

# Listening to an Authoritarian Neighbor: Russian Propaganda on Chinese Social Media After the Ukraine Invasion

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## Abstract

Authoritarian states actively engage in cross-border propaganda. While the effects and the narratives of this propaganda targeting democracies have been studied in the past, little attention has been paid to how sudden and significant geopolitical events influence the engagement of authoritarian propaganda in other like-minded states. This study closes the gap by looking at Russia's propaganda in Chinese social media platform Weibo. We look at how users of the platform reacted to messages spread by Russia Today (RT) and Sputnik after the full-scale invasion against Ukraine. Applying computational text analysis and regression analysis we show that although the outbreak of the war led to a surge in Russian propaganda—especially anti-Western and war-related narratives—Chinese audiences exhibited a pronounced tendency to engage primarily with narratives highlighting non-Western cooperation, reflecting a strong alignment with the Chinese government's domestic propaganda.

## Keywords

propaganda, Russo-Ukrainian war, authoritarian states, public diplomacy

## Introduction

Authoritarian states have invested considerable resources in propaganda abroad (El Damanhoury et al. 2024; Fisher 2020; Hernández and Madrid-Morales 2020; Rawnsley 2015; Saunders et al. 2022; Turcsanyi and Kachlikova 2020)<sup>1</sup>; the emergence of Internet and social media facilitated this effort, making autocracies potentially particularly capable of spreading their narratives in other countries. There is a large literature studying the patterns of authoritarian states' international propaganda operations and their impact within democracies (Carter and Carter 2021; Crilley et al. 2022; Elshehawy et al. 2022; Elswah and Howard 2020; Hoyle et al. 2024; Radnitz 2022; Wagnsson 2023). However, authoritarian states not only target the public in democracies but also aim to influence citizens of like-minded authoritarian allies (Carter and Carter 2021; Chapman and Gerber 2019). This propaganda is massively understudied both in terms of its content and the public reaction<sup>2</sup>; at the same time, looking at it can reveal new insights with respect to the effects of propaganda by authoritarian regimes.

On the one hand, there are reasons to believe that audiences in authoritarian states may be more receptive to

narratives from the sponsoring states compared with their counterparts in democracies. Literature suggests that public diplomacy activities are more likely to succeed in countries with close political and value alignments with the sending country (Sheafer et al. 2014; Sheafer and Gabay 2009). On the other hand, even if authoritarian states permit foreign propaganda (not all of them do), they also subject their population to massive domestic propaganda (Fu 2023; Ji and Liu 2021; Wang 2023; Zhang and Zhong 2024), which is likely to shape the perception of foreign propaganda narratives. In other words, the public in like-minded autocracies may not be equally receptive to all types of narratives from the sending country. Heterogeneous effects of foreign propaganda have been documented in the literature (Peisakhin and Rozenas 2018)<sup>3</sup>; in authoritarian states this heterogeneity

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could be driven by domestic propaganda. Therefore, it is plausible that certain narratives from sending countries are more appealing than others to the public in authoritarian states. Furthermore, given massive preference falsification in authoritarian states, responses to foreign propaganda may have less to do with the actual change of attitudes and beliefs and more with the willingness to fit the preferences of the domestic autocrat.

The resonance of citizens with foreign propaganda is influenced not only by the content of the narratives but also by major events and crises that provide context and serve as catalysts for interpretation (Zebregs et al. 2014). Major events like wars and pandemics can reinforce or challenge public understanding of narratives (Barberá et al. 2015; Birkland 1998; Kim 2023; Lee 2002).<sup>4</sup> However, the impact of significant events has been largely understudied in research on authoritarian foreign propaganda. While most existing studies acknowledge that the intensity of informational operations peaks during elections, crises, and wars (Carter and Carter 2021; Elshehawy et al. 2022), the specific effects of significant events on public reactions to different narratives are still largely unknown.

This paper aims to address these gaps by investigating Russia's propaganda on Chinese social media platforms and the publicly observable reaction of Chinese citizens in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian War. Social media platforms are significant channels through which authoritarian states conduct propaganda and project narratives (Chen et al. 2024; King et al. 2013; Lu et al. 2022). While social media enable authoritarian states to disseminate their alternative narratives more directly and efficiently to a broad audience, autocracies have to compete for scarce attention and persuade the public to trust their narratives. Social media users have a degree of autonomy that enables them to decide whether to engage with the state's narratives and interpret them from various perspectives (Szostek 2016). The responses of social media users to the foreign propaganda could be driven by different factors: in addition to persuasion, they can be explained by confirmation bias ("cherry-picking" of posts fitting the content of domestic propaganda or other prior beliefs), strategic behavior or, as we will argue in what follows, even reflect (open or implicit) policies of the target authoritarian state.

Over the past 3 years of open war, China and Russia developed intensive cooperation, with Chinese economy serving as an important lifeline for Russia under conditions of Western sanctions. Both countries use aligned narratives to influence global audiences (Rawnsley 2015) and, more generally, form what Repnikova (2023) calls an "information nexus" affecting both domestic and international propaganda. A study analyzing narratives about the 2022 Russo-Ukrainian War on Chinese social media,

which included over 8 million articles from 10,000 news websites across China, Russia, Ukraine, and the US, found that Russian news websites are the primary originators and influencers of these narratives on Weibo (Hanley et al. 2024). Still, the fact that Russian propaganda media are directly present in the Chinese Internet and disseminate their information in Chinese, has hardly been noticed by the scholarly audiences.

Prior work on authoritarian foreign propaganda primarily relied on survey experiments (Carter and Carter 2021; Huang 2018; Mattingly and Yao 2022; Szostek 2016). Although this approach effectively identifies the causal effects of propaganda on public attitudes, it is somewhat limited by its artificial settings, typically exposing participants to a single source of information. On social media platforms, states must vie with other content creators for public attention and engagement (Hassid 2012). Unlike most survey settings, social media allows users to express their attitudes and interpretations flexibly when exposed to multiple frames (Sniderman and Theriault 2004). Our research therefore focuses on analyzing narrative projection and reception using observational data from social media platforms. This real-life setting allows us to investigate the responses to foreign propaganda narratives outside artificial lab environments.

