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Eurovision Song Contest and the Iron Curtain

Introduction

Abstract

This editorial frames the special issue *Eurovision Song Contest and the Iron Curtain*, examining the Eurovision Song Contest as a site to perform Europeanization and belonging from the perspective of Central and Eastern Europe. The article traces the ESC's institutional origins in the European Broadcasting Union alongside its Cold War-era counterpart, the OIRT/Intervision network, before following the ESC's eastward expansion after 1989 and the recurring anxieties this expansion generated in Western commentary, particularly after the 1998 shift to televoting, which was widely perceived in the West as favoring Eastern and Southeastern European blocs. The editors argue that dominant scholarly and popular narratives about Eurovision have been written largely from a post-Cold War, Western European vantage point that treats CEE as a homogeneous, peripheral, or perpetually transitional space.

Drawing on decolonial and inter-imperial frameworks, the essay contends that this framing obscures the ways in which the region has itself been subject to external empire-building, while also erasing the diversity of knowledge produced within the region. Collectively, the issue advances the engagement of performance studies' with Eurovision as a transnational stage on which geopolitics, cultural memory, and contested Europeaness are continuously performed and renegotiated.

Keywords

Eurovision Song Contest, iron curtain, Central and Eastern Europe, performance studies, decolonial studies, Europeanization

Abstrakt

Konkurs Piosenki Eurowizji a żelazna kurtyna: Wprowadzenie

Niniejszy wstęp prezentuje blok tematyczny *Konkurs Piosenki Eurowizji a żelazna kurtyna*, analizując Eurowizję jako przestrzeń, w której mamy do czynienia z performatywną realizacją europeizacji z perspektywy Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej. Artykuł przywołuje instytucjonalne początki Konkursu Piosenki Eurowizji w ramach Europejskiej Unii Nadawców (EBU) oraz jego zimnowojenny odpowiednik – Interwizję, powołaną przez Międzynarodową Organizację Radia i Telewizji (OIRT), a następnie omawia ekspansję konkursu na wschód po 1989 oraz powracające obawy, jakie budziła ona u zachodnich komentatorów, zwłaszcza po wprowadzeniu w 1998 teległosowania, które powszechnie postrzegano jako faworyzujące bloki krajów Europy Wschodniej i Południowo-Wschodniej. Redaktorzy bloku dowodzą, że dominujące narracje o Eurowizji, zarówno naukowe, jak i popularne, w dużej mierze reprezentują pozimnowojenną perspektywę Zachodu, z której Europa Środkowo-Wschodnia postrzegana jest jako przestrzeń jednorodna, peryferyjna lub permanentnie znajdująca się w stanie transformacji. W oparciu o dekolonialne i międzyimperialne ujęcia badawcze artykuł pokazuje, że ta perspektywa nie pozwala dostrzec, w jaki sposób region ten doświadczał zewnętrznych procesów imperiotwórczych, a także wymazuje różnorodność wytwarzanej lokalnie wiedzy. Jako całość prezentowany numer tematyczny pogłębia potencjał badawczy performatyki w odniesieniu do Eurowizji jako transnarodowej sceny, na której nieustannie odbywa się performowanie i renegotjowanie geopolityki, pamięci kulturowej i kłopotliwej europejskości.

Słowa kluczowe

Konkurs Piosenki Eurowizji, żelazna kurtyna, Europa Środkowo-Wschodnia, performatyka, studia dekolonialne, europeizacja

Between West and East

"I've said it so many times it has become a cliché. We won the Cold War but we lost the Eurovision"—this is one of the most memorable quips of Terry Wogan, a legendary British broadcaster.¹ He started commenting occasionally on the Eurovision Song Contest (ESC) for the BBC in the 1970s and permanently between 1980 and 2008. The quote comes from 2007, when the contest was won by the Serbian singer Marija Šerifović. She became the fourth winner from the former Eastern Bloc since 2001. The following year, at the 2008 ESC in Serbia, which saw Dima Bilan from Russia triumphant, Wogan decided to resign from his post. Wogan is also famous for a frequently cited quip on the nature of the ESC: "I don't make the mistake of thinking it's a major musical event. I love the Eurovision Song Contest and it will continue long after I'm gone. Just please don't ask me to take it seriously."² For him, the contest in the early 21st century had become too political, which is one of the standard arguments used by critics of the show. It was no longer the songs themselves that mattered—he claimed—but biased voting controlled by a clique from the East: the Baltic and Balkan countries as well as former states from the Soviet sphere of influence, implying block voting had not existed before.

