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# **Queer to be kind: Exploring Western media discourses about the “Eastern bloc” during the 2007 and 2014 Eurovision Song Contests**

Research Article

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# Queer to be kind: Exploring Western media discourses about the “Eastern bloc” during the 2007 and 2014 Eurovision Song Contests

Alexej Ulbricht \* Indraneel Sircar \* Koen Sloopmaeckers\*

This article examines the voting results and Western European media coverage of the 2007 and 2014 Eurovision Song Contests. The Austrian drag act Conchita Wurst (the alter ego of an openly gay man) won in 2014, whilst Serbian entrant Marija Šerifović, portrayed in Western European media as lesbian at the time, won in 2007. We first explore the extent to which there was an East-West voting divide in both contests. In 2014, while there was some elite hostility against Conchita in Eastern Europe, the popular support was on a similar level to that in Western Europe. In 2007, we find no significant geographic divide in support for Šerifović. However, when we examine mainstream UK and German media coverage during and after both contests, we find strong anti-Eastern European discourses that are at odds with the similarity in the public voting. We employ the concept of homonationalism to interrogate inconsistent Western media discourses: the East was depicted as a site of homophobia and the West as a site of tolerance in 2014, whilst the queer aesthetic / identity of Šerifović was largely overlooked in 2007.

**Keywords:** homonationalism, queer politics, xenophobia, voting behaviour, Eurovision

## Introduction

When Eurovision is accused of being “political”, this usually refers to voting based on national blocs. The 2014 edition, however, seemed to have become political in a more complex way. Austria’s entrant, drag act Conchita Wurst, challenged heteronormative gender conventions through her performance, and faced hostility both in the run up to the event and after winning. This hostility was widely reported, and tended to be ascribed to a group of countries collectively represented as Eastern European. There was concern whether Conchita would fare less well at the competition due to widespread homophobia in Eastern Europe, and the competition was stylised into a political contest about the status of LGBT rights.

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We want to critically interrogate this discourse connecting Eastern Europe and LGBT rights. We will be arguing that it is not really the result of a sincere commitment to LGBT liberation, but rather builds on a longer-standing anti-Eastern European discourse. In 2014, this discourse was combined with a homonationalist discourse to construct a particular picture of a backward, homophobic Eastern Europe and a progressive LGBT-friendly Western Europe.

We will contrast the media coverage and voting related to Conchita with Serbia’s 2007 winning entry Marija Šerifović. Although Šerifović only came out publicly in 2013,<sup>1</sup> her sexuality “was not secret to [Serbian] tabloids”<sup>2</sup> as far back as 2004 (when the tabloid *Kurir* published a story that she had revealed her sexuality to her father),<sup>3</sup> and she was described as lesbian by media outside Serbia at the time of the 2007 ESC.<sup>4</sup> We identified the 2007 Serbian entry as an appropriate comparative case, instead of other drag acts, such as Verka Serduchka (Ukraine, 2007 runner-up), for three primary reasons. First, we focus on winning acts, as these allow for sufficient media coverage to make a more informed analysis. Second, the Serbian victory in 2007 led to widespread Western media accusations of Eastern bloc voting. Third, both Conchita and Šerifović were identified as non-heterosexuals, contrary to Verka, who is an act performed by a heterosexual man.

We employ a mixed-methods approach to ground our observations about a particular schema of representation in the context of actual voting behaviour. Our focus is not confined to the politics inherent to Eurovision itself, but rather the way the event serves as a platform for particular political discourses. Thus, we seek to reveal the inconsistencies in how Eurovision results are represented by media in two particular Western European countries, Germany and the UK (both of which are part of the ‘big five’ funders that do not need to qualify for the main event), despite evidence of similar televoting behaviour across the East-West divide. Rather than providing an exhaustive account of all media coverage in these countries, we have focused on examples that illustrate particularly well the way that Eurovision is reported on, allowing us to present a rich and textured picture of the way Eurovision is represented.

In the next section, we situate our study within the study of Eurovision, and we outline the concept of homonationalism. In the subsequent section, we clarify the terminology we use in regards to “Eastern Europe” and “Conchita”. We then turn to an analysis of voting results in the 2007 and 2014 contests, with a particular focus on East-West bloc voting. Next, we analyse the predominant discourses in German and British media in relation to Conchita’s participation and victory in 2014, followed by a comparison with 2007. This section particularly illustrates the depiction of unfair bloc voting whilst ignoring the lesbian and ethnic minority identity of Marija Šerifović in 2007. We then offer

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<sup>1</sup> N.N. 2013. *Marija Šerifović otkriva: lezbijka sam, seks sa devojkom je divan!* *Telegraf*, 27. November 2013 (accessed: 12. April 2015).

<sup>2</sup> Bieber, Florian. 2014. *It Ain’t So Queer: The Success of Conchita Wurst Across Continental Divides*. *Balkan Insight*, 16. May 2014 (accessed: 12. April 2015).

<sup>3</sup> N.N. 2004. *Tata, ja sam lezbijka!* *Kurir*, 24. August 2004 (accessed: 31. March 2015).

<sup>4</sup> Greer, Germaine. 2007. *Go, Marija! Eurovision’s Triumphant Lesbian Gypsy*. *The Guardian*, 21. May 2007 (accessed: 12. April 2015).

conclusions on how a homonationalist framing allows us to be critical in reflecting Western respect and tolerance for LGBT individuals.

