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Grey people in an ordinary world: Navigating the politics of migration at the Eurovision Song Contest

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Abstract
The Eurovision Song Contest positions itself as a nonpolitical cultural event that unites Europe in song. However, politics and the representation of politicised issues permeate the song contest through a focus on values-based politics rather than state-based politics. This article uses the highly politicised issue of migration to explore how participating artists and nations navigate the Eurovision Song Contest's rules about political expression and politicisation through these values-based politics. It argues that these values create a political space wherein politicised issues can be addressed without contravening the contest's rules about political expression.

Keywords
Eurovision, humanitarianism, migration, political expression, politics

Introduction

Over the past 10 years, Europe has been engaged in debates around migration, largely precipitated by mass humanitarian migration events resulting from the conflicts in Syria and Ukraine. The tensions, anxieties, experiences, and politics of this migration have been reflected in the artistic and cultural outputs of the region, including its largest cultural event, the Eurovision Song Contest (Sieg, 2017). The Eurovision Song Contest is a unique cultural platform as it is connected to real politics, values and international relations, but it is framed explicitly as a nonpolitical event with rules that prohibit the

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politicisation of the contest, including political gestures, statements and lyrics; this politics rule extends also to non-competitive elements of the production, such as interval acts and skits produced by the host country. Despite the rules, politics and the representation of politicised issues, such as migration, permeate the song contest, albeit frequently through a depoliticised notion of shared values – either European or global.

This article uses the issue of migration to explore how participating artists and nations navigate the Eurovision Song Contest's rules about political expression and politicisation through an emphasis on a particular set of purportedly shared globalist values. It argues that due to the Eurovision Song Contest's emphasis on a set of depoliticised values, articulations of migration politics are generally acceptable within its rules, provided they focus on ideas of humanitarianism and empathy rather than states and their policies. To achieve this, the article first examines how political expression is governed at the Eurovision Song Contest and establishes it as a space where the political can nevertheless be expressed and explored through values-based rather than state-based politics. It then explores several examples of how migration politics have been articulated at the song contest. It focuses predominantly on examples occurring within the contest broadcast, including the overall production and the individual performances, and its associated events, such as press conferences, wherein artists provide commentary on their songs, staging, and artistic motivations. Accordingly, it identifies four areas where migration has been represented at Eurovision: in the performances (including the song and its staging); in the artist selection (choosing artists of migrant backgrounds to represent the nation); by the artists themselves outside of their performances, such as at press conferences and interviews; and in the various production choices made by the host country. With the exception of the artist selection, each of these areas is subject to the rules of the contest. It argues that by framing migration within the values and politics of humanitarianism and migration as a human experience rather than political field, performers and host countries can bypass the contest's rules about politics by drawing upon the idea of shared humanitarian values but nevertheless provide commentary about the events they seek to depict.

The examples used in this article are drawn from contest editions since 2010 as this encompasses a period of European debates about the efficacy of multiculturalism, the so-called 'Syrian migrant crisis', and Ukrainian displacement following the Russian invasion. Songs and performances, including interval acts and other host performances, were reviewed for thematic and symbolic engagement with themes of migration, mobility, and diaspora. As artist mobility is common not only within the contest but within Europe (and from Australia to Europe) (Magkou, 2012; Toplak, 2017), artist profiles were cross-referenced against interviews and other media coverage in both Eurovision fan press and mainstream media to identify artists that were either actively engaged in conversations about migration, such as Ermal Meta and Salvador Sobral, who is not of a migrant background, or who were the subject of commentary about their identity, such as Mahmood. From this, cases were selected for analysis based upon further shared characteristics: migrant children as a moral referent in 'Mercy' and 'De la capăt'; the different reception and instrumentalisation of *em*igrant and *imm*igrant artists by Italy and Armenia; the acceptable limits of artist politics between Sobral and Meta; and host country agency in using their productions as a form of political commentary. With these limits, the study

is therefore indicative rather than comprehensive and identified significant scope for future studies beyond the current one, such as mapping themes of migration both qualitatively and quantitatively, analysis of Eurovision artist mobility as a specific form of migration, and, beyond migration, a systematic analysis of political statements by artists.

