

Discourse Analysis of Russian Media Coverage on the China-Europe Railway Express from a Global South Perspective

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Abstract: This study explores the narrative strategies of Russia's mainstream media regarding the China-Europe Railway Express (CR express) from the perspective of the Global South, utilizing framing theory as an analytical framework. As a key project under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the CR express has become a crucial link in regional economic cooperation and technological exchange. Against the backdrop of Russia's increasing identification with the Global South, Russian mainstream media frame the CR express as a driving force for regional economic integration and a multipolar international order. Through economic frame, transnational cooperation frame, infrastructure frame and competitiveness frame, as well as the extraction of high-frequency words from reports content under each frame, this research analyzes the attitude and ideology of Russia by shaping a comprehensive and multidimensional image of CR express.

Keywords: China-Europe Railway Express; Russian Media; Global South; Framing Theory

1. Introduction

"Global South" is one of a family of terms, including "Third World" and "Periphery", that denote regions outside Europe and North America, mostly low-income and often politically or culturally marginalized. The use of the phrase "Global South" marks a shift from a focus on development or cultural difference toward an emphasis on geopolitical power relations [1]. In September 2013, China proposed the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which connected the Global South countries by promoting infrastructure construction and economic cooperation, and promoted connectivity and common development among the South countries. Today, BRI is an important

part of the multipolar international order and plays a positive role in promoting economic cooperation and technological innovation. In particular, the scientific and technological innovation cooperation within the BRI has become a key link for China to connect with the world, share development opportunities, and pursue common development and prosperity [2]. As a flagship project and an iconic brand of BRI, the China-Europe Railway Express (CR express) is hailed as the "Iron Camel Caravan" of the BRI. It now reaches more than 220 cities in 25 European countries and connects over 100 cities across 11 Asian countries, with its service network essentially covering the entire Eurasian continent. The Third Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation explicitly proposed accelerating the high-quality development of the CR express and promoting participation in the construction of the Trans-Caspian International Transport Corridor [3]. CR express not only provides a convenient and efficient trade channel for both sides but also builds a bridge for technological exchanges and innovation cooperation among the countries along the route, serving as a key passage for the transmission of technological innovation [4]. The positive role of CR express in improving logistics efficiency and economic development in countries along the route has made it one of the core projects of the BRI [5].

Chinese media often use positive frames such as "connection" and "green channel" to describe CR express, highlighting its role in deepening China-Europe economic cooperation and promoting cultural exchanges, and shaping CR express as a model of "win-win cooperation" [6]. British and German media paid more attention to its potential threat to the stability of European supply chains. This difference reflects the different national interests and political positions of European countries in dealing with BRI [7]. In recent years, some scholars have inclined towards the concept of Russia as part of the

"Global South" [8]. Russia has also positioned itself as a member of the "Global South" to counter Western-led unilateralism and hegemonic discourse. This context has profoundly influenced the reporting logic of Russian mainstream media regarding CR express. Within the narrative framework of the Global South, Russian media views CR express as an important tool for promoting a multipolar international order, highlighting the driving effect of the railway on regional economic development, while setting the tone of shared destiny among the Global South and presenting the railway as a symbol of promoting the unity and development of the Global South countries [9].

The theory of frame analysis originated in the 1970s. It was first proposed by Goffman and later further developed and applied by scholars such as Tuchman and Entman. In recent years, frame analysis theory has been widely used in international communication research. When reporting on major domestic events, the media not only effectively conveys correct values, but also successfully establishes a rational and objective tone of public opinion [10]. As a media that communicates with the world and promotes exchanges in the international discourse space, it has the mission of eliminating misunderstandings and creating intercultural space. It should try its best to eliminate ideological prejudices and cultural value barriers, and cultivate global awareness and responsibility [11].

This study, based on framing theory, explores the narrative strategies of Russia's mainstream media regarding CR express and analyzes the logic behind its reporting, which provides new theoretical perspectives on how media shapes national image and promotes geopolitical agendas.

