

You Know I Can Never Lose, This Has Never Been About You: The Politics of Conflict in  
Eurovision in Russia, Estonia and Ukraine 2014-2023

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**Abstract**

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Estonia, Ukraine, and Russia have intensified their use of political messaging in Eurovision since the 2014 Russian invasion of Ukraine, through lyrical protest, ethnic performance, and artist identities. This thesis examines ten Eurovision entries from 2014-2023 and the instances of non-participation by Ukraine (2015, 2019) and Russia (2017, 2022 onwards) to determine how these countries have chosen to display political messaging in their entries. My analysis examined lyrics, artist identities and linguistic elements to demonstrate political messaging tactics and their varying degrees of specificity depending on the intended audience. The results thus demonstrated that Eurovision has become a common stage for political messaging of each country's ideology for Estonia, Ukraine and Russia in the context of the current Russian-Ukrainian war, although the tactics used to do so varied from country to country.

## Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction .....	1
The Functionality of Music:.....	2
Cosmopolitanism vs Nationalism .....	3
The Messaging of Music: Nation Branding vs Political Messaging.....	4
A Note on Methodology .....	4
A Battle of Ideas .....	5
Chapter 2: Background .....	6
A Brief History of Russian Aggression: .....	7
The Apolitical Stance of the EBC.....	9
Estonia: .....	10
Ukraine:.....	11
Russia:.....	12
Chapter 3: Eurovision Analysis .....	13
How are Contestants Chosen .....	13
Eesti Laul .....	13
Vidbir .....	14
Russian Government Selection .....	15
Estonia.....	16
Hope and Stefan.....	16
Bridges and Alike .....	17
Russia.....	18
Shine .....	18
A Million Voices.....	19
Julia Samoylova.....	19
Russian Woman .....	20
Withdrawal from the EBC .....	21
Ukraine.....	21
1944 and Jamala.....	21
Time .....	22
2019 Non-Competition .....	23
Solovey .....	24
Stefania .....	25
Heart of Steel .....	27
Conclusions.....	27
Bibliography .....	29

## Chapter 1: Introduction

On February 22, 2022 Russia launched a full scale invasion of Ukraine. To some this came as a shocking turn of events, one of the first land wars between two sovereign states since the last world war. But to those familiar with the situation, it was simply an escalation of a conflict that had been raging historically for centuries and recently since the 2014 annexation of Crimea. The war between Russia and Ukraine has been fought on many battlefields over the last ten years from the literal battles in Donbas to the economic and legal battles between the governments. And one of these important fields of battle is the battle that is being fought with words. These are the battles over who, in the eyes of their citizens and the international system, is morally right and who is morally wrong. Many of these battles are being fought in courtrooms and through intense information or misinformation campaigns, but another side of it is the culture. What governments and their citizens are choosing to promote as their national culture in the soft power politics of the international system. This is where Eurovision comes in. Since its inception in 1956, Eurovision has been a pillar of European cultural diplomacy, acting as a space where the European community can band together and find common ground. But while it has been a space that is meant to be apolitical, there have long been instances of countries pushing those boundaries, especially in times of conflict.

This thesis examines instances in Russia, Ukraine and Estonia in the period from 2014-2023 where the countries or artists have chosen to include political elements in support of or protest to the Russian-Ukrainian war in their Eurovision entries. I found that all three countries use political messaging in Eurovision, but all do so in different ways. Estonia is focused on the singer's story and carefully chooses who to send, Ukraine focuses on traditional elements and lyrics to fight the cultural war with Russia, and Russia used platitudes and manipulation to both appeal to Europe and get their way against perceived slights.

Chapter one of the thesis is both an introduction and serves as a literature overview of previous academic works on Eurovision and the politics of music. I cover both the conflicts between nationalism and cosmopolitanism as well as talking about morality in music and how it connects to both emotion and memory to create the ideals that have universal appeal within Eurovision. I found that there is substantial study into the connection between music, emotion, and memory and because of this there is significant theory that states that winning or significant Eurovision entries use either performance or lyrics to create a universal ideal that other countries can relate to and support and that is how the message gets across.

Chapter two is the historical background to my thesis. I focus on the history of Russian aggression which is always a background concern of the competing countries as well as the Eurovision histories of all three countries within the scope of my study. I studied how each country has historically approached Eurovision to gain a better understanding and found that each country has a separate approach to Eurovision. Estonia has found success in careful selection of participants emphasising their stories and background, many of them embracing Estonian culture while hailing from outside of Estonia. Russia has a long history in Eurovision of being caught between desiring European identity and holding a strong sense of perceived moral superiority, even when this is at odds with European cosmopolitanism. Ukraine has a record of Eurovision excellence, making it into every Eurovision finale that they have entered, and have done so by using elements of Ukrainian language, folk music, folklore and literature to bring their identity to the world stage.

Chapter three is the survey of the last ten years of Eurovision within each country using relevant Eurovision entries. I also used this chapter to establish agency demonstrating who makes the decision behind the messaging and choice of Eurovision entry. To demonstrate my findings I analyse various lyrics, artists and scandals which support the idea of political protest in Eurovision. In Estonia, the choice of artists and their individual stories demonstrates the importance of artist identity in Eurovision selection. In Russia, there have been a variety of tactics used, including platitudes after the Crimean Annexation and the instigation of a Eurovision scandal to right a perceived insult. In Ukraine, lyrical protest and a desire for honest representation of Ukrainian identity and culture has proven crucial to Ukraine's Eurovision success.

### *The Functionality of Music:*

Music is not simply for entertainment. While the catchy lyrics and beats are created with the intention of invoking emotion and drawing a listener in, more often than not, there is also a message that the musician and song writer intend to get across to the audience. In fact, music is a perfect vehicle for spreading messaging and information. Neuropsychologist Lutz Jäncke wrote a review on the recent psychology articles pertaining to the importance of music in creating both memory and emotion.<sup>1</sup> In his review, Jäncke finds that music is an ideal vehicle for activating emotion in an individual and then using the music and the emotions to create strong memory of the associated events. This is likely why music is often used in social movements, as studied by Rob Rosenthal. Rosenthal goes through the functions and methods that music plays in a larger political social movement. Music performs a distinct function in the perspectives of both the musician and the audience. Musicians largely use music for two functions in social movements: education and mobilization. The musician both wants the audience to understand the problem and be inspired to try to fix it. From the audience perspective, the music serves as an emotional attachment to the social movement itself based on shared ideals and understandings. Thus, hearing a song can then come to serve as a call to arms rallying behind the ideals of the music or the movement.<sup>2</sup>

When it comes to the Eurovision stage, this dual perspective comes into sharp relief especially within the cross-cultural setting of the song competition. There are always two sides to a Eurovision performance – the intention of the artist and the reception of the audience. Thus, when crafting messages for Eurovision, artists have to take into account what they are wanting to get across and who their intended audience is. Some of the messaging in Eurovision is subtle, intended for a specific community instead of the entire audience, and so it is woven subtly into the framework of the song. This can often involve cultural messaging that is specific to a country. Then for the audience, often there has to be a conscious decision of choosing whether to vote and support songs with messages that the audience thinks are important, or simply voting for the song they think is catchiest.

Ariel James also studies this dual messaging but in the context of analysing successful Eurovision songs. James argues for the existence of a 'musical person,' This is the person that the song is written for, a moral person. It goes beyond the 'I', 'you', 'they' identities in the song into a fourth person which transcends the author of the song and the audience. This person is created by the musician to ensure that both the singer and the audience are feeling the same type of emotion. James argues that it is this emotional connection that is created

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<sup>1</sup> Lutz Jäncke, "Music, memory and emotion," *Journal of Biology* (2008).

<sup>2</sup> Rob Rosenthal, "Serving the Movement: The Role(s) of Music," *Popular Music & Society* (2001).

between the artist and the audience by playing upon universal ideals that creates the song's success.<sup>3</sup>

Beyond success, this idea of creating a universal moral can work towards creating an effective political message. In order to transcend cross-cultural and international borders and get its message across, it becomes intrinsically important for a song's message to be something that the audience can understand. This is what wins votes for a song and hearts for a message.

### *Cosmopolitanism vs Nationalism*

Part of the need for careful consideration of audiences and messages comes from the multi-faceted nature of the Eurovision song contest. Often within the contest there is a sense of conflicting identities within the motivations of the participants. As a stage of international diplomacy Eurovision is a chance for a country to represent a central message of its own national identity to the world. In fact, this is often part of the significance of a country getting to host Eurovision, as it allows the country to exhibit its own national significance and appeal to an international audience. However, there is also a pull to show how each country can fit into the broader collective. In Eurovision audience members are not allowed to vote for their own country. Instead, each artist has to make appeals to the judges and audience members of other countries by appealing to the broader European identity. This conflict can be explained as a conflict between nationalism and cosmopolitanism.

Philip Bohlman tries to explain what nationalist music is. He defines nationalist music as music that is intended to showcase a national identity in a way that claims that your music or your musician is better than everyone else's.<sup>4</sup> It is this competition that is at the heart of Eurovision. In recent years Eurovision performances have been trending back into countries showcasing their own languages and cultures on stage instead of creating something that they think is universally popular. Instead of seeking the broader European and global identity each country is trying to showcase what makes it unique. This fits the basic definition of nationalist music set against the backdrop of soft power diplomacy.

In contrast, there is an overarching sense of cosmopolitan identity running through Eurovision. At its base the song competition was set up to bring countries together in a united identity through music. As Phil Jackson argues, the Eurovision song contest sets up a cosmopolitan identity however contrived between all the countries that choose to participate in it. Jackson argues for a concept called instrumental cosmopolitanism. In this type of cosmopolitanism each country knows its own identity, knows in essence "who am I as a country."<sup>5</sup> Then with the broader European context this turns into the idea of how does a country's individual identity relate to the group as a whole. Through each country understanding its place in the greater European identity more intelligent and strategic decisions can then be made when choosing which aspects of national identity to portray through events such as Eurovision. This in a way balances out the ideas of nationalism and cosmopolitanism. While a country can be strong in its own identity it just has to figure out

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<sup>3</sup> Ariel James, "Sharing Values in the Eurovision Song Contest and the OTI Festival: The Moral Fourth Person in the Lyrics of the Winning Songs," in *The Eurovision Song Contest as a Cultural Phenomenon*, 129-143 (United Kingdom: Routledge, 2022).

<sup>4</sup> Philip Bohlman, "Nationalist Music," in *Focus: Music, Nationalism, and the Making of the New Europe* (London: Routledge, 2011), 85-117.

<sup>5</sup> Phil Jackson, "Welcome Europe! : the Eurovision Song Contest as a continuum for cosmopolitanism," in *Media and Cosmopolitanism*, ed. Aybige Yilmaz (Phil Lang, 2015).

how that identity relates to the whole. Jackson then goes on to argue that this is partially why nationalist messaging on the international stage is much more nuanced and subtle.

Thus, when looking at entries for Eurovision it is important to look at these conflicting values of a country in both who they are as a nation and how it relates to the whole. By understanding this tension, it opens the possibility of strong analysis of performance.

### *The Messaging of Music: Nation Branding vs Political Messaging*

When looking at what messages are sent out during Eurovision performances, they largely fall into two categories, nation branding and political messaging. Every performance in Eurovision acts as nation branding, serving as a chance to reflect the messaging of the country that the performance is representing. However, political messaging is something that as previously discussed, is subtle in nature and is intended to speak on a specific issue.

