



International
Olympic
Committee

The President

Keynote Speech at the Portuguese EU Presidency Conference on Sport Diplomacy

3 June 2021

Distinguished delegates,

Please allow me to first of all thank the Portuguese Presidency of the EU, for inviting me to be part of this important conference on sport diplomacy.

Indeed, sport is a powerful tool for promoting peace and social harmony. In this respect, the Olympic Games have throughout their history demonstrated their ability to promote human understanding even where political agreement has proved elusive.

The power of the Olympic Games is their universality. They are the only event that brings the entire world together in peaceful competition.

When the athletes of all the 206 National Olympic Committees and the IOC Refugee Olympic Team finally come together for the postponed Olympic Games Tokyo 2020 in exactly 50 days from now 23rd of July, they will send a powerful message from Tokyo to the world: the message of peace, solidarity and resilience.

The purpose of the IOC has always been to promote peace through sport. Already 3,000 years ago, in ancient Greece, there was an inseparable link between the ancient Olympic Games and peace.

This contribution to peace by the Olympic Games was also the guiding principle for Pierre de Coubertin when he created the International Olympic Committee in 1894, with full support of leading figures of the international peace movement at the time.

This peace mission continues to guide us today. It is at the heart of the Olympic Games, which unite the entire world in all our diversity.

At the Olympic Games, the best athletes of the world are competitors in sport, but at the same time, they are living peacefully together under one roof in the Olympic Village. There is no discrimination whatsoever. Everyone respects the same rules, we are all equal.

In this way, the Olympic athletes are sending an important message to the world: yes, it is possible to compete with each other, even for the highest prize, but at the same time to live together peacefully.

The Olympic Games can only become this inspiring symbol through a fundamental commitment to inclusion. Our mission compels us to always embrace human diversity, and never to exclude others. The Olympic Games always build bridges. The Olympic Games never erect walls.

To ensure that the unifying power of the Olympic Games can unfold, our relationship with politics must be based on solid principles. This universality that define the Olympic Games require the IOC to be politically neutral. Only this principle of political neutrality ensures that the Olympic Games can stand above and beyond the political differences that exist in our world.

This is why sport and diplomacy can complement each other so well. Both stand for dialogue, for building greater understanding between people and for the advancement of peace.

The Olympic ideal of developing sport to promote peace and understanding among nations is also intrinsically linked to the values at the heart of the European project. Sport

can therefore make a valuable contribution in promoting these ideals of inclusion, solidarity and tolerance on the wider global stage.

There are many examples of how sport diplomacy has opened the door to peace. Over the years, the IOC has mediated between governments, building bridges through sport. This has been the case in the last couple of years for our negotiations with governments in Europe and beyond from Spain to Serbia, Kosovo, Tunisia, Israel, Palestine, Iran, Ukraine, Russia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, South and North Korea, and many others.

But our discussions and our negotiations were always restricted to sport and to sport only. They always took place with strict political neutrality. Only in this way, could we be successful with sport diplomacy.

At the same time, we know very well that sport alone cannot create peace. We cannot prevent conflicts or change the laws of sovereign states – this is the exclusive realm of politics.

The Olympic Games cannot address all the political and social challenges in our world which generations of politicians were not able to solve. But they can set an example for a world where everyone respects the same rules and one another. They can inspire us to solve problems in friendship and solidarity. They can build bridges leading to better understanding among people and cultures.

We can accomplish our mission only if our political neutrality is respected by politics. If this political neutrality is not respected, then the Olympic Games would become divisive rather than unifying. If this political neutrality is not respected, then it is just not possible for us to bring together the world in peaceful competition.

If our political neutrality is not respected, the Olympic Games and any other sport competition would become instrumentalised to promote the political ends that politics cannot achieve otherwise.

The most blatant expression of such disrespect are calls for boycotts of sporting events, or boycotting host countries of sporting events. Such kinds of sport boycotts are against the mission of the Olympic Games to build bridges. They destroy the principle of political neutrality and have been proven to achieve nothing at all.

In our interconnected and globalised world, international relations are ever-more complex. Nations interact with each other on multiple levels. Yes, there is competition between nations, and this is healthy. There is competition, for example in the economic realm. In some cases, such competition leads even to confrontation and conflict. In other areas, nations join hands for mutually beneficial outcomes, as in science or research.

The Olympic Games and sport must always be part of this joining of hands.

If sport can play a role in international relations today, it is precisely in supporting and strengthening these areas of cooperation for peace between nations. Sport can show the way of how we can compete against each other while living in peace together.

There is no peace without solidarity. This is why sport, with such powerful symbols of the unity of humanity in all our diversity, can give us hope for a better, a more peaceful future.

In this Olympic spirit, I wish you a very successful conference.