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Political images taking stage

A narrative analysis of Russia in the Eurovision Song Contest

Abstract

Ever since it was created, the Eurovision Song Contest has functioned as an arena for nation branding and nation building. The aim of this thesis is to contribute to the field of cultural diplomacy and political storytelling through studying how participation in the Eurovision Song Contest can contribute to a country's international image. This thesis has studied how the Russian entries between the years of 2013 and 2017 were perceived and how this could contribute to the general image of Russia. Cultural diplomacy formed the basis of the theoretical framework and the theory of fantasmatic logic was used in addition. To conduct the case study, the lyrics, performances and context surrounding the entries were studied through a multimodal narrative analysis. Three main narratives were identified when studying the Russian entries, those were of Russia as a peaceful, innocent and progressive country. The main conclusion drawn from the study was that Russia was perceived positively in the contest, which could contribute to their general international image.

Keywords: Eurovision Song Contest, cultural diplomacy, fantasmatic logic, Russia

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1 Introduction

Since the beginning of the last decade, the interest for the Eurovision Song Contest (hereafter the ESC) has increased massively. In 2016, approximately 204 million people watched at least one of the two Semi-Finals or the Grand Final, compared to 106 million in 2006 (Eurovision Song Contest, 2021a; Eurovision Song Contest, 2010). Therefore, the competition has the power to influence millions of people all over Europe. The contest was created in the 1950's as a peace building project, with the aim of bringing Europe together. Ever since, it has functioned as an important stage for nation building and as a method for new states to establish themselves. The method was for example used after the fall of the USSR, when several new countries were constructed and joined the competition. In addition, the ESC has functioned as an arena for friendly competitiveness between countries, while at the same time fostering and developing international relations (Carniel, 2019, pp. 151 - 152).

The contest has always strived to be apolitical, but political messages through songs and high voting between politically allied countries have always occurred (Gauja, 2019, p. 207). In similarity to the Olympics, it is thus an arena where soft power politics in the shape of nation branding and cultural diplomacy can be practiced (Carniel, 2019, p. 151). To conduct research studying soft power instead of hard power is an aspect of importance within Peace and Conflict studies and a field that has evolved in recent years. Therefore, it is highly important and relevant to study the ESC to better understand the cultural foundations of international politics (Schneider, 2005, pp. 147 - 148). Scholars argue that the contest in many ways uses the language of diplomacy, since each country sends a "delegation" with the competing artist functioning as an "ambassador" (Carniel, 2019, p. 152). The participation of a country in the ESC can therefore contribute to the general image of the country through the power of cultural diplomacy and is thus highly important for the subject of Peace and Conflict studies.

1.1 Purpose and research question

The purpose of this study is to contribute to the field of cultural diplomacy and political storytelling and widen the understanding as how a participation in the ESC can contribute to a country's international image. A positive international image is important for building international relations and conducting diplomacy. To fulfill this purpose, the case of Russia will be studied. Using fantasmatic logic and a narrative analysis, the five Russian entries between the years of 2013 and 2017 will be studied with the focus of examining which narratives that can be identified. The point is to study how entries in the ESC can be perceived by a general audience and how this may contribute to the general image of a country. The research question is therefore:

How does Russia's participation in the Eurovision Song Contest contribute to the perception of its international image?

1.2 Background

To analyze how Russia is perceived in the ESC and how this could contribute to the perception of its international image, background is a necessity. This chapter will present the history of the ESC as well as a description of the general international image of Russia outside of the competition.

1.2.1 Eurovision Song Contest

The European Broadcasting Union (hereafter EBU) was established in 1950 with the aim to bring Europe together after the two world wars. Six years after its founding, the EBU broadcasted its very first edition of the ESC. Inspired by the Sanremo Music Festival in Italy, the ESC was created with the purpose to encourage the composing of songs and to stimulate friendly rivalry between

writers and composers. Each year, all members of the EBU¹ are welcome to send in an entry to represent their country. In the beginning, the competition was broadcasted on one single night, but over the years, semi-finals were added where one had to qualify for the Grand Final, due to a huge influx of countries from the former USSR. The voting in both the Grand Final and the Semi Finals nowadays consist of 50% public vote and 50% jury vote (Wellings & Kalman, 2019, pp. 8 - 10).

The participating countries may choose for themselves how they select their representative in the competition. Some countries choose to select their representative through a national final while others select their representative internally. Each year, the competition is viewed by millions of viewers. In 2018, it held more viewers than the 2018 UEFA Champion's league (Wellings & Kalman, 2019, pp. 8 - 10).

As stated in the introduction, the ESC holds an overall aim to be apolitical, although it is viewed by many as an impossible task. Ben Wellings and Julie Kalman argue that the ESC travels between the reality of geopolitical events and an imagined, idealized space of the ESC. The ESC rules forbid political symbols and lyrics, however, these lyrics and symbols often manage to slip through the rules. The winning song of 2016, "1944", deals with the subject of invasion of Ukraine but constantly refers to the historical event where hundreds of thousands of crimean tatars faced mass deportation, even though many fans and experts interpreted it to comment the 2014 invasion of Crimea. However, since it never explicitly commented the 2014 invasion, it was allowed to participate (Wellings & Kalman, 2019, pp. 10 - 12).

