Tuesday, May 7, 2024 / Israel, Gaza, and Eurovision

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

SEAN RAMESWARAM (host): EUROVISION IS HERE!

SCORING IN – ARMENIA’S SUBMISSION – "JAKO" by LADANIVA

SEAN: This year’s contest gets underway this week in Malmo, Sweden. But this year’s contest comes with a dose of controversy. I’ll give you one guess as to what people are mad about.

Yes. Correct. It’s that.

*<CLIP> REUTERS – PROTESTERS CHANT: Boycott Israel!*

*<CLIP> BBC ANCHOR: Organizers of the Eurovision song contest say they are assessing whether Israel’s entry breaks the rules on political neutrality.   
  
<CLIP> REUTERS – PROTESTOR: I think it's a shame. I think there's no way that, that Israel should be able to participate in Eurovision.*

SEAN: Pro-Palestinian protestors are taking to the Swedish streets. More than a thousand Swedish artists – including Robyn – have called for an Israel ban. Some European politicians are joining them.Charlie Harding from *Switched on Pop* joins us on *Today, Explained* to help us figure out if Europe can sing its way out of the situation.

[THEME]

*<CLIP> “Europapa” - Joost Klein*

*“Europe, let’s come together!”*

SEAN: *Today, Explained*. Sean Rameswaram here with friend of the show, host of Switched on pop, musician / songwriter, Professor Charlie Harding. Charlie, you're a fan of Eurovision, yes?

CHARLIE: Big fan of the Eurovision Song Contest. Yes.

SCORING UP AND OUT

SEAN: What makes this one different for the people at home?

CHARLIE: Well, this year's Eurovision has been embroiled in a controversy.

*<CLIP> REUTERS: Protesters in Eurovision host city call for boycott of Israel*

*Mats Rehle, Malmo resident: There is no way that Israel should be able to participate.*

*<CLIP> HABER LUTFEN: Protesters call for Irish national broadcaster to boycott Eurovision*

*Protester: In our thousands in our millions…*

*Crowd: We are all Palestinians!*

CHARLIE: Many countries, broadcasters, participants and fans have called for the disqualification and boycott of Israel's participation, because of the ongoing war in Gaza and the humanitarian crisis. And you might be thinking, Israel, not in Europe, but they've actually participated in Eurovision for 50 years.

SEAN: For people who don't pay attention to Eurovision, Charlie, can you give us the, the essentials here? How did it get started?

CHARLIE: The Eurovision Song Contest is one of the biggest international song contests in the world.

*<CLIP> EUROVISION 1956: Lys Assia - Refrain*

CHARLIE: It started in the 1950s as a postwar institution of international cooperation between European broadcasters. The Eurovision Song Contest is not exclusively a European contest. It's actually not even a national contest. It's a contest of the European Broadcasting Union …   
  
SEAN: Hm.  
  
CHARLIE: … which is an alliance of public broadcasting organizations that represents 56 countries in the European Broadcasting Area, which includes parts of North Africa and the Middle East. It's become one of the most televised non-sporting events in the world, everywhere it seems but the United States, where it seems like nobody pays enough attention ….  
  
SEAN: <chuckles>  
  
CHARLIE: … because the event is a great deal of fun, where each country submits a singer or group of singers up to six people to sing a live new original song no longer than three minutes. Frequently sung in English for broad musical appeal. You hear all kinds of Euro pop …

*<CLIP> 1986 EUROVISION:*

*Sandra Kim “J'aime la vie”*  
  
CHARLIE: … lots of folk traditions, a lot of kitsch. And then all of the different countries have panels of judges and a voting public that decide on the best song of the year, and the winning song and winning country gets to host the next year's competition.

SCORING OUT

SEAN: Can you give us some of Eurovision’s greatest hits? I mean, certainly you've heard of some of the artists who have come out of this competition, some of the songs even.

CHARLIE: Yeah. I mean, there's a lot of just mostly national burgeoning pop stars all around Eurovision participants. But big names that you might have heard of: Julio Iglesias, was in the 1970 competition representing Spain.

*<CLIP> EUROVISION 1970:*

*Julio Iglesias - “Gwendolyne”*

CHARLIE: Probably the biggest of all time was 1974, when Olivia Newton-John competed and ABBA won for the song Waterloo.

