



The Political Economy of Cultural Colonization: Media Monopolies, Hybrid Warfare, and the 'Serbian World' Project in Croatia

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Abstract:

This paper analyzes the transformation of Serbian soft power from a cultural phenomenon into a sophisticated goeconomic instrument of influence in Croatia. Moving beyond the traditional focus on the Orthodox Church and historical revisionism, this research investigates the "infrastructure of surrender"—a network of media monopolies and advertising cartels that facilitate the penetration of the "Serbian World" (*Srpski svet*) project. The author argues that the current cultural landscape in Croatia is not a result of spontaneous market preferences, but a product of manufactured demand orchestrated by trans-border interest groups. By utilizing the "Media Capture" model, the study reveals how private capital and radio-television monopolies prioritize profit over national strategic interests, thereby creating a security vacuum. Special attention is given to: **Generational Identity Shift:** Generational Identity Shift: How the Belgrade lifestyle, amplified by algorithms (TikTok, YouTube), bypasses state educational systems, effectively integrating "Generation Z" into a unified, Serbian-centric cultural and aesthetic space. **Economic Extraction:** The mechanism by which cultural events serve as investment projects for capital outflow, weakening the domestic creative industry. **Hybrid Security Dimensions:** The role of "entertainment-as-anesthesia" in neutralizing public resistance to long-term political destabilization. The paper concludes that the lack of a coherent national strategy for cultural security has turned Croatia into a market colony, where economic actors serve as the primary distributors of foreign soft power under the guise of neoliberal market freedom.

Keywords: Media Capture, Political Economy, Serbian Soft Power, Hybrid Threats, Cultural Hegemony, Goeconomics.

Review Article

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary geopolitical landscape of Southeast Europe, the Republic of Croatia serves as a unique laboratory for hybrid warfare and goeconomic subversion. While traditional security discourse remains fixated on conventional military threats, the actual erosion of national sovereignty is occurring through the systematic application of soft power and the "Media Capture" model. This paper argues that Croatia is currently positioned within a trilateral goeconomic encirclement: identity-informational pressure from Serbia, energy-capital dominance from

Hungary, and financial-maritime interests from Italy.

The central element of this analysis is the concept of the "Infrastructure of Surrender"—a domestic network of media monopolies and advertising cartels that facilitate the penetration of the "Serbian World" (*Srpski svet*) project. This project is not a mere cultural initiative; rather, it is a sophisticated hybrid operation designed to achieve cognitive occupation and strategic economic extraction of capital.

2. Theoretical Aspects of the Political Economy of Cultural Colonization

The theoretical framework of this paper is based on the synergy between the political economy of communications and security studies. Cultural colonization is not an accidental byproduct of the market, but a strategic process that Šarić (2025. a), in his work on Serbian soft power, defines as the utilization of cultural centers, media, and religious institutions to destabilize neighboring states and promote the concept of the "Serbian World" (*Srpski svet*). Šarić's thesis regarding Serbian soft power as an instrument for weakening national identities is further developed here through an analysis of the economic levers that facilitate such power.

To understand the depth of this process, we must rely on the following authors and concepts:

1. **Media Capture:** According to Besley and Prat (2006), media monopolies do not arise through free competition but through tacit agreements between commercial elites and political actors. In Croatia, local media "gatekeepers" (collaborators) control frequencies, creating what Schiffrin (2017) calls "information asymmetry," where the public is intentionally fed low-quality content (*schund*) to suppress strategically important topics.
2. **Cultural Hegemony and Manufactured Consent:** Utilizing Gramsci's (1971) concept of hegemony, we observe that Serbian soft power in Croatia does not operate through coercion, but through the subtle imposition of cultural codes. This is executed through Herman and Chomsky's (1988) model of "Manufactured Consent," where media cartels (such as Extra FM) utilize content bombardment to transform a foreign political project into the "natural" taste of the masses.
3. **Reflexive Control and Cognitive Warfare:** In the context of special warfare, Thomas (2004) explains the process of "Reflexive Control"—the transmission of information that leads the target (Croatia) to make decisions that serve the interests of the aggressor (Serbia), while believing they are acting independently. This aligns with Galeotti's (2022) theory of the

"Weaponization of Everything," where entertainment projects become tools of cognitive warfare.

