Soft power, cultural relations and conflict through Eurovision and other mega-events: a literature review

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1 Introduction

1.1 Research questions

This literature review explores the significance of the Eurovision Song Contest for soft power strategies and cultural relations activities, especially at times of conflict and international aggression.

The European Broadcasting Union (EBU), Europe's alliance of public service broadcasters, has organised Eurovision annually since 1956. Uniquely among events of its scale, the winner of each contest enjoys the right to host the event the following year. It now consists of three live television shows broadcast in more than 40 countries and streamed globally online. In 2023, it reached 162 million television viewers and attracted 500,000 additional visitors to its host city, Liverpool.[1]

Eurovision today has features of sports mega-events like the Olympics and large-scale city-based cultural events like City/Capital of Culture programmes, as well as distinctive features of its own. It is unique as an international, televised popular music competition produced by an alliance of public service broadcasters which promotes cultural exchange across borders.

In Part I of this review, we draw on research on these other kinds of mega-events to understand how they have been used for soft power and cultural relations purposes. We also review the literature on UK cultural brands and soft power since London 2012, and the literature on cultural events, conflict and peacebuilding. In Part II, we apply insights from these literatures as we review the literature on Eurovision itself.

The review aims to address the following research questions:

- How are sports mega-events and cultural mega-events used for soft power and cultural relations purposes?
- How has conflict affected large-scale events?
- How do these help us understand the context of Eurovision 2023, when Ukraine could not host because of Russia's ongoing full-scale invasion?
- How do these help us understand Eurovision's soft power and cultural relations potential in future?

In defining 'conflict', we note that Ukrainian experts emphasise 'conflict' is too loose a term on its own to describe Russia's aggression towards Ukraine.[2] This review takes 'conflict' to include outright international military aggression and other geopolitical disputes which have caused tension in international competition.

This review does not systematically cover evidence from Eurovision 2022, when Ukraine won the contest while resisting Russia's full-scale invasion, or Eurovision 2023, the first time the contest has ever had to be moved because the rightful host was under attack. These will form part of the background for our final report.

1.2 Key concepts

1.2.1 Soft power

The idea of soft power appeals to diplomats, politicians, governments, institutions, researchers and commentators as a way of explaining how states acquire influence in the modern world. Its originator, Joseph Nye, described it as 'getting others to want the outcomes that you want', through attraction and co-option rather than the 'hard power' of economic, political, or military force.[3]

Soft power assumes that people and states live in an inherently competitive world.[4] It frames the intititutions, activities, culture(s) and heritage within each state as 'assets' or 'resources' in that competition.[5] It simultaneously encompasses much less quantifiable aspects of influence and emotion. These all rest on perceptions of actors' reputation and credibility.[6]

Some ways that states might build soft power today overlap with traditional statecraft, such as influence and leadership in cybersecurity,[7] the COVID-19 response,[8] or indeed the attractiveness of their defence policy or military prowess.[9] Actors' participation in spheres of international collaboration from science diplomacy to humanitarian aid can also be seen as increasing their soft power.[10]

Demonstrating a functioning and fair civil society, or exercising thoughtful leadership and governance within the international community, can contribute to soft power in this model. So can states' reputations in the creative industries and arts, and their wider international service to these sectors (section 4).

The non-state actors who make these things happen usually do not see themselves as working for the state's soft power, and may distance themselves from it, as in the cultural relations model (1.2.2). The soft power model still treats them as assets which will reflect on the soft power of the state.

Soft power is not the same as public diplomacy, but is closely connected, because public diplomacy represents one set of approaches that international actors commonly use to develop their soft power.[11] However, much activity linked to soft power occurs outside the public diplomacy sphere.

The soft power debate has led to further concepts such as 'smart power' and, more recently, 'sharp power'. 'Smart power' relates to how actors combine tools of hard and soft power, as the USA was under pressure to do during the Global War on Terror.[12] 'Sharp power' refers to how divisive actors manipulate democratic information environments in countries they target, often using routes like culture and media which are often seen as soft power tools.[13]

Critics of the soft power model argue that it relies on 'unsubstantiated and simplistic assumptions about culture, communication and audiences',[14] and often fails to engage with cultural policy studies or the arts and humanities.[15] Media and communications scholars are well aware that audiences participate in creating meaning when they engage with content, and transforming meaning when they create new content that communicates about it in digital space.[16]

'Relational' models of soft power therefore reframe one-way ideas of influence and attraction to expect that audiences will be interacting with others and communicating in a 'global public sphere', as long as they are engaged enough with what an actor is offering.[17] This requires actors to give up more control over the creation of meaning than they have conventionally been comfortable with.[18]

Soft power's greatest weakness as a concept is probably that, as Laura Roselle, Alister Miskimmon, and Ben O'Loughlin argue, it does not account for how assets and resources have effects.[19] Statistics about their reach do not in themselves explain what impact they had, if any.[20] Nor does someone's engagement with cultural content from a country tell us anything, in itself, about how far they share the values of the actor which offered it to them.[21]

Evaluations of institutions' soft power activities, meanwhile, tend to measure outputs much more often than impact, that is, 'who notices and what difference does it make?'[22]

One higher-level means of synthesising evidence about soft power indicators which often appeals to policymakers is the soft power index. These use various polling methodologies to rank states against each other and illustrate rising and falling powers year on year.[23] These can measure attractiveness, but do not reveal what narratives respondents had about the countries involved.[24]

A further criticism of the mainstream notion of soft power is that it understands attraction simplistically. Attraction is a 'subjective' experience, yet the model does not ask 'how attraction happens' or what is attractive to whom.[25] It is detached from insights into the dynamics of attraction that the humanities, feminism or queer politics might bring.

For instance, Ty Solomon has argued that emotions and aesthetics need writing back into how soft power theory conceives of attraction. Solomon views attraction in soft power as less to do with 'cultural influence' or even narrative, more to do with audiences' emotional investments in the ideas and images of identity that actors offer them.[26] These emotional investments underpin the communities of shared interests and values that individuals imagine themselves into as they engage with communications.[27]

These insights about attraction may be particularly useful for understanding the soft power impact of culture, because engaging with culture already engages the senses in ways that heighten emotions.

For instance, O'Loughlin and Marie Gillespie suggest that viewers' 'embodied, visceral and deeply emotional' responses to watching mega-events like the Olympics, where national identity and pride are in play, make these events an out-of-the-ordinary viewing experience.[28] They might therefore create stronger emotional investments in the perceptions that viewers form. The question then becomes how far those perceptions linger after the festive event.

The 'Arts, cultural relations and soft power' report commissioned by the British Council in 2017 found some early developing evidence of arts aimed at large-scale global audiences influencing people emotionally. Since cultural connections are incremental, though, they noted challenges in measuring this over the long term.[29]

Soft power is usually separated from cultural relations by contrasting their purposes. If soft power represents 'the pursuit of influence through attraction in the national interest', cultural relations denotes 'creating the conditions for collaboration between like-minded people and countries in pursuit of the common good'.[30]

1.2.2 Cultural relations

Today, ideas of soft power and cultural relations may be blurring, according to one of the British Council's most recent reports. Many states' soft power strategies now appeal more to ideas of the common good, especially around climate change and COVID-19, and cultural relations are increasingly instrumentalised for foreign policy ends.[31]

However, soft power and cultural relations have always been connected, in the sense that actors which want to grow their soft power will be interested in what advantages cultural relations could bring them. If they make policy, like states or cities, they also influence the conditions of possibility for cultural relations activity.

A year after the London Olympics/Paralympics in 2012, the British Council's 'Influence and attraction' report used the 'multi-layered', 'powerful' example of the London 2012 Olympic opening ceremony (2.5) to set the scene for arguing that cultural relations matter:

> *The United Kingdom is completely connected to a multipolar and interdependent world, and just as the people of the UK came together in the Olympic opening ceremony through culture, with everyone recognising their distinctiveness, their commonalities, and the complexity of their differences, so culture must be acknowledged as a fundamental and indispensable means of creating a global dialogue. People comprehend each other through culture. That is why cultural relations matter, and why they hold such promise.*[32]

'Influence and attraction' argued that digital media and international people-to-people communication were transforming cultural relations. People in most of the world enjoyed more exposure than ever before to culture from other countries, beyond the bounds of their own national media and cultural industries, and new technologies were equipping grassroots and amateur cultural producers to create, communicate, share and sell their work across borders.[33]

Conceptually, it brought 'big-C culture' ('formal' high culture), 'small-c culture' (popular entertainment), 'capital-D diplomacy' (formal activity pursuing national interests), and 'small-d diplomacy' (cross-border interaction by independent actors) into one matrix of cultural relations.[34]

'Influence and attraction' hypothesised that cultural relations build trust between people, which can have a positive impact on activities like tourism and trade which benefit cities, regions and states. It emphasised that governments should stay at arm's length from cultural relations activity, to avoid the 'suspicion and hostility' that often accompanies direct government sponsorship of cultural exchange.[35]

It encouraged governments to work over the long term to 'create conditions for broad and deep cultural exchange' between peers, since this is 'more likely to generate trust', and to support inward-facing as well as outward-facing cultural relations, in the interests of developing 'a culturally literate and globally aware population'.[36]

'Influence and attraction', and other UK reports about cultural relations and soft power in 2013–14 (4.1), appeared at a time of international optimism about how global digital networking between people with shared values could promote common understanding and democratic change. The picture is very different today.[37]

Peer-to-peer digital communications on social media platforms can promote disinformation and conspiracy narratives as readily as they have enabled international people-to-people cultural exchange.[38] Manipulative state-sponsored campaigns can seed these narratives,[39] which are amplified by platforms' algorithms, but so can private citizens themselves.[40]

'Soft power and cultural relations: a comparative analysis' updated two previous studies of states' soft power and cultural relations approaches during the COVID-19 crisis, and was published shortly after Russia began its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. It perceived several key trends in the literature on cultural relations and soft power:

- the impact of actors relying even more on digital communication and delivery, and the challenges of communicating in a 'post-truth culture'
- new actors play greater roles in creating, influencing and sharing cultural meanings – including individuals, and also cities, regions, international/multilateral organisations and NGOs
- soft power strategies are increasingly appealing to shared values, while actors with illiberal values are making increasing use of cultural relations and soft power, including the manipulation of trust
- domestic audiences, and diaspora communities within the domestic audience, are becoming more important
- more attention to sports activities, and to activities linked to nationalist narratives and identity construction[41]

It noted that cultural relations practices and narratives can only build trust if they are consistent with actors' policies and strategies.[42] It also observed that 'cultural relations' as a term is not well understood beyond the sphere of practitioners in countries which already use it, which limits how much public debate there can be about it.[43]

The impacts of cultural relations, just like the impacts of soft power, are seen as difficult to evaluate. This is even more the case for trying to measure how non-state actors' cultural relations work could also be helping achieve the objective of states' cultural diplomacy.[44]

One approach to the impact problem has been to recommend studying 'reception and interpretation of specific narratives' by audiences.[45] The 'strategic narrative' literature takes this up.

1.2.3 Strategic narrative

Laura Roselle, Alister Miskimmon and Ben O'Loughlin's concept of strategic narrative views narratives and attractiveness in two ways. Narratives about a country's history, identity, or actions can be compelling and attractive in themselves. Moreover, culture and other soft power 'assets' can resonate with individuals' own personal narratives about their identity and values, their communities, and their place in the world.[46]

In a changing communications environment and an increasingly unpredictable world, narratives arguably become more important as ways for people to impose order over perceived chaos.[47] The range of actors and institutions involved in this process is much wider than states.[48]

Strategic narratives take three main forms in this model:

- narratives about the international system, which show how an actor conceives of international order
- narratives aiming to influence the development of policies
- narratives about identity that an actor aims to project internationally[49]

Actors that can align these three narrative layers attractively stand the best chance of exercising influence.[50]

International organisations articulating strategic narratives, like the European Union (EU), face the additional challenge of harmonising narratives that will be acceptable to all their member states.[51]

To interpret strategic narratives, Roselle, Miskimmon and O'Loughlin use narrative theory to break down key narrative elements and suggest what these might correspond to in the international order. For instance:

- which 'characters and actors' have agency and are considered important to the narrative?
- which 'characteristics, attitudes and behaviours' are the characters associated with?
- what is the setting, where does action take place, and what kind of environment is it depicted as – for instance, 'a world of friends and enemies' or a co-operative world?
- what is the action: who is doing what to whom, and what follows from that?
- how is its time-frame organised into past, present, and future?
- what is the suggested resolution to the narrative?[52]

Other theoretical approaches pose further questions. For instance, a feminist approach asks what ideas and assumptions about gender, identity and security underlie narratives in international affairs.[53]

Understanding strategic narratives' impact involves studying their 'formation', 'projection' and 'reception'. Formation refers to how actors construct and agree the narratives. Projection refers to how the narratives are crafted into content, communicated and contested, especially through digital media. Reception refers to how individuals make sense of the narratives and what reach they have.[54]

Studies of reception are less common than studies of formation or projection, because establishing causal relationships between narratives and impact is so difficult.[55]

Strategic narrative might seem less relevant to cultural relations than to soft power. However, cultural relations activities also advance implicit narratives about actors and the international system. Moreover, the strategic narrative literature reminds us that participants in cultural relations activity already have pre-existing narratives about those things which make new narratives more, or less, 'sticky'.[56]

1.2.4 Nation branding

Nation branding has affinities with soft power, but is distinct from cultural relations. It applies corporate branding strategies to nations and states, and emerged in the late 1990s/2000s as a practice that consultants deliberately promoted to states which wished to improve or change their international profile.[57]

On its own terms, nation branding views the world as 'a gigantic stage on which nations are competing against each other for attention and affection' by creatively leveraging their soft power assets.[58]

Reviews of the nation branding literature identify several different approaches. 'Technical–economic' approaches by practitioners and marketing experts have promoted nation branding as a strategic tool, without necessarily evaluating its effectiveness.[59] Indeed, sceptics of nation branding suggest its ability to change perceptions is limited by what is already in people's minds 'and the sad fact that manifestly not many countries actually matter to most people.'[60]

'Political' approaches have concentrated on the importance of nation branding practices for international relations in a competitive world, and are also aimed at helping practitioners and institutions employ nation branding more effectively.[61]

Critical approaches to how nation branding strategies use culture and represent collective identity were the smallest group of studies when Nadia Kaneva surveyed the nation branding literature in 2011[62] – and, even then, included one study of Eurovision.[63] The critical literature has since grown substantially.[64]

Critical studies focus on how internal struggles over the meanings of national identity play out in nation branding campaigns, mismatches between public and elite versions of national identity, and the internal and external pressures on countries to live up to Western stereotypes in their self-representation. Some even question the impact that marketing and monetising national culture and territory may be having on ideals of national citizenship.[65]

A shortcoming of the critical nation branding literature is arguably that it has often not paid enough attention to media as active participants in nation branding practices. While nation branding campaigns depend on media, and many critical scholars of nation branding work in media and communications, the literature itself has often treated them as 'passive' actors.[66]

However, media organisations play active roles in producing the content of nation branding campaigns, and sometimes in encouraging states to hire them. Every media technology used in nation branding has characteristics which affect the content, format and audiences of the campaign. Göran Bolin and Galina Miazhevich have thus called on scholars to study nation branding 'as a media production and reception practice'.[67] This resonates with how Roselle, Miskimmon and O'Loughlin suggest thinking about soft power.

Nation branding is not the same as cultural relations, which assumes mutuality and co-operation. However, because culture is so important to nation branding, many sites of nation branding activity are also sites where cultural relations are taking place.

1.2.5 City branding

City branding is another dimension of 'place branding' which is important for understanding the soft power and cultural relations potential of mega-events. A literature on 'city branding' began appearing in the early 2000s to explain how city authorities were adopting corporate branding and marketing strategies to promote their cities' images.[68]

Much like the nation branding literature, city branding literature has divided into studies aimed at making city branding more effective and studies which examine the practices and impact of city branding critically. Similarly, the production of city branding strategies has been a more common research topic than the reception of them.[69]

A key theme in critical studies of city branding has been that, compared to corporations and products, cities are much more 'complex and uncontrollable' entities where the life and identity of the city develop organically, through the activities of what may be millions of people and their organisations.[70] This has suggested that successful city branding ought to be based on more dynamic, community-driven, and fluid understandings of each city's identity.[71]

City branding 'clearly emphasises specific discourses, places, subjects and narrations' in its representations, while it makes 'subjects, spaces and issues disturbing the promotional narrative' invisible.[72] Such gaps between image and reality often make city branding less credible to local audiences.

Culture is 'crucial' to city branding, though scholars suggest it is often used quite instrumentally.[73] Branding practices like attracting hallmark events, associating the city with a famous cultural personality, and investing in flagship buildings or signature districts are much more common than approaches which employ deeper understandings of how culture and its meanings are socially constructed.[74]

City branding differs from destination branding, which is aimed mainly at tourists, because it addresses all the 'users, potential users and ... stakeholders' of a city.[75] Among those stakeholders are higher levels of governmental authority, up to the nation-state.

States themselves can have interests in city branding. Cities 'often symbolise and represent the nation at large', so their branding campaigns can have indirect benefits for states and national governments.[76] States can also launch city branding campaigns directly. Rhys Crilley and Ilan Manor suggests this can enable states with negative international images to 'use cities as branding surrogates', hoping audiences will transfer the positive values and qualities they associate with the city on to the nation; they call this practice 'un-nation branding'.[77]

However, there are several unknowns in evaluating the impact of this emerging practice. It is not yet clear how far audiences do transfer the values they associate with cities on to the nation-state over the long term, or how tourists and other audiences resist or challenge the identity claims that nation-states are making when they promote cities and downplay the nation-state.[78]

City branding and nation branding both leverage occasions when the place they are branding is likely to receive higher levels of international attention than usual. Among the largest-scale of these are mega-events.

1.2.6 Mega-events

There is some debate over how large events must be to count as mega-events. Maurice Roche's widely cited definition of the term states they are 'large-scale cultural (including commercial and sporting) events which have a dramatic character, mass popular appeal and international significance'.[79] He especially applied this to the Olympic Games and international expos.

Some event studies specialists reserve the term 'mega-event' for events with visitor numbers in the hundreds of thousands, global broadcast rights worth at least US $100m (£78.8m), costs of over $1bn (£787.5m), and/or at least $1bn (£787.5m) of capital investment.[80] In its narrowest applications, this might effectively only cover the Olympics and the men's football World Cup,[81] which some scholars even elevate into 'giga-events'.[82] Other international events are then considered 'special', 'hallmark', 'major', or part of a 'second-order' category of mega-events.[83]

Outside this strand of the specialist events literature, however, 'mega-event' is used more loosely. The media scholar Göran Bolin described Eurovision as a mega-event as long ago as 2006, in one of the first articles on the event's international politics.[84] European Capital of Culture programmes have been described as mega-events for even longer.[85]

Indeed, an alternative approach to mega-events in the cultural events literature takes into account the scale of endeavour an event represents for its host city compared to the city's capacities, not just the event's absolute size. City/Capital of Culture programmes are thus mega-events for their cities because they demand 'mega' levels of effort.[86]

Today, Eurovision operates on a scale that even exhibits characteristics of mega-events more strictly defined. Eurovision 2023 attracted 500,000 visitors to Liverpool, five times the expected number, and reached 162 million people on television. It is the world's most familiar non-sport event to members of the public in Europe, enjoying 96 per cent familiarity, behind only the Olympics with 99 per cent familiarity and the World Cup with 97 per cent.[87]

Moreover, the wider international framework of mega-events has become a frame of reference for viewers, journalists and stakeholders to understand Eurovision. Commentators have called it the 'Olympics' and 'World Cup' of song, and called it the 'gay Olympics' or 'gay World Cup' to illustrate its importance to LGBTQ+ fans.[88]

Cities apply practices and know-how from hosting other large-scale cultural and sports events to hosting Eurovision.[89] Discourses about the human rights records, especially LGBTQ+ rights records, of host states have connected Eurovision to other mega-events since at least 2008–9, when Beijing hosted the 2008 Olympics and Moscow hosted Eurovision 2009.[90] For all these reasons, Eurovision can be treated as a mega-event.

Many commentators link mega-events to the idea of soft power, as sections 2 and 3 explore further. The challenge for evaluating the soft power impact of mega-events is to demonstrate how they increased a host's soft power and influence, or how they change behaviours.

Mega-events are also spaces where formal and informal cultural relations take place. Eurovision represents a distinctive example, with elements of both sporting and cultural mega-events.

1.3 Structure

This review explores what the research literature about sports and cultural mega-events in general, and Eurovision in particular, can suggest about the cultural relations and soft power impact of Eurovision. Eurovision is less studied from a cultural relations and soft power perspective than other mega-events, though this is changing.[91]

We explore how sports mega-events and large-scale city-based cultural events have been used for soft power and cultural relations purposes. We also consider the impact of conflict on them. To help understand the context of Eurovision 2023, we also review literature on culture, conflict and peacebuilding, and literature on the soft power potential of UK cultural brands.

Eurovision exhibits features of sports mega-events:

- it is a competition, with quantifiable results and records
- competitors must trust the governing body and its rules
- it is broadcast internationally with mass audience reach
- its structure emphasises nation-states as actors
- hosts' and participants' human rights records are discussed in a transnational public sphere

It also exhibits features of large-scale city-based cultural events:

- it is themed around culture and music
- it is delivered by the creative and media sectors
- visitors come to host cities for cultural experiences
- cities can provide supplementary cultural programming for visitors (and residents, during Liverpool 2023)

In other respects, Eurovision is distinctive as a mega-event:

- its governing body is an international alliance of public service broadcasters, the European Broadcasting Union
- it places national musical cultures in competition with each other
- the public directly participate in deciding the result
- it has developed an appeal to LGBTQ+ audiences which is not shared by any other mega-event
- the host country for each year is not decided by the governing body in advance – instead, winning the contest gives hosting rights for the following year

Literature shows that Eurovision has often been used to advance soft power strategies and communicate strategic narratives, especially for countries on peripheries of Europe. The politics of conflict have also affected it throughout its history. We explore case studies of these aspects in the literature, and highlight other themes in Eurovision research which demonstrate its cultural relations potential.

Part I

2 Sports mega-events, soft power, cultural relations and conflict

2.1 Introduction

This review does not attempt exhaustive coverage of the literature on soft power/cultural relations and sport in general. A wide literature already exists on 'sport diplomacy', which sometimes uses the idea of 'soft power'.[92] There is now also a critical literature on 'sportswashing', or how international actors can launder their reputations by sponsoring or associating with sport.[93] A very recent British Council literature review has surveyed the literature on sport, cultural relations and peacebuilding.[94]

Sports mega-events have been seen as bridging all five domains where states try to build soft power: culture, tourism, branding, trade, and diplomacy.[95] Sport diplomacy mechanisms that could support soft power outcomes include:

• image-building for political capital

• peaceful cultural exchange, building platforms for dialogue

• bottom-up trust-building activities

• promoting reconciliation, integration and anti-racism[96]

All can have 'unintended consequences' or be taken over by third-party actors.[97]

The 'Sport, cultural relations and peacebuilding' literature review urges organisations to think about sport's cultural relations value in establishing mutuality, trust and co-operation over the long term, and to look beyond elite sports to the grassroots.[98] It warns that building strategy around mega-events risks 'short-termism' and reactive, not proactive, policymaking.[99]

Nevertheless, mega-events still bring unparalleled international public attention to sports, competitors, host cities, and host states. They provide 'vehicles for nation-states to construct or reshape specific brand identities and achieve certain foreign policy objectives',[100] though there is no guarantee this will succeed.

