

## Eurovision and the City: “United by Music” Meets “Malmö against Genocide”

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### Abstract

“United by Music” was the slogan of the 2024 edition of the Eurovision Song Contest, held in Malmö. However, the festive spirit of the event oddly contrasted with what was described as “the largest police operation in Sweden’s history” (Ivarsson, 2024). This operation was mobilized in response to the expected civil protests regarding Eurovision’s decision to welcome Israel’s participation, despite its ongoing genocidal war on Gaza. We examine the temporary disruptions in Malmö’s urban space during Eurovision to understand the dissonance between a peaceful pro-Palestine movement, a supposedly festive event, and the heightened securitization of the city with its alarmist tones. We aim to understand these contrasts within a broader temporal context and across different geographical scales. We argue that the distinct racialized characterizations of neoliberal authoritarian practices in Malmö during Eurovision are deeply enmeshed with the implications of the Western narratives about Israel and Palestine, the growing influence of the far-right in Swedish politics, and, ultimately, the identity Malmö aspires to and is perceived to have. Rather than being a local manifestation of isolated authoritarian practices, Eurovision in Malmö opens a conceptual space to explore authoritarianism as a multiscalar discourse and practice. This perspective allows us to move beyond the dichotomy of the “democratic West” versus the “authoritarian others” by revealing the persistence of authoritarian practices in democracies.

### Keywords

authoritarianism; Eurovision; mega event; neoliberal planning; pro-Palestine; securitization; Sweden

## 1. Introduction

“United by Music” was the slogan of the 2024 Eurovision Song Contest, held in Malmö from May 4–11. The vibrant display of rainbow flags, pink pom-poms, glittery garlands, and the 51,000 excited Eurovision fans (Upplevelseinstitutet, 2024) starkly contrasted with what was described as “the largest police operation in Sweden’s history” (Ivarsson, 2024). During those days, 1,500 police officers were deployed, recruited nationally, and supplemented by officers from neighboring Norway and Denmark. The city spent over 13 million SEK (approximately 1.2 million Euros) on surveillance technologies and anti-terror equipment (Gillberg, 2024b). While increased policing measures have been a common approach to securing mega-events since 9/11, Malmö experienced an exceptional level of public space securitization. This mobilization aimed to protect urban spaces from expected civil protests against Eurovision’s decision to welcome Israel’s participation, despite its ongoing genocidal war on Gaza, recognized by the International Court of Justice (ICJ, 2024), UN experts (Human Rights Council, 2024), and international human rights organizations (Amnesty International, 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2024). In the Police and Swedish Armed Forces report on security threats during Eurovision, terrorist, cyber-attacks, and civil disobedience were identified as top concerns (Jönsson, 2024). Pro-Palestine solidarity movements, under the slogan “Malmö against Genocide,” were perceived as a significant public security threat requiring maximum attention.

Malmö is Sweden’s third-largest and one of its most ethnically diverse cities, with one-third of residents born outside the country (Malmö Stad, n.d.-a). Its high rate of migrants, especially from the Middle East, and high levels of segregation and socio-economic inequalities make it a focal point for political mobilizations. The city has a vibrant history of anti-racist and pro-Palestine solidarity, which intensified in response to Israel’s genocidal war on Gaza since October 2023. Malmö has also been portrayed in far-right discourse as a socially problematic city (Schclarek Mulinari, 2017). Notably, far-right activists have used public Qur’an burnings to instigate protests and riots, perceived as direct attacks on Muslim communities. This has also damaged Sweden’s reputation internationally, especially in Muslim countries, leading the Swedish Security Service to upgrade the threat level of terrorism (Glaad, 2023). The latest Qur’an burning event occurred during Eurovision week. Concurrently, Malmö has been labeled for several years as a hotspot for antisemitism, prompting the city of Malmö to implement preventive measures (Katzin, 2022). In this context, Malmö and the police forces took extensive measures to prevent social unrest during Eurovision.

As urban scholars based in Malmö, in this commentary we try to collectively make sense of the dissonant discourses that emerged during Eurovision week. On the one hand, the solidarity with Palestine and the discontent over Israel’s participation materialized in the mobilization of the “Malmö against Genocide” campaign. On the other hand, the municipality’s effort to provide a safe and welcoming environment for visitors in a city “United by Music” included increased security measures in urban spaces. We suggest that Eurovision in Malmö represents more than just a local manifestation of isolated authoritarian practices; in our reflection, it opens a conceptual space to explore authoritarianism as a multiscalar discourse and practice. This perspective allows us to move beyond the dichotomy of the “democratic West” versus the “authoritarian others” and to reveal the persistence of authoritarian practices within democracies (Koch, 2019).

