

# Public Diplomacy and Decision-Making in the Eurovision Song Contest

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In the 2013 Eurovision Song Contest (ESC) that was held in Malmö, Sweden, the Montenegrin hip-hop duo Who See and singer Nina Žižić performed the song “Igranka” (The Party), with Who See appearing on stage dressed as astronauts. It was a symbolic performance in a contest that has historically been used in cultural diplomacy to influence how Europeans see each other: as astronauts, Who See suggested how Europeans of different nationalities still often perceived each other as aliens despite the process of European integration, and even though the ESC has reflected how Europeans have commonly experienced fashions in popular culture and the development of technologies such as television. The term “vision” in the contest’s name refers to the fact that the ESC has been conceived as a televisual event from its beginning. However, because entries in the contest have always represented states, they have also reflected the cultural diplomacy, nation branding, and soft power that shape how states are perceived internationally. The ESC has been especially beneficial for the cultural diplomacy of small states like Montenegro: the three-minute time-limit for entries is a relatively long opportunity for small states to regularly promote themselves to a worldwide audience numbering in the hundreds of millions.

*Who* should exactly determine how we *see* a state in the ESC has, however, been a matter of controversy ever since the contest was established in 1956. In the case of Who See, the group was internally selected by officials from the Montenegrin national broadcasting organization, RTCG (Radio Televizija Crne Gore, Radio and Television of Montenegro). The entries of other states in the 2013 contest were selected either directly by such officials or through a national selection process in which juries or the public voted for the winner. The ESC has always been a stage upon which political values have been contested through cultural diplomacy, be it through the whitewashing of authoritarian govern-

ments' international images or the promotion of the rights of sexual minorities. However, the extent to which the public has been allowed to participate in the national selections has particularly highlighted both the ESC's democratic exceptionalism in relation to other international mega events and a problematic relationship between national broadcasting organizations and the larger public with regards to democratic participation. While the democratic deficit is most obvious in the broadcasting organizations of authoritarian states, the debates over the role of public voting in the ESC demonstrate that it is an issue that liberal democracies have had to contend with as well.

This chapter focusses on issues of democracy in the ESC in terms of public participation in the national selection processes and the appropriation of the contest in the public diplomacy of governments. I herein also underline a distinction between cultural and public diplomacy. The term "public diplomacy" has usually been used to refer to diplomacy which is directed towards an audience—the "public"—with agents usually being national governments or international organizations, and their methods being more varied than just the cultural. In cultural diplomacy, however, the emphasis is on the "cultural" means—in other words, how artistic products are used to promote a state (Kim 318-9). As entries in the ESC are usually not selected by national governments but nonetheless still represent states, I consider them to be more an example of cultural rather than public diplomacy, although a national government often appropriates the ESC in its official public diplomacy policies when its state hosts the contest. However, the ESC is a rare case of direct democracy in cultural diplomacy, and this gives another spin to the term "public diplomacy," as the public actually plays a decision-making role, whereas in more conventional approaches to public diplomacy the public is a subject rather than an agent. While the receptive role of the public is usually given more consideration in studies on public diplomacy, I am here concerned with the role that the public is allowed to play in the creation of cultural diplomacy and the related tensions that the ESC has highlighted between decision-makers, including governments, national broadcasting organizations, and the larger public.

## **CULTURAL DIPLOMACY IN THE ESC**

The ESC has historically been significant for cultural diplomacy because it has reached an unusually large audience and, being based on cultural trends and new technologies, the contest has been attractive because of its fashionability and modernity. Held annually in May, the ESC has included entries from almost

every European state and has attracted around two hundred million viewers in recent years, making it one of the longest-running and most-watched television events worldwide. The ESC is organized by the European Broadcasting Union (EBU), which was established in 1950. The organization's active membership comprises national, public service broadcasting organizations from European states and the Mediterranean rim that are part of the European Broadcasting Area, a technical region defined by the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), a United Nations agency, for the purpose of allocating broadcasting frequencies. During the Cold War, Eastern European states had their equivalent international broadcasting organization, the International Organization for Radio and Television, but it dissolved in 1993 when the Central and East European broadcasting organizations joined the EBU. The EBU promotes cultural and technical cooperation between its members, especially through the Eurovision Network for program exchange that gives the ESC its name. The EBU has always been a technical rather than political grouping: indeed, it has never had political criteria for membership, be it for the accession or expulsion of members (Eugster 59).

