

# Russo-Chinese Narrative Alignment in International Broadcasting: The Case of Russia's Invasion of Ukraine

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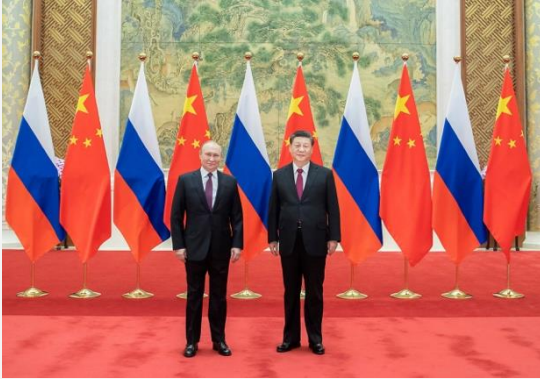
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# ‘Without limits’ — on whose terms?

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Three summits, one widening asymmetry: a declared partnership in 2022 has matured into "dependence".



**Beijing · 4 Feb 2022**

‘No limits’ — weeks before the invasion



**Beijing · 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

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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

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- 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

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

Channel · Platform	Videos	On Ukraine	<10 min
RT · Odysee	12,312	3,960	3,090
RT · Rumble	10,923	3,610	2,901
CGTN · YouTube	20,631	1,927	1,124
France 24 · YouTube	23,349	6,503	5,385

# Ten narratives, coded at scale

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## Process

1. Inductive codebook from full viewing of a sample of videos.
2. Three coders coded a sample using non-exclusive binary labels
3. Iterated to full agreement = gold standard
4. Then LLM classification across the corpus

## The ten narratives

1. War porn / militarisation
2. China as peaceful mediator
3. Civilian suffering
4. Religious persecution by Kyiv
5. Russia as defensive actor
6. Ukraine as Nazi / far-right
7. Ukraine is losing
8. Western double standards
9. Western media deception
10. Criticism of Western sanctions

# A validated classification pipeline

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- Three models tested: GPT-4.1, GPT-5.1, GPT-5.2
- GPT-5.2 best on F1 (overall  $\kappa = 0.85$ ) and inter-rater agreement.
- Engineered prompt applied to the full corpus to create a narrative profile per video
- Qualitative dimension: close reading of 60 RT & CGTN videos

