

Natalie Bauer

Independent Scholar

ORCID: 0009-0006-8447-2743

Televoting Ties

Reciprocity Among Central and Eastern European Countries in the Context of the Eurovision Song Contest

Abstract

Traditionally, research on how and why people vote for acts in the Eurovision Song Contest covers aspects such as geographic proximity, the language of a song, or effects of prior exposure to acts, mostly without discriminating between the popular and the jury vote. To put televoting behaviour in a wider frame, this article investigates televoting patterns among Central and Eastern European Countries (CEECs) in the Eurovision Song Contest from 2000, 2003–2008, and 2016–2025 through the anthropological lenses of *potlatch*, gift-giving, and reciprocity to determine whether patterns of mutual support can be interpreted as ritualized solidaristic exchanges. Drawing on quantitative analysis of popular voting data, three hypotheses were tested: If there are long-term “gift alliances” among countries, whether bilateral or generalized reciprocity prevails, or if reciprocity through televoting, regardless of performance quality, prevails. The findings suggest that long-term reciprocal voting relationships are statistically robust. Only a few significant bilateral correlations were observed; instead, a system of centralized reciprocity and selective pooling seems

to be favored. Additionally, strong evidence indicates that CEECS often reward each other with high points even when the performance ranks lower overall, pointing to political and cultural biases.

Keywords

Eurovision Song Contest, symbolic exchange, Central and Eastern Europe, gratitude, reciprocity

Abstrakt

Więzi w teległosowaniu: Wzajemność pośród krajów Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej w kontekście Konkursu Piosenki Eurowizji

Badania nad wyborami i motywacjami głosujących w Konkursie Piosenki Eurowizji, zazwyczaj dotyczą aspektów takich jak bliskość geograficzna, język piosenki oraz wcześniejsza znajomość wykonawców. Najczęściej nie wprowadzają też rozróżnienia między głosami widzów i jurorów. Proponując szersze spojrzenie na zachowania głosujących, w niniejszym artykule poddano badaniu schematy teległosowania w Konkursie Piosenki Eurowizji w krajach Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej w latach 2000, 2003–2008 oraz 2016–2025. Zastosowano pojęcia antropologiczne *potlaczu*, obdarowywania i wzajemności, by ustalić, czy schematy wzajemnego wsparcia można interpretować jako zrytualizowane wymiany solidarnościowe. W oparciu o analizę ilościową danych z głosowania widzów odpowiedziano na trzy pytania: czy między poszczególnymi krajami można zaobserwować długotrwałe „sojusze oparte na darach”, czy przeważa wzajemność dwustronna czy uogólniona oraz czy w teległosowaniu dominuje wzajemność, niezależnie od jakości występu. Statyki wskazują na wyraźne, długotrwałe wzajemności w głosowaniu. Zaobserwowano jedynie kilka istotnych korelacji dwustronnych. Wydaje się, że preferowany jest system scentralizowanej wzajemności i selektywnego łączenia głosów. Istnieją ponadto mocne wskazania, że kraje Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej często przyznają sobie nawzajem wysoką punktację, nawet w przypadku występów plasujących się niżej w ogólnym rankingu, co sugeruje stronniczość motywowaną politycznie i kulturowo.

Słowa kluczowe

Konkurs Piosenki Eurowizji, wymiana symboliczna, Europa Środkowo-Wschodnia, wdzięczność, wzajemność

If friends make gifts, gifts make friends.¹

Marshall Sahlins

Setting the Stage

This insight forms the conceptual foundation of this paper, which explores patterns of televoting among Central and Eastern European Countries (CEECS) in the Eurovision Song Contest (ESC). Founded in 1956 by the European Broadcasting Union, the ESC was designed to promote unity in war-torn Europe through cultural exchange. Today, it constitutes a pan-European media event with a global audience that blends music, identity politics, and ritual performance. Officially apolitical, the ESC has long reflected geopolitical tensions, especially in Eastern Europe with the legacy of the Cold War and most recently with the exclusion of Russia and Belarus from the contest in 2022. In this context, CEECS provide a particularly fertile ground for examining cross-national relationships in the contest. Rather than viewing votes as mere expressions of musical taste, this paper adopts the lens of *potlatch*, gift-giving, and reciprocity to investigate how CEECS use televoting to perform solidarity. Hence, the study treats votes as symbolic gifts, which are awarded during the Grand Final in the years 2000, 2003–2008, and 2016–2025. Supposedly, these phoned-in gifts carry the expectation of gratitude and return, while reinforcing group identity. This paper then examines whether stable reciprocal patterns can be observed through Pearson's test, which are then interpreted as ritualized exchanges to illuminate the emotional and symbolic undercurrents of contemporary European relationships.

To do so, it is necessary to first define CEECS before delving into the ins and outs of the ESC. Usually, authors do not undertake the herculean task to define specific countries or areas precisely when speaking about the region(s).² Even if effort is put into narrowing down what areas and countries can belong to the various constructions of the Baltics, Central and Eastern Europe, it becomes clear that there are exclusions, inclusions and overlaps depending on perspective.³ To keep the discussion feasible, a deductive approach following Chlebowczyk is chosen: he defines Central and Eastern

¹ Marshall Sahlins, "On the Sociology of Primitive Exchange," in *The Gift: An Interdisciplinary Perspective*, ed. Aafke Komter (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1996), 26.

² One example for this may be found in Derek H. Aldcroft and Steven Morewood, "Economic Change in Eastern Europe Since 1918," *Capital & Class* 22, no. 1 (1998): 158, <https://doi.org/10.1177/030981689806400122>.

³ Refer to Willibald Steinmetz, Michael Freeden, and Javier Fernández Sebastián, *Conceptual History in the European Space*, vol. 3, *European Regions and Boundaries: A Conceptual History*, ed. Diana Mishkova and Balázs Trencsényi (New York: Berghahn Books, 2017) for an extensive discussion on the European regions.

Europe as the broad region between the four local seas (Baltic, Adriatic, Aegean and Black Sea).⁴ As prior research shows a somewhat cohesive voting bloc exists in CEECs, with the ex-Yugoslavian countries displaying a strong intra-bloc-solidarity, the countries Slovenia, Serbia, Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, and Montenegro are excluded from closer assessment.⁵ Including Germany next to discussions about its status in *Mittel(ost)europa* reveals little, as they enter the Grand Final every year regardless as a member of the *Big Five*. This leaves us with a comprehensive list of 13 countries that have entered the ESC at some point (Table 1).

