

FOSTERING TALENT AND INNOVATION IN THE RUSSIAN-LANGUAGE INFORMATION SPACE

1.0. Executive summary

The project is aimed at mobilising independent Russian-language media to provide audiences in the Baltic States with a credible alternative to the tendentious programming sponsored by the Kremlin. It recognises, however, that these audiences have a low sense of ownership for existing outputs which often feel either anodyne or antagonistic. Despite recent efforts by the national broadcasters to introduce bespoke Russian-language programming, there is still a lack of content which genuinely reflects the interests and concerns of Russian minorities in the region. Activities will, therefore, focus on tapping into the wealth of creativity inherent in Russian-speaking communities with a view to developing programming which celebrates the cultural and ethnic diversity of the target countries and promotes greater cohesion.

Devised by Albany Associates working in partnership with IREX Europe, Memo 98 and the Baltic Film and Media School, the project will comprise two key phases. The design phase will provide new insight into Russian-language media consumption trends in the region as well as identifying gaps in current provision. The consortium will then work with key media partners to prepare for a regional media festival aimed at identifying and fostering young talent within minority communities. The festival will generate programme ideas which have the potential to enrich the current Russian-language offering in the region. During the implementation phase, these ideas will be developed under the mentorship of international experts; showcased at the festival; and broadcast/published by the media partners. These activities will also help to connect media outlets with their audiences; strengthen their footprint and visibility in the Baltic States; source new programming ideas; and explore commercial opportunities.

The project will benefit from the combined input of four partners with complementary experience and expertise. Albany Associates boasts a 12-year track record in strategic communications and media regulation in politically complex environments. This includes an OSCE-funded project in the former Soviet Union (FSU) countries which delivers legal training to governments, media outlets and civil society. IREX Europe has an exceptional experience of facilitating media training, production and acquisition as well as developing business plans for independent media globally and in the Baltic States. Both Albany and IREX Europe contributed to the 2015 study of Russian-language media commissioned by the European Endowment for Democracy (EED). Memo 98 has already carried out extensive research work around media consumption in the three target countries whilst the Baltic Film and Media School is considered a leading centre for media excellence in the region. The selected project team are Russian speakers with decades of experience in the countries of the FSU, including the Baltic States.

2.0. Analysis of target audience

Audience segmentation analysis of Russian minorities in the Baltic States conducted by Albany's local CSO network in 2016 shows that people over the age of 40 tend to share a positive view of the Soviet era and perceive some European values (e.g. freedom of speech and tolerance) as a threat to national traditions and family values. They are concerned about the economic situation in the region and about losing touch with the younger generation. This group is highly dependent on TV news from Russia but, with the exception of Lithuania, demonstrates low levels of social and political activity.

People between the ages of 30 and 40 show marked differences across the three countries. Those in Estonia are generally pro-European and well-integrated whilst those living in Latvia distrust the national government and are suspicious of certain developments in Western Europe (e.g. migration and LGBT rights). Citizens aged between 20 and 30 are concerned about being strangers in their own country and, due to high unemployment and financial instability, some are considering emigration. Those in Latvia in particular feel a strong sense of belonging to Europe but have low levels of political engagement. People in both these age groups rely heavily on news and information from the Internet.

All three groups are susceptible to Kremlin-sponsored propaganda to varying degrees. Those who are disassociated from the societies in which they live willingly consume a bombastic narrative which evokes nostalgia for a "glorious past" and echoes their sense of grievance towards host communities. Individuals who are disillusioned by the

economic and employment prospects in their home countries are actively seeking for opportunities elsewhere and may be attracted by the upbeat messaging coming out of Russia. Perhaps the most harmful propaganda lies in the increasingly insistent message that Russians should collectively adopt a “siege” mentality in the face of alleged hostility from the West.

3.0. How the project will reach the most vulnerable

The formats adopted by Kremlin-aligned media – full of swagger and hyperbole – have massive popular appeal amongst audiences. During a series of focus groups commissioned by the EED in 2015, one respondent commented, “[It is] emotionally attractive, because some news you watch as an exciting movie. You don’t trust it, but you watch it gladly.” By contrast, Russian-language programming sponsored by Baltic States governments or funded by the international community is often considered to be staid and/or sanctimonious whilst some outputs are fronted by controversial figures who do not necessarily resonate with the younger generation (e.g. Artemy Troitsky on Aru TV).

