Speech of IOC President Thomas Bach (transcribed version)

General Assembly of the European Olympic Committees

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The world, since we were together like the last time, has changed a lot. If you look back a little bit, try to look back, you may have the feeling that we have been living in another age. And I am afraid this is the case. We are living in a different age than we were used to, two or three years ago.

And now, today, we cannot just look back at how we navigated the Olympic Movement through these two-and-a-half years of a pandemic and how successful we, despite the pandemic, organised the two Olympic Games with very grateful athletes and with the world’s tensions like never before, before any Olympic Games. We cannot be satisfied by looking back. We have to address the present crisis in the world. And we have to look ahead, at how we are addressing this crisis, and at what our role, the role of the Olympic Movement, is during such a crisis.

And this is why I hope you allow me to reiterate the principles that we have to respect and to apply in order to get through this crisis, as we did through the previous crisis. It means that we are getting through the crisis in a safe way and that we are getting out of this crisis even stronger than before.

And your President, Spyros Capralos, has already outlined some of these principles, because the war in Ukraine has confronted all of us with a very difficult challenge: how to walk this very fine line between upholding our mission to unite the world in peaceful competition without getting dragged into the politics of war. This is why we had to make our position on this war very clear from the very start. I think we were the first international organisation that condemned the war, roughly four hours after the invasion. And we were the first international organisation that then issued the sanctions and measures and addressed the crisis.

The principles we applied and that underpin our position were outlined in my *Give peace a chance message*, where we condensed all this and published it on 11 March. There, I would like to thank all those in our Olympic community who have followed our recommendations and supported this position of the Olympic Movement as so many, many did across the world. And just two days ago, again, the Olympic Summer Federations. They all confirmed their support for and approach to weathering this crisis following our recommendations.
When addressing this crisis, we all have not only to look at the principles and consequences, because we all have deep emotions and feelings about this war. And every day, we are confronted with the atrocities of this war, which is stirring up emotions again. And this is true for all of us, but it is, in particular, true, of course, for those who are suffering the most, the Ukrainian people and our friends in the Ukrainian Olympic community. And this is also true and hard for all of our friends who are living close to Ukraine, who have friends, who have families there, who every day experience the suffering of the refugees from Ukraine, who are hosting them, who are welcoming them, who listen to their stories, to their experiences, to their suffering.

And there, I can again say thank you to so many of you who have played a real and great role in our humanitarian commission, to assist those of our community who are suffering and who are hosting athletes from Ukraine, refugees, their entourage, and providing them with what they need, also to continue to practise sport and to represent the National Olympic Committee of Ukraine in international competitions. And I’m sure you will hear more from our friend Sergii Bubka later on. And these feelings, they are deep. But we also, when having these feelings and when being leaders of this Olympic Movement in your National Olympic Committees in Europe and as a member of the National Olympic Community, you have to bear in mind your responsibility for the future of this Olympic Movement.

And there, you can get in conflict because, if you follow your emotions, I think the reactions are very clear. But if you take your responsibility, and this is what we are all elected for, to take this responsibility, then we must consider the consequences of all our actions, not only just according to our own feelings, but what it means for your NOC, what it means for the Olympic Movement as such, what it means for the Olympic Movement in the world; that we have to act in order to protect this Olympic Movement and to protect the mission of the Olympic Movement. And because of this mission, and because this mission is in your hearts, because this mission is why you started your careers in sports administration, this mission is to unite the world in peaceful competition. Otherwise, you would not dedicate all your time and efforts to the different positions you hold in this Movement.

This mission is even more important in our fragmented world at this moment. We always have to bear in mind this mission. The Olympic Games always build bridges. The Olympic Games never erect walls. The Olympic Games which unite the world in a peaceful competition are, and must be, a symbol of peace. But to be a symbol of peace, Olympic sports need the participation of all the athletes who accept our rules, especially if their countries are in conflict or at war. Because a competition between just like-minded governments or countries is not a credible symbol of peace.
Peace is something that you have to prove. Peace is something that concerns somebody on the other side who is not necessarily of your opinion, who has different meanings, who has different interests, who is even in confrontation with you. If you want to be a symbol of peace, you have to respect and accept these differences, and look for ways to overcome them. And a peaceful competition where everybody respects the same rules is such a tool to overcome differences, or at least to show that differences can be overcome.

And the situation we are in, this mission, causes for us, at this moment in time, such a dilemma. Because our mission is clearly defined in the Olympic Charter. Our mission is not a political mission. Our mission is a humanitarian mission, and this humanitarian mission we can only accomplish if we stand above and beyond political interests and all differences, either political, cultural, or otherwise. This is why, in accordance with the Olympic Charter, in accordance with our mission, we do not discriminate for any reason whatsoever.

To achieve this non-discrimination, we have to be politically neutral. Because, if we take a political stand, then we are drawn into all these conflicts and wars. We cannot become a tool for politicians to achieve their political goals. Otherwise we lose our unifying power and even contribute to the deepening of such divisions in our world, which is already drifting apart in so many ways. As a global movement, we can only function if we are rule-based, and only if everybody accepts these rules can international sport function.

