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Back to the Future: Imagining a New Russia at the Eurovision Song Contest

Yana Meerzon and Dmitri Priven

A *Washington Post* journalist once wrote: 'Russia and the European Union are neighbours geographically. But geopolitically they live in different centuries... Europe sees the answer to its problems... in transcending the nation-state and power. For Russians, the solution is in restoring them' (Kagan, 2008). In spite of the seeming incongruity between the economic and cultural politics of the European Union (EU) and those of Russia, it seems that for both geopolitical entities the Eurovision Song Contest (ESC) has become a venue to test the changing cultural, political, and economic values that both Europe and Russia began to experience after the fall of Berlin Wall in 1989. Looking at Russia's eager participation in the ESC, this chapter examines the creative, administrative, funding, and media systems behind Russia's ESC output. It views Russia's growing interest in the ESC as an indicator of the country's negotiation of its position as a separate geopolitical entity vis-à-vis the EU.

However, in considering the musical and performative output that Russia has fielded at the ESC, we choose not to look at Russia's recent involvement in the contest in terms of its relation to the geopolitical, cultural, or aesthetic sensibilities endemic to the expanding EU; we argue instead that the ESC served Russia's ruling regime in the 2000s as an ideological tool and a nation-building device. Furthermore, this study suggests that Russia's participation in the ESC is indicative of the country's leading role within the emerging Euro-Asian economic bloc and the related geopolitical discourse actively explored by Russia's government. This discourse around the ESC, abundant in the state-run media, speaks to the governing regime's desire to re-establish a

post-Soviet cultural space that would include not only its current political and economic partners, such as Belarus, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan, but also the Baltic states and Georgia, all of which have decidedly European political, economic, and cultural leanings. In this respect, this study proposes to deconstruct Russia's vision of the ESC's artistic, musical, and performative norms and expectations in light of how the country's dominant ideologies position Russia vis-à-vis the post-1989 EU and in the world. We suggest that by making a targeted effort to compete in and win the ESC, including increasingly substantial monetary and artistic investment, Russia's authorities reify a particular national mythology for both domestic and external consumption.

To this effect, this chapter analyses several Russian ESC entries of the 2000s, Dima Bilan's 2008 victory in Belgrade, and Russia's subsequent hosting of the ESC in 2009. Using methodologies of critical discourse analysis and performance theory, we argue that the ESC is one in a series of events that the current political regime is using to demonstrate to the West that the country can create musical and performative products compatible with the standards of Western showbusiness. Russian political and media authorities employ what one could call an ESC formula of success, a combination of artistic and economic efforts, as a strategy not only to win the contest but also to re-establish the pre-Perestroika image of the country (both on the home front and abroad) as a competitive, progressive, and wealthy Euro-Asian nation. Accordingly, this study recognizes the 2009 ESC held in Moscow and its official media coverage as a stepping stone for Russia's subsequent successful bids for and implementation of the University Games in 2013, the Winter Olympic Games in 2014, and the FIFA World Cup in 2018.

Setting the context: On a politics of (re)mapping a post-Soviet cultural space

The 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union instigated post-communist Russia's search for the country's new identity, and for marketing strategies to promote this identity internally and internationally. The continuity of the Soviet zeitgeist within the country had been disrupted in the early 1990s, when ideologists of the new Russia were trying to relinquish 70 years of Soviet history and create temporal and cultural bridges (at least in the people's collective consciousness) with pre-Soviet Russia. The 1990s search for Russia's new sociopolitical and cultural image began – top down – with resurrecting and glorifying the pre-Soviet 'golden age', especially the period between 1861 and 1917.

