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Born in Belorussia, USSR-Time Belorussia

Belarusian ESC 2011 Entries as Reflections of Clashing State Propaganda Narratives

Abstract

The aim of the paper is to analyze all the texts of a series of song choices for the 2011 Belarussian Eurovision Song Contest entry to discern different propaganda strategies, from presenting the Belarusians as open-minded and friendly, yet faithful to “traditional values,” to evoking feelings of Soviet nostalgia—with close-reading as the analytic tool. The influence of the geopolitical situation ca. 2010 on the Eurovision acts of CEE countries will be a crucial context that will allow assessment of whether Vinnikova’s entry was an unprecedented mix of authoritarian propaganda content with the form of a Eurovision song, a reflection of a broader trend, or a foreshadow of new pop-cultural poetics.

Keywords

Belarus, Eurovision Song Contest, Anastasia Vinnikova, Post-Sovietness, state propaganda

Abstrakt

Born in Belorussia, ussr-Time Belorussia: Białoruskie utwory zgłoszone do ESC 2011 jako odzwierciedlenie sprzecznych narracji propagandowych państwa

Celem niniejszego artykułu jest identyfikacja i rozróżnienie strategii propagandowych obecnych w tekstach piosenek zgłoszonych przez białoruską delegację na Eurowizję 2011 – od narracji przedstawiającej Białorusinów jako ludzi otwartych, przyjaznych, a jednocześnie wiernych „tradycyjnym wartościom”, po przywołanie uczucia nostalgii za Związkiem Sowieckim. Analiza – przy pomocy metody close readingu – osadzona zostanie w szerszym kontekście oddziaływań sytuacji geopolitycznej Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej w początkach drugiej dekady XXI wieku na występy krajów tej części kontynentu w konkursie Eurowizji. Wnioski z takiej kontekstualizacji, zderzone z innymi przykładami z kilkudziesięcioletniej historii eurowizyjnych zmagani reprezentacji różnych narodów, pozwolą rozsądzić, czy utwór Winnikawej stanowił bezprecedensowe połączenie autorytarnych treści propagandowych z formą piosenki eurowizyjnej, odzwierciedlenie szerszego trendu czy też zapowiedź nowej popkulturowej poetyki.

Słowa kluczowe

Białoruś, Konkurs Piosenki Eurowizji, Anastasija Winnikawa, postsowieckość, propaganda państwowa

On the evening of May 12, 2011, during the second semi-final of the Eurovision Song Contest (ESC) in Düsseldorf, Germany, Anastasia Vinnikova represented Belarus by performing a song called *I Love Belarus*. Having placed fourteenth, she failed to qualify for the grand final of the contest¹—therefore putting an end to the turbulent story of this particular participation. The fact she eventually got to perform on the Eurovision stage (contrary to the Galasy ZMesta band a decade later²), however, can be seen from another point of view as a success itself as the Belarusian delegation was granted and fully used the opportunity to pass a specific message to the nearly 120-million, Europe-wide audience.³ Moreover, there were moments in the lead up to the performance where it had not been at all certain it would happen as Belarus' involvement in ESC 2011 encountered several difficulties that resulted in profound changes to what had originally been planned to be sent to Düsseldorf.

I Love Belarus (music: Evgeny Oleinik, with lyrics by Evgeny Oleinik and Svetlana Geraskova)⁴ was, in fact, not originally selected to represent the country; as officially announced on February 28, 2011, Vinnikova was to sing a composition called *Born in Byelorussia* (Evgeny Oleinik, Oleinik and Viktor Rudenko).⁵ The use of the B(y)elorussia toponym sparked controversy,⁶ as it derives directly from the Russian word Belorussiya and thus is thought to connote the country's dependence upon Russia⁷ (contrary to the Belarusian-language Belarus as in the

Disclaimer: I, the author of this paper, have never set foot on Belarusian soil (to my deep regret). This work has been prepared on the basis of my privately and academically backed interest in Eastern European culture, in the history of post-war communist states in this region, and, of course, in the Eurovision Song Contest, and also on the experience of living in post-communist Poland. In the first instance, however, it was the huge and kind help and much advice from Dr. Jana Shostak that made this analysis possible for me. Owing a fair debt of gratitude, I dedicate the paper to her. Aware of my limited perspective and the complexity of the relationship between Belarus and Poland, I have tried not to impose an a priori attitude to the analyzed matter. However, some of my subconscious stances might find their expression here despite all the efforts—hence my desire to state this in the first place.

¹ "Second Semi-Final of Düsseldorf 2011," eurovision.tv, accessed April 7, 2025, <https://eurovision.tv/event/dusseldorf-2011/second-semi-final>.

² José Luis Panea and Ángela Cámara Rojo, "Bielorrusia, Eurovisión y el debate internacional sobre la democracia: El impacto mediático de las candidaturas de la БТБС en el Festival de la Canción," *Eu-topías: revista de interculturalidad, comunicación y estudios europeos* 23, no. 1 (2022): 53–56, <https://doi.org/10.7203/eutopias.23.21957>.

³ "114.5 million watched Eurovision Song Contest," EBU, June 3, 2011, <https://www.ebu.ch/news/2011/1145-million-watched-eurovision>.

⁴ "Anastasiya Vinnikova," eurovision.tv, accessed April 11, 2025, <https://eurovision.tv/participant/anastasiya-vinnikova>.

⁵ "Anastasiya Vinnikova is Born In Byelorussia!," eurovision.tv, February 28, 2011, <https://eurovision.tv/story/anastasiya-vinnikova-is-born-in-byelorussia>.

⁶ Kastus' Lashkevich, "'Bielorussia' vmesto 'Belarus': belorusy spoyut na Yevrovidenii o nesushchestvuyushchey strane," TUT.BY, March 1, 2011, archived May 15, 2017, at <https://web.archive.org/web/20170515090915/http://news.tut.by/society/216773.html>. The title alone speaks for itself: "'Bielorussia' instead of 'Belarus': the Belarusians will sing at Eurovision about a non-existing country" (all the quotations from the Belarusian and Russian sources or lyrics translated by W.A.P., if not stated otherwise).