2. Data Collection

In this study, we select reports on CR express from TASS, RT (Russia Today), The Moscow Times, and Sputnik since the launch of BRI, particularly from 2019 to 2024, and categorizes 40 articles into four following frames.

2.1 Economic Frame

As shown in Table 1, Russian media emphasize the role of CR express as a regional economic bridge, highlighting its efficiency in promoting economic cooperation between Russia and China

and cross-border logistics. For instance, headlines such as "Silk Road trade on track: Freight train sets off from China to Russia, drastically cutting travel time" particularly focus on improvements in transportation efficiency. Such framing reveals that Russian media underscore the CR express's contributions to reduce logistics costs and facilitating cross-border trade. By emphasizing greater transport efficiency and closer regional connectivity brought about by infrastructure development, "cutting travel time" also highlights the practical benefits of the railway.

The CR express is not only functioned as a transport corridor, but also increasingly been portrayed as a driver of a more multipolar economic order. This perspective is reflected in a TASS report stating that the "Conflict in Ukraine hasn't affected Russian-Chinese cooperation in transport sector," suggesting that bilateral transport cooperation has continued despite geopolitical tensions.

Similar reports also present Russia as an important transit hub within an emerging multipolar economic landscape. For example, RT referred to the "Mutually beneficial good-neighborliness strategy on the development of trade relations between Russia and China," framing bilateral trade as a relationship based on mutual benefit rather than geopolitical competition. This narrative suggests that the CR Express is valued not only for its contribution to the economic development of border cities such as Manzhouli and Suifenhe, but also for its role in strengthening broader patterns of economic cooperation among countries in the Global South.

To clarify its attitude towards CR express, Russian media also strengthen the economic frame by incorporating statistics and other factual evidence into their reporting. Rather than relying solely on evaluative language, these reports use quantitative information to support claims about the economic value of the CR Express, making the narrative appear more credible and evidence-based. In this way, the railway is presented not simply as a transport corridor, but as infrastructure that contributes to regional economic development and cross-border connectivity.

Taken together, these reports portray the CR Express as more than a logistics network. Frequent coverage, the use of economic data, and references to its broader strategic role

collectively frame it as a platform for economic cooperation among Global South countries. Within this narrative, the railway is represented both as a link connecting regional markets and as a driver of sustained economic growth.

Table 1. The Coverage of the China-Europe Railway Express by Russia's Four Mainstream Media under the Economic Frame

No.	Title	Media
1	Conflict in Ukraine hasn't affected Russian-Chinese cooperation in transport sector	TASS
2	S.Korea suggests setting up Northeast Asian railroad community with Russia's participation	
3	Beijing urges Astana to expand cooperation in energy and mining	
4	China and Iran begin to discuss geopolitical project of allies in Eurasia	RT
5	Silk Road trade on track: Freight train sets off from China to Russia, drastically cutting travel time	
6	Mutually beneficial good-neighborliness strategy on the development of trade relations between Russia and China	
7	Silk Road on steel wheels: China launches new cargo route to Europe	
8	Russia Approves Rail Union of 3 Ex-Soviet States to Tap Into China-Europe Trade	The Moscow Times
9	Putin Pledges Support for China's \$124 bln 'New Silk Road'	Sputnik News
10	In 2023, 847 China-Europe trains with 85,098 TEUs will enter and leave Suifenhe Port	
11	Chengdu official: Sichuan's imports and exports to Russia will reach 26.85 billion yuan in 2023, a year-on-year increase of 54.5%	
12	The China-Europe Express has passed 2,000 trains through the Manchuria, Suifenhe and Tongjiang railway ports so far this year, a year-on-year increase of 7%.	
13	The number of China-Europe express trains passing through the Central Channel has exceeded 1,000 this year	
14	By 2023, the number of China-Europe trains passing through Manzhouli Railway Port will exceed 5,000	

2.2 Transnational Cooperation Frame

As shown in Table 2, 13 reports fall within the transnational cooperation frame. An examination of these reports suggests that Russian media consistently portray multilateral cooperation as a central element in the development of the CR Express. Reports particularly highlight its transnational cooperation with India, China, and neighboring countries. The headlines emphasize bilateral cooperation (such as the Russia-India "North-South Corridor") and regional development strategies (such as the Russia-China Economic Corridor), reflecting Russia's efforts to achieve economic recovery through transnational logistics and energy cooperation in the context of sanctions. Through the emphasis on mutual benefit, cooperation is framed as contributing to regional stability as

well as cross-border economic integration.