More specifically, 1996 saw Boris Yeltsin, in a quest to improve his chances to win a second presidential term, announce the need for a new Russian idea, one that would ideologically unite the post-Soviet nation. Thinking of Russia's future, his cabinet 'implicitly acknowledged that seeking "normality" patterned after the achievements of wealthy Western nations had not sufficed as a guiding principle for authority-building in Russia' (Smith, 2002: 159). Russia would choose its own way. Accordingly, in 1996 the cabinet turned its gaze to the country's history to shape an image of its future. It was time once again to rethink or, rather, retell Russia's history, and for some pro-Western politicians to 'embrace the idea of having a set of positive memories [and thus to invoke them] as markers of a shared political identity' (ibid.). After Yeltsin's success in the 1996 election, *Rossiiskaia gazeta* (a major state newspaper) started a contest to articulate a new 'all-national progressive idea' that would be capable of 'binding together and energising [the] society' (ibid.: 162). Although the state apparatus did not openly outline the search criteria, the suitable 'national idea' was in the end to be 'civic, not "political, ethnic, or confessional"'. At the same time, however, [the idea] needed to be national and patriotic – an idea not just for ethnic Russians... but for all citizens of the Russian Federation' (ibid.: 163). Specifically, the new ideological discourse was intended to fix 'the time that is out of joint' – that is, to re-establish the lost continuity of the collective zeitgeist of the Soviet era. Accordingly, in the 1990s, many artists, singers, political activists, and media authorities turned their nostalgic gaze to the pre-1917 Russian past and its unity of orthodoxy, autocracy, and nationality.¹ This discourse was meant to create an image of a new Russia as an ideologically and culturally solid country able to position itself independently but in dialogue with its Western neighbours, the countries of the EU. At the same time, it foregrounded another image of Russia – a strong state capable of supporting and controlling (if necessary) its Eastern neighbours and former constituents. This dual positioning of Russia as a Euro-Asian state was therefore intended to reinforce its historical status as a buffer zone between West and East, with a tinge of 19th-century nationalist romanticism.

The Putin–Medvedev rule of the 2000s started out much in the same socio-political vein, with a view to regaining domestic economic stability and to ensuring Russia's return to the European and global stage as an economically, militarily, and culturally competitive power. However, the decade witnessed the ideologists of the post-communist state gradually capitalizing on the population's 'hypochondria of the heart' (see Boym, 2001) – that is, its nostalgia for Soviet myths of a guaranteed perfect

future, or at least of a stable present, underlaid by an ‘as-long-as-it-does-not-get-any-worse’ mentality. The government’s internal politics then aimed to address a ‘widespread sense of insecurity and loss’ (Remington, 2008: 249) using economic and cultural mechanisms. By 2012, the year Putin returned as president, the country found itself in a cultural zeitgeist that many speak of as similar to the 1970s, Brezhnev-era ‘stagnation’. In the 2000s, ‘the worldwide increase in the price of oil [had] strengthened Putin’s hand’ (Remington, 2008: 249), whereas employment of mass communications, namely of TV, had helped his new economic and cultural politics.

Russian TV, a progressive national idea, and the ESC

Once the new ‘progressive national idea’ had been rediscovered in the ideological practices of the Soviet past, the government could not overestimate the leading role of Russian TV in its reinforcement. The authorities eagerly embraced the power of national TV, notably two of its genres – episodic series and music shows (MacFayden, 2008). Governmental use of popular music for ideological purposes has a long history in Russia: leading Russian rock critic Artemy Troitsky (2010a) claims that ‘Russia’s state ideology in music has always been and remains... music for popular entertainment and for the peace of mind of the government’. In the 1960s, the communist regime appropriated Western mainstream popular music styles to create the so-called VIA (‘vocal-instrumental ensembles’) – expanded and sterilized versions of rock groups. In the late 1990s, in order to re-emphasize the discourse of continuity in post-communist Russia, Channel 1 Russia aired a three-part project entitled *Starye pesni o glavnom* (‘Old songs about what’s important’) on New Year’s night, which presented a corpus of recognizable Soviet pop songs about love, sung and restaged by pop stars of the mid-1990s. Today, David-Emil Wickström and Yngvar Steinholt see this appropriation of pop music’s appeal (including the ESC) for ideological purposes as a manifestation of what Svetlana Boym (2001) terms ‘restorative nostalgia’, which ‘attempts a transhistorical construction of the lost home’ (2009: 325).² The outcome of such politics is a newly established, state-approved, multigenerational group of TV personalities (including popular singers, composers, and TV hosts) who repeatedly appear in Channel 1 Russia’s programming. Just as in the 1970s, in today’s Russia this common core of state-approved popular TV stars functions as a symbol of economic stability, and underscores the idea that new Russia has left the unpredictability of the 1990s free market of

pop music behind. Hosting the 2009 ESC was very much in line with Channel 1 Russia's longstanding mandate to build the country's 'democratic' identity by capitalizing on old sentiments. It is not surprising in this context that t.A.T.u, who competed for Russia in the 2003 ESC, performed their hit 'Not Gonna Get Us' (note the title's symbolism) in the opening act of the 2009 semifinal along with the Alexandrov Red Army Choir and Dance Ensemble, with a Russian fighter jet in the background.

