Resilience on the Front Lines: Russia's Global Information War on Ukraine
Part 1: Propaganda about Ukraine in the West and Latvia

Activity	Time	Instructions & objectives
Discuss lesson goals	2 min	Tell participants that they will learn about Russian propaganda on the war in Ukraine in two lessons. Establish your goals for this lesson (Part 1): • To learn what propaganda is • To learn about common propaganda techniques • To understand the goals of Russian propaganda on the war in Ukraine as it appears in Western countries and Latvia • To learn basic fact-checking techniques
Defining propaganda, disinformation, and misinformation	2 min	Ask participants (answers can be given verbally, in chat, or through Jamboard) to share if they know what propaganda, disinformation, and misinformation are. Ask: "How would you define disinformation? What about propaganda? Do you think there's a difference between the two? What about misinformation?"
Defining propaganda, disinformation and misinformation	3 min	Read the definitions of propaganda, disinformation, and misinformation. Ask what common traits there are between propaganda and disinformation. How does misinformation differ? (answer: intent to mislead) Source
Aliona Romaniuk introduction video	2 min	Aliona Romaniuk, a Ukrainian fact-checker and founder of NotaEnota, talks about false information she saw at the beginning of the war. Video link
Discuss the video	2 min	Ask participants "What types of false information mentioned previously (disnformation, propaganda, misinformation) were brought up by the expert?" to strenghten their understanding of these definitions.

Activity	Time	Instructions & objectives
Propaganda techniques	3 min	<u>Give participants a printout of this information so they can follow along later in the presentation!</u> Talk through things that propaganda depends on and propaganda tactics. Say: "Since we are mostly focused on propaganda today, we will discuss it more in a bit more depth before we turn to particular examples. Propaganda is biased information designed to shape public opinion and behavior. Its power depends on the following: ○message; ○ technique; ○means of communication or where and how the messages is spread; ○ environment; ○ audience receptivity. We have to consider the environment because the events in the country might help propaganda sound more believable. For example, if Russian propaganda outlets talk about independent former Soviet states as failed states, it will spread easier when there's an economic crisis in the country, people are angry, struggling and upset. Then the audience receptivity would be higher. These last two points are essential for propaganda to be successful. What people are experiencing during a particular time makes them more receptive to a specific message. Propaganda only works when the audience is already receptive to the message. It's also worth paying attention to particular techniques that make the propaganda more interesting, eye-catching, and easier to understand and accept if the person is receptive. ○ Uses truths, half-truths, or lies; ○ Omits information selectively; ○ Simplifies complex issues or ideas; ○ Plays on emotions; ○ Advertises a cause; ○ Attacks opponents; ○ Targets desired audiences. You can use the paper copy of this slide you were given to follow along as we go through the information on particular messages and notice the techniques that are used." <u>Source</u>

Activity	Time	Instructions & objectives
Goals of propaganda about Ukraine targeting Western countries	2 min	Say: "The IREX staff in Ukraine identified three large groups of messages used in the context of war when Western countries are targeted: • messages that undermine the truth and confuse people • messages that erode public support for Ukraine and make it seem like it is not a country worthy of support, that they deserved the attack and the war isn't unjust. • messages that present Russia as powerful, a country you shouldn't challange and at the same time – often victimized. We will look at particular stories that are told to pass on this message."
Undermining the truth - the MH17 plane case	2 min	The media examples in this slide shows how Russian propaganda works to undermine the truth. Say: "Often the Kremlin makes multiple contradictory and inconsistent claims to confuse audiences about the reality of contested events. One such example is the myriad of explanations offered for the downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17, the passenger plain shot down over eastern Ukraine in 2014, killing nearly 300 civilians. We can see multiple contradictory examples here. The attack was targeted at the plane of the Russian president but also it was an airliner that Ukrainian dispatchers forced to descend. Kremlin has said it was a Ukrainian missile that downed the plane, that it was an Israeli missile and also that it was a Ukrainian fighter jet, not a missile. A court in the Netherlands found that it was downed by a missile by two Russians and a Ukranian seperatist." Show the media examples on the slide.