Table 2. The Coverage of the China-Europe Railway Express by Russia's Four Mainstream Media under the Transnational Cooperation Frame

No.	Title	Media
1	"Will be in demand by business": How Moscow and New Delhi are creating the North-South transport corridor	RT
2	Mutually beneficial good-neighborliness strategy on the development of trade relations between Russia and China	
3	China and Iran begin to discuss geopolitical project of allies in Eurasia	
4	Silk Road trade on track: Freight train sets off from China to Russia, drastically cutting travel time	
5	Beijing urges Astana to expand cooperation in energy and mining	TASS
6	Conflict in Ukraine hasn't affected Russian-Chinese cooperation in transport sector	
7	Baise Yihao: Based on Guangxi, Covering the Whole Country and Linking ASEAN	
8	S.Korea suggests setting up Northeast Asian railroad community with Russia's participation	
9	Hyperloop to Build 'New Silk Road' in Russia	The Moscow Times
10	China-Europe Rail Linked	Sputnik News
11	Expert: Against the backdrop of Western sanctions, Belarus is actively expanding economic and trade cooperation with China	
12	Expert: The Russian President mentioned that the construction of the logistics corridor is in line with the actual situation and will be supported by relevant countries	
13	Xi Jinping and Tokayev jointly attended the opening ceremony of the China-Europe Trans-Caspian Sea direct express via video	

The second theme links transnational cooperation with technological innovation. Articles from The Moscow Times entitled "Hyperloop to Build 'New Silk Road' in Russia" and "China-Europe Rails Linked" cover technological development as another aspect of cross-border cooperation. When referring to Hyperloop, they place emphasis on Russia's desire to continue cooperation in technological advances and Russia's participation in international projects like BRI.

Thirdly, the theme of relations with neighbors and regional connectivity recurs throughout the sampled reports. Various articles emphasize cooperation with bordering nations by mentioning the "mutually beneficial neighborly strategies" and South Korea's idea of creating a Northeast Asia Railway Community. Instead of framing railway transportation simply as Russia's internal development, sampled reports frame CR Express as part of a wider effort to regional economic cooperation and transportation connections. This framing also places Russia as being involved with shaping cooperation in the region.

Reports cover change in Russia's partners abroad due to increased sanctions against the country. Fewer articles focused on relations with Western countries and placed significance on cooperation with China, Iran, Belarus, and non-Western partners. Articles imply that CR Express functions as more than a corridor connecting countries, but as another way to continue international economic cooperation.

Altogether, the frame of transnational cooperation paints CR Express as fulfilling various functions. Samples depict the railroad as allowing for transportation between countries, cooperation with neighbors, reacting to external sanctions, and creating a more multipolar landscape of economic development.

2.3 Infrastructure Frame

As shown in Table 3, 11 reports were categorized under the infrastructure development frame. A close reading of these reports indicates that Russian media consistently present the expansion and modernization of the CR Express as essential to improving cross-border connectivity and logistics efficiency. Particular attention is given to new railway routes, upgraded logistics hubs, and technological improvements, all of which portray Russia as an increasingly important transit country within the Eurasian transport network.

A recurring theme in these reports is the relationship between infrastructure investment and trade facilitation. For example, The Moscow Times reported "Russia Approves 'Shortest' Europe-China Highway – Reports," while RT published "Silk Road on Steel Wheels: China Launches New Cargo Train Route to Europe." Rather than simply describing new transport projects, these reports frame infrastructure expansion as a means of reducing transport time and logistics costs, thereby reinforcing Russia's position within Eurasian freight networks.