Nation branding in Eurovision is something that is explained by Paul Jordan. Jordan focuses primarily on Estonia in the wake of their 2001 Eurovision win. Jordan outlines what nation branding is and why it's important to Eurovision. In theory, nation branding is when a government pays special attention to its international image and what the international perception of the country is. Frequently this can include a focused branding campaign such as Estonia's 2002 "Welcome to Estonia: Positively Transforming." But at the base of it, it is a country trying to send a carefully packaged image to the international community about the identity of the country, its culture, and its people.<sup>6</sup> Often, this is seen in Eurovision when a country gets the chance to host Eurovision and what they do to handle the image of their culture both on television and with the influx of tourists. However, this is also in its base definition what a country is doing in Eurovision. They are presenting the best image of themselves to the international scene in a carefully produced package.

However, there are frequently cases where it goes much deeper than that. These cases aren't mutually exclusive from the nation branding, but instead just have a message that chooses to address a specific issue. This is the political messaging. It follows the nuances of cosmopolitanism to bring meaning to the song that is subtle enough to pass the board of the EBC while announcing to the world the grievances of the country. The level and the subtleness of this messaging varies year by year and country by country but often when a country is in some kind of distress Eurovision provides a clear and open international stage to express its political grievances. This isn't always separate from a country trying to define itself but is intended to send a message to either the international audience at large or to a specific intended audience.

This paper focuses on political messages. These emerge in moments when a country either chooses to repair its international image, or decides enough is enough, and uses music to tell the world its stance on an issue. In recent years, a common political issue within Eurovision political messaging in Estonia, Ukraine, and Russia has been the war in Ukraine, so using the war as a lens can provide valuable insight.

### *A Note on Methodology*

While I have chosen to study a ten-year window of Eurovision, I have not chosen to analyse every performance within that window. This is because while every performance is important

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<sup>6</sup> Paul Jordan, *The Modern Fairy Tale: Nation Branding, National Identity and the Eurovision Song Contest in Estonia*, (Tartu: University of Tartu Press, 2014).

to cultural diplomacy and the national brand that the countries that I'm studying are displaying, this thesis is focused specifically on political messaging related to the conflict in Ukraine. There are two factors to this conflict that I am looking at and I chose criteria based on those factors. The first is the hard power military conflict that has been happening in Ukraine since 2014. To find mentions of this conflict I chose to look for direct references to either war or peace within the lyrics of the song and statements made about the song. The second factor is the soft power cultural war between Russia and Ukraine. On February 21st, 2022 Vladimir Putin made a statement claiming that modern Ukraine is a Soviet invention and the people, culture and history of Ukraine is Russian.<sup>7</sup> This reflects a long-time rhetoric of the Russian state, and this soft power spread of colonial history has been a large factor in the current war. To address this, I also looked for songs especially in Ukraine, that fought for Ukrainian culture and language in the face of this Russian rhetoric, or songs from Russia, although they haven't competed since 2021, that perpetrated the rewritten history.

Once I had my criteria, I looked at all of the performances within the period from 2014-2023. I was looking at three main things in each performance. The first was the lyrics of the actual songs. I did a read-through of the lyrics in the songs, looking for any of the criteria. The next thing I did was look at statements that the artist had put out about the meaning of their songs; this allowed me to determine what the artist intended for the message to be. Finally, I looked at outside commentary on the meaning and reception of the song because this tells me what the general interpretation of the meaning was outside of what it may have been intended to mean. If any of these things fit the criteria, the song was included in my analysis. This left me with ten songs to look at, two Estonian, three Russian, and five Ukrainian. Due to my positioning as a cultural outsider, there may be other songs within the time period which are also relevant but I have chosen to focus on the strongest examples from every country.

Furthermore, while doing the research I ran into instances where there was political scandal in Eurovision that ended in a withdrawal (Ukraine in 2019 and Russia in 2017 and 2022). Since all of these were related to the geopolitics of the war, they were all included in the analysis.

### *A Battle of Ideas*

It would be remiss to examine the effects of the war of ideologies without a brief understanding of what they are based on. There is currently a long ideological and legal battle going on between Russia and Ukraine. It has its roots in the dissolution of the USSR in 1991 when Ukraine got sovereign independence in the international sphere. Both Russia and Ukraine, following the dissolution of the USSR, entered longstanding international treaties such as the UN Charter. Shortly thereafter, in 1994, the Budapest Memorandum was signed between Russia, Ukraine, the UK, and the United States. The point of this memorandum was to ensure the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons by having Ukraine transfer all nuclear weapons within their borders to Russia on the condition that all the signed countries respect Ukraine's sovereign borders.<sup>8</sup> This also coincided with Russia and Ukraine signing and ratifying other large international treaties, such as the Geneva Conventions. The issue that quickly came to light was there was not a properly demarcated border between Russia and Ukraine, and there was controversy as to where it should be. In 2003, Russia and Ukraine signed and ratified a border treaty that delineated the land border between the two countries.

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<sup>7</sup> The Kremlin, "President of Russia," February 21, 2022, accessed April 26, 2024, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/67828>.

<sup>8</sup> United Nations, "Budapest Memorandum," December 5, 1994, <https://treaties.un.org/Pages/showDetails.aspx?objid=0800000280401fbb>.

However, the Russian state consistently ignored the terms of setting the border until Ukraine unilaterally demarcated the border in 2015.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, when Russia launched its invasion of Ukraine in 2014 and escalation in 2022, there was a large legal backlash from the Ukrainians on Russia's justifications for the invasion. Russia used the Geneva Conventions (LeDonne 2003) (LeDonne 2003) in 2022, claiming Ukrainian genocide over states that had not previously existed. Thus prompting Ukraine to present a countersuit to the international justice court, on the subject of Russian genocide including claims of forcible removal of Ukrainian children from Ukraine's sovereign borders, that is backed by much of the world. Ukraine has been arguing for legal repercussions for Russia choosing to invade another sovereign state, which is consistent with Russia's long history of doing so, which is further discussed in chapter 2. The court cases have been a long drawn out affair that is still in deliberation. But, Ukraine has used international law to prove that Russia does not have legal proof of genocide and, thus, no legal provision under international law for violating the sanctity of Ukrainian borders.<sup>10</sup>

The Russian side of the argument comes from the historical opinions of President Vladimir Putin. He has long held a publicly stated view that Ukraine should not exist as a sovereign territory. He released a paper entitled "On the Historic Unity of Russians and Ukrainians" in 2021 where he stated: "Therefore, modern Ukraine is entirely the product of the Soviet era. We know and remember well that it was shaped – for a significant part – on the lands of historical Russia."<sup>11</sup> He draws a Russified version of history starting with the Kyivan Rus that creates a unified history of Russia and Ukraine. This is a long held traditional Russian reading of history in which the Russian empire coopted Ukrainian history to claim ancient ties to land, religion and ideals.<sup>12</sup> This has been a consistent part of Russian foreign policy and has been echoed in more extreme remarks since Putin has been president. This shapes the view of Russian belief on the legality of the Russian-Ukrainian war since, with the Russian rewriting of shared history, the war is not then an invasion but a reunification.

By understanding how these countries view and have been fighting legal and ideological wars between the states it is then possible to get background insight into the Eurovision entries and how these ideologies have worked to impact the backbone of this thesis: the music.

## Chapter 2: Background

Many factors make a country successful in Eurovision. At its heart, Eurovision is a music contest, something that people tune into for the flashy performances and catchy chorus lines. Thus, countries have to toe a line between what will be successful and what is the best representation of their country, because at the end of the day a country's and artist's goal in the Eurovision song contest is to win. This is reflected in the memoir *Olen see, kes olen* which was written by prominent Estonian musician and Eurovision winner Dave Benton. He states that a country's primary goal in Eurovision is to win, that it's every contestant's dream

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<sup>9</sup> Kataryna Wolczuk and Professor Rilka Dragneva, "Russia's Longstanding Problem with Ukraine's Border," Chatham House, October 13, 2022, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2022/08/russias-longstanding-problem-ukraines-borders>.

<sup>10</sup> Allegations of Genocide under the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (Ukraine v. Russian Federation), n.d., 182 (International Court of Justice).

<sup>11</sup> Vladimir Putin, "On the Historic Unity of Russians and Ukrainians," July 12, 2021, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>.

<sup>12</sup> Laada Bilaniuk, "Contested Tongues: Language Politics and Cultural Correction in Ukraine" 71-102; (Cornell University Press, 2006).

to be declared the winner and get the chance to bring recognition to their country and Eurovision into their borders. Benton perceives Eurovision as something revered stating:

Eurovisioon on see, mis ta on - Euroopa ja võib-olla kogu maailma suurim meelelahutusüritus. Korra aastas tulevad Euroopa riigid kokku maailma suurimaks teleshowks. Iga Euroopa riik soovib seda võistlust korraldada ja iga laulja, kes seal esineb unistab ilmselt ka Eurovisiooni võidust. Kui on olemas selliseid riike, kes võitu ei soovi ja võistlust ei austa, siis nemad ei peaks võistlusel osalema.

Eurovision is what it is - the biggest entertainment event in Europe and possibly the world. Once a year, European countries come together for the world's biggest TV show. Every European country wants to organize this competition, and every singer who performs there probably also dreams of winning Eurovision. If there are countries that do not want to win and do not respect the competition, then they should not participate in the competition.<sup>13</sup>

Bringing a song to Eurovision success, however, is often more complicated than it seems at face value. Music and the people who write it don't exist in a vacuum. They are shaped by culture, politics and ideals, all three of which tend to seep into the music and how it is written and performed. Thus, to properly understand what is going on in Eurovision between 2014 and 2023 it is essential to look at the past and the trends of each country as they have chosen to approach the song contest. Mostly, this means looking at the times each country has won the right to host Eurovision and what they have done with it, as hosting Eurovision gives a country immense opportunity to showcase who they are. Understanding the background of Eurovision in each country, as well as the context of Eurovision at large can provide the foundation for Eurovision analysis.

With the countries studied in this paper, at the time of the country's first Eurovision competition (1994 for Russia and Estonia and 2003 for Ukraine), the countries were in a stage of shifting identities following the fall of the Soviet Union. All three of the countries were trying to reinvent their identity. Estonia was the country quickest to try and showcase themselves as a country of modernity and "Europeanness", with Ukraine also joining the cosmopolitan fold while holding firm to Ukraine's cultural roots. However, from the start Russia was a country of two identities. In a large sense Russia in the 00s tried to embrace a more European identity. The Russian government wanted to enter an era where Russia was more integrated into Western culture and economics. But, while embracing Western Europe, Russia continued to provoke the countries of the former USSR, including Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, in a pattern of aggression that was reminiscent of Russia's imperial past and shaped actions and perceptions in the region.

### ***A Brief History of Russian Aggression:***

Despite being the geographically biggest country in the world, the Russian Federation has a long history of violent expansionism. There is a trend that when Russia considers another country a threat or a potential threat Russia seeks to eliminate the threat before it becomes an issue. In political science, this is termed "defensive expansionism". There is a long history of this stemming all the way back to the Russian empire where in an effort to "defend itself"

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<sup>13</sup> Dave Benton, Olen See Kes Olen, 133, Good News Kirkastus, 113, 2020.

