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A Queer Celebrity: Marija Šerifović and National *vs.* Sexual Identity

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Introduction: Eurovision and collective identities

In scholarly considerations, the Eurovision Song Contest is often acknowledged as one of the oldest, truly international media events with trans-continental popularity spanning over six decades. Eurovision brings together the issues of (European) identity construction, expansion of the EU, international branding of the newly formed political entities, geopolitical and cultural hegemonies, Orientalist and post-colonial discourses, issues of gender and race, media visibility of the minority groups, and (especially in the recent years) the post-Cold War divisions in Europe. An important topic of discussion are thus the Eurovision representations of the 'nation'. How has this event shaped collective identities, social bonds, or political agendas in different countries? A major question here is that of *who* is allowed to speak (or sing) in the name of the nation (state) – who is permitted to access the public sphere of Eurovision, and which narratives of the national identity may become dominant in that sphere.

Music has been recognized as an effective tool for promoting a nation abroad through nation-branding strategies, rather apparent at the Eurovision Song Contest (see, for instance, Anđelić 2015, Mitrović 2010, Baker 2008a, 2008b, Yair 1995, Bolin 2006, Raykoff and Tobin 2007, Sieg 2013, Jordan 2011, 2015, Pavlyshyn 2006, Fricker and Gluhovic 2013, Fabbri and Tragaki 2013, Bohlman 2010, Jones and Subotić 2011, Danero Iglesias 2015, Cassiday 2014, Ulbricht *et al.* 2015 etc.). Moreover, Eurovision has defined for decades its own "geography" of Europe (see Pajala 2012). The (geo)political use of Eurovision for the purposes of national self-promotion (especially in the case of the newly created states which gained

independence after the end of the Cold War) has lead some commentators to conclude that "the festival has been hijacked from the entertainment industry by political leaderships, especially those that have based their legitimacy on nationalism." (Anđelić 2015: 94)

The history of the Eurovision Song Contest may be seen as part of the Cold War processes of fashioning (Western) Europe as a unified bloc. Throughout this history Eurovision has served as a platform for performing essentialized narratives of national identity. However, the new geopolitical narrative with which the Eurovision-related imaginations of Europe have to contend is the discourse of the supposed "new Cold War" between Russia / Eastern Europe and the West. In this context, in the recent years the divisions have particularly revolved around attitudes towards gender equality and LGBT rights which serve as indicators of a country's relationship to an imagined Europe, reproducing the set of discursive practices referred to as "sexual democracy" (Fassin 2010), even "homonationalism" (Puar 2013). While Éric Fassin adopts Samuel Huntington's thesis on "clash of civilizations" to denote a sexuality-oriented clash of civilizations, Jasbir Puar's concept of "homonationalism" addresses the normalization of queer politics and identities into a nationalist discourse used in delineating the boundaries between the progressive West and its oppressive "other" (Carniel 2015: 139). Short for "homonormative nationalism" (Puar 2007: 38), the concept indicates that acceptance or tolerance of previously marginalized sexualities became a tool for legitimating national sovereignty based upon a country's attitude towards queer identities and on the access queer subjects have to civil and human rights. Puar developed the term to stem out of frustration with traditional constructions of the nation as heteronormative, constructs which did not adequately reflect the complexity of interactions between queer politics, nationalism, and global relations. According to Puar, homonationalism is "a facet of modernity and a historical shift marked by the entrance of (some) homosexual bodies as worthy of protection by nation-states, a constitutive and fundamental reorientation of the relationship between the state, capitalism, and sexuality" (2013: 337).

Homonationalism's corollary "pinkwashing" refers to the strategic use of queer-friendliness in marketing strategies. Carniel observes that "[h]omonationalism, as an extension or continuation of the Orientalist tradition that is concerned with issues of social justice, can also serve to highlight the imperialist dimensions to humanitarian and human rights discourses that serve to promote Western interests, including those pertaining to sexuality" (Carniel 2015: 147). As noted by Ulbricht *et al.,*

> [T]he homonationalist discourse… has a double function: it reinforces the idea of (Western) European exceptionalism in the field of LGBT rights; and it constructs Eastern European deficiency in terms of individual (but shared) homophobia. By situating its concern in terms of individual attitudes that need to be changed, the West can avoid challenging its own heteronormativity. This discourse, furthermore, proves an easy fit with longstanding anti-Eastern European discourse in the West of Europe, which likewise denigrates one locale whilst presenting the other as a site of enlightened progressivism. What these discourses share is a profound distrust of the Other and a profound blindness to the limitations of the West. What they show is a severely anti-progressive tendency at the heart of progressive politics. (2015: 169)

Eurovision's gender and sexual politics have gained prominence since the 1990s as human rights issues pertaining to sexuality increased in global importance (Kollman and Waites 2009), and ESC's queer fan base and its reputation for high camp has gained more publicity and attention. Dana International's winning performance for Israel in 1998 was largely seen as Eurovision's "coming out", a fact which implies that prior to this contest held in Birmingham Eurovision's gay appeal had largely been considered as being closeted (Lemish 2004). Since then the Eurovision Song Contest has been elevated nearly into a representation of the current state of LGBT rights in Europe. From the Western perspective, the battle lines in this conflict are clearly drawn between the supposedly progressive West and the reactionary East.

