



INTERNATIONAL OLYMPIC COMMITTEE STRUGGLE AGAINST THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: HEALTH DIPLOMACY OF NON-STATE ACTORS

DZIAŁANIA MIĘDZYNARODOWEGO KOMITETU
OLIMPIJSKIEGO W ZMAGANIACH Z PANDEMIĄ COVID-19.
DYPLOMACJA ZDROWOTNA AKTORÓW NIEPAŃSTWOWYCH

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— ABSTRACT —

The COVID-19 pandemic caused not only substantial turmoil in the international environment, both politically and economically, but it also inspired new forms of diplomatic conduct. Since 2020 we could observe new forms of health diplomacy, which is already well-established among theoretical concept. While counteracting the harmful effects of the pandemic was the primary goal of most of the initiatives, it soon became apparent that health diplomacy can be perceived by many as a political tool, supporting foreign policies and strategic goals.

This research aims to investigate International Olympic Committee as a non-state diplomatic actor and its efforts related to the COVID-19 pandemic that can be classified as public diplomacy and, more specifically, health diplomacy. The main research question refers to the character of diplomatic conduct, more specifically, whether it can be related to traditional health diplomacy focused on addressing health

— ABSTRAKT —

Pandemia COVID-19 przyczyniła się do pojawienia się licznych wyzwań i zagrożeń zarówno o charakterze politycznym, jak i gospodarczym. W środowisku międzynarodowym dało się także zaobserwować pojawienie się wielu nowych inicjatyw dyplomatycznych, które stanowiły niejako odpowiedź na te wyzwania. Szczególnie miejsce wśród tych inicjatyw zajmowały działania, które mogą zostać określone jako dyplomacja zdrowotna, rozumiana jako szczególnie przejaw dyplomacji publicznej. Kategoria ta jest niejednoznaczna i w najbardziej dosłownym znaczeniu jej celem jest współdziałanie ukierunkowane na minimalizowanie zagrożeń zdrowotnych. Jej drugie znaczenie jest bliższe dyplomacji publicznej, bowiem skupia się na wykorzystaniu działań z zakresu promocji zdrowia jako narzędzia wspierającego politykę zagraniczną oraz osiąganie celów strategicznych.

Badanie skupia się na Międzynarodowym Komitecie Olimpijskim jako aktorze niepań-

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challenges or also to public diplomacy, aimed at reaching own goals.

stwym i jego inicjatywach podejmowanych w okresie pandemii COVID-19, które można zaklasyfikować jako dyplomację zdrowotną. Zasadnicze pytanie badawcze odnosi się do charakteru podejmowanych działań – czy noszą one znamiona tradycyjnej dyplomacji zdrowotnej skierowanej na zapobieganie zagrożeniom zdrowotnym, czy też mają charakter narzędzia wspierającego osiągnięcie własnych celów, również strategicznych.

Keywords: health diplomacy; non-state actors' diplomacy; public diplomacy; health diplomacy; International Olympic Committee; COVID-19

Słowa kluczowe: dyplomacja zdrowotna; dyplomacja aktorów niepaństwowych; dyplomacja publiczna; dyplomacja zdrowotna; Międzynarodowy Komitet Olimpijski; COVID-19

INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 changed world politics and global diplomacy significantly. Most of the international actors focused their agendas on the pandemic. We could observe unprecedented measures undertaken worldwide to counteract the new disease. Pictures of empty streets of usually crowded cities spread around the world through international media. Most of the states were under strict lockdowns. Borders were closed, tourism almost stopped, and international trade faced significant transportation difficulties.

Since 2020, many new diplomatic and cooperative initiatives aimed at fighting against coronavirus have been implemented, limiting the adverse effects of this health threat and joining forces on creating vaccination. Not only states were engaged in those efforts. Intergovernmental organisations, like the World Health Organization, play a significant role in global health diplomacy. The WHO, which serves as one of the leading fora for health diplomacy and provides expertise on health issues, served as a guiding force, providing recommendations for states and other organisations on how to act in the face of the pandemic. However, not only the WHO engaged itself in health diplomacy. Many other actors supported fighting against COVID-19, either through bilateral or multilateral cooperation. Such support was not necessarily focused only on opposing the pandemic but was perceived as a political tool. China was one of the most active states using the pandemic for its diplomatic and foreign policy goals (Kobierecka & Kobierecki, 2021). Its endeavours were soon dubbed by international media outlets and later

further analysed by scholars as “mask diplomacy” (Fischetti & Roth, 2020) or “vaccine diplomacy” (Kobierecka, 2022; Itugbu, 2021).

This research aims to investigate the International Olympic Committee as a non-state diplomatic actor and its efforts related to the COVID-19 pandemic that can be classified as health diplomacy understood as a form of public diplomacy, aimed at reaching the IOC’s strategic goals. One of the interests of the IOC is to safeguard the Olympic Games as its primary asset and tool to influence other actors in international relations. Since the pandemic posed a significant threat to the IOC’s asset and forced it to postpone the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games, the IOC provides an interesting case for analysis. The main research question refers to the character of diplomatic conduct, more specifically, whether it can be related to traditional health diplomacy focused on addressing health challenges or also to public diplomacy, aimed at reaching own goals. The main argument states that the IOC had to take action because of the pandemic and adjust its diplomatic efforts to the new reality to safeguard its main asset, without which the IOC would not be able to remain influential sports governing body.

