

Mirrors and Mosaics: Deciphering Chinese and Russian Domestic Bloc-Building Narratives

Introduction

We live in an era of intensified geopolitical competition, with key actors in international politics engaging in bloc-building: creation of coalitions with ‘equally minded’ states (Ickenberry 2024). This process is going on in both East and West, across democratic and authoritarian countries (Brands 2018). The amplified cooperation between two foremost authoritarian powers – Russia and China – is a particularly important example of it (Zhao 2021). Authoritarian states cooperate in different forms, e.g., formal organizations (Obydenkova and Libman 2019) and informal coalitions (Lo 2004; von Soest 2015). The literature argues that this cooperation potentially has multiple benefits for autocracies: besides direct gains from cooperation in security, political and economic spheres, it can boost domestic legitimacy (Libman and Obydenkova 2018; Debre 2021). Essentially, authoritarian states can show to the domestic audiences (both elites and the general public) that they are not isolated in the world and enjoy support of other countries.

However, external recognition from authoritarian counterparts may be a double-edged sword, especially when those allies are notoriously aggressive (Ambrosio 2022; Onuch and Sasse 2022) or enjoy otherwise poor reputation. Not any cooperation with authoritarian partners is legitimacy-boosting in the eyes of domestic population and elites. Our paper suggest that authoritarian states try to solve this problem by carefully crafting *strategic narratives*, i.e., presenting their partnership with other autocracies in the way, which would be particularly

beneficial from the point of view of the legitimacy. The importance of strategic narratives as tools of legitimizing international coalitions and foreign policy in general can hardly be overestimated (Roselle et al. 2014; Walker and Ludwig 2017), especially during the periods of crises and international confrontation (Jaworsky and Qiaoan 2021; Götz and Staun 2022; Hagström and Gustafsson 2021; Repnikova and Zhou 2022). Recent research has observed narrative coordination between authoritarian states on *international* platforms (Budnitsky and Jia 2018; Flonk 2021; Wong and Ho 2022; Lams et al. 2022; Rasheed 2021; Ghiseli and Alsudairi 2023). But how do authoritarian leaders navigate communication with their *domestic* public and elites regarding their bloc-building efforts?

Our paper offers a systematic investigation of this topic studying Russia's and China's narratives of bloc-building after Russia's full-scale invasion against Ukraine in 2022. The cooperation of these two countries started already before the invasion and continued after February 2022, when the prospects of geoeconomic and geopolitical fragmentation of the world became more tangible. The question remains, however, how the regimes present this cooperation at home in order to increase possible legitimacy gains. For China, war in Ukraine is from this point of view a challenge: Chinese leadership has long advocated the principle of sovereignty and territorial integrity as key elements of their foreign policy, but at the same time weeks before the full-scale invasion declared a limitless partnership with a country, which openly disregards the sovereignty of another state. In Russia, similarly, the cooperation with China in the shadow of Western sanctions can be perceived as asymmetric, leading to

dependence on a foreign partner – this also clearly contradicts the self-representation of Putin’s regime as being absolutely independent in its policy choices (Umarov 2023).

We conduct computational and qualitative analysis of bloc-building narratives in major state-affiliated mass media of Russia and China published during the first 12 months after the full-scale invasion. These media are heavily manipulated for political purposes (Blaydes 2021; Tyushka 2021), and at least some experimental evidence suggests that they do have impact on the public opinion (Rozenas and Stukal 2019) (although our study refrains from any statements about effectiveness of propaganda). State media in authoritarian regimes also serve as a communication tool in relations to political elites, as we discuss in what follows. We study how China and Russia talk about cooperation and/or confrontation with respect to a broad set of countries in the West and in the East (Ickenberry 2024). We also cover how Russia and China talk about each other in the propaganda; however, this is not the exclusive focus of the paper. First, ‘bloc-building’ today frequently refers to constructing broad coalitions of countries (the BRICS is the most prominent example for China and Russia), and thus limiting attention only to one partner would constrain our analysis too much. Second, talking about other countries, Russia and China provide point of reference for the public perception of media communication (Dittmer 1981) about each other. The focus of the study is on the *differences* in narratives between Russia and China: this allows us to show how two regimes, depending on other aspects of their propaganda and their overall status-seeking strategy, can reframe their cooperation in their communication with the domestic audiences.

In a nutshell, while we observe several similarities in the narratives Russia and China employ, there are important differences. Both Russia and China share a negative depiction of the US and the NATO in their propaganda, presented as responsible for the instability in the world and at the same time weak and plagued by problems. However, when it comes to the justification of the emerging non-Western bloc, both countries differ quite strikingly. China portrays bloc-building as a ‘bridge’ for various international actors, including to some extent both Western and non-Western countries, whereas Russia regards it as a ‘fortress’ of non-Western states (see also Miskimmon et al. 2014). For Russia, hostility towards the West seems to be reason enough to engage in bloc-building, while China points out substantial benefits of cooperation. Russia sees the EU and the US as parts of a unified Western front, while China offers a more differentiated picture. In media coverage of authoritarian regional institutions and member states’ statements on the Russia–Ukraine war, China underscores the necessity of respecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all parties in the context of this conflict. Russian official media presents Russia’s involvement in bilateral and multilateral diplomatic activities as global endorsement of its actions in Ukraine.

Theoretical Argument

Friendship with Autocrats: A Path to External Legitimacy?

There is abundant evidence of authoritarian countries mutually supporting each other. Contemporary China and Russia are good examples of such collaboration (Yarhi-Milo et al. 2016; Korolev 2018; Kaczmarek 2020). ‘Clubs of autocrats’ provide tangible benefits to their members. These benefits can be categorized into two broad groups: material advantages and

legitimacy benefits (Libman and Obydenkova 2019; Debre 2022). In this paper, we focus on the latter. Essentially, the literature argues that autocrats can ‘sell’ the collaboration with other autocracies (even if it is limited to establishment of international institutions and fora or regular summits) to their domestic public (including both the general public and the elites) as a sign that the regimes enjoy sufficient support abroad. This should boost their legitimacy (Libman and Davidzon 2023).

This argument, which is extremely widespread in the literature, ignores an important challenge authoritarian regimes face. Whether membership within such authoritarian clubs and, more broadly, friendship with other autocrats benefit an autocrat’s legitimacy hinges on public perception of the partners and the nature of cooperation. If the public or the elites perceive such alliances as detrimental to the national interest or their individual benefits, the association with particular authoritarian states might transform into a liability – a ‘toxic asset’ – for the autocrats. To provide an extreme example, the fact that the representatives of the Taliban were invited to the St Petersburg Economic Forum (once the most important events in Russia, where international economic relations are discussed) in 2022 to substitute the now absent Western companies and politicians (Kondratieva 2022), hardly increased legitimacy of Putin – for many in Russia, it could have even strengthened the perception of their country as being isolated and relying on highly problematic allies.

Many studies highlight the domestic backlash that authoritarian bloc-building can generate. For example, alliances with Russia triggered protests in Belarus (Onuch and Sasse 2022).

China's aid to developing countries has prompted widespread complaints about the misuse of public funds (Schrader 2018). The government-endorsed policy toward Afghanistan has also been met with dissatisfaction in China, since Afghanistan has been regularly portrayed as a haven for terrorist organizations in the Chinese media (BBC 2021). Pro-Russian stances of the Chinese government have been claimed to exacerbate domestic polarization in China, as part of the society perceives Russia's war against Ukraine as inconsistent with China's professed respect for sovereignty (Yan 2022). Conversely, in Russia, feelings of nationalism and opposition to immigrants are major factors associated with negative attitudes and hostility towards China (Gerber and He 2022). There exists a long tradition of concerns about possible Chinese claims on the Russian Far East, which also negatively affects the attitude of the public towards the cooperation with China (Blank 2016). Similar concerns exist in Kazakhstan, where cooperation with China became the cause of protests in the past (Pamfilova 2019).

Thus, endorsements from international authoritarian peers and authoritarian blocs and alliances do not necessarily translate into domestic public approval. To deal with this problem, authoritarian regimes could try to craft strategic narratives to prevent the cooperation with toxic partners from leading to a legitimacy loss. Strategic narratives allow political actors to shape the understanding and behaviors of domestic and global audiences by forming the collective meaning of international politics (Miskimmon et al. 2014). They are frequently employed by powerful states to either promote the image of their own country or discredit other targeted states (Fu 2023; Herd 2022). From the point of view of our paper, we expect these narratives to fit other aspects of domestic propaganda. Using similar narratives enhances their impact

because of information intensity and perceived objectiveness. The public tends to believe and be affected by the information they receive repeatedly and from multiple sources, even if they are informed of potential biases.

We define a ‘narrative of bloc-building’ as the *story* constructed by a state to affect the public’s perception and understanding of strategic alignment. *Authoritarian bloc-building* narratives are defined as the rhetoric and discourse authoritarian leaders utilize to ‘frame’ their bloc-building initiatives, including narratives about rival blocs and discourse about self-bloc construction. These narratives can be distributed across different channels, in particular, state-controlled public media, and be directed towards foreign or domestic audiences; we focus on the latter. Somewhat simplified, it is possible to distinguish between three types of these narratives: narratives of the international system as a whole (justifying the need of an alliance by features of the international order), of individual countries and their role in international politics (justifying the need of an alliance by how individual countries act), and of individual political events (e.g., wars or conflicts). We will look on how China and Russia develop bloc-building narratives of each of these types.

For authoritarian states with their lack of domestic accountability, support of their policy by the domestic public is less important than for democracies (Fearom 1994). However, it is not irrelevant (Weeks 2008). A recent literature highlights the importance of legitimacy for autocracies (Gerschewski 2018; Przeworski 2023). For the specific topic of our investigation, first, while foreign policy typically is not an issue of primary importance, it can have a

mobilizing effect on the public concerned about other grievances and lead to weakening the power of the autocracy or even to protests. In Ukraine, it was the foreign policy of Viktor Yanukovych, which triggered the Revolution of Dignity – although the roots of public dissatisfaction were most likely related not only to the foreign policy decisions (Shveda and Park 2016). Xi's and Putin's regimes are much more stable than the Yanukovych's rule in Ukraine was, but not immune from protests. Conversely, a foreign policy, which enjoys broad support, can distract the public from the domestic problems (Hale 2022) or (in more competitive regimes) be used by the incumbent to attack the opposition as one serving foreign interests against the national objectives (Libman and Davidzon 2023).

Second, the existence of an encompassing propaganda narrative without obvious contradictions could be an important tool of communication of the regime with the elites. Support of the elites is crucial for any authoritarian regime and depends on the expectations of the elites with respect to the regime stability. Clever and consistent propaganda directed at the general public could communicate to the elites that the regime is sufficiently in control of the country; obvious contradictions between propaganda and policies, erratic and unclear decisions could increase doubts and concerns (Stanovaya 2023). Thus, even if regime could disregard the support of the general public, it would still be interested in ensuring the consistency of propaganda to prevent otherwise increasing doubts by the elites.¹

Both Russia and China are known to invest substantial effort in their propaganda (for a review, see Rosenfeld and Wallace 2024). For Russia as an electoral authoritarian regime (at least,

before 2022), public approval of its policies is likely to be more important than for China (Smyth 2020). Putin, for example, has been known to avoid taking personal responsibility for decisions potentially damaging his approval ratings shifting them to the government (Sirotkina and Zavadskaya 2020; Busygina and Klimovich 2024) and to use public opinion polls conducted by the FSO (Russian analogue of the Secret Service) (Pertsev and Solopov 2020) to inform his decisions. After 2022, the stress Russian state and politics experience increases the relevance of propaganda. However, Chinese regime also seems to care about how the public perceives its policy. It developed an elaborate system of identifying public grievances (Dimitrov 2023) and manipulating public opinion. This means that for both countries it is reasonable to expect the development of strategic narratives of being an issue of substantial importance.

Context and Narratives of Bloc-building in Authoritarian State Media

In what follows, we develop several hypotheses on the similarities and differences of the Chinese and Russian bloc-building narratives. We start with possible similarities. Here, one issue appears to be of paramount importance for both countries' propaganda: the general negative attitude towards the West, and in particular, the US and the NATO as the US-led alliance. Both China (Cooley and Moore 2023) and Russia (Stent 2019) engage in intensive criticism of the West in their domestic propaganda, and it is reasonable to expect this issue to play an important role in the narratives of bloc-building of both countries. The war in Ukraine made the anti-Western and in particular anti-US rhetoric the key element of Russian

propaganda. However, Chinese propaganda also became increasingly hostile towards the US in the last years. This brings us to our first hypothesis:

H1: Both China and Russia emphasize the criticism of the West (and especially the US and the NATO) in their bloc-building narratives.

In the next step, we develop more specific hypotheses by focusing on three types of narratives we highlighted in the previous sub-section. Two of them are on a higher level of abstraction than the third one and refer to the general depiction of the international system and the Western countries; the third one looks at the specific event (the war in Ukraine). We still include this third hypothesis in our analysis due to the importance of the war for both countries though.

First, in terms of the narratives of the international system, we expect the existing international order to be presented in the Chinese and the Russian propaganda as based on a set of *hegemonic rules* disproportionately favoring the US, which exploits this power asymmetry. Second, in terms of the narratives about individual countries, we expect China and Russia to present the US (and, possibly, other Western democracies) as both dysfunctional and flawed, i.e., plagued by major internal contradictions that cannot be resolved through internal reforms and lead to poor quality of public policy (Lams et al. 2022), and aggressive, i.e., willing to trigger external conflicts or exaggerate rival threats from ideologically different states to divert the attention of their domestic audience and allies (Bolt 2014). Third, we expect China and Russia to present the US as ultimately responsible for the war in Ukraine, disregarding Russia's security

concerns or generally behavior in an aggressive and imperialist manner. These narratives seem to fit each other quite closely Our hypotheses can be formulated as follows:

H1a: Both China and Russia present the international system as unequally benefitting the US, which exploit these advantages.

H1b: Both China and Russia present the US (and other democracies) as harboring irresolvable contradictions and behaving in an aggressive and imperialist manner to hide these contradictions.

H1c: Both China and Russia present the US (and US-led Western alliance) as ultimately responsible for the war in Ukraine.