4. **Value Extraction and Data Colonialism:** Couldry and Mejias (2019) introduce the term "data colonialism," which can be adapted here as the "colonialism of attention." Local collaborator capital does not invest in domestic culture; instead, it acts as a rentier profiting from the sale of the Croatian cognitive space to foreign actors, leading to what Schiller (1976) calls "communications imperialism."

These theorists confirm that the situation in Croatia is a textbook example of asymmetric conflict. While Šarić (2025) correctly identifies the ideological foundations within the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts (SANU), political economy reveals the infrastructure that puts these ideas into practice: a media monopoly that converts profit into a tool for national deconstruction.

3. Case Study – "Entertainment Descents" and Mechanisms of Manufactured Demand

The most drastic example of contemporary cultural colonization in Croatia is the series of mass concerts by Serbian singer Aleksandra Prijović at the Zagreb Arena (2023/2024). In the public eye, this phenomenon is often misinterpreted as a "market victory" or a "reflection of public taste." However, a political economy analysis of the media reveals that this was a precisely executed "**entertainment descent**" (*estradni desant*) based on three key pillars:

1. **The Manufactured Demand Model:** The demand for this content did not arise organically. It is the result of aggressive engineering by media monopolies, primarily through a network of stations like Extra FM. Applying the "**AstroTurfing**" model, local media collaborators created a façade of "inevitability" and "universal acceptance" through months of 24-hour rotation of specific narratives and musical codes. As noted by Šarić (2025), this level of media saturation serves as an anesthesia for national identity, preparing the ground for the acceptance of broader political constructs such as the "**Serbian World**".

2. **Collaborator Logistics and Media Monopoly:** The key actors in this operation are local owners of radio frequencies and marketing agencies (so-called "**gatekeepers**"). They consciously exploit public goods (state-allocated frequencies) to promote a foreign geopolitical project. Their role is one of **logistical collaboration**: they provide the infrastructure, sell advertising space, and exert pressure on public opinion while simultaneously implementing systematic censorship of authentic Croatian performers, such as **Marko Perković Thompson (MPT)**, labeling them as "undesirable" or "controversial."
3. **Geoeconomic Extraction:** Beyond the cognitive aspect, this "descent" has a clear economic purpose. Through ticket sales, sponsorships, and related services, a massive transfer of liquidity is performed from the Croatian budget to the Serbian creative-political sector. Within this constellation of power, the charming megacity of **Belgrade** positions itself as an authentic "**Balkan Hollywood**" and "**Balkan Brazil**," becoming a central laboratory for the media industry that not only dictates trends but aggressively prescribes a **lifestyle** across the entire region. The Belgrade machinery erases national borders by imposing a specific lifestyle—from aesthetics and fashion standards to speech phrases and social values—effectively performing a deep standardization of the Balkan space according to the Serbian model. Using this superior production power, Belgrade exports hybrid cultural models that serve as a means of soft occupation, transforming Zagreb and other regional centers into mere **consumption colonies** of the Serbian entertainment empire, where Croatian sovereignty dissolves into the glamour of the Belgrade industry.
4. **Financial Outflow:** It is estimated that through such "projects," millions of euros are siphoned from Croatia to Serbia (and into the pockets of local intermediaries).
5. **Market Crowding-out:** While Serbian projects are financed by aggressive capital, the domestic music industry is left without resources or available dates in national

venues. This creates a state of **economic castration** of national culture.

The "Prijović Project" is a prime example of how "**capital before which one remains silent**" overcomes national strategy. It represents the triumph of profit over security, where collaborator actors within Croatia serve as the extended arm of Serbian soft power, transforming the capital city into a market colony of Belgrade.

3.1. Cognitive warfare and Gen Z

While Croatia's institutional framework and its educational system remain focused on traditional curricula, the **Belgrade lifestyle**—conveyed through aesthetics, slang, and social standards—utilizes algorithms (TikTok, YouTube) to establish a 'parallel educational system.' This mechanism effectively bypasses state borders, integrating Croatian 'Generation Z' into a unified, Serbian-centric cultural space. As youth no longer perceive the world solely through national textbooks but through the lifestyle trends of the Belgrade megacity, a cognitive dependency is created, neutralizing national resilience in the long term.