NON-STATE ACTORS IN DIPLOMATIC CONDUCT

Public diplomacy and, more specifically, health diplomacy conducted by the International Olympic Committee is the main object of analysis in the following research. Since traditional public diplomacy is mainly focused on states as its primary subjects, it is necessary to conceptualise the new public diplomacy as well, as it recognises non-states engagement in diplomatic efforts.

In general, traditional public diplomacy aims to reach the foreign public and shape foreign perceptions. James Pamment describes public diplomacy as a form of communication referring to actors’ policies aimed at foreign countries. Such communication can be conducted by ministries, NGOs, and even civil society (Pamment, 2013). At first, public diplomacy was perceived as a tool for hostile states to influence foreign societies and then, through grassroots pressure, impact foreign governments (Gilboa, 2008). Georgyi Szondi (2008) outlines the main goals of public diplomacy as changing behaviour and political attitudes and promoting economic interests.

Recognition of non-state actors in traditional diplomatic conduct is already well-established due to their activity based on government-to-government communication (G2G). As Langhorne states, due to globalisation, non-state actors

received more attention and higher profile roles in promoting certain ideals or setting new political trends. It resulted in their growing significance in diplomatic activities. The occurrence of contemporary global issues required global management, increasing the role of international organisations and NGOs and allowing them to acquire the right to diplomatic representation (Langhorne, 2005).

Recognition of non-state actors in public diplomacy approaches resulted in the distinction between traditional, state-centred public diplomacy and the new public diplomacy. According to Nancy Snow (2008), traditional public diplomacy is based on government-to-people communication (G2P), aimed at reaching foreign publics, influencing them and shaping their support for their foreign policies and interests. The recent trends show a shift towards people-to-people communication (P2P), where both governments and private individuals can engage in certain diplomatic activities, thus shaping the perceptions and influencing foreign governments' decisions.

Another significant issue is whether non-state actors, like international governmental or non-governmental organisations, can engage in diplomatic efforts independently from states to reach their own goals. It is generally accepted that non-state actors can engage in the diplomatic effort if they act on behalf of other states' governments (Huijgh, 2016). However, together with the emergence of the new public diplomacy, the broader role of non-state actors has been noticed. As Hocking states, non-state actors correlate public diplomacy strategies with their identities, and through public diplomacy, they project particular messages intending to reach their interests (Hocking, 2005). Also, Jan Melissen (2005) notices the fact that all non-state actors are capable of developing their public diplomacy. Ellen Huijgh (2016) highlights the fact that many international organisations, like the European Union or NATO, create within their structures public diplomacy units and engage in multi-actor public diplomacy.

The growing significance of international organisations and their role in addressing global challenges can be specifically observed in the field of global health. Health challenges generate many threats to international order, which comes evident whenever a pandemic occurs. Reaching global health and health security requires the engagement of a wider group of actors (Adams, Novotny, & Leslie, 2008). According to Ilona Kickbush, Gaudenz Silberschmidt, and Paulo Buss (2007), health diplomacy is conducted by many diverse actors on various levels. The occurrence of many new, non-state actors results in changes within the international political agenda – such organisations lobby for their interests and move them higher in the agenda's hierarchy (Davenport, 2002). More specifi-

cally, NGOs influence new political trends and directions, and intergovernmental organisations have the power to concentrate states on significant issues, like health challenges (Ruckert et al., 2016). Also, the role of health promotion in providing development, stability and security is noticed, especially in reference to the World Health Organization (Rodriguez-Garcia et al., 2001).

HEALTH DIPLOMACY AND ITS DIMENSIONS

The increase in new health challenges and threats that occurred together with the globalisation resulted in popularisation of the health diplomacy. As a category, we can discuss it since the first Sanitary Conference organised in Paris in 1851 (Fidler, 2005). The creation of the WHO provided a momentum for health diplomacy as it widened significantly the scope of health topics that were discussed internationally, as well as served as a global forum for discussing health related issues (Kickbush & Ivanova, 2013). Health diplomacy itself can be perceived as a complex phenomenon. It is usually defined either as a process of multilevel and multistakeholder negotiations aimed at resolving significant health challenges or the way of implementing health-related aspects within policies aimed at reaching political, economic, or social goals (Ruckert et al., 2016). Novotny and Adams (2007) similarly define health diplomacy as a way of promoting global health and strengthening international relations. Additionally, Hotez (2001) links diplomacy with peace and stability promotion. Fauci (2007) provides significant insight into the understanding of health diplomacy as he notices a close correlation between health challenges and significant political, economic, and social threats. Health diplomacy, in this sense, should concentrate on activities that could limit such health risks, e.g., development aid. For Fauci (2007), health diplomacy is about “winning minds and hearts of people in poor countries”. The linkage between health diplomacy and development aid can serve as the evidence for a close correlation between public diplomacy and health diplomacy, where both serve to promote their interests and support foreign policies. Considering the IOC’s engagement in various initiatives aimed at health promotion, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is worth analysing the motivations behind the IOC’s endeavours in order to identify, whether they were aimed at reaching health or non-health related goals. At the same time, the main focus is rather put on those initiatives that can be referred to as a form of public diplomacy, where health issues are used rather for reaching own, strategic goals.

