

# Towards a theory of participatory diplomacy via the Eurovision Song Contest

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## Abstract

The Eurovision Song Contest is officially a non-political event but has nevertheless been a useful tool for participating nations' public and cultural diplomacy strategies. While Eurovision's diplomatic utility for states is subject to much scholarly attention, little attention has been paid to how fans and audiences participate actively in these processes as political agents and actors. Drawing upon the frameworks of public diplomacy and participatory culture, this article puts forth the portmanteau concept of 'participatory diplomacy' to explain and explore how Eurovision illuminates a particular intersection of public diplomacy and participatory culture wherein the audience actively participates in its cultural platform to shape its political message and meaning.

## Keywords

Eurovision Song Contest, participatory culture, public diplomacy, transnationalism

## Introduction

For many, the 2022 Eurovision Song Contest (ESC) answered the eternal question: is Eurovision political? The 2022 contest played out against the backdrop of the ongoing conflict between Ukraine and Russia that commenced in February 2022. Tensions between the two states have been a significant part of the contest's context

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throughout the 2000s (Baker, 2022; Jordan, 2011; Kyriakidou et al., 2018), further intensifying following the annexation of Crimea in 2014. In 2022, the Russian delegation were excluded from the ESC within days of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and the EBU membership of the three Russian broadcasters was suspended in response to their own stated intention to withdraw following the Eurovision decision. The *New York Times* described Ukraine's subsequent landslide victory in the ESC as "European viewers and juries deliver[ing] a symbolic, pop culture endorsement of solidarity behind Ukraine in its defence against Russian invasion" (Povoledo et al., 2022).

Even before the example of Ukraine and Russia brought the political dimensions of the song contest into stark perspective, the answer to the question of Eurovision's political status has always been that it indeed is political, but with several important caveats. It is a global media event centred on a core conceit as a peaceful contest of nations. The ESC's parent organisation, the European Broadcasting Union (EBU), maintains a stance that both it and the song contest are non-political. By this, the EBU seeks to prevent state intervention and instrumentalisation of the ESC, reinforced by its so-called 'politics rule' that prohibits overt political messaging in songs and performances. Despite this official view, the contest has served as a site for reflecting and articulating broader political contexts and identities. In recent years, the ESC has leaned into a discourse of universal values that, while framed as apolitical, are nevertheless politicised in the geopolitical context of European regionalism (via the European Union) and lingering values divides between western states and former Warsaw Pact states. In maintaining its official stance as a non-political event, the ESC distinguishes between 'unacceptable' state-based politics and acceptable values-based politics, but, as many have observed, it is difficult to remove politics entirely from an event that is ostensibly a contest of nations. Accordingly, the EBU's Eurovision Reference Group, participating broadcasters, scholars, fans and audiences have developed a malleable concept of what constitutes 'politics' in practice. For example, generic displays of national identity and pride, such as flag waving, are considered acceptable, but lyrics or performance elements that directly address political policies, leaders or international relations with other states have fallen afoul of the politics rule. Fans of the song contest are aware of its political dimensions and often actively embrace the contest's values-based politics of diversity, acceptance and unity, as well as its capacity to articulate benign national pride, but they are also wary of how the state-based political dimensions have been wielded by states themselves, critics and fellow fans of the contest alike (Georgiou, 2008; Kyriakidou et al., 2018). The song contest therefore has varying and sometimes limited political value for its various stakeholders, from states to public broadcasters, to its fans and audiences.

A core part of the ESC's political value for states is its usefulness as a platform for public diplomacy, a diplomatic form that seeks to communicate with foreign publics (Snow, 2020) and cultural diplomacy, which refers to the use of culture to foster mutual understanding between different states and their publics (Cummings, 2003). As diplomacy ostensibly emphasises cooperation and communication, cultural and public diplomacy, together with nation branding, constitute acceptable political applications of the song contest. Such expressions must stay on the benign side of propaganda and focus on showcasing a nation's soft power resources – resources that are accrued through shared cultural and political values (Nye, 2004). While Eurovision's diplomatic utility for states

is subject to much scholarly attention, little attention has been paid to how fans and audiences participate actively in these processes as political agents and actors. Equally, the large body of scholarship on Eurovision fans and audiences concentrates on their identities, communities and contributions to participatory culture (e.g. Fricker et al., 2007; Halliwell, 2018; Lemish, 2004; Waysdorf, 2021), but rarely their complicity and, importantly, their agency in the state-oriented rather than valued-based political dimensions of the song contest.

