

## Exactly like the EU, Just a Little Bit Cheesier? Discursive Links between the EU and the Eurovision Song Contest

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*The Eurovision Song Contest can be a useful and fun allegorical tool for explaining the dynamics of the EU, writes **Anna Wambach**. She argues that, although comparisons between the two can create strong cognitive associations over time, if taken too seriously such links can lead to misunderstandings about how the EU works in practice.*

It is tempting to equate the Eurovision Song Contest with the EU. The EU itself can appear mind-bogglingly complex and boring. So why not use the ESC to explain the EU's unappealing institutions to its citizens in an entertaining way? There seem to be so many parallels. The ESC provides a useful means of breaking down complicated processes of supranational decision-making through a commonly shared pop culture reference. However, the equation – although tempting – is not without negative consequences, since the discursive links have the potential to mislead judgement about the EU.

Despite its objective as an opportunity for European countries to showcase themselves, the ESC has always been a political event. Voting patterns have long been interpreted as symptoms of international alliances or tensions. In the week prior to the 2016 ESC in Stockholm, this trend intensified, particularly in the UK's debate on EU membership. British journalists, commentators and campaigners explicitly linked Eurovision to the [in/out referendum](#) in June.

The BBC started a [Snapchat](#) campaign in which it explicitly – although light-heartedly – combined the referendum debate and the Eurovision Song Contest. Vote Leave, the official campaign for the UK to leave the EU, produced a [video](#) in which it compared the UK's status in the EU with its past performances in the ESC. The conclusion is simple: the UK is persistently outvoted by its European neighbours.

Two years earlier, in 2014, the *Guardian* published an [op-ed](#) in which Christina Patterson explained that the British regard both of them as a frivolous waste of money. The EU would need to change in order to lose this ESC reputation.

The list of examples goes on. The discursive link between EU politics and the ESC is reinforced every year. Discourse in this context does not refer to one communicative event or an extended piece of text but rather – in Foucault's sense – to socially constructed knowledge or social practice, a more or less regulated way of doing things ([Van Leeuwen 2008](#)). In this case, knowledge about the EU is constructed by linking it to knowledge about the ESC.

It is understandable. Few people are interested in the details of EU policy-making. It is boring and somewhat distant. The ESC, however – love it or hate it – is certainly not boring. People can relate to it.

Particularly in the UK, many of the dominant discourses about both the EU and ESC seem to match perfectly, as the above examples illustrate. The UK's lack of success in the ESC can be interpreted as a symptom of feelings towards the EU: no support, no understanding and blocs of nations ganging up against the UK.

The voting system combining jury and public votes can be interpreted as undemocratic – just like the EU with its unelected bureaucrats infringing on British sovereignty. The whole show – be it ESC or EU – is a waste of money in which Britain invests but never gets anything in return.

Shared cultural knowledge is used to explain a complex political process – to make it relatable. This is a handy and effective shortcut. No further explanation is needed. From a journalist's or commentator's point of view, this is appealing because it saves time and space. However, by discursively linking, repeating and reinforcing it year after year, it becomes manifested in citizens' minds.

It is a powerful discursive link, but one that is misleading in two ways. Firstly, it can lead to a factual misunderstanding of the EU. Secondly, it may have an effect on attitudes towards the EU and European integration. This effect, however, is based on misjudgement. During a campaign like the British in/out referendum, but also in more routine times, this can have a negative impact on support for the EU.

The factual differences between the ESC and EU are more obvious and can be pointed out easily. ESC participants go far beyond the EU's borders – for example, the 2016 final included Australia, Israel and Azerbaijan. The ESC is run for entertainment purposes – the EU for political and economic ones. The outcome of the ESC has practically no impact on citizens' lives, whereas the outcome of EU decision-making does very much.

The effect of this discursive construction of EU knowledge by linking it to social practices of the Eurovision Song Contest may, however, be resistant to factual clarifications. By illustrating shared, historical discourses about the relationship between the UK and the EU with ESC metaphors, common myths are reinforced rather than overcome. Because the discourses about the EU and ESC, as well as the UK's position in either, can be so elegantly integrated, disentangling the discourses again is difficult.

If they match so nicely, and help citizens understand the EU, then one could argue that the discursive link between the ESC and EU might be useful after all, if only to engage citizens in the debate. The equation of the EU and the ESC, however, is akin to drawing a caricature of the EU. It oversimplifies, exaggerates and can even be plain wrong. It might fit into historical discourses about the EU, but even those can often be misleading with regard to the relationship between the UK and EU. Therefore we should attempt to

unpack and challenge those dominant discourses instead of fuelling them with pop culture references.

In the end, the link is a misjudgement of both the EU and Eurovision. Neither of them can receive a fair verdict from its audiences. In the case of Eurovision, this might not seem too dramatic. It could have more far-reaching consequences for attitudes towards the EU among its citizens, if they judge it based on a cheesy entertainment spectacle.

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