Table 1

Defined CEECs			
Country	Debut (year)	Number of Appearances	Last Participation (year)
Belarus	2004	3	2020
Bulgaria	2005	5	2022
Czechia	2007	5	2025
Estonia	1994	8	2025
Hungary	1994	5	2019
Latvia	2000	9	2025
Lithuania	1994	9	2025
Moldova	2005	8	2024
Poland	1994	8	2025
Romania	1994	9	2023
Slovakia	1994	0	2012
Ukraine	2003	14	2025
Russia	1994	10	2021

Voting System and Voting Behavior

General televoting was first established in 1998 and served as the only voting mechanism in the years 1998–2000 and 2003–2008. During 2001–2002,

⁴ Quoted in Balázs Trencsényi, "Central Europe," in Steinmetz, Freeden, and Fernández Sebastián, *Conceptual History in the European Space*, 3: 177.

⁵ Anthony Dekker, "The Eurovision Song Contest as a 'Friendship' Network," *Connections* 27, no. 3 (2007): 55; Derek Gatherer, "Voting in Eurovision: Shared Tastes or Cultural Epidemic?," *Empirical Text and Culture Research*, no. 3 (2007): 76; Marta Blangiardo and Gianluca Baio, "Evidence of Bias in the Eurovision Song Contest: Modelling the Votes Using Bayesian Hierarchical Models," *Journal of Applied Statistics* 41, no. 10 (2014): 2316, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02664763.2014.909792>; Sofronis Clerides and Thanasis Stengos, "Love Thy Neighbor, Love Thy Kin: Strategy and Bias in the Eurovision Song Contest," *Ekonomia* 15, no. 1 (2012): 35, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.882383>.

participating countries could choose between 100% televoting or 50% tele- and 50% jury voting. In the years 2009–2015, the 50:50 rule became the norm. Both results were announced combined. This changed in 2016 with the introduction of the announcement in two rounds: first the juries' then the viewers' votes. Due to COVID-19, no contest was held in 2020. In 2023, televoting for the semi-finals was introduced, as well as the possibility of voting from a non-competing country. Points awarded are 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, and 12, with 12 symbolizing the highest approval. Because of changes in jury size, a rule from 2018–2022, where individual jury members' points were added together and no specific qualifications made members representative of their countries, juries' votes are excluded from this research.⁶ Accordingly, the focus of this paper lies on the popular vote and will only consider the years in which it is possible to specify how the examined countries' populations voted. As televoting in the semi-finals was introduced recently, semi-finals are neglected in this research, as by the date of publication only data from three years will exist. The years 1999 and 2019 are further excluded, as only two CEECs entered the Grand Final in each year. Additionally, the year 1998 is left out due to technical difficulties in Romania, leaving only Estonia and Poland as competitors in that year. Another notable anomaly in the competition of 2006 is that only 37 songs were performed, but 38 countries voted.⁷

With the time frame defined, the voting patterns of the CEECs can now be examined. Alongside bloc voting, people appear to vote for their neighbors, likely because of a shared cultural background (which could even translate to comparable tastes) as well as potentially a shared religion, or just for being more familiar with them than with countries further away.⁸ This neighbor effect is even observed on the national level in Germany⁹ and is consistent over the whole run of the event, as well as when taking different configurations of televoting and jury voting into account. For instance, robust relationships between countries, when sorted for jury

⁶ "Eurovision Voting Rules," Eurovisionworld, April 30, 2024, <https://eurovisionworld.com/esc/voting-systems-in-eurovision-history>.

⁷ "Serbia and Montenegro," Eurovision Song Contest, access January 20, 2026, <https://eurovision.tv/country/serbia-montenegro>.

⁸ Blangiardo and Baio, "Evidence of Bias in the Eurovision Song Contest," 2320; Dekker, "The Eurovision Song Contest as a 'Friendship' Network," 57; Daniel Fenn, Omer Suleman, Janet Efsthathiou, Neil F. Johnson, "How Does Europe Make Its Mind Up? Connections, Cliques, and Compatibility between Countries in the Eurovision Song Contest," *Physica A: Statistical Mechanics and Its Applications* 360, no. 2 (2006): 596, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.physa.2005.06.051>; Gema Bello Orgaz, Raul Cajas, and David Camacho, "A Study on the Impact of Crowd-Based Voting Schemes in the 'Eurovision' European Contest," in *WIMS, 11: Proceedings of the International Conference on Web Intelligence, Mining and Semantics* (New York: Association for Computing Machinery, 2011), 8, <https://doi.org/10.1145/1988688.1988718>; Laura Spierdijk and Michel Vellekoop, "The Structure of Bias in Peer Voting Systems: Lessons from the Eurovision Song Contest," *Empirical Economics* 36, no. 2 (2009): 403, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00181-008-0202-5>.

⁹ Oliver Budzinski and Julia Pannicke, "Culturally Biased Voting in the Eurovision Song Contest: Do National Contests Differ?," *Journal of Cultural Economics* 41, no. 4 (2017): 365, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10824-016-9277-6>.

voting, where applicable, have been uncovered for the years 1957 to 2016.¹⁰ Diaspora voting is also a factor in voting allocation and can lead to geographical shifts among the blocks, as demonstrated by the examples of Spain and Romania or Latvia and Ireland, since the a large proportion of immigrants live in the former.¹¹ Additionally, language as an influence is at play when explaining voting behavior, as winning songs are most often sung in English.¹² The quality of the songs seems to have an impact as well,¹³ although Spierdijk and Vellekoop found that even when cleaned for linguistic and cultural aspects, multiple countries prefer songs from geographically close countries.¹⁴ Results obtained for the years 2004–2014¹⁵ confirm earlier findings for the years 1975–1997,¹⁶ namely the significant favoring of geographically neighboring countries as well as the role of shared religions. In CEECS, Catholicism and Orthodox Christianity predominate, which might factor into voting behavior. Culturally close countries were favored, too, according to more recent research, again in line with earlier findings.¹⁷ However, no influences on voting in terms of performance aspects, like the gender of the performer, were found. Only the language of the song had an influence, as a common official language leads to positive bias, although this could be attributed to shared cultures as well.¹⁸ This complies with other findings, where, only 26% vote for their preferred song, while another 26% place their vote strategically on the song they believe would turn out to be the winner, despite not preferring it. 11% of the surveyed vote for the most likely song to win among their preferred songs, but the biggest group (37%) votes neither for the strategic choice, nor their favorite song, nor the most likely winner.¹⁹ This indicates that other reasons, like a shared culture,

