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Research Article

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Skirting the issue: finding queer and geopolitical belonging at the Eurovision Song Contest

Jessica Carniel*

This article examines how the ideological boundaries of East and West are built, maintained and challenged through the performance of sexual and other politics in the Eurovision Song Contest (ESC). It argues that the contest is a useful prism through which to examine and understand contemporary European debates about sexual politics, and the role that this plays in defining the borders of modern Europe and its conditions of belonging. The contest itself offers an important site for belonging to the European community both to states on the eastern margins and to queer communities throughout Europe. It examines examples of performances that have challenged sexual politics, such as the Finnish entry from 2013, as well as state responses to the queer dimensions of the contest, such as those from Russia and Azerbaijan. It concludes that different states may challenge the ESC rules on political gestures depending on their own status within the European community as well as the extent to which that gesture challenges or reaffirms “European” ideology.

Keywords: sexual politics, human rights, Eurovision Song Contest

Introduction

It is widely acknowledged that, despite its glittery, wind-machined appearance, the Eurovision Song Contest (ESC) is a highly political event. Although the Eurovision Song Contest rulebook explicitly states that “No lyrics, speeches, gestures of a political or similar nature shall be permitted during the ESC”,¹ various political messages have been encoded into songs and performances over the years, and enacted through the fairly entrenched voting blocs, which are based upon historical relationships, geographical proximity, transnational connection and ethno-religious affinity. Indeed, Eurovision has as much been a site for acting out the contentious geopolitics of post-WWII and post-Soviet Europe as it has been commercially imagined by the European Broadcasting

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¹ European Broadcasting Union. 2014. *Rules of the 59th Eurovision Song Contest*. *Eurovision*, 1.2.2. (accessed: 17. April 2015).

Union (EBU) as the song that unites Europe. Yet it could be argued, as this article contends, that in recent years this geopolitical tension has been further charged by the politics of social justice. Russia's controversial "anti-gay laws", in which it is illegal to spread so-called "gay propaganda", has caused the nation to be a site of global protest, especially as Russia hosted such high-profile international events as the Winter Olympics in 2014 and the Eurovision Song Contest in 2009. Furthermore, the expansion of the event into the eastern margins of Europe, where legacies of Soviet ideologies intersect with contemporary Islam, has also fuelled tension over the role that liberal sexual politics play in defining modern Europe. Given the much-documented strong gay fan base for the Eurovision Song Contest, as well as its reputation for high camp, this article argues that the event has become an effective site for understanding contemporary European debates about gay rights and identity politics. This has been achieved in a manner that has somehow effectively skirted around the European Broadcasting Union's ideas and rules about what constitutes political gestures and political causes. However, eluding these rules and regulations is dependent upon the status of the entrant's state in "Europe" and the extent to which their political statement contributes or detracts from Europe's defining and dominant ideologies. The article also explores how this movement is enacted in specific geopolitical dimensions that perhaps further exacerbates the political and socio-cultural divide between eastern and western Europe.

Defining the borders of Europe through Eurovision

The very origins of the Eurovision Song Contest belie its political significance. Modelled on the Italian San Remo Festival, the ESC was conceived with the intent of uniting the nations of post-war Europe; its more prosaic intention was to promote the European Broadcasting Union's Eurovision distribution network.² The first contest, held in Switzerland in 1956, comprised seven EBU nations: Switzerland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Belgium, France, Italy and the Federal Republic of Germany. Although Denmark, Austria and the United Kingdom were also part of the network and did screen the contest, they did not register in time to participate.³ This post-WWII, Cold War historical context of Eurovision's origins places the contest firmly within an implicit set of Western European values. The fact that the Soviet bloc established its own song contest in 1977, the Intervision Song Contest,⁴ only serves to reinforce the symbolic status of Eurovision as a Western European cultural (and implicitly political) event.

The history of Eurovision and its participants nonetheless presents a significant challenge to binary understandings of the East and the West and to

² O'Connor, Kennedy John. 2005. *The Eurovision Song Contest: the Official History*. Sydney: Carlton Books, 8.

³ O'Connor, *The Eurovision Song Contest*, 8.

⁴ Raykoff, Ivan and Robert Deam Tobin. 2007. *Introduction*, in *A Song for Europe: Popular Music and Politics in the Eurovision Song Contest*, edited by Raykoff, Ivan and Robert Deam Tobin. Aldershot: Ashgate, xvii.

the implicit values within this.⁵ The list of contestants and founding nations of the EBU paints a specific portrait of post-war “Europe” that is also firmly located within an historical alignment of Europe with the West, but as the contest has evolved and the list of EBU member nations has grown the implicit meanings of “Europe” and “Europeanness” in Eurovision have shifted significantly. Many newcomers to the Eurovision audience are often astounded to see entries from countries such as Israel and Azerbaijan, as these nations do not fit into their idea of what constitutes “Europe”. Even when the EBU eligibility is explained,⁶ this membership can still be understood as different or distinct to “actual” membership in Europe and its community, revealing particular cultural, linguistic and religious assumptions about what constitutes a European nation.⁷ EBU membership is seen as an economic or commercial relationship, which results from considering television as a business enterprise in addition to a cultural venture. Television and radio broadcasting, as well as the arts and popular culture more broadly, are important sites of cultural exchange that can foster a sense of shared identity, community and citizenship.⁸ Karen Fricker and Milija Gluhovic argue that the ESC specifically is an ongoing and historical “symbolic contact zone”⁹ for European countries that facilitates these processes of exchange and communal identity formation.

The very concept of “Europe” itself has historically shifting borders that suggest an ongoing interplay between the persistent binary of its eastern and western reaches. As Etienne Balibar states, “Europe has never been a *closed space* since it emerged as a historical reality and will never become one”; its borders are “arbitrary”.¹⁰ Geographically, the European and Asian continents are conjoined, virtually indistinguishable, which Balibar has described as the “*un-limited* character of the European ‘continent’”.¹¹ This is illustrated further in the post-Cold War era as “Europe” expands to incorporate Turkey and former Soviet states that are geographically proximate but are considered by some to be ideologically different on the basis of assumptions about historical and cultural specificity. Even the mythology of Europe suggests an ambiguous cultural origin and geographical identity. Anthony Pagden’s wry account of Europe’s Eastern origins perhaps illustrates this best: “an abducted Asian woman gave Europe her name; a vagrant Asian exile gave Europe its political and finally its cultural identity; and an Asian prophet gave Europe its

⁵ Fricker, Karen and Milija Gluhovic. 2013. *Introduction: Eurovision and the “New” Europe*, in *Performing the “New” Europe: Identities, Feelings and Politics in the Eurovision Song Contest*, edited by Fricker, Karen and Milija Gluhovic. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 17.

