The Molitva factor: Eurovision and 'performing' national identity in world politics

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Forthcoming in: *Eurovision as a Cultural Phenomenon: From the Music Halls to the Halls of Academia* ed. Adam Dubin, Antonio Obregón García and Dean Vuletic (Routledge, 2022 or 2023)

'Sooner or later Eurovision explains everything,' the beginning of my Twitter bio currently says, and world politics keep bearing that out. Repercussions of Putin's annexation of Crimea from Ukraine marked almost every contest between 2014 and 2019, and might only have waned in 2021 because a hastily-reorganised Russian preselection produced a winner who vocally championed a multiethnic concept of Russian nationhood and LGBTQ rights, hence Russian disinformation channels ignored the contest instead. The contest's historic associations between queerness and nationhood, forged first through fandom then also by iconic performances by openly LGBTQ contestants, have made it a site of struggle over transnational LGBTQ visibility. And while it might be facetious to say that Serbia–Montenegro broke up in 2006 because they had been unable to agree a joint Eurovision entry, the impasse still revealed something about their fragile union, a year before Marija Šerifović won the contest for Serbia on its first solo appearance with the intimate sapphic ballad 'Molitva' ('Prayer').

Eurovision is also a uniquely valuable site to illustrate the idea of contestants, leaders and other figures as symbolic representatives of the nation whose bodies and embodied practices 'perform' national identity. The idea of 'performing' national identity implies that certain ways in which bodies can look, dress, speak and move are interpreted, both in ritual and everyday life, as signs of belonging or not belonging to a nation, which are further inflected by other systems of social identity including gender, race and class. At its root is Judith Butler's notion of gender itself as being 'performative' since, she theorised, gender is continually being reconstituted through the repeated impression of individuals' bodily appearance and practices, that is, 'a stylized repetition of acts' (Butler 1988: 519). The performance scholar Diana Taylor (1997), inspired by Butler, viewed nationhood the same way in her study of conformist and non-conformist public spectacle during the 1976–83 Argentinean dictatorship. Indeed, for Taylor, gender and nationhood 'are the product of each other's performance and therefore difficult to imagine separately' (1997: 92).

Such is quite visibly the case in gender-segregated international sport, where some scholars have also used the idea of performance to understand the construction of national identity (e.g. Rinehart 1998). The idea that viewers interpret athletes' performances as embodying certain national masculinities and femininities, and may fault athletes for not embodying gendered national ideals well enough, is most perceptible in figure skating, where Ellyn Kestnbaum (2003) used performance studies to understand how skaters too performed gender and nation (and the often unspoken layer of race) together. There, competitors must not only master technique but also synchronise costume, movement and music in an assemblage that, live singing aside, becomes not unlike the elements of meaning involved in designing an entry for the Eurovision stage.[1]

The idea of 'performing' national identity is a central pillar of how I study nationalism and nationhood, along with the idea of 'narratives' of national identity (which, shortly before I began my PhD, Alex Bellamy (2003) had applied to Croatia following the theoretical footsteps of Paul James (1996) and Homi Bhabha (1990)). The struggles that occur whenever performances of national identity are regarded as not authentic enough can often reveal clashing narratives of national identity underneath. In post-Yugoslav popular music, where my research began, these struggles frequently turn on the significance of 'European' belonging, an aspect of identity that Eurovision necessarily brings to the fore. First in contemporary south-east European cultural history and then in International Relations, researching Eurovision has helped me draw out these issues in two domains that might initially seem disconnected – pop-folk music and LGBTQ rights. Yet since the end of the Yugoslav wars both have become what Bojan Bilić (2016: 118) calls a 'litmus test' of nations' Europeanness itself. Embodied performances of nationhood such as those made at Eurovision, but also those made by political leaders and other symbolic figures, can sway or attempt to sway the litmus test in particular ways. The 'Molitva factor', as this chapter terms it, denotes what happens when they are made.

Performing national identity at Eurovision

Performances of national identity at Eurovision go well beyond the literal – though of course some entries have presented themselves as performances of national identity very

[1] Figure skating and Eurovision have, of course, directly crossed over as well: in 2008, the Russian skater Evgeni Plushenko (and violinist Edvin Marton) appeared in Dima Bilan's (winning) entry thanks to a mobile ice rink.

immediately by incorporating national names or flags into what viewers see on stage. Nelly Ciobanu's Moldovan entry in 2009, based on neotraditional Moldovan folk music and costumes, was titled 'Hora din Moldova' ('The dance from Moldova') and purported to explain the dance's appeal to curious tourists ('it's a dance you've never seen / from a country called Moldova'). LT United, a collective of male Lithuanian music and television personalities (including Viktoras Diawara, the Malian-Lithuanian producer who had also performed with Skamp in 2001) with the country's national abbreviation in their band name, declared 'We are the winners' in the title of their 2006 entry (they came sixth in Athens, but still have Lithuania's best ever Eurovision result). Details from national flags can mark a wider range of entries as directly national, like the Albanian double-headed eagle symbol on Hersi Matmuja's back in 2014 (the opening shot of her performance) or the blue, yellow and red outfits worn by Moldova's DoReDoS (and their lookalike dancers) in 2018.

Individual entries aside, Eurovision's structure as an international competitive event and the perpetual reinforcement of that fact through practices structured into the television broadcast frame *all* entries as representing their nation – or rather the state associated with it, which funds or licences the public service broadcasters who belong to Eurovision through membership of the European Broadcasting Union (EBU). The transition between the short 'postcard' videos broadcast before each performance and the beginning of the performance itself is ritually achieved through featuring the entry's national flag (e.g. through stage lighting itself, in recent contests; on the lighting rig surrounding Baku's spectacular and controversial new arena in 2012 (Vuletic 2018: 182); composed from everyday objects in the BBC's postcards for Eurovision 1998). Entries have been denoted on the scoreboard by the name of their nation rather than performers, titles or broadcasters since the beginning of the contest (on-screen digital scoreboards usually also include national flags), and during the public 'televoting' era host broadcasters started superimposing nations' names and songs' running-order positions in the bottom left corner of the screen to help viewers vote. The permanent Eurovision logo introduced in 2004 is designed so that the national flag of any host or participant can be inserted into its heart shape, assimilating any potential nation into the branding of the contest as an institution. All these techniques thus frame Eurovision and its performances as making nationhood structurally salient (Bolin 2006), just as the structure of international sports events normalises a 'banal nationalism' of territorially-bounded nations as the natural order of things (Billig 1995).

