The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Russia's Eurovision Hopes Dimmed by Ukraine, Gay Propaganda Law

By Christopher Brennan

May 07, 2014

The Tolmachevy Twins during a Meet & Greet at the Eurovision Song Contest 2014.

Resounding jeers unleashed Tuesday night against the photogenic young twins chosen to represent Russia in Eurovision 2014 may have been motivated more by Russia's souring international reputation than by the sisters' singing skills.

Members of a live studio audience in Copenhagen booed loudly when it was revealed that the Tolmachevy Sisters — Russia's entrants in the pan-European song contest — had scored a spot in the finals.

The reaction was a far cry from the warm reception Russian entrants have enjoyed in past Eurovision competitions. The elderly dance troupe filling out Russia's 2012 team took second place and went down as the competition's most talked-about act. Likewise, Russian entrant Dima Bilan took first in the 2008 contest.

However, international attitudes toward Russia have shifted against the backdrop of such recent events as the Crimea annexation, Russia's purported involvement in the turmoil in eastern Ukraine, and Russia's adoption last year of a law prohibiting gay propaganda, which passed amid a flurry of Western outrage.

Russia's evolving reputation may cast a more pessimistic pallor over the chances of the 17-year-old Tolmachevy twins.

Though international headlines on Russia have recently tended to revolve around the Ukraine conflict, Tuesday night's reaction may have had more to do with the gay propaganda law, according to William Lee Adams, a former TIME journalist and editor of popular Eurovision fan site Wiwibloggs.

"There is a large number of gay people in the [Eurovision] crowd. In the wake of [President Vladimir] Putin's anti-LGBT laws, they are particularly sensitive and I think that came through last night," Adams told The Moscow Times by phone from Copenhagen.

As fans are unable to cast votes for their own national entrants, Russian performers have often benefitted from the support of voters from post-Soviet countries. While support from Ukraine will likely sink this year, the voting patterns in countries such as Belarus and Azerbaijan may not suffer any impact from recent events.

The same may not be true for Western participants. "I think that jurors in the West will be hesitant to put their name next to the Russian song because it might be interpreted as an endorsement of Putin's politics," Adams said.

Each participating country has a five-member jury whose rankings of other countries' contestants are combined with the public's telephone votes to award points to 10 different countries' singers.

The Tolmachevy Sisters, who previously won the Junior Eurovision competition in 2006, may have been selected as Russia's entrants as a means of deflecting political tension.

State television channel Rossiya, which selected the entrants, "knew that [Russia] would come up against criticism for the situation in Ukraine and for its anti-LGBT laws. So they thought, 'We need someone adorable. We need someone people won't boo.' Unfortunately it didn't really work out for them," said Adams, who has been in Denmark for the competition since late April.

The Russian delegation has also pursued a subdued and non-nationalistic media strategy. The Tolmachevy Sisters have generally shied away from the media, and delegation members have endorsed the duo's song "Shine" as the product of an international team that included members from Greece and Sweden.

It remains to be seen whether the controversy surrounding the Ukraine conflict will impact Saturday night's final performances or vote.

Contact the author at c.brennan@imedia.ru

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2014/05/07/russias-eurovision-hopes-dimmed-by-ukraine-gay-propaganda-law-a35263