1.6. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

The project comes at a time when the international community is intensifying its efforts to combat fake news and disinformation crafted by pro-Russian ideologues, cultivated by troll-farms and propagated through social media channels. The US Global Engagement Center has been allocated more than $200 million to support related efforts whilst the State Department is actively funding independent media to develop alternative narratives. Meanwhile, the Creative Content Support Fund managed by the European Endowment for Democracy offers grants to foster "plurality and creativity in the Russian-language media landscape" and the Prague-based Russian-language News Exchange facilitates cooperation between independent outlets which share common editorial values.

And yet, stakeholders entering this sector will find it hard to gain an insight into the impact of these initiatives or to access the findings of audience research. There is a sense that, despite significant investment, the collective understanding of what makes Russian-speaking audiences tick and how to engage with them has not grown substantially. On one level, this can be ascribed to limited coordination and information-sharing between international agencies working in this field. However, it is also true to say that old solutions are being used to address new problems whilst staid approaches are failing to strike an emotional chord with Russian-speaking audiences. Consequently programming aimed at countering Russian propaganda continues to be outmanoeuvred by larger-than-life bombastic content which is not constrained by ethical principles and which is perfectly pitched at its target audience.

The lack of innovation has, perhaps, been mirrored by a reluctance to give leadership roles to local stakeholders in these collective efforts. As frustration grows amongst Western agencies overwhelmed by the sheer scale of Russian information operations, project teams are looking for quick wins which prove core assumptions. However, the ongoing struggle to counter Russian propaganda is unquestionably a long game and one which needs to be firmly rooted in local institutions. Sustainable, lasting solutions should be built on replicable models which can be adopted by a range of local actors. The consortium's recommendations for improvements to the Terms of Reference, therefore, comprise:

Putting local partners and networks at the centre of activities

The project will take a measured and modulated approach which avoids taking vital funding away from local organisations by deploying a vast array of international personnel who are not always conversant with the challenges on the ground. It will support initiatives with proven track record and will endeavour to work with organisations which have a clear idea of their audiences and their developmental goals. These beneficiaries value the contribution of experts who bring new experience and ideas into the local information space but they should have greater freedom to decide what expertise is required and how it is deployed. Currently, many feel that these decisions are being made for them.

Building sustainability into programmes from the outset

Whilst acknowledging the importance of organisational audits and sustainability targets, the project partners also recognise that the independent sector has been deliberately disadvantaged in all three countries and that their ability to generate sufficient revenue to cover their operating costs remains limited. Examples of initiatives which have succeeded in dramatically boosting income are few and far between.

There is value, however, in unlocking the potential of individual programmes and initiatives to become self-sustaining and to create important multiplier effects for the industry as a whole. This will be a key aspect of the project, particularly on a hyperlocal level where innovative approaches have a good chance of attracting support from local businesses and institutions. Crucially, it is important to be realistic about what can be achieved in terms of sustainability and to avoid creating a set of expectations which encourages local players to overpromise and under-deliver.

Furthermore, the project will take a holistic approach to developing research and insight which can provide the rationale for content-related initiatives, incorporating an iteration of product-testing and peer review in order to provide reassurances of long-term sustainability before committing resources to ambitious production plans. This approach will ensure value for money and reduce the risk of investing in products which later fail to meet initial expectations.

Repackaging content to reach new audiences

As stated in the handbook "Key Steps for Countering Russian Propaganda" by Political Capital (2017), Russian propaganda relies heavily on clickbait – attention-grabbing headlines, images or infographics which "reassure pre-existing beliefs" and are rapidly shared across multiple platforms. This content uses humour, satire, parody and hyperbole to engage readers, then keep them "hooked and distracted". Long-form content – despite its ability to present a considered, balance picture – risks getting lost amid a maelstrom of half-truths and sound-bites.

The repacking and redistribution of existing content is, therefore, essential to winning new audiences and market share for independent media. This content needs to reach young people on the platforms they frequent and speak to them using the tone and style which are integral to their culture. Interactive approaches are vital to achieving viral resonance across multiple platforms. These efforts will be informed by improved audience research and monitoring which provides better insight into consumption trends and the shifting focus of propagandistic messaging.

