

Russo-Chinese narrative alignment in international broadcasting: The case of Russia's invasion of Ukraine

Dani Madrid-Morales (U of Sheffield) | Ilya Yablokov (U of Sheffield) | Aybüke Atalay (U of Glasgow)



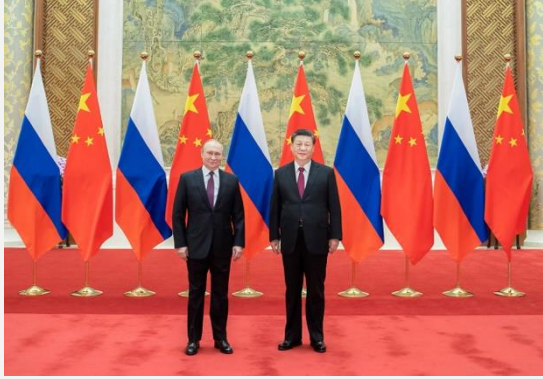
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‘Without limits’ — on whose terms?



Beijing • 4 Feb 2022

‘No limits’ — weeks before the
invasion



Beijing • 3 Sept 2025

Victory Day parade: the spectacle of
alignment



Beijing • 19–20 May 2026

State visit days after Trump’s Beijing
trip

Aligned states, divergent narratives

Moscow and Beijing share a publicly expressed grievance with the US-led order. However, the extent to which a shared grievance can be described as a shared narrative script is unclear.

In this project, we ask where **their narratives actually converge on external propaganda**, and where they may diverge.

- Areas of convergence include status-seeking, anti-hegemonic discourse, an ‘axis of necessity’ (Gabuev 2025; Larson & Shevchenko 2010; Walker 2018).
- Asymmetry can be seen in Russia being described as the ‘junior partner’, and in how Beijing is increasingly seen as “setting the terms” (Marat, Laruelle & Atreya 2024; Zhao 2025)

What we know, and the gap

- The literature to date that has focused on the media dimension of the ‘alignment’ already converges on the existence of an ‘**asymmetrical alignment**’.
- Several studies have shown that Chinese outlets amplify and reframe Russian narratives, with no reverse flow. However...
 - The evidence comes mostly from social media and *Global Times*, single-period, with no Western baseline (Hanley et al. 2022, 2024; Rogers & Zhang 2024; Ofori et al. 2026)
- With this study, we test the degree of (mis)alignment on the two flagship broadcasters , RT and CGTN, in English video, across two periods, against France 24, with a validated classifier.

Three broadcasters, two periods, two languages

- RT scraped from Odysee (banned on mainstream platforms); CGTN & France 24 via the YouTube API & yt-dlp.
 - Collected videos in Spanish and English
- Two windows (**Jan-Dec 2022 and Jul 2024-Jun 2025**) to track alignment over time.
- Media were collected via yt-dlp; missing subtitles transcribed with Whisper; Ukraine items isolated with the newsmap dictionary.

Sample (N = 99,867)

ENGLISH	Channel · Platform	Jan-Dec 2022	Jul 2024 - Jun 2025
	RT Odysee	6,352	5,960
	CGTN YouTube	10,651	9,980
	France 24 YouTube	11,355	11,994

SPANISH	Channel Platform	Jan-Dec 2022	Jul 2024 - Jun 2025
	RT Odysee	9,086	8,736
	CGTN YouTube	8,053	7,406
	France 24 YouTube	9,523	10,771

A typology of narratives analysed

System narratives

How the international order is structured: who major powers are and what norms govern the system.

Western double standards

Western media deception / propaganda

Criticism of Western sanctions

Identity narratives

Who actors are; the character, values and intentions ascribed to “us” and to others.

Russia as defensive actor

China as peaceful mediator

Ukraine as Nazi and/or far-right state

Issue narratives

Why a particular action, conflict or policy is framed as necessary or justified.

Ukraine is losing the war

War “porn” & militarisation

Religious persecution by Kyiv

From codebook to LLM

1 Watch & draft

A subset viewed in full. Inductive typology of eleven narratives, plus a binary gate for whether a video is substantially about Ukraine. Codebook v1 written, annotators trained on it.

2 Human coding

Three annotators, video as unit, non-exclusive binary labels. Independent rounds, discussion, codebook revision, repeated until full agreement. That subset becomes the gold standard.

3 Code

The codebook rewritten as a prompt for LLMs and iterated against the gold standard until best fit.