We acknowledge that the disadvantage of this approach is our inability to causally identify the effect of specific narratives Russian propaganda on Chinese users. At the same time, our study still has a causal component. In particular, we study the engagement of Chinese users with the Russian propaganda messages before and after the full-scale invasion of Russia in Ukraine. While the evidence on the co-movement between specific narratives of Russian propaganda and responses of Chinese users is not causal (although, given the novelty of topic and lack of any previous research on this topic, this correlational evidence is valuable), the effect of the war can be plausibly interpreted as exogenous (there is no confounder, which at the same time affected the onset of the war and the responses of Chinese users). The change of engagement with the Russian narratives before and after the war can be interpreted as a causal effect of the war; the evidence on the attention Chinese users pay to specific narratives (as opposed to others) is correlational.

We collect data from Weibo, the most popular social media platform in China, and examine the narratives and public engagement with two prominent Russian media outlets, Russia Today (RT) and Russia Sputnik News (Sputnik) 6 months before and after the onset of Russo-Ukrainian War. We find that the onset of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has greatly increased public engagement with Russia's narratives promoting collaboration across non-Western countries (again, it does not mean that Russian propaganda became more convincing;

we clearly distinguish these categories). At the same time, paradoxically, narratives about the war itself enjoy smaller attention, although Russia focuses on these narratives in its propaganda more than others. Chinese audiences pick parts of the Russian message, which is less controversial from the point of view of domestic Chinese propaganda. There are three explanations for it. One is, as mentioned, confirmation bias: Chinese audiences are more likely to treat Russian messages more in line with the Chinese propaganda, as more convincing. Another is strategic engagement: Chinese users show their attitude towards Russia by responding to messages they believe could be more inconspicuous from the point of view of their own government. The final explanation is signaling by the Chinese government itself, manipulating responses in the social media and directed at the Russian government.

## Theory

### *Authoritarian Propaganda Narratives in Like-Minded Countries*

In order to develop our theoretical argument, we proceed in three steps. First, we discuss the narratives of authoritarian propaganda abroad. Here, due to enormous diversity of authoritarian regimes, we focus on Russia (our main empirical case), and the content of its propaganda in like-minded states (like China).<sup>5</sup> Second, we discuss possible effects of these narratives on readers' engagement (again, these effects are not limited to persuasion). Third, we look at how major events like wars could moderate these effects.

The overarching goals of an authoritarian state's outward-facing propaganda are to shape the perception of the existing global order, key international actors, and specific events among a foreign public (Roselle et al. 2014). For a country like Russia, which at least since the annexation of Crimea in 2014 saw itself in a state of confrontation with the West (Laruelle 2025), this involves a dual strategy: rhetorically attacking Western democracies and fostering collaboration among non-Western nations, which in the Russian discourse are often framed as the "Global Majority."

When targeting audiences in Western democracies, the key goal is to influence their attitudes toward both the message sender (in our case, Russia) and their own home governments, either discrediting it or supporting pro-Russian political factions if there are any (Carter and Carter 2021). The goals of propaganda in other like-minded authoritarian states are likely to be different. Autocracies are extremely sensitive to external influence of their domestic affairs, even on a purely rhetorical level. While some of them (relatively weak ones) could benefit from rhetorical support from outside (Obydenkova and

Libman 2019), strong and powerful regimes are likely to eschew any foreign propaganda in any way addressing the legitimacy or the rule of the autocrat (even if it comes from a "friendly" regime). Hence, Russia's primary goals is likely not to bolster the Chinese public's view of its own government, but rather to reshape mass perceptions of democracy and autocracy without incurring the reputational costs that overt intervention entails.

This is achieved through several core narratives. First, the narrative of blaming the West pivots on two main themes: (a) the inherent flaws in democratic systems and (b) the Western hegemony. The first theme emphasizes the shortcomings within democracies, such as political gridlock, corruption scandals, social inequality, and policy inconsistencies (Carter and Carter 2021; Chernobrov and Briant 2022; Persily 2017; Polyakova 2020). By bringing these issues to the forefront, this narrative aims to undermine the perceived moral and functional superiority of democratic systems and portray them as inherently flawed and struggling to meet the needs and aspirations of their citizens. It critiques questions the efficacy of democratic governance and seeks to reduce the appeal and influence of democratic models, suggesting that they should not be emulated by other states. The second narrative advances the concept of an unjust and oppressive Western (particularly US) hegemony (Baumann 2020; Kiseleva 2015). It criticizes the exploitative nature of US global leadership and asserts that the US and its allies have used their superpower status to create and sustain global dominance at the expense of other nations. It also addressed how the West orchestrates geopolitical strategies that lead to chaos and instability in various regions, under the pretext of promoting democracy and human rights.

The narrative that promotes non-Western collaboration equally involves two themes: (a) highlighting the sending state's achievements and (b) showcasing its partnerships with non-Western countries. Merely underlining Western hegemony is insufficient for authoritarian states looking to foster a favorable global environment. The targeted public may prefer collaborating with another non-Western country over aligning with the sending state. The first strategy therefore focuses on the sending state's successes across various domains, including economic growth, technological advancements, and cultural influence. These narratives are crafted to showcase the authoritarian states' capabilities and progress as powerful, independent nations free from Western influence (Mattingly and Yao 2022), that is, engage in image laundering and nation branding (Cull 2008; Nye 1990; Pamment 2014; for the Russian case see Carter and Carter 2021; Miazhevich 2018; Yablokov 2015). The second strategy emphasizes the authoritarian state's partnerships with countries outside the Western bloc. These narratives highlight the sending state's role in fostering international cooperation

without Western dominance. By highlighting these partnerships, propaganda aims to position the sending state as a global leader committed to a multipolar world order, where collaboration and dialogue replace unilateral actions and dominance (Kanet 2018; Morozova 2009).

The content of the collaboration, which is at the center of the narrative of partnership of non-Western states, is not identical though, and therefore, the propaganda can pivot on different aspects of this collaboration. It could highlight the political, economic and ideological collaboration. It could, however, look at non-political content—cultural exports, entertainment and human-interest stories. We will refer to these narratives as those of soft propaganda. Their goal is to subtly cultivate affinity and positive associations with the sending state (Nye 1990). This strategy focuses on building long-term relationships rather than direct persuasion (Zaharna and Uysal 2016). By using culturally resonant and appealing content, it can bypass initial skepticism and embed the sending state's influence within the social fabric of the target society, making it a powerful tool for shaping perceptions over the long run (Huang and Wang 2020; Saunders et al. 2022). This strategy's non-confrontational nature allows it to deeply integrate into the social fabric of foreign societies. By employing themes and narratives that are less overtly political, soft propaganda can mitigate prior skepticism toward the sending state. Although the ultimate goal of soft propaganda is to facilitate the sending state's broader geopolitical aims, such as consolidating partnership between allies, soft propaganda still differs from direct collaboration narrative by focusing more on seemingly non-political content.

