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- 1 For the first time in its fifteen years of brilliant yet unsuccessful candidacies to host the Olympic Games (OG) and the Football European Championships (Euro), Turkey was admitted into the elite group of countries capable of staging sports mega-events. Although it failed in the last round for the 2020 Olympic Games (beaten by Tokyo in 2013), and for the Euro 2016 (beaten by France in 2010), it has since been tipped as the strong favourite to host Euro 2024. International matches have been simultaneously utilized by the Turkish government as an opportunity to publicly demonstrate its willingness to resolve historically problematic issues with other countries, notably Armenia, Greece, and Syria. It will be argued that Turkey's ambitions to host sports mega-events and its politicization of specific matches (against Syria and Armenia) can be interpreted as a strategy of the state to diffuse a positive image at home and abroad, and consolidate its role in the region.
- 2 This issue aims to assess the applicability of Nye's (2004) concept of soft power to a description and explanation of Turkey's foreign policy and its regional impact in the last decade. It is tempting to participate in this debate by focusing on the political uses of sport. Nye's concept of soft power has been frequently employed in studies seeking to establish a correlation between the growth of international influence and the use of sports diplomacy, including hosting sports mega-events and achieving national recognition through sporting success. This approach raises the question of the links between sport and politics, a theme that is as recurrent in common reasoning as it is in the academic field.<sup>1</sup>
- 3 Before outlining the limitations of Nye's concept of soft power, the relationship between sport and politics will be firstly considered. Although the neutrality of sport is often claimed by the sporting world (Defrance 2000) through statements asserting its difference from politics, numerous potential implications of the impact of sport on

political issues remain (Polo 2005), and particularly from an International Relations perspective. According to Pierre Milza (1984), the international significance of sport encompasses three areas: Sport as a part of and reflecting the international stage; sport as a signifier of public feeling; and sport as a means of foreign policy. It is the latter dimension of sport as an instrument of foreign policy that requires elaboration in relation to Nye's concept. International competitions continue to constitute a quest for the recognition of national power (Elias and Dunning 1994: 307). Numerous examples across history have illustrated the ways in which states have striven to demonstrate their power through the achievement of international sporting success (Boniface 2002; Houlihan 1994). International sport is deeply impregnated with nationalism, which has often reached spectacular degrees. From Nazi propaganda in the 1936 OG (Brohm 1983) to the Beijing Games in 2008 (Collectif anti-Jeux olympiques 2008), the consequences of the political uses of sport has served at best to boost national pride, and at worst encouraged nationalism. However, international sport has not only been a means used by states to show off their power,<sup>2</sup> it can also simply be a way of achieving international recognition of its existence and increasing legitimacy. International sports authorities, such as the International Olympic Committee (IOC), the Football International Federation Association (FIFA), and the Union of European Football Association (UEFA), have the capacity to act as effective parallel channels for international diplomacy. Awarding the organization of an international sports mega-event to a country, such as the Football World Cup or the OG, signifies international recognition, the implications of which is amply demonstrated by the fierce competitiveness of candidate countries. Events have been utilized by authoritarian states as a means of legitimizing their political systems, or at least improving their international appeal, as can be argued in the cases of the Argentinian FIFA World Cup in 1978 and the Moscow Olympic Games in 1980. In other contexts, fulfilment of the bid criteria represents an implicit acknowledgement of the high standard of development attained by a country, such as the OG in Seoul, 1988, Barcelona, 1992, Athens, 2004, and Rio, 2016. Similarly, the political progress of South Africa's peaceful transition from apartheid was translated into recognition by FIFA through its award of the 2010 World Cup.

- 4 Studies of sport as a diplomatic tool frequently cite the concept of soft power (Gillon 2011; Freeman 2012; Champagne 2012; Huish, Carter and Darnell 2013). However, the majority of the time the assumed relevance of the term is employed without sufficient appraisal of its practical applicability. References to the definition of soft power developed by Nye usually offer case studies that claim sport to be an efficient medium of soft power in the international arena, but without elaboration through relevant supporting examples. Other authors have argued for a more strategic use of soft power, even urging its exercise in a more prescriptive way (Verschuuren 2013). Nye himself argues that as part of popular culture "sport can play a role in communicating values... National Basketball games are broadcast to 750 million households in 212 countries and 42 languages. Major League Baseball games flow to 224 countries in 11 languages. The National Football League's Super Bowl attracted an estimated 800 million viewers in 2003. The number of sport viewers rivals the 7.3 billion viewers worldwide who went to see America movies in 2002" (Nye 2004: 47). For Nye soft power is defined as "the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments. It arises from the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals, and policies" (Nye 2004:

x). However, use of the term soft power to denote the instrumentalization of sport in foreign policy evokes critical questions around two main issues:

- The first relates to the actors that constitute the soft power of sport (i.e. the states, sports federations, and athletes) and whether they share the same expectations. The preeminent actors, the way in which they interact with one another, and their international role in sport firstly requires determining.
- The second question concerns the relationship between national success and mega-events and any subsequent benefits that could be achieved in terms of foreign policy, for example, to what extent has the Super Bowl had a positive impact on the image of the United States? Furthermore, the way in which the desirability of a country might be affected requires consideration, that is, whether the concept of soft power offers a useful approach to analyse, for example, the successes of the Beijing OG, 2008 or Sochi OG, 2014.<sup>3</sup>

5 The concept of soft power should be approached with a great degree of caution. As Jean Leca has suggested it is an “uncertain concept” (Leca 2013) due to its polysemy and concrete uses, since soft power is often only considered as an attribute of powerful countries with the capacity to mobilize hard power. Undoubtedly, over that last decade Turkey has tried to manoeuvre its position to increase its regional influence, largely thanks to its economic growth and its relationship with the European Union (EU), despite the ongoing ambiguities of the membership process. In particular, the government of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) has endeavoured to develop the means and arguments for asserting its regional power, in all probability feeding a collective imaginary drawing on the nostalgia of the former power of the Ottoman Empire, albeit the pursuit of a neo-Ottoman strategy is refuted by Ahmet Davutoğlu. Notwithstanding the recent tumultuous developments, Turkey has played a significant part in the Middle Eastern political scene over the last few years. Yet, how is its relative influence to be evaluated? Can it be asserted with certainty that Turkey’s so-called positive regional image has enhanced its interstate relationships to the extent that it has enabled decisions to be made in its favour? And if so, what were the desired images that the Turkish authorities intended to promote and what role have they played?

6 In this paper, I will make a distinction between the use of sport, more accurately football matches, as a tool of diplomacy (in which the state remains the main actor of the process in the context of bilateral relationships) and the use of sports events which includes also the involvement of sports actors for more diffuse ends. Rather than referring to the concept of soft power, the notion of sports diplomacy will be utilised in the first part to analyse Turkey’s influence through the strategic use of sport:

Today sports diplomacy is associated with governments employing sports people to amplify a diplomatic message, or with states using sporting events to enhance their image among global publics, to cool tensions in flagging diplomatic relationships, or simply to test the ground for a possible policy change. Sports diplomacy transcends cultural differences and creates opportunities for alternate avenues for overcoming hostilities, official dialogue and people-to-people relations, uniting separate nations through a love of sports. More specifically, sports diplomacy involves representative and diplomatic activities undertaken by sports people on the behalf of, and in conjunction with, their governments (Murray 2013: 12).

7 Thus, sports diplomacy may be understood as a policy implemented by political authorities to rationally and strategically exploit football matches and its media coverage in order to achieve its diplomatic goals. In the second part of the paper, mega-event bids, and particularly the Istanbul OG bid, will be analysed as a more complex use

of sports diplomacy. Indeed, the political uses of sports exemplified through the bid process reveals the degree of collusion that occurs between political, sport, and economic elites for the promotion of state and individual interests. Specifically, through the comparative analysis of successive bid proposals to host the Istanbul Games, the AKP's strategy to promote Turkey's image will be critically appraised.

- 8 The study is based on interviews, newspaper analysis, and personal observations that I have carried out in Turkey throughout the last fifteen years. While reluctance to discuss their activities has problematized the sociological analysis of interview data gathered from diplomats – a comparatively less restrictive issue with sports authorities – the media has been crucial to the study, not only as a source of information, but primarily as a raw material itself. Of particular relevance to the methodological approach undertaken in this paper is the active involvement of the national media in the political strategy of sports diplomacy, which has aimed to increase the prestige and recognition of the Nation. Sporting events facilitate broad media and public consensus as a result of the support of pro-government newspapers and because of the difficulties the opposition media face in criticizing events, which create a sense of pride and often feed off a strong sense of nationalism.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, only in the wake of the Gezi events<sup>5</sup> in June 2013 did some rare media commentary emerge welcoming the failure of Istanbul 2020. In a sense, rather than focusing on sports diplomacy in policy-making per se, this paper critically examines the significance of its uses and implementation through the provision of specific case examples.

