CPD Perspectives

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Introduction

Since its inception in 1956, the Eurovision Song Contest (ESC) has emerged as a platform for international displays of nation's cultures and identities with political and diplomatic implications. While Eurovision's diplomatic utility for states is subject to much scholarly attention, little attention has been paid to how fans and audiences participate actively in these processes as political agents and actors. The large body of scholarship on Eurovision fans and audiences concentrates on their identities, communities, and contributions to participatory culture (Fricker et al, 2007; Halliwell, 2018; Lemish 2004; Waysdorf, 2021), but rarely their attitudes toward and agency in the political dimensions of the song contest or, in other words, its participatory politics. Seen through Fricker and Gluhovic's (2013, p. 3) characterisation of the ESC as a "symbolic contact zone between European cultures," Eurovision is a site that enables fans, performing artists, and broadcast media to actively participate in the processes of public diplomacy, often using strategies learned through fan and audience participation. Although the political dimensions of the Song Contest are hotly contested—the official stance of Eurovision's organizers is that it is a nonpolitical event—fans, artists, and producers of Eurovision often use the contest as a prism for understanding and engaging with global politics, and for enacting a cosmopolitan ethics centred upon music, performance, and participatory culture. Audience and industry responses to various global events—from the global COVID-19 pandemic to regional conflicts—suggests a deeper significance surrounding the contest, its political functions, and the importance of the Song Contest's enduring mythology as a symbol and site of unity. Most importantly, the participatory nature of the song contest, which includes a popular

vote, has been increasingly interpreted as a litmus for public opinion on international issues and relations.

Several incidents in the past few years have illustrated Eurovision's political importance and usefulness as a tool for public diplomacy, including Ukraine's victory in 2022 and the controversies regarding Israel's participation in 2024, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Israel's investment in a voting campaign for the contestant, Eden Golan.

When Kalush Orchestra brought home the crystal microphone (the trophy awarded to the winners of the Eurovision Song Contest) for Ukraine in May 2022 with the song "Stefania", the victory was immediately interpreted as an indication of widespread support for Ukraine as a nation in the wake of the Russian invasion just three months prior. The Russian broadcasters had been excluded from the song contest following pressure from member broadcasters, as well as concerns the European Broadcasting Union (EBU; the international non-profit media organisation that runs Eurovision) had regarding Russian broadcasters' media independence within the Putin regime. The members of Kalush Orchestra were provided with special permission to leave Ukraine for the purpose of performing at Eurovision and at pre-Eurovision shows around Europe for the purpose of raising awareness and humanitarian funds. It was thus perhaps impossible to understand Ukraine's participation in Eurovision 2022—and their subsequent victory—beyond this immediate geopolitical context. As Povoledo et al (2022) observed in *The New York Times*, "European viewers and juries delivered a symbolic, pop culture endorsement of solidarity behind Ukraine in its defence against Russia's invasion." The idea that this victory was indicative of popular support (rather than musical quality alone) was prevalent in media coverage of Ukraine's win.

Belam and Cvorak (2022), writing for *The Guardian*, describe it as "a wave of support from the telephone-voting public", while Kottasová and Picheta (2022) of CNN similarly describe Kalush Orchestra as "surfing a wave of goodwill from European nations." *Deadline*'s Haring (2022) underscores the potentially problematized relationship between political and musical quality, observing of the contest in general that "sympathy for aggrieved nations sometimes wins out over style and substance." While politics and the instrumentalization of the song contest have undeniably been a core dimension of Eurovision throughout its history, Ukraine's victory seemed to set a particular precedent for its usefulness in the age of digital engagement, public diplomacy, and propaganda as they can potentially intersect with Eurovision's popular vote.

Following October 7, Eurovision fans (often referred to as "Eurofans") were divided about Israel's participation in the song contest, and numerous individuals and organisations called for a boycott of the contest or for Israel's exclusion, with parallels inevitably drawn to Russia's exclusion from the contest in 2022. While Israel's participation in Eurovision is frequently contested because of Palestine, the political significance of the contest for Israel post-October 7 was brought into clear focus when Israeli president Isacc Herzog intervened in Israeli broadcaster KAN's fraught negotiations with the EBU regarding political lyrics in their original submission, "October Rain." Herzog publicly emphasized the importance of Israel's participation in the contest and requested that the broadcaster change the lyrics to ensure participation (Astier, 2024; Naot, 2024; Jeffery, 2024; *Times of Israel*, 2024). KAN obliged and resubmitted the song with altered lyrics and a new title, "Hurricane." The Israeli foreign ministry then implemented a campaign to encourage votes from the Jewish and Israeli

diaspora, comprising social media posts, advertising, and even a billboard in New York's Times Square. The political intervention into the lyrics dispute and the subsequent online campaign targeting diaspora and Rest of the World (ROTW) voters was a recognition of the political value of the contest in both shaping public opinion and of using Eurovision results as an indicator of these opinions. In the Israeli press, Brown (2024) for *The Times of Israel* observed, Golan "placed high in the audience televoting from around the world, proving that while there has been a wave of antisemitism around the world following the outbreak of the war against Hamas, thousands support Israel." An article in *YNet* (Eichner, 2024) quoted David Saranga, the acting deputy director of public diplomacy for Israel's foreign ministry, who stated, "The fact that even in countries where public opinion is critical of Israel, such as Sweden or Ireland, they gave Israel a high score indicates that there are underground currents that are worth examining," while also confirming the use of the voting campaign. In contrast, international media outlets appeared to avoid overstating the idea that Israel's Eurovision result was an indicator of public support for the state, opting for factual reporting that differs significantly in the interpretive style and tone used to report Ukraine's victory in 2022. *The New York Times*, for example, reported that Golan "secured 375 points to finish" (Marshall, 2024), before going on to describe the Gaza conflict and related protests at Eurovision, while the *Associated Press* reported simply that she "ended in fifth place" and that KAN had been ordered to change the original song submitted to the contest (Lawless, 2024). The news service for SBS, the broadcaster who participates in Eurovision on Australia's behalf, does refer specifically to the impact of the public vote but frames it as the ineffectiveness of the protests and boycott rather than as an active indication of support: "Israel's Eden Golan finished fifth in the contest, after

emerging as one of the lead contenders once the public vote was added, despite demonstrators' calls for a boycott of the country" (Yosufzai, 2024). While these reports contextualize Israel's participation in the contest within the Gaza conflict, unlike Israeli media, they avoid suggesting it signifies popular support in the same way that they were eager to suggest for Ukraine in 2022.

One message is clear from both these examples: Eurovision results will be interpreted politically, with the popular vote read as an indicator of global public sentiments on complex geopolitical issues. This raises the question of the extent to which audiences are aware of this and how this awareness impacts their engagement with the song contest including but also beyond voting. Using the portmanteau concept of participatory diplomacy (Carniel, 2024), this article explores how Eurovision fans understand and experience the politics of the song contest, and how they see the song contest as a site for enacting their diplomatic agency as members of a transnational global public. Participatory diplomacy is a concept that describes the intersection of the fan studies concept of participatory culture with the political concept of public diplomacy. It argues that the way that fans and audiences interact with a popular culture text like Eurovision can and is used as a site of political expression and, more importantly, political agency.

Methodology

The primary data for this research was collected via an online survey of Eurovision fans (n = 322) conducted from July 18 to August 31, 2024. This end date was selected as it signified the end of the Eurovision year; songs released after September 1 are eligible for submission into the song contest, so the date is considered "Eurovision New Year" by its

fandom. The survey timing also sought to capture fresh responses to the 2024 contest, which was a politically controversial year due to the contested inclusion of Israel, calls for boycott, vocal pro-Palestinian artists, and the disqualification of the Dutch artist. The survey comprised a combination of multiple choice, scaled, and open-ended questions, with additional optional open-ended questions that allowed respondents to elaborate on their reasoning in the closed questions and to regularly provide commentary on issues raised by completing the survey that might not otherwise be directly covered. After determining eligibility—the respondents were required to be over 18 years of age and to have watched Eurovision—the survey was divided into five main sections: demographic, fandom, voting, politics, and current political situations (specifically Russia-Ukraine and Israel), followed by an additional section at the end of the survey for respondents to include any final thoughts that were not covered by the survey. Inductive thematic analysis is applied to the qualitative responses.

Additional data was collected via digital ethnographic observation of X/Twitter. Although some quantitative data was collected, this research does not take a "big data" approach to its social media research. Rather, it applies "analogue" ethnographical approaches, such as participant observation, within the digital space. Its contemporaneous digital ethnographic method comprises observation of fan engagement and interactions on X/Twitter throughout the Eurovision season for 2024. Contemporaneous ethnographic observation enables the researcher to witness the various events and debates within the fan community as they unfold. Here, a "vibes-based" method (Watson, 2025) was deployed, noting that this also meshes well with the inductive thematic analysis used in the survey. This involves "being together with

others in situ or in amongst important things, to enable us to share in experiences; to be in the field and in feeling" (Watson, 2025, p. 14).