Activity	Time	Instructions & objectives
The firehose of falsehoods - Video	2 min	Say: "This firehose of falsehoods type of messaging is happening more often than just on this occasion. The same thing happened when Russia was trying to define the rationale for invading Ukraine. Let's hear what Mariia Sahaidak, Head of the Strategic Communication department at the Centre for Strategic Communication and Information Security has to say." Video link
Eroding support for Ukraine - Paint Ukrainians as not worthy of support	2 min	Say: "The Kremlin has worked extensively over the past decade to discredit the image of Ukraine among its western partners. For example, the war in Donbas was referred to by many experts as the Ukrainian "crisis," distracting attention from the real problem — Russia's occupation of those territories. Ukraine was also depicted as a failed state, an impoverished, corrupt puppet of its Western allies. The fact that the country has been at war for eight years has been often diminished or even ignored as the war was presented as an internal problem, rather than one created from abroad by the Kremlin. Ukrainians are also painted as extremists or corrupt to emphasize that they are not worthy of support." Show the media examples on the slide. Source 1, Source 2
Eroding support for Ukraine - Discrediting Ukrainian refugees	2 min	Say: "Kremlin propaganda often weaponizes the likelihood of social media users taking information online at face value. For example, a video filmed by a man inside a littered, defaced train went viral on German social media. Accompanied by a caption claiming the litter was left by Ukrainian refugees, the video was widely shared – and later refuted by independent fact-checkers from the German non-profit Correctiv. The culprits were in fact football fans, and it was later confirmed the train was not used to transport Ukrainian refugees. These and similar claims made it to Latvian social media users too." Source 1, Source 2, Source 3, Source 4, Source 5, Source 6, Source 7

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Eroding support for Ukraine - Support comes at the expanse of Latvians	2 min	Say: "Another narrative that is targeted at Latvia is that Latvia is not doing well economically and supporting Ukraine is a big strain on the country. It's worth remembering what we discussed about the environment and audience receptivity in order to make propaganda seem reasonable and worth paying attention to. The articles say that Latvia is providing a lot of support, but the refugees are a big strain on the country, are not eager to find work, and don't learn the Latvian language. The standard of living for Latvians is falling and medical services are failing."
Present Russia as powerful, yet treated unfairly - The threat of WW3	2 min	Say: "Many messages are about Russia – on the one hand it is depicted as powerful and threatening, but on the other – as the actual victim. For many years, Kremlin propaganda has been using its nuclear capabilities as a fearmongering tactic to push the idea that Western countries are provoking escalation to World War III through their support for Ukraine. State propaganda TV shows in Russia regularly discuss the looming potential for World War III and the weaponry Russia possesses." Source
Present Russia as powerful, yet treated unfairly - Russians presented as victims	2 min	Say: "By emphasizing the victimization of Russians abroad, the Kremlin attempts to shift attention from atrocities in Ukraine, reversing the moral paradigm to one where the West, and implicitly Ukraine, are the aggressors. Kremlin propagandists present Western administrations, schools, banks, and health institutions as actors that discriminate against Russians. Debunked claims included that the University Hospital of Munich (LMU) no longer wants to treat Russian citizens, that Deutsche Bank and Postbank sanctioned all their Russian clients, or even that Russian children were kicked out of German schools. These fakes target Germany specifically due to the large amount (around 2.5-3 million) of Russian immigrants living in the country, many of whom have limited German language skills." Source

Activity	Time	Instructions & objectives
Basic fact-checking tips	3 min	Talk to students about questions to ask themselves when they come across suspicious information, especially if it comes from an unfamiliar source and is about an emotional and divisive topic. Who made the claim? Do they have the expertise and information to know that? Google the author of the claim, the organization and the media outlet. Who are they? Do they have a good reputation? Do a little investigation on their background! What evidence and sources did they provide to back up their claim? Does the source actually say what they claim it does? If there is no source for the claims, it is a red flag! If the source is indicated, check it too. What are other sources saying? Google keywords related to the claim. Are there reliable sources of information saying the same thing? Ask the participants: "Do you know about some other information verification tricks you would like to share with others?"
Exercise	2 min	Show participants the video and while it's playing, explain that this video has been used on social media to claim that it shows crisis actors filming war footage in Ukraine. Ask which of the previously discussed fact-checking tactics would they use to verify this video. Suggest that they should think about keywords to look up. For suggested steps, go to the next two slides. Link
Exercise	2 min	Tell participants that they can try to look up words that are visible in the video, although often they would have to try to generate keywords that characterize the video, image or text they are fact-checking.

