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**“Russia, Goodbye!”: An analysis of Russia-Ukraine Geopolitical Dynamics and Competing Narratives within the Eurovision Song Contest (2003-2023)**

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Department of History

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*To my dearly missed grandpa José Jacinto, the wind beneath my wings.*

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## Abstract

Television has long proven to be the storyteller of contemporary world politics. The Eurovision Song Contest, an annual TV music competition, has been shown to be a microcosm of Europe and all the political friendships and enmities that characterize the European political landscape. Known as a kitsch and quirky *pop* show, Eurovision is the most popular event in Europe, gathering hundreds of millions of viewers worldwide. Despite being considered apolitical by the European Broadcasting Union, the singing competition has served as a platform for countries to spread their values, culture and several narratives to a broad audience and, consequently, enhance their soft power and influence. Russia and Ukraine have a longstanding tradition of political posturing around Eurovision as both countries have been narrating their hostile relations for the past 20 years through song lyrics, voting patterns, political speeches and statements. To understand the spill-over of Russia and Ukraine's geopolitical tensions and conflict to the Eurovision stage, this study will explore this bilateral relation within the international event through the lens of popular geopolitics. This analysis will then provide valuable insights on how Russia and Ukraine are producing and disseminating their geopolitical narratives through a musical and entertainment platform and how these specific narratives are reflecting broader geopolitical dynamics between both countries. Through the Eurovision Song Contest, it is possible to study how popular culture and geopolitical issues intersect, which provides a distinctive perspective of Russia-Ukraine relations and how they are perceived on the international stage before a global audience.

**Keywords:** Popular Geopolitics; Geopolitical Narratives; Soft Power; Eurovision Song Contest; Russia; Ukraine.

## Resumo

Há muito tempo que a televisão tem provado a sua capacidade de narrar a política internacional contemporânea. O Festival Eurovisão da Canção, um concurso anual televisivo de música, tem demonstrado ser um microcosmo da Europa e de todas as amizades e inimizades políticas que caracterizam o panorama político europeu. Conhecido como um concurso de *pop* peculiar, a Eurovisão é o evento mais popular da Europa, reunindo centenas de milhões de espectadores em todo o mundo. Apesar de ser considerado apolítico pela União Europeia de Radiodifusão, o concurso de música tem servido como plataforma para os países divulgarem os seus valores, a sua cultura e várias narrativas a um público variado e, conseqüentemente, aumentarem o seu *soft power* e influência. A Rússia e a Ucrânia têm uma longa tradição de postura política em torno da Eurovisão, uma vez que ambos os países têm narrado as suas relações hostis nos últimos 20 anos através de letras de canções, padrões de votação, discursos e declarações políticas. Para compreender as repercussões das tensões e conflitos geopolíticos da Rússia e da Ucrânia no palco da Eurovisão, este estudo irá explorar esta relação bilateral no evento internacional através das lentes da geopolítica popular. Esta análise fornecerá, assim, percepções úteis sobre a forma como a Rússia e a Ucrânia estão a produzir e a divulgar as suas narrativas geopolíticas através de uma plataforma musical e de entretenimento, e como estas narrativas específicas estão a refletir uma dinâmica geopolítica mais ampla entre ambos os países. Através do Festival Eurovisão da Canção, é possível estudar como a cultura popular e questões geopolíticas se interseitam, o que proporciona uma perspetiva distinta das relações Rússia-Ucrânia e como estas são entendidas no cenário internacional perante um público global.

**Palavras-chave:** Geopolítica Popular; Narrativas Geopolíticas; *Soft Power*; Festival Eurovisão da Canção; Rússia; Ucrânia.

## Table of Contents

Acknowledgments.....	i
Abstract .....	ii
Resumo .....	iii
Table of Contents .....	iv
Glossary of Acronyms.....	vi
Introduction.....	1
Background & Research Problem .....	1
Research Objectives & Research Question.....	2
Methodology: Research Methods.....	4
Conceptual Framework .....	5
CHAPTER 1 – Literature Review .....	7
1.1. Geopolitics, Soft Power and <i>Pop</i> Culture.....	7
1.1.1. Defining geopolitics.....	7
1.1.2. Defining soft power .....	8
1.1.3. Defining <i>pop</i> culture.....	9
1.1.4. The link between geopolitics, soft power and <i>pop</i> culture: the concept of popular geopolitics.....	10
1.2. Political changes in Ukraine and diplomatic relations with Russia: from the 2004 Orange Revolution to the 2022 Russian invasion .....	12
1.3. The Eurovision Song Contest as a Post-Soviet Geopolitical Battleground ....	16
CHAPTER 2 – Analysis of Russia and Ukraine’s Geopolitical Dynamics and Competing Narratives within the Eurovision Song Contest (2003-2023) .....	19
2.1. The Eurovision Song Contest: brief context, rules and voting system .....	19
2.2. Geopolitical voting blocs and political voting .....	23
2.3. Russia-Ukraine Relations within the Eurovision Song Contest.....	24
2.3.1. Pre/Post Orange Revolution in Ukraine .....	26

2.3.1.1. The Ruslana phenomenon: From winning Eurovision 2004 with <i>Wild Dances</i> to being a symbol figure of the Orange Revolution and Euromaidan protests .....	27
2.3.1.2. Dancing Russia Goodbye: Verka Serduchka’s controversial <i>Dancing Lasha Tumbai</i> in Eurovision 2007 .....	30
2.3.2. Post-Russian Annexation of Crimea .....	33
2.3.2.1. The boos and jeers: Russian Tolmachevy Sisters (2014) and Polina Gagarina’s (2015) message of unity and peace and Ukraine’s withdrawal .....	33
2.3.2.2. ‘Where is your heart? Humanity rise’: Crimean Tatar singer Jamala wins Eurovision 2016 with the song <i>1944</i> .....	36
2.3.2.3. From Ukraine’s travel ban on Russian act Yuliya Samoylova to Russia’s consequent withdrawal from Eurovision 2017 .....	45
2.3.2.4. ‘I’m not a tool in the political arena’: <i>Natsionalnyi Vidbir</i> controversy and Ukraine’s withdrawal in 2019.....	48
2.3.2.5. From <i>Tini Zabutykh Predkiv</i> to <i>Stefania</i> : Alina Pash’s withdrawal as Ukrainian representative of Eurovision 2022 .....	50
2.3.3. Post-Russian Invasion of Ukraine.....	51
2.3.3.1. Russia’s banning of the Eurovision Song Contest 2022.....	51
2.3.3.2. ‘I will always find my way home’: Ukrainian act Kalush Orchestra triumphs at Eurovision 2022.....	52
2.3.3.3. Russia’s bombing of the city of Ternopil during Eurovision 2023 – hometown of Ukrainian act Tvorchi .....	55
2.4. Discussion: Summary of key findings.....	57
Conclusions .....	62
Bibliography.....	65
Annexes.....	74
Annex A. Song lyrics of <i>A Million Voices</i> by Polina Gagarina – Russian entry of Eurovision 2015 .....	74
Annex B. Song lyrics of <i>1944</i> (translated version) by Jamala – Ukrainian entry of Eurovision 2016 .....	75



## **Glossary of Acronyms**

EBU – European Broadcasting Union

ESC – Eurovision Song Contest

EU – European Union

NATO – North Atlantic Treaty Organization

NTU – National Television Company of Ukraine

UA:PBC – Public Broadcasting Company of Ukraine

USSR – Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

## **Introduction**

### **Background & Research Problem**

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russia and Ukraine have undergone moments of ties and tensions to this day. Considering the early years of independence, both Ukraine and Russia signed several agreements on economic cooperation and were both members of the Commonwealth of Independent States. However, tensions between the two countries started to emerge with the 2004 Orange Revolution protests and reached their climax in 2014 with Russia's annexation of Crimea and consequent conflict in eastern Ukraine (Shahi, 2022). Currently, Russia and Ukraine are coping with life-and-death issues in a terrorizing scenario after Moscow's decision to invade Ukrainian territory in February 2022. While both countries are fighting in a bloody battlefield, a less violent stage has been receiving the hostility between Russia and Ukraine, namely the Eurovision Song Contest. This popular cultural platform has been used by Moscow and Kyiv to disseminate narratives about their diplomatic relations and ongoing geopolitical and military conflict to a global audience. Despite considered an apolitical cultural event that intends to bring nations together, the Eurovision stage has been reflecting political friendships and enmities since its debut through what is known as geopolitical voting blocs (Güvendik, 2020). Russia and Ukraine have been a part of the same voting bloc, namely the Eastern bloc, in which there is a heavy exchanging of points between those who are part of it (Mantzaris, et al., 2018). Nevertheless, as notable tensions began to emerge between the two countries, especially after the 2014 Crimean crisis, their apparent political friendship in the contest started to be questioned.

Since the implementation of a new voting system in 2016 that allowed the audience to see the votes coming from the professional juries and televoters separately, there has been an evident difference between the popular vote and the more clearly political jury vote (Cashman, 2017). This was particularly witnessed in the voting exchanged between the Russian and Ukrainian national jury, that since 2016 have been awarding zero points to each other. The unquestionable contrast between the voting exchanged between the two countries before and after the Crimean crisis, along with song lyrics and political dropouts, statements and speeches that started to emerge, manifests how geopolitics have a role to play in Russia and Ukraine's relations within the Eurovision Song Contest. As a matter of fact, these countries' relations in the competition are one of the greatest examples of how wide geopolitical narratives invade the Eurovision stage (Jordan, 2015). The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine and consequent protests from other participating countries led to the exclusion of Russia from participating in the international singing

competition. Nonetheless, the ongoing conflict continued to play an active role in Ukraine's path in the song contest. Thus, it is important to explore not only how the singing competition is political at its very roots (Pavlyshyn, 2019), but also how it is a tool for countries such as Russia and Ukraine to bring political conflicts to the international stage. By paying close attention to the Eurovision dynamics through the lens of popular geopolitics – the main approach of this study –, it becomes clear how Russia and Ukraine's geopolitical narratives have been shaping their relations within the song contest for the past 20 years and how the global audience has perceived this post-soviet geopolitical battleground.

### **Research Objectives & Research Question**

Having this in mind, this study focuses on how Russia and Ukraine's geopolitical tensions and conflict have been spilling over to the Eurovision Song Contest since the Ukrainian debut in 2003. The time span of the dissertation is going to be extended until May 2023 as Russia's bombing on the western city of Ternopil during the Eurovision Grand Final is a crucial event to add to Russia-Ukraine geopolitical dynamics and finish a 20-year chapter of exchanged coded-political messages and provocations. Naturally, within this period, there are years that will not be explored in such detail as there are no significant controversies or tensions between Russia and Ukraine within the song contest. Therefore, the most relevant years to the research that will be further analysed are 2004, 2007, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2019, 2022 and 2023. Accordingly, to explore Russia-Ukraine geopolitical dynamics and competing narratives within Eurovision, this study aims to answer the following research question – How was geopolitics reflected in the behaviour of Russia and Ukraine within the Eurovision Song Contest between 2003 and 2023?

The international singing competition has historically served as a lens for subjects other than music. Russia-Ukraine diplomatic relations have been told through performances, voting patterns, political statements and speeches. Both countries have constructed and disseminated geopolitical narratives through popular culture hoping to reach a broad audience and win their preferences. The Eurovision Song Contest is the most popular cultural event in Europe, and since it is within *pop* culture that narratives are produced (Grayson, et al., 2009), it becomes extremely important to study this *pop* show to understand how geopolitical issues and popular culture intersect. That said, the dissertation's main goal is to study how geopolitics play a role in Russia and Ukraine's relations within the Eurovision Song Contest since 2003 and until 2023 through the lens

of popular geopolitics. Thereupon, I intend to analyse different criteria to explore the effects of this field of study associated with international relations on this specific bilateral relation.

Firstly, it is of utmost importance to offer a brief overview of Eurovision as a European popular cultural platform with geopolitical significance. Through the explanation of the called preferential voting, it will become clear how this specific cultural event intersects with geopolitics as there are several geopolitical voting blocs, commonly between neighbouring countries. Considering Russia and Ukraine's complex diplomatic relations and most recent events, this specific bilateral relation within the *pop* event will give us one of the greatest examples how music and geopolitics collide. Therefore, I intend to explain how the Eurovision stage was used by Russia and Ukraine as a soft power tool to share political and cultural claims. Through both countries various entries, there seems to be relevant aspects regarding not only the performance itself, but also the song lyrics that have enlightened the desire of Russia and Ukraine to disseminate their geopolitical narratives to a wide audience. For instance, we can consider Russia's 2015 song that called for peace worldwide. While this song was sung at the Eurovision Grand Final, the Russo-Ukrainian war continued in eastern Ukraine – and was thus interpreted as Russia wanted to portray a positive international image about itself (Saunders, 2015). Ukraine's victory in 2016 can also be used as an example of a geopolitical narrative. The lyrics were very explicit as the singer talked about the deportation of Crimean Tatars in the 1940s, that alluded to the current Crimean crisis. By singing about the suffering of this group, Ukraine wanted to share with the world the atrocities committed by Stalin and how History was repeating itself following the annexation of Crimea by the Russians (Pavlyshyn, 2019). Therefore, Russia and Ukraine perform their own geopolitical narratives on an international stage before a global audience, hoping to enhance their soft power and influence.

Additionally, I plan to explore the differences in the voting exchanged between Russia and Ukraine in the abovementioned time span – and especially compare the voting exchanged before and after the Crimean crisis in 2014. Russia and Ukraine have had positive relations within the show at the beginning, however, after the annexation of Crimea, the Russian and Ukrainian national juries voting breakdown would reveal the *null* points awarded to each other in 2016 – a pattern that persisted until Russia's banning in 2022. For that reason, I aim to analyse the implicit/explicit political messages behind significant lyrics; the reactions of both countries to each other's songs and behaviour (including political leaders and media perceptions); Russia and Ukraine's withdrawing statements linked to their ongoing geopolitical conflict; and the patterns of support and

opposition from the Eurovision audience. Through the analysis of the previously mentioned elements, we will understand how Russia-Ukraine geopolitical tensions spilled over the Eurovision stage for the past 20 years – answering then the research question of this study.

### **Methodology: Research Methods**

The present section is going to outline the methodology and research methods that were used to investigate and analyse Russia-Ukraine geopolitical dynamics and competing narratives within the Eurovision Song Contest. Considering the nature of the chosen topic, a qualitative methodology is undoubtedly the best approach to this study. Notwithstanding the obvious final voting patterns to evaluate Russia and Ukraine's relations within the musical event, it goes beyond the voting exchanged. Song lyrics with political content, withdrawals from the contest following political controversies, political speeches and public support and opposition must also be addressed when studying the geopolitical behaviour within this bilateral relation in the *pop* show. Thus, this study will be conducted using a content analysis strategy. Firstly, there should be an interpretation of the existing literature within this specific topic. Besides literature, there will be a particular attention to official statements from the Russian and Ukrainian broadcasters available online, as well as media articles and testimonies of political leaders through their social media. These will be considered as it presents key evidence of both parts that political tensions cannot stay out of the popular cultural event. As a matter of fact, the official withdrawal statements from Eurovision were justified in the light of the ongoing conflict between Kyiv and Moscow. In addition, there will be used content from interviews given by significant Eurovision Russian and Ukrainian acts to analyse how they perceive the conflict and how they are indispensable to the dissemination of the countries' narrative to a wide audience. The analysis of these statements and testimonies will then allow me to compare perspectives on the way this geopolitical conflict is being reflected in Russia and Ukraine's relations within Eurovision. Considering that the EBU is the entity responsible for hosting Eurovision and is a moderator between both countries' state broadcasters, their official statements reacting to Russia and Ukraine's enmity within the singing competition will also be analysed as an impartial side.

Posteriorly, audio-visual means will be used to analyse explicit or implicit political content from Russia to Ukraine and vice-versa, including song lyrics and in and off-stage elements that have strengthen the tension between the two countries within the contest. Song lyrics have proven to play a role in the enmity of these nations, as some are

considered political provocations. In fact, one of the most contested songs is the 2016 Ukrainian winning song that was highly criticised by Russian officials, that appealed to its disqualification as it violated EBU's rules against political content. This is behind the calls for Russia to boycott the Kyiv-hosted 2017 contest over the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, showing once again the power of geopolitics within this bilateral relation.

Last but not least, the voting patterns between Moscow and Kyiv will also be analysed in detail. The EBU's official website will be crucial to this approach as it has available all the points exchanged between Russia and Ukraine since 2003 until today, which will allow a full analysis of the voting patterns throughout their hostile diplomatic relations, and more specifically, before and after the Crimean crisis in 2014. Eurovision was created with the assumption that the best song wins the competition (Yair, 2018), but as we will see in the analysis chapter, Europe's musical taste seems to be no coincidence. Instead, it is linked with external factors such as diplomatic relations or cultural affinity, hence the existence of geopolitical voting blocs. If at first the good diplomatic relations between Russia and Ukraine were clear through the number of points awarded to each other, since the Crimean crisis it is evident the role of this geopolitical conflict in the voting as both countries started to exchange zero points between each other the moment their relations became hostile. Considering all the methodological strategies previously mentioned, I intend to provide an answer to my research question and explore how Russia and Ukraine's geopolitical conflict and popular culture intersect within the Eurovision Song Contest.

## **Conceptual Framework**

In order to answer the research question abovementioned, a conceptual framework will be used as the foundation of this study – popular geopolitics. Through this model derived from concepts, it will be possible to understand how elements of the research align and intersect. When analysing Russia-Ukraine geopolitical dynamics and competing narratives within Eurovision through the lens of popular geopolitics, several other concepts should be considered, such as soft power or popular culture. Taking into consideration that it is within popular culture that narratives are produced (Grayson, et al., 2009), the concept of popular geopolitics was the main approach chosen to this research considering that it studies how geopolitical narratives are constructed and disseminated through popular culture and how these narratives are perceived by the audiences (Dodds, 2007). As popular culture is a mean to shape geopolitical narratives and influence the audiences' perception of world politics, the lens of popular geopolitics

will be crucial to explore Russia and Ukraine's geopolitical narratives aimed at the Eurovision audience that gathers hundreds of millions of viewers worldwide. By using this lens, it will be possible to proceed with an empirical analysis and engage it with this concept in order to achieve the research objectives aforesaid and answer to the research question that focusses on the spill over of Moscow and Kyiv's conflict to this *pop* cultural event through geopolitical narratives. Popular geopolitics will thus enhance the clarity of the research with valuable insights, and undoubtedly contribute to a more complete analysis as it will offer a unique perspective on the intersection of geopolitics, popular culture and international relations.

