

## **Marginal voices: Sub-state units and symbolic exclusion in the Eurovision Song Contest**

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**Abstract:** The Eurovision Song Contest (ESC) is celebrated for showcasing songs that represent nations and fostering a sense of transnational unity. The contest is centred on European entrants, but has expanded to include several other nation-states as determined by the rules of the organising body. However, the non-participation of Europe's various subnational jurisdictions, or 'sub-state units' (SSUs), including (semi-)autonomous territories/regions and microstates, raises questions about cultural sovereignty, hegemony and symbolic exclusion. This article explores the dynamics of exclusion within the ESC, focusing on the mechanisms that preclude SSUs from participating. Through a study of the ESC's regulatory practices, the UK and other British jurisdictions, the article argues that exclusion is not merely a matter of logistical constraints, but a reflection of deeper geopolitical realities. The findings underscore the need for a more inclusive approach in international arenas, one that recognises and values the voices of all European entities, regardless of size or political status.

**Keywords:** Europe, European Broadcasting Union, Eurovision Song Contest, hegemony, song, subnational jurisdictions, sub-state units, symbolic exclusion, United Kingdom.

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### **Introduction**

The Eurovision Song Contest (ESC) is a prominent annual cultural spectacle that has captured the imagination of audiences throughout Europe and beyond since its inception in 1956.<sup>1</sup> The televised contest has long been celebrated as a platform for showcasing songs that represent nations and seemingly fostering a sense of national and transnational unity. The idea of unity is an underpinning trope of the contest, as represented by "the iconic Eurovision heart symbol, which stands for dialogue, unity and the unifying power of music" (ESC, 2025a), amongst much other textual and visual symbolism. The contest is centred on European entrants, but has expanded over the decades to include several other nations as determined by the rules of the organising body (ESC, 2025b). However, the non-participation of Europe's various subnational jurisdictions, or

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<sup>1</sup> For more detailed information on the history and practicalities of the ESC, visit: <https://eurovision.tv/>

‘sub-state units’ (SSUs) (Baldacchino, 2018, p. 107; Marks et al., 2014, p. 20), including (semi-) autonomous territories/regions, areas of special sovereignty and some microstates, raises questions about cultural sovereignty, hegemony and symbolic exclusion (Greaves et al., 2014; Sibley, 2010), thereby contradicting the very foundation of the contest itself.

This article explores the dynamics of marginalisation within the ESC, focusing on the cultural and political mechanisms that preclude SSUs (defined broadly) from participating and thereby having representation that truly acknowledges their distinct political status and identity. By examining the historical and contemporary contexts of non-participation of select jurisdictions, the study highlights how the dominance of nation-states in the ESC framework reinforces broader patterns of cultural hegemony and political legitimacy. Through a select, case-study review of how the sovereign territory of the United Kingdom (UK) (England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland), 14 British Overseas Territories,<sup>2</sup> and three Crown Dependencies<sup>3</sup> are represented (or not) in the ESC and the ESC’s regulatory practices, the article argues that the exclusion of SSUs in their many forms is not merely a matter of logistical constraints, but a reflection of deeper geopolitical realities that maintains cultural hegemony over supposedly SSU status. The findings underscore the need for a more inclusive approach to cultural representation in international arenas, one that recognises and values the voices of all Eurovision entities, regardless of their size or political status.

The notion of symbolic exclusion is useful in deconstructing contexts that allude to hegemonic practices, and particularly applicable as an analytical tool when discussing the political dynamics between a nation-state and its SSUs. For example, such dialectics have been demonstrated negatively in connection with (post)colonial cultures where “symbolic exclusion justifies the omission of Indigenous cultures from the nation’s identity” (Newton, Sibley, & Osborne, 2018, p. 24; see also Greaves et al., 2014; Sibley, 2010). Another example concerns indigenous rights to self-determination, where, as a result of exclusion, there may be a “lingering stranglehold of state and colonial power” (Korson, Poaouteta, & Prinsen, 2022, p. 69). Such perspectives can be compared to SSUs that are subsumed into nation-state representation. This field of jurisdictional politics has been particularly apparent with several island jurisdictions, which, by their particular geographical existence and established historical practices, have attained a degree of autonomous political status (Baldacchino, 2009, p. 120; 2017).

