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# Eurovision in Moscow: Re-imagining Russia on the Global Stage

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This article considers how the Eurovision Song Contest has come to be used by participating countries as a platform for image-building and identity politics. With particular focus on the 2009 contest, this article explores the debates which surrounded the event which was staged in Moscow. The programme is often dismissed as a kitsch and not very serious event in the UK (West 2006), yet even a brief examination of the contest's history shows that it has in fact had tremendous economic, political and socio-cultural significance for a number of European countries (Jordan 2005, p.51-53). The 2009 event was dubbed 'the Beijing Olympics of Eurovision' (Norton 2009) given the spectacle and scale which were like no other before. It was widely seen by media commentators as an opportunity to promote a positive image of Russia to the international media and therefore to the imaginations of millions of viewers (Malpas 2009). The deaths of critics of the Kremlin government such as Anna Politkovskaya and Alexander Litvenenko as well as the on-going unrest in Chechnya and the 2008 war with Georgia, which in itself was played out in the gaze of the global media, have meant that in recent years Russia has not fared well on the global stage. This paper, based on my own empirical research conducted in Moscow at the competition itself and on previous research in Estonia and Ukraine, explores the debates surrounding the competition and will argue that

it is much more than just a song contest.<sup>1</sup> Scholarly neglect of this event is all the more surprising since Eurovision reflects the issues of the day; it has the capacity to illuminate debates surrounding national identity, polity and protest. This will be discussed as a prelude to the focus on the 2009 event in Russia. Eurovision has tremendous ability to engage with the imaginations of European citizens. Sarah Squire, former UK Ambassador to Estonia, believes that the contest engages with more people across Europe than an election to the European Parliament (Sarah Squire, interview, 15<sup>th</sup> January 2008). Given the scale and the cost of the Eurovision Song Contest in Moscow, it appears that the Russian authorities saw value in this event: it was a platform for Russia and a way of Russia being re-imagined in both the media and in the eyes of European television viewers *on their own terms*.

### **Eurovision in context**

The Eurovision Song Contest is an annual event broadcast since 1956. It was devised by the European Broadcasting Union (EBU), to unite Europe and lift disillusioned nations out of the post-war blues to promote cultural understanding, whilst at the same time pioneering new broadcasting techniques (*Nul Points: TV Hell* [TV] 1992). The original idea behind the contest and still its defining feature today, is that nations (whose television companies are active members of the EBU) submit original songs which are performed and televised live. This is followed by voting to determine the “best” European song of the year. Until 1997 a jury system consisting of music industry professionals and the general public had been used. By 1998 public telephone voting commenced. Until 1993 the

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<sup>1</sup> Permission for citing respondents has been obtained. For ethical considerations, the names of some respondents have not been disclosed and codes have been used where appropriate.

participants of the competition, with the exception of Yugoslavia, were all from Western Europe. Other countries in the Eastern Bloc were not eligible for entry since the national broadcasters were not members of the EBU. In this context Yugoslavia's participation in the event can also be seen as an indicator of cultural autonomy from the rest of the communist bloc. The competition can be seen as a symbolic representation of Europe; fashioning Europe as a unified bloc. Israel has entered the competition since 1973 and Morocco did in 1980. In this context their participation in the event reinforces the notion of Europe as a social construct (Lehti & Smith 2003, p.183-184).

The Eurovision Song Contest has highlighted the changing map of Europe in the wake of the collapse of communism in the East and the "Return to Europe" political discourses which prevailed throughout the 1990s<sup>2</sup> (Smith 2000, p.2). Eglitis (2002) argues that following the collapse of state socialism there was a widespread desire in these countries for "normality". In this context Eglitis argues that the public embraced political, social and cultural traditions (2002, p.8-12) Thus the participation of post-communist countries in the Eurovision Song Contest marks a "Return to Europe" in terms of popular culture; a way of increasing visibility and awareness in the imaginations of the population. The event is in effect a cultural ritual which is replicated every year. Popular culture events such as the Eurovision Song Contests are opportunities for the host nation to take centre stage in the imaginations of millions of Europeans and therefore it has tremendous significance in terms of raising a country's international profile.

