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Performing Europeanization

The Case of the Post-Yugoslav Countries

Abstract

The Eurovision Song Contest (ESC) is not merely a normative platform for the projection of Western soft power, but also a stage on which (trans)national identity formation can play out. This article examines how two post-Yugoslav Southeastern European states, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia, have used their ESC entries since 1992 to articulate divergent strategies of Europeanization. Drawing on scholarship on Balkanism, nation-state branding, and the politics of aesthetics, this paper analyses Bosnia-Herzegovina's 1993 debut entry *Sva bol svijeta* by Fazla, staged amid the siege of Sarajevo, alongside Serbia's 2022 entry *In Corpore Sano* by Konstrakta, which reappropriates Orthodox religious imagery to critique the commercialization of self-care. Through close readings of performance, lyrics, and staging, this paper argues that while the ESC presents itself as apolitical, its nation-state-based structure makes it a potent platform for performing national identity. It concludes that Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia illustrate distinct artistic strategies—dissentient

protest and critical reappropriation, respectively—through which post-Yugoslav states have contested and reshaped normative expectations of European belonging on the Eurovision stage.

Keywords

Eurovision Song Contest, Europeanization, Yugoslavia, Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Konstrakta, Fazla, performance and performativity

Abstrakt

Realizacja europeizacji: Przypadek krajów postjugosłowiańskich

Konkurs Piosenki Eurowizji to nie tylko normatywne forum oddziaływania „miękiej siły” Zachodu, ale także scena, na której może rozgrywać się proces kształtowania tożsamości (trans)narodowej. W artykule zostało omówione, w jaki sposób państwa południowo-wschodniej Europy powstałe po rozpadzie Jugosławii – Bośnia i Hercegowina oraz Serbia – od 1992 wykorzystywały zgłoszenia konkursowe do wyrażania odmiennych strategii europeizacji. Czerpiąc z badań nad bałkanizmem, brandingiem państw narodowych i polityką estetyki, autor analizuje zaprezentowany w trakcie obłężenia Sarajewa debiutancki utwór Bośni i Hercegowiny *Sva bol svijeta* (1993) w wykonaniu Fazli. Zestawia go z serbskim kandydatem z 2022, *In Corpore Sano* Konstrakty, który przechwytuje prawosławną symbolikę religijną, by skrytykować komercjalizację zabiegów pielęgnacyjnych spod znaku self-care. Na podstawie analizy występów, tekstów piosenek i inscenizacji autor dowodzi, że choć Konkurs Piosenki Eurowizji deklaruje się jako apolityczny, jego oparta na państwach narodowych struktura czyni go ważnym forum performatywnej realizacji tożsamości narodowej. Przedstawione badania pozwalają wysnuć wniosek, że przypadki Bośni i Hercegowiny oraz Serbii ilustrują odmienne strategie artystyczne – protest wyrażający sprzeciw oraz krytyczne przechwycenie – za pomocą których państwa postjugosłowiańskie podważają i przekształcają normatywne oczekiwania dotyczące europejskości na scenie Eurowizji.

Słowa kluczowe

Konkurs Piosenki Eurowizji, europeizacja, Jugosławia, Serbia, Bośnia-Hercegowina, Konstrakta, Fazla, performans a performatywność

Introduction

Since its inception in the 1950s, the Eurovision Song Contest (ESC) has emerged as an important instrument to project Western soft power in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and beyond.¹ In the context of the Cold War, both the structure and the symbolic narrative of the ESC was aimed at providing a multi-party democratic and capitalist alternative to the socialist brotherhood of nations. However, this symbolic narrative is complicated by the participation of socialist Yugoslavia, which first entered the ESC in 1961 and would continue to compete until its dissolution in the 1990s. The presence of Yugoslavia in the ESC was a potent symbol of the importance of “performing Europeanization”²—to stage a country’s belonging to Europe—through participation in the contest even before the end of state socialism in the early 1990s. It underlined the modern and European character of Yugoslav society, while simultaneously symbolically and culturally separating it from the Warsaw Pact countries in CEE.³ However, the nation-state structure of the ESC obscured the differences and divergencies between the various constituent republics, which was simultaneously copied in the Yugoslav pre-selection process, which pitted the constituent republics and autonomous provinces against each other and which was popularly known as *Jugovizija*.