An even deeper level on which performing at Eurovision entails performing an embodiment of the nation arises from the fact that the notion of a shared national culture

inherent to the principle of nationalism means that narratives of every nation's cultural identity encode certain musical practices, singing styles, dance traditions, dress customs, instruments, and of course languages as authentic expressions of nationhood. These are the 'symbolic "border guards"' of national identity, in John Armstrong's words, which are made to delineate the boundaries between 'us' and 'them' (Yuval-Davis 1993: 627). Other sets of practices can connote belonging to transnational cultures of popular music, entertainment and consumption (especially but not only the Anglophone West), and another set again can connote regional rather than narrowly national cultural identities, with origins that predate a territory's division into bounded nation-states. While the ritual structure of Eurovision conditions us to observe such significations at work, more everyday modes of performing the nation in Taylor's sense are in fact operating all the time.

In postsocialist south-east European cultural politics, practices connoting 'Europeanness' through their Westernness and practices connoting 'Balkanness' because they are symbolically marked as 'eastern' are continually set against each other. While 'Western'-coded music and dance practices often go unmarked, their counterparts denoting the region that the ethnomusicologist Donna Buchanan terms 'the Ottoman ecumene' – that is, the area from south-east Europe to the Caucasus, Anatolia and the Middle East ruled and influenced by the Ottoman Empire between the fourteenth or fifteenth centuries to the nineteenth or the beginning of the twentieth – carry the heaviest symbolic weight (Buchanan (ed.) 2007). Throughout this region, national folk music cultures and the popular music inspired by them exhibit an 'eclectic interweaving' of similarities (Buchanan 2007: xviii), frequently visible and audible at Eurovision whenever 'ethnopop' has been in vogue. These can be attributed to intercultural exchange and diffusion during the Ottoman period laying foundations for today's 'locally distinct but often similar' customs, instruments, choreography, and songs, even the travel of particular melodies around the region where speakers of different languages endowed them with different lyrics, but also to the institutionalised yet stigmatised role of Romani musicians in folk music-making, and to the role of popular culture, musical performance and recording in the new market economies that emerged in postsocialist south-east Europe (Buchanan 2007: xix). In the world music market, then in a Eurovision which had been opened up to public voting, musical practices from the Ottoman ecumene were well suited for capitalising on audiences' thirst for the exotic, but also carried high cultural risks

lest they frame the nation as 'backward and Balkan' rather than cosmopolitan and knowing purveyors of tradition for the European gaze.[2]

Every performance of national identity at Eurovision, but especially those walking this tightrope in south-east Europe or other peripheralised areas, can thus be seen as taking a position in the continual struggles to define and fix the substance of national identity which, according to constructivist scholars such as Rogers Brubaker (1996), constitute 'nationalism' as we recognise it in the world. For all nationalism's emphasis on shared history and culture, narratives of national identity in every nation are in fact multiple, implying different narratives of the nation's past and cultural origins, and often compete against each other as part of socio-political struggles (Bellamy 2003). Every assertion of national identity, implicitly or explicitly, is simultaneously an act in an ongoing contestation about which version of national identity should prevail; which individuals, groups and institutions have the greatest ability to define and communicate their preferred version, or to mobilise others to identify with it, is a matter of power relations but can sometimes also prefigure changes in them. Eurovision may sometimes even be a site where one can observe this taking place.

This processual view of national identity also recognises the part played by outside observers in making assertions and definitions of national identity meaningful, through the acts of interpretation that are necessary to complete performances' meaning. Interpersonally, individuals' experiences of national belonging differ greatly depending on how far their claims to membership of the nation are also accepted as a member by others, with powerful social, material and emotional consequences if acceptance is denied or made conditional – consequences felt far more deeply and often by those who exhibit linguistic, ethnic, racial, religious and/or sexual Otherness (Yuval-Davis 1993). Brubaker's own interest was in the triangular relationship between nation-states, ethnic minority groups within them, and their neighbouring 'homelands', where the power relationships between different positions in any one of these 'fields' are always shifting depending on which positions are winning out in the other two (Brubaker 1996: 8) – the dynamic behind open territorial disputes that have had repercussions at Eurovision as well as more routinised minority relations matters in central and eastern Europe or beyond. Throughout peripheralised regions of Europe, and indeed peripheralised regions of the world, the afterlife of coloniality makes the judging gaze of the West another all but inescapable reference point.

[2] Controversies in Turkey exemplified this tension when Sertab Erener entered and won Eurovision with an 'oriental R&B' entry staged to evoke the trope of the harem (Solomon 2007).

Eurovision and the litmus test of ‘Europeanness’

The stakes of being evaluated as modern, cosmopolitan and progressive, rather than primitive, ethnocentric and backward, overshadow even cultural production that is not primarily aimed at a Western audience, let alone production that is. In post-Cold War Europe, the European Union (EU) accession process put material and political fabric on this cultural frame. To be accepted as EU member states, candidate countries in postsocialist Europe had to demonstrate that they had ‘caught up’ with the EU in implementing the hundreds of laws and obligations known as the acquis communautaire. These covered everything from the rule of law and judicial freedoms to safety standards, border security regimes and social rights; as a consequence of the EU adopting the Treaty of Amsterdam in 1997, which made protection from discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation part of EU law for the first time, one of the many demands of the EU accession process was for candidates to demonstrate progress on LGBTQ+ rights as it would be understood by the EU (Stychin 2004: 962–3).

In a setting where right-wing nationalisms met the articulation of gay/lesbian, trans and bisexual rights claims with escalating homophobia, biphobia and transphobia, holding Pride parades and successfully securing them against far-right attacks thus became seen, within the EU and on its eastern periphery, as another benchmark of countries’ readiness to accede (Slootmaeckers 2017). Eurovision too came under this scrutinising lens, even though the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) which organises it is institutionally completely separate from the EU: in 2002, when the Slovenian drag trio Sestre were selected for Eurovision and faced a campaign of homophobic and transphobic abuse, the Dutch liberal MEP Lousewies van der Laan famously stated that ‘perhaps, Slovenia is not yet ready for EU membership’ if ‘the issue of gay rights’ was still being questioned there (BBC 2002). Such articulations of a European ‘Pink Agenda’, Francesca Ammaturo (2015: 1152) argues, have operated to draw ‘lines of fracture’ between a queer-friendly interior of Europe and a subordinate queerphobic outside, excluded from full European citizenship even when it is geographically part of the continent.

