

The Politicization of the Eurovision Song Contest: The Case of Ukraine

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Abstract: *The 66th Eurovision Song Contest held in Turin, Italy, began with a special performance of John Lennon's song "Give Peace a Chance," a powerful symbolic message addressing the current war on European soil. There has been an ongoing debate regarding not merely this act, but over the broader politicization of the Song Contest. Some critics argue that wider socio-political events have such a powerful impact to the extent of determining the winners of the show, which is precisely what this essay investigates. Through the case study of Ukraine, which has used the ESC stage as an exhibition of its cultural and ethnic identity, as well as an arena of soft power, the essay explicates the three key events in Ukrainian Eurovision Song Contest history—its three wins (2004, 2016, and 2022).*

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Introduction

From catapulting numerous musical acts to worldwide stardom, including the Swedish pop group ABBA—known for their *Waterloo* performance—and Céline Dion, the winning entry for Sweden in 1988, to reaching an audience of more than 200 million viewers around the world, the Eurovision Song Contest (ESC) has become an international music festival sensation and a marvel of technological achievement in the live broadcasting industry. The ESC draws its plentiful audience from more than 40 participating countries and encompasses the entirety of the European continent as well as a few nations from Africa, the Middle East, and, as of 2015, the “Down Under” (Huges, 2022). The criteria as to who qualifies as an eligible participant in the contest come from the standards upheld by the European Broadcasting Union (EBU), the exclusive organizer and owner of the ESC, which pertain to either being a member of the European Broadcasting Area (EBA), as determined by the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), or by being a member of the Council of Europe (European Broadcasting Union: Operating Eurovision and Euroradio, n.d.). Thus, as the EBU is made up of 56 member countries and 20 associate countries, tied together with the Council of Europe membership—which includes Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan—we arrive at the expanded membership of the EBA (60 countries) (European Broadcasting Union, n.d.). This is not to say that all of the eligible countries have utilized their status to participate in what some refer to as the biggest party night of the year, as we will find out later that nation-state politics play an active role in who participates and when.

Through discourse analysis of its performances, as well as the contextualization of the broader socio-political events taking place on the local and regional level—aided by desk analysis—the essay seeks to advance our understanding of the importance of political, social, and economic events on the outcomes of the ESC. The main research and theoretical approaches used are qualitative ones, as the theories of social constructivism and poststructuralism help us better understand these performative events.

The competition had very modest beginnings with highly ambitious intentions. It is said that the originator and founder of Europe’s popular show was Marcel Bezençon, the director of the EBU from 1954 to 1970, and it was in 1955 when he conceived the idea for the ESC, based on Italy’s Sanremo Music Festival. Concurrently, the synonym for ESC—Eurovision—was associated with the set of TV shows broadcasted across Western Europe, formerly known as the “European Television Season” (Jaquin, 2004). As Bezençon saw it as useful to promote television as a medium in a time when the technical capabilities were proliferating and costs of technology declining, and as Europe wanted to turn the page of the book called World War II and its consequences, the ESC became one of the two major projects of the EBU (the other was Eurovision but for amateur performers) (Jaquin, 2004). Today, besides the glass microphone trophy, in honoring the founder, delegations may win the so-called Marcel Bezençon Awards including the Press Award, the Artistic Award, as well as the Composer Award (Eurovision Song Contest, n.d.).

The Eurovision Song Contest in the Post-Cold War Context

Talking about the winners, the process of deciding on the winning entry has changed over the years, as well, and has taken on a significantly more democratic and participatory character, given the ability of European citizens to directly cast their votes and, on an equal footing with the professional jury, decide on the winning performance (Eurovision Song Contest, n.d.). Originally, the voting was conducted in secret and the national jury awarded only 2 points to the performance of their liking (Eurovision World, 2022), typically basing their decision on objective criteria regarding the act's vocal capabilities, stage performance, originality, and the overall impression regarding the act (Spence, 2013). Despite these benchmarks, it soon became clear that great regional bias in the point-award system persisted; thus, the EBU introduced public voting, also known as televoting, in 1997, although not in every country (Eurovision World, 2022). Over time, televoting gained importance as the main method of choosing the winning act, representing the exclusive method from 1998 to 2000. However, jury voting made its comeback and, from 2009, the weight has been split equally between jury and televoting in determining the outcome of the ESC (Eurovision World, 2022). Today, the jury awards points from 1-8, as well as 10 and 12 points to their chosen top 10 acts, with the public doing the same for their favorite performances, thereby addressing what some refer to as the democratic deficit of the ESC, which has come to haunt some of the European institutions (Gonzalez, 2022).

