

Conchita Wurst Prompts Calls for Russia to Leave Eurovision Song Contest

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Austrian Thomas Neuwirth, also known as Conchita Wurst, acknowledges fans after winning the 59th annual Eurovision Song Contest in Copenhagen.

Voters from across Europe on Saturday selected Austrian singer Thomas Neuwirth, better known as Conchita Wurst, as the winner of Eurovision 2014. Russian singers Anastasiya and Maria Tolmacheva took seventh place.

The Austrian singer is best-known for performing as a bearded drag queen, an act that has startled many in Russia and prompted Vitaly Milonov, a deputy in St. Petersburg's legislative assembly, to send a letter to Russia's Eurovision organizing committee asking that no further Russian performers be sent to Eurovision, as in his opinion the competition propagandizes homosexuality.

"The participation of the clear transvestite and hermaphrodite Conchita Wurst on the same stage as Russian performers on live television is obvious propaganda for homosexuality

and moral decay," Milonov wrote. In July 2013, Russia passed a law forbidding the spread of "propaganda" of "nontraditional sexual relationships" among minors, a measure that has been widely criticized in the West.

Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin also criticized the choice of Neuwirth as the Eurovision winner, writing on Twitter that "Eurovision showed the eurointegrators their europerspective — a bearded girl."

Neuwirth told Reuters that his beard was "a statement to say that you can achieve anything, no matter who you are or how you look," adding that his whole Conchita Wurst persona is a statement on tolerance.



Tobias Schwarz / Reuters

The Russian Tolmachevy sisters perform the song "Shine" at Eurovision.

Despite the criticism of Neuwirth from Russian government figures, the Russian Eurovision team supported his victory. Russian singer Filipp Kirkorov, who helped write the Russian Eurovision song "Shine," called on Russians to respect Neuwirth's victory.

"They do not judge the victors, it was the song that won, and in my opinion it was a beautiful song," Kirkorov said, adding that "with a beard, without a beard, a woman, a man — it is unimportant, this is a competition, a song contest. This time, Europe voted this way."

Neuwirth was not the only source of controversy at the contest — ongoing controversy over Russia's alleged involvement in the separatists movements in eastern and southern Ukraine caused many commentators to speculate that politics would hurt the chances of Russia's Tolmachevy sisters.

Russia's recent annexation of Crimea caused further confusion, as Eurovision organizers chose to count votes from the region as votes from Ukraine, stating that the policy was because Crimean phone operators continue to use Ukrainian telephone codes.

The Tolmachevy sisters were booed by the audience on May 6 when they qualified for the finals, while Ukrainian singer Mariya Yaremchuk was greeted with cheers. Yaremchuk finished in sixth place, one spot ahead of the Tolmachevy sisters, who were warmly received by the audience at the finals. The Tolmachevy sisters have avoided making any statements on the situation in Ukraine.

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