THE EUROVISION SONG CONTEST, A STAGE FOR NATIONAL AND EUROPEAN IDENTITY

ARIANNA SCARNECCHIA

Abstract (IT): Nella sua analisi del corpo di ricerca accademica riguardo l'Eurovision Song Contest, Yair (2019, 1013) dipinge la gara canora come un campo di ricerca fertile e attraente "per uno studio serio della civiltà Europea e dei suoi scontenti". La storia dell'ESC è sempre stata connotata da "proteste, boicottaggi, politicizzazione, e censura" (Bohlman 2018). Inoltre, come sottolinea Jordan (2013, 49), la gara è "uno strumento comunicativo per la costruzione della nazione e, in anni più recenti, per la promozione della nazione", poiché l'Eurovision offre un palco per "inscenare la nazione, e prendervi parte costituisce l'affermazione dell'identità europea di quella nazione. Mentre, come nota Jordan (ibid), le nozioni riguardo a cosa significhi essere europei sono in costante mutamento, l'Eurovision offre una prospettiva per esaminare i nazionalismi e le politiche identitarie. Yair (2019, 1014) definisce questa prospettiva come una "singolare lente culturale per vedere questioni politiche complesse che riguardano l'identità europea". Il ricercatore (ibid), ritiene che l'ESC abbia dato prova di essere uno strumento per calibrare e comprendere le crepe sia culturali che politiche che minacciano la visione politica dell'Unione Europea. Questo articolo esplora come l'Eurovision Song Contest sia stato usato come palco per la costruzione della nazione e per i nazionalismi, e per costruire, al contempo, un senso di appartenenza all'Europa e una cultura comune e condivisa.
Parole chiave: Eurovision Song Contest, costruzione della nazione, identità europea, nazionalismo, politiche identitarie

Abstract (EN): In his study on the Academic body of work on the Eurovision Song Contest, Yair (2019, 1013) depicts the Contest to be an attractive and productive field 'for the serious study of European civilisation and its discontents'. Indeed, the history of the ESC has always been 'marked by protest and boycott, politicisation, and national censorship' (Bohlman 2018). Furthermore, as (Jordan 2013, 49) points out, the contest 'has been a discursive tool in nation building and, in more recent years, nation branding', since the Eurovision offers a stage for 'the performance of the nation and participation is arguably affirmation of a nation's European credentials'. While, as Jordan (ibid) notes, the notions pertaining to what it means to be European are continuously changing, the Eurovision offers a perspective to examine nationalism and politics of identity. Yair (2019, 1014) defines this perspective as a 'unique cultural lens to view those larger political issues around European identity'. The scholar (ibid) argues that the ESC has proved to be a tool to calibrate and understand both the cultural and political ruptures that threaten the European Union's political vision. This essay aims to explore how the Eurovision Song Contest has been used as a stage for nation building and nationalism, as well as to construct a common European sense of belonging and shared culture.
Keywords: Eurovision Song Contest, nation building, European identity, nationalism, identity politics.

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1. Context: European Broadcasting Union and Eurovision Song Contest History

The history of the European Broadcasting Union, EBU, begins in 1925 in Geneva, where the International Broadcasting Union, IBU, was founded, following the birth of radio broadcasting around Europe (EBU n.d.-aWebsite). Among those who supported the creation of the Union, there was John Reith, the first Managing Director of the British Broadcasting Company, BBC, in the United Kingdom, and he aimed to create a public service for education, information, and entertainment (ibid). According to the official EBU website, cited above, Arthur Burrows, the first Director of Programmes for the BBC and his multi-national colleagues, were not only managing the airwave frequencies, but they also endeavoured to promote the idea that the IBU could foster a better mutual understanding through programme contents and ideas between different nations and therefore engender peace (ibid).

World War II and then the Cold War withheld their project, and Burrows left the IBU in 1941, but 'his ideal lived on in the soon-to-be-formed EBU' (ibid). In 1950 the broadcaster of Western Europe founded the International Radio and Television Network, OIRT, which existed until 1992 before it became the EBU (ibid). The aim of the EBU network was to make programme content of each country available for other broadcasters from the start; it was a technical system of media content interconnections around Europe that allowed for the content to be exchanged (ibid). The Eurovision technical network is now operating as a subsidiary of Eurovision Services to serve companies in the media and event industry (ibid). In the early days

of the EBU institution, three types of programmes were judged the most valuable as being of universal interest: news, sport, and music (ibid).