1.2.2 The international image of Russia

The image of Russia differs significantly across countries depending on for example their political and economic relations with Russia. In addition, the image of a country varies within countries as well. However, one can uncover a general

¹ Mostly European countries with few exceptions.

image that is relevant at least for most Western countries, which constitute most of the competing countries in the ESC. Valentina Feklyunina argues that the general image of Russia was quite positive in the beginning of the 1990's since many Western countries hoped for a democratization and liberalization of the country after the fall of the USSR. The image of Russia began to appear in a more negative light in the mid 1990's, following the war in the break-away republic of Chechnya. When Vladimir Putin was elected president in 2000, the view of Russia first appeared to be of a positive note. When Russia first involved themselves in the Iraq War in 2003, followed by the arrestation and murder of several public figures during the mid-2000's, the initial positive image of Russia suffered quite hard. Putin was also accused of creating an authoritarian state, which contributed to the negative image (Feklyunina, 2009, pp. 39 - 41).

The international image of Russia suffered even more after the five-day war with Georgia in 2008, reinforcing the view of Russia as aggressive. During the 2011 and 2012 elections, there were public protests regarding fraud, which led to a strengthening of the image of Russia as authoritarian. The EU addressed critique towards Russia regarding their methods to handle human rights issues and the fighting of corruption, among others (Sergunin & Karabeshkin, 2015, p. 349).

In 2013, a law banning "gay propaganda" was implemented in Russia. This caused several leaders of Western states to boycott the opening ceremony of the 2014 Sochi Olympics in Russia. A few days after the Sochi Olympics were over, Russia, with only the support of a few countries, annexed Crimea. Most countries chose to vastly criticize them, and a few sanctions were imposed (Kobierecki, 2016, pp. 174, 179). To conclude, the general image of Russia since the mid-2000's as seen by Western countries have been that of an aggressive and authoritarian state lacking in its methods of handling human rights issues.

1.3 Previous research

Several scholars have argued Eurovision to be an important arena for cultural diplomacy and for national image-branding. Alison Lewis argues for example in the anthology *Eurovisions: Identity and the International Politics of the Eurovision Song Contest* that Germany managed to change their negative public image after the Second World War through sending entries in the 1950's and 1960's to the ESC that portrayed them positively. Lewis claims Germany succeeded in creating a narrative in the competition where they were perceived as peaceful, reformed, a reliable neighbour and a "good European". Being viewed as a "good European" was especially important according to Lewis since that gave Germany an opportunity to show that they shared identity with the rest of Europe (Lewis, 2019, pp. 21 - 23).

In the same anthology as Alison Lewis, Dean Vuletic argues that the ESC together with events such as the Olympic Games and the FIFA World Cup are important tools for nation building. He has studied Kosovo, who considers a participation in Eurovision Song Contest very important for its cultural diplomacy, soft power and to increase the number of countries who recognize Kosovo as a country. A participation would also be an affirmation of the Europeanist aspirations Kosovo has, in similarity to the aspirations of Serbia when they joined the competition (Vuletic, 2019, pp. 111 - 113, 123). Both the cases of Germany and Kosovo are perfect examples as of how the ESC can contribute to the perception of a country's image. The case of Kosovo is quite interesting in the sense that they themselves view the contest as an important tool to be able to conduct cultural diplomacy.

Galia Press-Barnathan and Naama Lutz have also written about the ESC as an important cultural event with the possibility to impact a country's economy and status. They specifically focus on hosting mega events such as the ESC, and the impact hosting a mega event has on the country. Hosting the competition not only increases tourism, it also functions as a tool for nation-branding and enhancing the soft power of the state (Press-Barnathan & Lutz, 2020, p. 729). Press-Barnathan and Lutz also describe the ESC as an arena where "European" values are performed, such as displaying a strong adherence to Human Rights. In their

article, they specifically studied Israel and their hosting of the competition in 2019. Hosting the competition in 2019 functioned as a method for Israel to brand themselves as LGBT-friendly and to screen a positive image of themselves to the rest of Europe (Press-Barnathan & Lutz, 2020, p. 741). The Press-Barnathan and Lutz article helps to understand why winning is such an important aspect of competing in the ESC.

Catherine Baker further contributes to the research on hosting mega events and discusses both Russia hosting the ESC in 2009 as well as Russia hosting the Olympics in 2014. She claims that the hosting of the ESC in 2009 created an opportunity for Russia to brand itself as open and tolerant. On the final day of the ESC, however, this narrative lost power because of violent police repressions towards a pride march held by Belarussian and Russian activists. Therefore, the narrative of an open and tolerant Russia conflicted with the image of a Russia that oppressed the LGBT community (Baker, 2017, p. 105). Likewise, this thesis aims to study how Russia can be perceived in the ESC and how this perception might contribute to the general image of Russia.

2 Theoretical framework

To answer the research question, a theoretical framework will be outlined below. It will consist of a combination of the theories of cultural diplomacy and fantasmatic logic. First, cultural diplomacy will be presented, which will form the basis of the theoretical framework. Thereafter, the additional theory of fantasmatic logic will be explained.

2.1 Cultural diplomacy

Soft power relies on sharing the same values, or at least letting others to think you share the same values, to reach a desired outcome (Nye, 2004, p. 111). It consists of three primary factors, culture, political values and foreign policies. The focus of this thesis is on the cultural aspect of soft power, namely cultural diplomacy (Nye, 2004, p. 11). Cultural diplomacy is often used through a twofold strategy. First, to “explain” hard power interventions, for example the invasion of another country, and thereafter convince the population involved to facilitate its success. Second, to improve the national image in the international arena (Zamorano, 2016, p. 177). During this study, the second part of the strategy will be the focal point.