Table 3. The Coverage of the China-Europe Railway Express by Russia's Four Mainstream Media under the Infrastructure Frame

No.	Title	Media
1	Russia Approves 'Shortest' Europe-China Highway – Reports	The Moscow Times
2	Hyperloop to Build 'New Silk Road' in Russia	
3	A China-Europe train loaded with 165 fuel-powered vehicles departs from Datong to Moscow	Sputnik News
4	The China-Europe express train from Beijing to Moscow enters the normal operation track	

5	The number of China-Europe express trains passing through the Central Channel has exceeded 1,000 this year	
6	Heilongjiang opens its first China-Europe train line to the Netherlands, exiting the country via the Manchuria railway port	
7	Director of Shenyang Commerce Bureau: The Shenyang-Moscow route will be officially opened on February 28	
8	By 2023, the number of China-Europe trains passing through Manzhouli Railway Port will exceed 5,000	
9	China Railway Express launches freight service between Shijiazhuang and Moscow	TASS
10	Silk Road trade on track: Freight train sets off from China to Russia, drastically cutting travel time	RT
11	Silk Road on steel wheels: China launches new cargo train route to Europe	

Technological innovation represents another important dimension of this infrastructure narrative. Coverage of the Hyperloop, for instance, extends beyond the discussion of a single transport technology. Instead, it reflects a broader vision of infrastructure modernization, presenting advanced transportation systems as part of Russia's long-term strategy for improving regional and international connectivity.

Regional integration is likewise portrayed as a key outcome of railway development. Reports such as "China Railway Express Launches Freight Service Between Shijiazhuang and Moscow" (TASS) and "Director of Shenyang Commerce Bureau: The Shenyang-Moscow Route Will Be Officially Opened on February 28" link the expansion of railway services to closer economic cooperation with neighboring countries. By emphasizing new freight routes and cross-border transport links, these reports associate railway infrastructure with broader processes of regional economic integration.

To conclude, the infrastructure development frame presents the CR Express as more than a transportation project. It is represented as infrastructure that improves logistics efficiency, supports technological modernization, and strengthens regional connectivity. Within this narrative, railway development also serves as evidence of Russia's broader effort to consolidate its role as a major transit hub in Eurasia despite an increasingly challenging geopolitical environment.

2.4 Competitiveness Frame

As shown in Table 4, reports categorized under the competitiveness frame reveal two recurring themes. One concerns the need to strengthen

Russia's regional competitiveness and avoid economic marginalization, while the other emphasizes the diversification of transport corridors as a way to reduce dependence on a single logistics network and enhance Russia's position in global trade.

Table 4. The Coverage of the China-Europe Railway Express by Russia's Four Mainstream Media under the Competitiveness Frame

No.	Title	Media
1	S.Korea suggests setting up Northeast Asian railroad community with Russia's participation	TASS
2	"Will be in demand by business": How Moscow and New Delhi are creating the North-South transport corridor	RT

3. Data Analysis and Discussion

3.1 Frame Distribution and Characteristics

As illustrated in Table 5, economic issues account for the largest share of media coverage (35%), suggesting that Russian media primarily frame the CR Express as a mechanism for facilitating international trade, improving supply chain efficiency, and promoting regional economic integration. Infrastructure development represents another major theme (33%), with reports frequently linking railway expansion to improvements in transcontinental transport and logistics networks. Transnational cooperation also receives considerable attention (27%), reflecting the importance attached to multilateral partnerships and cross-border connectivity in media narratives. By comparison, the competitiveness frame appears far less frequently (5%). Rather than centering on geopolitical rivalry, most reports give priority to themes of cooperation and connectivity. Nevertheless, the limited coverage devoted to competitiveness indicates that Russian media remain attentive to the strategic challenges associated with the CR Express, particularly in the context of continuing geopolitical uncertainty, while discussing possible ways to respond to these pressures.

