Introduction

The story of Istanbul’s bids for the Olympic Games started in 1989 when the mayor of the city sent an official letter to the President of Turkey.1 A short time afterwards, it was announced in public that Istanbul would bid for the Olympics in 2000. Other bids followed for the Games in 2004, 2008 and 2012. Istanbul did not bid for the Olympic Games in 2016 but is expected to bid for 2020.

It is not just the seemingly endless succession of bids that might remind us of “The Never Ending Story” by Michael Ende. In fact the content of the novel reveals some parallels with campaigns to bring the Olympic Games to Istanbul. For those who do not know this work, the story is summarized below:

One of the protagonists of the story, a ‘normal’ boy called Bastian Balthasar Bux, who reads about the mythical land of Fantastica and becomes absorbed in its fantasy world. Over and above, he recognizes that it is his task to rescue Fantastica which is being destroyed by the Nothing – the lack of imagination in the real world. As he succeeds, he is endowed with the capacity to reshape the world of fantasy according to his own wishes. But what he does not know is that each wish costs him one memory. If he does not want to lose his mind and stay within the book forever, a way back from Fantastica to the real world needs to be found.

Before we can compare this plot with the Bidding History of Istanbul also the latter must be outlined a little more. The Turks had considered the possibility of bidding as early as 1938 and in the following decade there had been further thoughts about bringing the Olympic Games to Istanbul – but these came to nothing.2 The second approach started when Bedrettin DALAN was mayor in Istanbul from 1984 – 1989. Under the auspices of his governance, the IOC session in 1987 was assigned to Istanbul and the first Master Plan for an Olympic Village in the city was developed. To apply officially, as Nurettin SOZEN, the new mayor of Istanbul did in 1989, was to continue this progression.

There is a complex cohesion of reasons on an international, national and urban level as to why it was during that time when the aspirations towards the Games evolved. Why was it at that special time that the necessary pre-conditions and motivations were to be found? We shall first have a look at the development of modern Istanbul, considering the impact of the Olympic Games and the effects of hosting them would have on the city. The approach taken and how the ideas and visions were put
Today's population is officially put at around 13 million. The setting of the bids into reality are also considered. Recent developments and future perspectives are also taken into account.

**Istanbul – Endless growing city?**

**The setting of the bids**

Before the First World War, the ‘old Istanbul’ was inhabited by around one million people and did not exceed this number considerably until the beginning of the fifties. Today’s population is officially put at around 13 million and this might even be a conservative estimate. Since the 1950s Turkey has become one of the most rapidly urbanizing countries in the world with Istanbul’s population growth from 1 million in 1950 to 5 million in 1989 and 10 million in 2000. This rapid urbanisation was caused in the main by migration from rural areas in Turkey to the city. At the same time the possibility of semi-legal land appropriation and allocation provided the incorporation of the newcomers within the city: Gece kondus (‘built over night’), settlements of self-built houses und huts, spread within the gaps and at the edges of Istanbul. Dense social networks had already existed as a precondition of chain migration and were further strengthened during the process of settling – the new neighbourhoods evolved following the logic of a common origin instead of any city planning measurements and led to a disintegrating infrastructure.

The development of the city into a metropolis capable of bidding for the Olympic Games was underpinned by a strongly changing political and economic environment. Under the Republican Regime, political and cultural attention and capital were focused on Ankara and its hinterland. Istanbul, capital of the Ottoman Empire was regarded as symbol of a decadent period, and suffered from marginalization. It regained its strength though in the years after 1945, absorbing the inflowing manpower to some extent. Still, the available mechanisms for coping with the uneven growth were not sufficient. Economical instability, increasing political polarization and radicalization between left-wing and right-wing groups led to upheavals which were brought to an end by a military coup in 1980.

Three years of military rule followed during which economic liberalization was introduced into the commercial systems in Turkey - the regime aimed at a fundamental break with the national developmentalist strategy of the previous decades which had reached its limits with the collapse of the world order instituted by the postwar hegemonic power. It entailed attempts to [...] pave the way for Turkey’s full integration into the unitary logic of global capitalism.

