ISR Journal of Economics, Business and Management (ISRJEBM)
Homepage: https://isrpublisher.com/isrjebm/
Volume 02, Issue 02, February 2026 ISSN: 3108-1517 (Online)

The Political Economy of Sports Diplomacy: The Croatian National Football Team as a Target of Cognitive and Hybrid Warfare

Marko Šarić[1]*

[1]PhD Candidate, Faculty of Logistics, University of Maribor, Slovenia Director and Founder, Geoeconomic Office Croatia d.o.o. Samoborska 63, Zagreb, Croatia, Europe

***Corresponding author:** Marko Šarić
PhD Candidate, Faculty of Logistics, University of Maribor, Slovenia Director and Founder, Geoeconomic Office Croatia d.o.o. Samoborska 63, Zagreb, Croatia, Europe

Article History

Received: 15-12-2025

Accepted: 02-02-2026

Published: 05-02-2026

Abstract: Original Research

In contemporary international relations, a state's soft power has become as critical a component of national security and geoeconomic positioning as traditional elements of hard power. For small and medium-sized states such as the Republic of Croatia, global sporting achievements – particularly those of the men's national football team – represent the most potent generators of reputational capital and internal social cohesion. Drawing upon the methodological frameworks of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Framing Theory, this paper analyzes asymmetric reflexive control operations within the Croatian media space. The research focuses on deconstructing the narratives of prominent columnists (B. Dežulović, M. Jergović, *et al*.,) during key sporting cycles (2018–2024). The paper demonstrates that the systematic devaluation and subversion of cohesive national symbols do not represent isolated aesthetic or ideological pluralism. Instead, they constitute an operational component of a broader "infrastructure of surrender" within cognitive warfare, tightly intertwined with cryptocommunist structures and the transnational "Serbian World" project.

Keywords: Geoeconomics, Soft Power, Reflexive Control, Cognitive Sovereignty, Media Capture, "Serbian World", Cryptocommunist Forces.

Copyright © 2026 The Author(s): This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution **4.0 International License (CC BY-NC 4.0)** which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium for non-commercial use provided the original author and source are credited.

1. Introduction and Theoretical Framework: Soft Power and Cognitive Sovereignty

The traditional understanding of national sovereignty has undergone profound structural changes due to the rise of the network society and doctrines of hybrid warfare. While classical geopolitical conflicts primarily unfold in the physical domain, contemporary asymmetric conflicts shift their center of gravity to the **cognitive domain** – the space of human perception, values, and collective psychology. Cognitive sovereignty is defined as the capacity of a political community to autonomously form, maintain, and protect its value system, historical narrative, and cohesive factors from external and internal subversive operations.

In this context, the concept of soft power, initially formulated by Joseph Nye, ceases to be a mere secondary byproduct of cultural diplomacy and becomes a primary geoeconomic tool. For states with limited demographic and military resources, success in globally dominant sporting disciplines acts as an asymmetric power multiplier. Throughout its history, and particularly through its achievements in Russia (2018), Qatar (2022), and Germany (2024), the Croatian national football team has transformed from a sports entity into **the nation's most valuable brand** and a crucial pillar of internal social integration.

However, precisely because of this role, the national team becomes a primary target for reflexive control operations. According to Vladimir Lefebvre's theory, reflexive control entails transmitting information to a target

audience in a manner that induces them to make a decision predetermined by the initiator of the operation. In the context of the cognitive war against Croatia, the operation's goal is to neutralize the positive psychological effects of sporting triumphs and reformat them into social frustration, collective guilt, and internal division.

This paper tests the following research hypotheses:

- **H1:** Narratives directed against the national football team in mainstream media are not the product of sporadic social criticism, but rather a coordinated framing strategy aimed at weakening national cohesion.
- **H2:** The actors deploying these narratives utilize structures of media capture to marginalize affirmative discourse, acting as internal vectors for transnational geopolitical projects (such as the "Serbian World") and cryptocommunist structures.

2. Methodology and Research Design

This study is grounded in a combination of two methodological approaches: **Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)** based on Norman Fairclough's framework, and **Framing Theory** as defined by Robert Entman. CDA allows for the investigation of relationships between discursive structures and broader socio-political power dynamics, while Framing Theory serves to identify how media texts select and emphasize specific aspects of reality to promote a particular interpretation of an issue.