⁷ Timothy Snyder, *The Reconstruction of Nations: Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus, 1569–1999* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), x–xi.

legal name of the present independent state that discarded Russian dominance in 1991 following the Soviet Union's collapse),⁸ and remains an object of dispute between Belarusians and Russian philologists.⁹ The text was consequently rewritten in March 2011 as *I Am Belarusian* (Oleinik, Oleinik and Geraskova).¹⁰ Then, the entry was ultimately rejected by the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) on the grounds of premature release—as a video of the artist presenting the song in May 2010 had surfaced on the Internet—which forced Oleinik and Geraskova to create another composition, nota bene, to the publicly expressed relief of the former.¹¹

Each of the Belarusian 2011 entry's iterations, however, expressed the idea of glorifying the country, though on slightly different terms. The aim of this paper is therefore to analyze comparatively the texts of all the songs submitted by BTRC, the Belarusian broadcaster, to the Eurovision Song Contest in 2011 in order to find, distinguish, and name the various state propaganda strategies they contain. The political events of 2010–2011 in Belarus will form a crucial context in this analysis, allowing the formulation of hypotheses concerning reasons and goals behind Vinnikova's ESC participation.

Nation Branding, Affective Nationalism, or State Propaganda: Methodological Remarks

Understanding Belarus' 2011 entries as propagandist acts is the assumption on which this paper is founded. Though it is written purely from the perspective of cultural, not political, studies, it seems necessary first to emphasize the difference between *propaganda* and *nation branding* (a notion often used by Eurovision scholars in reference to some self-themed countries' representations at the contest;¹²

⁸ "Byelarus," Wikimedia Foundation, last modified January 24, 2025, 23:25 (UTC+2), accessed April 12, 2025, <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/%D0%91%D0%B5%D0%BB%D0%B0%D1%80%D1%83%D1%81%D1%8C#Belarusian>.

⁹ Artur Borovoy, "Belarus' vs 'Belorussiya': stavim tochku v voprose," *Onliner*, February 26, 2014, <https://people.onliner.by/2014/02/26/bel-17>; Boleśław Cieślak and Bożena Iwanowska, "White Russia or Belarus? German Problems with the Name of a Certain State," in *Von der Fachübersetzung zur literarischen Übersetzung*, ed. Artur Dariusz Kubacki and Piotr Sulikowski (Göttingen: V&R unipress, 2023), 17–18.

¹⁰ "Belarus: Song lyrics changed to *I Am Belarusian*," *eurovision.tv*, March 3, 2011, <https://eurovision.tv/story/belarus-song-lyrics-changed-to-i-am-belarusian>.

¹¹ "Anastasiya loves Belarus and Eurovision," *eurovision.tv*, May 8, 2011, <https://eurovision.tv/story/anastasiya-loves-belarus-and-eurovision>.

¹² See e.g. Galina Miazhevich, "Sexual Excess in Russia's Eurovision Performances as a Nation Branding Tool," *Russian Journal of Communication* 3, no. 3/4 (2010): 250–252, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19409419.2010.10756776>; Galina Miazhevich, "Ukrainian Nation Branding Off-Line and Online: Verka Serduchka at the Eurovision Song Contest," *Europe-Asia Studies* 64, no. 8 (2012): 1505–1507, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23275227>; Paul Thomas Jordan, "The Eurovision Song Contest: Nation Branding and Nation Building in Estonia and Ukraine" (PhD diss.,

sometimes also the concepts of *national self-imaging*¹³ and *playful or affective nationalism*¹⁴ have found use in that particular context), then to explain the grounds on which the first term has been applied.

According to Simon Anholt, the scholar who coined the term in 1996, the *nation brand* concept stemmed from an analogy he observed between how the reputation of countries (places in general) and companies' brand images behave—especially in terms of progress, prosperity, and good management.¹⁵ A couple of years afterward, he nevertheless noted that the term, eventually transformed into *nation branding*, is far from precise and can be misleading if “associated with the act of creating favourable images of countries through marketing communications” as “little evidence suggests this is possible.”¹⁶ Putting aside the doubted accuracy of the term itself, its evident commercial marketing overtone makes it quite questionable to use it in the context of post-Soviet Belarus' authoritarian regime, characterized by strong tendencies of subordinating many aspects of public life to the state, be that in the economy or mass media.¹⁷ For that reason, the primarily historic notion of propaganda seems much more suitable here.

As Alan Hunt notes, “propaganda is about narrowing down the perceptions of the target audience, i.e. closing their minds to any alternative possibilities.” Yet “the ‘new’ public diplomacy,” activities of which are undoubtedly closely allied with those of nation branding, though specific and limited, “is much more about generating creative dialogue.”¹⁸ He also mentions “today's virtual impossibility

University of Glasgow, 2013), x–xi, 15–19, <https://theses.gla.ac.uk/2972/?ref=vickyteinaki.com>, and the book partially based on it, Jordan, *The Modern Fairy Tale: Nation Branding, National Identity and the Eurovision Song Contest in Estonia* (Tartu: University of Tartu Press, 2014), 49, 61–63, 71–72; Jess Carniel, “Nation Branding, Cultural Relations and Cultural Diplomacy at Eurovision: Between Australia and Europe,” in *Eurovision: Identity and the International Politics of the Eurovision Song Contest since 1956*, ed. Julie Kalman et al. (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 151–156.

¹³ Marko Pavlyshyn, “Ruslana, Serdushka, Jamala: National Self-Imaging in Ukraine's Eurovision Entries,” in *Eurovision: Identity and the International Politics*, 130–131.

¹⁴ Haktan Ural, “Turkishness on the Stage: Affective Nationalism in the Eurovision Song Contest,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 22, no. 4 (2019): 521, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877918820335>.

¹⁵ Simon Anholt, “Beyond the Nation Brand: The Role of Image and Identity in International Relations,” *Exchange: The Journal of Public Diplomacy* 2, no. 1 (2011): 6–7, <https://surface.syr.edu/exchange/vol2/iss1/1>.

¹⁶ Anholt, “Beyond the Nation Brand,” 6–7.

