

Statist Roots, Neoliberal Ambitions: A Historical Analysis of the Government's Istanbul 2000 Olympic Bid

Devletçi Kökler, Neoliberal Hedefler: Hükümetin İstanbul 2000 Olimpiyat Adaylığının Tarihsel Analizi

Research Article / Araştırma Makalesi

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İstanbul's long-standing ambition to host the Olympic Games, formalized with the İstanbul 2000 bid, reflects the intersection of sport, politics, and economic policy in late-20th-century Turkey. Rooted in the Early Republican era, this ambition gained institutional momentum during the 1980s and 1990s amid neoliberal economic reforms and Turkey's efforts to integrate into the global economy. The 2000 bid, publicly promoted by TMOK, municipal authorities, and national politicians, symbolized both a strategy to showcase Turkey's economic and organizational capacities and a populist assertion of national prestige. This study employs a hermeneutic, critical historical approach, analyzing TMOK periodicals and newspaper archives from 1986 to 1994. Findings indicate that the candidacy exemplified a top-down, neo-populist decision and exposed structural governance challenges within a centralized, statist sports system.

Keywords: Olympic games, İstanbul 2000, Olympic bids, Neoliberalism, Sport governance

Özet

İstanbul'un 2000 Olimpiyat Oyunları adaylığıyla resmîyet kazanan uzun vadeli olimpiyat ev sahipliği hedefi, 20. yüzyılın sonlarında Türkiye'de spor, siyaset ve ekonomi politikalarının kesişim noktasını yansıtmaktadır. Erken Cumhuriyet dönemine dayanan bu hedef, 1980'ler ve 1990'lardaki neoliberal ekonomik reformlar ve Türkiye'nin küresel ekonomiye entegrasyon çabalarıyla kurumsal bir ivme kazanmıştır. TMOK, yerel yönetimler ve ulusal siyasetçiler tarafından kamuya açık şekilde desteklenen 2000 adaylığı, hem Türkiye'nin ekonomik ve örgütsel kapasitesini gösterme stratejisinin hem de ulusal prestiji yükseltmeye yönelik populist bir söylemin simgesine dönüşmüştür. Bu çalışma, 1986–1994 yılları arasında yayımlanan TMOK dergileri ve gazete arşivlerini inceleyen hermenötik ve eleştirel bir tarihsel yaklaşım kullanmaktadır. Bulgular, bu adaylığın tepeden inme, neo-popülist bir karar örneği olduğunu ve merkezi, devletçi spor sisteminde yapısal yönetim sorunlarını görünür kıldığını göstermektedir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Olimpiyat oyunları, İstanbul 2000, Olimpiyat adaylıkları, Neoliberalizm, Spor yönetimi

Abstract

Introduction

For decades, Istanbul has pursued a grand ambition: hosting the Olympic Games. Rooted in the Early Republican period and formalized in the late 1980s, the persistent idea of hosting the Olympics has endured despite successive changes in government. Istanbul has relentlessly bid for the 2000, 2004, 2008, 2012, and 2020 Games. These bids were publicly announced by the Turkish National Olympic Committee (TMOK), successive mayors of the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality, contemporary politicians, and the ministries and state units responsible for sport—each emphasizing the potential economic and athletic benefits. Millions of dollars were spent on these bidding campaigns; the budget for the most recent one, for the 2020 Games, alone reached 55 million dollars (ESPN, 2013, January). Although Istanbul has never won the bid, the determination persists, extending even to a potential candidacy for the 2036 Games (Lloyd, 2021, July 14).

In the 1980s, when neoliberal economic thought was taking shape, Turkey was undergoing significant shifts in its economic policies, implementing measures necessary for integration into the global economy. During the 1990s, the economic growth spurred by neoliberal policies and the emergence of powerful capital groups made it possible for Turkey to pursue hosting major sport events. These bids became part of a broader strategy to legitimize Turkey's European Union accession process by showcasing the country's economic potential and organizational capacity (Polo, 2015). Therefore, it is no coincidence that the idea of Istanbul hosting the Olympic Games was first taken seriously and formalized during this period. Building on this context, the purpose of this study is to examine Istanbul's initial enthusiasm for hosting the Olympics by analyzing the first official bid—the Istanbul 2000 Olympic Games candidacy—in light of the developments of that era. The research questions why Istanbul pursued the 2000 bid and what the bidding process signified within the political regime of the time.

The research is designed as a hermeneutic, critical historical analysis. A historical method was employed for data collection, utilizing the Turkish National Olympic Committee's periodical *Olimpiyat* and newspaper archives accessed through the WikiLaLa database. In the newspaper searches, the keywords "Olimpiyat," "İstanbul aday¹," and "İstanbul 2000" were used, covering the period from January 1986 to January 1994 (the bid results were announced on September 24, 1993). In the first stage, 666 news items containing the keywords were reviewed; subsequently, 23 articles obtained from *Cumhuriyet*² newspaper directly addressing Istanbul's Olympic bid were subjected to descriptive discourse analysis. Relevant articles and reports from *Olimpiyat* magazines of the same period were also included in the dataset. The findings were presented in chronological order, and the discourses of the actors of the time were

interpreted in relation to the social, economic, and political developments of the period.

The following section will first address the evolution of the Olympic hosting idea, which was initially discussed during the Early Republican period and later revisited in the 1950s but never realized. Subsequent sections will analyze the ideas and events that led to the revival of this vision in the mid-1980s, culminating in Istanbul's first official Olympic bid.