The interpretation of new public diplomacy recognising and allowing non-state actors to pursue their public diplomacy serves as a theoretical foundation for this research. The critical category analysed in the research is health diplomacy as a specific form of public diplomacy. Additionally, the concept of multistakeholder diplomacy, proposed by Hocking, serves as a theoretical framework. According to this concept, diplomatic efforts are more frequently conducted through networks encompassing both state and non-state actors, where non-state actors occur as producers of diplomacy (Hocking, 2006). This allows analysing the IOC's efforts in the field of health promotion from the perspective of health diplomacy aimed at reaching both health-related and non-health-related goals. Such health promotion often is based on bilateral or multilateral endeavours concentrating on different types of actors.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research required analysis of current endeavours of the International Olympic Committee as an example of an international relations actor. The main purpose was to identify the recent efforts of the IOC in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and link them with the concept of health diplomacy as a tool for achieving its own goals and interests.

The research has a qualitative character and has been performed through content analysis of 209 official press releases of the International Olympic Committee issued between January 1, 2020, and February 20, 2022. The timescale encompasses the period of the COVID-19 pandemic, with the first mentions of the new disease at the turn of 2019 and 2020, through the World Health Organisation's announcement of the pandemic in March 2020, consecutive waves of the pandemic, lively discussions on COVID-19 vaccines development and preparations for Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games and Beijing 2022 Olympic Winter Games. The timescale ends on February 20, 2022, with the last press release before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which significantly changed the world stage and dominated the mainstream political and non-political world.

Within the chosen timescale, all press releases were considered and analysed. They were filtered using a word search with the following keywords: COVID-19, coronavirus, pandemic, vaccines, and health. The second stage concerned categorising all press releases that mentioned any aspects according to the keywords. The identified categories were as follows:

- Efforts to safeguard the organisation of the Olympic Games – 21 records;
- Promoting COVID-19 vaccines – 5 records;
- International cooperation and solidarity – 24 records;
- Pandemic as a context for new endeavours – 23 records;
- Showing the strong impact of sport on health – 28 records.

Some of the records could have been classified into more than one category. It refers mainly to press releases that report significant new endeavours or cooperative initiatives and present the sport's impact on health.

Classification of all selected press releases allowed further distinction between a traditional understanding of health diplomacy, perceived as a process of negotiations between various actors aimed at solving health-related challenges, and a less direct understanding of health diplomacy as a tool of fostering foreign policy and strengthening reputation and soft power. The IOC's health diplomacy understood as negotiation process aimed at solving health-related issues refers mainly to all actions undertaken in cooperation with the Organising Committees in Tokyo and Beijing and aimed at implementing security procedures that would not let to the spread of disease during the Games or cooperation with Pfizer in promoting vaccinations that can limit the numbers of cases. The second dimension of the IOC's health diplomacy, understood as a tool fostering own goals, refers to all endeavours aimed at promoting healthy lifestyles, contributing to sustainable development, and providing development aid through sports. Analysis of the press releases allowed the identification of all those types of activities and simultaneously served as evidence for the diplomatic conduct of the IOC as a non-state actor.

IOC'S PUBLIC AND HEALTH DIPLOMACY

The International Olympic Committee, as a non-state actor, engages in many diplomatic efforts, among others, within public diplomacy. The link between the IOC's endeavours and public diplomacy can be identified based on the Olympic Charter, which indicates IOC's goals, mission, and role. According to the Olympic Charter, one of the goals of Olympism is to contribute to the "harmonious development of humankind, with a view to promoting a peaceful society concerned with the preservation of human dignity" (Olympic Charter, 2021). Such a declaration reflects the IOC's engagement in building a better world through undertaking many initiatives aimed at global publics. They take

a form of different programmes that can be classified as development aid or public diplomacy in general.

The range of different endeavours undertaken by the IOC that are to contribute to building a better world is wide. Some of them focus on providing development aid, like the Olympic Solidarity or Olympic Refugee Foundation. Some are focused on sustainable development, like engagement in the Great Green Wall project together with the United Nations or the IOC declaration concerning its willingness to become climate positive until 2030 (IOC, 2021h). Already while establishing modern Olympism, Pierre de Coubertin referred to Olympics as a form of diplomacy through a culture focused on providing conditions for peaceful competition and overcoming all the differences between states and nations (Cull, 2008). Postlethwaite and Grix (2016) notice many roles and influences on diplomacy that the IOC has, together with significant power to influence nation states. Stuart Murray and Geoffrey Pigman (2014) describe the IOC as a power that controls significant assets. It can be compared to a multilateral institution as a diplomatic actor with its interests and specific goals to be achieved. Conducting not only traditional diplomatic efforts but those within the scope of public diplomacy can safeguard their interests and increase the prestige and potential of influencing other actors.

