Zinc Network has brought together a consortium with Thomson Reuters Foundation, the British Council and the Baltic Centre for Media Excellence. As a consortium, we are uniquely-placed to:

- **Deliver impact on-time and on-budget.** Zinc has a proven track record of managing consortiums to successfully deliver large and complex projects in challenging environments. Our operating model involves pre-empting problems through an open and collaborative approach with partners and clients; robust project and financial management underpinned by a very experienced Finance Director, and; flexible and adaptive management based on robust analysis and continuous M&E.

- **Help local Russian language media to not only survive but thrive** in the new Baltic media landscape by integrating our consortium's distinct and complementary strengths into a single team, offering: cutting edge digital and creative teams; online business model development; world class journalism and news experience; local media understanding and established networks. We bring a commercial approach to deliver impactful projects borne out of our experience in running successful media brand and outlets in both English and Russian, with over 1.6m followers which regularly outperform major outlets such as BBC Russian.

- **Add value to other HMG and international projects** and manage a complex stakeholder environment. Our extensive experience across the region ensures we can not only avoid duplication with existing projects; but find real opportunities to add value and generate efficiency savings. For example, this could include: cross-referring investigative journalists to the Open Information Partnership (Zinc) for training; building media campaigns around the People to People Cultural Engagement programme (British Council); and drawing on the best Russian language shows by the Content Factory to augment Public Sector Broadcasters' On-Demand services.

- **Drive evidence-based innovation.** Our approach comes out of real experience of working with key partners on the ground and conducting a robust evaluation of previous regional media development work, including '*Independent Media in the Baltic States*' (2016-18). As the main delivery partner, Zinc successfully increased the skills of media organisations and the quantity and quality of Russian language content available. However, we believe that co-financing and supporting productions is not ultimately sustainable. We therefore aim to innovate by investing not only in organisations and content, but in low-cost and flexible supply chains, and the skills to enable leaders to adapt their outlets to the changing and low-margin digital environment. We will capitalise on the emerging hub of digitally-led innovation and start-up growth in the Baltics, harnessing the strengths of the vibrant, free and creative technology industries that already exist.

- **Capitalise on our existing relationships** with Embassies and partner governments to ensure HMG and other stakeholders are aware of, consulted, involved in and supportive of this project's activities by giving them the chance to feed in and review at the right time and in the right way.

- **Use our collective expertise to embed gender and social inclusion** throughout the project, and empower local communities to champion gender equality as a core component of building resilience to disinformation.

SECTION 1 – Our Understanding of the Problem

Baltics are on the front line of a disinformation war: The Baltics remain a geopolitical priority for the Kremlin due to their proximity to Russia, membership of NATO and the EU, economic progress relative to Russia, and complicated shared history. Following the Baltic nations' successful bid for independence from its sphere of influence, Russia has sought to weaken and divide them through a combination of intimidation, diplomacy and influence activities including disinformation. The presence of large Russian minorities in two of the Baltic nations gives Russia more opportunity for attempted influence with media and disinformation activity.

Disinformation exploits a wide range of existing social divisions, not just language: Kremlin disinformation operations exploit existing social divisions to accelerate division in Baltic society. Although one of these is clearly the complex cultural, ethnic, linguistic and historical divisions between those who identify as Russian and others, Kremlin disinformation also harnesses wedge issues which reach across language and ethnicity including: fear of Muslim migration; scepticism about EU integration; LGBTQ issues, and; emigration and cultural decline. This can be evident from Baltic language Sputnik output, as well as Russian interaction with far-right groups, such as Uued Uudised and Objektiiv in Estonia.[1] On all of these topics, geography, relative income, age and religiosity tend to be equal determinants of receptiveness to Kremlin narratives as Russian identity.