The dissertation is divided into four parts – introduction, literature review (chapter 1), analysis and key findings (chapter 2) and conclusions. Throughout the introduction, as we have seen, the research problem, objectives and question are introduced, as well as the necessary methodology and research methods to answer the research question of the study (How was geopolitics reflected in the behaviour of Russia and Ukraine within the Eurovision Song Contest between 2003 and 2023?). This part is followed by chapter 1 that covers the literature review of the study and explores different concepts to contextualize the previously mentioned research problem. Posteriorly, chapter 2 focuses on the analysis of Russia-Ukraine geopolitical dynamics and competing narratives and is organised by periods of time, namely Pre/Post Orange Revolution protests (2004), the annexation of Crimea (2014) and Russia's invasion of Ukraine (2022). Furthermore, it encompasses the summary of the key findings of the analysis, in which concepts of the literature review are engaged with the empirical research presented. Lastly, we can find the conclusions of the dissertation that include the relevance of the topic and encourages further research on the Eurovision Song Contest's political dynamics.

## **CHAPTER 1 – Literature Review**

### **1.1. Geopolitics, Soft Power and Pop Culture**

#### **1.1.1. Defining geopolitics**

Defining geopolitics can be a challenging task as the meaning of this concept tends to alternate as the world order changes (Tuathail, et al., 1998). In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, German geographer and ethnographer Friedrich Ratzel developed the idea of states as growing organisms as part of his wide theory of geopolitics, applying scientific laws from biology to international relations (Scholvin, 2016). Ratzel argued that states can grow from expanding their territory through conquest, affirming that the explanation behind a state's capacity to survive in the international arena lies on the land it controls (Scholvin, 2016). Nonetheless, the term 'geopolitics' was coined by Swedish political scientist Rudolf Kjellén in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to study the relationship between geography and politics (Tuathail, et al., 1998). For Kjellén, the concept of geopolitics focuses on how geographical factors – such as land, climate or resources – influence the political behaviour of states and the dynamics of international relations (Scholvin, 2016). However, Tuathail, et al. (1998) states that Kjellén's concept has moved beyond its original meaning as geopolitics is shaped by the changing global landscape. The author explains that to fully understand geopolitics, it is important to consider not only its historical development but the ways in which it is discussed. In fact, several types of geopolitics emerged throughout various periods in history, such as economic geopolitics, energy geopolitics, popular geopolitics, geopolitics of identity, among many others.

According to Hepple (1986), the word geopolitics was highly underestimated both in Europe and North America after the end of the Second World War. For several authors, geopolitics only emerged as an indispensable topic of research in the 1980s (Hepple, 1986; Scholvin, 2016; Tuathail, et al., 1998). For instance, during the Cold War, geopolitics was used to narrate the rivalry and tension between the United States and the Soviet Union – the so-called 'global contest' that aimed to expand each superpowers' spheres of influence and promote their respective ideologies (Tuathail, et al., 1998). Since the late 1980s, we have been witnessing the increase of books and policy articles with the word 'geopolitics' in their titles (Hepple, 1986), Colin Gray being one of the many contributors to this field of study. Gray (1988) emphasizes the importance of geography and its influence on state behaviour and international relations, affirming that geopolitical factors such as access to resources or proximity to potential threats notably shape a state's strategic choices. The author describes States as rational actors that pursue their interests in a world of competition, and besides the fact that geopolitics should not aim



to predict state behaviour, the truth is that – “the political behaviour of a country is the reflection of that country’s history; and that country’s history is in great part (though certainly not entirely) the product of its geographical setting” (Gray, 1988, p. 43). Thus, the geographical setting composes a stage that hints the plot and undoubtedly influences the characters in the play (Gray, 1988). As stated by Scholvin (2016), the interplay between geographical and non-geographical elements allows us to recognize the importance of comprising geographical factors into our analyses of international affairs. Geopolitics seems to give us an insight into the hereafter of international relations and, consequently, the future shape of the world political map (Tuathail, et al., 1998).

### **1.1.2. Defining soft power**

Power is one of the most contested concepts in social sciences, since for some it is the capacity to create or resist change, and for others it lies on the aptness to get what we desire (Nye, 2021). It can be described fundamentally as the ability of an actor to exercise influence and have control over other actor’s actions to achieve desired outcomes (Rothman, 2011). Power can manifest itself in several forms, such as coercive or economic power, usually known as hard power. In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, American political scientist Joseph Nye – who had already introduced the concept of hard power – developed and popularized the term ‘soft power’ (Saaideh, 2023). Nye (2004) describes soft power as “the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments” (ibid., 2004, p.6). Therefore, soft power is the capacity of a country or an entity to influence others and shape their behaviour through non-coercive means, such as culture, values, diplomacy and ideology (Nye, 2004). Unlike hard power – that relies on coercion, threats and tangible resources to influence others –, soft power operates through attraction, persuasion and the ability to shape preferences (Saaideh, 2023). As mentioned by Saaideh (2023), soft power is unquestionably a game-changing phenomenon in contemporary diplomacy and international relations.

Soft power is often built through diverse channels, including diplomacy, global aid, education, media and popular culture (Saaideh, 2023). In fact, the author states that cultural exports such as literature, movies, art or music play a significant role in building soft power. For example, Nye (2004) addresses the popularity of American movies, TV shows, among others, that undoubtedly enhances the United States’ soft power, as it spreads their values, lifestyle and language on a global scale – “much of American soft power has been produced by Hollywood, Harvard, Microsoft and Michael Jordan” (ibid., 2004, p. 17). Thus, by projecting a positive image and promoting its ideals and values, a

country can influence and shape the preferences and actions of other states and, consequently, increase their global influence (Rothman, 2011). Nye (2004) emphasizes this idea by stating that our soft power is enhanced the minute our policies are seen as legitimate in the eyes of others, hence the importance of credibility and attractiveness. There are various types of soft power enumerated by Saaideh (2023), namely cultural, ideological, economic and educational soft power. From the point of view of the author, cultural soft power is, without a doubt, the most commonly recognized type of soft power. It lies on a country's capacity to influence others through its cultural products such as literature, music and movies (Saaideh, 2023). As it operates through attraction and persuasion, soft power is definitely an important tool in modern diplomacy. In fact, soft power increases or decreases based on geopolitical events and the world's perception – correctly or incorrectly – of the country in question (Nye, 2004).

### **1.1.3. Defining *pop* culture**

Cultural studies have a privileged position within the academic community (Dittmer, 2010), as culture has the power to shape an individual's behaviour (Çiftçi & Belli, 2016). Culture is characterized as the collective traditions, customs, beliefs and values of a specific group or society (Çiftçi & Belli, 2016). It can be categorized into several types considering different criteria, popular culture being one of these types. The concept of popular culture – also known as *pop* culture – is often very difficult to define (Grayson, et al., 2009; Ibe, 2019; Street, et al., 2012), since it is subject to persistent change as it evolves alongside technological advancements, social shifts or global influences. The study of this phenomenon in the academia is recent as Dittmer (2010) dates it back to the 1960s. It is frequently influenced by a blend of local, national and international features, and can reflect and shape societal norms, values and identities (Ibe, 2019). Popular culture is usually recognized as the set of cultural products, practices, and ideas that are widely consumed and shared by a large audience, encompassing several forms of entertainment such as fashion, literature, magazines, popular music, movies, TV shows, videogames, social media, sports, among many others (Dittmer, 2010).

*Pop* culture is distinguished by its mass appeal and accessibility to potential audiences, often displaying their preferences and interests (Çiftçi & Belli, 2016; Dittmer, 2010; Street, et al., 2012). In fact, popular culture influences social trends, attitudes and values (Street, et al., 2012). The several forms of cultural expression aforesaid usually capture the interests and concerns of people at a given time and place (Çiftçi & Belli, 2016; Ibe, 2019). Thus, according to Ibe (2019), *pop* culture plays an important role in

shaping identities and behaviours and provides a shared cultural experience for individuals within a society, leading to a collective identity. As stated by van Zoonen (2000), popular culture suggests new ways of communicating and brings new topics into the common public sphere. These new topics might be brought by celebrities and public figures that unquestionably influence *pop* culture, as they have a notable impact when it comes to shape trends and set cultural norms. For that reason, *pop* culture serves as a lens through which people can express themselves and share collective interests and aspirations (Ibe, 2019).

#### **1.1.4. The link between geopolitics, soft power and *pop* culture: the concept of popular geopolitics**

Despite three different concepts, geopolitics, soft power and popular culture are undoubtedly interconnected in several ways. In fact, they can have a crucial role when it comes to States and their global influence. As previously explained, geopolitics studies how geographical factors influence States' political behaviour (Scholvin, 2016), while soft power is the ability of a country to influence others through attraction rather than coercion (Nye, 2004). Both concepts are linked as Dodds (2007) emphasizes the importance of a country's geographical location and consequent technological access to generate ideas and spread it around the world, highlighting North America and Europe in this regard – that unquestionably have a great soft power potential. Indeed, a country's geopolitical strategy can use soft power as an essential tool not only to project a positive image about itself, but to improve its geopolitical position. Nye (2021) addresses the European Union's successful soft power strategy as an example, stating that its model of multilateral cooperation contributed to enhance EU's influence in the world. Additionally, geopolitical factors impact the effectiveness of soft power, as the attractiveness of a country's soft power initiative might be undermined if the country is geopolitically unstable (Nye, 2004), i.e., if the country is involved in any military conflict and, consequently, lost its credibility (Saaideh, 2023). As these conflicts and wars automatically change the perception of popular culture regarding the countries involved, it usually leads people to censor its cultural expressions.

That said, one of the many tools for soft power projection is assuredly popular culture, since a nation's cultural products can be attractive to a global audience and, therefore, create a considerable admiration for that country's ideals and way of life (Grayson, et al., 2009). For instance, in Europe, a popular platform that countries often use to spread its culture and values is the Eurovision Song Contest, one of the greatest

examples of how music and geopolitics collide (Pavlyshyn, 2019). Each participating country creates its narrative for a global audience, hoping to transmit a positive image about its culture and way of life. In fact, countries like Russia or Ukraine are highlighted in this regard, as both participants have engaged with the global audience of the show through the years to narrate their side of the ongoing geopolitical tension since Ukraine's independence (Cashman, 2017). Popular culture has come to be used as a tool not only for this purpose, but also for propaganda, since it is indivisible from politics (Grayson, et al., 2009). Besides uniting people beyond political borders and foster cultural exchange, *pop* culture is highly significant when it comes to produce and materialise power, ideology and identity (Grayson, et al., 2009), which has been very clear among all participating countries in the Eurovision Song Contest.

On that account, popular geopolitics was one of the many types of geopolitics that emerged throughout history. It studies how geopolitical narratives are constructed and disseminated through popular culture – such as television, music, movies, the internet, among other forms of entertainment (Dodds, 2007). That is, it studies how geopolitical issues and international affairs are understood by ordinary people that get access to information through the aforementioned media means. In fact, Dodds (2007) addresses the fact that governments have sought to regulate and monitor broadcasting considering the power of media means to shape and influence public opinion on a national and global scale. Therefore, it is possible to shape public opinion through music and TV shows (Dodds, 2007), since it is within popular culture that narratives are produced (Grayson, et al., 2009). As a matter of fact, through music, musicians can highlight significant causes and raise awareness about it, advocating for change. Grayson, et al. (2009) support this idea as the authors state that political action and a sense of community are a direct consequence of the coherent narratives that are produced by *pop* culture, i.e., it fosters political change.

It is undeniable that several geopolitical powers undertake many soft power strategies to reach their objectives and that these soft power competitions draw a special attention to popular culture as a mean to shape narratives considering that it influences how people perceive world politics and the legitimation of State's policy postures (Grayson, et al., 2009) – thus, the link between geopolitics, soft power and *pop* culture becomes clear. Ultimately, State's soft power potential can be influenced by geopolitical factors (Saaideh, 2023), and *pop* culture can be influenced by and influence geopolitical realities (Grayson, et al., 2009). All-embracing, favourable geopolitical conditions can enhance a country's soft power (Nye, 2004), which can be projected through *pop* culture,

that, in turn, shapes perceptions about a certain country, contributing to its soft power and influence on a global scale.

The Eurovision Song Contest is one of the many international events where we witness a stage where countries can spread their narratives (Cashman, 2017). Considering recent events such as the war in Ukraine, Russia-Ukraine relations within the show have been receiving more attention. This contest is the *pop* culture platform that will be explored throughout the analysis chapter, in which popular geopolitics will be the main approach employed when studying Russia and Ukraine's relations in the competition. By analysing these countries' relations through the lens of popular geopolitics, various valuable insights will come to the fore regarding their complex geopolitical interplay within Eurovision. Several aspects will be considered when studying this topic through the lens of popular geopolitics, namely the geopolitical background (to help frame the analysis of the countries' interactions within Eurovision); the relevance of popular geopolitics to Eurovision (to discuss its stage as a place where geopolitical narratives are performed); the countries' performances (to identify specific geopolitical meanings); public reception and discourse (to identify patterns of support or opposition); and the impact on Russia-Ukraine bilateral relations (how it influences broader geopolitical dynamics between them). Therefore, by adopting a popular geopolitics approach, this dissertation will enlighten how the Eurovision Song Contest is used as a cultural arena where numerous geopolitical tensions and conflicts intersect. Additionally, it will provide an understanding of Russia and Ukraine's relations within the context of this European popular cultural event.

## **1.2. Political changes in Ukraine and diplomatic relations with Russia: from the 2004 Orange Revolution to the 2022 Russian invasion**

Russia and Ukraine's diplomatic relations have had periods of close cooperation, as well as political tensions and territorial disputes. Both countries share historical and cultural ties as Ukraine was part of the Russian Empire and later the USSR (Pavlyshyn, 2019). After the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, Ukraine became an independent country and started a challenging period of transition to new political and economic structures. Despite the signing of agreements on economic cooperation among former Soviet republics, Jordan (2015) states that Ukraine seemed to want to build stronger ties with the EU and closer European integration. Strategically located between Russia and the EU, Ukraine needed to foster stronger cooperation with Western democracies in order to counterbalance Russia's influence in the country (Jordan, 2015). This desire for a

closer European integration is behind the series of protests and political events that took place in Ukraine from November 2004 to January 2005, better known as the Orange Revolution. In fact, Katchanovski (2008) describes the pro-Western Orange Revolution as a pivotal event considering its outstanding impact on Ukraine's domestic politics and diplomatic relations with Russia. These mass protests started due to allegations of electoral fraud in the Ukrainian presidential election in 2004 closely linked to Russian President Vladimir Putin (Pavlyshyn, 2019). The protests were essentially led by supporters of former Prime Minister Viktor Yushchenko, the pro-Western and EU oriented candidate, that was against Viktor Yanukovich, the Prime Minister at the time, who was more aligned with Russia's interests and had the support of Putin's government. Yanukovich was declared the winner of the election, nonetheless, due to allegations of voter intimidation and corruption, the orange-clothing protesters demanded a more transparent presidential election (Jordan, 2015). A revote was scheduled for December 2004, and pro-Western candidate Viktor Yushchenko won the second round of the presidential elections, having the support of a massive portion of the population (Katchanovski, 2008; Kuzio, 2006). Yushchenko's victory had a significant role in shaping Ukraine's foreign policy as the president planned an EU oriented foreign policy (and closer ties with NATO), and distance itself from its Soviet past, which gave rise to tensions with the Russian Federation (Katchanovski, 2008; Kuzio, 2006).

In February 2010, Viktor Yanukovich won the next presidential election that would be later marked by several controversies. As it was previously mentioned, with the Orange Revolution, many Ukrainians voiced their will to pursue a Western-oriented future, desiring economic prosperity, political stability and democratic values (Kuzio, 2006). However, Pro-Russian President Yanukovich decided to suspend Ukraine's free trade and association agreement with the European Union in November 2013, seeking closer ties with Putin's government (Katchanovski, 2022). This decision led to a wave of protests in December 2013 known as the Euromaidan Revolution or Revolution of Dignity, that gathered thousands of protesters in Kyiv and several other regions of Ukraine (Katchanovski, 2022) – these protesters interpreted Yanukovich's decision as a possible integration with Russia in the future (Shahi, 2022). For Pishchikova & Ogryzko (2014), the Euromaidan Protest Movement is of utmost importance for the EU, as it was clear that for many Ukrainians, European integration was considered the safest path to fix deficiencies in domestic governance and guarantee a democratic regime. In the Orange Revolution, thousands gathered in Kyiv's Independence Square (Maidan), however, on Euromaidan, the movement grew to such an extent that it reached a national scale (Pishchikova & Ogryzko, 2014). Protesters demanded not only the signing of the

EU Trade Agreement, but also the resignation of Yanukovich, who was seen as a corrupt president. Ultimately, the protests turned violent as they were dispersed violently by riot police units, leading to the death of several protesters (Katchanovski, 2022; Pishchikova & Ogryzko, 2014). After the most aggressive events, namely in February 2014 – that were internationally condemned –, Yanukovich was removed from the position of the President of Ukraine by the vote of the Ukrainian parliament and fled the country to Russia (Katchanovski, 2022), the EU Trade Agreement being later signed in June 2014. These protests led to a period of political transition in Ukraine, as well as geopolitical shifts as Russia annexed the Crimean Peninsula and started the armed conflict in eastern Ukraine, specifically in the regions of Donetsk and Luhansk (Pishchikova & Ogryzko, 2014).

Considering the exit of then-president Viktor Yanukovich and Ukraine's political transition, Russian President Vladimir Putin seized the opportunity to assert Russia's influence in the regions abovementioned (Pishchikova & Ogryzko, 2014). Thus, in March 2014, the Russian Federation annexed Crimea, a Ukrainian peninsula with a notable number of ethnic Russian population, which led to a major deterioration in Russia-Ukraine diplomatic relations (Shahi, 2022). In accordance with O'Loughlin & Toal (2019), the annexation of Crimea was profoundly contested in the international community and even a shocking moment as people presupposed such acts were a thing of the past. A 'self-determination' referendum was organized by Russia on March 16<sup>th</sup>, giving local Crimeans the option to join the Russian Federation or continuing a part of Ukraine, which was clearly an illegal act under Ukraine's state law, violating its sovereignty and territorial integrity (O'Loughlin & Toal, 2019). Despite being condemned for its act and accused of violating international law by the international community, Russia criticizes the word 'annexation' as it claims that people of Crimea chose to 'reunify' with Russia through a democratic referendum (O'Loughlin & Toal, 2019). Geographical location is undoubtedly one of the main elements that play an important role when it comes to geopolitical decisions (Shahi, 2022). Therefore, Shahi (2022) explains that the location of the Crimean Peninsula has a massive importance in geostrategy and geopolitics, hence Russia's annexation of Crimea as the peninsula is used to fulfil the country's geostrategic and geopolitical interests. Additionally, the aftermath of Euromaidan also witnessed the emergence of separatist movements supported by Russia in eastern Ukraine that later escalated into a full-scale military conflict, namely in the Donbass region, that, as Crimea, comprise a significant community of Russians (O'Loughlin & Toal, 2019). These acts of Vladimir Putin's government, as previously mentioned, were highly condemned by the

international community, resulting in several sanctions imposed by the United States and the European Union against Russia (Shahi, 2022).