We understand authoritarianism as a set of spatialized practices centered on control, discipline, and univocal authority that are diffuse and ephemeral, unfolding in particular spaces and places, and impacting different

people in various ways (Koch, 2022). In this sense, authoritarianism is sustained and legitimized by the long-lasting legacies of the “coloniality of power,” which produce racialized forms of world-making through ideological, epistemic, and material forms of subjugation (Quijano, 2000). Nationalism and far-right populism have increasingly intertwined with neoliberalism worldwide (Gallo, 2022), a phenomenon Bruff (2014) defines as “authoritarian neoliberalism.” Indeed, authoritarian practices are often accentuated during exceptional events, such as international mega-events, where democratic governance and urban planning routines are suspended to meet the demands of organizing committees, sponsors, and international organizations (Gruneau & Horne, 2015). The combined economic imperatives and racialized authoritarian practices enforced before, during, and after mega-events disrupt the social fabric of localities, leaving long-lasting effects (de Oliveira, 2020). Here, we examine the temporary disruptions in urban space during Malmö’s hosting of Eurovision, thus highlighting the twofold amplification of social tensions and security measures. We propose an interpretation that connects these urban scale disruptions to neoliberal authoritarian practices at both national and global scales.

## 2. Two Tales of a City: “United by Music” Meets “Malmö against Genocide”

The European Broadcasting Union’s (EBU) decision to include Israel in the 2024 Eurovision Contest while maintaining the ban on Russia enraged pro-Palestine citizens in Malmö and beyond. Russia was punished in 2022 for its invasion of Ukraine, while Israel was invited to participate despite allegations of committing genocide against the Palestinian population in Gaza (ICJ, 2024). This decision amplified the discontent towards the Swedish government’s silence on the situation in Gaza, thus giving new momentum to the existing pro-Palestine movement to boycott the song contest. The movement was international, with Malmö as its core, and produced creative ideas and materials for resistance and solidarity months before Eurovision, encapsulated in the slogan “Malmö against Genocide.” These efforts were highly visible in Malmö’s urban life and public spaces, shaping several counter-events through a boycotting campaign. The week of the contest became the highlight of pro-Palestine demonstrations and featured an alternative “genocide-free” series of events called “FalastinVision” (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Posters by the pro-Palestine campaign demanding Israel to be excluded from Eurovision and that Eurovision be removed from Malmö. Photographs by Laleh Foroughanfar.



Under the slogan “United by Music,” Malmö underwent a profound transformation that affected not only the event site but also the heart of the city. These interventions disrupted the daily lives of Malmö residents, regardless of their interest in participating in the event. The city of Malmö and the police forces used the safety of Eurovision visitors, especially in response to the increased national terror risk level, to justify the presence of barricades, checkpoints, surveillance cameras, and observation posts, reminiscent of what Graham (2011) calls “passage point-urbanism” (Figure 2). This security apparatus took center stage, becoming an integral part of this Eurovision edition and everyday urban life (Figure 3). State security agencies, which hold a monopoly over the surveillance and safety of public space in Sweden, devised an expensive plan described as the largest police operation in Sweden’s history (Ivarsson, 2024). The operation was highly publicized, with surveillance



**Figure 2.** Barricades and security checkpoints set up around the streets leading to the People’s Park (*Folkets Park*) during the Eurovision Song Contest. Photograph by Laleh Foroughanfar.



**Figure 3.** Police passing by pro-Palestine artwork on the legal graffiti wall outside the People’s Park/Eurovision Village. Photograph by Laleh Foroughanfar.

technologies on full display and heavily armed police officers. Malmö's display of force was not only a tool for maintaining order but also a symbol of power and control (Boyle & Haggerty, 2009).

Key public spaces were repurposed and fenced for the event. The People's Park (*Folkets Park*), a site with historical roots in the labor movements (Mitchell et al., 2021), was transformed into the "Eurovision Village," while the pedestrian street Friisgatan leading to the park was marked as "Eurovision Street" (Figures 4 and 5). Access to the People's Park was extremely restricted, with zero tolerance for bags or "anything bigger than you could fit in your pocket," according to Malmö Municipality (Malmö Stad, 2024a). Amid these restrictions, a mother wearing a Palestinian shawl (*Kufiyah*) was violently apprehended by the security forces in front of her children while entering the park (Esmailian, 2024). However, pro-Palestinian citizens responded with non-violent and creative actions, reclaiming the park by jogging with flags, putting up murals with political signification for Palestine, and covering many meters of the park's wall with posters declaring "Malmö against Genocide" (Figures 1, 6, and 7).

