

Between Red and White or Red, Blue and White? Assessing Delije's Role as a Russian Proxy on Telegram

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Abstract

This study examines whether Delije, the ultras group supporting Red Star Belgrade, function as a Russian proxy on Telegram within the context of hybrid warfare. While known for their political ties in Serbia, their online role remains underexplored. Although some scholars have identified offline proxy traits among Serbian ultras, this study investigates whether Delije exhibit similar dynamics online. Using qualitative content analysis of Delije's Telegram channel (September 2022 - January 2025) and a coding framework based on prior research on Russian proxy groups, the analysis finds recurring anti-Western sentiment, pro-Russian messaging, and hostility toward civil society. However, the analysis also identifies notable gaps: limited evidence of recruitment, fundraising, or coordinated cross-channel activity. In response, the study introduces the concept of a 'semi-proxy group' to more accurately capture the ambiguous positioning of Delije. Rather than functioning as a full-fledged Telegram-based proxy, Delije retain their primary identity as a fan group, while occasionally contributing to Russia's influence efforts in Serbia. This study contributes to the broader understanding of how influential non-state actors in the Balkans can function as instruments of foreign influence, particularly in the evolving digital landscape of hybrid warfare.

Keywords: Delije; Ultras Groups; Hybrid Warfare; Russian Influence; Proxy Group

Introduction

In recent years, Russia's hybrid warfare strategy has increasingly targeted the Western Balkans, with Serbia emerging as a key target for influence operations.¹ Russia's hybrid warfare model

¹ Kuçi, Gurakuç. 2024. Russia's hybrid warfare in the Western Balkans: Geopolitical strategies and proxy actors. *Octopus Journal: Hybrid Warfare & Strategic Conflicts* 3(27), 1-27.

incorporates a broad spectrum of tools, including the use of proxy actors, to destabilise political environments and undermine pro-Western orientations. Telegram has become a key online platform for conducting these information operations in this strategy.²

Simultaneously, the intersection of football fandom and political mobilisation has become increasingly prominent in Serbia. One group at the centre of this phenomenon are Delije, the ultras group supporting Red Star Belgrade. Delije have evolved into a powerful sociopolitical actor with extensive influence over public discourse. Several scholars have pointed out that Delije's role extends far beyond football culture, with links to organised crime³, far-right extremism⁴, and political elites⁵. Some even describe Delije as the second most powerful entity in Serbia after the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (*Srpska Napredna Stranka*, SNS)⁶.

Delije's worldview is consistently structured around enemies such as the West, Albanians, or the LGBT community, but also an imagined community grounded in Serbian Orthodoxy and alignment with Russia. Đorđević's analysis demonstrates how Delije embed geopolitical positioning into fan practices. His work underscores that Delije's political credibility is not incidental but rooted in decades of symbolic and material entanglement with national identity and state power.⁷

While the political entanglements of Serbian ultras groups are well documented, their growing role online has not been sufficiently studied. In recent years, Delije has established a notable online presence through Telegram, where they publish not only club-related content but also messages that often contain ideologically charged messages. This activity becomes especially relevant in light of claims by scholars that ultras groups in Serbia may function as proxy groups in Russia's hybrid warfare.⁸

In parallel, growing attention has been given to how ultras groups leverage social media. Studies from various contexts demonstrate that online platforms offer ultras the means to construct identity⁹, reinforce their in-group loyalty, and coordinate political messaging¹⁰. Yet, in Serbia, a context marked by specific historical evolution and unresolved issues such as the Kosovo territorial dispute, the politicisation of fan culture acquires unique dimensions. Ultras like Delije

² Kuchmii, Olena, and Oksana Frolova. 2023. The use of social media as a tool of modern hybrid warfare. *Acta de Historia & Politica: Saeculum XXI* 2(2), 70-77.

³ Đorđević, Saša, and Ruggero Scaturro. 2022. *Dangerous games: Football hooliganism, politics, and organized crime in the Western Balkans*. Working Paper. Geneva: Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime.

⁴ Djorić, Marija. 2023. *Violent extremism and sports in the Western Balkans*. Working Paper. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

⁵ Ahern, Abijah. 2022. Violent terraces, violent government: Football ultras, organized crime, and political clientelism in Aleksandar Vučić's Serbian dual state. *European and Eurasian Undergraduate Symposium*, 44-57.

⁶ Džajić, Dragan. 2015. Džajić: Delije posle SNS najjača partija u Srbiji. *B92*, 26 October 2015.

⁷ Đorđević, Ivan. 2016. The role of Red Star football club in the construction of Serbian national identity. *Traditiones* 45(1), 117-132.

⁸ Životić, Ilija, and Darko Obradović. 2022. Spread of the Russian propaganda on Western Balkans – Case study in Serbia. *Paper presented at the International Scientific Conference: 45 Years of Higher Education in the Area of Security – Educational Challenges and Security Perspectives Conference*. Struga, 26-28 September 2022.

⁹ Alomari, Mamer. 2019. *Political activists or violent fans? Understanding the Moroccan Ultras perspective through social media discourse analysis*. Working paper. Brattleboro: SIT Graduate Institute.

¹⁰ Sayan, Anil / Görgülü, Vehbi / Erhart, Itr, and Yonca Aslanbay. 2017. A social influence perspective on uses of online football forums: The case with Turkish football fans. *International Journal of Sport Communication* 10(4), 467-489.

play a dual role: as both football supporters and ideological actors contributing to nationalist stances and geopolitical alignment.¹¹

The article addresses this gap by examining to what extent Delije's online communication on Telegram exhibits characteristics typically associated with pro-Russian proxy groups, such as groups 'Dejan Berić' or 'Bunt je stanje duha'¹². These characteristics will be closely introduced in Methodology (Table 1). The study draws on the analytical findings by Pekmez et al. and Khan, and their analysis of Telegram-based proxies in the Western Balkans, in which they analysed dozens of pro-Russian Telegram channels.¹³ This study conducts a qualitative content analysis of Delije's Telegram posts between September 2022 and January 2025. The exact research question has been set to *How do Delije's communication and framing strategies on Telegram from September 2022 until the end of January 2025 resemble known Russian proxy groups' framing techniques and narratives?*. The possibility of Delije acting as a proxy shows that the boundaries between fandom, far-right politics, and geopolitical influence are increasingly blurred, with ultras groups in Serbia emerging as overlooked yet consequential actors in contemporary hybrid warfare.

Conceptual framework

This study is grounded in a conceptual framework that brings together hybrid warfare, proxy groups, and communication via Telegram, to assess to what extent the Serbian ultras group Delije engages in behaviours that align with characteristics of Russian proxy actors online.

