

Gagarina Gains Support on Eve of Eurovision Final

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Two Germans wearing wigs and covered head to toe in red sequins, in imitation of Irish pop duo Jedward, are standing in front of Vienna City Hall. Nearby, a group of Irish men and women are dressed completely in green with shamrocks dotted all over their clothes

Welcome to Eurovision 2015 in Vienna, which comes to an end with the final Saturday evening.

On the surface, Vienna can seem a staid city but it has taken the assorted eccentricities of Eurovision fans to its heart, and thrown in some of its own like the single sex traffic lights that show the city's welcoming attitude to the LGBT community.

"I'm a big fan of the contest," said Daniel Redeng, one of the Jedward duo, who is attending Eurovision for the third time, "It is like a family and coming home every year. You feel immediately welcome."

Redneg is in the Eurovision village, which has a copy of the Secession Building, one of Vienna's most famous buildings which is topped with a golden leaf patterned dome. Its glam extravagance seems to match the glitz of Eurovision.

The Irish fans will only talk about the Irish contestant Molly Sterling and show off their Austrian SIM cards, which they have bought so they can vote for her. Unfortunately, it didn't help as she failed to get through Thursday's semifinal.

Russian contestant Polina Gagarina did make it through and she will face off against 27 other countries in the final. Sweden, with a slice of quality pop from Mans Zelmerlow, is the clear favorite but Russia seems to have struck a chord in the hearts of many and is now second favorite.

"She is the warmest Russian presence that we have had here in a long time. You hear the song and you almost forget it is Russia [...] it was spine chillingly perfect." said Ewan Spence who hosts ESC Insight, an unofficial Eurovision podcast.

Gagarina is, indeed, one of the most excitable contestants at the contest, always with a huge smile on her face and never far away from tears. "It is a big responsibility to represent such a big and beloved country because my shoulders are rather small [...] it is a really big honor," she said at a press conference last week.

However, it is not just Gagarina's song or her smile that people are talking about but the country she represents.

"The president of Russia is not OK but it wouldn't stop me voting for their song," said one Eurovision fan Nadine Novotny from Vienna

"[Russia's] song is perfect but there are lots of political things so I am hesitant to say she will win," said another Eurovision devotee, Akvile Vanagaite from Lithuania, "Lithuania is very close to Russia, we have a six percent Russian population and feel close to Russia's people and culture but not the politics."

Lithuania's Eurovision contestant Monika Linkyte, who also made the final, doesn't agree: "If we are not thinking politically, then yes we should vote for them. I like the Russian song," she said.

Still, Gagarina has not won everyone over.

Many fans of the Eurovision, which traditionally has always been big in the gay community, have been critical of Russia for its record on gay rights.

Russia's contestant in 2014, the Tolmachevy Twins were booed so much last year that they burst into tears offstage and there are concerns that Gagarina will also be jeered in the final. Eurovision organizers said that they would not tolerate any booing and that they had put measures in place to prevent it happening.

The audience did not boo in the semifinal but a number still protested by raising rainbow flags, a symbol of gay-pride, during the performance. "I was surprised that everyone seems to love Russia this year. It is really sick that all these people are applauding for a country that

wants to put them in prison," said German fan Mattias Wotschke. "We put a gay pride flag in the air and she looked right at us. She is a cold-hearted monster and propaganda puppet."

Eurovision organisers were quick to deny that it had been an intentional camera shot. "It is important to state that we did not deliberately zoom in," Jon Ola Sand, executive director of Eurovision, told the Moscow Times, adding that there is a lot of flag waving and it is easy to briefly block the view of an artist, as happened with Gagarina.

Wotschke, who came to Vienna with his partner, didn't travel to Baku for the contest in 2012 because of Azerbaijan's human rights record and homophobic attitude and said he would not travel to Russia were Gagarina to win this year.

Sand said Eurovision has no worries if Russia hosts the concert in 2016. "Every broadcaster that we work with will follow the rules and regulations of the Eurovision Song Contest" he said, "I do not foresee any trouble."

Whether everyone in Russia will be happy to host is another question. Russian legislator Vitaly Milonov, has campaigned against the contest and called last year's winner Conchita Wurst a "europervert."

The head of the Russian Orthodox Church Kirill said that Russia should have its own contest with lullabies, patriotic and sacred songs. He warned that if Gagarina wins then Eurovision would come to Russia next year "together with its bearded female singers" which would "impose on us what is against our culture," TASS news agency reported.

Nevertheless, Eurovision is still very popular in Russia with some fans coming to Vienna to support Gagarina. "We think Conchita is good and that people shouldn't judge," said fan Maria Gorodentseva, although she did admit that she "wanted to bring a Russian flag but we're afraid of having it in the crowd."

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