Eight years later, Russian President Vladimir Putin decided to invade Ukraine, bringing back war to the European continent. Even though the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula was a surprise for many in 2014, Marandici (2022) argues that the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine was long expected and that it represents a continuation of the Russo-Ukrainian War that started in the Donbass region. This invasion is entitled as 'Special Military Operations in Ukraine' by the Russian government, and it is the greatest and most serious military escalation since the Second World War, causing a humanitarian and refugee crisis not seen in Europe since then, as well as an aggravated global food crisis and inflation (Marandici, 2022). As it has been previously explained, after the Euromaidan Revolution, Russia annexed Crimea and a military conflict emerged in eastern Ukraine. In early 2021, it was witnessed a growing Russian military presence in the Russia-Ukraine border, which caused speculation of a possible Russian attack (Marandici, 2022). That attack only occurred on February 24<sup>th</sup>, 2022, the goal being, in accordance with Marandici (2022), Russia establishing control over all Ukrainian territory and install a 'puppet-government' in Kyiv led by pro-Moscow authorities. For Kuzio (2022), Russian leaders believe that Ukraine belongs to Russia due to the shared historical and cultural background. The author also emphasizes Vladimir Putin's unwillingness to recognize Ukraine as a sovereign State and the country's right to exist, as the Russian president sees Ukrainians as a branch of the pan-Russian people. The Russian Federation considers this conflict as a preventive war, however, Ukraine posed no threat to Russia when invaded, and since then, we have been witnessing the killing of civilians, captures of nuclear power plants, attacks on the capital, airstrikes on military and civilian infrastructures, among others (Marandici, 2022). Vladimir Putin has been describing the post-1997 NATO enlargement as a threat to Russia's security and, therefore, demanding that Ukraine does not join the military alliance or the European Union (Marandici, 2022). In fact, the Russian President during his speech to the Russian Security Council on March 1st, 2022, declared that Russians and Ukrainians are 'one people' (Kuzio, 2022), and blames the West for the expansion of NATO and the EU in the neighbourhood of Russia, which is manifesting through Russia's destruction of Ukraine (Shahi, 2022). For that reason, since the Crimean crisis, and especially since the Russian invasion, Russia-Ukraine diplomatic relations are practically inexistent and will not be restored any time soon according to Kuzio (2022), that affirms that Putin's invasion is leading to the greatest deterioration in Russia's relations with the West.



These key years of geopolitical changes and tensions with Russia have gone beyond the battlefield and are witnessable in several other platforms, the Eurovision Song Contest being one of them. Ukraine's will to pursue a Europe-oriented path has been clear through the singing competition, as well as its relations with its former 'colonial master' (Pavlyshyn, 2019). Russia, on the other hand, has also used Eurovision as a platform to share its narratives and, through the voting patterns, song lyrics and official statements, it becomes clear how this geopolitical tensions and conflict have invaded the Eurovision stage. Thus, Ukraine's geopolitical changes and consequent diplomatic relations with Russia will be of utmost importance during the analysis of the Eurovision Song Contest as a post-soviet geopolitical battleground.

### **1.3. The Eurovision Song Contest as a Post-Soviet Geopolitical Battleground**

Russia and Ukraine have been engaged in several strategies to shape narratives and influence public opinion, such as media, propaganda, disinformation campaigns or entertainment. The Eurovision Song Contest has been a platform for all its participating countries to share messages, and Russia and Ukraine are no exception as both countries have competing narratives within the contest, aiming to reach a wide audience (Cashman, 2017). The Eurovision Song Contest, usually known simply as Eurovision, is an apolitical annual international singing competition held since 1956 by the European Broadcasting Union (EBU). Every member-state of the EBU is allowed to participate in the contest, both European and non-European countries. Eurovision has become a significant part of popular culture, especially in Europe, where there is a large fan base that help spread *pop* music trends and memorable moments of the show, such as extravagant performances or controversial acts and songs (Wellings & Kalman, 2019). Therefore, Eurovision, a *pop* cultural event, is used as a platform to express geopolitical ideas, political messages and project soft power to a large audience (Carniel, 2019). Even though the competition's main goal is to celebrate cultural diversity through music, Eurovision is considered a highly political event (Carniel, 2015). Over the years there have been patterns of voting that question the full quality of the performances and challenges the assumption that the best song wins (Yair, 2018). These patterns are influenced by diverse factors, such as geographical proximity, cultural ties or diplomatic relations, hence the existence of geopolitical voting blocs in the contest addressed by several authors (Baker, 2015; Carniel, 2015; Cashman, 2017; Dekker, 2007; Güvendik, 2020; Kalman, et al., 2019; Kumpulainen, et al., 2020; Mantzaris, et al., 2018; Stockemer et al., 2018; Yair, 2018).

Since Russia and Ukraine's Eurovision debut in 1994 and 2003, respectively, both countries have been associated with the Eastern geopolitical voting bloc that encompasses former Soviet states that exchange a high number of votes in the competition (Mantzaris, et al., 2018). This can be explained by the evident historical and cultural link between ex-Soviet states and the existing diaspora communities in these countries (Pavlyshyn, 2019). In fact, Pavlyshyn (2019) addresses the existence of a post-soviet audience that is still linked to cultural elements of the erstwhile Soviet Union, hence the voting biases between these countries. Eurovision undeniably reflects political friendships and enmities between the participating countries since its creation (Güvendik, 2020). Thus, multiple authors have been examining Russia-Ukraine relations through the lens of the Eurovision Song Contest as it is one of the greatest examples of how geopolitical factors influence a country's behaviour within the singing competition (Cashman, 2017; Jordan, 2015; Mantzaris, et al., 2018; Pavlyshyn, 2019). Since the Ukrainian debut in 2003, it was witnessed a heavy exchanging of points between Russia and Ukraine (Mantzaris, et al., 2018). As significant tensions began to emerge between the two countries with the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula by Russia and the military conflict in the Donbass region in eastern Ukraine, there was a clear difference in the voting patterns (Cashman, 2017), as both countries' national juries have not exchanged a single point since Eurovision 2016.

After its independence, Ukraine sought a Western-oriented future (Kuzio, 2006), and by stepping into the Eurovision stage for the first time in 2003, the country hoped to build closer ties with western Europe and closer European integration (Jordan, 2015). This will of closer ties with Europe was expressed by many Ukrainian acts, such as Ruslana (2004), Verka Serduchka (2007) or Jamala (2016), the three most discussed Ukrainian Eurovision entries considering the unquestionable political content regarding their country's relations with Russia (Pavlyshyn, 2019). Following the Russian military intervention in Ukraine and the Crimean crisis in 2014, Russia-Ukraine relations reached their climax within the Eurovision stage (Pavlyshyn, 2019), and rising geopolitical tensions resulted in an intensive booing to Russian representatives Tolmachevy Sisters (2014) and Polina Gagarina (2015) during the show. In fact, in 2016, the politically charged Eurovision contest came to unveil a new voting pattern between Russia and Ukraine that was not so amicable (Cashman, 2017), that persisted until Russia's banning of the contest in 2022. Furthermore, the Crimean crisis came to display political tensions witnessable not only within the song contest, but in the national selection processes – which are going to be explained in detail in the analysis chapter along with the voting patterns between Russia and Ukraine before and after the Russo-Ukrainian war.

Considering all the Russia-Ukraine controversies, political provocations, dropouts over geopolitical tensions, and political lyrics and speeches, the Eurovision Song Contest is considered a post-soviet geopolitical battleground as both countries bring their ongoing tension to the contest and use it as a platform to influence diverse audiences through their narratives (Cashman, 2017). Despite considered a contest with an apolitical nature by the EBU, Eurovision is undoubtedly a stage full of politics where countries like Russia and Ukraine perform their visions and ideologies in front of hundreds of millions of viewers across the world (Jordan, 2015; Yair, 2018). Thus, Eurovision is far from being immune to geopolitical factors and the projection of soft power as the geopolitical voting blocs, voting patterns and political statements during the singing competition contribute to the crossing of geopolitics and soft power within the Eurovision Song Contest, a popular culture platform (Wellings & Kalman, 2019). In the next chapter, I will analyse how Russia and Ukraine's geopolitical conflicts and tensions are being reflected in their behaviour within the Eurovision Song Contest through strategies, narratives, political messages and voting patterns.

## **CHAPTER 2 – Analysis of Russia and Ukraine’s Geopolitical Dynamics and Competing Narratives within the Eurovision Song Contest (2003-2023)**

### **2.1. The Eurovision Song Contest: brief context, rules and voting system**

Following the Second World War (1939-1945), several efforts were made to peacefully unite all European states, which was a common desire among Europeans after decades of conflict. Considering the idea of uniting Europe through culture, in 1955, the then director of the Swiss Broadcasting Corporation Marcel Bezençon, inspired by the Italian *Sanremo* Music Festival, developed the proposal of a European song competition (Wellings & Kalman, 2019). The intention behind this televised competition was “to encourage the creation of original songs and to stimulate, by means of an international competition, a spirit of friendly rivalry between writers and composers” (European Broadcasting Union, 2015). Therefore, in 1955, the General Assembly of the European Broadcasting Union approved the *Grand Prix Eurovision de la Chanson*, and its first edition was held in 1956 with seven participating countries, namely Switzerland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Belgium, West Germany, Italy and France. According to Sieg (2012), the international competition has become ever since a key arena for displaying the idea of a unified Europe that embraces national and cultural differences and stands for common values such as diversity, democracy and human rights. This event continues to this day and is what we now know as the Eurovision Song Contest.

The development of this singing competition over the years is considered highly important when studying the history of European integration since the 1950s, as it has contributed to the construction of several European identities (Wellings & Kalman, 2019). Taking this into account, as well as the longevity and massive popularity of the ESC, it is clear that the contest is a field of study that should be receiving more attention, since European politics are constantly performed before an international audience, where countries can spread their ideals and narratives every year. This platform has been gathering millions of viewers worldwide, currently being the world’s longest running annual TV music competition (Yair, 2018). Data from the EBU states that an estimated number of 182 million people (not including online streams) watched the two semi-finals and the Grand Final in 2017, when the contest was held in Kyiv, Ukraine (Jordan, 2017). Additionally, the estimated viewers of the ESC in 2018 – 186 million – have surpassed the viewers of the 2018 UEFA Champions’ League final and the number of voters in the 2014 elections to the European Parliament (Wellings & Kalman, 2019). These numbers have been constant over the years and the show continues to gather more loyal viewers around its performances.

The first seven participating countries aforementioned were joined by Denmark, Austria and the United Kingdom in 1957, and since then, more countries have joined the international competition. Factors such as tourism attraction and commercial potential brought to Eurovision countries like Yugoslavia (1961) and the two dictatorships on the Iberian Peninsula, namely Spain (1961) and Portugal (1964). The contest continued to grow and by the year of 1992, there were 23 States competing for the trophy, including Iceland, Norway, Finland, Sweden, Ireland, Monaco, Malta, Greece, Cyprus, Turkey and Israel. The Eurovision Song Contest inevitably accompanied the deep change of Europe and the European Union in the 1990s, that ultimately led to the enlargement of membership of the EBU and the loss of Yugoslavia, that participated for the last time in 1992. After the breakup of Yugoslavia, the newly independent countries joined the EBU and participated in the ESC: Slovenia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia in 1993; Slovakia, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Estonia, Lithuania and Russia in 1994. As more independent countries from Eastern Europe and the Caucasus region continued to join EBU and Eurovision, by the end of the second decade of the twenty-first century, around 43 countries competed in the semi-finals, hoping to earn one of the 26 spots in the Grand Final – including Andorra, Czech Republic, San Marino, Albania, Serbia, Montenegro, Bulgaria, Macedonia, Latvia, Belarus and Ukraine. It must be pointed out that the borders of the EBU are not reduced to geographic criteria, therefore, countries do not have to be inside of the European continent to compete in the ESC. As long as the country is in EBU's broadcast zone and meets the contest's requirements to participate, it is allowed to do so. Thus, countries like Morocco (that participated once in 1980) or Australia – whose Special Broadcasting Service is an EBU Associate and has participated since 2015 – can compete in the contest regardless their geographic location. Originally a single evening event, as new countries started to join Eurovision, the EBU was forced to introduce relegation procedures in the 1990s and later creation of semi-finals in the 2000s.

The Eurovision contest, like the European Union, demonstrates a vast distribution of power in the European continent as the show has five countries – the called 'Big Five' – that go directly into the final of the contest, not having to compete in the semi-finals with the other contestants (Wellings & Kalman, 2019) – a sixth member can join the Big Five as the winning country is automatically qualified to the Grand Final of the upcoming contest. The countries of the Big Five are the ones that contribute more financially to the EBU, namely France, Italy, Germany, Spain and the United Kingdom. The rules of the ESC are very clear, as the EBU describes the show as a non-political event.

*No lyrics, speeches, gestures of a political or similar nature shall be permitted during the ESC... No messages promoting any organization, institution, political cause or other, company, brand, products or services shall be allowed in the Shows and within any official ESC premises... A breach of this rule may result in disqualification.*

(European Broadcasting Union, 2019)

Despite this explicit rule, politics is an inherent part of the contest, and the Eurovision stage has been a highly political platform to share coded political messages into songs and performances since its creation (Carniel, 2015; Ganja, 2019) – which will be explained in detail later on this chapter when analysing Russia-Ukraine relations within the ESC.

The truth is that political symbols or lyrics are no surprise during the ESC and there is a clear politicisation of the show (Wellings & Kalman, 2019). Russia and Ukraine have been protagonists in this field, especially since the Crimean crisis in 2014, that conducted to the controversy surrounding Ukraine's 2016 winning song *1944*. However, there are other examples worth mentioning, such as Georgia's post-Russian invasion entry in Eurovision 2009 *We Don't Wanna Put In* – that had a clear reference to the then Russian Prime-Minister Vladimir Putin; France's 2015 entry *N'Oubliez pas* (Do Not Forget) – that coincided with the centenary of the First World War; Iceland's 2019 representatives waving the Palestinian flag during the live show in Tel Aviv, Israel, following Israeli policies towards Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza; among many other examples. All of these symbolic acts and will to communicate several messages has been shaping the history of Eurovision, as well as the European commonality that has been created throughout the contest. As a matter of fact, the singing competition manifests a popular European culture while also promoting state identities, hence its importance when considering contemporary Europe, as culture legitimises political structures (Wellings & Kalman, 2019).

The winner of the Eurovision Song Contest is decided by a country-to-country vote in a scale from 1 to 8 points, then 10 points and the famous *Douze Points* (Yair, 2018). It must be mentioned that a country cannot vote for its own song. The participating countries have its own internal approach to selecting the singer who will represent the nation, as well as the song – it can either be an internal selection or other platforms, such as national selection live shows. Currently, the points in the ESC are awarded considering both the will of the international audience through the televote, and the professional jury appointed by the national broadcasters (European Broadcasting Union, 2016a). In its first editions, the ESC had an exclusive system of jury voting, that according

to Ganja (2019), was much more open to manipulation of the results. Therefore, since the late 1990s, the popular participation through public televoting was introduced and maximized, and in 2009, both national juries and televoters started to weight the same (50% each) and the votes started to be combined.

As the jury votes continued to be suspicious in some countries and several manipulations evidence was caught, the identities of the national juries appointed by their broadcasters started to be revealed before the show from 2014 onwards. For instance, in 2013, there was evidence of manipulation as the Azerbaijani president allegedly placed their national jury under investigation for not giving any points to Russia – whose foreign minister contested the voting process and showed concern over the lack of points coming from Azerbaijan. On the other hand, in 2015, the jury points awarded by Macedonia and Montenegro were discredited after suspicious behaviour was uncovered. More recently, in 2022, the EBU found irregular voting patterns in the jury points of six countries, that seemed to have been tampered with and were recalculated, namely those coming from San Marino, Montenegro, Romania, Poland, Georgia and Azerbaijan. Thus, the decision of revealing the identities of the national juries aimed to increase transparency, as well as the democratic ideals of the international singing competition (Ganja, 2019). With the introduction of the televoting in the contest, an interesting pattern was witnessed, as there were concerns that the popular vote was being driven by other factors than the quality of the songs. Instead, it was being ‘manipulated’ through what we know as bloc and strategic voting (Ganja, 2019).

For that reason, in 2016, the EBU announced an enormous change to the Eurovision Song Contest voting system. Prior to 2016, the national juries and viewers’ results were presented as a combined result – each accounting for 50% of the final score. In the new voting system implemented in 2016, the national juries and televoters from each country award an independent set of points from 1 to 8, 10 and 12. Therefore, instead of combining the national jury points and the televote in just one announcement as we were used to watch before, the jury points would be set forth first, followed by the televote points announced by the hosts of the event – starting with the country that has received the lowest points from the public and ending with the country that gathered the highest number of votes (European Broadcasting Union, 2016a). This new format had been discussed for years as every year the winner of the ESC had been known before the end of the voting. This new feature of the show’s voting system – inspired by Sweden’s national selection format for ESC *Melodifestivalen* – added a new level of excitement for Eurovision’s hundreds of millions of viewers, since they have to wait until the last score is announced to know who wins the contest. This way, the show is more

captivating as it ratchets up the tensions and creates more anticipation – as it happened immediately with the 2016 contest when Australia, Russia and Ukraine were competing for the first place in the podium. According to the EBU (2016a), these changes also meant to increase more transparency and decrease the power of diaspora voting, which will be analysed in detail in the following topic. Additionally, this new system allowed the public to spot interesting discrepancies among the votes awarded by the professional juries and the televoters watching at home from the same country – something that will be further explored in this chapter.

