

# Ukraine's Eurovision victory brings the plight of Crimean Tatars to a European audience

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*Ukraine won the Eurovision song contest on 14 May, with a song framed around the deportation of Crimean Tatars under Stalin in 1944. [Ellie Knott](#) writes that the result highlights the plight of Crimean Tatars following the territory's annexation by Russia in 2014, particularly in light of the recent decision by a Crimean court to ban the legislature of the Crimean Tatar minority, the Mejlis.*



The 2016 Eurovision song contest was Ukraine's second victory and Eurovision's first song sung – at least partially – in the Crimean Tatar language.

The country's contestant, Jamala, Susana Jamaladinova, sang '1944', a song about Stalin's deportation of Crimean Tatars from the Crimean peninsula to Siberia and Central Asia on 18 May 1944. It was also a personal song, about her grandparents who themselves were deported from Crimea alongside approximately [200,000 Crimean Tatars](#), many of whom died en route.

Following Jamala's nomination to represent Ukraine, Russian authorities tried to lobby to have the song banned from Eurovision because political songs are against the rules of the contest. Russia's reaction signals its uncertain approach to Stalin's brutalities and creeping attempts to partially resuscitate Stalin as a World War Two hero and Soviet moderniser, rather than a brutal dictator.

As much as '1944' seems political, it is also about [remembering the past](#), in particular these personal experiences and traumas. Jamala herself was born in exile in present-day Kyrgyzstan, returning to Crimea, as many Crimean Tatars did, only after Ukrainian independence from the Soviet Union. Jamala's performance and Eurovision victory therefore helped to highlight the historic plight of Crimean Tatars and their deportation in 1944.

| *"I couldn't spend my youth there, Because you took away my peace" – 1944, Jamala*

But Jamala's victory does also speak to the contemporary plight of Crimean Tatars, and Crimean society more broadly. Crimean Tatars have been the most visible and vociferous opponents of Crimea's annexation by Russia in March 2014, and have faced the brunt of oppression by Crimea's de facto authorities.

Most recently, Crimea's authorities' [banned the Crimean Tatar Mejlis](#), the political organisation of the Crimean Tatar community in Crimea, limiting the already small recourse of Crimean Tatars against the de facto Crimean authorities and Russian regime. Since annexation in 2014, Crimean Tatars have been unable to officially and legally commemorate the Day of Deportation on 18 May.

Russia's response has been to use Eurovision as a demonstration of how Europe is isolating Russia, as opposed to Russia isolating itself from Europe. The 2017 Eurovision contest will now be held in Ukraine, yet here have been no direct flights between these neighbouring states – Russia and Ukraine – since [October 2015](#). The Russian team will therefore find it hard to travel to Ukraine next year, regardless of the potential fallout from doing so.

The politics, if not geopolitics, behind Eurovision voting strategies has long been emphasised, with states voting for their friends and not their arch-enemies. This speaks to the geopoliticisation of ties within Europe. Just 300 miles away, at the Lennart Meri conference in Tallinn, Sweden's Defence Minister emphasised Russia's annexation of

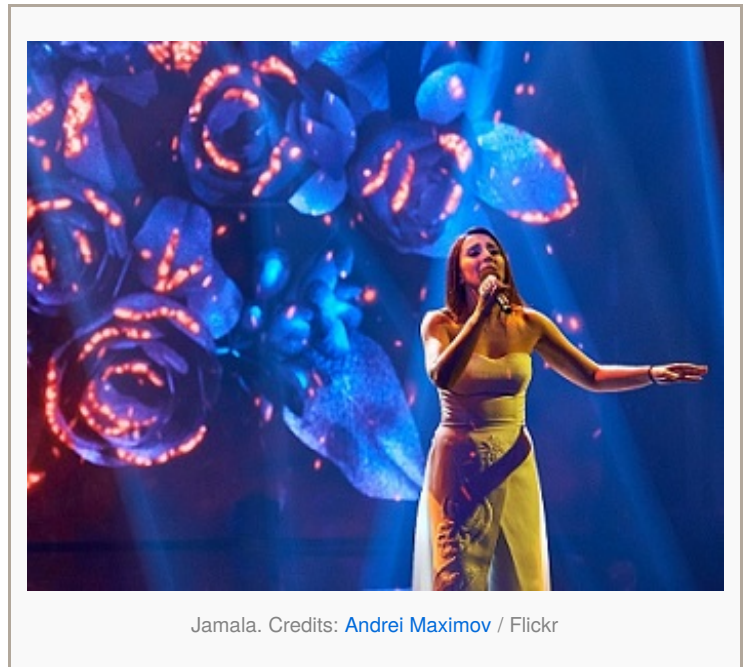
Crimea as the linchpin of insecurity in Europe.

Yet, in the popular vote, voters in Russia and Ukraine gave each other the highest number of votes. As much as this year's Eurovision should be remembered for highlighting Crimea's annexation and the plight of the Crimean Tatars, it should also be remembered as a time in which the publics in Ukraine and Russia potentially signaled their desire to end their two-year violent conflict.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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