These quotes illustrate perfectly the paradox of Eurovision: on the one hand, it is a contest often dismissed and accused of providing the worst kind of entertainment; on the other hand, it is taken very seriously as a political tool. As Karen Fricker analyzed Wogan's case, his sharp comments can be understood as part of "Euroscepticism in the UK that has existed since the 1970s, which reflects the 'crises of collective identity' suffered by the UK in its ongoing, problematic 'reorganization from an imperial state to a European Union member state,'"³ highlighting one of the most significant fields of tension within Eurovision: between the West and the East.

The Contest was established as an initiative of the European Broadcasting Union (EBU). Its first edition in 1956 featured seven public broadcasters from Western countries: Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and Switzerland. Dean Vuletic emphasizes that the event's goal was cooperation in the field of broadcasting, which primarily concerned technological

¹ Leigh Holmwood, "'Please Don't Ask Me to Take It Seriously': Terry Wogan's Eurovision Quotes," *The Guardian*, December 5, 2008, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2008/dec/05/bbc-television>.

² Holmwood, "'Please Don't Ask Me to Take It Seriously'."

³ Karen Fricker, "'It's Just Not Funny Any More': Terry Wogan, Melancholy Britain, and the Eurovision Song Contest," in *Performing the 'New' Europe: Identities, Feelings, and Politics in the Eurovision Song Contest*, ed. Karen Fricker and Milija Gluhovic (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2013), 54.

development;⁴ however, one cannot overlook the political element of this new project. Marcel Bezençon, the contest's initiator, knew and admired Jean Monnet, one of the architects of European integration. It is also worth noting the overlap between the members of institutions emerging at the same time that provided impetus for unification—such as the European Coal and Steel Community—and the founding member states of Eurovision (in 1952, the ECSC comprised France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and Belgium).⁵ One must also take into account the historical context: Eurovision emerged as a result of the post-1945 order cemented by the Cold War: in 1946, the Organisation Internationale de Radiodiffusion et de Télévision (OIRT) was established; after the public broadcasters from Western Europe broke away to form the EBU in 1950, the OIRT moved its headquarters from Brussels to Prague and brought together countries within the Soviet sphere of influence.

ESC grew in all directions, but its longest expansion was to the east. It included Austria in 1957, followed by Yugoslavia, which made its debut in 1961—a country that was part of the Eastern Bloc but independent of the USSR. 1989 was such a significant turning point that in his book Vuletic divides the history of Eurovision into two periods: before and after the fall of the Iron Curtain.⁶ In 1993, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Estonia, Hungary, Romania, Slovenia, and Slovakia wanted to make their Eurovision debuts but had to compete in a pre-selection qualifier. Eventually, only the top three—Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, and Slovenia—gained entry.⁷ In 1994, the largest expansion in terms of numbers took place, with the following countries joining: Estonia, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Russia, and Slovakia. By 2005, additional countries from the Eastern Bloc and those formed after the breakup of Yugoslavia had made their debuts in the Contest: North Macedonia, Latvia, Ukraine, Albania, Belarus, Serbia and Montenegro, Bulgaria, and Moldova. Some of the newcomers appeared regularly at Eurovision, while others participated only sporadically.

Another important change came in 1998, when jury voting was replaced by televoting. From that point on, victories shifted to the (broadly defined) East, which caused discontent in the West, as expressed in Wogan's comment. This trend was reversed thanks to another change in the voting system—since 2009,

⁴ Dean Vuletic, *Postwar Europe and the Eurovision Song Contest* (London: Academic, 2018), 16.

⁵ See Julie A. Kalman and Ben Wellings, "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: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

⁶ Vuletic, *Postwar Europe*.

