From Ruslana to Gaitana: Performing "Ukrainianness" in the Eurovision Song Contest

Research Article

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This article considers how the Eurovision Song Contest (ESC) has come to be used as a platform for the politicisation of national identity in Ukraine. Ukraine can be described as an amalgam of regions with different ethno-linguistic, economic, cultural and political profiles. The rhetoric concerning some Ukrainian Eurovision entries illuminates these complexities and as such sheds light on the construction of Ukrainian nationhood in a post-Soviet context. In particular this paper uses interviews with key decision makers involved with the Ukrainian selection process in the Eurovision Song Contest and examines the rhetoric surrounding four Ukrainian Eurovision entries which have generated considerable interest and controversy both in the country itself and within the wider context of the European media. Eurovision presents an opportunity for Ukraine to present a unified national identity to a global audience. The question is however, which Ukraine and for what purpose?

Keywords: national identity, Ukraine, nation-building, nationalism, Eurovision Song Contest

Introduction

This article considers how the Eurovision Song Contest (ESC) has come to be used as a platform for the politicisation of national identity in Ukraine. If Eurovision entries can be seen as a reflection of the state-centric nature of national identity, then the discussions that they engender within the state can provide a unique insight into how that identity is both constructed and contested. The narrative of the nation rarely speaks with a straightforward voice and in the case of Ukraine the way in which nationhood is defined is far from simple. Ukraine presents an interesting case study given the geopolitical position of the country, between Russia and Europe, and the acute cultural and political discourses that this engenders. In particular this paper uses interviews with key decision-makers involved with the Ukrainian selection process in the Eurovision Song Contest and examines the rhetoric surrounding

four Ukrainian Eurovision entries which have generated considerable interest and controversy both in the country itself and within the wider context of the European media. Eurovision presents an opportunity for Ukraine to present a unified national identity to a global audience. The question is, however: which Ukraine, and for what purpose?

Research that aims to scrutinise any part of identity can only be an inexact process, since identities themselves are dynamic. The methodology used to investigate issues such as national identity needs to be appropriate and an awareness of the potential limitations of the research design is necessary. The use of qualitative interview research, as done in this study, continues to be a subject of debate; indeed, it has been asserted that the data gathered using qualitative methodology is hardly distinguishable from journalism.[1] Yet, the value of qualitative interviews lies in the fact that they place emphasis on the way in which individuals interpret their social reality; interviews capture and deconstruct meanings attached to social phenomena by particular actors at specific moments in time. They therefore add an invaluable additional perspective to the study of identity construction and the meanings attached to such identities.[2]

This paper analyses perspectives on the ESC and the nation from "above", namely by using the viewpoints of political figures, opinion leaders and individuals involved with the ESC in Ukraine in order to ascertain what visions of the national political community or nation state were propagated through it. Much of the emphasis of my research is on official representations of the country rather than being totally focussed on public opinion, of which this paper therefore does not claim or aim to be completely representative. The majority of the data for this article was collected by carrying out in-depth interviews both at an elite/political level and public level in Ukraine in 2007–8 as part of my doctoral research. I conducted 28 interviews in total, 16 of which were with so-called elite level respondents. The elite level can loosely be defined as politicians, journalist, television executives and opinion leaders. Respondents were initially asked about their sense of national identity and the image of Ukraine more generally. I then went on to explore their views on the Orange Revolution and the Eurovision Song Contest itself, since these two events presented an opportunity for the country to manage its own image on its own terms for the first time since independence. Among the people interviewed as part of my original research were the Executive Producer of the 2005 ESC as well as the Head of CFC Consulting, a PR firm based in Ukraine which orchestrated Ukraine's debut in the contest and oversaw the selection of several of the country's representatives. Moreover, other respondents were drawn from a large sample using a snowballing technique, an established method for sampling and in this case, the only practical means of gaining access to these elites. The elite level does, however, provide only one perspective. Much of the recent literature on issues of nationhood and nationalism in the post-Soviet region has stressed the need to examine issues

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[1] Strauss, Anselm and Juliet Corbin. 1998. *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 28.
[2] Snape, Dawn and Liz Spencer. 2003. *The Foundations of Qualitative Research*, in *Qualitative Research Practice: A Guide for Social Science Students and Researchers*, edited by Ritchie, Jane and Jane Lewis. London: Sage, 1–23, 3.

at the "ordinary" level. Rogers Brubaker, in his work on Transylvania, argues that a perspective from "below" is needed if we are to truly understand the nature of identity processes in these countries:[3]

> *Ethnicity and nationalism could best be understood if studied from below as well as above, in microanalytic as well as macroanalytic perspective. From a distance it is all too easy to "see" bounded and homogenous ethnic and national groups, to whom common interests, perceptions, intentions and volition can be attributed. Up close, on the other hand, one risks losing sight of the larger contexts that shape experience and interaction. The study of large- and mid-scale structures and processes remains indispensible, but I came to believe that it must be complimented by research pitched at a level close to everyday experience if one is to avoid unwarranted assumptions of "groupness" and capture the way ethnicity actually "works".[4]*

I therefore also undertook a selection of public-level interviews in order to gain an overview of opinions relating to Ukraine's representation through the ESC. Whilst carrying out the research I was affiliated with the Kyiv-Moyhla Academy, a university in Kyiv. I was able to access a large network of students within a short space of time, many of whom had been active in the Orange Revolution of 2004–5, which was why they were specifically chosen. I also interviewed members of the general public. However, as stated earlier, rather than seeking to explore public opinion, this research aimed to investigate key debates with specific actors in Ukraine who have been involved in both the organisation of the ESC and the selection of Ukraine's official representatives. As such, the narratives between the two groups of respondents reveal interesting insights into the construction and contradictions of Ukrainian nation-building in the post-Soviet period.

Deconstructing "Ukrainianness"

Attempting to define and encapsulate what the essence of Ukrainian national identity is far from simple. Ukraine can be described as an "amalgam of regions" with different ethno-linguistic, economic, cultural and political profiles.[5] Ukraine itself can be seen as a "study in ambiguity".[6] The rhetoric concerning some Ukrainian Eurovision entries illuminates these complexities and as such sheds light on the construction of Ukrainian nationhood in a post-Soviet context. An examination of representations of Ukrainian national identity through participation in the ESC raises interesting questions concerning the way nationhood is both constructed and challenged.

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[3] Brubaker, Rogers. 2006. *Nationalist Politics and Everyday Ethnicity in a Transylvanian Town*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, xiv, 9.
[4] Brubaker, *Nationalist Politics*, xiv.
[5] Wolczuk, Kataryna. 2002. Catching up with "Europe"?: Constitutional Debates on the Territorial–Administrative Model in Independent Ukraine. *Regional and Federal Studies* 12(2), 65–88, 65.
[6] Subtelny, Orest. 2000. *The Ambiguities of National Identity: the Case of Ukraine*, in *Ukraine: the Search for a National Identity*, edited by Wolchik, Sharon L., and Volodymyr Zviglyanich. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1–10, 6.

A debate on nationhood raises many questions concerning the identity and legitimacy of the nation state, since nation states are modern fictions with clear political intentions disguised as ancient myths but without any old mythological background.[7] Discussions concerning national identity and statehood in turn pose the question of what a nation actually is. Benedict Anderson famously described the nation as an "imagined community", a construction of the post-industrial age.[8] Anderson argues that the nation is imagined since members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.[9] In order to keep a state together in the modern world, populations have a shared feeling of belonging, bound together by loyalty toward the same institutions, symbols and values. However, as Pål Kolstø argues, creating a common identity does not necessarily imply that all inhabitants of the nation state must have the same ethnic identity. National identity may, and in many cases, must be political rather than cultural.[10]

Discourses on nation-building set the agenda for inclusion or exclusion from a particular nation-state. Titular citizens of ethnic states hold membership automatically through their ethnic affiliations, whereas citizens from non-titular groups can be seen as (more or less explicitly) members of a second order.[11] Ralph Grillo argues that nation states are not natural entities; "they clothe and enclose an existing or developing political and economic framework".[12] John Keane sheds further light on this issue by arguing that, historically, the nation did not refer to the whole population of a region but only to those classes which had developed a sense of identity based upon language and history and had begun to act upon this.[13] If the nation is constructed then logic dictates that national identity is too. National identity "infuses citizens with a sense of purposefulness, confidence and dignity by allowing them to 'feel at home'".[14] A nation is a named human population sharing a historic territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass public culture as well as a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members.[15] What constitutes a national identity in a country with populations with differing understandings and interpretations of recent history, language and culture is therefore problematic. Arguing, like many of the modernist theorists, such as Brubaker, that national identity is constructed, I also assume that it is a learned attribute. What is it that makes someone Scottish, Irish, British or Ukrainian? As such, identities can be

[7] Fornäs, Jonas. 2011. *Signifying Europe*. Bristol: Intellect Press, 18.