Russia's participation in the ESC

Starting from its first ESC appearance in 1994, Russia has continuously worked on its winning strategies – on a product in line with what is expected at the contest. Although never articulated as a fully fledged recipe, Russia's ESC formula of success revolves around four performative and musical axes. The song's musicality (i) means that a new song must be 'danceable, catchy, so that the audience would be able to sing along' (Eurovision Song Contest, 2009). The contestant's performative presence and complexity (ii) refers to the singer's performative choices, acting technique, musical ability, and delivery. The contestant's 'youth, naiveté, energy and truthfulness' (iii) (Breitburg, 2010) alludes to his/her appearance, sex appeal, and age (the younger the better), and to flashy and revealing costumes and makeup. Lastly, there is the song's language and lyrics (iv): with no language restrictions after 1999, the so-called Populenglish, the Esperanto of world popular music, has become a staple of ESC performative aesthetics. We suggest that these four tenets reflect the transnational nature of the contest's expectations and output, something that 'conceives the poetic imagination as... a nation-crossing force that exceeds the limits of the territorial and juridical norm' (Ramazani, 2009: 2). Over the past 15 years, Russia has attempted to conform to the aesthetic and musical norms of the ESC, while exhibiting uniquely Russian sensibilities – the duality of Russian cultural politics that, as we have been arguing, reflects Russia's self-positioning as a new Euro-Asian entity, a strategy that paid off in 2008 with Bilan's victory.

Russia first appeared at the ESC in 1994 with the song '*Vyechniy stran-nik*' ['Eternal wonderer'], performed by aspiring singer Youddiph, and took ninth place. The choice of singer was as emblematic as it was misguided: Youddiph's quirky, jazz-tinged song was intended to show off the new Russia's musical sensibilities but failed to impress voters. Russia then fielded the heavy artillery of the king and queen of the Russian pop stage, Philip Kirkorov and Alla Pugacheva, in 1995 and

1997, respectively, but to little avail. Success finally arrived in 2000, when Russia was represented by 16-year old Alsou (daughter of Lukoil top executive Ralif Safin and widely known as 'the Oil Princess'), singing 'Solo' by Andrew Lane and Brandon Barnes – a catchy number with English lyrics. The performer was young, attractive, and naïve enough to believe that 'what helped was that it was the first contest in [her] life, and [she] wasn't quite aware of the responsibility so [she] didn't have much stage fright' (qtd. in Mikheev et al., 2000). The mise-en-scène of her act was in line with the European audience's expectations; her pink, sexy outfit was designed by the London couturier Maria Grachvogel, then the Spice Girls' regular designer and stylist. Arguably, Alsou took second place that year because her producers had for the first time succeeded in offering a Russian version of the ESC formula of success: the four performative qualities of a ESC act, along with heavy media coverage and strong financial support. Her success marked the beginning of Russia's more focused and concerted pursuit of Eurovision gold, which involved, in the words of the director of the 2009 Moscow ESC, getting advice from 'everybody who was or is somebody' in Eurovision and European TV (qtd. in Eurovision Song Contest, 2009), and consciously modelling their singers and musical material on Europop.

After Alsou's 2000 performance, Russia's ascent to the ESC summit continued with t.A.T.u.'s third place with '*Ne ver', ne boisya, ne pros'i*' in 2003; Bilan's second place with 'Never Let You Go' in 2006; and Serebro's third place with 'Song no. 1' in 2007. Bilan's 2008 number, 'Believe', composed by Jim Beanz (James Washington) and Bilan, received 272 votes with the maximum 12 points from many former Soviet states, such as Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Ukraine, Belarus, and Armenia (along with Israel), and it brought Russia the long-awaited Eurovision gold. The song's lyrics, such as 'I believe: I can do it all/Open every door/Turn unthinkable to reality/You'll see – I can do it all and more' (The Eurovision Song Contest Final, 2008), brought Bilan personal recognition and congratulations from both President Medvedev and Prime Minister Putin. Bilan's post-contest comments aligned his success with official state endeavours: 'We continued the string of beautiful victories taking place one after another... In sports, this is basketball, soccer, hockey and the chance to host the 2014 Olympics in Sochi' (qtd. in Kishkovsky, 2008).

