The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Did Russia Get a Raw Deal at Eurovision? (Op-Ed)

By Peter Rutland

May 16, 2016



Russia's Sergey Lazarev performs the song 'You Are The Only One' during the Eurovision Song Contest final in Stockholm, Sweden, May 14, 2016.

After the surprise victory of Ukraine at the Eurovision Song Contest in Stockholm on May 14, a chorus of complaints could be heard from Moscow.

Even before the show, Russia had lobbied Eurovision to ban Jamala's song about the deportation of Crimean Tatars in 1944, on the grounds that the competition does not allow political songs. Eurovision decided to accept the song, finding that its lyrics do not have specific political content.

Indeed, it is improbable that Eurovision's 200 million viewers are sufficiently familiar with the fate of the Crimean Tatars to decode the elliptical lyrics. More likely, viewers reacted to the generic emotional impact of the song, without connecting it to any particular political agenda.

There is in fact no evidence for political bias against Russia in the televoting. The spectacular performance of Russia's Sergei Lazarev placed first in the public voting with 361 points, ahead of Ukraine at 323 and Poland at 222. The vast majority of countries (27 out of 42) gave points to both Russia and Ukraine. Eight public audiences gave their top two places to Russia and Ukraine.

If there was politicization in the public voting, then, the pro-Russian votes seem to have more than balanced out the anti-Russian votes.

The problems for Russia came not with the public voting, but with the jury voting. Since 2009, a panel of five music industry professionals in each country issue their own ranking, which accounts for half the total points awarded to each contestant.

The jury voting on Saturday was more polarized than the public televoting. Eleven national juries gave Ukraine first place, and five of that group gave no points to Russia (Denmark, Georgia, Italy, Macedonia and Slovenia). Only four juries gave Russia first place, and just one of them (Cyprus) gave no points to Ukraine.

The same pattern played out in the two countries at the heart of the dispute. In both Moscow and Kiev, the professional juries did not award any points to the other country; whereas in the popular vote Russia won first place in Ukraine, and Ukraine won second place in Russia (after Armenia). This suggests that fear of political repercussions might have affected the jury vote, while the publics in the two countries were trying to rise above the political antagonism.

Defenders of the jury system will argue that their vote is based on technical assessment of the singer and the song, rather than the spectacle of the performance. The fact that the juries collectively awarded first place to Australia by a large margin could be cited as evidence of lack of political bias.

However, it should be noted that the identities of the jurors are known, and Eurovision posts their individual vote tallies online. So the risk of political retaliation is clear.

Strange though it may seem, Eurovision means a lot to the Kremlin, which is desperate for international recognition. After Russia managed to win for the first time, in 2008, Russian television opined that "after decades of isolation, our country is finally returning to Europe and reclaiming the status of a superpower in politics and culture, including popular music, that rightfully belongs to it."

The politics of Ukraine's victory aside, the Eurovision establishment will no doubt be breathing a sigh of relief to see Lazarev pushed into second place. Had Russia won, then the contest would have been hosted in Moscow next year. This would have been a contentious issue, since Eurovision is a huge event on the European gay calendar, and Russia has been locked in a campaign against "gay propaganda" since 2012.

The Eurovision Song Contest simultaneously affirms and subverts national identity, making it a fascinating laboratory for academics trying to track the cultural impact of globalization. Books have been written on the subject, and statisticians have developed sophisticated models to understand the the dynamics of logrolling and voting blocs.

The Nordic countries, the Balkans, and the East Europeans tend to vote for each other, due to "cultural proximity." The voting blocs were still very much in evidence this year.

Another prominent feature is the impact of voting by diaspora communities, keen to show their loyalty to their distant homeland. Diaspora voting presumably explains why Lithuania and Poland won first and second place in the televoting in Britain — which they also managed in Ireland and Norway. Overall, Poland placed 25th in the jury voting but won third place in the televoting.

Russia has the largest diaspora in Europe, with more than 10 million Russians living abroad. They presumably benefit from diaspora voting in the Baltic states and Ukraine. So some of the particularities of Eurovision voting may work in Russia's favor.

Peter Rutland is professor of government at Wesleyan University.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2016/05/16/did-russia-get-a-raw-deal-at-eurovision-op-ed-a52883