As contemporary literature understands, hybrid warfare represents a multi-layered strategy that blends conventional military force with irregular tactics and non-military tools, such as cyber operations, disinformation, and influence campaigns.¹⁴ It is specifically designed to remain below the threshold of direct military confrontation while destabilising adversaries from within.¹⁵ Cvetković et al. proposed a definition, which offers a comprehensive view of hybrid warfare as a "*multidimensional conflict*" that includes both military and non-military strategies such as "*information-psychological-ideological, political, economic, intelligence-subversive, cyber, criminal, terrorist, and military activities*"¹⁶ aimed at undermining an opponent's values, social cohesion, and sovereignty.

Russia's approach to hybrid warfare, especially post-2014, emphasises the information-psychological dimension significantly. This includes shaping public mindset and perception through coordinated communication campaigns, leveraging both Russian-controlled media such as RT or Sputnik, and ideologically sympathetic actors.¹⁷ In the Western Balkans, Serbia stands

¹¹ Bakić, Jovo. 2023. *The Serbian far right, football hooligans, and their instrumentalisation by an authoritarian regime*, in *The Routledge Handbook of far-right extremism in Europe*, edited by Katherine, Kondor, and Mark Littler. London: Routledge, 33-45.

¹² Pekmez, Irvin / Hodžić, Enes, and Nino Bilajac. 2024. *Proruski Telegram kanali na Balkanu sve popularniji poligon za regrutovanje i dezinformacije*. *Detektor*, 7 June 2024; Khan, Anna. 2024. *Echoes of Moscow: Russian Telegram network in Serbia*. *Centar za evropske politike CEP* 48(1), 1-20.

¹³ Pekmez, Hožić, and Bilajac, *Proruski Telegram kanali*; Kahn, *Echoes of Moscow*.

¹⁴ Hoffman, Frank G. 2007. *Conflict in the 21st century: The rise of hybrid wars*. Arlington: Potomac Institute for Policy Studies.

¹⁵ Bilal, Arsalan. 2021. *Hybrid warfare: New threats, complexity, and trust as the antidote*. *NATO Review*, 21 November 2021.

¹⁶ Cvetković, Nenad / Kovač, Mitar, and Branko Joksimović. 2019. *Pojam hibridnog rata*. *Vojno delo* 71(7), 323-43, 339.

¹⁷ Giles, Keir. 2016. *Handbook of Russian information warfare*. Rome: NATO Defense College.

out as a key target of Russian strategic interest due to its historical, religious, and cultural ties, as well as its geopolitical orientation outside the EU and NATO. Scholars like Životić and Obradović stress that Russia's hybrid tools in Serbia include cultural diplomacy, economic leverage, and a wide array of proxy actors, some of them operating on Telegram.¹⁸

Traditionally, proxies were understood as armed groups acting on behalf of a state in a military capacity.¹⁹ However, more recent literature reflects an expanded view and proxies now encompass a broader array of actors, including non-violent and non-state entities such as civil society organisations, media outlets or social movements that align ideologically, politically, or strategically with a foreign power's objectives.²⁰ These actors may not operate under direct command but advance a foreign actor's strategic influence.²¹ In the Serbian context, Životić and Obradović highlight Russia's strategic use of proxies operating through digital platforms such as Telegram.²² This is particularly significant, as it demonstrates how proxy groups can function without any physical presence, relying on virtual spaces to disseminate disinformation, coordinate activities, and shape public opinion. These online proxy actors are a core component of Russia's broader hybrid strategy in the Western Balkans. In this article, an online proxy group is therefore defined as an actor that consistently reproduces Kremlin-style frames and narratives in ways that support Russian strategic influence. Following Khan and Pekmez et al.²³, the presence or absence of such traits (outlined in Table 1) serves as the operational benchmark for classifying groups as proxies.

The role of Telegram is then central in this framework. Its unique architecture of combining anonymity and the ability to broadcast messages to large audiences makes it an ideal platform for information operations. As Greisman noted, Telegram has become a key tool in Russia's online influence efforts.²⁴ Channels with pro-Kremlin leanings are used to disseminate propaganda and disinformation. Telegram has seen a surge in popularity in Serbia, especially among nationalist and far-right groups. Životić and Obradović and other scholars emphasise how this platform has become a hub for pro-Russian content, especially since the onset of the war in Ukraine. This includes spreading misinformation about the conflict, glorifying Russian military actions, discrediting Western media, and building digital communities that reinforce Russia-friendly views.²⁵

To assess the alignment of Delije and Russian proxy characteristics, the article employs framing theory, particularly as articulated by Entman.²⁶ Frames help structure how an issue is perceived

¹⁸ Životić and Obradović, *Spread of the Russian propaganda on Western Balkans*.

¹⁹ Rauta, Vladimir. 2020. Towards a typology of non-state actors in 'hybrid warfare': Proxy, auxiliary, surrogate, and affiliated forces. *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 33(6), 868-887.

²⁰ Ivanov, Zoran. 2020. Changing the character of proxy warfare and its consequences for geopolitical relationships. *Security and Defence Quarterly* 31(4), 37-51.

²¹ Mullins, Sam. 2024. *The role of non-state actors as proxies in irregular warfare and malign state influence*. Working Paper. Arlington: Irregular Warfare Center.

²² Životić, Ilija, and Darko Obradović. 2024. Telegram as a specific playground of the Kremlin's information operations in Serbia. *National Security and the Future* 25(1), 65-92.

²³ Pekmez, Hodžić and Bilajac, *Proruski Telegram kanali*; Khan, *Echoes of Moscow*

²⁴ Greisman, Polina. 2024. *Russian propaganda in Serbia and the Western Balkans: The case of Telegram channels*. Working Paper. Belgrade: Belgrade Centre for Security Policy.

²⁵ Životić and Obradović, *Telegram as a specific playground*.; Khan, *Echoes of Moscow*.; Greisman, *Russian propaganda in Serbia*; Pekmez, Hodžić, and Bilajac, *Proruski Telegram kanali na*.

