



ISRAEL ON CENTER STAGE: EUROVISION, POLITICS, AND THE FIGHT FOR NEUTRALITY

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Months before the start of Eurovision 2026, the world's most famous international song contest has already sparked controversy over an issue that has been highly contested for some years: Israel's participation. Since the 2023 escalation of the Israel-Hamas conflict, public and institutional backlash against Israel's inclusion in Eurovision has intensified. In late 2025, at least five countries reportedly threatened to boycott the contest unless Israel was excluded, prompting the European Broadcasting Union (EBU), the governing body of the competition, to consider a formal vote on Israel's participation. That vote, initially planned for November, was ultimately canceled after a temporary ceasefire was announced between Israel and Hamas. Instead, the EBU introduced limited reforms to Eurovision's voting system and deferred further decisions to its general assembly held this week, December 4–5. Now, with the meeting underway, a key question remains: Can the EBU maintain Eurovision's commitment to political neutrality in an increasingly polarized international climate, and is its current framework equipped to handle these tensions consistently?

The rules that govern the EBU, the alliance of public service organizations that operates the Eurovision Song Contest (ESC), are outlined clearly in its Statutes. Countries whose broadcasting organizations are members of the EBU and who abide by its regulations as well as the codes and guidelines of the ESC are therefore eligible to participate in the contest. According to the Statutes, EBU Members are expected to promote “the freedom and pluralism of the media, the free flow of information and ideas, and free formation of opinions,”¹ reflecting a broader organizational commitment to media independence. Furthermore, the ESC Code of Conduct requires participants to “respect political neutrality ... [and] avoid linking political views”² to their performances. Together, these two frameworks establish a dual agenda: one focused on safeguarding independent media among

¹ European Broadcasting Union, “Statutes,” December 2024, https://www.ebu.ch/files/live/sites/ebu/files/About/Governance/Statutes_EN.pdf.

² European Song Contest, “Code of Conduct,” December 2024, <https://eurovision.tv/rules/codeofconduct>.

EBU members, and the other aimed at keeping the contest free from overt political messaging. However, these regulatory frameworks were designed in a media and political environment that has since evolved. As the ESC increasingly intersects with international conflicts and public diplomacy, questions emerge about how effectively the EBU's existing rules can respond to such pressures.

It is through the above-mentioned two-point agenda that Israel maintains its presence in the ESC. As a member of the EBU, Israel has participated through its national broadcaster, KAN, since 1973.³ Although Israeli participants have occasionally faced pushback for the content of their songs, violating the ESC's agenda of respecting political neutrality, KAN asserts that it dutifully observes the EBU's media independence requirements. This has, so far, prevented the EBU from taking stronger disciplinary action, despite mounting political pressures from some countries who have argued that Israel's inclusion, following its military campaign in Gaza, conflicted with Eurovision's principles and past precedents (such as the exclusion of Russia). However, while the EBU has acted cautiously to preserve institutional neutrality, critics argue that these limited actions reveal the organization's inconsistent enforcement of its rules in politically charged contexts.⁴

Over the past decade, the EBU has often been slow to act when protecting its values of media independence and nonpolitical content within the ESC. While the organization has clearly tried to enforce consequences for violations of its values in certain cases such as the expulsions of Russia and Belarus, its responses in more ambiguous cases, such as Armenia-Azerbaijan and now Israel, have been less decisive. The lack of a comprehensive EBU framework on politicization within and around the ESC has created a loophole that exacerbates public scrutiny and

³ Eurovision Song Contest, "Israel," 2025, <https://eurovision.tv/country/israel>.

⁴ Lauren Turner and Ians Young, "Eurovision tightens rules after Israel voting controversy," *BBC News*, November 21, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cly2yey51wko>.

spirals into broader controversy, as seen with the scene that unraveled before the ceasefire was announced.

This pattern of uneven enforcement is evident in the EBU's handling of recent political conflicts involving member countries, beginning with the case of Belarus. Belarus was initially suspended from the ESC and then expelled from the EBU in 2021, making it the first country to be expelled for violating the EBU's commitment to media independence.⁵ The ESC first suspended the chosen Belarusian participant after the band *Galaxy ZMesta* submitted overtly political songs that mocked anti-Lukashenko protestors, even after being given the chance for revision.⁶ Later that year, after Belarus's EBU member, Belteleradiocompany (BTRC), aired a confession under alleged duress from political activist Roman Protasevich, the EBU formally expelled BTRC.⁷ With violations to both the ESC's political neutrality requirement for participant performances and the EBU's principle of media independence, the EBU acted accordingly with what power its regulations equipped it with. The precedent established from this case is in line with what the EBU's regulations were intended to support, but is regrettably unique in that aspect.