To understand cultural diplomacy properly, one must begin with explaining the concept of culture and the concept of diplomacy. Culture in the cultural diplomatic sense is regarded quite broad and is in this study defined as “the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group, and that it encompasses, in addition to art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs” (UNESCO, 2001). Diplomacy in this case is defined as “an instrument for the implementation of foreign policy by peaceful means” (Pajtinka, 2014, p. 99). The definition of

cultural diplomacy will therefore also be broad and defined according to Milton Cummings popular definition. He argues that cultural diplomacy “refers to the exchange of ideas, information, art, and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples in order to foster mutual understanding”. Cummings also states that cultural diplomacy in many cases may function as a one-way street rather than a two-way exchange, for example when a country “tells its story” to the rest of the world, as in the case of the ESC (Cummings, 2003, p. 1).

2.1.1 Political storytelling

Political storytelling is a way of conducting cultural diplomacy and is simply defined as storytelling with a political ambition. It is often used to shape the political discourse without boring documents or manifestos. It is instead highly entertaining and addressed towards the broad audience. It frequently consists of a rather fantastic version of politics, often consisting of images in combination with text, in the form of for example election campaigns, promotion videos or through cultural arenas such as the Olympics or the ESC (Freistein & Gadinger, 2020, pp. 217 - 218). The political storytelling conducted on digital platforms can be described as a form of digital storytelling. The ESC platform can, according to this theory, be described as a multimedia platform conducting multimedia stories. The platform can be used to tell stories consisting of videos in combination with text (the lyrics of the songs) (Jenkins, 2017, p. 1062).

2.2 Fantasmatic logic

The theory of fantasmatic logic is used to identify narratives in text or images and explore how these narratives work contradicting to each other. Fantasmatic logic can be defined as adding fantasy to politics to depoliticize the actual intent and instead gain approval by the public (Glynos & Howarth, 2007, pp. 147 - 148). Donald Trump for example tweeted an image where he posed as the builder of the wall between Mexico and the US with the accompanying text: “The Wall is

Coming”. The text referred to the slogan “Winter is Coming” popularized by the popular tv-show *Game of Thrones*. Through referring to the slogan of a popular tv-show, the building of the wall appeared less political and more like an epic battle against his enemies (Freistein & Gadinger, 2020, pp. 217 - 218). Fantasmatic logic explores the logic of “eating the cookie while having it” in the sense that the actor in question can be portrayed in a certain way while acting completely opposite. A leader of a country might for example appear soft and caring on their social media and at the same time implement a very restricted migration policy (Glynos & Howarth, 2007, pp. 147 - 148). If a fantasmatic narrative works successfully, it hooks the subject through the enjoyment it creates and influences the general image of a country or an actor (Glynos & Howarth, 2007, p. 130).

Katja Freistein and Frank Gadinger used the theory of fantasmatic logic when studying election campaign posters from right-wing populist parties in Germany and the UK. They identify two narratives from the election campaigns which are used with the intent to camouflage the actual intent from the parties and gain approval by those who see the campaigns. Freistein and Gadinger argue that stories and narratives are more successful when they fit the previously known narratives as well as when they are relatable to the public. The goal when using fantasmatic logic, however, is not to study how well the narratives have worked, but rather to identify the existing contradictions (Freistein & Gadinger, 2020, pp. 217, 223).

While the cultural diplomacy and political storytelling explain the general framework, the fantasmatic logic will be used closely together with the method of multimodal narrative analysis explained in chapter 3.2. Together they shape the model for the analysis. In similar fashion, the Russian entries will be studied with the aim of analyzing how they contribute to the image of Russia.

3 Methodology

During this chapter, the research design will first be explained. Then, the method of conducting the analysis will be explained, followed by an explanation as to why the case of Russia and the studied years were chosen. Lastly, the primary material will be presented.

3.1 Research design

This study will conduct a comparative single case study, meaning that it will focus on one single case, Russia. It is comparative in the sense that several years will be analyzed and compared. Single case studies usually have high internal validity inferring that the study measures what it is supposed to measure. The external validity, however, is usually lower, which causes single case studies to be less generalizable to other cases (Halperin & Heath, 2017, pp. 174, 214 - 215). The key strength of a single case study is the possibility to conduct a detailed analysis of political phenomena while the most apparent flaw is the difficulty to draw general conclusions (Halperin & Heath, 2017, p. 217). Further, the study uses an interpretive methodology. It does therefore not measure anything, instead the image of Russia is studied through a narrative analysis (Halperin & Heath, 2017, p. 5).

3.2 Multimodal narrative analysis

For this study, the method of narrative analysis will be used. A narrative analysis is appropriate in this study since it considers several events or plots and weaves them together to create a single story. The material in this study consists of five different entries Russia has sent to Eurovision Song Contest five different years, with the purpose to identify how they contribute to the perception of Russia.

A narrative analysis aims to detect which narratives are presented by a country or an actor and in which way they want to be perceived by other countries and actors. Actors often use discourses and storytelling to form narratives in order to achieve political goals, for example through telling stories where they appear as the hero (Miskimmon, et al., 2013, pp. 7, 9 - 10). A narrative consists of several 'plots' or events that together create a story and can be useful when an actor has a strategic goal and wants to be perceived in a certain way (Freistein & Gadinger, 2020, p. 222).

During this study, a multimodal narrative analysis will be used. A multimodal analysis considers several textual "threads" such as gestures, images, speeches, writing and music. In this specific study, the technique of layering will be used, meaning that the analysis will begin with looking at the lyrics of the song, studying for example which words are being used and how the song is composed. For the second layer, the performance will be analyzed, focusing on the atmosphere of the performance, the lighting and what colors are visible on stage. The performance will also be analyzed in relation to the lyrics, analyzing whether they are complementary or contradictory to each other. Furthermore, for the third layer, context surrounding interviews and circumstances regarding the internal selection will be of main focus. A fourth and final layer, regarding the general image of Russia outside of the competition, will be added in chapter 5. Finally, all entries will be looked at together to identify which performances can be related to each other and to identify the larger narrative surrounding all performances. The goal is to study how the different layers interplay when studied together (Freistein & Gadinger, 2020, pp. 219, 225 - 226). Images and, for this specific study, performances may be quickly forgotten but they are still important in storytelling, especially combined with text. The performances in the ESC are viewed by millions of people and thus reach an abundance of observers (Freistein & Gadinger, 2020, p. 218). While analyzing the Russian entries, the focus will be on

the presentation, rather than the reception. This as it is much more difficult to analytically study the reception.