In sum, the author observed the X/Twitter feed in real-time while also watching the contest on television, sharing with fellow Eurofans various feelings as the event unfolded, then taking detailed, reflexive and intertextual notes. Importantly, vibes-based digital ethnographical observation is a qualitative not quantitative method; it is described here, somewhat paradoxically, as "analogue" because the research does not utilize programmatic data collection processes, or Application Programming Interfaces (APIs). Notably, X/Twitter ended its free API service in 2023, which resulted in hundreds of academic projects either being cancelled, shifting toward other platforms, or shifting methodological approaches (Gotfredson, 2023). Although the approach used here is of little use to big data researchers, it allows qualitative social and cultural researchers to still engage with the vast amount of human data generated by social media by hybridising traditional methods with new technologies.

In addition to contemporaneous ethnographic observation, posts related to Eurovision 2024 from the official Eurovision account, the EBU, member broadcasters, ministries of foreign affairs (or other relevant state social media accounts), and other users that could be reasonable considered to be public figures (former Israeli spokesperson Eylon Levy is a specific example, but also journalists and other commentators) were collated and saved, together with replies made by other users in response to these posts. By focusing on engagement with verified public entities and hash tagged posts, this enables a reasonable assumption that users were willingly engaging in a public conversation. This, in line with the

vibes-based method, allowed for an assessment of the atmosphere, or vibe, of online conversations and sentiment.

All primary data collection was approved by the University of Southern Queensland Human Research Ethics Committee (ETH2024-0061).

The Politics of Eurovision

Iconic and controversial BBC commentator Terry Wogan was highly critical of the role of politics in Eurovision. At a 2009 EBU summit on Eurovision TV, after stepping down from his BBC role, Wogan stated that the contest "is not about politics or asserting your place in the community, not even about national pride…It is about picking the best song in Europe" (quoted in Holmwood, 2009). Wogan saw politics as the demise of the "exciting, camp, foolish spectacle" (quoted in Holmwood, 2009) that Eurovision ought to be. The official stance of the contest is that it is a non-political event, yet scholars, commentators, and fans frequently emphasize the impossibility of extracting politics from what is essentially a contest between nations. As Bohlman (2007, p. 66) summarizes, at Eurovision, "politics compete for and on the main stage." However, as the EBU frequently emphasizes, the Eurovision Song Contest is, on paper at least, a contest between broadcasters, not between nations. Indeed, the EBU itself was established to work as a network of broadcasters rather than of states to avoid political interference in media sharing (Bourdon, 2007; Vuletic, 2018). Yet, artists, juries, and the public voters are framed and organized according to national boundaries. We do not speak, for example, of "the BBC's song" or the "BBC voters" but of the UK's entry and the UK public vote. Artists and audiences do not wave the BBC logo but rather the Union Jack. While the contest might be organized along the lines of

national public broadcasters administratively, its symbolism and representation are squarely in terms of nation, which is a deeply political concept. As Baker (2015, p. 74) observes, "Eurovision and the performances it contains have reflected, communicated and been drawn into narratives of national and European identity which were and are—but their very nature as a nexus between imaginaries of culture and territory—geopolitical."

A vast amount of Eurovision scholarship emphasizes its utility as a tool for nation branding and building, cultural diplomacy, public diplomacy, and the development of soft power capacity more broadly. In his case study of Estonian nation branding, Jordan (2014, p. 11) argues that participating in Eurovision allows countries to "present a certain narrative of nationhood to the international audience," while also working to shape ideas of "what Europe is about or what it means to be European." Studies of Ukraine (Miazhevich, 2012; Jordan, 2015; Pavlyshyn, 2019), Azerbaijan (Ismayilov, 2012), and Russia (Jordan, 2009; Meerzon & Priven, 2013) demonstrate the particular importance of this in the post-Soviet context (Sieg 2013). Similar arguments emerge around Israel's projection of a national identity and its navigation of its complex relationship with Europe (Mahla, 2023; Press-Barnathan & Lutz, 2020). Borić and Radović Kapor (2017, p. 238) suggest that Eurovision's usefulness as a tool in cultural diplomacy has been augmented by the shift toward "multi-polar, multi-layered, and braided" forms of diplomacy.

This rests upon a definition of cultural diplomacy that is broadened to include the participation of foreign publics. For some scholars, the line between cultural diplomacy and public diplomacy is drawn at whether the public are the target of or have access to the diplomatic action in question (Patjinka, 2014;

Vuletic, 2018b), while others accept or acknowledge that these diplomatic practices have necessarily adapted to the changed communications environment of the twenty-first century. Kiel's (2020) approach emphasizes the importance of active state intervention for cultural diplomacy to be effective in meeting foreign policy goals. In the case of hosting Eurovision in Tel Aviv in 2019, she found that the lack of a coordinated cultural diplomacy plan by the state made the event particularly vulnerable to the BDS movement, providing as much attention to criticisms of Israel as it did to the desirable projection of a liberal, cosmopolitan nation. For Vuletic (2018b), public diplomacy is diplomacy directed to the public by the state. States do not play a role in selecting Eurovision entries (acknowledging they may instrumentalize participation). But as these entries are nevertheless artistic products of that nation, he views them as examples of cultural diplomacy. However, he characterizes Eurovision as "a rare case of direct democracy in cultural diplomacy" (Vuletic, 2018b, p. 302) that gives rise to a new understanding of public diplomacy where the public has greater agency rather than being positioned simply as a passive audience. This reasoning provides foundations for the concept of participatory diplomacy, in which fans and audiences exhibit political agency through engagement with popular culture.

As indicated by Vuletic (2018b) and Borić and Radović Kapor (2017) above, Eurovision illustrates effectively how the practices of cultural and public diplomacy have shifted in an era of changed social, political, and technological relations. Artists already held an important role in traditional cultural diplomacy, often participating in exhibits and artist exchange programs, in which they could be understood as agents or at least tools or resources in the diplomatic process. In Eurovision, this is magnified

and, in some ways, leaned into. The language of diplomacy permeates the contest (Carniel, 2019): countries send delegations, as they would to the United Nations, and artists are framed as ambassadors for their country, with their actions under great scrutiny. Promotional media circulated by the official Eurovision accounts often shows artists sharing their culture and language with one another, emphasising the idea of the contest as a site of cultural exchange and understanding—core tenets of traditional cultural diplomacy. Yet such official material is not the only access we have to the cultural encounters occurring at the contest as artists can either reinforce or disrupt these official narratives through their personal social media posts.

The recent implementation of the Eurovision Code of Conduct for delegations, artists, sponsors, and stakeholders in late 2024 recognizes artists' political agency while also seeking to control it within the bounds of the contest. While elements of the Code of Conduct were previously incorporated into the rules of the contest and into artist contracts, the EBU introduced a singular code as a response to allegations of bullying and harassment at Eurovision 2024 in Malmö. In their foreword, Bakel Walden, the Chair of the Eurovision Reference Group, and Martin Green, the contest director, emphasize that the code "respects and protects the right of us all to personal opinion and freedom of speech" (Code 2024, p. 2). Its first section addresses the integrity of Eurovision, which comprises respect for Eurovision's values, political neutrality, and fair play and ethical competition. The code emphasizes freedom of expression as a fundamental right but establishes Eurovision as a bounded space where that right is somewhat restricted: "While participants retain their right to free speech outside the Contest, they are bound by the ESC's rules within the context of their

performance and official activities related to the Event" (Code 2024, p. 4). The code further elaborates:

> Participants can express themselves freely in a personal capacity but must avoid linking political views to their ESC participation. They must not instrumentalize the ESC or use the ESC as leverage by making political statements or causing controversies, thereby shifting focus away from the Event's purpose, which is celebrating music and promoting unity (Code 2024, p. 5).

In the section addressing responsible communication, the code reiterates its "support and respect for open expression and freedom of speech," but requests a "positive and respectful tone" in all communication, including personal social media posts (Code 2024, p. 8). Consequently, artists' capacity to be independent diplomatic agents, even if their views align with popular opinion or the official stance of the country they represent, is now far more limited than previously.

Drawing upon Mouffe's (2005) distinction between politics and the political and its further extrapolation by Bal and Hernández-Navarro (2011), Carniel (2024b) argues that the EBU implicitly engages in politics in its very attempt to regulate political expression. Mouffe (2005, p. 9) defines politics as "the set of practices and institutions through which an order is created," while the political is "the dimension of antagonism…constitutive of human societies." As Bal and Hernández-Navarro (2011, p. 9) extrapolate, "Politics constantly attempts to repress or defuse the political. The political resists this by creating political spaces where conflict can exist." Thus, paradoxically, the EBU's attempts to regulate Eurovision as a non-political event is "politics." Historically, participants and fans have found ways to resist this political repression

to engage with the contest as a political space where conflict can exist, albeit with varying effect. The Code of Conduct imposes limits on this; this was first tested at the 2025 contest, which is beyond the parameters of this study.

