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Countering Russian Propaganda While Providing Local-Language Services in the V4

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Since 2011, Russia has launched a propaganda war in the politically and economically allied Visegrád (V4) countries (Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, and Hungary), creating a false moral binary between the morally degenerate West and responsible protector Russia to gain strategic influence in the V4. Russian online, print, and television outlets fabricate photos and sources and rely on alternative Western “experts” to propagate their messages. Kremlin-funded networks spend \$1.4 billion annually on propaganda.¹ RT alone spends \$300 million a year and has 700 million cable subscribers, comprising about 10% of the entire world population.²

Bolstered by the approximately 270 Russian and local language propaganda websites in the V4³ and hundreds of Kremlin-paid internet trolls, populist political parties are gaining political influence in the region and are reshaping the narrative on Russia.⁴ Antiestablishment leaders like Czech President Miloš Zeman, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, and Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico support closer ties with Russia and oppose EU sanctions on their eastern neighbor.

V4 countries and their allies have responded but are being outmatched by Russia both financially and strategically in its propaganda war. Since 2014, the State Department, USAID, and the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) spent \$100 million for Russian independent media but were dwarfed by Russia’s \$400 million in propaganda spending.⁵ The EU External Action Service hired eight employees to create bilingual digests that collect and explain propaganda, but this is the only EU body devoted solely to countering Russian “fake news.”⁶ The Czech government created a twenty-member task force to educate officials and correct misleading reports, but other V4 countries have yet to follow suit.⁷

Because V4 citizens have little trust in their governments and Russia has a formidable campaign, civil society must be more prominent and the V4 strategically prioritized.⁸ The second criterion is elucidated by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing on Russian Violations of Treaties, Borders, and Human Rights last summer. While Secretary Victoria Nuland rightly focused on Russia’s propaganda spending, she may have overemphasized creating Russian language programming for the Baltics, Russia, and Ukraine. Nothing was said about countering the Kremlin’s local-language propaganda in V4 countries, which have a smaller proportion of Russian speakers and are also a vital part of Europe as EU and NATO members.⁹

My proposed program would partner the State Department and the Visegrád Fund, a V4 organization that already has the legal authority, procedural mechanisms, and political support to disburse grants for nongovernmental institutions in

the region. Every year, the Fund gives \$42,000 Strategic Grants for 1—3 year projects to organizations operating in all V4 countries and addressing Strategic Grants priorities.¹⁰ Under my policy, the State Department would contribute \$2 million over a four-year period towards the existing Strategic Grants fund called Democratic Values and the Media.

The Visegrád Fund explicitly lays out the mission of grant winners in the Democratic Values and the Media category as “the advancement of democratic values, human rights, and civil liberties.” About half of the objectives listed in this grant category are related to fact-checking, public education, and local-language investigative reporting. The listed target groups for funding in this category are consistent with the types of grassroots organizations that are trusted and typically engender sustainable local change, including young researchers and students, small- and medium-sized enterprises, and underrepresented scientists.¹¹

Ten \$50,000 grants would be added to the category annually by the United States for the four-year trial period. Successful recipients would be able to re-apply if they demonstrated significant social reach in the V4. State Department embassies in V4 countries and Visegrád Fund staff would be able to tweak the existing criteria if needed and judge entries together (for example, transparency criteria would be added to ensure that the methodology of winners can be vetted and corroborated by independent observers). Future grant winners could, for example, include a research center that analyzes the influence of Russian propaganda on Hungary’s political parties, or a Polish think tank that creates an accessible ranking system for Russian media outlets.

The Visegrád Fund has the infrastructure to handle short-term, medium-sized grants like the one I proposed and already has an established relationship with many successful local NGOs. The fund has an \$8 million overall annual budget with equal contributions from each V4 country and accepts foreign government donations but has only been funded by democracies without human rights violations.¹² The Visegrád Fund is also transparent, with publicly available budget forms, selection guidelines and criteria, and a list of past winners and their projects on its website. Because of these factors, the Visegrád Fund would probably be a low-risk asset from a US investment perspective.

