Pan-European, Regional and National Identity in the Eurovision Song Contest

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1. – Introduction

Since 1956, the Eurovision Song Contest (ESC) has been a highly ritualized, annual feature of European broadcasting. Its fifty years of uninterrupted broadcast, combined with high levels of estimated viewing audiences across Europe and beyond –amounting to circa half a billion viewers according to most estimates (Le Guern 2000)- have afforded to contest a solid foothold in the European public imagination across generations, national boundaries and cultural identities. At a time in which the cultural aspect of the European integration project is much debated and sought for –through initiatives such as the European Union’s Media Plus initiative, this paper argues that the Eurovision Song Contest presents one of the most successful pan-European identity-building vehicles to date, through the following three main modes:

a) identity-formation at the pan-European level;

b) identity articulation at a national level, both endogenous –that of the nation towards itself- and exogenous –the nation towards the ‘other’ Europe.

c) An arena for manageable popular expression of national ‘contests’ and regional collusion.

This analysis aims to present the ESC as a highly successful media event, of the order presented in the seminal study of Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz (1992), through a study of its very salient and highly recognizable ritualistic features. The paper will then analyze the manner in which pan-European identity is articulated in the ESC through such features as its audio-visual signifiers (anthem, logo), its historical development, linguistic features and voting procedures. Under this umbrella identity construction, regional European identities are routinely reinforced –most notably through voting collusion patterns and ethno-linguistic representation, features to which the paper dedicates a section. Subsequently, the political and discursive natures of the actors’ expressions of nationalism are analyzed, providing illustrations and demonstrations of how national dialogue and discord find a way to express themselves through the ESC.

2. - The Eurovision Song Contest

The ESC operates under the organizational framework of the European Broadcasting Union (EBU), a conglomerate of national public broadcasters from Europe and the Mediterranean, set in place in 190 as a means to enhance technical and cultural cooperation in the then nascent European television industry, The ESC came to existence in 1956, as an initiative to promote “peace and harmony in a Europe still recovering from the Second World War” (Tilden, 2003), and inspired by the popular pan-European commercial success of the annual Italian San Remo Song Contest. The main premise of
the contest was to be as follows: each national broadcaster would independently select a
song, and then send it to compete against all the others for the maximum amount of
points awarded by selected national juries in a live international broadcast. The winning
country is subsequently invited to host the following year’s event. The initial seven
participant countries in 1956 have grown over the five decades of the ESC’s existence
into 37 active participants in 2005—including the two non-traditionally European states of
Turkey and Israel, and a number of passive participants where the contest is broadcast but
who are not represented by a national entry. With the aforementioned estimated live
audience of 400 million viewers, the ESC has evolved well beyond its initial nature as a
popular music festival and has become a media event in and of itself, regardless of the
(very often questioned) artistic quality of its musical content. As a media event, the ESC
is an arena ripe for political and cultural expression—and, as the paper will show, has
been extensively used as such by its participants.

A caveat
An analysis of the purely cultural aspects and impact of the ESC is beyond the scope of
this paper, which is focused primarily on its political aspects of nationalism and identity
formation and articulation. However, in order to appreciate the political significance of
the ESC it is necessary to offer at least a cursory overview of its overall impact on national
and pan-European cultural spheres. Formally, the ESC remains above all a pop music
international event, and an intrinsically European one at that. In practice, this paper
would strongly argue that the musical content of the ESC has over the decades become
more of a ‘pretext’ for the holding of the contest itself than its ultimate means: the
context remains highly popular with viewers, but its music does not—or not as much. It is
not necessarily a stretch to state that the key to the ESC’s success lays on its elements of
ritual and national/international competition, with its actual musical content relegated to
the background of the viewing experience. Nevertheless, without a certain critical mass
of commercial success it is fair to assume that the ESC would have by now become a
‘failed’ media event and withered away. The commercial success of the ESC naturally
varies with every country, with every year, and every specific entry. Two examples of
this are provided as follows, highlighting that the commercial (if not critical) success of
Eurovision-related acts is very substantial and provides a solid base for the ESC to
operate: the International Federation of the Phonographic Industry’s updated list of the
150 best-selling artists of all time—as of 2006—reveals that a fourth of the top twenty
best-selling acts are ESC participants (Julio Iglesias, ABBA, Nana Mouskouri, Celine
Dion, Cliff Richard). Each of which has sold in excess of 150 million records worldwide
(West-Soley, 2006).