Governing Eurovision as a nonpolitical event: the politics rule

First held in 1956 with only seven participating countries, the Eurovision Song Contest has expanded into a global phenomenon with approximately 40 nations participating each year. The contemporary contest involves two semi-finals and a grand final, and the winner is determined by a combined public and professional jury vote. The performance of each song is preceded in the broadcast by a short video, known as a postcard. While voting processes (both casting and auditing votes) are underway, the host country provides interval acts to entertain the audience while they await the announcement of the winner. The production is regulated by a set of rules that are revised each year but that generally maintain certain parameters around performances (such as length of song, number of performers permitted on stage and age of performers), voting, and the production as a whole. Each year, the contest rules are fairly explicit on a particular principle: the Eurovision Song Contest is a nonpolitical event that is not to be 'politicised and/or instrumentalised and/or otherwise brought into disrepute in any way' by delegations, broadcasters, or states (Eurovision.tv, 2023: 2.7.i).

Officially, the Eurovision Song Contest is a nonpolitical event, yet its reputation and, indeed, its practice are inherently political. The politics rule is revised in its wording each year alongside the other rules, often reflecting current concerns or responding to boundaries pushed in previous contests. For example, the 2014 rule (Eurovision, 2014: 1.2.2.h) stated, 'No lyrics, speeches, gestures of a political, commercial or similar nature shall be allowed in the lyrics or performances of the songs', while the 2018 rule (Eurovision.tv 2018: 1.5) stated, 'No messages promoting any organization, institution, political cause or other, company, brand, products or services shall be allowed in the Shows and within any official ESC premises'. Interestingly, the rules were revised to include the phrasing about instrumentalisation and politicisation for the 2022 contest, but still included the specific prohibition of lyrics, gestures and statements; by the time of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February, this specific prohibition had been removed.

Arguably, the iteration of the rule in place since 2022 creates greater political space for artists to use their performances for political messaging, while restricting how states – either directly or via their publicly-funded broadcasters – might attempt to instrumentalise their participation in the contest. In 2023, it was reported that the EBU had refused Ukrainian President Zelenskyy's request for a video address in the contest's grand final on the grounds that it constituted politicisation of the contest (Goodman, 2023);[1] however, as discussed below, several of the interval performances that year provided overt humanitarian commentary on the Russo-Ukrainian conflict. Equally, the vagueness of

the most recent politics rule – a broad conceptualisation of politicisation and instrumentalisation rather than specific actions – means that the EBU itself also has more space for interpretation in how it chooses to police the rule. Certainly, the rule can be interpreted as being far more focused on states and their interventions into the song contest than on artists articulating their politics through lyrics and performance. Breaching these rules can – and has – resulted in disqualification, but many arguably political entries and production choices have eluded this. For example, Belarus was disqualified from the contest in 2021 – and its broadcaster eventually suspended entirely from the EBU for other issues related to journalistic integrity and freedom of the press – for a song believed to be promoting the Lukashenko government's re-education of dissenters. However, in 2022 several artists openly demonstrated support for Ukraine including the eventual winner, Ukraine's Kalush Orchestra. In response to criticisms of their decision to overlook these artists' actions, the EBU stated, 'We understand the deep feelings around Ukraine at this moment and believe the comments of the Kalush Orchestra and other artists expressing support for the Ukrainian people to be humanitarian rather than political in nature' (quoted in Frost, 2022). This raises questions about how 'politics', the 'political', and 'politicisation' are defined, understood, and applied by the EBU in its Eurovision policies at various times.

The Eurovision Song Contest as a political space

To understand how the politics rule can be manipulated by both the EBU and the participating states, it is useful here to draw upon Mouffe's (2011 (2005)) distinction between politics and the political. According to Mouffe (2011 (2005): 9), politics are 'the set of practices and institutions through which an order is created', while the political is 'the dimension of antagonism. . .constitutive of human societies'. As Bal and Hernández-Navarro (2011) extrapolate, 'Politics constantly attempts to repress or defuse the political. The political resists this by creating political spaces where conflict can exist (p. 9)'. In claiming the song contest as nonpolitical – and in also claiming to be a nonpolitical organisation – the EBU is paradoxically engaging in politics, per Mouffe's definition, *and* creating a political space. That is, the EBU's attempt to establish order through its practices and itself as an institution, including rules about political expression and instrumentalisation in the contest, is politics, while its song contest's attempt to create a space where competition between nations can occur without conflict is a political space. By this understanding, it would perhaps be more accurate (albeit less grammatically correct) to suggest that the EBU aims to be 'non-politics' rather than entirely nonpolitical and, despite the EBU's best efforts, the contest can and should be a 'political [space] where conflict can exist' (Bal and Hernández-Navarro, 2011: 9).

