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Singing was a potent symbol of nationhood for Estonians throughout decades of Soviet rule. Now it's helping the country complete its journey into European integration.

On a raw winter day on Europe's eastern frontier, 100 children aged seven through 10 sing in a school auditorium in Viimsi, a Baltic coastal village that used to be a former high-security Soviet submarine base.

Their eyes are riveted to charismatic choral conductor Aarne Saluveer, their voices rise in harmony with Alo Mattiisen's "No One Can Shut My Mouth." It was the banned patriotic lyrics of Mattiisen friend Juri Leesment that Estonians defiantly sang in the late 1980s to overthrow Soviet rule.

On Sunday, the children sang Mattiisen's song again, this time in a gigantic choir of 25,000 at Tallinn's "Singing Ground," the giant shell-shaped stage along the Baltic Sea built in Soviet times that is now considered a shrine to Estonian nationhood. The children carried on an almost uninterrupted tradition dating back more than 150 years, testifying once again to the power of singing as Estonia's main unifying force.

A nation-building tool in the 19th century, a peaceful force again in the 20th century, singing in recent years has acted as symbolic in helping this former Soviet republic complete its journey into European integration, observers say. Indeed, after pulling itself out of the latest economic crisis by its own bootstraps, Estonia this year joined the eurozone. It may currently be the smallest, and poorest of the currency zone, but it is also the country with the lowest debt, the result of rigid austerity measures Estonians mostly supported.

"Look, if you have 20,000 people singing, it's pretty much of a force," says Estonian President Toomas Hendrik Ilves, sitting with his wife and daughter, who also sang at the event. Behind him, a crowd of close to 100,000, many waving the blue, white and black Estonian flag and wearing colorful traditional costumes, applauded the young singers.

"Estonia went through rough times. But we came back out of the last three years better off than anybody else. Estonians really bit the bullet on tough economic reform," said the president. "This is the first time we're together celebrating we came out of it."

Endurance under duress

Born in 1869 as a national awakening rose in Czarist Russia, of which Estonia was a part, the "Laulupidu" song festival is Estonia's metaphor for the vibrant heart of a country that has chugged up the hill like "the little engine that could."

In 1989, when Glasnost and Perestroika were in the air, 35,000 Estonians rebelliously sang Gustav Ernesaks' forbidden "Land of My Fathers, Land that I Love."

The memory of that time when the crowd of a half million people - 10 percent of the Estonian population - stood reverently to hear the first public demand for independence, echoed back Sunday. Many Estonians, teary-eyed, rose up to sing the unofficial national anthem closing the ceremony.

A separate youth festival began in 1962 when the traditional singing event got too big.

"It shows what human beings are capable of enduring and achieving under the most difficult obstacles," said Jim Tusty, who co-produced the 2007 documentary 'The Singing Revolution.' Sunday's singing event capped a three-day festival that also had a dancing component.

But the song festival isn't only a thing of the past. Just ask Kati Naboer. All winter-long, she braved icy, snow-capped roads to take her daughter to the myriad rehearsals in Viimsi.

"As we Estonians know, we are part of a big singing group," Naboer says.

Although her daughter never experienced the singing revolution that toppled communism, "she too, can feel she is a part of a bigger community - the Estonian community."

No shortage of talent

Naboer's choir was among more than 241 ensembles and 47 orchestras selected to perform, the result of a hard competition process to select the nation's best young singers. More than 1,600 young instrumentalists played. Many children had converged on the capital from the country's furthest forested areas, where poverty and unemployment are still rampant.

"If you see them, how they live, somewhere in the east, you can see they live from one festival to the other," said Mart Agu, artistic director of the dance festival. He said he had personally gotten to know all of the 8,000 youngsters who danced at the festival, adding, "If you're a small child and live in the middle of the forest, it is something to come to this festival."

"The wide world begins in a small land" was the festival's theme this year. "The temptation of the wide world is there, we go abroad to see the world and we come back to find that we have the same thing here," says song festival artistic director Veronika Portsmouth. At 30, she represents the singing tradition's future.

Keeping children and youths interested in singing could be a challenge, she says. "Let's face it, you cannot shut your eyes: Children listen to pop and disco, we have to give them what they want," she said. "We have to give them rock 'n roll, but we have to give them good, valuable rock."

And in fact, the Singing Festival's first-ever "rock choir" ignited enthusiastic applause Sunday.

And yet, says Portsmouth, "This festival is about establishing a connection with our past, with our deep roots."

Hopes of freedom realized

One music figure linking the past and the present was Rene Eespere, whose song "My House is Sacred" became one of the festival's classics.

"When I wrote it - in 1983 - I was hopeful that Estonia would be free again, and now it is free," Eespere says. He wrote the song for children, because having adults sing it could have landed them time in Siberia work camps.

The Soviet Union ruled Estonia for 50 years, until the country got its independence again in 1991.

"We need this tradition to keep our roots alive," says Aarne Saluveer, a famous rock band player during the Soviet era and now rector of the Tallinn-based Georg Ots Music College. As head of the Estonian Choral Society, he oversees the country's 400 choirs.

"In the 1990s, some people said, 'Why do we have the singing festivals, we're free!'" says Saluveer. But that approach implies that singing is about protesting, about living in fear, he added. On the contrary, he said: "Singing is about telling important stories, it is about celebrating that we are free."

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