

Louisa Martin-Chevalier

Sorbonne University (FR)

ORCID: 0009-0005-3754-1710

Singing the Nation

Ukrainian Victories at the Eurovision Song Contest and the Politics and Musical Diplomacy (2004–2022)

Abstract

This article examines how Ukraine has transformed the Eurovision Song Contest (ESC) into a platform for cultural diplomacy and sonic sovereignty. Combining musicological analysis with perspectives from cultural studies and political sociology, it explores three emblematic entries—Ruslana’s *Wild Dances* (2004), Jamala’s *1944* (2016), and Kalush Orchestra’s *Stefania* (2022)—to investigate how musical performance articulates changing forms of national identity, historical memory, and geopolitical positioning. Drawing on the works of Dean Vuletic, Maria Sonevytsky, Marko Pavlyshyn, and recent scholarship on participatory diplomacy and nation branding, the article argues that Eurovision has become a site where Ukraine negotiates its place between post-Soviet legacies, postcolonial emancipation, and European aspirations. Rather than expressing a fixed national identity, Ukrainian Eurovision performances reveal how cultural identities are continually imagined, contested, and reinvented through sound, performance, and transnational circulation.

Keywords

Eurovision Song Contest, Ukraine, cultural diplomacy, sovereign imaginaries, national identity, popular music

Abstrakt

Śpiewać naród: Ukraińscy zwycięzcy Konkursu Piosenki Eurowizji w kontekście polityki i dyplomacji muzycznej (2004–2022)

Tematem artykułu jest wykorzystanie przez Ukrainę Konkursu Piosenki Eurowizji jako forum dyplomacji kulturalnej i suwerenności dźwiękowej. Łącząc analizę muzykologiczną z badaniami kulturowymi i socjologią polityki, autorka przygląda się trzem symbolicznym utworom – *Wild Dances* Rusłany (2004), *1944* Dżamały (2016) oraz *Stefanii* Kalush Orchestra (2022) – by zbadać, w jaki sposób wykonanie muzyczne wyraża zmieniające się formy tożsamości narodowej, pamięci historycznej i usytuowania geopolitycznego. Czerpiąc z prac Deana Vuletica, Marii Sonevytsky i Marko Pavlyshyna, a także najnowszych badań nad dyplomacją uczestniczącą i brandingiem narodowym, pokazuje, że Eurowizja stała się przestrzenią, w której Ukraina negocjuje swoje miejsce pomiędzy dziedzictwem postsowieckim, emancypacją postkolonialną i aspiracjami europejskimi. Występy ukraińskich uczestników konkursu nie są wyrazem niezmiennej tożsamości narodowej, ujawniają natomiast, w jaki sposób tożsamości kulturowe są nieustannie wyobrażane, kwestionowane i redefiniowane poprzez dźwięk, performans i obieg transnarodowy.

Słowa kluczowe

Konkurs Piosenki Eurowizji, Ukraina, dyplomacja kulturalna, suwerenne imaginaria, tożsamość narodowa, muzyka popularna

Since its inception in 1956, the Eurovision Song Contest (ESC) has evolved into one of Europe's most-watched cultural phenomena. Far from being a mere showcase of popular music, Eurovision functions as a transnational performance arena where national identity, historical memory, and geopolitical tension are negotiated through sound and spectacle. As Dean Vuletic argues, Eurovision has often functioned less as a space of European unification than as a platform for the symbolic reconstruction of national identities: "Even though the ESC has unified Europeans by creating shared cultural references, it has arguably been more successful in forging national icons and refashioning national identities rather than transnational ones."¹ Moreover, Eastern European entries often articulate an aspirational belonging to a "cosmopolitan Europe" while also contesting Western cultural hegemony through selective national redescription.²

In this sense, the ESC operates as a mechanism of soft power, as theorized by Joseph Nye:³ a means by which states can exercise influence not through coercion or economic strength, but through cultural appeal. Musical performance, symbolic staging, and affective resonance become tools of narrative projection, allowing participating countries to brand themselves as modern, democratic, or culturally distinctive before an international audience. In this perspective, music, media visibility and cultural prestige become strategic resources through which states cultivate international influence. Several scholars have shown how Eurovision enables participating countries to project desirable national images and to negotiate their place within Europe.⁴ This is particularly salient for post-socialist and post-Soviet countries seeking to reposition themselves vis-à-vis "Europe."

Yet the notion of "soft power" alone does not fully account for the dynamics at play in Eurovision. As Jessica Carniel argues, the contest cannot be reduced to a top-down strategy of image management.⁵ Eurovision is also a participatory arena in which artists, broadcasters, audiences, and digital communities actively

¹ Dean Vuletic, *Postwar Europe and the Eurovision Song Contest* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 4.

