presidential elections, they likely, (statistically speaking) voted for President Saakashvili. They will therefore retain some degree of personal connection with him.
- The Georgian media can presently be viewed as being somewhat pliant in terms of their willingness to accept, almost at face value, the information supplied to them by the Press Office.

These extremely favorable conditions help to contribute to an almost perfect opportunity for the President's Press Office to fully control and manage political messaging. Clearly, these opportunities are not being exploited to their full potential.

*"The single biggest problem in communication
can be the illusion that it has taken place."*
George Bernard Shaw

3. PRESENT PRESS OFFICE STRUCTURE, CULTURE, FUNCTIONS & REALITIES

The Press Office of the Administration of the President has a negative image in the eyes of the Georgian media, NGO's and even within its own Administration. It is perceived as being slow to respond, and meaningless once it does. In order to be truly effective, relevant and respected, the Press Office must work to enhance *its own image*, before it may even entertain the possibility of fulfilling its core function of enhancing the image of the President and reporting on his activities.

At present, the Press Office of the President operates as a semi-irrelevant instrument for simply collecting, recording and tabulating the presidential news that has already occurred (and that has already been reported by media).

The Press Office, in anticipation of an event, announcement or foreign visit, does not, at present, actively seek-out, research or investigate either the main issues or the small details involved and yet to unfold. Instead, the current standard operating procedure of Press Office staff is to simply wait for the news coverage to be reported by Georgian or international media, and to then 'cover it'. Press Office staff will, by routine, simply watch the news unfold, often live on television, and are then simply left to transcribe and record the event for posterity, producing news releases or other communications products to reflect the news that has already happened.

This stance leads Press Office staff to feel, (and clearly demonstrate), that they are 'out of the loop' and not part of an integrated team within the President's Administration.

There exists a consensus on the critical need to operate the Press Office differently, and in a more modern and proactive way. Though further examined in the "Conclusions and Recommendations" portion of this report, the principle findings of this report is to recommend a way forward:

Fundamentally, the Press Office must act as the very first reporting news source of the President's activities. In other words, the President's Press Office must behave, perform and function as an independent news agency unto itself. It must be considered as being mandated and fully authorized to find and determine the information that is relevant and complementary to the President's political messaging, and to then report this message to the Georgian and international media, in keeping with standard protocols and modern journalistic procedures. Relevant communications materials and products must flow from this core function, and be produced and delivered to media in a timely fashion.

The obvious benefit of this more proactive approach is that strategic political messaging, developed by the President's Administration, can be inserted as needed and then "fed" to the media.

The President's Press Office must adhere to the highest standards of ethics, transparency and professionalism in delivering information and communications products to its main clients: the media.

- A culture of excellence regarding client service and satisfaction must be created and cultivated regarding the practices, procedures and relationships with domestic and international news agencies.
- The Press Office must adopt and implement a series of new practices, techniques and standard operating procedures when conducting their work on behalf of the President.
- The Press Office must employ an efficient use of present and future resources and newly-learned techniques towards enhancing not only the image of the President, but also in enhancing its own image, in the eyes of the media.

Clearly, these stated goals and recommendations are not a radical departure from the mandate and function of any modern press service, and are very much in-step with the ideals and daily operations of the press services and media-relations organizations serving most Western democracies. These functions, however, may be viewed as a somewhat extreme change to the way business is done in the Press Office of the President of Georgia. Though the functions and machinery reflecting this new approach are comparatively easy to put in place, it is the actual human execution and fulfillment of this new function that may encounter resistance. At the very least, mental and attitudinal adjustments will need to be made.

It will take a different approach, a different mind-set to deliver this new, modern and effective media relations strategy on behalf of the President.

