**EuroStorie Podcast: Stories of Politics and Human Rights in Europe**

**Episode 2.3: Visions of Europe! Politics and Identity at the Eurovision Song Contest**

Hosts: Zoë Jay and Emilia Mataix-Fer­rándiz

Guest: Keshia Jacotine

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**Transcript**

[Intro music and fade out]

[Emilia Mataix Ferrándiz, EMF] Hello everyone, and welcome to this episode of the EuroStorie podcast, stories of politics and human rights in Europe. My name is Emilia Mataix Ferrándiz, and with me is my co-host, Zoë Jay.

[Zoë Jay, ZJ] Hello everyone!

[EMF] The aim of the EuroStorie podcast is to bring you close to some of the latest research on Europe and to share with you some of what researchers have to say about issues currently affecting Europe and the Europeans.

[ZJ] And today we are discussing what is, in my opinion, an extremely important issue for Europe, the politics of the Eurovision Song Contest. I'm so excited for this episode and it is our absolute pleasure to introduce our guest for today, Keshia Jacotine. Keshia has a Master of Philosophy in political science from Monash University in Australia and is one of the editors, together with Julie Kalman and Ben Wellings, of the 2019 book, *Eurovisions: Identity and the International Politics of the Eurovision Song Contest since 1956*. Welcome Keshia!

[Keshia Jacotine, KJ] Thanks for having me.

[ZJ] Thank you for being here.

[EMF] Thank you very much for being here.

[ZJ] This is so fun already! So, first things first. Can you tell us how did you come to do academic research on Eurovision?

[KJ] Basically it just came out of what I call a ‘shower thought’ and it was just thinking about Eurovision because that's something that I did a lot back then. You know, I mean, who doesn't think about Eurovision constantly? I was in that mindset when you're doing a thesis in political science where you start to realize everything is political and your mind just is always ticking away, connecting things and things. And it was like: wait, so Eurovision is political! and then I went home and I took a shower and I was thinking, you know: someone should write about the politics of Europe. And it was one of those lightning strikes things because it turned out that there was two more senior academics at the university I was studying at who always secretly wanted to write a book about Eurovision separately, but they all felt like they would be shamed and laughed at. So, there was already a bit of that. Then I can’t remember what order it was, I think it was Julie saying you should talk to Ben. And then me going, you know, I've always wanted to write a book about Eurovision and then we'll all thought, ‘well, why don't we just do it? Like what is stopping us from doing that sort of thing?’ And that's how we ended up becoming researchers in Eurovision. And the interesting thing was, once we started, we found out there were so many other people who have written books about Eurovision. There's another volume, an edited volume, that came out of Australia that was from the um…so we had a more social science, a historical perspective, but this was more from the humanities, with like critical theory and performance studies. They actually published their edited volume the same time around as us, so there is definitely a lot of academics who…It's not just like they love Eurovision, but they're able to see the themes and want to talk about it. So it just literally came from a: well, what if I do this and out of you know, 99 out of my 100 shower thoughts are really silly ideas, But this was one that really took off so I'm happy.

[EMF] If you leave a couple of moments from this podcast as well, then you will see the community you know, bubbling on your answers.

[ZJ] Yeah, I think there was a safety in numbers with that particular volume. There are a couple of very brave European political scientists and historians who were doing projects before these edited volumes, but there's, I think, there's a particularly large Australian yeah academic community, which is nice, and we'll come back to Australia's involvement with Eurovision. But can you also tell us a little bit about your experience as a fan of Eurovision? Can you remember your first Eurovision?

[KJ] So I watched Eurovision as a child with my father. So this just goes to speak to the power of Eurovision. So, my father didn't grow up in Europe, he grew up in Sri Lanka and then he migrated to Australia. Yeah, he watched Eurovision in Sri Lanka, so I watched it with my dad and it's funny because there's like different types of Eurovision fans. So, my dad’s from the school of thought where Eurovision used to be serious. Now it's just insane sort of thing and he'd always complain to me going, ‘you know that Céline Dion used to sing on Eurovision, you know Abba was on Eurovision!’ and you know he’d go through all the people who've won Eurovision who've gone on to have you know careers. It's yeah, it’s something that I watched with him and we still watch it now, but obviously we text each other now instead of me going over and me listening to him rant for ages about it.

Uh, but and the other memory I have that really sticks out is the infamous 2003 and Jemini getting *nul* points, and [former BBC Eurovision Commentator] Terry Wogan being like it's because of the Iraq war as opposed to them being completely out of tune. That was truly the lowest moment for the UK in their history in the song competition, and it's a great question, isn't it? That's still to this day no one can definitively say is it because of the Iraq war? Or is it because Jemini was shite? No one knows so.

[ZJ] What a mystery. I mean that really is that how the mighty have fallen situation, isn’t it?

[KJ] Oh yeah, it was.

[ZJ] The UK used to be so good at Eurovision and that was really like they were starting to peter off a little bit, but it really was just like ‘boom!’ and they have never really recovered. But I think like, I think it's fun to read the politics of the Iraq War into that story, but it's definitely just that the song was garbage.