The ESC is not merely a normative platform for Western soft power projection, but also a stage on which (trans)national identity formation can play out. The dissolution of Yugoslavia into several independent Southeastern European nation-states provides an interesting case study of the artistic strategies deployed in the performance of Europeanization since the end of the Cold War. Not only is this process highly normative, in the sense that it entails conforming to hegemonic Western European expectations on what it means “to be European,” but it is also a highly performative process through which countries such as Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia have tried to redefine themselves as either more or less European.

This paper will take a closer look at the artistic strategies deployed by acts sent by two post-Yugoslav Southeastern European nation-states (Bosnia-Herzegovina

¹ Lisanne Wilken, “The Eurovision Song Contest as Cultural Diplomacy during the Cold War: Transmitting Western Attractiveness,” in *Machineries of Persuasion*, ed. Óscar J. Martín García and Rósa Magnúsdóttir (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2019).

² Shannon Jones and Jelena Subotic, “Fantasies of Power: Performing Europeanization on the European Periphery,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 14, no. 5 (October 2011): 542–557, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549411412199>.

³ Danijela Š. Beard and Ljerka V. Rasmussen, eds., *Made in Yugoslavia: Studies in Popular Music* (New York: Routledge, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315452333>.

and Serbia) to the ESC. This article does not argue that these two acts are representative for *all* ESC entries of *all* post-Yugoslav Southeastern European nation states but instead makes the case that these two case studies are representative of the divergent artistic strategies that post-Yugoslav Southeastern European nation-states have deployed to reassert their Europeanness through the ESC. It will argue that the ESC is not an apolitical stage on which countries come together, as the contest often likes to claim, but that the ESC instead functions as a platform for nation-states to perform their *nation-stateness*.

The Return of the Balkans: Bationalism(s) and the Break-up of Yugoslavia

In one of the most memorable scenes of the 2013 Hermann Vaske film, *Balkan Spirit*, the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek asks a loaded question: “where is Balkan?”⁴ Standing in front of a socialist-era geographical map of Southeast Europe, with Yugoslavia at the centre, Žižek starts to point out how the boundaries of the Balkans shift depending on where in the region the question is asked: the Slovenians see themselves as the final frontier of Western civilization; the Croats argue that their Catholicism marks the boundary between the West and the Balkans; whereas the Serbs stake a claim to European belonging through their Orthodox Christianity, which they contrast with Muslim Bosniaks and Kosovars. Žižek concludes with a quip that from a British viewpoint, all continental Europe is one big Balkan, with EU institutions in Brussels constituting a new Istanbul. While the boundaries between Western modernity and the Balkans may shift depending on who is asking the question, the answer remains essentially the same: the Balkans are not an undisputed geographical or territorial unit, but instead a conceptual territoriality referring to a backwards Other. As Maria Todorova argued in her seminal 1997 work *Imagining the Balkans*, this form of “Balkanism” is inextricable from the identitarian self-fashioning of Western Europe after the end of the Cold War:

By being geographically inextricable from Europe, yet culturally constructed as ‘the other’ within, the Balkans have been able to absorb conveniently a number of externalized political, ideological, and cultural frustrations stemming from tensions and contradictions inherent to the regions and societies outside the Balkans. ... As in the case of the Orient, the Balkans have served as a repository

⁴ *Balkan Spirit*, dir. Hermann Vaske, 2013.

of negative characteristics against which a positive and self-congratulatory image of the “European” and the “West” has been constructed.⁵

Even though the contemporary notion of Balkanism draws on nineteenth century orientalist tropes on Southeast Europe,⁶ its contemporary form is inextricably linked to the disintegration of the Yugoslav state in the early 1990s, the Bosnian genocide, and the NATO bombing of Belgrade in 1999.