*<CLIP> EUROVISION 1970:*

*ABBA - “Waterloo”*

CHARLIE: Celine Dion actually has participated as well. In 1988, she represented Switzerland. Because, strangely, you actually don't have to be from the country of origin to represent it.

SEAN: Weird.

CHARLIE: And more, more recently, Flo Rida actually was in the 2021 competition representing San Marino.

*<CLIP> EUROVISION 2021*

*Senhit feat. Flo Rida - “Adrenalina”*

CHARLIE: And I got to say, some of the world's biggest songwriters have also written songs for the competition Diane Warren, Andrew Lloyd Webber, Tony Iommi of Black Sabbath and Guy Manuel from Daft Punk have all contributed music to the competition.

SCORING OUT

SEAN: Who are the frontrunners in 2024?

CHARLIE: My favorite time of year is Eurovision in pop music because I don't do sports and this is my sporting event. And actually, bookies also look at this as a sport. You can bet on who's going to win. And if you look at the current bookies in the top three, Croatia as of this moment has a 23% chance of winning with their song “Rim Tim Tagi Dim” by the artist Baby Lasagna

SEAN: <giggles>

CHARLIE: A kitsch song about economic depravity that is causing youth emigration in Croatia.

SEAN: Wow.

MUSIC IN — Rim Tim Tagi Dim

*Ay, I'm a big boy now*

*I'm ready to leave, ciao, mamma, ciao*

*Ay, I'm a big boy now*

*I'm going away and I sold my cow*

SEAN: <laughs>

*Before I leave, I must confess*

*I need a round of decompress*

*One more time for all the good times*

*Rim-tim-tagi-digi, dim-tim-tim*

CHARLIE: I mean, is that not amazing?

SEAN: <laughs> It sounds like, like Ace of Base meets Rammstein.

CHARLIE: Yeah, there's even a little bit of Linkin Park going on in it, too.

SEAN: Aw, there you go!

*My presence fades to black (whoa)*

*Yeah, there's no going back (whoa)*

*My anxiety attacks (whoa)*

*Rim-tim-tagi-digi, dim-tim-tagi-digi-dim*

MUSIC OUT

SEAN: Rest in peace, Chester.

CHARLIE: I know. And then at number two, we've got Switzerland. Their song is called The Code. The artist is Nemo, and it's all about breaking through gender binaries.

*Whoa-oh-oh*

*Welcome to the show, let everybody know*

*I'm done playing the game, I'll break out of the chains*

*You better buckle up, I'll pour another cup*

*This is my bohème, so drink it up, my friend*

SEAN: Wow! Amazing.

MUX

SEAN: Epic!

CHARLIE: Powerful, right?

SAAN: <laughs> I hope that wins! I mean, I've only heard two songs.

CHARLIE: Yeah. How about… can I give you one more

SEAN: Please?

CHARLIE: Ukraine. Who won in 2022, Has a… probably the best rap song ever written about Mother Teresa and Mother Mary. It's from…

SEAN: <laughs> Is it the only rap song written about Mother Mary and Mother Teresa?

CHARLIE: Probably. And we should listen to it.

SEAN: Let me just sign the cross first.

MUSIC IN — “Teresa & Maria” (Ukraine Eurovision)

SEAN: Wow.

MUSIC POSTS THEN FADES OUT

SEAN: Every song you play me like I like a little bit more. So if we kept going all day, I think I'd have to move to Europe.

CHARLIE: Yeah there’s a couple of bops.

SEAN: But, but we have to stop and talk about the controversy, Charlie, of course.

CHARLIE: Yes, yes.

SEAN: Which is that it sounds like Israel is in no danger of winning Eurovision, but they're certainly making a lot of news this year?

CHARLIE: Yeah. So this controversy really takes off. When Israel submitted a song to the competition called ‘October Rain’, with lyrics making not-veiled allusions to the October 7th attack on Israel by Hamas, including lyrics about the massacre at a music festival and metaphors of fallen IDF soldiers, and they put the song out. Eurovision has really strict rules – well, some would say not so strict – about no politics. And so the EBU rejects the song and Israel's broadcaster says no, we're not going to change these lyrics. This is our this is our submission. And thousands of musicians around the world start signing petitions from Sweden, Iceland, Denmark, all over the place, asking for Israel to be disqualified. And it just escalates and escalates and escalates.