[EMF] So I'm going to ask you the next question to move out from this touchy subject. So, the Eurovision Song Contest is the longest running international televised event in the world. It started in 1956, and with the exception of last year when it was cancelled due to COVID-19 pandemic, it has been held every year for nearly seven decades. So, what is the story of the contest? How did it start, and what were the aims of the creators?

[KJ] So I guess we got to look at Europe at that point. So, the late 50s was a time in Europe where there was this feeling of cooperation and wanting to cooperate and move…Acknowledge what had previously happened in the last decade but move on from that in a way where there was genuine sort of camaraderie and hopefulness, and optimism in terms of building relationships with each other. But also, the idea is that if we work more together, there's less like chances of horrific conflict because we are now all invested in each other's success. That's a very positive sort of way of putting it. But that was what a lot of the initiatives that came out of Europe at that time did have that utopian view. And Eurovision was one of them. It was this thought of, well, why don't we do something that has different countries in Europe participating. And at that time television was still quite new, so I think it was also just a novelty as well. The idea of what if we all send a representative to this competition? This competition isn't, you know, just a competition. It's just a, it's a friendly sort of event, an exchange of talent and you know music and enjoyment between countries. From that Eurovision was born, and what's interesting is it does mirror the European Union in terms of there's different stages of integration with European with their Eurovision Song Contest.

[EMF] Yeah, it's really good that you're saying that because my next question for you was like how Eurovision has developed through its enlargement. Like, who joined and when? I know this is a very big question, but more or less, what can you pinpoint on that on that behalf?

[KJ] So the group that started off it was for Netherlands, Switzerland, Belgium, Germany, France, Luxembourg and Italy. And what's interesting is Switzerland is not part of the other unnamed big European organization, but they did join Eurovision. So, the Swiss are not as neutral as they like to say, because they're actively involved in a voting competition and they try and beat their neighbors. So, you know always bring that up as a counterpoint in the future if you know, talking about the true nature of Swiss neutrality.

So it started there and now it spans 40 countries and the really interesting thing is while the European Union stopped essentially at Turkey, Eurovision has, you know, arguably gone beyond the borders of Europe into Central Asia to include countries, you know, that were former Soviet Union states, and Israel, and now Australia. So, if we're to compare Eurovision to the EU, you could arguably say the Eurovision was much better at transcending borders, and this idea of Europe extended across the world versus stopping at a certain geographical point.

[EMF] Yeah, yeah it's true. And also, you know my father is from the league of your father, saying that Eurovision was serious before and now it's a joke and he always says that that also they are inviting people who are not European. And I was like, yeah, but that's a good thing, you know, I don't really find that is a problem.

My next question is like, how the stories of European and national identity play out in the musical states in costumes, lyrics, staging and the languages? But also I would like to pinpoint humor. Like, Zoë and I when we're preparing this podcast, we were talking about when some countries try to be ironic and we are sometimes looking at them like: Is this a joke, or this is serious? Because if it's serious, this is really bad. I'm thinking of Poland when they had this lady doing the butter.

[ZJ & KJ] Oh the milk maids!

[ZJ] Donatan and Cleo.

[EMF] I thought it was butter but yeah, so it that was irony, I thought it was genius. If this was serious, honestly, there's something going wrong here. So, it's problematic because there must be so evident in like in in, maybe in Poland, you know, like oh, this is a joke, but for other people, like, OK, we don't get it.

[EMF] Well if I can, Sweden hosted a couple of years ago, they did that intermission song where it was making fun of them being Swedish, I remember watching it with two Scandinavians, a Dane and a Finn, and because they were close neighbors, they laughed and said this is really funny, and I was like I'm really confused because all the things they're mocking themselves about are like aspirational for Australians because, you know, we love anything Scandinavian. So is this idea of you know IKEA [and] being, you know emotionally cold. But I'm like, but those are things I'd like to do. I'd like to go to IKEA. And yeah, you're right because a lot of it is also, there's this narrative of togetherness and integration, but then simple things like humor and irony, still very much brings you back to the fact that it is very much limited to the national audience of the act for example.

One of the really sort of big positive platitudes there, which says, oh, you know certain human emotions transcends language barriers and things like that. But humor is something that is really different in peripheral countries and I think that you know, no matter how much the world progresses and how much Eurovision progresses, they're still going to be things where what we think is ridiculous is probably serious. Like the example that I can think off the top of my head was the babushkas who sang in, was it 2012, I think? The Russian babushkas and everyone thought it was a sort of funny act, but it was actually a traditional act. They were skilled singers. So, in terms of the stories of national identity, it's so rich in the competition. There was a year, I think the Ukrainian singer won a couple of years ago and it was around the time of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, and the story that she was telling in the song, but it was to do with the Russians.

[ZJ] Yeah. Jamala was her name.

[KJ] Yes, yes, that's what I'm thinking of.

[ZJ] And she was, like her ancestors were Crimean Tatars, and the story was about them being expelled. Yeah, expelled from the region by Stalin. 1944 is the name of the song.