Drawing upon the frameworks of public diplomacy and participatory culture, this article puts forth the portmanteau concept of “participatory diplomacy” to explain and explore how Eurovision illuminates a particular intersection of public diplomacy and participatory culture wherein the audience actively participates in its cultural platform to shape its political message and meaning, with the outcome of the contest providing a tangible measure of public sentiment. It suggests that a greater engagement with ideas of everyday, popular cultures and cultural participation central to cultural studies and fan studies can enrich the diplomatic concepts deployed by international relations. Ultimately, it seeks to provide a conceptual and theoretical framework to assist future empirical studies into the ESC as a site of popular political agency.

### *Europe, start voting now! Eurovision and/as political participation*

The paradox of the ESC is that it is a contest of nations that also requires its audiences to think and act beyond their own national borders. The audience cannot vote for their own nation’s representative, only for the competing nations. This ethos of friendly, international voting has been a core part of the contest since its inception. Voting publics, dependent on the national selection processes in place, often first have a say in selecting their national representative (Vuletic, 2018a), then for the winning song out of those submitted by other participating nations. Gauja (2019: 48) contextualises Eurovision voting within European political participation more broadly, highlighting that the introduction of the public televote “coincided with changing expectations and popular conceptions of democracy” since the 1990s; technology, political culture and the rise of participatory reality television have cultivated the public’s expectation of direct involvement in both political and cultural decision-making. Viewed in this context, she argues, Eurovision ‘provides opportunities for citizens to exercise democratic voice outside the sphere of formal politics in ways that are considered exciting and fun’ (Gauja, 2019: 49).

There are, of course, limits to viewing this voting system as some kind of transnational utopic ideal. Eurovision is frequently criticised for perceived collusive voting patterns, known as bloc voting, that appear to have been persistent since the 1980s (Gatherer, 2006). Indeed, the very first scholarly study of the song contest focussed on what voting patterns could reveal about European international relations and political balance in the region’s affairs and institutions as the European Union began to take shape in the wake of the Maastricht Treaty. Yair (1995) used aggregated trends in Eurovision voting between 1975 and 1992 to identify three cliques in the pre-EU and pre-fall of USSR song contest. Circumventing predicted criticism from the outset, Yair (1995: 148) argued that the serious study of a ‘non-serious event’ would be useful for revealing structures within European international relations and for seeing how European Union values of fairness

and objectivity were implemented in the process. Writing a decade later when the contest had undoubtedly evolved due to the increased participation of former Soviet states and the introduction of the popular televote, Gatherer (2004, cited in Gatherer, 2006: 1.11) identified six 'clusters of interlinked bilateral collusive voting partnerships'. Also writing in the early 2000s, Dekker (2007) identified five voting blocs, which he characterises as 'friendship networks' that could be used to quantify the social connection between states within the network. Importantly, these studies ultimately do not suggest collusion or corruption in these bloc patterns. Rather, they each suggest that these blocs cohered around various shared historical, political, cultural and linguistic interests (Yair, 1995: 160). Ginsburgh and Noury (2005: 2) concurred that 'what may look as strategic voting in the Eurovision Song Contest is in fact sincere voting based on linguistic and cultural proximity.' Gatherer (2006, 4.9) concludes that '[c]ollusion is thus simply a meme' in the contest. Sadly, this is not entirely true. The EBU tightened its regulations around voting fraud in 2014 following allegations that Azerbaijan had interfered with the public voting results and had attempted to buy votes (Plunkett, 2014; Vuletic, 2018b, pp. 191, 192). Despite this, in 2022, the EBU detected 'irregular voting patterns' in national jury votes submitted for the second semi-final, which led to the jury votes for Azerbaijan, Georgia, Montenegro, Poland, Romania and San Marino being removed and replaced with aggregate results from countries with similar voting patterns (Euronews, 2022).