¹⁷ Pavel Usov, “Characteristics of the Belarusian Media System,” *East of Europe: Humanities and Social Studies* 4, no. 1 (2018): 63–64 (note especially the Usov-translated quotation from Belarusian ideologists Matusevich and Parechina: “A very important task of the young Belarusian state is to fight with the manipulation of the public opinion, imposing of foreign (Western) ideology and morality. The media... should effectively counteract the information pressure exerted by the foreign mass media and shape a positive image of the country. It is unacceptable to use the television, radio and press to manipulate public awareness, impose reaction views and hamper the Belarusian government.”) Aliaksandr Papko and Piotr Kozarzewski, “The Evolution of Belarusian Public Sector: From Command Economy to State Capitalism?” *CASE Research Paper*, no. 12 (2020): 33, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3586496>.

¹⁸ Alan Hunt, *Public Diplomacy: What It Is and How to Do It* (United Nations Institute for Training and Research, 2015), 32, 34.

of divorcing the term *propaganda* from the excesses of the Nazi and Soviet periods.”¹⁹ On the other hand, the aforementioned concept of *affective nationalism*, as interpreted within the field of Eurovision studies by Haktan Ural, might also be of use as it emphasizes the relational character in expressing peripheral European (in other words—simply—non-Western) states’ national identity in the contest.²⁰ On the basis of Göran Bolin’s differentiation of nationalist styles represented by countries partaking in the ESC—the Western ones maintaining less serious, ludic position vs. the Eastern, attaching much more significance to the national-competition aspect²¹—Ural contrasts a *playful*, rather unexclusive nationalism of the former described by Kyriakidou et al. with the affective one of the latter.²² His argument, corresponding also with Ivan Raykoff’s and Robert Deam Tobin’s diagnosis from 2007,²³ that the Eurovision stage forms a space for “affective encounters” leading to the delineation of a “peripheral” nation identity’s symbolic boundaries in relation to “Europeanness” seems particularly applicable in discussing the case of the Belarusian ESC 2011 participation.

In the Quest for Propagandist Tropes: Analysis of the Songs’ Content

A Eurovision entry consists of a few layers—textual, musical, and performative—and the ratio of importance between them, naturally, varies in each case. I would argue that when it comes to Vinnikova’s songs it is the lyrics that play the key role of attracting attention (though in case of *Born in Belorussia* its musical production adds significantly to evoking certain associations and the *I Love Belarus* music video aesthetics are also quite suggestive). Taking this into account, I have decided to focus primarily on analyzing the texts but I will not refrain from occasionally relating to the other layers of the described entries so as to examine how they correspond with each other in conveying the general message.

¹⁹ Hunt, *Public Diplomacy*, 34.

²⁰ “Moreover, the affective dynamics are central to the making of national identities in diverse cultural events. . . . As the construction of national identity is about symbolic marking of differences, what is included and excluded derives from affective dispositions,” Ural, “Turkishness,” 522.

²¹ Göran Bolin, “Visions of Europe: Cultural Technologies of Nation-States,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 9, no. 2 (2006): 194–195, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877906064030>.

²² Ural, “Turkishness,” 520.

²³ “For many contributors, the song contest is an arena in which participating nations stage their relationship to this [Western, democratic, unity-oriented — W.A.P.] vision of Europe” —Ivan Raykoff and Robert Deam Tobin, “Introduction,” in *A Song for Europe: Popular Music and Politics in the Eurovision Song Contest*, ed. Ivan Raykoff and Robert Deam Tobin (Aldershot-Burlington: Ashgate, 2007), xviii, <https://archive.org/details/songforeuropepopoounse>.

Born in Belorussia: Taking Pride in a Romanticized Vision of the Soviet Past or a Joke Entry?

The narration of the first song²⁴ starts with an invitation: the persona informs the recipient they are going together on a journey back in time. The destination becomes fully uncovered in the second stanza when the subject reveals they were “wearing a star / Back in the USSR,” being “as good as [its?] mama.” Having gone “round and round” alongside the “passionate” narrator, we are granted information about their genesis both in time and space (“Born in Belorussia, USSR time”). Then, the atmosphere gets suddenly quite apocalyptic when the inevitable passage of time resulting in “everything’s crashing” is brought up. Moreover, the repetition of the chorus introduces some ambiguity—after the “USSR-time Belorussia” is mentioned the persona states that they’ve got “you” on their mind. The confusion about who they are referring to—the recipient or the country—is then followed by another one when the “you,” deemed to be their “passion,” is called to “do it old-fashioned,” apparently with their assistance (“do it old-fashioned / You and I”). The emotional tension is evident in opposition to the character of the activity. The third stanza introduces another actor—“Diamonds and treats of the West”—who is cordially invited to “come and check it [Belarus?] out.” At this point, luckily, the identity of “you” becomes ultimately clear as the subject states: “You’re still remaining the best / Belorussia.” The compliments are not confined only to this; returning to the eschatological register, the persona forecasts that “When everything will be gone / Your name will shine like the sun” and goes on praising “Belorussia” for remaining the only “good, old-fashioned” place.

One can observe here three main tropes shaping the overall message, namely narratives of:

- Soviet-era-oriented nostalgia (A)—going back in time, assuming the “old-fashioned” is superior;
- eternal glory (B)—the present is falling apart but the past-rooted “Belorussia” will not; and
- competitive hospitality (C)—the West has got its advantages, but they might be surprised by what “Belorussia” has to offer.

And the two last of them are undoubtedly subordinate to the first. The song is, in fact, a clear statement of pride taken in Belarus being on the “good” side of a self-imposed opposition between the “post-Sovietly old-fashioned” and “the

²⁴ Gwendal51, “Anastasia Vinnikova—Born in Belorussia Lyrics,” LyricsTranslate.com, accessed August 3, 2025, <https://lyricstranslate.com/en/Anastasiya-Vinnikova-Born-Belorussia-lyrics.html>.

