



Music in Political Culture: The Eurovision Song Contest

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Abstract

The Eurovision song contest of May 2020 has been cancelled in the global wake of the coronavirus epidemic. The song contest was first established in 1956 and has broadcasting annually every year. This was the first time of its' cancelation within 64 years of history. Obviously, it is a necessary protection both for musicians and the organizers of the Eurovision, and its' audience – as Eurovision has a strong history of uniting global nations. In case of uniting different nations, this contest directly affected from political relations of countries. This article aims to explore how this contest affected from countries' political culture, what kind of behaviour media institutions owned according to this issue and whether the quality of music really mattered in a song contest – in three parts. First part will focus on politics, second one is about mass media and last one is about musical quality. Eurovision song contest first appeared after a huge political event (which is World War II), so it directly gives us a chance to observe political relations between European and Eastern countries. This article will mention countries' strategic voting system (voting blocs) as an example for results of political relations and behaviour of media is also important. Generally, media instruments used for the benefits of countries' governments and the attitude of international media institutions also plays great role. Lastly, the quality and the presentation of music issue; it is strange to observe that counties pick new and unexperienced music groups/singers rather than well-known and experienced ones as a contestant for themselves. This article tries to explore the reason of this decision. Is it a beneficial system for musicians? And is it only about increasing new musicians' fame rank? Or are there any reasons which can be related with politics?

Keywords: Eurovision, International Media, Voting Blocs, European Countries, New Musicians

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Siyasi Kültür İçerisindeki Müzik: Eurovision Şarkı Yarışması

Özet

2020 senesinin Mayıs ayında gerçekleşmesi planlanan Eurovision şarkı yarışması, koronavirüs salgınının küresel yayılımı nedeniyle iptal edildi. Bu yarışma ilk olarak 1956 senesinde organize edilmiştir ve bu iptal kararı yarışmanın 64 senelik tarihinde bir ilktir. Kesinlikle bu karar - Eurovision'un farklı ulusları birleştirmek için güçlü bir geçmişi olduğu için - hem müzisyenler hem de Eurovision'un organizatörleri ve izleyicileri için gerekli bir korumadır. Farklı ulusların bir araya gelmesi konusunda, bu yarışma ülkelerin siyasi ilişkilerinden de doğrudan etkilenmektedir. Bu makale, bu yarışmanın ülkelerin siyasi kültüründen nasıl etkilendiğini, medya kuruluşlarının bu konuya karşı nasıl bir davranış sergilediğini ve müziğin kalitesinin bir şarkı yarışmasında gerçekten önemli olup olmadığını üç bölümde incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Birinci bölüm siyasete, ikincisi kitle iletişim araçlarına ve sonuncusu müzik kalitesine odaklanacaktır. Eurovision şarkı yarışması ilk olarak büyük bir siyasi olayın ardından (II. Dünya Savaşı) ortaya çıkmıştır, bu nedenle yarışma bize doğrudan Avrupa ve Doğu ülkeleri arasındaki siyasi ilişkileri gözlemleme şansı vermektedir. Bu makalede, siyasi ilişkilerin ve medyanın davranışlarının sonuçlarına örnek olarak ülke-lerin stratejik oylama sisteminden (oy blokları) de bahsedilecektir. Genellikle, medya araçları ülke yönetimlerinin yararına kullanılmaktadır ve uluslararası medya kurumlarının tutumu da bu noktada büyük rol oynamaktadır. Son olarak, müziğin kalitesi ve sunumu konusu ile ilgili; ülkelerin kendileri için bir yarışmacı olarak tanınmış ve deneyimli olanlar yerine yeni ve tecrübesiz müzik grupları / şarkıcılar seçtiklerini gözlemlemek ilginçtir. Bu makale bu kararın nedenini araştırmaya çalışmaktadır. Bu müzisyenler için faydalı bir sistem midir? Ve sadece yeni müzisyenlerin şöhret derecesini artırmakla mı ilgilidir?

Yoksa siyasetle ilgili olabilecek herhangi bir nedeni var mı?

