

Marcin Bogucki

University of Warsaw (PL)

ORCID: 0000-0002-5349-1208

Polish Aspirations

On Edyta Górniak's Song *To nie ja!*

Abstract

This article analyses Edyta Górniak's song *To nie ja!*, which placed second at the Eurovision Song Contest in 1994. Górniak's entry can be seen as an example of the transformation discourse of the postcommunist 1990s, in which the question of Polish aspirations is raised. The article focuses on press discourses that present the main narratives of success and scandal in the mainstream media, supplementing them with existing biographical and autobiographical sources. In addition, the article analyses the song, linking it with the political reality of the early 1990s in Poland. It concludes with a reflection on the role of nation branding in the country's first ESC entry, filling a knowledge gap existing in Eurovision Studies.

Keywords

Eurovision Song Contest, Edyta Górniak, Poland, nation branding, postcommunism

Abstrakt

Polskie aspiracje: *To nie ja!* Edyty Górniak

W niniejszym artykule został poddany analizie utwór Edyty Górniak *To nie ja!*, który zajął drugie miejsce w Konkursie Piosenki Eurowizji w 1994. Piosenkę można

rozpatrywać jako egzemplifikację postkomunistycznego dyskursu transformacyjnego lat dziewięćdziesiątych poruszającego kwestię polskich aspiracji. Artykuł skupia się przede wszystkim na recepcji utworu w prasie głównego nurtu, w której na plan pierwszy wysuwają się tematy sukcesu i skandalu towarzyszącego występowi. Zasób ten został poszerzony o źródła biograficzne i autobiograficzne. W tekście przedstawiono analizę piosenki i zaproponowano, w jaki sposób można połączyć ją z rzeczywistością polityczną wczesnych lat dziewięćdziesiątych w Polsce. Artykuł wieńczy refleksja na temat konstruowania polskiego brandingu narodowego podczas eurowizyjnego debiutu, wypełniając lukę w istniejących badaniach nad Konkursem Piosenki Eurowizji.

Słowa kluczowe

Konkurs Piosenki Eurowizji, Edyta Górniak, Polska, branding narodowy, postkomunizm

Poland and Eurovision

Poland made its debut at the Eurovision Song Contest (ESC) in 1994 with Edyta Górniak and the song *To nie ja!* ('That's not me!'). This first entry immediately placed second, which remains the best result achieved by the country in its 30-year participation in the ESC. This performance is significant locally but has become a notable ESC moment of the 1990s, confirmed by the artist's appearance on the Eurovision Legends podcast. Success and scandal—those are the keywords that defined Górniak's rise to stardom in the 1990s. In this article, I will analyze which factors led to such a high placement in the ESC and, as far as possible, reconstruct the controversy surrounding the performance. To accomplish this, I will focus on the discourse on Górniak in the mainstream media, supplementing it with existing biographical and autobiographical sources. I will also analyze the song and show how the entire performance can be seen as a discursive example of post-communist transformation in the early 1990s. I will conclude this text with my reflections on Polish nation branding at the ESC.

In Eurovision Studies, the topic of Polish entries is exceedingly rare. There is a lack of chapters devoted to it in major collective volumes.¹ Local research is also extremely limited and consists only of a few texts on the applicability of queer theory, sociology, or psephology,² focusing on social media or Eurovision in the context of other arts,³ while newly published books are written by fans.⁴ Three articles form an exception to this rule, but neither of them focuses

¹ Ivan Raykoff and Robert Deam Tobin, eds., *A Song for Europe: Popular Music and Politics in the Eurovision Song Contest* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2007); Dafni Tragaki, ed., *Empire of Song Europe and Nation in the Eurovision Song Contest* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2013); Karen Fricker and Milija Gluhovic, eds., *Performing the 'New' Europe: Identities, Feelings and Politics in the Eurovision Song Contest* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Julie Kalman, Ben Wellings and Keshia Jacotine, eds., *Eurovision: Identity and the International Politics of Eurovision Song Contest since 1956* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

² Marcin Bogucki, "Queerowanie Eurowizji: Szesnaście lat po wyoutowaniu," *Widok. Teorie i praktyki kultury wizualnej*, no. 5 (2014), <https://doi.org/10.36854/widok/2014.5.1142>; Bartosz Korinth, "Język narodowy jako wyróżnik tożsamości kulturowej wobec procesu integracji europejskiej na przykładzie Konkursu Piosenki Eurowizji w latach 2000–2016," *Media – Culture – Social Communication* 1, no. 14 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.31648/mkks.2951>; Daniel Patuba, "Konkurs Piosenki Eurowizji jako przedmiot badania socjologicznego," *Studia Socjologiczno-Polityczne. Seria Nowa*, no. 1 (2020): 147–159, <https://ojs.academicon.pl/ssp/article/view/10939/11015>; Oliwia Szelaąg, "Problem stronniczości w ocenie dzieł popkultury stworzonych z wykorzystaniem sztucznej inteligencji: Analiza porównawcza Konkursu Piosenki Eurowizji i A1 Song Contest (2020–2022)," *Com.press* 6, no. 1 (2023): 100–117, <https://doi.org/10.51480/compress.2023.6-1.532>; "Zmiany zasad głosowania w Konkursie Piosenki Eurowizji a problem stronniczości (2016–2023)," *Refleksje. Pismo naukowe studentów i doktorantów WNPiD UAM*, no. 23 (2023): 59–77, <https://doi.org/10.14746/r.2023.1.5>.

