War as a Catalyst: Russia's Public Diplomacy on Chinese Social Media During the Russo-Ukrainian War

Abstract

This study investigates Russia's information operations on the Chinese social media platform Weibo and analyzes Chinese citizens' reactions amid the Russo-Ukrainian War. Unlike previous studies that mainly focus on public responses to authoritarian states' narratives in democracies, this research explores public engagement with Russia's narratives in similar authoritarian environments. By using computational text analysis and regression discontinuity design, we find that the war greatly boosts public engagement with Russian narratives, especially those promoting partnerships outside the Western sphere. Our findings offer a deeper and more nuanced understanding of authoritarian states' exertion of sharp power. In addition, we enhance the literature on public diplomacy by demonstrating the varying resonance of public response to narratives from the sending state, as well as the impact of significant events on public reaction to foreign propaganda.

Keywords: **Public Diplomacy**, **Russo-Ukrainian War**, **Authoritarian States**

Introduction

Authoritarian states have invested considerable resources in outward propaganda to shape the global information environment (El Damanhoury et al. 2024; Fisher 2020; Hernández and Madrid-Morales 2020; Rawnsley 2015; Saunders, Crilley, and Chatterje-Doody 2022; Turcsanyi and Kachlikova 2020). This has led to a growing interest in studying the patterns of authoritarian states' international propaganda operations and their influence on public perceptions and understandings within democracies (Carter and Carter 2021; Crilley et al. 2022; Elshehawy et al. 2022; Elswah and Howard 2020; Hoyle et al. 2023; Radnitz 2022; Wagnsson 2023). However, the segment of the audience within authoritarian states, also exposed to the narratives of the sending authoritarian states, has been less studied. Authoritarian states not only target the public in democracies but also aim to influence citizens with like-minded authoritarian allies (Carter and Carter 2021; Chapman and Gerber 2019). Notably, the collaborative efforts between authoritarian states, particularly Russia and China, to influence global audiences (Rawnsley 2015) are overshadowed by more intensive and profound collaboration in their domestic media propagation. This enhanced cooperation reveals a deeper and more intricate alignment in their internal propaganda strategies.[1] For instance, a study analyzing narratives about the 2022 Russo-Ukrainian War on Chinese social media, which included over 24 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, followed by Ukrainian websites, with Chinese and US websites having less impact (Hanley, Lu, and Pan 2024). The lack of attention to authoritarian states' outward propaganda within like-minded states hinders a

[1] https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/china-russia-convergence-communication-sphere-exploring-growing-information-nexus

comprehensive assessment of their public diplomacy strength (Walker, Kalathil, and Ludwig 2020).

Audiences in authoritarian states may be more receptive to narratives from the sponsoring states compared with their counterparts in democracies. Traditional public diplomacy 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). However, this overlooks the variety of narratives in outward-facing propaganda and the diverse objectives of the sending countries. In other words, the public in like-minded countries may not be equally receptive to all types of narratives from the sending country. This is supported by 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. Therefore, it is plausible that certain narratives from sending countries are more appealing than others to the public in authoritarian states.

More importantly, the resonance of citizens with public diplomacy is influenced not only by the content of the narratives but also by major events that provide context and serve as catalysts for interpretation. This is in line with scholarship on narrative persuasion, which stresses the importance of evidence and experience in shaping the public perception of specific claims (Zebregs et al. 2015). Major events like wars and pandemics can reinforce or challenge public understanding of narratives. Recent literature on social movements also indicates that significant events can disruptively influence public perception and understanding of claims, narratives, and policies (Barberá et al. 2015; Birkland 1998; Kim 2023; Lee 2002). For example, Reny and Newman (2022) found that police killings decrease public favorability toward the police and increase mass opinion polarization. Similarly, Hebbelstrup Rye Rasmussen and Petersen (2023) showed that divisive offline events amplify political hostility on social media. However, the impact of significant events has been largely understudied in research on authoritarian foreign propaganda. In addition, Goldsmith, Horiuchi, and Matush (2021) found that leaders' visits boost public endorsement in foreign countries. More recently, Aksoy, Enamorado, and Yang (2024) demonstrated that the Russian invasion correlates with a slight but statistically significant increase in Chinese support for military force, particularly against Taiwan. Despite their evident impact, the role of significant events remains underexplored in studies of authoritarian foreign propaganda. While most existing studies acknowledge that the intensity of informational operations varies, peaking during elections, crises, and wars (Carter and Carter 2021; Elshehawy, Gavras, Marinov, Nanni, and Schoen 2022), the specific effects of significant events on public reactions to different narratives are still largely unknown.

The current research aims to address these gaps by investigating Russia's informational operation on Chinese social media platforms and the reactions 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, employing strategies like censorship, surveillance, bots, and trolls (Chen et al. 2023; King, Pan, and Roberts 2013; Lu et al. 2022). While social media enables authoritarian states to disseminate their alternative narratives more directly and efficiently to a broad audience, the diverse information environment also presents challenges. Authoritarian states must compete for scarce attention and persuade the public to trust their narratives. Moreover, 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 2018). As social media becomes increasingly central to conducting public diplomacy (Cull 2013), it is imperative to examine the efforts of foreign narrative projection and its outcomes within the social media landscape.

Prior work on authoritarian foreign propaganda primarily relies on survey experiments (Carter and Carter 2021; Huang 2018; Mattingly and Yao 2022; Szostek 2018). Although this approach effectively identifies the causal effects of state propaganda on public attitudes toward narratives, it is 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 departs from traditional approaches by analyzing narrative projection and reception using observational data from social media platforms. We leverage the Russo-Ukrainian War as a natural experiment to explore the causal effects of major events on public engagement with Russia's narratives. This methodological shift aims to provide insights more reflective of real-world dynamics and user interactions within the complex social media ecosystem.

Specifically, 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. By using Bertopic modeling and regression discontinuity design, we find that the Chinese public resonates more with Russia's narratives involving soft propaganda and critical information about Western democracies. The onset of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has greatly increased public engagement with Russia's narratives promoting non-Western collaboration.

Our findings offer a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of authoritarian states' sharp power. We expand the research focus from authoritarian states' informational operations in democracies to public reactions to the narratives in like-minded states. Moreover, we enhance the literature on public diplomacy by showing how public resonance with the sending state's propaganda varies across different narratives within a single state. We also highlight the impact of key events on public resonance with these narratives. By focusing on the use of social media by authoritarian states for public diplomacy and by the public to consume and interpret various cues, our study contributes to understanding the interaction patterns between the public and foreign state narratives in the authoritarian context.

Authoritarian Outward Propaganda in Like-minded States

Before analyzing the foreign propaganda objectives and narratives of authoritarian states in like-minded countries, we first outline our assumption that public opinion in targeted authoritarian allies is essential to the interests of the propaganda-sending state. Contrary to the conventional wisdom of audience cost theory, which suggests that autocrats are subject to less public pressure, recent studies demonstrate that authoritarian leaders are indeed constrained by public opinion on both domestic issues (Anderson et al. 2019; Chen, Pan, and Xu 2016) and foreign policies (Li and Chen 2021; Weeks 2008; Weiss and Dafoe 2019). Public opinion greatly influences the foreign policy orientation of authoritarian states and can shape the direction of bilateral

relationships. In other words, foreign policy in authoritarian states is not only determined by the interests of the ruling elites but also constrained by the public's perception and understanding of international affairs. Authoritarian states' strategic manipulation of foreign states' images through mainstream media coverage underscores the importance of public opinion in shaping foreign policy (Blaydes et al. 2021). In addition, literature on authoritarian regionalism indicates that bilateral and multilateral cooperation provides material support and legitimacy benefits, crucial for the survival of authoritarian regimes (Debre 2021; Libman and Obydenkova 2018). This becomes increasingly significant as the confrontation between authoritarian states and democracies intensifies (Baumann 2020). Thus, cultivating favorable public opinion in ideologically aligned authoritarian states serves as a safeguard, enabling the propaganda-sending authoritarian state to strengthen alliances and deepen cooperation with these like-minded nations.

