

# Television, Eurovision, Europe

## *Dubravka Sekulić*

### ■ POLITICS

*The Eurovision Song Contest provides more than just a metaphor for the process of European unification, says architect Dubravka Sekulić.*



▲ An image economy of European politics...

Months before my ninth birthday, Yugoslavia won First Prize at the Eurovision Song Contest. It was 1989, and I still remember the anchor Oliver Mwlakar saying something like, “now we can all drink a glass of cold water, it is finished, we won,” just before the last country performed and was able to read out the votes. Eurovision was coming to the only communist country through the competition. And then, a year later, everything was different. The Berlin Wall was down, the German reunification was well under way, and Yugoslavia was counting its last days. At the 35th Eurovision contest in Zagreb,<sup>1</sup> Toto Cutugno won with a song called “Insieme: 92”, which celebrated the scheduled signing of the Treaty of Maastricht and the formation of the European Union. I think of it as being one of the most ironic moments in the story of Europe.

In the next pages I will attempt to explore the post WWII history of Europe from the standpoint of technological development, and in particular television, in relation to Eurovision Song Contest as a grounds for formal competition among nations.

After World War II, European countries were no longer competing on battlegrounds, but on the field of technology. Television was symbolic of a country’s technological development, and each country was busy developing its own broadcasting protocols. The most important parameter was the size of image defined by the number of lines per second broadcasted over a continuous analogue signal. Protocols in use ranged from the 405-line standard used by the BBC in the UK, developed by the EMI Research Team, to the 819-line standard used in France, developed by René Barthélemy. Although a third one, the 625-line standard, became de facto standard and the only one used for colour transmission, France continued to use its 819-line standard until 1984 when the last transmitter was closed down. This coincided with the presidency of François Mitterrand, who implemented the 819-line broadcast standard in 1948. France stuck to the 819-line standard so long not

only because it was more advanced, but also to protect the national market. Supranational broadcasting was a complex technical issue, firstly because of converting between varying numbers of lines per second and frame rates used by different countries, and secondly there was little incentive for these countries to synchronise protocols due to the limited number of programmes one could broadcast in a broader region.

Initially, 26 members both from East and West Europe created a standardising body, the International Radio and Television Organisation in 1948. Already in 1950 however, political tensions resulted in some members, mostly from Western Europe, leaving the organisation to form the European Broadcasting Union (EBU).<sup>2</sup> The EBU’s main purpose was the promotion and coordination of common standards. In the beginning this process was slow going and the only way out of the deadlock seemed to be the establishment of the Eurovision Song Contest in 1955.<sup>3</sup> The idea came from Marcel Bezançon, the Swiss president of the EBU and was modelled after the Sanremo Music Festival.<sup>4</sup> The Eurovision Song Contest began in Lugano, Switzerland in 1956 and was the first major event in which European countries would compete against each other for some kind of European title (even preceding the European Football Championship which only started in 1960). Moreover, it was the only event to be broadcast live in all seven participating countries.<sup>5</sup> The rest is history: when the second contest was held in Frankfurt, in 1957, ten countries participated. Six of them, a few weeks later, signed the Treaty of Rome, the decisive document for the foundation of the European Union.

As I began travelling to the European Union after 2000, the easiest way to explain that Yugoslavia had never been “behind the Iron Curtain” was not by mentioning Tito and his break with Stalin, but Yugoslavia’s participation in the Eurovision Song Contest from 1961 and onwards. We shared common childhood memories. Subscription to Eurovision somehow meant being part of Europe.





The International Radio and Television Organisation ceased to exist on January 1st, 1993 when it merged with the EBU. Consequently, the next contest was flooded with former Eastern Block countries, finally eligible to take part in Eurovision.<sup>6</sup> Something like that had happened a year before when three new states formed after the break up of Yugoslavia – Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Slovenia – joined the contest. Bosnia and Herzegovina, only barely officially recognised as a country, even sent contestants that were selected in Sarajevo under siege. The name of the song “The Pain of the Whole World” sung by Fazla conveyed what Sarajevo was going through to the rest of Europe. The message, however, could not be heard in Yugoslavia, as it was banned from participating in or even broadcasting the contest due to UN Sanctions imposed in 1992. These sanctions not only applied to the economy but also to culture and sport. Furthermore, for former Eastern Block countries participation in Eurovision also marked a change in the status of television. It became a commodity instead of a privilege. Some of the new Eurovision countries even changed their colour system, switching from SECAM to the more widespread PAL standard, which was used by all Western European countries except France.<sup>7</sup>

The choice of SECAM over PAL in the Soviet sphere of influence was not just a technical affair. The German Democratic Republic insisted on adopting a standard that would be different from that of its Western neighbours. This was meant to prevent the smuggling of television sets, and the watching of programmes made in West Germany. A country’s willingness to change its national agenda and adopt different standards in order to participate in Eurovision, shows that standardisation is much more than a neutral, technical issue, and that Eurovision itself is a bit more than just a singing contest. The popularity of the contest transformed it into a pervasive soft power,<sup>8</sup> based on three simple rules.