modern,” presumably represented by the West and its “diamonds and treats.” The rhetorical load of convincing is visible primarily in the “private” layer of the song, that is, when “Baby,” perhaps a person from across the western border of Belarus, who needs to be *properly* “shown around,” is addressed and urged to “feel [the subject’s] passion.” The omnipresent longing for the USSR, turned up in the musical dimension by Alexandrov Ensemble-like backing vocals (!)—observed also by José Luis Panea and Ángela Cámara Rojo, who highlighted the resemblance of the song’s nostalgic aura to the military propaganda of the Soviet Union²⁵—is thus not only a matter of past here. It forms the foundation from which the subject-observed, very much present-day “goodness” of Belarus stems. The rest is in an intense, subtly doomsday-themed paroxysm of patriotic love to the eternally glorious Belarus (compare the last two lines of its state anthem’s chorus: “Oh, our beloved Motherland, / May you forever live and flourish, Belarus!”²⁶). This cherishing of post-Soviet identity entangled with a straightforward expression of USSR nostalgia,²⁷ bearing the marks of a restorative one as differentiated by Svetlana Boym—thanks particularly to its contrasting nature,²⁸ aligns perfectly with the official state auto-presentation strategy of Lukashenko-era Belarus. After all, it was at the very beginning of his tenure (1995) when both the flag and the coat of arms were changed back from independence-connoting to those of the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic, only dropping the hammer-and-sickle symbol.²⁹

From this point of view, the defensive line the *Born in Belorussia* authors took when the toponymic controversy burst out seems rather incredible. Evgeny Oleinik, when asked why the song had been selected for Eurovision, distanced himself from the choice and stressed it was originally penned not for the contest but for Vinnikova’s performance in a national TV show and that

²⁵ Panea and Cámara Rojo, “Bielorrusia,” 50.

²⁶ “Nasha lyubimaya matsi-Radzima, / Vyechna zhyvi i kvitnyey, Byelarus!” National Anthem of the Republic of Belarus; President of the Republic of Belarus, accessed April 18, 2025, <https://president.gov.by/en/gosudarstvo/simvolika/gimn>.

²⁷ It has to be noted that the title of Vinnikova’s song and in general the concept of drawing inspiration from being of Soviet origin isn’t exactly a novelty if it comes to the post-USSR pop-music scene (though it hasn’t been common to use this motive in that blindly glorifying manner). Compare DDТ’s rather ironic gos song *Born in the USSR* or, what seems to be a Bruce Springsteen pastiche, the slightly humorous yet visibly appreciative Oleg Gazmanov song *Made in the USSR* from 2005.

²⁸ “Restorative nostalgia knows two main plots: the restoration of origins and the conspiracy theory. The conspiratorial worldview reflects a nostalgia for a transcendental cosmology and a simple premodern conception of good and evil!” Svetlana Boym, “Nostalgia and Its Discontents,” *The Hedgehog Review* 9, no. 2 (2007): 14.

²⁹ Andrej Kotljarchuk, Andrej Radaman, and Elena Sinitsyna, “The Political Symbols and Concepts of Statehood in the Modern History of Belarus,” in *Belarus in the Twenty-First Century: Between Dictatorship and Democracy*, ed. Elena Korosteleva et al. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2023), 10–11.

it was her decision to send it to the closed ESC preselection.³⁰ He particularly emphasized the alleged farcical nature of the entry, based on the young age of the performer, born in the last months of USSR, stressing that their task now (as of the moment the interview was taken—March 3) is to make it “more lyrical and less humorous.”³¹ Viktor Rudenko, text’s co-author, added that it was just a “commercial composition” written in accordance with an idea of Oleinik’s, who “simply wanted to make fun of BSSR” and invented such a title. Moreover, not only did he state that putting the song in the Eurovision context would feel repulsive for him as he saw himself as a supporter of Belarus’ European aspirations; he went as far as to say that though “of course” they would like the song to be “telling about how awesome is our state and how long its history too,” it is impossible to “put that into a pop text”—in his opinion it would be much better for the country’s image to send an “aesthetic and trend-suited song that won’t say a word about Belarus.”³²

When it comes to taking the song as a joke, another context must also be mentioned: on March 2, 2011 Lavon Volski released a short video as a part of the *Sawka dy Hryshka* project, published on the Radio Svaboda (the Belarusian branch of Radio Free Europe) Internet channels. He mocked Lukashenko’s regime in the aftermath of the 2010 political repressions with a direct travestiation of *Born in Belorussia*—

Byelorussia
Crazy and so fine
Byelorussia
Vodka and cheap wine
Red and green and constitution
We don’t need a revolution!

—with the stanza mentioning also the government’s favors towards other dictators such as Muammar Gaddafi, Kurmanbek Bakiyev, and Laurent Gbagbo.³³

³⁰ Tat’yana Zamirovskaya, “Rozhdënnyye v «Belarash»,” *Belgazeta*, March 5, 2011, archived January 16, 2024, at https://web.archive.org/web/20240116204344/http://www.belgazeta.by/ru/2011_03_05/vizavi/22409/.

³¹ “The *Born in Byelorussia* song wasn’t written for Eurovision. It was created in 2010 at the request of the performer in a humorous manner. Nastya [Vinnikova] was born a couple of months before the collapse of USSR, the accent was put on it, you know, just a musical joke—said Oleinik with a tired voice—If the jury chose the song, they are to be asked,” “Na Yevrovidenii Anastasiya Vinnikova spoyet pesnyu *I am Belarusian*,” *Novaya Lida*, March 3, 2011, https://lida.org/news/read/Na_Evrovidenii_Anastasija_Vinnikova_spoet_pesnyu_I_am_Belarusian.html.

³² Tat’yana Zamirovskaya, “Rozhdënnyye.”

³³ Lyavon Vol’ski, “*Sawka dy Hryshka*: Byelorussia,” *Radyjo Svaboda*, March 2, 2011, <https://www.svaboda.org/a/2325809.html>.

I Am Belarusian: A "Whole Life to Live" Taking Place as "Back in the History We Go"

In the official EBU announcement the new lyrics, this time a result of Oleinik's cooperation with Svetlana Geraskova, were described as having had their theme "shifted to a more contemporary way of describing Belarus" because the previous iteration "quoted memories from Soviet Union times as well as the historical name of *Byelorussia*, which is not officially used anymore these days."³⁴ There is not much to add to such a summary as this time the song's message was significantly simplified. In general, *I Am Belarusian*³⁵ is a statement of a young person who is self-confident, future-oriented, gaining strength, and open to new possibilities. Of course, the Belarusian nationality of the lyrical subject is still the leading motif, but this time it means not being "good as USSR-time mama" but characterized by a bunch of general virtues: generosity ("I've got so much I can give,") friendliness, and both free spiritedness and honor, not to mention a love that is "as deep as the sea."

