

Brief n. 16/ July 2024

A Tale of Two Eurovision Songs: Revealing Europe's Dichotomy

Agnesa Jashari

With the support of



Fondazione
Compagnia
di San Paolo

A Tale of Two Eurovision Songs: Revealing Europe's Dichotomy

Art is the language that culture speaks, and Eurovision is the contest that seeks to bind cultures together through art. Priding itself on celebrating the unity of Europe, this year's slogan *United by music* leaves one wondering: is Europe truthfully that united though? While Eurovision is a platform for musical expression and cultural exchange, this year's top two songs, namely, Switzerland's "The Code" and Croatia's "Rim Tim Tagi Dim", have managed to convey to the worldwide audience their truth through masterfully written songs and performances which end up offering a deeper insight into the complexity of European society.

Croatia's "Rim Tim Tagi Dim": Migration, Nostalgia, and Anxiety

Croatia's song "Rim Tim Tagi Dim" by the artist Baby Lasagna reveals the true Balkan spirit and nostalgia through hard rock, techno, and punk pop tunes. The song treats the nostalgic, anxious, and complex experience of migration. A decision that has had to be made by every Balkan youngster that has ever existed. Hard rock perfectly resembles the true mess and chaos that exists within each youngster who has to face such a big decision contrary to their instinctive inertia of sticking around their hometown. The song and its video encompass it all: a heavy conundrum, a one-eyed-cat, burek, a family gathering, rhythm... leaves one wondering if this is what would be revealed if a true Balkan spirit would be unboxed. While the whole constellation of the song, the music, lyrics and the video are uniquely blended to make one feel the emigration sentiment in three minutes, the following parts of lyrics best captures the experience and the essence of the song:

*There's no going back / my presence fades to black / there's no going back /
my anxiety attacks*

*I hope I find peace in the noise / [I] Wanna become one of them city boys /
They're all so pretty and so advanced / maybe they also know our dance*

While the rhythmic sound makes the song appear rather positive, the lyrics capture this deep nostalgia and anxiety of leaving everything behind. Feeling like one's presence is going to fade to black by leaving behind one's past and embracing an uncertain future gives this sense of *unbecoming* as a person which resonates deeply with individuals facing the challenges of emigration.

Emigration as a main challenge to the (Western) Balkans society

Emigration has been characterizing Balkans and Eastern Europe for many years now, as countries in our region strive through developmental and economic challenges. The issue has reached such a height that it has become a concern of demographic disruption or decline. While Croatia has experienced a significant emigration rate, with a 26% increase in 2022 compared to

2021¹, the situation is also relevant for other countries in the Western Balkans, with emigration rates as follows Albania (28%), Kosovo (22%), Bosnia and Herzegovina (20%), North Macedonia (18%), Serbia (10%) and Montenegro (9%)². The decision to emigrate is usually driven by economic hardships, high unemployment rates, and limited opportunities for personal and professional growth³. This undoubtedly has a major impact in hindering economic development of these countries, raising concerns such as labor shortage and brain drain. It is noteworthy that Croatia is among developed countries now, however the phenomena which is treated in this song is one highly representative of developing countries in the Balkans and those of Eastern Europe.

Switzerland's "The Code": Embracing Non-Binary Identity

In contrast, Switzerland's song "The Code" by Nemo (CHE) offers a powerful narrative of self-discovery. This exciting song is an ode to the singer's journey while embracing their non-binary identity. The ups and downs of the operatic vocals and the pop-rap beats captures the ebb and flow that an individual has to go through in finding and then embracing their own gender identity in nowadays' box-putting and labeling societies. As anyone from the Lgbtqia+ community and NEMO themselves tell, sometimes it's hell and at times it's paradise. The dramatic tunes evoke a sentiment which at times is depressing and at times is exhilarating, which leaves you feeling like the latter is definitely worth the experience in the end.

*I, I went to hell and back / To find myself on track / I broke the code / Like ammonites, I just gave it some time / Now I found paradise
Somewhere between the 0s and 1s / That's where I found my kingdom come /
My heart beats like a drum*

Although finding yourself is one hell of a journey, it is also one tremendously significant experience which every individual undergoes. The phrase of enjoying the journey rather than the destination might not be as pleasant to members of the Lgbtqia+ community, as societies can at times be incredibly repressive, nevertheless nothing can bitter the fulfilling experience of *becoming* your true self. For this self-finding and self-acceptance experience to be safe for members of any community, our countries and societies have to be open and able to protect and fulfill the rights of individuals to embrace their own identity regardless of where the journey takes them.