The UK, with its different levels of jurisdictional authority, offers an example of such layering of political status. The reach of political control is broken down across geographical space, and particularly with the distinct island jurisdictions that are part of this political realm.<sup>4</sup> As Clegg (2018, p. 162) notes, “[m]any have aspirations of (at the very least) more autonomy and possibly independence in the medium-term”. As shown in our discussion, the larger British domains such as Scotland and Wales have expressed an increasing desire for their countries to be represented in

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<sup>2</sup> Anguilla, Bermuda, British Antarctic Territory, British Indian Ocean Territory, British Virgin Islands, Cayman Islands, Falkland Islands, Gibraltar, Montserrat, Pitcairn Islands, St Helena, Ascension and Tristan da Cunha, South Georgia and South Sandwich Islands, Sovereign Base Areas of Akrotiri and Dhekelia, and Turks and Caicos Islands.

<sup>3</sup> The Isle of Man and the two Bailiwicks of Jersey and Guernsey, the latter including the jurisdictions of the islands of Guernsey, Alderney and Sark.

<sup>4</sup> These spheres of connectedness are represented by various notions of being British, as defined by six types of British nationality: British citizenship, British overseas territories citizen, British overseas citizen, British subject, British national (overseas), and British protected person.

the ESC, but are yet to exercise their higher levels of nation-based jurisdiction in this contest outside nation-state representation, thereby revealing hidden signifiers of symbolic exclusion. Similar exclusion is exhibited elsewhere across the British realm, favouring the UK as the representative British entrant in the ESC.

The study of song competitions has received much interest in music research. Topics include country music in New Zealand (Bendrup & Johnson, 2007), island song in southwestern Japan (Hayward & Kuwahara, 2008) and media spectacle in Japan (Brunt, 2003). While such settings are typically locally based, the ESC has received much scholarly attention as an international competition, and in connection with political identity and competitiveness (e.g., Baker, 2008; Fricker & Gluhovic, 2013; Vuletic, 2018a; b; c). For example, Tragaki (2013) has contributed an intriguing collection of essays covering approaches that reflect the contest as a site for musico-political discourse. Other influences on our study include Raykoff and Tobin's (2007) exploration of the ESC's inherent politics, Press-Barnathan and Lutz's (2020) work on the politics of depoliticizing the ESC by examining participating states, Raykoff's (2021) study of musical tastes and values in the contest, and Baker's (2016) critique of Eurovision's national identity dynamics through a critical geopolitical lens. Such work helps show the inherent political discourse around the event and how the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion offer a useful pointer for a discussion of power dynamics within and between states, countries and SSUs.

A notion that helps contextualise the cultural politics inherent in the ESC is Antonio Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony (Urbinati, 1998), which provides a useful lens for analysing the ESC and its contested power dynamics within Europe and beyond. That is, despite Eurovision's stated mission to "celebrate diversity", to quote the 2017 slogan for the contest (ESC, 2017), its structure and outcomes often reflect the cultural dominance of certain countries over others, and particularly SSUs. Although beyond the scope of the current discussion, the idea of diversity within the ESC can also be viewed within a critical framework around gender equality and LGBT rights, not only through study of the stage and musical setting, but also backstage politics, fan-base activism and resistance, and political intervention (Baker, 2016, p. 79; Cassidy, 2014; Gluhovic, 2013). After all, as the Chairperson of the Eurovision Song Contest Reference Group comments, "[t]he ESC stands for freedom of expression" (Bakel Walden, in Eurovoix News, 2024). Nevertheless, in this paper, we respond to Baker's call for further study of exclusion within Eurovision (Baker, 2016, p. 81). That is, while the competition promotes a message of "bringing Europe together" (p. 89), especially in a new Europe (Bohlman, 2010; Fricker & Gluhovic, 2013), in practice, it appears to uphold a politicised framework that has "silencing and marginalizing effects" (Baker, 2016, p. 89).