Anahtar Kelimeler: Eurovision, Uluslararası Medya, Oy blokları, Avrupa Ülkeleri, Yeni Müzisyenler

The Eurovision song contest of May 2020 has been cancelled in the global wake of the coronavirus epidemic. As Eurovision has a strong history of uniting global nations, it is inevitable for its nature to not affect from global issues. On following parts, we will explore how this contest affected from countries' political culture, what kind of behaviour media institutions owned according to this issue and whether the quality of music really mattered in a song contest.

Political Culture and Eurovision

Most of the people will probably think of a shiny sequins and lights which make singers and dancers look fabulous on stage, when they first heard the term – Eurovision. Add to its shiny parts, we need to say; Eurovision undeniably affected by politics. It would be not wrong if we categorize Eurovision as a political event, additively to its' musical side. To understand how politics take an important role in Eurovision, we need to learn a brief story of this music contest, at first. In 1950s, when war-torn Europe continent endeavours to rebuilt itself, the European Broadcasting Union - EBU (an alliance of pub-

lic service media entities which based in Switzerland) set up an ad hoc committee to search for ways of new things which aim to bringing together the countries of the EBU around a light entertainment programme. In 1955, when a committee meeting held in Monaco, director general of Swiss television and committee chairman Marcel Bezençon created an idea of the international song contest whereby EBU members from different countries would compete in one television show (Kuyucu, 2011). Each country submits a song to be performed on live television (also in radio) and then cast votes for the other countries' songs to determine the most popular song of the competition. The contest has been broadcast every year since its opening ceremony happened in 1956 and is one of the longest-running television programme in the world. Actually, the format of the contest was based on the existing Sanremo Music Festival, which held in Italy, and was seen as a technological experiment in live television (BBC, 2003). In these days, it was a very enthusiastic project to gathering many countries in a wide-area international network. The concept was approved by the EBU General Assembly on 19 October 1955 (in a meeting held in Rome) and it was decided that the first contest would take place in spring 1956 (in Lugano, Switzerland) and it is viewed by 600 million people from many countries (Murray, 2005). The name "Eurovision" was first used in relation to the EBU's network by British journalist George Campey in the London Evening Standard in 1951 (BBC, 2003).

About political side of the Eurovision we need to mention about two main issues. First issue is about how can be Eurovision used as a political tool. Second issue is about the swinging voting system that the contest has and voting blocs between participant countries.

For the first issue, we are able to say that Eurovision provides a great opportunity to countries which were newly independent nations, or whom applying to become part of the European Union. Also, they are able to show themselves in an international concept and earn a positive reputation in front of others. Add to these two points, another important point is a slogan that hosting countries owned, which send a message to the other participants (also the rest of Europe) about their political position through the contest's motto or theme since the 2002 contest. For example, when Turkey takes role as a host country in 2004, the slogan/theme was 'Under the Same Sky,' a slight dig at Europe's gatekeepers as they were ramping up efforts to join the EU and be under that same sky. (Westcott, 2014) Some countries, which held great political power, select much more assertive slogans like Germany did in 2011. The slogan was 'Feel Your Heartbeat' which can be a reminder, that Germany is the heart of Europe and the most powerful nation. As they were one of the 'Big Four'; Germany, France, Spain and the United Kingdom (Ginsburgh and Noury, 2004), they were able to praise themselves easily since 2000. The issue of 'Big Four Countries' also creates a political problem