Economic development as an enabler of Lgbtqia+ rights protection

There are many theories that suggest that there is a link between economic development and Lgbtqia+ rights protection. For instance, the post-materialist demand for human rights theory proposes that increased economic development could lead to a higher likelihood of countries

¹<https://total-croatia-news.com/news/politics/croatian-emigration-rate/>

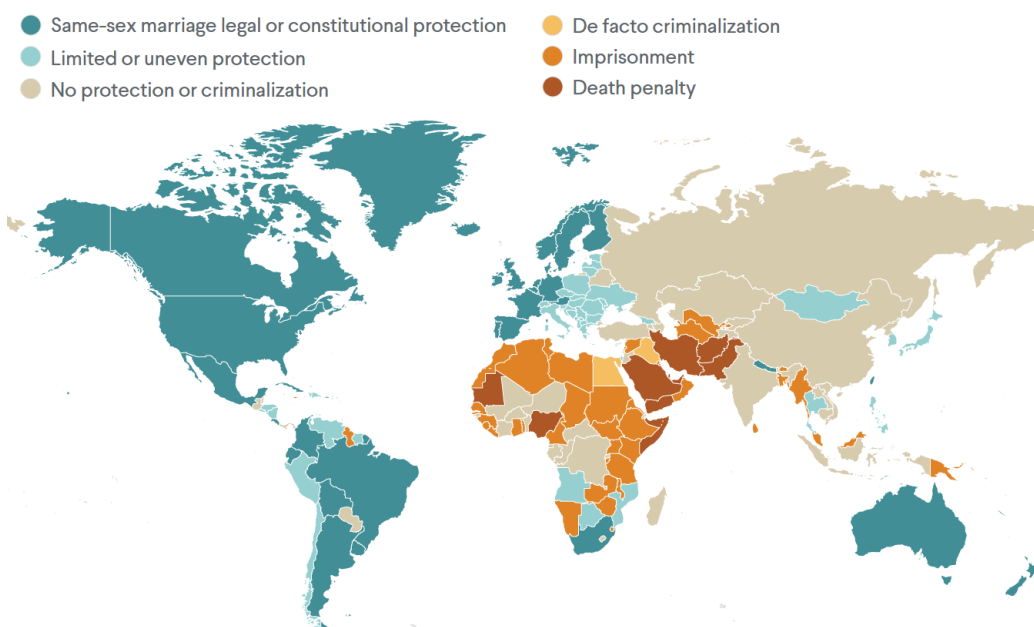
²<https://www.oecd.org/south-east-europe/programme/Labour-Migration-report.pdf>

³<https://www.oecd.org/south-east-europe/programme/Labour-Migration-report.pdf>

respecting the rights of Lgbtqia+ individuals⁴. This is because economic progress may empower the Lgbtqia+ community to advocate for legal reforms and as public attitudes evolve to support greater individual autonomy and minority rights. Additionally, the strategic modernization approach suggests that nations aiming to appear more modern and attractive to trading partners may strategically leverage Lgbtqia+ rights to enhance economic prospects⁵. Thus, countries are now leveraging the civil and political rights of the Lgbtqia+ community into expanding economic opportunities, through strategically attempting to resemble developed-country-behavior.

In reality, despite the global efforts to secure legal safeguards for Lgbtqia+ individuals, in numerous countries this community continues to face oppression, incarceration, and even the risk of losing their lives⁶. Curiously, CFR’s world mapping of the civil and political rights of the Lgbtqia+ community⁷ reveals some truth regarding economic development and the current state of the level of protection for civil and political rights of the Lgbtqia+ community.

While on the left side of the map, the West hemisphere, we have a rather homogenous blue, the right side of the map or the East hemisphere looks like a rainbow that slightly and ironically resembles the nuances of the trans pride flag colors. These colors in this map represent the non-protection of Lgbtqia+ civil and political rights, or even imprisonment and death penalty.



Sources: ILGA World; CFR research.

COUNCIL *on*
FOREIGN
RELATIONS

⁴<https://www.marketlinks.org/resources/relationship-between-lgbt-inclusion-and-economic-development-emerging-economies>

⁵ Ibid.