At the time in the early 2000s when I began researching the cultural politics of post-Yugoslav popular music and thus began researching Eurovision, then, the study of popular music in south-east Europe was contending with the impact of postsocialism on the cultural dynamics of popular and folk music as well as the economy of music as an industry. Though each country represented its own music market dominated by production in its own national

language, all exhibited similar cultural anxieties around the popularity of what Bulgarians called 'chalga', Romanians called 'manele', Albanians called 'muzik popullore' and speakers of Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian called 'newly-composed folk music' (NCFM), 'narodnjaci' or 'turbo folk': popular music or 'pop-folk' appealing to and dramatising the social and romantic problems of the inhabitants of late socialist and postsocialist urban peripheries, celebrating hedonistic lifestyles, inspiring rowdy behaviour and sexual excess at nightclubs, gaining notoriety through associations with organised crime, and employing rhythms and melismas that unmistakeably marked the music as having an 'eastern' or 'Balkan' sound. While its gender politics have often been critiqued as patriarchally nationalistic, its Ottoman cultural legacy and its inseparability from Romani musicianship threaten fixed notions of autochthonous national cultures wherever in south-east Europe one turns (Archer 2012: 178).

The break-up of Yugoslavia had charged the symbolic boundaries around 'turbo folk' with even more meaning in post-Yugoslav states, since the governments and media of both Slovenia and Croatia had aggressively sought to distance their national identities from anything 'Balkan', 'Yugoslav', 'Serbian' or 'eastern' during and after the wars of independence they fought against Yugoslav People's Army (JNA) and paramilitary aggression. Indeed, while Croatia's 'Balkans' started in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia, even taking in the mountainous Dinaric hinterland on the Croatian side of the Bosnian border itself, Slovenia's 'Balkans' included Croatia as well – the phenomenon that Milica Bakić-Hayden (1995) termed 'nesting orientalisms' in one of the articles that opened up this field of research.

Whereas NCFM as a genre had existed since the 1960s and had already absorbed contemporary Western-coded instruments such as synthesisers and electric guitars, the label 'turbo folk' had originated in 1990s Serbia to describe a version of NCFM that fused its neotraditional components with hip-hop and Eurodance music and style while (according to its many critics) reinforcing the patriarchal nationalist values of Slobodan Milošević's regime. To its Serbian detractors it connoted an internal rather than external cultural Other, seeming to express the ethnocentric and traditionalist Serbia that had defeated cosmopolitan and democratic Serbia when Milošević came to power. The destruction that Milošević's regime had wrought on the alternative social spaces of the Serbian rock scene, and the middle classes who had used to populate it, stuck in the throats of Serbian liberals who witnessed the Milošević regime give concessions and airtime to channels that promoted turbo folk and other forms of populist entertainment, fuelling Serbia's version of the 'rock/folk' divide. Accordingly, post-Yugoslav taste cultures treated pop-folk and so-called 'etno' music as

opposite poles of using traditional music in new musical production. 'Etno' implied authenticity, research, knowledge of genuine folk traditions, professional training, and engagement with the world music market before domestic commercial pop – elements that all testified to a musician's skill and intellect, and were seen as suited to a Western gaze (Čolović 2006).

Changes in Eurovision's format since 1993, when many postsocialist central and eastern European broadcasters expressed interest in participating for the first time and post-Yugoslav successor states began competing independently, had meanwhile made the contest into a site where postsocialist countries' very presence was enacting their region's so-called 'return to Europe' (Jordan 2015). This common intellectual discourse in the region during and soon after the collapse of state socialism held that Communist rule had held each country back from being the modern European economy, society and culture it deserved to be – though arguably foreclosed anti-colonial solidarities with the Global South in favour of identifying with a 'Europe' that defined itself against that region (Mark et al. 2020: 18–19). To manage the increased number of potential entries in 1993, the EBU held a pre-qualification round for the new broadcasters only (including those from Croatia, Slovenia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Macedonia – but not the 'Federal Republic of Yugoslavia', which comprised Serbia and Montenegro and was still subject to international sanctions until the fall of Milošević in October 2000). It experimented with relegation and pre-qualification methods in 1994–6 before settling in 1997 on a system where countries would be forced to skip a year if their average scores over the past four years fell into the relegation zone.[3]

Eurovision staging and voting practices were also in transition in the late 1990s, in mutually reinforcing ways that altered delegations' perceptions of how to win. Five northern European countries (Austria, Germany, Sweden, Switzerland and the UK) gave their points through a public telephone vote instead of a small jury of music professionals in 1997, and televoting was rolled out as the contest's preferred scoring method in 1998. Removing the live orchestra in 1999 (to fit into an unusually small venue in Jerusalem) placed pop-rock instrumentation and electronic backing tracks on equal terms with orchestral light-entertainment music, while the contest's move into arenas rather than theatrical spaces (trialled at Birmingham 1998 and institutionalised from Stockholm 2000 onwards) facilitated

[3] This system reduced the risk of embarrassing large broadcasters like Germany's ARD, the contest's highest financial contributor at the time: Germany had come last in 1995, so would have been relegated if the rules for 1996 had not been changed, then failed to qualify in 1996 from a pre-selection round involving all potential songs. In 1999, Germany, France, Spain and the UK were guaranteed places in the Eurovision final, as was Italy when it returned to Eurovision in 2011.

larger-scale props and choreography. The pioneer of contemporary Eurovision performance, Iceland's Páll Óskar, sang his a camp and BDSM-flavoured 1997 entry, often compared at the time to George Michael, from what was then the largest prop ever used on a Eurovision stage, a white leather sofa; 16 of his 18 points came from the five televoting countries, suggesting that spectacle would appeal more to everyday viewers than to disapproving professional juries, and he was also notable as the first Eurovision contestant to be openly gay. In 1998, Israel's Dana International became Eurovision's first openly trans participant and its first LGBTQ winner. Broadcasters strategising to do well at Eurovision took note of these transformations.

