

# **Eurovision and the global stage: culture clash and geopolitics**

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### **More than songs**

The Eurovision Song Contest is spectacular, kitschy and campy, and a lot of fun. Behind the glitter and glamor of the world's longest-running song contest, however, hides a veritable battleground for some of the most relevant issues in the world today, culturally, politically, and geopolitically. This battleground persists regardless of the efforts of organizers to ensure the event remains "non-political." Instead, political identities and conflicts suffuse Eurovision as often as their uplifting four-chord choruses and shiny colored jumpsuits.

Why does the political persist? This has to do largely with two dimensions of what are called mega-events – those enormous celebrations of sport or culture (like the Olympics) that travel the world, attract major audiences, come with major costs, and have profound impacts on cities and societies.

Eurovision does not belong in the same league as the Olympics or the Men's Football World Cup, since it is significantly smaller in scope and impact. This has advantages, though: due to its smaller profile, Eurovision is a much less risky investment for cities and societies than top-tier mega-events. Still Eurovision exhibits many of the same features as its larger and more famous mega-event cousins, for instance in terms of broadcast reach. Though Eurovision cannot compete with the audience sizes of the top-tier, its media footprint is still massive, easily reaching hundreds of millions of people. At the same time, its cultural impact can resonate across the globe in ways that far belie the event's relatively small size.

### **How and why the political happens**

This enormous broadcast audience is the first dimension of mega-events that nourishes the political. With so many people watching from around the world, Eurovision in effect becomes a global stage. There is power in the opportunity to broadcast messages at this scale. But what messages are sent and how are these messages received?

The second political dimension is the fact that in many of these events – Eurovision and top-tier mega-events alike – participants come to represent their home countries in context or competition with other countries. This generates an almost innate need to display something like a national character or even to prove your nation's superiority by winning whatever contest is at hand.

This combination of national representation and the global stage makes for a powerfully political cocktail. At the same time, overt politicization can threaten the general popularity and financial stability of the event itself, so Eurovision bosses – similarly to the top-tier

mega-event owners – continually stress the non-political nature of their spectacle. They actively police song content and regulate participant behavior to control for political statements.

### **(Geo)politics**

Yet political statements persist, and there is an impressive list of song entries that have been banned or withdrawn from Eurovision due to (geo)political content. One of the most famous took place during Eurovision 2009, hosted in Moscow in the aftermath of the 2008 Russian invasion of Georgia. The Georgian Public Broadcaster initially announced that they would not participate in Eurovision due to this Russian state and military aggression. They soon reversed this decision, however, perhaps because the international community was largely silent on this topic, and the Georgians could use the global stage to highlight the injustice of the war. Subsequently, the Georgian 2009 Eurovision entry was entitled “We Don’t Wanna Put In” – a play on words against the Russian president / prime minister / president Vladimir Putin. The lyrics were challenged by the Russian delegation and Eurovision bosses insisted that they be changed or the song replaced. Rather than comply, the Georgians withdrew from Eurovision 2009.

Similar geopolitical controversies have erupted around the various phases of the Russian war against Ukraine, the longstanding conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, as well as the participation of Israel – most recently in reference to the Gaza war. Conflicts regarding these nations take place not only in the broadcasters’ boardrooms, but also in protests in the host cities, in the studio audience, and on the stage itself. Fans and performers alike have been known to unfurl banned flags or messages in an attempt to garner a few seconds of international airtime in support of a given cause. Further, the voting procedures usually give a fascinating view into the geopolitics of the moment, with regional alliances or rivalries on display in the public outlay of points.

### **Domestic effects**

There are also important domestic dimensions to these machinations on Eurovision’s global stage. One of the most dramatic of these was the 2014 victory of Conchita Wurst, Austria’s iconic bearded drag queen. Conchita’s victory was both celebrated and decried across Europe, east and west. Those in support hailed his victory as an inspiration for millions of queer and queer allies around the world, advancing a conception of European modernity based on tolerance, diversity, and equality. In contrast, those opposed used Conchita’s victory as a sign of European moral degradation and the modern turn away from Christianity and so-called “traditional values”. These fissures around a victorious bearded gay man in a dress prefigured the fractures that later would erupt around the European continent in the turn toward extreme right politics, authoritarian practices, and full-scale war.

