

GUEST ESSAYS CIVIL SOCIETY & THE PRIVATE SECTOR

CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE PRIVATE SECTOR: GOING ALL OUT AGAINST HOMOPHOBIA AT SOCHI

ALEX FARROW

In 2006, the regional government of Ryazan, a city 200km from Moscow, Russia, passed a new law banning the “propaganda of homosexuality among minors.” Over the next eight years, the response to these actions of a local government in rural Russia would result in changes to the Olympic Charter, mobilise hundreds of thousands of activists across the world, and shine a spotlight on Russian state homophobia.

THE PASSING OF ANTI-LGBTI LEGISLATION

While other regions in Russia enacted similar legislation to Ryazan, the campaign group All Out knew that when a law was passed in Saint Petersburg, home to an otherwise thriving LGBTI community, it was the moment to act. Moscow and St Petersburg had already banned numerous Pride rallies, and had been [fined](#) by the European Court of Human Rights for doing so, but what troubled All Out activists was the rapid escalation from laws at the regional level to federal-level legislation. Then, as expected, on 30 June 2013, Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a national law against the “propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations,” ensuring that state-wide homophobia was legitimised.

The [legislation](#) uses broad and often intentionally vague phrasing such as the “promotion of homosexuality.” While officially it blocks the “act of distributing information among minors... aimed at the creating non-traditional sexual attitudes,” the specific activities that would justify a prosecution remain unclear. It isn’t simply public displays of affection; it could be seeking medical advice, accessing information about relationships, or watching a film or TV series with gay characters. The law acts as a blanket barrier to the rights of the LGBTI community, and those LGBTI individuals who simply want to live their lives peacefully, whose choices, actions and liberties are constrained. The [punishments](#) are clearer: personal fines of US\$150 to US\$1,500 at the regional level and up to US\$30,000 for organisations under the federal law.

Anti-gay propaganda bills have [sprung up](#) across the region, including in Kyrgyzstan, Moldova and Ukraine. Even in some European Union member states, such as Hungary, Latvia and Lithuania, advocates for such discriminatory legislation have gained

significant attention. The impact of such legislation is considerable. Fundamentally, it infringes on the individual freedom of expression and assembly, an aspect that the UN Human Rights Council has [condemned](#). But it goes [further](#): it restricts independent choice and behaviour; blocks information and access to services; creates a culture against homosexuality that can, and has, led to violence, attacks and murder; prevents the media from reporting on issues; and legitimises discrimination and the dehumanisation of LGBTI people. With Russia in the midst of an [HIV/AIDS](#) epidemic, LGBTI people, particularly young people, are unlikely to seek the help and support they require when such laws enable a culture of violence, fear and repression to prevail.

SOCHI IS IN SIGHT

It is within this context that LGBTI activists saw the run-up to the 2014 Sochi Olympic Winter Games as a unique window of opportunity to draw attention to the new laws.

The campaign group All Out was one of the groups that decided to take action. All Out are a global movement that mobilises people through online and offline actions, with the [aim](#) of creating:

“...a world where no person will have to sacrifice their family or freedom, safety or dignity, because of who they are or who they love.”

Talking to the author about the campaign, Director of Programmes Leandro Ramos reflected that the Sochi Winter Games were a huge moment, but also offered an activism challenge:¹

“We knew that the standard campaign mechanisms were not going to be effective in moving the Russian government.”

With the world’s attention on Russia, the All Out team developed an overarching strategy: make the Sochi Winter Games synonymous with the anti-gay propaganda bill in the discussion of and reporting and commenting on the Olympics. Put simply, its aim was to ensure that there would be no mention of the Olympics without corresponding mention of Russia’s anti-gay laws.

All Out recognised that its direct impact on the Russian government was likely to be minimal. Instead, it focused its efforts where they could be most effective: on direct action, corporate sponsorship, lobbying the International Olympic

¹ Interview with Leandro Ramos, Director of Programmes at All Out, conducted on 19 December 2016.

Committee (IOC) and mass awareness raising. As part of the campaign, over one million people, mostly All Out members from around the world, took action in partnership with 13,000 Russian members.

This case study focuses on its strategy towards two global corporations, and what civil society organisations (CSOs) can learn from the experience.

COCA-COLA: SPONSORING A HOMOPHOBIC EVENT

Coca-Cola is a major sponsor of the Olympics, giving large sums of money in return for advertising, branding and exclusive rights. All Out's campaign was two-fold. Firstly, it encouraged Coca-Cola to withdraw its sponsorship. Even the threat of ending such a large sponsorship deal could embarrass the host country and the IOC, generate significant attention for the issue and, ideally, force the Russian government to drop the anti-gay propaganda law. The second aim was to hold Coca-Cola accountable for the decisions it was making in sponsoring the event, as well as to call out the double standards of the company in promoting LGBTI issues in one country while silently standing by in another.