While the rules of the ESC have undergone changes throughout its history, particularly with regards to its voting system, the contest's basis has remained the same: the national broadcasting organizations send artists and songs to compete against each other. The artists appear in the contest under the name of the states that the broadcasting organizations are from, so there is a direct—albeit, as we shall see, deceiving—association with the states. Juries from these states, and since the late 1990s public audiences as well, have submitted their votes to select the winner, whose state consequently earns the right to host the contest the following year. The voting results are analyzed in the international media, with a good result usually being equated with a positive international image for a state. On the other hand, poor results have often been discussed within the states themselves as being not only connected to the quality of the entry but also to broader issues, such as the international image of a state or any political controversies that it might be party to. Voting can also be controversial at the stage of the national selection of the ESC entry, the organization of which the EBU leaves up to the national broadcasting organizations. The latter sometimes choose to stage the national selection as a televised event based on the vote of a jury or the public, but officials from the national broadcasting organizations can also make the decision themselves—which can reflect both a desire to make participating in the ESC less financially costly as well as an elitist mistrust of the public's tastes.

Besides serving as a platform for the promotion of national interests, another dimension of the ESC that makes it important for cultural diplomacy is its engagement with the cultural, economic, and political concepts of Europe. The contest is quintessentially European: almost all parts of Europe have been represented in it at some point,<sup>1</sup> and states have often used their participation to express the Europeanist aspirations or pro-Western orientations of their foreign policies.

The ESC was established in 1956 in order to promote cultural and technical cooperation among Western European countries that were then pursuing their first steps towards economic and political integration through the European Coal and Steel Community, Euratom, the European Economic Community (EEC), and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The EBU has historically been closer to the Council of Europe (CoE) than to the European Union (EU) in terms of its symbolism, scope and style, especially with its focus on internationalism rather than supranationalism; the CoE and the EBU were also the first organizations that, in the mid-1950s, pioneered the use of the circle of twelve stars as a European symbol (Fornäs 117-8, 136).

However, despite the fact that it has functioned as a metaphor for European integration, the ESC has never been organized by either the CoE, the EEC or the EU, or any other European political organization. Not all of the ESC's participants during the Cold War were members of such organizations, either: ESC participants then included Israel, communist Yugoslavia, and neutral states such as Austria, Switzerland, and Finland. However, what all of these states had in common was that they were not part of the Eastern Bloc, even if they were not fully part of the Western one. Even Yugoslavia, which was still a one-party communist state with restrictions on media freedom, participated in the ESC because its alliance with the Soviet Union had been severed in 1948. And it did so alongside the anti-communist dictatorships of Franco's Spain and Salazar's

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1 The exceptions have been Liechtenstein and Vatican City: the former because it has not had a national, public service broadcasting organization, and the latter because it has likely not considered the contest to be appropriate for its cultural diplomacy. National broadcasting organizations from states with limited international recognition, such as Kosovo, have also not been allowed to enter the EBU because it only admits national broadcasting organizations whose states are members of the ITU. That the ESC has been seen as a desirable instrument of cultural diplomacy by states seeking wider international recognition was underlined by Kosovo's Deputy Foreign Minister, Petrit Selimi, who said in 2012 that "nothing is more important than the Song Contest in nation-building" (qtd. in European Broadcasting Union, "Kosovo").