### **The Eurovision Song Contest as European Homonationalism**

Over the years, the Eurovision Song Contest has become more than an annual showcase, revealing something about the countries that participate in the event, and the complex relationships amongst them. The spectacle of a European-wide televised event has pushed countries, particularly in Eastern Europe, to streamline the complexities of their national identities in order to present a simplified and stereotypical version during the contest.<sup>5</sup> The event has been used as an opportunity for nation branding in parts of the post-Soviet space for the purpose of creating an image of a “return to Europe”,<sup>6</sup> sometimes with the aid of Western European brand consultants.<sup>7</sup> These diverging currents of simplified national stereotypes on the one hand and a return to a multi-ethnic European ideal on the other have necessitated uneasy, “corrective” Eastern European representations of cosmopolitanism.<sup>8</sup> As a result, Europeanization through Eurovision is limited, and countries can choose which aspects of European practices to incorporate through an à-la-carte process of “political imagination”.<sup>9</sup> The tensions in these processes can allow for more “bottom-up” constructions of the nation that are sometimes at odds with traditional representations.<sup>10</sup>

More importantly, representations around the Eurovision contest are especially salient in the contestation, confirmation, and problematisation of sexualities, particularly in demarcating the divide between Western and Eastern Europe. For example, resonant with the aforementioned process of “political imagination,” Russia has sought to produce new forms of “camp” in its entries to the contest that nonetheless protect and perpetuate traditional ideas of heteronormativity.<sup>11</sup> On the other end of the “divide”, commentators have argued that the Eurovision Song Contest press conferences show evidence of a shift from national heteronormativity to a transnational (European) expectation that non-heteronormative individuals should be treated with greater respect and tolerance.<sup>12</sup> We situate our analysis within the literature which critically examines attempts to negatively represent the Eastern “other” unwilling or unable to accept European notions of gender and sexuality, such

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<sup>5</sup> Baker, Catherine. 2008. Wild Dances and Dying Wolves: Simulation, Essentialization, and National Identity at the Eurovision Song Contest. *Popular Communication* 6(3), 173–89.

<sup>6</sup> Jordan, Paul. 2011. *The Eurovision Song Contest: Nation Branding and Nation Building in Estonia and Ukraine*. PhD-thesis. Glasgow: University of Glasgow.

<sup>7</sup> Jordan, Paul. 2014. Nation Branding: a Tool for Nationalism?. *Journal of Baltic Studies* 45(3), 283–303.

<sup>8</sup> Sieg, Katrin. 2013. Cosmopolitan Empire: Central and Eastern Europeans at the Eurovision Song Contest. *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 16(2), 244–63.

<sup>9</sup> Jones, Shannon and Subotic, Jelena. 2011. Fantasies of Power: Europeanization on the European periphery. *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 14(5), 542–57.

<sup>10</sup> Iglesias, Danero Julien. 2015. Eurovision Song Contest and Identity in Moldova. *Nationalities Papers* 43(2), 233–247.

<sup>11</sup> Cassidy A. Julie. 2014. Post-Soviet Pop Goes Gay: Russia’s Trajectory to Eurovision Victory. *The Russian Review* 73(1), 1–23.

<sup>12</sup> Motschenbacher, Heiko. 2013. “Now Everybody Can Wear a Skirt”: Linguistic Constructions of Non-Hetero-Normativity at Eurovision Song Contest Press Conferences. *Discourse and Society* 24(5), 590–614.

as the “frenzied fixation” by Western media and NGOs on LGBT rights in Azerbaijan preceding and during the 2012 contest in Baku.<sup>13</sup> To do this, we employ the notion of homonationalism.

In order to understand how nation-states are increasingly defined by their gay-friendliness or homophobia, Jasbir Puar developed the concept of homonationalism,<sup>14</sup> which is “a facet of modernity and a historical shift marked by the entrance of (some) homosexual bodies as worthy of protection by nation-states, a constitutive and fundamental reorientation of the relationship between the state, capitalism, and sexuality.”<sup>15</sup> In recent years, an idealised Europe has become increasingly connected with LGBT rights, and “gay-friendliness”.<sup>16</sup> This narrative can be understood as homonationalist in the sense that it has been built upon the back of the (Eastern) Other, which is constructed as not yet modern, trying to catch up with the West (i.e. “Europe”), or where progress has yet to arrive. In a recent article, Francesca Ammaruto has studied the political use of LGBT rights in what she calls the “*Pink Agenda*”, which works by “creating and promoting lines of fractures between presumably *queer-friendly* and *homo-transphobic* countries both within and outside the European borders,”<sup>17</sup> in order to create and reinforce (Western) European exceptionalism in the fields of LGBT rights and human rights more broadly. This agenda deepens the already problematic East-West distinction, as it presents the “homophobic East” as a place that is trying to catch up with the West, and at the same time “dragging progress down” (as perceived in the “West”).<sup>18</sup>

Before proceeding further, it is important to clarify how we use the term “Eastern Europe”. Moreover, given the notion of homonationalism, it is also important to link this concept to understandings of “heteronormativity” and “homophobia”. These terminological issues will be explored in the next section.

### **Clarifying terminologies: Where is Eastern Europe? Who is Conchita?**

We will be using the term Eastern Europe in the same way as the German and British press, that is, referring to the countries that make up former Yugoslavia, the European and Caucasian ex-Soviet Republics, as well as the former Warsaw Pact members (excluding East Germany). The term does not therefore include various participant countries that lie (in the) East of Europe, such as Greece, Turkey, Cyprus, and Israel. The term is associated with former

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<sup>13</sup> Gluhovic, Milija. 2013. *Sing for Democracy: Human Rights and Sexuality Discourse in the Eurovision Song Contest*, in *Performing the “New” Europe: Identities, Feelings, and Politics in the Eurovision Song Contest*, edited by Karen, Fricker and Gluhovic, Milija. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 209.

<sup>14</sup> Puar, K. Jasbir. 2007. *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press; Puar, K. Jasbir. 2013. Rethinking Homonationalism. *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 45(2), 336–39.

<sup>15</sup> Puar, *Rethinking Homonationalism*, 337.