The reasons consumers choose Russian media are complex and not only reducible to language or quality: Through qualitative research we found that Russian speakers' media consumption choices are determined to a large extent by: 'brand' appeal; highly specific interests in topics; a desire for and social utility in following Russia-based media outlets, and; alignment with editorial stances and cultural mores.[2] This suggests simply supporting more Russian language outlets or producing more diverse content will not necessarily give audiences a 'reason to switch'. It also suggests that, ***as editorial stance responds to audience demand, it may be difficult to closer align the editorial outlook of Russian language outlets and their national language competitors***. We therefore have to try and build a vibrant and innovative independent media sector which aligns credible ***brands, online communities of interest,*** and quality ***content*** to service highly specific audience segments.

[1] https://sputnik-news.ee; https://sputniknewslv.com/; https://sputniknews.lt; https://uueduudised.ee/; https://objektiiv.ee/
[2] "Virtual Russia in Estonia: The influence of Russian media on the Russian-speaking population living in Estonia", International Centre for Defence and Security, Estonia, 2015

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The media environment creates fragmentation rather than a clear distinction between Russophone and national language media environments, and this develops different types of vulnerability to disinformation: Through desk research and social media analysis, we have identified two distinct Russian-speaking audiences in the Baltics. 'Settlers' who tend to be monolingual, typically older generations who live in tightly-knit, trusting communities with a shared culture, history and identity. These audiences, < 30% of the Russian-speaking population, are loyal consumers of entertainment and news via a unified, Russian-influenced traditional media. Conversely, there is a growing multilingual audience of typically younger individuals more integrated into wider society. These audiences (70+%) are information 'Hunter-Gatherers', consuming news and entertainment in multiple languages and via multiple, predominantly digital channels with no unified source. The vulnerabilities to, and opportunities to counter, Russian disinformation are manifestly different for each audience. There is indeed a lack of "balance and plurality" within the Russian language media space for the 'Settler' audience which leaves them vulnerable to a single, consistent Russian-influenced narrative. However, this is not true of the 'Hunter Gatherers' audience. It is the very "plurality" of their media usage, and lack of trusted, evidence-based information sources that leaves this audience open to hostile narratives via multiple channels, such as targeted social media campaigns, echo chambers of issue-based disinformation and generalised mistrust of all 'establishment' or 'mainstream' media.[3]

A new media landscape that offers uncertainty and opportunity: The Baltics include the most digital societies in the world - from widespread online public services, to thriving creative and technology sectors. The media sector remains free, open and vibrant, with all three countries ranking higher than the UK (33rd) on the World Press Freedom Index: Estonia (11th); Latvia (24th) and Lithuania (30th). The media sector is going through profound shifts: traditional media outlets (e.g. print) are struggling to be sustainable; more outlets are opening up to serve niche markets and communities; there is a growth in citizen journalism and content production (and a correlative growth in the demand for journalism to help people sift through it), and; challenges to public trust compounded by disinformation. In this fast-paced media environment, it is hard to challenge disinformation. It can go 'under the radar', working insidiously through online communities of interest, harnessing the anonymity of the web, and taking advantage of the sheer volume of content, ideas and perspectives to undermine trust in evidence-based discourse itself.

SECTION 2 – Our Overall Strategic Approach

We believe there is a significant opportunity in the Baltics to help build a media market that responds to changing patterns in the production, distribution and consumption of media, and to build genuine resilience to disinformation across all language groups. Our objectives are to:

- Better equip quality outlets, journalists and content producers to grow sustainably in the new media market
- Provide audiences vulnerable to disinformation with quality, evidence-based alternatives from the right brands, in the right formats and on the right platforms
- Increase the resilience, adaptivity and innovation of the media sector as a whole, in particular the Russian language elements
- Reduce the ability of disinformation actors to exploit social division and wedge issues by building communities of interest from across social divides around particular brands, personalities and platforms

There are 5 elements to our strategic approach, which have informed the development of our activities:

(1) Audience-specific approach: For the 'settler' audience**,** there is an opportunity to capitalise on their close-knit community ties by tapping into the high levels of trust they have in locally-shared content, by building the capacity of hyper-local outlets to produce news content they trust and that resonates. Rather than compete with high-quality Russian entertainment programming, we seek to '**de-couple**' where they get their entertainment from, which is likely to remain Russia-based media and TV, and where they get their news from, by supporting locally-trusted news sources to harness their social networks. Conversely, for Hunter Gatherers, we instead need to bring together the global and diverse sources they use for content and entertainment and **connect** them with credible news information by capacity-building the champions and outlets capable of bridging that divide, and that reach this audience.