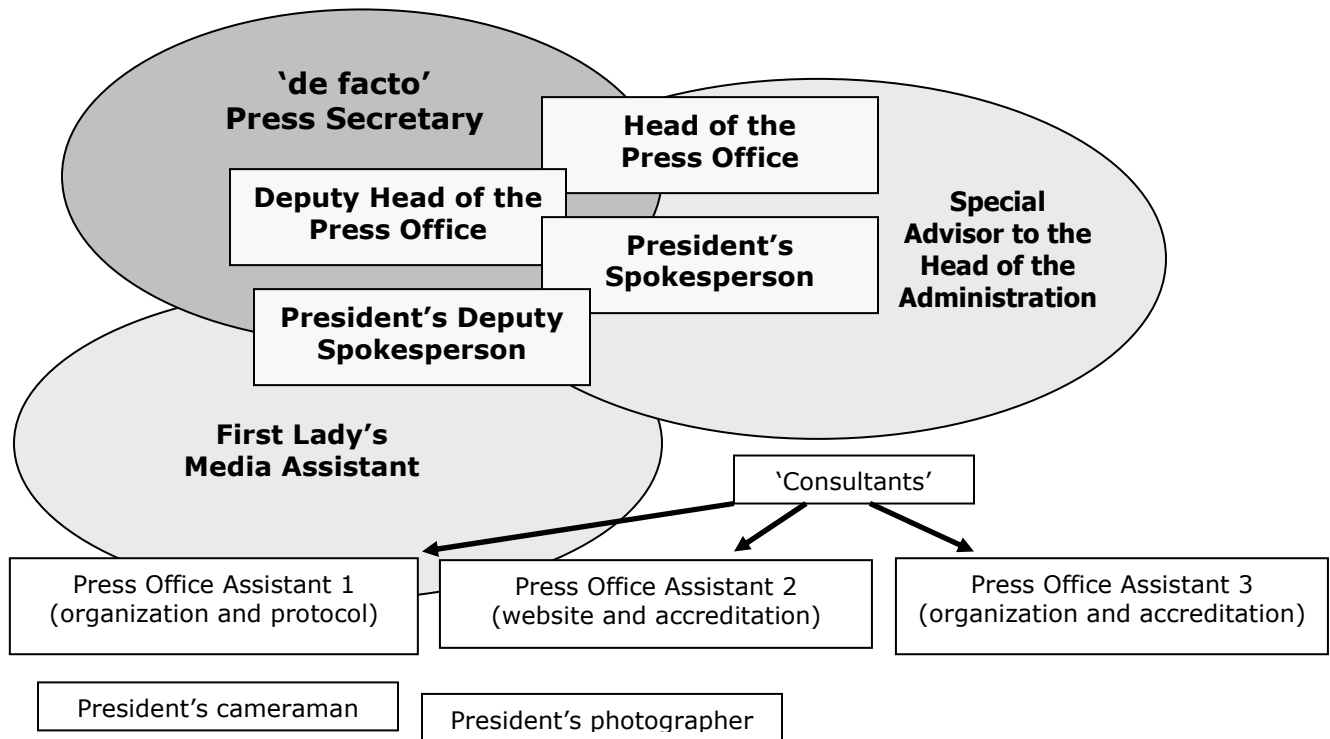
In keeping with the stated goals of complete transparency, integrity and the desire to strengthen Georgia's democratic institutions, the Press Office of the President's Administration should be a full partner, and in fact a driving force, in establishing, crafting, delivering and monitoring the President's political message.

As well, the Press Office should be routinely expected, (and openly invited when possible and appropriate), to work in close collaboration with the Head of the President's Administration (and Deputy Head), the newly-formed "foreign office team", and with protocol personnel of the Administration, in terms of the planning, program, schedule and media logistics of the President's daily agenda, including foreign visits, domestic events and appearances.

It is believed that although these conditions may presently exist, (meaning the 'invitation' has been extended), perhaps the leadership of the Press Office has not always 'accepted' the invitation, or have not taken the initiative to seek-out the information needed.

By definition, a Press Office should be investigative and proactive, always working to seek out and uncover the story. Sometimes, the story can simply be found within the walls of the President's Administration building, and the answers to many of the questions simply resting with President's Administration colleagues.