THE TRADITION OF THE IOC'S HEALTH DIPLOMACY

Health diplomacy is one of the dimensions of the IOC's public diplomacy and its engagement in building a better world. The IOC already has experience in that field and significant input in health promotion. "Winners for Health" (WFH) can be evoked as one of the first more meaningful initiatives within health aspects. This initiative can be related to the Olympic Charter from 1984, which states that the Olympic movement serves to educate young people through sports and contribute to the development of a better and more peaceful world (Olympic Charter, 1984). Through health promotion, the IOC tried to reach those declared goals.

"Winners for Health" was a programme conducted in cooperation with the World Health Organization. The first attempt to start cooperation between the two came from the WHO on January 6, 1984. Dr Nedd Willard, Information Officer in the Division of Public Information and Education for Health in the World Health Organization, sent a letter to Monique Berlioux, Director of the International Olympic Committee, introducing the idea of starting a new infor-

mation programme “Winners for Health” by the WHO with the suggestion to link this new initiative with the Olympic Games (Willard, 1984). As we can read in the letter of intent signed by Juan Antonio Samaranch and dr. Mahler during the Geneva meeting in May 1984, the IOC and the WHO both share fundamental beliefs and opinions on the significance of mental and physical health (OMS, 1984b). The agreement between the IOC and the WHO for the collaboration on the “Winners for Health” programme was aimed at promoting “the idea of health as a personal and community achievement, with developing countries as the primary target”, and “to develop a joint programme of medical research in relevant areas”. Among others, the “Solidarity” sports training programmes held by the IOC were to be used within the WFH framework as well (OMS, 1984c).

The “Winners for Health” programme linked the Olympic ideals with better mental and physical health. Its impact was supposed to be universal, reaching both developed and developing countries, people on all social and economic levels, people of different ages (OMS, 1984a). One of the declared goals was to “get the developing countries to reverse the present trend of accumulating the health risks of the highly developed countries” (OMS, 1985). Also, some of the proposed elements of the programmes on a national level could encompass developing sports facilities in shanty towns or anti-drug programmes in Kenya, just to name the few (OMS, 1985). The Olympic Solidarity programme was proposed as the leading platform for implementing “Winners for Health”. This way, the Olympic Solidarity programme was widened by the scope of health aspects by establishing “health messengers” supported and trained by the WHO staff and experts. The programme also included coordination with a more comprehensive range of international organisations and encompassed a broad information campaign about the initiative – among others organising a signing ceremony, promoting it in the World Health Assembly, providing a “Winners for Health” award (OMS, 1984a).

After implementing the “Winners for Health” programme, further cooperative initiatives were proposed, among others, by the UNICEF. Together with the proposal of starting a joint initiative similar to the WFH, suggestions that such cooperation between the IOC and the UNICEF may “have far greater impact and complement the excellent image of the IOC” were made (Lindley French, 1986). This short statement indicates how such cooperative endeavours could have been perceived as public diplomacy efforts aimed at serving the IOC’s interests.

With the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, it became clear that the IOC will have to take a stance, especially in light of the forthcoming 2020 Tokyo Olympics and

the latter 2022 Beijing Winter Games. Managing the Olympic Games is the main IOC's asset giving this organisation the potential to become a diplomatic actor. The pandemic resulted in the necessity of safeguarding not only the possibility of conducting safe Games, but also the need to generally protect the IOC's reputation and international position. The pandemic also provided opportunities for undertaking new initiatives aimed at conducting public diplomacy through health diplomacy.

FINDINGS

Analysing all press releases made by the IOC throughout the COVID-19 pandemic allowed identifying the IOC's engagement in health promotion and its endeavours aimed at counteracting the negative impact of the pandemic. Press releases were grouped into several categories, which refer to the following areas:

- Efforts to safeguard the organisation of the Olympic Games;
- Promoting COVID-19 vaccines;
- International cooperation and solidarity;
- Pandemic as a context for new endeavours;
- Showing the strong impact of sport on health.

Two identified categories – international cooperation and solidarity, and pandemic as a context for new endeavours – are described in one subsection, as most of the new cooperative initiatives were strongly determined by the pandemic context. This refers mostly to such initiatives as starting cooperation on vaccines with Pfizer or introducing new, online events.

EFFORTS TO SAFEGUARD THE ORGANISATION OF THE OLYMPIC GAMES

This category of press releases is the most fundamental and refers to the most basic understanding of the IOC's diplomacy. Those releases describe the results of talks held between the IOC's representatives and the representatives of the Organising Committees in Tokyo and Beijing aimed at conducting safe Olympic Games. The negotiations referred primarily to such aspects as the postponement of the Tokyo 2020 Olympics, the case of spectators during the Olympic Games, especially in reference to the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games, the issue of

athletes' vaccinations, regulations referring to entry restrictions and COVID-19 countermeasures in general.