⁶ For an explanation of admission guidelines for the EBU, see [European Broadcasting Union, Admission, 2015](#) (accessed: 8. April 2015). See also the explanation for Eurovision participation provided on the Eurovision website: [Eurovision.tv Which Countries Can Take Part?, 2015](#). (accessed: 8. April 2015).

⁷ See, for example, discussions of such perceptions in the popular press, many of which focus on the perennially popular question of why Israel is a Eurovision contestant: Denham, Jess. 2014. [Eurovision 2014 Voting: Why is it So Political?. The Independent](#), 1. May 2014 (accessed: 15. April 2015); Westbrook, Caroline. 2012. [It’s the Eurovision Song Contest, not the European Song Contest. Metro](#), 24. May 2012 (accessed: 15. April 2015).

⁸ Fricker and Gluhovic, *Introduction*, 2.

⁹ Fricker and Gluhovic, *Introduction*, 3.

¹⁰ Balibar, Etienne. 2009. Ideas of Europe: Civilization and Constitution. *Iris* 1(1), 3–17, 6–7. Original emphasis.

¹¹ Balibar, *Ideas of Europe*, 6. Original emphasis.

religion".¹² Furthermore, the processes of colonisation and immigration have led to the permeation of various European cultures across the world, which arguably further expands the reaches of "Europe", its culture and its ideologies. This has in turn influenced the reach and appeal of the ESC. As Ivan Raykoff highlights, the Middle Eastern contingent of the ESC is a natural result of French colonialism and British presence in the region during the formative years of the EBU,¹³ while Eurovision's Australian audience is the result of significant waves of post-war European migration and a government policy of multiculturalism that facilitated transnational cultural connection through the establishment of a dedicated multicultural broadcaster, SBS, which subscribes to EBU content.

Despite the apparent arbitrariness of European borders observed by Balibar, and by extension the borders of the EBU, there is resistance against incorporating historical differences into its definition. The distinction between East and West lingers in the political and cultural imaginary, which is in turn reflected and challenged by the Eurovision Song Contest. Ivan Raykoff and Robert Deam Tobin argue that the contest provides literal and figurative access to an ideal of post-war, modern European society that is "democratic, capitalist, peace-loving, multicultural, sexually liberated and technologically advanced."¹⁴ This provides a significant challenge for the newer European states that are seeking belonging within the European community, or older states seeking to maintain their status in a changing social and political environment, while simultaneously developing and maintaining an individual national culture and identity that may at times be at odds with those modern European values outlined above by Raykoff and Tobin, particularly around issues of sexuality. Éric Fassin's appropriation of Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilisations" thesis as a *sexual* clash of civilisations clearly indicates the importance of gender and sexual politics in understanding modern geopolitical affiliations, particularly within Europe.¹⁵ The idea that sexual politics are an important ideological boundary has also been taken up in Jasbir Puar's concept of "homonationalism", which addresses the normalisation of queer politics and identities into nationalist discourse and its utilisation in delineating the boundaries between the progressive West and the oppressive 'other'.¹⁶ While this other is increasingly stereotyped as Islamic in post-9/11 discourses, Conor O'Dwyer's examination of gay rights movements in Poland highlights how other historical and socio-political differences are also at play. Specifically, the tension between the liberal West and post-communist East can also result in a potential backlash against European Union (EU) expectations. O'Dwyer found this clash of norms to be productive in the Polish context, but warns that in

¹² Pagden, Anthony. 2002. *The Idea of Europe from Antiquity to the European Union*. Washington DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 35.

¹³ Raykoff, Ivan. 2007. *Camping on the Borders of Europe*, in *A Song for Europe: Popular Music and Politics in the Eurovision Song Contest*, edited by Raykoff, Ivan and Robert Deam Tobin. Aldershot: Ashgate, 1-12, 2.

¹⁴ Raykoff and Tobin, *Introduction*, xviii.

¹⁵ Fassin, Éric. 2010. National Identities and Transnational Intimacies: Sexual Democracy and the Politics of Immigration in Europe. *Public Culture* 22(3), 507–29, 509.

¹⁶ Puar, Jasbir. 2013. Rethinking Homonationalism. *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 45(2), 336–9.

other places could result in a threat to minority rights.¹⁷ The announced revival of the Intervision Song Contest in 2014 in partial response to the victory of Conchita Wurst underlines two key issues: there is an ongoing sense of ideological affinity amongst the former Soviet states, and sexual politics plays an important role in defining these boundaries.¹⁸

Sexual politics has thus become a means of redefining ideological borders and is, quite literally for some political and economic organisations such as the EU and Council of Europe, a condition of belonging in “Europe”, as will be discussed later in relation to Azerbaijan. As such, attitudes to sexuality expressed and performed at Eurovision as a significant site of cultural exchange are charged with political value that can be the cause of tension or, more optimistically, harnessed positively. As Milija Gluhovic observes, “this European cultural performance can serve as a productive locus of tension over gender/sexuality versus cultural/religious identity in the service of a more progressive image of Europe.”¹⁹

The soft and hard politics of the ESC

Despite the contest’s rule against political statements and gestures, European politics have played an important part of the culture of the ESC. For example, amongst the more notorious characteristics of the ESC is the practice of collusive or bloc voting, in which certain culturally and politically aligned countries “swap” votes with one another.²⁰ In some instances the underlying reason is regional, such as amongst the Scandinavian nations. In others, such as the Eastern bloc, regional affiliations may be further influenced by other historical connections, such as an ongoing sense of political or cultural affinity in the post-Soviet Eastern margins, while the German-Turkish bloc reflects the effects of migration flows on communities’ sense of cultural identity and loyalty.²¹ In rarer instances, arguably minimised by changes to voting rules and practices that allow for popular votes from audiences, countries may be either “punished” or “rewarded” with votes in relation to current political issues. Eurovision has also been the launching pad for the political careers of several contestants: Norway’s 1966 contestant, Åse Kleveland, later became the minister of culture; Ireland’s winner, Dana, became a member of the European Parliament in the late 1990s; and the 2004 winner Ruslana also

¹⁷ O’Dwyer, Conor. 2012. Does the EU Help or Hinder Gay-Rights Movements in Post-Communist Europe? The Case of Poland. *East European Politics* 28(4), 332–52, 333.