There are, however, also reasons to expect narrative divergence between Russia and China. While they both attempt to elevate their international status, they pursue different strategies in doing so (Kaczmarek 2017; Krickovic and Zhang 2020). Under Putin's leadership, Russia has lost the last chance to collaborate with the West, and promoting an independent or parallel bloc to the West is the only viable option. While China has faced disengagement pressure (e.g., trade wars or decoupling) similar to what Russia has encountered in the past, it still pursues opportunities for multilevel dialogue and aims to expand its global influence by further accelerating its trade partnership with other countries, including the US and the West (Dai and Luqiu 2022). In other words, being captured by Russia and becoming involved in larger and more intensive geopolitical conflicts does not align with China's approach to seeking status

and influence. This is likely to be reflected in the narratives China and Russia are going to construct for their domestic public, which leads us to the following hypothesis:

H2: Russia's narratives are based on the inherent and fundamental nature of the confrontation with the West as the main reason for bloc-building; China pursues a more nuanced approach, allowing even for some forms of cooperation with Western countries.

More specifically, the following three hypotheses can be suggested concerning individual aspects of authoritarian bloc-building narratives. First, at the level of narratives about the international system, Russia and China will present somewhat different pictures of the emerging authoritarian bloc. Russia will present the new emerging authoritarian bloc as a '*fortress*' for those states that have been marginalized by the West (Tyushka 2022). Authoritarian bloc-building will be presented as a critical means to maintain Russia's great power status, expand its influence, and reshape the global political landscape (Sharafutdinova 2020; Kari and Pynnöniemi 2019). China, on the contrary, given that remains deeply integrated into the global economic system and is rather seeking its transformation based on what it considers to be a more unified and inclusive world order, will rather base its rhetoric of bloc-building on what one could call a '*bridge*' philosophy, pointing out the need of a more equal and integrated world system. China will also emphasize the economic benefits derived from bloc-building (Kaczmarek 2017), eschewing characterizations of the process as a tool for expanding China's influence and global status. Instead, it will promote the bloc-building in

terms of mutual benefits and international public goods. Consequently, we expect China to use more ‘cooperative’ narratives than Russia.

At the level of narratives about individual countries, while China will champion the strategic autonomy of Europe, Russia will largely treat Europe and the US as a unified actor. Russia will present the authoritarian bloc-building as key to competing with Europe (Izotov and Obydenkova 2021), while China will claim to welcome European countries to participate in its bloc-building process, presenting it as a tool to promote the EU’s strategic autonomy independent of US influence. This will result in more favorable narratives about the EU in China than in Russia.

Finally, yet another divergent self-bloc narrative is likely to be different tones on the Russia–Ukraine war. While both China and Russia will blame NATO for instigating the war (Hanley et al. 2023), they will differ in their accounts of reaction of their allies on the war. Faced with sanctions and isolation, Russia’s leaders have a strong incentive to prove their military operation is supported by their counterparts in the non-Western camp. What China cannot accept however is Russia’s annexation of four Eastern regions of Ukraine; the primacy of issues of territorial integrity and sovereignty for Chinese rhetoric makes narrating China-Russia cooperation to the domestic public a difficult endeavor (Sakwa 2005; Liff 2018). Territorial integrity and borders are one of the most sensitive issues for bilateral relationships among SCO and BRICS countries (Henry 2020); it is also a topic of paramount importance in the domestic propaganda. To justify its military action, we expect Russia to point out the unconditional

support for its aggression from its authoritarian allies. China, by contrast, in its rhetoric will pay more attention to highlighting the core principles of regional organizations it participates in, particularly respect for the other members' sovereignty and territorial integrity, and downplay the fact that its cooperation with Russia allows the latter to violate the territorial integrity of Ukraine.

This allows us to formulate the set of three hypotheses:

H2a: Russia in its narratives presents bloc-building as a substitute for the Western-dominated global order, while China regards it as a bargaining chip and emphasizes the existing international connections.

H2b: China uses a more nuanced image of Western countries in its narratives, while Russia clearly presents them all as part of a unified, US-dominated anti-Russian alliance.

H2c: Russia portrays statements from authoritarian regional institutions as unambiguous endorsements for the war in Ukraine, while China maintains a more neutral stance emphasizing respect for each country's sovereignty as the core principle of authoritarian bloc-building.

Importantly, while our study looks at the narratives of the period following the full-scale invasion to Ukraine, we do not see the Ukraine war as the cause of divergence of narratives. Differences in status-seeking strategies precede the war (and are results of fundamental differences between Russia and China, e.g., economic potential). Some of the arguments we presented above with regard to strategic narratives towards the domestic audiences would have

been valid for China and Russia already before the war (although probably less prominently) (Kaczmarksi 2019). We treat the war merely as an event strengthening the differences between Russia and China and because of that making the development of strategic narratives more important.

Relation to the scholarly literature

Preempting our results, we identify several literatures this study talks to. First, at the conceptual level, it contributes to our understanding of the dynamics of cooperation of authoritarian regimes. Starting from the democratic peace theory (Rosato 2003; Baum and Potter 2019), democracies are considered to be more likely to cooperate with each other. This could be driven by both the differences in the way decisions are made in different regimes (the issue of credible commitments) but also by ideational clashes between autocracies preventing them from working together and the existence of common values in the democratic camp. Our study demonstrates that authoritarian regimes can to some extent try to work around the differences in ideologies, at least when it comes to justifying cooperation to their domestic audiences,² by developing strategic narratives.

Interestingly, while our study looks at the domestic rhetoric of authoritarian regimes, it somewhat downplays the importance of domestic politics for foreign policy decision-making of autocracies – because autocrats can frame their foreign policy decisions in a favorable way in the domestic debate. We, somewhat paradoxically, provide a comparative politics argument for the importance of the more IR-oriented view on foreign policy.³ Two important caveats –

lack of causal evidence on the effectiveness of narratives and external validity – are discussed in the conclusion to this paper though.

Second, our research bridges the literatures on authoritarian regionalism and authoritarian propaganda. While the former, as we have already mentioned, suggests that membership in regional or multilateral organizations of autocracies or other forms of cooperation with fellow autocrats provides external legitimacy to authoritarian regimes (Cooley 2015; Obydenkova and Libman 2019; Debre 2021), our findings indicate that the legitimacy associated with ‘authoritarian friendship’ requires propaganda as a catalyst. Recent studies indicate authoritarian leaders are also subject to domestic audience costs (Bell and Quek 2018; Li and Chen 2021; Smetana 2024; Lams 2018; Weiss and Dafoe 2019) and responsive to bottom-up requests (Chen et al. 2016; Meng Pan and Yang 2017). Our study posits critical nuance: public opinion in such contexts is not entirely exogenous but can be, and often is, influenced and shaped by the state’s narratives. Furthermore, we expand the current scope of authoritarian propaganda research, which has largely focused on negative propaganda against adversaries and positive propaganda about self-achievements (Pan, Shao and Xu 2022; Mattingly and Yao 2022; Deng 2023) by studying propaganda techniques used by authoritarian leaders to justify their alliances with other authoritarian regimes. And while much research has focused on negative messaging about ‘adversaries’ by authoritarian states (Fu 2023; Blaydes 2021), there has been less exploration of the narratives about the authoritarian ‘in-group’.

Third, our study offers insights into the narrative construction of authoritarian bloc-building for domestic public. Compared to their counterparts in democracies (Tomz et al. 2020), authoritarian leaders enjoy advantages in ‘leading’ or ‘manipulating’ rather ‘following’ the public opinion, given the sophisticated media control strategies at hands to repress different voices. Our study reveals that, different from strategic communication in democracies that emphasizes the top leaders’ stance and communication skills (Kertzer and Brutger 2016; Nomikos and Sambanis 2019), more subtle manner of manipulating mainstream media coverage concerning specific international events and foreign actors is used by authoritarian leaders in shaping public perception about the state’s diplomatic initiatives.

At the more empirical level, fourth, our study contributes to the large literature on the substance and evolution of the China-Russia alliance (Ambrosio 2017; Wong and Ho 2022; Lams et al. 2022). Our research shows that, on the one hand, the countries still have very different bloc-building visions and patterns, at least in terms of how they present them to the domestic audience. On the other hand, however, obvious contradictions in important propaganda narratives do not necessarily pose an unsolvable threat to the domestic legitimacy of the cooperation of China and Russia. The findings of our paper also complement the studies focusing on the increasingly converging narratives between authoritarian states on international platforms (Hinck et al. 2019) and demonstrate the importance of examining the discourse of authoritarian states in both domestic propaganda and international domains (Lu et al. 2022). In addition, this paper offers an in-depth examination of the divergent narratives between two major authoritarian powers regarding perspectives on international order. This enriches our

understanding of how authoritarian states communicate about international norms (Faizullaev and Cornut 2017; Hagström and Gustafsson 2019).

Data and Methods

To empirically validate our hypotheses, we compiled data from the main *state-affiliated mass media outlets* in Russia and China for the period of *one year after the start of Russia's full-scale invasion against Ukraine*. Despite the burgeoning growth of social media, traditional media remains a critical vehicle for disseminating propaganda and shaping public opinion in authoritarian regimes (Alyukov 2022). Recent research affirms that mass media sometimes outperform social media when it comes to manipulating public opinion (Alyukov 2022; Maschmeyer et al. 2023). They command more legitimacy, as states often sacrifice rigor for popularity in their social media propaganda efforts (Lu and Pan 2022).

For China, we applied specific keywords (see Online Supplementary Material (SM) A2) to identify and gather discourse materials related to bloc-building from People's Daily, Xinwen Lianbo, Global Times, Xinhua News, and regular conference statements by the Foreign Affairs Ministry. For Russia, also based on keywords search, our dataset comprises news articles by three main state-owned and state-affiliated channels (i.e., Pervyi Kanal, NTV, and Vesti), as well as the five major pro-regime newspapers. A more detailed description of the process of data collection is provided in the SM A1.

Computational text analysis is becoming increasingly popular in the field of news frame extraction and narrative analysis (Grimmer and Stewart 2013; Eisele et al. 2023; Guo et al. 2023). Its main advantage is the ability to detect patterns in large corpora; this is what makes it a suitable tool for our study, as we are interested in how bloc-building is discussed regularly in government-loyal media rather than in analysis of individual high-profile speeches. We employ the Structural Topic Model (STM) to systematically uncover principal themes related to bloc-building as portrayed in state-affiliated media outlets in the two countries. As the public's perception was not influenced by the content of narrative but also the repetition of certain narrative (Cacioppo and Petty 1979), STM allows us to quantify the text dataset and examine both the narrative content and also propagation intensity of different narrative clues.

Topic modeling, an unsupervised machine-learning technique, facilitates the categorization of vast text corpora into discernible “topics” – clusters of words that signify distinct thematic elements (Blei 2012) and is frequently used in the identification of frames and narratives (Chen et al. 2023; Guo et al. 2023; Eisele et al. 2023). In this paradigm, each document is visualized as a composite of these latent topics, with each topic characterized by a distinctive word distribution. This setup allows us to assign a probabilistic score to each document, indicating its alignment with specific topics.

There are several topic modeling algorithms, including the renowned Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA), but the STM stands out due to its capacity to integrate document-specific metadata into the analysis. This flexibility allows the model to incorporate external details like

the document's authorship, publication date, and length, thus yielding richer insights (Roberts, Stewart, & Airoidi 2016). As pertinent metadata for our study, we included the publication date of each news article and a binary variable indicating its origin (either Russia or China).

For data preprocessing, we translated documents from their original languages to English and adopted the procedure outlined by Eshima et al. (2023), which entails the removal of punctuation, stop words, and numbers, as well as stemming and retaining words that occur a minimum of 50 times in the corpus. To determine the optimal number of topics (K) for our model, we sought a balance between topic specificity and semantic clarity, eventually settling on K=10 (SM A3).

Beyond topic identification, our analysis delved into the tone of the discourse, since sentimental appeal also plays an essential role. To this end, we segmented our text corpora, originally in Chinese or Russian, at the sentence level and conducted sentiment analysis by fine-tuning the DeBERT model (Decoding-enhanced BERT with disentangled attention). We used a stratified sampling strategy to select 2,000 cases for annotation. Two MA level research assistants, both proficient in Chinese and Russian, labeled the sentences as negative (-1), neutral (0), or positive (1). The intercoder consistency of Krippendorff's alpha stood at 0.84, and disagreement was resolved through discussion. We followed the standardized pipeline of fine-tuning and eventually achieved an F1 Macro score of 0.83 (SM A4) and then predicted the sentiment of the all the sentences in our datasets using fine-tuned model. The integration of STM and sentiment analysis enables us to gain more subtle understanding about not only the two states'

general sentiment toward international actors, but also the sentiment differences across multiple topic arenas.

Existing literature suggests STM is effective at extracting topics but might not always capture framing strategies and narratives (Eisele et al. 2023). Given the exploratory nature of this study on bloc-building discourse, topic analysis can serve well in elucidating the agenda setting of authoritarian states when discussing international cooperation or confrontation. Acknowledging its limitation in extracting narrative that encompassing more complete story and drawing ideas from previous work by Li et al. (2020) and Xia (2022), we also conducted a critical discourse analysis of 2,000 randomly selected articles to get a better understanding of the underlying narratives behind the topics and the more macro-level correlation among narratives, which is challenging for computers to capture and interpret.

Results

Narrative Topics for Bloc-building

We start by presenting the results of the STM analysis. For this purpose, we read the topic words and the most representative documents of each topic and suggested suitable labels (SM A7). Our analysis identifies ten topics, which we label as follows: Global Inflation and the Pandemic (articles pointing out the problems of global price increase and the spread of Covid-19), Western Partisan Politics (articles focusing on the domestic political dynamics in the Western countries, often highlighting its internal contradictions and flaws), BRICS and International Cooperation (articles about the BRICS and cooperation in this and similar

formats), Taiwan Sovereignty Issue, Russia-Ukraine War, Cultural and Technological Exchange (articles focusing on the cooperation across societies in the area of culture and technology), Disasters and Accidents (in this group we also have reports about various catastrophes in the Western countries), Sanctions and Finance (these articles report on the Western sanctions and the overall development of the global financial system), NATO Expansion, and Energy Trade and Prices.

While we calculated expected topic proportions and rankings across the 10 topics for the entire dataset (SM A8), given the imbalanced document count between China and Russia, a more meaningful comparison lies in the topic distribution for each country. According to the Figure 1, the dominant topics for China state media texts are Topic 3 (BRICS and International Cooperation) and Topic 4 (Taiwan Sovereignty Issue). By contrast, prominent topics for Russia are Topic 9 (NATO Expansion) and Topic 2 (Western Partisan Politics). This aligns with previous studies finding that China's CGTN is less inclined to report on partisan politics than Russia's RT (Moore and Cooley 2024).