²⁶ Entman, Robert M. 1993. Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm. *Journal of Communication* 43(4), 51-58.

by selecting certain aspects of reality and making them more salient. In this study, frames were identified through a coding scheme specifying features of Russian proxy communication, such as linguistic markers ('the EU is corrupt'), symbolic references (Russian flags, Orthodox icons), or emphases constructing collective identity. Delije's online content is therefore analysed not only for what it says, but also for how it frames geopolitical issues. Furthermore, narratives function as the broader structures into which these frames are embedded. As Barthes argues, narratives help organise meaning through stories that feature heroes, enemies, and moral conflicts.²⁷ Here, narratives were traced by examining how frames coalesced into recurring plots, for example, Russia as Serbia's protector or the West as a civilizational threat. This distinction captures both micro-level framing in individual posts and macro-level ideological patterns over time.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative content analysis to assess the extent to which Delije's communication on Telegram aligns with characteristics of Russian proxy groups. A case study design was chosen due to its suitability for examining a single actor in depth, in this case, the Delije Telegram channel, active since 10 September 2022. As Schreier notes, qualitative content analysis is well-suited for capturing meaning, framing strategies, and symbolic communication in texts and images.²⁸ This method prioritises the interpretation of themes and context, while still allowing for the inclusion of statistical elements such as word frequency.²⁹ Following Elo and Kyngäs, the analysis followed three stages: preparation, organising, and reporting.³⁰

In the preparation phase, the unit of analysis was defined. For text, thematic expressions, as classified by Zhang and Wildemuth, served as the primary unit.³¹ This could range from a sentence to an entire post if it conveyed a coherent theme. For images, the units included visual symbols (such as flags and icons) and culturally significant motifs that collectively form a thematic unit. This study uses a deductive coding approach. The categorisation matrix was created based on findings identified in the analysis by Pekmez et al. and Khan, who identified core traits of Russian Telegram-based proxy actors.³²

²⁷ Barthes, Roland. 1975. An introduction to the structural analysis of narrative. *New Literary History* 6(2), 237-272.

²⁸ Schreier, Margrit. 2012. *Qualitative Content Analysis in practice*. London: SAGE.

²⁹ Morgan, David L. 1993. Qualitative Content Analysis: A guide to paths not taken. *Qualitative Health Research* 3(1), 112-121.

³⁰ Elo, Satu, and Helvi Kyngäs. 2008. The Qualitative Content Analysis process. *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 62(1): 107-115.

³¹ Zhang, Yan, and Barbara M. Wildemuth. 2009. *Qualitative Analysis of Content*, In *Applications of social research methods to questions in information and library science*, edited by Wildemuth, Barbara M. Westport: Libraries Unlimited, 308-319.

³² Pekmez, Hodžić, and Bilajac, *Proruski Telegram kanali*; Khan, *Echoes of Moscow*.

Table 1: The Categorisation Matrix

Code Name	Description
Pro-Russian Propaganda	Content aligning with Russian geopolitical interests, often portraying Russia as Serbia's protector.
Anti-Western Sentiment	Criticism of NATO, EU, and Western democratic values.
Historical Revisionism	Reframing historical events to align with Kremlin narratives.
Disinformation and Misinformation	Sharing misleading or false content to manipulate public perception.
Recruitment and Mobilisation	Calls for volunteers to join paramilitary or military groups supporting Russian interests.
Fundraising for Pro-Russian Causes	Financial campaigns supporting military or ideological efforts.
Networked Amplification	Cross-posting content with other pro-Russian channels.
Anti-NGO and Anti-Journalist Rhetoric	Discrediting independent media and NGOs that criticize Russia or Serbia.

Source: Pekmez, Irvin / Hodžić, Enes, and Nino Bilajac. 2024. [Proruski Telegram kanali na Balkanu sve popularniji poligon za regrutovanje i dezinformacije](#). *Detektor*, 7 June 2024; Khan, Anna. 2024. Echoes of Moscow: Russian Telegram network in Serbia. *Centar za evropske politike CEP* 48(1), 1-20.

Data were exported from the public Telegram channel *Delije Sever* on 2 February 2025. This included all posts from 10 September 2022 to 31 January 2025. No personal data was collected or analysed, and ethical guidelines regarding public data and anonymity were strictly followed.

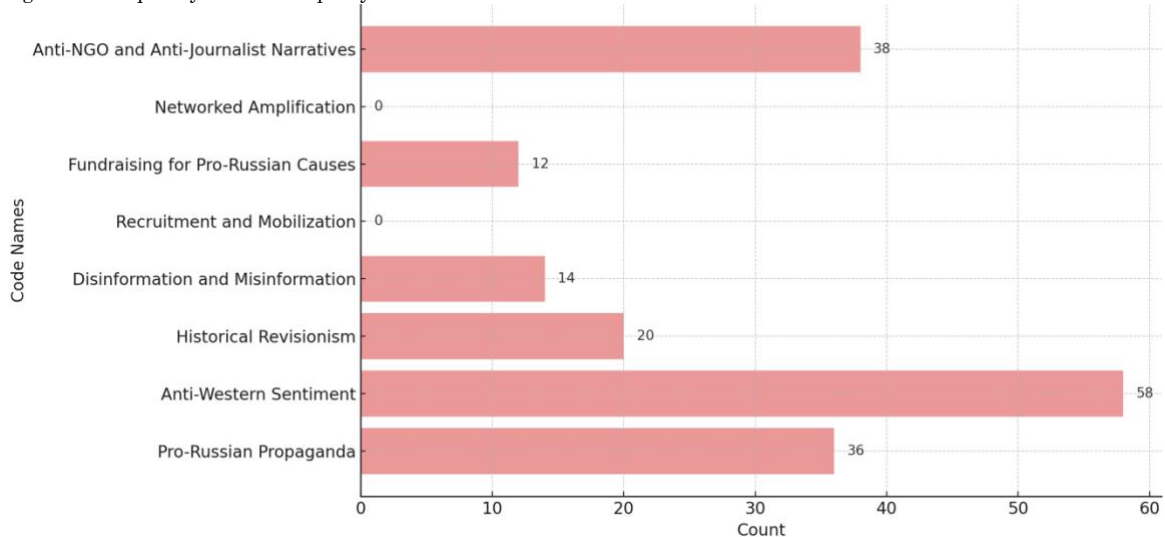
The overall text had over 1200 messages. A total of 2,816 images were extracted. However, the majority were matchday photo reports documenting offline activity. These were excluded from analysis, as they did not constitute deliberate digital messaging. A curated set of 213 images was retained for thematic analysis. Approximately 600 videos were available on *Delije's* Telegram channel, but these were excluded from analysis as well. The majority depicted matchday scenes, chants, and crowd activity, meaning content that primarily documents offline stadium events rather than conveying deliberate digital messaging. Given the time-intensive nature of video analysis and the limited insight these clips offer into intentional online communication, their exclusion was a strategic choice to maintain focus on more thematically rich text and image content.

Analysis

Across the dataset, a total of 178 instances were identified that align with the predefined proxy-related codes. These occurrences provide insight into how *Delije's* Telegram communication might reflect the framing strategies, ideological patterns, and strategic messaging typical of Russian-affiliated proxy groups on Telegram. However, two codes were entirely absent from their channel history: 'Recruitment and Mobilisation' and 'Networked Amplification'. There were no cross-posts or shares of other pro-Russian channels. The only instance of sharing a different Telegram channel was when the official Red Star Football Club created their channel. Additionally, there were no mentions of how people could or should join Russian or Serbian paramilitary groups or any similar organisations.