A handful of scandals notwithstanding, the above studies of Eurovision voting trends and patterns nevertheless support a particular proposition: the ESC can be a useful litmus test for popular sentiments about fellow participating nations. However, the majority of these studies rely on a quantitative analysis of voting results; although they remain useful for identifying broad patterns, these do not provide qualitative insight into whether the actual voting decisions of viewers align with the theories of cultural and political proximity that emerge from these studies. Stockemer et al.'s (2018) survey of Eurovision viewers' voting behaviours is a welcome exception to this literature. Based on a survey of 500 Eurovision viewers in Germany, France and the UK, the study identifies four types of voting: sincere voting, where a person simply votes for their favourite song; strategic voting (voting for their preferred entry among the handful of likely winners rather than a personal favourite); bandwagoning (voting for the expected winner regardless of personal preference); and 'other' voters who do not fit into the previous three types, but may use other reasons, such as language affinity, ethnic or diaspora voting or neighbourhood/proximity voting. Collectively, these 'other' voters constituted 37% of the respondents, while sincere and bandwagon voters were 26% each and strategic voters comprised the minority at 11%. Stockemer et al. (2018) conclude that Eurovision voters are influenced by affective factors other than musical preference. While the sample is limited, it nevertheless demonstrates the potential and the need for further studies into the meaning audiences themselves assign to their votes.

The concept of participatory diplomacy pushes the interpretation of these results beyond simply the idea that it polls how the public feels about participating nations in the ESC. It suggests that the public can and do use their participation in the ESC as a form of political voice and participation, and that they actively engage with its diplomatic possibilities. The following section explores how public diplomacy can be expanded into

participatory diplomacy through its engagement with popular culture theory and practice, particularly the fan studies concept of participatory culture.

## **From public diplomacy to participatory diplomacy**

Attitudes and expectations regarding participation have shifted significantly over the last 30 years, aided by the intersecting effects of democratised communication platforms and increased political participation in global civil society. Developments in communications technology have facilitated the movement from one-to-many to many-to-many modes of communication, which in turn has elevated expectations for dialogic engagement in diplomatic actions, and the importance of listening and being heard for foreign publics (Cull, 2019; Di Martino, 2020; Pamment, 2016). Most significantly, these changed dynamics have seen a shift away from a state-centric understanding of public diplomacy and open greater opportunities for participatory forms of diplomatic practice and engagement that are already illustrated in the ESC.

Where traditional diplomacy refers to communication between states for the purpose building and maintaining effective relations, public diplomacy concentrates on influencing the perceptions of foreign publics. Cull's (2020) pre-history of the term illustrates its evolution from its use in the 19th century to describe the open communication of diplomatic developments to the public, to its post-WWII use to describe how the public attitudes of foreign publics affects the formation and execution of foreign policies. Contemporary understandings of public diplomacy theory and practice are influenced by Nye's (2004) concept of soft power that describes the increasing importance of co-optive techniques in foreign relations; Gilboa (2008: 61) describes public diplomacy as 'an official policy translating soft power resources into action'. It seeks to build effective relationships between states and foreign publics that will create an 'enabling environment' (Nye, 2008: 101) for government policies. In this way, we can see that traditional approaches to public diplomacy view it in terms of monitoring state interests rather than public interest and agency.

Core to many descriptions of how public diplomacy functions is the idea that the state is communicating *to* rather than *with* the public. Contemporary public and cultural diplomacy operate in an information and communications landscape that has changed drastically since its increased instrumentalisation during the Cold War and even since the early 2000s, when there was a proliferation in scholarly literature about public and cultural diplomacy. Where traditional public diplomacy centred on one-way communications from the state to the public, communications technologies, such as the internet and the various media platforms it houses, facilitate many-to-many communications that have radically altered the operational context. For Bound et al. (2007: 17), writing about the related concept of cultural diplomacy, this shift has disrupted the idea of diplomacy as an exchange between elites. Communication within this context of many-to-many cultural exchange rather than a closed circle of cultural elites is 'fast moving and capable of profound effect' (Bound et al., 2007: 17). The movement away from diplomacy centred on a cultural and political elite to a broadened range of potential actors and agents reflects changing ideas of what constitutes 'culture' in cultural diplomacy, and who now has

diplomatic agency. It has opened greater space for both the public and popular culture to contribute to diplomatic activities.

With this, the purpose of public and cultural diplomacy has also shifted. It is no longer simply about the state communicating its actions to the public and monitoring the resulting attitudes but as illustrated by Cull's (2008) typology of public diplomacy, also about listening, advocacy and exchange. Foreign publics are more receptive to those forms of public diplomacy that are relational and dialogic, and that they feel offer meaningful opportunities for engagement, exchange and understanding (Cull, 2008, pp. 35, 36). Similarly, Cummings' (2003) oft-cited definition of cultural diplomacy as 'the exchange of ideas, information, art and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples in order to foster mutual understanding' (p. 1) is significant because of its emphasis on mutual understanding over other definitions that position cultural diplomacy as an intervention by the state for state interests (Goff, 2020: 31). Importantly, such definitions with a relational focus open diplomatic opportunity and agency to a broader range of actors, including the foreign publics that were previously placed in the role of passive receivers of the state's projections. By contrast, Pajtinka's (2014: 100) definition of cultural diplomacy that centres on the state and its interests, arguing that even mutual understanding is only brought about to realise the ultimate objective: foreign policy interests. Providing the example of the negotiation of international cultural policies and treaties, Pajtinka (2014: 101) differentiates between cultural diplomacy and public diplomacy along the lines of both public access to the diplomatic action in question and whether the action or activity is public-oriented in nature.