There are, however, further limits to how this political space can function. Just as Mouffe distinguishes between politics and the political, the EBU have created a political space within Eurovision that distinguishes between state-based politics and values-based politics (Carniel, 2022; Carniel, 2024) centred upon idea(l)s of acceptance, tolerance, unity, and inclusion. In the EBU's practice, the 'political' is defined as state-based politics, whereas values are seen as shared and universal, and as such 'nonpolitical' in nature because they are not the sole domain of any one nation-state. To do so presumes a shared

set of values for the participating nations and, by extension, for Europe, which has been the source of disquiet among participating nations. The most recent iterations of the politics rule are preceded by definitions of EBU values and those specific to the song contest: ‘universality, diversity, equality and inclusivity and proud tradition of celebrating diversity through music [sic]’ (ESC Rules, 2023: 2.7). The politics rule’s subclause on values states, ‘The Participating Broadcasters shall at all times respect the EBU and the ESC Values and shall ensure that no contestant, delegation or country is discriminated and/or ridiculed in any manner’ (ESC Rules, 2023: 2.7.ii). The contest’s values draw upon the Western liberal tradition, which has its own implications in contemporary European geopolitics; both Russian and Turkish politicians have criticised the song contest as Western propaganda for not aligning with or adequately considering those nations’ values (Edgar, 2014; Granger, 2014; Luhn, 2014; Religion News Service, 2014).

The values-based politics of the Eurovision Song Contest underpins its most enduring myth: that it was a song contest to unite Europe. Although this is not strictly true – rather, it was conceived to help promote the new Eurovision television and radio network, and its technologies (Bolin, 2006; Bourdon, 2007; Vuletic, 2018)–it is also not entirely false. Through affective engagement, the song contest has come to signify this for its fans and audiences (Carniel, 2024; Waysdorf, 2021), arguably expanding increasingly towards a kind of global unity. As Georgiou (2008) found in her study of British Eurovision audiences, enthusiasts of the contest imagine ‘Europe as a meeting point rather than as a point of conflict’ (p. 150). The EBU’s recent announcement of a permanent slogan for the contest, ‘United by music’–the theme for Liverpool 2023 – further underscores this. The myth of European unity can be used somewhat paradoxically to contest the political nature of Eurovision. This argument, of course, overlooks the idea of ‘unity’ as an inherently political concept (Fossum, 2001; Jones, 2001; Patrono 2004). Yet, in the history of the contest, unity is not only an acceptable political value but one that is embraced and celebrated, as illustrated by Toto Cotugno’s victory for Italy in 1990 with ‘Insieme 1992’, an ode to the forthcoming European Union. However, as Holmes and Castañeda (2016) observe, ‘there is clearly no unified ‘Europe’ in relation to the refugee crisis’ (p. 14), nor, we could argue, migration more generally. Accordingly, it is a potentially divisive issue with which to engage, in the bounds of a ‘nonpolitical’ event such as the Eurovision Song Contest.

Finding space for migration politics at the Eurovision Song Contest

While not entirely absent, migration as a theme or issue has largely been peripheral to Eurovision scholarship. For example, studies of voting practices identify patterns of diaspora voting (Blangiardo and Baio, 2014; Dekker, 2007; Ginsburgh and Noury, 2005; Spierdijk and Vellekoop, 2006; Stockemer et al., 2018), but these are predominantly quantitative and do not offer any qualitative insight into how the contest operates to help us understand migration as a transnational phenomenon. Nevertheless, diaspora voting warrants further qualitative inquiry, particularly to analyse the effect, if any, of the mass displacement of Ukrainians since 2022. Thinking about Eurovision in a broader

cultural discourse, Sieg (2017) considers the contest alongside trends in European narrative film that explore sentiments about migration and European identity. Important to the discussion here, she highlights the paradox of how these narrative films use values, such as humanitarianism, to claim particular notions of cultural civilisation and identity, but frequently states will act in ways that contravene those values to protect that identity. Carniel (2018) has also illustrated how the history of migration from Europe to Australia has been used to justify Australian participation in the song contest. The discussion below focuses on the politics of representation within the production of the contest and its promotional activities. It identifies four areas in which migration and its politics are represented: performances, artist selection, artist interviews and the production choices determined by the host country.