One of the central points of resistance was the *Gazarondellen* (Gaza-roundabout), located at one corner of the People's Park in the Möllevången neighborhood. This ethnically and socially diverse neighborhood serves as a hub for numerous political demonstrations (Hansen, 2021). The roundabout was not always called *Gazarondellen*. During the Eurovision week, pro-Palestinian citizens renamed it due to its location at the heart of solidarity demonstrations close to the People's Park. *Gazarondellen* evolved into an alternative scene, where activists, artists, students, and other citizens gathered to perform, chant, read poems, and



**Figure 4.** Eurovision Street, at the pedestrian street Friisgatan in Möllevången, leading towards the People's Park/Eurovision Village. Photograph by Laleh Foroughanfar.





**Figure 5.** Eurovision Street, leading towards the People’s Park/Eurovision Village. The signs remind visitors about filming and photographing in the area, as well as the rules regarding prohibited items inside the Eurovision Village (left); Eurovision Street, leading towards the People’s Park/Eurovision Village, is decorated with Eurovision slogans and pampas (right). Photographs by Laleh Foroughanfar.



**Figure 6.** The main entrance to People’s Park, where private security guards and a team of the Eurovision organizers are stationed. Photograph by Laleh Foroughanfar.





**Figure 7.** The back entrance of People's Park has been heavily policed. Photograph by Laleh Foroughanfar.

organize memorial events in remembrance of the mass killing of Palestinians. Outside of the People's Park, there is a legal graffiti wall that has long been a site of social and political expression. After October 7, the murals often depicted the ongoing genocide. However, during Eurovision week, all these murals were erased by a cleaning company sent by the municipality, thereby raising tensions. Malmö City, which does not usually remove graffiti, claimed that this action was due to a miscommunication (Malmö Stad, n.d.-b).

During the week leading up to the Eurovision final, tension continued to rise, and the voices opposing Israel's participation grew louder. Over 1,000 Swedish artists called for a ban on Israel ahead of the contest, but their demands were rejected (Adler, 2024). Additionally, the EBU banned Palestinian flags and any pro-Palestinian symbols from the contest ("Palestinaflaggan förbjuds," 2024a). Several restaurants withdrew from the official Eurovision celebrations, including Moriskan nightclub, located inside the European village. Moriskan resigned from its role as the host of this year's Euro Fan Café, preferring not to participate in the mega-event economy. The CEO of Moriskan explained the decisions as follows:

We saw how polarization increased, and the atmosphere changed in the city. You can't pretend it's a joyous folk festival when surrounded by concrete walls, machine guns, and drones on the roof. It is a lie....We feared that people would not feel the security that the police wanted to signal. (Gillberg, 2024a, authors' translation)

Similarly, Friisgatan, dubbed "Eurovision Street," leading from the train station to the Eurovision Village, became a battleground of representation. The city of Malmö's project manager for the Eurovision Song Contest, Karin Karlsson, envisioned a giant party for all residents to celebrate music, diversity, and community in connection with Eurovision week (Malmö Stad, 2024b). Friisgatan—which the city aims to renew as a pedestrian car-free, green, and attractive area (Malmö Stad, 2024c)—was adorned with heart-shaped street furniture, balloons, and colorful pom-poms. In contrast, residents hung Palestinian flags and watermelon signs from windows and balconies as symbols of transversal solidarity (Yuval-Davis, 1999).

Furthermore, people organized several informal sit-in actions in smaller groups along the outdoor dining areas on “Eurovision Street.”

The public space outside Malmö Arena, the venue for the Eurovision Song Contest, was also heavily securitized. The chief of security at Malmö Arena highlighted the concerns related to a “threat picture connected to the outside world” (Stolpe, 2024). To enhance surveillance capabilities, Malmö Arena partnered with Axis, a Swedish company specializing in video surveillance. To extend the area eligible for surveillance, the organizers circumvented Swedish law by fencing off the surrounding public space, even though Swedish legislation prevents private surveillance in public spaces. This temporary expansion of private land allowed Axis to install outdoor thermal cameras, license plate recognition, and security software capable of detecting and classifying humans and vehicles beyond the limits of the arena. According to Axis Communications (2024), “the bottom line with AI is, the algorithm is only as good as the data it trains on.” The company described the event on its website as a “testbed for innovation,” where real-time data and feedback opened new possibilities for product development and the training of new AI models (Axis Communications, 2024).