While civil society actors are increasingly mobilised as tools of public diplomacy, cultural diplomacy and nation-branding (Iwabuchi, 2015), they differ from official diplomats in that they do not have the power to act on behalf of the state, which can be seen in Pajtinka's differentiation between public and cultural diplomacy. Civil society actors can nevertheless be positioned as representatives of the nation, and by extension the state, even if they do not hold any significant diplomatic or political power. This can be seen in Eurovision, which uses the language of diplomacy: the teams representing each country are delegations and the artists are frequently framed as ambassadors for their nation's culture (Carniel, 2019b; Jay, 2023). Such framing is symbolic and contingent; sometimes artists' actions can be subjected to state, public or broadcaster censure when they are perceived to behave or speak in ways that are contrary to national values. For example, in 2022, the North Macedonian artist Andrea was seen to throw the national flag she was holding on to the floor. Macedonian broadcaster MRT acted quickly to distance themselves from her 'scandalous' act that 'showed disrespect for the national symbol, which is punishable by law' (quoted in van Lith, 2022). MRT called for Andrea to 'apologize to the citizens for such behaviour', threatening to withdraw her from the contest, and ensuring that they would take 'all legal possibilities for the strictest sanctioning for this scandal. . . against those responsible in the Macedonian delegation' (quoted in Ten Veen, 2022). The artist quickly apologised, explaining that she dropped the flag for a photograph because she was not close enough to the rest of the delegation to hand it over to someone else. The incident illustrates the pressure broadcasters and artists are under to ensure that they properly represent the nation(state) on the global stage of the song contest.

Recent scholarship on cultural and public diplomacy has shifted away from debating definitions to theorising around how their practices have and must necessarily alter in the contemporary cultural, political and communications environment. Some, such as Arsenault's (2009: 136) 'public diplomacy 2.0', are arguably more adaptive, while others, such as humanity-centred diplomacy (Zaharna, 2019) and cosmopolitan diplomacy (Gulmez, 2018; Villanueva, 2018) seek out more radical possibilities. Although Villanueva (2018: 690) imagines cosmopolitan cultural diplomacy as a 'radical, all the way down approach' that does de-centre the state, both he and Gulmez focus on examples from supranational and intergovernmental entities rather than drawing out how cosmopolitan diplomacies, cultural or otherwise, might be enacted on a vernacular level. By contrast, Zaharna's humanity-centred diplomacy is more effective in challenging state-centric perspectives. She critiques Nye's conceptualisation of soft power for placing culture in the 'unquestioned domain of the state' through his insistent use of the possessive, 'its [the state's] culture' (Zaharna, 2019: 7). By enabling direct interaction between people, digital technologies 'are untethering both culture and communication as domains that were once largely controlled by the state' (Zaharna, 2019: 9). This enables culture to be viewed and used as a 'human dynamic' (Zaharna, 2019: 8) rather than something static and territorially defined. One possibility offered by participatory diplomacy is its challenge to both state 'ownership' of culture and of diplomatic engagement and agency.

### **From participatory culture to participatory diplomacy**

In studies of popular culture, an equivalent challenge to power and possession of cultural texts to that in cultural and public diplomacy discussed in the previous section has occurred between those who produce texts and those who consume them, again facilitated by digital technologies and globalised communications.

In fan studies, the term participatory culture has come to signify the changed relations between fans and texts, and between producers and consumers. Participatory culture refers to the ways 'fans cease to be simply an audience for popular texts; instead, they become active participants in the construction and circulation of textual meanings' (Jenkins, 2012 [1992]: 24). Practices such as fan fiction and fan art illustrate the various ways that fans experience their object of fandom as something that is malleable, incomplete and dynamic rather than static. Most importantly, participatory culture recognises the power of the 'interpretive communities' (Fish, cited in Dittmer and Dodds, 2008: 446) that rise around a variety of cultural texts, forming 'social collectivities that imbue similar meanings to texts' (Dittmer and Dodds, 2008: 446). As a result of fan participation, the meaning of texts can shift over time, responding to various generational, technological, social, cultural, economic and political developments. In a recent dialogic article with Kozinets, Jenkins characterises participatory culture as 'translat[ing] consumption into a more active participation in . . . social debates' (Kozinets and Jenkins, 2022: 267).