³ Anna G. Piotrowska, "The Vision of the Balkans in Musical Culture: Between Viennese Operetta and Eurovision," *Journal of Religion and Society* 19 (2019): 124–135; Alicja Orent and Paweł Obrycki, "Wizerunek Eurowizji w mediach społecznościowych i na portalach internetowych w Polsce – skandale i 'obciach narodowy' czy festiwal muzyczny? Analiza 67. Konkursu Piosenki Eurowizji," in *Aktualne problemy badawcze*, ed. Magdalena Golińska-Konecko, vol. 3, *Nauki humanistyczne i społeczno-pedagogiczne* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2023).

⁴ Kamil Polewski, *Eurowizja: Historia, muzyka, polityka* (Warszawa: Kamil Polewski, 2020).

on Górniak. In the first one entitled *The Eurovision Song Contest—A Continent (still) Divided?* Anna G. Piotrowska, in addition to Serbian and Russian performances, focuses on Donatan and Cleo's song *My Słowianie—We Are Slavic* (2014). The second one is *Cosmopolitan Empire: Central and Eastern Europeans at the Eurovision Song Contest* by Katrin Sieg, which interprets Ich Troje's song *Keine Grenzen—Żadnych granic* (2003).⁵ The latter text can be seen as problematic, as the author uses an incorrect spelling of the singer's last name (Wiszniewski instead of Wiśniewski) and confuses band member Justyna Majkowska with the lead singer's wife, Marta Wiśniewska, who performed with Wiśniewski not in 2003 but 2006 with another song, which affects the interpretation of the entry. The third one is the most recent: "From *We are Slavic* to *My Sister's Crown*: Gender, Ethnicity, and Media Events" by José Luis Panea and José Patricio Pérez Rufi who compare two entries: aforementioned Polish one from 2014 and Czech from 2023 in the context of representation of Slavic women.⁶

Górniak's Path to ESC

In my query I focused on the Polish press: daily newspapers (*Gazeta Wyborcza*, *Rzeczpospolita*, *Sztandar Młodych*, *Trybuna*), women's magazines (*Claudia*, *Elle*, *Kobieta i Życie*, *Przyjaciółka*, *Naj*, *Twój Styl*, *Zwierciadło*), weeklies (*Angora*, *Antena*, *Gazeta Polska*, *Panorama*, *Polityka*, *Przegląd Tygodniowy*, *Przekrój*, *Nie*, *Tygodnik Powszechny*, *Wprost*) and monthlies (*Playboy*, *Sukces*), teenage magazines (*Bravo*, *Filipinka*), local newspapers (*Życie Warszawy*, *Trybuna Opolska*) and the only tabloid published at that time (*Super Express*). I focused on 1994, especially on the months before and after the Eurovision final that took place on April 30. I supplemented my research with later issues of the selected newspapers and magazines, the unauthorized biography *Edyta Górniak: Bez cenzury* by Piotr Krysiak, the autobiography of lyricist Jacek Cygan, *Życie jest piosenką*, the author behind the song,⁷ as well as TV footage.⁸

⁵ Anna G. Piotrowska, "The Eurovision Song Contest—A Continent (still) Divided?," *Journal of Historical Sociology* 33, no. 3 (2020): 371–388, <https://doi.org/10.1111/johs.12285>; Katrin Sieg, "Cosmopolitan Empire: Central and Eastern Europeans at the Eurovision Song Contest," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 16, no. 2 (2013): 244–263, <https://doi.org/10.1177/136754941245063>.

⁶ José Luis Panea and José Patricio Pérez Rufi, "From *We are Slavic* To *My Sister's Crown*: Gender, Ethnicity, and Media Events," *Visual Review* 16, no. 1 (2024): 107–123, <https://doi.org/10.62161/revvisual.v16.5176>.

⁷ Piotr Krysiak, *Edyta Górniak: Bez cenzury* (Warszawa: Akapit, 2005); Jacek Cygan, *Życie jest piosenką* (Kraków: Społeczny Instytut Wydawniczy Znak, 2014).

⁸ Lots of valuable materials can be found on the website Eurowizja.org prepared for the 25th anniversary of Polish debut.

I was surprised how little press material was produced on Poland's Eurovision debut, especially quality content in opinion news weeklies. Some brief mentions of the event in dailies do occur, but most articles come from women's magazines and teenage press. The only information about the Polish entry before the show comes from a tabloid, which includes a concise note and an interview. It is also mentioned in one newspaper for teenagers (*Sztandar Młodych*) and the TV guides of the most important dailies *Rzeczpospolita* and *Gazeta Wyborcza*.⁹ Articles after the ESC merge the two aforementioned narratives: scandal and success. Górniak's achievement and her tears of joy were counterpointed with ambivalent titles dealing with the topic of controversies.