One strategy used by the EBU to navigate the implicit politics of the contest is emphasising it as a contest between broadcasters rather than a contest between states. For example, in response to queries as to why Israel was permitted to participate in 2024 when Russia was excluded in 2022, EBU Director General Noel Curran stated, "the Eurovision Song Contest is a non-political music event and a competition between public service broadcasters who are members of the EBU. It is not a contest between governments." The Eurovision website's FAQ for the 2024 contest emphasizes this by referring to "the Israeli public service broadcaster" and "Israeli member KAN" in its responses to questions about "Israel." This separation between state and broadcaster assists the EBU in maintaining that the Eurovision Song Contest is "a non-political event that unites audiences around the world through music" (Eurovision.tv 2024, FAQ). This is enshrined in its rules, which are revised and released prior to each edition of the contest. The rules for the 2024 edition stated:

The ESC is a non-political event. All Participating Broadcasters, including the Host Broadcaster, shall be responsible to ensure that all necessary measures are undertaken within in their respective Delegations and teams to safeguard the interests and the integrity of the ESC and to make sure that the ESC shall in no case be politicized and/or instrumentalized and/or otherwise brought into disrepute in any way.

This truncated version of the so-called "politics rule" was developed for Eurovision 2022. Prior to this,

the rules included greater detail prohibiting the promotion of political causes, speeches and gestures, as well as the promotion of commercial brands and the use of foul language. For example, the 2021 rules stated:

> The lyrics and/or performance of the songs shall not bring the Shows, the ESC as such or the EBU into disrepute. No lyrics, speeches, gestures of a political, commercial or similar nature shall be permitted during the ESC.

The removal of this detail in 2022 enabled several artists to make supporting comments and gestures for Ukraine throughout the contest. For example, both the German and Icelandic artists pasted Ukrainian flag stickers on their guitars and, perhaps most famously, Oleh Psuik from Ukrainian entry Kalush Orchestra ended their performance by shouting, "Please help Ukraine, Mariupol. Help Azovstal right now." When queried about whether such gestures constituted a breach of the politics rule, the EBU responded that it viewed these as "humanitarian rather than political in nature" (quoted in Jones, 2022). By contrast, in 2017 Portuguese artist Salvador Sobral was censured by the EBU for wearing a sweatshirt that read "SOS Refugees" at a press conference, where he also criticized European government responses to the ongoing refugee crisis in the Mediterranean. Although Sobral complied with the EBU's request that he refrain from wearing the sweatshirt or making such comments again during official press engagements for the contest, in an interview after the contest, he refuted the claim that the sweatshirt's message was political, stating, "it is a humanitarian and essentially human message" (quoted in Honciuc, 2017). This seemed to be reinforced by the EBU themselves when in the following year, there was little to no discussion about whether the French entry, "Mercy," about an infant

asylum seeker born at sea, was a political song (Carniel, 2024b; Alley-Young, 2022). Objectively, Sobral's statement was less political by the EBU's rules than Psuik's as he spoke broadly of European responses to a politicized issue while at a press conference yet did not seek to politicize his participation in the contest, whereas Psuik called for specific assistance to the country he was representing while on stage. An additional comparison can be made to the 2024 Ukrainian delegation who were censured for wearing "Free Azovstal Defenders" t-shirts while backstage. Thus, in the space of time between Sobral and Psiuk, the EBU's definition of "humanitarian" had been de-politicized and its stance on political messaging by artists rendered inconsistent, only to be re-established and reinforced in the Code of Conduct introduced in 2024.

As can be seen here, the EBU's definitions of politics has implications for how participants and audiences can enact their political agency while within the bounds of the Eurovision Song Contest. Furthermore, its attempts to manage how politics permeates the contest has been inconsistent. Yet the more the EBU and other stakeholders grapple with this, the more the political dimensions of the song contest are highlighted.

Participatory Diplomacy Framework

Participatory diplomacy (Carniel, 2024a) is a portmanteau concept that seeks to combine the operations of public diplomacy, as a largely state-driven strategy, with those of participatory culture, which is used to describe how fans of popular culture actively construct and circulate meaning (Jenkins, 2012 [1992]). In so doing, the concept of participatory diplomacy enables the exploration of the dynamic of an audience actively participating in a popular cultural

platform to shape its political message and meaning, and through this communicate with both state and non-state actors. Although one derives from international relations and statecraft and the other from popular culture and fan studies, both public diplomacy and participatory culture are concerned with the communication processes and power relations between two groups: the state and foreign publics and producers and consumers respectively. Participatory diplomacy takes the top-down disruption of production and consumption offered by participatory culture and applies it to public diplomacy. Importantly, both public diplomacy and participatory culture have had to adapt to new social, political, and technological environments that both facilitate and prioritize engagement with, and the agency of the public.

The connection between popular culture and politics itself is, of course, not new. Popular culture has long been recognized as providing space to reflect and (re)imagine political figures, processes, and realities (see Jenkins et al, 2020's concept of the civic imagination; see also scholarship on *The West Wing*, such as Riegert, 2007; Gans-Boriskin & Tisinger, 2005; Lorenzo-López, 2024, as a good example) as a useful soft power resource (Nye, 2008; Watanabe & McConnell, 2008) and as an effective tool in political science and international relations pedagogy (Grayson, 2015; Clapton, 2015). Although various American examples abound (e.g. Bayles, 2014; Dittmer, 2015; Schneider, 2004), particularly in the Cold War period, Japan and South Korea are frequently cited as contemporary examples of the effective strategic deployment of popular culture to serve state interests (see, for example, Istad, 2016; Kim, 2016; Elfving-Hwang, 2013; Iwabuchi, 2015; Otmazgin, 2008) particularly in relation to nation branding and cultural diplomacy. However, Iwabuchi

(2015, p. 420) highlights the importance of understanding popular culture as not just something that is projected by a country but as a site for engagement and participation, arguing that Japanese "pop-culture diplomacy" is often limited in its utility as it "goes no further than a one-way projection of Japanese culture."

Accordingly, what has shifted over the past two decades, particularly with the rise of social media, is the interest in the productive possibilities of the connection between popular culture and politics as a participatory space rather than one of passive reception of a projected image. Early forays into this field, such as the initial agenda for Pop Culture World Politics (PCWP; Grayson et al, 2009) and popular geopolitics (Dittmer & Dodds, 2009; Dittmer & Gray, 2010) argued for the development of more nuanced methodologies that moved beyond reading texts as representations of politics toward seeing this politics as shaped by or even produced by popular culture. Grayson (2015) characterizes much international relations scholarship on popular culture as "an ersatz version of New Criticism…where a text means what it means without any socio-political consideration of its producer or audience or context of reception." Similarly, Crilley (2021) identifies the need for more PCWP scholarship engaged with audiences and participation to better reflect a changed media environment where the audiences are both producers and consumers of content. Arguably, this PCWP agenda is at times better reflected in some fan studies scholarship or at least indicates that collaborations between fan studies and PCWP offer fruitful possibilities. Where once popular culture was seen as simply a reflection of political values and themes at best—and escapism at worst—it is now perceived as "a provocation for civic engagement" (Jenkins et al, 2020, p. 7). This encourages a view of popular culture

not just as a tool of the state to be used for purposes of nation branding or passive accrual of soft power resources but as an element with which publics are actively engaged and productive with an understanding of its political value and their own political agency.

As originally conceived by fan studies scholar Henry Jenkins (2012 [1992], p. 24) participatory culture refers to the ways "fans cease to be simply an audience for popular texts; instead, they become active participants in the construction and circulation of textual meanings." The related concept of convergence culture (Jenkins, 2006) expands upon this to encapsulate the operations of participatory culture in new media environments that facilitate collective intelligence, or collaborative knowledge-making. Convergence culture describes how consumers engage with and make meaning from dispersed content across multiple media platforms that often heavily rely upon consumers' active participation, which in turn can influence the "official" text. Both participatory culture and convergence culture disrupt the traditional dynamics between the producers and consumers to involve "both a top-down corporate-driven process and a bottom-up consumer-driven process" (Jenkins, 2006, p. 18). To better encapsulate this new dynamic, Bruns (2006) proposed the concepts of "produsers" and "produsage," which are collaborative, user-led, and user-distributed approaches to content production that can span from fan spaces, to Wikipedia, to citizen journalism. Many scholars see the participatory potential of this convergence, but others caution that it is bound in problematic systems of data-harvesting, surveillance, and exploitation of free labor. Furthermore, this environment of user-generated content has both facilitated greater production and dissemination of misinformation and platforms for

countering this. What these problematics of participatory culture and convergence culture highlight are the ways that they are intrinsically bound to ideas of power, collective intelligence and action, and democratic ideals of communication and participation.

