
Culture, place and partnership: the cultural relations of Eurovision 2023

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Foreword

This report tells the story of the Eurovision Song Contest in 2023, when the UK found itself as host on behalf of the 2022 winners Ukraine, due to Russia's full-scale invasion of the country in 2021. As the UK's 2022 entry Sam Ryder put it – "It's Ukraine's party, we're just inviting them to throw it at our house." Once the UK had accepted the invitation to host, Liverpool subsequently won the bid to be host city and things rapidly moved from that point.

Eurovision is one of the most well-known mega-events amongst European – even global – audiences, alongside the FIFA Football World Cup, the Oscars and the Olympics. This was the first time one country has hosted the competition on behalf of another in Eurovision's history which dates to 1956. It seemed apt, as well as examining the other effects of hosting Eurovision, such as on health, wellbeing and economic impact, to explore this moment of cultural co-operation and co-creation. That explains how we became involved, with our partners in Liverpool, with DCMS, and subsequently with the University of Hull, in this area of research.

Our connection to this very special Eurovision stems from the British Council's long cultural relationship with Ukraine. In 2022/23, the British Council produced a Season of Culture between the UK and Ukraine, in partnership with the Ukrainian Institute. That programme included 76 partners, 27 Ukrainian arts and cultural organisations, and 49 organisations from the UK. Our involvement in EuroFestival is a development and legacy of that investment in cultural relations.

The core subjects of this report are soft power, cultural relations, shared values, and the role of Eurovision – and cultural events more broadly – in addressing conflict. Complemented by an excellent literature review, it explores in real depth the complex interlinkages between culture, people and place.

The report shares insights from stakeholder interviews showing that the Liverpool organisers considered the emotional resonance of Eurovision and the surrounding events to the people of the city. This was supported by policy: robust equality, diversity and inclusion frameworks were implemented from the bidding stage through to legacy and drove Liverpool's approach to community participation.

The collaborative approach to the Eurovision Song Contest 2023, for us is the embodiment of cultural relations in practice. This way of working, including engagement with UK and Ukrainian artists, with global visitors and local communities, signals a possible new way forward for the event. This research suggests that this approach is relevant not just for future hosts of Eurovision, but also of other large-scale events.

Eurovision 2023 had a lasting impact on international TV viewers' positive intentions to travel to the UK and to visit Liverpool, with positive uplifts reported by almost a third of those who watched Eurovision in five of the surveyed European countries. So, it observes a soft power effect, but also notes that much of that was driven not by flags and branding, but by collaboration and co-operation. And while we see the power of Ukrainian artists being able to showcase their country and its culture to the world, even in the face of war, the report also reminds not to assume that arts and culture are always a force for good, and that they can equally be used for propaganda and disinformation.

Importantly, this report includes a list of recommendations for Liverpool and the UK's culture sector, for future Eurovision host cities and states, the European Broadcasting Union, for other broadcasters, and researchers in this space. We would highlight here the recommendation for the UK culture sector to continue to nurture UK/Ukrainian partnerships, and to work with partners to ensure the needs of Ukraine's cultural sector are not forgotten.

Collaborating with Liverpool City Council and our friends at the Ukrainian Institute in the EuroFestival, a significant part of Eurovision 2023, was a highlight of the year for us and we welcome this report, as we look ahead to Eurovision 2024 in Malmö.

Rebecca Simor, Director Festivals and Seasons

Christine Wilson, Director Research and Insight

British Council

1 Executive summary

1.1 Context

The 2023 Eurovision Song Contest was the first time a winning country could not host because it was under attack. When Ukraine won Eurovision in 2022 and the United Kingdom came second, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine was already underway. The contest's organisers, the European Broadcasting Union (EBU), invited the BBC to host as runner-up.

Winners usually enjoy the important benefit of promoting their culture to Eurovision's international audience as host country. Since Ukraine could not exercise it directly, the EBU and BBC committed to showcasing Ukrainian culture and creativity, leading to the narrative of hosting 'on Ukraine's behalf'.

The BBC and the host city, Liverpool, developed new ways of working with Ukrainian partners against the challenges of the invasion and the compressed timescale of the first UK-hosted Eurovision in 25 years. This required a never-before-seen approach to producing the event.

A theme of UK/Ukrainian cooperation ran throughout the TV production and Liverpool's place-based programme, including the Eurovision 2023 slogan 'United By Music', which the EBU has now adopted as the permanent Eurovision Song Contest slogan.

The British Council, in partnership with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and Liverpool City Council, commissioned research in March 2023 exploring these questions:

- What is Eurovision's role in developing and crystallising shared values?
- Which brands (such as the BBC) are pivotal in adding credibility when we talk about values?
- Does Eurovision create 'soft power' effects such as future visits, new business opportunities, and reputation uplifts?
- What is the role of culture in conflict and does Eurovision play a contributing role?
- The story of Eurovision 2023 and what was learnt from the UK hosting on behalf of Ukraine

1.2 Delivering Eurovision 2023

The BBC and Liverpool were both responsible for hosting Eurovision 2023 on behalf of Ukraine. The BBC worked closely with Ukraine's public broadcaster Suspilne Ukraine to ensure authentic, contemporary representation of Ukrainian culture and embed Ukrainian input into the production. Its event branding drew attention to Ukraine and Liverpool but did not centre the UK itself.

Liverpool harnessed its extensive experience of large-scale events to curate EuroFestival, a more extensive festival of cultural programming than any Eurovision had ever seen, where 19 of the 24 commissions included UK/Ukrainian partnerships. This was not directly shown in the TV shows, but did reach many of Liverpool's 300,000 event visitors, almost 31,000 of whom were international.

Culture Liverpool worked closely with the Ukrainian Institute Kyiv to curate EuroFestival, through networks facilitated by the British Council and its UK/Ukraine Season of Culture. Funders including DCMS and the National Heritage Lottery Fund made extensive community programming possible.

Stakeholders' approaches to hosting on behalf of Ukraine built trust in the UK as a cultural relations partner. The event created the usual business opportunities for creative industries in Eurovision host countries, plus further UK/Ukrainian partnerships in arts, TV production and design.

Eurovision 2023 reaffirmed the BBC's reputation for innovation, creativity and professionalism among public broadcasters. It boosted Liverpool's reputation as a city of music, a place with expertise of delivering immersive cultural events with strong community participation, and a leader in event evaluation. Liverpool's approach to cultural programming and community participation represents a new departure for Eurovision's politics of place.

1.3 Insights into hosting on behalf of Ukraine

- Conflict and international aggression have affected Eurovision before, but the circumstances in which Ukraine could not host shows the event is now more exposed to geopolitical risk
- The BBC's broadcast production and Liverpool's city-based programming both embedded cooperation with Ukrainian partners into their creative process to ensure sensitive and accurate representations of Ukraine, with direct Ukrainian participation
- The context of Russia's war on Ukraine posed creative and logistical challenges, though EuroFestival could acknowledge it in ways the TV shows could not
- 65.2% of people who watched Eurovision 2023 in five surveyed European countries perceived it as an event hosted by the UK on behalf of Ukraine or a joint UK/Ukrainian event. 58.7% perceived it this way five months later
- The unprecedented responsibility of hosting Eurovision 2023 on behalf of Ukraine, combined with Liverpool's vision for achieving positive impact from the opportunity, has redefined the event's politics of place in ways that can inspire future hosts

1.4 Conclusions to the research questions

1.4.1 What is Eurovision's role in developing and crystallising shared values?

As an international TV coproduction frequently involving 40 or more countries, Eurovision is intrinsically a cultural relations activity, attracting an audience of more than 160 million TV viewers plus a vibrant international fandom that engages with its content year-round. EBU membership and the contest rules both involve sets of shared values, and myths about shared values and the idea of 'Europe' also underpin common historical narratives about Eurovision's past.

Values must be balanced with pragmatism to make Eurovision manageable, and every value is also subjective. Therefore, values are often also contested at Eurovision. Contest rules frame Eurovision as a non-political event, which helps build trust between member broadcasters, but the boundaries of these rules are often tested. Many contestations over values surrounding Eurovision have related to LGBTQ+ equality and/or whether certain countries should take part.

Eurovision 2023's strongest evidence for how Eurovision develops and crystallises shared values is seen among stakeholders who were closely involved with the event, rather than TV audiences.

1.4.2 Which brands (such as the BBC) are pivotal in adding credibility when we talk about values?

Reputational uplifts from hosting large-scale events are more likely for actors whose reputations are not yet well known. The UK and BBC already had strong existing credibility with international stakeholders. Liverpool also had high credibility with audiences who knew it well, such as in UK cultural policy or among prior visitors. It built credibility among those newly encountering it.

Eurovision as a brand grew more credible among some UK culture stakeholders in 2022–3 as they engaged more with the event.

1.4.3 Does Eurovision create 'soft power' effects such as future visits, new business opportunities, and reputation uplifts?

Like sports mega-events, Eurovision generally creates more reputational uplift opportunities for less well-known states and cities, especially hosts. New winning countries in the 21st century, including Ukraine, have striven to harness these. Internationally, Liverpool was in a similar position to these actors as host of Eurovision 2023, because its contemporary image was not as well established as the UK's. While The Beatles bring Liverpool global awareness, Liverpool's city branding strategy also wished to communicate the city's expertise in hosting large-scale events, its friendliness to visitors, and the diversity of its music sector today.

International media coverage of Liverpool was amplified through links with partners like TikTok, but also by hundreds of local event volunteers and community event organisers, fuelling the event's participatory atmosphere. This suggests host city communities are important people-to-people actors in place-based activities that create soft power and cultural relations outcomes.

It is difficult to demonstrate any one broadcast event is the cause of reputational uplift, especially when events coincide (Eurovision 2023 came very soon after King Charles III's Coronation). Concrete outcomes such as future visits, business opportunities, and new cultural partnerships are easier to identify. Eurovision 2023 created more potential for new international creative partnerships than most contests due to the need for bilateral UK/Ukrainian working, and also because Liverpool's place-based cultural programming involved a greater range of actors.

1.4.4 What is the role of culture in conflict and does Eurovision play a contributing role?

Culture plays various, much-studied roles in conflict, not all of them positive. It can be a source of morale, resilience, and consolation, and it can help preserve the identity of displaced communities, but it can also be a vehicle for propaganda and disinformation. Culture can be a diplomatic asset for sides seeking support in a conflict, while opponents may target culture to erase communities' pasts and futures in contexts that may amount to genocide. Culture can be the subject of boycott campaigns linked to a conflict, and is often a site of protest against unpopular wars.

All these connections between culture and conflict have touched on Eurovision in some form. Just as music and culture are not automatically forces for good, Eurovision's value for peacebuilding and trust-building depends on how participants and other actors use it. Moreover, while Ukraine had broad public sympathy in 2023, stakeholders of future contests must be prepared for conflict to affect them in more publicly contentious ways, when the tensions of staging a non-political cultural event during a conflict will be greater.

1.4.5 The story of Eurovision 2023 and what was learnt from the UK hosting on behalf of Ukraine

Eurovision 2023 was a historic edition of the contest for an underlying tragic reason: the winning country of 2022 was being invaded and could not host. The event became the first time two broadcasters had partnered to represent two different countries' cultures, and also saw the most extensive cultural programme of any Eurovision host city, with greater local community participation than ever before. This created a new departure for the Eurovision Song Contest's politics of place.

Key partners interpreted 'hosting on behalf of Ukraine' to mean Ukraine should still be able to exercise the winner's benefit of showcasing its culture to the contest's audience, even though the event was being hosted elsewhere. UK actors' images thus depended more on how the event represented a different country than how the UK represented itself. UK and Ukrainian creative talent cooperated to advance a narrative of Ukrainian culture as modern, diverse and independent.

The EBU and Suspilne had to put high levels of trust in the BBC's capacity to deliver the concept of hosting on behalf of Ukraine successfully. The BBC built this trust through significant levels of consultation with Ukrainian partners, and our survey research suggests this strategy was a success.

1.5 Overview

Eurovision 2023 suggests that engaging productively in cultural relations can bring reputational uplift or sustain already-strong reputations. The consensus not to harness Eurovision 2023 for traditional soft power purposes contributed to making it a cultural relations success.

Eurovision 2023 suggests reputational uplifts from fostering large-scale cultural relations activity may be even stronger for cities than states. Liverpool achieved its successes as host by virtue of its long-term culture strategy and events infrastructure, its experience mobilising community participation and designing inclusive, emotive visitor atmospheres; its ability to unlock further funding for cultural/ community programming through its commitment to harnessing events for community wellbeing; and a narrative of civic identity where hosting on behalf of Ukraine harmonised with themes of social justice, solidarity and diversity which already generated pride.

Place-based and broadcast activity at Eurovision 2023 complemented each other and put cultural relations at the heart of the event. The creative strategy of representing two countries instead of one host was forced on the event for distressing reasons, but could inspire more radical ways of expressing a cultural relations approach and downplaying state soft power strategies through Eurovision, and fresh ways for host broadcasters and cities to express connections between places in Europe and beyond.

1.6 Key recommendations



For Liverpool and the UK culture sector

- Share knowledge of the scale, scope and impact of EuroFestival and Liverpool's community programming beyond Merseyside
- Break down silos between sports mega-events and cultural mega-events
- Leverage bilateral relationships with future Eurovision host cities/countries
- Nurture new UK/Ukrainian partnerships and ensure Ukraine's cultural sector is not forgotten



For future Eurovision host cities and states

- Consider how to approach the Eurovision Song Contest in ways which harness senses of civic identity
- Implement and ringfence robust equality, diversity and inclusion policy frameworks
- Ensure city stakeholders are communicating effectively with each other from the outset
- Consult diverse fan communities, and consider fans without TV show tickets as an audience
- Consider how official and informal social spaces can facilitate cultural relations
- Consider what lasting benefits hosting can bring to LGBTQ+ residents
- Invest in national and local culture sectors to respond to short-notice opportunities



For participating broadcasters

- Complete city selection as early as possible
- Provide more support for city stakeholders beyond the immediate circle of delivery partners
- Tackle perceptions that Eurovision is Eurocentric or disconnected from diasporas of colour



For the European Broadcasting Union

- Consider how to share knowledge of the scale and benefits of hosting
- Engage with a wider range of stakeholders from recent host cities
- Systematise how Eurovision is evaluated from year to year
- Review hosting practices to ensure cities get maximum benefit

2 Introduction

The Eurovision Song Contest (ESC) is a European tradition which has evolved across almost seventy years into the world's largest televised music festival and an event capable of attracting massive numbers of visitors to its host cities.¹

The European Broadcasting Union (EBU) and its member broadcasters have cooperated since 1956 to hold this annual competition, which uniquely for an event of its scale awards hosting rights to each winner. In 2022, for the first time in Eurovision Song Contest history, the winning country Ukraine could not host the following year because it was, and is, confronting Russia's full-scale invasion. The BBC, as runner-up broadcaster, was invited to host on Ukraine's behalf, and selected Liverpool as host city.

Cultural relations are at the heart of the Eurovision Song Contest as an international coproduction, and of its international fandom, which discovers new music, languages and destinations through it. Creative professionals esteem it highly as an advanced, innovative live broadcast event on which it is desirable to work. Host states have often viewed the Eurovision Song Contest as a nation branding and soft power opportunity, especially since its twenty-first century transformation into a mega-event, and cities have used it to advance their city brand. Many competing entries have also seemed to communicate narratives about relationships between national, European, and often LGBTQ+ identity.

The Eurovision Song Contest's televised Live Shows now consist of two Semi-Finals on Tuesday and Thursday nights during the event week, accommodating entries from every EBU member that wishes to take part, and the Grand Final on the Saturday night, plus six ticketed rehearsal performances.

Host cities must facilitate logistics for the Live Shows and their visitors, organise a fan village, and arrange an official event nightclub. They are free to create additional programming. Harnessing its extensive experience of cultural events, Liverpool curated a wraparound cultural festival (EuroFestival) and community programming on a scale no previous Eurovision had seen.

There is consensus among Eurovision Song Contest stakeholders that promoting the winning country and its culture to the event's mass international audience is an important reputational benefit for hosts. Ukraine has hosted the Eurovision Song Contest twice before as a winning country, in 2005 and 2017. Since the host and winner were separated in 2023, the BBC and Liverpool both cooperated with Ukrainian partners to ensure that Ukraine was not robbed of this benefit. The BBC worked closely with Ukraine's public broadcaster Suspilne Ukraine (formerly also known as UA:PBC), and Liverpool's partners included the Ukrainian Institute Kyiv and the Association of Ukrainians in Great Britain.

This research, commissioned by the British Council in partnership with Liverpool City Council and DCMS, seeks to understand the cultural relations and soft power impact of Eurovision in the context of it being hosted in the UK for the first time in 25 years, while the country that should have hosted by right was facing a war of aggression. This required a never-before-seen approach to producing the Live Shows and inspired a theme of UK/Ukrainian cooperation which was worked throughout the delivery and content of the TV production and the place-based programme.

This report explores five research questions that the British Council, in partnership with Liverpool City Council and DCMS, developed in the run-up to the Eurovision Song Contest 2023 for researching Eurovision from a cultural relations and soft power perspective:

- What is Eurovision's role in developing and crystallising shared values?
- Which brands (such as the BBC) play a pivotal role in adding credibility when we talk about values?
- Does Eurovision create 'soft power' effects such as future visits, new business opportunities, and reputation uplifts?
- What is the role of culture in conflict and does Eurovision play a contributing role?
- The story of Eurovision 2023 and what was learnt from the UK hosting on behalf of Ukraine

We find that Eurovision 2023 boosted Liverpool's reputation as a city of music, a place with expertise of delivering immersive cultural events with strong community participation, and a leader in event evaluation. It reaffirmed the BBC's reputation for innovation, creativity and professionalism among public broadcasters. The majority of viewers surveyed in five different European countries understood it as an event hosted by the UK on behalf of Ukraine or as a joint UK/Ukrainian event.

By showcasing the UK and Ukraine alongside each other rather than the UK alone, the approach to representing Ukraine on screen, backstage and in the host city satisfied Ukrainian partners and fulfilled the EBU's vision for a contest that would still enable Ukraine to benefit from the cultural representation it should have enjoyed as host. This was a result of the depth with which producers of the TV event and the cultural programme both approached their engagement with Ukrainian culture.

Eurovision 2023 has had an immediate branding legacy in that the EBU has now adopted the BBC's event slogan, 'United By Music', as a new permanent slogan for the Eurovision Song Contest. This will embed the partnership between the BBC and Liverpool to host Eurovision 2023 on behalf of Ukraine into the event's memory, especially if the EBU continues to refer to it when explaining the slogan's history.²

It has also had important legacies for other partners. Besides the BBC's cooperation with Suspilne, several UK and Ukrainian production companies developed new partnerships through contributing to the broadcast event. EuroFestival developed new creative partnerships between UK and Ukrainian artists, amplifying the impact of the British Council's UK/Ukraine Season of Culture. Liverpool's event evaluation methodology is likely to influence how the EBU and future host cities understand the impact of Eurovision, and its approach to cultural programming and community participation represents a new departure for the event's politics of place.

3 Methodology

Our research on the cultural relations of Eurovision 2023 contained three pillars:

- a literature review
- stakeholder interviews, supported by observation of place-based and social media activity
- a tracker survey conducted in five European countries in two waves shortly after Eurovision 2023 and five months later

The full **literature review** has been published separately from this report and was produced between May and July 2023. It reviewed research on the Eurovision Song Contest's own relationship to cultural relations and soft power, and research on themes the team had identified as relevant to the wider context surrounding the cultural relations and soft power of mega-events.

Literature was identified through keyword searches on Web of Knowledge, Google Scholar, the Summon discovery tool at the University of Hull, and a 25,000-item Zotero bibliography.

Semi-structured interviews with 29 stakeholders involved in delivering Eurovision 2023 were conducted by the project team between 31 May and 5 December 2023. A small number of written answers were collected from stakeholders who could not join interviews in real time. Interviews were conducted remotely using Microsoft Teams and lasted between 30 and 100 minutes.

Interview participants represented a range of stakeholders across the Live Shows and the cultural programme, including the BBC, Suspilne Ukraine, Liverpool City Council, Culture Liverpool, the Ukrainian Institute, DCMS, the Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, other local and national stakeholders, and independent artists and producers from the UK and Ukraine.

Results from the interview analysis inform our process tracing of how the narrative of hosting on behalf of Ukraine was created across the broadcast and place-based strands of Eurovision 2023. They also inform our analysis of perceptions of shared values and perceptions of the event's impact and legacy.

The **tracker survey**, conducted by our partners Information By Design, took place 31 May–14 June and 20 October–9 November 2023. Within a budget that allowed 5 countries to be sampled across two waves, target countries of Estonia, France, Poland, Romania, and Spain were chosen to reflect a range of geographical regions, country sizes, and engagement levels with the Eurovision Song Contest.

Questions were designed in April 2023 in collaboration with the British Council, and employed wording and options from the British Council's Global Perceptions Survey where appropriate to enhance comparability between the studies. Questions were translated into national language (Estonian, French, Polish, Romanian, Spanish) by the panel provider in each country.

The survey launch page indicated that the survey was on the topic of the Eurovision Song Contest as translated by each provider. Users who were uninterested in the topic or had never heard of the event may therefore have been less likely to take part, though the survey reached a higher proportion of respondents who had not heard of the Eurovision Song Contest than the EBU's own survey of familiarity with the Eurovision Song Contest and other international television programmes for its 2023 Brand Impact Report.

Each wave surveyed independent samples through online panels of 1,000 respondents per country, selected by the panel provider to be representative of the national population structure according to age, gender, and region of residence.³ Regional quotas had to be relaxed at the ends of both waves in Estonia due to slow responses from 25–34-year-old men in the Kirde-Eesti region (north-east Estonia). Kirde-Eesti was 19 respondents under quota across age/gender groups in both waves.

This administrative region contains Ida-Viru County and the city of Narva, which have predominantly Russian-speaking populations. The limited response of 25–34-year-old men in this region could suggest that they were less likely to engage with a survey about the Eurovision Song Contest, a survey that was not in Russian, and/or a survey from the UK, though other age/gender demographics in Kirde-Eesti completed to quota.

Results were cross-tabulated to differentiate between respondents who had or had not watched at least one broadcast of Eurovision 2023 (a Semi-Final and/or the Grand Final). These provide the basis for analysis in the Eurovision Tracker Survey results section of this report.

Our methodology was also informed by **place-based observation** in Liverpool on various dates between 1 and 18 May 2023, and **social media monitoring** of selected official Twitter feeds which had already begun in January 2023 for another study. This included the EBU and BBC official Eurovision Song Contest Twitter feeds plus key local government, marketing and media accounts in Liverpool.

4 Literature review

Our literature review addressed the following questions:

- How are sports mega-events and cultural mega-events used for soft power and cultural relations purposes?
- How has conflict affected large-scale events?
- How do these help us understand the context of Eurovision 2023, when Ukraine could not host because of Russia's ongoing full-scale invasion?
- How do these help us understand Eurovision's soft power and cultural relations potential in future?

Chapter 1 of the literature review introduces key concepts for the research including soft power, cultural relations, strategic narrative, nation branding, city branding, and the idea of mega-events. It notes that conventional models of soft power have struggled to give audiences credit for how they make meaning out of the narratives and experiences of international actors that they encounter, or how audiences process these emotionally. This is a particular weakness in trying to understand the soft power of culture.

One approach to understanding how states and other actors build influence and attractiveness internationally is the idea of analysing 'strategic narrative'. This involves analysing the narratives about the international system, actors' identities and desired policies/behaviour that actors put across.⁴ Fully understanding their impact involves researching their formation (how actors construct and agree narratives), projection (how narratives are crafted into content, communicated, and then contested in the public sphere), and reception (how individuals make sense of the narratives and what reach they have).⁵

Usually, soft power is separated from cultural relations by contrasting them as 'the pursuit of influence through attraction in the national interest' on one hand and 'creating the conditions for collaboration between like-minded people and countries in pursuit of the common good' on the other.⁶ Today, however, the two ideas may be blurring, as more states' soft power strategies appeal to ideas of the common good and more actors instrumentalise cultural relations for foreign policy purposes.⁷

A well-established literature on mega-events explores how they are used to produce increased reputational gain and influence for host cities and states, but also critiques of their negative impacts and their risks. Many mega-events have suffered from cost overruns, partial delivery, or controversial reception by their publics and audiences.

The widest literature on the international politics of mega-events concerns sports mega-events, discussed in Chapter 2. Sports mega-events bridge all five domains where states try to build soft power: culture, tourism, branding, trade, and diplomacy.⁸ They convey narratives about hosts' identities to global audiences, most massively of all in the Olympic Games.

Despite the literature's typical separation between sporting and cultural events, sports mega-events too employ cultural production, most spectacularly through opening and closing ceremonies, which scholars recognise as key places where narratives of the nation are formed and projected to the national and international public. The tradition of wraparound cultural programming was invented by the Olympic movement and has spread to other sports mega-events.⁹

Sports mega-events frequently negotiate, and often generate, contentious international politics. Especially since the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, transnational public debate has surrounded how host states may use mega-events to claim soft power while deflecting international attention from human rights abuses they are responsible for.¹⁰ Actors perceived to have been cynical in attempting to accumulate soft power this way run the risk of 'soft disempowerment' among audiences who care about the event's professed values.¹¹

More discussion of sports mega-events surrounds their soft power value than their cultural relations value. Comparisons of soft power impact for various host countries suggest that hosts of sports mega-events with strong images abroad can easily maintain their reputation by managing the event competently, but improving their image even further from this baseline is more difficult.¹² The cultural relations potential of sports mega-events, especially for in-person visitors, is underexplored.

Emerging developments in the politics of sports mega-events are contentions involving LGBTQ+ visibility and rainbow pride symbols, and the detachment of mega-events from single host countries through governing bodies opening events up to joint bidding. This could arguably protect mega-events from capture by the narrative strategies of any one host state.

The second form of mega-event we use as a source for critical questions about the Eurovision Song Contest is city-based cultural events such as City/Capital of Culture (CoCs), discussed in Chapter 3. Liverpool is one of eight cities to have been a European Capital of Culture (ECoC) and gone on to host the Eurovision Song Contest.

The first ECoC in 1985, Athens, went on to host the Eurovision Song Contest in 2006, two years after the Olympic Games. Dublin, Copenhagen and Stockholm were all ECoCs in 1990s and hosted the Eurovision Song Contest only a few years later: Dublin even hosted it on three separate occasions between 1994–7 due to Ireland's winning streak. Helsinki, Lisbon and Rotterdam have also been both ECoCs and subsequent Eurovision Song Contest hosts. Tallinn, Riga and Istanbul all hosted the Eurovision Song Contest in 2002–4 and became ECoCs in 2010–14, suggesting the Eurovision Song Contest may have empowered them to bid for this year-long cultural event.

Critical studies of city-based cultural events discuss the processes of cultural engagement they employ, how inclusive they manage to be, how they create feelings of belonging and ‘pride in place’, how they manage security and surveillance, how they are linked to socioeconomic regeneration, and cities as soft power and cultural relations actors.

We illustrate city branding through case studies of Liverpool as ECOC 2008 and Hull as UK City of Culture 2017, and we review the emergence of international LGBTQ+ city-based events, including EuroPride/WorldPride and the Gay Games. Critical scholars have questioned how liberal democracies seek reputational gains by crafting LGBTQ+-friendly images for themselves around and beyond these events, and these debates are relevant to the Eurovision Song Contest because of its significance to LGBTQ+ audiences.

Chapter 4 explores debates about the role of UK cultural brands, including the BBC and UK music, in how the UK has projected or should project its image abroad since London 2012. Direct thinking about UK cultural brands as soft power assets dates back to the 2000s, when government and UK institutions were responding to soft power and nation branding theories in the wake of ‘Cool Britannia’.

Chapter 5 explores the use of arts and culture in peacebuilding and post-conflict recovery, and how cultural relations operate in times of crisis and international aggression. The evidence base on how conflict affects large-scale cultural events, or even the commercial culture industries generally, is scattered, with disparate historical and contemporary examples. Three particularly relevant topics to British Council arts and culture activity and to understanding the impact of Eurovision 2023 are the impact of war and conflict on large-scale cultural events such as international expos and biennials, the role of arts and culture in supporting the Sustainable Development Goals in times of conflict, and the special role that music is often thought to have in peacebuilding.

The most important insight from such studies is probably the warning not to romanticise the power of culture, art, music or song. Many scholars are critical of projects which idealise music as a universal language of reconciliation and which thus miss the more politically, socially and culturally specific ways in which people make meaning through music.

Part II of the literature review surveys research on the Eurovision Song Contest itself. While the contest has been held annually since 1956 (except in 2020 due to COVID-19), research on the Eurovision Song Contest sprang up in the mid-2000s during major transformations in the event’s own format and in European politics.¹³

These included the Eurovision Song Contest’s expansion into an arena-style show with winners chosen by international public vote, the involvement of many new participating countries from central and eastern Europe, and transnational debates over the boundaries of ‘Europe’ and what it meant to be ‘European’ associated with European Union enlargement. The Eurovision Song Contest had no formal connection to this process but symbolically still seemed to parallel it.

Popular perceptions of the Eurovision Song Contest often attribute its origin to efforts at peacemaking and reconciliation in western Europe after World War II. Archival research by the author of the first academic history of the Eurovision Song Contest suggests that technical cooperation and cost-effectively improving members’ programme offer were more important rationales for the EBU to develop a song contest.¹⁴ However, the idea of the Eurovision Song Contest being founded to reunite people across borders after conflict has become a ‘usable past’ or origin narrative for participants and commentators who refer to it this way.¹⁵

Many researchers have recognised the Eurovision Song Contest’s significance for communicating narratives about nations’ identities and their relationships to Europe, because it affords participants the ‘capacity annually to engage a vast pan-European public, temporarily produced via the contest’s liveness and symbolic power’.¹⁶ Its values have been seen as particularly inclusive towards LGBTQ+ communities, though there is debate over how successfully it also manages multicultural inclusivity.

The literature also clearly understands the Eurovision Song Contest as a site for soft power and cultural relations.¹⁷ This is the case even though the contest is, by definition, a non-political event.¹⁸ Researchers emphasise that neither politics nor conflict have ever been far from the Eurovision Song Contest. Neither debates over participation by illiberal regimes, nor repercussions of international aggression, are twenty-first century phenomena in the event: the participation of broadcasters from authoritarian regimes in Spain and Portugal attracted some protest in the 1960s, and the impact of Türkiye’s 1974 invasion of Cyprus directly affected the Eurovision Song Contest in 1975–6.

Broadcasters in the Middle East and North Africa are eligible to join the Eurovision Song Contest as EBU members, but since Israel joined in 1973, others have not taken part, except Morocco for a single year in 1980 when Israel did not compete. Télé Liban in Lebanon expressed interest in 2005 but could not take part due to state laws against broadcasting content from Israel.¹⁹

The review explores how conflict and the politics of European integration have affected the Eurovision Song Contest both before and after the collapse of state socialism in central and eastern Europe in 1989–91, which led many new broadcasters to start participating in the early 1990s. The Yugoslav Wars had repercussions at the Eurovision Song Contest for several years in the early 1990s and still have consequences for today’s event in Kosovo’s as-yet-unfulfilled ambition to participate.²⁰

In the 2000s, the Eurovision Song Contest’s centre of gravity shifted eastward as broadcasters, states, and capital cities understood how performing in and hosting the event could help fulfil desires for their countries to be equally recognised as European in the West. Tallinn’s hosting of the Eurovision Song Contest in 2002 and Kyiv’s first hosting of the Eurovision Song Contest in 2005, months after the pro-European Orange

Revolution in Ukraine, exemplify the use of the Eurovision Song Contest for nation branding in this period. The case of Baku hosting Eurovision Song Contest 2012 provides a more controversial example.²¹

Russian aggression towards its neighbours and NATO since 2008–9, and its impact in the states it has targeted, is the international tension which has most affected the twenty-first century Eurovision Song Contest. In 2009, Moscow hosted what was then the highest-budget Eurovision Song Contest ever, less than a year after the Russo-Georgian War. The EBU had to reject a Georgian entry which appeared to directly ridicule Putin, and on the day of the Grand Final police broke up an unsanctioned Pride march, which activists had called to draw attention to the Moscow mayor's continued bans on Pride.

Since 2014, Russia's war against Ukraine has been 'the conflict ... at the forefront of the international media coverage of the Eurovision Song Contest', and both states have used the event to promote strategic narratives.²² Ukraine's second Eurovision Song Contest victory in 2016, when Jamala's song '1944' commemorated Stalin's deportation of the Crimean Tatars, can be considered successful Ukrainian cultural diplomacy.

A particularly symbolic moment for debates about the Eurovision Song Contest and shared values was the Eurovision Song Contest victory of Conchita Wurst, a bearded drag queen character played by Tom Neuwirth, in 2014. This followed a year in which Russia had passed anti-LGBTQ+ laws, some Western LGBTQ+ organisations had called for a values-based boycott of the Sochi Winter Games, and Russia had begun its attack on Ukraine by annexing Crimea.

After six years in which debates about human rights in Eurovision Song Contest host locations had interwoven with transnational public discourses about the Beijing, London and Sochi Games, Conchita's image became a symbol in debates which contrasted 'Europe' and Russia as opposite spaces in terms of values and framed the Eurovision Song Contest as a key site of liberal sexual citizenship.²³

The EBU has taken more decisive values-based action towards Russia and its allies in the past two years by banning attempts by Belarus to threaten democratic protestors through its entry in 2021 and then suspending Russia and Belarus after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. This could signify the EBU becoming more assertive as a human rights actor, but will invite more scrutiny towards how it chooses whether to break off cooperation with a broadcaster or not.²⁴

Besides the impact of Russia's wars against Georgia and Ukraine, the contemporary Eurovision Song Contest has also been affected by the conflicts involving Armenia/Azerbaijan and Israel/Palestine.²⁵ Eurovision Song Contest 2019 in Tel Aviv represented 'one of the more significant political and diplomatic challenges for all participating countries', as actors had to decide how to respond to the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement's calls for a boycott of the event.²⁶

Other themes explored in Part II include how past discourses about the Eurovision Song Contest in the UK may have affected the UK's image within the event's international community, the cultural relations and soft power significance of the EBU and its member broadcasters, and the significance of Eurovision Song Contest artists, fans and audiences in people-to-people cultural relations.

Broadcasters, cities, state actors, the EBU, media organisations, fan communities, and the Eurovision Song Contest's wider audience of viewers and visitors are all seen to play conscious or tacit parts in soft power activities through this literature. Simultaneously, the production of each Eurovision Song Contest, the event spaces where it occurs, and the physical and virtual spaces in which viewers interact with it are all sites of cultural relations activity.

Tensions between soft power and cultural relations principles also appear. The EBU does not appear to describe its work as cultural relations, but still exemplifies a cultural relations approach based on shared values and commitments to public service media principles. As owner and custodian of the event brand and arbiter of its rules for fair competition, it recognises the benefits of hosting the Eurovision Song Contest for cities and states, but must also take views on whether soft power activities by actors subject to its rules instrumentalise the contest unacceptably. It has less power over soft power activities by actors beyond its control.

Until recently, research on the Eurovision Song Contest has discussed soft power more frequently than cultural relations. Yet cultural relations are embedded into the very concept of the event. A literature on Eurovision's role in cultural relations is now emerging through studies of how fan cultures relate to public and cultural diplomacy.²⁷

No studies of soft power or cultural relations at the Eurovision Song Contest before 2023, however, have had to deal with a context in which the host country is not the winner from the previous year. The Eurovision Song Contest has not been held outside the previous winning country since 1980, when its scale was much smaller and it had not yet developed all its current affordances for cultural relations or soft power. No winner before 2022 has ever been unable to host because it was under military attack.

The reputations of Liverpool and the UK as host locations would therefore depend not just on how Eurovision Song Contest 2023 represented their own identities in relation to the Eurovision Song Contest and its values, or even of how well logistically they staged the event, but also on how they approached the responsibility of hosting on behalf of Ukraine.

5. Process tracing: the narrative of hosting on behalf of Ukraine

The process of creating the narrative of hosting on behalf of Ukraine was complex and involved many partners. It began when the EBU determined that Ukraine could not host Eurovision Song Contest 2023 and another broadcaster should host on Ukraine's behalf.

Once the BBC had accepted the invitation and selected Liverpool as host city, the process followed two parallel tracks, as the BBC cooperated with Suspilne to produce the Live Shows and Liverpool created the place-based programming with input from the Ukrainian Institute Kyiv.

The tracks combined when the BBC televised the host city handover ceremony from Liverpool on 31 January 2023 and once BBC production moved into the Liverpool Arena, culminating in the EuroFestival fortnight of 1–14 May and the Eurovision Song Contest event week of 7–13 May.

5.1 Negotiating the Eurovision Song Contest (ESC) 2023 host country

On 14 May 2022, Kalush Orchestra's song 'Stefania' won the Eurovision Song Contest for Ukraine in Turin. Sam Ryder's 'SPACE MAN', produced by the BBC and representing the UK, came second, the UK's best result since 1998. Under EBU rules, Suspilne should have been entitled to host Eurovision Song Contest 2023, but Ukraine had been defending against Russia's full-scale invasion since 24 February 2022.

The Eurovision Song Contest has been an important international cultural stage for Ukraine since its debut in 2003, first win in 2004, and Kyiv's first hosting of the event in 2005. Its second win in 2016 came in the aftermath of, and reacted to, Russia's annexation of Crimea. Kyiv thus hosted again in 2017.

After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine began in 2022, Suspilne resolved to go forward with the Eurovision Song Contest, to be present among other European nations and show that the ongoing aggression could not silence Ukraine's voice. On 2 April it announced Kalush Orchestra, an all-male band, had state permission to leave the country to support Ukraine.²⁸ Their win forced the EBU to decide whether Ukraine could safely host in 2023.

Although Kyiv had already hosted Eurovision once in wartime – since the Russo-Ukrainian war had begun in 2014 – the front line in 2017 had been 800 km away from the capital. In 2022, every Ukrainian city was vulnerable to air attacks or renewed ground offensives, and predicting 2023's security situation was impossible.

For the first time, the EBU's responsibility to deliver a safe event overrode Eurovision Song Contest tradition, and it immediately began exploring whether the runner-up broadcaster, the BBC, could host if a security analysis concluded that Ukraine could not.

'Everybody hopes that the war will come to an end tomorrow. That is the biggest wish of every Ukrainian, that this invasion comes to an end, that Ukraine wins, and we can go back to peaceful life. That was the main wish when we won, that we could host the Eurovision Song Contest in peaceful Ukraine.'

Suspilne Ukraine representative

In the meantime, the EBU conducted its usual procedural discussions, including security matters, with the winning broadcaster. Based on these discussions and an independent security assessment, it had to announce on 17 June that Eurovision Song Contest 2023 would not be in Ukraine. The EBU regarded broadcasters not governments as the appropriate parties in these negotiations, though the then UK prime minister and the president of Ukraine both publicly expressed preferences for Ukraine to host during this negotiation stage.²⁹

The Ukrainian Embassy in London kept in contact with the EBU, the BBC and Ukraine's Ministry of Culture during this process, while the BBC confirmed with UK Government that it would be welcome to accept the EBU's invitation to host if the UK could not. On 25 July 2022, the EBU announced that it, the BBC and Suspilne had all agreed the BBC should host 'on behalf of' Ukraine, as stated in the EBU's press release.³⁰ This key phrase for Eurovision Song Contest 2023's narrative strategy was thus already set.