SEAN: Okay, so. So how do they change this song to appease Eurovision?

CHARLIE: So the original lyrics of the song October Rain have these not very subtle allusions to the conflict. The opening line is “those that write history stand with me.” A call to stand up alongside Israel. The updated lyrics in the song “Hurricane…”

EDEN GOLAN: *Writer of my symphony, play with me.*

CHARLIE: We've gone from “Those that write history / Stand with me” to “Writer of my symphony / Play with me.” So they maintain the prosody, the rhyme scheme “October rain”n even rhymes with “hurricane”.

SEAN: Hmm.

CHARLIE: They, later on in the original, have a line that says, and I promise you that never again. I'm still wet from this ‘October Rain’, a nod to the Holocaust, and October rain, of course, pointing to, the attack in October. They change to

*MUX: Baby promise me you hold me again.   
I'm still broken from this Hurricane  
This Hurricane*

SEAN: How did Israelis feel about changing the lyrics of the song, changing the message of the song? How did the musicians behind the song feel about that?

CHARLIE: I think that the song and its reception in Israel is as politically divided as the country. Despite these changes, many Israelis are supporting their contestant, Eden Golan, who will sing the song at this year's contest.

SEAN: Do these updates appease Eurovision and the nations who are upset about Israel's? Israel's participation?

CHARLIE: Yes and no. So far there have been lots of threats of countries pulling out, but none actually have. It seems as though the show is going to go on as usual. Israel is, as of today, absolutely participating in the show. But calls for protests have risen. You're not supposed to, as a participant, make political statements. But artists from Ireland, Norway, Portugal, San Marino, Switzerland and Lithuania have released a joint statement making a call for peace, a ceasefire, return of hostages and denouncing anti-Semitism and Islamophobia. And the Irish artist Bambie Thug went further to say that as an Irish person with a shared history of occupation and a queer individual, I cannot and will not remain silent. And goes on to say that they are a pro-Palestinian voice in the contest, and that the contest shouldn't be stopped. And as of today, it does seem as though, there's sort of no formal change to the competition.

<SCORING IN> Digital republic - APM

CHARLIE: The host country, Sweden, is bringing in extra police forces from Denmark and Norway to go into Malmo, a city of just 360,000 people who are expecting 100,000 folks to show up and protests are expected. The country has raised their threat level to a four out of five, and they are hoping that the song contest goes on without a hitch.

SCORING BUMP

SEAN: Charlie Harding. *Switched on Pop* is the podcast. Wouldn’t you know they got an episode breaking down this year’s Eurovision bops waiting for you.

When WE are back on *Today, Explained*, the long political history of this apolitical song contest.

<SCORING OUT> Digital republic - APM

[BREAK]

*<CLIP> Planet of the Bass*

*When we out in the space*

*On the planet of the–*

SEAN: *Today, Explained.* Tess Megginson writes about European history, including Eurovision history. One time she did so for the *Washington Post*. And the takeaway from her writing is that politics at Eurovision is nothing new. Take the 90s for example:

TESS: I would argue the 1990s are actually some of the most political years of the contest. And this actually isn't always a bad thing. As soon as you have the Eastern European countries start joining, hosts are talking about ‘Welcome to the rest of Europe!’ And now we're finally unified. And you have all these songs about peace and unity and breaking down walls.

*<CLIP> EUROVISION 1990*

*Toto Cutugno - Insieme*

TESS: And some of these do quite well in the contest. Some of them don't. So in 1990, which is actually the first competition held in Eastern Europe, it's held in Zagreb, the winning entries Italy with “Insieme: 1992”:

*<CLIP> EUROVISION 1990*

*Toto Cutugno - Insieme*

TESS: The kind of hook in the choruses “Unite, unite Europe.”

*Toto Cutugno - Unite, unite Europe!*  
  
TESS: That's kind of one of the big ones that we see and obviously gets a very good reception and wins the competition.

