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Spotlighting Eurovision as a political stage: Exploring how Turkey and Ukraine use the ESC to further their political agendas

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Introduction

Beginning in 1956, The Eurovision Song Contest is the longest running television musical competition (Kivak, 2024). Not only does it showcase the talents of musical artists across Europe, but it is also a celebration of culture and a platform for countries to showcase their unique identities. By framing the contest in this context, it transcends simple entertainment, serving as a powerful tool for nations to further their political agendas. This essay will argue that the ESC can be strategically utilised by countries and individuals in order to promote their political interests and spotlight social issues through both performance and public discourse. By analysing Turkey's 2003 win and both Ukraine's 2005 and 2016 entries, an understanding of how music intersects with politics and how the contest acts as a communication device for these nations to share their cultural narratives can be arrived at. These performances provide a stage for countries to showcase their Europeaness, critique their own country's politics and highlight injustices committed by other nations.

History of Turkey's relationship with the EU and Eurovision

Turkey's inability to join the European Union after decades of trying represents their ongoing struggle in achieving full acceptance within Europe, leading the country to look towards the Eurovision Song Contest to help bridge this gap. Having first applied to be a part of the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1987, Turkey holds the record for the longest wait for EU membership (Liboreiro, 2023). Since this date, 16 countries have successfully joined the European Union (Liboreiro, 2023). Although an attempt at transitioning to a more Westernised Turkey under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's leadership (which included the use of Latin-script alphabet) and being declared a candidate for the EU in 1999, this has not been enough to join the Union (Liboreiro, 2023). Additionally, Turkey has accepted over 2,000 pieces of legislation in multiple areas in order to meet the standards of the EU (Bozkir, 2015). However, progress toward joining has halted in recent years, with Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the current President of Turkey, attempting to distance the country further and further from the West (Liboreiro, 2023). In regard to the ESC, Turkey's on-and-off participation in the contest since 1975 reflects their tumultuous relationship with European identity. The European Union plays an important role in the perception of countries in relation to

“identity, communication and capital” (Christensen & Christensen, 2008, p. 157). Since the 1990s, the perception that the EU represents the ideal state of ‘Europeanness’ has grown and led to discussions surrounding Turkey’s 2003 entry and how the country showcased their unique European identity (M. Christensen & Christensen, 2008). When selecting the representative for the contest, Turkey often focuses on a diverse range of aspects such as the political, cultural and visual elements, yet the media, especially towards countries from the Eastern Bloc, Greece and Turkey, often deem these countries as inferior to other European nations (Christensen & Christensen, 2008). As a result, the media commentary surrounding Turkey’s 2003 win often revolves around their ability to balance between Western influences and their idealised cultural heritage linked to the Middle East (M. Christensen & Christensen, 2008).

Turkey’s 2003 entry *Everyway That I Can*, was commissioned directly to Sertab Erener (the performer) by Türkiye Radyo ve Televizyon Kurumu (TRT), a Turkish broadcaster, in pursuit of gaining success (M. Christensen & Christensen, 2008). The lyrics “Every way that I can. I’ll try to make you love me again” can be interpreted as Turkey declaring their dedication to Europe and their willingness to do what it takes in order to join the EU. During this part of the song, Erener sings directly into the camera, connecting with the audience and sending a clear and direct message to the public watching at home. This gaze represents Turkey’s desperation for the acceptance of the European Union and Erener deliberately points towards the camera on multiple occasions making sure Europe knows that this message is for them. Both of these factors, in addition to her pained facial expressions and Erener’s emotive vocal style, add a vulnerability to her performance that mimics the emotions of Turkey and their determination to gain acceptance from Europe.

The fact that Turkey deliberately chose to sing this song in English broadened the appeal and allowed for more people to be able to understand the messaging, strengthening the connection with the public. The use of English also helps to change perspectives of Turkey, helping them to appear more ‘modern’ and Westernised which strengthened its case for EU membership. However, some media outlets at the time were against the use of English, and Member of Parliament Suat Kiliç even requested a parliamentary inquiry into this matter (Christensen & Christensen, 2008).

In addition to using English to appear more Western, the song also combines traditional music from Turkey with pop elements from Western culture. The melody has similarities to Turkish *makams* with its “repeated phrase in the lower half of the octave” and the gradual “expanding [of] the range upward in successive phrases” (Solomon, 2007, 137). This hybrid style sets it apart from other entries from the same year, and appeals to audiences outside Turkey (Solomon, 2007, 137). This is further reinforced by the costumes, as they appear both westernised yet contain Turkish embellishments that keep them rooted within their culture.

The results and feedback of this entry represents the ongoing political dynamics that continue to occur post-performance. Within Turkish media, the Greek and Cypriot voters were seen as a major factor that helped contribute to the win (Christensen & Christensen, 2008). Some perceived these votes to have been given as a reward from Cyprus and Greece to Turkey for opening their borders to Greek-Cypriots (M. Christensen & Christensen, 2008). This highlights how the song contest can reflect and reward recent political developments. In addition to this, the Turkish parliament in

2003 voted against allowing the United States to use their military bases to attack Iraq (Solomon, 2007). Although this decision negatively impacted Turkey for a multitude of reasons, including not receiving \$6 billion worth of aid, the rejection of American culture and 'bullying tactics' aligned with what many fans associated with the Eurovision Song Contest (Solomon, 2007, 138). Russia, who came third that year, and the United Kingdom, which received zero points, both believed that Turkey's result was due to them being rewarded by other countries for not aiding the United States (Heller, 2007). Therefore, Turkey's 2003 win can be viewed not just through a musical lens, but also from a political and cultural standpoint. By using the competition to push the perception of them as westernised, Turkey strategically attempted to integrate themselves with European values in a push to join the EU. Their win also showcases how other countries are able to promote their political interests by awarding votes to competitors who support their beliefs.