[KJ] Yeah yeah, so she like, that is such a blatant example of talking about national identity. And one of the big debates as well with national identity is about whether or not people sing in their language. And if they sing in English, in some countries it's actually a very big debate because some countries don't like it, if you win Eurovision singing in English. You should be singing your native tongue because this is your opportunity to sing a song from your country on the worldwide stage. It even transcends European identity. So, Céline Dion represented Switzerland many years ago and back then she was, well, she still is a French Canadian, she hasn't changed, she's still very much a proud Quebecer. At the time she was wanting her big break. She grew up in a part of Canada that is French speaking, and there is a back story to the the people of the Quebecois about their French identity and the conflict that they've had with this the federal Canadian government over preserving their culture and their language. There was this tension with her that, she's from Quebec, she's a French-Canadian singer, she shouldn't go into the mainstream because you know, that means singing in English, and that means selling out. Even though at the end of the day she ended up becoming one of the most famous French Canadians out there. So while this tension was happening, she participated in the Eurovision Song Contest and she sang for Switzerland and she sang in French, but that wasn't an issue because she was still singing in French, but at the same time there was this idea that no, you know she's becoming too big for her boots. She shouldn't leave Quebec because she's, you know, she's one of us. So again, that's even beyond the question about the European identity, they've had questions about Francophone identity, question about Canadian identity all wrapped up in this competition. You know it's like any text or example from pop culture, even if it's not intentional, certain choices in terms of the costumes you wear, the language you sing in, it has very deep significance in terms of identity and culture and national identity. It would be virtually in part even if everyone came into it saying I don't want to think about my country, I just want to sing a good song, they're still gonna unintentionally or inherently bring a sense of who they are to the competition.

[EMF] Yeah.

[ZJ] So we have been talking about politics, like it's a perfectly, like it's a fundamentally normal central part of the Eurovision Song Contest, but the contest itself and the European…the European Broadcasting Union actually very famously has a quite strict no politics rule. The rules on their website, state that ‘no lyrics, speeches, gestures of a political, commercial, or similar nature shall be permitted’, and all of the participating broadcasters and the national delegations are prohibited from promoting political causes and commercial products. So in the past, performers have been pulled up for having like sponsorship deals with like headphone companies or for making a reference to a product like FaceTime in the lyrics of their songs and have had to change it, because it is seen as commercial. Can you give us a few examples of some of the ways that performers and audiences have raised political issues at the contest?

[KJ] I guess the most recent one that I can think of was in 2019, the Icelandic entry waved Palestinian flag in the Green Room, the rule is that you can only fly the flag of the competing countries. So it was sort of one of those situations where, well, technically, yes, it is against the rules, but the fact is, it's a flag from a country that is embroiled in a conflict and is seen as being needing assistance and support, you know it was very fraught conversation again because you know, arguably, the band would know that waving that flag would cause controversy. But whatever the true feelings of the EBU is, they were able to fall back on that rule, so it's interesting to see how they also police certain things as well and what they choose to police.

[ZJ] The Palestine issue is really interesting because it sorts of flattens what is fundamentally a two-sided issue. By banning the Palestinian flag and any other kind of small regional noncompeting national flags, they're sort of saying those are “political” flags, but Israeli performers and audience members are allowed to fly Israeli flag.

[KJ] Exactly, that’s it, right?

[ZJ] Israel is the key actor in that…occupation.

[KJ] Yeah, the key actor in the dispute is a member of Eurovision.

[ZJ] So it sort of whitewashes their [Israel’s] side in that story.

[KJ] Yeah, and it's also having that rule made it easier for the EBU to step in as well to say well when neutral it's not about, you know Palestine/Israel, it's about the rules, yeah?

[ZJ] I think this speaks to a broader question about the European Broadcasting Union as an institution, and the contest as a television program. How can a contest that claims to be non-political and claims to uphold what it calls “neutral rules” also claim to be part of a political narrative that there's a common European identity and a narrative of coming together and cooperation. How do they reconcile those…that inherently political tension?

[KJ] There's like any organization which brings together a lot of different countries and claims it's neutral, if you actually look between the lines, it's still very political. It puts across a narrative, which is something in European studies that's constantly being discussed: is this idea of the common European identity that we're Europeans that you know, we are neutral because we don't see countries we don't see color, we don't see gender. We're all just Europeans having a great time at a song competition. And that in itself, then, is political because it's choosing to overlook the nuances, the difficulties, the conflicts that have happened in Europe. And arguably, if we're having a song competition about Europe, then you know, being a devil's advocate, you say, well, you should talk about it. You know you should talk about the conflict because it's essentially presenting an untrue story as opposed to saying you know where Europe, but we're not, we're fractured, we're broken, but there's still parts of being European that bring us together as opposed to this still incessant belief and wanting to believe that, no, there's one common European identity, there's no deviations. We're all great, and that's why we're neutral because we don't want to get involved.

[ZJ] Yeah, I think you've really got to the heart of what the EuroStorie Center of Excellence and this podcast try to do, which is taking the Instagram filter version of European history and identity. The really shiny, sort of nice, red-eye removed, version of European history and saying well what act what material is actually under that?

[EMF] Yeah, but you, you highlight the conflicts and you know and an Australian friend, also big fan of Eurovision, she told me: when you record this podcast you really need to touch a paper that I read in my undergrad that was about Eurovision as a tool of cultural diplomacy during the Cold War. So, I would like to know what is your take on that, because I've always take her not very seriously when she has mentioned that paper to me.