Background: Turkey and Olympic Bids from the Early Republican Period to the 1980s

Bilsel and Zelef (2011) identified traces of Olympic bid projects in the city plans they examined from the Early Republican period and afterward. According to their findings, the French urban planner Henri Prost was invited in 1936 to oversee the development of Istanbul and remained in this position until 1951. Having previously served as the chief planner of Paris, Prost was well acquainted with the impact of World Fairs and the Olympic Games on urban development. When the Istanbul Municipality requested that he designate sites for a stadium and a hippodrome, he approached these requests as part of a comprehensive Olympic project centered around a major stadium. He proposed the Yenibahçe Valley as a site for sporting facilities, and the plan was approved in 1939; however, it was not implemented due to the outbreak of war.

In 1943, Governor–Mayor Lütfi Kırdar announced the ten-year celebration program prepared by Prost for the 500th anniversary of the conquest of Istanbul. Within this program, the idea of hosting the Olympics resurfaced, with plans for sporting facilities and an Olympic village. Although no official bid was made, the notion of organizing the Olympics in Istanbul was frequently discussed in the press throughout the 1950s. In 1957, Carl Diem, the organizer of the Berlin Games who visited Turkey for the second time, also supported Prost's proposal for a sports complex outside the city walls. The proposed complex included a 100,000-seat stadium, a sports hall, a swimming pool, a velodrome, and training fields. Although a competition for the Olympic stadium was announced in 1958, the projects were never realized (Bilsel & Zelef, 2011).

In the 1950s, Turkey transitioned to a multi-party democracy and adopted liberal economic policies, while its relations with the United States strengthened. As Turkey positioned itself within the Western Bloc, it also became a member of NATO. Urbanization increased during this period, and migration to major cities highlighted the importance of regional urban planning. The willingness to pursue such ambitious projects may have been related to the evolving liberalization movement. Indeed, it is understandable that mega-projects would be pursued not

¹ Translation: "Olympics," "Istanbul Candidates" and "Istanbul 2000"

² *Cumhuriyet* Newspaper, founded in 1924, is a daily publication.

only for housing development but also for sporting facilities. Investment in the infrastructure required for the Games—especially considering that a 100,000-seat stadium would serve not only the Olympics but also the rapidly growing sport of football—would naturally act as a catalyst for liberal economic activity, an aspect the authorities of the time likely considered. Nevertheless, sport remained under a statist framework, with federations—including the TMOK—operating under state control (Erturan-Ogut & Şinoforoğlu, 2024). This may help explain why these projects and the Olympic bid were shelved and rarely mentioned for an extended period, potentially due to TMOK's limited autonomy.

Although the TMOK is today the country's largest independent sports organization, it did not achieve this status easily. The process, initiated in 1907 through Pierre de Coubertin's efforts and represented by Selim Sırrı Tarcan, could not institutionalize for a long time due to association bans and political unrest in the Ottoman Empire. During the Republican period, particularly under the Turkish Sports Institution (1936) and subsequently within the Directorate General of Physical Education (1938), TMOK came under state supervision. However, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) requires that national Olympic committees be independent and elected. In Turkey's state-controlled sports system, TMOK presidents were appointed rather than elected. This situation escalated into a crisis when the IOC warned in a letter that, unless corrected, Turkish athletes might not be allowed to participate in the 1956 Melbourne Games (Atabeyoğlu, 2001). Although Turkey participated in the Melbourne Games thanks to bilateral relations, TMOK's structure could not immediately become independent. It was not until 1970 that TMOK was restructured in accordance with the IOC's requirements, achieving genuine independence (TMOK, 2008). As can be observed, the only institution capable of implementing the Olympic bid proposed in the late 1950s—an independent national Olympic committee—did not come into being until the 1970s. This factor may have contributed to the suspension of the bid during that period.

It is therefore necessary to briefly revisit the period between 1960 and 1980. Industry was developing, and society was transforming into a consumer-oriented public. The young democracy advanced under the control of military tutelage; the first coup took place in 1960, resulting in the execution of the prime minister and a change of government. By the 1970s, Turkey, situated on the border of the Soviet Bloc during the Cold War, experienced some of the most turbulent years in its modern history. The country was engulfed in violent conflicts among right-wing, left-wing, and Islamist factions, which culminated in severe street clashes. Labor and student unrest led to the closure of schools and factories, and acts of terror in the streets brought the country to the brink of economic and social collapse—an episode often described as a small-scale civil war (Ahmad, 1993).

This period was also marked by political instability, as successive coalition governments struggled to maintain authority. Under such conditions of insecurity and instability, Istanbul's Olympic candidacy would have been almost inconceivable. Moreover, until the 1980s, Turkey's economic growth lagged behind that of other developing nations, resembling that of countries that were "late starters" to liberal economic systems (Altug, Filiztekin, & Pamuk, 2008). Discussion of an Olympic bid would only become plausible toward the late 1980s—specifically under the government of the Motherland Party (ANAP), established after the 1980 military coup that ended chaos and terrorism, and known for its adoption of neoliberal economic policies.

Neoliberalism Loves Sport: The 1980s and the Özal Era

Following the military coup of September 12, 1980, the constitution was amended to grant greater authority to the prime minister. In 1983, Turkey returned to democratic elections, resulting in the formation of the ANAP government, with Turgut Özal becoming prime minister. Özal emerged as a key figure in Turkey's transition during the 1980s toward the neoliberal development programs that had spread from the United Kingdom and the United States.