## Timeline of Russian Aggression

<b>1990-1992</b>	War in Transnistria
<b>1992</b>	War in Abkhazie
<b>1994-1996</b>	First Chechan War
<b>1999-2000</b>	Second Chechan War
<b>2004</b>	Assasination attempt of Yushchenko
<b>2004 -2005</b>	Orange Revolution
<b>August 2008</b>	Russo-Georgia War
<b>2008</b>	Ukraine Bids to join NATO
<b>January 2009</b>	Russia cuts off natural gas supply to Ukraine
<b>2010</b>	Pro-Russia President Victor Yanukovych elected in Ukraine
<b>2011</b>	Syrian Civil War: Russia provides military aid
<b>2013</b>	Ukraine seeks association agreement with EU and then is threatened by Russia with the movement blocked by Yanukovych
<b>November 2013- February 2014</b>	Revolution of Dignity

Russia became the third largest empire in history.<sup>14</sup> This can further be demonstrated by the heavy-handed involvement in periphery states and republics under the Soviet Union and continued interference after the 1991 collapse of the USSR.<sup>15</sup>

Looking at the region's history, the Russian Federation interfered early in various states. In 1990, Russian troops swarmed into Chechnya in an effort to overcome the independence movement within the region. Hoping for a quick and overwhelming victory, the war ended up being a loss for Russian troops until a second invasion was launched in 1994, which lasted until the new millennium.<sup>16</sup>

In Georgia, Russia supported the independence movement of Abkhazia, which ended in Russian occupation of the region and a slew of war crimes. This was continued in the 2008 Russo-Georgian war where Russian troops invaded and occupied Northern Georgia. This followed on the back of Georgia seeking and failing to receive NATO membership.<sup>17</sup> This support by occupation is further seen in the Transnistria region of Moldova where Russian troops have been occupying the region since 1992 in an effort to 'keep the peace.'<sup>18</sup>

This trend further continued with Russia's aid to Syria in 2011. Despite this war not happening in Europe, much of Russia's actions in the area were in direct opposition to UN and NATO efforts in the area. Russia chose to support and aid the Assad regime.

The final case is that of Ukraine. The invasion and annexation of Crimea was not the first time that there was conflict between the two countries. The conflicts started as early as the

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<sup>14</sup> John P. LeDonne, "The Grand Strategy of the Russian Empire, 1650-1831," 3-12 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>15</sup> Taylor McNeil, "The Long History of Russia and War," Tufts Now, March 31, 2022, accessed March 12, 2024, <https://now.tufts.edu/2022/03/31/long-history-russia-and-war>.

<sup>16</sup> Andrew Higgins, "The War That Continues to Shape Russia, 25 Years Later," The New York Times, December 10, 2019, accessed April 26, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/10/world/europe/photos-chechen-war-russia.html>.

<sup>17</sup> Priyanka Shankar, "'Before Bucha in Ukraine, There Was Abkhazia in Georgia'," Al Jazeera, August 5, 2022, accessed April 26, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/8/5/forgotten-war-crimes-of-abkhazia>.

<sup>18</sup> Keith Harrington, "Three Decades On, the Spark that Ignited War in Moldova," Balkan Insight, March 17, 2022, accessed April 26, 2024, <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/03/17/three-decades-on-the-spark-that-ignited-war-in-moldova/>.

early 1990s when Russia was fighting Ukraine for continued access to Sevastopol on the Crimean Peninsula. This continued in a series of economic and gas disputes throughout the 2000s and finally cumulated in the pro-Russia presidency of Yanukovich who sought closer ties with Russia at the risk of cutting ties for EU membership. This ended in the Revolution of Dignity in 2013 where the people of Ukraine loudly and vocally called to be a part of Europe.<sup>19</sup>

A further factor in the conflict in Ukraine has come not as direct interference but as a soft power spread of misinformation by the Russian state. On February 21st, 2022 in a speech at the beginning of the full scale invasion of Ukraine Vladimir Putin stated, "During the recent Direct Line, when I was asked about Russian-Ukrainian relations, I said that Russians and Ukrainians were one people – a single whole...Therefore, modern Ukraine is entirely the product of the Soviet era."<sup>20</sup> He echoes a long time Russian rhetoric that Ukraine is not a separate entity from Russia and thus should not be its own independent state. This is a war of historical misinformation that Ukraine has also had to fight on the international stage.

### *The Apolitical Stance of the EBC*

The Eurovision Song Contest was started by the European Broadcasting Commission in 1956. However, for the first couple of decades of the song contest, the apolitical nature of the broadcast was something that was assumed instead of explicitly stated. This changed in 2000 when there was a statement explicitly added to the rules. It states:

The lyrics and/or performance of the songs shall not bring the Shows, the ESC as such or the EBU into disrepute. No lyrics, speeches, gestures of a political or similar nature shall be permitted during the ESC. [...] A breach of this rule may result in disqualification.<sup>21</sup>

This rule, however, has been controversial not necessarily in itself but in how it gets applied. Over the years, there have been moments when there is backlash as to where this rule has been applied and not applied. There is no longer any question in scholarship and media that despite the EBC's official stance, Eurovision is a mode for political messaging from wartime grievances to issues of race, sexuality and gender. When it comes to the messaging between Russia and other post-Soviet states, it is a long and tenuous history due to countries being angry about Russia's continued interference in the region. This interference has led to Russia's exclusion from Eurovision since the launch of the full scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

When songs seem to criticise, Russia is often the biggest target and the biggest voice of offence. There have been cases previous to the war where songs were and weren't allowed due to explicit implications in the lyrics. In 2009, the Eurovision Song Contest was held in Moscow. Georgia tried to enter with a song called "We don't want to put in" whose lyrics were blatantly about Russia's expansionism into Europe. This was Georgia's response to

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<sup>19</sup> NATO Association of Canada, "A Timeline of Russian Aggression," accessed March 12, 2024, <https://natoassociation.ca/a-timeline-of-russian-aggression/>. ; Jon Roozenbeek, "A History of Russian-Ukrainian Relations," in *Propaganda and Ideology in the Russian-Ukrainian War, 7-26* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024).

<sup>20</sup> The Kremlin, "President of Russia," February 21, 2022, accessed April 26, 2024, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/67828>.

<sup>21</sup> Eurovision Song Contest, "The Rules of the Contest 2024," accessed March 28, 2024, <https://eurovision.tv/about/rules>.

Russia's invasion. This song was deemed too political, and Georgia, instead of changing the lyrics, chose to withdraw from the contest. However, two years previously, Ukrainian artist Verka Serduchka sang the song "Dancing Lasha Tumbai", claiming that Lasha Tumbai was the Mongolian phrase for a milkshake. Russia claimed offense because within the song, the words Lasha Tumbai have phonetic similarity to the words Russia Goodbye.<sup>22</sup> The song was allowed by the EBC to be performed in Eurovision despite Russian outcry.

There appears to be some leniency given to countries over this rule during times of war.<sup>23</sup> This is reflected further when looking at the songs that are included in my analysis. But whether this is an oversight of the EBC or whether it is Europe standing against Russian imperialism, it is hard to tell.

### **Estonia:**

Estonia was one of the first countries to join Eurovision after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Eager to showcase their identity as a European country and try to change the perception of Eastern Europe, Estonia was a keen contestant in Eurovision in their early entries. However, Estonia didn't see much success in Eurovision until 2001.

Estonia's entries in Eurovision have primarily been about story. While there are different tactics that countries have employed, including flashy performances or shocking contestant choices, Estonia has stuck mainly with what message a performer and a song can contribute to the contest while representing the country. In 2001 Estonia was on their push for two things: modernisation and acceptance into European organisations, including the European Union. To do this Estonia was trying to break out of the pre-conceived stereotypes of "post-Soviet" states and assert their inclusivity and progressive society. This is likely in part why that year Estonia chose to send Tanel Padar and Dave Benton, a native Estonian and an immigrant from Aruba to Eurovision to sing in unity. Estonia was trying to put itself on the map, remembered in Dave Benton's memoir *Olen see, kes olen* (I am who I am). He describes talking to foreigners before Eurovision and how almost no one he talked to knew about Estonia and its people. According to Benton his primary goal in the entire contest was to represent Estonia on the world stage. He states that he was honoured to represent the country which had taken him in and given him so much.<sup>24</sup>

Estonia's win in 2001 gave Estonia the chance to do something that no other Eastern European country had done to date: host the Eurovision Song Contest. The EBC had initial concerns about whether Estonia even could host the song contest since it is a pricey endeavour, and the country was still struggling on the economic scene. However, to Estonia, this was a chance of a lifetime, so Estonia pushed to have the Eurovision rules honoured and be given a chance to host Eurovision. According to prominent Eurovision scholar Paul Jordan, however, Estonia was raring for the chance to show the world what made Estonia Estonia. This launched according to Jordan an incredibly successful national branding campaign for Estonia. Using the slogan "Welcome to Estonia: Positively Transforming," Estonia worked to show the rest of the world that not only was it a growing economy, but it

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<sup>22</sup> Arve Hansen, Andrei Rogatchevski, Yngvar Steinholt, and David-Emil Whickstrom, "'Lasha Tumbai' or 'Russia, Goodbye?' – The Eurovision Song Contest as a Post-Soviet Geopolitical Battleground," in *War of Songs* (Ibidem Verlag, 2019).

<sup>23</sup> Phil Jackson, "The Politics of Belonging at the Eurovision Song Contest," *EuropeNow Journal*, accessed March 11, 2024, <https://www.europenowjournal.org/2017/02/28/the-politics-of-belonging-at-the-eurovision-song-contest/>.

<sup>24</sup> Dave Benton, *Olen See Kes Olen*, Good News Kirkastus, 2020.

was a country quickly being ushered into the modern era.<sup>25</sup> On the back of this successful hosting of Eurovision, Estonia has since been an active and avid competitor in the Eurovision Song Contest.

### *Ukraine:*

Ukraine has maintained an enormous amount of Eurovision success since joining the competition in 2003. Ukraine joined the contest in 2003 in an effort to change its international image and has had immense success at doing so. Ukraine has been the only country to successfully qualify for the grand finale of Eurovision in every Eurovision that it has competed in.<sup>26</sup>

The earliest indicator of this success came in 2004, a mere year after Ukraine joined the ESC. Ruslana won Eurovision with the song *Wild Dances*. This was the instance when the world was first introduced on the international stage to Ukraine's unique version of ethno-pop. Wanting to stay true to her Ukrainian heritage, Ruslana sought to create a song for Eurovision that was intrinsically Ukrainian. To do so she travelled around the Carpathians, a region of Ukraine that she was from, studying the local musical traditions and beats. These were incorporated into *Wild Dances*, transforming it into a number that was modern enough to win Eurovision but sought to bring a uniquely Ukrainian cultural twist to it. David-Emil Wickstrom makes the argument that this was partially as a way to differentiate Ukrainian music from the similar but distinct brand of Russo-pop that was also being played at the time.<sup>27</sup> Ruslana and other local artists worked to weave Ukrainian cultural and folk elements into their music and performances to disprove Russian and Western European Stereotypes of Ukraine as simply a 'little brother' to Russia. Ruslana, by bringing the traditional elements into Eurovision, started a long tradition of Ukraine using cultural elements within their Eurovision entries that continues to this day.

A mere year later, Ukraine was in trouble at Eurovision even though they were hosting. Domestically, Ukraine was recovering from the Orange Revolution, a series of massive protests over corruption during the 2004 national election. Partially in response, the winning entry of Vidbir that year was *Green Jolly*, and their song "Razom Nas Bahato", which was the unofficial anthem of the Orange Revolution. However, when the song was presented to Eurovision, there was a major issue. In the chorus of the original lyrics, *Green Jolly* sings, "Yushchenko (Yes), Yushchenko (Yes), Is our president", which is a direct reference to one of the Ukrainian presidential candidates. This broke the European Broadcasting Commission's rule against direct political messaging in Eurovision. The lyrics were changed to "We trust (yes), we can (yes), I know we will win (yes, yes)" to follow the Eurovision guidelines.