Portugal, states which subsequently transformed into liberal democracies in the mid-1970s (Vuletic 82-4). Since the end of the Cold War, the ESC has continued to include national broadcasting organizations from states with authoritarian governments where media freedom is heavily restricted, including, for example, Azerbaijan, Belarus, and Russia. Belarus is now the only state in Europe that is represented in the ESC but is not a member of the CoE.

For both the preparation of an entry and, if it is victorious, the hosting of the contest the following year, the national broadcasting organizations responsible for arranging ESC entries have drawn on various experts to determine how to present their states, including ones from the music industry, tourism organizations and advertising firms. There has sometimes even been direct government involvement as well. The choices of artists, composers, lyrics, genres, themes, choreography, and costumes have thus been loaded with political meanings. For example, while an entry not sung in a state's native language and without folk elements may appear non-national or international in style, it can also be symbolic of a desire for European integration or international cooperation in the right political context. This was the case when Estonia won the 2001 ESC with the English-language pop song "Everybody." The song was performed by a duo that included Dave Benton, a black Dutch resident of Estonia, and its transnational character correlated to the final phase of Estonia's EU accession negotiations before the state joined that organization in 2004 (Jordan 77-83).

Issues of minority rights have furthermore been highlighted at the ESC through the performances of the representatives of ethnic, linguistic, racial, religious, and sexual minorities. In 1998, the transsexual Israeli singer Dana International won with her song "Diva," which promoted an image of Israel as diverse, open-minded, and tolerant. The artist and performance challenged the common representations of Israel in the European media as a state at war with its neighbors, occupying the Palestinian territories and violating the human rights of its Arab citizens. Dana International's success also prompted the Israeli government to develop a new tactic in its international promotion: to present itself as a state that is tolerant of sexual minorities, which critics have dubbed "pinkwashing" because they claim that it diverts attention from the human rights situation of Israeli Arabs and Palestinians (Gluhovic 203). During its promotional events at the 2012 ESC in Baku, the Israel Broadcasting Authority distributed a leaflet published by the Israeli Ministry for Public Diplomacy and Diaspora Affairs which promoted Israel as a state that is inclusive of its sexual minorities ("The True Face of Israel").

Other states have also sought to promote an image of themselves as more liberal or tolerant by including representatives of different ethnic groups and

linguistic traditions in their ESC entries. For example, in 1999 Germany sent a group of Turkish German artists to the ESC in Jerusalem where they performed the song “Reise nach Jerusalem—Kudüs’e Seyahat” (A Journey to Jerusalem) in English, German, Hebrew and Turkish (Bohman 218). When the German city of Düsseldorf hosted the ESC in 2011, each entry was introduced by a postcard that featured people from the entry’s state who were visiting or working in Germany. These short clips promoted Germany as a state welcoming of migrants at a time when its conservative government was criticized for being too dominant in determining the EU’s financial policies during the debt crisis that struck the continent in 2008.

While some entries in the ESC have taken international peace as their main theme, wars have also been a constant backdrop in the contest, from the Cold War to the wars in the former USSR, former Yugoslavia, and the Middle East after 1989. The tensions deriving from such wars have also been played out on the ESC stage from as early as the mid-1970s, when Greece and Turkey first debuted in the contest but protested against each other’s entries in light of the political tensions related to the Turkish invasion of Cyprus (see Şahin in this volume). Armenia and Azerbaijan have also not given each other points in the contest’s voting and have made political gestures concerning their conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, while the Azerbaijani authorities have even questioned Azerbaijani citizens who have voted for Armenia in the ESC (Adams, “How Armenia”).

However, cultural diplomacy at the ESC need not only reflect existing political tensions, but can even suggest different ways for states to relate to one another. For example, despite the political tensions that continue to exist among the states of the former Yugoslavia, they still tend to support each other in their voting, as studies on bloc voting in the contest have demonstrated (Gatherer 76-77). This may appear discordant with the recent history of the wars that they fought between themselves in the 1990s and the political problems that have consequently remained. However, their voting patterns are explained by the cultural affinities that these states share, especially through languages and the common cultural industries that were developed in Yugoslavia, which still transcend national boundaries to define a common market for popular music. When Serbia and Montenegro returned to the ESC in 2004, after having been excluded from the contest because of international sanctions for their roles in the wars in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, they received twelve points from other states of the former Yugoslavia that they had been at war with in the 1990s. This led Serbia and Montenegro’s former foreign minister, Goran Svilanović,

nović, to describe this mutual support at the ESC as a positive development in relations between these states (Petruševa).