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Exercise	2 min	After finding a video with the same title, it's important to check whether the videos match. Afterwards, you can translate the tittle of the video and look at the source that posted it – it's a report from a Austrian channel about a climate protest, not about Ukraine.
Conclusion	2 min	In conclusion, encourage participants to polish their information verification skills by taking a course that with tools and techniques described. Invite them to scan the QR code in the presentation. Link

Optional extra content for the lesson

Activity	Time	Instructions & objectives
Propaganda techniques - example	2 min	If you want to discuss propaganda techniques in more depth, you can look at this example with instructions on spreading misleading information. Say: "Let's start with a very interesting example uncovered by the Ukrainian Center for Combating Disinformation. A Telegram channel with over 25,000 subscribers at the time, "Notes of Veterans," that was sharing instructions on how to create fakes and spread disinformation in Ukraine. You can see that the advice given on spreading fakes are very much in line with what researchers have found to be common techniques."
Eroding support for Ukraine - Paint Ukrainians as not worthy of support	2 min	Show other media examples with Russian propaganda about Ukrainians that journalists have fact-checked - the example about selling organs, the story about the crucified boy, the falsehoods about concentration camps and stolen children if you want to include more media examples. Source 1, Source 2, Source 3, Source 4
Eroding support for Ukraine - The most tragic events are staged	2 min	Another message used to suggest that Ukraine actually should not receive support, is that a lot of the war footage we are seeing is faked. Say: "In April, Ukraine accused withdrawn Russian troops of massacring over 450 civilians in the small town of Bucha outside of Kyiv. The Kremlin denied it, calling it a "heinous provocation," and claiming the evidence was staged with actors by the Ukrainian government. The Russian Defense Ministry itself shared the video on April 3 on its official Telegram channel, claiming that one of the corpses can be seen moving his arm and another standing up in the rear-view mirror. Several users on social networks pointed out that the corpse in view was not moving (it was just a drop of rain on the windshield of the car in which the video was filmed), and journalists from AFP confirmed that the body in the video was the same they had photographed upon visiting Bucha on April 2. Such stories also have become popular on social media in Latvia. One example is a shooting of an ad that was filmed by a passerby and posted on TikTok with a claim that fake footage about the war in Ukraine was being shot there. The director of the shooting said that they were just filming a commercial that had nothing to do with Ukraine." Source 1, Source 2

Activity	Time	Instructions & objectives
Discuss lesson goals	2 min	Tell participants that in the second lesson they will: • Learn about Russian propaganda in Ukraine • Learn about means used to spread propaganda • Discuss what we can do to reduce the spread of propaganda
Discuss propaganda goals in Ukraine and in Latvia	2 min	Ask the students a question (Answers can be given verbally, in chat, or through Jamboard): "After learning about propaganda in the Western countries, what do you think the main goals are of Kremlin propaganda in Ukraine for Ukrainian citizens?" Encourage them to share what they've heard or seen.
Goals of propaganda in Ukraine and in Latvia	2 min	The Ukraine program at IREX has again identified several goals or main messages of propaganda: • To divide Ukrainians, cause tension within the country • Make the Western partners seem less reliable • Demoralize the population so that they are less interested in resisting
Name It to Tame It	2 min	Before discussing more propaganda examples, tell students that you will share a tactic that can help them deal with misleading content. Say: "Before we discuss these propaganda goals and messages used in more detail, I'd like to introduce a very important idea often referred to as Name It to Tame It. Strong emotions are a key factor in making viral online content and effective propaganda. Getting us angry drives up clicks, shares, comments and keeps us interested. Checking whether a story made you emotional is the first step to getting a sense of whether you are being manipulated. Not all stories using emotional language are untrue, of course. But it's one of the signs that something could be wrong – the use of highly emotional narratives and graphic images often signals an attempt to manipulate. It means that you should learn to pause, understand what you're feeling, and check the facts to see if the reality is as dramatic as the story."