There is, thus, a need to strike an emotional chord with Russian audiences and explore what the academic Svetlana Boym calls a “more reflective, less negative form of nostalgia” which acknowledges a cultural and historical legacy but accepts that it needs to co-exist with modern-day realities. The alternative narrative should, therefore, be more textured and less categorical, empowering Russians to take control of their lives and building greater resilience to all forms of political manipulation.

The project will develop programming which addresses common interests outside the nationalist/political agenda and which is aligned to people’s daily lives and aspirations. Attempts to take the Kremlin’s propaganda machine head-on are likely to fail but helping Russians outside Russia to shape a media space which is tailored to their needs could play a key role in defusing tensions and tackling frustrations. This media space will be based around a coalition of Russian-language media which incorporates a multi-platform approach to improving information provision for Baltic audiences. By leveraging traditional and new-media platforms as well as staging interactive events, the project will be able to reach diverse interest groups and facilitate a broad exchange of views.

4.0. How the project will impact on knowledge of and support for European narratives

The initiative will avoid an approach which could feed perceptions that Europe is attempting to counter Russian propaganda by propagandising its own ideology. The Euro-Atlantic narrative should not be imposed but enacted. In other words, these values should be implicit in media outputs and other forms of dialogue which are respectful of ethnicity and culture but promote community cohesion and civic engagement.

Through the project activities, individuals who are susceptible to negative Kremlin-aligned messaging will be involved in an inclusive process which encapsulates Euro-Atlantic values and demonstrates how they work in practice. Specifically, activities such as online/offline gaming will reflect the need to be self-critical and consider entrenched attitudes from a different perspective. The media festival will represent diverse cultures and encourage majority populations to consider the added value that these cultures bring to society as a whole. The emphasis on audience engagement will highlight the need to create media platforms which are shaped by the people who access them. In addition, the programme development phase will promote public service media values with a particular focus on producing content for specific interest groups and empowering individuals to make informed decisions.

5.0. Objectives

- To increase the audience share of public service media committed to serving Russian-language audiences in the Baltic States;
- To improve the quality of existing Russian-language media outputs by bringing them closer to perceived needs;
- To enhance the sustainability of media outlets by promoting business models which preserve independence and editorial credibility, and increase links to local communities;
- To promote a sense of ownership for programming outputs by involving audiences in programme development and nurturing talent in Russian-speaking communities.

6.0. Outcomes

- A clearer picture of audience share and media consumption trends in the Baltic States is captured.

- Better insight into the development needs of Russian-language media, both editorially and institutionally, is made available; stronger links are forged with international partners.
- Greater capacity is developed within selected media to build a sustainable business; to engage with audiences in the Baltics; and to introduce bespoke programming models.
- New revenue-generating streams through off-line audience engagement activities are developed.
- Innovative programme ideas – including drama, games and documentaries – are developed and audience-tested; viable media interventions are identified for future funding.

7.0. Innovative activities to complement more traditional forms of engagement

The consortium is aware of the work being done by the British Council to engage with Russian-speaking communities in the Baltic States. These include study tours, policy dialogues, competitions and youth forums as well as initiatives aimed at promoting the arts. The CSSF project will complement this work by providing further outlets for creativity but also by pioneering innovative elements such as games aimed at developing critical-thinking, a training programme for citizen journalists, pitching sessions for would-be programme makers, content labs and on-/offline mystery-based challenges.

Innovation will play a key role in the project's success since traditional methods (training, co-production) do not make proper allowance for the unique contours of the Russian-language media landscape. Leading practitioners – particularly those in “exile” – share a high level of professional competence and do not feel that they need training in journalistic skills. Direct consultancy around traditional business models may also be limited in its impact, since the revenue-generating opportunities for Russian-language media outside Russia are scarce. Furthermore, efforts to develop new programming with the public broadcasters in Latvia and Lithuania may well be frustrated due to a lack of political will in national governments whilst ETV+ in Estonia is soon to be the beneficiary of a separate FCO-funded training programme which will address many of its immediate needs.