Istanbul received a major influx of state funding for the first time in the history of the Republic – the significance of the former ‘stepchild’ for the international recognition of Turkey was about to change.

The course of liberalization was continued in the 1980s after military rule had ended and a new democratic government elected. The liberal rhetoric and economic transformation towards an extension of cross-country trade, attracted international companies and advanced the integration of Istanbul into the world economy.

On the political agenda, cities and their development gained importance. In the course of a policy of decentralization that weakened the influence of Ankara’s ministries, the mayor of Istanbul attained more powerful position than he had ever enjoyed. Before, a complicated network of agencies had been controlled by the central government, each fighting for their influence, hindering consistent action. "The government, in one sweeping motion in 1984, enacted a new law which amounted to a total politico-administrative overhaul of the existing confusion." The new political agenda had a greater focus on cities than before and thus widened the scope of influence of the mayor of Istanbul. These developments paved the way for Istanbul to become a ‘global city’ which could start to compete with other cities worldwide. Within this setting the story of the candidacy to host the Olympic Games can start.

**The Olympic Games imbedded in a stream of modernization**

The mayor who was first in a position to take advantage of the transformation was also the first to take action towards organising an Olympic. In 1984 Bedrettin DALAN was elected, a former businessman who “proved to be a man with a mission. He embarked upon transforming Istanbul from a tired city whose glory resided in the past into a newly-imagined metropolis.” DALAN himself formulated the ambitions as follows:

[...] our aim is to contribute to the development of our city as a modern metropolis and a universally acclaimed focal point for international attractions [...] In short, Istanbul is getting ready for the 21st century [...] We believe that national traditions and cultural heritage as well as personal skills and contemporary achievements should be esteemed on an international level and considered as integrants of common
The necessary steps to realize these visions suited the claims of a global city and DALAN proved to be capable of implementing many of them. The construction of a great number of new thoroughfares, underpasses and overpasses were built, including a new highway along the Marmara Sea to connect the Atatürk Airport with the inner city, and in 1988 the second Bosphorus Bridge 'Fatih Sultan Mehmet' was opened. In order to enhance the city's attraction for tourists and other visitors, the historical part of the city in Sultanahmet was transformed. Gone were unsightly buildings and the area was turned into an "open-air museum of historic monuments and picturesque old wooden houses". At the same time the skyline of Istanbul, previously famous for its congeries of minarets, was increasingly shaped by skyscrapers hosting international companies and banks as well as a growing number of luxury hotels.

Of course there was little free space within the crowded city where migration and industrialization had made use of every single square metre - most new buildings could only take shape as others were demolished. DALAN, having "little patience for legal procedure or for canons of historical preservation" was not concerned that the policy would "literally bulldoze" through private housing, former fabrics or Istanbul's wholesale fresh produce market, the Perşembe Pazari. The modernization he envisaged was radical: "Dalalan Faustian progressivism was a kind of uncompromising modernization [...] He never thought about the price that had to be paid for his demolition. Above everything else it was the city's collective memory that was lost." 14

This statement gives us an understanding about a parallel between the bid for the Olympic Games being embedded in an "uncompromising" understanding of modernization and fulfilment of wishes in Endel's Neverending Story: By modernizing with a perspective that only looks into the future and has no regard for heritage from the past that might be worth preserving, for every piece of 'modernization' one piece of memory is to be paid.

This attitude was also debated in public - the official rhetoric that necessary steps had to be taken in order to ensure a proper future of Istanbul were opposed by those who questioned the radical nature of the approach. Still, it was DALAN who succeeded in implementing his model of "preparing Istanbul for the 21st century" and the Olympic Games. Though the mayors have changed, many ideas of urban transformation, kentsel dönüşüm, have remained.