Improving coordination and information-sharing

The consortium recognises that inter-agency competition is a key spoiler for information-sharing and one that continues to undermine coordination efforts in regions of the world where there is a high level of concurrent activity (e.g. the Middle East). There is mileage, therefore, in continuing to promote the approach adopted by the EED's 2015 feasibility study whereby donors were encouraged to take responsibility for disparate components of an overarching strategy. This strategy, however, needs to be articulated and redefined to reflect changes in the operating environment and the programme will play a role in this. A potential model for this exchange is UkraineWorld (http://ukraineworld.org) which engages key Ukrainian and international experts in a frank discussion of related issues as well as prospects for improved integration with the EU. UkraineWorld functions as a communication network, channelling a daily exchange of information and dialogue through a dedicated Google group.

Avoiding a post-factum approach

The international community finds itself playing catch-up in its efforts to counter Russian propaganda. The Kremlin's tactics and procedures are already well-developed, extremely well-funded and enjoy considerable traction. Western donors run the risk of being seen to provide too little, too late and – at worst – feeding the Kremlin's propaganda machine by delivering an inadequate response. The project will avoid taking a post-factum approach which allows pro-Russian forces to set the agenda for independent media outlets. Instead it will focus on proactive content production which responds to clearly articulated needs. These needs will be identified on a rolling basis through research and monitoring which combines grass-roots approaches with freely available technology. By capturing data on social media trends, for example, the project's programming efforts will be better placed to steal the march on Russian propagandists.

Targeting content at specific demographic groups

The project will look to support programming initiatives which respond to the perceived needs of key demographic groups, particularly those which are vulnerable to Russian propaganda. One example might be Optmart SRL, a TV magazine show which tackles the problems faced by women in Moldova (e.g. discrimination, stereotyping and economic disenfranchisement). Further support for this programme could help to dramatically expand its audience by launching a sustained social media strategy and organising outreach activities in the regions. Another example is Agro Gakvetilebi, a talk-show on Georgia's TOK TV which helps farmers to better understand the EU market and seek new opportunities. This initiative reflects the urgent need to provide high-quality programming to ethnic minorities who are particularly vulnerable to Russian propaganda because they do not speak Georgian and are marginalised by the wider population.

Empowering local media to access funding directly

Whilst the programme includes mechanisms for direct support to media outlets, experience shows that this support tends to be monopolised by a small minority of players who have the in-house expertise to make credible applications for funding. This imbalance means that deserving local projects are often underserved by sub-granting programmes. This situation will be improved by providing greater support to potential grantees in developing project proposals and engaging with the international community. The issue of language is key here: a facility will be in place for accepting applications in local languages and processing submissions in a compressed timeframe.

Building on existing networks where they exist

There has been significant focus across the media development world on creating new networks rather than working through existing ones. The approach adopted by the Albany-led consortium will use the convening power of networks such as the EBU and EPRA whilst building on the momentum that they have already accrued. This approach will be extended to use professional associations and networks as channels for content and programmes developed by the project. The media literacy campaigns, for example, will require support from multiple stakeholders in order to realise their true potential and reach a broad stakeholder base.

Strengthening ties with European institutions

The project will complement and underpin the international community's goal of forging closer links between local institutions and their EU counterparts in an effort to build resilience to Russia's soft power initiatives. In particular, the EBU will give public service broadcasters access to experience from across the region, empowering beneficiaries to choose the models and approaches which are most relevant to their situation. The Georgian public broadcaster, for example, has chosen YLE in Finland as its role model for governance, funding and programming issues.

Working in close collaboration with state actors

Programmes focusing on supporting independent media have a tendency to view the institutions of state as inhibitors rather than as essential stakeholders. Whilst it is true that, in the three target countries, governments have rarely shown themselves to be champions of free speech, independent media can only function effectively if it engages with government and vice versa. The programme will, therefore, include mechanisms for improving this engagement, in particular by actively seeking collaboration with the regulators and, through the EBU, by feeding into government-level discussions about the future of public service broadcasting.