4. Defense Mechanisms – MPT as a Biopolitical Shield and Rational Optimism

Despite the aggressive expansion of the "Belgrade Hollywood" and the collaborator support of local media cartels, an authentic point of resistance persists in Croatia, personified in the phenomenon of **Marko Perković Thompson (MPT)**. While Serbian soft power offers a "**liquid identity**" (faceless entertainment and consumerism), MPT represents a **fixed identity**—a biopolitical immune system that preserves the historical sediment of the nation. His resilience is key to understanding the asymmetry of this warfare:

1. **Organic Strength vs. Investment:** While the popularity of Serbian projects must be artificially sustained by multi-million-dollar investments and the monopoly of Extra FM, MPT survives without a single second of mainstream airtime. This proves that the national "code" is stronger than the algorithm.
2. **The Limits of Soft Power:** MPT serves as a "Wailing Wall" for collaborator structures;

he is a reminder that market colonization cannot erase the essence of a people.

Although aggressive Serbian soft power—through the synergy of collaborator subservience and Belgrade production—has managed to "muddy the waters" of the Croatian cognitive space, historical analysis suggests this is a transient pollution. The water will pass, but the sediment will remain. **Rational optimism** is based on the fact that an identity that has survived decades of blockage (like MPT) cannot be defeated by five-day "concert descents." The key to victory lies in regaining sovereignty over the media infrastructure and breaking the monopoly of those profiting from national anesthesia. Croatia must cease to be a consumption colony and once again become a **cultural subject**.

However, while MPT represents the primary defensive mechanism within the national corpus, his trans-border reach is strictly bounded by specific socio-cultural and geographical zones. His influence cannot penetrate broader regional spaces but is limited to "identity enclaves" outside Croatia's borders, primarily in:

- **Bosnia and Herzegovina (parts of the Federation and the Una-Sana Canton):** Where he serves as symbolic resistance and a cohesive factor in a multi-ethnic and often tense environment.
- **The coastal part of Montenegro (Boka Kotorska):** Where his music is an instrument for preserving indigenous Catholic and Croatian identity under the pressure of Serbianization.
- **Poland:** Where, due to a similar Catholic and sovereignist sentiment, MPT is occasionally recognized as a kindred European cultural expression, albeit without broad mass influence.

This limitation confirms the thesis that MPT, although vital for intra-national defense, does not possess the **offensive potential** of Serbian soft power. He is a "watchman on the walls" who cannot attract other nations nor serve as the foundation of modern Croatian cultural diplomacy.

While the "Belgrade Hollywood" aggressively conquers the Balkans via Extra FM and lifestyle engineering, actual Croatian soft power, capable of parrying this empire, must be built on more inclusive models that once dominated the region:

- **The Mediterranean Code (Oliver Dragojević):** A superior aesthetic standard that possessed universal appeal and naturally integrated regional audiences without political barriers.
- **The Croatian Urban Sound (Dance and Pop scene):** Production that in the 1990s represented Croatia as a modern, Western leader of the region, dictating the club lifestyle from Ljubljana to Skopje.

Without the return of such an offensive cultural expression, Croatia remains trapped in a permanent defensive posture: MPT will preserve the national sediment from disappearing, but without "Oliver" and the urban sound, the state will remain a mere passive consumption colony of the Belgrade megapolis.

5. Comparative Geopolitical Resilience: Croatia and India

The geopolitical situation in Croatia offers striking similarities to the challenges faced by India, making this study highly relevant for a broader analysis of 21st-century sovereignty. Both states operate in complex environments where soft power is utilized as a precursor to territorial and political ambitions (Šarić 2025b):

1. **Serbia as the 'Balkan Pakistan':** Just as Pakistan employs hybrid operations, shared linguistic heritage, and religious institutions to destabilize India's internal cohesion, Serbia utilizes the "**Serbian World**" project for the cognitive occupation of Croatia. In both instances, the entertainment industry and information operations serve to erase borders and manufacture identity chaos.
2. **Hungary as a Regional Reflection of China:** Hungary's penetration into Croatia's strategic infrastructure (energy via MOL, banking via OTP) mirrors

China's "debt-trap diplomacy" and its acquisition of ports in India's neighborhood. In both cases, economic "partners" utilize capital to quietly circumvent and restrict national sovereignty.

