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LGBT Boycott of Russian Olympics?

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By Phillip M. Ayoub and Chris Zepeda-Millán, August 3, 2013



The recent passage of a federal bill to ban the [“propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations to minors”](http://thedisorderofthings.com/2013/06/23/russias-anti-gay-laws-the-politics-and-consequences-of-a-moral-panic/) by the Russian Duma has brought international attention to the rampant state and societal repression of LGBT people in Russia. LGBT activists and their allies across the globe have expressed outrage that the Olympic Games—an international symbol of friendship and respect for diversity—are set to be held in Sochi, Russia, next year. Arguments seem to be split among those in support of an official boycott of the 2014 Winter Olympics and those who oppose such actions.

As social movement scholars, we want to call attention to the fact that the most successful movement campaigns have often employed a range of tactics. As LGBT groups in Russia and other countries know, the international attention garnered by this debate is paramount to the visibility of LGBT issues on the ground in Russia and, importantly, beyond it. From the United States to Uganda—where anti-gay backlashes are, to varying degrees, commonplace—the games in Sochi will undoubtedly spark a dialogue about homophobia in response to the tactics and strategies that activists decide to employ. Here, we outline what we see as the contours of this tactical-debate and

the need to look seriously at the opportunities it holds.

There are justifications for the calls to boycott supported [by some LGBT groups](http://tv.msnbc.com/2013/07/29/gay-activists-call-for-boycott-of-2014-olympics-and-russian-vodka/). These arguments, which pundits from the New York Times to Macleans have traced as far back as to the moral question of attending the 1936 Olympic games in Berlin, point to the high price of silent complacency with human rights violations. In a similar vein, others have called for the international boycott of Russian vodka, for the canceling of sister-city relations with Russian cities, and for corporations—such as Coca-Cola, Panasonic, VISA, Samsung, and Procter & Gamble—to suspend their sponsorship of the games. The boycott tactic of placing external pressure on the host nation is effective in drawing international attention to the situation for LGBT Russians, as well as in fostering a dialogue about the situation for LGBT people elsewhere—including those in states critical of Russian policy.

That said, many LGBT organizations, like the Russian-LGBT Network and ILGA-Europe, oppose a boycott of the games and have warned of the possible negative effects that this strategy could provoke within Russia. They fear that a boycott could be used by Russian officials to further scapegoat the LGBT community—blaming it for the national catastrophe that the failure of the games would represent—and cementing the notion that LGBT rights are antithetical to being Russian. Their message is clear: [“use the Games to speak out, but don’t walk out.”](http://www.ilga-europe.org/home/guide_europe/country_by_country/russia/response_russia_july_2013)

While the decision of whether or not to boycott the winter games ultimately rests with elected officials, the ability to take a stand against homophobia is distributed more broadly. Athletes, spectators, and foreign publics can protest and display their solidarity with LGBT people in many other ways. Activists in Russia are, themselves, calling for a [“diversity of approaches,”](https://www.facebook.com/LGBT.Russia?fref=ts) highlighting the multiplicity of tactics in which acts of resistance can be performed beyond boycott strategies. For example, increasing financial support to Russian LGBT organizations or sending letters of support have been encouraged. In the United States, activists are petitioning NBC (the television network covering the 2014 Winter Olympics) to have openly lesbian MSNBC news anchor Rachel Maddow cover the games as a human rights correspondent. Activists could also pressure the network to show public service announcements about LGBT equality throughout their coverage. Thus, external activism need not focus solely on the Russian state and its policies.

Acts of resistance from within the 2014 Winter Olympics are as important as those performed outside of Russia. A powerful image, similar to that of Jesse Owens winning four gold medals in Nazi-Germany, can be imitated by athletes in Sochi. For example, openly gay New Zealand speed skater Blake Skjellerup says he will compete in the games, proudly wearing a “rainbow flag pin.” Athletes representing various nations could also carry rainbow flags during the games’ opening or closing ceremonies, as Swedish artist Alexander Bard recently called on his country’s representatives do. Others have even proposed that the International Olympic Committee (IOC) itself host a “Pride House.” Waving a rainbow flag, wearing a rainbow pin, or displaying any type of pro-LGBT symbols are political acts of solidarity and dissent that anyone attending the winter games can perform.

Despite the fact that, earlier this week, the IOC claimed that the anti-gay legislation would not affect international athletes and visitors, Russia’s Sports Minister declared recently that [no one is exempt from the law](http://en.ria.ru/sports/20130801/182524193/-Sochi-Athletes-Subject-to-Anti-Gay-Law--Russian-Minister.html). These mixed signals from the IOC and the Russian authorities are unlikely to deter activists from taking advantage of the opportunity that an internationally watched event like the 2014 Winter Olympics affords them.


As American police attempted to break up protests during the anti-war movements of the 1970s and early-2000s, activists chanted that, “The whole world is watching!” In the case of Sochi, the whole world actually will be watching. While Mexico 1968 will forever be recalled for the raising of two

brave black fists, Russia 2014 could be remembered for the displaying of a thousand intrepid rainbow flags...or pins, t-shirts, and rallies.

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