Moreover, these efforts paid off: in 2001–9, every winning country was a first-time winner, most were from postsocialist central and eastern Europe, and the rest were also located on European peripheries (Finland in the north, and Turkey and Greece in the south-east). Estonia's victory in 2001, Tallinn hosting Eurovision in 2002, and the Estonian government's fortuitous ability to harness these opportunities into a nation-branding strategy it had already developed to reframe Western perceptions of Estonia made national promotion through Eurovision an accessible strategy for other broadcasters as well (Jordan 2015). Winning Eurovision in these years demonstrated that a nation could stage productions to a European standard and create a memorable concept which would play to viewers' preconceptions of that nation but perhaps also update them. The winning entries in 2001 and 2002 could both be taken as performing a comfort with (ethnic or sexual) difference, as well as global musical style, which Western viewers might not have associated with the Baltic States. Estonia's winners in 2001 were a multi-ethnic, multiracial disco band fronted by Tanel Padar and Dave Benton, and Latvia's Marie N (short for Naumova, a surname indicating Russian descent) spent most of her performance wearing a white suit and dancing salsa with a woman, before switching her attention to three male dancers who removed her suit and revealed a pink dress underneath (Aston 2013: 168–9).[4]

The 2003 and 2004 winners, in ostensible contrast, enshrined a mode of self-exoticism in mid-2000s Eurovision performance that postsocialist creative entrepreneurs negotiating the Western-dominated cultural market had already been developing in world music and cinema (see Buchanan 1997; Iordanova 2001). Sertab Erener, who won for Turkey in 2003, played

[4] Padar was a white Estonian, Benton was a Black Aruban who had settled in Estonia, and their dancers were white Estonian Russian-speakers. Benton remains the only performer of Black African descent to have been part of a winning act, and at the time of writing there has still been no solo Black winner, though Sweden's winner in 2012, Loreen, has Moroccan Amazigh family heritage.

on orientalist harem fantasies and the beginning of Western pop's fashion for 'oriental R&B' to stage a seductive spectacle around her song 'Every Way That I Can' (Solomon 2007). The concept of Ruslana's 'Wild dances', which she had already been developing in Ukraine before being selected for Eurovision, remained iconic enough ten years later to provide the opening note of the 2014 interval act 'Love, love, peace, peace', a remarkably faithful satire of 21st-century Eurovision performance ('Step 1: get everyone's attention. A powerful, majestic start. Maybe a battle horn of some kind?').

Ruslana's mobilisation of 'wildness' and the sexualised figure of the Amazon was ostensibly grounded in her ethnomusicological research with Carpathian Hutsuls, though also mediated for many viewers through the concept's resemblance to *Xena: Warrior Princess*. Maria Sonevytsky (2020: 43) summarises its effect as 'a dedicated endeavor to appease Europe by perfecting the Eurovision aesthetic that blends catchy global pop with essentialized national self-presentation' – indeed, defining that aesthetic for the entire wave of entries that followed. Yet within Ukraine her performing body carried 'the weight of internal national discourses of Ukrainian sexuality and femininity', with many Hutsul villagers unimpressed by her eroticisation of Hutsul femininity and 'the shame of being called "wild"' that they felt she had brought (Sonevytsky 2020: 42, 44). Ensuing debates in Ukraine about whether a nation representing itself 'as a cradle of ancient, primitive expressive culture' could also be 'taken seriously as a "European" state' (Sonevytsky 2020: 49) anticipated what Eurovision would mean for post-Yugoslav entries in the following years.

Post-Yugoslav Eurovision entries and essentialised folklore after Ruslana

The same year that Ruslana won Eurovision with her creative packaging of essentialised folklore, Serbia-Montenegro came second on its Eurovision debut with an alternative version of the same approach, Željko Joksimović's 'Lane moje'. Here, too, interpreting the performance as a symbolic embodiment of the nation casts contestations over national identity at that time in an intriguing light. The soft, pastoral masculinity of Joksimović's performance has been read as an effort to reframe Western perceptions of Serbian masculinity, which since the Yugoslav wars had consisted largely of stereotypes about warlords, Milošević and aggressive nationalism (Mitrović 2010); in a Serbian context, its use of traditional instruments (the saz and kaval) and elements of neotraditional costume such as Joksimović's sash also coded its approach to folklore as 'etno' rather than 'turbo folk'. This

conveyed mastery and erudition rather than the negative social connotations of turbo folk, suitably so for a Serbia performing its readiness to join or return to 'Europe', while Ivan Čolović (2006) has suggested that the pre-modern aesthetic fostered by the visual identity of Serbian etno music in post-Milošević Serbia also had the effect of downplaying the Ottoman element of Serbia's past, that is, the 'eastern' and 'Balkan' dimension of Serbian culture which in orientalist frameworks would mark the nation as not fully 'European'.

Joksimović's model inspired several other post-Yugoslav entries, sponsored by broadcasters who saw winning and hosting Eurovision as an opportunity to follow Tallinn's and Kyiv's lead and certify their capitals as European metropolises capable of hosting the mega-event Eurovision had become. Though Bosnia-Herzegovina Radio-Television (BHRT) even recruited Joksimović as composer for Hari Mata Hari's 'Lejla' in 2006, Joksimović's near-success was probably most influential in Croatia, the post-Yugoslav state which had had the strongest Eurovision results in the 1990s, even though separation from Serbia and 'the Balkans' had become axiomatic in Croatian public culture during the war.[5] In 2005, Boris Novković won the Croatian national selection and came 11th at Eurovision, automatically qualifying Croatia for the final in 2006, with the song 'Vukovi umiru sami'. Like 'Lane moje', this was a dramatic ballad featuring traditional wind instruments, and Novković's backing band included the gajde (bagpipe) player Stjepan Večković and three female vocalists from the national folk music ensemble Lado – again claiming the authenticity of etno rather than the inauthenticity of pop-folk. Where Joksimović's style had emphasised the pastoral, though, Novković wore a black satin-fronted frock-coat and a collared shirt, striking a nineteenth-century bourgeois note that might have evoked Habsburg Zagreb.