Neoliberalism, in its fundamental propositions, advocates for enhancing efficiency in the free market through state reforms, removing barriers to global capital flows via deregulation, and emphasizing financialization and privatization as means to expand the role of the private sector in society (Harvey, 2005). To integrate Turkey into the global economy, Özal implemented a series of neoliberal reforms aimed at improving productivity, developing various markets, privatizing state-owned industrial and service enterprises, and strengthening financialization through banking sector reforms (Öniş, 2004). However, Özal was not merely a neoliberal reformist but also, as Öniş (2004) describes a neoliberal populist—or neo-populist—politician. In neoliberal populism, reforms are typically initiated from above, implemented swiftly and without the involvement of organized social forces. This mode of governance is authoritarian in style, weakening representative institutions and personalizing politics. Dialogue with interest groups is absent, and the charismatic leader assumes a central role in executing and legitimizing reforms. Consequently, a liberal economy coexists with authoritarian politics—or at best, with a shallow form of democracy.

Thus, after 1980, Turkey transitioned to a neoliberal economic program that was restructured and aligned with the global economy through various economic methods and discourses. Here, economic dynamism and international prestige became attractive investment opportunities for platforms involving global actors. Hosting mega sport events, therefore, aligned perfectly with neoliberal principles—emphasizing both economic benefits and the populist narrative that such initiatives would serve the public good. It is evident that the decision-

makers behind Istanbul's bid for the 2000 Olympic Games adopted this decision in a top-down manner, without consultation or dialogue with other stakeholder groups—particularly the residents of Istanbul. There was neither a referendum nor any formal public consultation process regarding the bid; and that was not unusual in a traditionally authoritarian statist political sphere.

This situation is not unique to Turkey. In literature, it is frequently emphasized that the Games serve as neoliberal instruments, and that states and politicians bid to host them by persuading the public that they will bring various benefits. Regarding this, Tomlinson (2005) argues that after 1984, the IOC developed a marketing game to give the Olympics an appearance of idealism and universality. Accordingly, cities participate for global positioning and urban restructuring, corporations for visibility and television opportunities, and confused consumers for their enthusiasm for sports or the feeling of being part of a grand event. The Olympics have become a commercialized global commodity; a gamble essentially scaling media, and market influence. Zimbalist (2020) explains that not only the Olympics but also the World Cups have become economic gambles. According to him, the projected budgets for mega-events are often exceeded by several multiples, and except for Los Angeles 1984 and Barcelona 1992, most Games have resulted in economic losses. For instance, during the 2012 London Olympics, the city generated approximately US\$3.5 billion in revenue but spent over US\$18 billion (Zimbalist, 2015).

There are studies claiming that the Games act as catalysts for urban planning, accelerating infrastructure investments and facility development (Chalkley & Essex, 1999). However, in most cases, the stadiums built for the Games become “white elephants” — underused or abandoned after the event — while the preparation period is often marked by ethical violations concerning human rights, regional displacement, and social inclusion (Zimbalist, 2020). Similarly, the Games have not always been found to bring consistent benefits to tourism (Solberg & Preuss, 2007). Consequently, misleading elements in the presentation of economic returns may create the impression that these events are more beneficial to host regions than they actually are, which can lead governments to support events that fail to produce sufficient positive impact (Preuss, 2005).

Thus, instead of fully benefiting the public, the Games generate profits for other actors. Boykoff (2013) argues that the Olympic Games have evolved into a vast form of planned economy designed to shield the wealthy from risk while offering them a grand visual spectacle. He introduces the concept of “celebration capitalism,” a system in which state actors are manipulated into public-private partnerships where the public pays and the private sector profits. According to Boykoff, while the 2004 Athens Games symbolized the full emergence of celebration capitalism, the 2012 London Games represented its most typical example—characterized by a state of social exception, unlimited commercial activity, suppression of dissent,

questionable claims of sustainability, and the collaboration of mainstream media. Similarly, Andrews and Silk (2018) describe how the Olympic Games, once a bastion of amateur sport, have been transformed by the forces of neoliberal corporatization. They define London 2012 as “a strange new hybrid of sports appreciation and consumerism gone wild” (p.11)

Turkey's Olympic bid during those years—unaware of the literature that would largely develop in later decades—may have stemmed from a somewhat naïve “soft power” motivation driven by the global allure of the Games, or equally from a habitual eagerness to seize opportunities for economic dynamism, relying on international actors. Introduced by Joseph Nye in 1990, the concept of “soft power” refers to the representational dimension of diplomacy, describing a country's ability to make itself attractive internationally through cultural and ideological values rather than coercive means (Nye, 2017). Although scholars in recent years have increasingly questioned the explanatory adequacy of soft power in the context of sports diplomacy, there remains a substantial body of literature linking the hosting of the Olympic Games and World Cups to demonstrations of power within the global economy, framing these events as instruments of soft power (Grix & Lee, 2013).

It is difficult to clearly interpret the decisions made during the 1980s and 1990s—when Turkey began to integrate into the neoliberal global economy—from today's perspective. The decision-makers of Istanbul's bid may have had notions of soft power in mind. Yet, as examined in the following section, the ideas and conditions surrounding the bid reveal early traces of the neoliberal ambitions that would characterize the country's pursuit of such endeavours in the years to come.