The News Exchange was established in 1961, and the Music Exchange in 1967, following music exchanges organised previously by the IBU (ibid). The History section of the EBU website underlines how 'music was, and is, a universal language readily enjoyed across the world' (ibid). In the mid-1950s, a pan-European version of the Italian Song Festival Sanremo was proposed, which became the Eurovision Song Contest, now viewed by up to 200 million enthusiastic viewers each year, which makes it 'the most successful entertainment show ever made' (ibid).

At the present time, the list of the EBU members on its official website counts sixty-nine active members representing 113 organisations from fifty-six countries within the European Broadcasting Area, as defined by the International Telecommunication Union, or that are members of the Council of Europe. (EBU n.d.-bWebsite). Additionally, the Union has thirty-one Associates member from twenty countries, within members countries of the International Telecommunication Union outside the European Broadcasting Area 'which provide a radio-television service with a major role in national broadcasting and whose membership is deemed useful for the EBU' (ibid).

For what concerns the Eurovision Song Contest, most of the member countries select a singer from their country to represent it during the competition, the songs are presented in evening-long TV shows, two semi-finals and a final, and the winner gets voted by the people of the member countries through their phones or online (Coupe and Chaban 2019, 889).

In his recent review of two decades of academic research on the Eurovision Song Contest, Gad Yair (2019, 1014) defines the event as being 'a musical festival accompanied by year-long fandom events and one of Europe's most central cultural events – if not the most central of all'. Le Guern (as cited in Yair 2019, 1014) illustrates the ESC to be a 'landmark in the collective memory associated to TV history, and thus part of the social memory'.

Furthermore, as Yair (2019, 1016) notes, the Eurovision Song Contest is 'one of the main cultural means for promulgating an imagined common heritage with people across countries – notwithstanding cultural, religious and political diversity – sharing a common cultural event'. As Bohlman (2011, 255) notes, the ESC has recently reached 600 million viewers in Europe and beyond, including China and Australia.

As mentioned above, the ESC has broad outreach. However, it was noted how the public consumes the event from different national perspectives, concurrently 'experiencing Europe in festive unity and in competing national diversity' (Henrich-Franke 2012, 33). Furthermore, regardless of the ESC label of 'non-political event' clearly prescribed in its rules by the EBU, the event cannot be observed outside of its geopolitical context (Piotrowska 2020, 127).

2. Eurovision Song Contest and National Identity

As Bourdon (2016, 275) underlines, National identity, while maybe being historically contingent, has exerted considerable influence over theorists and politicians since the nineteenth century. Based on the experience of the major European countries, modern nations are founded on a 'high level of cultural integration, with shared values and symbols communicated primarily through a common language' (ibid). Furthermore, Şıvgın (2015, 195-196) argues that the nation-state form produced by the modern world requires new ways to express social cohesion and identity. Hence, identity is the most crucial tool for constructing a homogeneous nation, and national identity is based on a singular cultural understanding, thus, identity 'has been included in the field of responsibility of the state' (ibid).

In light of these visions on national identity, it is possible to interpret its role in the Eurovision Song Contest. While Bolin (2006, 190) argues for the Eurovision Song Contest to be representative of the politics of the nation, drawing upon an analysis of 'Brand Estonia' in the context of the ESC hosted in Tallinn in 2002, Jordan suggests

that many participant countries use the event's stage 'to manage the image of the country, on its own terms' (Jordan 2013, 301)

Notably, as Mahla (2022, 188-189) writes, in the case of Israeli participation, many people see it as an act of cultural diplomacy. Citing an article in the Jerusalem Post published in the early 1990s, he points out how the Eurovision Song Contest is generally seen as a moment to stand 'shoulder to shoulder with European brethren', solely a competition between songs, outside of politics and of the Mideast Peace Conference (ibid). Therefore, Mahla (ibid) observes that this aspect is especially significant when Israel is criticised for the military occupation of Palestine and that the participation is additionally used as a way to promote the tourism industry to the European audience.

In 2019 the Contest was hosted in Tel Aviv, and the Icelandic entry, Hatari, showed some Palestinian flag scarves during the voting. The EBU fined RÚV, the Icelanding public broadcast, for their action (Abellan Matamoros, 2019). In the aftermath of Russia's exclusion from the ESC, calls were made to exclude Israel from the competition in 2024, after the Israeli bombing of the Gaza strip (Marshall, Sella. 2024). The EBU did not seem to respond to the claim and Israel competed in 2024 and is scheduled to participate in 2025.