## **I. The strategic use of sport: Sport as a tool of diplomacy in interstate bilateral relations**

- 9 This section analyses the way in which sport as a diplomatic tool is conceptualised and used by political authorities. As Norbert Elias (1994) has asserted, sport has the capacity to euphemize the political competition and rivalry that exists between nations. However, the strategic positioning of sport to resolve political problems illustrates its more expansive role than the euphemization described by Elias. By emphasizing the symbolic signification of certain matches and appealing to the goodwill of the populace for reconciliation through sport, political authorities are able to display their capacity to overcome a political impasse. In this process, the state is the main actor and sport becomes the tool for unlocking difficult situations, or at least functions as the means of facilitating bilateral interstate relationships. The most famous example of sports diplomacy is the Ping-Pong diplomacy between China and the United States in 1971, which eventually led to the first official visit to the People's Republic of China by an American president (Xu 2008). This use of sports often occurs through matches between two national teams within the framework of bilateral interstate relations.
- 10 In the last decade, Turkish authorities have utilized the opportunity offered by sporting competitions between the teams of countries with historically difficult relations to display its benevolence towards reconciliation. However, the question is raised as to the intended ends of these strategies. There are multiple possible explanations: national security concerns over its borders, a means of demonstrating its compliance with EU membership requirements, or alternatively, an act made by a regional power demonstrating its commitment and generosity towards populations outside of its borders. Participation in international sports matches have provided opportune

occasions for the implementation of Turkey's "zero-problem with neighbours policy", developed by the then Foreign Minister Davutoğlu. The way in which the government appropriates these events will be outlined before the effectiveness of the strategic use of sports diplomacy is assessed.

## From Aleppo to Yerevan, the capacity to use sport as a diplomacy tool: Scoring goals

- 11 Turkey's strategic use of sport as a tool of diplomacy was observable in two recent football events: The friendly Aleppo match between Fenerbahçe of Turkey and Al-Ittihad of Syria in 2007; and secondly, the two football matches held between the Turkish and Armenian national football teams in 2008 and 2009 respectively. The matches represented an occasion for the demonstration of Turkey's goodwill towards establishing relations with its former enemies, a strategy that corresponded to its wider aim of strengthening its role in the region.

### Aleppo, April 2007

- 12 On the April 3, 2007, Prime Minister Erdoğan joined Syrian President Bashar-al-Assad in Aleppo to watch a friendly match between Turkey's Fenerbahçe and Syria's Al-Ittihad to mark the opening of the new stadium. According to *Today's Zaman* (April 2, 2007), Erdoğan convinced Fenerbahçe officials to hold the match after receiving a personal request from Assad. Occurring during a period of comparative stability in Turkish-Syrian relations, the match provided an advantageous occasion to publicly demonstrate the progress of reconciliation that had been achieved by the two countries. Up until the 1990s, relations had remained particularly tense, dominated by water disputes – Syria complained that Turkey's massive development program in the border region, which included dams, power plants and irrigation systems, diverted valuable water resources away from its agricultural lands – and Syria's support for Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), the separatist movement fighting for an autonomous Kurdish region in Turkey. Although escalating to the brink of war, the arrest of the PKK leader Öcalan in 1998 following his expulsion from Syria facilitated a diplomatic opening for a dramatic strategic realignment, including a period of cooperation between the country's new leaders Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Bashar al-Assad from 2002 to 2010. Under Turkey's new "zero problem policy with neighbours," Erdoğan's government sought to pursue investment opportunities in Syria and secure assurances from Damascus regarding the PKK. For his part, Assad required new allies in the context of renewed tension with the United States over Syria's role in Iraq and Lebanon. Meanwhile, Turkey was playing a mediatory role between Syria and the international community concerning Syrian-Israeli relations. Regular visits between both leaders were continued until the invitation was extended from Assad to Erdoğan for the stadium opening.
- 13 Despite difficulties in accessing direct information about the organization of the match, it nevertheless remains important to bear in mind that it was the direct product of a political decision in so far as the prospect of the two teams being drawn in a match against each other were impossible given that they belonged to different regional football federations; Turkey to UEFA and Syria to the Asian Football Confederation. According to the mainstream Turkish media, the match was a friendly watched by 75,000 supporters inside the stadium and 150,000 outside in celebration of the two

countries and its leaders with slogans and flags.<sup>6</sup> At a press conference held in anticipation of the Aleppo ally, Erdoğan emphasized the strength of historical and cultural ties that existed between the countries and reiterated the capacity of the match to foster relations and intensify contact between their populations. He went on to welcome “the unbelievable friendship wind blowing from a country with which Turkey had been on the verge of a war” (Cemiloğlu April 4, 2007). Erdoğan was accompanied by his wife and the Minister of Energy and the Minister for Women and Family Affairs. Ahead of the game signs of friendship were signalled as Assad pledged their mutual support of the opposing team. An official meeting was held at the presidential palace in Aleppo to correspond with the match and facilitate discussion about regional geopolitical issues – Iran and Lebanon, the Israel-Palestine conflict, and energy trade – and the promotion of bilateral ties. Future possibilities for cooperation on natural gas, water and energy trade were explored, including the planned construction of a joint dam project on Orontes [Asi] river: “A friendship dam.” (Çetin April 4, 2007) Therefore, it can be argued that the Aleppo match offers a useful example of the instrumentalization of sport by political authorities for the benefit of its leaders. The event and its media coverage were utilized as platforms for the public affirmation of the political will behind the desire to overcome past tensions and build new forms of co-operation. With regard to Turkey, the visit coincided with a favourable political climate towards a Syrian rapprochement. The match served to endorse Davutoğlu’s doctrine and strengthened Turkey’s regional image. Between 2008 and 2009, after Erdoğan made a stance against Israel, the Turkish Prime Minister continued to promote a positive image of Turkey in the Middle East, or at least until the events of the Arab spring played out. In the Aleppo case, the political exploitation of the match served to engender an image of peace. However, although these benefits were the cumulative product of diplomatic overtures, the match failed to have a significant impact on Turkish-Syrian relations. On the contrary, the example of the Turkish-Armenian football matches discussed below is a very different case.

### Turkey-Armenia football matches, 2008 and 2009

- 14 While points of comparison may be drawn with the Aleppo match, the example of Turkey and Armenia offers an alternative understanding of the uses of sports diplomacy. In particular, three notable points of departure can be discerned: Firstly, the occurrence of the Turkey-Armenia football matches were not of pre-determined by politics; secondly, they were held in the context of non-existent official diplomatic relationships; and thirdly, the Armenian issue constituted a critical political issue for Turkey at both domestic and international level.
- 15 An intervention of fate resulted in the drawing of Turkey and Armenia in the same group for the qualifying rounds of the 2010 FIFA World Cup (European zone), the matches scheduled to be played in Armenia, 2008, and Turkey, 2009. However, since Armenia’s establishment as an independent state following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the two states had no official diplomatic relationships. In addition, Turkey’s territorial border with Armenia had been unilaterally blocked since 1993, in reaction to international pressure for the recognition of the Armenian genocide, and in expression of Turkey’s solidarity with Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh issue, Armenia’s occupation of a fifth of Azerbaijan’s territory. Although in all likelihood the matches would have continued irrespective of the diplomatic situation, Turkish-



