

The Kremlin's and Far-Right War on Gender at the Paris 2024 Olympics

by Leo Goretti

"A politically motivated cultural war" waged through "hate speech, aggression and abuse" via social media:¹ it was thus that Thomas Bach, the President of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), described the swathe of disinformation and misinformation that spread following Algerian boxer Imane Khelif's victory by withdrawal against Italian Angela Carini at the Paris 2024 Olympic Games.²

No longer than a week before, in his speech at the Opening Ceremony, Bach had invited to celebrate the "Olympic spirit of living life in peace, as the one and only humankind, united in all our diversity".³ With two major wars raging

on in Ukraine and in Palestine, and amidst increased political polarisation on both sides of the Atlantic, including in host country France, Bach's hopes sounded highly optimistic to say the least. Not only is such a global mega-event impossible to be truly shielded away from the social, political, economic and cultural cleavages that traverse our world; at a more mundane level, it clearly provides an easy target for propaganda ops that try to influence in a malicious way the public debate on polarising issues – this time, LGBTIQ rights.

In the Kremlin's shadow

Following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russia's participation in the 2024 Paris Games was long debated.⁴

speech-olympic-games-paris-2024-opening-ceremony.

⁴ Leo Goretti, "The Olympics of Discontent: Paris 2024 and Russia's War against Ukraine", in *IAI Commentaries*, No. 23|64 (December 2023), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/17905>.

¹ "'We Will Not Take Part in a Culture War': Bach Defends Khelif's Right to Fight at Olympics – Video", in *The Guardian*, 3 August 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/p/xv75xg>.

² In the round-of-16 bout of the women's 66 kg event.

³ International Olympic Committee (IOC), *IOC President's Speech – Olympic Games Paris 2024 Opening Ceremony*, 26 July 2024, <https://olympics.com/ioc/news/ioc-president-s->

Leo Goretti is Head of the Italian Foreign Policy Programme at the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) and Editor of The International Spectator.

Finally, the IOC decided to allow limited participation of Russian athletes as individual neutral entrants whose eligibility had to be vetted by an ad-hoc committee. In the end, only 15 Russian participants accepted the invitation to Paris 2024,⁵ with some Russian federations such as judo denouncing the entry requirements as “humiliating” and therefore dropping out altogether.⁶ While the Russian Olympic Committee did not formally announce a boycott of the Games, the event has been diminished and ridiculed by Russian government spokespeople and media and is not being broadcast in the country (the first time since the Los Angeles 1984 Games).⁷ Furthermore, plans for organising an alternative event, the World Friendship Games, are underway, although postponed to 2025.⁸

In parallel, evidence accrued that a number of Russia-affiliated actors were launching disinformation campaigns targeting the event, also using AI tools. According to a Microsoft Threat Intelligence report, deceptive and fake videos (including one featuring a fake

Tom Cruise’s narrator’s voice) were produced denigrating the organisers and fomenting public fears about expected violence during the Games.⁹ Just a few days before the opening ceremony, France’s Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin announced that a number of Russian individuals had been arrested on suspicion of plotting destabilisation acts against the Games.¹⁰

Once the Games started, the focus of Russian attacks shifted to the issue of ‘traditional values’ and gender. The opening ceremony, which featured the scene of a grand pagan feast that some found reminiscent of Leonardo da Vinci’s Last Supper, was described by Russian foreign ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova as “an LGBT mockery of a sacred Christian story”.¹¹ Going further, President of the International Boxing Association (IBA) Umar Kremlev scathingly portrayed the Ceremony as “pure sodomy” via Instagram, asking for Bach’s resignation and announcing that the upcoming World Friendship Games – of which he is the chairman of the Supervisory Board – will instead be imbued with “true human values” such

⁵ IOC, *Individual Neutral Athletes at the Olympic Games Paris 2024*, updated 20 July 2024, <https://olympics.com/ioc/paris-2024-individual-neutral-athletes>.

