

# [***Opinion: Eurovision's slogan is 'United by Music.' The reality turned out very different***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6C11-JYB1-JBSS-S00G-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; The [*Eurovision Song Contest*](https://eurovision.tv/) is a glittery and eccentric spectacle that rivals the Super Bowl for its attraction to audiences. It showcases the best (and often bizarre) music that the wider European continent has to offer. Past winners include [*ABBA*](https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20240510-abba-was-somewhat-of-a-dirty-word-how-the-pop-bands-1974-eurovision-win-divided-sweden) and [*Celine Dion*](https://eurovision.tv/participant/celine-dion). But this year's contest, [*won by Switzerland*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/05/11/europe/eurovision-song-contest-winner-switzerland-nemo-intl/index.html) in the coastal Swedish city of Malmo, became the center of deep political divisions over Israel's inclusion, amid its government's war with Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

In the lead up to the contest, there were fan boycott campaigns and [*thousands*](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-68986410) including Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg took to the streets of Malmo in protest. Security was ramped up and helicopters flew overhead, with a particularly heavy security presence around the Israeli delegation's [*hotel*](https://www.thewrap.com/eurovision-protests-israel-eden-golan-hurricane/).

During Saturday's grand final, a combination of cheers and loud boos could be heard when Israel's act, Eden Golan, performed an emotional ballad. Some fans even [*turned their backs*](https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-68996532). But despite this, Israel ended up [*coming second in the public vote*](https://www.reuters.com/lifestyle/switzerland-won-eurovisions-jury-vote-while-viewers-favoured-croatia-israel-2024-05-12/), with 323 points - narrowly behind Croatia's entrant, Baby Lasagna.

When combined with the jury vote, Israel's impressive public vote tally saw Golan [*finish in fifth place*](https://www.jpost.com/breaking-news/article-800851) overall. Such fierce divisions - and the [*response*](https://eurovision.tv/mediacentre/release/ebu-statement-esc-2024-artists) of the European Broadcasting Union, the organizing body behind the contest - have shattered Eurovision's [*pretense of being an apolitical contest*](https://www.dw.com/en/eurovision-song-contest-politics-getting-in-the-way-of-pop/a-68979556).

The story of Eurovision 2024 is one of a divided Europe. For many fans, the contest's long-held [*insistence*](https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/article/2024/may/10/eurovision-song-contest-malmo-israel-controversy) on so-called political neutrality - casting itself in the figurative role of Switzerland - is no longer convincing, or even possible.

If the EBU does not face up to that, further crises seem likely. When Switzerland's winner, Nemo, lifted (then accidentally [*dropped*](https://twitter.com/Variety/status/1789442108404703476)) the trophy after being crowned victorious, it was a fittingly chaotic end to a contest that has been dominated by political polarization - and has suffered as a result.

The [*first*](https://eurovision.tv/event/lugano-1956) Eurovision Song Contest was held in 1956 in Switzerland. With the exception of the event's 2020 [*cancellation*](https://eurovision.tv/story/eurovision-2020-in-rotterdam-is-cancelled) because of COVID-19, it has continued every year. The original premise was grounded in bringing Europe together around a shared European identity in the aftermath of World War II. And over the years, further afield countries - such as [*Turkey*](https://eurovision.tv/country/turkiye), Israel and [*Russia*](https://eurovision.tv/country/russia) - were incorporated into this vision.

***Politics*** - and political tensions - have always lingered beneath the surface of the contest. In 1974, Portugal's entry, "E Depois do Adeus," became a [*rallying cry*](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/apr/21/how-portugals-1974-eurovision-entry-toppled-the-countrys-fascist-regime) for the country's political revolution, which eventually delivered democracy. In 1975, when Turkey joined Eurovision, Greece pulled out. (Turkey had [*invaded*](http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/july/20/newsid_3866000/3866521.stm) Cyprus the previous year.) In 2009, the voting system was updated from only a public vote to incorporate a jury vote system, because of complaints that [*political voting*](https://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/eurovision/entries/18aa5cc2-0f94-3882-9c57-07fdec46dc5b) was giving the [*"Eastern bloc"*](https://www.spiegel.de/international/zeitgeist/ending-the-eastern-bloc-eurovision-will-change-its-voting-system-a-596039.html) of countries an unfair advantage.