Furthermore, as Lutz and Press-Barnathan (2020, 731) note, the hosting of what they define as 'mega-events' such as the Eurovision Song Contest, can be analysed from the perspective of identity politics and nation-building in light of the how they offer the chance to create, negotiate and boost identity. Thus, they observe that 'hosting a mega-event can be thought of as generating a space for practising and highlighting nationhood—internally and externally—and also for negotiating a complex national identity, which may encompass several components, not all of which are necessarily mutually compatible' (ibid). Mega-events such as the Olympic Games or Expos often proved to be vectors of nation-branding. Hosting and taking part in them offers the chance to construct deeply stratified national identity meaning. In the 1990s the Olympic logo became a commercial brand as the International Olympic Committee

(IOC) began registering trademarks for its properties, helping the process that showcases the hosting city in some sort of 'international visibility market'(Rasmi, 2024)

Moreover, the display of national identity through flags during the event and through national symbols at all the events preceding the Contest, namely during the constellation of related small concerts known as pre-parties (Escudero and Zwart 2018), appears to be an essential part of fan participation in the Eurovision Song Contest event. Kyriakidou et al. (2017, 609) note that it is performed in a rather ironic manner, that they define as 'playful nationalism', in which national symbols are used to communicate with other fans and participants at the international event, and not as an 'exclusive expression of nationalism and belonging'. Similarly, Björnberg (2007, 23) argues that the 'neo-ethnic musical constructions of national identity' presented at the ESC may display what he defines as 'progressive attenuated nationalism', a nationalism that may even embrace cultural diversity.

Conversely, according to Coupe and Chaban (2019, 890) the competitive spirit of the ESC might encourage people to support their nation during the Contest, favouring the national identity feeling over the European identity. The scholars underline that people from the countries that are not successful at the competition might feel as if other Europeans were underestimating, underappreciating, and even unrespecting them (ibid). Considering that what constitutes the Eurovision Song Contest is a competition between nation-states, Şıvgın (2015, 199) argues that the framework of what he defines as 'cultural struggle' can be used to consider the cultural and political implications of the Contest. In light of the fact that the ESC is not only a television show but a contest in which the rivals are the countries, it involves elements that 'stimulate national consciousness'. In his words (ibid), 'the ESC in fact assessed a ground where national identities compete', and he argues that the event became a 'cultural struggle' for Turkey because its national identity has been competing with Western nations since its foundation.

Regarding the relation between nationalism and the Eurovision Song Contest, an interesting vision is offered by the research on the participation of the Eastern Europe countries. In the case of the ESC taking place in Serbia in 2008, after the previous year's win by Marija Šerifović in Finland, Coupe and Chaban (2019, 890) note that the festive European engagement in music-making promoted by the Song Contest conflicted with Serbian national political tensions. The researchers observe that Serbian national election posters and those announcing the 'Legends of Eurovision tour' around the Balkan region were occupying the same space across the streets of the capital as well as the countryside. The national elections were fought between those wanting measures for national reconciliation with Europe and those averse to those measures, fearing that those measures would eventually lead to EU membership (ibid). Thus, as Coupe and Chaban (ibid) note, 'in the history of Europe and the Eurovision Song Contest, nationalism manifested itself via musical as well as cultural politics'.

Another significant aspect is underlined by Bohlman (2018) in his work on the 2018 Eurovision Song Contest in Lisbon. Bohlman notes that 'nationalism has become the dirtiest word in all of European cultural politics', it in fact appears to constitute a danger to Europe's existence. Thus, as he argues, as the competition between nations is the central theme of the ESC, the Contest has persistently responded to nationalists' pressures (ibid). As Bohlman (ibid) underlines, the national acts 'compete in the name of the nation; nation struggles against nation, accompanied by the symbols of national selfness'.

Importantly, Bohlman (ibid) points out that in recent years, what he defines as 'intrinsic nationalism' has increased in the context of the Eurovision Song Contest. The scholar notes that the Eurovision songs competing in the recent editions of the Contest contained references to the 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea, the refugee crisis, and the rise of far-right movements and parties across Europe. As case studies, Bohlman (ibid) cites the commemoration of the hundred years since the Armenian genocide in the 2015 Armenian entry, and the 2016 Ukrainian winning song, titled

1944, which juxtaposed Soviet repression of Crimea under Stalin and contemporary Russian repression in Crimea.

