

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

## Executive Summary

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**This is the executive summary of the Culture, place and partnership: the cultural relations of Eurovision 2023 report. This publication was funded by the British Council and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport who commissioned the research in partnership with Liverpool City Council. It forms part of a suite of evaluations commissioned by Liverpool City Council and its partners examining the economic, cultural, social and wellbeing impacts of Eurovision 2023.**

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This report was commissioned by the British Council in partnership with DCMS and Liverpool City Council.

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Baker, C., Atkinson, D., Grabher, B., & Howcroft, M. (2024).

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).



# 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

# Acknowledgements

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## Authors

Catherine Baker is Reader in 20th Century History at the University of Hull. She is an expert on the politics of popular culture, media and national identity in post-Cold War Europe, especially the post-Yugoslav space, and has researched the Eurovision Song Contest's narratives of national, European and LGBTQ+ belonging alongside those of other mega-events for more than 15 years.

David Atkinson is a Professor of Cultural and Historical Geography at the University of Hull. He has longstanding interests in geographical imaginaries and representations and how these may be contested and renegotiated as they circle around Europe. More recent work addresses the politics, impacts and reception of cultural mega-events such as Cities of Culture.

Barbara Grabher works as a Lecturer in Event Studies at the University of Brighton. Her research is at the intersection of critical event, gender and environmental studies with a particular interest in UK City / European Capital of Culture event frameworks. She is the author of the monograph *Doing Gender in Events: Feminist Perspectives in Critical Event Studies* (Routledge, 2022) and co-editor of the forthcoming collection *Events and Infrastructures: Critical Interrogations*.

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## The University of Hull and UK universities

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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
- Royal Albert Dock
- Royal Liverpool Philharmonic
- Spirit of 2012
- Suspilne Ukraine
- Tate Liverpool
- Ukrainian Institute Kyiv
- Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs
- Independent artists and producers

## Thanks to

- Academic Audio Transcription
- Anna Bubnova
- Angelica Burrill
- Charlotte Clark
- Anuja Desai
- Elliott Gibson
- Emma Gorman
- Mona Lotten
- Alistair MacDonald
- Autumn McCartney
- Ian Thomas
- Lorna Walsh
- Helen Watters
- Christine Wilson

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