Also set at this stage, and affirmed by senior representatives of all three organisations in the press release, was the expectation that hosting ‘on behalf of’ Ukraine would include enabling the winning country to still showcase its own culture. The BBC and Suspilne would work together in developing the Live Shows’ Ukrainian elements, and the contest logo would also reflect the collaboration.

‘It was understood very clearly from the beginning that the BBC and the United Kingdom were hosting on behalf of Ukraine, and that was very much part of our message, that this was not going to be a British song contest, this was very much happening in the UK because it could not happen in Ukraine.’

EBU interviewee

Sam Ryder, who had made friends with Kalush Orchestra and many other Eurovision Song Contest acts in Turin, translated the concept of hosting on behalf of Ukraine into an accessible metaphor in a TikTok video on 25 July: ‘It’s Ukraine’s party. We’re just inviting them to throw it at our house.’³¹

‘I think Sam coined the phrase really early on in summer last year of “It’s Ukraine’s party, we’re just hosting it in our house,” which we always loved to think about.’

BBC Studios producer

Stakeholders from several organisations referred to this video as an inspiration for their approach.

With two countries instead of one to represent, Eurovision Song Contest 2023 would not only be more complex for nation-branding, but would also build cultural relations into hosts’ production of live show content in a way the event had not explored before. This unique creative challenge aligned with a core EBU value, innovation, but would have to be met while one country was at war.

Because the host broadcaster had not been confirmed until late July, UK-based stakeholders also had two and a half months’ less time to plan than Eurovision Song Contest hosts usually would. UK stakeholders universally identified this compressed timescale as the greatest challenge in developing content and delivering the event.

5.2 Selecting the UK host city

BBC preparations began with the appointment of Martin Green as Eurovision Song Contest 2023 managing director, immediately after the end of his roles as chief creative officer of the Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth Games and UNBOXED: Creativity in the UK. The BBC next had to select a host city.

Since the UK had not hosted Eurovision for 25 years (Birmingham had hosted in 1998 after the UK’s last win in 1997), the BBC therefore decided to organise an open, multi-stage bid process for host cities which would drive national excitement about Eurovision coming to the UK.³² The BBC and EBU would cooperate on selecting the eventual host.

Culture Liverpool’s director Claire McColgan and close colleagues had already sparked excitement for hosting Eurovision in their city while exchanging text messages during the moment in Eurovision Song Contest 2022 when it seemed the UK might win. Liverpool City Council’s cabinet member for culture and visitor economy, Harry Doyle, had been a fan of the event since childhood, and also championed the bid from the beginning, providing insights into the Eurovision Song Contest’s contemporary scale as a broadcast, place-based and digital event.

Noticing fan enthusiasm for the idea of Liverpool hosting Eurovision on social media while the 2023 host was still being negotiated, Liverpool’s then mayor Joanne Anderson boosted the idea, persuaded the city commissioners in charge of Liverpool’s finances of the business case, and ensured her ‘triple lock’ policy of mainstreaming equality, social impact and environmental impact was embedded in Liverpool’s approach.

Liverpool City Council’s Twitter account first put Liverpool forward as the best UK host city on 17 June 2022, before the 2023 host broadcaster had even been agreed. Its reasons included Liverpool’s ‘enviable music scene’, its UNESCO City of Music status, Liverpool being ‘home to the biggest band in the world’, its ‘year-round music events’ and its ‘warmest welcome around’.³³

Culture Liverpool perceived a ‘perfect fit’ between the brands of Eurovision and Liverpool, since both emphasised music and a party spirit but also touched deeper issues. For instance, Eurovision had seen narratives about LGBTQ+ rights, national identity and personal storytelling told through the event, while Liverpool was ‘a city of social justice’ and ‘a sanctuary city’ as well as ‘a place that is trying to welcome all and loves to have a party’.³⁴



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Representing Ukraine when the country was under attack and could not showcase its own culture through Eurovision aligned with the narrative of civic identity Culture Liverpool was already mobilising through cultural events, and with local experiences of solidarity with displaced Ukrainians since February 2022.

‘Given our previous experience on a number of issues, whether that be Hillsborough and – people understand it when they get the sense of social injustice. They do rally around. And so that part was really easy to sell.’

Liverpool councillor

The BBC began its bid process on 25 July by inviting contact from interested cities, which had to demonstrate they met the EBU’s minimum logistical and technical requirements. On 12 August it shortlisted Birmingham, Glasgow, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle and Sheffield. London also met the criteria but was not shortlisted, because the BBC and UK Government were both looking to move events and opportunities outside the capital.³⁵

In August and September, these cities pitched more extensive accounts of their approach, narrative and partnerships to the BBC and EBU. The BBC’s assessment criteria embedded representation of Ukrainian culture and music within the overall ‘strength of the cultural offer’, which also covered ‘off screen local and regional activity’.³⁶ Other assessment criteria addressed suitability of the venue and space, the level of financial and other commitments that cities/regions could make to the event, and alignment with the BBC’s strategic priorities as a public service broadcaster.

Stakeholders from multiple organisations connected to the bid process agreed Liverpool united Ukrainian representation wider community participation more emotively and powerfully than any other bidder, with more ambitious place-based cultural programming than the Eurovision Song Contest had ever seen.

'Liverpool, like the BBC, really embraced that [producing on behalf of another country]. And in terms of what they did culturally, it was very much putting Ukraine front and centre around the city, inviting Ukrainian artists, they had a whole culture festival around the event. They were really exemplary at showing the support. And it was very much in line with the values of the song contest, which are universality, inclusivity and celebrating diversity through music.'

EBU interviewee

'Liverpool was really passionate about making it a special and also Ukrainian Eurovision Song Contest. And we realised if Liverpool is chosen, then they will certainly make something very, very special and unique. So it was clear, even back then, when the decision was still to be made. And as experience showed, it was not only a promise, but it was a real plan, that was actually fulfilled.'

Suspilne Ukraine interviewee

This ambition characterised Liverpool's bid development, led by McColgan and Culture Liverpool's head of creative development Robin Kemp, from inception. The bid's narrative combined the serious responsibility of hosting Eurovision on behalf of Ukraine with what Culture Liverpool saw as the event's core – the power of 'this idea of fun and joy and bringing people together'.³⁷

Liverpool also sought more input from the Eurovision Song Contest fan network OGAE UK than any other bidder, which fans credited as a factor in the superb visitor experience they enjoyed in May.

'One thing we did do, which other cities hadn't done, is we worked really, really closely with the OGAEs. [...] I always said, "We are going to set the bar for Eurovision moving forward. We are going to smash everything out of the park in terms of the figures, and we want to host the absolute best that there's ever been." So we had a lot of insight from them of how we wanted to shape things, and they've come back to us to say, "You absolutely have beat anything that we've ever seen before.''

Culture Liverpool interviewee

The public first saw Liverpool's narrative for Eurovision when Liverpool released its bid video on YouTube on 22 September.³⁸ The video opened with the sound of a western Ukrainian trembita, the mountain horn on the introduction to Ukraine's first Eurovision Song Contest winning song from 2004. Its narrative positioned Liverpool as an energetic city that puts music and culture to an ambitious social purpose, was already standing in solidarity with Ukraine, and understood what the Eurovision Song Contest meant to fans.

Clips from a rally by Hillsborough justice campaigners, a Remembrance parade, Liverpool Pride, and a service in the city's Ukrainian church appeared in the video alongside scenes of past flagship cultural events in Liverpool, sports crowds at Anfield, Goodison Park and Aintree, and images of hospitality and music venues as evidence of the visitor experience Liverpool would deliver.

On 27 September 2022, the BBC confirmed Eurovision Song Contest 2023 would be held in either Glasgow or Liverpool. It then worked with both cities to bring them to contract stage. Liverpool's team were aware Glasgow had logistical advantages including a larger arena, but Arena and Convention Centre Liverpool successfully solved remaining technical challenges, enabling Liverpool to be contract-ready.

The BBC and EBU declared Liverpool the winning bidder live on BBC1 on 7 October 2022, leaving the host city and broadcaster seven months to deliver the event.

It soon also became public, on 11 October, that King Charles III's coronation would take place on 6 May 2023 very shortly beforehand. The BBC would thus have to cover both large-scale events in the space of a week, and Liverpool's creative programming would have to take this date into account.

Coordinated by a tripartite team involving the BBC, Liverpool and DCMS, creating the narrative of hosting on behalf of Ukraine developed along parallel tracks from then on – BBC Studios producing the Live Shows, and Liverpool delivering place-based content and the promised cultural festival.

Frequently cited reasons for Liverpool's success in the bidding process included its passion to host the event, its record of delivering other large-scale cultural events from European Capital of Culture 2008 onwards, the unique capacity of its in-house culture team to deliver Eurovision 2023 at such a scale on so short a timeline, and the alignment between Liverpool's city brand and Eurovision's values. Both Liverpool-based stakeholders and external stakeholders expressed this.

'I watched a little bit of catch-up from the year before and was like, "Oh yeah, I get it now. You know, it's so wacky and diverse and just the celebration of individuality with healthy competition between countries, and so over the top." And that's just how Liverpool is. It's right up Liverpool's street.'

Liverpool political leader

'When you think of Eurovision, you think of energy, and fun, and light-heartedness. It's a joyful event. It's known to be inclusive, and it has a real cult following of superfans, who will try and come whichever country it's in. And I think Liverpool is also like that. It embraces quirky; it embraces big events. [...] They will embrace whatever comes their way.'

DCMS interviewee

The poignant added layer of hosting on behalf of Ukraine galvanised emotions of support and solidarity among Liverpool's organising team and the wider community, which other stakeholders also perceived. Once the Ukrainian Institute became involved in developing commissions for Liverpool's cultural programme, for instance, it also saw Liverpool's values as aligned with its own:

'[Liverpool's] infrastructural investment and the rich cultural programme of the Capital of Culture helped establish this tradition that this is a city of culture, this is a city open to others, this is a city with a great maritime and port legacy, it is within the city's DNA to be open and diverse. And I think that aligns very much with what we would like to achieve through cultural relations.'

Ukrainian Institute interviewee

UK Government stakeholders played a less visible but essential role in delivering the event. A new Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at DCMS with responsibility for sport, ceremonials and civil society, Stuart Andrew MP, was appointed in September 2022 and reappointed by Prime Minister Rishi Sunak in October, when he also became Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Equalities. Eurovision became part of his portfolio along with other major events, including the Coronation. A professed fan of Eurovision who had grown up visiting Liverpool, the Minister built a 'great relationship' and smooth channels of communication with stakeholders in the host city.³⁹

Within DCMS, the Director for Media and Creative Industries, Robert Specterman-Green, took responsibility for Eurovision as part of his liaison with the BBC. DCMS was the lead UK Government department for the event, liaising with other departments such as the Home Office on policing and security, FCDO on liaison with Ukrainian ministers, and the Department for Transport on logistics.

Arm's length bodies such as National Museums Liverpool and the National Lottery Heritage Fund also met regularly with DCMS and Culture Liverpool to discuss how they were supporting the event.

5.3 Planning to January 2023: the Live Shows

With the host city now known, the BBC team could begin mapping the local, regional and national stakeholders necessary to deliver the event and dividing up responsibilities with Liverpool City Council and other Merseyside logistical stakeholders, mediated at speed by Culture Liverpool. The team also consulted recent contests' executive producers and prioritised consultation with Suspilne Ukraine.

In October 2022, the BBC and Suspilne met to sign a partnership agreement in Warsaw, the closest suitable location to Kyiv. Suspilne accepted there would be limits to how far the Live Shows could address the wartime context, but wanted to showcase Ukraine's modern, forward-facing cultural production and also involve Ukraine's innovative TV and digital creatives. The agreement established the BBC had executive responsibility for production decisions, and this clarity helped decision-making later.

'We were lucky in that both UA:PBC [Suspilne] and the BBC are incredibly creative, incredibly organised, and have unmatched love for the Eurovision Song Contest.'

EBU interviewee

In mid-November 2022 the BBC, Liverpool City Council and DCMS also visited the Ukrainian Embassy in London and met the then ambassador Vadym Prystaiko, who agreed the shows should have a fun atmosphere. A BBC interviewee said this gave the team confidence in their approach.

Creative planning for the Live Shows took place between October and December, with the aim of catch up by January 2023 to where the BBC would have been if producing the Eurovision Song Contest on its normal schedule. The BBC Studios production team was led by executive producer Andrew Cartmell, who first acted as BBC head of delegation at Eurovision Song Contest 2012, and head of show Lee Smithurst, who first joined the BBC delegation at Eurovision Song Contest 2019: both had been part of the BBC delegation in Turin.

The key contact at Suspilne was Oksana Skybinska, who had worked on the Kyiv 2017 contest and led Ukraine's Eurovision Song Contest delegation since 2018, and the BBC also appointed a Ukrainian creative director, German Nenov.

The BBC team had to hire its key designers and directors in August–September while host city selection was ongoing. Preliminary work on stage design had to occur before the city was known, but more detailed plans depended on knowing the layout, size, and capabilities of the chosen arena.

In autumn 2022, many participating broadcasters including Suspilne were already working towards selecting their entries for Eurovision 2023. Suspilne was determined to send a Ukrainian entry to the contest and involve the public in selecting it, despite the challenges of safely organising a televised selection with a public vote while Ukraine was under attack. The selection, *Vidbir 2023*, took place on 17 December 2022 underneath Maidan metro station in Kyiv, which served both security and symbolic purposes.

'Maidan is the Independence Square, the biggest square and the most important square of Ukraine. It's in the heart of Kyiv, the capital city. This is a very symbolic place, where all important movements have originated from. And the metro station under this Independence Square had been used as a main music scene for months, basically from the first months of the invasion. [...] It became a cultural heart of Ukraine, underground.'

Suspilne Ukraine interviewee

A live audience also attended the selection, so that performers could experience crowd reactions. A backup studio in another city stood ready to relay pre-recorded performances to Ukrainian viewers in the event that Kyiv's signal went down, and viewers gave their votes via Ukraine's e-governance app Diia. Media coverage of this act of resilience again supported Ukraine's strategic narrative of determination to showcase its culture even during war.

The winning act TVORCHI were an electronic music duo from Ternopil composed of producer Andriy Hutsuliak and Nigerian-born vocalist Jeffrey Kenny, who had met while studying pharmacy in the city. This continued Ukraine's recent reputation for creativity in electronic music at Eurovision, and opened space to spotlight multicultural identities in Ukraine.

Ukrainian public diplomacy aimed to harness this in activities aimed at audiences in Africa, where public knowledge about Ukraine is low and exposure to Russian disinformation is high.⁴⁰ For instance, TVORCHI visited Kenya in March 2023 to support Ukrainian cultural diplomacy activities linked to the unveiling of the 'Grains of Culture' mural in Nairobi (part of a mural series supported by the Ukrainian Institute which was also included in EuroFestival through the 'Sound of Freedom' installation at Tempest Hey).⁴¹ Kenny was also featured in Ukraine.ua's #OpenYourHeartToUkraine social media campaign tying in with Eurovision 2023.

5.3.1 Creating the postcard films

While much Eurovision Song Contest Live Show content is created by member broadcasters' entries or determined by the voting system, host broadcasters are able to present their own narratives through pre-recorded VTs and live performances in the Live Shows' opening and interval acts, the presenters' scripts, and the 'postcard' films which traditionally introduce each Eurovision entry, as well as each contest's visual identity.

Eurovision Song Contest postcard films usually promote the host country and its destinations, and often also feature the competing country's artist, either in their home country or once they have arrived. The 2023 contest followed two years in which postcard makers could not feature artists in person due to contingencies of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The 2023 postcards could work directly with artists but also had to accommodate Eurovision 2023's more complex symbolic geography in which two countries had to be given equal prominence as winner and host, and the challenges of location filming in Ukraine while it was under attack.

The winning production company in the BBC's tender process for the postcards, Windfall Films, offered a concept using innovative 360-degree drone filming to zoom in and out of locations connected by a common theme in the UK, Ukraine, and each artist's country, where the artist would express their personality to viewers. The postcard for Croatia, for instance, connected Kyiv's river port in Ukraine, Whitby Harbour in the UK, and the harbour in the Croatian band's home city of Rijeka, where they showed off the sense of humour underpinning their song.

Windfall was specialised in drone filming and had recently recruited a Ukrainian producer to produce its documentary *Ukraine From Above: Secrets From the Frontline*. The producer, Alyona Synegina, had come to the UK under the Homes for Ukrainians scheme earlier in 2022 and taken part in a Channel 4/Media Trust mentoring programme before joining Windfall.

Synegina's input added richness to the postcard concept by taking inspiration from parallels Ukrainians already drew between national landmarks and famous sites abroad. Once Windfall had won the bid, she advised on where filming would be possible in Ukraine, and helped liaise with the Ukrainian production company 23/32 Films: this company had already handled filming in Ukraine for *Ukraine From Above* and would now film the Ukrainian locations for the postcard films. A total of 111 locations in 37 countries would be filmed, by local crews wherever possible, once artist selection had finished in March 2023.

The postcard concept symbolised the cultural fusion between the UK, Ukraine and participating countries presented to viewers during the Live Shows, and became a flagship illustration of UK/Ukrainian technical cooperation backstage. For Ukrainians such as the executive producer for 23/32, Sasha Cherniavskiy, inclusion of locations in Ukraine also supported a Ukrainian strategic narrative:

*'We are pleased to participate in this project and to show that shooting of every difficulty level is still possible in Ukraine. This year's Eurovision, despite not happening in Ukraine due to Russian aggression, will have our country in its heart.'*⁴²

5.4 Planning to January 2023: city-based programming and EuroFestival

Liverpool's ambition to deliver an extensive cultural festival, EuroFestival, and community programme was part of its plan for Eurovision from bid stage, and exceeded the place-based artistic activity of any previous Eurovision Song Contest host city. The idea of accompanying Eurovision with this scale of wraparound place-based programming allowed Culture Liverpool to convey the city's capacity for arts-led cultural events to a huge international audience, or rather to international media who would relay it to their audiences, and to match the 'extraordinary' production quality of the BBC.⁴³

The concept also created space to represent Ukrainian culture and the impact of Russia's invasion in ways that would not have been possible on the BBC Live Shows, which had to strike an appropriate emotional tone for the song contest and avoid perceptions that editorial content was favouring Ukraine over other competing countries.

Culture Liverpool also committed to an education and community programme engaging audiences across the City Region with the event. This was novel for Eurovision, but standard in Liverpool's approach to cultural events, and ensured the City Council's commitment to inclusivity and social impact would be met.

McColgan approached Spirit of 2012, the London 2012 legacy funder, to discuss whether Culture Liverpool could apply for funding to support the education programme and the evaluation of Eurovision's impact on community wellbeing. This application was successful and became Spirit's first grant to Liverpool City Council, and one of its final grants as its funding wound down. DCMS created a working group with funders including the National Lottery Heritage Fund to identify further funders to whom Culture Liverpool could apply. The Lottery fund, for instance, supported Culture Liverpool to apply with a turnaround of only a few weeks and awarded £250,000.

The Ukrainian Institute became a partner in EuroFestival while the call for commissions was being developed in late October and early November. Since February 2022 Liverpool's team had built strong connections with the local Ukrainian community, including the Liverpool branch of the Association of Ukrainians in Great Britain, whose chair Father Taras Khomych cooperated with Liverpool's host city pitch. However, they were aware that they did not have direct connections into Ukraine's contemporary cultural scene, and also understood that awareness of the distinct cultures of central and eastern European countries in the UK is low.



Culture Liverpool also committed to an education and community programme engaging audiences across the City Region with the event. This was novel for Eurovision, but standard in Liverpool's approach to cultural events, and ensured the City Council's commitment to inclusivity and social impact would be met.

Realising that inauthentic and outdated representations of the country would compromise Liverpool's promise to deliver Eurovision on behalf of Ukraine, the team quickly sought partners in Ukraine's culture sector.

'There's a very clear shorthand for Ukraine, which is that very traditional view of the country, traditional dress. [...] In all the conversations with our creative team, I'd always say, "imagine how you would feel if someone says 'on behalf of the UK' and it was just London buses and people in bearskin hats." [...] And that's why, super early on, it was like, "We need the Ukrainian voice in here really, really quickly."

Liverpool events producer

On learning that Liverpool was including a programme of cultural commissions in Eurovision, the Ukrainian Institute offered to contribute to developing the programme. They approached Liverpool with the help of the British Council, harnessing partnerships built up through their cooperation on the British Council's UK/Ukraine Season of Culture. Anna Bubnova, Head of Arts for the British Council in Ukraine, provided 'invaluable' knowledge of the Ukrainian arts sector, introduced the EuroFestival team to the Ukrainian Institute, and helped the Liverpool team learn Ukrainian cultural cues.⁴⁴ Having a British Council office in Ukraine was thus essential to allow these connections to be made.

EuroFestival's creative team and the Ukrainian Institute both identified that a shared commitment to having Ukrainian voices shape the call for commissions had connected both stakeholders.

'We helped to frame it so that it didn't just appear to be a celebratory programme of entertainment activities taking place during Eurovision. The proposed applications had to reflect somehow the sad reality of today's Ukraine, but also the optimistic nature of the resilience and the courage and the solidarity that Ukraine has demonstrated to the rest of the world.'

Ukrainian Institute interviewee

Rather than a model where UK hosts would have designed and applied the selection criteria for collaborations involving Ukrainian artists, the EuroFestival team preferred a coproduction model where Ukrainian partners shared authority in developing and implementing the approach. The Ukrainian Institute's director-general Volodymyr Sheiko and creative director Tetyana Filevska played key roles in selecting the programme. This partnership therefore shaped Liverpool's creative narrative as host city from then on, since the ubiquity of UK/Ukrainian commissions in city space gave material evidence of how Liverpool was representing Ukraine.

The Liverpool team's self-awareness in understanding their own knowledge gaps towards Ukrainian culture laid foundations for trust-building between EuroFestival producers and the Ukrainian Institute. As with the BBC and Suspilne, this trust was necessary to develop the commissions at pace. Moreover, Culture Liverpool's approach to representing Ukraine in EuroFestival also helped build other Ukrainian stakeholders' trust in Liverpool as a host city:

'From the very early stages of preparation, Liverpool showed how serious it was about its plan, by announcing this competition involving partnerships of Ukrainian creatives and cultural figures to present different cultural projects on site in Liverpool.'

Suspilne Ukraine interviewee

The call appeared on 23 November 2022 and foresaw three strands: UK x Ukraine, Music United, and Eurovision in Liverpool.⁴⁵ These reflected three themes of Liverpool's brand as Eurovision host city: UK–Ukrainian collaboration, the power of music to unite communities, and the 'perfect match' between Liverpool's identity and the spirit of Eurovision. Commissions could be medium- or large-scale, with the majority of large-scale commissions expected to come from UK x Ukraine.

Artists were asked to make expressions of interest by 12 December, and shortlisted artists would enter a development stage to create a formal proposal and budget. This process aimed to create lower burdens for bidders at the initial stage, and Culture Liverpool also offered to support Ukrainian artists in matching with UK counterparts. The call received 700 expressions of interest across the three strands, and 50 shortlisted applicants received £2,000 R&D grants.

Though commissions were initially to be announced in the week of 30 January 2023 to coincide with the host city handover ceremony, commissioning was instead completed in February and announced on 1 March. This was due to the high volume of applications, and producers' determination to exhaust all possibilities before concluding certain commissions were infeasible for May delivery.

Whereas developing a festival programme of this scale would usually take between eighteen months and two years, EuroFestival had only five months from call to delivery. UK Government funding made this pace possible by investing in EuroFestival as an opportunity to showcase UK support for Ukraine and by trusting Culture Liverpool to develop the programme independently.

Two guiding principles for selecting works emerged during the development stage: 'does this either absolutely represent modern Ukraine and feel like something in that space, or does it bring the joy of Eurovision to a different audience?'⁴⁶

Nineteen of the twenty-four chosen commissions involved UK/Ukrainian collaborations,⁴⁷ and the EuroFestival dates were confirmed as 1–14 May to wrap around the Bank Holiday weekend.

5.5 Host city handover and visual identity reveal, 31 January 2023

On 31 January 2023, to accompany the host city handover ceremony from Turin to Liverpool, the BBC released Eurovision 2023's visual identity and slogan, 'United by Music'. Both the brand design and its production process reflected the concept of hosting on behalf of Ukraine.

The slogan 'United by Music' alluded to Liverpool and the UK hosting the event in solidarity with Ukraine, and to Liverpool's own heritage as a global music city, but also to the tradition of Eurovision having been 'developed to bring Europe closer together through a shared TV experience across different countries.'⁴⁸ The slogan was a major turning point in creating the narrative of Eurovision 2023, and became a touchstone for the production team to return to in resolving creative decisions.

Liverpool's music sector was not involved in developing the slogan, but welcomed it:

'It helped reinforce and play to an agenda that a lot of us have been promoting for a while, which is that music is a real strength of the city. So the fact that the city was branding itself in the run-up to Eurovision with that phrase 'United by Music' was very positive mood music, if you like, upon which we can build. And upon which the notion of Liverpool Music City has now emerged.'

Liverpool music sector interviewee

The branding process took approximately six weeks. So that the brand could be designed as a UK/ Ukrainian collaboration, the BBC asked Suspilne to recommend Ukrainian branding agencies and paired them with selected UK agencies to pitch.⁴⁹ The winning pair, UK agency Superunion (now Design Bridge and Partners) and Ukrainian agency Starlight Creative, created a brand with signature colours reflecting the colours of the UK and Ukrainian flags and the Kalush Orchestra frontman's signature pink hat, which had itself gained patriotic meaning in Ukraine since Eurovision Song Contest 2022. The name of the brand typeface, Penny Lane, referenced Liverpool's streetscape and musical heritage.

Both Eurovision Song Contest 2023 logos, the EBU's ongoing brand logo and the contest-specific logo, also directly symbolised the narrative of hosting on behalf of Ukraine. The 2023 version of the EBU's logo, which contains a heart featuring the flag of each year's host country, was produced with the Ukrainian flag rather than the UK flag to emphasise that Ukraine should have been the rightful host.

The multi-coloured symbol at the centre of the 2023 visuals, a sound wave pulsing into a heart, responded to the physiological idea that listening to music together can synchronise heartbeats. It invited diverse emotional meanings to be projected on to it, including but not limited to the passions of fandom and the emotions of solidarity with Ukraine, and again referenced the concept of Eurovision as a shared live broadcast experience connecting viewers in dozens of countries around Europe and the world.

Coincidentally, Vidbir 2023's staging had also included a heart, 'symbolising that the heart of Ukraine is still beating strongly no matter what', and TVORCHI's winning song was titled 'Heart Of Steel'.⁵⁰ These were created independently of the Eurovision 2023 branding but contributed to the meanings of the symbol, especially for Ukrainians who had seen it on the Vidbir stage.

The show music beds were created by a Ukrainian composer, Michael Nekrasov, and the sting began with a trembita sound. The postcard music was composed by another Ukrainian composer, Dmitry Shurov (also the musical director for Vidbir 2023).⁵¹

Banners with the Eurovision Song Contest 2023 visuals were installed in the city centre for the host city handover ceremony and Semi-Final draw allocation at St George's Hall, which was broadcast live on BBC1 (the first time a host broadcaster has done so). This ceremony, featuring the host city mayors of 2022 and 2023, marked Liverpool's first stage of Eurovision city dressing. A Ukrainian flag instead of a UK flag was flown over the hall, which also strengthened some Ukrainian stakeholders' trust in how Liverpool would represent Ukraine:

'I remember [...] the council of Liverpool decided to replace temporarily the Union Jack for the Ukrainian flag. And it was a very strong message that this path that was chosen by the city of Liverpool to make [Eurovision] on behalf of Ukraine, to make it Ukrainian in its heart, was going to be taken really seriously.'

Suspilne Ukraine interviewee

The handover ceremony, produced by the BBC, centred Ukrainian national symbols and culture in several ways. The broadcast began with music from 'Stefania' and images of St George's Hall lit in Ukrainian, rather than UK colours. The voiceover welcoming viewers was given in both English and Ukrainian. Ukrainian TV personalities Nikita Kuzmin (BBC *Strictly Come Dancing*), Timur Miroshnychenko (Ukraine's Eurovision commentator and co-presenter of Eurovision Song Contest 2017) and Julia Sanina (vocalist of the rock band The Hardkiss) explained in one VT what Eurovision means in Ukraine, and three of the six young people assisting with the Semi-Final allocation draw were also Ukrainian.

Two short BBC films during the ceremony reflected more of Eurovision Song Contest 2023's creative narrative. One was scripted by the award-winning screenwriter Frank Cottrell Boyce, who comes from Bootle (Merseyside) and had worked with Green on the London 2012 Olympic opening ceremony.

This film integrated local Ukrainians into its mosaic of community members as one more section of the city community alongside groups such as healthcare workers, musicians, dance students, drag queens, and fans of both Liverpool and Everton inviting viewers to Liverpool and promising them that 'you'll never walk alone.' The internationally famous anthem of Liverpool FC fans named in this closing line has had powerful significance in Liverpool since the 1989 Hillsborough disaster as an emotive memorial for the 97 dead and their families' long justice campaign.⁵²

The second film, featuring Keri-Lynn Wilson and the Ukrainian Freedom Orchestra performing at the Proms in July 2022, premiered on BBC social media on the morning of the ceremony and closed the broadcast. Using Wilson's words about the power of music during conflict, it established a narrative of the values with which the BBC would frame its hosting of Eurovision on behalf of Ukraine during Russia's invasion:

'My baton is my weapon... it's one that reaches to the soul, it's not one that kills. It's one that is about life and hope and freedom and unity.'

This opened into scenes of groups coming together in Liverpool to dance and sing to music in diverse genres. As well as associating Eurovision Song Contest 2023 with musical genres beyond TV, the film was explicitly intended to launch alongside the brand visuals and set expectations about how the BBC would handle the theme of war:

'Once we had the brand, we wanted to get that brand launched so that people would start understanding the kind of Eurovision we were going to put on. And we did this really beautiful film with a Ukrainian orchestra conductor that I wanted to go out first of all and be reasonably serious. And it was about making a statement that we weren't going to ignore that there was a war going on. [...] There were a few sharp intakes of breath when we first showed it to people internally, but I wanted to be very upfront from the beginning that we were going to hit this head-on. But obviously the whole thing ends in joy.'

Event managing director

During the ceremony, the mayor of Turin also handed Anderson his city's contribution to the host city Insignia Keys, a tradition for recent Eurovision Song Contest host cities that Helsinki inaugurated when handing over to Belgrade in 2008. National Museums Liverpool agreed to exhibit them at the Museum of Liverpool on the waterfront and created a display to explain the tradition's heritage to visitors, where they remained until June 2023.

Right Joanne Anderson and Stefano Lo Russo, then mayors of Liverpool and Turin, with Turin's Insignia Key.

Credit: Marketing Liverpool.



5.6 BBC production, setup and rehearsals

Between January and March 2023, the BBC production team costed their creative ideas for the Live Shows and put logistics in place. Ukrainian acts were to be featured throughout the opening and interval acts, and plans for these had to be finalised by early March in order to leave time to apply for visas and gain state permission for Ukrainian men to travel abroad. DCMS liaised with the Home Office to help the visa process run smoothly. Two Ukrainian acts already on international tours experienced minor complications in visa collection, but these did not prevent their arrivals.

Two Ukrainian creatives recruited at this stage enhanced producers' ability to get a real-time 'sense check' on whether the tone of an idea was appropriate for Ukrainians and made a 'phenomenal' contribution to the team.⁵³ Maryana Pasalar Kyadzhui, who had worked on Eurovision 2017 in Kyiv, supported the multicamera directors and was lead runner for the Outside Broadcast truck.⁵⁴ The other was Alyona Synegina, a producer previously employed by Windfall Films, who worked on the opening films and interval acts, and supported Julia Sanina in her role as co-presenter for the three Live Shows.

UK producers' readiness to learn from Ukrainian colleagues both helped to ensure authentic, contemporary representation of Ukrainian culture in the Live Shows and led to personal intercultural learning. In one example during this part of the process, producers were keen to check that the traditional Ukrainian vyshyvanka (embroidered shirt) was still worn in Ukraine. On learning that it remains a symbol of Ukrainian identity and has gained new importance since Russia's invasion, they decided to include an image of the Beatles statues on Pier Head wearing vyshyvankas as a symbol of Eurovision 2023's fusion of Liverpoolian and Ukrainian identity. Synegina had vyshyvankas imported from Kyiv and through connections she established with Merseyside's Ukrainian community found a Ukrainian seamstress to install them on the statues for the film.

'It was really important for us – authenticity, all the way through – that we incorporated Ukrainians into the content. And that made me understand the significance of the vyshyvanka still, as not just a traditional thing, but still mattering today.'

BBC Studios interviewee

Tickets to the Live Shows went on sale on 7 March and sold out in 90 minutes, a contest record.⁵⁵ 7,620 of the 54,627 tickets were sold to buyers outside the UK, including 963 to Australia, 581 to Ireland, 544 to Germany, 420 to the Netherlands and 406 to Spain.⁵⁶ International ticketholders came from 62 different countries, with Australian fans the single biggest group of international ticketholders despite the length and expense of reaching Liverpool from their home country.

On 13 March, the Eurovision heads of delegation meeting took place in Liverpool to confirm all broadcasters' entries and performance plans. Producers were now aware of which entries would require large props or special effects, and any staging decisions that might need sensitive handling: for instance, floor managers would need to check one band's outfits for broadcast decency. Media accreditations opened on 14 March and were awarded to 1,738 media from 63 countries (1,197 accredited for on-site access and another 541 online).⁵⁷

Five weeks before the Grand Final, in mid-April, production moved up to Liverpool. While technicians were setting up the arena, UK-based dancers and talent rehearsed offsite at the Invisible Wind Factory so that performances could easily be transferred on stage. Most Ukrainian acts arrived in Liverpool for the event week, though producers from one multimedia company with a longer technical setup had to travel to Liverpool once for technical rehearsals and again for the event.

Before rehearsals, the EBU also set up its digital studio in the arena. EBU digital channels had been operating year-round to bring attention to all participating broadcasters' entries and to equally spotlight the UK and Ukraine as the countries cooperating to produce Eurovision Song Contest 2023. During the event period, these channels continuously produced multimedia web and social media content, artist photographs, rehearsal and performance clips, newsletters, podcasts, live blogs, and show results. Timur Miroshnychenko was involved as host of 'TikTok Lives' with rehearsing artists as another sign of hosting on behalf of Ukraine.

The arena stage was publicly revealed on 26 April with a visit from King Charles and Queen Camilla, who recorded a cameo for the opening film of Semi-Final 1. A Ukrainian producer on the BBC team who was invited to meet the Royal couple remembered this as a special moment.

Broadcaster delegations began arriving in Liverpool in time for arena rehearsals to begin on 30 April–1 May for acts in the Semi-Finals and 4 May for acts who had automatically qualified (France, Germany, Italy, Spain, UK and Ukraine). FCDO encouraged UK embassies to organise send-offs for departing artists and create social media content to tie in with Eurovision Song Contest 2023 and GREAT Britain and Northern Ireland, the UK Government's international brand marketing campaign. Ukrainian ambassadors also featured in at least some of these.

The embassy in Belgrade, for instance, saw off Serbia's (usually London-based) entrant Luke Black at a ceremony involving both ambassadors and Serbia's 2022 entrant Konstrakta.⁵⁸ He received a gift basket including a t-shirt from the new GREAT Love campaign, which had been launched at Sydney Mardi Gras/WorldPride in February 2023.⁵⁹



Left TVORCHI
greeted at Liverpool
John Lennon Airport.

Credit: Marketing Liverpool.

'In an event where there's a lot of pressure on the artists, to look outside at the Mersey and have time on your own outside is sometimes what you need to make sure that everyone's relaxed and calm'

BBC Studios interviewee

Arriving artists were welcomed at their hotels with live music and performances, organised by Culture Liverpool's visitor experience group after consulting the BBC and EBU on how to make delegates' experiences 'the absolute best'.⁶⁰ Suspilne's delegation arrived at Liverpool John Lennon Airport on 3 May and received a special welcome from the Lord Mayor of Liverpool, a local drag queen, and the Liverpool Signing Choir performing the Ukrainian national anthem. The head of delegation praised this welcome as another example of Liverpool's attention to detail and sincerity in acknowledging Ukraine.⁶¹

Rehearsals followed an established EBU schedule designed to be fair to each act, illustrating how producers treat the Eurovision Song Contest as a serious competition. Delegations' feedback to the BBC suggested the production team had successfully created a happy, friendly and relaxed culture which made artists less tense despite the pace of production and the pressure of representing their nations on live television. The backstage 'delegate bubble' was designed with artist wellbeing in mind, including a designated quiet room for artists and open-air access. The design of ACC Liverpool's riverside campus facilitated this:

All acts participated in the 'turquoise carpet' civic welcome ceremony at Walker Art Gallery, a National Museums Liverpool (NML) venue, on 7 May. This was produced by Entertainment One, hosted by Miroshnychenko and Sam Quek, and livestreamed on the EBU's Eurovision channel. BBC1 broadcast highlights the following evening along with highlights of the National Lottery's Big Eurovision Welcome at St George's Hall, Liverpool's public opening ceremony for the event.

The Big Eurovision Welcome gathered the single largest audience of any Eurovision 2023 event, with tickets free to National Lottery players, and aimed to give Liverpool residents a special crowd moment even if they would not be in a position to see the arena shows live. Jamala appeared in the programme performing 'All You Need Is Love' with the UK singer-songwriter Birdy, and a proportion of tickets were reserved for Ukrainian residents in the UK.

The turquoise carpet ceremony also had immediate impact for NML, which the very next day started receiving queries from brands interested in holding receptions or photo shoots at Walker Art Gallery.

5.7 EuroVillage

EuroVillage, Eurovision's official fan zone, opened on 5 May 2023 at the Pier Head with a capacity of 15,000. It provided free programming for visitors and residents every day until 12 May with ticketed entry on the Grand Final day.

Basic EBU requirements for EuroVillage include the ability to screen the Semi-Finals and Grand Final for fans who do not have tickets to the Live Shows, and space for sponsor stalls. Further development of the village concept and content is left to host cities. Culture Liverpool's creative team, led by host city creative director Robin Kemp, was in charge of EuroVillage programming as well as Eurofestival.

Liverpool approached the fan village concept innovatively in several ways. Pier Head was a city centre location, rather than a park outside the city centre which past host cities had preferred, and was also in walking distance from the arena. The team conceived the village as a freeflow rather than all-day destination, and curated the programming to appeal to different audiences each day so that even visitors who did not enjoy Eurovision music could still 'have a Eurovision experience', while the Eurovision brand could bring forms of culture like opera to new audiences.⁶²

Liverpool's past experience in crowd management made this expanded vision for the village feasible, and up to 35,000–40,000 people passed through the venue per day.

'The Eurovision village is a place where we can provide visibility for the sponsors of the event, who are very important when it comes to the funding, but also a place for people to gather, to watch the shows if they can't get tickets, but also for the local community to feel that they're part of the event.'

EBU interviewee

EuroVillage provided the stage for two EuroFestival cultural commissions, ENO Does Eurovision (featuring the English National Opera performing Eurovision hits) on 9 May and the premiere of Jamala's album QIRIM with the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra on 11 May. Kalush Orchestra headlined the opening of the village on 5 May. Ukraine's first Eurovision Song Contest winner, Ruslana, contributed to ENO Does Eurovision and to 'TikTok Legends', a medley of Eurovision winners, on 12 May, and another past Ukrainian act, Melovin, also performed on the 9th. One day's programming on 8 May was dedicated to contemporary Ukrainian music, featuring alyona alyona, Jerry Heil, Go_A, TVORCHI, and Antytila.