(2) Building networks and collaborations: Talent and outlets exist, but **collaboration** is key to thriving in the new media landscape. This could include: sharing distribution channels (e.g. BBC and ITV's joint On-Demand initiative); finding new ways of developing content by harnessing young digital talent (e.g. the BBC 3 'crowdsourcing creativity' approach); and creating issue specific brands that work across multiple media and platforms, to enable multiple outlets to capture audience focus on specific issues. Our approach is to build networks and facilitate collaboration, enabling media outlets to: i) share costs around marketing, technology or production; ii) cross-pollinate and benefit from each other's audiences (i.e. media competition is not a zero-sum game as audiences use multiple outlets and brands for different things); iii) find innovative ways to stay at the forefront of the sector (e.g. Public Sector Broadcaster partnerships with up-and-coming influencers), and; iv) integrate skills development to ensure a best-in-class offer.

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[3] September 2014, Open Estonia Foundation, https://oef.org.ee/fileadmin/user_upload/Current_events_and_different_sources_of_information_CORRECT.pdf'; Role of Russian Media in the Baltics and Moldova; BBG/Gallup Poll 2016; https://www.bbg.gov/wp-content/media/2016/02/BBG-Gallup-Russian-Media-pg2-02-04-164.pdf

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(3) A talent-focused, people-first approach enabling journalists to adapt to changing conditions: The media sector in the Baltics reflects global trends by evolving rapidly, with increasing numbers of creative journalists, personalities and influencers finding innovative ways to reach and grow their audience. To capitalise on this, our strategy is less about '*outlets, news and content*' and more about '*people, leadership and talent*'. We will bring together both traditional *and* new media outlets with exciting, up-and-coming individuals. For Public Sector Broadcasters and media organisations, this is about leadership: equipping editors and decision-makers with the skills, confidence and networks to be creative and innovative in the way they create, publish and market their content.

(4) A focus on resilient supply chains: Within a rapidly evolving media environment, outlets will invariably develop, grow and fail. New business models are emerging all the time, adapting to changing flows of advertising revenue. We need to support media entrepreneurs and establish outlets able to successfully adapt to these changing conditions. We'll do this by ensuring they have access to products and services to reduce costs, produce cutting-edge content and follow an increasingly nomadic audience. We will focus on supply chains in areas such as: specialist provision of white-label Content Management Systems for digital outlets; automated fact-checking services, and; low-cost semi-automated social video production. As leaders in technology and creative industries, some of this already exists in the Baltics. Our approach is about better connecting the media sector with the specialist support available.

(5) An aspirational global approach to reflect the dynamism of the region and tastes of audiences: The Baltics are a digitally-advanced, business-friendly and outward-looking environment. Even for our identified 'Settler' audience, it is not that they have a local perspective on current affairs, but rather a global perspective that is shaped almost exclusively by Russia. We are therefore designing a *globalised approach for a globalised media sector and audience*.

SECTION 3 – Our Methodology

We are proposing six strands of activity to support Public Sector Broadcasters, editorially independent private media organisations, hyper-local outlets and journalists to build their audience share and increase resilience to hostile Kremlin messaging. We will work closely with the FCO during the inception phase to further refine and plan these activities to ensure they fully address the Target Audience Analysis and FCO's objectives and will adapt these activities to the differing environments in each of the three countries.