Croatia's entry in 2006, also co-composed by Novković, repackaged folklore even more ambitiously but also became the country's most scandalous entry to date, due to the background of its performer Severina and the fact that it was perceived as transgressing the sacrosanct symbolic boundary between 'Europe' and 'the Balkans' whereas Novković's own entry had not. Severina was already a bestseller among the Croatian pop acts whom critics regularly decried as offering ersatz versions of Serbian turbo folk, and one of Croatia's most popular singers in other post-Yugoslav countries (including Serbia), while her public persona had gained further notoriety in 2004 after one of the world's first online sex tape scandals. Rumours that Novković and Severina were collaborating on a Eurovision entry, inspired by

[5] Socialist Yugoslavia's only winning entry, Riva's 'Rock me' in 1989, had also been selected by TV Zagreb, the Croatian studio within the federal Yugoslav television system which was shortly to become Croatian Television, post-Yugoslav Croatia's state broadcaster.

Ruslana, became a furore when the song was announced with the arranger as none other than Goran Bregović – the Sarajevo-born rock musician turned brass-band entrepreneur who typified the mode of self-exoticism in postsocialist Balkan world music, with many arrangements appropriated from Romani music (Silverman 2011: 22–3). The involvement of Bregović, whom Croatian media often regarded as having sided with Serbia during the Yugoslav wars (for co-operating with the director Emir Kusturica and spending part of his time in Belgrade), compounded Severina's own cultural connotations and the song's playful lyrics to produce a perfect discursive storm of claims and counter-claims over whether 'Moja štikla' ('My high heel') was authentically Croatian enough to represent the nation in front of a European audience.

Novković, Severina and Croatian Television's entertainment editor Aleksandar Kostadinov, who was also forced to defend the song, all pointed to numerous features that should mark it as authentically Croatian. These included the accredited expertise of Večković, the song's lijerica (lyre) player, a Lado member who could be trusted to understand what was Croatian and what was not; the knowledge that the lijerica and dvojnice (flute) were Croatian instruments; the male dancers' origin from Čavoglave, a former front-line village in the Dalmatian hinterland where a well-known war veteran turned musician had been born; the knowledge that the traditional singing practices it featured (ganga and rera) came from the Lika region and from Herzegovina, traditionally viewed as part of the Croatian homeland on the right, and that the dancers' costumes came from the Neretva river valley; the fact that part of the song sounded different from standard Croatian because it was in 'ikavica' dialect, and not the Serbian 'ekavica' variant (into which a Serbian tabloid had transcribed it when reporting on the scandal).

Even though hegemonic narratives of Croatian national identity have conventionally rejected the Balkans, grounding the nation's cultural heart in its Pannonian and Mediterranean regions instead, the 'Štikla' controversy revealed that 'Balkan' musical traditions with a presence in the Dinaric region did indeed have roots in the Croatian homeland – exemplifying the kind of interstices Bhabha had theorised, where 'domains of difference' overlap and 'nationness' is performed (Bhabha 1994: 2–3), and discomforting Croatians who feared such ambiguity would compromise the nation's litmus test of Europeanness. Since the case unfolded during the very middle of my PhD, I discussed it extensively in an article for *Nationalities Papers* and my first book (Baker 2008a, 2010), and my effort to theorise Eurovision's gazes of meaning-making and pleasure towards these performances of essentialised folklore in order to explain the contest's structural context

became my first contribution to Eurovision research (Baker 2008b). A year after 'Štikla', however, the post-Yugoslav space recorded its first Eurovision victory with 'Molitva' – bringing the litmus test's focus sharply towards Serbia just as Eurovision was becoming a site of struggle in the European and world politics of LGBTQ rights.

'Molitva' and the politics of LGBTQ visibility in Europe

Marija Šerifović's Eurovision victory with 'Molitva' was not only a landmark in Eurovision's LGBTQ history but also another episode in cosmopolitan Serbian identity-making, all the more so since it gave Serbia the right to host Eurovision 2008. With 'Molitva', Serbia had won Eurovision on its standalone debut, now that Serbia-Montenegro was no more; Montenegro had declared independence in June 2006, and an outcry at apparent collusion by Montenegrin jurors to put the Montenegrin favourites through in Serbia-Montenegro's last Eurovision preselection earlier that year had caused such chaos that the Alliance of Public Radio and Television (UJRT), Serbia-Montenegro's joint broadcaster, refused to accept the result and send no entry.[6] 'Molitva' stood out from the decade's preceding Eurovision winners as a ballad performed in Serbian, and as a lyric which (unusually for Eurovision) blended sacred and secular love (Bohlman 2007). Neither did it adopt the form of camp then most associated with Eurovision that viewers familiar with that cultural code projected on to the cross-gender performance of the Ukrainian runner-up Verka Serduchka (Miazhevich 2012). The butch/femme aesthetic of Šerifović's gender non-conforming, casually rumpled appearance contrasting with her backing vocalists' high-femme style and intimate movements nevertheless allowed the performance to be legible as 'lesbian camp' (Vänskä 2007).

Since Šerifović was not yet openly discussing her sexuality in 2007, it was primarily the design of the performance, overseen by Radio-Television Serbia (RTS), that queered 'Molitva' on stage (Vuletic 2018: 191). As an embodied performance of national identity, Šerifović and her backing vocalists the Beauty Queens could be read as symbolising a Serbia which was comfortable sending an entry to Eurovision which could be interpreted in this way: even viewers to whom the performance was not legible as sapphic camp would still have noticed Šerifović's gender variance and the moments of hand-holding between women. Such a Serbia would simultaneously be proud and accomplished enough in its national

[6] Both Severina and Hari Mata Hari, invited to perform in the interval due to their popularity in Serbia and Montenegro, would have witnessed the breakdown of the preselection live – and all this happened on the same day that Slobodan Milošević had been found dead in The Hague.

linguistic traditions to deploy them in a popular music medium which had become dominated by global English, and open to personal faith being part of the everyday in a more inclusive manner than the institutionalised national Church (which condemned homosexuality and gender non-conformity as sinful then and now). This was perhaps a more amenable balance between sexual difference and nationhood than the 'globalised gay' identity articulated through coverage of Belgrade's first Pride in 2001 (Slootmaeckers 2017: 525). As well as confirming Eurovision as a site where, in Peter Rehberg's now much-cited words, '*both* queerness *and* national identity' could be celebrated at the same time (Rehberg 2007: 60, emphasis original), the conjunction in a largely secular contest perhaps even allowed for a simultaneous celebration of queerness, national identity *and* faith.