Other days highlighted Liverpool's drag ball scene (tying in with the Coronation on 6 May), children's music, and emerging local music acts.

'We really wanted to make sure that there was a Ukrainian day in the Eurovision Village, when people of Liverpool and Ukrainians who either live in Liverpool or can visit Liverpool during Eurovision can enjoy a special Ukrainian programme.'

Suspilne Ukraine interviewee

'The best moment for me was the free concert on the waterfront, listening to Ukrainian rave music and being immersed in the city.'

Liverpool political leader

The 'Discover Ukraine' zone, located near the village main exit, was a dedicated space for Ukrainian NGOs and small Ukrainian businesses in the UK to engage visitors with Ukrainian culture, food and design. Its curator, Culture Liverpool's event project assistant Veronika Yasynska, had also come to Liverpool after February 2022.

Originally, the zone had been conceived as a boulevard featuring traders and artisans from Ukraine, but operational difficulties of bringing people into and out of the country precluded this. However, its producers felt that the expanded concept including interactive exhibitions and the art workshops ended up facilitating deeper visitor engagement with Ukrainian culture, and still provided space for UK-based Ukrainian traders.

Traders included the chef Ievgen Klopotenko with Dnister Restaurant, the fashion boutique I AM VOLYA, the brand marketplace Bravery, and the bookshop UKRBOOKS. Art School Tsybalya, founded by a displaced Ukrainian family, offered painting and pottery workshops, and Liverpool's Homes for Ukrainians scheme held an information stand. The NGO Music Saves UA presented an interactive exhibition on the history of Ukrainian music and culture, and the NGO Brand Ukraine in partnership with the Ukrainian MFA presented a Ukraine.ua interactive chalet at the village entrance which contrasted images of Ukraine at peace and Ukraine at war.

This installation was the ministry's most direct opportunity to communicate narratives of Ukrainian public diplomacy to Eurovision visitors. It reached 37,000 visitors and tied in with an international social media campaign via Ukraine.ua channels, #OpenYourHeartToUkraine.⁶³ The visuals and slogan connected to the title of TVORCHI's Ukrainian entry, and a video manifesto using Kenny's voiceover focused on English-speaking audiences in Qatar, UAE, Saudi Arabia, Nigeria, Kenya, and South Africa where Ukrainian public diplomacy wanted to grow support.

#OpenYourHeartToUkraine culminated in an Instagram flashmob, #TheUnityWave, which paired 18 Ukrainian governmental, celebrity and cultural sector accounts with UK counterparts to create joint posts reaching 5 million social media users.⁶⁴

The EuroVillage programme exemplified how Liverpool went ‘above and beyond’ EBU requirements for host cities.¹⁷⁹ It has diversified the cultural offer host cities might programme, created new potential for host cities to advance their own music policy through it, and illustrated how bringing fan space closer to the city centre amplifies the event atmosphere.

Delivering the zone required cooperation between Ukraine’s culture and foreign affairs ministries, Culture Liverpool and DCMS. One Ukrainian stakeholder praised how much Culture Liverpool had involved the local Ukrainian community in curating the zone:

‘We were involved, but all the decisions were made by Liverpool City Council. And they involved brilliant Ukrainian people from local communities to help them with making choices. That’s what I liked the most about the Ukrainian Village, how local communities were involved in all of it.’

Ukrainian MFA interviewee

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5.8 EuroFestival

EuroFestival launched on 1 May with the unveiling of installations such as Izyum to Liverpool at Liverpool Cathedral, Protect the Beats at Exchange Flags, and Soloveiko Songbird at twelve city-centre sites. A thousand volunteers participated in creating the mass participation film *The People’s Flag*, produced by Jeanfer Jean-Charles & Associates and Northern Town, forming a Eurovision heart out of a Ukrainian flag.

Roman Grygoriv and Illia Razumeiko’s multimedia opera *Chornobyldorf*, which premiered at the 2022 Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival as part of the British Council’s UK/Ukraine Season, also had its first performance that evening at Invisible Wind Factory.

To mark the opening of EuroVillage, The Blue and Yellow Submarine Parade took place on the evening of 5 May in city centre streets surrounding Williamson Square. The parade featured hundreds of performers from different community groups, and ended in the square with music by local DJs Dogshow, Ukrainian vocalist Sofia Pavlichenko, and Ukrainian sopilka (flute) player Bozhena Hamar, playing an instrument that had featured on Ukraine’s Eurovision entries in 2021–2. Kalush Orchestra were simultaneously opening EuroVillage at the Pier Head.

Several case studies of EuroFestival commissions illustrate how the narrative of Liverpool hosting Eurovision on behalf of Ukraine and the surrounding context of culture under attack translated into collaboration and creative practice.

5.8.1 Soloveiko Songbird

These twelve illuminated inflatables in the shape of nightingales, produced by Svitlana Reinish, Anton Dehtiarov, Black_Box, Amigo & Amigo, and M3 Industries, became the flagship UK/Ukrainian collaboration in Liverpool city space during Eurovision 2023. Each bird was designed with motifs inspired by traditional embroidery from a different Ukrainian region, with a visitor-activated light/sound installation and accompanying information board.

The nightingale is the national bird of Ukraine, and many Eurovision fans would have recognised it as the title of the song with which Go_A would have represented Ukraine in 2020.

Right Soloveiko Songbird.

Credit: Marketing Liverpool.



This installation's development illustrates the intercultural dialogue that was necessary to create a cultural festival showcasing Ukrainian culture which would satisfy both Liverpool and Ukrainian partners. While Culture Liverpool had identified the artwork as an impressive pitch from the beginning, Ukrainians had initially been concerned the placement of traditional motifs on these iconic birds might appear clichéd.

After dialogue, both teams agreed that the birds would be a 'showstopper' which would be very well received by residents, parents and children, as indeed they became.⁶⁶ The Ukrainian Institute reflected on it as 'a good example of an accessible project that still conveyed important cultural messages to us', and appreciated being listened to in the partnership.⁶⁷

5.8.2 Dialogues

The visual art exhibition Dialogues was a collaboration between the Bluecoat and the Jam Factory Art Center in Lviv, featuring Liverpool-based artist Ellie Hoskins and Ukrainian artist Alevtina Kakhidze. Kakhidze had already visited Liverpool during the first round of the British Council's SWAP: UK/Ukraine Residency Programme in 2016, and another Ukrainian SWAP participant, Olena Kasperovych, suggested her as a partner to the Bluecoat team.

Dialogues explored how two artists with different relationships to the war could find a common visual language and sense of humour. Kakhidze's contribution to the exhibition included an English-language audio piece and drawings that dealt with themes of invasivity, resistance and the environment, inspired by the resilience of the tardigrade and the impact of the Chernobyl disaster on Ukraine. Hoskins also found inspiration in the microorganism as they discussed their ideas online before Kakhidze came to Liverpool.

The Eurovision context influenced the exhibition by making both artists aware of the huge volume of tourists who would be in Liverpool but might not often go to contemporary art galleries. They agreed Kakhidze's work should be in a room with windows so that passers-by would be more likely to notice it, because Ukraine had lost the opportunity to welcome Eurovision tourists itself in 2023. Kakhidze also suggested putting a table with recent books about Ukrainian art and resistance in the exhibition space, with chairs so that visitors could talk to each other. This proved popular among the Bluecoat's 8,000 visitors during EuroFestival.

5.8.3 QIRIM

Jamala, the winner of Eurovision 2016 with a song that responded to Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, played important roles in both the BBC's Live Shows and EuroFestival. Her EuroFestival commission was the live premiere of her new album QIRIM, comprising fourteen traditional songs inspired by different parts of Crimea. More than eighty Crimean musicians had contributed to the album in 2021, some of whom have since been interrogated by Russian authorities, and her producer had had to rescue the recordings from Kyiv in 2022 after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine began.⁶⁸

QIRIM represented an intensely personal project for Jamala, who has Crimean Tatar heritage and whose great-grandmother was among the Crimean Tatars deported to Kyrgyzstan by Stalin in 1944. Music and other intangible heritage had become even more significant symbols of Crimean Tatar identity during this trauma as deportees had had to leave most belongings behind.⁶⁹

Developing the concept of the premiere at EuroVillage thus took negotiation in order to persuade all partners that the venue would be appropriate for this intimate, emotive work. EuroFestival programmers listened to Jamala's creative team and ensured the day's EuroVillage programming would build up suitably to the premiere, including a set by another contemporary Ukrainian artist (KRUTb) and performances by the Serbian and Croatian Eurovision entrants who also came from more alternative musical genres.

The event communicated Jamala's narratives of Crimea to a live audience of more than 10,000, with associated media coverage, and set a potential precedent for future host cities to widen the creative scope of EuroVillage programming.

5.8.4 With Fire And Rage

The immersive audio trail *With Fire And Rage*, collaboratively developed by Artists on the Frontline and Parade-Fest Kharkiv, used video, visual art, 360-degree photography, poetry and music to engage visitors with Ukrainian artists' testimonies about the impact of Russia's attack on Ukraine and past Russian suppression of Ukrainian culture. Its creators, Veronika Skliarova and Zoe Lafferty, had previously worked together in 2020 through the British Council's UK/ Ukrainian theatre residency programme *Taking the Stage*. They had stayed in touch, and after February 2022 wrote an article together for *The Stage* about how artists were responding to attacks on cultural property.

To create the work, Skliarova led on producing testimonies and recordings in Ukraine, and Lafferty scouted locations in Liverpool. More than 50 Ukrainian artists contributed to the commission, and the QR code posters which visitors would use to access each testimony were created by a Ukrainian designer, Kateryna Drozd.

The site-specific trail invited visitors to play back multimedia recordings at locations which echoed themes in the testimonies, including the Everyman Theatre, Liverpool Philharmonic, St Luke's Bombed Out Church, the News From Nowhere bookshop, the Bluecoat, Liverpool Central Library, Lovelocks Coffee Shop, Moorfields station, and Liverpool Parish Church.

Collectively, the testimonies recorded how theatre-makers, musicians, journalists, writers, photographers, women's/LGBTQ+ activists and film-makers from diverse parts of Ukraine were experiencing the invasion and resisting attempts to erase Ukrainian cultural identity. One speaker was the writer Victoria Amelina, who described recovering the buried diary of the author Volodymyr Vakulenko after he had been killed by Russian forces in Izyum. Amelina was herself killed on 1 July 2023 during the Russian missile attack on Kramatorsk.

The work's opt-in, smartphone-based format allowed it to deal with mature, challenging and political themes such as the Russian bombing of Mariupol Drama Theatre, the politics of Russian language and literature in today's Ukraine, sexual violence committed by Russian troops in occupied territory, and the implications of seeing both Russia and Britain as colonial powers.

Audio also enabled the team to include many more Ukrainian artists than they could have brought to Liverpool with the available funding, and to involve male artists who were unable to leave Ukraine, such as the theatre/film director Dmytro Kostyumynskyi, who had volunteered for the military and sent his contribution as voice messages from the front.

'Within a context of Eurovision, which potentially is quite light and fun, I was quite happy that it was really heavy and it was very intense. [...] Maybe if you were to do it in a festival where that isn't a context, you'd approach it slightly differently. But I certainly felt like, in that festival, it was important to go, "And here's something that is heavy and complex."

UK artist

We wanted it to be visible that the performance is talking about war. But not victimising. We could suggest pictures of destroyed buildings, but it's not about destroyed buildings, it's about flowers that can grow, it's about artists that can perform and can transform their sorrow and their pain into art.

Ukrainian artist

The team estimated that 1,000+ visitors engaged with the tour, though the accessible mode of delivery precluded collecting more detailed visitor data. While its audience may have been small, it illustrated how EuroFestival gave UK and Ukrainian collaborations the creative freedom to make challenging, politically-engaged work.

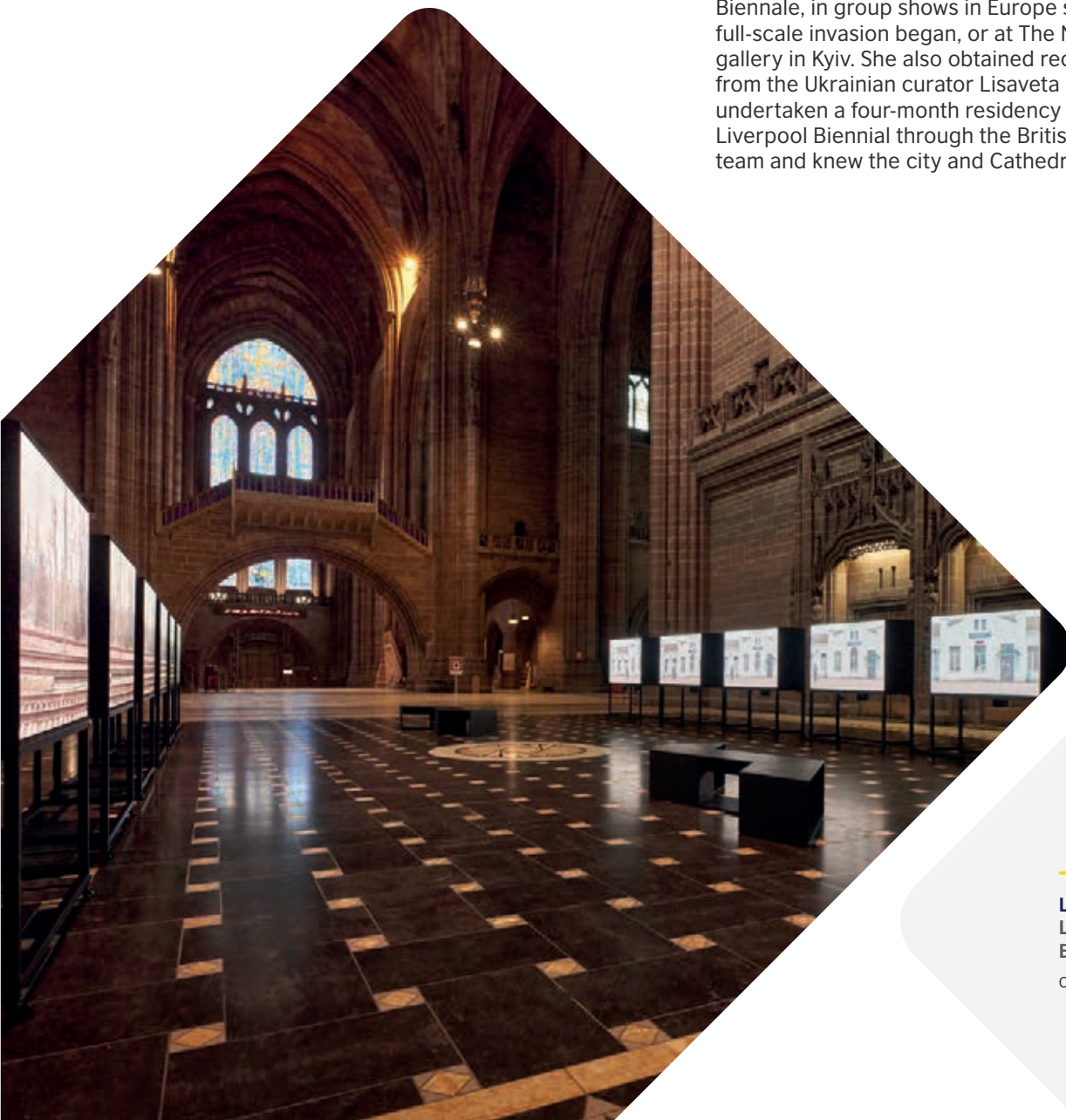
5.8.5 Izyum To Liverpool

The 12-channel video installation 'Izyum to Liverpool', exhibited at Liverpool Cathedral during EuroFestival, was created by the Ukrainian artist Katya Buchatska depicting a rail journey westwards from Izyum to Lviv and towards western Europe, echoing the journeys of millions of displaced Ukrainians since February 2022. It was filmed in March 2023 with the cooperation of Ukrainian Railways and installed in Liverpool Cathedral's main space as a EuroFestival commission between 28 April and 19 May 2023.

Liverpool Cathedral has a history of engagement with large-scale events in the city, including commissioning Tracey Emin's light installation 'For You' for ECoc 2008. It was already seeking to host more art exhibitions before Liverpool was awarded Eurovision 2023, leading up to its centenary in 2024. Within a week of the host city announcement, and before EuroFestival had even been announced, the Cathedral had decided it wanted to participate in tie-in programming. Its cultural programme manager, Elisa Nocente, suggested partnering with a Ukrainian artist to express solidarity with Ukraine. This collaboration would likely have gone ahead even without EuroFestival funding, but the funding allowed the commission to be developed on a greater scale.

Nocente identified that a video installation would be logistically easier to present in Liverpool than a physical artwork, and that women artists would not face the same travel restrictions as men in visiting Liverpool if based in Ukraine. Selecting a female artist also improved the gender balance of the Cathedral's commissions.

Nocente began researching contemporary Ukrainian artists online, for instance by identifying artists featured at past Ukrainian pavilions in the Venice Biennale, in group shows in Europe since Russia's full-scale invasion began, or at The Naked Room gallery in Kyiv. She also obtained recommendations from the Ukrainian curator Lisaveta German, who had undertaken a four-month residency with the 2016 Liverpool Biennial through the British Council's SWAP team and knew the city and Cathedral space.



Left Izyum to Liverpool (Katya Buchatska).

Credit: Rob Battersby.

Following online studio visits with Ukrainian artists, Nocente proposed Buchatska to the Cathedral team in late November 2022. Buchatska had formed the idea while travelling by train after Russia's full-scale invasion and noticing an emergency exit hammer, which made her perceive that the space outside was now as dangerous as staying inside a crashed train.⁷⁰ Her concept fitted well with the cathedral's objectives to create a more serious counterpoint to the joyful atmosphere of Eurovision given that it was only happening in the UK because of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

The following week, Nocente read details of the EuroFestival call in a Culture Liverpool newsletter. Despite the run-up to Advent and Christmas being the busiest time of year for Liverpool Cathedral, the team sent an outline proposal to EuroFestival and heard that it had been shortlisted in mid-December. EuroFestival's development stage funding, for a full proposal to be submitted in mid-January, allowed the Cathedral to invite Buchatska for a site visit, which would have enabled cooperation on a smaller commission even if the proposal had not been successful at the final stage.

In late January 2023, Liverpool Cathedral heard the commission would be funded, and started meeting with Culture Liverpool's creative commissions producer Bren O'Callaghan. Buchatska visited the cathedral in early February and was inspired by World War II bomb marks on the cathedral building to remind UK visitors how easily war can come to a country. Parts of the Ukrainian landscape could also have reminded UK visitors of rail journeys through Wales or the North.

Nocente and Buchatska met regularly online and closely collaborated to develop the project. They discussed the curatorial and technical aspects of the presentation in Liverpool and the logistical aspects of shooting the film in Ukraine, bearing in mind the vulnerable context the artist worked in.

Right Izyum to Liverpool (Katya Buchatska).

Credit: Rob Battersby.

The filmed rail journey was originally to take place in February, but due to the risk of a Russian anniversary offensive took place in March. A crew of 8 accompanied Buchatska, including project manager Anna Potyomkina and composer George Potopalsky who recorded a soundscape for the soundtrack. Buchatska worked intensively on post-production with an editor in Kyiv to ready the installation for a soft launch on 28 April, and created a printed travel map of the journey for Cathedral visitors. The work's final title highlighted Izyum as a less well-known city that had been hit by Russian attacks.

While the commission was in place, Nocente organised a talk by German on Ukrainian art during the war and another in-conversation event with Buchatska. An interpretation text and Cathedral welcome leaflet were translated into Chinese, Dutch, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Spanish, Portuguese, and Ukrainian, based on the Cathedral's typical visitor profiles plus expectations about Eurovision visitors. Some languages were translated in partnership with University of Liverpool language students. A total of 36,815 people visited the Cathedral while Izyum to Liverpool was open.

A smaller, one-channel version of the installation has since been shown at the Baltic Art Center in Gotland, Sweden (which deferred Buchatska's residency to October 2023 so that she could participate in Liverpool), and the National Railway Museum in York plans to acquire prints. Coincidentally, the Gotland showing means the commission has already travelled to the host country of Eurovision Song Contest 2024.



HOW CAN
I USE IT
IF THE
DANGER
IS OUTSIDE
TOO?

As an established organisation in the city with an existing arts strategy and budget, Liverpool Cathedral would likely have cooperated with a Ukrainian partner on a commission tying into Eurovision 2023 even without EuroFestival, but could create more ambitious work because of EuroFestival and the funding that Liverpool secured to make it possible.

EuroFestival was much shorter than the year that the Cathedral would usually have allowed, and a longer lead time might have made it more possible to develop further outreach activities such as suggested workshops with displaced Ukrainian children. 'Izyum to Liverpool' was nevertheless among EuroFestival's most visited commissions, and among its most serious depictions of the war.

5.8.6 Rave Ukraine

Rave Ukraine took the form of simultaneous raves in Liverpool and Kyiv clubs, livestreamed to each other on the afternoon of 7 May 2023 and developed by the founder and director of the Birmingham Music Archive, Jez Collins, in partnership with the Ukrainian NGO Music Saves UA.

Collins's organisation had contributed to the 2022 Commonwealth Games cultural programming with projects including *In the Que*, on rave culture in Birmingham. He was also aware of the Ukrainian volunteer initiative *Repair Together*, which had been holding daytime raves while rebuilding homes in villages that were occupied and liberated in 2022. When the EuroFestival call for commissions appeared, Collins conceived of the concept and title, and connected with Music Saves UA and the Liverpool social enterprise *Open Culture* to develop the idea.

The UK and Ukrainian partners worked in parallel to book venues and acts in each city. Logistically, Kyiv's night-time curfews demanded that the rave had to take place in the afternoon. In other ways logistics were easier in Ukraine than the UK, where the event's humanitarian character complicated negotiations with commercial venues and promoters.

The club HVLV hosted the Kyiv rave. Liverpool's was at Hangar 34, with sets from two Ukrainian DJs (Mingulitka and human margareeta) alongside UK acts like Hot Chip and Jodie Harsh.

'Music brings people together so it doesn't matter if you are a diehard Eurovision fan or whether you hate Eurovision or whether you're a diehard raver or you hate rave. Actually we've all come together for the same thing, that's about music, and how music can bring people together and create expression and overcome language and cultural barriers and wars.'

UK producer

Rave Ukraine attracted global press attention and amplified the narrative that cultural expression remains vibrant in Ukraine as a form of resistance to Russia's attacks on Ukrainian cultural identity. If hosted in a larger capacity venue, it would likely have raised even more funds for Music Saves UA, its humanitarian partner.

The profile of the commission and the enthusiasm it generated suggests there would be follow-on potential to host another simultaneous rave with the UK venue at a music festival like Glastonbury, or to take a follow-on tour of UK DJs to Kyiv, if further funding and assistance with networking became available.

5.9 Everyday visitor experience

Liverpool's attention to visitor experience, honed through the city's experience with large events since European Capital of Culture, provided the backdrop for 473,000 attendances at Eurovision events in the city, 306,000 individual visits to the city, and almost 31,000 visits from outside the UK.⁷¹ This included 58,837 attendances at the Live Shows, 250,000 total EuroVillage visits, 164,651 visits to other events including EuroFestival commissions, and 65,652 visitors coming to the city without attending events.⁷²

Culture Liverpool embedded the context of hosting on behalf of Ukraine into its visitor economy stakeholder briefings by involving displaced Ukrainian participants or incorporating Ukrainian content in each event. While local stakeholders were familiar with the process of mobilising the city for large-scale events, the added need to sense-check political and cultural sensitivities was a dynamic that most had not had to consider before Eurovision 2023.

Decorations in Liverpool shops and businesses during the event fortnight widely used the Ukrainian flag, and sometimes words of welcome in Ukrainian, alongside UK flags, Pride flags, and symbols of Eurovision including disco balls, famous contestants' outfits, and participating countries' flags in Eurovision hearts. Juxtapositions of Ukrainian and Pride flags were common and seemed to symbolise two communities that residents felt were both celebrated by the event.

The Eurovision delivery team facilitated the city's saturation with Eurovision branding by developing a separate community brand, 'Proud to Welcome', which was available for businesses and organisations in the Liverpool City Region to use and was launched on 15 March. In contrast to frequent frictions between community groups and organising committees over tie-in visuals during the Olympic Games, the EBU's flexibility in permitting a community brand multiplied the impact of official city dressing and may also have given residents a greater sense of stewardship over their city's welcome to visitors because organisers had trusted them with a version of the brand.

The UK branch of the contest's international fan network, OGAE UK, contributed to delivery by taking charge of the programming at Liverpool's EuroClub venue, Camp and Furnace. EuroClub is the official Eurovision Song Contest nightclub and, besides EuroVillage, is the other place-based space that the EBU requires host cities to provide.

As with EuroVillage, Liverpool's delivery of EuroClub broadened its concept beyond the venue's traditional function, in this case a meeting place for broadcaster delegations and accredited media. Instead, EuroClub operated as a commercial club with ticket sales and 50–70 spaces a day reserved for delegations. Camp and Furnace held the commercial risk/benefit and brought OGAE on as content lead, trusting the club to create a programme with a diverse range of artists that would sell tickets and come within a set budgetary framework.

'I was keen from the outset that Ukrainian acts should feature heavily in our programme for the event, in the same way the City Council were really keen to involve Ukrainian cultural elements in the EuroVillage [and] the EuroFestival.'

OGAE UK interviewee

Kalush Orchestra performed at EuroClub on 6 May, and a range of UK and international Eurovision acts appeared on other nights.

Some community-focused events also indirectly contributed to the atmosphere visitors experienced, even if they were taking place outside the city centre, since they would have communicated a narrative of Liverpool's creativity and community involvement to visitors seeing coverage of them.

'People did not expect those commissions. They didn't expect Eurovision being done in care homes across the whole City Region and they didn't expect little children to be learning Ukrainian sign language.'

Culture Liverpool interviewee

Liverpool John Moores University's study of nightlife and entertainment users in Liverpool during Eurovision found that 54.3% said they had made new acquaintances, 84.9% had enjoyed meeting new people, and 92.6% felt a sense of belonging. More than 95% agreed that Eurovision helps bring nations together and celebrate different cultures.⁷³

13.0% of all its participants were international visitors, and 12.0% of all its participants had visited at least one past host city for Eurovision. Most participants with experience of other host cities agreed Liverpool was better for nightlife, drinking, dancing, friendliness, and knowing where to get help. More than 98% of the participants overall agreed that Liverpool had a festive atmosphere during Eurovision and that people were friendly and welcoming.⁷⁴

5.10 The Live Shows

Elements of the Live Shows where the BBC could communicate the narrative of hosting on behalf of Ukraine included opening and interval acts for each broadcast, the postcard films before each entry, and scripted presenter interactions. The choice of Live Show presenters – Hannah Waddingham, Alesha Dixon, and Julia Sanina, plus Graham Norton for the Grand Final – itself embodied a narrative of UK/Ukrainian cooperation. It also embodied the 'United by Music' theme, since Waddingham, Dixon and Sanina each came from different musical genres.

Each Live Show had its own creative concept. Semi-Final 1 aimed to acknowledge the context behind why Ukraine was not hosting the contest to the extent that the BBC shows could. Semi-Final 2 aimed to celebrate the fun and inclusivity of Eurovision, and the Grand Final had to reinscribe the production team's core narrative for viewers who had not seen the other shows.

5.10.1 Semi-Final 1

Welcome to Liverpool: Semi-Final 1's opening film retold Liverpool's excitement about being chosen as host city and passion to host on behalf of Ukraine through scenes of local residents and personalities – including Paul O'Grady in his last television appearance – preparing to decorate the city (often in blue and yellow), get ready for parties, and welcome Ukrainians. One scene featured a girl from a Ukrainian family who was chosen to symbolise Ukrainian children living in UK. The scene showed her teaching her classmates how to say 'Welcome to Liverpool' in Ukrainian.

Synegina worked with displaced Ukrainians and host households to source participants and authentic Ukrainian food for another scene:

'There were some younger people in Liverpool who had taken in some Ukrainians, and we got them together. It was just a short scene where they were seen eating together. And it was borsch, it was important it was Ukrainian food, and there was a trident symbol tattoo on one of the Ukrainians. Just small details, which probably most people would not notice. But I think if you're watching in Ukraine, you'd be like, "Wow, they've really paid attention to detail."'

BBC Studios interviewee

EUROVISION

SONG CONTEST

UNITED KINGDOM LIVERPOOL 2023

Right Alesha Dixon, Julia Sanina, Hannah Waddingham, and Graham Norton, presenters of Eurovision Song Contest 2023.

Credit: BBC.

United By Music: The first live performance of Semi-Final 1 united the local boy and Ukrainian girl from Welcome to Liverpool in a dance where they moved in sync on opposite sides of a screen, then walked together towards the main stage, set to a version of Phil Oakey's 'Together In Electric Dreams'. The production team interpreted the song on two levels:

'One that we're together with Ukraine, but also, remembering back to 1956 why Eurovision was created, it was created after the war to bring Europe together, and television was in its infancy, and through the power of the electric dreams we were able to share these moments together.'

BBC Studios interviewee

The main stage performance opened into Sanina performing an English-language version of The Hardkiss's recent song 'Lighthouse', with a guitar solo from her husband and bandmate Val Bebko. This meant the first professional performers shown at Eurovision 2023 were Ukrainian, and introduced Sanina to viewers as a rock musician.

Welcome to Our House: This widely-acclaimed interval act featured Alyosha, Ukraine's Eurovision representative in 2010, and Liverpool-born Rebecca Ferguson, performing a bilingual version of Duran Duran's 'Ordinary World', with spectacular digital graphics created by the Ukrainian multimedia company Freckled Sky. As Dixon explained while introducing the act to viewers, its narrative was based on Alyosha's own experiences of fleeing Ukraine and having to separate from her husband in 2022.

This act's creative development was explicitly Ukrainian-led. The BBC production team had invited Freckled Sky to participate in autumn 2022, and entrusted the narrative development to Skybinska and Nenov. Their suggestion of Alyosha's personal story also inspired the emotive digital effects.

'Alyosha had mentioned that, sometimes when you're on your laptop or your phone speaking to your other half in Ukraine you just want to jump into the screen, because you can't physically touch them. And I think that's what we wanted to try and get across in the graphics.'

BBC Studios interviewee

Rita Ora medley: Rita Ora's performance was intended to create an upbeat and engaging moment for the wider audience, but had added resonance with the semi-final theme because of Ora's personal experience of displacement as a refugee from Kosovo in the 1990s. At Ora's suggestion, the medley opened on a young Ukrainian ballet dancer who had settled in the UK, representing Ora's own innocence as a child before becoming a star.

5.10.2 Semi-Final 2

Semi-Final 2's creative concept was designed to celebrate the fun and inclusivity of Eurovision, and contained one interval act developed by Suspilne and another developed by the BBC.

Sanina and Waddingham's introduction to the Suspilne act, **Music Unites Generations**, reminded viewers that UK and Ukrainian talent were cooperating on and behind the scenes. Mariya Yaremchuk, Ukraine's representative at Eurovision Song Contest 2014, performed the song 'Rodyna' by her father Nazariy Yaremchuk, who was known for singing only in Ukrainian during Soviet rule, and Myroslav Skoryk's 'Melody', a symbol of Holodomor commemoration in Ukraine.⁷⁵

The rapper OTOY, whose brother was killed defending Mariupol, performed a version of Taras Shevchenko's famous poem 'A Cherry Orchard by the House', and the Junior Eurovision Song Contest 2022 winner Zlata Dziunka plus a Ukrainian choir from north-west England joined Yaremchuk in performing the traditional Ukrainian song 'Shchedryk', which was translated into English in 1936 as 'Carol of the Bells' and popularised in 1990 by the movie *Home Alone*.⁷⁶

After the act, a dialogue between Sanina and Waddingham informed viewers about the famous carol's Ukrainian origins, leading into Sanina teaching Waddingham how to say 'United by Music' in Ukrainian. Synegina had championed this scene and, with Sanina, was able to establish its positive reception in Ukraine by monitoring positive perceptions on social networks.

'It's a really old melody, one hundred years old. And I think no one in the world knows this is properly Ukrainian. And we want to talk about this because it's our history, because we're proud of this.'

Ukrainian producer

In the BBC act, **Be Who You Want To Be**, drag queens took the place of the three presenters and performed a medley of pop songs about empowerment and self-expression, surrounded by dancers expressing many kinds of bodily and subcultural diversity.

5.10.3 The Grand Final

In developing acts for the Grand Final, producers were aware it would reach millions of viewers who had not seen either Semi-Final, so had to reinscribe their narrative's core themes.

Traditionally, host broadcasters open Grand Finals with a film depicting their own country and city. The 2023 opening film, **Voices of a New Generation**, began in the Kyiv metro with Kalush Orchestra performing 'Stefania' and showed its melody connecting with UK musicians in many genres, including a string quartet, Sam Ryder atop the Liver Building, Andrew Lloyd Webber, Joss Stone, Miss Banks, and the Princess of Wales at Windsor Castle. A Ukrainian company, 1+1 Media, filmed the Kyiv sequences.

'We wanted the opening of the final to be in Ukraine, and then travel to Liverpool. Because essentially the reason that we were all in Liverpool is that Ukraine won. [...] We filmed in the metro, which is where they film a lot of their TV shows at the moment, because it's safer to film.'

BBC Studios interviewee

The film segued into Kalush Orchestra performing 'Stefania' and their new song 'Changes' on the arena stage with props of giant hands (a motif from their Eurovision Song Contest 2022 performance) and the image of 'Mama Stefania', the frontman's mother, as a backdrop. Dancers wore outfits inspired by vyshyvankas.

The **Flag Parade**, where artists enter in running order with their national flags, featured four past Ukrainian Eurovision acts (Go_A, Jamala, Tina Karol, Verka Serduchka) performing their entries, selected in consultation with Suspilne who advised on which were best remembered internationally. These were mixed with famous UK pop, indie and dance tracks by the Chemical Brothers, the Eurythmics, S'Express, and Blur. The performer behind Verka's character, Andriy Danylko, suggested the last song, Blur's 'Song #2', to introduce a rock version of Verka's entry 'Dancing Lasha Tumbai'.

Sam Ryder's appearance in the interval with Roger Taylor of Queen was also discussed with Suspilne to ensure it would not be taken as implying that the UK had won in 2022. The friendship Ryder had struck up with Kalush in Turin eased this process, and a Ukrainian dancer joined the group of disabled and prosthetic-using dancers in his performance.

The centrepiece interval act, **The Liverpool Songbook**, paid tribute to the host city's musical heritage with six well-known Eurovision acts from different countries (Mahmood, Netta Barzilai, Daði Freyr, Cornelia Jakobs, Sonia, and Duncan Laurence) performing hits by Liverpool artists, including Sonia's own UK entry from 1993. Laurence's version of 'You'll Never Walk Alone' was linked with Ruslana and a group of Ukrainian children performing the same song at Kyiv's Golden Gate. It closed with the presenters, Flag Parade acts and interval act cast walking up behind Laurence in a moment that many remembered as the most moving of the night.

'The song is so symbolic anyway, in the city of Liverpool. It's got such meaning. And just the lyrics. The sentiment of You'll Never Walk Alone was the perfect anthem to finish Liverpool Songbook, to show Europe's solidarity with Ukraine.'

BBC Studios interviewee

With funding from DCMS, 3,000 subsidised tickets across the arena shows were made available for displaced Ukrainians who had settled in the UK on the three UK Government visa schemes. This was also acknowledged during the broadcast.

A request by President Zelenskyy to address the Grand Final audience was, however, turned down by EBU management on 11 May. The organisation explained that the contest's non-political nature prohibited 'the possibility of making political or similar statements', and emphasised that the involvement of Ukrainian musicians, designers and postcard locations were the best way to honour Ukraine during the show.⁷⁷

Shortly before TVORCHI were due to perform in the Grand Final, the Ukrainian delegation had to manage news that the band's home city Ternopil had been struck by Russian missiles. The band performed as scheduled, posted about the attack on Instagram before and after their performance, and held up a handwritten sign with the city's name when the camera came to Ukraine's delegation in the green room.⁷⁸ The broadcast did not refer to the attack, but viewers also using social media might have seen the news, which underlined that Ukraine was still under full-scale attack.

One important dimension of Eurovision 2023 that could not feature prominently in the Live Shows was EuroFestival. This was because VTs had had to be filmed before it opened. Audiences who did not visit Liverpool were dependent on their national media and any content from Liverpool creators they consumed to be able to appreciate how much Liverpool had delivered on this scale.

Right Eurovision Song Contest 2023 presenters and Ukraine's Kalush Orchestra congratulate the Eurovision Song Contest 2023 winner Loreen.

Credit: BBC.



6 Process tracing: analysis

Every Eurovision Song Contest projects a narrative about place, and host cities' and countries' opportunities to broadcast narratives about themselves to the contest's mass audience are widely recognised as a benefit of hosting the event. Creating the place-based narrative of Eurovision 2023, however, was a unique creative challenge, because the previous year's winning country was still under attack and unable to enjoy those benefits itself.

UK stakeholders and the EBU all felt strong responsibilities towards authentically representing Ukrainian culture in these circumstances, which demanded even deeper cultural relations activity than the routes of exchange that are embedded into the annual event.

Key partnerships in creating the narrative of hosting on behalf of Ukraine was the BBC's partnership with Suspilne plus guidance by the EBU, Culture Liverpool's partnership with the Ukrainian Institute, and the three-way partnership between the BBC, Liverpool and DCMS. Stakeholders viewed all three partnerships as impressively successful.

Eurovision 2023 witnessed the building of new UK/ Ukrainian cultural friendships and partnerships, though these were seeded by networks created before 2022. Stakeholders had to negotiate the challenges of working together in a context where one country was experiencing full-scale invasion and partners in the other country were physically and culturally distanced from the war, and the challenges of Eurovision's production timescale, which was additionally compressed in 2022–3 by the time taken to negotiate the hosting of the event.

Evidence from Eurovision 2023 illustrates how UK stakeholders presented the UK as a respectful partner in cultural relations through their cooperation with Ukrainian stakeholders, and indeed through changing perceptions of Eurovision in the UK. It also shows that the context of an internationally televised music competition and the context of a place-based cultural festival set very different parameters for creative responses to the impact of Russia's war on Ukraine, with the festival offering much more creative freedom.

Key insights from analysing the process tracing include:

- The delivery of Eurovision 2023 illustrated trust-building values such as inclusivity, diversity and internationalism
- The strategic narrative of hosting Eurovision 2023 'on behalf of' Ukraine reinforced these values and was incorporated into all delivery strands, publicity considerations and policy documentation
- These values were also reinforced by the strategic alignment with the history, identity and 'spirit' of Liverpool as host city
- Partners both on the Live Shows and on the place-based event were sensitive to the context of Russia's war on Ukraine and the importance of co-narrating a 'reimagined' modern Ukraine to a global audience in these circumstances
- The BBC was seen as a trusted partner which boosted the reputation and visibility of the Eurovision Song Contest and stakeholders associated with it
- The UK's extensive festival and cultural mega-event production expertise and skills infrastructure, applied to Eurovision, illustrated that organisational expertise can be a source of reputational uplift and soft power. However, this capacity is likely to be at risk without continued public investment in the culture sector
- Liverpool was unique as a host city for having hosted several large-scale multi-partner cultural events in recent years and developing an extensive evaluation methodology for these. Its significant place-based networks of knowledge enabled it to respond creatively at pace and scale to the short-notice opportunity to host Eurovision 2023
- For the UK, Eurovision 2023 affirmed the country's existing reputation for its expertise and creativity in hosting large-scale cultural events, while for Liverpool it brought the contemporary city brand and the city's reputation for events expertise to new audiences, complementing the international reputation for music heritage that Liverpool already enjoys
- Liverpool's local communities acted as a cultural relations asset, sometimes in unexpected and unplanned ways. Future mega-event organisers should not underestimate the potential soft-power value of relational, place-based and people-centred approaches. Indeed, the combination of place-based and people-centred thinking in Liverpool's approach was decisive in creating the event's acclaimed atmosphere
- The framework of the Eurovision Song Contest as a non-political event created latent tensions with the geopolitical context in 2023 and with contentions over who is welcomed or included in society, which have political dimensions. Participants chiefly negotiated these by framing their own purposes as non-political, though there was more creative freedom to explore political contentions in EuroFestival commissions, which were not subject to broadcast rules



The BBC's relationship with Suspilne paralleled Culture Liverpool's relationship with the Ukrainian Institute in embedding this commitment to listening and learning across both the televised and place-based pillars of the event. While the BBC and Suspilne had an established working relationship through the EBU, Culture Liverpool's cooperation with the Ukrainian Institute was new. Ukrainian stakeholders emphasised the importance of accuracy and detail in building their confidence about how UK partners would represent Ukraine.