Public opinion in neighboring countries is also regarded by the authoritarian state as a 'sphere of influence.' In Kyrgyzstan, for example, media broadcasts from Russia have been very influential since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and their prominence has intensified in recent years, in line with Russia's escalated information conflict with the United States (Chapman and Gerber 2019; Gerber and Zavisca 2016). Laruelle, Royce, and Beyssembayev (2019) also demonstrate that Russian-origin media in Kazakhstan has been reshaping public opinion, potentially steering government actions in favor of Russia. The importance of shaping public opinion in neighboring states is further highlighted by the Arab Spring, where the wave of pro-democracy protests and uprisings across the Middle East and North Africa posed a major threat to authoritarian regimes in the region (Khondker 2011). In summary, directly reaching and influencing the public in authoritarian allies is important for the sending authoritarian states to build a robust favorable external environment and extends the traditional alliance-building strategy, which focuses primarily on the top elites in authoritarian states.

Some may argue that the significance of public opinion in other authoritarian states does not necessitate intensive outward-facing propaganda from the sending authoritarian states, since authorities in the target states can construct a positive image of the sending states through their official media. For instance, China has issued a directive to its official media to eliminate negative coverage of Russia after the start of the Russo-Ukrainian War.[2] However, it remains crucial for the sending authoritarian states to disseminate their narratives to the public in like-minded states under these circumstances. First, the public in authoritarian allies is exposed to competing narratives from both state-affiliated media and independent sources, which may contradict the official narratives of the targeted authoritarian states (Enikolopov, Makarin, and Petrova 2020; Pang, Liu, and Lu 2022). Second, owing to pressure from Western democracies or strategic interests, authorities in targeted authoritarian states may be reluctant to show unequivocal support for their allies. For instance, despite its close ties with Iran, China supports the United Arab Emirates' efforts to resolve disputes over islands controlled by Iran.[3] Therefore, authorities in authoritarian states strategically disseminate narratives to the public (Blaydes et al.

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[2] https://www.voachinese.com/a/chinese-state-media-and-the-internet-ban-opinion-critical-of-russia-s-invasion-of-ukraine/6477511.html

[3] https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2024/06/02/iran-summons-china-s-ambassador-over-uae-statement

2021). In other words, authoritarian states adjust their tone toward foreign states based on their interests and goals and do not always demonstrate unwavering support for their allies. This complexity suggests that relying solely on official media in authoritarian allies is neither reliably effective nor sufficient for the sending authoritarian states to shape public opinion in those countries.

Diverse and Multifaceted Propaganda Objectives and Narratives

Drawing on the literature of strategic narrative (Roselle, Miskimmon, and O'Loughlin 2014), we argue that the overarching goals of authoritarian outward-facing propaganda are to (re)shape the targeted public's perception of the existing global order, international actors, and specific events. As the leading authoritarian propaganda superpower, Russia's foreign propaganda contains two primary components: confronting Western democracies and fostering collaboration among non-Western states. Here, we borrow the concepts from Ikenberry (2024) to distinguish different groups of states: the Global West, spearheaded by the United States and the European Union; the Global East, led by Russia and China; and the Global South, with India and Brazil as the representative states.

The narrative of blaming the West pivots on two main themes: the inherent flaws in democratic systems and Western hegemony. The first theme meticulously dissects and 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. This critique questions the efficacy of democratic governance and seeks to reduce the appeal and influence of democratic models globally, suggesting that they should not be emulated by other states. Another key objective of authoritarian propaganda is to challenge the narrative of Western hegemony, with a particular focus on the United States (Baumann 2020; Kiseleva 2015). This narrative 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, often 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.

Parallel to criticizing Western hegemony, the narrative that promotes non-Western collaboration involves two key strategies: highlighting the sending state's achievements and 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. In response, authoritarian states must effectively present their value to the targeted public. The first strategy 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). Broadcasting these positive aspects is also a typical form of image laundering, where achievements are emphasized to enhance the state's global image (Cull 2008; Nye 1990; Pamment 2014). For instance, Russia emphasizes its accomplishments in multiple aspects of nation branding (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, the 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 narrative of soft propaganda represents a crucial and integral component of modern authoritarian messaging strategies, notable for its subtlety and cultural appeal. This nuanced approach employs non-political content such as cultural exchanges, entertainment, and even conspiracy theories to subtly disseminate the values and lifestyle associated with the sending state. Reflecting an evolution in public diplomacy strategy, this method emphasizes building relationships with the target audience rather than solely focusing on direct message broadcasting (Zaharna and Uysal 2016). Research by Saunders, Crilley, and Chatterje-Doody (2022) has shown that Russia skillfully tailors its narratives to align with the interpretive perspectives and rhetorical preferences of younger generations. Similarly, Huang and Wang (2020) highlight how China employs the symbolic imagery of pandas to capture public attention and foster engagement, showcasing the country's proficient use of soft power tools to advance its diplomatic objectives. 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. This subtle infiltration into popular culture and everyday discourse makes soft propaganda a particularly effective tool for shaping public perceptions and attitudes. Using culturally resonant, appealing content helps bridge emotional and cognitive gaps, facilitating a more seamless acceptance of the sending state's broader geopolitical aims.

In summary, the outward-facing propaganda of authoritarian states targeting like-minded countries is a multifaceted and dynamic tool used to achieve various strategic objectives. The narratives crafted to support these objectives are sophisticated and diverse, ranging from direct criticism of democratic systems and Western hegemony to more subtle forms of cultural engagement and nation branding. This intricate tapestry of propaganda strategies reveals the adaptability and complexity of authoritarian states in shaping global perceptions and international relations.

Crises and Political Information

The mere supply of political information from Russian media may be ineffective on its own. 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. 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, but when the painful process of transition had concluded, people gradually lost interest in this kind of information. 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). This is supported by modern scholarship in political communication, which suggests that media coverage frequency can shape perceptions of an issue's importance (Iyengar and Kinder 2010; Kazun 2017). 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, Neuman, and MacKuen 2000).

Major events like wars, terrorist attacks, economic crises, and pandemics can have a profound impact on how the public interprets narratives from various sources. The narrative persuasion literature shows that people find narratives more compelling when they can directly relate them to significant events they have experienced (Appel and Richter 2010; Zebregs, Putte, Neijens, and Graaf 2015). 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, Jost, Nagler, Tucker, and Bonneau 2015). Nomikos (2022) found public support for the current leader decreased after the US's withdrawal from Afghanistan. Similarly, Scharbert et al. (2024) demonstrate that the Russo-Ukrainian War has decreased the sense of well-being, illustrating the psychological implications of such conflicts.

That is why we focus not only on studying the media preferences of the Chinese audience for RT and Sputnik but also on examining how these preferences shifted due to the onset of the Ukrainian crisis in 2022. Following the literature mentioned earlier, we believe that during this period, many ordinary Chinese citizens were drawn to the rapidly unfolding crisis in Ukraine, which threatened to reshape international politics. Influenced by this crisis, many Chinese people began to actively follow news about Russia, including content from the Chinese branches of RT and Sputnik, potentially leading to a shift in their preferences for Russian public diplomacy content. 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 (Orttung and Nelson 2019, p. 84). Therefore, examining this case allows for a better understanding of the evolving attitudes of the Chinese toward their relationship with Russia and evaluating the effectiveness of Russia's authoritarian public diplomacy in China during this critical period.