The next controversial song came a mere two years later with Verka Serduchka and her song "Dancing Lasha Tumbai". The fast-paced pop song was sung in a series of languages. As explained in an article by Hansen, Russia took offense with the lyrics that are also present in the title. Serduchka claimed that *Lasha Tumbai* was a Mongolian phrase that mean something along the lines of milkshake. However, the Russian audience thought that within the song the

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<sup>25</sup> Paul Jordan, *The Modern Fairy Tale: Nation Branding, National Identity and the Eurovision Song Contest in Estonia*, (Tartu: University of Tartu Press, 2014).

<sup>26</sup> Eurovision Song Contest, "A Brief History of Ukraine at the Eurovision Song Contest," July 25, 2022, accessed March 11, 2024, <https://eurovision.tv/story/brief-history-ukraine-eurovision-song-contest>.

<sup>27</sup> David-Emil Wickstrom, "'Drive Ethno-Dance' and 'Hutzul Punk': Ukrainian-Associated Popular Music and (Geo)Politics in a Post-Soviet Context," *Yearbook for Traditional Music*, 60-88 (2008).

lyrics resembled the words “Russia Goodbye.” The song was allowed to be performed in the song contest however, since the translation of Lasha Tumbai was shown to be nonsense which, according to Hansen, lent credence to the perspective that Serduchka was indeed making fun of Russia in her Eurovision entry, which the singer vehemently denied.<sup>28</sup>

After, Ukraine ventured on to not only be successful in Eurovision but continued the trends of adding a little bit of either Ukrainian or another indigenous culture to their Eurovision performances.<sup>29</sup>

### *Russia:*

Russia joined Eurovision with a good chunk of Eastern Europe in the early 1990s. Russia’s first Eurovision competition was in 1994. At the time Russia was seeking to create a new identity for itself that was separate from the former Soviet Union. In the early years, Russia was seeking a more European identity and closer ties to the West.

However, Russia did not win Eurovision until 2008 with Dima Bilan’s song Believe. This was a song that had a quite over-the-top staging performance featuring gold medal figure skater Evgeni Plushenko. But this performance brought Eurovision to Moscow. Russia pulled out all the stops for their Eurovision hosting. Up till that time, the Moscow Eurovision in 2009 was the most expensive Eurovision ever. Much like other times that Russia has hosted international competitions, the government sought to create the best image of Russia on the international level. There were allegations of Russia taking extreme measures to clear the Moscow streets. This added controversy onto the concerns that already existed over Russia’s treatment of minority populations including the LGBT movement.<sup>30</sup>

But one of the biggest surprises of the 2009 Eurovision in Moscow was Russia’s choice of artists. Russia held a rare chance at Evrovidenie, their national selection competition. This competition was won by Anastasia Prikhodko, a Ukrainian singer, with the song Mamo. Because the song was sung partly in Ukrainian, there was uproar from certain parts of the government and a suggestion of vote rigging during the competition.<sup>31</sup> Mamo certainly provides an interesting case of messaging in Eurovision with two possible explanations. The first is presented by Johnson in her article, that Russia was attempting to send a message to former Soviet countries in the wake of the 2008 Georgian conflict that Russia was still mother to them, creating a sense of harmony and unity among the former soviet states.<sup>32</sup> An alternative explanation that I think fits better into the larger political goals and foundational beliefs of the government is that due to Russia’s continued narrative around Ukraine sharing a culture with Russia, it is continued cultural appropriation by the Russian government.

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<sup>28</sup> Hansen, “Lasha Tumbai.”

<sup>29</sup> Daniel Welsh, "How Ukraine Went From New Kids on the Eurovision Block to One of Its Strongest Competitors," *Huffington Post*, May 13, 2023, accessed March 11, 2024, [https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/ukraine-at-eurovision-timeline-ruslana-jamala-kalush-orchestra\\_uk\\_643e91cce4b0408f3e4ef9d0](https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/ukraine-at-eurovision-timeline-ruslana-jamala-kalush-orchestra_uk_643e91cce4b0408f3e4ef9d0).

<sup>30</sup> Paul Jordan, "The Eurovision Song Contest: Nation Branding and Nation Building in Estonia and Ukraine," ProQuest Dissertations, 2011.

<sup>31</sup> Emily D. Johnson, "A New Song for a New Motherland: Eurovision and the Rhetoric of Post-Soviet National Identity," *The Russian Review*, 24-46 (2014).

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

## Chapter 3: Eurovision Analysis

### *How are Contestants Chosen*

How does a country choose not only what message they want to sing but who they want to represent them? This is an important factor when trying to study political messaging in Eurovision because this is the only way that you can understand where the messaging is coming from. Something that makes Eurovision an interesting cross-section is that this messaging isn't, in most cases, coming from a single primary source. This multi-level agency means that all of the actors have to be in agreement on the messaging of the song before it can pass on to Eurovision. This means that one can be hard pressed sometimes to figure out where the messaging is coming from. But it can also make the messaging more powerful because it means that at the end of the day what is being performed at Eurovision is not the ideals of an individual artist or government but instead of the country.

So, who are these actors that work together. The first and primary step is the songwriter. This is the individual who is shaped by their own personal culture and ideals and works to create a song that they want to bring to the world. At this level the messaging is the result of either an individual or small team who work to bring their ideals to life. The song then goes to the singer. Sometimes, the artist is involved in the writing of the song, but sometimes, it is just an individual who is willing to embody the message that is presented. They become the face of the song and the music. From there, the song gets sent to the national selection contest. This is the first hurdle that a song and, thus, the message has to pass. There is usually a panel that works to whittle the songs down to just what will be presented. On top of the panel, there is the agency of the organization that runs the competition itself as this can often determine what is being looked for in a successful song. Depending on the country, this may or may not be state-run. Once a song gets entered into the contest, the final two levels of agency come. The same two preside over Eurovision: the jury and the audience. The jury are music professionals. They are people who know their field and know what works and what doesn't. They are those who study the song as professionals and give their opinion on what works. The audience is more grassroots based. The audience votes for what they relate to. This is where the ideals that have been crafted up to this point can lead to the selection of a certain artist. However, sometimes this backfires because the audience doesn't seek deeper meaning; they seek what they think will win.

Looking into how each country selects their participants gives access into what each country values and who gets a say in the selection process.

### **Eesti Laul**

Estonia follows the general model of Eurovision selection. Every year Estonia's national broadcasting company, Eesti Rahvusringhääling or ERR, hosts the singing competition Eesti Laul. ERR is a government-subsidized broadcasting service which claims that the news source is independent. Artists who are interested in competing send their song into the contest with their application. In order to determine which artists were selected for the contest, up until this year, there was a panel of music professionals who would weed through the songs, determining which songs they thought were successful enough to compete at Eurovision. For 2024, Estonia switched from two semi-finals to one, and to try and give some agency back to the general population, non-music professionals were added to the selection panel.

Once the songs made it past the panel, up until this year, twenty songs were selected for the semi-finals. During each semi-final there are two rounds of voting, the first is 50% jury and 50% popular vote with the top four songs securing finals spots. The second round of voting is 100% popular vote sending an additional one song plus a wildcard. These twelve songs advance to finals where they are performed. With a 50% international jury vote and a 50% popular vote the top three songs are sent to a super final where 100% of the popular vote determines the Eesti Laul winner.<sup>33</sup>

In 2024, Eesti Laul officially outgrew its original stage. To accommodate this, it was cut to a single semi-final to afford a larger stage production. The panel chose five songs to automatically advance to the finals, with another 10 competing in the semifinals. Five more songs were selected at the semi-finals, just as in years past, excluding a wild card. Voting at the finals remained the same.<sup>34</sup>

But what does Estonia push for in selecting a song through Eesti Laul? Thankfully Estonia is very open in what the contest and panel value in the selection of songs. In October of 2023 Karmel Killandi who is the current head of Eesti Laul gave an interview talking about the importance of thoughtful selection in Eurovision. She pushes the idea that it is not so much the language that the song is written or performed in but the message behind it that is important to think about.<sup>35</sup> This was echoed in a separate interview with Priit Pajusaar who served on the 2024 panel claiming that the professionals are looking at the complete picture of a song. They study not only its catchiness and international appeal but what kind of story and message it will send to the world. He did admit that this year this was hampered a little bit by non-music professionals being added to the selection panel.<sup>36</sup>

## Vidbir

Vidbir is the Ukrainian competition that selects their artist for Eurovision. It is run by the 1+1 Corporation, which is a massive independent media corporation that has run out of Ukraine. Thus, although the government has to clear the news source, it is an independently run competition. To enter Vidbir, artists in Ukraine enter their songs, and twenty artists are selected for live auditions. Once an artist performs in auditions, there are ten selected for the finals, with the general public allowed to vote to save an artist from those left to send them to finals.<sup>37</sup>

At the finals, all eleven artists perform for the general public and three judges who have also been selected by the Ukrainian public. These are people that Ukrainians trust to know the

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<sup>33</sup> Eurovision World.com, "Estonia: Eesti Laul 2023," accessed March 11, 2024, <https://eurovisionworld.com/national/estonia/eesti-laul-2023>.

<sup>34</sup> Eurovision Song Contest, "Everything you need to know about Estonia's 'Eesti Laul' final," February 15, 2024, accessed March 11, 2024, <https://eurovision.tv/story/everything-you-need-estonias-eesti-laul-final>.

<sup>35</sup> Neit-Eerik Nestor, "Karmel Killandi Eesti Laulust: tähtis on lugu, mida artist juurde räägib," ERR, October 10, 2023, accessed March 28, 2024, <https://menu.err.ee/1609127654/karmel-killandi-eesti-laulust-tahtis-on-lugu-mida-artist-juurde-raagib>.

<sup>36</sup> Neit-Eerik Nestor, "Priit Pajusaar Eesti Laulu žüriis Eurovisiooni võidulugu ei kuulnud," ERR, November 11, 2023, accessed March 28, 2024, <https://menu.err.ee/1609162009/priit-pajusaar-eesti-laulu-zuriis-eurovisiooni-voidulugu-ei-kuulnud>.

<sup>37</sup> Dave King, "Vidbir 2024 Promises A New Surprise For The World," ESC Bubble, October 24, 2023, accessed March 11, 2024, <https://escbubble.com/2023/10/vidbir-2024-promises-a-new-surprise-for-the-world/>.

music scene and what's going on.<sup>38</sup> The winner of Vidbir is determined by jury vote and general public vote at 50% a piece. Voting uses a government app Diia, ensuring each Ukrainian a single vote.<sup>39</sup>

When looking at what Ukraine values in their selection of artists it can be seen in a mix of trends and statements. Especially in more recent years Ukraine has pushed sending Eurovision contestants who use Ukrainian culture within their music be it through themes, images, language, voice style or instruments. Ukraine has its own very distinct brand of euro-pop that they seek to demonstrate in their music. As well during interviews about how the music was being handled in the most recent Vidbir, sound producer Roman Kievvtskyi stated:

Ми відтворили у звуках те, що віддзеркалює взаємодію між конкурсними треками музикантів та підкреслює основні цінності Євробачення, яке завжди підтримує різноманітність, інклюзивність і мистецьке самовираження. У наш трек вклали позитив і тренди сучасності: ми самостійні, позитивні і конкурентоспроможні.

