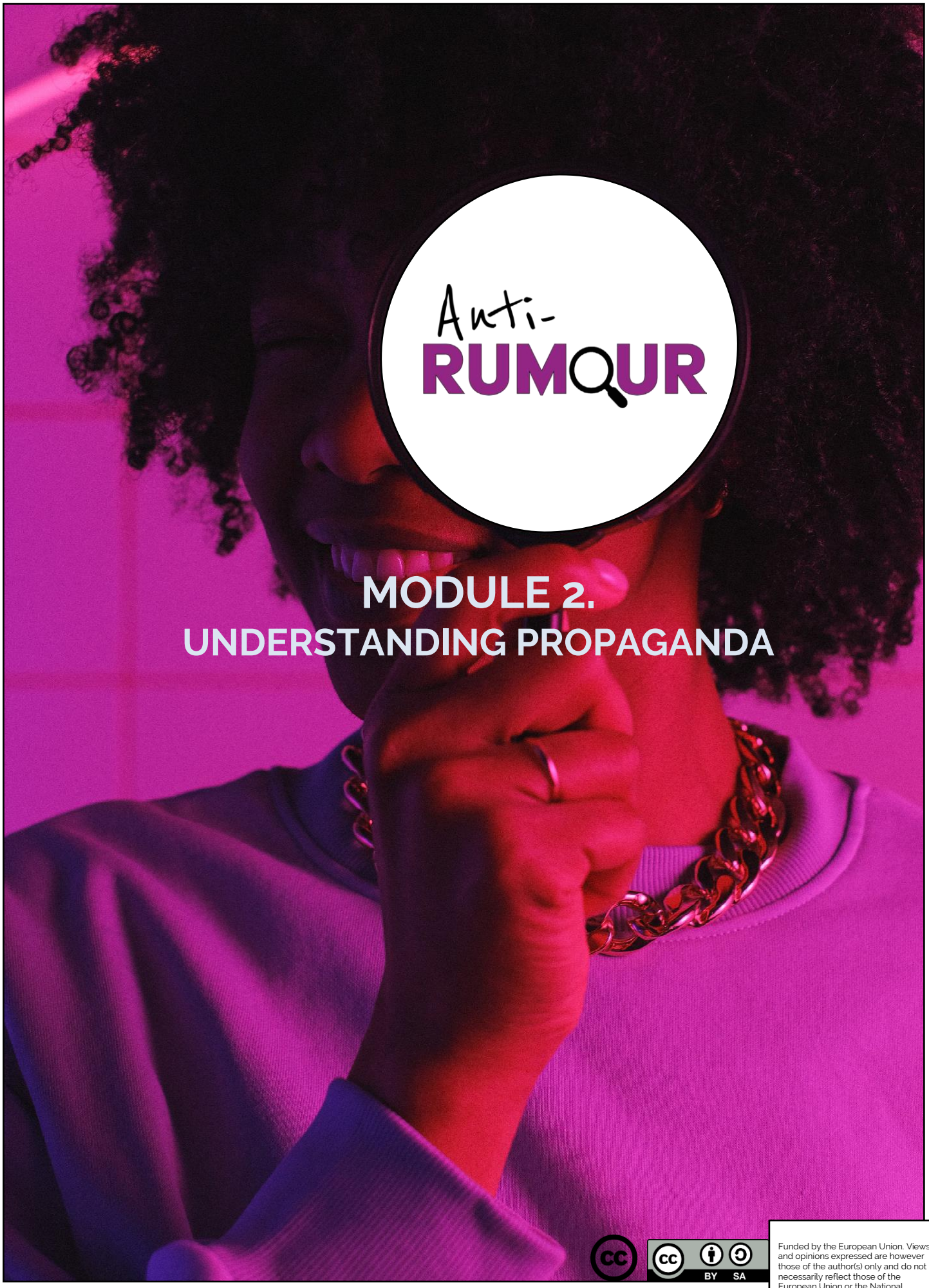

MODULE 2.
UNDERSTANDING PROPAGANDA

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Module 2. Understanding propaganda

2.1 Activity 1. Reflecting about propaganda

Duration: 20 minutes

Materials/Resources needed: Copies of Annex I, Annex II

Participant instructions: Hand over copies of Annex 1a and 1b to participants. Give them 5 minutes to have a look at them and proceed to ask the following questions:

- What common elements do you see in those pictures? What do you think they represent?