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<sup>2</sup> Applications to join the Council of Europe and the European Union are examples of the "Return to Europe" in the political sphere. The very notion of a "return" therefore implies that being in Europe is "normal". In the case of the Baltic States, it suggests that the Soviet annexation was therefore illegal and that these countries were retaking their rightful place in Europe.

The integration of Eastern European countries into the competition, (more than doubling from the early 1990s to encompass forty two nations in 2009) led to various qualification systems being introduced in 1993 and semi-finals in 2004. These changes to the contest and the use of a public telephone vote have led to debates surrounding the impact these modifications have had. In recent years much comment has been made about so-called Eastern-bloc voting, which has at times echoed media debate surrounding European Union enlargement (Watts 2007). The failure of the Netherlands to reach the final in 2005 was held up in the Dutch media as an example of how power within the EU has shifted eastwards (Browne 2005). Every winner from 2001–2008 has been from a new-entrant country outside the contest’s traditional Western European heartland, or from long-time participant countries which had not yet scored a victory. Greece and Finland, both of which are located on the physical edges of Western Europe, won for the first time in this period. While Western European mainstream interest waned, since 2000 it has been the countries from outside the contest’s Western European foundations that have come to dominate it, and have infused it with a new energy, new focus – and new controversies. Therefore Russia’s victory in 2008 represented a certain culmination of the eastward shift of energies that have characterised the contest over the past 15 years (Fricker 2009, p.1).

Popular culture is something which most people in all societies interact with every day. Evolving over time and space, popular culture encompasses the views and perspectives most strongly represented and accepted within a society. It is strongly manifested in areas of entertainment such as sporting events, music, art or literature (Storey 2006, p.1–2). National and international concerts, events, exhibitions and competitions can come into this category and can

enrich perceptions of a country whilst paying their own way in terms of economic benefits. For a country to become a competitor on the global stage, image-building and branding are important factors to consider. Anholt (2005, p.140-141) argues that national wealth is derived from the ability to export and argues that the branding of countries is the way to achieve this; it has become an immutable law of global capitalism. Thus having a positive international image is essential to attract investment through encouraging investor confidence. By restoring credibility through image, a country can increase international political influence and this in turn can eventually lead to a growth in the export of branded products. Paul Temporal (2001, cited in Anholt 2005, p.141) goes further than this to suggest that such branding exercises can also be conducive to enhancing nation building by inspiring confidence, pride and national resolve. These are all factors which are present in staging large events. The Eurovision Song Contest is one of the most watched television programmes in the world, attracting upwards of 100 million viewers (EBU 2008). It has therefore become a traditional fixture in European popular culture and in the imaginations of millions of viewers. Anholt states that ‘the international promotion of a country’s culture is essential for the renewal and regeneration of culture’ (2005, p.140). Thus events such as the Eurovision Song Contest become vehicles for the promotion of culture through participation in and hosting of the event itself.

In terms of tourism and infrastructure development, hosting the contest has been likened to hosting the Olympic Games and World Fairs of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century (Bolin 2006). Yet equally significant has been the role Eurovision plays in terms of promoting and refining a country’s international image (the case of Ireland within the EU exemplifies this point). John Urry (2002, p.1-3) highlights

the ‘tourist gaze’ concept, which is applicable to the Eurovision Song Contest. The ‘tourist gaze’ is a set of expectations and assumptions within which individuals regard destinations in particular and tourism in general. It is fundamentally ‘constructed through difference’ (Urry 2002, p.1) understood by contrast to the routine of everyday life. The resources for constructing the tourist gaze are drawn from ‘a variety of non-tourist practices, such as film, television, literature, magazines records and videos’ (Urry 2002, p. 1-3)

It is this use of media which therefore makes this idea relevant to the Eurovision Song Contest. The reach of the mass media means that it may not be necessary to travel in order to see with the tourist gaze (Urry 2002, p.90). The strongest examples are the short film clips shown between each song during the Eurovision Song Contest. These “postcards” resemble tourist advertising campaigns, promoting scenery, cityscapes and other places of interest to the potential tourist, and are in essence representations of essentialised heritage.