Figure 1 about here

Figure 1 Topic Proportion for Each Side (Russia and China)

Another way of presenting the differences between two countries is offered in Figure 2, which depicts the variations in the anticipated proportions of 10 topics (China state media is used as the benchmark group). Russian state media places greater emphasis on issues like NATO Expansion, Western Partisan Politics, Sanctions and Finance, Disasters and Accidents, the

Russia–Ukraine War, and Energy Trade and Price (i.e., Topics 9, 2, 8, 7, 5, and 10). By contrast, China’s state media focuses more on themes like BRICS and International Collaboration, Taiwan Sovereignty Issue, Global Inflation and the Pandemic, as well as Cultural and Technical Exchanges (i.e., Topics 3, 4, 1, and 6).

Figure 2 about here

Figure 2 Topic Prevalence Comparison for Both Sides (Russia and China)

Note: Topic distribution differences between Russia and China. The graph displays the point estimate along with a 95% confidence interval, showcasing the mean variation in topic percentages between Russian and Chinese state media. The latter serves as the benchmark group.

While some of the differences can be driven by the idiosyncratic importance of certain topics (like Taiwan Sovereignty) for one of the countries, our findings go in the direction of our basic hypotheses. On the one hand, for both countries Topic 9 (NATO expansion) (the most obvious narrative criticizing the West) plays an important role, as the H1 would suggest. On the other hand, however, in the Chinese media, Topics 3 and 6 are much more frequent than in the Russian ones. Topic 3 (BRICS and International Cooperation) suggests China promotes institutional cooperation with other nations via regional institutions to contribute to the global community. Topic 6 (Cultural and Technical Exchange) portrays China’s efforts in expanding technical, cultural and digital innovations, and exchange and facilitating trade and economic ties with other countries. The predominance of these topics in China as opposed to Russia is consistent with H2a – Chinese media are more likely to talk about substance of cooperation and not merely about its anti-Western nature. Interestingly, Russia highlights Topic 7 (Disasters and Accidents, often referring to poor performance of the Western states in this respect) more than China – again, the focus is on unconditional and complete criticism of the West.

The Dynamics of Bloc-Building Narratives

Are there any changes in the frequency of topics over time of the observation (one year after the full-scale invasion)? To answer this question, we recalculated the STM, incorporating an interaction between country variables and dates. Figure 3 illustrates the linear trends in topic reporting by Russia's and China's state media. The red line and blue line represent topic prevalence in Chinese media and Russian media, respectively.

The findings highlight both growing similarities and expanding differences across varied topics over the one-year period of our study. The prevalence of Topic 1 (Global Inflation and Pandemic) slightly declined in Chinese official media, while its presence in Russian media remained at a low level. Topic 2 (Western Partisan Politics) saw an increase in coverage within Russian official media, while its proportion decreased among official Chinese outlets. Topic 3 (BRICS and International Cooperation) dominated official Chinese media, revealing a significant surge. However, this theme remained marginally represented in official Russian narratives. A similar trend can also be observed from Topic 6 (Cultural and Technical Exchange). Topic 4 (Taiwan Sovereignty Issue) had a low profile in Russian media, but its previously high prevalence in Chinese official outlets experienced a decline over the past year. A more detailed examination of daily changes in topic proportion (SM A5) reveals that the prevalence of Topic 4 peaked around the time Nancy Pelosi visited Taiwan.

Figure 3 about here

Figure 3 Russia and China's State Media Reporting Trends on Each Topic Over Time

Topic 5 (Russia–Ukraine War) experienced a marked surge in Russian official media, whereas its coverage in Chinese media saw a slight decline. Topic 7 (Disasters and Accidents) noticeably increased in Russian state media but only increased slightly among their Chinese counterparts. After the full-scale invasion, Finland and Sweden decided to seek NATO membership. The prominence of Topic 9 (NATO Expansion) in Russian official reports peaked during this period, but when the two nations officially joined NATO, interest in the topic decreased significantly. Conversely, this theme has always held relatively little importance among official Chinese media channels. Topic 8 (Sanction and Finance) showed a similar trend. Furthermore, the representation of Topic 10 (Energy Trade and Prices) in both countries' official media remained relatively stable and parallel.

Summing up, we observe dynamic shifts in narrative congruence between Russia and China over the period of our observation. First, the topics where they saw converging prevalence over the past year predominantly relate to broad, ongoing themes like Topic 1 (Global Inflation and Pandemic) or Topic 10 (Energy Trade and Price). Second, some topic divergences remained consistent between the two, with Russia prominently featuring Topic 2 (Western Partisan Politics) and Topic 5 (Russia–Ukraine War), and China focusing on Topic 3 (BRICS and International Collaboration) and Topic 6 (Cultural and Technical Exchange). Again, in line with H2a, China points out the more substantive aspects of collaboration. Moreover, the differences

in topic prevalence between the two countries have gradually become more pronounced. Over time, China state media have begun deliberately downplaying the Taiwan issue in its rhetoric to somewhat lower the focus on confrontation with the West. By contrast, Russia increasingly uses a ‘diversionary strategy’ that emphasizes external disasters, accidents, threats, and conflicts. In essence, the narratives around bloc-building between Russia and China are diverging rather than converging. These observations should not be treated as evidence of long-term convergence or divergence patterns – they cover only one year of observations – but are still interesting given how turbulent the respective year was for two countries we study.

Qualitative examples

The qualitative analysis corroborates the topic modeling results and aligns with our expectation about Chinese and Russian narratives. Both countries emphasize: (1) the dysfunctionality of developed democratic systems; (2) the US’s exploitation of its allies; and (3) the US’s responsibility for international conflicts. These narratives are interconnected and mutually reinforced, which provides a completer and more persuasive story for their domestic audiences.

The narrative about individual countries begins with the dysfunctionality of developed democratic regimes, including political polarization and manipulation, shooting incidents, violent police enforcement, poor pandemic response, and racial discrimination (State Council Information Office 2022), all classic themes authoritarian states employ for “downward comparison” (Fu 2023). Some news reports are negative but not explicitly framed as persistent problems of democracies. For instance, Russian NTV (2022) cites a report from

Rosselkhoznadzor (governmental agency responsible for agricultural sector) stating that the United States is experiencing its largest avian influenza outbreak in seven years. Similarly, an article in the Chinese People's Daily states that "for some time now, the costs of fossil fuels such as natural gas, oil, and coal in the United States have surged, further driving up electricity prices. The rise in electricity prices in turn exacerbates inflation issues, leaving middle and low-income households struggling to cover expenses for food, mortgages, and utilities like water and gas." (Li 2022). To show the 'objectiveness' of their media coverage and delineate their propaganda warfare, Chinese outlets sometimes quote critical news articles from Western media, such as a Global Times piece that cites an article about racism in the US from The Guardian (Namkung and Chen 2022).

Although a significant portion of negative propaganda is centered on the US, as indicated by the topic modeling results, the qualitative analysis also demonstrates Russia and China disseminate negative news about US allies, including the UK and Germany. One article from Xinhua states, "The UK government's move (to co-exist with COVID-19) will undoubtedly promote the spread of the coronavirus. Multiple datasets show that the UK's epidemic situation has continuously deteriorated since March, with infection levels reaching an all-time high." (Zhao 2022). Another piece from Xinhua states, "Germany is facing its most severe energy crisis in decades, and the public is being forced to revert to the era of heating with wood, which is deeply thought-provoking" (Wu 2022). Similarly, NTV reported on social unrest in France, where thousands of protesters gathered in the heart of Paris near the Palais Royal, stating that "The demonstrators are demanding the resignation of the French President." (NTV 2022a).

Channel One also mentioned public demonstrations in Germany, noting that “In Leipzig, Germany, over a thousand people participated in a rally protesting against the rise in food and energy prices. They are demanding compensation for the public due to losses from inflation.” (Pervyi Kanal 2022).

The two states also stress that the US exploits its relationship with its allies and highlight the disparities within the Western bloc. This narrative seeks to expose the vulnerability of the Western bloc and insinuate that cooperating with the US may be harmful to a country’s interests. The responsibility of the US hegemony and the Western bloc it dominates for the global problems is used to justify the endeavors to formulate a new multipolar international system and inclusive norms. In terms of disparities within the Western bloc, Vesti reports, “German authorities accuse Poland of poisoning the Oder River.” (Krasulin 2022). Another article from Vesti mentions, regarding sanctions against Russia, that “there are not only sharp divisions within the EU but also significant disagreements within NATO” (Emelyanova 2022). Guangming Daily quotes France’s finance minister, Bruno Le Maire, as saying, “The US establishment of a strong industry should not come at the expense of Europe (expressing concerns that the US Inflation Reduction Act might harm European interests)” (Wang 2023). Meanwhile, an article in the Global Times claims that “the United States, deeply mired in political divisions and economic stagnation, on one hand pursued an ‘America First’ policy by undermining its allies and other countries, while on the other hand, it continued to meticulously advance its strategy to contain China” (Chen and Ding 2022).

Turning to the narratives about the international system, both Russian and Chinese media suggest that external conflicts are produced and used by the US to distract from its domestic problems. For example, Russia's Channel One alleges, "the more internal issues one has, the more actively one needs to create problems externally — this is a long-tested American approach." (Pervyi Kanal 2022a). Xinhua Daily echoes this sentiment in an article that reads, "For politicians in Washington, China seems to have become their 'savior'. Ever since they had China as the 'scapegoat,' they felt a burden lifted off their shoulders. Issues like inadequate pandemic response, unemployment, and social injustices within the US seem to no longer be problems. As long as they can place the blame on China, it seems that all problems are resolved" (Zhao 2022).

These international conflicts are also depicted as attempts by the US to sustain its hegemony and strategic interests. An article on Vesti states, "As Washington loses its influence over global developments, it will become increasingly aggressive and reckless" (Vesti 2022). Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian remarks, "Think about what the United States did on its own in the 1960s to Cuba and Panama, in the 1980s to Grenada, in the 1990s to the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, at the beginning of this century to Afghanistan and Iraq, and later to Syria and Libya. The actions of the US are the widely recognized examples of 'big countries bullying small countries'" (Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2022). A series of commentary articles on People's Daily detailed instances where the United States, by inciting color revolutions, disrupted the political stability of countries like Venezuela, Chile, and Georgia, as well as various nations in the Middle East (Xu 2022).

Finally, for the narratives about the crucial political issue – the Russia–Ukraine war – Russia and China consistently frame it as an example of the United States manufacturing external threats to divert domestic focus from and consolidate its allies. Vesti (2022a) quotes Liu Shayu, China’s ambassador to France, as saying that “the United States played a role in creating the crises in Ukraine and Taiwan”. NTV (2022b) remarks that, since the start of Russia’s military operation in Ukraine, the stock prices of most US military companies have risen by at least a third, using this as evidence of the US profiting from the Russia–Ukraine war. People’s Daily published an article stating, “Not only did NATO not disband after the end of the Cold War, but under the leadership of the United States, it expanded eastward five times, ultimately leading to the Russo-Ukrainian conflict” (Wu 2022).

At the same time, we also need to highlight important differences. At the level of narratives of international system, as already mentioned, China criticizes the bloc-building initiatives by the US, such as its stance on bloc confrontation, trade war, and technical blockades (Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2022a) and insists that open collaboration is beneficial not only for China and the US but also for other countries. By contrast, Russia uses the narrative of an emerging non-Western bloc and champions the idea of a “power center independent from the West.” NTV cites Putin as saying, “The world is heading to real multi-polarization, and the new power center in Asia has been rising.” Vesti even references Indian astrologer Ajay’s statement that “America’s role in global affairs has been declining and the power center will be transferred from West to East.”

While talking about authoritarian regional organizations, China and Russia have exhibited distinct reporting tendencies concerning regional institutions' stances on the Russia–Ukraine war. When referencing statements from the BRICS and SCO summits, China places greater emphasis on respecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all parties (People's Daily 2022). Conversely, Russian official media interpret these meetings as non-Western nations endorsing their war actions. For instance, a report from Channel One proclaimed, "Half of humanity stands with Moscow. The events surrounding Ukraine did not result in a large-scale isolation of Russia. The summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization that concluded yesterday clearly demonstrated this" (Pervyi Kanal 2022b). Another article from Channel One quoted the Brazilian president saying, "The conflict in Ukraine was instigated by NATO and the EU. Sanctions against Moscow are a mistake" (Pervyi Kanal 2022c). These differences, again, are fully consistent with our expectations.

Similar Tones about Enemies and Divergent Perspectives on Bloc-Building

In the next step, we look at the sentiment of reporting about individual countries by Chinese and Russian media in our corpus. This is important to test the hypotheses H1b and H2b. Figure 4 reports the results of the sentiment analysis.

As expected, Chinese and Russian state media consistently employ negative sentiments in their coverage of the US, NATO, and the UK. Both Russia and China themselves, as well as BRICS, rank very high in terms of positive sentiments about each other. A more interesting difference

is, however, the depiction of European countries (e.g., Germany and France). While for Russia there is hardly any difference in the reporting about these countries and the US, Chinese media are more nuanced: the negative attitude towards the UK and the US is not matched by a similar attitude towards France and Germany. This is in line with our expectations (H2b).

Figure 4 about here

Figure 4 Sentiment Analysis of Russia and China's Media Coverage about Other Actors

Note: We compute sentiment score at sentence level. To achieve this, we generate dummy variables for each sentence, enabling us to track the presence of specific nations or regional institutions. We focus exclusively on sentences that reference solely the target country or regional institution. In other words, sentences incorporating references to two or more entities are systematically excluded. One exception is Russia and China's media coverage toward each other, where we allow the sentence contains both the country name and BRICS. For each score, 5% confidence intervals are also indicated.

Combining the STM and the sentiment analysis, we find even stronger confirmation of our hypotheses. Figure 5 shows that China uses positive sentiments toward the US in the arenas of Topic 3 (BRICS and International Cooperation) and Topic 6 (Cultural and Technical Exchange), while Russia uses negative sentiments toward the US in all topics. Thus, even for the US Chinese propaganda is open to some type of positive reporting, leaving avenues for cooperation.

Figure 5 about here

Figure 5 China and Russia's Media Coverage about the US across Topics

Note: We assign the most salient topic to each document, and the sentiment across topics is calculated by aggregating the sentiment score of sentences. One document may contain multiple topics, which will cause systematic bias in our approach. To mitigate this problem, we set 80% as the threshold for the salient topic's estimated proportion of that document. In other words, we mainly select the documents that has a single dominant topic and where the content related to other topics in this document amounts to less than 20%.