[8] Anderson, Benedict. 2006. [1983]. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 5.

[9] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 6.

[10] Kolstø, Pål. (ed.). 1999. *Nation-Building and Ethnic Integration in Post-Soviet Societies: an Investigation of Latvia and Kazakhstan*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1.

[11] Semyonov, Aleksei. 2002. *Estonia: Nation-Building and Integration: Political and Legal Aspects*, in *National Integration and Violent Conflict in Post-Soviet Societies: the Cases of Estonia and Moldova*, edited by Kolstø, Pål. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 105–58, 106.

[12] Grillo, Ralph. 1980. "*Nation*" and "*State*" in Europe: Anthropological Perspectives*. London: Academic Press, 8.

[13] Keane, John. 1995. *Nations, Nationalism and European Citizens*, in *Notions of Nationalism*, edited by Periwal, Sukumar. Budapest: Central European University Press, 182–207, 182.

[14] Keane, *Nations*, 186.

[15] Smith, Anthony D. 1999. *Myths and Memories of the Nation*. New York: Oxford University Press.

contested. Whilst there is inevitably a tolerance of difference, that difference or diversity is only tolerated by mainstream governments responsible for nation-building if it does not compromise or threaten the sense of self of the titular population, or their ownership of the nation.

As the Soviet Union disintegrated, it forced changes in the political space and the identities within the new Soviet successor states. The rediscovery of the national self represents a symbolic break from the past which in turn aids the development of the new independent state. As in other Soviet successor states, after the passage to independence, ruling elites embarked on a process of forging a national identity by (re)constructing the discursive boundaries of nationhood.[16] Nation-building in the post-Soviet region was therefore fraught with tensions, complexities and contradictions. Nation-building in the post-Soviet context essentially represented the competition for power in which the various national elites in the region sought to "naturalise" their own particular model of state institutions and gain legitimacy for their own claims to power. They did this by invoking a particular vision of what constitutes the national political community and by propagating this amongst the population through speeches, interviews and within the wider media. The aim was to create and impose, from above, a new "imagined community" (to use Anderson's term) amongst the state's population. Further to this the dimensions of state and nation-building also involve deciding who "belongs", essentially in terms of citizenship on the legal level. There is also a cultural dimension of nation-building projects which draw upon various cultural "raw material" such as language, ethnicity and religion. Language is a key part of the nation-building process, a further way of distancing the republics from their Soviet past.

In Ukraine, language has played a symbolic role in terms of nation-building, and the implementation of one official state language (Ukrainian) is therefore a clear signal of the direction of nation-building in the country. However, unlike in other former Soviet republics such as the Baltic States, Ukrainian nation-building is not so easy to categorise. Kataryna Wolczuk's assertion that Ukraine is an "amalgam of regions" means that these regions have different understandings of what constitutes a national culture and identity and indeed nation-building. For western Ukrainians, it implies breaking with Russia, and for others in the East less so. There are paradigms of post-colonialism, propagated by "Ukrainophiles" who subscribe to a post-colonial view of their Soviet past, enmeshed with discourses of oppression and forced Russification.[17] On the other hand, the situation in Ukraine is further complicated by the presence of Russophone Ukrainians as well as ethnic Russians. Whilst Ukraine might be seen in the same vein as other bi-national states such as Belgium or Canada, the boundaries in Ukraine are far more blurred. Rigid distinctions between a Russian speaking east and Ukrainian speaking west Ukraine do not necessarily tell the full story regarding Ukrainian identity. This ambiguity or complexity of Ukrainian identity is exemplified strongly in the capital, Kyiv,

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[16] Wolczuk, Kataryna. 2000. History, Europe and the "National Idea": the "Official" Narrative of National Identity in Ukraine. *Nationalities Papers* 28(4), 671–94.

[17] Wilson, Andrew. 1998. *National History and National Identity in Ukraine and Belarus*, in *Nation-Building in the Post-Soviet Borderlands: the Politics of National Identities*, edited by Smith, Graham / Vivien Law / Andrew Wilson / Annette Bohr and Edward Allworth. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 23–47, 40.

where Ukrainians "commute" between identities.[18] However recent anecdotal evidence suggests that the Ukrainian language has and is becoming more widely spoken and its use more politicised following the armed conflict in Eastern Ukraine and the Russian annexation of Crimea.[19] The rudimentary East/West divide therefore may not be sufficient in conceptualising discourses on national and linguistic identity in Ukraine which speak with more than one voice. However there are some broad generalisations which can be made: the west, which tends to be Ukrainian-speaking, views the Soviet past and identity differently to the east. In 2005, only 6% of Ukrainians in the west saw themselves as "Soviet", compared with 18% in the east.[20] An examination of the rhetoric concerning portrayals of Ukraine through the prism of the ESC sheds further light on these identity questions.

Judy Batt argues that Ukraine cannot be considered to be a "nation state" in the conventional sense of the word, given the sizeable Russian speaking population who have deep historical roots to the territory and also the fact that Ukrainians themselves are far from homogeneous in terms of how they perceive their own identity.[21] In the Ukrainian case, language is not necessarily a marker of identity. Miss Ukraine 2005 did not speak Ukrainian yet still identified very much as a Ukrainian rather than Russian.[22] Moreover, Batt points to the fact that many in Ukraine are also bilingual and there is an element of fluidity in terms of language, which in turn makes the boundaries blurred and subject to change. In the 1990s and early 2000s presidents Leonid Kravchuk and Leonid Kuchma promoted a sense of nationhood which was not based on ethnic criteria.[23] Despite the implementation of only one official state language, Ukrainian, both Kravchuk and Kuchma accepted the use of Russian. This can be seen as in stark contrast to paradigms of nationhood in the Baltic States, for example, which emphasise that knowledge of the titular nationality is the marker of belonging to the national community. The ongoing armed conflict in Eastern Ukraine and the government-initiated "United Country" campaign suggests that a new process of nation-building is taking place in Ukraine.

Nation-building in Ukraine was slow and piecemeal. This is reflected by the fact that a new constitution was adopted in June 1996, making Ukraine the last former Soviet republic to do so. Under Kuchma, the country's relationship with Russia improved, the two countries being seen as strategic partners whilst at the same time Ukraine drew closer to Europe. In reality this dual-vector approach did little to advance Ukrainian nation-building. Ukrainian political elites essentially walked a tightrope between emphasising EU integration whilst balancing the demands of the Russian government.[24] Wolczuk deems the

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[18] Kuzio, Taras. 2001. Nationalising States or Nation-Building?: a Critical Review of the Theoretical Literature and Empirical Evidence. *Nations and Nationalism* 7(2), 135–54, 154.

[19] Author interviews conducted in November 2014.

[20] Velychenko, Stephen. 2007. *Ukraine: EU Member or a Second Belarus?*, in *Ukraine, the EU and Russia*, edited by Velychenko, Stephen. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1–26, 2.

[21] Batt, Judy. 1998. *National Identity and Regionalism*, in *Contemporary Ukraine: Dynamics of Post-Soviet Transformation*, edited by Kuzio, Taras. Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 57–59, 57.