This foregrounds more clearly the political potential of participatory cultures, which has increased as an area of interest for both scholars and policymakers. Participatory culture is recognised as a site for articulating political values and facilitating activism, providing fans with resources, skills and communities to foster their capacity to engage

with participatory politics, and in turn how politics and industry can leverage this political engagement (Bennett, 2012; Van Zoonen, 2004). Van Slyke's (2015) report *Spoiler Alert* creates an explicit political agenda for popular culture and progressive politics, although this focusses more on how industry creatives can and ought to instrumentalise their power as producers to address and progress political issues. Kligler-Vilenchik (2013) focusses more on the political agency of fans, identifying a multidirectional flow between participatory culture and participatory politics that facilitates stronger and productive engagement in each field. More recently, Jenkins, Peters-Lavaro and Shresthova's edited collection uses the concept of the civic imagination to explore 'the political consequences of cultural representations and the cultural roots of political participation' (Jenkins et al., 2020: 5). This approach sees popular culture as 'a provocation for civic engagement rather than as escapism' (Jenkins et al., 2020: 7). Similarly, Klein and Coleman (2022) argue that media participation is itself a form of civic participation, particularly for those who may feel marginalised by formal political processes.

Interest in the productive possibilities of this engagement between politics and popular culture has been increasingly reciprocated by international relations (IR) and political science over the past decade. Interestingly, this turn to the potential of popular culture coincides with revitalised interest in public diplomacy, cultural diplomacy and soft power as scholars sought to adjust these concepts and their professional practice into the changed cultural and communications landscape of the 21st century. Grayson et al.'s (2009) suggestion that popular culture and world politics should be seen to exist on a continuum seems to reflect Kligler-Vilenchik's identification of the multidirectional flow between participatory politics and participatory culture. Viewing popular culture and world politics on a continuum, Grayson et al. (2009: 158) argue, facilitates an understanding of these phenomena as not just intersecting, but 'mutually constitutive and even materially entangled through cycles of production, distribution and consumption.' Although this perspective is arguably foundational to cultural studies, and fan studies in particular, it marked an important (pop)cultural turn in IR. Grayson et al. (2009: 156) set an agenda for a subset of IR, Popular Culture World Politics (PCWP), urging, 'there must be a willingness to go beyond an engagement with illustrations of world politics. There is a need to investigate the political possibilities and limits of the politics produced and/or shaped by popular culture.' Dittmer and Dodds (2008) and Dittmer and Gray (2010) identify a similar capacity within popular geopolitics. Both PCWP and popular geopolitics argue for the development of nuanced methodologies that push engagements with popular culture in IR beyond a positivist cause-and-effect approach (Grayson et al., 2009: 156) and, importantly, away from a state-centric focus towards an understanding of how the (geo)political is embedded in and formed by everyday practices of civil society (Dittmer and Gray, 2010). These scholars call for IR to engage with cultural studies to re-emphasise lived practices and the role of people, thereby challenging top-down notions of political and cultural power and agency. Dittmer and Dodds (2008: 449) specifically identify fandom and fan studies as productive fields for mapping 'cartographies of textual reception and cultural geographies of reading' that can illuminate various 'geopolitical imaginations'.

The concept of participatory diplomacy seeks to draw out and foreground the political and diplomatic potential of participatory culture within a more explicit transnational



perspective. This has been explored to some extent in ideas of ‘pop cosmopolitanism’ (Jenkins, 2006) and ‘transcultural fandom’ (Chin and Morimoto, 2013), as well as Giulianotti and Robertson’s (2007) exploration of football as a site of cosmopolitanism and transnationalism. Participatory diplomacy is also favoured over the term ‘pop-culture diplomacy’ because, as Iwabuchi (2015: 420) illustrates, this refers solely to the state utilisation of popular culture products in a one-way projection rather than meaningful promotion of cultural exchange and dialogue. A concept is needed that better captures participation over consumption and, importantly, that sees engagement with popular culture as an active process of agency rather than merely a consumerist pursuit.