Scholars optimistically emphasize the political potential of participatory culture even within this environment of misinformation, surveillance, and capitalism, advocating for popular culture and its practices as an avenue for social change. Germinal cultural studies scholars who precede these theorizations of popular and fan culture, such as Hall (2005 [1981]) and hooks (1990), characterize popular culture as an important site of political and cultural struggle and resistance. Similarly, Storey (1996) suggested that it is because of the potential of popular culture to be co-opted by powerful forces for profit and ideological control that we ought to engage more vigilantly in how it is produced, distributed, and consumed. Van Slyke's (2015) approach to this addresses the traditional producers by providing an explicit political agenda for liberal and progressive industry creatives to instrumentalize their political power to progress political issues, while others focus on the participatory possibilities of fans and audiences. For Van Zoonen (2005), entertainment or popular culture are intrinsically bound in politics. She advocates for further bolstering and instrumentalizing that connection to rejuvenate engaged citizenship and political participation. Van Zoonen's view of popular culture and politics is one of civic edutainment that also inspires enthusiastic political participation modelled on participatory fan practices. Other approaches reverse this process of influence to highlight how popular culture and fan practices can themselves be politically engaged activities. Kliger-Vilenchik (2013) highlights the political agency of fans

and identifies a flow between participatory culture and participatory politics that is more multidirectional than that explored by Van Zoonen. In a dialogic article with Kozinets, Jenkins observes that participatory culture "translates consumption into a more active participation in…social debates" (Kozinets & Jenkins, 2021, p. 267).

Public diplomacy has also adapted to the new media environment and the political and social relations this environment facilitates. As illustrated by Cull's (2008) typology of public diplomacy, this has necessitated a shift from traditional, one-way communications to multidirectional communications that provide space for listening, advocacy, and exchange. Foreign publics, he argues, are more receptive to forms of public diplomacy that are relational and dialogic, and that they feel offer meaningful opportunities for engagement, exchange, and understanding (Cull, 2008). Arsenault's (2009) "public diplomacy 2.0" specifically draws upon Jenkins' convergence culture to advocate for a "participatory ethos" that maximizes the potential of media and technological convergence to move towards collaborative public diplomacy strategies. Writing about the related concept of cultural diplomacy, Bound et al (2007) argue that this shift in communications has disrupted the idea of diplomacy as an exchange between elites, similar to the observations about the disrupted relations between production and consumption in participatory and convergence culture, which in turn has implications for how "culture" is also defined. This shift away from the idea of diplomacy as an activity for the elite and cultural diplomacy as concerned with the "high" forms of art broadens the range of diplomatic actors and the kinds of cultural texts and activities that can be used in meaningful diplomatic connection and exchange, and also reflects the impact that the discipline of cultural

studies has had on challenging the high-low dichotomy of culture. Other approaches to public and cultural diplomacy consider more radical possibilities that de-center the state, such as humanity-centered diplomacy (Zaharna, 2019) and cosmopolitan diplomacy (Gulmez, 2018; Villanueva Rivas, 2018). As Zaharna (2019, p. 9) highlights, digital technologies enable more direct interaction between people, thereby "are untethering both culture and communication as domains that were once largely controlled by the state." Culture is thus able to be viewed and used as a "human dynamic" (Zaharna, 2019, p. 8) rather than something static and territorially defined.

The concept of participatory diplomacy foregrounds active civic engagement and political agency of the public via their participation in popular culture practices. Importantly, it is explicitly transnational in its perspective, drawing upon an even "thicker" formulation of cosmopolitanism (Giulianotti & Robertson, 2007) than offered by Jenkins' (2006, p. 154) "pop cosmopolitanism," which struggled to untangle itself from the consumption of difference. Chin and Morimoto's (2013) expansion upon Hills' (2002) transcultural homology offers a strategy for dealing with the challenge of "thin" consumption of otherness by emphasising how fans are drawn to texts by a "subjective moment of affinity" (Chin & Morimoto 2013, p. 99). Their "affinity of affect" (Chin & Morimoto 2013, p. 93) is reminiscent of Appiah's (2006, p. 135) "connection made in the imagination," wherein we are drawn to art for both its intrinsic value and for its reminder of humanity. This places the focus on popular culture as connection over consumption.

Where Chin and Morimoto (2013, p. 93) eschew "transnational" in favor of "transcultural"—as the former "privileg[es]...a national orientation that

supercedes other – arguably more salient—subject positions"—transnational remains most useful for participatory diplomacy because it provides space for national orientation while also acknowledging how cultural and human connection and exchange permeate national borders. Kyriakidou et al (2018, p. 614) characterize national identification at Eurovision, particularly for its fans, as "playful…expressed and performed mostly for the purpose of celebrating diversity," arguing that the space of the contest is "based on fandom and sexual identities"; identities that Chin and Morimoto might suggest are more salient to the fans than their national identities. The Eurovision Song Contest is both a "transnational social space" (Roudometof, 2005, p. 114 via Beck; Carniel, 2019), constructed through the routine practice of social life, which includes engagement with political culture (Sandvoss, 2008), and a transnational *political* space that enables fans and audiences to enact political agency (Carniel, 2024a). The state remains significant to participatory diplomacy because this often is the primary actor to which the public is responding, and the national can also play an important role in how members of the public contextualize their response in a manner that evokes Appiah's rooted cosmopolitanism. In the case of the Eurovision Song Contest, the nation also remains important as it is used as the organizing principle for the contest. Although it is technically the public broadcaster and not the state that is participating in Eurovision, artists are framed as representatives of their nation and votes are tallied and presented as the results of each nation's public opinion. As voters, fans and audiences are emplaced within the national—that is, their vote counts toward the tally of the country to which they (or, perhaps more accurately, their credit cards) belong. However, this same voting system encourages the audience, however imperfect in execution and management, to think, feel, and vote in transnational

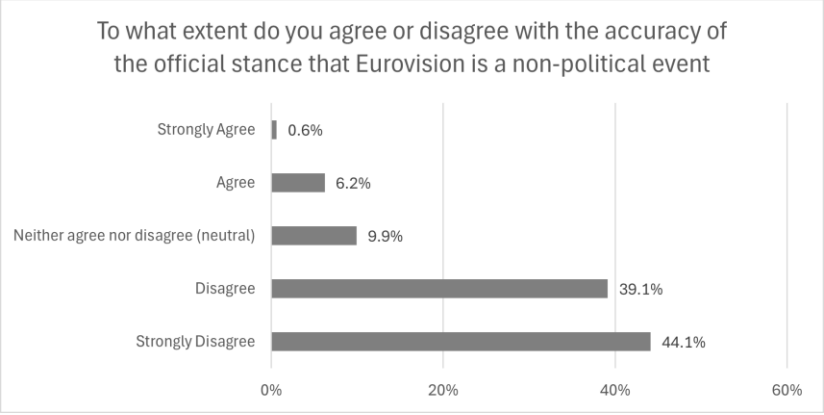
terms. Transnationalism is thus useful here for thinking about participatory diplomacy, and about the specific case of the Eurovision Song Contest, as it allows the public to both speak to the nation-state and across or beyond it.

Defining Politics at Eurovision

As has been established, the official stance of the Eurovision Song Contest and its organizer, the EBU, is that it is a non-political event. However, audience perceptions of the contest are sceptical of the veracity of this stance. When asked the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the accuracy of the official stance that Eurovision is a non-political event, 83.2 per cent of survey participants indicated a degree of disagreement (39.1% disagreed and 44.1% strongly disagreed).

Figure 1

Survey respondents' perception of whether Eurovision is a non-political event.



While many expressed a wish that politics could be removed from the contest, others expressed an

acceptance or resignation to the impossibility of removing it entirely, with many emphasizing the importance of managing the politics productively:

> "I wish that Eurovision could be non-political, but it just isn't possible for an event of this scale to be completely separate from politics."
>
> "A country is a political entity; therefore I do not think it is possible or desirable for any international event to be completely apolitical."
>
> "There's no problem in Eurovision being political, but it should be consistent. Instead, it seems to follow the general hypocrisy of governments in Europe. More independence of the EBU would be a good thing."
>
> "Some political aspects are unavoidable because that is the nature of songs/art. With everything in the world being outrage farms it would be nice to have one event where it can just be about the music and not artists or fans [sic] political views."
>
> "I think Eurovision is never going to be non-political as well as that people are smart enough to know that. However, I do think the aim to be non-political is important in fostering an environment where artists from all these different countries can be celebrated and to keep things on the positive side."
>
> "I would rather Eurovision have more concrete ideas re: what values it has/what politics it has rather than saying it has no politics at all. Because decisions it makes, such as the disqualification Russia, or even just allowing queer expression, are political actions whether the EBU thinks that are political or not."

This last quote reflects an ongoing concern among the participants regarding transparency and consistency in the contest, particularly around what the EBU defines as "political." As the example of Sobral and Psuik illustrates, the EBU has previously seen humanitarian statements as political and non-political at different moments in time. As Carniel (2024a) argues, values such as love, peace, unity, and acceptance are viewed as "non-political" at Eurovision, despite being quite deeply political concepts, because they are framed as "universal" values. This values-based politics is distinguished from state-based politics, which are considered unacceptable by both the contest rules and, evidently, its fans. As another participant stated:

> Eurovision too often applies an unfair standard when determining what is "political" - often, the personal political (a performer's identity) is allowed, but when things stray into the global political (like we've seen with Russia/Ukraine and Israel/Palestine), what feels like the same situation has not received the same response from the team determining what is appropriate vs. too far.

