

# The reaction to Conchita Wurst's victory at Eurovision highlights the polarisation over LGBTI rights across Europe

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*The Eurovision Song Contest, held on 10 May, generated controversy in some countries in Europe over the victory of Austrian singer Conchita Wurst. [Roch Dunin-Wąsowicz](#) writes on the political dimension to the contest and the wider issues of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) rights. He notes that the varied reactions between some countries in Central-Eastern and Western Europe highlight the polarised nature of LGBTI issues, but that the results of the public vote across Europe may mark a change of popular attitudes.*



This year's Eurovision Song Contest, and the [victory](#) of the Austrian drag queen Conchita Wurst, more than ever before illuminated Europe's contemporary culture wars. Europe witnessed a triumph of performed gender – a camp drag show outclassed all rivals, including catchy songs and rather lascivious performances of the kind so familiar in western pop culture.

The verdict of the European public is a good sign for progressive forces because it suggests an appreciation for an intrinsically queer and gender transgressive performance. At the same time, the conservative outcry against Conchita can be situated in the nexus of the homophobic backlash in Russia and its periphery, as well as the politicisation of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) rights ahead of the European Parliament elections on 22-25 May.

## The political dimension to Eurovision

Whether deliberate, accidental, or a result of the western aspiration of some of the 'almost European' members of the European Broadcasting Union, Eurovision is known for its campness. Since its naissance in 1956, Eurovision has had a political dimension linked to the early stages of European integration – for a brief moment it even competed with an Eastern Bloc equivalent, [Intervision](#). However, since the 1990s, the extension of the contest to all of Europe, and to its near periphery, has infused it with more political temporality, manifested in ideological statements, voting bargaining, and various forms of social subversiveness.

This year in Copenhagen, blatantly political references were also inescapable: the anchor from (the former Yugoslav Republic of) Macedonia emphasised the country's 'Macedonianess' every few words he uttered; while the persistent booing of Russia from the audience each time the country's song received points was symptomatic. As with every year, there were a few performances that can be seen as contemporary emanations of [opera buffa](#), however, Austria's act took centre stage.

The singer, Tom Neuwirth, appearing under the artistic pseudonym of Conchita Wurst, was not the first queer performance in the history of the contest. Most notably, it was Dana International from Israel who as early as 1998 in Birmingham broke the gender taboo when it turned out she was a transsexual female. Back then, apart from mild consternation and protests coming from the Orthodox community in Israel, the song *Diva* became an international hit.

Other similar entries followed, with *Sestre* the Slovenian transvestite flight attendants trio in 2002 in Tallinn, a Danish drag performer Drama Queen in 2007, and Ukrainian drag comedian Verka Serduchka singing 'Russia goodbye' the very same year in Helsinki. In the end that edition of the contest was won by a lesbian singer, Marija Šerifović, from Serbia. In 2008 Dana International re-entered the contest in Belgrade, though with moderate results.

This year in Copenhagen, however, the Austrian entry was not only more performatively queer than any song ever

before, but also coincided with a heightened politicisation of LGBTI rights in Europe, and a visible polarisation of attitudes in societies and governments alike. This trend continued after the contest with Russian officials [acting](#) to prevent a parade from taking place in Moscow on 27 May to honour the Eurovision winner.

### The politicisation of LGBTI rights in Europe

Although Eurovision is no stranger to frivolous and carnivalesque songs that explicitly play with gender roles, Conchita Wurst was exceptionally transgressive in terms of her physical appearance, musical performance, and the construction of the artistic persona. Following [Butler's](#) and [Sedgwick's](#) understandings of 'performativity', the gender of Conchita Wurst results from her artistic practice, transgresses culturally normative gender identification, is ungraspable, and hence socially subversive.



Conchita Wurst, Credit: Albin Olsson (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

The decorum of Conchita's seemingly feminine attributes – a gallant frock, a diva-like appearance, and a song *à la* Dame Shirley Bassey – is symbolically broken by the prominence of her full beard. The beard is there to remind us about the normatively understood sex of the singer and to heighten the effect of transgression that takes place. Conchita is deliberately queer.

It is no surprise that responses to Conchita's victory varied greatly. Even before the contest began, radical groups in Russia, Belarus and Azerbaijan vocally campaigned to deny her entry – a similar petition also appeared in her native Austria, though with a meagre 40,000 signatures. However, the reactions to Conchita's victory not only stem from the intensified gender performativity of her act in comparison to the ones Eurovision has seen before, but have to be related to the current politicisation of LGBTI rights in Europe.

Most prominent is the current [scapegoating](#) of LGBTI people by the present Russian regime. This has been carried out in terms of an ideological construction in which Vladimir Putin, his supporters, and the Russian Orthodox Church have drawn a distinction between 'healthy hetero-normative' Russia and 'morally repugnant homosexual' Europe. Consequently, one of the leaders of Russia's government sanctioned opposition in the *Duma*, the ultranationalist Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, expressed his outrage over Conchita – the very same man who a few weeks ago caused [controversy](#) with comments in which he stated that one of his bodyguards should 'rape' a pregnant journalist. It was also in Russia where young men started shaving their beards and announcing it on Twitter in reaction to Conchita's win.

In the EU, negative reactions came mostly from right-wing political forces and have to be seen from the perspective of the upcoming European Parliament elections. In Hungary, the conservative weekly *Heti Válasz* featured Conchita on a bull with the title "The Rape of Europa: The Gay Lobby Won Song Contest", somewhat obscuring the classic Greek myth. In Poland, the country's entry to Eurovision, a rather awkward celebration of Slavic women, was juxtaposed with Conchita's act by right-wing MEPs. However the Polish entry marked its own ideological divide, given it reproduced a brand of explicit sexism common to American pop culture.

### The gap between public and elite-level opinion

The vote of Eurovision's audiences somewhat highlights an illiberal-liberal divide over LGBTI rights in Europe and in its neighbourhood. In a historical context, 12 points given from Israel to Austria are particularly curious. However, the apparent polarisation in Europe over LGBTI issues is nuanced by the detailed results of popular vs. jury voting. The points in the contest are allocated using a mix of public voting and rankings by a jury of experts in each country. As it

turns out, the public votes [showed](#) high support for the Austrian entry irrespective of geography, while the low points given to Austria by most Central-European countries, as well as in Germany, stemmed largely from the professional juries.

In other words, while the public was equally taken by Conchita's performance across Europe, elite-level opinion in a few countries thought otherwise. It was also in these states where her win became a politicised public issue and served as a supply of ideology for right-wing parties gearing up for the European elections. Moreover, the popular protests against Eurovision's winner were largely exaggerated by social media, as has previously occurred in other instances of politically stimulated homophobic outrage, particularly in Russia.

While LGBTI rights activists may be pleased with this symbolic victory, the performativity of Conchita Wurst is still confined to a sideshow, where the mediated sociability of Europe's television audience allowed many to vote outside of their regular comfort zone or acceptance standards. At the same time, the success of this inherently queer and subversive performance marks a change of popular attitudes towards LGBTI people in Europe. Hence, following the Danish anchor of Eurovision, it's wholly justifiable to offer 'congratulations to Conchita, the Queen of Europe' and wait for what might come in the next Eurovision contest in Vienna in 2015.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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## About the author

### **Roch Dunin-Wąsowicz** – LSE

Roch Dunin-Wąsowicz is a PhD candidate at the European Institute of the London School of Economics and Political Science, and a graduate of the New School for Social Research in New York City. Roch's dissertation examines contemporary meanings and social understandings of Europe in culture; his research interests include studies of nationalism, issues of European migration and minority rights. He tweets [@RochDW](#)