0.83

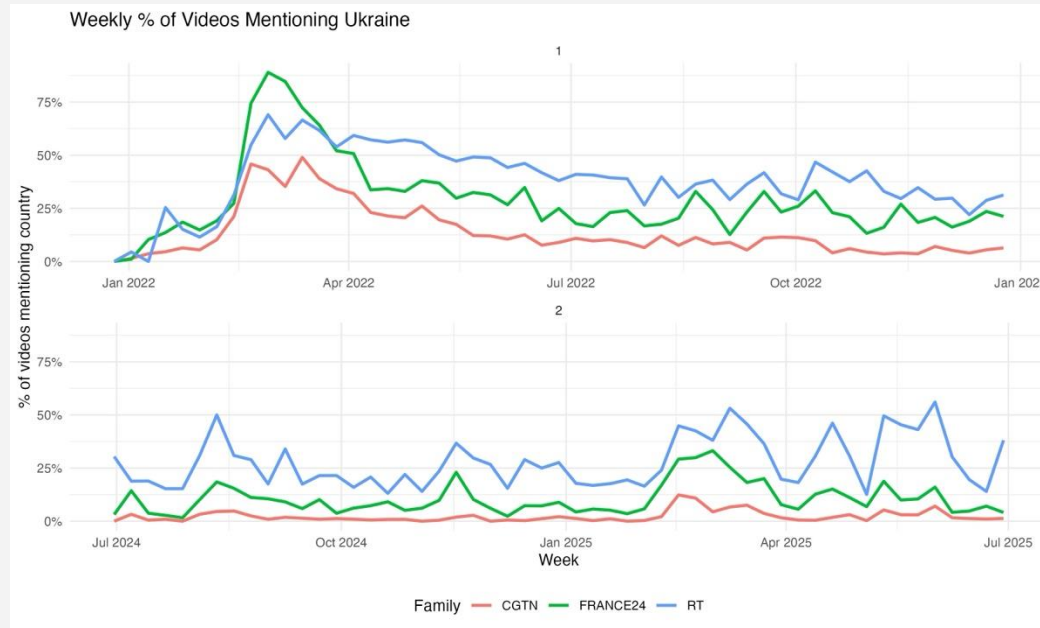
Cohen's  $\kappa$  vs. human coders

# Geographic attention



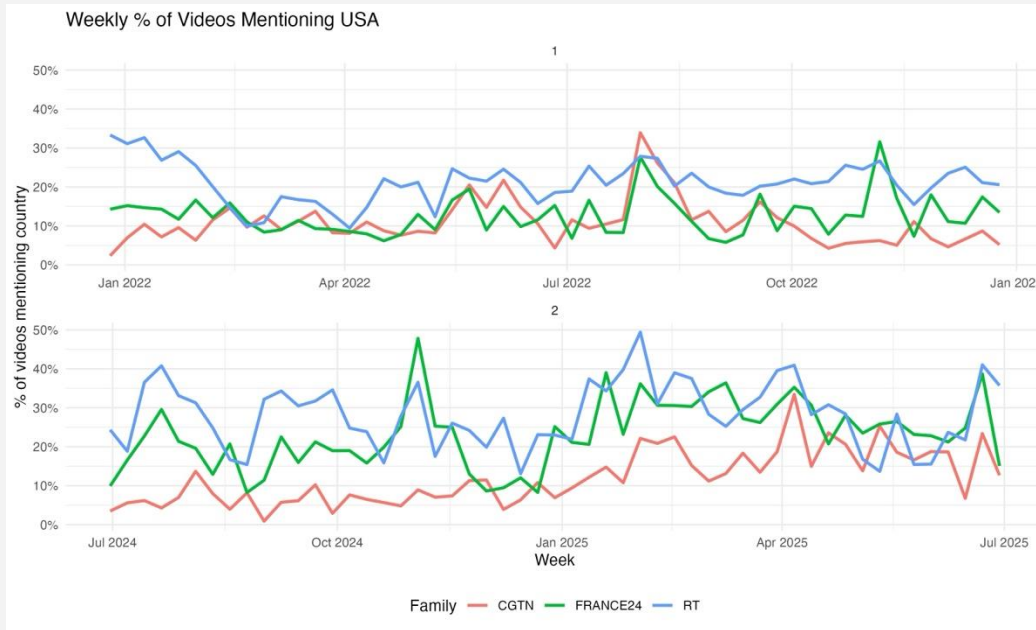
# RT keeps the war centre-stage

RT sustains attention; CGTN's collapses after the 2022 spike; France 24 sits between.