According to Yair (2019, 1023) tensions between Ukraine and Russia were always evident in the Eurovision Song Contest. As Vuletic (2018, 204) points out, Ukraine did not participate in the 2015 contest in Austria because of the Russo-Ukrainian armed conflict in Donbas. However, in 2016 'it waged its biggest ever battle in the ESC with Russia' (ibid). As noted above, the song was interpreted as a statement against Russia's annexation of Crimea, namely because some of the lyrics were in Crimean Tartar (ibid). Before the Contest took place in Kyiv in 2017, following Ukraine's 2016 victory, Russia's act Yulia Samoylova was banned from entering the territory of Ukraine as the Ukrainian authorities judged her to have contravened Ukrainian law by entering Crimea to perform (DW 2017). This led Channel One, the Russian member of the European Broadcasting Union, to intend not to broadcast the Contest for that year, as reported on the ESC official website in 2017. Prior to the Turin Contest of 2022, following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Russia was excluded from participating to the competition,

Similarly, by way of illustration Paul Jordan (2009, 47-48) notes the implications that the Turkish invasion of Cyprus in 1974 had for the Eurovision Song Contest. When it was announced that Turkey would enter the ESC in 1975, Greece withdrew, and neither country participated at one time until 1978, refusing to share the same stage, which underlines 'the symbolic value of the contest in terms of nationalist politics' (ibid). As discussed above, the Contest has always reflected contemporary European political events. At the 1976 Contest, Greece presented the song Panaghia Mou, Panaghia Mou (My Lady, My Lady). The lyrics were against the 1974 Turkish invasion and contained 'references to napalm ruins and fields of refugees' (ibid). In recent times, when Salvador Sobral, the Portuguese entry of 2017, who then won in Kyiv, wore a jumper stating "SOS Refugees" during official events and press conferences, the EBU asked him to stop wearing the statement jumper as they claimed the message to be political and therefore against the Contest's rules. The Portuguese

singer argued that the message was humanitarian and not political, and that he decided to promote the message in light of the 'European exposure', asking the European Union to create legal and safe pathways to reach the arrival countries (Romanenko, 2017).

Another important example of the 'political significance of the forms of nationalism that constitute the core of the European Song Contest' (Bohlman 2011, 2-3), is the 2005 Ukrainian entry Greenjolly. The competition was held in Kyiv that year; in the aftermath of the Orange Revolution, the civil resistance and protest for democratic voting in the country, led to Viktor Yushchenko's election (ibid). According to Bohlman (ibid), the narrative of the Orange Revolution was stated in the song both through the lyrics and through symbolic gestures during the performances, and as thousands of Ukrainians were gathering to watch the event in symbolic sites of the civil protests, 'figuratively and literally, the Orange Revolution served as a visible stage for the new forms of the old nationalisms forming along the fissures between East and West Europe'. Hence, the 2005 ESC in Ukraine 'witnessed how music, history and nationalism were forming a triangulation of historical teleology' (ibid).

Interestingly, in 2025, two songs crystallising Italian identity will compete for two different countries. 'Espresso macchiato' by Tommy Cash will compete for Estonia, featuring lyrics about spaghetti and mafia, therefore the Italian consumers' association Codacons requested the EBU to disqualify the song for what they defined as 'offensive stereotypes' on Italian culture (ADN, 2025). Gabry Ponte song 'Tutta l'Italia', combining electronic music with elements recalling Italian musical tradition, such as tarantella, and lyrics containing references to Italian popular culture, will compete for San Marino.

3. Eurovision Song Contest and European Identity

According to Coupe and Chaban (2019, 886), many scholars consider the development of a European identity and Europeans' sense of belonging to Europe as 'crucial for the future of the European Union'. The Eurovision Song Contest has been defined as 'an arena for the celebration of Europeanness or pan-European belonging' (Allatson 2007; Sandvoss 2008; as cited in Yair 2019, 1015). In the summary of her 2013 work on the ESC, Dafni Tragaki underlines that the song contest is not only unifying European people through the medium of music but also performing and allegorically representing 'the idea of Europe'. According to Yair (2019, 1016), what makes the ESC a unique and relevant event is the fact that the Contest gives the pan-European audience the chance to 'simultaneously participate in being European and to determine an outcome, collectively, outside of nation-state politics'. Furthermore, despite the existence and the building up of political tensions, the event offers a 'space to belong' (ibid).

In an article published on the Guardian in March 2024 Jeffrey Ingold wrote that when he first moved to England for University, he took a course on the European Union: 'I remember my professor's opening gambit was telling us that if we wanted to know how different countries felt about each other, we had to watch Eurovision' (Ingold 2024). In 2016 Eurovision was awarded the Charlemagne Medal for the European Media, a prize 'awarded to a European personality or institution that contributed to European unity and the development of a European identity in the field of media in a particularly significant way' (Coupe and Chaban 2019, 890). As Coupe and Chaban (ibid) note, the Chairman of the Charlemagne Medal Board of Directors, Jürgen Linden, explained their decision to reward the Eurovision 'on the basis of a common liking of music, millions of people celebrate one idea together, an idea resulting in one song emerging victorious. National interests and differences fade into the background as we celebrate our similarities'. The scholars (ibid) also report that Michael Kayser,

the Chairman of the Médaille Charlemagne Association, defined the Eurovision Song Contest as an 'opportunity to feel interconnected across borders'.