In the post-war era, the term “Balkans” was far less common as a referent in comparison with “Yugoslavia,” which in turn was less associated with backwardness and more with state socialist modernity, the performing arts,⁷ and tourism.⁸ This perception was bolstered by Yugoslav foreign policy which from 1961 onwards was a leading member of the Non-Aligned Movement and which sought to serve as a bridge between the West and Central and Eastern Europe (CEE).⁹ Unlike other state socialist countries, it was a member of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the Western-aligned European Broadcasting Union (EBU), the latter organization being one of the reasons why Yugoslavia became the only state socialist country to participate in the ESC. As Diana Mishkova argues in *Beyond Balkanism*:

For a while, in the 1960s and the early 1970s, it looked like the Balkans could successfully claim to play a balancing role in the confrontation between east and west and aspire, in the language of one politological report, “to turn the meaning of the notion of ‘balkanization’ upside down, erase it from the international political vocabulary as synonymous with an ‘explosive situation,’ and assert it as a synonym of good neighborliness.” In reality, however, such appeals were little more than a propagandistic weapon meant to attenuate to some extent the tensions inherent to a situation of rampant ideological hostility, militarized state borders, and pervasive secret services.¹⁰

Yugoslav domestic policy also followed a different path from other state socialist countries in CEE, as it began to devolve economic, social, and cultural policymaking away from central government to its constituent republics (Slovenia, Croatia,

⁵ Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans: Updated Edition* (New York: Oxford Academic, 2009), 188.

⁶ Diana Mishkova, *Beyond Balkanism: The Scholarly Politics of Region Making* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 43.

⁷ Marko Ilić, *A Slow Burning Fire: The Rise of the New Art Practice in Yugoslavia* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2021).

⁸ Hannes Grandits and Karin Taylor, eds., *Yugoslavia's Sunny Side: A History of Tourism in Socialism (1950s–1980s)* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2022).

⁹ Eric Burton, James Mark, and Steffi Marung, “Development,” in *Socialism Goes Global*, ed. James Mark and Paul Betts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 80.

¹⁰ Mishkova, *Beyond Balkanism*, 141.

Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, Macedonia) and autonomous provinces (Vojvodina and Kosovo).¹¹ Its economy moved away from the Soviet model of centrally run state-owned enterprises, instead developing a nominally market socialist economy based on worker self-management.

However, as the Yugoslav central government started to disintegrate under the pressures of a prolonged economic crisis and the rise of nationalist movements in its constituent republics and autonomous provinces,¹² the older orientalist ideas associated with the Balkans returned with a vengeance. As other post-communist countries in CEE were moving down the road of Westernization and modernization through the adoption of multi-party democracy, the introduction of a liberalized market economy, and ascendance to NATO and the EU,¹³ the former Yugoslavia was rocked by war and genocide. As a symbolic concept, the Balkans once again became a byword for backwardness, violence, and ethnic strife:

Balkanization came to define, in tautological fashion, the Balkans, and to separate this area off from the rest of Eastern Europe, now the home of transitology, and from Central Europe, site of a refurbished vision of Mitteleuropean civility. Popular media and academic analyses alike centered on the new-old gatekeeping category of nationalism, now stripped of positive connotations, as the quintessential feature of an unchangeable Balkan condition predicated upon its dissociation from developments in the rest of Europe.¹⁴

In the post-communist context of the 1990s, however, a fissure appeared between Slovenia and Croatia, which pre-breakup had been the wealthiest constituent republics and who had argued for independence, and the eastern post-Yugoslav states led by Serbia, who wanted to maintain a central Yugoslav government infused with Greater Serbian nationalism.¹⁵ But already before the NATO bombing of Belgrade and the overthrow of the authoritarian Yugoslav government of Serbian nationalist Slobodan Milošević by student protesters in 2000, there was a normative process underway of “de-Balkanization” driven by Western

¹¹ This is based on the 1974 constitution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, <https://www.worldstatesmen.org/Yugoslavia-Constitution1974.pdf>.

¹² Marie-Janine Calic, *History of Yugoslavia* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2019), 263.

¹³ Dan Hough, William E. Paterson, and James Sloam, eds., *Learning from the West? Policy Transfer and Programmatic Change in the Communist Successor Parties of Eastern and Central Europe* (Oxford: Routledge, 2006).

¹⁴ Mishkova, *Beyond Balkanism*, 211.