Three model configurations scored on the same cases, and the best carried forward.

4 Iterate

The chosen configuration run over the remaining corpus through the API. A narrative profile for all 90,000+ videos, which is what the comparison rests on.

Validating the classifier

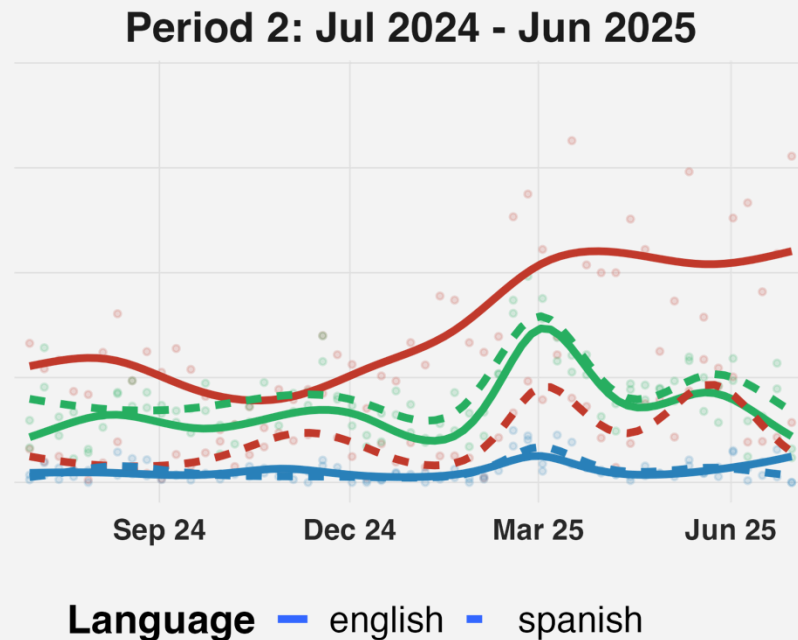
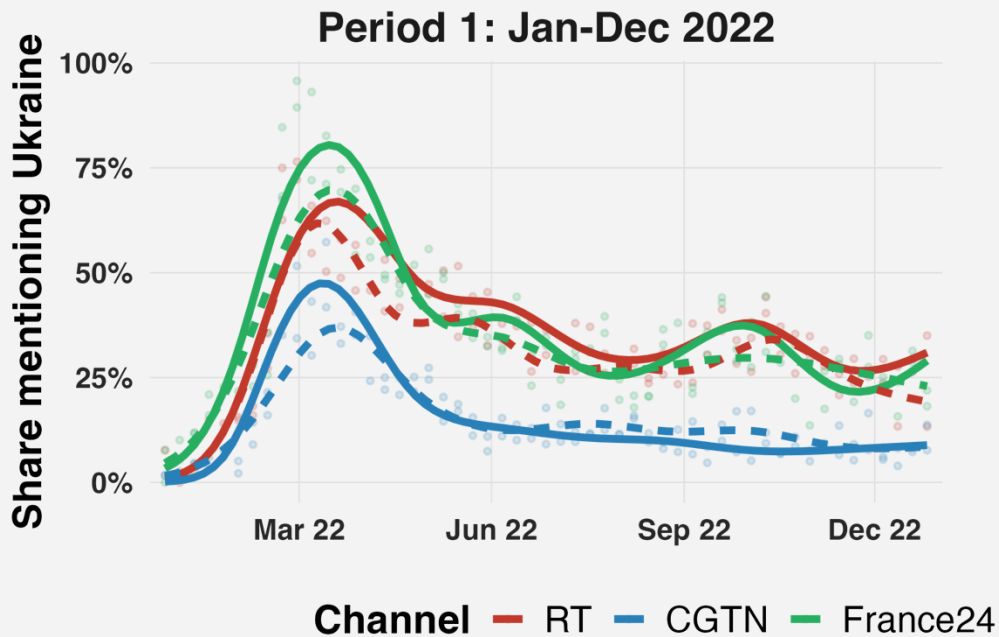
Model	Accuracy	Precision	Recall	F1	Kappa
gpt-4.1	0.967	0.818	0.925	0.843	0.826
gpt-5.1	0.948	0.741	0.925	0.786	0.759
gpt-5.2	0.967	0.857	0.892	0.849	0.831

- **Newer is not better.** gpt-5.1 is worse than gpt-4.1 on both F1 and kappa. Model choice has to be validated per task, not inferred from a release date.
- **Averages hide the spread.** Per narrative, F1 runs from 0.50 to 1.00. Report by category or you are reporting nothing.