We reproduced in the sounds that which reflect the interaction between the musicians' competition tracks and emphasizes the main values of Eurovision, which always supports diversity, inclusiveness and artistic self-expression. We put positivity and modern trends into our track: we are independent, positive and competitive.<sup>40</sup>

As successful as Ukraine has been within Eurovision,, they value sending something to Eurovision that is successful and reflective of Ukraine.<sup>41</sup>

## Russian Government Selection

Russia breaks the mould when it comes to Eurovision selection. The choice of artist comes directly from Channel 1, which is the state-controlled media channel in Russia. In the past, Russia has chosen to do selection through a national competition. However, in the period between 2014-2023, Russia only held a public selection of the Eurovision competitor once in 2021, when the artist they had chosen, Little Big, failed to produce a "Eurovision-worthy" song.<sup>42</sup> With the Russian selection of Eurovision contenders, the agency gets significantly smaller. Everything is run by the state and through the state. Russia chooses to keep a tight hold on what it puts out to an international audience.

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<sup>38</sup> Вероніка Обух, "Українці проголосували за членів журі Нацвідбору на 'Євробачення-2024'. Кого обрали," Ukranews, January 22, 2024, accessed March 11, 2024, <https://ukranews.com/ua/news/979384-ukrayintsi-progolosuvaly-za-chleniv-zhuri-natsvidboru-na-yevrobachennya-2024-kogo-obraly>.

<sup>39</sup> Eurovision Song Contest, "What to look forward to at Ukraine's 'Vidbir'," February 1, 2024, accessed March 11, 2024, <https://eurovision.tv/story/looking-forward-to-ukraines-vidbir24#:~:text=The%20winner%20of%20Vidbir%202024,in%20by%20the%20Ukrainian%20public>.

<sup>40</sup> Олена Новікова, "Представлено саундтрек Нацвідбору на Євробачення-2024," Ukranews, January 18, 2024, accessed March 11, 2024, <https://ukranews.com/ua/news/978844-predstavleno-saundtrek-natsvidboru-na-yevrobachennya-2024>.

<sup>41</sup> Олена Новікова, "Нацвідбор на Євробачення-2024. Стали відомі імена ведучих," Ukranews, January 19, 2024, accessed March 11, 2024, <https://ukranews.com/ua/news/978929-natsvidbor-na-yevrobachennya-2024-staly-vidomi-imena-veduchykh>.

<sup>42</sup> Felix Light, "Russia's Controversial Eurovision Entry Challenges Tradition," The Moscow Times, May 17, 2021, accessed March 11, 2024, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/05/17/russias-controversial-eurovision-entry-challenges-tradition-a73917>.

Emily Johnson points out that Channel One almost always picks artists whose talent has been cultivated on other Channel One shows. This way, the artists chosen have already been state-approved. Furthermore, when Russia presents songs at Eurovision, they are largely written by Western songwriters who have been brought in to write a ‘winning’ song.<sup>43</sup>

Russia’s approach to Eurovision makes it both harder and easier to analyse. On one hand, since the selection is government-controlled, it means that who is behind the messaging is clear (usually). However, because the selection is done behind closed doors and not for a public audience, it means that there isn’t as much information presented by the artist and about the artist as in other countries where the musicians have to rally for popular support.

## *Estonia*

Estonia presents a unique case into the situation between Ukraine and Russia. While not directly involved in fighting the war, Estonia is one of the biggest supporters in the percentage of the GDP donated to Ukraine during the duration of the war. This is an ideology that has been passed on from the people. Kaja Kallas was elected on the backbone of supporting Ukraine in the war against Russia. For Estonia, this is not a current existential question but a future existential question. The government of Estonia is very aware that if Russia were to win in Ukraine, it wouldn’t bode well for Estonia, the Baltic states, Poland, Moldova and Europe as a whole. Estonia’s support of Ukraine has integrated into the realm of music. Estonia is a culture that is steeped in singing tradition, holding song festivals every five years. Because of this tradition and their historically strong showing at Eurovision, it is no surprise that Estonia’s support shows itself in the realm of political messaging as well.

## **Hope and Stefan**

With Estonia’s focus on story within their entries to Eurovision, Stefan certainly portrays an interesting example. Stefan is a child of immigrants to Estonia, as his parents are originally from Armenia, another former Soviet country which isn’t a stranger to conflict. In early interviews, he talks about his song being about the idea of finding a place in Estonia as someone who is an outsider but has now been accepted into Estonian society.<sup>44</sup> This can be seen in lyrics such as: “We’re standing tall and looking up, our Father would be proud, And I’m happy to be working my own ground, We’ll be the last ones breathing here.”<sup>45</sup>

While the song “Hope” was written and chosen before the invasion of Ukraine in February of 2022, the invasion caused the original sentiment to quickly change. In interviews Stefan stated that the song reached a new level of poignancy in its callings for hope after the invasion started. Following the invasion, Stefan took to singing the song at support rallies for Ukraine, and it spearheaded several fundraising efforts. He stated in interviews that:

I’m sincerely glad this song exists. I would’ve never imagined that the world would take this turn. And I’m glad to see people write to me saying that the song gives them hope to cope in this difficult situation. And Ukrainian people write me that, and they

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<sup>43</sup> Johnson, “A New Song for a New Motherland.”

<sup>44</sup> Eurovision Song Contest, "Estonia: Stefan gives us all a little bit of 'Hope'," May 9, 2022, accessed March 11, 2024, <https://eurovision.tv/story/stefan-estonia-22>.

<sup>45</sup> Stefan, "Hope," composed by Stefan Airapetjan and Karl-Ander Reismann, 2021.

thank me for that! And I would like to say that YOU be good, hang on. Our thoughts are with you<sup>46</sup>

Looking at the song, it is easy to see why it provides a rallying cry of hope to the Ukrainian people while conveying a strong international message. The second line of the song opens with the words, “We live to die for worthy things.” This sentiment is commonly reflected in Ukraine at the moment and is also shared in Estonia, where there is continued concern over Russian aggression.

This premise also appears in the first verse, which states:

We promised we would never lose our pride, Everyday they try to turn it into lies,  
We're standing tall and looking up, our father would be proud, And I'm happy to be  
working my own ground<sup>47</sup>

This verse again posits the idea that Estonia and Ukraine have worked to be separate independent countries. They have worked for their own governments and identities and for their cultures to be seen and recognized across the globe. And this is something that Russia has tried to deny. Putin and many of those in Russia still call Ukraine Russia’s “little brother” claiming that Ukraine has no culture of its own and is instead a part of Russia. Estonians have successfully fought to gain an international standing and reputation as a European country in their own right. The lyrics of this song have come to fit the situation where the idea of nationalism has taken hold in Ukraine and Estonia and there is a strong sense of national pride in the face of adversity. This is mirrored in the lines of the last verse of the song, which states, “Oh, when all else is lost, The future still remains our own.”

## Bridges and Alika

Continuing the narrative of the Estonian people choosing artists that may be contentious is Estonia’s 2023 choice of musician Alika Milova. Alika was born in Narva, a Russian-speaking city of Estonia close to the border, in a Russian-speaking family. When she was a young musician, she was popular in Russian circles with most of her fanbase coming out of Russia. She became popular in Estonia following her winning Estonia’s version of American Idol, Eesti otsib superstaari.<sup>48</sup> However, once the war broke out in Ukraine, the people in Estonia were stirred into an outrage against Russia and against Russian speakers. This outrage fell onto Alika. Merely two days after the invasion started, she was in a public interview when she was asked about the war in Ukraine. She was very vocal in her support for Ukraine, and it was in that interview that she revealed that although her family is Russian speaking, her grandparents had immigrated to Estonia from Ukraine. This changed the national perspective from being against her to supporting her, which was further solidified by Alika’s continued condemnation of the Russian state. However, when she competed in Eesti Laul there was split support. Many people supported her because she was a strong contender for Eurovision and was very vocal in her support for Ukraine. But at the time Alika was also the victim of internet slander and misinformation, mostly originating in Russia, over exaggerating Russia’s influence over the singer. Including a strongly worded article in

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<sup>46</sup> Lucy Percy, "The Future Still Remains Our Own" – Stefan Preaches of Keeping the Faith in the Face of Adversity in the ‘Hope’ Lyrics," Wiwibloggs, April 18, 2022, accessed March 11, 2024, <https://wivibloggs.com/2022/04/18/stefan-hope-lyrics-estonia-eurovision-2022/271519/>.

<sup>47</sup> Stefan, "Hope."

<sup>48</sup> Eurovision Song Contest, "Alika," May 5, 2023, accessed March 11, 2024, <https://eurovision.tv/participant/alika-2023>.

Ukrainian news source oboz, which has been criticised for its journalistic integrity, slamming Alike for her performances in Russia as a minor.<sup>49</sup> This information led to a questioning of her allegiances. Therefore, the Estonian people's choice of Alike as their Eurovision contender is an interesting choice. It sends two messages, one internal and one external, and these messages have been sent by the people of Estonia since Eesti Laul was decided on by popular vote. The first internal message is for the Russian speakers in Estonia. These are people who are likely frightened. They are in a country where they are still, in some cases, and often by choice, not fully integrated into society. All Russians were being associated with a country that is doing awful things regardless of their personal loyalty to Russia. By choosing an ethnically Ukrainian Russian speaker for Eurovision, the people, be they Russian, Estonian or of other national origin, are not only throwing out a message of support for Ukraine but assurance for their own minority population that they are seen and, in most cases, accepted. The external message is obvious and has been clearly shown in all cases of Estonian foreign policy. Estonia wholeheartedly supports Ukraine in their fight against Russia.

This messaging continues in Alike's song for Eurovision, Bridges. Alike herself helped to write the song for Eurovision, and it is very clear that the song came from a place of brokenness. In fact, in both interviews about Bridges and later musical projects, she talks about writing music to be able to put her feelings on paper and bring genuineness and emotion to music.<sup>50</sup> In interviews she talks about Bridges being about finding hope and connection in the darkest of times.<sup>51</sup> This is clear in the lyrics of the song. She sings about finding hope and connection with other people after being in a place of brokenness. While at face value the song is about coming to terms with yourself in a larger cultural context, following the reception and backlash that Alike faced, it can also be her coming to terms with her own mixed ethnic identity in the face of the war.

## *Russia*

Russia is a bit of an odd contender in Eurovision. Russia started out in Eurovision in 1994, being on board with trying to engage with a European identity. Since then, there has been a continued duality in the Russian image. On one hand, Russia, on paper, had attempted to keep up with Europe and be competitive in Eurovision. However, this cooperation was always under the condition that it was done on Russia's terms. This has led to a series of subtle messaging and manipulation since the invasion of Crimea, where Russia always has to, in their opinion, get its way.

## *Shine*

Eurovision 2014 came a few short months after the start of the Crimean invasion. Russia was already facing political backlash at Eurovision because of the ongoing conflict and

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<sup>49</sup> Kateryna Malay, "Participant of Eurovision 2023 from Estonia performed in occupied Crimea with Baskov: what she says about the war now," Obozrevatel, May 12, 2023, <https://eng.obozrevatel.com/section-entertainment/news-participant-of-eurovision-2023-from-estonia-performed-in-occupied-crimea-with-baskov-what-she-says-about-the-war-now-12-05-2023.html>.