Negotiations with the Tokyo 2020 Organising Committee were especially significant since these Olympic Games still required extraordinary measures to make all participating athletes and potential spectators safe and healthy. One of the joint statements of the Government of Japan (GoJ), the International Olympic Committee (IOC), the International Paralympic Committee (IPC), the Tokyo 2020 Organising Committee, and the Tokyo Metropolitan Government (TMG) referred to the GoJ announcement on the state of emergency in Tokyo, which was aimed at suppressing the flow of people and limiting the spread of COVID-19 (IOC, 2021d). Another statement was issued on June 21, 2021, announcing the potential "either cancelling or reducing the scale of any live sites and public viewing events to minimise the movement of people, review any other Games-related events, and establish new safe and secure ways of cheering and supporting the athletes" (IOC, 2021f). What is worth adding is that most frequently, such talks and negotiations were held at a high level, with the attendance of the IOC's President Thomas Bach highlighting the high profile of discussed issues. Playbooks negotiated between the IOC and the Japanese side referred mostly to security aspects and focused on securing safe Olympic Games. The decisions made and countermeasures that were acquired, like introducing new regulations for spectators, strict rules referring to vaccination requirements and additional testing of athletes, were also aimed at limiting the spread of disease.

This category of releases can be categorized as a typical form of traditional diplomatic conduct, where negotiations are held on official level and between official representatives of all sides. In this sense, this communication is not aimed at foreign audiences whatsoever, however decisions made through those negotiations have an impact on them. At the same time, this category refers to health diplomacy in its purest understanding as well as it focuses on counteracting health threats through introducing necessary solutions limiting the spread of disease that could occur in case of free access to the Olympic Games for spectators. Lastly, in spite of being an example of health diplomacy aimed at addressing health threats, securing safe Olympic Games is equal to protecting the most valuable asset of the IOC, without which its international, political meaning and potential influence on other actors would be limited.

PROMOTING COVID-19 VACCINES

COVID-19 vaccines have dominated the international agenda since the beginning of the pandemic. Especially in 2021, when the vaccine was already developed, the case of its distribution became a significant issue discussed internationally. It attracted so much attention and momentum that some countries, like China, decided to incorporate it into their diplomatic efforts (Kobierecka, 2022). Although the International Olympic Committee was not highly active in the field of vaccine promotion, five press releases from the analysed period referred to COVID-19 jabs.

The IOC strongly supported COVID-19 vaccines and tried to inspire the international community to provide equal access to vaccines. The first mention of COVID-19 jabs was made on May 6, 2021, when the IOC announced signing a Memorandum of Understanding with Pfizer Inc. and BioNTech SE. According to Memorandum, Pfizer was supposed to donate doses to Games' participants from the National Olympic Committees and Paralympic Committees with the aim of ensuring safe Olympic Games in Tokyo. Thomas Bach indicated that vaccines are a significant tool for safeguarding secure Olympic Games and a symbol of solidarity. He also compared sportsmen taking vaccines as role models, showing their "solidarity and consideration of the well-being of others in their communities" (IOC, 2021m). In another statement, Thomas Bach also supported the initiative of Noble Peace Laureate Prof. Muhammad Yunus to make the COVID-19 vaccines a Global Common Good by saying: "So we call on governments, foundations, philanthropists, health organisations and social businesses to join hands in giving free and equal access to the vaccine for everybody across the world to pledge our collective responsibility to protect those who are the most vulnerable because everyone on this planet has a right to live a healthy life. We are stronger together when we stand in solidarity and care for each other" (IOC, 2022b). Bach also declared plans for closer IOC's cooperation with the WHO in providing free and equal access to the vaccines (IOC, 2022a). The IOC decided to produce a video in which athletes call on world leaders to work together and safeguard equal and free access to COVID-19 vaccines (IOC, 2022b).

Promoting vaccinations, cooperating in safeguarding greater accessibility to vaccines and using athletes as role models for vaccination promotion can be perceived first and foremost as a tool for preserving the organisation of the Olympic Games in the difficult time of the pandemic, thus securing the core interest of the IOC. It is also an element of handling a significant health crisis and limiting the

spread of the disease through building higher immunity owing to vaccinations. At the same time, stressing the significance of solidarity and cooperation in promoting accessibility of the jabs can serve as a narrative presenting the IOC as an engaged dedicated international actor. Thus, it can be perceived as a tool contributing to the general image of the IOC. This aspect is discussed in more detail in the following section.

INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION AND SOLIDARITY: NEW ENDEAVOURS IN THE PANDEMIC CONTEXT

International cooperation and solidarity during the coronavirus pandemic were among the most frequently raised issues – twenty-four press releases referred to many different manifestations of the IOC’s cooperative endeavours. One of the first attempts to foster cooperation was the signing of the new cooperation agreement with the World Health Organization on May 16, 2020. Both organisations declared their willingness to promote healthy societies through sports in line with Sustainable Development Goals, precisely the “Good health and well-being” goal. In his official statement, Thomas Bach stressed the significance of sport for physical and mental health, especially when referring to post-coronavirus crisis support programmes. Key objectives of this cooperation referred mostly to strengthening collaboration on non-communicable diseases prevention, promoting physical activity and healthy lifestyles through sport, strengthening the health legacy of the Olympic Games, and strengthening health promotion through the Olympic Movement (IOC, 2020f). This cooperation is specifically channelled through #HealthyTogether, which is co-branded by the UN and the WHO (IOC, 2021h). The declaration of the WHO and the IOC’s cooperation made at the beginning of the pandemic in May 2020 was reaffirmed at the beginning of 2022. The President of the IOC, Thomas Bach, and the WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus met during the Olympic Winter Games Beijing 2022 and discussed further strengthening of their collaboration. They mostly focused on the accessibility of the COVID-19 vaccines and on potential initiatives accompanying the future Games, starting from Paris 2024, and finally, promoting health through sports (IOC, 2022a).

The IOC also made a solid reference to the significance of solidarity and international cooperation as a way of overcoming crises through changes in the Olympic motto and the oath. This change was made along with the post-

poned organisation of the Tokyo 2020 Summer Olympic Games. In his speech during the Tokyo 2020 opening ceremony, Thomas Bach referred to the new motto – “faster, higher, stronger – together” – as a symbol of the unifying power of sports and the benefits of solidarity (IOC, 2021b). The change in the oath directly incorporated the significance of solidarity by adding “Together we stand in solidarity” (IOC, 2021c).

One of the core cooperative initiatives in recent years, which can be referred to as tackling some health issues, is conducted by the Olympic Refugee Foundation. Since refugees constitute one of the most vulnerable groups to the adverse effects of the pandemic, the IOC’s President frequently expressed his belief in the role of sport in providing for mental health. One of the examples of health diplomacy of the IOC can be a pilot project launched in Uganda in cooperation with the UNHCR Sport for Protection programme. It was aimed at safeguarding the mental health and physical well-being of more than 10,000 refugees and hosting young people aged 15–24 (IOC, 2020g). Another project worth mentioning is “Ven i juega” [Come and Play], designed for Venezuelan refugees who fled to Colombia and aimed at safeguarding their access to health care, among others (IOC, 2021e). All the projects and programmes gained a special meaning in the context of the pandemic, as it generated further decrease on health care accessibility for refugees.

One press release refers to the Olympic Agenda 2020 and its assessment. A firm reference is made to the previous IOC contribution to athletes’ mental health. The IOC also encouraged all UN member states to recognise sport as a significant tool of post-coronavirus recovery plans as well as to notice the role of sport in providing sustainable development (IOC, 2020a). The IOC is already closely cooperating with the UN based on a Memorandum of Understanding signed together with the implementation of the Olympic Agenda 2020 (IOC, 2021h). Also, the new Agenda 2020+5 seems to correlate health issues together with developmental goals (IOC, 2021j).

The IOC has also decided to increase the Olympic Solidarity Fund to provide broader support programmes for athletes, which “is a powerful demonstration in times of a worldwide crisis” as the IOC President Thomas Bach declared (IOC, 2020h). The International Athletes’ Forum also can be mentioned as an additional forum for health diplomacy, where different actors conduct talks on mental health in the world of sport (IOC, 2021k). The 10th International Athletes’ Forum, the largest-ever athlete representative event, was held from May 26 to 27, 2021. Athletes’ commission members from 199 National Olympic

Committees (NOCs), all summer and winter Olympic sports federations, the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA), the International Paralympic Committee (IPC), all Organising Committees for the Olympic Games (OCOGs), and NOC Continental Associations, as well as representatives from the World Olympians Association (WOA) and members of various National Olympians Associations attended the virtual event discussing together the most significant issues also in the context of the coronavirus pandemic (IOC, 2021l).

Together with advocating for broader solidarity and international cooperation focused not only on counteracting the coronavirus pandemic but also on more general aspects of health promotion, also in reference to non-communicable diseases frequently resulting from the lack of physical activity, the IOC used the COVID pandemic for starting many new initiatives, some of them conducted in various partnerships. The IOC at the very beginning of the pandemic inspired athletes from around the world to share their daily workouts online under #StayStrong, #StayActive and #StayHealthy campaigns on social media (IOC, 2020d). The “Stronger Together” campaign further developed this initiative, a global campaign launched on the Olympic Day, celebrating the long way of athletes to the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games. One of the goals of this initiative was to present the significance of solidarity in the hard times of the coronavirus pandemic (IOC, 2021g).

It is also worth mentioning that the new Olympic Agenda 2020+5 was developed in the pandemic context, thus it has strongly influenced its narratives. The IOC recognised significant threats imposed by the pandemic that should be addressed in the new Agenda. It also focused on providing assistance in reaching the United Nations’ development goals in reference to sustainable development and included within this area health issues (IOC, 2021j). The IOC strongly focused in recent years on sustainable development and associated environmentally friendly solutions and initiatives with health aspects. As an example, the engagement of the IOC in the UN Great Green Wall project can be mentioned. Through planting the Olympic Forest, the IOC is willing to support communities in the Sahel region, including the improvement of health and well-being of local communities (IOC, 2021h).