Accordingly, this essay looks at the celebrity case of Marija Šerifović, the first Eurovision winner from Serbia, from two angles: 1) the political context of her success as a representative (and cultural emissary) of a (newly-defined) Serbian nation, and 2) social context of communication of her sexual/gender identity to a largely unsympathetic domestic audience. This case study focuses on the dynamics of communication of collective identities (national and gender/sexual in this case) by an individual who has attained a celebrity status in a small nation – in this particular case, by winning the Eurovision Song Contest. What makes this case interesting is the over-politicization of this communication: the initial conflict between Šerifović's celebrity status of a "national heroine" and a (potentially) "queer outcast" has gradually changed in the public sphere according to the overall political shifts in attitudes towards the members of the LGBT community in Serbia.

This essay also aims to situate this dynamics in the wider political context of the "sexual diversity debates" revolving around the Eurovision

Song Contest as a unique trans-national media forum. As a media scholar, for this analysis I rely on the existing interdisciplinary literature on the Eurovision Song Contest and on media reports. In the first part of the essay, I discuss the history of the politicization of Eurovision entries in socialist Yugoslavia and post-socialist Serbia, and what Marija Šerifović's winning performance in 2007 meant for Serbia in terms of national self-representation at the Eurovision contest. In the second part, I discuss Marija Šerifović's Eurovision victory in the context of the newly created East/West divide revolving around the questions of LGBTIQ+ rights in the respective parts of Europe. This part of the essay focuses on Marija Šerifović's struggles to openly communicate her sexual identity as her celebrity relied on her status as Serbia's winning representative of the nation; the social context in which this had to be a struggle indeed, is explained.

Serbia and Eurovision: a long march to the top

In 1948 the Communist Information Bureau expelled socialist Yugoslavia from its ranks since its president Josip Broz Tito and the country's political leadership refused to submit to Soviet political domination. The popular (media-influenced) musical culture emerged in Yugoslavia in the 1950s through the early development of the music festivals, specialized radio programs, film and recording industries (Vuletić 2008, 2011, Arnautović 2012: 36–47, Petrov 2014: 128–13). From the very beginning the Eurovision Song Contest had a strong impact on the emerging media industries in Yugoslavia.

The way in which the political leadership approached international affairs had a major impact on popular music in Yugoslavia in the early stages of its Westernization. The governing party gradually ceased to label popular music as part of the cultural-political armory of the West – especially as it increasingly relied on the economic and political support from the US and its allies. As a result, Yugoslavia was more open to Western cultural influences than other socialist countries (Vučetić 2012). Its highly specific cultural context came to be seen as "the West of the East" (Vučetić 2006). The Eurovision Song Context was a major international podium for asserting this position.

In the 1950s, while Europe was still recovering from World War II, the European Broadcasting Union based in Switzerland founded a committee appointed to search for ways of connecting the member states. In 1955 the committee proposed the idea to launch an international contest based on the Italian music festival in San Remo, one which would be broadcast in all the member states of the EBU. The concept named *Eurovision Grand Prix*

was adopted, and the first edition of the contest was held in Lugano (Switzerland) in May 1956. At the time of the Cold War divisions in Europe, the countries of the Eastern Bloc had their counterpart of the Eurovision Song Contest – the International Song Festival in the Polish town of Sopot (Intervision Song Contest), along with other international popular music festivals held in Leipzig, Bratislava or on the Bulgarian Black Sea coast (Lindenberger 2006, Pajala 2013).

The Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia had its Eurovision debut in 1961 with the song *Neke davne zvezde* performed by Ljiljana Petrović, a renowned singer from Serbia. Her appearance at the Palais des Festivals et des Congrès in Cannes in a simple dark dress adorned only with a brooch was meant to be seen as a moderate reference to her socialist background (Vuletic 2007: 88). The Yugoslav Eurovision delegations were of a representational character and were recruited on the state level. They normally included the presence of members of the diplomatic corps, folklore ensembles, national costumes, and food which was to represent the rich cultural variety of the Yugoslav "multi-ethnic carpet" of a landscape.

The Yugoslavs loved Eurovision also because it gave them an ostensible feeling of belonging to Western Europe, which fed the sense of pride and superiority over the unprivileged citizens of the Eastern Bloc. In 1976 Yugoslavia competed at the ESC in Hague with the song *Ne mogu skriti svoju bol* performed by the band Ambasadori from Sarajevo which finished second-to-last. Unhappy with the score, the Yugoslav Radio Television (JRT) decided to withdraw from the contest, claiming that the Yugoslav media and audiences no longer support the ESC, and that it is international record companies who influence the voting results (Vuletic 2010: 323). As a result, Yugoslavia abstained from the contests in London (1977), Paris (1978), Jerusalem (1979), and Hague (1980). Another cause for this refusal lay in the fact that the contest held in Göteborg was scheduled coinciding with the fifth anniversary of the death of President Josip Broz Tito – on May 4, 1985. It was only six years later that Yugoslavia took part (for the last time before its dissolution) in the contest, held in Rome on May 4, 1991.