Nevertheless, there are still those voices who loudly assert that Eurovision is highly politically motivated, to the extent of politics influencing the outcome—the winner. Some point to the renowned “Big Five” who are automatically qualified for the finals, without having to go through the semi-final evenings which were introduced as a way of managing the ever-increasing number of participating countries in 2004 (Motschenbacher, 2016). Due to the financial burden the “Big Five” carry, they have earned this prestigious position and, originally, those countries were France, Germany, Spain, and the UK, with the addition of Italy in 2011 after its hiatus of 14 years (Motschenbacher, 2016). On the other hand, the politicization of the event is witnessed in the so-called bloc voting—a phenomenon whereby geographically, culturally, and linguistically proximate nations favor each other when distributing points, thereby forming voting blocs, especially in the televote. For example, the dominant blocs are the Nordic countries, Eastern European countries, the Balkans, the Cypriot-Greek “alliance,” as well as Iberia and Germany (Kawala, 2019; Price, 2020). In fact, a study by Garcia and Tanase (2013) found high degrees of cultural affinity between blocs of states, but also the importance of the economic situation in Europe, making a connection between economic crisis and bailouts received from countries and the subsequent voting patterns (García & Tanase, 2013). It is important to mention, however, that this perceived bias in voting is felt more in televoting than in jury votes, as showcased by Price, 2020.

Whilst some are primed to voting patterns, others point to the high-jacking of the event for the dissemination of political messages, predominantly seen in the displays of certain flags—especially those of internationally unrecognized states and regions—which goes against the aspired “apolitical” character of the show, as per the EBU. At the crux of its rules, the EBU pronounces that “the ESC is a non-political event” and that all participants have to adhere to

this as well as provide for such an atmosphere whilst acting in non-accordance could result in fines or, ultimately, disqualification from the ESC or the EBU as a whole, as was the case with Belarus and its broadcaster in 2021 (European Broadcasting Union, 2021; Eurovision Song Contest, 2021). How true and widely applicable the aforementioned rule is, in reality, is highly contested, considering that the show itself was a politically-motivated one in its origins, considering the idea of the EBU to organize an event to bring together the various European audiences as well as promote a common European identity, as noted by (Motschenbacher, 2016).

They argue that, whilst the EU and the Schengen area facilitated the freedom of capital, goods and services, and people—thereby bridging the administrative and geographical boundaries in Europe—the ESC worked on bringing about a sense of “Europeanness,” modernism, cosmopolitanism, human rights, and cultural expression juxtaposed to the sensed conservatism stemming from the notion of a white, Christian Europe with pronounced boundaries (Motschenbacher, 2016). The ways in which these “values” are brought about through discourse formation and identity construction will be addressed in the continuation of this paper, as well as the debate over the politicization of the ESC, whilst in the last segment, the case of Ukraine and the manifestations of its soft power, cultural diplomacy, and strong symbolism aired during Eurovision are addressed.

Art and Politics of the Eurovision Song Contest

Upon the investigation of political incidents, it is evident that such happen almost on an annual basis and have long-standing roots dating to the inception of the competition and, as some argue, this is bound to transpire considering that the participants are representatives from different nation-states who, outside of this context, have entirely misaligned foreign policies and even hostile relations. On top of this, and as the Director-General of the EBU says, it is difficult to disentangle broader political and happenings of other nature from musical and visual performances at the ESC, which are known to reflect the prevailing and current developments not merely on the European continent but those from across the globe (Fortuna, 2022). At the ESC held in Zagreb in 1990—which was the first time the competition was held in Eastern Europe, especially important given the prevailing liberal-communist divide—the entry from the United Kingdom, “Give a Little Love Back To The World” performed by Emma Booth, was a wake-up call to humanity regarding its negative behavior for the environment (Eurovision Song Contest Wiki, n.d.). However, it is not these issues that become contentious as much as nation-state politics do and chiefly those with underlying issues of state secession and ethnic minorities’ self-determination.