¹⁵ Calic, *History of Yugoslavia*, 271.

countries. This “radical Europeanization of the region through the massive introduction of European norms assumed to be alien to the region”¹⁶ grafted itself onto the pre-existing inequalities between the various post-Yugoslav states, allowing Slovenia to join NATO and the EU in 2004, followed by Croatia in 2009 (NATO) and 2013 (EU) respectively. Consequently, the symbolic concept of the Balkans has become coterminous with the countries that were left out of these Western organizations, with an additional differentiation being made between the states that entered NATO but not the EU (Montenegro and North Macedonia) and those who are outside both institutions (Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo).¹⁷ The more peripheral the country, the more likely for it to be orientalized and Balkanized.

The Eurovision Song Contest as Symbolic and Political Stage: Direct Protest and Refusal in Fazla’s *Sva bol svijeta* (Bosnia-Herzegovina, 1993)

Balkanism as a lens through which the Western European core produced knowledge about the Southeaster European periphery resurged in the 1990s and raised the stakes of symbolic performance spaces like the Eurovision Song Contest (ESC). Since its inaugural edition in Switzerland in 1956, the ESC and its organizer, the EBU, have maintained that the contest is apolitical and primarily intended to foster cultural exchange across national borders through music.¹⁸ However, as the Croatian ESC scholar Dean Vuletic has shown, the structure of the ESC as a competition between representatives of nation-states has had the effect of reproducing and reinforcing the cultural boundaries of those same nation-states:

Despite the shared Eurovision Network programmes, the multinational squads behind ESC entries or the experience of Americanization, popular music and television still largely developed in the postwar era within national structures and their growth was connected to national economic and technological advancements.¹⁹

¹⁶ Mishkova, *Beyond Balkanism*, 212.

¹⁷ Jelena Radoman, *Serbia and NATO: From Enemies to Partners* (Belgrade: Centre for Security Policy, 2012).

¹⁸ Tom Coupe and Natalia Chaban, “Creating Europe through Culture? The Impact of the European Song Contest on European Identity,” *Empirica* 47, no. 4 (November 2020): 885–908.

¹⁹ Dean Vuletic, *Postwar Europe and the Eurovision Song Contest* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 78.

As such, there is a paradox at the center of the ESC: the contest can only claim to be apolitical if it obscures the politicality of its structure. To achieve this, it uses several complementary strategies, such as its strict adherence to nation-state representation, with no exceptions for multinational states. This naturalizes the nation state through its implicit acceptance of the unity of nations, states, languages, and peoples, which creates complications for countries with burgeoning nationalist movements and/or multiple public broadcasters, such as Belgium. This also runs counter to the EBU's argument that its nation-state-based structure is a consequence of it being a union of public broadcasters: to again use Belgium as an example, its two public broadcasting organizations (VRT and RTBF) are both members of the EBU, but because they both operate in the same nation state they are forced to alternate their participation in the ESC biannually. This logic is also extended to the ESC voting system, where both the jury vote and the public vote are nation-state based, with strict rules against nation states voting for their own national representative. While this structure can be defended on a practical and/or pragmatic basis, that does not change the fact that the ESC reproduces normative national identities through its staging, both to domestic and international audiences.²⁰

Reconceptualizing the ESC as a thoroughly political stage makes it possible to deconstruct and demystify the myriad ways in which it contributes to the creation of cultural artefacts that perform “the imagined community” of the nation.²¹ Here it should be noted that a crucial factor in its symbolic and political power comes from its popular appeal, as it reaches millions of people across the continent and beyond.²² Authoritarian regimes in southern Europe recognized the political potential of this mass reach early on; countries such as Greece, Portugal, and Spain used the ESC to whitewash their regimes in the 1960s and 1970s.²³ The political significance of nation-state representation was also shown with West Germany's 1982 victory, when the singer Nicole won with *Ein Bißchen Frieden* (A Little Bit of Peace), which sent a clear message to the rest of post-war Europe that the country had—in symbolic terms—left behind its militaristic

²⁰ While it is true that there is no nationality requirement for an artist to represent any given country in the ESC (see: Vuletic, *Postwar Europe and the Eurovision Song Contest*, 87), that does not change the fact that a given artist represents a nation state first and foremost as opposed to their own artistic work. Even in the case of break-out successes such as ABBA, they are forever associated with Swedish national identity and the Swedish pop industry.

²¹ Benedict Richard O'Gorman Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2016).