3. - The ESC as a Media Event

Dayan and Katz’s Media Events: the Live Broadcasting of History (1992) includes the
ESC amongst its exhaustive list of media events under analysis. Their study focuses on
‘Media Events’ as a significant genre of television broadcasting with intrinsic
repercussions on the formation and articulation of group-national identities, a step beyond
Benedict Anderson’s emphasis on the printed press and its fundamental influence in the

1 Netherlands, Italy, France, Switzerland, Germany, Belgium, Luxembourg
creation of ‘imagined communities’. In this respect, the ESC effectively signifies the mobilization of a very large pan-European audience around a localized live event; the contest gathers audiences that are “geographically and socially heterogeneous but who engage in the same activity; [it] conjures up a collective identity, socializes each viewer’s singular experience by linking it to that of all other viewers, and creates affective links between them (Le Guern 2000). The ESC makes it possible for each viewer to belong to a larger community: a pan-European one, designed to bring together large chunks of national audiences” (2000).

In the study of media events presented by Dayan and Katz, the ESC is easily identified as possessing the following definitional elements: it is an interruption of routine, happening only once a year, while at the same time presenting a ‘yearly’ ritualized routine by which European viewers can (and do) expect it to take place invariably every year, invariably in may, invariably on a Saturday evening. It is organized live and by a public body (the European Broadcasting Union) and is preplanned, announced and advertised in advance. In addition, Dayan and Katz’s criteria states that successful media events must by definition attract the ‘largest audiences’ (1992, 14), offering a blueprint of circa 500 million viewers, a rating that the ESC is alleged to consistently obtain.

The ESC naturally falls under the category of ‘Contest’ media events, according to the following features proposed by the authors: its periodicity is fixed (annual); its set of rules are stated and agreed, in terms of performance order, voting procedures and length of entries; its locus is the host city as awarded by the rules of the competition (the winner of the previous year’s contest); the opponents, quite crucially, are formally the European public broadcasters, or else the performers of the different national entries –in practice, the opponents are nations and nation states; the role of the audience is one of judging: advances in telecommunications technology have virtually substituted the national juries with phone- and SMS- voting, rendering the verdict of the contest entirely on the hands of the audience. Ultimately, the ESC is a contest insofar as it frames, miniaturizes and humanizes collective conflict.

The notion of media events has not remained unchallenged, particularly on Nick Couldry’s Media Rituals: a Critical Approach (2003); there are, indeed, alternative modes of analysis of mediated public rituals which do not stem from the underlying assumption of their power of social integration and transformation. In addition, the conceptual definition of media events per se is problematic insofar as it excludes mediated collective experiences that, although not pre-planned, have a substantial degree of collective significance (Couldry, 2003, 64). This should not be of immediate concern for the subject matter of this analysis –however, Dayan and Katz’s model is indeed open to scrutiny on the grounds of the individual’s assumed response to the event itself: in other words, the range of private experience of the collective viewing can be deemed to be wider than that implicitly assumed by the authors. The effect of this wider range of individual experience in the ESC is a substantial degree of identity fluidity, by which several collective articulations do compete with each other, but also may well act in a complementary fashion: the national, regional and continental articulations that are discussed below are by no means fixed, or mutually exclusive.

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A second caveat
The ESC has been involved in a process of constant and steady expansion over its five decades of existence. This implies that its institution as a media event is uneven amongst the 37 countries that are currently listed as active participants. Naturally, relative newcomers to the contest such as the entire Central Eastern European bloc (excluding the Balkan countries) will see their national audiences regarding as less of a ‘ritual’ than longer-term participants, and the impact of the ESC in national popular is deemed to be less significant –institutional memory being a lengthy process. As an example, the financial difficulties of the Hungarian national broadcaster allows it to make only occasional and discontinuous appearances at the contest while public broadcasters in France, Spain, Germany and the United Kingdom remain constant active participants and contribute to the majority of the financial backing of the event. This by no means implies that the ESC is less popular with audiences in newcomer countries (in fact the opposite may be true, comparing viewing figures between France and Estonia, for example), but merely that the ESC’s nature as a media event is still in the process of consolidation among such actors.