## **PUBLIC DEMOCRACY IN PUBLIC DIPLOMACY**

How the ESC is conceived of as public diplomacy by governments is, however, a more complicated question than the aforementioned examples suggest. When I write that a state did this or that at the ESC, it might appear that this implies the involvement of the respective national government. This is usually not the case, however, and it is mostly deceptive to see an ESC entry as somehow representative of a national government. As described earlier, the EBU is the main organizer of the ESC, and its active membership is comprised of national broadcasting organizations that have a public service aim. These organizations, mostly from liberal democracies, are meant to function independently of government interference. In this case, a government would also not have control over the entry chosen to represent its state, for this is a matter for the national broadcasting organization to decide. However, the ESC entry appears on stage under the name of its state, not that of its national broadcasting organization, so the first association is that the entry is, for example, an Austrian, British or Italian one, and not from ORF (Österreichischer Rundfunk, the Austrian Broadcasting Corporation), the BBC (the British Broadcasting Corporation), or RAI (Radiotelevisione Italiana, Italian Radio and Television). Already in the contest's first decade, the EBU decided that the entries should be performed under the names of states because it felt that using the names of the national broadcasting organizations was too cumbersome and unattractive (European Broadcasting Union, "Planning Group Meeting"). As ESC entries are presented under the names of states, they are therefore examples of cultural diplomacy even though they are usually not produced with interference by national governments.

How the national broadcasting organizations have organized and selected their states' entries has often been controversial, especially when they have been perceived as doing so without a democratic mandate. As the ESC entry represents a state and the national broadcasting organization is financed by public sources, such as licensing fees and taxes, many citizens would like to participate in the process of selecting the entry. This procedure is often done through some sort of televised national selection process in which viewers determine the winner. Such public participation is also invited by the genre: popular music is, after all, characterized by a popularity based on commercial success. In this way, the ESC entry can be a rare example of cultural diplomacy that is the direct

result of a national, democratic process in which the public directly selects a state representative. This is indeed an unusual phenomenon, for artists who represent their states in international competitions are usually not chosen by the public. Conversely, athletes who represent their states in international sports competitions like the Olympic Games or the FIFA World Cup do not, for example, have to face a public vote, but instead qualify on the basis of their talents measured by quantifiable criteria. However, in other international mega events in which the national selection is more subjective, such as for the Venice Art Biennale, cultural ministries or professional commissions usually conduct the selection process. And when it comes to examples of cultural diplomacy that are part of a government's foreign policy strategy, it is the democratically-mandated representatives of the government rather than the public who decide.

However, there are also cases in which the national broadcasting organization decides to select the entry for the ESC itself, with a technocratic committee made up of officials from the national broadcasting organization or experts from the popular music industry, and without input from the public. In recent years, national broadcasting organizations that have chosen to select their entries in this way have usually justified it by claiming that their television stations have needed to cut back on costs in light of the Great Recession, and that one of the ways to do so has been to cut down on the budget for the ESC. In many states, this has usually not been controversial, especially if the ESC has not been so domestically popular. National broadcasting organizations might also intervene if public tastes are considered too parochial to choose an internationally competitive entry:<sup>2</sup> ironically, in order to be successful and celebrated by national pride, an ESC entry should never be too national. However, the officials from national broadcasting organizations also have their own interests, predilections, and preferences. In some cases, public protests against such internal selections have compelled national broadcasting organizations to reverse their decisions: in

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2 These debates also influenced the EBU's decision from 2009 to have mixed voting in the contest's semi-finals and final. The national public voting was seen as biased towards geographically neighbouring states and ones with shared cultural and political affinities, especially in states of East and Southeast Europe, although this has historically also been a phenomenon among Nordic states as well. The biggest five financial contributors to the contest, France, Germany, Italy, Spain and the United Kingdom, have since 2000 also been given a direct entry into the final, an issue that has prompted Turkey's national broadcasting organisation to withdraw from the ESC since 2013, considering that Turkey has a larger population than all of these states except Germany (Vuletic 156-60).