This interim iteration is not quite as interesting as the others, but it does reflect some symptomatic changes in conveyed narratives (developed further in the final version):

- a strict focus on the future (D)—not a single word about the Soviet Union nor being "old-fashioned," only the prospective of a "new start" and a "whole life to live;"
- friendliness (E) instead of a rivalry-driven relation with the (Western) other (C);
- a discourse of virtuousness (F)—positioning the Belarusians as kind, honorable, generous, and filled with all-powerful love; but also
- rising in strength (G).

I Love Belarus: Arcadia Preparing for a Confrontation?

The lyrics of *I Love Belarus*³⁶ seemingly dominated by the motif of country-oriented affect (H), are in fact filled with a variety of tropes, which makes it seem the most complex of all. It starts from a declaration of the persona's well-being and strength that is—crucially—of collective origin ("it's easy to be strong / When

³⁴ "Belarus: Song" eurovision tv.

³⁵ "*I am Belarusian*: Belarus; Song lyrics changed," *data.minsk.by*, March 3, 2011.

³⁶ "Anastasiya Vinnikova," eurovision tv.

all the hearts keep on beating as one”). This is followed by an equally subtle ironic meta-allusion about “writing a new song / Saying that I’m free, friendly and young.” Then, the subject mentions the numerous riches their land has got and offers the recipient their company in discovering them. When the chorus drops, the subject’s patriotic love reaches its climax, reflected in statements of insatiableness and the promise of endless devotion. The figure of the “shining sun,” previously serving as a *comparans* to the name of “Belorussia,” reappears here—this time more literally (“And I wanna see the sun / Shining from above”). The emotional intensity remains disturbingly high as the subject declares immediately in the following stanza their readiness to rise up (unspecifying against what or whom), with a complete lack of fear and ruling out forever the possibility of surrender—because time passing will have no effect on their “courage and grace.” The Russian-language version of the song, called *Moya Byelarus’* (My Belarus)³⁷ emphasizes particularly the bucolic aspect (I)—evoking images of “rivers, forests and lakes / Endless, golden fields / Fire of sunsets, quiet sunrises” referred to as “my home and my land” by the subject.

As mentioned above, the final lyrics mark a paradigm shift—from celebrating the past to concentrating on the present and near future. There are, though, some significant differences:

- the aspect of (collective) strength being on the increase (G) absolutely dominates here, bumped up by the mentions of “rising up” and “not giving up” (quite contrasting with the opening statements of being “free, friendly and young;”)
- that aspect in turn reverting the nature of the relationship with the other from open friendliness of the previous song’s “Belarusian” (E) back to the competitive one (C)—compare “I’ve got so much I can give” vs. “I have so much and I’m ready to show you;”
- a competitiveness in which—of all the supposed spiritual qualities of Belarus’ people (F)—*military* virtues such as courage and fearlessness prevail.

William Lee Adams interpreted the song as the result of what may have been “if members of the Soviet Politburo ever produced an adult video,” thus pointing out also the double entendre character of the love claims.³⁸ The sense of ambiguity, ac-

³⁷ “Ya vizhu reki, lesa i ozera / Beskraiyniye, zolotyie polya / Ogon’ zakatov i tikhiye zori / Eto dom rodnoy i moyazemlya,” Effily, “Anastasiya Vinnikova—*Moya Belarus’* Lyrics,” LyricsTranslate.com, accessed August 3, 2025, <https://lyricstranslate.com/en/Anastasiya-Vinnikova-Moya-Belarus-MOYA-BELARUS-lyrics.html>.

³⁸ William Lee Adams, “Eurovision 2011 Profile: Belarus’ Anastasiya Vinnikova with *I Love Belarus*,” wiwibloggs, April 17, 2011, <https://wiwibloggs.com/2011/04/17/eurovision-2011-profile-belarus-anastasiya-vinnikova-with-i-love-belarus/10232/>.

cording to him, is reinforced by the music video, in which Vinnikova is said to be “posing provocatively.” Whether her body language is sexually unrestrained or not seems for me rather a secondary question; what strikes me the most is the confrontational gesture she (followed by the backing vocalists) makes each time she sings the lead line of the chorus, powerfully raising her hand with a closed fist. It is quite thought-provoking, as has obviously been thought about in regard of the video’s aesthetics—as can be seen in the blending of traditional elements of Belarusian folklore (the dulcimer, dancers in the folk costumes) within the contrastingly modern, LED-pulsating stage design, which corresponds with the thematic paradigm shift.

On the other hand, despite the message having been ridden of straightforward mentions of the Soviet past, I would argue that certain motifs of Soviet imaginary and, generally speaking, communist topoi, resurfaced in *I Love Belarus*. Let us take a closer look at this particular stanza of the Russian version of the text: “I see rivers, forests and lakes. ... This is my home and my land” and compare it with the widely popular in the USSR (though of a slightly earlier, unclear origin³⁹) folk song called *Rodina* (the fatherland):

I see wonderful space,
I see leas and fields
This is Russian space
This is Russian land

I see mountains and valleys
I see rivers and seas—
These are the Russian images
This is my Fatherland!⁴⁰

The figure of a shining sun in the Eastern European context is also not a novel solution (compare Dmitri Shostakovich’s *The Sun Is Shining Over Our Motherland*, Op. 90 cantata from 1952,⁴¹ and nor is the motif of one heart beating for many people as a symbol of collective strength. It was featured, for example, in

³⁹ Nikolay Ovsiyannikov, “Vizhu chudnoye privol’ye,” *Alef*, August 3, 2016, archived November 13, 2019 at <https://web.archive.org/web/20191113165126/http://www.alefmagazine.com/pub4425.html>.

⁴⁰ “Vizhu chudnoye privol’ye, / Vizhu nivy i polya,— / Eto russkoye razdol’ye, / Eto russkaya zemlya! Vizhu gory i doliny, / Vizhu reki i morya,— / Eto russkiye kartiny, / Eto Eto Rodina moyal,” *Rodina* (pesnya), Wikimedia Foundation, last modified January 21, 2023, 22:17 (UTC+2), accessed April 20, 2025, [https://ru.wikisource.org/wiki/%D0%A0%D0%BE%D0%B4%D0%B8%D0%BD%D0%B0.\(%D0%BF%D0%B5%D1%81%D0%BD%D1%8F\)](https://ru.wikisource.org/wiki/%D0%A0%D0%BE%D0%B4%D0%B8%D0%BD%D0%B0.(%D0%BF%D0%B5%D1%81%D0%BD%D1%8F)).