¹⁰ Alexander V. Mantzaris, Samuel R. Rein, and Alexander D. Hopkins, "Examining Collusion and Voting Biases Between Countries During the Eurovision Song Contest Since 1957," *Journal of Artificial Societies and Social Simulation* 21, no. 1 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.18564/jasss.3580>; Alexander V. Mantzaris, Samuel R. Rein, and Alexander D. Hopkins, "Preference and Neglect amongst Countries in the Eurovision Song Contest," *Journal of Computational Social Science* 1, no. 2 (2018): 384–385, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42001-018-0020-2>.

¹¹ Bello Orgaz, Cajias, and Camacho, "A Study on the Impact of Crowd-Based Voting Schemes", 8; Silvia D'Angelo, Thomas Brendan Murphy, Marco Alfò, "Latent Space Modelling of Multidimensional Networks with Application to the Exchange of Votes in Eurovision Song Contest," *The Annals of Applied Statistics* 13, no. 2 (2019): 920, <https://doi.org/10.1214/18-AOAS1221>.

¹² Spierdijk and Vellekoop, "The Structure of Bias in Peer Voting Systems," 413; Blangiardo and Baio, "Evidence of Bias in the Eurovision Song Contest," 2317.

¹³ Victor Ginsburgh and Abdul G. Noury, "The Eurovision Song Contest: Is Voting Political or Cultural?," *European Journal of Political Economy* 24, no. 1 (2008): 49, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ejpoleco.2007.05.004>.

¹⁴ Spierdijk and Vellekoop, "The Structure of Bias in Peer Voting Systems," 424.

¹⁵ Budzinski and Pannicke, "Culturally Biased Voting in the Eurovision Song Contest," 360.

¹⁶ Spierdijk and Vellekoop, "The Structure of Bias in Peer Voting Systems," 424.

¹⁷ Spierdijk and Vellekoop, 424.

¹⁸ Budzinski and Pannicke, "Culturally Biased Voting in the Eurovision Song Contest," 360; Spierdijk and Vellekoop, 419.

¹⁹ Daniel Stockemer, André Blais, and Chris Chhim, "Voting in the Eurovision Song Contest," *Politics* 38, no. 4 (2017): 436, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263395717737887>.

religion, and geographic closeness are bigger deciding factors for most people's vote placement. Or, to put it more bluntly: the voting patterns are inconsistent and little strategy is visible.²⁰ These findings however can only carefully be applied to the present case, as the survey was conducted online by means of convenience and 429 out of 601 people answering lived in the United Kingdom, Germany or France.²¹

Research regarding the ESC generally does not distinguish between popular and jury votes, e.g., when building cases about bloc-voting behavior,²² or when televoting was not yet established for the period investigated.²³ Furthermore, other studies only focus on one specific year or on specific periods, without focusing specifically on the Eastern bloc, but looking more at individual countries and their overall relations to all other countries entering the competition.²⁴ This is why for this analysis, CEECs were chosen. Moreover, it is assumed that the people most likely to vote are also avid fans of the event,²⁵ and Verrier showed that prior exposure has an impact on voting behavior, too.²⁶ Others additionally concluded that the performance order on the evening very likely influences voting behavior in televoters as well, and that the hosting country receives a substantial share of the votes in general.²⁷ To a certain degree, this influence is manufactured by the hosting broadcasting institute, as they started to allocate starting places to countries instead of randomly assigning them in 2014. Arguably, this change was introduced in order to keep the viewers' attention.²⁸ Considerations about speed-accuracy trade-offs during the voting interval²⁹ should not be weighed too heavily, as the audience is already (at least partially)

²⁰ Stockemer, Blais, and Chhim, "Voting in the Eurovision Song Contest," 438; Clerides and Stengos, "Love Thy Neighbor, Love Thy Kin," 39.

²¹ Stockemer, Blais, and Chhim, 435.

²² Gatherer, "Voting in Eurovision," 74.

²³ Spierdijk and Vellekoop, "The Structure of Bias in Peer Voting Systems," 407.

²⁴ Spierdijk and Vellekoop, 407; Dekker, "The Eurovision Song Contest as a 'Friendship' Network," 53.

²⁵ Stockemer, Blais, and Chhim, "Voting in the Eurovision Song Contest," 431.

²⁶ Diarmuid B. Verrier, "Evidence for the Influence of the Mere-Exposure Effect on Voting in the Eurovision Song Contest," *Judgment and Decision Making* 7, no. 5 (2012): 642, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1930297500006355>.

²⁷ José Luis Arroyo Barrigüete, Lourdes Fernández, Antonio Obregón, "Eurovision in the Boardroom: What Does Voting Order Tell Us About Decision Making?," *The Eurovision Song Contest as a Cultural Phenomenon: From Concert Halls to the Halls of Academia*, ed. Adam Dubin, Dean Vuletic, Antonio Obregón (New York: Routledge, 2022), 153; Wändi Bruine De Bruin, "Save the Last Dance for Me: Unwanted Serial Position Effects in Jury Evaluations," *Acta Psychologica* 118, no. 3 (2005): 257, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.actpsy.2004.08.005>; Marco A. Haan, S. Gerhard Dijkstra, and Peter T. Dijkstra, "Expert Judgment Versus Public Opinion? Evidence from the Eurovision Song Contest," *Journal of Cultural Economics* 29, no. 1 (2005): 72, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10824-005-6830-0>.

²⁸ Arroyo Barrigüete, Fernández, Obregón, "Eurovision in the Boardroom," 153.

²⁹ As proposed by Victor Ginsburgh and Juan D. Moreno-Ternero, "The Eurovision Song Contest: Voting Rules, Biases and Rationality," *Journal of Cultural Economics* 47, no. 2 (2023): 274, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10824-022-09456-5>.

familiar with the contributions prior to the event through media coverage and has enough time during the ESC to form their own opinion.