*Toto Cutugno - Unite, unite Europe!*

SCORING UP AND OUT

TESS: So it is a really beautiful time in the contest. But then also of course in the 90s you have the Yugoslav Wars.

*<CLIP> ABC NEWS:*

*ANCHOR: The fragile peace in Yugoslavia is more fragile than ever.*

TESS: And this is the first time that we actually see a country banned from the competition.   
  
SEAN: Hm.  
  
TESS: When the Yugoslav war begins in Bosnia, Yugoslavia is banned from the contest shortly after the 1992 competition. This is because of the siege of Sarajevo, which is when what remains of Yugoslavia occupies the city and put it under siege.

*<CLIP> AP ARCHIVE: Former Yugoslavia, Sarajevo Under Siege, Srebrenica Besieged*

*WOMAN: I think this is not a war, it is a genocide. I think and … I mean, we all see it. This is a genocide. Sarajevo is a dying city.*

TESS: So this is when you see UN sanctions come against Yugoslavia, and Bosnia is actually able to participate in the competition, but Yugoslavia cannot.

*<CLIP> Eurovision 1993*

*“Sva bol svijeta” (All the Pain in the World) - Fazla*

TESS: This also plays out in the Eurovision Song Contest because they're still able to vote in the contest.

*<CLIP> EUROVISION 1993:*

*Host: We’ll now go to Sarajevo and Bosnia Herzegovina.*

TESS: So they actually call into the contest while under siege…

SEAN: Wow.

*<CLIP> EUROVISION 1993:*

*Host: Good evening, Sarajevo. May we have your votes please?*

TESS: … and the phone line initially disconnects and it goes dead. And there's just this silence that falls over the audience.

*<CLIP> EUROVISION 1993:*

*<static>*

TESS: Soon they're able to reconnect…

*<CLIP> EUROVISION 1993:*

*<static>*

*Host: Hello, Sarajevo? We’re hearing you.*

*<applause>*

TESS: … and there's a loud applause and cheering from the audience as they're able to give their points for the contest. And it's such a beautiful moment.

SEAN: Amazing!

*<CLIP> Eurovision 1993*

*“Sva bol svijeta” (All the Pain in the World)- Fazla*

TESS: I watched it, I'm shedding tears watching it, right? It's a really beautiful moment of, like, solidarity for people who were at war and under occupation. And it's something that, you know, even though it's a very political moment, it's quite a beautiful moment in the contest’s history.

SCORING POSTS THEN FADES OUT

SEAN: These political moments. We're talking about: the fall of the Berlin Wall; the fall of communism; the, the genocide in Bosnia. They all happened on the continent of Europe. But here, now, in 2024, we've got this conflict, this controversy, these calls for a boycott that relate to something happening in the Middle East. Is there a precedent for something like that at Eurovision?

TESS: Yeah. Boycotts in Eurovision are almost as old as the contest itself.  
  
SEAN: <chortles>  
  
TESS: So we start seeing them in the 1970s.

*<CLIP> THAMES TV: “THIS WEEK”*

*Jonathan Dimbleby, correspondent: Tanks of the Turkish army, on the outskirts of Famagusta, are about to complete their victory in Cyprus.*

TEE: 1975: Turkey invades Cyprus, and Greece boycotts the contest.

SEAN: Aha!

*<CLIP> EUROVISION 1976:*

*“Panagia mou, panagia mou (Oh my Virgin Mary)” - Mariza Koch*

TESS: The following year, Greece submits a song that is a very anti-war song and clearly referencing Turkey's presence in Cyprus and Turkey boycotts the contest.

SEAN: <higher pitch> Aha!

*<CLIP> EUROVISION 1976:*

*“Panagia mou, panagia mou (Oh my Virgin Mary)” - Mariza Koch*

TESS: And then of course, Russia.

*<CLIP> NBC NEWS: The European Broadcasting Union has banned Russia from participating in this year’s Eurovision song contest.*

TESS: Russia's the big one that you see a lot in the conversation because of its invasion of Ukraine. And of course, it was finally banned from the competition in 2022.

SEAN: You're making it sound like it's kind of par for the course to have this kind of level of controversy and calls for boycotts and tensions between nations at Eurovision, does that make this current controversy less exceptional?