In the subsequent analysis, we will refer to the soft propaganda as a separate narrative, distinct from the narratives focusing on economic and political collaboration. This is because soft propaganda is, probably, least “costly” narrative to engage in for the foreign audiences. It is less likely to trigger controversial debates; while in the West, given the shock of Russia's invasion against Ukraine, all forms of engagement with Russia in the areas of culture, sports and education became highly contested and frequently rejected by the public (which was not the case before the full-scale war), in China and in the Global South they are mostly perceived as unproblematic and often non-political. Practically, it means that we could use this least controversial and neutral category of narratives to evaluate the relative engagement with other, more controversial narratives Russian propaganda promotes.

### *Effects of Foreign Authoritarian Propaganda: Selective Engagement*

Does the authoritarian propaganda from abroad “work”? On the one hand, one could expect outward propaganda from a like-minded authoritarian state to be likely to

succeed in allied authoritarian countries compared to democracies (due to lack of strong pushback from the domestic democratic media and ideological similarity). However, this does not imply that citizens in the targeted authoritarian state will uncritically accept all such propaganda. While shared ideology can create a receptive environment, cognitive and motivational factors determine which specific narratives resonate.

- (1) First, the narrative resonance is influenced by frame congruence, which refers to the cognitive ease with which new information is integrated into an individual's existing views and knowledge (Entman 1993). In the case of authoritarian outward propaganda, where intensive domestic propaganda shapes public discourse, narratives from a foreign source are more likely to gain traction when they align with frames and messages already promoted by the home government.
- (2) Second, since narratives are not purely informational but also deeply emotional, the public tends to respond differently to narratives with varying emotional affordances (Dunlop et al. 2008). A narrative's potential to evoke strong emotions—such as moral outrage or a sense of existential threat from foreign aggression—is a powerful driver of engagement.
- (3) Third, perceived utility shapes the instrumental value that audiences assign to a piece of content (Knobloch-Westerwick et al. 2005). Information is valued not only for aiding the interpretation of complex events, such as understanding the causes of a war, but also for fulfilling social functions, such as signaling loyalty to an in-group or affirming a particular political identity.

Together, the above factors—frame congruence, emotional affordances, and perceived utility—help explain why certain foreign narratives, especially those aligning with domestic propaganda are more readily internalized and amplified in authoritarian contexts. Beyond these intrinsic features of narratives themselves, the broader context in which a narrative circulates also exerts a significant influence. As the next section will demonstrate, situational factors—such as focusing events—can serve as important reference points that shape narrative reception and resonance.

What is particularly important for us though is that empirically observed correlation between attention of target public to specific propaganda narratives should not necessarily be interpreted as persuasiveness of foreign propaganda at all. The causality could go the opposite way—not from media consumption to beliefs but from beliefs to media consumption (Strömberg 2015). In this

case, it is not the case that similarity of narratives convinces the readers; rather, readers “cherry-pick” narratives, which they already believe in, and respond to them. This is of extreme importance for our non-experimental setting, where we cannot randomize the treatment (access to Russian propaganda). As long as the media content is not randomly assigned to individual groups of users (Enikolopov et al. 2011; Kern and Hainmueller 2009; Yanagizawa-Drott 2014), we cannot separate two interpretations: that certain narratives (probably, due to their proximity to domestic propaganda) convinced the readers and that readers focused on narratives they found convincing in the first place in their response. From the sender country’s perspective, the second interpretation means that the effort of foreign propaganda was, while not harmful, useless: the target public would still hold the same beliefs without it. The first interpretation implies that foreign propaganda could be useful, but would “work” only if tailored to specific content domestic audiences are likely to believe in.

### *Crisis as a Catalyst for the Public Reaction to Narratives*

Simply supplying information on specific topics to the population of a foreign country may turn out completely irrelevant because this population will not consume this information. With some exceptions (like the former Soviet Union countries with strong presence of the Russian media), propaganda by foreign authoritarian powers is much less visible than domestic propaganda. It is relatively rare for people, whether they live in a democracy or an autocracy, to actively seek out political information (Prior 2007). Typically, individuals identify convenient sources of information for themselves and seldom change them. Anecdotal evidence indicates that even in autocracies, where sensitive information is restricted, providing access to unrestricted Internet does not necessarily increase the consumption of alternative information (Chen and Yang 2019).

People usually need additional incentives to begin looking for political information. Such stimuli, which can prompt people to change their media preferences, may include international crises. Events like wars or the Covid-19 pandemic disrupt normal life, forcing citizens to seek more information about what is happening both globally and locally.<sup>6</sup> During such periods of socio-political instability, media impact on public opinion may increase as people engage with it more frequently (Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur 1976). The primary mechanism behind this heightened incentive to seek political information during crises and exogenous shocks seems to be an increase in societal anxiety. In such times, individuals attempt to manage this heightened anxiety by seeking out current

information about the ongoing crisis (Marcus et al. 2000).<sup>7</sup>

Wars, terrorist attacks, economic crises, and pandemics can have a profound impact on how much attention the public pays narratives from various sources.<sup>8</sup> Drawing on Birkland’s (1998) focusing events theory, major crises act as critical junctures that interrupt everyday routines and force citizens to re-assess the importance of political information. Focusing events are characterized by their suddenness and magnitude, which increase the salience of political issues and lead to a temporary reordering of public priorities. In this context, the full-scale invasion of Ukraine represents a potent focusing event. The narrative persuasion literature also shows that people find narratives more compelling when they can directly relate them to significant events they have experienced (Appel and Richter 2010; Zebregs et al. 2014). These events shape the evidence and experience people use to evaluate the plausibility of claims. Social movement studies also find that critical events can disruptively shift public perceptions around the movement’s core narratives and demands (Barberá et al. 2015). Nomikos (2022) found public support for the current leader decreased after the US’s withdrawal from Afghanistan.