[22] Velychenko, *Ukraine*, 10.

[23] Kuzio, (ed.), *Contemporary Ukraine*, 1.

[24] Krushelnycky, Askold. 2006. *An Orange Revolution: a Personal Journey through Ukrainian History*. London: Harvill Secker, 78.

policies of the 1990s to be "declarative Europeanisation" in that lip service was paid to the idea of Ukrainian integration with European structures such as the European Union but little else in reality.[25] Kuchma highlighted the EU as an aspiration, but did little in practice to move Ukraine towards that goal, nor did the EU embrace Ukraine as a prospective member. Arguably Ukrainian nation-building has further problematized given the "junior partner" role that Ukraine played in governing the USSR.[26] It is this legacy and the fact that Ukrainians did not inherit a more uniform understanding which has had an impact upon the formation of a congruent national identity in the post-Soviet era as well as nation-building itself. A significant question therefore emerges: what *kind of* Ukraine has been promoted by participating in the ESC?

The Eurovision Song Contest in Context
The political, economic and social realities of Europe as well as understandings and definitions of what Europe is as a geographical, political and cultural entity have shifted since the collapse of communism. Europe has become a transitory site of competing flows of power. Since its inception in 1956, the Eurovision Song Contest (ESC) has served as a platform for cultural exchange between European countries and has reflected the wider geopolitical discourses which these competing flows of paper have engendered. The original idea behind the contest, and still its defining feature today, is that nations (whose television companies are active members of the European Broadcasting Union) submit original songs which are performed and televised live. This is followed by telephone voting and since 2009, jury voting, to determine the "best" European song of the year. Although officially the Eurovision Song Contest is a non-political event, its history can be seen as part of the Cold War process of fashioning Europe as a unified bloc.[27] In this context, the "Europe" referred to here is the West; the ESC can be seen as an event uniting western European countries in terms of popular culture and one which, with the exception of Yugoslavia, did not include any communist nations. The event also represents a mirror image of the development of the European Union in that both have continued to expand their memberships eastwards since the fall of communism, the event has therefore reflected the changing map of Europe. Daina Eglitis argues that amongst post-communist countries there was a desire to embrace the political, social and cultural traditions of Western Europe.[28] Thus participation in the event can be seen as confirmation of a nation's European, or more specifically, western European, identity and culture.

Eligibility to participate in the ESC is not determined by geographic inclusion within the continent of Europe, despite the inference in the title of the competition. Rather, entry to the event is dependent upon the national broadcaster being a full and active member of the EBU. Several countries which are outside the "natural" boundaries of Europe, the Ural Mountains to

[25] D'Anieri, Paul and Taras Kuzio. (ed.). 2007. *Aspects of the Orange Revolution*. Stuttgart: Ibidem-Verlag, 217.
[26] Kuzio, (ed.), *Contemporary Ukraine*, xii.
[27] Fricker, Karen and Ronit Lentin. 2007. *Part of the Show: the Global Networking of Irish Eurovision Song Contest Fans*, in *Performing Global Networks*, edited by Fricker, Karen and Ronit Lentin. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 139–62.
[28] Eglitis, Daina Stukuls. 2002. *Imagining the Nation: History, Modernity, and Revolution in Latvia*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 8–12.

the east and the Mediterranean Sea to the south,[29] have competed; Israel since 1973, Azerbaijan since 2008 and Morocco appeared in 1980. In addition, Turkey and Russia, which are both transcontinental countries with most of their territory outside of Europe, have competed since 1975 and 1994 respectively. Thus Europe, as a socio-political construct,[30] is not only mirrored in the ESC but effectively reinforced. The integration of Eastern European countries into the competition led to various qualification systems being introduced from 1993–2003 before live semi-finals began in 2004. Since the 1990s the number of competing countries has nearly doubled (from 22 participants in 1990 to 43 in 2011), and new entrant countries have come to dominate the Contest. Six out of twelve winners in 2001–12 were former communist countries which entered Eurovision after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Turkey, Greece and Finland, on the periphery of Western Europe, also won during this period. These developments have provoked consternation amongst some Western European countries and media who have viewed this as unfair domination. These anxieties echoed, and were fuelled by, larger tensions within Europe about Westward migration, and perceived differing levels of economic and cultural development between Western and non-Western European nations.[31] The failure of the Netherlands to reach the final in 2005 was held up in the Dutch media as an example of how power within the EU has shifted eastwards.[32] The 2007 Eurovision Song Contest semi-final, where all ten qualifiers came from east of the Danube, inflamed the passions of critics and arguably paved the way for further changes to the organisation of the contest. In 2009 the EBU re-introduced a jury vote, which had originally been abandoned in 1998, combining the jury vote in equal proportions with the public telephone vote. Such a move can be seen as evidence of the EBU desire to continue to expand the competition whilst at the same time providing reassurance to long-standing (western) participants that their concerns were being addressed whilst at the same time ensuring that the funding for the competition continues to be secured.[33] The ESC has therefore become a platform on which the wider geopolitics of Europe is played out.

Articulating Nationhood, Nationality and Nationalism in the Eurovision Song Contest

The ESC is a stage where national identity and the politics of identity are performed not just through the songs but also the way in which the individual contests are staged. Throughout its history the ESC has served as a platform for performing essentialised narratives of national identity,[34] and this can even be seen in the choice of outfits for performers; a folk dress for Sweden in 1958,

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[29] Outhwaite, William. 2006. *The Future of Society*. Oxford: Blackwell, 109

[30] Made, Vahur. 2003. *Estonia and Europe: a Common Identity or an Identity Crisis?*, in *Post-Cold War Identity Politics: Northern and Baltic Experiences*, edited by Lehti, Marko and David J. Smith. London: Frank Cass, 181–96, 183–4.

[31] Fricker, Karen and Milija Gluhovic. 2013. *Introduction: Eurovision and the New Europe*, in *Performing the "New" Europe: Identities, Feelings and Politics in the Eurovision Song Contest*, edited by Fricker, Karen and Milija Gluhovic. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1–28

[32] Browne, Anthony. 2006. How Song Contest Defeat Clouds Dutch Eurovision. *The Times*, 24. May 2005 (accessed: 07. May 2015).

[33] See also Ulbricht, Sircar and Slootmaeckers, this issue.

[34] Baker, Catherine. 2008. Wild Dances and Dying Wolves: Simulation, Essentialization, and National Identity at the Eurovision Song Contest. *Popular Communication* 6(3), 173–89.

a kilt of the UK in 1966 and traditional costume for Albania in 2006. Ruslana's "*Wild Dances*", which represented Ukraine in 2004 was a modern take on the ancient Carpathian Hutsul culture which had been widely suppressed during the Soviet era. Estonia, also in 2004 – the same year it had become a member of the EU – entered a song which was performed in the Võru dialect. Thus the Contest has acted as a platform for the representation of ethnic cultures and national and minority identities within a pan-European context.

Eurovision can be considered a platform for the reproduction of certain narratives of the nation in the sense that singers are encouraged, according to the rules, to reflect the national identity or the culture they represent.[35] However this reflection of national identity is questionable given the fact that there are no set rules regarding the nationality of the performer or songwriter. It also raises further questions regarding who decides on each entry and what is deemed to be representative of a particular nation and what is not. National entries in Eurovision represent essentialised narratives of national identity, and their selection as a national song for Europe involves numerous choices and decisions about what is appropriate for representing the nation.[36] A question then arises: which version of national identity is being communicated and for what purpose? This paper argues that, in the case of Ukraine, it is typically a small, elite circle that has made these decisions.