6.1 Commitments to authenticity

BBC and Liverpool stakeholders both expressed heartfelt commitments towards representing Ukrainian culture authentically. This was evident from the EBU's first press release announcing the BBC as host, and formed part of the BBC's host city selection criteria.

Culture Liverpool's cooperation with local Ukrainians during the bid stage enabled Liverpool to stand out to Ukrainian partners in the pitch process with its commitment to representing Ukraine. This cooperation rested in turn on the city's long-standing connections with Ukraine, including its twinning agreement with Odesa dating back to 1957, and the scale of community mobilisation in Liverpool for Ukrainian causes after February 2022.

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'Authenticity' is, of course, a contested concept. Every national culture contains diverse perspectives on what counts as 'authentic' representation of the nation, as research on debates around early Ukrainian Eurovision entries has shown.⁷⁹ An authentic representation of Ukraine for the Ukrainian Institute, for instance, was one which reflected 'the diversity of voices from Ukraine' in regional and ethnic terms, in terms of sexual diversity, and in its balance between artists who were still in or had been displaced from Ukraine.⁸⁰

Folklore required particularly sensitive handling due to its significance in Ukrainian cultural politics. Before Ukraine's independence, Soviet authorities had created a stylised, state-sponsored form of folklore known pejoratively as 'sharovarshchyna' which erased regional specificities, constrained free Ukrainian cultural expression, and was seen as suppressing Ukrainian cultural consciousness as a modern nation.⁸¹

Against this background, artists such as Go_A, Kalush Orchestra, and Jamala represent a movement in Ukrainian cultural production since the 2013–14 Euromaidan protests and Revolution of Dignity which is fusing elements of folklore with innovative, contemporary creative techniques, asserting the heritage of a Ukraine free from direct or indirect Russian control. Suspilne, and Ukrainian viewers who vote during national song selections, have increasingly opted to present this current dynamic in Ukrainian culture to Eurovision audiences, who have received it enthusiastically. Liverpool's early determination to represent 'the best of young Ukraine' in its Eurovision aligned well with this context.⁸²

The Ukrainian Institute itself is a product of Ukraine's cultural context, since the Revolution of Dignity, it was established as an affiliate organisation of the Ukrainian MFA in 2017 and began working in 2018. Its orientation towards bilateral cultural relations equipped it well to participate in developing EuroFestival and reaching shared understandings with the Liverpool team:

'As opposed to the more obsolete concept of cultural diplomacy, which is basically a one-way projection of a country's narrative or narratives internationally, this is very much about a dialogue, co-creation, listening to each other and exploring themes that are relevant to both or all parties involved.'

Ukrainian Institute interviewee

Through the process of developing commissions, the Institute's ability to advise the Liverpool team and matchmake between UK artists and the Ukrainian cultural scene sometimes made it possible to turn well-meaning UK applications which had a strong idea but initially less sophisticated understanding of Ukrainian heritage and culture into commissions with greater cultural insight.

Ukrainian partners' involvement in creating the narrative and representation of productions was essential for BBC producers, EuroFestival developers and UK artists to deliver their contributions with accuracy and the necessary pace, at whatever scale they worked. Participants with high-level perspectives on the event recognised that partners' shared vision had been essential to deliver to its compressed timescale, 'and that's quite rare, especially when you're having conversations with producers who are sitting in war bunkers.'⁸³

Ukrainian stakeholders felt listened to, and most UK interviewees felt comfortable with how UK and Ukrainian involvement was balanced in the process, though occasionally it was questioned whether EuroFestival could have also contained Ukrainian commissions which did not need UK partners.

Artists were also more likely to express the view that, to authentically represent Ukraine in 2023, it was necessary to represent the impact of Russia's war on the country. The Live Shows and EuroFestival operated within different parameters for how they could do this.

6.2 Creative contrasts between the Live Shows and EuroFestival

While the BBC's Live Shows and Liverpool's EuroFestival both shaped the overall narrative of Eurovision 2023, their different formats, audiences and purposes also led to contrasts in their creative approach. In particular, EuroFestival offered artists more creative freedom in narrating the impact of Russia's war on Ukraine than was possible on a primetime BBC entertainment show.

At BBC production level, the team were clear that Ukraine was facing 'an unjust and cruel war' of international aggression.⁸⁴ The brand playbook reminded content creators that Ukraine was 'currently in the biggest fight of its life' and Ukrainians were 'fighting for their freedom.'⁸⁵ Direct editorialising about the war, however, was perceived as inappropriate for several reasons. It would be unsuitable for primetime television entertainment or the Song Contest atmosphere, and could also be perceived as unfairly favouring Ukraine over other competitors. Ukrainian stakeholders who cooperated with the event may have disagreed with this decision but accepted it as part of the partnership.

One political issue which the Live Shows and cultural festival both had to negotiate was that of mentioning Russia as the party attacking Ukraine. The Live Shows' script did not mention Russia or the word 'war' (though 'war' did appear in one entry's lyrics, from Croatia). Nor did the brand playbook mention Russia directly. An editorial line of being 'pro-Ukraine' rather than 'anti-Russia', which guided EuroFestival producers as well as the BBC, was developed through the BBC/Liverpool/DCMS tripartite group, with guidance from DCMS's liaison with FCDO.⁸⁶

The EBU's Reference Group had also reviewed and approved all contest entries in March to ensure they met contest rules, including the rule against politicising or instrumentalising the contest. The entries from Switzerland, Czechia and Croatia in particular dealt with themes of war, peace and resistance to aggression. All three entries qualified for the Grand Final and made additional contributions to the Live Shows' narrative of the war, within the limits of the EBU's understanding of what would or would not politicise the event.

Not all the constraints of the Live Shows applied to EuroFestival commissions, which were able to explore the war and its impact on Ukrainian culture in more challenging ways. They could for instance criticise Russia, refer to Russian air attacks and their effects, or refer to the longer-term history of Russian colonialism as well as Russia's full-scale invasion. The spontaneity of live unbroadcast performance settings also gave artists more freedom in the narratives they voiced.

This contrast in approaches to depicting culture during war fulfilled the overall creative approach for the event, which had recognised the constraints of a live television show with competition rules on the responsibilities that delivery partners felt towards Ukraine.

'I said I thought sometimes we should trust art and culture to say things that maybe we can't say in other ways.'

Event managing director

Indeed, the opportunity to inject something ‘heavy and complex’ into a programme accompanying the ‘light and fun’ atmosphere of Eurovision offered some artists creative inspiration.⁸⁷

EuroFestival also enabled artists to prompt more pointed reflection among visitors about the UK’s place in the world, and to deal critically with themes inspired by the politics of Eurovision such as anti-LGBTQ+ politics in and beyond the UK, or the UK’s relationship with Europe since Brexit. Traces of war in Blitz damage at sites such as St Luke’s Church or Liverpool Cathedral prompted some artists to use local and national memory of the Blitz as a bridge towards empathy with civilians suffering aerial bombing today. Perhaps surprisingly, no commissions directly took the opportunity of a ‘European’ contest to tackle the role of Europe in the transatlantic slave trade at headline level, though slavery too is a context on which Liverpool’s heritage sector continues to reflect.

The context of EuroFestival was complex for some artists, as it involved critical engagement with institutions and funders whose agendas they might not share. The Eurovision brand itself was not universally perceived as a match for artists’ own values. Its discourse of unity and inclusion could be seen as too idealistic, they could have reservations that it was Eurocentric, the practice of ‘Big Five’ broadcasters automatically qualifying could be seen as unequal, the event could be seen as not racially diverse enough, or the EBU’s cooperation with a past host country could conflict with an artist’s own solidarities. Participating artists had still chosen to engage with the festival in order to achieve a creative and professional aim.

While the Live Shows dealt thoughtfully with the context of Russia’s war on Ukraine and the displacement of millions of Ukrainians within the limits of BBC and EBU editorial policy, more of the depth with which Eurovision 2023 handled the theme of Ukrainian culture under attack came from Liverpool’s cultural festival. The outcomes of EuroFestival’s creative risk-taking added meaning to the event’s treatment of these themes as a whole, but could mostly only be appreciated by in-person visitors who engaged with the programme. Those who only experienced Eurovision 2023 through broadcast and digital content would have been dependent on what media and content creators showed them to appreciate how the cultural commissions had supported the TV event.

6.3 New UK/Ukrainian cultural partnerships

Eurovision 2023 resulted in numerous new cultural partnerships between UK and Ukrainian stakeholders. Indeed, artists’ enthusiasm for UK/Ukrainian collaboration meant the UK x Ukraine strand became an even bigger aspect of EuroFestival than envisaged.

BBC Studios’ involvement of Ukrainian designers, producers and crew in the Live Shows gave these professionals experience of working on this large a television event that they would otherwise not have been able to access since Ukraine could not host Eurovision 2023. It also aligned with the event’s commitment to capacity-building and employability in Merseyside through steps such as Liverpool’s pre- and post-Eurovision job fairs advertising roles in and beyond the visitor economy or the BBC’s involvement of Liverpool Institute for Performing Arts students in group performances and backstage, where the opportunity for young people to learn from ‘the world’s best producers, designers, directors, scriptwriters, fashion, all descending on a city’ had cultural relations value.⁸⁸



Without the British Council’s mediating role in introducing the Ukrainian Institute to Culture Liverpool, EuroFestival’s representation of Ukrainian culture might not have been as deep and the festival might not have lent so rich a Ukrainian character to place-based activity in the host city during May.

Participants from both countries learned more about how to cooperate across differences in culture and communication styles. One Liverpool producer, for instance, described learning not to rely on the British custom of perceiving feedback through listeners' smiles and eye contact and to make their verbal communication more direct. The BBC production team recognised that, although Ukrainian colleagues spoke English well, easy access to language mediation was still important in the fast-paced environment of the Live Shows:

'Julia speaks perfect English, but I always think it's easier in a live environment where you need to understand something quickly, that that can happen in their native language, so nothing's misunderstood.'

BBC Studios interviewee

Synegina was Sanina's producer during the Live Shows for this reason, and also helped Ukrainian artists who spoke less English feel comfortable on the production through facilitating translation and a WhatsApp group.

Behind the scenes of EuroFestival, the British Council's existing presence in Ukraine had a decisive impact in making UK/Ukrainian partnerships possible. Its understanding of cultural relations meshed with the Ukrainian Institute's approach, and Sheiko's own prior British Council background made him very familiar with the UK's business culture and art sector, though Liverpool was a new city for him to cooperate with. The UK/Ukraine Season of Culture, which was then taking place, further boosted the British Council's already very positive reputation among Ukrainian cultural professionals.⁸⁹

The British Council was able to add value when the unexpected opportunity to kickstart further UK/Ukrainian creative collaborations through EuroFestival arose because of the relationship-building that takes place through its cultural relations approach. Without the British Council's mediating role in introducing the Ukrainian Institute to Culture Liverpool, EuroFestival's representation of Ukrainian culture might not have been as deep and the festival might not have lent so rich a Ukrainian character to place-based activity in the host city during May.

DCMS also played an important facilitating role, in coordinating funders to support EuroFestival and in supporting both the BBC and Culture Liverpool to bring Ukrainian performers and creatives to the UK. To build a business case in government for supporting Eurovision, DCMS had to forecast a return on investment in both economic and social wellbeing terms. DCMS's grant agreements committed the BBC and Culture Liverpool to ensuring that facilitation of Ukrainian performers' involvement would take place, but did not express any further steers over content.



'Everyone was telling me that they never understood the texture of this war. They just saw the news. They just never understood in detail how it's actually related to ordinary people.'

Ukrainian artist

Personal connections and trust were essential in building and extending relationships between UK and Ukrainian cultural partners. Some of these had been forged through past bilateral activities such as the British Council's SWAP/Taking the Stage residencies and preparations for the UK/Ukraine Season, or by broadcasters' past cooperation through the EBU, and others were formed for the first time in 2022–3. Successful partnerships placed 'inherent trust' in Ukrainian partners to deliver.⁹⁰

Stakeholders often foresaw ways that partnerships created through the Eurovision process could continue, either for their own relationships or in general. This appeared more the case than with past contests because of Eurovision 2023's unique status as a coproduction.

'Eurovision is always a platform for unity, but this special Eurovision has also become a platform for so many, I hope, prosperous partnerships at different levels and in different areas.'

Suspilne Ukraine interviewee

Through these new partnerships, UK participants also often learned from Ukrainian partners about the reality of everyday life during the war.

Some Ukrainians found ways to communicate this texture to UK colleagues through sharing social media content with them, giving their partners fresh understandings of the situation.

6.4 Working together in conditions of war

For stakeholders with existing UK/Ukrainian collaborations, the challenges of working together during Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine had already manifested in February 2022. Other stakeholders had to navigate these afresh during summer and autumn.

Most meetings between UK and Ukrainian stakeholders took place virtually, employing ways of working which had become customary during the Covid-19 pandemic but had to be adjusted to invasion conditions. Frequent Russian attacks on Ukrainian infrastructure meant that electrical supply and Wi-Fi connections were often limited to particular times of day, which had to be respected when setting meeting times, and partners became used to having to rearrange meetings when there were air raid alerts. BBC leaders could not travel to Ukraine to sign the in-person partnership agreement with Suspilne, so the Suspilne team had to travel to Warsaw. An interviewee at one UK organisation recalled feeling guilty when a Ukrainian colleague might have had to choose between joining an online meeting and fulfilling basic household needs during energy shortages in winter 2022–3.

Security considerations severely affected filming of television content in Ukraine. Live outdoor broadcasts from Kyiv were too high risk, and even prerecorded filming had to take security into heavy account. The postcard films could not represent locations under Russian occupation or close to the front line, because drones could not fly there, restricting the postcards' ability to depict the whole of the country. In other locations, 23/32 Films had to obtain special permits for drone filming due to the ongoing risk of Russian drone attacks, and certain locations were off limits.

Ukrainians involved in producing Eurovision Song Contest 2023 were satisfied with the postcards. However, one Ukrainian artist remembered that, after the contest, friends had been disappointed that the postcards had not depicted the impact of the war on Ukrainian locales. While the BBC would not have been able to do this, it is still a reminder that public views in Ukraine were disparate on Eurovision's atmosphere and hosting arrangements during this time of national trauma.

Creators of cultural commissions also faced many challenges, such as the logistics of exporting physical artworks and prototypes from Ukraine to sites in the UK and restrictions on male Ukrainians' travel. National Museums Liverpool, for instance, had to explore solutions such as reprinting artwork from 4K resolution photographs or fitting printed prototypes of augmented reality projections on to installation sites to deliver certain collaborations in its EuroFestival strand.

Designers faced difficulties cooperating on visuals and audiovisual content since high-speed internet in Ukraine was unstable, and Eurovision's tight timescale exacerbated this.

'The artist who did the designs is in Kharkiv and they need to be uploaded with such high internet. And that was just so tricky. It took three days. And then when the deadline is just like back-to-back-to-back, three days is insane.'

UK artist

UK partners required well-developed ethical awareness in handling projects based on Ukrainians' personal experience and testimony, and the UK partner of one EuroFestival commission had to deal sensitively with a project contributor who was in occupied Crimea and would have been at risk if Russian authorities had discovered they were receiving payment from the UK.

However, these practical experiences of cooperation helped UK partners appreciate what Ukraine's cultural sector has faced during the war, which was strategically important for Ukrainian stakeholders to communicate.



'I think a lot of those relationships give people a proper idea in Liverpool of how difficult it is to be there [in Ukraine] at the moment if you're a DJ, if you're an artist, if you're any sort of artistic cultural practitioner, the struggles you're going through. But also how culture and music is really important in Ukraine at a time like that.'

Culture Liverpool interviewee

The question of how to achieve a suitable tone for representing Ukraine while the country is under attack during an event which famously has a fun, party atmosphere was a major creative challenge both for the BBC and Culture Liverpool. Continued engagement with Ukrainian partners, such as Anna Bubnova on the British Council's Ukraine team for Culture Liverpool, was essential in finding a tone that acknowledged the war while also celebrating Ukraine.

Another set of challenges arose from the fact that the BBC and Culture Liverpool each had to make calls on how to acknowledge Russia's invasion as the reason why Ukraine could not host the event. Stakeholders recognised this as a major tension in creating the event narrative:

'The country that we were hosting on behalf of is at war, and can't do it itself. And then you've got Eurovision, which is in essence a huge big celebration of joy and creativity and culture and bonkersness. So to [...] get the line that we trace really perfect was pretty hard.'

Culture Liverpool interviewee

Artists experienced in engaging audiences with cultural production about conflict and aggression in other countries, however, noted that such a background could support learning and solidarity.

'Often [...] you go to present a piece to an audience that are not experiencing something, and actually solidarity between movements is a really important way to develop and learn, for both myself and hopefully others.'

UK artist

Ukrainian partners were often able to advise UK counterparts on details that would be sensitive in Ukraine. For instance, Kyiv's famous 'Motherland' monument did not appear in the postcards because its Soviet emblem had not yet been replaced with the Ukrainian trident. Presenter scripts for the Live Shows avoided describing the war as 'the conflict', which is sensitive to Ukrainians because it is seen as blurring lines of responsibility for the war.

A further potential sensitivity arose around how to narrate the heritage of past Eurovision Song Contest host cities in the Insignia Keys collection. Helsinki had created this tradition in 2007–8, and is likely to have drawn on placemaking experience from its ECoC year in devising this ritual. Moscow had hosted Eurovision Song Contest 2009, and the collection therefore contained a Moscow key. This was retained on the grounds that the Moscow contest was a historical fact and it would be inappropriate for the museum service to alter the history.

In this case, and another case where a Ukrainian organisation objected to a Russian-born UK-based artist participating in the festival, the festival's robust editorial process enabled producers to explain their decisions and resolve contentions, which may have helped to build trust.

Left Protect the Beats.

Credit: Marketing Liverpool.



6.5 Eurovision's challenging timescale

Even without uncertainties over whether a winning broadcaster can host the following year, the timescale of delivering Eurovision at its current scale is immensely challenging for broadcasters and cities. The sharing of knowledge between recent and new host broadcasters, facilitated via the EBU and its Reference Group for the contest, provides the continuity that makes this possible at all.

The extra time taken to confirm the BBC as host for 2023 meant that the broadcaster and other national-level stakeholders had two months less than usual to prepare, with knock-on effects for host city selection. City-level stakeholders were very conscious of this pressure, as were stakeholders who worked with Liverpool and praised its ability to go so far beyond the event's basic requirements and deliver such ambitious programming and so welcoming an atmosphere in the available time. Some attributed this to the astuteness of Liverpool's cultural leadership and its sense of how to make events build on each other to deliver positive outcomes for the city.

'I'm not sure it would be possible within the timeframe to have given it to a city that didn't have that kind of overall sense of events. Not just on their own, but building on each other and amplifying, working with what's there.'

Spirit of 2012 interviewee

The BBC was able to catch up with the timescale by running a fast-paced host city selection process, and then by setting a target to catch up with a 'normal' Eurovision schedule by January 2023. Since many production decisions depended on knowing the arena and host city, this created pressure in October–December 2022, but made production smoother after January. For the EBU, the host city announcement came no later than it had for Eurovision Song Contest 2022, since Italy's broadcaster RAI had not announced Turin until October 2021.

At high level, a tripartite group consisting of the BBC, Liverpool City Council and DCMS met every week to solve issues in real time, more frequently than would have been necessary in a multi-year event cycle such as City of Culture. Liverpool held weekly 'silver' meetings between the chairs of groups responsible for different aspects of delivery, and 'gold' meetings chaired by the City Council chief executive and chief constable of Merseyside Police, as well as a monthly Project Group meeting with the BBC.

Interim results from Edge Hill University's evaluation of multi-agency working for Eurovision found that 96.6% of respondents felt the approach had been a success, though 58.6% reported they would do something differently for a similar future event, including having more time to plan.⁹¹

Economically, the timescale affected the BBC's capacity to secure national sponsors for the event as brands had already allocated sponsorship budgets for the year, though EasyJet and Google did sign up. At city level, a longer timescale would likely have enabled Liverpool to bring more businesses and inward investment into the event and to maximise regional impact in the North.

One funder identified that, although it has been urging stakeholders to view event development and evaluation on longer-term cycles, Eurovision makes this difficult because hosting is only ever decided a year in advance. However, they also felt the year-long cycle mitigated the risks of stakeholders overpromising in bids that can arise in multi-year bidding cycles for other mega-events.

The Eurovision 2023 timescale was probably most challenging for producers of EuroFestival and its commissions, since it significantly accelerated the typical pace of cultural programming. Stakeholders estimated that to deliver a cultural season of this scope would usually take one year or even two years. Some organisations were not able to source content for exhibitions they would have liked to propose, and some had to fit EuroFestival collaborations around launches and milestones they had already planned. Creators of site-specific programming were not necessarily aware of all other planned activity at that site when they developed their work.

Certain commissions with Ukrainian partners were simply not feasible for May 2023 delivery, though added to a pool of artists that Liverpool could invite to future events. For instance, Tais Poda and RocknLight Studio's 'Ukrainian Dreams' installation (inspired by the art of Maria Prymachenko) was projected at Royal Albert Dock during Liverpool's River of Light festival in October 2023, when daylight was shorter. This was supported by an Arts Council England Eurovision legacy grant and helped mark the six-month anniversary of Liverpool hosting Eurovision on behalf of Ukraine.⁹²

The pressured timescale might also have constrained Ukrainian partners who did not already have UK contacts, despite Culture Liverpool's commitment to matchmaking. Artists who were already experienced at applying for commissions in English and had active UK partnerships, including those facilitated by the British Council, had greater capacity to apply.

Some stakeholders however also perceived the time pressure as a perverse advantage. Some EuroFestival producers felt that, once their Ukrainian partners had made them confident in understanding the Ukrainian cultural scene, the need to make choices quickly had facilitated creative risk-taking and delivered a more adventurous programme. The impending deadline might also have been helpful in making connections quickly in government.

Overall, most stakeholders experienced frustrations with the timescale, but also understood the reasons why it had been compressed even more than usual for Eurovision. Production of the Live Shows to this cycle is also well supported by the EBU. For future host cities, however, the twelve-month cycle will make it challenging to match the ambition of Liverpool's place-based offer in ways that will grow the event's brand and their own.

6.6 The UK as a respectful partner in cultural relations

The process of delivering Eurovision 2023 and creating its event narrative was greatly facilitated by UK partners' respectful approach towards representing their own country when Ukraine, the rightful winner, could not exercise its hosting rights.

The EBU, the BBC and Liverpool all shared an understanding that to centre the UK as if it had won in 2022 would be inappropriate. Stakeholders creating the narrative of Liverpool's Eurovision also understood that narratives which invited pity for Ukrainians and self-congratulatory praise for 'a brilliant UK' would be insensitive.⁹³ Instead, producers showed awareness of what Eurovision has meant in Ukraine before and during Russia's full-scale invasion, readiness to learn and adapt based on Ukrainian partners' feedback, and responsibility to fulfil the trust Ukrainians were placing in the BBC and Liverpool.

'This was the chance that had been taken away from their country to present themselves to the world. And so we couldn't mess it up on their behalf.'

Culture Liverpool interviewee

The BBC's brand playbook carefully advised how content creators should balance the tone: 'DO be warmly patriotic. It's great that Liverpool and the UK get to host such an incredible event', but 'DON'T forget where it should be happening. This is Ukraine's celebration, we're just throwing it on their behalf'⁹⁴ – paraphrasing Sam Ryder's words in July 2022 when the BBC was confirmed as host.

Creative content using the brand assets was to describe the event's location as 'Eurovision Song Contest Liverpool 2023', not 'United Kingdom 2023', and 'United Kingdom' was only approved in the 2023 Eurovision Song Contest logo where it appeared jointly with 'Liverpool' and the Ukrainian flag.⁹⁵

Ryder's personality and approach when representing the UK in 2022 aligned with a new BBC approach to developing UK entries, and contributed to inspiring the BBC's tone in 2023. It also seemed to align with how a number of UK stakeholders wanted to think of the UK as a partner in cultural relations.

'He was a great ambassador. He was everything that I think people want to like about our country. He was proud to be British. He wasn't cocky and confident, and he was just happy. He genuinely was just happy to be there and sing his song. The result was just the icing on the cake for him. He just went to have a great time.'

BBC Studios interviewee

Hosting Eurovision in Liverpool also enabled national-level and city-level stakeholders to show themselves as willing and able partners in European cultural relations. Some perceived this as an opportunity to demonstrate that, although the UK had left the European Union, it was proud to be cooperating in a large-scale European cultural event. Some thought it was an opportunity to show that willingness to welcome Europe was distinct from views about the EU as an institution, or that whatever British people's views about the EU and Brexit they could still enjoy welcoming Europe for Eurovision. Some stakeholders in the arts and culture sector who perceived Brexit as having projected an unwelcome or insular image of the UK internationally looked to culture as a way to repair this image.

Liverpool stakeholders widely perceived their city as international, welcoming and European, and some also alluded to the fact that Liverpool voters had expressed a Remain majority (of 58.2%) in the 2016 Brexit referendum.⁹⁶ Eurovision had been an opportunity to affirm continued feelings of Liverpool being a European city in a way that matched with the city's creativity:

'It felt like we were the centre of Europe for a moment when we were doing Eurovision and that's what was glorious about it and that's what was loved about it [...] There is the conversation around "we're still part of Europe" that I think this event showed really beautifully, and you can do that in Liverpool, because Liverpool is so anarchic anyway.'

Culture Liverpool interviewee



The BBC's efforts to transform perceptions of Eurovision in the UK resonate with the image of the UK as a respectful partner in cultural relations by showing it takes the contest seriously. Liverpool's hosting of Eurovision created new opportunities to do this by engaging viewers with the atmosphere and scale of the contemporary event.

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6.7 Changing perceptions of Eurovision in the UK

BBC stakeholders were proud the UK had come second in 2022, and saw it as an opportunity to change perceptions of the Eurovision Song Contest among the wider UK public and media. These perceptions were often still shaped by viewers' memories of watching much earlier content, or by the tone of media coverage which had mocked the contest in ways that created distance between the UK and other European participants.

For public service broadcasters and the EBU, the Eurovision Song Contest stands out as a live broadcast music event of unparalleled reach which also massively engages young audiences with public service media. The 2023 contest reached 162 million viewers across the three Live Shows and had a 53.5% viewing share among 15–24 year olds, four times the average for those channels in primetime.⁹⁷

'It's had a renaissance in recent years. Even though it's an old event and it's got all this wonderful heritage. It's the history of Europe, performed, on stage. But it also attracts younger audiences who come to the event and its music without any prejudices. And for public service media to stay relevant, that's massively important.'

EBU interviewee

Sam Ryder's strong result in 2022, as the first UK runner-up since 1998, was the first time younger UK viewers would have seen their own country do so well in the event. For public and media perception in general, it was strategically valuable for changing perceptions of the Eurovision Song Contest in the UK because it helped counter narratives that the voting is politically motivated or that viewers do not like the UK.

The fact that Eurovision 2023 then became hosted in the UK also made it possible to engage the public with more insight about what it takes for broadcasters and cities to host an event that most people usually only experience as viewers of broadcast and digital content.

'A lot of the power of Eurovision is that it's such a digitally-focussed event, in the sense that many people will watch it as broadcast viewers, but the opportunity to host in the UK gave an insight into the amount of hard work, putting on a series of in-person events and cultural wrap-around programmes, and a sense of what it's like to be on the ground for something like Eurovision.'

DCMS interviewee

The BBC strategised to drive up excitement about Eurovision coming to the UK through the host city selection process, and through tie-in content across its programming, inspired by how BBC departments cooperate to amplify sports mega-events. A BBC Commissioning content group with representatives from all TV commissioning genres plus radio met monthly to identify existing brands and new content opportunities to bring viewers closer to the contest and eliminate preconceptions that the BBC had identified through audience research as potential barriers to engagement.⁹⁸

To engage children, the BBC joined the Junior Eurovision Song Contest for the first time in December 2022, featured the UK junior representative Freya Skye on the children's news show Newsround during 2023, and held a live music lesson from St George's Hall through its educational programming. Editions of many BBC magazine shows, quiz shows and soaps during Eurovision week tied into the event, and some involved representation of Ukrainian culture, such as Saturday Kitchen featuring Ukrainian chef Olia Hercules plus cooks from Sweden and Ireland.

The wave of excitement leading on from Ryder's second place to Liverpool's Eurovision made the 2023 Grand Final the most watched ever in the UK, with 9.9 million viewers.⁹⁹ BBC stakeholders saw this as a strong platform for continuing to grow UK viewers' engagement with the Eurovision brand as a legacy of 2023.

Some stakeholders gained new appreciation of the event personally through participating in the culture surrounding it.

'When we first started talking to really huge Eurovision fans at the very start of it, I was struck by quite how powerful and emotive their words were. And I thought, 'This is a singing contest.' [...] And now I've done it and lived it. And I absolutely recognise and appreciate and have my own set of incredibly powerful feelings about what Eurovision stands for. And I think that that desire to think about it is something that's much bigger and much more important than the TV show.'

Culture Liverpool interviewee

Changing perceptions of the Eurovision Song Contest in the UK could itself be seen as a contribution to good cultural relations, by encouraging wider UK audiences to think more positively about a European coproduction which largely features other countries' musical cultures.

6.8 Narratives of welcome

One asset of Liverpool's civic identity that influenced the narrative of hosting on behalf of Ukraine, both when host cities were bidding and in producers' own narrative after host city selection, was the idea of the 'Liverpool welcome' or 'Scouse welcome'. City stakeholders had promoted this with extra pride ever since ECoC 2008, and Eurovision allowed them to reaffirm it internationally, all the more once visitors arrived and started experiencing the welcome as authentic.

*'A city that wraps its arms around you and won't let go.'*¹⁰⁰

Liverpool bid video

'All anyone talked about afterwards, and at the time, was the Liverpool welcome [...] you can't buy what that does for your reputation nationally and internationally.'

Culture Liverpool interviewee

The extent of UK/Ukrainian collaboration in EuroFestival contributed to the impression of welcome through place-based programming, to the point that the entire festival was sometimes spoken about as a UK/Ukrainian season. The UK/Ukrainian commissions and the amount of community programming involving Ukrainian culture pulled the narrative of hosting on behalf of Ukraine out from the arena and television screen, into visitors' and residents' everyday, material space.

A number of speakers commented on the atmosphere during event fortnight of arriving at Lime Street station (which had been dressed with Eurovision decorations including a Soloveiko bird), walking through the city centre, seeing joyful crowds with colourful outfits and flags, and hearing street performers and free events.

Visitors as well as locals noticed community programming in the city centre, such as the Pysanka Eggs designed by Merseyside schoolchildren and installed at Liverpool ONE through an event in Liverpool's EuroLearn strand of community programming for schools:

'The whole culture festival that Liverpool put on around Eurovision was fantastic, and something I think we haven't seen on that scale before, all the artistic activities that were taking place in Liverpool. The art installations that were everywhere, the Ukrainian eggs for example that were around the city. There was a real sense of including the Ukrainian culture, and the Ukrainians who were living in the UK, who had left Ukraine because of the war, but also, everybody who travelled there from all over Europe felt included in this event.'

EBU interviewee



Left Pysanka Eggs in Liverpool ONE.

Credit: Marketing Liverpool.

The amount of Ukrainian flags and welcome greetings in Ukrainian language displayed by many shops and hospitality venues was particularly meaningful to Ukrainian stakeholders who visited Liverpool, and some commented on warm welcomes they had had from local people who realised they were Ukrainian. Another meaningful moment occurred at the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra's Eurovision event on 12 May, when the host announced the Ukrainian ambassador and culture minister and they received a standing ovation.

'That was just an example of the mood in the city at the time. Which you can't necessarily plan for. But I hope that all of the Ukrainian visitors felt that sense of warmth and support when they were there as well.'

DCMS interviewee

Liverpool's city space facilitated the welcoming atmosphere because its compact layout and the main venues' proximity to each other gave the sense of the whole city being taken over. Members of broadcaster delegations who had visited multiple Eurovision host cities also appreciated that, unlike in most host cities, the arena was in walking distance of hotels. One BBC producer estimated this had prevented 2,000 on-site crew per day needing to travel there by motor transport, saving on costs and emissions.

UK Government's most visible contribution to the event's narrative of welcome was its sponsorship of 3,000 subsidised Live Show tickets for Ukrainians who had settled in the UK after February 2022 on the Homes for Ukrainians Scheme, Ukraine Extension Scheme or Ukraine Family Scheme. This aimed to ensure that Ukrainians in the UK who had been displaced by the war could watch the event celebrating their country. A Ukrainian member of the BBC production team encouraged this to be mentioned in the show and communicated to the TV audience.

Some stakeholders did perceive dissonances between the idea of celebrating Liverpool or the UK as a welcoming place and the experiences of recent refugees and migrants from the Global South, even before the outbreak of unrest targeting asylum seekers at a Knowsley hotel in February 2023. One suggested it would have been 'uncomfortable' to project a narrative about welcome that was too detached from these experiences, though also acknowledged scope for cities to deal with such themes independently of national policy.

Liverpool's narrative focused on ideas of welcoming Ukrainians' recent arrivals and welcoming Eurovision rather than ideas of the UK as a wider place of welcome. It avoided parallels with other refugees or wars, though EuroFestival commissions were free to explore these.



Members of Liverpool's Eurovision 2023 team.

Credit: Marketing Liverpool.

6.9 Putting Liverpool and the UK on the map

Liverpool's success in turning Eurovision into a 'citywide festival' beyond the arena set an example for future Eurovision host cities, and also enabled Liverpool culture stakeholders to communicate their key narratives about the city to the event's huge international audience.

Liverpool's globally-renowned music heritage inspired the creative team's focus on music as a unifying theme for Eurovision 2023, and made Liverpool appeal as a destination to many international Eurovision stakeholders, such as broadcaster delegations.

'When we first saw some of our other counterparts from the delegations, they said "we're so pleased it's Liverpool, we love the Beatles," or "we love Frankie Goes To Hollywood." It conjures up all these different sorts of musical memories for people.'

BBC Studios interviewee

'We were lucky to be in possibly the UK's global brand city for music, so that helped.'

Event managing director

While The Beatles still have an enduring impact on international audiences' sentiments towards Liverpool, one long-standing objective for Liverpool's culture sector has also been to raise international audiences' consciousness of the city's wider music heritage and its standing as a music city today. Eurovision facilitated this objective by enabling Culture Liverpool to place new local musical talent in front of thousands of visitors at once, for instance during the EuroVillage day dedicated to new Liverpool musicians.

The BBC also contributed to showcasing Liverpool's wider contributions to pop history in the 'Liverpool Songbook' interval act, though how well this communicated Liverpool's music city narrative would have depended on viewers' ability to recognise that the songs' original performers had all been from Liverpool.

International content creators visiting Liverpool for Eurovision also disseminated representations of local uniqueness through their social media channels. Culture Liverpool created a strategic partnership with TikTok, Eurovision Song Contest 2023's official entertainment partner, to invite 80 global influencers to the city, where they explored visitor attractions and independent businesses.

'You had influencers running around getting curly blows, which you can only get in this city... just things that could only happen here.'

Culture Liverpool interviewee

'Everything that was happening in the city was also being seen online, on our channels, but [also] on social media everywhere – everybody going there, taking selfies, filming video. All of that was being seen all over the world, and all of that was happening in Liverpool.'

EBU interviewee

For a DCMS interviewee, Eurovision had projected Liverpool's 'Scouse-ness', friendliness, 'Northern energy' and the strength of its civic and political identity, but also 'the power of investment into culture' that had primed the city to be able to take up such an opportunity. Culture sector stakeholders also spoke up for the power of investment into culture, but warned that funding cuts over the past decade had caused them pressure and future underinvestment might weaken the sector's capacity to respond in future to a similar event.

The praise for Liverpool's place-based programming also affirmed its positioning as an 'events city' nationally and internationally.¹⁰¹ One funder of community programming felt that Liverpool's profile as 'a city that does events in a really thoughtful, strategic way' had allowed it to develop an event with community relevance and longer-term impact. The city's commitment to involve and enthuse local people throughout the event had a knock-on effect for cultural relations, as the numbers of residents enjoying official and unofficial activities linked to Eurovision helped to create the friendly, welcoming atmosphere visitors perceived.

Stakeholders visiting Liverpool had varying levels of familiarity with the city. Some knew it well, while for others it was a new destination and partner. Its reputation for events was already known to some, and became known to others:

'I was amazed by the openness, passion for international collaboration, opening up the city to others, within the UK but also internationally. Dedication and the "doer" culture were very much present in their work.'

Ukrainian Institute interviewee

While the event's branding did not prominently emphasise UK state symbols, praise for both Liverpool and the BBC still reflected on to the UK as the country containing them both. The proximity of Eurovision and His Majesty's Coronation, a week before the Grand Final, also meant that the narrative of the UK internationally projected in May 2023 in practice flowed from both events. Some stakeholders saw the events as reinforcing each other:

'Over the course of a week, the UK hosted and the BBC broadcast two of the most extraordinary events that were held this year. And they were completely, completely, different. But they had some common elements, and British excellence was at the heart of both of them.'

BBC interviewee

'You have that month where the UK was broadcasting the best of our pomp and ceremony and traditional heritage for audiences that love that, and then the following week a very very different feel, a much more contemporary, completely non-traditional event. Both broadcast internationally; both by the BBC; both with a lot of fantastic cultural and creative sector people involved.'

DCMS interviewee

Some stakeholders found that the idea of the Coronation representing the UK in a traditional way opened up creative space for contrasting Liverpool and Eurovision with what had been presented from London and Windsor, further positioning Liverpool as distinctive internationally.

'Because the Coronation was the week before, you had all that pomp and ceremony of a civic London, and then you had this crackers city in the north with people wearing a Ukrainian flag as a headdress and with feathers and flowers and stars. And those two images of the UK that went out more or less simultaneously are quite incredible.'

Culture Liverpool interviewee

EuroVillage screened the Coronation live on 6 May and themed the day as 'A Royally Good Party', with a vogue ball hosted by Liverpool's House of Suarez in the evening. The National Lottery's Big Welcome on 7 May coincided with Windsor Castle's televised Coronation Concert, but this inspired its producers to conceive of it as a 'youthful, edgy, diverse, fun' offer that would open Eurovision week and 'felt so Liverpool'.¹⁰²

The proximity of the Coronation also had practical benefits for the BBC Studios production team: since the BBC was already negotiating with the Palace over the Coronation, it was easier to negotiate the Royal visit on 26 April and the Princess of Wales's participation in the Grand Final opening film.