1990s: The Olympic Bid Amidst the Shadow of Statist Tradition and Bureaucracy

As reported in the press, in November 1986, the Ministry of National Education, Youth and Sports (MEGSB) invited Willi Daume—the President of the National Olympic Committee of the Federal Republic of Germany and the head of the Munich 1972 Organizing Committee—to Istanbul to assess the city's potential to host the Olympic Games (Cumhuriyet, November 27, 1986). After touring Istanbul and potential sites for facilities, Daume remarked that the city's “infrastructure and superstructure were almost non-existent,” yet he suggested that this could be turned into an advantage by allowing everything to be built from scratch. In his statement, Daume encouraged Turkey to pursue hosting the Olympic Games, listing the advantages as follows: through the Games, Turkey would acquire much-needed sports facilities, potentially generate profit, and—if the 1996 Games were awarded to Athens (which they were not)—Istanbul should consider submitting a bid for the 2004 Olympics.

Subsequently, the then Mayor of Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality, Bedrettin Dalan, appears to have initiated preparations for an Olympic Village project, as he publicly announced the good news to the press (Olimpiyat, 1987, Fall, p. 2):

“As you know, the beautiful facilities where the Munich Olympics were held were built on an area of 250 acres. We have contacted the company that constructed these facilities and informed them that we have allocated 1,000 acres for the Istanbul Olympic Village. WE GIVE YOU OUR WORD. The Olympic Village we will build between Küçükçekmece and Büyükçekmece Lakes, together with a modern 100,000-seat stadium, will be completed as soon as possible, and Istanbul will be ready for the Olympic Games by the year 2000. Thus, for the first time, the Olympics will be held simultaneously on two continents—Asia and Europe—in accordance with the meaning of the rings in the Olympic emblem.”

In April 1986, sports administration was separated from the national education system, and the General Directorate of Youth and Sports (GSGM) was placed under the authority of a Minister responsible for Youth and Sports (Fişek, 1998). This restructuring was intended to make the sports system more agile and reduce bureaucratic inefficiency. On December 1, 1988, a meeting hosted by the Lions and Lioness Clubs was held in the Municipal Assembly Hall, attended by Mayor Dalan, the Director of GSGM, representatives of the TMOK, as well as athletes and sports journalists, including weight-lifting record breaker Naim Süleymanoğlu. During the meeting, Dalan declared that they would “secure the Games for the year 2000 no matter what.” The discussions also emphasized the importance of governance, adherence to IOC regulations, and parliamentary support in the preparation process (Olimpiyat, 1989, Winter, pp. 16–18).

In 1989, Nurettin Sözen of the Social Democratic People's Party (SHP) succeeded Bedrettin Dalan from the ANAP as mayor, yet maintained a similar level of determination to pursuing the Olympic bid throughout his tenure. On December 24, 1989, Sözen organized an “Olympic Cocktail” at the municipality, where the then Minister responsible for Youth and Sports, İsmet Özarslan, declared that “this is the matter of the Turkish nation.” In doing so, he attributed a decision to the public through populist rhetoric, even though the Turkish people had not been involved in the process. Concerns over costs were also raised during the event: how would approximately 8.9 trillion TL (=3.56 billion USD, with 1 USD = 2,500 TL in 1990) be financed? (Cumhuriyet, January 24, 1990, p.8)

The then-president of TMOK, Sinan Erdem, accelerated public relations activities in 1990. On December 26, Erdem gave a speech at the Karaköy Lions Club, expressing his support for the municipality's bid to host the Games. He emphasized that the Olympics would not only promote harmony among nations but also bring economic and tourism benefits, calling upon the Lions clubs for their support (Cumhuriyet, January 26, 1990, p.8). Speaking at a panel on May 19, Erdem stated that the Games could demonstrate that “leaping into a new epoch can be achieved through action, not words” (Cumhuriyet, May 20, 1990, p.10). The slogan “The country that leaps into a new epoch: Turkey!” was used by ANAP during the 1987 elections

and frequently echoed by politicians of the time (Başkan, 2021). Erdem's statement can thus be interpreted as a reference to this populist discourse—and even as a provocative call that underlined the potential benefits of the Games for the neoliberal economy.

In June, Erdem raised the issue of ensuring full autonomy for sports federations as a prerequisite for hosting the Olympic Games in a newspaper interview. “As the National Olympic Committee, I am having difficulty in having my status recognized. My foundation consists of sports federations, yet they have not come to office through elections,” he stated, pointing to one of the most distorted aspects of Turkish sport governance at the time—the dependence of federations on the state (Cumhuriyet, June 4, 1990, p.10). He warned that under such conditions, Turkey's chances of being awarded the Olympics would be jeopardized. Erdem would later continue to emphasize these issues frequently, insisting on the establishment of an autonomous sports system and the drafting of a corresponding law.

The autonomy of the federations, which Erdem persistently advocated, was in fact a fundamental necessity according to Article 5 of the Olympic Charter. This principle states that within the Olympic Movement, sports organizations must be autonomous, and neither the state nor any political entity may interfere in the affairs of National Olympic Committees. In Turkey, however, the sport management system had long been structured as a state monopoly, whereby the state nourished the entire system from the top down—from clubs to federations. No organized sports activity could take place without the approval of the GSGM.

A study examining the evolution of this state-dominant model identified several underlying causes: the influence of early Kemalist statism, the perceived success of the Soviet state-controlled sports model, and, later, under Özal, the use of sports as a political propaganda and rent-seeking tool (Erturan-Ogüt & Şinoforoğlu, 2024). Indeed, despite the neoliberal discourse of the Özal era—which, in principle, should have favored autonomy and a reduction of state intervention—sports clubs remained weak, and federations were nominally federative but in practice functioned as state institutions. As the ANAP Minister responsible for Youth and Sports Mehmet Ali Yılmaz noted, “(...) the clubs have neither revenue nor a single penny of profit,” surviving entirely on state allocations (Cumhuriyet, November 21, 1991, p.10). Given the clubs' financial weakness, they were unable to contribute either democratically or economically to their federations. As a result, these so-called federations remained dependent on the state, with their presidents, as Erdem pointed out, appointed by government authorities. This dependency indirectly undermined the independent functioning of the TMOK as well, forcing it into constant engagement with state bureaucrats and political actors. Ultimately, federation autonomy did not materialize during this period; it was only in 1993 that a law was enacted stipulating that

federation presidents should be elected rather than appointed³. The first such presidential elections took place in December 1993, following the Olympic bid vote in September of that year.