¹⁸ Barlett Paul. 2014. Bearded Lady Spurs Russia to Revive Soviet-Era Song Contest. *Eurasianet.org*, 23. May 2014 (accessed: 15. April 2015).

¹⁹ Gluhovic, Milija. 2013. *Sing for Democracy: Human Rights and Sexuality Discourse in the Eurovision Song Contest*, in *Performing the “New” Europe: Identities, Feelings and Politics in the Eurovision Song Contest*, edited by Fricker, Karen and Milija Gluhovic. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 194–217, 195.

²⁰ Ginsburgh, Victor and Abdul G. Noury. 2008. “The Eurovision Song Contest: Is Voting Political or Cultural?”. *European Journal of Political Economy* 24(1), 41–52, 42.

²¹ For research into the various voting blocs, see Christensen, Miyase and Christian Christensen. 2008. The After-Life of Eurovision 2003: Turkish and European Social Imaginaries and Ephemeral Communicative Space. *Popular Communication* 6(3), 155–72; Dekker, Anthony. 2007. The Eurovision Song Contest as a “Friendship” Network. *Connections* 27(3), 53–8; Spierdijk, Laura and Michel Vellekoop. 2006. *Geography, Culture, and Religion: Explaining the Bias in Eurovision Song Contest Voting*. Twente: Department of Applied Mathematics, Faculty of EEMCS, University of Twente. Memorandum No. 1794.

secured a seat in the Ukrainian parliament after actively endorsing the Orange Revolution, and has been an activist on various human rights issues.

Politics have also not been entirely absent from the songs themselves. Italy's winning entry in 1990, "*Insieme: 1992*", sung by Toto Cutugno, was one of several songs in the early 1990s that sought to invoke the changing face of Europe with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dismantling of the USSR.²² While the politics of "*Insieme: 1992*" were probably soft enough to be palatable for audiences and passable to auditors, producers requested that Ukraine revise the overtly political lyrics of their 2005 entry, perhaps unsurprisingly as it was also the anthem of the Orange Revolution.²³ Although not overtly political in its actual performance, Portugal's entry in the 1974 competition was used as a secret signal to begin the coup known as the Carnation Revolution. In the same year, Gigliola Cinquetti's "*Sì*" was subject to censorship in her home state of Italy as a referendum on a liberalised divorce law was due to be held, and it was feared that the song could be interpreted as a political statement in favour of the laws, thus influencing voters.²⁴ Although applauded by the Israeli president for their contribution to the nation and to peace,²⁵ Noa and Mira Awad's 2009 Israeli entry, "*There Must Be Another Way*", courted controversy due to Awad's Arab ethnicity and the use of Arabic in the song. Also including lyrics in English and Hebrew, the song provides no direct political commentary but is thematically preoccupied with peace and respect for humanity. Iceland's 2014 entry, Pollapönk's "*No Prejudice*", also sought to draw attention to respect and social justice and succeeded in a much less controversial manner. These examples illustrate how broad commentary on ideologies core to "European" human rights and social justice can slip past the ESC rules and regulations, while songs relating to specific political situations are subjected to greater scrutiny.

The politics of kissing: performing gender politics on the Eurovision stage

Eurovision's gender politics have gained prominence since the 1990s and are arguably increasingly important as human rights issues pertaining to sexuality have increased in global importance, and the ESC's queer audience have garnered more attention. Various scholars have observed that Dana International's winning performance of "*Diva*" for Israel in 1998 symbolised Eurovision's "coming out". Prior to this, Eurovision's gay appeal, while present, was considered closeted.²⁶ Eurovision's camp aesthetic, which remains a large

²² Raykoff, *Camping on the Borders*, 44.

²³ Heller, Dana. 2007. t.A.T.u. You! Russia, the Global Politics of Eurovision, and Lesbian Pop. *Popular Music* 26(2), 195–210, 203.

²⁴ Wolther, Irving. 2012. More Than Just Music: the Seven Dimensions of the Eurovision Song Contest. *Popular Music* 31(1), 165–71, 168.

²⁵ Webb, Glen. 2009. Israel: Noa & Mira to Moscow with Einaiych. *Eurovision.tv*, 2. March 2009 (accessed: 15. April 2015).

²⁶ Cassiday A., Julie. 2014. Post-Soviet Pop Goes Gay: Russia's Trajectory to Eurovision Victory. *The Russian Review* 73(1), 1–23, 8; Motschenbacher, Heiko. 2013. "Now Everybody Can Wear a Skirt": Linguistic Constructions of Non-Heteronormativity at Eurovision Song Contest Press Conferences. *Discourse and Society* 24(5), 590–614, 593; Singleton, Brian / Karen Fricker and Elena Moreo. 2007. Performing the Queer Network: Fans and Families at the Eurovision Song Contest. *SQS: Journal of Queer Studies in Finland* 12–24, 12, 19 (accessed: 15. April 2015).

part of its appeal to its gay audience, has become increasingly overt in recent years. Ukraine's Verka Serduchka is considered by many to be a pinnacle of Eurovision camp that at once plays with gender politics, by virtue of its drag queen artist, and the harder politics of Ukrainian tensions with Russia.²⁷ Yet the camp aesthetic does not completely contain the appeal and importance of Eurovision for the gay and queer communities of Europe. As Peter Rehberg observes, Eurovision "certainly provides the opportunity for queer people to experience a feeling of belonging on both the national and transnational level, which is rendered more complicated or foreclosed in other cultural mainstream contexts and the public sphere in general."²⁸ In short, it is a site where the idea of "European citizen" is open to those otherwise marginalised. As equality on the grounds of sexual orientation increases in importance throughout Europe and the world, such politics begin to permeate the concerns of the songwriters and performers, just as they have been preoccupied with other political trends, such as, in the early 1990s, the aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989.