That is why we examine how the narrative preferences of the Chinese audience for RT and Sputnik shifted following Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. It is plausible to argue that during this period, many ordinary Chinese citizens were drawn to the rapidly unfolding crisis and began to actively follow news about Russia, including content from the Chinese branches of RT and Sputnik. This could have led to a shift in their preferences for Russian propaganda content.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, similarly to the discussion in the previous section, there may be other mechanisms triggered by the war, which could change the response of Chinese users to the Russian propaganda. The war could have affected the overall interest in the Russian messages but not their convincingness; this would lead to Chinese users focusing in particular on the part of the Russian message, which they find convincing (essentially, “cherry-pick”). It is also possible that the war increased the willingness of Chinese users to react to Russian messages due to their salience. We will address these issues in the subsequent analysis.

### **Main Hypotheses**

Our study is based on three hypotheses. The first refers to the effect of the full-scale invasion on the engagement of Chinese users with Russian propaganda. The second and the third, which are even more interesting for us from the theoretical standpoint because they are more controversial, refer to how the effect of the full-scale invasion differs for different narratives (i.e., interactional

hypotheses). Here, as mentioned, we use relatively non-political and neutral soft propaganda as a reference category. Our main focus is on searching for already existing narratives in the Chinese public discourse (reinforced by the Chinese domestic propaganda), which would matter for how Russian propaganda and its specific narratives would be perceived after the full-scale invasion.

The first hypothesis is relatively straightforward. In the theoretical section, we argued that major shocks and crises increase the interest for news related to these crises. At the same time, unlike the EU and the US, in China, Russian media have never been subject to public controversial debate highlighting their role of transmitters of Russian propaganda and fake news. Therefore, it is probable that Chinese users will actively try to find information about the giant geopolitical event unraveling in the world, and will see Russian media (RT and Sputnik) as interesting sources of information (due to their arguable proximity to the event; this, again, does not imply that RT and Sputnik will automatically convince Chinese users). Our first hypothesis therefore is:

**H1:** Russia's full-scale invasion against Ukraine is likely to lead to greater engagement of the Chinese public with the messages of the Russian propaganda.

Next, we proceed with interactional hypotheses. Here, our fundamental logic is as follows: we discuss specific features of the Chinese public discourse (and, most importantly, propaganda of the Chinese state), which would make certain narratives of the Russian propaganda more appealing for the Chinese audiences. This would mean that either this propaganda would be (relatively) more convincing for the Chinese audience after the full-scale invasion or Chinese audiences would be more likely to perceive Russia and its war against Ukraine through a particular lense and thus engage with elements of Russian propaganda narrative fitting this lense more closely.

First, by framing the conflict as a necessary response to Western intimidation, Russia's strategic communication aims to portray Western powers not merely as internationally influential but also as aggressors imposing their will through military power and economic sanctions. Chinese public has been historically wary of Western intervention—a legacy of the Century of Humiliation and collective memory of encroachments on Chinese independence. This type of narratives plays an important role in the Chinese official propaganda. The (from this point of view) conspicuous involvement of Western nations in Ukraine provides potent fodder to view of Western countries as aggressors seeking to maintain their global supremacy. Russian propaganda taps into existing sentiments and is likely to find an amplified echo amid the backdrop of the war; Russia's narratives gain credibility

among those predisposed to viewing Western actions with suspicion. From this point of view, we can formulate our second hypothesis.

**H2:** Russia's full-scale invasion against Ukraine is likely to lead to greater engagement of the Chinese public with the messages of the Russian propaganda criticizing the West (including the presentation of the Western democracy as unreliable and the Western hegemony as unjust and aggressive) in relation to more neutral soft propaganda.

There are, however, good arguments against this conjecture. Russia's aggressive military actions in Ukraine raises concerns over Russia's reliability as a stable partner. Historically, China has been cautious of Russia's territorial ambitions, which may color current public perceptions of Russia's geopolitical strategies. Russia was among actors taking over Chinese territory and imposing unequal treaties to China during the Century of Humiliation. This historical perspective could foster skepticism among the Chinese populace regarding Russia's intentions in Ukraine. The incursion might be perceived as an indication of Russia's willingness to escalate conflicts, potentially dragging China into broader, unwanted conflicts. Such views could undermine the credibility of Russian narratives in China. Furthermore, for the Chinese domestic propaganda, there is hardly any trope as important as "sovereignty": this is an essential for China both to criticize Western interventions into domestic affairs of other countries and reinforce Chinese claim over Tibet, Xinjiang and Taiwan.<sup>10</sup> Russia's aggression against Ukraine constitutes such a blatant breach of the principle of sovereignty that it is very difficult for China to reconcile with it.

There is, however, a different aspect of Russian propaganda, which could be interpreted by the Chinese public without these problematic connotations. War in Ukraine has strengthened Russia's strategic pivot toward fostering a multipolar world where it positions itself as a formidable counterbalance to the West. This alignment with the concept of a multipolar world order may resonate with the Chinese public, with Chinese domestic propaganda strongly opposing a unipolar global structure dominated by the US and its allies. In this broader geopolitical context, Russia's military actions could be perceived not as acts of aggression but as decisive steps aimed at challenging and potentially reshaping the international system to allow for increased influence from other global powers, notably China. This strategic shift can be perceived as underscoring Russia's commitment to diminishing Western influence and highlights its role as a staunch ally to nations favoring global diversification, committed to collaborating with China and other like-

mindful nations to promote a truly multipolar world. This stance potentially elevates Russia's image in the eyes of the Chinese public and government and reinforces the perception of Russia as a key player in the global struggle against Western dominance.

The war in Ukraine had a major impact on Russia's foreign economic ties. Traditionally, Europe has been a key market for Russian raw materials, but the imposition of sanctions and the deteriorating political relationships have compelled Russia to redirect its economic focus toward non-Western countries. This shift not only aligns with Russia's long-term strategy of reducing dependency on Western markets but also resonates strongly with Chinese economic and geopolitical interests. As Europe reduces its dependence on Russian energy, Russia has increasingly turned to China and other Asian markets to compensate for these losses. This realignment has facilitated more favorable energy prices for China, which benefits from the increased availability and potentially lower costs of Russian energy supplies. Moreover, this shift is advantageous for Chinese manufacturers and exporters, as it opens up the Russian market to Chinese products, filling the gaps left by reduced European trade—Russian market, for example, for the first time in history made China a globally important exporter of cars.<sup>11</sup> Such economic interdependencies enhance the Chinese public's perception of the benefits derived from a closer relationship with Russia, thereby fostering more favorable views toward the narratives of international collaboration promoted by Russia. From this point of view, we suggest the following hypothesis:

**H3:** Russia's full-scale invasion against Ukraine is likely to lead to greater engagement of the Chinese public with the messages of the Russian propaganda emphasizing cooperation with non-Western countries (including emphasis on Russia's achievements) in relation to more neutral soft propaganda.