Activity - 1 Hyper-Local Outlet Development

Rationale: Rather than compete with high-quality, high-production value Russian TV entertainment programming loyally-consumed by this audience over many years, we want to capitalise on the high levels of trust within the 'settler' audience segment to 'de-couple' their entertainment and their news sources. Our approach is informed by best-practice of reaching older generations of Russian-speakers by using a "*wider circle of communicators on a very local level to spread messages*".[4]

During the inception phase, we will identify three hyper-local radio, social and digital outlets in each country (ensuring that at least one outlet represents marginalised voices e.g. LGBT, women or PwD[5]). We will conduct needs and scoping assessments to ensure they have potential for sustainable growth. We will balance growth potential with the need to ensure funding is not diluted too widely across multiple outlets. The central foundation of this strand will be an intensive accelerator model with training sprints, tech builds, grant mechanisms and ongoing mentoring. Target media could include local community pages on social media platforms popular among older demographics such as vk.com/minunarva and ok.ru/narvanews, local news websites, and digital and analogue FM radio stations. We will work with them to build cost sharing networks and pool resources and content, helping them create digital strategies which can leverage the sharing habits and online networks of our settle audiences.

Added Value: To support long-term commercial viability, we want to create a network of hyper-local outlets, helping them to pool resources and share news across multiple formats including digital and analogue radio news bulletins, podcasts, social media and websites. To facilitate this, we will invest in a Content Management System (CMS) to enable outlets to share resources, branding, advertising and content assets. This is an evidence-based approach to creating commercially-sustainable local media through shared resourcing, drawing on best-practice examples such as: ♦ News Templ: a news site constructor enabling Ukrainian media outlets to create websites using seven editable templates themes and fourteen compatible plugins ♦ The Village: a local media outlet in Russia which has introduced a franchise model covering multiple regional cities as well Kyiv and Minsk ♦ and *Setka*: which has used a white-label IP platform for dissemination not only locally but across wider Eastern Partnership countries.

Activity 2 – Building aspirational Russian language media personalities

Rationale: Audiences have strong brand allegiances to individuals. We will build the reach and influence of exciting Russian-speaking journalists and media personalities, including émigré and exile journalists from Russia who have followings amongst different sections of the Russophone community. By then connecting and placing their articles on international and regional quality news sites, we can cross pollinate audiences and introduce them to brands which deliver quality evidence-based journalism. During the inception phase, we will conduct a scoping exercise to identify a minimum of 15 journalists (6 in both Estonia and Latvia, 3 in Lithuania). We will ensure representation from marginalised voices in the Baltic Russian-language media space, including women and LGBTQ champions, to help

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[4] The Prague Manual: '*Lessons Learned from Countering Kremlin's Hostile Subversive Operations in Central and Eastern Europe*', pgs. 21 and 65.

[5] Persons with Disability

move marginalised voices into the mainstream (*Output 10*). We will conduct an audience and needs assessment to inform support across two areas: **1. Brand and audience development**: personal brand strategy informed by individual target audience analysis, support development of a sustainable business model, e.g. financial planning, contract negotiation etc. (*Output 1*); building growth strategies for their chosen social media platform, e.g. blogs, twitter handles or FB pages, and; digital marketing and campaign training. We will also provide core funding (*Output 6*) through grants of up to £1,000 per individual for content production. **2. Placement of stories and media appearances:** We will help journalists to develop, pitch and place articles with national and international media outlets; and provide opportunities to pitch for regular slots with media outlets supported via our other activities (e.g. PSBs (Activity 3) and private sector outlets (Activity 4)).

> ***Added Value:*** We will also refer investigative journalists to our Open Information Partnership (OIP) to ensure we complements, rather than duplicate, existing programmes.

Activity 3 – Public Sector Broadcasters (PSBs)

Rationale: It is hard for PSBs to capture Russian language audiences, given the perception they are targeting Russian speakers with 'propaganda'. ETV+, the Estonian PSB TV channel for Russian speakers, only has a 1.1% share of the daily audience. While Russian TV channels such as PBK and RTR are the "*main information source*" for 72% of Russian speakers in the country.[6] In order to grow this audience, we need to equip PSBs to thrive in the new media landscape by connecting them with the platforms, brands and influencers this audience already follows. To help PSBs compete within this contested Russian language media space, we are proposing three strands of activity:

(1) Leadership capacity-building and regulatory exchanges: We will deliver a tailored package of leadership capacity-building (*Output 1*) for PSBs which will focus on exploring the legal, financial and reputational implications of building language specific channels vs integrated service offers. Across a programme of exchanges, executives from PSBs will engage with regulators, directors and commissioners from other broadcasters such as the BBC and Deutsche Welle, who are dealing with the challenge of servicing multi-linguistic audiences as well as other minorities, in nuanced ways (*Output 3*). We will also develop a Media Sector Editor Toolkit that builds on Thomson Reuters Foundation's expertise in embedding ethical journalism and journalistic standards, including conflict and gender sensitivity, at a strategic, decision-maker level (e.g. encouraging inclusivity of minority language groups) (*Output 9*).