When studying the narratives in the chosen entries, what will be identified and considered is system, identity and issue narratives. System narratives explain how the narrative views the structure of international affairs and how it argues that the international system is organized. Identity narrative on the other hand explains how the actors perceive themselves and other actors. Lastly, issue narrative works as a micronarrative and focuses on the specific situation and in what way the specific issue co-operates with the other narrative levels (Miskimmon, et al., 2013, pp. 10 - 11). A narrative analysis is more suitable for this thesis than a discourse analysis because the focus of this thesis is the storytelling and chain of events the five entries represent rather than viewing them as separate entities.

3.3 Case selection

Most of the soft power literature focuses on the US as well as Western Europe and their respective soft power strategies. Joseph S. Nye, Jr for example, considered to be the creator of the concept of soft power, targets the US in his book “Soft power – The means to success in world politics”, since he considers them as the most successful country regarding soft power. He studied soft power in the Soviet Union during the cold war era and concluded that the US was much more successful with their soft power in Western Europe than the Soviet Union (Nye, 2004, pp. 73 - 75). Since most soft power literature has focused on the US and Western Europe, the case of Russia has been chosen for this thesis as an attempt to bridge the academic gap. Oleg Shakirov argues that Russia during the mid-2000s and early 2010s, started focusing more on cultural diplomacy and soft power strategies. First, the focus was primarily on countries with Russian speaking minorities such as former Soviet states. In 2010, two new institutions were established with foreign policy goals: the *Gorchakov Fund for Public Diplomacy Support* and *Russian International Affairs Council*. These, Shakirov argues, were considered radical steps in improving the country’s image abroad

since it was different than anything Russia had done before (Shakirov, 2013). Alexander Sergunin and Leonid Karabeshkin also argue that Russia has had a prominent soft power strategy since the mid-2000s.

As mentioned in chapter 1.2.2., Russia's international image suffered severely after the war with Georgia in 2008 and suffered even worse after allegations of fraud during the 2011 parliamentary and 2012 presidential elections. Thus, Russia began a major soft power attempt to reduce the image of themselves as an aggressive and undemocratic country in 2013 according to Sergunin and Karabeshkin (Sergunin & Karabeshkin, 2015, pp. 347, 349 - 350). The year of 2013 was therefore chosen as the first year to begin this analysis with. The year of 2017 was chosen to end with, since five years are an appropriate amount to study to be able to detect possible narratives and connect chains of events.

3.4 Material

When conducting the analysis in this thesis, the material studying the first narrative layer (the lyrics) will be retrieved and analyzed from the website "Eurovision world". "Eurovision world" is a website collecting everything ESC related, such as odds, lyrics, news, and results, in one place. The exception is the 2017 entry, which never competed in the competition and the lyrics were therefore never uploaded to the website "Eurovision World". Further explanation on the circumstances regarding the 2017 entry can be found in chapter 4.5. Instead, the lyrics for the 2017 entry will be retrieved from the website "wiwibloggs". "Wiwibloggs" is another well visited web site devoted to the ESC (Wiwibloggs, 2017).

The second narrative layer (the performances) will consist of the Russian performances of the respective year in the Grand Final, uploaded on the official ESC Youtube channel. The 2017 entry never performed in the Grand Final, therefore, a live performance named as the official video of the song uploaded on the official ESC Youtube channel will be analyzed. The context and third layer consist mostly of interviews with the contestants by the likewise English likewise

Russian fan site ESCKAZ, as well as media coverage of the competition, official statements from the Russian delegation and explanations as of how the Russian entries were chosen.

4 Analysis

In this section, all entries studied will be presented and the textual, visual and context narrative layers will be considered and discussed.

4.1 Russia's entry in Eurovision 2013

In 2013, the chosen competing artist was 22-year-old Dina Garipova, her song was a ballad with the title "What if". Most lines in the song start with the words "What if" and the song begins with Dina singing "What if I could change the path of time? What if I had the power to decide? What if I could make us unified?" implying that she does not have the ability to unify the world, but she wishes she did. The song continues with lines such as "What if we all opened our arms? What if we came together as one? What if we aimed to stop the alarms? What if we chose to bury our guns?" (Eurovision World, 2013). Dina sings about her eagerness for the world to come together as one and stop fighting. There is no doubt that the message of the song is peace.

The second layer, the visuals, contribute to a similar message. On stage, Dina wore a light and long pink dress with lighter sleeves and the focus on stage was her. During the first half of the song, she is completely alone on stage with yellow light bulbs in the background, resembling suns. These sun-like props differ in size, with the smallest being approximately half a meter in diameter and the largest being over a meter in diameter. Even though Dina is mostly in focus, some camera angles are aligned to capture these props first and Dina secondly, in the leftover space of the camera's view. The camera movement is slow and often panning from one point to another, possibly using dollies or connections to cables in order to perform smooth aerial shots. Only the close-up shots of Dina's face are lacking panning. Practically all shots fade into each other, further creating a

smooth viewing sensation (Eurovision Song Contest, 2013, 00:00 - 1:37). Approximately 1:30 minutes into the performance, Dina is joined on stage by two men and two women, all dressed in white (Eurovision Song Contest, 2013, 1:38). The two men carry a yellow lightbulb each, which they with approximately one minute left of the song throw into the audience. The song ends with Dina singing “Why don't we always reach out to those who need us the most?” and all five people on stage taking each other's hands and raising them to the sky (Eurovision Song Contest, 2013, 2:17 - 3:23). The hand holding in the end, combined with the sun-looking lightbulbs, the light clothing worn by all performers and the camera angles leaves the viewer with a feeling of unity and peace.

