

Gay Rights in Russia and the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics

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Introductory Background

This article is written in part as an update to my article of this past March 6 “[Overview Of The 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics](#)”. Relative to the upcoming winter Olympiad, that piece addresses the issues pertaining to feasibility, terrorism, corruption, human rights, environment and the Circassians. Since then, a June enacted [nationwide Russian Article 6.13.1 law on restricting the communication of homosexual content to minors](#), has drawn a considerable degree of commentary, regarding the 2014 Sochi winter Olympics.

The Russian government maintains that the law’s intention is not meant to encourage discrimination against the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) community. (In less popular usage, there is the termed [LGBTQ](#), which has faced opposition among some LGBT activists over the categorized use of “queer”.) Critics of Article 6.13.1 include the opinion that the broadly stated wording of the law serves to encourage rather than discourage discrimination. There will likely be an increased scrutiny of how Russia’s LGBT community is treated.

When compared to its level of support in Russia, Article 6.13.1 is not as popular a move from the overall perspective of Western countries. It has been emphasized that Russia at large has a socially conservative outlook on the LGBT subject. There are other ways of supporting that position, in a manner (different from Article 6.13.1) which would not be seen as provocative.

Without the law in question, the local municipalities could decide on whether to approve gay pride parades along major roadways, with the public education authorities influencing what is formally taught to minors. (To a noticeable degree, these circumstances existed before Article 6.13.1.) In turn, LGBT activists could civilly make the case on why the wording in something like Article 6.13.1 is unnecessarily divisive. That nationwide law is not needed to aggressively prosecute homosexual as well as heterosexual pedophilia via legal means. The non-existence of Article 6.13.1 would have probably decreased the negative coverage that Russia has been receiving on the LGBT topic.

Concerning the subject of the LGBT community in Russia, several English language articles have appeared, which place a different emphasis from what has been typically highlighted in Western mass media. A few of them immediately come to mind. Dmitry Babich’s July 30 Voice of Russia commentary “[Olympic Stick: Can Washington Wield It Against Russia?](#)” notes an openly pro-LGBT advocacy in Russia, running counter to the image of an underground movement. Patrick Buchanan’s August 13 article “[Post Versus Putin – Whose Side Are You On?](#)” and Aaron Wolf’s Chronicles Magazine piece “[Nazi Russians And ‘Basic](#)

[Morality'](#)", take issue with likening present day Russia with Nazi Germany.

The Motivation Behind The NBC-MSNBC Coverage

Following the enactment of Article 6.13.1, [it was suggested that NBC \(the television network with the Olympic broadcasting rights in the United States\), should make it a point to spend time on covering the opposition to that law](#). Unofficially, NBC's cable television news affiliate MSNBC has done this in a way which suggests a desired policy of accommodating the anti-Russian government legislation activism, for the purpose of lessening any disagreement with NBC covering the Sochi winter Olympics. This stance meshes with the view favoring no boycott of the Sochi winter Olympics, while staunchly opposing Article 6.13.1.

Among the three major American 24/7 television news networks, MSNBC has spent the most time on the LGBT subject in Russia, with CNN coming in a clear second over Fox News. Part of this aspect might have to do with the overall slants of these networks. (Fox News is the more socially conservative of the three, with CNN having a perhaps less liberal lean than MSNBC.)

MSNBC host Lawrence O'Donnell has stood out among the hosts at MSNBC in criticizing Article 6.13.1. To a lesser degree, MSNBC hosts Rachel Maddow and Chris Hayes have covered this subject as well.

Organized Sports And The LGBT Community

On [O'Donnell's August 6 show "The Last Word"](#), retired American Olympic diving legend Greg Louganis made it a point to say that the Olympics are about different cultures exchanging their ideals - adding that he comes from a society of free speech. He also hails from a nation where there are some periodically exhibited mass media inaccuracies. Louganis apparently did not always feel so free to reveal his gay orientation, as evidenced by the years he remained silent on that aspect. Upon further querying, Louganis would probably (if not already) acknowledge this last point, along with the opinion that LGBT concerns in the United States are by no means settled, even with recent advancements.

In media, academia and the arts, there seems to be a longer established understanding of LGBT sentiment, unlike some other fields, including sports, which relates to Louganis and the Olympics. This observation is partly underscored by the lower number of openly gay upper echelon athletes. An August 16 Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty article ["As Gay Athletes Prepare To Take A Stand In Sochi, The Question Is How To Do It"](#), named only two gay winter Olympic athletes. In the National Football League, Major League Baseball, National Basketball Association and National Hockey League, I do not recall any past or present actively playing player "come out of the closet". A limited number did so in retirement.