[KJ] The one time that the Soviet Union in 2021 is a thing, outside of like, Tankie Instagram and TikTok, is Eurovision where there is an actual Soviet Union voting bloc where Central Asian countries band together with Russia and they all vote for each other, like it's still a thing even though, as I'm sure you know, in those different countries they have such a fraught relationship with Russia, with the Soviet Union. Yeah, it's really interesting because when the Soviet Union fell you would have certain countries who are part of that bloc being like: I'm never, you know we're not Russians, we are, you know, we're our own people, but then we come to Eurovision and then it's like, well, let's all swap votes because that way we have a chance of winning. So it's really interesting that there's Cold War and post-Cold War narratives, mirrored in the song competition, and the role that Russia feels within it.

[ZJ] So I want to actually push back a little bit on the bloc voting idea. You're quite right though, there definitely are those patterns, especially Ukraine and Russia swapping votes. Other sort of Eastern European countries, but also like Greece and Cyprus I think is another quite famous one, or the Scandinavian countries. But I don't necessarily think that is the degree of Soviet solidarity that it sort of sounds like here. I think the accusation of block voting is quite famously something that Terry Wogan levelled at…

[KJ] I was going to say! Maybe I've spent too long in the UK and I am now fully bought into the block voting conspiracy.

[ZJ] So Terry Wogan was..In in the 90s, when Eurovision sort of enlarged at the same kind of time as the Council of Europe in the lead up to the EU's enlargement. That's when this narrative of block voting started to emerge, and Terry Wogan was one of the sort of leading conspiracists of this idea that the Eastern European countries were voting for each other.

[KJ] [laughs]

[ZJ] Yeah, and that sort of ties in with the UK's own sort of downfall, and it’s a key part of their personal narratives of explaining why they've [the UK] stopped doing so well. So there's obviously a very political, and arguably borderline xenophobic, argument underpinning that bloc voting idea. So what are some of the other explanations that might exist for why countries that are neighbors or are near each other might swap votes?

[KJ] Firstly, I just want to say there is an actual academic study done by statisticians at the University College London about bloc voting and they actually did find that it’s a thing.

[ZJ] Phenomenal!

[KJ] But I also I'm also able to be self-aware and say maybe it's just too much Terry Wogan. So, you know what point I would link what you've just asked to is that idea about understanding culture and humor and irony. Maybe rather, this could be perhaps a hypothesis, maybe then it being an organized bloc as such, where you know, I don't think Putin's up late calling the Prime Minister of Kazakhstan being like hey, so you vote for me this year and I vote for you next year.

[ZJ] It’s not the UN Security Council, it's not that well organized.

[KJ] What it could be is just an appreciation of each other's acts. Plenty of examples or for example folk songs and stories which you know it. It's the same story, but it's slightly differs in each country and if you hear a version of the story you kind of go, oh, that's that's you know, Snow White, or that's Goldilocks or whatever. It's maybe that familiarity that draws people into voting for countries that are your neighbors but also happened to be, you know, your former Soviet Union bloc neighbors.

You know, maybe it could be something to do with language too, I mean, a lot of people who are English speakers may appreciate a song in English, more than one in French in terms of understanding the lyrics, understanding you know what the songs about, but you know then at the same time there's people who truly just loved beauty of the music. And no matter what the language is, they like it. And the other thing I was going to say though, which is, you know, I think quite common is if there's an absolute simply stunning or banging song that year. All alliances or perceived alliances are gone because you know it's such a great act that everyone can respect and recognize that this is really cool and there is no sense of pattern in terms of, you know, certain countries are voting for them because you know they all are Scandinavian or they all speak English. I think that's where if we're to talk about, well, the true validity of voting blocs. That's where it also falls apart where there's just acts where they just blow everyone away, like Conchita.

[ZJ] Loreen in 2012. Yeah? She won in 2012 and Sweden hosted in 2013.

[KJ] Yeah, and the… the Icelandic entry.

[ZJ] Dadi Freyr, this year? They're great.

[KJ] Yeah.

[EMF] But you know the conversation is already leading to very different fronts and I would like to also to backlash a bit and touch a bit on your homeland. Well that's your home, not mine, going towards Australia. So, Australia has been a competing member of the contest since 2015. So, it seems that Australia is now very much a member of the Eurovision family. But I have to ask the two Australians – so it doesn't just go for you but also for Zoë – What are you, or Israel? Or maybe I need to make the voice of my father because I don't really like think that, and say, what are you doing in a competition for Europeans? Is then Eurovision about European identity and I know that you have mentioned some of these things before but to get back on to ask if we can talk about something like Pan European identity?