² Katrin Sieg, "Cosmopolitan Empire: Central and Eastern Europeans at the Eurovision Song Contest," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 16, no. 2 (2013): 244–263.

³ Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2004).

⁴ Dean Vuletic, "Public Diplomacy and Decision-Making in the Eurovision Song Contest," in *Popular Music and Public Diplomacy: Transnational and Transdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Mario Dunkel, and Sina A. Nitzsche (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2018), 301–313; Lisanne Wilken, "The Eurovision Song Contest as Cultural Diplomacy during the Cold War: Transmitting Western Attractiveness," in *Machineries of Persuasion: European Soft Power and Public Diplomacy during the Cold War*, ed. Óscar J. Martín García, and Rósa Magnúsdóttir (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2019), 171–190.

⁵ Jessica Carniel, "Towards a Theory of Participatory Diplomacy via the Eurovision Song Contest," *Media, Culture & Society* 46, no. 5 (2024): 925–941.

co-produce political meanings and affective solidarities. Recent work by Yamarik, Fidrmuc and Mor further nuances this perspective by demonstrating that cultural diplomacy constitutes one of the principal channels through which soft power operates in the Eurovision Song Contest.⁶ Their quantitative analysis suggests that participation in Eurovision influences international perceptions not only through state-sponsored image-building, but also through cultural proximity, emotional engagement, and long-term reputational effects. Soft power in this sense, emerges less as a static national resource than as a relational process mediated by cultural exchange and popular reception.

For this reason, this article draws more specifically on the notion of cultural diplomacy.⁷ Dean Vuletic has demonstrated that Eurovision has long operated as a site of public and cultural diplomacy, where governments, broadcasters and performers negotiate symbolic influence through popular culture. More recently, Borić and Radović Kapor have argued that Eurovision constitutes a privileged arena for cultural diplomacy because it combines state representation, mass media circulation, and emotional identification.⁸ Rather than merely reflecting political relations, the contest contributes to shaping them.

In the Ukrainian case, however, cultural diplomacy cannot be understood solely as a strategy of national branding. To understand Ukraine's use of Eurovision as a platform for cultural diplomacy and identity work, this article draws on Maria Sonevsky's concept of "sovereign imaginaries". She uses this term to describe "expressions of citizens' desire for ways of life that are enabled by particular forms of governance. ... that are sensory, acoustic, musical—with their history, temporality, and 'characteristic aesthetics'."⁹ In her study of Ukrainian folk-pop and national soundscapes, Sonevsky argues that nations under geopolitical threat may enact cultural agency through public rituals—such as music competitions—in which identity is actively claimed rather than passively inherited. This perspective aligns with broader theories of performance as political articulation,¹⁰ framing sonic expression as a mode of political assertion. According to Paul Jordan, Ukrainian entries in particular have articulated

⁶ Steven Yamarik, Jarko Fidrmuc, and Ioanna Mor, "The Impact of Cultural Diplomacy on the Eurovision Song Contest," *Journal of Cultural Economics* 49 (2025): 777–810.

⁷ Frédéric Ramel and Cécile Prévost-Thomas, eds., *International Relations, Music and Diplomacy: Sounds and Voices on the International Stage* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

⁸ Zrinka Borić, and Ana Radović Kapor, "The European Song Contest as a Tool of Cultural Diplomacy," *Zbornik Sveučilišta Libertas* 1, no. 2 (2017): 225–240.

⁹ Maria Sonevsky, *Wild Music: Sound and Sovereignty in Ukraine* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2019), 6–7.

¹⁰ Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 2–3, 19–22.

contrasting visions of “Ukrainianness,” ranging from stylized folklore to ironic post-Soviet parody and cosmopolitan inclusivity.¹¹ These performances do not simply express national culture. They construct it, often in response to internal contestation and external pressure. Galina Miazhevich has shown how Eurovision became a strategic site for Ukrainian nation branding, allowing the country to project images of modernity, Europeanness and cultural distinctiveness across traditional and digital media.¹² Eurovision thus provides a unique site for the negotiation of post-Soviet identity and geopolitical belonging. Ukraine has pursued a cultural diplomacy approach grounded in narrative resistance and expressive authenticity, whereas Russia adopted a more propagandistic, image-based strategy in the same period.¹³

Ukraine’s Eurovision trajectory is thus not merely a sequence of televised pop songs, but a compelling case of symbolic nation-building through musical diplomacy. As Serhy Yekelchuk has argued,¹⁴ the very question of what constitutes a specifically Ukrainian popular culture remains open and contested. Eurovision provides a particularly revealing arena in which these competing visions of Ukrainianness are staged, negotiated and transformed. This article analyzes three key Ukrainian entries—*Wild Dances* (2004), *1944* (2016), *Stefania* (2022)—to examine how musical form, performance strategy, and cultural reference work in tandem to project a resilient and evolving national identity. It explores how musical performances on the Eurovision stage have allowed Ukraine to assert affective and aesthetic claims to sovereignty. These are not declarations of political power, but rather sonic expressions of national desire—where music becomes a space in which sovereignty is imagined, felt, and performed.