²² Ben Wellings and Julie Kalman, “Entangled Histories: Identity, Eurovision and European Integration,” in *Eurovision: Identity and the International Politics of the Eurovision Song Contest since 1956*, ed. Julie Kalman et al. (Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore, 2019), 17.

²³ Vuletic, *Postwar Europe and the Eurovision Song Contest*, 79.

past and would not seek to restore its pre-war borders. This makes it a good example of what the French philosopher Jacques Rancière termed “the politics of aesthetics,” which he defined as “the practices and modes of visibility of art that re-configure the fabric of sensory experience.”²⁴ While Rancière argued in favour of emancipatory political art generating “dissensus,” the obverse is applicable in the case of Nicole’s ESC victory: instead of effecting “a dissensual re-configuration of the common experience of the sensible,”²⁵ her performance represented a form of Rancièrian “consensus.”²⁶ To the millions of Europeans who tuned in for the 1982 ESC, the question whether Nicole’s message represented or critiqued the minutia of West German foreign policy was irrelevant, as it instead symbolized a consensual representation of a political reconfiguration of West German national identity that had been underway since the late 1960s.

The political potential of the ESC’s mass audience was most evident in Bosnia-Herzegovina’s 1993 debut entry, *Sva bol svijeta* (All the Pain in the World) by Fazla. The country had declared independence from Yugoslavia in 1992 but found itself split along ethnic lines between Bosniaks, Serbs, and Croats, which culminated into the 1992-1995 Bosnian War and the Bosnian genocide. In order to take the ESC stage at Millstreet, Ireland, Fazla had to smuggle himself out of besieged Sarajevo, risking his life in the process.²⁷ In this context, a simple love song such as *Sva bol svijeta* has a clear political meaning:

Ja ne mogu skinuti zvijezde sa neba
Ne mogu naći put, put do svemira
Al’ ti mogu ovu pjesmu poslati
Da znaš da sam živ, ljubavi

I can’t take the stars out of the sky
I can’t find a way, a way to the universe
But I can send you this song
So you know I’m alive, my love

Kad se noćas na mom licu suze zalede
Neću dati da me strah sa sobom povede
Ja još imam snage sam da pobijedim
Da smo zajedno, lakše bilo bi

When the tears freeze on my face tonight
I won’t let fear take me with me
I still have the strength to win alone
If we were together, it would be easier

²⁴ Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, trans. Steven Corcoran (London: Continuum, 2010), 140.

²⁵ Rancière, *Dissensus*.

²⁶ Rancière, 27.

²⁷ Nina Markovic Khaze, “Negotiating Post-War Nationhood: Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and the Eurovision Song Contest,” in *Eurovision: Identity and the International Politics of the Eurovision Song Contest since 1956*, 102.

Sva bol svijeta je noćas u Bosni
 Ostajem da bolu prkosim
 I nije me strah stati pred zid
 Ja znam da zapjevam, ja znam da
 pobijedim

All the pain in the world is in Bosnia tonight
 I stay to defy the pain
 I'm not afraid to stand in front of the wall
 I know how to sing, I know how to win

As this excerpt of the first verse and the chorus shows, the imagery deployed by Fazla is better understood as a metaphor for the suffering that Bosniaks were then undergoing, a point which is underscored by the direct reference to Bosnia in the chorus. To underscore the point, the singer turned his back on the ESC audience in the middle of his performance, in a symbolic gesture meant to underline how Western Europe had turned its back on the Balkans. In doing so, Fazla generated a form of Rancièrian dissensus, as his performance was a dissonant note in the ESC spectacle, where a country firmly at the periphery of Europe used the ESC stage to talk back to the hegemonic center of Europeanization. While the Western European core was basking in the afterglow of the end of the Cold War and busy transforming the European Community into the European Union, a process that also directly impacted the ESC as many former state-socialist countries debuted at the contest for the first time in the early 1990s, the performance of Fazla resonated as a dissonant note. The urgency of the situation, with bombs dropping on Sarajevo on a daily basis, motivated the Bosnian delegation to adopt an artistic strategy of direct protest and a symbolic refusal to face the Millstreet audience—and by extension the television audience throughout the continent. The potency of this direct intervention came in the fact that it made it painfully clear how the ESC habitually obfuscates the inherent politicality of its symbolic stage.

