# The Intervision Song Contest

## Popular Music and Political Liberalization in the Eastern Bloc

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**Abstract:** During the Cold War, Eastern Bloc broadcasting organizations held the Intervision Song Contest (ISC) as an alternative to Western Europe's Eurovision Song Contest (ESC). Staged in Czechoslovakia and Poland between 1964 and 1980, the ISC has usually been depicted in the popular media as merely a belated, fleeting copy of the ESC, with the ISC's failure being a metaphor for the decline of the economic and political systems of communist party-led Eastern Europe. However, unlike with the ESC, there has been little academic research on the ISC. This chapter is based on archival sources from national and international broadcasting organizations, and focuses on the first series of the ISC in Czechoslovakia. It argues that the ISC was conceived by its organizers as a pan-European event that would promote cooperation between the Eastern and Western Blocs, especially in the context of Khrushchev's Thaw and the cultural and political liberalization in Czechoslovakia that culminated in the Prague Spring. The ISC's organizers accordingly introduced innovations that made their contest more internationally open and commercial than the ESC. Furthermore, the staging of the ISC in Czechoslovakia underlined the limits of the Soviet Union's cultural and political influence over Eastern Europe and the role that geopolitics played in the power relations between states within the Eastern Bloc. The ISC was, then, not simply an imitation of the ESC, but rather a product of international political relations that tells us much about the aspirations that some Eastern European artists, politicians, and officials from record companies and television stations had for the democratization of their states.

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The traditional controversies that accompany the voting results in every edition of the Eurovision Song Contest (ESC), one of the world's longest running and most-watched television programs, are widely infamous. As I demonstrate in

my book *Postwar Europe and the Eurovision Song Contest*, the first-ever academic monograph on the history of the ESC, such controversies have marked the contest ever since its first edition in 1956. In that year, the Swiss jury allegedly cast the deciding vote that brought Switzerland's entry "Refrain" (sung by Lys Assia) victory in that contest, which was staged in the Swiss city of Lugano. The Swiss jury did so after it voted in place of the Luxembourgish jury, whose members were not able to travel to Lugano to participate in the voting. Since then, voting blocs based on commercial, cultural, geographical, linguistic, and even political connections have been a perennial feature of the ESC.[1] These blocs have been especially controversial since the 1990s, following the entry of states from the former Eastern Bloc and the incorporation of public voting into the contest. In 2009, in response to accusations made mostly by officials from West European national broadcasting organizations that Central and East European public audiences were exacerbating the problem of bloc voting, the public voting component in the final voting results was reduced to fifty percent, with the other half being determined by national expert juries made up of professionals from the music industry. The participation of East European states in the ESC has also been controversial in the post-Cold War era for the involvement of authoritarian governments, such as those of Azerbaijan and Russia. There, the participation of government-controlled national broadcasting organizations in the contest and their hosting of the event, such as in Moscow in 2009 and Baku in 2012, has been used to whitewash the international images of these governments.[2]

Criticisms of Central and East European participants in the ESC by West European commentators have also reflected suspicion over the impact that the integration of states from this region could have on pan-European organizations—not only on the ESC and its organizer, the European Broadcasting Union (EBU), but also, more significantly, on the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).[3] Yet, these criticisms have highlighted a longer history of West European cultural prejudices against Central and East Europe, prejudices that have considered the latter region to have been, throughout history,

1 Dean Vuletic, *Postwar Europe and the Eurovision Song Contest* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 66–74.

2 Vuletic, *Postwar Europe and the Eurovision Song Contest*, 156–59, 194–97.

3 See, for example, the case study on the British Broadcasting Corporation's (BBC) ESC commentator Terry Wogan by Karen Fricker, "'It's Just Not Funny Any More': Terry Wogan, Melancholy Britain, and the Eurovision Song Contest," in*Performing the 'New' Europe: Identities, Feelings and Politics in the Eurovision Song Contest*, ed. Karen Fricker and Milija Gluhovic (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 53–76.