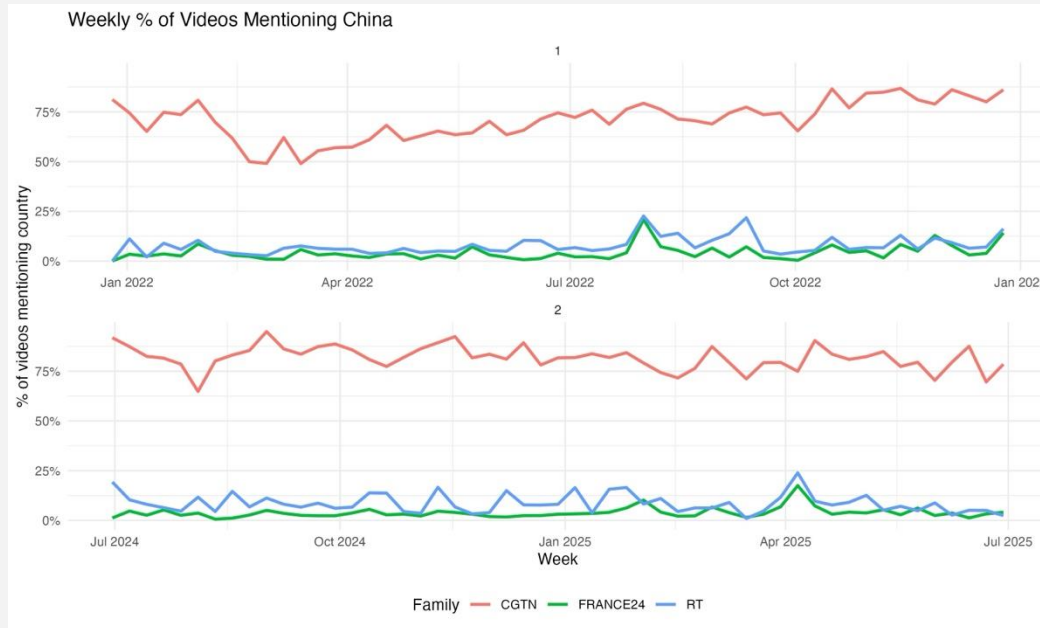
# RT's prism: a contest with the US

RT (and France 24) foreground the US; CGTN does so far less — until the Trump-era rise in Period 2.

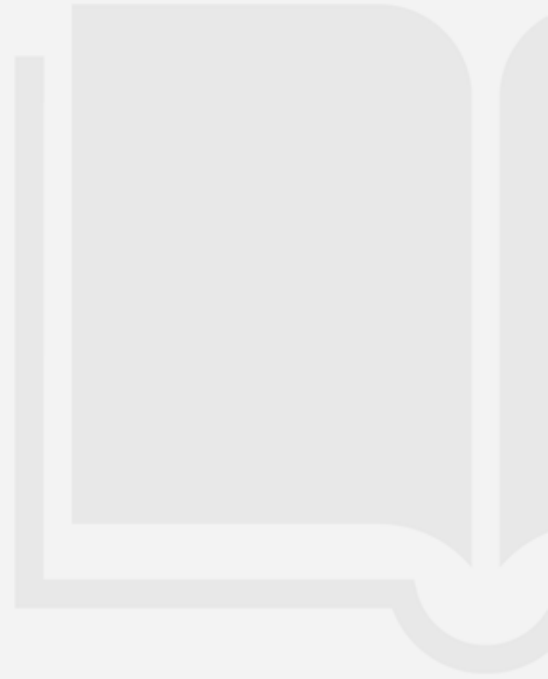


# CGTN: every story leads to China

Even in war coverage, CGTN references China in most videos — its own vantage point dominates.

