

Old Foes Serenade Serbia in Istanbul

Author: [Ana Petruseva](#)

Love is in the air in the Balkans - if the Eurovision Song Contest is anything to go by.

When a smiling presenter in Zagreb announced that Croatia was awarding 12 points to historic enemy Serbia in the Eurovision Song Contest, you could almost hear the sound of a sharp intake of breath all over the Balkans.

Behind the scenes at the May 15 event in Istanbul, Serbia and Montenegro's singer Zeljko Joksimovic rushed to thank his Croatian rival, Ivan Mikuljic, for his country's unexpected gesture.

It was not the only shock of the evening, upsetting widespread stereotypes of the former Yugoslav peoples as obsessed by ancient tribal hatreds. Throughout the show, the telephone voting juries of each republic tended to give high scores to neighbours' songs.

Croatia, and Slovenia both gave Serbia and Montenegro their top scores of 12 points, though both republics went to war with Belgrade in 1991.

In another surprise, Macedonia gave its 12 points to neighbouring Albania, even though ethnic Albanians staged a revolt inside Macedonia in 2001.

In spite of a gruelling three-year war pitting Bosnian Muslims and Croats against Bosnian Serbs and their allies in Serbia from 1992 to 1995, Bosnia gave its highest score to Serbia's Zeljko.

The Serbian come-back was all the more impressive as it marked the first time that Serbia and Montenegro had ever participated before in the show.

The song contest, a huge high-camp joke in much of Europe, is a serious business in the Balkans, where newly-emerged states tend to see it as a popularity contest.

Britons may have laughed at their failure to score any points at all last year, but in the Balkans such a setback would be seen as a national humiliation.

Such was the importance that Macedonians invested in their chances, that the head of the country's Orthodox Church blessed singer Tose Proevski before he headed off to Turkey.

Albanian prime minister Fatos Nano personally telephoned the beautiful teenager Anjeza Shahini to wish her luck as the first ever Albanian contestant. Thousands of her fans, including politicians, gathered in Tirana to watch the contest and cheer.

A three-day national celebration culminated on May 15 when the culture ministry staged an open-air party in Tirana's Sheraton Hotel.

Though Zeljko was pipped to the victory post by Slav rivals Ukraine, crowds of supporters gathered at Belgrade airport to greet him on his return.

Politicians from the region were also quick to seize on the Eurovision voting scores as evidence of a more important phenomenon than singing and dancing.

Serbia and Montenegro's foreign minister Vuk Draskovic, on an official visit to Macedonia on May 20, joked that regional leaders should take their cue from the unity shown among Balkan voters in Istanbul.

"When politicians can't agree, they should look to the people. Recently at the Eurovision contest we saw Macedonians voting for Albanians, Croats voting for Serbs, and Serbs voting for Albanians, Bosnians and Croats," he said.

Former Serbian foreign minister Goran Svilanovic suggested that the voting might have diplomatic repercussions. Croatia's decision to give 12 points to Serbia will "help improve relations between the countries in the region", he told Croatian TV on May 16.

The politicians' upbeat remarks met some echoes on the streets. One thirty-nine-year-old man in Belgrade told IWPR that the voting heralded a new, peaceful era. "The vote showed that after all the animosity and wars of the past decade, the time has come for tolerance," he said. "Music has won."

"It felt good that people in the Balkans were united after so many years of tensions and violence," said Nena, in Skopje. "It sent a message that the Balkans can offer something good for a change."

Singer Zeljko, meanwhile, contributed to the idea that a summer of love might be breaking out in the Balkans by declaring Croatia's 12 points were "the most precious" of all to him.

But not all commentators have read tremendous significance into the unexpected voting scores of the Balkan states in the Istanbul Eurovision.

Aleksandar Dragas, music critic for the Croatian daily Jutarnji list, unsportingly declared that Croats voted for Serbia and Montenegro for the simple reason that Zeljko sung well.

"Zeljko's song was a real Eurovision song," he wrote. "It was not bad, it was not turbo-folk and obviously it caught the attention of the viewers."

In Sarajevo, many people said Serbia had only gained its 12 points from Bosnia because TV viewers in the Bosnian Serb entity, Republika Srpska, hogged the phones to vote.

Similarly, in Macedonia, many commented bitterly that the 12 points awarded to Albania were the result of the country's ethnic Albanian minority dominating telephone voting.

"The Albanians were working the phones, as otherwise Serbia would have gained the top score," Vlatko, 28, from Skopje complained.

While the Balkans peoples display of mutual admiration may have impressed local politicians and people, outsiders were less complimentary about what they saw as block voting.

“This is barking (mad),” said veteran BBC presenter Terry Wogan, famous for his acerbic commentary on countless Eurovisions, past and present.

“I was afraid the Balkan block voting was going to make a difference - and I'm afraid it has. It's beyond me.”

Ana Petrusseva is IWPR project manager in Skopje. Dragana Nikolic Solomon in Belgrade, Drago Hedl in Osijek and Nerma Jelacic in Sarajevo contributed to this report.

Location: Balkans
Macedonia
Albania
Turkey

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/old-foes-serenade-serbia-istanbul>