A challenge for the GREAT campaign and VisitBritain was how to use Liverpool's spotlight to also drive interest in tourism to other UK destinations. VisitBritain created themed online hubs for Liverpool in France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Spain, and used Liverpool's music heritage as a bridge to encourage its international campaign audiences to consider musical experiences in other UK cities. It also had a presence at the Eurovision Song Contest media centre to engage international journalists with its Spilling the Tea on Great Britain campaign.¹⁰³

6.10 Continuities and learning from other events

The EBU has a well-established process of exchanging knowledge between Eurovision host broadcasters through inviting executive producers of recent contents on to the contest's Reference Group, and through its annually-updated online Knowledge Base platform. This details information about venue requirements, production requirements, logistical instructions, technical instructions for the TV production, expected ticket-holder numbers, and how to cooperate with the host city on the Eurovision village.

The BBC's lead commissioner for Eurovision, Rachel Ashdown, had been a Reference Group member since 2019 and had experienced how colleagues shared experiences of working together through COVID-19 to replace the cancelled 2020 Rotterdam contest with alternative programming and for the contest to go ahead with mitigations in 2021. As with other stakeholders, the Reference Group's prior experience of remote working during the pandemic made it easier to cooperate with Ukrainian partners who could not travel in 2022–3.

Within the UK, stakeholders drew on experiences from a range of other large-scale events to inform their approach to Eurovision 2023. Martin Green had been head of ceremonies for the London 2012 Olympics and Paralympics, director of Hull UK City of Culture 2017, and chief creative officer of the Birmingham Commonwealth Games and UNBOXED: Creativity in the UK in 2022. These roles were just ending when the opportunity to lead Eurovision for the BBC arose.

Green's experience thus combined leadership of mega-events communicating a national narrative, often on a global stage, and an 'ability to identify the importance of the local people in a major event' as expressed in Hull 2017's programme.¹⁰⁴ This harmonised with Liverpool's emphasis on community participation. Indeed, some saw direct parallels between the example of the London 2012 opening ceremony and the narrative of Eurovision 2023:

'Up to that point there had been a whole series of Olympic Games with very glamorous opening ceremonies [...] but they hadn't actually told a compelling story of a place, and what the opening of the Olympics did was tell a compelling story of the United Kingdom as a place. And it had a very interesting artistic director and it took risks. I think that's what we did with Eurovision.'

Culture Liverpool interviewee

One funder perceived London 2012 and Eurovision 2023 as connected through:

'values and how to create something that bridges divides, that talks about "we have more in common", and tries to create that inclusive feel of a city or of the country as a whole... and manage some of these soft power dynamics in a way that feels comfortable for people across different political views.'

Spirit of 2012 interviewee

Experience from the 2022 Commonwealth Games also benefited some culture stakeholders at other levels. Liverpool had been the only other UK city to bid for the Games in 2017, with involvement from Culture Liverpool. Rave UKraine's producer was based in Birmingham and had gained experience of mega-event cultural programming through working with the Games: the Birmingham programme's emphasis on expressing culture of other Commonwealth countries alongside the UK's helped him approach expressing UK and Ukrainian culture together for EuroFestival.

Birmingham itself was in the Commonwealth Games evaluation period when the opportunity to bid for Eurovision 2023 arose, and became one of the seven shortlisted host cities. Its fan village area would have been a space in the Gay Village used for the Commonwealth Games cultural festival.

Fewer stakeholders referred to UNBOXED as an influence, though DCMS recognised that UNBOXED's objective to increase international partnerships and attendance had helped build more relationships with FCDO around events. However, UNBOXED had stemmed from a multi-year policy programme whereas Eurovision was delivered in less than a year. One DCMS interviewee felt that Eurovision had created opportunities to realise events' international objectives that might have been more difficult to engineer for previous programmes.

The British Council's past facilitation of UK/Ukrainian cooperation in arts and culture also delivered an important legacy which contributed to Ukrainian satisfaction with how Ukrainian culture was represented in Liverpool.

Its UK/Ukraine Season of Culture, 'Future Reimagined', had originally been intended to celebrate thirty years of UK/Ukrainian diplomatic relations and build on intensified relationships with UK and EU cultural partners that Ukrainian artists had been cultivating since the Revolution of Dignity. When planning for the Season began in 2019, Ukraine's art and culture sector was still poorly known in the UK and overshadowed in public awareness by culture from Russia, which had had historical advantages in cultural promotion as an imperial power.

The Season had to be reoriented and reworked after Russia's full-scale invasion to respond to the Ukrainian culture sector's new immediate needs and move programming to the UK, while the Ukraine team and Ukrainian artists were themselves finding safety in countries across Europe.

The reinvented Season launched at Sheffield DocFest in June 2022, with programming in 12 UK towns and cities but not originally in Liverpool. However, the British Council's engagement with Liverpool over Eurovision allowed the Season's conclusion to coincide with EuroFestival, where an adapted version of ChornobylDorf received a second performance with free tickets.¹⁰⁵ This was achieved with DCMS funding and helped bring the acclaimed opera to further audiences, as the British Council had hoped to do.

Several cities bidding for Eurovision besides Liverpool in summer 2022 were aware that the British Council could connect them with Ukrainian partners and contacted the British Council during the bid process. This shows the British Council was well recognised as a source of knowledge about Ukrainian cultural partnerships.

Once Liverpool had been selected, Liverpool City Council and DCMS engaged proactively with the British Council about seeking Ukrainian partners, leading to the strong relationships between Culture Liverpool and the Ukrainian Institute which enhanced EuroFestival's Ukrainian representation. The process also led to the British Council itself coming to understand more about the cultural relations and values of Eurovision as an event.

The UK/Ukraine Season also played an important background role in building capacity for UK and Ukrainian arts professionals to engage with EuroFestival. Its evaluation found that 8 of 17 UK partner organisations had never collaborated with Ukrainian creatives before the Season,¹⁰⁶ and each arts participant made on average 10 new professional contacts and 3 new organisational contacts.¹⁰⁷

UK partners helping Ukrainian projects relocate to the UK for the reworked Season had felt a similar sense of responsibility to platform Ukrainian voices and redress the war's injustice on Ukrainian cultural production that EuroFestival producers expressed.¹⁰⁸ Experiences of partnership working across the traumatic challenges that Ukrainian partners faced were also similar.

These resonances manifested even though the Season's initial reworking, which started before Ukraine had even won Eurovision Song Contest 2022, could not have taken Eurovision into account. Retrospectively, Eurovision 2023 nevertheless came to feel like 'a natural continuation and the culmination of the Season', allowing some Season partners and contributors to be brought to Liverpool, and also gave the Season a presence there that had not originally been planned.¹⁰⁹ The Ukrainian Institute perceived that the Season's culmination in Liverpool had created some lasting connections between partners that would be continued later in 2023.¹¹⁰

The reworked UK/Ukraine Season's objectives also appeared to carry over into EuroFestival. After February 2022, the Season's overarching ambition became:

to showcase and celebrate Ukrainian culture and identity, to increase international awareness and understanding of the challenges faced by the Ukrainian people and to support the resilience and contribution of arts and culture in Ukraine in helping to shape a more positive future.¹¹¹

These could well describe EuroFestival's objectives for representing Ukrainian culture. EuroFestival also amplified the Season's long-term goals of enhancing opportunities to increase international appreciation of Ukrainian arts, culture and heritage and increasing international awareness and understanding of the war and its consequences for Ukrainians. Indeed, the Season may have primed UK artists to think about Ukrainian partnerships in 2022 which helped them respond to the EuroFestival call.

Before the UK/Ukraine Season, some UK and Ukrainian participants in EuroFestival had also built bilateral networks through other British Council programmes, including the SWAP: UK/Ukraine Residency Programme and Taking the Stage. They felt this had put them in a stronger position to respond at pace to EuroFestival's UK x Ukraine theme.

Some further Ukrainian participants in these programmes who had built connections with UK arts organisations acted as brokers in the short-notice circumstances of autumn 2022 by recommending Ukrainian artists to UK arts organisations who wished to do Eurovision tie-in work in Liverpool with Ukrainian artists but, like most UK arts organisations before the UK/Ukraine Season, did not themselves know Ukraine's culture sector well. This shows the programmes' longer-term capacity-building value in creating links that professionals could tap in the very different context of 2022.

The British Council in Ukraine had also engaged with Eurovision in 2017 when Kyiv hosted the event. It partnered with the then FCO through the UK Embassy in Kyiv to develop public diplomacy, consular and security strategies in recognition of the large number of UK LGBTQ+ fans expected to attend. The Embassy visited Kyiv's mayor, applied London 2012 experience to support an event volunteers programme, gave Kyiv police English language training, and invited a group of UK LGBTQ+ journalists to Kyiv to help them advise audiences on how fans could safely enjoy Eurovision there.¹¹²

Liverpool's own legacy of events experience stemmed from European Capital of Culture 2008 and the long-term culture strategy it had built since then. Culture Liverpool stakeholders frequently referred to events such as Three Queens in 2015 (when 1 million people watched three Cunard liners sail into Liverpool), the Liverpool Giants (in 2012, 2014 and 2018), annual music festivals such as Africa Oyé!, and Liverpool FC's open-top bus parades as precedents which had given themselves and external partners confidence that Liverpool could host Eurovision. Some UK participants in EuroFestival from outside Liverpool already had relationships with Liverpool's independent arts scene through events such as the Liverpool Arab Arts Festival.

Some stakeholders outside the UK recognised a lasting impact of ECoC on Liverpool's positioning:

'This infrastructural investment and the rich cultural programme of the Capital of Culture helped then establish this tradition that this is a city of culture, this is a city open to others, this is a city with a great maritime and port legacy, that it is within the city's DNA to be open and diverse. And I think that aligns very much with what we would like to achieve through cultural relations.'

Ukrainian Institute interviewee

While Liverpool had already evaluated ECoC's long-term legacy for the tenth anniversary in 2018, Eurovision taking place another five years later created further opportunity for reflection. A DCMS interviewee, for instance, saw Liverpool's approach to evaluating the economic, social and cultural impacts of Eurovision 2023 as continuing the position 'as a cultural evaluation city' it had built after 2008.

For the EBU, Liverpool's approach to evaluation created new opportunities to demonstrate Eurovision's impact on host cities. The EBU has started producing an annual Brand Impact Report demonstrating the musical, television, digital and societal impact of each contest, and expects host broadcasters and host cities to produce their own impact reports. There are clear opportunities for future hosts to learn from Liverpool:

'Liverpool certainly, I think more than any other city, has really done a fantastic job at measuring the impact. Which is fantastic for us, and something we can use for the future, to show the power of this event in a city, and in a country, for the impact it has.'

EBU interviewee



The most visible representations of host communities' role in cultural relations were the 475 event volunteers, including more than 30 Ukrainians, who provided 12,000 hours of volunteering at event sites, transport hubs and in the city centre. All received training on intercultural communication, disability and neurodiversity, LGBTQ+ inclusion, first aid, tourism and security.

6.11 Host city communities' role in cultural relations

Liverpool's commitment to involving local communities in cultural events created a participatory atmosphere which many stakeholders credited for driving the successful visitor experience of Eurovision 2023. This highlights that host city communities are important people-to-people actors in the cultural relations that occur during international place-based events.

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However, Liverpool City Council also treated the entire City Region community as partners in creating Liverpool's Eurovision welcome. Its delivery process engaged extensively with local residents, community organisations, and businesses. This aimed to reassure community stakeholders that the event's impact on local services was worthwhile, but also reflected a broader vision, underpinned by the Mayor's social value commitment, to include the whole community in excitement for the event, including schoolchildren, care home residents, and communities across the whole City Region. It also aligned with the EBU's aspiration for host cities' local communities to feel that they are part of the event, not having it imposed on them.

Some EuroFestival commissions representing Ukraine had schools outreach built in, including Izyum to Liverpool, which harnessed Liverpool Cathedral's existing schools outreach networks to engage children with Ukrainian families' experiences of fleeing front-line eastern Ukraine by rail in 2022. Many more children engaged in cultural relations through EuroLearn.

EuroLearn reached 17,746 children in 257 Merseyside schools,¹¹⁴ including St Nicholas's Catholic Academy in Liverpool, where the Ukrainian ambassador made a much-publicised visit the day before the Grand Final as part of his EuroFestival tour organised by Liverpool City Council and DCMS.

The Pysanka Eggs designed by schoolchildren and installed in Liverpool ONE, inspired by Ukrainian and east European Easter traditions, were a EuroLearn activity. These would have been seen by many of the shopping centre's increased visitors, whose footfall during event week was 31.5% up on the same period in 2022.¹¹⁵

Many other EuroLearn events engaged children with Ukrainian culture and/or with music in other languages, including 'mini Eurovision' (with the Ukrainian spelling of 'mini'), organised by the University of Liverpool's Department of Languages, Cultures and Film for children at 16 primary schools in the City Region. This was designed to link the Eurovision atmosphere with consciousness of the linguistic diversity of the school communities and City Region itself, and finished with a concert by the schoolchildren at the University of Liverpool on 28 April.¹¹⁶

The British Council supported a separate collaboration in which All Saints Catholic Primary School children and the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic composed a song expressing Eurovision's values of 'friendship, inclusion, diversity and community' for use in a resource for schools with international partnerships.¹¹⁷

Classes used the resource to discuss Eurovision, the 2022 UK/Ukrainian entries, their own special music, and the song's values in online lessons with their partner schools, and 180 Liverpool children plus 70,000 children worldwide took part in an online concert on 12 May hosted by the Resonate music education hub.¹¹⁸

The EuroStreet programme, including 'EuroGrants' of up to £2,000 for community groups to host their own activities throughout May–June 2023, also contained a cultural relations dimension. The Association of Ukrainians in Great Britain was represented on the group overseeing EuroLearn/EuroStreet project development,¹¹⁹ and descriptions of at least 20 funded activities listed what could be called cultural relations activity, mostly but not exclusively engagement with Ukrainian culture.

These included HOTA's 'SingAlong a SewAlong', where participants practiced Ukrainian sewing while singing along to Eurovision songs, and Polish Migrants Organise For Change's 'Migrant Cabaret'. This initiative by a politically active group of east European women and gender non-conforming people was based on drag workshops with east European migrants and presented at Xpresia Festival, an electronic music and performing arts festival created by UK and Ukrainian producers as another of the EuroFestival commissions.

One DCMS interviewee had visited the sewing group and commended it as an example of how Liverpool had threaded the representation of Ukrainian culture down to community level:

'All the things they'd been sewing in the last few weeks were Ukrainian-themed: nightingales that were part of the cultural programme. They'd been doing embroidery. They'd been doing the beautiful floral headpieces. And it was a perfect example of: this wasn't formal. This wasn't part of the formal programme; it wasn't driven, top-down, by the organisers. This was just a Liverpool community wrapping themselves around both this programme, but also the Ukrainian support element of it, and really delivering on that.'

DCMS interviewee

EuroGrant-funded activities also provided some of the event's most innovative exchanges between Ukrainian culture and diasporic cultures of the Global South. For instance, the Black-E arts centre ran music workshops for young people inspired by Afro-Ukrainian artists and held 'Café Crimea 1854', celebrating Mary Seacole and Ukrainian food.¹²⁰ A community cooking workshop held on 4 June by Liverpool East and South East Asian Network, 'Dumplingvision', celebrated 'the humble dumpling', in its Scouse, Chinese and Ukrainian variations, plus East and South East Asian performers' contributions to Eurovision.¹²¹

These events were small-scale and beneath the lens of visitor experience – Dumplingvision only had space for 30 people, and took place several weeks after Eurovision – but still point to ways in which Eurovision's concept and values were being interpreted in ways transcending Eurocentric frames.

Right Utility, Liverpool ONE.

Credit: Marketing Liverpool.



Community projects were not even limited to those with official event funding. For instance, Baltic Triangle Area CIC, the Big Help Project (a Liverpool charity), local businesses, and a crowdfunding campaign organised the planting of a Ukrainian Peace Garden on Baltic Green in collaboration with St Vincent de Paul Catholic Primary School. The garden contained sensory planting, mosaics, Ukrainian plants and materials, and permanent concrete chess tables, though unfortunately youths vandalised its wooden objects on the night of 5 November 2023.¹²²

Two focus groups in the University of Liverpool's evaluation of community and wellbeing impact on Merseyside were particularly linked to cultural relations within the city: one case study of a EuroStreet activity based around Ukrainian cooking delivered by Squash Nutrition, and another group of participants and partners in Homes for Ukrainians.

Participants in most focus groups for the study also spoke of solidarity with Ukraine and feelings of empathy between settled residents and displaced Ukrainians as themes of the event, and the fact of hosting Eurovision so well on behalf of another country that was under attack appeared to create stronger reasons for feeling pride in the city.¹²³ The study suggested that younger generations might also have gained 'enhanced empathy for others who dwell in war-torn or disadvantaged countries' more generally as well as their better understanding of Ukraine.¹²⁴

A Ukrainian artist recalled the ways they had been able to explain what was happening in the war to local residents during their stay in Liverpool, but was also sceptical about how far one could really explain the everyday impact of war to people who were not experiencing it. They had sometimes felt a responsibility to keep their tone light and to show gratitude, which created pressure on them that local people they spoke with probably would not have noticed.

Wider community enthusiasm to engage with Eurovision in a spirit of welcome, including city-centre shops and businesses displaying Eurovision decorations and pop-up performances by community groups, also influenced on how visitors perceived the city. Initiatives such as Pysanka Eggs, the painting of two Lambanana sculptures in Ukrainian and Polish colours outside the Museum of Liverpool, and Ukrainian menus at National Museums Liverpool venues and Royal Albert Dock helped make the context of hosting on behalf of Ukraine ubiquitous in the city centre atmosphere.

Both Culture Liverpool and Green's team were aware through their past events experience that businesses would create their own off-brand visuals unless they provided an official community brand. The 'Proud to Welcome' brand toolkit was available to users across the City Region free of charge, and appealed not just to communities and SMEs but even large businesses such as John Lewis and Lush, which were not event sponsors but hosted their own programmes of tie-in events. Lush also hosted the exhibition Stay Queer, No Matter War of work by the queer Ukrainian photographer Artur Vovchenko.

The BBC reflected the community focus of Liverpool's Eurovision by including local residents and public service workers in its opening film for Semi-Final 1. Local Ukrainians played invaluable roles in creating material details for BBC VTs and adding depth to how the BBC presented Ukrainian culture.

The combined effect of all these activities created a vivid impression of the whole city welcoming Eurovision for visitors, including stakeholders:

'It was amazing to see, everywhere in the city there were choirs singing Ukrainian songs. And every single shop had window dressing in for Eurovision. It was completely taken over.'

BBC Studios interviewee

A Suspiine interviewee who had experienced Kyiv hosting Junior Eurovision 2013 and Eurovision 2017 recognised that the vibrancy Liverpool had created through residents being able to feel the positive impact of the event and enjoy Eurovision at EuroVillage, EuroClub or EuroFestival sites created a message that international media visiting the city were likely to have amplified.

6.12 Soft power versus cultural relations?

Eurovision's scale and reach makes it attractive to actors interested in growing and sustaining their soft power, as well as actors interested in cultural relations. Our literature review has shown, for instance, that cities as well as states can have soft power objectives; by promoting cities, states may try to translate audiences' positive associations with city brands on to their national brands; city and national actors are very keen to do nation branding and city branding through Eurovision, especially if they can win the right to host; but also that cultural relations organisations often distance themselves from the idea of soft power. There might, therefore, be a latent tension between ways in which different actors hope the event will benefit them.

The EBU, arbiter and brand owner of the event, clearly positions itself as dedicated to cultural relations and to limiting the exploitation of the event by any actor in ways it deems political. One might see this as a prerequisite for member broadcasters' continued trust in the event and the EBU, all the more so at geopolitically contentious times.

'We want to keep the event non-political, in the sense that it is a competition between different broadcasters and different countries but it is not a political event. And where other people wish to project their opinions and their viewpoints and campaigns on to the event, because it's such a huge platform, it's our job really to ensure that the event stays politics-free.'

EBU interviewee

The EBU aims to achieve this by celebrating the idea of the contest as an event which has successfully transcended politics, endured through '70 years of history where the changes in Europe have been anticipated and reflected on screen', and had 'real positive cultural and societal impact' through creating new international friendships, introducing audiences to new international songs and artists, and inspiring people to learn new languages.¹²⁵

Though it resists the event being politically instrumentalised, it does not reject nation-branding altogether. Indeed, it perceives Eurovision as a fairer platform for actors to compete for nation-branding opportunities than other large-scale events:

'In terms of nation-branding, it's something we actually focus on quite a lot, when we say that this is an even playing field, unlike many sporting events. That a country the size of Estonia, with a few million people, has the same chances in this competition as a country the size of Germany, with 80 million people. So it's always about projecting your culture on an international stage, and helping launch artists on an international stage.'

EBU interviewee

Many of the contest's rules and practices, from the equal rehearsal times allocated to each delegation to the concern taken in 2023 not to let it appear that the production was encouraging viewers to vote for any one country, can be seen as aimed at assuring fairness and building trust – though it is only an even playing field for those broadcasters that can meet the participation fees.

Still, the process of hosting a large-scale event in any country inevitably involves governments. Culture ministries are likely to be the lead department, but foreign ministries and the strategic narrative campaigns attached to them are unlikely to be indifferent to the public diplomacy opportunities of a large-scale event.

Eurovision 2023's context was different to most editions because the event spotlighted two states. Ukraine could not exercise its hosting rights due to Russia's ongoing invasion, and the state's strategic narratives were geared towards persuading Western governments and publics that with sufficient military and diplomatic support Ukraine could liberate occupied territory and end the war. The UK could take credit for its generosity, creativity and expertise as a partner to the EBU and Ukraine, and UK stakeholders both at city level and national level recognised that the successful hosting of Eurovision 2023 reaffirmed the narrative of the UK being skilful at delivering large-scale events. The 'spirit of openness' in how EuroFestival commissions were selected also impressed one Ukrainian stakeholder.¹²⁶

For the UK to be seen as promoting its own narratives in a way that subtracted attention from Ukraine would however have been a sensitive issue. This may have posed FCDO, Visit Britain and GREAT more challenges in messaging than if the BBC was hosting Eurovision because a UK entry had won.

Ukrainian actors' opportunities to communicate strategic narratives were meanwhile constrained by event rules protecting its 'non-political' nature, most publicly around whether Zelenskyy could address the Grand Final. However, the same rules would have precluded unfiltered communication of state strategic narratives through the event even had it been hosted in Ukraine, as in 2017.¹²⁷

Ukrainian organisations did still have direct and indirect opportunities to engage audiences and visitors with strategic narratives. Ukraine.ua's interactive installation in the EuroVillage's Discover Ukraine zone encouraged visitors to feel passionately about what Russia's invasion had taken away from peacetime Ukraine. The content of commissions depicting Ukrainians' experiences of war would often have resonated with official narratives about the distinctiveness of Ukrainian culture and the past and present impact of Russian oppression. Interpersonal cooperation itself often led to UK participants learning more about the struggles of Ukraine and its cultural sector during the war, and Ukrainian participants not uncommonly saw themselves as having an ambassadorial role in this respect.

Other stakeholders saw soft power as further from their remit. A funder such as Spirit of 2012, for instance, was much more focused on the benefits of events for places and communities. These types of stakeholders are unlikely to see themselves as involved in soft power promotion, and are likely to prioritise long-term impact over the political advantages of an event, though they recognise that receiving international acclaim for an event that puts a place on a 'world stage' may reflect back into community pride. Independent artists may be even more likely to resist the idea that they are being coopted into soft power strategies through collaborating with events programming.

While Liverpool was much more prominent than the UK in Eurovision 2023's branding, stakeholders did not seem to perceive these two layers of place as competing for attention. This was especially so for DCMS. One DCMS interviewee, for instance, expected perception uplifts for Liverpool from the event would contribute to perception uplifts for the UK and vice versa, creating a 'virtuous cycle', while the showcasing of 'the best of our creative sectors' would improve UK reputation as well as bringing the sector more work.¹²⁸

Another DCMS interviewee thought Liverpool's selection as host city had strategically been able to combine the city's 'local cultural soft power' (including its standing as a music city, and its events track record) with UK soft power in the event narrative. It had affirmed government support for displaced Ukrainians, which could be a soft power asset, and supported the narrative of the UK as a capable host of events:

'The national brand would be one that emphasises the UK's capacity and capability to be a host of major events, whether that's cultural or sporting. And Eurovision is another example to add to our remit of hosting really effective and inclusive and hopefully impactful major events.'

DCMS interviewee

Eurovision also had the potential to support UK soft power in other years, through the opportunity to assert the UK's status as 'one of the most successful exporters of musical talent in the world'.¹²⁹ Sam Ryder's second place had drawn fresh attention to this.

What stakeholders meant by 'soft power', however, was not necessarily always the same. Some talked about the soft power of a state in terms closer to Nye's definition, as persuasive capacity which could be increased by culture and events, whether or not they believed events should be used to grow soft power. Others talked about the soft power of culture or the soft power of music.

A coproduction in the circumstances of Eurovision 2023 could have become a case of two countries' actors competing to convey their own strategic narratives, but this is not what happened. Instead, both UK and Ukrainian creative partners approached the event and its narrative in a spirit of cooperation, judging that to do so would also advance their own interests better than trying to take creative precedence. Executive responsibility for the event did ultimately rest with the BBC for the television production and Liverpool for place-based programming, but each organisation's Ukrainian partners still felt they had been appropriately involved.

Eurovision's rules do not permit actors to instrumentalise the event, though where the boundary between instrumentalisation and positive promotion lies is always a subjective decision, and other actors may or may not agree with it. In this sense, Eurovision could be seen as an event whose organisers try to limit its use for soft power purposes. At the same time, though, part of Eurovision's acknowledged positive impact for hosts is the reach it gives host nations' and host cities' narratives and brand images. Producers' narratives must comply with the event rules, but actors with more overt soft power purposes can also generate their own narratives around the event.

Soft power strategies may thus become at odds with the event's cultural relations ethos if applied heavy-handedly or too directly. Yet soft power and cultural relations are not totally at odds through Eurovision either. Facilitating good cultural relations by successfully hosting the event, or successfully contributing to its atmosphere, may indirectly boost an actor's soft power, at least as far as one can demonstrate this. It is probably easier to do so among partners and stakeholders than at a mass scale.



Soft power strategies may thus become at odds with the event's cultural relations ethos if applied heavy-handedly or too directly. Yet soft power and cultural relations are not totally at odds through Eurovision either.

7. Eurovision International Tracker Survey results

To complement this study's research into the formation and projection of the narrative of the UK hosting Eurovision on behalf of Ukraine, a tracker survey in five target European countries took place to explore reception of the narrative and characteristics of Eurovision Song Contest 2023's viewers.

The Eurovision International Tracker Survey took place in Estonia, France, Poland, Romania, and Spain in two waves between 31 May–14 June and 20 October–9 November 2023. Panels of 1,000 respondents per country took part in each wave, and were nationally representative of age and gender.¹³⁰

7.1 Demographics

Across all five countries, 62.4% of respondents in wave 1 and 67.8% in wave 2 watched at least one of the Eurovision Song Contest 2023 Live Shows (we term these 'watchers' in our results). The lowest proportion of respondents who had watched Eurovision Song Contest 2023 was in France, and the highest was in Estonia.

The Eurovision Song Contest demonstrably has strong intergenerational appeal. Roughly a third of watchers in each wave fell into the 18–34, 35–54 and 55+ age bands. The 18–34 band is the target bracket for the British Council's Global Perception Survey.

Figure 1: Proportion of respondents who had watched Eurovision Song Contest 2023 in each country

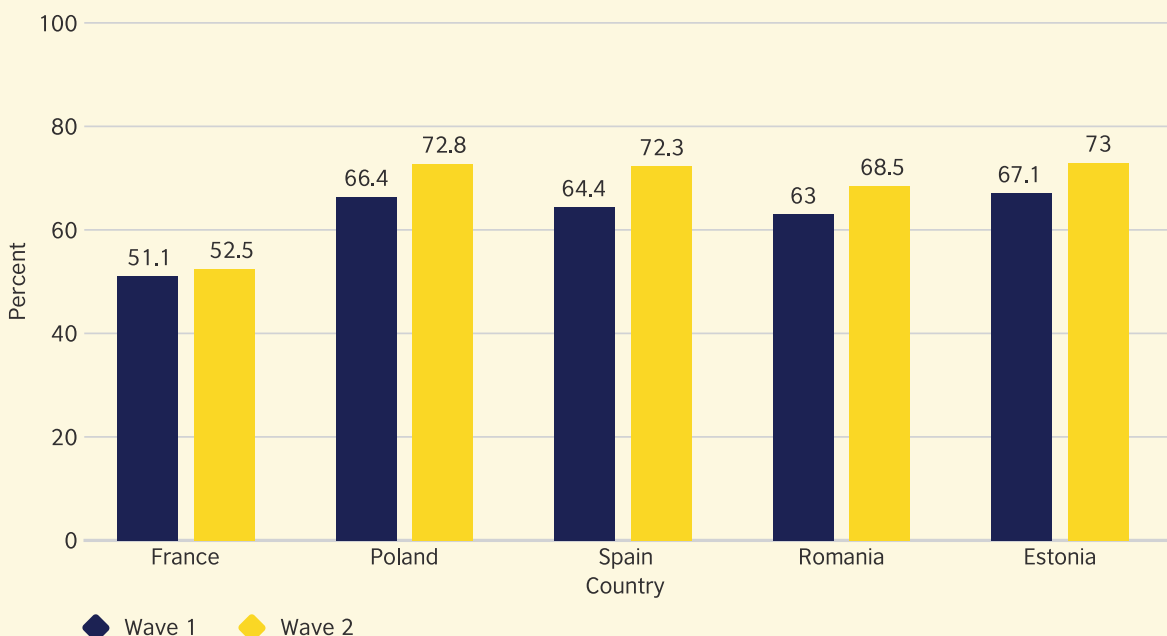
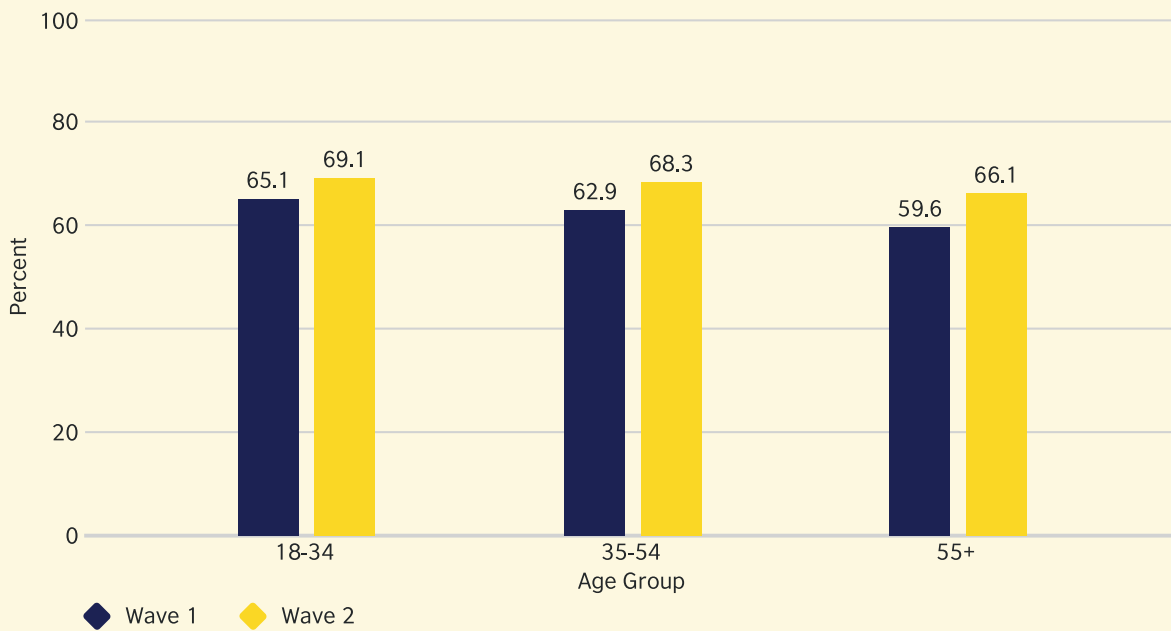


Figure 2: Proportions of respondents who had watched



Audience profiles exhibited some national differences. For instance, higher proportions of watchers in Spain than the other countries were aged 35–54 (42.2% wave 1 / 39.7% wave 2) and 55+ (34.2% wave 1 / 35.0% wave 2). This may represent a particularly strong tradition in Spain of watching Eurovision in multigenerational family groups.

The gender breakdown of respondents who watched Eurovision Song Contest 2023 was the same in both waves, 51.8% female and 48.1% male. Fewer than five on either wave were another gender or preferred not to say.

The majority of respondents who watched Eurovision Song Contest 2023 had completed either practical / technical / occupational higher education (33.6% / 31.9%) or general upper secondary education (27.5% / 27.6%). Proportions of watchers who had theoretically-based or research degrees varied between countries, from 4.4% / 6.6% in Poland to 24.3% / 26.3% in Estonia and 28.3% / 30.0% in Spain. 64.1% / 64.2% lived in urban areas, 19.7% / 20.0% in suburban areas, and 16.2% / 15.8% in rural areas.

Figures for respondents who might be LGBTQ+ were very small. In wave 1, respondents who watched Eurovision Song Contest 2023 were very slightly more likely to describe their sexual orientation as gay/lesbian or another sexual orientation besides heterosexual (5.8%; we term these ‘LGBTQ+’ for our results) than respondents in general (5.4%). This did not occur in wave 2, where 5.0% of watchers, and 5.3% of overall respondents, described their sexuality in these ways.

This suggests that, although Eurovision’s associations with LGBTQ+ fandom are well known, LGBTQ+ viewers as a small sexual minority are still subsumed in mass event audiences by the much larger number of heterosexual people in society. The highest proportion of watchers who were LGBTQ+ was 6.4% in France on wave 1 and 6.6% in Spain on wave 2.

7.2 Engagement with the UK

Respondents who had watched Eurovision Song Contest 2023 were more likely than respondents who had not watched it to have prior experience of engagement with UK culture, and more positive perceptions of the UK. This applied across the domains of engagement and attractiveness we surveyed.

The most common forms of prior engagement with the UK were tourist travel and enjoying UK arts and culture. Respondents in wave 2 were more likely than wave 1 overall to have lived/worked/studied in or done business with the UK. Those who had watched Eurovision Song Contest 2023 were more likely to have travelled to the UK as a tourist in wave 2, without the same rise among non-watchers.

Table 1: Prior engagement with the UK

Engagement	Watchers		Non-watchers	
	Wave 1	Wave 2	Wave 1	Wave 2
Tourist travel	48.6%	49.8%	35.2%	34.1%
Enjoying UK arts and culture	37.2%	37.1%	20.3%	20.0%
Personal contacts and friendships	30.0%	29.8%	16.0%	16.2%
Lived and worked in the UK	8.2%	9.3%	5.9%	6.6%
Business with UK	7.6%	7.8%	4.4%	5.1%
Study in UK	4.8%	5.4%	3.3%	4.3%
No prior engagement	32.9%	31.2%	50.1%	48.5%

These results had noticeable national differences. Almost two-thirds of watchers in France and Spain had visited the UK as tourists (63.8% / 63.2% in France, 64.0% / 64.3% in Spain), almost half in Poland (46.2% / 46.4%), and only around a third in Romania (37.5% / 39.4%) or Estonia (35.3% / 39.0%). This is to be expected given higher average incomes and wider transport options in France/Spain.

Estonia exhibited the lowest levels of prior engagement with the UK in each domain, suggesting this is a country where the UK could do more to stimulate interpersonal cultural relations and engagement with UK culture generally.

7.2.1 Attractiveness and trust

Respondents who watched Eurovision Song Contest 2023 were also more likely to perceive the UK as attractive and trustworthy than respondents who had not. Using the Global Perception survey's measure of attractiveness (respondents who scored an answer between 6 and 10 on a Likert scale):

Table 2: Respondents' perceptions of UK attractiveness and trust

	Watchers		Non-watchers	
	Wave 1	Wave 2	Wave 1	Wave 2
Attractive place to study	83.9%	84.8%	68.3%	67.7%
Attractive source of arts/culture	89.9%	86.9%	73.8%	72.8%
Attractive for business/trade	76.8%	76.1%	59.8%	59.6%
Trusted people from UK	74.9%	72.6%	54.3%	56.4%
Trusted UK government	67.0%	65.5%	45.0%	46.3%
Trusted UK institutions	67.0%	65.5%	52.7%	53.4%
Attractive overall	88.5%	87.8%	72.9%	72.4%

Most of these attractiveness indicators, including attractiveness as a source of arts and culture, were not sustained or increased in wave 2 among respondents who had watched Eurovision Song Contest 2023. This may suggest that the Eurovision Song Contest on its own is not enough to persuade viewers that a host country is attractive as a source of arts and culture. The Eurovision Song Contest may do more to increase attractiveness of or interest in a host country's culture among viewers who have engaged with that country's culture less in the past.

In a few cases at country level, nearly all in Poland, an attractiveness indicator rose for watchers and decreased for non-watchers in wave 2:



75.0% of watchers in Estonia found the UK attractive as a place to study
(rose from 74.2%; non-watchers dropped from 55.2% to 54.3%)



92.7% of watchers in Poland found the UK attractive as a source of arts/culture
(rose from 91.9%; non-watchers dropped from 80.1% to 77.1%)



75.6% of watchers in Poland trusted UK institutions
(rose from 69.8%; non-watchers dropped from 59.5% to 58.8%)



92.6% of watchers in Poland found the UK attractive as a place to study
(rose from 88.7%; non-watchers dropped from 75.9% to 75.7%)



87.3% of watchers in Poland found the UK attractive for business or trade
(rose from 83.5%; non-watchers dropped from 70.2% to 68.8%)



93.2% of watchers in Poland trusted UK government
(rose from 91.1%; non-watchers dropped from 80.1% to 79.1%)

This could suggest watching Eurovision Song Contest 2023 had had some impact on these respondents' perceptions.

7.2.2 Future interests

As with all indicators of prior engagement with the UK and attractiveness/trust, future intentions to engage with UK culture were higher among watchers than non-watchers:

Table 3: Respondents' interests in future engagement with the UK

Interest in	Watchers		Non-watchers	
	Wave 1	Wave 2	Wave 1	Wave 2
Future study in UK	10.8%	10.6%	5.9%	7.0%
Future tourist travel to UK	80.7%	71.8%	62.6%	59.1%
Doing business with UK	16.2%	16.1%	8.5%	9.8%
Living and working in UK	21.8%	22.5%	12.7%	14.0%
Future contacts and friendships	41.3%	40.9%	23.5%	23.1%
Learning/enjoying UK arts/culture	47.0%	47.3%	30.1%	28.8%
No interest in any of these	7.3%	8.1%	25.0%	25.1%

Most domains of interest followed a pattern where watchers' interest in that domain had dropped slightly between waves 1 and 2, but was still higher than interest levels of non-watchers. Interest levels in living and working in the UK grew among both groups.

Future interest in learning about and enjoying UK arts and culture, however, did grow slightly among watchers in wave 2 while dropping among non-watchers. This could suggest that Eurovision Song Contest 2023 had had a positive impact on this interest among its audience.

At country level, the only indicator where a greater gap between watchers and non-watchers appeared in wave 2 was interest in making future contacts and friendships with the UK in Poland (rose from 48.0% to 50.9% among watchers, dropped from 29.2% to 27.2% among non-watchers).