Dressed in a white shirt and matching trousers, the colour of youth and innocence (and the colour of Eurovision victory) Bilan started his song alone, sitting at the tip of a thrust stage surrounded by the audience, cultivating a sense of intimacy with his listeners. He sang in 'nearly



Figure 5.1 2008 ESC winner Dima Bilan (centre) performing 'Believe' with Edvin Marton (left) and Yevgeni Plushchenko
Source: Indrek Galetin.

flawless English', 'frequently flashed his bare chest' (Kishkovsky, 2008) and alternated sitting, lying, and kneeling, all of which added to the sex appeal of his number. With the second part of the act and the lyrics 'Nothing else can stop me if I just believe/And I believe in me', Bilan stood up and moved centre stage, where Olympic champion ice skater Yevgeni Plushchenko, dressed in a white shirt and black trousers, twirled around Bilan, while the Ukrainian/Hungarian virtuoso violinist Edvin Marton,³ also dressed in white, supported the singer's determination to believe in his own powers with a musical intervention on his magical Stradivarius. The act reached a crescendo with the lines 'nothing else can stop me if I just believe', as the trio lined up on their knees across the platform gesturing towards the audience, and triumphantly finished with Bilan singing: 'and we believe in you' (Figure 5.1). The gesture and the song suggested the self-assurance of the singer and the country that he represented, as well as their openness to the new audiences and the new markets of the West.

By combining the talents of Bilan (a classically trained singer capable of performing 18th-century opera), Plushchenko, and Marton, the Russian ESC producers offered not only a strong artistic bid but also an ideological statement targeted at domestic and international audiences. The Bilan–Plushchenko–Marton combo signified the newly rising power of the post-communist Russia. It generously contributed to the longstanding image of 'Russianness' that the country has been selling to the West during the communist period by re-enforcing the masculine authority and power that was associated with the militarist and somewhat aggressive Soviet Russia. At the same time, it capitalized on another stereotype of Russia's cultural superiority dating back to Soviet times: the

talented singer was backed up by the Olympic champion figure skater and the virtuoso violinist, all products of Russia's excellent training system in arts and sports. More specifically for the contest itself, the victory demonstrated, as 2009 ESC producer Konstantin Ernst suggests, that by that point the Russian TV authorities had not only learned lessons about ESC aesthetics (by creating an act that did not necessarily promote the country's musical distinctness) but also proved themselves able to create a performative product that could win the ESC battle of national prides and sensibilities (qtd. in *Eurovision Song Contest*, 2009), because for Russia, 'Eurovision [is] not just a song contest. It is an opportunity to show off, and . . . to defend the face of the homeland' (qtd. in *Eurovision Song Contest*, 2012).

The subsequent, triumphant staging of the ESC in Moscow reflected the then-current tenets of Medvedev–Putin's domestic politics: taming Russian private business; merging the structures of power with those of financial, industrial, and media oligarchies; making oil industries and profits serve the building of a national idea; and manipulating the population's votes. As with many other projects aired on Channel 1 Russia, the 2009 ESC served the Medvedev–Putin government as a tool to market a post-Soviet, open, tolerant, and democratic new Russia to both domestic and foreign audiences. In Ernst's view, it was mainly the 'external political effect' that the organizers were after (qtd. in *The Economist*, 2009). The 2009 ESC, like any other international event hosted by Russia, including the 1980 Olympic Games, was perceived by the Russian authorities as an opportunity for self-affirmation through massive spending: hosting the ESC cost £26 million, at that point the largest ESC budget in the contest's history. Writing about the finances involved, as well as Putin's personal engagement in monitoring preparations for the contest, the witty *Economist* suggests: 'In the past Kremlinologists monitored Soviet leaders by their line-up above Lenin's mausoleum. Now it is by their appearance at Eurovision' (ibid.).

The 2009 Russian ESC performative endeavour

According to Vladimir Aksyuta, artistic director of the 2009 ESC, the Russian organizers raised the technology bar so high that any subsequent host nation had a hard act to follow (*Eurovision Song Contest*, 2009). They made a serious point of hiring world-class lighting, sound, and stage designers, and brought in 30 per cent of all the LED screens available in Europe. The 2009 ESC had the largest audience and the widest media coverage of any contest to date; Moscow's Olympiysky Arena became, for the duration of the contest week, Europe's biggest

concert venue. Hence, the general perception in the media was as if this had been not only a musical but also a logistics competition.