States mainly leverage mega-events through communicating messages to international audiences, successfully hosting, and/or demonstrating sporting abilities on the world stage'.[101] Such leveraging strategies offer the kinds of empirical examples that can fill gaps in abstract theorisations of soft power.[102]

Literature on the politics of hosting mega-events concentrates on the material benefits to host states and cities, how mega-events can enhance the host state's attractiveness to others (which can build soft power), and increasingly also on mega-events' role in 'creating, negotiating and boosting' national identity and other collective identities.[103]

Jonathan Grix and Donna Lee argue that sports mega-events appeal for internationally and domestically focused public diplomacy because 'sport is a collective event which is culturally understood and socially played out through the lens of shared and celebrated universal values'.[104] Successfully hosting a mega-event can simultaneously convey a state's 'cultural distinctiveness and value' and its capacity for 'shared norms and sameness' with other states, though unsuccessfully building or communicating these narratives can weaken hosts' attractiveness instead.[105]

Cities too leverage mega-events to communicate narratives about themselves. Olympic host cities, for instance, project their narratives through visuals, opening and closing ceremonies, sporting and accommodation architecture, and through (often unproven) policy narratives about the event's legacy.[106]

Host states and cities also, however, give up some agency to mega-events' governing bodies. The organisers of the largest mega-events, FIFA and the International Olympic Committee (IOC), have been seen as effectively taking 'infrastructural, legal, and financial control of host cities and nations' by warping their development priorities towards delivering the event.[107] 'Event seizure' also takes place within countries when host elites backing the event, like national/local politicians, landowners and business leaders, use it to appropriate resources.[108]

Culturally, the mass international broadcasting of any mega-event gives the impression of an international community gathering 'around a moral or social centre, a set of values and shared histories that anchor that community's sense of self'.[109]

Literature on the narratives that states and cities hosting mega-events articulate within this atmosphere has set the tone for research on Eurovision hosts' narratives as well. Key research questions in this literature include:

• what narratives hosts project
• what tools they use
• what audiences they reach
• how their audiences interpret them[110]

Disjunctures between stakeholders' and audiences' discourses about these narratives have also grown more visible, and demanded more research, in the social media era.[111] One major theme of public debate in these spaces is often the selection of event hosts, since governing bodies' endorsement of a host is liable to be seen as their recognising 'certain values and identities' by giving that host a platform for its narratives.[112] Host states/cities and governing bodies must therefore 'be prepared for open social media debate in multiple languages about great power politics and national or sub-national identities' associated with the chosen site.[113]

Many questions about the effects of global media coverage of mega-events remain open in the literature. Among them are:

• whether soft power actually is cultivated in a given case
• whether the coverage legitimates host states' management of the event thus enhancing their authority
• whether audiences 'spontaneously form productive cross-cultural conversations and come to share understandings' through their digital interactions
• whether broadcasters too establish their own centrality to world events through sharing the coverage with their audiences[114]
• how far they also expose hosts to negative publicity or 'soft disempowerment'[115]

It is difficult to answer these without sustained, long-term, international audience research.

2.2 Culture in sports mega-events

Research on culture in sports mega-events is most extensive for the Olympics, although the principles can be extended to other mega-events. Beatriz García identifies four main sources of cultural production in the Olympic movement:

• the symbols of each Games and the Olympic movement
• Olympic ceremonies and rituals
• the promotional strategy and branding for each host city
• the cultural activities programme ('Cultural Olympiad')[116]

Opening and closing ceremonies, televised to the live international audience, are the most elaborate uses of culture in sports mega-events. At the Olympics, they began taking their current form at the Moscow 1980 and Los Angeles 1984 Games.[117]

Olympic opening ceremonies communicate narratives of national and city identity to international viewers and host country citizens at the same time, and usually employ 'a serendipitous mix of influences from sports to the music industry; an aggregation of civil society'.[118] They not only connect viewers with 'trans-historical cultural symbols associated with universal values' (the Olympic movement) but also reaffirm or reimagine historical consciousness in the host nation.[119] Televised ceremonies therefore:

also function as tools of soft power and public diplomacy – aiming to project positive and attractive images abroad and instill a sense of pride and belonging at home. Danny Boyle's London 2012 ceremonies may have been met with surprise and bewilderment overseas but they made a powerful statement about Britain's place in the world and its cultural heritage.[120]

The ceremony format's conventions invite creative teams to deliver world-leading examples of mass performance, technological prowess, symbolic manipulation, aesthetic enchantment, whimsy and humour (argued to display soft power 'because it is designed to demonstrate both a soft heart and the self-assurance and strength to be able to let the mask of power slip'), and musical grandeur.[121] Certain ritual elements such as the torch-lighting are stipulated in the Olympic charter, but even these are performed in 'nationally specific' ways which harness and communicate national culture.[122]

Scholars see mega-event opening and closing ceremonies as key places where narratives of the nation are created and broadcast to the national and international public. They have become 'elaborately staged and commercialized narratives of nation', which deserve critical analysis for how they represent questions of gender relations and racial/ethnic belonging within the nation.[123]

Today, ceremonies' producers, directors and artistic teams are increasingly drawn from the 'international entertainment landscape' of film, television, theatrical and live-event production.[124] Their creative challenge is to deliver innovative staging methods for 'media-saturated audiences' while complying with the stipulations and values of the event's governing body, and the host's ambitions to project its strategic narratives at home and abroad.[125]

Cities and event organising committees also rely on culture in crafting their city branding. García suggests that city brand images supporting mega-events need to be 'bold', 'simplified', and easily recognisable to a diverse global audience where awareness of the local environment is low.[126] Today's media environment requires them to be suitable across media platforms and attractive for social media users to share. García sees this form of '"packaging" cultural narrative' as 'a form of contemporary myth-building exercise' which can require careful bridge-building between local and global interests.[127]

The Cultural Olympiad tradition meanwhile dates back to the beginning of the modern Olympic movement. Its founder, Baron Pierre de Coubertin, had always aspired for arts and literature to become part of Olympic competition.[128] Olympics between 1912 and 1948 contained arts competitions where medals were awarded for architecture, literature, music, painting and sculpture.[129] Anticipating controversies about fairness at Eurovision (6.9.5), there were difficulties about how to judge art, how to transport large artworks, whether to restrict entries to sporting themes, and whether professional artists could compete.[130]

From 1952 onwards, the IOC required cities to deliver a non-competitive cultural programme instead of medal-bearing cultural competitions.[131] In 2014, the IOC adopted a more active cultural strategy by opening an executive department for culture and Olympic heritage, which developed an ongoing cultural action plan.[132] It also began exploring how Olympic branding regulations could change to allow grassroots cultural programming in host cities to associate itself directly with the Games.[133]

There is a much smaller literature on culture and the Paralympics, which since 1988 have been hosted directly after each Olympics in the same host city.[134] They are still significant in their own right for the culture of disability, patriotism and resilience they mediate to audiences.[135]

For instance, Paralympics have had their own opening and closing ceremonies since 1992.[136] These involve disabled performers and may showcase national examples of disabled culture and art.[137] The London 2012 Paralympics ceremonies, for instance, were co-directed by Jenny Sealey, artistic director of the mixed-ability theatre company Graeae, in a highly-charged national climate for disability activism (where the Paralympics' main sponsor, Atos, was a protest target).[138]

London 2012's Paralympic Cultural Olympiad was celebrated as 'the largest showcase of disabled art ever seen', with more than 800 disabled and Deaf artists participating over the four years, including almost 200 who were commissioned for the inaugural Unlimited Festival.[139]

The Paralympics also have direct links to conflict, since many Paralympic athletes are civilians or military veterans who have been disabled in war. Others have survived landmine injuries. The movement itself takes its origin point as the first Stoke Mandeville Games in 1948, which coincided with the 1948 Olympics and were organised for disabled veterans of the Second World War.[140]

Besides cultural production by event organisers and governing bodies, the most important cultural institutions involved with mega-events are broadcasters. Broadcasters leverage mega-events to build influence for themselves. They mediate the event's meanings to their national public by buying its broadcast rights in their territory, and some public broadcasters have international news arms which communicate to a global audience. These aim to 'enhance the influence and attractiveness of their sponsoring nations' through communicating news.[141]

For BBC World News, for instance, 'international sporting rivalries and the inevitable political debates surrounding how the host country manage the task of staging the Olympics are an ideal context in which values, deemed to be British and democratic, can be demonstrated, for example by adherence to the core BBC value of impartiality.'[142]

This now takes place in the context of transnational public debate about how hosts use mega-events.

2.3 Soft power, cultural relations, and the 'transnational public sphere'

The case of the 2008 Beijing Olympics illustrated that mega-events and their governing bodies have arguably created a 'transnational public sphere' around their professed shared values.[143] International campaigners can appeal to this public sphere in pressuring host states to improve their human rights records, and in exposing 'sportswashing'.[144] Activists in different countries protesting against their cities bidding for or hosting mega-events can also connect through this public sphere.[145]

Jules Boykoff points out 'sportswashing' can be employed by democratic as well as authoritarian states, and address domestic as well as international audiences. In all four forms, 'political leaders use sports to appear important or legitimate on the world stage while stoking nationalism and deflecting attention from chronic social problems and human-rights woes on the home front'.[146]

'Sportswashing' itself was coined by Rebecca Vincent and the Sport for Rights campaign before Baku hosted the 2015 European Games, in a complex of newly-built venues including a controversial arena built for hosting hosting Eurovision 2012.[147]

Actors perceived to have been cynical in attempting to accumulate soft power through sportswashing run the risk of what Richard Giulianotti calls 'soft disempowerment' among audiences who care about the event's professed values.[148]

Mindful of how Russia concealed preparations to annex Crimea and invade Donbas behind the Sochi Winter Olympics, Boykoff also observes that sportswashing 'can smooth the path for war' by 'clear[ing] space for hard-power interventions like an invasion'.[149] Not all the power that states can exercise through mega-events is soft.

The idea of mega-events having a 'transnational public sphere' is relevant for cultural relations as well as soft power. A cultural relations perspective on sports mega-events could treat them as 'key sites of geopolitical encounter … through people's interactions in the host cities and countries'.[150] These interactions can be direct and in person, direct and remote, or indirect (encounters with other cultures' ideas, values and beliefs).[151]

The most immersive interactions, however, are direct in-person encounters by visitors to event sites and spaces. One form of event space in contemporary mega-events that may be productive for cultural relations encounters is the fan park/fan zone/fan village.[152] These secured, sponsored and usually free-to-enter areas where fans watch the event on big screens and can purchase food, drink and merchandise were introduced at Euro 2004 in Portugal and popularised after the 2006 men's football World Cup in Germany.[153] Their cultural relations potential is still underexplored.

2.4 Conflict, soft power and the Olympic Games until 2008

The Olympic Games provide the longest history of how conflict has affected a mega-event and how it has been leveraged for soft power. They are the largest global mega-event, and also the sports mega-event which articulates shared values most deeply, through the 'Olympic movement' and the 'Olympic Truce'.[154]

Participating in and hosting the Olympics 'involves the convergence of cultural diplomacy, international broadcasting, and benign patriotism in an assertion of soft power within a multilateral yet competitive community of nations'.[155]

Critical scholars such as Helen Jefferson Lenskyj, however, reframe the Olympic movement as 'the Olympic industry'.[156] They contrast the movement's rhetoric with negative impacts they have identified in many host cities and countries, and argue against its claims that sport is above politics.[157]

The question of whether 'the games [are] a force for international peace or conflict' has overshadowed successive Olympiads.[158] The most famous example of an authoritarian, aggressive regime manipulating the Olympics is the Berlin 1936 Games, which normalised Nazi Germany in world society and distracted international attention from its antisemitic laws and military build-up.[159] The Nazis' aims to promote Aryan supremacy through culture meant these Games had the largest competitive Cultural Olympiad,[160] and also informed the introduction of the torch relay.[161]

World Wars forced the cancellation of the Olympics in 1916, 1940 and 1944. The first Games after each war symbolised the return to peace but also the realities of the postwar international order. Postwar Germany and Bolshevik Russia were not invited to the 1920 Antwerp Games, just as neither were initially invited to the League of Nations.[162]

Germany and Japan were not invited in 1948, and the USSR remained outside the IOC until 1951-2. The continued Soviet absence in 1948 thus arguably marked the first incursion of Cold War politics into the Olympics, which had greatest impact with the US boycott of Moscow 1980 and the Soviet bloc boycott of Los Angeles 1984.[163]

The Olympics of 1960 in Rome, 1964 in Tokyo and 1972 in Munich each enabled a state which had been on the Axis side (Italy, Japan and Germany) to promote how it had reformed and modernized, and be welcomed back into the international fold.[164] Munich is however remembered above all for the Black September terrorist attack which killed eleven members of the Israeli team – the most direct way armed conflict has affected any Olympic Games.[165] Competition was stopped, but for only one day.[166]

Local memories of the 1968 Games in Mexico City are also inseparable from political violence, since the Tlatelolco massacre of unarmed students protesting against the Games took place on the eve of the opening ceremony. Internationally, these Games are most remembered for the iconic Black Power protest by African American athletes John Carlos and Tommie Smith during their medal ceremony.[167]

Diplomatic conflicts expressed through boycotts increasingly defined the Olympics' politics in the 1960s–80s. Postcolonial African states used the power of a threatened boycott to force the IOC to exclude apartheid South Africa in 1968, and many did boycott the Montreal 1976 Games because the IOC would not punish New Zealand for its rugby team touring South Africa.[168] Post-apartheid South Africa returned in 1992.

The People's Republic of China boycotted the 1956 Games, withdrew from the IOC in 1958 and did not return until 1979 in protest over the IOC's position on the 'two-China dispute'.[169] Taiwan boycotted the 1952 and 1976 Games over its country name, and the IOC's 1979 resolution that it could compete as 'Chinese Taipei' is contested in Taiwanese society.[170]

The largest-scale Olympic boycotts were however the reciprocal boycotts of the 1980/1984 Summer Games, which marked the peak of state-based boycotts as a tactic.[171] They did not, however, affect the 1984 Winter Olympics in Sarajevo, since socialist Yugoslavia was geopolitically independent from the USSR. These Games became an important local marker of collective identity in Sarajevo, but are now overshadowed by the siege of the city during the Yugoslav Wars, which left the city's Olympic sites in ruins.[172]

The 1992 Barcelona Games, like Seoul in 1988, had been intended to communicate narratives about how the Olympics were jumpstarting economic regeneration in host countries and cities which were going through transition.[173] The 1992 Games also, however, had to manage the impact of the break-up of Yugoslavia and the USSR, and the effects of the Yugoslav Wars. Slovenia, Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina all competed as independent states, achieving an important milestone of international recognition.[174] Lithuania, Estonia, and Latvia also competed independently.

Athletes from the 'Federal Republic of Yugoslavia', which was already under United Nations sanctions, competed under the Olympic flag in 1992, as did athletes from independent Macedonia which did not yet have an Olympic committee. Athletes from Russia, Ukraine and the remaining former Soviet republics competed as the 'Unified Team'.

Olympics at the turn of the millennium celebrated peacemaking and optimism. The IOC lobbied for Olympic truce resolutions to be passed every two years at the UN General Assembly, and appealed to political leaders before the 1998 Winter Olympics to respect the truce during the weapons inspections crisis in Iraq.[175]

The Sydney 2000 Games offered global viewers the image of an Australia which was reconciling its settler and Indigenous populations, though domestically also involved the reinvention of an idealized and nostalgic national sporting history.[176] Its optimistic millennial mood had been shattered by the 2002 Winter Games in Salt Lake City, held in a climate of militarized patriotism in the wake of 9/11 and the US-led invasion of Afghanistan.[177]

The Athens 2004 Games were not as affected by international conflict, but illustrated how poor management of mega-events can compromise their soft power potential. The event creatively used antiquity as a resource for communicating the identity of modern Greece, featured architectural innovation, and successfully preserved ancient cultural heritage in Athens. In the longer term, these positives were compromised by the venues' later disrepair, the impact of Olympic spending on Greek public finances, and the lack of strategic planning for post-Olympic cultural tourism.[178]

The Beijing 2008, London 2012 and Sochi 2014 Games have all been extensively researched as examples of how states, cities, broadcasters and the IOC attempted to exercise influence through public diplomacy tools.[179] These efforts were also extensively contested at all three Games, which together shaped the contemporary international politics of mega-events.

2.5 The Beijing/London/Sochi Olympics and after

Beijing's Olympic narrative has been described as a 'glocalization' of the Olympics by adapting a global event through a traditional Chinese and Confucian lens.[180] It did not significantly alter the mainly negative perceptions of China among Western audiences in 2008–9 opinion surveys, though its narratives were arguably more aimed at a domestic audience anyway.[181] The 2008 Games remain recognized as a 'prominent, instructive instance' of sportswashing in action, though this did not stop the IOC awarding the 2022 Winter Olympics to Beijing.[182]

London 2012, conversely, left an 'almost uniformly positive' impact on international media after its opening ceremony, and a 'generally positive' impression of the Games themselves, despite some negative publicity beforehand about the practicalities of its organization and security.[183] It likely benefited from contrasts with the narrative strategies of Beijing.[184]

The London 2012 opening ceremony remains part of British cultural memory.[185] However, some critics argue it has been subject to 'misplaced nostalgia', since austerity measures in public spending were already affecting society, and the UK government had already introduced its 'hostile environment' immigration policy before the Games.[186] Its branding has also been criticised for not reflecting multicultural, working-class East London where the Olympic Park was developed,[187] though this did not carry over into its international reception.

London's strategy of 'putting "culture at the heart of the Games"' resulted in a Cultural Olympiad which invested in infrastructures to make people feel part of the Games beyond London and ticketed arenas, and consistently translated its narrative priorities into programming decisions.[188]

These narratives included youth engagement, raising Deaf/disabled artists' profile, inspiring communities in every UK region, showcasing the UK as a world-leading creative hub, driving large-scale participation, and 'celebrating London and the whole of the UK welcoming the world – its unique internationalism, cultural diversity, sharing and understanding.'[189]

Some programming also engaged audiences with themes of contemporary conflict. The 'Globe to Globe' strand of the Olympiad's World Shakespeare Festival, for instance, featured 37 Shakespeare productions from global theatre companies, including a production of *Cymbeline* in Juba Arabic from South Sudan, then the world's newest nation-state.[190]

London 2012 appeared to have immediate short-term soft power impact for the UK, which topped Monocle magazine's soft power chart in November, though longer-term impact is less clear.[191] As the first 'micro-blogged' Olympics on social media, it also opened a new phase in the formation of a transnational Olympic public sphere, and in overseas audiences' role in co-creating the meanings of global media events.[192]

Some studies evaluate UK soft power responses to London 2012. The UK government's GREAT campaign, launched to coincide with the Games, sought to use a 'hybrid', cross-platform approach to facilitate online public engagement.[193] The Foreign and Commonwealth Office's approach to London 2012 itself has been criticized for 'treating 'overseas publics … as passive subjects of UK´s soft power and public diplomacy', not 'equal counterparts in a global conversation'.[194]

The Sochi Olympics were the third significant Games in defining the 2008–14 transnational public sphere. Before Sochi, campaigns raising awareness of Russian sportswashing had focused on state persecution of dissidents such as Pussy Riot, and the introduction of anti-LGBTQ+ laws in June 2013.[195] The IOC banned athletes from protesting against the anti-LGBTQ+ laws during the Games.[196]

Russian provocations during the climax of Ukraine's Euromaidan revolution defined Sochi as a media event during the Games, 'foreshadowing Russia's eventual annexation of Crimea' which began only a few days later.[197]

Other human rights concerns were arguably 'largely forgotten' after Sochi, especially in North America.[198] The core Eurovision audience is an exception to this, since knowledge about Russian state homophobia significantly influenced reception of Eurovision 2014 and fans' responses to Russian entries in following years.[199]

Joseph Nye has argued that Russia 'failed to capitalize' on the soft power potential of hosting an Olympics because Putin attacked Ukraine instead.[200] Jonathan Grix and Nina Kramareva, however, suggest that Russia's narrative strategy during Sochi was not aimed internationally but domestically, engaging Russians with a national myth of Russian greatness in line with the narrative being weaponized against Ukraine.[201] This 'Russian world' narrative implied that Russia had the right to keep its neighbours within a common space and out of Euro-Atlantic institutions.[202]

Analysing Sochi's cultural dimension bears this out. Susan Tenneriello argues that the opening ceremony's stagecraft 'intensified the polarizing geocultural politics' of the Sochi Games, representing 'the opening scene of a much larger cultural campaign that has since rippled through neo-nationalist movements across Eastern and Western Europe, as well as the United States'.[203]

Among the actors involved in a 'game of projecting and counter-projecting narratives of the Russian nation' during these Olympics were BBC World News and Russia Today. Marie Gillespie and Ben O'Loughlin found that the BBC emphasised constructions of Russia as corrupt, insecure and illiberal by focusing on the cost of the Games, security problems, and LGBTQ+ issues. Russia Today 'spent more time rebutting critiques of Russia and bolstering a primordial Russian national myth'.[204]

Between the Beijing, London and Sochi Olympics, soft power became a greater focus in foreign policy for many international actors.[205] All three Olympics seem to have contributed to this turn. The 2010 Winter Games in Vancouver have been much less significant to mega-events and soft power scholars, besides critiques of how they narrated Canadian multiculturalism 'while deflecting attention from unresolved battles over the legal status of Indigenous land'.[206]

Appraisals of the impact of more recent Olympics, and their links to conflict, are still developing. Rio 2016 was the first Olympics held in a Global South country other than China since 1988, and enabled Brazil to consolidate itself as a regional power having only just hosted the 2014 men's World Cup.[207] Its soft power impact is still seen as unclear, requiring better understandings of which mechanisms might help states gain prestige after mega-events.[208]

The 2018 Winter Games in PyeongChang asserted South Korea's competitiveness in a domain dominated by the Global North and wider Europe, winter sports. It capitalized on the goodwill towards the so-called 'Korean Wave' in popular culture, and promoted this further through the closing ceremony. It also occurred at a fortunate time for South Korean/North Korean relations and enabled South Korea to communicate a peacemaking role.[209]

The narratives surrounding the Tokyo 2020 Games were of course dominated by the politics of recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic, which had delayed them to 2021. Before 2020, Japan's rationales for hosting the Games had included accelerating recovery from the 2011 earthquake and tsunami, and encouraging Japanese society to 'internationalize' itself away from its insular image.[210]

Tokyo's opening ceremony could not deploy culture in as much depth as other ceremonies due to pandemic restrictions, though Naomi Osaka's participation briefly symbolized a rarely visible multiracial Japan. Very shortly before the Olympics, Japan had also hosted the 2019 Rugby World Cup, and it may have been easier for Japan to achieve its domestic, regional and international objectives through this smaller-scale event than an event of Olympic size.[211]

Beijing entered Olympic history in 2022 as the first city to host both Summer and Winter Games. The central narrative of these second Beijing Games has been seen as 'reaffirm[ing] the PRC's authoritarian governance system and prove its legitimacy and success to the domestic and international audience, amidst the backdrop of the Covid-19 pandemic, diplomatic boycotts and allegations of human rights violations'.[212]

Pandemic restrictions on performer numbers under China's continuing zero-Covid policy again limited the event's ability to mobilise culture as conventionally understood in Olympic ceremony practice, though organisers compensated with technological solutions which promoted China as a 'green, high tech and engineering global power'.[213]

As the global refugee crisis worsened, the IOC acknowledged the impact of conflict at Rio 2016 by enabling athletes who had fled South Sudan, Syria, the DRC and Ethiopia to compete as a 'Refugee Olympic Team' under the Olympic flag.[214] A larger Refugee Team participated in Tokyo and also included athletes from Congo, Eritrea, Cameroon, Venezuela, Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan. No refugee athletes appeared in the 2018/2022 Winter Games.

The IOC has also had to respond to World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) sanctions against the Russian Olympic team for covering up evidence of systematic doping at the Sochi Olympics. In 2019, WADA initially banned Russia from international sport for four years, reduced to two on appeal to the Court of Arbitration for Sport.[215] In 2021–2, Russian athletes in Tokyo and Beijing competed as the 'Russian Olympic Committee' without use of the state flag or anthem. The Beijing Games ended on 20 February 2022, four days before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

2.6 Football World Cups and European Championships

After the Olympics, the second most-researched type of sports mega-events are global and continental football tournaments, including the FIFA World Cup and UEFA European Championships (as the tournament on the same continent as Eurovision).

These are large-scale events for host states, but have less impact on the branding of any one city, because they take place in a wider range of cities. Culture beyond sport is also less prominent in them. They do not have Olympic-style requirements for cultural programmes. They do have opening ceremonies, but these attract less media and research attention than their Olympic counterparts, though can still be analysed for what narratives they project about the identity of the host nation and the shared values of their sport.[216]

Besides their reliance on cultural industries for architecture and visual design, their strongest link with the culture sector is usually through musical production linked to the event. Official tournament songs and anthems are chosen by the governing body rather than local organisers, and designed for broad appeal among the game's international community. National sporting associations sometimes also co-operate with their country's recording industry to record team anthems.

Football tournaments have less to do with individual cities or with culture than the Olympics. For states, however, the politics and anticipated benefits of hosting them are similar. They also bring similar discourses about geopolitics, nation branding and human rights in the host country into the transnational public sphere.

