

FIAT/IFTA Television Study Grant

The Intervision Song Contest

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The Eurovision Song Contest continues to be the biggest and most famous song contest in the world, with some 200 million television viewers having watched the sixtieth edition of it that was staged in Vienna in 2015. Yet, despite the fact that it is one of the most-watched television programmes in the world – and probably because it is commonly derided as being of a low cultural quality - the Cold War history of the Eurovision Song Contest and its Eastern European equivalent, the Intervision Song Contest, has not been systematically studied. In the research project that I conducted with the FIAT/IFTA Television Study Grant, I examined how the Intervision Song Contest was appropriated in the cultural and public diplomacy of international organisations and states and how it both effected and reflected cultural, economic, political, social and technological change in Cold War Europe. The main sources of evidence for my project were archival documents from the Czech and Polish national television broadcasters. As the International Organisation for Radio and Television had its headquarters in Prague, its fonds are now located in the Czech Television Archives, with the Polish Television Archives in Warsaw providing documents on the organisation of the Intervision Song Contest from 1977 to 1980. As I had already done extensive research on the Eurovision Song Contest, I was able to compare how both song contests were stages upon which international relations in Cold War Europe were performed, stages upon which Europeans expressed how they viewed each other culturally and politically. As entries in the song contests always represented states, the song contests spotlighted the cooperation, conflict and realpolitik that defined international relations

among European states. They were also catalysts for public debates on political issues concerning national identity and regional integration.

The establishment of Eastern and Western European international song contests for popular music was rooted in the development of separate international organisations for Eastern and Western Europe during the Cold War. In 1950, two different international broadcasting organisations were formed that brought together national radio and television broadcasters and promoted cultural and technical cooperation between them: the European Broadcasting Union for Western Europe, and the International Broadcasting Organisation, later renamed the International Organisation for Radio and Television, for Eastern Europe. Beforehand, the International Broadcasting Union had been the equivalent organisation for all European states, and in the interwar period it had pioneered the simultaneous radio broadcasting across European states of musical radio programmes, although none of these were set up as competitions like the Eurovision and Intervision song contests would be. Due to early Cold War tensions, cooperation between Eastern and Western European states within the International Broadcasting Union became unfeasible, resulting in the establishment of separate international broadcasting organisations for each of the blocs. These international broadcasting organisations promoted cooperation among their members as the blocs were pursuing their first steps towards economic and political integration through the Council of Europe, the European Coal and Steel Community, Euratom, the European Economic Community and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation in Western Europe, and the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance and the Warsaw Pact in Eastern Europe. However, the geographical remit of the European Broadcasting Union and the International Organisation for Radio and Television went beyond Western Europe and Eastern Europe respectively: for technical reasons, namely the allocation of broadcasting frequencies, the former also included Middle Eastern and North African states from the Mediterranean rim, while for ideological reasons the latter included national broadcasting

organisations from socialist states from other continents. The European Broadcasting Union and the International Organisation for Radio and Television both had their own networks for programme exchange, the Eurovision Network and the Intervision Network respectively, from which the names of the song contests that the international broadcasting organisations arranged for their members were derived. The Eurovision Song Contest was first held in 1956, while the Intervision Song Contest was staged in Czechoslovakia in its first phase in the 1960s through the Golden Clef Festival and subsequently in Poland in the 1970s as a rebranding of the Sopot International Song Festival.

The development of the Eurovision and Intervision song contests mirrored cultural, economic, political, social and technological changes in postwar Europe. Although the contests were initially conceived by the European Broadcasting Union and the International Organisation for Radio and Television as events that would promote cultural and technical cooperation between the states of their blocs, such as through programme exchange and the advancement of television technology, the fact that they were based on national entries meant that they were stages upon which national interests and identities were also articulated. The format for the two song contests was the same to the extent that the national television broadcasters sent a singer or group and song to represent their states, with juries from each of the latter submitting their votes to select the winner. The song contests were both also accompanied by media reporting and public discussions in which performers and songs were analysed for their political meaning – although this was not as overt in the Eastern European media, which was controlled by the ruling communist parties, as it was in the Western European media. However, in both cases the voting results were popularly interpreted as a measure of how national publics perceived each other. The entries that were sent by the national television broadcasters were examples of cultural diplomacy that demonstrated how states wanted to promote themselves to an international audience. For both the preparation of an entry and the hosting of the contest, the national television broadcasters that were