Like the Tallinn, Riga and Kyiv contests before them, Belgrade's hosting of Eurovision 2008 gave its organisers an opportunity to reframe international, especially Western, perceptions of the host city and country on an even wider scale by demonstrating that they could also hold successful mega-events. The director of Radio-Television Serbia (RTS), Aleksandar Tijanić, famously promised to present 'the new face of Serbia' to the world through Eurovision, and also said directly that '[h]osting Eurosong will help Serbia improve its image in the European Union' (Mitrović 2010: 176). He told the Serbian tabloid *Blic* after the contest that by hosting it successfully 'we have managed to change the stereotypical image of Serbia', and the Serbian president Boris Tadić's congratulations to the organising team stated that 'Serbia and its capital have again proved to be a part of Europe'. While these remarks were addressed to Serbian audiences, Marijana Mitrović (2010: 176–7) found reports by CNN, Deutsche Welle, Itar-Tass, the BBC, Czech and Polish media hailing Serbia's friendly face in similar terms.

Yet this was still tempered with the fact that the EBU had had to take security soundings about whether to move the contest to a different country after the riots in Belgrade following Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence on 22 February 2008 (Mitrović 2010: 175–6), and the fact that an information sheet for foreign journalists (including many fan media as well as mainstream media representatives) signed by Eurovision's executive supervisor and RTS's executive producer for the contest had to advise them 'to avoid political discussions, public same gender sexual expressions and jaywalking', as reported by Vänskä (2007: 60). In cities where official strategy to appear LGBTQ-friendly coexists with high levels of anti-LGBTQ militancy which authorities ignore, hosting Eurovision continues to manifest these tensions between the ideal and symbolic space of performance and the material city space where the contest takes place. In 2017, when Kyiv next hosted Eurovision, Kyiv Pride

published a map of LGBTQ-friendly venues in order to reassure queer foreign tourists they would be welcome there (and steer them away from places where they would not); the city council began redecorating the People's Friendship Arch, built under Soviet rule in 1982, as the 'Arch of Diversity' in rainbow colours, but the works were interrupted halfway by militant members of the group Right Sector – leaving Kyiv's official celebration in an unfinished stalemate that the Kyiv Pride activist Zoryan Kis described as 'a good metaphor' for contemporary Ukraine, consisting of 'only changes on the outside' and incomplete at that (Miller 2017).

Between 2007–8 and 2017, much had changed for the visibility of LGBTQ rights in world politics and as a political issue at Eurovision itself. In more recent work on Eurovision, I have given a fuller account of how this international agenda-setting occurred after the launch of the Yogyakarta Principles in 2007, and how activists' strategy of using international mega-events to draw attention to LGBTQ rights violations as well as other human rights abuses in host countries started taking in Eurovision as well as the Olympics (Baker 2017). This feedback loop took in the 2008 Beijing Olympics, Eurovision 2009 in Moscow (where Pride had been banned since 2006), Eurovision 2012 in Baku (see Gluhović 2013), the London Olympics' performance of diversity and multiculturalism including LGBTQ inclusion, echoes of the same at Eurovision 2013 in Malmö, the Russian parliament passing its 'gay propaganda' law one month later, and the catalysing events of 2014 – when Russia hosted the Winter Olympics in Sochi, foreign campaigners called on Western countries to boycott the Games due to Russia's anti-LGBTQ law, Putin's regime began the annexation of Crimea as the Games were closing, and the bearded Austrian drag queen Conchita Wurst, a character created by Tom Neuwirth, won Eurovision in May 2014. Conchita's victory was widely taken as confirmation that embracing sexual and gender diversity was part of what it meant to be 'European' today, all the more once she dedicated her reprise to 'everyone who believes in a future of peace and freedom. You know who you are. We are unity, and we are unstoppable!' (Weber 2016: 162), and commentators gladly swept her up into their visions of a 'new Cold War' between Europe and Russia.

These developing international politics of LGBTQ rights also caught up Pride marches in Belgrade, and other post-Yugoslav cities which had begun holding them, as apparent evidence of countries' records on LGBTQ equality as a whole, and benchmark symbols of whether the nation was 'European' enough (Kahlina 2015). This 'litmus test', as Bojan Bilić (2016: 118) calls it with reference to Belgrade Pride, is the same one that has charged Eurovision performance and hosting with symbolic significance. Within Serbia, Belgrade

Pride has existed in tension between manifesting LGBTQ inhabitants' 'right to the city' in coalition with other social movements (Bilić and Stubbs 2015) and recognition that this form of Belgrade-centric activism on a single day a year did not fully represent the interests of economically disadvantaged LGBTQ people elsewhere in Serbia (Radoman 2016: 182). The first Belgrade Pride, in 2001, had been broken up by far-right militants in attacks that still emotionally affected some participants more than a decade later (Kajinić 2019: 69–74). The next attempt to hold one in 2004 was called off for fear of further far-right violence given the security situation in Kosovo (Radoman 2016: 174). When 'Molitva' won Eurovision and Belgrade hosted the contest, in other words, no Pride had been held in Belgrade or anywhere else in Serbia since 2001.

New attempts to hold Belgrade Pride did however manifest in September 2009, six months after the Serbian parliament had passed its Anti-Discrimination Law. In the face of far-right threats, police cancelled the march's permission to pass through central Belgrade and forced it on to the city's periphery where police could secure it; organisers cancelled the march rather than compromise Pride's objective of visibility and protest in symbolic urban space. In October 2010, Belgrade finally held its second Pride, under heavy armed police guard, whose clashes with violent far-right counter-demonstrators escalated to the scale of a riot. Requests to hold Pride were rejected again in 2011, 2012 and 2013, but accepted in 2014, under a new prime minister, Aleksandar Vučić – with LGBTQ rights higher on the international political agenda after the Russian 'homopropaganda' law and the Sochi boycott campaign. This Pride proceeded without violence for the first time on 28 September – five months after Conchita Wurst had won Eurovision and the Serbian Orthodox Church's patriarch had blamed her and the LGBTQ community for inviting divine punishment in the shape of devastating floods. It was by now clear that whether or not Pride could be held peacefully, or at all, depended on state whim, the authorities' willingness to leverage their ambiguous relationships with organised football-fan groups in order to tone down threats, and how far the government desired to be seen as performing Serbia's readiness for Europeanisation in any given year (Ejdus and Božović 2019).