An interesting question from this point of view is which type of narratives Russia itself wants to promote to a larger extent. Ma et al. (2025) suggest that Russia in its domestic propaganda is much more focusing on presenting the West as an inherently hostile power, while China in communicating with its public focuses more on tangible economic and political benefits of cooperation with non-Western powers (including Russia). If Russia protracted this domestic approach towards a foreign (Chinese) audience, it could lead to a mismatch: Chinese propaganda would rather emphasize narratives of non-Western cooperation, while Russian propaganda would strengthen the narratives of the hostile West. We will check whether we observe similar patterns in our data.

## Data and Method

To perform our analysis, we scraped all Weibo posts from RT (with 1.96 million followers) and Sputnik (with 11.74 million followers) for the 6 months before and after the full-scale invasion (February 24, 2022), completing data collection in June 2023. The dataset includes the content of all posts, their posting times, and the number of likes, shares, and comments each received. We also scraped all comments under these posts. In total, we collected 14,814 posts (RT: 5,720; Sputnik: 9,094). Each post was assigned to a specific propaganda narrative (see Appendix A8). To find out the extent to which different narratives of Russian propaganda resonate with Chinese audiences and how this effect differed after the full-scale invasion, we estimated a series of OLS regressions, using a tweet of RT or Sputnik as a unit of observation and three dependent variables: number of likes, shares, and comments associated with a tweet. To account for the highly skewed distributions of engagement metrics, we performed a log transformation on the variables measuring user engagement. We regress these variables on (a) a set of dummies for topics of individual posts; (b) dummy for posts published after the full-scale invasion and (c) interaction between (a) and (b).

The principal independent variables (i.e., the themes of the posts) are delineated as follows. The first five narratives categories are directly derived from theory. As discussed in the theory section, we introduce two main narratives (combatting the West and collaborating with the non-West), two sub-narratives within each of them (problems of democracies, pitfalls of the Western hegemony, attractiveness of Russia as a partner and collaboration between Russia and China), and an additional sub-narrative within the "Collaborating with non-West" narrative (soft propaganda). This translates into the following dummies for each post<sup>12</sup>:

- (1) Rotten\_Democracy, encompassing posts that highlight adverse developments within Western democracies (e.g., lax drug policies, shooting incidents) and partisan political strife.
- (2) West\_Hegemony, including posts asserting that Western democracies instigate conflicts in other regions through sanctions, containment strategies, and military interventions.
- (3) Russia\_Achievement, featuring posts that celebrate Russia's national accomplishments in economy and technology, alongside efforts to enhance President Putin's public image.
- (4) Russia\_Collaboration, covering posts that detail Russia's international partnerships and its active involvement in regional

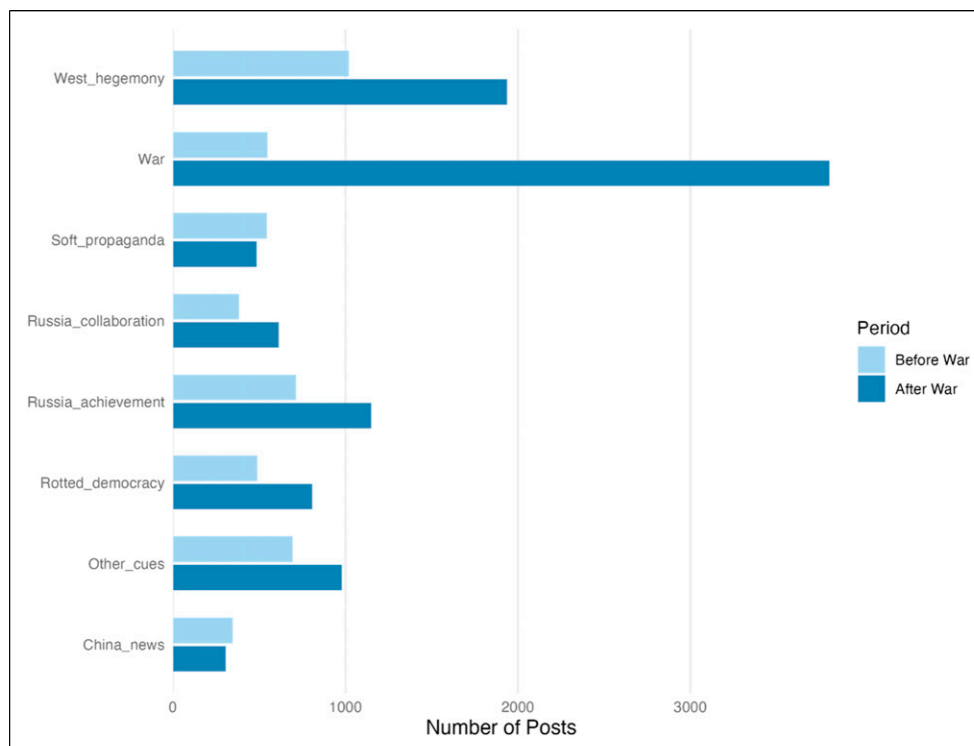
organizations, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and BRICS.

- (5) *Soft\_Propaganda*, comprising posts related to sports, entertainment, and cultural exchanges. We use the soft propaganda dummy as the baseline category (as discussed above), so that all other dummies should be interpreted as certain narratives receiving greater (or smaller) response as opposed to soft propaganda. Three further narratives are derived from the empirical observations and are not theoretically driven.
- (6) *War*, containing posts pertaining to the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, as well as pre-conflict tensions.
- (7) *China\_News*, referring to posts that discuss China's internal news and its diplomatic engagements. When addressing cross-strait relations, these are categorized under *West\_Hegemony*, reflecting their portrayal by Chinese state media as examples of containment.
- (8) *Other\_Cues*, encompassing posts related to events in other countries and regions, such as

the Middle East and Africa, as well as Russia-related news not encompassed by the aforementioned themes.

It is plausible to argue that for Chinese audiences, the full-scale invasion was mostly unexpected: while there has been discussion about the possibility of invasion before the war, the scope of invasion came as a surprise for most. Therefore, one can plausibly treat the effect of the war dummy as causal in our analysis. The dummies for narratives are of course not exogenous, and because of that we are able to obtain only correlational evidence in this case.

