

LGBT Controversy Takes Spotlight at Moscow Athletics Championships

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Anna Chicherova reveling with her daughter. **Matt Dunham / AP**

As Russian authorities worked hard to prepare facilities for the first large-scale track and field event in the country since the Moscow Olympics, their efforts appeared largely overshadowed by the intensifying uproar over gay rights in Western media.

The 2013 World Athletics Championships saw a full stadium for the first time during its eight-day run on Sunday with the closing ceremony, for which tickets sold out, giving the event an overall audience of more than 390,000 spectators.

Despite reports of sparse crowds at the event, the Moscow championships gathered more crowds than the 2011 championships in Daegu, with most British athletes saying it was "a largely positive experience." Overall, however, the organizers "could do better," BBC Sport review said.

As Russia finds itself in the midst of a tight sporting schedule, it will not be long before athletes come back for the 2014 Winter Olympic Games in Sochi and the stalls of the Luzhniki Stadium will be demolished for reconstruction for the 2018 World Cup.

But if the track and field championships offer any indication, it seems the controversy over gay rights will be in direct competition with actual sports in terms of what will dominate the agenda in the run-up to the events.

After several prominent athletes and human rights activists in the U.S., Britain and other Western countries voiced their concerns over the gay propaganda law signed by President Vladimir Putin in June — which banned the promotion of a homosexual lifestyle among minors — the debate over whether sports can be used as a vehicle for change has come to the foreground.

British actor and playwright Stephen Fry called for the International Olympic Committee to ban the upcoming Sochi Olympics, calling the law "fascist" and comparing Russia to Nazi Germany.

But many high-level sports officials interviewed by The Moscow Times, including President of the British Olympic Association Lord Sebastian Coe, said a boycott would only harm athletes without achieving any progress in gay rights.

Many athletes, including American figure skater Johnny Weir, have said the Olympic Games provides the perfect chance to lobby against the law.

"Like anyone, I am afraid of being arrested, but also I am not afraid of being arrested," Weir, who is married to a man of Russian descent, told CBS News. "If it takes me getting arrested for people to pay attention and for people to lobby against this law, then I am willing to take it."

The ongoing controversy has also inspired many of the athletes competing in Moscow to use the World Athletics Championships to make their views known.

Emma Green Tregaro, a Swedish high jumper, and her fellow teammate sprinter Moa Hjelmer painted their fingernails in the colors of the rainbow, inviting a great deal of media attention and some criticism.

After winning his silver medal in the 800 meter race, U.S. athlete Nick Symmonds said he dedicated the medal to his gay and lesbian friends.

"As much as I can speak out about it, I believe that all humans deserve equality as however God made them," Symmonds told RIA Novosti.

These gestures provoked condemnation from one of Russia's greatest athletes, pole vault jumper Yelena Isinbayeva, who also expressed her apparent support of the law, immediately triggering criticism that overshadowed her third win as world champion.

"We consider ourselves like normal, standard people where boys lives with womans, womans with boys and everything must be fine here. It comes from the history so we never had any of these problems in Russia, and we don't want to have this in the future," she said in English

at a news conference.

Isinbayeva's statement fueled further outrage from some in the West, with flamboyant and outspoken British singer Boy George calling her a "stooopid [expletive]" on his Twitter account.

Isinbayeva, who is posed to be the "mayor" of the Olympic Village in Sochi, quickly responded to the backlash, issuing a statement saying that she was "misunderstood" because English is not her "first language."

"I respect the views of my fellow athletes, and let me state in the strongest terms that I am opposed to any discrimination against gay people," she said.

Russian athletes Ksenia Ryzhnova and Tatyana Firova sparked further debate on Saturday when they shared a kiss on the winners' podium after winning the 4x400m race relay, prompting bloggers to question whether it was an act of defiance or just the thrill of victory.

It remains unclear how the law — which only loosely defines what constitutes "propaganda of homosexuality among minors" — will be applied during the Sochi games, but Sports Minister Vitaly Mutko on Sunday reiterated that the law would not infringe on the lives of athletes at the Olympic Games.

"I can say once again that the freedoms of Russian and foreign athletes and guests who come to Sochi will be absolutely protected," Mutko said, The Associated Press reported.

"In my view, Western media, media outside Russia, give more attention to this than we do in Russia," he said.

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