Ukraine and a critique on their own Government

Furthermore, the Eurovision Song Contest can be used as a platform for nations to voice dissatisfaction with their country and critique their current government, urging for change. After Ukrainian singer Ruslana Lyzhychko won in 2003 with her song *Wild Dances*, she became involved with the Orange Revolution. Although her performance is not seen to be inherently political or directly address the Orange Revolution, just two years later Ukraine would send Greenjolly with their song *Razom Nas Bahato*, a song explicitly about this cause (Hansen, et al. 2019). The Orange Revolution was a series of protests after the results for an election were fixed for the current prime minister at the time, Viktor Yanukovych (Wilson, 2006). Yanukovych was backed by authorities who had been in power since the fall of the USSR, and who were determined to maintain this control (Wilson, 2006). His opposition was Viktor Yushchenko, preferred by the West with a positive image – the first genuine challenger to this power structure (Wilson, 2006).

The 2005 entry was in favour of Yushchenko, representing the Orange Revolution with a rap style anthem (Hansen, et al. 2019). The Eurovision Broadcasting Union initially rejected this song due to its highly political lyrics that referenced Yushchenko directly such as, "Yushchenko – yes!" and "that's our president! Yes, yes," were changed to more broad sentiments – "we believe – Yes" and "I know we're going to win/conquer – Yes, yes" (Hansen, et al. 2019). These changes allowed for Greenjolly to enter the competition whilst also preserving the messaging of the song. The title, translated to 'Together We Are Many,' instils a sense of hope and inspiration within audiences, urging them to work together to illicit social change. It is repeated in eight different languages throughout the duration of the song, reflecting the themes of unity in addition to extending the reach of the song to multiple nations.

Additionally, Greenjolly continued to showcase aspects of the Orange Revolution within their performance through costuming and symbolic imagery (Hansen, et al. 2019). The drummer of the band wore a bright orange shirt, an obvious reference to the revolution of the same name. Another form of clothing that stands out is the keyboarder's jacket with "La Revolución Pací fi ca," translated to "the peaceful Revolution," on the back (Hansen, et al. 2019). The break dancers dance in unison, creating a visual representation of the joint solidarity and the power gained from working together. Right before the climax of the song, the chains on their wrists are broken, highlighting the strength gained from the collective action of the Orange

Revolution and the freedom from oppression the Ukrainian people sought. The song was deliberately chosen to reflect the nation from a Western Ukrainian perspective, in an attempt to brand itself as a progressive country whose values align with that of Western Europe (Hansen, et al. 2019). However, *Razom Nas Bahato* finished 19th in the competition, with the only ex-USSR points being received from Moldova and Russia, highlighting the lack of support given to Ukraine by other European countries.

Ukraine and Historical Injustice

On the other hand, rather than just critiquing their own country, participants can use Eurovision to spotlight the historical and political injustices they have faced at the hands of other nations. Cultural diplomacy and soft power strategies can be employed in order to control ideas surrounding which countries are included and excluded from Europe (Hansen, et al. 2019). An example of this is Ukraine's 2016 entry, *1944*, performed by Jamala, which aimed to exclude Russia from European identity by highlighting their historical oppression at the hands of Russia. Being an ethnic Tatar, the song, which tells the story of Jamala's great-grandmother and the forced deportation of other Tatars from Crimea by the Soviet Union in World War II, attempts to showcase the suffering of her people whilst also highlighting current issues (Shea, 2016). Although there were calls from within Russia to disqualify the song, this did not occur due to it not explicitly naming a historical event, and to the deliberately ambiguous lyrics, though the title does situate it during World War II (Hansen, et al. 2019).

Through its simple staging, the emphasis of the song lies with the lyrics and emotional performance by Jamala. The minimalist background of a golden tree, which represents resilience, amplifies the emotional messaging intended by Jamala. Not shying away from highlighting the violence and destruction towards her people, lyrics such as "they kill you all and say we're not guilty," aim to confront the audience and paint Russia in a negative light. Additionally, the voting showcases the political nature of the ESC as the Russian and Ukraine jury gave each other zero points, whilst the televotes awarded each other ten and twelve points respectively (Hansen, et al. 2019), highlighting the tension between governments. However, a survey showcased that 65% of the Russian population attributed Jamala's win to "propaganda and anti-Russian sentiment" (Hansen, et al. 2019), demonstrating how national narratives and political contexts can be perceived to influence public perception and the results of the contest.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the Eurovision Song Contest, at its core, is a multidimensional platform that not only showcases musical talent but also acts as a political tool for countries to further their national agendas. Through the use of strategic performances, Turkey and Ukraine have respectively been able to shift perceptions of themselves, scrutinise their own country's politics, and bring to light struggles faced by their nation. Not only do the performances showcase this, but also the results and post-contest media reactions that reflect the underlying political currents. The ESC can be utilised as a vital tool to explore and understand the interrelationship between music, performance and politics.

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