

Ex-Olympian Rodnina Apologizes For Racist Twitter Picture

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Irina Rodnina, the famed figure skater who lit the Olympic flame at the Sochi opening ceremony.

Irina Rodnina, the famed figure skater who lit the Olympic flame at the Sochi opening ceremony, has said that a racially insensitive tweet sent from her account and featuring U.S. President Barack Obama and his wife Michelle was posted by hackers.

The doctored — and, in the eyes of many, crudely racist — image, which showed the Obamas looking at a banana, prompted international outcry when it appeared on Rodnina's Twitter page five months ago. The skater subsequently defended the post, also via Twitter, as an expression of freedom of speech.

She seemed to have an about-face on Monday, breaking from her usual practice of tweeting in Russian to post an apology in English.

"I respect the Obama family and apologize for not clearly stating earlier that I don't support

the tweeted photo or racism in any form," Rodnina tweeted.

"My account was hacked, and I should have shown better judgement in my initial response and handling of the event," she added in another message.

It was unclear if Rodnina had any help writing the English-language tweets, but her U.S.-raised daughter Alyona Minkovsky, a news show host on HuffPost Live, circulated the apology and stepped in to defend her mother.

"My mother is neither a racist nor a homophobe. I think the tweet was extremely insensitive, and we've addressed it as a family," Minkovski tweeted Saturday.

Rodnina — a winner of three successive Olympic gold medals and 10 successive World Championships — is a State Duma deputy, and after the picture was posted online last September, a member of a Moscow district council took to Twitter to apologize "in the name of Russian parliamentarians" for Rodnina's tweet.

At the time, U.S. Ambassador to Russia Michael McFaul called Rodnina's tweet "outrageous behavior, which only brings shame to her parliament and country."

Following Rodnina's disowning of the tweet on Monday, some skeptics expressed doubt over the sincerity of her apology.

"Combined picture of Rodnina's lies about her racism. Now she claims hacking. Before she appealed to freedom of speech," Russian journalist Yevgeny Feldman said via Twitter in an English-language post.

At last fall's Silver Galosh ceremony, which is organized by radio station Serebryany Dozhd to single out public figures for their dubious achievements, Rodnina was named one of three winners in the "biggest intolerance of the year" category.

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