⁶ “Russia Opts Not to Send Any Judokas to Paris Olympics”, in *Reuters*, 29 June 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/sports/olympics/russia-opts-not-send-any-judokas-paris-olympics-2024-06-28>.

⁷ Jim Heintz, “Russian Media Throw Shade at Paris Olympics, which TV Won’t Show”, in *AP News*, 27 July 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/835aabe6cca7cb288dbec07c2f6a2ebd>.

⁸ “International Friendship Association Proposes to Postpone 2024 World Friendship Games”, in *TASS*, 30 July 2024, <https://tass.com/sports/1823241>.

⁹ Microsoft Threat Intelligence, “How Russia Is Trying to Disrupt the 2024 Paris Olympic Games”, in *Security Insider*, 6 June 2024, <https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/security/security-insider/intelligence-reports/how-russia-is-trying-to-disrupt-the-2024-paris-olympic-games>.

¹⁰ Daniel Boffey, “Russian Chef Arrested in Paris over Alleged ‘Large Scale’ Olympic Games Plot”, in *The Guardian*, 24 July 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/p/xv547g>.

¹¹ John Leicester, “Paris’ Olympics Opening Was Wacky and Wonderful – And Upset Bishops. Here’s Why”, in *AP News*, 28 July 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/49f9885ff2b95b9b7ccc51ca195e84e1>.

as “family values”.¹² Homophobic and sexist tones crept very quickly in the row over the opening ceremony, with artistic director Thomas Jolly and DJ Barbara Butch being targeted by death, torture and rape threats.¹³

The controversy on gender and LGBTIQ rights was soon to be refocused from the opening ceremony to the sporting ground, once unfounded claims started to appear in social media that “transgender” athlete Imane Khelif was due to compete in Paris in the name of “woke ideology”.¹⁴ IBA followed on quickly by releasing a communiqué that stated that two women participants – Lin Yu-ting and Khelif herself – had not met the “necessary eligibility criteria” in a “separate and recognized test, whereby the specifics remain confidential” at the 2023 IBA World Championship.¹⁵

¹² @umarkremlev, “The 2024 Games...”, X post, 31 July 2024, <https://x.com/umarkremlev/status/1818633618371076546>; umar_kremlev, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/C-IJbLdMkkR>. Kremlev had been elected President of IBA in 2020, pledging to bring the organisation out of the financial and reputational ills that had led to its suspension by the IOC in 2019; to this end, in 2021, he announced a major sponsorship with Russian energy giant Gazprom. In 2023, the IOC found that the concerns about the governance, financial transparency and integrity of IBA had not been addressed, and therefore withdrew the Olympic recognition of IBA.

¹³ Jon Henley, “French Prosecutors Open Inquiry into Death Threats to Opening Ceremony Artistic Director”, in *The Guardian*, 2 August 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/p/xv6qdk>.

¹⁴ @matteosalvinimi, “Pugile trans...”, X post, 30 July 2024, <https://x.com/matteosalvinimi/status/1818317332164248025>.

¹⁵ IBA, *Statement Made by the International Boxing Association Regarding Athletes Disqualifications in World Boxing Championships 2023*, 31 July 2024, <https://www.iba.sport/?p=52414>.

Interestingly enough, back in March 2023, Kremlev himself had provided some highly sensitive details about the testing conducted at the World Championship to Russian news agency TASS.¹⁶ According to the IBA, the IOC’s decision to let Lin and Khelif compete in Paris would “raise serious questions about both competitive fairness and athletes’ safety”.¹⁷ The IOC pointed out that the two athletes had competed in women’s boxing for many years (including at the Tokyo 2020 Olympics), that they complied with all eligibility and entry requirements and that the IBA 2023 decision had been “sudden and arbitrary”.¹⁸ The Pandora’s box of the cultural – better, anti-gender and LGBTIQ rights – war, however, had now been opened.