Pride in the Górniak's result was intertwined with two scandals: one concerning the singer's behavior during the dress rehearsal, which was also the jury show, that could lead to disqualification, and the other focused on the song's authorship. Both issues are important in reconstructing the process of creating the song and the performance. The most important tropes in the press were portraying Górniak's life as a Cinderella story (Edyta, born in 1972, coming from a small town where she attended a school for beekeeping is now making an international career),¹⁰ the rising tide of her success after her appearance in the musical *Metro* (more about that later)¹¹ and the controversy over the artist's actual / alleged diva attitude.¹²

To reconstruct how Poland made its Eurovision debut and how the preparations for it unfolded is not an easy task. Many myths have surrounded the performance itself, and only recently, thanks to interviews with people involved, has the picture become a bit clearer.¹³ Poland could have entered the ESC as early as 1993, but did not do so for financial and organizational reasons (due to a new law regulating radio and television, and changes in television management). It finally appeared a year later, along with six other countries from Central and Eastern Europe making their Eurovision debut, which was the largest ever influx of new countries to the contest since the inaugural competition in 1956.

The first choice of TVP, the Polish public broadcaster, was the popular pop-rock singer Edyta Bartosiewicz, who turned down the offer. As Górniak recalled, she

⁹ Maciej Gajewski, "Kapryśne wysokie C," *Sztandar Młodych*, April 22–24, 1994, 22; Anna Sobczyk and Krystyna Baranowska, "Trzymamy kciuki za Edytę," *Super Express*, April 30–May 3, 1994, 19.

¹⁰ Edyta Górniak, "To nie ja skradłam niebo...", interview by Iwona Kwiecińska, *Panorama*, June 16, 1994, 4–6; Zdzisław Jucewicz, "Jestem po to, by kochać," *Przyjaciółka*, June 23, 1994, 14–15.

¹¹ Edyta Górniak, "Hit nie z metra," interview by Anna Bimer-Góralczyk, *Sukces*, no. 6 (1994): 59–62.

¹² "Młoda i kapryśna," *Claudia*, August 8, 1994; "Edyta Górniak: Co złego to nie ja," *Naj*, no. 1 (1994): 14.

¹³ Konrad Szczepny, "1994: Edyta Górniak," *Eurowizja.org*, accessed March 22, 2025, <https://eurowizja.org/25lat-1994-edyta-gorniak/>.

received a phone call from TVP at the end of 1993. At first, she thought the proposal was a joke because it seemed so unrealistic.¹⁴ The artist said this happened after her resignation from the musical *Metro*, although it may have been more about her decision to leave the Studio Buffo Theater where the show was performed. The artist was preparing three songs, two of them in secret from the Polish broadcaster. The first song, proposed by TVP, was written by entertainment industry legends: composer Włodzimierz Korcz and lyricist Wojciech Młynarski, but it did not appeal to Górniak. Wiktor Kubiak, her London manager and a wealthy businessman, came to her aid. He, or rather his partner at the time, singer Alicja Borkowska, found a song by Stanisław Syrewicz, a renowned composer of pop and film music living abroad. It was recorded in a poor-quality demo version, and at first, the singer found the song kitschy and the recording weak-sounding. Górniak's comment from 2016 regarding her creative path is telling. She was seen as a material for star who could build a career in the West, however the singer's aspirations differed from the manager's image:

[Kubiak] found a piece by a Polish composer who was living in France at the time. He played it to me and I didn't like it either! It was precisely *Ewa* [*To nie ja!*]. I didn't like that song, I didn't want it. I wanted a modern one, I wanted to be like Janet Jackson. Wiktor said: "Leave her, you're Céline Dion!"¹⁵

The first lyrics were written quickly by Borkowska's friend, lawyer Mariusz Ejsmont. Kubiak called him and presented the melody. The result was a love song:

Tak daleko Weronia	Verona is so far away
A ta miłość to o nas...	But this love is about us...
Ile odbyć mam słów	How many words do I have to hold
Aby ciebie przekonać?	To convince you?
Tak daleko Weronia	Verona is so far away
A my z dłońmi na dłoniach	And we holding our hands
Niecierpliwi do krwi	Impatient to the bone
Zbyt niepewni, by drwić	Too uncertain to mock
Z naszych scen i balkonów...	From our scenes and balconies.... ¹⁶

Kubiak, however, was not thrilled: "the text rustles too much."¹⁷

¹⁴ Szczęsny, "1994: Edyta Górniak."

¹⁵ Szczęsny. If there is no name given, the quotes are in my own translation.

¹⁶ Krysiak, *Edyta Górniak*, 54.

¹⁷ Krysiak.