Hegemony is further evident in the dominance of Western cultural norms in Eurovision's music, staging and production standards. Entrants conform to Western-centric pop aesthetics, and traditional musical forms, when presented, are typically modernised or adapted to align with the expectations of a predominantly Western audience. This dynamic risks commodifying or diluting the cultural heritage of peripheral entrants and positions their songs within a framework defined by hegemonic norms. At the same time, Eurovision is a site where resistance to cultural hegemony emerges. Counter-hegemony can be observed in instances where countries challenge dominant narratives through their performances. For example, Ukraine's 2016 victory brought attention to historical and political struggles tied to Crimea, explicitly resisting the commercialised themes typically celebrated in Eurovision. Similarly, Portugal's 2017 win with a jazz-inspired song challenged the dominance of formulaic kitsch, pop aesthetics.

As a way of expressing the ideas behind this article, several examples are introduced within a critical, analytical methodology to show how the sovereign territories of the UK and its broader realm are represented (or not) in the ESC and other international competitions. This is focused on ESC literature and foregrounds key themes for comprehending the inherent power dynamics involved in the exclusion of SSUs in the ESC.

### Membership framework

The term ‘Eurovision’ in the title of the ESC is a brand of the European Broadcasting Union (EBU), the prefix noting a geographic, political or cultural region, and the suffix connected to broadcasting as in television and radio. It is with this prefix that the scope of the ESC is contested: that is, the scope of participation within and beyond Europe.

The ESC is an annual televised event featuring participants chosen by EBU member broadcasters. Each nation-state entry is *de facto* represented by its respective or chosen public broadcaster. The ESC has a set of rules established by the EBU and approved by the Reference Group, which is the ESC governing body. The rules are known to change from time to time.<sup>5</sup>

The EBU consists of members, associate members and approved participants, thereby creating a framework that could lead to ambiguity in defining selection. While affiliation to the EBU is through broadcasting organisations and not countries per se, eligibility for EBU affiliation depends on which state the broadcasting organisation or group of broadcast organisations belongs to.<sup>6</sup> The EBU statutes specify eligibility for membership as defined within a framework of affiliations:

Membership of the EBU is open to broadcasting organisations or groups of such organisations from a member country of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) situated in the European Broadcasting Area [EBA] as defined by the Radio Regulations annexed to the International Telecommunication Convention, or a member country of the Council of Europe which is situated outside the European Broadcasting Area (EBU, 2023).

Currently, there are no member states of the Council of Europe situated outside the EBA; however, there are 14 states situated in the EBA that are not member states of the Council of Europe. The boundaries of the EBA have their origin in the regions served and linked by telegraph cables, differing from the Council of Europe boundaries. For instance, the EBA boundaries include North African states such as Morocco and Egypt, and Middle Eastern states such as Israel and Saudi Arabia.

It is with such a framework that entry to the ESC can extend beyond Europe's primary geographic and political domains (Table 1).<sup>7</sup> The Council of Europe has 46 state members and only Liechtenstein does not have a broadcaster affiliated with the EBU. The remainder 45 members of the Council of Europe are active EBU members. The remainder nine states with EBU active membership, which are states outside the Council of Europe but within EBA boundaries, are

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<sup>5</sup> Information regarding how the ESC currently works is available at <https://eurovision.tv/about/how-it-works>

<sup>6</sup> The definition of 'state' in this context aligns with that of the United Nations, where recognition “generally implies readiness to assume diplomatic relations” (United Nations, 2025).

<sup>7</sup> The ‘Our Members’ EBU (n. d.) page lists 68 members in 56 states; however, the EBU’s Belarusian member was suspended in May 2021 and the EBU’s Russian members were suspended in May 2022. Therefore, the current figures are 64 active members from 54 states.

Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Tunisia, and the Vatican State.<sup>8</sup> The states within EBA boundaries that are not EBU active members are Belarus and Russia (both suspended), Iraq, Liechtenstein, Saudi Arabia, and Syria. Despite not being an active member, Syria is an EBU associate member (see associate membership below).

As an example, the UK is a member state of the Council of Europe and the ITU within the EBA boundaries, making UK broadcasting organisations or groups eligible for EBU membership. Two EBU members are from the UK: British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and ITV Network Centre. The ITV Network Centre is a group of broadcast organisations including, among others, ITV Granada Television, ITV Wales Television, ITV Channel Television, and Sianel 4 Cymru.

The EBU (2023) statutes provide the following information regarding associate membership:

The status of Associate of the EBU is open to broadcasting organisations or groups of broadcasting organisations from an ITU member country situated outside the European Broadcasting Area which provide a radio and/or television service with a major role in national broadcasting and which are deemed useful for the Union, taking into account the purposes and means of action of the EBU. Usefulness is decided upon by the General Assembly at its sole discretion, following a recommendation by the Executive Board regarding either admission or expulsion.

Therefore, broadcasting organisations or groups of broadcast organisations can become associate members of the EBU if they are ITU members but outside the EBA. Moreover, associates are not required to be members of the Council of Europe. The "Our Members" EBU (n. d.) page lists 30 associates in 19 states. Two of the associate members are broadcasters from Georgia; therefore, broadcasters belonging to a state member of the Council of Europe. The two states within the EBA boundaries with EBU associate membership are Georgia and Syria. The remaining 17 states are neither members of the Council of Europe nor within the EBA boundaries. The states outside the EBA boundaries with broadcasters affiliated with the EBU are Australia, Bangladesh, Brazil, Canada, Chile, China, Cuba, Iran, Japan, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Mauritius, Nepal, New Zealand, Oman, Republic of Korea, and the United States.

**Table 1: States with broadcasting organisations or groups of broadcast organisations with the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) membership.**

States with organisations with European Broadcasting Union (EBU) membership	Active Members	Associate Members
On the Council of Europe	45	1
European Broadcasting Area (EBA), but outside the Council of Europe	9	1
International Telecommunication Union (ITU), but outside the European Broadcasting Area (EBA)	0	17
Total	54	19

<sup>8</sup> The Vatican State has an observer status with the Council of Europe, but it is not a Council of Europe member state.

While the "Our Members" EBU (n. d.) page states that "[i]t is important to note that associate membership does not grant access to the Eurovision system," Australia is one exception to this statement because it takes part in the ESC (since 2015). A topic that has featured much in scholarly discourse (e.g., Hay & Carniel, 2019), the ESC's Media Centre offers an intriguing response regarding why Australia is included in the contest:

The Eurovision Song Contest has been broadcast in Australia for more than 30 years. The Australian broadcaster SBS is an Associate Member of the EBU and in 2015, to mark the 60th Eurovision Song Contest, was invited to submit an entry. In 2016 the broadcaster requested to take part in the Eurovision Song Contest again. The Reference Group, the governing body of the Eurovision Song Contest, voted unanimously in favour of Australia's participation in 2016, 2017 and 2018 respectively. In February 2019, it was announced that Australia has secured participation as a competitor at the Eurovision Song Contest until 2023. It is yet to be decided whether Australia will become a permanent participant in the contest (ESC, n. d.).

However, while the geographically distant Australia is included in a primarily but not exclusively European song contest, some European countries and territories are excluded, as discussed in the next section.

### **Participation and symbolic exclusion**

Since its inception, when the ESC was exclusively a media spectacle for competing European states within a framework of unity (evidenced with discourse, emblems and expressive merchandise throughout the Eurovision brand), the contest has expanded locally and beyond continental boundaries. Within this process, discourse is rife in clarifying the reasons for inclusion or exclusion of certain countries in a framework that inherently brings nations together. Several examples will illustrate this point effectively.