In light of this, the EBU interjected with fines and disqualifications multiple times. Recently, the Icelandic broadcaster was financially sanctioned in 2019 after the delegation from Iceland unfurled the Palestinian flag during the counting of the votes (Megginson, 2022). Before that, in 2009, the delegation from Georgia was warned about its symbolic lyrics and the title of their song “We Don’t Wanna Put In,” which constituted a play on words for the then-Prime Minister of Russia, Vladimir Putin, and ultimately banned from the competition for disobeying to adapt

to the rules (Holmwood, 2009). Of course, the more relevant reason was that the Georgian song was a reflection of the majority will of Georgians and the resentment of the Russian invasion of their sovereign territory less than a year before the competition (Dickinson, 2021). Staying in the region, Armenia and Azerbaijan have had a long history of not just territorial disputes but disputes over awarding points at the ESC, as well. In 2009, the government of Azerbaijan, with an existing ill repute regarding human rights and democracy, brought their citizen to questioning as to why he had voted for Armenia, accusing him of a national security risk and calling him a shame to the Azeris as a nation (Anush, 2009). Furthermore, on other two occasions, the EBU had to react to the actions of Armenian representatives: in 2015 it requested the Armenian entry to change the name of its song from “Don’t Deny” to “Face the Shadow,” as it was warned that the first name had accusatory political undertones towards Turkey regarding the Turkish denial of the Armenian genocide during World War I committed by the Ottoman Empire (Granger, 2015; Suny, 2021); and in 2016 for displaying the flag of the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh (officially part of Azerbaijan with strong ethnic ties to Armenia) (The Associated Press, 2016).

The EBU has reacted in a few cases pertaining to the issues of human rights and fundamental freedoms. As mentioned above, the authority disqualified the Belarusian act after the former refused to change its entry which mocked the protesters of the autocratic Lukashenko regime and the police state in that country (Kelly, 2021). However, as politics play out both ways at the ESC, some member countries unilaterally choose to withdraw from the competition—at least for some time and for reasons of clashing values. Due to the highly hostile and contentious issues across the Middle East, some Arab countries like Morocco and Tunisia have refused to share the stage, particularly with the Israeli delegations over the years (O'Connor, 2010), whilst the broadcast was interrupted ‘for technical reasons’ by the Jordanian broadcaster when it was obvious that Israel was to be the winner of the 1978 ESC (Motschenbacher, 2016). On the other hand, several conservative countries protested the increased visibility of LGBTQ paraphernalia and the community itself, reaching the peak of discontent in 2014 after the Austrian Conchita Wurst, a drag persona, took the first spot, resulting in Turkey’s lasting departure from the show (Tobin, 2022).

Interestingly enough, Wurst took the ESC award at the time of a growing anti-LGBTQ rhetoric spreading across the European continent; most notably the infamous “anti-gay” law in Russia, leading some to debate whether Wurst’s win was a purposeful “dust in the eyes” to such governments from those liberal ones (Associated Press, 2013). At this point, we have established that political, ethnic, and issues over gender and sexual orientation permeate the ESC; however, the hypothesis of this essay pertains not merely to a clear-cut “Yes” or “No” to whether the show is political, but also whether the wider socio-political developments have an impact on the Song Contest. Through a qualitative approach and desk analysis, with a social constructivist and poststructuralist theoretical framework, this essay analyses the potential correlations between ESC performances, voting outcomes, as well as political, social, and economic events in Europe.

