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FOR SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY

Eurovision, Eurasianvision, and Tunnel Vision

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At first glance the media extravaganza known as the Eurovision Song Contest (ESC) provides no support at all for the expansive, inclusive notion of Eurasia which underpins our project. Although broadcast live in China for the first time, the organizers this year judged it more appropriate to invite a “wildcard” entry from Australia than from any Asian country. Most contestants nowadays sing in English. Critics draw attention to the diversity of the compositions, from crooners’ ballads to disco, techno and punk, but the great majority fall within the parameters of global “pop” genres created and dominated by “the West”. Successful localized variations of this music, such as Korean “Gangnam style” a few years ago, hardly threaten Euro-American dominance. Even if the historical contributions of Africa are perfunctorily acknowledged, global pop is a monument to the hegemony of the West, the English language, and North America. Everything else is secondary. For 60 years, this format has solidified national identities, evidenced every year in the close attention paid by the media to sordid reciprocities between juries, especially in such dubious places as the Balkans.

How could there be any good news for Eurasia in all this? Well, the 2015 ESC in Vienna happened to coincide with a summit meeting of the leaders of the European Union (EU) in the ancient German Baltic city of Riga, nowadays the capital of independent Latvia. This meeting was the first opportunity after his re-election for British Prime Minister David Cameron to lay down some critical markers for EU reform in advance of the British referendum on continued EU membership, a key promise of the election campaign. Mr Cameron arrived conspicuously late, tried hard to plead his cause, but no one paid him much attention. The Riga summit was supposed to focus on more elevated matters, notably consolidating the EU’s policy towards its eastern neighbours. Though many observers would say that the southern borders currently pose the more urgent problems, the EU also has to formulate policies towards eastern neighbours who can themselves lay claim to the mantle of Europe, and who do so to varying degrees. Six former republics of the Soviet Union figure in the “Eastern Partnership” programme. The leaders of Belarus, Ukraine, Moldavia, Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia were

invited to the former Soviet republic of Latvia, but they went away empty-handed.

In a time of enduring political and economic crisis, the EU is in no shape to offer concessions, such as opening up visa-free mobility within the Schengen zone (only Moldavians enjoy this privilege at present). As a result, most of these countries remain more dependent on the labour markets of the Russian Federation than on the West. Russia is of course the elephant in the room. In Latvia, Russians have long replaced Germans as the largest minority. There is less anti-Russian sentiment here than in neighbouring Estonia and Lithuania, but fear of “the bear next door” has been whipped up throughout the region to justify NATO manoeuvres and ethnic Russians experience discrimination and vulnerability in all three states. There was a time when Russia was an integral element of postsocialist strategic policymaking, but the Kremlin was gradually excluded from the conversations long before violence erupted in Ukraine in 2014. I have written in earlier posts about hopelessly bungled diplomacy, media distortions, and Western culpability for those tragic events.^[1] Socio-political and economic conditions inside Russia itself, as well as those targeted in the Eastern Partnership, continue to deteriorate as a result of the deceitful tunnel vision of Western policymakers still unable to think outside Cold War antinomies. The Riga summit, to those who registered it at all, showed that this impasse remains.

From the point of view, say, of an NGO activist in Tbilisi, or for that matter in Moscow, it is all so unfair. They believe in a liberal Western model of civil society, but the current policies of the EU make such ideals ever more illusory and serve instead to consolidate the worst elements of the Soviet legacies. In their domestic political struggles, the pro-Western forces appear to be losing ground to those who assert the necessity of respecting the old dependencies. It must be especially galling for liberals outside the EU to see the rise of nationalist-conservative forces inside the fortress. Hungary’s Viktor Orbán was once a radical proponent of the civil society model himself. Nowadays he is one of the few Western leaders on good terms with Vladimir Putin. As a result, he is ostracised by other EU leaders. This is entirely understandable, but those who pour scorn on leaders such as Orbán (or the newly elected Polish President Andrzej Duda) should first make an effort to grasp the social conditions which prevail throughout postsocialist Eastern Europe.