Research Corpus

The sample comprises texts, columns, and public appearances by authors Boris Dežulović and Miljenko Jergović published between June 2018 and July 2024. The analyzed texts were published within key temporal windows:

1. The FIFA World Cup in Russia (June–July 2018)
2. The FIFA World Cup in Qatar (November–December 2022)
3. The UEFA European Championship in Germany (June–July 2024)

The unit of analysis is the individual column/text, within which key words, metaphors, and rhetorical strategies of devaluation are identified.

Author	Primary Media Channels	Dominant Theoretical Construct
Boris Dežulović	N1, Index.hr, Novosti	Satirical deconstruction of symbols, cognitive destabilization
Miljenko Jergović	Jutarnji list, Personal Portal	Cultural framing, relativization of identity, historical revisionism

3. Results: Subversive Narrative Matrices and Mechanisms of Cognitive Occupation

To precisely map and deconstruct the instrumentalization of the media space against a core pillar of Croatian soft power – the national football team – it is necessary to apply the theoretical models of the **"infrastructure of surrender"** and **"cognitive anesthesia"** (Šarić, 2025; Šarić, 2026a). An analysis of the empirical corpus of texts by Boris Dežulović, Miljenko Jergović, and srodnih authors within mainstream platforms demonstrates that their activities do not represent isolated incidents within a pluralistic public debate. Rather, they are highly structured reflexive control operations that directly correlate with the transnational geopolitical goals of the **"Serbian World"** project and the re-actualization of **cryptocommunist forces** in the region.

Cryptocommunist forces within the Croatian media and cultural space are defined as networked actors, interest groups, and inherited nomenclatures that, by utilizing postmodern and ostensibly progressive narratives, systematically seek to deconstruct the sovereignty of a state belonging to the Western and Euro-Atlantic sphere. Simultaneously, they aim to maintain a mental and cultural dependence on the former Yugoslav, or broader regional, space. In this constellation, sports diplomacy and the successes of the national team are recognized as the most dangerous adversaries of this agenda, because they generate absolute social cohesion

and immunize the public square against the regional integration forced by Belgrade through cultural and geoeconomic expansion (Šarić, 2025).

3.1. Boris Dežulović and the "Primitivization" Frame as a Vector of Cognitive Debilitation

Within the analyzed sample, Boris Dežulović's texts published during major tournaments (2018, 2022, 2024) display a consistent application of the **"primitivization framing"** strategy. The fundamental objective of this strategy is cognitive destabilization (Šarić, 2026a), through which the collective experience of national pride and integration is linguistically reformatted into pathology, xenophobia, and backwardness.

In his columnistic practice, Dežulović employs aggressive satirical tools to manufacture a false equivalence between supporting the national team and the fascitizaton of society. For instance, victory celebrations and mass welcomes in Croatian squares are regularly framed in his discourse through terms such as *"collective psychosis"*, *"mobocracy"*, and *"the triumph of checkered brains"*. When analyzing the phenomenon of public support, the author consciously ignores the socio-economic and psychological benefits of sporting soft power, shifting the focus exclusively to marginal excesses or the musical repertoire (such as the songs of Marko Perković Thompson). Consequently, the entire Croatian nation, united around a shared cohesive symbol, is framed as a civilizational retrogressive mass.

This mechanism directly builds upon the postulates advanced in *The Political Economy of Cultural Colonization* (Šarić, 2025), which outlined the concept of **"media monopolies"**. Despite positioning himself in public as a marginalized dissident, Dežulović in reality commands prominent logistical infrastructure across highly influential media outlets (such as the *Index.hr* portal, *N1* television, and the *Novosti* weekly). This asymmetry enables cryptocommunist forces to hijack the interpretation of reality.

Scientific deconstruction of this frame exposes its hybrid nature:

1. **Generating Collective Shame:** By systematically repeating the narrative that celebrating sporting success is a manifestation of primitivism, these texts seek to induce discomfort and shame among urban and younger demographics. If supporting one's national team is successfully equated with an intellectual deficit, the passivization of that demographic is achieved.
2. **Cognitive Anesthesia of the Public Square:** As established in the analysis of cognitive occupation (Šarić, 2026a), while mainstream media monopolies aggressively attack cohesive Croatian identity from above, the public space is simultaneously "anesthetized" from below through the mass penetration of regional pop culture (the so-called *cajke* and folk aesthetics). Dežulović's narrative acts as a top-down reflexive control operation – it intellectually clears the field by eliminating indigenous symbols, creating a vacuum that is subsequently filled by cultural colonization from Belgrade.

