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Displaying Ukraine, Negotiating Europe

An Unexpected “Success Story” at the Eurovision Song Contest

Abstract

The paper examines two decades of Ukraine’s participation in the Eurovision Song Contest (ESC), charting the trajectory from “no place” at the periphery to a “success story” and a safe bet at the ESC. Departing from the positionality of a “double subaltern” in a blind zone between the West and Russia, it sought visibility and recognition to validate its claims to sovereignty and Europeaness. Moving beyond the commercial logic of accessing the pan-European music market, it prioritized elevating its geocultural status by disentangling from the Russian orbit, embedding itself in the European cultural space, and contributing to it. The empirical basis of the research is the author’s fieldwork at the 2024 ESC in Malmö, where successful strategies of artistic performances and Ukraine’s national projections, as perceived by external observers, were identified. Ukraine has carved out its distinct cultural profile at the ESC as “making folk cool and modern”: bridging and blending authentic musical traditions with contemporary

aesthetics, it has advanced to the position of a subversive hegemon, simultaneously mimicked and contested by others.

Keywords

Eurovision Song Contest, Ukraine, subaltern cultural diplomacy, subversive hegemony

Abstrakt

Pokazywanie Ukrainy, negocjowanie Europy: Nieoczekiwana „historia sukcesu” na Konkursie Piosenki Eurowizji

Autorka analizuje uczestnictwo Ukrainy w Konkursie Piosenki Eurowizji na przestrzeni dwóch dekad, szkicując jej drogę od peryferyjnego „nigdzie” do „historii sukcesu” i konkursowego pewniaka, na którego warto postawić. Startując z pozycji „podwójnie wykluczonego” w martwym polu między Zachodem a Rosją, Ukraina dążyła do widoczności i uznania, by potwierdzić swoją suwerenność i europejskość. Nie ograniczając się do komercyjnej logiki dostępu do paneuropejskiego rynku muzycznego, swoim priorytetem uczyniła podniesienie statusu geokulturowego poprzez wyrwanie się z orbity rosyjskiej, osadzenie w europejskiej przestrzeni kulturowej i wkład w jej współtworzenie. Podstawą empiryczną zaprezentowanych analiz są badania terenowe autorki przeprowadzone podczas Konkursu Piosenki Eurowizji w 2024 roku w Malmö, które umożliwiły rozpoznanie skutecznych strategii występów artystycznych oraz projekcji narodowych Ukrainy postrzeganych przez zewnętrznych obserwatorów. Ukraina wypracowała sobie w ramach Eurowizji własny wyrazisty profil kulturowy – uczestnika, który potrafi „sprawić, żeby folk był cool i nowoczesny”. Dzięki łączeniu i mieszanii autentycznych tradycji muzycznych ze współczesną estetyką przesunęła się na pozycję subwersywnego hegemonu, równocześnie naśladowanego i kontestowanego przez innych.

Słowa kluczowe

Konkurs Piosenki Eurowizji, Ukraina, dyplomacja kulturalna subalternów, subwersywna hegemonia

Introduction: The ESC as a Major Geocultural Venue

The Eurovision Song Contest (ESC) has received exponentially growing—yet unevenly distributed—scholarly attention as one of the most popular and long-standing media events with global viewership and important geopolitical ramifications. The expanding body of “Eurovision studies” has diversified considerably, ranging from holistic comparisons with other cultural technologies¹ to institutional-procedural analyses of voting patterns and broadcaster roles,² nation-branding and soft power readings,³ critical accounts of structural inequality and othering,⁴ its engagement and meaning for the transnational queer community,⁵ and more recent explorations of participatory democracy⁶ and militarization.⁷ Importantly, the contest’s geopolitical repercussions and projections are drawing increasing attention, inter alia, exposing cultural connections across the Berlin Wall in the Cold War era,⁸ as well as its more recent manifestations of the EU’s soft power globally.⁹ It was the contest’s eastward expansion

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¹ Göran Bolin, “Visions of Europe: Cultural Technologies of Nation-States,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 9, no. 2 (2006): 189–206, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877906064030>.

² Gad Yair and Daniel Maman, “The Persistent Structure of Hegemony in the Eurovision Song Contest,” *Acta Sociologica* 39, no. 3 (1996): 309–25; Derek Gatherer, “Voting in Eurovision: Shared Tastes or Cultural Epidemic?,” *Empirical Text and Culture Research* 3 (2007): 72–83, <https://eprints.gla.ac.uk/4800/>.

³ Paul Jordan, *The Modern Fairy Tale: Nation Branding, National Identity and the Eurovision Song Contest in Estonia* (Tartu: University of Tartu Press, 2014); Albert Meijer, “Be My Guest: Nation Branding and National Representation in the Eurovision Song Contest” (MA thesis, University of Groningen and Uppsala University, 2013).