<sup>50</sup> Sten Teppan, "Alike: kõige mõnusam on muusikat kirjutada halva tujuga," ERR, December 5, 2023, accessed March 11, 2024, <https://menu.err.ee/1609185325/alika-koige-monusam-on-muusikat-kirjutada-halva-tujuga>. ; Luca D'Elia, "ALIKA interview: 'My song talks about hope,'" ESC United, February 6, 2023, accessed March 11, 2024, [https://www.escunited.com/alika-interview-my-song-talks-about-hope/#google\\_vignette](https://www.escunited.com/alika-interview-my-song-talks-about-hope/#google_vignette).

<sup>51</sup> Simon Coyle, "Eurovision 2023 Estonia entry: Who is Alike, Bridges song lyrics and odds to win," Manchester Evening News, May 13, 2023, accessed March 11, 2024, <https://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/tv/eurovision-2023-estonia-entry-who-26900981>.

annexation. That year, through internal selection, Channel One chose the Tolmachevy Sisters and their song Shine. At face value, the song is an upbeat pop song about being reunited with a lost love. The all-pink staging of their music video confirms this. However, there are lyrics at the beginning of the song that bring another darker meaning to the song.

The first verse states: "Living on the edge, Closer to the crime, Cross the line a step at a time."<sup>52</sup> These are lyrics that don't seem to fit the rest of the song at all. However, in the context of the geo-political situation it is easy to make the inference that the artist is talking about Russia's desire for Ukrainian territory. The annexation of Crimea was declared illegal, claiming that Russia was overstepping its borders and thus crossing lines. This feeds into the next lines which state, "Now maybe there's a place, Maybe there's a time, Maybe there's a day you'll be mine," echoing the Russian decision that parts of Ukraine were now Russia and serving as ominous foreshadowing for the events to come. This thought is echoed in news pieces which claim that the Tolmachevy sisters were singing about Ukraine and Russia's desire for the unification of the two countries.<sup>53</sup> This song got a bad reception at Eurovision, with the artist being booed on stage, likely in response to the invasion of Ukraine.<sup>54</sup>

## A Million Voices

In 2015 Russia's Eurovision choice was an attempt to soothe international backlash and appeal to the universal international ideals. Their song that year was A Million Voices by Polina Gagarina. In it there is an appeal for in essence world peace.<sup>55</sup> The singer states, "We are the world's people, Different yet we're the same."<sup>56</sup> The song claims that it will be best if the world finds middle ground. However, despite the nature of the lyrics it wasn't taken this way on the international stage. This is something that Gagarina herself claims when talking about the meaning of her song stating, "The lyrics may cause controversy, but we are hoping that this song will share a bit of love and will not get affected by anything else, like it happened last year."<sup>57</sup> And there was controversy across the world. The international reception was that a mere year after the annexation of Crimea and with the war continuing in the SE region it was ironic for Russia to be singing about world peace and everyone being the same.<sup>58</sup>

## Julia Samoylova

In 2017, following Jamala's win with her song "1944", Eurovision was hosted in Kyiv. The theme that Ukraine chose for the competition was celebrating diversity. Russia, in response,

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<sup>52</sup> Tolmachevy Sisters, "Shine," composed by Dimitris Kontopoulos, John Ballard, Ralph Charlie, and Gerald James Borg Philipp Kirkorov, 2014.

<sup>53</sup> William Lee Adams, "Russia: Do the Tolmachevy Sisters support the annexation of Crimea?" Wiwibloggs, March 25, 2014, <https://wivibloggs.com/2014/03/25/russia-tolmachevy-sisters-crimea/44173/>.

<sup>54</sup> BBC, "Russia booed at Eurovision semi-final," May 7, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-27306108>.

<sup>55</sup> Tolik, "Polina Gagarina: 'A Million Voices' is a Song About Peace!" ESCXTRA, March 11, 2015, accessed March 11, 2024, <https://escxtra.com/2015/03/11/polina-gagarina-a-million-voices-is-a-song-about-peace/>.

<sup>56</sup> Polina Gagarina, "A Million Voices," composed by Joakim Bjornberg, Katrina Noorbergen, Leonid Gutkin, and Vladimir Matetsky Gabriel Alares, 2015.

<sup>57</sup> Mikhail Vasilyev, "Russia: Polina Gagarina Reveals 'A Million Voices'," Wiwibloggs, March 15, 2015, accessed March 11, 2024, <https://wivibloggs.com/2015/03/15/russia-polina-gagarina-reveals-million-voices/86410/>.

<sup>58</sup> Karoun Demirjian, "Russia is desperate to win the Eurovision song contest. Everybody else is desperate they lose," The Washington Post, May 20, 2015, accessed March 12, 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/05/20/russia-is-desperate-to-win-the-eurovision-song-contest-everybody-else-is-desperate-they-lose/>.

chore artist Julia Samoylova, who is wheelchair-bound with spinal muscular atrophy. Although Samoylova's disorder was Russia's obvious gimmick for sympathy in Eurovision, the events that followed showed that Russia had a deeper meaning for their choice. Since the annexation of Crimea, Ukraine, following international law and wanting to reinforce the sanctity of its sovereignty and borders, declared entering Crimea through Russia was illegal, and anyone who had done so faced a three-year ban from entering Ukraine. Russia purposefully chose Samoylova, knowing that she fit the terms of this ban. This presented a challenge to the Ukrainians. They could uphold their national law and ban Samoylova from entering Ukraine and thus competing at Eurovision, or they could bend their national law for the sake of Russia and allow Samoylova to compete. Ukraine chose the international backlash of upholding the ban on Samoylova. This caused controversy within the EBC because they were facing a case where a member country was willing and committed to the competition but, due to Ukraine upholding its sovereign borders, it left Russia unable to participate. The EBC pressured Ukraine to change its mind, but barring that, the EBC offered Samoylova the opportunity to compete remotely. Russia declined this opportunity, trying to force Ukraine's hand, and ended up withdrawing from the competition a mere month before Eurovision, becoming the first Eurovision contender in the competition's history to do so. Facing the backlash, the EBC had to make a choice and, because of this, changed the rules and issued Ukraine a fine. Now, to host Eurovision, a country has to allow all contenders to enter the country. This was seen as a win by Russia as the rule change was forced by their actions. This was echoed in Samoylova's song for the next year of Eurovision, which was aptly titled 'I Won't Break.'<sup>59</sup>

## Russian Woman

In 2021 Russia did something they hadn't done in a long time; they held a national competition for their Eurovision competitor. The Russian government's first choice had been the 2020 Eurovision contestant Little Big, but they failed to produce a song that Channel One considered competitive. Since following the cancellation of the 2020 Eurovision due to the pandemic, artists were required to submit new songs. So, Channel One put on *Evrovidenie* their occasional running selection contest. The Russian public chose Manizha and her song "Russian Woman" with just shy of 40% of the vote. Manizha was a controversial choice for the contest because her identity as a Tajikistan refugee and strong feminist has frequently left her at odds with the Russian government and much of the Russian populous. Many Russian politicians were concerned or even against her participation as Russia's contestant in Eurovision. Yet it connected her to the Russian public who didn't see her Tajik status as foreign but instead embraced her and her ideology as Russian.<sup>60</sup> This shows a case where, although the Russian government was heading towards social conservatism, the Russian people chose to go against this in their international messaging. Also, the lyrics are interesting because towards the end of the bridge, Manizha sings, "The son without a father, the daughter without a father But a broken family will not break me, au."<sup>61</sup> In the face of a Russian government that was pushing expansionism and aggression, the Russian people were voting for a "Russian woman's" song that spoke out against losing Russian men to war. This shows an interesting clash where the political messaging views of the public conflicted with those perpetuated by the national government.

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<sup>59</sup> Hansen, "Lasha Tumbai."

<sup>60</sup> Felix Light, "Russia's Controversial Eurovision Entry Challenges Tradition," *The Moscow Times*, May 17, 2021, accessed March 11, 2024, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/05/17/russias-controversial-eurovision-entry-challenges-tradition-a73917>.

<sup>61</sup> Manizha, "Russian Woman," composed by Ori Avni and Ori Kaplan Manizha, 2021.

## Withdrawal from the EBC

In 2022, Russia was facing obvious backlash following the escalation of the war in Ukraine. There were several countries including Finland and Estonia threatening to boycott competing in Eurovision if Russia was allowed to compete. As well, there were countries writing public letters to the EBC claiming that Russia should not be allowed to compete in Eurovision. Originally, the EBC claimed that due to the apolitical nature of the Eurovision Song Contest, they could not ban Russia from the competition. However, following the immense political backlash, the EBC was forced to repeal this decision, stating that no Russian acts were allowed to compete in the 2022 Eurovision contest.<sup>62</sup> Following this decision, Russia and Channel One, in a move to both save face and likely restrict access of Russian citizens to outside media sources, not only pulled out of Eurovision but the European Broadcasting Commission entirely. Their statement was:

Отстранение России — последнее, но далеко не первое из подобных решений, связанных с Евровидением. Так, в 2016 году победу одержала песня "1944", являющаяся открытым политическим манифестом. При этом спустя несколько лет организаторы конкурса дисквалифицировали Беларусь ("Я научу тебя"), сославшись как раз на политику.

The removal of Russia is the last, but far from the first of such decisions related to Eurovision. So, in 2016, the song "1944", which is an open political manifesto, won. At the same time, a few years later, the organizers of the contest disqualified Belarus ("I'll teach you " ), referring precisely to politics.....<sup>63</sup>

This sentiment echoes past statements that Russia had made when other former soviet states had chosen Eurovision performances that Russia deemed offensive. According to Russia, these previous cases of political messaging were offensive to Russia, and Eurovision was clearly no longer an “apolitical” contest. 2021 was thus the last year that Russia competed in Eurovision.

## *Ukraine*

When pulling out of the European Broadcasting Commission, Russia explicitly referenced the song 1944, which was the entry that won Ukraine Eurovision in 2016. This is a voicing of the fact that Ukraine frequently and strongly uses Eurovision to spell out its political injustices. Ukraine does this in a variety of ways often playing off of Ukraine’s culture to send messages to both their own public as motivation and Russia as a rebuke. In times of war, the EBC has been lenient with Ukraine and their lyrics, and Europe has thus used Eurovision as a chance to publicly rally in support of Ukraine in the face of the adversity.

## 1944 and Jamala

Following the invasion of Crimea, Ukrainian broadcasters were put into a hard position. Ukraine has always had a strong track record of success in Eurovision, and it is something that is incredibly popular in Ukraine. However, due to the Donbas invasion, there were limited funds for competition. Thus, for the first time since Ukraine started competing in

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<sup>62</sup> Eurovision Song Contest, "EBU statement regarding the participation of Russia in the Eurovision Song Contest 2022," February 25, 2022, accessed March 11, 2024, <https://eurovision.tv/mediacentre/release/ebu-statement-russia-2022>.

<sup>63</sup>РИА Новости, "ВГТРК, Первый канал и Радиодом 'Останкино' выходят из ЕВС," RIA, February 26, 2022, accessed March 12, 2024, <https://ria.ru/20220226/evs-1775269307.html>.

2015 Ukraine pulled out of Eurovision stating, “We don't want to do something badly, and we don't have the money to do something well.”<sup>64</sup> Thus in 2016 there was a strong push for Ukraine to do something memorable in Eurovision since it was their first performance after the invasion of Crimea. Ukraine’s response was Jamala and her song 1944.