Since 1961, Yugoslavia competed many times until 1992 with the break-up of the state. One of the areas that sought independence was Kosovo, which itself declared independence from Serbia in 2008, which still claims Kosovo as one of its provinces. As such, Kosovo is recognised by more than half of UN nation-states, although not a member itself. Several singers from Kosovo have participated in the ESC, not representing Kosovo as an entrant per se, but for the former Yugoslavia or for nearby nations. More recently, the ESC notes why Kosovo – now a *de facto* state – is not participating:

Kosovo cannot take part in the Eurovision Song Contest because their public broadcaster is not a Member of the EBU. The statutes of the EBU say that a Member must come from a country that is a Member of the International Telecommunications Union or is a Member of the Council of Europe. Kosovo is in neither. (ESC, n. d.)

In this context, besides members and associates of the EBU, the EBU (2023) statutes also have approved participants, who must be a broadcasting organisation or group of broadcast organisations representing an ITU member country, although such approved participants are not entitled to participate in the ESC.

All states represented at the ESC have a broadcaster or a group of broadcasters as a member or associate member at the EBU; however, not all members or associates at the EBU have taken

part at the ESC. More specifically, the EBU active members Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Tunisia, and the Vatican State have not taken part in the ESC. Regarding associate members, Australia is the only associate member that has taken part in the ESC, despite the significant geographical distance between Australia and most of the Eurovision states, which are located primarily in Europe.

The current ESC rules allow a maximum of 44 participating broadcasters to participate in the ESC. Six broadcasters have guaranteed places at the ESC: one for the host broadcaster, and five for the so-called 'Big Five' who provide the largest financial contribution: France, Germany, Spain, Italy, and the UK. Therefore, assuming that the host broadcaster is an EBU member, the Big Five claim their slots, and Australia takes one slot, leaving 37 slots to the remaining states. Such limitations restrict the number of participating states, let alone SSUs. The rule capping the total number of participants, combined with the political and logistical constraints on eligibility, means that new entrants must compete for a limited number of spots, making it increasingly difficult for other entities to gain entry. It is with such parameters that the ESC offers a focal point for discussing SSU representation in a contest that has inclusion at its core. Or is the ESC a competition that has transnational media hegemony at its core and thereby maintains national dominance of participating states and their public media?

### **The UK and its SSUs**

Inclusivity within the ESC is a contested area of dialectical politics between nation-state and SSU representation. While not a defining factor of the ESC, such tension is evident within the European Union (EU) where regional voices have particular influence (Tatham, 2015). While not all entrants in the ESC are EU members, and the UK is now a former EU member, such tensions where some regions have increased political influence have been played out in areas of the UK and its sovereign territory in terms of contestation between national and SSU representation.

Within the framework of the ESC, the UK's participation is facilitated by the exclusive broadcasting rights held by the BBC. This arrangement enables the BBC to represent the constituent countries of the UK, as well as, *de facto*, the SSUs within the broader British realm. The UK enters the ESC as a member country of the ITU, situated in the EBA, fulfilling the requirements of entry by the EBU. However, while such an entry follows the narrative of strengthening a sense of national identity, for the UK – and some other nation-states – it does little to recognise other levels of identity that make up the national whole. In the case of the UK, while its entry represents the union of England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, these countries, just like Kosovo with the former entries from Yugoslavia, are not exclusively visible, and nor are the Crown Dependencies of Jersey, Guernsey (and the other jurisdictions within the Bailiwick) and the Isle of Man, or the fourteen British Overseas Territories, all of which maintain constitutional and historical ties to the UK. Acknowledging that some UK entrants were born in the home nations, thereby showing the breadth of UK representation, and some in Australia, India and the USA, it is with the symbolic exclusion of distinct entries from the home nations and beyond that the UK through the BBC maintains a hegemonic presence. Several examples help illustrate this point.