There is some evidence that the UK in general experienced a perception uplift in Poland and Estonia, more so than the other target countries, between May–June and October–November 2023. In Poland this was more pronounced among respondents who had watched Eurovision Song Contest 2023, and in Estonia there was less difference.

A few indicators rose whether respondents had watched Eurovision Song Contest 2023 or not, particularly in Estonia:



9.2% of watchers in Estonia were interested in future study in the UK

(rose from 5.8%; non-watchers rose from 5.2% to 5.9%)



17.4% of watchers in Spain were interested in future business or trade with UK

(rose from 15.0%; non-watchers rose from 9.0% to 9.4%)



21.2% of watchers in Spain were interested in living and working in the UK

(rose from 17.9%; non-watchers rose from 12.0% to 12.6%)



32.1% of watchers in Estonia were interested in learning about UK arts and culture

(rose from 26.8%; non-watchers rose from 17.9% to 26.3%)



20.0% of watchers in Poland were interested in future business or trade with UK

(rose from 19.5%; non-watchers rose from 10.4% to 13.2%)



11.4% of watchers in Estonia were interested in future business or trade with UK

(rose from 10.1%; non-watchers rose from 8.2% to 11.1%)



14.4% of watchers in Estonia were interested in living and working in the UK

(rose from 12.1%; non-watchers rose from 7.6% to 13.3%)



32.1% of watchers in Estonia were interested in future contacts/friendships with UK

(rose from 28.7%; non-watchers rose from 17.3% to 25.6%)

7.2.3 Visit intentions

Results did provide some evidence that Eurovision Song Contest 2023 had had some lasting impact on watchers' intentions to visit Liverpool. In wave 1, 51.8% of all respondents, 60.9% of watchers and only 36.6% of non-watchers said they were likely to visit Liverpool in future (6–10 on Likert scale). This had increased in wave 2 to 54.2% overall, 61.9% of watchers and 37.7% of non-watchers.

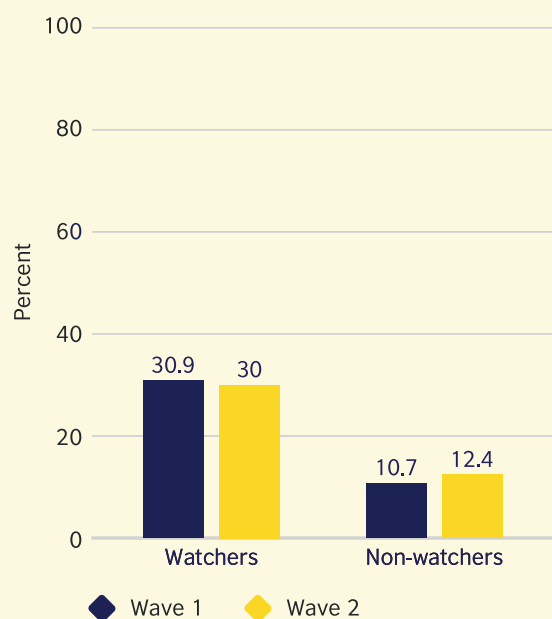
Later in the survey, however, respondents were directly asked what effect Eurovision Song Contest 2023 had had on their likelihood of visiting the UK or Liverpool. Almost a third of respondents reported it had made them more likely to visit both destinations.

In wave 1, 23.3% of respondents overall, 30.9% of watchers and 10.7% of non-watchers said Eurovision Song Contest 2023 had made them more likely to visit the UK. In wave 2, a similar proportion of watchers (30.0%) said it had made them more likely to visit the UK. The small proportion of watchers who said it had made them less likely to visit the UK had risen slightly, from 5.6% to 7.8%.

At the same time, non-watchers in wave 2 became more likely to say that Eurovision Song Contest 2023 in Liverpool had made them more likely to visit the UK (rising to 12.4%). A slightly higher proportion than in wave 1 (8.0%) said it had made them less likely to visit the UK, but this rise was smaller than the rise in 'less likely' responses for watchers.

People who had watched Eurovision Song Contest 2023 were also more likely to say that Liverpool hosting the event had made them more likely to visit Liverpool. Indeed, a slightly higher proportion said this about Liverpool than the UK (32.5% of watchers in wave 1, 30.3% in wave 2).

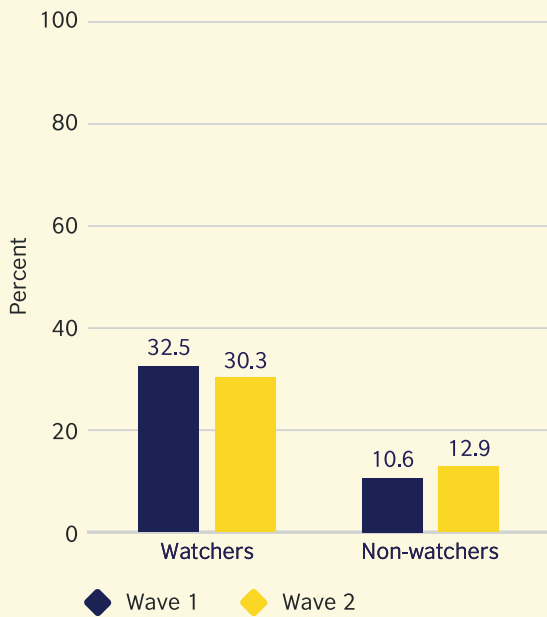
Figure 3: Proportions of respondents who said Eurovision Song Contest 2023 made them more likely to visit the UK



In wave 2, 30.3% of watchers and 12.9% of non-watchers said that Eurovision Song Contest 2023 in Liverpool had made them more likely to visit the city, and 8.1% of watchers / 7.6% of non-watchers said it had made them less likely. Again, the proportion of non-watchers saying Eurovision Song Contest 2023 had made them more likely to visit the destination was higher in wave 2. This could suggest it had taken longer for positive impacts of Eurovision Song Contest 2023’s destination marketing for the UK or Liverpool to reach them.

Reported likelihood of visits among wave 2 respondents who had watched Eurovision Song Contest 2023 did however see a slightly higher drop-off rate for Liverpool than for the UK. This could be because, even with the asset of Eurovision, Liverpool’s image was still not as well embedded in their consciousness as the UK’s image in general.

Figure 4: Proportion of respondents who said Eurovision Song Contest 2023 made them more likely to visit Liverpool

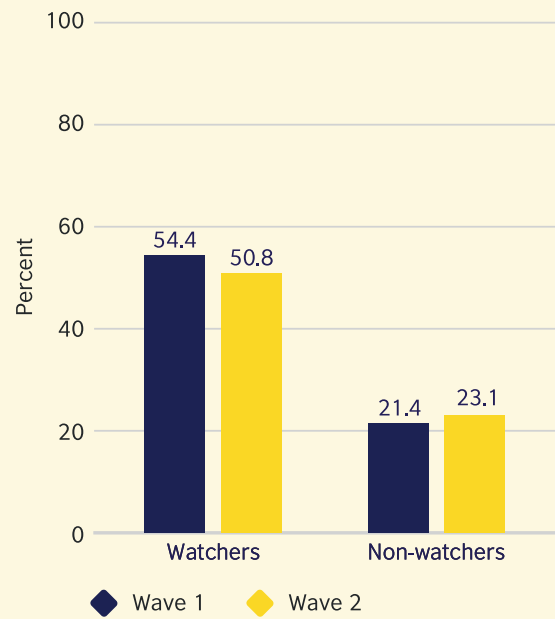


7.2.4 General image of the UK

When asked what effect the UK hosting Eurovision Song Contest 2023 had had on their view of the UK, 54.4% of watchers and 21.4% of non-watchers in wave 1 said it had been positive or very positive. In wave 2, this fell to 50.8% of watchers and rose to 23.1% of non-watchers. Again, this could suggest the immediate perception halo of the broadcast event had waned between waves 1 and 2 for viewers, but that a more positive impact of the event on non-watchers took longer to develop over time.

Only 1.6% / 2.0% of watchers and 2.8% / 4.1% of non-watchers indicated Eurovision Song Contest 2023 had had a negative or very negative effect on their view of the UK. Negative perceptions among this very small minority of watchers could have related to dissatisfaction with some broadcast content or organisational matters such as ticketing, even potentially with the Grand Final result (which was decided by the international public and professional juries in competing countries, not by UK actors).

Figure 5: Proportion of respondents who said Eurovision Song Contest 2023 had a positive effect on their view of the UK

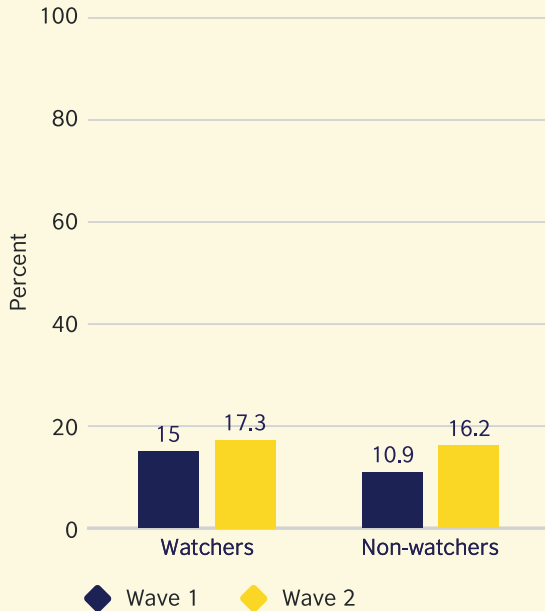


An unexpected finding about perceptions of the UK was that self-reported impacts of Brexit on perceptions of the UK appeared to have softened between waves 1 and 2. Respondents were asked whether Brexit had had a positive influence on their perceptions of the UK, a negative influence, or no effect. Those who had watched Eurovision Song Contest 2023 were slightly more likely to report Brexit having had a negative influence, and Brexit having had a positive influence. This could suggest that watchers were more engaged than non-watchers with European/international affairs and therefore more likely to have formed an opinion about Brexit.

In wave 1, 45.7% of respondents had stated Brexit had no influence on their views of the UK, 36.6% reported a negative influence and 13.5% reported a positive influence. Among watchers, 44.2% reported no influence, 37.4% reported a negative influence, and 15.0% reported a positive influence. 48.2% of non-watchers reported no influence, 35.3% reported a negative influence, and 10.9% reported a positive influence.

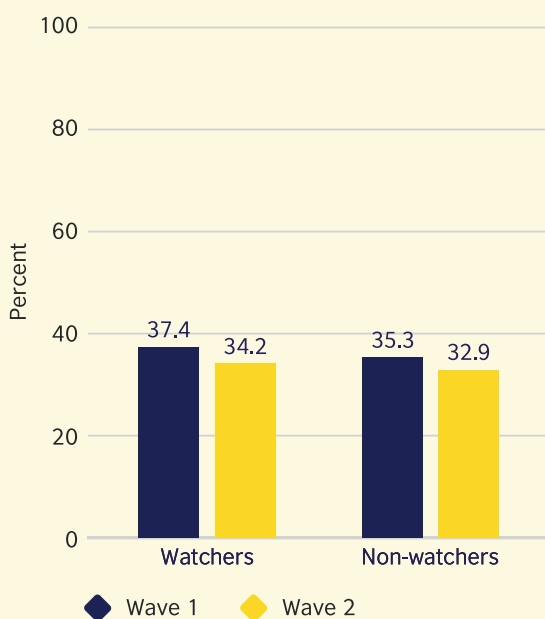
In both groups, watchers and non-watchers, a gap between those who reported a negative influence and those who reported a positive influence narrowed between wave 1 and wave 2.

Figure 6: Proportion of respondents who said Brexit had a positive influence on their view of the UK



This was unlikely to be connected to Eurovision Song Contest 2023, since both groups exhibited the same pattern, but does suggest some underlying changes in perceptions of the UK as a European partner over these five months in 2023.

Figure 7: Proportion of respondents who said Brexit had a negative influence on their view of the UK



7.3 Engagement with other cultural events

More respondents had heard of the Eurovision Song Contest than any of the cultural events in the British Council's 2021 Global Perceptions Survey, which our survey used for comparison purposes. In wave 1, the Eurovision Song Contest had 83.0% recognition among respondents overall, 88.5% recognition among watchers and 73.6% recognition even among non-watchers. Next was the Cannes Film Festival, at 76.6% (75% in wave 2).

In wave 2, recognition of the Eurovision Song Contest dropped by around 3–4 percentage points. It had 80.5% recognition overall, 85.9% among watchers and 69.0% among non-watchers, but was still better recognised than Cannes or any other surveyed event. This suggests some awareness of the Eurovision Song Contest dropped after it had not been receiving extensive international media coverage for some months.

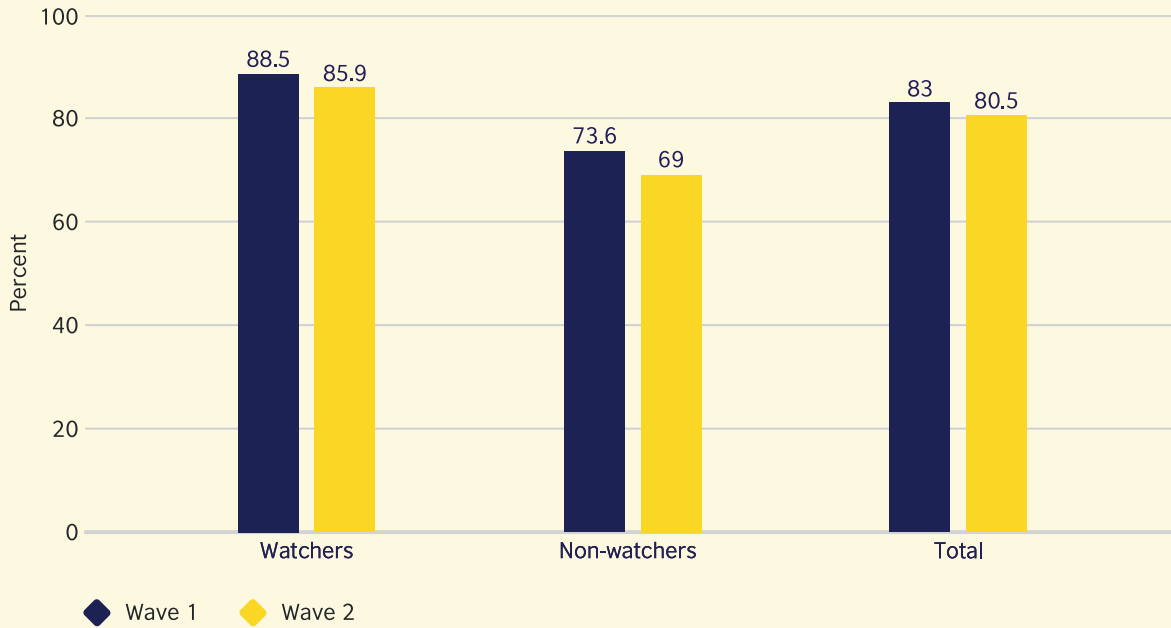
Unlike the EBU's own Eurovision Song Contest Brand Impact Survey, which reported 96% familiarity with Eurovision in 2023, the Tracker Survey's comparative recognition question was restricted to arts and culture events and so did not include the Olympics or World Cup. These were the only events in the EBU survey to enjoy more recognition than the Eurovision Song Contest, at 99% and 97% respectively.¹³¹

The 2023 Global Perceptions Survey, conducted in G20 countries among 18–34 year olds only during June–July 2023 (between Tracker Survey waves 1 and 2), returned notably lower results for respondents who had heard of the Eurovision Song Contest in the only country sampled by both surveys, France. Only 23% of these respondents had heard of it.¹³²

This discrepancy may be due to lower awareness and high drop-off among French 18–24 year olds. By Tracker Survey wave 2, more than half of French 18–24 year olds who did not watch Eurovision Song Contest 2023 said they had not heard of it (56.3%), and even 44.8% of those saying they had watched Eurovision Song Contest 2023 did not recognise the Eurovision Song Contest in a list of other events. This did not occur as much among 25–34s.

All European and UK cultural events enjoyed more recognition among people who had watched Eurovision Song Contest 2023 than people who had not. Among UK cultural events, the best-recognised was the Notting Hill Carnival, which around 1 in 4 respondents had heard of (24.8% / 25.5%) in wave 1. The Edinburgh Fringe and Glastonbury enjoyed equal recognition at 14.5%. Only 9.5% had heard of the BBC Proms, and only 8.8% had heard of the Hay Festival.

Figure 8: Proportions of respondents who had heard of the Eurovision Song Contest



In wave 2, some uplift in recognition appeared among watchers for the summertime popular-music-led events, Glastonbury (16.1% / 17.9%) and the Notting Hill Carnival (29.0% / 30.5%). This might suggest people who watched Eurovision Song Contest 2023 were more likely to be aware of other popular-music-led events than non-watchers. Non-watchers did not show the same uplift for these events but did show more recognition for Hay (3.8% in wave 1, 4.2% in wave 2).

Recognition levels for different events varied widely between countries, though people who watched Eurovision Song Contest 2023 were nearly always more likely to have heard of an event. The only exception was during wave 1 in Poland (the country with most non-watchers who had lived and worked in the UK), where non-watchers were slightly more likely than watchers to have heard of Glastonbury (13.4% versus 12.8%). This was not repeated in wave 2.

Table 4: Top 3 most recognised events overall by country, in descending order (wave 2)

Estonia	France	Poland	Romania	Spain
Eurovision Festival (83.1%)	Cannes Film Festival (82.9%)	Eurovision Festival (76.7%)	Eurovision Festival (85.5%)	Eurovision Festival (80.9%)
European Capitals of Culture (70.1%)	Eurovision Festival (76.1%)	Cannes Film Festival (66.5%)	Cannes Film Festival (77.5%)	Cannes Film Festival (80.7%)
Cannes Film Festival (67.3%)	UNESCO World Heritage Sites (63.3%)	UNESCO World Heritage Sites (64.8%)	UNESCO World Heritage Sites (63.1%)	UNESCO World Heritage Sites (77.3%)

Table 5: Top 3 most recognised UK events overall by country, in descending order (wave 2)

Estonia	France	Poland	Romania	Spain
Notting Hill Carnival (14.3%)	Notting Hill Carnival (22.0%)	Notting Hill Carnival (26.4%)	Notting Hill Carnival (23.6%)	Notting Hill Carnival (41.1%)
Glastonbury Festival (12.0%)	Glastonbury Festival (15.1%)	Edinburgh Fringe (19.0%)	Glastonbury Festival (14.7%)	Glastonbury Festival (22.5%)
Edinburgh Fringe (11.5%)	Edinburgh Fringe (12.2%)	Glastonbury Festival (13.7%)	Edinburgh Fringe (12.5%)	Edinburgh Fringe (15.4%)

Respondents in Estonia were least likely to have heard of UK cultural events in general across both waves. However, Estonians who watched the Eurovision Song Contest showed greater recognition of several UK cultural events in wave 2 (the BBC Proms, Edinburgh and Hay – though not Glastonbury). This could suggest that watching an Eurovision Song Contest broadcast from the UK might have had a more perceptible impact on their engagement with UK culture through the rest of 2023 which was more perceptible than in other countries because prior engagement with UK culture had been relatively lower there.

Recognition levels for other European events were unsurprisingly influenced by place. French respondents were most likely to have heard of Cannes (87.2% in wave 1, 82.9% in wave 2), and France was the only country where respondents were more likely to have heard of Cannes than the Eurovision Song Contest. European Capitals of Culture had the best recognition in Romania (59.8% in wave 1, 60.2% in wave 2), where Timișoara was an ECoC in 2023, and – even more so – in Estonia (67.6% in wave 1, 70.1% in wave 2), where Tartu was about to become an ECoC in 2024.

7.4 Engagement with the Eurovision Song Contest

The survey also asked about respondents' engagement with the Eurovision Song Contest itself in 2023 and over the past five years. Almost half of watchers (48.2% / 45.5%) said they watched every year, and even more than half of those who did not watch in 2023 said they had watched at least one Eurovision Song Contest since 2018 (61.5% / 61.7%). This suggests that there is a large rolling audience with some engagement with the Eurovision Song Contest in each five-year period beyond the audience figures quoted for each year's event.

Estonia had the highest proportion of watchers in 2023 who also reported watching every year (57.6% / 57.9%). In France, around half of non-watchers had never watched the Eurovision Song Contest since 2018 (53.0% / 49.7%), while in Estonia only 18.5% / 20% of non-watchers had never watched since 2018.

Around 1 in 5 watchers and 1 in 6 non-watchers remembered looking at BBC digital content for Eurovision Song Contest 2023, and the figure was similar for looking at other newspaper or digital content. Around 1 in 4 watchers and even 4.5% / 7.0% of non-watchers reported voting in the Grand Final. The latter may have been users who voted for a song through the Eurovision Song Contest app but did not end up watching live.

4.9% of watchers in both waves had attended or organised a Eurovision party, and so had 1.9% / 3.1% of non-watchers (who might have helped organise one but not joined in). More than 1 in 10 watchers in Spain had been to a Eurovision party, more than twice that in any other country.

Just over 3% of respondents in both waves who had watched a 2023 Live Show, and 2.2% / 3.5% who had not, said they had also attended Eurovision Song Contest 2023 in person. This is higher than one would expect among the general public. However, only 147 people in wave 1 and 163 in wave 2 said they had attended in person. An ANOVA test determined that their inclusion did not have a significant effect on the final results except for the question about in-person attendance itself.

Although numbers of LGBTQ+ respondents were very small, there is some indication that LGBTQ+ respondents were more likely than heterosexual respondents to watch the Eurovision Song Contest and to engage with official and unofficial content. Homosexual women and homosexual men were also more likely to have watched the Eurovision Song Contest at least once or twice in 2018–22 than any other group defined by sexuality and gender, except the extremely small group of women with another sexual orientation in wave 1.

Table 6: Proportion of respondents who had watched the Eurovision Song Contest 'every year', 'most years' or 'once or twice' in 2018–22, by gender and sexual orientation

Group	Wave 1	Wave 2
Lesbians	81.9%	73.4%
Gay men	74.0%	78.2%
Heterosexual women	64.2%	62.8%
Heterosexual men	57.3%	61.6%
Women, other sexual orientation	83.4%	65.6%
Men, other sexual orientation	65.2%	44.5%

Further research with more LGBTQ+ respondents, including more trans and gender non-conforming respondents, is needed to test this association.

7.5 Perceptions of Eurovision Song Contest 2023's identity

When given options for how they might have perceived Eurovision Song Contest 2023's identity, the majority of watchers in wave 1 perceived it as hosted by the UK on behalf of Ukraine (46.3%) or a joint UK/Ukrainian event (18.9%). 15.2% perceived it as a UK event, and 7.1% perceived it as a Ukrainian event.

Five months later in wave 2, however, the proportion of watchers who perceived Eurovision Song Contest 2023 as a Ukrainian event had grown by more than half. While a little awareness of the UK/Ukrainian partnership had slipped, the slip was in the direction of perceiving Eurovision 2023 as a Ukrainian event rather than a UK event. An ANOVA test suggests this difference between waves was statistically significant (p-value 0.024).

Almost half of those who did not watch Eurovision Song Contest 2023, in contrast, did not know how they would perceive the show's identity. This suggests that watching the broadcast content made viewers much better equipped to answer this question.

Even non-watchers, however, exhibited a (smaller) perception shift in wave 2 towards seeing Eurovision Song Contest 2023 as a Ukrainian event. This suggests the show's branding and creative narrative successfully communicated Ukrainian involvement even to some audiences who did not watch the broadcast.

Figure 9: Respondents' perceptions of the identity of Eurovision Song Contest 2023



8 Shared values and mutual relationships

8.1 Introduction

Unless the BBC is invited to host Eurovision on behalf of another future winner, a UK entry will probably need to win the contest before another Eurovision takes place in the UK. Even then, UK organisations will only have 12 months' notice to consider how to engage with the event. It is also, therefore, worth considering what values attach to the event from year to year. This section does so by considering evidence from the stakeholder interviews and the Eurovision International Tracker Survey together.

Existing research on Eurovision frequently depicts Eurovision as an event that invites its audience to celebrate shared values. Its 'origin story' has become one of countries re-establishing mutual relationships after conflict through broadcasters cooperating and audiences watching the same live event across borders. Might Eurovision therefore strengthen relationships based on mutual values and interests during times of conflict as well?

The field of broadcasters which participate in the event is itself defined by shared values in the sense that they must all be EBU members in good standing. If the EBU suspends a broadcaster because it considers that member has seriously contravened its values, or a broadcaster judges that the event's values are too far from its own, that broadcaster ceases to take part.

Broadcaster withdrawals are typically for financial reasons, but may also involve values explicitly or implicitly. A disagreement with the qualification system or the participation fee is also a disagreement over how the EBU applies its values of universality and diversity in practice. When there is speculation that a broadcaster has withdrawn under pressure not to broadcast international LGBTQ+ content to its national audience, this also frames the withdrawal as values-based.

The EBU has recently become more assertive in exercising its powers in ways that define the field of participating broadcasters, or even non-competing partners which broadcast the contest, according to shared values. In 2018, it terminated its partnership with the Chinese broadcaster Mango TV the day after Semi-Final 1 because Mango had applied new state censorship rules and not broadcast two entries (the Irish entry had shown two men holding hands, and the Albanian entrant was visibly tattooed).¹³³ The announcement stated the censorship was 'not in line with the EBU's values of universality and inclusivity and our proud tradition of celebrating diversity through music.'¹³⁴

In 2021, the EBU took direct steps to disqualify attempted entries from Belarus which it considered to break its rules about instrumentalising the Eurovision Song Contest and bringing it into disrepute.¹³⁵ These preceded the EBU suspending Belarus's broadcaster from membership altogether in May 2021 for reasons including its broadcasting of interviews apparently obtained under duress.¹³⁶



Among the main values that stakeholder interview participants attached to Eurovision were inclusivity, diversity, hospitality, freedom and solidarity. Solidarity was particularly linked to the context of Eurovision 2023 being hosted on behalf of Ukraine, though different stakeholders conceived of solidarity at different scales.

In response to calls by ten member broadcasters after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine began, the EBU excluded Russia from the Eurovision Song Contest on 25 February, and fully suspended Russia's three EBU member broadcasters on 1 March.¹³⁷ These steps show that the EBU has been prepared to take more decisive action to create Eurovision as a space of shared values among broadcasters. However, they will also leave the EBU more open to questions about how it applies its values to take action against other broadcasters when state authorities are violating human rights on large scales.

The strongest evidence for perceiving Eurovision as a space of shared values and mutual relationships comes from stakeholders who contribute to delivering the event. Its values become part of their professional lives for months or even all year as they cooperate with international colleagues.

Among the main values that stakeholder interview participants attached to Eurovision were inclusivity, diversity, hospitality, freedom and solidarity. Solidarity was particularly linked to the context of Eurovision 2023 being hosted on behalf of Ukraine, though different stakeholders conceived of solidarity at different scales.

The BBC, Liverpool and the EBU all appealed to shared values in branding the event and deciding what affective atmosphere to create around it. Where stakeholders who believed in soft power foresaw Eurovision could have most soft power impact, however, was less through its direct projection of values and more through what successfully organising this large-scale event said about the BBC, the city of Liverpool, and the UK.

Right Flags of participating countries in Clayton Square Shopping Centre, Liverpool.

Credit: Marketing Liverpool.

8.2 Audience perceptions of values associated with Eurovision

A majority of Tracker Survey respondents who watched the Eurovision Song Contest associated the values of diversity (54.3%), internationalism (53.5%) and creativity (51.0%) with the contest in wave 1. In wave 2, even more respondents who had watched Eurovision Song Contest 2023 associated the contest with internationalism (54.8%), and associations with diversity and creativity remained strong, though slightly lower (51.7% and 49.3%). However, this still left almost half those who watched Eurovision Song Contest 2023 not associating the contest with each value.

Respondents who had watched Eurovision Song Contest 2023 could, unsurprisingly, associate it more with values in general than respondents who had not. Only 8.0% of watchers declined to associate Eurovision with any values in wave 1 ('none of the above', 'don't know' or 'prefer not to say'), compared to more than a third of non-watchers (36.7%).

In wave 2, only 7.9% of watchers declined to associate Eurovision with any listed values. The proportion of non-watchers declining to associate it with any of the values decreased to 34.1%. This suggests that some people who did not watch Eurovision Song Contest 2023 had heard things about Eurovision in the meantime which allowed them to associate it with one or more values in wave 2.



Respondents who had watched Eurovision Song Contest 2023 were also more likely to associate other places and brands in the Tracker Survey with listed values than respondents who had not. The strongest associations for each place/brand were:

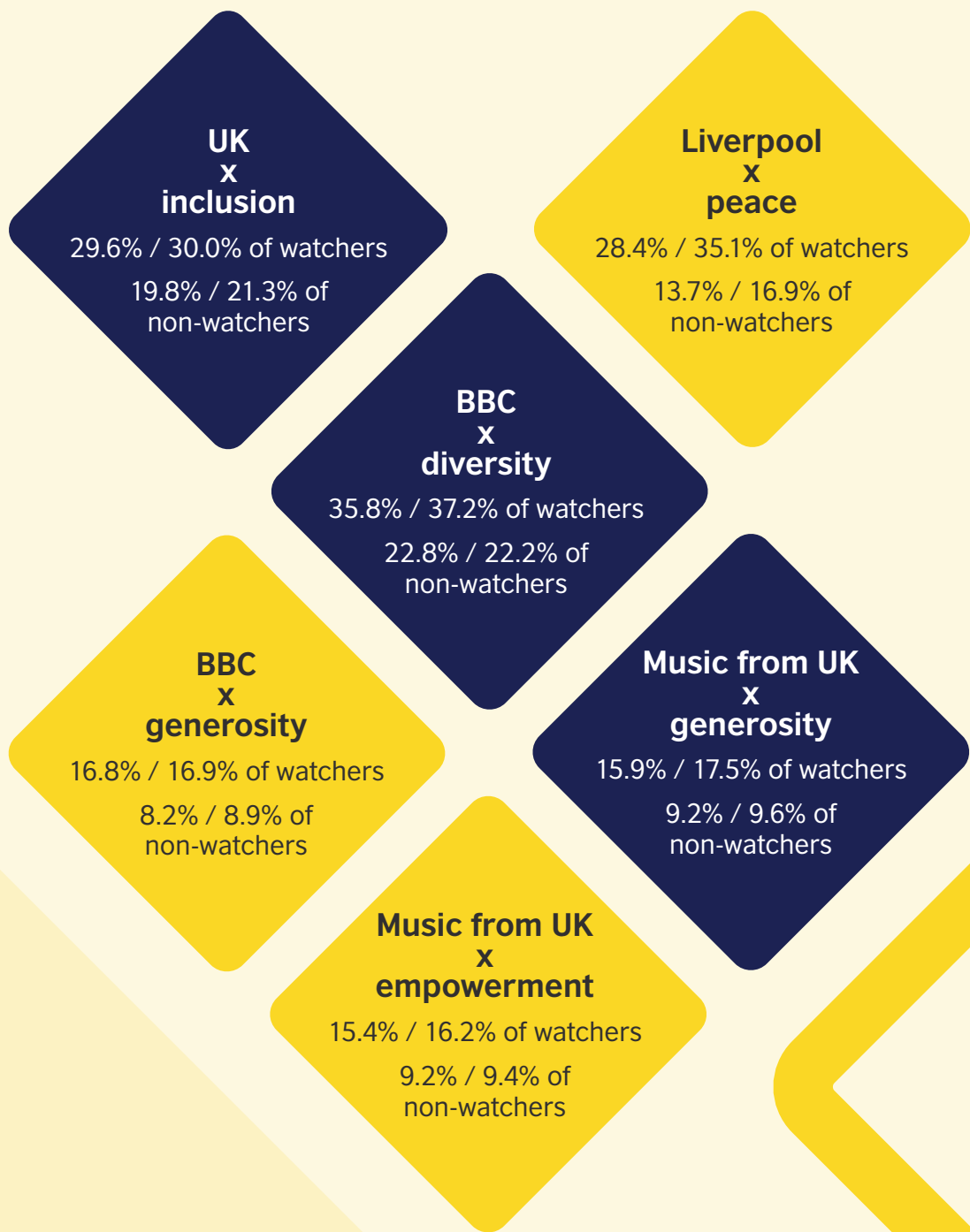


People who watched Eurovision Song Contest 2023 chose every combination of values and places/brands more often.

The results do not, however, suggest that watching Eurovision Song Contest 2023 contributed to more respondents perceiving associations between most values and most places/brands five months later. Besides music from the UK x creativity, which only saw a 0.1% increase among watchers in wave 2, only six other combinations of values and places/brands rose among those who had watched Eurovision Song Contest 2023:

Apart from the very small increase for music from the UK x creativity, the only combination where associations rose for watchers but not for non-watchers in wave 2 was BBC x diversity. This might suggest Eurovision Song Contest 2023 did improve perceptions of the BBC's diversity among audiences who watched it in the target countries.

In some other cases, associations had risen in wave 2 among people who had not watched Eurovision Song Contest 2023 but had fallen or stayed the same for those who did watch. This still never led to non-watchers being more likely to make a certain association than watchers. In these cases, other factors between waves might have influenced non-watchers without having an equivalent influence on watchers.



Such uplifts in value associations were particularly notable among non-watchers in perceptions of Liverpool. Their perceptions of Liverpool in wave 2 showed an uplift on every value association except creativity, though they still made each association in smaller proportions than watchers did.

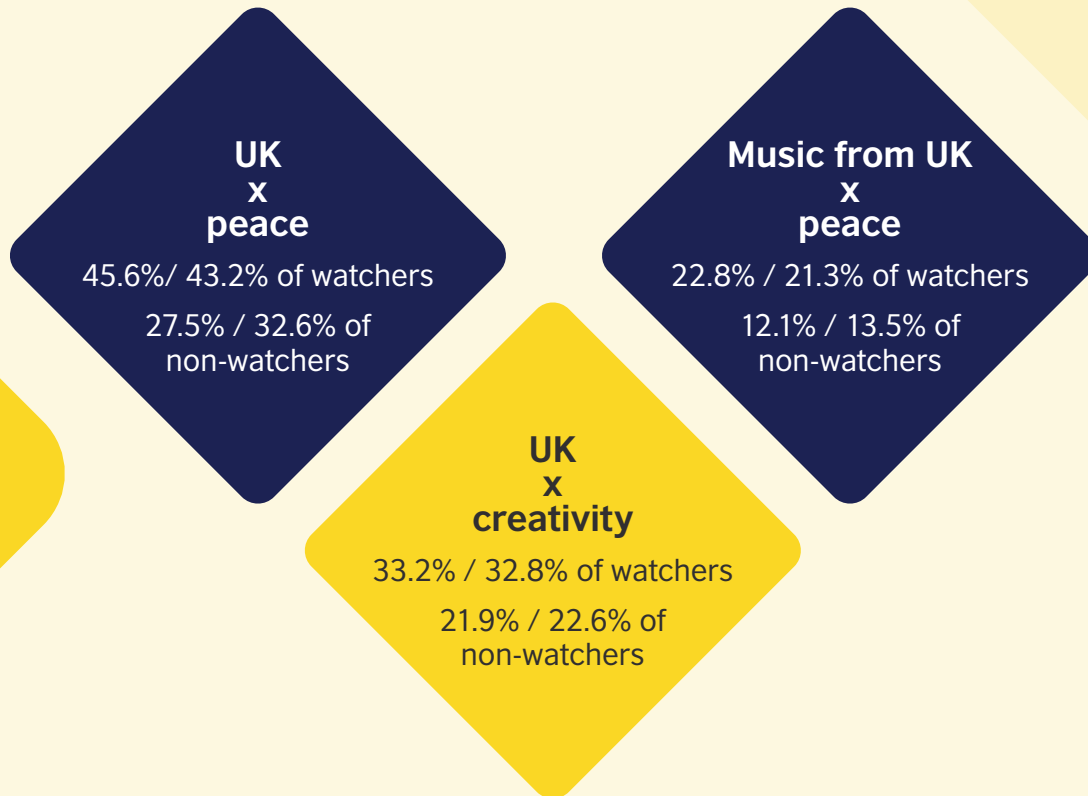
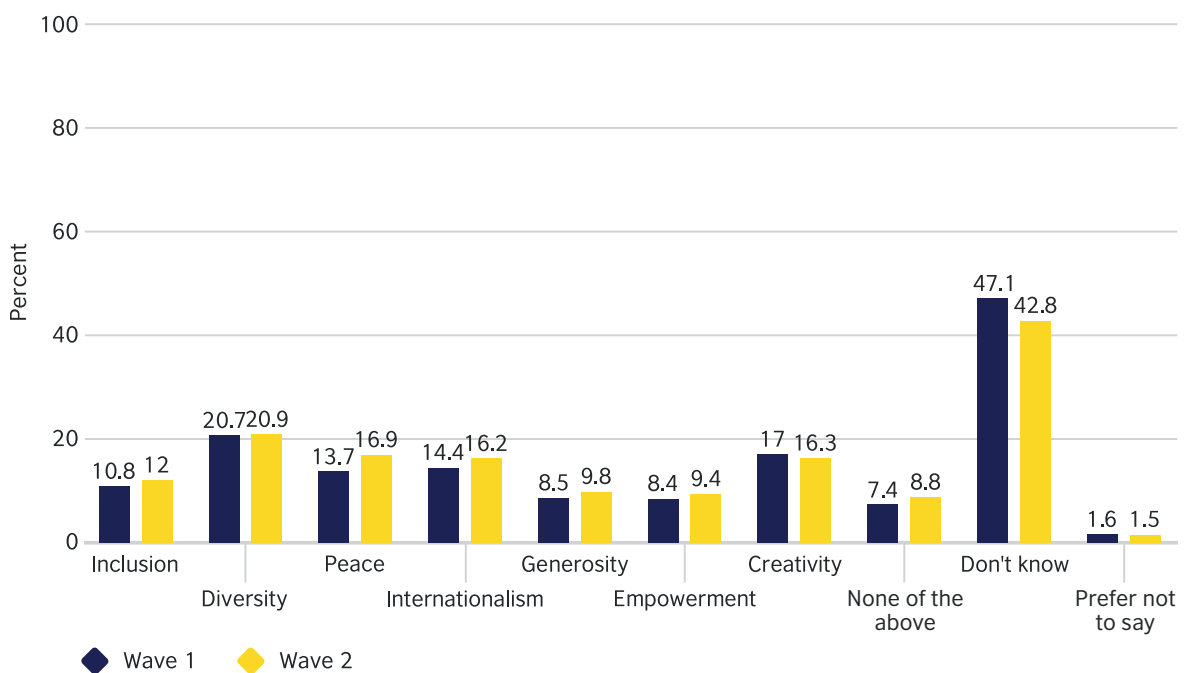


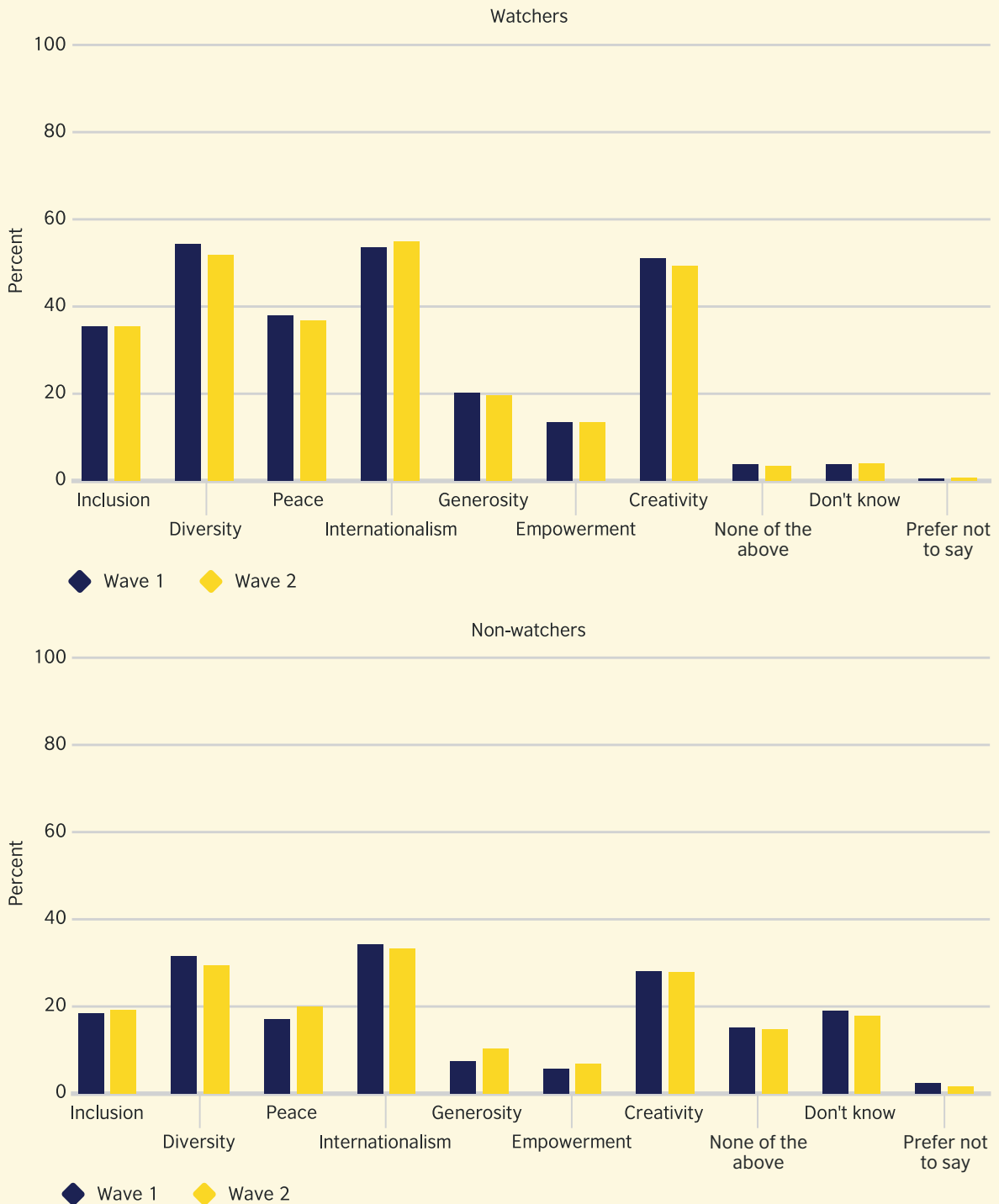
Figure 10: Proportion of total respondents who associated each value with Liverpool



The only value that a higher proportion of watchers associated with Liverpool in wave 2 than wave 1 was peace. This suggests that content or experiences that reached non-watchers between the two waves may have served to give them a stronger sense of Liverpool’s identity, whereas watching Eurovision Song Contest 2023 had already made watchers more able to make this association before wave 1.