Present Organizational Structure
President of Georgia's Press Office



Clearly, the present organizational structure of the President's Press Office does not fit a traditional hierarchical model, delineating specific task and responsibilities, decision-making and power structures. There exists a large degree of overlapping of responsibilities and of authority. This present model is not conducive to the efficient functioning of the Press Office.

Press Office staff are presently linked both directly and indirectly, and both 'vertically' and 'horizontally'. Direct links would normally exist between one's immediate superior or to one's immediate subordinates, though this does not reflect the true nature and relationship presently at work in the President's Press Office structure. This means for example, that two co-workers, neither of whom is the other's true boss, (but both of whose chains of command meet), can only be unsure of their working relationship and status.

Certainly, it is not the desire or aim of this report to impose a Western-styled system on the realities of a Georgian culture. And, if this present system was considered as being workable, then major adjustments would not be recommended. But, because there presently exists deficiencies in the way the Press office operates, then clearly a new structure should be introduced and implemented over a short period of time. Weeks, not months, should be the time frame, and particularly in the lead-up to the Presidential elections, a more directly-accountable and hierarchical model must be implemented. (Additional research and observation will take place in relation to this structure over the coming weeks, and the planned workshops and seminars will greatly assist in this process).

4. TASKS PRESENTLY UNDERTAKEN BY THE PRESIDENT'S PRESS OFFICE

The more problematic areas dealing with timely and effective communications and information concerning presidential news, media advisories and other communications products, will be dealt with later on in this report, as well as during an implementation phase in the coming weeks. Soon, the author of this report will be further observing the functions and work of the Press Office, by performing a "shadowing" of Press Office staff. Specific problems with the execution of their duties will be immediately commented upon and rectified, with meaningful, noticeable and measurable results.

The President's Press Office is, (for the most part) presently staffed by competent, sincere and enthusiastic communications professionals, who have an acceptable level of understanding concerning basic media relations principles and practices, and who have developed good working relationships with Georgian and international press organizations. Most importantly, they are open to the concept of introducing new and modern techniques, and they possess the skills, and the positive attitude, required to tackle some of the problems that exist.

Additionally, they benefit from the experience of a former journalist, (the Special Advisor), and this should only have a positive effect on the Press Office, as they will soon be undertaking the role and functions of a sophisticated news agency, by reporting on the President's work.

To complement its media relations work, the President's Press Office is specifically mandated to carry out the following tasks. Each evaluated individually, the author of this report has been mandated to specifically evaluate the following:

Item: Maintenance of bilingual (Georgian and English) Presidential website
(<http://www.president.gov.ge>)

The assessment of the website is quite favorable. The site is crisp, easy to navigate and well-designed, keeping much of the same look and feel as other Government of Georgia sites, including the Parliamentary site and web-portal. The President's news and other content (pictures, press releases, etc.) is updated quite regularly, mostly on a daily basis, and the news items are fresh and well-presented. The translation to English is almost without flaw, and the English version is seemingly updated at the same time as the Georgian.

Improvements could include the addition of video clips to accompany the more important announcements and events, and an interactive component to the site. Specifically, a 'feedback' section could be added. Additionally, visitors to the site should have an opportunity to join a newsletter subscription list.

At present, only Georgian media are able to receive such products, though it might be beneficial to have everyday Georgians added to this list. As well, potential foreign visitors and investors abroad would benefit from the ability to join such a newsletter subscription.

Item: Recording and transcribing of speeches, declarations of the President

There were no major problems or deficiencies associated with these functions. (These tasks are, however, a metaphor for the present function of the President's Press Office: to simply transcribe and record what has already happened, and already been reported on).

Item: Maintenance of the Presidential photo and video archive

The methods used for maintaining the photo and video archives are, in reality, very much the same as is witnessed in more developed, Western nations. Essentially, the material and footage need to be well-catalogued and marked, and then easily retrieved at a moment's notice, (should the Press Office require stock footage, archived photos of past events, etc.) These conditions are being met.



As is the procedure with the storing and maintenance of Canada's Prime Ministerial photo archive, these basic duties within the President of Georgia's Press Office rest with one specific person, who acts as the gate-keeper and holds the institutional memory of the relevance and importance of the material.