Finland's Krista Siegfriids's performance of "*Marry Me*" in the 2013 ESC provides a significant text for examining the gender politics of Eurovision and its role in instigating debate about significant issues in queer human rights and social justice. In her live performance, Siegfriids is surrounded by female backup dancers dressed as male wedding attendants, who later reveal bridesmaid dresses under their suits. Two female backup singers dressed in highly stylised, 1940s-inspired outfits accompany her. This ostensible paean to the heterosexual institution of marriage is subverted by a kiss shared between Siegfriids and one of the backup singers. (Such public kisses between women are referred to popularly and in the media as "lesbian kisses", regardless of the sexual orientation and identities of the women involved. Use of the term to refer to kisses between women seeks to draw upon this popular discourse, but is acknowledged to be misrepresentative and problematic.) The live performance contrasts against the official music video for the song, in which Siegfriids aggressively pursues her recalcitrant boyfriend with the assistance of her leather-clad female friends, one of whom Siegfriids slaps suggestively on the bottom as she passes her to enter the awaiting car. While certainly more heteronormative than the live performance, Siegfriids's slap on her friend's behind suggests the possibility of a more fluid sexuality, even as she pursues marriage to a man; conversely, the slap occurs in the presence of male onlookers, which could also suggest a performance of queer sexuality for a male gaze. While the live performance of "*Marry Me*" was derided by some as too kitsch, it was nevertheless a pointed statement regarding gay marriage rights throughout Europe.

The kiss was a highly publicised dimension of Siegfriids's performance. According to the rules of the ESC, the stage performance at the finals must be identical to the dress rehearsals. The kiss was thus a known element of the performance, featured in press coverage of the rehearsals, and one that had passed the scrutiny of the officials despite complaints from more conservative

²⁷ Rehberg, Peter and Mikko Tuhkanen. 2007. *Dancing Time: Dissociative Camp and European Synchrony*. *SQS: Journal of Queer Studies in Finland* 12, 43–59 (accessed: 12. April 2015).

²⁸ Rehberg, Peter. 2013. *Taken by a Stranger: How Queerness Haunts Germany at Eurovision*, in *Performing the "New" Europe: Identities, Feelings and Politics in the Eurovision Song Contest*, edited by Fricker, Karen and Milija Gluhovic. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 178–93, 178.

countries that the kiss broke the ESC rule regarding political statements. In response to these complaints, Siegrids stated, “I don’t think ‘*Marry Me*’ is political. It’s about love and tolerance. But gay marriage is not allowed in Finland and that’s wrong. I wanted to make a statement about that.”²⁹ The Turkish and Greek media disagreed that the kiss was not political, citing the rule about political gestures and bringing the contest into disrepute in their criticisms of her actions.³⁰ Turkey cancelled its broadcast of the event, citing poor ratings, while gay activists outside of Turkey claimed it was due to the media furore over the kiss.³¹

Siegrids’s statement was in response to the failure of a Finnish marriage equality bill in 2012, which the Finnish parliament eventually passed in December 2014 by a narrow vote of 102 in favour and 92 against. The act removed the distinction between same-sex unions and heterosexual marriage, affording same-sex couples equal rights in adoption and shared surnames.³² Prior to this change, Finland was the only country in the Nordic region to have maintained conservative marriage laws, although registered partnerships between same-sex couples had been permitted since 2002.³³ While Scandinavia holds, in the global imaginary, a reputation for being more socially progressive than other parts of Europe, Finland’s stance on homosexuality had, until the passing of the 2014 bill, been slightly more conservative in comparison to its Nordic neighbours. This is due in part to conservative, often religious-based aspects of traditional Finnish culture and to Finland’s geopolitical status as a boundary between progressive Scandinavia (and by extension the West) and Soviet Russia. As Jens Rydstrom explains, Finland’s geography placed it in a precarious political position during the Cold War, with significant repercussions for its internal politics, including its approach to social issues, such as gay rights.³⁴ Homosexuality was constructed as a foreign concept – specifically “something that was done in Sweden”³⁵ – much in the same way that it has continued to be constructed as a foreign import in Russian discourse about homosexuality.³⁶

Siegrids’s onstage kiss is evocative of fellow Eurovision contestants t.A.T.u, an established Russian pop act who gained global notoriety for their faux lesbian antics both on stage and in their music videos prior to their appearance as contestants in the 2003 ESC at Riga. Comprised of Lena Katina and Yulia Volkova, t.A.T.u emerged in the 1990s as a contrived girl band that deliberately played with faux lesbianism as a commercial ploy that was openly

²⁹ Wyatt, Daisy. 2013. [Eurovision 2013 to Feature First Lesbian Kiss in Protest Against Lack of Gay Marriage Legislation](#). *The Independent*, 17. May 2013 (accessed: 15. April 2015).

³⁰ Glennie, Alasdair and Laura Cox. 2013. [Finnish Entrant Krista Siegrids Stokes Controversy in Eurovision with On-Stage Kiss During “Lesbian Wedding”](#). *The Daily Mail*, 18. May 2013 (accessed 15. April 2015).

³¹ Morgan, Joe and Dan Littauer. 2013. [Turkey Cancels Eurovision Song Contest over Lesbian Kiss](#). *GayStarNews*, 16. May 2013. (accessed: 17. April 2015).

³² Rosendahl, Jussi and Anna Ercanbrack. 2014. [Finland Votes to Legalize Same-Sex Marriage](#). *Reuters*, 28. November 2014 (accessed: 17. April 2015).

³³ Jussi and Ercanbrack, *Finland Votes to Legalize Same-Sex Marriage*.

³⁴ Rydstrom, Jens. 2011. *Odd Couples: a History of Gay Marriage in Scandinavia*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 63.

³⁵ Rydstrom, *Odd Couples*, 63.

³⁶ Baer, Brian James. 2011. *Queer Russia: Othering the Other of the West*, in *Queer in Europe: Contemporary Case Studies*, edited by Downing, Lisa and Robert Gillett. Farnham: Ashgate, 3.

acknowledged in Russia by both the performers and their management.³⁷ In 2003, they gained success beyond Russia with their single, “*All The Things She Said*” and its follow-up, “*Not Gonna Get Us*”. They were selected to represent Russia in the 2003 ESC in the hopes that an internationally-recognised act still experiencing global popularity would secure a Eurovision victory.³⁸ While t.A.T.u were bookmakers’ favourites to win and did achieve third place, their unprofessional behaviour in the lead-up to the contest, such as arriving late to the required dress rehearsals in Riga and insolent attitudes in press conferences, marred their reputations with contest officials and voters prior to their lacklustre and off-key performance at the finals. Unlike Siegrids at Malmo, t.A.T.u did not kiss during their 2003 ESC performance. Beyond some handholding and a moment where Katina and Volkova knelt down together at the back of the stage and gazed at one another, t.A.T.u’s notorious antics were almost entirely absent.