4. - The ESC and Pan-European Identity

The ESC has created throughout its history a form of European public sphere that has both reflected and contribute to what constitutes the shared meaning of ‘Europe’: from the initial core continental group with its preponderance of the French language, to the inclusion of Israel and Turkey, the welcoming of Yugoslavia in the 1960s, the opening up to post-communist Europe in the early nineties and the current further expansion to the East. It has both reflected and preceded European expansion, and in the cases of Estonia, Latvia, Turkey and Ukraine in the 2000s, it has been utilized by nations as a vehicle to ‘speak’ and present themselves to Europe as rightful members of it. In this way, the early inclusion of Yugoslavia in the ESC signifies the explicit acceptance of the country’s acceptance as an entity politically pertinent to the European, rather than the Soviet realm, both by the broader European collective and by Yugoslavia itself. The elements of pan-Europeanism in the ESC are identified around the following items: corporate signifiers, language use, formal equality of procedure and access, and minimum cultural denominators.

The corporate signifiers of the ESC are designed to reinforce the concept of a common European image not ascribed to any one individual country. The contest’s anthem, as played in the opening credits of every ESC, is an instantly recognizable (and in true Eurovision fashion, quite ‘hummable’) tune of an early European Christian origin: Marc-Antoine Charpentier’s Prelude to Te Deum, composed in 1642. Due to its incorporation within the framework of the ESC, the anthem itself was recognized as having attained ‘iconic status’ amongst the European public and became a strong contender for the status of official European Anthem² (Clark, 1997, 795). This iconic status essentially entails that a pan-European audience recognizes it and reacts to it

² An honor finally awarded to Beethoven’s “Ode to Joy”
regardless of national identity or affiliation, reinforcing the collective identity that the ESC helps to create.

The Eurovision logo, a visual signifier *par excellence*, has not been a constant one. Initially, the design that appeared during the broadcast mirrored what is now the European Union flag (golden stars over navy blue background), but in line with a clear move to disassociate the two with the incorporation of a substantial (and increasing) number of non-EU participants, a new common official logo (a heart, an internationally understood symbol, filled with the colors of the pertinent country’s flag) was adopted in 2003. This official logo does not allow for the previous variations depending on the host country and promotes constant and uninterrupted visual identity, a collective one regardless of national alignment. The ESC thus possesses audible and visual signifiers that are both highly recognizable and not country-specific.

Language use at the ESC reinforces pan-Europeanism. During the 1960s and 1970s, the entire show was conducted in a cumbersome combination of English, French and German, with individual national broadcasters providing simultaneous commentary in their national language. The host (or hosts) of the show would essentially repeat every sentence in all of the three languages, a practice clearly influenced by the need to address a pan-European audience un meaningful linguistic terms along the lines of the three main languages dominating the Western European public sphere at the time. This practice has been progressively discontinued, much as the European collective has moved away from the public usage of German –and to a large degree French- in intra-European relations in favor of the English language. Nowadays, the ESC is conducted entirely in English regardless of the hosting country, with the exception of a strictly bilingual English-French voting procedure, a ritualized reminder of the former symbolic place that French used to occupy in the European public sphere. When giving out their votes, national spokespeople have the formal chance to opt for either of the two languages –in practice, all but France and Belgium have embraced English while voting. This residual usage of French remains part of the symbolic and ritualistic value of the ESC and reflects the somewhat awkward pan-European adoption of English as its *lingua franca* whilst still nominally upholding the formal value of other European languages in intra-European dealings.

Similarly, performance languages are significant in terms of highlighting the pan-European construction in the ESC. The contest rules state the principle of ‘freedom of language’, which poses no formal restrictions on the language of the national entries. Remarkably, singing in English has become the norm among contestants from across the regional European spectrum\(^3\) (with notable nationalist exceptions such as France, Israel or Spain, which have nonetheless begun to introduce elements of the English language in their entries throughout the 2000s). Regardless of the underlying reasons for this trend – Anglo-American domination of the international pop music market, deliberate appeal to a common linguistic denominator- the result is that, when 400 million Europeans from

\(^3\) In Kiev 2005, 18 out of 25 countries in the semi-final performed in English; 15 out of 24 did so in the final. In Athens 2006, 28 out of 37 countries performed in English.
different regions as a whole tune in together to listen to each other at the ESC, what they hear is by and large a succession of national entries sung in a de facto lingua franca. The emphasis is thus once again laid on communality of culture rather than national—or regional—difference. It is important, however, to reiterate that the stated analysis refers to a marked and significant general trend, not a rigid and homogeneous feature. Cleavages in the use of the English lingua franca at the ESC do occur and constitute notable exceptions that shall be analyzed further below.