As well, appropriately, the material is stored in fire-proof lock-boxes.

An improvement to the present system could involve the copying/backing-up of the more important materials, photos and videos, and storing these copies in an alternate, off-site location.

Item: Organization of exclusive and group interviews with the President

It was made obvious by the President's Press Office, and through individual and group meetings with Georgian media, that the President is always very available, accessible and open to meeting journalists. Georgian news services do not seem to be demanding extra interviews with the President, as he accommodates them as often as possible as it is. Media do not ask, ostensibly, for individual interviews, (and they are not generally granted), nor are 'exclusive' interviews given, so as to avoid any appearance of favoritism among news services. This is an arrangement that could potentially be adjusted in the future, but for now and in the months ahead, this system seems to serve the President well.

There was, incidentally, a recent example of one specific Georgian news organization receiving background materials directly from the Press Office, to the exclusion of all other news organizations. Predictably, this caused problems, though it is understood to have been resolved.

Item: Delivering annual accreditation for journalists

All seems well with this. Importantly, journalists have not voiced any problems or concerns.

Item: Ensuring the technical provisions for live transmission

No problems were recorded or observed.

Item: Ensuring for the First Lady's media relations

No problems were recorded or observed concerning the First Lady's communications and media relations functions. There is a link to the First Lady's work directly on the Presidential website, and all seems to run seamlessly.

It was suggested that videos of the First Lady's public appearances could be placed on the website, and this is presently being worked-on.

The functions and events of the First Lady run quite independently of those of the President, and there seem to be no conflicts whatsoever with present arrangements.

Item: Organization of briefings and press conferences of the President

Solely in consideration of what was observed during the 2-week consultancy, (between June 16 to June 30, 2007), this function seems to have been executed adequately. During this period, the President was involved in several foreign visits, with many of the press conferences and briefings being conducted jointly with the host country or organization. This fact prevents a full and fair assessment of the President's Press Office in relation to this task.

However, as a staple of a modern press conference or media briefing, communications materials such as briefing notes, backgrounders and/or media releases and media kits should always be distributed to attending media. This practice was seemingly not the standard during the two-week assessment, and for this reason, only a fair grade can be given to this important task.

It will be noted, however, that the technical provisions and logistics of these press events were good. Media seemed to be, considering the absence of communications products and advisories, well taken-care of, and the President was able to deliver his message in a clear way, in spite of the absence of the Press Office's full support.

Item: Ensuring media relations domestically and abroad

Though the President's Press Office works in a team environment, there is one designated person specifically mandated to work with foreign journalist and news organizations. This individual is fluent in several languages, including French and English, (a language skill which will only gain in importance as time goes go by, as the President continues to be the face of Georgia to the Western world).

Foreign media seems to be well taken-care of by the President's Press Office for the time being, though a definite enhancement of its capacity and capabilities will need to be undertaken in the months ahead. Language training (i.e. English courses, should continue to be introduced when possible to staff). Though not necessary at present, the addition of another foreign media staffer within the Press Office may be appropriate, as the international press continues to take a closer look at Georgia and the President.

Foreign and domestic journalists seem to have a solid, and friendly working rapport with the President's Press office, and have good access to its staff. (It is the *information itself* that is lacking in the Press office, though the relationships with journalists, domestic and foreign, have seemingly been well-cultivated).

A word about the work culture in the President's Press Office...

The President's Press Office must endeavor to meet a higher standard than the average Georgian enterprise. The bar must be set higher. Their work, after all, is on behalf of the *President of Georgia*, and it should always be considered as an honor and privilege to work within his Administration. The work of the Press Office is directly related to the image of the President, and any misstep on the part of the Press Office will ultimately reflect poorly on him.

As stated earlier in this report, the President's Press Office is presently staffed by competent, sincere and enthusiastic communications professionals, all of whom care about the quality of their work. Here, the quality of their work is not being critiqued: it is the Press Office culture and their work habits that must be addressed. For example, in any Western-style democracy within a developed country, it would simply not be acceptable for the Press Office to begin the work day at 11:00 am. Traditional culture and work habits notwithstanding – a press office is a press office, and put quite simply, the President of Georgia's Press Office should start their day earlier.