The patriarchal populist discourse on women’s bodies

“A male punching a female”. “A person who transitioned”. “A good male boxer”. “An Algerian transgender”. These are just some of the unfounded and degrading allegations that highly prominent figures – most of them belonging or close to the populist far right – raised against Imane Khelif. The heated discussion around Khelif’s

¹⁶ Jonathan Crane, “Paris 2024: What’s Behind Boxing’s Olympic Outcry?”, in *Deutsche Welle*, 3 August 2024, <https://www.dw.com/en/a-69849580>. See also “IBA Expels Athletes Who Tried to Pass Themselves Off as Women from World Championships” (in Russian), in TASS, 25 March 2023, <https://tass.ru/sport/17370249>.

¹⁷ IBA, *Statement Made by the International Boxing Association*, cit.

¹⁸ IOC, *Joint Paris 2024 Boxing Unit/IOC Statement*, 1 August 2024, <https://olympics.com/ioc/news/joint-paris-2024-boxing-unit-ioc-statement>.

body and identity showcases some of the defining tropes of what Rebecca Sanders and Laura Dudley Jenkins have called transnational patriarchal populism: “a virulent and increasingly dominant variant of contemporary right-wing populism that uses blatantly sexist and regressive tropes to mobilise mass support and undermine women’s and LGBTQ equality, as well as sexual and reproductive health and rights”.¹⁹ Transgender participation in sport has become a preferred target within this narrative, as it allows far right populists to attack LGBTIQ rights while supposedly ‘defending’ women’s rights. Notably, this approach (as many other tropes of the anti-LGBTIQ narrative) is also shared by Russian President Vladimir Putin, who scathingly dismissed transgender athletes as “the end to female sports” in 2021.²⁰

What we know for sure, however, is that Imane Khelif is not a transgender person: she was born and grew up as a woman – and a woman boxer – in a country where same-sex relations are criminalised, and gender transition de facto too.²¹ As long as the governing

authority of the Olympic Games (that is, the IOC, not the IBA) confirms her eligibility to participate in the event, any speculations of whatever kind (testosterone levels, DNA and so on) about her body or identity are not just unfounded, but inappropriate, if not abusive. This is especially concerning when such speculations are made publicly by government officials (as happened in Italy) or experts from the scientific community, without having access to solid evidence and disrespecting the right to privacy and confidentiality regarding personal health information.

This is not to say that issues of fairness, safety and eligibility criteria in women’s sport should be simply ignored, sure. These are serious matters that should be raised and addressed, however, in the appropriate international fora and in the awareness that there are no easy, clear-cut or conclusive answers in light of the complexity of being human – both from a biological and cultural point of view.²² Should there be concerns about specific instances or decisions, appeals should be made through the appropriate channels made available by sports organisations and law, not via social media or tv broadcasting.

¹⁹ Rebecca Sanders and Laura Dudley Jenkins, “Patriarchal Populism: The Conservative Political Action Coalition (CPAC) and the Transnational Politics of Authoritarian Anti-Feminism”, in *The International Spectator*, Vol. 58, No. 3 (September 2023), p. 1-19 at p. 2, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2023.2225660>.

²⁰ “Female Sports May Become Extinct with Male Transgender Athletes’ Arrival, Says Putin”, in *TASS*, 23 December 2021, <https://tass.com/sports/1380231>. On these issues see also Leo Goretta and Sofia Mariconti, “Let’s Learn Judo with Putin. Sport, Power and Masculinity in 21st-Century Russia”, in *IAI Papers*, No. 23|03 (January 2023), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/16482>.

²¹ Emma Guinness, “Inside the Tough Childhood of Olympic Boxer Imane Khelif as

She Faces Groundless Accusations of Being Male”, in *Independent*, 3 August 2024, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/b2590229.html>. On homosexuality in Algeria see Human Rights Watch, *Algeria: Mass Convictions for Homosexuality*, 15 October 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/node/376698>; on gender transition Cairo 52 Legal Research Institute website: *Algeria*, <https://cairo52.com/?p=3652>.

²² Alessia Tuselli, “Il corpo di Imane Khelif ci insegna che non siamo pronti”, in *Ultimo Uomo*, 3 August 2024, <https://www.ultimouomo.com/imane-khelif-carini-boxe-parigi24-corporo-donna>.