This makes sport so unique. It's maybe the only area of our life where we have worldwide rules and standards accepted by everybody. You don't have this in science. You don't have it in culture. And I won't even speak about politics, where we are experiencing these rules being broken by the day.

This is our asset. This is essential to accomplish our mission. And that means this rule of our laws, our regulations, and the rules of law of the international system, this means, on the one hand, that we can only sanction those who are responsible for something; on the other hand, we have to protect the rights of those who are not responsible for any breach of the law. This is exactly what we have always been doing and what we are doing now, also with regard to the war in Ukraine.

On the one hand, we sanctioned the Russian and Belarusian governments that are responsible for this war. On the other hand, we want to protect the rights of those who are not responsible. Nobody should be punished for the actions of their governments if they do not support the violation of the rules, and if they support them, this is the other side of the same point, then they must be sanctioned. This is, for instance, what the International Gymnastics Federation and FINA, the
international swimming federation, have been doing with athletes declaring support for the war. They sanctioned them. And this is the right and correct thing to do.

This protection of the rights of those who are not responsible for anything, applies to everybody, the athletes, the IFs, the NOCs and all their members. In our case now, with the war in Ukraine, they cannot be held responsible for the blatant violation of the Olympic Truce Resolution by the Russian and Belarusian governments. If I could speak in formal terms, I would say this becomes already clear from the nature of the Olympic Truce Resolution, because this is a resolution adopted by the Member states in the United Nations General Assembly. And it is therefore directed, only and exclusively, at the governments of the Member States. And this is very logical because only governments can decide about peace and war.

This war has not been started by the Russian athletes or by the members of the Russian Olympic community or by the Russian people. This war has been started by the Russian government. If we punished people only for holding a specific passport, not for having any further responsibility, but only for their passport, then we would set an extremely dangerous precedent. This leads to a situation where politics finally takes over sport. If we left it up to the governments to decide who can take part in which international competition or meeting, it would set off and initiate a domino effect. And here again is our dilemma, because we cannot live up to our mission at this moment.

We had to take protective measures with regard to Russian and Belarusian athletes and officials in international competitions in order to protect the integrity of our competitions by recommending their non-participation. If we had not done this, governments would have taken such decisions according to their respective political beliefs. And we have seen examples and see others also in Europe just now, while we are talking.

And unfortunately for us, the time to lift these protective measures has not arrived. Our decisions are based on these solid principles that reflect our values and not political interests. As organisers of major sports events, which you, the EOC, also are, we have to ensure that host countries respect their responsibility to provide free access to all qualified athletes and participants. Otherwise, international sport cannot function.

If we give in to political pressure in this, the domino effect will lead to discrimination, division and conflict in sport too. This would mean the full politicisation of sport. This would mean that sport and the athletes would become just a tool of politics, just another tool of political sanctions.
Today, it is Russia and Belarus. But if we let politics take over, then tomorrow, it will be you. There are many colleagues sitting here among us today who can testify how hard we have been fighting for our principles. Just ask our European friends from Israel, Kosovo, Armenia or Azerbaijan how we had to fight for them, so that they are respected in competitions and so that countries who did not want to compete with them or did not want to host them, had to respect our rules, that they had to respect non-discrimination in sport.

With all and for all of them and many others... I could give you a much longer list... We had to defend them against very tough political pressure and against discrimination. We should not believe for one minute that we in Europe are somehow immune from this political pressure or interference from politics. I still remember very well that, for your very first European Games, I had to travel with Patrick Hickey to Armenia to convince the government of Armenia to allow their athletes to participate in Baku after having received the respective guarantees at the time from the Azeri government to accept them.

We understand that, also now, some NOCs are facing political pressure from their governments, in one form or the other. We, at the IOC, stand ready to help every NOC whose responsible autonomy is threatened in this way or any other way. And this is the responsibility of every sports organisation, to stand in solidarity in this respect, because the autonomy of one is the autonomy of all of us. This is why each and every one of you can count on us to support you in taking on your responsibility for your autonomy, in taking on your responsibility to stand up for the Olympic Charter and the Olympic peace initiatives that define us all.

It is not effective justice and in no way a contribution to peace if you paint everyone with the same brush. This is why it is fundamentally important that we follow the rules of law and only sanction those who are responsible for something. We cannot sanction someone just because of the passport they hold. And if we did, it would not only be against our principles, our mission, our rules. If we did, it would even be counterproductive for what we all want to achieve because, if we did, we would drive these people into the camp of a propaganda machine that wants to make their people believe that everything that we are undertaking, that all our measures and sanctions are part of a wider conspiracy against the Russian and Belarusian people.