<sup>16</sup> Ayoub, M. Philippe and Paternotte, David, (eds.). 2014. *LGBT Activism and the Making of Europe: A Rainbow Europe?*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>17</sup> Ammaruto, Romana Francesca. 2015. The “Pink Agenda”: Questioning and Challenging European Homonationalist Sexual Citizenship. *Sociology* (in press).

<sup>18</sup> Mizielińska, Joanna and Kulpa, Robert. 2011. “*Contemporary Peripheries*”: *Queer Studies, Circulation of Knowledge and East/West Divide*, in *De-Centring Western Sexualities: Central and Eastern European Perspectives*, edited by Kulpa, Robert and Mizielińska, Joanna, 11–26.

Communist countries, with Slavs, and at least implicitly with being part of a Russian cultural sphere. As such, we acknowledge that it is a problematic and simplifying term that glosses over and denies great cultural differences as well as local conflicts in order to create a unified sphere that takes its semiological coherence from a Cold-War-era conception of everything Eastern as Russian. However, we will be using it repeatedly in the course of this paper, since the way Eastern European countries are represented in British and German media is precisely such a rendering. That is, when talking of the representation of Eastern Europe one has to use the term, as it is usually not even possible to give it more specificity, since those that employ it have nowhere specific in mind. Nonetheless, we will endeavour to problematise and destabilise the term even while we use it, precisely by looking more closely at the way in which Eastern Europe is talked about when reporting on Eurovision.

We also need to reflect on how to refer to Conchita Wurst, a drag act performed by a gay man, Tom Neuwirth. As this paper focuses on media coverage of the Eurovision act, we will refer in the remainder of the paper to Conchita using either her name or a feminine pronoun. Before we can continue with the analysis, we must also clarify the position of the drag act in a wider heterosexual matrix.<sup>19</sup> Whilst it is beyond the scope of the article to unravel the current academic debate on whether drag acts challenge the binary gender system,<sup>20</sup> we want to draw attention to certain aspects of drag in relation to the idea of *heteronormativity*. We use Samuel Chambers' conceptualisation of heteronormativity as a regulatory practice,<sup>21</sup> which is "the *expectation* of heterosexuality as it is written into our world [...]. It means that *everyone and everything is judged from the perspective of straight*."<sup>22</sup>

The subversive potential of drag in this regard is that it can challenge, call into question, and undermine the presumption of heterosexuality; to expose the internal structure of heteronormativity.<sup>23</sup> Conchita, for example, challenges heteronormativity by denaturalising the gender system. Indeed, by appearing as a woman with a beard, she blurs the fixed distinction between the two genders, therefore illuminating the underlying structures of heteronormativity (as the strict distinction between sexes/genders is essential to assume opposite-sex attraction).<sup>24</sup>

Although often used interchangeably, heteronormativity is distinct from homophobia.<sup>25</sup> Contrary to heteronormativity that designates both the political power and social structuring effects of heterosexuality as a norm, homophobia suggests a reduction to the individual. Taking homophobia, rather than

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<sup>19</sup> See Butler, Judith. 1999. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.

<sup>20</sup> For a good overview of this debate, see Rupp, J. Leila / Taylor, Verta and Shapiro I. Eve. 2010. Drag Queens and Drag Kings: The Difference Gender Makes. *Sexualities* 13(3), 275–94.

<sup>21</sup> Chambers, A. Samuel. 2003. Telepistemology of the Closet; or, The Queer Politics of Six Feet Under. *Journal of American Culture* 26(1), 24–41.

<sup>22</sup> Chambers, *Telepistemology of the Closet*, 26.

<sup>23</sup> See Chambers, A. Samuel. 2007. "An Incalculable Effect": Subversions of Heteronormativity. *Political Studies* 55(3), 656–79.

<sup>24</sup> Chambers, *An Incalculable Effect*.

<sup>25</sup> Chambers, *An Incalculable Effect*, 664.

heteronormativity, as a political problem, it is implied that the solution can be found in changing individual attitudes.

Although it is clear that Conchita departs from the heterosexual norm, the media struggle to classify her according to the known LGBT categories, i.e., she is often described along the lines of transgender or gay identities, ignoring the performativity of the act. More interesting for this paper, however, is that opposition to Conchita is almost always described as homo- or transphobia. By doing so, the heteronormative system seeks to uphold its norms by, first, explicitly marking Conchita’s departure from the norm, and second, making the opposition to Conchita a personal problem that needs to be eliminated, reducing her subversive potential.

In order to better understand the context in which the Western discourses analysed below are operating, we will examine the voting behaviour in the two song contests under study in the next section. We will first look at the 2014 competition and then compare the results with the 2007 competition.

### **Voting in the 2007 and 2014 Eurovision Song Contests**

The long-standing song contest certainly lends itself readily to complex quantitative analyses of voting behaviour, particularly using social network methods.<sup>26</sup> These analyses have identified different voting blocs and different voting patterns, like intra-bloc countries’ “favouritism”,<sup>27</sup> or voting alongside cultural and linguistic proximity.<sup>28</sup> Unlike these past studies, we will employ more modest quantitative techniques in examining the voting patterns for the two song contests under study in this article. We will focus on two voting blocs, Eastern European countries and the other countries, as outlined above. Using the geographic demarcation explained in the previous section, there were 16 countries from “Eastern Europe” out of the 37 participants (including Austria) in 2014, and 21 of the 42 participants were from Eastern Europe (including Serbia) in 2007.

Whereas the data for the 2007 event only comprises the points awarded based on the televote results,<sup>29</sup> the 2014 data is much more detailed, and contains the ordinal ranking of the national televote, ordinal rankings of the national juries, ordinal rankings by individual jurors, and the points awarded by each country.<sup>30</sup> Thus, we have an unprecedented level of transparency in the scoring. For the comparison between 2007 and 2014, we are limited to an analysis of the awarded points.