***Wild Dances* (2004): Folklore, Pop and Pre-Revolutionary**

Ukraine’s 2004 victory at the Eurovision Song Contest was more than a musical triumph; it offered a stylized performance of national identity at the intersection of folklore, pop spectacle, and geopolitical aspiration. Ruslana’s *Wild Dances*

¹¹ Paul Jordan, “From Ruslana to Gaitana: Performing ‘Ukrainianness’ in the Eurovision Song Contest,” *Contemporary Southeastern Europe* 2, no. 1 (2015): 110–135.

¹² Galina Miazhevich, “Ukrainian Nation Branding Off-line and Online: Verka Serduchka at the Eurovision Song Contest,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 64, no. 8 (2012): 1505–1523.

¹³ Lea Welslau and Torsten Selck, “Geopolitics in the ESC: Comparing Russia’s and Ukraine’s Use of Cultural Diplomacy in the Eurovision Song Contest,” *New Perspectives* 32, no. 1 (2024): 5–29.

¹⁴ Serhy Yekelchuk, “What Is Ukrainian about Ukraine’s Pop Culture? The Strange Case of Verka Serduchka,” *Canadian-American Slavic Studies* 44, no. 1/2 (2010): 217–232.

emerged as more than a pop anthem—it was a carefully constructed performance that blended elements of ethnic folklore, Western pop tropes, and implicit political messaging. The song’s impact resonated beyond the contest itself, symbolizing Ukraine’s simultaneous assertion of cultural uniqueness and desire for European belonging, just months before the eruption of the Orange Revolution.

Dyki tantsi (*Wild Dances*) was composed and performed by Ruslana Stepanivna Lyzhychko, better known simply as Ruslana. In January 2004, the National Television Company of Ukraine (NTU) internally selected Ruslana to represent the country at the 49th edition of the Eurovision Song Contest in Istanbul. Just days later, her song was officially confirmed as Ukraine’s entry. As the BBC noted at the time, the performance drew on Carpathian highlander traditions while blending traditional instruments, fast choreography, and flamboyant costumes.¹⁵

The song is built around a driving 4/4 rhythm with syncopated percussion patterns that simulate traditional Hutsul drumming, though these are rendered through contemporary electronic production. Harmonically, the piece is rooted in A minor (Am), alternating Am–C in the verses, and expanding into a more developed Am–C–D–Em progression in the chorus—clearly aligning with Western pop-rock conventions. Modal inflections, particularly minor second intervals, introduce Eastern European folk coloration. Ruslana’s vocal technique oscillates between powerful Western-style belting and folk-derived ornamentation, including grace notes, glottal stops, and microtonal slides. Musically grounded in recognizable pop forms, the song derives much of its symbolic power from how it repurposes folk markers into a globally legible aesthetic.

Ruslana herself emphasized the Carpathian influences in her artistic direction, speaking of “powerful and permeating ethnic drums,” “cries of ‘Hey,’” foot-stamping, whip-blows, and the trembita—a long wooden horn traditionally used in the region. The inclusion of this instrument in the introduction functions as a sonic marker of regional identity, even though it is not heard again throughout the song. This selective use of traditional instrumentation fits within a broader performative strategy that Maria Sonevytsky identifies as a form of geopolitical narration. When *Wild Dances* was televoted to Eurovision victory, fans and media interpreted the song and its performance as an allegory of Ukraine’s tortured post-Soviet geopolitical position.¹⁶

¹⁵ “Ukraine Celebrates Eurovision Win,” BBC News, May 16, 2004, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/3715907.stm>

¹⁶ Sonevytsky, *Wild Music*, 2.