Taking the above into account, one might ask whether concepts such as sympathy, community, or shared culture can truly be quantified. Here, I would like to argue that, while statistics are relevant, they only gain meaning when placed within a broader social and historical context. One such lens could be hauntology, but for this paper the framework of solidarity was chosen. While the ghosts of the past undoubtedly linger, the focus here is on conscious, present-day acts of solidarity and mutual recognition. The argument made is that Eurovision votes are not simply the product of internalized, path-dependent ties, but also active expressions of affinity.

From Hand to Heart

Based on Maus's notion of *potlach*, a social gathering in which contributions—either freely or obligatorily—are made in exchange for material and immaterial goods among Native Americans, which overall constitutes a *total social* phenomenon that goes above the rules of legalities and the market, the ESC can be conceptualized as a such an event as well.³⁰ In the first place, the broadcasting companies have jointly developed the framework for the ESC, under which the host country then organizes the event through a kind of hybrid collaboration involving various local stakeholders, like the host city and venue management,³¹ and with viewers, who contribute points via phone calls. Krogh Petersen and Ren use this approach to conceptualize the staging of the ESC 2014 in Denmark as a *value-adding cooperation* between different actors (despite its escalating costs). They conclude that organizing the ESC collaboratively cannot be quantified solely from an economic perspective, as public and creative logics play into it too.³² Taking these reflections into account, votes may be seen as contributions or, simply, as gifts. A gift, according to Malinowski, is always on the spectrum of the so-called pure gift (giving something without expecting something in return) and the attempt of both parties to get as much out of the exchange as possible.³³ Gifts are typically given to show that one is grateful for

³⁰ See Morten Krogh Petersen and Carina Ren, "Much More than a Song Contest!: Exploring Eurovision 2014 as Potlatch," *Valuation Studies* 3, no. 2 (2015): 100–101, <https://doi.org/10.3384/vs.2001-5992.153297>.

³¹ Krogh Petersen and Ren, "Much More than a Song Contest," 101.

³² Krogh Petersen and Ren, 115.

³³ Bronisław Malinowski, "The Principle of Give and Take," in Komter, *The Gift*, 15–16.

something the other did for them; when one is not sure about a relationship with the receiver, because one feels sympathy towards the receiver; as well as due a need for attention; or to manipulate or bribe somebody.³⁴ Functions of gifts may entail means of mutual help; to “satisfy the god” (in a more worldly sense, charity); to create and support social relationships (not at least through the feeling of indebtedness that makes one reciprocate on the gift)³⁵ to foster inter-group relationships; and to create, manifest, and maintain social status; as well as to create dependency and to demonstrate one’s power through ‘over reciprocity’ and a too speedy return of the gift.³⁶ In summary, gift giving entails economic, moral and social functions.

While Komter opens the possibility of interpreting Malinowski’s idea of gift giving playing a ritualized role in the setting of the ESC as functionalist gift-giving for intergroup relations,³⁷ Lévi-Strauss argues that, while functions of gifts are not mutually exclusive, people have agency and create interpersonal meaning through gift giving.³⁸ A danger of overlooking power dynamics and the feeling of obligation to give something to someone³⁹ seems relatively low in this case, as the cost, up to max. 1,70€ per call, and the effort to vote is comparable for every potential voter.⁴⁰

Beyond the functions of the gift itself, the exchange’s context is further important, as “[c]ertain occasions, such as rituals, call for more ‘obligatory’ gifts than others. ...,”⁴¹ like it is the case in the institutionalized ESC. Giving points can be seen as giving non-material gifts between the populations, as it is not an economic trade for the individuals to call in for their favorites. The closer the relationship, the likelier it is that the gift is “free-er,” although over an extended period, there is always a system of giving and taking.⁴² The link between the theoreticalities of relationship level and attitude towards gift giving resembles findings outlined above regarding the culturally close and often neighboring voting blocs.

³⁴ Aafke Komter, “Preface and Introduction,” in *The Gift*, 3.

³⁵ Aafke Komter, “The Anatomy of Gratitude,” in *Social Solidarity and the Gift*, ed. Aafke Komter (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 57: 72–73.

³⁶ Komter, “The Anatomy of Gratitude,” 71.

³⁷ Komter, “Preface and Introduction,” 9.

³⁸ Claude Lévi-Strauss, “The Principle of Reciprocity,” in Komter, *The Gift*, 19.

³⁹ Komter, “The Anatomy of Gratitude,” 69.

⁴⁰ Eurovision Song Contest, “How Can I Vote for My Favourite Eurovision Song?,” Voting, 2023, access January 20, 2026, <https://eurovision.tv/about/voting>.

⁴¹ Komter, “Preface and Introduction,” 11.

⁴² Malinowski, “The Principle of Give and Take,” 15.

On the receiver's side, showing gratitude is generally expected as a strong social norm. More concretely, experiencing gratitude means experiencing a warm feeling directed at people who are benevolent to one, an imperative making one return a gift and is needed for the respective parties to check the social ties attached to a reciprocal exchange.⁴³ Individuals not willing to express gratitude are socially punished.⁴⁴ It is therefore a pivotal step in the reciprocity chain of

gift < gratitude < counter gift.⁴⁵

In addition to gratitude, a motive for gift return may be the attempt to equal the balance of reciprocity. However, gratitude as a negative and positive force can lead to different outcomes depending on the amount of time that passed in between the two actions and the quality of the counter gift.⁴⁶ It can therefore be assumed that experiencing gratitude entails the need for the receiver to decipher the meaning the original giver attached to the gift, and then later to express the emotion in a way the giver is able to recognize that the receiver understood the originally intended message. Because of the structured sequency of gifts, gratitude, and counter gifts in the total social phenomenon of ESC, the concept of gratitude seems fit as the core conceptual framework, as the ESC case has a very clear set of rules when it comes to gifts and counter gifts: the point of time is a set date once a year, the return period is one year, and the date of the next ESC, respectively. The currency of gifts in quality and quantity is the narrowly defined point-system used to reward a specific performance.