Adding a third layer, context, Dina was chosen internally by Channel One Russia to represent Russia in Sweden where the contest was held. Channel One is the oldest tv-channel in Russia and is controlled by the government (BBC, 2020). The structure or decisions behind the internal selection has never been made public by Channel One, giving little insight into how Garipova was chosen. She was however the winner of Russian The Voice in 2012 which Yuriy Aksyuta, music director of Channel One, claims was a motivational factor behind the selection (ESCDaily, 2013). Dina was interviewed by ESCKAZ, an English/Russian site dedicated to delivering Eurovision News, prior to the competition and was asked why there were no dancers in the performance. Dina replied that the focus was the song and that they did not want anything on stage drawing attention away from the lyrics (ESCKAZ, 2013).

When analyzing the Russian entry to Eurovision 2013, one can identify several narratives. The general narrative of the song appears to be the message of peace. The system narrative of the song comes across as the world being occupied with war and fighting, as implied when Dina sings that she wishes that the world would unify. Studying this performance, the entry causes a perception of Russia as a peaceful country since the message of peace is directed towards the rest of Europe and not towards Russia themselves. The issue narrative complement the system and identity narrative and Dina appears to promote that everyone may work towards a solution through cooperation.

4.2 Russia's entry in Eurovision 2014

The Russian representatives in 2014 were the Tolmachevy sisters, consisting of the two twin sisters Marija and Anastasija Andrejevna Tolmachevy. At the time of the competition, the girls were 17 years old. The title of their song was "Shine" and it could be considered an uptempo ballad. With lyrics such as "Can you be a masterpiece of love. Sending out a message out above. Telling all the world to show some love. No one's gone bring me down, bring me down" there is no doubt that there is a love message involved in the lyrics (Eurovision World, 2014).

When performing the song in the ESC, the twins wore very light pink dresses and began their performance standing back-to-back, with their blonde hair intertwined, while standing on a seesaw. The color scheme in the beginning of the song is blue and the lighting is quite dull. There are headlights on the floor in the back of the stage shining with twelve light beams behind the girls. The light is bright and white, yet causes a sun-like sensation as the beams shine in a similar fashion as sunlight-beams. Therefore, the headlight-induced beams come off as half a sun, hidden in the background. During the performance, the number of beams caused by these headlights are continually increased. The visual focuses on symmetry through the use of the identical twins and the symmetrical seesaw. Most camera shots are aligned in a similar zooming-in fashion that cuts in at the same angle almost every time, which further displays the symmetry of the performance. Some camera shots pan from one end of the stage to the other. Most of the shots are performed slowly, but no fading transitional effects are in use to cause smooth impressions (Eurovision Song Contest, 2014, 00:10 - 2:13).

Approximately two thirds through the song, the twins step off the seesaw and slowly walk toward each other on stage. However, at this point of the performance the song increases in tempo and the camera movements begin to be more rapid in its panning and the lengths of each shot decreases (Eurovision Song Contest, 2014, 2:13). There is only one more person on stage during the performance, a man who shows up with less than a minute left of the performance. He transforms the seesaw into a sun behind the girls and all colors on stage turn from blue into a warm orange (Eurovision Song Contest, 2014, 2:30 – 2:45). The song ends with the girls, yet again, standing back-to-back, but this

time in front of the seesaw which has transformed into a sun (Eurovision Song Contest, 2014, 3:00 – 3:15). The performance reflects the lyrics well, their love towards each other is for example portrayed through their hair being intertwined. The staging with the headlight and the sun in the end of the performance complements the title of the song, “Shine”. The light clothing fits the lyrics as well, although white may additionally be seen as a symbol for peace.

In similarity to Dina Garipova, the sisters were chosen internally. This time it was however the Russian channel Russia 1 who were responsible for the selection, since Channel One and Russia 1 take turns in broadcasting the ESC. Russia 1 is also a government-controlled channel and is alongside Channel One, the leading channels in the country (BBC, 2020; Junior Eurovision Song Contest, 2014). The Russian delegation chose the sisters without further explanation as to how the process of selection had worked. The sisters were interviewed by ESCKAZ prior to the competition and explained that the song was about the sisters themselves and the love they shared for each other, fitting the narrative of love (ESCKAZ, 2014). When having finished performing, the girls were booed at by the audience (Eurovision Song Contest, 2014, 3:14 – 3:21).

This song offers an innocent impression to the viewers, due to the girls young ages and the song being about the love the sisters share for each other. The song reveals nothing of a system narrative, neither does it offer a strong sense of a specific Russian identity. The message was very apolitical, unlike the year before. The issue narrative appears to be the sisters encouraging the world to show some love.

4.3 Russia’s entry in Eurovision 2015

The singer behind the 2015 Russian entry “A Million Voices” was Polina Gagarina. At the time, Polina was 28 years old. The song was a ballad, and the lyrics began with the lines: “We are the world's people. Different yet we're the same. We believe. We believe in a dream” implying that everyone in the world is part of a collective and equal. The lyrics then includes lines such as “Praying for

peace and healing, I hope we can start again” focusing on forgiveness and implying that peace and healing is never too late. With a clear intention of spreading the word about peace in the competition to as many people as possible, Polina for example sings “Now as the world is listening, From cities and satellites” (Eurovision World, 2015).