Formal equality of procedure and access at the ESC means that, in form at least, every participant country receives the same status and consideration, reinforcing an egalitarian pan-European image (Le Guern 2000). Each entry is allocated the same amount of airtime (a maximum of three minutes); each country is given the same amount of votes to distribute among the entries, regardless of the size of the national population or of the amount of votes registered within a country. Visually, each national flag is displayed in the same size throughout the voting and at the opening and closing of each national performance. Penalties are in place for any national broadcaster that may not broadcast each and every one of the entries in their entirety and without interruptions, and allow their viewers to vote for each and every entry in equal conditions. In practice, the result of this is the reinforcement of a collective European image in which tiny Malta competes in equality of conditions with Russia, Muslim Turkey with Poland. In the words of Philippe Le Guern, “The ESC is quite important for smaller countries since it represents a rare occasion to be on an equal footing with larger nations” (2000). It is noteworthy that this principle of formal equality among European nations regardless of size or other considerations is omnipresent in intra-European organizational activities, to the degree that it constitutes a common cultural principle. The ESC is thus part of those procedures that help reinforce it.

The aforementioned pan-European signifiers, constructs and procedures have their practical implications on the way that Europe views itself as a collective through the television screen, once every year. The opening up of the contest to the non-traditionally European states of Israel (in 1974) and Turkey (in 1975) has entailed that, for over two decades, European viewers in their millions have seen, listened to, and competed with both nations in a markedly Euro-centric setting. Viewers are then faced with two cognitive options: either to acknowledge both states as legitimate European actors (implicitly or explicitly); or to acknowledge them as distinctly non-European, and therefore constituting their participation at the Eurovision song contest as illegitimate. The fact that Israel has won the contest three times (1978, 1979, 1998) and Turkey once (2003) strongly suggests that the general viewers’ conceptualization of what legitimately constitutes ‘Europe’ has expanded over time to include the two states, to the extent that so-called ‘Old Europe’ is willing to invest on SMS- and phone-voting for Israeli and

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4 This formal principle of equality led to Lebanon’s withdrawal from what was schedules to be their first Eurovision appearance in 2005, since “according to Lebanese legislation, Tele Liban is not permitted to broadcast the performance of the Israeli participant, thereby breaching the rules of the Eurovision Song Contest 2005”. The withdrawal drew further international media attention (see N. Christian’s The Scotsman article, March 2005).
Turkish competitors over other traditional European entries in order to grant them victory, and that they consider Jerusalem and Istanbul legitimate hosts for Europe in its entirety when they organize the event the following year. The incorporation of Turkey and Israel in a common European cultural sphere, implicitly acknowledged with the countries’ participation in Eurovision throughout two decades, has been made explicit with their public vote-based victories in 1998 and 2003.

As well as providing an articulation of the way Europe as a whole views itself, the ESC has been so successful in articulation a pan-European identity image that the contest is an arena for nations to establish a dialogue vis-à-vis Europe in terms of their position within it. Empirical examples of this abound; an examination of the Eurovision contests held in Tallin in 2002, Riga in 2003, Istanbul in 2004 or Kiev in 2005 show clear uses of broadcast time to promote a thoroughly modern, ‘European’ vision of the hosting nation, with mini-video insertions of modern infrastructure, industry, IT technology and the like in between songs –essentially playing down national idiosyncrasy and highlighting an adherence to a streamlined, modern common European image. A most salient example is that of Estonia, engaged in a very specific quest to redefine itself as a Nordic European – rather than post-Soviet- entity (Bruggemann, 2003). In 2002, the year when Estonia was to become the first post-Communist country to host the ESC, it selected a Swedish singer with a song in the English language as their entrant in Tallinn.