## **2.2. Geopolitical voting blocs and political voting**

As it has been previously discussed, there is a clear relationship between politics and the singing competition. Eurovision is a stage for nation branding and national identity, promotion of a political agenda (through the artists and the performances) and for evident regional alliances that have shaped the contest as a political event. These regional alliances, that have given the ESC its political reputation, are known as geopolitical voting blocs. Multiple studies address the existence of geopolitical voting blocs in the Eurovision contest that reflect factors such as diplomatic relations, geographical proximity and cultural affinity among the participating countries (Baker, 2015; Carniel, 2015; Cashman, 2017; Dekker, 2007; Güvendik, 2020; Kalman, et al., 2019; Kumpulainen, et al., 2020; Mantzaris, et al., 2018; Stockemer et al., 2018; Yair, 2018). These geopolitical voting blocs influence, therefore, the so-called political voting that deteriorate the assumption that the best song wins the competition (Yair, 2018). There are five geopolitical voting blocs recognized by academics, namely the Northern Europe, Iberia/Germany, Italy/Balkans, Black Sea Region and Eastern Europe voting blocs (Stockemer, et al., 2018). Despite only seven participations in the first edition of the event, the number has been increasing in the past decades as it has been stated. In fact, the fall of the Soviet Union and the dissolution of Yugoslavia are behind the significant increasing number of independent participating countries since the 1990s (Stockemer, et al., 2018). This influx of new countries came to accentuate not only the idea of geopolitical voting blocs, but also the political controversies that have been shaping the history of Eurovision.

The term 'bloc' or preferential voting increased significantly after the eastern enlargement of the ESC, especially regarding the former communist States (Yair, 2018). Therefore, despite past conflicts, the allocation of the *douze points* became even more obvious with the arrival of the so-called Balkan Bloc and the 'Warsaw Pact', that includes



Russia and Ukraine (Stockemer, et al., 2018; Wellings & Kalman, 2019). As the analysis of voting patterns has become one of the largest areas of Eurovision research, it has been clear that countries within each of the blocs above mentioned have a higher exchange of votes between them – which supports the idea that the voting is biased and political. Thus, the high score exchanged within friendship blocs poses a great challenge to the legitimacy of the contest's voting (Ganja, 2019). The voters usually have a strong tendency to vote for their neighbours, one of the best examples being the continuous 12 points exchanged between Greece and Cyprus. According to Stockemer, et al. (2018), this tendency of voting blocs and individuals to vote for their neighbouring countries might be explained if we consider factors such as common language, religious background or close cultural traits. However, these factors do not guarantee that these countries will reciprocally give each other the most votes in the contest. There are political factors from all natures that can deteriorate the diplomatic relations between countries and enhance a not-so-friendly posture in platforms like the ESC. Within the geopolitical blocs, there are countries that have had enmity episodes with each other and influenced its relations in the singing competition, such as Armenia-Azerbaijan, Russia-Georgia or Russia-Ukraine (all belonging to the Eastern voting bloc).

Considering the most recent events, one of the various witnessable examples of enmity episodes that has been gaining more attention from the public is Russia and Ukraine's tense relations within the competition – where music and politics undoubtedly collide (Pavlyshyn, 2019). Therefore, the next section is going to be dedicated to analysing how Russia-Ukraine geopolitical tensions and diplomatic relations are being reflected within the Eurovision Song Contest – considering the clear geopolitical dynamics between the two countries through strategies, narratives and messages that occur in the stage of this popular cultural platform.

### **2.3. Russia-Ukraine Relations within the Eurovision Song Contest**

Russia and Ukraine's relations within the Eurovision Song Contest can be described as complex, as it is often influenced by numerous political tensions (Pavlyshyn, 2019). Both countries have had a strong presence in the international competition since their debuts. Russia debuted in 1994 as part of the former Soviet Union, while Ukraine joined the contest later in 2003. These countries have achieved notable success in the singing competition as Ukraine holds three victories (2004, 2016 and 2022) and Russia one victory (2008). In fact, Ukraine has become one of the most successful countries in Eurovision history. As Pavlyshyn (2019) argues, there is still a strong bond among post-

Soviet countries within Eurovision. Consequently, these countries are part of what is called the Eastern voting bloc (that includes countries like Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Russia and Ukraine) in which we witness a high number of votes given and received by/from these nearby countries to each other (Dekker, 2007). Russia and Ukraine's exchanged voting over the years tells us that these countries have had positive relations within the competition since Ukraine's debut in 2003. Nevertheless, there are diverse episodes through their history within Eurovision that must be pointed out as they demonstrate wide geopolitical discourses in and off stage (Jordan, 2015), that had a tremendous impact on the countries' relations within the show.

As it has been previously stated, ESC has the main goal of bringing countries together through music, however, it has also been used as a platform where geopolitical issues every now and then come to the fore. Despite exchanging top-3 points with each other during the first editions of the show where the countries participated, there are several Eurovision editions where tension between both States has been clear. Despite being an organization of broadcasters and not governments, the EBU is frequently used as a soft power tool by some countries, particularly those whose state broadcasters are subject to an immense government influence. Aforementioned in the literature review chapter, countless governments have sought to regulate and monitor broadcasting to shape and influence public opinion on both a national and global scale (Dodds, 2007). For this reason, the Eurovision Song Contest – as a TV entertainment mean – has a huge potential to be a stage for the production and spread of states' narratives. Russia and Ukraine have been narrating their side of the story regarding the ongoing geopolitical conflict between them on the ESC stage, especially since 2016, where the voting exchanged between the Russian and Ukrainian jury did not exist. After the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation, we witnessed the rise of the ongoing geopolitical tension between Russia and Ukraine, however, tension has always been present since Ukraine's debut in 2003 as an independent and Europe-oriented country. All of these tensions will be analysed throughout this chapter, highlighting key moments that show how geopolitical tensions are being reflected in Russia-Ukraine relations within Eurovision between the years of 2003 and 2023.

Within this period, there are years that will be analysed in detail considering its extreme importance to answer the dissertation's research question. Others will not be mentioned or be analysed in such detail due to the lack of significant controversies or tensions between Russia and Ukraine within the Eurovision Song Contest, and therefore, are less relevant to the research. The most crucial years that will be more explored

considering the notable tensions witnessed are the following: 2004, 2007, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2019, 2022 and 2023.

### **2.3.1. Pre/Post Orange Revolution in Ukraine**

The 48<sup>th</sup> edition of the Eurovision Song Contest, that took place in Riga, Latvia, marked Ukraine's debut in the most-watched televised event in Europe. Ukraine's participation in Eurovision 2003 was very significant for various reasons, such as the fact that it was the country's first appearance in a high-profile international event since its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. After its independence, Ukraine sought a Western-oriented future (Kuzio, 2006), and by stepping into the Eurovision stage for the first time in 2003, the country hoped to build closer ties with western Europe and closer European integration (Jordan, 2015). The Ukrainian participation in the contest allowed the country to showcase its culture and values on a worldwide scale, standing before a broader European and global audience. With the song *Hasta La Vista* performed by Olexandr Ponomaryov, Ukraine achieved a 14<sup>th</sup> place out of 26 countries competing, which was faced as a successful debut entry that justified the continuous participation of Ukraine in future Eurovision editions, hoping to strengthen its ties with the European community. Russia, on the other hand, conquered the bronze medal with the song *Ne Ver', Ne Boysia* performed by the duo t.A.T.u. During Eurovision 2003, there were not visible political tensions between Russia and Ukraine. In fact, the voting revealed that Russia awarded 8 points to Ukraine (the third highest score possible in the Eurovision scale), while Ukraine gave Russia the exciting highest score *douze points* (European Broadcasting Union, 2003) – which was seen as an amicable start to Russia-Ukraine Eurovision relations. However, these amicable relations within the song contest did not last long. Ukraine's debut in Eurovision marked its path of efforts to be accepted in the European community after its independence. Several voices coming from Ukraine came to strengthen this desire within Eurovision, especially Ukrainian *pop* singer Ruslana. She has represented Ukraine in its second participation and has handled the country its first Eurovision trophy. Considered a symbol figure of the Orange Revolution and the Euromaidan protests, Ruslana Lyzhychko – who became extremely popular after Eurovision – enhanced the voice of many Ukrainians in favour of European integration, becoming one of the most memorable acts in Eurovision history.

### **2.3.1.1. The Ruslana phenomenon: From winning Eurovision 2004 with *Wild Dances* to being a symbol figure of the Orange Revolution and Euromaidan protests**

Eurovision 2004 took place six months before the beginning of the mass protests in Ukraine known as the Orange Revolution, following the falsification of the Ukrainian presidential elections, a process closely linked to Vladimir Putin (Pavlyshyn, 2019) – as we have seen in the literature review chapter. The singer Ruslana Lyzhychko was chosen internally by Ukraine's broadcaster NTU (National Television Company of Ukraine) to represent the country at Eurovision in Istanbul, Turkey. In its second attempt at the singing competition, Ukraine was crowned the winner of the 49<sup>th</sup> edition of the ESC in May 2004 with Ruslana's *Wild Dances* – with a total of 280 points, 12 of them coming from Russia (European Broadcasting Union, 2004). This first-ever Eurovision victory was highly significant for Ukraine, as it was considered a reflection of the country's desire for closer European integration. Additionally, *pop* star Ruslana was known for her pro-European views and activism in social and political causes. Considered by many as a representative of the Europe-oriented and non-Soviet Ukrainian youth culture (Pavlyshyn, 2019), Ruslana rapidly became a symbol figure of both the Orange Revolution and Euromaidan protests as she openly showed her support to guide Ukraine away from Russia and towards the West. Despite the six-month difference between Eurovision 2004 and the Orange Revolution, the truth is that Ruslana's *Wild Dances* had already an implicit meaning regarding the singer pro-Western ideas (Jordan, 2015). *Wild Dances* brought to the surface an ethnic Ukrainian narrative of national identity. This song is said to be derived from Hutsul song and rituals from the Carpathian region of western Ukraine, thus, Ruslana made known the western Ukrainian culture in the Eurovision stage, that for many Ukrainians, do not represent the country as a whole (Jordan, 2015). Despite not being the focus of the present dissertation, it must be pointed out that Ruslana's performances defied the meaning of *Ukrainianess* and resulted in several research regarding Ukraine's national identity within the Eurovision stage, a platform for identity construction.

Sung both in English and Ukrainian, the powerful and energetic performance of *Wild Dances* – featuring fire, drums and traditional Ukrainian clothing –, undoubtedly captured the attention of the wide Eurovision audience and helped to introduce Ukraine's culture to a global audience. In fact, many considered Ruslana's performance a significant move of public relations oriented towards a broad European market (Jordan, 2015). Besides having traditional Ukrainian folk-inspired elements and other cultural symbols, Ruslana's performance evoked women's power through its lyrics – in which

she demands the implied male to obey her command to desire her. This feminist element, along with Ruslana's Western-oriented ideas, allowed her to share a modern European/Western value system through her performance – where she pictured Ukraine as a revitaliser of Europe (Pavlyshyn, 2019). It cannot be ignored that the victory of the visually captivating performance of *Wild Dances* coincided with Ukraine's political ambitions of getting closer to the West and the European Union. Therefore, it was inevitable to witness Ukraine's pro-European sentiment on the Eurovision stage, a platform that allowed Ruslana to showcase her aspirations for European integration and ultimately boosted her career and music internationally, along with a positive image of Ukraine. As a matter of fact, Lyzhychko's success extended beyond Ukraine and *Wild Dances* became popular all across Europe and around the world, giving her a significant international recognition.

The Orange Revolution became a platform for several expressions of protest, music being one of them (Jordan, 2015) – hence the convergence of music and politics in Kyiv's Independence Square (*Maidan Nezalezhnosti*) during the protests. Ruslana took advantage of the popularity that she gained after winning Eurovision and became an extremely important figure in supporting the opposition movement during the Orange Revolution protests. She played an active role in the protests, supporting essential democratic reforms in Ukraine and raising awareness about all the issues involved in the Ukrainian presidential election. Ruslana's Eurovision victory and subsequent attention undoubtedly amplified her voice and allowed her to reach a wide audience with her pro-Western ideas. In every performance and every speech, Ruslana advocated for the importance of transparent elections to guarantee a democratic Ukraine. The singer even went on hunger strike in protest against the victory of pro-Russia candidate Viktor Yanukovich. She later became a politician herself as a member of parliament for pro-Western candidate Viktor Yushchenko's ruling *Nasha Ukrayina* (Our Ukraine) party. Through Ruslana's involvement in the Orange Revolution, it can be said that her participation unquestionably symbolized the power that public figures play in shaping public opinion and mobilizing a highly amount of support for political and social causes. The impact of the Ukrainian *pop* star in the aftermath of her Eurovision victory became known as the 'Ruslana phenomenon', as her widespread popularity during the protests (not only Orange Revolution, but also Euromaidan) allowed her to gather support and inspire a political change in Ukraine. This movement represented a significant turning point in Ukraine's history and undeniably marked a shift towards a more pro-Western orientation (Pavlyshyn, 2019).

Ruslana's victory gave Ukraine the right to host the next Eurovision's edition in Kyiv in 2005, which, for many, was essential to promote a positive international image of Ukraine following the Orange Revolution protests (Jordan, 2015). As Ukraine was undergoing a period of political tensions caused by the Orange Revolution, the preparations for Eurovision 2005 contest were severely compromised. Thus, Ukraine's capacity to host such a large-scale international event started to be questioned. In fact, the delays were so serious that in May 2005 the EBU warned that unless immediate action was taken, the contest would be hosted in another country (Jordan, 2015). The newly elected President Viktor Yushchenko, aware of the importance of hosting such event to amplify Ukraine's international standing, actively intervened in the preparations for the European contest. The commitment of Yushchenko's government in hosting the 2005 Eurovision Song Contest made clear Ukraine's desire to be part of the European cultural scene as it would promote the country's European integration aspirations. As a matter of fact, the ESC was very present in Ukraine's popular press in 2005 – that highlighted the political relevance of the event for Ukraine, namely, to promote Ukrainian culture and music to a wide global audience and to support the idea of Ukraine as a modern European country (Jordan, 2015). Ukraine managed to successfully host the 2005 event in Kyiv, where Ruslana made a special appearance as the show's guest star. Since then, she has solidified her position as an outstanding figure in the Eurovision community.

As national sensation Ruslana has been involved in Ukrainian politics, it became no surprise the singer's involvement in the 2014 Euromaidan protests. In fact, her activism and political engagement strengthened her status as a significant public figure in Ukraine. Often seen at the forefront of the protests, Ruslana was a vocal supporter of closer EU integration, using her music to support the movement – and also singing the Ukrainian national anthem night after night. Along with the other protesters, she delivered numerous speeches in Kyiv's Independence Square to speak out of Ukraine's future, demanding the end of corruption, democratic reforms and European integration.

*I think of myself as a volunteer showing people that we need to be here because there is no other way (...) Russia is our past, Europe must be our future.*

(Ruslana Lyzhychko, Reuters, 12 December 2013)

Ultimately, these protests led to notable political changes in Ukraine, such as the removal of Yanukovich as President of Ukraine and the signing of the EU Trade Agreement (Katchanovski, 2022).

Winning Eurovision placed Ruslana in the spotlight and her international recognition as the 'soul' of Ukraine's revolution led her to Washington, D.C. to receive one of the 2014 International Women of Courage awards by then-U.S. First Lady Michelle Obama. Therefore, Lyzhychko benefited from the international recognition following her victory at Eurovision and continued to advocate for peace in Ukraine while in the United States.

*Don't do something, do everything – to keep peace [in Ukraine] ... before Putin will kill us.*

(Ruslana Lyzhychko, Atlantic Council, 7 March 2014)

*Putin's plan is to destroy Ukraine (...) Putin lies with this information for you. Ukraine wants peace. We cancelled our nuclear weapons. We don't have any weapons to fight with the aggression of Putin. So, we just want peace, no war. Putin uses this propaganda, bad propaganda to destroy the image of Ukraine.*

(Ruslana Lyzhychko, BBC News, 2 May 2014)

Ruslana's active role and commitment to both the Orange Revolution and the Euromaidan protests made her a symbol figure of Ukrainian politics and activism, exemplifying how artists and public figures can influence a broad audience and advocate for political change. Other Ukrainian act that shaped Ukraine's Eurovision history was drag artist Verka Serduchka in 2007. In fact, Serduchka is considered one of the most iconic participants of the ESC until today. Three years after the Orange Revolution political protests, the European Union made clear that it did not have any plans for Ukraine's accession to the EU in the near future. Nonetheless, the 2007 Ukrainian representative came to highlight the enduring tension between Russia and Ukraine and the will to still pursue a Europe-oriented path with its controversial song *Dancing Lasha Tumbai*.

### **2.3.1.2. Dancing Russia Goodbye: Verka Serduchka's controversial *Dancing Lasha Tumbai* in Eurovision 2007**

The 2007 Ukrainian representative Verka Serduchka – a character played by comedy actor Andriy Danylko – was a controversial act that brought the long-lasting tension between Ukraine and Russia after the Orange Revolution to the Eurovision stage in Helsinki, Finland, with *Dancing Lasha Tumbai*. This song caused controversy and

immediate attention of Russian nationalists not only due to its lyrics, but mostly due to a phonetic resemblance to 'Russia goodbye' (Jordan, 2015). Serduchka's amusing *Dancing Lasha Tumbai* – that combines phrases in English, German, Ukrainian and Russian – clearly lacks a coherent story line and feels like words are just being kicked. However, some of those words captured the public's attention. In the song's English refrain, Serduchka sings *I want to see lasha tumbai* to a broad Eurovision audience – and for many, it sounded like *I want to see Russia goodbye* (Yekelchuk, 2010). This phonetic resemblance to 'Russia goodbye' caused a wave of controversy as it was accused of containing political subtext, something that the EBU forbids. Although the singer refused all the accusations at the time and declared that 'Lasha Tumbai' meant whipped cream in Mongolian, the Mongolian Embassy in Moscow came to dismiss such affirmation and, therefore, enlighten the tension between the two countries. Indeed, this particular situation only contributed to extend the longevity of the media attention towards the idea of Ukraine's 'goodbye' to Russia (Pavlyshyn, 2019).

*Dancing Lasha Tumbai* lyrics also featured interesting pro-Ukrainian statements in Ukrainian – *Ukraine is cool / Ukraine is super / Dance, Maidan* – Maidan being a reference to Kyiv's Independence Square, where the pro-Western Orange Revolution protests took place. In spite of being considered a nonsense song, the truth is that it was broadly decoded as some sort of proclamation of separation from Russia (Pavlyshyn, 2019). The song was very well-received from the Eurovision community and rapidly became extremely popular. In fact, Verka Serduchka gathered 235 points, and was only 33 points behind the winner from Serbia, Marija Šerifović with *Molitva*. Despite finishing in second place and having the best result since Ruslana in 2004, Serduchka's participation as the Ukrainian representative in the international singing competition did not please everyone. Pro-Russian Ukrainians and Russian nationalists accused Serduchka's song of representing Ukrainian nationalism at its most vulgar and a parody of the nation (Jordan 2015), but for Ukrainian nationalists, Verka's performance framed the geopolitical status of contemporary Ukraine – a country that wanted to end with Russian dominance in their territory. Ultimately, all of the features of *Dancing Lasha Tumbai* reflected the evident tense phase of Russia-Ukraine diplomatic relations post-Orange Revolution protests (Miazhevich, 2012).

