



Eurovision 2023

Broadcasting Liverpool, Welcoming LGBTQ+ Communities, Honouring Ukraine

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Eurovision Policy Briefing 1

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Key takeaways

1. Eurovision offers extensive place-branding and cultural diplomacy opportunities to host cities and nations, and is unlike any other mega-event in celebrating national and LGBTQ+ identities together.
2. Communicating narratives about the host city and nation through Eurovision is uniquely complicated in 2023 because Russia's ongoing invasion of Ukraine has left the winning country of 2022 unable to host, so Liverpool and the BBC are hosting on Ukraine's behalf.
3. Research shows that thoughtful engagement with marginalised, minoritised and dissonant heritage during cultural mega-events is key to successful impact in these communities. Communications and programming should avoid treating them as competing or mutually exclusive.
4. A growing anti-LGBTQ+ and anti-trans atmosphere in UK politics and media will also complicate efforts to promote the UK through a mega-event with decades of meaning to LGBTQ+ fans.
5. With just two months to go before the Eurovision grand final, stakeholders with missions to promote the UK should ensure their strategies emphasise partnership and solidarity with Ukraine, reflecting Liverpool's winning bid. Local stakeholders should take steps to ensure a welcoming and affirming on-the-ground experience for all visitors and prevent discrimination at venues that might compromise the event's legacy.

1. Introduction

In the past two decades the Eurovision Song Contest has become a prized opportunity for place-branding. The 2023 edition will be broadcast from Liverpool on 9–13 May. This year, however, promoting the host city and country through Eurovision 2023 is complicated by the fact that the UK is only hosting Eurovision because Ukraine cannot, and by the precarious state of LGBTQ+ rights in the UK during a mega-event beloved by LGBTQ+ fans.

Eurovision is not only [the most-watched live cultural event in Europe](#), but also brings mass tourism, with [more than 58,000 visitors](#) travelling to Eurovision 2022 in Turin. Unlike other cultural and sports mega-events, it awards hosting rights to the previous year's winner, but

Ukraine could not host in 2023 [because of Russia's ongoing invasion](#). The European Broadcasting Union (EBU), which organises Eurovision, thus invited the BBC to produce Eurovision 2023, and chose Liverpool as host city in October 2022. This policy briefing, the first in a short special series of Heseltine Institute policy briefings, uses insights from research on Eurovision and other cultural mega-events to explore how local and national stakeholders can acknowledge 2023's unique context in achieving their impact aims.

2. Hosting on behalf of Ukraine

Liverpool City Council and Liverpool City Region [hope](#) Eurovision 2023 will bring up to £25m of direct economic impact, comparable to the €22.8m (£20m) [calculated](#) as the direct impact of Turin

and the Piedmont region hosting Eurovision 2022. Turin/Piedmont expect the indirect impact to be the equivalent of €66m (£58m) advertising spend, while Liverpool's bid team estimates tourism will grow by an extra 5% per year to 2026.

Stakeholders in Liverpool and the City Region, plus national stakeholders hoping that hosting a Europe-facing cultural event can [repair UK 'soft power' after Brexit](#), must however take care not to overshadow celebration of Ukraine itself. In the [words of the UK's 2022 Eurovision representative Sam Ryder](#), "It's Ukraine's party, just at our house."

As the first country to win Eurovision three times this century, Ukraine has arguably led the field in harnessing the contest for cultural diplomacy. Estonia's success at nation-branding while hosting Eurovision 2002 created a model which, [according to researcher Paul Jordan](#), Ukraine honed further after its Orange Revolution when Kyiv first hosted Eurovision in 2005. Kyiv's 2017 contest, held when Crimea and parts of Donbas were already Russian-occupied, [boosted Ukrainian 'soft power'](#) by advancing the narrative of Ukraine's geopolitical turn towards Europe. It also showcased the [movement](#) to fuse global popular music with Ukrainian folk culture that helped Ukraine's Kalush Orchestra win Eurovision 2022.

Since Russia's continuing invasion prevents Ukraine's broadcaster UA:PBC from hosting Eurovision in 2023, the EBU has committed to celebrating Ukrainian musical culture through Eurovision despite the event being held elsewhere, during a war when Russian forces are [directly targeting](#) Ukrainian culture and heritage. Backstage, Eurovision will also be expected to create professional opportunities for Ukrainian creative workers. This is already visible in the contest's production and associated cultural programming. For instance, UK and Ukrainian creative studios are co-

operating on Eurovision 2023's [visual identity](#) and [pre-performance 'postcard' films](#), and one of Culture Liverpool's commission strands for city-based cultural programming is ['UK x Ukraine'](#).

Indeed, Liverpool's bid to host Eurovision 2023 stood out on the shortlist partly because co-operation with Ukrainian artists was so prominent in its city-based programme. These stakeholders have recognised the importance of partnership, and expectations for that partnership to be meaningful and authentic on and off screen will be high.