For France and Germany, the results diverge even more. As shown in Figure 6, sentiment analysis regarding France and Germany diverges between China and Russia. China employs relatively prominent positive sentiment toward France and Germany regarding Topic 3 (BRICS and International Cooperation) and Topic 6 (Cultural and Technical Exchange), while Russia uses general negative sentiment for almost all the topics. Figure 7 indicates that Russia's state media sentiment toward the EU and France declined rapidly after the outbreak of the war and has been mostly negative since then. In the same period, China's state media sentiment toward the EU and France in its reports remained relatively stable for six months, with a slight uptick since the beginning of August 2022. It is clear that China's state media portrays a more positive sentiment than Russia's.

Figure 6 about here

Figure 6 China and Russia's Media Coverage about France and Germany across Topics

Furthermore, we scrutinize the narratives through which Russia and China directly propagate each other by STM and sentiment analysis on media coverage reporting on one another (Russian media mentions China and vice versa). The STM results (SM A6) suggest that both sides have emphasized the threats posed to them by the Western bloc (Topics 3, 4, and 7) while talking about each other. Additionally, China places greater emphasis on multilateral (BRICS) cooperation (Topic 10), while Russia stresses bilateral cooperation more (Topics 8 and 9). Figures 4 and 7 indicate that China and Russia employ significantly more positive sentiment toward each other than toward other international actors. To sum up, Russia and China depict

each other as fellow victims of Western hegemony and underscore their comprehensive and deep bilateral cooperation. Beyond the concrete narrative content, we could also identify a grander level strategy of narrative manipulation – the deliberate avoidance of arenas where the two states share competing interests, as suggested by previous studies (Kaczmarek 2017; Chang-Liao 2023).

Figure 7 about here

Figure 7 The Trend of China and Russia's Media Coverage about Other Actors

Conclusion

The study offered a comprehensive view on the bloc-building narratives in Russia and in China. Some of our findings are more intuitive; others are more unexpected. In terms of *intuitive findings confirmed*, we have shown that China and Russia both engage in massive anti-US rhetoric as part of their bloc-building narratives directed at the domestic audience; this is consistent with the common perception of their foreign policy stance. Against the backdrop of this cooperation, one would expect Chinese and Russian narratives to converge over time; we, however, *do not confirm* this rather *intuitive expectation*. On the contrary, China and Russia continue 'selling' China points out tangible benefits from cooperation (e.g., in the economic and cultural sphere), while for Russia anti-Westernism is a reason enough. From this point of view, our study comes to another, and to some extent *counterintuitive finding*: China and Russia can report highly positively of each other although some actions of the partner are at odds with rather central arguments of the propaganda. Strategic narratives allow the countries to navigate around this problem, re-framing their cooperation in a more attractive way.

The results of our analysis have important implications for the literature on cooperation of autocracies. Unlike existing studies, which often assume partnership between authoritarian regimes is helpful for political legitimacy, our research indicates that having a strategic narrative could be essential in transferring external recognition from authoritarian peers to the domestic audience. These narratives can be adjusted to respond to specific domestic audiences and to ensure consistency with other aspects of narratives. Our findings also engage with propaganda and authoritarian legitimation literature. Previous studies have shown that negative propaganda about adversaries is helpful for authoritarian leaders to divert attention from internal issues (Blaydes 2021; Barberá et al. 2024; Fu 2023). The results of our study reinforce the longstanding viewpoint that Russia's state media predominantly highlights external threats and conflict (Miskimmon and O'Loughlin 2017; Alyukov 2022; Tyushka 2022). Narratives constructed by authoritarian states may, however, serve not only to divert attention but also, more ambitiously, to manipulate the public's perception of geopolitical events and justify their international alignments.

Although our main focus is on communication of authoritarian regimes with their domestic audiences, we can draw several conclusions with respect to the discussion about the emergence of international illiberal norms (Flonk 2021) and durability of strategic partnerships of authoritarian regimes (Chang-Lao 2023). We show that at the domestic level autocracies, united in their discontent with the global order (Andal and Miratshina 2022), pursue quite different narrative strategies to frame this discontent: forming an alternative bloc for non-Western states

or reshaping the international norms for all countries. Russia's official discourse has been pushing confrontation with the collective West, which illustrates the diminishing, if not entirely lost, opportunities for cooperation with the West, but also impacts its conceptualization and shaping of the functions and directions of the regional organizations it leads. China does not explicitly oppose the West's dominant ideologies (Aydin 2007), although the term "West" is frequently used to refer to accomplices of the US. Our argument from this point of view echoes the analysis of Kaczmarek (2019), looking at the perception of the world order by Chinese and Russian elites. Differences in domestic rhetoric can be indicative of the relative weakness of alliances between authoritarian states, in our case, Russia and China (see also Kaczmarek 2017); at the same time, they also show that regimes have substantial opportunities to 'repackage' their cooperation (driven by strategic interests, see Khomyakov 2018) to fit with various domestic narratives, even if the partner's behavior is problematic from this point of view.

Existing literature primarily sheds light on the synergies and disparities in international communication strategies of authoritarian states (Morales 2022; Moore and Colley 2024; Fan et al. 2024; Wagnsson et al. 2023). This study enriches our understanding by examining domestic propaganda. Rawnsley (2015) compares the outward digital presences of Russia and China and finds China's state news agency focuses on redressing perceived biases and misrepresentations in international news coverage of China, while their counterpart in Russia concentrates on events within the US in international broadcasting arena. Our examination of their domestic propaganda is in line with this observation by highlighting that although Chinese

official media have adopted several Russian narratives (mostly anti-West) since the start of the war in Ukraine, it has refrained from replicating narratives centered on jointly endorsed regional organizations and bloc-building endeavors.

This research presents certain limitations. Empirically, our dependence on specific keywords to define the analytical corpus might have inadvertently excluded some representative discourses. Moreover, the use of machine translation for cross-lingual analysis may have introduced elements of information loss. The time frame of this study, limited to the year following the full-scale invasion, might require validation over a more extended period and broader contexts.

Conceptually, while our study documents the differences between China and Russia, it explains them primarily through the foreign policy orientation of the country. We acknowledge, however, that there may be other differences between two regimes, which explain the propaganda differences. For example, personality of the political leader (Xi or Putin) could play a certain role (though developing hypotheses in this respect would be difficult). The fact that Russia is, at least according to the traditional definitions, an electoral authoritarian regime (although after the full-scale invasion it is contested) could also matter; for example, Russia could be more interested in constructing 'simple' narratives for broad masses (to mobilize voters), while China could offer a more nuanced narrative, focusing to a larger extent on the elites. To understand the differences in propaganda, one needs to look at how respective decisions are made in Russia and in China – another fascinating topic for future research.

Furthermore, our study focuses on the narrative construction and does not systematically examine the effects of these narratives. While we speculate that authoritarian regimes can solve the problems of cooperating with toxic allies by using strategic narratives, we did not explicitly test for it. Such an analysis would go beyond the framework of this paper and require different tools (like survey experiments). Empirically, while before the invasion, the Sino-Russian relationship has long been described as “hot above and cold below”, characterized by close interactions at the leadership level but lacking in deep understanding and mutual trust among the general public (Wong and Ho 2022; Gerber and He 2022), recent surveys have revealed a dramatic increase in mutual favorability between the two nations, with the populations of both countries expressing higher regard for each other than for Western countries⁴. Whether it is indeed a result of propaganda narratives, is a question requiring further investigation.

Finally, while China and Russia are very important examples of authoritarian states’ cooperation in the modern world, the question of external validity remains. Can (and will) other authoritarian regimes use the same strategy of narrative construction as China and Russia do to extract legitimacy gains from cooperation with other autocrats? There are examples of states for which this conjecture seems to be plausible (e.g., Belarus, which since mid-1990s was run by a regime extracting legitimacy, among other things, from the promise of more intensive cooperation with Russia, but also reframing this cooperation to fit the domestic propaganda), but we are cautious to make a general claim. Russia and China are finally autocracies with

extremely powerful propaganda machines; other regimes can face larger constraints in this respect. We hope our study will stimulate further research on this topic.

Notes

- ¹ This does not mean that elites have a veto position in determining foreign policy: the existing literature (e.g., Shirk 2023) shows both the strengths and the limits of the elite power.
- ² We do not look at the role of ideology in the actual decision-making, only in justifying decisions made by autocrats.
- ³ Of course, we do not claim that this ‘reframing’ is possible for any type of foreign policy decision – this serves as an important caveat for our study.
- ⁴ For Chinese’ attitudes toward other countries, see US-China Perception Monitor (2022); China Institute (2023); Center for International Security and Strategy (2023); for Russia’s attitudes towards other countries see Saradzhyan (2023).

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Title of Paper

Mirrors and Mosaics: Deciphering Chinese and Russian Domestic Bloc-Building Narratives

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Abstract

Authoritarian states are intensifying bloc-building efforts. While the authoritarian regionalism literature suggests that membership in these “clubs of autocrats” can bolster domestic support of authoritarian leaders, such external recognition can also pose challenges, especially when aligning with ‘toxic’ authoritarian partners. We argue that authoritarian regimes attempt to solve this problem by crafting strategic narratives and communicating them through regime-loyal media to the general public. The study examines strategic narratives of bloc-building used by Russia and China in the first year after the start of the full-scale war in Ukraine. Using ‘text-as-data’ methods and qualitative analysis, we find important similarities and differences in the narratives of these two countries. Both use narratives highly critical of the US and the NATO. However, while Russia has crafted a “fortress narrative” that focuses on external threats and non-Western resilience, China promotes a “bridge narrative”, advocating for spanning geopolitical gaps and championing global integration. Both narrative strategies converge in their criticism of shared adversaries but diverge in their portrayals of the blocs they lead.

Keywords:

Strategic Narratives, Authoritarian Regionalism, Propaganda, Bloc building, Russia–Ukraine War

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Competing interests declaration:

No

Figure 1

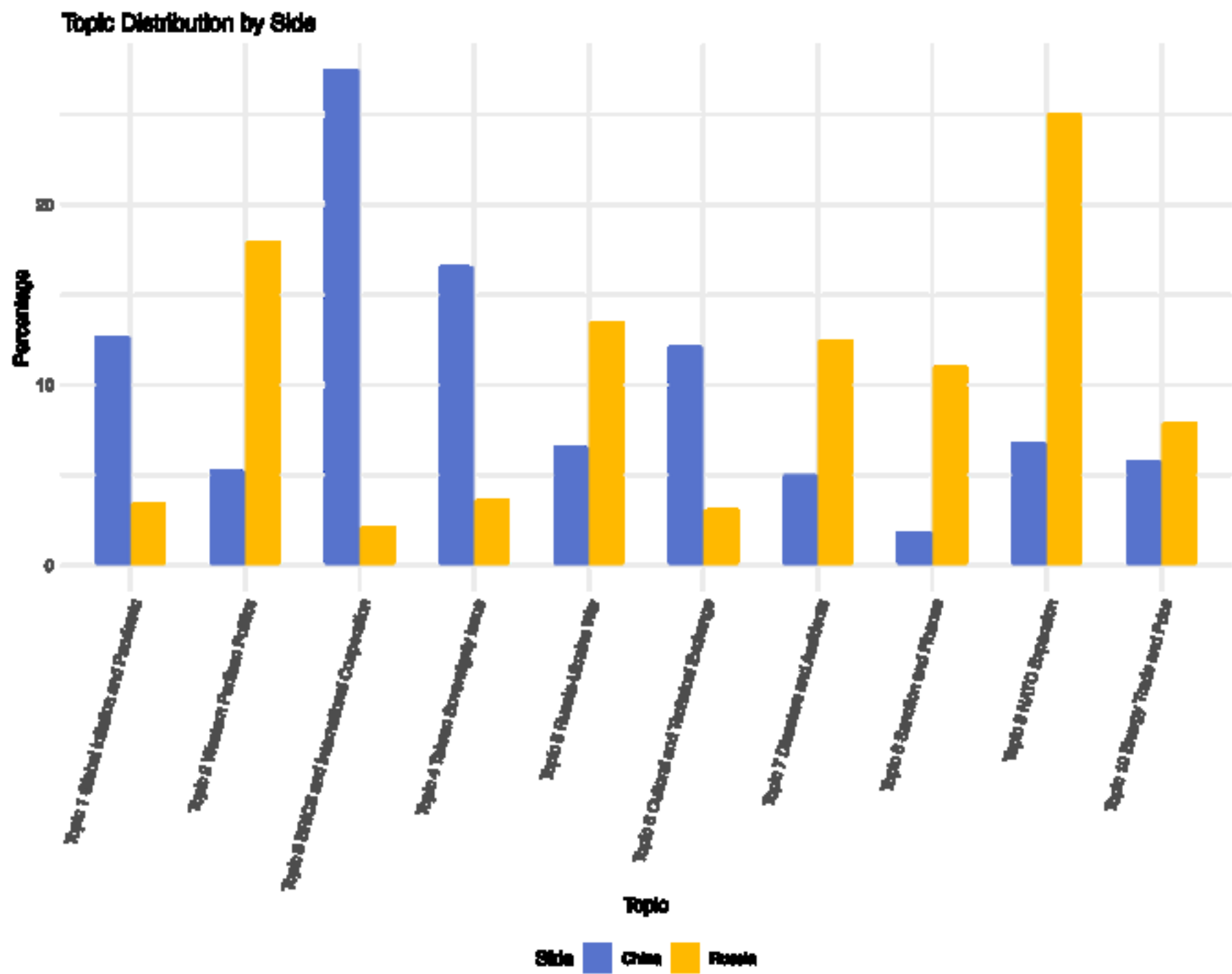


Figure 2

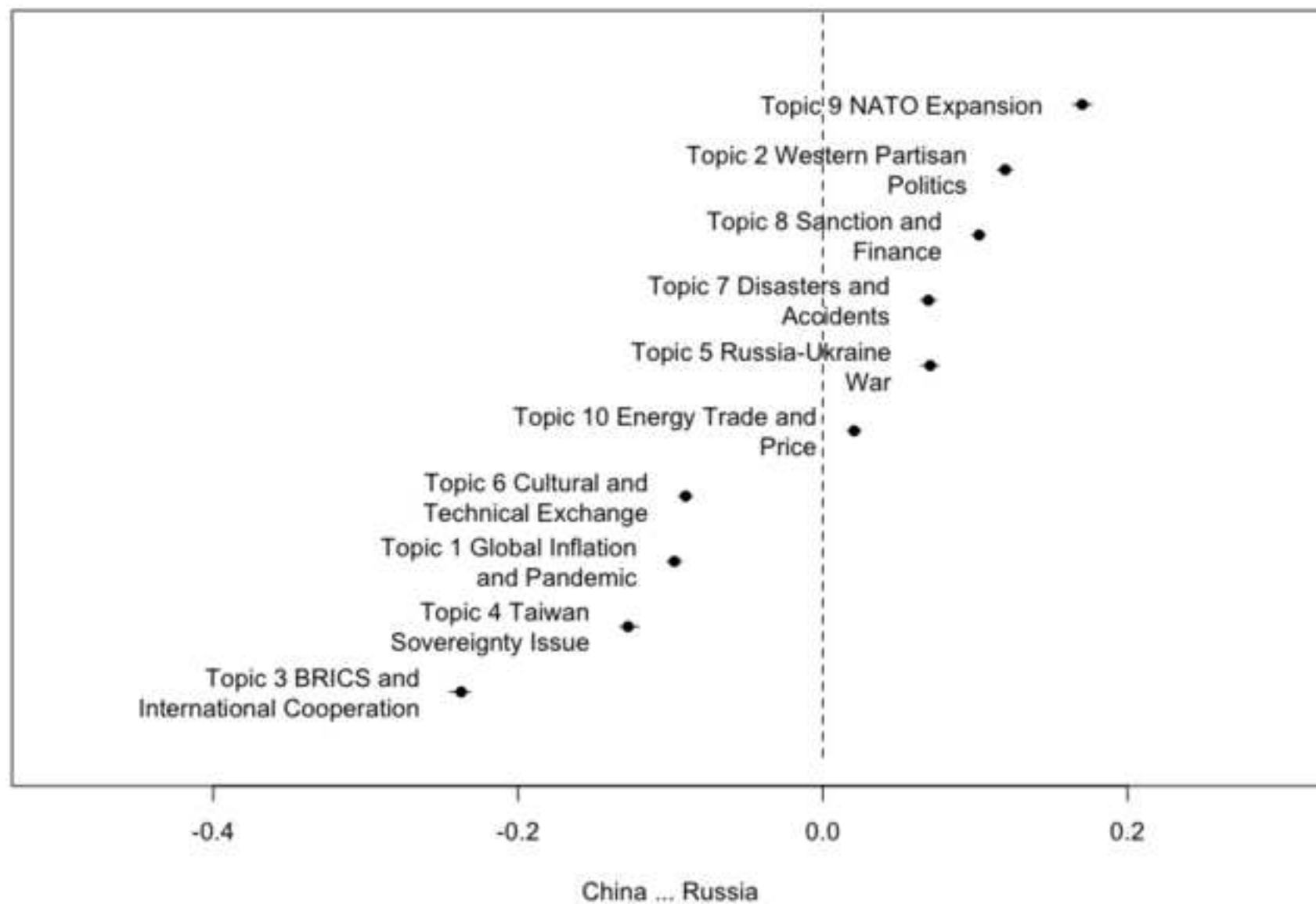


Figure 3

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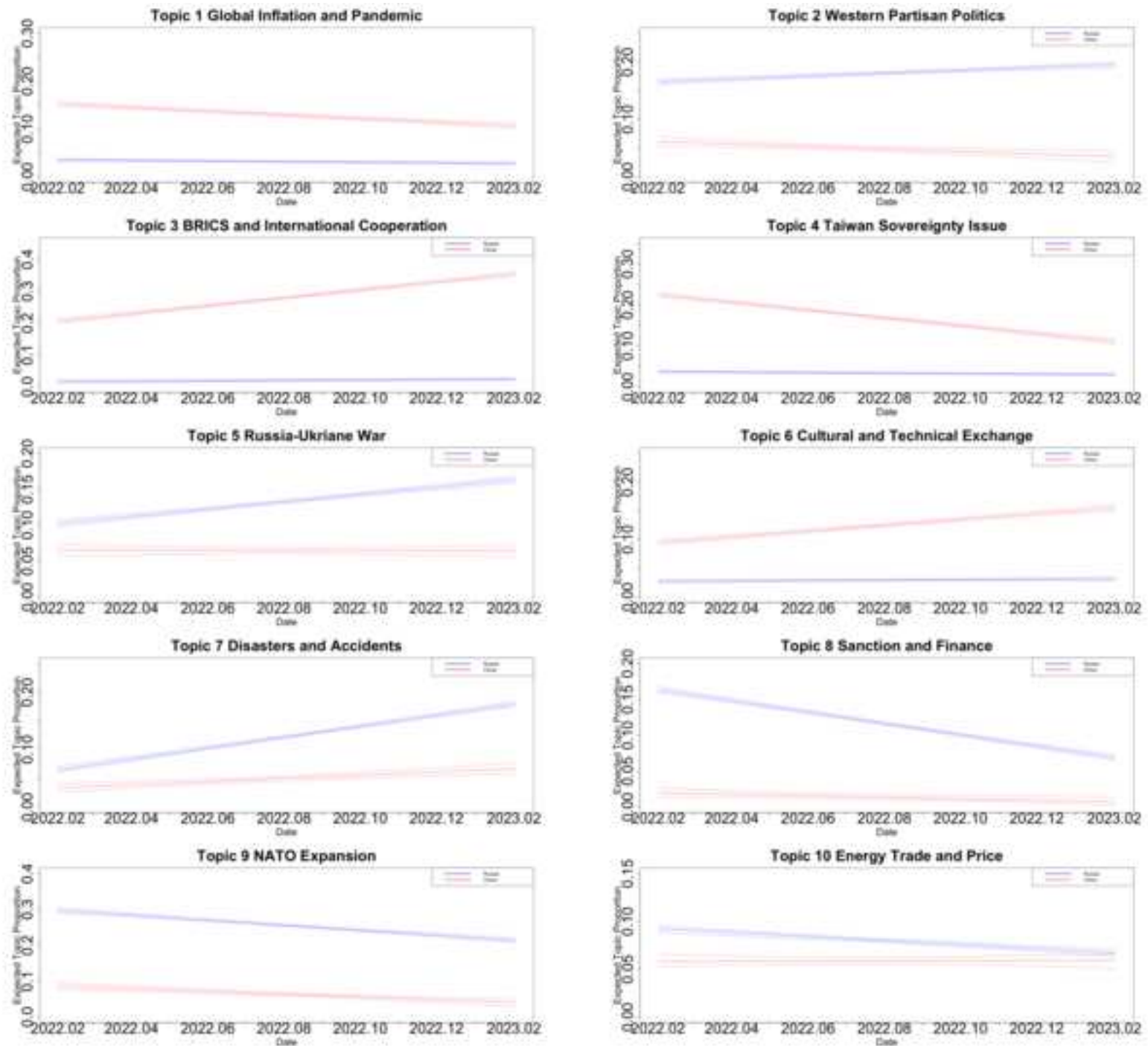


Figure 4a

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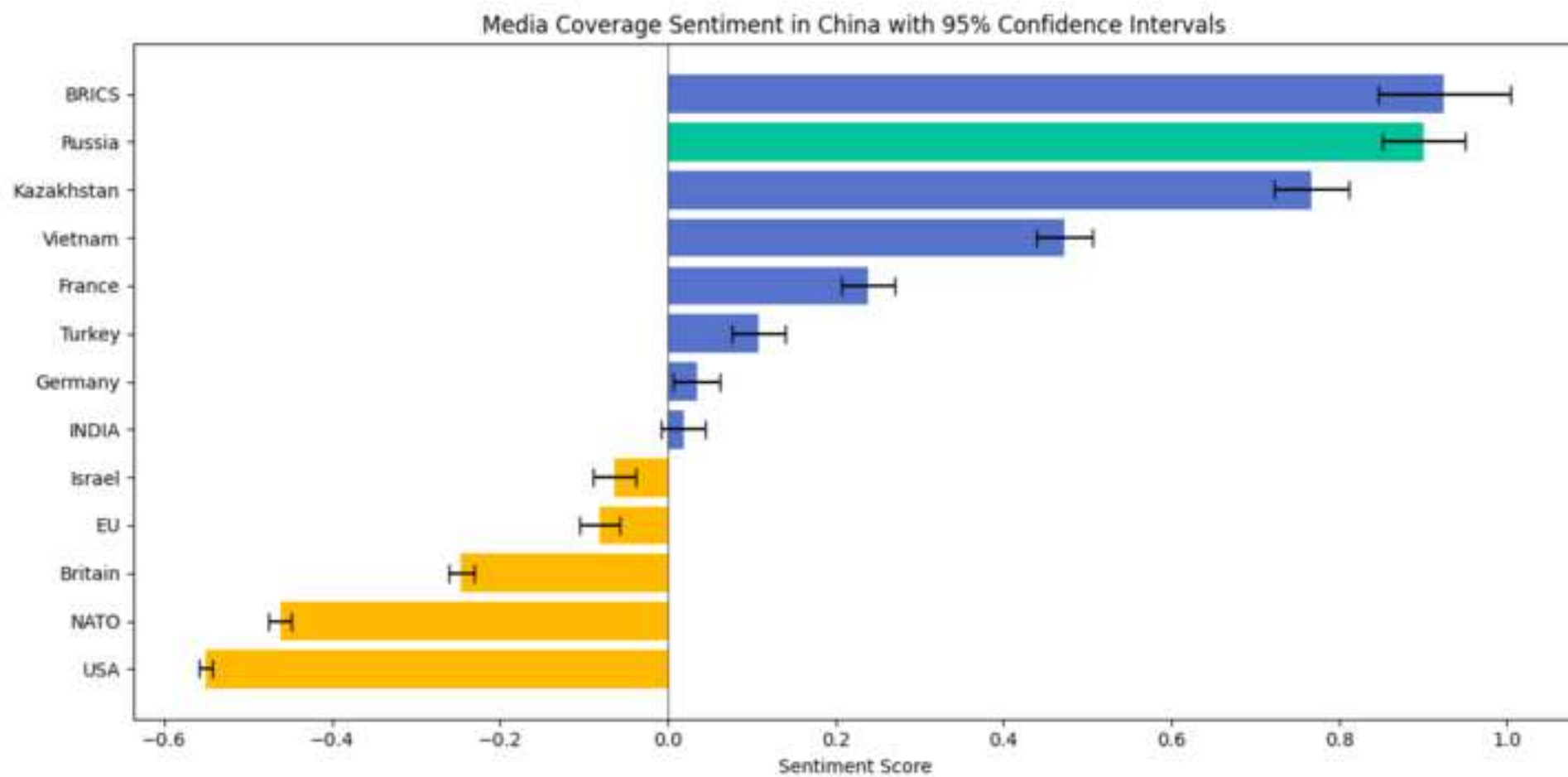


Figure 4b

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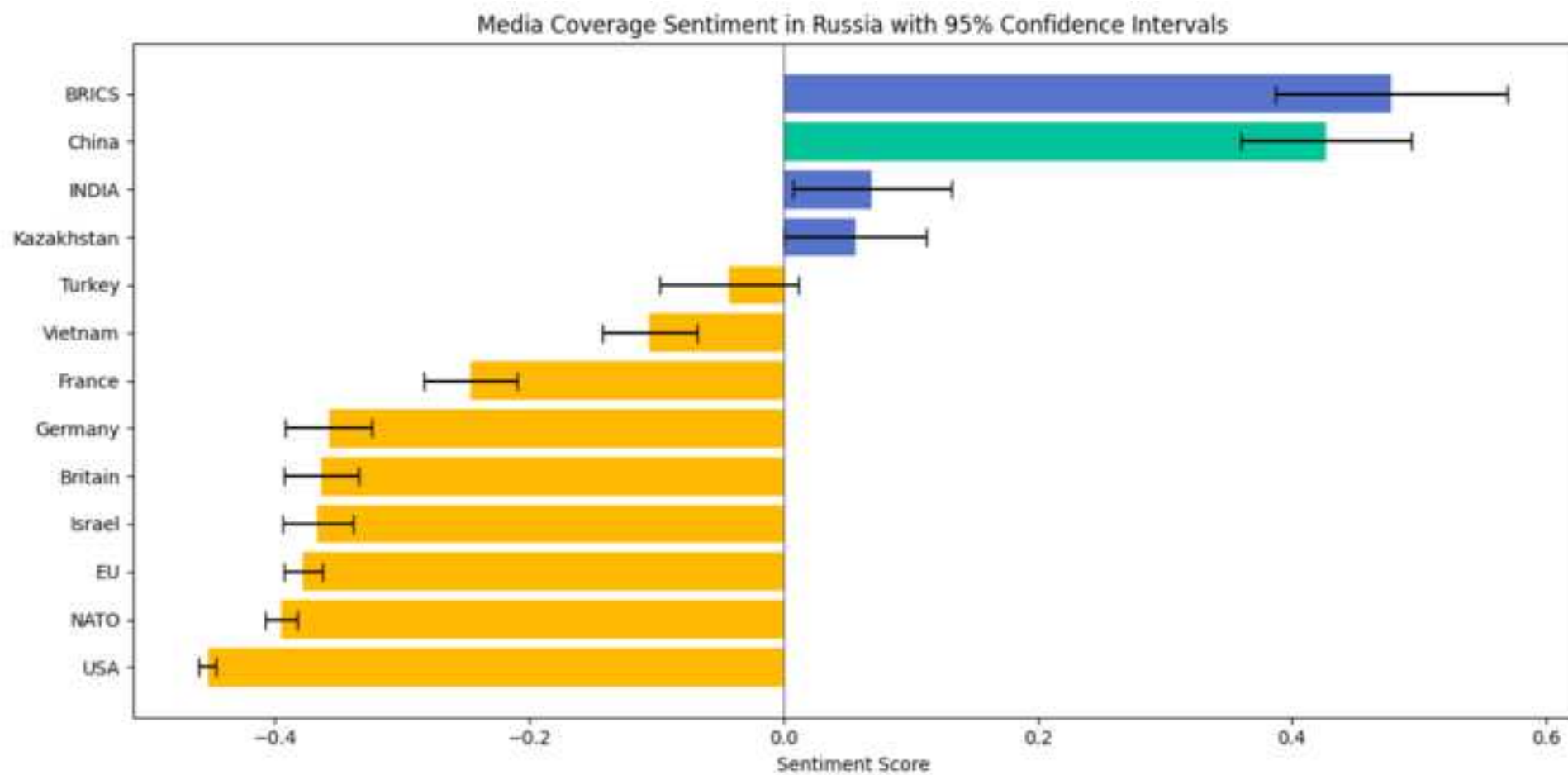