In 1978, this Eurovision abstinence prompted the Zagreb-based weekly magazine *Studio* to launch – together with several press outlets throughout the country – a survey concerning the Yugoslav participation at the ESC. As a result of this campaign Yugoslavia reentered the 1981 ESC in Dublin represented by the popular Bosnian pop singer Seid Memić Vajta. In the promotional video for his song *Lejla*, Vajta and his vocal accompaniment were shown enjoying the winter resorts around Sarajevo,

announcing (and promoting) the Winter Olympic Games to be held in the Bosnian capital in 1984. Throughout the 1980s Eurovision entries from Yugoslavia were accompanied by promotional videos which abounded in vivid images of tourist attractions (mostly from the Adriatic coast).

The 1990 ESC was held in the "Vatroslav Lisinski" concert hall in Zagreb, owing to the fortunate coincidence that the only participating socialist country had won the contest in the year of the fall of the Berlin Wall. Numerous contestants at this particular edition celebrated the events of 1989, multiculturalism, and freedom and European unification, including the iconic winning song *Insieme: 1992* performed by an Italian pop star,- Toto Cutugno. On the part of the hosts, emphasis was placed on the rich musical life of the city of Zagreb and the complex multicultural heritage of the host country. In commemoration of the European Year of Tourism, the Yugoslav Radio Television (JRT) contributed a collage of tourist attractions filmed in all of the Yugoslav republics. In the presence of the highest political leadership of the country, the hosts of the ceremony compared Yugoslavia with a "large and complex orchestra"; "[i]n the background, however, were the first ever multiparty democratic elections in Croatia. The second round of the elections was to take place the day after Eurovision and would bring into power the nationalist Croatian Democratic Union (*Hrvatska demokratska zajednica* – HDZ)" (Anđelić 2015: 99). Along with some organizational flaws and strains between the TV centers in Belgrade and Zagreb, a certain ominous symbolism was reflected in the fact that during the voting telephone lines functioned faultlessly except between Zagreb and Zadar – where the Yugoslav Eurovision jury was based.

In 1991 TV executives took the decision to choose the Yugoslav contestant at a "mini-Eurovision" organized in Sarajevo. The winner was to be decided by jury votes from each of the six republics and two provinces of Yugoslavia. *Jugovizija* was held on March 9, 1991 (the day of the massive demonstrations against the regime of Slobodan Milošević taking place in Belgrade). The winner was a popular singer from Belgrade Bebi Dol, however, as noted by Milović, "more important from her victory was the fact that the course of the voting gave proof to the impossibility of the Serbian-Croatian cohabitation" (2012). Bebi Dol won owing to the votes of the "pro-Serbian" TV centers (Belgrade, Novi Sad, Priština, and Podgorica), all the while scoring 0 points from the remaining ones (Zagreb, Ljubljana, Sarajevo, and Skopje). Due to the schism within the Yugoslav Radio Television, two commentators were dispatched to the 1991 ESC in Rome. The broadcast from the Croatian television (HTV) covered Croatia, Slovenia, Bosnia–Hercegovina, and Macedonia, while the other from TV Belgrade

covered Serbia, Vojvodina, Kosovo, and Montenegro. The former was not a live broadcast because of technical difficulties caused by the armed conflicts already taking place within the Croatian territory. Although her song *Brazil* counts among the most popular and well-remembered Eurovision songs (at least in Serbia), Bebi Dol finished second-to-last, receiving only one point – from Malta. Yugoslavia was dissolved in the same year.

Slovenia, Croatia, Macedonia, and Bosnia–Herzegovina became independent states, while Slobodan Milošević's regime remained in control of Serbia and Montenegro, retaining the name of Yugoslavia. On a more trivial level: only the latter country sent a 1992 Eurovision entry to Malmö as the newly independent countries had not met the deadline to register for participation. The Yugoslav contestant, the former folk singer Ekstra Nena, was elected at the *Jugovizija* festival held in March 1992 in Belgrade, in the absence of representatives from Slovenia, Croatia, and Macedonia who had withdrawn shortly before the event. The following year was particularly dramatic for the post-Yugoslav participation at the ESC as Slovenia, Croatia, and Bosnia–Herzegovina all had their independent Eurovision debuts at the Green Glens Arena in Millstreet, Ireland.

Due to UN sanctions and economic difficulties (and, of course, the loss of membership in the EBU) during the crisis in former Yugoslavia, Serbia and Montenegro had no Eurovision contestants until the event held in 2004 in *Abdi İpekçi Arena* in Istanbul, where the Serbian singer Željko Joksimović excelled with his second ranking song *Lane moje*. *Douze points* awarded to Serbia and Montenegro by voters in Bosnia–Herzegovina, Croatia, Slovenia, Austria, Switzerland, Sweden, and Ukraine received much (positive) commentary in the media, including from politicians and diplomats who saw this as a major indication of improvement in international relations in the region. Joksimović's Eurovision success was one of the most striking manifestations of what Tim Judah would later term the "Yugosphere" – a space where cultural connections among the people and places of former Yugoslavia are maintained even though the political entity itself had been destroyed, moreover manifesting "a reconnection of Yugoslav-era social, economic and cultural links that does not seek to undo the individual sovereignty of the successor states" (2009: 18). For Judah, shared tastes in popular music (widely demonstrated via the Eurovision "bloc voting" patterns) constitute an important evidence for the existence of the "Yugosphere".