3.2. Miljenko Jergović and the Strategy of "Identity Relativization" in the Service of the "Serbian World"

While Dežulović operates through aggressive subversion and satirical shock, Miljenko Jergović deploys a more subtle, hermeneutic, and culturological framing framework. His essays and columns published in *Jutarnji list* and on private platforms during the tournament cycles in Russia and Qatar focus on deconstructing national sports icons – with special emphasis on Luka Modrić and manager Zlat Zlatko Dalić – and on relativizing Croatian identity sovereignty.

Jergović's discourse does not view Modrić as a global geoeconomic brand and an ambassador of soft power; instead, it reductively confines him to a judicial context

(the trial in Osijek, the phrase "I don't remember"), transforming him into a symbol of moral and institutional decay. On the other hand, manager Dalić is framed as an exponent of a provincial, clerical, and reduced Catholic identity. Through this framing, the national team's success is depicted as an anomaly – a dangerous anachronism that feeds the mythomania of a small nation, rather than accepting the "reality" of the regional context.

This strategy directly services the transnational **"Serbian World"** project, whose geoeconomic pressures and mechanisms have been thoroughly dissected in our prior research (Šarić, 2025; Šarić, 2026b). The "Serbian World" project does not rely solely on military or classical political threats; it vitally depends on **erasing cognitive borders** between sovereign states in the region. For this project to succeed, it is necessary to dismantle the specific and potent cohesive factors within neighboring states that resist cultural and political assimilation.

The Croatian national football team, acting as an absolute homogenization factor that transcends partisan, regional, and social divisions, represents the toughest bulwark of the Republic of Croatia's cognitive sovereignty. Evaluated through the lens of cognitive occupation (Šarić, 2026a), Jergović's contribution consists of systematically offering a narrative of a "shared cultural and emotional space of the former state," wherein Croatia's successes are treated as provincial excesses that disrupt the broader, regional picture.



Figure 1: The Architecture of Cognitive Occupation and Subversion of Croatia's Sporting Soft Power

4. Discussion: Geoeconomic Damage, Financial Flows of Media Capture, and Regional Echoes

The empirical data obtained from the critical discourse analysis of texts by Boris Dežulović and Miljenko Jergović raises a critical question within political economy: how can narratives that directly subvert national cohesive capital maintain a structural monopoly within the core mainstream media of the Republic of Croatia? Answering this requires applying the model of **advertising cartels and media monopolies** (Šarić, 2025), thereby exposing the deep geoeconomic backdrop of cognitive occupation.

4.1. Financial Mechanisms and Parasitism on the State Budget

One of the greatest paradoxes hidden by cryptocommunist forces in the public square is the fact that their subversive activities are predominantly funded – directly or indirectly – by the resources of the very state they seek to cognitively weaken. Our earlier research (Šarić,

2025) demonstrated the existence of a specific asymmetry within the media market of Southeastern Europe. The observed authors and platforms operate within a triple ring of financing:

1. **Direct State Subsidies and Institutional Clientelism:** An analysis of budget items and funding allocations for non-profit and minority media (such as the *Novosti* weekly, where Dežulović regularly publishes) reveals a constant influx of public money under the guise of "promoting pluralism and minority rights." In reality, these funds serve as a logistical substrate to sustain an infrastructure that executes reflexive control operations against the majority identity fabric.
2. **Non-Market Advertising Cartels:** According to the model from *The Political Economy of Cultural Colonization* (Šarić, 2025), advertising agencies with non-transparent ownership structures (often linked to capital from the region, particularly Belgrade) condition the placement of marketing budgets of large corporations. Media outlets wishing to survive on the market are forced to yield prominent column spaces to authors representing the regional, i.e., cryptocomunist narrative, artificially creating a monopoly over public discourse.
3. **Monetization of Click-Bait Outrage:** Portals such as *Index.hr* exploit the algorithm of outrage. By deliberately publishing Dežulović's texts that insult sporting achievements, they generate massive traffic (traffic driven by the indignation of the majority population), which is subsequently monetized through Google Ads and other digital platforms. In this manner, the patriotic enthusiasm of Croatian citizens is directly converted into financial profit for the very actors working to dismantle that enthusiasm.