Ukraine, for example, the national broadcasting organization accordingly changed its internal selection of Vasyl Lazarovych for the 2010 ESC, with Alyosha subsequently winning a national selection that was based on jury and public voting. In a similar vein, the ARD (Arbeitsgemeinschaft der öffentlich-rechtlichen Rundfunkanstalten der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, Consortium of Public Broadcasters of the Federal Republic of Germany) had to retract its internal selection of Xavier Naidoo for the 2016 ESC since the popular singer was widely criticized for his right-wing political views (Lehming).

There was also criticism in Austria of ORF's internal selection of the bearded drag queen Conchita Wurst as the state's ESC representative in 2014 because of opposition to Wurst's gender presentation, with *Facebook* petitions opposing her selection and participation in the contest. In addition to objecting to her transvestism, such critics were also indignant that Wurst had not been selected by the Austrian public—to which the ORF responded that she had come second in a public vote in the national selection two years before and therefore had a democratic mandate. In her preparations for the ESC, Wurst was marketed as a symbol of diversity and tolerance, which aided Austria's international image that has often been tainted by far-right political figures. As a result, she was significant for Austria's cultural diplomacy even though she was not chosen by the government or the public, but rather by a group of liberal television officials who sought to present a more progressive national image. In the end, Wurst went on to win the ESC and her victory was well-received in Austria, with her domestic critics being marginalized: she was even received by the Austrian Chancellor, Werner Faymann, and Minister of Arts and Culture, Josef Ostermayer, upon her return to Vienna following her ESC win (Austrian Federal Chancellery). This was not, however, the first time that ORF internally selected an ESC entry with political connotations. Before the election of Kurt Waldheim as Austrian President in 1986, amidst controversy that he had concealed details about his role in the German army in the World War II, ORF sent an Austrian-Israeli singer, Timna Brauer, to the ESC. And when the far-right and anti-immigrant Austrian Freedom Party (Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs, FPÖ), led by Jörg Haider, joined the national coalition government in 2000, which prompted diplomatic sanctions against Austria by other EU member states, the ORF sent the Rounder Girls, a multiracial group composed of one white Austrian woman and two black female immigrants from the UK and the US, to sing a Motown-inspired song in English (Gura 68-70). In this way, the selection of an ESC entry can also play out over a domestic political battleground, as different political forces struggle to influence how their state—and their political programs—will be portrayed in the international arena.

The example of Wurst also demonstrated how governments in liberal democracies have tended not to take an interest in appropriating the ESC in their public diplomacy until their state has won. In authoritarian states that exercise control over the national media, the connection between the ESC and the government's public diplomacy is more direct. In Azerbaijan, for instance, participation in the ESC has been part of the government's broader campaign of public diplomacy in Europe, which has also included the "caviar diplomacy" of hosting and gifting officials from other European states and organizations. When it came to hosting the ESC in Baku in 2012, the First Lady, Mehrabin Aliyeva, was the head of the organizing committee while her son-in-law, Emin Agalarov, performed the interval act in the final. The 2012 ESC was the most expensive ever staged, after the one in Moscow of 2009, which again highlighted the importance that the Azerbaijani and Russian governments placed on the ESC for crafting their public image to international audiences (Adams, "Selling Azerbaijan"), especially as they sought to use it as a springboard for the hosting of other international mega events, such as the Olympic Games and the FIFA World Cup. European politicians urged the government of President Ilham Aliyev to also use Baku's hosting of the ESC to facilitate the state's democratization and improve its human rights record. When she presented Germany's voting results in the 2012 ESC, the German actress and comedian Anke Engelke emphasized that "it is good to be able to vote," thereby implicitly supporting the democratization of Azerbaijan. However, the legacy of the ESC has not left a lasting impact in this regard. Azerbaijan's media were still classified as "not free" by the human rights organization Freedom House in the years immediately following the 2012 ESC, and the state's international ranking regarding press freedom even worsened during that time (Freedom House 10). On the other hand, politicians from states that have been criticized by west European governments and organizations for their authoritarian systems have leveraged the same kind of criticism against the organization of the ESC. The president of Belarus, Aleksandar Lukashenko, for instance, attacked the voting in the ESC for being rigged and biased against Belarus—just as he had been criticized for not allowing free and fair elections in Belarus (BelTA).

