



**Eduard Soler i Lecha**  
Senior Research Fellow, CIDOB

Istanbul's Olympic candidacy has been persistent. It has put itself forward to organise the summer games on at least five occasions and was a finalist in the selection processes for the 2000, 2008 and 2020 Olympic Games. This determination is part of a strategy meant to consolidate Istanbul as a global city and position Turkey as a rising power. Another highly symbolic factor must also be considered: the Olympic Games have never been held in a Muslim-majority country.

Each and every one of these arguments have been put on the table every time Istanbul has presented its bid. Nevertheless, the ancient imperial capital's majesty, its position as a city straddling two continents, and the economic growth that Turkey has undergone over the last decade have never been enough to convince the jury that Istanbul is the best option.

Istanbul came close to being awarded the 2020 games. In the vote that took place in Buenos Aires on September 7th 2013 it beat Madrid into a distant third place. But the defeat to Tokyo was clear (60 votes to 36). Hopes in Istanbul had been extremely high and the way the then prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, took the defeat speaks for itself. The current president and former mayor of the city called the decision unfair and accused the jury of having turned its back on the Muslim world.

In an article published in the magazine *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, Hasan Arat, then president of the Olympic bid, explained that his strategy was not so much to explain why Istanbul was the best candidate in general but why it was the best candidate at that time. However, the timing worked against the interests of the Istanbul 2020 bid. Only four months had passed since the mass protests against an urban development project in Gezi Park resulted in a cycle of anti-government demonstrations that were harshly suppressed and which the Turkish government presented as a great conspiracy with international ramifications. An increasingly tense Middle East situation, with ever more visible consequences for Turkey in the form of refugees and bilateral crises with various governments in the region only added to this. The political and social tension along with the proximity of the conflict in Syria counted against Istanbul.

Many factors are weighed when choosing a city to host the Olympic Games and, paradoxically, sport is not the most important. It is a political, economic and symbolic decision in which security and cultural factors also figure. Although having been a finalist may provide a degree of comfort, so many accumulated failures oblige us to reflect on the factors that are holding Istanbul back from hosting and organising an Olympic Games.

The first factor – not exclusive to Turkey – are the doubts about emerging economies. Over recent years, Turkey has pushed to be associated with the BRICS club and to present itself as an active member of the so-called “Global South”. Beijing and Rio de Janeiro having previously been selected to hold the 2008 and 2016 games, respectively, seemed to show that the concept of “emerging economy” looked good on a covering letter. However, the fact that many of the emerging economies – the Brazilian among them – have recently fallen into crisis, and the constant speculation over the sustainability of the Chinese economic model, means a change of strategy is needed from now on.

The second factor is insecurity. The last time Turkey made a bid, security was already one of its negative points. But back then the ceasefire with the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) was still in place and negotiations had begun between that group and the Turkish intelligence services. Syria was at war, but Turkey seemed to be containing the problem on its borders, and the threat from the Islamic State organisation was seen as secondary. Both factors have since changed. On the one hand, the peace process with the PKK has been replaced by one of the worst cycles of violence for decades, during which the violence has moved from the mountains to the cities; on the other, the Islamic State organisation has become a global threat and has Turkey in its sights. The attacks Turkey has suffered in the past year are a heavy blow to tourism and the strategy of making Istanbul a meeting point for large business, academic and sporting events.

The third factor is a lack of international support, or, better said, the growing number of countries that have become Turkey’s enemies. The former prime minister and foreign minister, Ahmet Davuto lu, designed the doctrine of “zero problems with neighbours”, but in practice Ankara has had to face various diplomatic crises with Egypt, Syria, Israel and Russia in addition to its difficult relations with Armenia and Cyprus. It is interesting to recall that a year after the vote on the Olympic bids in Buenos Aires, Turkey suffered another defeat when it was not chosen to be a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council. At the time, there was speculation that certain states with problematic relations with Turkey had carried out a diplomatic counter-offensive to strengthen alternative candidates. It would be no surprise if something similar had happened with the Olympic Games.

Istanbul deserves to host an Olympic Games, but without economic consolidation, without stability and without reconciliation with old and new enemies, the city will remain the eternal candidate.