The World Cups of other team sports are also smaller-scale mega-events which raise the same questions. Narratives from them can sometimes cut through beyond the sport's community, notably the emergence of post-apartheid South Africa as the 'rainbow nation' after winning the Rugby World Cup in 1995.[217] However, we concentrate here on football because the UEFA European Championships are the other main mega-event where the UK and many other European countries complete together.

One theme of the literature on international football tournaments is their domestic significance for national identity in the host country, especially at times when that country's identity is going through significant change. Euro 96, for instance, is widely credited with reinforcing a more emotive sense of English national identity in 1990s Britain, without any corresponding reinforcement of 'European' identity.[218]

The multiethnicity of France's World Cup-winning team in 1998 was celebrated as a symbol of a changing nation at the time, but the narrative came to look like an 'unsustainable' myth amid continuing evidence of racism inside and outside football.[219]

Studies of how press coverage in participating nations employs collective 'us' and them' stereotypes towards other fans and players also appear after each tournament.[220] England's Euro 96 semi-final match against Germany, when English tabloid media mobilised Second World War memory to stereotype the teams, boosted this as a research theme in the UK.[221] National sports media coverage is aimed almost entirely at domestic audiences but can have potential to influence international perceptions of a country if it is reported abroad.

A second theme of literature on football tournaments, as with the Olympics, is their international politics. FIFA, like the IOC, is recognized as a significant non-state international actor, with challenges to address around governance, accountability, and corruption, though the long-term impact of these on fan perceptions seems 'ephemeral'.[222]

The politics of hosting and participating in football tournaments are similar to the Olympics. Boycotts have marked the World Cup and European Championships less than the Olympics, partly because fewer countries participate in tournament finals of any tournament. In 1966, however, African states boycotted the World Cup qualifiers in protest at FIFA not allocating Africa any finals places by right.[223]

Campaigners still mobilise to call for football tournament boycotts on human rights grounds, most recently campaigns in several European countries targeting the 2022 World Cup in Qatar.[224] This is not just a twenty-first century phenomenon: before the 1978 World Cup in Argentina, the Netherlands witnessed an active boycott campaign protesting state terror in the host country.[225]

The emergence of soft power thinking as an overt rationale for states hosting mega-events has been traced in the context of football tournaments as with the Olympics. Germany's hosting of the 2006 World Cup is considered a successful example, which resulted in increased tourism, inward investment and exports, and in renewed national confidence among elites and the German public.[226] This success has been attributed to Germany's international and domestic campaigns carefully targeting different audience segments, and to a supporting arts and culture programme, though the effect on external perceptions appeared longer-lasting than the effect at home.[227]

Gender is an underexplored theme in the study of football tournaments and soft power. Olympic teams are mixed-gender even though almost all events are not; however, all football tournaments are either for men or women.

The Women's World Cup has only been held since 1991, and compared to the men's World Cup is underrepresented in finance, media coverage, and research.[228] Studies of its bidding strategies and its significance for nation branding are only just emerging.[229] However, the importance of progressive fan cultures and the participation of openly LGBTQ+ contestants and fans in the women's World Cup make it resemble Eurovision in ways the men's event does not.[230]

At a European level, the most recent Women's Euros were both hosted and won by England in 2022. This may have had soft power potential around narratives of gender equality, but research on this event has not yet appeared.

The most notable theme in men's World Cup geopolitics during the 2010s was FIFA's shift towards emerging powers. Since 2010 in South Africa, every World Cup has been held outside the Global North (and the 2026 World Cup in the USA, Canada and Mexico will not be in the Global North entirely). This demonstrates that emerging powers of sufficient size have been keen to use them to communicate economic progress or diplomatic standing, and 'to project, in the absence of other forms of international influence, soft power'.[231]

Viewed critically, the complexity of bid requirements still puts hosting out of reach for most Global South states.[232] FIFA's global placemaking strategies have also been criticized for enabling elites to profit from the socio-spatial displacement, gentrification, and removal of public space from the commons that comes with remaking cities to host mega-events, and for leaving behind 'white elephant' venues.[233]

Global mega-events' turn away from the Global North, and emerging powers' interest in hosting them, indicates that models of soft power need to take the interests and strategies of non-Western states into account.[234] Grix and Lee suggest that emerging-power hosts hope to grow their soft power through communicating that they share norms and values with traditional host powers and thus have a similar identity, 'on the assumption that similarity is key to attracting others':[235]

> *Because of the centrality of universally admired values in international sporting events, hosting states can enhance their attractiveness to others by demonstrating that they not only share those values, but also that they wish to champion and collectively celebrate these within the context of their own distinctive cultural, social and political values.[236]*

Two football mega-events were also hosted in central/eastern Europe and Russia during the 2010s, Euro 2012 (Poland/Ukraine) and the 2018 World Cup (Russia).[237] These are relevant to explore further because they involve states which have also made significant use of Eurovision for soft power or cultural diplomacy strategies.

2.6.1 Football mega-events hosted in Ukraine and Russia

Ukraine's football association was the initiator of the joint European Championships bid, and first suggested it to Poland in 2003 (the same year Ukraine began entering Eurovision).[238] There is however more research on Euro 2012's narratives and impact in Poland than in Ukraine.

Official discourse in Poland before the event narrated it as evidence of Poland's modernization, normalization and Europeanisation, and the final stage of Poland's transformation since 1989.[239] The concept of nation branding became embedded in Polish diplomatic practice during the run-up to the tournament.[240]

Poland and Ukraine both aimed to communicate narratives of cooperation, mutuality and modern infrastructure through hosting Euro 2012. The 'Supporters United' project coordinated by the Polish organizing agency, PL.2012, involved football fans in setting up 'fan embassies' in host cities, which facilitated people-to-people cultural relations for visitors and continued after the tournament as centres for civic volunteering.[241]

Ukraine launched a number of nation branding campaigns aimed at driving tourism and investment, though they have been criticised as disparate and poorly coordinated.[242] It also leveraged synergies with Eurovision in 2012 by selecting the Ukrainian pop star Gaitana to perform an uptempo, welcoming entry, 'Be My Guest'. Gaitana's Afro-Ukrainian background could also have helped to counter alarming narratives about racism in Ukraine (and Poland) that had been troubling black footballers and fans.[243]

Although the mainstream soft power and mega-events literature suggests Euro 2012 was an example of 'where communication practices fail' and host states do not successfully signal their shared values,[244] studies with more local knowledge of Poland and Ukraine are more nuanced.

Press reports gathered by Polish embassies suggested Euro 2012 had positive impact for Poland despite the lack of an overarching governmental promotional project, and that direct experience of the country surprised many Western journalists into changing their perceptions.[245] Residents in one host city interviewed a year later were sceptical of the neoliberal economic benefits claimed by officials, but were happy to have been able to feel more 'proud of their city' through the event.[246]

Foreign visitors to Ukraine were also surprised by the safe environment and the friendliness of volunteers.[247] Wider soft power impacts for or in Ukraine were however less clear. This was due to several confounding factors, including the political turmoil of the Yanukovych presidency, especially the imprisonment of Yuliya Tymoshenko in 2011, which caused some European political leaders not to attend matches in Ukraine.[248]

In 2013-14 the Euromaidan revolution superseded the branding strategies of the previous regime, and Russia's attack on Crimea and Donbas – destroying the new airport built for one of the Euro 2012 host cities, Donetsk – forced the new authorities to redirect all planned public diplomacy efforts into winning support for Ukraine's cause in the war.[249]

Russia's war in Ukraine had already lasted four years by the time it hosted the second tournament discussed here, the 2018 World Cup. The bid itself had been developed in 2009–10 (precisely when Russia had just hosted its only Eurovision), illustrating how important it is to consider soft power narratives' 'temporality' when assessing them.[250] Narratives about the historic greatness of Russian culture, for instance, were more strongly expressed in the eventual delivery than in the bid book.[251]

As an international actor, Russia hosted the World Cup as the first host country 'under painful

economic sanctions and in a state of de facto military conflict with its neighbour'.[252] The geography of Russia's attack on Ukraine meant that, as one journalist put it, 'the 2018 World Cup is effectively at war with Euro 2012'.[253]

Like the Sochi Olympics (and many other sports mega-events), the 2018 World Cup has been seen as an example of 'domestically targeted soft power', that is, an event that prioritized enthusing the domestic public rather than international audiences with the narratives that state actors desired.[254] As with Sochi, it has invited further retrospective 'soft disempowerment' since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.[255]

2.7 Emerging developments in mega-events

One very recent contention in football mega-events, which Eurovision has witnessed for longer, is the politics of LGBTQ+ visibility and the rainbow pride symbol.[256] In 2021, Hungary had just passed new anti-LGBTQ+ laws before a Germany–Hungary Euro 2020 match in Munich, and the mayor of Munich applied to light the municipally-owned arena in rainbow colours. The rejected request indicated the primacy of governing bodies over cities in sports mega-events, though the German team captain could still wear a rainbow armband during the game.[257]

Disputes about rainbow symbols' display by fans and players also marked the Qatar World Cup.[258] England, Wales, Germany, Belgium, Denmark, the Netherlands and Switzerland had initially planned to wear rainbow 'OneLove' armbands to acknowledge public concern at home about LGBTQ+ rights in Qatar, until FIFA informed them that players would be sanctioned.

Rainbow armbands were available to players at the 2022 women's European championships, but at the 2023 women's World Cup players will be restricted to a range of FIFA-sanctioned armbands referencing social causes which do not specifically communicate LGBTQ+ rights.[259]

An emerging development in the hosting of football mega-events, which may reshape states' opportunities to use them for soft power, is the practice of governing bodies detaching their events from single host countries. FIFA and UEFA have both considered bids by paired neighbours since Euro 2000 in Belgium/Netherlands and the 2002 World Cup in Japan/South Korea.

Euro 2020, however, was to be spread over twelve countries and cities. Even though pandemic restrictions reduced this to eleven cities at the rescheduled tournament in 2021 (since Dublin could not commit to lifting spectator restrictions in time), this was still a dramatic shift in format.

Its rationale might have been to communicate 'cultural togetherness and fluidity within [and beyond] the Eurozone', to celebrate the tournament's sixtieth anniversary, and/or to allow cities and countries to reap some economic impact from hosting a match even if they could not fund a whole tournament.[260] It also, however, protected the tournament from capture by the narrative strategies of any one host state, which governing bodies concerned with brand management may also need to consider more often as global geopolitical tensions increase.

The World Cup has not yet taken such a radical step, though the successful 'United 26' World Cup bid from the USA, Canada and Mexico involves three neighbours for the first time. This is seen as marking a change in FIFA's approach to 'global placemaking' and potentially a pivot towards 'global peacemaking'.[261] For the US football association, collaborative bidding would also have offset potential negative perceptions of the USA under Trump during the bidding process in 2017–18.[262]

Even the Olympics now permits multiple-host formats. The IOC has not yet taken forward any bids by joint international hosts, but its 'Agenda 2020' reforms to the Olympic Charter did allow multiple cities, regions or countries to host the Games. The 2026 Milan–Cortina Winter Games will be the first held in a pair of cities within one country.[263]

Joint bids for sports mega-events help cities and states secure enough infrastructure to accommodate higher numbers of participating countries or sports. They mitigate the negative financial and social impacts which caused 'growing opposition to mega-event hosting' in many cities which have withdrawn bids.[264] They can also communicate narratives of co-operation and reconciliation between states, such as the joint Türkiye/Greece bid for Euro 2008 or the temporarily mooted South Korea/North Korea Olympic bid after PyeongChang 2018.[265]

Further moves towards joint bidding would pose challenges for traditional soft power strategies based on hosting mega-events, since no one state would enjoy viewers' and visitors' undivided attention. Conversely, they would create extra potential for cultural relations through the bilateral or multilateral relationships between the hosts.

For Eurovision to open itself to multiple-host formats would be impractical, due to the amount of arena setup time it needs and the short time between each televised show. A scenario where hosting rights are detached from winning the contest, giving the organizing body more control over which states could exercise soft power strategies as hosts, is imaginable in theory. It would however represent a controversial and likely unpopular break with the event's tradition, which remains a distinctive feature of the brand.

3 City-based cultural events

3.1 Introduction

Programmes such as European Capital of Culture and national City of Culture equivalents are large-scale, highly visible, public cultural spectacles which showcase a different city each time.

They have some features in common with the longer tradition of international exhibitions and world's fairs, which began with the 1851 Great Exhibition in London and 1855 Exposition Universelle in Paris, and continues (5.2). These 'festivals of modernity' contain national pavilions where countries showcase their art and culture as well as manufacturing and technology.[266]

Cities compete to host these large-scale events, which celebrate the city at the same time as promoting participating nations and engaging visitors in cultural relations. The influence and profile they may gain as hosts represents soft power in practice.

However, staging and managing these events also entails significant costs, substantial risk, and potential reputational damage for host cities and sponsors. These negative impacts are especially well-known for Olympic host cities such as Montreal in 1976,[267] but also need considering for cultural events.

The European Community/EU's European Capital of Culture (ECoC) programme began in 1985, as a means 'to bring the peoples of the member states closer together'.[268] Its creators were the French and Greek culture ministers, Jack Lang and the former actor/singer Melina Mercouri, and Athens was the first host city.

The launch of ECoC reflected wider European Community interest in using culture for European integration in the mid-1980s. In 1985 it also began promoting the production of common European television programmes, and in 1987, 1988 and 1990 co-operated with the EBU to sponsor some content in Eurovision.[269] Its student exchange programme, Erasmus, also launched in 1987.[270]

European Capitals (then Cities) of Culture in the 1980s were well-known artistic and cultural centres, and their programmes concentrated on fine arts. Glasgow's plan to attract sponsorship, drive economic regeneration, and restore its image through ECoC in 1990 saw the event change course towards 'culture-led urban regeneration'.[271] This inspired many other deindustrialising cities to use it for cultural and economic regeneration in the 1990s and 2000s.[272]

ECoC after the fall of the Berlin Wall has also been seen as a source of 'soft power' for the EC/EU itself, which can be illustrated by cities' desire to take part.[273] In 1990, the EC Council of Ministers decided that

European countries outside the Community with values based on 'democracy, pluralism and the rule of law' should also be able to nominate cities for ECoC.[274]

Kraków and Prague were still in accession countries when they were among the nine cities selected for the special ECoC millennium year in 2000.[275] Two other cities, Bergen and Reykjavik, were in EEA but not EU member states. After 2004, the EU decided that each pair of ECoC hosts from 2009 should include one pre-2004 member state and one newer one.[276] Istanbul also submitted an ECoC bid in 2005 (the year after hosting Eurovision 2004) and was one of three cities chosen for 2010.[277]

Cities hosting large-scale cultural events today are more aware of the potential risks than the Olympic host cities of the 1960s–70s. Besides local authorities, the state (through its various streams of financial support for culture) and a wider network of other funders and supporters make significant contributions to the costs.

In return, and in theory, these events bring visitor spend, plus repeat visits and improved touristic reputation if the city is experienced and marketed well.

Alongside the growing profile of city-based cultural events, event studies has developed as a research field. This deals with questions including:

- processes of cultural engagement or exclusion in events
- feelings of belonging and 'pride in place' created by events
- security and surveillance at events
- why and how cities and communities engage with these events
- the soft power cities can wield
- the need for perspectives which are critical, not just 'cheerleading'

Despite the costs of bidding for, developing and hosting urban mega-events, cities still seek them in the hope of boosts to their reputation, cultural activity and visitor figures. However, these events also remain vulnerable to much public, media and expert critique about what and whom they include or exclude, and how successfully or otherwise they have engaged with various audiences.

We illustrate the soft power and cultural relations potential of large-scale city-based cultural events further through case studies of Liverpool (ECoC 2008) and Hull (UK City of Culture 2017).

3.2 Liverpool as European Capital of Culture 2008

Since 2001, the European Union has chosen two countries per year to host ECoC simultaneously and celebrate the culture and values of an enlarging Europe. The historical port city of Liverpool was awarded this mega-event for 2008 alongside Stavanger, Norway.

At the time, *Liverpool08* was seen as a successful example of culture-led regeneration and economic growth.[278] The cultural programme was praised, visitor numbers were robust, and Liverpool's image and reputation improved, along with economic growth and regeneration. This rhetoric of success was alluring for a city that had seen two decades of social, economic and image problems, and the Liverpool example was promoted by some as a model for future mega-events.

There were also critical perspectives. Philip Boland noted that many locals remained untouched by the regenerated docklands and city centre lifestyles.[279] Likewise, persistent unemployment and crime were elided from this representation of the city. Buildings which were 'derelict, disused or considered unattractive' were wrapped with branded decorations, including the St Johns shopping precinct, which in the 1970s had been important for Liverpool's grassroots pub-rock scene.[280]

The programme has also been criticised for downplaying Liverpool's heritage sites, including the waterfront which made Liverpool one of the most significant ports in the transatlantic slave trade.[281]

The 'Liverpool model' for culture-led regeneration influenced the UK City of Culture programme, which was announced in 2009 and first held by Derry/Londonderry in 2013.[282] However, this did not necessarily guarantee similar culture-led development in other cities which did not share Liverpool 2008's political context.[283]

Liverpool's cultural soft power and heritage offer remains a site of debate and dispute. In 2021, UNESCO delisted Liverpool's waterfront as a World Heritage Site due to a perceived lack of interest in protecting this heritage, linked to the Liverpool Waters development and the granting of planning permission for Everton FC's new stadium.[284]

Hosting Eurovision 2023 required Liverpool to respond at short notice with infrastructure and capability it had developed during and since ECoC 2008. The EBU's executive supervisor of Eurovision, Martin Österdahl, praised Liverpool's hosting as 'phenomenal' and promised to feed lessons from Liverpool into future events.[285] Liverpool's capacity to host Eurovision 2023 was a consequence of ECoC and the city's continued investment in culture afterwards.

3.3 Branding Liverpool since 2008

Liverpool's European Capital of Culture also boosted research about the branding of Liverpool's civic and cultural identity. Boland sees images of Liverpool as being defined by 'competing "cultural knowledges"'.[286] On one hand are the positive 'reputational assets' such as the Beatles, the waterfront, the global profile of Liverpool FC, and Scousers' friendly and welcoming reputation.[287]

However, Liverpool also has to deal with stigma derived from how UK media have reported on social unrest, political militancy, football violence, crime and deprivation in Liverpool since the 1960s.[288] These negative images are well known in the UK, and frustrate local people, but do not appear to have spread into the very positive international perceptions that Liverpool already enjoyed in 2008.[289]

One theme of research on Liverpool's place branding has been the city's use of urban planning and redevelopment to brand Liverpool as a 'world-class city'. Besides the waterfront, the retail-centred Liverpool One development, which opened in 2008, has been seen as having 'catalytic' impact on the city's reinvention.[290] Liverpool's city branding has also served as an example for how multiple stakeholders interact to create and deliver a brand strategy.[291]

However, critics question whether this sense of pride has really extended into disadvantaged city areas,[292] despite efforts such as the Creative Communities initiative which aimed to involve residents in local cultural life in the run-up to 2008. This had intended to redress perceptions that ECoC would only benefit visitors and economic stakeholders.[293]

Another theme is the significance of popular music for Liverpool's brand. Many events in 2008 celebrated Liverpool's connection with the Beatles and how that musical legacy was continuing. The 'Sound City' audio walking tour, for instance, guided visitors to sites associated with the Beatles, the late 1970s post-punk scene, and late 1980s/early 1990s electronic dance music.[294]

All these were important aspects of Liverpool's popular music history, and had contributed to UK music's own cultural brand. Researchers leading participatory projects during ECoC, however, argued that they were also 'a select set of stories' which dominated Liverpool's popular music history at the expense of other scenes.[295] These included the 1970s pub rock scene underneath St Johns, and the hip-hop scene, where musicians have felt geographically and culturally marginalised within the city.[296]

Popular music is now readily recognized as part of Liverpool's brand, and Liverpool is often regarded as the UK's leading 'music city'.[297] However, Sara Cohen has shown that civic stakeholders in Liverpool were initially reluctant to leverage it when local Beatles fans and entrepreneurs started to suggest developing Beatles tourism in the 1980s.[298] This changed in response to pan-European trends in cultural policy which started defining popular music as 'heritage', aimed to celebrate local cultural traditions in a globalised world, and paid attention to cultural diversity and integration.[299]

The 2021 Core Cities UK/British Council report 'The soft power of UK core cities' chose Liverpool and its international brand profile, defined by 'culture, music, science and major events', as one of its case studies.[300] It observed that 'major events and the spirit of congregation' had 'created the best international narrative for Liverpool' since 2008, and highlighted how Liverpool's successful research into reopening mass gatherings safely after social distancing, commissioned by central government, had boosted global reach for Liverpool's events-led brand.[301]

3.4 Hull as UK City of Culture 2017

Kingston-upon-Hull was the second UK City of Culture (UKCoC) in 2017, after Derry/Londonderry in 2013, which had bid to become the first UKCoC with a promise that the programme would lead to conflict transformation and peacebuilding.[302]

Hull had a long, prestigious history of wealth and influence as one of England's primary trading ports and industrial centres, but some core industries declined quickly in the 1970s–80s, and its economy and reputation suffered in response.

Regardless of whether a culture-led response was an appropriate strategy for the city's economic challenges, few commentators initially saw Hull as a viable candidate for UKCoC 2017. Nevertheless, Hull's bid slowly built momentum, in part due to a launch video that resonated with local communities, plus the support of some key local creative institutions and the city council. In November 2013, Hull was awarded UKCoC 2017 and the city council appointed The Culture Company to organise the events.

In addition to the public spectacles delivered by contemporary cultural festivals, The Culture Company focused on Hull's civic pride and a sense that this had been eroded by the decline of traditional industries.[303] Spectacular events took place through the year in key public spaces that regularly referenced Hull's former industries,[304] and hundreds of locals were recruited as City of Culture 'volunteers'.[305]

All these initiatives suggested the city's pride was not lost, while the voices and presence of the local volunteers animated Hull's public spaces. Some locals objected to the exclusion of alternative histories, while others welcomed the initiatives, spectacle and attention.

Like Liverpool, Hull is a maritime port city, on the east coast rather than the west coast of Northern England. Both cities had traded the region's resources and manufactured goods with the wider world, and had built environments that reflected these communities' subsequent wealth and civic pride. Both were affected by the decline of traditional industries in the 1970s, but narratives shifted a little when each place became a 'city of culture'. The debates about the relevance and methods of these events are still rumbling, but each involved examples of soft power and the potential of place to be mobilised for cities in decline.

3.5 Cities as soft power actors

An emerging literature on 'city diplomacy' highlights that cities are not just soft power assets for the states they belong in: they can also be actors seeking soft power themselves.[306] Indeed, this is implicit in the city branding literature (1.2.5) when it considers international audiences.

A very small number of cities, such as Singapore, are states in their own right. These have been seen as able to exercise 'small state soft power' by promoting their competitive economic policies and management, their governance models, and/or their experience in diplomatic mediation.[307]

Other cities too are now being recognised as soft power actors. Confronting shared global challenges such as climate change, rising social inequalities, migration crises, and public health, cities are now often said to be more able and ambitious in advancing progressive policies than national governments. This brings them 'influence and assertiveness' internationally as well as nationally.[308]

The British Council's 'Cities, prosperity and influence' report in 2017 viewed cities' power as 'meeting points for goods, people and ideas' as indispensable for meeting global challenges.[309] It noted that national governments needed to respect cities' autonomy in engaging around their soft power assets, and cities needed to ensure their strategies did not run directly counter to national foreign policy interests. It concluded that city diplomacy is most effective when it aligned with the realities of residents' experience.[310]

Cities do not have formal voices in international policymaking. Instead, they achieve their influence through co-operating with the UN and other international organisations, mirroring networks such as the G20 at city level, creating their own bureaus of international affairs, implementing policies such as City of Sanctuary which go further on commitments to international law than their national governments have done, and forming networks on themes of shared interest with like-minded cities.[311]

In the UK, the British Council has empowered the 'Core Cities' group of Belfast, Birmingham, Bristol, Cardiff, Glasgow, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle, Nottingham, and Sheffield to understand how their soft power assets can generate social, cultural and economic value for themselves and the UK.[312] 'The soft power of UK Core Cities' responded to national-level soft power thinking in that year's Integrated Review and championed how the cities could contribute to the UK's desired global reputation for 'exchange, trust, and mutually beneficial relations.'[313]

Culture is a common theme for international co-operation between cities. UNESCO's Creative Cities Network – one of eight networks within the UNESCO Cities Platform – links approximately 300 'Creative Cities' around the world. Cities can put themselves forward as cities of literature, design, crafts and folk art, film, music, media arts, or gastronomy.[314] Liverpool, for instance, is one of currently 45 UNESCO Cities of Music.[315]

Even cultural institutions within cities have started being conceived of as soft power actors. This is particularly the case with museums.[316] The extent of the so-called 'Bilbao effect', or the supposed uplift in tourism and soft power after the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao opened with its flagship building in 1997, is still debated in urban planning.[317]

Museums conduct diplomacy with counterparts when they negotiate loans, and co-operate on cultural protection during conflict.[318] Art museums in particular have been seen as spaces of 'international relations where we least expect it', exercising 'soft discursive power, value, and authority' which reflects on, but is independent of, the cities where they are based.[319]

3.6 International LGBTQ+ city-based events

Research on the emergence of international LGBTQ+ city-based events is also useful for understanding the context and impact of Eurovision because of the significance to LGBTQ+ audiences that Eurovision has built up over time (6.9.3).