Politics has a broad definition that spans from the specifics of governance to social relations. As discussed previously, the main theoretical framework for understanding politics and the political is drawn from Mouffe's (2005) definition of "politics" as institutional order and practices and "political" as antagonism and encounter. However, how political scientists define politics and the political may not entirely align with how average citizens define these concepts, let alone those who are reflecting upon its implications for an international song contest. When asked to define the "political," the dominant themes that emerged from the survey were the state or

government, opinions or beliefs, conflict, controversy, geopolitics, and social issues and social relations. Notably, approximately one-tenth of participants provided variations on the theme that "everything was political." As one participant responded, the political is "anything that relates to the social organisation of human and non-human life." For these participants, the idea that anything—let alone Eurovision or similar contests of nations, such as the Olympics or FIFA World Cup—could be non-political was an impossibility because it emerges from and exists within our social world. However, as one participant noted, "While it is impossible to have a non political [sic] event, there used to be consensus around what a song about the many aspects of life was and what a blatant act of propaganda is." This seems to suggest that although everything is political, at Eurovision some things are more acceptably political than others.

Definitions of the political that referred to the state either provided an abstract or conceptual definition of politics or referred to the intervention of states or state-based politics specifically within Eurovision. For example, where one responded that the politics were "things that have to do with how a community or party is governed, where a connection or affiliation with someone or something can affect the overall governing of a country," another stated that the political occurs when Eurovision is "being used by an artist, songwriter, delegation, government or broadcaster to promote a viewpoint related to electoral or legislative politics, or a current ongoing military conflict." Both responses demonstrate an understanding of the political as something related to government and state affairs, but the second draws a connection to how that understanding manifests at Eurovision specifically. Close to a third of survey respondents provided an understanding that was focused specifically on the political as viewed through

the lens of the Eurovision Song Contest. Within this, there were specific examples of what they considered to be "political" influence or actions, such as campaigning for votes, using entries for propaganda purposes, voting blocs, and institutional bias from the EBU, including what was seen to be differential treatment in the cases of Russia and Israel, that generally indicated a negative sentiment regarding the role of politics in the contest. Others provided examples focused on fan actions, such as voting/not voting or cheering/booing for an act because of political reasons, and artist behaviour, such as expressing political views in either press conferences or in songs, which were again viewed as a negative influence of politics on the contest. One participant also specifically identified carrying one's flag in the flag parade as a political act that all artists engage in, one that is embedded into the production of the show itself. Another pointed out the competition of nations paradox: "In ESC terms, competitors are countries, represented by the country's name, and flag shown. It is therefore inherently political."

While many fans seemed resigned to the fact that politics were perhaps inescapable in a contest of nations, there was a persistent sense that the EBU, delegations, and fans ought to strive to separate politics as much as possible from Eurovision. As the survey was conducted in the wake of the 2024 contest, participants' views were understandably influenced by this controversial edition of the contest. The EBU was heavily criticized throughout the survey responses for allowing economic reasons—specifically Eurovision's sponsorship by Israeli company Morrocanoil—to influence their decision-making regarding Israel's participation. For example:

> "Participation is based on money and this year we saw that even a country that commits genocide can compete is [sic] they are the sponsor."

> "[2024] was a mess. It showed how the EBU is corrupt and ESC is about sponsor money far more than it is about art or being 'united by music'....The first step to fixing this would be to disqualify Israel and drop Morrocan Oil [sic] as a sponsor, but I don't believe that would happen unless several countries threatened to leave the show and drop enough financial support."

> "I think the fact that an Israel based company (I believe) is such a large sponsor (the oil ads) is also to blame for how messy the year was, because who knows how desperate the EBU was for that money to even have the show in the first place. I think the EBU should not be taking sponsorships with direct links to countries participating in the contest. This is a point of bias, because if the whole reason Israel didn't get removed was to keep their sponsor happy....Capitalism sure is fun."

Yet in the context of the BDS movement, the EBU's decision to either maintain or to remove Moroccanoil as a sponsor would be interpreted as political. The EBU were also criticized for lack of transparency and inconsistency in how it applied its rules to different delegations. Its alleged use of so-called "anti-booing technology" (a manipulation of sound levels to lower the sound of booing and increase the volume of cheers), introduced in 2015 to mitigate audience responses to the Russian entry, was perceived by fans to be an act of censorship anathema to the EBU's purported journalistic values, as were actions to silence artists and fans:

> "Censorship / trying to show an immaculate pictureperfect [sic] world isn't working. Therefore, editing audience reactions / artist remarks isn't helpful."
>
> "Artists should be free to express their political views! So should fans! Why are we having censorship at the communications event?"
>
> "I don't know how the politics can be separated from the contest so it seems silly to block artists and audiences from expression of political views. It seems to me that politics is intrinsic and instead the discussion should be around how to allow a healthy and tolerant expression of views"

Despite the circulation of numerous videos filmed by grand final attendees on social media indicating widespread booing throughout the arena, the EBU denied actively censoring the boos, stating, "Just like in all major TV productions with an audience, [Swedish national broadcaster] SVT work on the broadcast sound to even out the levels for TV viewers. This is solely to achieve as balanced a sound mix as possible for the audience; and SVT do not censor sound from the arena audience" (quoted in Welsh 2024).

Fans' Sense of Political Agency

In participatory culture, the various activities that fans engage with are the means through which they express agency in relation to their fan object. For example, Jenkins (1992) argues that fans use fan fiction as a way to gain power over the text. Various studies have demonstrated how fans have used their fiction, vidding, art, and other practices to challenge social norms and to create new interpretations of the original text. Other studies illustrate how fan communities mobilize around issues pertaining to their fan object,

such as casting and series cancellation. It is important to not see these practices as limited in their significance to the specific fan communities involved, as these activities are frequently engaged with broader social politics around, for example, race, gender, class, and sexuality (Kligler-Vilenchik, 2013). Importantly, these activities do not just empower fans in relation to their fan object but also assist in the development of civic knowledge and skills (Kliger-Vilenchek, 2015; Jenkins et al, 2020; Duncombe, 2002; van Zoonen, 2005); through doing fannish things, they develop and enact both cultural and civic agency.

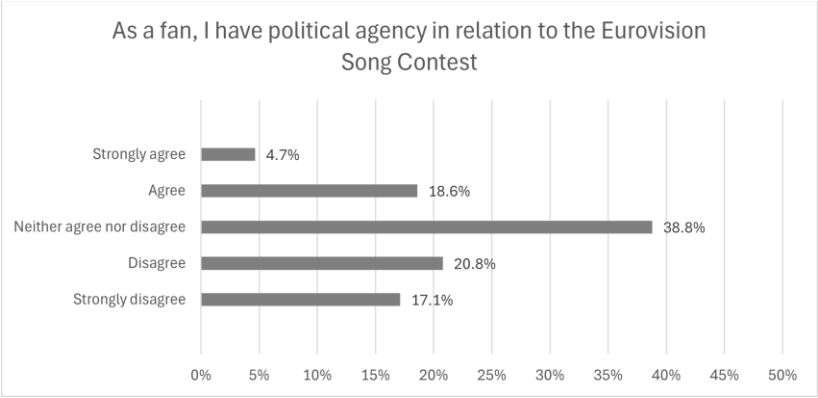
Agency refers to the capacity of an agent (which can be an individual or collective, human or non-human) to pursue an action (Adler-Nissen, 2016; Kelley, 2014), with civic agency referring to the right and capacity to influence the kind of society they wish to see and the process for achieving it (Fowler, 2010). Fowler (2010, p. 155) advocates for the application of the principles of civic agency to the "politics of everyday life" as "the application of civic agency to a multiplicity of micro-settings, relations, and transactions gives generative power for directing how societies change." Similarly, cultural studies is concerned with the politics of everyday culture (de Certeau 1984), including but not limited to popular culture, and the way that this enables acts of resistance (Hall, 2005 [1981]; hooks, 1990). Häkli and Kallio's (2014, p. 181) definition of political agency similarly emphasizes the everyday by not restricting it to participation in institutional political processes or social movements but any "variety of individual and collective, official and mundane, rational and affective, and human and non-human ways of acting, affecting and impacting politically." They ultimately argue against distinguishing between "everyday politics" and "institutional high politics" in recognition of how enmeshed these are. In sum, as the Eurofan participants suggest, everything in

every day is political, but agency determines their capacity to do anything about it.

When asked about the extent to which they feel they have political agency as fans in relation to the Eurovision Song Contest, participants were largely ambivalent: 23.3% expressed a degree of agreement, 37.9% expressed degrees of disagreement, and 38.8% neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement.

Figure 2

Survey respondents' perceptions of political agency in relation to Eurovision.



This limited perception of agency was supported in the survey comments:

> "I think fans have very little agency over the contest."

> "The fans have no power over the EBU. It has been shown that the EBU makes such crucial decisions based on the decisions of all the broadcasters in the union (it is a broadcasting union after all), and if they want to influence that, fans should pressure particular broadcasters first. Besides, there are no

> good avenues of 'talking' to the EBU, as a fan, in order to be 'heard.'"

> "I, like many other fans, was against Israel's participation in 2024. I found that there was essentially no way as a fan to raise this as an issue. Writing to broadcasters or the EBU was either met with no response, dismissed, or actively surpressed [sic] on social media by blocking. Fans who attempted to protest in person were prevented from doing so. It was incredibly disappointing and I feel it has completely broken the relationship between the contest's fans and its organizers."