Rather than a simple folkloric showcase, the performance embodies what Sonevytsky terms *wildness*—a strategic mode of exoticization used by Ukrainian musicians as a form of symbolic empowerment. As she explains:

These same exoticizing and self-exoticizing tropes. . . . are often also used by various Ukrainian musicians as tools for self-empowerment. . . . Wildness rebels against the constraints—both musical and political. . . . Wildness nonetheless consistently operates as a technology of escape. . . . that might finally release an imperilled state such as Ukraine from the “colonial matrix of power.”¹⁷

A closer examination of the lyrics offers another interpretive lens. By singing verses that combine English (*Just maybe I'm crazy, the world spins round and round and round*), Ukrainian (*Napevno daremno*), and Hutsul vocables (such as “shydy-rydy-dana”), Ruslana enacts what Marko Pavlyshyn has described as a “refutation of the Orientalist stereotype. By association with the wild beast, she has strength, and it is strength that inflects her attitude toward love.”¹⁸ However, Maria Sonevytsky invites us to hear the lyrics as an expression of postcolonial desire—a yearning for inclusion—framed through allegorical language such as “I want you to want me”. As she concludes: “By rehearsing some of the *clichés* of Orientalism—including this eroticizing of the mysterious ‘other’—here, the Hutsul—Ruslana’s autoexoticism attempts to slake the European public’s thirst for the exotic at its eastern borders.”¹⁹

Indeed, Ruslana’s appropriation of Hutsul imagery and musical traditions was not without controversy. The transformation of regional cultural practices into an internationally marketable spectacle raised questions about commodification and authenticity. As Marko Pavlyshyn observes, *Wild Dances* simultaneously resists and reproduces orientalist expectations: while Ruslana reclaims the figure of the “wild” woman as a source of agency and strength, her performance also relies on forms of exoticism that render Ukrainian identity attractive precisely because of its perceived alterity.²⁰ In this sense, *Wild Dances* reveals a tension at the heart of cultural diplomacy: the desire for European recognition may require the strategic performance of difference.

¹⁷ Sonevytsky, 177.

¹⁸ Marko Pavlyshyn, “Envisioning Europe: Ruslana’s Rhetoric of Identity,” *Slavic and East European Journal* 50, no. 4 (2006): 474.

¹⁹ Sonevytsky, *Wild Music*, 39.

²⁰ See Pavlyshyn, “Envisioning Europe.”

This ambivalence is not unique to Ruslana. Reflecting on Eurovision 2023, Phillip V. Bohlman argues that Ukraine's presence in the contest has often oscillated between visibility and spectrality, between political agency and symbolic projection. Eurovision celebrates cultural diversity, yet it also frames nations through narratives and images that are expected, recognisable, and emotionally resonant for European audiences.²¹ Ruslana's performance can therefore be understood not only as an act of self-empowerment, but also as a negotiation with Europe's enduring fascination with its eastern margins.

Two decades later, the figure of the warrior-woman reappears in Alyona Alyona and Jerry Heil's 2024 entry *Teresa & Maria*, which reimagines female strength through religious and maternal allegories. While Ruslana's wild woman is seductive and fierce, *Teresa & Maria* offers a softer yet equally potent icon of national perseverance. Both entries position Ukrainian femininity as central to cultural resilience and mobilize gendered tropes for political ends.

From this perspective, *Wild Dances* can be understood as a performative act of cultural sovereignty: a stylized, exportable version of Ukrainian identity, rooted in regional symbols yet formatted for a global stage. This kind of hybrid aesthetic transforms regional and cultural specificity into a form that is legible, resonant, and commercially viable on global stages. As Paul Jordan argues, "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."²²

Jordan's observation nevertheless needs to be historicized. Since the publication of his study, and particularly following Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, linguistic practices in Ukraine have undergone significant transformations. The increasing use of Ukrainian in public life and the growing refusal of Russian as a language of everyday communication for many Ukrainians have reshaped the symbolic boundaries of national identity. Ruslana's performance thus appears not as a fixed expression of Ukrainianness, but as a historically situated moment in an ongoing process of nation-building, illustrating the fluid and contested nature of cultural identities. The evolution of linguistic practices in Ukraine also reminds us that Eurovision does not stage a stable national identity. Rather, it offers a platform where competing visions of the nation are negotiated and periodically reformulated. Ruslana's multilingual performance in 2004, Jamala's articulation of Crimean Tatar memory in 2016, and Kalush Orchestra's exclusive

²¹ Phillip V. Bohlman, "On Specters and Spectacle: Tales of Two Eurovisions, Liverpool–Ukraine 2023," *Academic Insights for the Thinking World*, May 25, 2023.

²² Paul Jordan, "From Ruslana to Gaitana," 122.

use of Ukrainian in 2022 each reflect different historical moments and different understandings of what it means to represent Ukraine before Europe.