On December 28, 1990, a meeting was held with Turgut Özal, who was by then the President, and on January 23, the first official press statement was made: "We are bidding for the Olympics" (Cumhuriyet, January 23, 1990, p.10). However, within the complex bureaucratic structure, communication gaps increasingly hindered the progress of preparations. Governance problems persisted among the Municipality, TMOK, the Minister responsible for Youth and Sports, and GSGM. In one meeting, Mayor Sözen even claimed that he was unaware of the proposed Olympic Law. Before the upcoming European Olympic Committees meeting in November 1991, Sinan Erdem emphasized the urgent need to enact such a law, warning that without it, "the Olympics could not be hosted not only in the 2000s but even in the 3000s." In response, the then-Minister İsmet Özarslan, stated that the draft law was already prepared and subsequently invited Erdem to Ankara to work on it (Cumhuriyet, January 6, 1991, p.16).

Following a meeting held in Ankara on January 10, a commission was established, and the draft of the Olympic Law was completed. Sinan Erdem assessed the meeting by stating, "The discussions are now over, and preparations have begun" (Cumhuriyet, January 11, 1991, p.10). The meeting also addressed issues regarding the location and design of the Olympic Village, and a work plan was developed in coordination with the Metropolitan Municipality and the relevant state institutions. Subsequently, on March 19, the commission briefed President Özal on its activities and requested that TMOK be granted autonomy through a separate law (Olimpiyat, Winter 1991).

However, in an interview given in June 1991, Erdem once again noted that preparations were not progressing as desired, citing bureaucratic obstacles similar to those he had mentioned a year earlier: "There is nothing that Turkey cannot do. Engineers, technical staff, facilities, land—all are available. But there is such an organization that we cannot accomplish anything. I do not blame the heads of the organization. They are well-intentioned, but the way of thinking still operates as it did in the 1950s" (Cumhuriyet, June 21, 1991, p.10). Erdem also reported in the same interview that the Minister of Sport would not meet with them, that they could not find people to work on Saturdays, and that the law had still not passed in Parliament, adding, "If we cannot officially apply to the IOC by February 1992, all our efforts will be in vain." An important conclusion regarding sports governance can be drawn from Erdem's statement. Although an Olympic bid aligned with the neoliberal political and economic policies of the period, the state institutions were unable to shrink as required by neoliberal principles.

Consequently, decision-makers lacked the dynamic and rapid responsiveness necessary for organizing such events. Thus, Erdem questions why they were still dealing with bureaucracy dating back to the 1950s, pointing to the red tape in sports. His statements are significant in that they articulate firsthand the problems created by the state monopoly in sports administration.

While the bureaucratic burden in the country complicated the preparations for the bid, TMOK was publishing articles in its own *Olimpiyat* magazine to promote and publicize Istanbul's candidacy. In the Winter 1991 issue, the article titled "Olympics in 2000" featured Erdem's statements regarding the bid: "Turkey is located on both the European and Asian continents. This feature increases our country's chances. In addition, Turkey would be the first Islamic country to host the Olympics. They are sympathetic to us" (p.8). This optimism continues by explaining the benefits the Olympics would bring if awarded, summarized as promoting the country and attracting tourists, generating economic and foreign currency revenue, providing facilities, and leaving a legacy for youth. The article also notes Özal's assertion that the \$3.56 B budget could be covered without needing credit and that "we will receive returns in solid money," emphasizing that the Games would be a profit-generating "grand festival" (p.9).

The same issue included a piece by Mayor Sözen explaining the reasons for Istanbul's candidacy. According to Sözen, the reasons were that the Games suited Istanbul; would showcase the country's national assets in art, culture, and industry; would provide international promotion; and would leave permanent infrastructure such as airports, sports facilities, and roads. He emphasized that the \$3.56 B would be immediately recovered, with no financial loss (p.10). It is clear that there was a unified message emphasizing the economic benefits of the Olympics and their contributions to promotion and tourism. The Games were framed, as the literature indicates, as a neoliberal instrument: a cash-generating machine and a tool for global prestige. Presenting this approach to the public during a period when the country was transitioning to neoliberal policies and "leaping into a new epoch" in development naturally illustrates that the timing of the first official bid was not coincidental.

By November 1991, Istanbul hosted an important event: the 20th General Assembly of the Association of European National Olympic Committees (ACNOE), attended by 195 delegates from 36 countries. During the two-day meeting, offices were to be opened in the cities whose bids had been confirmed—Sydney, Beijing, Manchester, and Berlin—to assist with their promotions as well. Prior to the smoothly conducted meeting, TMOK presented a multimedia presentation to demonstrate Istanbul's readiness for the Olympics. The

³ Thus, the federations became administratively and financially dependent on the state, while their presidents and boards of directors transformed into bodies elected by vote. However, full autonomy would be postponed until 2004 to be restructured. Nevertheless, the attempts at autonomy did not succeed in the following years, and sports federations in Turkey continued to be structured as semi-state-dependent organizations.

presentation highlighted investments made to date, as well as developments in sports facilities and venues. According to the report (Cumhuriyet, 21 November 1991), TMOK Secretary General Togay Bayatlı noted that Sydney was disadvantaged due to the time difference, while Beijing lacked sufficient sports facilities, suggesting that Turkey would actually be competing with Berlin and Manchester. In retrospect, this statement reveals how unprepared TMOK was in accurately assessing the competitive landscape (in the vote, the final round was between Beijing and Sydney, with Sydney ultimately winning the Games).