⁶<https://www.cfr.org/article/changing-landscape-global-LGBTI-rights>

⁷<https://www.cfr.org/article/changing-landscape-global-LGBTI-rights>

Embracing Lgbtqia+ rights protection as a tool for political leverage

As for Balkans and Kosovo thereof, the global assessment reveals that we remain rather in the middle of the spectrum with limited or uneven protection. Although Balkans seems at first to be more neutral and to have made some progress in protection of Lgbtqia+ community, research suggests that the situation in reality is actually gloomier than the overall global comparative picture suggests. While for EU integration and accession purposes the countries in the Balkans have ratified most of the international human rights conventions, the reality is that the Lgbtqia + community lives in an environment, characterized by strong homo and transphobia, discrimination and violence, with little trust in the justice systems in their endeavor to seeking justice⁸. Is this the result of these countries leveraging developed-like country behavior for earning political rights, as theory suggests? Looks like it.

West and East: Striving to Protect the Civil and Political Rights of the Lgbtqia + community

Ultimately, in the realm of Lgbtqia+ civil and political rights, the Western hemisphere stands out as a beacon of progress and acceptance compared to its Eastern counterpart. This is also noticeable within the West and East regions of Europe. The higher levels of economic development and social advancement in the West have paved the way for greater liberty and protection for the Lgbtqia + community. In economically developed societies, where basic needs are met and a certain level of stability is ensured, individuals are more likely to have the freedom and resources to explore and express their gender identity and sexual orientation. This is because economic security can provide the necessary foundation for personal autonomy, allowing individuals to focus on their emotional and psychological well-being, rather than on mere survival. In contrast, economic distress can force individuals to prioritize basic survival over personal growth, making it even more challenging for Lgbtqia+ individuals to navigate their identities and find acceptance⁹.

Unity Amidst Dichotomy: A Call for Reflection

The economic disparity between West and East Europe is unfortunately an issue which has not become ancient history yet. While the countries in the West keep pursuing constant economic and social advancement continually raising the bar higher, the societies in the East are left picking up the pieces hoping they will be able to reach this constantly moving target at some point while their to-do lists keep getting longer and longer.

It is no coincidence that such a close competition came between the two songs with majorly different messaging at their core. One treats migration (a developing society issue) and the other non-binary identity embracement (a developed society issue), yet they both represent vast groups of people who seem to come from different backgrounds and who grapple with these issues in their daily lives. In a perpetually changing societal landscape where the developed keep developing, where does that leave the wagon that is moving slower?

If we are truly to be united by music, our music should be a symphony of genuine investment in the economic development of the regions lagging behind, as a precondition for real social advancement. Investing in the economic development of regions where Lgbtqia+ rights are not yet fully protected is the most promising strategy in improving the situation for the Lgbtqia+

⁸<https://cdn.sida.se/app/uploads/2021/05/07095503/rights-of-lgbt-persons-balkan.pdf>

⁹<https://bmcpublihealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12889-020-08902-3>

community in the less developed areas. As countries become more prosperous, their populations gain better education, more resources and the necessary stability to focus on issues of identity exploration, individual rights, and autonomy. This could enable a shift in public opinion and an organic social acceptance whereby the members of the Lgbtqia+ community can exercise their right to live freely and without fear of persecution or discrimination.

Otherwise, this dichotomy between West and East, developed and developing, abundant and scarce, and ultimately *becoming* and *unbecoming* societies, will keep existing while contests like *Eurovision* attempt to superficially unite countries (and their baggage of issues) through art. At that point the rest of us will be left wondering whether a dichotomy is by definition an antonym for unity? If we're truthfully united, or if it's just a unity in our own dichotomies and alienation between the two.

Finally, it is admirable that the European and the world community through a platform like Eurovision decided to embrace the '*becoming*' portion of Europe and chose it as a winner. After all we are all suckers for positive sentiments, imaging, and messages. Nevertheless, as Croatia's and 'Baby Lasagna's' messaging hits the shadows left by the blinding light of Switzerland's and Nemo's enthusiastic success, the Balkan and Eastern societies are also left alienated in their disrupted, aging, striving, and 'unbecoming' societies.

Agnesa Jashari, EU integration and Development Advisor in the cabinet of the First Deputy PM of Kosova