The opening ceremony took place in the Manege, adjacent to the Kremlin and Red Square. It began with a dance act performed by a military dance troupe, followed by a potpourri of ESC-winning songs from the past performed by the children's ensemble *Neposedy*, and a variety of ESC songs mixed with Russian folk music performed by famed Russian balalaika player *Aleksey Arkhipovsky*. The ceremony also featured several past Eurovision performers, the choice of whom exemplified Russia's tendency to create a transgenerational and transgeographical continuity of memory from the Soviet period to the present, from Western Europe to Russia. Notably, Moscow welcomed the first ESC winner, *Lys Assia*, who performed her 1956 winning song, 'Refrain'. The German act *Tschenghis Khan* (ESC winners in 1979) and the Dutch group *Teach-In* (the 1975 contest winners), who enjoyed immense popularity in the Soviet Union during the disco era, also appeared among the invited artists. Hence, the opening show and the Moscow ESC in general were intended to evoke the imaginary temporal space, along the lines of restorative nostalgia, that Russian state TV creates for its citizens and, now, for international audiences.

Emblematically, it was the firebird from Russian folktales – the bird that brings good fortune – that reigned over the 2009 contest. The first semifinal opened with a fairy tale about two little girls (played by *Masha and Nastya Tolmachev*, the winners of the 2006 Junior ESC), who sought advice about how to fly from plants and magic horses. The fairy tale continued accompanied by projections of creatures from other Russian fairy tales, including the firebird itself, which eventually materialized and flew 30 metres above the audience. The bird brought the two girls onto the stage to discover a magic tree capable of granting the girls' – and thus the Eurovision contestants' – wishes, because it is only the song that 'can give people wings' (Eurovision Song Contest, 2009). The choice of this symbol and the fairy-tale narrative exemplified the tendencies of Russian culture and music to cater to European tastes and standards, while enriching the country's creative output with its folk traditions. The firebird allowed the 2009 ESC producers to exploit a 'folk' vision of Russianness familiar to the Western gaze: the symbol spoke equally well to both domestic and foreign audiences.

At the same time, the design choices and the many international performers in the opening gala symbolized the Russian hosts' European tastes and high level of cultural awareness. The contest stage was designed by New York-based scenographer *John Casey*, who had worked on the 1997 ESC in Dublin. Creating his stage fantasy in Moscow, he

pursued a longstanding interest in Russian constructivism and avant-garde theatre design: he managed to introduce 'Russian avant-garde art into a contemporary setting, almost entirely made up of different types of LED screens' (Sandberg, 2009). This design involved a particular positioning of screens and mirrors over the performance area, allowing for unusual colour and image combinations that were evocative of El Lissitzky's and Kandinsky's paintings, and Rodchenko's photographs. This combination of historical imagery with advanced technological performance added a special visual flavour to the Moscow contest (see Figure 3.1). It both spoke to the nation-building desires of the Russian authorities and catered to Europeans' expectations of Russianness. Invited to participate in the opening of the final, Cirque de Soleil served this purpose too. It performed *Enfant Prodigue/Prodigal Son*, which featured, among other images, flying *matryoshka* dolls, and midgets descending from the sky in hot air balloons. Both of these images were curiously reminiscent of the flying bear from the 1980 Olympic Games. The number ended with Bilan being flown in to reprise the previous year's winning song.

The 2009 ESC also spoke to the official ideology positioning Russia as a buffer state between Europe and Asia, via, for example, the song it chose for the competition.⁴ Russia fielded the Ukrainian singer Anastasia Prikhodko with the much-publicized song '*Mamo*' (Mother). Beyond the iconicity of choosing not to sing in English at home, the fact that the song was performed in Russian and Ukrainian was in line with political tendencies towards rapprochement between the two countries after a decade and a half of political and economic animosity.⁵ As Ernst explains, the choice of Prikhodko to represent Russia 'personifies our [Russia's] pan-European approach to ESC, because Anastasia's father is Russian, her mother Ukrainian, she gained fame in Russia, the music was written by an ethnic Georgian, and the original lyrics are by an Estonian. All this fits well with our international vision of this contest' (qtd. in Eurovision Song Contest, 2009). Interesting to note here is Ernst's interpretation of the phrase 'pan-European'. All of the geographical references in relation to Prikhodko and her song happen to be as post-Soviet as they are European, again in line with Russia's desire to build a new post-Soviet space that is pan-Slavic and pan-Asian; or, in other words, to restore the cultural-economic and ideological hegemony of Russia within the territory of the former Soviet Union – an interesting statement on the country's vision of Europeanness coming from a person in charge of televised state ideology.

