

THE CONVERSATION

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Ukraine's Jamala reacts to winning the Eurovision Song Contest with the song 1944. TT News Agency

Along with soulful gazes and key changes, politics is never far from Eurovision

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From now on, when people ask me why Eurovision is worth paying attention to, I'm going to give them a short answer: 2016.

This year the contest has given us disputes over political lyrics, exclusions due to bankruptcy, flag controversies, geopolitical debates, a jury scandal, and, most importantly, a lot of great pop music. All of this came to a head in the Grand Final this weekend.

Sweden, the second most successful country in Eurovision history (behind Ireland), provided yet another clever and polished production. Last year's dapper winner Måns Zelmerlöw was joined in hosting duties by Swedish comedian and television presenter Petra Mede, who stole the show as she had at Malmö in 2013.

The Swedes were once again playful with their subject material. Måns and Petra's "Love Love Peace Peace" interval act about how to create the perfect Eurovision song was the true winner of the night, proving exactly what the song set out to: that war drums, soulful gazes, deep messages, key changes, and shirtless men win over the punters.

Måns Zelmerlöw and Petra Mede - Love Love Peace Peace (Inte...)



All jokes aside, these segments – and at times pointed commentary from the hosts – highlighted the cultural and political nuances of the contest. Eurovision remains an important site of cultural exchange, and offers smaller states, in particular, a significant nation-building opportunity.

It's also an important [site for negotiating LGBTI politics](#) and human rights issues, which in turn play out on a bigger scale of articulating shared geopolitical values.

Ukraine's Jamala won with [1944](#), a song about [Stalin's deportation of the Crimean Tartars](#), which is part of Jamala's family history. The song courted controversy in the lead-up to the competition for allegedly breaching the European Broadcasting Unions's rules banning political content in performances. Although the song refers to events during the Second World War, it's been interpreted as commentary on Russia's more recent annexation of Crimea in 2014.

Politics are [never too far from Eurovision](#), despite the contest's attempts to contain them. The trick seems to be historical context. Songs that refer to the past – even if they might also be interpreted as contemporary comment – appear to bypass the rules, while songs that are seen to be direct commentary on current issues are required to change or withdraw.

Given the ongoing tensions between Russia and Ukraine, it's arguably impossible to depoliticise any song that refers to their shared history.

Sergey Lazarev, representing Russia, performs with the song You Are The Only One. TT News Agency

Ultimately, [1944](#) was deemed [not to breach](#) the political content rule, and voters decided it was the song of 2016.

Russia is vocally displeased with the ruling on the song's political content and with Ukraine's victory on Saturday night.

Politicians claim the result is "a consequence of the propaganda war of information that is being waged against Russia," and are calling for a Russian boycott of the contest in 2017.

Although the disgraced Russian jury didn't award any points to Ukraine, the popular televote awarded them ten points. This may show a disconnect between Russian politicians and their people – or at least their musical tastes.

Although they won the contest, Ukraine came second in both the professional jury vote and popular televote. They were beaten by Australia in the first instance and bookmaker favourite Russia in the second.

Fans have spent their Sunday crunching the numbers to reveal that Australia would have won under the voting system in place between 2013 and 2015, but still would have placed second if the system between 2009 and 2012 was used.

While the hosts were the highlight, Justin Timberlake's interval act proved to be the lowlight of the evening. After an awkward tour of the green room during which he SPOKE VEEERY, VEEERY SLOWLY AND LOUDLY TO THE EUROPEANS, JT performed his new single, Can't Stop That Feeling, co-written with Swedish songwriters Max Martin and Shellback.

Unfortunately the much-hyped slick funk track lacked the soul of the other performances, including another slick funk track from Belgium's bubbly pocket rocket Laura Tesoro. This should set to rest any concerns that the Americans will be ruining our Eurovision fun any time soon.

Although some have suggested that it is Australian, not American, involvement that will bring about the downfall of Eurovision (I'm looking at you, Mr Graham Norton), Dami Im and the songwriters at DNA showcased Australia's pop chops on a global stage.

Im's Sound of Silence was a classic mid-tempo ballad replete with diva notes, and crying out for a house remix to dominate the European summer club scene.

Australia dominated the professional jury vote and came fourth in the televoting, which has caused much stir among the fans and prompted the hashtag [#JusticeForAustralia](#). The result stoked criticism against the [reformed voting system](#). In the past the results of the professional jury and the popular televote were aggregated and reported in a single round of scoring.

In 2016 the voting system was changed to increase tension, as in previous years the winner was usually evident before all votes had been announced. It was also hoped that the new system might dissipate bloc voting by making professional and popular votes more transparent.

While some might remain sceptical about the fairness of the outcome, the organisers certainly delivered on tension. Australians were on the edge of their seats until (almost) the bitter end.

Perhaps we were robbed, but we should remember the other prize waiting for us. As announced in March, there are plans to begin [a song contest for the Asia-Pacific region](#) and Australia is slated to be the inaugural host. Dami's success at Eurovision, as well as her cultural heritage, could work as a massive drawcard for the proposed competition.

Theories abound regarding how the two events will be related, with many suggesting that each year's Asiavision winner should be the wild card entry for the Eurovision grand final. Given that Dami's song has been [rocketing up the charts](#) since the weekend, a connection between the competitions could be a massive boon for global music culture and its artists.

This seems like a fair proposition, but I can't help but hope that Australia maintains a special place in the heart of the Eurovision organisers.

I have enjoyed Eurovision since childhood, but must admit that Australia's participation in recent years has added a little frisson to the event. Given the results, I think Europe would mourn the sound of silence from our absence too.