The International Olympic Committee uses many different channels and diplomatic forums for its sake. During the coronavirus pandemic, the IOC conducted negotiations with the UN and G20 lobbying for the inclusion of sport in post-COVID-19 recovery programmes (IOC, 2020k). One of the results of these endeavours was the UN General Assembly stressing the significance

of sport and its prominent positive impact on societies, especially during the pandemic (United Nations, 2020). The coronavirus pandemic generally created a new context for initiatives that can be directly or indirectly correlated with health aspects used in the diplomatic efforts. Discussions held in the context of future Games became influenced by the pandemic context and certain limitations and health risks. The IOC is already talking to the Paris Olympic Games Organizational Committee about delivering the “new-era Olympic Games fit for a post-corona world” (IOC, 2020b). This issue was also brought in the context of the Los Angeles 2028 Olympic Games (IOC, 2020i).

Another example of new efforts and channels of communication through which the IOC promotes its values and safeguards its interests is pursuing online initiatives. During the pandemic, the world froze and a lot of the activities moved to cyber reality. The IOC, willing to protect Olympic Games and to implement the goals declared in the Olympic Charter, also engaged in providing online services. The Olympic Day in June 2020 gave an opportunity to broadcast live online workouts led by 141 athletes from 47 different sports. The main theme was promoting mental health. Another initiative assumed the organisation of the summer festival of Olympian and Paralympian Online Experience in cooperation with the International Paralympic Committee and Airbnb. The festival was supposed to celebrate Olympism as a substitute for postponed Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games. Online experience symbolised solidarity, spirit of friendship, and being stronger together (IOC, 2020c).

The analysis of the official statements provided by the IOC during the long period of coronavirus pandemic showed the level of engagement in health diplomacy. The IOC undertook many partnerships with international organisations and private sector to address the main challenges that arose together with the pandemic. All those initiatives within health diplomacy can be identified as forms of public diplomacy as they were mostly targeted at the global society. Through many new initiatives, by using numerous channels of communication, moving the IOC’s traditional events to cyber space, creating new partnerships, building new cooperative networks and focusing on the most pressing issues such as health challenges and sustainable development, the IOC attempted to secure its sustainability and boost its significance in the international environment. Thus, the IOC was not only aiming at counteracting health risks, but most of all, tried to secure its strategic interests.

SHOWING STRONG IMPACT OF SPORT ON HEALTH

The International Olympic Committee throughout the COVID-19 pandemic made a strong reference to the influence of sport on health. This theme can be observed in many of the press releases under analysis. The correlation between sport and health is frequently evoked together with presenting international cooperation between the IOC and the WHO or the UN. The IOC strongly relates sport with the development goals (IOC, 2020f), where physical activity serves in many different aspects, like mental health (IOC, 2021j) or providing social inclusiveness (IOC, 2020j). Thomas Bach frequently highlighted that “sport and physical activity make a great contribution to health in society” (IOC, 2020e).

Another strong message that can be identified in the press releases refers to the Olympic values promoted by the IOC, such as solidarity, unity, resilience, which apart from sport can also be related to mental health. In this sense, sport, physical activity and most notably Olympic Games, as the most significant international sport event, gave humanity hope in the dark times of the coronavirus pandemic. During the opening ceremony in Tokyo, the IOC President Thomas Bach talked about the “unifying power of sport” and “the message of solidarity, the message of peace and the message of resilience” which “gives all of us hope for our further journey together” (IOC, 2021b). Significance of sport on so many different levels was mentioned frequently on many other occasions, like the celebrations of the Olympic Day or launching the “Stronger Together” campaign (IOC, 2021g). Such aspects were also stressed together with reflections on the future Olympic Games that should contribute not only to sustainable development or focus on development goals, but also in the field of health.

CONCLUSIONS

The COVID-19 pandemic changed the world significantly, and for almost two years it has dominated the international political and diplomatic agenda. Not only states had to find themselves in the new pandemic reality, but non-state actors as recognised political and diplomatic subjects as well. The International Olympic Committee as the most significant sports governing international body engaged itself in diplomatic efforts addressing the new corona health crisis. Since the pandemic coincided with two most significant sport events managed by the IOC – Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games and Beijing 2022 Olympic Games – it was

clear that the IOC will have to take a stance and undertake certain actions to counteract potential risks posed to the Games by the pandemic. The conducted analysis of the IOC's press releases allowed identification of certain categories of messages that were sent by the IOC. Those are:

- Efforts to safeguard organisation of the Olympic Games;
- Promoting COVID-19 vaccines;
- Promoting international cooperation and solidarity, among others, through new endeavours in the pandemic context;
- Showing strong impact of sport on health.