Within Russia, Conchita’s victory coincided with a macho and vindictive conservative politics. In the run-up to the 2014 Sochi Olympics, the Russian government passed globally controversial legislation colloquially known as the “anti-homosexual propaganda”

law. Conchita's victory was attacked relentlessly on state-run outlets by politicians and media figures alike, held up as a sign of Western Europe decay. In their reading, Russia was now the alternative to widespread liberal moral degeneracy, and indeed should be the defender of conservative, heteronormative values around the globe. Variations on this view were echoed throughout Central and Eastern Europe in particular, but also found resonance wherever a certain brand of conservatism was present.

Conchita – and Eurovision more broadly – can be seen as a bellwether for liberal values in a given society and government. At the same time, it is crucial to remember that no society is homogeneous. For instance, despite the vociferous and often militant response of Russian elites and other social conservatives to Eurovision 2014, Russian fans and activists attempted to organize the “Conchita Wurst March of Bearded Women and Men” through Moscow, in honor of both the Eurovision victory and all that it represented, as well as the anniversary of the decriminalization of homosexuality in Russia. The parade was denied permission.

### **Eurovision and the rise of the far right**

On this background, what can we make of Nemo's victory at Eurovision 2024? As the first openly non-binary winner, Nemo inspired similar reactions to those of Conchita Wurst ten years prior. While supporters hailed their victory as a sign of increasing equality and tolerance, implicitly or explicitly framing this development as the vanguard of modernity, conservatives within Europe and abroad viewed Nemo's victory in much the same way as they criticized Conchita: disgust, moral degradation, and a sign that Europe must return to “traditional values”.

Yet much has changed in these ten years, and not necessarily for the better. The Russian state has moved from a fragile or Potemkin democracy into outright autocracy, hurtling headlong towards a totalitarian nightmare. Gone are the days when opposition political movements or minority groups might attempt to organize a public action, and in its place is a terrifying, exclusionary, and muscular nationalism. At the same time, the Russian state and army continue to wage a full-scale war on Ukraine, as well as routinely threatening Russia's neighbors and, at times, the entire globe. Can it really be only in 2021 that Manizha represented Russia in Eurovision with *Russian Woman*, rapping about feminist consciousness and railing against Russian patriarchy and routinized sexism?

Russia's trajectory is part of a reactionary arch-conservative movement ascendant around the world, most recently evidenced in the United States. Although the USA clearly does not participate in Eurovision, their disastrous unravelling of democratic practices and rule of law has outsized implications on the globe, including and especially for Europe and the broader European project. Trump and the MAGA movement alike hold up the defense and restoration of so-called “traditional values” in order to justify their transformation of the United States into something more autocratic, unaccountable, and demonstrably sinister. This appeal to a mythical social conservatism is at the heart of the assault on liberal and democratic values, both in the USA and around the world.

At the same time, it is important to remember that many hundreds of millions stand opposed to this aggressive wave of anti-democratic, exclusionary, and increasingly violent right-wing extremism. Among them is the traditional Eurovision fanbase, in all their fabulousness and camp and glitter. So we return to the hero of Eurovision 2024, Nemo, the Swiss non-binary musician who broke the code and took home the trophy. Can there be a starker contrast between the orange spray tan on Trump and the glittering face gems on Nemo, and all that they represent? It is hard to imagine a more dissimilar pair of global figures.

In this light it becomes clear that Nemo, like Conchita, has transcended the typical ways in which Eurovision can be understood as political. Rather than representing a single nation on the global stage, Nemo has come to symbolize a much broader community in a time of global conflict. The stage in Basel might seem to be only about music, and about who might take home Europe's most coveted trophy in 2025. Certainly, Eurovision organizers wish this to be the case, as their policies against politicizing the event remain in force. In actual fact, however, this Eurovision – perhaps more than any other – reminds us of what is at stake for the world beyond the spectacle and the stage. Do we want a world of increasing acceptance for all, regardless of gender or sexuality or political beliefs – a world where we might disagree on politics but we certainly agree on the rule of law and the peaceful transfer of democratic power? Or do we succumb to a world of increasingly rigid borders – between genders, communities, nations – where the law is wielded by the powerful against whichever enemy they choose, and for their own gain?

The Eurovision 2025 stage in Basel might seem a rather small stage for such global affairs, but history shows us that it is precisely here that the fault-lines of these social, cultural, and political conflicts take shape.