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Name It to Tame It	2 min	Explain how this method works: "Here's how to do it in practice: Pause: Turn your head away from the screen after viewing an image or article that provokes you. Take a deep breath: Ask yourself: How am I feeling? Say: Name and accept your emotion – regain control of your logical brain!"
Name It to Tame It	2 min	Now do a short exercise to try it out. Show the students the example Telegram post on the screen and say: "Now, let's try it out. Imagine you stumble upon this post on Telegram. Use "Name It to Tame It" tactic and identify what you feel." Ask a few students to say what their emotions are out loud.
Name It to Tame It	2 min	Explain that this post was discovered to be fake. Say: "Fact-checking outlet StopFake journalists uncovered that photos showing Christmas decorations with Nazi symbols were taken at an exhibit in a museum in Germany, others were taken from ads trying to sell such ornaments." <u>Source</u>
Divide Ukrainians	2 min	Say: "The example discussed previously fits in with a narrative that has been used a long time to sow division within Ukraine. For decades, the Kremlin has been trying to divide Ukrainians along linguistic, political, and cultural lines. During most of the Soviet period, the Russian language was promoted over the Ukrainian language, which was associated with lower social status, just like it was in Latvia. Before and during the full-scale war, Russia reignited the language issue in Ukraine, claiming that the rights of the Russian-speaking population were being violated. The language issue has also been used to support a radical narrative about Ukrainian nationalists or "Nazis" who, according to Kremlin propaganda, make up most of western Ukraine. The Kremlin thus divides Ukrainians into a loyal majority of "Little Russians," conveying the imperialist view that Ukrainians belong to one larger Russian nation, and a perverse minority of "nationalists" ruled by politicians corrupted by Western influence." <u>Source</u>

Activity	Time	Instructions & objectives
Undermine trust in Western partners	2 min	Say: "A key narrative in Kremlin propaganda is the idea that Ukraine as a country exists only as a "puppet" of its Western partners, entirely dependent on the West and subservient to their political goals. For example, one of the goals of the network of pro-Kremlin TV channels which operated in Ukraine until their ban in 2021 was to undermine public trust in the EU and NATO. Putin himself echoed these narratives just before the start of the war on Feburary 21, 2022, when he described Ukraine as a "colony with a puppet regime." During the war, the Kremlin has simultaneously attempted to sow despair and frustration among Ukrainians by convincing them of Western partners' betrayal. This includes the idea that the West is willing to abandon Ukraine on a moment's notice once it no longer suits its foreign policy objectives. "
Demoralize the population	2 min	Say: "Another important tactic by Kremlin propagandists has been to instill fear and hopelessness in Ukrainians. At the beginning of the full-scale war, the Kremlin tried to convince Ukrainians that they had been abandoned by their president and government. There were various false statements of such nature, for example, that the president has committed suicide or that he has fled the country. Attempts to demoralize Ukrainians also include false accusations of war crimes allegedly committed by Ukrainian forces on Ukrainian soil. Kremlin propagandists also exploit the economic vulnerabilities of Ukrainians, overplaying energy and food crises and blaming them on the shortcomings of the Ukrainian government. "
Means of communication	2 min	Tell the participants that you have talked about messages, their goals and propaganda techniques. but the remaining lessons will be devoted to media platforms and ways they are used to spread these messages and increase the audience exposed to them.