Unless otherwise indicated, all textual examples and paraphrased content discussed in this chapter are derived from posts published on the public Telegram channel *Delije Sever* between 10 September 2022 and 31 January 2025. Specific dates are provided in tables or, where particularly relevant, but general references to narratives or coded themes draw from this full dataset.

Figure 1: Frequency of Russian proxy characteristics codes



Source: Own illustration.

Anti-Western Sentiment

The code ‘Anti-Western Sentiment’ is defined broadly to include any criticism directed at NATO, EU, or Western democratic values in general. This code appeared 38 times in the analysed text, with an additional 20 occurrences identified in images. A total of 4,013 characters in the text were coded under this category, while images associated with this sentiment accounted for approximately 4,606,625 pixels, representing 60.5% of the total coded image data.

The anti-Western sentiment has been present regularly with noticeable spikes around key remembrance dates such as the anniversaries of the NATO bombing of Serbia and the commemoration of the ‘March Pogrom’ against Serbs by Kosovar Albanians. The ‘March Pogrom’ refers to a wave of violent unrest in Kosovo in March 2004, sparked by the drowning of three Albanian children in the Ibar River. Although Serbs were initially blamed, the precise circumstances remain disputed.³³ The events led to widespread attacks on Serb communities, with 19 deaths (11 Albanians and 8 Serbs) officially reported.³⁴

NATO is repeatedly portrayed as Serbia’s primary enemy, as illustrated in Table 2. The bombing campaign is framed as a clear act of aggression, while Serbian troops are celebrated as heroes, especially those who fought in Kosovo and Metohija. A particularly celebrated event is the Battle of Košare, which, according to Delije, marked an attempted ground invasion by NATO forces and Kosovar Albanians that was heroically repelled by an under-equipped and outnumbered Serbian army. For Delije, this battle represents one of the most significant and honourable moments in modern Serbian military history.³⁵

³³ Humanitarian Law Center. *The March violence in Kosovo – A reminder of the facts* (accessed: 24 March 2025).

³⁴ United Nations. *Report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo, S/2004/348* (accessed: 24 March 2025).

³⁵ Delije Sever. *Telegram channel* (accessed: 2 February 2025).

NATO is frequently mentioned alongside Albanians, reflecting the perception of a joint effort to undermine Serbian sovereignty over Kosovo and Metohija. This rhetorical alignment serves to reinforce a narrative in which Serbs are victims of coordinated external aggression and ongoing terror. The depth of hatred toward NATO is clearly reflected in visual materials with images bearing slogans such as ‘Fak NATO’ or ‘Fuck NATO’, depictions of civilian casualties from the bombings, and iconography featuring crossed-out NATO and EU flags. One notable example includes a graffiti image made by Russians, reading ‘When the army returns to Kosovo’, which also included the phrase ‘FUCK NATO’. This instance illustrates the symbolic agreement between Delije and pro-Russian narratives, particularly in their shared opposition to Western institutions and influence, which shows the further alignment between Delije and Russia.

Mentions of the EU are less direct compared to NATO, but it is still evident that Delije perceive the EU as an ideological threat and enemy. This position is apparent in one of their messages, where they express a continuous effort to assert their political views during European cup matches, opinions which they frame as fundamentally opposed to the values promoted by the EU. According to Delije, both the EU and the broader West are attempting to ‘decode’ the Serbian people by undermining their patriotism, historical heroes, and national identity, and instead ‘recode’ them according to liberal values, which they interpret as inherently anti-Serbian.

A particular example of this sentiment can be found in a lengthy passage dedicated to environmental issues. Delije acknowledge that every reasonable person wants a clean and healthy environment, and agrees that access to drinkable water should be a priority. However, they firmly reject the notion of ‘political ecology’, a concept they associate with the contemporary EU. In their view, environmentalism has been instrumentalised as a political tool, serving broader ideological and geopolitical agendas rather than genuine ecological concerns. Delije frame this as yet another threat Serbia must resist.³⁶

This rhetoric underscores a broader anti-EU sentiment, portraying the EU not just as politically intrusive but as a cultural and ideological force working to reshape Serbian society in ways that clash with traditional values and national identity. A view similar to that of Russia and other pro-Russian proxies.

Much of the anti-Western sentiment is also focused on Ukraine. Ukraine is often portrayed as an extension, or a forearm of NATO, with any public demonstrations of support for Ukraine within Serbia being interpreted as pro-NATO itself, and therefore as completely anti-Serbian. This framing aligns Ukraine with Western structures that Delije view as hostile to Serbian interests and identity.

In another post, however, Ukrainians are framed as a brotherhood nation of Serbia and Russia, who have been deceived and manipulated by the West for its geopolitical aims. According to this narrative, Ukrainians remain unaware of how they are being exploited and continue to serve Western agendas. This dual portrayal of Ukraine as both an enemy proxy and a misled brotherly nation serves to reinforce Delije’s broader ideological alignment with Russia. The framing of Ukraine as a ‘brother nation’ that has lost its way due to Western influence mirrors a dominant

³⁶ Delije Sever, *Telegram channel*.

narrative promoted by Russian state media and other pro-Russian proxies.³⁷ This narrative allows Delije to present anti-Ukrainian positions not because of ethnic or national hatred, but rather as criticism of Western manipulation, further reinforcing their anti-Western and pro-Russian worldview.

Other references reflect a more general anti-Western sentiment. The West is portrayed as inherently hostile to Serbian interests, accused of supporting ‘killers’ and ‘arsonists’ in their efforts to create the so-called ‘fake country’ of Kosovo. The supposedly ‘morally superior’ West is also criticised for denying basic human rights, particularly in the case of Ratko Mladić, who, according to Delije, is unfairly suffering under the authority of the Hague Tribunal. They reject the legitimacy of the Tribunal altogether, viewing its judgments as biased and politically motivated. Additionally, the West is blamed for financing anti-Serbian media and NGOs, which are portrayed as well-paid soldiers of the West.

Table 2: Examples of ‘Anti-Western Sentiment’ Code

Excerpt (Translated from Serbian)	Date
“Some gatherings of support for Ukrainians are taking place, who are the extended arm of NATO.”	11 July 2023
“NATO villains will forever remain a hated enemy of the Serbs! Never forget! 24.03.1999.”	24 March 2023
“The 15th anniversary of the shameful and cowardly bombing of Serbia was also commemorated.”	29 March 2024
	12 July 2023
 “24.03.1999. To never forget that NATO villains are enemies of the Serbian people!”	24 March 2024

Source: Delije Sever, Telegram channel.

Anti-NGO and Anti-Journalist Rhetoric

By definition, the code ‘Anti-NGO and Anti-Journalist Rhetoric’ encompasses themes involving criticism and discrediting of media outlets and NGOs that are perceived as critical of Serbia or Russia. It also reflects the general hostility of Delije toward these groups. This code was among the most frequently occurring in the text, appearing 38 times and covering a total of 5,255 characters. No images were tagged with this code. Typically, the code appeared within longer textual passages where the primary focus was on journalists and NGOs, often framed as problematic or hostile entities.