1944 (2016): Memory, Trauma, and the Voice of Jamala

Ukraine's victory at the 2016 Eurovision Song Contest with Jamala's emotionally charged *1944* marked a striking departure from the festive hybridity of previous entries. The song, composed and performed by Susana Jamaladinova (Jamala), draws from her family's traumatic past—the mass deportation of Crimean Tatars under Stalin's regime in 1944. As Jamala explained:

My great-grandmother Nazalkhan had five children: four sons and one daughter. They were put onto a freight train and taken from Crimea to Central Asia. My grandmother spent several weeks in this train: without food, without water. And while they were on the train, her little daughter died. And I realised that I would like to write about that.²³

While the lyrics are rooted in personal history, the geopolitical resonance was unmistakable. In the wake of Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea, many interpreted *1944* as a veiled critique of Russian aggression. As Maria Sonevitsky notes:

Her victory sparked a furious response from the Russian mediasphere, which condemned the song as violating ESC rules that songs be “apolitical.” As the representative of Ukraine at the ESC, singing a song of Crimean Tatar trauma, Jamala's presence on the global stage signified how this emergent postcolonial sovereign imaginary has come to be supported both within the Ukrainian state and by the international Eurovision audiences, who voted the song to victory despite Russian protestations of the song's political overtones.²⁴

The voting results further complicate a binary reading of the contest as a simple geopolitical confrontation between Ukraine and Russia. Although Russia won the overall televote with 361 points, Ukraine secured victory with a combined score of 534 points, including 323 points from the public and 211 from the professional juries. Significantly, Jamala received strong public support not only

²³ Catherine Hardy, “Global Conversation Talks to Ukraine's Eurovision Winner,” *Euronews*, May 20, 2016, <https://www.euronews.com/2016/05/20/global-conversation-talks-to-ukraine-s-eurovision-triumph>.

²⁴ Sonevitsky, *Wild Music*, 137.

from Western Europe but also from several post-Soviet countries, including Belarus, Georgia, Latvia, Lithuania and Moldova. Even more strikingly, the Russian televote awarded her ten points, while the Russian jury gave her none. The opposite tension can also be observed in Ukraine itself. Ukrainian viewers awarded their maximum of twelve points to Russia's representative Sergey Lazarev, whereas the Ukrainian professional jury did not rank the Russian entry among its top ten. These voting patterns suggest that the circulation of musical affects and historical memories cannot be reduced to official political alignments. Rather, Eurovision emerges as a space where cultural solidarities may transcend, complicate, or temporarily suspend geopolitical divisions. Jamala's victory therefore illustrates not only the international recognition of a Ukrainian postcolonial narrative, as argued by Sonevytsky, but also the ambivalent and sometimes contradictory ways in which such narratives are received.

Dean Vuletic also reminds us that Eurovision performances often acquire political resonance through context, even when their lyrics avoid explicit political messaging.²⁵ 1944 fits this model: formally autobiographical, yet symbolically potent, the performance was widely received as a cultural response to contemporary conflict.

Musically, 1944 deviates sharply from Eurovision conventions. The song opens with an ambient drone, then transitions into a mournful melody loosely based on the Dorian mode. The introduction evokes the Crimean Tatar folk song *Ey, güzel Qirim* (Beautiful Crimea), tinged with the microtonal inflections of the Armenian duduk. The melodic phrasing is irregular, with emphasis on downward motion and lament-like motifs. The bridge section, sung in Crimean Tatar, employs extensive melisma and ornamentation characteristic of maqam traditions. The absence of a traditional pop chorus further distances the piece from Eurovision norms. The lyrics are stark, elliptical, and testimonial: "They kill you all / and say / we're not guilty. ... Where people are free / to live and love. / The happiest time. / Where is your heart? / Humanity rise." As Ivan Raykoff observes, "what sounds to some listeners like a plaintive or tragic wail is here a powerful signifier of cultural and spiritual identity."²⁶ This reading highlights how Jamala's melismatic lament disrupts the polished aesthetics of Eurovision pop and instead projects a distinctly minoritized sonic identity.

The performance's staging reinforced its narrative power: Jamala barefoot, in a dark flowing costume, singing under stark blue, yellow and red lighting, with abstract visuals alluding to uprooting and mourning. The climax—a melismatic

²⁵ See Vuletic, "Public Diplomacy."

²⁶ Ivan Raykoff, *Another Song for Europe: Music, Taste, and Values in the Eurovision Song Contest* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 132.

Tatar lament without words—serves as a sonic rupture, pulling the audience into an unresolved emotional space. Though officially accepted by the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) on the grounds of historical content, the performance was widely interpreted as implicitly critical of contemporary geopolitics.