This past National Basketball Association (NBA) season, Jason Collins became the first non-retired player in that league to reveal being gay. He acknowledged this when he was not actively playing. To date, Collins has not been signed by any NBA team - something that is universally considered as unrelated to his revealed sexual orientation.

The NBA and others in the United States have generally lauded Collins' acknowledgement. [ESPN analyst Chris Broussard](#) and [Golden State Warriors coach Mark Jackson](#) were not as charitable. The expressed disagreement with these two NBA

personalities was nowhere near as condemnatory as the feedback to what Russian pole vaulting great Yelena Isinbayeva said on the LGBT subject. Numerous media reports left out this excerpt from what [she initially stated](#): *“We are against publicity but we are not of course about every choice of every single person. it’s their life, it’s their choice, it’s their feelings, but we’re just against the publicity in our country and I support that.”* Hence, Isinbayeva’s follow-up was not so much a change of her opinion (as claimed by some) as a regret of an evident language barrier and [incomplete overview of what she first said](#).

Same Sex Kissing In Different Cultures

On his August 8 show, O’Donnell posed the hypothetical instance of what might happen if a gay American athlete decided to kiss his spouse at Sochi, with the cameras rolling. In the history of the Olympics, when has a known married gay Olympian been seen kissing his spouse? Besides Johnny Weir, who are the other potential gay American winter Olympians – married or single?

Shortly after O’Donnell’s aforementioned scenario of same sex kissing in Sochi, much hoopla was erroneously raised at the awards ceremony for the women’s 4 by 400 meter relay at last month’s International Amateur Athletic Federation (IAAF) World Championships in Moscow. Some of those unfamiliar with Russian cultural norms, jumped to the wrong conclusion that the [kissing Russian female athletes on the award podium](#) were sending a political message. There was no noticeable look of astonishment in the stands by the mostly Russian crowd. No one in that country sought punitive action against the four women.

Before world wide audiences, Soviet female athletes engaged in same sex kissing, during a period when the Soviet Union officially viewed homosexuality as abnormal. In the Soviet Union, I recall seeing two heterosexual men kissing in a very open public setting with no response of stunned indignation. The folks seeing this same sex kissing could not know for sure the sexual orientation of the two men – a family member and his happily married friend. [Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev engaged in same sex lip kissing](#).

As a youngster, my American upbringing was initially miffed at seeing this behavior. My parents informed me of a different culture and custom. Thereafter, I was no longer surprised to see this manner at gatherings involving my family and their Russian expat friends. Upon my noting this experience, a Russian friend added that in Russia, it is not so out of the ordinary to see girls/women walking about, with their hands and arms around each other’s waist.

Mixing Politics With Sports

O’Donnell is aghast at the International Olympic Committee (IOC) for trying to keep politics out of the Olympics as much as possible. As a Russian government instituted law, Article 6.13.1 falls under a political matter. The IOC has expressed the ideal that the Olympics should primarily focus on the events and athletes, with the backdrop of their national identity. Allowing folks to express themselves on varying subjects, results in a free for all of promoting numerous agendas.

O’Donnell expressed sympathy for what John Carols and Tommie Smith did at the 1980 summer Olympics in Mexico City. During the playing of the American national anthem at the awards ceremony, honoring their athletic achievement, these two athletes gave a clenched fist black power salute to express solidarity with the American civil rights movement.

They were then expelled from the Olympiad (but not stripped of their medals). Likewise, Serb swimmer Milorad Cavic was suspended from the 2008 European Aquatics Championships for wearing a “Kosovo is Serbia” t-shirt at the awarding of his first place performance.

One can sympathize with the American civil rights movement and the mainstream Serb position on Kosovo, while not necessarily believing that these subjects should be highlighted at the awards ceremonies at major international sporting events. Some might take issue with likening the Carlos-Smith expression with Cavic’s. Such a stance leads to determining which political advocacy is more legitimate. Within reason, the IOC does not seem enthused about getting into the business of judging these kind of subjects.

Histrionics

It was no surprise to see O’Donnell uncritically laud the neoconservative leaning gay journalist James Kirchick’s August 21 stunt on RT. [The following day, Kirchick was treated as a very welcomed guest on O’Donnell’s show](#). RT responded to that segment with an August 23 commentary “[Meet The True Journalists: James Kirchick And Lawrence O’Donnell](#)”.

Going into his RT appearance via a Stockholm studio, Kirchick calculatingly went contrary to the subject that he was invited to speak about. The involved RT staff gave him plenty of time before appropriately cutting him off. O’Donnell does not come across as someone who would be more tolerant in a situation where a guest rudely hijacks the intended topic of his show.

Someone who can be categorized as part of the American neoconservative-neoliberal leaning punditcracy privately communicated the view that “*Jamie was wonderful*” in what he did on RT. I responded by adding wonderful, as in wonderfully crank like for a certain slant, which in Kirchick’s example lacked basic civility.