"The economic growth rate of France is currently the slowest of any large European country. Nicolas Sarkozy, its new president, has promised to reverse this trend, while speaking often of his admiration for the United States, and his rhetoric of hard work and appeals to the "France that gets up early".

– **Foreign Policy magazine, May, 2007**

Meeting with Georgian media

To gain a wider, more fulsome understanding of the services and products currently provided by the President's Press Office, and to observe first-hand its relationship with Georgian media organizations, the author was afforded an opportunity to meet and interact with several television and print organizations. Meetings were conducted both as a group (in Georgian, with English translation), and then individually with three of the news organizations who sent English-speaking representatives).



Journalists were invited, and encouraged, to openly voice their concerns and directly relate their experiences with the President's Press Office.

This meeting allowed for a wholly different perspective, (in effect, a view of fully 180 degrees of difference), as it assumed the standpoint of a reporter in search of a story, and examined some of the problems they may encounter with the President's Press Office along the way.

During a two-hour interactive meeting and open discussion with Georgian print and television media, several themes developed:

- The Georgian media is somewhat frustrated with the slow pace and quality of information that is given to them by the Press Office, (but they did not seem overly critical of the efforts of the Press Office).
- In general, the Georgian media organizations based in Tblisi seem to be giving the President's Press Office a 'free pass' (for the time being), regarding its ability to provide them with timely information, media advisories and press releases.
- Media would like more advanced warning concerning Presidential trips and events. It was widely agreed that media advisories are needed more often and with more lead-time. Media seemed sympathetic to the notion that the lack of information given to them on a timely basis will in turn hurt the President's image.
- Some news organizations expressed concern that these problems may persist and not be rectified in the lead-up to next year's Presidential elections.
- Some media members expressed specific complaints concerning the President's Main Spokesperson, saying that although he is "*very friendly and easy-going, he is hard to get a hold of at times, and he will never give an official comment*". This leads to the conclusion that the President does not have, in fact, a Spokesperson, in the truest sense of the word.

Media Holding Room - Chancellery



With the understanding that a new, modern building to house the President's Administration, (and his Press Office and Media Centre) is presently under construction, a full description of the inadequacies of the present facilities is not productive.

Suffice to mention that members of the Georgian and international media should have, in this new facility, access to a well-lit, comfortable working area, featuring several computer terminals, each with high-speed Internet connections, telephones, televisions and a separate interview space.

Communications products, to be developed by the Press Office, including backgrounders, should be on display.

The author of this report was afforded an opportunity to visit the newly-opened Press Centre within the Parliament of Georgia. Although these facilities are perhaps larger than what may be needed for the purposes of the President's Press Office's media holding room/press centre, it should serve as a model for what should be made available to journalists.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS AND NEXT STEPS

Without doubt, establishing, modernizing and strengthening the core functions of the President's Press Office is a necessity. To simply keep the status quo – meaning, to not embark on a process of institutional change and modernization, and to not begin a new approach to the ways in which the President's Press Office interacts and serves the Georgian and international media, would have detrimental effects on the President and on his image.

By enacting no changes, the natural course of news competition will eventually overtake the operations and supplant the relevancy and legitimacy of the President's Press Office.

In meeting with Georgian news organizations, it was made clear to the author that the President has been given a grace period, a certain window of opportunity, in light of his monumental election victory, where he will continue to enjoy, for the most part, encouraging and positive coverage of his plans, policies, foreign visits and domestic events.

After all, journalists themselves are voters, and the vast majority of them, in tandem with their countrymen from other professions and walks of life from across Georgia, were caught-up in the exuberance and emotions following the Rose Revolution. For the most part, and with few exceptions, the Georgian media hungered for reform, and fully supported a vast sea-change in the way the public business of running the country was conducted and government and the State as a whole was perceived.