The official bid dossier was submitted on time. For the Olympic Village, a large site near Küçükçekmece Lake in the southeastern part of Istanbul was proposed. The Istanbul metro project was planned to extend to this area (Olimpiyat, 1991,

Winter). At that time, the newly appointed Minister responsible for sports, Mehmet Ali Yılmaz, considered the 100,000-seat Olympic Stadium too large (Cumhuriyet, 21 November 1991), and the stadium was later actually designed to accommodate 80,000 spectators. However, the dossier continued to list it as a 100,000-seat venue.

The Olympic Park, containing the stadium, sports fields, and halls, along with the accommodation areas in the Olympic Village, was planned in the city's southeastern region, while rowing, cycling, archery, and some other sports would take place in other parts of the city (Figure 1). Transportation was arranged so that the farthest distance would be 45 km, utilizing ferries, rail systems, and road networks.



Figure 1. Olympic Facility Locations Across Istanbul for Istanbul 2000.

(Source: Comité de Candidature Olympique d'Istanbul 2000, 1993, Volume III, p.12)

The budget allocated for the Games in the dossier was set at \$1.232 billion, with \$427.6 million designated for facility construction and \$507.5 million for operational costs (Table 1). This expenditure plan differed from the \$3.56 billion figure reported in the press. The largest revenue sources in the budget were

\$480 million from TV broadcasting rights and \$388 million estimated from sponsorships. For the necessary research and architectural consultancy, two firms were contracted—one from Istanbul and one from Atlanta (Comité de Candidature Olympique d'Istanbul 2000, 1993).

Table 1. Olympic Budget Estimates for Istanbul 2000

<i>Revenue</i>	<i>US \$m</i>	<i>Expenditure</i>	<i>US \$m.</i>
I. TV Rights (Net)	480.0	<i>I. Construction</i>	427.6
II. International & local sponsors, Licensees and Suppliers	388.0	Venues	402.0
III. Revenues from National Lottery, horse race betting, etc. as defined by the Turkish Olympic Law	193.0	Village	25.6
IV. Tickets	81.0	<i>II. Operational Cost</i>	507.5
V. Donations	8.0	Promotion-Media	37.0
VI. Coin Marketing	30.0	Signage	12.0
VII. Lottery	40.0	Hospitality / Protocol	13.8
VIII. Other	12.0	Cultural Programme	14.2
Total	1,232.0	Ceremonies	36.0
		Administration	71.6
		Security	44.3
		Telecommunications	136.0
		Medical	10.6
		Insurance	16.3
		Transport	9.3
		Venue Operations	7.6
		Village Operations	23.8
		Paralympics	45.0
		Other	30.0
		<i>III. Environmental Improvement</i>	90.0
		Olympic Park	60.0
		Other	30.0
		<i>IV. Contingency (surplus)</i>	206.9
		Total	1,232.0

(Source: Comité de Candidature Olympique d'Istanbul 2000, 1993, Volume III, p.43)

Thanks to this massive project, transportation networks and housing areas would expand, and Istanbul would inherit numerous sports facilities. Meanwhile, the media promoted the view that the Olympics would solve Istanbul's infrastructural problems, even portraying the Games as the city's "salvation." Architects even argued that the infrastructure issues could not be solved in fifty years and that the proposed budget could not be raised without the Games (Cumhuriyet, 14 March 1993, p.15). Yet, the amount allocated for this infrastructural legacy was less than what was planned for operational costs. Considering the \$507.5 million earmarked for operations, it is possible to conclude that this spending would serve Istanbul's global prestige rather than the city itself. Moreover, the table indicates that at least one-quarter of the costs would be covered by public funds. It should also be noted that these figures represent the most optimistic estimates, that such costs typically escalate significantly, require public funding, and ultimately do not yield the economic benefits originally anticipated for the host city (Zimbalist, 2015; Zimbalist, 2020).

On 30 April 1992, the "Law on the Olympic Games to Be Held in the City of Istanbul" (Law No. 3796) was passed by Parliament and enacted (Resmî Gazete, 5 May 1992). The law

regulated the establishment, operational procedures, and principles of the Olympic preparation committees, mandating the formation of a joint committee comprising representatives from the Municipality, the Ministry, and TMOK. The law is significant because it expanded TMOK's operational scope in a country rooted in a state-dominated sports tradition, formally recognizing its authority and responsibilities. In a context where every sports-related decision is controlled by the state, determining TMOK's role in Olympic candidacy and preparations was only possible through such legislation. In this regard, it is necessary to concur with sports historian İbrahim Yıldırım, who highlights that while Turkey can be positively regarded as the first country to pass a law for the Olympics, the law also conveys the impression of a country unable to host the Games without a binding legal framework (Yıldırım, 2025).