A prevalent sub-theme within this was the extent to which fans felt their concerns were being heard by the EBU as an organization:

> "Eurovision seem to show a lack of willingness to listen to fans, or artists. Artists openly spoke about how unsafe they felt at Eurovision this year because the EBU did nothing to protect them from abuse."

> "I felt more heard by the countries competing in the competition and their acts/delegations than the EBU, who I felt deliberately ignored the views of fans this year. As many artists said after the contest, this year was not the best of Eurovision and did not represent the values of the artists and fans."

> "Eurovision never hears what fans think or feel. Fans have been aching for random running order, a different voting system, not tolerating Israel as much as they've done last year, not disqualifying Joost Klein upon such a radical decision and so on. I do not protest Israel or support them (100% neutral on the events), but I felt extremely uncomfortable with the position they put a lot of representatives in."

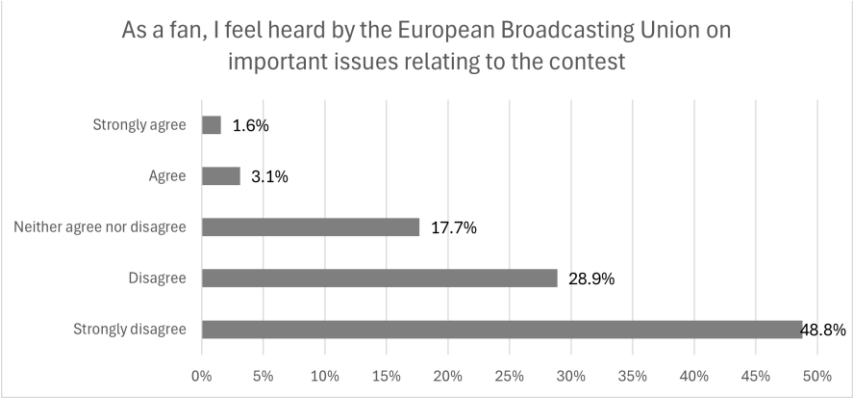
> "Honestly I never had much of a problem with feeling heard by the EBU until this year's edition with Israel's participation....I do not feel like the EBU listened to fan opinions at all this year or to their concerns and even now they are pressing on that Israel's participation was perfect and caused no issues despite the grievances it caused other participants"

Jenkins suggests that the true test of the extent to which a culture is participatory—whether that be the culture that surrounds a popular text or a political culture—is the answer to the question: "to what degree, if I spoke, would I be heard?" (Kozinets & Jenkins, 2021, p. 267). Various scholars have also argued that listening is a core part of public diplomacy (Cull, 2008; Cull, 2019; di Martino, 2020a; di Martino, 2020b; Pamment, 2016) and public relations (Macnamara, 2018, 2022). Although both public diplomacy and participatory culture emphasize changed communication technologies and cultures that enable multidirectional communication, many organizations still operate in a one-to-many and evaluation or monitoring-focused mentality that can overlook the importance of actually listening and responding to how that message is received. Listening is thus not simply about monitoring and evaluation; rather, active listening is itself an act of communication that demonstrates engagement and fosters mutual understanding between actors (di Martino, 2020). In public diplomacy, listening is most valuable when it leads to productive, responsive policy outcomes and having a reputation for listening is itself an important soft power asset (Cull, 2019). A lack of effective listening – that is, when what is heard is translated into action – can lead to declining trust among citizens and stakeholders (Macnamara, 2017, 2018; di Martino, 2020). As Macnamara (2018, p. 19) argues, "Affording voice to citizens and increasing the voice of marginalized groups will not improve their access to decision making, policy

making, or representation…unless there is effective listening by government, nongovernment, and nonprofit organizations." Listening is thus crucial to the experience of agency. When asked the extent to which they felt heard by the EBU regarding important issues relating to the contest, the majority of participants (77.7%) disagreed.

Figure 3

Survey responses regard whether or not they felt heard by the EBU.



As one participant observed, "Although extreme politics should be kept out of Eurovision, it seems to be the only way fans can express their opinion on politics: it's a global event and a chance for them to be seen and heard." However, another presents a counterpoint:

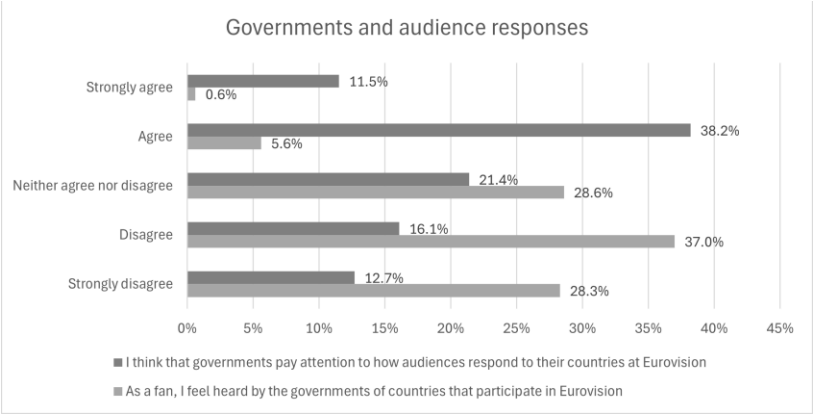
> As a fan, I feel heard by the European Broadcasting Union on important issues relating to the contest" implies that I ought to feel heard, that a failure to give me that feeling would be a failure by the EBU. I couldn't care less about "feeling heard" by the EBU, I don't need external validation from broadcasters.

Fans also did not feel heard by the governments of countries, but a slight majority did think that

governments do pay attention to how audiences respond to their countries at Eurovision.

Figure 4

Survey responses regarding feeling heard by governments and the extent to which governments pay attention to audience responses at Eurovision.



One fan response suggests that the difference between being heard and governments paying attention to Eurovision results is in how that information is used:

> Concerning the last point about governments paying attention to the Eurovision results, we know that to be a fact. This year, Israel's Minsitry [sic] of Foreign Affairs financed a large advertising campaign in order to boost their votes in several countries. They did this through analyzing [sic] voting patterns and targetting [sic] specific people of influence, including politicians and diplomats from around the world. They went a step further by telling people to use all 20 of their votes and tell their friends. This has never happened in the history of the contest. While this is not against the rules, it is very clearly an example of

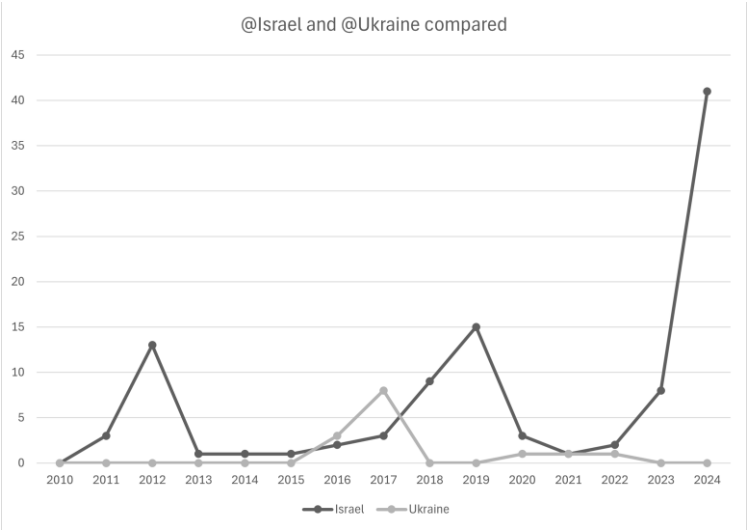
how Eurovision can be exploited by governments to push propaganda.

Participants frequently referred to the Israeli voting campaign throughout the survey, with some alleging that the state or its agents phoned people directly to encourage them to vote and used bot farms to artificially increase the public vote. The Israeli government did indeed engage in a voting campaign (YNet 2024) that spanned from social media to a billboard in New York's Times Square. This included posts from the official @Israel X/Twitter accounts, various Israeli embassy accounts, and several from the official accounts of ambassadors, as well as targeted advertising for those watching the contest on YouTube posted to a dedicated channel, "Vote Hurricane," that has since been deleted, but can be found on the Internet Archive. Further allegations of vote manipulation are unsubstantiated, but acting deputy director of public diplomacy at the Israeli foreign ministry David Saranga stated, "it is true that we, as the Foreign Ministry, worked among friendly audiences to increase the vote," which included mobilizing audiences not usually engaged with the contest (quoted in Eichner 2024).

While it is not unusual for official government social media accounts to post support for their Eurovision representatives and to encourage votes, the scale, intensity, and tone of Israel's 2024 campaign was notable. The chart below provides a comparison of the official @Israel and @Ukraine X/Twitter accounts between 2010 and 2024.

Figure 5

A comparison of posts on official accounts for Ukraine and Israel (2010-2024). 2010 was selected as the starting point as this was when both accounts were active.