inherently more illiberal, poor, and unmodern than its Western counterpart.[4] Such engrained prejudices have also appeared in popular documentaries and literature that have discussed the popular music industry in Eastern Europe during the Cold War. This has been the case with regard to the Intervision Song Contest (ISC), the Eastern Bloc alternative to the ESC that was staged in Czechoslovakia from 1965 to 1968 and in Poland from 1977 to 1980. As the ISC has received little scholarly attention,[5] it has been clichédly presented in popular media as a fake, feeble, and fleeting, a censored, communist, and controlled, imitation of the ESC.[6] This approach has ignored the connections and similarities between the popular music industries in Eastern Europe and Western Europe in the Cold War era; it has also blinded an understanding of the ISC that is counterintuitive to stereotypical interpretations of the Eastern Bloc as being

4 For a seminal study on the cultural construction of such notions of "Eastern Europe," see Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994).

5 The few other academic studies on the ISC mostly focus on the series in Poland, and they include: Mari Pajala, "Intervision Song Contests and Finnish Television Between East and West," in *Airy Curtains in the European Ether: Broadcasting and the Cold War*, ed. Alexander Badenoch, Andreas Fickers, and Christian Henrich-Franke (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2013), 215–39; Anna G. Piotrowska, "About Twin Song Festivals in Eastern and Western Europe: Intervision and Eurovision," *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* 47, no. 1 (June 2016): 123–35; Yulia Yurtaeva, "Ein schwarzer Rabe gegen Conchita Wurst oder: Wovor hat Russland Angst?" in *Eurovision Song Contest: Eine kleine Geschichte zwischen Körper, Geschlecht und Nation*, ed. Christine Ehardt, Georg Vogt, and Florian Wagner (Vienna: Zaglossus), 111–35; and Yulia Yurtaeva and Lothar Mikos, "Song Contests in Europe During the Cold War," in *New Patterns in Global Television Formats*, ed. Karina Aveyard, Pia Majbritt Jensen, and Albert Moran (Bristol and Chicago: Intellect, 2016), 110–24.

6 For an example of such a presentation, see the television documentary *The Secret History of Eurovision*, dir. Stephen Oliver (Electric Pictures, 2011), which incorrectly asserts that the ESC was not broadcast in the Eastern Bloc during the Cold War and portrays Eastern Europeans as subversively desirous of the Western contest. It also contains the myth that voting in the ISC was done by viewers switching their lights at home on and off and the consequent electricity surges being measured. This myth is also repeated in a non-academic book by Chris West, *Eurovision! A History of Modern Europe Through the World's Greatest Song Contest* (London: Melville House UK, 2017), 97–98. In one of the major English-language media reports on the history of the ISC, which was published by the BBC, the opening line falsely claims that the Soviet Union set up the ISC: "[w]hen nestled behind the Iron Curtain, the Soviet Union could not take part in the Eurovision Song Contest, so it set up a rival competition—and called it Intervision." Steve Rosenberg, "The Cold War Rival to Eurovision," BBC (May 14, 2012), https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-18006446.

backward, closed, and homogenous. Indeed, in my archival research on the ISC that I conducted in the archives of the national broadcasting organizations of the Czech Republic, Germany, Poland, Russia, and Slovakia, I discovered that the contest rather promoted cultural and commercial cooperation between the Eastern and Western Blocs in the 1960s and the 1970s, in light of diplomatic transformations such as the Thaw and the Helsinki Accords. The ISC was the product of liberalization processes in the Eastern Bloc, namely the cultural, economic, and political reforms in the 1960s that accompanied de-Stalinization in Czechoslovakia and culminated in the Prague Spring, or those in Poland in the 1970s that were enacted by the government of Edward Gierek. The ISC's fate in both states was also determined by the ending of these periods of liberalization. Focusing on the first series of the ISC in Czechoslovakia in the 1960s, this chapter will examine what the history of the ISC tells us about the aspirations of Eastern European artists, politicians, and the representatives of record companies and television stations, for the political liberalization of the communist party-led systems in their states, and about the cultural and economic ramifications of liberalizing reforms.