⁴¹ *Shostakovich Work List* (Berlin: Boosey & Hawkes, 2023), 210, https://www.boosey.com/downloads/shostakovich_worklist.pdf.

a Polish communist propagandist song called *Miliony rąk* (Millions of hands) from 1947, where these numerous pairs of hands, sharing a common heart, were going to “build a home: People’s Republic/Sunny and independent.”⁴²

The Political Background: The 2010 Belarusian Presidential Elections and Civil Unrest

On December 19, 2010—78 days before Vinnikova was named the Belarusian ESC representative—presidential elections were held in the country. Despite Western hopes for progress in Belarus’ democratization processes, fueled by the temporary deterioration of its relationship with Russia, the result was first a harshly violent governmental reaction to opposition demonstrations against fraud on the eve of election day and another Alexander Lukashenko-rigged victory, announced on December 24.⁴³ In the aftermath, 639 of the protestors were arrested (including opposition presidential candidates, interrogated by secret police, then eventually sentenced to prison). The civil unrest combined with developing economic crisis—which eventually led to another outbreak of mass protests in June 2011—and escalating tensions with both Russia and the West remained key problems for the Lukashenko regime in 2011.⁴⁴

The Concept of “Love Towards Belarus” as a 2010 State Propaganda Slogan: The “Ya [lyublyu] Belarus” Campaign and Other Examples

Alongside preparations for the election day, 2010 was also marked by several campaigns of social advertising. This specific form of governmental public communication, though making use of originally commercial means, is in fact not a nation-branding mechanism, but simply another form of state-controlled mass media influencing the Belarusian society.⁴⁵ One of its main themes, described by

⁴² “*Miliony rąk*,” *Stare Melodie*, accessed April 20, 2025, https://staremelodie.pl/piosenka/3503/Miliony_rak.

⁴³ Elena Kropatcheva, “Presidential Election in Belarus in 2010: The Winner Takes It All?,” in *OSCE Yearbook 2011* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2012), 90, 97–98.

⁴⁴ Kropatcheva, “Presidential Election,” 97–101, 103.

⁴⁵ Definition from the Belarus “On Advertising” legal act (1997): “Social advertising – information of the governmental organs regarding healthy lifestyle, health and nature protection, saving energy resources prevention of crimes, social protection and safety of the people, that is not of the commercial nature,” P. A. Shishko, “*Sotsial'naya reklama v Respublike Belarus. Put' v nauku. Ekonomicheskkiye nauki* 21 (2018): 313, https://journals.psu.by/specialists_economics_sciences/article/view/6560/5877 (neither the given nor the patronymic name of the author has been made publicly known).

P. A. Shishko, is “the propagation [*propaganda*] of patriotism,” namely “forming and maintaining state sovereignty of the country.”⁴⁶

Bearing this in mind, one might find it strikingly thought-provoking that in the spring of 2010 there was a new series of social adverts created under the “Ya [lyublyu] Belarus” slogan—exactly, “I love Belarus.” According to Shishko, the goals of this cycle were to “evoke patriotic emotions in Belarusians and to *show guests from other countries what associations the citizens have when Belarus is mentioned.*” The billboard purportedly contained no state symbols as it had been decided to create “contemporary content” so as to make the message easy to receive by the “target group.” The slogan itself had been chosen because of the identical spelling in both the Belarusian and Russian languages.⁴⁷

Launching this series of advertising actions among many others—like, for instance, “Za. ... Belarus” (for Belarus), with one of the banners presenting Kseniya Sitnik, Belarusian Junior Eurovision Song Contest 2005 winner, holding the trophy—can also be seen as a part of Lukashenko’s presidential campaign. It has been common for his regime’s propaganda mechanism to resort to such measures, namely, basing the electoral strategy on officially unengaged, patriotic-themed media campaigns in various forms—from the aforementioned to allegedly spontaneous flashmobs.⁴⁸ Nota bene, the “social advertising” series of 2010 continues up to this day, coordinated by Belarusian state news agency BelTA, retaining the “traditional form of visual propaganda” as Anton Ignatovich admitted.⁴⁹

This slogan, however, didn’t only come down to the billboards. Its omnipresence at that time was reflected by many other initiatives that differed in scale—for example, in February 2010 the Belarusian Republican Youth Union (BRSU) organized a likewise entitled series of patriotic drawing and poem-writing contests commemorating the sixty-fifth anniversary of [the Soviet] victory in WWII.⁵⁰ A year later, on March 1, 2011 (two days before the *I Am Belarusian*

⁴⁶ Shishko, “Sotsial’naya rekama,” 313.

⁴⁷ Shishko.

⁴⁸ Jan Novak, “Belarus’ propaganda machine mobilises citizens for Lukashenko’s re-election campaign,” *Euractiv*, November 28, 2024, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/belarus-propaganda-machine-mobilises-citizens-for-lukashenko-s-re-election-campaign/>.

⁴⁹ Anton Ignatovich, “Reprezentatsiya belorusskogo obshchestva cherez vizual’nyye obrazy plakatov BelTA: ot proshlogo k sovremennosti,” *THESAURUS: Zbornik navukovykh prats* x1 (2022): 78, 80–82, http://elib.institutemvd.by/handle/MVD_NAM/7008; “BelTA opublikovala novuyu seriyu plakatov ‘Ya lyublyu Belarus!’,” *BelTA*, June 20, 2017, <https://belta.by/society/view/belta-opublikovala-novuju-seriyu-plakatov-ja-lyublyu-belarus-253530-2017/>.

