

What Eurovision told us about attitudes toward Ukraine

Ukraine won the 2022 Eurovision Song Contest with a record 439 points being awarded via the public vote. Lauren Rogers examines what the result told us about attitudes toward Ukraine across the rest of Europe.

It is not an uncommon experience while watching the Eurovision Song Contest to encounter something surreal. This year, however, that out-of-body experience came not from a novelty act on stage, but from the stunning 439 points awarded to Ukraine's Kalush Orchestra by the public.

Never before in the history of Eurovision have viewers so clearly chosen a winner. Yet, as war continues to rage across Ukraine, the dominant narrative in the run up to the contest was not only that Ukraine was the favourite to win, but that Ukraine *had* to win. This narrative, coupled with the unprecedented vote and the coverage of Kalush Orchestra across Europe, brought to mind a growing field in international relations: vicarious identification.

Vicarious identity [refers to](#) instances where people "appropriate others' stories as their own, as if they happened to them, integrating them as part of their own biography". Individuals often vicariously identify with sports teams, religious groups, or their own countries. In this sense, vicarious identity is actually a fundamental part of Eurovision. Everything, from the performances to the votes, receives a national label, and citizens are expected to identify with their own countries, with the historic friendships and antagonisms that come at the state-level then trickling down to expectations at the national level. Portugal not giving Spain 12 points would have been a shock, but Lithuania not doing so is par for the course.

Though most Eurovision purists are strident that politics plays no role in the competition, the expectations of viewers are so ingrained that it is hard to untangle politics from performance. Was the UK's dismal showing in 2021 a Brexit reaction (zero points), or was it just a reflection of a bad song? Do political conflicts between Armenia and Azerbaijan (or Russia and Ukraine) manifest in the contest? What about the Palestinian flags in 2019? All of this is to say that Eurovision is as political as any contest that treats states as unitary objects and makes the public choose a winner.

Returning to Ukraine, the 2022 Eurovision results reflect a broader phenomenon that has been visible since the start of the war. Public support for Ukraine is unparalleled with any recent crisis. In countries like the UK, shop windows have been transformed with blue and yellow, and the Ukrainian flag has been raised in front of schools, councils, and even the Scottish Parliament. The speaker of the Lithuanian Parliament, echoing a [WSJ headline](#), summed up these sentiments by [telling](#) fellow lawmakers that "today, we are all Ukrainians".

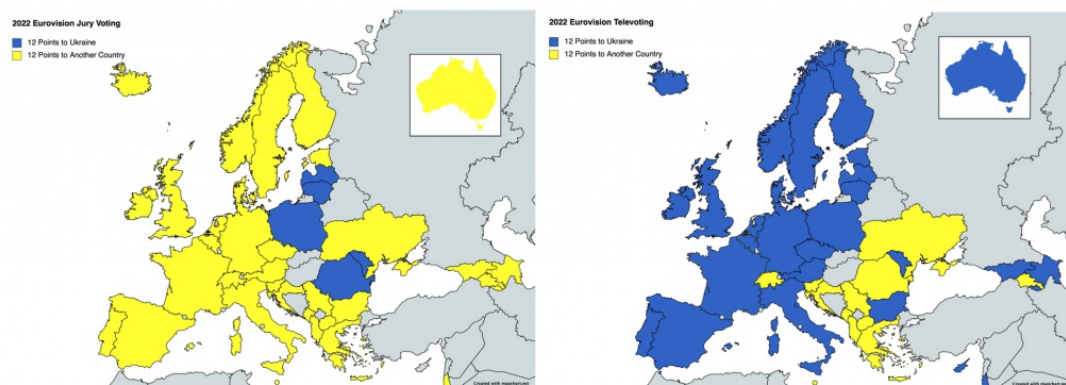
Moreover, videos of Ukrainian soldiers reuniting with families in refugee camps or in Kyiv are garnering as much traction in the media as similar videos of [US soldiers returning home](#) do in the US. Entire mythologies, complete with artistic renderings and songs, are cropping up about specific soldiers or acts of bravery. In February, an older Ukrainian woman famously told Russian soldiers to carry sunflower seeds in their pockets so that when they die flowers will grow. First a [video](#) of the encounter went viral, then a meme, then dozens of cartoons and [paintings](#) depicting the scene. As comedian [John Oliver](#) put it, "that woman brought seeds to a gunfight and comfortably won".

Meanwhile, while foreign legions in Ukraine continue to grow and the Ukrainian government actively encouraging both active and vicarious participation, states and state representatives have also joined in the wave of solidarity with Ukraine. Dozens of EU leaders have changed their profile or cover photos on social media to fit the Ukrainian colours. The hashtag [#standwithUkraine](#) has been tweeted by every EU leader.

Yet, what has also been made clear is that despite the support and the flags and the tweets, there will be no direct intervention by EU, NATO, or US troops. As Christopher Browning [recently put it](#), "all we have is vicarious identification, either with historical episodes such as the ignominious Charge of the Light Brigade of 1854, or with Ukrainians who are actually fighting (for us) today." The vicarious identification of state agents is therefore two-fold. This simplified battle between good and evil resonates with many, but the war also reflects some states' own impotence and ontological insecurity. They can do nothing in practice, so they offer performance as an alternative.

The questions of why these narratives have become salient in the West and why we identify so strongly with them have been unpacked [elsewhere](#), but for Eurovision, the evidence can be summed up in two maps. The first shows which country juries gave Ukraine 12 points – confined to some of those bordering Russia and Ukraine. The map of public televoting at Eurovision is also particularly telling, with voters in 28 countries giving Ukraine full marks.

Figure 1: Countries awarding Ukraine maximum points in the 2022 Eurovision Song Contest



Source: Compiled by the author using mapchart.net (CC BY-SA 4.0)

To be clear, none of this is to say that the Kalush Orchestra did not deserve to win on the basis of their performance. While politics plays a role in the contest, the quality of a song is still a key factor in determining the outcome. Yet this year, there was an air of inevitability about the result. With so many hoping Ukraine emerges victorious on the battlefield, there was an impulse to give the country a victory where we can, namely a Eurovision title and the opportunity to host the competition in 2023.

Meanwhile, the fact there has been no backlash against the result, or accusations of political voting, has also been notable. Yet, with the largest margin of televotes in Eurovision history, how could there be? Indeed, comments from leaders have characterised the victory as a show of solidarity. British Prime Minister Boris Johnson [tweeted](#) to the Ukrainian winners that the result was “a clear reflection of not just your talent, but of the unwavering support for your fight for freedom.”

This sentiment was underlined the day after the competition by photos of Kalush Orchestra frontman Oleh Psiuk saying goodbye to his partner being splashed across the pages of newspapers. He is now on his way to the frontlines.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [James Dant](#) on [Unsplash](#)