Since the main interest of the conducted analysis is health diplomacy of non-state actors understood as a tool of reaching non-health objectives, therefore, the IOC's diplomatic endeavours were specifically analysed from the perspective of this particular type of diplomatic conduct. All the IOC's efforts classified as health diplomacy, focused on the pandemic context, can be analysed on two different levels:

- traditional health diplomacy focused on counteracting the pandemic and addressing health challenges;
- health diplomacy as a form of public diplomacy, focused on using health-related initiatives in reaching non-health-related goals.

What is worth noting, is that both those understandings of health diplomacy serve in reaching its goals, which can be related mostly to securing the most significant asset in the IOC's hands – the organisation of the Olympic Games.

The case of safeguarding the Olympic Games can be identified as a typical diplomatic conduct. As an international sports governing body, the IOC conducted traditional diplomatic endeavours, mostly related to negotiations with the host cities' representations in the field of staging safe and secure Olympic Games during the pandemic. In that sense, traditional diplomacy was aimed at implementing procedures allowing organization of safe Olympic Games. This category also bears the marks of typical health diplomacy in its purest understanding. Negotiations that were held with host cities' representatives were aimed at providing conditions minimizing the risk of further spread of the disease, therefore it was aimed at addressing significant health threat. Finally, through organizing safe Olympic Games, the IOC tried to reach non-health goal which was to secure its main asset – Olympic Games.

Similarly, the second identified category that referred to vaccines promotion can be related to both dimensions of health diplomacy – the IOC tried to provide access to vaccines for the athletes in the first place, securing at the same time the

organization of the safe Olympic Games in Tokyo and then in Beijing. With this aim in mind, the IOC decided to start cooperation with Pfizer, among others. It is also an element of handling a significant health crisis and limiting the illness's spread through building higher immunity owing to vaccinations. The second narrative that could have been identified in the press releases that mentioned coronavirus jabs was promoting solidarity and cooperation, and safeguarding equal and fair access to the vaccines. IOC decided to use varied forums for advocating COVID-19 vaccines as a global public good. It also conducted social campaigns promoting vaccines with the participation of recognisable athletes. All those efforts were aimed at limiting the spread of disease through vaccinations and at the same time, such endeavours may have been helpful in presenting IOC as a responsible actor, devoted to global initiatives aimed at building a better world, thus being an example of public diplomacy and providing development aid.

The third narrative focuses on presenting many new efforts undertaken by the IOC in the pandemic context and in the new pandemic reality. The pandemic spotlighted new threats to the most significant asset of the International Olympic Committee – the Olympic Games, which had to be postponed for the very first time in its modern history. Also, organisation of the Games in pandemic reality and in the post-coronavirus world needs some adjustments and, thus, requires more intense diplomatic efforts, initiating new activities and programmes and establishing new partnerships. The IOC has already a long tradition of international cooperation with most significant and diverse actors. Its Charter also stresses the significance of sport in non-sport areas, like development goals, sustainable development, contributing to better inclusiveness, providing peace and stability and finally, addressing health challenges and threats. The coronavirus pandemic showed how new cooperative endeavours with diverse subjects – NGOs, IGOs, and private entities are becoming vital. This stays in line with the concept of multistakeholder diplomacy, which stresses the role of networks encompassing both state and non-state actors in conducting diplomatic efforts. In this sense, the IOC occurs both as a non-state actor and a producer of certain diplomatic products. It cooperates with other NGOs as well as states' representatives, especially when discussing the organisation of the Olympic Games with organisational committees of the host cities.

Through promoting cooperation, solidarity, introducing new endeavours in the pandemic context and spotlighting the relation between sports and health, health diplomacy was strongly linked to public diplomacy. One of the most fundamental manifestations of the IOC's engagement in addressing the health

crisis through public diplomacy was the change in the Olympic motto to “faster, higher, stronger – together”. As Thomas Bach said in his speech during the Tokyo 2020 opening ceremony: “This solidarity fuels our mission to make the world a better place through sport. We can only go faster, we can only aim higher, we can only become stronger by standing together – in solidarity” (IOC, 2021b).

The conducted analysis suggests that the IOC as a non-state actor is conducting its health diplomacy in both dimensions – as a tool targeting health crisis and aimed at solving health-related challenges, and as a tool of reaching strategic goals that are not directly linked to global health. Although the endeavours of the IOC during the pandemic can be categorized in line with those two dimensions, a special focus on the second one seems to be visible. Through health-related initiatives, the IOC first and foremost tried to secure its interests, which can be in general linked to safeguarding its most valuable asset – Olympic Games. Whether it is vaccines promotion, negotiations with the host cities, introducing new initiatives and establishing new online events, building new partnerships and networks providing space for cooperation aimed at limiting the spread of coronavirus, all those efforts were aimed mostly at securing the future of the IOC’s and its international position and potential to influence other actors. All the efforts made by the IOC during the pandemic that refer in any way to addressing health challenges were made on two levels – first of all, all the initiatives were aimed at safeguarding the IOC’s interests and most specifically, securing organisation of the Olympic Games as without them, the IOC would have lost its international impact and significance. At the same time, those efforts can provide a contribution to countering the pandemic.

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