Representing migration through lyrics and performance

Unsurprisingly, given they are at the heart of the contest, the lyrics and performances are undoubtedly the elements that are most heavily scrutinised through the lens of the politics rule. France's 2018, 'Mercy' by Madame Monsieur, is perhaps the song most overtly engaged with contemporary European migration politics. It tells the story of a real child, named Mercy, born aboard a migrant rescue vessel in the Mediterranean in 2017. Written from the perspective of newborn Mercy, its lyrics advocate the importance of a humanitarian response to maritime migrants, particularly 'all those children/Who were taken by the sea' (Satt and Lucas, 2018). Although its focus is primarily upon the hopeful optimism of Mercy's birth and rescue, this particular lyric is nevertheless an example of mobilisation around migrant deaths by refugees, migrants, and solidarity activists that Rygiel (2016: 546) characterises as a form of transgressive citizenship politics. This is further compounded by the deliberate focus on children – both Mercy and those children lost at sea, such as Alan Kurdi, whose lifeless body on a Turkish beach took hold of the global moral imagination (Adler-Nissen et al., 2020). 'Mercy' found remarkable national success for a Eurovision entry; after winning the public national selection show, *Destination Eurovision*, the song hit number three in the French charts. Yet it was also divisive; radio stations in Calais, home to the notorious 'Jungle' migrant camp, refused to play the song, despite band member Jean-Karl Lucas being Calaisien (Adams, 2018). Alley-Young (2022 (2020): 218) observes that the song successfully communicates a political message while still avoiding 'humanitarian terms that have been politicised', such as refugee and asylum seeker, that may have more clearly earmarked their song as political according to the Eurovision rules. Alley-Young (2022 (2020): 218) also argues that the use of Mercy's newborn voice de-politicises the song as 'children are constructed as apolitical'. However, it is important not to conflate children's limited political agency with being apolitical; rather, children are highly politicised subjects. As Moeller (2002: 38) has argued, children are '*the* moral referent' in communicating international news, working as 'a motive for action'. They are positioned at the pinnacle of the 'hierarchy of the innocent' (Moeller, 2002: 48), particularly an infant such as Mercy. While recent scholarship in childhood studies, including studies of child migrants, emphasises children's agency (Scutaru and Paoli, 2020), both 'Mercy'

and the mimetically circulated images of Alan Kurdi position children as innocents at the mercy of a society and its politics controlled by adults. By capitalising on the 'hierarchy of the innocent' to elicit an emotional response from the global community and from policy-makers (Adler-Nissen et al., 2020), 'Mercy' highlights the moral responsibility of the (adult) European community to improve their humanitarian response. As one French music commentator noted,

> If people are uncomfortable with 'Mercy', it may be because they don't want to face reality . . . or because they demonise refugees and refuse to be moved by the story of a little girl. . .But if you focus on the lyrics you have to answer the question, 'Where is my humanity?' (Fabien Randanne quoted in Adams, 2018)

Children are also the moral referent in the migration commentary offered by the 2015 Romanian entry, 'De la capăt', by Voltaj. The context is, however, arguably less politically charged than that of 'Mercy'. Released in conjunction with a campaign collaborating with various NGOs (Sopon, 2015), the song addresses Romanian migrants who have left their children behind to seek work elsewhere to support their families, and seeks to raise awareness of the effect this kind of migration has on children (Sopon, 2015). The song's official music video featured a real child of an economic migrant, Razvan, who was later reunited with his family at Eurovision in Vienna (Eurovision.tv, 2015). Voltaj's intentions with the song are twofold. First, they sought to combat perceptions of Romanians as 'lazy or thieves', instead promoting an image of them as 'hard-working and honest, making enormous sacrifices for their families left behind' (Voltaj lead vocalist Călin Goia quoted in Eurovision.tv, 2015). Second, they sought to raise awareness of the trauma suffered by the children left behind who grow up with economic care through remittances and gifts, but lack parental intimacy and affection (Eurovision.tv, 2015). Indeed, studies of the impact of parental migration on Romanian children have found that they often have increased incidence of mental health issues, including depression, anxiety, and substance abuse (Dafinoiu et al., 2022; Robila, 2011). It is not clear what solution the band or the accompanying campaign sought to achieve beyond the visibility of the issue. Lead singer Gioa's suggestion that 'maybe they could return home' (quoted in Eurovision.tv, 2015) overlooks the significant economic factors driving Romanian migration patterns (Davidescu et al., 2020) that may make return difficult. Nevertheless, given trends in regional mobility and migration flows, it was undoubtedly a message that resonated beyond its Romanian context (Qvist, 2015). As evidenced by the official Eurovision site's coverage of Razvan's family reunion, the EBU did not view the utilisation of a song for public awareness as a political issue, nor was the matter raised for public debate. As with 'Mercy', 'De la capăt' eluded the politics rule by its appeal to human emotion and experience rather than critique of states and their policies.