⁷ Michaela Maria Hintermayr, "Eurovision Cold War: Geopolitics and Queerness at the Eurovision Song Contest in 2007," *fernetzt*, 2016.

votes have been split equally between the jury and televoting. In the meantime, countries from the Caucasus (Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan), the last remaining country from the Eastern Bloc (the Czech Republic), as well as Montenegro and Serbia as separate entities made their debuts in the Contest. However, the expansion did not end with the inclusion of these countries, as Eurovision's border was pushed even further—since 2015, Australia has also been participating in the ESC. This development, along with Canada's planned debut in 2027, demonstrates that geography intertwines with cultural and political factors.⁸

Thinking Central and Eastern Europe

Central and Eastern Europe is a diverse and complex region, stretching all the way from Estonia in the north-east of the continent, to Slovenia in the south or Georgia in the south-east. Yet it is also a malleable concept, one which often has little to do with the geography of the European subcontinent and more to do with geopolitical dynamics and cultural politics. Sometimes it only includes Slavic-speaking nation-states, other times it only includes the countries of the former Warsaw Pact; sometimes its borders are placed in western Ukraine and Belarus, other times they stretch all the way to the Urals and the Caucasus. If it is a concept region that is so hard to define, then why dedicate a special issue to the Eurovision Song Contest, especially in times of war and genocide, and especially from the perspective of Central and Eastern Europe?

This is a reasonable question to ask in 2026, but one which reveals some of the biases that this collection of articles seeks to remedy, foremost the tendency to think Europe from a post-Cold War and Western European perspective. Now that the majority of the former state socialist countries of the Warsaw Pact have joined the European Union, surely it must be the case that they share equally in the wealth and influence that historically has belonged to Western European countries such as France and Germany? Yet even a cursory glance at Eurostat shows that convergence has not erased regional inequalities even nearly four decades after the end of state socialism,⁹ and this fact has fueled the common perception in the West that Central and Eastern Europe remains stuck in

⁸ See Karen Fricker and Milija Gluhovic, "Introduction: Eurovision and the 'New' Europe," in *Performing the 'New' Europe*.

⁹ Massimo Giannini and Barbara Martini, "Regional Disparities in the European Union: A Machine Learning Approach," *Papers in Regional Science* 103, no. 4 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pirs.2024.100033>.

transition, and as a result remains a region which is struggling to democratize and which is often synonymous with poverty and corruption. It is a perspective that homogenizes what Europeanness entails, while simultaneously pushing Central and Eastern Europe beyond its boundaries and erasing its existence from the imagined community of Europe.

This builds on recent scholarship which has sought to critically think Central and Eastern Europe from a decolonial perspective. While the region has historical complicity in settler-colonial projects that are often underplayed¹⁰ or even outright denied,¹¹ it is also the case that this part of Europe has been subject to settler-colonialism itself through the empire-building of its neighbours, most prominently the German Empire and Russia. This has resulted in the region being in a complex state of “inter-imperiality,”¹² where knowledge production and cultural production intertwine and generate worlding practices that deny the validity of knowledge and culture produced in the region itself, reinforcing the belief that Central and Eastern Europe is at the periphery of the subcontinent and failing to sufficiently Westernize. This dynamic has greatly contributed to the political valence of the Eurovision Song Contest, as it has become an accessible platform to perform Europeanization to a mass audience.¹³ It also has turned the Eurovision Song Contest in a potent platform to counter the prevalence of “Westspaining,”¹⁴ the practice of privileging knowledge and cultural production on Central and Eastern Europe that does not engage with regional actors, a dynamic which became more visible in the denial of activists and academics in the West of Ukraine’s right to defend itself against Russia’s illegal invasions.¹⁵ Shifting the focus towards knowledge produced on Central and Eastern Europe by scholars primarily living and/or working in Central and Eastern Europe can be understood as a modest contribution to countering these inter-imperial dynamics.¹⁶

¹⁰ Bolaji Balogun, “Polish *Lebensraum*: The Colonial Ambition to Expand on Racial Terms,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 14, no. 41 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2017.1392028>.

¹¹ Piotr Puchalski, *Poland in a Colonial World Order—Adjustments and Aspirations, 1918–1939* (New York: Routledge, 2022).