In early 1994, Górniak appeared with Aleksandra Trzcińska, her manager in Poland, at the home of Jacek Cygan, a well-known lyricist whom she had met not long before and with whom she developed a good relationship. She did not tell him that it was a song for Eurovision, but rather a song for a wide audience, including those who do not speak Polish, in which both the message and the sound aspect of the text would be important.¹⁸ Cygan worked for several weeks, prepared several versions of the text, and presented the version he found best, while remaining open to the changes Górniak suggested. Both Cygan and Borkowska also mentioned Kubiak's interventions: "Every line was discussed with Wiktor, so that everything would be pleasing to the ear, so that there would be no rustling and so on."¹⁹ This was not the end of the changes either. The song received its final touches during the recording, when producer Graham Sacher also gave comments on the text.

Meanwhile, a third composition was made by young aspiring composer Piotr Rubik. Cygan also wrote the text to this song, *Śpijcie, dzieci nocy* (Sleep, children of the night), a ballad about homelessness. The team consulted their decision with a couple they trusted: composer Marek Bychawski and singer Beata Molak. Without hesitation, they chose *To nie ja!* from three proposals.

When presenting the recording to the broadcaster, Górniak revealed that she did not like the song TVP had chosen and wanted to go with another one. She convinced the decision-makers (a little extortion from the artist may have also been involved). On April 23 she travelled to Dublin with her team, where she was scheduled to perform on April 29 and 30. The singer was dealing with health problems, specifically with a combination of laryngitis, tracheitis, and pharyngitis.²⁰ Anxiety related to health problems coupled with the stress of representing the country at an international competition. An idea arose, originally from Kubiak, that at the dress rehearsal, which was also a televised jury show, Górniak should sing part of the song in English, despite the then-current ESC rule stating that a participant should use their national language. The singer used lyrics written on the fly by the producer, which is apparent because they do not always fit the melody. Cygan recalls that the updated version was sent by fax on April 29, the day of the jury show. The fragment Górniak sang, read as follows:

¹⁸ Cygan, *Życie jest piosenką*, 94.

¹⁹ Alicja Borkowska, "Alicja Borkowska dla eurowizja.org: 'Wiktor zaproponował Edycie, by zaśpiewała po angielsku,'" interview by Sergiusz Królak, Eurowizja.org, accessed March 22, 2025, <https://eurowizja.org/alicia-borkowska-dla-eurowizja-org-wiktor-zaproponowal-edycie-by-zaspiewala-po-angielsku/>.

²⁰ Szczęsny, "1994: Edyta Górniak"

This is once in a lifetime
 Baby, this is my moment
 Loving you is so easy for me
 You're the best thing that's happened to me.²¹

At the time, Górniak explained that, firstly, it was easier to sing in English and, secondly, she was convinced that the regulations applied to the final show but not to the rehearsals.²² Six countries protested.²³ This is the most enigmatic part of the story. Allegedly, the negotiator was Syrewicz, who spoke the best English on the team. Poland was reportedly disqualified, but the decision was reversed due to the composer's intervention. Another version of the story claims that the Eurovision rules required a majority of delegations to protest but less than half did.

Eventually, Górniak performed in the finals, winning second place. Theories arose, picked up by the press, that in order to punish the singer, some countries did not award her points. As the artist admitted in 2019, she deliberately, upon the encouragement of her manager, broke the rules, but still insisted that it was a matter of health (it was easier to sing in English for technical reasons) and not the *succès de scandale* that Kubiak wanted to achieve.²⁴ We do not know the exact reasoning behind this move and also how the story would have ended, had it not been for this unfortunate intervention.

However, this is not the end of the controversies surrounding Poland's first ESC entry. After the performance, news spread in the media that Israeli singer Yoni Nameri had accused Stanisław Syrewicz of plagiarism. Therefore, headlines and articles mixed praise for Górniak along with sensational reports about the authorship of the composition. Nameri was "amazed and shocked" to hear his composition at the ESC.²⁵ He claimed it sounded eerily similar to a song he recorded in 1987, to words written by Talma Alyagon, as *Gever meuhav* (A Man in Love).²⁶ *Gever meuhav* was even submitted to Eurovision in 1988 but did not

²¹ Graham Sacher, "Once in a lifetime," Diggiloo Thrush, accessed March 22, 2025, [https://www.diggiloo.net/?1994pl11;EdytaGórniak,\"Once%20In%20A%20Lifetime%20/%20To%20nie%20ja!\";YouTube, March 22, 2025, video, 3:01, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JBACNHEU6as/](https://www.diggiloo.net/?1994pl11;EdytaGórniak,\).

²² Górniak, "Hit nie z metra," 61–62.

²³ Cygan, *Życie jest piosenką*, 102.

²⁴ Konrad Szczęśny, "Edyta Górniak dla eurowizja.org: 'Wiedzieliśmy, że łamiemy regulamin. Zrobiliśmy to świadomie,'" Eurowizja.org, accessed March 22, 2025, <https://eurowizja.org/edyta-gorniak-powiedzialam-ze-albo-pojade-z-tym-utworem/>.

²⁵ Jacek Lutomski, "Dźwięki piękne i fałszywe," *Rzeczpospolita*, May 4, 1994, 5.