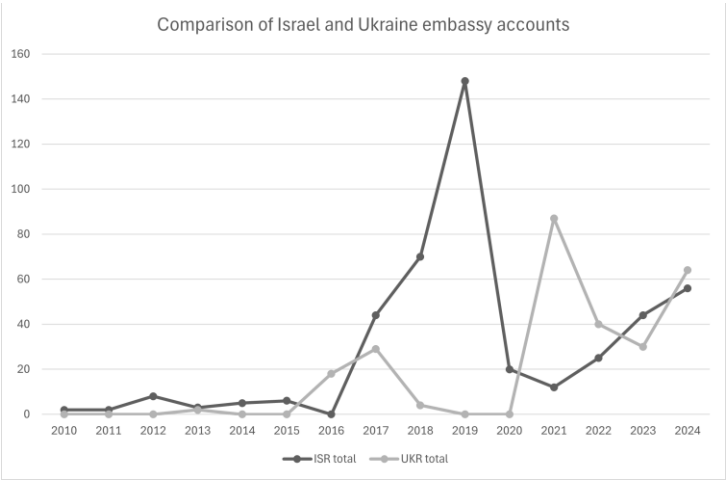


As can be seen, @Israel is generally more active in promoting Eurovision than @Ukraine. Both countries' activity peaked during years that they were hosting (2017 for Ukraine and 2019 for Israel), although @Ukraine was notably quiet while co-hosting with the UK in 2023. However, @Israel's Eurovision-related activity sharply increased in 2024. This suggests that the official @Israel account was used specifically to generate interest in and support for its Eurovision entry. A comparison of embassy accounts (using a sample of ten countries that have active social media accounts for their embassies in both Ukraine and Israel) show similar peaks in activity around hosting Eurovision in 2017 and 2019. However, the Ukrainian entries peak in their posts about Eurovision in 2021 and actually decrease significantly in 2022, with most accounts posting two or three times only. Interestingly, both Ukrainian and Israeli embassies

increase their post rate again in 2024, with Ukrainian embassies actually surpassing Israeli embassies. The increase in embassy posts is interesting to compare to the complete lack of posts by @Ukraine in 2024. It is also worth observing that embassies in both countries appear to work from a template. That is, the posts are fairly consistent between embassies, with individual embassies occasionally adding their own spin on a consistent message, such as connecting with the artist for the state in which the embassy is located. This suggests an official support campaign from their foreign ministries.

Figure 6

Comparison of embassy account for states that have embassies in both Israel and Ukraine.



While there was some engagement between official Israeli social media accounts and other users, this was exclusively focused on users expressing pro-Israel views. Di Martino's (2019, pp. 137-139) spectrum of listening is useful for assessing how states use social media as a public diplomacy tool. In this, di Martino outlines a spectrum ranging from “active listening,” which is dialogic, engaged, and relational, with a focus on long-

term strategies and the promotion of trust and understanding, to "surreptitious listening," which does not engage and is primarily concerned with surveillance. Israel's social media activity in 2024 falls in the mid-range of this spectrum, "listening in," where the focus is on unidirectional engagement and a basic metric assessment of the message reach. By not engaging with pro-Palestine users, these accounts make no attempt to use social media for either tactical or active listening, which are both approaches that work to improve levels of public trust. As McNamara (2018, p. 19) observes, "increasing expenditure on advertising and PR that are almost exclusively focused on persuasion and often propaganda," such as a targeted social media campaign, is unlikely to improve stakeholder agency and issues with declining trust.

The Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs' substantial investment in the voting campaign for Eden Golan demonstrates that it sees the Eurovision public vote as a useful indicator of public opinion. Saranga (quoted in Eichner, 2024) stated that "the gap between the jury vote and the audience vote indicates the fear of decision-makers and public office holder to adopt a pro-Israeli position," which also implies that juries are seen as instruments of the state rather than an indication of the opinion of industry professionals. However, the ministry's 2024 campaign was viewed negatively by many fans. As pointed out by the participant above, the campaign was not against the rules of the contest, it was seen to be against its spirit. Indeed, a replication of this campaign during the 2025 contest has led numerous broadcasters to request that the EBU investigate further. Furthermore, it appears to have eroded fans' trust in the validity of the televote, which in turn impacts their perception of voting as an act of agency and voice in the song contest and its outcomes.

Voting as Political Communication

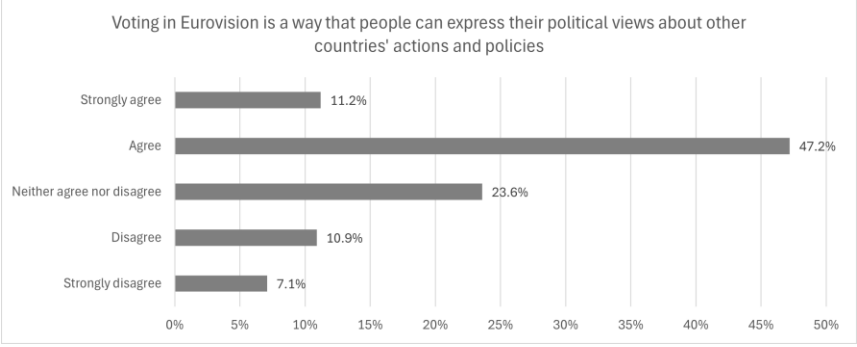
Studies of voting patterns in Eurovision comprise one of the largest fields of Eurovision scholarship, now only to be rivalled by the growing interest in its possibilities for cultural and public diplomacy. The very first academic study of Eurovision by Yair (1995) analysed voting results from 1975 to 1992 to see what they could reveal about European international relations and political balance in the region's affairs and institutions as the European Union began to take shape. He identified three "cliques" in the pre-EU and pre-fall of USSR song contest—the Western Bloc, the Northern Bloc, and the Mediterranean Bloc—thus beginning the formal preoccupation with Eurovision's voting blocs. Gatherer (2004, cited in Gatherer, 2006, 1.11), writing a decade after the fall of the USSR, identified "clusters of interlinked bilateral collusive voting partnerships," creatively named the Viking Empire, the Warsaw Pact, the Maltese Cross, the Balkan Bloc, the Pyrenean Axis, and the Partial Benelux. Dekker (2007), also writing in the early 2000s, identified five voting blocs, which he characterizes as "friendship networks": Eastern, Nordic, Balkan, Eastern Mediterranean, and Western. In contrast, Ginsburgh and Noury's (2008, p. 41) study found that "there seems to be no reason to take the result of the Contest as mimicking the political conflicts (and friendships)." Beyond blocs, Clerides and Stengos (2012) found that "some deeper sociological likes and dislikes among nations…manifest themselves in systematically biased voting" beyond the aesthetic quality of the song. Most recently, Stockemer et al (2018) presented a non-geopolitical typology for Eurovision voting that identified patterns of sincere, strategic, bandwagon, and "other" voting, and advocated for more qualitative research into Eurovision voting habits. Gauja (2019) contextualizes Eurovision voting within broader European political participation, observing that the contest's shift to the televote in the 1990s coincided with a shift in expectations of democratic participation, including a

surge in the use of referendums. She argues, "Public televoting in the ESC both reflects and reinforces these changing expectations" and "provides opportunities for citizens to exercize a democratic voice outside the sphere of formal politics in ways that are considered exciting and fun" (Gauja, 2019, p. 209). This reinforces democratic ideals, but Gauja cautions that trends in direct forms of participation and decision-making can also lead to populist decision-making that can silence vulnerable minorities. Nevertheless, she concludes that the democratic ideals fostered by Eurovision "will become ever more important in an increasingly fragmented political landscape" (Gauja, 2019, p. 217).

As seen in the previous section, fans believe that governments do pay attention to how their countries perform at Eurovision. Furthermore, 58.4 per cent of survey participants agreed (11.2% strongly agreed, 47.2% agreed) that "Voting in Eurovision is a way that people can express their political views about other countries' actions and policies."

Figure 7

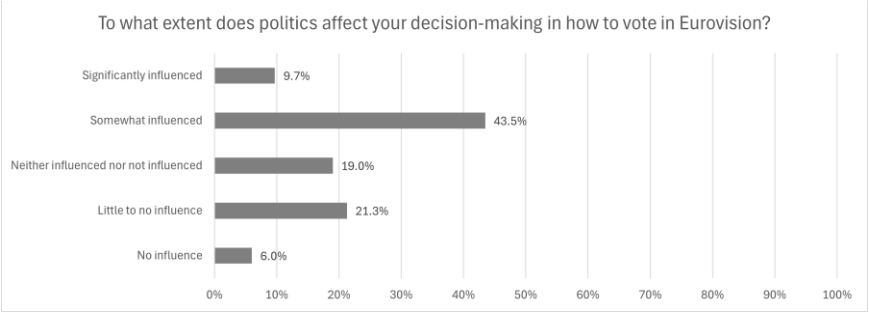
Survey results regarding voting in Eurovision as a form of political expression.



In terms of the extent to which respondents felt that politics affects their decision-making in how to vote in Eurovision, 53.2 per cent responded that had a degree of influence, with only 27.3 per cent indicating that it had little to no influence on their voting decisions.