¹² Laura Doyle, *Inter-Imperiality: Vying Empires, Gendered Labor, and the Literary Arts of Alliance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv18zhcpg>.

¹³ Shannon Jones and Jelena Subotic, “Fantasies of Power: Performing Europeanization on the European Periphery,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 14, no. 5 (2011): 542–557.

¹⁴ Tereza Hendl, Olga Burluk, Mila O’Sullivan, and Aizada Arystanbek, “(En)Countering Epistemic Imperialism: A Critique of ‘Westspaining’ and Coloniality in Dominant Debates on Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine,” *Contemporary Security Policy* 45, no. 2 (2024): 171–209, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2023.2288468>.

¹⁵ Hendl, Burluk, O’Sullivan, and Arystanbek, “(En)Countering Epistemic Imperialism.”

¹⁶ At the same time, we are aware that this approach has its limits, as its analytical focus does not allow for extensive work on other pertinent topics, such as the controversies around Israel’s continued participation in the ESC as

In our view, the common reduction of Europeanness to Western Europe warrants a special issue dedicated to thinking the Eurovision Song Contest critically from the perspective of Central and Eastern Europe. It takes seriously the challenge that Central and Eastern Europe can (and should) be thought of as a post-imperial region which has varying degrees of access to hegemonic and normative Europeanness. This special issue seeks to achieve this by taking knowledge production on the Eurovision Song Contest that takes this part of Europe as its central focus. At the same time, we also want to point out that while this special issue studies a popular song contest that stages nation-states, that does not preclude thinking the region transnationally. Even though many of the articles deal with the representatives sent by the national broadcasters of nation-states, that does not mean an embrace of methodological nationalism, and it can be assumed that many of the dynamics that are critically investigated transcend national, linguistic, cultural, or socio-political borders within the region and beyond the region.

State of the Art and Research Gaps

Research on Central and Eastern Europe in Eurovision Studies, which has been developing since the 1990s, has focused primarily on two countries: Russia and Ukraine—firstly, because of the significance of Eurovision for these countries, and secondly, the political tensions between them, which have escalated in recent years, as evidenced by the war in Donbas, the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, and Russia's full-scale invasion launched in 2022. This is confirmed by chapters in collected volumes and numerous articles.¹⁷

Among the Baltic states, Estonia is a well-studied area, thanks to the research of Paul Jordan, one of the first scholars to earn a PhD in Eurovision Studies (Jordan 2011 and 2014, see also Verschik and Hlavac 2009, Ojamaa and Labi 2009, Ibrus, Rohn and Nani 2019). The Balkans are also represented, thanks to the works of Vuletic and Catherine Baker on Yugoslavia and post-Yugoslavia

it stands accused of committing genocide in Palestine. See Marc Richard Hugh Koscieljew. "Songwashing and Cultural Boycotting the Eurovision Song Contest: A Soft Power/Disempowerment Analysis of Israel's Entry to Eurovision 2024 during the Israel-Hamas War," *Popular Music and Society* 48, no. 3 (2025): 318–345, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03007766.2025.2485784>; Francesca Albanese, *Torture and Genocide: Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in the Palestinian Territories Occupied since 1967*, UN Doc. A/HRC/61/71 (United Nations Human Rights Council, March 23, 2026), <https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/61/71>.

¹⁷ Due to the large number of sources, they are listed not in the footnotes but in the bibliography at the end of the issue: *Shattering the Iron Curtain: Recent research on the ESC in Central and Eastern Europe*. For clarity, we use in-text citations in this section of the article.

(Vuletic 2007, 2019, and 2024, Baker 2022, see also Bohlman 2007, Mitrović 2010, Scott 2013, Neves 2017, Markovic Khaze 2019; Grmuša 2026); it is also worth mentioning the 2015 issue of *Contemporary Southeastern Europe* (Baker 2015, Andjelić 2015, Carniel 2015). Analyses of other parts of the regions are much less prevalent. Among these, we can highlight areas that have been studied very little, such as Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, Czechia, Moldova, and Albania (Ingvoldstadt 2007, Arntsen 2005, Aston 2013, Panea and Rufi 2024, Paľuba 2024, Heřmanová 2025, Iglesias 2015, Tochka 2016), as well as areas that remain largely unexplored, such as Belarus, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, or Bulgaria (Szeman 2013, Miazhevich 2015). Comprehensive general studies are rare: those on politics by Shannon Jones and Jelena Subotic (2011), Katrin Sieg (2013) and Anna G. Piotrowska (2020); on folklore by Alf Björnberg (2007); on gender and sexuality by Alexej Ulbricht, Indraneel Sircar, and Koen Sloomaeckers (2015). Vuletic's chapter *Where is Central Europe in the Eurovision Song Contest?* (2018) raises important questions on why the region is largely a blank spot when it comes to Eurovision victories.