A further, more dramatic example of ‘nation vis-a-vis Europe’ dialogue in the context of the ESC will illustrate the extent to which Eurovision has become identified with the political ramifications of pan-Europeanism and European identity. The Dutch ESC entry of 2005 fared very poorly with the European public vote; the Dutch mass media gave front-page coverage of the failure, alleging the collusion of Central and Eastern European voters as a reason for the poor performance. Three immediate opinion polls reported a “huge advance” of the ‘no’ vote to the European Constitution referendum to be held a week after the contest. The Times of London reported: “the country’s top pollster, found that 71 percent of people think that the fact that substantially more Eastern European than Western European countries have reached the final of Eurovision is an example of how the power within the EU has shifted to the East” (Browne, 2003). The Dutch prime minister was reportedly ‘shocked’: “It’s the world upside-down that [the Dutch entrant] is being connected to the referendum” (Bakker, 2005). As is well known, the European Constitution was subsequently rejected by Dutch voters. This is by no means a suggestion that the ESC was the sole, or even the main, determinant in explaining the Dutch decision; but it serves as an illustration of just how much the ESC has become an arena for European political and cultural interaction, where the Dutch nation saw its place in Europe reflected as a smack actor losing its political clout to the Emerging Eastern bloc. As for the ESC itself, The Times wrote: “established half a century ago to bring the people of Europe together through music, the Eurovision Song Contest now seems to blow the European project apart” (2005). Indeed, a pan-European collective identity has been advanced by and though the ESC, but this identity is in constant competition with regional collusions and alignments and the collective articulation of the individual nation-state.
5. - The challenge of European regionalism

The rules of the ESC state that participant countries cannot award votes to their own entries. In theory, this principle should allow for the elimination of nationalistic considerations in the voting procedure and make the quality (or lack thereof) of the songs themselves the sole criteria for a European viewer to invest time and money voting for a specific entry. In practice, however, strong and clearly noticeable regional voting collusions have developed over the past fifty years, reinforcing the view that at least a substantial part of the millions of Europeans that annually watch the show engage in voting behavior along the lines of kinship and cultural and political affinity. This could be perceived as a problem: it not only contradicts the entire principle of equal access and pan-Europeanism described above, but it may lead to instances of defensive nationalism as the aforementioned Dutch example shows. Eurovision rarely has such a salient and explicit political impact, of course; but in terms of national identity and collective perception, regional collusion threatens to shatter the illusion of one united Europe that the ESC has strived to promote. It has now become somewhat of a tradition that the international audience present at the ESC venue during the broadcast will show their discontent by loudly booing when the inevitable exchange of maximum scores between Greece and Cyprus comes; national commentators such as those in Spain and the United Kingdom routinely express their exasperation with regional voting during their live commentaries, as do subsequent reports in the national mass media which reinforce the victimization identity of ‘Europe doesn’t like us’ (see Eurovision votes ‘farce’ attack, BBC Online May 16th 2004 for an extensive example).

Thanks to the availability of extensive pools of data, several academic research studies have been undertaken on the voting patterns of the ESC (see Fenn et al’s Oxford University research paper of 2006). These studies invariably highlight the alignment of voting trends along the following regional ‘blocs’: the Nordic/Baltic, Slavic, South East European, Western, and Mediterranean, leaving several participant countries sitting outside specific collusion groups.

The reasons behind this regional alignments have a lot to do with collective identity; naturally, it should come as no surprise that regions with well developed political, historical and cultural ties, as well as mutually understandable national languages, would find their national entries mutually appealing; see for example the case of Serbia & Montenegro in 2004, which joined the contest for the first time (after the breakdown of Yugoslavia) with a sentimental ballad with Balkan folk influences. The song received the maximum scores from the public votes of Croatia, Slovenia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, and the second highest score from the Macedonian vote (whose maximum core went, significantly, to Albania, in clear ethnic alignments); thanks to this support, Serbia & Montenegro went on to win the contest’s semifinal and came second three days later in the final in Kiev. What is most interesting is the fact that Croatians, Bosnians, Slovenians, Slovenes and Macedonians granted unequivocal support to the representative of Serbia in spite of the highly strained political relations and recent history of violence still fresh in the collective memory of ex-Yugoslavians as a whole; and that they did so out of regional cultural affinities, rallying around a song that stroke an essentially Balkan emotional chord. Nor is this only an isolated incident, as voting patterns over time show. The conclusion to be drawn is that regional identities are
prevalent and overtake pan-European collective images, a fact that sits somewhat uncomfortably with the basic premise of continental cultural harmony on which the ESC was created.