Lastly, pro-Palestinian solidarity events were not limited to areas adjacent to the formal Eurovision venues. Among various initiatives, two large demonstrations took place on May 9 and May 11 (one during the Eurovision second semi-final and the other on the final day). People from all over Sweden, Denmark, and Germany came to Malmö to protest against Israel’s genocidal war and its participation in the song contest (Figure 8). The police-approved routes for the demonstration did not include the Eurovision Village or the contest venue. These demonstrations concluded in one of the city’s largest parks, “keeping” the protestors out of sight from the city center, where Eurovision tourists gathered. At the end of the second demonstration on the final day, some protestors defied police orders and went to Malmö Arena. There, some were violently removed, arrested, and temporarily detained.



**Figure 8.** Pro-Palestinian demonstration on May 11, with the event being heavily policed with security assistance from neighboring countries. Photograph by Laleh Foroughanfar.



### 3. Discussion: Geographies of Authoritarianism and Pro-Palestinian Solidarity

Even though Eurovision in Malmö did not involve any large urban redevelopment plans typically associated with mega-events, the temporary spatial re-organization could have a long-lasting effect on the social fabric and memory of the city, with material, representational, and discursive repercussions. Previous research on mega-events highlights how “states of exception” allow for the suspension of democratic governance to cater to private interests connected to events (de Oliveira, 2020). This has historically enabled the expansion of capitalist exchange across global scales, accelerations in the neoliberalisation of planning, and also the rise of authoritarian governance models. Scrutinized under the notion of “authoritarian neoliberalism” (Jenss, 2019), the attempt to provide a sense of security and enjoyment for the Eurovision fans in Malmö reveals a series of not-so-exceptional exceptionalist measures for mega-events worldwide. However, we want to pinpoint the racialized connotations that authoritarian neoliberalism assumed here, and that, we argue, are connected to geopolitical discursive and material processes at different scales in which the “civilized democratic vs. the barbarian autocratic” is constructed and made visible. In this case, racialization takes the form of anti-Palestinian racism, especially suffered by Arabs and Muslims (Bakan & Abu-Laban, 2024).

As urban researchers, we examine the events during Eurovision to understand the dissonance between a peaceful pro-Palestine movement, a supposedly festive event, and the heightened securitization of the city with its alarmist tones. We aim to contextualize these events within a broader framework, connecting them to different geographical scales and urban planning. We argue that the distinct racialized characterizations of neoliberal authoritarian practices in Malmö during Eurovision are deeply enmeshed with, firstly, Western narratives about Israel and Palestine, secondly, the growing influence of the far-right on Swedish politics, and thirdly, the type of city Malmö aspires to be and is perceived as.

First, the securitization of the city has been colored by the international legitimacy enjoyed by the Israeli state, both internally and externally. This legitimization of Israel and its actions denies the “history, geography, demography, and political system created under Jewish colonization of the land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea” (Yiftachel, 2023, p. 2) and normalizes the violence against the Palestinian people. Hamas’ attack on October 7, 2023, intensified Israel’s warfare and aggravated its colonial claims. Within this framework, the pro-Palestinian movement is de-legitimized and labeled as being antisemitic (Bakan & Abu-Laban, 2024), violent, and a threat to “Western democratic values.” These geopolitical tensions were directly reproduced in the Eurovision, which included Israel in the song contest while banning Palestinian flags and other solidarity symbols. This dynamic was broadly translated into Malmö’s city spaces: as we observed, this overarching international discourse served as a legitimizing force for the securitization of the city. Moreover, the transnational support of Israel and the concomitant de-legitimation of pro-Palestinian protests created an environment where it became acceptable to erase graffiti artwork on the Graffiti Wall of People’s Park, which expressed solidarity with the Palestinian people.

Second, the materialization of security measures, as a form of authoritarian practice, occurred within the context of Sweden’s recent shift towards the far-right and the growing influence of the Sweden Democrats Party (*Sverigedemokraterna*) in the government. With roots in the neo-Nazis movement of the 1980s and 1990s, the party, with its anti-Muslim and anti-migration ideology, became Sweden’s second-largest political party in the 2022 election. This shift has contributed to a paradigm shift in both rhetoric and reforms regarding immigration (Rothstein, 2023). Although Sweden had already experienced increasing bordering

practices within the state through internal border controls, heightened police intervention, and racial profiling (Schclarek Mulinari & Keskinen, 2022), after 2022, we have seen a punitive and authoritarian spatial turn. This includes the creation of temporarily designated zones where police can frisk individuals without any criminal suspicion, especially targeting people living in “racialised working-class neighborhoods” (Schclarek Mulinari, 2024, p. 5).