²⁶ Yoni Nameri, "Gever meuhav 1988," YouTube, March 22, 2025, video, 4:30, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r-BqwmYgkujw>.

pass the selection process of the participating Israeli public broadcaster, the song ended up on a vinyl for radio stations. Syrewicz retorted that the song had been composed even earlier, in 1984, for the group Chicago. A demo was recorded with the lyrics *No One Said It Was Easy* by Don Black and sent to a number of record labels. The composer's version of the story sounds plausible because since the 1980s he was already an established artist, cooperating with Island Records among others.

Polish Aspirations

The political situation of the 1990s is crucial for understanding the phenomenon of *To nie ja!*. After the democratic breakthrough in 1989, most narratives about political change in Poland took the form of stories about maturing into capitalist prosperity. Along with other post-communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe, it belonged to a “no man's land” between the West and two types of East: Russia and the Orient. Simply put, their identity was based on a desire to cut themselves off from everything defined as Eastern and a longing for everything Western.²⁷ The belief in the possibility and even the necessity of catching up with the West is reflected, for example, in the name given to this period in Polish history, namely “transformation”—a teleological process, which will be discussed later.

How can we connect Górniak's performance with Polish aspirations toward the West? Let us look closer at the lyrics, music, and the performance itself. The text is quite simple, but understanding the message can be difficult:

Świat mój tak zwyczajny	My world is so common
Pod niebem biało-czarnym	Under a white-black sky
Ludzie są wycięci z szarych stron	The people are cut out of grey pages
Ze środka książek	From the interior of books
Piękni są z romansu tła	They are beautiful from the background romance
Zmęczeni tylko z gazet	You are tired of a newspaper that is cut out
A ja... jestem białą, czystą kartką	And I... I'm white, a clean card
Pośród was	Amongst you

²⁷ Jan Sowa, *Fantomowe ciało króla: Peryferyjne zmaganie z nowoczesną formą* (Kraków: Towarzystwo Autorów i Wydawców Prac Naukowych “Universitas,” 2011).

To nie ja byłam Ewą
 To nie ja skradłam niebo
 Chociaż dosyć mam łez
 Moich łez, tylu łez
 Jestem po to, by kochać mnie

I was not Eve
 I had not stolen heaven
 Though I'm tired of tears
 My tears, so many tears
 I'm born to love me

To nie ja byłam Ewą
 To nie ja skradłam niebo
 Nie dodawaj mi win
 To nie ja, to nie ja
 Nie ja, jestem Ewą

I was not Eve
 I had not stolen heaven
 Don't blame it on me once more
 That's not me, that's not me
 Not me, I'm not Eve

Niebo wieje chłodem
 Piekło kłania się ogniem do stóp

The sky blows chilly
 Hell bows deeply with its flames to its feet

A ja... papierowa marionetka,
 muszę grać

And I... a paper marionette, I have to play

To nie ja byłam Ewą
 To nie ja skradłam niebo
 Chociaż dosyć mam łez
 Moich łez, tylu łez
 Jestem po to by kochać
 Wiem

I was not Eve
 I had not stolen heaven
 Though I'm tired of tears
 My tears, so many tears
 I was born to love
 I know it

Zanim w popiół się zmienię
 Chcę być wielkim płomieniem
 Chcę się wzbić ponad świat
 Hen, ogrzać niebo marzeniem.

Before I turn to ashes
 I want to be a big flame
 I want to look down on earth
 Want to warm up the sky with dreams.²⁸

The interpretation of Cygan was as follows: "the song is an allegory of the fate of a woman, and Edyta, as its heroine, does not want to bear the guilt for the sin of the biblical Eve, for all the evil that is in the world."²⁹ The author himself admitted that he got a little carried away. If we take a look at individual lines, they

²⁸ Jacek Cygan, "To nie ja — That's not me," trans. Raphael Koscielny et al., Diggiloo Thrush, <https://www.diggiloo.net/?1994pl>, accessed March 22, 2025. The studio version and the live performance are slightly different but it does not affect the interpretation of the text.

²⁹ Cygan, *Życie jest piosenką*, 100.

are hard to interpret. Sometimes, the quality of the poetic text is problematic, for example: "Piękni są z romansu tła" (They are beautiful from the background romance). The original text was easier to understand: "Piękni są z romansu kart" (They are beautiful, from the pages of a romance). The biggest problem here was adapting the lyrics to a Western audience, which does not understand Polish. The discussions about the changes were centered primarily around the qualities of certain consonants and not the meanings of the text. Jacek Cygan provides us with details, saying that Kubiak even insisted on inserting English phrases. The aforementioned changes were made just before the recording, when the producer asked to change the word "kart" to the cluster "rt". From a reproduction of the handwritten annotations to the lyrics published in the autobiography, we can trace more such changes of difficult word clusters: "gorzkich łez" (bitter tears) to "moich łez" (my tears), "cała drzę" (I'm all trembling) to "muszę grać" (I have to play). Because of those substitutions, the original meaning of the song was lost. Cygan's first proposal for the title was *Płonąca marionetka* (The Burning Marionette), referring to a winning Eurovision entry by France Gall, *Poupée de cire, poupée de son* (1965), however, the author admitted that it sounded too pretentious for him.