Adding the second layer, Polina could be seen wearing a long white dress on stage and performing together with a band consisting of five people positioned behind her. The stage performance consisted of several small sections. The first section lasts for about 40 seconds and balances between close-up shots of Polina and slow-panning wide shots of the darkened stage in the dark blue light. The transitioning between the shots varies in effects, with some transitions being faded and some with instant jumps to the next shot. During the entire first section, Polina is standing still, positioned in the middle, and the overall dark blue light highlights her white dress. When the build-up to the chorus commences, the band behind her lights up slightly and the stage’s frame, which is decorated with hundreds of separate light sources, begins to create a pulsating effect, with heavy light starting in the lower left end from the audience point of view and slowly transitioning its focal points to the right, up and around the entire frame. This light effect gives the impression that a light-pulse is travelling all around Polina (Eurovision Song Contest, 2015, 00:00 - 00:45).

Once the chorus starts, the lighting changes, lighting up the entire stage, including the band behind her. The visual display behind Polina presents a spacey motive, with the display being to a majority black and having hundreds of smaller circulating star-like dots in differing colors. At this point, the camera movements change as well. From this point on, very few transitions are faded and the cameras pan in a more rapid fashion. The lengths of each shot are also shortened, causing the performance to feel more fast-paced. During the remaining part of the performance, the colors shift from blue to orange and then back to blue again. White is very present as well, not only is everyone on stage wearing white, but the lights are also very bright. Towards the end of the performance, several lightning effects are used. Both in the stage’s frame, the background display and the display under the stage’s ground. The performance ends with the screen behind her showing a globe slightly rotating while she sings a final “A million voices”. It should also be noted that as soon as the performance is over, Polina reacts very

emotionally and seems to have difficulties thanking the audience, suffering voice cracks. During the entire performance, Polina's implicitly performed emotionality is quite apparent which influences the overall performance to give it an even more emotional and nerveing touch (Eurovision Song Contest, 2015: 00:45 – 3:14). Therefore, the visual layer complements the textual layer well. The use of bright lights, the color white and the rotating globe are elements that all contribute to the sense of peace. Polina being emotional contributes to the feeling of her being genuine when performing the song.

Adding a layer of context, Polina stated in an interview with ESCKAZ that the song was chosen internally for her and that she believes that it was this specific song that was chosen because it fitted her very well and had a message she could stand by (ESCKAZ, 2015). With the clear peace message, the storytelling appears to the viewer as similar to the storytelling in 2013. Again, the system narrative appears to the viewer as a world torn by war where Russia is portrayed as a peaceful force. The issue narrative of spreading the message of peace to the rest of Europe works well together with the other narrative levels, since all of them are on the topic of peace.

4.4 Russia's entry in Eurovision 2016

In 2016, Russia's entry was the song "You are The Only One" performed by Sergey Lazarev. The genre was pop and the song was uptempo. With lyrics such as "You're the only one, you're my only one. You're my life, every breath that I take. Unforgettable, so unbelievable. You're the only one, my only one", he gives the impression of singing to someone he loves. Through the story of the lyrics, Sergey seems to have lost the person he loves, but refuses to stop believing that the two will be together again one day. "Won't ever give up 'cause you're still somewhere out there. Nothin' or no one's gonna keep us apart" (Eurovision World, 2016). Therefore, the main two themes may be summarized as love and hope.

The performance of the song consisted of many elements, including advanced visuals. On stage, Sergey stood in front of a large screen covered in fabric sheet stretched across a frame, giving the impression that Lazarev was climbing on the screen (Eurovision Song Contest, 2018). Initially, the stage is completely darkened with the exceptions of a few dynamically shifting headlights from the roof of the arena. These lights display Sergey in front of the large screen and another person (a woman) behind and on top of the large screen. Sergey is completely dressed in black as well. No fading camera transitions are in use, still only a total of three major angles, with some exception of distance to Sergey and zooming, are used at this stage of the performance (Eurovision Song Contest, 2016, 00:00 - 00:40). Then, the screen turns white, and huge black wings appear on it, giving the impression of being on Sergey's back. During the following 2 minutes and 20 seconds, the screen and lightning changes multiple time. Sergey is for a brief moment joined by four dancers, also dressed in black. While the visuals on the screen dynamically change to give the impression that different surfaces randomly appear and disappear, to which Sergey can climb to and be forced to move away from. During this entire section of the performance, the camera works from different onwards angles and a few sideways angles. However, most of the view from the cameras are a still angle showing the entire screen from the direct front, maximizing the visual effects of Sergey climbing the screen (Eurovision Song Contest, 2016, 00:40 – 3:10).

When the last chorus is about to take place, a very wide shot of the entire arena is shown and tens of headlights aggressively start to flash, to certify the viewer of the power coming ahead. Sergey is now standing atop of the large screen, which has now turned into yellow and orange, showing off what appears to be a sun. The rest of the stage behind the large screen also turns into the bright shade of orange and yellow. At this point in the performance, the camera angles change quite rapidly and use very fast in-zooming to quickly traverse from one end of the arena to Sergey. In short, the camera work gives an impression of very high pace, which combines well with the crescendo of the song. Almost every zooming occurs towards the stage, except for a few in the end of the performance. One of the last shots zooms straight out, from a center-perspective, and reveals the woman from the beginning of the performance. Now, Sergey and the woman have switched places, since he is on top of the screen and she is on the stage ground. In

the very last shot, the orange colors fade away to the grey from the beginning and the large sun on the screen decreases in size and flies towards the woman on the stage ground. Just as the song reaches the end, she captures what remains of the now very small sun (Eurovision Song Contest, 2016, 2:33 – 3:10). The visual layer complements the lyrics, reinforcing the message of love through the woman appearing in the beginning and the end of the performance. The main focus of the performance, however, seems to be to perform as advanced of a performance as possible through the highly advanced visuals.

