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Research Article

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National Promotion and Eurovision: from Besieged Sarajevo to the Floodlights of Europe

Neven Andjelić*

The Eurovision Song Contest, as an important part of the entertainment industry, has offered European countries a platform for national promotion. The original format has developed over 60 years and has come under scrutiny and criticism as allegations of block voting, politics and nationalism have been raised. It has also been argued that similarity of cultures, linguistic connections, and close national identities, rather than national interests and politics, are what actually bring countries together in this competition. This study has two focuses in an attempt to determine what role the contest has had for participating countries and how they have used it. The first focus is on analysing historical incidents at the competition when countries have attempted to politicise the contest. The second focus and the main part of the study is a thorough investigation into the organisation of the first Bosnian-Herzegovinian delegation to participate in Eurovision, their escape from besieged Sarajevo and their participation at the contest in Ireland in 1993. After taking into account the history of the contest and the specific case study of Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1993, the conclusion is that, although cultural similarities exist, the politics of national promotion do also play an important role in the competition and, in countries sending such entries, actually influences audiences at home towards stronger national pride and self-identification. Therefore, one might argue that the festival has been hijacked from the entertainment industry by political leaderships, especially those that have based their legitimacy on nationalism. Hence the success stories coming from the “New Europe”.

Keywords: Eurovision, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Yugoslavia, Music, Politics, Nationalism, Identity

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Introduction

A perception held by many Eurovision Song Contest commentators is that geopolitics, close relationships between neighboring countries and secret trade deals are in the background of the voting results. The states that used to make up Yugoslavia are frequently mentioned in these terms. Interviews with people who have participated in Eurovision in various roles, however, give the impression that this is not the case: all the interviewees for this paper who were involved in the contest as participants, organizers, jury members, producers or editors claim no or very little connection to politics. The general view among these professionals is that similarity of cultures, close ties between neighboring nations, shared identities and languages are factors that make juries, and indeed people, more likely to vote for each other. Despite this strong opinion, the politicisation of the contest has to be investigated to be able to draw conclusions.

This paper will show whether the professionals involved in the contest are right or possibly unaware of the widespread practice of the political use of Eurovision for the purposes of national self-promotion. The claims of “Eurovision politics” often originate in the west and are supported by bloc voting stating that former Soviet republics offer mutual support to each other. Former Yugoslav countries are another bloc. The fact that all former Yugoslav republics awarded Serbia 12 points when it won the competition in 2007 might support this argument. However, even Albania awarded a point to Serbia on this occasion. Therefore the result might also support the argument that cultural similarities account for neighbors giving each other points. This is not a practice introduced into the competition by “easterners” or the “New Europe”, but one that already existed, as the Scandinavian bloc or the “special relationship” between Greece and Cyprus might confirm.

Considering these facts and arguments, this paper first briefly investigates the history of the Eurovision Song Contest in search of incidents or practices of political involvement or politicised participation in the contest. The second and the main part of the paper is a specific case-study which aims to provide insight and in-depth knowledge of operations within a national Eurovision contest team. The focus is on the participation of Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1993, using a series of Research interviews providing invaluable material about the background of this participation in particular and the Eurovision Song Contest in general. It is then possible to offer a conclusion about whether competition, participation and voting in Eurovision is actually a reflection of politics or whether it based on norms of cultural similarities and close identity links. It is also possible to draw a conclusion that participation in the competition and voting simultaneously reflect politics and norms of cultural similarities and identity linkages.

The case study presented in this paper is qualitative, based on interviews with members of the delegation from Bosnia-Herzegovina that competed in Eurovision in 1993. The interviewees were speaking with a time-lag of more than two decades, and intervening events have certainly influenced their judgements and memories to some extent. It is possible, however, to draw

certain conclusions based on their interpretations and opinions, whether they are unanimous or even when they disagree on some points.

The members of the first delegation of Bosnia-Herzegovina interviewed for this study have followed very different paths since 1993. Milan Stupar, a long-serving senior music producer at Television of Bosnia-Herzegovina (previously named TV Sarajevo), was the Head of Delegation in 1993. He eventually left Sarajevo and joined his family in Montenegro, where he helped set up a local television station and some festivals in Budva. Ismeta Dervoz, who was behind the idea of joining the competition and getting approval from the bosses of Radio-Television of Bosnia-Herzegovina (RTVBiH), was awarded a “Crystal Star by the Irish Culture Minister and the EBU (European Broadcasting Union) as the best Head of Delegation.”¹ Thus there is a contradiction that the Bosnian delegation actually had two Heads; Stupar was more senior in the hierarchy in Sarajevo, but Dervoz was the real executive behind the whole process. She was also the Bosnian broadcaster’s commentator for Eurovision from this contest onwards. Dervoz had contacts with the Eurovision Song Contest ever since she, with the band *Ambasadori*, had represented Yugoslavia in 1976. In the meantime she had become a music producer at RTVBiH and was the driving force in getting the country to participate in the contest when Bosnia-Herzegovina gained independence. She followed her professional career with political engagement as a deputy in the state parliament on behalf of the Party for Better Future (*Stranka za bolju budućnost*).