National musical style is an ideological construct connected to the rise of nationalism in the 19th and 20th centuries.[37] A central tension therefore emerges between the apolitical ideals behind Eurovision and the reality of the content of the show both in terms of music and also broadcasting. Switzerland, the founding Eurovision nation, exemplifies the construction of national identity through the way it has presented itself on the Eurovision stage. Switzerland last won the contest in 1988, when Céline Dion, a French-Canadian, took the prize with a song written by a Turkish songwriter, Atilla Şereftuğ. In recent times the country has opted for a girl band from Estonia, Vanilla Ninja, in 2005 and an international group, Six4One, in 2006. The entry in 2006 was written by the German songwriters Ralph Siegel and Bernd Meinunger. The group itself consisted of six performers from countries across Europe: Malta, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Sweden, Switzerland, Israel and Portugal. Switzerland as a united country representing its national identity in the Eurovision Song Contest is therefore a construct. The group Six4One can be considered to be reflective of the complexities concerning Swiss identity.

Despite the continuous flagging of the apolitical nature of the ESC by the European Broadcasting Union, the event is used by competing countries as a stage upon which the politics of protest are performed, as demonstrated by a number of incidents since the 1970s. After the Turkish invasion of Cyprus in 1974, Greece withdrew from the contest in 1975 when it was announced that

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[35] Gumpert, Matthew. 2007. *"Everyway That I Can": Auto-Orientalism at Eurovision 2003*, in *A Song for Europe: Popular Music and Politics in the Eurovision Song Contest*, edited by Raykoff, Ivan and Robert Deam Tobin. Aldershot: Ashgate, 147–158, 148.

[36] Baker, *Wild Dances and Dying Wolves*.

[37] Björnberg, Alf. 2007. *Return to Ethnicity: the Cultural Significance of Musical Change in the Eurovision Song Contest*, in *A Song for Europe: Popular Music and Politics in the Eurovision Song Contest*, edited by Raykoff, Ivan and Robert Deam Tobin. Aldershot: Ashgate, 13–24.

Turkey would enter, and neither country took part in the same contest until 1978.[38] The Greek entry of 1976, "*Panaghia Mou, Panaghia Mou*" (*My Lady, My Lady*) was a direct protest against the Turkish invasion. The lyrics included references to napalm ruins and fields of refugees. At the time of the 1993 contest, the war in the Balkans was raging on, and this was given particular attention in the songs from Bosnia Herzegovina and Croatia which reflected the turmoil in each country: the Bosnian entry was entitled "*Sva Bol Svijeta*" ("*All the World's Pain*") and the Croatian effort "*Don't Ever Cry*".[39] At the 2000 contest, the Israeli representatives, Ping Pong, waved Syrian flags during rehearsals. Israel and Syria were officially in a state of war at the time and Israel's then Deputy Education Minister, Shlomo Yahalom, called for the group's participation to be banned claiming that they failed to represent national values.[40]

In 2009, a series of disputes between Armenia and Azerbaijan unfolded throughout the live broadcasts of the semi-finals and final. During the semi-finals, an introductory "postcard" leading into the Armenian performance depicted, amongst other monuments, a statue located in Stepanakert, capital city of the unrecognized Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, which constitutes a part of Azerbaijan. The statue was built in Soviet times to celebrate the Armenian heritage of the area. The delegation from Azerbaijan complained to the EBU that the video clip was unacceptable based on the fact that Nagorno-Karabakh is a part of Azerbaijan, and it was subsequently edited out for the broadcast of the final. In retaliation, the presenter of the Armenian votes held up a clipboard with the monument's picture on it multiple times as she read off the votes, and in the background a screen in the capital's main square could also be seen to display the disputed monument.

In August 2009, the BBC reported that several people had been questioned in Azerbaijan after their votes for Armenia were traced by mobile phone service providers. According to the BBC "one man was accused of being unpatriotic and a "potential security threat" after he sent a text backing Armenia's song […] the Azerbaijani authorities said people had merely been invited to explain why they voted for Armenia".[41] The issue was investigated by the EBU and, whilst they found no evidence to pursue the affair, a clause preventing telecom communication providers from disclosing personal information was added to the rules of the contest. Thus the ESC has regularly acted as a platform for political protest, highlighting the contested nature of the construction of nationhood in a post-communist contest.

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[38] Gambaccini, Paul. 1998. *The Complete Eurovision Song Contest Companion*. London: Pavilion, 69.

[39] See Andjelić, this issue.

[40] N.N. 2000. Israel Flagging in Eurovision Row. *BBC News Online*, 11. May 2000 (accessed: 07. May 2015).

[41] N.N. 2009. Azerbaijanis in Eurovision Probe. *BBC News Online*, 18. August 2009 (accessed: 07. May 2015).

Selling Ukraine to Europe

Ukraine made its debut in the Eurovision Song Contest in 2003, a decade later than some other former Soviet republics such as Estonia, Russia and Lithuania. Ukraine's participation in Eurovision reflects the country's arguably slow approaches to economic reforms in the 1990s as well as other state-building exercises, namely European integration. CFC Consulting, a private marketing and public relations organisation based in Kyiv, engineered Ukrainian participation in the ESC with the aim of improving the international image of the country.

> *When we started with the idea of having Ukraine in the Eurovision [...] what we had in mind was how to use it to work on improving the image of Ukraine internationally [...] I remember when we had to present the entire project of Eurovision to the vice Prime Minister of Ukraine [...] we had to draft all the positive benefits Ukraine would get should we actually win the contest. So it was on the back of our minds from the very beginning, how to use this television musical project for the benefit of Ukraine's image [...] the idea that we had to be there [in Eurovision], it was a good opportunity to showcase Ukraine [...] so we teamed up with the National TV Company of Ukraine, we have helped them [...] to secure Ukraine's participation [...] firstly it was the broadcasting rights in 2002 and in 2003 we had the first singer from Ukraine.*[42]

This raises interesting questions concerning nation-building processes in Ukraine, given that the country was being promoted internationally by a private organisation. Thus the narrative of Ukrainian identity sold to a wider European audience was controlled by a select group of elites in the country. I will now draw upon four very different acts which have represented Ukraine in the ESC. What "official" representations of national identity have been presented through hosting and participating in the ESC? Who ultimately took the decisions on how Ukraine would be represented? What debates did these representations elicit and how contested were they?

Ruslana's Wild Dance

The song "*Wild Dances*" performed by the Ukrainian singer Ruslana in 2004 is said to be derived from Hutsul songs and rituals from the Carpathian region of western Ukraine. Ruslana's performance drew upon various "ethnic Ukrainian" motifs and victory in Eurovision arguably boosted self-esteem and the image of the country. The song which features traditional drums and the Hutsul alpine horn, the trembita, immediately connects with Ukrainian tradition; the various incantations in the song carries associations with Hutsul culture and the Carpathian region of Ukraine.[43] However, what is perceived by audiences as Hutsul may be in fact be references to a more generic European folk sound.[44]

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[42] Myroshnychenko; Vasyl, partner at CFC Consulting. Interview, Kyiv, 5. December 2007.
[43] Pavlyshyn, Marko. 2006. Envisioning Europe: Ruslana's Rhetoric of Identity. *Slavic and East European Journal* 50(3), 469–85, 475.
[44] Yekelchyk, Serhy. 2010. What Is Ukrainian about Ukraine's Pop Culture? The Strange Case of Verka Serduchka. *Canadian–American Slavic Studies* 44, 217–32.