In the intricate landscape of international relations and public diplomacy, the resonance of the public with specific narratives is not only determined by the content of the propaganda but also profoundly influenced by big external crises. We stress the importance of the event as a major factor in influencing the public's support for narratives from abroad, which deviates form existing accounts that focus on describing characteristics of informational operation activities around important events in democracies. For instance, recent studies show that illiberal states' targeted political communication is more frequent and evident during the election period (Carter and Carter 2021; Elshehawy, Gavras, Marinov, Nanni, and Schoen 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, Putte, Neijens, and Graaf 2015). As Thomas (1999) demonstrates, external shocks can lead to shifts in the public's political perception and changes in security policy. Similarly, Berelson (1949) insightfully points out that "real happenings" often have a greater impact on changing people's minds than "mere words" (p. 145).

Russia's Foreign Propaganda

The history of modern public diplomacy in Russia began shortly after Vladimir Putin came to power. In his 2000 address to the Federal Assembly, Putin noted, "An important direction of foreign policy activity should be the promotion of an objective perception of Russia. Reliable information about events in our country is today a matter of its reputation and national security."[4] Putin's vision quickly translated into action; in 2005, the international media outlet Russia Today was established, headquartered in Moscow. At its helm was 25-year-old Margarita Simonyan, who continues to lead RT and related projects to this day. Initially tasked with providing positive coverage of Russia for foreign audiences, RT's role evolved after the 2008 conflict between Russia and Georgia, which resulted in high volumes of criticism from Western countries, Russian leadership decided that Russia Today, a rebranding, and a strategic shift toward advancing geopolitical goals (Elswah and Howard 2020). The final stage of its politicization followed the 2014 Russian-Ukrainian conflict. During this time, RT mostly abandoned entertainment content to focus solely on political events. At the same time, the news agency Sputnik was launched, affiliated with Simonyan. The primary goal of these Russian media outlets aimed at foreign audiences has been to criticize Western democracies, portray Russia as a victim of Western hegemony, and present global events from alternative perspectives, as reflected in RT's slogan, "Question More."

Despite these efforts, RT and Sputnik have repeatedly faced criticism for manipulating facts and spreading disinformation and conspiracy theories (Yablokov 2015; Cull et al. 2017; Pomerantsev 2015), leading to sanctions and restrictions.[5][6] The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 intensified crackdowns on RT and Sputnik in Western democracies. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen notably announced a ban on these outlets so that they would "no

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[4] President of Russia. (2014, March 18). Speech by the President of Russia at a rally in support of Crimea joining Russia. Kremlin. Retrieved from http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/21480

[5] Strobel, W., & Torbati, Y. (2017, November 13). Russia's RT registers as 'foreign agent' in U.S. Politico. Retrieved from https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-usa-media-restrictions-rt-idUSKBN1DD25B

[6] Waterson, J. (2019, July 26). RT fined £200,000 by Ofcom for breaching impartiality rules. The Guardian. Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/media/2019/jul/26/rt-fined-breaching-impartiality-rules-ofcom

longer be able to spread their lies to justify Putin's war."[7] However, notwithstanding the widespread concern over RT and Sputnik's negative impact on Western audiences, the effectiveness of the Russian propaganda machine remains mixed. While the content produced by Russian media can weaken support for Western policies internationally (Fisher 2020), its influence on domestic affairs appears less effective (Carter and Carter 2021). Moreover, in both online and offline domains, RT struggles to attract substantial interest among Western audiences (Mickiewicz 2014; Crilley et al. 2022). Therefore, considering the widespread bans and restrictions imposed on RT and Sputnik well before the 2022 Ukrainian crisis, which have intensified significantly since the war began, it can be argued that Western democracies have severely curtailed Russia's ability to influence them through public diplomacy.

However, it is worth noting that RT and Sputnik target audiences beyond the West. They also aim to position Russia as a leader of an anti-Western coalition among developing countries (Yablokov 2015; Orttung and Nelson 2019), a strategy potentially facilitated by negative sentiment toward Western societies among those populations. This is evident in RT and Sputnik's activities in China. Russian public diplomacy in China is a relatively new endeavor. It gained momentum after the 2014 Russian-Ukrainian conflict as relations with Western countries deteriorated and ties with China strengthened. For example, RT launched a Chinese YouTube channel in 2015. However, Russian media encountered unexpected difficulties in China: Unlike in other countries, news agencies are prohibited from broadcasting in Chinese without approval from the Chinese government. Therefore, from the outset, RT and Sputnik relied on popular Chinese social networks, primarily Sina Weibo. However, Russian media were not unprepared. RT, established in 2007, had already built a substantial social media presence, particularly on Twitter and YouTube. With more than 2.5 million subscribers, its YouTube channel was among the world's most viewed. Russian propagandists prioritized working with social networks due to their cost-effectiveness and reach, which mitigated the impact of restricted television broadcasting in China.

Unlike their approach in Western societies, where the goal of Russian media was to sow discord (Elswah and Howard 2020), Russia seeks to build bridges between Russians and Chinese in China. Insights from rare interviews with employees at the Chinese branch of RT reveal that their target audience is ordinary Chinese citizens, to whom Russian media managers aim to demonstrate the benefits of cooperation with Russia.[8] This is achieved through two main channels: First, Russian journalists report on life in Russia, including its politics, culture, and stories related to both China and Russia, thereby fostering a positive view of Russian-Chinese relations. Second, by leveraging content from other RT branches worldwide, the Chinese branch of RT presents exclusive insights into current international events, showcasing Russia's role in opposing Western countries. This strategy positions Russia and China as allies in opposition to Western countries.

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[7] Cerulus, L., & Braun, E. (2022, February 27). Ursula von der Leyen announces RT, Sputnik ban. Politico. Retrieved from https://www.politico.eu/article/ursula-von-der-leyen-announces-rt-sputnik-ban/

[8] CGTN. (2023, December 19). RT: Experience of a Russian Media Outlet in China. CGTN. Retrieved from https://russian.cgtn.com/news/2023-12-19/1736974263667273730/index.html

In summary, Russian media managers use narratives similar to those used with Western audiences – highlighting the flaws of Western democracies – to build bridges between Russia and China. A notable example of this bridge-building is the active collaboration between the Chinese branch of RT and CGTN, a Chinese media outlet for international audiences. Instead of competing, Russian and Chinese media engage in mutual development through exchanges of exclusive content on international politics, access to Russian commentators who provide perspectives on events in Russia, and the creation of joint content.[9] Thus, the two propaganda machines complement and reinforce each other's narratives, creating a unified perception among their audiences.

Russo-Ukrainian War and the Chinese Public's Reaction

The outbreak of the war between Russia and Ukraine has provided fresh material for Russia's international propaganda efforts and reinforced its long-standing master narratives. While there has been some innovation in disinformation tactics since Russia's invasion, the core narratives, which include blaming the West and promoting collaboration with non-Western nations, remain consistent. The war serves as a live demonstration of Russia's narratives about resisting Western hegemony, promoting multipolarity, and pursuing strategic international collaborations. For the Chinese public, influenced by a complex mix of historical experiences with the West, current geopolitical strategies, and regional security concerns, the war offers a new lens through which to evaluate the credibility and relevance of Russian narratives. This context allows Russian propaganda to strengthen its portrayal of Russia as a defender against Western aggression and a promoter of a new world order based on multipolar governance.