The picture of East–West relations can be complicated by the permeability of the Iron Curtain. Even before 1989, the Eurovision Song Contest was broadcasted to Eastern Bloc; in addition, OIRT, also known as Intervision, attempted to create its own song contest, though it was a short-lived endeavor that was always cut short by political factors: in Czechoslovakia from 1965 to 1968, stifled by repression following the Prague Spring, and in Poland from 1977 to 1980, which was cancelled after the “Solidarity” movement's campaign ended with the introduction of the martial law in 1981. Vuletic (2019) and Piotrowska (2016) explored the topic of Intervision as an initiative that mirrored Eurovision but was not a copy of it (see also Wilken 2019). Interestingly, after many years of rumors, it was revived in 2025 under different political conditions: in Moscow, following Russia's expulsion from the EBU in 2022, with the participation, among others, of countries comprising the BRICS+ initiative (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa), whose goal was to challenge Eurovision as both an artistic and political project, thereby forcing a reevaluation of East-West relations (Kunakovich 2026).

Overview

The special issue is a continuation of existing research in the field of Eurovision Studies, which simultaneously fills noticeable gaps, amplifies voices from the region, and charts new academic perspectives. The special issue opens up with

a contribution by Marcin Bogucki, which looks at the production history of Edyta Górniak's *To nie ja*, which constituted Poland's debut at the Eurovision Song Contest in 1994, which fittingly deals with the pressures of navigating multilingualism at a time that the contest had strict language requirements. This is followed by a contribution by Izabela Andrzejak, who takes a critical look at *My Słowianie—We Are Slavic*, the Polish entry in 2014, which she argues is an example of performing self-exoticization for the Western gaze. Fitting with the transnational scope of this special issue, the next article deals with the borderlands between Poland and Ukraine, as Xawery Stańczyk looks at the mid-2000s collaborations between Renia Pączkowska (performed by Michał Wiśniewski) and Verka Serdutchka, who were both former Eurovision contestants. Staying in Ukraine in the early to mid-2000s, Valeryia Korablyova critically examines the rising soft power of Ukraine at the Eurovision Song Contest from the perspective of political science and sociology, an endeavour she is joined in by a second article by Louisa Martin-Chevalier which looks at Ukrainian musical diplomacy in the *longue durée from the musicological lens*. Moving further to the north, Wojciech Artur Pietrucha looks at the ways in which the regime of Lukashenko in Belarus has tried to perform a normalization of his authoritarian rule through the Eurovision Song Contest, focusing on the 2011 contest. In a similar vein, Halszka Fryźlewicz takes a critical look back at the Russian entry of t.A.T.u. from 2003, which staged lesbianism as a way to perform Europeanization, only for some of the performers to denounce their own actions later in life. For the final regional contribution to this special issue we turn south, towards the performing of post-Yugoslav national-identities in South-eastern Europe, where Jonas Vanderschueren takes a critical look at Bosnia-Herzegovina's entry in 1993 and Serbia's entry in 2022. The special issue concludes with an article by Natalie Bauer, which examines the previously cited claims by Terry Wogan that CEE block voting has ruined the ESC by taking a thorough look at the televoting system since its introduction in the late 1990s.

Finally, we would like to acknowledge that this special issue has been long in the making. It all started back in 2024 with the *Eurovision Song Contest and the Iron Curtain* conference at the University of Warsaw on September 26–27 and which was organized by Marcin Bogucki at the Institute for Polish Culture. We would like to thank everyone who attended the conference and all of authors and editors of this essay-cluster.



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