EuroPride, WorldPride, and the Gay Games are all directly LGBTQ+-themed events which date back to the internationalisation of LGBTQ+ activism in the 1990s, when groups in many more cities started adopting the Pride model.

EuroPride and WorldPride are badges that international committees of Pride organisers award to a different city's Pride on each occasion, bringing it extra publicity and resources. The EuroPride concept was created by Pride organisers in London and Berlin, and is managed by the European Pride Organisers Association, which licenses the brand to city Prides.[320] It was first held in London in 1992, and takes place every year unless a European city is hosting WorldPride.[321]

WorldPride is a similar, global model, created by InterPride (formerly the International Organization of Lesbian and Gay Pride Coordinators) at its Glasgow conference in 1999.[322] It was first held in Rome in 2000, then in Jerusalem in 2006, and came to London in 2012. Its frequency is now approximately every two years.

The Gay Games were founded in 1982 by Tom Waddell, a US LGBTQ+ activist and Olympic decathlete. 1,350 athletes from 12 countries took part in the first Gay Games in San Francisco, and were billed as representing cities instead of nations, to encourage an atmosphere of mutuality rather than nationalistic competition.[323] Waddell had originally called these Games 'the Gay Olympics', until an injunction from the IOC.[324]

Like the Olympics, the Gay Games are held every four years, and have accompanying cultural programmes.[325] Every Gay Games took place in North America until 1998, when Amsterdam became the first European host city (they have never yet been held in the UK). They do not have qualifying standards, and were already gathering more participants than the Olympics by 1994.[326]

A parallel international LGBTQ+ multisport event, the Outgames, also took place on four occasions between 2006 and 2017 after the organisers of a Gay Games in Montreal split from the organising body.

These LGBTQ+ multisport events facilitate cultural relations between participants from different countries. Many athletes take part in more than one Games, and use them as opportunities to reunite with friends they have made in past years. Informal spaces of conviviality such as the stands in the stadium, dinners, and afterparties make this 'construction of relations and common identities' between competitors happen.[327]

There is also a soft power angle on supranational LGBTQ+ event frameworks.[328] Soft power is rarely explored directly in Pride events research, which typically concentrates on themes such as identity,[329] community-building,[330] resistance,[331] public health,[332] and critiques about their commodification.[333]

Other related concepts such as Europeanisation and the nationalistic instrumentalization of LGBTQ+ causes known as 'homonationalism' are, however, debated in research on Pride events.[334] A subset of this literature involves Prides in central and eastern Europe.[335]

In the late 1990s, LGBTQ+ equality started to become part of what the EU defines as its shared values, and it started expecting progress on LGBTQ+ rights from accession candidates.[336] Pride and LGBTQ+ rights in general became closely associated with 'Europe' in discourses about progressive versus traditionalist politics throughout central and eastern Europe, though there are critiques of how these discourses have exported Western liberal models of sexual activism.[337]

Studies of Pride in Belgrade (which hosted Eurovision in 2008) illustrate the critical literature on LGBTQ+ cultural events in the region. Belgrade LGBTQ+ activists first attempted to hold Pride in 2001, but the far right attacked it. They did not try again until 2009–10. By then, the state had calculated that allowing Pride to take place would win it favour with the EU even though it did not intend to make more meaningful LGBTQ+ rights reforms.[338]

The critical queer scholar Bojan Bilić addresses how LGBTQ+ events like Belgrade Pride have become an increasing '"litmus test" of the status of LGBT rights in countries acceding to the European Union'.[339] This means that states and cities can opt to allow Prides to happen and thus appear more attractive to liberal actors, while upholding policy that limits LGBTQ+ equality in other ways.

Similarly, during the War on Terror, Jasbir Puar argued that actors in the USA, Israel and elsewhere often celebrated the LGBTQ+-friendliness of their own nations in ways that presented Muslims as a homophobic community and mobilised liberal sentiment against them. She added that celebrations of LGBTQ+ inclusivity like these left out how the state's welcome was not extended to LGBTQ+ Muslims, who suffered as Muslims because of Islamophobic policy.

Puar called this turn in the relationship between sexual politics and nationalism 'homonationalism', and one of her empirical examples was her interpretation of the Jerusalem WorldPride.[340]

Lenses on LGBTQ+ politics and nationalism developed through the study of LGBTQ+ cultural events have also been applied to other events. For instance, Phil Hubbard and Eleanor Wilkinson's study of LGBTQ+ destination marketing leading up to London 2012 indicates that actors can also perceive LGBTQ+-friendliness as a soft power asset surrounding events with more general audiences.[341] This has also occurred with Eurovision.[342]

Though most literature on LGBTQ+ city-based events with relevance to soft power treats it from liberal perspectives, antagonism towards these events can also be a source of 'conservative soft power' in networks that see illiberal values as attractive.[343] The city of Moscow's hard line against Pride marches dating back to 2005–6,[344] for instance, is part of the track record that lets Russia be seen as a leader in defending 'traditional values' by the global anti-gender movement.[345]

4 UK cultural 'brands', soft power and cultural relations

Debates about how the UK should project its image abroad in today's world already identify a significant role for UK cultural 'brands'. These comprise a wide range of institutions, activities, products and events. The organisations behind each brand develop and market them for their own purposes, but according to the nation branding model, they can also be expected to influence perceptions of the UK itself.

Britain's media industries have arguably been a soft power asset since the late nineteenth century, when they would have been influencing perceptions of the British Empire.[346] The World Wars, the 1960s, and the second half of the 1990s (the so-called 'Cool Britannia') were all occasions when culture communicated narratives about the UK to international audiences in ways that also boosted government interests.[347]

Direct thinking about UK cultural brands as soft power assets dates back to the 2000s when government and UK institutions were responding to soft power and nation branding theories in the wake of what they saw as the lessons of Cool Britannia. London 2012, as we have seen (2.5), represented a clear and sustained effort to use cultural brands from London and the UK as a soft power source. The terrain to build on this seemed clear after 2012 but was complicated again in 2016 after the result of the Brexit referendum.

4.1 UK cultural brands between London 2012 and the Brexit referendum

The 'Persuasion and power in the modern world' report, published by the House of Lords Select Committee on Soft Power and the UK's Influence in March 2014, offers a baseline for how British elites and institutions saw UK cultural brands soft power assets after London 2012.

Many soft power 'assets' named in the report were state institutions and activities, including:

- The monarchy, and the standing of HM Queen Elizabeth II
- The UK armed forces
- UK government development aid
- The Houses of Parliament
- The UK's devolved governments
- UK participation and leadership in international organisations
- The UK's engagement with the Commonwealth, and as of 2014 the European Union[348]

It also identified numerous non-state institutions and activities which reached international audiences and could shape international perceptions of the UK, most of which touched on culture:

- the BBC, as 'one of Britain's leading global cultural assets'[349]
- tourism, which had increased by 1 per cent since London 2012[350]
- UK education, science, and research
- museums, galleries, libraries and collections
- English language teaching
- UK-based financial, accounting and legal services
- UK luxury consumer brands
- British Council-sponsored cultural activities
- sport, as 'an almost universal appeal that crosses language and cultural boundaries'[351]

Its remarks about the BBC illustrate how the nation branding model sees non-state actors' activities as contributing to the national brand through international audiences' perceptions of shared values:

> *Though it takes a specifically non-British approach to broadcasting and finds strength in its operational independence from Government, the values underpinning the BBC reflect, however indirectly, the values that people overseas associate with the UK. As such, the BBC projects a positive image of the UK to the rest of the world.*[352]

This report appeared at a time when the UK was still experiencing the short-term 'glow' of London 2012, reflected in surveys such as the 2013 BBC World Service Country Ratings Poll, where the UK experienced the highest positive rise of any country and ranked third behind Germany and Canada.[353] It therefore called on UK Trade and Investment to 'strongly promote the UK as a reserve of expertise in the design and delivery of megaprojects like the London 2012 Games and the 2014 Commonwealth Games', which were then about to take place in Glasgow.[354]

If London 2012 had not done much to improve the UK's reputation, Simon Anholt argued in his evidence to the committee, that was only because its reputation was already so high.[355] This aligns with arguments from comparative studies of sports mega-events that hosts which already have strong images abroad can easily maintain their reputation by managing the event competently, but improving their image even further from this baseline is more difficult.[356]

UK music appears quite briefly in the Select Committee report: it was considered in passing within the cultural industries paragraphs, but did not receive as much space as e.g. sport or the BBC. It did observe that 13.3 per cent of all albums sold globally had been by UK artists.[357]

The report also identified risks to the UK's ability to continue maintaining its strong international image through cultural relations. These included budget cuts to cultural institutions, creative industries, the BBC World Service and the British Council; emerging powers expanding their soft power activities at a faster pace; and the off-putting effects of visa and immigration policies across trade, tourism, culture, and education.[358] Many of these trends have intensified since 2014.

'The art of attraction', which also appeared in March 2014, likewise predicted that soft power would become more and more important to international affairs over the coming years. It reminded policymakers that 'the assets that really matter are the deeper, slow-moving qualities of a society and not the surface glitter of a successful Olympics or royal wedding.'[359]

Much like the Select Committee, 'The art of attraction' divided UK soft power into state and societal sources. Culture and heritage were foremost among its societal soft power sources. It dedicated a paragraph to UK music, including the global prominence of UK recording artists ever since the Beatles' breakthrough in 1963, and the diversity of live popular and classical music attracting music tourists.[360]

It noted the BBC as '[o]ne of the most valuable cultural soft power institutions' for the UK, and the British Council's 'substantial contributions' in facilitating cultural relations with emerging powers regardless of relationships between their governments.[361] It viewed sport as 'another major asset … not to be underestimated', though questioned how far the economic and promotional advantages of sport amounted to 'power'.[362]

One theme emphasised more in 'The art of attraction' than the Select Committee's report was the question of independence from government agendas. It advised government to invest in soft power institutions over the long term, to avoid direct interference in them, and to ensure that official state actions through foreign policy did not undermine the narratives that the UK would like to project.[363]

Pragmatically, it also advised non-governmental stakeholders in organisations which contribute to soft power that:

> *They are to some extent regarded as representative of their country's interests. They need not and should not compromise on such principles as academic or artistic freedom, but it is excessively innocent to imagine that their work takes place in a vacuum, untouched by the manoeuvring of governments and the competing narratives of world politics – especially when they are beholden to the taxpayer for funding. Whether they like it or not, universities, orchestras, novelists, sportsmen and women, archaeologists – and indeed the British Academy – are all part of the 'projection of Britain abroad'.*[364]

These reports offer a snapshot of how cultural brands figured in debates about UK soft power practices after London 2012 and before the Brexit referendum.

4.2 The impact of Brexit

4.2.1 Brexit and international perceptions of the UK

The result of the Brexit referendum in 2016, when a majority of participants voted to leave the European Union, had impacts on international perceptions of the UK which have altered the context for cultural relations activity.

Immediately after the referendum, uncertainty about the short-term impact on the UK's influence and reputation 'as a member of the EU and a multicultural, open society' mixed with uncertainty over the longer-term impact on the cultural, scientific, educational, humanitarian and business relationships that underpin many of the assets and cultural brands praised by the House of Lords Select Committee.[365] Many international actors struggled to understand why voters had chosen Brexit.[366]

Indeed, even before 2016, political and diplomatic communities elsewhere in the EU had been coming to view the UK 'as a bystander on core issues, turning inwards on itself', rather than the 'awkward if pragmatic partner' it had been.[367] Decision-makers in non-EU states were also concerned that Britain would become more 'inward-looking' and a less capable partner after leaving the EU.[368] Interestingly, these perceptions were being expressed at the same time the UK was experiencing its apparent reputational uplift in post-Olympic soft power polls.

Awareness of this shift in perceptions prompted calls for a change of approach in UK public diplomacy. Gary Rawnsley argued that the values of democracy, transparency and accountability illustrated by examples such as Prime Minister's Questions, the Chilcot Inquiry, and the Supreme Court's independence from government could tell a stronger story than narratives focusing on culture.[369]

Stuart MacDonald argued that UK public diplomacy needed to become 'smarter … in its ability to describe and analyse multiple points of view, more attuned not only to promoting the UK, and to the development of new relationships.'[370] This would require 'a rigorous approach to mutuality, based on understanding and collaboration', that is, a cultural relations approach.[371]

As Theresa May's government worked on negotiating UK exit from the EU in 2017-19, its narrative of 'Global Britain' aimed to communicate that the UK was still an 'outward-looking' international actor, 'championing the rules-based international order', and a trustworthy partner.[372] This aimed to reassure strategic partners whose expectations about the UK's role in the world had been unsettled in 2016.[373]

The Johnson government's Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy in 2020-1 defined 'Global Britain' through the UK's open society and economy; a robust security and deterrence policy; commitment to defending openness, democracy and human rights around the world; and determination to seek multilateral solutions on global challenges such as climate and health, including the UK's leadership on developing vaccines against COVID-19.[374]

Potentially, the 'Global Britain' orientation created opportunities for the UK to build influence as a 'global broker', by investing in bilateral relationships with 'like-minded' democracies.[375] A recent study of political elite perceptions of the UK in Türkiye affirms that multilateral co-operation is important for building such influence.[376]

The 'Global Britain' narrative has also attracted much critical commentary, in tones which are sometimes sharp. Its message about openness and international engagement has been seen as 'fundamentally at odds' with insular sentiment in much Brexit discourse during 2016-18.[377] Some see it as 'unravelling' altogether by 2019 as UK/EU relations grew more tense.[378]

The historical perspectives of 2017–19 'Global Britain' narratives have sometimes been viewed as framing the EU as an actor that has constrained UK global ambitions in the past,[379] and the critical historian Robert Saunders argued that they relied on a 'forgetting of empire'.[380] Whatever cultural institutions' own perceptions of the 'Global Britain' concept, working in partnership with government involved engagement with it.[381]

The studies cited in the last two paragraphs, however, were based on research up to 2019. They do not account for how the paradigm has evolved in the Johnson, Truss and Sunak governments' foreign policy, or how it was applied in the Integrated Review. These post-2019 developments have been seen as giving the orientation more 'diplomatic form' based on plurilateralism and 'minilateral' frameworks.[382]

At least according to soft power indices, Brexit had 'only partially affected' global perceptions of the UK by 2021.[383] The UK was top of the Portland Soft Power 30 Index in 2018, and only fell to second in 2019,[384] when Culture and Education shored up its ranking and its Government and Enterprise ratings fell.[385]

The UK was second in the 2020 Brand Finance Global Soft Power Index (which replaced the Portland index using different methodology) and dropped to third place in 2021, but this was not as large a fall as the USA was experiencing during the Trump presidency.[386] It came second in 2022 and 2023.[387]

Qualitatively, however, international journalists still observe that the Brexit process projected an 'inward-looking' image of the UK.[388] This may mean the organisations behind UK cultural brands feel they have more challenges to overcome in projecting positive images of the UK than they did before Brexit. Brexit has also caused them significant material challenges.

4.2.2 Brexit and the cultural sector

Before 2016, UK cultural organisations were already becoming aware that their activities could also serve national 'soft power' objectives. One case study explored how government and industry bodies described soft power in the film sector under David Cameron's governments through the example of the GREAT campaign's tie-ins with the James Bond franchise in 2012/2015, with additional remarks on discourses under May and Johnson.[389] It suggested that the British Film Institute's concept of soft power referred more to 'cultural exchange, difference and understanding' than government discourses about soft power in the 2010s.[390]

Strategically, Brexit stirred many cultural organisations to consider how they could reach 'across the fault lines' and mobilise culture to retain cultural links between the UK and the EU.[391] The British Council is seen as 'particularly active in deploying culture as an instrument of diplomacy', including the Our Shared Future international consultation in 2017.[392]

A recent French study (predating the UK's 2023 deal with Horizon Europe) sees the British Council's cultural relations work as an important tool for 're-engagement' with European partners, though notes this was complicated after 2020 by COVID-19 and the UK's exit from Creative Europe and Erasmus.[393]

In this context, Michael Clarke and Helen Ramscar call for more understanding of how Britain's 'implicit' persuaders contribute to shaping the UK's international influence and reputation.[394] Besides the BBC World Service and British Council, which are publicly funded for this purpose:

> many other institutions and organizations … play roles that are at least as important, even if they may not know it themselves. … the rest of the BBC, the wider entertainment industries, sport, professional regulatory bodies, hospitality industries or education sectors have more penetrating soft power effects even as they pursue their own independent or commercial rationales.[395]

This may be particularly so for audiences who might not engage directly with BBC World Service or British Council content but do engage, sometimes passionately, with these other actors' work.

Another body of policy research after 2016 began evaluating material risks of Brexit to the cultural sector. In 2016–18, Arts Council England, the Creative Industries Federation, the Department for Exiting the European Union's sectoral analysis, and the House of Commons Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee all evaluated Brexit's likely impact on the creative sector.[396]

Concerns raised in cultural sector responses included:

- 'the UK's image and societal resilience' post-Brexit
- attraction and retention of international talent
- participation in EU-funded pan-European networks
- the UK's future relationship to the single market
- intellectual property implications
- impact on international trade[397]

Arts Council England, the Creative Industries Federation and the Select Committee all identified changes to freedom of movement as a major concern for live music, live events and film/TV production in particular, though the DEXEU sectoral analysis did not.[398]

During Brexit negotiations in 2017–19, city-level culture stakeholders also expressed concerns about potential logistical, financial and administrative impacts of Brexit could cause, and knock-on effects from a potential loss of UK reputation in Europe, especially in more severe Brexit scenarios than have since materialized.[399]

An Italian/European Commission study in 2020 also warned that Brexit could have serious medium- to long-term impact on the economies of UK cultural and creative cities because of obstacles to recruiting skilled creative workers from the EU, soft-power damage to the UK's image, and a likely medium-term decrease in international tourism.[400]

One material impact for cities had manifested even before the UK left the EU: in 2017, while DCMS was considering five UK cities' bids to host European Capital of Culture 2023, the EU removed hosting rights from the UK because by 2023 the UK would no longer be an EU member state.[401]

While the terms of the EU–UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement left the cultural sector with challenges, particularly regarding mobility regimes,[402] soft power indices suggested that deeper damage to UK reputation as feared by some stakeholders before 2021 had not come to pass (4.2.1).

Studies evaluating the actual impact of leaving the EU on the UK cultural sector are only just emerging, and these can explore individuals', organisations', cities' and regions' resilience strategies in ways that research conducted before the Agreement could not.[403]

5 Culture, peace and conflict

5.1 Introduction

The British Council has already started to understand the role that arts and culture can play in post-conflict recovery. Its 2019 report 'The art of peace' found evidence that arts in post-conflict contexts can not only have therapeutic value but can also contribute to reconciliation and strengthening civil society in certain circumstances.[404]

The case studies in 'The art of peace' emphasised grassroots, participatory interventions, and argued these can make contributions to conflict prevention and recovery as long as they are well managed and sustained. Often these interventions involved people in a locale taking part in creative activity together which became a platform for everyday dialogue.[405]

Suggested benefits of arts and culture in post-conflict recovery included community engagement, upskilling of young people, therapeutic intervention, building of social cohesion, integration of cultural policy into national and regional development strategies, and the role of arts as alternative modes of expression where conventional political protest is difficult.[406]

However, it was seen as essential for organisers to understand local conflict dynamics and apply 'Do No Harm' principles, especially where projects directly addressed questions of identity, culture and conflict. It was also noted that – as the critical literature on soft power also finds – measuring the intangible outcomes of cultural programmes is very difficult.[407]

Faced with continued global challenges and rising geopolitical tensions, however, the roles of culture during conflict and the prospects for cultural relations 'in times of crisis' also need attention.[408] Moreover, the evidence base on how conflict affects large-scale cultural events, or even the commercial culture industries generally, is scattered.

Public diplomacy actors and cultural relations initiatives are seen as having the ability to 'function as drivers of international development, peacekeeping, and bridges of communication during difficult times in international relations'.[409] For actors whose nations or communities are directly involved in conflict, meanwhile, conveying strategic narratives through culture takes on existential importance, above all when cultural erasure by an aggressive power might be the outcome of defeat.[410] This means the stakes of international cultural relations during conflict and the interests of participants are asymmetric, though not necessarily opposed.

Conflict can also cause swift and dramatic change in what experts influenced by Nye consider to be the main currency of public diplomacy and soft power, attractiveness. As Nye observes, 'if the content of a country's culture, values, and policies are not attractive, public diplomacy that "broadcasts" them cannot produce soft power. It may produce just the opposite.'[411]

To audiences who value a rules-based international order, culture linked to a state which is perceived as an aggressor is likely to be less attractive. Conversely, sympathy with the cause of a country or group involved in a conflict may drive attractiveness of and interest in its culture.

While Ukraine was often described before 2022 as having a weak or unclear international profile,[412] this is no longer the case.[413] Instead, Ukrainian cultural producers fear not being able to keep up with the new Western interest in Ukrainian culture because of how severely Ukrainian cultural institutions are being damaged by Russia's war.[414]

The potential scope of literature on culture, peace and conflict is vast. This review identifies three specific topics that are relevant to British Council programmes and the impact of Eurovision 2023. These are the impact of conflict on large-scale cultural events, the role of culture in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and the potential value of music in peacebuilding.

5.2 Large-scale cultural events in times of conflict

There is limited research on how conflict on a host state's territory affects large-scale cultural events, simply because insurance and security reasons do not allow international organisers to hold them in countries experiencing ongoing full-scale conflict on their territory. If an emergency makes them too high risk, they would be cancelled or moved.

Smaller-scale cultural events organised by national or local actors do take place, often aimed at communicating cultural resilience. An example from the Yugoslav Wars is the Sarajevo Film Festival (founded during the siege in 1995).[415]

Large-scale cultural events do, of course, take place in states which are involved in military operations abroad. Italy, the host state of the Venice Biennale, for instance had troops in Afghanistan from 2001–21 and in Iraq from 2003–6 as a member of NATO. The Biennale is among many sites where artists have questioned those wars, including through Iraq's national pavilion which opened in 2011.[416]

Events hosted away from conflict-affected spaces, meanwhile, have to react to ongoing or new conflicts while they are taking place. A historical example is the 1939–40 New York World's Fair. The opening of Czechoslovakia's pavilion was delayed – but not prevented – by Hitler's annexation of what remained of the state in March 1939, and the Polish pavilion became a gathering place for compatriots after the Nazi and Soviet invasions of Poland six months later.[417]

States participating in international exhibitions while affected by conflict have used participation to draw global attention to their cause. The most renowned example in world art history is Picasso's 'Guernica', which the Spanish Republican government commissioned for Spain's pavilion at the 1937 Paris Expo, during the Spanish Civil War. Picasso had to depict the attack on Guernica by Nazi bombers without breaking the exhibition's rules against artworks 'that might be viewed as a provocation' by any other participating country, so could not directly depict Nazi perpetrators.[418]

Roselle, Miskimmon and O'Loughlin's ideas about strategic narratives in conflict help to illustrate how conflict typically affects large-scale cultural events. The 'characterization' of combatants and their claims, and attempts to define and dispute the 'narrativization' of episodes in the conflict,[419] map on to contentions about which countries/representatives should participate, and what they present.