Muhamed Fazlagić, the lead singer of the Bosnian entry in 1993, had been on the fringes of the Sarajevo music and fashion world prior to the war. He was known among his friends and, by now, fans as Fazla. He later emigrated to the USA, together with his wife Sanda, who had been his girlfriend at the time of the contest in 1993. Fazla, however, remains strongly connected to Bosnia-Herzegovina and was involved with the Party for Bosnia-Herzegovina (*Stranka za BiH*) at the elections in 2014. Erliha Bičakčić, a backing vocalist in 1993, remained in Sarajevo for a long time after the war until she took up a position at the Council of Europe in Strasbourg. Vesna Andree Zaimović, who subsequent to 1993 would be involved with the Eurovision Song Contest in several capacities, was a pioneer in setting up the “*Djeca pjevaju hitove*” (“Children are Singing Hits”) competition in besieged Sarajevo, a format which was to be found much later globally in the form of *Pop Idol* and similar shows. role in 1993, She was later involved in the music world and the Eurovision Song Contest as a journalist, editor, producer, musician, public relations manager, national jury member and jury chair. She resides in Sarajevo and runs a web portal. Fionnuala Sweeney, the presenter of Eurovision 1993, is now one of the leading newscasters at CNN.

Most of the interviewees are long-standing friends of mine while I have known all of them for more than ten years if not twenty. Therefore the interviews could have been conducted in an unorthodox fashion. They were thorough and detailed conversations (by phone, e-mail or Facebook private messages) between people who had full confidence in each other.

¹ Ismeta Dervoz, research interview conducted by e-mail and telephone, 7. January 2015.

Nations, Politics and Eurovision

Public interest in the domestic politics of Eurovision Song Contest participants is not a novel development. The competition was open to non-democracies from the outset, and in “1961 the first representatives of fascist Spain and communist Yugoslavia shared the stage.”² The first Yugoslav participant, Ljiljana Petrović, “later recalled that ‘the appearance of Yugoslavia aroused much interest [...] as the first socialist country at the festival...’”³ Fazla, commenting on representing Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1993, similarly said: “You become a picture of your own country during this few days and your behavior and act determine whether the judgement about your country is going to be positive or negative.”⁴ This statement received an indirect confirmation in 2012 when the German jury’s spokeswoman, Anke Engelke, actually addressed the political system in that year’s host country, Azerbaijan. While delivering the results she said: “Tonight nobody could vote for their own country. But it is good to be able to vote. And it is good to have a choice. Good luck on your journey, Azerbaijan. Europe is watching you.”⁵

The “New Europe” often uses the contest as an opportunity for self-promotion. One BBC producer, for instance, already considered in 2005 that “former Eastern bloc countries saw the contest as a way of gaining visibility, albeit briefly, in the international arena.”⁶ Academic authors are of no dissimilar opinion. “While Eurovision is marked by international politics,” argues Dean Vuletić, “it can also be a force in politics too.”⁷ This was certainly realized by many nations, and Catherine Baker describes an attitude at Croatian Television that “treated Eurovision as a deliberate site of political and cultural messages about what Croatia was and was not.”⁸

These arguments about politics and the Eurovision Song Contest could be divided into two groups: the first group of arguments are about songs with some political connotations, and the second are about political voting patterns, discreet alliances, praise or criticism of some political issue, and attempts at national promotion. In fact, both kinds of political involvement in the Eurovision Song Contest have a long history. While *The Guardian* claimed in 2005 that “[o]nly rarely has a song carried a political message: Portugal’s 1974 entry, *After Goodbye*, was the coded signal to launch a coup against the country’s rightwing dictatorship, and Bosnia-Herzegovina funneled the trauma of war into *The Whole World’s Pain* in 1993”,⁹ this claim was obviously wrong:

² Deniz, José Miguel Galván. 2005. *Eurovision Shows Political Side*. *BBC News Online*, 14. March 2005 (accessed: 20. April 2015).

³ Vuletić, Dean. 2007. *The Socialist Star: Yugoslavia, Cold War Politics and the Eurovision Song Contest*, in *A Song for Europe: Popular Music and Politics in the Eurovision Song Contest*, edited by Raykoff, Ivan and Robert Deam Tobin. Aldershot: Ashgate, 83–98, 87.

⁴ Vele, Faruk. 2015. *Muhamed Fazlagić Fazla: Bosna će nadživjeti sve svoje grobare*. *Kliker*, 4. January 2015 (accessed: 20. April 2015).

⁵ Streader, Pete. 2013. *Eurovision’s Top Ten Worst Moments*. *The Copenhagen Post*, 16. May 2013 (accessed: 19. April 2015).

⁶ Galván Deniz, *Eurovision Shows Political Side*.

⁷ Vuletić, *The Socialist Star*, 97.

⁸ Baker, Catherine. 2010. *Sounds of the Borderland: Popular Music, War and Nationalism in Croatia since 1991*. Farnham: Ashgate, 201.

⁹ Lynskey, Dorian. 2005. *What Will Terry Wogan Think*. *The Guardian*, 19. May 2005 (accessed: 20. April 2015).

the politicisation of the Eurovision Song Contest can be found in songs and what they symbolize and represent, whether this is to the country itself, to other countries in general or to some specific country.