My policy would supplement current US government efforts in an overlooked area by re-gearing an existing V4 program to be bilateral and more explicitly geared toward the twenty-two million Central Europeans who do not speak Russian. It would bolster funding for local language anti-propaganda programs in the region and avoid the distrust often associated with top-down campaigns. Traditional government initiatives have often fizzled out due to the fact that the region’s citizens strongly associate their governments with corruption, and for good reason: all four V4 countries were included in the World Economic Forum’s 2016 list of the eleven most corrupt OECD countries.¹³ As one of the only institutions in the region with a

good track record, mission, and transparency, the Visegrád Fund is an ideal home for US government investment.

The US State Department has allocated funding to NGOs in Europe in the past, including \$500,000 for an investigative journalism training program spanning the Baltic States.¹⁴ My program would be the first to involve all of the V4 countries in a grant program focused specifically on countering Russian propaganda in the region while providing local-language services. This program would be a relatively cost-efficient way to reach sixty-three million people in a region that has been historically important for European and worldwide stability.

There are a number of relatively easy ways to measure the metrics of successful grant applicants. The Visegrád Fund website regularly audits winners and has publicly enumerated financial criteria for grantees to meet. In addition, winners' performance can be measured through the final required report at the end of the four-year term. When assessing the efficacy of these initiatives, it is important to look beyond likes, comments, and shares. Because of the sheer volume of fake news flooding the internet monitors of V4 citizens, efficacy must be at least partially measured by numbers of stories debunked and originally investigated. Public polling on the West's role in Euromaidan and other Russian conspiracy theories is another way to naturally measure whether people are being properly informed about what is going on in their countries.

One of the main implementation challenges is public opinion on American engagement in foreign countries. There is currently domestic opposition to increasing US foreign aid stemming from confusion about the portion of the US budget going to foreign aid. A Kaiser Foundation 2014 poll found that 5% of Americans correctly estimated that the US budget devotes less than 1% to foreign aid; the typical respondent thought the figure was 26%. Once Americans are educated on this issue, the proportion of respondents who think the United States overspends on foreign aid halves from 56% to 28%, showing that legislative and executive branch leadership can correct public misperceptions to a large extent.¹⁵

The United States is also at a political crossroads about its foreign policy priorities and will decide its 2018 fiscal year budget for the State Department and USAID in September. Although most Congressmen and Senators on both sides of the aisle vehemently oppose the proposed 32% cut to these agencies, funding is likely to remain flat, or slightly decrease, in every region except eastern Asia.¹⁶ Keeping in line with the fiscal and strategic streamlining philosophy the Trump administration seems to be operating under, my policy proposal would reach out to an underserved population and yield a high return on investment in the short term and potentially prevent a major Russian propaganda problem from ballooning in the long term.

V4 countries are also in an identity crisis, neither trusting Russia nor their own demo-

cratic institutions.¹⁷ The majority of V4 citizens view Russia negatively, believe their countries are somewhere between the West and East geopolitically, and have a neutral view on NATO membership, with some notable exceptions.¹⁸ The majority of Czechs and Slovaks disapprove of the United States' role in Europe and think the United States uses NATO to control smaller countries like themselves.¹⁹ In the outlier country, Poland, strong majorities approve of NATO and the United States' role in Europe; the country can help guide its counterparts towards a new identity during a time of populist turbulence on the continent.²⁰

By providing needed funding to civil societies with limited red tape and shortened time lags, V4 governments will incentivize innovation that will improve the public welfare of some of the United States' staunchest allies. As a region that is suffering from brain drain stemming from burdensome statutes and rent-seeking governments, the V4 can begin to reverse the tide of talented young people leaving to the United Kingdom and the United States with a new message of serving the common good in the nonprofit and academic sectors.²¹

Perhaps most importantly, the United States can improve its diminished image in the region with a relatively unobtrusive and transparent display of soft power, which overcomes its negative legacy of Middle Eastern military action in the 2000s and ill-timed withdrawal from Central and Eastern Europe after the Cold War. As the country turns towards eradicating the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and possibly increases military activity in Afghanistan and other countries, it stands to benefit from the continued personnel support of these Central and Eastern European countries.

As Central and Eastern Europe remains the key bridge between the West and Russia, it is important for the United States to communicate that the V4 and its neighbor countries are a priority, especially given recent unchecked Russian military interference near the Baltic States and in Georgia, Ukraine, and the Crimea. If successful, this pilot program can be the precedent for other government-funded organic civil society initiatives in former Soviet countries that have been more beleaguered by Russia and unleash real transformational change in the region.

¹ Kenneth R. Weinstein, "Testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, November 17, 2015," accessed August 30, 2017, www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/111715_Weinstein_Testimony.pdf.