To be an eligible participant in the contest, a country

has to have a national broadcasting corporation which is a member of the EBU, it has to be part of the European Broadcasting Area,<sup>9</sup> and it needs to have the capacity to broadcast the entire event live.

The combination of the first two rules opens up the competition to countries not conventionally considered “European”. The African and Asian coast of the Mediterranean are within the boundaries of European Broadcasting Areas and, as most of the countries in that region have television companies that are member of EBU (Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Tunisia), all of them are potential participants in Eurovision. Out of these eight countries, Israel is the only one that has regularly participated in the competition since 1973, winning the contest three times. Morocco was the only other country in the group to compete in 1980.

The third rule requiring the ability to broadcast the contest live, without any interruption, is the most important considering the influence of Eurovision on the standardisation of broadcasting in Europe. This factor played a key role in the withdrawal of Lebanon from the contest in 2005. In 2004, Télé Liban, the only Lebanese member of the EBU, announced that Lebanon would be making its debut on the 50th Eurovision Song Contest, to be held in Kiev, Ukraine. Lebanon was put on the official list of participants, along with two other debuting countries, Bulgaria and Moldova. However, when the official Lebanese Eurovision Song Contest web site went live, it showed no sign of Israeli participation in the contest. Neither could Télé Liban guarantee that the entire event would be transmitted, as this would violate Lebanese legislation prohibiting the broadcasting of Israeli content. Unable to comply with the requirements, Télé Liban was banned from the contest for three years. And as none of Lebanon’s other television stations is an EBU member, Lebanon has to wait for the ban to be lifted.

Although the Eurovision Song Contest is ‘not a political event’<sup>10</sup> it is impossible to extract politics from the contest.

■ SPOT THE ODD ONE OUT

- |           |           |
|-----------|-----------|
| 1 France  | 6 Sweden  |
| 2 Italy   | 7 Armenia |
| 3 Morocco | 8 Poland  |
| 4 Poland  | 9 Serbia  |
| 5 Russia  | 10 Spain  |

7. Armenia  
After years of lobbying, Armenia (together with Azerbaijan and Georgia) became eligible to participate in the competition in 2005, when the European Broadcasting Union jurisdiction.

■ SPOT THE ODD ONE OUT

- |                  |                |
|------------------|----------------|
| 1 Bulgaria       | 5 East Germany |
| 2 Romania        | 6 Yugoslavia   |
| 3 Hungary        | 7 Poland       |
| 4 Czechoslovakia | 8 Albania      |

6. Yugoslavia  
During Cold War, Yugoslavia was the only communist country that was member of the EBU who participated regularly in the contest from 1961 to 1991 (with breaks between 1976 and 1980 and also in 1985). In 1989, Yugoslavia won with a song "Rock me" performed by the band Riva, and went on to host the competition the following year in Zagreb (in the current Croatia).

■ SPOT THE ODD ONE OUT

- |            |                  |
|------------|------------------|
| 1 Spain    | 6 Norway         |
| 2 Portugal | 7 Ireland        |
| 3 Malta    | 8 Lebanon        |
| 4 Morocco  | 9 United Kingdom |
| 5 Turkey   | 10 Romania       |

8. Lebanon  
Lebanon never competed in Eurovision, though it was included in the official programme of the 2005 contest. The discovery was made that official Lebanese communication of the competition did not list Israel among the participants. The rebel Libani, Lebanese broadcaster was in fact required by law to "black out" the Israeli broadcast without interruption, Lebanon was disqualified from the competition.

■ SPOT THE ODD ONE OUT

- |           |           |
|-----------|-----------|
| 1 Lebanon | 4 Georgia |
| 2 Turkey  | 5 Greece  |
| 3 France  | 6 Austria |

3. France  
Of all the countries on the list, France remains the only example of country never to withdraw from the contest for political reasons. Austria withdrew in 1969 when the competition was held in Spain under the Franco regime; Greece in 1975, in protest because of Turkey's debut during the Turkish occupation of Cyprus. The Cyprus, France was by Muslim countries, Turkey was forced to withdraw once more in 1979 when the contest was held for the first time in Israel. Lebanon was ~~forced~~ to pull out of the 2005 contest because of an unfortunate connotations of their entry which was a direct reaction to the 2008 Russian invasion into Georgian territory.