### **Eurovision: Image Building**

Recent victories by Estonia (2001), the first former Eastern Bloc country to win the competition, and Ukraine (2004) have demonstrated the tremendous significance attached to Eurovision by those post-socialist states pursuing the goal of a ‘Return to Europe’. After Estonia won the competition, the then Prime Minister, Mart Laar, spoke to the homecoming crowd in Tallinn the following day and declared that Estonians had

Crumbled the Russian Empire by singing [...] that is how we will enter Europe, not by knocking on the door but entering by singing (*SL Õhtuleht* 2001).

In this context, the Eurovision Song Contest came at a defining moment in Estonia’s history in that it affected the ways in which

Estonia imagines Europe and how Europe images Estonia, when EU accession talks were concluding. The direct reference to the “Singing Revolution” of the late 1980s is also significant, the comparison by Laar shows that this victory was afforded significance alongside a major event in Estonian cultural history.

Ukraine’s Eurovision victory was afforded even greater significance given the lasting impact that the Chernobyl nuclear disaster has had on the international image of the country. When Ukraine hosted the event in 2005 it was seen as an important opportunity to further build on the positive media images generated by the Orange Revolution of 2004-5, given that the eyes of the world would be focussing on the event. Head of the PR firm CFC Consulting stated that it was their aim to enter Eurovision to win and host the contest in Ukraine specifically to improve the country’s international image (Gennadi Kurochka, interview, 5<sup>th</sup> December 2007). As a result of the revolution the preparations for the event were seriously delayed, and in March 2005 the EBU threatened to move the event from Ukraine (Svante Stockselius, interview, 3<sup>rd</sup> April 2008). Stockselius, the EBU Supervisor for the contest, was promptly taken to a meeting with Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko, where Stockselius agreed to extend the deadline by two weeks.

Whilst I did not speak Ukrainian or Russian, I understood what he was doing. He assigned each member of his cabinet a specific responsibility for Eurovision. It was extraordinary. (Svante Stockselius, interview, 3<sup>rd</sup> April 2008).

Two weeks later Stockselius returned to Kyiv to find that all his conditions had been met. This shows the significance of this event for Ukraine since failure to stage the event would have been damaging to Ukraine’s international image. There is currently a



similar ongoing discourse in the country surrounding the Euro 2012 championships, which Ukraine is jointly hosting with Poland<sup>3</sup>. Both events reinforce the notion of media and cultural events as significant when it comes to image building in the imaginations of people across Europe and the world.

### **Eurovision: A Platform for Essentialised National Identities, Protests and Politics**

The Eurovision Song Contest has been used by participating nations as a platform for displaying aspects of essentialised national heritage, whether through costume choice or musical style. The competition represents an opportunity for a country to either compound national stereotypes or to “re-imagine” the nation on a global scale. In 1964 the UK were represented by Kenneth McKellar, a Scotsman who performed in a kilt. Thus an appearance at Eurovision is an opportunity to present a certain narrative of national identity to a European audience.

Throughout its fifty-four year history, Eurovision has reflected political changes in Europe. Immediately after the collapse of communism and the Berlin Wall, the contest was used to express the events at the time. The 1990 contest featured songs such as the the Norwegian entry which made reference to Berlin’s Brandenburg Gate. Ireland’s song was called “Somewhere in Europe”, Austria pleaded for “No More Walls”, Germany’s effort was called “Frei Zu Leben” (“Free To Live”). The winner from Italy called for a united Europe (Gambaccini *et al* 1998, p.114-116). The contest has also routinely been used as a platform for political statements. The Turkish invasion of Cyprus in 1974 had implications for the Eurovision Song Contest, the most noticeable being the voting

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<sup>3</sup> Interviews conducted with respondents in Ukraine exemplify these concerns.

between Greece, Turkey and Cyprus which will be discussed further below. Greece withdrew from the contest in 1975 when it was announced that Turkey would enter, and neither country took part in the same contest until 1978 (Gambaccini *et al* 1998, p.69). The Greek entry of 1976, “Panaghia Mou, Panaghia Mou” (My Lady, My Lady) was a direct protest against the Turkish invasion. The lyrics included references to napalm ruins and fields of refugees. It shows how the contest has reflected political events in Europe and highlights the symbolic value of the contest in terms of nationalist politics as neither country were willing to share the same stage.