However, there are also different types of reciprocal relationships.⁴⁷ They share that they imply a certain balance in relationships, albeit on different levels and sides of dependence and independence.⁴⁸ Sahlins carved out two reciprocal movements to explain the different levels: *bilateral* or vice-versa movements and *centralized movements*.⁴⁹ The first can be split up further into *direct bilateral* movements where entity *A* gives to entity *B*, who later returns a gift to *A* and so forth (*A < B < A < ...*), and *indirect bilateral* or circular movements, where entity *A* gives to entity *B* who gives to entity *x* and so forth, until entity *A* receives

⁴³ Malinowski, 15.

⁴⁴ Malinowski, 16.

⁴⁵ Komter, "The Anatomy of Gratitude," 72.

⁴⁶ Komter.

⁴⁷ Sahlins, "On the Sociology of Primitive Exchange," 27.

⁴⁸ Komter, "The Anatomy of Gratitude," 69.

⁴⁹ Sahlins, "On the Sociology of Primitive Exchange," 27.

a gift again ($A < B < x < \dots < A$). An example of direct bilateral movements is the relationship between neighboring countries like Greece and Cyprus.⁵⁰ Indirect bilateral reciprocity is potentially found in the voting blocs. Centralized movements, too, consist of two subgroups. One is *pooling*, where several entities pool resources to give collectively to another entity ($A + B + C < D$). This is a flow of mutual aid or assistance to someone within that specific social setting, who is deemed to be worthy or in need of said resources. Pooling therefore helps the community through helping an individual.⁵¹ This framework is potentially applicable as well, because a bloc's countries may pool for one country they think is not getting enough points from others. The second subgroup is *redistribution*, where one entity distributes resources to several entities ($D < A + B + C$).⁵² This model is not deemed to be applicable here as there is no centralized authority in power to (re-)distribute points.

Instead, the countries interact with each other on one level. This interdependence can be categorized into three different modes of relationships: *Generalized reciprocity*, $A \leftrightarrow B$, happens where "the counter is not stipulated by time, quantity or quality."⁵³ Consequently, there is no definite expectation of reciprocity to be found, and it is thus the relationship that most closely resembles Malinowski's pure gift. Due to the clear framework of the ESC, this type of relationship is not expected to be found. The next mode is *balanced reciprocity* between $A \leftrightarrow B$, which works through direct exchanges and less personal reciprocity because the economic function prevails.⁵⁴ If, however, the flow gets disrupted or only flows one way, not only the economic but also the social relationship between both gets disrupted. Due to the impersonalized system of points and the assumption that countries stop giving (too many) points to a country that is not giving points to them, this level of dependence seems more accurate than generalized reciprocity in the ESC context. Lastly, there is also *negative reciprocity*, where one entity maximizes their own benefits without regard for the other, for instance, through stealing from someone.⁵⁵ In the short run, a relationship like this is imaginable in the context of the ESC, however, it is not deemed to be feasible inside the voting blocs, as the ESC is a recurring ritual, and this type is the most impersonal form. Accordingly,

⁵⁰ Spierdijk and Vellekoop, "The Structure of Bias in Peer Voting Systems," 410.

⁵¹ Sahlins, "On the Sociology of Primitive Exchange," 27.

⁵² Sahlins, 27.

⁵³ Sahlins, 31.

⁵⁴ Sahlins, 32.

⁵⁵ Sahlins.

this form of interdependence would contradict earlier findings of long-term, solidaristic voting patterns. Next to individual factors in reciprocity, social distance and kinship relations generally determine the mode of reciprocity, and one cannot classify reciprocal relationships between two entities strictly following one level and mode every single time.⁵⁶ Due to prior argumentation, it therefore became clear that the modes potentially best applicable to the ESC are direct and indirect bilateral movements and centralized pooling movements, and that the type of reciprocity is mostly balanced.

The combination of the existing research on ESC-voting and Komter's and Sahlin's frameworks on gifts, gratitude, and reciprocity hence boils down to the following research question: To what extent can televoting patterns among CEECS in the ESC between 2000, 2003–2008, and 2016–2025 be interpreted as forms of ritualized reciprocal gift-giving? The hypotheses derived from this are:

1. Countries that engage in reciprocal televoting in one year are likely to continue doing so in subsequent years, forming long-term alliances, with the null hypothesis that there is no statistically significant increase in the likelihood of receiving high televote points from a country that received high points the previous year.
2. Bilateral reciprocity occurs more frequently than generalized reciprocity among CEECS.
3. High televote points are more likely to be awarded regardless of the musical quality of the performance.

Cracking the Code

This analysis focuses on correlations in televoting by only intra-CEECS, limited to votes cast in the Grand Final. For a relevant interpretation and to help control for a satisfactory artistic quality under the assumption that countries with strong entries are more likely to qualify anyway, only countries that participated more than ten times and made it to the final at least five times out of the 15 contests in the selected timeframe are included. This leaves eight countries out of the initial thirteen for analysis (Table 1). Limiting, however, is that there are no statistics on individuals' voting behavior published, and

⁵⁶ Sahlin, 33.

multiple votes are allowed.⁵⁷ Therefore, diaspora voting cannot be considered; while official statistics are available for the immigrant makeup of the single countries, it cannot be accounted for whether these groups watch and vote in the first place, if they vote in unison, and if so, if they vote for their host country, their country of origin, or other countries. Additionally, through different migration prospects in the first place, for instance, the length of the countries' EU memberships or the effect Brexit had on the UK's migrant groups, if one were to look at migration, a sub-study must be undertaken to put diaspora voting into comparison with the overall voting of a country. So even though trends can be observed for large-sized immigrant groups like Romanians in Spain, it is a too ambiguous factor (for now) to be taken into account here. That said, the number of total votes gives a rough sense of scale. Between 6.6 and 10.7 million people voted annually via SMS or phone from 2004 to 2009, with numbers steadily increasing ever since.⁵⁸ As voting costs money, that may discourage casual viewers but also likely limits spam or bot voting. To gather the results of the public voting, all vote announcements were reviewed by the researcher, and Okhuijsen's publicly available data set was consulted.⁵⁹

Methodologically, the approach of analysis takes inspiration from Fenn et al., who correlated the combined votes of countries with each other,⁶⁰ and Yair and Maman, who investigated the over- or undervaluation between countries in relation to each other.⁶¹ The latter looked at how many points were given on average by country *A* to country *B* over the course of several years, and how many points were given from all other countries combined to *B*. The difference between both results shows the over- or undervaluation of country *B* by country *A*. Using Fenn et al.'s approach will help to identify the potential existence of general gift alliances among CEECs (H1), while Yair and Maman's approach will assist in identifying bilateral and generalized reciprocity patterns between the CEECs (H2), as well as putting them in relation with the other countries' votes (H3).