▲ Spot the odd one out.

The Lebanon controversy was just one example of when politics played a crucial role in drawing up the final list of entries. There were often cases when countries would pull out as a sign of protest. Greece withdrew from the 20th contest held in Stockholm in 1975, in reaction to the 1974 Turkish invasion of Cyprus and the fact that Turkey was a debuting participant in the contest that year. Austria refused to participate when Eurovision was held in Spain under Franco in 1969, and Georgia's entry was rejected by the EBU for its overt political connotations in 2009. Actually, Eurovision is legendary as an arena for settling diplomatic scores, venting ethnic grievance, baiting national rivals and undermining governments – and, what's more, these moments are almost always the highlights.<sup>12</sup>

Already mentioned was the 35th Eurovision Song Contest held in Zagreb in 1990 where three entries (Norway, Austria, Germany) sung lyrics dedicated to the fall of Berlin wall and the reunification of Germany. Portugal's entry to the 1974 contest simultaneously announced the coup that would end the dictatorship of Salazar. When the 27th Eurovision was held in Harrogate in the United Kingdom,

just 22 days after the Falklands War between UK and Argentina started in 1982, Spain performed a tango, showing that sometimes not even controversy can be created without words.

Though ridiculed for the increasingly appalling quality of its music, the contest has been platform for peripheral European countries to express their ambition of becoming part of growing European community.<sup>13</sup> The best example of this is Turkey. The country's participation – which has lasted for over three decades – was always perceived as a bid to demonstrate a "Western" orientation, and eligibility for admission into the European Union.<sup>14</sup> After all, Eurovision is about making an impression and drawing attention to the country. Almost all Yugoslav entries in the 1980s brought to the stage a mischievous feeling of summer vacations, with Yugoslavia promoting itself as "The" destination for an exploding number of European tourists. Songs had titles "Ciao, amore" (1984), "Ja sam za tles/T'm up for a dance" (1988), "Rock me baby" (1989), "Hajde da ludujemo/Let's get wild" (1990), with lyrics decrying beautiful girls "that came alone with summer" (Dzuli, 1983). West-

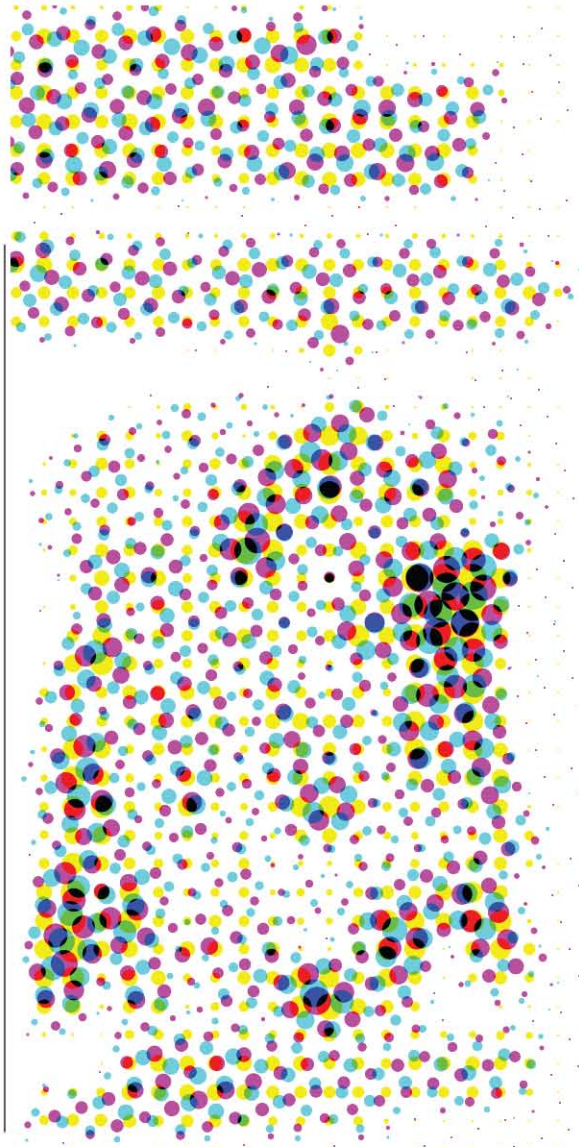




▲ The music and lyrics of nation branding...

ern European television stations were flooded with adverts for package holidays on the Adriatic coast, saturated with images of sun, beaches and above all, beautiful women. Video clips presenting the Eurovision entries were using the same visual language. The shift from communism to capitalism that was slowly taking place in Yugoslavia was visible in the ways Yugoslavia portrayed itself for broad Eurovision audience.