4.2. Quantification of Geoeconomic Damage: The Destruction of Reputational Capital

In the era of geoeconomics, the soft power of a national team is directly converted into **hard economic value**. Croatia's successes in Russia, Qatar, and Germany generated hundreds of millions of euros in earned media value for Croatian tourism, the food industry, and foreign investment attraction. When the team captain lifts a trophy or when millions of viewers on Western television networks watch spectacular images of the welcome home ceremony in Zagreb, Croatia is positioned in the cognitive maps of global investors as a safe, victorious, cohesive, and Western-oriented European state.

However, the reflexive control operations executed by Jergović and Dežulović directly sever this process of converting soft power into economic gain. When their texts, via the transnational echo mechanism (Šarić, 2026b), are translated and cited in foreign media (both in the region and within left-liberal circles in the West), a completely inverted narrative is produced. Croatia is then branded as:

- A country plagued by neo-fascism and right-wing extremism (due to Dežulović's framing of fan celebrations).
- A corrupt and institutionally decayed state where sports heroes are in fact judicial fugitives or criminals (Jergović's focus on Modrića).
- A provincial, insular, and clericalized environment unsuited for modern integration.

This framing inflicts direct, measurable economic damage. It acts as a **reputational discount** – depressing the value of the Croatian national brand on the global market, deterring high-spending tourists seeking safe destinations, and creating a perception of political risk among institutional investors. Internal vectors of cognitive occupation (Šarić, 2026a) thus directly undermine the negotiating and geoeconomic position of the Republic of Croatia within the European Union.

4.2.1. Convergence of Subversive Vectors: The Homeland War, Operation "Oluja", and Censure of Identity Symbols

Scientific deconstruction of the entire corpus of texts by Boris Dežulović and Miljenko Jergović reveals that the assault on the national football team is not an isolated phenomenon of sports journalism, but rather the final stage of a broader, deeply structured operation within cognitive warfare, whose ultimate geopolitical goal is **the systematic delegitimization of the**

defensive Homeland War and the historical devaluation of Operation "Oluja". Within the hybrid doctrine of reflexive control, to completely dissolve a state's cognitive sovereignty, it is necessary to contaminate its foundational state-building myth and clear the field for the historical revisionism of regional hegemonistic projects (Šarić, 2026a). Media monopolies and cryptocommunist forces in Croatia therefore employ a framing strategy through which the victorious and liberating character of the Homeland War is systematically suppressed, while narratives of collective guilt, ethnic cleansing, and institutional revanchism are pushed to the forefront. The primary objective is to transform Operation "Oluja" – the zenith of Croatian military-political emancipation – from a symbol of national pride into a symbol of moral burden for younger generations.

Within this analytical framework, the aggressive pressures aimed at banning, censuring, and entirely criminalizing the musical catalog of Marko Perković Thompson (MPT) in mainstream public discourse cannot be viewed merely as an aesthetic debate over popular culture. In Croatian social reality, MPT functions as an **authentic cohesive cultural symbol** of the memory of the defensive identity born in 1991. The systematic framing of his character and work as "fascistoid" and anachronistic by media elites represents a top-down operation to clear the cognitive space (Šarić, 2025). By doing so, administrative and media monopolies attempt to eliminate the right to articulate an indigenous patriotic sentiment, creating a cultural and identity vacuum that is subsequently, synchronously filled from below by the penetration of transnacional regional folk aesthetics from Belgrade.

In this constellation of asymmetric threats, the national football team emerges as **the final institutional and pop-cultural shield of cognitive sovereignty**. It is the sole entity on a global scale possessing the power of instantaneous mass homogenization of Croatian society. Its actors (players and the manager) regularly and spontaneously reintroduce into the public square the very symbols that cryptocommunist and regional infrastructures have spent years trying to erase: celebrating victories with the songs of MPT, publicly expressing gratitude to Croatian veterans, and explicitly linking sporting triumphs with the historical legacy of the Homeland War. Precisely because of this synergistic function, the national football team becomes the target of a frontal media dismantling. The destruction of the national team through narratives of "primitivism," "nationalist kitsch," and "collective madness" seeks to sever the critical communicative link between the historical legitimacy achieved by the state in 1995 and the modern, globally recognized brand of the Republic of Croatia, thereby directly opening the gates for the unhindered cultural and political reintegration of the country into the geopolitical framework of the "Serbian World".

4.3. Convergence with the "Serbian World" Project

The ultimate geopolitical objective of these operations is to forcibly anchor Croatia within the so-called "region" or "Western Balkans," preventing its complete integration into the Central European and Western cultural spheres. The "Serbian World" project, as a contemporary reincarnation of Belgrade's hegemonistic ambitions, vitally depends on the degradation of Croatian cognitive sovereignty.