Figure 5

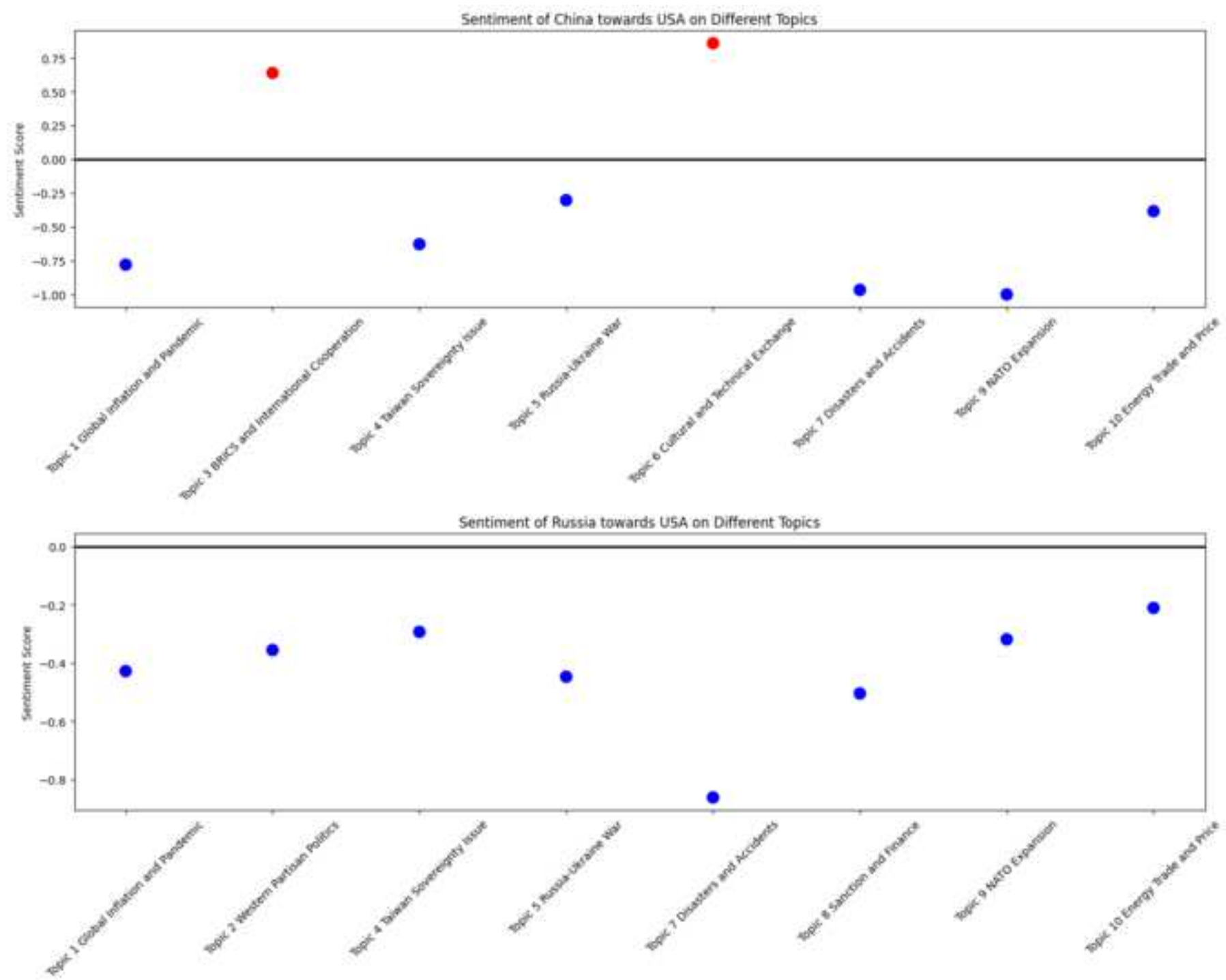


Figure 6a

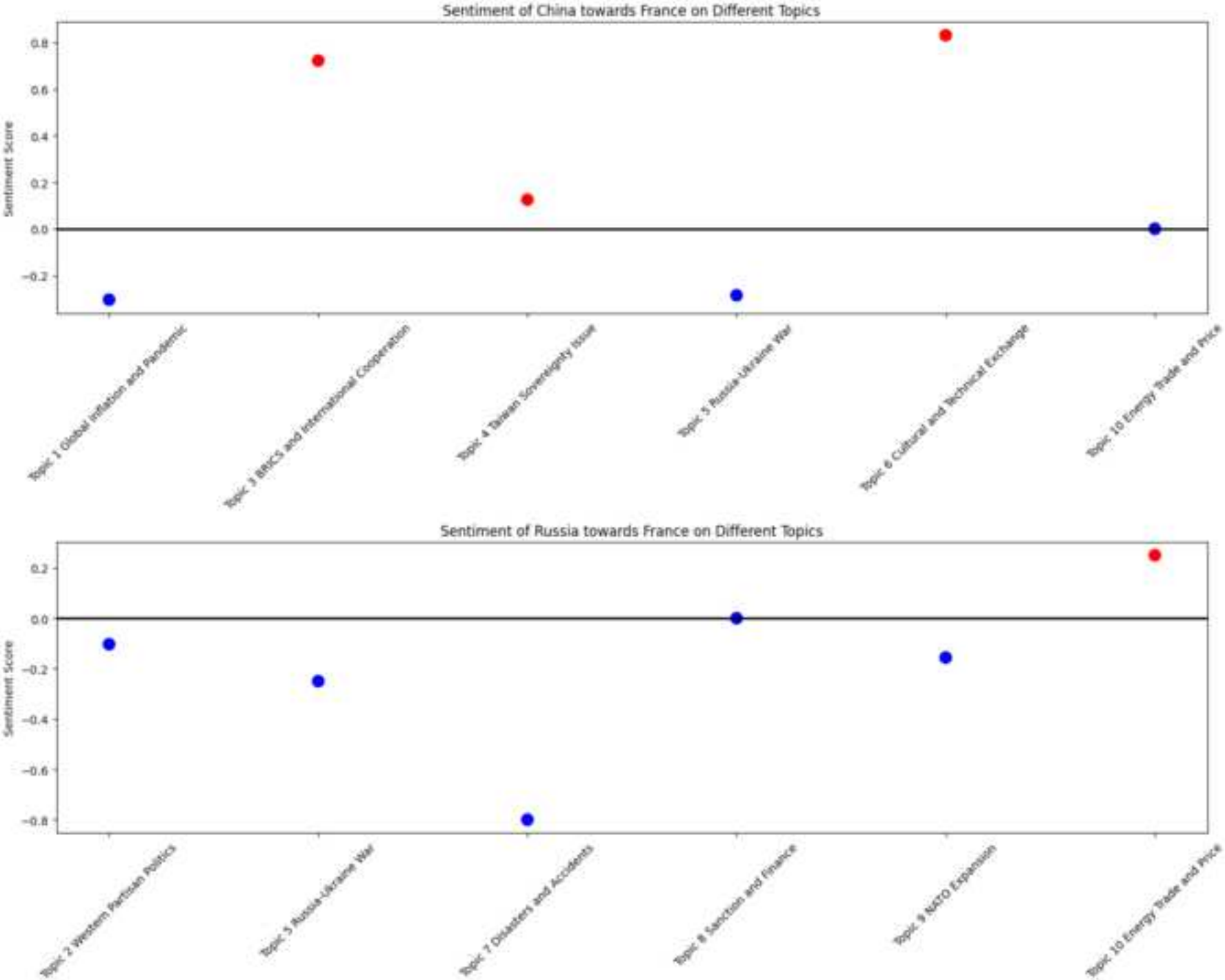


Figure 6b

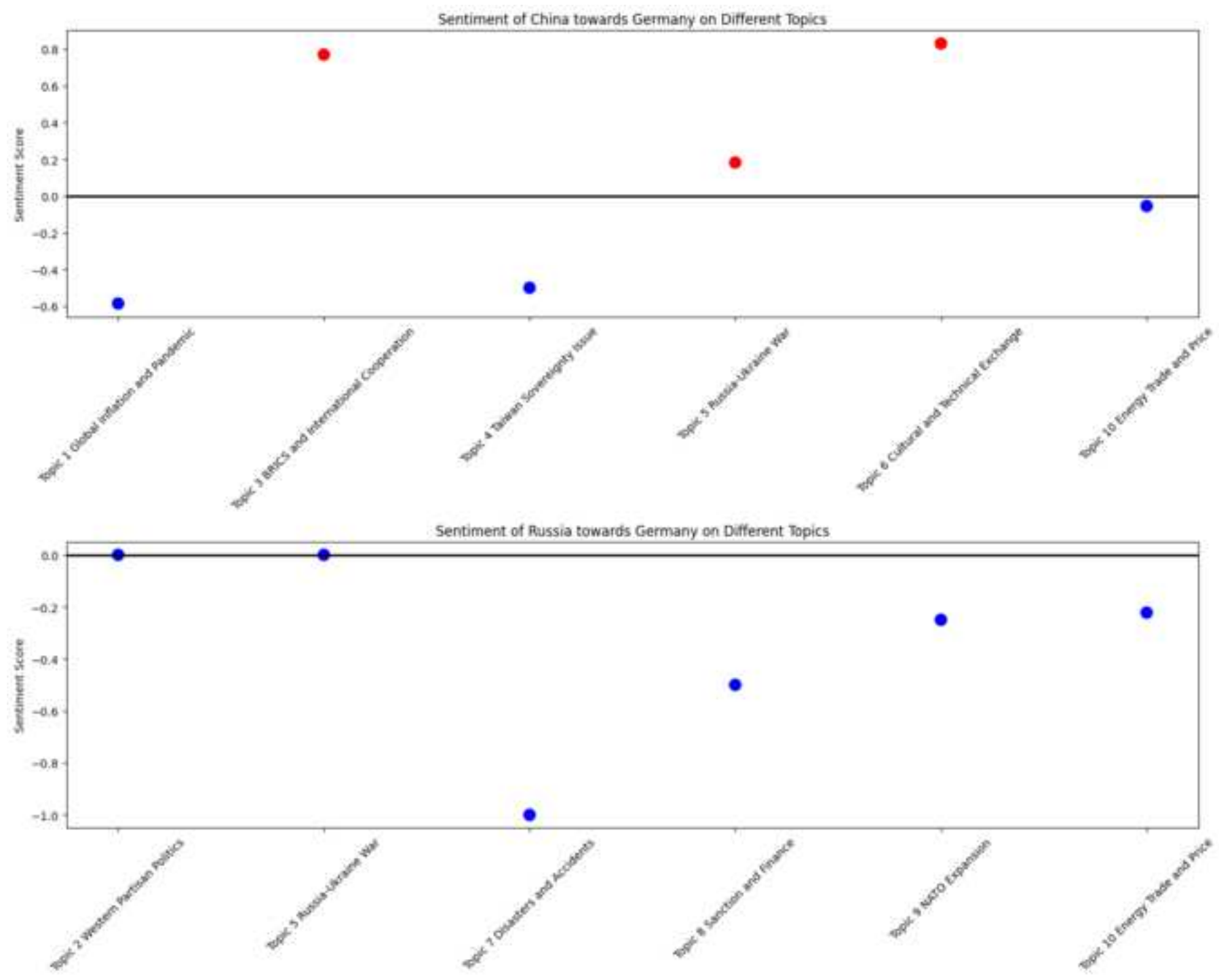


Figure 7a

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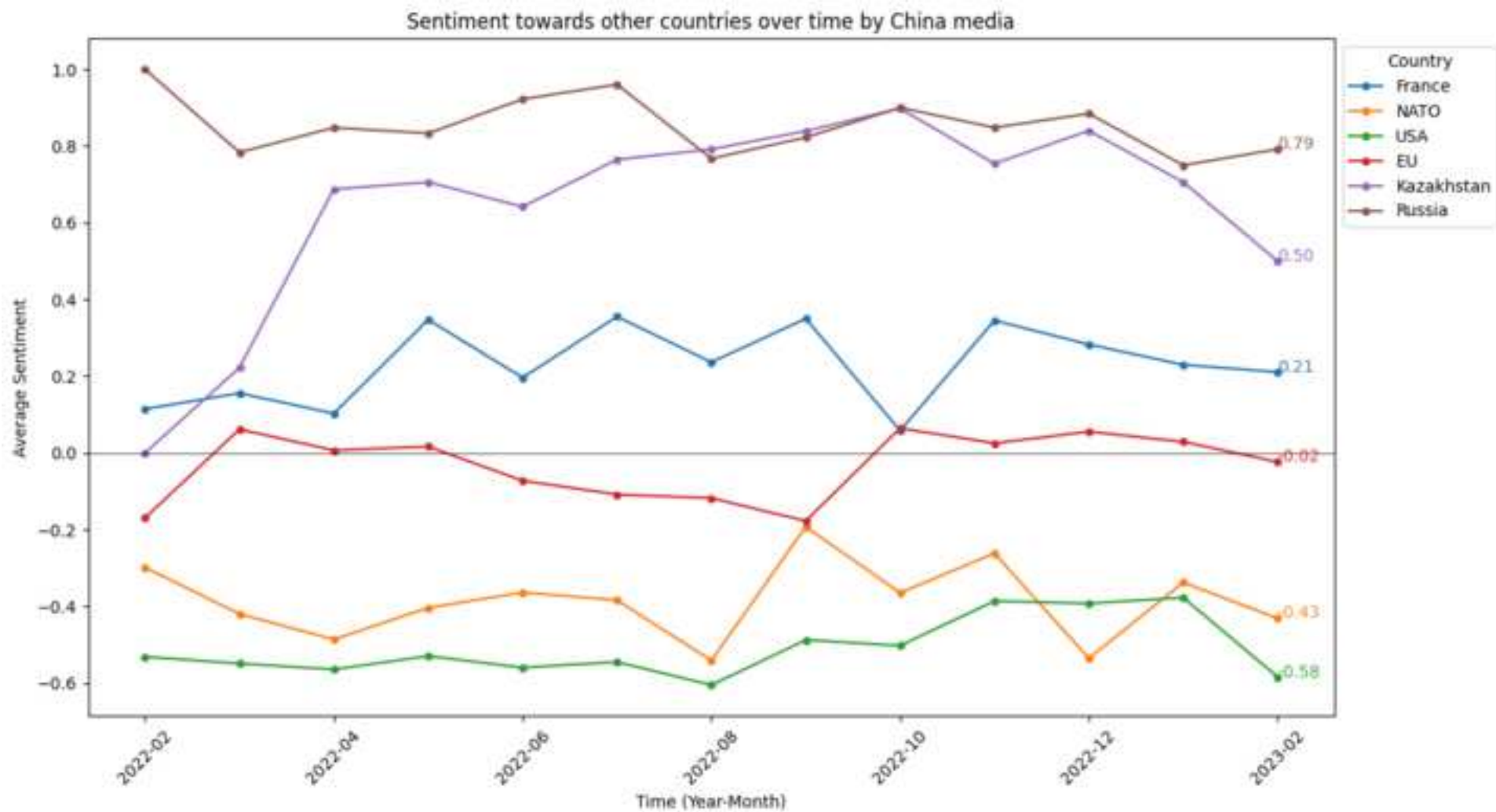
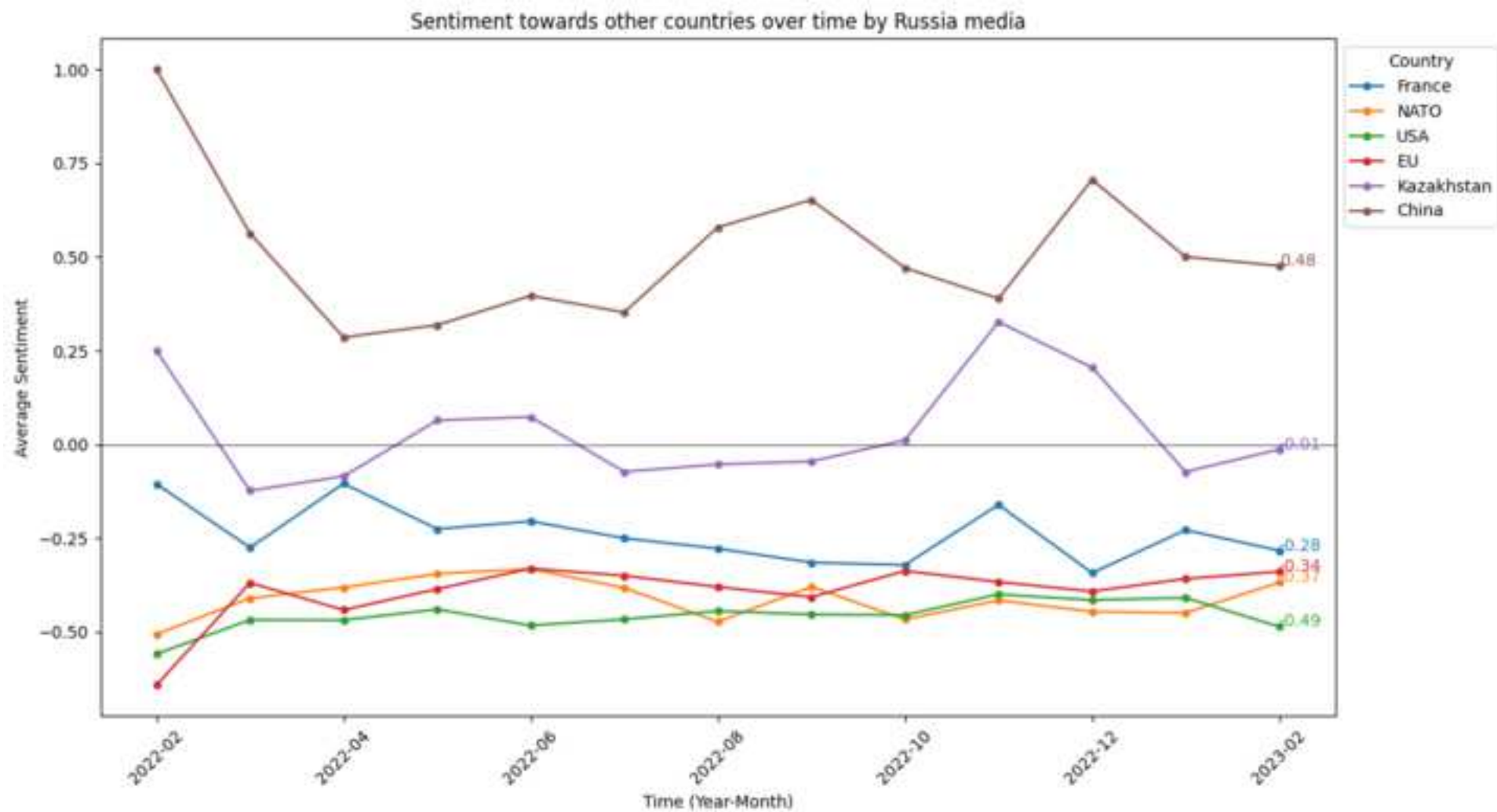


Figure 7b

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Online Supplementary Material

A1. Data Collection Procedure

General remarks: Defining the scope of state narratives can be a challenge. State narratives could include speeches by leaders, media coverage from the most authoritative outlets, or, more broadly, everything from central and local state-affiliated media. In this study, we defined state narratives based on news articles from mainstream mass media at the central level based on the following considerations: First, the selected state media sources are both representative and widely accessed, which provides a more comprehensive representation of state discourses, as authoritarian regimes consider these media outlets as crucial to their propaganda strategy. Second, this approach aligns with our investigation’s objective of understanding how the state communicates with domestic rather than international audiences, so we excluded English channels of the Chinese and Russian governments like People’s Daily Overseas Edition, CGTN and RT. For the Russian case, we also excluded two prominent newspapers with large circulation (i.e., Vedomosti and Kommersant) because they have a somewhat more ambiguous stance toward the regime. For both countries, we used keywords to exclude news related to international sports.

We set a time frame of one year from the full-scale Russian aggression against Ukraine on 24 February 2022 and collected a total of 58,254 news articles/statements from the Chinese perspective and 34,205 on the Russian side. Since our keywords were broad, the dataset included some domestic news articles containing the bloc-building keywords. For the Chinese dataset, we removed this ‘noise’ by fine-tuning a pre-trained news article classification model with 95% accuracy performance and narrowed the pool down to 11,047 news articles. Then, we manually inspected every document to ensure it would fit our research scope and eventually had 7,954 cases for China and 23,654 cases for Russia. The use of the aggression as the starting point for our investigation is driven by, first, the fact that the block-building narratives in both East and West became much more prominent after the war started and second, because the war is likely to exacerbate the differences in narratives and, for China, create a particular challenge of “selling” the cooperation with Russia at the same time maintaining the commitment to sovereignty as the main principle in the propaganda.

China: In China, the mainstream media at the central level play a pivotal role as primary channels for the public to access both domestic and international news. These media outlets are not only significant for their widespread reach but also serve as the most representative and authoritative sources for understanding the stances and viewpoints of the top authorities. To this end, our research involved collecting data from state-controlled newspapers that operate under the leadership of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC), the State Council, and the Central Propaganda Department of the CPC. This includes prominent publications such as the People’s Daily, the Global Times, Xinhua News, and Guangming News. We utilized the [China Core Newspapers Full-text Database](#), employing a keyword search methodology for data collection (for detailed information on the keywords used, refer to Supplementary Material A2). Television, another critical mass media channel, significantly shapes public opinion in China. In this regard, we focused on collecting data from Xinwen Lianbo, one of the most popular state-sponsored television programs. We developed a web crawler to aggregate all news articles broadcast by this program from the official website <https://tv.cctv.com/lm/xwlb/>, applying

keyword-based filtering to refine the dataset. Furthermore, the spokespersons of the China Foreign Ministry play a crucial role in influencing public perception of international dynamics and China's foreign policy direction. Recognizing this, we also developed a web crawler to systematically collect all news releases from the [official website of the China Foreign Ministry](#). This approach allows us to comprehensively analyze how China's foreign policy is communicated to the public.

Russia: Most people in Russia get their information from television news, which is why our primary data source was news articles published on official websites and aired by the three most popular Russian news channels, Channel One (*Pervy Kanal*), Russia 1 (*Rossiya 1*), NTV. The data was collected in the following way:

1. **First Channel:** Channel One archives published news articles on the following website: <https://www.1tv.ru/search/news>. The website contains a search engine that allows you to search for articles by keywords. Also, each article is accompanied by tags. To avoid being included in the sample of articles that mention this or that country, but which is not directly related to international relations, we used two tags with which Channel One marks articles related to international relations and foreign countries: "international relations" (*mezhdunarodnyye otnosheniya*) and "in the world" (*v mire*). Further, for each collected article from our sample, we matched the name of the country, its capital or leader (prime minister or president) and, if the article contained one or more mentions, we included this article in our sample;
2. **Russia 1:** If a news article touches on a topic related to a particular country, then Russia 1 marks such articles with the appropriate tags. Accordingly, for each country in our sample, we searched for the corresponding tag and collected all articles marked with this tag. Access to all news articles can be obtained through the search engine of the website of the Vesti program, which is the leading news program of the Russia 1 TV channel: <https://www.vesti.ru>;
3. **NTV:** As in the case of Russia 1, if a news article is partly or wholly devoted to a particular foreign country, NTV marks this article with the corresponding tag. For each country in our sample, we searched for relevant tags and collected all available articles. Access to NTV news articles can be obtained through a search engine on the official NTV website: <https://www.ntv.ru>

A somewhat less popular source of information among Russians is newspapers. Nevertheless, in order to study in more detail the representation of foreign states and the topics they cover in the context of international relations, we diversified our sample with news articles from the most popular Russian newspapers. Our sample includes articles from the following Russian newspapers: Komsomol Truth (*Komsomolskaya Pravda*), *Izvestia*, Moscow Komsomolets (*Moskovskij Komsomolets*), *Russian Gazette* (*Rossiyskaya Gazeta*), and *Arguments and Facts* (*Argumenty i Fakty*). All articles were collected from the [Integrum](#) database, which is one of the largest data repositories for Russian media. Unfortunately, Integrum does not provide thematic tags, but simply displays all the articles that mention this or that country. This leads to the fact that the sample may include articles in which, for example, Germany is indirectly mentioned, but the article itself is devoted to LGBT laws in Russia. That is, the article is devoted to Russian domestic policy, and not to Germany, which does not correspond to our research task. Therefore, two teaching assistants and one member of the writing team, who are native Russian speakers, manually reviewed all the articles received from Integrum, removing those that did not directly relate to international politics.

A2. Keywords for Identifying Bloc Building in State Media Coverage

The keywords listed in Table 1 were used to pinpoint media coverage related to bloc building. The keywords selection strategy is twofold. First, we used a series of keywords of individual states and regional institutions. The “entity_keywords” category encompasses several groups. It includes China, Russia, and the regional institutions they dominate, like “Beijing,” “China,” “Russia,” “Moscow,” and “BRICS.” In addition, the category includes the states considered long-standing allies of these two countries, such as “Kazakhstan,” “Vietnam,” and “Iran.” Furthermore, there are states that have an ambiguous alignment with various blocs, like “Israel,” “Turkey,” “Brazil,” “India,” “Argentina,” and “Hungary.” Lastly, this category also captures countries and regional institutions that China and Russia view as rivals: “USA,” “Germany,” “Great Britain,” “Poland,” “Italy,” “France,” “Finland,” “Sweden,” “Finland,” and “NATO.”

Second, we used a set of single keywords to identify bloc-building materials. This set, termed ‘single_keywords,’ included terms such as “sanctions,” “blockade,” and “decoupling.” These terms were selected for their direct relevance to the processes and phenomena of bloc building, enabling us to focus on the most pertinent sources.

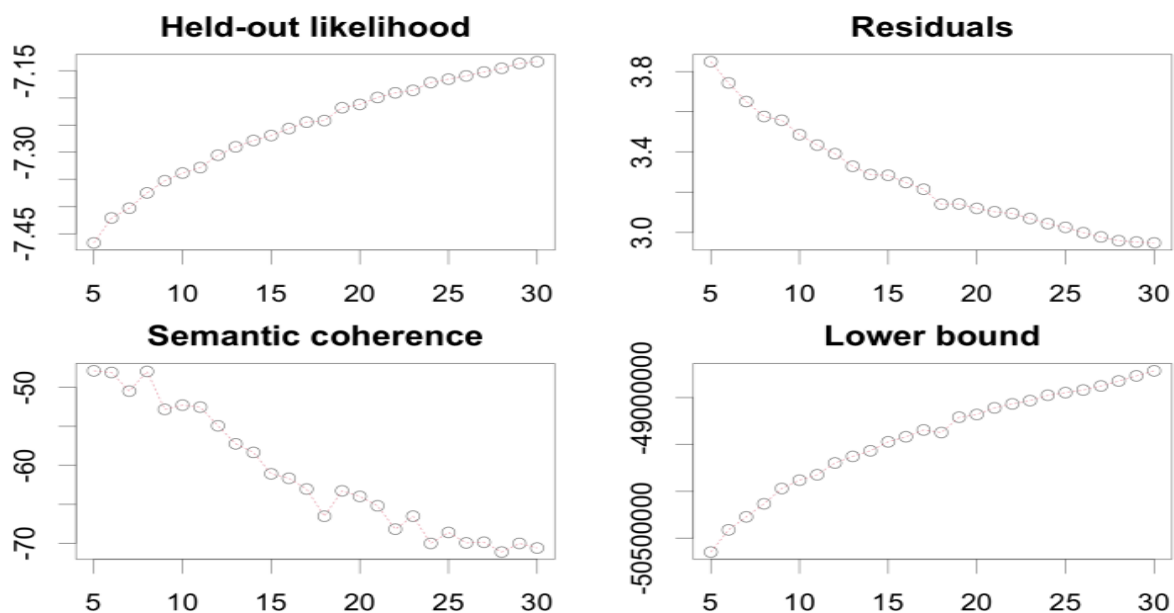
We recognize that while a keyword-based approach is effective in many respects, it may not capture all the relevant content related to bloc building. Indeed, authoritarian regimes often employ more colloquial, relatable language in their state-controlled media to achieve broader and more effective dissemination of their messages. For instance, Chinese state media may use terms like “小圈子”(small circle) or “阵营对抗”(camp confrontation) as indirect references to bloc building rather than more formal language terms like “脱钩”(decoupling). To mitigate this issue, we have supplemented our keyword methodology with a word-embedding approach. Word embeddings are a type of word representation that allows words with similar meanings to have similar representations. This method enables us to identify synonyms and related terms that may not have been included in our original set of keywords.