In 2000, the ESC tried to counter accusations of politicization of its symbolic stage by banning overt political messaging,²⁸ but ironically this has only reinforced the political potency of the contest. Good examples of this are Israel, which has been regularly accused of using the ESC as a stage to “pinkwash”²⁹ its settler-colonialist project in Palestine; and Ukraine, which was able to use the ESC as a means to rally public support as it sought to defend itself against Russian aggression after 2014.³⁰ There are limits to the overt politicization of the ESC: both

²⁸ Vuletic, *Postwar Europe and the Eurovision Song Contest*, 170.

²⁹ Mikko Joronen and Mark Griffiths, *Encountering Palestine: Un/making Spaces of Colonial Violence* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2023), <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/111185>.

³⁰ Catherine Baker, David Atkinson, Barbara Grabher, and Michael Howcroft, “Soft Power, Cultural Relations and Conflict through Eurovision and Other Mega-Events: A Literature Review,” British Council, 2024, 39, <https://doi.org/10.57884/MB1H-DT68>.

Russia and Belarus were banned indefinitely in 2022 for their blatant violation of EBU guidelines after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. However, it is relatively rare for public broadcasters to send overtly political performances, as the politicality of the ESC lies precisely in its naturalization of nation-states and its professed apoliticality, which confers significant symbolic legitimacy to whichever artist gets to represent a given nation-state.

Performing Europe: The Politics of Europeanization on the ESC Stage and the Case of *In Corpore Sano* by Konstrakta (Serbia, 2022)

A tension can be observed in the ESC between its function as a stage for cultural artefacts that reproduce the imagined community of a given nation-state, and its transnational scope, which has meant that over time the ESC has become an important cultural artefact *in-and-of-itself*, in the process contributing to a transnational European imagined community. This tension is most visible on the periphery of the EU, where according to Shannon Jones and Jelena Subotić the ESC has become a potent stage to “perform Europeanization”:

we understand the Eurovision Song Contest to be a valuable stage for conducting everyday politics among European nations as a form of state identity branding and status signalling. ... Europeanization, further, entails a determination by “core” European states as to which states on the “periphery” deserve membership in the European society based on how much they live up to European rules or values that Europe holds dear. ... The EU increasingly defines what it means to be “European” by imbuing “Europeanness” with civic liberal values.³¹

As countries on the periphery of the EU, in particular in CEE and in Southeast Europe, seek to conform to the normative expectations from the West, it leads to a bifurcation in the ways in which they perform their national identity through cultural artefacts:

We argue that when faced with perceived or real structural power inequalities in the European sphere, states on the European periphery use everyday cultural practices – such as music festivals and sporting events—as ‘hidden transcripts’ that project fantasies of power and equality. ... They send one set of cultural messages

³¹ Jones and Subotić, “Fantasies of Power,” 544–545.

abroad ('We are European,' 'We look and sound European'), with a very different message directed at home ('We know what Europeans want us to be, but we are still ourselves—our identity is secure').³²

It is not necessarily a new phenomenon that the ESC is used as a stage to perform Europeanization, as arguably shown by Israel's 1978 and 1979 victories, or Yugoslavia's 1989 victory with the Italo-pop inspired *Rock Me* by the Croatian band Riva. What is new, however, is the intensification of Europeanization as a performance strategy from the 1990s onwards, as the former state socialist countries of CEE and Southeast Europe joined the EBU and saw participation in the ESC as a pop cultural counterpart to their integration with the economic, political, and security structures of Western Europe.³³

A recent ESC entry that exemplifies contemporary artistic strategies to perform Europeanization can be found in Serbia's entry in 2022, *In Corpore Sano* by Konstrakta. Legally one of the successor states to Yugoslavia, the history of Serbian participation in the ESC has been turbulent: between 1993 and 2003 it was banned (as Yugoslavia and later as Bosnia-Herzegovina) from participation due to its role in the Yugoslav Wars. After the overthrow of the authoritarian government of Slobodan Milošević in 2000 and the reconstitution of Yugoslavia into Serbia-Montenegro in 2003, it re-entered the ESC in 2004 with *Lane Moje* (My Darling) by Željko Joksimović which came second in the final. This started a trend of Serbia sending self-exoticizing/self-Balkanizing songs which emphasized its Orthodox and Ottoman heritage, an artistic strategy aimed at differentiating it from the Western European norm while simultaneously claiming its place within a wider European identity.³⁴ Participating in 2007 for the first time as an independent nation-state, Serbia immediately won with *Molitva* (Prayer) by Marija Šerifović, in the eyes of Shannon Jones and Jelena Subotić an archetypal example of a cultural artefact performing contemporary Europeanization.³⁵ This initial success was replicated in 2012 when the country again sent Željko Joksimović as its national representative, this time with the power ballad *Nije Ljubav Stvar* (Love Is Not An Object) scoring third place in the final. However, Serbia was unable to sustain its string of successes, and between 2013