(2) Content acquisition and creation: First, we will provide pro-bono support to the PSBs from distribution agencies to help them scope out the opportunity in the market. We will also support them to attend key distribution fairs and conferences to foster opportunities for content acquisition and exchange. Finally, we will help PSBs to work with influencers and independent production companies to develop in-house content labs to generate 'social-first' content within thematic verticals (e.g. women; local business; travel; sports; music; and social affairs). This will be achieved through a content lab model, based around BBC 3's comedy lab and C4's young talent programme, whereby we will work with commissioners to identify young Russian speaking talent in the online influencer, stand-up comedy and social commentary spaces. They will be supported to develop 3 content ideas and pilots each, which will then go live on the PSB's social channels and OD service to test audience responses and viability. This model enables the PSB to reduce the cost of development and cross-pollinate the influencers' audiences to their own channels, whilst offering those influencers the chance to build revenue and profile. It is also an opportunity to increase the visibility of minority groups (often with more niche audiences), including women, LGBTQ and people with disabilities, within mainstream media.

(3) Innovative On Demand Service: Although PSBs have On Demand (OD) services, these have little reach and success with Russian speaking audiences as they have limited content and no brand appeal. Instead, PSBs should consider partnering with other existing OD services, or building issue specific verticals with existing media brands that have a significant following amongst Russia speakers, e.g. an OD vertical dedicated to tech with Wired. This will enable them to aggregate the best content from multiple sources, benefit from other content produced by FCO funded projects such as the content factory, and reach new audiences with more niche interests. Following consultation with PSBs, we will facilitate a partnership with existing OD services in the region with significant Russian language audiences and content including *Megogo* (250+ TV channels, 30 interactive channels, 45,000 TV shows and 20,000 news programmes) and *HelioTV* (100+ TV channels and 5,000+ films and series).

Activity 4 – Media Market Accelerator

Rationale: There are significant opportunities to capitalise on digital innovation and infrastructure support for business growth across the Baltic States. Indeed, not only are the Baltics considered to be some of the world's most advanced digital societies (e.g. 99% of Estonia's public services are available online, including their pioneering e-residency programme[7]), but they are also creating favourable regulatory environments to help start-ups flourish (e.g. all three States rank in the top 20 in the '*Ease of Doing Business*' Index[8]). Within this environment, our Media Accelerator will not only support multi-lingual, independent private sector media outlets but also the complementary organisations in their supply chain which help improve their media outputs for example: CMS providers; fact checking services, and;

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[6]September 2014, Open Estonia Foundation,
https://oef.org.ee/fileadmin/user_upload/Current_events_and_different_sources_of_information_CORRECT.pdf'; Role of Russian Media in the Baltics and Moldova;
[7] CNBC: '*How Estonia became one of the world's most advanced digital societies*', (8th February 2019).
[8] World Bank Group: 'Ease of Doing Business' Index 2019 – Lithuania 14th, Estonia 16th and Latvia 19th.

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automated social video production software. By integrating private sector media outlets and these organisations in the same accelerator, we can create mutually reinforcing ecosystems which reduce costs for media brands and generate revenue for suppliers, whilst helping to grow audience share (*Output 2*).