Despite this, the EBU has always insisted that Eurovision is an apolitical music competition between broadcasters, rather than a political competition between governments. Lyrics and performances are [*carefully scrutinized*](https://www.rferl.org/a/eurovision-jamala-overly-political-controversy/27739159.html) to make sure that political references are kept to a minimum.

This year, the [*EBU instructed Israel*](https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-68505050) to alter the lyrics to Golan's song "[*Hurricane*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K60BWlEhtAA)," originally titled "October Rain," thought to be a thinly veiled reference to Hamas' October 7 assault on Israel. In February, Israel's president, Isaac Herzog, publicly [*intervened*](https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2024/feb/25/israel-should-have-a-voice-at-eurovision-says-president-amid-row-over-lyrics) to stress the importance of agreeing to the lyric change so that Israel could compete this year.

Such a high-level political intervention suggests that Eurovision is in fact very political. Nowhere was this clearer than the 2022 [*banning*](https://eurovision.tv/mediacentre/release/ebu-statement-russia-2022) of Russia following the invasion of Ukraine. The next year, the contest was held in Liverpool, United Kingdom, who [*hosted on behalf*](https://www.ebu.ch/news/2022/10/liverpool-to-host-eurovision-song-contest-2023-on-behalf-of-ukraine) of Ukraine. (Usually, the winner of each contest hosts the next year, but Ukraine was unable to host for security reasons.) The 2023 contest in Liverpool was a moving display of unity - so much that Liverpool's slogan, "United By Music," was [*adopted*](https://eurovision.tv/story/united-by-music-permanent-slogan) by Eurovision for all future contests.

On the streets of Malmo, there has been a noticeable split between protesters and Eurovision attendees. Almost every protester I spoke to at a demonstration on Thursday cited the "hypocrisy" of Russia being banned while Israel was still allowed to compete. Palestinian flags fly from windows and are stuck across lampposts and shop fronts. Many posters for Eurovision are defaced and makeshift posters, which describe Eurovision as the "genocide song contest," have appeared across the city.

On Saturday, there was very little sense that Eurovision was "united by music." Some fans boycotted, while others mobilized online to vote for Israel. Such a strong Israeli phone vote performance - securing even more votes than Ukraine's 307, including the maximum number of votes from [*14 countries*](https://eurovision.tv/event/malmo-2024/grand-final/results/israel) including Italy, France, Germany and the United Kingdom - is a stark contrast to the loud boycott calls and protests that dominated the run-up to the contest.

The significant difference between that and Israel's jury vote total - a modest 52 points - suggests voting that was motivated by political factors. (Just like in 2022, when Ukraine won via a [*landslide public vote*](https://www.dw.com/en/eurovision-song-contest-2022-ukraine-wins-the-publics-hearts/a-61788818), securing a record-breaking 439 televote points.)

Throughout this year's contest, many fans felt that the EBU had not adequately explained the difference in its decision-making between banning Russia and allowing Israel to compete. (In a [*statement*](https://eurovision.tv/mediacentre/frequently-asked-questions-israel-24), the EBU said that it understood the "concerns" of some fans but stated that "comparisons between wars and conflicts are complex and difficult.") During the week of competition, there was noticeable [*discontent*](https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/article/2024/may/10/eurovision-song-contest-malmo-israel-controversy) among other performers who became frustrated that the music was being overshadowed. Ireland's act, Bambie Thug, said they [*cried*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4qRgwgJkcGc) on Thursday when Israel qualified for the grand final.

On Saturday morning, the Netherlands' entry Joost Klein was [*disqualified*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/05/11/entertainment/eurovision-disqualifies-dutch-entrant-joost-klein-intl/index.html) after an "incident" backstage reportedly involving a female EBU photographer, which is being investigated by the Swedish police. The decision was criticized by Dutch broadcaster AVROTROS, who called the decision "disproportionate." In advance of the announcement, rumors swirled that the incident, which occurred after Thursday night's second semi-final, involved another delegation - a testament to how tense the atmosphere had become.

During Saturday's final, [*loud boos*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9ktJQ5UR_iU) could be heard inside the stadium whenever EBU's executive supervisor, Martin Osterdahl, appeared on the screens, reflecting anger at his handling of the contest's various controversies.

The precedent set with Eurovision's ban of Russia changed the contest forever. And this year, the EBU has felt the consequences of that decision. As much they might insist otherwise, choosing to include a country amid boycott calls and accusations of war crimes, which Israel denies, is in itself a political move.

Opinion by Louis Staples

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