In Kiev in 2005 Serbia and Montenegro were "by appointment" represented by No Name, a Montenegrin boy band who voiced a clear

independist attitude with their song *Zauvijek moja*. Belgrade prepared thoroughly for the next Eurovision in Athens, selecting the catchy song *Ludi letnji ples* performed by a "politically correct" vocal duo, Flamingosi, consisting of the popular TV host Ognjen Amidžić (as "the Serb") and no less popular actor Marinko Madžgalj (as "the Montenegrin"). The morning of March 11, 2006 when the selection festival *Evropesma–Europjesma* was held, saw the passing of Slobodan Milošević, at the time detained by the Hague Tribunal (International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia). Nevertheless, the selection proceeded as planned. Both sides manipulated the jury votes so that No Name unexpectedly won (again) with their patriotic song *Moja ljubavi*. The audiences in Belgrade were outraged. The Eurovision incident exploded in the media: as such, it was debated by the Montenegrin Parliament. The chair of the Montenegrin jury (singer Bojan Bajramović) admitted that the Montenegrin delegation had certain plans for their performance in Athens. The Eurosong final was supposed to take place on the evening before the referendum on Montenegrin independence and No Name were supposed to raise and wave the Montenegrin national flag – the same flag they would carry to the referendum – in Athens. The issue was resolved by Aleksandar Tijanić, head of Radio Television Serbia, refusing to sign the Eurovision entry forms, and Serbia and Montenegro officially abstained from the contest in 2006. The scandal in Sava Centar became a major argument for the inevitable "divorce" of Serbia and Montenegro on the state level.

It was at this point when Marija Šerifović, a young and moderately successful Serbian singer, entered the Eurovision arena. The first representative of an "independent" Serbia at the ESC 2007 in Helsinki, she proved to be the first Serbian winner of the contest as well. With the system of telephone voting (used between 1998 and 2008) in place, she scored a total of 268 points and *douze points* from audiences in Montenegro, Bosnia–Herzegovina, Croatia, Slovenia, Macedonia, Hungary, Austria, Czech Republic, and Switzerland. Šerifović received an enthusiastic welcome from Helsinki by the citizens of Belgrade, with national flags, sirens, and crowds singing her winning song *Molitva* ("Prayer") in a celebration which lasted until the early morning hours around Belgrade's city hall. As she "brought joy to Serbia", the Eurovision winner received congratulations from the Serbian President and Prime Minister. Among the first officials to compliment Serbia on its Eurovision victory was Olli Rehn, EU's enlargement commissioner, in a statement for the Serbian news agency *Tanjug*. He described Šerifović's success in Helsinki as a European vote for a European

Serbia. In addition to other celebratory activities, Marija Šerifović attended an official reception hosted by the members of the Serbian Parliament.

Eurovision has indeed served as a launching pad for political careers of some of its participants. For example, Norway's 1966 contestant, Åse Kleveland, was subsequently appointed minister of culture; in the late 1990s Ireland's 1970 winner, Dana Rosemary Scallon, became a member of the European Parliament. The 2004 winner Ruslana Lyzhychko secured a seat in the Ukrainian parliament for Viktor Yushchenko's ruling Nasha Ukrayina ("Our Ukraine") party, after actively endorsing the Orange Revolution. She has since then also been engaged in activism in favor of various human rights issues. Marija Šerifović has not pursued an active career in politics, but her manager Saša Mirković has. Mirković was actively involved in PR campaigns on behalf of Tomislav Nikolić, President of Serbia from 2012 to 2017, and subsequently became President of the City Assembly of the Serbian town of Zaječar and an MP. In his book *Molitva za patriote* ("A Prayer for Patriots"), published in 2008, when his collaboration with Marija Šerifović had temporarily ended (at her request), Mirković presented himself as the chief engineer of Šerifović's success and the mastermind behind the Eurovision victory of Serbia who had successfully overcome not only skepticism and disbelief (even from Marija Šerifović), but active obstruction and setbacks from the non-supportive executives of Radio Television Serbia, primarily put in place by its chief executive Aleksandar Tijanić. The ongoing conflict between Mirković and Tijanić later culminated in a lawsuit against Tijanić started in January 2008 (Stanković 2008: 24–25), and an announcement in February 2008 stating that Marija Šerifović would be not appearing at Eurovision in Belgrade (performing instead at a free-entry, open-air solo concert held during the contest week). Marija Šerifović eventually did perform for the Eurovision audiences in the contest held at the Belgrade Arena. In addition to a panoply of aggressive promotional activities and tricks of the trade, Mirković's managerial ingenuity included buying SIM cards in various European countries for subsequent use in voting for Marija Šerifović. "Of course, the performance itself brought a certain number of votes, but we added the so-called artificial votes or votes from the cards that we had bought" (Mirković 2008: 58).