1944 at face value and in official statements by Jamala is about the deportation of the Crimean Tatars under Stalin. Her grandmother was one of those deported and Jamala grew up hearing the stories. Jamala herself grew up in Kyrgyzstan where her grandparents had been deported before her family was eventually allowed to return to Crimea.<sup>65</sup> Jamala’s references to her own cultural heritage and history is demonstrated by the bridge of the song being sung in the Crimean Tatar language. However, it is widely accepted that the song is also a very thinly veiled condemnation of the Crimean invasion. This can be seen in two ways. The first is the inclusion by Jamala of Crimean cultural elements into the song. This fights the Russian narrative that Crimea is Russian. There has been a strong narrative from Putin stating that Ukrainian culture is Russian culture and isn’t distinct which is something challenged by Ukraine in Eurovision. The second way this can be seen is lyrically. There are two parts of the song that serve as a rebuke of Russia. The first comes in the first verse which states, “When strangers are coming... They come to your house, They kill you all and say, We’re not guilty not guilty.”<sup>66</sup> This is a blatant rebuke of the war crimes committed by Russia in 2014. These crimes include a continued persecution of the Tatars in Crimea including abductions, detentions and executions of Tatar leaders following the invasion.<sup>67</sup> The second part of it comes in the section that is sung in Crimean Tatar, which states, “I did not enjoy my youth; I was not able to live in this place.”<sup>68</sup> The Russian invasion of Crimea has worked to steal the lives of a generation of Crimean Tatar and broadly Ukrainian youth. Instead of focusing on their youth and having fun they instead have had to fight for existential survival. It is this requiem that Jamala is singing for the people of Ukraine that appealed to the international audience and won her Eurovision.<sup>69</sup>

## Time

The following year saw the Eurovision Song Contest come to Kyiv. However, much of the world’s attention and support for Ukraine was fading. While the annexation of Crimea wasn’t condoned, the world seemed to be moving on. This is the context that O. Torvald and his song ‘Time’ was walking into. While Ukraine was still grieving and still fighting, the world had turned its face away, and Russia had ended up with Crimea. On face value, Time is a song about seeking peace and realising that to do so can’t always mean compromise, but put in the context of Crimea, the song turns into both a lament and a challenge. The lament comes in verse one with Torvald singing, “Turn down, The volume of your cry, Let's take time to find, A place without violence.”<sup>70</sup> At the time there was a lot of cultural grief over the loss of Crimea. Torvald is offering a place of metaphorical comfort to those who were

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<sup>64</sup> BBC, "Eurovision 2015: Ukraine announces exit," September 19, 2014, accessed March 11, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-29280319>.

<sup>65</sup> Viktoria Veselova and Oleksandra Melnykova, "Crimean Tatar Singer Hopes to Take People's Tragedy to Eurovision," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, February 9, 2016, <https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-jamala-eurovision-crimean-tatar-singer/27541517.html>.

<sup>66</sup> Jamala, "1944," composed by Jamala, 2016.

<sup>67</sup> Anti-Discrimination Centre, "The Discrimination and Persecution of Crimean Tatars in 2014-2022," December 30, 2022, <https://adcmemorial.org/en/articles/the-discrimination-and-persecution-of-crimean-tatars-in-2014-2022/>.

<sup>68</sup> Jamala, "1944."

<sup>69</sup> Jackson, "Politics of Belonging."

<sup>70</sup> O. Torvald, "Time," 2017.

grieving and disturbed by the violence that the country was facing. Torvald continues on to issue a challenge to Russia and the world that was claiming that Ukraine and Russia should just find common ground with the lyrics, "Stop missing, The things you haven't found, You will realize, There's no common ground."<sup>71</sup> Torvald is directly responding to statements that Ukraine and Russia could find a peaceful solution to the conflict, claiming that there is no compromise of Russia annexing Ukrainian territory.

## 2019 Non-Competition

In 2019, Ukraine was put in another hard place politically when it came to their participation in Eurovision. During the Vidbir selection process, the Ukrainian public chose artist Maruv and her song 'Siren Song.' However, when the time came for Maruv to sign the contract with Ukraine for Eurovision participation glaring issues arose.<sup>72</sup> Since the meetings were behind closed doors, all of the facts aren't completely readily apparent. However, from statements on both sides it's possible to put together a picture. After winning Vidbir and competing in Eurovision, Maruv was scheduled for a music tour of Russia. This was something that she was facing backlash over because of the conflict. Furthermore, there was a stipulation in Ukraine's Eurovision contract stating that any artist choosing to represent Ukraine in Eurovision could not then perform concerts in Russia.<sup>73</sup> This is the eventual issue that was publicly cited for Maruv refusing to sign her contract to perform at Eurovision although the singer herself claimed that she had offered to cancel the concerts and that the issue was her refusing to in her words, "I am not ready to address [people] with slogans, turning my participation in the contest into the promotion of our politicians."<sup>74</sup>

These stipulations were in the contract because as the broadcasting channel stated:

The performer representing Ukraine at the international stage, upon signing an agreement with UA:PBC, also has commitments of becoming a cultural ambassador of Ukraine and delivering not only their music but also expressing the opinion of the Ukrainian society in the world. After the negotiations, UA:PBC and the singer MARUV have not found common ground in the mission of the representative of Ukraine at the international song contest.<sup>75</sup>

The statement goes further on to state the non-political nature of the Eurovision competition and Ukraine's fear that Maruv's politicalization would force Ukraine's disqualification from the competition. Ukraine was acknowledging the importance of messaging in Eurovision through not only the song but who is chosen to sing. Unfortunately, this is a case where Russian influence on Ukrainian musicians forced Ukraine to pull out of the 2019 Eurovision contest.

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<sup>71</sup> O. Torvald, "Time."

<sup>72</sup> Palko Karasz, "Ukraine Singer is Pulled from Eurovision After Her Patriotism Is Questioned," *The New York Times*, February 28, 2019, accessed March 11, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/28/arts/music/ukraine-eurovision-crimea-maruv.html>.

<sup>73</sup> Українська правда, "MARUV поставили умову – не гастролювати в РФ," *Ukrayinska Pravda*, February 24, 2019, accessed March 11, 2024, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2019/02/24/7207559/>. ; Natalia Datskevych, "Ukraine's Maruv wins Eurovision national selection, sparking controversy," *Kyiv Post*, February 24, 2019, accessed March 11, 2024, <https://www.kyivpost.com/post/8656>.

<sup>74</sup> Mark Savage, "Ukraine Bans its Eurovision Entrant Over Russia Row," *BBC*, February 26, 2019, accessed March 11, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-47357471>.

<sup>75</sup> Eurovision Song Contest, "MARUV will not represent Ukraine in Tel Aviv," February 25, 2019, accessed March 11, 2024, <https://eurovision.tv/story/maruv-will-not-represent-ukraine-in-2019>.

## Solovey

Some messages in Eurovision are meant for an international audience and some are meant for a more specific audience. This can be seen in Go\_A's 2020 entry to the Eurovision song contest, Solovey. In Solovey the band chose to use both Ukrainian musical elements and cultural elements to make a powerful song.<sup>76</sup> First in a break from past tradition the band chose to sing in Ukrainian. Previously most of Ukraine's Eurovision entries were sung in English. Kateryna Pavlenko stated in an interview:

За правилами Євробачення можна, щоб пісня звучала не тільки українською, а й будь-якою мовою, якою країна захоче її презентувати, і переробляти пісню ми не будемо. Адже, повторююсь, мета була саме в тому, щоб на Євробаченні прозвучала українська пісня українською мовою.

According to the rules of the Eurovision Song Contest, it is possible for the song to be performed not only in Ukrainian, but also in any language in which the country wants to present it, and we will not redo the song. After all, I repeat, the goal was precisely for a Ukrainian song to be performed in Ukrainian at the Eurovision Song Contest<sup>77</sup>

It was important to Go\_A that the song represented Ukraine in an authentic way. This is furthered in Pavlenko's use of the Ukrainian singing technique "white voice" throughout the song. White voice is a traditional Ukrainian singing technique developed in rural Ukraine in the Eastern European tradition of open throat singing. It is representative of traditional Ukrainian folk music.<sup>78</sup>

Furthermore, the band sought to bring Ukrainian culture to life through their song. Pavlenko studied folklore at university and wanted to create a song with traditional Ukrainian folklore elements. The first part of this uses "Solovey", a nightingale in Ukrainian. The nightingale is a common symbol in Ukrainian folklore ushering in spring and used as a term of endearment.<sup>79</sup> The other element that is pulled in is one from Ukrainian literature. You can't study Ukrainian literature without studying the poet Taras Shevchenko. One of his more well-known pieces is the poem Kateryna. This poem tells the story of a young Ukrainian girl, Kateryna, who gets caught up in a romance with a Muscovite soldier, Ivan. Ivan then abandons Kateryna pregnant and when she chases him down, he pretends he never knew her.

This is the poem that appears to show up in the lyrics of Solovey. In looking at both the poem and the lyrics, one can see stark similarities between the texts. The first step is the names. In Kateryna, the main characters are Kateryna and her Russian lover Ivan. In Solovey, the characters are Katrusha and Vanyusha, which are diminutives for the same names. It is also interesting because these are the Russified diminutives of the names, the Ukrainian

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<sup>76</sup> Renske Ten Veen, "Go\_A's 'Solovey' Lyrics Describe a Love Story in the Ukrainian Countryside," Wiwibloggs, April 15, 2020, accessed March 12, 2024, [https://pdfixers.com/downloadFixer.html?campaign\\_id=21025233285&adgroup\\_id=159059818477&placement\\_id=wiwibloggs.com&creative\\_id=691230829357&gclid=EAIaIQobChMIytH5v\\_jvhAMV46t\\_BB1HyAuCEAEYASAAEgKZ8fD\\_BwE](https://pdfixers.com/downloadFixer.html?campaign_id=21025233285&adgroup_id=159059818477&placement_id=wiwibloggs.com&creative_id=691230829357&gclid=EAIaIQobChMIytH5v_jvhAMV46t_BB1HyAuCEAEYASAAEgKZ8fD_BwE).

<sup>77</sup> Марина Яцкевич, "Євробачення 2020: гурт Go\_A розповів, чи зазвучить пісня Solovey англійською," Suspilne, February 25, 2020, accessed March 12, 2024, <https://suspilne.media/culture/16240-evrobacenna-2020-gurt-go-a-rozpoviv-ci-zazvucit-pisna-solovey-anglijskou/>.