Criticism of journalists often centred around accusations of manipulation and distortion of truth, particularly in relation to Serbian national figures. For example, Delije strongly rejected media portrayals of Ratko Mladić as a war criminal, instead framing him as a hero who defended the

³⁷ Ilin, Illia, and Olena Nihatova. 2023. The ‘Brotherly People’ metaphor and the Russian-Ukrainian irredentist war: A corpus-based study. *Czech Journal of International Relations* 58(2), 7-41.

Serbian nation. They argue that the media promotes division within Serbian society and acts in the service of hostile Western agendas. Delije often point out the fact that their showcasing of basic patriotism is, according to the media, portrayed as something extreme, bad, and not desired in Serbia. A recurring pattern within the rhetoric of Delije was the effort to disassociate themselves from labels such as ‘right-wingers’, ‘far-righters’, ‘nationalists’, or ‘brawlers’. This distancing from ideologically charged terms, especially ‘nationalist’, is particularly interesting given their frequent proclamations of pride in being Serbian nationalists. This contradiction signals a more profound effort to reframe their public image.

Journalists are often referred to sarcastically as ‘journalists’ (in quotation marks), reflecting Delije’s deep contempt for the profession and their perceived bias.³⁸ According to Delije, the media go so far as to portray football fans as ‘terrorists’ and as the primary societal problem in Serbia, a characterisation they find unacceptable and fundamentally anti-Serbian.³⁹ At one point, they even compare contemporary Serbian media to that of the Slobodan Milošević era⁴⁰, implying manipulation and propaganda. These examples illustrate how Delije position the media not only as a hostile force against them as a group, but also as an enemy of all football fans and patriotic Serbs.

In the context of Russia, the only reference to journalists involved the arrest of a Russian football fan in Germany based on an existing warrant for him after a clash with English supporters during the World Cup in Qatar. According to Delije, media coverage focused disproportionately on the Russians while ignoring the role of English fans.⁴¹ This was interpreted as clear evidence of an anti-Russian bias in Western media, as well as in pro-Western segments of Serbian media.

The case of anti-NGO rhetoric within the Delije narrative reveals a more explicit connection to pro-Russian sentiment. In contrast to general critiques of the media, the attacks on NGOs frequently involve direct references to Russia and the West. According to Delije, NGOs operating in Serbia are instruments of Western influence, allegedly financed to destabilise the country and to support hostile ideologies against Serbia. A particularly telling example involves a criticism of one NGO, which had previously condemned patriotic graffiti across Belgrade and other Serbian cities. In response to the increasingly frequent removal of patriotic graffiti, Delije declared that they would paint two more for every piece erased. The NGO in question likened this response to the Nazi policy of retaliatory killings, precisely the principle of ‘100 for 1’, used during World War II. Delije rejected this comparison as hypocritical, arguing that the very same NGO was fundraising for Ukraine’s Azov Battalion, which they label as openly Nazi, as shown in Table 3.

This rhetoric frames Western-funded NGOs not only as hostile but also as morally corrupt and ideologically aligned with the historical enemies of the Serbian people. Delije’s portrayal of NGOs emphasises their alleged efforts to erase patriotism, propagate internal division, and spread hatred under the guise of liberal values, objectives presented as deeply anti-Serbian. In this narrative, NGOs are not just political adversaries but existential threats to national cohesion. This framing closely mirrors the official Russian stance under Vladimir Putin, where NGOs are

³⁸ Posted on 20 November 2024 on Delije Sever, *Telegram channel*.

³⁹ Posted on 17 December 2024 on Delije Sever, *Telegram channel*.

⁴⁰ Posted on 21 December 2024 on Delije Sever, *Telegram channel*.

⁴¹ Posted on 24 December 2023 on Delije Sever, *Telegram channel*.

often labelled as ‘foreign agents’ and accused of undermining national interests on behalf of the West.⁴² Delije’s rhetoric reflects a view that aligns Serbian patriotism with resistance to the West and embraces a shared ideological space with Russia. Thus, anti-NGO rhetoric functions not only as a tool of domestic political resistance but also as a symbolic gesture of solidarity with Russian geopolitical narratives.

Table 3: Examples of ‘Anti-NGO and Anti-Journalist Rhetoric’ Code

Excerpt (Translated from Serbian)	Date
“For over two decades, pro-Western media in Serbia have been working on changing the mindset of the people. A key part of this propaganda machinery is labelling people like us as “right-wingers”, “ultra-right”, “nationalists”, and so on.”	13 July 2023
“It is incredibly bold and shameless of this NGO, which, we heard, collects money for the Azov unit in Ukraine that openly supports Nazi ideology.”	15 August 2023
“Journalists often aim to stir up hatred and further divide society. That’s clearly because they’re all paid, by one side or another, to engage in politicking instead of the topics they were supposedly trained to cover.”	14 December 2024

Source: Delije Sever, Telegram channel.

Pro-Russian Propaganda

‘Pro-Russian Propaganda’ is a code that captures content aligning with Russian geopolitical interests. In this narrative, Russia is consistently portrayed as a brotherly nation to Serbia, a steady ally, cultural kin, and even a protector. Such framing emphasises historical ties, shared Orthodox faith and positive portrayals of Russia. In the analysed material, this code appeared 30 times in the text, covering approximately 3,395 characters. Additionally, images reflecting this sentiment comprised around 2,056,018 pixels, accounting for 38.8% of the total coded image data.

The most frequent narrative present within the code is the portrayal of Serbia and Russia as brotherly nations. Phrases such as “Serbs and Russians brothers forever” or variants such as an example from Table 4 appear frequently in their posts, reinforcing this ideological alignment. Specific brotherhood narrative is Delije’s close relationship with their partner ultras group of Spartak Moscow, who are consistently referred to as ‘brothers from Moscow’. This connection is not merely rhetorical; both groups actively engage in mutual support through public messages, coordinated displays, and joint initiatives. One illustrative example includes Spartak Moscow ultras organising a support protest in front of the Serbian Embassy on the anniversary of Kosovo’s declaration of independence, which Delije proudly shared on their Telegram.⁴³

While explicit pro-Russian propaganda is not always overt in Delije’s online content, it becomes evident through specific activities. One notable case is the organisation of film screenings in collaboration with the Russian House (*Ruski Dom*), a Russian cultural centre in Belgrade. These screenings, periodically promoted via Delije’s Telegram channel, often feature Russian-produced films such as *The Sky (Nebo)*, with tickets directed toward support for Donbass, a topic discussed further under the ‘Fundraising for Pro-Russian Causes’ code. Additionally, Serbian films focusing on Kosovo and Metohija are sometimes included, reinforcing shared nationalist and historical narratives. The connection to the Russian House is significant, as such institutions are

⁴² Zavyalova, Anastasiya. 2024. Stigmatization by an authoritarian government: Russian NGOs under the 2012 Foreign Agents Law. *Administrative Science Quarterly* 70(1), 69-118.

