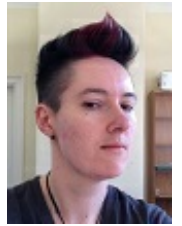


Eurovision 2017 was remarkable for its lack of politics

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The build up to the 2017 Eurovision Song Contest was overshadowed by a dispute between Russia and Ukraine which resulted in Russia withdrawing from the event. Catherine Baker writes that despite this dispute, the show itself was largely free from the kind of political controversy that has emerged in previous years.



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Eurovision 2017 was a contest with politics much further in the background than many viewers would have expected at the end of last year's show: the 2016 contest saw Jamala win Ukraine the right to host the following Eurovision with a song that commemorated Stalin's deportation of the Crimean Tatars in 1944.

Russia's last-minute selection of a contestant, Yuliya Samoilova, who had visited Crimea in 2015 without crossing the Russian-Ukrainian border and would therefore be ineligible for entry under Ukrainian law, generated almost a month-long stand-off before Russian television decided in mid-April not to accept any compromise solution or broadcast the show. This meant the greatest reverberations of the Russia–Ukraine conflict for Kyiv 2017 had subsided before they could preoccupy the bubble of journalists, bloggers and fans that generates many of the framing narratives for every Eurovision during a fortnight of rehearsals in the host city.

While visitors to Kyiv were surrounded by architectural and visual reminders of Ukraine's increasing cultural separation from Russia and the memory of coexistence in the USSR, Ukrainian nationhood in the broadcasts themselves came across largely through citations of folk tradition. There was no equivalent of the moment in Eurovision 2005 where President Viktor Yushchenko, presenting the winner's trophy, reminded viewers that the Orange Revolution had only ended four months before. Even the Ukrainian entry by rock band O.Torvald had abandoned the ticking countdowns, flame and rubble concept of its early performances – calling to mind iconic

photographs of the Euromaidan – for an abstract, utilitarian design.

The European Broadcasting Union, for its part, contributed to the politics-free atmosphere by preventing Portugal's Salvador Sobral, who had been urging European governments throughout the week to accept more refugees, from wearing an 'SOS Refugees' sweatshirt in his last press conferences on the grounds that it broke Eurovision rules against 'political or commercial' messages. This was despite the fact that last year's Eurovision had contained a segment, the acclaimed 'Grey People', which was no more and no less political in its depiction of the dangers refugees subject themselves to in order to reach the very 'Europe' that Eurovision viewers are celebrating.

The nature of live television nevertheless creates occasional ruptures in this increasingly tightly regulated ideological space. Israel's spokesperson Ofer Nachshon's farewell to Eurovision from the soon-to-be-closed Israel Broadcasting Authority left many viewers wondering if he was also announcing the departure of Israel itself. Perhaps the most alarming moment I can remember on a Eurovision screen occurred during the interval, when a man wearing an Australian flag climbed on stage and dropped his trousers in front of Jamala as she performed her new single, 'I Believe In U'.

While no-one was readier than the internet's Australians to take self-deprecating credit for the display, the man was a Ukrainian 'prankster', Vitalii Sediuk, with a long track record of confronting and assaulting mostly female celebrities in public. With Ukraine in direct conflict with another country where opposition politicians and journalists are liable to become targets of attacks in the street – and with tennis fans in the Yugoslav region especially likely to remember a spectator's attack on Monica Seles in Hamburg 24 years ago – the fact that a member of the public could get this close to any performer on stage, let alone as politically symbolic a figure as Jamala, overshadowed a contest where in many respects the politics remained off screen.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

About the author

Catherine Baker – *University of Hull*

Catherine Baker is Lecturer in 20th Century History at the University of Hull. She is the author of [The Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s](#) (2015) and has published widely on media, popular culture and national identity during the Yugoslav wars, including [Sounds of the Borderland: Popular Music, War and Nationalism in Croatia since 1991](#) (2010) and [Interpreting the Peace: Peace Operations, Conflict and Language in Bosnia-Herzegovina](#) (2013, with Michael Kelly). She blogs at <http://bakercatherine.wordpress.com> and tweets at [@richmondbridge](#)