In contrast, the EBU was less active in responding to Russian violations of EBU and ESC conduct and requirements, allowing for tensions to escalate. In 2014, following Russia's annexation of Crimea, an action condemned internationally, the EBU refused to suspend Russian participation from Eurovision 2015, arguing no formal breaches of the contest or membership rules had occurred. In 2022, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine was likewise not initially addressed by the

⁵ Although Romania was expelled from the ESC in 2016, this was due to unpaid debts to the EBU. "Romania expelled from Eurovision Song Contest," BBC News, April 22, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-36111208>.

⁶ Eurovision Song Contest, "EBU statement on Belarusian participation," 2021, <https://eurovision.tv/story/ebu-statement-on-belarusian-entry-2021>.

⁷ European Broadcasting Union, "EBU Executive Board agrees to suspension of Belarus Member BTRC," May 28, 2021, <https://www.ebu.ch/news/2021/05/ebu-executive-board-agrees-to-suspension-of-belarus-member-btrc>.

EBU. Only after Ukraine's outcry bolstered by Western governments and several other EBU Members did the EBU announce that Russia would be excluded from Eurovision 2022, arguing that its continued involvement would bring the contest into disrepute and undermine Eurovision's values.⁸ Shortly after, Russian state broadcasters withdrew from the EBU, and the EBU confirmed that these broadcasters no longer met its membership criteria due to lack of editorial independence.⁹ Although the Eurovision ban was justified on reputational grounds rather than formal rule violations, the decision exposes inconsistencies in how the EBU applies its rules to politically sensitive situations.

In the case of Armenia and Azerbaijan, the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh (or Artsakh, for Armenians) reveals not only an inconsistency in the EBU's enforcement practices, but a broader absence of initiative and action. The disputed region has seen intermittent violence since the late 1980s, with tens of thousands killed, including over seven thousand soldier deaths reported during the 2020 war alone.¹⁰ That conflict led to mass displacement and infrastructure damage, much of it attributed to Azerbaijani forces. Despite the severity of this, the EBU did not suspend either country from the ESC or their member broadcasters (although it has taken isolated actions, such as revising voting rules after Azerbaijan's 2009 voter privacy controversy and fining Armenia for its late withdrawal from Eurovision 2012, which was held in Baku). This lack of action despite clear violations of international peace and security echoes the controversy seen today with Israel.

Israel's recent history in Eurovision is largely shadowed by controversy, sparked after the October 7th attacks and exacerbated from there. Between initial Israeli

⁸ European Broadcasting Union, "EBU Statement on Russia in the Eurovision Song Contest 2022," February 25, 2022, <https://www.ebu.ch/news/2022/02/ebu-statement-on-russia-in-the-eurovision-song-contest-2022>.

⁹ European Broadcasting Union, "EBU Statement on Russian Members", March 1, 2022, <https://www.ebu.ch/news/2022/03/statement-on-russian-members>.

¹⁰ Laurence Broers, "Analysing the Second Karabakh War," *Conciliation Resources*, February 2021, <https://www.c-r.org/news-and-insight/analysing-second-karabakh-war>.

songs being rejected for political content, conflicts with other participants and allegations of vote rigging, many fans and countries disputed Israel's presence in the ESC.¹¹ While the EBU introduced new voting rules in November, intended to counter concerns on Israeli influence on the voting system, its decision to not hold a formal vote on Israel leaves fundamental questions unanswered. As the general assembly takes place, the broader issue remains unsolved: what expectations for action, if any at all, can be leveled?

The EBU cannot hide from the fact much longer: real-world conflicts have consequences, even in song competitions. The new voting regulations do little to address the deeper concerns raised by the EBU's handling of international crises. The December general assembly will be the first meeting of member broadcasters since the threats for boycotts were leveled, but whether or not Israel's participation will be formally addressed is still to be seen. What should be monitored is if any of the five countries who threatened boycotts follow through with their commitments, as this would severely damage the EBU's reputation. And, if they do, what would the EBU be prepared to do in response and what would this mean for the future integrity of the ESC? More broadly, depending on how the crisis between Israel and Hamas continues, how the EBU manages Eurovision 2026 will be integral to the contest's credibility. The EBU now faces a dilemma: exclude Israel to protect the contest's reputation, as it did with Russia, and risk further arbitrariness in applying its own rules; or allow Israel to remain, adhere to its regulatory framework, and face renewed accusations of inconsistency, potential

¹¹ Henri Astier, "Eurovision 2024: Israel agrees to October Rain lyrics change," *BBC News*, March 3, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-68462848>; Eurovision Crave (@eurovisioncrave), Joost Klein challenges Israel's Eden Golan to answer uncomfortable question. KING behaviour, Instagram post, May 10, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/C6w-P1htBhO/>; Martin Belam, "It is time to ask if the rules allow abuse': broadcasters call for overhaul of Eurovision voting after Israeli near win," *The Guardian*, May 21, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2025/may/21/eurovision-public-vote-israeli-near-win-social-media-campaigns>.

boycotts, and reputational damage. Either path carries consequences that will shape not only Eurovision 2026, but the future legitimacy of the contest.

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