Once the law was enacted, TMOK and the Olympic Preparation Committee accelerated their public relations efforts. For instance, on 3 March 1993, during a special Galatasaray-Sevilla match, the entire Sevilla team, including Maradona, wore jerseys emblazoned with "Istanbul 2000 Olympic Games" (Cumhuriyet, 4 March 1993). Similarly, on 21 April 1993, the entire city of Istanbul was adorned with "Istanbul 2000" banners in

preparation for an IOC inspection visit. The IOC delegation toured Istanbul and the project sites and attended the OCOG briefing. At the time, Time magazine published a special supplement with the support of Turkish sponsors. While the supplement highlighted Turkey's promotion from the Atatürk and Republican periods onward, it also included a page specifically about Istanbul's Olympic candidacy. Companies entering the global market from Turkey—including Sabancı, Koç, Impexbank, Interbank, Hema, Conrad, ENKA, Profilo, Tekfen, Set Groupe, and THY—contributed through advertising in this supplement (Cumhuriyet, 22 April 1993).

September 24, 1993: Istanbul Lost! Who was to blame?

The IOC's voting and decision meeting for Olympic candidacies was scheduled to take place in Monaco on 24 September 1993. In the run-up to the meeting, various assessments appeared in the Turkish press. One report listed Istanbul's advantages as demonstrating its seriousness by passing a law through parliament, its historical and cultural heritage, its religious diversity, and its unique position bridging continents. The Istanbul Municipality's role as a financial guarantor was also highlighted as a strength. Conversely, Istanbul's disadvantages were identified—terrorism, traffic congestion, inflation, environmental issues, and the lack of a strong sporting culture—all of which were quite accurate observations (Cumhuriyet, 28 May 1993, p. 8). In its 22 September issue, Cumhuriyet (1993, p. 8) discussed the final outlook before the Monaco meeting, suggesting that Beijing was the frontrunner, while Sydney's chances were lower due to time zone differences. The report emphasized Turkey's security disadvantages stemming from the Kurdish conflict. It also claimed that the Kurdistan United People's Party (YEKBUN) Committee had sent letters to the National Olympic Committees of 181 countries, urging them not to award the Games to Turkey. The letter allegedly argued that "Istanbul reflects Turkey's discriminatory, repressive, and bloody face," and described the city as "one of Turkey's leading centers of imprisonment, torture, and unresolved murders" (Cumhuriyet, 22 September 1993, p. 7).

Whether the reason was the protest letter, security concerns, the lack and dispersion of sports facilities, economic and political instability, or simply Sydney's far stronger candidacy remains uncertain. Yet on 24 September 1993, during the first round of voting in Monaco, Istanbul received only seven votes and lost its bid to host the Games. Newspapers reported that Prime Minister Tansu Çiller left Monaco in disappointment, with headlines reading, "No Votes from Muslim Countries" (Cumhuriyet, 24 September 1993, p.15). This was in stark contrast to earlier claims by figures such as Erdem, who had suggested that the IOC viewed the prospect of hosting the Games in a Muslim country for the first time with sympathy. The fact that not even Muslim countries voted in favor of Istanbul revealed that this supposed sympathy was, in reality, an illusion.

Following the defeat, bureaucrats and politicians were quick to offer explanations: Mayor Sözen described the IOC as "a club of the rich," while Minister Şükrü Erdem stated that "the decision was political." Meanwhile, former General Director of Sports Yücel Seçkiner blamed the Çiller government, claiming that preparations had made no progress after she took office (Cumhuriyet, 25 September 1993).

So, to what extent were the authorities of the time justified in seeking a scapegoat for this loss? Was there truly any political injustice or corruption influencing the bid decision? While the answer remains open to interpretation, later publications pointed out that the IOC itself had been involved in ethically questionable bidding processes (i.e., Mason, Thibault, & Misener, 2006; Jennings, 2011; Szymanski, 2016). Sydney was not entirely exempt from such controversies. An investigative report concerning Sydney's candidacy mentioned procedural violations—such as the offering of gifts, covering IOC members' travel expenses, and providing assistance to National Olympic Committees—though it refrained from directly asserting that IOC members received bribes (Mallon, 1999). In 1999, the IOC eventually cleared several senior Australian officials of criminal misconduct but recommended stricter rules and greater transparency (Deseret News, 1999, February 2). Yet, what remained most memorable was a later interview with Australian OCOG President Joan Coates, who bluntly remarked, "We bought the Olympics." In 2008, Coates admitted to offering two African National Olympic Committees (Kenya and Uganda), represented on the IOC panel, payments of \$35,000 each in exchange for their votes—claiming that such acts were permissible under IOC regulations at the time (The Guardian, 2022, May 1). Following the 2002 Salt Lake City bribery scandal involving ten IOC members, the organization established an Ethics Commission and undertook reforms to improve transparency in the bidding process (MacAloon, 2011).

Then, to what extent could such allegations have genuinely influenced the outcome for Turkey, which exited the first round of voting with only seven votes, while Sydney and Beijing competed until the fourth? Even if there were irregularities in the process, any corruption would have been decisive primarily among the finalists. Thus, attributing Istanbul's loss directly to political misconduct would be rather naïve. Rather than searching for such speculative explanations, it would be more appropriate to examine the weaknesses within the bid itself.

First of all, at that time, Istanbul lagged significantly behind its competitors in meeting fundamental requirements such as natural gas infrastructure, urban planning, and security. The country was also struggling with severe inflation, making it likely that the promised budgets in the bid dossier would be exceeded. Indeed, among all the candidate nations, Turkey had

the lowest annual GDP indicators⁴ Traffic congestion, frequently cited again in subsequent bids, posed a serious challenge for the smooth operation of the Games (International Olympic Committee, 2013). Moreover, considering the ongoing acts of terrorism associated with the Kurdish movement—a persistent issue on Turkey’s domestic agenda—security risks were substantial. Except for Beijing, none of the other candidate cities were facing such levels of security issues. Then, the country’s and the city’s fundamental weaknesses in finance, infrastructure, and security may have been the reasons the Games were not awarded to Turkey.