The case for sub-state inclusivity within the ESC is emphasised with recent media headlines on Wales: "Wales puts forward Eurovision entry: Campaign for Wales to compete as a nation begins" (Nation.Cymru, 2024). More detail about this move notes that:

On Friday the campaign was given a focus with the release of a song called *Anfonaf Angel* (I Send An Angel) with a glitzy Eurovision-style video by the singer Sara Davies, who won this year's *Cân i Gymru* (Song for Wales) competition, to draw attention to the fact that many Welsh people would like their homeland to have a chance to take part (Morris, 2024).

Since 1969, Wales has held its own Eurovision-style song contest, *Cân i Gymru* (A Song for Wales), and has long campaigned to have a Welsh entry in the ESC, although it does participate in the Junior Eurovision Song Contest (Eurovoix, n. d.). With over half a million Welsh speakers, representing nearly 18 percent of the Welsh population (Welsh Language Commissioner, n. d.), there is both cultural and political support for a distinct Welsh entry to the ESC. After all, while several UK entries have been by major Welsh singers, including Mary Hopkin and Bonnie Tyler, an entry has thus far not been sung in Welsh.

As reported in the Guardian newspaper, the case for a Welsh ESC entry is given strength by the fact that the country has its own Welsh-language TV channel (S4C) and competes as a country in many national and international sporting events (Morris, 2024). It should be noted that S4C is within the ITV Network Centre, a group of broadcast organisations that also has EBU membership. Further, the Welsh political party, Plaid Cymru, has a policy aim for Wales to have its own ESC entry. However, in a contemporary setting where Wales, a country within the UK, strives for entry into the ESC, its hopes (along with other British SSUs) were set back in a 2025 letter from the Chairperson of the Eurovision Song Contest Reference Group: “As the BBC continues to participate, and remains the rights holder in the United Kingdom, this means an entry from the individual nations of the UK is therefore not possible at the Eurovision Song Contest” (Bakel Walden, in Price, 2025).

Scotland too has featured in the media as a country seeking to have its own entry in the ESC. As noted in the self-claiming, apolitical broadsheet, the *Herald*, there are calls for Scotland to have its own entry, especially through the likes of the Scottish National Party Member of the European Parliament, Alyn Smith (Didcock, 2018; *The Herald*, 2014). Smith argues that while the BBC hosts the UK entry, there are other broadcasters in the UK that are also EBU members. “Smith’s proposal is for a system of rotation, with the home nations [England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland] taking it in turns to field an entry under the UK flag” (Didcock, 2018). Such a move would help democratise the UK entry into the ESC, but there are still questions concerning representation from other British SSUs. The inclusion of Scotland in another European music competition, the Eurovision Choir, organised by the EBU, highlights the recognition of Scotland as a distinct political entity in one contest, despite this acknowledgment being absent in the ESC.

For the Bailiwick of Jersey, a British Crown Dependency that is not part of the EU, its online newspaper, *Bailiwick Express*, recently featured an article discussing whether or not the island should or could put forward a Jersey entry into the ESC. The article was written with an emphasis on what such an entry might sound like. However, commenting on the rules of the competition, the newspaper concluded:

The bad news is that Jersey falls under the UK's jurisdiction when it comes to the European Broadcasting Area and the Council of Europe.

The good news is that ‘associates of the EBU may also be eligible to enter the Eurovision Song Contest, this is decided by the Reference Group, the governing body of the Eurovision Song Contest, on a case-by-case basis.’ (Frost, 2023)

These examples help show the contested nature of the ESC within the UK and other British domains. On the one hand, while the UK entry is intended to represent the UK (and *de facto* any other British territory), which is an all-embracing point of representation across diverse jurisdictions, on the other hand, British SSUs within and outside the UK have shown, or could show, examples that counter such sovereign-state hegemony. The UK entry therefore represents a nation-state, but by doing so antagonises the nation's constituent countries, or SSUs, to seek their own representation.<sup>9</sup>