⁴ Katrin Sieg, “Cosmopolitan Empire: Central and Eastern Europeans at the Eurovision Song Contest,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 16, no. 2 (2013): 244–263, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549412450639>; Shannon Jones and Jelena Subotić, “Fantasies of Power: Performing Europeanization on the European Periphery,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 14, no. 5 (2011): 542–557, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549411412199>.

⁵ Catherine Baker, “The ‘Gay Olympics’? The Eurovision Song Contest and the Politics of LGBT/European Belonging,” *European Journal of International Relations* 23, no. 1 (2017): 97–121, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066116633278>.

⁶ Jessica Carniel, “Towards a Theory of Participatory Democracy Via the Eurovision Song Contest,” *Media, Culture & Society* 46, no. 5 (2024): 925–941, <https://doi.org/10.1177/01634437231224080>.

⁷ Inbar Noy, Meital Viner-Serdtsse, and Galia Press-Barnathan, “Militarization and Popular Culture in the Shadow of War: The 2022 Eurovision Song Contest,” *International Affairs* 100, no. 4 (2024): 1675–1692, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iaie133>.

⁸ Dean Vuletic, *Postwar Europe and the Eurovision Song Contest* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019).

⁹ Hila Zahavi and Gal Arieli, “The Eurovision Song Contest and the Potential of Unintended Events and Public Diplomacy: How Exposure to an International Mega-Event Shapes External Views of the EU,” *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 32, no. 4 (2024): 1148–1160, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2024.2324289>.

that gave a strong impetus to this research development, in which pondering how a “New” Europe is performed on the Eurovision stage has a dual focus on the new members joining the community and on how this changes the entire endeavor as a cultural projection of the EU project.¹⁰ Critical accounts expose the mirroring of the East–West divide within the ESC, often interpreted as the cultural difference in gender normativity,¹¹ on the one hand, and the perpetuated orientalization of Europe’s East,¹² on the other.

The founding contradiction of the contest lies between the declared unity, forged by music, and the *national grammar* of the competition, in which nation-states figure as contestants in the tables. Against the lack of objective criteria of excellence, as in sports, and robust institutional design, as in formal politics, the ESC is much more sensitive to shifting power balances, which makes it, in Yair’s apt expression, “the cultural seismograph.”¹³ While sticking to this approach in the current study, we would argue that the ESC is not only “a space for the dramatisation of *existing* political and national tensions”¹⁴ but also a venue for *negotiating* and *prefiguring* desired political changes. Thus, Estonia’s victory in 2001 signaled the political expansion of symbolic Europe eastwards,¹⁵ codified as the EU Eastern Enlargement in 2004 and 2008. The string of non-Western wins in the 2000s questioned the differential inclusion of European peripheries and exemplified the desired shift in power balances, in which former geopolitical underdogs should renegotiate the now-common project.¹⁶ Often, though, they did so by embracing the exoticizing stereotypes of themselves.¹⁷ The pending question is whether it reinforces Western hegemony¹⁸ or subversively establishes the power of former subalterns.¹⁹

¹⁰ Karen Fricker and Milija Gluhovic, eds., *Performing the ‘New’ Europe: Identities, Feelings, and Politics in the Eurovision Song Contest* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

¹¹ Julie A. Cassiday, “Post-Soviet Pop Goes Gay: Russia’s Trajectory to Eurovision Victory,” *The Russian Review* 73, no. 1 (2014): 1–23, <https://doi.org/10.1111/russ.10717>.

¹² Jones and Subotić, “Fantasies of Power,” 542–57; Sieg, “Cosmopolitan Empire,” 244–263.

¹³ Gad Yair, “Douze Point: Eurovisions and Euro-Divisions in the Eurovision Song Contest: Review of Two Decades of Research,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 22, no. 5/6 (2019): 1022, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549418776562>.

¹⁴ Maria Kyriakidou, Michael Skey, Julie Uldam, and Patrick McCurdy, “Media Events and Cosmopolitan Fandom: ‘Playful Nationalism’ in the Eurovision Song Contest,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 21, no. 6 (2018): 603–618, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877917720238>, 607, emphasis V.K.

¹⁵ Jordan, *The Modern Fairy Tale*, 92.

¹⁶ Sieg, “Cosmopolitan Empire,” 246.

¹⁷ Catherine Baker, “Wild Dances and Dying Wolves: Simulation, Essentialization and National Identity at the Eurovision Song Contest,” *Popular Communication* 6, no. 3 (2008): 173–189, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15405700802198113>.

¹⁸ Meijer, “Be My Guest.”

¹⁹ Marko Pavlyshyn, “Ruslana, Serduchka, Jamala: National Self-Imaging in Ukraine’s Eurovision Entries,” in *Eurovision: Identity and the International Politics of the Eurovision Song Contest Since 1956*, ed. Julie Kalman et al. (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 129–150.