Participation of Ukraine at the Eurovision Song Contest in the New Millenium

Over the last few decades, a sizable number of scholars have emerged with a particular interest in studying the Eurovision Song Contest, producing a body of academic research and scholarly articles, including several books encompassing the entire history of the show. Some of the prominent titles include *Empire of Song: Europe and Nation in the Eurovision Song Contest* (Tragaki, 2013); *Performing the 'New' Europe: Identities, Feelings, and Politics in the Eurovision Song Contest* (Fricker and Gluhovic, 2013); *Eurovision and Australia: Interdisciplinary Perspectives from Down Under* (Hay and Carniel, 2019), and many others. In fact, annual conferences have been held on the ESC ever since 2018, discussing various pertinent topics from gender identity, sexual orientation and queer politics, nationalism, and urban development, to the use of language (Eurovisions, 2018). Mentioned above was the study by Garcia and Tanase (2013) with a quantitative approach to the ESC, which seems to be the entry point for authors on such a topic. However, post-materialist and critical approaches have dominated the field, offering rich findings by focusing on identity (re)creation, as well as discourse analysis; that is, the relationship between identity and language and language as a discursive structure. Together with this, the notions of performativity and normativity are discussed, in terms of their impact on identity construction. Here, we can mention the works *Language, Normativity and Europeanisation: Discursive Evidence from the Eurovision Song Contest* by Motschenbacher (2016), and a collection of articles in *Eurovisions: Identity and The International Politics of the ESC Since 1956* (Kalman et al., 2019).

However, the approach of this essay will be more so on the contextual socio-political backdrop against which performances are crafted and acts awarded with high rankings, as this seems to be rather omitted from the existing body of research. As a country with its debut at the ESC in 2003, Ukraine has managed to bring home no less than three victories and achieve one of the most successful track records at the show, as it never failed to qualify for the Grand Final evening (Eurovision Song Contest, n.d.). The first monumental Ukrainian appearance was at the 2004 ESC in Istanbul. The bold act of Ruslana Lyzhychko incorporated elements of the so-called “wild folk” of Ukrainian ethnic folklore together with a blend of contemporary sound, thus appealing to the more modern western audience (Pavlyshyn, 2019). In her performance, the usage of symbols of fire and lightning, altogether with fur and leather as costumes, gave the song a highly “dangerous” outlook, with many comparing it to an “Amazonian” fiery and powerful female superhero able to “fend for herself” (Baker, 2022). Certainly, the west European audience was able to reimagine what a Ukrainian woman looked like; thereby, we can assume that this presentation of Ruslana’s shifted the collective imagination of millions across Europe. It is interesting to note that the source of visual and musical inspiration for Ruslana is the Ukrainian Hutsuls, a subethnic group living in the western parts of the country, who stood as the last conquered people by the USSR of the former Republics (Baker, 2022).

The win and a record-breaking number of points did not represent Ruslana’s culmination in the fight for Ukraine. Approaching the end of 2004, just months after Ruslana’s victory, Ukraine saw a slew of internal instability and protests across the country which saw their peak in Kyiv, the capital. Namely, as the presidential run-offs resulted in a marginal victory of a more

Russian-oriented and Russian-backed candidate, Viktor Yanukovich, which the opposition leader and his supporters deemed as fraudulent, en masse protests erupted demanding for the results to be annulled (Encyclopedia Britannica Authors, 2022). Indeed, the difference between the two Viktors (one pro-Russian and one pro-European), was a mere 3% of the votes in the second run-offs, with observers' allegations of voter fraud, voter intimidation, as well as physical assaults present at the ballot boxes (Quinn-Judge & Zarakhovich, 2004). Less than a month after this, the Ukrainian Supreme Court ordered a new electoral standoff between Yanukovich and Yushchenko and, this time around, in what millions of Ukrainians celebrated as a "democratic triumph in a country . . . that only 13 years ago emerged from the Soviet Union," the results favored Yushchenko with a clear 7% ahead of Yanukovich (Chivers, 2004; Myers, 2004). In an unprecedented event for this post-Communist state, one of its main bodies, the Supreme Court, had managed to assert itself as an independent institution, although not entirely releasing itself from the clasp of bribery and corruption; however, this was enough to show Europe—which supported the overturning of previous fraudulent elections—that democracy is, indeed, possible in Ukraine.