Greece and Cyprus have become infamous for awarding each other the maximum twelve points every year whilst giving very few, if any, to Turkey. When Cyprus broke with tradition in 2003 and awarded eight points to Turkey, it did not go unnoticed when the spokesperson declared ‘Europe, peace to Cyprus, Turkey eight points’ (Melani Steliou, Eurovision Song Contest 2003). This highlighted the political relevance of the gesture, it represented a change in the way the relationship between Cyprus and Turkey was imagined. It is interesting to note that this occurred at a time when both sides of the divided island were moving closer together as a result of the ongoing peace talks. However, it should be noted that some Greek-Cypriots accused the state-run Cypriot broadcasting authorities of rigging the vote (Soloman 2007, p.140). Similarly, points exchanged between Greece and Turkey have increased in recent years and this has been attributed to the so-called ‘earthquake diplomacy’ of 1999 (Ioannis Polychronakis, interview, 1<sup>st</sup> March 2008)

The case of Israel has shown how the Eurovision Song Contest often touches on sensitive subjects such as gender identity, sexuality, religion and politics particularly where Israel is imagined in the

world. In this context the international image that Israel has presented has been controversial over the years. Israel has to date won the competition three times, in 1978, 1979 and 1998. In 1978, when it became clear that Israel were winning the contest, neighbouring Jordan stopped transmitting the show. In 2005 Lebanon were forced to withdraw from the contest due to the laws of the national broadcaster which imposed strict censorship on any Israeli entry (Raykoff 2007, p.2). In 1983 the Israeli entry, “Alive”, attracted attention due to its lyrical content; Israel existing and the people being alive. Given that this took place in Munich, the same city where Israeli athletes were assassinated in 1972, it took on profound significance.

In 1998 the IBA selected a trans-gendered artist, Dana International, to represent Israel at Eurovision. This caused uproar in the country with ultra-Orthodox Jews, who considered Dana International to be peripheral to their ideal of national identity (Raykoff 2007, p.11). Others such as composer Svika Pikk highlighted the fact that it was a chance to promote Israel as a liberal and tolerant country, changing the way the Middle East is imagined. Israeli controversy continued into the 2000 contest when the representatives, Ping-pong, waved Syrian flags during rehearsals. Israel and Syria were officially in a state of war at the time and Israel’s then Deputy Education Minister, Shlomo Yahalom called for the group’s participation to be banned claiming that they failed to represent national values (BBC News 2000). The waving of the Syrian flag during rehearsals on Israel’s Independence Day May 10<sup>th</sup>, in particular, caused further upset to officials. Ping-pong had already caused offence to some in Israel when the video for their song was aired and featured the two men in the group kissing. Despite threats from IBA officials to ban the group from performing, they appeared

at Eurovision 2000 and waved the Syrian flag together with the Israeli flag in a call for peace. This shows that the contest is significant in terms of highlighting how a country is both imagined and imagines itself.

### **Eurovision 2009: Spotlight On Russia**

Dima Bilan won the 2008 contest and in the words of Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin it represented ‘not only Dima Bilan’s personal success, but one more triumph for all of Russia’ (Kishkovsky 2008). Russian national broadcaster Channel One then went on to stage the event in Moscow in May 2009. The 2009 contest was like no other before; it was the most expensive in the contest’s fifty-four year history, costing over 30 million Euros (compared to the 13 million Euros spent in 2007). It was also the largest physically; the stage, according to the organisers held 30% of the world’s available LED lighting. The event was also one of the most controversial in recent years with various political and nationalist grievances being played out in front of an international audience. Given the unprecedented budget in the midst of a global financial crisis and the overall spectacle surrounding the 2009 affair, Eurovision was therefore a chance to promote a positive international image of Russia *on its own terms* to the global media, given that much coverage of Russia in recent years has come from outside Russia and outside its control.