As Mariia Kuleshir argues, *1944* derives its distinctive character from the close intertwining of personal and collective memory. The song is rooted in Jamala's own family history and transforms the experience of the 1944 deportation into a broader narrative of Crimean Tatar identity and historical remembrance. Kuleshir further emphasizes that the use of the Crimean Tatar language reinforces the authenticity of the composition, while its bilingual structure gives voice to a historically marginalized community. Through its symbolism, autobiographical dimension, and careful integration of historical references, *1944* becomes both a work of artistic expression and a medium for preserving and transmitting collective memory. The performance thus extends beyond Eurovision itself, functioning as a cultural act of remembrance for a trauma that had long remained silenced.²⁷

In contrast to the celebratory hybridity of Ruslana's *Wild Dances*—which Pavlyshyn characterizes as “the folkloric as global”²⁸—Jamala's *1944* embraces solemnity and historical depth. Where Ruslana celebrated the “erotic self-exoticization,”²⁹ Jamala performs the minority subject as wounded, dispossessed, and dignified. This aesthetic shift signals a broader transformation in Ukraine's Eurovision strategy—from vibrant self-assertion to postcolonial witness. The context amplifies this transformation: Russia withdrew from participating in the 2017 contest after its annexation of Crimea and political tensions with Ukraine escalated. In this light, *1944* not only commemorated a family's trauma but articulated a nation's cultural sovereignty through absence, memory, and international solidarity.

***Stefania* (2022): Folk-Rap Fusion and Wartime Resonance**

Ukraine's 2022 Eurovision victory with Kalush Orchestra's *Stefania* marked an unprecedented moment: the first time a contest winner so directly embodied

²⁷ Mariia Kuleshir, “The Theme of the Deportation of Crimean Tatars in Popular Songs,” *Scientific Journal of Polonia University* 61, no. 6 (2024): 63–66.

²⁸ Marko Pavlyshyn, “Ruslana, Serdushka, Jamala: National Self-Imaging in Ukraine's Eurovision Entries,” in *Eurovision: Identity and the International Politics of the Eurovision Song Contest since 1956*, ed. Julie Kalman et al. (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 132.

²⁹ Sonevsky, *Wild Music*, 41.

wartime experience in real time. Originally composed as an ode to frontman Oleh Psiuk's mother, the song acquired profound national significance following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Amid this context, the maternal figure came to symbolize not only individual familial love but also the resilience, endurance, and suffering of the Ukrainian nation.

Notably, *Stefania* was not Ukraine's original selection. Singer Alina Pash had initially won the national competition with the song *Tini zabutykh predkiv* (Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors), but was disqualified after it was revealed she had entered Crimea through Russian-controlled territory in 2015. Kalush Orchestra, the runner-up, was subsequently chosen to represent Ukraine.

The incident was not isolated. Questions surrounding Crimea, territorial sovereignty, and cultural allegiance have repeatedly shaped Ukraine's participation in Eurovision. In 2017, Russia's selected representative, Yulia Samoylova, was banned from entering Ukraine because she had previously performed in Crimea after entering from Russia, leading Russia to withdraw from the contest. In 2019, Ukraine itself withdrew after failing to reach an agreement with the singer Maruv, winner of the national selection. Although Maruv publicly affirmed that Crimea was part of Ukraine, she opposed contractual restrictions concerning her artistic activities in Russia and rejected the politicization of her participation, declaring: "I am a musician, not the baseball bat on the political arena" in a statement announcing her withdrawal. The controversy exposed tensions between artistic autonomy and national representation at a moment of increasing geopolitical polarization. These successive episodes reveal that Eurovision is not merely a musical competition but also a site where geopolitical conflicts, legal frameworks, and competing definitions of cultural loyalty are publicly negotiated.

Performed entirely in Ukrainian—a rarity on the Eurovision stage—the song fused traditional folk instruments such as the sopilka and telenka with contemporary hip-hop and trap rhythms. The emotional resonance of *Stefania* is heightened by the chorus lyrics, repeated like a mantra throughout the song: "Stefania mother, mother Stefania / The field blooms, but she's turning grey." These lines simultaneously express personal grief, intergenerational continuity, and national endurance in the face of devastation. The folk motifs, based on pentatonic and natural minor modes, are layered over syncopated, bass-heavy beats. The refrain, structured as a two-measure melodic phrase within a narrow ambitus of a fourth, repeats throughout the song with minimal variation, creating a chant-like, incantatory resonance. In contrast, the rap verses inject rhythmic urgency and thematic movement—narratives of memory, protection, and resistance—expressed in colloquial, contemporary language. This hybrid

strategy echoes the approach of Go_A's 2021 entry *Shum*, which similarly blended Ukrainian folklore with electronic beats and a war-like aesthetic, foreshadowing Eurovision's shift toward affective and political intensity. Both songs evoke a ritualistic atmosphere through incantatory choruses, sonic layering, and choreographic minimalism, crafting spaces of resilience and cultural assertion. This hybrid structure illustrates a layered form of national expression. As Kiss, Pidkuimukha, and Kolisnyk observe, *Stefania* was widely reinterpreted as a symbolic representation of Ukraine's resilience and vulnerability during wartime. The use of Ukrainian throughout the performance, they note, became a powerful affirmation of linguistic identity and cultural sovereignty under threat.