Representing migration through strategic diversity: artist selection

Artist selection plays an important role in how participating nations leverage the song contest as a nation branding exercise. Using the Netherlands and Australia, respectively,

Meijer (2017) and Carniel (2017) each present a case for the strategic usefulness of diversity attained through migrant populations on the Eurovision stage, usually signified through the racial or ethnic identities of the performers, to convey the progressiveness and cosmopolitanism of the nation being represented. The diversity of artists is also useful to the contest as a whole in illustrating its global connections through artists representative of various migrant groups in Europe (and, in the case of Australia, of European migrants).

The symbolic importance of the performer as representative of the nation and ideas of ethno-national identity is further illustrated by criticisms of the suitability of performers selected for this role. In 2019, Egyptian-Italian Mahmood accepted the opportunity to represent Italy at Eurovision after winning the Sanremo Song Festival, the Italian national song competition credited with inspiring the development of the Eurovision Song Contest, and that now acts as a de facto national selection.[2] The autobiographical song ‘Soldi’ explores Mahmood’s complicated relationship with his Egyptian father who left when the singer was five years old. Mahmood has described his musical style as ‘Moroccan pop’ (Rocca, 2019) that combines hip hop with other genres and, in particular, Arabic influences; ‘Soldi’ includes several lyrics in Arabic. The combination of the Arabic lyrics, unconventional (especially for Sanremo) musical style, Mahmood’s ethnicity, and the fact that he won the jury vote but not the popular vote, led critics to decry its selection as political (Monella, 2019), prompting significant public debate. The Italian Interior Minister Matteo Salvini, known for his anti-immigration stance, made a dismissive tweet about the song and expressed support for the runners up, Ultimo. He later stated, ‘In my opinion it doesn’t represent Italian music in the world’ (quoted in Le Iene, 2019), implying the song’s Otherness to Italian musical culture and by extension the Italian nation. One of Salvini’s party members soon proposed legislation limiting foreign music on Italian radio (Horowitz, 2019; Lall, 2019); again, this suggests that a song with Arabic lyrics and influences is ‘foreign’, despite the Italian identity of the artist. Salvini and others also suggested that the disparity in the jury and popular votes indicated the ‘opposition between people and elites’ (quoted in Hawlin, 2019); however, after winning Sanremo, ‘Soldi’ topped the Italian charts and came second in Eurovision. Mahmood, who was born in Italy to an Italian mother and who is also openly queer, was frequently expected to reaffirm his Italianness in interviews after his win (Monella, 2019; Spaziante, 2021), but in doing so he also took the opportunity to emphasise Italy’s diversity, framing the criticisms in terms of generational difference: ‘My generation does not even perceive (these differences). . .Possibly the earlier generations feel this difference because they were raised in a world in which a migrant or the son of mixed couples was an exception’ (quoted in Monella, 2019). Dolasinski (2022: 133) argues that artists like Mahmood are ‘icons of empowerment for Italian youth’ that ‘promote the acceptance of hybrid cultures and identities in a country that has historically privileged expressions of homogeneity’. As feared by far-right populist politicians, for many, Mahmood’s victory in the national song contest and subsequent representation in the global contest signalled ‘a moment in redefining “Italianness”’ (Webster, 2019) as an identity encompassing ethnic and sexual diversity.

By contrast, the background of Albanian-Italian singer Ermal Meta, who represented Italy alongside Fabrizio Moro in 2018, appeared to have attracted little to no controversy.

Many Albanians, including Meta and his family (Kristjans, 2018), fled Albania in the 1990s in the wake of political instability after the collapse of communism, and now comprise one of the largest migrant groups in Italy. Although Albanians have largely integrated into Italian society, they were nevertheless subject to stereotyping and discrimination throughout the 1990s (Mai, 2005). That Meta eluded the criticisms levelled at Mahmood and his song may be in part because his song with Moro, 'Non mi avete fatto niente', fulfils some of the more traditional expectations of Italian *canzone*. The song is a response to the political issue of global terrorism but, like the other examples above, bypasses the Eurovision politics rule by focusing on ideas of common humanity. While the song was not about migration, the issue was raised in an interview with Eurovision fansite Wiwibloggs in relation to Eleni Foureira, another Albanian diasporic artist performing that year for Cyprus. In reflecting upon their shared history of migration, Meta critiqued the prevalence of contemporary anti-immigration sentiments, stating, 'Borders are made for men. All people are travellers. In front of the border they become immigrants. That's not right' (Kristjans, 2018).