Since the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the ESC modelled “a dream Europe without Russia,”²⁰ in the words of anonymous British experts, as quoted by long-term Ukraine ESC commentator Timur Miroshnychenko. Russia’s revival of the Intervision competition as an ESC conservative doppelgänger, held in Moscow in September 2025, with a strong presence of BRICS and MENA states, along with post-Soviet ones, both reflects and enables shifting geopolitical alliances.²¹ Those cases suggest that musical contests with global viewership have salient geopolitical repercussions: they reflect and reproduce existing geocultural hierarchies, but also can potentially expose, challenge, and change them. Ukraine would be a telling example explored from this vantage point. The paper proceeds as follows. The introduction situates the research within Eurovision studies and identifies the geocultural gap it addresses. The second section traces Ukraine’s history at the ESC across three analytical phases. The third section presents the fieldwork methodology and empirical findings, clustered around the subaltern trajectory of visibility, differentiation, recognition, and contribution. The conclusion discusses the results and their broader implications.

From Zero to Hero: Ukraine’s History of Eurovision

Ukraine’s profile on the official Eurovision website once opened with the declaration that it is “one of the biggest success stories” of the ESC—a framing added in 2022 and retained until mid-2025, reflecting the surge of global attention following Russia’s full-scale invasion.²² The site also noted that Ukraine is the only participating country to have qualified for the final every time it has entered. This fact still stands as of 2026, even after the line was quietly removed. The statistics are striking: across twenty-one appearances, Ukraine has claimed three victories, two runner-up finishes, and placed the majority of its entries in the top ten. Symbolically, its debut victory came in the very year the semi-final system was introduced as an additional barrier for newcomers. The most recent win, by Kalush Orchestra in 2022, drew a record 439 televoting points.

²⁰ Russia was banned from participation in 2022, on the day following its full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

²¹ Steve Rosenberg, “Russia’s Answer to Eurovision Is Less Kitsch, More Kremlin,” BBC News, September 20, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cre5vvox31p0>.

²² The phrasing from the official Eurovision website in 2022–2025, before it was modified in mid-2025. Now, Ukraine is described as “one of the most successful countries in the show’s more recent history,” accessed June 18, 2026, <https://www.eurovision.com/eurovision-song-contest/countries/ukraine/>. Arguably, the new, more moderate description reflects the changing geopolitical climate in 2025, as compared to 2022, which further exemplifies mutual entanglements between the cultural and the political.

That was the moment when the “success story” framing crystallized, both on the website and in fans’ minds.

Facing the threat of physical and cultural extinction following Russia’s invasion, Ukraine received the recognition it had been seeking for decades—recognition that spilt over into politics, sport, and the arts. Sceptics have argued that Ukraine’s string of victories amounts to symbolic compensation both for the absence of direct Western military engagement and for the longstanding disregard of Ukrainian culture. Antagonists resent these expressions as yet another wave of politicization disrupting the contest’s “love love peace peace” ethos.²³ Some go further, reading all three of Ukraine’s ESC victories as political rewards: Ruslana’s 2004 win tied (anachronistically) to the Orange Revolution; Jamala’s 2016 victory to Russia’s annexation of Crimea; and Kalush Orchestra’s 2022 triumph to the unexpectedly resilient Ukrainian resistance.

The argument presented here runs in the opposite direction. Artistic successes generated international visibility and helped forge a distinct cultural profile for Ukraine, enabling a decoupling in foreign perception from Russia, which in turn legitimized Ukrainian claims to sovereignty against encroachment from its former imperial hegemon. In this, Ukraine has deployed what we term *a subaltern model of cultural diplomacy*, in which soft power does not extend hard power but compensates for its deficit. Positioned far from centers of geopolitical gravity, a state-subaltern generates influence in less rigidly controlled domains.²⁴ Estonia arguably pioneered this model in the region: its 2000 Human Development Report suggested that Estonia might prove itself “part and parcel of modern cultural Europe” capable to “stand up and be noticed *even before* economic and political integration.”²⁵ Musical diplomacy was central to that effort, and the ESC was its chosen venue.²⁶ Estonia’s 2001 Eurovision victory opened a sequence of non-Western wins that coincided with Baltic and Central European integration into Euro-Atlantic structures, color revolutions in the post-Soviet region, and what has been aptly described as Russia’s reactionary counter-revolution.²⁷

²³ Cf. Christina Öberg, “Love Love Peace Peace? The Paradoxes of the Eurovision Song Contest,” *Journal of European Popular Culture* 16, no. 1 (2025): 27–42, <https://doi.org/10.1386/jepc.00079.1>.