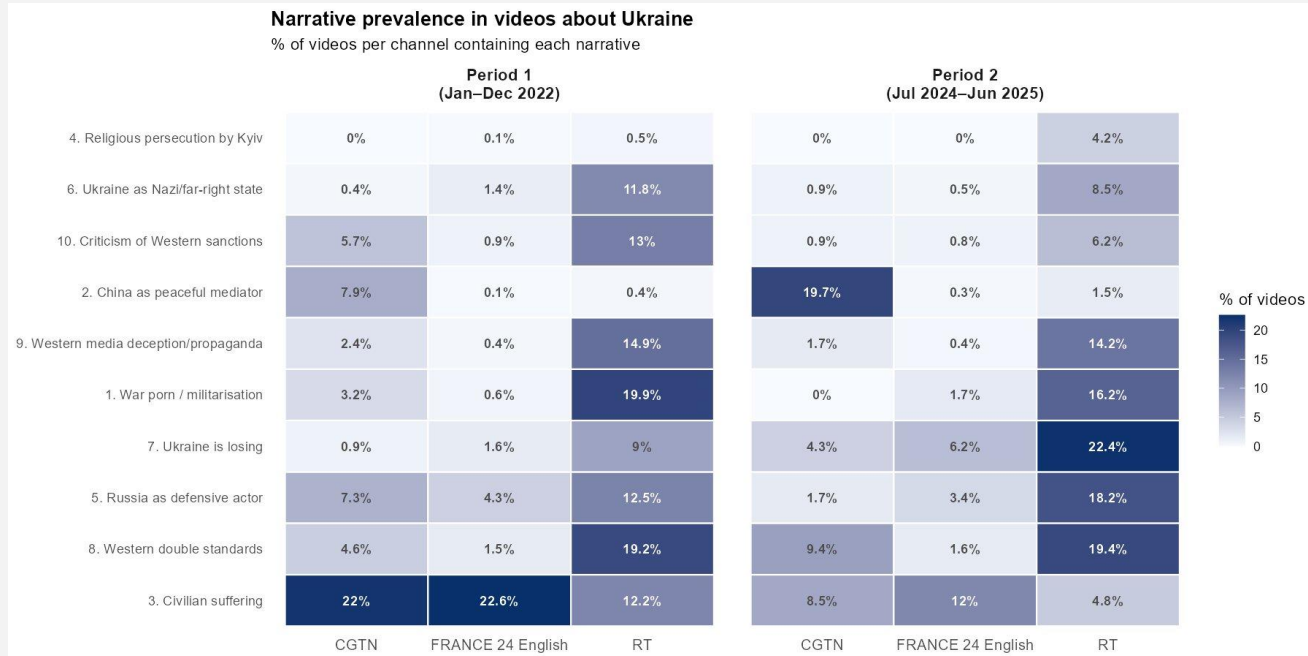


# Narrative (mis)alignment



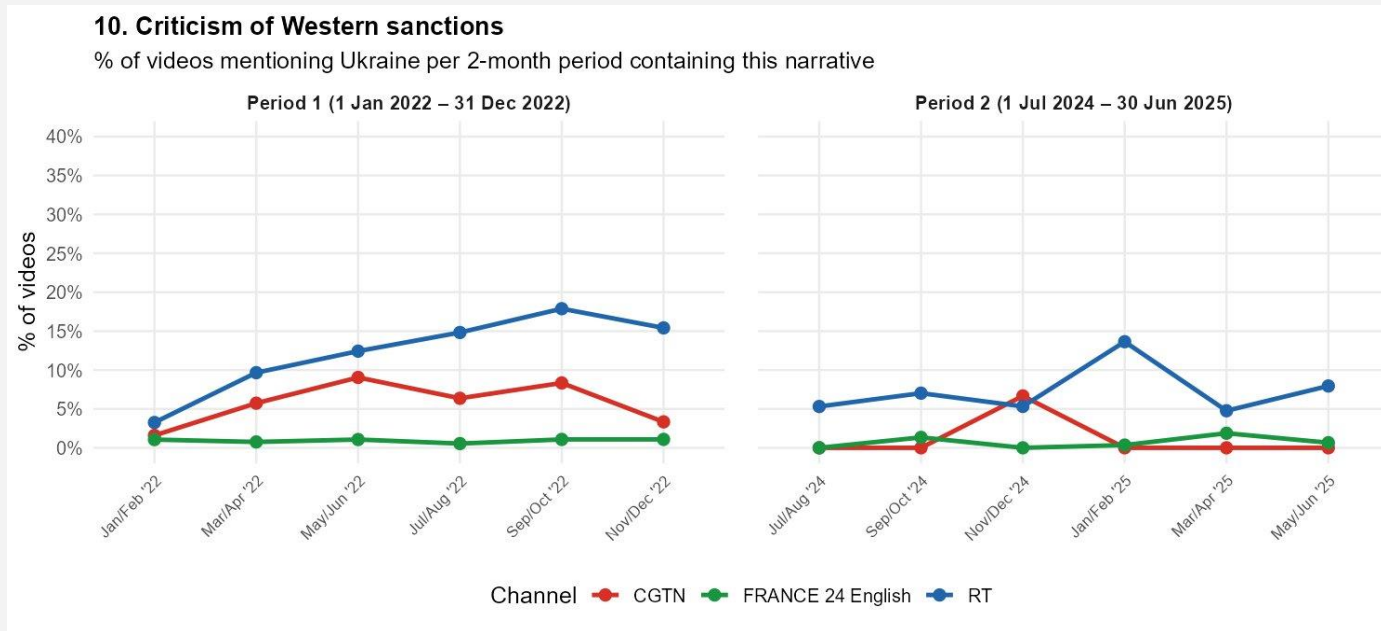
# Selective amplification

RT leads every partisan narrative; France 24 is the baseline; CGTN amplifies double standards, sanctions and multipolarity, but never war porn, the Nazi frame or religious persecution.



