

The Russian government's anti-gay scapegoating and the Olympics Games: The LGBT Movement Takes Aim at Sochi

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The Russian government's anti-gay scapegoating diverts attention from what appears to be the most corrupt Olympics in history.

It says something about the skittish levels of repression and fear in Russia that nail polish could provoke an international crisis. But that's what happened at the IAAF World Championships in Moscow last August, when Swedish high jumper Emma Green Tregaro and her teammate, sprinter Moa Hjelmer, were pressured by their nation's officials to remove the rainbow decorations that adorned their fingernails or risk being sent home. Their nails were meant to be a subtle protest against recent legislation in Russia aimed at criminalizing and marginalizing the LGBT community.

"I couldn't imagine how big and how much it would mean to people. So I'm so glad that I did it," said Green Tregaro. "Of course I've got some ugly messages too, and that makes it even more worth it."

The Russian Duma passed a spate of anti-gay laws last year, one of which bans "propaganda of nontraditional sexual relations." These laws are so all-encompassing and so vague that they could threaten prison time for anyone who acknowledges the mere existence of LGBT people in any public forum such as the Internet, the classroom or even the Duma itself. These laws were of course signed by President Vladimir Putin, who also, with great fanfare, signed ordinances banning the adoption of Russian children by LGBT couples, as well as by any single person or unmarried couple who reside in a country where marriage equality is on the books. And he still wasn't finished: Putin approved legislation that doles out two-week jail sentences for any visitor to the country suspected of being gay or sharing this information with others. Recently, the Russian newspaper *Gazeta* reported that four Dutch tourists were arrested because they were "suspected of promoting homosexual propaganda among children." The legislation has also led to a spike in violence and harassment aimed at the country's LGBT community.

As *The Guardian* reported, "Activists say the legislation has emboldened rightwing groups who use social media to 'ambush' gay people, luring them to meetings and then humiliating them on camera—sometimes pouring urine on them. These groups often act against gay teenagers, several of whom told the Guardian that rising homophobia and vigilante activity force them to lead lives of secrecy."

Much of this legislation was passed in the shadows, with little discussion or condemnation on an international scale and very few mentions in the media outside Russia. That changed dramatically when people started to discuss it in the context of the coming Winter Olympic Games in Sochi.

Debates exploded around the world about whether LGBT athletes and allies would be safe in Russia, about whether countries should boycott in protest or even whether activists should push to ban Russia from its own Winter Games. Among athletes and Olympic federations, the question is even starker: Should athletes just “shut up and play,” or should they use their athletic platforms to protest at the Olympics? This last option is the one that we are most likely to see. The United States Olympic Committee (USOC) has already taken a boycott off the table, making the case that “history has proven that the only people...hurt by boycotts are the athletes that have worked their whole lives to participate in these Games.”

That leaves protest as the only option for athletes. It’s an option with considerable risk. Putin initially outlawed all forms of protest in the two months leading up to the Games. That decree, which has been slightly eased, banned all “gatherings, rallies, demonstrations, marches and pickets” that aren’t a part of Olympic ceremonies—meaning arrest or deportation for anyone who believes that just being who they are should not be seen as “an act of protest.”

Athletes who want to make a statement should not look to the International Olympic Committee for solidarity. Already, former IOC president Jacques Rogge has made clear that he is siding with Russia, warning athletes to forgo any protest. The new IOC chief, Thomas Bach, the first president to be a former gold medalist, has said only that “we will follow our values and the Olympic Charter.” He was not referring to the part of the charter that forbids discrimination of any kind but to Rule 50, which states, “No kind of demonstration or political, religious or racial propaganda is permitted.” More bluntly, Gerhard Heiberg, the IOC’s chief marketing officer, called for a plan to squelch demonstrations, saying, “I think this could ruin a lot for all of us.”

Former Canadian Olympic Committee leader Dick Pound offered the following advice to Olympic officials: “You say to your kids, ‘If you screw around with this, we’ll send you home.’”