During the protests, dubbed the "Orange Revolution" after Yushchenko's campaign color, numerous Ukrainian musicians and artists offered their support at the Independence Square in Kyiv—including Ruslana. The "Xena Warrior Princess," who brought Eurovision to Ukraine in 2005—at the time when Ukraine was still unstable as Yushchenko had tough times forming his cabinet—was a staunch supporter of the protests, even proclaiming a hunger strike after Yanukovich's rigged election (McLaughlin, 2017). She, furthermore, went on to pursue a political career under the Yushchenko mandate in the Ukrainian Parliament as a deputy, serving there rather shortly before she resigned under the pretext that the government did not deliver what the protestors were fighting for—bringing Ukraine closer to the West, among other things (McLaughlin, 2017). Ruslana's activism, unlike her official political career, continued far into the 2010s, following incessant political upheaval and instability, as well as the 2014 Russian invasion of Crimea (Encyclopedia Britannica Authors, 2022). Ruslana went on to release a song in 2013 vividly portraying the subsequent Euromaidan protests, following Yanukovich's turnaround in EU discussions and failure to sign the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement which was to bring these two entities closer together and the latter farther from Russia (Emmott, 2014). Besides addressing the Atlantic Council in 2014 in a moving speech about the plight and suffering of Ukrainians in Crimea, her win in 2004 not only set Kyiv as the capital of Europe for a night in 2005 but also allowed the Ukrainian delegation—a hip hop duo known as GreenJolly—to deliver yet another powerful protestors' anthem at the ESC called "Together we are many" (Baker, 2022).

The second pivotal moment in the ESC history of Ukraine came right after the Russian invasion of this sovereign, internationally recognized, independent country. The political situation got increasingly heated in the country and politicians fumbled to form governments, stay true to their promises, and manage the increased regional desire for autonomy (especially in the eastern, Russian-majority-speaking parts of Ukraine) (Encyclopedia Britannica Authors, 2022). As the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) expressed its worries over a Russian military build-up near the eastern borders of Ukraine, Russia quickly seized the opportunity to

send armed professionals to Simferopol and Sevastopol in what was to result in the eventual annexation of this peninsula (Encyclopedia Britannica Authors, 2022). Whilst Russia began to economically exhaust Ukraine through higher gas prices (Reuters, 2014), Ukrainians continued to support their sovereignty and independence by all means possible. Already, in 2016, at the ESC in Stockholm, Ukraine sent Susana Alimivna Jamaladinova, also known as Jamala, a descendant of the Crimean Tatars (Freeman, 2016). In an emotional delivery of her song—with parts in English as well as consisting of a locally-popular Crimean folk song “Ey Güzel Qırım” longing for Crimea—Jamala won the hearts of Europeans, placing first at the ESC 2016 (Eurovision World, n.d; Haplin, 2016). The EBU decided not to qualify the song as overtly political as it claimed the song to be more about “historical occurrence” and not current political events—a rather dubious explanation (Megginson, 2022).