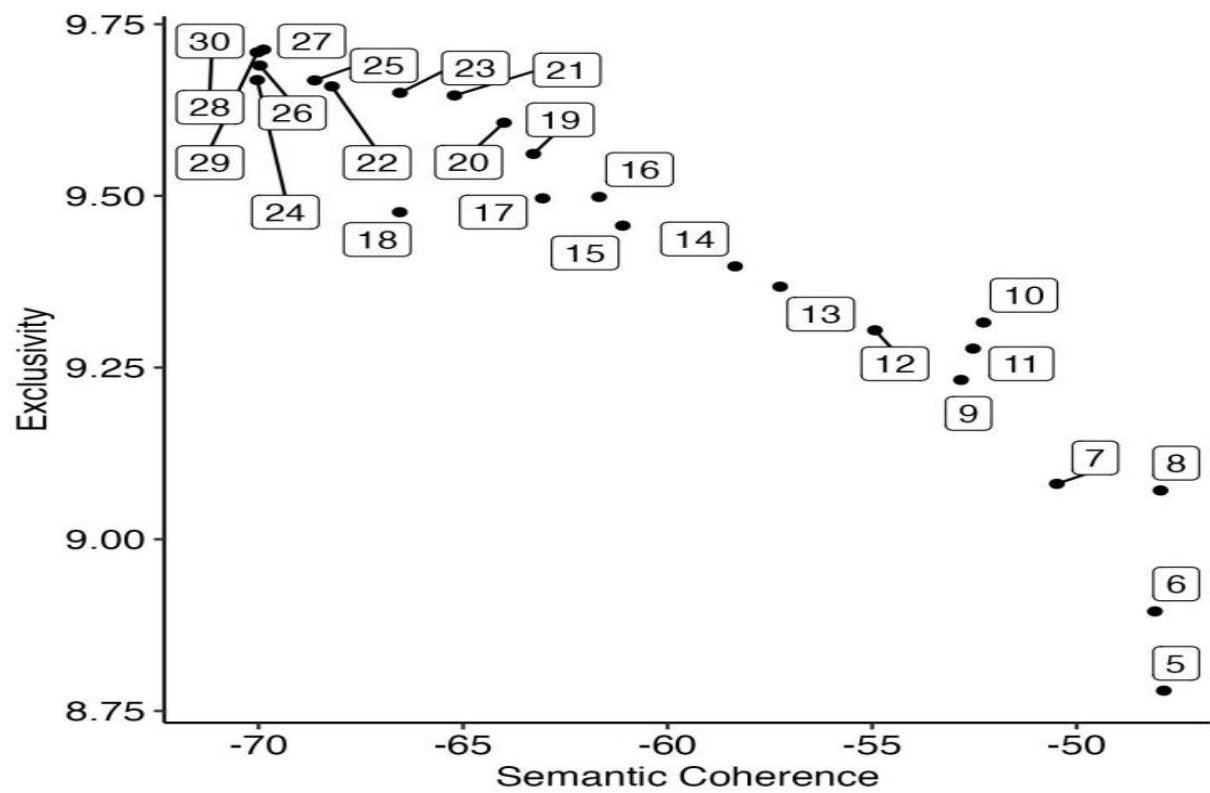
Specifically, we applied word embedding methods to the speeches of foreign ministry spokespersons (2019–2023). These speeches often contain nuanced and coded language that reflects the state’s official stance on various issues, making them a valuable resource for our research. In this way, combining keyword and word-embedding methods allows us to overcome the limitations of a purely keyword-based approach. By identifying and incorporating synonyms and related terms, we can capture a more comprehensive and nuanced picture of bloc building in international relations. We do not use this approach for data collection on the Russian side because “sanction” are pervasively used in media coverage.

Others may question the breadth of our keyword selection, suggesting that these terms might be too broad to precisely locate bloc building–related material. However, we argue that this breadth is both necessary and strategic. The concept of bloc building spans a variety of interconnected political, economic, and cultural activities, and using entity keywords, we can better grasp the diversity of narratives for bloc building. This is different from traditional methods that mainly focus on a single narrative. More importantly, authoritarian states weaponize media coverage for specific political goals, such as expressing their attitude toward specific countries.

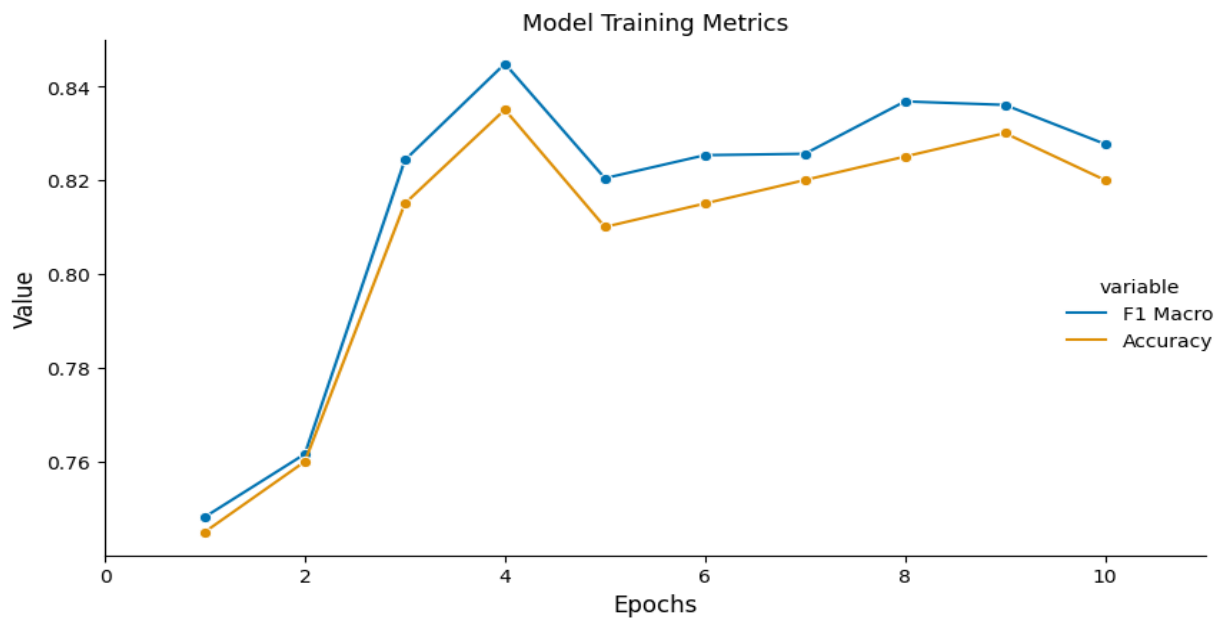
	China Side	Russia Side
Overlapping Keywords	“Beijing,” “China,” “Russia,” “Moscow,” “BRICS,” “Kazakhstan,” “Vietnam,” “Iran,” “Israel,” “Turkey,” “Brazil,” “India,” “Argentina,” “Hungary,” “USA,” “Germany,” “Great Britain,” “Poland,” “Italy,” “France,” “Finland,” “Sweden,” “Finland,” “NATO”	
Synonyms Identified by Word-Embedding Methods	“withdraw,” “clique,” “opposition,” “break chain,” “high walls of the courtyard,” “confrontation,” “camp confrontation,” “gang up,” “trade war,” “cold war”	
Synonyms in Chinese	“退群”，“小圈子”，“对立”， “断链”，“小院高墙”，“对 抗”，“阵营对抗”，“拉帮结 伙”，“贸易战”，“冷战” “单边主义”，“霸权主 义”，“强权政治”，“保 护主义”，“筑墙设垒”， “脱钩断链”，“单边制 裁”，“极限施压”，“多 边平台政治化”	

A3. STM Model Search_K

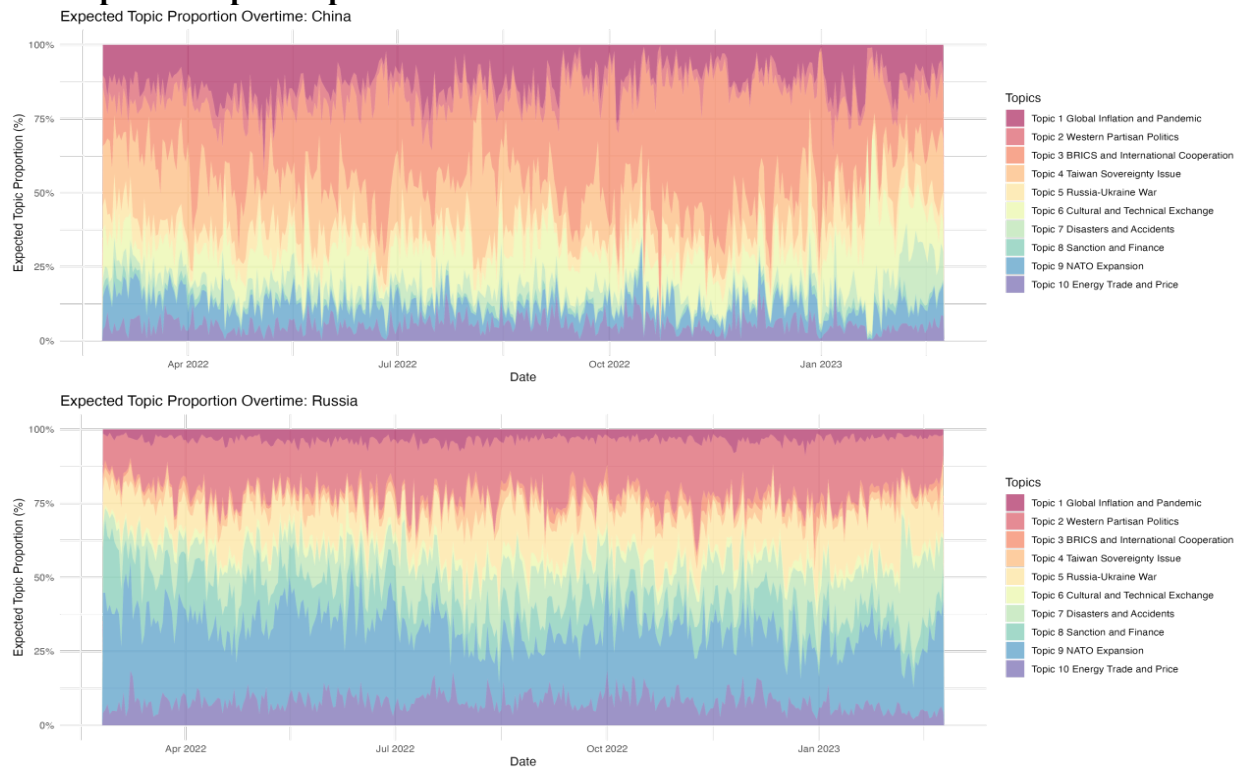




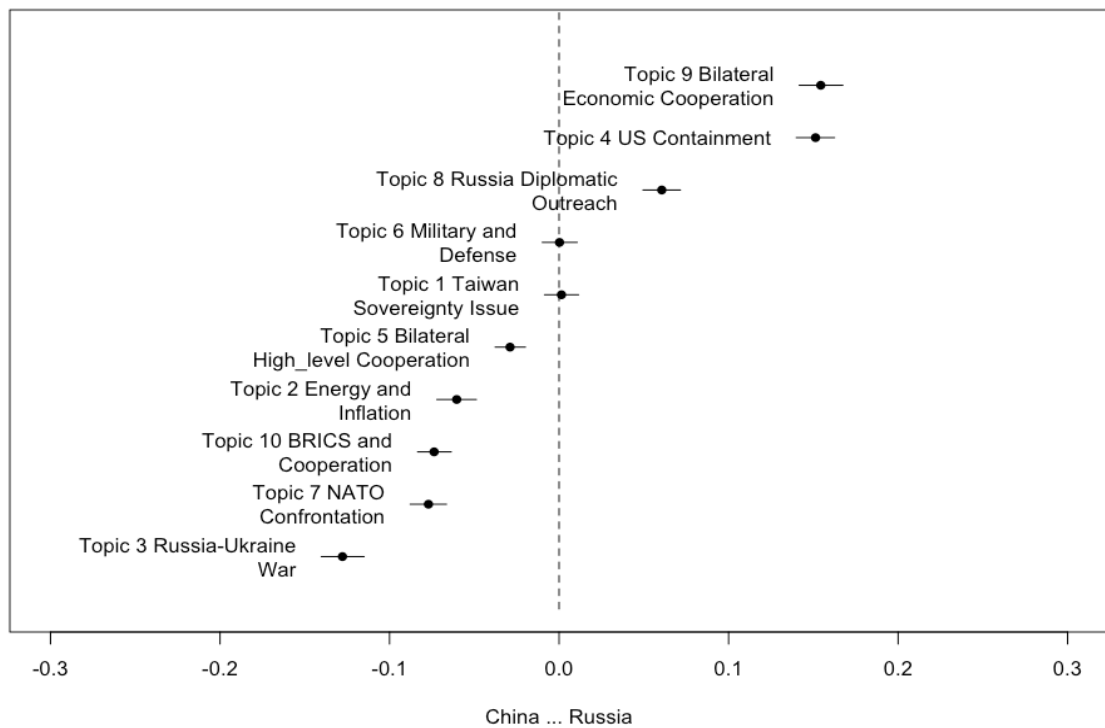
A4. Fine-tuned Model Performance



A5. Expected Topic Proportion for Each Side



A6. China and Russia's Media Coverage about Each Other



A7. Keywords for Each Topic

Topic 1 Global Inflation and Pandemic	rate, virus, disease, inflation, monetary, prevention, statistic
Topic 2 Western Partisan Politics	republican, election, trump, democrat, truss, johnson, conservative
Topic 3 BRICS and International Cooperation	jinping, brics, communist, cooperation, promote, mankind, promoting
Topic 4 Taiwan Sovereignty Issue	taiwan, wenbin, indopacific, lijian, strait, sinous, japan
Topic 5 Russia–Ukraine War	missile, artillery, army, armored, pentagon, ammunition, rocket
Topic 6 Cultural and Technical Exchange	exhibition, festival, technology, railway, electric, museum, digital
Topic 7 Disasters and Accidents	injured, earthquake, police, killed, victim, prison, incident
Topic 8 Sanctions and Finance	visa, payment, ruble, izvestia, currency, airline, card
Topic 9 NATO Expansion	putin, lavrov, vladimir, sweden, diplomat, nato, peskov
Topic 10 Energy Trade and Price	oil, gas, export, price, barrel, energy, coal

Notes: The seven words with the highest FREX score for each topic were presented. FREX is a measure that balances word frequency and exclusivity to a specific topic. Words with high FREX scores are both relatively frequent in a topic and exclusive to that topic, which makes them suitable descriptors of the topic.

A8. Topic Proportions for Entire Corpus