Activity	Time	Instructions & objectives
Care Before You Share	2 min	Say: "Before we discuss these in more depth, it's worth remembering another slogan – Care Before You Share. All of us are responsible for the information environment we live in. If you don't want to live in a world where a lot of fakes are shared around and people have a hard time knowing what's really true or not, you also have to verify before you trust information even if the content aligns with your opinions and makes you feel good about your choices. Never share information if you don't know it is true. Refer to the fact-checking tips in the first lesson when encountering emotional content about divisive, controversial topics."
Means of communication - state and Kremlin owned media	2 min	The largest media outlets in Russia are run by the state or companies with close links to the state. It allows a more direct control and oversight to make sure the massaging of the outlet is in line with the state policy. If you would like to show a slightly more in-depth explanation, there is a video available at the optional content section at the end of the presentation of this lesson.
Means of communication - manipulated visuals	2 min	Another way to attempt to spread more convincing false stories is by using manipulated photos or videos because people often see visuals as evidence. It can include very simple manipulations as taking a real photo and lying about the context. Here's an example: There were messages about Ukrainian soldiers looting Ukrainian homes during the war. Russian accounts began distributing this photo right after numerous reports about Russian soldiers looting Ukrainian houses started appearing online. In fact, this photo had been taken and posted a month before Russian propaganda used it. It was taken by a news agency AP and, as reported by the outlet, actually shows Ukrainian soldiers helping to relocate goods from a market in Kharkiv, which had been destroyed by shelling. Source, Source
Means of communication - manipulated visuals: deepfakes	2 min	Say: "There are also more sophisticated manipulations used at times. They're called deepfakes. Let's watch this video to learn what this means." Link

Activity	Time	Instructions & objectives
Means of communication - manipulated visuals: deepfakes	2 min	Show the participants a real world example from Ukraine. Say: "On March 2, the Ukrainian government's Center for Strategic Communication warned the Kremlin was likely preparing a "deepfake" video that appeared to show president Volodymyr Zelensky surrendering to Russian forces. A few days later, a fake and heavily manipulated video depicting Zelensky appearing to tell his soldiers to lay down their arms started circulating on social media and was placed on a Ukrainian news website by hackers."
Means of communication - manipulated visuals: deepfakes	2 min	Say: "Let's watch a fragment". Link Pause the video before the news anchor starts commenting at 1:12
Means of communication - manipulated visuals: deepfakes	3 min	Ask the participants to talk about the signs in the video they noticed that make the video look faked. What did they notice? (Answers: the body and the background are static and look like a photo, only the head moves, the head is larger than the body, the color of the skin on the fact and neck differs)
Means of communication - inauthentic social media accounts	2 min	Say: "Another way propaganda can spread is through inauthentic social media accounts. Those can be fake Telegram channels posing as channels dedicated to local news. This slide shows two screenshots of fake Telegram channels (channels posting Kremlin disinformation while posing as local Ukrainian news sources) representing towns in the Sumy region in northeastern Ukraine. These channels post news as if the towns were already occupied by Russia, pushing the narrative that the Ukrainian army has abandoned them and that Russia will protect them."

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Means of communication - inauthentic social media accounts	2 min	Say: "One of the reasons that these channels are effective is due to the thousands of Kremlin bots and trolls tasked with amplifying their messages. Since the start of the war alone, the Ukrainian government has reported 1,500 Telegram channels and another 1,500 fake Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok accounts, including bots, for spreading Kremlin propaganda. The primary aim of these bots is to demoralize Ukrainians and diminish trust in Ukrainian leadership. Ukrainian experts observed that they post made-up stories about violence or death, promoting the message that the Ukrainian government is responsible for the suffering of ordinary citizens. The goal of these comments is to sow panic and provoke an emotional reaction, more importantly redirecting blame for atrocities from the Kremlin onto the Ukrainian government. "
Means of communication - inauthentic social media accounts	2 min	Show the participants the examples of bot and troll accounts from the Baltics. Read from the slide the key messages they were trying to spread. Source Additional source, additional source
Turn Off Your Autopilot	2 min	When thinking of how to deal with all of this false information, I'd like to share another tip that is important. Think about your media consumption habits long-term. Limit how much time you spend on social media apps and take control of what you consume and how. Be very conscious of what you expose yourself to. Resist the urge to click on catchy headlines, turn off autoplay on video platforms and delete addictive apps.
Discussion: reducing the spread of propaganda	3 min	Ask the participants what they think they can do as individuals to reduce the spread of propaganda (potential answers: commit to fact-checking claims on divisive issues, never share information they are not sure about, evaluate the source of information and think about their intent)