Armenian relations entered an unprecedented period of conciliation from 2008. According to Cheterian (2010: 39-40), four new elements contributed to the resumption of dialogue. Firstly, in August 2008, the Turkish AKP government launched its “regional stability and cooperation platform in the Caucasus” as an instrument of its new foreign policy orientated towards its eastern borders. Ankara wanted to be perceived as a peacemaker and subsequently sought opportunities to expand its influence in the East and South. The objectives of the policy were inconsistent with the continued blockade of Armenia and the refusal to establish diplomatic relations. Secondly, during his presidential campaign, Barack Obama pledged to recognize the Armenian genocide and the new American administration pressed Ankara to normalize its relations with Armenia. Thirdly, the desire to improve its problematized image in the wake of the Russo-Georgian war in August 2008, resulted in the favourable modification of Russia’s strategic position towards a Turkish-Armenian rapprochement. Finally, and by no means least, following the election of Serzh Sargsyan, as Armenian President in February 2008, it was announced that he wanted to initiate new relations with Turkey and establish an Armenian opening. Actually this latter point might have constituted the decisive factor in triggering the football diplomacy. Elected under the suspicion of committing fraud, Sargsyan had been resolutely criticised by western governments, the EU, and non-governmental organizations, such as Human Rights Watch, for the bloody repression that followed his controversial election. According to Galstyan (2010: 246), the Armenian President had to find an original means of legitimizing his presidency and credibility in the eyes of his international critics. Within this context, initiating a process of conciliation with Turkey and creating an Armenian opening with the West were crucial factors in the consolidation of his position (and besides which the Turkish issue had been a key campaign point of his presidential rival). During a Moscow state visit on June 23, 2008, Sargsyan surprised the international community with an invitation to his Turkish counterpart, Abdullah Gül, to attend the Turkey-Armenia World Cup qualifying match in Yerevan. The official invitation was delivered two weeks later via a Wall Street Journal article:

And just as the people of China and the United States shared enthusiasm for ping-pong before their governments fully normalized relations, the people of Armenia and Turkey are united in their love for football – which prompts me to extend the following invitation. On September 6, a World Cup qualifier match between the Armenian and Turkish national football teams will take place in Yerevan. I hereby invite President Gül to visit Armenia to enjoy the match together with me in the stadium. Thus, we will announce a new symbolic start in our relations. (Sargsyan July 9, 2008)

- 16 The question of attendance provoked fierce debate in Turkey throughout the summer among political actors, intellectuals, and “civil society” (Polo 2012a). The leaders of the main political opposition parties, the Republican People’s Party (CHP) and the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), argued that this so-called invitation should be declined. However, Erdoğan, pro-government newspapers, and liberal intellectuals broadly supported the gesture, with some even urging Gül to pay a visit to the Genocide Monument in the Armenian capital. At first, the Turkish president reserved his reply by specifying that he would study with benevolence this invitation. While he had not given his official answer, Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan indicated on September 1<sup>st</sup> that Gül would travel to Yerevan. Finally, on September 3<sup>rd</sup> Gül announced that he accepted the invitation of President Sargsyan to visit Yerevan and to attend to the match. In a statement, Prime Minister Erdoğan expressed his satisfaction at Gül’s



acceptance. In underlining the potentially negative consequences of refusal, Erdoğan lends creditability to the sports diplomacy dimension of the invitation:

President Gül's decision to accept or reject an invitation from Armenia will have a considerable impact on the improvement or deterioration of Turkey's image in the international arena. If he had declined to go to Yerevan, everyone would have criticized Turkey for refusing to improve its ties with Armenia. If Armenia had ulterior motives when inviting Gül to the soccer game, then Gül spoiled their plan by accepting the invitation [...]. If the first dimension of Gül's planned visit to Armenia is to improve ties with this country, the second dimension is the Caucasus platform. (Ünal September 6, 2008)

- 17 Thus, Gül, accompanied by the Minister of Foreign Affairs, became the first ever Turkish President to make an official visit in Armenia in 2008. The visit, comprising joint meetings in addition to the match, took care to avoid any potentially contentious political issues; the visit was to resolutely convey an image of mutual peace and cordial dialogue. For example, although taking place during the holy month of Ramadan, President Gül suspended his fast in honour of the pre-match meal offered by President Sargsyan. The two Presidents exchanged signs of mutual friendship and benevolence. The pretext of the game opened an unprecedented dialogue in daylight, making almost forget that the contacts had never been completely suspended. Following the match, the symbolic significance of Gül's visit was perpetuated by the media and politicians. The political import of the event totally eclipsed the football event, including the national win achieved by the Turkish team. Before his departure, Gül returned the invitation to President Sargsyan to attend the away match in Turkey in 2009.
- 18 Although the two cases presented above are indicative of the presence of sports diplomacy in a manner reminiscent of Ping-Pong diplomacy, they in fact exemplify two very different uses of sports diplomacy. In the case of the Aleppo match, the official process of reconciliation had already been initiated prior to the meeting; the event was therefore organized as a symbolic demonstration of this process as a tool of real power. Conversely, and comparable to the situation that had existed between the United States and China, Turkey had no diplomatic relationships with Armenia. The draw therefore presented an opportunity for the dramatic reversal of this situation, offering a pretext for the initiation of an official process of reconciliation. Here, sport operates as a performative diplomatic tool transcending its symbolic value. In a constructivist perspective (Wendt, 1995), it contributes – or at the very least marks an attempt – to redefine the mutual interests of state parties, facilitating new opportunities and constraints in their bilateral relations. In the following section, the impact of diplomacy on Turkey's regional position and influence will be examined.

### Football diplomacy challenged by realpolitik: Game over

- 19 Assessing the impact of diplomatic strategies is a complex endeavour because of the different parameters of impact (domestic and international), the difficulties of measuring the extent of impact, and the variable temporalities of impact in terms of its short and long-term outcomes. In addition, judging sports diplomacy to be a failure would be misguided since instruments of traditional diplomacy may prove to be equally unsuccessful. A final point for consideration is the evolving nature of the political environment, which has the capacity to radically alter the balance of international relations in favourable or negative ways, particularly given recent events in the region.

- 20 The prospect of Turkey taking advantage of its growing economic and political growth to assert its position as a regional power remains not only contingent on the conduct of its foreign policy, but on potential and emerging regional and international dynamics on which it does not have any grip. Turkey's remarkable reconciliation with Syria offers a case in point. While the freeze in bilateral relations experienced a period of thaw, including the initiation of cooperative projects and the belief that Turkey could play an intermediary role in the Israeli-Syrian conflict, the Arab revolts presented a profound challenge to Davutoğlu's strategy. The Aleppo match represented a celebration of reconciliation as a mutually self-serving process largely conducted in pursuit of the interests of its leaders. However, decline into civil war following the Syrian revolt in 2011 and Turkey's ensuing support of the opposition, considerably altered relations. Yet, it would be misguided to assume that this unfolding of events represented a failure of sports diplomacy. Rather, the Aleppo match offers an understanding of sports diplomacy reduced to its simplistic expression of an extension of friendship.
- 21 Conversely, it could be argued that the matches between Turkey and Armenia had a real diplomatic impact, at least in the short-term. The European Union and the United States publicly supported Gül's visit to Armenia (*Today's Zaman* September 5, 2008). Olli Rehn, the European Commissioner for Enlargement, warmly welcomed the visit, humorously adding that if Turkey played in Yerevan as it had in Euro 2008, "it would cause a new diplomatic incident." (*Hürriyet Daily News* September 6, 2008; Rehn October 13, 2008). International acknowledgement of the visit was marked in other ways. The Monaco based Peace and Sport organization distinguished Turkey and Armenia with the "Peace and Sport Image of the Year Award" on December 4, 2008, for the photograph of the historic handshake between Gül and Sargsyan taken at the Yerevan match as embodiment of the image of fraternization through sport. The award was jointly presented to the Armenian Minister of Youth and Sport and the President of the Turkish Football Federation.<sup>7</sup> In the following year, the FIFA Fair Play Award, 2008, was presented to the respective Football Associations of Armenia and Turkey in recognition of their part in facilitating dialogue between two countries with otherwise absent diplomatic relations (*Fifa* [2008]).
- 22 Notwithstanding the historic accomplishments of Yerevan, the most momentous outcomes were achieved in the political events that followed, without which the visit would have remained a simple meeting of state representatives and limited to a basic level of diplomatic exchange. What assumes significance here, therefore, is that the pretext of the match and the Gül's trip to Yerevan allowed the Armenian President apply diplomatic pressure to ensure on Turkey by conditioning his presence at the return match to the signing of two diplomatic protocols. The protocols envisaged the establishment of diplomatic relations and the founding of an intergovernmental commission to address the political issues that existed between the two countries, including the institution of a sub-commission on history. Of course, the negotiation process sparked a harsh backlash from the Armenian diaspora, the Armenian opposition, Azerbaijan, and nationalist circles in Turkey. The content of the protocols was passionately debated in both countries and negotiators had difficulty in reaching an acceptable compromise that would be agreeable to both parties. President Sargsyan, irritated by the slowness of the discussions, declared at the end of July 2009, "I will only accept this invitation if previously made agreements are fulfilled, if there are real steps.