<sup>78</sup> Caroline Bithell and Juniper Hill, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Music Revival* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>79</sup> "Nightingale," Encyclopedia of Ukraine, accessed March 12, 2024, <https://www.encyclopediaofukraine.com/display.asp?linkpath=pages%5CN%5CI%5CNightingale.htm>.

diminutives are different. Solovey goes on to describe the heroine walking through the guelder roses, waiting in a grove to meet her beloved. Shevchenko's poem states,

In the orchard meeting,  
She destroyed herself, her future,  
Yielded to entreaty.  
Mother called to sup in vain,  
The daughter unheeding;  
Where she dallied with her love...  
'Neath the guelder-rose she sings  
A song sad, beseeching.  
'Tis of Hryts, so dear her woe,  
That the rose starts weeping.<sup>80</sup>

Shevchenko tells of Kateryna meeting her beloved in the orchard grove and there being caught up in love long despite the calls of her mother. In Solovey Go\_A states over and over that, "I am in love with you, while mum doesn't know yet, And if mum knows, we will have to break up."<sup>81</sup> The story goes that once the parents know of the love affair that the couple will have to part ways. This is what is echoed in Shevchenko's Kateryna which states, "You without a husband? Father, mother — strangers are, Difficult and stubborn!"<sup>82</sup> Finally, in Shevchenko's poem, the heroine, Kateryna, has a tragic end. Upon finding Ivan and him refusing to recognise her she passes off her son to someone else and commits suicide. While the song doesn't end in that much tragedy Pavlenko stated in an interview that this was a deliberate choice. She states,

Але ми її переробили — в попередній версії пісня закінчувалась трагічно, тому ми подумали, що в нас є можливість переробити текст так, щоб усе вийшло набагато краще. Бо скільки ж можна плакати?  
But we reworked it - in the previous version the song ended tragically, so we thought we had an opportunity to rework the lyrics so that everything turned out much better. Because how much can you cry?<sup>83</sup>

In choosing to use Shevchenko's Kateryna as the basis of the song, Pavlenko manages to send a message but one to a more targeted audience. While not internationally popular, Shevchenko is a figure who is culturally beloved in Ukraine and also known throughout Russia. In choosing to use Shevchenko's poem, Go\_A is appealing to that audience. They are bringing to the forefront of people's minds a poem where, even after the abuse of a Russian lover, the heroine, Kateryna, chooses to go on a perilous journey for the love of her son and doesn't give up until she's met her goal. It is a poem that Pavlenko uses to show that even after the abuse of a Muscovite the heroine (Ukraine) chooses loyalty to her family and a single-minded quest for her goals.

## Stefania

The Eurovision of 2022 was one of the most important Eurovisions for Ukraine. It came less than two months after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia in February of 2022.

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<sup>80</sup> Taras Shevchenko, *Katerina*, trans. by Mary Skrypnyk, St. Petersburg, 1938.

<sup>81</sup> Go\_A, "Solovey," composed by Taras Shevchenko and Kateryna Pavlenko, 2020.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Марина Яцкевич, "Євробачення 2020."

While to the rest of the world, the perception was largely that the war just started, for Ukraine, this was a war that had already been going on for eight years.<sup>84</sup> Their song that year was Stefania by Kalush Orchestra. The song continued the Ukrainian tradition of containing traditional elements, in this case using both elements of folk music including Ukrainian instruments, and the inclusion of a lullaby as the end of the verses. The song was a mix of pop and rap which is typical of modern Ukrainian music while continuing the tradition that Go\_A set in the two previous years of singing in Ukrainian.<sup>85</sup> When looking at the lyrics, the song is on the face of it, and even in the explanation of the songwriter, a dedication to his mother. However, on a deeper gaze, the lyrics seem to refer not only to a human mother but also to Ukraine as a mother. The song states:

Ломаними дорогами прийду я завжди до тебе  
Вона не розбудить, не будить, мене в сильні бурі  
Забере в бабулі дві дулі, ніби вони кулі

I will always walk to you by broken roads  
She will not awaken, won't wake, me in strong storm  
She will take two fig signs from grandma, as if they were bullets <sup>86</sup>

The song talks about the unwavering loyalty of Kalush as the singer as he walks down the roads to return to her. While the mother defends the child (Ukraine) from the “figa” sings, a culturally rude gesture from the grandmother (Russia). While the song is honouring the mother, there is also a deep-seated loyalty for the mother expressed in the song. This mirrors the deep-seated loyalty to Ukraine and its national sanctity that was expressed in the country over the course of the war. Where it appears to be clear that the singer is also speaking about Ukraine is at the end of the chorus where Kalush sings, “Sing me a lullaby mum I want to hear your native word.”<sup>87</sup> This term ‘native word’ when looking at the native Ukrainian holds a bit of a deeper meaning. It is talking about a home language, a language that makes someone comfortable and has a long-standing tradition. In the long and complicated cultural fight between Ukraine and Russia, there has been a long argument over language. Laada Bilaniuk studies this distinction in a book about language politics. She states that under the Soviet Union Ukrainian became a language that was associated with the peasant class and underwent several stages of Russification. This perception of Ukrainian persisted even after Ukrainian independence, with large portions of the population still caught between languages. But one of the large actions of the government post-independence was to make Ukrainian the sole national language and there are still associations between the Ukrainian language and Ukrainian sovereignty. <sup>88</sup> By Kalush claiming that he wants to hear his mother tongue, he is calling for the Ukrainian language.

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<sup>84</sup> Yaroslava Bukhta, “Why Eurovision is a big deal for Ukrainians – and not only this year,” Euractiv, May 13, 2022, accessed March 11, 2024, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/europe-s-east/news/why-eurovision-is-a-big-deal-for-ukrainians-and-not-only-this-year/>.

<sup>85</sup> Renske Ten Veen, “‘She Rocked Me; Gave Me Rhythm’ – Kalush Orchestra Bring an Ode to Mothers in ‘Stefania’ Lyrics,” Wiwibloggs, February 10, 2022, accessed March 12, 2024, <https://wibloggs.com/2022/02/10/lyrics-kalush-orchestra-stefania-english/269492/>.

<sup>86</sup> Kalush Orchestra, “Stefania,” composed by Tymofii Muzychuk, Vitalii Duzhyk, Ivan Klymenko, and Oleh Psiuk Ihor Didenchuk, 2022.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Bilaniuk, “Contested Tongues.”

## Heart of Steel

From February 24 to May 16, 2022, the Azovstal Iron and Steel Works in Mariupol became one of the remaining holdouts in the Russian siege of the city.<sup>89</sup> While all Ukrainians watched the story unfold, some artists turned to how they knew how to process best: music. This became the basis for Ukraine's 2023 Eurovision entry, Heart of Steel by Tvorchi. The duo wrote the song while watching the siege as a way to process the strength of the Ukrainian people in the shadow of the war.<sup>90</sup> Throughout the song, Tvorchi makes strong statements about the will and the fight of the Ukrainian people, claiming that in the end, they will end up the winners. To make sure this challenge got out to an international audience, they also broke the tradition of previous years and sang the song in English so that everyone could understand their message. They managed to get the message they wanted to across as Tvorchi had said in interviews, "We hope we can inspire people all around the planet to take a look at the Ukrainians who are fighting for their freedom, for their land, for their families."<sup>91</sup>

The song also chose to reflect the national stance of Ukraine on the spread of Russian misinformation and the consistent clambering by Russia to try and justify their invasion. The lyrics of the first verse state: "You know I can never lose, You like the attention too, This has never been about you."<sup>92</sup> Tvorchi makes it very clear in their statements surrounding the war and the song that, to them, they are fighting for Ukraine. To Tvorchi and to many people in Ukraine the inclusion of Russia on the international stage in relation to the war narrative is unjust to Ukraine and to the truth. In an interview the duo stated:

If Russia was allowed to compete, I think it would be a slap in the face to not just Ukraine, but to every other country as well. And especially to Ukraine, because it just wouldn't make any sense at all. You know, why should the aggressors be involved?<sup>93</sup>

This sums up the views of Ukraine on Russia being allowed to speak to the war narrative. Despite Russia's continuous attempts to justify itself in the face of its actions is there really space for Russia in the narrative? This is the position that has been reflected by the Ukrainian government in the face of the war. Instead of rising to refute every Russian narrative or misinformation campaign they have instead chosen to show the world who they are as a country using their own culture and identity. Because as the lyrics and the title of the paper states it's never really been about Russia anyways.

## Conclusions

In the face of tremendous adversity countries often have to fight their battles across many battlefields one of which being the cultural battlefield. Russia has been perpetuating a long

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<sup>89</sup> Michael Schwartz, "Last Stand at Azovstal: Inside the Siege That Shaped the Ukraine War," *The New York Times*, July 24, 2022, accessed March 12, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/24/world/europe/ukraine-war-mariupol-azovstal.html>.

<sup>90</sup> Katie Palmer, "Ukraine Eurovision 2023 Song Lyrics: Heartbreaking Meaning Behind TVORCHI's 'Heart of Steel'," *Express*, May 13, 2023, accessed March 12, 2024, <https://www.express.co.uk/showbiz/tv-radio/1762667/Ukraine-Eurovision-2023-song-lyrics-tvorchi>.

<sup>91</sup> Sarah Mills, "Pop duo Tvorchi to show Ukraine's 'Heart of Steel' at Eurovision," *Reuters*, May 10, 2023, accessed March 12, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/lifestyle/pop-duo-tvorchi-show-ukraines-heart-steel-eurovision-2023-05-10/>.

<sup>92</sup> Jimoh Augustus Kehinde and Andrii Hutsuliak, "Heart of Steel," composed by Jimoh Augustus Kehinde and Andrii Hutsuliak, 2022.

<sup>93</sup> Stone, May 12, 2023, <https://www.rollingstone.com/tv-movies/tv-movie-features/tvorchi-eurovision-song-contest-2023-ukraine-interview-russia-heart-of-steel-1234732871/>.

time cultural narrative which states that Ukraine does not stand culturally distinct from Russia. And it is this narrative that Ukraine and its allies have been fighting against. It then makes sense that these countries would use one of Europe's biggest stages of cultural diplomacy to do so and thus Eurovision has frequently become a battleground for soft power politics.

This paper has demonstrated the instances that Ukraine, Russia and Estonia have used the Eurovision stage to send messages in various ways to the international public and to each other. And while the narrative that the apolitical nature of the Eurovision song contest is often broken it is interesting to see how each of the countries chooses to use Eurovision. Estonia as an ally but not a current direct member of the conflict chooses to send their messages more subtly. The Estonian Eesti Laul and the public have a focus on the good story to send to Eurovision and this goes beyond the lyrics to the person behind them. In recent years Estonia has chosen artists that are loud and vocal in their support for Ukraine either because of personal connection to the war or because they had family who had fled similar circumstances in other countries. When it comes to Russia it becomes a country caught in between two worlds. Initially, Russia had intended and was being drawn towards being a more European country, but as this European identity clashed with Russia's larger political goals, the country reverted back to former imperialistic tendencies. Through Eurovision, Russia seeks to fight the damning international narrative when it swings against Russia. As well Russia often fights Eurovision itself through non-participation. In typical Russian diplomatic fashion, there is a narrative and an agenda to the Russian Eurovision entries, and when it is thwarted by Eurovision they pull out in retaliation. This is why it is so refreshing to see the sole opportunity when the Russian people were allowed to decide the message. To Ukraine Eurovision has always been a point of pride. It is something that as a nation they've always been very successful at. This is because they always seek to send their best. In recent years in light of the war this has frequently meant reverting back to their cultural and linguistic origins. In an effort to fight the Russian narrative, Ukraine has been committed to presenting entries at Eurovision that are uniquely Ukrainian. This has been successful and many countries have started to follow suit.

These distinct methods of engaging in Eurovision have also been seen to be not mutually exclusive. There are instances where the identity of a singer was important in Ukraine, where Ukraine fell victim to political scandal surrounding Eurovision or where Russia decided to use lyrics to try and send a political message. But Eurovision is meant to serve many purposes. The importance is that these messages exist and that Eurovision is a platform for these countries to express their political messaging in ways that are engaging and reach the international audience. In the same way, there is a lot of room for studying other purposes that Eurovision can play, in cultural diplomacy, nation branding or broadcasting political messages that don't involve conflict. Many of these show up in songs within Ukraine, Russia and Estonia that are beyond the scope of this thesis but provide a wealth of material for future study of the song contest.

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