



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

# Can the Eurovision Song Contest survive the politicisation to which it has contributed?



These days, many people reminisce about the peaceful times a few decades ago when the Eurovision Song Contest was exactly what its name suggests.

Especially in Sweden, where this year's final is being held. Together with Ireland, Sweden holds the record with seven victories in the 68-year history of Eurovision.

The history of the ESC is inextricably linked to Sweden. ABBA's first shot at worldwide fame happened when they won the Eurovision Song Contest.

The Swedish city of Malmö, which organises the competition, has concerns this year that overshadow the 50th anniversary of ABBA's victory, so there is not much time to celebrate the year the ESC "came home".

Thousands of pro-Palestinian protesters **stormed** the streets of Malmö, demanding Israel's exclusion from the competition. The wave of anti-Israel protests that have been taking place across Europe for months to protest the operation in Gaza could not have passed Malmö by.

Some of its residents, who had been looking forward to the arrival of the colourful music caravan, were somewhat disappointed that the city had been "**militarised**" when the five-day festival started.

Sweden deployed a large police force and even brought in reinforcements from neighbouring Denmark and Norway to prevent incidents between pro-Palestinian and pro-Israeli demonstrators.

Police patrols were unavoidable on the streets; snipers stood on rooftops, and police helicopters flew over the city.

Sweden received the ESC organisation at a time when the risk of a terrorist attack had previously been raised from level 4 to the highest level 5 due to an increased risk following cases of public Quran burnings.

## Is there censorship at the ESC?

Both onstage and backstage at the popular TV show were equally tense. However, the tension (not competitive but political) will persist until the winner is determined, and the political classification of the results will endure much longer after the spotlights are turned off.

Israeli contestant Eden Golan was forced by the organisers to **change** some of the lyrics of her song at the last minute, as well as the title, as they felt they were too closely associated with the Hamas terrorist attacks on October 7.

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The song "October Rain" was renamed "Hurricane," and some verses were given a "toned down" version without many associations with the October massacre in southern Israel.

The ESC organisers have been meticulously examining the lyrics of the participants, and the "censorship" used in the case of Israel is nothing unusual.

Three years ago, Belarus was excluded from the competition because the band Galasy Zmesta did not want to change the lyrics of a song that mocked the civil protests against President Alexander Lukashenko.

## Are Israel and Russia the same thing?

Israel's participation in this year's ESC presented a challenge to the European Broadcasting Union, an alliance of national television broadcasters from across Europe.

They rejected many appeals for Israel's exclusion from the competition in response to

military action in Gaza and the Palestinian humanitarian crisis. Israel is one of the festival's oldest competitors, with musicians competing since 1973 and winning four times.

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However, it has become increasingly difficult for the EBU to defend Israel's participation. Their difficulties will not end when the show in Malmö is over, nor when the crisis in Gaza is over.

They will continue to be accused of double standards because they permitted Israel to participate while suspending Russia two years ago for its aggression against Ukraine.

In their great effort to be politically aseptic, EBU officials caused problems for themselves, for example, when they declared Russia's exclusion in 2022 an act in defence of "the basic and highest values of democracy".

## Troubles for the host of Eurovision 2025

For decades, the Eurovision Song Contest has been a reflection of geopolitical shifts, at least in Europe. Furthermore, the ESC's rise to the level of the largest entertainment platform has served as a catalyst for social change.

One of the biggest waves of expansion of the participant base took place in the mid-1990s, when participants from Eastern Europe, Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and other countries began to perform on the ESC stage.



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The audience of millions in Eastern Europe, newly liberated after the fall of the Iron Curtain, experienced participation at the ESC as an important confirmation of their own European emancipation.

However, with its rapid expansion, the ESC has been importing hidden or open political tensions for years, disguised by heavy make-up and glittering costumes.

They have imported conflicts from the Caucasus (Russia, Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia), the Balkans, between Russia and Ukraine, but also between Russia and the rest of Europe, and, most recently, crises in the Middle East.

The loophole for Eurovision's apparent long-term politicisation was eventually opened in 2009, when millions of spectators across Europe were included in the vote in a purported attempt to democratise the winner selection. Until then, the winner was determined solely by expert juries in national television centres.

For 15 years, political preferences have dominated over musical criteria, but the organisers of the EBU could hardly return the whole system to the previous, "undemocratic" way of voting.

As Malmö awaits a new winner, all eyes are on the host country for Eurovision 2025. The joy of triumph in Malmö will be short-lived, and the following year will be spent planning a

festival loaded with political and security risks.

The stakes in the organisation are high, given that around 200 million people in Europe and twice as many worldwide watch content on television or digital platforms, resulting in substantial exposure.

However, the publicity larger than that of the Super Bowl audience will inevitably attract political players, as it is one of the most powerful advertising channels for their ideas and actions.