[KJ] With Israel and Australia, what they have in common is there's a huge diaspora of European people in these two kind of you from European countries in Israel and Australia. In Israel there's a lot of people who are of European descent, whether it's from Western Europe and whether they were refugees after World War Two. Or whether they've migrated over there from, you know, a variety of Western and Central European countries, but also from the former Soviet Union. And in Australia we…Australia has had different waves of migration, we are a country that is essentially a country of migrants, everyone except the traditional owners of the land migrated to Australia. One of the reasons why Eurovision was so popular, I think is because it was a connection back to home for a lot of people who are Greek or Italian or Maltese. So it was a way of sort of connecting back home, because people could have been watching Eurovision at home. And then they migrated to Australia and they're watching it here and it's hearing your native language like, it's something that I think, if you live in a country where your native tongue is the spoken, the main spoken language, it's something you take for granted, but when you move somewhere where you don't speak the native language, it can be really comforting to hear your language and to see something from home. And now when we enter the European song competition, yes, we're Australia, but we belong there because I think we are part of the story of Europe because part of the story of Europe is about migration. And it's about people leaving and forming communities overseas. And navigating their new identities with the old identity that they had, and whether they're Europeans still or if they're Australians with European ties. And I think that Australia might not be a central role in the narrative of Europe. It's still a secondary character because it's a place where a lot of people migrated too.

[EMF] Yeah, and you know, I agree with your interpretation. But then for example, the US is also a country of migrants, and correct me if I'm wrong, but the impression I got from American friends is like they don't really give a sh\*t about the contest. So, is that a question of publicity or is there's something that is kind of unconnected?

[kJ] I think it boils down to just the difference in what is the American identity and what's the Australian identity. And being an American is just so different to being an Australian, and I think also that America is a bit of an older country too, so there's you know people who are Irish American, Italian American, but they’re several generations back, whereas in Australia it's people sitting down with their grandma who came from Greece or Italy and still can't speak English. And this is to bond with them over your mother tongue or just because your grandma wants to watch because she loves Eurovision. So I think that, I guess that's my interpretation would be it's just boils down to the differences in being a migrant in America and navigating your new identity of your adopted homeland versus being an Australian of migrant descent or being a migrant in Australia.

[ZJ] I think there's also a slight difference in the way Australians consume culture and the way Americans consume culture. The migrant stuff, I think is really important, the connection to like, between Australian diaspora and their sort of European relatives is really important and Jess Carniel from the University of Southern Queensland has written a really beautiful book and wrote one of the other co-edited volumes that you were talking about earlier on this kind of stuff on Australia’ s connection to Eurovision and why we love it, but there's also like America is such a large country and such…Exceptionalism is such a fundamental part of their identity, so they've got their own sort of enormous music industry and don't need to be finding out like, who's this niche little performer in Slovenia is, because they've got 6000 equivalents of that kind of performer in California alone, whereas Australia is a sort of medium sized country. We've got our own very strong music industry and lots of really fantastic Australian performers, which I think is why we do quite well at Eurovision. But we're also a little bit more open to picking and choosing music and a lot of that music culture comes from the UK, but it can also sort of come from Europe and from America, and a little bit from other parts of the world as well, so there's a little more, there's not as insular a sort of identity. I mean, Australia definitely has very insular identities in a lot of ways, it's a very isolated and closed off country in a lot of ways, but musically we're quite happy to pick and choose,

[KJ] I think If it's a bop, it's a bop in Australia.

[ZJ] Exactly, we appreciate a good party and we appreciate a good song and I think, but the Eurovision community specifically is that kind of group of people. Like, if you're willing to get up at 5:00 AM to watch something on the other side of the world, you do it for the love of the music.

[KJ] Yeah, in terms of like American exceptionalism and you know, being a basically a cultural hegemon in the sense that you know America doesn't need to look outside America because just the sheer power of their entertainment industry means they only have to consume American cultural products and not have to seek it outside.

[ZJ] Who needs Eurovision when you’ve got Kanye and Taylor Swift?

[KJ] Yeah! And you know it's this whole, if you're someone who's not American, you make it by going to America. Like you know even Céline Dion as I said before, she had to go to America to become Big, leave Canada and go to America. But in America, you're in America.

[ZJ] I think on the other side there's also a little bit of protectionism within Europe. There's there is an idea that they're like, I think the fan base is mostly quite inclusive and is open to new ideas in the way the contest is run, but when there are new countries entering it…it's a noticeable change and it causes some kind of: oh, will this change the competition? I love it as it is, I don't want it to move in a different direction. And there is this idea…there can be a concern that you want the thing that you love to stay the way it is and you don't want people who don't ‘get it’ to participate. And I think there can be a bit of a narrative that Americans don't understand Eurovision and would maybe ‘ruin it’.

[KJ] Yes, that if they were involved, they would ruin it. Basically, they're going to turn it into American Idol or something that's super competitive. And I think when Australia joined one of the fears they had was ‘oh, it's Australia now, America tomorrow!’ And I say it's a well-founded fear that America is going to join and they're going to just take it way too seriously and change it, and it's going to be American Idol.

[ZJ] And I think that speaks to your original question, Emilia, which is, is that like, is there some kind of European or universal value underpinning the contest? And it's…there clearly is some sort of idea held amongst fans of the competition that there is a quintessential Europeanness to it and I think Australia can sort of get away with that, but the broader point is, there's clearly some kind of underpinning Europeanness that fans and viewers are aware of and don't want to lose to an expansion to a country, like to include countries like America or finally I mean like or anywhere else, and so..I have no idea how to articulate that, I don't know what it is exactly, but it does sort of imply there's an idea that there really is something European underneath it. It's just that it’s totally unclear what that is.