Indeed, non-watchers in wave 2 also showed an uplift in how much they associated many values – inclusion, peace, generosity, and empowerment – with Eurovision itself. Their associations were never as strong as the watchers’, but this did suggest up to around 3% of respondents who did not watch Eurovision Song Contest 2023 had formed stronger impressions of the Eurovision brand by wave 2.

Figure 11: Proportion of respondents who associated each value with Eurovision



The third place/brand to produce this effect was Ukraine. The proportions of watchers who associated each value with Ukraine tended to drop by up to around 3% between the two waves, as with watchers' value associations in wave 2 generally. Among non-watchers, almost every value association witnessed an uplift:





Rather than expecting Eurovision to attract an audience who share a set of specific values, it is more probable that Eurovision offers many affordances and pleasures to different people, who come together in sufficient number to form the largest international audience for any televised musical event. This is diversity in its own way, but does not imply viewers form one stable community of values through the year.

Those who did not watch Eurovision Song Contest 2023 therefore related Liverpool, Eurovision, and Ukraine more strongly to almost every surveyed value in wave 2 – without them having watched the broadcast event. Their perceptions of the UK, the BBC, and music from the UK did not behave this way.

As with engagement with the Eurovision Song Contest and associated content, some associations between brands and values were particularly strong for certain LGBTQ+ groups, within the very small number of LGBTQ+ respondents. Across genders, more than half of gay and lesbian respondents associated Eurovision with inclusion (66.0% in wave 1, 55.0% in wave 2), compared to fewer than 4 in 10 straight respondents (37.0% in wave 1, 39.4% in wave 2).

Lesbians were more likely to associate the UK with inclusion than any other LGBTQ+ group, straight men, or straight women (45.5% in wave 1, 40.0% in wave 2). They also associated Eurovision with empowerment much more than any other group in wave 1 (27.3%), though this fell in wave 2 to 13.3%. These results could support the common suggestion that the Eurovision Song Contest has special meaning to LGBTQ+ people, but can only be indicative given the small numbers of LGBTQ+ respondents.

Rather than expecting Eurovision to attract an audience who share a set of specific values, it is more probable that Eurovision offers many affordances and pleasures to different people, who come together in sufficient number to form the largest international audience for any televised musical event. This is diversity in its own way, but does not imply viewers form one stable community of values through the year.

There is some evidence to suggest that the Eurovision Song Contest influences perceptions of the host city, previous winner and event brand even for people who have not watched it that year, over a timescale which takes longer to build than any perception uplifts for people who have watched it. Future research would need to incorporate a baseline wave before the event in order to identify what perception uplift the broadcast itself might have caused. This wave would need to take place early enough before the Eurovision Song Contest that public anticipation was not yet building, an issue that Liverpool's community and wellbeing evaluation encountered in 2023.¹³⁸

8.3 Stakeholder perceptions of values associated with Eurovision

Compared to audiences' perceptions, stakeholder perceptions of values associated with Eurovision were more concrete. Interviewees understood Eurovision's brand values as inclusive, diverse and welcoming across cultures and languages. Comments such as 'there is something inherently inclusive about Eurovision' or that Eurovision was about the power of culture to connect people on different sides of the world were common.

'The celebration of creativity makes people closer. It really unites and it really opens the doors to new connections and projects.'

Ukrainian MFA interviewee

Many also commented on the event's light-hearted, anarchic or ludic nature and its opportunities for optimism, joy and fun. The slogan 'United by Music' was often mentioned as reflecting the Eurovision 'spirit' well, at a time when it was not yet known this would become a permanent slogan for the event.

Diversity was another significant value. This included diversity of cultural tastes. A producer delivering EuroVillage, for instance, considered that its programming had been 'an opportunity to create something for everyone' by applying the 'Eurovision ethos' so that there would be days appealing even to people who did not like Eurovision music.

Diversity was also understood on a social level, which included but went deeper than the fact of the contest's huge international audience. Eurovision could be described as an event that opens 'possibilities [...] for people of different nations, different age groups, different beliefs' (Suspilne Ukraine interviewee), or a 'place where you can project your own identity as well as your national identity, your cultural identity' (EBU interviewee).

The value of freedom which resonated in multiple and overlapping ways through 2023, reflecting Ukraine's fight for freedom as well as the celebration of LGBTQ+ freedom now associated with Eurovision. Many respondents reflected on Eurovision as a high-profile platform for celebrations of queerness (e.g. wins by Dana International in 1998 and Conchita Wurst in 2014) or for opening conversations about attitudes to sexuality (e.g. a Ukrainian participant recalled feeling hopeful that Ukraine had selected the cross-dressed character Verka Serduchka in 2007 despite some public discourses at home arguing that sending such a performer to Eurovision would be a shame).

Eurovision was seen as somewhere where the LGBTQ+ community 'feels at home', with strong representation in the event's international fan club, strong representation in the arena audience as a result, and now also many openly LGBTQ+ performers. The EBU is aware that for many years LGBTQ+ fans were 'possibly the most visible fan community'.¹³⁹ BBC producers celebrated the idea that 'Eurovision accepts anybody and celebrates everybody' through the Live Shows.¹⁴⁰ This combined a specific welcome to Ukrainians with a wider objective to show off the UK and Eurovision as inclusive and welcoming in a context where progress towards acceptance across Europe has been uneven, and indeed is still contested within the UK.

UK stakeholders at the core of the event interpreted solidarity in a humanitarian way, as Eurovision taking the opportunity to come together through music to support Ukraine. This prevented having to take positions on more explicitly political questions such as the UK's approach to Ukraine compared to other conflicts, or the visa schemes for Ukrainian refugees. Indeed, it may have helped facilitate cooperation between stakeholders with different views on these.

8.4 Values and the UK hosting on behalf of Ukraine

The narrative of the UK hosting on behalf of Ukraine can be seen as a strategic narrative for the event, which was threaded through all its different aspects, platforms and sites. The Live Shows, for instance, integrated this narrative through the Semi-Finals' approaches to BBC/Suspilne coproduction and through the structure of the Grand Final opening act and flag parade. Such public displays of 'helping' Ukraine were seen by production stakeholders including the EBU as a lived expression of Eurovision's values.

At the same time, these displays also became a potentially useful currency for UK nation-branding and influencing international perceptions of the UK. The spotlight on the DCMS-subsidised tickets for Ukrainians who had settled in the UK after February 2022 on UK Government visa schemes, for instance, was understood as having a potentially positive impact on people's feelings about the UK as well as Eurovision. A DCMS respondent, for instance, described meeting many Ukrainians over Eurovision week who were pleased to have the opportunity to see it live, and believed they would share their positive experience with friends and families across the UK and back in Ukraine.

The Tracker Survey results do not suggest that the UK was perceived as building its image through these measures at Ukraine's expense. The majority of respondents in both waves perceived it as an event hosted by the UK on behalf of Ukraine or a joint Ukrainian event. In wave 2 there was even a small increase in those who saw it as a Ukrainian event, and a further shift away from seeing it as solely a UK event.

Eurovision 2023's objective to make it possible for Ukraine to still enjoy the winner's benefit of showcasing its culture can thus be seen as successful by this measure. A key narrative created through the event was that of Ukraine as a modern, creative European country. UK interviewees often explained what they had learned from Ukrainian partners while working on Eurovision about the importance of winning Eurovision Song Contest 2022 to Ukraine's sense of pride and how the contest in 2023 was an opportunity to speak to a huge audience about Ukraine's independence, history and modern cultural identity.

Senior BBC producers had, for instance, recognised that Ukrainian partners wanted the broadcast 'to show Ukrainian expertise in front and behind the camera' and 'to look at Ukraine as a modern country' with a 'forward-facing culture'.¹⁴¹ Liverpool stakeholders delivering the place-based programming had also understood this, and learned more about it through their cooperation with the Ukrainian Institute. This important strategic narrative for Ukraine had therefore successfully been communicated to the UK stakeholders who were most closely involved in delivering the event.



Right EuroVillage's celebration of Ukrainian music, 8 May 2023.

Credit: Marketing Liverpool.

The opportunity to project a new national cultural narrative for Ukraine was, indeed, a key driver for Ukrainian participants' involvement. An interviewee from the Ukrainian MFA described Eurovision 2023 as a 'mutual process of opening us to the world and opening the world to us' – echoing the theme of coproduction – and 'a good opportunity to show what Ukraine is about' beyond the images of war and suffering.

Everyday interactions generated through planning, creating and attending Eurovision activities provided some Ukrainians with opportunities for 'street-level' soft-power engagements between cultural practitioners, civic representatives and audiences. A Ukrainian MFA interviewee had observed that Ukrainian creatives 'tried [their] best to show the very essence of Ukraine to [their] friends in the UK', and an interviewee from Suspilne Ukraine had noticed that Ukrainian 'people on site [shared] their stories with their friends [who] spread this information online, so that many other people can see [and] learn what's actually happening [in Ukraine].' These respondents understood how these relationships could ripple out through trusted media and be told across the world.

8.5 Political ambiguity

Discussions of Eurovision and values often revealed the event's ambiguous relationship to politics. Many interviewees recognised its unique position within geopolitics and cultural politics. At the same time, some preferred to explain it as 'simply a music festival' or 'only a song contest' rather than discuss its political potential.

The EBU's line on the Eurovision Song Contest's politics is that 'obviously we want to keep the event non-political.'¹⁴² Preventing it from being politically instrumentalised is important for the EBU to uphold its own values such as universality and independence, and preserves Eurovision's brand image from year to year.

'Where other people wish to project their opinions and their viewpoints and campaigns on to the event because it's such a huge platform, it's our job to ensure that the event stays politics-free.'

EBU interviewee

A Liverpool politician considered that separating the delivery of Eurovision from other political questions had been conscious: 'We didn't conflate it with how politically we might feel about the government.'¹⁴³

Some stakeholders who knew Eurovision well also suggested that being formally non-political allows the event to have its cultural power.¹⁴⁴ At a time when UK/Europe relations and public institutions' displays of LGBTQ+ inclusion are both subject to heated debate in UK 'culture wars', Eurovision avoided controversy despite touching directly on both questions.

Most Ukrainian interviewees perceived direct associations between Eurovision and progressive values. One Ukrainian artist reflected that seeing queer artists representing other countries in Eurovision had made them wonder whether Ukraine could be 'brave enough' to choose an openly LGBTQ+ artist too. Another Ukrainian interviewee picked out freedom and self-expression as a value particularly promoted by the Junior Eurovision Song Contest as well as the main contest. A Ukrainian Institute interviewee was happy that the EuroFestival programme had included queer representation in the work of some Ukrainian artists and UK organisations.

As suggested in the process tracing, some respondents inferred that the place-based cultural festival had more leeway than the broadcast Live Shows to engage with the wider politics of Russia's war on Ukraine and with UK domestic politics. Even the Live Shows, however, could be seen as having potential to communicate political narratives just through the scale of their reach, with so large a global audience watching and experiencing the same cultural product at the same time.

'It's not just entertainment. It's a really huge power and huge force. We could correct the audience, and show them, and share some moments, and show more than they saw before.'

Ukrainian producer

Despite its aspirations to become a global event, however, Eurovision's reach is not universal. The British Council's 2023 Global Perception Survey revealed that mass awareness of Eurovision 2023 was far lower in the Global South, where Eurovision is scarcely broadcast, though internet users can watch it online and since 2023 can even vote in the Grand Final. In 2023, residents of 144 countries voted in the Grand Final.¹⁴⁵

However, awareness of Eurovision in most surveyed non-participating countries was still niche. An exception is Türkiye, where the proportion of 18–34s who had heard of it on the Global Perception Survey (37%) was higher than any other target country except Italy (38%).¹⁴⁶ Turkish respondents were more likely to have heard of Eurovision than respondents in France (23%), Germany (33%), Ireland (28%) and Australia (30%), which all participated in Eurovision Song Contest 2023, even though Türkiye has not participated in 2012.¹⁴⁷

Türkiye's exception may be due to the Eurovision Song Contest's significance there as a symbol of the re-engagement with European institutions that many Turkish youth desire. The opposition leader in Türkiye's 2023 election campaign, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, even included clips of Türkiye's Eurovision Song Contest 2003 win in his campaign video and referred to the Eurovision Song Contest on the campaign trail.¹⁴⁸

Since the Global Perception Survey only surveys 18–34s, its results are not fully comparable with this study's survey research or with the EBU's Brand Impact Report, which also include older age brackets. At least among young people, however, results in the Global Perception Survey for other countries in Asia and the Global South suggest that awareness of the Eurovision Song Contest there is very low. Only 20% of respondents in Argentina, 17% in Mexico, 15% of respondents in China, 14% in India, 13% in Indonesia / Brazil, 9% in Saudi Arabia / South Africa, and 2% in Japan had heard of Eurovision Song Contest 2023.¹⁴⁹ The only Global South broadcaster to broadcast Eurovision in 2023 was Canal 13 in Chile.¹⁵⁰

The idea that Eurovision is 'for everyone', as some stakeholders observed, therefore has limits. Audience members cannot bring flags of non-participating countries into the arena,¹⁵¹ which limits one form of political statement being made on camera but also prevents some attendees celebrating their own heritage in ways that attendees with heritage from participating countries can easily do. The contest has still never had a solo Black winner (though Loreen, the 2012/2023 winner, has Moroccan Amazigh heritage), it has been suggested that performers of colour fare poorly in the public vote,¹⁵² and the UK has not had a solo Black representative since 2009.¹⁵³ Some researchers have criticised Eurovision for exhibiting racial diversity at only a surface level, without driving deeper transformations of what musics, cultures and histories viewers think are 'European'.¹⁵⁴

Debates about how European liberal politics appear to deal differently with sexual and racial diversity reflect on to Eurovision, as an occasion which celebrates liberal values before a larger broadcast audience than any other European cultural event. Though these shared values are important to the event's culture, there is a risk that 'Eurocentric' ways of expressing them which present 'Europe' too sharply as a separate space of values from the rest of the world could limit the appeal of the event brand in global markets or even among youth audiences in Europe who identify their solidarities in global terms.

8.6 Values and city branding

Process tracing of the narrative of hosting Eurovision 2023 on Ukraine's behalf identified the city brand developed by Liverpool's culture team, and perceptions of its close alignment with the Eurovision brand, as important creative 'glue' for articulating what hosting on behalf of Ukraine might mean in content and production practice.

As a city-based cultural event, Eurovision aligns with new trends in 'the public diplomacy of global cities',¹⁵⁵ and has provided a platform for capitals with lower international profiles, such as Tallinn and Kyiv, to position themselves as metropolitan European destinations after entries from their national broadcasters won Eurovision.

Interviewees recognised Eurovision's international reputation, reach and visitor appeal as a key economic and soft-power opportunity that would have been a positive economic and emotional boost for any host city, as well as an economic and reputational boost for the host country's creative sector. A Liverpool councillor thus described Eurovision as 'a great advertisement' and 'window to the world opportunity'.

In a context of national economic insecurity and both local and national political instability, the event became an opportunity for local optimism. Local stakeholders acknowledged Eurovision 2023 should have been held in Ukraine, but since it could not be, 'the best thing to happen to the city' (as a senior Liverpool politician identified) was to have the opportunity to host on Ukraine's behalf instead.

Indeed, for many interviewees, much of Eurovision 2023's success was to be attributed to Liverpool as a host city. Its specific history, identity, and characteristics amplified Eurovision's 'spirit' and values in general, and the 2023 contest's theme United by Music specifically. Liverpool's world-famous musical heritage and status as a UNESCO City of Music was frequently remarked upon, as was an alignment of values between the event and the place.

One Liverpool political leader, for instance, drew comparisons with Eurovision's 'wackiness', 'diversity' and 'over the top' nature, claiming 'that is just how Liverpool is'. Similarly, a senior DCMS respondent described Liverpool as embracing the 'quirky' and that was an 'inclusivity that comes with Eurovision [and that] really resonated in Liverpool'. An EBU representative felt that Liverpool's civic contributions were 'very much in line with the values of the song contest, which are universality, inclusivity and celebrating diversity through music. You could see that in the city itself.' A senior BBC producer suggested that a major contributory reason to Liverpool winning the host city bid process 'was their passion for the contest' and 'their determination and passion for doing Ukraine right'. Crucially, this would include delivering a place-based, and people-centred, cultural festival at a scale that Eurovision organisers had not seen before.

Liverpool stakeholders' self-perception that, in the words of one political leader, 'we're really good on social justice' and also 'know how to throw a party' became a confluence of values and narratives with the context of Eurovision 2023 that provided the BBC creative team with rich inspiration. Several interviewees identified the inclusion of 'You'll Never Walk Alone' in the Grand Final's Liverpool Songbook sequence as one powerful example.

'That was a feeling, and a moment of time, that we'll never feel again in the city. Europe sang, "You'll never walk alone." And given the circumstances that we were in, and the fact that [there was a] live link to Kyiv. That was a real message from Liverpool.'

Liverpool councillor

'[You'll Never Walk Alone] was everything. It was symbolic. It was quite emotional. It was a statement of solidarity.'

BBC Studios interviewee

8.6.1 Atmospheres of inclusion

Many interviewees commented that a key attribute of this year's event was Liverpool's friendly and welcoming atmosphere. This could be seen as Liverpool having successfully expressed its own values in delivering Eurovision. UK and EBU interviewees commented on Liverpool's incredible atmosphere on welcome in general, and Ukrainian interviewees identified details which had made them feel specifically welcomed as Ukrainians, such as the flying of the Ukrainian flag over St George's Hall during the city handover ceremony.

'Everybody felt welcomed. In shops, businesses, they embraced the contest. The friendliness of everyone in the city was remarked on by everyone who visited.'

EBU interviewee

Liverpool's city-wide commitment to hosting on behalf of Ukraine produced unique and unplanned opportunities for grassroots or 'everyday' cultural diplomacy, drawing on similar values-based narratives of inclusion, welcome and connection.

Many Liverpool-based respondents took pride in explaining how local communities embraced the cultural programme and in celebrating Ukrainian culture. For example, a councillor described accompanying the Ukrainian ambassador to a primary school which had been funded through the community programme to hold a 'whole-school Eurovision Ukrainian party with Ukrainian dancing', attended by over a hundred parents, families and community members, where the children were 'signing the Ukrainian national anthem, in Ukrainian sign [language] that they had taught themselves.'



There is growing attention in events and marketing research to questions of belonging and atmosphere design, within which Liverpool has already become an example of how the city's geography and infrastructure produce intensity of atmosphere for football fans.

The same councillor had visited HOTA's SingAlong a SewAlong, where participants created their own version of the Ukrainian nightingales and embroidered Ukrainian floral headpieces, and found it 'a symbol of what we wanted to achieve in the city. It was felt right across the community, as people stepped up to the plate. They did their own things. This is exactly what we wanted.'

Ukrainian interviewees' responses suggest that these efforts were appreciated, and that Liverpool's strongest soft-power asset may in fact be its local communities. A Ukrainian TV producer explained that Liverpool is 'about people', and not its built environment, and that Ukrainians 'never talk about an amazing building or an amazing street, we always talk about people [who are] open, friendly and welcoming'. Both the amount of city-dressing using Ukrainian flags, and smaller details such as a restaurant using Ukrainian words of welcome in a display, were received very positively.

Such examples conveyed authenticity and sincerity, but were also the result of an active design strategy which consciously sought to translate Liverpool's values of friendliness and inclusivity into atmosphere. There is growing attention in events and marketing research to questions of belonging and atmosphere design, within which Liverpool has already become an example of how the city's geography and infrastructure produce intensity of atmosphere for football fans.¹⁵⁶

Interviewees with executive branding and visitor experience responsibilities described some methods they employed to ensure a welcoming atmosphere underpinned by an objective to 'fuse emotional connection between people and a place'.¹⁵⁷ One of the visitor experience workstreams, 'Eurovision Fans Travel This Way', for instance was set up to create positive, 'inclusive' experiences for visitors to the city, 'whether on train, bus, cruise, air'.¹⁵⁸ Organisers 'worked very strategically with regional, national and international carriers' to create themed journey experiences, such as the Avanti West Coast Eurovision Express, that would be imbued with a 'sense of belonging' and 'sense of celebration' up to the moment of arrival in the city centre.¹⁵⁹

City dressing, similarly, was designed with a celebratory brief but also with the intention to make everyone in the city feel included. The event managing director recognised this as 'a great community engagement tool' that should not be underestimated:

'you wake up and your city looks and feels different, and you feel part of it even though you don't have a ticket [...] And I think that was a real win, being able to say, 'We're part of it.'"

Eurovision 2023's rollout of a community/SME brand that would not conflict with obligations to commercial sponsors may have lessons for future contests other mega-events.

Culture Liverpool's large-scale training system to support these place-based strategies included communications workshops with businesses throughout the visitor economy, including more than 200 hotel and accommodation managers.

'Our vision was that every visitor, from the moment they arrived in the city to the moment they went home, their experience would be second to none. We set a very, very clear vision for that group and a clear set of objectives that they needed to achieve.'

Culture Liverpool interviewee

Yet, interviewees with interests in community impact of large-scale events also reported some frustration that the tools to measure and evaluate lived and felt impacts are limited. For example, one asked, 'How do you quantify that sense of people feeling like they belong to the community, rather than feeling like they might be an outsider or they might not feel safe?' It is difficult to understand the real impact of values-driven atmosphere design processes without suitable tools.

8.7 Values and the UK national brand

Eurovision also facilitated the articulation of values associated with the UK national brand, but in a different way to what might have been foreseen when the EBU invited the BBC to host in July 2022. This was because HM King Charles III succeeded HM Queen Elizabeth II on 8 September 2022 and the date of his coronation was subsequently also announced for May 2023. The UK national brand projected through international media in May was therefore made up of two events, with Eurovision Song Contest 2023's Grand Final a week after the King's Coronation.

This combination caused logistical challenges which the BBC won esteem for managing successfully. Communicatively, it was largely seen as a positive, which enabled creators of the Live Shows and place-based programming to profile Eurovision and its stakeholders as either different to, or complementary to, the Coronation. For example, a senior Culture Liverpool interviewee described how Eurovision was 'so much younger' and 'so diverse'. With a humorous nod to the spectacle of both events, they also argued Eurovision 'had such better costumes'.

Liverpool's city image was able to capitalise on this contrast. Various interviewees from the city described London and the Coronation in terms of an older, monied, establishment ('pomp and ceremony', 'dripping with majesty'), and Liverpool during Eurovision in contrast to this (an 'absolute glitter bomb'; 'this crackers city in the north with people wearing a Ukrainian flag as a headdress with feathers and flowers and stars'). In other words, the Coronation gave Liverpool an opportunity to create a clear strategic narrative of its own.

Interviewees with interests in the UK's national image, for instance at DCMS or the BBC, meanwhile felt that the combination of the two events showed that the UK national brand was expansive enough to hold both these narratives successfully.

Many interviewees also positioned the positive international reputation Liverpool had earned through Eurovision as an ameliorating counter to negative images of the country that might have circulated internationally since Brexit. One BBC Studios producer, for example, acknowledged that an objective of the production 'was to show people across Europe that Liverpool is welcoming everyone', and that:

'British people can and will be very welcoming of Europeans. We're very much part of Europe and always will be. We've perhaps not had the best image in recent years. But I think Eurovision has gone a long way to improve that. And I think people would have looked at Eurovision and the UK and the city of Liverpool and seen that we are a welcoming country.'

BBC Studios interviewee

Another key factor for the success of Eurovision, and for its potential soft power uplift for the UK, was highlighted as the production expertise in cultural mega-events and festivals which UK stakeholders brought to the event. Past prevailing media representations of Eurovision in the UK had, by the late 2000s, sometimes led to perceptions abroad that the UK had an arrogant or disdainful attitude to the event,¹⁶⁰ despite the BBC's long record of support for it. Eurovision 2023 was an opportunity to correct the record by applying the UK's 'world-class' expertise in cultural mega-event production:

'The expertise we were able to bring in and the history we've got in the UK now over the last ten, fifteen years of staging these major things really pays off.'

Event managing director

This ambition was not purely about demonstrating creative and organisational prowess for national benefit (a soft power-led approach), but also, according to a BBC Studios producer, an opportunity to show the Eurovision audience that the UK 'was taking it seriously' (a cultural relations approach).



This ambition was not purely about demonstrating creative and organisational prowess for national benefit (a soft power-led approach), but also, according to a BBC Studios producer, an opportunity to show the Eurovision audience that the UK 'was taking it seriously'.

Liverpool as a city actor enhanced the UK's ability to gain reputational uplift from this kind of event because since 2008 it has hosted numerous successful cultural mega-events and learnt from their evaluation processes, including the large-scale Impacts 08 exercise and its successor Impacts 18, which reapplied the Impacts 08 methodology to revisit the impact of Liverpool's European Capital of Culture programme ten years on.¹⁶¹ A senior Liverpool cultural director described the value of this retained place-based learning:

'The fact that we have a team in-house is very different than other places. There's nowhere else in the country that's got a team like Culture Liverpool that can deliver events at the scale that you need to deliver this on without bringing a third-party in. And I think that was probably key with the time scale [for Eurovision] as well, because we had six months.'

Culture Liverpool interviewee

Liverpool's relatively extensive experience with large-scale events led one DCMS analyst to describe Liverpool as an event host city which can be trusted to deliver because the personnel have such a long-term viewpoint and experience of cultural evaluation at scale. Interviewees from Liverpool's political sector had meanwhile been able to trust Culture Liverpool's team to produce a successful event which would consider equality, diversity, inclusion, and social and environmental impacts. These values had been 'triple lock' manifesto commitments for the then mayor Joanne Anderson when Liverpool was bidding for the event.

'When I had questions around sustainability and waste, it had all been done; when I looked at equality, the staff had already got lottery money to make sure everyone was included.'

Liverpool political leader

The BBC's contribution to UK reputational uplift as a brand which enjoys high trust outside the UK was a particularly important factor for many interviewees. Since Eurovision is powered by public service broadcasting, it naturally leverages the BBC's reputation whenever the UK takes part, but all the more so when the UK has the opportunity to host and the BBC is producing the event.

The BBC receives higher brand recognition, and influences perceptions of the UK more favourably, than any other British cultural export.¹⁶² This is on top of the national brand recognition that UK television content in general maintains among young Europeans, the opinion-formers of tomorrow. Despite disruptions caused by digital streaming technologies and by perception shifts since Brexit, the latest available research suggests that in Denmark, for instance, 78% of 16–34-year-olds still place the UK among their top three countries of origin for TV content, and 47% believe that watching British screen content makes them want to visit the UK.¹⁶³

Liverpool stakeholders trusted the BBC to deliver a project as large-scale and complex as Eurovision and thus to enhance the city's own reputation through the images of the city that it would broadcast to an audience of 162 million. This was especially important after a difficult political and economic period for the city.

Tracker Survey respondents who had watched Eurovision Song Contest 2023 were around twice as likely to associate the BBC with each of the surveyed values than respondents who had not. Their strongest associations on both waves were with diversity, internationalism, and creativity (35.8%–38.5% on wave 1, 36.4%–38.2% on wave 2). On wave 2 they were slightly more likely to associate the BBC with diversity (37.2%, up from 35.8%). Respondents in wave 2 who had not watched Eurovision Song Contest 2023 had become slightly more likely to associate the BBC with peace (14.3% up from 11.8%), while this dropped very slightly for respondents who had (23.6% down from 24.0%).

Both the BBC and its partners understood that the BBC's capacity and experience would boost the reputation of the 2023 contest, but that it would need to show sensitivity to the unique context of why Ukraine could not host in 2023 and the process of producing Eurovision 'on behalf of' Ukraine in order to win this uplift. As one production team member commented, they 'felt a responsibility not just to make great TV shows which would entertain people' but also to honour this year's 'extra resonance and importance'.

This extended not just to representing Ukrainian culture as Ukrainian partners wished it to be shown, but to ensuring a culture of co-creation between the UK and Ukraine. This was innovative for an event where hosts usually only project the identity of their own city and country, not another country.

Stakeholders considered that the media had successfully communicated this ethos:

'The way the media portrayed it as well as what we did to deliver it really showed that powerfulness of collaboration.'

Culture Liverpool interviewee

The narrative about collaboration also cut through to the majority of survey respondents.

9 Impact and legacy

The narrative of hosting Eurovision on behalf of Ukraine in 2023 was not just communicated through the content of the BBC Live Shows. It was also embedded into the ways of working that the BBC and Culture Liverpool developed for involving Ukrainian partners, the predominance of UK/Ukrainian collaboration in EuroFestival, and the enthusiasm for Ukrainian elements of groups who proposed community programming. Local people and businesses made the narrative material during the event fortnight with their own displays of welcome for Ukraine.

This atmosphere formed part of what stakeholders widely regarded as an extremely successful event. The Live Shows reached 162 million television viewers in 39 markets, 75 million unique viewers watched Eurovision YouTube content, all arena tickets sold out for the first time, and visitor footfall was higher than in any previous host city.

'It's something that I think the UK, and Liverpool particularly, and the BBC, should be really proud of. Because it was a fantastic example of collaboration, between the city, the broadcaster, the EBU and all its member broadcasters. It was a really wonderful event that was a massive success on all levels [...] And I would say it felt like every single person who came to Liverpool, who worked for two and a half weeks or longer, they felt the warmth of the people, and they felt that they were part of something very special, because it was a very unique event, in unique circumstances.'

EBU interviewee

Liverpool's hosting of Eurovision was the subject of 280,000 news media articles written internationally between October 2022 and May 2023,¹⁶⁴ which Culture Liverpool expected to positively influence visitor numbers for the next 3–4 years. It also expected the amount of positive content about the city on TikTok and other digital platforms to influence young people making decisions about where to study or start businesses, while Liverpool's universities would be able to use images from Eurovision in their own recruitment marketing.

Behind the scenes, hosting Eurovision also conveyed Liverpool's reputation for friendliness to international stakeholders such as the EBU and the 36 member broadcasters besides the BBC who sent delegations to the event. Hosting on behalf of Ukraine was just one element which contributed to these perceptions of Liverpool's friendliness, but still aligned well with it.

'Liverpool produced an amazing atmosphere and celebration. The friendliness of everyone locally who worked on the event and those in the city itself was remarked on by all who attended.'

EBU interviewee

Stakeholders also noted particular impacts for their own organisations. The BBC had noticed increased reputational uplift for itself in Merseyside and the north of England after producing Eurovision, and a senior interviewee felt that the event had been 'a unifying point across the political divide', with cross-party support for solidarity with Ukraine and for the BBC.¹⁶⁵ They observed the Ukrainian ambassador and Ukrainian cultural groups had been satisfied, and also suggested the successful event had helped demonstrate the benefits of investing in public broadcasting to the public who pay for it.

A DCMS interviewee felt that Liverpool's successful hosting of Eurovision represented a return on the department's history of cultural investment in the city, which had been one of the earliest cities to demonstrate the value of taking cultural events and cultural investment outside London and the South-East. The department's experience of tripartite working with the BBC and Liverpool City Council was likely to inform how it approached working with delivery partners for UK City of Culture and other events. The BBC's presentation of the Eurovision Song Contest was seen as successfully fulfilling DCMS's objective to showcase the best of the UK's creative sector, for which it would hopefully generate more work.

Delivering Eurovision had also created new cross-departmental relationships between teams in government, and given DCMS 'a very real-world example of international cultural diplomacy' involving a sensitive political topic which had built confidence in the department's capability to undertake an event of this scale at short notice.

Other kinds of stakeholders also noted impacts for their own practice. An events producer from another UK city thought it had inspired them to think about how their city too could 'come together so quickly and with such camaraderie' to deliver so technical and complex a project in such a short space of time.¹⁶⁶

Independent artists noted that having cooperated with such a large-scale event could improve their own fundability in future and had strengthened their capacity to engage with commissioning and application processes.

A funder which had contributed to the cultural programming thought that its cooperation with Culture Liverpool had created pathways to support community organisations in the city to apply for its open grants when they might previously have thought its funding process was too complex.

Few of these impacts were directly linked to hosting on behalf of Ukraine, except in that Liverpool and the BBC would not have been in a position to host the 2023 event without this context.

Liverpool's events approach also promises to have an important legacy for the EBU and future Eurovision host cities, creating lasting impact from this positive cultural relations activity.

The EBU saw the return on investment Liverpool witnessed from its visitor-led approach to hosting Eurovision as evidence that would change cities' cost/benefit perceptions when their country has won and they are considering whether to express interest in hosting. In a context where cities are increasingly perceiving mega-events such as the Olympics and World Cup as costing more than the value they deliver, encouraging more cities to bid to host Eurovision when it comes to their country is important for the EBU and the song contest brand. Liverpool's ability to provide evidence to prove the value of hosting Eurovision is thus significant:

'Liverpool showed what you can do to benefit from hosting the event. So rather than see it as an expense, and that money had to be spent on the activities, it actually showed that if you invest, and if you do it smartly, you don't have to spend a lot of money to have a lot of return on investment. And it's actually become a fantastic blueprint for future host cities to not see the event as something that will possibly cost them money, but actually it will make them money.'

EBU interviewee

Liverpool's approach to assessing the impact of the event, drawn from the city's experience of evaluating cultural events since 2008, is itself a positive legacy for the EBU, which is now equipped with a greater depth of data to demonstrate Eurovision's value to host cities. For instance, in explaining how Eurovision benefits cities' reputation, an EBU interviewee was able to refer to findings from Liverpool's visitor survey about intentions to return.

The EBU also foresaw that future host cities would benefit from how Liverpool has brought its evaluation methodology into the Eurovision cycle, and that this would improve its own learning about the impact of Eurovision over time, within its own goals of creating a more structured impact assessment process for the event.

In 2022–3, Turin had already shared some data on visitors and economic impact with Liverpool. Liverpool's example of what to assess and how to assess it would now enable the 2024 host city, Malmö, to evaluate the event's place-based impact comparably, while 2024's winning broadcaster would have access to evidence of the event's impact on Liverpool a full year out to share with interested host cities.

Liverpool's evaluation methodology is thus likely to have transformative impact on how the EBU and host cities learn about the impact of future contests.

'Liverpool is an amazing best practice case study, because we can take what Liverpool has done in terms of impact assessment and show the next city. [...] And then once we've gone through a number of years of having real best practice examples of impact assessment, that is a whole file of information we will absolutely give to the cities who are bidding for the following year's contest.'

EBU interviewee

At the same time, not all cities have the resources and long-term expertise that Liverpool needed to deliver Eurovision so ambitiously. For some host cities, the legacy of Liverpool may be more a question of thinking about how to 'galvanise what you have got' and mobilise stakeholders in the city around a shared vision of what kind of experience they want to create.¹⁶⁷

Through Liverpool's event evaluation strategy, the EBU and future host cities are learning more about how cities can measure place-based impact and continue that process from year to year in order to demonstrate the impact and social value of the event. This learning will extend beyond economic impact into themes such as community wellbeing, public health, and indeed this report's own subject of soft power and cultural relations as long as future hosts follow Liverpool's lead.

The EBU's identified need to deepen how cities and broadcasters learn about the impact of Eurovision following Liverpool's experience could lead it towards a data observatory model. Separately, one UK funding body had identified the need for an events data observatory at national level to promote knowledge transfer between different types of events, and found that Eurovision's standing in between an international competitive event and a cultural event exemplified why this would be useful.

Within the city, National Museums Liverpool has preserved legacy through a comprehensive collection programme covering the event development process, EuroFestival, EuroLearn and other community programming as well as the Live Shows. From a cultural relations perspective there has been consideration of how to engage Ukrainians in Liverpool with the collection and how to make it digitally available to users in Ukraine, and the collection will have impact for international researchers of the Eurovision Song Contest since no other city is known to have collected material on its Eurovision so substantially.

Eurovision 2023's deep connection with Ukraine has also been written into its legacy. The majority of Eurovision Song Contest 2023 viewers in both waves of the Tracker Survey understood the contest as an event hosted by the UK on behalf of Ukraine or a joint UK/Ukrainian event.

The event is also likely to have had some impact on Liverpool residents' awareness of Ukrainian culture and their understanding of why culture and heritage are targeted in wars of aggression. EuroFestival amplified this in a way that the television shows alone might not have done.

'When I listened to the launch of all the commissions, [I was] listening to how Ukraine was delighted because this was a celebration of their culture outside their country, and something that we can capture in the city forever. We all know more about Ukraine because of that experience.'