Transferred to the Eurovision stage, this essentialised depiction of a local, western Ukrainian culture comes to be seen not as a local representation but as a national one; speaking on behalf of Ukraine as a whole. Further analysis of the song itself reveals interesting insights into the nature of this construction of identity. The song was performed in both English and Ukrainian and not Russian. The absence of this effectively shows that the performance of Ruslana was an ethnic Ukrainian narrative of national identity. Ruslana's sexualised and almost militant style led her to be dubbed *Xena: Warrior Princess,* by UK commentator Terry Wogan. Ruslana was not only "wild" for the purposes of the performance of her song; she also projected this image in the promotional material for her song, even sharing a cage with wolves. "*Wild Dances*" therefore served to sexualise and exoticise a particular narrative of national identity whilst simultaneously presenting Ukraine, or more specifically, the Carpathian mountains, which inspired the performance, as being at the heart of Europe.[45]

Ruslana was selected internally as the Ukrainian representative for the ESC in 2004 and promoted internationally by CFC Consulting. This publicity strategy involved Ruslana appearing in a number of other countries prior to the contest, usually featuring as an interval act in the various televised selections across Europe. In representing Ukraine as a nation-state, Ruslana's performance raises interesting questions about how nationhood is defined and affirmed through Eurovision:

> *We didn't have any national selections here so it was pretty much the decision of CFC and the National TV Company of Ukraine and we came up with Ruslana […] her act and her performance was very ethnic but it was very particular to special rituals in Western parts of Ukraine, from the mountains […] it was very Ukrainian […] it was an act itself which did a great deal for promoting Ukraine the country.*[46]

It is interesting to note that Myroshnychenko appears to suggest that this western Ukrainian style is perhaps more organic than something reflecting the eastern influences in the country. "*Wild Dances*" is therefore a product of a small elite circle that decided and disseminated understandings of what constitutes national culture in Ukraine, and promoted that message to the rest of Europe. "*Wild Dances*" ultimately had little to do with the folk traditions of east-central Ukraine, by far the most populous area of the country.[47] Thus the constructed nature of national identity in Ukraine and the underlying power relations behind it are revealed.

In terms of how interview respondents read Ruslana's performance, most highlighted the crude divisions between east and west Ukraine; "there is a division between eastern western Ukraine […] It's like a struggle […] therefore Ruslana can't be seen as representing all Ukraine".[48] This is a notion which another respondent touched upon. Professor Valentin Yakushik from the Kyiv-Moyhla Academy emphasised that Ruslana "does not represent the whole of

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[45] Baker, *Wild Dances and Dying Wolves.*
[46] Myroshnychenko, interview.
[47] Yekelchyk, *What Is Ukrainian about Ukraine's Pop Culture?.*
[48] Anne, interview, Kyiv, 18. December 2007.

Ukraine, in the east she is foreign to them with the Carpathian culture".[49] Ukrainians who saw the performance in ethnicised terms drew a strong distinction between East and West, Ukrainian and Russian. It is also worthy of note that that many of the public-level respondents for this paper came from the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, which embodies a "nationalising" tendency within Ukraine in the sense of upholding the use of Ukrainian language over Russian and promoting a clean break with the Soviet past. Despite the connotations some attached to the song, it was not necessarily perceived in adversely ethnic terms by Russian-speaking Ukrainians. Alexander Feldman, in an article taken from a Russian-language newspaper in Ukraine, *Den* (Day), highlights the issue of language and "Ukrainianness" and appears to be representative of the general trend:

> *The new nation has acquired new symbols that embody its success on the international arena: the footballer Andriy Shevchenko, Ruslana Lyzhychko and boxing champions the Klitchko brothers. No matter what language they speak, no matter where they were born and where you work at this time, it is important that they feel themselves to be Ukrainian.*[50]

The discourse concerning Ruslana reflects the complexities and difficulties in defining Ukrainianness, which is complicated further by the apparent absence of a linguistic divide that exists in other post-Soviet states. The journalist Mykola Kniazhyts'kyi argues that, regardless of language or narratives of identity, figures such as Ruslana present an opportunity for Ukrainians to build a common identity and can act as an antidote to what he calls the "national inferiority complex" in Ukraine.[51] It is interesting to note that some Western Ukrainian "purists" objected to the alleged corruption of traditional Carpathian musical styles, thereby further highlighting the complexities of identity.

The debates surrounding Ruslana's narrative of national identity and traditional Carpathian music reached the UK, with the BBC reporting that Ruslana's Eurovision victory had triggered a folk revival in Ukraine. However there was comment from one Carpathian musician that the authenticity of Carpathian music was in danger of being lost as a result of the increased commercialisation of the tradition: "I think it would be better for the world to see the real authentic music, in its natural surroundings".[52] It is interesting to note that Ruslana's selection as Ukrainian representative at Eurovision took place when Leonid Kuchma's allegedly "pro-Russian" regime was still in power. Ruslana presented a narrative of Ukraine which was exotic and sexualised; a wild country in need of exploration. Arguably Ruslana's performance was a highly competent piece of PR and one which was directly orientated towards a wider European market. Ruslana therefore represents the contested nature of encapsulating Ukrainian national identity; the narratives of identity which can

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[49] Yakushik, Valentin. Interview, Kyiv, 19. December 2007.

[50] Fel'dman, Oleksandr. 2004. <u>Від держави до нації</u>. *Den*, 21. September 2004 (accessed: 07. May 2015).

[51] Pavlyshyn, *Envisioning Europe*, 482.

[52] Alexandra, cited in Fawkes, Helen. 2004. <u>Eurovision Triggers Ukraine Folk Revival</u>. *BBC News Online*, 1. September 2004 (accessed: 07. May 2015).

be discerned from her Eurovision performance are questioned in the west of Ukraine amongst the people who can arguably understand it the most. The rhetoric concerning Eurovision 2005 in Kyiv and the selection of Greenjolly as Ukrainian entry to the ESC sheds even further light on the contentious and politicised nature of performing Ukrainian nationhood.

A Revolutionary Eurovision: Kyiv 2005

In the immediate aftermath of Ruslana and Ukraine's victory in the 2004 Eurovision Song Contest, explicit references were made to the connotations that the event would have for Ukraine's image and standing in the world, both in the Ukrainian media and by Ruslana herself. The event was afforded significance given that it provided Ukraine with the opportunity to host a major cultural event for the first time since independence and a medium with which to control its own image on its own terms. The winning performer, Ruslana, declared at a press conference immediately after the event that "all of us are making a positive image of Ukraine. I want my country to open up before you with friendship and hospitality […] I would like you to forget about Chernobyl".[53] Thus from the outset the victory was linked to the international image of Ukraine and as such it was seen as an opportunity to present a different view of the country to the rest of the world. The hosting of the 2005 Eurovision Song Contest in Kyiv took on even greater significance following the political protests which took place across the country at the end of 2004, which became known internationally as the Orange Revolution.

By 2004 Ukraine was said to have slipped into an increasingly authoritarian state with widespread corruption which went largely unchallenged by the Kuchma government.[54] The first vote was held on 31 October 2004 and since neither candidate, the pro-Western Viktor Yushchenko or the pro-Russian Viktor Yanukovych, had surpassed 50% of the vote (they received (39.9% and 39.3% respectively) the election passed to a second round. On 21 November the second round of voting took place, which appeared to show that Yanukovych was the victor. In the immediate aftermath, widespread protests took place against the apparent falsification of the election results. Reports emerged of corruption, voter intimidation and electoral fraud. When it emerged that the opposition candidate Victor Yushchenko had been poisoned with dioxin, it served as a rallying call to people, and effectively the presidential election came to be seen as being "stolen".[55] People took to the streets of Kyiv with orange flags, banners, and symbols representing their opposition to the government. Later, counter-protests from pro-Yanukovych supporters, with blue as their emblem, emerged. In crude terms, the Orange Revolution can be seen as a clash between east and west. However, as Velychenko points out, not all western regions were 100% pro-Yushchenko nor were all regions 100% pro-

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[53] Butler, Daren. 2004. Ukraine's Ruslana Wins Eurovision Song Contest. *The Moscow Times,* 17. May 2004. (accessed: 07. May 2015).
[54] D'Anieri, Paul. (ed.). 2010. *Orange Revolution and Aftermath: Mobilization, Apathy, and the State in Ukraine*. Washington DC: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1.
[55] D'Anieri (ed.), *Orange Revolution and Aftermath*, 81, 99.

Yanukovych in the east.[56] Thus the Orange Revolution can be seen as a further reflection of the wider difficulty in succinctly defining Ukrainianness.

