

Britain to Send Same-Sex Marriage Minister to Sochi

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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LONDON — Britain is to send the government minister responsible for the country's recently passed same-sex marriage laws to next month's Winter Olympics in Russia, where a row over gay rights has clouded the build-up to the event.

Western criticism of Russia's anti-gay policies ahead of the Winter Olympics has threatened to take the gloss off President Vladimir Putin's \$50 billion showpiece.

On Wednesday, a British government spokeswoman confirmed that Culture Secretary Maria Miller, who steered last year's same-sex couples act through a divided British parliament to legalize gay marriage in England and Wales, would attend on Britain's behalf.

"Maria Miller has been a staunch champion of gay equality here in Britain," said Sam Dick, director of campaigns at Stonewall, a lesbian, gay and bisexual campaign group.

"We are sure that her experience of facing down those who oppose equality will stand her in good stead to raise the very real concerns facing gay people in Russia."

U.S. President Barack Obama included three openly gay athletes in his Olympic delegation and made clear the decision was to send a message to Russian authorities. Russia passed a law last year banning what it called the spread of homosexual propaganda among minors.

Senior government figures from Germany, France and the U.S. have said they will not attend, without linking the decision to the issue of gay rights.

British Prime Minister David Cameron, who says he has repeatedly raised the question of gay rights with Putin, is not expected to attend the event, though his office said his plans had not yet been finalized.

Sources close to Cameron said a decision not to go would not be politically motivated, stressing that the prime minister did not usually attend Winter Olympics anyway.

A senior Italian IOC member has criticized the U.S. for including openly gay athletes in its official delegation for next month's Sochi Olympics.

"It is absurd that a country like that sends four lesbians to Russia just to demonstrate that in their country gay rights have [been established]," Mario Pescante said at an Italian Olympic Committee meeting in Milan on Wednesday, in comments widely reported by Italian media. "The Games should not be an occasion and a stage to promote rights that sports supports daily."

The Italian Olympic Committee would not confirm or deny Pescante's comments, but his speech was reported by the Gazzetta dello Sport and the ANSA news agency.

Asked for clarification later in a phone interview, Pescante said he is not against gays. "Of course not," the 75-year-old Pescante said. "I just wanted to make the point not to let politics interfere with the Olympics." (AP)

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