## Establishing Eurovision and Intervision

Unlike other international mega events such as the Olympic Games, the Venice Biennale, or the World Cup, the ESC stood out during the Cold War in that it never had representatives from the Western and Eastern Blocs competing against each other. Indeed, it was Cold War division that determined the establishment of Eastern European and Western European international song contests for popular music, as these were based on the membership of the separate international broadcasting organizations that were set up for each of the Blocs. Europe's first international broadcasting organization, the International Broadcasting Union, had been formed in the interwar period, but it never included the Soviet Union due to its diplomatic isolation as the first communist party-led state in the world.[7] In the late 1940s, cooperation among European states in a single international broadcasting organization became unfeasible amidst early Cold War tensions. This resulted in the establishment, in 1950, of separate international broadcasting organizations for each of the Blocs: Western Europe's European Broadcasting Union (EBU), which was based in Brussels and Geneva, and Eastern Europe's International Broadcasting Organization

7 Suzanne Lommers, *Europe—On Air: Interwar Projects for Radio Broadcasting* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012), 143–44.

(OIR), which was in 1960 renamed the International Radio and Television Organization (OIRT),[8] with headquarters in Prague. Each of these brought together national radio and television broadcasters and promoted cultural and technical cooperation between them, just as each of the Blocs had their own other separate international organizations, like the Council of Europe, the European Coal and Steel Community, Euratom, the European Economic Community, and the NATO for the West, and the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance and the Warsaw Pact for the East.[9] The EBU and the OIRT similarly developed separate networks for program cooperation and exchange among their members. These were called the Eurovision Network (established in 1954) and the Intervision Network (established in 1960), respectively. It was from these that the names of the song contests organized for the members of these organizations were derived.

Following the death of Soviet leader Joseph Stalin in 1953, the beginning of the Thaw under the government of Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev saw the introduction of de-Stalinization policies that relaxed cultural censorship, including that of Western popular music and other cultural products. As political tensions between Eastern Europe and Western Europe declined, the EBU and the OIR began to cooperate, with the first meeting between their officials being held in Helsinki in 1957. Finland was poised to play a bridging role between the two organizations as it was politically non-aligned, which made its national broadcasting organization, the Finnish Broadcasting Company (Yleisradio Oy, YLE), the only one that was a full member of both the EBU and the OIRT. The cooperation between the EBU and the OIRT was also manifested in the program exchanges between the Eurovision and Intervision networks, with the ESC being one of the earliest examples of these. The ESC was first relayed by the Intervision Network to Eastern European states in 1965. The Intervision Network also received the program for free from the Eurovision Network; this became even more of a political gesture from 1976, when the EBU started requiring a participation fee both from the national broadcasting organizations that entered as well as those that just relayed the contest, but still did not charge OIRT members "to avoid creating misunderstandings between the two Unions."[10] Another symbolic gesture that was made in the ESC towards Eastern Europe was that, after 1965, the hosts of the ESC often mentioned in their introductions to the shows the

8 "OIRT" was the abbreviation that was used internationally for the organization, based on its French name "Organisation internationale de radiodiffusion et de télévision," as had also been the case with the OIR.

9 Ernest Eugster, *Television Programming Across National Boundaries: The EBU and OIRT Experience* (Dedham, MA: Artech House, 1983), 39–47.

10 OIRT, "52nd Meeting" (Algiers, May 16–19, 1975), 56 [Archives of the EBU, Concours Eurovision de la chanson, Décisions 1].

states of the Intervision Network in which the contest was being broadcast, thereby underlining to viewers the significance of the Esc as a shared, pan-European, and trans-bloc cultural phenomenon.