Important in this context is the issue of nation branding, which enables us to understand such far-reaching changes. This is a term which has been widely adopted in Eurovision Studies and was most fully developed by Paul Jordan in 2014, in his book, in which he analyzed Estonian Eurovision entries. Using Bolin and Ståhlberg's findings, he describes nation branding as "a phenomenon by which governments engage in self-conscious activities aimed at producing a certain image of the nation state."³⁰ The Eurovision Song Contest is an excellent tool for building or developing an image of a country due to the reach and the popularity of the ESC. This is aided by the competition formula, in which countries are treated equally, regardless of their size and importance on the international stage. As Jordan shows, after 1989 Eurovision was a medium for the former countries from the orbit of the Soviet Union to show their urge to integrate with Western Europe and gain a reputation as a reliable partner. One of the reasons why Rubik's song was not chosen was precisely the topic. Kubiak was outraged at Cygan: "What? you have written about homeless people? Do you want the entire world to think that there are only homeless people in Poland?"³¹

³⁰ Paul Jordan, *The Modern Fairy Tale: Nation Branding, National Identity and the Eurovision Song Contest in Estonia* (Tartu: University of Tartu Press, 2014), 16.

³¹ Cygan, *Życie jest piosenką*, 97.

It was a clear attempt to adapt to a foreign audience and create a positive image of Poland.

To nie ja! and Litania

In one of the articles on *To nie ja!* one can find a quote that describes the song as “hit nie z metra” (a hit not from the subway).³² There is a double meaning in this passage. It states that the song itself is not schematic but at the same time not comparable to those from the musical *Metro*. 1994 was the year when Górniak had already left the show, hence the desire to disassociate herself from the previous stage of her life. However, I see similarities between *To nie ja!* and *Litania* (Litany)—a hit song from the musical composed especially for Górniak.³³ Like the Eurovision one, it is difficult in terms of technique and interpretation. They differ because of the text: *Litania* is a very ambivalent prayer to the God of money. When you look at the dramaturgy of the song, however, they are comparable in the use of solo instruments and in terms of structure: the beginning is delicate, while the ending is ecstatic, similar is the use of glissando, showing the possibilities and power of the voice.

The producer of the musical *Metro*, in which Górniak was the main star, was the aforementioned Wiktor Kubiak. The artist repeated in interviews that she presumed that the proposal made by the broadcaster was related to her stage preparation and experience working with an orchestra,³⁴ although in my opinion, the symbolic aspect also mattered. Górniak was a symbol of Polish aspirations, especially in the context of her career, which took off with her debut in the musical.

Joanna Krakowska wrote about the importance of two theatre performances of the early 1990s: “*Tamara* (1990) and *Metro* (1991) were the theater’s most expressive proposals for the new times, meeting the aspirations for the West, the challenges of the market and the media demand for an event.”³⁵ *Metro* was the first major theatrical production made in Poland with private financing, provided by Kubiak. Its momentous success sparked dreams of Broadway, which eventually came true, but the show in New York turned out to be a flop.

³² Górniak, “Hit nie z metra.”

³³ Edyta Górniak, “Litania,” YouTube, March 22, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h41AGu41Bqs>.

³⁴ Szczęsny, “1994: Edyta Górniak.”

³⁵ Joanna Krakowska, *Demokracja: Przedstawienia* (Warszawa: Instytut Teatralny im. Zbigniewa Raszewskiego, 2019), 39.

“American critics saw immediately that *Metro* was a fake and reacted like brand owners,” wrote Krakowska.³⁶ The reviews were really cruel:

this show is *A Chorus Line* as it might have been produced by the Festrunk brothers, those wild and crazy Eastern European swingers that Dan Aykroyd and Steve Martin used to play on *Saturday Night Live*. Gloomy and jerky, *Metro* often looks as if it is taking its cues from a faded 10th generation bootleg videocassette of the film version of its Broadway prototype, with a reel of *Hair* thrown in by mistake,³⁷

music by Janusz Stokłosa was defined as an: “imitation of West European radio stations in the days when their signals still battled Soviet jamming on their way East.”³⁸

The 1990s in Poland were a decade of counterfeit and its synonyms: fake, copycat, knock-off, that started appearing in the marketplace. As a rule, this applied to luxury or easily recognizable products and brands, but this principle can also be applied to the creative industry. “The counterfeit became a symbol of an unsuccessful transition,” wrote Magda Szcześniak, which draws attention to this model of peripheral capitalism in Poland.³⁹ The narrative of that time stressed that the country was just learning how to function under new economic and cultural standards.

Mimicry as Nation Branding

In the 1990s, Poland was in the grasp of the “politics of mimicry,” of which Górniak can be a symbol. In 1995, *Wprost* magazine published an article about her: “The Polish youth of the 1990s wants just this kind of idol—without the burdens of the past, but illusively similar to the heroes of Western music videos.”⁴⁰ Górniak was presented as the new Céline Dion, a young singer on the threshold of her career. Battered by the Broadway failure of *Metro*, but still the

³⁶ Krakowska, *Demokracja*, 59.