After, give them 10 minutes to discuss it in small groups (3-5 people).

Introduce them to the concept of propaganda in spreading conspiracy theories. Indicate the definition: Propaganda refers to news stories created by political entities to mislead people. It typically has a political context, and political intentions, pursuing the promotion of specific agenda.
Therefore, political actors are the main emissors of propaganda. Political actors do not just refer to state actors but all positions that claim political room in the state scenario.

The first image was published in 1953 in the US. The objective of this propaganda post is to fuel those theories that secularist policies of the US government would 'destroy souls' making a comparison with the death effects that the nuclear bomb, thrown only 4 years before, had in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Using propaganda, the author(s) were supporting a conspiracy theory that argued that communist/socialist ideas were influencing governmental policies, and one of the main examples regarded some Congress bills launched by the beginning of the 50's that aim at secularization in education and institutions. Establishing impactful imaginary and dramatic comparison is an essential element of propaganda. In this case, not only the message (secularization is even worse than the nuclear war) but also the visuals create attention and aim for causing an effect on people.

The second image was published in 1909 in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, showing an industrial train smashing a village. Although not having the powerful message and strong colours as the first one, this image gives a clear picture: industrializing the country will destroy the traditional and rural areas. In this message it is clear to see the dualization: 'Us', the calm, innocent and rural villages vs 'Them', the ugly, industrialized train and polluting factories. In this case, the train is attacking the village, without an apparent justification. This image then fuels radicalisation of the rural areas against the industrialization and modernisation of the country, by installing a conspiracy narrative: the modern industry will destroy our villages.
The ultimate aim has therefore a conservative perspective, criticising the rapid growth and modernisation of cities

Debrief: Do you think this propaganda messages have an effect on you and your group? How would you combat these messages? How did you feel? Do you think propaganda is nowadays present?

Background information/ External resources:

2.2 Activity 2. Getting out of the cave

Duration 25 minutes

Materials/Resources needed: a projector, WI-FI connection, pens and paper.

Participant instructions Watch the video listed in the external resources. The video is about a person that used to believe the most common conspiracy theories and managed to get away herself from that. In her personal way, she describes how her personal situation affected her and determined her to believe in that stuff.

After watching the video, discuss in small groups:

- What was her reason to believe in this conspiracy theories? Do you think it can happen to anyone? What could be the appeal?
- How could certain conspiracy theories include political elements? What political elements did you see in the ones that see mentioned?

Give a few minutes to discuss in groups or pairs (depending on the size of the group).
After, proceed to explain:

Conspiracy theories can also be a powerful tool to spread propaganda. The political mean however is broader, as it does not focuses on a specific issue, but rather a narrative.
As seen in previous modules, conspiracy theories relay in the 'Us' vs 'Them' narrative, usually framing or hoaxing information so to implement the wanted theory, which can be also political theory. Usually, these conspiracy positions are promoted by then extremes Us vs Them acquires then a political interpretation, that has solidify in the recent decades, in which each side of the political spectrum identifies a different 'bigger' enemy. In many cases, right wing conspiracy theories associate the enemy with the government, public institution or foreign power. On the other hand, left-wing rallies identify big corporations, branding business and capitalists' companies among the target of their conspiracy theories.
Therefore, conspiracy theories can take up the form of propaganda, being spread with political reasons. Many times, the conspiracy narrative establishes an 'Us' vs 'Them' scenario in which the enemy coincides with the political enemy of an extreme right/wing faction.

After, ask participants the following input questions for debate:

- What 'Us vs 'Them' narrative did you identified in the conspiracies that she was believing
- Do you manage to find a common pattern regarding political propaganda in the conspiracy theories that she mentioned she used to believe?

Discuss it for the next 10- 15 minutes.

Debrief: What propaganda elements can you observe in certain conspiracy narratives? Could you classify depending on the right/left wing aspirations? Could you name a few conspirations that do not seem to have political motives?

Background reading/ External Resources:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gdPbmYAuMs0&t
- Uscinski et. al. (2022) 'The *psychological and political correlates of conspiracy theory beliefs*', Nature portfolio, Scientific reports, 12:21672