Despite these controversies around the political or non-political context of *Dancing Lasha Tumbai*, there was not much of a difference in the voting patterns, as Russia and Ukraine continued to exchange high points between each other. Russia gave 8 points to Ukraine's song, that in turn awarded 10 points to Russia's (European Broadcasting Union, 2007). Verka Serduchka's participation in Eurovision 2007 left a lasting impact as



the character brought a unique and highly entertaining element to the singing competition. The visually captivating and musically catchy *Dancing Lasha Tumbai* remains one of the most unforgettable performances of all Eurovision history – the costumes, the energetic and amusing choreography, as well as Serdutchka's humour in the stage are all elements that made this song so successful. In fact, the character of Verka Serdutchka became internationally recognized and the 'Russia goodbye' received attention and recognition beyond the Eurovision stage – which brought attention to the political issue. As one of the most popular singers of Eurovision, Serdutchka continues to be an integral part of the contest and remains a beloved public figure within the Eurovision community. Whether or not there was a political connotation in the song lyrics, the truth is that it added to the intrigue and interest surrounding this Ukrainian entry and 'Russia goodbye' will never be forgotten as a political statement coming from Ukraine that reached a significant portion of listeners both internationally and domestically.

Notwithstanding this controversy over Ukraine's 2007 entry, Russia-Ukraine relations cooled off within the Eurovision stage and there were no significant controversies until Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. It should be mentioned that Russia conquered its first Eurovision victory in Belgrade, Serbia, with Dima Bilan's *Believe* in 2008. Hosting the event in Moscow was particularly important to the Russian Federation as the 2009 contest was the most expensive in the ESC's history until then – costing over 30 million euros (Jordan, 2009). Considering that the world was going through a global financial crisis, this effort coming from Russia was faced as the country had been given a chance to promote a positive international image of itself on its own terms to the global audience (Jordan, 2009), especially following the Russo-Georgian War in the summer of 2008. It could be interesting to add that in the 2009 contest, Russia was represented by Ukrainian singer Anastasia Prikhodko. The singer entered the Russian national selection after being disqualified from the Ukrainian one due to the length of the song and to the fact it was not an original composition. As Russia had different rules, she eventually won the Russian national selection with the song *Mamo*, sung in both Ukrainian and Russian. Despite some negative and disapproval comments coming from both countries – as it happened during one of Russia-Ukraine gas disputes (gas crisis in 2009) – Eurovision 2009 went smoothly and there were no visible controversies.

Notable conflicts began to emerge between the two countries in the light of Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea from Ukraine and subsequent conflict in eastern Ukrainian territory. These events marked a turning point in Russia-Ukraine diplomatic relations that promptly spilled over to the Eurovision stage. Since the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula, there has been an increase of political content in song lyrics, not so-amicable

voting, withdrawals over political reasons and a clear hunger of Russia and Ukraine to succeed in the most-watched televised event in Europe, where narratives are produced and disseminated – all of which will be analysed in detail throughout the next sections.

### **2.3.2. Post-Russian Annexation of Crimea**

#### **2.3.2.1. The boos and jeers: Russian Tolmachevy Sisters (2014) and Polina Gagarina's (2015) message of unity and peace and Ukraine's withdrawal**

Following the Russian military intervention in Ukraine and the Crimean crisis in 2014, Russia-Ukraine relations were irreparably harmed. This was very clear beyond the battlefield as Russia-Ukraine relations also reached their climax within the Eurovision stage after the annexation of Crimea (Pavlyshyn, 2019). Rising geopolitical tensions resulted in an intensive booing to Russian representatives Tolmachevy Sisters (2014) and Polina Gagarina (2015) when they were mentioned or awarded any points during the show. The European backlash against Vladimir Putin's signing of the Russian gay propaganda law (anti-gay law) in 2013 and Russia's actions in Ukraine in 2014 was highly witnessable through the enormous booing coming from the Eurovision audience in the venues of Copenhagen, Denmark (2014) and Vienna, Austria (2015) aimed at the Russian representatives. Therefore, anti-booing technology was installed to protect Russian singer Polina Gagarina in Eurovision 2015 from the same anti-Russian sentiment that Tolmachevy Sisters had to go through. However, booing continued to come from the live audience that was clearly manifesting their disapproval against Russia's latest actions.

Despite the military conflict in eastern Ukrainian territory, both Russia and Ukraine participated in the Eurovision Song Contest 2014, while the conflict continued in the Donbass region between the Ukrainian army and Pro-Russian separatists. After the escalating tension in Ukraine, the truth is that all eyes were in Russia. The Crimean crisis along with the armed conflict initiated by the Russian Federation in eastern Ukraine was tremendously criticized by numerous countries in Europe and beyond. This negative reaction towards Russia undoubtedly spilled over into the biggest song contest in the whole world, hence the spread of the anti-Russian sentiment, especially around Europe. Considering that the ESC is known for its political undertones, experts had forewarned that Russia's anti-LGBT agenda and recent actions in Ukraine could and would have a negative impact on the Russian act Tolmachevy Sisters' experience at Eurovision in May 2014 (BBC, 2014). The singers were not only booed when they qualified for the contest's finals, but also during the Grand Final – indeed, a great portion of the ten thousand

audience present in the event expressed their disapproval of the Russian act (Skey, et al., 2016). Besides the artists representing Russia, the Russian spokesperson was also booed by the crowd as she attempted to read the country's top three votes out loud. After Moscow's votes the audience could still be heard. In addition, countries who voted for Russia – such as Armenia or Belarus – were booed right after delivering their votes. Notwithstanding all the political controversies, Ukraine awarded Russia's *Shine* 4 points whilst Russia gave 7 points to Ukraine's *Tick-Tock* (European Broadcasting Union, 2014). Between the boos and the jeers, the Russian twin sisters finished in seventh place, which was secured by a strong former-soviet voting bloc.

In September 2014, the Ukrainian broadcaster NTU announced that they would not participate in Eurovision 2015 due to the unstable financial and political situation caused by the conflict in east Ukraine (BBC, 2014). It was the first time that Ukraine did not compete in the song contest since its debut in 2003.

*The unstable financial and political situation, military aggression from the east, the annexation of Ukrainian territories — all these events have forced [the broadcaster] to focus on the main [priorities of] NTU: the construction of public broadcasting in Ukraine. This is necessary to carefully optimize any cost. Therefore, the National Television Company of Ukraine has decided not to participate in the Eurovision Song Contest 2015.*

(Wiwibloggs<sup>1</sup>, 19 September 2014)

Despite being the centre of criticism over the crisis in Ukraine, Russia confirmed their will to participate in the 2015 contest and sent Polina Gagarina with *A Million Voices*, a song about peace and tolerance that purposely or not, captured attention to the country's actions in Ukraine. Many perceived this entry as a 'cynical' move from Russia as the song's message implicitly portrayed Russia as a country concerned about peace and unity (Saunders, 2015). *A Million Voices* was clearly a soft power move considering the ongoing military conflict in Ukraine while Gagarina was in the Eurovision stage powerfully singing to appeal to peace and global tolerance – *Praying for peace and healing / I hope we can start again (...) Now as the world is listening / From cities and satellites / We believe / We believe in a dream* (Eurovision Song Contest, 2015, 0:19)<sup>2</sup>. Following all

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<sup>1</sup> The Ukrainian official withdrawal statement is no longer available on the public broadcasting website where the country initially published it. Therefore, this information had to be retrieved from the unbiased and reliable world's most-read independent Eurovision web site – Wiwibloggs.

<sup>2</sup> See full lyrics in Annex A (p. 74).

the spread anti-Russian sentiment due to the gay propaganda law in the country and the conflict in Ukrainian territory, Russia needed to portray a positive international image of the country and pacify its detractors in Europe and the rest of the world with this sort of song.

Fairly or not, Europe seemed to react positively to a considered 'downright peace message coming from an aggressor' (Romanyshyn, 2015) as Polina Gagarina finished in second place with a total of 303 points – San Marino and Lithuania being the only countries that did not give Gagarina a vote. It must be pointed out that the anti-Russian sentiment was stronger in the previous year with the teenage Tolmachevy Sisters, which was clear through the intensive booing. This incident led to the deployment of anti-booing technology to protect the next Russian act in the competition to avoid what had happened in the past. However, Polina Gagarina also ended up paying the price for Russia's aggression in Ukraine and homophobic laws as the live audience booed her so loudly during the Grand Final's voting that the hosts had to intervene (Baker, 2019), reminding the audience that the contest was about singing and not politics. In accordance with John Kennedy O'Connor – Eurovision author and expert – the booing towards Gagarina was absolutely expected.

*The audience in the hall booed Russia every time they scored one of the top three marks, which clearly upset their singer. Whatever her government is doing, it has nothing to do with her. However, singing a song about peace, love and harmony on behalf of Russia appears hugely cynical. Perhaps some of the booing was justified for that reason.*

(John Kennedy O'Connor to BBC, 24 May 2015)

Notwithstanding Polina Gagarina's second place in Eurovision 2015 with *A Million Voices*, Russia was seen by many as 'cynical' by sending a song about unity and peace while the conflict in eastern Ukraine continued. This sentiment led to a massive online reaction in favour of Ukraine, that did not participate in that edition due to the political and financial instability of the country as we have seen. This massive online reaction to the Russian entry resulted in an alternative YouTube video that was spread all over the internet mocking the song's call for peace, in which we could see a mixture of the *pop* song with scenes of Russian violence in Ukrainian territory, more specifically, in eastern Ukraine and Crimea (Romanyshyn, 2015) – this video, entitled 'War Cut', was released in March, however, it was not only until the Eurovision's Grand Final in May that the video gained more popularity. The video contains documentary shots of war scenes with original shots from the official videoclip of *A Million Voices* – it includes footage from

several episodes of the Russia-Ukraine geopolitical conflict, such as the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula, the capture of Ukrainian soldiers by pro-Russian rebels, the frontier city of Mariupol after the violent shelling in January 2015, and the ruins of the Donetsk's airport that was destroyed by the war (Romanyshyn, 2015). In spite of all the controversies, sanctions and counterpropaganda, Europe voted for Gagarina and put Russia on the 2015 Eurovision podium.

As Ukraine had the intentions to return to Eurovision in 2016, it made a deal with the EBU – and it did come back. Ukraine, a perennial favourite at the Eurovision Song Contest among the Eurovision community, came back to win Eurovision 2016 after not participating for the first time since 2003 due to the Russo-Ukrainian war. The country came back thirsty for a victory, that was clear. But it was not the only one – Russia seemed desperate to win and change its game in the Eurovision stage. ESC 2016 was a politically charged edition where Russia and Ukraine fought to achieve the first place of the biggest popular cultural event in Europe. In this particular edition, the tension witnessed in Russia-Ukraine diplomatic relations spilled over – in a way never seen before – to the Eurovision stage for more than 200 million viewers. Ukraine was crowned the winner with *1944*, a song that told Europe Joseph Stalin's actions against the Crimean Tatars during the 1940s. Considered a political win, this song caused a wave of controversy and since Eurovision 2016, Russia and Ukraine's national juries have not exchanged a single point between them. All of these factors will be analysed in the next section.

#### **2.3.2.2. 'Where is your heart? Humanity rise': Crimean Tatar singer Jamala wins Eurovision 2016 with the song 1944**

The 2016 Eurovision Song Contest is considered one of the most politically charged contests, if not the most, when considering Russia-Ukraine relations within the competition. As rising geopolitical tensions between the two countries were evident, Ukraine made it even clearer with its song choice for the show – a song considered by many as anti-Russian. Ukrainian televoters participating in the selection of Ukraine's representative in ESC 2016 had a clear favourite act – and so did the national final's jury panel that placed Jamala in the top 2. The jury panel included ESC 2004 winner Ruslana and ESC 2007 runner-up Andriy Danylko (comedian that played drag artist Verka Serduchka). Despite the tie between the artists Jamala and band The Hardkiss, the

popular vote prevailed in the selection, meaning that Crimean Tatar<sup>3</sup> singer Susana Jamaladinova, usually known as Jamala, was the choice of Ukraine with over 380 million votes – a Ukrainian record at the time (Pavlyshyn, 2019). Thus, Ukraine was represented by Jamala with the song *1944*, a song that talks about the suffering behind the deportation of Crimean Tatars to Central Asia by then USSR leader Joseph Stalin during World War II – hence considered highly political (Pavlyshyn, 2019). In fact, Jamala's *1944* is a visible example of how political rivalries and conflicts smoothly invade the Eurovision stage. As it has been previously stated, the banning of political lyrics is a goal – and a rule – of the EBU, that aims to host an apolitical event and celebrate diversity through music. That said, *1944* could easily be interpreted as a political song since it referred to a specific ethnic cleansing directly linked to Ukraine and Russia's past – two countries that were then in an ongoing military conflict. However, in spite of the controversies and public opinion, the EBU allowed *1944* to compete based on its historical nature (Cashman, 2017) as the song was inspired by Jamala's great-grandmother who was a Crimean Tatar herself.

It is essential to contextualize the deportation of Crimean Tatars as it can be helpful and necessary to understand Russia's concern over this song exposed on the biggest cultural event in Europe, especially following the Crimean crisis in 2014 – as a matter of fact, Russia demanded the disqualification of Ukraine in 2016 for not respecting the contest's rules. *1944* reflects the adversities of Jamala's family and gives us an insight of the modern history of Crimean Tatars, that were deported to Uzbekistan and other parts of Soviet Central Asia and suffered a fatal deathrate during the process (Pavlyshyn, 2019). Post-Soviet discourses stereotyped Crimean Tatars as traitors due to suspicions of collaboration with Nazi Germany and always avoided the term 'genocide', as well as the term 'deportation' that was replaced by euphemisms (Pavlyshyn, 2019). Born in Kyrgyzstan in 1983 to a Crimean Tatar father, Jamala and her family were only able to return to the peninsula in 1989 following the *Perestroika* era, when the Soviet Union began to liberalize under Russian politician Mikhail Gorbachev's orders – that allowed the exiled Crimean Tatar people to return to Crimea. For the Ukrainian singer, the ballad *1944* was essential to help demystify that Crimea historically belongs to Russia. The singer declares that when the Tatars came back to Crimea decades later, not only did their centuries-long history had been erased, but the Russians had moved to their homes and the peninsula's geography had been rewritten – with

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<sup>3</sup> Turkic ethnic minority indigenous to the Crimean Peninsula.

Russian names all over the various villages and towns of Crimea (Graham-Harrison, 2023).

Following the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation in 2014 there was a clear pressure on Crimean Tatars. This pressure resulted in the closure of a television station that broadcasted in the Crimean Tatar language and the opening of a television station funded and controlled by Russia; the banning of the Crimean Tatar parliament-like representative body; house searches and arrests of Crimean Tatars; harassment on Crimean Tatars activists; among many others (Pavlyshyn, 2019). Since Russia's illegal annexation, Jamala has been advocating for Crimean Tatars, fearing that history repeats itself under Vladimir Putin's government (Graham-Harrison, 2023). This fear was very clear through the lyrics and attitude of the singer while performing *1944* on the Eurovision stage. The 2016 Ukrainian winner declares that the ethnic cleansing in Crimea is a 'foundation stone' for Russia's persistence that the peninsula is historically Russian. Therefore, she started to write about this issue after the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and bringing it to the Eurovision stage ended up being inevitable. From this desire to write about Crimean Tatars, Jamala got inspired by her great-grandmother and wrote Eurovision winning song *1944* – which contained a dangerous lyric to present due to EBU's prohibition of explicit and implicit political content in Eurovision. However, the singer insisted that the song was stimulated by memories she heard from her great-grandmother and, therefore, it was a personal lament linked to her family's adversities that she wanted to talk about.

*The roots [of this song] are in my childhood. When I was five, my great grandmother told of how they experienced deportation. She had five children; only four survived. [...] This tragedy is not a story about what happened somewhere to somebody. It happened in my home; it was to my place specifically that they came.*

(Jamala, My Vin, 7 April 2016)

*1944*'s historical and personal nature were accepted as the Ukrainian song for Eurovision 2016 and Jamala rapidly became one of the favourites acts to win the contest – which she did. As a matter of fact, *1944* was ranked as the third best song/performance in the Eurovision's Song Contest seven-decade history (Graham-Harrison, 2023). Nevertheless, close to the Grand Final's day, Jamala opened up more about the link between her song and Russia's actions in Crimea following the annexation.

*Of course it's about 2014 as well. These two years have added so much sadness to my life. Imagine, you're a creative person, a singer, but you can't go home for two years. You see your grandfather on Skype who is 90 years old and ill, but you*

*can't visit him. What am I supposed to do: just sing nice songs and forget about it? Of course I can't do that.*

(Jamala, The Guardian, 13 May 2016)

Aware that she is one of Ukraine's most recognized musicians, especially after her triumph at Eurovision and consequent international recognition, Jamala uses that platform to talk about the suffering of the Crimean Tatars and their long struggle against Russian oppression – a journey that she started at the 2016 Eurovision stage before an international audience with a song sung in both English and Crimean Tatar (Graham-Harrison, 2023) and that appealed to humanity and peace.

Ukraine's Eurovision comeback – after being absent the year before – and subsequent victory with one of the most controversial songs of the contest will always remain an unforgettable memory among the Eurovision community. With lyrics like *When strangers are coming / They come to your house / They kill you all / And say / We're not guilty* (Eurovision Song Contest, 2016, 0:18)<sup>4</sup>, Eurovision 2016 was undoubtedly one of the tensest editions of the singing competition. Russia and Ukraine reunited in the Eurovision stage following the countries' hostile diplomatic relations due to the illegal annexation of Crimea and conflict in eastern Ukraine – that forced Ukrainian broadcaster NTU to withdraw from the 2015 contest. Unsurprisingly, this political conflict between the two countries overwhelmed the Eurovision stage and Ukraine's victory in 2016 was unquestionably the perfect event to affirm that the song contest can and does function as a geopolitical battleground (Cashman, 2017).

Both Russia and Ukraine looked desirous to win Eurovision 2016 and take the trophy to their respective soils. Russia had been among the top 10 of the most voted countries for the last years and wanted a first position. Conversely, Ukraine needed national pride following two years of a conflict that reduced the country's ability to join the European community. The Russian act Sergey Lazarev presented a more standard Eurovision performance with catchy lyrics – *You Are The Only One* – that was visually captivating with the singer's constant movement and a pair of computer-generated wings. In fact, Russia invested significantly to produce an excellent staged performance in Stockholm as it recognized that the ESC was an extremely important event to promote Russia and show what the country could do. The country needed to build a more positive image about itself following the international condemned annexation of Crimea and Eurovision was the event to do so – for a moment, it felt like winning Eurovision had become a

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<sup>4</sup> See full lyrics in Annex B (p. 75).



national priority (Fidgen, 2016). Lazarev's *You Are The Only One* rapidly became the bookmakers' favourite to win the contest, however, it was expected that many countries in central and eastern Europe would vote tactically to prevent Russia from being at the top of the leader board (Walker, 2016). On the other hand, Jamala's performance was certainly not like the other contestants as her song was not an upbeat *Europop* song like we are used to see at the Eurovision stage (Cashman, 2017). *1944* was a powerful and emotive ballad that had elements of traditional Crimean folk music and also a significant part of the song sung in Crimean Tatar. Bookmakers predicted a third place for Ukraine, but the country – surprisingly or not – defeated Russia and conquered the desired Eurovision trophy.