I will visit Turkey if we have reopened the borders and if we are on the verge of an end to the blockade" (*Hürriyet Daily News* July 29, 2009). As for the visit of the Turkish President to Armenia the previous year, the presence of Armenian President for the return match on 14 October 2009 became an issue for the two actors but in a different context: in 2009, the symbol of the match (and the visit of Sargsyan) must be preceded by diplomatic agreements. Indeed, it could be argued that the symbol creates a diplomatic constraint. However, the contested content of the protocols created political fracture lines and tensions continued to remain high in both countries and in Azerbaijan. The protocol was finally signed in Zurich on October 10, 2009. The terms stipulated the opening of the borders post-ratification and engagement in Zurich the protocol which stipulates the next opening of the borders (once the protocol ratified by both parties) and the implementation of "a dialogue on the historical dimension with the aim to restore mutual confidence between the two nations, including an impartial scientific examination of the historical records and archives to define existing problems and formulate recommendations" (*Protocol* [October 10, 2009]). Sargsyan attended the return match between Turkey and Armenia on October 14, 2009, alongside President Gül, who declared that "Turkey and Armenia are not writing history but making history" (*Kanlı* October 14, 2009). Therefore, in a context of non-existent official diplomatic relations and where a meeting of heads of state was highly improbable, the matches created a valuable opportunity for staging a commitment to reconciliation at the highest level.

- 23 Seeking a definitive answer to the question of which signatory gained the most out of the protocols is difficult to ascertain. Both states moved to secure their own interests: On the one hand, Armenia, having initiated the process, obtained the promise of the opening of the border; while on the other hand, Turkey capitalized on the process by publicly demonstrating, especially to the EU, its readiness to engage in a process of dialogue and reconciliation. As France was holding the rotating presidency, French President Sarkozy welcomed the protocols on behalf of the EU as "courageous and historic", later praising Turkish efforts to reach a peace deal between Israel and Syria at the Damascus summit. However, such benevolent rhetoric did little to indicate a fundamental change to Sarkozy's oppositional position vis-à-vis Turkey's EU candidacy. In addition, the prospective long-term success of the reconciliation process remains uncertain due to the failure to ratify the protocols and implement its terms, including the opening of the borders. In this regard, Azerbaijan has played a critical role as the real referee of the match, its relations with Turkey pivotal to the progress of normalizing relations with Armenia. As a result of its cultural ties and the issue of energy, Turkey has been ill able to afford alienating its key strategic partner in the Caucasus. Irritated by the rapprochement between Turkey and Armenia, Azeri President Aliyev put pressure on his Turkish allies to mobilize Ankara into securing a resolution on the Armenian occupation of Nagorno-Karabakh as the sine qua non condition of the ratification of the Turkish-Armenian protocols.<sup>8</sup>
- 24 However, at the domestic level it can be argued that the real outcome of the match has been the lifting of the Armenian taboo in Turkey (Polo 2013). Debates concerning relations with Armenia have intersected with other events, such as the murder of the Turkish-Armenian journalist Hrant Dink in 2007, which unleashed a powerful emotional reaction, and discussions addressing historical issues, such as the deportations and massacres of the Armenian populations in 1915, that have been increasingly engaged with across a variety of academic, media, publishing, and civil

society platforms. Of course, this shift has not necessarily been translated into an official recognition of the 1915 genocide, but it rather signals that the taboo of its dark history has been lifted (Insel and Marian 2009). In 2014, for the first time in state history, a Turkish Prime Minister offered his condolences for the 1915 Armenian massacre.

- 25 Thus, sports diplomacy may appear to offer a means of endowing bilateral interstate relationships with a more spectacular, publicised, and attractive dimension. At times, this may also go further, as illustrated by the signing of the diplomatic protocols between Turkey and Armenia. However, the real scope of these diplomatic strategies is dependent on both the political context and *realpolitik*. In 2007, which unleashed a powerful emotional reaction, and discussions addressing historical issues, such as the deportations and massacres of the Armenian populations in 1915, that have been increasingly engaged with across a variety of academic, media, publishing, and civil society platforms. If sport mega-events have the potential to fulfil a comparable role in diffusing beneficial images, this is not totally the same process as they are not bilateral interstate relations.

## II. Hosting sports mega-events as a means of promoting a positive image abroad

- 26 In the last twenty years Turkey has dramatically increased both the number of sports international events it has organised and the number of bids it has made to host sports mega-events, such as the OG and the Football Euro. The impetus behind this process has been initiated and predominantly driven by Turkish sports federations. Although due to the large budgets, logistical support, and urban planning developments required to host a mega-event, very little can be achieved without strong local and national political backing. In this regard, there is a continual degree of overlap between the political and sporting spheres of activity. Although the sports field has its own agendas and interests, which may fit (or not) with political ones, hosting a mega-event requires the collusive collaboration of both sporting elites and political actors. What is of interest in the bid process is the necessity of creating an imaginary around the candidate city (or country) in order to persuade decision-makers. This refers both to the bid content and the technical specificities of each application, and also to the symbolic images candidates wish to construct and communicate to an international audience. Through a consideration of Turkey's bids to host the Istanbul OG, it will be argued that the process may be analysed as a branding strategy implemented through a communication policy. At least between the 1990s and 2005, when the values of secular republican political elites collided with those of sporting elites, the strategies aimed in part to claim belonging to Europe. In an appraisal of the images promoted during the candidacy for the 2020 OG, prepared under the auspices of the AKP government, the comparative continuities and discontinuities of the bid process will be considered. The paper will ask whether the 2020 bid was the product of foreign policy changes, and whether its use of other images marked an attempt to redefine its values. However, obtaining the OG or FIFA World Cup is dependent on the capacity of an applicant city to attract and seduce decision-makers, i.e. to secure the votes of the International Olympic Committee. In a sense, therefore, the bid process already constitutes a tangible

means of measuring the perceived attractiveness of a country or, in other words, the so-called “soft power” of a country.

### International sports events in Turkey: A passport to Europe?

- 27 From the 1990s, hosting international sporting events has been a means of the Turkish state, founded on the principles of “modernity, secularism, and nationalism,” to demonstrate its modernity and organizational capabilities, and thus to legitimize its EU candidacy. Prior to the 1980s, Turkey had only hosted wrestling competitions (in 1974 and 1977 respectively); and perhaps unsurprisingly, its first successful bids were in disciplines that are part of Turkish traditional sports practices and in which Turkish athletes have a proven track record of success in (wrestling, weightlifting).<sup>9</sup> However, from the 1990s, as bids became progressively more frequent, the increasing diversity of sports bids can be observed: not only sports which have a tangible international and media impact, and in which Turkey has begun to have some success in (football, basketball), but also in other disciplines (swimming, motor racing, archery, etc.). To date the most prestigious applications submitted by the Turkish state has been its bids to host the Summer Olympic Games.
- 28 From 1992, Istanbul has repeatedly bid to host the Olympic Games, though without success; Turkey was perhaps unlucky not to have been awarded the co-organisation with Greece for the UEFA Euro 2008 and Euro 2016 Football Championships. Not all bids have been unsuccessful: In 2000, Istanbul hosted the thirty-fifth European Karate Championships (EKF); in 2001, Turkey hosted the International Basketball Federation’s (FIBA) European Basketball Championships; in 2005, Istanbul hosted the final of the UEFA Champions League and the first Turkish Formula One Grand Prix; in 2010, it held the FIBA World Basketball Championships and the Judo world championships; in 2011, The International University Sports Federation (FISU) held the Winter Universiade (World Student Games) in Erzurum; between 2011 and 2013 Istanbul host the Women’s Tennis Association Tennis (WTA) Tour Championships; in 2012, the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF) World Indoor Championships in Athletics was held in Istanbul followed by the Swimming World Championships (FINA); in 2013, the Mediterranean Games were held in Mersin; and in 2014, Turkey hosted the Women’s Basketball World Championships. In addition, the European Capitals of Sport Association (ACES) selected Istanbul as the European Capital of Sport in 2012.
- 29 Bids to host sports mega-events were initiated in the 1990s in the context of economic growth and neo-liberalism alongside the emergence of powerful business groups with the financial capacity to back these bids. In a sense these bids reflected the new economic potential and power of Turkey in the 1990s. Turkey’s numerous bids to organize international sports events may be regarded as a means of demonstrating the nation’s modernity and its organizational capabilities, and thus the legitimacy of its application for EU membership. This strategy was particularly apparent in the period prior to the AKP’s assumption of power. Candidate for EU membership since 1987, Turkey continues to claim its anchorage to the West, thereby pursuing the work of its founder, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. However, this western polarization is questioned both inside and outside its borders. Although Turkey applied to the EU before the new Eastern European members did, negotiations for its membership were formally opened

only in October 2005, and are set to continue for a while, given the strong reluctance of some member states (including France and Germany) to admit Turkey to the EU.