²⁴ Valeria Korablyova, “Russia vs. Ukraine: A Subaltern Empire Against the ‘Populism of Hope,’” *AUC Studia Territorialia* 21, no. 2 (2022): 53, <https://doi.org/10.14712/23363231.2023.3>.

²⁵ Tiit Tammaru and Raivo Vetik, eds., *Estonian Human Development Report 2000* (Tallinn: Estonian Cooperation Assembly, 2001), 68 (emphasis V.K.).

²⁶ Cf. Jordan, *The Modern Fairy Tale*, 92.

²⁷ Robert Horvath, *Putin’s Preventive Counter-Revolution: Post-Soviet Authoritarianism and the Spectre of Velvet Revolution* (London: Routledge, 2013).

Framing these developments as nation branding risks inscribing them into a neoliberal market logic—maximizing returns, attracting investment—while underscoring their political and postcolonial dimensions. As Olesya Khromeychuk observes: “if Ukraine does not exist on the[se] mental maps, its existence on the actual map of the world will continue to be at risk.”²⁸ From this standpoint, the subaltern objective is threefold: to gain visibility (placement on mental and cultural maps), to earn recognition (as a distinct and worthy entity), and ultimately to claim agency and sovereignty.

Subaltern cultural diplomacy differs from its great-power counterpart as *compensatory* and *sociocentric*. Where major powers use soft power to project and extend hard power—both emanating from the state apparatus—peripheral states deploy it compensatorily, generating agency in domains less tightly controlled by geopolitical gatekeepers. It tends to engage a broader coalition of actors beyond the state, becoming, as in Ukraine’s case, an all-society endeavor. For peripheral participants, the ESC is frequently an all-in undertaking, pursued at a net financial loss and understood as an investment in sovereignty and geopolitical standing rather than access to a music market.

These geocultural claims are predictably contested by imperial centers. Whether through unreflective bias or deliberate misinformation, dominant players resist shifts in cultural power balances. For Ukraine, its rivalry with Russia became a defining thread of ESC history before Russia was banned from the contest in 2022. That rivalry peaked in 2007, when Verka Serduchka represented Ukraine with a song whose lyrics closely resembled “Russia, goodbye!”, which provoked a large-scale smear campaign in Russia that reportedly ended the artist’s career on the broader post-Soviet market. The strategic threat that Serduchka posed to Russian neo-imperial aspirations went beyond the lyrics.²⁹ The performance was a successful public act of postcolonial hybridity: Surzhyk, the colloquial Ukrainian-Russian blend previously coded as provincial and underdeveloped, was recast as a creative resource; self-irony was deployed as resistance; and both were projected westward, effectively “Surzhyk-ing” the ESC’s lingua franca. The audience validated the gamble: Serduchka finished second and entered the contest’s canon of golden hits, while helping Ukraine step out of Russia’s shadow.

²⁸ Olesya Khromeychuk, “Where Is Ukraine?,” *RSA Journal*, no. 2 (2022), <https://www.thersa.org/rsa-journal/where-is-ukraine/>.

²⁹ Cf. Pavlyshyn, “Ruslana, Serduchka, Jamala,” 136; Serhy Yekelchuk, “What Is Ukrainian about Ukraine’s Pop Culture? The Strange Case of Verka Serduchka,” *Canadian-American Slavic Studies* 44, no. 1/2 (2010): 232, <https://doi.org/10.1163/221023910X512877>.

From a subaltern perspective, Ukraine's ESC participation has been driven by three interlocking objectives: gaining visibility and fighting for attention; contesting claims from the former imperial metropole; and engaging in proactive, constructive self-projection. These objectives map onto three analytically distinct phases, each anchored by a Ukrainian victory:

Ambiguous (2003–2014)—a search for identity, oscillating between Ukrainianness and a generic post-Soviet aesthetic in the shadow of *kirkorovshchyna*.³⁰

Maturing (2015–2021)—consolidation around indigenous cultural elements, the introduction of democratic entry selection (*Vidbir*), and an increasingly explicit anti-Russian positioning.

Quasi-hegemonic (since 2022)—operating in Russia's absence, a Ukrainian garnering of broad recognition framed as a “success story,” while simultaneously facing growing fatigue and rivalry, reflected in persistent narratives of “undeserved” results and calls for suspension of its participation for the duration of the war.³¹

The first phase, lasting until Russia's 2014 invasion of Crimea and Eastern Ukraine, was largely entangled with Russia. It opened with Ruslana's overtly indigenous 2004 victory and Ukraine's hosting of the contest under the slogan “Awakening”—staged in the direct aftermath of the Orange Revolution, with then-president Yushchenko on the Eurovision stage. What followed, however, was largely generic post-Soviet Euro-pop, often guided by Russia's self-proclaimed Eurovision expert Philipp Kirkorov: conventionally attractive female singers, strong vocals, Anglophone lyrics, polished staging. The median Ukrainian entry of this period was professional but culturally indistinct.