TESS: Not necessarily. I think there's also been a long history and unique history, with Israel's participation in the contest.  
  
SEAN: Hm.  
  
TESS: As the first non-European country to participate in the contests. It's also had relative success since it's joined. It's won the contest four times and hosted it three times. And all the way back in 1978, we start seeing these controversies arise with Israel's participation.

*<CLIP> EUROVISION 1978: “Abanibi” - Izar Cohen and The Alphabeta*

TESS: In 1978, they actually won the competition.

*<CLIP> EUROVISION 1978:*

*HOST: Well, that’s it. Israel, with song number 18. The Izar Cohen and Alphabeta.*

TESS: But in Jordan, which was a member of the EBU, although not participating in the contest, they don't air the Israel entry. And when it becomes clear Israel's going to win the contest, they cut the broadcast short ….

SCORING HARD OUT

TESS: … and announce Belgium as the winner in Jordan.

SEAN: <laughs hysterically> What? They just lied?!

TESS: Sure. Jordanians think that, yeah, they just fully lied to people in Jordan and said Belgium had won the contest. I don't know when they found out that wasn't true.

SEAN: When they got Wikipedia.

TESS: <laughs> Yeah. Before it … pre-Internet, it was a lot easier to, to get away with that sort of thing.

SEAN: Wow, wow. How does Eurovision typically handle the boycotts and the tensions between these nations?

TESS: Not very well. Obviously they officially market themselves as an apolitical contest. So this means that when politics enter the contest, they are not happy about it. One kind of fun example is in 2015, they introduced this – what they called anti-booing technology – so sound reducing technology.

SEAN: <laughing>

TESS: So you couldn't hear the crowd booing the Russian entry during the contest.

*<CLIP> EUROVISION 2015*

*HOST 3: Are you ready? 12 points go to Russia!*

*<crowd cheers, inaudible boos>*

*HOST: No surprise there*

TESS: So I don't think it's been used since then, but I wouldn't be surprised if they use a similar thing this year. And another thing is fines. They do really like to fine their members. So in 2019, when Israel hosted the contest, there was obviously large calls to boycott to move the contest out of Israel and the Icelandic performers actually held up Palestinian flags.

*<CLIP> EUROVISION 2019 HATARI PRESS CONFERENCE:*

*Klemens Hannigan: We of course hope to see an end to the occupation as soon as possible, and that peace will come. We are hopeful.*

TESS: And the Icelandic broadcaster ended up getting a huge fine from the EBU for doing that.

SEAN: Do you think Eurovision this year will end up transcending our current geopolitical situation?

TESS: There are a couple signs we can look forward to see how Europeans are reacting to Israel's participation. The first is going to be the live audience reaction. This is going to be more difficult for us to see as viewers. We're probably going to have to rely on things like social media and journalists on the ground to hear how the audience is reacting to Israel participating. But we're also going to see this maybe with the other performers, if they say wave Palestinian flags like we saw in 2019. A second thing. Of course, it's the popular vote. Will people vote for Israel and will this be maybe a protest vote against them? The way we can see this is if there's a big difference between the jury vote for Israel and the popular vote, that's probably a sign that people are not voting for Israel because they don't agree with what they're doing in Gaza. And then the third thing to see is viewership, obviously. So if the boycott is effective, there'll probably be a stark decline in viewership in certain countries. Obviously, there's other factors at play here. So if a country’s participant doesn't make the finals, there could be a decline in viewership because of that. But if we see a significant decline, I would probably argue that it's the boycott and it's showing how effective it can be.

<SCORING IN> “Europapa” - Joost Klein

SEAN: Well, I guess we're going to have to watch to find out.   
  
TESS: Yeah.   
  
SEAN: Thanks so much, Tess.

TESS: Thank you.

SCORING POSTS  
  
SEAN: Tess Megginson. Historian. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Haleema Shah made the show today. She had help from Matthew Collette, Patrick Boyd, Laura Bullard, and Amanda Lewellyn. Tomorrow on *Today, Explained*, we’ll have another song contest. Less political, more petty. Less European, but still international. Kendrick v. Drake.

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]