As part of the response, [over 150,000](#) emails were sent to Coca-Cola's CEO urging the company to "denounce Russia's anti-gay laws" and take their money out of the Sochi Games. All Out members crowd-funded huge "billboards on wheels" to drive around Coca-Cola's headquarters in the USA. Social media was used to encourage Coca-Cola employees to press for change, and once the global media caught the story it spread around the world. The campaign kicked up a media storm.

While Coca-Cola was certainly on the back foot, it continued with its sponsorship of the Games. Though the company defended its record, Coca-Cola's [statement](#) expressed support for LGBTI rights:

"We have long been a strong supporter of the LGBT community and have advocated for inclusion and diversity through both our policies and practices."

The strategy had been effective: global corporations expressed their commitment, while three sponsors of the US National Olympic team condemned the Russian laws.

Furthermore, Coca-Cola's public statement directly supported Principle 6 – a statement of "core values of the Olympic Movement" – which would become the next strategic focus for All Out.

PRINCIPLE 6: CHAMPIONING THE OLYMPIC VALUES

Principle 6 of the Olympic Charter states that:

“The enjoyment of the rights and freedoms set forth in this Olympic Charter shall be secured without discrimination of any kind...”

While this principle explicitly [referred](#) to “race, religion, politics, gender” it did not say anything about sexuality or gender identity: at least not before the All Out campaign.

Initially campaign actions focused on the IOC, with a petition signed by 300,000 people being hand delivered by 50 members of All Out to the IOC headquarters in Switzerland. By delivering this in person, All Out became the first LGBTI rights organisation to meet with the IOC in its 120-year history. But a petition was never going to get the attention needed; as the world’s eyes turn to the Games, attention was needed at the event itself.

The IOC bans athletes at the Games from political actions. The charter states:

“No kind of demonstration or political, religious or racial propaganda is permitted in any Olympic sites, venues or other areas.”

This rule prevents athletes from revealing a t-shirt, unfolding a banner, or making a political comment. But All Out’s strategy was innovative: to get athletes simply to support Principle 6 of the IOC, while simultaneously making a news story about its failure explicitly to protect LGBTI individuals. The [call](#) was for the IOC to “honor its principles” and live up to the Olympic values that it already preached.

A corporate partnership with American Apparel led to the creation of the Principle 6 campaign, which saw the outfitter produce a range of [clothing](#) and accessories emblazoned with the text from the Olympic Charter. Next, a mass of professional athletes, along with prominent LGBTI supporters such as Rihanna and Mark Ruffalo, committed to wearing, sharing and promoting the products to raise awareness of the IOC’s position. The campaign took off, gaining significant traction in the media, which spiked when the Russian [authorities](#) issued threats of fines and imprisonment for any foreigner violating the anti-propaganda law at the Games.

ALL OUT’S STRATEGY WAS INNOVATIVE: TO GET ATHLETES SIMPLY TO SUPPORT PRINCIPLE 6 OF THE IOC, WHILE SIMULTANEOUSLY MAKING A NEWS STORY ABOUT ITS FAILURE EXPLICITLY TO PROTECT LGBTI INDIVIDUALS

GUEST ESSAYS

CIVIL SOCIETY & THE PRIVATE SECTOR

Despite this threat, actions were visible throughout Sochi, with support for the Principle 6 campaign from 50 Olympic champions. Away from the games, a [film](#) produced by All Out, which combined a depiction of what the games would look like for a lesbian athlete with the voice and words of the IOC President, went viral with over 1.5 million views. In the face of the petition delivered in Switzerland, the furore over Principle 6 at the Games, and the media attention surrounding sponsorship, the IOC changed its Charter, to extend the protection against discrimination, in the form of, “race, colour, sex, sexual orientation.” It was a victory for the campaign and for the one million people who took part in All Out’s actions.

The corporate partnership with American Apparel was mutually beneficial, and matched values that the company had already pursued through Pride events in the USA. But the company also knew that its products would be used in a major, controversial campaign that carried the threat of 15 days in a Russian jail for foreigners who wore the clothing during the Games. The partnership with American Apparel offered an alignment of values and demonstrated the power such a relationship can realise. The ability of the outfitter, as a well-known brand, to produce and distribute clothing rapidly around the world was essential, but this had to be combined with a political strategy that could generate attention, achieve impact and carry a message effectively. The global brand of American Apparel meant it had a natural reach far beyond the All Out team, enabling it to print a set of t-shirts and secure celebrity endorsement.

In sum, the campaign was a success. Though it didn’t succeed in repealing the anti-gay propaganda law, it secured huge global attention for the LGBTI community in Russia, and resulted in a change to the Olympic Charter. The lives of members of the LGBTI community in Russia are still under threat, but the campaign achieved the best it could hope for. It knew it was unlikely to change the law, so it placed its attention where it could have an impact. It followed the money, it caused a storm, and it changed the Olympics.