⁴³ Posted on 17 February 2023 on Delije Sever, Telegram channel.

widely recognised as instruments of Russian soft power.⁴⁴ Although these screenings fall under Delije's offline activities, their promotion online plays a crucial role in spreading pro-Russian narratives. This blend of cultural engagement represents a subtle but effective form of propaganda dissemination.

Within the 'Pro-Russian Propaganda' code, posts frequently include narratives that portray Ukraine as an extension of NATO, emphasise the presence of Nazi battalions, especially referencing the Azov Battalion, and frame Ukraine as a 'lost brother nation' of Russia and Serbia, led off track by Western influence. References to the suffering of the 'brotherly nation' in Donbass are also common. These narratives closely align with official Kremlin rhetoric, and their repetition within Delije's content illustrates a clear promotion of pro-Russian propaganda.

A notable subcategory within this code includes sympathy-oriented posts, which seek to generate emotional support for Russia and its actions. For instance, Delije have shared messages expressing outrage over alleged Ukrainian drone attacks on civilians in Moscow, they also emphasised the prolonged suffering of children in Donbass and used hyperbolic language to describe Ukraine and the West as inhumane actors responsible for atrocities.⁴⁵ Such posts serve to demonise perceived enemies while positioning Russia as a victim. In addition, commemorative content is used to promote emotional solidarity with Russia. Examples include posts marking the Day of Remembrance for the Victims of the Siege of Leningrad. These efforts reinforce the notion of historical and moral alignment between Serbia and Russia.



In terms of image sharing, pro-Russian propaganda within Delije's digital presence mirrors previously observed patterns. Visual content includes invitations to film screenings such as *Nebo*, spray-painted 'Z' symbols signifying support for the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and a range of pro-Russian graffiti and flags. These visual materials serve as tools of ideological reinforcement and as expressions of solidarity with Russia's geopolitical stance.

The presence of pro-Russian propaganda is a defining characteristic of proxy groups aligned with Russian interests. Therefore, its consistent appearance within Delije's communications is a key indicator when evaluating the extent to which the group may function as a pro-Russian proxy actor.

⁴⁴ ADF. 2024. [Kremlin opens 'Russian Houses' as soft power tool](#). *Africa Defense Forum*, 18 December 2024.

⁴⁵ Posted on 23 March 2024 on Delije Sever, *Telegram channel*.

Table 4: Examples of ‘Pro-Russian Propaganda’ Code

Excerpt (Translated from Serbian)	Date
“Glory to Russia! With our brothers until victory!”	7 April 2023
“We cannot comprehend that someone would unapologetically support Nazi units in Ukraine.”	15 August 2023
“Also, at this moment, this match is more than just a game, and to show our stance on everything happening in the world, to show who we consider our brothers, it is necessary that every seat in the stadium be filled!” ⁴⁶	20 March 2024
 “Glory to Russia.”	5 March 2024
	25 August 2024

Source: Delije Sever, Telegram channel.

Historical Revisionism

Another crucial code for proxy groups is the use of ‘Historical Revisionism’, which refers to the reframing or reinterpretation of historical events to align with Kremlin-approved narratives and, in this context, Serbian nationalist narratives. The Kremlin’s support for Serbian historical claims, particularly in the Balkans, serves a broader geopolitical purpose by promoting instability and undermining Western influence in the region. This code appeared 20 times in the data, encompassing 1,540 characters, with no associated images.

Most of the content coded under historical revisionism focuses on Kosovo, particularly the denial of its independence, repeated references to it as a ‘fake country’, and ongoing claims that Albanians are committing ethnic cleansing against Serbs.

A notable case involves the annual commemorative posts surrounding what Serbian narratives refer to as the ‘March Pogrom’. Despite official reports stating that the 2004 unrest resulted in 19 deaths (11 Albanians and 8 Serbs),⁴⁷ Delije’s posts frequently cite 29 Serb deaths, illustrating a deliberate inflation of figures to reinforce a narrative of exclusive Serbian suffering.

A further instance that recurs often is the NATO bombing campaign in 1999. Delije’s messaging typically claims that 3,000 people were killed, the majority of them civilians. However, this figure lacks support from independent sources. Human Rights Watch, for instance, estimates a maximum of 527 civilian deaths, alongside roughly 1,000 deaths of Yugoslav security forces.⁴⁸ Serbian government estimates vary widely, from 1,200 to 5,700 civilian deaths, placing Delije’s claims somewhere near the upper midpoint. However, these figures lack a consistent evidentiary foundation, as neither the Serbian nor the former Yugoslav government maintained an official, verifiable database of casualties.

⁴⁶ Posted before a match between Zenit Petersburg and Red Star.

⁴⁷ United Nations, *Report of the Secretary-General*.

⁴⁸ Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21st century*.

Human Rights Watch. *Civilian deaths in the NATO air campaign* (accessed: 24 March 2025).

The tendency is also evident in Delije's framing of the Račak massacre, widely recognised as a key trigger for the NATO bombing campaign.⁴⁹ Delije portray the event as fabricated, claiming that the killing of 45 Albanians was not a massacre of civilians but a legitimate anti-terrorist operation targeting the Kosovo Liberation Army (*Ushtria Çlirimtare e Kosovës*, UÇK). This interpretation outright denies the established account of civilian deaths and reframes the incident in a way that clears Serbian forces of wrongdoing.

A similarly revisionist narrative is applied to the Srebrenica genocide. Delije reject the classification of genocide, asserting that all Bosniak men killed during or after the fall of Srebrenica were members of the 28th Division of the Army of BiH, thus combatants rather than civilians. This narrative not only denies the genocide but also introduces whataboutism, shifting focus by emphasising that 3,267 Serbs, including children, were killed in the broader Srebrenica region during the war, deaths for which, they claim, no one has been held accountable. Notably, this number is also not supported by credible, verifiable sources.

In general, the wars in the former Yugoslavia are repeatedly framed in Delije's communication as defensive and patriotic, with the implication that Serbs were solely defending their homeland against external aggression, further reinforcing a one-sided historical perspective aligned with nationalist and pro-Kremlin narratives.