⁵⁷ Stockemer, Blais, and Chhim, "Voting in the Eurovision Song Contest," 431.

⁵⁸ Statistisches Bundesamt, José Gabriel Navarro, „Fernabstimmung beim Eurovision Song Contest nach Anzahl der Anrufe und SMS von 2004 bis 2009," May 2010, To the Author, date of access? <https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/157773/umfrage/eurovision-song-contest-fernabstimmung-nach-anrufe-sms-seit-2004/>.

⁵⁹ Stephan Okhuijsen, "Eurovision Song Contest Scores since 1957–2023," Datagraver, 2024, <https://data.world/datagraver/eurovision-song-contest-scores-1975-2019>.

⁶⁰ Fenn, Suleman, Efstathiou, Johnson, "How Does Europe Make Its Mind Up?," 7.

⁶¹ Gad Yair and Daniel Maman, "The Persistent Structure of Hegemony in the Eurovision Song Contest," *Acta Sociologica* 39, no. 3 (1996): 309–325, <https://doi.org/10.1177/000169939603900303>.

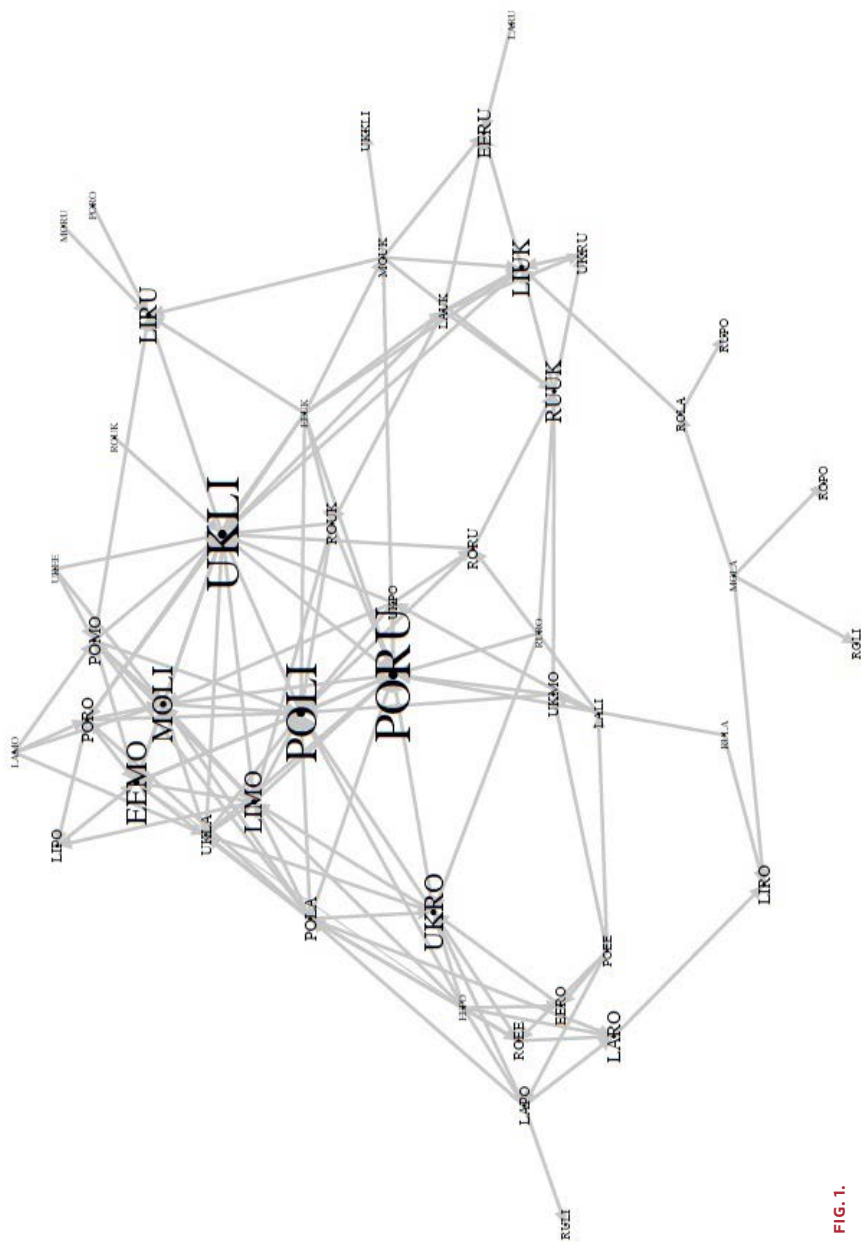
Analysis and Interpretation

The data are comparably sparse in the investigated period, and, accordingly, normal distribution for every relationship cannot be assumed. Nevertheless, based on the theoretical expectations regarding reciprocal behavior, Pearson's test for correlation was applied. This procedure reveals a total of 137 highly significant, exclusively positive connections with $\rho < .001$ for $N > 5$. Hence, Fisher's test for $N < 5$ was not carried out (FIG. 1).

Rather than now interpreting these correlations solely as evidence of statistical association, they may be understood through the concept of reciprocal gift exchange laid out above: gifts may be used to establish and maintain relationships because every gift implicitly carries an obligation to acknowledge and eventually return it. It must be noted that a lack of gifts can be just as informative as (over) reciprocity. Consequently, recurring positive correlations within the institutional framework of the ESC do not only indicate similar voting behavior but further suggest the constant renewal of social relationships between the national audiences. The central links in the network illustrate that process particularly well. Ukraine repeatedly gifts points to Lithuania (UKLI) and Poland gifts consistently to Lithuania (POLI) and Russia (PORU). These three relationships correlate with an array of other awarding that does not necessarily reveal pooling patterns, gifts do not remain confined to individual dyads. Instead, the overall pattern suggests that centralized reciprocity prevails, where several members of the community repeatedly direct symbolic support towards selected countries.