3. **Italy as a 'Disingenuous Britain':** Italy, much like the former colonial power Britain toward India, maintains a patronizing relationship. By leveraging the banking sector and historical Adriatic

narratives, Italy exerts quiet pressure, similar to how Britain utilizes post-colonial levers to influence Indian politics and its diaspora.

This comparison proves that Croatia, like India, must develop a **Doctrine of Cognitive Sovereignty** to defend itself against neighboring vectors of influence that utilize media monopolies as Trojan horses.

Table 1: Trilateral Geoeconomic Threat to Croatia (2025/2026 Analysis)

| Threat Vector | Main Instruments of Influence | Strategic Goal of the Operation | Impact on Croatia (Security Gap) |
|-------------------------------|---|--|--|
| SERBIA (Informational) | Media monopolies, Extra FM, "Serbian World" project, entertainment descents | Cognitive occupation, capital extraction, lifestyle engineering | Loss of identity sovereignty among Gen Z; cognitive dependence on Belgrade |
| HUNGARY (Capital) | MOL, OTP Bank, agricultural land acquisition, bypass of the JANAF pipeline | Energy dominance, resource control, weakening of Croatia's strategic position | Transformation of Croatia into a transit service without decision-making power |
| ITALY (Financial) | Banking sector (ownership of top banks), pressure on EEZ, Port of Trieste | Financial dependence of Croatia, marginalization of the Port of Rijeka for Trieste | Silent financial occupation; control over financial flows and the Adriatic |

6. Conclusion – Rational Optimism and Cognitive Sovereignty

The analysis of the political economy of cultural colonization in Croatia reveals a profound asymmetry between aggressive regional vectors of influence and a passive national defense system. The "**Serbian World**" project, bolstered by local collaborator structures and media monopolies such as Extra FM, has succeeded in temporarily "muddying" the cognitive space of the Republic of Croatia, imposing Belgrade's lifestyle engineering as the dominant cultural code for "**Generation Z.**"

However, this paper also offers grounds for **rational optimism**. The historical constant, embodied in the phenomenon of **Marko Perković Thompson (MPT)**, proves that the authentic national sediment possesses a biopolitical resilience that no amount of foreign capital or media blockade can erase.

While Serbian "entertainment descents" are artificially generated projects with an expiration date, the organic identity of the people survives as an impregnable fortress.

The key findings of this research point to the necessity of urgent strategic steps:

1. **Breaking Media Monopolies:** The state must reclaim sovereignty over public frequencies and prevent collaborator capital from utilizing national assets for foreign propaganda.
2. **Restoring Offensive Soft Power:** Croatia must not defend itself solely behind "walls" (MPT); it must revitalize its inclusive Mediterranean and urban brands (**Oliver Dragojević, Dance scene**) to once again become a cultural subject rather than a mere consumption colony.
3. **Cognitive Sovereignty:** Much like India, Croatia must recognize that the battles of

the 21st century are won in the spheres of algorithms, media, and education.

7. Recommendations for the Protection of the National Informational and Cultural Space

1. **Ultimate Beneficial Ownership Revision (Anti-Proxy Regulation):** An urgent amendment to the Electronic Media Act is required to introduce a mandatory obligation for all concessionaires to prove the origin of their capital. Security services (SOA) must be authorized to conduct vetting processes on media network owners to prevent the infiltration of capital linked to war profiteering or foreign centers of power.
2. **Dismantling Hidden Monopolies:** Stricter criteria must be introduced for "connected parties" within the radio airwaves. The regulator (AEM/VEM) must be granted the authority to revoke concessions if it is determined that a system is managed by the same group of individuals operating under different legal entities.
3. **Identity Protection Quotas:** The mandatory share of original domestic music production should be increased to a minimum of 40% during prime-time hours (06:00 – 22:00), with a strict legal distinction between domestic and regional production. This would prevent the "padding" of statistics with regional low-quality content (*schund*) at the expense of Croatian authors.
4. **Implementation of a "Schund Tax" for Advertisers:** Additional taxation should be imposed on marketing revenues generated on platforms proven to promote content that contradicts the Cultural Strategy of the Republic of Croatia. These funds should be directly diverted into a fund for the promotion of domestic urban, rock, and contemporary music scenes.

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