## **Discussion and conclusion**

A comparison of the UK's participation in the ESC with its involvement in other international competitions highlights the selective inclusion of certain SSUs in some events and their symbolic exclusion in others. This variation reflects the diverse geopolitical structures of different sports and cultural institutions, which are shaped by their distinct political histories (Andreff & Szymanski, 2006). For example, there is no individual subnational representation in the ESC and the Olympic Games. While the ESC entrant is identified as representing the UK, the Olympic situation is more complex, with the UK entering as Great Britain (‘Team GB’), despite athletes not necessarily all being from the island of Great Britain (England, Scotland and Wales). In the Cricket World Cup, England and Wales continue to be represented together as ‘England’, though Ireland and Scotland are now independent members of the International Cricket Council. The Rugby League World Cup initially had a Great Britain squad, which was progressively divided: first into England and Wales in 1975, and then permanently into England, Scotland, Wales, and Ireland in 1987. And England, Scotland, Wales, and Ireland have always competed independently in the Rugby World Cup. In the FIFA World Cup and the Commonwealth Games, England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland compete independently. Showing a hegemonic level of interdependence, as Professor Szymanski explained to the *Business Insider*, ‘if FIFA actually did ever force Britain to field a single team, rather than have four home nations, the Scots would actually demand independence’ (Wiggins, 2018). Overall, the evidence demonstrates that in international competition events, the UK has been divided into its constituent nations—sometimes gradually, as with the Rugby League World Cup, and sometimes partially, as with the Cricket World Cup.

In a setting that has politics at its core, the Eurovision platform introduced the annual Junior Eurovision Song Contest (JESC) in 2005 for contestants aged 9 to 14.<sup>10</sup> While symbolic exclusion is inherent in the ESC, inclusion of SSUs seems to be at the heart of the JESC, but within the contest's operating procedures. For example, Wales is yet to enter the ESC as a country, but has been a part of the JESC, in a show of European unity recognising the subnational status of the country, yet somewhat contradicting the guiding principles of the ESC. That is, the JESC may be

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<sup>9</sup> Cornwall is politically part of the UK and does not possess the same level of devolved government as Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland. However, it has a distinct cultural identity and has seen historical movements advocating for greater autonomy or recognition. Regarding Cornwall and the ESC, see Cornwall Live's article noting 12 reasons why Cornwall should host the Eurovision Song Contest: <https://www.cornwalllive.com/whats-on/music-nightlife/12-reasons-cornwall-should-host-7234346>

<sup>10</sup> For information about the Junior Eurovision Song Contest, visit: <https://junioreurovision.tv/>

modelled on the ESC, yet it functions in politically different ways. The JESC website shows an interesting list of member countries, with both the UK and Wales listed, although Wales only entered during a time when the UK had not participated. Similarly Kazakhstan has not participated in the ESC, although it participates in the JESC.

The political narrative of the ESC is that of national and transnational unity: nation-states competing in a song contest within the EBU remit and a spectacle that exudes media hype. Within this framework, various SSUs are subsumed within the national whole, regardless of their degree of autonomy. However, counter to this is the idea of symbolic exclusion that views such a framework as hegemonic, where such SSUs can only voice their identity as part of a nation-state rather than their particular politico-territorial jurisdiction. Although having expanded much in terms of geographic scope over the past few decades, the ESC maintains the idea of state representation rather than promoting a framework that recognises SSUs with their distinct jurisdictional identity.

Counter to the ESC's emphasis on the nation-state, other types of competitions have helped to foreground sub-state and regional identities.<sup>11</sup> For example, the International Island Games offers a sporting competition that while based on islands (with the exception of Gibraltar), it politicises islands in contradistinction to their national connection, thereby affirming local jurisdiction within a broader political framework. Such politicking has been noted by McDowell, who argues:

[T]hat the Island Games represent an emerging thread of European and Atlantic policy and politics, one which allows a (tenuous) opportunity for UK local authorities, crown dependencies, and overseas territories to practise diplomacy and forge relationships beyond the UK and the Commonwealth. (McDowell, 2024, p. 265)

In a discussion of Sweden's subnational and national relationship with the EU, Lidström shows that the country's subnational entities have been able to exert greater influence where they "have mediated EU influence over the Swedish state" (Lidström, 2020, p. 137). However, in the context of the ESC, it seems that subnational entities have no direct presence to voice their own identity.