The Orange Revolution was of notable interest to western observers for several reasons: firstly, Ukraine's strategic positioning, essentially a border between Russia and the European Union. At one point the geopolitical shift appeared to be so monumental that Ukrainian membership of the European Union began to be discussed in the context of continuing enlargement. Moreover the Orange Revolution in Ukraine brought unprecedented publicity for the country, presenting a positive image of Ukraine; a country which made the transition to democracy through peaceful means. An analysis of the 2005 Eurovision Song Contest offers a potentially rich set of insights into the nature of the "Orange Revolution" and its accompanying debates on Ukrainian nation-building and Ukraine's place in Europe more generally.

The Orange Revolution became a platform for other expressions of protest namely through music. Ukrainian bands performed for the hundreds of thousands of people who were gathered in Kyiv's Maidan Nezalezhnosti (Independence Square). The reigning Eurovision champion Ruslana also became heavily involved in the proceedings and went on hunger strike in protest against what she saw as a stolen election and later went on to become a politician herself as a member of parliament for Yushchenko's ruling Nasha Ukrayina (Our Ukraine) party.[57] The political turmoil caused by the Orange Revolution also meant that the preparations for the 2005 contest were seriously hampered. The delays were so significant that in March 2005 the European Broadcasting Union threatened to move the event from Ukraine unless immediate action was taken. Given the involvement of the newly-elected President Yushchenko, who actively intervened in the preparations for the competition, the importance of hosting the competition in order to enhance Ukraine's international standing is plain to see.[58]

Given that the Eurovision Song Contest was taking place in a country which only months before had become the focal point of the world's attention as a result of political protests, it is perhaps unsurprising that the contest that year was tinged with political rhetoric. The slogan for the competition in 2005 was "Awakening"; this along with the selection of the band Greenjolly, who had been active in the political protests, as the Ukrainian Eurovision entry that year meant that the contest was highly politicised and, as such, highly contested. The insights of Svante Stockselius, the EBU Executive Supervisor, and Juhan Paadam, the Executive Producer of Eurovision 2002 in Tallinn and a member of the EBU Reference Group in 2005, are crucial in understanding the way in which Eurovision was used as a political platform for Yushchenko's government. According to Paadam, Yushchenko initially intended to make a lengthy political speech at the contest itself:

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[56] Riabchuk, Mykola. 2007. *Ambivalence or Ambiguity?: Why Ukraine is Trapped Between East and West*, in *Ukraine, the EU and Russia*, edited by Velychenko, Stephan, 70–88, 85.
[57] Krushelnycky, *An Orange Revolution*, 294.
[58] Jordan, Paul. 2011. *The Eurovision Song Contest: Nation Branding and Nation Building in Estonia and Ukraine*. PhD-thesis. Glasgow: University of Glasgow, 169.

President Yushchenko wanted to come to the show and have a speech for forty minutes. I think the EBU had a strong word and explained that it was a TV show. The president agreed to come and give the award [trophy to the winner] which is ok as it was a revolution situation, democracy won and so on. But they could have used any celebrity for the final, the Klitchkos were there. They had their president.[59]

Svante Stockselius asserts that the Yushchenko government "tried to influence it [Eurovision] more than they were supposed to".[60] Yushchenko's appearance at Eurovision was a brief affair; however, the fact that he went on to the stage is significant. In the history of the Eurovision Song Contest, such a move was unprecedented, and it took place despite the continuous reinforcement from the European Broadcasting Union that the contest was a non-political event.

Another issue which was highly politicised in 2005 was the selection of the Ukrainian candidate. In autumn 2004, the National Television Company of Ukraine (NTU) announced that it was to host a national selection for the first time. The Ukrainian national final comprised 15 rounds, where each week five songs were presented to the audience and the winner put through to the grand final, which was to be held in February 2005. Ani Lorak, one of Ukraine's most popular singers and a vocal supporter of Viktor Yanukovych, was one of the acts who had competed in the qualifying rounds. However, controversy arose when four "wildcards" were entered into the national selection programme at the request of the Deputy Prime Minister, Mykola Tomenko. One of these was a pro-Yushchenko political anthem by the band Greenjolly, a group from the Ivano-Frankivsk region in Western Ukraine. The group's entry, "*Razom nas bahato, nas ne podolaty*" ("*Together we are many, we cannot be defeated*"), went on to win the competition and were to represent Ukraine in the Kyiv final. Largely seen as a political coup, the actions were highly controversial with both competing artists and the public alike.

They [Greenjolly] did nothing before and nothing after. It was purely political I don't think that one song of Greenjolly can represent the whole country.[61]

I really don't think the people voted for it, I seriously doubt it [...] I was at the first national channel listening and reporting [...] I don't know. They tried to link Ukraine and the revolution with Eurovision but I don't think it was the right decision.[62]

The decision to insert a band from the Orange Revolution into the national selection at a late stage was one which was not seen as appropriate by the majority of respondents and therefore highlights a disparity between the political elite at the wider public just months after a new government was elected. Such actions on behalf of politicians and management at NTU were

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[59] Paadam, Juhan. Interview, Tallinn, 2. November 2007.
[60] Stockselius, Svante, email, 3. October 2008.
[61] Natalia. Interview, Kyiv, 19. December 2007.
[62] Olena. Interview, Kyiv, 13. December 2007.

seen as a throwback to the pre-revolutionary corruption which was supposed to have been suppressed as a result of Yushchenko's rise to power.

Further controversy ensued when the EBU rejected Greenjolly's song as it contravened the rules of the Eurovision Song Contest which state that political messages are banned. The original lyrics of the song "*Razom nas bahato, nas ne podolaty*" include direct references to Yushchenko and the political situation at the time of the Orange Revolution; "No to falsifications... No to lies. Yushchenko – yes! Yushchenko – yes! This is our president – yes, yes!" The mention of Yushchenko as President in the chorus of the song was dropped, and more generic phrases were introduced in English: "We won't stand this (no), revolution is on, 'cause lies be the weapon of mass destruction […] All together we're one, all together we're strong, God be my witness, we waited too long". The entry then was allowed to proceed to the Eurovision finals, having become a non-specific call for greater democracy. It is interesting to note one of the points made by the respondent above; that Greenjolly cannot be seen as representative of the whole of Ukraine. Thus Greenjolly acts as a mirror for the frustrations of a Yanukovych supporter, which Natalia identified herself as; neither Greenjolly nor Yushchenko represent the Ukraine with which they identify. Greenjolly's participation in the ESC therefore represents a specific political narrative, that of the ruling elite, the Orange Revolution government.

Despite the delays to the organisation of the contest, the 2005 ESC was a success for NTU. Closer reading of the broadcast sheds further light on the way in which Ukrainian elites chose to present the country to an international audience. A cursory glance of the scenes depicted in the postcard images shown between each national performance suggests that this was an event in which the eastern urban regions of Ukraine were not the point of focus. Many of the images depicted non-descript rural regions whilst others focussed on Kyiv and in particular western Carpathian traditions. The significance of Eurovision itself was routinely flagged; the preparations of the host city were shown regularly, along with scenes of the semi-final which had been held two days prior to the event. Two postcards in particular appear to depict elements of eastern Ukraine, namely mining and steelworks. However the ratio of these two segments compared to images of Kyiv or of the Ukrainian countryside is very small and appears to serve a point in hand; this was not a contest for promoting Eastern Ukraine. Moreover the scenes were disjointed and seemingly incoherent; shots of ballet were intermingled with fishing, weddings and shipping. The ambiguity of the scenes depicted are a metaphor for Ukrainian national identity itself; difficult to encapsulate in a limited narrative. The clips shown directly before the Ukrainian entry were scenes from the Orange Revolution, featuring protesters, tents and banners bearing Yushchenko's name as well as shots of the president's inauguration. It was undoubtedly a political message depicted through Eurovision. Moreover the actual performance of "*Razom nas bahato, nas ne podolaty*" included direct and explicit references to the Orange Revolution, contravening the EBU rules governing political messages in ESC entries. The song, like "*Wild Dances*" the preceding year, featured lyrics in both English and Ukrainian. At the start of the performance the two backing dancers wore handcuffs, symbolising the stifling of democracy which had been such a driving force for protestors in Ukraine. As the performance culminated, the handcuffs were broken. Again

this can be seen as a metaphor for Ukraine: as a result of the protests described in the song, the country was now free.