States can only have national pavilions at the Venice Biennale and be recognised as 'characters' in that large-scale event, for instance, with approval from the Italian ministry of foreign affairs.[420] Ambiguities around the status and name of Taiwan affect the Biennale as they affect international sport.[421] A Palestinian pavilion is not possible because the Italian state does not recognise Palestine, though the Palestinian heritage organisation Riwaq operated what it considered the first Palestinian national pavilion (officially a 'collateral event') at the 2009 Biennale.[422] The Palestinian Museum US held a Palestinian art exhibition as another 'collateral event' in 2022.[423]

Conflict also affects large-scale cultural events when creators or institutions from one side in a conflict oppose the participation of creators from another side. Russia's continued inclusion in the international art world between 2014 and 2022 through the Biennale and peripatetic exhibitions attracted protests from Ukrainian artists, including the displaced Izolatsiya collective who staged a covert occupation of the Russian pavilion at the 2015 Biennale to protest Russian tactics in Crimea.[424]

Creators representing their country in large-scale cultural events sometimes even protest their own country's involvement in conflict. At the 1970 Venice Biennale, for instance, many of the selected US artists withdrew to protest the Vietnam War and racist repression at home, holding a counter-exhibition called the 'Liberated Venice Biennale' in New York instead.[425] The curators of Russia's pavilion in 2022 resigned three days after Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine.[426]

Continuing the history of artists reacting to attacks on their country at international exhibitions, the Ukrainian pavilion in 2022 presented an artwork that one curator had been able to drive across the border into Poland so that the exhibition could go ahead.[427] Since Ukraine's pavilion is a small space within the Arsenale building, the Biennale worked with its Ukrainian curators to also install a temporary pavilion in the centre of the Giardini event space, consisting of a scorched wooden pergola and a pile of sandbags symbolising how monuments have been protected from damage in Ukraine.[428]

Some City/Capital of Culture programmes (section 3) in cities which have recently experienced conflict have explicitly adopted peacebuilding themes. These include Derry/Londonderry UKCoC 2013,[429] and Donostia/San Sebastián's programme as ECoC 2016, which aimed to use peacebuilding in the Basque Country as a starting point for wider exploration of human rights.

Many European cities hosting large-scale cultural events must also negotiate memory of past wars and the Holocaust in their built environments. In this respect, ECoC has been seen as promoting 'cosmopolitan ways of remembrance' that 'promote reconciliation, tolerance and multicultural coexistence'.[430] These appeal to liberal city actors like those behind Wrocław's ECoC programme in 2016 who want to stimulate similar understandings of the local past.[431]

5.3 Culture and the Sustainable Development Goals in times of conflict

The British Council has already identified arts and culture as a 'missing pillar' of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).[432] These goals are seen as an important focus for public diplomacy because they offer a vision of the future which can be widely, multilaterally, and globally shared.[433]

Several targets in the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development touch on culture, including:

- target 4.7 (education for sustainable development including appreciation of cultural diversity)
- target 8.3 (creativity and innovation among the activities to be promoted in development-oriented policies)
- target 8.9/12.b (promotion of sustainable tourism, including through local culture)
- target 11.4 (protection of cultural and natural heritage)[434]

However, no single goal mentions culture specifically.

Other organisations also perceive culture could play a greater role in delivering the SDGs. For instance, a report for the Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen argued that Europe and the EU could contribute to culture and the SDGs in at least five valuable areas:

- the role of culture and cultural diversity in education
- supporting creative industries and cultural tourism to drive sustainable job creation
- protecting cultural, natural and mainstream heritage
- disaster risk prevention to address environmental threats to cultural heritage
- supporting freedom of expression and the right to culture where these are under attack.[435]

The EBU also relates its work to the Sustainable Development Goals, though not specifically through a culture lens. Instead, it focuses on:

- the role of public service media (PSM) in empowering audiences to have informed views on the complex ideas behind the SDGs
- PSM's ability to hold governments to account about their promises on the SDGs
- PSM's prioritisation of environmental sustainability through members' production and distribution value chains
- reduction of inequalities in staffing and media content
- members' contributions to educational broadcasting[436]

In practice, culture has seemed easiest to link to the SDGs in cultural heritage, where responsible management of cultural heritage requires sustainable or even 'regenerative' tourism (that is, tourism practices which repair the damage of past overtourism).[437] Here it immediately links to SDGs 11 and 12 (Sustainable Cities and Communities; Responsible Consumption and Production), and other SDGs connected to employment, infrastructure and the environment.

Culture in conflict overlaps with culture's role in the SDGs in the sphere of protecting cultural heritage from destruction during war. The intentional destruction of cultural heritage by aggressors in war is characteristic of contemporary conflict.[438] The former UNESCO director-general Irina Bokova has termed it 'cultural cleansing' to emphasise how it attacks the cultural identity and memory of targeted communities within perpetrators' strategies of eliminating groups from territory.[439]

Well-known examples before 2022 included the attacks on religious and multi-ethnic heritage sites by perpetrators of ethnic cleansing and genocide during the Yugoslav Wars, the destruction of ancient archaeological sites in Syria and Iraq by Islamic State, and the Taliban's destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan.[440] Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has from the outset involved the systematic targeting of Ukrainian cultural heritage and cultural life.[441]

The British Council is already involved with cultural protection through its management of the Cultural Protection Fund (CPF) in partnership with DCMS, which it links to SDG 11.[442] Phase 1 of the CPF awarded 51 grants across 12 target countries in the Middle East and North Africa,[443] and after February 2022 the CPF contributed to the coordinated Cultural Emergency Response action plan for Ukraine.[444]

The CPF focuses on protecting cultural heritage including sites and objects, intangible heritage such as crafts and languages, and the workforce and communities related to that heritage, rather than on contemporary cultural production or the cultural sector more generally.[445] What might be termed everyday cultural protection, that is, how cultural workers survive and create during conflict and how their sector can recover afterwards, is however also a major concern in conflict-affected countries, including for Ukraine's cultural sector as the Russian invasion continues.[446]

Protecting the capacity and future of cultural sectors during war is, however, a precondition for being able to draw on cultural activity in post-conflict peacebuilding. Practitioners and experts show growing interest in arts-based, including music-based, peacebuilding work.

5.4 Music, peacebuilding and cultural relations

Music deserves special consideration as a cultural form in peacebuilding because of its unique significance in personal experience and social life. Making and listening to music is a physically involving, often intense experience which can bypass language.[447] Individuals actively use music to regulate their emotions in certain ways, to accompany certain activities, to help themselves remember, to communicate aspects of their identity, and to do all these things socially with others.[448]

The very process of taking part in social and cultural activity around music reaffirms and creates social identities of various kinds.[449] Its motivational and cohesive role for social and political movements is well attested.[450] Many musical experiences are intimately linked to place and locality, and to the spaces that groups and communities make for themselves within those places.[451] For diasporas and displaced communities, music also works through memory to reaffirm their identity as an imagined connection to the place they have left behind.[452]

Symbolically, music has acquired close connections to ethnic, national and regional identities because of how cultural movements have used it to build collective consciousness.[453] At the same time, music makes the fluidity of cultural boundaries audible and perceptible. Professional musicians, and ordinary people being sociable with music, are continually reinventing music's potential for cultural borrowing and creativity.[454] Commercial musical cultures which gain fandoms abroad are well known as assets for 'pop-culture diplomacy'.[455]

In cultural relations, music has added practical advantages. Audiences do not need to understand musicians' language to experience instrumental music meaningfully, and can experience other emotive aspects of music with lyrics even if they do not know the language.[456] Simultaneously, it can enhance language learning by driving motivation to learn a language, by reinforcing listening and grammatical skills, and by supporting grammar and vocabulary recall through rhythm and rhyme.[457]

An example of a recurring place-based musical event with explicit peacebuilding aims is the Llangollen International Musical Eisteddfod, which was founded in 1947 to bring together choirs from around the world and promote intercultural understanding after the Second World War.[458] A study of the contemporary Eisteddfod's potential for intercultural communication and exchange found that organisers' provision of informal spaces was particularly important for allowing these to happen.[459]

According to John Paul Lederach, music thus has important affordances for peacebuilding. Its operation on the human body through sound and vibration means that we feel it before we attach rational explanation to it, and it touches experiences which words and conversation do not. It provokes response and action, it has value for psychosocial healing, and its repetitive power can facilitate coming to terms with trauma. Lederach therefore finds it 'astounding' that music has been so neglected in peacebuilding literature.[460]

Surveys of the music, peacebuilding and conflict transformation literature, however, suggest that idealistic claims about the power of music need treating with caution.[461] An example is the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra, founded in 1999, which is often praised as an ideal of dialogue and reconciliation in the Middle East.[462] However, a critical study of the orchestra argues that it expresses a carefully crafted utopian vision that does not meet Palestinian needs on the ground.[463]

If research on emotions and peacebuilding more broadly needs to treat emotions as 'politically, socially and historically embedded phenomena' rather than human universals,[464] music's peacebuilding potential needs to be viewed the same way.

Arild Bergh and John Sloboda found that organisations' evaluations of conflict transformation projects involving music frequently exaggerated what music and art could achieve, did not employ long-term approaches to relationship-building, treated participants' ethnic groups as too homogenous, and overlooked power imbalances between local communities and intervening NGOs. They warned against the assumption that music is 'a universal language' that builds understanding on its own.[465]

Elaine Sandoval found that most studies of music-based peacebuilding were focused on its use in the aftermath of conflict for therapeutic purposes, for reconciliation, or in protest for forms of justice such as reparations.[466] There were also studies of uses of music to pursue an end to ongoing conflict: as cultural resistance, as peace education, or as co-operation between musicians on different sides of a conflict – which is often over-romanticised.[467] Applied ethnomusicology projects aimed at preventing violent conflict had aimed to promote musical multiculturalism, cultivate empathy in communities, or channel resentments in non-violent ways.[468]

Like other critical scholars, Sandoval considers that, to avoid idealising the capacity of music in peacebuilding, it is important to critically juxtapose it with knowledge about the role that music has played in violence and aggression.[469] This too has a specialist literature.[470] Indeed, music scholars' attention to music and violence was partly spurred on by professional self-reflection during the War on Terror when reports exposed how music had been used as torture in US detention facilities.[471]

Sandoval thus suggests that music and action that 'ignores or even obscures' the power relations that influence conflict, such as nationalist aggression, identity-based oppression and economic exploitation, are unlikely to be able to contribute to peace.[472] These critical remarks in the music and peacebuilding literature resonate with cultural policy studies' criticisms of 'culturephilia', or the 'fetishisation of the alleged curing qualities of culture', in the culture-led urban regeneration field.[473]

The latest review of music and peacebuilding literature is by Gillian Howell. Howell identifies four types of practice that music-based peacebuilding projects might or might not incorporate: encounters (facilitating between groups who are usually kept apart by conflict-supporting narratives); conflict engagement (directly examining experiences of conflict and division); sociality (unstructured opportunities for participants to build mutual relationships with each other); and projecting the work to an external audience.[474]

According to Howell, what types of peace can be facilitated through musical activities depend on which combination of practices they employ:

- projects aiming to facilitate intergroup learning and understanding all feature encounter with 'the musical materials of the Other' but generally do not involve conflict engagement
- projects building 'everyday' peace between people in divided societies by creating opportunities for non-contentious interaction involve interpersonal encounter and sociality, but not conflict engagement or projection to an external audience
- 'dialogic' peace requires conflict engagement and uses music as a platform to process participants' and groups' conflicting narratives, experiences and beliefs[475]

Howell too cautions against treating music itself as a universal change mechanism. Instead, she argues that projects need to foreground 'the agency of participants and the complex relationships between people, place, identity, and musical meaning that shape any peace-related outcomes of the musical action'.[476] In other words, it is not music itself but what people do with music that can build peace.

We suggest the same is true of Eurovision. There is now a wide literature on how Eurovision has been used to advance soft power strategies, but also evidence across the growing literature on this mega-event that it facilitates cultural relations in distinctive ways. These do not come only or primarily from what people watch, but are a consequence of what people do, as they produce the contest or participate as part of its audience.

Part II

6 Eurovision in international politics, soft power, and cultural relations

6.1 Introduction

Eurovision has been held annually since 1956, and has reflected international politics for all that time.[477] Research on Eurovision, however, came of age in the mid-2000s, during major transformations in the event's own format and in European politics.[478]

At the turn of the millennium, Eurovision had expanded into a mega-event being held in arenas with live audiences of thousands, and its voting system had been democratised so that points were now awarded by the public of each nation via telephone vote.[479] Most countries in the so-called 'new' Europe were now participating, including many countries which had become independent through the break-ups of Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia and the USSR at the end of the Cold War.[480]

Successive wins by Estonia, Latvia, Türkiye, and Ukraine in 2001–4 saw the contest's centre of gravity move decisively to areas of Europe which were often perceived as marginal in the West. Actors in these countries could contest these perceptions by 'performing' their Europeanness to Eurovision's transnational audience.[481] In 2001–8, every winning country was a new winner, and none were situated in western Europe.

The boundaries of 'Europe' and what it meant to be 'European' were also being debated and transformed in European politics at the same time. Most central and eastern European countries that had been under state socialist rule until 1989–91 aspired to join the European Union. In 2004 eight of them plus Cyprus and Malta fulfilled their aspirations, and other candidates were moving through the accession process.

The EBU and EU have always been entirely separate organisations, and indeed the EBU has historically distanced itself from the supranationalism of EU political integration (steering closer to the intergovernmentalism of the Council of Europe).[482]

However, actions by one institution which communicates about 'Europe' and shared values still influence symbolic ideas of 'Europe', and can therefore influence what meanings people perceive in actions by other European institutions. The EBU's 'spirit of interaction and exchange' does not exist in a vacuum.[483]

In 2004, for instance, the accession of the EU's ten new member states and Eurovision's addition of a live televised semi-final (so that all interested broadcasters could participate every year) both represented an eastward 'enlargement' for those organisations and occurred only ten days apart.[484] Research on Eurovision and its politics took off against this background.

6.2 Eurovision research and the changing politics of Europe

The first academic study of the contest, analysing the voting networks of northern, western and Mediterranean nations, appeared in 1995.[485] A larger wave of studies began appearing in the mid-2000s, including the first edited collection on the politics of Eurovision (by Ivan Raykoff and the late Robert Deam Tobin) in 2007, with chapters analysing how specific countries had represented their identities through Eurovision performances.

This collection framed the event as a mechanism of post-conflict reconciliation after the Second World War, established 'as a live televised spectacle to unify post-war western Europe through music' by the EBU in 1956.[486] This narrative about the contest is persistent.

Archival research by the author of the first academic history of Eurovision, however, suggests that technical co-operation and cost-effectively improving members' programme offer were more important rationales for founding the contest.[487] Indeed, it has sustained its reputation for technological adaptation and experimentation ever since.[488]

The myth that Eurovision emerges from post-war efforts at peacemaking and reconciliation is nevertheless pervasive in the contemporary event's culture.[489] It frames the post-1945 and also post-1989 moments as occasions where Europe has redeemed itself from conflict and united people across borders while respecting national cultural diversity.[490]

This overarching narrative of Eurovision's history has the status of a 'usable past' for understanding what the contest appears to mean in the present.[491] In other words, present-day organisers, participants and fans who subscribe to this narrative of the contest feel a need for the contest to have stood for unity and reconciliation throughout its almost seventy years of existence.

Researchers such as Karin Fricker and Milija Gluhovic have recognised Eurovision's significance for communicating narratives about nations' identities and their relationships to Europe because it affords participants the 'capacity annually to engage a vast pan-European public, temporarily produced via the contest's liveness and symbolic power'.[492]

Fricker and Gluhovic's edited collection on Eurovision appeared in 2013, when Greece, Finland, Serbia, Russia and Azerbaijan had also become debut winners of the contest and when the European financial crisis was threatening to limit the event's growth. It also reacted to the contentions over values that had surrounded the Moscow and Baku contests in 2009 and 2012.[493]

Contributors questioned how Eurovision could foster a 'European public sphere', how practices of performance and communication at Eurovision might engage and create 'new publics and counterpublics', how it managed East/West divides and postcolonial diversity, how it had reflected the gender politics and sexual politics of European enlargement, and how it could remain sustainable in a time of public austerity politics.[494]

Another volume in 2013 edited by the ethnomusicologist Dafni Tragaki called on researchers to remember Eurovision's significance as a specifically *musical* international event. Tragaki described Eurovision as 'a level of reality where European subjectivities are constantly emerging, while established worldviews are negotiated, contested, inverted or reaffirmed *in song*', so that '[s]ong becomes a site for branding Europe and the nation, on and off stage'.[495]

Especially for peripheralized countries such as those in central and south-east Europe, selecting songs for Eurovision involves often risky and contentious, but also potentially highly rewarding, decisions about what narratives to communicate to the transnational audience. Broadcasters and creative teams have thus had to consider:

> *should these countries emphasize sameness rather than difference? Alternatively, should there be an attempt to demonstrate a linguistic and cultural diversity that, far from posing a threat to the idea of European unity, adds instead to the richness of European culture?*[496]

This question demonstrates that similarity alone does not determine attractiveness (as some soft power studies suggest) where culture and performance are involved.

Musical trends in Eurovision have ebbed and flowed around this trade-off. The international world music market's tastes for Celtic and Balkan sounds inspired a trend from the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s which has been called Eurovision's 'return to ethnicity'.[497]

One of this trend's earliest examples was also the one with the greatest commercial and cultural impact for its country of origin: the phenomenon of the *Riverdance* stage show, which began as the Irish broadcaster RTÉ's interval act for Eurovision 1994 during the 1992–6 period in which Ireland won Eurovision three times in four years.[498] *Riverdance* gained international 'popular cultural status … of mythic proportions', though made Eurovision less important thereafter for Ireland's cultural promotion.[499]

After a period in the late 2000s and early 2010s where many broadcasters preferred to select amateur talent show participants performing 'X Factor' style ballads in English,[500] trends have swung back towards professional recording artists and towards linguistic and cultural diversity.

Participants have been free to sing in any language of their choice since 1999, and winning songs have usually been in English ever since. Until 2017, only one song wholly in a national language had won Eurovision in the 'free language' era (Serbia's entry in 2007).[501] Ukraine's first two winning songs used combinations of English and a national language, Ukrainian in 2004 and Crimean Tatar in 2016.[502] However, songs in national languages won in 2017, 2021 and 2022, the last of these being Ukraine's third win, which in peacetime would have led to Ukraine hosting Eurovision 2023.

The digitalisation of the music industry has also made Eurovision a potential platform where artists from countries on the margins of the global recording industry can access transnational audiences. The Armenian singer Rosa Linn's 2022 entry went viral on TikTok weeks after the contest and has now been streamed 1.7 billion times.[503]

Nevertheless, outside specialist studies, awareness of research into how states and other international actors manage external and internal identity challenges in Eurovision is lower than awareness of similar research regarding sports mega-events.[504] Neither has Eurovision been connected extensively with the most comparable large-scale city-based cultural event format in Europe, Capitals/Cities of Culture.

One aspect that distinguishes Eurovision from other mega-events is how its culture has applied values of inclusivity. In 2007, when it had had a large LGBTQ+ fan-base for several decades and when openly LGBTQ+ artists had been competing since 1997–8, it was already seen as offering a model of European and national belonging that was 'particularly amenable' to LGBTQ+ communities' wish to belong to national communities they had often been excluded from.[505]

Themes of gender non-conformity and intimacy between women in Serbia's winning performance in 2007 strengthened this association, though the singer (Marija Šerifović) had not then come out. It has become even tighter, and embraced by the EBU, since 2013–14, including the iconic victory of the bearded drag queen Conchita Wurst soon after the Sochi Olympics.[506]

How successfully Eurovision also communicates multicultural inclusivity is debated. On one hand, it has enabled Europeans (and, since 2014–15, Australians[507]) of African and Asian descent to perform as symbolic representatives of nations whose communities are often perceived abroad and at home as exclusively white. One vocalist in Estonia's 2001 winning entry, for instance, was Dave Benton, a black musician originally from Aruba (performing with Tanel Padar, a white Estonian-speaker, and two Russian-speaking dancers).[508]

However, Benton is still Eurovision's only black winner as of 2023. No black soloist has ever won, and there has been only one other winner of colour: Loreen, who represented Sweden in 2012/2023 and is of Moroccan Amazigh descent. Some commentators express concern that the public vote does not accept black performers or understand the stakes of their creative work.[509]

There is also critique of *how* Eurovision performs racial inclusion. Black and minority performers' individual visibility does not have any bearing on representation and conditions for their wider group, and celebrations of inclusivity based on them can also deflect attention away from other forms of racism in a country or Europe.[510] Australian scholars have been particularly critical of celebratory discourses of national multiculturalism since Australia started participating in 2014–15.[511]

Eurovision is clearly understood in the literature as a site for soft power and cultural relations. Jess Carniel, for instance, writes that:

> *Like sporting events such as the Olympics, the Song Contest is perceived as a safe arena for national competitiveness to play out and for international relationships to be fostered, developed, or even be performed in more negative terms. It is thus a space in which the soft power politics of nation branding, cultural relations, and cultural diplomacy can be exercised.*[512]

The national communicative acts performed through Eurovision are usually not, however, the direct work of national governments, since public service broadcasters are expected to be independent of government in a democratic mediascape. However, since the contest's very first decade, songs have been performed under the names of their states.[513]

Therefore, 'what is engrained in public opinion is that state X won the ESC [Eurovision Song Contest] in year Y', and 'it is always a state that is seen as the winner of the contest, even if the state itself has often done little to win it.'[514]

Another paradox of Eurovision's capacity for communicating narratives which could support soft power strategies to such a large, diverse and immediate audience is that the contest is, by definition, a non-political event.[515] The contest's rules describe it in these words and hold participating broadcasters responsible for seeing that the event is not 'politicised', 'instrumentalised', or 'brought into disrepute' in any way.[516]

Researchers, however, emphasise that neither politics nor conflict have ever been far from the contest.[517] It has been open to appropriation by 'the cultural diplomacy of authoritarian states', both recently and historically, and has been used as a 'symbolic battlefield' for European wars.[518] It has been subject to boycotts, artist bans, and numerous attempts to test the boundaries of the 'non-political' rule through songs and press appearances.[519]

Moreover, 'the Song Contest's purported values of unity, diversity, and tolerance are in themselves political, for all that the EBU seek to depoliticise them by positioning them within a universalist discourse'.[520] A research-driven approach to cultural relations at Eurovision needs to be guided by these political realities beneath the event's origin myths.

6.3 Eurovision, European integration, and conflict before 1989

Eurovision has always been institutionally separate from political integration projects which have promoted narratives of European cultural identity. However, it is still both significant and 'under-researched' in the history of public identifications with 'Europe' since the 1950s, precisely because of the scale of its audience and the length of its annual tradition.[521] This has been unbroken since 1956 except for the 2020 contest's cancellation due to COVID-19.

Its origins as a contest date to the EBU's founding of the Eurovision Network for live international broadcast relays in 1954 and interest in developing its own programming for the network.[522] Members perceived light entertainment music as likely to be more appealing and intelligible across borders than other variety formats such as comedy.[523]

Its best-known inspiration, the Sanremo Festival, was founded in postwar Italy in 1951, and has itself been seen as an effort to 'reassert a common melodic culture' and 'create a pan-Italian public sphere' after the divisive war years.[524] The international, competitive structure however came from a separate International Song Festival held for radio broadcasters in Venice in 1955.[525] This was one of a number of forgotten musical initiatives that tried to (re)create 'a European mode of production' in broadcasting after the Second World War.[526]

The major impact of the Cold War on Eurovision was that central and eastern European broadcasters did not belong to the European Broadcasting Union and therefore did not compete. The only state socialist country to take part was Yugoslavia (from 1961), which was not aligned to the Soviet bloc.[527]

Other state socialist broadcasters belonged to the separate International Radio and Television Organisation (OIRT), which sometimes broadcast a contest called Intervision in the 1960s and 1970s. However, it is a myth that Intervision was designed to harden 'Iron Curtain' divisions. OIRT members often organised international song festivals, and exchanged broadcasts of them through an Intervision Network. Two such festivals were badged as the 'Intervision Song Contest' in Czechoslovakia during 1965–8 and Poland during 1977–80.[528]

Research by Dean Vuletic shows, however, that the Intervision concept was not isolationist. The EBU rebuffed OIRT interest in co-operating on an international song festival, not vice versa, and EBU members were allowed into one Intervision (during the Prague Spring in 1968), while the EBU never admitted full OIRT members to Eurovision.[529] The EBU did start making Eurovision broadcasts available to the Intervision Network in 1965.[530]

Conflict interjected itself into Eurovision during the 1960s and 1970s in several ways. Authoritarian regimes in Greece, Portugal, Spain and Türkiye were able to use participation to launder their international images while they were in power, most of all Franco's Spain which hosted Eurovision in 1969.[531] The 1974 'Carnation Revolution' against Portugal's authoritarian regime is also associated with Eurovision because its leaders co-operated with Portuguese radio to use Portugal's 1974 Eurovision entry as the preparatory signal for their left-wing military coup.[532]

The Irish representative Dana, from the Bogside in Derry, 'transcended the politically negative images emanating from her home city' when she won Eurovision 1970 early in the Troubles, and the moment was more 'iconic' in one Irish reading since the pre-contest favourite had been from the UK.[533]

One conflict that left at least as much of a political mark on Eurovision as any twenty-first century example was Türkiye's invasion of Cyprus in 1974. Greece had only just started participating in 1974, and Türkiye joined in 1975. Greece then withdrew from Eurovision 1975 in protest. The Greek representative in 1976, Mariza Koch, was active in the pro-democracy, pro-Cyprus musical movement that had surged up after the collapse of the Greek junta.[534]

Her song contained what by light-entertainment standards were graphic references to the Turkish occupation's impact on people and the land in Cyprus, and may still be the most politicised entry in the contest's history, at a time when the EBU did not yet have rules against political messages.[535] Turkish television did not send an entry in 1976, broadcast a Turkish protest song during Greece's performance, and did not return to Eurovision until 1978.[536]

The politics of conflict in the Middle East have affected Eurovision since Israel joined in 1973.[537] Organisers have had to manage the heightened security needs of Israeli delegations (Israel's debut was less than a year after the Munich Olympics), and Arab states' bans on broadcasting Israeli content has prevented the event expanding further into the Middle East.[538]

European contentions about the placement of NATO missiles in West Germany during the early 1980s, and the culture of anti-nuclear environmentalism, also influenced several Eurovision entries including Germany's first winning entry in 1982 ('Ein bisschen Frieden' by Nicole).

