

Opinion – Why Russia’s 2025 Intervision Matters

Written by Jennifer Ostojski

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JENNIFER OSTOJSKI, OCT 4 2025

On September 20th, 2025, Russia hosted in Moscow the Intervision 2025 competition, bringing together artists from twenty-three countries from all around the world. This mega-event was introduced in its current modern iteration as a direct counter to the Eurovision Song Contest, which has been on the air since 1956 and has seen dozens of European and non-European countries compete over the years. Today’s Intervision offers insights into soft power, LGBTQ+ discourse, and geopolitical considerations.

Russia participated in the Eurovision Song Contest 23 times in the past, starting in 1994 after the fall of the Soviet Union and the inclusion of the country in the European Broadcasting Union (EBU), the organization behind the competition. Russia won the competition in 2008 with Dima Bilan’s “Believe”. In 2009, Russia hosted the competition in Moscow. On February 25, 2022, a day after the country’s invasion of Ukraine, the EBU announced that Russia was banned from the competition “based on the rules of the event and the values of the EBU”. As a self-proclaimed non-political entity, Russia’s conduct was not deemed appropriate and would bring the competition “into disrepute”.

The revitalizing of the Intervision format is not too farfetched. The music competition itself is relatively “old”. Initially hosted in the mid-1960s in Czechoslovakia, then again in the late 1970s in Poland, the Intervision format brought the Soviet bloc’s biggest artists together to compete musically and show off their best artists. Its organizers aimed at the time to create a cultural event that brought the two sides of the iron curtain together, finding commonalities in music. Eurovision’s organizers, though, rejected any form of cooperation with Intervision at that time. Nonetheless, Western artists, Eurovision singers, and Western labels sang at the competition and scouted talent throughout the competition’s Cold War iterations. In 2008, Russia hosted a one-off Intervision competition amongst the former Soviet countries. President Putin pushed in 2009 for it to be held again, though this did not happen. Attempts for it to come back in 2014 failed as well.

The 2025 iteration was announced in early February 2025, wherein by decree Russia’s president announced his intentions to “developing international cultural and humanitarian cooperation.” The list of invited countries ran the geographical and politically ideological spectrum but were designated as friends of Russia. The format of the show highlighted internationality (i.e., a diverse group of moderators from Russia, India, and China, who spoke in English and Mandarin respectively). Participants were interviewed in Russian with a translator; most artists spoke only in their native language. The rules of the competition allowed singing in any language, though no one sang in another language other than their native one.

Unlike Eurovision, Intervision and Russia as its first host did not shy away from politics. Early on the broadcast showed a pre-taped message from President Putin, in which he emphasized Intervision’s emphasis on tradition, variety in cultures, and kindness, while simultaneously highlighting the changes that modernity brings and every countries’ right to live their own national identities. Summarizing the values of the competition as those of “respect for traditional values and cultural diversity,” President Putin indicated a strong preference for sovereign cultural rights and the rejection of Eurovision’s “modern” values of openness, diversity, and its support for LGBTQ+ communities. Foreign Minister Lavrov attended the event in person, speaking in the earlier part of the event with two moderators from Russia’s Channel One. He stated that although the current format was envisioned as a way for BRICS countries and their partners to come together, Intervision resonated with countries across the world, widening the scope of Intervision. Lavrov also emphasized that Intervision is one amongst many other on-going and future cultural events

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that brings these countries together.

There are several notable highlights from the competition. For example, the Russian candidate, Shaman, chose voluntarily right after his performance to remove himself from the competition. Arguing that Russia had already won by hosting the competition and welcoming the world, Shaman insisted on not being ranked. Shaman plays a significant role in Russia's cultural diplomacy. A supporter of Putin's government, the singer recently traveled to North Korea as part of a Russian delegation to celebrate the country's 80th anniversary of the end of Japan's colonial rule over the country. In June 2025, Australia sanctioned Shaman along with other notable Russian figures "considered strategically important for Moscow's war effort in Ukraine".

Perhaps surprising (to some), the United States was also an invited participant to Intervision 2025. More noteworthy though is the country's ultimate absence from the competition. The R&B singer and producer B Howard was scheduled to represent the United States, although how he received this honor is unclear. He dropped out days before the competition started, and he was replaced with the Australian-born musician Vassy, who also has US citizenship. Vassy claims that she dropped out at the last minute due to pressure from the Australian government. A representative from the Australian government denies any engagement on their behalf.

Intervision 2025 matters in three areas of International Relations. First, international mega-events, like music competitions or sport events, are an important tool for countries in their cultural diplomacy arsenal. Authoritarian governments, in particular, use them to soften their national images to a global audience. But all countries use the opportunity of mega-events to reframe historical memories of their countries and reinterpret/present themselves to others.

Second, the comparison of Eurovision and Intervision highlights a value-based conversation between democratic and non-democratic countries. Sometimes referred to as the "gay olympics", the Eurovision Song Contest has become a space for progressive, liberal, and inclusive values – most visible through its support for and the participation of members from the LGBTQ+ community. This includes Dana International's win in 1998. The Israeli pop singer was the first openly trans winner of the contest. Conchita Wurst's win in 2014 stands out as well. The win of the Austrian drag queen is often credited with causing Russia's push for more "traditional" values, and finding like-minded countries resist the LGBTQ+ community in their politics and policies.

As early as 2013, Russia passed its first federal law banning "propaganda of non-traditional sexual relationships". Notably, Russia uses "positive" language to oppose the LGBTQ+ communities by emphasizing "traditional values and families." In 2023, the "international LGBT social movement" was designated as an extremist grouping. The country has positioned the West's move towards pro-LGBTQ politics as "moving towards open satanism", describing Europe sometimes even as Gayropa. Intervision is a manifestation of values and attitudes of a non-Eurovision world, but more so it is providing a legitimization platform for countries around the world, who are demarcating their value systems from the "satanic" European continent – all shrouded in a cloud of music-washing. Of interest may be that this year's winner, Vietnamese artist Duc Phuc, is in fact gay.

Third, it is worth reiterating with an eye towards great power politics that – although Intervision is framed as an international competition – participants could only join at Russia's invitation. Intervision realigns in the cultural diplomacy realm alliance structures, bringing together the United States, China, Russia, and India as well as other BRICS countries, former Soviet countries, and other authoritarian states from around the world to unify under the guise of cultural celebration. Although, they did not participate, North Korea and Hungary (an EU country) were invited and participated in negotiations. Offering an alternative to Eurovision's stronghold over music-based cultural diplomacy and Western ideas, Intervision offers a look at authoritarian-made soft power strategies (and their reach).

According to the Belarusian Telegraph Agency (BelTa) Intervision's press service announced that approximately 4 billion viewers around the world watched this year's Intervision competition. The New York Times provided more nuance to this statement, stating that government representatives had said 4 billion people would be able to watch the broadcast. (For comparison: This year's Eurovision garnered 166 Million viewers across its 37 participating public service markets (not including the worldwide online participation)). Saudi Arabia was announced as the host of

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Intervision 2026. Real effects of this mega-event will be seen and felt when and if the competition comes back next year and does not become a one-off as it has been in recent past. Then we be able to observe a process of institutionalization on the global scale and the continued messaging of bringing the (rest of) the world together. A first start of this new narrative of how countries come together was already kicked off in interviews after the event, as China's competitor said after the competition, "We have always been friends, and now we [Russia and China] are like a family."

About the author:

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