On stage in Turin, the group appeared in embroidered folk garments—*vyshyvanky*—traditionally associated with Ukrainian heritage. These garments were designed by Gaptuvalnya, an ethno-inspired Ukrainian brand from Ivano-Frankivsk founded by Natalia Herhelyuk, known for combining traditional embroidery with modern aesthetics to support national identity and cultural continuity.³⁰ Visual motifs such as sunflowers, rural fields, and ruins functioned as symbolic icons of endurance and nationhood. The symbolic vocabulary mobilized by Kalush Orchestra also echoes earlier Ukrainian Eurovision performances. Like Ruslana in 2004 and GreenJolly in 2005, the group originates from western Ukraine, a region often associated—both within Ukraine and abroad—with strong attachments to the Ukrainian language, folk traditions, and pro-European aspirations. The embroidered *vyshyvanky*, the rural imagery, and the emphasis on cultural continuity thus resonate with longer-standing narratives of national identity. Yet these symbols should not be understood as fixed markers of a regional identity. Rather, their meanings have evolved over time, especially since 2014 and 2022, becoming part of a broader and increasingly inclusive repertoire of Ukrainianness.

The performance extended beyond the stage to the music video, filmed in the recently liberated towns of Bucha and Irpin—sites of documented war crimes. Kalush Orchestra's frontman, Oleh Psiuk, became a national and international symbol of cultural resistance. His iconic pink bucket hat became widely recognizable, appearing on posters, street murals, and in fashion across Ukraine and beyond. As Nadiya Kiss, Liudmyla Pidkuimukha and Yuliia Kolisnyk note "The pink hat worn by Oleh Psiuk . . . became the prototype for fashionable accessories

³⁰ Nadiya Kiss, Liudmyla Pidkuimukha, and Yuliia Kolisnyk, "Resistance Through Pop Culture and the Ideology of the 'Russian World': On Deconstruction in Times of War," *AREI: Journal for Central and Eastern European History and Politics*, no. 2 (2024): 65.

for kids and adults not only in Ukraine but also abroad.”³¹ At the end of the Eurovision performance, Psiuk made a direct appeal to support the besieged Ukrainian city of Mariupol and Azovstal. Despite Eurovision’s rules prohibiting overt political messaging, the plea was broadcast live and had immediate global consequences. The performance and its symbolic elements—such as Psiuk’s pink hat and the mention of Azovstal—circulated across visual and digital culture, turning the song into a widely shared act of commemoration and protest.

Following the group’s victory, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky tweeted: “Our courage impresses the world, our music conquers Europe!” The result—driven strongly by public televote—was interpreted internationally as a moment of symbolic solidarity, with Western press framing the song as an act of musical resistance and humanitarian alignment.

In contrast to Ukraine’s earlier Eurovision entries—Ruslana’s folkloric hybridity in 2004 and Jamal’s testimonial lament in 2016—*Stefania* established a third paradigm: a wartime anthem rooted in maternal imagery, stylistic hybridity, and affective resonance. It demonstrated that music diplomacy, especially in times of national crisis, could be both sonically compelling and politically charged on a global stage.

Conclusion

Over the past two decades, Ukraine has approached the Eurovision Song Contest not simply as a musical competition, but as a symbolic arena for cultural sovereignty and geopolitical narration. Drawing on Joseph Nye’s notion of “soft power,”³² the concept of cultural diplomacy, and Maria Sonevytsky’s notion of “sovereign imaginaries,”³³ this article has argued that Ukrainian Eurovision entries function as acts of sonic diplomacy—instances where aesthetic form becomes a vehicle for historical memory, political agency, and national self-articulation.

The three entries examined here exemplify distinct yet interconnected responses to Ukraine’s evolving political and cultural context. *Wild Dances* (2004) mobilized stylized folklore and “wildness” as a form of auto-exotic empowerment, negotiating Ukraine’s place within Europe through the strategic performance of difference. *1944* (2016) introduced testimonial rupture and Crimean Tatar trauma

³¹ Kiss, Pidkuimukha, and Kolisnyk, “Resistance Through Pop Culture,” 66.