Pop cosmopolitanism refers to how the ‘transcultural flows of popular culture inspire new forms of global consciousness and cultural competency’ (Jenkins, 2006: 154). Although Jenkins was cautious of the ‘thin line’ pop cosmopolitans walk ‘between orientalist fantasies and a desire to honestly connect and understand an alien culture’ (Jenkins, 2006: 164) and certainly the later work on civic imagination realises popular culture as a site of political consciousness and activism, his initial conceptualisation of pop cosmopolitanism nevertheless struggles to emerge from a ‘thin’ interpretation of cosmopolitanism that characterises it primarily as the consumption of difference. While this consumption of difference does facilitate more open attitudes to global otherness, its mechanisms and the resulting social dynamics are largely superficial and driven by the self-interested preservation of diversity for the purpose of cosmopolitan consumption (Hannerz, 1996: 250; Jenkins, 2006: 162). In thinking about its possibilities for understanding participatory diplomacy, pop cosmopolitanism must engage with the ‘thick’ forms of cosmopolitanism that ‘promot[e] deeper transnational interrelations’ (Giulianotti and Robertson, 2007: 179) through ethical engagement (Appiah, 2006; see Corpus Ong, 2009 for a specific application of these ethics to media and cultural studies scholarship) and the de-centring of the nation-state as the primary mode of socio-political connection (Beck, 1998).

By privileging fan feeling and affect over consumption, Chin and Morimoto’s (2013: 90) expansion upon Hills’ (2002) transcultural homology highlights the intrinsic transculturalism of fan cultures in a ‘thicker’ manner than offered by early pop cosmopolitanism. Transcultural homology initially grappled with a dilemma like that found in pop cosmopolitanism in that it sought to untangle itself from appropriation and the consumption of otherness. Hills’ (2002: 13) identifies how ‘subcultures can use representations of other national subcultures to articulate a shared identity or devaluation’ as transcultural homologies. In this, the shared experience of fan identity subculture is of greater significance than national identity, which is ‘tactically deactivated or backgrounded’ (Hills, 2002: 13). Chin and Morimoto’s thickened formulation emphasises how fans are not necessarily drawn to a text by its place of origin or their desire to consume difference but rather by a ‘subjective moment of affinity regardless of origin’ (Chin and Morimoto, 2013: 99). This ‘affinity of affect’ (Chin and Morimoto 2013: 93) is akin to Appiah’s (2006: 135) ‘connection made in the imagination’, in which he suggests we are drawn to art for both its intrinsic value and its intrinsic reminder of humanity. According to Appiah (2006: 135), cosmopolitanism is a connection to the human in humanity that is ‘not *through* identity but *despite* difference’. However, identity still plays an important role in Chin and Morimoto’s transcultural formulation; it simply does not privilege national identity over

other subject positions (Chin and Morimoto, 2013: 93). For this reason, they 'eschew the term 'transnational' with its implicit privileging of a national orientation that supersedes other – arguably more salient – subject positions' in favour of 'transcultural' (Chin and Morimoto, 2013: 93).

Transcultural remains a useful concept for understanding other many other dimensions of Eurovision fandom and its practices, but transnational is more suited to the specific objectives of participatory diplomacy because of the place it provides to national orientation while acknowledging the permeability of the nation's borders by, amongst other 'harder' processes, cultural and human connection and exchange. The state still matters in participatory diplomacy because it is often the primary actor for the matters to which the public is responding, perhaps in the same way that the official producer of a pop culture text still matters as an actor in the process of participatory culture. Transnationalism allows the public to both speak to the nation-state and across/beyond it. Roudometof (2005: 118) characterises transnationalism as an 'emergent property that is born out of internal globalisation' or glocalisation. While transnationalism does not necessarily lead to increased cosmopolitanism, it can facilitate the production of cosmopolitan attitudes and can open 'transnational social spaces' (Roudometof, 2005: 114 via Beck). These transnational social spaces are constructed through the routine practices of social life, including the consumption of popular culture (Sandvoss, 2008). Elsewhere I have argued that the ESC constitutes such a transnational social space (Carniel, 2019a: 222); here, I extend that further to suggest that it is a transnational *political* space in which fans and audiences can enact participatory diplomacy. This also emphasises the underlying political dimensions of Dayan and Katz's (1998: 177) assertion that 'watching a media event is a social act'; watching or not watching are also political acts (Casemajor et al., 2015). Both transnationalism and its political potential are arguably amplified in the example of Eurovision as a global media event, and even more so given the inherently participatory dimensions of its production design. Due to the use of nations as an organising principle in the ESC, and in particular its role in managing the voting processes, the cosmopolitan and transnational affect expressed by the fans and audiences is necessarily 'rooted' or 'emplaced' in some formulation of national identity, but they are not bound solely to this subject position. From the outset, Eurovision fans are encouraged to engage with the event in both national *and* transnational terms. Nations are used as the organising principle for the song contest, both in terms of representation and in organisation of the voting process, yet its audience is encouraged to think (or feel) transnationally in selecting their winning song by virtue of not being able to vote for their own national representative.