The Eurovision Song Contest followed a series of other “cultural victories” for Russia. In May 2008 St Petersburg team Zenit won the UEFA Cup. Following on from this Moscow staged the Champions League Final, the first time the event had been staged in Russia. The authorities won praise in the global media for the effective handling of the event and for their decision to waive the

visa requirements for fans travelling to the event. This was also done for Eurovision itself when it was staged in Ukraine in 2005, and the visa-free legislation remains in place today. One respondent wrote that the Champions League Final in Moscow was

A chance for Moscow and Russia to show to the world that they are capable of hosting big events, and to showcase their country in a positive light. (Patrick McAvoy, interview, September 1<sup>st</sup> 2009).

Overall Moscow left positive impressions in the minds of those who had travelled there. One fan was quoted as saying ‘I would definitely go back, with or without the football’ (Tunney 2008).

The Caucasus city of Sochi was chosen as the host of the 2014 Winter Olympics with Prime Minister Vladimir Putin making his first English language speech in an attempt to woo the Olympic committee (Weir 2009). This further exemplifies Russia as both a sporting competitor and as capable of staging large international events in the eyes of the global media. In December 2008 Russia then won the Miss World beauty pageant. Whilst this competition continues to be controversial and is seen through the gaze of the Western media as misogynistic (Dewey 2008, p.4), this event was again seen as another symbolic victory for Russia. One respondent interviewed, a student, dismissed criticisms of the pageant by stating that ‘it was such a big year for Russia and it was one more jewel in our crown’ (Student “A”, interview, May 11<sup>th</sup> 2009).

On 10<sup>th</sup> May 2009 Russia won the World Ice Hockey Championships, at the same time as rehearsals were ongoing for the Eurovision Song Contest finals<sup>4</sup>. What followed was an eruption of national celebrations with Russian flags being flown from cars and a series of impromptu parties on the streets. The student explained that these “cultural victories” were significant in terms of raising Russia’s

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<sup>4</sup> Semi finals on 12<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup> and the Eurovision final on May 16<sup>th</sup> respectively.

international profile in the media but also considered it to be an opportunity to unite the country.

We Russians have been through a lot, such events and victories are something to be proud of, not only are the celebrations fun but they are also positive. I guess in your media you don't read many positive things about us (Student "A", interview, May 11<sup>th</sup> 2009).

For Russians, these victories serve as important indicators that things are going well. However, others such as Viktor Shenderovich, a satirist and political commentator, argued that popular culture events have their place but their significance should not be overplayed (Weir 2009). However, given the prominence the Eurovision Song Contest was given in Moscow, those who made the decisions clearly saw it differently.

In the media gaze of Western Europe, Russia has not fared well. The recent and public fallout from the death of Alexander Litvenenko, the recent killings of prominent critical journalists such as Anna Politkovskaya as well as the so-called "cyber attacks" on Estonia and the 2008 war with Georgia have left Russia open to criticism with consistent negative narratives appearing in the UK media (*Daily Mail* 2007; Halpin & Boyes 2008). The Eurovision Song Contest was therefore an opportunity to present a positive side of Russia to the world through the media. The official programme booklet published by the national broadcaster, Channel One, emphasised the significance of the event in terms of boosting international images of the host country. It made specific reference to the 2008 competition which was hosted in Belgrade, Serbia; another country seeking to improve its international image through cultural

participation<sup>5</sup>. One respondent, a journalist present at the event in Moscow viewed the competition as:

A chance for Russia to show our country in the right way [...] *In the European mind* Russia and real Russia are different things. I care about what people think of my country. In the time of the Soviet Union we had a very bad relationship with other countries. Now we can talk about other countries and cultures [...] When we won Eurovision it was like a second victory day in Russia [...] Eurovision in Moscow is very very important for Russia [...] it is a chance for us to show what Russians think [...] The organisation of this event is brilliant, I am so proud of my country [...] My friends from Spain, Scotland, Israel, were amazed and I am very proud. I feel so good for my country. I think Eurovision in Moscow is the best Eurovision (Journalist “A”, interview, May 10<sup>th</sup> 2009).

The journalist in question stated that hosting the competition represented an important chance for Russia to present itself in a positive light and for those present at the event to be aware that the Western media may have been presenting an alternative view to the Russia that she identified with.