Still, there were limits to this cooperation between the Ebu and the Oirt when it came to the Esc and the Isc. Eastern Bloc national broadcasting organizations were, as mentioned above, never allowed to participate in the Esc. Already in 1958, the Oir expressed interest in participating in the song contests organized by other international broadcasting organizations,[11] and it began organizing popular music festivals for its members when it staged the first Festival of Light and Dance Music in Prague. Popular music programs were considered by the Oirt's members to be increasingly important in light of government policies that promoted consumption and entertainment under the liberalizing cultural and economic reforms that marked the Thaw.[12] It was in this context that the Oirt organized a conference of music professionals at the second edition of this festival in 1959 to discuss the development of popular music in the Eastern Bloc.[13] That international song contests played a significant role in fostering cultural cooperation between the Eastern and Western Blocs was also underlined when Oirt officials proposed the joint organization of an international show of popular music between the members of the Eurovision and Intervision networks at a meeting of the representatives of these in Helsinki in 1964. The director general of Czechoslovak Television (Československá televize/Československá televízia, Čst), Jiří Pelikán, subsequently reported that the Ebu officials had rejected the proposal and had instead suggested that the Oirt arrange its own contest and that the two organizations broadcast each other's contests through the Eurovision and Intervision networks.[14] Pelikán did not explain exactly why his Ebu colleagues had rejected the idea for a pan-European song contest, but the answer could lie in a broader disinterest in Western Europe for Eastern European popular cultural products. Through the Western gaze, these were usually considered to be less fashionable and modern than Western ones, as well as being stunted by the continuing censorship that

11 Oir, "Resolution" (Moscow, May 21, 1958), 6 [Archives of Czech Television, Oirt, 5/2].

12 Timothy W. Ryback, *Rock Around the Bloc: A History of Rock Music in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 14–18.

13 Oir, "31st Session of the Oir Administrative Council" (Prague, August 1959), 3–4, [Archives of Czech Television, Oirt, 6/2]; Oirt, "34th Session of the Oirt Administrative Council" (Prague, June 1961), 3–4 [Archives of Czech Television, Oirt, 7/2].

14 Jiří Pelikán, "Předběžná zpráva o setkání s delegacemi Oirt a Uer /Eurovize/a Intervize" (Prague, July 2, 1964), 5, 8 [Archives of Czech Television, Zahraniční styky, 248/27].

was directed at criticisms of communist party rule. So even though the ISC was broadcast in eight Western European states via the Eurovision Network in 1965, there was less public interest for the ISC in Western Europe than for the ESC in Eastern Europe. This was generally the case with the transfer of programs from Intervision to Eurovision members: throughout the Cold War, the national broadcasting organizations from the Eurovision Network always sent more programs to their counterparts in the Intervision Network than vice versa.[15] Although the two sides agreed that the programs involved in the exchange should not be commercially or politically motivated, the Eurovision Network's members often considered the Intervision Network's offerings to be too politicized and uninteresting, while Intervision members also rejected programs from the Eurovision Network that they deemed to be commercial, political, or religious.[16] Still, when it came to the ESC, the only time that Intervision members collectively refused to broadcast it was in 1979, when the contest was staged in Israel, with which almost all Eastern Bloc states—Romania was the only exception—did not have diplomatic relations as they supported the Arab states in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Furthermore, ESC entries were often hits in Eastern Europe when they were recorded in local cover versions: for example, the Czechoslovak singer Helena Vondráčková recorded some Czech-language covers of ESC songs, such as of "Après toi" ("Jak mám spát"/How Can I Sleep) in 1972 and "Save Your Kisses for Me" ("Já půjdu tam a ty tam"/I'll Go There and You There, a duet with Jiří Korn) in 1977. Yet no ISC entry was ever a major success on the Western European charts.

## Aspiring to the West

It may seem counterintuitive that communist Eastern Europe was more open to cultural influences from liberal democratic Western Europe than vice versa, especially as the Eastern European national broadcasting organizations were state controlled and therefore promoted the goals and policies of the ruling communist parties. However, as the ISC demonstrated, Western Europe had popular music markets and models that the Eastern European popular music industries increasingly aspired to in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Yet, the

15 Thomas Beutelschmidt, *Ost—West—Global: Das sozialistische Fernsehen im Kalten Krieg* (Leipzig: Vistas, 2017), 95–96.

16 ČST, "Rozborová zpráva o činnosti OIRT, Intervize a Eurovize" (Prague, September–October 1965), 30–31 [Archives of Czech Television, Zahraniční styky, 200/1129]; Eugster, *Television Programming Across National Boundaries*, 193–96.