The second phase began with Jamala's 2016 victory, which repositioned Ukraine as a winner on its own terms: no longer following Euro-trends but deliberately departing from them. The staging was minimalist, the mood neither light nor entertaining; the intent was to disentangle Ukraine from Russia stylistically and morally, challenging Russian claims to cultural supremacy. A more

³⁰ This was a period of encroaching Russian influence on the Ukrainian artistic scene: local artists were incentivized to produce content in Russian, while artists from Russia received privileged access to the local audience. Participation at the ESC was usually guided by Philipp Kirkorov, a Russian pop-star and an ESC participant of 1995 (finished seventeenth). As a self-proclaimed expert, he consulted a bunch of regional participants (Ani Lorak from Ukraine, Dmitry Koldun from Belarus, Natalia Gordienko from Moldova), crafting the post-Soviet version of generic Euro-bangers. The ambiguity is that the audience validated both the “authentic” Ukrainian entries, like Ruslana in 2004 and Serduchka in 2007, and the “post-Soviet” ones, like Ani Lorak in 2008 and Loboda in 2009.

³¹ The author's participant observation recorded extensive internal debates within fan and expert communities regarding Ukraine's allegedly inflated scores, frequently framed as “political moves” or “moral gestures”—with the 2022 victory drawing the most pronounced backlash (particularly so in retrospect). In its most radical form, this discourse manifests as calls to disqualify Ukraine from participation for the duration of the war, a position typically coupled with similar demands regarding Israel and drawn in explicit contrast to Russia's exclusion. An alternative tendency, gaining increasing currency since 2025, involves conspicuously avoiding any public discussion of Ukraine's entries, thereby symbolically placing them outside the bounds of legitimate competition.

transparent national selection process, *Vidbir*—produced by the public broadcaster Suspilne, itself a product of the Maidan revolution—was introduced the same year, evolving into a significant annual event in the Ukrainian mediascape and a fixture for global ESC fans. The phase's most enduring contributions came not only from contest winners: the *ONUKA* interval act in 2017 and the band *Go_A*'s entry in 2021—both blending folk and electronic music—established a recognizable and progressive Ukrainian sonic identity that would define the country's ESC image going forward.

The third phase was triggered by the shock of Russia's full-scale invasion and the widespread admiration for Ukrainian resistance. Paradoxically, at its most geopolitically precarious moment, Ukraine became a *quasi*-hegemon at the ESC: it ousted its long-term rival, received overwhelming audience support, won convincingly in 2022, and co-hosted the contest with the United Kingdom in 2023. The flip side is a growing resentment—persistent speculation about “undeservingly high points” and anticipation of Ukraine's first non-qualification. The most telling sign of genuine hegemony, however, is imitation: Sweden's 2025 representative, the Finnish band *KAJ*, built their entry *Bara Bada Bastu* on the same postcolonial self-irony that Serdushka pioneered—a lineage made explicit when the band was filmed backstage performing *Dancing Lasha Tumbai*.³² Ukraine's 2025 entry by Ziferblat—a musically complex work drawing on diverse musical influences beyond Ukraine's folk brand, widely tipped as a potential first non-qualifier—confirmed the pattern: ambitious, experimental, authenticity-driven, indifferent to commercial success.

“Shhh! It's Ukraine Now”: Negotiating (Cultural) Europe through Shaping Itself

Even if Ukraine's performance at the contest was only recently framed as a “success story,” since the country itself entered the limelight of global attention in the wake of the Russian full-scale invasion, it had caught academic attention even before. Often analyzed through the lens of self-exoticization and over-erotization,³³ on the one hand, and poorly veiled racism and exclusive nationalism,³⁴

³² Humorgruppen Kaj, “TikTok video,” TikTok, accessed June 18, 2026, <https://www.tiktok.com/@humorgruppen.kaj/video/7497687763387567382>.

³³ Baker, “Wild Dances and Dying Wolves,” 176.

³⁴ Paul Jordan, “From Ruslana to Gaitana: Performing ‘Ukrainianness’ in the Eurovision Song Contest,” *Contemporary Southeastern Europe* 2, no. 1 (2015): 130.

on the other, the body of literature exposes Western biases toward Europe's East and other peripheries. This dominant *ethos of suspicion* ascribes two modalities to non-Western participants: locally grounded performances are categorized as an outdated "return to ethnicity,"³⁵ and more universal offerings are perceived as "secondary," allegedly mimicking the Western hegemon.