3. Eurovision's LGBTQ+ meanings

Eurovision also stands apart among cultural mega-events in the special meaning it has built up over decades to LGBTQ+ communities (Baker 2017). Older LGBTQ+ fans may remember [holding their own Eurovision parties](#), even before Iceland's Páll Óskar became Eurovision's first openly LGBTQ+ participant in 1997 and Israel's Dana International became Eurovision's first openly LGBTQ+ winner, and first trans participant, in 1998 (the last time Eurovision was held in the UK). Further iconic LGBTQ+ winners include Serbia's Marija Šerifović in 2007, Sweden's Loreen in 2012, bearded drag queen Conchita Wurst from Austria in 2014, Dutch musician Duncan Laurence in 2019, and two members of Måneskin in 2021. Indeed, Eurovision 2023 will be the largest LGBTQ+ international cultural event hosted in the UK since WorldPride 2012 in London shortly before the Olympic Games.

Eurovision has famously been [described](#) by Peter Rehberg (2007: 60) as "a rare occasion for celebrating *both* queerness *and* national identity". Eurovision organisers themselves recognise that being able to express LGBTQ+ identities and national identities at once is part of the contest's pleasure for many fans – as

Eurovision's digital and communications manager Dave Goodman [told the BBC's 'Eurovisioncast'](#) in February 2023.

In the late 2000s, many states started promoting LGBTQ-friendliness through public diplomacy to suggest their nations had moved on from silencing or stigmatising sexual difference and gender non-conformity. These strategies are often closely scrutinised, as when during Eurovision 2019 in Tel Aviv the event was [caught up](#) in the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions campaign against Israeli governments' occupation of Palestine. Another example involves how Serbia's appointment of an openly lesbian prime minister in 2017 has arguably served to distract from an illiberal presidential regime (Baker 2022).

Countries' reputations can also be damaged if a government backslides on LGBTQ+ rights. The UK witnessed this in 2022 when more than 100 organisations [pulled out](#) of the UK government's planned international LGBTQ+ rights conference, 'Safe To Be Me', after ministers excluded trans people from a proposed conversion therapy ban. Eurovision 2023 takes place amid alarming escalations of anti-LGBTQ+ (especially anti-trans) rhetoric and violence in the UK: recorded homophobic hate crimes in England and Wales rose by 44% in [2021-22 figures](#), and transphobic hate crimes rose by an even more upsetting 56%.

ILGA-Europe's [annual review of LGBTQ+ human rights throughout Europe](#) for 2022 detailed a growing anti-trans atmosphere in UK media reporting and Westminster policy, threatening trans people's safety and creating fear of a wider rollback of rights. The Council of Europe's Commissioner for Human Rights, Dunja Mijatović, also [warned](#) the UK's past 'leading role' on LGBTQ+ human rights was 'under increasing pressure' due to 'increasingly harsh political and public

discourse' on trans equality after her last visit to the UK in 2022. One of the first public gatherings outside St George's Hall after Eurovision host city branding went up was, by tragic coincidence, Liverpool's [vigil mourning Brianna Ghey](#), the sixteen-year-old trans girl killed in Warrington on 11 February 2023. Championing Eurovision as a place of LGBTQ+, and especially trans, safety is all the more important against this national background.

4. Insights from cultural research

Eurovision, and other cultural mega-events like City/Capital of Culture programmes, is already the subject of cultural research. Over a decade ago, Eurovision was already being recognised as "a stage on which [...] changing realities of Europe are being played out" (Fricker and Gluhovic 2013: 3), amid the European financial crisis, Russian aggression against Georgia, and international contentions over LGBTQ+ rights – the background against which Conchita Wurst won Eurovision 2014, a year after Russia's first new anti-LGBTQ+ laws and less than three months after Russia's annexation of Crimea (Baker 2017).

Evidence from City/Capital of Culture (CoC) programmes also helps pinpoint challenges and opportunities for stakeholders promoting Liverpool during Eurovision 2023. Liverpool's year as European Capital of Culture 2008 was a powerful precedent for its Eurovision bid team, who [hope Eurovision too](#) can help boost the economy and restore 'civic pride'. The 2022 'Charter for Mega-Events in Heritage-Rich Cities', based on [research into CoC experiences in Genoa, Pafos, Milan, Wrocław and Hull](#), identifies thoughtful engagement with 'Communities and Identities' as a major prerequisite for mega-events to have successful impact in heritage-rich cities like Liverpool. One important angle, it suggests, is exploring

'lost, dissonant and new' heritage (HOMEE 2021: 11) as well as, and within, widely-known heritage stories.