During the course of the interview the focus changed to Georgia, which only months before had been in a state of war with Russia. Georgia, after initially refusing to take part in the show after the war, confirmed their choice of entry in early 2009. However the song, “We Don’t Wanna Put In”, was disqualified by the EBU after the Georgian team refused to change the lyrics. Largely believed to be a criticism of Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, the EBU deemed the entry “too political” and Georgia were therefore barred from participation. The journalist stated she was unsure who was the aggressor in the war but conceded that she did have views on the Georgian entry:

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<sup>5</sup> Recent successes in tennis, the Eurovision Song Contest and the staging of international concerts exemplify this.

I think the words in this song are not gentle. Everybody understands what it is. When you go to Moscow you cannot sing this song [...] we respect our former President (Journalist “A”, interview, May 10<sup>th</sup> 2009).

Her response, whilst balanced, highlights several aspects of the construction of Russian national identity. During the interview she regularly mentioned Russia as being “the best” in sports, cinema, and music in the imaginations of people in Europe and conducive to the idea of a strong resurgent Russia which demands respect. She viewed Georgia as being disrespectful and thus as having no place in Moscow.

In the run-up to the contest the Moscow authorities made headlines with alleged heavy-handed tactics being employed in the efforts to clean up the city with up to 30,000 stray dogs removed from the city streets in a bid to present a positive image of the city to the international delegations (Gardiner 2009). The article also reported rumors that prostitutes and homeless people were to be taken out of the city centre as reportedly happened with the 1980 Olympic Games, thus reinforcing the notion of such spectator events being seen as a viable and serious platform for image building. In this context the label of the ‘Beijing Olympics of Eurovision’ takes on deeper significance. The authorities in Beijing were criticised after reports emerged of heavy-handed tactics whilst the city was being prepared for the event and it was alleged that a recall of contaminated milk products was delayed so as not to damage China’s international image during the games (Spencer 2008). This alongside the cost and scale of the production provides an interesting counter narrative and Eurovision 2009 in Moscow can be viewed in a similar vein.

Confirmation of how seriously the authorities were taking the event came when Prime Minister Vladimir Putin appeared at one of



the rehearsals to oversee the preparations for himself. Security was tight in Moscow in the run-up to the 2009 contest with a heavy police presence: up to 20,000 officers were brought in to preside over the event (Gardiner 2009). It was also announced that a gay pride march would take place on the same day as the main broadcast. The organisers hoped to draw attention to what they see as systematic discrimination against the gay community whilst at the same time hoping that the heavy media presence for Eurovision would decrease the chance of violence, which occurred at Moscow Pride in both 2006 and 2007. The Mayor of Moscow previously described homosexuality as “satanic” and banned the proposed march. The protest did go ahead and more than twenty people were forcibly removed and arrested by police. There was no repeat of the violent scenes; however such unrest and the removal of the protestors did provide a striking counter narrative to the scenes broadcast during the Eurovision Song Contest itself. A journalist for *The Times* newspaper said that the sheer number of police, the overall cost and the size of the event were all

Blatantly obvious examples of how seriously they [organisers] are taking this [...] Believe me they are worried this [march] will affect the positive image they have tried to present through this contest. (Philippe Naughton, interview, May 15<sup>th</sup> 2009).

As previously highlighted, politics is never far from Eurovision and 2009 was no exception after a series of disputes between Armenia and Azerbaijan unfolded throughout the live broadcasts of the semi-finals and final. During the semi-finals, an introductory “postcard” leading into the Armenian performance depicted, amongst other monuments, a statue located in Stepanakert, capital city of the unrecognized Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, which constitutes a part of Azerbaijan. The statue was built in Soviet times

to celebrate the Armenian heritage of the area. Azerbaijan complained to the EBU that the video clip was unacceptable based on the fact that Nagorno-Karabakh is a part of Azerbaijan, and it was subsequently edited out for the broadcast of the final. In retaliation, the presenter of the Armenian votes held up a clipboard with the monument's picture on it multiple times as she read off the votes, and in the background a screen in the capital's main square could also be seen to display the disputed monument. Again, an example of Eurovision being used as a vehicle for nationalist politics, displayed to a global audience. In August 2009 the BBC reported that several people had been questioned in Azerbaijan after their votes for Armenia were traced by mobile phone service providers. According to the BBC “[O]ne man was accused of being unpatriotic and a “potential security threat” after he sent a text backing Armenia’s song [...] the Azerbaijani authorities said people had merely been invited to explain why they voted for Armenia” (BBC News 2009). The issue is currently being investigated by the EBU and a decision on whether Azerbaijan contravened the voting rules will be taken in the coming months. Such a reaction on the part of the authorities in Azerbaijan again shows how this is viewed as more than just a song contest in some countries. There were other controversies in the host nation after a Ukrainian was selected to sing the Russian entry. The artist was labelled as a traitor in Ukraine and an imposter in Russia (Henley 2009) thus highlighting the complexities surrounding post-Soviet national identity.