³⁷ Frank Rich, “Review/Theater: Metro; A Hit in Warsaw Lands on Broadway,” *New York Times*, April 17, 1992: section C, 1, <https://www.nytimes.com/1992/04/17/theater/review-theater-metro-a-hit-in-warsaw-lands-on-broadway.html>.

³⁸ Rich, “Review/Theater.”

³⁹ Magda Szcześniak, “Fake It Till You Make It: The Trouble with the Global East Category,” *Praktyka Teoretyczna* 4, no. 38 (2020): 172.

⁴⁰ Roman Rogowiecki, “Dotyk Barbie,” *Wprost*, no. 21 (1995): 83.

only one idol with potential prospects for international success. The popularity of the song emerged from the coherence of the message. I interpret *To nie ja!* not from a gender perspective, but from a political one—as a story about Poland's return to Europe. From this perspective, it is a song about forgetting the past and striking out for independence, accompanied by strong, not only positive emotions. Not long before the contest, Poland signed an association agreement with the European Union, and the so-called London Club cancelled half of the Polish debts incurred before 1989. A young girl born during state socialism, but making a career after the transformation, was chosen to sing a song about freedom, dressed very modestly, which was notoriously emphasized, masking the strength she possessed. Górniak had three outfits in store: long, knee-length and short, which she eventually decided on. The choice of costume, which was demure rather than *haute couture*, was deliberate, although discussed in the media as too modest.

The song is not harmonically complex however, its growing dramaturgy is interesting.⁴¹ It begins with two stanzas that are different in terms of instrumentation: the first is dominated by the piano, as befits a ballad, in the second a solo oboe is added, followed by a contrasting chorus sung with full voice, repeated to reinforce the categorical nature of the confession (“I was not Eve”). In the next stanza, a quickened pulse in the strings is added to build tension. The next chorus, with full orchestra and background singers, is followed by an emotional bridge that leads to dramatic outro that is the climax of the whole song. Nothing suggests Górniak's vocal capabilities when we hear the very beginning. The singer begins with a delicate voice projection, with a lot of air and light ornaments. By the end, on the other hand, she shows her full potential: the sound is strong, the impression is made by a glissando, and a flood of ornaments. It is interesting to hear the use of the voice, which can sometimes resemble a scream or a sob, although in this case, both phenomena are fully controlled and sublimated by the vocal technique.

When comparing Górniak's performance to others in her edition of Eurovision, it is clear that she stood out from the other female soloists. The winners that year were a male duo from Ireland (Paul Harrington and Charlie McGettigan), while third place went to the female trio Mekado from Germany with a catchy pop hit. Friderika from Hungary took the spot just off the podium. Her performance—also from a country making its ESC debut—was based on a similar strategy: it featured a modestly dressed young singer performing

⁴¹ Edyta Górniak, “To nie ja (Eurovision 1994),” YouTube, March 22, 2025, video, 3:12, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PL5rmmPiHp8>.

a ballad with a rich instrumental arrangement, though in this case the acoustic guitar dominated, and the song's structure lacked a dramatic finale, it was also not focused on showcasing the vocal display. The top ten also included, though in lower positions (7–9), other solo female artists: Nina Morato from France, whose performance was more theatrical and edgy; Sara Tavares from Portugal, who was much closer in style to Górniak, also opting for visual minimalism and a ballad with a delicate intro, and Youddiph from Russia; however, in this case, the performance was more dramatic due to the choreography featuring an orange dress that also served as a veil. In contrast to the young female singers, the older ones, such as Willeke Alberti from the Netherlands and Silvi Vrait from Estonia, found themselves at the very bottom of the rankings (23rd and 24th out of 25, respectively).

Two theories can help to understand the (almost) winning strategy of Górniak. The first is the concept from Agata Pyzik's book *Poor but sexy*. Although the author is not writing about Eurovision, the slogan borrowed from Berlin mayor Klaus Wowereit resonates with the Polish entry.⁴² Górniak combined those two qualities: girlish simplicity in the costume, and feminine sex appeal, in the performance. A quote from *Playboy* confirms this was the right way to interpret it:

Debut of Polish television at 39. Eurovision Song Contest was to remind the world that a Pole can do it. A pretty girl with a strong voice and a tuneful song—a hit actually—seemed to guarantee victory in the contest.⁴³

Górniak did not pose a threat to the West—she tried to play the European cards, but she did not break Western rules, but rather tried to buy her way into favor by aspiring to the dominant musical trends.

I was also inspired by Boris Buden's book *Zone des Übergangs*, in which the author criticizes the simplistic model of transformation from the dark reality of state socialism to the colorful world of democracy and free-market prosperity. It is an outsider's perspective that devalues the participation of the societies through which the change was able to occur. Buden writes:

the language of post-communism betrays a paradox, revealing the great scandal of recent history: here were people who had just proven their maturity in the

⁴² Agata Pyzik, *Poor but Sexy: Culture Clashes in Europe East and West* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2014).