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<sup>26</sup> See e.g., Blanglardo, Marta and Baio, Gianluca. 2014. Evidence of Bias in the Eurovision Song Contest: Modeling the Vote using Bayesian Hierarchical Models. *Journal of Applied Statistics* 41(10), 2312–22; Ginsburgh, Victor and Noury, G. Abdul. 2008. The Eurovision Song Contest: Is Voting Political or Cultural?, *European Journal of Political Economy* 24(1), 41–52; Yair, Gad. 1995. “Unite Unite Europe”: The Political and Cultural Structures of Europe as Reflected in the Eurovision Song Contest. *Social Networks* 17(2), 147–61.

<sup>27</sup> Blanglardo and Baio, *Evidence of Bias in the Eurovision Song Contest*.

<sup>28</sup> Ginsburgh and Noury, *The Eurovision Song Contest*.

<sup>29</sup> N.N. 2007. *Eurovision Song Contest 2007 Final*. *Eurovisiontv* (accessed: 12. April 2015).

<sup>30</sup> N.N. 2014. *Grand Final Full Results*. *Eurovisiontv* (accessed: 12. April 2015).



We first examine whether there is an Eastern bias in the overall vote against Conchita. The average points given to Austria from Eastern European participants were 5.38, whilst they were 10.20 for the rest of the countries. Only San Marino, Poland, Armenia, and Belarus gave Conchita “nul points” of the 36 countries voting (Austria could not vote for itself). We conducted an independent-samples t-test, and found that the average overall points given to Conchita significantly differed between Eastern European and other participants ( $t=4.022$ ,  $df=34$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). This is further corroborated by looking at the ordinal rankings for Conchita.<sup>31</sup> Again, there is evidence of a statistically significant difference of average rankings at all conventional levels ( $t=3.240$ ,  $df=34$ ,  $p=0.003$ ). We are 95% confident that the average ranking given to the Austrian entry was between 1.5 and 6.4 places lower from Eastern European countries compared with her ranking elsewhere. These findings confirm that there was a negative “Eastern bias” in the average points given to Conchita overall.

When we focus only on the jury voting in 2014, however, the picture becomes more interesting.<sup>32</sup> The average ranking of Conchita by juries was 7.14, with a significant difference ( $t=3.798$ ,  $df=33$ ,  $p=0.001$ ) in average ranking between Eastern European countries (11.60) and the other countries (3.80). Thus, Eastern European national juries ranked Conchita significantly lower on average. There are three important observations to add to this analysis. First, the standard deviations (SD) of national jury rankings for both groups are quite different, i.e., compared with non-Eastern European countries (SD = 3.694) there is a high degree of variation amongst Eastern European national juries (SD = 8.166). That is, Eastern European national juries were not uniformly pro- or anti-Conchita. Secondly, given the overall popularity of the Austrian entry across all participating televoters (see below), there were substantial discrepancies between the public vote and national juries, particularly in parts of the former Soviet Union: Armenia (24<sup>th</sup> in national jury, 2<sup>nd</sup> in televote); Azerbaijan (24<sup>th</sup> in national jury, 3<sup>rd</sup> in televote); and Belarus (23<sup>rd</sup> in national jury, 4<sup>th</sup> in televote). Third, this gap between the public and national jury is not confined to Eastern Europe. Despite the high-profile antipathy towards Conchita from Russia, the Austrian entry placed 3<sup>rd</sup> in the televote but only 11<sup>th</sup> in the national jury. However, in Germany, Conchita was placed 1<sup>st</sup> based on the televote, but the national jury placed her 11<sup>th</sup> – the same as its Russian counterpart.

We then turn to a comparison of the voting between the 2007 and 2014 contests, for which we can only use the televote results (as explained above). In order to compare the two events, we convert the televoting rankings of the 2014 Austrian entry into points.<sup>33</sup> From this it follows that, based on televoting only, Conchita received a remarkable 9.0 out of a maximum 12 points on average. In fact, every country would have given the Austrian entry at least five points except for Estonia, which would have given three points. We then sub-divided

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<sup>31</sup> For rankings, “1” denotes the highest rank, “2” as second, and so on. Thus, *lower* numbers denote a more positive assessment.

<sup>32</sup> The ranking from Georgia was nullified by the organisers and is therefore not included in the analysis.

<sup>33</sup> The televote scores from Albania and San Marino were excluded due to unspecified issues. Consequently, these countries are not included in the analysis.

the votes by geographic bloc, and found that the average points based on televotes only was 7.6 points within the Eastern bloc and 10.2 points outside Eastern Europe. A difference found to be statistically significant via an independent-samples t-test ( $t=3.827$ ,  $df=32$ ,  $p=0.001$ ). We are thus 95% confident that Eastern European televoters gave Conchita between 1.2 and 4.0 points less on average compared with televoters elsewhere, if we converted the rankings into points.

Turning to the votes for Marija Šerifović in 2007, we find that the average number of points was 7.59 amongst the 39 countries that gave a televote,<sup>34</sup> with Eastern European countries giving 8.40 points on average and other countries giving 6.74 points. The difference between the two blocs was not statistically significant, however ( $t=1.444$ ,  $df=37$ ,  $p=0.157$ ). We, therefore, do not have sufficient evidence to conclude that there was significant bloc voting (or intra-bloc favouritism) in 2007.