The participatory dimension of Eurovision can be thought about in three different ways that intersect meaningfully in the notion of participatory diplomacy. First, it exemplifies 'social television' with political implication and engagement (Selva, 2016), and it is one of the few events to engage a global audience in this way, particularly with the advent of the 'Rest of the World' vote in 2023. Second, it can be understood in a pragmatic, democratic sense, in that the audience votes contribute to the contest's outcome. Focussing more on the national selection process, Vuletic (2018a: 307–308) describes this dimension as 'a rare example of cultural diplomacy that is the direct result of a national, democratic process in which the public directly selects a state representative.'

Participatory diplomacy extends this process and significance beyond the national selection context to give diplomatic weight to the transnational voting processes of the Eurovision finals. The audience can use their votes to communicate particular messages into and about the global community that can speak to shared, transnational values and current events or international relations. The second dimension draws from the meaning utilised in participatory culture and refers to the audience's active cultural agency in shaping the meaning of the contest. An enduring myth of the ESC is that it was intended to unite post-war Europe. The reality is that it was intended to make the most of new television technology and to create an audience for the EBU's transnational Eurovision television network. Despite this less romantic origin story, the 'song to unite Europe' trope has nevertheless accrued its own 'truthfulness' over time; that is, Eurovision has come to mean this because this is a meaning that has been consistently attributed to it by fans and audiences over time. Finally, the contest enables them to shape the very meaning of Europe itself (Sandvoss, 2008), as well as broader ideas of international community and belonging. As Georgiou (2008: 150) observes, for many Eurovision enthusiasts, Eurovision allows them to imagine Europe as 'a meeting point rather than as a point of conflict'. It also allows them to participate in the construction and maintenance of its symbolic boundaries and conditions of belonging. Through these processes, the political participatory and the cultural participatory combine to give fans and audiences a collective, public diplomatic voice, which we can term participatory diplomacy.

### **Finding participatory diplomacy in the outcomes of Eurovision 2022**

In the early days of the Ukraine-Russia conflict in 2022, fans, activists, the Ukrainian broadcaster (UA:PBC) and other broadcasting members immediately urged the EBU to exclude Russia from Eurovision. The EBU initially hesitated to do so, releasing a statement on 24 February reaffirming Eurovision's official status as a 'non-political cultural event that unites countries and celebrates differences through music', and stating its intention to support both Russia and Ukraine's commitment to participate (quoted in Granger, 2022). Within a day, the EBU had reversed its stance after consultation with the contest's Reference Group and the wider EBU membership. It stated that 'no Russian act will participate in this year's Eurovision Song Contest' and that the decision 'reflects concern that, in light of the unprecedented crisis in Ukraine, the inclusion of a Russian entry in this year's Contest would bring the competition into disrepute' (European Broadcasting Union, 2022). While the terms by which Russia was excluded from the song contest are embedded in the institutional structure of the EBU, the idea of 'disrepute' highlights the weight that is given to public opinion and the symbolic value of Eurovision as a unifying cultural event. The public pressure placed upon the EBU to exclude Russia from the song contest – and upon other international cultural and sporting organisations to exclude Russia from their various events – illustrates publicly held terms and conditions of belonging to the (European) international community and their intersecting power as consumers and global citizens to pressure governing bodies to conform to and enforce those expectations.