Professional wrestling has been classified as “[sports entertainment](#)”, in contrast to a “sport” as has been generally defined. Likewise, the category of “news entertainment” over “news” has validity.

Concluding Thoughts

Russia is by no means alone in exhibiting a limited tolerance of LGBT concerns. In English language mass media, this point has been raised in an incomplete way. Up to a point, it is understandable why a high profile country like Russia will get more attention than many other nations. This facet does not completely explain the negatively inaccurate and hypocritical coverage against that country. In contrast to how some other countries are treated, Russia bashing seems to be more popular. There is a lack of constructively critical pro-Russian advocacy in English language mass media, coupled with a lingering, although decreased Cold War attitude.

On [Chris Hayes’ August 14 MSNBC show “All In”](#), actor/playwright Harvey Fierstein passionately stated that LGBT activism should focus attention on where it is needed. Earlier, [O’Donnell’s August 9 show](#) had a segment which targeted other parts of central/eastern Europe besides Russia, for an intolerance towards the LGBT community. The non-Russian condemnation was limited. For example, there was no mention made of European Union member Lithuania’s [2009 implemented law](#) on restricting the

communication of homosexual content to minors. On a more recent note, Lithuania is [considering further measures](#) that run counter to LGBT preferences. Following the recent G-20 meeting in St. Petersburg, American President Barack Obama stopped off in the Lithuanian capital Vilnius. He did not say anything about the LGBT situation in Lithuania. Some other countries with a less tolerant attitude than Lithuania and other central/eastern European nations were not mentioned on O'Donnell's aforementioned August 9 show.

Bangladesh is a country where clothing is manufactured and sold en masse in the United States and other nations. [Put mildly, that country has a noticeably less tolerant attitudes towards the LGBT community than Russia](#). Where is the mass media outrage? Is there an economic interest at play, having to do with not rocking the boat against a country where cheap labor has benefitted American and other foreign big business interests?

Along with Bangladesh, a number of other countries including [Qatar](#) and [Saudi Arabia](#) have worse records than Russia on LGBT tolerance. Qatar based Al Jazeera has highlighted the LGBT issue in Russia. Upon a quick review, I was not able to see any Al Jazeera coverage of LGBT concerns in Qatar. An August 29, Al Jazeera America telecast featured a piece on the opposition to same sex marriage in an American state. Rather ironically, that segment was followed by a news item about Qatar having a satellite in outer space. That country is scheduled to host soccer's 2022 World Cup.

In historical terms, the not too distant past reveals a dramatic change in how the LGBT community is viewed. In the 1970s, I attended a socially liberal Long Island public school district. At the time, the sex education taught there at the junior and senior high school levels did not include homosexuality, without any protest. The American government led boycott of the 1980 Moscow summer Olympics did not include protesting the official Soviet view that characterized homosexuality as an illness. A historian acquaintance [reminded me](#) that the American Psychiatric Association (until 1973), American Psychological Association (until 1975) and the World Health Organization (until 1990) held a similar view. [It was not long ago](#), that some American states had laws against homosexuality. Homosexuality has been decriminalized in post-Soviet Russia.

The increased acceptance of the LGBT community has not ended the violence and discrimination it has faced in the United States and elsewhere. Last month, Mark Chapman of the Kremlin Stooge blog brought up a crime story which has received little, if any major headline news coverage in local New York area and American national media (include MSNBC and CNN). In a discussion following his August 16 article "[The Sucking Sound of Receding Credibility: MSNBC's Chris Hayes Drops The Ball](#)", Chapman said:

"Returning for a moment to topic, hate crime case opened in New York for the [murder of a transgender woman](#). She was apparently punched in the face. That must have been some punch.

Defenders will say, ah, yes, but in the United States these things are punished, while they are not even reported in anti-gay Russia. That so? Show me your evidence of widespread anti-gay hate crimes in Moscow. This is the 68th incident this year in New York, up from 54 last year, and we're only a bit over halfway through the year. Just off the top of my head, I'd say the strict measures the U.S. authorities take are not much of a deterrent against what looks like a building wave of anti-gay hate crimes. No

Olympics for you New York."

Since the enactment of Article 6.13.1, Russia has hosted two international sporting events (the World University Games and the IAAF World Championships), without any report of abuse against LGBT athletes or spectators. In comparison to these two sports events, the winter Olympics receives greater attention, thereby making it a more attractive event for advocacy promotion. At Sochi, the Russian authorities might be tested in a situation of provoking activism in opposition to Article 6.13.1. In this scenario, many will not take kindly to either a heavy handed Russian counter response and/or a blatant attempt to focus the interest away from the athletic competition.

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