However, after the 2009 ESC, the interests of the Russian government and, therefore, the executive management of Channel 1 Russia shifted towards different nation-building projects. The 2010 Russian ESC contestant, Petr Nalich, was selected and supported by Rossiya 1, a smaller state-controlled TV channel. Asked whether he was ready to fight a Russian victory at the 2010 ESC after the country's unfortunate performance at the 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver, Nalich said: 'I don't think we should treat a song contest as the Olympic Games, because music is not sport. If you treat music as a competitive sport and demand that a singer win at all cost, the music only gets worse' (2010).⁶

Conclusion: The Buranovo Grannies, ESC 2012

Many Russian show-business personalities consider Russia's 15-year-long effort to win the ESC as evidence of several inferiority complexes. Besides the most obvious complex related to the country's loss of superpower status, there is also an inferiority complex in the area of pop music. The popular sentiment – if Russia wins Eurovision, it will prove that it has become a world leader in pop music – should be taken with a grain of salt, according to Troitsky (2005). The closest Russian pop music has ever come to European, let alone world, pop music standards and markets was with t.A.T.u. Russian popular singers' target audiences have been, and remain, in Russia proper, the Russian-speaking population of the former member states of the Soviet Union, and the Russian-speaking diasporas of Europe, Israel, North America, and Australia (Breitburg, 2010).⁷ As a result, Russia's participation in the ESC can serve as a performative mirror on the country's economic and geopolitical processes over the past two decades. Back in 2000, Alsou's second-place finish reflected important political and economic changes happening in Russia at the beginning of Putin's presidency, specifically in terms of the state reclaiming control of the energy sector. It was not a coincidence that Ralif Safin, a top executive at Lukoil at the time, decided to sponsor his daughter, Alsou, to perform in the ESC. It seems no less a coincidence that it was with Alsou that Russia's serious financial and artistic investment in Eurovision began. Accordingly, to speak of the Russian government's ideological influence over the country's ESC choices, and the strategy that finally brought the competition to Moscow in 2009, is also to speak of the continuous merger of money (i.e. significant private businesses, such as Lukoil) with state power. The lavish 2009 contest budget exemplifies the outcomes of the process. In this context, one can state that Bilan's 2008 performance was a currency much more stable and attractive than the ruble.

Geopolitically speaking, Russia's participation in the ESC reflects a certain stand that the state-run media (and through it the ruling United Russia party of Putin–Medvedev) have taken in terms of how they position Russia in the post-Soviet space. The unique geopolitical position that Russia sees itself occupying in today's balance of world power – a uniquely Euro-Asian position that serves as a sociocultural bridge and economic buffer zone between Europe and the Asia-Pacific region – is also reflected in the choice of performers and acts representing Russia over the past decade, and in the performative choices in contest programming during the 2009 ESC in Moscow.

Ultimately, this chapter argues that for Russia its involvement in the ESC has become increasingly more important as a national reaffirmation device, both in economic and cultural terms, and for both internal and external use (Figure 5.2). It was not surprising in this context to see the folk band Buranovskiye Babushki (the Buranovo Grannies) as the country's 2012 official ESC entry. The group lives in the village of Buranovo in the Malopurginsky district of Udmurtia (an autonomous republic in the Volga region) and sings Udmurt folk songs in its native language. The fact that it was selected to represent Russia at the ESC 2012 is indicative of the country's attempts to build the image of a strong state that is sensitive to its ethnic



Figure 5.2 2012 Russian ESC entry, the Buranovskiye Babushki

Source: Thomas Hanses.

minorities. It is also in line, although paradoxically, with the Russian ESC formula of success. 'Party for Everybody', the group's ESC number was a new song composed by Viktor Drobysh and Timofey Leont'ev, with lyrics by Ol'ga Tukhtareva (one of the group's vocalists) and the American poet Mary Susan Applegate, who has also worked with Kylie Minogue and the German synthpop duo Modern Talking. The new song is danceable and catchy, and it is sung in two languages – Udmurt and English. An invitation to sing and dance, the song presents the grannies happily setting tables while waiting for guests to arrive and sing together 'really loud', so 'the boredom will go away' (Radio Golos Rossii, 2012).