Another significant factor highlighted by an analysis of voting patterns is the large amount of public votes awarded by countries with large European immigrant populations to their ‘home’ nations, i.e. Germany to Turkey, UK to Ireland, Spain to Romania, Scandinavia and Switzerland to the Balkan countries, France to Portugal, etcetera. Since the establishment of public voting in the mid 1990s, it has become reasonably clear that immigrant or national minority populations strongly align themselves with their perceived ‘homeland’—so for instance, in 2005 the Albanian entry received maximum or near-maximum scores from Macedonia, Greece, Switzerland and Serbia & Montenegro, while being largely ignored by the rest of participants. In other words, when it comes to Eurovision it appears that ethnic Albanians (or Turks, or Germans, or Portuguese, or Swedish-speaking Finns, etcetera) abroad vote not as ‘Europeans’ or citizens of their host country, but as Albanians, Turks, and so on. Combined with the regional collusion voting, this ‘homeland’ voting trend becomes a further expression of the current state of European collective identity: an abstract concept whose existence is flanked by alternative national and regional articulations. This is not a suggestion that regional or ‘homeland’ voting patterns are a necessary contradiction with the articulation of a shared European identity; in fact, it can be argued that these trends are constantly negotiated and fluid components of said identity, under which umbrella there is much room for apparent contradiction and multiple identity links. Balkan collusion is one example of this multiplicity of collective identities at play: nationalist representation combines with jugonostalgija, in an accepted pan-European framework.

6. – Nationalism and National Representation

If, as has been shown above, pan-European and regional/’motherland’ shared meanings occupy such a large portion of the Eurovision collective sphere, what then is the role of the nation (and more poignantly, the nation-state) in the ESC? The short-hand answer is, a very significant one.

It becomes now important to state that, whilst formally the ESC remains a contest between broadcasters represented by a song, in practice it is a competition between nations: the on-screen presence of respective national broadcasters’ corporate identities is null, and entries are represented by the visual signifiers of their national flag throughout the event. The international audience present at the venue during the live broadcast waves energetically a sea of national flags; the votes are announced and allocated to countries, not broadcasters or performers (that is, it is the United Kingdom, not the BBC, who is awarded the votes). Statements and reports made in national mass media reinforce the ‘battle of the nations’ angle”

“It’s all about representing your country, which I would love to do. The whole country getting behind and voting for someone like me would be amazing […]. I will do my very best. I would love to fly the flag for the
The above is a quote from Katie Price, a British glamour model and overall ‘tabloid darling’, competing for the chance to represent the UK at Eurovision in 2005 (incidentally, she failed). In addition, the fact that the participant broadcasters are national public channels makes their ESC entries subject to potential political influence along nationalist lines—an influence which, as we shall see, is on occasion quite explicit.

Regardless of whether the national broadcaster selects their ESC entry through an open national final with a public vote or through internal appointment, the selection and presentation of national ESC entries has been and continues to be a political issue, one of public dialogue of the nation with itself regarding its nature and the image it wishes to portray to the exterior. As English becomes the default language of the competition, the mere choice of performing in one’s national language becomes an issue of collective representation: hence, when in 2006 the notoriously bilingual Norwegian public shunned the entire English-language, middle-of-the-road list of pop songs bidding to be the national entry in favor of the only song performed in Norwegian (a folk-tinted ballad with ethnic musical elements), the public was in fact making a political and cultural choice upon its own outwards representation—most remarkably given than the Norwegian domestic music market is dominated by English-language productions. Similarly, Hungary celebrated its return to the contest in 2005 by publicly selecting the Hungarian-language folk-pop band NOX, who stated in an interview: “Why should we sing in English? NOX has become known for presenting Hungarian folk songs combined with world music. This song is a mixture of Georgian, Jewish, Gypsy, Argentinean and Hungarian folk music” (Phillips, 2005). The Hungarian public chose thus to be represented by an entry inclusive of the main cultural traditions to be found within its realm—and with a bit of tango thrown into the mixture.