Under Mirković's influence, Marija Šerifović agreed to sing at the rally of Tomislav Nikolić's right-wing Serbian Radical Party (SRS), a move which she later regretted, and proceeded to claim that she would never repeat the experience and emphasize her apolitical stance (Manojlović 2022). Mirković commented on Marija Šerifović's involvement in promoting the SRS in following terms: "This was always and exclusively a professional

collaboration. In the period of the presidential elections I worked on the segment of the campaign which included Marija Šerifović. And I do not think that we had made a mistake because we gave Tomislav Nikolić European gravity. He only profited from that campaign and became acceptable both to the world and to Europe" (Majstorović 2010). Saša Mirković was the first candidate to start a presidential campaign for the 2017 elections in Serbia "in spite of the blows from Aleksandar Vučić's regime and the media blockade imposed by the regime's yellow media, for understandable reasons" (as described in the *Reporter* magazine), but eventually decided to abstain.

Following her Eurovision win, Marija Šerifović was elected in Brussels as an European Ambassador for Intercultural Dialogue and, according to media reports, her collaboration with the Radical Party met with scorn on the part of the European Commission. In one interview she found it necessary to explain: "The EU did not disapprove, but merely said they would go over certain video material and check whether my actions were or weren't in accordance with my position as an ambassador" (*City Guide* 2008: 23). At this point her role was arguably to embody "the ideal type of hero(ine) that emerges from the mass audience" (Marshall 1997: 8).

Because of the mass demonstrations in Belgrade against the proclaimed independence of Kosovo and security concerns accompanying these, on February 17, 2008 the EBU executives had to make a decision whether the ESC 2008 should be held in Belgrade at all. The alternative candidates included Ukraine, Finland, and Greece. It was eventually decided that Serbia should host the contest (with delegations of Albania, Croatia, and Israel under special security protocols during the event). As noted by Paul Jordan, "the ESC is a stage where national identity and the politics of identity are performed not just through the songs but also the way in which the individual contests are staged" (2015: 117). Importantly, when Belgrade finally became the host of the Eurosong in May 20–24, 2008, international media reported how Serbia was "basking in the Eurovision glow" and that this was "being seen as an ideal opportunity for the much maligned country to showcase itself internationally" (Fawkes 2008). On Page 3 of the Eurovision City Guide which covered the ESC 2008 in Belgrade, the President of the Republic of Serbia Boris Tadić welcomed the Eurovision visitors, proclaiming the following: "[I]n keeping with the Eurovision Song Contest tradition of being a meeting of people, countries, customs, and cultures from the entire continent, completely void of any political content, I'd like to stress that Serbia is highly motivated in this moment to be a worthy host for the whole of Europe." It seemed obvious

that, to end the isolation imposed by the international community during the Milošević period, it was necessary to make a joint effort and demonstrate before international TV viewers and visitors alike that Serbia was a "normal country", and to express Belgrade's honor in hosting Eurosong.

Catherine Baker sees Southeastern Europe as currently "not near" Eurovision's geopolitical centre of gravity; this is potentially another sign that the "nation-building citizenship regime" (after Zaharijević 2015: 96) might have been replaced by another: a regime based on adapting states and their citizens to the neoliberal order. "In this latter relationship between state, nation, media and public there might be less to be gained from the nation-promoting Eurovision strategies of the past" (Baker 2015: 84), namely, those employed in the period which peaked with the 2008 contest in Belgrade.

Although far less ambitious than the first appearances at the ESC of Serbia (and Montenegro) after the break during the crisis in former Yugoslavia, later Eurovision acts from Serbia were still perceived more as representatives of a nation than "ordinary" entertainment professionals, delegated by broadcasting executives mainly from the lower ranks of Serbian show business. Nevertheless, they still do occasionally serve as tools for subtle political advertising (in favor of the President of Serbia Aleksandar Vučić, for example, as was the case with the 2016 representative of Serbia Sanja Vučić). A virtually unknown vocalist in her own right, Vučić was quite unexpectedly selected to represent Serbia at the ESC in Stockholm by the executives of Radio Television of Serbia without any participation from audiences (i.e., tax and subscription payers) or other Eurovision aspirants involved in the process.

Marija Šerifović as a queer celebrity

As the German national radio broadcaster *Deutschlandfunk* commented in relation to the winning performance of the Austrian drag act Conchita Wurst in 2014, "the vote count of the Grand Prix unwittingly provided the opportunity to draw a European map of sexual repression and behavioral norms anew" (Ulbricht *et al*. 2015: 164). Following Stefan Raab's parodistic Eurovision performance in 2000, concerted efforts have been seen in Germany to de-queer the contest throughout the decade by selecting more conventional or "buttoned-up" contestants, a fact which has neither tarnished the country's image nor led to any questioning as to its record on LGBTQ+ rights (Ulbricht *et al*. 2015: 168). Indeed, the same tendency of "de-queerization" of the contest (and contestants) can be seen ever since the actual 2015 contest in Vienna. After the longtime ESC commentator

for BBC, Sir Terry Wogan, noted that Conchita Wurst had turned Eurovision into a "freak show", in an attempt to return Eurovision to a family entertainment format, ESC in Vienna put much emphasis on conservative family values. The usual Eurovision trivia at this contest now included the following information for the spectators: that the representative of Greece has three sons and regularly goes to church; that the representative of France carries her daughter's picture with her at all times; that the representative of Russia had lost 30kg after childbirth; that the representatives of Slovenia are a married couple, etc. The hosts of the show, Mirjam, Alice, and Arabella were described as "lovely mothers and wives". The total number of miniskirts onstage was 5 and they were worn only by backing vocalists (from Denmark, Serbia, and the UK). The total number of gender-ambiguous contestants was zero. (Šentevska 2015)