⁵⁰ Ol’ga Grek, “Ya lyublyu Belarus,” *Trybuna Pratsy*, March 17, 2010, <https://www.tribunapracy.by/2010/03/ya-lyublyu-belarus/>.

song text was made public and two weeks before the release of *I Love Belarus*) an exhibition of the works of BelTA photographer Nataliya Ablozhey was unveiled in one of the Minsk cinemas. The display, deemed by the press to be “presenting the objective reality of life,” also shared the very same name.⁵¹

Lukashenko’s Direct Comment on Vinnikova’s ESC Results

Putting the indirect context of local propaganda initiatives aside, it is essential to mark that the Belarus government embodied by Lukashenko himself once happened also to refer openly to Vinnikova’s participation,⁵² straightforwardly locating it within the affective nationalist discourse. It was the day after her performance in Düsseldorf when Alexander Grigoryevich shared this thought with the public while on a working visit to the Vitebsk oblast:

Yes, they [the West] don’t like us, because they feel we’re their competitors. And they will continue on strangling us in every dimension. They will strangle us at Eurovision, like the girl yesterday. . . . What a brave girl! There was everything alright—her behavior, her face, the song. She sung the anthem of Belarus. Who would pass her on with the anthem of Belarus?⁵³

The “myriad” affects—effervescence and pride above all—noted by Ural in the Turkish ESC context as the direct outcome of contest results’ national reception⁵⁴ are not even left to conjecture here, they are put out *expressis verbis* by the head of state himself (not by the head of delegation, BTRC executives, nor even the Ministry of Culture). What strikes here the most, though, is the entangling of Vinnikova’s song not only with the affective nationalist aspect of ESC rivalry but also aligning her three-minute europop track with the state symbolics and

⁵¹ Viktor Lovgach, “Ob”yektivnuyu real’nost’ zhizni predstavila segodnya na svoey vystavke fotokor BelTA Natal’ya Ablozhey,” *Moyby*, March 1, 2011, <https://moyby.com/news/37838/>.

⁵² It is worth mentioning this was not the last time Lukashenko engaged personally in Belarusian ESC matters: he intervened a year later when the local preselection voting was deemed rigged and also officially voiced his support for Alyona Lansкая in 2013; Dean Vuletic, *Postwar Europe and the Eurovision Song Contest* (Bloombsbury Academic, 2018), 198; Panea and Cámara Rojo, “Bielorrusia,” 50.

⁵³ Betina Ferman, “Lukashenko: Belorussiyu ‘zadushili’ na Yevrovidenii,” *ERR*, May 13, 2011, <https://rus.err.ee/132429/lukashenko-belorussiju-zadushili-na-evrovidenii>; Igor Remzik, “Yevrovideniye po-belorusski: vse intrigi i skandaly za 19 let,” *NewGrodno*, May 14, 2023, <https://newgrodno.by/society/evrovidenie-po-belorusski-vse-intrigi-i-skandaly-za-19-let/>.

⁵⁴ Ural, “Turkishness,” 521.

therefore taking offence for the defeat in a pop music contest on the ground of national pride.

Of course, it has not been uncommon at all for state leaders to have commented on the contest; however taking the Eurovision national rivalry so extremely seriously seems to be mainly the domain of the non-Western countries where democratic rule is thought to be somehow flawed⁵⁵—consider also the Azerbaijani president Ilham Aliyev's order to inquire into the reasons behind his country giving the Russian entry zero points in 2013,⁵⁶ or Israeli state leaders' direct involvement in both the 2024 *October Rain* song-lyrics controversy and the staunch promotion of the next year's representative.⁵⁷

Conclusions

Having analyzed the case, one seems to be left with a number of questions:

a) Were *Born in Belorussia* and *I Love Belarus* unprecedented mixes of propaganda content with the form of a Eurovision entry?

b) Was it something specific for CEE and uncommon anywhere else?

c) Was it a reflection of a broader trend of that time or something unique?

d) Ultimately, what makes it so disturbing and so specific?

Fortunately, the answer to the first question is provided by Anna Herran's meaningfully entitled conference paper from 2021, "We Loved Belarus Before Anastasiya Vinnikova." Focusing on Junior Eurovision, she presents a few cases of songs (all of them originating from post-Soviet countries)—Belarus 2008, Georgia 2007, Armenia 2011, and Ukraine 2014—the messages of which bear the marks of strategies similar to those present in Vinnikova's song (note especially the first one, called *Serdtshe Belarusi* (the heart of Belarus): "The world is full of different things, but Belarus is unique. . . . I'm proud of you, my dear Belarus." Herran also points out that the "overtly patriotic entries," as she calls them, were not unknown (though uncommon) in Eurovision history—the very first song

⁵⁵ „Democracy Index 2024: What's Wrong with Representative Democracy?," Economist Intelligence Unit, 2025, 16, 19, <https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2024/>.

⁵⁶ Alice Vincent, "Azerbaijan recounts Eurovision votes after awarding Russia 'nul points'," *The Telegraph*, May 21, 2013, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/tvandradio/eurovision/10070514/Azerbaijan-recounts-Eurovision-votes-after-awarding-Russia-nul-points.html>.

⁵⁷ Jon Henley, "Israel should have a voice at Eurovision, says president amid row over lyrics," *The Guardian*, February 25, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2024/feb/25/israel-should-have-a-voice-at-eurovision-says-president-amid-row-over-lyrics>; Alex Marshall, "Israel's Campaign to Win Eurovision Went All the Way to the Top," *The New York Times*, May 24, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/05/24/arts/music/eurovision-israel-votes.html>.

performed at the Contest, *De vogels van Holland*, one of the two representing the Netherlands in 1956, being of this character.⁵⁸ Panea and Cámara Rojo argue though—naming some other examples, such as Portugal 1977 or Greece 1993—that no one before the Belarusian artist had praised the represented nation while performing on the Eurovision stage as fiercely as she did.⁵⁹ Leaving the matter of emotional intensity aside, one has to note that some Israeli entries also evidence that Vinnikova's act was not a precedent, but yet another example of a long-running Eurovision tendency—following in the footsteps of the legendary 1983 Ofra Haza hit *Chai* (“I am still alive. . . . The Nation of Israel is alive”⁶⁰), performed at the ESC in Munich eleven years after the 1972 massacre of Israeli Olympic team members in the very same city,⁶¹ yet also during the second Israeli invasion of Lebanon (1982–1985), and the eventually withdrawn *Balalaika* of Ilanit in 1984 (“Balalaika, balalaika, / Oh, sing to me if I forget thee Jerusalem, / Balalaika, balalaika, / My song will yet be heard in the Land of Israel”⁶²), and most recently the Eden Golan songs.