Despite the unprecedented level of advance work to squelch any semblance of freedom of expression, several Olympic participants have already made it clear that they will be defying any ban placed on their ability to be heard. The story of Brian Burke is exemplary. Burke, a grizzled longtime National Hockey League high-level executive, is now director of player personnel for the US Olympic hockey team. He became an LGBT advocate after his own son Brendan came out of the closet. When Brendan died in a car accident at the age of 21, Burke and his other son, Patrick, started the You Can Play Project, aimed at making sports a safe space for LGBT athletes. Burke wrote in *Sports Illustrated* in September that “Russia has criminalized my ability to be a father and our ability to be a family.”

He went on to say, “You don’t have to be gay to care about this. You don’t have to have a gay son or daughter to recognize an organized effort by a government to target and destroy a minority group. History has taught us that, left unchecked, this sort of bigotry will only escalate. The rest of the world cannot bear silent witness.... So, Olympians, when you pack your skates, pack a rainbow pin. When you practice your Russian, learn how to say, ‘I am pro-gay.’ When you gather your winter clothes, know that You Can Play will happily outfit any Olympic athlete with complementary You Can Play merchandise. The pressure to do what’s right shouldn’t end with the closing ceremony. The IOC, USOC and each sport’s governing bodies should refuse to stage future international competitions in Russia until these outrageous laws are repealed. That is the boycott I’m calling for.”

Burke is not alone. The openly gay New Zealand Olympic speed skater Blake Skjellerup joined the Athlete Ally/All Out campaign, which demands the repeal of Russia’s anti-LGBT legislation ahead of the Sochi Games. “I want to stand in solidarity with Athlete Ally and the rest of the LGBT community to show that Russia’s policies are archaic and a violation of human rights everywhere,” he said. “This issue is much bigger than athletics, but if I can help change minds and open doors through the

platform of sport, that is what I will do.”

President Obama, seeing an opportunity to stick a thumb in the eye of the Russian president, has also seized on this moment. In a departure from tradition, the US delegation will not include someone from the president or vice president’s family. Instead, it will include out-and-proud tennis legend Billie Jean King, out-and-proud two-time Olympic hockey player Caitlin Cahow and gold-medal-winning figure skater Brian Boitano, who came out of the closet after being named to the delegation. Considering that King said the LGBT community could use “a John Carlos moment”—a reference to the 1968 Olympic bronze medalist who raised a black-gloved fist for human rights and against racism at the Mexico City Games that year—this will probably not be the most placid of delegations.

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This movement has elicited contradictory responses from Russia’s ruling circles. Vitaly Milonov, the politician who spearheaded the “homosexual propaganda” ban in St. Petersburg that served as a model for Putin, ardently defended the legislation. He said, “I haven’t heard any comments from the government of the Russian Federation, but I know that it is acting in accordance with Russian law. And if a law has been approved by the federal legislature and signed by the president, then the government has no right to suspend it. It doesn’t have the authority.”

Yet Russia’s sports minister, Vitaly Mutko, is claiming that any concern about the safety of LGBT athletes and their allies is an “invented problem” that the Western media have focused on as a way to besmirch the country’s reputation. “Russian athletes, foreign athletes, guests, those who come to Sochi, will be granted all rights and freedom,” he said, adding: “This law does not deprive any citizen of rights, whether athletes or guests.”

Putin, for his part, has released political prisoners, including members of the punk rock group Pussy Riot and oil magnate Mikhail Khodorkovsky, to quell concerns. He also recently announced the creation of “protest zones”—about nine miles from the nearest Olympic site. Clearly, there is fear in Russia that an international public relations disaster awaits the country if it crushes athletic dissent, while at the same time officials want to use LGBT people as scapegoats for Russia’s existential crises: low birth rates, massive wealth disparities, economic stagnation and an insecure place in the global power structure.

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The scapegoating of LGBT people also turns attention away from what appears to be the most corrupt Olympics in history—which is quite a feat. Conservative estimates put the cost of the Sochi Games at \$51 billion. This is more than 400 percent higher than originally planned, and it would make the Sochi Games the most expensive in history—in fact, more expensive than all of the other Winter Olympics Games combined. The costs have not been accrued because of security concerns, although there will be 30,000 soldiers on the ground and an unprecedented amount of surveillance. Instead, the huge sums involved are the result of some of the most brazen cronyism imaginable.