From a technical perspective the 2009 contests staged in Moscow were flawless and widely seen by those present as a piece of highly sophisticated television production and therefore a triumph for Russia. To reinforce the notion of a successful Russia, small clips of recent cultural victories were shown during the telecast. Fricker

(2009, p.2) argues that whilst the show was a spectacle in itself, the self-representation of Russia seemed somewhat uncertain. For example several times the presenters repeated that Russia “does not have bears walking in the streets” in an attempt to jokingly refute an image of Russia as being perceived by the rest of Europe as uncivilised, backward, and barbaric. This shows how the issue of Russia’s image is a sensitive one; however the continuous repetition of this, according to Fricker, verbally and visually actually reinscribes this notion (Fricker 2009, p.2-3). During the interval the choice of entertainment was also ambiguous. The Russian girl-duo Tatu performed backed by the Red Army Chorus whilst a pink inflatable tank and jet appeared on the stage. In an attempt to dispel the idea of Russia as militaristic and aggressive the producers inadvertently reinforced the image with such imagery and attempt to inject humour into the scenes, in the form of the pink tank, months after the war with Georgia. Russia is the only country to explicitly make on-air references to stereotypes in order to attempt to dispel them, thus the 2009 Eurovision Song Contest became a public relations vehicle for the Russian government, who assisted with the financing of the project.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has demonstrated the significance that the Eurovision Song Contest has for countries, in particularly those from Eastern Europe, in terms of raising their international profile. For Russia the 2009 contest was an opportunity for the country to be re-imagined in the international media. It was dubbed “The Beijing Olympics of Eurovision” by UK commentator Graham Norton during the broadcast, alluding to heavy-handed tactics by the police as well as the scale of the spectacle in Moscow itself. Parallels can be drawn

with the Beijing Olympics; the striking counter narrative to the proceedings in Moscow in the form of the suppressed gay right march and reports of dog culls compares with the Chinese case and reports there of heavy-handed tactics and a blanket ban on discussions surrounding Tibet. The Beijing Olympics, like the Moscow Eurovision, were the most expensive ever and a testament to how seriously the authorities in both countries view such events as serious opportunities to promote positive international images to the global media. One respondent recalled

Looking at it now, and at the amazing venue we were in, it was not hard to believe that the Russians had spend over €30 million on staging the event. It was all very big, very grandiose and very expensive. We were told anecdotally that the Russians simply kept throwing money at any problems that arose during the organisation of the contest until those problems went away (Journalist “B”, interview, July 9<sup>th</sup> 2009).

Such events afford the hosts the opportunity to change perceptions in the imaginations of the viewer.

In Soviet times Russia used the Olympic Games as an opportunity to demonstrate sporting prowess and international credentials. I would argue that Russia has used the Eurovision Song Contest in the same way. It is an event linked with national prestige, both in terms of placing and hosting the event itself. In terms of voting, victory relies solely upon the approval of other nations in the form of telephone votes. Both Beijing and Moscow show that striking counter-narratives can influence the way this re-imagining takes place. The very stereotypes they sought to dispel may in fact have been compounded by the “spin” and scale of the production, and the anecdote quoted above seems to confirm this: Russia attempts to present certain narratives regardless of the cost, financial or otherwise. It is unclear where Eurovision will go from here or if

the 2010 hosts, Norway, will provide a budget of anything near the levels of Russia's Channel One. The Eurovision Song Contest in Moscow was on a scale which has never been seen before and had some of the highest viewing figures across European television networks. Such a feat is something which surely only existed in creator Marcel Baison's imagination.

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