One would struggle to define what a political song is. It usually depends on lyrics but it also depends on interpretation. When Great Britain was at war with Argentina in 1982, for instance, the Spanish entry was a tango melody, and this choice was interpreted as political.¹⁰ The Portuguese Eurovision entry in 1974, though non-political in its lyrics and melody, "was chosen as a signal for the start of that year's Carnation Revolution."¹¹ Ukraine in 2005 and Georgia in 2009 were both told their songs were "too political".¹² The Eurovision executive supervisor in 2005, Svante Stockselius, described the Ukrainian entry as "a political song so we cannot allow this", and the song's lyrics had to be changed.¹³ Georgia not only boycotted the competition in Moscow in 2009 after the rejection of its entry "*We Don't Wanna Put In*" but went as far as staging an alternative festival, the "AlterVision Open Air Song Contest". Political messages have also been sent by simple participation or boycotts. "Austria decided to stay at home for political reasons" in 1969 because that year's host country, Spain, was under the rule of Franco's dictatorship,¹⁴ while Turkey boycotted, and Yugoslavia also failed to broadcast, the contest held in Israel in 1979.¹⁵ Thus the competition has often had political dynamics, and songs have often carried some political connotations, whether in lyrics, melodies, or contexts that were to be read into the performance. The contest might have been described as "the kitschy extravaganza in which viewers crown the best pop song,"¹⁶ or "the cheesiest, campest and arguably most ridiculous of all music competitions,"¹⁷ meaning we are considering "the trashiest, splashiest event on the global pop calendar."¹⁸ However, it was also political.

Yugoslavia and the Geopolitics of Eurovision in 1990–93

The Eurovision Song Contest of 1990 took place in a country, Yugoslavia, that was about to dissolve, while many songs celebrated European unification. Only six months earlier, the Berlin Wall had symbolically fallen. In Zagreb, an Austrian song "*Keine Mauern mehr*" ("*No more walls*") came tenth while the Norwegian entry also referenced the end of European divisions with "*Brandenburger Tor*" ("*Brandenburg Gate*") but still came last in the competition. The German entry in 1990, "*Frei zu leben*" ("*Free to live*"), comes

¹⁰ Galván, Deniz. *Eurovision Shows Political Side*.

¹¹ Davison, Phil. 1994. *Carnation Revolution Withers*. *The Independent*, 25. April 1994 (accessed: 20. April 2015).

¹² N.N. 2015. *Eurovision Hosts in Political Row*. *BBC*, 8. March 2005 (accessed: 20. April 2015).

¹³ N.N. *Eurovision Hosts in Political Row*.

¹⁴ N.N. *Eurovision Song Contest 1969*. *Eurovision.tv* (accessed: 20. April 2015).

¹⁵ N.N. Eurovision Song Contest 1969; Eurovision.tv, Wikipedia contributors, *Eurovision Song Contest 1979* (accessed: 20. April 2015).

¹⁶ Kaufman, David. 2006. *Quest for a Homeland Gains a World Stage*. *The New York Times*, 16. April 2006 (accessed: 20. April 2015).

¹⁷ Denham, Jess. 2014. *Eurovision 2014 Voting: Why Is It So Political?*. *The Independent*, 1. May 2014 (accessed: 20. April 2015).

¹⁸ Donadio, Rachel. 2014. *Hamster Wheels, Sequins and Yes, a Lot of Singing*. *The New York Times*, 9. May 2014 (accessed: 20. April 2015).

within this group of songs celebrating European unity too.¹⁹ The winning song in 1990 itself strongly reflected current trends in European politics and integration, with a title in Italian, “*Insieme: 1992*” (“*Together: 1992*”), lyrics partly in English (“Unite, Unite Europe”) and celebrating the forthcoming European Single Market, Maastricht Treaty and the creation of the European Union. The title of the Yugoslav song, “*Hajde da ludujemo*” (“*Let’s go crazy*”) might have been an irony or just an example of how much Yugoslavia was out of touch with current trends in Europe.²⁰ As Yugoslavia had been participating in the contest for three decades, “Yugoslavia’s distinct Cold War character,” as Vuletić observes, “found expression at Eurovision.”²¹ In the early 1990s, this era and character, and indeed the state, were coming to an end.

Geopolitics played an obvious role in the 1990 competition. Yugoslavia, a federation with eight television centres, all state-owned and all having the status of official state broadcasters, had first to decide on the host city. The country’s federal system was reflected in the fact there was no central broadcaster for the whole country and it became clear, once more, that particularistic interests were being placed above the common interest. This was not a unique situation, as the Swiss and Belgian examples (where there are also multiple broadcasters able to participate in Eurovision) are not very dissimilar. Thus the competition was staged in the Croatian capital, Zagreb, because the winning song had come from Croatia in the previous year. The contest was not affected by the growing Yugoslav political crisis but was affected by some technical problems. The main issue was the choice of presenters. Surprisingly, given the ethnic problems in society, the issue was the age of presenters and not their ethnic background.

“The 1990 [Eurovision Song Contest] ESC took place on 5. May, a day after the anniversary of Tito’s death and, coincidentally, on the birthday of Karl Marx; perhaps more meaningful for the time, however, was that it also fell on the Council of Europe’s Europe Day.”²² In the background, however, were the first ever multiparty democratic elections in Croatia. The second round of the elections was to take place the day after Eurovision and would bring into power the nationalist Croatian Democratic Union (*Hrvatska demokratska zajednica* – HDZ). Its leader, Franjo Tuđman, became notorious for his calculation that five and a half Serbs were editing and presenting the main news on Croatian television.²³ If he had been in power at the time of the Eurovision Song Contest, the ethnicity of presenters might have been an issue.