While the safety of athletes should be a priority, much more controversial is the widespread tendency to frame the debate in terms of 'protection' of women's sport.²³ As Jean Williams pointed out, "The protectionist logic has been used for over 170 years to keep women out of sport".²⁴ Historically, this logic has been used to exclude or limit women's participation in sport. Without going back to Pierre de Coubertin's notorious opposition to women's sports competitions as such, one should simply recall that women's boxing became an Olympic discipline only in 2012, exactly due to this kind of logic. More generally, the abusive comments on Imane Khelif, her appearance and 'biology' are a case in point of the tendency of far-right populists to regulate women's bodies and behaviour. To make just one example, JD Vance's "childless cat ladies" remarks, compounded with his radical anti-abortion stances (basically, he accepts no exception to the prohibition of abortion), shed an alarming light on what some far-right populists think women should be and look like.²⁵

²³ This was a recurrent argument that was made, amidst reiterated attacks by Kremlin against Bach and the IOC as well as references to Sodom and Gomorrah, at a conference held by IBA on 5 August to supposedly clarify their stance on the case: see "Chaos at Imane Khelif Press Conference as Boxing Chiefs Double Down on Banned Fighters", in *The Telegraph*, 5 August 2024, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/olympics/2024/08/05/imane-khelif-iba-explain-olympics-gender-row-boxer-live>.

²⁴ @JeanMWilliams, "Please stop saying...", X post, 1 August 2024, <https://x.com/JeanMWilliams/status/1819065343089725712>.

²⁵ Camilla Cavendish, "'Childless Cat Ladies' Fight a Tide of Pronatalism", in *Financial Times*, 3 August 2024, <https://www>.

Olympic signs of hope

And yet, however disturbing the row on Imane Khelif's victory has been, positive signs in the direction of comprehension and solidarity have manifested as well. Algerian authorities and media stood firmly by her,²⁶ as did the IOC. Fact-checking articles in the media helped draw a neat line between facts and speculations or outright falsities. As Khelif went on to fight against Hungarian Luca Anna Hamori in the round-of-8 bout, a passionate crowd of supporters cheered her in Paris;²⁷ Khelif is now certain to secure a medal in the Paris Games.

It is just a pity that, amidst this hateful 'war on gender' waged by the populist far right and actively fed by Putin's cronies, the performance of Afghani runner Kimia Yousofi in the 100m-heat went almost completely unnoticed. At the end of her run, Yousofi – who fled from Afghanistan in 2021 – showed a handwritten piece of paper stating: "Education. Sport. Our rights", calling attention to the dire situation in her native country,²⁸ where the Taliban

[ft.com/content/52bd814a-6571-4571-94a1-0db4df01c9ac](https://www.ft.com/content/52bd814a-6571-4571-94a1-0db4df01c9ac). JD Vance described Imane Khelif in X as "a grown man pummeling a woman": @JDvance, "This is where Kamala Harris...", X post, 1 August 2024, <https://x.com/JDVance/status/1819085100363272282>.

²⁶ Ashraf Hamed Atta, "Algerian Boxer Khelif Eyes Gold amid Gender Row", in *Reuters*, 3 August 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/sports/olympics/boxing-algerian-khelif-eyes-gold-amid-gender-row-2024-08-03>.

²⁷ Alanis Thames and Megan Janetsky, "Olympic Fans Cheer on Imane Khelif during Win after She Faced Days of Online Abuse", in *AP News*, 3 August 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/d4ed497911efceb6393fd4fc30c0d0ed>.

²⁸ Jack Snape, "Afghanistan 100m Runner

have banned all sports for girls and women: for once, a genuine and potent message for change delivered in the Olympic arena.

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Kimia Yousofi Sends Olympic Message to the Taliban", in *The Guardian*, 2 August 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/p/xv6qf5>.

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Via dei Montecatini, 17

I-00186 Rome, Italy

Tel. +39 066976831

iai@iai.it

www.iai.it

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