Thus, looking at the televoting in the two contests, we find that there was no statistically significant difference between Eastern European and other countries in the average points given to the 2007 Serbian entry, whilst the televoters outside Eastern Europe gave Conchita significantly higher points than Eastern European publics in 2014. However, if we convert the discrepancy in average scores into ordinal rankings, Eastern European televoters, on average, placed Conchita only between 0.9 and 2.8 places lower than televoters elsewhere (95% Confidence Interval). Thus, although the difference is *significant*, it is not particularly *important*. In other words, Eastern European televoters did rank Conchita significantly lower than televoters elsewhere, but the gap is not that stark.

Drawing together the results from the above analysis, we find that overall, there was indeed an “Eastern bias” against Conchita. However, if we divide the televote and jury voting, the picture is more complex, which corroborates voting analyses conducted soon after the event.<sup>35</sup> First, although Eastern European televoters did rank Conchita lower on average, the difference is not substantial, and the Austrian entry seemed to enjoy public support across Europe. Second, although given 12 points by its Balkan neighbours, there was not enough statistical evidence to conclude that Eastern and non-Eastern Europeans voted significantly differently on average for Marija Šerifović in 2007. Third, there is a noticeable gap between national juries and televoters in Eastern Europe in 2014, with the former being more negative towards Conchita on average, especially in some of the former Soviet republics. However, there was also a substantial gap between the televote and national jury ranking in Germany.

With these results in mind, we will now turn to the media coverage on Conchita and how it contributed to the creating of the homophobic other (Eastern Europe), in an attempt to highlight Western Europe’s “progressiveness” in accepting non-heterosexual subjects.

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<sup>34</sup> Serbia could not vote for itself, and Albania and Andorra relied on backup national juries.

<sup>35</sup> Renwick, Alan. 2014. *Eurovision: a Continent Divided in its Sexual Attitudes?*. *Politics at Reading* (accessed: 12. April 2015).

### **Rise like a phoenix: reporting Conchita as a triumph of LGBT rights**

The announcement that Conchita would be representing the country at Eurovision garnered considerable media attention. This attention further increased after some hostile reactions, both within Austria and from other parts of Europe. And whilst Austrian negative reactions were reported (mainly in Austria itself),<sup>36</sup> it was negative reactions from Eastern Europe that went on to receive far more attention across Europe. The form that the hostilities took is interesting in and of itself, and is certainly worthy of media attention, but we are more concerned with the particular form this media attention took.

The story of hostility against Conchita is reported across the board in both Germany and the UK. *Bild* wrote of Conchita being “mobbed” by other ESC countries.<sup>37</sup> The *Daily Mail* reported “a barrage of homophobic and transphobic attacks.”<sup>38</sup> The BBC reported that “Conchita recently fac[ed] a transphobic backlash online, as conservative protesters in Russia, Armenia and Belarus branded the contest a “hotbed of sodomy.”<sup>39</sup> The *Independent* ran a story entitled “Conchita Wurst faces transphobic backlash for ‘unnatural’ lifestyle.”<sup>40</sup>

However, whilst there was initially mention of trans- and homophobia both within Austria and in Eastern Europe, a narrative soon emerged that shifted the focus onto Eastern Europe and identified it as the primary locus of homophobia today. Thus, the Reuters report on Conchita’s selection stated: “her entry has highlighted Europe’s geographical divide on attitudes to homosexuality. Unlikely to raise much controversy in the West, her appearance has prompted criticism by some in the East where anti-gay rhetoric remains more common.”<sup>41</sup> In a similar vein, *Der Spiegel* wrote that “it fits into the developments of the last few months that the most inhuman comment on the young Austrian, who dared laugh in the face of common gender markers, came from Russia.”<sup>42</sup>

These sentiments all tie into a larger narrative that portrays Eastern Europe as in various ways culturally backward and in opposition to the progressive values of Western European society. This narrative intensified as the competition drew nearer, and Conchita’s participation became stylised as part of a cultural conflict with Eastern Europe in general and Russia in particular. For instance, the *New Statesman* published a story entitled: “Can a bearded

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<sup>36</sup> For example Kurzel, Julia. 2013. Conchita Wurst: “Ein Bart alleine reicht nicht”. *Kurier*, 17. September 2013 (accessed: 12. April 2015); N.N. 2014. Song Contest: auch Strache beleidigt Conchita Wurst. *News*, 7. May 2014 (accessed: 12. April 2015).

<sup>37</sup> N.N. 2014. ESC- Länder stänkern gegen den Travestie-Künstler. *Bild*, 6. May 2014 (accessed: 12. April 2015).

<sup>38</sup> N.N. 2014. Bearded Austrian Drag Queen Splits Opinion Ahead of Eurovision Performance with Song Rise like a Phoenix. *Daily Mail*, 7. May 2014 (accessed: 12. April 2015).

<sup>39</sup> Griffiths, Jane Sarah. 2014. Eurovision 2014: the Ones to Watch Out For. *BBC News Online*, 6. May 2014 (accessed: 16. January 2015).

<sup>40</sup> Denham, Jess. 2014. Eurovision 2014: Conchita Wurst Faces Transphobic Backlash for “Unnatural” Lifestyle. *The Independent*, 28. April 2014 (accessed: 12. April 2015).

<sup>41</sup> Brooks, Derek. 2014. Bearded Austrian Drag Queen to Take on Eurovision. *Reuters*, 28. April 2014 (accessed: 12. April 2015).

<sup>42</sup> Zylka, Jenni. 2014. ESC-Kandidatin Conchita Wurst: Küsschen, liebe Schwulenhasser. *Der Spiegel*, 8. May 2014 (accessed: 12. April 2015).