³² Jones and Subotić, 546.

³³ Jones and Subotić cite Estonia's 2001 ESC victory (*Everybody* by Tanel Padar, Dave Benton & 2xL) and Serbia's 2007 ESC victory (*Molitva* by Marija Šerifović) as representative of the ESC as a stage to perform Europeanization in CEE and Southeast Europe.

³⁴ Khaze Markovic, "Negotiating Post-War Nationhood," 93.

³⁵ Jones and Subotić, "Fantasies of Power," 550.

and 2022 it regularly failed to qualify and received only middling scores. This changed in 2022 with its submission of *In Corpore Sano* written and performed by Konstrakta. Initially an underdog who entered the Serbian pre-selections³⁶ primarily to promote her new art project *Triptih*,³⁷ she unexpectedly became a sensation, winning both the jury vote and the televote.³⁸ This enthusiasm carried over to the ESC stage, where her performance placed fifth in the grand finale largely due to televoting,³⁹ which allowed Serbia to crack the top ten for the first time in a decade.

An example of experimental pop (or avant-pop),⁴⁰ in the live performances of *In Corpore Sano* Konstrakta takes center stage, sitting in a cathedra or bishop's chair, while in front of her there is a small stand holding an Orthodox holy water bowl. She is wearing a white jumpsuit decorated with a variant of a black Christian cross and red carnations, which are traditionally used in Orthodox liturgy to be placed around the cross. The song starts with backing vocalists singing "Onas eroproc ni imrifni snem", which is "Mens infirmi in corpore sano" spelled backwards: "A healthy mind in a healthy body." From the very beginning of the performance, it is made clear to the spectator that Konstrakta will be using Orthodox imagery and symbolism throughout the song: whether it is in the title and the lyrics, her outfit, or the staging of her ESC performance. But unlike Joksimović's and Šerifović's ESC entries, whose use of traditional music and Orthodox symbolism fit within a conservative appropriation of Serbian tradition and culture, Konstrakta from the outset of her performance makes it clear that her use of Orthodox imagery is a form of critical reappropriation. Whether it is through the backwards singing of well-known religious proverbs, or the blasphemy of staging female backing singers as Orthodox priests, it becomes clear quickly that Konstrakta is not willing to cede the ground to political and cultural conservatives when it comes to Serbian traditional culture. At the same time, the ways in which she reappropriates Orthodox imagery through reconfiguration and citation made it possible for church leaders to praise the song.⁴¹ In that sense, her use of Orthodox symbolism can be understood as an

³⁶ These are colloquially known as *Beovizija*, a direct reference to the former *Jugovizija*.

³⁷ *Triptych / In Corpore Sano* forms the middle part of this three-part music project.

³⁸ Ana Kalaba, "Pesma o zdravlju je samo deo Konstraktinog Triptiha—pogledajte ceo video," nova portal, March 6, 2022, <https://nova.rs/magazin/lifestyle/pesma-za-evroviziju-je-samo-deo-konstraktinog-triptiha-pogledajte-ceo-video/>.

³⁹ "Results of the Grand Final of Turin 2022—Eurovision Song Contest."

⁴⁰ Paul Grimstad, "What Is Avant-Pop? | The Brooklyn Rail," *The Brooklyn Rail*, September 2007.

⁴¹ Mo Fanning, "Serbian Turbo-Folk Singer Threatens RTs with Eurovision Lawsuit—Oneurope.Co.Uk," March 16, 2022.

example of Rancièrian dissensus, in the sense that it generates a tension that forces the spectator to reflect on what they are watching.