This public agency can also be seen in the results of the contest. Ukraine performed well in the jury vote; national juries comprise professional members of the music, television and broadcast industries who vote against set criteria. Ukraine received 192 points from 26 of the 39 other participating countries and placed fifth overall prior to the announcement of the public vote. It received top points – the coveted *douze points* (12 points) – from five countries; notably, these were its nearest neighbours, Lithuania, Romania, Latvia, Moldova and Poland. Its lowest jury vote (excepting those that gave it 0 points) was 2 points from San Marino. The jury mode score was 6 and its average (based on the countries that did allocate them points) was 4.6. By contrast, in the public televote Ukraine received 439 (out of a possible 468 points), including 12 points from 28 of the participating countries. Its lowest public vote was 7 points from Serbia. Notably, it received points from every single participating country. Media coverage described the victory almost exclusively in terms of a show of public support for Ukraine. In the *Washington Post*, Timsit and Pannett (2022) report, ‘The band’s victory. . . was secured by audience votes and cheered by world leaders, in a sign of the strong public support for Ukraine’. Belam and Cvorak (2022), writing for the *Guardian*, characterised the victory as ‘[r]iding a tidal wave of support from the telephone-voting European public’. CNN deployed a similar oceanic description of the victory as ‘surfing a wave of goodwill’ (Kottasová and Picheta, 2022). The *New York Times* called it a ‘symbolic, pop culture endorsement of solidarity’ (Povoledo et al., 2022) and is one of the few accounts to also credit the victory to the juries. It is important to emphasise that framing the Ukrainian win entirely as a ‘sympathy’ vote is potentially problematic. While public sentiment about the Ukrainian crisis may have contributed to their landslide success, the entry itself is of the calibre that fans and audiences had come to expect from Ukrainian performers over the years. Ukraine is, after all, the only country remaining with an unblemished record of qualifying for the grand final in each year that they have participated. While I do argue that Ukraine’s 2022 victory was driven by global political sentiment, I also suggest that for many (but possibly not all) voters, this was underpinned by an appreciation of the song itself. However, it is perhaps telling that Kalush Orchestra’s ‘Stefania’ debuted only at 39 in the 2022 ESC250, an annual countdown of fan rankings of Eurovision songs held each New Year’s Eve; the runner up in 2022, UK’s Sam Ryder, placed 14, while the number one spot was taken by Spain’s Chanel, who had placed third in the contest that year (Tsinivits, 2022). Its entrance into the rankings indicates that fans still liked the song, but its placement against other songs in the same contest cohort suggests a shifted sense of urgency or importance in its success; put simply, removed from the immediate political and affective context, they liked other songs better. Furthermore, it illustrates the difference between the dedicated fans and the broader global audience, who have different levels of investment in the song contest. Unpacking these differences will be a fruitful area of investigation for future studies into participatory diplomacy.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this article has been to explore the conceptual and theoretical possibilities of merging understandings of public diplomacy with participatory culture to develop the concept of participatory diplomacy. Where public diplomacy encompasses actions by a

state to influence the perception of foreign publics through various means of communication and engagement, participatory diplomacy can be understood as the attempt by foreign publics to influence the state through their engagement with popular culture, broadly defined to encompass various media and consumer products that make up everyday cultures. The Eurovision Song Contest provides a platform for exploring the dynamics between participatory and public diplomacy as it is a contest of nations designed around public engagement and participation, and it is often leveraged as a public diplomacy opportunity. The traditional view of Eurovision as a public diplomacy tool to communicate with foreign publics and gauge some sense of their perceptions still places agency upon states, or on the public broadcasters as publicly funded representatives of states. Thinking about Eurovision voting as participatory diplomacy rather than traditional public or cultural diplomacy recognises the agency of the public to use cultural consumption and participation as a form of political participation. An interpretive analysis of the Eurovision 2022 results and surrounding commentary provides an indicative illustration of participatory diplomacy in action, but it also demonstrates the need for further qualitative investigation into the precise relationship between audience motivations and the results, it also invites further investigation into other fan interventions and activism at other contest editions, such as Russia 2008, Israel 2019 and Sweden 2023 (in response to the Israel-Hamas war).

The ESC has long served as a tool of cultural diplomacy, public diplomacy and, more broadly, for the development of nations' soft power capacities. It also serves as an example of participatory culture in practice. Theoretically, the contest provides a somewhat utopic platform on which the audience can temporarily suspend political reality and imagine that all the participating nations are coming together to provide an evening of entertainment despite their differences in the 'real world'. It is impossible to extract people and their cultures from political feeling and context, let alone in what is ostensibly a contest of nations. The concept of participatory diplomacy functions to highlight the important role that popular culture can play in public and cultural diplomacy. More importantly, its invocation of the fan studies concept of participatory culture places greater emphasis on public agency and voice in international relations through popular culture. It sees popular culture as an avenue through which political and cultural values are not simply represented but given political weight in their expression.

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