Eurovision was big news in the popular press in Ukraine in 2005. In a special-edition magazine, the Executive Producer of the 2005 event, Pavlo Grystak, highlighted the importance of the event for Ukraine in the wake of the Orange Revolution: "I want to thank you for your support and your trust in us". This was followed by Ruslana herself who wrote that Ukraine is "a modern European country with an ancient past". Such articles have highlighted the political relevance of hosting Eurovision but they also reveal interesting insights into the way Ukraine was being promoted at the time. Neither magazine presented any information regarding eastern Ukraine. The Hutsul and Carpathian regions were focussed on but the east of the country was not. These articles were written in the immediate aftermath of the Orange Revolution and so reflect the mainstream political discourse at the time: othering of eastern influences. The discourses reflect how contentious and contradictory narratives of national identity and symbolism are in Ukraine. If we consider Ukraine to be a divided country, these divisions appear to have been airbrushed, Ukrainian national identity is therefore represented in the international arena by specific, elite-driven narratives of identity. Ruslana, Greenjolly and the 2005 ESC itself can be seen as manifestations of this.

Verka Serduchka: From Ukraine with controversy
The character of Verka Serduchka, played by the comedy actor Andrii Danylko, was selected as Ukrainian representative in the ESC by a mixture of jury and public votes. Whilst the character was well known both in Ukraine and Russia, this decision to send the act to represent Ukraine on the Eurovision stage was met with anger, with many believing that such an act was "vulgar and grotesque" act would be damaging to Ukraine's international image.[63] A Ukrainian Member of Parliament, Taras Chornovil, called on Ukrainians to boycott the event, stating that the selection of Serduchka would not be perceived by other European countries as "normal" and that it would bring shame upon the Ukrainian international image:[64]

> *All these hermaphrodites have never been accepted anywhere.*
> *Therefore I think that this will be a serious embarrassment factor*
> *and the world will see us as complete idiots.*[65]

The entry was called "*Dancing Lasha Tumbai*" and was performed in English, German, Russian and Ukrainian. Further controversy erupted when the lyrical content of the song was analysed; "*Dancing Lasha Tumbai*" bore a phonetic resemblance to "Russia goodbye", a further ode to the Orange Revolution of 2004–05. Serduchka's claim that "lasha tumbai" was Mongolian for "whipped cream" was dismissed by the Mongolian Embassy in Moscow, suggesting that the ambiguity had deliberate political connotations. The lyrics also make

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[63] Fawkes, Helen. 2007. Eurovision Act Angers Ukrainians. *BBC News Online*, 2. April 2007 (accessed: 07. May 2015).
[64] Taras Chornovil in *Korrespondent*, 14. March 2007.
[65] N.N. 2007. Чорновил: Сердючка опозорит Украину. *Fraza*. 13. March 2007 (accessed: 07. May 2015).

reference to Maidan Square, where the political demonstrations of the Orange Revolution took place. For pro-Russian Ukrainians and Russian nationalists alike, the performance represented Ukrainian nationalism at its most vulgar. In Ukraine, nationalists rejected Serduchka as a parody of the Ukrainian nation. The character is said to be based on Soviet-era train conductors as well as a caricature of middle aged women and is therefore a manifestation of Sovietness which speaks to a larger post-Soviet space. Like most people moving from the Ukrainian-speaking countryside to Russian-speaking cities,[66] Serduchka uses a mixture of Ukrainian and Russian, reinforcing provincialism thus conveying a reflexive irony towards Ukrainian nationhood.[67]

Serduchka's linguistic transnationalism can be seen as a reflection of the disconnection between elite and public national identities, in that the Ukrainian state imposed one official state language, Ukrainian, despite the norm in many cities of commuting between languages. The choice of outfit, with a silver star as the headpiece, ridicules a failed Soviet utopia and a parody of the Soviet past,[68] arguably arousing consternation amongst Russian nationalists. The controversy Serduchka engendered is therefore a curious one; by mimicking Sovietness, it links Ukraine to its past which is arguably what some Ukrainian elites, namely from the west of the country, have been trying to move away from since independence. Further reading of the performance, which mixes languages frequently, often interchanging between Russian and Ukrainian, suggests that the character of Serduchka may be entirely representative of Ukraine, a country with often ambiguous national and linguistic identities. Serduchka was seen as denigrating Ukrainians on multiple levels – their folk culture, linguistic identity, and representations of femininity.[69] For Ukraine's political elites the image of the country is paramount and Eurovision therefore is a platform which promotes a certain narrative of the nation, the debates surrounding Serduchka exemplify this. The rhetoric concerning Serduchka reflects wider debates in Ukrainian society with regard to minority rights and the way the relationship with neighbouring Russia is imagined given that the apparent parody of Soviet rule and the timing of the performance, with ambiguous lyrics, which came at a particularly tense time in Russian–Ukrainian relations.

Interpreting Ambiguity: a View from the Field

For many post-Soviet Russian speakers, Sovietness represents what Svetlana Boym has called a "common place" (nostalgia for the past, before the unpredictability of the transition to a market economy).[70] The 2007 Ukrainian performance, parodying both the Soviet and post-Soviet eras (Serduchka the character, the Soviet star headdress versus the ambiguous "*Lasha Tumbai*" / "*Russia Goodbye*"), can be read on multiple levels. The responses from those interviewed in Ukraine provide an insight into the wider debates on Ukrainian

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[66] Yekelchyk, *What Is Ukrainian About Ukraine's Pop Culture?*.

[67] Miazhevich, Galina. 2012. Ukrainian Nation Branding Off-Line and Online: Verka Serduchka at the Eurovision Song Contest. *Europe–Asia Studies* 64(8), 1505–23, 1513

[68] Miazhevich, *Ukrainian Nation Branding*.

[69] Yekelchyk, *What Is Ukrainian About Ukraine's Pop Culture?*, 217.

[70] Boym, Svetlana. 1994. *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

nationhood as well as a lack of congruence of national identity. Many expressed a disconnection between the image that the act portrayed and the Ukraine they felt should be showcased. One issue which manifests itself strongly in the interviews is that the image of Ukraine is important; respondents care about what the world thinks about their country, even when viewed through the gaze of Eurovision. When questioned about their views on Serduchka representing Ukraine in the ESC many respondents immediately returned the question; "What is your opinion on this man?"[71] Other respondents were more confident:

> *I think the image is not very positive, Eurovision maybe promotes Ukraine but most of the people don't like this singer Verka. He is a man or a woman, we don't understand. Ukraine is not Verka Serduchka and I don't want to associate Ukraine with this, it's shameful for Ukraine to have such a representative.*[72]

Many other respondents flagged the fact that the artist himself, Andriy Danylko, identifies as heterosexual, publicly at least, as well as the parodist nature of the performance. Serduchka's obvious masculinity beneath an unflattering female stage costume suggests that it was, unlike the Danish entry that year (the drag act DQ), not commodity camp, even though it may be been interpreted this way by foreign audiences. The repeated re-inscription that Serduchka's creator is heterosexual, as well as the general tone of the responses, provides an insight into social attitudes in Ukraine. Other respondents were more pragmatic in their view:

> *I think they [critics of Serduchka] were taking the competition too seriously, they thought that if Verka goes to the competition then everyone would think Ukraine is a strange country, full of transsexuals who dress up like women. This is too conservative. These are people who take it too seriously. Eurovision is a fun competition, in 2006 those monsters [Lordi] won. It's a song competition but it's also about the show, costumes and the entire show. She did well so why not?*[73]

> *I think they were scared that Europeans would not take Serduchka or understand the humour. Ukrainian humour is a bit different from European and English, it's not as liberal or straightforward and people were afraid that there would be shame for the country.*[74]

Closer reading of these responses suggests that there is a subtle rift between the public and political elites in Ukraine regarding image, a reflection of a wider public disconnection with the Orange Revolution government at the time. Verka Serduchka's "shameful" performance therefore shows the post-imperial inferiority complex that some Ukrainians still suffer.[75] In particular the use of the term "hermaphrodite" by the politician Taras Chornovil demonstrates that

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[71] Valentin. Interview, Kyiv, 19. December 2007.
[72] Anne, interview.
[73] Volodymyr. Interview, Kyiv, 16. December 2007.
[74] Olena, interview.
[75] Donchenko, Evgeniya. N.D. <u>Ukrainian Cindarella</u>. *WAVE: International Youth Magazine*, no. 8. (accessed: 07. May 2015).

the image Serduchka presented to Europe through the ESC was peripheral to the heteronormative construction of national identity in Ukraine.