Nevertheless, Conchita's win was largely interpreted as both inspiration for the LGBTQ+ community across Europe, and a provocation towards the persistent homophobia in Eastern Europe as voiced by its political, cultural, even religious leaders – indeed a triumph of Western values, in spite of the fact that Conchita won with a large number of points coming from Eastern European voters. In partial response to the victory of Conchita Wurst, a revival of the Intervision Song Contest was announced in 2014. According to Jessica Carniel, this accounts for two key issues: an ongoing sense of ideological affinity among the former Soviet states, and a highly important role of sexual politics in defining these boundaries (2015: 140).

Elaine Aston observes: "[o]ne would imagine that there might be parallels in the reception of both Conchita and Marija Šerifović, since both acts represented a form of queer identity. Like Conchita, Šerifović's performance can be seen as being strategically designed as queer" (Aston 2013: 174). However, this was not how her performance was read in most media outlets. While some of the reactions after her win portrayed her sexuality and Romany identity in a positive light, even referring to her as a "triumphant lesbian Gypsy" (Greer 2007), nothing like the proclaimed triumph of LGBT rights after Conchita's success was to be seen – rather, Šerifović's victory was explained in terms of "receiving neighborly votes" (Ulbricht *et al.* 2015: 166). Importantly, the contestants from Eastern Europe with the most successful results in the contests of 2001–2008 (won respectively by Estonia, Latvia, Turkey, Ukraine, Greece, Finland, Serbia, and Russia) were commonly perceived by the Western European media as having won their victories through "bloc" or "political" voting (Fricker 2013: 55), in fact trading points between Eastern European states. This implied that the Eastern European participation in the contest was not only duplicitous, but

also apparently rigged against Western states. Russia's victory in Belgrade in 2008 prompted a change to the voting format (so that points would from then on be given 50% on the basis of public voting and 50% on that of a jury of experts again).

Bloc voting was in fact the major talking point in most media outlets after Marija Šerifović's win, and slogans such as "the voting-mafia from the East", "the lowly cheating at the Grand Prix", "viewers outraged", and "Germany should quit" were in circulation, in Germany's tabloid *Bild* for instance (Ulbricht *et al*. 2015: 166). "The idea that this was a triumph for LGBT rights was almost completely absent from the reactions. In fact, *Der Spiegel* even went so far as claiming the win was politically reactionary, suggesting that Šerifović's win was to be regretted as it served as a 'fig leaf for anti-European resentment' in Serbia" (Ulbricht *et al.* 2015: 167). Based on a detailed mathematical analysis and comparison between the voting patterns for Marija Šerifović and Conchita Wurst, Ulbricht *et al.* confirmed the lack of "sufficient evidence to conclude that there was significant bloc voting (or intrabloc favouritism) in 2007" (2015: 162). "Serbian community certainly is not an environment that gladly accepts and encourages love between members of the same sex. This choice is barely tolerated at best… This is the reason why all gay and lesbian visitors of the Eurosong – especially those coming from abroad – are strongly advised to be cautious this weekend!" (*City Guide*, 43): this friendly warning in the official Eurosong guide to Belgrade in 2008 was followed with a list of "LGBT friendly" cafés and bars, disco clubs, and walks.

Eurosong's reputation for being a favorite meeting place for members of the international LGBTQ+ community causes various kinds of strains for the hosts in less tolerant societies. This was also the case in 2012 when Eurovision provoked diplomatic tensions between Azerbaijan and its neighbor state of Iran. Iran withdrew its ambassador from Azerbaijan in response to protests from clerical circles who had characterized Eurovision as a "gay parade". Such descriptions of the event lead to the misunderstanding that a pride parade would actually be held as part of it. In Serbia two years later, Metropolitan Amfilohije Radović of the Serbian Orthodox Church connected the advent of disastrous floods in several South-East European countries (Serbia included) with Conchita Wurst's Eurovision win, during his TV interview. The prominent Serbian church official protested against what he saw as abuse of the imagery pertaining to Jesus on the part of Wurst, claiming that the floods were "a sign that God loves us" and tries us, so that we (i.e., the Serbs) could "return to the right path" (Amfilohije 2014). Patriarch Irinej of the Serbian Orthodox Church stated

– during the flood crisis as well – that the announced Pride Parade in 2014 is also to be blamed for the natural disaster, calling it a major gathering of lawlessness and vice assembled "all against God and the laws of living" (Irinej 2014).