Germany's approach to Eurovision before and after reunification in 1990 has been seen as an example of symbolically atoning for the national past, reinventing itself as 'a "good European"' and trustworthy partner who is happy to keep participating without needing to win.[539]

The 1982 contest was held in Harrogate on 24 April during the first month of the Falklands War. Its songs would have been selected before the war broke out, but viewers of the live show would have been aware of the conflict if they followed world news. The voting behaviour of the UK and Spanish juries in 1982, when Spain was supporting Argentina, is sometimes seen as politicised by the Falklands War (Spain gave the UK 1 point, and the UK gave no points to the Spanish song, which was based on tango).[540]

6.4 Eurovision, European integration and conflict in the 1990s

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the collapse of state socialism across central and eastern Europe had extensive material and symbolic impact on Eurovision. Firstly, they led to the OIRT's absorption into the EBU, opening participation in Eurovision up to ex-OIRT members.[541] Once these started competing in 1993, the EBU had to experiment with various unsatisfactory options for accommodating this greater number of participants until introducing the semi-final format in 2004.

Secondly, they produced the 'unanticipated' but highly symbolic coincidence of the first Eurovision since the 1989 revolutions taking place in a democratising socialist country.[542] Yugoslavia had won Eurovision for the first and only time in May 1989, so already had the right to host Eurovision 1990. This contest would be hosted in Zagreb because the song that represented Yugoslavia in 1989 had been produced by the Zagreb-based studio of Yugoslavia's federalised broadcaster.

Thirdly, Italy's winning song in 1990 unambiguously referenced European political and economic integration, while many other entries alluded to the political context through lyrics about eastern Europe, freedom or walls.[543] The song by Toto Cutugno, 'Insieme 1992', mentioned symbols of European unity and looked ahead to the Maastricht negotiations.

Fourthly, the transformations of 1989–90 also pointed to the very conflict that would undermine this optimism for post-Cold-War peace in Europe, the Yugoslav Wars. Behind the international euphoria in 1989–90 over the end of superpower tensions, the reunification of Germany and renewed political freedom in central and eastern Europe, the Yugoslav political and constitutional crisis which led to the 1990s wars was well under way when Eurovision 1990 took place.[544]

The Yugoslav ruling party had collapsed in January 1990, leading to multi-party elections at different stages in each republic. The last round of Croatia's elections took place the day after Eurovision 1990, and brought to power the nationalist party which had to lead Croatia into its war of independence in 1991 when a Serb nationalist militia and the Yugoslav army resisted Croatia's secession.[545]

The case of Eurovision 1990 is worth explaining at length because it marked a new phase in the event's effort to communicate an idea of European identity connected 'with the idea of postwar Europe as a zone of peace'.[546] It also illustrates how the politics of conflict persist beneath Eurovision's production of this myth.

When the former Yugoslav republics began competing in Eurovision as independent states in 1993, the Croatian and Bosnian entries both highlighted strategic narratives about their nations during the conflict, at a time when European powers were failing to agree a common response or stop the war.[547] The Croatian entry asserted the nation's Catholic identity with a choral sound and a feminine appeal for the life of a teenage boy at war.[548]

The Bosnian delegation had had to flee Sarajevo under sniper fire to attend the EBU's preselection event.[549] Their song highlighted the resilience of citizen defenders during the siege of Sarajevo, and its music asserted that Bosnia's cultural identity blended east and west.[550] Foreign journalists were intrigued by the band's story, sometimes in ways that revealed their lack of knowledge about modern Bosnia, and the contest produced an emotional moment during the voting sequence when technicians managed to make live contact with the jury in Sarajevo.[551]

This episode undoubtedly engaged followers of the contest with Bosnian strategic narratives, but was framed 'within the peace narrative of European integration' which was not perceived to politicise the event in an unacceptable way.[552]

The geopolitics of Eurovision continue to be affected by consequences of the Yugoslav Wars. The 1999 contest in Jerusalem took place during the NATO air strikes against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Serbia–Montenegro) in the last phase of the Kosovo War, and featured all artists uniting on stage to perform the famous Israeli entry 'Hallelujah' (which had won Eurovision when Israel last hosted in 1979, days after the Egypt–Israel peace treaty).[553]

Serbia–Montenegro was excluded from Eurovision in the 1990s due to sanctions against Slobodan Milošević's regime. It began participating in 2004 with a two-stage song selection system in which the Serbian and Montenegrin broadcasters both held finals, but in 2006 the system collapsed ahead of Montenegro's independence referendum and they could not agree an entry.[554]

Serbia won the 2007 contest and therefore Belgrade hosted Eurovision 2008, despite concerns about ultranationalists' reactions to Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence earlier that year.[555] This was the first Eurovision in the post-Yugoslav space since 1990. It was also the first contest where LGBTQ+ human rights in the host city became a matter for the public sphere, given the LGBTQ+ associations of Šerifović's song, the large LGBTQ+ tourist audience expected to visit Belgrade, and the contentious history of activists' attempts to hold Belgrade Pride.[556]

Kosovo itself aspires to join Eurovision and the EBU as part of the same soft power strategy it has employed in international sport, but still cannot. This is because participant broadcasters must belong to member states of the International Telecommunications Union, a United Nations agency where Kosovo does not yet have recognition.[557]

In contrast, to seek qualification for sports mega-events, Kosovo only needs recognition from the relevant governing body.[558] The greater obstacles to Kosovo joining Eurovision have thus been seen as demonstrating a tension between the contest's stated values of 'apoliticism, cooperation and diversity' and the politics behind its organisation.[559]

Post-Yugoslav entries during the 1990s and 2000s also exemplified a dynamic across 'postsocialist' Europe where central and eastern European broadcasters 'flocked to the ESC … to demonstrate belonging to and partnership with Europe'.[560] Their opportunities to do so were greatest when they won hosting rights.

6.5 Nation branding by Eurovision hosts in central and eastern Europe

Eurovision's mega-event transformation has 'spatially and temporally expanded' the demands, and the impact, of hosting the material media event.[561] This has increased the technical demands on broadcasters, and the costs for all partners. It has also made city and regional actors much more important to the event's production, with more to deliver but also more to gain.

Opportunities to practice nation branding and promote strategic narratives at Eurovision are larger-scale for hosts than other participants. While all participants gain Eurovision's 'opportunity for national display and promotion on an international stage', states dedicate higher-order resources to the event when they are hosting, cities also co-operate, and actors in the country have access to opinion-formers for a longer time.[562]

Hosting sports mega-events, as we have seen, 'provides emerging states with the potential to practise public diplomacy to attract the citizens of other states using the global media'.[563] This has also been true for Eurovision, especially in the 2000s and 2010s.

However, Eurovision's tradition of hosting rights following the winner immediately distinguishes it from other large-scale events. It does not for instance witness the competitive international bid process that characterises, and sometimes weakens the reputation of,[564] sports mega-events. though host broadcasters and the EBU do now conduct in-country bid processes between cities if more than one city meets requirements and expresses interest.

Whereas in sports mega-events '[w]inning the bidding process for the Olympics or World Cup usually sends out a number of positive signals of inclusion and acceptance in the international system',[565] what primarily brings this affirmation through Eurovision is winning the contest itself, especially by public vote. Hosting rights are then a byproduct of that affirmation.

Host city announcements therefore do not generate as much public debate as they do in sport, where the governing body is perceived as actively endorsing the host state. Debates about place and legitimacy at Eurovision instead play out as debates about whether the country deserved to win the previous year or indeed whether it should even be in Eurovision.[566]

Financially, Eurovision's lead time of only one year does not require hosts to build new infrastructure or commit the level of architectural investment required for sports mega-events. Certain hosts have still initiated major capital investment projects aimed at regenerating the sites around Eurovision arenas, like Baku in 2012 and Copenhagen in 2014.[567] Both these projects caused concern that future potential host cities would be deterred by the required costs if new capital investment became part of Eurovision practice.[568]

The cases of Estonia in 2002 and Ukraine in 2005 are widely seen as emblematic examples of Eurovision nation branding on Europe's eastern periphery, and were researched in a comparative study by Paul Jordan.[569]

6.5.1 Estonia and Ukraine in the 2000s

Estonia enjoys high regard in the nation branding literature as 'a technological avant-gardist when it comes to statecraft', which has used nation branding to promote this narrative and encourage Western audiences to perceive it as a Nordic country.[570] By doing so, it avoids being perceived through 'east European' or 'post-Soviet' lenses, which the state rejects.[571]

After Estonia won Eurovision 2001, Enterprise Estonia engaged the UK consultancy Interbrand to research perceptions of Estonia in European countries and propose a new logo and narrative for the nation branding campaign. This aimed at attracting inward investment and building positive images of Estonia during ongoing EU accession negotiations.[572]

Elites connected to the project believed it had paid off in the long term. However, members of the public interviewed by Jordan in 2007–8 were usually critical of the campaign. They criticised its value for money and the engagement of a UK agency, they found the logo outdated instead of modern, and Russian-speakers found the campaign harder to identify with.[573]

At the same time, a Ukrainian marketing agency, CFC Consulting, was persuading government that Ukraine should join Eurovision. It sent its first entry in 2003, won in 2004, and hosted in 2005. The concept of the winning 2004 entry by Ruslana, which repackaged folklore of the Hutsul people in western Ukraine, influenced Eurovision performances for several years,[574] and Ukrainian experts have critically analysed its strategic exoticism in the context of wider domestic and international representations of Ukraine.[575]

By the time Kyiv hosted Eurovision 2005, the Orange Revolution had taken place, supported by many Ukrainian-language musicians including Ruslana.[576] The peaceful outcome of the revolution brought positive publicity to Ukraine, but caused significant delays to organising Eurovision which required presidential intervention.[577] The new government also removed tourist visas for EU citizens for Eurovision and did not reinstate them, differentiating its tourist appeal from Russia's.[578]

References to the revolution were present throughout the broadcast, including the host entry having been a well-known anthem of the protests, and President Yushchenko presenting the winner's trophy. This caused some contention with the EBU's concept of Eurovision as a non-political event.[579]

As with Estonia, Jordan found that Ukraine's early Eurovision participation tended to represent a 'specific, elite-driven' version of narrative identity that sections of the public often disagree with.[580] These insights are valuable for understanding Ukraine's participation in this period, though predate the 'cultural revolution' in Ukraine's creative sector since the 2013–14 Euromaidan revolution, and the impact of Russian aggression and information warfare since the annexation of Crimea.[581]

Probably Ukraine's most controversial Eurovision representative at home was the cross-dressing comedy character Verka Serduchka in 2007, who parodied post-Soviet cultural aesthetics.[582] Verka came second and became a 'Eurovision celebrity' among international fans,[583] who have adopted her iconic costume as part of fan culture.[584]

A line in her entry that sounded like the words 'Russia, Goodbye' pushed the edges of Eurovision's non-political rule and attracted widespread media attention.[585] With time, it has also acquired a Ukrainian reading as 'an audacious and explicitly anti-colonial statement',[586] and as a reclamation of Russian tropes about Ukrainian cultural inferiority.[587] Since February 2022 Verka's performer Andriy Danylko has sung the unambiguously worded version.[588]

The Tallinn/Kyiv model can be extended to other contests which have enabled national actors to communicate narratives of the nation as cosmopolitan, progressive and European, including Belgrade 2008. Serbia's broadcaster was keenly aware that creating a welcoming, safe atmosphere could alter international visitors' and journalists' stereotypes of Serbia and help Serbia be seen as meeting European standards.[589]

These discourses were strongly bound up with questions of LGBTQ+ rights because LGBTQ+ equality was already framed as a 'European' value and as resistance to conservative parochial nationalism in Serbian politics. LGBTQ+ visibility did improve in Serbia in the 2010s when Belgrade Pride began to be held, although critics argue the Serbian government has often instrumentalised it to cover up illiberal behaviour and policy.[590]

6.5.2 Eurovision 2012 in Baku

An example of nation branding and city branding through Eurovision that fans have perceived as unpersuasive is the 2012 contest in Baku. Azerbaijan was already committing to 'grand modernisation and event hosting projects' when it won Eurovision 2011, and aimed to become a competitive host for larger sports mega-events.[591]

Azerbaijan's undemocratic political regime did not require public consultation or accountability for its capital investment, which included the compulsory purchase and demolition of a residential area so the arena could be built[592] – a problem more familiar to critical Olympics scholars.[593] Independent journalists found that the ruling family had personally benefited from the arena's construction.[594]

This lavish and coercive investment programme, plus state repression of democracy activists (who appealed for visiting international media's attention through a 'Sing for Democracy' Campaign) and Azerbaijan's poor record on LGBTQ+ rights, created negative perceptions among fans.[595]

Stephen Hutchings and colleagues who researched UK and Russian broadcasters' coverage of Sochi 2014 suggest soft power strategies are most effective 'when uncontrived and invisible'.[596] The Baku contest seemed to break this code in fans' eyes, producing what Richard Giulianotti termed 'soft disempowerment' in the case of the Beijing 2008 Olympics.[597]

The Baku contest's impact on other audiences is less clear. A rare longitudinal country image survey after the contest, in Austria, concluded respondents did have stronger country associations two weeks after Eurovision 2012 but none of these uplifts except 'tradition' continued two years later, and associations for culture, shopping and relaxing had even decreased.[598]

Within Azerbaijan, an immediate assessment anticipated that this first opportunity for residents to have contact with tourists at large scale could create more dialogue between different sections of civil society, but did not follow this up.[599] A crackdown on independent journalism in 2013–15 showed the regime preferred openly silencing dissent over being able to present an image of transparency.[600]

The 2015 European Games in Azerbaijan, after this crackdown, led to similar 'unintended and unwelcome outcomes of soft disempowerment, weakened diplomatic ties and critically dissenting voices'.[601] They were somewhat less pronounced after Baku's Euro 2020 game due to the event's shorter footprint there, pandemic restrictions affecting travel, and the poor publicity surrounding Hungarian and Russian reactions to diversity initiatives in football.[602]

Case studies of the politics of Eurovision hosting typically focus on the representational strategies of the televised show, the representational strategies of communication by other actors, and/or international public discourses about the host country. They concentrate on cases where the 'European' belonging of the host nation is questioned internationally and debated at home.

Studies of how these strategies and discourses impact international perceptions of the host state or city are still rare. Surprisingly, there is also little literature on Eurovision host site infrastructure and planning, compared to the literature on sports mega-events and other large-scale city-based cultural events.

With the exception of Baku, cities' role in providing Eurovision infrastructure has rarely elicited research questions. There is more debate around the scale and financial demands of the contest in general, which affects broadcasters, cities and states. In 2011, after Moscow's huge investment in Eurovision 2009, the EBU was already expressing concern on many members' behalf that broadcasters would be intimidated from hosting in future.[603]

This has increased since the European financial crisis worsened in the early 2010s. The Malmö contest in 2013, in the same city that will host Eurovision 2024, was deliberately scaled down by its host broadcaster to create a smaller-scale model.[604] Participation itself has become too costly for some south-east European broadcasters in particular to compete every year, weakening the event's impression of diversity, and in 2016 Romania was excluded from Eurovision over unpaid debts to the EBU.[605]

6.6 Eurovision and conflict in the twenty-first century

6.6.1 Russia, Ukraine and other neighbours

The conflict and international aggression which has had most impact on Eurovision in the twenty-first century has been Russia's actions towards its neighbours and NATO since 2008–9.

Treatment of Russia in the Eurovision literature has changed dramatically since the early 2000s, when Russian entries typically featured young women and established a reputation for 'sexual excess … as a nation branding tool'.[606] In 2003, Russia selected the 'lesbian' duo t.A.T.u. a year after the international breakthrough.[607] Russian creative teams at this time were prepared to engage with the contest's camp and queer associations in a way that would not be seen in the 2010s as regime homophobia increased.[608]

In 2008, the Russian singer Dima Bilan won Eurovision with a performance also featuring the famous Russian figure skater Yevgeni Plushchenko and violinist Edvin Marton. This enabled Moscow to host Eurovision 2009 with what was then the highest budget for any contest, £26 million, and 'world-class' technical capacity including 30 per cent of all LED screens then available in Europe.[609] Yana Meerzon and Dmitry Priven interpret the 2009 contest as a move to communicate Russia's strength as a Euro-Asian power and also its entitlement to 'cultural–economic and ideological hegemony' within the pace of the former USSR.[610]

This contest took place in the context of geopolitical contentions between Russia and its neighbours including the 2007 'Bronze Soldier' controversy in Estonia and the subsequent cyberattack in which Russia was implicated, and the Russo-Georgian war in 2008. The EBU banned the 2009 Georgian entry, 'We Don't Wanna Put In', from participating after the broadcaster refused to alter its lyrics.[611] Ukraine's entrant Svetlana Loboda completed her performance flanked by giant Ukrainian flags.

LGBTQ+ human rights politics also affected the Moscow contest's meanings, since the mayor of Moscow had banned attempts to hold Pride since 2006. On the afternoon of the grand final, police broke up an unsanctioned 'Slavic Pride' march by Russian and Belarusian activists, which led the BBC's new commentator Graham Norton to refer to the incident as 'the Beijing Olympics of Eurovision' live on air.[612]

Other elements of narratives projected through the Moscow contest have been less discussed, but require revisiting since Russia's annexation of Crimea. These include one semi-final interval performance featuring t.A.T.u., the Alexandrov military ensemble, and mock military equipment, and the Russian entry itself, performed by the Ukrainian-born Anastasia Prikhodko with lyrics in Ukrainian and Russian.

The apparent 'message of brotherly love' behind this creative choice was also legible as a 'veiled threat' to viewers who understood how Soviet 'Friendship of the Peoples' discourse was being revived in Russia to justify Russian hegemony over the wider region, that is, a claim that Russia knew better than Ukraine about where Ukraine should culturally belong.[613] During the 2010s this narrative became increasingly pronounced in Russian information warfare against Ukraine.[614]

Since 2014, Russia's war against Ukraine has been 'the conflict … at the forefront of the international media coverage of the ESC', and both states have used the event to promote strategic narratives.[615]

One research team doing fieldwork at the 2014 contest, only a few months after Sochi and the annexation of Crimea, were able to gauge the immediate effect on fans' perceptions of Russia.[616] This particularly concerned loud booing of the Russian entry heard from parts of the live audience during the voting, which the presenters had had to criticise on air.[617]

The team found that most fans they met away from the arena criticised the booing and separated the state from the entrants. Some fans at the arena who had booed indicated they had done so because of Russia's anti-LGBTQ+ laws.[618]

Other scholars were able to follow media discourses in various countries reacting to Conchita Wurst's victory. These included claims that Europe had affirmed its progressive and liberal values by voting for Conchita; homophobic and transphobic attacks on Conchita and 'Europe'; claims that the victory showed a 'new Cold War' of values opening up between 'Europe' and Russia; and reactions to discourse flows from Russia in neighbouring states.[619]

Some used evidence that east European publics had been more likely to vote for Conchita than east European professional juries to resist simplistic Western media narratives of eastern Europe as a 'homophobic other' to the liberal West.[620]

Repercussions of Russia's attack on Ukraine continued to affect Eurovision after 2014. Ukraine did not participate in 2015 because of the financial impact of the war in Donbas (its 2014 entry did not comment on the war because it had already been selected). Russia did participate, and was loudly booed when the scoreboard suggested Russia's entrant might win, which would mean the next contest being hosted in Russia.[621]

Ukraine's returning entry, '1944' by Jamala, brought its second Eurovision victory in 2016. This can be considered successful cultural diplomacy for Ukraine. The song's content and emotional appeal communicated a significant Ukrainian strategic narrative to the international audience, which was reinforced by Jamala's own Crimean Tatar heritage and use of Crimean Tatar language.[622] The win also brought Ukraine the right to host Eurovision 2017 and enjoy the greater soft power opportunities for hosts.[623]

'1944' successfully negotiated Eurovision's rules against political messages because its face value topic was historical, the deportation of Crimean Tatars by Stalin in 1944.[624] Implicitly, it invited audiences to draw continuities between Stalin's aggression in 1944 and Russian aggression in 2014, and to see through Russian disavowals of responsibility for attacks in Crimea and Donbas.[625] It could also have resonated with emotive collective memory of 1944 in wider European memory culture.

In 2017–19 the contentions between Ukraine and Russia through Eurovision involved artist selection.[626] When Kyiv hosted the 2017 contest, Russia selected an entrant, Yulia Samoilova, whom Ukrainian security services ruled ineligible to enter Ukraine because she had visited occupied Crimea through the Russian mainland. The EBU steering committee condemned the ban but could not overturn it.[627] Samoilova was selected again to represent Russia at Eurovision 2018 in Lisbon.[628]

Ukraine's post-Maidan, wartime restrictions on Russian popular culture have also affected Ukrainian artist selection. In 2019 the winner of Ukraine's national selection, Maruv, did not participate in the contest because she did not wish to cancel existing contracts to perform in Russia.[629] The initial winner of Ukraine's 2022 selection, Alina Pash, withdrew amid questions over the legality of her own 2015 visit to Crimea, and was replaced by Kalush Orchestra, who had won the public vote.[630] Kalush went on to win Eurovision 2022 outright.

Since 2021 the EBU has taken its most decisive action against authoritarian regimes to date. In 2021 it rejected two Belarusian entries which appeared to mock democratic protestors, and in 2022 it suspending both Russia and Belarus after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Scholars who call on the EBU to take a stronger position as an international human rights actor have praised this decision.[631]

There is some debate over whether Russia's more alternative-seeming entries of 2020–1, especially the 2021 entry by the feminist, ethnic-minority and pro-LGBTQ+ artist Manizha, signalled attempts to communicate more independent narratives of Russian identity, or simply another dimension of state-sponsored 'songwashing' to distract audiences from repression.[632]

Ukraine's case since 2014, meanwhile, might confirm one analyst's speculation in 2013 that '[i]f other countries' publics feel that they "know" the Baltic nations, they might pay more attention to them and be inclined to support them in disputes with Russia.'[633] Roselle, Miskimmon and O'Loughlin highlight this in their work on strategic narratives.[634]

Estonia, Latvia and Ukraine all made themselves known through Eurovision in the early 2000s, but it is Ukraine which most established itself as an iconic Eurovision nation. The impact of its presence at Eurovision will have been greatest on those international fans who have enjoyed Ukrainian entries and translated their sentiments on to Ukraine as a country.