Table 5: Examples of 'Historical Revisionism' Code

Excerpt (Translated from Serbian)	Date
"The pretext for this crime was a staged event in the village of Račak in Kosovo and Metohija, where a counter-terrorist operation against the so-called KLA units was declared a massacre of civilians."	24 March 2023
"Those who killed and burned were gifted a fake state by the West."	17 March 2024
"All people from Srebrenica who were killed in combat or executed after being captured perished as soldiers of the 28th Division of the Army of BiH from July 12 to 16, 1995, during the breakthrough of the column towards Tuzla, outside the city of Srebrenica and outside the "Srebrenica" protected zone."	11 July 2024

Source: Delije Sever, *Telegram channel*.

Disinformation and Misinformation

Under the code 'Disinformation and Misinformation' falls the sharing of misleading or false content to manipulate public perception. In the analysed material, 14 instances of disinformation and misinformation were identified, totalling 2,242 characters. No images were coded this way.

This code overlaps significantly with Historical Revisionism, as both involve the reframing or distorting of historical events, often through misleading or demonstrably false content. For instance, posts referring to the 'March Pogrom' and the NATO bombing of Serbia frequently present inflated or unverified casualty figures. Similarly, the Račak massacre is framed by Delije as an anti-terrorist operation, despite its recognition by international observers as a massacre of civilians. Another example includes the portrayal of the Battle of Košare, where Delije claim that NATO attempted a ground invasion of Serbian territory, which no credible sources support. The denial of the Srebrenica genocide, framed as the killing of exclusively military personnel from

⁴⁹ Isufi, Perparim. 2020. *Kosovo commemorates massacre that prompted NATO bombing*. *Balkan Insight*, 15 January 2020.

the Army of BiH, further illustrates the deliberate use of false or misleading content to shape public perception and rewrite historical narratives.

Disinformation and misinformation are also evident in Delije’s narratives regarding Ukraine. Their depiction of Ukraine as merely an extension of NATO is a misleading oversimplification, designed to provoke anti-NATO sentiment and align with Kremlin narratives. Similarly, the repeated assertion that Ukraine’s military is dominated by Nazis, particularly through references to the Azov Battalion, reflects a direct reproduction of Russian state propaganda. While the Azov Battalion did have associations with far-right and neo-Nazi groups in its early stages, its subsequent incorporation into the Ukrainian National Guard and attempts at rebranding reflect a far more nuanced reality. Labelling the entire Ukrainian military as Nazi is not only factually inaccurate but also a deliberate propaganda tactic. Additionally, Delije’s claim that the West is manipulating Ukraine lacks substantiated evidence and serves as a manipulative narrative itself, echoing broader Russian efforts to frame the West as an aggressor.

Similar patterns of disinformation appear in Delije’s rhetoric around Kosovo. They frequently assert that Serbs, particularly in the north of Kosovo, are victims of ongoing ethnic cleansing by Albanians, a claim not supported by credible evidence. Despite the lack of verification, this narrative is presented as an urgent and persistent threat. Such statements represent an apparent attempt to influence followers through emotionally charged disinformation, a strategy which is a common characteristic of Russian proxy groups on Telegram.

Table 6: Examples of ‘Disinformation and Misinformation’ Code

Excerpt (Translated from Serbian)	Date
“On March 24, 1999, the NATO alliance began its aggression against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro). The pretext for this crime was a falsified event in the village of Račak in Kosovo and Metohija, where an anti-terrorist operation against the so-called KLA units was declared a massacre of civilians. The real goal was to seize the territory of Kosovo and Metohija.”	24 March 2023
“Additionally, some gatherings in support of Ukrainians are taking place, which are an extension of NATO’s arm.”	12 July 2023
“It is obvious that the Albanians from Kosovo do not intend to stop the ethnic cleansing.”	8 August 2024

Source: Delije Sever, Telegram channel.

Fundraising for Pro-Russian Causes

‘Fundraising for Pro-Russian Causes’ is a code used to categorise content related to financial campaigns that support the Kremlin’s military or ideological objectives. This code appeared 11 times in the textual data and once as an image. The total character count for these entries was 828, while the single coded image accounted for 51,590 pixels, representing only 0.678% of the total coded image area.

The fundraising activities were straightforward and direct and consistently framed as support for their “suffering brothers in Donbass”. The methods of collecting donations varied. As previously mentioned, one approach involved movie screenings at the Russian House in Belgrade. Donations were collected either through ticket sales or via voluntary contributions at the entrance. On another occasion, funds were raised at a football match, where donation boxes were placed at the entrances and within the stadium. This initiative was an answer to a drone attack on Moscow and was framed as a gesture of solidarity. Additionally, Delije organised the sale of Serbian-Russian t-shirts, with all earnings designated for humanitarian aid in Donbass. The only image coded under this theme was a promotional poster inviting people to the screening of the Russian film ‘The Sky’ at the Russian House.

These fundraising efforts reinforce the narrative of a ‘suffering brotherly nation’ and reveal a layer of pro-Russian alignment within Delije’s activities. While the campaigns are framed as humanitarian aid, there is no transparency regarding the final destination of the collected funds. No reports or public disclosures were provided about where the donations were ultimately sent, leaving open the question of whether they were exclusively used for humanitarian purposes or even used at all. Notably, such fundraising initiatives are sporadic, with only four documented instances across the entire analysed period, with just one occurrence as a direct response to a current event. While the presence of this code supports the characterisation of Delije as a potential proxy group, its infrequency raises critical questions about the extent to which such activities can be considered a defining or consistent feature.

Table 7: Examples of ‘Fundraising for Pro-Russian Causes’ Code

Excerpt (Translated from Serbian)	Date
<i>“The least we can do is to reciprocate with a new aid campaign for Donbass! The first in a series of planned actions is the screening of the Russian film “Nebo” at the Russian House.”</i>	7 November 2022
<i>“Due to the enormous interest in Serbian-Russian t-shirts, we will also be selling them tomorrow at the stand in front of Sever, two hours before the start of the match. We remind you that the earnings from the t-shirts go to Donbass as humanitarian aid!”</i>	21 April 2023
<i>“Tonight, at the match, we are collecting aid for our brotherly nation in Donbass!”</i>	23 March 2024

Source: Delije Sever, Telegram channel.

Discussion

The presence of the analysed codes strongly suggests that Delije exhibit characteristics of a Russian proxy group. Given Delije’s influential position within Serbian society, their potential role in Russia’s hybrid warfare strategy in the largest country of the Western Balkans, where Russia holds significant geopolitical interests, should not be underestimated. However, it is essential to acknowledge that two codes, ‘Recruitment and Mobilisation’ and ‘Networked Amplification’, were entirely absent from the data. This raises questions about the extent to which Delije can be considered a full-fledged Telegram-based proxy group. Nonetheless, according to Pekmez et al., the absence of certain codes, particularly ‘Recruitment and Mobilisation’, is not uncommon across all proxy cases. While these elements are central to many proxy groups, their absence does not categorically exclude a group from being classified as one.⁵⁰ A similar argument applies to the missing ‘Networked Amplification’ code. Although many established proxy groups regularly share and amplify each other’s content, this behaviour is not standardised. Therefore, while these omissions complicate a definitive classification, they do not entirely negate the proxy characteristics that Delije does demonstrate.

