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**Popular Politics in Hard Times**

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This year’s Eurovision pop song competition was watched by more than 170 million people globally, the Champions League soccer final, by over 300 million. These are large numbers compared with the Superbowl (108 million viewers) and the American Idol final (14.3 million).

To my disappointment, none of my favorite Eurovision songs won (Montenegro, Austria, Greece, Switzerland, and Macedonia). In fact, most didn’t even make it to the final. Although I’m from Europe, my twelve years in the US must have altered my musical preferences. Now I associate ballads with cheesiness, but that’s just me. This year, Denmark won. As soon as the competition results were announced, they sparked political debates. Similarly, this year’s soccer final was kicked around in the political arena even before it had started.

*Sergei Lavrov*, Russia’s foreign minister accused Azerbaijan of vote-rigging in the Eurovision contest. According to the rules of Eurovision, the winner of the competition is decided by popular vote from participant countries (through text messaging). No country is allowed to vote for itself. According to the official Scoreboard, Russia’s song did not receive any points from Azerbaijan. Lavrov growled, “That 10 points were stolen from our contestant … does not make us happy regarding the organization of the event … the outrageous action at Eurovision regarding the Russian contestant will not go unanswered.”

These tempests hide serious geopolitics. The gas monopoly that Russia has on the EU energy market is threatened by Western-friendly Azerbaijan. The choice between the Trans-Adriatic and Nabucco West pipelines transporting Azeri gas to Europe, will be decided in June. They are essential for Europe’s energy security. Azerbaijan, once a Soviet republic, started buying arms from Israel instead of Russia, built the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline to transport oil to the West, and closed down a Soviet era radar station operated by Russia.

The post Eurovision debate in Germany focused on the poor score that placed the German entry “Glorious” among the last five. As countries “award” popular votes to others, the German song received only 18 points from five countries (out of 39): Austria, Israel, Spain, Albania, and Switzerland. “I don’t want to say ‘this was 18 points for Angela Merkel,” said Germany’s ARD TV network coordinator Thomas Schreiber. ‘But we all have to be aware that it wasn’t
just Cascada up there on stage (being judged) but all of Germany'. Resentment about the austerity course of German chancellor Angela Merkel was in the air. “Is it that people just don’t like us?” asked another commentator.

Financial problems are turning people closer to right wing ideologies and populist parties. In Greece, the Golden Dawn party rose from 0.29 % in 2009 to almost 7% in 2013, winning 18 seats in the Greek Parliament. In Italy, populist and anti-establishment party Five Star Movement lead by comedian Beppe Grillo won 25% of the votes in the parliamentary elections in February, causing a post-election political stale-mate. Even Germany has to deal with a rising anti-euro party. In a talk about Europe, Chancellor Angela Merkel and Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk called the European project a guarantee of freedom and success. They noted that freedom was a rarity on the continent 70 years ago, and an abstract concept for the Eastern bloc only 25 years ago.

Maybe some things have to be fixed. A 2011 bureaucracy survey by UK’s Telegraph showed important practical differences in member countries: while it took 17 days to get electricity connected to a new business in Germany, it took 192 to do the same in Italy; while it took on average 331 days to resolve a commercial dispute in France, it took a staggering 819 days for the same in Greece and 1,210 in Italy.

Eurovision is not the only popular event in Europe that’s politicized. “There will be two German soccer teams in the Champions League final next week, and maybe people didn’t want Germany to win Eurovision too,” mused Peter Urban on Germany’s ZDF TV. New Statesman, a British weekly asked, “Why can’t we be more like Germany?” And it went on, “From politics to football, Britain is losing out.” Despite the cash flow from Russian oligarchs and Middle Eastern sheikhs to top European clubs, German teams Bayern München and Borussia Dortmund qualified for this year’s championship final in London. The Bavarians won. Let’s hope that two Bundesliga teams are not playing in the final next year in Lisbon.

Europoint: European soccer and music are politics with other means.