Socio-cultural anthropologists have been prominent in the documentation and analysis of the new peripheralization of the East in the last 25 years. Politicians and technocrats in Brussels have not noticed these contributions. For a number of reasons, above all the symbolic significance of maintaining the Eurozone, the market turbulence which erupted in 2008 has rendered Europe’s north-south cleavage suddenly more salient than the old east-west divide. But the latter has not gone away, and of course the deeper problems are the same in both east and south. Why should citizens of the Ukraine or Moldavia or Georgia be attracted by a system

which, even for more favourably located states such as Hungary and Poland, has brought so much economic disruption and compelled millions to seek work in the EU's richer states? Even if the wages in the Russian Federation are much lower and the jobs hardly any more secure, it makes much more sense for the life-worlds of those who live in the countries targeted by the Eastern Partnership to seek work where they can at least communicate in the dominant language. Instead of seeking more comprehensive solutions to people's livelihood challenges through negotiations with the rising powers of East and South Asia, Western European politicians can agree only on the deepening of free trade with North America and the increasing of defence budgets. It seems that their only way to deal with the new economic precarities of neoliberal capitalism is to revive the old geopolitical precarities.

Against this rather frightening background, the positive elements of the ESC in Vienna shone through brightly. The liberal ethos was exemplified by the glamorous hosting of the previous year's winner, drag queen Conchita Wurst. The European Broadcasting Union has yet to recognize Eurasia (that may come in time if commercial interests dictate) but it has long been in the forefront of disseminating more generous conceptions of Europe and of the gendered person. Israel has been a stalwart in both respects. The end of the Soviet Union opened the competition not only to the Baltic republics (soon to become full members of the EU and NATO) but also to others located somewhere in the antechambers. Azerbaijan won the event in 2012. Thanks to its oil, it had the wherewithal to host the spectacle impressively in Baku a year later. It is hard to exaggerate the significance of such events in modifying, even transforming social imaginaries of Europe in Western countries such as Britain. Even before the demise of socialism, small northern countries have been conspicuously successful in the ESC. This, together with the phenomenon of regional bloc voting, can lead viewers to question the evolved pattern of nation-states which at first sight the ESC appears to entrench. If Scots, Catalans and Kurds notice the success of artists from Ireland, Estonia or Latvia, they proceed to ask why their own people should be unrepresented at this annual Olympics of popular culture.



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The 2015 ESC was a close race between Sweden, the eventual winner, and Russia. This was remarkable. Just one year earlier in Copenhagen, Russia's representative was loudly booed by

the audience, which had been fed a diet of anti-Russian propaganda since the “invasion” of Crimea two months earlier. In Vienna, Conchita’s dulcet tones had little difficulty in silencing such protests. Austro-Russian relations were highly conflictual in the not so distant past and Vienna is a city which, in Habsburg days, played a very significant role in the genesis of the Ukrainian national movement. But the Viennese public knew better than to allow its moment in the limelight be instrumentalised by those whose demonization of Russia is eerily reminiscent of the era of *The Third Man*. At least in the realm of popular culture, thanks to Polina Gagarina’s honourable second place, Russia remains a part of Europe.

Conclusion

The ESC is a mammoth media event managed by the European Broadcasting Union, a bureaucracy dominated by its largest members, obliged to work within commercial dictates, and clever enough to call upon the services of PricewaterhouseCoopers as the ultimate auditor of the voting mechanism. Like the equivalent bodies in the world of football when they allow Kazakstan to compete in the European Championships, these bureaucratic-commercial actors provide a valuable corrective to the tunnel vision of the politicians and officials who shape the policies of the EU and NATO. The ESC in Vienna completely overshadowed the EU summit in Riga. Both are predicated upon nation-states, but only the ESC provides sensory evidence every Spring of the diversity of these units, and at the same time a reminder of the arbitrariness of the national classifications. It also drives home the arbitrariness of *continental* classifications, by helping viewers to imagine an alternative, more inclusive Europe. This is a welcome step in the direction of recognizing the long-term unity of Eurasia. It seems especially important at a time when the exclusionary policies of the West have isolated Russia diplomatically and hurt its population economically, while strengthening anti-democratic illiberal forces (including all those who abhor Conchita Wurst). Populist reaction is on the upsurge almost everywhere, inside as well outside the EU. The only way out of this imbroglio is for the West to abandon its piecemeal colonization of postsocialist space and militaristic posturing, and instead to engage in a new dialogue with President Putin and other Eurasian leaders on the basis of common interests and values.

[1] See the first two posts at this blog in 2014. For perceptive analysis of the most recent developments in Ukraine itself, highlighting the rise of nationalist politics, see the post by John-Paul Himka: ‘Legislating Historical Truth: Ukraine’s Laws of 9 April 2015’: <http://net.abimperio.net/node/3442> (02.05.2015)