One form of heritage newly being celebrated in CoC events which is relevant to Eurovision is LGBTQ+ heritage: Hull's UK CoC programme in 2017, for instance, included an '[LGBT50](#)' strand [commemorating the anniversary of the Sexual Offences Act 1967](#). Liverpool's promotional videos have already highlighted the LGBTQ+ community as one of many groups making up the diverse city (largely through drag queens and scenes of crowds with rainbow flags). It remains to be seen how much more deeply Eurovision's 2023 cultural programme will explore LGBTQ+ histories in Liverpool, which have important differences from the London/Brighton/Manchester models.

The longer-term heritage of central and eastern European migration to the UK, including the Ukrainian diaspora which settled in Liverpool and many other Northern cities after World War II, is a 'lost' heritage which sometimes becomes more visible at moments like the European Union expansion of 2004 or Russia's current invasion of Ukraine.

One 'dissonant' heritage in a Eurovision context, meanwhile, might be Liverpool's reckoning with past connections to the racialised oppression of Atlantic slavery. Liverpool's European CoC programme [included](#) the newly-opened International Slavery Museum under the heading 'Untold Stories', but we are still to see whether or how Eurovision 2023's cultural programme could relate this theme in Liverpool's identity to its other missions.

Communicating about Liverpool's communities and identities during Eurovision 2023 should also avoid treating these themes as completely separate. LGBTQ+ communities, central and eastern European migrant communities,

Black communities, and other communities of colour, are not competing or mutually exclusive, in Liverpool or elsewhere.

5. Countdown to Eurovision

With just two months to go before the Eurovision grand final, many decisions influencing communications with and about key communities and identities surrounding Eurovision 2023 have already been made. Nevertheless, residents', visitors' and audiences' experiences of the event itself will shape its legacy. Stakeholders like the BBC or EBU delivering the televised event, city and region stakeholders leading visitor experience and cultural programming on the ground, and organisations hoping to benefit from a Eurovision boost to Liverpool's image all have parts to play.

As national public excitement for Eurovision builds, stakeholders such as the government and Visit Britain with missions to promote the UK should avoid constructing UK nation-branding activities around Eurovision 2023 in ways that detract from celebrating Ukraine. Acknowledging past and present UK/Ukrainian cultural and community connections is a much more suitable strategy, with Ukrainian participation wherever possible.

Civic stakeholders should carefully consider how to enable all residents to feel part of the event amid a cost of living crisis and well-publicised challenges to local authority finances. The cost and scarcity of tickets will price most out of attending the live shows, and even access to the free 'Eurovision Village' will have to be restricted at peak times.

Arena management, hospitality venues, and contractors delivering the fan village will need to ensure a safe and welcoming environment for all visitors. This will involve zero tolerance of homophobic,

biphobic, transphobic, ableist and racist behaviour; ensuring visitors of all genders and abilities can access safe, affirming toilet provision; preventing racial profiling of visitors by staff; and ensuring all venue and security staff have had suitable, ideally trans-led, trans awareness training. Stakeholders up to City/Region and BBC/EBU level should be aware that distressing experiences for visitors on the ground would embarrass the event and city.

Organisations and groups representing marginalised, minoritised and dissonant heritage in Liverpool should consider now whether and how they wish to engage with the numerous international journalists who will spend the week before Eurovision in Liverpool, and with fan communities seeking to enrich their visits.

Venues and organisations in Liverpool fundraising in solidarity with Ukraine during Eurovision should inform themselves about the experiences of LGBTQ+ Ukrainians, who face [specific needs](#) during the war and are less directly able to raise awareness of LGBTQ+ causes in Ukraine through Eurovision than when Kyiv hosted [in 2017](#). Fundraisers could consider donating to [Kyiv Pride](#), [Insight](#) or [other Ukrainian LGBTQ+ NGOs](#), in the spirit of Eurovision's unique heritage of celebrating LGBTQ+ and national identities together. They could also raise fans' awareness of the thousands of [African students displaced from Ukraine](#) – whose lives in Ukraine until the war were not unlike that of Nigerian-born Jeffery Kenny, who studied pharmacy in Ternopil before becoming vocalist of Ukraine's 2023 representatives TVORCHI.

6. Conclusion

Eurovision 2023 requires innovative thinking about communicating the identities of the host city, host country and previous winner. This comes both through Eurovision's international LGBTQ+

significance as a mega-event and the distressing circumstances which have prevented the 2023 contest being held in Ukraine, and sits on top of [the ongoing 'soft power' challenges](#) to UK public diplomacy and relations with European partners since Brexit. Stakeholders involved in place-branding or delivering the Eurovision experience on the ground will need to react to all these factors to sensitively fulfil the hopes that Liverpool has invested in hosting Europe's largest cultural event.

7. References

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The Heseltine Institute is marking Liverpool's status as host city for *Eurovision 2023* with this special series of policy briefings. *Eurovision* is the subject of an increasingly rich, diverse field of research, with contributions from fields as diverse as political science, geography, history, cultural studies and social policy. This series explores the impact of *Eurovision* from a range of practitioner and academic perspectives, assessing the economic, social and cultural impacts of the event on Liverpool City Region and beyond.

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