Yugoslavia survived for another year, and television bosses came up with an interesting solution for choosing a representative for Eurovision in 1991. A kind of “mini-Eurovision” contest was organised in Sarajevo with representatives from each of eight television centres, i.e. federal units. The show was known as “*Jugovizija*” and the winner was decided by jury votes from each of the republics and provinces. Votes were traded between television

¹⁹ N.N. *Eurovision Song Contest 1990*. *Eurovision.tv*. (accessed: 20. April 2015).

²⁰ N.N., *Eurovision Song Contest 1990*.

²¹ Vuletić, *The Socialist Star*, 84.

²² Vuletić, *The Socialist Star*, 94.

²³ Lilić, Miroslav. 2011. *Posljednji televizijski romantik*. *Politika Plus*, 24. May 2011 (accessed: 20. April 2015).

centres and did not necessarily reflect political alliances; close business deals between music managers, television producers and members of the juries were of greater importance. Two managers confided in me that they had organised a system that would benefit a particular singer. On this occasion, the singer in question finished very close to the top but did not win the contest, as someone along the line did not respect a pre-agreed voting pattern.²⁴ “*Jugovizija* was a competition that replaced a festival where a song was chosen for Eurovision,” Milan Stupar describes. “The voting system was similar to the Eurovision contest. I managed to organise ‘smaller’ centers to vote for each other and stopped domination by Belgrade, Zagreb and Ljubljana. Thus, the voting was agreed but there was no politics in it. It was based on professional interests.”²⁵

The winning entry in 1991, however, shows the opposite. The song came from Serbia and was awarded maximum points by the juries from Belgrade (rules allowed juries to vote for their own competitor), Novi Sad and Pristina, with some points awarded by the Montenegrin jury. Thus it reflected political alliances and the situation in Yugoslavia in 1991. One might conclude that both practices – voting based on professional interests and voting based on politics – were actually coexisting at the end of Yugoslavia. The Serbian jury, however, also awarded some points to the Croatian song and to others who were not politically allied to Milošević’s camp. It might have been the case that music managers from Belgrade took advantage of the regime controlling several centres and got their song to win the national competition; this would have meant music using politics to achieve its own aims, and not the other way around. The song, “Brasil” by Bebi Dol, received just one point at the Eurovision Song Contest and thus marked the end of the state.

Yugoslavia dissolved in the same year. Slovenia, Croatia, Macedonia and Bosnia-Herzegovina eventually became independent states, while Milošević controlled Serbia and Montenegro, retained the name of Yugoslavia, and attempted to continue the legacy of the former state. On a more trivial level, they sent an entry to the 1992 competition as Yugoslavia, while the newly independent countries did not meet the deadline for participation. They were preoccupied with wars on their territories, as Serbia and Montenegro pretended not to have anything to do with these conflicts.

The new Croatian leadership paid attention to state promotion during the war, and under nationalist leadership the songs were carefully chosen to send a message to the outside world. Croatia’s first ever entry was in 1993, alongside two other former Yugoslav states, Slovenia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. The Croatian song “*Don’t ever cry*” was understood as “a rare expression of patriotism in the lyrics of a Eurovision song,”²⁶ and “an opportunity to propagate a Croatian perspective on the war: Don’t Ever Cry contained an appeal to angels for peace, a prayer for an 18-year-old boy called Ivan and as much English as was then permissible,”²⁷ and the messages “peace, give us

²⁴ I was personally involved in the entertainment industry in Yugoslavia and was well aware of these schemes. I am not prepared, however, to produce names or affiliations of the managers in question. They would not go on record with this information as it would be the end of their careers.

²⁵ Milan Stupar, research interview conducted by telephone, 5. January 2015.

²⁶ Vuletić, *The Socialist Star*, 97.

²⁷ Baker, *Sounds of the Borderland*, 201.

peace, sky of love” (*mir, daj nam ti, daj nam ti nebo ljubavi*). The Croatian head of delegation, quoted by Catherine Baker, justified the choice of the song: “It was wartime, every promotion of Croatia in the world was more than welcome.”²⁸

Bosnia-Herzegovina in the Eurovision Song Contest 1993

The song representing Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1993 also sent an important message to the world, just by virtue of participating during the war. When the multiethnic country declared independence, its cosmopolitan capital of Sarajevo was put under siege by Bosnian Serbs’ forces in April 1992. Many Serbs left the city and joined the besieging forces but a significant number stayed within the city, together with the Bosniaks, Croats and others who either belonged to minorities or did not belong to any ethnic group. The war in Bosnia-Herzegovina, and the siege of Sarajevo in particular, attracted huge media attention. The citizens’ human suffering, without electricity, water or gas supplies and under almost permanent sniper and rocket fire, received much sympathy from the international community. Although this did not mean support for a particular political system, Sarajevo became a symbol of the multi-culturalism that Europe was embracing. The city was dominated by Bosniak nationalist politicians, but non-Bosniaks were not only tolerated but included in many aspects of life of the besieged city. This did not mean there were no discrimination and crimes against non-Bosniaks, but discrimination was not a general public policy of the government.