Dressed in somewhat stylized Udmurt national costumes, the Buranovo Grannies impress their audiences with their performative appeal, energy, simplicity, and openness. Although some music critics saw the duo of former winner Bilan and Julia Volkova, with their mega-hit 'Back to Her Future', as a more mainstream option for Russia in ESC 2012, the final round of the national competition brought them only 29.25 votes, whereas the Buranovo Grannies received 38.51 votes (Gasparyan, 2012). What contributed to their national victory was, it seems, the third factor of the ESC formula of success: the contestant's 'naiveté, energy and truthfulness', their charm and ability to act 'not quite mainstream', to be 'original and very sincere' (Breitburg, 2010). Moreover, for many people who voted for the Grannies, the group's seeming disengagement with current Russian politics, and the (also seeming) absence of strong producers who can dictate their own politics in the world of pop music, played a particular role.

The Buranovo Grannies came second in ESC 2012. Their stay, while in Baku, was at the villa of Emin Agalarov, the son-in-law of Azerbaijan's president Ilham Aliyev – himself a businessman and a pop singer. Although this may have started some rumours of nepotism, the sincerity and wholesomeness of the group were seen by the contest's winner, Loreen, as a major contributing factor towards their success (Vovk, 2012). While they were dancing and singing in Baku, their importance to their local community was affirmed: they were awarded the title of People's Artists of Udmurtia; and Aleksandr Volkov, President of Udmurtia, promised to allocate 1 million rubles (around £20,000) to restore the Church of St. Trinity in the village of Buranovo, which had been destroyed in the 1930s (Vovk, 2012). Ultimately, the participation of the Buranovo Grannies in ESC 2012 may once again be indicative of a desire of Russia's leadership to position the country in a certain light both domestically and internationally, this time as a strong but tolerant and friendly state.

Notes

1. This unity was the cornerstone of a nationalist manifesto written in 1832 by Sergey Uvarov, minister of education for Tsar Nicholas I, and is still flaunted by several cultural icons in today's Russia (notably filmmaker Nikita Mikhalkov).
2. A disconnect evident in the 1970s and 1980s, between state-sanctioned pop music and the semi-underground rock music scene, has now been completely glossed over by aged representatives from both camps being invited to perform in Channel 1 programmes; everyone is now equally part of the country's cultural legacy, with nostalgia being the great cultural and social equalizer.
3. Marton was born in an area of Ukraine largely populated by ethnic Hungarians. He trained at the Tchaikovsky Central Music School in Moscow.
4. Today's dominant political discourse in Russia, marked by calls to recognize the uniqueness of Russia's geopolitical position (see Kratochvíl, 2008; White et al., 2010), re-enforces the government's preoccupation with a neo-Euro-Asian idea. Putin has frequently voiced the country's desire to be perceived as a Euro-Asian rather than a European nation (see Laruelle, 2008: 7–8). This position, according to Marlène Laruelle (2008) and Mark Mazawer (2011), is conditioned by Russia's tendency to seek the support of, and influence on, its former Soviet co-constituents in order to create an alliance that might serve as an economic link between the economies of the EU and the Asia-Pacific region. Moreover, today the government's policy 'is far from seeking to isolate Russia from the international capitalist economy, as the Soviet regime did. Nor is it intending to compete with the US as a global power. However, it does seek to become... a "regional superpower"' (Remington, 2008: 249). Thus, the government would recognize 'a united Eurasia in opposition to the transatlantic West' as the mechanism to assure 'protection from external threats and increasing global competition', something made possible by the Commonwealth of Independent States' 'common intellectual potential and united efforts' (Putin *ctd.* in Torbakov, 2004).
5. A pan-Slavic discourse has recently reappeared in Russian TV shows, with 1960s–1980s Soviet TV personalities reminiscing about the good old days when Ukraine was still part of the USSR (read Russia); we can read Prihodko's presence as Russia's representative at the 2009 ESC as part of this wave of nostalgia.
6. Despite his less-than-ambitious take on the contest, Nalich was placed a respectable 11th in the 2010 ESC.
7. As an example, 2009 ESC winner Alexander Rybak, who was born in Belarus and is now a Norwegian national, was embraced by Russian-speaking audiences in Russia and in the diaspora.