Narrative (mis)alignment



Weekly share of videos mentioning Ukraine



Overview of findings

		RT	CGTN	France 24	
International System Narratives	Western double standards	Advances the claim	Advances the claim	Reports or contests it	
	Criticism of Western sanctions	Advances the claim	Advances the claim	Reports or contests it	
	Western media deception	Advances the claim	Advances the claim	Absent	
Identity Narratives	Russia as defensive actor	Advances the claim	Absent	Absent	
	Ukraine as Nazi / far-right state	Advances the claim	Absent	Absent	
	China as peaceful mediator	Absent	Advances the claim	Absent	
Issue Narratives	Ukraine is losing	Advances the claim	Absent	Absent	
	War porn / militarisation	Advances the claim	Absent	Absent	
	Religious persecution by Kyiv	Advances the claim	Absent	Absent	

 Advances the claim  Reports or contests it  Absent

International-system narratives (English only)

	Period 1 (Jan–Dec 2022)			Period 2 (Jul 2024–Jun 2025)		
	CGTN	F24	RT	CGTN	F24	RT
Western double standards	4.6%	1.5%	17.7%	9.4%	1.6%	18.9%
Western media deception/propaganda	2.4%	0.4%	14.4%	1.7%	0.4%	13.6%
Criticism of Western sanctions	5.7%	0.9%	12.4%	0.9%	0.8%	5.5%

Identity narratives (English only)

	Period 1 (Jan–Dec 2022)			Period 2 (Jul 2024–Jun 2025)		
	CGTN	F24	RT	CGTN	F24	RT
Russia as defensive actor	7.3%	4.3%	12.5%	1.7%	3.4%	16.3%
China as peaceful mediator	7.9%	0.1%	0.3%	19.7%	0.3%	1.4%
Ukraine as Nazi/far-right state	0.4%	1.4%	11.5%	0.9%	0.5%	8.4%

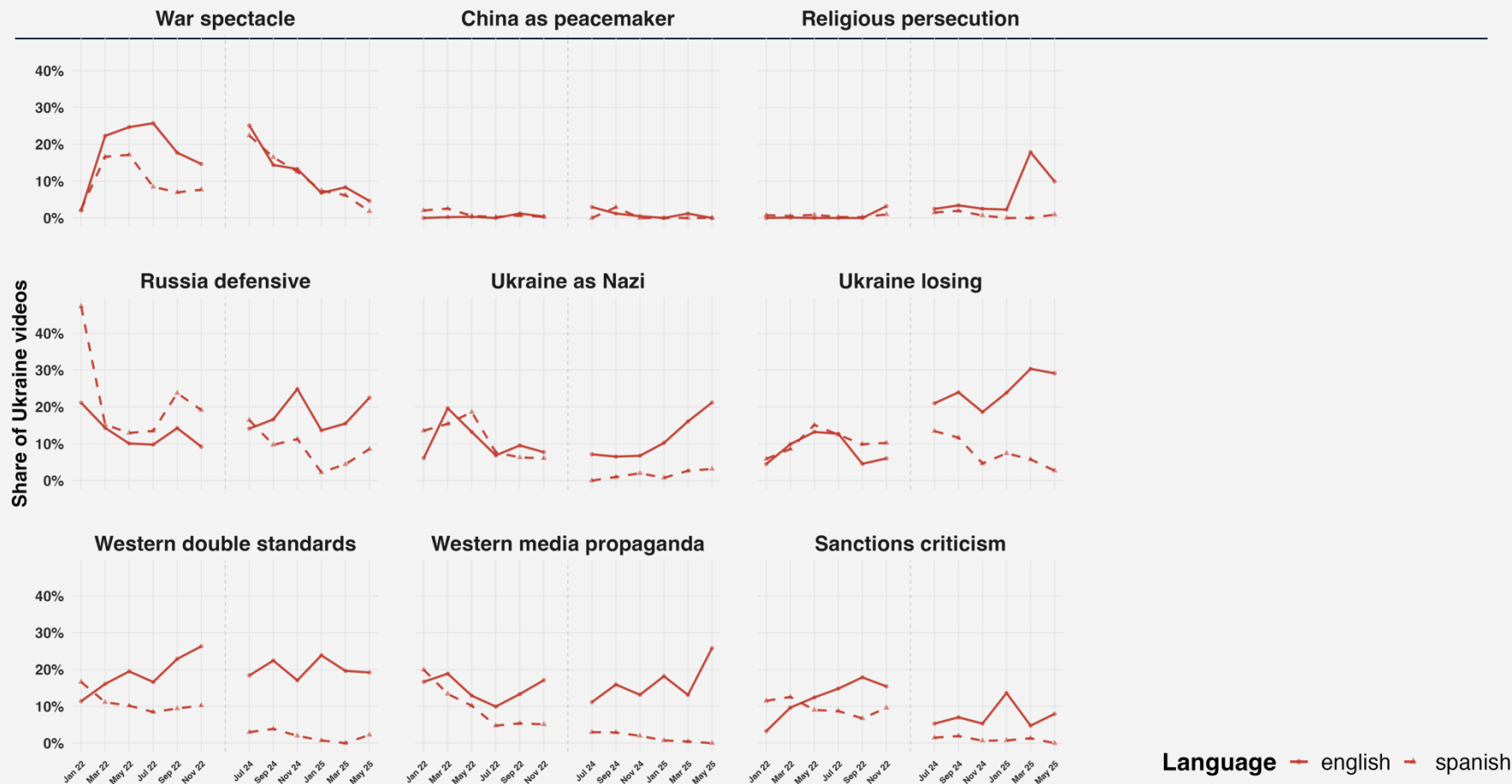
Issue narratives (English only)