responsible for arranging these drew on various experts to determine how to present their state, including ones from the popular music industry, tourism organisations and government ministries. For example, the documents that I examined in the Archives of Polish Television showed that the Intervision Song Contest was organised by the local government in Sopot which was, of course, controlled by the Polish United Workers' Party, the communist party that governed Poland.

However, there were also major differences between the two song contests that reflected the nature of international relations between and within the two blocs in terms of ideology and political, cultural and economic hierarchies. The first was that the winning state in the Eurovision Song Contest held the contest the following year, whereas the Intervision Song Contest was always staged in the same state, first in Czechoslovakia and then in Poland. The reasons for this were that these two states were among the most technologically advanced in Eastern Europe. As the documents in the Archives of Czech Television highlight, it was Czechoslovakia and Poland that founded the Intervision Network in 1960 together with East Germany and Hungary, with the Soviet Union and other Eastern European states joining in 1961 and 1962. Czechoslovakia and Poland were perceived by other Eastern Europeans through an Occidental lens as being more up to date with trends in Western popular culture because of these states' geographical proximity to Western Europe. The second difference was that the Eurovision Song Contest has been held annually since 1956, whereas the Intervision Song Contest was first held in Czechoslovakia from 1965 to 1968 and then in Poland from 1977 until 1980. In both cases the Intervision Song Contest was likely stopped because of political upheaval, namely the Prague Spring in Czechoslovakia in 1968 and the imposition of martial law in Poland in 1981, but the documents in the archives of Czech Television and Polish Television do not give specific reasons for this. This points to another apparent difference between the Eurovision and Intervision song contests: that political censorship was greater in the Intervision Song Contest than in the Eurovision Song

Contest. However, while it was indeed the case that communist governments censored popular music and television more than most of their Western European counterparts did, there were members of the European Broadcasting Union whose Eurovision Song Contest entries were censored because the national television broadcaster was controlled by authoritarian governments, such as in the cases of Portugal and Spain under their right wing dictatorships until the mid-1970s, Greece and Turkey in the years in which they were ruled by military juntas in the 1970s and 1980s respectively, and Yugoslavia which was the only one-party, communist state represented in the European Broadcasting Union because of its nonaligned foreign policy. An example of such censorship is the fate of Joan Manuel Serrat, the artist who was initially chosen to represent Spain in the Eurovision Song Contest in 1968 but was replaced after he declared his intention to sing in Catalan in protest against the Franco government's suppression of regional identities. A third difference between the two song contests was that the Intervision Song Contest was more open to participants from outside of Eastern Europe than the Eurovision Song Contest was to non-Western Europeans, even though the Eurovision Song Contest also included Israel, Morocco, Turkey and Yugoslavia. The Intervision Song Contest, as its prefix suggested, also invited other socialist states from around the world, and in some years it even welcomed Western European performers as competing entries or interval acts. The Eurovision Song Contest, however, never allowed Eastern European states to join it even though some of them expressed interest in doing so. In this regard, the Intervision Song Contest was more open to Western cultural influences than the preconceptions that we often have of a closed and controlled East Bloc suggest.