The unfolding drama of the Russo-Ukrainian War may fortify the resonance of Russian narratives concerning Western hegemony within Chinese public discourse. Before the war, Chinese attitudes toward Western dominance oscillated between skepticism and resigned recognition. However, the military conflict instigated by Russia against Ukraine, portrayed within Russian propaganda as a defensive counter to Western encroachment and NATO expansionism, could drastically reshape these perceptions. By framing the conflict as a necessary response to Western intimidation, Russia's strategic communication aims to portray Western powers not merely as international influencers but also as aggressors imposing their will through military intimidation and economic sanctions. This narrative is likely to resonate with the Chinese public, given the historical wariness of Western intervention – a legacy of the Century of Humiliation and collective memory of encroachments on sovereignty. The conspicuous involvement of Western nations in Ukraine, through direct support or sanctions against Russia, provides authoritarian regimes with potent fodder to propagate the view of Western countries as aggressors seeking to maintain their global supremacy. By emphasizing Western hegemony, Russian propaganda taps into existing sentiments and is likely to find an amplified echo amid the backdrop of the war. By consistently portraying the West as a collective antagonist, Russia's narratives gain credibility among those predisposed to viewing Western actions with suspicion. In summary, the escalation of the Russia-Ukraine conflict into full-scale war acts as a catalyst, potentially heightening the Chinese public's receptiveness to narratives depicting the West as a domineering force. This receptiveness is rooted in both current events and a historical consciousness wary of Western influence. Thus, the war becomes a lens that brings into sharp

[9] Ibid, 30:35 – 33:47.

focus the narratives of Western hegemony, making them more compelling and urgent to a Chinese audience seeking to understand the shifting dynamics of global power.

The Russo-Ukrainian War may also influence the resonance of Russian narratives among the Chinese public in the opposite direction, incorporating historical perspectives and contemporary geopolitical assessments. As articulated by Kertzer and Brutger (2016), audience costs can be understood through the dual logic of policy inconsistency and the belligerence cost associated with the threat or use of force. Russia's aggressive military actions in Ukraine present a paradox to the Chinese public. On the one hand, such aggression underscores Russia's commitment to countering Western dominance, aligning with China's interests. On the other hand, it 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. This historical perspective could foster skepticism among the Chinese populace regarding Russia's intentions in Ukraine. The incursion might be perceived not only as a challenge to the West but also 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, fueling fears that Russia's aggressive stance might entangle China in further international disputes.

Hypothesis 1: The war intensifies negative perceptions of Western hegemony, as the public in targeted countries becomes more receptive to narratives that portray the West as a military and political aggressor.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine, while predominantly viewed as a military endeavor, also reflects 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 strongly with the Chinese public, which generally opposes a unipolar global structure dominated by the United States and its allies. In this broader geopolitical context, Russia's military actions are perceived not merely 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 underscores Russia's commitment to diminishing Western influence and highlights its role as a staunch ally to nations favoring global diversification. By taking a firm stand against NATO's expansion, Russia not only asserts its sovereignty and strategic interests but also demonstrates its value to the Chinese as a robust anti-Western warrior. This alignment enhances the narrative of Russia's credibility in its commitment to collaborating with China and other like-minded nations to promote a truly multipolar world. Moreover, 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. Therefore, the military engagement in Ukraine serves as a vivid demonstration of Russia's willingness to confront Western encroachments, thereby further solidifying its role as an indispensable ally in China's long-term vision of global restructuring.

In light of the economic repercussions following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, there has been a noticeable shift in Russia's trade dynamics, particularly concerning its raw material markets. 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 concurrently advantageous for Chinese manufacturers and exporters, as it opens up the Russian market to Chinese products, potentially filling the gaps left by reduced European trade. 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.

Hypothesis 2: The Russo-Ukrainian War will increase resonance in China with Russian narratives that promote collaboration with non-Western countries.

Data and Method

This study collected a dataset of Weibo posts from RT and Sputnik for the six months before and after the onset of the war (February 24, 2022). 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 17,216 tweets (RT: 5,722; Sputnik: 9,128). The narrative categories of all posts may not fully align with the theoretical framework derived from previous studies. Therefore, we employed an unsupervised topic modeling approach to refine the narrative categories for subsequent supervised classification. Specifically, we analyzed all posts using the Bertopic model (Grootendorst 2022), an unsupervised learning approach that helps extract different themes from large volumes of short texts. After identifying these topics, we integrated them with the categories derived from our theoretical framework to optimize the classification schema for the posts. We then invited two research assistants to annotate 2,000 posts according to the optimized narrative categories and assess the sentiment of the content. Subsequently, all posts were classified using a fine-tuned, pre-trained BERT model, which achieved an accuracy of 0.85.

To explore the engagement of Chinese citizens with diverse narratives emanating from Russia, we ran OLS regression to examine the correlation between narrative types and levels of public engagement. The primary dependent variable is public engagement, measured by the aggregate of likes, shares, and comments associated with a tweet. We normalized these engagement indicators by the daily volume of the posts for each theme to account for variations in posting frequency. The principal independent variables are the themes of the posts, delineated as follows: (1) Rotted_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. (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. Control variables are carefully selected to account for potential confounders and include 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; and the overall sentiment of the post, which can substantially affect audience reaction. In addition, a crucial treatment variable, assigned a value of 0 for the period preceding the war and 1 for the period following the war's onset, explicitly captures the temporal demarcation.

To assess the impact of the onset of the Russo-Ukrainian War on public engagement, we implemented a regression discontinuity design. This analytical approach allows us to rigorously evaluate causal effects by examining abrupt changes in public engagement at the threshold marking the start of the invasion. The primary dependent variable is public engagement, quantified by the sum of likes, shares, and comments on a tweet. Control variables, carefully selected to account for potential confounders, include 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; and the overall sentiment of the post, which can significantly affect audience reaction. In addition, a treatment variable is introduced, assigned a value of 0 for the period preceding the war and 1 for the period following the war's onset, to explicitly capture the temporal demarcation. This design facilitates a nuanced understanding of how the war's outbreak alters engagement levels while holding other influential factors constant.

