

# The Congress of EuroVision: Building European Community One Bricolage at a Time

Written by Joel Vessels

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JOEL VESSELS, MAY 8 2015

Recently in this space we saw a clear argument for considering the narratives of national broadcast television in the study of world politics. Color me convinced, but as the American spouse of a Swede I am also pressed to consider the significance of a *trans*-national television event that is wildly popular across borders; even if it is so in a 'so-bad-it's-good' kind of way. It is the season of the Eurovision Song Contest (ESC), the annual competition sponsored by the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) showcasing the often spectacularly sequined representatives of EBU member countries singing frothy pop-songs with nonsensical titles. But no matter what I might initially think of it as an 'outsider', last year's finale captured some 195 million viewers across 41 national markets. And while it may not be the most 'scientific' measure, this year, when you type 'm-e-l' in Google.se – as my wife has done – it is auto-filled to 'melodifestivalen' and you are directed to the Swedish Eurovision page.

Personal examples weighing the popularity of Eurovision are everywhere and while the plural of anecdote is not data, the notion raised here is that even if ephemerally (for every ABBA or Celine Dion, there are at least a half-dozen Bucks Fizz), the ESC is consequential enough that a 'small cross-disciplinary field . . . called "eurovisiopsephology"' has developed in recent years. Intent on mining contest voting for patterns and relationships, a broad coterie of scholars have combed through raw data attempting to ferret out everything from entrenched political alliances and regional cultural similarities to shifting cliques of particularized interests. One study even found that voting adhered to – of all things – 'the quality of the participants'. Yet, the focus on post-performance voting seems to me to miss half of the equation of what has been labelled performative geopolitics.

This year's contest marks the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the ESC, and among 2015's array of commemorative events was a 24 April academic conference held at the British Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTA) in Piccadilly, London, to 'explore the impact the Song Contest has had on the European public sphere over the last six decades'. A bit high-minded perhaps, but in truth and if nothing else, the contest – begun as a way of uniting a still war-torn continent around a 'light entertainment programme' – has in that time anticipated the development of a unified Europe: politically, commercially, and artistically. Moreover, the event has certainly been picked up as a totem of acceptance by ethnic minorities (such as the Udmurts of Russia), socially marginalised groups (the Roma for instance), and particularly Europe's LGBT community, among whom the ESC is often lauded as a 'Gay Christmas'. Given such representational dynamics, the performance – while a staged product – is somewhat significant in terms of international relations; however, the 'real' geopolitics is in the participation.

In the post-1991 world, many of the break-away states of the old Soviet Union threw themselves into the performative 'arts' of the ESC. When Estonia won the competition in 2001, the Prime Minister declaimed, 'We are no longer knocking at Europe's door. We are walking through it singing' – and in 2004, when Belarus participated in the competition for the first time, a spokesman for the Ministry of Culture insisted, 'Participation in Eurovision is an excellent opportunity for a young state to establish a positive image and tell the world about itself'. Generally, the assumption is that among the core states of Western Europe, the ESC is to be met with grinning harrumphs, while in the post-socialist east the reception is much different. In a number of states Eurovision was among the few television extravaganzas not centrally directed; as such it took on much more meaning than perhaps a silly event of dress-up and singing in a foreign tongue would initially seem to possess.

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Still, in describing the ESC in both the popular press and academic treatments, one term is consistently and constantly recycled: 'kitsch'. No doubt, the predominance of English-language singing has had the effect of sanding down the interest of particularity; and while this has kept open the door for the broadest viewer participation, it has simultaneously forced ESC contestants to ever greater levels of spectacle that often spills over into anyone's definition of the absurd. Consequently, kitsch is the well from which most ESC participants performatively draw. In discussion of those states that notate their claim to European identity by way of the competition I would offer the descriptive term *bricolage*.

In the art world the term denotes the act of creation with the various and sundry materials at hand; here I use it in a sense akin to Claude Lévi-Strauss' appropriation of the idea. In *The Savage Mind*, the French ethnologist suggested that the *bricoleur* creates structure by way of ready events, and relationship by the associated similarities between members of a group. Effectively, that is what I am suggesting is taking place in post-Soviet states where ESC participation is embraced with wanton abandon (and an earnestness that has been approvingly lampooned, interestingly enough by satirists from 2015 first time ESC participant Australia). By taking on the kitschy blandishments of the event – including singing principally in English – Estonia, Latvia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and even Russia (to name only those states that have actually won the competition) brand themselves as 'European' by contributing to the communal construction of shared experience – even a wry embrace of the chuckling ambivalence many of the participating countries have towards the contest becomes confirmation that in 'getting the joke' they are brandishing their European credentials.

There is much more that could be argued about this reading of the ESC and the fevered productions its participants put on offer – particularly the 'singing nation' Estonia about which a case study has already been written – but the Eurovision app on my phone is goading me with more recaps of state competitions. Go Dinah Nah and 'Make Me (La La La)'

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