At Eurovision in 1993, Muhamed Fazlagić - Fazla sang “*Sva bol svijeta*” (“*All the pain in the world*”), clearly a message to the world from the besieged city. The song was heard after more than a year in which Sarajevo had been under an international media spotlight. The stories had been told already, and journalists were searching for new angles to narrate the same tale of the destruction of a European capital city at the end of the twentieth century. Participation in the Eurovision Song Contest provided such an opportunity, and in this context the lyrics of the song worked well.

First, Bosnia-Herzegovina, together with several other post-communist countries, had to qualify. The qualifying competition was held in Ljubljana, and Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and the hosts of the pre-selection, Slovenia, proved that previous Yugoslav experience was invaluable as they qualified at the expense of Estonia, Slovakia, Romania and Hungary. Fazla describes a “tense atmosphere” at the pre-selection. “We gave ten points to Croatia. Ksenija Urlicic, the head of the Croatian delegation, insisted on reciprocal voting and the exchange of ten points but she did not honor the word. We voted first and awarded the Croats ten points but they did not give anything to us. They did not want us to qualify.”²⁹

This competition had coincided with the beginning of war between Croats and Bosniaks. Many refugees from Bosnia-Herzegovina were being rounded up by Croatian authorities and sent back to fight on the side of the Bosnian Croats,

²⁸ Baker, *Sounds of the Borderland*, 201.

²⁹ Muhamed Fazlagić, research interview conducted on Facebook, 8. January 2015.

while Bosniaks were suffering increasing persecution in Croatia. The voting pattern between Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina at the pre-selection clearly reflected politics and war. While officially Croats and Bosniaks were fighting against Serbs together, the reality was that by 1993 it was a war of all against all. In addition it shows a dose of naivety on Bosniaks' part. Firstly, the delegation in 1993 was not a delegation of Bosniaks but a Bosnian delegation. However, Bosniaks did dominate in the delegation and in the politics of the Sarajevo government. While the policies of Sarajevo government and the army were primarily in the interests of Bosniaks, they also reflected a multiethnic character, if often only in form. The Bosnian delegation, therefore, was more open to regional cooperation. The Croatian delegation, on the other hand, had firm nationalist aims presented to them by their government which firmly controlled national television, and the head of their delegation, Ksenija Urličić, was close to the political leadership of the country.

Ismeta Dervoz also describes "regional cooperation. The head of the Croatian delegation gave Bosnia-Herzegovina zero points. I gave Croatia 10 points. It remained like this for years."³⁰ No such "exchange", however, took place in the final. Bosnians had clearly learnt the lesson from Croats that in war, like in a song competition, everything is allowed in order to achieve one's aim. The aim was obviously country promotion and drawing global attention to the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

The importance of the Eurovision Song Contest is recognized in national broadcasters' behavior. Croatia had attempted to participate immediately after international recognition in 1992 but was late with the application. Bosnia-Herzegovina was recognised in April 1992 and Ismeta Dervoz "initiated the process of joining the EBU [European Broadcasting Union] which would enable participation at the Eurovision Song Contest."

A very small team organized the process of selecting the song. Sarajevo was "under siege, radio-television building was semi-destroyed, there was no electricity."³¹ War and the siege are the main features in memories of the Bosnian participants at the competition. "A competition was announced. It was wartime and Sarajevo was under siege. Therefore it was of limited appeal. War atmosphere prevailed. Nothing was like before," says Milan Stupar, who was to lead the delegation to the ESC in Ireland.³² "In such an atmosphere," says Ismeta Dervoz, "it was almost logical the winning song was the one that sent a message [about] what was going on in the heart of Europe."³³ This firmly connects the competition and national promotion. While Eurovision in politically stable countries might be mainly business, countries experiencing not only turbulent politics but actual violent conflict use the opportunity for self-promotion and to attract attention to their most immediate needs.

Nevertheless, there was the question of how to select a song in the middle of the war. "Authors themselves chose who would sing their songs," says Dervoz.³⁴

³⁰ Dervoz, *interview*.

³¹ Dervoz, *interview*.

³² Stupar, *interview*.

³³ Dervoz, *interview*.

³⁴ Dervoz, *interview*.

The state broadcaster's television signal could not reach even the whole of the territory controlled by government forces. Therefore it was only Sarajevo songwriters who could offer songs for the competition. "It is more a curiosity that one song was delivered from Konjic on VHS tape by channels unknown to anyone."³⁵ The contestants reflected the fact Sarajevo was under siege. Communications were cut off. "The invitation was sent by word of mouth to all authors and singers who happened to be in Sarajevo," explains Dervoz.

Fazla describes how he "was playing billiards when I was told about the contest." One author offered him a song, but the leading songwriter made another offer, and they entered the competition together instead. "Forty-seven songs were entered. Twelve were chosen by editors at the Television."³⁶ Dervoz remembers "eleven songs were in the competition. We broadcast a television show on 27. February. It was minus 17 degrees in the Radio Television building. We will never know how many people actually saw the show."³⁷ Erliha Bićakčić was surprised when Fazla asked her to join the team. "I thought he was joking," before inquiring "how do you imagine leaving the city?"³⁸ The only way out was to run across the airport runway, which was controlled by the United Nations forces.