- 30 International sports authorities, such as FIFA, UEFA and the IOC, define the application criteria for candidate countries, including the quality of sports infrastructure, security, communications and media, financial guarantees, transport system, environmental quality, and accommodation, etc. In addition to the more technical specifications, which have a symbolic value insofar as they are an indicator of a country's level of development, applicant countries are required to specify the particularities of their candidacy assets. For bidding cities, this presents an opportunity to build a vision of a strong national identity in the image of the Olympic ideals. In this regard, the focus placed on multicultural diversity was remarkable given the controversy surrounding Turkey's human and minority rights issues as grounds for contesting its EU candidacy. The values of tolerance and generosity have played a role in the imaginative construction of the country's image by the Istanbul Olympic Bid Committee (IOBC), the body with overall responsibility for the city's candidacy. All Istanbul application files have emphasised the city's unique geographical location. From its first Olympic bid to host the 2000 Olympic Games in 1994, Istanbul's logo depicted two interlinked rings with the slogan "The Meeting of the Continents" (although the logo was later changed for the 2020 OG bid). The two rings invoked the stylised image of the Olympic rings to represent the continents of Europe and Asia linked by the two Bosphorus bridges. Istanbul was thus presented as a metaphorical "bridge between the cultures and civilizations of Asia and Europe. [...] It is a city of culture where religions and languages have merged over thousands of years of co-existence". The bid book claimed that Istanbul "is home to 26 ethnic groups and its people speak ten different languages. The very existence of "'Olympist Istanbul' is a challenge to prejudice and sectarian divide."

<sup>10</sup> It is of interest to note that these statements made at the end of the 1990s, sharply diverged from the official state line towards multiculturalism, national belonging being firmly situated in a homogenous conception of identity that failed to recognize ethnic minorities. By insisting on diversity and pluralism, the authors of the Istanbul Olympic bid were striving to portray an image of a peaceful and tolerant country.

- 31 Beyond its domestic audience, bids to host sports events also present an opportunity to extend the image of peace to its regional neighbours. This was the goal of Turkey and Greece's unsuccessful joint bid in 2000 to host the Euro 2008. In the context of the complex and conflictual (if improving) relationship between Turkey and Greece, the Turkey initiated bid was represented as the inauguration of a new era of peaceful cooperation and "greater mutual understanding"<sup>11</sup> between the two countries. Following the example set by the 2002 FIFA World Cup Finals between Japan and Korea, Şenes Erzik, then FIFA executive committee member, Korea-Japan World Cup Finals Organization Committee member, and the Vice-President of UEFA, considered that the event "would help to build a better relationship between Turks and Greeks."<sup>12</sup> The Turkish Football Federation's proposal to Greece in February 2000, was enthusiastically accepted by the Greek Football Federation and supported by the foreign ministers of both states. In under eighteen months, a joint bid committee was instituted to prepare the official bid for submission to UEFA in November 2001. The change of parliamentary majority following the first AKP victory in the general election, of November 2002, did little to change the political momentum behind the project. On the contrary, just days after the AKP's historic victory, Erdoğan delivered a speech to UEFA members to coincide with the selection day for the Euro 2008 host nation. However, it is interesting



here to distinguish the political support to host Euro 2008 from the bilateral diplomatic use of sport described above. Euro 2008 was initiated exclusively by sports elites and the Turkish Football Federation who reasoned that they stood a better chance of securing the Euro through a joint bid with Greece. Reconciliation with Greece was not viewed as a politically invested endeavour, but was rather a means of lending a symbolic dimension to the bid. Of course, politicians lent their support, however they did so while remaining largely in the background. Despite some persisting diplomatic disputes with Greece over the status of Cyprus and Aegean rivalry, the continuity of relations between Turkey and Greece has never been seriously interrupted. Indeed, Greece even supported Turkey's EU membership. Turkish sports bids thus strive to promote the image of Turkey as a European country on the verge of becoming an EU member: "At present, Istanbul is the largest city in a country that is preparing for membership of the EU" (Bid document for the 2008 Olympic Games).

- 32 Finally, hosting an international sports event, or the victories of Turkish teams in international events, are presented and celebrated as true national successes, and a step closer to Europe: "Now, we are Europeans!" claimed Turkey's former President, Suleyman Demirel when Galatasaray won the UEFA Cup in 2000 (Sonntag June 9, 2000). Indeed, these victories are all the more so celebrated precisely because of their achievement on the sports field. According to Ehrenberg (1991), the sports field is a condensation of the democratic society ideal in which competition is equal and the winner is the best. In other words, sport establishes a hierarchy based on merit rather than on human ranking or categorisation. The focus of Turkey's policy is based on the understanding that through sporting successes the nation can achieve the European recognition it so desires, even while the European political system continues to refuse it.
- 33 If sport is considered only as a means of diplomatic action, or as an instrument serving political strategies or ideologies, then a full comprehension of the complex relationship that exists between sport and politics in Turkey would be neglected. Of course, political actors have to refer to sport: Sport is a valuable political resource. Sport can glorify youth, – one of the most popular themes of the young Turkish Republic – and facilitate patriotism in a country where May 19, is a national day for "sport and youth," with ceremonies organized in stadiums full of children, featuring poems and speeches made in honour of the glory of young people, the Republic and Atatürk (Yurdsever 2003). The political authorities in Turkey have always supported bids and tried to profit from victories, whether they are derived from sporting victories achieved on the field or from the victories won through hosting sports events. However, sport is not utilized by Turkey in the same way and to the same extent as it was in the former Soviet Union or in China for example. Even if the relationship between sport and politics is a particularly entangled one in Turkey, it cannot be merely reduced to a politically exploitative one.
- 34 Sporting elites are closely interrelated with the political elite, sharing the same republican values, at least prior to the AKP's assumption of power, and possessing the implicit knowledge that they can draw support from them. This phenomenon blurs the lines between sport and politics in Turkey. Sporting elites acknowledge that they want their teams to win competitions, but that they also want to see Turkey become a member of the EU. Demirel's exclamation following Galatasaray's UEFA Cup Final victory is not an isolated example, but an assumption commonly shared by sporting and



political elites: “now, I hope you understand that we are Europeans!” claimed Sinan Erdem the president of Turkish National Olympic Committee (TNOC) following a traditional Turkish dinner (with fish and rakı) to IOC members during an official visit to Istanbul in 2000.

- 35 However, even if sporting elites believe that their sports project will prove advantageous to Turkey’s application for EU membership, they are more often than not convinced to the contrary that the opposite is likely: Barcelona and Athens hosted the Olympic Games only after their acceptance into the EU (six years later for Spain, and 22 years later for Greece). However, focusing on the country’s political image is a strategic way of realising other specific goals, such as the agenda of supporting sports development in Turkey. Istanbul’s bidding efforts are also a means of building national sporting infrastructure, as defined by the IOBC, the General Directorate of Youth and Sports, and the Greater Istanbul Municipality, as well as by private bodies. Through urban policy-making, Turkey has been able to attain European standards in terms of its infrastructural development, and to subsequently justify expenditure in this area. Sporting elites also aspire to promote sport among young people, not only from a health perspective, but with the aim of producing a future generation of champions. Sporting elites consider themselves to be the vanguard of sport, using sport to build the image of a modern Turkey in order to procure vital support and financial investment from political elites for the proposal of serious bids to host international sports competitions. Furthermore, the sports sector draws important benefits from the support of political elites. An astonishing example of the extensity of goodwill towards sport is manifest in the Turkish Olympic Law. Istanbul’s Olympic bid is endorsed by a special law, near-unanimously passed by the national parliament in April 1992, making Turkey the first (and so far only) country to have enacted a legal instrument in its support. The Turkish Olympic Law (No. 3796) established the Istanbul Olympic Games Preparation and Organisation Council (IOBC,) and authorised it to “take all necessary action in the pursuit and organisation of the Games”; and “recognises and respects the supremacy of the IOC in all Olympic matters”. The law requires all public institutions and agencies, including local government bodies, to give “priority to the requests of the IOBC in relation to the pursuit and organisation of the Games”. The Olympic Law guarantees a continuous flow of funds for the pursuit and organisation of the Games. It is also of interest to note here that this law was devised and prepared thanks to the strength of relationship between Sinan Erdem, president of the TNOC, and Erdoğan Teziç, the famous lawyer, Chancellor of Galatasaray University, and latter day president of the Council of Higher Education [*Yükseköğretim Kurulu, YÖK*]. Both were graduates of the renowned Galatasaray High School [*Galatasaray Lisesi*] and the Faculty of Law, Istanbul University. Sinan Erdem, who went on to become a professional volleyball player and captain of the national team, coached Erdoğan Teziç during his time at Galatasaray. Both individuals belong to the Kemalist elite and share the political project of the westernization of Turkey. Beyond the pursuit of their own interests, political and sport elites shared the same vision throughout this period: To be recognised as Europeans and to strengthen the European identity of Turkey. It could be asserted that the bid process constitutes a political claim for recognition and Turkey’s acceptance as an equal by their Europeans counterparts.