	Period 1 (Jan–Dec 2022)			Period 2 (Jul 2024–Jun 2025)		
	CGTN	F24	RT	CGTN	F24	RT
Ukraine is losing	0.9%	1.6%	8.9%	4.3%	6.2%	22.2%
War porn / militarisation	3.2%	0.6%	18.6%	0.0%	1.7%	15.8%
Religious persecution by Kyiv	0.0%	0.1%	0.5%	0.0%	0.0%	4.1%

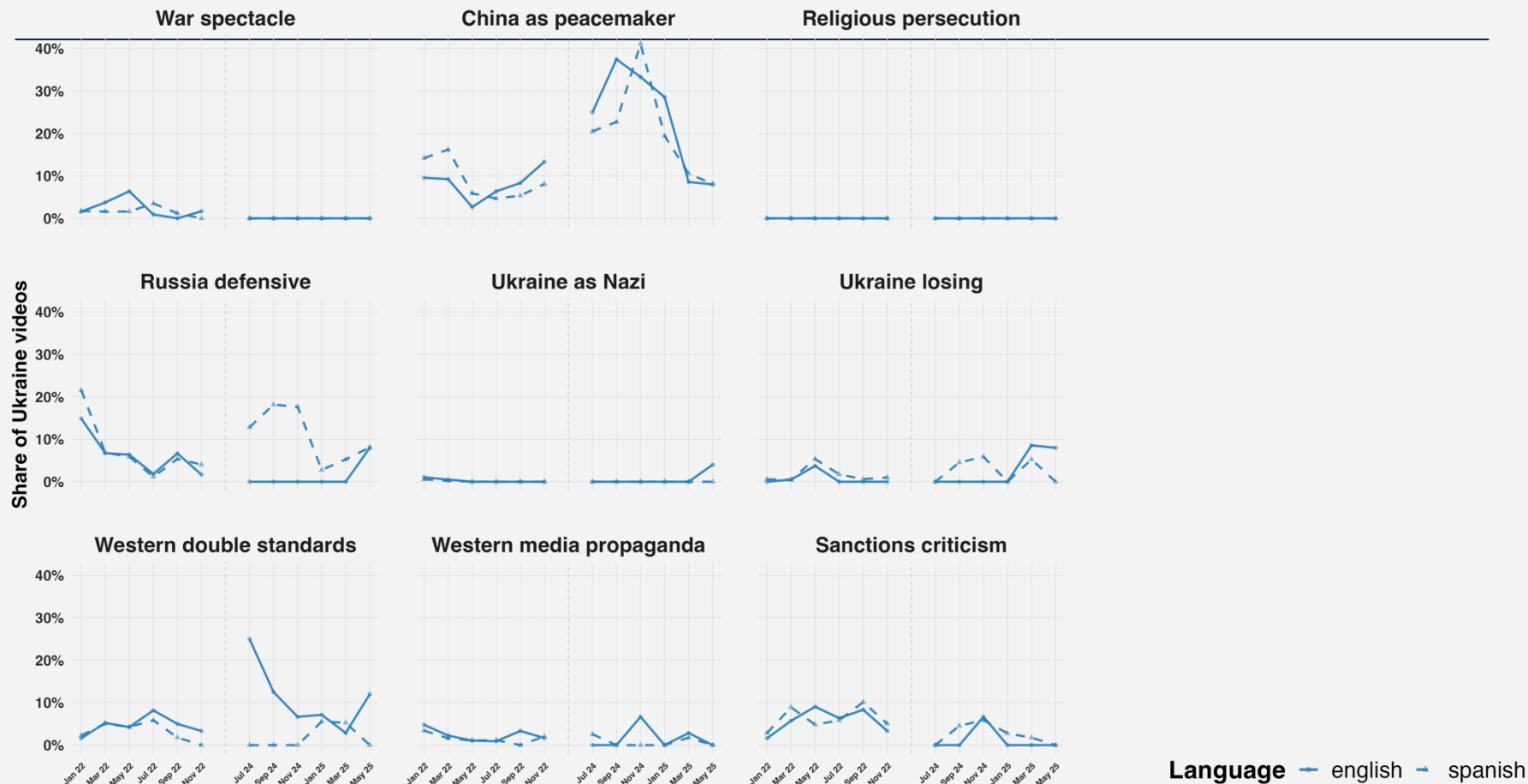
Language Comparison



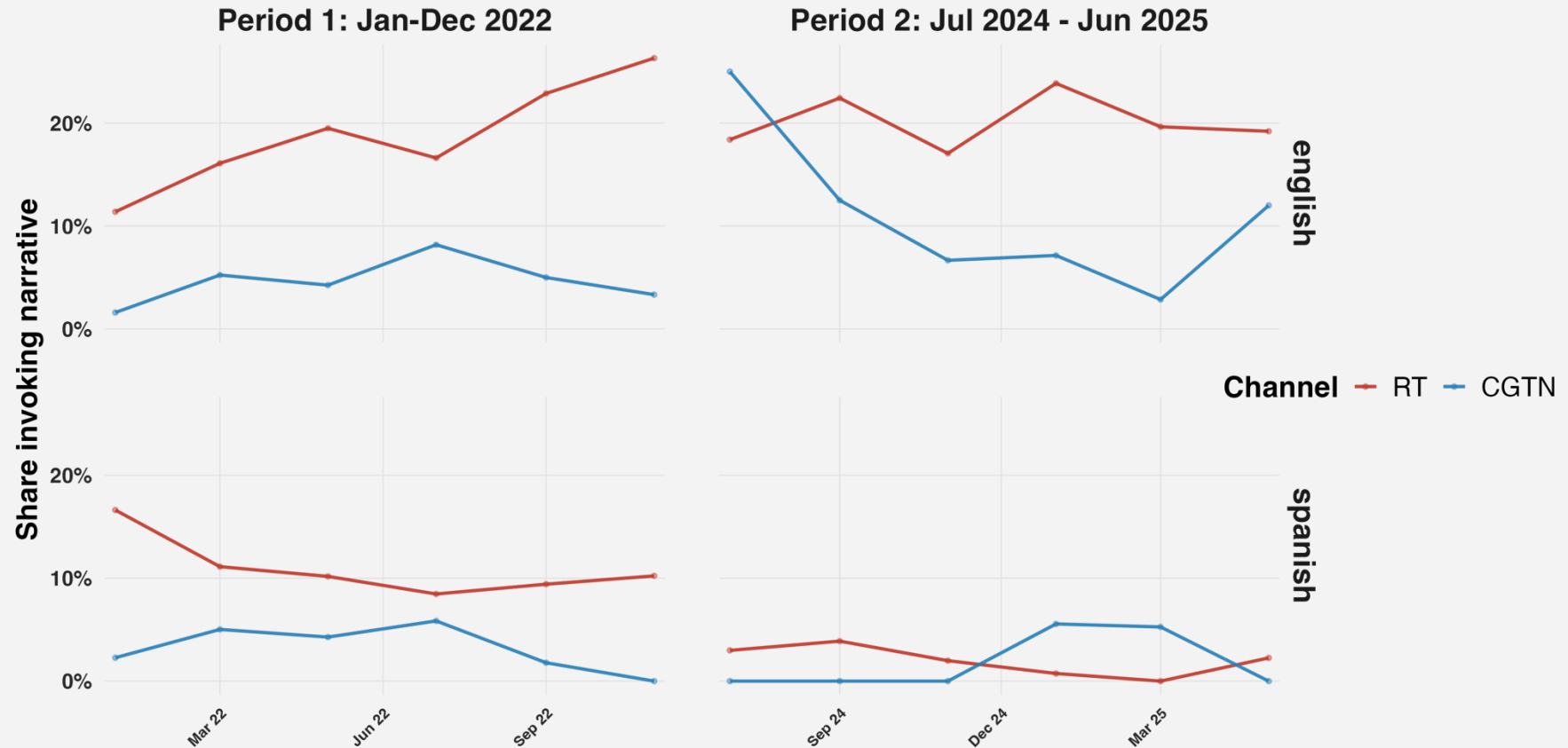