Amid the 'litmus test' Pride had become, Koen Slootmaeckers argues, 'the government (particularly Vučić)' had the most to gain from enabling Pride as it began doing in 2014:

> Playing on the organisers' desperation to exercise their freedom of assembly, Vučić used Pride as a move to align with EU's expectations, a tool to bolster his

> (inter)national image as a reforming Pro-EU force and to highlight his capacity to enforce Serbia's constitution. (Slootmaeckers 2017: 529)

In Serbian LGBTQ politics, this had created a situation where the heavy security around Belgrade Pride was giving it the character of a ritualistic 'transparent closet' (Slootmaeckers 2017: 529) – one where LGBTQ people were visible to foreign camera lenses but not in the wider everyday life of the domestic city, and where police were showing off their power to enforce what 'Europe' was expecting them to do. Vučić's opportunistic policy orientation towards LGBTQ visibility equally stood in the background when he appointed Ana Brnabić to replace him as prime minister in June 2017, shortly after winning Serbia's presidential elections that year. The wide literature on Belgrade Pride, and the emerging literature on Brnabić, thus deals with the very litmus test that surrounded the instrumentalization of 'Molitva', and post-Yugoslav politics of Eurovision more generally - symbolic politics of readiness for 'Europe', contestations between 'the two Serbias' or the city and the small town, ideas for alternative forms of organising that can bridge them – yet neither 'Molitva', nor Belgrade's hosting of Eurovision where thousands of LGBTQ tourists would need to be kept safe, have been widely acknowledged as part of the background to the reinstatement of Belgrade Pride, or for that matter Brnabić's political persona.

Europeanisation, LGBTQ visibility and embodied performances of national identity: the Molitva factor

Ana Brnabić, formerly Serbia's non-party-political minister for public administration and local government, is not only the first female Serbian prime minister but also the first openly LGBTQ prime minister in postsocialist Europe, the second openly lesbian prime minister of any country (following Iceland's Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir in 2009–13), Serbia's only openly LGBTQ politician, and the first serving prime minister to have a same-gender partner give birth – all of which she has been hailed for by international media (and even by my own university, where Brnabić studied for an MBA in 2000–1). Her gender expression is also visibly masculine-of-centre: compared to most female world leaders' fitted pantsuits and skirt suits, Brnabić typically wears blazers, dark trousers, open-necked shirts and brown or black lace-up shoes, and has rarely if ever been photographed in a skirt or dress. Her choice not to wear make-up stands out perhaps even more from the conventions of femininity expected of female world leaders. Together, these practices make her style 'legible' (Lewis 1997: 104) as

lesbian or queer. Though Brnabić distanced herself from LGBTQ rights reforms as a policy priority and stated after taking office that she did 'not want to be branded "Serbia's gay PM"' (Wintour 2017), she did attend Belgrade Pride in 2017–19 – to some resistance from campaigners who believed she had not done enough to strengthen LGBTQ rights, even though she continued to be welcomed by Pride organisers themselves (Maričić and Živić 2018).

The critical queer and feminist scholar Bojan Bilić acknowledges both these aspects of Brnabić's persona in his study of her impact on gender and sexual politics in Serbia. On the one hand, her masculine-of-centre gender expression as a female, lesbian political and diplomatic figure 'has the potential to destabilise gender dichotomies and widen the spectrum of ways in which women can be represented' (Bilić 2020: 380). In practice, however, she disappointed feminists by refusing to connect her personal sexual difference and gender non-conformity to any wider critique of Serbian gender and class relations; she shows disinterest in the legal recognition of same-gender marriage and parenting even though it would protect her own household; her own success within the managerial class has insulated her family from the marginality of most same-gender couples; and in May 2019 she called former Kosovo Liberation Army members in Kosovo politics 'people who have literally just come out of the woods', a statement that 'quickly activated racist discourses about Albanians which are in the marrow of Serbian nationalism' (Bilić 2020: 386). In 2018 she directly refused to call the Army of Republika Srpska's killing of 8,372 Bosniaks at Srebrenica a genocide in an interview with Deutsche Welle (Deutsche Welle 2018), and continues to describe Srebrenica with the minimising language of a 'terrible crime' (Husarić, Kuloglija and Stojanović 2021). Her acceptance of the Order of Republika Srpska from Bosnia-Herzegovina's Serb entity during its self-proclaimed national day celebrations in 2019 was criticised for legitimising separatist policies there (Banjac 2019).

The contentions in Serbia that manifested first through Belgrade Pride and then through Brnabić's appointment were national-level expressions of global struggles over LGBTQ visibility and rights that International Relations scholars were starting to address within a new field of 'Queer IR' (Richter-Montpetit and Weber 2018: 222), dealing with problems such as homonationalism and exclusionary liberal definitions of sexual citizenship. Its landmark monograph, Cynthia Weber's *Queer International Relations*, demonstrated how queer analytics could inform IR's understandings of sovereignty and the 'will to knowledge' that states exercise over sexuality, producing sexual categories such as 'the homosexual' and giving them political meaning. Weber sought to expose the limitations of constructing all

such figures as either 'normal' or 'perverse', which conventional liberal logics did by setting up opposing 'good' and 'bad' gay figures. Weber uses the figure of 'Neuwirth/Conchita', who had just won Eurovision when Weber was writing, to show that their assemblage could not be contained within either a 'normal' or a 'perverse' frame.[7]

Debates about Neuwirth/Conchita in 2014 had attempted to fix them as either the 'normal' homosexual, representative of LGBTQ-friendly European integration and a homophobia-free Europe, or the 'perverse' homosexual, transgressing gender boundaries and embodying the corrupting influence of 'Gayropa' on national morals. Yet in the terms of queer theory Neuwirth/Conchita could not 'signify monolithically' on either side of the border, not least because of their beard, which on Conchita's body simultaneously evoked the figure of the bearded drag queen, bearded female saints, and a cross-gender image of Christ (Weber 2016: 158, 161). Weber thus writes, citing blog posts I wrote before and after Eurovision 2014:

> Neuwirth/Wurst's Eurovision victory mattered for 'Europe itself', then, because – in Catherine Baker's terms – Neuwirth/Wurst's victory made her/him/them 'available as a symbol for denoting … ideological and geopolitical clashes' as well as agreements around what it means to be a unified and/or fractured 'Europe' and what it means to be identified as/with this 'Europe'. (Weber 2016: 153)

This imagined modern, progressive and tolerant 'Europe', critical scholarship in postcolonial queer studies was pointing out, is commonly played off against Islam, the Global South and its diasporas, creating racialised symbolic boundaries around 'Europe' and even within European city space (El-Tayeb 2011). By analogy with postcolonial critique, postsocialist queer studies too was criticising the Eurocentric temporality with which central and eastern European countries were continually being told to catch up with the West on LGBTQ rights (Kułpa and Mizielińska (ed.) 2011). In these debates, Eurovision illuminates the fact that the relationship between 'Europeanisation' and LGBTQ rights claims is not solely produced by states and activist NGOs, but also by popular cultural production and the individuals and institutions who create it (Baker 2017). It also reveals the complex entanglement of nationhood and sexual difference in an international competition with strong LGBTQ associations. Indeed, while nationalist opponents of Europeanisation often point to LGBTQ

[7] 'They' here refers to two people using different pronouns – Neuwirth's are he/him and Conchita's are she/her.

movements, supposedly driven by 'Europe', as separating people from national traditions of masculinity and femininity, one precondition for a transnationally emancipatory queer politics is to be able to imagine ways of being queer that are simultaneously national, that is, not confined to the so-called 'globalised gay' identities of the commercial West.

Eurovision even contains the potential for these hinges to be forged, whether through Marija Šerifović's interweaving sapphic camp with personal faith and native-language expression, or the response of Montenegro's Slavko Kalezić in 2017 when Montenegrin social media users attacked the homoeroticism of the video for his entry 'Space'. With lyrics crammed with allusions to ejaculation, orgasm and switching gender roles (including 'Wet dreams, wild nightmares, I surrender / Come into me from within / We can be as one in the sin', and 'I've got my suit on, no need to worry', which gay fans readily took to mean a condom as well as a space suit), a video directed by Dejan Milićević, and visual nods to Byzantine iconography and even perhaps Sufi tradition, Kalezić's entry was more conscious of, and more adapted to, the pleasures of gay spectatorship than any other that year.[8] Moreover, it cast him as taking pleasure in the receptive sexual role – a riskier, and queerer, position in many binaries of male sexuality compared to an active role that might compromise masculinity less. Reacting to comments including the remark that 'Njegoš would be turning in his grave', Kalezić told one Montenegrin web portal that 'if Njegoš were alive, he'd actually support me', because he had been '[f]ull of symbolic energy and the energy of life' (CDM 2017) – not even just queering Eurovision or queering the nation, but queering the Montenegrin national hero himself.[9] Unfortunately for Kalezić, his entry's sparse on-stage presentation did not excite viewers enough to qualify for the grand final; his participation still represents the same aspiration to embody queerness without having to separate oneself from national tradition that organisers of Montenegro's first Prides channelled into the language and symbols they used to describe their 'processions' in 2013–14 (Kalezić and Brković 2016: 173).

The quite distinct embodied performances of Šerifović, Brnabić and Kalezić are each expressions of the 'Molitva factor' at work – that is, the signifying power that embodied performances of national identity take on in settings where an individual is understood to

[8] Milićević's sexualisation of the male body has notably created a local homoerotic aesthetic in contemporary post-Yugoslav pop-folk (Dumančić and Krolo 2017: 175).
[9] Njegoš, the prince-bishop and poet who ruled Montenegro between 1830 and 1851, is renowned as the author of 'Gorski vijenac' ('The mountain wreath'), the epic poem that has codified heroic masculinity in Montenegrin nationalism – and also fuelled Islamophobic imaginations in Montenegrin and Serbian literary culture with the vehemence of its antagonism towards Turks and Muslim Slavs (Longinović 2011: 72).

symbolise the nation and where the litmus test of progress on LGBTQ rights as a proxy for European belonging has been set into motion. Indeed, Vučić's very appointment of Brnabić can be read as an instrumentalization of that litmus test. This is not to suggest that Šerifović winning Eurovision made Brnabić a more thinkable prime minister on its own, and Šerifović herself has been lukewarm about what Brnabić might mean for Serbian society (in 2018, she told one web portal that 'I think she was chosen because someone in authority estimated she was familiar with what needed to be done. As far as a more free society goes, I still don't think we're very close to one' (Espreso.rs 2018)). Nevertheless, understanding how 'Molitva' enabled television officials to reframe Serbia for a European gaze in 2007–8 helps to explain what Vučić stood to gain from appointing a lesbian, gender-non-conforming prime minister in 2017, while there is still more to explore about how the experience of hosting Eurovision and welcoming many foreign LGBTQ visitors in 2008 might have influenced activity in 2009 around the Anti-Discrimination Law and Belgrade Pride.

Fresh aspects of LGBTQ politics continue to enact themselves at Eurovision, including the alliances between queer activism and Palestinian solidarity which were tested when BDS mobilised against Eurovision 2019 while Hatari attempted to participate from a standpoint of critical engagement; the 2021 contest's open alignment with trans equality through the involvement of co-presenter Nikkie de Jager, the trans YouTuber whose on-screen outfits all incorporated trans pride colours; and Jeangu Macrooy's articulation of a Black, queer and explicitly anticolonial stance as the 2021 Dutch host entry. The contest's LGBTQ associations expose it to reaction from institutions captured by state homophobia, which is widely considered to account for the withdrawals of Turkey and Hungary even though other financial and commercial reasons may have been involved. Questions of LGBTQ visibility might not have charged Eurovision with such international political significance if LGBTQ rights had not been turned into a 'litmus test' of Europeanness by policymakers and activists at the beginning of the 21st century. Yet the stakes of performing Europeanness in south-east Europe were in place long before the litmus test turned towards LGBTQ rights. For scholars of these questions, Eurovision makes such sensitivities visible and audible – and calls attention to the roles that embodied performances of national identity also play in other political domains.

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