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Ireland is now leading Europe's hate for Israel

The state broadcaster's Eurovision boycott clearly represents a public expression of its own views on the war in Gaza

As Ireland's most important news organisation the RTE is meant to be beyond any suspicion of bias or partisanship Credit: FABRICE COFFRINI/AFP via Getty Images

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Yesterday's decision by Ireland's state broadcaster, RTE, both to boycott and not to broadcast next year's Eurovision Song Contest from Vienna has triggered the most serious crisis in the 75-year history of the European Broadcasting Union (EBU). That is because at yesterday's critical meeting of EBU members in Geneva, the EBU decided not to ban Israel from the Eurovision. As a consequence, Ireland, along with Spain, the Netherlands, and Slovenia, will boycott next year's event in Vienna. They may be joined by others in the days ahead.

The decision has been welcomed by the Ireland-Palestine Solidarity Campaign (IPSC) with an online message saying: "Well done RTE." However, a former minister for justice of the governing Fine Gael Party, Alan Shatter has called the decision by RTE an "international embarrassment".

The decision is a severe blow to the EBU's ambition to develop the Eurovision into a major transnational entertainment event. It also burnishes Ireland's reputation as Europe's leading anti-Israeli country, something the Irish government is now trying to soft-pedal because of significant blowback, especially from America.

With its slogan of "United by Music", a song contest founded in the 1950s to help heal the divisions of post-war Europe, Eurovision has recently become something of a battle zone itself. Because of the war in Gaza, the 2004 Eurovision Song Contest in Malmo, Sweden, became an unlikely lightning rod for anti-Israeli protests. Greta Thunberg even donned a keffiyeh and became the public face of the anti-Israeli protests outside the Eurovision venue in Malmo.

Climate activist Greta Thunberg took part in a Stop Israel demonstration in Malmo, Sweden last year Credit: Johan Nilsson/TT News Agency via AP

The protests snowballed from there so that by this years' event in Basel, Switzerland, the demands to have Israel banned had reached a crescendo. What seems to have roiled the protesters further, along with vehemently anti-Israeli countries like Ireland, was that Israel's entry, despite getting few votes from the professional juries, received overwhelming support in the popular vote. In Malmo, Israel actually led the voting at one stage – no doubt causing EBU official's hearts to stop briefly as their worst nightmare came into view – staging the Eurovision in Tel Aviv or Jerusalem. In the end, Israel came second this year; a major achievement under the circumstances. However, there were accusations that, in some way, that popular vote had been manipulated by unseen Israeli players.

As Ireland's most important news organisation, RTE, like the BBC, is meant to be beyond any suspicion of bias or partisanship. Indeed, under current broadcasting legislation the station is obliged to present matters "of public controversy or … public debate … in an objective and impartial manner and without any expression of the broadcaster's own views".

There are few matters of public controversy and debate in Ireland that are currently more contentious than the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. To most people, RTE's decision to boycott Eurovision clearly represents a public "expression of the broadcaster's own views" about the war in Gaza. And there is no provision in Irish broadcasting legislation for high-moral-ground exceptions; for the very good reason that such elevated terrain always comes with some very slippery slopes.

What is particularly striking about RTE's boycott decision, is that it aligns the Irish state broadcaster with those Arab and Muslim countries that have boycotted the event for many decades. Like Israel, many other countries in the Middle East are eligible to participate in the Eurovision Song Contest. Every year, the EBU organisers in Geneva wait patiently for those Arab countries who are in the EBU to indicate that they are prepared to join in the Eurovision jamboree. Invariably, they decline to do so because of the participation of Israel. Indeed, in those Arab countries where the Eurovision can still be viewed, the screens usually fade to black when the Israeli entry goes on stage and Israel's existence, at least on Eurovision, is expunged in real time.

The extent to which the Irish viewing public supports this performative decision by RTE will be seen next May when Irish viewers are likely to switch to the BBC's coverage to watch the 70th anniversary edition of Eurovision – where Irishman, Graham Norton will provide the commentary.

Meanwhile, in the light of these boycotts, the EBU will struggle to keep its flagship Eurovision event afloat because, ceasefire or no ceasefire in Gaza, the campaign to delegitimise Israel is still gathering momentum.