LONDON — It’s springtime in Europe — time for the annual blossoming of spectacle and sound known as the [*Eurovision Song Contest*](https://apnews.com/hub/eurovision-song-contest).

Taking place in May in Malmö, Sweden, the 68th annual competition will see acts from 37 countries vie for the continent’s pop crown in a feelgood extravaganza that strives — not always successfully – to banish [*international strife and division*](https://apnews.com/article/sweden-eurovision-song-contest-police-demonstrations-0d2def92828339685f6008a2dbf0db6d). And you don’t have to be in Europe to watch, or to help pick the winner.

Here’s a guide to all things Eurovision.

**WHAT IS EUROVISION?**

On one level, it’s simple: Eurovision is an international pop music competition in which acts from countries across Europe, and a few beyond it, compete in a live televised contest to be crowned Eurovision champion.

But it’s also much more -- a celebration of diversity, national pride and the joyous power of pop. And glitter. So much glitter.

Launched in 1956 to foster unity after World War II, Eurovision has become a campy, feel-good celebration of pop music with an audience of hundreds of millions around the world. It has grown from seven countries to almost 40, including non-European nations such as Israel and Australia.

It’s now known for songs that range from anthemic to extremely silly, often with elaborate costumes and spectacular staging.

Paul Jordan, an expert on the contest who is known as “Dr. Eurovision,” said the contest “is almost indescribable in terms of its scale, in terms of its craziness — but I would liken it to probably the musical version of the Olympic Games.”

**WHEN AND WHERE IS EUROVISION HAPPENING?**

This year’s contest will be held in Malmö in southern Sweden, with two semifinals on May 7 and 9 followed by a grand final on May 11. Traditionally the competition is hosted by the previous year’s winner, and [*Sweden triumphed in 2023*](https://apnews.com/article/sweden-eurovision-song-contest-loreen-winner-42f21bf8126bd658740fa0fb5cdbd59a) with “Tattoo,” a power ballad by pop diva Loreen.

The Nordic nation is a Eurovision powerhouse that has won the contest seven times, a number equaled only by Ireland.

This year marks the 50th anniversary of a Eurovision’s most iconic moment, [*ABBA’s victory*](https://apnews.com/article/abba-waterloo-50-years-eurovision-5ce0b8dc35c07104b5c3b59e607d2102) in the 1974 contest with “Waterloo.” The win propelled the band toward superstardom and helped jump-start Sweden’s music industry.

Fans are hoping for an appearance by the Swedish supergroup in Malmö, though the band members have played down those suggestions.

**ARE THERE POLITICAL CONTROVERSIES AMID THE POP?**

Eurovision’s motto is “united by music” and organizer the European Broadcasting Union strives to keep political divisions out of the competition, though it doesn’t always succeed.

Russia has been banned since its 2022 invasion of Ukraine. [*Last year’s contest*](https://apnews.com/article/eurovision-song-contest-final-liverpool-1a3425206e00b500ee2d59e7eee79be7) was held in the English city of Liverpool because the 2022 winner, Ukraine, was at war.

This year, pro-Palestinian activists and some musicians have urged organizers to drop Israel from the event over its conduct in its war against Hamas, which has killed more than 33,000 people in Gaza, according to its Health Ministry.

Israel has not been suspended, but it was ordered to change the lyrics of its competing song, originally titled “October Rain,” an apparent reference to Hamas’ cross-border Oct. 7 attack that killed some 1,200 Israelis. Renamed “Hurricane,” the power ballad will be performed by 20-year-old singer Eden Golan.

With feelings running high, organizers issued a statement saying they “firmly oppose any form of online abuse, hate speech, or harassment directed at our artists or any individuals associated with the contest.”

Jordan said Eurovision organizers have sometimes been accused of inconsistency in setting the contest’s boundaries.

“You’re not allowed political entries \u2026and yet Finland 2013 has a song about equal marriage,” he said. “You had other songs about world peace -- technically they’re political too. So what is the division between ***politics*** and non-***politics*** is quite a blurred line.”

Pro-Palestinian groups plan demonstrations in downtown Malmo during Eurovision week that they hope will draw thousands of protesters from Sweden and neighboring countries.

Malmö district police chief Petra Stenkula said security would be “rigorous,” with Swedish police reinforced by officers from Denmark and Norway.

**WHO AND HOW TO WATCH EUROVISION**

Eurovision’s complex voting system, which awards points from juries of music industry professionals as well as viewers across Europe, makes winners notoriously hard to predict.

Jordan said there used to be a “typical” Eurovision sound -– a three-minute pop song in English with a key change — but the contest is now much more diverse. Many acts perform in their national languages and some draw on folk traditions and instruments, though slick production and electro beats still predominate.

Winners have ranged from Canadian chanteuse Celine Dion, who competed for Switzerland in 1988, to fright mask-wearing Finnish metalheads Lordi in 2006, bearded Austrian drag performer Conchita Wurst in 2014, Italian rock band Måneskin in 2021 and Ukrainian folk-rap group [*Kalush Orchestra*](https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-eurovision-song-contest-entertainment-turin-5128b6080a781fc49d1ce2aa52b2761b) in 2022.

Bookmakers’ favorites this year include nonbinary Swiss singer Nemo’s powerhouse song “The Code” and Croatian singer-songwriter Baby Lasagna’s earwormy electro number “Rim Tim Tagi Dim.”

Other entries to watch include the Netherlands’ Joost Klein with pop-rap song “Europapa,” “La Noia“ by Italian TikTok star Angelina Mango and “Teresa & Maria” by the Ukrainian duo of rapper alyona alyona and vlogger Jerry Heil.

Spain’s entry, “ [*Zorra”*](https://apnews.com/article/spain-eurovision-song-zorra-sanchez-nebulossa-07ac53321e07455651e5f550831e574c) by the duo Nebulossa, has drawn controversy because its title can be translated as an anti-female slur.

The U.K., which has not won since 1997, is pinning its hopes on Olly Alexander’s vertiginous pop song “Dizzy.” Host country Sweden is represented by identical twins Marcus & Martinus -– who, confusingly enough, hail from Norway -- with the confidently titled “Unforgettable.” Eurovision voters will be the judge of that.

The competition will be aired by national broadcasters in participating nations, on streaming service Peacock in the United States and on the Eurovision YouTube channel. Viewers in the U.S. and other nonparticipating countries can vote online or using the Eurovision app; viewers in participating countries can also vote by phone or text message.