"We did this all to defend our professional and human dignity," confides Dervoz. "There were no combinations about ethnic backgrounds of participants. Politicians did not understand what we were doing. Most of them thought we did not stand a chance to reach Ljubljana and especially Ireland later."³⁹ The winner was decided by a jury made up of television music editors and songwriters. "To cut it short, I won with twice as many votes as the second placed," Fazla provides the details.

Sarajevo was under siege and mainly without electricity, with no communications to the outside world. "Ham-radio operators helped us to apply for the competition and to contact colleagues abroad," explains Dervoz.⁴⁰ The siege provided another obstacle for the team. The only way out was to run across the airport runway and dodge sniper fire. "The whole team had to run across the airport runway in order to escape the besieged city. We did it at 3 or 4 o'clock in the morning," describes Milan Stupar.⁴¹ "We took a risk and all eleven members of the team ran across the runway."⁴² Bićakčić also remembers the exit well: "We were attempting to leave for three nights but UNPROFOR [United Nations Protection Force] caught us and returned to the city. Once you are caught, they shower you with lights and you have to throw yourself immediately into mud to avoid sniper fire. We managed to cross to the other side on the third night only."⁴³

³⁵ Dervoz, *interview*.

³⁶ Fazlagić, *interview*.

³⁷ Dervoz, *interview*.

³⁸ Erliha Bićakčić, research interview conducted by e-mail, 7. January 2015.

³⁹ Dervoz, *interview*.

⁴⁰ Dervoz, *interview*.

⁴¹ Stupar, *interview*.

⁴² Dervoz, *interview*.

⁴³ Bićakčić, *interview*.

“As soon as I stepped into the mud in Dobrinja [a Sarajevo suburb next to the airport], I lost my shoes. Thus I reached Igman (mountain on the outside of the siege of Sarajevo) in February literally barefoot,” Fazla describes the difficulties.⁴⁴ “It took us three days to reach Zagreb,” says Bičakčić.⁴⁵ Dervoz stresses the “lack of financial means, no travel visas. The Embassy [of Bosnia-Herzegovina] in Zagreb took care of us and organized our journey to Ljubljana. [...] Everything that we needed, costumes for singers, money to stay, participation fees, was donated by friends, colleagues, successful citizens of Bosnia-Herzegovina from the whole of Europe.”

The team attracted plenty of attention because of the war at home. The ethnic element of the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina provided for a not uncommon explanation of the post-Yugoslav wars. This was reflected in questions in Millstreet, where the contest was organized. “There were 20 TV crews waiting for us. We held a press conference immediately. One of the questions was how had it come about that a Serb is the head of the delegation.” Milan Stupar had worked as the “head of music production for 25 years” and “[t]herefore it was normal, pre-assumed I would lead the delegation,” he explained in an interview.⁴⁶ Ismeta Dervoz puts the number of TV and press crews at 70. “The interest in our press conference was unprecedented. The BBC provided coverage of our team in the main news. Everyone was apparently surprised by ‘these cultivated, professional, well prepared, non-aggressive Bosnians’.”⁴⁷ “All major media companies, including BBC and CNN,” describes Erliha Bičakčić, “broadcast lengthy reports about our team and interviewed all of us. However, they paid special attention to Fazla and Sanda. Their love story was of interest to them.”⁴⁸

Sanda is not a name that could lead to conclusions about her ethnic belonging, while Fazla’s name Muhamed clearly described him as Bosniak. Regardless of Sanda’s ethnicity, which I refused to ask about, she and Fazla made a good story for international journalists showing this side of multi-culturalism that had been preserved in Sarajevo. This was another way of telling a story about the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina by pointing to youth, their lives and loves, like any other young people anywhere in the world; it was just that they had been caught up in the war. Stereotypes and clichés came forward regardless, and they proved that the West was not immune from similar behavior some of their journalists ascribed to those in the Balkans. “Given the circumstances we came from,” Fazla explains, “it was logical we attracted huge attention from media who were interested in our motives and aims for participating in the Eurosong. I think we articulated the then situation in Bosnia-Herzegovina very well.”⁴⁹ “A French journalist, however, claimed Fazla, being blond-eyed and blond-haired, tall and handsome, was not a Muslim from Bosnia. He said that I certainly lived abroad,” confides Ismeta Dervoz, “because I spoke English and French and wore a mini-skirt.”

⁴⁴ Fazlagić, *interview*.

⁴⁵ Bičakčić, *interview*.

⁴⁶ Stupar, *interview*.

⁴⁷ Dervoz, *interview*.

⁴⁸ Bičakčić, *interview*.

⁴⁹ Vele, *Muhamed Fazlagić Fazla*.