Furthermore, as Fricker and Gluhovic (2013, 3) underline, the Eurovision Song Contest is a 'symbolic contact zone between European cultures' and 'an arena for the European identification in which both national solidarity and participation in European identity are confirmed', and also, 'a site where cultural struggles over meanings, frontiers, and limits of Europe, as well as similarities and differences existing within Europe, are enacted'. Bourdon (2016, 266) argues that watching the Contest might reflect a desire to connect with Europe, although he points out that what he defines as 'Euro-patriotism' can be primarily found outside Europe, at its peripheries, namely in Finland, Israel and Turkey or in countries that have only recently joined the European Union. As the scholar states, 'if Europe is an imagined community at all, it is never better imagined than from the outside' (ibid).

Moreover, Bourdon (ibid) points out that amongst the countries participating in the European Broadcasting Union, forty-four are Western European countries and from the Mediterranean basin, and eighteen are from Central and Eastern Europe. Thus, the participation of countries like Tunisia, Israel and Russia might be 'a vague aspiration to be part of "the West"' rather than the participation in sharing a common European culture (ibid). Therefore, as underlined by Yair (2019, 1015), the ESC fosters a wide and inclusive definition of Europe, which allows the national competitors to choose between that European inclusiveness and 'emphasising ethnic and national identities'. As discussed above, the Eurovision Song Contest is often a stage for cultural struggle and for expressing political and cultural contrasts and alliances. The recent declaration of Ukraine's 2004 winner Ruslana reported by Yair (2019, 1024) 'Russia is our past, Europe must be our future', might be telling. Similarly, Raykoff (2007, 7) notes that, during the 1993 contest, a Romanian delegate said 'we have always wanted to belong to Europe, and the Song Contest is the only part of Europe that functions without political union, for this reason, we want to be a part of this world'. The scholar points

out that when Estonia won the 2001 song competition, the prime minister stated, 'we are no longer knocking at Europe's door, we are walking through it singing'.

Moreover, as Piotrowska (2020, 123-124) underlines, when Austria's entry Conchita Wurst won the Contest in 2014 with the song Rise Like a Phoenix, the 'stage appearance of the bearded winner dressed in drag as Conchita' raised some hostile reactions, particularly within Eastern European countries, namely amongst some Russian politicians 'who proclaimed the moral end of Europe'. The scholar adds that some former Soviet countries labelled Wurst's performance as a 'hotbed of sodomy'. In their analysis of audience involvement in the Eurovision Song Contest Coupe and Chaban (2019, 886) show that there is little evidence that the Contest fosters an improvement of the Europeans' feeling of belonging to Europe or the European Union, notwithstanding the 'high level of brand recognition of the contest throughout Europe'.

Conclusions

As discussed above, the Eurovision Song Contest, through the competition between nation-states, offers a stage for nation-building, nation-branding, and nationalism. In fact, what has been defined as the 'Eurovision phenomenon' by Lampropoulos (2013, 154) is 'an idiosyncratic phenomenon' composed of the annual building up of the competition, the fan involvement analysed by Coupe and Chaban (2019), the political and cultural discussion around the event, the historical and social references often presented in the songs, as well as issues like nationalism and Europeanness, 'inextricably related to it from its very beginning' (Lampropoulos 2013, 154).

This essay has attempted to give an overview of the complex cultural, social, and political meanings involved and represented in the popular culture musical event of the Eurovision Song Contest. Furthermore, it discussed how the ESC constitutes a stage for the construction of pan-European identity and nationalisms concomitantly.

The academic body of research on the topic is broad and of remarkable interest, going from analysis of the performances, music, audience engagement and response to the event to the voting alliances and contrasts reflecting cultural and political issues. In 2019, when Yair was working on his review of the research on the ESC, he wrote that the review was 'relevant and important, particularly at the current moment when the European Union and European identities are heavily debated, with Brexit looming large, growing populist hatred against the EU in other countries, and continued Russia–West conflicts over the Ukraine'.

The current political situation of the European Union, almost six years after Yair's work, is far from being less complex or less fragmented. The upcoming 2025 contest in Switzerland, which will be taking place during the contemporaneous Russian military invasion of Ukraine and the aftermath of the humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza, will probably provide insight for future research on the political implications involved in the Eurovision Song Contest.

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