Third, we argue that the national and international political atmosphere have acute impacts in Malmö, because of its demographics, as well as its racialized representations. Depicted as “Sweden’s Chicago” (Schclarek Mulinari, 2017), Malmö has adopted a security rationale that has “legitimised the mass surveillance of citizens, and the increased concern relating to pre-crime risk management through technological innovations aimed to be pre-emptive” (p. 6). This approach has had a specific impact on racialized groups. This atmosphere, influenced by the national turn towards far-right politics and rhetoric, as well as the external perception of Malmö as a crime city, became a justifying force for the city and the police to roll out Sweden’s largest police intervention in its history. As authoritarianism is a political discourse that “draws upon and produces particular moral geographies and identities” (Koch, 2022, p. 3), the shift towards more racist, anti-Muslim discourses and politics provides important context for the above-mentioned Qur’an burning events and the resulting social unrest, which motivated the implementation of public and private security measures. Crucially, the normalization of more authoritarian ideas at the national political level has a significant effect on the racialized population in Malmö. This was evident, for instance, in the incident where a mother was prevented from entering the Eurovision village because she was wearing a *Kufiyah*. Among demonstrators, racialized protestors were specifically targeted, as seen when a special task force with assault rifles removed young men from a peaceful demonstration outside of the Eurovision Village (Pressfeldt, 2024).

In conclusion, scrutinizing how Eurovision in Malmö materialized in the city, both discursively and practically, helps us to understand the urban *spatialization of authoritarianism*, its contradictions, and its consequences for urban planning. Authoritarian practices that are salient nationally or internationally become embedded locally. Authoritarianism manifests in locally situated spatial practices as transnational cycles of power, pointing to global conflicts, are embedded in the “flows of power attached to place” (Luger, 2020, p. 1). In our case, this is linked to how mega-events disrupt the urban social fabric and impact planning practices (de Oliveira, 2020). Here, we can see that the city was eager to welcome the 184.4 million SEK in tourist spending reported during Eurovision (Upplevelseinstitutet, 2024). But arguably, Eurovision meant more than that for the city planning. From a longer perspective, Eurovision represented a testbed for the local government in Malmö to advance its vision for the city. For instance, the city designated Friisgatan as Eurovision Street, connecting the People’s Park with the train station that links Malmö to Copenhagen Airport. Friisgatan had previously been a site for urban experiments, including cultural district development and, more recently, efforts to create a car-free, green city (Gillberg, 2016; Malmö Stad, 2024d). However, as explained in the previous section, the city also became a battleground for representation during Eurovision, bringing to light existing contradictions, contrasting imaginaries and resistance to neoliberal planning. While Malmö aspires to be an open and vibrant city, welcoming everyone to celebrate Eurovision and express their opinions (Ftouni, 2024), it also experienced the largest security event in its history, including armed interventions against peaceful protesters and racial profiling of Eurovision visitors. The combination of the security apparatus dominating public space, surveillance measures, and the use of mega-events as a testbed for planning interventions should be seen as moments where authoritarianism is translated into local



temporary practices which might consolidate some exceptional neoliberal planning practices. Our multiscalar perspective on authoritarianism speaks about urban planning as embedded in and shaped by trans-local scales and discourses. While urban planning literature has acknowledged the multiscalar governance framework, it has mostly highlighted its economic imperatives and financial constraints. While critical literature has highlighted the social effects of this, the multiscalar racialized and colonial dimensions of urban planning are less discussed and require urgent attention.

Most importantly, we would like to emphasize that the legacy of Eurovision 2024 in Malmö should not be reduced to authoritarian trends alone. Since October 2023, Malmö has seen a flurry of activism in solidarity with the Palestinian people in Gaza. People had been demonstrating every weekend, demanding an immediate ceasefire and urging the Swedish government to take a stance against the ongoing genocidal war in Palestine. Several new solidarity groups have formed, and a new generation of activists has mobilized, injecting new energy and plurality into Malmö's already political landscape (Hansen, 2024). Solidarity and resistance movements challenge the boundaries of what a city is represented to be, and who it is for. The Eurovision event served as a local catalyst for the widespread dissent across the country against Israel's settler colonialism. It also amplified this dissent's visibility on a local-to-global trajectory, thus reinforcing the transnational and transversal solidarity movement of those who stand with Palestine against its ongoing, livestreamed annihilation.

### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

### Data Availability

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