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Eurovision under the shadow of war: how the 2023 contest highlighted humanitarianism, empathy and solidarity

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Jess Carniel

Senior Lecturer in Humanities, University of Southern Queensland

In 2022, Ukraine won the Eurovision Song Contest in a landslide victory. Traditionally, the winner hosts the following year but due to the significant security issues posed by the ongoing war with Russia, Ukraine was unable to host.

As the 2022 runners-up, the United Kingdom stepped in to assist with hosting duties. It was the eighth time Eurovision has not been hosted by the winner, and the fifth time the UK has helped out. It is, however, the first time the contest has not been hosted by the winner due to an active conflict situation.

The production was a collaboration between last year's Ukrainian winners and the UK hosts, to ensure both were fairly represented throughout. In addition to representation within the show itself – including the genuine co-host chemistry between Ukrainian rock goddess Julia Sanina and British actor Hannah Waddingham – a share of inexpensive tickets were reserved for displaced Ukrainians in the UK.

As per tradition, the grand final opened with the previous winners, Ukraine's Kalush Orchestra, performing their winning song. This was followed by the flag parade, which featured past Ukrainian performers, including [Go_A](#) (2020-21) and the iconic [Verka Serduchka](#) (2007).

[The postcards](#) – the short videos used to introduce each performance – connected the co-hosts Ukraine and the UK to their performing guests via similar landmarks found in each country, from beaches to national libraries. In line with the year's theme, "United by Music", these sought to illustrate we are united by shared experiences.

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The interval act during voting was a medley of songs by Liverpoolian artists, ending with 2019 winner Duncan Laurence performing Gerry and the Pacemakers' [You'll Never Walk Alone](#). It, too, aimed to express solidarity with Ukraine.

Read more: Ukraine's Eurovision win shows us that despite arguments to the contrary, the contest has always been political

The politics of the non-political contest

The Eurovision Song Contest aims to be non-political. According to reports, Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky's request to address the audience was denied by the European Broadcasting Union because it would contravene their policy that the contest not be used for political ends.

(Representatives for Zelensky denied claims he had made the request.)

Politicians have appeared on Eurovision before. Ukrainian president Viktor Yushchenko presented the winner, Greece, with a special award for "the winning song that unites the whole Europe" when the country first hosted in 2005. Appearances by politicians can never be fully divorced from their political context, but they can be tempered by limiting these to an appearance rather than directly addressing the audience on a political issue.

The Eurovision production didn't ignore the Russia-Ukraine conflict, but focused on framing it through the more acceptable values-based politics of humanitarianism, empathy and solidarity.

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But what about the performances?

Austria opened the show with the catchy [Who the Hell is Edgar?](#), a song [critiquing gender bias](#) and artist remuneration in the music industry.

Read more: ['Who the hell is Edgar?' – a viral Eurovision song about Edgar Allan Poe evokes a strange history of mediums and creative possession](#)

It's not the first time Austria has sent an act critical of the music industry. Schmetterlinge's [Boom Boom Boomerang](#) in 1977 mocked the commercialisation of the European music industry.

Reigning champions Ukraine placed sixth with Tvorchi's [Heart of Steel](#), while their co-hosts placed second-last – a reversal of fortunes from last year's second-place finish.

While the live performance of Mae Muller's radio-friendly I Wrote A Song didn't capture votes, the UK garnered a lot of goodwill for the production itself. It shows why Eurovision is still a good cultural (and political) investment for them, win or lose.

In another reversal of fortunes, Norway illustrated the power of the popular vote. Alessandra's feminist sea shanty, Queen of the Kings, moved from 17th in the jury vote to fifth overall thanks to the audience televote.

This included four points from the rest of the world. For the first time ever, audiences from non-participating countries were able to vote online for their favourite performances. This vote has the same weight as the votes from a single country. Their points – the maximum 12 points – were awarded to Israel.

While this vote isn't enough to shift the contest's outcome, it is a welcome recognition of the contest's global reach and audience. Eurovision is watched by more than 180 million viewers around the world each year.

Finland proved to be a crowd favourite. The arena audience could be heard chanting the chorus throughout the voting. Käärijä's infectious industrial hyperpop, [Cha Cha Cha](#), narrates escaping the drudgery of everyday life by hitting the dancefloor with a piña colada.

(It was reported anecdotally many Finnish supermarkets sold out of piña colada ingredients this weekend.)

Eurovision powerhouses

Sweden's victory with Loreen's [Tattoo](#) is record-breaking.

Loreen is now the second person to win Eurovision twice, the first woman to win twice, and the first [LGBTQIA+](#) artist to win twice. She previously won in 2012 with [Euphoria](#), credited with [changing the artistic direction](#) of the modern Eurovision.

Sweden now tie with Ireland for the most Eurovision victories, seven. Somewhat auspiciously, the 2024 Eurovision marks the fiftieth anniversary of ABBA's iconic first win for Sweden in 1974 – again, at a Eurovision hosted by the UK.

Read more: [*The 'gay world cup': why LGBTQ+ audiences love Eurovision*](#)

Australia's fifth appearance

This year marked another anniversary: the 40th anniversary of the Eurovision broadcast in Australia. It is also the end of Australia's five-year participation agreement with the European Broadcasting Union.

Western Australian prog-synth band Voyager made a strong case for the continuation with [Promise](#). They placed [ninth overall](#), after winning their semi-final.

Fingers crossed Australia will be getting up at 5am next year to support its artists again.

Correction: this article misstated the results of previous Australian Eurovision contestants. This has been corrected.