[EMF] No, I think your interpretation with Kesha's interpretation goes well, because my idea of like this pan Europeanness and Eurovision contest was more on the line of the European Dream on the on. On the on the line of the American Dream, you know? Like we know because we study these things on the project. It's not that easy to be European, but the idea of, like you know European is a big family because people have spread all over the world and at the end of the day we get back together once a year to sing together in this contest or something like that. But maybe that's a bit too Instagramy and idealistic, but that is what I was mostly thinking about.

So my roommate used to refer to Eurovision as ‘Gay Christmas’, and while it is true that the show has a great appeal and it makes standing point on openness and LGBTQI issues. But when did it start to be that way?

[KJ] First up, it's important to be upfront and say I am as straight cis woman and there is lots of excellent research expertly on the queer politics of Eurovision, so I'll try to defer to that research as much as much as possible.

[EMF] OK yeah, well that's great that you mentioned that because we normally include a list of the research works and pop culture reference from each episode in the show notes of the podcast in the website of EuroStorie. So then listeners will be able to look this research up if they want to read further, so thank you very much.

[KJ] That's great. So, to answer the first part of your question. You're right that Eurovision is often referred to as ‘gay Christmas’. Catherine Baker, who's a historian at the University of Hull and one of the contributors to my edited volume, has written about this term along with the ‘Gay Olympics’ that has been used since the 1990s to describe Eurovision. The contest had its first out gay performer, Pàll Oskar from Iceland in 1997, and then in 1998 its first trans performer and first LGBTIQ artist to win the contest, the iconic Dana International from Israel. The contest has also had a very strong LGBTIQ fanbase, especially amongst gay men, that dates back to the 70s, and this was the moment that the contest started to shift from the relatively formal music performances of the 50s and 60s, that wer more akin to the type of thing that you would see at the San Remo Song Competition, towards disco and pop and towards the really camp and bold and loud style that we're familiar with today.

For LGBTQ politics at Eurovision in general, there's several different dimensions and issues under this umbrella and there's too many to cover everything today, but I'll do my best to outline a few specific examples that your listeners are probably familiar with. So, one aspect is visibility and representation of queer identities and issues on stage. So since Pàll Oskar and Dana International in the 90s, the Eurovision stage has seen a huge range of Queer performers and queer performances so perhaps one of the most notable examples after Donna would be Conchita Wurst, who was the first drag performer to win in 2014, but there are other few drag acts in the contest before Conchita, for example, the Ukraine's….

[ZJ] Verka Serduchka! “Sieben sieben eins zwei!”, haha, that's one of my favorites!

[KJ] Exactly. They've also been numerous performances that have featured forms of queer visibility or activism or LGBTQI issues. So, some of these have been from artists who themselves are queer, for example, the reigning Eurovision champion, Duncan Laurence from the Netherlands, is bisexual. And although his song ‘Arcade’ doesn't specify any particular forms of relationships, it can be read. However, different audiences want to take it. Other performances have emphasized LGBTQ activism of visibility, although the artists themselves sometimes straight. And, for example, Ryan O'Shaughnessy from Ireland sang his love song together with two male dancers.

[ZJ] Oh yeah, and the other one I was thinking of is Poli Genova from Bulgaria in 2016. Her song, ‘If Love Was a Crime’, sort of alludes to the criminalization of queer relationships in some parts of Europe. It's also just a banger. One of my favorites.

[KJ] Exactly, it's an absolute banger. So, the point here to bring it back to the question. The point here is that when we talk about queer politics at Eurovision, we're not talking about, you know, one coherent thing. The politics will be different depending on whether a performer uses their song to openly advocate for gay or trans riots or the song has lyrics or costumes that are queer coded, such as women wearing tuxedos. Uhm, or whether artist’s sexuality or gender are politicized by others.

[ZJ] Yeah, that last point I think is really important, even in seemingly queer-friendly spaces like Eurovision, or in fact perhaps, precisely because they are queer-friendly spaces, a lot of what ends up making these performances political and being discussed as political issues is the homophobia and transphobia that comes with them and comes from more conservative elements of the Eurovision community so that sometimes takes the form of backlash and protests against specific artists and performers. For example, Hungary has withdrawn from the competition, and the sort of…the rumor is that part of that was because the contest is seen by the Hungarian broadcasters’, being quote unquote, “too gay”, which is obviously up like that's the Hungarian broadcasters’ problem, that’s absurd.

[KJ] Yeah, Exactly.

[ZJ] But I think Catherine Baker also talks in her book chapter about how queer people’s lives are routinely politicized just by virtue of existing. And so even somewhere like Eurovision that you think is fairly safe…this politicization by other people is something that's always there.

[KJ] Yeah, very much so. Conchita for example, you know she spoke about doing Eurovision because she is a musician, but she also recognized that by doing so, she is became inherently, you know, an icon of visibility, but also a vector for homophobes to target their hate. So she took on this, um, ambassadorial for LGBTIQ rights, which is a role straight winners are not equally expected to adopt. If they have any kind of ambassadorial role with the Song Contest it’s because they're a host like Mans…uhm, again apologies for the mispronunciation, Zoë will be able to tell me!

[ZJ] Måns Zelmerlöw

[KJ] There we go!

[ZJ] The love of my life!

[KJ] [laughing] Oh, oh wow!