The same performance receives different interpretations, depending on the researcher's positionality and preexisting perceptions of the country. Thus, Ruslana's *Wild Dances* is taken by Western researchers as an ethnic act, a simulation,³⁶ and an elite imposition of the Western Ukrainian cultural canon on the allegedly divided country.³⁷ In contrast, researchers more versed in the local context take it as a plea for recognition as culturally equal,³⁸ presenting the folkloric as global³⁹ and embracing the trope of wildness for making political claims.⁴⁰ Similarly, Gaitana's 2012 performance is dismissed as a manipulative showcase of allegedly non-existent Ukrainian multiculturalism and tolerance, by citing notorious statements from political outliers⁴¹ or by presuming she must represent only the Afro-Ukrainian community,⁴² while ignoring the artist's domestic popularity and perception. Katrin Sieg rightly notes that "historically, CEE countries have been positioned as *ethnic* in Western political imagination," and their performances, conceived as "bids for empowerment, ensnare them in unequal dynamics of control and dispossession."⁴³ A certain polarity of perceptions remains intact after 2022. Some researchers accentuate genuine cultural exchange as Ukraine's rationale, as opposed to Russia's neo-propagandist zeal,⁴⁴ while others resent Ukraine's presumed attempts at the militarization of the contest.⁴⁵

³⁵ Alf Björnberg, "Return to Ethnicity: The Cultural Significance of Musical Change in the Eurovision Song Contest," in *A Song for Europe: Popular Music and Politics in the Eurovision Song Contest*, ed. Ivan Raykoff and Robert Deam Tobin (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2007), 13–23.

³⁶ Baker, "Wild Dances and Dying Wolves," 175.

³⁷ Jordan, *The Modern Fairy Tale*, 115–116.

³⁸ Marko Pavlyshyn, "Envisioning Europe: Ruslana's Rhetoric of Identity," *The Slavic and East European Journal* 50, no. 3 (2006): 469–485, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20459314>.

³⁹ Pavlyshyn, "Ruslana, Serdushka, Jamala," 136.

⁴⁰ Maria Sonevsky, *Wild Music: Sound and Sovereignty in Ukraine* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2019), 2.

⁴¹ Jordan, "From Ruslana to Gaitana," 130.

⁴² Meijer, "Be My Guest," 74–76.

⁴³ Sieg, "Cosmopolitan Empire," 247.

⁴⁴ Lea M. Welslau and Torsten J. Selck, "Geopolitics in the ESC: Comparing Russia's and Ukraine's Use of Cultural Diplomacy in the Eurovision Song Contest," *New Perspectives* 32, no. 1 (2024): 22–23, <https://doi.org/10.1177/23336825X231222000>.

⁴⁵ Noy, Viner-Serdtshe, and Press-Barnathan, "Militarization and Popular Culture," 1688–1689.

The current research was undertaken to examine fans' perceptions of Ukraine's entries at the ESC over two decades of participation from the vantage point of post-2022. Noticing a divide between the European Broadcasting Union's favorable stance toward Ukraine (the "success story" framing), siding with the overwhelming support of the TV audience, and the overall critical approach of the existing scholarship and the expert community, I was wondering about the perceptions of the rank-and-file fandom attending the contest and inhabiting the commonly available space. The research consisted of participant observation and field research at the Eurovillage in Malmö on May 7–11, 2024 and interviews with the representatives of the Polish OGAE⁴⁶ on September 26, 2024. Altogether, twenty-seven semi-structured interviews were recorded, with balanced gender representation and an overrepresentation of younger Western respondents, which reflected the structure of the audience at the Eurovillage.

Several methodological remarks are due. The research combines participant observation at the Eurovillage with semi-structured interviews, analyzed through a qualitative thematic coding framework aligned with the four-part subaltern trajectory: visibility, differentiation, recognition, and contribution. Given the limitations of the sample, the findings are not statistically representative but indicative—designed to trace sustained perceptions of Ukraine's ESC participation rather than immediate war-contextualized reactions. A double social desirability bias was anticipated: respondents, when identifying the interviewer as Ukrainian, might have refrained from critical answers either out of wartime solidarity or to conform to the Eurovillage's code of conduct. To mitigate this, questions were framed historically, asking about Ukraine's entries across two decades rather than its current standing, and were triangulated with participant observation. The questionnaire consisted of four blocks marked according to the research methodology as "Visibility," "Differentiation," "Recognition," and "Contribution."