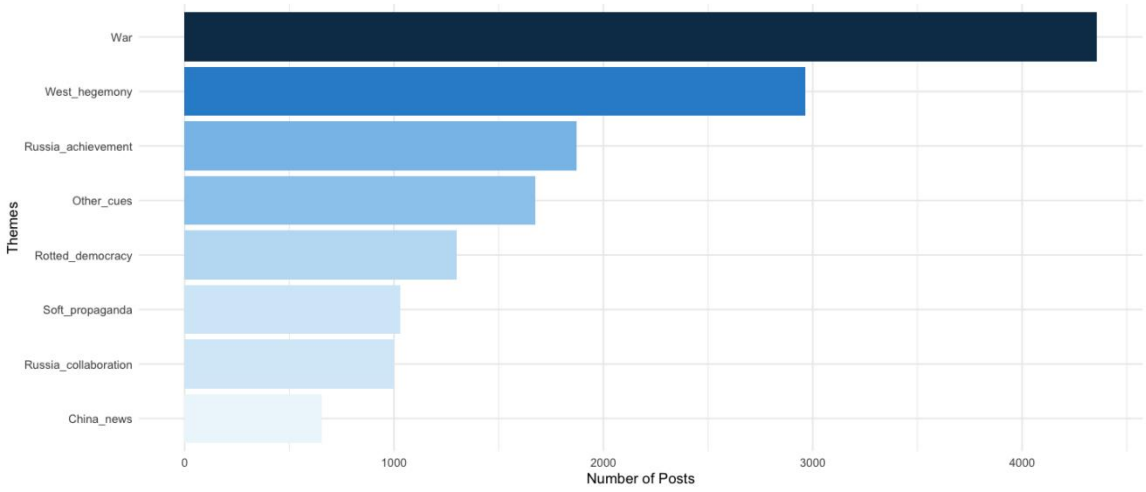
Findings

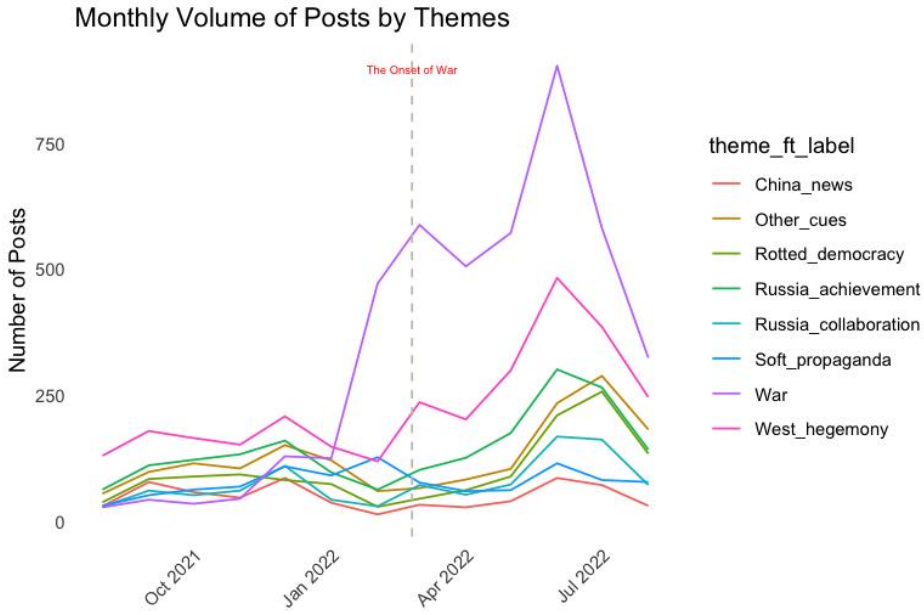
Thematic Content of Russia's Public Diplomacy

The topic modeling of Russia's public diplomacy cues on Weibo reveals a multifaceted strategy, targeting a wide range of themes, as illustrated in Figure 1. Prominently featured is the Russia-Ukraine conflict, unsurprisingly dominating the discourse with frequent mentions of Ukraine, Russia, NATO, and Putin. This underscores the conflict's centrality in Russia's current international messaging and suggests a strategic emphasis on framing the geopolitical narrative in ways that likely align with China's views on sovereignty and Western intervention. The analysis also highlights topics such as 'Energy,' where keywords like natural gas, oil, and pipeline suggest a narrative connecting Russia's role as an energy superpower to the broader geopolitical landscape, perhaps also reflecting China's concerns about energy security amid global shifts. 'Pandemic' narratives focus on vaccine diplomacy and COVID-19 management, topics that have become integral to contemporary geopolitical engagement, while 'Olympic' discussions hint at sports diplomacy, signaling a softer approach to influence. The themes extend into global politics and economics with 'Inflation,' 'Goods_shortage,' and 'Putin_support' depicting a comprehensive narrative strategy that portrays Russia as a key global player and voicing support for Putin's leadership. Meanwhile, mentions of 'Football' and figures like Abramovich demonstrate an attempt to weave cultural influence into public diplomacy, fostering soft power through popular culture. Together, these themes create a tapestry of narratives crafted

to project Russia's worldview, defend its actions, and promote its interests on a platform frequented by the Chinese populace, revealing the breadth and adaptability of Russia's strategic communications on social media. By integrating our theoretical framework with the results of topic modeling and an in-depth review of the most representative posts, we have developed a taxonomy (as introduced in the Data and Method section) for classifying the diverse narratives propagated by Russian public diplomacy on Weibo. Figure 2 indicates a notable peak in the volume of posts with the themes of "War" and "West_hegemony" around the onset of the war, while other themes, including "China_news" and "Soft_propaganda," display relatively steady trends with some fluctuations over time.

Russia's Narrative On Weibo





Multiple Narrative Cues And Public Engagement

Our empirical analysis employs linear regression models to examine the relationship between thematic content and user engagement (shares, comments, and likes), incorporating various control variables to minimize potential confounding effects.

From the table below, we observe that cues associated with soft propaganda consistently show a positive correlation across all three engagement dimensions: shares ($\beta = 0.111$, $p < .001$), comments ($\beta = 0.116$, $p < .05$), and likes ($\beta = 0.235$, $p < 0.01$). These findings suggest that soft propaganda cues are more engaging than posts about the Global South, highlighting the persuasive power of such content, which is similar to the findings regarding Russia's soft propaganda in democracies (Crilley, Gillespie, Vidgen, and Willis 2022; Saunders, Crilley, and

Chatterje-Doody 2022; Zaharna and Uysal 2016). Conversely, news about negative events in Western democracies correlates with higher levels of engagement in comments ($\beta = 0.133$, $p < 0.01$) and likes ($\beta = 0.162$, $p < 0.05$). Compared with posts about the Global South, cues regarding Western hegemony are associated with lower levels of engagement across shares ($\beta = -0.249$, $p < 0.001$), comments ($\beta = -0.239$, $p < 0.001$), and likes ($\beta = -0.435$, $p < 0.001$). In addition, cues related to Russia's domestic achievements and Russian politics negatively impact public engagement: shares ($\beta = -0.144$, $p < 0.001$), comments ($\beta = -0.173$, $p < 0.001$), and likes ($\beta = -0.231$, $p < 0.001$).

These results indicate that Russia's public diplomacy media outlets effectively engage the Chinese public through soft propaganda. In addition, these outlets increase public resonance with narratives blaming the West, consistent with previous studies showing that some radical Chinese individuals celebrate disasters in rival states. However, content related to Russia's domestic achievements and international collaboration seems less effective, potentially due to the perceived imbalance of power between China and Russia.

	Dependent variable:		
	Shares	Comments	Likes
	(1)	(2)	(3)
China News	-0.053	-0.107	-0.091
	(0.045)	(0.057)	(0.083)
War	-0.129***	-0.079	-0.181*
	(0.039)	(0.049)	(0.072)
Soft Propaganda	0.111**	0.116*	0.235**
	(0.039)	(0.050)	(0.072)
Rotted Democracy	0.075	0.133**	0.162*

	(0.040)	(0.051)	(0.074)
Russia Collaboration	-0.097*	-0.130*	-0.082
	(0.044)	(0.055)	(0.080)
Russia Achievement	-0.144***	-0.173***	-0.231***
	(0.036)	(0.046)	(0.067)
West Hegemony	-0.249***	-0.239***	-0.435***
	(0.034)	(0.043)	(0.062)
War Onset	-0.474***	-0.352***	-0.579***
	(0.034)	(0.043)	(0.062)
Text Length	-0.0004	-0.001*	-0.001**
	(0.0002)	(0.0003)	(0.0004)
Number of Unique Words	0.004***	0.006***	0.010***
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.002)
Source Sputnik	-0.503***	-0.572***	-0.884***
	(0.019)	(0.023)	(0.034)
Video	-0.111***	-0.064**	-0.131***
	(0.017)	(0.021)	(0.031)

Hashtag	0.028	0.008	0.037
	(0.016)	(0.020)	(0.029)
China News:War Onset	0.661***	0.946***	1.412***
	(0.063)	(0.080)	(0.117)
War:War Onset	-0.117*	-0.326***	-0.470***
	(0.046)	(0.058)	(0.085)
Soft Propaganda:War Onset	0.525***	0.762***	1.066***
	(0.054)	(0.069)	(0.100)
Rotted Democracy:War Onset	-0.001	0.025	0.002
	(0.052)	(0.065)	(0.095)
Russia Collaboration:War Onset	0.529***	0.711***	0.947***
	(0.056)	(0.070)	(0.103)
Russia Achievement:War Onset	0.281***	0.321***	0.426***
	(0.047)	(0.059)	(0.086)
West Hegemony:War Onset	0.231***	0.163**	0.263***
	(0.043)	(0.054)	(0.079)

Constant	1.204***	1.321***	2.092***
	(0.030)	(0.037)	(0.055)
Observations	14,812	14,812	14,812
R^2	0.237	0.225	0.246
Adjusted R^2	0.236	0.224	0.245
Residual Std. Error (df = 14791)	0.680	0.859	1.254
F Statistic (df = 20; 14791)	229.634***	214.291***	241.678***
Note:			*p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Table 1: Regression results of thematic content and public engagement

War and Public Engagement

Our analysis reveals significant changes in public interactions with narrative themes following the Russo-Ukrainian War, effectively functioning as a natural experiment for gauging shifts in the public's engagement with specific propaganda themes. As Figure 3 shows, posts under the themes of "Russia_collaboration," "Soft_propaganda," and "War" saw a substantial uptick in engagement, registering increases across shares, likes, and comments. This surge in interaction suggests an alignment of public sentiment with the premise that significant events like the Russo-Ukrainian War intensify the impact of narratives showing Russia's value as a strategic partner. By contrast, the onset of the war did not significantly alter engagement with "West_hegemony" and "Rotted_democracy" themes, indicating that these narratives may not resonate as strongly with the Chinese public in the context of the war. This may be attributed to the public's long-held perceptions of bias in Russian reports about the West.