Patriotism was certainly part of the mission, as Dervoz concluded: “I realised then that all our efforts came through and we did a great thing for Bosnia-Herzegovina.”⁵⁰ “We were proud and happy following the show. This feeling I still bear in my heart,” Erliha Bičakčić shows her emotions. “We cried when the connection was established with Sarajevo to get the results of the votes of the jury.”⁵¹ “Back in Sarajevo, there was electricity. Thus they watched the show and took pride in our participation,” described Milan Stupar.⁵² The presenter of the competition, Fionnuala Sweeney, stated during the show: “This was a particularly difficult link that we have been trying to establish whole day but thankfully it came through, just about.”⁵³ Now a leading political journalist at CNN, Sweeney remembers twenty-two years later:

*What stands out in my memory from that night was that when the juries were calling in from their respective countries with their votes, there was a huge round of applause when the Bosnian call came through. The applause was in recognition of the difficulties of trying to get through live from a warzone and also in appreciation that the jury had indeed got through. ... Everybody in the arena that evening welcomed the distant, crackly phone line announcing the votes of the jury in Sarajevo.*⁵⁴

In addition to media attention, everyone showed sympathies for the Bosnian team. The question might be whether this was reflected in the voting patterns. “There were no pre-agreed voting arrangements,” says Stupar. “No cheating. There might have been some votes for Bosnia-Herzegovina out of sympathy but nothing was arranged.”⁵⁵ Dervoz is of the same opinion, stating “the voting showed there was no regional cooperation.”⁵⁶ This was shown in Millstreet by “a big round of applause from the audience,” the presenter of the show recalls.⁵⁷ They showed this kind of appreciation only for those scoring the highest numbers of points. Thus, the question might be: was it political, or just an expression of human appreciation? “Their song had a message in keeping with the times its countrymen and women were experiencing,” remembers Fionnuala Sweeney. “It was also a big moment for them because they had *travelled* at some risk to get to Ireland to compete in the contest.”⁵⁸

Conclusion

This special appreciation for the Bosnian delegation in Ireland might be described as a human response to the efforts and struggle they had to go through in reaching Millstreet. However, the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina had been making headlines across the world for more than a year and very diverse interpretations and explanations had been offered to viewers. Therefore showing a warm welcome to the team from Sarajevo, the city under siege, was also a political statement of support. The official government side in Sarajevo,

⁵⁰ Dervoz, *interview*.

⁵¹ Bičakčić, *interview*.

⁵² Stupar, *interview*.

⁵³ Eurovision Song Contest. 1993. *Youtube*, 22. January 2012 (accessed: 20. April 2015).

⁵⁴ Fionnuala Sweeney, research interview conducted via e-mail, 19. January 2015.

⁵⁵ Stupar, *interview*.

⁵⁶ Dervoz, *interview*.

⁵⁷ Sweeney, *interview*.

⁵⁸ Sweeney, *interview*.

though dominated by the Muslim nationalist Party of Democratic Action (*Stranka Demokratske Akcije* – SDA), was still multiethnic; the head of delegation immediately attracted questions about his ethnicity, and the media interest in the simple love story of Fazla and his future wife was material deemed interesting enough by the news desk editors of the global media. Even when organizers' or the audience's intentions are not strictly political, if they are perceived to be political they become political. There is a reasonable expectation on the organizer and the audience to be aware of the possible political perceptions of participating in Eurovision. It therefore becomes possible to say that participation is a political statement or the competition is used for political purposes: the promotion of a country at the Eurovision Song Contest is a political purpose of participation.

This leads to the renewed question of whether the Eurovision Song Contest is politicised by competitors, national broadcasters and the ordinary public. It is certainly an entertainment, as a former singer, delegation member, head of delegation and chair of the national jury testified.⁵⁹ Another former jury member, jury chair, a musician on stage at one contest and PR for the participant at another contest, who has also reported on Eurovision and been an ordinary member of the audience on one occasion, says “it is a huge industry that offers a great chance for success but the team has to come to the competition prepared for exploiting success.”⁶⁰ It seems everyone involved professionally is of a similar opinion, as another former music producer with 25 years' experience argues along the same lines.⁶¹

Many commentators, those who observe from the outside (which might provide them with objectivity, but also deprive them of inside knowledge), see it as “highly political, albeit flavored with a hefty dose of camp.”⁶² Duncan Watts, while on sabbatical in Europe from Columbia University, explained in his *New York Times* column:

*It's just a game, after all, and the outrageous bias in the voting is as entertaining as the songs themselves. But it does offer an unexpected glimpse of how ordinary Europeans perceive one another. More than anything, it seems, blood is thicker than water, and not just in the Balkans.*⁶³

Watts saw a “pointed rejection of Western Europe” in the contest's voting patterns that “might even be seen as a poignant metaphor for contemporary Europe as a whole.”⁶⁴ Thus there is more to the competition than pure entertainment.

When it comes to former Yugoslavia, Eurovision has worked as a reconciliation tool “suggesting that memories of war and ethnic cleansing can be set aside with surprising ease when it comes to the serious business of winning a singing contest.”⁶⁵ However, one of the leading experts on the competition offers a

⁵⁹ Dervoz, *interview*.

⁶⁰ Vesna Andree Zaimović, research interview conducted by telephone, 26. December 2014.

⁶¹ Stupar, *interview*.

⁶² Rachel Donadio, *Hamster Wheels*.

⁶³ Watts, Duncan J. 2007. *The Politics of Eurovision*. *The New York Times*, 22. May 2007 (accessed: 20. April 2015).

⁶⁴ Watts, *The Politics of Eurovision*.

