

Costly time for Russia as the Winter Olympics shine light on homophobia

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The Winter Olympics currently running in the Russian resort city of Sochi are set to be the costliest games in history, and not in financial terms. Russian President Vladimir Putin has wanted to make them a showcase of modern Russia; instead they have become a battleground for human rights.

The present games are the first in the Russian Federation since the break-up of the USSR in 1991. And the controversies surrounding the event remind us once again that despite the fall of the Iron Curtain, the world is characterised by a deep divide between east and west. Yet whereas during the Cold War, the dividing line was primarily based upon economic questions, today divisions are centred upon struggles around values and norms. Last year Russia adopted a bill that bans “propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations”. The legislation imposes hefty fines for providing information about the LGBT communities to minors, or for holding gay pride rallies. As a response, US President Obama has included three openly gay athletes to represent the United States during the official ceremonies, while he himself has decided not to attend the games. Russia’s government is certainly not the only one discriminating against LGBT people. However, Sochi has become a symbol for the mounting opposition to – and repeal of – laws that discriminate against LGBT across the globe.

Europe became a continent completely free from laws criminalising homosexuality this January when Northern Cyprus, the last jurisdiction in Europe where gay sex between consenting adults was illegal, voted to remove the offence from its statute books.

At the end of 2013, the European Court of Justice also ruled that laws that make homosexuality a jailable offence in any country are legal grounds for asylum whenever these jail sentences are actually being enforced.

In the United States, a 2003 ruling by the Supreme Court made same-sex sexual relationships legal in every US state and territory. Ten years later, the Supreme Court also ruled the Defense of Marriage Act – which allowed states to refuse to recognise same-sex marriages granted under the laws of other states – as unconstitutional. In contrast, 76 nation states around the world currently have bills that criminalise same-sex relations. Nigeria’s president just recently signed a bill that further criminalises homosexuality, making any expression of same-sex affection illegal and setting penalties of up to 14 years in jail. The bill that passed Uganda’s parliament last December, if enacted, even punishes “aggravated” homosexual acts with life in prison.

Notwithstanding these different legal trends, LGBT people all over the globe are still affected by hostility and rejection. Many of them feel that they have to hide or even deny who they are. According to the Pew Research Centre, 33 per cent of Americans believe that homosexuality should not be accepted in society.

It’s shocking to think that we still have to say this in the year 2014, but while we cannot dictate how one should think about those who do not share the same lifestyle or beliefs, neither should we dictate how others have to lead their lives.

To put it simply, we should be free to believe differently, but we should not judge each other. Or, as Pope Francis put it poignantly after receiving a letter from gay believers: “If someone is gay and seeks the Lord with good will, who am I to judge?”

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