In order to illustrate nationalist articulations in the ESC, an analysis could be done of countless national entries throughout the decades. The scope of this paper does not allow for an exhaustive list of all the instances of nationalist and national identity articulations through the selection of Eurovision entries; it will have to suffice to highlight two examples of struggles over national identity and representation that have recently grabbed international media attention: Israel in 2000 and Serbia & Montenegro in 2006.

The Israeli Broadcasting Authority (IBA) selected a Tel Aviv pop group as the national entry to the ESC in 2000, whose song’s Hebrew lyrics versed about a bored Kibbutzim Israeli woman who is having a “torrid affair with a Damascus man” (Goldenberg, 2000). The selection turned into a national scandal in the week before the contest, when it became apparent during the dress rehearsals that the group intended to wave Syrian flags during their live performance. Public protests in Israel forced the IBA to contemplate pulling out from that year’s ESC, which according to the Eurovision rules would have entailed a financial penalty and possible suspension from participating in future events. As the scandal gathered momentum, the band’s manager offered the following statement:
"The song is about love and peace so we thought it would be a good idea to use Syrian and Israeli flags, because we would like to have peace with Arab countries […] We represent a new kind of Israeli who wants to be normal and have peace. We want to have fun and not go to war, but the right wing is not happy about that message" (Goldenberg, 2000)

Eventually, the IBA effectively ‘disowned’ the band by allowing it to participate but at their own financial expense, including their lodging in Stockholm, where the contest was being held. The chairman of the IBA publicly stated: “They will compete there, but not on behalf of the IBA or the Israeli people […] They are representing only themselves” (Goldenberg, 2000). Much as it had two years earlier, with the selection and ultimate ESC victory of transgender singer Dana International, Israel engaged in an intense public debate about its national identity and the image it would allow itself to export to the rest of Europe; whilst the debate in 1998 focused on secularism versus Jewish orthodoxy and morality (Walzer, 2000), in this occasion the controversy versed around the perceived affront to the integrity of the nation through the embracing of the flag of an ‘enemy’ country. The Israeli nation could collectively come to terms with being represented by a transgender singer, but issues of national security proved to be too controversial to be agreed upon.

The case of Serbia & Montenegro in 2006 resulted from the country’s withdrawal from than year’s ESC. The selection of the national entry took place in a joint live TV event organized by the Serbian and Montenegrin public broadcasters, a contest with an equal number of Serbian and Montenegrin performers and judges –all this with the backdrop of the upcoming referendum on Montenegrin separation from Serbia scheduled for the day after the ESC. When the Montenegrin judges refused to award any votes to any of the Serbian performers, effectively granting victory for a Montenegrin band, the audience in the Belgrade hall began “booing and throwing bottles at the stage” (BBC source, March 2006). The Serbian national broadcaster subsequently refused to accept the result of the national selection; the ensuing scandal across the Federation prompted former Serbian Prime Minister Zoran Zivkovic to state that the commotion had caused “much more excitement last night than the death of Slobodan Milosevic”. According to the BBC, “several Montenegrin newspapers [said] the row shows that the federation with Serbia not only fails to work politically or economically, but cannot even function musically” –a view that transcended the boundaries of the national media sphere through the international repercussion of the ESC. Unable to find consensus in a political environment marred by discursive struggles over national identity, Serbia & Montenegro withdrew their participation on the 2006 contest; a day after the European final, Montenegro voted itself out of its federation with Serbia.

**Conclusion**

As it became painfully evident during the research process for this paper, an exhaustive analysis of the articulation of collective identity in the Eurovision Song
Contest can—and perhaps should—occupy an entire volume. This chapter has attempted to outline the triangular process of collective identity at play in the ESC: pan-European, regional, and national; and has needed to be rather restrictive with the empirical cases it has adopted as illustration. Even within its limits, the argument has been made: well beyond its musical content, the ESC is a rich and complex arena for the interplay of collective representation, and it will continue to be so as long as it remains as popular with viewers as it has become over the past five decades.

In 2006, the show celebrated its 51st hosting in Athens. Once again, hundreds of millions of Europeans have staged their public dialogue about their national representation through their local selections, and in May will engage in interactive viewing and voting, exercising their national, regional and continental identities through it. It makes for infectious viewing and compulsive political analysis, national pride and—often—embarrassment and ‘banal’ international confrontation, and for all its regional collusions and nationalist content, it remains an intrinsically European classic.

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