⁶⁵ Watts, *The Politics of Eurovision*.

different view. “It was not reconciliation that led to awarding votes to neighbouring countries. It is a reflection of a common cultural space, common language, common media space,” explains Vesna Andree Zaimović. “Pop-Culture is extremely regional. There is mutual identification with a culture that is common. It creates mechanisms of liking.”⁶⁶ In this view, it is a sincere taste in music and culture that creates voting patterns:

*The press in the former Yugoslav countries was of huge importance. It created regional tastes. The tabloid press was read widely across the societies of the former Yugoslavia. It was this tabloid press and women’s magazines that contributed the most to the common media space. Internet came in later.*⁶⁷

Thus one might come to the conclusion that a commonality of cultures, languages, and tastes creates spaces in which similarity of identities is mutually recognized. The Eurovision Song Contest only provides a platform for the public acknowledgement of these recognitions.

This connection to cultures is especially reflected in the system of casting votes by telephone, which has provided the opportunity for three different kinds of votes. Expert juries have been replaced by an exercise in democracy with very few rules. One group of votes reflect people’s voting intentions and support, which nicely references ideals of liberal democracies in post-Cold War Europe. Another kind of voting, meanwhile, came from diasporas, after the forces of globalization, borderless Europe and integration inspired millions to become migrants and move abroad. This vote is partly patriotic when cast for their own country but it is also a sign of reintroduction of self-dignity, of revenge against a new country whose society often did not recognise the skills and qualities of migrants. A Serbian professor or Bosnian television presenter working as a plumber in London does this for financial reasons but often blames the host country for this. “Those who finally crowned their struggle for freedom with victory in Eastern Europe have become almost overnight, losers,” analyses Boris Buden.⁶⁸ It is the Eurovision Song Contest that provides migrants, “overnight losers” as Buden describes them in a different context, with recognition of their own nation as equal or even better than a west European country.

These voting patterns, however, resulted in votes often ignoring rich nations and the competition’s traditional powerhouses. The rule was therefore changed in 2009 and half of the votes again come from national juries while the “democracy” of tele-voting accounts for another half. The current model of the Eurovision Song Contest is a combination of democratic rules combined with meritocracy based on political-economic power. A minor digression into the end of Communism provides a telling example. Polish communists offered democratic elections in 1989 but preserved an uncontested half of parliamentary seats for themselves. The rule changes at Eurovision have not solved the problem of mysterious results. It has finally been recognized there were some suspicions about the operations of national juries as “allegations

⁶⁶ Andree Zaimović, *interview*.

⁶⁷ Andree Zaimović, *interview*.

⁶⁸ Buden Boris. 2010. *Children of Postcommunism*. *Radical Philosophy* 159 (accessed: 20. April 2015).

that oil-rich Azerbaijan [...] trying to buy votes” became too difficult to handle. Since then, the names of jury members have finally become public.⁶⁹

Not everyone has been happy with the change. “Turkey has sat out Eurovision since 2013 to protest this change, which diluted the power of the Turkish diaspora vote,” claimed Duncan Watts in the *New York Times*. As an insider and expert, Andree Zaimović, however, explains: “It is expensive to participate. This is based on the number of viewers from each country. Therefore, the more populous the country, the more expensive it is to participate. This is why Turkey stopped their participation.”⁷⁰ While boycotts of the contest have been political in the past, they have become more often caused by economic reasons over the recent years. Poorer countries, even those with smaller numbers of viewers and therefore responsible for a smaller financial contribution as a Eurovision participant, simply could not afford further participation. This has been the case for Bosnia-Herzegovina and for many countries in the neighboring region.

Finally, the issue of organized voting patterns cannot be ignored. “SIM cards are playing an important role,” Andree Zaimović explains. “It is estimated that only one to two percent of viewers actually vote. Smaller countries award the same number of points as big ones. Thus a couple of hundred of SIM cards can change the voting result of a smaller nation.”⁷¹ This usually comes in addition to preparatory efforts prior to the contest. “Regional promotion campaigns are bringing in the votes. It requires investment and it is not necessarily restricted to one region only.”⁷² “The Eurovision Song Contest is a competition of production teams and machines with enormous resources and means that are necessary for victory,” says Ismeta Dervoz. “Teams of voters are easily organized in countries that participate if one has enough money and teams capable to create an infrastructure.”⁷³

One might conclude that the contest itself might lack quality but is certainly entertaining enough for Europe. There might be differences in perceptions of the competition, and the continent’s division on old and “New Europe” is often reflected in this understandings. “New Europe” tends to give more importance to it as a means of national promotion and national pride. Votes are often given to allies and neighbours but this is not necessarily political; more often it has been a reflection of similarity in cultures. Yet, there is politics in the Eurovision Song Contest, as has been proven throughout its sixty-year history. “It is a job for professionals,” as Ismeta Dervoz stated. “[It is] a huge business. It is a national interest too, of course.”⁷⁴

⁶⁹ Watts, *The Politics of Eurovision*.

⁷⁰ Andree Zaimović, *interview*.

⁷¹ Andree Zaimović, *interview*.

⁷² Andree Zaimović, *interview*.

⁷³ Dervoz, *interview*.

⁷⁴ Dervoz, *interview*.

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