Figure 8

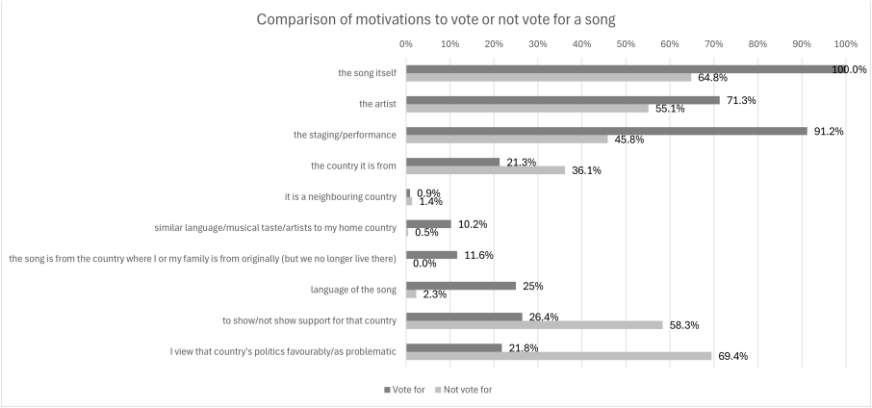
Survey responses regarding the influence of politics on their Eurovision voting habits.



This needs to be considered within the broader context of the various reasons why fans decide to vote for or not vote for a song. As can be seen in Figure 9, song, performance and artist quality are the primary factors driving fans' voting decision-making, while politics was more likely to play a role in deciding to *not* vote for a particular song rather than to vote *for* it: 69.4 percent indicated that they would not vote for a song if they found that country's politics to be problematic, but only 21.8 per cent indicated that they would vote for a song if they viewed that country's politics favourably.

Figure 9

Comparison of motivations to vote or not vote for a song in Eurovision.



This tension between song quality and politics is best summed up by one participant: "There are some countries I would never vote for (Azerbaijan, Russia, Belarus, Israel) but otherwise I'll vote for whoever has the best song and show." Importantly, this applies across the political spectrum, with several participants indicating that in 2024 they did not consider voting for songs whose artists had indicated pro-Palestine sentiments.

While there is no way of "voting against" an entry, numerous participants described behavior that they used to communicate a variety of sentiments about the contest and its politics that can be characterized as tactical or strategic voting, as also found by Stockemer et al (2018). This includes voting for songs that are not their favorite if they feel that their favorite will safely do well and that other songs deserve support, or voting for an act that they feel is direct competition to a song that they do not wish to win, even if the song they are voting for is not one of their favorites. The latter tactic can have political implications, underscoring participants' understanding of how voting results can be used by

states. Regarding the Ukrainian victory in 2022, 61.8 per cent indicated that they saw it as the result of popular support for Ukraine and an additional 24.22 per cent perceived it to be a political win. As one participant explains, "It was a moment of solidarity with Ukraine, even if it's just winning a silly music contest, it was a moment to stand with Ukraine when a majority of the world wanted to be able to do that, so they did." The idea of a Eurovision victory as a litmus for popular sentiment regarding the conflict was also reflected in the media commentary at the time, making the message to states clear: performing well at Eurovision will be interpreted as an indication of political support, and not entirely without grounds, thereby emphasizing its political utility for other countries embroiled in conflict or controversy.

Many participants indicated that in 2024 they engaged in politically motivated tactical voting by deliberately voting for songs they felt were in direct competition with Israel:

> "I tactically voted this year, I voted for songs that I believed would do well in the televote despite my feelings on the songs [sic] quality to try to block an Israeli win"

> "Deliberately voted for someone who could win over Israel this year"

> "Voted for Croatia 2024 to try and combat Israel manipulation. Actually Spain was my #1"

> "I gave 20 votes to Croatia in the final this year to attempt to counterbalance the massive ROTW votes for Israel. It wasn't completely deliberate as I loved the song and it was the one I wanted to win the most, but in a normal scenario I would have given 10 votes maximum and split them between it and my other favorites this year"

> "I voted for Croatia in the final of 2024 because I believed it was the song with the best chance of preventing an Israeli victory"

> "It was known before the 2024 contest that there'd be a campaign to vote for Israel, so I voted only for songs that I both liked and would make it harder for Israel to win (Croatia, Switzerland, Ireland)"

However, one participant indicated that they voted tactically against Israel despite their support for them because of their concern regarding the political consequences of an Israeli win in this climate:

> My Israeli roots mean loads to me, but I voted for faves Croatia and Switzerland 4 times each as I was nervous about how much damage a deserved win for Hurricane would have caused, even though I would have voted for it in the heat had I been able to do so, and gave votes for her countrywoman Tali in the other heat.

Similarly, several participants indicated that they deliberately supported Israel to protest antisemitism and the behavior exhibited by both fans and artists toward Eden Golan. The decision to do so seems to be less about support for the state of Israel and more in response to perceived toxicity within the fandom:

> "Politics has not come into my voting until 2024 when I gave a few votes to Israel because I had had a bellyfull [sic] of fans' never ending, obsessive anti-Israel posturing and their sickening treatment of the Israeli singer. I was embarrassed to call myself a fan by that stage."

> "Would normally send my 20 votes to the 10 or so countries/songs I liked the most. This year, I sent all my votes to Eden Golan, not just because I liked her

> song and performance, but as a protest against the antisemitism within the fan community."
>
> "I personally did not much care for Israel's performance or song this year, but gave them one vote in the semi as I'd been getting hit in the face for months by the fandom's constant shouting about boycotting Israel. After the RAI leak that indicated that Israel had won their semi by a landslide, I decided to not give them any pity votes to try and avoid the political and practical disaster that would have been an Israel win."
>
> "I vote if a [song] is like-able. This [year] was an exception. As Israel was getting invaded by scum, and the community started to take the antisemitism stance. I decided to give all my votes to Israel."

This illustrates that what fans are communicating in their voting is not entirely about state politics but also about the politics of the fan community. Of the 17 participants who voted for Israel's entry in 2024 (noting that multiple reasons were permitted to be indicated), nine (52.9%) indicated that it was to show support for the country and three (17.6%) because they viewed the country's politics favourably, with two (11.8%) noting in the open comments that they "protest-voted against the anti-semitism [sic] within the Eurovision community" and voted "to piss off the anti-Israel and anti-Jewish fans and activists." However, the song was still the most important factor (12 participants; 70.6%).

Conclusion

As this study has shown, Eurovision fans do see their votes as a form of political communication. While the quality of the song is the most important factor, a negative perception of the country being represented does impact whether they will vote for the song. This sends the message: we do not wish you to win; we do not wish you

to host; we do not wish to visit your country. However, the recent events of the Eurovision 2024 and Eurovision 2025 have ruptured fans' faith in their agency to pick Europe's favorite song, let alone to use their votes to communicate political views. This complicates the usefulness of the Eurovision public televote as a form of participatory diplomacy. However, participatory culture does not simply take the form of public votes in a contest. It can be found in various fan practices, such as fan press, content creation, vidding, and fan fiction—areas where fans arguably have even more agency to speak to and about the politics of the song contest in a manner more nuanced than casting their allocated twenty votes. This indicates an important new dimension for further study into the concept of participatory diplomacy as a form of cultural and political participation.

The Eurovision Song Contest may never have *not* been political, but it has certainly entered into a new age of politics in recent years due to the intersection of technologies, geopolitics, and its participatory approach to deciding the "song to unite Europe" each year. By maintaining its stance that Eurovision is a contest between broadcasters rather than nations, the EBU has attempted to manage the impact of politics on the contest. While the Code of Conduct introduced in 2024 manages the artist delegations and broadcasters, the EBU overlooked the importance of managing or preventing state investment in the contest through advertising or through leveraging participation in the song contest for political gain. After all, Eurovision has been a useful soft power and cultural diplomacy resource since its beginning. What has changed, however, are the technologies that enable states to not just leverage success in the contest as political messaging, but to influence the outcomes of the contest more directly. As a result, the contest's outcomes, particularly in terms of the public televote, have effectively been rendered suspect. Broadcasters, fans, and audiences are thus using other tools

to communicate their concern that inaction itself has politicized the song contest beyond the acceptable limits.

In late 2025, shortly before this paper went to press, the EBU announced changes to the contest rules in 2026 to implement changes to voting parameters, improved technical safeguards against fraudulent voting activity, and "stronger limits on promotion to curb disproportionate third-party influence, including government backed campaigns" (Goodman, 2025). The EBU describe the changes to voting as seeking to "support audience participation" and to actively encourage fans to "share their support across multiple entries" (Goodman, 2025). Although the EBU emphasizes that the 2025 result was "robust and valid", its claim that the changes will "increase engagement so fans can be sure that every vote counts and every voice is heard" (Goodman, 2025) nevertheless recognizes concern among fans and broadcasters about political interference in the voting processes. The effectiveness of these changes to future editions of the Eurovision Song Contest remains to be seen but their implementation suggests that the EBU have improved their commitment to effective listening. As the Contest Director Martin Green asserts in the press release about these changes, "We've listened and we've acted."

Author's Biography

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