³² Nye, *Soft Power*.

³³ Sonevytsky, *Wild Music*, 6–7.

onto the global stage, transforming Eurovision into a space where postcolonial memory and minoritized histories could claim international visibility. *Stefania* (2022), finally, blended folk and hip-hop idioms to articulate wartime resilience through maternal allegory, while simultaneously revealing how questions of cultural allegiance, territorial sovereignty, and national representation have become inseparable from Ukraine's Eurovision trajectory.

As Paul Jordan has argued, Ukrainian Eurovision performances have articulated contrasting visions of national identity, ranging from folkloric spectacle to post-Soviet irony and inclusive modernity. *Wild Dances*, 1944, and *Stefania* echo this diversity, each engaging with different expressive modes: stylized heritage, testimonial lament, and hybrid resistance. Yet these performances should not be understood as fixed representations of Ukrainianness. Rather, they reveal the fluid and contested nature of nation-building itself, showing how cultural identities are continually negotiated, reformulated, and projected onto international stages.

This trajectory is not limited to the songs discussed here. The success of Go_A's *Shum* in 2021 points to other forms of sonic resilience emerging from Ukraine. Reyes and McGee interpret the performance as a "patch of survival,"³⁴ where electronic music, ritual practices, melancholy, and ecstasy converge to negotiate uncertainty and crisis. Their analysis suggests that contemporary Ukrainian Eurovision entries increasingly mobilize vernacular traditions not as nostalgic remnants of the past, but as resources for imagining collective futures.

As Hansen, Rogatchevski, Steinholt and Wickström have argued, Eurovision has progressively become a post-Soviet geopolitical battleground, where performances are read not only as musical acts but also as statements on history, sovereignty, and political allegiance.³⁵ The controversies surrounding Verka Serdushka, Jamala, Maruv, Alina Pash, and the recurring disputes over Crimea illustrate how the contest has become entangled with broader debates on Ukraine's place within Europe and its relationship to Russia.

The events of 2022 perhaps revealed this paradox more clearly than ever. Initially, the European Broadcasting Union insisted that Eurovision was a non-political event and announced that Russia would remain eligible to participate

³⁴ Manuel Reyes, and Kristin McGee, "Patches of Survival in the Anthropocene: Melancholy and Ecstasy within Go_A's 2021 Eurovision Song Contest Performance of *ШУМ* (шум)," *Popular Music and Society* 46, no. 2 (2023): 191–212.

³⁵ Arve Hansen, Andrei Rogatchevski, Yngvar Steinholt, and David-Emil Wickström, "'Lasha Tumbai' or 'Russia, Good-Bye'? The Eurovision Song Contest as a Post-Soviet Geopolitical Battleground," *A War of Songs: Popular Music and Recent Russia-Ukraine Relations*, ed. Andrei Rogatchevski and Yngvar Steinholt (Stuttgart: ibidem Press, 2019), 163–195.

despite the invasion of Ukraine. Faced with strong opposition from broadcasters, artists, and audiences across Europe, it reversed its position only a few days later. The episode exposed the limits of Eurovision's longstanding claim to political neutrality. Far from existing outside politics, the contest has become a space where cultural identities, historical memories, and geopolitical conflicts are publicly negotiated.

What Eurovision uniquely offers is therefore not an escape from politics, but a particular mode of engaging with it—through music, affect, performance, and shared imaginaries. Ukraine's entries from 2003 to 2022 demonstrate how nations under existential threat do not retreat from global visibility but transform it, making voice, memory, and sonic creativity central to the performance of sovereignty. This makes the Eurovision Song Contest not simply a competition, but a laboratory of sonic nationhood.



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LOUISA MARTIN-CHEVALIER

Associate Professor at Sorbonne University, she has been on temporary assignment at CEFRES (French Research Center in Humanities and Social Sciences in Prague)

since September 1st, 2025. She is initiating a wide-ranging research programme to examine the impact of exile on women's artistic creation, with a particular focus on the contemporary Ukrainian musical scene. She participates in several research program such as UkFEMM/Ukrainian Female Musicians and Migration and she is co-Principal Investigator with Valeria Korablyova of the TANDEM-CNRS-UK "A Subaltern That Sings: From Sound Resistance to Musical Diplomacy in War-time Ukraine," a collaboration between Charles University and CEFRES (Prague). She is also a member of ESCAPE, a 4EU+ SEED Funding project exploring the Eurovision Song Contest as a site of cultural diplomacy, identity formation, and European imaginaries.