Or Alex Rybak, returning to contests as show hosts or intermission entertainment, they returned to the contest, as you know hosts or the intermission entertainment, which is often when we see the previous winners as well. So you know, there was that moment that when Conchita received her trophy she said ‘we are unstoppable’. And that phrase and Conchita’s image became key symbols of LGBTIQ activism and pride movements.

Conchita also addressed the European Parliament in 2014 and in her speech she spoke about ‘forces in Europe…forgetting our common history’ which linked LGBTIQ rights to the view of Europe as a protector of human rights and liberal democracy, but also linking Eurovision to the European integration project. And I think that's a really interesting dimension, because scholars like Peter Rehberg and Ivan Raykoff have written about how, while not discounting the persistence of homophobia and transphobia, like as you just mentioned Zoë, with Hungary pulling out of the competition. Eurovision is a rare space where people can express their queer identity and national identity at the same time. National identities that aim at presenting a united, homogeneous community often actually exclude or suppress other identities and not just sexual and gender identities, but regional and ethnic or linguistic identities. And Eurovision is a place where people can enact what Raykoff calls ‘queer patriotism’ and play with the European identities in a more creative and inclusive way.

[ZJ] That’s really cool.

[KJ] Another example which, it might sound a bit weird but bear with me, and we haven't talked about them yet, I think Lordi from Finland, they're a great example of how Eurovision artists don't have to conform to a specific type or category to do well at Eurovision and be beloved by the fans as well.

[EMF] Yeah, well thank you for mentioning that, it was about time we talked about Lordi, you know, being a podcast based in Finland! So now our Finnish fans can go to sleep, everything is good, we have mentioned Lordi.

[KJ] Yeah, I was gonna say it probably take us this long to talk about Lordi!

[ZJ] Our duty is done!

[KJ] The icons that they are within the Eurovision Song Competition history and…mythology almost. But you know, Peter Rehberg actually wrote about Lordi and talked about how Lordi applied the campness of Eurovision to straight masculinity to produce this wildly, over the top, ridiculous rock metal song. And you know if you asked anyone before 2006 what they thought makes a winning Eurovision Song, they would have said sequins, glitter, and you know, disco and be, you know campness. They never would have thought that a Finnish heavy metal band in monster costumes would end up becoming one of the most iconic winners of Eurovision, but you know that kind of performance or to bring it directly back to queerness at Eurovision, performers like Conchita and Verka who bring something exciting and maybe a little something unexpected but very essentially authentic to the contest. They're examples of how if, you know, you go hard; you go big and you're just utterly, entirely authentically yourself, the Eurovision fandom will make a lot of space for you in their hearts and embrace you.

[ZJ] Yeah, I think that's really true and Lordi’s a really awesome example of that. It's a really good illustration of the more inclusive and more experimental version of national identity. Metal music is such a huge part of Finnish music culture, so for Finns it makes perfect sense to send hard rock or metal artists to Eurovision, and they're doing that again this year with Blind Channel. But yeah, it makes perfect sense from a Finnish perspective, but it's probably a little bit baffling to countries where Eurovision and the concept of ‘campness’ as an over the top sort of ‘go big’ kind of concept is more typically associated with glitter and key changes and costume reveals.

[KJ] And you know, interestingly, we were talking about, you know we're talking about campness and camp performances in areas that aren't really initially seen as being, you know, camp. I think hair metal is a great example, for example of combining that really aggressive masculinity with a…with the type of campness to it. You know you look at all those Guns n Roses and Poison and all those bands and you know, there's been papers written about it, and I find it fascinating as well, and that's very much, you know what Peter Rehberg was talking about where it's…finding these elements that you know on paper don't go together, but they're still authentically, you know, someone putting their all into music. And I know I'm comparing Guns n Roses to Eurovision now, but trust me, I'll compare everything, because November Rain is also a massive bop, and probably it's a bit Eurovision-esque, I think so, when you really think about it.

[EMF] Also, Axel Rose has really changed a lot his way of dressing and it could be seen as a symbol of different identities now, I feel.

[KJ] Yeah I mean, Axel Rose has really like played around, like he had with boas if I remember and wore all these flamboyant outfits as well, and it's just really interesting because like, you know, we're talking about Lordi at Eurovision…it's this thing that when you compartmentalize it doesn't sound likely like the idea of a death metal band performing at Eurovision. But as you said, there's just a core sense of authenticity that people really like. But you know, to sort of take it back to what we're talking about, you know, as Conchita says in her European Parliament speech in in, ‘If you're if you're European, believe in this Europe where everyone can live in freedom, peace, and just having a great time’ and that's what Eurovision really is about.

[Music break]

[ZJ] What is a book or film or other piece of culture, so fiction or nonfiction, academic or popular, any type of culture or media that has shaped how you think about Europe or about Eurovision?

[KJ] In terms of Europe, this is a bit of an obscure one, but hopefully it will give me hipster points.

[ZJ] We love obscure.