It therefore becomes evident that H1 regarding long-term gift alliances is supported. However, due to the small sample size, these findings should be interpreted with caution. Additionally, one must take the relationships' evolution in absolute terms into consideration, too, as the sole existence of the network and relative positive correlations do not mean that the CEECs award each other consistently highly. As becomes clear from FIG. 2, over time the participants counter-gift in the fashion of the initial gift. And currently, the gifts' sizes are on the decline. This makes sense from a Maussian perspective, where the persistence of repeatedly given gifts—or lack thereof—demonstrates the *potlatch* character of a ritualized Eurovision in which existing social relationships are continuously reshaped. Instead of yearly isolated translations, televotes become part of an ongoing chain of gifting and receiving.

When zooming in on bilateral gift alliances, it becomes clear that they exist in 17.8% of the examined cases: between Estonia and Romania, Latvia and Poland, Ukraine and Moldova, Ukraine and Romania, Moldova and Lithuania, and Ukraine and Lithuania (each with $r_s > .922$; $\rho < .001$). Point awarding among Romania and Moldova, as well as Poland and Ukraine, is so consistent that it is



○ Amount of Points Allocated per Country and Year

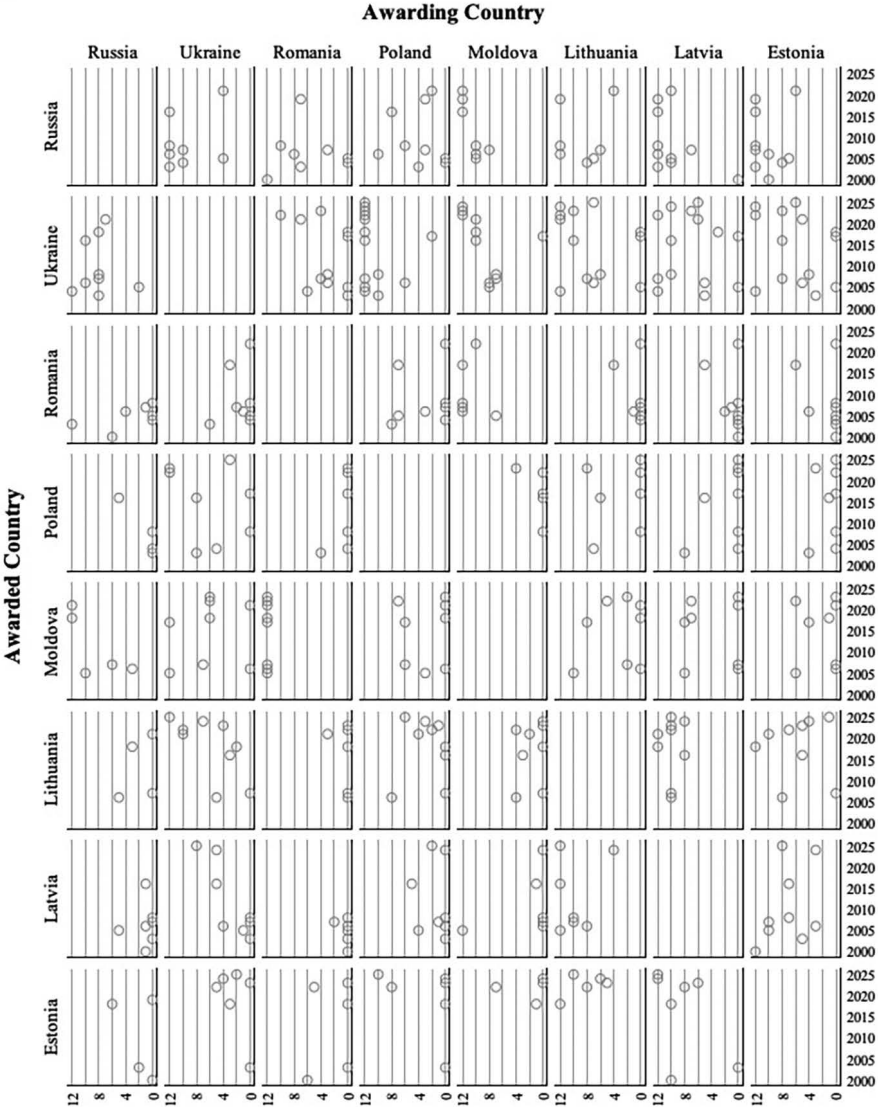


FIG. 2.

not captured adequately by Pearson's test, which suggests the existence of firm bilateral ties. Nevertheless, H₂ must be rejected as it is not the predominant *modus operandi*. In general, a form of circular pooling seems to prevail instead. Consequently, the reciprocal obligation becomes collective. This means, that while CEECs are awarded by other CEECs, as can be seen in **FIG. 1**, that there are favorites that perform consistently better than others, especially Russia and Ukraine. Komter's concept of gratitude helps to explain the perseverance of these trends. As a social mechanism through which relationships are maintained, gratitude in ESC-voting becomes visible through the repeated willingness to participate in reciprocal giving, particularly to those two countries, despite qualitative fluctuations in the actual act.

Hence, it can be assumed that high televote points are more likely awarded regardless of the musical quality of the performance. This applies both to the collective group of examined countries as well as to individual countries. When interpreting the country-level results in absolute numbers, it becomes evident that CEECs tend to overvalue each other. This is particularly visible in the relation between Russia and Ukraine and giving towards both countries. The latter of the two not only received yearly points by other CEECs in the analyzed periods but was also overvalued by CEECs compared with non-CEECs in 13 out of 14 years. This became even more pronounced in the 2020s, presumably with the motivation to show solidarity after Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Viewed through the Komterian lens, these votes must be interpreted as symbolic demonstrations of solidarity and charity that exceed sole expressions of musical preference. Gift-giving operates less in the cycle of payment and repayment, but as the reaffirmation of membership within a moral community, connotated with compassion with Ukraine and shared identity as a unified Central and Eastern European Bloc, that publicly rejects Russia's geopolitical aspirations through televoting behavior.

