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UIPM VICE-PRESIDENT JOEL BOUZOU BELIEVES THAT TO BE AT SOCHI GAMES IS TO BE HEARD



In recent weeks the international media has been abuzz over the question of whether or not to attend the Sochi Winter Games in February 2014. In my mind, there is no question: owing to their influence among young people the world over, and to the values of solidarity, exchange and open-mindedness conveyed by the Olympic ideal, the Games deserve to be protected. The very thought of shunning this event should not be entertained.

Many, it would seem, take a different stance. Joachim Gauck, President of Germany, declared in December that he would not go to Russia. The US administration announced that Barack Obama would also be absent. And Laurent Fabius, the French Minister of Foreign Affairs, stated during Le Grand Rendez-vous, a television program led by Europe 1, iTélé and Le Monde, that neither he nor the French President François Hollande would be present in Russia, and indeed that “no leading French authorities are expected to attend”.

No Head of State has mentioned the word boycott, but plenty have done so on their behalf. In the past, the Olympic Games have been no stranger to such events, and they have had to recover from them; as have political leaders, albeit to a lesser degree. But it is the athletes, the main protagonists of the Games, who have borne the brunt of boycotts, and it is their dreams and ideals that have been damaged in the process. Those Heads of State and Government not attending the Sochi 2014 Games, therefore, are not just neglecting the event itself.

SOUNDING BOARD

To turn one's back on the Games is to ignore a major fact of our society; that sport has become a powerful diplomatic tool. As President of the organization Peace and Sport and President of the World Olympians Association, I have come to believe that major international sporting events can today serve as a platform for conveying ideals, fostering dialogue and, even sometimes, driving forward ideas for progress and tolerance.

In the political community, some have cited human rights issues and Russian laws on homosexuality as grounds for not attending the Games. Others have alluded to violations of freedom of expression. We think, in contrast, that in order to bring to the fore topics and causes that they hold dear, Heads of State and Government would do better by adopting a position of open-mindedness and dialogue. Why not go to Russia in February with the resolve to raise these issues with the Russian government? Why not use the Olympic fortnight, and the sounding board that it represents, to tackle the subject head on? Why not seize the opportunity to attend Sochi 2014, an event of international scope, to promote the values of tolerance, integration and humanitarianism?

VOICE OF A VICTIM OF THE 1980 OLYMPIC BOYCOTT

Contrary to what some believe, the Russians are not closed to dialogue and the exchange of ideas. We witnessed this first-hand when, in November 2012, Peace and Sport held its sixth International Forum in Sochi, our first on foreign soil. Among the topics of discussion, a round table was dedicated to the Olympic Games and their impact as a tool for diplomatic dialogue.

Anita DeFrantz, IOC Executive Board member and victim of the 1980 Moscow Games boycott, took the floor. She shared her personal experience, her setbacks and regrets and, expressing her views at the heart of the Olympic village, she dealt candidly with the issue of boycott. The Russian authorities listened to her. Having been there, I would like to think that her words spoke much louder than the silence of absence.

DIPLOMACY THROUGH SPORT

Many have forgotten, but the last two French Presidents who chose to attend opening ceremonies of Winter Games did so on home turf; General de Gaulle in Grenoble, 1968 and François Mitterrand in Albertville, 1992. The others have not followed suit, and who remembers that? In 2014, the announced absence of François Hollande has divided the political community and fuelled the debate.

Many will view this controversy as regrettable, but I welcome it. It demonstrates the major role that sport plays, and will always play, in international relations. It highlights the power and impact of sport in the diplomatic arena. Not fewer than 122 Heads of State and Government attended the opening ceremony of the Beijing Games in 2008. Of course, the global influence of the Summer Games is much greater than that of their winter counterpart, but for so many of the world's leading authorities to be present at this event, despite the intense political and media debate during its run-

up, remains one of the greatest illustrations of sport's diplomatic success. No-one knows how these next Games on 7 February will be, but one thing is certain: boycott is the wrong approach.

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