For these reasons, the approach described in this document is considered to be the most realistic at the current time. The project is based around a working partnership with influential media outlets which will give them the chance to push back the boundaries and embrace innovation. It will develop a bond of trust between these outlets and their audiences which is based on a shared creative vision rather than a partisan agenda. A key incentive for target media outlets is to explore interactive collaborations with Russian-language communities which can lead to new revenue-generating activities and local business investment. In addition, the project will serve to highlight a pipeline of possible project interventions aimed at building local capacity and outreach. It could also feed into longer-term plans to develop a Russian-language content factory, as proposed by the 2015 EED report.

7.1. PHASE ONE

Despite a significant volume of research into the Russian-language media space over the past two years, there is still a knowledge gap around the preferences of Russian-speaking audiences in the Baltic States and the kinds of programming formats which could be most effective in engaging with them. International stakeholders would also benefit from an enhanced understanding of the ability of media platforms to deliver genuine public service programming and reach vulnerable audiences.

7.1.1. Engaging with media platforms

The project will endeavour to work with a broad base of media organisations which have the potential to reach audiences in the Baltic States. This engagement will enable the consortium and the FCO to understand where the opportunities for collaboration and support exist. Of key importance is the will within media outlets to develop new programming as well as the resources which can be made available to external interventions. In addition, experts will be able to assess the viability of specific outlets as long-term partners. Media platforms covered during this phase will include: ETV+ (the Russian-language service of the Estonian broadcaster), LTV in Latvia and LRT in Lithuania (both of which produce or rebroadcast a limited number of Russian-language outputs), Re:Baltica (the website of the Baltic Centre for Investigative Journalism), Russian-language platforms on Delfi, Meduza, Aru TV and TV Dozhd'.

7.1.2. Output monitoring

This activity aims to provide new insight into the viewing trends of Russian-speaking audiences and the extent to which they believe in or trust existing media outlets. It will draw on research into market ratings which has already been commissioned and delivered but it will also examine the types of programming on offer, their popularity ratings and the perceived effectiveness of different formats. This work will be carried out by Albany's consortium partner, Memo 98, and will help to shape the programme development initiative in Phase Two of the project. The monitoring results will also be shared with Russian-language media, thereby demonstrating where gaps in provision currently exist and where there is room for extending their audiences. Output monitoring will be carried out by local researchers who will be trained by Memo 98 at the beginning of the project. This activity will help to create lasting capacity on the ground whilst the chosen methodology will be shared with local partners, thereby creating a framework for future initiatives.

7.1.3. Developing the concept and scope of the media festival

The project's implementation phase will culminate in a media festival aimed at showcasing the talent of young programme-makers from minority groups in Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia (including Polish, Belarusian and Finnish minorities). The event will provide a forum in which Russian-language media can engage with local audiences, "spot" talent and commission new programme ideas. It will also highlight and explore key themes affecting minority groups including culture, integration and identity through a series of creative challenges.

During Phase One, the project partners will work with local stakeholders to devise the brand and concept of the festival as well as selecting locations and identifying the necessary resources. They will also seek partnerships with a range of institutions including ministries of culture, media schools and cultural organisations. Securing commercial sponsorship will be a key aspect of this process, since it is anticipated that the support of local businesses could lead to commercial opportunities for Russian-language media in the region and ensure the long-term sustainability of the festival.

7.2. PHASE TWO

7.2.1. Engaging with audiences

Audience engagement sits at the heart of Phase Two of the project. Once the format and profile of the media festival has been defined, young creatives from across the region will be invited to submit ideas for programmes, games and animations which reflect their interests, concerns and aspirations. These opportunities will be promoted through social media channels such as Facebook, VKontakte and Odnoklassniki as well as by participating media organisations. The Baltic Film and Media School will investigate possibilities for leveraging networks in schools and colleges with a view to accessing a broad cross-section of the target groups.

Ideas submitted for the festival will be evaluated by experts from IREX Europe and the Baltic Film and Media School who will pre-select entries in a number of categories. The choice of category will depend on the results of the research phase but they are likely to include: sequential drama, debate-shows, documentaries, online games and journalism investigations. Short-listed entrants will then be invited to attend a pitching session aimed at "selling" the idea to a panel comprising members of the Russian-language or other minority communities who are prominent in the Baltic film and media sphere. The pitching sessions will be filmed and disseminated on social media. Audiences will be invited to vote for ideas and for individuals (as presenters, hosts, comedians etc).