And by the way, for your conversations you may have with your governments, with this respect for the rule of law, we are in line with the governments, or these governments that are applying sanctions, because they also sanction only organisations or individuals who allegedly support the war and not simply because they hold a Russian or Belarusian passport. This group of governments understands our position. And they can report to you that I have been in discussions with
numerous, numerous world leaders, including many European heads of state and governments in the recent months. And they understand, respect, or even support our position.

Nevertheless, there are also some governments which may need some reminding of our mission. But it’s not the first time that governments want you, as NOCs, to address problems that they were not able to solve. And sometimes, one even has the impression that one or the other government that is giving ethically public advice to sport, that they are maybe not fully aware of their own responsibility or inconsistency, or may just want to distract from this.

All the more so, we have to base our actions on solid principles. In doing so, we must also always bear in mind that the Olympic Movement is universal. Our birthplace is here, yes, in Europe, but the mission of the Olympic Movement is universal. And this means that all of you are not only a member of the European Olympic Committees. You are, first of all, a member of this global Olympic Movement. Therefore, we must also be mindful not to expose ourselves to allegations of double standards, allegations that we are addressing the war in Ukraine differently from the many other wars and conflicts around the world.

Imagine how it would be perceived by the Olympic communities in Yemen, in Iraq, in Afghanistan, in Ethiopia, in Syria, in Libya, and I could give you dozens of more examples unfortunately. Imagine how we would be perceived, if we measured with a different yard stick here in Europe, when it comes to the universal Olympic principles. In our Olympic community, we are all equal, and this is why everyone affected by war deserves our attention, and our support.

The response to these allegations of double standard by the IOC is: first, the war in Ukraine is different, because it is a blatant violation of the Olympic Truce. Second, the far reaching political, social and economic consequences of the war make it a turning point in world history, and we see this.

There is, while we speak, a new world order in the making. The trends for this new world order we can already see on the horizon. This new world order will be more divisive than the one we were using. This new world order may very well lead to what some describe as a decoupling of the different economic and political systems, and now we have to take the decision. What is our role in the making of this new world order? What is our role in this new world order?

There, the answer is very clear. It is: we have to accomplish our mission, to unify, to show the unity in all our diversity of humankind. Our role cannot be in decoupling sports systems. It cannot be
decoupling sets of rules. Our role must continue to be the same role and mission we received from our founders, and this is to unite people in peaceful competition. We must not fall victim to this decoupling. On the contrary, our mission is to make the Olympic Games, and the Olympic Movement, an even more important symbol of the unity of humankind, a demonstration of rules-based peaceful competition. This is the mission we received from Pierre de Coubertin, who emphasised that this unifying role of the Games is even more important in times of conflict and war. So if we do not want to fall victim to the divisive effects of a new world order, it is imperative that we stay united in our position, united in our principles, united in our actions, united in our values.

But we are also gathered here today to look into a, hopefully, brighter future. I'm sure that here, you will have developed today your vision for the European Games 2023. We at the IOC are already now looking forward to having two Olympic Games in Europe over the next three-and-a-half years. The Olympic Games Paris 2024 will mark the beginning of a new era. These Olympic Games Paris 2024 here in Europe will be the first Olympic Games inspired by Olympic Agenda from start to finish. We can look forward to celebrating together exciting and inspiring Olympic Games. They will be inclusive, youthful, gender-balanced and sustainable Olympic Games, in one of the most beautiful cities in the world. Already today, we are looking forward to celebrating a unique Opening Ceremony with our gracious French hosts, and the entire world.

The Olympic Winter Games Milano Cortina 2026 will bring an innovative approach to the organisation of Olympic Winter Games. There will be a clear focus on sustainability and visibility, and they will address the great challenge we are all facing, in particular in winter sports, and this is climate change. The success of the most recent Olympic Games, and the overwhelming international response that they received, give us all great confidence. For Tokyo, over three billion people tuned into Olympic coverage across linear TV and digital platforms. Twenty-eight billion views on digital platforms made these the first streaming Games and the most watched Olympic Games ever on digital platforms. The Olympic Winter Games Beijing 2022 had more broadcast hours than any previous Olympic Winter Games edition, with more record numbers on the digital platforms.

All this shows how much the world is longing for our message of sporting excellence, peaceful competition and solidarity. We can see this not only from these peak numbers. We had feedback in response to these two Olympic Games like never before, from all walks of life, from the Secretary-General of the United Nations, the President of the United Nations General Assembly, to numerous, numerous heads of state, to people from the scientific world, the scholars. You name it.
The most emotional response was from the kids. We received countless letters and drawings from kids from all across the world. "Thank you. Thank you for giving us hope." "Thank you for making this possible." "Thank you, I want to be an Olympic athlete one day too." "Thank you, why is my sport not on the Olympic programme?" So it is really an experience we have never had before, and you can see how much this message of peace, solidarity and understanding is not only touching our hearts. It’s also touching the hearts of people around the globe. So apparently, the world is inspired by our new Olympic motto: Faster, Higher, Stronger – Together.

So let’s together aim higher, go faster, and become stronger together. Thank you very much.