Although the performers were full of bluster in the days leading up to the contest, they were ultimately compliant with its rules and expectations when it came to the performance itself. Nevertheless, t.A.T.u attributed their loss to homophobia rather than to a poor performance that could not be saved by votes from an existing fan base. Yet, this rationalisation was at odds with Eurovision’s famed queer fan base and its significance for these gay viewers, even though t.A.T.u had been subject to homophobic criticisms throughout their career.³⁹ Furthermore, such claims are undermined by t.A.T.u’s use of lesbianism as a spectacle of (male) heterosexual fantasy rather than a political statement. While t.A.T.u were not entirely apolitical – they were notoriously outspoken on the US involvement in Iraq and frequently articulate a strong Russian nationalism – their gender politics are rendered suspect by their exploitation of the image of lesbian desire as commercial product. As Heller observes, t.A.T.u were designed to be both titillating and offensive to everyone, including feminists and gay activists.⁴⁰

While Siegrids and t.A.T.u may hold acts of faux lesbianism in common, they differ significantly in terms of political intent. Even in performances where they did kiss and touch one another intimately, making statement on gender issues was never t.A.T.u’s intent, whereas it is central to Siegrids’s 2013 performance, even if she denies that the act or statement is “political” by her understanding. In their analysis of queer public kissing, Charles E. Morris and John M. Sloop insist that same-sex kissing should be seen as “at once cultural representation and a *political imperative*.”⁴¹ Where straight kissing reaffirms heteronormative values and behaviour, same-sex kissing performed in public spaces disrupts these norms and “constitutes a paramount political performance”.⁴² Morris and Sloop focus on male-on-male kissing in their research, arguing that women kissing is far more tolerable in mainstream

³⁷ Heller, *t.A.T.u. You!*, 203.

³⁸ Heller, *t.A.T.u. You!*, 203.

³⁹ Heller, *t.A.T.u. You!*, 203.

⁴⁰ Heller, *t.A.T.u. You!*, 201.

⁴¹ Morris, Charles E., and John M. Sloop. 2006. “What Lips These Lips Have Kissed”: Refiguring the Politics of Queer Public Kissing. *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 3(1), 1–26, 2. Original emphasis.

⁴² Morris and Sloop, “*What Lips*”, 3.

society; they do not suggest that it is normalised but that it has been appropriated into male heterosexual fantasy, thus does not have the same political impact as two men kissing. Such an argument may rest upon context and audience. While not all Eurovision viewers are gay men, their prevalence within the audience alters the reception of the performance, which by Siegfriids's own admission is targeted at a social issue of direct relevance to them, albeit not necessarily for the purpose of gaining votes. Placed within the camp pantomime of a wedding, Siegfriids's relatively chaste kiss does not aim at titillating the straight male gaze (nor even the queer female gaze); it is a political performance that seeks to disrupt the idea that the institution of marriage itself, and the desire to enter into it, is the sole domain of heterosexuality.

Conversely, t.A.T.u objectify lesbian sexuality for the purpose of fulfilling heterosexual male fantasy, and in doing so reaffirm heteronormative values. Their faux lesbian performance was political only inasmuch that its contrivance strikes out at Western identity politics, as Heller argues, and illustrates how such a politics had not developed in Russia as it had in the West.⁴³ As Brian James Baer observes, homosexuality in Russia is “inscribed with Western hegemonic claims”;⁴⁴ within this particular discourse, to align with gay identities and activism, therefore, is to align with Western ideology and to abandon Russianness, although some activist movements in post-Soviet Russia do work to legitimate homosexuality within this idea of Russianness and vice versa.⁴⁵ The politics of t.A.T.u's Eurovision performance is thus couched in the more traditional terms of national identity and foreign relations than sexual politics. Their song selection and performance was emblematic of Russia's relationship with the West. By singing in Russian and flouting the contest rules in the lead-up to the event, t.A.T.u (and Russia) alienated their non-Russian voting audiences and articulated an historical Russian defiance of and disdain for dominant Western culture and politics.⁴⁶ Declaring themselves “Russian body and soul”, the open secret of the inauthenticity of t.A.T.u's performance of lesbianism becomes a joke at the expense of pop music marketing as a product of the West itself, and a statement of “Russian immunity and superiority”.⁴⁷

Nevertheless, as Julie Cassiday has argued, t.A.T.u signify the beginning of Russia's “gay trajectory” throughout the 2000s, culminating in Dima Bilan's 2008 homoeroticised performance of “*Believe*”, in which he was accompanied by a virtuoso violinist and a champion figure-skater, both of whom were male. Expanding upon Yana Meerzon and Dmitri Priven's contention that Russia developed a deliberate strategy for winning Eurovision, Cassiday argues Russia “went gay” throughout the 2000s for the purpose of winning a contest renowned for its gay audience and camp aesthetic. While Meerzon and Priven provide a useful analysis of Russia's shifting geopolitics and its strategic use of international events like the ESC to promote a specific image of a modern,

⁴³ Heller, *t.A.T.u. You!*, 208.

⁴⁴ Baer, *Queer Russia*, 3.

⁴⁵ Baer, Brian James. 2002. Russian Gays/Western Gaze: Mapping (Homo)Sexual Desire in Post-Soviet Russia. *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 8(4), 499–521, 503–4.

⁴⁶ Heller, *t.A.T.u. You!*, 203.