Austrian drag queen give Putin the bird?”<sup>43</sup> The article writes that the petitions and protests about Conchita:

*illustrate the ever more stark cultural differences within Europe and the widening gulf in attitudes to homosexuality. Whatever you think of the song, [...] a vote for Wurst on the night is another vote against Russian homophobia and transphobia, and a win would send out a strong message of defiance eastwards.*

In a similar, but plainer, expression of the same message, the *IB Times* article “Ten reasons why Austrian drag queen Conchita Wurst must win” listed as its first two items: “1. It will upset the Russians”; and “2. It will upset homophobes in Eastern Europe.”<sup>44</sup> It was thus hardly surprising to find the *Daily Telegraph* refer to the 2014 contest as “the most political Eurovision yet”.<sup>45</sup>

The contest became elevated to a representation of the current state of LGBT rights in Europe. The battle lines were clearly drawn between the progressive West and the reactionary East. After the competition, *Der Spiegel* wrote that Conchita had “turned the competition into a referendum about what society accepts in Europe and what it does not.”<sup>46</sup> The same article goes on to say that Conchita “split the Entertainment- and Economic Community along its invisible value border between East and West.” The German state radio broadcaster *Deutschlandfunk* hit a similar tone in a commentary (itself notable for exhibiting considerable unease with LGBT identities) stating that “[l]ike all politics, the body politics displayed here has certain geographic referents. And so the vote count of the Grand Prix unwittingly provided the opportunity to draw a European map of sexual repression and behavioural norms anew.”<sup>47</sup> The major weekly *Die Zeit* wrote: “How does the West defend its values? By letting the incomparable artistic figure Conchita Wurst win the Eurovision Song Contest.”<sup>48</sup> That is, Conchita is seen to have won the contest despite Eastern homophobia, rather than the win belying the idea of a homophobic East.

The fact that a number of public figures in Eastern Europe were outspoken in their criticism after Conchita won did not help any move towards a more nuanced analysis. Western media outlets were quick to pick up on this vocal disgust, which seemed to vindicate the previous narrative of a homophobic East. There is no denying the homophobic content of these statements; to give just a few examples: Russian nationalist politician Vladimir Zhirinovskiy said of the result “There’s no limit to our outrage. It’s the end of Europe. It has turned

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<sup>43</sup> Calvocoressi, Thomas. 2014. Can a Bearded Austrian Drag Queen Give Putin the Bird?. *New Statesman*, 28. April 2014 (accessed: 12. April 2015).

<sup>44</sup> Sim, David. 2014. Eurovision 2014: Ten Reasons Why Austrian Drag Queen Conchita Wurst Must Win. *IB Times*, 9. May 2014 (accessed: 16. January 2015).

<sup>45</sup> Merz, Theo and Hayes, Kat, 2014. The Politics Behind the Eurovision Song Contest. *The Daily Telegraph*, 9. May 2014 (accessed: 16. January 2015). To be fair to the *Telegraph*, it attributes this as much to the conflict between Russia and Ukraine.

<sup>46</sup> Frank, Arno. 2014. Dragqueen siegt beim Eurovision Song Contest: Conchita’s Liebesgrüße nach Moskau. *Der Spiegel*, 11. May 2014. (accessed: 15. January 2015).

<sup>47</sup> Ulrich – Müller, Burkhard. 2014. Warum ausgerechnet Conchita Wurst gewann. *Deutschlandfunk*, 11. May 2014 (accessed: 12. April 2015).

<sup>48</sup> Kümmel, Peter. 2014. Europa’s bärtige Königin. *Die Zeit*, 15. May 2014 (accessed: 12. April 2015).

wild. They don't have men and women any more. They have 'it.'"<sup>49</sup> Russia's vice premier, Dmitry Rogozin, released a tweet claiming the Eurovision result "showed supporters of European integration their European future – a bearded girl."<sup>50</sup> The deputy leader of the Russian Communist Party, Valery Rashkin, was quoted as saying that "the last Eurovision results exhausted our patience [...]. We cannot tolerate this endless madness."<sup>51</sup> Some religious leaders even went so far as blaming Conchita for causing flooding in south-east Europe.<sup>52</sup>

This all seems to fit neatly into the established narrative. Conchita's win can serve both as inspiration for the LGBT community across Europe and demonstrate the persistent homophobia of Eastern Europe, as exemplified by its political, cultural, and spiritual leaders. It was a triumph of Western values. However there are two principal problems with this reading. Firstly, Conchita won, and she won with a large number of points from Eastern European states. How does this fit into the narrative? If the people of Eastern Europe helped vote Conchita to her win, how can we describe them as homophobic, at least in this regard?<sup>53</sup> Statements made by (high-profile) individuals are deemed to be more representative than the decisions made by millions of people. But secondly, and in contrast to this, statements critical of Conchita made by (high-profile) individuals in Western Europe were not treated in the same way. When Terry Wogan, the former host of the British broadcast of Eurovision, called Conchita a "freak show",<sup>54</sup> this was not taken to be indicative of a general homophobic tendency in the United Kingdom, nor when German rapper Sido kicked off a barrage of online abuse directed at Conchita.<sup>55</sup>

We are not saying that homophobic comments by politicians and protests should not be reported on, but we are suggesting that there is a dubious operation here where this homophobic attitude becomes constructed as an essential feature of Eastern Europe. Moreover, there is a certain elision from simply reporting critically on these things to using the event as part of a "culture war" in which the West – regardless of its practice – is marked as progressive, and the East – regardless of its practice – is marked as reactionary.

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<sup>49</sup> Davies, Caroline. 2014. Conchita Wurst Pledges to Promote Tolerance After Jubilant Welcome Home. *The Guardian*, 11. May 2014 (accessed: 16. January 2015).

<sup>50</sup> Hodgson, Claire. 2014. Conchita Wurst's Eurovision Win Slammed by Russia as Politician Brands it "the End of Europe". *The Daily Mirror*, 11. May 2014 (accessed: 17. January 2015).

<sup>51</sup> McCormick, Patrick Joseph. 2014. Russia to Revive Soviet Eurovision Alternative to Protest Gay "Madness" of Conchita Win. *Pink News*, 29. July 2014 (accessed: 12. April 2015).