states of the Eastern Bloc did not all experience the Thaw equally. Czechoslovakia, for example, had been the most economically prosperous and politically liberal state in the region in the interwar period, when Prague was also a major European center for popular music production with a renowned jazz scene. However, until the early 1960s the Czechoslovak government was slow in instituting cultural, economic, and political reforms, being a relative latecomer to de-Stalinization policies, especially in comparison to Hungary and Poland. The world's biggest statue of Stalin, for example, was demolished in Prague only as late as 1962, while Prague's International Jazz Festival was established in 1964—well after the Sopot Jazz Festival had begun in Poland in 1956. Another early sign of the increasing cultural openness in Czechoslovakia in the early 1960s was the establishment by ČST in 1964 of the Golden Prague international television festival, in which Eastern European and Western European national broadcasting organizations participated. In the context of the second edition of this festival in 1965, the OIRT decided to stage the first edition of the ISC as the Golden Clef Intervision Contest on 12 June, in the Karlín Musical Theatre in Prague. That the ESC was the model for the ISC was underlined by the fact that the rules adopted for the ISC were largely a copy of those for the ESC, a move on the part of the OIRT that the EBU apparently did not oppose, and perhaps even encouraged. However, a major difference between the two contests was that the ISC had just an international jury comprised of musical experts representing each of the participating national broadcasting organizations, with one more from Czechoslovakia as a non-voting chair, and its voting was ostensibly secret.[17] Voting in the ESC, on the other hand, has been done by national juries representing the states participating in the contest, and the results have been presented by each national jury at the end of the show. Whereas the ESC has also always been organized independently by national broadcasting organizations, the preparations for the ISC had more obvious government involvement, reflecting the fact that the OIRT's membership was largely based on state-controlled broadcasting organizations. Czechoslovakia's government, namely its Ministry for Culture and Information, accordingly organized the ISC in cooperation with ČST, artists' organizations, concert organizers, and local record companies, and it also approved the selection of Czechoslovak artists for the contest. All of this underlined that the ISC was not just a product of ČST, but also a tool of the state's cultural diplomacy.

Just as the ESC has only allowed entries from states whose national broadcasting organizations were members of the Eurovision Network, the ISC's rules

17 ČST, "Statut intervizní 'Soutěže tanečních písní a chansonů' o 'Zlatý klíč'" (Prague, March 10, 1965), 1–5 [Archives of Czech Television, Zahraniční styky, 30/262].

initially only permitted participation in that contest to members of the Intervision Network. National broadcasting organizations from Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary, Poland, the Soviet Union, and Yugoslavia were represented in the first ISC by two of their most prominent artists, who each performed one song. Karel Gott won this edition of the ISC for Czechoslovakia with the song "Tam, kam chodí vítr spát" (Where the Wind Goes to Sleep). Bulgaria's Lili Ivanova was victorious in the second edition in 1966 with "Adagio," and Czechoslovakia's Eva Pilarová won the 1967 ISC with "Rekviem" (Requiem). In 1966 and 1967, the ISC was incorporated into the first two editions of the Bratislava Lyre festival, which was staged in the Slovak capital to decentralize Czechoslovakia's cultural events, thereby reflecting moves towards the federalization of the state. Such cultural events had hitherto been concentrated in Prague, which since 1964 had held both the international television festival and the international jazz festival.[18] During the years that the ISC was staged in Bratislava, the contest expanded to include Bulgaria, Finland, and Romania. This left Albania as the only Eastern European state that was never represented in the ISC, which was the result of that state withdrawing from the OIRT as it opposed the Soviet Union's de-Stalinization policies and took the side of China in the Sino-Soviet split over leadership of the international communist movement. For the rest of the Cold War, Albania remained the Eastern European state that was most closed to Western cultural influences.