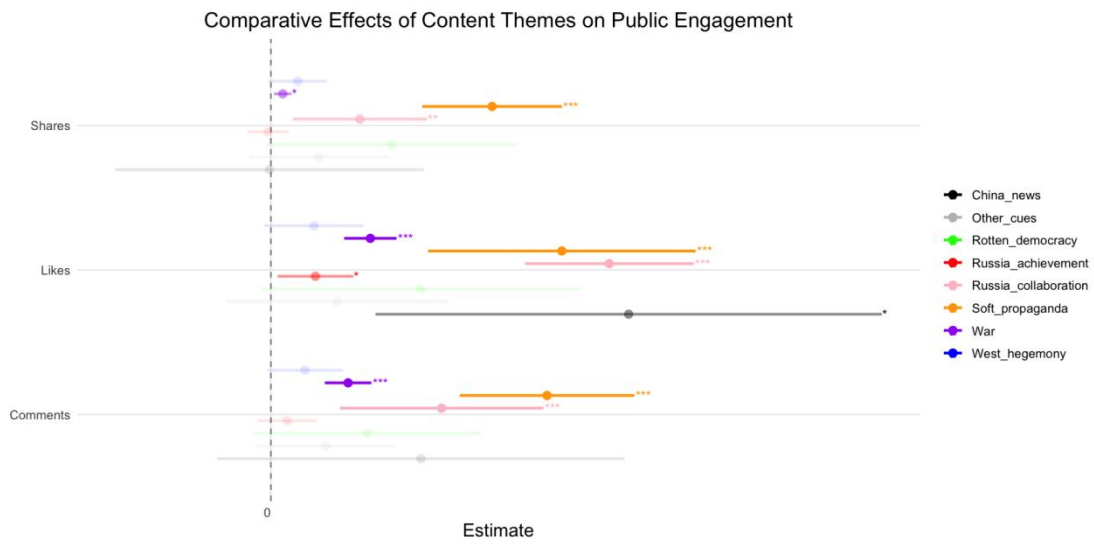


Figure 3: The Effects of War Outbreak On Public Engagement

Robustness Checks

Placebo test

To further validate the robustness of our findings, we conducted a placebo test to ascertain the causal relationship between the start of the Russo-Ukrainian War and public engagement. The placebo test involved randomly assigning pseudo-treatment dates unrelated to the actual onset of the war (specifically, the dates of the 13th and 14th BRICS summits, held on 9 September 2021 and 23 June 2022, respectively). We set the time window for the pseudo-treatment period as eight weeks before and after the pseudo-treatment date. The results of the placebo test, as depicted in Supplementary Material Figures 1 and 2, show no significant changes in engagement, reinforcing the causal link between the war outbreak and heightened public engagement with specific narratives. This test underscores the reliability of our findings and the validity of using a regression discontinuity design to capture the impact of significant events on public engagement.

Making the causal Inference from text data

Our core explanatory variable, the theme of posts extracted from text features, may be influenced by the confounding effect of unobserved features. Following the strategy suggested by Fong and Grimmer (2023), we adjusted for potential confounders and controlled for the sentiment of the posts. The results, as presented in Supplementary Material Table 2 and Figure 3, indicate that post sentiment does not significantly affect public engagement, thus confirming the robustness of our main results.

Engagement caused by trolls and bots

Concerns have been raised that increases in public engagement could be driven by trolls and bots. We scrutinized the top 50 users who commented most frequently on RT and Sputnik News by looking at their profiles and their posts over the past three months. Employing strict criteria for bot and troll identification based on previous studies (Golovchenko et al. 2020), such as publishing negative information about the West or engaging exclusively with RT and Sputnik

News, we identified 19 troll accounts among these most frequent commenters. Notably, these accounts represent only 13% of the total comments.

The impact of China's official media

Another concern is that the Chinese public's reaction to Russia's propaganda may also be influenced by their domestic media. Rhee et al. (2024) show that domestic media framing can shape public perceptions toward foreign states. To address this concern, we analyzed all posts from the People Daily Weibo account during the same period. We calculated text similarity with posts from Russia's public diplomacy accounts, considering posts from three days before and after the posts from People Daily. We retained the posts with the highest similarity scores and re-ran the regression analysis, including additional control variables for the similarity scores. The results show that the similarity score does not significantly affect public engagement, and the main findings remain robust.

Discussion

By analyzing social media data from Russian public diplomacy accounts before and after the onset of the Russo-Ukrainian War, we explored the relationship between media cues and public engagement and assessed the impact of the war on public reactions to multiple narratives. Given the sustained and increasing media collaboration between China and Russia, our research findings have major implications for understanding the dynamics of public opinion in authoritarian states and the effectiveness of their public diplomacy.

The increase in public engagement following the war may be interpreted through multiple mechanisms, including the rallying effect (Bryanov et al. 2023; Orttung and Nelson 2019), narrative resonance (Carter and Carter 2021; Fisher 2020), or signaling support for national propaganda (Huang 2015). We argue that narrative resonance, rather than the other mechanisms, predominantly drives engagement. Our findings indicate that there has not been a significant increase in engagement with anti-Western narratives among the Chinese public since the start of the war, which, according to Ma et al. (2024), is a crucial element in both Russian and Chinese propaganda. This suggests that Chinese netizens are not uncritically accepting propaganda but are primarily resonating with narratives about cooperation between Russia and other countries. We further classified the posts on this topic into five subdomains: military, economic, energy, science and technology, and diplomatic activities. The majority of the posts were concentrated in the domains of diplomatic activities and economic matters. In other words, apart from broad diplomatic engagements, the Chinese public views trade with Russia as a key opportunity.

Building on the work of Gurol (2023), Rasheed (2022), and Chapman and Gerber (2019), we contribute to the literature on authoritarian outward propaganda in like-minded states. Unlike previous studies that focus on the reaction of mainstream media in the targeting states (Gurol 2023), we use social media data to directly investigate public engagement, closely aligning with the goals of public diplomacy. Furthermore, while recent studies emphasize how narrative shapes public perceptions of international affairs (Chapman and Gerber 2019; Rasheed 2022), we examine how public resonance with certain narratives is influenced by significant events.

Our research advances the discussion within public diplomacy literature by scrutinizing the effectiveness of such practices within like-minded nations. While prior studies posit that public diplomacy is primed for success in countries sharing similar political and ideological frameworks

(Sheafer and Gabay 2009), they often overlook the intricate diversity of narratives and the multidimensional nature of public engagement. Departing from treating the authoritarian narrator's narrative as homogeneous, we investigate the public's reaction to different types of narratives. Our findings challenge this one-dimensional view, demonstrating that Chinese citizens do not uniformly embrace all narratives from Russia. The research reveals a nuanced pattern of engagement where narratives about soft propaganda and negative portrayals of Western democracies attract more public attention than those highlighting Russia's achievements and international collaborations. This suggests that the success of public diplomacy is more complex than previously assumed, depending not only on political alignment but also on the substance and framing of the narratives presented. Contrary to previous studies that suggest that the public is more receptive to foreign propaganda's manipulation of international affairs (Carter and Carter 2021; Chapman and Gerber 2019), our findings indicate that the public engages more with domestic news than with third-party countries' news broadcasted by the sending states.