## Istanbul 2020 Olympic Games: A sports mega-event to celebrate the “new Turkey”?

- 36 The Istanbul 2020 Olympic Games bid will be addressed through the analyses of the bid book, published in January 2013, and the personal observations that were carried out during the IOC delegation’s assessment visit to Istanbul in March 2013. It will be demonstrated that although the 2020 Istanbul bid retained the use of the majority of images and symbols and was very much in line with previous bids, subtle changes can be observed. These points of divergence require contextualizing within a broader perspective of the images that the government intended to promote over its decade in power, claiming the rise of the new power of Turkey.
- 37 Following its failed candidacy attempts to host the 2012 OG (awarded to London), the TNOC took the pragmatic decision to postpone its next bid until the 2020 OG, based on the rule of rotating continents every Olympiad and its assessed need to prepare a flawless application.<sup>13</sup> The Istanbul 2020 OG bid, the fifth consecutive bid to be made after the 2000 OG, was indeed the best presentation given to date due to the strength of its candidacy assets. As a result of the Olympic Law, Istanbul has been equipped with modern sports venues in accordance with IOC requirements. Since the last candidacy for the 2012 OG presented in 2005, the TNOC underwent a series of significant changes. The former TNOC President (1989-2003) and spiritual father of the Istanbul OG candidacies, Sinan Erdem,<sup>14</sup> passed away in 2003. Erdem was the man responsible for initiating this (his) dream of the Istanbul OG.<sup>15</sup> His same generation successor left his post in 2011 to be replaced by the President of the World Archery Federation, Uğur Erdener. During this period, Turkey enjoyed a sustained period of economic growth and relative political stability with the AKP continuing to retain its position of power following its successive electoral successes from 2002.
- 38 In November 2009, the head of the International Sports Organisation of the Turkish Republic and senior consultant to Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, announced that Istanbul would bid for the 2020 OG. It was officially confirmed by Erdoğan himself in July 2011, during a speech presented before a cheering crowd of more than 20,000 to mark the opening of the European Youth Olympic Festival. An initial appraisal of Erdoğan’s declarations and the Istanbul bid book results in the observation of comparable themes to earlier bids, however, closer attention reveals an alternative tone. For instance, in a jointly signed letter by the Prime Minister, the President of the Republic, and the Minister of Youth and Sports, addressed to the IOC President in the introduction of the Istanbul bid book, reiterates that Turkey is “a democratic and modern nation with its ongoing European Union Candidature negotiations.”<sup>16</sup> The location of the city is restated as the point where the “East literally meets West [in our city], where Europe and Asia are metropolitan suburbs, separated only by the spectacular waters of the Bosphorus.” According to a journalist specializing in sports events, the Istanbul bid book does the best to embrace
- ... the jargonistic and portentous lingua franca of the Olympic Movement. [...] Within a few pages of the first volume, it has seamlessly interwoven an array of phrases and ideas that sum up why taking its flagship product to Istanbul is such a tempting idea for the Olympic Movement. “*The first-ever Games host in the Muslim world;*” Turkey’s Olympic law “*in place now for 20 years;*” the potential for sponsors in “*leveraging a spectacular city;*” “*Europe’s youngest population.*” All are phrases just crying out to be highlighted in fluorescent marker pen. And then there is the

obvious point about the city being where Europe meets Asia (Owen January 13, 2013).

- 39 Yet, what these ironic remarks fail to comprehend is the emphasis placed on the new power of Turkey. The Istanbul 2020 bid book claims that “This bid holds a unique place within the vision of the new Turkey and the region’s development.”<sup>17</sup> This “new Turkey” referred firstly to its economic growth:

Turkey has made great strides in all fields in recent years. Significant reform and stability have strengthened our large and expanding economy. Our record of economic growth continues in spite of the ongoing impacts of the global crises for our region.<sup>18</sup>

- 40 Furthermore, the bid book develops an argument which aims to prove the financial viability of the delivery of the Games:

Driven by a stable democracy and economic growth averaging 5.2% annually between 2002 and 2011 (more than three and a half times Europe’s average for the period), the visionary 2023 Master Plan for Turkey has been delivering transformational development in Istanbul’s physical and social landscape for the last five years. Already billions of dollars have been invested in programmes to deliver Istanbul’s new transport network for the twenty-first century, with further major investment programmed to 2020. These and other development programmes will drive, and in turn be accelerated by, the Games. The city has become a multinational financial and enterprise hub. With its stock market growing by 26% in 2012 and foreign direct investment in the city jumping 110% in 2011, Istanbul is the financial capital of a Turkish economy forecast to be in the world’s top 10 by 2023 (ranked by GDP).<sup>19</sup>

- 41 The use of economic statistics not only evidences Turkey’s low-risk delivery strategy, but also enables Turkey to play a broader role in the region:

The momentum of Istanbul’s development fuelled by Turkey’s prosperity and youthful populace, offers the Olympic and Paralympic Movements a number of long-term strategic, commercial and operational benefits. The Olympic objective of universality will be reinforced by embracing the Muslim culture, adding distinctive value to the Olympic and Paralympic brands, as a new chapter in Games history is opened. Benefits will also arise from Istanbul’s status as a multinational hub of business, sport and culture for markets in Eastern Europe, the Middle East and Africa, enabling penetration into new and sustainable markets.<sup>20</sup>

- 42 Finally, the decision to change Istanbul’s logo, was unveiled by the Prime Minister in July 2012, may also be invoked as indicative of the shifting uses of images. In comparison to the former logo, which underlined the geographical position of Istanbul, the new logo, allegedly chosen by popular vote from a selection of five alternatives, combines a tulip with the world-famous skyline of Istanbul to encompass its monuments and mosques.



- 43 Hasan Arat, leader of Istanbul 2020, stated his belief that the new logo metaphorically symbolizes what Istanbul is capable of offering the Olympic Movement:

A vibrant and young nation, a bridge between Europe and Asia, a modern and spectacular setting steeped in history – these are the ideas we wanted the Istanbul 2020 Candidate City logo to represent and our people have not let us down with their vote. Our new logo has been chosen by Turkey’s young population to act as a symbol of inspiration for our Olympic dream. (*Gamesbids* July 22, 2012)

- 44 It is significant to recognise the performative role of the motif of the tulip as an evocative reference to a symbol of the Ottoman period, and the annual International Tulip Festival organized by the Metropolitan Municipality of Istanbul.
- 45 Thus, the Istanbul 2020 Olympic Games has been represented by the political authorities as a constitutive element of the momentum towards Turkey’s destiny, its grandeur, and its renaissance as they “prepare to celebrate the centenary of the Republic in 2023.”<sup>21</sup> During the IOC evaluation visit in March 2013, the Istanbul Olympic Bid Committee invested a comparable level of confidence in its Istanbul bid thanks to its new role in the region. From discussions with international journalists who followed the IOC’s delegation visits to the three candidate cities, it became clear that some of them found the Turkish presentation to be too austere and even a little bit arrogant. An impression was imparted that the Turkish authorities were publicising a message that suggested any decision other than a favourable result for Turkey would not only be an incomprehensible injustice, but might even be received as a humiliation for the wider Muslim world.
- 46 It is important to bear in mind that Turkey invested substantial resources in its bid to convince IOC members of its intended new regional and international role. Sporting elites and political authorities have actively promoted Turkey broadly, and the Istanbul 2020 OG specifically through the numerous international trips that were undertaken between 2012 and 2013 (New York, Saint Petersburg, Dakar, Abidjan, Doha, Paris, Barcelona, etc.). Turkey’s ability to develop an ambitious foreign policy and to extend the reach of its influence, particularly in the Balkans, the Middle East, and Africa, is largely a result of its economic prosperity. In Africa, for example, Turkey has opened more than twenty new embassies since 2009, and Turkish Airlines currently operates services to 28 African countries. Turkey has become a solid investor in the continent as well as a generous donor for humanitarian crises. In 2013, Erdoğan visited several African countries, such as Niger, Gabon, Senegal (in January), Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco

(in June), accompanied by businesspeople and journalists. Although primarily motivated by political and economic concerns, the trips have also served to promote Turkey abroad. However, when a Turkish delegation travelled to the Ivory Coast to attend the General Assembly of the Association of National Olympic Committees of Africa (ANOCA) in July 2013, the aims of the visit were far more transparent. The Turkish delegation was led by the Istanbul Bid Committee Chairman and the President and Secretary General of the TNOC. The delegates were accompanied by the former Ambassador of the Turkish Republic for Cameroon (also advisor to the Istanbul 2020 Bid Committee) and the Ambassador of the Turkish Republic for the Ivory Coast. Speaking before travelling to Abidjan, the Istanbul Bid Committee Chairman asserted with the intonation of a third world leader that:

Istanbul is in a region that has never hosted the Games, just like Africa. We understand the challenges of African sport – and we understand the huge ambition of other nations that have not hosted the Games. In the city where the continents meet, Istanbul 2020 will meet that ambition and help connect Africa with the full power of the Olympic Movement... Istanbul 2020 is committed to providing the most comprehensive support package for National Olympic Committees and their teams. For the first time in Olympic history, every athlete from every nation will have access to a free-to-use Olympic Training Precinct and Recovery Centre on the same site as the Olympic Village. So in Istanbul, the sportsmen and women of Africa will have a better chance of realising their full potential than ever before – perhaps the best chance they will have until the Games come to the continent. (*Sportcal* July 10, 2013)

- 47 This statement well illustrates the strategic use of Turkey's new foreign policy in the service of Istanbul 2020.
- 48 While it is commonly assumed that the Olympics are an instrument of "soft power" (which has yet to be demonstrated), the question remains whether the impact of this new Turkish foreign policy can be measured through its ability to promote and bring the Games to Istanbul? The rapid analysis and interpretation of the awarding process for the 2020 Olympics may provide guidance as to the scope of this new foreign policy. In other words, before we can regard the Olympics as an instrument of soft power, the question firstly needs to be asked whether the award of the OG in itself is a tangible indicator of this so-called soft power.
- 49 Evaluation of Istanbul's 2020 candidacy, which had many points in its favour, was well documented in the IOC delegation report, released in April 2013. Firstly, the IOC, ever eager to embrace the "new world" in the image of Beijing 2008 and Rio 2016, cast a watchful eye over the candidacy of an applicant Muslim country, aware that very few major sporting events had been held in the region.<sup>22</sup> The IOC delegation stressed the quality of the application, an impression shared by other state observers, such as the UK and Greece who announced their support for Istanbul 2020. Since its release ten years ago, the internet website Games BidIndex has become the "industry standard" measurement of the competitiveness of OG bids.<sup>23</sup> For example, in the last two bid campaigns, BidIndex correctly gauged the successful outcomes of Olympic host cities Rio de Janeiro and Pyeongchang. In February 2013, Istanbul was ranked slightly ahead of Tokyo in first place: Istanbul's high score (61.78, up 1.58 points) was calculated on a combination of over 100 fundamental evaluations carried out by BidIndex. Highlighted among them was Turkey's strong economic growth compared to its rivals and Istanbul's Olympic bidding experience that had included four recent campaigns. Istanbul also demonstrated strong public support coming from a country and region

that had “never hosted an Olympic Games” (*Gamesbids* February 28, 2013). Thus, at the beginning of 2013, Istanbul’s was tipped as the favourite nation to host the 2020 Games.

50 However, the choice of an Olympic city is a combination of factors outside the pure rationality of the inherent quality of a candidate city’s application file. Beyond unofficial rankings and official reports, it is ultimately the IOC members who vote according to their personal convictions. Obviously there are strong political pressures, the risk of corruption exists, and until the last moment uncertainty remains a considerable factor.<sup>24</sup> On September 7, 2013, in Buenos Aires, the CIO elected the city to host the 2020 OG. After defeating Madrid to reach the final round, Istanbul lost the final ballot to Tokyo by 60 votes to 36. The results of the IOC vote is indicative of the persuasive power of Tokyo’s proposal. Of course, it is very difficult to point out with any certainty the reasons behind the failure of the Istanbul bid, and it will not be attempted here. The comparative successes and failures of various other previous bid applications have shown the demonstrative need for candidate cities to expand their sphere of influence in the international arena and position their country in international sporting bodies, including in the IOC. Despite the considerable mobilization of resources and the support of the political authorities and sports elites to launch an effective lobbying campaign – and indeed despite being tipped as host favourites during the selection process – the Istanbul bid resulted in a heavy loss during the final round. This failure may appear to constitute a genuine deficit of “soft power”; a failure of capacity to capably convince IOC members to vote for Istanbul. The failure of successive Turkish bids to host sports mega-events often evokes a bitter response from those involved in the projects (Polo 2012b). The failure of Istanbul 2020 was received with great resentment, particularly as Erdoğan had been so publicly engaged in supporting the bid. Never before had a Turkish Prime Minister been so personally involved in fostering a bid for a sport event.<sup>25</sup> Following the domestic and international turmoil of 2013, the attribution of OG to Istanbul would have been celebrated as a personal victory for Erdoğan, evidence that under his leadership Turkey had been successfully guided into occupying a new position on the world stage. His involvement in the bidding process may explain why for the first time in its history the Istanbul Olympic bid was no longer the consensus dream it had previously been (Polo, 2011). The urban projects behind the Olympic bid had already generated a negative backlash from the AKP’s hard-line critics in Turkey.<sup>26</sup> In the wake of the Gezi events, opponents rallied against Erdoğan’s authoritarianism. Some organizations even “requested the IOC to take Istanbul off of the list of cities for the 2020 Olympics in order to reclaim the honour of Olympic ideals.”<sup>27</sup> Even commentators who had supported Istanbul 2020 worried about the impact of the Games on Istanbul.<sup>28</sup> When the results were announced during the ceremony in Buenos Aires, the Turkish delegation remained seated, utterly dejected. Then, Erdoğan stood up, hugged his Japanese counterpart warmly and said, “We shall win [next time], God willing.” However, later, he told the Turkish media that “it hasn’t been fair: In a way, they are cutting ties with the 1.5 billion people of the Muslim world” (*Today’s Zaman* September 10, 2013). Erdoğan’s statement conveys the feeling of Turkey’s isolation and its paradoxical dilemma: Not European enough to be accepted into Europe, and not enough powerful to be persuasive. He also vehemently criticized the Turkish media and social networks, accusing them of ensuring Istanbul lost its bid to host the 2020 Olympics.<sup>29</sup>

51 Unlike bilateral sports diplomacy, the impact of major sporting events are more diffuse and uncertain. If the application process highlights the number of symbolic values a



country is expected to embody, then its real impact is difficult to measure. In addition, being awarded a sports mega-event like the Olympic Games implicitly means that the country already has the strength and means of persuasion beyond traditional spheres of influence. The first Olympic bids submitted by the TNOC were initiated by elites wholly committed to the achievement of EU member status to consolidate Turkey's European identity, an ideal to which the Kemalist elites were so attached. Istanbul's 2020 bid can be considered to have occurred in a very different context. Turkey's externally projected image changed as the result of intersecting non-hierarchical factors: Firstly, greater economic prosperity provided the means for the development of a new foreign policy that has sought to establish Turkey's regional influence, including the former territories of the Ottoman Empire and the Muslim world; and secondly, the difficult progress of EU accession negotiations was exacerbated by the opposition of some European member states and Turkey's slow pace of reforms towards the fulfilment of membership criteria. The Olympic Games in Istanbul could have been a way of symbolically demonstrating to Europe Turkey's continued movement towards its destiny, regardless of the lack of progress in the EU negotiation process.