From 1966, the organizers of the ISC continued to express an interest in expanding the contest to include Western European entries. This was unlike their ESC counterparts, who were never as open to allowing Eastern Bloc participants in their contest. The ISC organizers considered either allowing Western European entries to enter the ISC or establishing a contest that would pit songs from the two Blocs against each other.[19] The ISC's connections with the ESC were already apparent in that non-aligned Finland and Yugoslavia—which were the only states that had entries in both the ESC and the ISC from 1965 to 1967 due to their memberships in both the EBU and the OIRT—were sometimes represented by the same artists in both contests, although, of course, with different songs. Finland's Viktor Klimenko—who was of Cossack origin and had emigrated to Finland from the Soviet Union as a child—and Lasse Mårtenson performed in both the ESC and the ISC in the 1960s. Yugoslavia's Lado Leskovar participated in the ISC in 1966 and the ESC in 1967; Leskovar was preceded as Yugoslavia's entry in the ESC in 1963 and 1965 by Vice Vukov, who went on to compete in the ISC in 1967 and 1968. Further demonstrating how the ESC was

18 Ivan Szabó, *Bratislavská lýra* (Bratislava: Marenčin PT, 2010), 17.

19 Jiří Malásek and Ladislav Peprník, "Národní soutěž a Zlatý klíč" (Prague, July 11, 1966), 3 [Archives of Czech Television, Zahraniční styky, 40/311].

a model for the ISC, winners of the ESC were also invited to perform in the ISC, including Udo Jürgens and Sandie Shaw. That the organizers of the ISC sought to make the contest a pan-European event that went beyond Eastern Europe was underlined in internal reports from ČST that emphasized the cooperation of Western European actors in the ISC. In addition to the performances of the ESC winners, these reports also praised the coverage given to the ISC by Western media outlets and the contracts that Western record companies negotiated with ISC artists, especially Czechoslovak ones like Gott.[20] He went on to develop a prominent career not only in Eastern Europe but also in some Western European states, including Austria and West Germany.

## The Prague Spring

Indeed, Gott even became the only resident of an Eastern Bloc state who ever participated in the ESC during the Cold War, when he represented Austria in the 1968 ESC with the song "Tausend Fenster" (A Thousand Windows). Apart from his Czechoslovak nationality, Gott's participation in the ESC was otherwise unremarkable as the contest's rules have never required performers to be citizens of the states that they performed for: Austria was even represented by a Greek singer, Jimmy Makulis, in the 1961 ESC, and, even more politically significant, by the Israeli Carmela Corren in the 1963 ESC. Reflecting Czechoslovakia's increasing cultural openness towards the West in the period of de-Stalinization, the Austrian and Czechoslovak national broadcasting organizations had been developing closer ties in co-productions, live relays, and the exchange of materials since 1964. However, the symbolism of Gott being allowed to perform in the ESC for Austria without censure from the Czechoslovak government—and just months before he went on to represent Czechoslovakia in the 1968 ISC—was heightened by the political context of the Prague Spring. The leadership of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia had been taken over in January by the reformist Alexander Dubček from Slovakia. With the establishment of the Dubček government, the liberalizing reforms of the Prague Spring began, which included an ending of media censorship that made ČST more open to cultural and political influences from the West. This also made it most opportune for the ISC's rules to be changed so that Western European entries could be included

20 Jaromír Vašta, Jiří Malásek, and Josef Koliha, "Zpráva o přípravě vysílání pořadu 'Vstup volný pro písničku' Intervize—'Zlatý klíč'," (s.l., 1965), 1–2 [Archive of Czech Telvision, Zahraniční styky, 30/262]; Malásek and Peprník, "Národní soutěž a Zlatý klíč," 2–3; ČST, "Bratislavská lýra 1967" (s.l., 1967), 2–3 [Archives of Czech Television, Zahraniční styky, 40/331].

in the contest in 1968. The ISC consequently became the first international song contest which was open to states that were represented in both the EBU or the OIRT; this was described in the American music industry magazine *Billboard* as "another step towards open competition and a common market in European pop music."[21]

