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‘United by Music’

Eurovision describes itself as an apolitical platform. Still, the song contest is not tone-deaf to the times we live in

It is that time of the year again — Eurovision is right around the corner. This year, the song contest will be held in Liverpool, famously known for having seen the rise of The Beatles. Will there be a tribute to them during the show? Yes. And not only that but Ukraine is promised to be the protagonist of this year’s show.

The country won last year’s edition in Turin with the *Kalush Orchestra* and their song ‘Stefania’, which earned them a fourth position with the juries and an all-time highest televoting score of 439 points.

Through its votes, Europe sent a clear message via the Eurovision platform. The musical quality of ‘Stefania’ was undeniable and the song created a moment of unity with Ukraine. While we were feeling enraged about the invasion, the only thing we could do at that moment was to show our support by singing with them. The *Kalush Orchestra* made us feel like we were one in those three minutes and therein lies their victory.

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As an expert committee from the European Broadcasting Union deemed it unsafe to hold the 2023 Eurovision Song Contest in Ukraine – which would have been their right as last year’s winners – the opportunity was offered to the 2022 runner-up, the United Kingdom who had sent Sam Ryder with his song ‘Spaceman’ into the running. The BBC, the UK’s main broadcaster, accepted the offer and vouched to include Ukraine in everything; as Sam Ryder put it best: ‘it’s Ukraine’s party. We are just inviting them to throw it at our house.’ Their efforts were successful, working with Ukrainian broadcaster UA:PBC, many Ukrainian personalities are involved in the development of the show on 13 May.

Ukraine is set to perform as 19th on the Grand Final night and is represented by the electronic duo TVORCHI with 'Heart of Steel' this year. The song is a reference to the nation's extraordinary resilience, and the artists said that they have poured all the emotions they felt during the war into it. Yet, the listener won't find a direct reference to concrete events. Eurovision describes itself as an apolitical platform and has certain ground rules in place for competing songs. Still, it is not tone-deaf to the times we live in. Artists are free to express themselves off-stage. Hence, you can find more rage in TVORCHI's interviews than what they may perform on onstage. The duo talks about Mariupol, about the defenders, about the courage every victory gives to them...

A battle for political messaging

Despite the set rules, there have always been participants who wanted to see just how far they can push the Eurovision boundaries. One notorious example is Verka Serdushka, who, in 2007, managed to bypass Eurovision rules with clever phonetics. The Ukrainian singer's 'Dancing Lasha Tumbai' has a great phonetic resemblance to 'Russia Goodbye'. Less fortunate was Georgia's 'We Don't Wanna Put In' song, which was supposed to be performed at the 2009 Eurovision in Moscow. The strategic space between 'Put' and 'In' was still too telling and the song was ultimately disqualified.

There is one country this year jumping on the political satire bandwagon. Croatia has found a way to fit their 'Mama ŠČ' operetta within the Eurovision boundaries. When asked about their political message, the band *Let 3* very jollily proclaimed that they want to change the world with their love. Their success lies within the metaphors in the lyrics and by shouting 'little psychopath' without giving any names – creating a space of interpretation wide enough to avoid censorship. Humour also allows for a certain wiggle room. Ukraine's 12 points will most likely go to Croatia this year.

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Even if the motivation behind the song is understandable, it is a shame, as it will fire up once again the 'political voting' claims Eurovision has been burdened with in recent years. Many are worried that allowing this type of voting would be detrimental to Eurovision as it hinders the credibility of the contest as a song competition and the quality of entertainment provided. The audience is not stupid, producers surely don't want to insult audiences by force-

> feeding them songs with a clear political message stirred to a particular wing. Disguised subtext doesn't go unnoticed in Eurovision.

Some of those claims are based on good arguments, but what people commonly refer to as 'neighbouring voting' or 'political voting' can easily be explained. The closer the countries, the more history and cultural background they share and the more relatable the audiences of those countries will find the song. Again, success in Eurovision means to make a wider audience from different backgrounds feel as one. So, this is rather a 'cultural voting' than a 'political voting'. Let's also not forget that artists do release music and tour in neighbouring countries, so some of them have an already established fanbase abroad that will vote for them.

For a song to thrive in more than just the neighbouring countries and result in a cascade of televotes, its message must be open enough to fit into the understanding of every particular individual's cosmovision. A message of love, a message of peace, those are concepts ingrained in every culture and a message that can fit into their understanding of life.

Hence, another country that also deserves 12 points this year is the United Kingdom for making sure that Ukraine is walking with them at every step of the game. We now wait to see how that translates visually and musically during the televised events.



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