Likewise, the insufficiency of Istanbul’s sports facilities may have been among the critical reasons for losing the bid. By the time of the vote, none of the venues proposed in the project had yet begun construction. The Atatürk Olympic Stadium, whose construction started in 1999 following the failed bid, stands as evidence that the Committee took the lack of facilities seriously and began focusing more concretely on tangible legacies (Leopkey, Salisbury, & Tinaz, 2021). The stadium was eventually completed with a capacity of 80,000 and built close to the area once designated for the Olympic Village. However, the Olympic Village project itself was never realized, and in subsequent bids, proposed sites for Olympic projects were shifted to the northern parts of Istanbul.

Additionally, the fact that Turkey took six years to move from the idea stage to the formal application stage, and that the planned public relations phase lasted only 14 months, suggests that Istanbul was underprepared in almost every respect compared to Sydney. Indeed, Australia had already gained considerable experience by hosting the Games in Melbourne in 1956 and by submitting further bids for Melbourne and Brisbane in later years. Following Sydney’s official bid announcement in 1990, this accumulated experience was combined with strong local support, and construction of sports facilities began promptly with \$150 million in state funding (Sydney Organising Committee for the Olympic Games, 2001). Considering Turkey’s lack of prior experience, along with persistent governance problems among the state, municipality, and NOC, it would undoubtedly have been difficult for Istanbul to match such an organized campaign. Taken together, these factors suggest that Istanbul’s failure to secure the 2000 Olympic Games was less the result of political injustice and more a consequence of being a comparatively weak candidate.

Concluding Remarks

The study examined how Istanbul’s bid for the 2000 Olympic Games—the city’s first official bid after 30 years of attempts—was shaped, as reflected in the media. The bid emerged as a significant turning point, revealing the relationship between investments in sports in Turkey and the country’s political and

economic transformations. While the idea of hosting the Olympics had surfaced on various occasions during the early Republican period, it gained an institutional dimension with the neoliberal economic policies implemented in the 1980s and the restructuring initiatives of the 1990s.

According to the findings, the bid process reveals that sports in Turkey were positioned not merely as an athletic activity, but as a strategic tool for economic development and international legitimacy. The Games, which Özal described as “yielding solid financial returns,” were seen as part of the country’s neoliberal development plans, a solution to Istanbul’s infrastructure problems, and a global prestige “spectacle” that would attract tourists and foreign currency. Thus, the Istanbul 2000 bid demonstrates that the Olympics were not merely a sporting event, but a multi-layered process intertwined with neoliberal economic policies, populist politics that declared the Games a “national issue” to secure them at any cost, and international relations. Turkey’s participation in this process reflected both a desire for modernization and integration into the global system, particularly the European Union, and a need to produce domestic political legitimacy (Polo, 2015). Consequently, Istanbul’s 2000 bid was not simply a failed hosting attempt, but also a symbolic indicator of how Turkey began to redefine sport within the frameworks of neoliberal development and soft power diplomacy. Indeed, in subsequent bids, traces of this approach became even more pronounced, culminating in the second wave of neoliberal reforms under the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in the 2000s, where Olympic bids were positioned at the center of neoliberal populist discourse (Erturan-Ogut, 2014).

Another important finding of the study concerns the governance challenges encountered in executing such mega-projects at the time. In particular, statements by then TMOK President Sinan Erdem indicate that preparations could not progress in a coordinated manner. The federations’ cumbersome structures, lacking autonomy, and the centralized state tradition emerged as fundamental bureaucratic obstacles to this ambitious project. Therefore, Istanbul’s failure to secure the hosting of the 2000 Games cannot be explained solely by economic backwardness, inadequate physical infrastructure, or security concerns; it can also be understood as a consequence of structural deficiencies in institutional independence, democratization, and governance capacity.

In conclusion, the bid for the 2000 Games reflects a top-down decision conveyed through a populist approach and represents a manifestation of the Özal government’s neoliberal policies. The candidacy exposed the governance challenges within a sports ecosystem organized according to a statist tradition, revealing how ill-suited the system was for implementing such a neo-populist decision in practice. Nevertheless, the bid

⁴ GDP values in 1990 (billion \$): Turkey: 150.66, Australia: 311.43, China: 360.86, United Kingdom: 1,093, Germany: 1,778 (www.macrotrends.net).

arguably contributed both to the development of sports infrastructure—such as the construction of the Olympic Stadium—and to the sports governance system, for instance by enabling federation presidents to assume office through elections. Interpreting this first bid from a historical and political perspective can serve as a reference for understanding Turkey's subsequent persistent Olympic applications, and the findings of this study may contribute to the literature examining the causes, processes, outcomes, and impacts of Olympic bids.

The main limitation of this study is that the data used is largely confined to press archives and TMOK publications. Oral history research with the decision-makers and actors of the period, as well as documents obtained from official state archives, would allow for a more comprehensive analysis of the political and economic motivations behind the bid process. In addition, the research is limited to the 2000 Olympic bid. Analyses of Istanbul's subsequent Olympic bids could more systematically reveal continuities and ruptures in Turkey's approach to mega sports events. Future research could explore the intersections of neoliberal policies and populist rhetoric with mega-event bids, the long-term effects of such bids on Turkey's sports sector, and their relationship with urban planning and social transformation.

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