Performing Multiculturalism: Gaitana in ESC 2012

The nature of the discourse surrounding Verka Serduchka revealed unique insights into ideals of masculinity in a post-Soviet context. The selection of the singer Gaitana as Ukrainian representative in the 2012 ESC provoked further controversy both in the country and across the wider media in Europe. The singer, who is of Congolese descent, won the right to represent Ukraine after winning the national selection, which consisted of 50% public telephone votes and 50% jury. Gaitana is the first non-white performer to represent Ukraine in the ESC. The song *Be My Guest* was an up-tempo number. Closer reading of the lyrics of the song suggest that it sought to promote Ukraine as an open and welcoming country to visitors:

> *Welcome! Stay with me, Be my friend, You are free, To live your life, To share your love with world, You can count on me, Darling, I'm your friend, I'll do anything for you, From the bottom of my heart, I wish you, I wish you the best, You can be my guest, People be my guest, Now you can be my guest!*

Ukraine was indeed welcoming guests in 2012 as the host of the UEFA European Football Championships. This presented Ukraine with an opportunity to present a positive international image through both the gaze of the international media and the tourists who would inevitably travel to the country as spectators of the event. The song "*Be My Guest*" takes on significance when striking counter-narratives concerning underlying racism amongst Ukrainian football fans are taken into account. Former English football player Sol Campbell urged fans not to travel to the country because they "could end up coming back in a coffin".[76] The Foreign Office advised fans of African-Caribbean or Asian descent to take "extra care" when travelling to Ukraine. However, others such as Yuri Bender, a journalist in Kyiv, argued that the allegations of racism in Ukraine had been sensationalised and were no more acute in Ukraine than in other countries.[77]

Regardless of the truth of the matter, Gaitana's participation in the ESC, wearing a traditional Ukrainian headdress, the vinok, represented a performance of Ukrainian multiculturalism. However, this representation of multiethnic Ukraine did not sit well with some political elites in the country. Yuri Syrotyuk of the Freedom Party condemned the selection of Gaitana as the Ukrainian ESC entry on the grounds that she was "not an organic representative of Ukrainian culture":[78]

> *Millions of people who will be watching will see that Ukraine is represented by a person who does not belong to our race [...] The*

[76] Harding, Luke. 2012. <u>Euro 2012 Turning Into PR Disaster for Ukraine as Racism Fears Scare off Fans</u>. *The Guardian*, 28. May 2012 (accessed: 07. May 2015).

[77] Harding, *Euro 2012*.

[78] Zhuk, Alyona. 2012. <u>Racist Comments about Gaitana Stir Controversy</u>. *Kyiv Post*, 21. February 2012 (accessed: 07. May 2015).

vision of Ukraine as a country located somewhere in remote Africa will take root.[79]

Syrotyuk later claimed that he was merely criticising the lack of transparency in the Ukrainian selection process. However the rhetoric engendered by Gaitana's selection reveals a more hard-line, nationalising element to Ukrainian nation-building which had not been so apparent in, for instance, Estonia, which won the ESC in 2001 with a black performer, Dave Benton. This is curious given the restrictive citizenship policies in place in Estonia towards the Russian-speaking minority. If Russians were to a certain extent excluded from political life then it is not improbable that a black immigrant would be too. This was not the case. Syrotyuk's comments also fail to take account of the complex nature of the construction of Ukrainian identity. As highlighted earlier in this article, many in Ukraine have fluidity in terms of identity, and the narrative of Ukrainian nationhood does not speak with a linear voice. Interestingly, the rhetoric from Syrotyuk was not necessarily internalised by the Ukrainian public and all mainstream political parties and several high-profile figures, including Ruslana, spoke out condemning such comments. Gaitana herself spoke of her shame that the comments brought:

> *I was in tears, it was extremely hurtful. I was ashamed also because of the image these comments would give to Ukraine. My country is Ukraine, it is beautiful and people should visit and be our guest. I am a Ukrainian as well as African girl. I am both.*[80]

Arguably Ukraine is a multi-ethnic state, given its sizeable Russian speaking population; however, like many post-communist states, the country does not have an established black community. The response from Gaitana is therefore rather unique; it is unlikely that such rhetoric ("*I am a Ukrainian as well as African*") would be repeated by a black British performer for example. The discourse from the singer is interesting in that she appears to almost justify her existence as a Ukrainian. The attempt by political elites to argue that one person does not represent Ukrainianness opens the door to questions concerning what actually constitutes organic national identity in the Ukrainian context. The furore that Gaitana's entry into the ESC engendered therefore highlights a lack of congruence between Ukrainian nation-building and multiculturalism in a post-Soviet context.

Conclusion

This article has examined the rhetoric concerning four Ukrainian entries in the ESC. As such the ESC represents a site where cultural struggles over the meaning of nationhood are performed. In the Ukrainian case the ESC is a highly politicised event and has continued to reflect nationalist antagonisms in the country. The ESC is a stage where the sensitivities of national identity in Ukraine are performed. The Ukrainianness performed through entries such as Ruslana and Greenjolly is that of an elite-level, western Ukrainian narrative of

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[79] Karpyak, Oleg. 2012. <u>Ukraine's Eurovision Entry Gaitana "Ashamed" by Racism</u>. *BBC News Online*, 23. May 2012 (accessed: 07. May 2015).
[80] Gaitana. Interview, Baku, 15. May 2012.

nationhood which arguably does not represent significant proportions of the country. On the other hand, Verka Serduchka and Gaitana highlight the contested nature of identity politics in Ukraine and exemplify the battleground that Ukraine has become in terms of representing a unified narrative of that identity. The nationalist antagonisms presented through Eurovision reflect the wider discourses of the Ukrainian political scene. The ESC upholds the notion of the nation-state as the primordial framework for identity, in-line with nationalist discourses on statehood thus the ESC itself can viewed as a platform for nationalism itself. The somewhat conflicting narratives on nationhood in Ukraine reflect the overall ambiguity and complexity in defining what Ukrainianness constitutes.

Ukrainian entries have continued to reflect narratives of identity and domestic politics. The Ukrainian entry for the ESC in 2014, "*Tick Tock*", was essentially a metaphor for the tensions which are on-going as a result of the armed conflict in Eastern Ukraine and the Russian annexation of Crimea. Ukraine withdrew from the ESC in 2015 citing the on-going turmoil in the country as one of the main reasons as well as financial pressures facing the national broadcaster.[81]A process of nation-building is taking place in the country as it comes to terms with destabilised borders and displaced internal migrants. Given the country's previous record in the contest, if and when Ukraine ever returns to ESC it is likely the domestic politics of the country will be performed on the international stage. A comment from one respondent concerning Ukrainian Eurovision entries provides a fitting closing remark to this article. The Ukrainian narrative of identity at Eurovision can be seen as a metaphor for wider political developments in the country, developments which, like Ukrainian nation-building, are continuing to unfold.

> *In 2004 Ukraine was really wild, she was fed up with everything but she was very positive and energetic so she produced Ruslana and she produced the revolution. In 2005 she was so optimistic about the future but not really professional so she produced Greenjolly, Orange Government. In 2007 she is so cynical about everything so she produced this chaotic democracy […] Verka Serduchka.*[82]

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