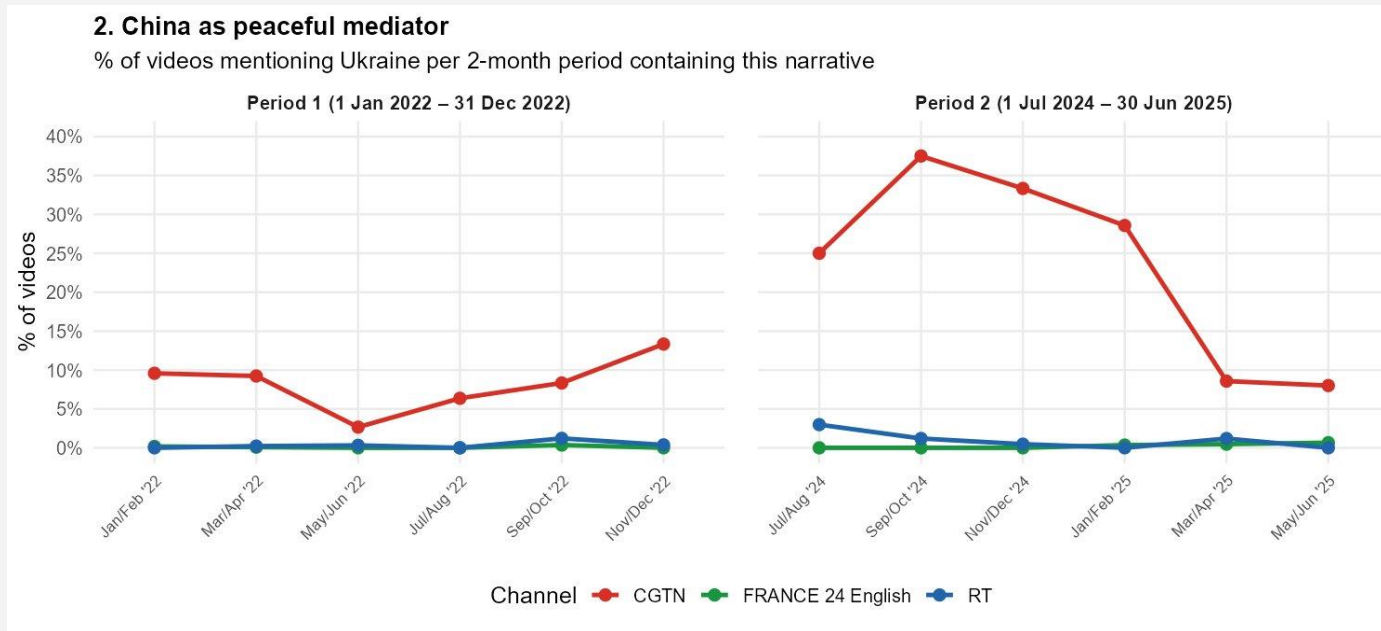
# Alignment: sanctions criticism

RT leads, CGTN tracks the same arc at lower volume, France 24 stays flat — parallel movement is the signature of alignment.



# Divergence: the mediator frame

A narrative almost unique to CGTN, surging in 2024–25. RT never picks it up — alignment runs one way only.