Once Konstrakta starts singing, it becomes clear that the song deals thematically with health. She asks: “Koja li je tajna zdrave kose Megan Markl?,” what could be the secret behind Megan Markle’s healthy hair? She proceeds to explain the importance of hydration, and how skin and hair indicate how healthy an individual is. This leads into the refrain of the song, which states:

A umetnica mora biti zdrava	And the artist ought to be healthy:
Biti zdrava, biti zdrava	to be healthy, to be healthy
Biti zdrava, biti-biti-biti-biti zdrava	to be healthy, to be, to be, to be, to be
	healty
Biti zdrava, biti zdrava	to be healthy, to be healthy
Biti zdrava mora, mora, mora	to be healthy, to be, to be, to be

This refrain is repeated twice throughout the song and sounds like a mantra, establishing a parallel between the repetitive character of religious rituals and the commercialization of healthcare through the mantra of self-care routines. The reappropriation of Orthodox rituals in the performance should then be understood as a dissensual reconfiguration of skincare as a religious ritual, while also desacralizing religious rituals as something bodies do in the present, in the process establishing a link between past tradition and present cultural practices. In doing so, Konstrakta manages to reappropriate religious practices in a playful way without resorting to mocking or sarcasm, while also avoiding a reification that places traditional rituals over the lives of human beings. From this perspective, it is possible to say that *In Corpore Sano* sidesteps the Balkanization/de-Balkanization binary that was reimposed on the region after the disintegration of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s. As a form of performance art, the song and its ESC performance succeed in mixing traditional Serbian Orthodox ritual with the Yugoslav performance art tradition that was made famous by Marina Abramović in the 1970s.⁴² By blending these two different traditions, Konstrakta succeeds in performing Serbia’s Europeanness without resorting to strategies of Westernization or Balkanization.

⁴² “Pozadina pjesme kojom će Konstrakta predstavljati Srbiju na Eurosongu 2022 i zašto je toliko genijalna |,” ВУКА, March 6, 2022, <https://gyka.com/bih/pozadina-pjesme-kojom-ce-konstrakta-predstavljati-srbiju-na-eurosongu-2022-i-zasto-je-toliko-genijalna/>.

Conclusion

The cases of Fazla's *Sva bol svijeta* and Konstrakta's *In Corpore Sano* demonstrate that the Eurovision Song Contest, far from being the apolitical cultural exchange the EBU claims it to be, functions as a potent stage on which post-Yugoslav nation-states negotiate their contested belonging to Europe. Bosnia-Herzegovina's 1993 entry, staged under the literal conditions of siege and genocide, deployed a strategy of direct protest: its dissensual refusal to face the Millstreet audience made visible the very obfuscation that allows the ESC to present itself as apolitical in the first place. Nearly three decades later, Serbia's 2022 entry pursued a markedly different strategy, one of critical reappropriation, using Orthodox liturgical imagery not to assert a conservative, self-exoticizing national identity but to destabilize and reconfigure it, folding it into the aesthetics of Yugoslav-era performance art and contemporary critiques of self-care culture.

For nearly seven decades, the Eurovision Song Contest has provided a platform for nation-states to perform their Europeaness in one form or another. Just as the normative concept of Europeaness has shifted throughout the second half of the twentieth century and the first three decades of the twenty-first century, so have the artistic strategies to perform that Europeaness changed over time. This has become particularly visible after the end of state socialism in the late 1980s and early 1990s, as former state socialist countries from CEE and Southeast Europe joined the ESC stage. Due to the ESC offering a symbolic space for nation-states to perform their belonging to the Western European core, while simultaneously being more accessible than economic, political, and security-based organizations such as the EU and NATO, it became one of the most important symbolic spaces for the new nation-states of Southeast Europe to announce themselves to the rest of the continent as legitimate.

At the same time, there is a tension and irony in the fact that a song contest that is based entirely around nation-state competition, has also become a symbol of a nebulous pan-European cultural identity. As Dean Vuletić argues in his book *Postwar Europe and the Eurovision Song Contest*, in the popular imaginary the ESC has become associated with the European Union despite not being a part of its institutional framework. It points towards the importance of popular culture as a political space, while also indicating how even the most nation-state centric events such as the ESC can be used to subvert and undermine the naturalization of the nation-state.



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