Adding a layer of context, Sergey was chosen internally and said in an interview with ESCKAZ that he had been asked to participate several times before, but that he said yes this time because he really enjoyed the song (ESCKAZ, 2016). Due to the lyrics not stating if Sergey is singing to a boy or a girl, rumors were going around prior to the competition that Sergey might be gay. The Russian song was also favorite to win before the competition began and Sergey Lazarev stated multiple times in interviews that everyone would be welcome to Eurovision Song Contest the following year in Russia and that Russia is welcoming LGBT visitors (Holden, 2016).

In 2016, the Russian delegation nonetheless chose a different approach than the years prior. A male singer, an uptempo song and dark clothing on the performers on stage, in relation to the ballads, light clothing and women performing the years prior. The focus comes across as proving to the rest of Europe that Russia is a country capable of impressing Europe with a highly advanced performance and participating in the competition to win it. A system narrative is difficult to state since the focus of the song is the love Sergey has for an unknown person. The way the Russian identity is portrayed through the song is as modern and powerful. In addition, the interviews and statements Sergey conducted before and during the competition amplifies this identity. The specific issue narrative comes across as Sergey trying his best to appeal to the European audience and bring the contest back to Russia.

4.5 Russia's entry in Eurovision 2017

The year 2017 was different from the years prior, since Russia did not actually participate in the competition this year. They did, however, select an entry. The chosen singer was Julia Samoylova and the chosen song was the ballad "Flame is burning".

The message of the song comes across as hope, with lyrics such as "If there's a light, Then we have to keep dreaming, If there's a heart, Then we must keep believing inside, After the night, There's a light, And in the dark, This time a flame is burning" (Wiwibloggs, 2017). When the Russia delegation announced the song, they also uploaded a live performance. The performance was very simple, showing Julia in her wheelchair in the middle of the stage, alone. During the whole performance, she remains in the same spot and the focus is completely on her (Eurovision Song Contest, 2017, 00:00 - 3:10). She is dressed in a blue shirt, jeans and a black leather jacket. The lighting in the performance is dark blue during most parts of the performance, until the bridge of the song when the lighting turns into a warm orange (Eurovision Song Contest, 2017, 2:15). The only special effect used in the performance is fog close to her feet during the first half of the performance (Eurovision Song Contest, 2017, 00:00 - 1:14). The performance says little on its own, but the simplicity of the performance complements the first layer, the lyrics, well considering for example the switch to warm orange colors while Julia over and over sing "A flame is burning".

To add a third layer, context, to the lyrics and the performance, the selection by the Russian delegation was again internal, this year done by Channel One. Julia Samoylova had prior to the competition visited and performed in Crimea, according to Ukraine, unauthorized. Ukraine did not accept this and forbade Russia to send her. Instead, they asked the Russian delegation to choose a different singer. Russia refused and instead chose to withdraw. Aider Muzhdabayev, the deputy director of the Crimean Tatar television channel ATR said in a statement that he believed Russia used Julia as a live bomb in the war against Ukraine, while Vladimir Putin's spokesperson Dmitry Peskov told journalists that Russia tried to avoid politicization in the ESC and that they did not see the choice of Julia as a provocation (Luhn, 2017).

This 2017 entry shows some similarities to the song in 2014, sharing the same sense of innocence, since it is simply a song about hope sung by a fairly young woman. Julia is moreover in a wheelchair, adding to the feeling of innocence. With Julia being banned to participate in the competition, Ukraine appears as the villain, not allowing an innocent girl to sing a song about hope. Russia is perceived as apolitical and innocent, simply wanting their chosen representative to perform and refusing to exchange her for someone else who was actually allowed to enter Ukraine. The issue narrative appears to be to stay hopeful and to remember that anything is possible and is in line with the presented identity narrative.

5 Discussion

Chapter five will consist of two parts. First, the five entries studied will be divided into three major narratives and the three narrative layers already presented will be linked with the fourth and final layer of competing narratives. Thereafter, a discussion will occur debating whether Russia can be presented as the standardized actor behind the entries sent by Russia or if the artist and the production team behind the entry are the primary actors.

5.1 The fantasmatic logic of the narratives

After analyzing the five songs and their accompanying performances representing Russia in the ESC from 2013 to 2017, three major narratives have been identified. The first will be called *A country of peace* and is identified primarily in the entries sent by Russia in 2013 and 2015. The second main narrative will be named *A country of innocence and love* and is foremost present in 2014 and 2017. The performance of 2016 stands out from the rest and is difficult to fit in the two narratives present, instead it will be categorized in a third category called *A country of modernity and progression*.

In the first narrative identified, *a country of peace*, Russia is perceived as a peaceful country trying to spread the message of peace and forgiveness in the ESC. Studying the entries of 2013 and 2015, there are several similarities between the two. Both are ballads performed by young women. The first layer, the lyrics, in both performances tell a tale of unity and a wishful thinking of a world filled with peace instead of war. The visuals in both performances are bright and the focus of the performances are the lead singers. The songs were both chosen internally and both women highlighted the message of the songs in interviews. Five years before Dina Garipova sung “What if” on the ESC stage, Russia was portrayed by several Western countries as aggressive, due to their war with

Georgia. In 2014, after the annexation of Crimea, the international image of Russia as an aggressive country was strengthened. In relation to this image, the narrative of Russia as a country of peace appears as a strong contradiction. Through the enjoyment of the entries, the narrative of *a country of peace* tries to appeal and hook the audience and make them forget the image they had prior to the competition. The narrative of *A country of peace* shows similarities with the narrative Germany sent out in the 50s and 60s, when aiming to rebrand themselves after the Second World War. However, Germany managed to stay out of conflicts while rebranding themselves, avoiding the discrepancy Russia is facing (Lewis, 2019, pp. 21 - 23).