We add a number of control variables to account for potential confounders and include the daily amount of posts for that narrative category at a given moment of time (this allows us to control for supply-side effects); the length of the post, which could influence readability and engagement; the diversity of language, measured by the count of unique words within a tweet, indicating content richness; whether the post contains a video or hashtags, which may affect its visibility and engagement and the overall sentiment of the post, which can substantially affect audience reaction.



**Figure 1.** Main narratives of RT and Sputnik posts in Weibo. Note. A horizontal bar chart showing the frequency of different narrative categories. After the onset of war, the number of posts about “War” and “West\_hegemony” narratives increased dramatically, while other narratives showed moderate increases and “China\_news” posts decreased slightly.

## Results

### Narratives of Russian Propaganda

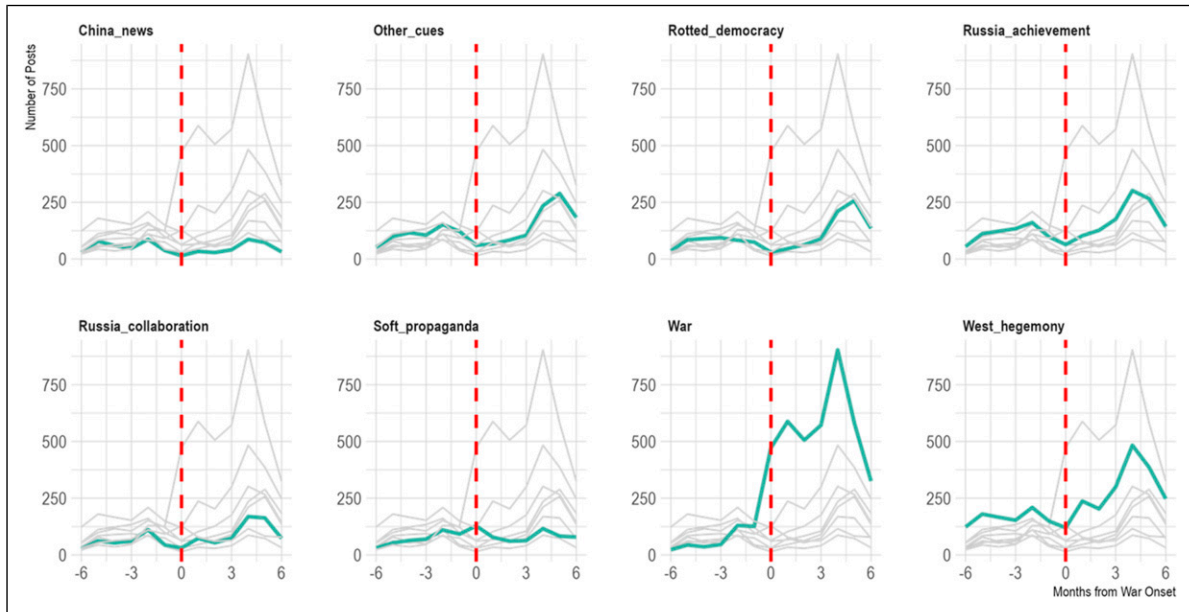
Figure 1 presents the distribution of key topics of Russian propaganda on Weibo (see also Appendix A1); Figure 2 describes the evolution of propaganda content over time. The largest category in the Russian propaganda are war-related news (which is hardly surprising, given the centrality of the war in Ukraine for Russia); this observation, however, is driven by the posts published after the invasion (before the full-scale invasion, this category included posts covering war in Donbass). The second largest group of posts (which was the largest one prior to the invasion) covers the criticism of the Western hegemony, while the third group describes Russia’s achievements. As Figure 2 shows, there is a notable peak in the volume of posts with the themes of “War” and “West\_ hegemony” around the onset of the full-scale war, while other themes, including “China\_news” and “Soft\_propaganda,” display relatively steady trends with some fluctuations over time. Thus, Russia’s main focus in propaganda directed to Chinese audience, which also intensified after February 2022, seems to be, on the one hand, the spread of Russia’s narrative about the war, and, on the other hand, the spread of narratives criticizing Western hegemony and Western democracy. Russia focuses on the first component of its propaganda we discussed in the theoretical section (criticizing the West) more than on the second one (emphasizing the benefits of

cooperation with the non-West and Russia’s achievements).

### Response of the Chinese Audience

Table 1 reports the results of OLS regressions investigating the reaction of Chinese audiences to the Russian propaganda. The first three columns test the H1. They do not include interaction terms between narratives and full-scale invasion dummy, allowing us to test whether overall engagement with Russian messages increased after the full-scale invasion. The coefficient for the full-scale invasion is significant and positive throughout all specifications. In the last three columns, we add interaction terms between dummy post-full-scale invasion and narratives. This allows us to test hypotheses H2 and H3. After the full-scale invasion, both narratives associated with the collaboration with the non-West (i.e., Russia’s achievements and Russia’s collaboration with China and the Global South) seem to gain more in attention of Chinese users than the politically neutral soft propaganda. This fits the hypothesis H3. The engagement with the rotten democracy narrative actually went down (in comparison to the engagement with soft propaganda), and for the Western hegemony narrative the results are inconclusive. Thus, while some regression coefficients are in line with H2, most of them are not.

It appears that while Russian propaganda intensified its focus on war-related messaging after February 2022, as



**Figure 2.** Change of narratives over time. Note. A set of eight line charts shows monthly post counts for each narrative from 6 months before to 6 months after the war’s onset (marked by a red dashed line). “War” and “West\_ hegemony” spike sharply after the war begins; “Russia\_achievement,” “Rotten\_democracy,” and “Soft\_propaganda” increase moderately; “China\_news” declines slightly.