"The brief history of attempts and organizing of the Pride Parade in Belgrade is a brief history of physical and verbal violence over the marginalized LGBTIQ population in Serbia." (Stojaković 2014: 7, see also Mikuš 2011, Nielsen 2013): homosexuality was decriminalized in Serbia in 1994 and the Anti-discrimination law adopted in 2009. Nevertheless, the Pride Parade – as the central event and focal point of mobilizing the LGBTQ+ community around the issues of their marginalization and deprivation in the Serbian society – had been organized in Serbia since 2001 with various degrees of success. The event had suffered most due to the aggressive opposition and physical attacks inflicted by ultra-nationalist groups and the following perceived security threats. The first attempt in organizing this highly politicized event in 2001 resulted in a complete fiasco; the next one in 2004 was also inconclusive due to the ongoing security crisis over the status of Serbs in Kosovo. The parade in 2009 was prepared under great pressure and security threats, to ultimately be "removed" from the central area of Belgrade, and subsequently canceled. The following march held in 2010, although with dozens of injured protesters and policemen and accompanying hooligan raving, was deemed the most "successful", although the following 2011 parade was banned due to security concerns (so were the parades in 2012 and 2013). Since 2014, the parades have been held "without major incidents" as Aleksandar Vučić's populist government gradually recognized the symbolic importance of the Pride Parade for their needs of demonstrating that the state (or, the police) is functional and capable of guaranteeing safety to different (be it otherwise marginalized and discriminated) social groups. This politics of "demonstrative tolerance" for gender/sexual minorities has probably culminated with the appointment of Ana Brnabić as the first Serbian Prime Minister who is not only female, but openly lesbian. International pressure coming from the EU and human rights organizations also played a significant role in changing official attitudes towards the Pride Parade in Serbia (Maljković 2014) as hitherto "each announcement of the Pride influenced the rise of tensions in the society and, it may be assumed, the feeling of unsafety and fear in the LGBT persons" (Stojaković 2014: 76). The heated debates and controversies surrounding the 2010 Pride Parade in Belgrade motivated the popular Serbian film director Srđan Dragojević to address the issue in a light, comedic manner (with occasional dramatic twists) in his

film *Parada* ("Parade") where a former Serbian paramilitary and now a respectable "security expert" unexpectedly decides to side with the Parade protesters and protect them from extremists and the physical threat they pose. However, as noted by Marija Grujić (2013), "LGBT characters in the *Parade* are depicted as a misfortunate, troubled minority, a handful of people deprived of any chance in this world without some form of generosity from bullies and (turbo-folk) singers".

In this social setting, Marija Šerifović's Eurovision winning performance "certainly invited a queer subtext even if […] it was not yet text" (Baker 2015: 77). At the time of the 2007 ESC, while the media in Serbia had been persistently reluctant to comment on her sexuality, Šerifović was openly referred to as lesbian by international media. Her sexuality, however, "was not secret to [Serbian] tabloids" (Bieber 2014) ever since 2004 when the tabloid *Kurir* reported that she had come out to her father.

After her Eurovision victory Marija Šerifović attempted to protect her privacy mostly by conforming to the expectations of the dominant heterosexual audience and media executives. She maintained an image of a hard-working (though tattooed) young professional: perhaps she never wore a skirt, but had a "normal life without any dark secrets" (Stepanović 2008: 34) and refused to publicly reveal the identity of her (male) partner at his own request (Nikolić 2008: 54). However, she did share her hopes of having a husband and children soon, and was portrayed exercising family duties with her English bulldog named after her great inspiration, Robbie Williams. When her former manager Saša Mirković announced that he would publish details from both her love life and family life in his upcoming book "Prayer for Patriots" (eventually published in May 2008, at the time of Eurovision in Belgrade), Šerifović responded with a lawsuit. Private text messages and supposedly compromising photographs were omitted in the book, but it did contain references to Marija's troubled family situation, strained relations with her divorced mother, and a same-sex relationship which Mirković refused to accept "as a man of patriarchal upbringing, Orthodox Christian, (and) man from the Balkans" (Mirković 2008: 84).

Marija Šerifović actually decided to come out by the end of 2013, with the premiere of the documentary film "Confession" (*Ispovest*) in Belgrade's Sava Centre, attended by many fellow show business luminaries. From this point on, "privileging of the private self" (Turner 2004: 14) or "revelations of the "true self" (Gamson 1994: 52) became the dominant narratives in her public appearances. In the film, Marija presents a completely different picture of herself than that circulated in the Serbian media at the time of

her Eurovision win, namely, the "friction in (her) management of inter-personal relations" (Rojek 2001: 12). Her appearance in the film may be read against the background of a decrease in homohysteria in the media sphere (Streitmatter 2009, Warner 1999), a global rise of "media-friendly lesbians" (Leimbach 2011, Reed 2005, Gever 2003) and narratives of outness (Santana 2014, Brady 2011), celebrity news (Turner 2014) and confessions (Redmond 2008, 2010). Marija therefore confesses not only her bisexuality, but also details from her life: that her father, folk musician Rajko Šerifović, was an abusive alcoholic who abandoned her mother during pregnancy, and that her mother (folk singer Verica Šerifović) was sent to psychiatric treatment for drug abuse. She is depicted to have had a difficult childhood which shaped her robust character; it was faith in God and her mother's support that helped her overcome the setbacks in her life. She disclosed several other facts: she was an alcoholic, nursed a plan to get pregnant using insemination, and despite her undeniable patriotism was planning to leave Serbia for good. Along with a number of Marija's close associates the film featured President of Serbia Tomislav Nikolić who, coming from the same home town (Kragujevac) as Marija Šerifović, gave his affirmative opinion of the singer. Serbian tabloids were speculating why Marija Šerifović's late half-brother Dušan (unlike Marija's other half-brother and musician Danijel Pavlović) was never mentioned in the film. In 2014 *Laguna* in Belgrade published Marija Šerifović's book under the same title (*Šerifović*) whose mere authorship was disputed in the media.