for the global nature of the contest. For the second issue, Eurovision becomes interesting since each country votes for other participating countries. This gives a rare opportunity to test in a direct way whether countries exchange votes but as we watched the contest we will surely get a chance to observe voting blocs between countries. The most established voting blocs, formulated by Derek Gatherer¹, include “The Viking Empire” of Scandinavian countries; “The Balkan Bloc,” which includes Romania, Serbia, and Albania; and “The Pyrenean Axis,” which includes Andorra and Spain (Westcott, 2014). Primarily, Eurovision's strategic voting system appears according to geography. Greece and Cyprus have historically voted for each other and not for Turkey, although points are increasingly shared between all three countries, says the specialist about this contest; Dr. Eurovision (whose real name is Paul Jordan). Member countries of the Balkan voting bloc (one of the largest and most influential) also favor each other, but it's more for cultural reasons than political affinity. “Bosnia and Serbia don't really get on, and Albania and Serbia don't really get on, but they tend to vote for each other in Eurovision.” Paul Jordan said in his blog. This protectionism can appear because of the existence of The Former Soviets and The UK/Ireland/Malta voting blocs. People who lived in Balkan countries feel themselves they were into a kind of illusion about Eurovision voting system because of the results of contest. The participation time of countries got a direct connection with political history of countries – the time when they get control of their sovereignty – which also affected their attitude in context of Eurovision.

Media and Eurovision

The mass media plays an important role in constructing reality by using mass events, attracting wide attention around the world, like the Eurovision. As this contest was established after the World War II, the intentions of integrating the European region in terms of the people's social, cultural and ethnic differences maybe another reason for why this contest seen as biased with regards to the quality of the music and the country which ends up winning – countries may want to vote for their neighbouring country to further their relations or even start new relations (i.e. Turkey gives full points to Armenia). To prevent full political biased representation, the contest has reformed itself partially allowing viewers at home to take part via phone calls to generate public opinion on music – arguably criticized that this may not be sufficient as people also have nationalistic views and biases towards other countries or that immigrants viewing can also vote in favor of their home country. If we want to understand how did relationship between media and countries' appeared in Eurovision, we need to focus on how the mass media

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shape our perceptions about other countries, especially we barely ever heard of – as the show seems to inform peoples internationally however, the national and international media both show different approaches towards it for their purposes (even their ordinary duty is to televised event for entertainment). Events like Eurovision - which attract so many viewers internationally - lead opportunities for hosting nation states such as; marketing their institutional political ideas and promoting their political vision, and to present themselves to a broader public. Therefore, taking this into account, one can say that the media; especially the mass media, exert a major influence on public opinion and perceptions of other nation states. Mega events such as the Eurovision and others like the Olympics have great opportunities for hosting countries to ‘advertise’ in some way to even generate direct foreign investments or even private investments by showing increasing levels of developments in a given country. So with regards to huge events attracting wide audiences, we could assume that the hosting country would provide a plan towards the best advertisement of its nation with a video as a timeline during the contest, which would show both in cultural, social and historical aspects – also shedding light on the state with regards to background information. Although these kinds of events shed light on nation states which most people barely know, Eurovision seems to ignore other aspects of the nation state; like the government type and the level of social and political freedom in the state – with some of the states being either autocratic or lacking democracy or fundamental human rights. For example; Christiana Schallhorn, using questionnaires to found out heavy viewers of Eurovision knew more about Azerbaijan and the neighbouring countries than of those who didn’t watch it. However, the research also highlights that the mass media shapes people’s perceptions as the heavy viewers have little knowledge of the neglect ion of mass human rights in the state (Schallhorn, 2013).

Although events like the Eurovision neglect social negative problems, the intention of the contest from the 1950’s till present was to integrate regional social and cultural understandings of one another between countries, globally (Garcia and Tanase, 2013). As we can understand, with the help of Eurovision, countries aim to perform collaborative live broadcast among their TV’s. By opposing the negative usage of media, we have some positive effects that viewers might want to visit these countries or even learn more about them in future and we must not forget Eurovision meant to be integrating citizens of different countries as one of its’ main purposes.

Music and Eurovision

Fundamentally, Eurovision Song Contest is a competition which puts musical art pieces against each other in a competitive environment. As with any competition, goal is to win for every participant, not to create the best

score. Thus, strange trends, strategies and statistics do occur over the years. These are not only confined to the music itself, but also inspire different forms of acts and themes. As we already explored in other parts of this article.