THE POTENTIAL OF CIVIL SOCIETY AND PRIVATE SECTOR PARTNERSHIPS

For the Sochi Games, the targets of activism strategies were rarely the direct decision-makers with the power to repeal the anti-propaganda laws. Often campaigns focus directly on decision-makers, such as government or industry leaders, but in this case the intention was to put pressure on the Russian government via the Olympic sponsors and the IOC.

² Interview with Leandro Ramos, op. cit.

This isn't to say that All Out wouldn't actively campaign against the Russian government, but it is a recognition of the fact that the higher the profile of a campaign, the higher the risks may be. In this case, the focus on Coca-Cola and the IOC provided a platform for international activism that caused little threat for the LGBTI community in towns and cities across Russia.

As a campaign group, All Out's success relies on mobilising its members. By focusing on Coca-Cola, rather than the Russian government, it "cut the story shorter." Leandro Ramos continues:²

"With Coca-Cola, the membership will respond - you don't need to spell it out – as they can join the dots."

Coca-Cola is a product that individuals use as part of their daily life: it is in their fridges, in their supermarkets and on their TV screens. The political processes of the Russian government are not so easily explained, and don't fit easily within a campaign email or necessarily appeal to an international audience. By focusing attention on Coca-Cola, the campaign generated a story that could be easily understood. Crudely put, the message was: Russia is anti-LGBTI; Coca-Cola is giving them money; you give money to Coca-Cola when you buy a drink. It was a similar focus on symbols of support that led to [boycotts](#) of Russian vodka by London gay clubs, as well as across the [USA](#), in a coordinated effort to protest against Russia's treatment of their LGBTI community.

While the focus on Coca-Cola did not lead to the withdrawal of their sponsorship at Sochi, it arguably encouraged a significant push from the company on LGBTI issues. The company helped form a [business coalition](#) in support of Equal Marriage in the USA, [extended](#) healthcare benefits for LGBTI employees, [declared](#) its opposition to discriminatory legislation and ran an [advertising campaign](#) that was seen as 'pro-gay'. The unwanted attention the company received around the Sochi Games could be seen to result in a real drive, with public support, to reach out to the LGBTI community, at least in the USA.

While the focus on Coca-Cola may have allowed a short-circuit connection for activists to understand the situation, it forced All Out to be more sophisticated in its approach. For a campaign group originally formed to respond to an issue, the Sochi Games demanded a more proactive and complex strategy to achieve its goals.

In a way, All Out used Coca-Cola as a mechanism for a wider goal: the target wasn't the drinks company itself; it was always the Russian government and its discriminatory laws towards the LGBTI community. The focus on a corporation as a piece within the puzzle, rather than as a direct decision-maker itself, was a nuanced position. It was arguably more effective than a simple product boycott would have been, however admirable the vodka bans were in gay clubs. All Out's subtler approach forced Coca-Cola, a global brand that is expected to respond to media requests and has a heavy social media presence, to take a public position and commit to it. While it may have had limits, its statement of support for Principle 6 laid the foundations for the later campaigns.

GUEST ESSAYS

CIVIL SOCIETY & THE PRIVATE SECTOR

For CSOs, this example demonstrates the usefulness of corporations within campaigns, whether as allies, targets or players within a larger plan. While All Out may have used Coca-Cola, the example shows that the company was to some extent willing to be used. Coca-Cola has supported LGBTI causes before - it is, for example, a top-ranking employer of LGBTI staff - but it couldn't pull out of the Sochi Games without significant impact to its business.³ There is also nothing to suggest that had it done so, the Russian government would have repealed the anti-gay propaganda law. But Coca-Cola allowed a media storm to erupt regardless, and in doing so, provided a platform of attention for activists to launch more direct campaigns against the IOC towards Principle 6. Whether willingly or not, Coca-Cola formed a vital part of a bigger strategy.

The dichotomy within civil society is often simplistic, with many of us believing that CSOs are good and corporations are bad. Whether this is true or not is irrelevant: it simply isn't useful to a campaign. Campaigns are increasingly complicated to run, with overlapping motivations, drivers and stakeholders involved in any decision, and cases are increasingly emerging where the private sector is an ally of civil society. As civil society, we need to seek out opportunities for utilising such partnerships, while continuing to call out mistakes when companies are wrong, in order to succeed in our campaigns. Better still, we must use those mistakes to our advantage, just as All Out did with Coca-Cola. Their campaign has demonstrated how impactful such a strategy can be.

³ Coca-Cola received a perfect score on Human Rights Campaign's [Corporate Equality Index 2017](#), which rates workplaces on LGBTI inclusion.