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Bach Becomes IOC Head Amid Sochi Olympics Controversy

By Irina Filatova

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A security guard walking last month near the Bolshoi Ice Dome, background, one of the Sochi Olympics venues. **Pawel Kopczynski**

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) on Tuesday elected German fencing champion Thomas Bach as its new president as tensions remain high around the upcoming Olympic Games to be hosted by Russia next year.

Bach, 59, will succeed the committee's long-standing chief, Jacque Rogge, who has chaired the IOC for the last 12 years. He was elected by a secret vote, beating the four other candidates including legendary Ukrainian pole vaulter Sergei Bubka.

The vote took place amid a controversy around the Winter Olympics in Sochi, as Marek Migalski, a member of the European parliament and of the Committee for Russia-EU cooperation, launched a campaign urging European Union officials to boycott the games.

The move, called Olympic Shames, is aimed at punishing Russia for human rights violations, with the country's civil society facing the worst situation "during its entire post-Soviet history," Migalski's office said Tuesday in an e-mailed statement.

"We'll call on the EU's leaders not to come to Sochi, not to participate in official meetings, not to legitimize the regime of [President Vladimir] Putin," the statement said.

Migalski's comments followed concerns by the games' sponsors about the new Russian law that bans promoting "nontraditional sexual relations" to minors.

The IOC's marketing chief Gerhard Heiberg said Monday that he had been approached by a number of Olympic sponsors, especially U.S. companies that feared that the law — widely seen as an effort by the Russian government to discriminate against sexual minorities — could provoke a wave of protests at the Olympic sites.

Some companies already faced pressure from LGBT activists urging them to boycott the games. In one recent example, Coca-Cola came under fire in the U.S. last month, as a group of LGBT activists flooded Times Square in New York to protest against its sponsorship of the Olympics.

The protesters were holding posters that read "Coke, don't sponsor hate!," "Coke, boycott Sochi, defend human rights!" and "Coca-Cola sponsors Russian homophobia," the Voice of America reported. They also spilled a few cans and bottles of Coke on the asphalt, the report said.

The campaign — initiated by U.S. human rights organization Queer Nation and RUSA LGBT, which unites the country's Russian speaking gay rights activists — was aimed at attracting the attention of the global community to human rights violations in Russia, the organizers said.

The protesters demanded that Coca-Cola provide its LGBT employees in Russia with benefits equal to those enjoyed by such staff in the U.S.

The activists also pushed for other sponsors like Visa, McDonalds, Procter & Gamble and Samsung to pull their support.

In response to the statements, Coca-Cola said it considered diversity to be a major value. "We have long been a strong supporter of the LGBT community and have advocated for inclusion and diversity through both our policies and practices," it said in a statement. "We do not condone human rights abuses, intolerance or discrimination of any kind anywhere in the world."

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