While countries outside of the European Union still seem enthusiastic, “old Europe” appears disenchanted and continues to marginalise Eurovision. Italy, one of the prominent competitors in former years, and member of the “Big 5”, withdrew from the contest in 1997, with no plans to return. One of the reasons for Italy’s withdrawal from the contest was that the block voting, where “new” countries vote amongst themselves, there is little chance that “old” countries will win. The last Eurovision, held in Moscow in 2009, tackled that problem and in break with tradition, the winner was not decided solely by viewer votes, but also by expert juries. This seemed to complete the circle begun with the first introduction of tele-voting in 1998, when the European LGBT

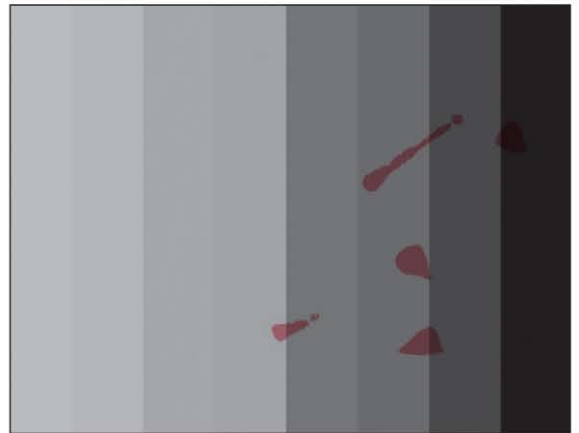
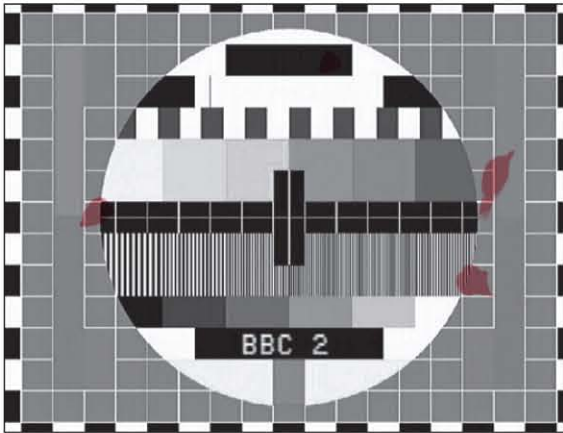
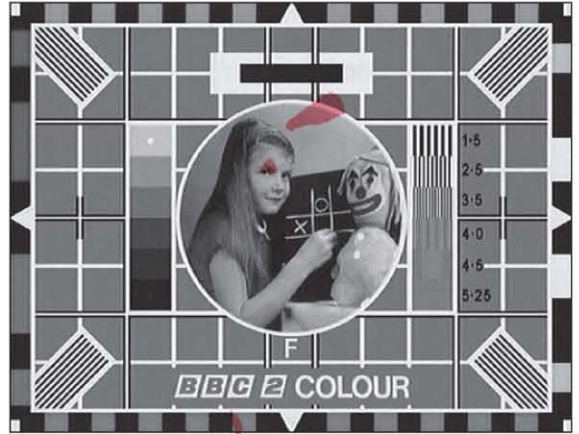
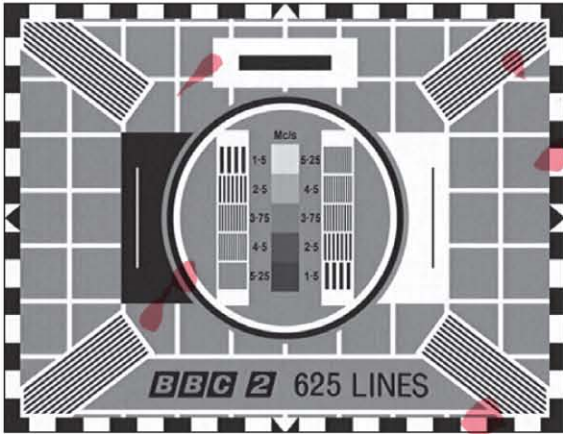


community voted Israeli transsexual, Dana International, to win. This confirmed Eurovision as a space for the articulation of otherness within the geography of Europe.

