

The Eurovision in Ukraine was an exercise in soft power

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Eurovision 2017, held in Kyiv, may have [lacked overt politicisation](#) when it came to the performances showcased on stage, especially in comparison to previous years. But as [Roch Dunin-Wąsowicz](#) argues, the contest nevertheless delivered a carefully constructed ideological message about Ukraine's European aspirations and its pride in its cultural heritage and traditions, while also signalling comradeship with the Slavic world and Eastern Europe. The net result was a quintessential exercise in Eurovision's enduring soft power.



The Eurovision Song Contest is no stranger to political controversy. Envisioned as a means of forging cultural ties between Europe's nations in the aftermath of World War II, the contest was closely tied to the [idea of European integration](#) taking shape in the 1950s. For a brief period, the Warsaw Pact countries hosted a competing [Intervision](#) contest, but it was Eurovision, and the idea behind it, that ultimately prevailed. And it wasn't until the majority of Europe's states from the continent's east (and from its near periphery) entered the competition that it became the political playground which it is known as today.

Time and again it has provided ample data for better understanding [European politics and society](#). In 2014, Conchita Wurst's "inherently queer and subversive performance" was a sweeping success in the popular vote, but it was shunned by East European juries. As I argued [then](#), this revealed just how complicated the polarisation over LGBTQ+ issues is in the region. Similarly, last year's [victory of Jamala](#), singing about Stalinist atrocities in Crimea in 1944, was a triumph of [cultural soft power](#) that signalled the significance of collective historical consciousness among the European public.



Verka Serdutchka with her ensemble in the Eurovision Song Contest 2007. Image by [Indrek Galetin](#), (Wikipedia), licenced under Attribution-ShareAlike.

Culture as soft power

This year, however, the 200+ million audience of Eurovision was spared outright political messaging in the

performances, and the pre-contest squabble over [Russia's participation](#) was largely lost on the public. The political dimension of Eurovision 2017 was, however, noticeable in how Ukraine decided to, yet again, use it as a vehicle of soft power (albeit less overtly than in years past when one of its songs' lyrics uncannily sounded like "[Russia Goodbye](#)").

This year was marked by far more discreet efforts. Firstly, the hosts showcased a country with western-democratic aspirations, putting emphasis on freedom, and on being a tolerant and open country that belongs to the European family of liberal democracies. Secondly, it was pride in Ukraine's cultural heritage that was noticeable, which permeated most vividly from the adjoining performers during the contest's final and the hosts' commentaries. Finally, an even more discreet, almost subliminal, message conveyed was that of the regional Eastern European (and Slavic) embeddedness of Ukraine, and its role in the region being markedly different from Russia's.

A European Ukraine

As noted by the [Atlantic](#), Eurovision "serves as a stage for countries to express their national pride and affirm their European affiliation". This couldn't be truer of Ukraine, parts of which are currently engulfed in war with Russia. Openness and belonging to Europe were major themes of the three parts of the song contest, as well as its physical surroundings in the nation's capital. Most notably, one of the last damaged buildings standing on the famous Maidan square where the 2013 protests, followed by violent clashes, took place, was decorated with a larger-than-life banner stating that "Freedom is our religion".

The "celebrate diversity" theme of this year's edition was embodied by altering a Soviet-era monument and trying to put as much daylight as possible between it and a Russia perceived as being intolerant and authoritarian. What once was an arch symbolising Russo-Ukrainian unity, was painted in [rainbow colours](#), much to the dismay of Russia, as well as conservative and nationalist forces within Ukraine who prevented the arch's rainbow from being completed.

This western-democratic aspiration is closely linked to the idea and the process of European integration. It derives from a profound sense, shared by a sizeable part of the intellectual elite and decision-making class in the country, that Ukraine is, both historically and politically, at the heart of Europe. After all, it was Ukraine's association agreement with the EU that the Maidan protests erupted over and which put the country at odds with Russia, plunging it into a proxy-war that still has no end in sight. Ukraine's insistence on its European credentials, including being able to [successfully host such a show](#), is hence part of a soft power effort focused on its geopolitical reorientation. It is, however, only one part of a concerted effort to showcase the country to the outside world.

Слава Україні! (Glory to Ukraine!)

Occidental yearnings among countries of the former Communist East are not a new phenomenon. Almost thirty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, however, such aspirations can no longer be simply assimilationist. Hence, the sense of a Ukrainian national self was very much present throughout Eurovision. Contemporary Ukrainian pop stars at the show's grand final – Ruslana, Jamala and Onuka – draw heavily on Ukrainian folk music in their performances. This link between popular and Ukrainian folk music is very much appreciated by the domestic public where references to Ukrainian cultural traditions and use of the Ukrainian language are integral to the civic and identity soul-searching that the country has been going through in the past few years.

A sense of pride in the success of Eurovision hosted by [Kyiv](#) is seen as validation of the skill and ability of the Ukrainian people and plays a crucial role in the process of crystallising its national self-understanding vis-à-vis Europe, rather than just emulating its neighbours to the west. In this instance, Eurovision performed a function which for many countries around the world is carried out by large sporting events. There was, however, yet another dimension to Ukraine's soft power Eurovision pitch.

Eastern Partnership

Ukraine cannot defy geography, especially its proximity to Russia and its client states. Therefore, the final message communicated in Kiviy was how much Ukraine cherishes its Slavic ‘cousins’ and how it maintains positive relations with its neighbours in the East European region, while highlighting how different it is from Russia. Paired with an emphasis on the country’s western-democratic and European credentials, it was a conscious attempt to demonstrate the distinctions between Ukraine (positioned as pro-Western, liberal, democratic, and tolerant) and Russia (presented as anti-Western, illiberal, autocratic, and intolerant).

This message follows Ukraine’s current diplomatic efforts. The above was communicated side-by-side with a less explicit signalling of Slavic/regional brotherhood. During the final show’s last stage, where points are collected from Europe’s capitals, almost all Slavic-speaking countries were greeted with the Ukrainian *добрий вечір* (*dobryy vechir*), which can be largely understood in the region, while niceties and other linguistic innuendos were also exchanged.

Most importantly, however, 12 points from the Ukrainian jury (representing the country’s elite voice) went to Belarus, which can be seen as a proxy for Russia, absent from the competition. In underlining its Slavic and East European credentials, Ukraine exercised a fine balancing act between Europe and Russia (which claims ownership of the idea of pan-Slavism). It was a deliberate attempt to prove the country’s western-democratic credentials while stressing its regional embeddedness, and its shared cultural and historical heritage.

Despite lacking overt politicisation, this year’s Eurovision was a quintessential exercise in soft power for Ukraine, a country fighting for the right of self-determination on the world stage. The contest delivered a carefully constructed ideological message about what kind of country Ukraine wants to be: a western-democratic and a European state, which takes pride in its cultural heritage and traditions, and which at the same time is rooted in the Slavic world and supports liberal change in the region of Eastern Europe.

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