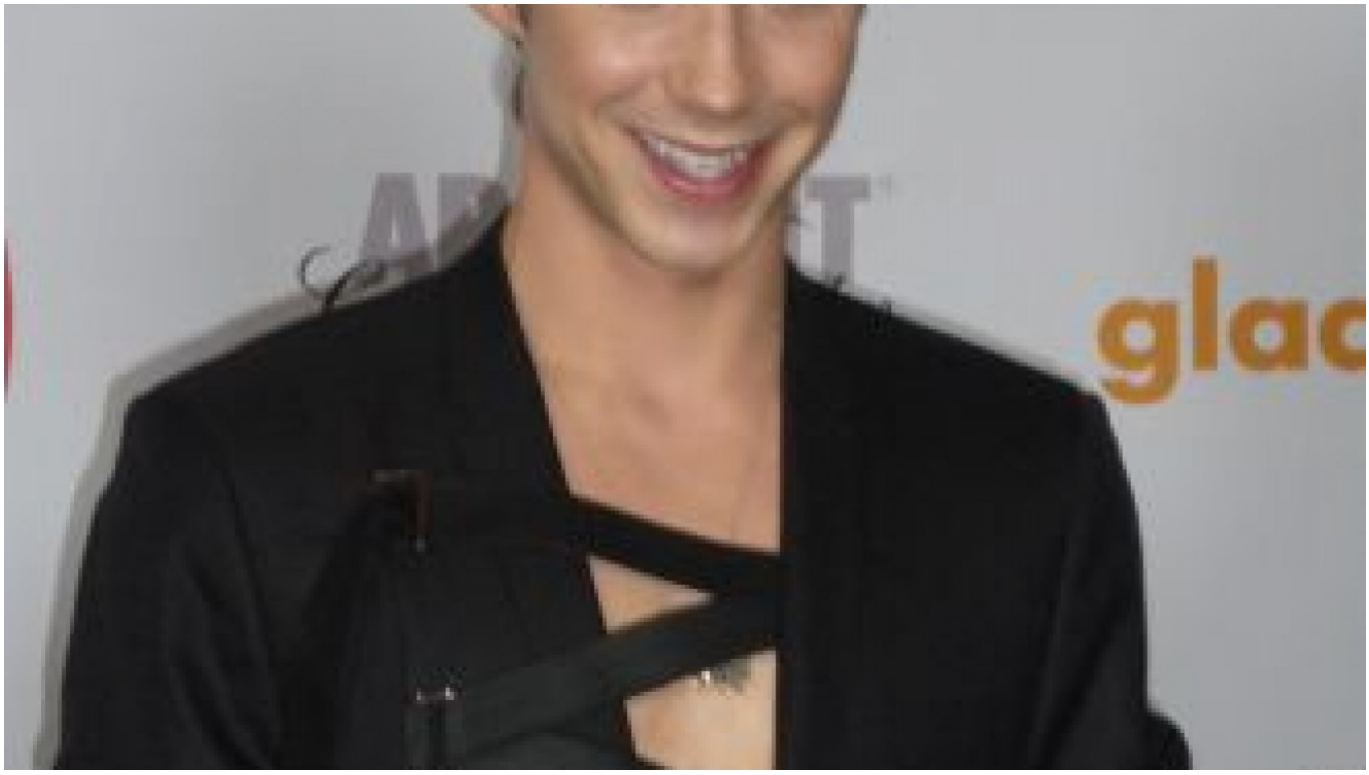
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Gay U.S. Skater Weir Caught in Crossfire for Stand on Games

By The Moscow Times

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Johnny Weir

LONDON — As an openly gay American athlete who is a self-confessed Russophile, Johnny Weir feels he has been caught up "in a crossfire" for not backing a boycott of the Sochi Olympics in the wake of the country's anti-gay policies.

Yet the flamboyant figure skater, who had hoped to compete in next month's Winter Games until his aching body let him down, is adamant that an issue that affects a minority group should not ruin a "lifetime of sacrifices" made by thousands of athletes.

"I've come under so much hate and scrutiny from within my own LGBT community for my views on the Olympics," two-time Olympian Weir said in a telephone interview from his home in New Jersey.

"But as somebody who watched my parents sacrifice everything so that I had at least one

chance of making the Olympics, I could never boycott the Olympics whether they be in Pyongyang [in North Korea], in Uganda, in Iran or Mars.

"I would have competed there because my whole life has been about going to the Olympics. Being gay is not something that I chose, being gay is something I was born into.

"But being an Olympic athlete was something that I chose and something I worked hard for and I will see it to any necessary end.

"The entire Olympic team is not made up of LGBT people. It is people who have sacrificed their livelihoods, it is people who have sacrificed their parents' finances and health and sometimes even marriages to get that one chance at glory.

"As an athlete who has lived it, I could never turn my face to that. While equality is necessary all over the world, the Olympics is not the place for me to make a stand."

President Vladimir Putin has defended the nation's laws, which include a ban on the spread of homosexual propaganda among minors.

Gay rights activists are hoping athletes and others use the Feb. 7 to 23 sporting extravaganza in the Black Sea resort as a venue for protest.

Weir, a three-time U.S. national men's champion, is adamant that politics and sport do not mix.

"There is this preconceived notion by many of these activist groups who think that the Olympics are a place to make change and it is a place to have your story heard and it is a place to fight for the LGBT community of Russia," said the 29-year-old, who will be in Sochi as a commentator for American network NBC.

"I see the Olympics strictly as a sporting event and not a political event. In Beijing, there were human rights issues going on before the [2008 summer] Games. Even in London, the week before [the 2012 Olympics] all these security concerns had come out.

"If that was something that had affected the masses entirely, the Olympics could not have gone on.

"I see the Olympics for what they are — it is young people performing for their country and for glory. That is how I see the Olympics, I do not see them as a political protest."

Rather than shunning the Olympics, Weir hopes that his mere presence in Russia will speak louder than any vocal protest.

"I am just going there to be me, to be gay, to be proud and to be a strong light for the Russian LGBT community," he said.

"Those who want me to be more gay than I am are going to be disappointed and those who want me to be less gay than I already am will be disappointed.

"My statement is simply being there and being gay and showing the world and the Russian

government that there is nothing weird or wrong with me and that there is nothing weird or wrong with the LGBT community in your country, so we should not be treated as pariahs."

Activists fear the possible proximity of children could be used to punish displays of affection. Holding hands or kissing a same-sex partner in public, they say, might lead to a fine equivalent to $170.

His parents were worried about his well-being in Sochi but Weir allayed their fears by pointing out that "Elton John had gotten in and out safely."

"I have been called so many names and been hated on so many fronts, and been called a Russian spy and all of these wild and outlandish things ... I definitely feel in the crossfire," Weir said.

"I feel that in many ways I cannot give the right answer that everyone wants to hear. You cannot please everyone.

"The only people I am worried about pleasing is the Russia LGBT members that are living under this scrutiny on a daily basis and have a hard life for it. I worry about them and I want to be there [for them].

"Activism should be ongoing until the laws of equality are in place and gays are not scrutinized or thrown into prison simply for being gay in public in front of children.

"I am sure in Sochi there will be people protesting and that there will be rainbow flags. I am sure people will want to provoke the government just to get arrested and just to make a point.

"But I am also sure there will be LGBT people at the Olympics who just want to compete or just want to watch their favorite event or athlete and sit in awe with the rest of us while we marvel at the glory that is an Olympic athlete."

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