In addressing the impact of 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, Gavras, Marinov, Nanni, and Schoen 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.

Our research enriches the understanding of authoritarian regionalism by empirically examining the role of alliances and partnerships among authoritarian states in reinforcing political legitimacy. Previous scholarship in this area often highlights the benefits of such relationships without substantiating these claims with empirical data (Debre 2021; Libman and Obydenkova 2018). By analyzing the interaction patterns between Russian state media narratives and Chinese public engagement, our research illustrates how sending states can effectively leverage and amplify narratives that resonate with the target state's own stances. This dynamic suggests that the collaboration in propaganda between authoritarian allies can indeed enhance the perceived legitimacy of their respective political narratives, providing concrete evidence of the interplay between alliance formation and public diplomacy within authoritarian regionalism.

Several limitations of the current research should be noted. First, although we controlled for the impact of domestic government statements when assessing the sending state's public diplomacy endeavors, the Chinese government's pro-Russia or at least neutral stance toward the Russo-Ukrainian War represents a converging relationship between the narratives of the two countries. This may limit the generalizability of our findings. Ambrosio (2022) analyzed the official narratives from Belarus and Kazakhstan, noting that the Ukraine crisis heightened their concerns about threatened autonomy within the alliance with Russia. Future studies could further explore the intricate relationship between public diplomacy from foreign countries, domestic propaganda, and public reactions to both similar and divergent narratives. Moreover, given the data limitations, we could not evaluate the heterogeneity of public reactions to Russia's narratives. Laruelle, Royce, and Beyssembayev (2019) found that Kazakhstan's public trust toward

Russian-origin media significantly decreased after the Ukraine crisis, while Russian ethic groups still exhibit relatively high trust compared with ethnic Kazakhs. Future research could benefit from examining reactions to Russia's narratives across different regions and social groups.

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Supplementary Material

Table 1 The 13th BRICS Summit As Placebo Test

	Dependent variable:		
	Shares	Comments	Likes
	(1)	(2)	(3)
China News	0.061	-0.139	0.019
	(0.163)	(0.179)	(0.261)
War	-0.319*	-0.405*	-0.684**
	(0.144)	(0.158)	(0.230)
Soft Propaganda	0.078	0.056	0.010
	(0.151)	(0.166)	(0.242)

Rotted Democracy	-0.563***	-0.732***	-1.082***
	(0.149)	(0.164)	(0.238)
Russia Collaboration	-0.040	-0.094	-0.147
	(0.163)	(0.179)	(0.261)
Russia Achievement	-0.345*	-0.434**	-0.603**
	(0.142)	(0.156)	(0.228)
West Hegemony	-0.571***	-0.683***	-1.071***
	(0.129)	(0.142)	(0.207)
BRICS13	-0.160	-0.111	-0.133
	(0.129)	(0.141)	(0.206)
Text Length	-0.0003	-0.001	-0.001
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Number of Unique Words	0.003	0.005	0.009*
	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.004)
Sentiment	-0.022	-0.031	-0.011
	(0.024)	(0.027)	(0.039)
Source Sputnik	-1.406***	-1.790***	-2.759***

	(0.050)	(0.055)	(0.081)
Video	-0.300***	-0.149**	-0.298***
	(0.051)	(0.056)	(0.082)
Hashtag	0.005	-0.042	-0.048
	(0.029)	(0.032)	(0.047)
China News:BRICS13	-0.167	-0.122	-0.321
	(0.176)	(0.194)	(0.283)
War:BRICS13	0.025	-0.074	-0.033
	(0.156)	(0.172)	(0.250)
Soft Propaganda:BRICS13	0.038	-0.115	-0.005
	(0.166)	(0.182)	(0.266)
Rotted Democracy:BRICS13	0.214	0.217	0.241
	(0.161)	(0.177)	(0.258)
Russia Collaboration:BRICS13	-0.093	-0.162	-0.112
	(0.177)	(0.194)	(0.283)
Russia Achievement:BRICS13	0.019	-0.036	-0.088
	(0.154)	(0.170)	(0.247)

West Hegemony:BRICS13	0.233	0.230	0.334
	(0.142)	(0.156)	(0.227)
Constant	2.406***	2.816***	4.319***
	(0.130)	(0.143)	(0.208)
Observations	2,921	2,921	2,921
R^2	0.491	0.536	0.566
Adjusted R^2	0.487	0.533	0.563
Residual Std. Error (df = 2899)	0.655	0.721	1.050
F Statistic (df = 21; 2899)	133.179***	159.508***	180.043***
Note:			*p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Table 2 The 14th BRICS Summit As Placebo Test

	Dependent variable:		
	Shares	Comments	Likes
	(1)	(2)	(3)
China News	0.661***	0.991***	1.544***

	(0.046)	(0.064)	(0.094)
War	0.357***	0.573***	0.891***
	(0.030)	(0.043)	(0.062)
Soft Propaganda	0.859***	1.231***	1.892***
	(0.039)	(0.054)	(0.079)
Rotted Democracy	0.498***	0.820***	1.192***
	(0.034)	(0.047)	(0.069)
Russia Collaboration	0.546***	0.832***	1.267***
	(0.035)	(0.048)	(0.070)
Russia Achievement	0.298***	0.445***	0.666***
	(0.026)	(0.036)	(0.052)
West Hegemony	0.186***	0.291***	0.416***
	(0.023)	(0.032)	(0.046)
BRICS14	-0.020	-0.006	-0.005
	(0.019)	(0.027)	(0.039)
Text Length	0.0001	-0.0004	-0.001
	(0.0003)	(0.0004)	(0.001)

Number of Unique Words	0.001	0.004*	0.005*
	(0.001)	(0.002)	(0.002)
Sentiment	0.018	0.025	0.049*
	(0.010)	(0.015)	(0.021)
Source Sputnik	-0.239***	-0.264***	-0.411***
	(0.019)	(0.026)	(0.038)
Video	-0.075***	-0.055*	-0.100**
	(0.016)	(0.022)	(0.032)
Hashtag	0.032	0.035	0.069*
	(0.017)	(0.024)	(0.035)
China News:BRICS14	0.005	0.008	0.077
	(0.063)	(0.089)	(0.129)
War:BRICS14	-0.270***	-0.418***	-0.618***
	(0.039)	(0.055)	(0.080)
Soft Propaganda:BRICS14	-0.114*	-0.099	-0.109
	(0.054)	(0.076)	(0.110)

Rotted Democracy:BRICS14	-0.331***	-0.528***	-0.764***
	(0.043)	(0.059)	(0.087)
Russia Collaboration:BRICS14	-0.050	-0.085	-0.090
	(0.047)	(0.065)	(0.095)
Russia Achievement:BRICS14	-0.033	-0.057	-0.050
	(0.036)	(0.051)	(0.074)
West Hegemony:BRICS14	-0.050	-0.099*	-0.136*
	(0.031)	(0.044)	(0.064)
Constant	0.321***	0.383***	0.579***
	(0.021)	(0.029)	(0.043)
Observations	7,838	7,838	7,838
R^2	0.228	0.232	0.253
Adjusted R^2	0.226	0.230	0.251
Residual Std. Error (df = 7816)	0.483	0.674	0.983
F Statistic (df = 21; 7816)	109.927***	112.237***	126.381***
Note:			*p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Table 3 Controlling The Impacts of Chinese Domestic Propaganda