A neglect of the musical quality of the performances also becomes particularly pronounced in the ratio of televoting calls between Russia and Ukraine. Despite long-lasting geopolitical tensions, both countries keep calling in for each other, even though the point count gradually decreased in recent years. Over time, Russia has awarded Ukraine an average of 7.3 points annually, and Ukraine has awarded Russia 9.5 on average. This is also the case in years when the countries placed in the lower half. For instance, in 2003, Ukraine was placed 14th, only reaping 30 points in total, of which 8 were Russian. Their relationship appears so solid that brief outliers, such as 2005, when both countries awarded each other only 2 (Russia to Ukraine) and 4 points (Ukraine to Russia) appear subsequently ignored by the voters. Even though the two countries have clearly favored each

other within the bloc, the two do not correlate significantly with each other. Nevertheless, when comparing the two major periods, 2003–2008 and 2016–2025, in which both countries participated and that lie in the select time frames, different values emerge. This approach was chosen because of the interim Euromaidan protests in Ukraine in 2013 and the annexation of Crimea in 2014, presumably being reasons for both national audiences to call in less for the other country's act, therefore exemplifying the importance of relationship over musical quality.

Before 2009, Russia distributed points generously, even in comparison with other CEECs (on average 8.0 versus 6.6 versus 3.7 by non-CEECs per country per year for Ukraine). Russia stays consistent with awarding 8.3 points on average after 2016, far ahead of other CEECs (5.6) and non-CEECs (4.5). This change is reflected diametrically in the ratio towards Russia: While Ukraine awarded an average of 10.0 points to Russia from 2003 to 2008, this value drops to 8.0 points from 2016 onwards. Contradictorily, both CEECs (from averagely 7.8 to 9.1 points for Russia) and non-CEECs (from averagely 4.0 to 5.2 points per country per year for Russia) started to award Russia with more points over the years. These developments suggest that musical quality plays a subordinate role, especially considering that both countries each won the contest once between 2003 and 2008, and Ukraine additionally scored an overall victory in 2016, even though Russia won in 2016 by televoting only.⁶² Both countries regularly display highly regarded musical quality, but bilateral, centralized, and outsider voting shifted between 0.3 to 2.0 points in either direction. In the comparison, Russia gained ground on Ukraine in terms of popularity among the CEECs, while both countries earned more points from non-CEECs on average from 2016 on. Consequently, reciprocity between Russia and Ukraine declined. Marked presumably by the outbreak of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and Russia's consequent exclusion from the ESC in 2022, the CEECs' perception of Ukraine changed again. Between 2022 and 2025, the country was awarded an average of 10.1 points per CEEC per year, which amounts to double the points awarded previously. This behavior suggests a shift from centralized to pooled solidarity but may also be attributed to the vacuum Russia's expulsion left. The points awarded from non-CEECs continues to further grow to 7.2 on average per country and year during the 2020s. Overall, these shifts in televoting suggested that they cannot solely be linked to the countries' actual performance in the competition and that reciprocal obligations in the ESC setting are indeed continuously renegotiated rather than reflexively reproduced.

⁶² Eurovision Song Contest, "Russia" Eurovision Song Contest, accessed January 20, 2026, <https://eurovision.tv/country/russia>; Eurovision Song Contest, "Ukraine," Eurovision Song Contest, accessed January 20, 2026, <https://eurovision.tv/country/ukraine>.

Following Yair and Maman's approach, the consistent overvaluation of each other by the CEECS reinforces that interpretation. This might seem to be a coincidence or a result of the quality and public image of countries like Ukraine and Russia, but does not explain cases like Latvia, which is overvalued by CEECS regardless of performance. Whether Latvia finishes 5th or 16th, it continues to receive comparatively stronger support from CEECS than other participants. Across the bloc, the pattern is consistent. High points were likely to be answered with high points in return, regardless of placement. This was especially true for Ukraine–Poland and Romania–Moldova, suggesting that the acknowledgment of existing relationships outweighs musical merit as a structural feature of CEEC televoting.

Thank You, Europe!

This paper set out to examine whether televoting patterns among CEECS in the ESC can be interpreted as forms of ritualized reciprocal gift-giving. The findings suggest that such an interpretation offers an important complement to existing explanations centered on geography, cultural proximity, and strategic voting, to understand what these recurring exchanges mean socially and emotionally. Also, instead, of viewing televotes solely as expressions of musical preference, they can be read as symbolic gifts exchanged within a recurring ritual that continually reproduces relationships between national communities.

From a Maussian perspective, the ESC emerges as a contemporary total social phenomenon. Like the *potlatch*, it is simultaneously political, cultural, moral, and emotional. Hence, the annual exchange of points becomes a public act through which national audiences nurture their relations with one another. The contest itself provides the setting in which these symbolic exchanges become socially meaningful. Komter's concept of gratitude enriches this interpretation. Although gratitude cannot be measured directly through televoting statistics, its social effects become visible in the persistence of reciprocal exchanges across successive contests that suggest reaffirmed mutual recognition and belonging to the bloc. The annual rhythm of Eurovision enables the recurring sequence of *gift* < *gratitude* < *counter-gift*, even when the exchanges are neither immediate nor perfectly symmetrical. Instead, reciprocal support mostly circulates through wider networks of countries, which indicates that solidarity is frequently expressed collectively and, at times, pooled. On the one hand, the symbolic points awarded therefore reinforce individual relationships as well as broader relations in the regional community.

On the other hand, attention should not only be paid to gifts that are exchanged, but also to gifts that are withheld. Within a system in which reciprocal giving is ritualized and socially meaningful, the absence of a counter-gift or the reduction of support also carries meaning. Both may signal the weakening of social ties between nations or changes in political relationships just as clearly as generous exchanges do.

Overall, future research could more regularly combine quantitative voting patterns with qualitative approaches, such as audience interviews or discourse analysis, to explore how viewers view their own giving, withholding, and counter giving of points. Such work would, especially when viewed in the context of the Asian Song Contest, scheduled to begin in 2026, contribute to the deepening of our understanding not only of why countries vote as they do, but also of how the ESC functions as a ritual through which contemporary European relationships are continually shaped.



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NATALIE BAUER

She obtained a M.A. of European Studies: Transnational and Global Perspectives at KU Leuven, Belgium, during the research to this article. Her research focuses on visual communication, specifically stickers, and the democratic use of public space.