The first block contained questions about remembered Ukraine entries over the years and the favorite ones. With the exception of two respondents from Manchester, who just recently got interested in the contest and could recall only Kalush Orchestra, other interviewees named almost all of Ukraine's entries. Even if they could not always recall the names, they often remembered the performances themselves. More recent entries were predominant, which might be explained by the young age of most interviewees (usually in their mid- to late twenties) and greater visibility for the winners, although even the very first Ukrainian entry (Oleksandr Ponomariov in 2003) was mentioned once. Ruslana and Jamala got the most mentions: the former was framed as a positive shock

⁴⁶ Organisation Générale des Amateurs de l'Eurovision, the international network of official Eurovision fan clubs.

and a fresh, energetic take from Ukraine, while the latter was credited with professionalism, the ability to hold her own on a stage with no props, and delivering a strong personal message through her family story. A surprising finding was to discover that *Wild Dances* is often played at weddings and student parties in today's Belgium, which one of the Belgian respondents labelled as "a part of Ukraine's [ESC] legacy in Belgium today."

Apart from the ESC winners, much credit was given to Go_A as a breakthrough for Ukraine, but also for the contest more broadly. As a male respondent from Polish OGAE mentioned: "the biggest recent impact outside of the bubble was Go_A. Ukraine is now associated with making folk music modern and cool." Their friend echoed this: "It went viral, was played constantly at parties, at barbecues. 'Oh my God, it's something amazing, something modern, something fresh.'" A Ukrainian female respondent in Malmö noted: "Go_A gave the most successful concert here, in the Eurovillage, yesterday. They are now sensational in Europe, more popular even than in Ukraine."

On the question of how music is important as a vehicle for cultural diplomacy and the ESC as a major venue, a female respondent (early twenties, Denmark) remarked: "it makes it easier for you to make a connection to Ukraine. It creates more of a natural interest." A male respondent, mid-twenties, Belgium, noted:

it is very important for countries to participate so that we get to know them. Before Ukraine entered the ESC, it was just a country somewhere in the Eastern part of Europe, that's it. And through Eurovision, we get to know its culture.

A female member of the Polish OGAE refers to the times of her internship:

When I was working in Brussels, I had friends from all over Europe. They learnt about Ukraine through Eurovision. There are so many people who say that when they think of Ukraine, one of the first things they instantly think of is its music at the ESC.

Moving from visibility to differentiation, interviewees shared perspectives that converged on a common theme, as illustrated by the following:

Ukraine has always been to me, like, Orthodox, and, like, "Russian." But it's not! ... How you see Ukraine today towards how you did before. I think they saw Ukraine in the West as a third-world country. But today it's actually advanced, industrial, normal, Western, sort of, life-living in Ukraine, and it's cool! (M, late twenties, Belgium)

There are myths about Eastern Europe, that they all just being former Soviets. But it's a conglomerate of ethnicities. And Ukraine happens to be the widest in the group, in the region. (M, thirty, New York, USA)

Elaborating further on Ukraine breaking through pre-existing biases and stereotypes, a male representative of the Belgian OGAE, mid-twenties, explained:

in the Western world, in Belgium, for our parents, it was a closed world [behind the Iron Curtain]. We did not know much. It was Communism: everything and everyone should be the same, should be in line with what they are told. At the beginning of the 1990s, Ukraine was still perceived as Communist, not so modern, not so modern-thinking. I have followed Ukraine over all these years, also, what Ukrainians voted for: for the things that are gay friendly, Europe-friendly, for the things that are more erotic, have something sexy in them. We always look through Western glasses, of course. But I see more freedom, more liberalism.

Being asked if Ukraine is perceived as exotic or European at the ESC, the respondents admitted both the admiration of an exotic—and exoticized—Other and Ukraine's embeddedness in the European cultural context:

And maybe something exotic for the rest of Europe. These dances in the mountains—it's a kind of magic, it's a mystery. That attracts people. (M, late twenties, Belgium)

I like to believe it's both. Slavic culture is part of European culture. It would be sad to divide them instead of celebrating different areas that Europe has, their own special traits. I think Ukraine is really good at sending something that everyone will like. It is still very much Ukrainian but also very popular, so to say. (F, early twenties, Denmark)

Moving further to contribution, I asked whether Ukraine's entries ever managed to set new trends at the ESC. Ruslana, Verka Serduchka, and Go_A were mentioned in this context.

It was something brand new. She [Ruslana] brought something we did not see before on stage. Spectacular. Professional. A combination of dance, good vocals. That was impressive. And she could breathe while doing all these things. And maybe it was something authentic as well. ... She brought a new sound, something that we did not know before at the song contest. And also a personality. (M, mid-twenties, Belgium)

I mean, they sent Verka Serduchka in 2007 with her mother as a DJ. Now, in 2024, people do many things. But back then! (M, early thirties, Cyprus)

Asked to explain Ukraine's success at the Contest, multiple respondents noted determination and diligence, "taking things seriously" and "having always the full package," explaining it through the combination of vocals, staging, visuals, the lyrics, and adding a strong message on top of that. As a Polish OGAE member noted: "I heard the [Ukrainian] team fixed 300 mistakes in Malmö after the first rehearsal. That's the thing—you always work to improve. You're professionals."