**Table 1.** Reaction of Chinese audiences on narratives of RT and Sputnik before and after the full-scale invasion

	Dependent variable					
	ln_shares	ln_comments	ln_likes	ln_shares	ln_comments	ln_likes
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Narratives (reference group:soft propaganda)						
Rotten_democracy	-0.291*** (0.041)	-0.168*** (0.042)	-0.465*** (0.046)	-0.097 (0.057)	-0.023 (0.064)	-0.294*** (0.070)
West_hegemony	0.038 (0.039)	0.252*** (0.041)	-0.007 (0.044)	-0.021 (0.052)	0.185** (0.059)	-0.254*** (0.062)
Russia_collaboration	-0.092* (0.044)	-0.111* (0.047)	-0.087 (0.048)	-0.201*** (0.057)	-0.354*** (0.072)	-0.430*** (0.067)
Russia_achievement	-0.135*** (0.041)	-0.162*** (0.042)	-0.205*** (0.045)	-0.248*** (0.054)	-0.419*** (0.064)	-0.519*** (0.064)
Dummy full-scale invasion	0.196*** (0.022)	1.138*** (0.023)	1.448*** (0.024)	0.144* (0.067)	0.962*** (0.069)	1.102*** (0.075)
Text length	0.002*** (0.0004)	0.002*** (0.0005)	0.002*** (0.0005)	0.002*** (0.0004)	0.002** (0.0005)	0.002*** (0.0005)
Number of unique words	-0.007*** (0.002)	-0.008*** (0.002)	-0.010*** (0.002)	-0.006** (0.002)	-0.007*** (0.002)	-0.009*** (0.002)
Source Sputnik (as opposed to RT)	-1.003*** (0.040)	-0.927*** (0.040)	-1.556*** (0.043)	-1.005*** (0.041)	-0.933*** (0.040)	-1.567*** (0.043)
Video	0.187*** (0.040)	-0.017 (0.037)	0.015 (0.041)	0.185*** (0.040)	-0.018 (0.037)	0.010 (0.040)
Hashtag	-0.025 (0.026)	0.097*** (0.029)	0.005 (0.029)	-0.021 (0.026)	0.100*** (0.028)	0.007 (0.028)
Daily_post_count	-0.019*** (0.002)	-0.023*** (0.002)	-0.025*** (0.002)	-0.018*** (0.002)	-0.022*** (0.002)	-0.024*** (0.002)
Rotten_democracy × dummy full-scale invasion				-0.302*** (0.081)	-0.195* (0.084)	-0.196* (0.091)
West_hegemony × dummy full-scale invasion				0.091 (0.073)	0.135 (0.076)	0.458*** (0.081)
Russia_collaboration × dummy full-scale invasion				0.188* (0.084)	0.434*** (0.094)	0.639*** (0.092)
Russia_achievement × dummy full-scale invasion				0.189* (0.077)	0.448*** (0.082)	0.584*** (0.085)
Constant	2.985*** (0.063)	3.294*** (0.064)	5.377*** (0.070)	3.000*** (0.072)	3.366*** (0.074)	5.531*** (0.081)
Observations	8,140	8,140	8,140	8,140	8,140	8,140
R <sup>2</sup>	0.313	0.451	0.609	0.319	0.458	0.617
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.312	0.450	0.608	0.317	0.457	0.617
Residual Std. Error	0.906 (df = 8,128)	0.956 (df = 8,128)	0.962 (df = 8,128)	0.902 (df = 8,124)	0.950 (df = 8,124)	0.951 (df = 8,124)
F Statistic	337.106*** (df = 11; 8,128)	607.048*** (df = 11; 8,128)	1,148.513*** (df = 11; 8,128)	253.302*** (df = 15; 8,124)	458.210*** (df = 15; 8,124)	874.343*** (df = 15; 8,124)

Note. \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ . Standard errors in parentheses.

well highlights topics about Western hegemony and rotten democracy (Western hegemony dominated Russian media communication already before the full-scale invasion), Chinese users engaged with different narratives: the war

led to greater attention to narratives about Russia's collaboration with the Global South. [Appendix A2](#) shows that Chinese users did not increase their engagement with the war narrative after the full-scale invasion. Chinese

audiences “cherry-pick” pieces of Russian narratives rather than engage more frequently with narratives Russia itself seems to prioritize; this cherry-picking is more in line with H3 than H2.<sup>13</sup>

### Alternative Explanations

The patterns we report in the previous section could be explained by the reaction of the Chinese public (either convinced by the Russian propaganda or simply preferring to respond to the parts of propaganda it believes anyway due to domestic propaganda, see also [Appendix A7](#)). However, we need to acknowledge the existence of two other explanations, quite interesting from the theoretical standpoint and certainly deserve further analysis.

First, it may be that the behavior of Chinese users is strategic: by engaging in certain topics, they consciously concentrate on those, which they believe to be a closer fit with Chinese propaganda. In this case, the most interesting piece of evidence we observe is not the increase of attention to specific topics, but the overall increase of number of likes, shares and comments to the RT and Sputnik posts after the full-scale invasion. The t-test for two accounts reveals that after the full-scale invasion there was a significant increase of all engagement indicators for Sputnik and a significant increase of the number of shares for RT (and it is also confirmed by the results of the [Table 1](#)). By increasingly engaging with the Russian propaganda media, Chinese users could signal their approval of the Russian narrative, but select aspects of it which they find less conspicuous from the point of view of the government.

Second, it is not beyond reason that response to Russian propaganda does not reflect the spontaneous behavior of netizens at all but is, in fact, strategic action of Chinese authorities. We are not aware of any evidence of such orchestrated action. At the same time, it is not beyond reason. [Weiss \(2013\)](#), using Chinese experience, argues that authoritarian regimes frequently use supposedly spontaneous nationalist demonstrations (e.g., anti-American protests) as a signaling tool in relations to foreign countries. [Chen \(2022\)](#) similarly argues that online discussions in China serve as a tool of foreign diplomatic signaling. If that is the case, the observations we made in this paper could have uncovered yet another way how Chinese government signals to Russia the importance of cooperative relations, at the same time underscoring their aspect more important for China—cooperation of non-Western countries rather than resolute and uncompromising fight against the West. This finding could be important for understanding complex relations between two major authoritarian powers in Eurasia.

### Conclusion

Our study is among the first to explore the impact of authoritarian propaganda in another authoritarian state in a real-world setting. By analyzing social media data from Russian propaganda accounts before and after the full-scale invasion against Ukraine, we explored the relationship between media cues and public engagement of Chinese Internet users and assessed the impact of the war on public reactions to multiple narratives. In a nutshell, we found that the onset of full-scale war led to increasing attention to Russian propaganda accounts; however, Chinese users seem to more actively engage with pieces of Russian propaganda, which is more compatible with the Chinese domestic propaganda narratives. In particular, Chinese netizens are not uncritically accepting propaganda but are primarily resonating with narratives about cooperation between Russia and other countries. The increase in public engagement following the war may be interpreted through multiple mechanisms, including the rallying effect ([Bryanov et al. 2023](#); [Ortung and Nelson 2019](#)), narrative resonance ([Carter and Carter 2021](#); [Fisher 2020](#)), or signaling support for national propaganda ([Huang 2015](#)). Furthermore, we cannot exclude that the effects we observe are driven by strategic signaling by the Chinese state.