<sup>52</sup> N.N. 2014. Conchita Wurst Caused Balkan Flood After Eurovision Win, Say Church Leaders. *The Daily Telegraph*. 22. May 2014 (accessed: 12. April 2015).

<sup>53</sup> More specifically, while the fact that Conchita did well with televoters in Eastern Europe does not prove an absence of homophobia (nor for that matter does her success with Western European televoters), it does suggest that there is no reason to presume homophobia.

<sup>54</sup> Day, Aaron. 2014. Terry Wogan Says Conchita Wurst Made Eurovision a "Freak show". *Pink News*, 3. November 2014 (accessed: 12. April 2015).

<sup>55</sup> Wrusch, Paul. 2014. Hass auf Conchita Wurst bei Facebook: "Die gehört in die Gaskamer". *Taz*, 14. May 2014 (accessed: 12. April 2015).

### **Some queers are better than others: Serbia 2007 versus Austria 2014**

As seen above, the voting behaviour in 2014 suggests that there was elite hostility towards Conchita in Eastern Europe, but little difference in the popular vote between East and West. By contrast, there seems to be no statistically significant geographic divide in 2007. Before looking into this further, it is worth looking briefly how the 2007 Serbian victory was reported. One would imagine that there might be parallels in the reception of both Conchita and Marija Šerifović, since both acts represented a form of queer identity. Like Conchita, Šerifović’s performance can be seen as being strategically designed as queer.<sup>56</sup> However, this was not how the performance was read in most media outlets, and the way the Western media reported on the Serbian win was in fact quite different to the reactions to the Austrian win. The form that these differences take is quite instructive in terms of identifying what is problematic about the discourse around Conchita.

When Marija Šerifović won the contest for Serbia in 2007, despite being portrayed in Western European media as a lesbian, there was no concern in Western media about how her sexuality might result in a lack of votes from homophobic Eastern European populaces, nor for the homophobic abuse she might receive. Unlike Conchita, neither Šerifović nor her sexuality was reported on much at all in the run-up to the competition. And in the aftermath, the major talking points were seen to lie elsewhere.

While some of the reactions after her win talked positively about her lesbian and Romany identity,<sup>57</sup> there was nothing like the proclaimed triumph of LGBT rights after Conchita’s win – rather, Šerifović’s win was explained in terms of receiving neighbourly votes.<sup>58</sup> Bloc voting or political voting was in fact the major talking point in most outlets after the event. *Bild* bemoaned the low placing of Germany’s entry Roger Cicero (rank 19) and said: “Instead of rewarding our swing-king with points, the Eastern European states once again traded points with one another.”<sup>59</sup> The article also stated “Grand-prix-anger against the voting-mafia from the east” and listed a number of “experts” (who happened to be involved in the German production of Eurovision), asserting that there was no chance for Germany because the Eastern states were giving their points to each other. The paper complained that licence fees were being used for a competition in which there was no chance of winning and which did not provide sufficiently strong songs. The following day, *Bild*’s title page read: “Lowly cheating at the grand-prix: millions of German viewers outraged; East-Europeans hand each other the points; Schlagerstar Nicole: ‘Germany should quit’.”<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Aston, Elaine. 2013. *Competing Femininities: a “Girl” for Eurovision*, in *Performing the “New” Europe: Identities, Feelings, and Politics in the Eurovision Song Contest*, edited by Fricker, Karen and Gluhovic, Milija. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 163-177, 174.

<sup>57</sup> We found just one amongst the major outlets: Greer, Go, Marija!

<sup>58</sup> Hastings, Chris. 2007. *Eurovision Faces Overhaul After Vote Fiasco*. *The Daily Telegraph*, 20. May 2007 (accessed: 19. January 2015).

<sup>59</sup> N.N. 2007. *Grand-prix Wut nach Platz 19 für Roger Cicero: warum mag uns eigentlich keiner?* *Bild*, 13. May 2007 (accessed: 12. April 2015).

<sup>60</sup> N.N., *Warum mag uns eigentlich keiner?*.

This suggestion was reported by the BBC, together with complaints from several other sources. The BBC cited the Liberal Democrat MP Richard Younger-Ross demanding a change in the voting system, because the current *modus operandi* was both “a joke” and “harmful to the relationship between the peoples of Europe”.<sup>61</sup> He insisted that either the rules needed to change or the UK should withdraw. The article ended with the BBC DJ Paul Gambaccini bemoaning political voting and stating “Now with the public voting instead of the panel voting it is really extensive.” Another article detailed complaints from the head of the Maltese Eurovision contingent accusing several countries of bloc voting and demanding that phone voting be scrapped in certain countries until it could be monitored more closely.<sup>62</sup> The same article finished with Terry Wogan (then still the BBC commentator on Eurovision) stating how aggrieved he was by political voting, saying: “It’s a pity it’s not about the songs anymore. There’s a definite Baltic bloc and a Balkan bloc, and they’ve been joined in recent years by a Russian bloc.”

So we can once again see an anti-Eastern European narrative at work in most of the reporting. The idea that this was a triumph for LGBT rights was almost completely absent from the reactions. In fact, *Der Spiegel* even went so far as claiming the win was politically reactionary, suggesting that Šerifović’s win was to be regretted as it served as a “fig leaf for anti-European resentment” in Serbia.<sup>63</sup> The larger accusation though was that Eastern European participation in the contest was somehow duplicitous, and rigged against Western states.