7.2.2. Developing programme ideas through "content labs"

The most promising ideas will be developed in a "content lab" environment whereby the programme-makers will be given access to equipment at the Baltic Film and Media School and mentored by IREX Europe experts. The mentoring will cover areas such as technical skills, editorial values, production budgets and marketing, thereby ensuring that they are viable propositions. Members of the audience will be invited to attend specific "content lab" sessions during which they will be invited to give their feedback. These groups will include representatives from the older generation (e.g. the parents of young hopefuls) and will be moderated by IREX Europe experts. The "content labs" will demonstrate the wealth of creativity within the Russian-speaking population and will introduce participants to key European narratives, including inclusive problem-solving, critical thinking, freedom of expression and community cohesion. They will also give young Russians in the region a sense of ownership for the outputs and a greater awareness of the role public service media can play in developing social values and cultural consciousness.

7.2.3. Developing interactive games

This component of the project will focus on creating narrative games which encourage participation through social media and mobile platforms. Meduza is a leading proponent of these games (<https://meduza.io/games>) which, for the most part, embrace political themes (e.g. “Putin Bingo”, “help Putin get to his meeting with the Pope on time” and “help the Orthodox priest get to his church without succumbing to earthly pleasures”). The project will facilitate the development of satirical games which will send up certain aspects of the “Euro-Atlantic proposition” whilst making the valid point that, ultimately, the offer of a fairer, respectful and caring society is better than that of an arrogant, nationalistic regime. Themes could be directly linked to the experience of Russian-speakers in the EU: e.g. “help the whimsical Russian exile preserve his cultural identity in the face of British political correctness” or “help the oligarch’s son conceal his unseemly wealth on his first day at university”. The idea would be to explode Russian/EU stereotypes; highlight some of the frustrations experienced by Russians in the EU; and demonstrate that the perceived “tensions” exist on a political rather than an individual level.

7.2.4. Developing critical thinking and fact-checking skills

In the run-up to the festival, the project will seek to build the capacity of citizen journalists to challenge the official version of events and investigate fabricated stories. Taking its cue from the approach adopted by StopFake in Ukraine, this activity will comprise a series of four five-day workshops aimed at bloggers and social media activists. They will learn how to verify information, photographs and audiovisual reports by accessing multiple sources and by mobilising the growing community of amateur sleuths who fight running battles with Kremlin-sponsored trolls on the Internet. The training, delivered by experts from StopFake and IREX Europe (which hosted a similar initiative in April 2016), will help to build resilience and critical thinking within the Russian-speaking online community. Russian-language media will also be invited to support this process by providing a platform for key investigations. After the workshops, participants will be given the task of debunking a number of selected stories and the results of their efforts will be showcased at the festival.

7.2.5. The media festival

The concept is based on a highly successful model devised by People in Need in the Czech Republic (www.oneworld.cz). Held in three separate locations consecutively, the festival will bring together media professionals, international experts, young programme-makers and audiences from each of the Baltic States. As noted above, representatives from all minority groups will be invited to take part, thereby countering any perceptions that Russian populations require special treatment. The declared aim of the events will be to celebrate the cultural and ethnic diversity of the region, thereby demonstrating how minority groups contribute to the political, economic and social well-being of local societies.

All material created during the content labs will be screened or showcased at the festival. Screenings will be followed by panel debates on the issues raised or by creative challenges in which the general public is invited to take part. The challenges will take the form of mysteries or puzzles which participants can solve by following a “breadcrumb trail” of clues seeded on- and offline. This process will require teamwork, lateral thinking and research skills. All content – including these competitions – will be offered to Russian-language media partners for broadcast and publication. There is a strong likelihood that some of the programme ideas will be commissioned by individual or multiple outlets.

7.2.6. Boosting business models

The festival will offer Russian-language media the ability to raise their profile, improve visibility and forge closer links with local communities, including potential sponsors. The perception that these outlets are committed to giving Russian-speaking minorities a voice should help to leverage support from businesses and other associations.

Some direct consultancy will be offered to Russian-language media to help them access donor funding and to engage with ongoing processes aimed at improving independent content (e.g. the content factory). Consultants will also promote off-line revenue-generating activities, highlighting the way community interaction can build audiences, strengthen audience loyalty and solicit private business investment (the best known example of this are the offline activities of the Guardian newspaper).