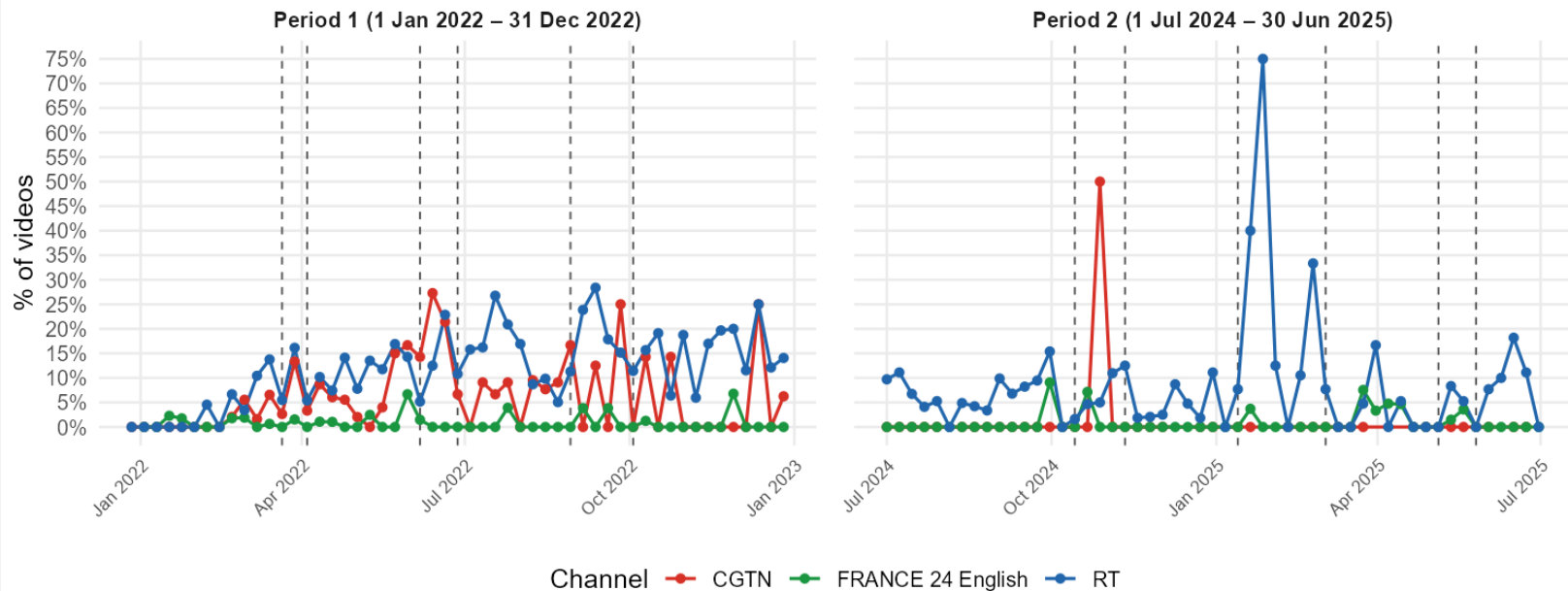
# Sanctions, up close



# A deeper dive: criticism of Western sanctions

## 10. Criticism of Western sanctions

% of videos mentioning Ukraine per week (peak windows marked by dashed lines)