A male respondent from Spain formulates it thus:

First of all, just the quality of the songs. Every year, it is a very good song. And the act. Perfectionism. I think it's really *professional*. It's always the package that is complete.

Another frequently mentioned feature was authenticity. A female respondent, early twenties, Los Angeles, USA, noted: "I like it that it sounds of its place and unique, not just something that could have been performed anywhere." A male respondent, mid-twenties, New York, USA: "Ukraine has a strong culture and is very proud to be premium in it. ... Majority sends what sells the most, not the one that best represents the country." A Polish OGAE member noted: "after the war started, you're not afraid to show your identity much more than before. The main goal is not to go international but to present your culture. Not afraid, not ashamed of that."

This authenticity, Ukraine's musical brand, was unpacked as *bridging traditions and progressiveness*, blending musical styles to expose historical roots and cutting-edge trends. As a female respondent from Rivne, Ukraine, exemplified:

the senses that Ukraine transmits are not purely local, they are universal. There is this value click. For example, Jamala has recently made a cover of Madonna's *Frozen* for a collective tribute. She used this peculiar Crimean-Tatar singing, and it sounded organic.

This point was connected with conscious risk-taking, not playing safe, which might result in a defeat or in trend-setting. As Carlos from New York mentioned: "they [Ukrainian participants] always expose me to the kind of music I do not actively seek out." A young female from Sweden seconds that: "Ukraine always picks someone crazy. They just come in, and they bang, they rock everyone."

Taken together, the interview findings trace a coherent arc. Ukraine's ESC trajectory is perceived by the fandom not as a series of politically motivated

rewards but as the result of sustained investment in quality, authenticity, and risk-taking. The visibility achieved through early entries like Ruslana's *Wild Dances* enabled a differentiation from both Russia and generic post-Soviet Euro-pop, which in turn generated recognition of a distinct Ukrainian cultural identity. The contribution phase—exemplified by Go_A's and Verka Serduchka's lasting influence on the contest's aesthetic—marks the transition from subaltern challenger to a participant whose style others now emulate. The fan community's perceptions broadly validate the analytical framework proposed in this paper, while also exposing its limits: recognition and sympathy are entangled with geopolitical solidarity in ways that resist clean attribution of Ukraine's success to cultural merit alone, as one Swedish respondent encapsulated: "They have a disaster behind them. But they still choose the language of music, the language of love" (M, thirties, Sweden).

Yet if geopolitical context explains some of the goodwill, it does not account for the depth of aesthetic investment the interviews reveal. Respondents consistently described Ukraine's entries as trustworthy—reliable deliverers of something unexpected. This paradox of predictable surprise is perhaps the clearest marker of a consolidated brand. As three members of the Polish OGAE summarized Ukraine's cumulative achievement at the contest:

Ukraine has built a brand attracting attention and recognition outside of the Eastern bloc. Many people say, "I started to love Ukrainian music, and now I wait for Ukraine's entry. They always bring a banger." The biggest success of Ukrainian music at the Eurovision stage is that every single person watching says: "Shhh, it's Ukraine now." It's always quality. Watch carefully—it's going to be something interesting, something modern, something worth seeing.

That instinctive hush of anticipation—"Shhh, it's Ukraine now"—is the subaltern's ultimate arrival: no longer fighting for attention, but commanding it.

Conclusion: Ukraine's Mock Europeanization

This research traced Ukraine's trajectory at the Eurovision Song Contest from a "no place" on the global musical landscape to a "success story." It was argued that this trajectory is postcolonial: starting from the positionality of a "double subaltern" squeezed between the West and Russia, Ukraine invested in subaltern cultural diplomacy—compensating for a lack of geopolitical weight with cultural creativity to gain visibility, recognition, and ultimately

a hegemonic position within the contest. By bridging and blending authentic musical traditions with contemporary aesthetics, it has carved out the Ukrainian musical brand at the ESC as “making folk cool and modern,” exemplified by Onuka and Go_A.

Ukraine’s consistently strong performance, underpinned by the dramatic geopolitical rupture of 2022, solidified its position as the contest’s subversive hegemon—simultaneously mimicked and contested, as outlined above. Whether this hegemony proves durable or fleeting, and whether such power hierarchies can be sustainably transformed or tend to revert to a baseline equilibrium, remains an open question. At present, however, having secured visibility and recognition, Ukraine’s ambition has shifted: from winning to trend-setting, from guaranteed results to deliberate risk, as exemplified by the 2025 Ziferblat entry. Its staging offers a metaphorical response to critics who argue that Ukraine has more urgent wartime tasks than participating in the contest. Featuring a magical bird from Ukrainian mythology that awakens the day with its song, the performance affirms that as long as the bird sings, a new day will come for Ukraine and for the world.



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