Liverpool political leader

The community and wellbeing study also found that EuroStreet and EuroLearn events had created a grassroots sense of solidarity with Ukraine, with strong involvement from Ukrainian citizens, ensuring authenticity and sensitivity to the contrast between Eurovision's party atmosphere and Ukraine's circumstances.¹⁶⁸ In a post-event doorstep survey, 92.9% of residents said they had been pleased with the way Liverpool hosted Eurovision 2023 on behalf of Ukraine.¹⁶⁹

Some participants in UK/Ukrainian collaborations reflected on legacy for their own partnerships. Besides the experience of cooperation that the BBC and Suspilne had gained, the Live Shows had also created opportunities for some independent production companies in both countries to continue working together. Producers of some EuroFestival commissions perceived potential to take some cultural programming to Ukraine or continue working with their Ukrainian partners, though work created for UK visitors would need adaptation for Ukrainian audiences, and concepts such as Rave UKraine would require fresh funding and sponsorship. Concerns about how easy it would be to achieve this outside the context of a large-scale international event echoed concerns in Ukraine's cultural sector that its needs while facing Russia's ongoing invasion will be forgotten post-event.

Looking further ahead, Liverpool's hosting on behalf of Ukraine may also have created new ways for future host cities, broadcasters and the EBU to think about how Eurovision represents place. Some interviewees speculated that future Live Shows and host city programming could also find ways to represent more than one country's culture or have partners from two countries cooperating, such as the current host working with the host of a previous year, or a winner working with a runner-up.

Host cities could twin with the previous host or the next host to create lasting bilateral city-level partnerships as a result of hosting Eurovision, and some cities could leverage existing twinning relationships to bring culture from countries which do not participate in Eurovision into their programming.

Eurovision Song Contest 2023 was the first example in Eurovision's history of two countries cooperating to deliver the event, and as one interviewee suggested might therefore have expressed the spirit of Eurovision even more directly than past editions where the winner and host have been the same. The EBU's permanent adoption of the Eurovision Song Contest 2023 slogan will embed this cooperation in the brand identity of future editions.

While the collaborative approach to producing Eurovision Song Contest 2023 emerged for reasons no-one would desire, it has also signalled new ways in which the event could stage its cultural relations dimension through creative engagement with the idea of place.

10 Conclusions, recommendations, and areas for future research

10.1 Conclusions to the research questions

10.1.1 What is Eurovision's role in developing and crystallising shared values?

As an international TV coproduction in which 40 countries or more frequently take part, Eurovision is intrinsically a cultural relations activity, and one which attracts an audience of more than 160 million TV viewers plus a vibrant international fandom that engages with its content year-round. The values of universality, diversity, equality, and inclusivity, and pride in the event's tradition of celebrating diversity through music, are part of the contest rules to which participating broadcasters agree.

As EBU members, all participating broadcasters also agree to the EBU's own stated values of universality, independence, excellence, diversity, accountability and innovation. The Eurovision Song Contest is seen as a flagship expression of these values in action, and is the main occasion where members of the public are likely to hear about this cultural relations institution.

Myths about shared values and the idea of 'Europe' also underpin common historical narratives about the event's past. Its development since 1956 is often interpreted as a story of countries coming together after the end of World War II to cooperate in celebrating their mutual diversity and make lasting peace. According to this narrative, since then the contest has expanded as the space of European countries sharing its liberal values has grown, most notably after the end of the Cold War. This narrative is often the starting point for critical approaches to the Eurovision Song Contest's cultural politics, which debate the limits of this liberal idea of inclusion.

Delivering and managing Eurovision also requires stakeholders to balance values with pragmatism. 'Equality' does not dictate that every participating broadcaster gains direct entry to the Grand Final, which is limited by audiences' anticipated attention spans to 25, exceptionally 26, participants. Charging participation fees to broadcasters, even on a sliding scale, limits 'universality' when more poorly funded broadcasters have to drop out and their countries are not represented in the Eurovision Song Contest, but is still financially necessary for the EBU.

Moreover, all values are subjective. To various stakeholders delivering Eurovision Song Contest 2017 in Kyiv, for instance, 'diversity' could stand for sexual diversity, the musical and cultural diversity of the Eurovision Song Contest, the 'unity in diversity' of states within the EU, or even a political subtext of freedom from Russian pressure.¹⁷⁰

The Eurovision Song Contest is also, therefore, a place where values are contested. Its framing as a non-political event is pragmatically useful, or even necessary, in building trust between member broadcasters, but raises the question of how far celebrating the diversity of music extends to accommodating musicians' socio-political engagement. Some artists hold this dear as a core creative value. By positioning itself as a values-based event, the Eurovision Song Contest also stakes more of its reputation on how it delivers the event and which actors it chooses to cooperate with than a purely commercial music event might.

Many contestations over values surrounding the Eurovision Song Contest have involved LGBTQ+ equality. LGBTQ+ rights and visibility in host countries and cities, impacts of anti-LGBTQ+ government policies in certain countries which may have dissuaded broadcasters from showing the Eurovision Song Contest, and controversies over how states may instrumentalise LGBTQ+ rights in public diplomacy campaigns have all affected the event. There is debate in the critical literature about how successfully the Eurovision Song Contest has reflected LGBTQ+ diversity compared to other dimensions of diversity that reimagine what it has traditionally meant to be 'European', particularly around race.

On the evidence of Eurovision 2023, the strongest evidence for how the Eurovision Song Contest develops and crystallises shared values is seen among stakeholders who were closely involved in producing the event. Their lived professional experience of cooperating within the EBU's framework in this event cycle, and sometimes also in previous years, is likely to give personal meaning to values which might 'on paper' sound abstract.

Stakeholders forming new partnerships to deliver Eurovision 2023, such as Culture Liverpool and the Ukrainian Institute, often expressed that perceiving the other partner had shared values enabled them to build the sense of trust and common purpose that was necessary to deliver programming within the Eurovision Song Contest's tight timescale.

The Eurovision Song Contest invites its mass audience to feel part of a community of shared values through its broadcast content. A majority of Tracker Survey respondents who had watched Eurovision Song Contest 2023 associated Eurovision with values of diversity, internationalism and creativity. Respondents who had not watched Eurovision Song Contest 2023 had weaker associations between Eurovision and any surveyed values. Those who had watched Eurovision Song Contest 2023 also associated values with other 'brands' connected to the event more strongly and clearly than viewers who had not.

In wave 2, respondents who had not watched Eurovision Song Contest 2023 even became more likely to associate Liverpool, Eurovision, and Ukraine with many of the surveyed values. The same effect did not occur in their perceptions of the UK, the BBC, or music from the UK. This suggests that media coverage with the headline narrative of Liverpool hosting Eurovision Song Contest 2023 on behalf of Ukraine may have had a 'slower burn' impact on respondents who did not have their own viewing as a reference point.

Diversity, internationalism, and creativity might be the closest things to shared values among the Eurovision Song Contest audience in this research. These are not dissimilar to the event's own stated values. Even then, almost half the viewers did not share each association between Eurovision and a given value.

Eurovision's strongest potential to develop and crystallise shared values is therefore likely to occur through settings which involve prolonged and interpersonal cooperation, be these production-based or fandom-based, rather than through impacts on audiences who only engage with the event at broadcast time.

10.1.2 Which brands (such as the BBC) play a pivotal role in adding credibility when we talk about values?

Among place and institution brands linked to Eurovision 2023, questions of credibility are particularly pertinent for understanding the UK national brand in light of debates in the soft power literature since 2016 about the UK's continued ability to exemplify values associated with building international trust.¹⁷¹ These had been speculated to threaten the UK's position as a 'soft power superpower' after the course of Brexit from 2016 to 2021.¹⁷²

The British Council's Global Perceptions Survey in 2021 did note a sharp decline in interest in visiting the UK among 18–34 year olds in G20 countries since 2016 and smaller but significant declines in their interest in UK study opportunities and UK arts/culture.¹⁷³ However, it also found respondents ranked the UK higher for trust in government than any G20 country except Canada.¹⁷⁴

These responses suggest that the UK already had high credibility as a national brand when it hosted Eurovision Song Contest 2023. It was in the position of state actors with high reputations which are unlikely to increase them further through mega-events but can still weaken them, rather than state actors with weakly known reputations which have more to gain.

The BBC is similarly in the position of an institution with strong existing credibility around the values that international actors associate with it. Indeed, this reputation would have increased international stakeholders' confidence in the BBC as a replacement host broadcaster for Eurovision Song Contest 2023 once the EBU decided to offer it to the runner-up of Eurovision Song Contest 2022.

Liverpool as a brand already had high credibility among stakeholders who knew it well, such as funders and government stakeholders who were aware of its reputation for delivering and evaluating cultural events in ways that promoted socioeconomic impact and community wellbeing. It enjoyed credibility for its visitor experience among people who already knew it as a destination, and built credibility among those encountering it for the first time. This gave credence to the city's messaging around values such as hospitality.

No brand enjoys universal credibility with all audiences, however. The Eurovision brand adds credibility among audiences such as those creative professionals who recognise it as the largest-scale televised event of its kind with a reputation for driving innovation in production and stagecraft, and are accordingly excited to work on it. Viewers who do not watch the Eurovision Song Contest are less likely to credit its creativity, or to associate it positively with any other surveyed values.

Similarly, there are audiences who do not attach credibility to other brands. The EBU is highly trusted by many of its member broadcasters, but may be less trusted by those which have criticisms of the Eurovision Song Contest qualification system or its participation fee structure at any given time. Viewers who mistrust BBC news and current affairs programming may be less likely to trust the rest of the BBC.

It is more likely to be the case that brands have credibility among certain audiences who can build the brand's credibility further through word of mouth in other communities of practice that they belong to, if there is particularly strong alignment between their own values and how the brand seems to be expressing them. An example may be how perceptions of Eurovision changed among some UK culture stakeholders in 2022–3 as they engaged more with the event.

10.1.3 Does Eurovision create 'soft power' effects such as future visits, new business opportunities, and reputation uplifts?

The Eurovision Song Contest expanded into a mega-event between the late 1990s and early 2000s just as soft power thinking and the concept of nation branding were spreading in international affairs. Estonia's approach to hosting Eurovision Song Contest 2002 linked the event into an overt nation branding strategy for the first time, inspiring the hosts of the Riga, Istanbul and Kyiv contests and others.

Above and beyond steps taken by the EBU and member broadcasters to increase the event's scale, the energy of social forces in these host countries and others which deeply desire to be recognised as part of 'Europe' has been generative in growing this event for the EBU. Indeed, Liverpool's own drive to reaffirm its identity as a European city now that the UK has left the EU was one ingredient of the city's enthusiasm for hosting the event.

Studies of the soft power effects of sports mega-events suggest that it is easier for states and cities which are less well known internationally to gain reputational uplift as mega-event hosts than it is for hosts with already high reputations to build them further, though hosts with high reputations can weaken them by delivering a disappointing event.

The Eurovision Song Contest likewise creates more reputational uplift opportunities for states and cities which are not so widely known. These are greater for hosts than other participants because hosting illustrates many other aspects of state and city capacity besides those involved in delivering a successful entry, and generates more international media attention towards the city and state. The event's new central and east European winners in the 2000s gained some ability through their branding of each contest to advance their goals of differentiating their countries and capitals from others in the region and demonstrating themselves as part of 'Europe'.

Ukraine did this more successfully than any other new 21st-century winner, and had already hosted two contests in 2005 and 2017 before its 2022 win. In the 2000s, Ukraine had already put itself on the map for Eurovision Song Contest fans as a home of creative and energetic entries and exciting stagecraft. Since 2020 its Eurovision Song Contest participation has also reflected the post-Revolution of Dignity movement to reimagine cultural traditions through 21st-century creative genres and to promote creativity in Ukrainian.

Liverpool was in a similar position to these central and east European actors in terms of its potential reputation uplift through hosting Eurovision Song Contest 2023, since its contemporary image was not as well established internationally as the image of the whole UK. While there is global awareness of Liverpool's association with popular music through The Beatles, Liverpool's city branding strategy also wished to communicate the city's expertise in hosting large-scale events, its friendliness to visitors, and the diversity of its music sector in the present day.

The extent of international media coverage Liverpool earned through simply being a Eurovision Song Contest host city was amplified by the work of its own culture and marketing team in linking with partners such as TikTok. It was also amplified by the hundreds of local people who contributed as official event volunteers or community event organisers and created the event's participatory atmosphere. This suggests that host city communities are important people-to-people actors in place-based activities that create soft power and cultural relations outcomes.

It is still difficult to demonstrate that any one event creates reputational uplift for actors among mass broadcast audiences, especially when audiences encounter other representations of that actor at the same time. This complicates efforts to understand the reputational uplift Eurovision 2023 might have had on audiences, since it occurred in such proximity to the King's Coronation.

It is easier to identify concrete outcomes such as future visits, business opportunities, and new cultural partnerships. Eurovision 2023 itself brought almost 31,000 international tourists to Liverpool who experienced the event's place-based affective atmospheres,¹⁷⁵ and more than two-thirds did not have Live Show tickets. Almost a third of people in both waves of the Tracker Survey said Eurovision Song Contest 2023 had made them more likely to visit Liverpool and more likely to visit the UK.



Eurovision 2023 itself brought almost 31,000 international tourists to Liverpool who experienced the event's place-based affective atmospheres,¹⁸⁰ and more than two-thirds did not have Live Show tickets. Almost a third of people in both waves of the Tracker Survey said Eurovision Song Contest 2023 had made them more likely to visit Liverpool and more likely to visit the UK.

The Eurovision Song Contest's scale as a television production creates new business opportunities every year for creative professionals in the host country, which can develop these into lasting relationships if they impress partners: the Ukrainian specialist camera firm OperTec, for instance, worked on Eurovision Song Contest 2017 in Kyiv and has won repeat business at several contests since. Non-host countries can also gain business opportunities for performers and creative teams whose entries impress an audience which is larger than for any other televised music event.

Another soft power effect of Eurovision is the potential for new international creative partnerships. This can occur in any year when artists or songwriters meet at the event, but was deepened in 2023 for two reasons. Firstly, the host broadcaster was responsible for representing another country and cooperating with creatives from that country to do so authentically and appropriately. Secondly, the extent and depth of Liverpool's place-based cultural programming allowed a wider range of actors beyond those which might conventionally engage with Eurovision to be involved.

Future hosts could widen opportunities for their creative sectors to build partnerships through Eurovision through what they choose to include in place-based programming and by conceiving of bilateral international connections they could spotlight during their programme.

10.1.4 What is the role of culture in conflict and does Eurovision play a contributing role?

Culture plays various, much-studied roles in conflict. As a symbol of national identity, culture or particular forms of it can be mobilised to assert particular narratives about the nation's historical and cultural identity in societies going through conflict. Since culture and identity are so tightly linked, all strategic narratives which express the identity of one or more sides in a conflict, or appeal to audiences' identities, relate to culture in some way.

Culture can be an asset in the cultural diplomacy of a side seeking to win support in the international public sphere, and it can be targeted by opponents which seek to erase the very past, present and future of communities on territory in contexts that may amount to genocide.

Keeping cultural expression going during full-scale conflict can be a source of morale and consolation, both for individuals and communities. Examples of cultural activity being sustained under attack can then convey messages of resilience in actors' public diplomacy. The activities of independent cultural scenes during conflict have sometimes, meanwhile, become sites of resistance to climates of wartime patriotism that their members experience as oppressive, including feminist resistance to patriarchal nationalism. Culture is often a site of protest against unpopular wars.

Culture can serve both as a vehicle for, and as a subject of, propaganda and disinformation. Culture with origins that predate and transcend modern-day national borders can be claimed exclusively as the property of one side in a conflict, or can be reduced to a symbol of the enemy. Supporters of one side in a conflict may seek to limit the ability of another side to communicate its strategic narratives through cultural boycott campaigns or through lobbying to exclude it from international events, and these protests may continue once a formal conflict has come to an end.

After conflicts where communities have been displaced, culture becomes part of diasporic memory. Intangible cultural heritage such as musical traditions and foodways can be all that communities have held on to after their homes and possessions have been lost.

All these things can happen, and have happened, in contexts related to Eurovision. Most are not even developments of the 21st century. If music and culture should not be romanticised as automatically forces for good, it follows that neither should the Eurovision Song Contest. Its value for peacebuilding and trust-building depends instead on how its participants, and those who create narratives around it, use it and interact through it.

The case of Ukraine in Eurovision Song Contest 2022 and 2023 is not one of 'conflict' in a broad sense. Rather, it is one where a participating country was facing international aggression and public sentiment in most other participating countries was widely on this participant's side. This will not always be the case, nor will there be such consensus among partners about whether to sanction one side in a conflict as there was when the EBU excluded Russia from the Eurovision Song Contest in 2022. Stakeholders of future ESCs will need to be prepared for conflict to affect the event in more contentious ways.

10.1.5 The story of Eurovision 2023 and what was learnt from the UK hosting on behalf of Ukraine

Eurovision 2023 was a historic edition of the contest for an underlying tragic reason: for the first time, a winning country was being invaded and could not exercise its right to host.

Against this background, it also became the first time two broadcasters, the BBC and Suspilne, had partnered to represent two different countries' cultures through the Live Shows. Once the BBC as host broadcaster joined forces with Liverpool as host city, it was the first time the Eurovision Song Contest had ever been accompanied by such an extensive cultural festival and such large-scale host community participation. **This represents a new departure for the Eurovision Song Contest's politics of place.**

Key partners interpreted the concept of hosting on behalf of Ukraine as enabling Ukraine to still be able to represent the winner's benefit of showcasing its culture to the Eurovision Song Contest audience, even though the event was being hosted elsewhere. This created different opportunities for influencing perceptions of the UK and Ukraine.

For Ukraine, UK and Ukrainian creative talent cooperated to advance a narrative of Ukrainian culture as modern, diverse and independent. Ukrainian institutions saw this as strategically valuable for cultural diplomacy even though the rules and format of the Eurovision Song Contest limited how other Ukrainian strategic narratives could be expressed, including those more specifically about the war.

The image of the UK and the BBC depended more on how the Live Shows represented a different country than how the host country represented itself. The process demanded the EBU and Suspilne to put high levels of trust in the BBC's capacity to deliver the concept of hosting on behalf of Ukraine successfully.

The BBC built this trust through the amount of material involvement and consultation it afforded Suspilne and Ukrainian creative professionals. Our survey research suggests this strategy was a success. The majority of respondents across both waves perceived the event as hosted by the UK on behalf of Ukraine or as a joint UK/Ukrainian event. The proportion of respondents who watched Eurovision Song Contest 2023 and perceived it as a Ukrainian event even increased in the months between the first and second wave, suggesting their impression of it as Ukrainian had strengthened over time.

Liverpool came to the fore as the material space where the outcomes of this cooperation were being delivered. It achieved its acclaimed contribution to hosting Eurovision 2023 through:

- a long-term culture strategy and events infrastructure that allowed it to respond ambitiously to the creative and logistical challenges
- experience of how to mobilise community participation and design inclusive, emotive visitor atmospheres
- a narrative of civic identity where the aim of hosting on behalf of Ukraine could harmonise with broader themes of social justice, solidarity and diversity in which people already felt pride
- a commitment to creating community wellbeing as well as economic impact for events, which helped the city unlock more funding for cultural and community programming

From a critical perspective, the alignment of values and narratives created through Eurovision 2023 were achieved in a context where there was mass public support for the participating country which had been attacked and for its strategy in the war. It will be more difficult to create event atmospheres that depend on a sense of shared values, and to manage the tensions of staging a non-political cultural event during a conflict, in cases where public sentiment about the actions and strategic narrative of a participating state are much more divided.

The more that Eurovision Song Contest organisers and custodians assert the event as a space of shared values, the more they could also become vulnerable to negative publicity or what has been termed ‘soft disempowerment’¹⁷⁶ if they cooperate with actors who are not perceived to share those values. The examples of contentions over Eurovision Song Contest hosting in 2012 and 2019 suggests the EBU will have to manage this risk carefully in future.

In terms of cultural relations, Eurovision 2023 suggests that engaging productively in cultural relations can bring reputational uplift or sustain already strong reputations. There may be particular potential for cities, even more than states, to gain reputational benefits from fostering large-scale cultural relations activity if their reputation as event hosts is not yet widely known internationally. The consensus not to harness Eurovision 2023 for traditional soft power purposes contributed to making it a cultural relations success.

Place-based and broadcast activity at Eurovision 2023 complemented each other and put cultural relations at the heart of the event. The extent of commitment to collaboration with Ukraine in Liverpool’s place-based cultural programming expanded the breadth of cultural relations activity that the event could contain, and attracted visitors and residents who would not have engaged with Eurovision music or obtained tickets for the Live Shows. The extent of broadcaster coproduction behind the Live Shows embedded an extra mode of cultural relations into Eurovision Song Contest practice.

The creative strategy of representing two countries instead of one host was forced on the event by the distressing circumstances of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine but could inspire more radical ways of expressing a cultural relations approach and downplaying state soft power strategies through the event in future, and fresh ways for host broadcasters and cities to express connections between places in Europe and beyond.

10.2 Recommendations

10.2.1 For Liverpool and the UK culture sector

Share knowledge about the scale, scope and impact of EuroFestival and the community programming beyond Merseyside

The extent of Eurovision 2023’s footprint on Liverpool has been captured through the evaluation programme of which this study forms part, and through National Museums Liverpool’s collection strategy. **Knowledge about the scale, scope and impact of EuroFestival and Liverpool’s community programming still needs to be shared with audiences beyond Merseyside** in order for it to register with appropriate user-communities and not be forgotten.

Continue to support the grassroots counter-cultural creative sector

As Liverpool continues to build its reputation as a national leader in hosting large-scale events, it will need to **ensure it still supports the grassroots counter-cultural creative sector** across the Liverpool City Region. Some organisations from this segment of the sector made important contributions to Liverpool’s Eurovision programme, but beyond Liverpool the programmes’ reach was stronger in some LCR boroughs (particularly Wirral) than others.

Ensure evaluation strategies and funding timescales allow for suitable baselines in events research

Culture sector stakeholders’ **evaluation strategies and funding timescales for survey research on events should allow for long enough baselines to capture the build-up as well as the afterglow**, even for events with as tight delivery timelines as the Eurovision Song Contest. Results from the community wellbeing study for Eurovision 2023 suggested that by its residents survey baseline in late April 2023, community excitement for the event was already building – just as Culture Liverpool’s engagement strategy had intended – and a more accurate baseline would have been earlier in the year.¹⁷⁷

The tender and inception timescale for our own study was too tight to allow for a baseline, which would have deepened insights into how far the narratives of Eurovision 2023 influenced respondents’ perceptions of the places/brands.

Incorporate questions on past large-scale events into future perception surveys

To improve tracking of the long-term impact on audiences of Eurovision 2023, and indeed of other large-scale events recently hosted in the UK, it will be necessary to **build questions on engagement with these large-scale events into perception surveys in future years**.

Break down silos between sports mega-events and cultural mega-events

Stakeholders who engage with large-scale events could also be empowered to **break down silos between sports mega-events and cultural mega-events** by the fact that the Eurovision Song Contest combines features of both event types and is now part of the evidence base that UK events stakeholders will learn from. This would create more potential to understand the cross-pollination of both types of event.

Leverage bilateral relationships with future Eurovision Song Contest host cities/countries

Nurture UK/Ukrainian partnerships

Work with partners to ensure the needs of Ukraine's cultural sector are not forgotten

The British Council should consider how to **leverage bilateral relationships with future Eurovision Song Contest host countries/cities** during each year-long event cycle, and how to **use evidence of UK participation in cultural relations through the Eurovision Song Contest** in its engagement activities. It should **nurture new UK/Ukrainian partnerships** which came about through Eurovision 2023, and **work with partners to ensure the needs of Ukraine's cultural sector are not forgotten** once the Eurovision spotlight has moved on.

10.2.2 For future Eurovision host cities and states

Consider how to approach the Eurovision Song Contest in ways which harness senses of civic identity

Liverpool stakeholders often considered the city's approach to Eurovision had been successful because the development process had started by asking what hosting the event meant emotionally to the city and its people. Future host cities could **consider how to approach the Eurovision Song Contest in creative and participatory ways which harness senses of civic identity** that communities could get behind.

Implement and ringfence robust equality, diversity and inclusion policy frameworks

Another key lesson from Liverpool is that event host cities should **implement and ringfence robust equality, diversity and inclusion policy frameworks** from the event's inception and bidding stage through to legacy. This drove the ambitious approach to community participation which boosted Eurovision 2023's cultural relations atmosphere.

Ensure city stakeholders are communicating effectively with each other from the outset

Consult diverse fan communities to understand what they value in a host city

The joined-up relationships between city stakeholders exemplified by Liverpool's visitor experience workstreams were credited with enabling the vibrant and immersive atmosphere which many fans and broadcasters have remembered as the best Eurovision Song Contest they have attended. Future host cities should **ensure city stakeholders are communicating effectively with each other** from the outset, and should **consult diverse fan communities** to understand what they value in a host city.

Consider how official and informal social spaces (EuroClub, EuroVillage; the hospitality sector) can facilitate cultural relations

Future host cities should also **consider how official and informal social spaces (EuroClub, EuroVillage; the hospitality sector) can facilitate cultural relations**. Investment in the health of the hospitality economy for event cities is also investing in the ability to facilitate informal cultural relations during mega-events.

Consider visitors without Live Show tickets as a specific audience

Eurovision Song Contest host cities are likely to be better able to facilitate person-to-person cultural relations potential if they **consider visitors without Live Show tickets as a specific audience** when planning their offer. This is necessary in order to draw enough visitor volume for host cities to see a return on investment and positive economic impacts.

Consider how hosting the Eurovision Song Contest will have lasting benefit for LGBTQ+ residents, including those who also belong to ethnic and racial minorities

In recognition of the large LGBTQ+ fan base within the Eurovision Song Contest's fan community, host cities should also **consider how hosting the Eurovision Song Contest will have lasting benefit for LGBTQ+ residents**, including those who also belong to ethnic and racial minorities.

Continue to invest in national and local culture sectors to respond to short-notice opportunities

States and funding bodies should **be aware that continued investment in national and local culture sectors is necessary** for actors to be able to respond to short-notice opportunities such as the Eurovision Song Contest. How far future host cities and states will be able to harness their cultural sectors to respond at scale and creatively to such opportunities will depend on what investment those sectors have received.

10.2.3 For participating broadcasters

Complete city selection as early as possible

Cities and their culture sectors are more able to deliver a rewarding and impactful visitor experience the longer that they have to plan. Broadcasters hosting the Eurovision Song Contest should **complete city selection as early as possible** so that city stakeholders can build strong partnerships and so that broadcasters' own production teams can take maximum creative benefit from the choice of place.

Provide more support for city stakeholders beyond the immediate circle of delivery partners

Providing **more support for city stakeholders beyond the immediate circle of delivery partners** to understand the scope of the Eurovision Song Contest and how they can benefit from it would maximise these stakeholders' ability to develop and contribute to place-based cultural relations activity.

Tackle perceptions that the Eurovision Song Contest is Eurocentric or disconnected from diasporas of colour in Europe

The Eurovision Song Contest is sometimes perceived as not inclusive enough. Member broadcasters can help address this by **tackling perceptions that the Eurovision Song Contest is Eurocentric or disconnected from diasporas of colour in Europe**. This might in turn improve the event's appeal in Global South markets, which will be necessary to fulfil the EBU's ambition of growing the contest as a global brand. Broadcasters should take steps to make their presentation of the event appeal to multicultural communities, and to make sure that significant communities within their audience all feel represented by the contestants they select, especially in countries with growing ethnic and racial diversity among youth.

10.2.4 For the European Broadcasting Union

Consider how to share knowledge of the scale and benefits of hosting

The EBU could also consider how to **share knowledge of the scale and benefits of hosting** so that city stakeholders in countries which may do well in an Eurovision Song Contest can begin considering what hosting would mean to them even before a Grand Final success. While the EBU does make detailed information available to winning broadcasters to share with bidders during host city selection, stakeholders in Liverpool's culture sector sometimes suggested they could have delivered more and benefited more if they had understood in July 2022 what they had learned by January 2023.

Engage with a wider range of recent host city stakeholders to understand what knowledge these organisations need at what timescale

The EBU might also think about **engaging with a wider range of recent host city stakeholders to understand what knowledge these organisations need at what timescale**. National Museums Liverpool, for instance, would have benefited from more prior knowledge about the Insignia Keys tradition and/or more research time. This is an example where broadcasting professionals might not anticipate a stakeholder need.

Systematise how the Eurovision Song Contest is evaluated from year to year

Systematising how the Eurovision Song Contest is evaluated from year to year will improve these future opportunities. Liverpool's event evaluation approach has provided deeper insights into the Eurovision Song Contest's impact than those from any previous host city, building on evaluations by Rotterdam and Turin in 2021–2. This presents an opportunity to create a more systematised evaluation methodology over time which can also track the longer-term impact of hosting the Eurovision Song Contest on cities and states.

Enhancing how the impact of Eurovision is evaluated and understood over time is itself a contribution to cultural relations. It will contribute to the sharing of knowledge between international partners, as part of the process of Eurovision Song Contest host cities, countries and broadcasters learning from each other which already exists but has potential to become more systematised.

Review hosting practices to ensure cities get maximum benefit

The EBU could even **review hosting practices to ensure cities get maximum benefit**. Broadcasters are well supported by the EBU to deliver each Eurovision Song Contest within 12 months. However, the timescale is more challenging to host city and country stakeholders who are used to longer lead times for events and festivals. This limited how some organisations could benefit from or engage with Eurovision 2023, though it also encouraged risk-taking and innovation in developing Liverpool's cultural programme.

With the Eurovision Song Contest at its current scale, a two-year hosting cycle might allow cities to plan programming in more depth, attract more sponsorship, gather more inward investment, and deliver more community benefit from hosting.

One mechanism to facilitate this schedule would be for the winner and runner-up of a given contest, e.g. Eurovision Song Contest 2025, to both win hosting rights. One would host Eurovision Song Contest 2026, and the other would host Eurovision Song Contest 2027. The winner of Eurovision Song Contest 2026 would host Eurovision Song Contest 2028, and thereafter every winner would have two years to prepare.

This mechanism would support smaller countries and less wealthy broadcasters to prepare and raise sufficient funds to host the Eurovision Song Contest, while removing some risk from the process and allowing host cities to pursue more inward investment. While other mega-events work on even longer schedules, a 24-month lead time may now be more practicable than 12 months and it would only require one transitional year to introduce this pattern.

A distinctive and valuable aspect of the Eurovision Song Contest is that a great song and performance can earn attention, excitement, and reward for any broadcaster and its country – whatever its size and wherever it is located. Maintaining this opportunity while reducing financial and reputational risk would be a positive step forward for Eurovision's sustainability, inclusivity and profile.

A more radical option would break the link between winning and hosting the Eurovision Song Contest altogether. Introducing a bid system for prospective host broadcasters would create an extra layer of mitigation against the logistical and reputational risks that could arise from the host country only being known 12 months in advance. It would also reduce the financial risks to broadcasters from committing to Eurovision Song Contest participation.

A cultural relations approach to this hosting model could institutionalise the practice of the host and winning broadcasters cooperating on creative content as the BBC and Suspilne did in 2023.

However, breaking the link between winning and hosting would be one of the greatest changes in the Eurovision Song Contest's history and could weaken its appeal to broadcasters which rarely have opportunities to showcase their country to international audiences on their own terms (especially since some broadcasters have done much to help the contest grow). It would also interfere with fans' enjoyment of visiting a destination they might never have considered visiting until the country wins the Eurovision Song Contest and the next contest is hosted there.

10.3 For future research

Many questions raised by the unique context and process of Eurovision 2023 are beyond the scope of this report's timescale but deserve future research. They include:

- What is the impact of hosting the Eurovision Song Contest on cities' cultural/creative industries, and what are the best methods to research this?
- What would a longitudinal study of a defined set of host city/state impacts (e.g. future visits, business opportunities, new cultural partnerships) reveal about the impact of the Eurovision Song Contest?
- What could be learned through comparative longitudinal ethnographic research on the Eurovision Song Contest about its place-based affective atmospheres and the spaces for person-to-person cultural relations that they create?
- How well are creative representations of place during international broadcast events understood by international audiences, and what effects do these have on audiences' perceptions of the places shown in the broadcasts?
- What can be learned about the grassroots role of host city communities in cultural relations or in building soft power for cities and states that host large-scale events?
- What can be learned about the history of how host cities have responded to the opportunity of hosting the Eurovision Song Contest, and how they may have translated practices and know-how between hosting the Eurovision Song Contest and other large-scale events?
- How can better baselined and more longitudinal impact and perception studies be developed that understand the soft power and cultural relations impact of the Eurovision Song Contest and other large-scale events, looking at how narratives are formed, projected and also received?

Appendices

Interview schedule

Semi-structured interviews with stakeholders covered the following main topics, with additional questions tailored to their role in the delivery process:

- Their involvement with Eurovision 2023 being hosted in Liverpool
- What they see as the main values of Eurovision, and how Eurovision promotes them
- Their perceptions of Eurovision, Liverpool, the BBC and the UK before 2023
- How they have seen conflict impacting Eurovision in the past
- How the context of Liverpool hosting Eurovision 2023 on Ukraine's behalf influenced their approach to the contest in 2023
- Eurovision's past impact and potential future impact for host cities and countries
- How Eurovision could unite people across borders

Tracker Survey questions

1. [Information and consent page]
2. What is your age? (18–24; 25–34; 35–44; 45–54; 55–64; 65+)
3. What is the highest level of education you have achieved? (primary; lower secondary; vocational upper secondary; general upper secondary; practical/technical/occupational higher; theoretically based/research higher)
4. Are you? (female; male; another gender; prefer not to answer)
5. Which of the following regions do you live in? (region lists supplied by online panel provider in each target country)
6. Which, if any, of the following have you already done? (studying in the UK; visiting the UK as a tourist; doing business/trading with people or organisations in the UK; living and working in the UK; making personal contacts and friendships with people from the UK; learning about and enjoying the arts and culture of the UK; none of these)
7. Before today, which of these cultural events and sites have you heard of? (Venice Biennale (La Biennale di Venezia); UNESCO World Heritage Sites; Eurovision Song Contest; The BBC Proms; The Cannes Film Festival (Festival de Cannes); Glastonbury Festival; European Capitals of Culture; The Edinburgh Festival Fringe; Notting Hill Carnival; The Hay Festival of Literature and Arts; none of the above)
8. Thinking specifically about the 2023 Eurovision Song Contest, which of these activities did you do, if any? (watched Eurovision live (on TV or live streaming online); Looked at other official (BBC) Eurovision online/digital content – not the live broadcasts themselves (e.g. YouTube videos, podcasts); looked at other content (e.g. newspaper or online coverage **not** from the BBC); attended Eurovision in person (for any of the performances, including dress rehearsals and semi-finals); voted in the Eurovision grand final; organised or attended a Eurovision party; none of the above; don't know)
9. Thinking about the previous Eurovision Song Contests, how often would you say that you have watched them in the past 5 years – not including this year (so between 2018 – 2022)? (every year; most years (3–4 times); once or twice; never; don't know)
10. In your opinion, was Eurovision 2023: a Ukrainian event; a UK event; an event hosted by the UK on behalf of Ukraine; a joint UK and Ukrainian event; don't know)

11. How attractive do you find the UK as a country in which to study, on a scale from 0 (very unattractive) to 10 (very attractive)?
12. How attractive or unattractive do you find the UK as a source of arts and culture, on a scale from 0 (very unattractive) to 10 (very attractive)?
13. How attractive or unattractive do you find the UK as a country with which to do business/trade on a scale from 0 (very unattractive) to 10 (very attractive)?
14. Thinking generally about people, to what extent do you distrust or trust people from the UK on a scale from 0 (strongly distrust) to 10 (strongly trust)?
15. And now thinking about government, to what extent do you distrust or trust the government of the UK, on a scale of 0 (strongly distrust) to 10 (strongly trust)?
16. And now thinking about institutions – such as the media, police, justice system – to what extent do you distrust or trust institutions in the UK on a scale from 0 (strongly distrust) to 10 (strongly trust)?
17. And taking everything into consideration, how attractive overall do you find the UK on a scale from 0 (very unattractive) to 10 (very attractive)?
18. And again, taking everything into account, which, if any, of the following are you particularly interested in doing in the future? (studying in the UK; visiting the UK as a tourist; doing business/trading with people or organisations in the UK; living and working in the UK; making personal contacts and friendships with people from the UK; learning about and enjoying the arts and culture of the UK; none of these)
19. Which of these values are most important to you? Please select up to 3 options (inclusion (providing equal opportunities for all in society); diversity (many different types of things or people being included in society); peace (freedom from war); internationalism (appreciating the diverse cultures in the world); generosity (a willingness to help and support, beyond what is normal or expected); empowerment (people having control and power over their own lives); creativity (the ability to produce original or new ideas); none of the above; don't know; prefer not to say)
20. Which of these values, if any, do you associate with the UK? (values list as Q19)
21. Which of these values, if any, do you associate with Liverpool? (values list as Q19)
22. Which of these values, if any, do you associate with Eurovision? (values list as Q19)
23. Which of these values, if any, do you associate with the BBC? (The BBC is the British Broadcasting Corporation, which runs TV and radio stations in the UK and is funded by public subscription.) (values list as Q19)
24. Which of these values, if any, do you associate with music from the UK? (values list as Q19)
25. Which of these values, if any, do you associate with Ukraine? (values list as Q19)
26. How unlikely or likely are you to visit Liverpool in the future, on a scale from 0 (very unlikely) to 10 (very likely)?
27. Has holding Eurovision 2023 in Liverpool made you more or less likely to visit the UK in the future? (more likely; less likely; no effect; don't know)
28. Has holding Eurovision 2023 in Liverpool made you more or less likely to visit Liverpool in the future? (more likely; less likely; no effect; don't know)
29. Did the UK hosting Eurovision have a positive or negative effect on your view of the UK, or did it make no difference? (very positive effect; positive effect; no difference; negative effect; very negative effect; don't know)
30. Are you aware that in 2016, the UK voted to leave the European Union (commonly known as 'Brexit')? (yes; no)
31. Does Brexit influence your perception of the UK? (yes – it positively influences my perception of the UK; yes – it negatively influences my perception of the UK; no – it doesn't influence my perception of the UK; don't know)
32. Is the area you live in: (urban area (inner city/town); semi-urban area (outskirts of a city/suburban area/small town); rural area (areas other than towns or cities, such as the countryside, villages or farms))
33. Which of these best describes your sexual orientation? (straight/heterosexual; gay or lesbian; other sexual orientation; prefer not to say)

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The University of Hull and UK universities

This research project was led by the University of Hull with a team of consultants from the University of Brighton, the University of Glasgow, and Royal Holloway (University of London).

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Interviews

Interview participants represented the following organisations:

- BBC
- Birmingham Music Archive
- Culture Liverpool
- DCMS
- European Broadcasting Union
- Liverpool Cathedral
- Liverpool City Council
- Liverpool City Region Music Board
- National Lottery Heritage Fund
- National Museums Liverpool
- OGAE UK
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- Royal Liverpool Philharmonic
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Endnotes

- 1 The 'Eurovision Song Contest' is the event's full brand name, after the EBU's 'Eurovision Network' of telecommunications links. Colloquially, the ESC is often called 'Eurovision'. This report refers to 'the ESC' for the annual broadcast event, 'Eurovision Song Contest 2023' for the broadcast in 2023, and 'Eurovision 2023' for the full event comprising the BBC-produced Live Shows plus Liverpool's place-based activity as host city.
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