Thus, there is a very peculiar understanding of democracy in the discourse around the 2007 event. The outcome of a democratic vote was challenged because it produced what was seen to be an illegitimate result (even though it is not clear how any deliberate illicitness would actually be executed). But the only supposedly legitimate result was a Western European win. Thus when Norway won two years later, after the reintroduction of juries, this was seen as a triumph of process, even though it was less democratic. We might also ask why it is that the supposedly political voting of Eastern European states was seen negatively whereas the mobilisation to vote politically for Conchita in the West was seen as positive. After all, one of the consistent complaints about supposed bloc voting was that the contest was “no longer about the music.”

## Conclusion

This all suggests that what we really encounter in reporting on Eurovision is a prevalent xenophobic discourse directed against Eastern Europeans that manifests itself differently at different times. In 2014, this combined with a homonationalist discourse to result in a specific narrative around Conchita. What we can see in the context of reporting on Eurovision is the mobilisation of the value of tolerance for intolerant ends. That is, support for LGBT rights and anti-homophobia are rallied around, but they are rallied around in order to

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<sup>61</sup> N.N. 2007. [MP Demands Eurovision Vote Change](#). *BBC News*, 15. May 2007 (accessed: 12. April 2015).

<sup>62</sup> N.N. 2015. [Malta Slates Eurovision’s Voting](#). *BBC News*, 14. May 2007 (accessed: 12. April 2015).

<sup>63</sup> Haas, Daniel. 2007. [Eurovision Song Contest 2007: Den Westen ins Gebet nehmen](#). *Der Spiegel*, 12. May 2007 (accessed: 19. January 2015).

denigrate a particular identity: Eastern Europeans. In this discursive move, Eastern Europeans are presented as backwards and Other, whereas the West can present itself as the site of enlightened tolerance.

More broadly speaking, this discourse fits into the kind of operation of power where one part of the world is consistently portrayed as the site of injustice, and the other part is portrayed as being in the position of righting these wrongs.<sup>64</sup> This discourse is not limited to a split between Europe and Africa and Asia, which is what most of the literature focuses on.<sup>65</sup> Rather, we can see that within Europe as well, the East is presented as persistently backward, in need of reform, and not quite up to (Western) European standards. As discussed above, a similar trend is identified in the context of LGBT politics,<sup>66</sup> with homonationalism and the *Pink Agenda* only but two theoretical frames to analyse this phenomenon.

We can see this operation in the reporting of Conchita. Homophobic statements by individual figures in the West, be they Austrian politicians or Terry Wogan, were not seen as the expression of a generalised homophobia. Even though heteronormative discourse is still dominant within Western Europe, the idea that it is the locus of a flourishing of queer rights is not questioned. In the context of Eurovision, we can even see that there have been concerted efforts, in Germany for instance, to de-queer the contest throughout the 2000s.<sup>67</sup> However, this has not tarnished Germany’s image or led to people questioning its record on LGBT rights.

As mentioned above, in the build-up to the 2012 event there were questions as to whether Azerbaijan’s bad record on LGBT rights made it a suitable host for Eurovision. While one could link this to the same anti-Eastern European discourses we have outlined, what is more interesting is the shift that happens from the kind of invocation in 2012 to that in 2014. In 2012, assessments of an on the ground situation regarding LGBT rights were tied up with a homonationalist discourse that constructed East and West in a particular way. In 2014, we witnessed the positing of a particular attitude within Eastern European populaces, for which a quantitative analysis of the 2014 Eurovision voting gives little actual evidence, which is then used for grounding a homonationalist discourse. That is, we are operating on a purely representational level.

What is particularly insidious about this is that Western European states have contributed to the very situation in which the attitudes of Eastern Europe can be read in a way that allows them to be portrayed as homophobic. If voting in

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<sup>64</sup> Spivak, C. Gayatri. 2004. Righting Wrongs. *South Atlantic Quarterly* 103(2/3), 523–81.

<sup>65</sup> Mohanty, T. Chandra. 1988. *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse*, in *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, edited by Russo, Ann and Lourdes, Torres. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 51–79; Gayatri C. Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Nelson, Cary and Grossberg, Lawrence. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988, 271–313.

<sup>66</sup> Ammaturo, *The “Pink Agenda”*; Ayoub and Paternotte, *LGBT Activism*; Mizelińska and Kulpa, *Contemporary Peripheries*; Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*.

<sup>67</sup> Rehberg, Peter. 2013. *Taken by a Stranger: How Queerness Haunts Germany at Eurovision*, in *Performing the “New” Europe: Identities, Feelings, and Politics in the Eurovision Song Contest*, edited by Fricker, Karen and Gluhovic, Milija. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, 178–93.



2014 had been carried out purely by popular vote, there would have been little discrepancy between East and West. Elite figures within Eastern Europe may have still expressed their disgust, but this would be operating on the same level as statements by some public figures in Western Europe (although whether this would have led to both of these being reported in the same way is debatable). It is only the partial reintroduction of the jury system that allowed for the perception of a substantive divide between East and West on Conchita, by allowing elite hostility to directly affect the outcomes. That is, the very system brought in to counter the supposedly illicit behaviour of Eastern European publics resulted in the creation of another illicit behaviour. Eastern Europe is thus made to seem illegitimate both when it votes democratically (an expression of tribalism) and when it gives its points by jury (an expression of bigotry).

The homonationalist discourse regarding Conchita has a double function: it reinforces the idea of (Western) European exceptionalism in the field of LGBT rights; and it constructs Eastern European deficiency in terms of individual (but shared) homophobia. By situating its concern in terms of individual attitudes that need to be changed, the West can avoid challenging its own heteronormativity. This discourse, furthermore, proves an easy fit with longer-standing anti-Eastern European discourse in the West of Europe, which likewise denigrates one locale whilst presenting the other as a site of enlightened progressivism. What these discourses share is a profound distrust of the Other and a profound blindness to the limitations of the West. What they show is a severely anti-progressive tendency at the heart of progressive politics.

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