As for continuing her music career in Serbia, Šerifović has changed her mind several times; nevertheless, she did return and gained much publicity in the tabloid press as a jury member of the singing competition "Zvezde Granda" where her hot-tempered outbursts, straightforward comments and frequent quarrels with the fellow jury member Jelena Karleuša were commented on at length. Other news features about Marija Šerifović might have included trivia about her diet, loss of virginity, health condition of her dog Robi, her marriage plans, preferences for male children, (surprisingly conservative) comments on the sexual behavior of young girls in Serbia, protests from the theater community against her concert in the National Theater (March 2016), or general verbal attacks on her sexual identity. The tabloids in Serbia have aptly exploited her same-sex love affairs, especially that with the married Elena Karaman Karić (daughter of fashion designer Verica Rakočević). Gossip columns abound with exaggerated stories about Marija's alleged sexual competency, referring to her as "the best lover in Serbia's show business" (Milošević 14).

In a 2016 tabloid article, an unnamed friend of Verica Šerifović claimed that Marija's mother, even after 12 years, "has not yet fully accepted the truth about her (Marija's) sexual preferences" (Milošević 2016b: 4). According to this "source" Marija revealed her secret to Verica in 2005: her mother almost died of shock and disappointment, but later changed her attitude and today publicly shows support for her daughter (Milošević 2016a). At Marija's concert in Belgrade's Sava Centre she was sitting in the front row next to Elena Karić. Šerifović is currently balancing between the positive and negative media images of her celebrity standing, eluding "the danger that a celebrity will fall prey to the hazards of negative image and thus lose celebrity status, or become a negative figure" (Kellner 2003: 5).

Conclusion

Ever since Yugoslavia had entered the Eurosong, the contest was (though not openly) a highly-politicized domain of political and broadcasting elites who used this international podium to communicate positive images of Yugoslavia as a modern, European, culturally specific, West-leaning albeit politically independent country (thus asserting its international "between the Blocs" position). After the dissolution of the country (in spite of the fragmentation and "nationalization" of the once common music market), its popular music – including the "Eurovision opus" – remained an important part of the cultural legacy of the newly-formed countries, however subjected to processes of re-contextualization and selective presence in the media. In the first years of political independence of the post-Yugoslav states, the Eurovision acts became important symbolical avenues for communication of the newly established national identities. Marija Šerifović's Eurovision victory and her ensuing celebrity status must be viewed along these lines of continuity in politicization of Eurovision acts, as imposed by the power elites. In the more recent geopolitical circumstances the political and media-controlling elites (both in the "East" and in the "West") have continued, to a greater or a less obvious extent, to use the Eurovision stage as a platform for dissemination of idealized images and narratives of national self-identification.

The new geopolitical narrative of the Eurovision-related imaginary "Europe" has grown to include the discourse of the "new Cold War" between Russia / Eastern Europe and the West, also largely revolving around issues of gender equality and sexual minorities' rights. The concepts of "sexual democracy" and "homonationalism" refer to normalization of queer politics and identities into a nationalist discourse used in delineating the boundaries between the progressive West and the oppressive "other".

Namely, acceptance or tolerance of previously marginalized sexualities becomes a tool for legitimating national sovereignty based upon a country's attitude to queer identities and the access which queer subjects have to civil and human rights. In the Serbian context, controversies surrounding the Pride Parade have indicated a high level of intolerance for sexual minority rights in the society at large, but also towards the issue of LGBTQ+ rights as a highly sensitive realm of political manipulation and a(nother) playground of populist politics which maintains a risky political balance between the "enlightened" West and the "traditionalist" East. Marija Šerifović's career, perhaps more than that of any other celebrity figure in the Serbian context, found itself in the melting pot of issues pertaining to the "nation-building regime" on the one hand, and communication of a "minority sexual identity" on the other. The way in which Šerifović's celebrity status has been established and maintained against the background of Eurovision battles for asserting "Europeaness", equality or superiority in the imagined community of Eurovision nations is highly indicative for contemporary conflicts, both in "small nations" and in nations not so small, around the issues of national sovereignty and sexual minority rights.

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Summary

The paper examines the media phenomenon of Marija Šerifović, Serbia's Eurovision Song Contest winner, from two angles: 1) the political context of her success as a representative and cultural emissary of a newly-defined (post-Yugoslav) Serbian nation, and 2) the cultural context of communication of her sexual identity to a largely unsympathetic domestic audience. What makes this case interesting is the over-politicization of this communication: the initial conflict between Šerifović's celebrity status of a "national heroine" and a (potentially) "queer outcast" has gradually changed in the public sphere in accordance with the more general political shifts in attitudes towards members of the LGBTQ+ community in Serbia. The essay also aims to situate this dynamics in the wider political context of the "sexual diversity debate" revolving around the Eurovision Song Contest.

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