# Same claims, three voices

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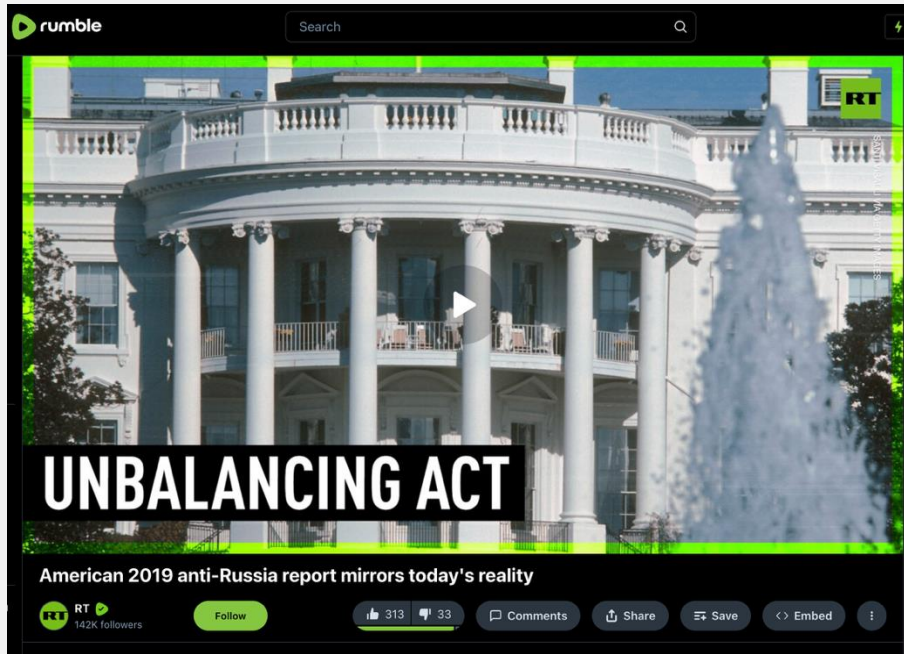
## Five recurring claims

1. Sanctions hurt ordinary people, not elites
2. Sanctions are futile; Russia can't be isolated
3. Sanctions as US hegemony & Western hypocrisy
4. Intra-Western dissent & sanctions fatigue
5. Sanctions obstruct peace

## Three voice strategies

- RT: vox-pops, street protest, conspiracy
- CGTN: officials, economists, the '140 of 190 countries' line
  - However, **CGTN never carries intra-Western dissent**
- France 24: straight news, no narrative push

# 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

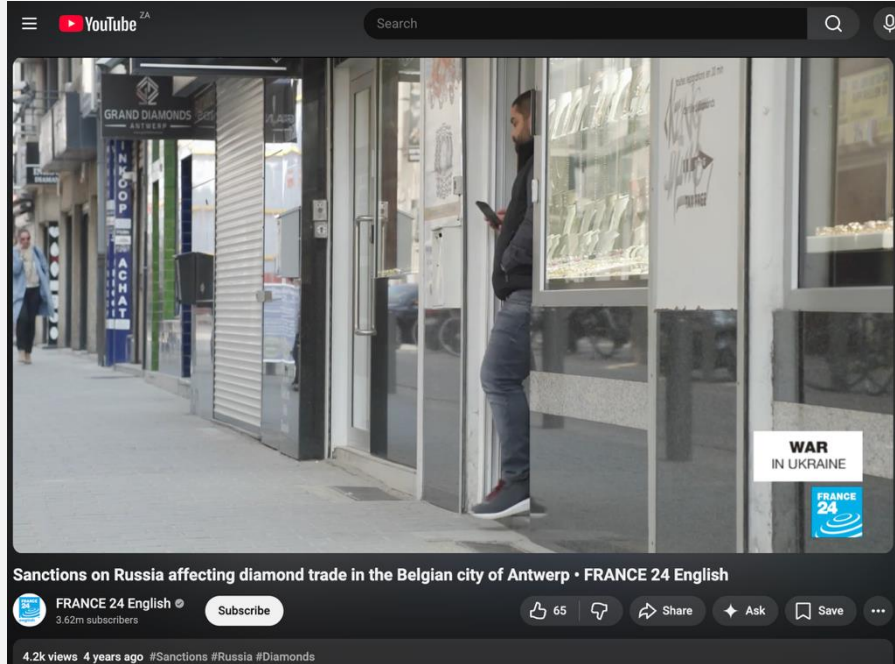


‘US sanctions only exacerbate disasters’

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.**

# France 24: the control case



Covering the same sanctions story (for example, a Lavrov press conference, the Antwerp diamond trade) France 24 reports the facts and carries none of the narrative.

**France24 shows that an ‘alternative’ framing exists.**

# Realignment, not alignment

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- 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.



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