3.2 Discourse Characteristics and Ideological Analysis

A comparison of the high-frequency words across the four frames reveals both common patterns and frame-specific differences in Russian media coverage of the CR Express. As shown in Table 5, words that appear across frames include port, transport, cargo,

development, trade, and corridor. This points to logistics and trade being the primary focus across the different frames: instead of being covered only as a railway line, the CR Express coverage describes it as infrastructure facilitating mobility across borders and promoting trade and economic activity within the region. Shared keywords also include references to geographical locations like Moscow, Belarus, Kazakhstan, China, Iran, and India. Recurrence of these countries across different frames embeds the railway within Eurasian contexts and connects development of the CR Express to cross-border political and economic exchanges. However, differences remain between the frames in terms of keyword choice. Keywords that reoccur within infrastructure development frame tend to be freight and service. This indicates continued focus on capacity (freight) as well as facilities and service industries around the CR Express. The economic frame shares keywords like trade and increase; connecting CR Express development with commercial development and economic growth. Finally, words cooperation and corridor are common in the transnational cooperation frame.

Table 5. Summary of High-Frequency Words in Each Frame

Infrastructure	Economy	Transnational cooperation
Moscow	port	trade
freight	trade	countries
Beijing	increase	cooperation
port	cooperation	transport
cargo	billion	Belarus
service	initiative	corridor
manzhouli	goods	new
transport	transport	Chinese
trade	corridor	economic
goods	cargo	logistics
containers	freight	Moscow
international	route	project
company	economic	president
hyperloop	development	Iran
project	project	special
customs	Xi	Kazakhstan
load	service	development
depart	energy	goods
export	channel	city
highway	percent	Indian

3.3 Comparison with Western and Other Global South Media

Likewise, Russian media outlets frame the CR Express differently than some Western media sources. Coverage in Western media outlets tends to analyze the railway within larger geopolitical debates surrounding the BRI.

Russian coverage focuses less on geopolitical tensions and more on economic cooperation, transport connectivity, and highlighting successes achieved through cross-border infrastructure development. Where coverage in *The New York Times* and *The Economist* has focused heavily on topics like debt sustainability and China's growing geopolitical influence, Russian coverage frames the CR Express as a "reflection of healthy economic cooperation [12]."

This trend is also observable within certain Global South countries. The growth of communicative capacity in Global South media through digitalization, media convergence, and emerging communication technologies has allowed Global South news outlets to develop alternative frames to those prevalent in Western media [13]. In this regard, Russian media exhibit several similarities in their framing with media from Iran, Pakistan, and several ASEAN member states. Instead of framing the CR Express within geopolitical competition, these countries' media tend to discuss the railway in terms of economic development, regional connectivity, and multilateralism; casting the BRI in a supportive light.

4. Conclusion

To sum up, this paper analyzed how Russian mainstream media frame the CR Express by bringing together frame analysis and the Global South perspective. The results indicate that Russian media attribute several, albeit overlapping frames to the CR Express, including those of economic development, transnational cooperation, infrastructure development, and competitiveness. Together, these frames present the railway both as more than just a transport corridor and as a meaningful avenue for regional integration, as well as Russia's involvement in emerging multipolar world order.

More specifically, regardless of the frames through which it is discussed, the CR Express is closely linked to themes of economic development, cross-border connectivity, and regional cooperation in the Russian media. Discussions of economic impact highlight trade and logistics expansion; depictions of transnational cooperation frame the CR Express as beneficial for strengthening connections between Russia, China, and other Global South countries; infrastructure-focused narratives focus on railway modernization, logistics hubs, and

cargo volumes, depicting infrastructure as an engine of economic development. Meanwhile, although less prominent in the overall sample, the competitiveness frame illustrates how Russia seeks to maintain strategic advantages and diversify its transport routes in light of shifting geopolitical realities.

Finally, the Global South lens through which this research is conducted reveals how Russian media frame the CR Express as part of a larger trend of South-South cooperation. Iranian, Pakistani, and select ASEAN media show similar framing trends, discussing the CR Express in relation to connectivity, economic development, and a diversified international economic order. The implications of this study suggest the CR Express operates as both a piece of transport infrastructure and as rhetorical tool through which Russian media can discuss Russia's place in modern Great Power discourse.

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