After the evident tension felt in the Eurovision arena while the televotes were being revealed, the Russian Sergey Lazarev with *You Are The Only One* conquered the bronze medal, while Ukrainian Jamala won the competition. The major controversy surrounding this Ukrainian entry that moved Russian officials to defy this victory was beyond a doubt the allusions to the current Crimean crisis following Russia's annexation of the territory (Cashman, 2017). Russia accused the EBU of closing their eyes to the political message of the Ukrainian entry and affirmed that the non-disqualification of the song was against the contest's own rules. It became clear that what really bothered Russia was the fact that their representative lost the gold medal of Europe's most popular song contest to a Ukrainian woman of Crimean Tatar descent in the context of the unilateral annexation of the Crimean Peninsula and the Russo-Ukrainian war in the Donbass region (Pavlyshyn, 2019). In fact, a Crimean Tatar singing on behalf of Ukraine and not Russia was an important political statement witnessed in the Eurovision stage.

Following all these controversies, differences in the final voting between Russia and Ukraine started to emerge, as the usual top-3 points exchanged between the countries rapidly became zero points. The new voting system implemented in 2016 must be addressed to understand the latest Eurovision results. As it has been explained, the votes coming from the national juries and the televoters – worth 50% each – stopped being combined, allowing each part to give its points separately. This system came to unveil discrepancies between the jury appointed by the national broadcasters and the televoters' points. The voting breakdown in 2016 would reveal that neither professional jury from Russia nor Ukraine awarded each other points (European Broadcasting Union, 2016b). However, as official data from the EBU (2016b) confirm, the Ukrainian televoters awarded the maximum 12 points to Russia while the Russian televoters awarded 10 points to Ukraine (that was only behind Armenia). Thus, there was a clear difference between the opinions of both the government and the people from each country.

It is not unusual for national juries to have a different view of a song than the televoters or to be influenced by political considerations and diplomatic relations (Fidgen, 2016). As Eurovision's voting is split between the juries and the popular vote, the national juries' vote represents the official government position towards a certain country since the jury is seen as someone who speaks on behalf of the country (Cashman, 2017). That said, expecting any exchanging of points between the Russian and the Ukrainian professional juries was not realistic. On the contrary, the popular vote represents the people living in the countries and that can include thousands of immigrants. Considering the ease of politics to invade the Eurovision stage, many expected a lower number of points coming from the Ukrainian and Russian televoters – which did not happen. For the Ukrainian press, despite 'deeply indignant', the high points exchanged between Russia and Ukraine coming from the televote in 2016 were not a surprise, neither were the *null* points coming from the national juries (Fedyuk, 2016). Although it cannot be proven, for the Ukrainian press, the televote exchanged is easily explained by several components. To understand Ukraine's votes to Russia, the press mentions factors such as Russian's influence and pressure on the Ukrainian Donbass region to vote politically and the ease of purchasing a SIM card of a Ukrainian operator and cheat numerous thousand votes to Russia (Fedyuk, 2016). On the other hand, Russia's points awarded to Ukraine might be explained due to the Crimean Tatars' opportunity to vote as Russians in the contest – and therefore be eligible to vote for Ukraine –, as well as the sympathy for Jamala's song of those residing in Russia who have also personally experienced deportation – for instance, in Chechnya (Fedyuk, 2016).

An interesting feature of the 2016 ESC voting is that Ukraine did not win the national jury or the televote highest scores and was still crowned the winner of the singing competition. When analysing the 2016 voting, Russian singer Sergey Lazarev won the popular vote with 361 points – which was not a surprise considering the contestant was one of the favourites to win among the Eurovision community – and received 130 points from the professional juries. On the other hand, the professional juries chose Australia's *Sound of Silence* by Dami Im as their favourite with 320 points, while the artist got 191 votes from the public. Finally, Ukraine's *1944* was the second choice of both the juries and the televoters with 211 and 323 points respectively (European Broadcasting Union, 2016b). Therefore, Ukrainian singer Jamala gathered the highest score and became the winner of the contest with a total of 534 points.

Despite the general support that was witnessed for Ukraine's Crimean song and Jamala's Eurovision victory, this support was not 'straightforward nor outright' in the voting process (Cashman, 2017). In fact, almost half of the 42 participating countries

gave the maximum punctuation to Australia – that was interpreted by many as a neutral non-European alternative to step away from the Russia vs Ukraine picture. Thus, Australia ended up being a necessary pawn but, at the same time, completely irrelevant to the real battle that was being fought at Eurovision. Ukraine only got the highest scores (10 and 12 points) from the national jury of fourteen countries – but in the popular vote, the country was luckier and received these votes from eighteen countries (European Broadcasting Union, 2016b). Overall, Ukraine was only 38 points behind Russia, the televoters favourite – which clearly demonstrated that the popular vote was not negatively affected by Russia's actions in Ukraine. EBU's changes to the 2016 voting system undoubtedly increased the excitement over the final results. Besides, it also allowed the public to see the divergent jury and public's votes on a big screen – which created notable tensions when the votes were being revealed (Cashman, 2017). These features were illustrated in the 2016 contest where Russia and Ukraine fought fiercely for Europe's attention in front of more than 200 million viewers worldwide.

With this victory, Ukraine changed their game within the Eurovision stage and spread among a diverse global audience the Russian oppression witnessable on Crimean Tatars and Ukraine's desire for peace. *1944* was undeniably a soft power tool that involved the show's international audience in the discussion of Soviet Union's past actions and Russia's current actions in Ukraine. While receiving her trophy, Jamala took the microphone and advocated for peace again and also showed excitement for bringing Eurovision to Ukraine once again.

*I know that you sing a song about peace and love, but actually, I really want peace and love to everyone. Thank you, Europe – welcome to Ukraine!*

(Jamala's winning speech, The Guardian, 15 May 2016)

Following Jamala's victory in Stockholm, several Ukrainian political figures publicly congratulated her in social media channels for enhancing Ukraine's voice and power regarding Crimea. As a matter of fact, *#CrimealsUkraine* was a witnessable growing hashtag in social media after Jamala's Eurovision victory. *1944* was extremely relevant to the contemporary Crimean situation (Pavlyshyn, 2019) as its lyrics about atrocities committed against human beings in times of war assuredly made every viewer question what happened in Crimea in 1944 and what was happening at that moment following Russia's illegal annexation – which definitely showed the capacity of Ukraine to persuade the international audience to have an opinion on what Russia was doing in their country. For many, this victory represented Ukraine's win over Russia's rhetoric

about Crimea and brought even more attention and support from Europe and the West – thus, the Ukrainian narrative regarding Crimean Tatars triumphed all over the world.

*I personally congratulated Jamala on her victory. Today, through her voice, the whole of the Ukrainian people spoke to the world.*

(Petro Poroshenko, Then President of Ukraine, *Ukrainska Pravda*, 14 May 2016)

*Bravo Jamala! A brilliant and deserved victory. Ukraine wins and will continue to win. Crimea will be Ukrainian.*

(Arseniy Yatsenyuk, Then Prime-Minister of Ukraine, *Ukrainska Pravda*, 14 May 2016)

*The truth always wins as Jamala and Ukraine did tonight. Congratulations and many thanks... And please don't forget that #CrimeaisUkraine.*

(Pavlo Klimkin, Then Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, *Ukrainska Pravda*, 14 May 2016)

*1944* inevitably provoked a reaction on Russia's side. As it has been stated, the country did not approve this victory and demanded Ukraine's disqualification for forbidden political content in their lyrics regarding Crimea (Pavlyshyn, 2019). The supporters of the Russian annexation of the peninsula were fast in mobilising a counteroffensive, including state-owned Russian television channel Russia-1. The channel seemed to want to neutralise the content of the Ukrainian song as their commentators described it as a 'prayer for people who willingly or unwillingly leave their homes in quest of a better life' – which was considered insulting to the millions of victims of the Stalinist regime (Ukrainska Pravda, 2016b). As manifested by Russia's prompt negative response to *1944*, the Ukrainian victory had undoubtedly a political weight in Europe and the West (Cashman, 2017). The anger in Moscow after losing to Kyiv was witnessable as Russia affirmed that ESC 2016 had been a political competition instead of a musical one. On Russian state news, singer Sergey Lazarev stand firm on the premise that national juries had lowered his score intentionally to prevent his victory as he was clearly the favourite among the public. Following Ukraine's win, several stories started to emerge within the Russian state news, including one that the Crimean Tatars did not enjoy seeing their history of deportation 'cheapened' in a *pop* event (Cashman, 2017). Other story analysing Jamala's victory leaned on the fact that Ukraine would not be able to host the next year's event in Kyiv – 'How will it be possible to hold Eurovision

in a country that has a hole in its budget, a war in the east, and regular disturbances in its capital?’ (Gessen, 2016). The truth is that, prior to the song contest, there seemed to be a general concern of European media regarding a possible Russian victory. As Russia had turned homophobia into the country’s official policy, Europe was visibly apprehensive in the possibility of hosting the next Eurovision edition in an anti-LGBT country (Gessen, 2016).

The outraged Russian politicians called for a boycott of Eurovision 2017 in protest of Ukraine’s song explicit political content – demanding an inquiry into how a politicised song like *1944* was able to compete in the contest. Thus, in Russia’s point of view, Eurovision’s rules should be taken seriously, and it would not be possible for the best song to win if politics prevailed over music.

*Music lost, because victory clearly did not go to the best song, and the contest lost because political attitudes prevailed over fair competition.*

(Konstantin Kosachev, Deputy Speaker of the Russian Federation Council, The Guardian, 15 May 2016)

*This is partly a consequence of the propaganda war of information that is being waged against Russia (...) There is a general demonisation of Russia – that we are all evil, that our athletes are doping, that our planes violate airspace.*

(Elena Drapeko, Russian Member of Parliament, The Guardian, 15 May 2016)

Political and diplomatic tensions have always been present in the voting of the ESC, but *1944* took it to a whole other level. Songs with political lyrics are completely forbidden by the EBU, but for many, *1944* was an exception. For instance, Armenia did not have the same luck with its 2015 entry as they were forced to change their song title *Don’t Deny* that was considered political after claims from Azerbaijan and Turkey that the title referred to both countries’ denial of the 1915 Armenian genocide. Ukraine managed to win Eurovision with a considered political song about the deportation of Crimean Tatars as an operation of ethnic cleansing of the borders – which has proven to be a major soft power triumph for the country as it brought renewed international attention to the issue. For that reason, Moscow was very clear regarding Russia’s intentions to boycott the 2017 contest, a decision that was highly supported by Russian President Vladimir Putin. Thus, the political tensions between Russia and Ukraine continued to be vividly felt within Eurovision context – as it will be analysed in detail in the following topic.

### **2.3.2.3. From Ukraine's travel ban on Russian act Yuliya Samoylova to Russia's consequent withdrawal from Eurovision 2017**

By conquering the first place in the 2016 edition, Kyiv went on to host the Eurovision Song Contest 2017. The fact that Ukraine was the country hosting the singing competition following a controversial victory made Russia wonder whether they should participate or not (Walker, 2017) – as they made clear the year before that they intended to boycott the song contest. Russia ended up choosing singer Yuliya Samoylova as their representative with the song *Flame Is Burning*, but this specific choice brought various political claims into discussion. The Ukrainian government had passed a law that anybody entering the Crimean Peninsula without passing through Ukrainian border controls would be banned from entering Ukraine. A few days after Russia's announcement, the Security Service of Ukraine reported that it had banned Samoylova from entering Ukraine for three years (Reuters, 2017) as they discovered evidence that the artist had performed in the Crimean city of Kerch in 2015 without entering the peninsula via Ukraine.

The choice of Samoylova was very contested by Ukraine and many considered it as a political move coming from the Russian Federation. On one hand, Ukrainian officials accused Russia of deliberately selecting Samoylova as a political provocation since they knew her travel to Crimea would impede her to participate in the contest (Walker, 2017). On the other hand, critics pointed the finger at Russia for choosing a disabled contestant knowing that she would be banned from the ESC for violating Ukrainian law – which was a 'cynical' move (Schearf, 2017).

*It was not just tactless; it was so unfair (...) It was cruel to use a disabled person in their political games knowing in advance the risks. Hoping that the disability would melt the hearts of the European Union and, especially performing in Ukraine, I think that was very cruel.*

(Veronica Ivanova, Disability Expert, VOA, 17 May 2017)

Despite denying both accusations, the truth is that Russia did use the disability card. Moscow's indignation after Samoylova's travel ban was witnessed as the country pointed out that the 2017 Eurovision slogan was *Celebrate Diversity* and the Russian contestant, having a physical disability and needing a wheelchair, was being wrongfully discriminated. In fact, the ban on the singer – that did not present a threat to Ukraine – was considered 'outrageous, cynical and inhumane' by a Russian deputy foreign minister (BBC, 2017).

The European Broadcasting Union demanded that Ukraine allowed Samoylova to perform in Kyiv as Eurovision's focus should not be on politics – and even threatened Ukraine of exclusion from future contests (BBC, 2017).

*Should this ban be confirmed by your office, it would certainly have a very big negative impact on Ukraine's international reputation as a modern, democratic European nation. We are increasingly frustrated (...) that this year's competition is being used as a tool in the ongoing confrontation between the Russian Federation and Ukraine. No previous host country has prevented an artist performing at the ESC and the EBU would not like a precedent to be set in 2017. We consider the current ban of the Russian singer as unacceptable. As a consequence, the UA:PBC<sup>5</sup> might be excluded from future events.*

(Head of the EBU Ingrid Deltenre's Letter to Ukraine's Prime Minister Volodymyr Groysman on March 23, BBC, 2017)

In spite of this letter addressed to then Ukrainian Prime Minister Volodymyr Groysman, the country did not allow Samoylova to enter their territory and insisted on the singer's violation of Ukraine's law. In order to find a solution for Russia's participation, the EBU suggested sending a different contestant to ESC and offered the opportunity to have Samoylova participate remotely in the singing competition, via satellite. However, Russia refused to participate under these conditions.

*Ukraine didn't even have the common sense to make use of this opportunity to look like a civilised country (...) We find the offer of remote participation odd and refuse it, for it is going absolutely against the very essence of the event.*

(Statement of the official Russian Broadcaster Russia-1, BBC, 1 April 2017)

Ultimately, Russia decided not to participate in the Eurovision Song Contest in 2017 hosted in Kyiv as their representative was not being equally treated to others.

*In our view this represents discrimination against the Russian entry (...) Naturally, we are not taking part in the Eurovision 2017 competition under the terms that are being offered to us, and we will not broadcast it either. The absence of a Russian participant, in my view, is a very serious blow to the reputation of the contest itself, and for Russian viewers it is also another reason not to pay attention to the contest.*

(Yuri Aksyuta, Head of Music and Entertainment Programming of Russia-1, Reuters, 14 April 2017)

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<sup>5</sup> Successor of NTU (National Television Company of Ukraine).

EBU declared that they had done what they could so all eligible countries would take part in ESC 2017, however, Russia accused the organization of protecting Ukraine as they were allowing such situation to happen. In fact, Kremlin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov demonstrated 'regret that the Eurovision organisers have turned out to be unable to fulfil the terms of their own rules' (Reuters, 2017). EBU, in turn, declared that it did condemn Ukraine's travel ban on the Russian contestant as it undermined the apolitical nature of the event, but that 'preparations continue apace for the Eurovision Song Contest in the host city Kyiv' as the production of the ESC was their top priority (Reuters, 2017). Russian President Vladimir Putin made it clear that he did not have any regrets regarding Russia's withdrawal from the 2017 contest as it was a proper decision considering the circumstances.

*I believe that our agencies involved in that process did the right thing when they refused to take part in it, because, from my point of view, the current authorities in Kiev are unable to host events of this kind.*

(Vladimir Putin at a press conference at the Belt and Road International Economic Forum in Beijing, Wiwibloggs, 16 May 2017)

As this action from Russia inevitably draw attention to the Ukrainian law on travel bans, it was expected a continuing reaction from Ukraine to a clear political provocation coming from Russia. Among the Ukrainians that publicly criticized Putin's government for supposedly choosing Samoylova on purpose to create a bad image of Ukraine was Eurovision 2004 winner Ruslana. As a pro-Europe Ukrainian, Ruslana reacted to this episode and acknowledged the importance of Eurovision to Ukraine's positioning in the world.

*I hope when Eurovision begins, we will have got past this [Russian] provocation and be able to concentrate on a celebration of music. We don't need any other provocations. (...) This is extremely important for Ukraine. This is a good chance to show ourselves to the world. It will be the best of Ukraine.*

(Ruslana Lyzhychko, The Irish Times, 8 May 2017)

In one way or another, Russia kept its promise of boycotting Eurovision 2017 hosted in Kyiv – therefore, Ukraine accused the country of knowing indeed that Samoylova would be barred from Ukraine due to her illegal entering in annexed Crimea. The spill-over of Russia and Ukraine's conflict resulted in two narratives that both countries wanted Europe desperately to believe. Ukraine needed to host a major european *pop* event and attract Europe to the country's culture and values, nonetheless,



Russia chose as its representative a wheelchair user that had violated Ukrainian legislation – a move that placed Ukraine in a complicated position. Despite the clear international support to Ukraine concerning the Crimean Peninsula, the country's insistence in maintaining Yuliya Samoylova out of the contest was condemned by the EBU and some of its members. From Samoylova onwards, the Ukrainian law regarding border controls continued to bring political controversies to the singing competition, more specifically, to Ukraine's own national selection for Eurovision – *Natsionalnyi Vidbir*, commonly known as *Vidbir*.

#### **2.3.2.4. 'I'm not a tool in the political arena': *Natsionalnyi Vidbir* controversy and Ukraine's withdrawal in 2019**

Following Portugal's win with *Amar Pelos Dois* by Salvador Sobral in Kyiv, the Eurovision Song Contest came to Lisbon for its 63<sup>rd</sup> edition. It was expected that Russia and Ukraine's ongoing tensions would, once again, be visible within the competition. However, Eurovision 2018 was a relatively calm edition, as there was no notable conflict between the countries. Unlike Ukraine's *Under the Ladder* by MELOVIN, Russian act Samoylova's *I Won't Break* did not qualify for the Eurovision Grand Final. Nevertheless, the tense relations of Russia and Ukraine were present at the Ukrainian national selection platform *Vidbir* for the Eurovision Song Contest both in 2019 and 2022 – this last year will be posteriorly explored in the next section.