Indeed, when it came to cooperation between the European Broadcasting Union and the International Radio and Television Organisation, documents from the archives of Czech Television and Polish Television show that it was the International Radio and Television Organisation that was more enthusiastic about such cooperation, especially as it recognised

that it could benefit from technological transfers from the European Broadcasting Union. Despite having been formed as separate international broadcasting organisations because of Cold War divisions, there was cooperation between the European Broadcasting Union and the International Organisation for Radio and Television that began in the de-Stalinisation era of the mid 1950s and developed into the organised exchange of programmes from 1960. As documents from the Archives of Czech Television demonstrate, officials from the International Radio and Broadcasting Organisation even attended the Eurovision Song Contest in 1964 and suggested that the two organisations organise a joint song contest the following year. The response from the European Broadcasting Union was negative — although the documents do not explain why — and its officials instead suggested that the International Organisation for Radio and Television organise its own song contest and that the two organisations arrange for their members to broadcast both song contests. Indeed, from 1965 Eastern European audiences could watch the Eurovision Song Contest on their national television stations as part of the programme exchanges that existed between the European Broadcasting Union and the International Organisation for Radio and Television, and the Intervision Song Contest was also shown in some Western European states. There was thus more exchange occurring across the Iron Curtain than established Cold War narratives might lead us to think, and one of the aims of my research is to examine the connections between television stations and music professionals from Eastern and Western Europe at the Intervision Song Contest and to show the commonalities that existed in popular culture throughout Europe during the Cold War. There were even some stars whose careers successfully straddled both sides of the Iron Curtain. One of them was Karel Gott, the Czechoslovak singer who was selected by the Austrian national television broadcaster to represent Austria at the Eurovision Song Contest at the time of the Prague Spring in 1968, the same year in which he won the Intervision Song Contest for Czechoslovakia. Gott's popularity on both sides of the Iron Curtain reflected the persistence of a common cultural

area in Central Europe that was defined by the German language (Gott sang in both German and Slavic languages) and a common predilection for the “schlager” genre of popular music in the region. Gott’s representation of Austria at the 1968 Eurovision Song Contest was also symbolic of the bridging role that the Austrian national television broadcaster, ORF, played between the European Broadcasting Union and the International Organisation for Radio and Television. Documents from the Archives of Czech Television highlight the key role that ORF played in facilitating programme exchange and technical cooperation between the two organisations.

With the end of communism in Eastern Europe, the International Organisation for Radio and Television and its Intervision Network were dissolved in 1993 and its members joined the European Broadcasting Union, allowing them to enter the Eurovision Song Contest. However, the subsequent victories of many East European entries in the Eurovision Song Contest stoked resentment in the West European media and public opinion, reflecting an angst that was related not only to historical stereotypes of the “East” but also to the expansion of the European Union and related waves of immigration from East to West. In recent years, renewed political tensions between Russia and the West have also been played out at the Eurovision Song Contest. Some Russian politicians have criticised the Eurovision Song Contest for being structurally biased against Russia by privileging the direct entry of France, Germany, Italy, Spain and the United Kingdom into the song contest’s final and for promoting the visibility of sexual minorities. They have even called for the Intervision Song Contest to be revived once again as an alternative to the Eurovision Song Contest, although they envisage the new version as being targeted at Eurasian states. The Intervision Song Contest has been revived only once since the end of the Cold War, in 2008 when it was held in Sochi and won by Tajikistan, leaving the Eurovision Song Contest as the sole stage upon which geopolitical conflicts continue to be played out in a European song contest. However, my study of the documents in the archives Czech Television and Polish Television shows that

the Intervision Song Contest was really not a Russian- or Soviet-led event during the Cold War, but one that was spearheaded by the Czechoslovak and Polish television broadcasting organisations. In this regard, the recent calls to revive the Intervision Song Contest as a Russian-led alternative to the Eurovision Song Contest do not acknowledge the actual history of the Intervision Song Contest, and the more so because they do not recognise that the organisers of the Intervision Song Contest during the Cold War were more keen to cooperate than compete with the Eurovision Song Contest.

