

US media, politicians mobilize against Sochi Olympics

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The Sochi Olympics opened on Friday amid a propaganda onslaught from the US media. Taking its cues from the Obama administration and allied powers in Europe, the American press has sought to sabotage the event and turn it into a humiliation for the regime of President Vladimir Putin.

More than 2,800 athletes are competing in 98 events unfolding over the course of two weeks in the Black Sea resort town. Moscow's intention was that the Sochi Olympics would signify Russia's economic and geopolitical resurgence. Coming in the midst of sharpening tensions between the White House and the Kremlin over the domination of Eurasia, Washington and Brussels are working to turn the games into a diplomatic and publicity debacle for Moscow.

No major Western leader or top official is attending the Sochi Olympics, and the Obama administration deliberately sent a delegation of low-ranking figures to represent the US. It includes a White House aide, former Homeland Security chief Janet Napolitano, and US Ambassador to Russia Michael McFaul, who has been a vociferous advocate of the anti-Putin opposition and just announced his resignation from his post. McFaul's departure is widely viewed as signifying an end to the official US policy of "resetting" relations with Russia after the rift created during George W. Bush's presidency.

Great Britain, France, and Germany have followed the US lead, with top political figures calling for government representatives to boycott the event. British Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg announced on the opening day of the games that he had banned Liberal Democratic ministers from going, allegedly over Russia's anti-gay laws. In December, German President Joachim Gauck declared he was boycotting the event. Italian Prime Minister Enrico Letta, the only G8 leader outside of Japan to show up in Sochi, has been roundly criticized for attending.

Recently passed anti-gay laws in Russia that ban "homosexual propaganda" are being utilized as one of the principal cudgels against the Putin government. While the

US maintains the closest ties with regimes like Saudi Arabia, where homosexuality is punishable by flogging and death, Washington and its allies have whipped up a frenzy in the human rights community around these issues with regards to Russia.

Germany's Olympic athletes paraded into Friday's opening ceremony attired in rainbow-colored uniforms, a symbol of gay rights. The same day Google changed its Olympic-themed logo of the day to a similar color scheme. Writing for the *New Republic*, Julia Ioffe reported that Sochi's one gay club has been deluged by foreign journalists requesting interviews with management and clientele.

Joining in the pile-on are a whole number of leading writers and artists, who published an open letter in Britain's *Guardian* newspaper last week denouncing the Russian government for suppressing free speech and expression. Salman Rushdie, Günter Grass, EL Doctorow, Margaret Atwood and Tony Kushner, to name just a few, called on the Kremlin to "recognise Russia's obligations under the international covenant on civil and political rights to respect freedom of opinion, expression and belief." The letter, clearly timed to coincide with the start of the Sochi Olympics, is part of the burgeoning "human rights" campaign against Russia.

While Russia is hardly a paragon of democratic rights, the signatories of this letter come from countries that are carrying out a massive assault on civil liberties. US President Barack Obama openly declares that he has the right to authorize the assassination of US citizens without due process, and has done so. His government presides over the largest spying operation in world history.

Accompanying the orchestrated political snubs and "human rights" agenda that have been unleashed against the Sochi Olympics are endless press stories about every alleged security and infrastructure failure. The American media, having gotten its marching orders from Washington, is in full swing.

The initial focus on the danger of a terror attack—which ignored the fact that the greatest threat to the Sochi

Olympics stems from Islamist forces allied to US-backed rebels in Syria—has given way to ongoing reports about everything from the game’s massive costs and environmental damage to lurid tales of brown water coming from hotel room faucets, broken toilets and door handles, stray dogs roaming the city, and large heaps of construction garbage.

“Journalists at Sochi are live-tweeting their hilarious and gross hotel experiences,” reported the *Washington Post* on February 4. “Sochi: Worst Olympics Travel Destination Ever?” was the title of a recent piece in the leading US magazine *Time*.

In its February 7 article, “The Darkness Behind Sochi’s Sparkle,” the *NY Times* sought to undermine any positive impression observers might have gotten from watching Friday’s elaborate opening ceremony. “It was so entrancing, and ran so smoothly, that it was tempting to forget what was behind the pageantry and sparkle,” wrote Juliet Macur, adding, “This week Sochi was like a party host whose guests had shown up way too early: just out of the shower, hair in curlers, no makeup, dirty dishes in the sink.”

The media has also focused on the existence of stray dogs in Sochi. As if on cue, animal rights activists have joined in the condemnation of Russia. The Humane Society International has even prepared a document outlining how one can adopt a stray from the Black Sea town.

In a display of media hypocrisy, the *Washington Post*’s Sally Jenkins attacked the Sochi games for the misuse of public funds, the poverty of the surrounding region, and environmental damage. Jenkins, who has forgotten that she hails from a country in which the top 20 percent of the population controls 90 percent of all household wealth, vacillates between complaining about the quality of the carpeting in the hotel rooms and “root[ing] against Putin and the small group of 110 billionaire accomplices who have hijacked [Russia’s] wealth.” She criticizes the Sochi Olympics for their grandiosity, which is intended “to make the ordinary citizen quail with helplessness at the power of the ‘new’ Russian state.”

Her comments and that of the American press as a whole bring to mind the old adage: those in glass houses should not throw stones.

The *Washington Post* has come out in defense of the creation of an American police state and the NSA’s mass spying operations, which it has sought to justify as a necessary part of the war on terror. When it comes to the interests of US imperialism, this leading daily has no problem with ordinary people quailing “with helplessness.”

As for the glaring wealth gap that exists in Russia and surrounds the Sochi Olympics, recent Olympic Games hosted in the US and Britain were no different.

At the time of the 1996 summer Olympics, the US host city Atlanta ranked ninth in the country for poverty and second in violent crimes per capita. The neighborhoods immediately surrounding the Olympic Ring were deeply impoverished, with a median household income that stood at just \$8,621.

The 2002 Salt Lake City Winter Olympics, which were engulfed in a scandal over bribery allegations, were also sharply criticized by environmentalists for harming the region’s pristine natural areas. Alexis Kelner, co-founder of the Utah environmental group Save Our Canyons, told the *Los Angeles Times* at the time, “The only thing green about these Games is the color of the currency being thrown around.”

Every Olympics in modern history has been marred by reports of graft and corruption. The \$30 billion of allegedly unaccounted for Russian government expenditures on the Olympics, while sizable, pales in comparison to the \$85 billion that the US government has been injecting into the financial system on a monthly basis as part of its “quantitative easing” strategy. This ongoing bailout of the financial industry has fueled a massive stock market boom and a further transfer of wealth to the super-rich.

The press coverage of the Sochi Olympics reflects the media’s total subordination to the interests of the American ruling class. The US views Russia second only to China as an impediment to its imperialist interests. Washington is aggressively working to undermine Moscow’s influence in Eastern Europe, supporting a far-right, anti-Russian protest movement in Ukraine that threatens to split the country in two and instigate a civil war. The White House and the Kremlin are presently at loggerheads over policy in the Middle East, with regards to both Syria and Iran.

The attitude of Washington and its European allies to the Sochi Olympics is driven by these and other simmering geopolitical divisions with Russia. With the aid of a subservient media, the White House is attempting to undercut the international stature of one of its major rivals, lay the groundwork for regime change in Russia, and prepare the American population for future military conflict.



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