Activity	Time	Instructions & objectives
Final video	4 min	Play the final video with fact-checking expert Aliona Romaniuk about the ways the orgnanization has worked to contain the spread of propaganda. Link
Final discussion	3 min	To conclude, if the time allows, ask the participants: Do you check where information comes from before sharing? If not will you do so now? Are falsehoods often spread in chats (for example, on WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger or Telegram) in Latvia? Why is that? How can this information be checked?
Conclusion	3 min	Ask the participants: Do you check where information comes from before sharing? Will you do so now? Are falsehoods often spread in chats (for example, on WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger or Telegram) in Latvia? Why is that? How can this information be checked?

Optional extra content for the lesson

Activity	Time	Instructions & objectives
Divide Latvians	2 min	If you want to include more examples that are more relatable, you can compare to tropes that are used to target people living in Latvia. Say: "There are very similar narratives in the Russian media about Latvia. Latvians, just like Ukrainians, are frequently referred to as Nazis, especially in relation to the deconstruction of Soviet-era monuments, sanctioning Russia, and the parliamentary vote for the resolution to designate Russia as a 'state sponsor of terrorism'."
Divide Latvians	2 min	If you want to include more media examples on the theme of sowing division in the target countries, you can consider these and include them in the lesson. Say: "The mayor of Riga at the time attended an opening of a LGBTQ+ friendly nightclub. Afterwards, stories appeared suggesting that such clubs will now be a priority for the municipality and mayor of Riga, while, at the same time, Russian theater is getting closed. Neither story is true – the mayor or other municipal leaders or spokespeople have not discussed LGBTQ+ firendly nightclubs as a priority for the city and the Russian theater is not getting closed."
Undermine trust in Western partners	2 min	If you again want to include a comparison to narratives about Latvia, say: "The same kind of narratives are spread in the Baltic states too. Researchers at the Atlantic Council Digital Forensic Research Lab conducted research on narratives spread in Kremlin media. You can see the most frequent narratives related to NATO on the slide – that the Baltic states are spending too much on defense and that being in NATO is actually not good or useful for the countries." Point to some of the most common narratives identified - that the Baltics are spending unnecessarily on defense, being in NATO is not good for the countries, and NATO is not united.
Undermine trust in Western partners	2 min	Say: "There is a story about dangerous biolabs that has been spread about Latvia too with no evidence, as Latvian fact-checkers found – in the previous lesson it was mentioned how the same story has spread in reference to Georgia and Ukraine." Emphasize that these stories suggest that Western partners are doing something harmful here, not in the interest of general population but these stories have no evidence. Source

Optional extra content for the lesson

Activity	Time	Instructions & objectives
Demoralize the population	2 min	Say: "Again, there are similarities to propaganda targeted towards the Baltic states – emphasizing economic difficulties and attributing them to the Latvian government. It is said that we expect help from the EU but it won't come. There are also stories on how the Baltics are suffering without Russian gas and that the Russian president could help."
Means of communication - state and Kremlin owned media	3 min	If you want to include more information on how state media work and how they differ from private media, you can show this video. Play a fragment of a video about media ownership models from the media literacy course VeryVerified.eu to hear how commercial and state media differ. Link For even more detailed information on media ownership models, consult Unit 2 on VeryVerified.eu (link) or the blended learning lesson on this topic (link).
How to spot deepfakes?	2 min	If you want to explore the topic of deepfakes in more depth, play participants a video that discusses more signs that can help them spot deepfakes. Link You can find more resources on this topic on VeryVerified.eu. Link
Means of communication - inauthentic social media accounts	2 min	Say: "Some of the fake channels were imitating the social media accounts of real news media. Ukrainska Pravda Official is a fake account which is imitating reputable media outlet in Ukraine called Ukrainska pravda. It's useful to note that impersonation is a frequently used tactic. In the U.S. media outlets like the Washington Post and Fox News are impersonated to make anti-Ukraine messages seem credible."
What are bots and trolls	2 min	Show this video to the participants if you expect they might not know what trolls and bots are and an extra explanation is needed. Link You can find more resources on this topic on VeryVerified.eu. Link