Conclusion

In summary, the results of my research project on the Intervision Song Contest provide alternative understandings that challenge established narratives of the Cold War by contributing the following perspectives on political, cultural and economic aspects of international relations in Europe during the Cold War:

- **A common European popular culture:** There was cooperation between the European Broadcasting Union and the International Organisation for Radio and Television in programme exchange in popular music which contributed to the forging of a common European popular culture. Both the Eurovision and Intervision song contests helped to create cross-border networks between popular music industries on both sides of the Iron Curtain, networks that produced stars like Gott who were popular in both Eastern and Western Europe. In this regard, Eastern European popular music had an influence on Western Europe, although the existing scholarship on the Cold War tends to disregard this when compared to the greater impact of Western European popular music on Eastern Europe.
- **Popular music as cultural diplomacy:** Popular music was used as cultural diplomacy in both Eastern Europe and Western Europe to project images of a state's

fashionability, modernity and prosperity. In the Eurovision and Intervision song contests, national television broadcasters carefully opted for the performers and songs that they chose, taking into consideration, for example, how the biographies of the performers rendered them as suitable representatives in their states' cultural diplomacy. There was a strategic effort made by the national television broadcasters in both Eastern Europe and Western Europe to present a certain image of their states - what we would now call "nation branding" (Dinnie) or "soft power" (Nye) - in cooperation with other agents, including national governments, record companies and tourism organisations.

- **National stereotypes:** National differences, hierarchies and stereotypes were expressed in both the Eurovision and Intervision song contests - and despite the official intentions of the European Broadcasting Union and the International Radio and Television Organisation to respectively promote ideas of Western European integration that were spearheaded by the Council of Europe and the European Community or equality and solidarity among socialist states in tune with communist ideology. Yet, Orientalist and Occidentalist stereotypes were apparent in both of the song contests. For example, the Intervision Song Contest was held in Czechoslovakia and Poland because they were considered the parts of the East Bloc that were most "Western" - which was still a synonym for fashionability, modernity and prosperity in Eastern Europe - among the Eastern European states. Such geocultural hierarchies defined relations among Eastern Europeans and even fuelled resistance against the Soviet Union, which was militarily and politically dominant in Eastern Europe but did not have the same cachet in popular culture.
- **Cultural openness:** Eastern Europe was not necessarily less open to cultural influences from the West than vice versa, as the European Broadcasting Union's resistance to accepting the participation of Eastern European states in the Eurovision

Song Contest demonstrates. There was a continuation of Western stereotypes of Eastern Europeans as backward and folkish, which had a historical tradition preceding the Cold War, as the historian Larry Wolff has argued, and which continue even to exist today, as is reflected in West European media reports on the participation of East European states in the Eurovision Song Contest. After the Stalinist era, the ruling communist parties in Eastern Europe did not censor Western popular music just because it was “Western,” especially when we consider that the same styles of popular music were performed at both the Eurovision and Intervision song contests and that cover versions of Eurovision Song Contest entries were produced in Eastern Europe. Communist governments in Eastern Europe also appropriated popular cultural influences and products from Western Europe in order to produce “socialist” alternatives that could embody notions of fashionability, modernity and prosperity and reflect the apparent successes of the communist governments’ own cultural and economic policies.

- **Austria as a bridge between East and West:** The Austrian national television broadcaster, ORF, played a specific role in the exchange of popular music and television programmes between Eastern Europe and Western Europe. The cultural, economic and political reasons that permitted Austria to play this role unlike any other state in Western Europe were related to its geographical location, military neutrality and cultural connections that were legacies of the Habsburg Empire. The success of Eastern European artists in Austria, such as Gott, demonstrated the persistence of a common Central European culture despite the Cold War division of the region. This suggests that we also need to rethink the existence of a Central Europe during the Cold War, even though it was seemingly erased by Europe’s division into East and West.

Dissemination of Results

Unlike the Eurovision Song Contest, whose post-Cold War development has received extensive scholarly attention in the past decade, the Intervision Song Contest has hardly been the subject of academic research. There is currently very little scholarly literature on the Intervision Song Contest, and the few articles that do exist focus on national case studies for Poland, Hungary and Finland. This results of this research project are therefore highly original and will now be disseminated through a book, articles and conference presentations. I am currently writing the book *Postwar Europe and the Eurovision Song Contest*, which will be published by Bloomsbury in 2017 and in which I will also have a chapter on the Intervision Song Contest based on the results of this research project. I have so far also presented some of these results at the conference “Unlearning Cold War Narratives: Toward Alternative Understandings of the Cold War World,” which was held at the National University of Singapore in May 2016.