Besides having the purpose to choose Ukraine's representative for Eurovision, *Vidbir* 2019 seemed to be used for political propaganda (ten Veen, 2019). The winner of the Ukrainian national final was determined by the public and a panel of three juries, two of which are well-known within the Eurovision community – ESC 2016 winner Jamala and 2007 runner-up Andriy Danylko. Jamala, along with *Vidbir*'s host Sergey Pritula, asked the contestants questions with explicit political content during the national final. These questions included topics such as nationality, individual political leanings and who Crimea belonged to. In fact, Pritula implied through a question to a contestant with Russian citizenship but permanent resident of Ukraine, that in order to represent Ukraine in the ESC, the contestant would have to banish its Russian citizenship (ten Veen, 2019).

At the end, *pop* star MARUV was crowned the winner of *Vidbir* with the *Siren Song* and, therefore, would represent Ukraine in Tel Aviv, Israel. The artist was asked by Jamala about her point of view regarding the issue of Crimea and who it belonged to – to which MARUV affirmed that it was Ukraine's. The host also questioned the singer about her frequent visits and concerts in Russian territory, which resulted in MARUV

declaring that the question should not be asked as *Vidbir* was a musical contest rather than politics. After her victory, the *pop* star was asked by UA:PBC to sign a contract in order to represent Ukraine in the European contest, a contract that was very specific about the artist's relationship with the Russian Federation. Some terms of the contract were – 'Not to allow any actions, statements or manifestations that may have a political ground or may be used in a political aspect; Not to allow statements that may call into question the issue of territorial integrity and security of Ukraine; Not to tour in the Russian Federation from the date of signing the contract and for another 3 months after the end of the contest' (Petersen, 2019).

Despite requiring the cancellation of all upcoming performances and appearances in Russia within 24 hours, the contract also included clauses that would impede the singer from improvising on stage and communicating to journalists without the permission of UA:PBC. Consequently, MARUV refused to sign the contract and thus represent Ukraine under such terms, stating on her social media, 'I'm a musician, not a tool in the political arena' (Savage, 2019). The singer's refusal of signing the contract caused a reaction coming from former Ukrainian Vice Prime Minister and Minister of Culture Vyacheslav Kyrylenko that condemned MARUV's intentions to continue to perform in Russian territory.

*The representative of Ukraine cannot be an artist who tours in the aggressor state, has plans to do so again and doesn't realise it's unacceptable. Therefore, the story of the Ukrainian entrant [for Eurovision] is far from complete.*

(Vyacheslav Kyrylenko, Eurovisionworld, 27 February 2019)

As the Ukrainian broadcaster was unable to communicate effectively with the top 3 artists from *Vidbir* to represent the country in Eurovision 2019, Ukraine decided to withdraw from the competition and issued an official withdrawing statement mentioning the country's position regarding artists' connection with Russia.

*The national selection this year has drawn attention to a systemic problem with the music industry in Ukraine – the connection of artists with an aggressor state with whom we are in the fifth year of military conflict. Whilst for some, these links are acceptable, for others it causes indignation and unacceptance. Given the current situation (...)  
UA:PBC has decided to withdraw from the 2019 Eurovision Song Contest.*

(European Broadcasting Union, 2019)

Following the controversy surrounding *Vidbir* 2019, a new rule was introduced in the competition. Starting from 2020, artists who had performed in Russia since 2014 or had

entered the Crimean Peninsula violating Ukrainian legislation would be forbidden from entering the competition and thus represent the country at Eurovision. This new rule came to invade once again the Ukrainian national selection platform *Vidbir* 2022, forcing Alina Pash – the winner of the national selection – to withdraw her candidacy as the Ukrainian representative of the Eurovision Song Contest 2022.

### **2.3.2.5. From *Tini Zabutykh Predkiv* to *Stefania*: Alina Pash's withdrawal as Ukrainian representative of Eurovision 2022**

*Vidbir* 2022 could not escape from political controversies either, as winner Alina Pash was accused of violating Ukrainian legislation due to entering the Crimean Peninsula via Russia and not Ukraine, a rule that was essential to compete at *Vidbir* (Holden, 2022). A few days after winning *Vidbir* 2022, Alina Pash, ready to represent the country with the song *Tini Zabutykh Predkiv* (translated to Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors), was accused of entering Crimea via Russia in 2015 and falsifying her travel documentation alongside with her team to be able to participate in the contest. As a consequence, Ukrainian broadcaster UA:PBC refused to sign the agreement with Pash until the investigation of her trip to Crimea was being looked into – as well as the authenticity of her documents after the Ukrainian State Border Guard Service questioned its legitimacy (Petersen, 2022). Additionally, the Supervisory Board of the Public Television of Ukraine – that encompasses members of the Ukrainian Parliament – immediately started to discuss the participation of Alina Pash as the Ukrainian representative (Petersen, 2022).

Before a decision was made by this institution, the attacks on Pash led her to withdraw her candidacy as the Ukrainian representative at Eurovision.

*I am a citizen of Ukraine (...) I am an artist, not a politician. (...) I don't want this virtual war and hate. The main war now is the foreign one which came to my country in 2014. I don't want to be part of this dirty story anymore. With a heavy heart, I withdraw my candidacy as a representative of Ukraine in the Eurovision Song Contest.*

(Alina Pash, Eurovisionworld, 16 February 2022)

Following Pash's withdrawal, she was replaced with the runner-up of *Vidbir*, the Kalush Orchestra, that months later was crowned the winner of the 66<sup>th</sup> edition of the Eurovision Song Contest with *Stefania* – a song that brought hope to many Ukrainians after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022.

### 2.3.3. Post-Russian Invasion of Ukraine

#### 2.3.3.1. Russia's banning of the Eurovision Song Contest 2022

In the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the Ukrainian broadcaster UA:PBC appealed not only to suspend Russian EBU's member broadcasters from the union, but also to exclude the country from competing at Eurovision (Adams, 2022). In a first reaction statement, the European Broadcasting Union affirmed that Russia would still be able to compete in the contest as Eurovision was an apolitical event.

*The Eurovision Song Contest is a non-political cultural event which unites nations and celebrates diversity through music. EBU members in both Russia and Ukraine have committed to participating in this year's event in Turin and we are currently planning to welcome artists from both countries to perform in May.*

(EBU, Wiwibloggs, 24 February 2022)

Immediately after this statement, the EBU faced pressure from broadcasters across Europe that stated they would not participate unless Russia was banned from the contest, such as Denmark, Estonia, Lithuania, Iceland, Finland or Sweden. For instance, the head of the Swedish state broadcaster condemned EBU's decision publicly.

*The EBU needs to rethink this. I sympathize with the basic idea of Eurovision as an apolitical event. But the situation in Europe is extremely serious with Russia's invasion of Ukraine. It crosses all boundaries. We have called on the EBU to change course and will follow the development closely.*

(CEO Hanna Stjärne, Wiwibloggs, 24 February 2022)

Therefore, in the following day, the European Broadcasting Union announced that no Russian act would participate in Eurovision 2022 – this ban being the first one in Eurovision history aside from the imposed ban on Yugoslavia during the Balkan Wars (or Belarus' ban in 2021 over political lyrics).

*(...) in light of the unprecedented crisis in Ukraine, the inclusion of a Russian entry in this year's Contest would bring the competition into disrepute. Before making this decision the EBU took time to consult widely among its membership.*

(European Broadcasting Union, 2022)

Russia's response to EBU's official statement came in less than 24 hours as the country announced the withdrawing of their broadcasters, namely VGTRK and Channel One (Russia-1), from the union – hence worsening its relations with Europe. As Putin's

government actions were being condemned all over the world, Russia was expelled from the biggest *pop* cultural event in Europe, while Ukraine succeeded and still holds the record for receiving the highest percentage of maximum points from the popular vote to this day. The truth is that, for many, the EBU's banning on Russia after the invasion of Ukraine was highly surprising (Keating, 2022) – for the reason that, through all the years since Russia's debut in 1994, the EBU tolerated invasions and repressions at the country (including the country's aggressive geopolitical actions in Georgia and Ukraine, and anti-LGBT laws) and even deployed special technology to impede the audience from booing every time a Russian contestant was mentioned. Not to mention the extreme popularity of Eurovision in Russia, that is one of the most successful countries in the competition.

Despite EBU and Italian broadcaster's effort to keep politics out of the 2022 contest hosted in Turin, the war in Ukraine unavoidably spilled over to the Eurovision stage as the support to Ukraine was felt inside and outside of the arena. Ukrainian representative Kalush Orchestra asked for international help while attempted cyberattacks were orchestrated by Russian hackers to prevent Ukraine's victory in the world's biggest popular event.

### **2.3.3.2. 'I will always find my way home': Ukrainian act Kalush Orchestra triumphs at Eurovision 2022**

Russia's invasion of Ukraine may have not guaranteed Ukraine membership in the EU or NATO, but it did push the country to win the Eurovision Song Contest 2022 after the country's last victory in 2016 with Jamala's *1944*. Promptly after the beginning of the war, the Ukrainian representatives at Eurovision, folk-rap group Kalush Orchestra with the song *Stefania*, have spent the entire Eurovision season on top of the odds to win the singing competition. In fact, bookmakers predicted Ukraine as the winner of Eurovision 2022 with a 62% winning chance (Eurovision World, 2022). As it has been stated, the EBU has always insisted on the non-political nature of the international singing competition, but Eurovision 2022 tested EBU's commitment to political neutrality in every level – as it was impossible to ignore the ongoing military conflict in Ukraine started by Russia. In spite of writing *Stefania* before the war, Kalush Orchestra's song seemed to have an implicit patriotic sentiment, which undoubtedly had an impact on the Eurovision audience. The song, completely sung in Ukrainian, is about the frontman Oleh Psiuk's mother, but to the millions of viewers, the lyrics rapidly became about his motherland Ukraine – *She was rocking me as a baby / She gave me a rhythm / And you can't take willpower from me / As I got it from her* (Sheftalovich, 2022). It must be pointed out that

the ESC was the first major cultural event in which Ukraine participated since Russia's full-scale invasion, and the audience's support was undeniable as there was a high number of the blue and yellow Ukraine's national flag being waved not only by the audience, but by artists from other competing countries present in the venue (Kottasová & Picheta, 2022). In fact, Ukraine's entry received one of the loudest cheers when on stage.

Kalush Orchestra's *Stefania* performance was extremely eye-catching and, as Ruslana's performance back in 2004, it had traditional elements of the western Ukrainian Hutsul ethnic group. Not to mention the persistence of the colours blue and yellow on stage. National pride and politics were definitely represented on that stage, which was reinforced by the group's short speeches after their performances. While competing in the semi-final for a spot in the Grand Final, a member of the group, right after the performance, said to Europe – 'Thank you for supporting Ukraine' (Eurovision Song Contest, 2022a, 3:16). On the other hand, in the Grand Final, the speech's message was more explicit as the same member yelled – 'I ask to all of you, please help Ukraine, Mariupol... Help us Azovstal right now!' (Eurovision Song Contest, 2022b, 3:11). Despite the ban on political speeches at the Eurovision stage, the Ukrainian act made sure Europe knew what was happening in the war while the singing competition continued – which questioned the EBU's capacity to guarantee the impossible task of organizing a non-political event following the latest Russian actions in Ukrainian territory.

Ukraine was a firm favourite of the public to win the contest, but the popular vote only makes up 50% of the final score. Thus, many wondered whether the points coming from the professional juries would be enough to guarantee the country's victory. United Kingdom's *Space Man* by Sam Ryder was the jury's favourite to win as Ukraine was placed fourth among the music professionals, however, that did not stop the predictable outcome of the show. Professional juries from Moldova, Romania, Poland, Latvia, and Lithuania – countries that are geographically close to Ukraine – awarded the maximum 12 points to the Ukrainian act. On May 14, 2022, the group won the 66<sup>th</sup> edition of the song contest with a smashing result of 631 points, 192 points being from the national juries and 439 points from the televoters (European Broadcasting Union, 2022a). In fact, Ukraine's total score is the second highest in Eurovision history (only behind Portugal's Salvador Sobral in 2017) – but this victory faced some difficulties along the way. As Ukraine was almost a certain winner of the biggest cultural event in Europe, the controversies did not stop with Russia's exclusion from the contest. This victory would mean that Ukraine easily attracted the international community to its cause and the anti-Russian sentiment, which was a clear concern for the other side as Kyiv had this major

soft power triumph. To prevent the Ukrainian victory from happening, Pro-Russian *Killnet* hacker group attempted to disrupt the voting both in the first semi-final, in which Ukraine performed, and the Grand Final – which was confirmed by the Italian Police (BBC, 2022). According to what the Italian law enforcement declared to the BBC (2022), their cybersecurity division was able to block all the attacks and, therefore, prevent interference in the final voting. Nonetheless, winner or not, Ukraine was unquestionably in everyone's mind the minute their act stepped into the Eurovision stage. Over the decades, the EBU has made clear efforts to promote the contest's non-political nature and prevent bloc voting, even so, Ukraine's victory ended up being inevitable and for many, it was a clear naked political result (Keating, 2022).

Following Ukraine's win in the contest, the current Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky congratulated Kalush Orchestra through his social media, applauding their bravery and talent that conquered Europe.

*Our courage impresses the world, our music conquers Europe! Next year Ukraine will host Eurovision! (...) We will do our best to one day host the participants and guests of Eurovision in Ukrainian Mariupol. Free, peaceful, rebuilt!*

(Volodymyr Zelensky, CNN Entertainment, 15 May 2022)

Despite Zelensky's positivity towards the possibility of hosting the Eurovision Song Contest 2023 in Ukraine, specifically in Mariupol, the truth is that the Ukrainian victory was a 'nightmare scenario' for the EBU (Keating, 2022) as hosting the event in a war zone was out of question. There was even a suggestion coming from Tamile Tasheva, the permanent representative of the President of Ukraine to Crimea, that wanted the event to be hosted in a venue in Yalta, a resort city on the south coast of the Crimean Peninsula (Keating, 2022), which was a very unrealistic possibility considering all the political tensions surrounding the territory. The ongoing military conflict and its unpredictable character impeded Ukraine's desire to host the 67<sup>th</sup> edition of the show. Thus, the Russo-Ukrainian war handed the Eurovision 2023's hosting to another EBU state member, namely the United Kingdom, who came second after losing to Ukraine.

To contribute to the Ukrainian resistance against the Russian army, the group – who had previously fought as part of it before Eurovision – auctioned the crystal microphone on Facebook, aiming to purchase drones for Ukraine's military. They sold their Eurovision trophy for near 850 million euros, all this money being donated to the Ukrainian army, that used it indeed to buy drones do defeat Russia (Jackson, 2022). Not only this trophy was important for Ukraine following the destruction and deaths that were being witnessed in the country, but Kalush Orchestra's win came to comfort all the

Ukrainians affected by the war and their song even found a new resonance among the Ukrainian people, 'I will always find my way home / Even if all roads are destroyed' (Belam & Cyorak, 2022).

Eurovision 2023 was expected to be a relatively calm edition of the competition as Russia was out of the picture and Ukraine had already won the contest after massive support from the popular vote. However, Russia did step into the Eurovision stage indirectly as the country was involved in a bombing concerning the 2023 Ukrainian representatives' hometown – minutes before they went on stage. Once again, it was impossible to divide politics from the international singing competition.

### **2.3.3.3. Russia's bombing of the city of Ternopil during Eurovision 2023 – hometown of Ukrainian act Tvorchi**

As Ukraine did not provide the safety and security environment required for hosting an event such as Eurovision, the 2023 contest was hosted in Liverpool on behalf of Kyiv. It was the eighth time that a Eurovision's winner has not been able to host the show – nonetheless, it was indeed the first time that the competition was not hosted by the winning country due to an ongoing military conflict. Thus, Ukrainian and British broadcasters, UA:PBC and BBC, worked together to make sure there was Ukrainian elements in the show that would honour and celebrate the country's culture (European Broadcasting Union, 2022b). A good few of Ukraine's most popular Eurovision contestants participated and performed in the contest, such as Ruslana (2004), Tina Karol (2006), Verka Serduchka (2007), Jamala (2016), Go\_A (2021), and, obviously, the Kalush Orchestra (2022). At the end of her performance, Jamala yelled 'Glory to Ukraine, glory to our heroes' to more than 170 million viewers worldwide that were accompanying the live show (Reaney, 2023). As someone else was hosting the show on behalf of Ukraine, the will to honour the country and to use the ESC as a platform to spread messages related to the fragility of the country after a year since Russia's full-scale invasion was visible. Allegedly, Ukrainian President Zelensky asked the EBU to give a speech to the massive global audience that would be watching the show – which was denied by the organization considering the risk of politicising the contest.

*The request by Mr Zelensky to address the audience at the Eurovision Song Contest, whilst made with laudable intentions, regrettably cannot be granted by the European Broadcasting Union management as it would be against the rules of the event.*

(European Broadcasting Union, 2023a)



For Eurovision 2022 winners, Kalush Orchestra, Zelensky's only intention was to thank the United Kingdom for its support on organizing the event on behalf of Ukraine as the country did not reunite the conditions to (Reaney, 2023), however, putting the Ukrainian political leader on stage could be dangerous as the geopolitical condition of the country and Russia's actions would naturally come to the fore. Despite being banned from competing at the ESC 2022 and onwards, Russia's presence was still felt in the 67<sup>th</sup> edition of the competition. In fact, it was the country itself that stepped into the spotlight after it fired several missiles at Ukraine, forcing Ukrainians to hide in bomb shelters as Kalush Orchestra was beginning their performance in Liverpool (Shevchenko & Mackintosh, 2023). Additionally, Russian President Vladimir Putin launched an attack on Ternopil, a city located in Western Ukraine and the hometown of the 2023 Ukrainian representatives Tvorchi (Shevchenko & Mackintosh, 2023), which is extremely far from the frontlines of the Russian invasion. This attack happened minutes before Tvorchi's performance of *Heart of Steel* in the Eurovision stage – that for many was not a coincidence. As a matter of fact, Russia was accused by Ukraine's foreign ministry of deliberately attacking Kyiv and Ternopil before and during their representatives' Eurovision performances (Shevchenko & Mackintosh, 2023). The electronic music duo went on their social media after their performance, begging Europe to be united in order to bring peace back to Ukraine.