6.6.2 Armenia and Azerbaijan

A second conflict in Russia's neighbourhood which has affected Eurovision but been less researched is the war between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh/Artsakh. Armenia joined Eurovision in 2006 and Azerbaijan followed in 2007.[635] Azerbaijan protested to the EBU in 2009 over an Armenian 'postcard' film displaying a monument in this region's capital, and after the 2009 contest the Azerbaijani authorities reportedly worked through mobile phone providers to identify and interrogate citizens who had voted for the Armenian song.[636]

Armenia withdrew from participating in the 2012 contest in Baku, and also withdrew in 2021 due to the impact of Azerbaijan's offensive over Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020. In 2016 its broadcaster was sanctioned but not suspended by the EBU after the Armenian contestant displayed a Nagorno-Karabakh flag (banned under EBU rules) live on air, during a semi-final that was also broadcast by Azerbaijan.[637]

The EBU also had to rule in 2015 over whether an Armenian entry commemorating the centenary of the Armenian Genocide, 'Don't Deny', infringed the 'non-political event' rule, after Azerbaijan's broadcaster claimed this was a political message. The song was allowed to compete under the less pointed title of 'Face the Shadow', though the words 'Don't deny' remained in the lyrics.[638] Conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan has therefore accounted for some of the most direct decisions the EBU has had to make about applying its non-political rules.

However, more mutuality between the two countries is facilitated in Eurovision than in international sport. UEFA has restricted Armenia and Azerbaijan from sharing a qualifying group since the Euro 2012 qualifiers,[639] but Armenia and Azerbaijan can be drawn in the same Eurovision semi-final and must commit to broadcasting each other's performances.

6.6.3 Israel/Palestine

Conflict between Israel and its neighbours is the third conflict to have seriously affected Eurovision in the twenty-first century. The EBU's commitment to Israel since 1973 precludes broadcasters which boycott Israeli content from joining the contest. Both contests hosted in Israel in the twentieth century occurred in the halo of recent peace deals. The 1979 contest was remembered in Israel as the 'Peace Eurovision',[640] and during the 1999 contest the Oslo Accords were still in force.

Tensions within Israeli society over how Israel should relate to Syria and Lebanon were sometimes visible through Eurovision in the 2000s. The 2000 entrants Ping Pong were criticised by their own broadcaster for waving Syrian and Israeli flags on stage (they also performed the contest's first same-gender kiss).[641]

The year after the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah, which was backed by Iran, the 2007 entrants Teapacks submitted a song that indirectly protested against the Iranian nuclear threat. This was investigated by the EBU and allowed to compete.[642]

What most now defines the politics of Israel's participation in Eurovision, however, is Israel/Palestine. The beginning of the Second Intifada in 2000, and especially Palestinian civil society's launch of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) campaign in 2005, has added an extra political dimension to Israel's participation in international events.

Israel's entry in 2009, a duet between singers from Jewish and Arab backgrounds (Noa and Mira Awad), attempted to symbolise peaceful dialogue but was rejected by Arab critics and left-wing Israeli artists for laundering the reality of the occupation.[643] Later Israeli entries took uniformly escapist, touristic or camp tones, until the 2018 winning entry by Netta Barzilai which responded to popular feminism. This gave Israel the right to host the next contest.[644]

Eurovision 2019 thus represented 'one of the more significant political and diplomatic challenges for all participating countries in Eurovision', as actors had to decide how to navigate the boycott campaign.[645] This campaign had identified the international LGBTQ+ community as a target audience in order to resist Israeli public diplomacy's strategic narrative of the state as LGBTQ+-friendly, which boycott supporters have termed 'pinkwashing'.[646]

Eurovision has been an 'important element' of this public diplomacy strategy since approximately 2010 both because of its large LGBTQ+ fandom, which represents a pool of potential tourists and supporters, and also Israel's own place in Eurovision's LGBTQ+ history.[647]

Dana International won Eurovision 1998 when it was held in Birmingham, the last time before 2023 that the BBC produced the show. She is an openly trans woman and the first ever LGBTQ+ artist to win Eurovision, having overcome religious–conservative opposition at home.[648] Her win when LGBTQ+ equality was only just gaining ground in Israel had offered LGBTQ+ Israelis a then-rare chance to celebrate with the rest of the nation.[649]

Eurovision thus witnessed more contention over where to site the 2019 contest than any other year to date. Within Israel, struggles over whether Tel Aviv or Jerusalem should host the contest reflected contending liberal–cosmopolitan and religious–conservative narratives of the nation.[650]

Abroad, the 'Boycott Eurovision' campaign asked the international public not to visit or watch Eurovision 2019.[651] Pro-Palestine activists in several countries campaigned for their broadcasters not to participate in a contest held in Israel.[652] The Icelandic band Hatari entered their national selection in order to provoke critical dialogue about 'pinkwashing' and anticapitalism.[653]

While at the contest, they visited Palestine and recorded a video for a collaboration with a queer Palestinian musician, Bashar Murad, which they could only release after Eurovision.[654] During the grand final voting sequence, they displayed Palestinian flags live on air, incurring their broadcaster a fine of €5,000. An interval performance by Madonna and Quavo had also briefly featured dancers displaying Palestinian and Israeli flags which had not been cleared in rehearsal.[655]

The case of Eurovision 2019 presents difficult questions about soft power. Christina Kiel has argued that Israeli state actors' leveraging of Eurovision for cultural diplomacy purposes in 2018–19 was ultimately counter-productive. Although it aimed to transfer international audiences' positive associations with Eurovision on to Israel, it also linked the state more closely to the event, potentially giving the boycott campaign more legitimacy.[656]

There have been limited attempts to assess the impact of the boycott campaign on fans. A questionnaire of 220 international fans who chose to attend found the most common reason they gave for not boycotting Eurovision 2019 was that they respected its status as non-political. Almost half (40%) would however have been prepared to boycott certain host nations, especially Russia (27% of all respondents).[657] This hints at the shape of the 'transnational public sphere' among fans with the resources and desire to visit Tel Aviv. However, the study did research fans who did boycott or do not visit contests in person.

In a broader study of Israeli soft power and nation branding strategy, Rhys Crilley and Ilan Manor have identified Tel Aviv's touristic and LGBTQ+ appeal as a resource that Israeli state-level promotion has been able to use to compensate for the mixed image of the national brand. They observe some state-driven campaigns, such as a campaign promoting two-centre holidays in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, have run 'with minimal or even no reference to the nation-state'.[658]

Crilley and Manor term this practice of 'states symbolising themselves as and through cities (or regions)' 'un-nation branding'. They argue it may be used by states 'whose national brands are viewed as contentious or who have limited soft power resources', leveraging the city brand for the soft power and strategic narrative of the state.[659]

Since 2021–2, there has been potential for the EBU's swift action towards Belarus and Russia to be critically contrasted against its relationship with Israel. The EBU as an international actor will face the choice to either ignore this discourse or explain through its values why the contexts are not equivalent.

The EBU has in fact taken action towards Israel which is probably less well known beyond media specialists, in pressuring the Israeli government not to split up the public broadcaster and weaken its autonomy in 2019 (as well as insisting the 2019 contest should be in Tel Aviv, not the government's preferred site of Jerusalem).[660] This indicates what the EBU considers its remit in this relationship.

6.7 Perceptions of the UK in Eurovision

Literature on most of the Eurovision participating countries which have been seen as significant for soft power or cultural relations focuses on the representational and promotional strategies they have used (much more rarely on evaluating the impact of these strategies). Literature on the UK, in contrast, focuses on public and media perceptions of Eurovision in the UK, and how these may have affected perceptions of the UK in the event's international community.

While Eurovision has an extensive fan base in the UK, its fans have long had to contend with negative and stigmatising attitudes towards the event among the wider public and mainstream media.[661] Despite the UK's successful record in Eurovision until the late 1990s (with five wins and fifteen runner-up places between 1957 and 1998), the contest's wider image in the UK was 'as a moment of cultural embarrassment'.[662]

This worsened in the 2000s when UK entries regularly came last or close to last, including the occasion in 2003 when a UK entry received no points at all for the first time ('nul points' in Eurovision culture). There is still a pervasive discourse in the UK that this was a result of mass European displeasure at UK participation in the invasion of Iraq.[663] This argument was voiced on air by the long-standing BBC commentator Terry Wogan during the broadcast and widely taken up by UK media at the time.[664]

The fact that UK performance in Eurovision declined just as central and eastern European states were becoming successful, coinciding with the increase in central and eastern European labour migration to the UK after the EU enlargement in 2004, is seen as intensifying the latent xenophobia behind this attitude to Eurovision.[665]

Literature is particularly critical of Wogan's role as commentator. His commentary since becoming the BBC's permanent television commentator on Eurovision in 1980 had always tended to invite British laughter at less discerning Europeans, and to exoticise acts that did not reflect north-west European cultural norms.[666] This drove the BBC broadcast's appeal to some UK viewers,[667] and employed the ironic mode of communication familiar to his radio listeners, but was hierarchical and not conducive to good cultural relations.[668]

During the 2000s, Wogan's commentary expressed increasing discontent with the growing amount and strong results of entries from central and eastern Europe.[669] It framed these countries as liable to exercise 'political voting', and implicitly as not respecting values of fair play, culminating in his last broadcast as Russia won in 2008.[670]

This narrative has persisted in much UK media even though the current BBC commentator does not espouse it. Karen Fricker has linked it to 'feelings of unprocessed anger, frustration and loss about the country's changing relationship to Europe and the rest of the world', and to what Paul Gilroy described as 'postimperial melancholia'.[671] A more recent Australian study links these sentiments directly to the political and cultural Euroscepticism that led to Brexit.[672]

The case of UK media discourse about Eurovision complicates the idea of Eurovision as a platform for cultural relations by highlighting how media can negatively influence the event's attractiveness. Literature on media discourses of narrative identity in sport strongly suggests that the framing of European sports events as us/them contests between nations, as in English media coverage of Euro 96, strengthens national identity and does not strengthen senses of Europeanness.[673] One might expect the values of Eurovision or a song contest to create different results, but this is not necessarily so when media apply us/them frames.

The context of Brexit has sharpened perceptions among UK stakeholders that more positive action was necessary to prevent 'complacency' about the UK's international image which could weaken its attractiveness in cultural relations.[674] This is likely to have been as apparent to the BBC as to other UK cultural actors.

Behind the scenes, the BBC has consistently regarded Eurovision as a world-class television event which producers would aspire to work on,[675] and was the EBU's chosen partner for the one-off 2015 show marking the contest's sixtieth anniversary.[676] Its partnership with TaP Music to find contestants with the potential to succeed at Eurovision and in music charts paid off in 2022 when Sam Ryder's entry came second.

Historically, the BBC has hosted Eurovision more than any other broadcaster, in 1960, 1963, 1968, 1972, 1974, 1977, 1982, and 1998 as well as 2023. Four of these contests (in 1960, 1963, 1972, and 1974) were produced on behalf of winning broadcasters that could not afford to host the contest again so soon or did not have a suitable venue.

Research studies of the 2022 contest have not yet appeared, but the experience may well have improved perceptions of Eurovision in the UK, and perceptions of the UK in Eurovision, even before the BBC's hosting of Eurovision 2023 on Ukraine's behalf.

It is also worth noting the BBC is not, in fact, the only UK broadcaster to have been involved with Eurovision. ITV is also an EBU member, and organised UK entries to the Junior Eurovision Song Contest when the EBU launched this children's version of the event in 2003. ITV stopped participating after 2005, but S4C was able to compete in 2018–19 and sent entries in Welsh.

Studies are less likely to appreciate the backstage cultural relations impact of the BBC, or other actors involved in producing the contest, because researching this requires greater levels of access. Research on media discourses and representations at Eurovision is much more frequent because it does not require specific access or funding.

6.8 Public broadcasters and the EBU as soft power and cultural relations actors

The role of member broadcasters and the EBU itself as soft power and cultural relations actors is implicit in any studies of the representational strategies of Eurovision performance and Eurovision hosting, even if they do not say so directly.

6.8.1 Host broadcasters

In partnership with the EBU, host broadcasters influence the framing of Eurovision as a site of cultural relations, and have the capacity to communicate strategic narratives, throughout their production decisions. These include the contest's visual identity, the concept and delivery of its stage design, the casting of presenters, the presenters' scripts, and the filmed and live opening acts and interval performances for each broadcast.[677]

One element of host broadcaster framing that directly dramatizes cultural relations is the set of 'postcard' films that precede each entry. Traditionally, these postcards 'resemble[d] tourist advertising campaigns, promoting scenery, cityscapes and other places of interest to the potential tourist' and supporting national soft power strategies.[678] Often they also feature the contestant and depict or allude to their own country.

Jess Carniel suggests that how each broadcaster approaches the balance between representing the host country's culture and the contestant country's culture can indicate how they view the role of Eurovision itself for them. A stronger focus on the host country implies branding or rebranding, whereas a stronger focus on other countries 'emphasises an ethos of cultural relations', though this 'can be equally self-serving'.[679] Certain host broadcasters have explicitly based their postcards around depicting cultural relations between their host country and each participant, such as Swedish Television in 2000.[680]

Broadcasters' themes and branding for each contest also indicate what they choose to affirm as the event's shared values, and how much emphasis they place on its soft power significance for the host country versus its significance for cultural relations. For instance, the executive producer of the Malmö 2013 contest (Martin Österdahl, now the EBU's executive supervisor for Eurovision) directly argued that broadcasters should 'turn the focus away from using the program to market your own country at any cost, instead highlighting the diversity and wealth of all nationalities and cultures' without losing a national perspective.[681]

Besides the idea of unity in diversity embedded in the contest's slogan and branding, many practical details also signalled the impression of Sweden as a nation committed to sustainability and democracy. These included the provision of refillable tap water bottles rather than bottled water for accredited journalists, and discussions of human rights being permitted during the press conference, demonstrating a clear 'intention … to promote egalitarian values through the Eurovision Song Contest'.[682]

All these decisions by host broadcasters, however, take place in coproduction and negotiation with the EBU.

6.8.2 The EBU

The EBU is Eurovision's overarching soft power and cultural relations actor as the owner and custodian of the contest's brand, and the arbiter of its rules for fair competition.

The EBU also has sanctions it can impose when relationships break down. It has the power to move or threaten to move a contest if it is not happy with organisers' progress, and to fine broadcasters for acts by delegations which break contest rules. It can suspend broadcasters from a contest, over unpaid debts or egregious politicisation of the contest. In 2022, it showed that it was even prepared to suspend broadcasters from the entire organisation.

Adam Dubin has called for the EBU to use 'hard' interventions more often in protecting media freedom and human rights by stipulating that it can sanction members when their states violate human rights in promoting an EBU event, especially now that IOC is adding a human rights requirement to its host city contracts for Olympic Games.[683]

Relationships 'between organizers and mainstream media, hosts and organizers, and fans attending the event and media audiences' all create potential brand management fault lines for the EBU.[684] Insistence on the event's non-political nature mitigates these tensions, from a liberal perspective in which 'adhering to strict rules and formalities' enables states and societies to interact across disagreement.[685]

Just as the IOC and other sports mega-event governing bodies can be seen as foreign policy and public diplomacy actors,[686] the EBU can be seen the same way. Both types of organisation are:

important actors with the power to help states to affirm and perform their identity as members of international society by virtue of participating in, and especially hosting, these events. The organizations behind institutionalized mega-events are thus inherently political actors, even when their stated agendas – whether on music or sport – are supposedly 'apolitical'. Their political power makes them a target both for potential hosts seeking legitimacy and for potential contesters who seek to deny or undermine it.[687]

How the EBU applies the 'non-political event' rule is thus crucial for how the values of Eurovision are experienced in practice, and for perceptions of the event's fairness and legitimacy.

In practice, 'broad commentaries on ideologies core to "European" human rights and social justice' have been treated as less contentious than 'songs relating to specific political situations',[688] though the latter can be framed as the former. Histories enjoying broad consensus in western European memory culture are less likely to be scrutinised than histories from the peripheries of Europe such as the deportation of Crimean Tatars or the Armenian Genocide.[689]

Since at least 2013–14, the EBU has also accepted LGBTQ+ equality as part of this social consensus.[690] During Eurovision 2018, it immediately broke its partnership with the Chinese broadcaster Mango TV for censoring two performances in its broadcast of the semi-final which had featured LGBTQ+ relationships or visible tattoos (both of which had just been banned on Chinese television). Its statement emphasised this had not been 'in line with the EBU's values of universality and inclusivity and our proud tradition of celebrating diversity through music'.[691]

Often, the line between what is ruled to be political or non-political is very fine. Responses to the global refugee crisis, which exposes the limits of welcome and diversity as European values, have demonstrated this. In the first contest since the crisis's escalation in Europe in 2015, the Swedish host broadcaster staged an interpretive dance performance, 'The Grey People', to acknowledge refugees' suffering during one semi-final in 2016.[692]

In 2017, the Portuguese representative Salvador Sobral was asked to stop wearing a 'SOS Refugees' sweatshirt to press conferences, indicating some responses could be considered too political.[693] In 2018, the French entry about refugee rescue in the Mediterranean was not challenged even though it was inspired by the humanitarian work of a specific organisation, Médécins Sans Frontières.[694]

The EBU is not, however, subject to the level of criticism about disparities between the 'rhetoric' and 'reality' of its event that surrounds the IOC.[695] Except to stakeholders and fans, and when it is directly depicted in the Eurovision broadcast, the EBU is less visible than host broadcasters. Generally, host countries suffer more than the EBU when a contest's organisation or management is criticised.[696]

Another important aspect of the EBU's contemporary role as an international actor is its ambition to globalise the Eurovision brand through franchises in territories beyond Europe. In 2014–15 it opened Eurovision participation to the Australian broadcaster SBS (which has broadcast Eurovision since 1983) even though Australia is not in the European Broadcasting Area, and in 2016 SBS became the EBU's partner for the (still unrealised) 'Eurovision Asia' project.[697] An American Song Contest in partnership with NBC took place in 2022.[698]

Since at least the 1970s, when Türkiye and Israel began participating, the 'map' of Eurovision has always created debates about how far certain participants belong to Europe.[699] No other participating country, however, destabilises the idea of Eurovision as a spatially-based community like Australia. The EBU and SBS have justified Australia's participation as a co-operation based on shared cultural values.[700] The event's dedicated Australian fan base, some of whom now rise in the middle of the night to watch it live, also makes Australia an attractive market.[701]

Australian scholars have thus been able to observe the soft power and cultural relations impact of their country participating in the contest from the beginning. They focus in particular on how Australia attempts to communicate multiculturalism and diversity rather than Eurocentricism, and how fan practices differ when the event is so geographically remote.[702] A future study by Zoe Jay will centre fans themselves as diplomatic actors.[703]

While 'a discourse of historical connection and contemporary shared values' has been important for stakeholders explaining why Australia participates in Eurovision, it is unclear how far contemporary Australian identity narratives are influencing European viewers.[704] Host broadcasters' postcards for Australian entries have often still framed it as 'a distant beach culture'.[705] Confusion over why Australia participates in Eurovision may also make the values of the contest itself less coherent.

From a cultural relations perspective, however, this may not matter. Australian entries have been popular with viewers, and only failed to qualify for the grand final in 2021 when COVID-19 travel restrictions prevented the Australian entrant performing in person. Initial discontent among some fans about the fairness of allowing Australian entries has alleviated with their consistent quality.[706] Participants' ability to make friends with other delegations and connect with fans may help to present Australians as generous, trustworthy partners who are aware that entitled attitudes would be counter-productive. Assuming Australia continues to participate in Eurovision, this is a positive cultural relations outcome.

6.9 Fan cultures and people-to-people cultural relations

As a televised large-scale event, Eurovision is inherently a space of people-to-people cultural relations. The event is always a co-production between the EBU and the host broadcaster, with many professionals from third countries on the technical crew.

The backstage production and delivery of Eurovision is researched much less than the content of Eurovision broadcasts or the media discourses and fan cultures surrounding Eurovision, since access to participants is more challenging. It is typically interview-based and retrospective, rather than observational.[707] A number of studies do however consider the roles of artists, volunteers and fans in cultural relations, and the cultural relations impact of audience behaviour through voting.

6.9.1 Artists as soft power and cultural relations agents

While all members of national delegations at Eurovision have roles in people-to-people cultural relations, artists have particular significance as diplomatic actors because of their media spotlight. Artists in today's Eurovision 'are acutely aware that, for all intents and purposes, they are the image of their own nation' during the event and in promotional activity before it.[708]

Indeed, because artists are seen to symbolise their nations, Eurovision can even be seen as a space where 'all acts are political and all interactions must be framed in terms of diplomatic relations.'[709]

Many artists start becoming international representatives weeks before the context, by travelling to 'pre-parties' such as those in London, Amsterdam, Madrid, Barcelona and Tel Aviv where they perform live for fans. Usually these are organised by fan clubs, though Israel's foreign affairs and tourism ministries support the Tel Aviv pre-party, which began in 2016.[710]

During their travel to the event itself, artists interact with their states' embassies and government organisations. They also interact extensively with international media, and these encounters 'are almost invariably framed in terms of a meeting between cultures rather than a meeting between two artists'.[711]

Artists are thus in similar positions to athletes in sports mega-events, whose potential as 'celebrity diplomats' is already understood.[712] In today's digital mediascape, their social media posts can communicate narratives which amplify or subvert the narratives of other stakeholders: they are subject to the EBU's rules against bringing the contest into disrepute until the event has ended, but these are less restrictive than for instance IOC social media policies.[713]

Some artists have used Eurovision to communicate about 'glocal' issues, 'those of global importance with a clear manifestation at the local level'.[714] Others directly raise the profile of strategic narratives from their state. This is particularly likely during conflicts where a state is resisting a larger neighbour's aggression and appealing for international support. Bosnian delegations felt this need during the Yugoslav Wars,[715] and since 2016 Jamala has emerged as Eurovision's most prominent celebrity diplomat for a national cause.

6.9.2 Fans and people-to-people cultural relations

Research on Eurovision fan cultures is positive about the event's capacity for supporting people-to-people cultural relations. While fans can be 'complicit' and 'unwitting' participants in the soft power strategies of state and non-state actors, they can also be 'powerful agents' in cultural relations themselves (and some fan cultures promote critical literacy towards the politics of the event).[716]

Stakeholders and observers of nation branding processes connected to Eurovision certainly believe it is a powerful place to connect with the imaginations of Europeans who watch the event. The UK ambassador to Estonia in 2000–3, Sarah Squire, for instance believed that Eurovision 'engages with more people across Europe than an election to the European Parliament'.[717] The deepest engagement comes from those who participate in Eurovision fan cultures and thus engage with the event year-round.

The research team led by Maria Kyriakidou and Michael Skey who studied the event space of Eurovision 2014 argue Eurovision fan culture represents 'a space of cosmopolitan engagement with cultural others opened up by the contest'.[718] In significant contrast to most sports fandom, they see Eurovision fan cultures as expressing 'playful nationalism', that is, 'the expression of national identifications in a non-antagonistic way … as part of the visual aesthetics and carnivalesque element of the media event'.[719] Supporting a country that is not one's own is common, and becoming a fan of a country's Eurovision entries can motivate language learning and further cultural discovery, a phenomenon which deserves further research.

At Eurovision as a live event, official and unofficial hospitality venues around the host city play an important part for grassroots cultural relations as the spaces where 'friendships and connections with people from other countries' develop.[720] A study at the Stockholm and Kyiv contests in 2016–17 also highlighted the significance of fan zones with cultural programming and hospitality as 'places where the event took on a material form and shape beyond the televisual experience'.[721]

Eurovision fans are therefore bearers of and participants in what the historian David Lowe has called 'vernacular internationalism'.[722] They 'embody and perform the nation in a variety of ways, both intentionally and inadvertently', and their interactions with each other and the host culture 'inform micro-perceptions of different nationalities' among visitors and hosts.[723] This also occurs year-round in digital spaces.

Travel industries and the experience economy are increasingly recognising fan tourism as a key market segment.[724] These are the tourists most likely to become repeat visitors to the event, and the opportunity it creates to discover new host cities can itself become a pleasure of participating in the fandom.[725]

Henrik and Sara Linden have described fans as co-creators of Eurovision as an event, because they are the holders of knowledge on which host cities depend to deliver a strong visitor experience.[726] This underlines the importance of people-to-people cultural relations between fans and the institutions of host cities in shaping how the event is planned.