RT Narrative use over time, by language



CGTN Narrative use over time, by language



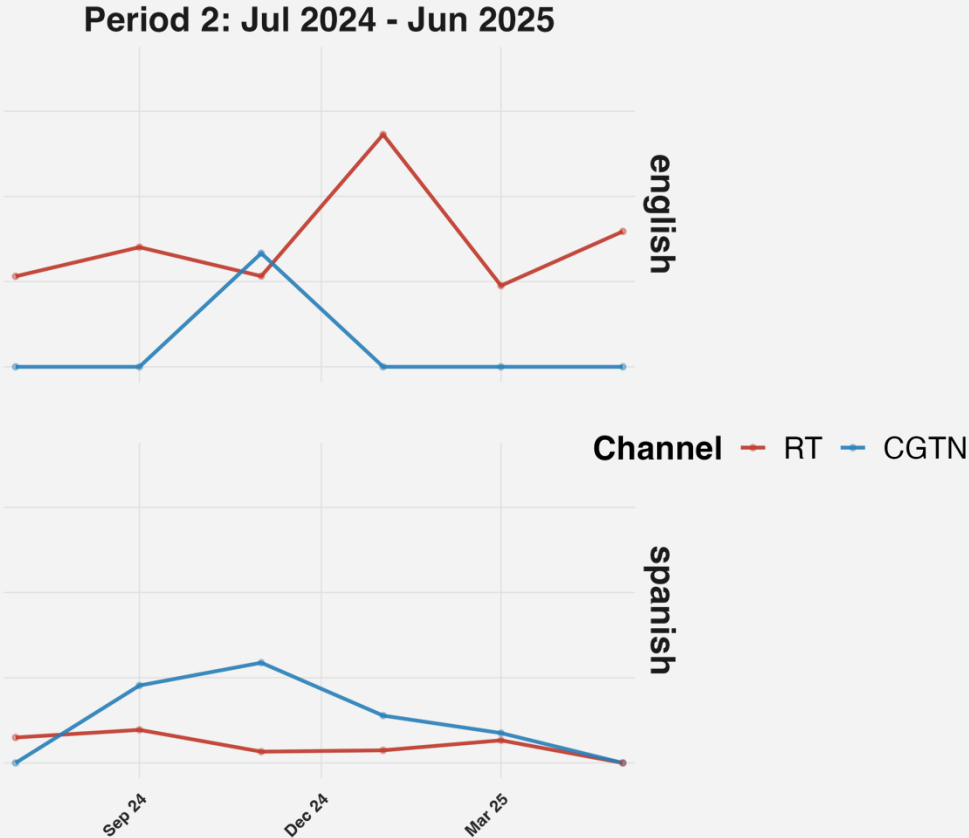
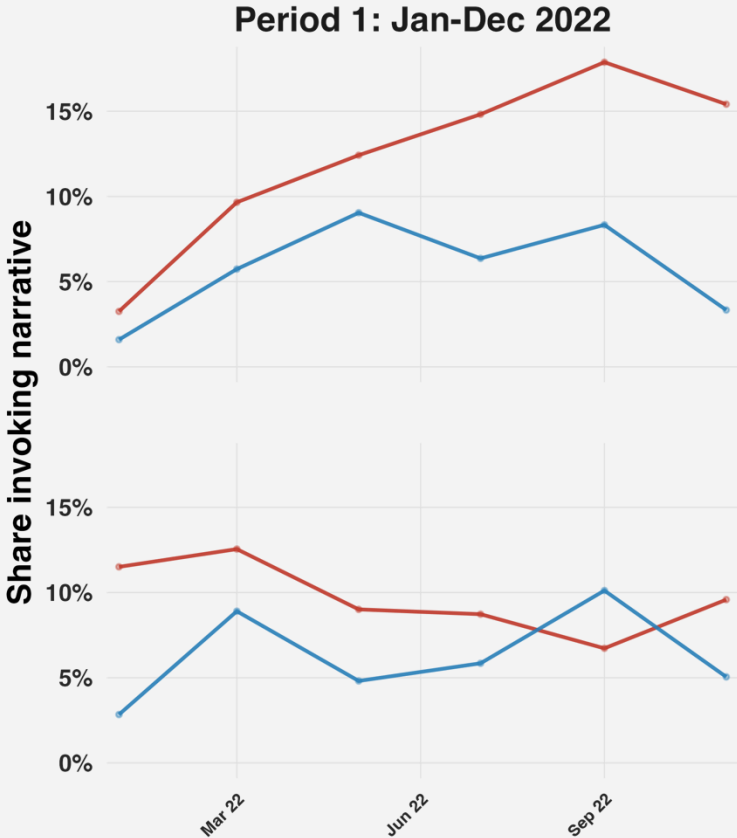
Western double standards narrative