The second narrative, *a country of innocence and love* is mainly identified in the 2014 and the 2017 entries. In 2014, the Tolmachevy sisters sang about the love they shared for each other, while in 2017, Julia Samoylova sang about hope with the message to never give up. Both performances begun with a blueish lighting which switched to a warm orange throughout the performance. Freistein and Gadinger declares in their study of election campaigns that it is nearly impossible having a negative reaction towards a mother and a child due to their innocence (Freistein & Gadinger, 2020, p. 233). Likewise, it is nearly impossible having a negative reaction towards two 17-year-old girls singing about the love they have for each other. Whether it was an intentional move or not by Russia to appear innocent, sending two young girls with a song containing an apolitical message, made it more difficult to send hate Russia's way in the competition. Although, the girls were booed at after having performed in the Grand Final, they also received love, mostly on the internet, saying that the girls could not be held responsible for Russia's actions (Eurovision Song Contest, 2014). Julia Samoylova was chosen to represent Russia the year after Ukraine won the competition, and as previously stated, she was not allowed to participate in the ESC in the end. Considering Julia is using a wheelchair, she may also fit in to the argument presented by Freistein and Gadinger. It is difficult presenting a girl in a wheelchair singing about hope as the villain in the situation. Regardless of the intentions when she was chosen by Channel One, she is portrayed as a victim. The narrative of *an innocent and loving country* may once again be seen in relation to the perception of Russia as an aggressive country. The performances indicate that

innocence and Russia are connected, while the narrative of an aggressive country tells another story.

The final narrative identified, *a country of modernity and progression*, is primarily connected to the entry of 2016 by Sergey Lazarev. In several aspects, this entry differs from the other four studied. Not only is he the only male performer out of the five, but the song is also an uptempo pop song instead of a ballad and the only one with an advanced stage performance. This year, the fantasmatic logic was primarily found in the third layer analyzed. Sergey stated in multiple interviews that Russia was an open and LGBT accepting country, claiming that everyone would be welcome to Russia in case they won (Holden, 2016). This narrative, however, contradicted the image of Russia as an authoritarian state that does not care for human rights. Again, the appeal of the song and the singer functions as a method to forget the previous narrative outside of the competition and instead focus on the enjoyment of the song and the happiness that would occur if your favorite song were to win.

5.2 Russia as an actor in the contest

When studying how Russia is portrayed in the ESC, the question arises if they as a country can be responsible for the presented narratives or if the narratives may rather be identified with the team behind the song and the channel that has selected it. The Russian entries in the ESC studied in this paper were internally chosen by either Channel One or Russia 1, both governmentally controlled. Therefore, it is possible that the Russian state has a say in who they send to the competition, it is however not certain. Furthermore, when an entry wins the competition, both the artist and the surrounding media often quickly assigns the victory the country rather than the contestant. The competition is traditionally organized by the winning country the succeeding year, strengthening the sense of a country winning rather than the entry by themselves (BBC, 2017; Eurovision Song Contest, 2021b). The fact that the Tolmachevy sisters were booed at, despite being only 17 years old, also strengthens the narrative that the people watching the ESC view each entry as a projection of a country, rather than one or a few

individuals performing. The involvement from the actual state is in the end irrelevant, as it is impossible for an entry to participate in the contest without being perceived as representatives of their country and treated thereafter.

6 Conclusion

This thesis aimed to study how entries in the ESC can be perceived by a general audience and how this may contribute to the general image of a country. This was done through studying the entries sent by Russia to the ESC between the years of 2013 and 2017 through a multimodal narrative analysis. The research question which this thesis is based upon is: *How does Russia's participation in the Eurovision Song Contest contribute to the perception of its international image?*

After having analyzed the five entries sent by Russia to the ESC between the years of 2013 and 2017, it can be concluded that all five entries studied can contribute positively to the perception of Russia's international image. The entries of 2013 and 2015 contributed to the perception of Russia as peaceful, the entries of 2014 and 2017 contributed to the perception of Russia as innocent and loving and the entry of 2016 contributed to the perception of Russia as modern and progressive. The thesis also shows that regardless of the involvement of the state of Russia in creating the narratives of the entries in the competition, the entries are viewed upon by the rest of Europe as the "Russian entry" and conduces to the image of Russia in Europe. These findings contribute to the research on cultural diplomacy and storytelling through explaining how the appeal created by the Russian entries in the ESC may improve the perception of Russia outside of the competition as well and thereby help Russia diplomatically in their relations with other international actors. In May 2021, when this thesis is written, the ESC of 2021 has just unfolded. There, the Russian woman Manizha sang a song called "Russian Woman" with the message of female empowerment. Again, the image of Russia in the competition is that of a progressive country. Will this result in a more positive view of Russia long term? Only time will tell.

6.1 Future research

This thesis concluded that the Russian ESC entries between 2013 and 2017 helped contribute to the image of Russia as peaceful, innocent and progressive. However, further research on the relation between the perceived image of a country in the ESC and the perception of the same country outside of the competition is of necessity. This can be done through applying the theories and methodology of this thesis on another case or through studying the reception of the narratives, instead of the perception.

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