## Conclusion

- 52 Over the last twenty years, the political use of sport in Turkey has been integrated into an influence-building diplomacy to foster a positive image abroad. From 2000, sports diplomacy, alongside other diplomatic instruments, have participated in a new AKP-driven foreign policy, such as the international cooperation policy (instituted through TIKA, the Turkish International Cooperation and Development Agency), and an external cultural policy (implemented through the opening of Yunus Emre cultural centres in 28 countries). At home this policy has sought to disseminate an image of the nation in multiple ways: As a benevolent country and regional power served by an ambitious foreign policy, as a country with a dynamic economy and a strong stable government, and as a modern state sustained by its commitment to conservative values. In the aftermath of the Arab revolts in the early 2010s, Turkey paraded itself, and was correspondingly vaunted abroad, as a political model of the ideal modern state, which had succeeded in successfully combining democracy with Islamic values. Particularly in the period after 2013, faced with a series of domestic and international setbacks the country's weaknesses were revealed through political developments that somewhat served to tarnish its image.
- 53 This is probably the point at which the limits of public diplomacy and sports diplomacy are reached. It is absolutely clear that states try to use sport for political purposes. Major sporting events, particularly those that can be considered truly mega-events by virtue of their exceptional scale and global impact, namely the Olympics and FIFA World Cup, receive absolute government backing. Nevertheless, it remains difficult to measure the actual effects of sports diplomacy beyond the declarations made by political authorities through communication policies and media coverage.



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## NOTES

1. See, for example, *Politix*, « Sport et politique », vol. 13, n° 50, 2000. URL : [http://www.persee.fr/issue/polix\\_0295-2319\\_2000\\_num\\_13\\_50](http://www.persee.fr/issue/polix_0295-2319_2000_num_13_50) ; *Géopolitique*, *Revue de l'Institut international de géopolitique*, « Sport et politique », n° 66, juillet 1999 ; *Relations internationales*, « Olympisme et Relations internationales », n° 111 et 112, automne et hiver 2002 ; *Bulletin d'Histoire politique*, « Sport et politique », vol. 11, n° 2, hiver 2003 ; *Sport in Society*, 17(9), 2014. There are also numerous articles in international reviews such as the *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics* ; *The International Journal of the History of Sport* ; and *Sport in Society*.

2. The reasons behind the decision to compete to host sport mega-events, such as the anticipated positive impacts on the local community and regional economy, or in terms of urban planning and regeneration, remain of course, fiercely debated (see Horne and Manzenreiter 2006; Murray and Pigman 2014) and will not be addressed in this paper.

3. For Manzenreiter although the “Beijing Games offered an excellent opportunity to promote China to the world, there was less consent with regard to the way this could have been achieved. Instead the vast majority of attention and effort [of the Chinese authorities] focused on the domestic audience” (Manzenreiter 2010 : 33). The *sans faute* of the Sotchi OG did not prevent Putin’s use of hard power when Russia annexed Crimea four months later.
4. For Hall “In fact to criticize the hosting of mega-events as an economic and social development mechanism is to be doubly damned. For one contends not only with the neoliberal discourse of competition and the relentless pursuit of regeneration but also with the mythologies of the social benefits of sport. Sport is extremely hard to argue against” (Hall 2006 : 67).
5. At the end of May 2013, a wave of demonstrations contesting the urban development plan for Istanbul’s Taksim Gezi Park sparked widespread protests in Istanbul and across Turkey. The Police suppressed the protests with tear gas and water cannons; eleven people were killed and more than a thousand were injured. The excessive use of force by the police alongside the overall absence of government dialogue with the protesters was criticized by some foreign countries and international organisations.
6. Syria was a strictly controlled country under Assad with tight security control over its social and political groups and public space. It was therefore apparent that supporters had been invited to celebrate the match at the behest of the leadership.
7. URL: [http://www.peace-sport.org/images/pdf/PEACEANDSPORTAWARDS2008\\_ENG.PDF](http://www.peace-sport.org/images/pdf/PEACEANDSPORTAWARDS2008_ENG.PDF).
8. Cf. Goksel (2009); see also Galstyan (2011).
9. Thirty-six out of the thirty-eight gold medals won by Turkish sportsmen at the OG were in these sports (twenty-eight just for wrestling).
10. *Istanbul 2008*, Application file, p. 2.
11. *Bid Document Greece-Turkey Euro 2008*, p. 24.
12. Interview, Istanbul, January 2003.
13. Interview, Istanbul, May 2008.
14. Between 1957 and 1967, Sinan Erdem served as the secretary general of the Turkish Volleyball Federation. In 1966, he became member of the International Volleyball Federation (FIVB) and served as the head of the organization committee of FIVB between 1972 and 1984. He was the deputy secretary general of the Turkish National Olympic Committee (TMOK) from 1975, before serving as the secretary general from 1982 to 1989. In 1989, Sinan Erdem was appointed chairman of the TMOK.
15. Interview, Istanbul, January 2002.
16. *Istanbul 2020 bid book*, vol. 1, p. 5.
17. *Istanbul 2020...*, *op. cit.*, p. 5.
18. *Ibid.*
19. *Ibid.*: 18.
20. *Ibid.*: 25.
21. *Ibid.*: 3.
22. The choice of Qatar to host the FIFA World Cup in 2022 has been the subject of much controversy, including amongst others, corruption charges and the bad working conditions of workers who build the stadiums. The debate that has surrounded the decision is demonstrative of the considerable damage that can be done to the image of a country awarded the responsibility for organizing a sports mega-events, that is to say, selection does not systematically produce positive effects.
23. URL: <http://www.gamesbids.com/eng/>.
24. The allocation of the 2012 Olympic Games to London over Paris would have been won at the hotel and before the vote, thanks to the leading role played by then British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, who put his political weight behind the campaign in the final straight.

25. Beyond making numerous trips abroad, Erdoğan flew from Ankara to Istanbul to host an IOC delegation dinner at the historic Esma Sultan Mansion next to the Bosphorus in Ortaköy in an effort to show his support for Istanbul's bid and land the 2020 Olympic Games (*Hürriyet Daily News* March 27, 2013).

26. Former UN Special Reporter on the Right to Adequate Housing, Miloon Kothari, visiting Istanbul in March 2013, invited by the Istanbul Chamber of architects [*TMMOB Mimarlar Odası*], stated that the "Olympics would be a disaster for Istanbul" (İnce April 1, 2013).

27. The Urban Movements Istanbul, Habitat International Network, and the Istanbul People's Houses wrote a letter addressed to IOC members denouncing the repression of the Gezi protests and the Urban projects initiated in the name of the Olympic Games, see URL: <http://www.sendika9.org/2013/06/this-is-an-urgent-call-to-the-international-olympic-committee-ioc-from-istanbul/>.

28. Thus, the secularist newspaper *Cumhuriyet* ran an article titled "Yes to the Olympics, no to looting" [*Olimpiyata evet, yağmaya hayır*], *Cumhuriyet*, August 9, 2013, p. 9.

29. See pro-government newspapers such as *Star*, *Yeni şafak*, *Akşam*, *Haber Türk* in their editions of September 9, 2013.

## ABSTRACTS

For the first time in its fifteen years of brilliant yet unsuccessful candidacies to host the Olympic Games (OG) and the Football European Championships (Euro), Turkey was admitted into the elite group of countries capable of staging sports mega-events. Although it failed in the last round for the 2020 OG (beaten by Tokyo in 2013), and for the Euro 2016 (beaten by France in 2010), it has since been tipped as the strong favourite to host Euro 2024. International matches have been simultaneously utilized by the Turkish government as an opportunity to publicly demonstrate its willingness to resolve historically problematic issues with other countries. In this paper, it will be argued that Turkey's ambitions to host sports mega-events and its politicization of specific matches can be interpreted as a strategy of the state to diffuse a positive image at home and abroad, and consolidate its role in the region. A distinction will be made between the use of sport, more accurately football matches, as a tool of diplomacy (in which the state remains the main actor of the process in the context of bilateral relationships) and the use of sports events, which includes also the involvement of sports actors for more diffuse ends. Rather than referring to the concept of soft power, the notion of sport diplomacy will be utilised to analyse Turkey's influence through the strategic use of sport. Specifically, through the comparative analysis of successive bid proposals to host the Istanbul Games, the AKP's strategy to promote Turkey's new power will be critically appraised.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** Sports diplomacy, sports mega-events, Olympic Games, Turkey, soft power

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