While the backgrounds of Mahmood and Meta simply illustrate the consequences of migration to Italy, those of the artists brought together to form Genealogy for Armenia in 2015 comprised a deliberate statement about the global Armenian diaspora after the 1915 genocide. Türkiye (which no longer participates in Eurovision) and Azerbaijan criticised the entry for being a political commentary on historical genocide and contemporary genocide denial. Although Armenia denied the allegations, the song name was quickly changed from 'Don't deny' to 'Face the shadow' to mitigate these concerns (Denham, 2015). Five of the six members of the group were descendants of the Armenian diaspora, each representing a different continent; the sixth member was Armenian. The diasporic composition of the group was represented visually towards the end of the performance as each member of the group moved to stand on their continent of origin on a map of the world projected on to the stage. In the lead up to Eurovision, the diasporan members of Genealogy took up Armenian citizenship and were awarded their passports by the Armenian president (Jiandani, 2015). The official music video included images of a group dressed in 1910s clothing for a family portrait wherein the family gathered decreased in numbers each time they were shown. The portrait is then reconstructed with the members of the group, symbolising the persistence of Armenian culture and ethnicity through diaspora. Even without the implied references to genocide through the lyric 'Don't deny' and suggestive imagery in the official music video, the deliberate engagement with a diaspora instigated by genocide implicitly ties the entry to this specific history and political context. The high-profile citizenship and passport ceremony indicates an instrumentalisation of these diasporic citizens by the state, reaffirming to the diaspora that there is a homeland to which they can 'return'. Genealogy thus provides an example of diaspora mobilisation (Mavroudi, 2018) through soft power mechanisms, such as diaspora diplomacy, transnational citizenship, and cultural representation.

Artists engaging with migration politics

Beyond the politics of identity, performers have their own political agency in the context of the song contest, but this can be limited by expectations about how to appropriately

adhere to the rules against the politicisation of the song contest. While Meta felt free to comment broadly on attitudes to immigration in the Wiwibloggs interview, in the previous year Portuguese artist Salvador Sobral – who went on to win the 2017 contest – was allegedly silenced on the issue of humanitarian migration after he wore a 'SOS Refugees' sweatshirt to an official press conference. The EBU requested that he no longer wear the sweatshirt as they perceived its message to be political. However, the issue was less the shirt itself and more the fact that wearing it prompted press to ask Sobral about immigration issues. Sobral only commented on migration issues in response to a question asking him about the significance of the sweatshirt he was wearing. However, in his response, Sobral critiqued the European response to the ongoing refugee crisis in the Mediterranean, stating,

> I can't say that Europe isn't making an effort. Everybody's making an effort. But I feel like there is . . . so much bureaucratic stuff happening in the refugee camps in Greece, in Turkey, in Italy. We can diminish these bureaucratic services. They ask for birth certificates for people who just came in plastic boats . . . that's just insane. (quoted in Honciuc, 2017)

Sobral did abide with the EBU's request, but in a later (non-official press conference) interview he refuted the claim that the sweatshirt expressed a political message: 'it is a humanitarian and essentially human message' (quoted in Honciuc, 2017). Sobral's words were later echoed in those of the EBU statement defending their stance on artists expressing support for Ukraine in 2022 (Frost, 2022), indicating a distinct policy change in how the EBU defined and policed politics at the song contest through a humanitarian lens.

Host engagement with migration themes and politics

Unlike other mega-events that determine hosting rights by a bidding system, such as the FIFA World Cup and Olympics, the rights to host the next Eurovision Song Contest are afforded to the winner each year. Although it generally requires significant expenditure in production costs and infrastructure in a very limited timeframe, it is an opportunity to generate significant tourism revenue, both at the time of the event and through tourists attracted to the host country through its portrayal in the broadcast (Linden and Linden, 2018). It is also a valuable nation-branding tool that allows the host country to communicate a cohesive image and narrative about the nation and its values for global consumption (Jordan, 2014). This is achieved through various production elements, such as postcards, choice of presenters, and the interval acts.