⁴⁷ Heller, *t.A.T.u. You!*, 208.

post-Soviet Russia, they fail to tease out concepts used in their analysis, such as “progressive” and “tolerant”, in light of Russia’s reputation for social and cultural oppression, particularly in relation to gender issues. Furthermore, they overlook the camp dimensions of Eurovision and its gay fan base, which responded to the “seductive spectacle of masculine virtuosity and vanity”⁴⁸ in Bilan’s ESC performance. As a consequence, Meerzon and Priven’s analysis of recent entries such as Bilan and the Buranovo Grannies in 2012, as well as the earlier performance by t.A.T.u, is fairly conservative, failing to acknowledge how ideas of tradition, nostalgia and wholesomeness hark back to more conservative and heteronormative gender politics. Such dimensions are explored more successfully in Cassiday’s analysis of camp and queerness in Russia’s Eurovision acts from t.A.T.u to Bilan. She emphasises that the gay trajectory evident in the entries of the 2000s had little to do with the reality of Russian LGBT identities and politics, as the increasing queerness of Russia’s Eurovision entries is in stark contrast to the increase in state-sanctioned homophobia that occurred at the same time. Russia has abandoned or perhaps completely reversed its strategy of queer performance since Bilan’s 2008 victory; performances since then, such as Bilan’s reprise of “Believe” at the 2009 ESC opening ceremony in Moscow and the Buranovo Grannies of 2012, have exhibited “blatant heteronormativity”.⁴⁹

Eurovision and homonationalism: redefining ideological boundaries between the West and the rest

Russia’s strategic deployment of the gay trajectory highlights the importance of sexual politics to not just to Eurovision victory but also to Western socio-political identity. Jasbir Puar’s conceptual framework of homonationalism is useful for understanding how and why such a gay trajectory would be useful for securing a victory from Western European audiences. Short for “homonormative nationalism”,⁵⁰ the concept denotes how acceptance or tolerance of previously marginalised sexualities has become a criterion for legitimating national sovereignty in both domestic and global discourses. Puar developed the term out of frustration with traditional constructions of the nation as heteronormative,⁵¹ which did not adequately reflect the complex interactions between queer politics, nationalism and global relations. She argues that homonationalism is “a facet of modernity and a historical shift marked by the entrance of (some) homosexual bodies as worthy of protection by nation-states, a constitutive and fundamental reorientation of the relationship between the state, capitalism, and sexuality.”⁵² It produces particular narratives of progress and modernity that can be used to delineate and evaluate political difference within and between nation-states based upon their attitudes to queer identities and the access queer subjects have to civil and human rights. In other words, homonationalism has become a way of distinguishing between the liberal, democratic West and the rest. Homonationalism’s more cynical corollary “pinkwashing” refers to the strategic

⁴⁸ Cassiday, *Post-Soviet Pop Goes Gay*, 15.

⁴⁹ Cassiday, *Post-Soviet Pop Goes Gay*, 17.

⁵⁰ Puar, Jasbir K. 2007. *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 38.

⁵¹ Puar, *Rethinking Homonationalism*, 336.

⁵² Puar, *Rethinking Homonationalism*, 337.

appeal to queer-friendliness through marketing strategies; applications of this term to the Israel–Palestine conflict demonstrate the political implications of this appeal and its connections to homonationalist discourse.⁵³ While homonationalism is useful for explaining how discourses of human rights and tolerance are used to differentiate between the liberal, progressive West and the rest, pinkwashing is an apt descriptor for Russia’s strategic appeal to liberal sexual politics in its attempt to secure a Eurovision victory and begin to lay the groundwork for its series of high-profile international events, such as the Winter Olympics and the upcoming 2018 FIFA World Cup. Arguably, however, recent controversies regarding homosexuality and human rights in Russia, such as the furore surrounding the Sochi Winter Olympics in 2014, suggest that Russia, having secured hosting rights for these events, currently has little need of the pinkwashing tactic but may return to it, depending on the international climate.

Homonationalism can and should be seen as an extension of Orientalist discourses and conservative imperialist thought, particularly in the post-Cold War, post-9/11 climate of global Islamophobia. While there has been a shift in the focus of anxieties from Communism to religious and cultural difference, such anxieties nevertheless symbolise the West’s ongoing desire or need to define itself against an ideological other. The boundaries between the Western self and its shifting other, as well as the role of homonationalism within this, becomes particularly relevant as the EBU expands to include Muslim-majority nations, such as Turkey and Azerbaijan, alongside the growth of Muslim populations within other European states through the processes of immigration and settlement. Within some homonationalist discourses, pro-LGBT agendas have been co-opted into anti-Muslim sentiment in order to create a further ideological boundary between the West and the Islamic world; whereas in older colonialist/Orientalist discourses the practice of homosexuality was considered a mark of lack of civilisation in Middle Eastern nations, in the homonationalist reiteration of this tradition it is now oppression of these sexualities and rights that signify this lack.⁵⁴ Homonationalism, as an extension or continuation of the Orientalist tradition that is concerned with issues of social justice, can also serve to highlight the imperialist dimensions to humanitarian and human rights discourses that serve to promote Western interests, including those pertaining to sexuality.⁵⁵

Examining the intersections and contradictions between local LGBT activism in Azerbaijan and the deployment of human rights and sexuality discourses by foreign activists during the 2012 ESC at Baku, Gluhovic explores how sexuality discourse is used to construct and emphasise an image of a progressive (western) Europe that is at odds with the Eastern “margins”, which are in turn constructed as less progressive and, in some cases, oppressive. Even within

⁵³ Puar, *Rethinking Homonationalism*, 337–8.

⁵⁴ Gluhovic, *Sing for Democracy*, 196–7.

⁵⁵ Gluhovic, *Sing for Democracy*, 198. For a more detailed discussion of the connections between humanitarianism and ideological interests, see: Barnett, Michael. 2013. *Empire of Humanity: a History of Humanitarianism*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press; Barnett, Michael and Thomas G. Weiss. 2008. *Humanitarianism in Question: Politics, Power, Ethics*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press; Fassin, Didier. 2012. *Humanitarian Reason: a Moral History of the Present Times* Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

these Eastern European states, gay-friendliness is used to delineate important regional differences and to signify increased allegiance with Europe and its values; although there were several dissenting voices within Western press, particularly from exiled Azeris, some activists in Azerbaijan sketched a picture of an Azeri society that was relatively tolerant to homosexuality in comparison with its neighbours such as Iran. Iran, in turn, characterises Azerbaijan's still relatively conservative attitudes to homosexuality as permissive, and as a degradation of morality resulting from their increased Westernisation and desire to construct themselves as a European nation.⁵⁶ In fact, Azerbaijan's hosting of Eurovision caused significant strain on the relationship between the two countries; Iran withdrew its ambassador from Azerbaijan after clerics criticised the event and characterised it as a "gay parade", leading to the misunderstanding that a specific pride parade would be held as part of the event.⁵⁷