² Simon Shuster, "Inside Putin's On-Air Machine," *Time*, March 5, 2015, accessed August 31, 2017, <http://time.com/rt-putin>.

³ This sum is the average of the twenty Russian propaganda websites in Poland and the 240–260 sites in the other V4 countries. "Russian Propaganda Entering Mainstream News: Disinformation Experts," Radio Poland, November 18, 2016, accessed August 30, 2017, www.thenews.pl/1/10/Artykul/280476,Russian-propaganda-entering-mainstream-news-disinformation-experts; Georgi Gotev, "Commission: Russian Propaganda

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⁴ Alina Polyakova, Marlene Laruelle, Stefan Meister, and Neil Barnett, “The Kremlin’s Trojan Horses,” Atlantic Council, November 15, 2016, accessed August 30, 2017, www.atlanticcouncil.org/publications/reports/kremlin-trojan-horses.

⁵ Victoria Nuland and Jeanne Shaheen, “Nuland: US Spends \$100Mln to Fund Russian ‘Independent Media’ to Counter Russian State Propaganda,” *Russia Insight*, YouTube, June 7, 2016, accessed August 30, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JDjW4Sgh28o>.

⁶ EU vs Disinfo, November 21, 2016, accessed August 30, 2017, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu>.

⁷ Czech Republic Sets up Anti-propaganda Unit,” *Ukraine Today*, October 21, 2016.

⁸ OECD Public Governance Committee and the Government at a Glance Steering Group et al., “Government at a Glance 2015,” OECD iLibrary, July 6, 2015, accessed August 30, 2017, www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/download/4215081ec050.pdf?expires=1479919674&id=id&acname=guest&checksum=4007.

⁹ Nuland and Shaheen, “US Spends \$100Mln.”

¹⁰ “About Us,” International Visegrad Fund, accessed August 30, 2017, <http://visegrad-fund.org/about>.

¹¹ “Grants,” International Visegrad Fund, accessed August 31, 2017, <https://www.visegradfund.org/apply/grants>.

¹² US Embassy, Vilnius, “Notice of Funding Opportunity,” August 31, 2015, accessed August 30, 2017, <https://vilnius.usembassy.gov/news-events/notice-of-funding-opportunity.html>.

¹³ Thomas Colson, “These are the 11 Most Corrupt Countries in the Developed World,” *Business Insider*, September 29, 2016, accessed August 30, 2017, www.businessinsider.com/wef-corruption-index-the-most-corrupt-countries-in-the-oecd-2016-9.

¹⁴ Poncie Rutsch, “Guess How Much of Uncle Sam’s Money Goes to Foreign Aid. Guess Again!” NPR, February 10, 2015, accessed August 30, 2017, www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2015/02/10/383875581/guess-how-much-of-uncle-sams-money-goes-to-foreign-aid-guess-again.

¹⁵ OECD, “Government at a Glance.”

¹⁶ Carol Morello and Anne Gearan, “Senators Sharply Question State Department Budget Cuts,” *Washington Post*, June 13, 2017, accessed August 30, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/tillerson-argues-state-departments-main-focus-should-be-on-us-security/2017/06/13/0438ebdc-503f-11e7-be25-3a519335381c_story.html?utm_term=.9e9f44778364.

¹⁷ Kat Devlin, “Anti-Russian Views on the Rise in Poland,” Pew Research Center, March 19, 2015, accessed August 30, 2017, www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/03/19/anti-russian-views-on-the-rise-in-poland.

¹⁸ “Poll Reveals Hungary as the Most EU and NATO-friendly Country in Central Europe,”

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¹⁹ Danielle Cuddington, “Support for NATO Is Widespread among Member Nations,” Pew Research Center, July 6, 2016, accessed August 30, 2017, www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/07/06/support-for-nato-is-widespread-among-member-nations.

²⁰ Derek E. Mix, “Poland and Its Relations with the United States,” Congressional Research Service, March 7, 2016, accessed August 30, 2017, <https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R44212.pdf>.

²¹ Re Judy Dempsey, “How Corruption is Driving Eastern Europe’s Brain Drain,” Carnegie Europe, September 9, 2016, accessed August 31, 2017, <http://carnegieeurope.eu/2016/09/09/how-corruption-is-driving-eastern-europe-s-brain-drain-pub-64545>.