Our approach will include **Training:** We will run three five-day 'training sprints' of tailored capacity-building activity covering: business model development (biannual); technical skills development (biannual); content creation (quarterly); and conflict and gender sensitivity (biannual). **Tools:** We will provide and train local media in digital and content capacity building tools including: *Raw Shorts* (video production); *Animaker* (infographics); *Spike* and *Newswhip* (social media monitoring); *Podbean* (podcast creation and hosting) and First Draft's *Cross Check* (online verification collaboration). **Digital growth and search optimisation:** We will increase search ranking and visibility of hyper-local media outlets by teaching them how to optimise organic Search Engine Optimisation as well as paid search activity for priority phrases to provide alternative information sources to RT.com for Russian speaking audiences searching for 'news in Russian'.[9] **Grants:** We will provide flexible core support to media outlets and suppliers through core funding grants of up to £20,000 per outlet for website development; and up to £10,000 per outlet for content production or product development. We will ensure a minimum amount of gender and social inclusion content is represented amongst the successful grants as a whole. **Mentoring:** We will provide ongoing mentoring to help outlets to embed learning from the training sprints. This will be tailored to individual needs (e.g. female journalists may need more support accessing personal protection).

> **Added Value:** Our approach will draw on ZINCs proven track record of delivering successful Media Accelerators in the Baltics (*see Q1.2.2*); and wider best-practice such as *Genesis*, Ukraine's largest IT-investor who produce digital solutions for scalable media products (e.g. AmoMedia – one of the largest publishers of meaningful and engaging content for women in 15 countries in four languages).

Activity 5 – Building Resilience

The recent persecution of Ivan Golunov, the freelance investigative journalist working for the new Latvia-based website *Meduza*, illustrates how journalists still face threats of trolling and intimidation when attempting to expose or counter Russian disinformation. Our activity will focus on three key areas:

Counselling and mental health support: We will create a counselling and support service for leaders and journalists and connect them with prominent independent media players who have survived sustained attacks to provide networks of support and mentoring. This will include tailored support for women, provided by women. ♦ Specialist Advisors: we will set-up a pool of specialists to give support to journalists in relation to legal training and advocacy, personal safety and upskilling training focused around gender issues, diversity and conflict sensitivity (*Output 4*). ♦ Cyber Security: our experts will run an annual Cyber Security Event in each country to help media outlets: understand cyber security risk audits; create action plans to address weakness and training, and; receive social media cyber security best-practice advice to protect digital and mobile-focused media outlets across multiple platforms.

Activity 6 – Critical Thinking Campaign

Rationale: Our research has highlighted the success of Russian State-backed media in exploiting current affairs and historical events to increase social divisions and polarise local communities. For example, after monitoring 19 Russian media websites, Latvia's Constitution Protection Bureau found that 63%[10] of publications were generally negative toward Latvia. In Estonia, a proposed removal of a Soviet monument was covered by mainstream national media, but Russian State-backed publications received 320% more interactions on average (found in our own primary research).

Our consortium will co-design a cross-network, digital and offline campaign to encourage public dialogue and improve critical thinking (*Output 11*). A number of anniversaries of significant landmark events in the history of the Baltics fall within the contract period which could act as hooks, including: diplomatic recognition (2020) and the 30-year anniversaries of post-Soviet Union independence (2020).

Our offline approach will be locally-driven, building on activities and opportunities that are already taking place across the region, such as the Latvia Democracy Festival. We will look to involve independent media organisations, influencers, CSOs, media outlets, schools and academic institutions (British Council). By amplifying and enhancing pre-planned and established events, we will ensure maximum participation from peoples with different backgrounds. In an already populated media activity environment, the establishment of prescribed events risks low participation from a cross-section of the community which could deepen divisions. This offline strand will be supported by a campaign resource hub with interactive film content to bring the issues to life, educational curriculum resources, media materials, sharable content and downloadable branded assets.

> **Added Value:** Working with the BC Peer to Peer programme we will leverage the FCO's significant investment in the ground activities and connect them up with our media work to increase their reach and impact using these key events as common hooks for the campaign.

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[9] Our analysis shows 5,500-9,500 Russian language searches for 'Russia news' or related terms per month in each of the three Baltic States.

[10] https://bnn-news.com/cpb-russia-s-propaganda-media-not-trying-to-affect-13th-saeima-election-results-199842

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