The 1968 ISC was held in June in the spa resort town of Karlovy Vary, near the borders with East Germany and West Germany, where it was incorporated again into the International Television Festival. EBU national broadcasting organizations from Austria, Belgium, Finland, Spain, Switzerland, West Germany, and Yugoslavia, together with OIRT ones from Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary, Romania, Poland, and the Soviet Union, were all represented in the 1968 ISC. The inclusion of Spain reflected the interest of the right-wing dictatorship of Francisco Franco in developing diplomatic relations with Eastern Europe. West Germany's participation was a prelude to the normalization of relations with Eastern European states—with which Bonn mostly still did not have diplomatic relations in 1968—under the *Ostpolitik* (Eastern Policy) that began in 1969. Gott won the ISC again in 1968 with "Proč ptáci zpívají?" (Why do Birds Sing?), while Yugoslavia's Vukov came second and Spain's Salomé, who would be a joint winner of the 1969 ESC, finished third. Yet while the 1968 ISC symbolized the ending of media censorship in Czechoslovakia, it was this media freedom that was among the factors that compelled the Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact allies to quash the Prague Spring in August 1968. These states had come to believe that the reformist movement would end the communist system in Czechoslovakia and undermine the Eastern Bloc as a whole. As a product of the Prague Spring, and the greater freedom accorded to ČST and its openness to Western cultural and political influences in particular, the ISC was ended after 1968. This occurred in the context of the renewal of media censorship in Czechoslovakia during the "normalization" period, when the reforms of the Prague Spring were mostly reversed. Reformist officials from ČST who had been behind the ISC, such as Pelikán, were accordingly removed from their posts.[22] The careers of some artists who were critical of the Soviet-led invasion of Czechoslovakia were also ended, most notably Marta Kubišová, who had recorded the patriotic song "Modlitba pro Martu" (A Prayer for Marta) just days after and as a protest against the invasion. Kubišová would later become one of the figures of the Charter 77 movement, a group of dissidents who, in 1977, signed a document that criticized the Czechoslovak government's failure to

21 Billboard, "Golden Clef Festival for All Europe," *Billboard*, May 11, 1968, 46.

22 Martin Štoll, *Television and Totalitarianism in Czechoslovakia: From the First Democratic Republic to the Fall of Communism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), 186, 192–93.

respect human rights and who were consequently subjected to the authorities' repressive measures.[23]

Kubišová had come third in the 1966 ISC with the song "Oh, Baby, Baby," a duet which she performed with Vondráčková. Unlike Kubišová, Vondráčková did not take a political stand against the Czechoslovak government—she was even a part of the pro-government, anti-Charter group that criticized Charter 77—and she went on to win the 1977 ISC for Czechoslovakia with the song "Malovaný džbánku" (The Painted Jug). That was the first time that the ISC had been staged since 1968. This second series of the ISC was a transformation of the Sopot International Song Festival, which had the longest historical tradition of any popular music song festival in the Eastern Bloc, having begun in 1961. As the Polish media was in the 1970s more open to Western cultural influences than most other Eastern Bloc states,[24] the organizers of the ISC from Polish Television (Telewizja Polska, TVP) wanted this new edition of the ISC to include participants from all over the world, and not just communist states or Intervision Network members. They presented the idea of this second series of the ISC in the context of promoting mutual understanding and peaceful cooperation in the "the spirit of Helsinki."[25] This referred to the Helsinki Accords that were concluded among almost all European states in the Finnish capital in 1975, and which included agreements on the inviolability of borders, respect for human rights, and cultural cooperation, including the co-production, exchange, and joint broadcasting of television programs. Indeed, the ISC in its second series was again more international and open than the ESC, which remained closed to any entries from states that were not members of the EBU. The Polish organizers also introduced an innovation to the ESC model by having a separate international competition for entries submitted by record companies from Eastern Europe and the West, alongside one for entries sponsored by national broadcasting organizations that were mostly members of the Intervision Network.

However, political dissent and social discontent had been growing in Poland in the late 1970s amid an economic crisis. A week before the 1980 ISC, a strike calling for economic, labor, and political reforms began in the Lenin Shipyard in Gdańsk, where the Sopot International Song Festival had first

23 Jonathan Bolton, *Worlds of Dissent: Charter 77, The Plastic People of the Universe, and Czech Culture Under Communism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 154.

24 Sabina Mihelj and Simon Huxtable, *From Media Systems to Media Cultures: Understanding Socialist Television* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 67–68, 180.