We contribute to several important lines of research. First, we add to the literature on authoritarian outward propaganda (and, more generally, public diplomacy) by focusing on other authoritarian states. This topic is generally speaking underresearched and few existing studies look at the reaction on mainstream media; we use social media data to directly investigate public engagement. Generally speaking, we provide a highly complex and nuanced picture of how audiences in target states can respond to propaganda and discuss different factors explaining these responses. We also demonstrate the crucial importance of domestic propaganda in moderating the effects of foreign propaganda (or, as mentioned, even the ability of the recipient state to organize a strategic response to foreign propaganda narratives). In addressing the impact of crises and significant events on public diplomacy efforts, our research contributes a novel perspective that transcends the traditional focus on the intensity of activities. While previous studies have noted spikes in public diplomacy activities during pivotal events ([Carter and Carter 2021](#); [Elshehawy et al. 2022](#)), they offer limited insight into how these events can dynamically shift public perception. Our analysis delves into the Russia-Ukraine conflict as a transformative moment that reconfigures public engagement with foreign narratives. We demonstrate how such critical events can recalibrate public sentiment, enhancing the impact of narratives that portray the West as an antagonist while simultaneously

accentuating Russia's assertiveness. This shows that significant events serve not merely as a backdrop for intensified information operations but as a crucible for reshaping and reaffirming public perceptions.

Several limitations of the current research should be noted. First, the issue of external validity should be mentioned. Chinese case is a special one, given both generally amicable relations between Russia and China (in other authoritarian states of Eurasia, for example, reaction on Russia's aggression at the level of official narratives showed much higher level of concerns, see [Ambrosio 2022](#) and omnipresence of Chinese domestic propaganda. Second, our data is collected from single social media platform, which may overlook the variances across platforms. In addition, it is extremely difficult to investigate the influence of platform algorithms on content recommendation, which suggests the possibility that some narratives are more likely to be exposed to audiences. As a result, these narratives may receive greater subsequent engagement, not solely because of their intrinsic appeal, but also due to algorithmic amplification that increases their visibility and reach. To partially address this point, we collected Baidu Index data about the keywords search of main narratives in our studies to capture active search from the general public, and the result (shown in [Appendix A5](#)) is consistent with our findings.<sup>14</sup>

At the same time, both importance of China and Russia as key authoritarian powers in the modern world and general lack of research on the topic of our study make the contribution of our paper an interesting one. In a more networked world, autocrats will find a way to convey their message to audiences in other autocracies as well. We hope our study will stimulate further research on the interplay of foreign propaganda by other authoritarian states and domestic propaganda narratives of authoritarian powers.

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### Data Availability Statement

Replication data and code are publicly available at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/FV5MRX> (Ma 2025).

### Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

### Notes

1. Replication data and code are publicly available at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/FV5MRX>.
2. There is merely a handful of studies looking at specific contexts of authoritarian states exercising their influence in countries with close cultural specificity or traditional social and political ties, for example, Russia in Central Asia ([Chapman and Gerber 2019](#); [Gerber and Zavisca 2016](#); [Laruelle et al. 2019](#)) and authoritarian Arab states in the context of the Arab Spring ([Khondker 2011](#)). [Rasheed \(2021\)](#) and [Gurol \(2023\)](#) look at Chinese propaganda in the Global South and in particular in the Gulf states.
3. Recent studies showing that even audiences in democratic states resonate differently with narratives from authoritarian states ([Carter and Carter 2021](#); [Hernández and Madrid-Morales 2020](#)). For instance, [Carter and Carter \(2021\)](#) discovered that Russian propaganda effectively shaped US citizens' perceptions of their government's role in global affairs but not their views toward Russia.
4. [Reny and Newman \(2022\)](#) found that police killings decrease public favorability toward the police and increase mass opinion polarization. [Hebbelstrup Rye Rasmussen and Petersen \(2023\)](#) showed that divisive offline events amplify political hostility on social media. Thus, [Goldsmith et al. \(2021\)](#) found that leaders' visits boost public endorsement in foreign countries. More recently, [Aksoy et al \(2024\)](#) demonstrated that the Russian invasion correlates with a slight but statistically significant increase in Chinese support for military force, particularly against Taiwan.
5. Qualitative evidence on Russian propaganda in China is reported in [Appendix A6](#).
6. A recent study revealed that the enforcement of a lockdown in China led to a surge in Chinese citizens circumventing restricted websites within the country and accessing political information that the government sought to conceal ([Chang et al. 2022](#)). In a similar vein, [Loveless \(2008\)](#) observed that during the turbulent period of democratization in Eastern

and Central Europe, people were more inclined to search for political information.

7. At the same time, the opposite effect is also possible: media coverage frequency can shape perceptions of an issue's importance (Iyengar and Kinder 2010; Kazun 2017); at least some crises are constructed by the way media report about them. Given the enormous importance of the full-scale aggression against Ukraine, it is unlikely to be an issue for our study.
8. Recent studies show that illiberal states' targeted political communication is more frequent and evident during the election period (Carter and Carter 2021; Elshehawy et al. 2022). Our argument aligns with narrative persuasion and belief-updating literature, which suggests that people's political identity and their support for certain claims correlate with their prior knowledge, experience, and beliefs (Baron and Jost 2019; Zebregs et al. 2014). As Thomas (1999) demonstrates, external shocks can lead to shifts in the public's political perception and changes in security policy. Similarly, Berelson (1949) points out that "real happenings" often have a greater impact on changing people's minds than "mere words" (145).
9. Previous studies have noted that during international crises, especially those involving Russia, RT tends to experience a "rally effect," characterized by heightened international interest in its content (Ortung and Nelson 2019, 84).
10. [https://chinamediaproject.org/the\\_ccp\\_dictionary/sovereignty/](https://chinamediaproject.org/the_ccp_dictionary/sovereignty/).
11. <https://motor.ru/news/china-export-24-09-2024.htm>.
12. Appendix A4 reports more detailed summary of the content of posts of this group.
13. The results of our analysis were corroborated by a number of robustness checks (Appendices A2 and A3).
14. We are grateful for reviewers' valuable suggestion for using Baidu Index data to capture the active search.

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