Industrialists Arkady and Boris Rotenberg, childhood friends of Putin’s, have received twenty-one government contracts, worth a total of \$7.4 billion. That’s more than the entire cost of the 2010 Olympics in Vancouver. A different project, a thirty-one-mile railway project from the coastal Olympic village in Sochi to the one in the mountains, will cost a staggering \$8.7 billion. Russian Esquire estimated that for \$8.7 billion, the tracks could “have been paved entirely with a centimeter-thick coating of beluga caviar.”

As Russian opposition leaders Boris Nemtsov and Leonid Martynyuk wrote, “Only oligarchs and companies close to Putin got rich. The absence of fair competition [and] cronyism...have led to a sharp increase in the costs and to the poor quality of the work to prepare for the Games.” In his blog, Nemtsov added, “The fact is that almost everything that is related to the cost problems and abuses in preparation for the Olympic Games was carefully concealed and continues to be covered up by the authorities.”

One of those officials was Akhmed Bilalov, deputy head of the Russian Olympic Committee, who also ran a company that built ski resorts in the Caucasus. After Putin blamed him for cost overruns last year, Bilalov lost his job and was charged with mishandling state funds. He subsequently fled Russia.

Even more nauseating, if not surprising, is the shrug of the shoulders that these corruption charges have elicited from officials of the International Olympic Committee. Jean-Claude Killy, the French skiing superstar and triple gold medalist at the 1968 Olympics, is now in charge of the IOC’s coordination commission for the Sochi Games. “I don’t recall an Olympics without corruption,” Killy said. “It’s not an excuse, obviously, and I’m very sorry about it, but there might be corruption in this country; there was corruption before. I hope we find ways around that.”

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If Putin expected he would be able to attack LGBT people with impunity while his childhood chums looted the treasury, he was mistaken. What he did not consider was that he would be running directly into an unprecedented level of confidence in the sports world among LGBT people and their allies. Since basketball player Jason Collins came out of the closet last spring—the first active NBA player ever to do so—more and more LGBT athletes and allies have organized themselves to end the tradition of the sports locker room as the “last closet.”

As Blake Skjellerup said, “My sexuality is gay and being gay is not propaganda, and I can’t change my sexuality and I’m not going, I guess, to change that during the Olympic Games.... My sexuality isn’t the be-all or end-all of who I am. However, given the situation in Russia, I think it’s important to highlight that and to be proud of that.”

In attempting to find wisdom about what athletes may really be risking by raising their political voices at the Olympic Games, I spoke with John Carlos, who protested in 1968 alongside Tommie Smith in the name of human rights [for more, see the sidebar on page 15]. I co-wrote Carlos’s memoir, *The John Carlos Story*, and know well the price he paid for defying the Olympic establishment.

I asked Carlos whether athletes should boycott or make a stand in Sochi. He said, “The bottom line is, if you stay home, your message stays home with you. If you stand for justice and equality, you have an obligation to find the biggest possible megaphone to let your feelings be known. Don’t let your message be buried, and don’t bury yourself. To be heard is to be greater than a boycott. Had we stayed home, we’d never have been heard from again.”

I pointed out to Carlos that he may be correct, but that this requires someone actually having the courage in Sochi to stand up and pay the price. You could lose your medal, get kicked out of the Olympic Village—as he and Smith were in Mexico City—and after the spasm of media praise, find yourself a pariah in the long years ahead. He said to me, “Yes, it takes courage, but if you have a conviction that what you are doing is right, then you’re going to make the right move. Someone has to sacrifice if we are going to move forward. You might be forgiven in your lifetime; you might not. But if you’re in the right, your sacrifice will be appreciated.”

Athletes are going into the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics knowing there may have to be a sacrifice. It's a stunning comment on our times that so many seem not only willing but eager to make it.

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P.S.

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