The emphasis in the postcards – the short videos used to introduce each artist before their performance – is usually upon an ethno-national rather than multicultural or pluralist image of the nation. However, representations of national diversity also serve a useful function within the political economy of the song contest. Diversity is, after all, 'at the heart of Eurovision values' (former Eurovision Executive supervisor (2011-2020) Jon Ola Sand, quoted in Eurovision.tv, 2017). The postcards for Dusseldorf 2011 featured migrants from each of the participating countries showcasing their new lives and locales

in Germany. Using the lens of everyday life in Germany, the postcards worked to provide an image of multicultural Germany not as a tourist destination, as other nation's postcards might emphasise, but as a desirable and welcoming place to live and work (Carniel, 2019; see also Vuletic, 2018). Just 6 months prior to this depiction, Chancellor Angela Merkel had declared Germany's attempt to build a multicultural society to have 'utterly failed', but emphasised migrants were still welcome (quoted in *BBC News*, 2010). In light of this, the postcards communicate an idea of Germany as diverse but its emphasis on migrants' engagement with the German landscape, culture, and economy seems to suggest expectations of integration that many feared were absent from 'multikulti'.

Other production elements, such as the contest theme and slogan and choice of presenters, also function to communicate certain ideas about the host nation and its values. In Lisbon 2018, the theme of 'All Aboard' sought to symbolise Portugal's seafaring history (Eurovision.tv, 2017), rewriting its historical colonial exploits as a globalising force that brought the world closer together (Baker, 2018). To underscore this, the event emphasised Lusitanic cultures more broadly, such as featuring Brazilian artists in Eurovision Village shows and as interval acts. The presenters included American-Portuguese actress Daniela Ruah, who was born in America to Portuguese parents who later migrated back to Portugal; Ruah symbolised the mobility and transnationality of Portuguese people. Australia also contributed to this messaging, replacing their previous, iconic, voting ambassador, newsreader Lee Lin Chin, with Portuguese-Australian newsreader Ricardo Gonçalves. This is illustrative of Australia's ongoing strategy of leveraging its migrant histories and multicultural present to both assert a connection to the host country and belonging to the contest itself (Carniel, 2018).

Interval acts are generally used to showcase the national talent and culture of the host country, which in turn also functions as an effective nation branding activity. These are performances that entertain the audiences while the voting processes (both submission of votes and auditing) are underway. Sweden famously parodied this trend in Malmö 2013 with 'Swedish Smörgåsbord', a musical skit performed by the presenter Petra Mede featuring a range of Swedish stereotypes. The lyrics aptly characterise the contest as an opportunity to 'sell your country through song and dance'. Sweden continued its tradition of parodying the contest at Stockholm 2016 with 'Love Love Peace Peace', a song about the common tropes of the song contest, with its title referring to the universal themes acceptable within the contest rules and culture. As with competing entries, all elements of the contest provided by the host country are subject to the contest rules about politics. Interval acts provide the host country with the opportunity to also engage in the artistic political space of the song contest. Two such acts have provided direct commentary on pressing humanitarian migration crises; Malmö 2016's 'The Grey People' responded to the European refugee crisis of 2015 and beyond, while Liverpool 2023's 'Ordinary World' depicted the refugee journey of Ukrainian Eurovision alumna Alyosha.

Broadcast during the interval of the first semi-final in 2016, 'The Grey People' is an interpretive dance performance featuring dancers dressed in grey clothes and makeup depicting the struggles of refugees as they seek to find home and belonging. As explained in an official Eurovision statement:

> With Europe going through its worst crisis in decades, we stop for a moment and think about what identity truly means. What home truly means. This contemporary dance act tries to depict the people behind the tabloid statistics. (quoted in Duffy, 2016)

In perhaps the most easily interpreted moment, a dancer lies on the ground, their posture mimetically referencing the famous image of Alan Kurdi. The performance ends with the dancers finally smiling and washing their faces and hands before walking off the stage and into the crowd to be literally and metaphorically embraced by the global audience. Writing on this performance, Vedel (2020) argues that by 'propound[ing] a universalised migrant experience' (p. 53), the choreographed performance 'may be read as an affirmation of the hospitable intentions on behalf of the receiving nation towards "the ontologised alien"' (p. 60). She notes that at the time, Eurovision host country Sweden was closing its borders, yet this interval act 'symbolically welcomes migrants' (Vedel, 2020: 60). Together with several of its Scandinavian neighbours, Sweden exercised what Naper (2022) has termed (border) securitisation' (p. 5), wherein it leveraged discourses of humanitarianism and welfare state sustainability in its securitisation rationale. Through this, Sweden, Norway, and Denmark were able to legitimise quite strict securitisation without destabilising their reputation as a progressive and humanitarian-focused region (Naper, 2022). While contest co-presenter Måns Zelmerlöw openly criticised Swedish policy in interviews, the content producer Sven Stojanovic described 'The Grey People' as showing that 'we are paying attention to the situation and that's something we are proud of' (quoted in Shepherd, 2016). Yet the performance is detached from the specific policies of the host country, framed instead as a shared European and global crisis; the 'we' of Stojanovic's statement thus reads less as a Swedish 'we' and more as an inclusive European 'we'. Read within this context, the performance of 'The Grey People' becomes an artistic affirmation of *European* principles of humanitarianism and hospitality rather than any direct commentary or moral claim by the host country itself.