25 Tadeusz Kędzierski, "Sprawozdanie z udziału w 63 Sesji Rady Interwizji" (Warsaw 1979), 2, 4 [Archives of Polish Television, Komitet do spraw radia i telewizji 'Polskie radio i telewizja', 1702/1].

been staged; the strikers capitalized on the already-present media attention for the ISC in nearby Sopot.[26] A week after the 1980 ISC was held, Solidarity (Solidarność), the first independent trade union in the Eastern Bloc, was formed in response to the strikers' requests. As Solidarity became the center of a broader social movement and anti-government protests continued amid worsening economic conditions, the ISC was not held in its usual August slot in 1981: the Polish government's Radio and Television Committee stated in 1981 that "in the current economically and socially tense situation such expenditures would not be approved by the population."[27] The Polish government's further attempt to quell political opposition through the imposition of martial law from December 1981 to July 1983 meant that the ISC would not be held in those years either—and never again revived for the rest of the Cold War, even as the Sopot International Song Festival was restarted in 1984.

## Conclusion

The Central and East European members of the OIRT—including the Czech Republic, Poland, and Slovakia, which had all also staged the ISC during the Cold War—joined the EBU in 1993 and went on to enter the ESC. Ironically, considering Czechoslovakia's pioneering role in organizing the ISC, the Czech Republic was the last state from Central Europe to debut in the ESC, doing so only in 2007, even though it had also joined the EBU in 1993. This was in spite of the fact that the Czech Republic was among the states from the former Eastern Bloc that were most successful in their European integration efforts, being among the first of these to enter the Council of Europe, the EU, and NATO. The ESC was perhaps not needed by Czech cultural diplomacy to articulate Prague's Europeanist aspirations as much as the ISC had been a tool for Czechoslovak cultural diplomacy to signify an openness to the West. Even though the ISC was not a Soviet creation, both the ESC and the ISC have figured prominently in Russia's cultural diplomacy since the end of the Cold War. Some Russian politicians—including President Vladimir Putin—have even called for a revival of the ISC, especially as they have criticized the ESC for allegedly being politically biased against Russia or for promoting the visibility of sexual minorities. The ISC has been staged one more time since 1980, in 2008 in Sochi, but that edition only included members from the former Soviet Union

26 Rosenberg, "The Cold War Rival to Eurovision."

27 Agence France-Presse, "Kein Geld für Chanson," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, August 15, 1981.

and not from any other state from the former Eastern Bloc.[28] Indeed, that was the first time the ISC was conceived more as a political challenge rather than a cultural opening to the West; it was also the only time that a part of the former Soviet Union ever took the lead in organizing the ISC.[29] In this way, the 2008 ISC was not like the ISC of the Cold War era, which had never been Russian-led or limited to the states of the Soviet Union. The original ISC had been a more internationally open event that reflected the desires of cultural and political actors in Czechoslovakia and Poland for cultural exchange with Western Europe during periods of political liberalization in these two states. Indeed, as an attempt to promote the national popular music industries of the Eastern Bloc, the ISC was modelled not on any Soviet cultural product but on the success of Western Europe's ESC, even though it emerged in the context of Moscow's de-Stalinization policies. Still, the ISC was not simply an imitation of the ESC. Rather, it introduced innovations to the ESC's format that made the ISC more internationally open than its Western European counterpart. That was especially evident in the 1968 ISC that was held during the Prague Spring, and which was the first televised international popular music song contest that included participants from both the Eastern and Western Blocs. Such innovations may seem unexpected when we consider that Eastern Bloc societies were otherwise subjected to greater cultural censorship and travel restrictions than Western European ones were, and that the global trendsetters for popular music during the Cold War were found predominantly in the West and not in the East. Nonetheless, these innovations demonstrate the importance of international song contests in the cultural policies of communist party-led states—especially as symbols of political liberalization, openness towards Western influences, and autonomy from the Soviet Union.

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28 William Lee Adams, "Following Outrage over Conchita, Russia is Reviving its Own Straight Eurovision," *Newsweek* July 25, 2014, https://www.newsweek.com/2014/08/01/following-outrage-over-conchita-russia-reviving-its-own-soviet-eurovision-260815.html.

29 During the Cold War, the Soviet Union only once won the ISC, with Alla Pugacheva singing "Vse mogut koroli" (Kings Can Do Anything), in 1978. She went on to represent Russia in the 1997 ESC with the song "Primadonna."

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