The context of the times, however, plays an important role in understanding the Belarusian ESC 2011 entries. It was only two years earlier when the contest took place in Moscow and, firstly, Anastasiya Prikhodko, a Ukrainian by nationality, represented Russia with an emotional ballad called *Mamo*, sung half in Russian, half in her native language—according to Emily D. Johnson, evoking the Stalinist-era Soviet concept of the “Friendship of Peoples” (*Druzhba Narodov*); secondly, Russia-attacked Georgia sent an eventually banned song called *We Don't Wanna Put In*.⁶³ Moreover, as Julie A. Cassiday argues, Prikhodko's ESC performance marked the exact moment when Russia abandoned the queer or “faux gay” trajectory of its multiple previous entries that is said to have emerged in the late 1990s—with its most striking examples being of course the t.A.T.u participation in 2003 and Dima Bilan's winning *Believe*

⁵⁸ Anna Herran, “We Loved Belarus Before Anastasiya Vinnikova: Performing the Nation at Junior Eurovision” (paper presented at the 10th ICCES World Congress, Montreal, August 2021), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/365777539_We_Loved_Belarus_Before_Anastasiya_Vinnikova_Performing_the_Nation_at_Junior_Eurovision.

⁵⁹ Panea and Cámara Rojo, “Belorussia,” 50.

⁶⁰ Tamar Leachtman, “Chai – lyrics,” The Diggiloo Thrush, accessed April 20, 2025, <https://www.diggiloo.net/?1983il>.

⁶¹ José Luis Panea, “Identity, Spectacle and Representation: Israeli Entries at the Eurovision Song Contest,” *Doxa Comunicación* 27 (2018): 131, <https://revistascientificas.uspceu.com/doxacomunicacion/article/view/658/1247>.

⁶² crimsonDyname, “Ilanit—Balalaika (English translation),” LyricsTranslate.com, accessed April 20, 2025, <https://lyricstranslate.com/en/balalaika-balalaika.html>.

⁶³ Emily D. Johnson, “A New Song for a New Motherland: Eurovision and the Rhetoric of Post-Soviet National Identity,” *The Russian Review* 73, no. 1 (2014): 27, 37–38, 40–42, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43661976>.

entry of 2008.⁶⁴ In the light of the geopolitical relationship between the so-called Euro-Atlantic community and Russia and Belarus (forming the Union State since the late 90s⁶⁵) getting ever more tense from the second half of the 2000s on—a situation sometimes infelicitously dubbed the “new” or “second Cold War”⁶⁶—this reversal to “heteronormative” aesthetics can be interpreted on a symbolic level as siding with conservative values so as to contrast with the liberal West. This observation seems to shed a particular light on the bizarre mix of competitive narratives present in Vinnikova’s ESC entries as searching for a new language to express the Belarusian national identity in the opening phase of what Andrew Monaghan has named “the clash of Europes.”⁶⁷ As a side note, as exemplified by Galina Miazhevich’s thorough analysis of the Belarusian press coverage of the Conchita Wurst ESC 2014 victory, the impact of this values-oriented clash on how Eurovision was perceived in the Union State intensified significantly in the following years but Belarus still managed to maintain a semiautonomous, nuanced approach to the matter.⁶⁸

So, what makes the songs of Vinnikova so disturbing and unique? It seems that it is a result of a strong contrast between the archaic form of content (“neo-socialist realism”?) and the attempts to present it in a modern way. Two supposedly completely different registers—seriously taken (post-)Soviet aesthetics and the modern form of 2010s Eurovision performance—have been intertwined under the impact of the country’s leading propaganda narratives (e.g., the “Ya lyublyu Belarus” slogan) and with direct state involvement (role of the broadcaster, Lukashenko’s comments). The context of the Eastern-Bloc tradition of using popular songs in propaganda mechanisms,⁶⁹ influencing some specific forms of expression and (post)communist topoi, also seems to have played a significant role here. Lastly, the variations and shifts in propaganda strategies between *Born*

⁶⁴ Though I would refrain from going as far as tracing this tendency back to Alla Pugacheva’s 1997 Eurovision performance (Cassiday’s argument about the allegedly drag queen-like ESC costume of the *tsaritsa* of Soviet pop music, supported with evidence that Pugacheva in general has been regularly impersonated by Russian drag performers, seems rather farfetched), it is rather undeniable that it significantly influenced the first decade of Russia’s twenty-first-century presence at the contest; Julie A. Cassiday, “Post-Soviet Pop Goes Gay: Russia’s Trajectory to Eurovision Victory,” *The Russian Review* 73, no. 1 (2014): 10–12, 17–18, <https://doi.org/10.1111/russ.10717>; for a deeper analysis of the circumstances surrounding the development of t.A.T.u.’s forced “faux gay” public image see also Halszka Fryźlewicz’s article within this issue.

⁶⁵ “The Union State of Belarus and Russia,” President of the Republic of Belarus, accessed June 23, 2026, <https://president.gov.by/en/belarus/economics/economic-integration/union-state>.

⁶⁶ Andrew Monaghan, A “New Cold War”? *Abusing History, Misunderstanding Russia* (London: Chatham House, 2015), 3–6.

⁶⁷ Monaghan, A “New Cold War”?

⁶⁸ Galina Miazhevich, “Paradoxes of New Media: Digital Discourses on Eurovision 2014, Media Flows and Post-Soviet Nation-Building,” *New Media & Society* 19, no. 2 (2017): 204–209, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444815591968>.

⁶⁹ Bolin, “Visions,” 200–201.

in Belorussia and *I Love Belarus* might reflect Belarus' early 2010s multi-vector international policy—as the political relationship with Russia was becoming more tense, the country was seeking to reinvent its approach towards the European Union (though the events of 2010, forming a turning point, jeopardized the thaw.)⁷⁰



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⁷⁰ Ekaterina Pierson-Lyzhina, "Actors of Belarusian 'Multivector' Foreign Policy towards the EU in the 2010s," *The Journal of Belarusian Studies* 11, no. 1 (2021): 57–58.

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