In 2008, the Eurovision Song Contest came to the landscape where my text began. This time the contest was held in Belgrade, Serbia and all states created after the break of Yugoslavia took part in the contest. They were criticised of block voting and reserving the highest marks for their former enemies in the war. The Bosnian entry became a big hit in the whole of ex-Yugoslavia and the performer, Laka, later said that his only interest in performing in Eurovision was to become visible in the newly formed region. The number of entries to this contest was higher than ever and Russia was won for the first time. It seems that a new chapter of the Eurovision story has begun already.■

*Notes*

- 1 The Yugoslavian Broadcasting Corporation (JRT) was a union of radio-television studios from each republic. The Eurovision Song Contest representative from Yugoslavia was chosen every year on Jugovizija (Yugovision), in a competition modelled after the contest. Every republic would delegate a couple of representatives for the competition; a jury would choose the winner. Even Eurovision’s voting pattern



▲ The evolution of the test screen and television as a standard.

- 1 was used and representatives of each studio would call and read the votes. The 1989 winner, "Riva", was selected by Television Zagreb, a Croatian broadcaster. Consequently, the final contest in 1990 was held in Zagreb and not in Belgrade, the capital.
- 2 The European Broadcasting Union (EBU) – unrelated to the European Union – is also the world's largest professional association of national public-service broadcasters.
- 3 Although its full title is the Eurovision Song Contest, the contest is usually known just as Eurovision. For the purpose of this text, Eurovision will be used for Eurovision Song Contest.
- 4 An Italian Popular Music Festival established in 1951. The winner of the festival from 1956 to 1966 – and in 1997 – was also the Italian entry on Eurovision.
- 5 Countries that participated in the first Eurovision Song Contest were: Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Switzerland. Austria, Denmark and the United Kingdom failed to choose their entries before the deadline and made their debut the following year.
- 6 Countries that debuted on the 39th Eurovision Song Contest, held in Dublin, Ireland in 1994, were Estonia, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Russia and Slovakia.
- 7 The development of both PAL (Phase Alternating Line) and SECAM (Séquentiel Couleur à Memoir) was started to create a European colour standard that would eliminate the problems with the American standard NTSC (dubbed "Never Twice the Same Colour," because of its colour consistency problems). Although the French-developed SECAM was established first (at the end of the 1950s) it was PAL, developed in the German Telefunken laboratories, which got the first official use, in 1967.
- 8 "Soft power's single most important asset is its allegedly non-coercive

- nature – the capacity to reach desirable outcomes without involving force, threat, or payment." Metahaven, 'Brand States: Soft Power, Networks, and Design,' in *Incorporate Identity*, Baden: Lars Müller Publishers, 2010, p. 453.
- 9 The European Broadcasting Area (EBA) is an airspace regulated by the EBU and European standardising bodies. It was defined for the first time in 1961 by the Stockholm Treaty (ST61), and revised several times since. Currently its eastern border is the meridian 40° East of Greenwich, and its southern border the parallel 30° North. Iraq, Jordan, Turkey and the former USSR countries in the Caucasus region are part of this airspace.
- 10 Svente Stockselius, Executive Supervisor of the 2005 Eurovision Song Contest, quoted at [www.eurovision.ua/en/news/00141/](http://www.eurovision.ua/en/news/00141/). From Ivan Raykoff, 'Camping on the Borders of Europe,' in *A Song for Europe*, Ashgate Publishing, 2007, p. 3.
- 11 The Georgian entry called "We Don't Wanna Put In" was seen a direct jab at Vladimir Putin, Russian Prime Minister and as a reaction to the Russian occupation of Georgia in 2008.
- 12 Andrew Muller, "The Politics of Pop", *The Guardian*, 26 March 2005, [www.guardian.co.uk/music/2005/mar/26/popandrock1](http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2005/mar/26/popandrock1). Accessed December 15, 2009.
- 13 After years of lobbying, former Soviet Union states from the Caucasus region, Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan succeeded in 2005 in changing the borders of the EBA, thus becoming eligible to compete in the contest. They proceeded to join respectively in 2006, 2007 and 2008.
- 14 The symbolic importance attributed by Turkey to the Eurovision Song Contest is so substantial that the country's first victory, in 2003, was perceived by its politicians as a sign that Turkey was finally being accepted by Europe.