“Georgian media outlets became so involved in the political process that they almost abandoned the traditional role of a neutral observer... In the pre- and post-election period, almost all media outlets demonstrated their political alliances, and this continued well after the revolution...media businesses will have to distance themselves from the chaos of the transition period—a tough task given the emotional attachment many journalists have to the political groups empowered by the revolution.

- Media Sustainability Index 2003: Georgia

The Georgian media will, and should, act as a form of un-official opposition, as a critic of the decisions and direction of both the government and of the State. This function has already begun to take hold within Georgian media.

Modern news organizations operate in a vacuum, as they must continuously feed the 24/7 news cycle, in keeping with increased news competition demands placed on them. Already in Georgia, there are signs of the “westernization” of the media, with several news channels now beginning to cater to a more ‘tabloid-oriented’ audience, while side-stepping important facts and journalistic principles, and turning towards an ‘infotainment’ format. This is also a market-driven reaction. Firstly, there is an increasing market for this type of coverage, and secondly, it is often more costly for a news organization to actually investigate and report on the ‘actual and factual’ news. Unfortunately in Georgia, as in more developed, Western nations, infotainment is simply cheaper to produce.

CHIEF RECOMMENDATIONS:

- To start a process of institutional change and modernization, and to begin a new approach to the ways in which the President's Press Office interacts and serves the Georgian and international media.
- To create a culture of excellence within the President's Press Office, in terms of delivering service and communications products to the domestic Georgian and international media in an effective, timely and meaningful way.

This will entail the following:

- The President's Press Office must act as the very first reporting news source of the President's activities.
- The President's Press Office must behave, perform and function as an independent news agency unto itself.
- The President's Press Office must be considered as being mandated and fully authorized to investigate and determine the information that is relevant and complementary to the President's political messaging.
- The President's Press Office must report this message to the Georgian and international media, in keeping with standard protocols and modern journalistic procedures.

6. A MISSION STATEMENT (DRAFT)

**Press Office
Administration of the President of Georgia**

To serve the President of Georgia with the highest degree of professionalism and dedication, while helping to craft and deliver his political messaging.

To be the first, foremost and best reporting service in Georgia, in terms of investigating, researching reporting and recording the activities of the President, including announcements, policies and strategic political messaging regarding domestic and foreign visits and special events.

To provide service excellence when dealing with its main client: domestic and foreign media organizations.

To deliver swift, timely and meaningful information and communications products, including comprehensive media advisories, briefing notes, press releases, research papers and backgrounders.

7. CONCLUSIONS

The recommended way forward is clear: the President's Press Office must re-brand itself, and undertake a wholly new identity, as the President's first and foremost reporting authority on his whereabouts, actions, events and political messaging, with communications products flowing as a result of this.

These communications products must be developed and distributed on a routine basis.



A strong recommendation is to initiate a series of seminars and workshops for the staff of the President's Press Office, designed to sharpen existing communications skills, as well as to introduce new concepts and techniques involved in news gathering, reporting and recording.

At left, communications experts engage UNDP Georgia staff in crisis management and media relations procedures.

Specific recommendations

- Press Office staff must attend regularly-scheduled meetings between Head/Deputy Head of Administration, dealing specifically with upcoming Presidential visits, events and announcements.
- Press Office staff themselves must meet internally, regularly and routinely, to plan their work in advance. The Head of the Press Office must take the initiative to chair these meetings, and to ensure his team is well-equipped to do their work.
- At least one member of the Press Office must have direct access to the President's scheduling and planning software. (*SharePoint?*)
- The President's Press Office should open earlier in the day. The Office should be staffed by at least one member by 9:00 AM, to allow for the reading of important news clippings, overnight wire-service dispatches and to collect and distribute important items highlighted by the media monitoring service.
- A very clear and easy-to-understand hierarchical office work structure must be put in place, delineating obvious and transparent roles and responsibilities. Precise 'terms of reference' (job descriptions) within this new organizational structure will be developed during media relations training seminars and workshops to take place in late July and early August, 2007.