⁴³ Grzegorz Basaj, "Sfinks na pięciolini", *Playboy*, no. 11 (1994): 80.

revolutions of 1989–1990, becoming children overnight! Just yesterday they were able to overthrow totalitarian regimes, in whose durability and invulnerability the so-called free, democratic world firmly believed until the very end, fearing their power as if they were the embodiment of monstrosity.⁴⁴

I see in Górniak's performance the perfect exemplification of the zone of transition logic in the strategy of repressive infantilization of the East and adopting the role of humble pupil who has yet to learn the rules of democracy. This kind of mimicry can be seen in the process of creating a song tailored for a Western audience and the clear adoption of a pop power ballad sung by a diva. Also noticeable is the song's additive dramaturgy, which symbolizes the educational process associated with the foundations of the post-communist transformation, fulfilling the idea of growing to maturity—in three minutes, Górniak has managed to show this aspect of adjusting to the Western rules.

Conclusion

With my text, I wanted to open a discussion on the Eurovision performances and Polish nation branding, of which a great start could be the analysis of the song *To nie ja!*. Members of the OGAE Poland, a local chapter of the Organisation Générale des Amateurs de l'Eurovision, devoted one of the episodes of their podcast *12 punktów* (12 points) to analysis of Polish performances and pointed out three strategies of the entries: 1. copying solutions that have achieved success in previous editions, 2. using folklore and 3. choosing a ballad.⁴⁵ The latter choice is, of course, the effect of Górniak's result, although I would perhaps add that it is not just about the aesthetic aspect of the performance, but also the ideological one—Polish aspirations. According to post-transition logic, the goal of the Eastern Bloc was to join the Western world, not only economically but also culturally. This was to be achieved not by asserting its individuality, but by conforming as closely as possible to the rules of the more powerful side.

I see a need for further research that would incorporate a musicological perspective⁴⁶ into topics related to nation branding. I believe it is crucial to

⁴⁴ Boris Buden, *Strefa przejścia: O końcu postkomunizmu*, trans. Michał Sutowski (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2012), 32.

⁴⁵ Konrad Szczęsny et al., host, *12 punktów*, podcast Eurowizja.org, season 3, episode 4, "Paw i papuga narodów—polskie (anty)wzorce eurowizyjne," YouTube, July 12, 2024, 45:28, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tm86Fb-zEod>.

⁴⁶ Krzysztof Stefański, "And finally, 0 points go to...", *Glissando*, no. 44 (2023): 22.

trace the stylistic changes in the ESC, particularly in the context of the participation of Central and Eastern European countries. This topic was suggested by Alf Björnberg, who noted an increase in the genre diversity of the ESC in the 1990s.⁴⁷ He wrote about the tensions existing between the center and the periphery, drawing attention to the symbolic “revenge of the margins”, understood as “an opportunity for culturally peripheral nations to come out on top of those nations normally playing the principal parts in the dissemination of popular culture.”⁴⁸ Drawing on Philip Bohlman’s theory, which distinguishes two types of otherness in relation to Western European culture—an “external” and an “internal” other—Björnberg differentiated between two types of countries: “ethnic” and “non-ethnic.” The former group includes countries from the southwestern, southeastern, and eastern parts of Europe, while the latter—those from the western and northwestern parts. Therefore, the countries from Central and Eastern Europe are an ideal group for examining not only how the ESC became more diverse but also what the limits are of this process, as described by Björnberg: “The particular conflation of the international popular music and issues of national musical culture in the context of the ESC has resulted in an inherent tension between homogenizing tendencies (that is, adaptation to the West European mainstream) and attempts at cultural/stylistic specificity.”⁴⁹ Absence of cultural specificity in Górniak’s entry was a political strategy, however it was later often counterbalanced by self-orientalism in the form of more or less modified folklore.

Pyzik, in her book, recalled the famous quote of the writer Czesław Miłosz about Polish literature that can be said about the local cultural production in general. It is like “a jacket with one sleeve for a dwarf, and the other for a giant,”⁵⁰ in which the larger sleeve symbolizes the ambitions of being a part of Europe, and the smaller one—fighting for Polishness. One can say that a spectre is haunting Polish Eurovision entries—the specter of Edyta Górniak. Second place can be a blessing as well as a curse.



⁴⁷ Alf Björnberg, “Return To Ethnicity: The Cultural Significance of Musical Change in the Eurovision Song Contest,” in *A Song for Europe: Popular Music and Politics in the Eurovision Song Contest*, ed. Ivan Raykoff and Robert Deam Tobin (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2007).

⁴⁸ Björnberg, “Return To Ethnicity,” 17.

⁴⁹ Björnberg, 19.

⁵⁰ Pyzik, *Poor but Sexy*, 143.

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MARCIN BOGUCKI

PhD, graduate of cultural studies, art history and musicology, assistant professor at the University of Warsaw (Institute of Polish Culture, Section for Theatre and Performance). His research focuses on the cultural history of music and modern staging of opera. Recently he also has been developing projects on queer performances and the Eurovision Song Contest, especially in the context of Central and Eastern Europe. Member of the Polish Society for Theatre Research, the International Association for the Study of Popular Music—Central, Eastern and Southeastern Europe branch, and the Organisation Générale des Amateurs de l'Eurovision.