The ESC offers a unique lens through which to explore the political and symbolic dynamics that extend beyond the realm of entertainment. This article has identified distinct themes that illuminate the broader implications of the contest: symbolic exclusion, the relationship between the UK and its SSUs, hegemony, and the intersection of music and politics.

The ESC serves as a microcosm of symbolic exclusion, where nation-states negotiate their identities through a song competition. The contest's format, while ostensibly inclusive, reveals underlying tensions and cultural hierarchies: an example of cultural hegemony where dominant cultural norms shaped by ESC rules dictate aesthetic and ideological standards within the competition. The act of exclusion, whether perceived or actual, and for SSUs or other communities (Cassiday, 2014), can be expressed through such factors as voting stylistic choices or the reception of songs. These dynamics shed light on the ways cultural values, historical relationships and geopolitical alliances shape inclusion and exclusion on the international stage. The contest thereby

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<sup>11</sup> It is worth directing readers to the forthcoming special issue in 2025 of the *International Journal of the History of Sport* titled 'Sport and history in small states and non-sovereign territories'.

becomes a site for affirming or challenging cultural boundaries, raising critical questions about the nature of symbolic belonging and exclusion in a globalised yet fragmented world. This is particularly important in the present day as the media spectacle of the ESC is no longer confined to television. That is, in recent decades, as home-based and mobile media technologies have advanced, the ESC has similarly expanded its consumer base through various broadcasting channels, including social media and streaming platforms. These platforms have a global reach and can instantly deliver content to locations that either don't enter the ESC or face restrictions.

While varying the rules governing language requirements in the contest, for 2025, "[e]ach Participating Broadcaster is free to decide the language in which its Contestant(s) will sing" (ESC, 2025). It is here that the language of a nation's entry does much to reveal further levels of symbolic exclusion. For example, the UK has several regional languages, including Welsh, Gaelic, Scots, Irish, Ulster Scots, and Cornish. None has yet appeared in the UK ESC entry, and the same for the languages of the Crown Dependencies: Jèrriais (Jersey), Guernésiais (Guernsey) and Manx Gaelic (Isle of Man). Further, while non-sovereign territories remain excluded from Eurovision, Australia—geographically and culturally distant from Europe—is welcomed into the contest, yet this country's entry has yet to use any of the country's many Indigenous languages, which are deeply tied to cultural identity and heritage.

The ESC provides a fascinating framework for examining the evolving relationship between the UK and its SSUs. While the UK competes as a single entity representing all British territory, this unified representation masks the diverse cultural and political identities within and beyond its borders. The contest has occasionally highlighted internal divisions such as calls for separate participation by SSUs, and through such dynamics, the contest can be understood as a cultural space where questions of national unity and jurisdictional identity politics are negotiated and performed on a global stage.

Finally, the ESC underscores the inextricable link between music and politics. Although Eurovision's rules explicitly discourage overt political messaging, the contest is undeniably a platform where political undercurrents surface: lyrics, staging, language, and voting. Furthermore, the contest's ability to amplify marginalised voices, whether included within or excluded from the competition, demonstrates the ESC's potential as a vehicle for diplomacy and cultural resistance. Yet, beyond the confines of Eurovision, Europe and geographically distant countries that participate in the competition, this dynamic raises broader questions about the mechanisms of symbolic exclusion and inclusivity in an increasingly interconnected yet fragmented world. Who gets to participate in global cultural narratives, and who is left on the margins? How do platforms like the ESC shape perceptions of nationhood, belonging and identity, and what do they reveal about the shifting boundaries of political representation in the modern era? As transnational media spectacles continue to grow, the ESC offers a credible lens through which to examine the broader stakes of representation of SSUs, along with their inherent political dynamics within and beyond cultural boundaries.

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