Another limitation lies in the overall volume of proxy-related content. While Pekmez et al. emphasise that proxy groups are primarily focused on propaganda dissemination⁵¹, the presence of such characteristics within Delije’s Telegram activity appears relatively limited compared to more established proxy groups. Over the two-year history of the channel, with over 1,200 analysed posts, only 178 instances of proxy-related codes were identified, some of which co-occur across posts, i.e. 16 times. This suggests that while proxy elements are present, they do not dominate Delije’s communication. In other words, the primary function of the channel is not to revolve around serving as a pro-Russian proxy, but rather, these activities appear as secondary to club-related content.

⁵⁰ Pekmez, Hodžić, and Bilajac, *Proruski Telegram kanali*.

⁵¹ Pekmez, Hodžić, and Bilajac, *Proruski Telegram kanali*.

However, the framing techniques used by Delije, such as repeated anti-Western and anti-Journalist/NGO rhetoric, glorification of Russia, the adoption of historical revisionism, and the further alignment with soft power tools like the Russian House, mirror strategies observed in other Russian proxy groups. These communication patterns not only reflect ideological affinity but also reinforce Kremlin-aligned narratives within Serbian public discourse.

Although Delije's content may not fully align with all the defined characteristics of a typical Telegram-based proxy, the consistency and clarity of their alignment with Russian state interests, coupled with identifiable proxy characteristics, suggest that they may be best understood as a hybrid or rather *semi-proxy group*. Their activity contributes meaningfully to Russia's information goals in the Balkans, particularly in Serbia, even if they do not operate as a formal or entirely focused proxy entity.

Hence, the findings of this study align and also extend the existing literature on Serbian ultras groups and Russian proxy strategies. Scholars such as Đorđević, Scaturro⁵², and Djorić⁵³ have highlighted how Serbian ultras groups, including Delije, are deeply connected with political elites and other social structures. Other authors, such as Filipović⁵⁴ or Životić and Obradović⁵⁵, specifically situate Delije within Russia's broader information warfare, identifying them as a key proxy actor in hybrid warfare. This study redefines this claim by classifying Delije as a *semi-proxy group*. While Delije express pro-Russian sentiment and shares Kremlin-aligned narratives, this is not the central focus of their online presence. Their primary identity remains rooted in football support, with their role as a proxy actor functioning in a supplementary, but for Russia strategically significant capacity, as Delije are one of the most influential actors in Serbia. This semi-proxy classification is further supported by findings from scholars like Chivvis⁵⁶ and Karar⁵⁷, who emphasise how Russia's hybrid warfare relies on proxies that can shape narratives on platforms like Telegram. While Delije do not engage in direct mobilisation or networking with other pro-Russian Telegram channels, their ideological alignment and symbolic actions clearly contribute to the broader Russian disinformation and informational operations.

Conclusion

This study examined the online communication of Delije, one of the most influential ultras groups in Serbia, in order to assess their alignment with Russian proxy group characteristics on Telegram. Using a deductive content analysis based on the framework of Khan and Pekmez et al.⁵⁸, eight proxy codes were applied to over 1200 posts between September 2022 and January 2025. The findings show that Delije consistently reproduce anti-Western rhetoric, pro-Russian

⁵² Đorđević and Scaturro, *Dangerous games*.

⁵³ Djorić, *Violent extremism and sports in the Western Balkans*.

⁵⁴ Filipović, Ljubomir. 2024. [Serbian or Russian stadiums? The story of football, politics, and organized Crime in Serbia](#). *Center for Western Balkans Studies*, 20 February 2024.

⁵⁵ Životić and Obradović, *Telegram as a specific playground*.

⁵⁶ Chivvis, Christopher S. 2017. *Understanding Russian "hybrid warfare" and what can be done about it*. Santa Monica: RAND Corporation.

⁵⁷ Karar, Irem Güldem. 2024. *Information warfare in the Balkans: The role of Serbia and the comparative analysis of Russia and the United States*, in *4th International Balkan Studies Congress proceedings*, edited by Abdula, Sevba, and Elif R. Nazim. Skopje: IDEFE Publications, 237-252.

⁵⁸ Pekmez, Hodžić, and Bilajac, *Proruski Telegram kanali*; Khan, *Echoes of Moscow*

themes, and hostility toward NGOs and journalists. However, other defining proxy features, most notably recruitment and networked amplification, were absent.

Aside from political content, it should be noted that the majority of posts on Delije's Telegram channel revolve around Red Star and football-related content, with somewhat fewer posts dedicated to basketball. This focus highlights the core purpose of the channel, which is aimed at supporting Red Star and engaging with its fan base.

On this basis, the article introduces the concept of a semi-proxy group: an actor whose primary identity lies elsewhere (football fandom) but which nonetheless reinforces Kremlin-aligned narratives in ways that extend Russia's influence, even without formal coordination. By contrast, full proxy groups, such as "the Night Wolves"⁵⁹ or Telegram group "Dejan Berić"⁶⁰, disseminate Russian propaganda as their central activity and coordinate across networks.

This distinction addresses a key definitional issue. Delije are not simply nationalists whose worldview happens to overlap with Russia's. Their consistent reproduction of Kremlin-style frames goes beyond generic anti-Western discourse and systematically reinforces Russia's preferred narratives in the information space. At the same time, the absence of recruitment and coordination with other Telegram pro-Russian groups suggests that their role is limited compared to dedicated proxy channels.

This argument builds directly on Đorđević's observation that Delije's potency allows them to extend their influence beyond football. Đorđević's study shows how this credibility has been instrumentalised on the ground, for example, through opposition to LGBT groups⁶¹, and this study extends the lens to digital spaces, demonstrating that the same ideological repertoire is now reproduced in ways that systematically reinforce Kremlin-aligned frames.

The article's contribution lies in three areas. First, it extends research on ultras by demonstrating how football fan groups can function as vectors of geopolitical messaging online. Second, it challenges binary understandings of proxy actors by introducing a "semi-proxy" category. Third, it shows that Russian hybrid warfare can gain traction not only through purpose-built proxies but also through culturally embedded groups whose pre-existing nationalist narratives overlap with and inadvertently reinforce Kremlin interests.

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⁵⁹ Kleiner, Jan / Gregor, Miloš, and Petra Mlejnková. 2023. The night wolves: Evidence of Russian sharp power and propaganda from the Victory Roads' itinerary. *Problems of Post-Communism* 71(2), 145-155.

⁶⁰ Pekmez, Hodžić, and Bilajac, *Proruski Telegram kanali*.

⁶¹ Đorđević, *The Role Of Red Star*.

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