Azerbaijan's official position on homosexuality is a useful barometer of its shifting position within the international community, although its acceptance and tolerance at a grassroots or societal level is more complex than the laws might suggest. The nation's original laws against homosexuality were residual of its Soviet membership rather than pre-Soviet Azeri legal tradition. In Soviet discourse, Muslim-majority states, such as Azerbaijan, were sites of "Eastern" (homo)sexual perversion due to their bathhouse cultures.⁵⁸ The elimination of such practices with the expansion of Soviet ideology into these zones was part of Russia's "civilising mission",⁵⁹ and reflects the same Orientalism that permeates current Western human rights discourse.⁶⁰ Anti-sodomy laws were introduced in Azerbaijan in 1923, with similar laws passed in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan in 1926 and 1927 respectively as a result of Soviet expansion.⁶¹

Just as anti-sodomy laws were a mark of Soviet membership, repeal of these laws was a condition of European membership, because the Council of Europe requires its member states to assure certain human rights and democratic standards. In order to join the Council in 2001, Azerbaijan reviewed its criminal code, which included the excision of the anti-sodomy article. It should be noted, however, that expansion of gay and lesbian rights into equal civil rights and anti-discrimination policy does not feature amongst Azerbaijan's further commitments to the Council and its various human rights projects.⁶² Reluctance to progress on these issues is perhaps a more accurate reflection of attitudes to homosexuality in Azerbaijan than the change to legislation suggests. In 2010, Azeri officials in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) boycotted debates about same-sex marriage and

⁵⁶ Kotecha, Hema. 2006. *Islamic and Ethnic Identities in Azerbaijan: Emerging Trends and Tensions*. Baku: Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, 28.

⁵⁷ Jussi and Ercanbrack, *Finland Votes to Legalize Same-Sex Marriage*.

⁵⁸ Healey, Dan. 2003. What Can We Learn From the History of Homosexuality in Russia?. *History Compass* 1(1), 1–6, 2.

⁵⁹ Healey, *What Can We Learn*, 4.

⁶⁰ Gluhovic, *Sing for Democracy*, 198.

⁶¹ Dan, Healey. 2002. Homosexual Existence and Existing Socialism: New Light on the Repression of Male Homosexuality in Stalin's Russia. *GLQ: a Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 8(3), 349–78, 357.

⁶² Council of Europe. [Azerbaijan: Member State](#) (accessed: 17. April 2015).

discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation.⁶³ As the chair of the parliamentary committee on social policy stated on the matter, “Yes, we have declared integration with European structures as our priority, but we must also protect our national and cultural values.”⁶⁴

Azerbaijan was again in the PACE spotlight in May 2012 in the lead-up to the Baku ESC when the assembly adopted a resolution on Azerbaijan’s human rights situation in response to the furore surrounding the contest, including a condemnation of radical Islamist threats against the participants of the ESC and the LGBT community while “strongly support[ing] the secular identity of Azerbaijan and its free choice of foreign policy orientation”. The resolution also noted that the “violation of Azerbaijani citizens’ rights and freedoms goes against [the] goal” of using “the Eurovision Song Contest in Baku to promote Azerbaijan”.⁶⁵ Thus, despite decriminalisation for the purpose of attaining membership in a European governing body, Azeri attitudes to homosexuality, as well as broader human rights breaches, highlight the tenuous nature of membership in this political community. Viewed through a homonationalist lens, it could be argued that states like Azerbaijan can adhere superficially to particular requirements in order to attain membership but will remain on the margins of that community until “European values” permeate beyond political and economic structures. Alternatively, Azerbaijan could use its pre-Soviet history of non-heteronormative practices, as discussed above, to redefine ideas about sexuality within an Azeri cultural context that affirms national identity while aligning with “European values”.

The stance articulated by these politicians reflects the significant residual intolerance to homosexuality that remains in Azeri society. Several factors combined, specifically religion, international relations and history, can be used to understand these attitudes. Islam is the dominant religion in the otherwise secular state,⁶⁶ but it is important not to fall into the trap of simply dismissing Islam as a monolithic entity with singular views and impacts. Religion is complicated by regional politics and history; in the case of Azerbaijan, the practice and influence of Islam is complicated by its relationships with Russia and Iran discussed above. It is important to emphasise that religious conservatism, while present in Azerbaijan, appears to be more frequently associated with anxiety about Iranian regional influence rather than an accurate reflection of Azeri religious views.⁶⁷ Conversely, as previously discussed, Iran decries Azerbaijan’s permissiveness on this issue, evidenced by its decriminalisation and tolerance of the gay culture associated with Eurovision, as a negative sign of their Westernisation and abandonment of Islamic values. Such attitudes were exemplified by the diplomatic furore

⁶³ Littauer, Dan. 2012. [The Truth about Gay Life in Azerbaijan outside of the Eurovision Song Contest](#). *PinkNews*, 27. May 2012 (accessed: 17. April 2015).

⁶⁴ Littauer, *The Truth about Gay Life*.

⁶⁵ PACE. European Parliament Resolution on Azerbaijan, [2012/2654\(RSP\)](#) (accessed: 12. April 2015).

⁶⁶ Cordier, De Bruno. 2014. Islamic Social Activism, Globalization and Social Change: a Case Study of Hajji İlgar İbragimoglu and the Cüma Ehli in Baku, Azerbaijan. *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 34(2), 136. De Cordier reports an increase in declaration of Muslim identity in Azerbaijan since 1998.

⁶⁷ Kotecha, *Islamic and Ethnic Identities in Azerbaijan*.

caused by the Baku ESC.⁶⁸ The legacy of the Soviet era must be acknowledged for playing a significant role in stigmatising homosexuality in the Caucasus, which is perhaps now strengthened by some anti-gay discourses in global circulation. As with other national contexts, the result of this combined history, religious presence and contemporary international relations is that, while homosexuality is legal in Azerbaijan, it does not follow that it is socially acceptable. As the Azeri author Alekper Aliyev explains,

*People here don't mind, as long as it's not in their family. There are several openly gay celebrities in Baku who have money and bodyguards, and they are safe. But nothing will change for the majority of gays, particularly in the provinces. This society will never accept them.*⁶⁹

Such an observation not only demonstrates the power of socio-economic status in providing protection to marginalised groups but also the gulf between legislative and societal change and between decriminalisation and substantive protection of civil rights. While homosexuals in Azerbaijan have the same age of consent as heterosexuals, and can openly serve in the military, they are not protected by anti-discrimination laws, do not have access to marriage or civil unions, and do not have equal access to adoption and IVF.