Over the years, Eurovision competitors reduced the production of the musical score to several steps. In short, music is “engineered” rather than composed for the Eurovision. Over the years, there has been several trends that stand out from the crowd. Although, Eurovision prides itself for diversity from all over Europe, Anglo-Saxon effect is undeniable. From 2000 to 2015, 13 of the winning musical pieces had English lyrics (ESC Database, 2015). This does not mean audiences favor English language over others, but they prefer lyrics that they can understand and relate to. Considering English is a second language across Europe, it is the logical way to perform (European Commission, 2006). In addition, countries with considerable diasporas in Europe such as Turkey and Russia, try to invoke nationalistic emotions by addressing unity to earn votes from their minorities in other countries. But most of the time, this is a double-edged sword, as nationalistic themes do not bode well with majorities of the mentioned countries and too much of it certainly results in a drop of points overall. Trends even stretch to affect the contents of the songs. Most of the time, upbeat songs was awarded (ESC Database, 2015). Upbeat songs themed with “life” and “happiness” tend to do better because audiences find it easier relate themselves to the music. Because of these facts, competitors avoid love themes and ballads most of the time. Love songs in particular are not preferred due to different interpretation of love across different countries in Europe. Conservative populations’ and liberal populations’ perspective on the matter of love differ significantly (Taylor, 2011) and competitors do not want to take the risk. Thus, it is very hard for the competitor to find a common ground for everyone to enjoy. Further, ballads are generally avoided because songs need strong choruses to be remembered as the most of the audience only hears the songs once. But even this topic is affected by the trends. After the winner of 2014, Conchita Wurst (ESC Database, 2015), in 2015, 55% of the 40 competitor songs are ballads (The Eurovision Times, 2015) as a song reminding “Rise Like a Phoenix” would certainly be among favourites. Also, competitor firstly needs to win the national pre-selection which strictly limit the themes that can be used even farther. National election reflects heavily on the cultural values so much that it can lead to loss streaks. For instance, in the year 2003 which Turkey was the winner, Sertab Erener’s “Everyway that I Can” song was heavily criticized by TDK (Turkish Language Association), because it featured its lyrics in English (ESC Database, 2015). It also included themes of homosexuality and drug use in Ottoman Harem. The debate was even held in Turkish Assembly (Radikal, 2003).

Over the years, acts and stage performances were affected by trends, too. By one research by Professor Derek Scott of the Leed’s School of Music,

proved that to get votes from Balkan countries such as Montenegro and Turkey, male performers needed moustaches. He even associated UK's competitors Blue was loss of points to this fact (Taylor, 2011). Although, this does not add to the musical quality, this kind of "retro" fashion elements attract the interest of adults of middle age who make up a significant proportion of the Eurovision audience. In addition, stage performances are very important, because they add the visual elements that needed to make the song unique and have audiences remember it during voting. In 2010, SunStroke Project & Olia Tira, used a spinning table which a violinist stood on and a saxophone solo which made the song quite memorable both visually and audibly (ESC Database, 2015). In 2011, many contestants chose to include fake trumpeters such as "Zdob și Zdub" (Taylor, 2011). As musical composition is obviously a very important topic paving the way to victory, added instrumentality (though fake) proved very popular among contestants.

In 2014, Sam Sutton² has analysed the past 50 years of Eurovision and found the most common traits between the top contenders of the competition. Firstly, the study pointed out songs that have length of 3 minutes have the greatest chance of winning. This was found in parallel to the attention span of the audience. Longer, the audience loses interest. Shorter, not enough content to get votes from audience. Secondly, 3 note chorus has been found to be the most memorable style among audiences. Anything short of 3 note chorus comes too short to be recognizable. If it is more complicated, audiences get perplexed and lose interest. On a final note, folk melodies or similar melodies audiences can relate to provide a significant advantage in that sense.

As a result, Eurovision song contest is not a proper art expedition. It is a competition where contestants try to gain every inch of advantage regardless what comes out at the end of the line. Music is only engineered from the beginning to win and win. Artistic concerns are left at the door and ambition takes over and music becomes only the context because of countries act according to their political purposes and media led them to represent themselves as they like to.

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