The governments of most liberal democratic states represented in the contest, however, refrain from criticizing the ESC. In these states, governments are not meant to interfere with the operations of the national broadcasting organizations, meaning that they usually also stay out of the decision-making process for an ESC entry. In states in which the ESC is temporarily less popular, governments may also deliberately distance themselves from the contest to show that they are in touch with public opinion as well as to demonstrate that they are not wasting

attention, funds, and time on such “frivolous” matters. However, governments in liberal democratic states usually do get involved in the ESC once their national entries have won. The first reason for this is that a victory is usually well-received in the winning state, even in one that was, until that point, not renowned for being enthusiastic about the contest, such as in Austria until Wurst’s win in 2014. In this way, governments also try to capitalize on public euphoria. The second reason is that the hosting of the ESC requires significant financial resources that the national broadcasting organizations may not be able to provide without assistance from public or private sources. In this case, governments may step in to assist with the financial costs, and they would justify this intervention by claiming that it is in the national interest of public diplomacy to ensure that such a prominent international event is properly staged, as occurred in Estonia and Latvia when they hosted the ESC in 2002 and 2003, respectively (Jordan 85-8). A final reason why governments may get involved in hosting the ESC concerns local officials that lobby for their city to host the contest. Different cities in the host state usually present bids to stage the contest the following year, and it is at this point that local governments vie to promote their cities as potential ESC hosts—and as potential agents of their state’s public diplomacy.

## CONCLUSION

As a unique example of direct democratic involvement in shaping cultural and public diplomacy, the ESC has highlighted the tensions that exist between public and elite views of how a state should be represented. The national denomination of an ESC entry is deceiving, as the decision-makers behind it can lack broader political or public legitimacy. On the one hand, the ESC has been seen by different types of governments as a way to improve their own international images, especially in the case of authoritarian, dictatorial and/or one-party regimes, such as in Azerbaijan and Belarus in recent times or Greece, Portugal, Spain and Yugoslavia during the Cold War. On the other hand, it has been a way for other states to promote themselves as tolerant of ethnic, religious, gender, sexual, and migrant minorities. In many cases, the forging of such an image for a state has been the work of the national broadcasting organizations charged with organizing and selecting entries, although there has been more government involvement in states in which the national broadcasting organization has been more controlled by the government.

However, governments have generally become more involved in the ESC after their state has won the contest and plans need to be made for hosting the

event the following year. Such victories usually appeal to the patriotic pride of citizens, even in states in which the contest was supposedly not so popular until then, as the recent case of Austria demonstrates. In addition, the hosting of the contest is regarded as an opportunity that can bring benefits for the international promotion of the state as well as the host city and region. In this regard, the ESC's significance for public diplomacy also involves different segments of a state's political structure, from national to local governments, as well as different public and private interests, from the national broadcasting organization to the commercial ambitions of the winning artists.

In the end, though, what is engrained in public opinion is that state X won the ESC in year Y because entries in the contest are always presented under the names of states. And this is why the significance of the ESC in cultural and public diplomacy is paradoxical: because it is always a state that is seen as the winner of the contest, even if the state itself has often done little to win it.

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