*Ternopil is the name of our hometown, which was bombed by Russia while we sang on the Eurovision stage about our steel hearts, indomitability and will. This is a message for all cities of Ukraine that are shelled every day. Kharkiv, Dnipro, Khmelnytsky, Kyiv, Zaporizhzhia, Uman, Sumy, Poltava, Vinnytsia, Odesa, Mykolaiv, Chernihiv, Kherson and all others. Europe, unite against evil for the sake of peace!*

(BBC, 14 May 2023)

Tvorchi's song itself brought the war to the Eurovision stage, as it has a strong anti-war message. *Heart of Steel* was inspired by the bravery of the Ukrainian people and addresses the Ukrainian troops who defended the Azovstal plant in Mariupol (Shevchenko & Mackintosh, 2023). To inform Europe of what was happening in Ukraine, the duo kept holding up a sign with their hometown's name in the live show – and just like Eurovision 2022, contestants from other participating countries were seen waving the flag of Ukraine. The bookmakers predicted that Tvorchi would do well in the popular vote as there was a clear pattern of solidarity towards Ukraine. The duo ended up in the sixth place overall with 59 points coming from the professional juries and 189

points from the televoters – the fourth highest score after Finland, Sweden and Norway (European Broadcasting Union, 2023b).

The EBU was concerned about the politicisation of the 2023 song contest and the truth is that politics were undoubtedly present and there was no way back. With war back to Europe and the previous winning country unable to stage Eurovision in its territory, as the winner usually does, because of someone else's invasion and consequent military conflict would never not come to the fore. EBU's decision not to allow Zelensky's video speech at the contest did not stop the singing competition from becoming political. In fact, the show was clearly a four-hour anti-war protest, unavoidably being politicized. Eurovision, as an entertainment mean, could possibly be more interesting without political messages and biased voting as it would turn the show unpredictable for the viewer. However, the platform encompasses way too many different countries and cultures, which makes it impossible to be totally apolitical. At the end of the day, politics will always find a way to inject itself within the Eurovision stage.

#### **2.4. Discussion: Summary of key findings**

Since its existence, the Eurovision Song Contest has become a strategy for many countries to display their soft power and obtain legitimacy. This has been particularly obvious when looking at countries that are recently new to the European political landscape and strive to achieve a respectable name on it, which is the case of Ukraine. As a newly independent country, Ukraine arrived at a political landscape where Russia was far ahead with a sit in several international institutions. Even though it is in Russia's best interests to project soft power, it is interesting to see how Ukraine has been able to step up the game through the ESC. Acknowledging the important role of cultural events in shaping international perceptions and relations, Russia and Ukraine have been using Eurovision to broaden their narratives as the event undoubtedly impacts public opinion and diplomatic tactics. As we have seen, favourable geopolitical conditions enhance a country's soft power (Nye, 2004), which can be projected through *pop* culture and shape perceptions of a certain country. Additionally, in order to exercise soft power and influence public opinion, a country's policies have to be legitimate, credible and attractive (Nye, 2004). Considering Russia and Ukraine's geopolitical conflict and the international condemnation to Putin's government actions in the equation, it was no surprise that this would invade the Eurovision stage – where the audience displays their preferences and concerns. The Russo-Ukrainian War and annexation of Crimea in 2014 were a noticeable concern among the international community and clearly changed the

perception of popular culture regarding Russia and Ukraine's relations as Russia's policies were not seen as legitimate nor credible. For two years in a row, the Russian contestants were highly booed by the Eurovision audience. Despite Russia's second place in 2015 and third place in 2016, the 2016 Eurovision contest came to show the continuous support to Ukraine, that triumphed with a ballad about the deportation of Crimean Tatars by Stalin. The international condemnation to Russia increased right after the country's full-scale invasion to Ukraine in 2022, and the Eurovision broad audience decidedly sided with Ukraine's narrative as it censored Russia's actions.

To better understand the intersection between Russia-Ukraine geopolitical tensions and the popular platform Eurovision, it is very advantageous to put the lens of popular geopolitics on as the main approach of this study. By using this specific approach, it is possible to perform a nuanced and multidimensional analysis that is crucial to understand the aforementioned intersection – as valuable insights will come to the fore concerning Russia-Ukraine complex interplay within Eurovision. Through the empirical analysis provided, it becomes clear that the ESC is unquestionably the perfect stage for countries to perform their geopolitical narratives, hence the relevance of popular geopolitics when studying the European musical contest. Thus, several aspects were considered throughout the research, such as the historical and geopolitical background of Russia and Ukraine; the relevance of popular geopolitics to Eurovision; Russia and Ukraine's performances and statements; audience reactions and public reception; voting patterns; and the impact on Russia-Ukraine bilateral relations.

Considering Russia-Ukraine historical and geopolitical background, the status of their relations has clearly influenced how both countries behave within the show. As we have seen, Eurovision is extremely relevant since it is a place where geopolitical narratives are performed before a wide audience. That said, narrative analysis was important to explore as it is within popular culture that narratives are produced (Grayson, et al., 2009). Therefore, song lyrics, coded political messages, symbols and others are important to deconstruct national identities and geopolitical narratives and positions. For instance, Ruslana came to offer a positive project for a Ukrainian national identity, as well as an activist role for Ukraine in the world as she affirmed 'Russia is our past, Europe must be our future' (Reuters, 2013). Verka's 'Russia goodbye' followed this narrative as it represented Ukraine turning its back on Russia in front of a global audience. Russia, on the other hand, bet on songs about peace and unity to represent the country as geopolitical tensions with Ukraine started to rise after the Russo-Ukrainian war – while Russia's international image was being negatively affected. Gagarina's second place with song lyrics like *Praying for peace and healing / I hope we can start again* (Eurovision

Song Contest, 2015, 0:19), despite considered cynical by critics, conquered the second-highest popular vote – but that did not reverse the public opinion and condemnation to Russia's actions in Ukraine, as the booing was still present in the venue. Popular culture is often used for propaganda (Grayson, et al., 2009), and Russia's 2015 entry was accused by critics to be a political propaganda move to improve the country's international image.

To counter argue Moscow's peace narrative, Kyiv sent a song about the atrocities committed by Joseph Stalin against Crimean Tatars during World War II – that vividly alluded to the current Russia's actions in the Crimean Peninsula. Ukrainian ballad *1944*, notwithstanding being a clear anthem against Russia's annexation of Crimea, appeals to humanity and insists on European principles, such as humanitarianism and peace. It did not necessarily discuss Russia-Ukraine relations, but it did mark a position regarding Russia's actions and appealed to its listeners – *Where is your heart? / Humanity rise / You think you are Gods / But everyone dies / Don't swallow my souls / Our souls* (Eurovision Song Contest, 2016, 1:38). This time, a song about peace was coming from Ukraine and it took the trophy back to Kyiv – *We could build a future / Where people are free / To live and love / The happiest time / Our time* (Eurovision Song Contest, 2016, 1:22). The public and the press were very clear regarding the peace songs coming from both countries. Those coming from Russia – the aggressor state – were cynical, while the ones coming from Ukraine – the invaded state – were an act of bravery, which brings us back to the loss of credibility of a country among popular culture when involved in a military conflict (Saaideh, 2023). Van Zoonen (2000) declares that *pop* culture brings new topics into the common public sphere, and that's exactly what *1944* did. Through Jamala's ballad, it was possible to draw attention to the issue of Crimea and reinforce popular perceptions, since according to Dodds (2007), geopolitical narratives told through music can shape and influence public opinion, increasing the country's soft power projection.

When analysing voting patterns among the neighbouring nations, it was clear that it accompanied Russia and Ukraine's diplomatic relations. From geopolitical allies, the countries started to be geopolitical rivals as tensions began to rise. An interesting voting from Ukraine to Russia is that between 2003 and 2012, Ukraine placed the Russian act in their top three slots every year except in 2005, when Eurovision was hosted in Kyiv months after the Orange Revolution protests. Russia, on the other hand, scored the Ukrainian act equally in their top three between the period previously mentioned except for 2005 as well, and in 2009, that coincided with the gas crisis between both countries. In 2013 and 2014, as geopolitical tensions were rising, Ukraine awarded only 4 points to

Russia – that, in turn, gave Ukraine 1 point in 2013 and 7 points in 2014 right after the annexation of Crimea. Finally, in the 2016 song contest, a new pattern was developed. As it was the first year that the jury and televoting votes were separated, it was witnessed that the Russian and Ukrainian national juries did not exchange points between each other – for the first time ever since Ukraine’s debut in 2003. As a matter of fact, since 2016, in every edition that counts with the participation of Russia and Ukraine, namely 2018 and 2021, the professional jury has awarded zero points to each other, demonstrating the continuing influence of geopolitics in the final voting exchanged between the two countries until Russia’s ban and how the nations’ voting history tracks closely with their diplomatic relations.

In light of Russia’s full-scale invasion to Ukraine in 2022 and consequent ban from the competition, we witnessed a wave of solidarity never seen before within Eurovision – whether through the voting or the persistence of the colours of Ukraine’s national flag in the arena. The Kalush Orchestra currently hold the record for obtaining the highest percentage of maximum points from the popular vote – receiving 439 out of 480 points possible, which means that Ukraine received the top *douze points* from almost every country (European Broadcasting Union, 2022a). Whether it was a vote of sympathy to the country or just the liking of the song *Stefania*, the European geopolitical context cannot be ignored. Televoters across Europe and beyond definitely rejected Russia’s expansionist violence and showed a gesture of solidarity towards Ukraine in the name of peace. There has been a visible support to Ukraine’s narrative since 2014, but since the country’s invasion this support has been more evident. The public support to Ukraine rather than Russia was very clear as several artists from other participating countries and audience viewers wore bands exhibiting Ukraine’s colours blue and yellow and others waved small replicas of the Ukrainian national flag. All of these controversies have undoubtedly influenced broader geopolitical dynamics between Russia and Ukraine, as its political leaders have publicly addressed their opponent’s behaviour within Eurovision, as it was visible in the 2016 and 2017 contests, for instance. As stated by Grayson, et al. (2009), soft power competitions draw a special attention to popular culture as a mean to shape narratives. Russia and Ukraine have strategically used it to narrate their side of the story regarding their hostile relations in the Eurovision stage. Through artist choices, song lyrics and political statements, both countries shaped their narrative on the ongoing geopolitical events between them on a global stage, hoping that the audience would connect with their side and support the country’s narrative – hence the significant role of popular culture in international relations. Russia and Ukraine fight for audience engagement within their geopolitical narratives on an international stage as they aim to

influence how people perceive their conflict and legitimate their actions through *pop* culture (Grayson, et al., 2009), and specifically, through the Eurovision Song Contest. Whoever takes the trophy home, symbolically wins the geopolitical conflict – and the global audience has handed the victory to Ukraine.

## Conclusions

The Eurovision Song Contest – one of the cultural arms of European integration – has historically been known as a platform to bring nations together through music. Despite EBU's efforts for the contest to remain apolitical, the contest itself is an outcome of an ambitious consequential political project of the 20<sup>th</sup> century right after World War II. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that several hints of geopolitics often come to the fore within the Eurovision stage. The *pop* contest has been instrumentalized to a great extent, and Russia and Ukraine's geopolitical tensions have been stealing everyone's attention for the past 20 years. These countries have contributed to the politicization of Eurovision and have turned the stage into a geopolitical battlefield where both fight for the winning narrative over their antagonistic relations following tense episodes like the annexation of Crimea or the military conflict in eastern Ukraine. These narratives have been, on one hand, around Ukraine's desire to earn a respectable name within the international community and addressing Russia's violation of their sovereignty and territorial integrity; and, on the other hand, around Russia's determination on improving its international image through peace songs and provocative strategies.

The status of Russia-Ukraine diplomatic relations has undeniably influenced their participation in the show. Prior to the 2004 Orange Revolution, there was still a tension between the countries as Ukraine wanted to pursue a Western-oriented path that Russia did not exactly approve. Despite happening six months before Ruslana won the Eurovision trophy on behalf of Ukraine, the Ruslana phenomenon was very intense during the Orange Revolution protests as the artist symbolized Ukraine's pro-Europe sentiment and appealed to a varied global audience for democracy. Serdushka's controversy in 2007 has also emphasized Ukraine's desire to say goodbye to Russia and move towards the West instead when the EU declared that it did not intend to give Ukraine EU membership. As Russia and Ukraine's relations became more hostile following the Crimean crisis and military conflict in eastern Ukrainian territory, Moscow started to send songs about peace and unity to the Eurovision stage, while Kyiv counter argued with a song about the atrocities committed by Joseph Stalin against Crimean Tatars, that strongly alluded to the 2014 Crimean crisis. As it was a contested victory by the Russian Federation, the country boycotted Eurovision 2017 hosted in Kyiv by sending an artist that was barred from Ukraine for violating Ukrainian legislation regarding Crimea's borders – expecting that the international community would condemn Ukraine's decision. Thus, it becomes clear that the countries' hostile relations have shaped their strategies and narratives in the contest, hoping their narrative will triumph among the hundreds of million viewers of the contest.

Despite Russia's success and popularity within the popular cultural platform, Ukraine has been a major Eurovision player since its debut as it has won the contest three times and was a runner-up twice, currently being the country with most wins in Eastern Europe. It must be pointed out that Ukraine's last two victories are closely linked with the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the Russian invasion in 2022, which means that Ukraine's narratives about the geopolitical conflict have been triumphing among the wide Eurovision audience. To come to this end, it was used an important popular geopolitics framework that enabled the research question of this study to be answered and also provided a distinctive and unique perspective on Russia-Ukraine relations within the Eurovision contest. Through the lens of popular geopolitics, it became clear how the countries' geopolitical conflict has spilled over to the international event and how the global audience perceived the narratives produced and disseminated by Russia and Ukraine – the last one being the one standing after Russia's banning of the international singing competition. Although it would be interesting to consider how Russia-Ukraine dynamics may evolve in the future, the truth is that it is very unlikely that Russia will return to the Eurovision stage any time soon. Considering that Ukraine did not win the 2023 song contest and will not host the event next year, there is no prevision that Vladimir Putin will take any action that may involve the *pop* event like it happened with Ternopil's bombing. Therefore, future developments on the countries' relations within this platform are highly impossible to predict. Additionally, considering the limitations of the current study, it is important to acknowledge that, even though geopolitical elements can play a role in the voting process, music quality and personal preferences are important drivers of voting behaviour – which emphasizes the idea of Eurovision's multifaceted nature. Despite the significance of the geopolitical European political landscape in voting behaviour, geopolitical considerations may not be enough to capture the whole spectrum of viewer motivations and thus, the contest's dynamics should not be oversimplified.

The Eurovision Song Contest is of utmost importance and an extremely relevant field of study if we consider the intersection between geopolitics, culture and international relations. Within this contest, countries engage in cultural diplomacy and project their soft power to a broad and diverse audience across the world. Through this platform, we witness numerous attempts by countries to shape global perceptions, which can be done through geopolitical narratives that usually encompass national symbols and historical references. In addition, regional alliances and rivalries are easy to uncover through voting patterns between the countries. Strong diplomatic bonds are unveiled effortlessly through what we call geopolitical voting blocs – the same way hostile relations are spotted when analysing the countries' voting patterns, currently the most studied field of



Eurovision. An evident promoter of transnationalism, the ESC brings together over 40 nations to an international stage before a global audience that have the opportunity to create a positive or negative image about a certain country. This feature can undoubtedly promote wider discussions in international affairs and impact the projection of soft power and influence, hence the importance of popular culture within international politics. As Eurovision has evolved over the years and accompanied changing geopolitical realities across Europe, it provides shifts in geopolitical narratives, as well as in diplomatic friendships and enmities, offering an understanding of the European political landscape – and in the specific case of this dissertation, it provided an interpretation of Russia and Ukraine’s geopolitical conflict. The study of this complex geopolitical conflict told through Eurovision provides a wise and distinctive perspective on how Russia and Ukraine have been using this cultural platform to sell their narratives and gain international support through song lyrics and political speeches and statements. In fact, these countries’ conflict contributes to a profound understanding of how geopolitical tensions are reflected in popular culture. The year 2022 marked a turning point in the international singing competition as Russia’s banning demonstrated that the contest is not fully removed from politics. Thus, it is highly recommended the continuous study of the Eurovision Song Contest as a wide-ranging platform where music and politics inevitably collide and shape global perceptions and narratives, i.e., as a geopolitical battleground where only one narrative can triumph – *Russia, goodbye!*

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## Annexes

### Annex A. Song lyrics of *A Million Voices* by Polina Gagarina – Russian entry of Eurovision 2015

<p><i>We are the world's people Different yet we're the same We believe, we believe in a dream Praying for peace and healing I hope we can start again We believe, we believe in a dream</i></p> <p><i>So if you ever feel love is fading Together like the stars in the sky We can sing, we can shine</i></p> <p><i>When you hear our voices call You won't be lonely anymore Oh, a million voices Your heart is like a beating drum Burning brighter than the sun, oh-oh A million...</i></p> <p><i>Now as the world is listening From cities and satellites We believe, we believe in a dream</i></p> <p><i>So if you ever feel love is fading Together like the stars in the sky We can sing, we can shine, oh!</i></p> <p><i>When you hear our voices call You won't be lonely anymore</i></p>	<p><i>Oh, a million voices Your heart is like a beating drum Burning brighter than the sun, oh-oh A million (voices)</i></p> <p><i>When I look around at these faces I can see the stars in the sky We will sing, we will shine, oh!</i></p> <p><i>When you hear our voices call You won't be lonely anymore Oh, a million voices Your heart is like a beating drum (beating drum) Burning brighter than the sun, oh-oh (A million voices) Voices, oh-oh! (Sing it out) A million voices</i></p> <p><i>Sing it out, sing it out, oh Sing it out, sing it out, oh Sing it out, a million (voices) Sing it out, sing it out, oh Sing it out, sing it out, oh Sing it out A million voices A million voices, oh yeah!</i></p>
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(Eurovision Song Contest, 2015)

**Annex B. Song lyrics of 1944 (translated version) by Jamala – Ukrainian entry of Eurovision 2016**

<p><i>When strangers are coming They come to your house They kill you all And say We're not guilty Not guilty Where is your mind? Humanity cries You think you are Gods But everyone dies Don't swallow my soul Our souls</i></p> <p><i>I couldn't spend my youth there Because you took away my peace I couldn't spend my youth there</i></p>	<p><i>Because you took away my peace</i></p> <p><i>We could build a future Where people are free To live and love The happiest time Where is your heart? Humanity rise! You think you are Gods But everyone dies Don't swallow my soul Our souls</i></p> <p><i>I couldn't spend my youth there Because you took away my peace I couldn't spend my youth there Because you took away my peace</i></p>
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(Eurovision Song Contest, 2016)