

1.4 Recommendations for Improvement

The Consortium believes that there are a wide range of potential interventions which would make a timely, relevant and effective contribution to the overall objective of this programme in terms of bringing balance and plurality to the media space in Eastern Partnership countries. We believe that the Terms of Reference are sufficiently broad to allow scope for most of these activities to be delivered. We have outlined a number of areas where we would feel the Consortium can add value to the Terms of Reference at no additional cost.

Firstly, we would propose integrating a stronger focus within the proposed work with media outlets on targeting audiences in breakaway regions and areas at risk of high conflict sensitivity. To this end:

- Aktis Strategy will work closely with up to 2-3 independent outlets in proximity of non-government-controlled areas of Donbas (NGCA) in Ukraine, Transnistria in Moldova and Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia, and other areas at risk of high conflict sensitivity. The Consortium has identified that this is an important opportunity to bring plurality of media options at community level in areas which are dominated by Russian, separatist and oligarch-controlled media. This work will need to be highly context specific and will include training on operating in high risk environments, with particular focus on ensuring health and security of staff and disseminating content in a conflict sensitive manner. Training will also build capacities to surpass digital restrictions and electronic warfare tactics. These are some of the highest risk areas to work in the target countries, but also those with the least media plurality and the highest vulnerability to misinformation and propaganda. Thus, reaching out to these hard-to-reach audiences is critical to achieving the project's objectives.
- BBC Media Action believes that for an investment of this size from CSSF it would be appropriate to include some focus on journalism education, as a long-term investment in the sector. Again, there is a cost implicit in this work and as such we are at present only proposing one intervention, which would be to establish a journalism training centre in Gagauzia. In the Gagauzia and Taraclia, autonomous region with a high consumption rate of Russian media, there are six TV companies, four radio stations, six newspapers and five informative web portals. However, these outlets are understaffed and there is a fundamental lack of professional journalistic skills and personnel. Comrat State University ceased to deliver journalism courses many years ago and the training opportunities for the few journalists in the area are next to non-existent. The result is a media environment characterised by poor quality journalistic outputs that do not address the needs or interests of the population in the region. We propose to address these issues by working with a local media NGO, Media birlii – Uniunea Media, to establish a training centre oriented to practical skills development. We would seek to foster close ties for the centre to Comrat State University. The centre would provide a diverse programme of workshops, placements and assignments with a focus on practical skills and collaboration and learning from other practicing, experienced journalists. As part of the project we would organise trainings and discussions on relevant topics with the participation of editors of major outlets and representatives of non-governmental organisations from Moldova, as well as the BBC thus creating a more pluralistic media environment, less focused on the agendas of politicians and oligarchs in this region. Over the longer-term, the sustainability of this initiative will be underpinned by working on the centre being affiliated to Comrat State University.

Secondly, we propose working with UA:PBC to more directly counter mis/disinformation. We believe this is very much within the spirit of the Terms of Reference but the co-production strand does not specifically mention the types of programming which media partners would be expected to produce. BBC Media Action anticipate that much of the co-production will focus on debate and discussion style programming, which plays a critical role in convening dialogue that bridges divides in fractured societies, enabling constructive exchange between different groups and dispelling rumours. However, the Consortium would be interested to explore programmes or digital content which could help to more

directly counter disinformation by exploring the facts on key stories being discussed across society, debunking myths and improving the audience's resilience to disinformation. BBC Media Action would draw from the wider BBC's experience in delivering its [Reality Check](#) service dedicated to examining the facts and claims behind a news story to determine whether or not it is true. The development of a similar format tailored to the Ukrainian context will offer UA:PBC a straightforward opportunity to challenge and debunk deliberately misleading and false stories masquerading as real news.

Thirdly, BBC Media Action will, working with national experts, produce a policy analysis of the media across these countries and foster a policy debate around that analysis. BBC Media Action has a long track record of producing high quality and influential policy analysis on the role of the media in relation to politics, democracy and society with a particular focus on generating insight around the political economy of the media (ownership, regulatory and other structures that impact on media behaviour). Policy briefings have been published on settings as diverse as Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, Nepal, Pakistan, the countries experiencing Arab Uprisings and (forthcoming) in the Baltics. Policy Briefings and allied activities have often influenced and sometimes formed the basis of new strategic support efforts for media within these countries and sometimes shifted government policy. The domestic policy environments for each of these countries is diverse, complex and unpredictable and even when legal and regulatory shifts are possible, huge challenges exist in implementation and sustaining positive change. A policy component of this project will focus on documenting and understanding the political economy of the media across these three countries, identifying opportunities and recommendations for meaningful positive policy change, and engagement with national and international actors to inform how the domestic policy environment and strategic support for independent media can be improved.

Fourthly we would propose the establishment in Ukraine of an independent temporary news platform by Thomson Reuters Foundation, timed for the run up to the 2019 elections. A lack of in-depth, independent news coverage is particularly problematic at key political junctures such as elections, especially when vested interests seek to influence particular outcomes. At present, we are only proposing this for Ukraine, but if the approach is successful and additional limited funding are available, we could look to replicate in Georgia in 2020. This platform would publish independent and vetted news content, freely syndicated to local and national media. Staffed entirely by local editors and journalists, it would provide a vital service, and encourage fairer reporting in general. TRF has experience of establishing such platforms, including *Aswat al-Iraq* in 2004, the award-winning *Aswat Masriya*, established in 2011 in the run-up to the first free elections in Egypt, and *Myanmar Now*, established in Myanmar in 2015 in the run-up to the country's first free elections. We would measure performance of this platform by the number of stories/videos published in Russian and local languages, how widely this material was syndicated, and the estimated reach of this syndicated material.

Finally, the Consortium would also propose including activities which aim to build stronger linkages between media outlets and their audiences and communities. A key component of this is working with media outlets on improving their interest, willingness and capacity to interact with their audiences and integrate audience insight into their programming in a meaningful and ongoing way. We conceive this to be part of the core mentoring outlined in the Concept and Methodology section. However, we would seek to build on this by encouraging media partners to create more systematic opportunities to meet with key local stakeholders in their community. This could include for instance "Open Days" at a station where local authority officials, local politicians, the media and community stakeholders could meet to discuss the role of the media or raise pressing local concerns. This approach helps to cement the media as a key governance actor and convenor of inclusive discussion at the community level, which further builds trust in independent media and resilience to misinformation and propaganda.