[KJ] When I well, I mean, I say obscure but it’s not obscure because I feel like this is an album that should be talked about a lot more because it's by someone who's very like, uh, acclaimed and popular. But it sort of has been forgotten with the sands of time and it came out when I was doing my honors thesis when I was an undergraduate and I was writing about Ireland and the EU. It was Let England Shake by PJ Harvey, and it's a really interesting album to listen to, because it's a concept album and it's about England and the identity of England, but there's quite a lot of narrative about Europe in there and it was sort of a pivotal moment for me because, it was one of those moments where what you're studying in terms of, you know, pretty much historical aspects of the relationship between Ireland, Britain, and the UK. Because I think it's really hard to talk about Ireland and the EU without Britain and the EU, because they're, you know, so closely linked. And even their membership was…the process of membership was quite fraught because it was very much about the two countries and their relationship. Spending my days reading books and articles and then writing and researching and then listening to an album by someone who is a popular singer, it was just one of those moments where it clicked and you know, it's one of those everything is political, but just the narrative in that album was about the place of the UK, where…and this was pre Brexit and I actually listened to it a couple of days ago and I was struck by how it really almost predicted what was going to happen in terms of where Britain saw itself, like this idea of they were sick of Europe, they didn't want to be part of Europe, England is this glorious place, we had this amazing history and, you know, we want to reclaim that and even though PJ Harvey, I'm pretty sure that wasn't her actual belief, it was her telling a story about England and I was really struck by it because that was the story I was trying to tell through my research.

[EMF] I don’t know if you have heard also this album that she released some years ago called the Community of Hope. I think it was 2017 or 18, but I think it follows on that thing right? She talks about England and what was going on? Because the referendum was done at that point. I haven't heard from the previous album you're mentioning, but now I think I'm going to listen to these both in a row to see how this story evolves.

[KJ] Absolutely, and it's really striking to listen to that album in twenty-twent… For second I was like, what year is it? It’s 2021. It’s the long 2020!

[ZJ] [laughs] What is time anymore?

[KJ] What struck me was listening to it again was how it really just nailed the feelings of England now and in the lead up to the referendum. It just really captured what the country was about like it was so incredible, how succinct it was and how you know, I spent years trying to write succinctly about the space between where Britain found itself in terms of being a post you know a post-world power basically and not a European, but maybe a European. And then PJ Harvey sang it in one song and I was like well there you go, maybe I should just pack up and go home now.

[EMF] [laughs]. So if you could get front row tickets to any Eurovision since the contest started in 1956, which one would you go to and why?

[KJ] Ooh!]

[EMF] Difficult question, I know.

[KJ] Because I…I feel really torn answering this because I feel like I should give a very astute answer that talks about politics of Eurovision, but I'm going to be real because I love it.

[ZJ] Now tell us where you really want to go. Give the real answer.

[KJ] Yeah, OK, so it's a tie. It's either the classic Abba win, so just, [mwah].

[ZJ] Waterloo.

[KJ] Yeah, it's just perfection. If I if I got to choose one last thing to witness before I die, it would be that performance so I could die happy.

And the other one is a bit of a niche one. So I have family in Quebec, so it would be Céline Dion when she performed on behalf of Switzerland, because I, one of my favorite niche things to talk about is the politics of the Francophone world in terms of a French…where French Canadians sort of sit in the Francophone universe, but also Céline Dion and she's an icon.

[ZJ] She is also perfection.

[KJ] Not just perfection, she is self-aware perfection. But she's an alien from outer space, but the most glamorous alien from outer space you'll ever meet, and yeah, I would just be stanning so hard for her because that's before she really reached her full potential, you know. And I would just go around telling people she's going to be big one day sort of thing, because I'm a time traveler, right? I know you’re not meant to interfere, but I would.

[ZJ] For me, I think it would have been the year that Dami Im performed for Australia, the year we almost won. We were so close and it was felt like Australia was still very new in Eurovision and Dami was phenomenal, and she sat on that block of, like, literal anti-matter and sang her phenomenal heart out, and it was just such a good song, and it was a good vibe. That was the time that I first sort of, I was like, ‘oh now I get nationalism! Now I understand why people are proud for their countries!’ It was like ‘yeah, Australia!’

[KJ] Yeah, actually it's funny because that's when we all came together, yeah.

[ZJ] And then we didn't win and it was a huge bummer.

[KJ] That's my controversial take for this episode, that is that if Dami wasn't Australia she would have won.

[ZJ] Yeah. I agree. That's all we have time for today. Thank you so much for joining us, Keshia. Happy Eurovision and good luck with your early morning starts watching the contest.

[KJ] Thank you for having me, and Happy Eurovision to us all.

[ZJ] It has been great to talk to you.

[EMF] This was now a blast and thank you to all our listeners. Whether you are a lifelong fan of Eurovision or you have never watched it before, I cannot really believe on that. We hope that you enjoyed this episode.

We would love to hear your thoughts on this episode about Eurovision, to get in touch with the podcast use Twitter and Facebook, follow EuroStorie on our website, on eurostorie.org. Don't forget to catch up on our other episodes too, available on SoundCloud, Spotify, Google Podcasts Breaker and Radio Public.

[ZJ] You can also follow the hosts. I'm @zoecharlottejay on Twitter and Emilia is @mataix\_emilia. And if you would like to know more about the politics in history of Eurovision, you can check out the book Keshia co-edited, *Eurovisions: Identity and the International politics of the Eurovision Song Contest since 1956*. Thanks everyone for listening.

[ALL] Bye!

[Music]

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[Music]