Jamala’s win meant that the 2017 ESC was to be held in Kyiv and, following the Russian invasion and illegal annexation of Crimea, Ukraine set itself on a mission to punish all those in favor of Putin’s regime, thus turning the ESC stage from a musical one into one of soft power. Precisely, under Ukraine’s new laws—which made it illegal to enter Crimea from a non-Ukrainian entry point—all those who entered this occupied area were put on a list of potential national security hazards by the Ukrainian Security Service (SBU) (Baker, 2022). No exceptions were to be made, including the Russian ESC representative, Julia Samoilova, who toured Crimea, resulting in a travel ban, but also a ban to perform at the 2017 ESC (Ellis-Petersen, 2017). Despite the protests by the EBU and Russia, who decided to pull out from the competition and the EBU altogether (Bundel, 2022), the Ukrainian authorities weighed in on their rule, eventually blocking their own entrant, Maruv, from the 2019 Song Contest, as it was confirmed that she toured Russia and entered Crimea in the mentioned “illegal” way (Subramanian, 2022). Fast forward to today, the decision of the EBU to ban Russia from competing in this year’s show was from the get-go political, but not automatically wrong. Since Russia has launched a full-scale military invasion on another sovereign country, targeted and executed civilians, and disrupted millions from their homes—with considerable economic detriment—it would have served no good to have it included in a lightweight singing competition anyway (European Broadcasting Union, 2022). The only surprising event at the 2022 ESC in Turin, Italy, was that Ukraine, despite all challenges it is facing at the moment, managed to send its representatives—and win. The Kalush Orchestra, employing a well-known formula of ethnopop placed first with considerable televote support, having performed their song “Stefania,” which, instead of an ode to a band member’s mother, became associated with the mother of all Ukrainians, their home country (Sheftalovich, 2022).

Now, regarding the influence of politics on winning outcomes, what can be observed by analyzing the points system is that Russia was not being punished with low rankings at the ESC for its aggressive and illegal actions. In 2015, although it invaded Ukraine only a year prior, Russia placed at a high second spot, losing out only to Sweden’s top hit “Heroes” (Eurovision World, n.d.). Moreover, in 2016, when Jamala was victorious, Russia nevertheless managed to score itself a high spot on the leaderboard, placing third, receiving only around 40 points less than Ukraine. Coming back to the competition in 2019, Russia achieved a high third spot yet again (Eurovision World, n.d.). There are certain caveats, however. Although Russia achieved

high placements, the televote pushed Russia above what it would've placed had only the jury votes been counted. As countries' publics cannot vote for themselves, this means that Russian entries enjoyed broad popular support throughout Europe. Lastly, regarding this year's Ukrainian win, it cannot be said that the ESC was entirely political. The points from the jury placed Ukraine 4th, a long 100-point distance away from the first spot; however, due to the increased sympathy towards Ukraine—and a swelling Ukrainian diaspora, some might argue—Ukraine received an overwhelming 439 points from the televote, result in its victory (Eurovision World, n.d.).

Conclusion

The Eurovision Song Contest is inherently political. At an event where the main actors are sent from different nation-states to compete against each other, their performances, including lyrics, visual cues, costumes, and other elements are bound to get embroiled in politics. However, the contentious point is not merely the fact that such a contest is political. The main question, thus, turns into observing whether and in which way the broader socio-political events influence delegations' performances and whether they have the power to produce an increased sentiment of compassion and sympathy in the European audience. Against the almost 20-years-long period of analysis of the Ukrainian acts at the ESC, the answer to this question becomes increasingly complex and requires a nuanced answer. In its crux, Ukraine has employed its ESC performances to a high extent in a manner that would exhibit its rich ethnic and cultural background; especially a distinct, non-Russian, non-post-Soviet one. The assertion of a separate and vivid Ukrainian identity, in the eyes of a somewhat stubborn and lethargic European audience, was one of the main goals of Ukraine. Furthermore, as the country slid back into political and civil turmoil, its performances became increasingly political, as well. From Jamala's "1994" to Kalush Orchestra's song about the mother Stefania, the Ukrainian entries held potent emotional—and political—symbolic messages. What's more, Ukraine used the advantage of holding the 2017 ESC in Kyiv as a moment to assert its soft power vis-à-vis its aggressive neighbor, Russia, thereby barring the entry of the Russian participant. However, one thing is for sure. Besides using the ESC stage for promoting the Ukrainian cultural and ethnic identity, the ESC, especially the professional jury, did not award Ukraine its well-deserved wins merely due to a specific political crisis it might have been going through at the time. Therefore, the hypothesis that Ukraine has achieved its success as a gesture of sympathy and exclusively due to the unfavorable political situation the country is in cannot be upheld. This is confirmed by its latest victory in Turin, Italy, where the professional jury would have placed Ukraine at the lower 4th spot.

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