

## CHAPTER 37

### **POLITICS, THE EUROVISION SONG CONTEST AND IRELAND**

*ADRIAN KAVANAGH*

First published on *Adrian Kavanagh's Blog*,  
<http://adriankavanagh.wordpress.com>, May 3rd, 2012.

While the Eurovision Song Contest attests to be a non-political event, there are always strong political elements running through the different stages of this contest each year, whether it be issues to do with national song selections, the staging of the contest or the much discussed Eurovision voting patterns. This post will consider the politics of the contest with respect to Ireland's participation in it. The political dimensions of the Eurovision Song Contest and Ireland's involvement relate not only to voting patterns and this was evidenced in the relationship between the Dustin debacle of the 2008 Belgrade contest and the failure of the first referendum on the Lisbon Treaty, which followed hot on the heels of that high profile Eurovision failure as will be discussed later. In light of this, it is perhaps chastening to remember that the upcoming European referendum will take place days after this year's Eurovision Song Contest in Baku and consider whether a high profile Jedward loss in the semi final or a Jedward win could have a bearing on people's intentions in the referendum! But first this post will look at the wider politics of the Eurovision and the different European countries that have been shaped by this.

#### **Politics and the Eurovision**

Outside of Ireland, even though the contest professes itself to be apolitical and the organisers have intervened to prevent it becoming politicised, the political alliances and divisions that mark Europe often become too readily evident with the contest. Political and cultural allies (for example, Russia and Armenia, Cyprus and Greece) tend to consistently award each other high votes at Eurovision, while countries that are at war, or have recently been at war, tend not to vote for each other even if they are neighbours (Cyprus and Turkey, Russia and Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan) although this interestingly does not seem to apply in the case of the Former Yugoslav states. There are a series of incidents where politics has directly impinged on the contest; one of the earliest probably being the "Francogate" controversy surrounding the 1968 contest which 'allegedly' cost Cliff Richard victory and lead Terry Wogan to mutter bitterly in relation to Spain's entry in the 2007 contest about how "even Franco's secret service couldn't even save this". In 2003 political opposition within Europe to the UK's involvement in the Iraq conflict was argued to be the reason why the UK

entry attained the dreaded nils points score in the Eurovision final in Riga.

The Orange Revolution in the Ukraine in 2004 was to strongly influence hosting of the 2005 Eurovision by that country, as well as the song represented to select the Ukraine in that contest – the lyrics of which had to be changed after the European Broadcasting Union took issue with political references to the Orange Revolution in the song. In the following year, tensions in the lead up to a Montenegrin independence referendum came to the fore in the Serbia and Montenegro Eurovision selection contest, almost leading to a riot at the event (which incidentally also featured Brian Kennedy – the show, not the near-riot...) and ultimately leading Serbia and Montenegro to withdraw from that year's contest. Following the conflict with Russia in 2008, Georgia initially seemed likely to boycott the following year's contest which was being held in Moscow, but eventually seemed to relent and announced they would enter the contest and went about the process of selecting a song for this. The song chosen by Georgia for the 2009 contest, *We Don't Wanna Put In*, awoke controversy with alleged references to Russia and its then prime minister, Vladimir Putin:

*We don't wanna put in*

*the negative move*

*It's killin' the groove*

*I'm a-tryin' to shoot in some disco tonight*

*Boogie with you*

(Diggiloo Thrush, 2009)

After protests from Russia, the European Broadcasting Union requested that Georgia either enter change the song lyrics or else enter a different song; when Georgia refused to do they were disqualified from the 2009 contest. Controversy also emerged surrounding Azerbaijan, when it was discovered that the authorities there had called in for questioning the 43 people who had voted for Armenia in the 2009 final (one of whom claimed they had for voted for the Armenian entry because it sounded more like a song from Azerbaijan than the song that had represented Azerbaijan that year). The 2010 contest did not attract the same degree of political controversy as the previous year's contest did, although there was controversy surrounding the initial selection of the Ukrainian entry, which was allegedly politically influenced, and a change of government in the Ukraine subsequently kick started a new selection process for their Eurovision entry. In 2011 to date there has already been controversy concerning the Belarus selection, in which the president of the country

was seen to intervene in the decision to overturn the initial result. The most dramatic development has circled around the decision of Armenia to withdraw from the contest given that it is being hosted by Azerbaijan, a country that it still effectively remains in a state of war with over the Nagorno-Karabakh secessionist cause. The hostility between these two neighbouring states (heightened by the significant success levels achieved by these during their very short histories as Eurovision participants) was already evident at Eurovision in relation to the controversy over the questioning by authorities of people within Azerbaijan who had voted for Armenia in the contest (as noted above) but also in the featuring of an image from the contested Nagorno-Karabakh region when Armenia was reporting their Eurovision votes at the 2009 final.