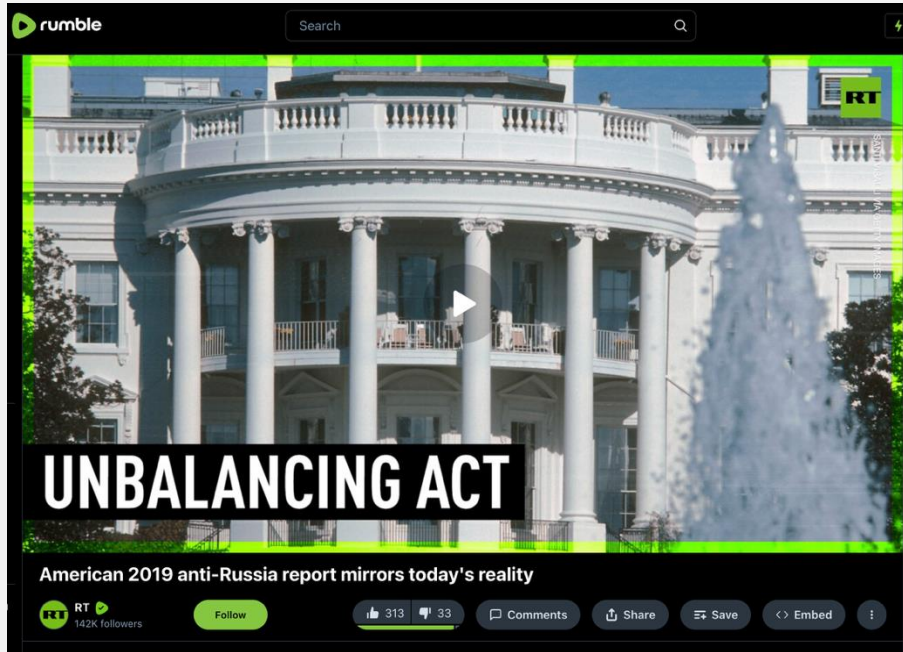
Sanctions, up close



Criticism Western Sanctions



RT: a 'CIA playbook'



‘American 2019 anti-Russia report mirrors today’s reality’

RT reads the 2022 sanctions off a RAND Corporation document, framing them as a long-planned plot to bring Russia ‘to its knees’.

The register is conspiratorial, satirical, emotionally charged.

CGTN: the same claim, in a suit



‘US sanctions only exacerbate disasters’

Wang Wenbin and invited economists deliver the identical US-hegemony argument as sober legal critique, anchored on ‘140 of 190 countries did not join’.

The register is institutional, expert-led, China as the responsible power.

Strategic amplification

- Russian and Chinese broadcasting are neither fully aligned nor independent. Some of Russia's narratives travel to CGTN and are laundered (e.g., by using economic-related language); China's do not travel back.
- A new mode of authoritarian mediated cooperation: **strategic amplification, not partnership.**
- In the asymmetrical geopolitical relationship between Russia and China, the weaker partner's story spreads, but it is the stronger partner that sets the terms.



University of Sheffield

Dani Madrid-Morales

d.madrid-morales@sheffield.ac.uk

www.sheffield.ac.uk

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