

## Should we boycott the Olympics?

Russia's discrimination of the LGBT community should absolutely be opposed, but boycotting the 2014 Winter Olympics is not the only option



By [George Wood](#), Deputy Muse Editor (2012/13)

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In June, a bill banning gay "propaganda among minors" in Russia was signed by President Vladimir Putin. Criticism of the bill abroad has put Russia under the spotlight for its history of widespread anti-gay hate crime, and its growing intolerance of LGBT groups. With the new laws passed, homophobic violence is effectively legitimised as Russia's police turn a blind eye to gay persecution, and public abuse, assaults and humiliation have reportedly increased.

But the international LGBT community is a force to be reckoned with. Protest against Putin's law has now been targeted towards Sochi's 2014 Winter Olympics, with Stephen Fry among those heading a boycott. Fry's open letter to David Cameron and the IOC compares Putin to Hitler in his scapegoating of gay people for despotic power gain. In a follow-up on Tumblr, Fry explains how Hitler at the 1936 Berlin Olympics wasn't seen as the Hitler we know now - he became the corrupt dictator by using events like the Olympic games to reinforce his power at home. To him, and many others, the situation with Putin is now comparable.

But despite his admirable sentiment, even Fry himself has admitted a boycott is unrealistic. Apart from being practically unfeasible (even if the Olympics were to be moved Vancouver), Cameron and Obama have since denied the prospect of a boycott, and we should expect no more from other political leaders, except disappointment. Of course, Western politicians can be verbally against the LGBT crisis in Russia, but it's unlikely that they are going to take drastic action so close to the Games. Whether you interpret this as political cowardice, or as a fact that it would be politically disastrous for the likes of UK and US to interfere in Russia's internal affairs in such a way, our government will only take action if the safety of our athletes is under threat. Similarly, the Russian government are unlikely to jeopardise their own Games by allowing harm to come to any pro-gay athletes from abroad, never mind that Russia's new law applies to foreigners as well. Neither side wants to spark such a direct inter-governmental conflict.

Don't expect much from the IOC either. Jacques Rogge's response for a clarification on Russia's laws is a diplomatic gesture to ensure the Games run as smoothly as possible; with the exception of South Africa during the apartheid years, the IOC do not hold moral stances. (Funnily enough though, his comments of new anti-gay law being a "translation issue" actually hit the nail on the head - the law is purposefully vague so it can legitimise homophobia, hiding behind a "protect the children" clause.) If the IOC were to take action, Russia would simply use the Beijing Olympics against them - the IOC didn't do anything to stop the Olympics then, despite China's shockingly abusive human rights record. (What makes Russia's case more shocking is that Russia's new law contrasts to how we expect LGBT rights to be generally improving over time, hence the global furore.)

A problem with the Olympics is that it will never be a competition purely for the love of sport; political willy-waving between nations is always to be expected. If our governments and the IOC will not take action, we might look to the athletes competing instead. But when a competition on such a world stage is

thrown into the context of a political background, it becomes easy to lose focus on these individuals who have spent the best part of their lives training for the Games. Who can blame them for wanting to ignore the LGBT crisis in Russia in perhaps one of their most important points in their career? Any kind of political demonstration can mean getting expelled from the Games. So commend those who do make a stand in Sochi next year, don't condemn those who don't.

Sadly, this could amount to Russia's LGBT issues being quietly dismissed next year, and there aren't many opportunities where the world's spotlight is focused so neatly on one country. We can be angry as much as we like with the IOC and our own government for not making more of a stand against Russia's new law, and we can pressurise gay right activists visiting the Games to do something about the situation. Or, instead of simply looking at others to make a difference, we could show solidarity for the LGBT victims of Russia's new law, like those who protested in London and Edinburgh over the weekend. Stephen Fry suggested athletes could make a certain gesture, like crossing hands in front of their chest, as a symbolic protest without infringing on the IOC's charters. Fry's open letter mentioned that "Putin cannot be seen to have the approval of the civilised world", but this does not necessitate a boycott or something that must be done by Cameron, Rogge or Obama. At the very least, we should show our own disgust at Russia's new law too.

Whatever happens at the Winter Olympics, the conservative agenda of Putin and his cronies must be continually challenged. Homophobia is a political tool long entrenched in Russia's conservative leadership, and thus has a deep grounding in Russian society. As for Putin, who has remained rather quiet on the whole matter, he cannot afford to underestimate the proliferating force of the international LGBT community. Perhaps he's is better off listening to Tina Fey's character in a particular episode of 30 Rock: "And *\*why\** did you have to offend the gay community? It is the most organised of all the communities! They make the Japanese look like the Greeks!"



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