By contrast, 'Ordinary World', performed in the first semi-final at Liverpool 2023, works to emphasise the United Kingdom's hospitality to those displaced by the Ukraine–Russia war, both as refugees and as co-hosts for the contest. As described above, hosting duties are usually awarded to the winning nation, but as 2022 winners Ukraine are in the midst of a conflict that made hosting the contest a significant logistical and security risk, runners up the United Kingdom agreed to co-host the 2023 contest. The production as a whole thus became an interesting balancing act between celebrating both Ukrainian and UK culture and identity, and provides an excellent example of how the contest functions as a tool of transnational cooperation and international relations. Each semi-final and the grand final thus sought to depict this cooperation in some way, such as the performance of 'Ordinary World' in the first semi-final. The duet by former Ukrainian Eurovision artist Alyosha and British singer Rebecca Ferguson is accompanied by a contemporary dance performance depicting Alyosha's separation from her husband as he went off to fight and her own flight across Europe to settle in the United Kingdom. Its message is as much about the extension of hospitality by the UK to Ukrainian migrants – and to Ukraine through the song contest – as it is Alyosha's individual story of humanitarian migration. Initially, the staging features the Ukrainian colours of blue and yellow. When

Alyosha 'arrives' in the United Kingdom, she stands centre stage in front of a circular light display of the Union Jack; other figures of Ukrainian migrants, signified as silhouettes washed in blue and yellow, stand in front the (smaller) flags of other nations, representing the hospitality offered by various members of Europe – and of the Eurovision Song Contest more specifically. While vilifying Russia as the belligerent state would be deemed political in the contest's rules, the focus on humanitarian migration and hospitality by participating states instead bypasses the rules. From this, we can see Eurovision's construction of 'political' as something that negatively critiques a state, its policies, and its actions for diverging from a shared set of global values (of peace, humanitarianism, and respect for sovereignty), while adhering to and even celebrating those shared values is acceptable. Although these values equally have political weight and implication, they are in effect depoliticised by the contest's interpretation.

Conclusion

Migration has been a pressing issue for Europe and often a far from unifying one. Thus, while states might debate national and regional migration policies, the Eurovision Song Contest provides a political space, per Mouffe, Bal and Hernandez-Navarro, for participating artists and countries to explore migration politics with an emphasis on human experience and empathy. Changes to the contest rules and their interpretation suggest a greater acceptance of contemporary migration politics as a humanitarian matter that is suitable for artistic engagement and representation within the bounds of the song contest. We can identify a particular shift following Sobral's comments on humanitarian migration in 2017 to the EBU's own definition of humanitarian sentiments as decidedly nonpolitical. The example of Liverpool 2023's 'Ordinary World' in particular illustrates how Eurovision can provide commentary on a complex and unequivocally political situation – the war in Ukraine and the subsequent displacement of millions of Ukrainians – through the lens of humanitarianism, empathy, and the ideal of European cooperation and unity. It elides the rules of the contest precisely because it played to its values so well.

While the rules of the Eurovision Song Contest continue to prohibit its politicisation or instrumentalisation by either the host or participating countries, it nevertheless provides an important political space in which issues of regional and global importance can be explored through various cultural media, from songs and dance to postcards. This political space necessarily emphasises value-based politics over state-based politics to navigate the requirements of the contest rules. Values are, of course, far from nonpolitical but they are more readily transnational than most state-based politics and even international relations themselves. As such, these values – and, indeed, the Eurovision Song Contest itself – can be constructed by the EBU and the participants (both artists and nations) as something shared and as something that unifies, even as policies and 'politics' might divide.

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Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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Notes

1. Zelenskyy's office denies making this request (Kyiv Independent, 2023).
2. Since 2015, artists who win Sanremo are offered the opportunity to represent Italy at Eurovision but are not required to do so. If the winner refuses, as Stadio did in 2016, the Sanremo organisers reserve the right to offer the opportunity to another participant.

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