Event volunteers represent another specific example of people-to-people cultural relations between host cities and guests. As with other mega-events, host cities have come to rely on volunteers for everyday greeting activities in the event space and around the city. Oslo and Düsseldorf both recruited volunteers in 2010–11, and so has every contest since Lisbon 2018.[727]

The Stockholm/Kyiv study argues that host city volunteering deserves recognition as a form of 'media work' which helps shape the emotional atmosphere of each contest. It also points out that national cultures of volunteering differ across host countries, so that volunteering in Kyiv for instance was influenced by the wider 'volunteer movement' that had developed in Ukraine since Euromaidan.[728]

Volunteers are also conscious, however, that they provide free labour to event organisers, while, at least in states with stronger labour protections, organisers may be under pressure not to describe volunteers' activities as work.[729] Trade unions protested about volunteer labour in both Lisbon and Turin (2022).[730] A critical perspective on host city volunteers, and fan media volunteers who provide the EBU with free labour of a different kind, therefore questions whether widespread reliance on volunteer labour might weaken the event's public service mission.[731]

6.9.3 LGBTQ+ fan communities

LGBTQ+ fans are a particularly distinctive and significant community for Eurovision. No other event of its scale has comparable meaning to LGBTQ+ fans, and although LGBTQ+-specific city-based international events have existed in Europe since the 1990s (3.6), none of them have Eurovision's mainstream recognition and reach.

LGBTQ+ fans have treated Eurovision as an important celebration since at least the 1970s in countries where the older fandom has been researched (though more studies of this longer history are needed across Europe). Initially, its associations stayed within the community.[732]

The first open participation of LGBTQ+ artists in Eurovision, in 1997–8, coincided with a number of LGBTQ+ rights reforms at both state and European levels.[733] For instance, the Icelandic singer Páll Óskar became the first openly LGBTQ+ Eurovision participant in 1997, less than a year after Iceland had introduced civil partnerships. Dana International represented Israel amid a major cultural shift in LGBTQ+ visibility there during the 1990s.[734]

Two European Court of Human Rights judgements against the UK, and the EU's incorporation of anti-discrimination protections for sexual orientation in the 1997 Treaty of Amsterdam, also supported an emerging idea of 'Europe' as a space of sexual equality and citizenship.[735] As with the theme of eastward enlargement, these developments influenced meanings of 'Europe' at Eurovision even though they stemmed from completely separate institutions.[736]

They also meant that the EU accession process for central and eastern Europe would scrutinise countries' records on LGBTQ+ rights. Researchers argue that this made Eurovision a space where broadcasters could promote their states' readiness to join 'Europe' by communicating their welcome of LGBTQ+ entrants and fans.[737]

Eurovision has also been seen as affording LGBTQ+ fans the pleasure of being able to identify with their nation and celebrate their LGBTQ+ identity at once. Such occasions were 'rare' anywhere in Europe when researchers first remarked on them in the mid-2000s.[738]

After Eurovision 2008 in Belgrade, the 2008 Beijing 2008 Olympics and Eurovision 2009 in Moscow, Eurovision also became a recurring site of discourse about international LGBTQ+ human rights and European citizenship.[739] The Moscow and Baku contests sparked debates about whether hosting Eurovision in countries with poor LGBTQ+ human rights records was in line with the event's values.[740]

The EBU began to take positions that actively aligned Eurovision with LGBTQ+ human rights in 2013. Swedish Television hosted this contest and included a scene celebrating equal marriage and two bridegrooms kissing in its interval act,[741] communicating a strategic narrative of Sweden as an LGBTQ+-friendly nation.

The 2013 Finnish entrant Krista Siegfrids also ended her performance with a same-gender kiss, at a time when a citizens' initiative to persuade the Finnish parliament to consider equal marriage legislation was taking place. By not ruling that Siegfrids had broken the event's rules against political statements, the EBU was tacitly accepting LGBTQ+ equality as within what it frames as the consensus values of the contest.[742]

The most sustained transnational debates about shared values and LGBTQ+ rights through Eurovision occurred after Conchita Wurst won the contest in 2014 (6.4.1). Conchita directly referred to shared values herself in her winning speech by uttering 'We are unity and we are unstoppable!'[743]

European political actors working on responses to anti-LGBTQ+ discrimination invited her to events in Brussels, and she performed for the UN general secretary at UN headquarters in Vienna.[744]

The interrelated themes of how both 'states on the eastern margins' of Europe and 'queer communities throughout Europe' have experienced and performed membership of a European community of values are therefore an important theme in the literature, all the more so since 2014.[745] Research on Eurovision thus also produces insights into how debates about sexual politics have contributed to 'defining the borders of modern Europe and its conditions of belonging' since the 1990s more widely.[746]

Amid rising transnational anti-gender politics and state homophobia/biphobia/transphobia since the mid-2010s, Eurovision has come to assert an increasingly 'active promotion of queer visibility'.[747] Ivan Raykoff has described it as enacting a 'deliberate crossing and queering of national and sexual identities' that creates a specific kind of 'queer patriotism'.[748]

How far Eurovision influences sexual politics beyond its own physical and virtual spaces is, however, unclear. The Kyriakou and Skey study found that the 'cosmopolitan openness' of the media event was 'detached from the social experience of fans' everyday lives', so that it 'functions as a two-week "bubble" that allows fans to express their identities and celebrate diversity but does not really challenge mainstream sexual politics beyond the competition.'[749] Year-round fan culture offsets this, but only to a certain degree.[750]

The majority of individuals who interact with culture across national borders through Eurovision are not, however, fans – they are wider audiences experiencing the event on television (or now livestream) in private homes, or in hospitality spaces in their own country.

6.9.4 Audience behaviour and digital networking

The transnational practice of holding Eurovision parties indicates that the event 'has created a European popular culture that some people experience as very significant', and which 'is not homogenous but has local variations'.[751]

Before cable/satellite television and the internet, the live Eurovision broadcast also gave viewers a rare opportunity to experience 'internationalism' on terms not fully set by their own national broadcaster.[752] Today, however, 'the geographically distant can become intimately familiar' all year round.[753] More actively engaged viewers can follow other countries' national selections and artists independently online.

The EBU has facilitated this form of engagement by supporting broadcasters to stream national selections through YouTube, enabling international viewers to bypass websites and apps aimed at broadcasters' own nationals abroad which often have limited foreign language support. Certain broadcasters such as Swedish and Finnish television even create English-language content to help international viewers engage with their national selections, another emerging development which deserves more research.

Since approximately 2010, Eurovision's spectacular and transnational liveness has made digital 'co-viewing' and 'second screen' experiences an important part of engagement for many viewers who are active social media users.[754] This facilitates 'distributed public conversations' both within and between national digital audiences, depending on which hashtag(s) a user engages with,[755] though practices and audiences differ across social media platforms.[756]

A core practice of Eurovision which public audiences have taken part in since the late 1990s, but which could potentially undermine rather than strengthen mutuality and trust, is voting. This deserves consideration from the perspective of trust and also of democracy.

6.9.5 Eurovision voting, trust, and democracy

Between 1997 and 2003, the EBU gradually reformed Eurovision voting so that points were awarded by public telephone vote instead of professional juries in all countries except microstates where public voting would have been impractical.[757]

A number of studies including what is thought to be the very first academic study of Eurovision in 1995 have attempted to analyse Eurovision voting patterns to identify alliances and voting 'blocs'.[758] Some attempt to interpret Eurovision voting through explanations of voting behaviour from electoral studies, although this is inherently limited since voters in Eurovision cannot vote for the country whose telecommunications network they are using and this confounds preference data.[759]

Patterns in frequent exchanges of votes between countries are often interpreted as revealing 'deep cultural and political schisms' within Europe.[760] Apparent voting alliances are unpopular when they are perceived to be 'neighbourly' or 'political', that is, awarded regardless of the quality of the song.[761]

Fans' booing of neighbourly voting in the arena creates a poor impression of the contest's mutuality and fairness,[762] and negative perceptions of voting among EBU member broadcasters have led to contentions about the format of the event. These were most serious in 2007–8. In 2007, all ten countries qualifying from the Eurovision semi-final were from eastern Europe or Türkiye, and in 2008 the only western European country in the final top ten was Norway. Both voting sequences produced negative reactions in western Europe.[763]

However, there are often cultural contexts which explain 'neighbourly' voting patterns.[764] Indeed, from a cultural relations perspective, actors explaining Eurovision voting to the public could reframe perceptions about 'political' voting by communicating more about historic cultural and musical connections between regional neighbours, and accepting diasporas' influence on musical tastes as part of everyday 'conviviality' in a multicultural society.[765]

In 2009 the EBU responded to concerns that viewers introduced a 50/50 balance between professional juries and public voting which continues today, at least in the grand final (the semi-finals reverted to public-only voting in 2023).[766]

The presentation of the grand final voting sequence, however, changed dramatically in 2016 so that the 'national' votes awarded on screen only represent the votes of five-member juries, and an aggregated public vote is delivered as 'the vote of a whole European electorate' instead.[767] This was designed as 'a more exciting broadcast experience', but also adds 'significant tensions' in years where jury and public votes visibly diverge.[768]

Perceptions of open unfairness or corruption, in jury voting or the reporting of public voting figures, jeopardise audiences' trust in the contest and its fairness, as well as their trust in specific countries involved.[769] The EBU has taken steps to secure the integrity of both voting processes,[770] though these can have knock-on effects on trust if they reveal irregularities to a wider audience.

In 2022, for instance, the EBU excluded the jury votes of six countries from the grand final after discovering irregularities in their semi-final voting, and calculated replacement scores for them. Three of these countries had their votes read during the grant final by the contest's executive supervisor rather than their own spokesperson, making the incident more visible.[771]

A more positive take on Eurovision voting is that Eurovision is an event where 'the institutional characteristics of modern democracy have always been present', evolving from the 'quasirepresentative' professional juries to direct popular participation.[772] This is a 'complex and highly-scrutinised process involving millions of voters across Europe and the world'.[773] No other large-scale event engages a transnational public this directly with the democratic principle.

The impression of national and international publics awarding votes that cut across conflict-affected boundaries, or appear to support a minority group, can also create emotive moments during the voting. Sometimes media can interpret these as signs of public attitudes changing, as in 2004 when the Croatian public gave maximum points to the first Serbia–Montenegro entry since the Yugoslav Wars.[774]

However, viewers vote for songs for numerous and personal reasons, so voting behaviour is not a proxy for public attitudes towards a country or group. The impact on a public or group who interpret the result as evidence that 'Europe' accepted or supported them is perhaps more genuine, and easier to observe through self-reporting. This goes both for peripheralized countries, and for LGBTQ+ communities confronting hate and discrimination in their own country who can take comfort in the idea that 'Europe' supported a singer with their identity.[775]

The very idea of Eurovision as a fair contest between countries of different sizes, populations and resource levels can also communicate the idea of the event as a space of common values, one of which is the continuing significance of the nation-state.[776] Anika Gauja has suggested that '[a]s Europe struggles with the rise of far-right populism and increasing disaffection with the formal institutions of politics, the Contest's commitment to diversity, participation and democracy will become ever more important in an increasingly fragmented political landscape.'[777]

One factor that does offset the idea of complete international fairness in the contest's format is the fact that five large western European countries which make the largest financial contributions to the EBU (the UK, France, Germany, Spain, and Italy since its return to the contest in 2011) gain direct qualification to the grand final.[778] Usually the only other country to bypass the semi-final is the host. Australia also gained direct qualification for its first entry in 2015, and Ukraine in 2023 as the winner from 2022.

This immediately creates a visible distinction between 'haves' and 'have-nots', and is open to question by any viewer who notices the 'Big Five' do not compete in semi-finals. It has caused disquiet among some broadcasters who do not benefit, and was the Turkish broadcaster's stated reason for withdrawing from the contest in 2013.[779]

There are also, however, strong suggestions that Türkiye actually withdrew as part of a wider 'symbolic exit from Europe' in the 2010s, and because the ruling party did not want so much LGBTQ+ content broadcast to the public (as also speculated for Hungary's more recent withdrawal after 2019[780]).[781]

Whether the 'Big Five' genuinely do benefit by qualifying directly for the final is debated. Their broadcasters certainly benefit from the guarantee of higher viewing figures and, where relevant, advertising income. Their artists are also protected from the potentially humiliating effect of failing to qualify.[782]

However, Big Five songs receive less exposure than semi-finalists, and their performers benefit from one less phase of performance and rehearsal.[783] The UK, Spain, France and Germany all often score very few points, though Italy (which selects its entrants through the competitive Sanremo Festival) is usually in the top ten. This suggests the Big Five system does not affect fairness to the point of giving these countries an unfair advantage to win.

Although there are inequalities in its structure, access and participation, Eurovision can still be regarded as a democratic event. Dean Vuletic has argued that it is 'a rare case of direct democracy in cultural diplomacy', where 'the public actually plays a decision-making role' – unlike typical examples of public diplomacy, in which 'the public is a subject rather than an agent'.[784] Because of Eurovision's hosting process, viewers do not just participate in choosing the winner but also in selecting the next host country. They therefore influence the contest's geopolitics.

This form of selecting winners, and selecting national representatives in cases where broadcasters open their selections up to public vote, is unique among large-scale events. Athletes in most sports events must meet quantitative performance criteria, the results of aesthetic sports such as gymnastics are determined solely by professional judges, and artists selected for international biennales are chosen by cultural ministries and expert commissions.[785]

Eurovision may therefore have more democratic and participatory potential than other large-scale events. However, broadcasters have sometimes had to stand up to public attitudes (or attitudes which national media frame as public attitudes) when they have selected entries that represent minority identities. Often this has affected selections of LGBTQ+ or gender non-conforming artists, including Dana International, Verka Serduchka and Conchita Wurst.[786]

Eurovision as a contemporary event has been seen to give host broadcasters experience in producing televised mega-events and raising their profile in the international television sector. It draws extra visitors to cities with well-established tourist markets, and enables others to present themselves. Its 'biggest benefit', Dean Vuletic argues, has been for states which have been able to 'promote refashioned cultural and political identities' when hosting it at historical turning-points.[787]

All these benefits connect to strategic narratives and soft power. They contribute to Eurovision's importance in cultural relations, but its cultural relations potential is not limited to them.

7 Conclusion: soft power and cultural relations prospects of Eurovision after 2023

The research on Eurovision we have reviewed in Part II shows that broadcasters, cities, state-level actors, the EBU as an international actor, media organisations, fan communities, and the event's wider audience of viewers and visitors all play conscious or tacit parts in soft power activities.

The production of the contest, the event spaces where it occurs, and the physical and virtual spaces where broadcast/online viewers interact with it are, simultaneously, all sites where cultural relations activity takes place.

Sometimes, soft power and cultural relations can be at cross-purposes through Eurovision. If actors with strong organisational or emotional investments in the contest perceive an actor's power strategies as heavy-handed, manipulative, or at odds with their own perceptions of the contest's values, it can weaken their perceptions of that actor and its cultural relations.

Actors who are widely perceived as positively embodying Eurovision's values through the cultural relations activity they conduct there, meanwhile, may well be perceived more attractively. One could expect this to lead to a soft power uplift among audiences who follow Eurovision, in as far as it is possible to establish these.

Eurovision also provides concrete examples of 'the value of trust'[788] in cultural relations. If member broadcasters did not largely trust the EBU to manage and deliver a fair contest, Eurovision as a competitive event would surely not have survived this song. On occasion, trust breaks down enough that a broadcaster withdraws or is suspended. However, these instances are rare, compared to how many broadcasters have remained in Eurovision or would like to keep participating if they could afford it.

Eurovision also represents a largely successful example of international co-operation outside the framework of European supranational political institutions. The EBU maintains a model of co-operation where power remains with the nation-state, which facilitates public broadcasting.[789] It has been said to promote a 'Europe' which 'does not have one hegemonic region or centre but … many',[790] though it is not immune from structural marginalities of its own, or insulated from marginalities outside.

The specialist literature on Eurovision contains many cases of how the event has been used for national soft power purposes, including examples from Estonia, Ukraine, Russia, Israel and Azerbaijan. All have had successes and limitations, though it is always important to clarify which audiences' attitudes one has in mind. Azerbaijan's strategy in 2012, for instance, appeared to weaken its image among socially-engaged international fans but to strengthen it among sports governing bodies which selected it for future events.

A literature on Eurovision's role in cultural relations is also emerging through studies of how fan cultures relate to public and cultural diplomacy. Implicitly, however, all studies of Eurovision are in some way about cultural relations – since cultural relations are inherent in delivering and experiencing the event.

Beyond stakeholders and specialist researchers, however, Eurovision's soft power and cultural relations potential are still underappreciated. One study of Olympic opening ceremonies, for instance, suggests they are 'unique as a cultural product with soft power impact underwritten and indirectly influenced by governments'[791] – but Eurovision could be defined the same way.

One factor that studies of Eurovision, soft power and cultural relations have never previously had to consider, though, is how these operate when a host country is not the previous year's winner. No previous winner in the mega-event era has been unable to host (the last such occasion was 1980), and no winner has ever been unable to host because of being under full-scale attack from a neighbour, as Ukraine was in 2022.

While the UK has faced challenges to its image both in Eurovision and since Brexit, the BBC is well trusted among peer broadcasters and the international public. As the goodwill towards the UK's second place at Eurovision 2022 already suggested before the BBC became host broadcaster for 2023, positive engagement with Eurovision could therefore improve perceptions of the UK among audiences who engage with this event.

The current international environment and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine have already left the British Council aware of an 'urgent and increasing need for credible international collaboration for the common good', especially with 'like-minded democratic countries' and with the European Union.[792] Eurovision complements this engagement, especially when the event is going through a similar rethinking with the EBU's decision to suspend Belarus and Russia.

Research on the soft power and cultural relations potential of sport (section 2) suggests several factors that organisations interested in Eurovision should take into account. Like sport, the event brings 'ordinary people and cultures with all their varied histories and disagreements' into contact, within a competitive framework in which all participants invest a baseline level of trust.[793] Its producers work hard to keep trust levels high amid technological and political challenges. Since at least 2008–19, its transnational public sphere has already overlapped with the public sphere debating the hosting of sports mega-events.

Eurovision also shares some drawbacks with sports mega-events as a focus for soft power and cultural relations activity. There is a high risk that any benefits accumulated by hosting an event will remain short-term without investment in projects that authentically carry out activities 'that people recognise as credible and valuable over a long period of time',[794] over and above the inherent short-termism of strategizing around events which only occur over a brief time in any year.[795]

It is difficult to demonstrate causal relationships 'between sport soft power initiatives and progress towards specific diplomatic objectives', and the same is likely to be the case with Eurovision.[796]

The varying potential for uplifts depending on the existing strength/weakness of a state's or city's image may also operate at Eurovision. In other words, improving an existing weak image and maintaining an existing strong image by successfully hosting an event are easier than improving an image that is already strong, while hosts with already-strong images have more to lose.[797] To form a hypothesis from this about perceptions of the UK would require understanding whether its image is already positive or not, which has become more challenging since Brexit.

Another potential drawback for stakeholders identified in the sport literature is that, in cultural relations activity around large-scale events, stakeholders must also give up a certain amount of control over meanings and narratives to the participatory,

'democratic' creation of meaning that takes place when cultural relations occur.[798] In fact, Eurovision already manages this tension at production level: each participating broadcaster creates the content that the EBU and host broadcaster integrate into the event, within a set of common rules.

Moreover, Eurovision allows its spatial meaning from year to year to be heavily shaped by the democratic process of voting, since the votes of viewers and professional jurors determine which state will benefit from the event being hosted by its public broadcaster in one of its cities the following year.

The literature on large-scale city-based cultural events (section 3), meanwhile, points to how important cities are in delivering each Eurovision contest's narratives and experience. Each edition of Eurovision takes its identity from its host city at least as much as its host nation, and the host city is in charge of participants' and visitors' everyday experience of the event.

City councils also influence the event at site selection stage in any country where more than one city meets EBU requirements for hosting Eurovision. They form business cases for expressing interest in hosting, and put themselves forward to their national broadcaster using know-how and practices from the wider field of large-scale city-based cultural events. Eurovision host cities for 2021–4 were all chosen through bidding processes which resemble those for other large-scale events but have a much more compressed lead time.

Cities hosting Eurovision deliver a potential soft power asset for their state, but can also boost their own influence internationally as a creative city if they desire this. Beyond the Eurovision arena, which is managed by the host broadcaster, cities are also responsible for the everyday spaces where the in-person cultural relations of a Eurovision contest take place. The expansion of cities' role in Eurovision during the era of 'festivalisation' in cultural policy still deserves more research.

Cities have been underappreciated as soft power and cultural relations actors in the literature on Eurovision, compared to the literature on city-based cultural events and sports mega-events. As Eurovision's scale and visitors' expectations have grown, however, their role in delivery has become much more significant.

The literature on UK cultural brands and soft power (section 4) argues that Brexit unsettled the soft power strategies that the UK appeared to be advancing after London 2012. Brexit's effect on trust in UK politics and governance was greater than its effect on the attractiveness of UK culture. Its material impact on the sector which creates that culture has been real, though since 2020 is hard to disentangle from the impact of COVID-19.

Clarke and Ramscar's idea of actors across the technology, education, tourism, trade, culture, entertainment, sport, and celebrity sectors as '"implicit" persuaders' counsels against ignoring entertainment.[799] Entertainment 'structures the way people think and react, and they experience it directly far more often than they experience political discourse'.[800] BBC delegations to Eurovision are among these implicit persuaders. They create the performances that show viewers how the BBC has chosen to share UK culture with them in a given year. Backstage, they influence other actors who deliver Eurovision by how they co-operate with the event and express its shared values.

Cull argues that 'being known as a good "team player" or a "facilitator" of partnership' is an advantage for countries' soft power.[801] Eurovision is somewhere where UK actors can demonstrate this. Mass international television/digital audiences, however, do not see the people-to-people activities that deliver Eurovision: they only see the outcome, the televised shows.

Nye underlines that actors' soft power strategies are only credible when their actions reinforce their words,[802] and this may limit what impact Eurovision can have on perceptions of the UK. Certain narratives of Eurovision 2023, such as UK support for Ukraine, were well matched in current government policy. Other narratives, such as the theme of international welcome, had a more complex relationship to government rhetoric and priorities.

The final body of literature we draw on in Part I is the literature on culture, conflict and peacebuilding (section 5). Its most important insight is probably the warning not to romanticise the power of culture, art, music or song. Many scholars are critical of projects that idealise music as a universal language of reconciliation and thus miss the more politically, socially and culturally specific ways in which people make meaning through music.

With this in mind, we should not simply think of Eurovision as a night when Europe sets aside differences to come together through song. Rather, we should understand how the event creates positive feelings associated with its values through this myth, and which audiences are more able or less able to share these pleasures.

Whatever impact the hosting of Eurovision 2023 will have had, soft power and cultural relations linked to the event in future years will usually involve it being hosted somewhere else. States which are not hosting Eurovision still benefit from the event, through the on-screen and off-screen cultural relations work that their national delegations do for them as non-state actors.[803]

Typically, governments in liberal democracies have tended not to consider Eurovision as a site of public diplomacy 'until their state has won', when domestic public interest in the event grows, public or private investment from beyond the host city is needed, and city authorities are engaging with the state.[804] How arm's length soft power and cultural relations institutions have approached the event still seems unexplored.

If institutions are interested in creating 'participatory engagement' as Gillespie and O'Loughlin recommend,[805] however, Eurovision offers an open door. It is a space where media organisations and creative professionals, plus everyday citizens as fans and visitors, are already engaged in cultural relations work.[806] It requires participants with different interests and narratives to co-operate around shared values which are often tested but still generally agreed.

Opportunities to link bilateral cultural relations activity to host states and cities are complicated by the much shorter lead time that Eurovision allows its hosts, compared to other large-scale events. Host countries are only ever known twelve months in advance, and most host broadcasters must also select a host city. This creates organisational challenges in all spheres of planning and delivery.

However, Eurovision's distinctively short lead time also means that there is less lag between creating core narratives about the event host site and delivering the event. This is in contrast to a mega-event like the London Olympics, where the narrative was exposed to much more domestic and international political change between bidding in 2005 and delivery in 2012.

In 2019, when the Brexit referendum had occurred but the UK's leaving the EU was still being negotiated, one team of Eurovision researchers argued that 'the UK's participation in the Eurovision Song Contest can be read as a metaphor for its engagement with the EU – without yet the dramatic denouement of Brexit.'[807] The perspective from 2023, however, might suggest a different and diverging story about UK international cooperation.

Successful cultural relations create fewer headlines than soft power plays. However, cultural relations are embedded in the concept of Eurovision as an international coproduction, and in the transnational culture that fans have created around it. Liverpool and the BBC hosting Eurovision 2023 on Ukraine's behalf may finally have driven wider appreciation in the UK of the event's politics, significance and scale.

Acknowledgements

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