	Dependent variable:		
	Shares	Comments	Likes
	(1)	(2)	(3)
China News	-2.999	-0.703	-6.035
	(2.175)	(1.726)	(44.999)
War	-2.139	-0.364	-11.977
	(1.890)	(1.500)	(39.103)
Soft Propaganda	9.504***	7.454***	177.209***
	(1.901)	(1.509)	(39.327)
Rotted Democracy	-1.950	-0.853	-10.775
	(1.948)	(1.547)	(40.311)
Russia Collaboration	-3.918	-2.228	-12.392
	(2.101)	(1.668)	(43.470)
Russia Achievement	-0.849	0.027	16.036
	(1.754)	(1.392)	(36.284)

West Hegemony	-3.862*	-2.086	-19.789
	(1.636)	(1.298)	(33.843)
War Onset	-10.545***	-7.911***	-88.934*
	(1.679)	(1.333)	(34.742)
Text Length	-0.014	-0.0002	-0.019
	(0.013)	(0.011)	(0.275)
Number of Unique Words	0.051	0.017	-0.336
	(0.061)	(0.048)	(1.256)
Source Sputnik	-11.814***	-17.377***	-180.870***
	(0.983)	(0.780)	(20.333)
Video	-1.807*	0.551	33.520
	(0.901)	(0.715)	(18.638)
Hashtag	0.588	0.066	-29.466
	(0.801)	(0.636)	(16.566)
Similarity	-3.422	-4.946	-75.746
	(3.720)	(2.953)	(76.963)
China News:War Onset	11.678***	19.446***	178.267**

	(3.164)	(2.512)	(65.466)
War:War Onset	2.730	-1.020	15.624
	(2.272)	(1.804)	(47.013)
Soft Propaganda:War Onset	-0.310	9.602***	146.579*
	(2.783)	(2.209)	(57.572)
Rotted Democracy:War Onset	1.904	3.000	17.990
	(2.554)	(2.028)	(52.848)
Russia Collaboration:War Onset	10.747***	16.835***	161.458**
	(2.769)	(2.198)	(57.286)
Russia Achievement:War Onset	4.752*	7.095***	62.823
	(2.324)	(1.845)	(48.093)
West Hegemony:War Onset	6.753**	6.030***	62.114
	(2.137)	(1.696)	(44.218)
Constant	21.781***	26.321***	277.932***
	(2.787)	(2.212)	(57.661)
Observations	12,906	12,906	12,906

R^2	0.041	0.116	0.025
Adjusted R^2	0.039	0.114	0.024
Residual Std. Error (df = 12884)	32.830	26.060	679.249
F Statistic (df = 21; 12884)	26.084***	80.318***	15.928***

Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Table 4 Controlling The Impacts of Sentiment of Text Content

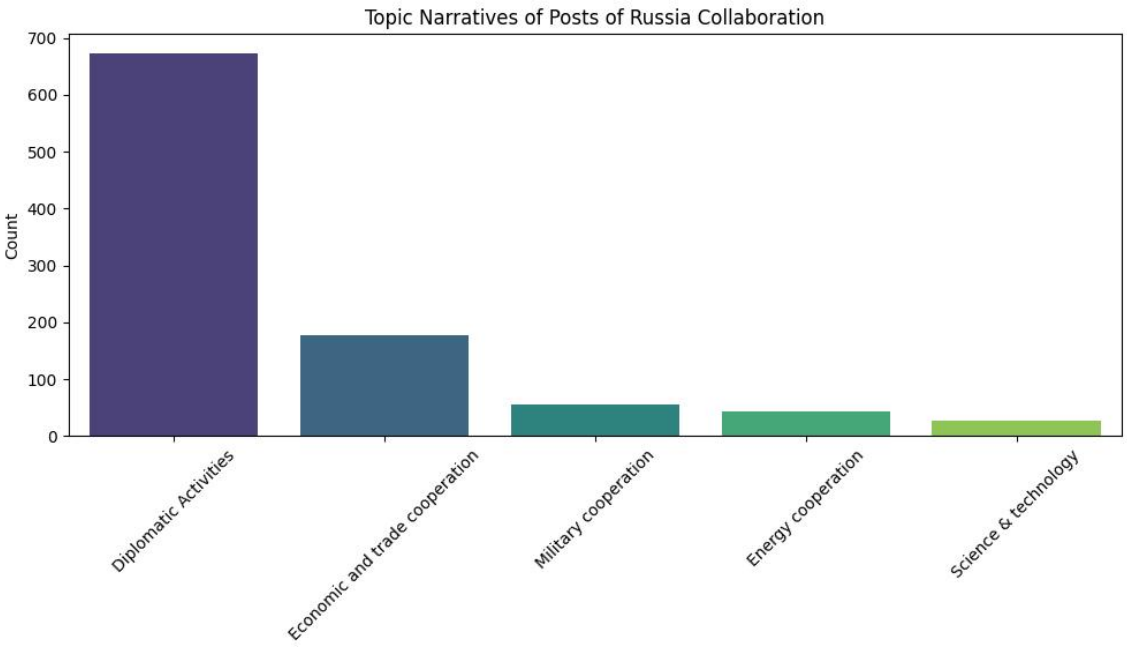
	Dependent variable:		
	Shares	Comments	Likes
	(1)	(2)	(3)
China News	-0.053	-0.106	-0.094
	(0.045)	(0.057)	(0.083)
War	-0.129**	-0.079	-0.178*
	(0.039)	(0.050)	(0.072)
Soft Propaganda	0.110**	0.116*	0.231**
	(0.039)	(0.050)	(0.073)
Rotted Democracy	0.076	0.132*	0.170*

	(0.041)	(0.051)	(0.075)
Russia Collaboration	-0.098*	-0.130*	-0.088
	(0.044)	(0.055)	(0.080)
Russia Achievement	-0.144***	-0.172***	-0.236***
	(0.037)	(0.046)	(0.067)
West Hegemony	-0.249***	-0.239***	-0.429***
	(0.034)	(0.043)	(0.062)
War Onset	-0.474***	-0.352***	-0.577***
	(0.034)	(0.043)	(0.063)
Text Length	-0.0004	-0.001*	-0.001**
	(0.0002)	(0.0003)	(0.0004)
Number of Unique Words	0.004***	0.006***	0.010***
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.002)
Sentiment	0.001	-0.003	0.022
	(0.011)	(0.013)	(0.019)
Source Sputnik	-0.503***	-0.571***	-0.888***
	(0.019)	(0.024)	(0.034)

Video	-0.111***	-0.064**	-0.131***
	(0.017)	(0.021)	(0.031)
Hashtag	0.028	0.008	0.037
	(0.016)	(0.020)	(0.029)
China News:War Onset	0.661***	0.946***	1.407***
	(0.063)	(0.080)	(0.117)
War:War Onset	-0.117*	-0.326***	-0.472***
	(0.046)	(0.058)	(0.085)
Soft Propaganda:War Onset	0.525***	0.762***	1.065***
	(0.054)	(0.069)	(0.100)
Rotted Democracy:War Onset	-0.001	0.025	0.0001
	(0.052)	(0.065)	(0.095)
Russia Collaboration:War Onset	0.528***	0.712***	0.945***
	(0.056)	(0.070)	(0.103)
Russia Achievement:War Onset	0.281***	0.321***	0.426***
	(0.047)	(0.059)	(0.086)

West Hegemony:War Onset	0.231***	0.163**	0.264***
	(0.043)	(0.054)	(0.079)
Constant	1.203***	1.324***	2.072***
	(0.031)	(0.039)	(0.057)
Observations	14,812	14,812	14,812
R^2	0.237	0.225	0.246
Adjusted R^2	0.236	0.224	0.245
Residual Std. Error (df = 14790)	0.680	0.859	1.254
F Statistic (df = 21; 14790)	218.685***	204.075***	230.235***
Note:			*p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Figure 5 Topic Narratives of Posts of Russia Collaboration


Topic Narratives of Posts of Russia Collaboration
Count
700
600
500
400
300
200
100
0
Diplomatic Activities
Economic and trade cooperation
Military cooperation
Energy cooperation
Science & technology