### **Politics and Ireland in the Eurovision**

Voting patterns can say a lot about Ireland's relationship with the rest of Europe— and probably are indicative of a growing peripheralisation of an Ireland – that Mary Harney would claim to be closer to Boston than to Berlin - in the 2000s from a Europe that was decidedly shifting further eastwards in focus. The results of contests in the 2000s lead many bemused Irish people and commentators to claim that they had never heard of countries such as FYR Macedonia, Moldova or Azerbaijan beforehand and that they weren't aware of such countries actually being in Europe. (It is worth noting that it is membership of the European Broadcasting Union that determines whether a country is eligible to take part in Eurovision or not, not being "European". This explains Israel's participation in the contest as well as Morocco's sole entry in 1980 – indeed all of the North African states and a number of Middle Eastern states are eligible to take part in Eurovision but most choose not to due to Israel's participation in the contest, a fact that was especially evident in 2005 when Lebanon decided to enter the contest and actually had chosen a song, but then withdrew when the EBU told them they would not be allowed to block the performance of the Israeli entry.) At the same time, it was obvious that Ireland simply wasn't registering as a voting option with voters from countries at the other side of the continent, such as those from Belarus, Bulgaria, Georgia and Azerbaijan. The growing Easternisation of the contest and Ireland's diminished fortunes fed into the political climate of mid-2000's Celtic Tiger Ireland, in which immigration issues and Ireland's changed position within an enlarging European Union was feeding into a growing antipathy towards the European Union (on which Ireland seemed to becoming less dependant on) within the state (and indeed other western states) during the mid to late Celtic Tiger era. Just as Ireland had been seen to lose out from the enlargement of the Eurovision to include new eastern entrants, it was feared that Ireland would similarly "lose out" in economic and political terms due to the 2004 and 2007 enlargements of the European Union. Just as (akin to a "boy who stops winning and takes the ball away" mentality) many were questioning whether Ireland should continue to

take part in the Eurovision Song Contest, there was a growing feeling that affluent Ireland no longer needed the European Union.

This culminated in the events of 2008 (which in cultural terms could be viewed as symbolising the dying embers of the Celtic Tiger era), where Ireland controversially entered a novelty entry, *Irelande Douze Points* by Dustin the Turkey, for the Eurovision contest in Belgrade, which was specifically seen to be a protest against Ireland's poor Eurovision results in the 2000s:

*Oh, I come from a nation*

*What knows how to write a song*

*Oh Europe, where oh where did it all go wrong?*

(Diggiloo Thrush, 2008)

The entry, part searing poststructuralist critique of the changing dynamics within a post-Stalinist Europe and Eurovision, part total rubbish, met a cold reception from the Eurovision voters, no doubt not totally unrelated to references in the song likening their previous Eurovision efforts as being akin to “Drag acts and bad acts and Terry Wogan’s wig, mad acts and sad acts” (Diggiloo Thrush, 2008). While Dustin himself has managed (so far) to escape the same fate, Ireland got stuffed as a result, failing abysmally to qualify for the final despite having been one of the pre-contest favourites. While some commentators rightfully roasted the decision to send such an entry to Eurovision especially at the expense a number of quality entries such as Leona Daly’s that lost out to it in the national selection, others blamed the failure of the song on a lack of a sense of humour on the part of Europeans who just “didn’t get us”. This was to tie in with the growing disenchantment and disengagement that sectors within Celtic Tiger Ireland had with all things European and European Union in the mid-2000s and would culminate in the loss of the first Lisbon Treaty referendum some weeks later. (Unlike the “accidental” loss of the earlier Nice Treaty (2001) referendum, which was largely explained by the low turnout levels for that contest and was not reflective of an especially significant anti-European bloc within the state at that time.)

Indeed, the misguided fowl was itself to call for a no vote in the wake of the Belgrade humiliation as a response to Ireland’s Eurovision defeat. The extent to which the Eurovision result did bear on people’s voting decisions is perhaps moot but the Dustin episode did point to a growing distancing between Ireland and Europe which was at the roots of the referendum defeat. The actual Lisbon vote itself was particularly notable given that the “No” victory could not this time be put down to low turnout as happened with the earlier vote on the Nice Treaty referendum.

The resultant sea-change in attitudes toward Europe in the wake of the economic recession, which saw a decided shift in favour of the treaty in the second referendum, also was replicated in Eurovision terms with credible acts being selected for the 2009 and 2010 contests and growing sense that the country was once again thirsting for Eurovision glory as an antidote to the economic gloom and doom:

Chastened and bowed by the collapse of the Celtic Tiger and by failure to qualify for the Eurosong finals three years in a row, how we would love the morale boost that a win for Niamh Kavanagh in Oslo tonight would give us. How we would love to watch the Irish contingent whooping victoriously in the Telenor Arena. (Irish Independent editorial, 2010)

Just as our Eurovision heyday preceded the economic boom of the late 1990s and 2000s, the Crisis of the past few years has seen a re-awakening of Irish interest in the contest. Ireland is now putting in a greater effort into its Eurovision selection and indeed staging of the Irish entry even within the growing financial limits placed on RTE – for instance contrast the staging of Jedward’s “Lipstick” in Dusseldorf in 2011 which was one of the most impactful performances in that contest with the staging of Irish acts earlier in the decade, which tended to be over-shadowed by more high-powered performances from other Eurovision countries, but most notably the more eastern states such as The Ukraine. This improved effort has fed into improved results in the contest – 2010 and 2011 were the first two years that Irish acts consecutively qualified from the Eurovision semi finals and, as the previous post shows, 2011 marked an especially significant return to form and the first time since 1997 that an Irish act won a number of douze points from different countries at the Eurovision voting on Final night. Increased success in turn links in to an increased interest level amongst the Irish public – the viewership for Eurovision shows over the past two years has ranked the contest as being one of the most watched shows on RTE in each of those years.

But there is a chastening dimension to these growing interest levels in light of the fact that the European Fiscal Stability Treaty referendum vote is scheduled to take place within days of this year’s Eurovision contest. If the vote is tight one (and this would appear to be highly likely), could voters’ attitudes be, albeit subconsciously, shaped by Jedward’s result in Baku? Could a Jedward defeat in the semi-finals lead to a growing embitterment towards all things European and encourage people to vote No? Could a triumphant Jedward victory in the Final lead to a growing sense of bonhomie towards Europe amongst Irish voters and help to get the treaty over the line? Only time will tell or as they say in Baku – at least according to Google translate! – *yalmıx zaman deyəcəklər*.