Azeri activists' refuting of the presence or extent of oppression within their society can, like Russia's gay trajectory, be seen as an act of pinkwashing, but one motivated more by self-preservation than strategic marketing ploys, as they seek to maintain what rights and tolerance they do have within that society. Gluhovic goes as far to suggest that international attention to queer human rights and civil rights issues can be counterproductive for local activism, with particular ramifications for individuals within those local movements.⁷⁰ According to Gluhovic, many Azeri activists distanced themselves from the Sing for Democracy campaign, which sought to highlight human rights abuses in Azerbaijan throughout the ESC event.⁷¹ He suggests that this distancing may have been from fear and intimidation, particularly given the threats circulating the local LGBT community; to protest could jeopardise their already tenuous place within Azeri civil society. This demonstrates the complexities of how and why homonationalist discourses can be deployed differently within a particular national context and within international contexts. Local Azeri activism for civil and human rights is (arguably) acceptable within the bounds of nation itself and can be used to argue for a modern, European Azeri national identity, but to participate in an international movement to condemn abuse of those rights is, to some officials, to align with foreign political values and therefore against the nation and state.

For nations relegated discursively to be on the "margins" of "Europe", like Azerbaijan, participation in Eurovision, let alone winning and hosting the competition symbolises belonging within the European community and, as a

⁶⁸ ILGA-Europe. 2013. Azerbaijan, in *ILGA-Europe Annual Review 2013*. Brussels: ILGA-Europe, 55.

⁶⁹ Newman, Dina. 2011. *Eurovision 2012: Azerbaijan's Gays Not Welcome at Home*. *BBC News Online*, 15 September 2011 (accessed: 17. April 2015).

⁷⁰ Gluhovic, *Sing for Democracy*, 211.

⁷¹ Gluhovic, *Sing for Democracy*, 209–10.

consequence, the West. It is also for many an important nation-building exercise. Conversely, Murad Ismayilov argues that, despite the various economic and political opportunities it offered, Eurovision actually interfered with Azerbaijan's processes of nation-building and national identity formation, including its negotiation of a post-Soviet European identity within the West.⁷² Specifically, he argues that the everyday encounter with the diverse, middle-class Eurovision tourists necessitated a "re-appraisal of the many imaginaries [...] the compatibility of values, habits and traditions [...] of the] national cultural Self and the European – Western – Other."⁷³ The implication is that this re-appraisal would result in an emphasis of differences between the national Self and the Western Other rather than an affirmation of Azerbaijan's Europeanness. While the LGBT dimensions of this encounter are relegated to a footnote in Ismayilov's discussion, he does suggest that Western visitors' "particular understanding of gender" would be amongst the more trivial reactions.⁷⁴ Nevertheless, many have observed that the international spotlight on human rights issues in Azerbaijan, and the related PACE resolution on the matter, exacerbated this difference in the political realm. It jarred Azerbaijan's political belonging to the European community as much as Eurovision affirmed Azerbaijan's pop-cultural belonging. Western and Eastern perspectives on the encounter are important to consider: for the West it highlighted the importance of human rights issues, including equal rights for LGBT citizens, in delineating its ideological borders and conditions of belonging; and for the East (as represented here by Azerbaijan) it highlighted the ongoing force of colonial and Orientalist discourses in Western European dealings with its Eastern fringe.

Conclusion

As this exploration of several of the Eurovision performances and events has demonstrated, some of the more interesting explorations are occurring at the boundaries of East and West in both the soft politics of the ESC and the harder politics of nation-states and the organisations and institutions to which they belong. Despite its official rules against political statements in performances, there is still space on its stage (and in its staging) for political expression, albeit conditionally. While direct commentary or incitement on political issues in specific national contexts is censored, such as the Ukrainian entry of 2005, there remains room within this rule for broader statements that help to establish the ideological boundaries of "Europe" as a whole, without drawing explicit attention to its specific internal divisions, as can be seen in the cases of Toto Cutugno in 1990 and Noa and Mira in 2009. Krista Siegfriids's on-stage kiss, while intended as a statement on the specific situation of Finland, is thus acceptable as it reinforces a broad liberal sexual ideology that has increasingly become part of the definition of modern Europe. Russia's announced revival of the Intervision Song Contest demonstrates the importance of sexual politics in defining the ideologies of contemporary "Europe" and the reluctance of the more conservative states to be complicit with this, and it will warrant further investigation as this competition develops alongside Eurovision.

⁷² Ismayilov, Murad. 2012. State, Identity, and the Politics of Music: Eurovision and Nation-Building in Azerbaijan. *Nationalities Papers* 40(6), 833–51, 834.

⁷³ Ismayilov, *State, Identity, and the Politics of Music*, 835.

⁷⁴ Ismayilov, *State, Identity, and the Politics of Music*, 837.

Eurovision is, by its very nature of bringing together diverse nations and cultures in an event that celebrates “Europe”, political. The various social, political and cultural concerns of the European citizenry find a place on its stage, which is a platform for nation building in its various overt and covert ways, and for requesting and expressing belonging to the European community. As discussed above, the modern tradition of Eurovision offers queer audiences an important opportunity to experience belonging to Europe. Perhaps ironically, this is an experience of Eurovision shared by both gay communities in Western Europe and the Eastern countries in which dominant social discourses about homosexuality are oppressive. The soft and hard political dimensions of the event are experienced differently according to a nation’s security in its belonging to Europe. In the case of the international concerns about Azerbaijan as a host, it demonstrates the very hard political limitations the nation faced for thinking about its identity as a Muslim state and as member state of Europe. For Finland, on the other hand, its membership in the progressive West, and the Nordic region more specifically, affords performers like Siegfriids the luxury of depoliticising their actions; while decried on the margins, the EBU’s approval of the so-called “lesbian kiss” implicitly established that in some cases and for some countries it was acceptable to reflect current concerns on the ESC stage. Importantly, Siegfriids’ kiss was acceptable because it re-affirmed equality as an important part of “European” – and by extension EBU – ideology. Even as the Eurovision Song Contest seeks its song to unite Europe, it remains a prism through which the EBU’s and the community’s shifting boundaries and power relations can be examined.

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