As detailed in the theory of cognitive occupation (Šarić, 2026a), this strategy is executed through a two-pronged pincer movement. On one hand, there is a bottom-up penetration via cultural colonization (folk music, *cajke*, shared media projects) aimed at blurring mental and aesthetic boundaries between younger generations in Croatia and Serbia. On the other hand, the work of Dežulović and Jergović represents a top-down pressure – an intellectual and media sabotage of every indigenous Croatian cohesive factor. When the national football team achieves historic success and momentarily sweeps away and neutralizes regional cultural influence (bringing indigenous national iconography and unity back into focus), cryptocommunist forces instantly trigger an alarm. Their task is to declare that moment dangerous, primitive, and fascistoid, ensuring society returns as quickly as possible to a state

of "cognitive anesthesia" (Šarić, 2026a) and accepts the imposed regional framework.

5. CONCLUSION

Through a rigid methodological apparatus of Critical Discourse Analysis and Framing Theory, this paper has successfully deconstructed and proven the role of media subversion directed against the Croatian national football team. Sports diplomacy and the soft power generated by Croatian football players are not merely isolated segments of the entertainment industry; in contemporary asymmetric geopolitical relations, they represent critical national infrastructure and a vital shield for the state's cognitive sovereignty.

The research has fully verified both advanced hypotheses. The narratives of Boris Dežulović and Miljenko Jergović, deployed within highly influential media channels, exhibit a high level of structural and temporal coordination with geopolitical cycles of pressure exerted on the Republic of Croatia. Through frames of primitivization, economic dissonance, and the destruction of role models, these actors do not conduct legitimate social critique; rather, they operate as internal vectors of reflexive control. Their output directly serves the logistical weakening of the defensive mechanisms of Croatian society in the face of onslaughts by the transnational "Serbian World" project and the re-actualization of cryptocommunist forces.

From the theoretical models established in our previous works (Šarić, 2025; Šarić, 2026a; Šarić, 2026b), it is evident that the Republic of Croatia must urgently redefine its national security strategy within the cognitive domain. Safeguarding cognitive sovereignty requires:

- Dismantling media monopolies and non-transparent advertising cartels that stifle authentic national thought.
- Introducing strict geoeconomic criteria for the allocation of public funds to non-profit media, to prevent the financing of subversive operations with taxpayer money.
- Systematic institutional branding and legal protection of sporting successes as strategic reputational capital of the state.

As long as we allow the "infrastructure of surrender" to dominate mainstream media space, our greatest global triumphs will be inverted into internal defeats. Victory on the sporting pitch must be defended and won in the cognitive space – this is the fundamental precondition for the survival of Croatian identity and geoeconomic independence in the 21st century.

REFERENCES

- Dežulović, B. (2018). *Checkered brains in the clutches of patriotism*. Index.hr, published July 16, 2018.
- Dežulović, B. (2022). *Fuck your water polo, football and national pride*. Novosti, Issue 1198.
- Entman, R. M. (1993). Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm. *Journal of Communication, 43*(4), 51-58.
- Fairclough, N. (2010). *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language*. Routledge.
- Jergović, M. (2018). *Luka Modrić: A portrait of the captain in the mirror of our amnesia*. Jutarnji list, published July 21, 2018.
- Jergović, M. (2022). *Dalić's clericalism and the provincialization of the Croatian triumph*. Personal Portal (jergovic.com), published December 19, 2022.
- Lefebvre, V. A. (1977). *Reflexive Control: Selected papers*. Lea.
- Nye, J. S. (2004). *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. PublicAffairs.
- Šarić, M. (2025). *The Political Economy of Cultural Colonization: Media Monopolies, Hybrid Warfare, and the 'Serbian World' Project in Croatia*. Zagreb: Geoeconomic Office / Faculty of Logistics.
- Šarić, M. (2026a). The Political Economy of Cognitive Occupation: Media Capture and Hybrid Threats in Southeastern Europe. *Journal of Geo-Economic Studies, 14*(1), 45-68.
- Šarić, M. (2026b). Reflexive Control Models in Asymmetric Geopolitics: Case Study of Croatia and the Transnational Media Echo. *International Journal of Cyber Security and Strategic Analyses, 9*(2), 112-135.