Starting the bids:
Istanbul bid for the Olympic Games in 2000

The first step towards the official application for the Olympic Games was made by the new mayor of Istanbul educated in 1989; Nurettin SÖZEN wrote a letter to the President of Turkey which sparked announcement of a bid. Since the foundation of the Turkish Republic in 1923, there has been a special relationship between law and society as the latter was shaped and changed to a considerable extent by the legal framework. It might be in this tradition that the Turkish government enacted a law (No. 3796) in 1992 that was to provide the preparation not only for the Olympic Games themselves but also for the bidding process that would be necessary. It is a law that remains unique in the world and is a source of pride for the Turks. Accompanying the Turkish National Olympic Committee (TNOC) a "Preparation and Organisation Council for the Istanbul Olympic Games" alias Istanbul Olympic Bidding Committee (IOBC) was founded according to the law whose task it is to take the necessary steps for the accomplishment of a successful bidding process. Their responsibilities are defined as locating and building up areas for the Olympic Games, the construction and modernization of facilities to comply with Olympic regulations as well as the cooperation with local and central authorities in order to prepare the necessary infrastructure for transportation and communication services. According to the law, the needs for the preparation of the Games were to take priority over other issues handled by "all public institutions and establishments, private administrations and municipalities" during the preparation and the organizations of the Olympics in Istanbul.

Land could even be appropriated if it were deemed necessary to the Olympic preparations:

The land recommended by the Preparation and Organisation Committee for the construction of the Olympic Venues will, by virtue of a Government Decree, be allocated by the Municipality of the Greater City of Istanbul, the Treasury or the Directorate of Private Administration of Istanbul to the use of the General Directorate of Youth and Sports. The Municipality of the Greater City of Istanbul will finalise all and/or any transactions pertaining to the development of the said land. 16

It is written that all sports facilities built by the IOBC shall become the property of the General Directorate of Youth and Sports after the Games and no further transactions are required. Financial responsibilities were also regulated, these gave the biggest role to the state but measures were also binding on the municipality of Istanbul.

A key motivation for the bid was the chance to solve problems in infrastructure within a much shorter period of time than would have been possible without the Games taking place. Another was to support the engagement of the inhabitants with sport activities and to increase their opportunities to do so. The government in Ankara supported the attempt to restore Istanbul's reputation as international site on the global landscape. The signals that these changes would have a positive impact on the whole city and its inhabitants helped galvanise public opinion as well. Yalçın AKSOY, the general director of the IOBC, saw the bid as beneficial not only in terms of constructional achievements within the city but also as a means by which Turkish products in general would benefit. Hosting
the Olympic Games would show the nation’s ability to realize self-set goals.17

The theme of the bid campaign begun at the end of 1992 was “Let’s meet where the continents meet” – emphasizing the unique geographical and cultural location of Istanbul which is the only metropolis that is situated on two continents. This approach was developed further for the bid in 2004 as we shall see. In addition plans for the construction of an Olympic Stadium were developed to show the substance behind the bid. Istanbul was a still ‘new-comer’ in terms of hosting major international sports competitions, this shortcoming was addressed by the organization in 1993 of the European Youth Aquatics, Archery and the Volleyball World Stars Championship were invited to the city.18

These efforts did not lead to success. At the final vote in Monte Carlo in September 2003 Istanbul was eliminated after the first round of voting with only 7 out of 89 votes. Just as enthusiasm for the games had been huge, so in turn was disappointment. This was only the beginning of Istanbul’s quest for the Games. The TNOC was convinced that an improvement of the bidding strategy would finally lead to success. The shortcomings of the 2000 bid were to be analysed.19 The TNOC started an inquiry among the members of the IOC asking them which factors had discouraged them from giving their vote to Istanbul. In the main, their responses singled out the weak infrastructure, a lack of experience and a general feeling that the bid was not really serious but a strategy of city-marketing. Also the general political situation at that time had not been very stable which made it difficult to plan and realize a mega-event. There had been 16 months between the passing of the law and the election - “Sinan Erdem said that within this 16-month period, [he] minister of Youth and Sports had changed for four times.”20

Continuing the bids, continuing the (hi)story: Istanbul’s bid for the Games in 2004

Four years later, in 1997, Istanbul again declared again its candidacy for the Olympics. This time a private advertising agency was assigned to develop an image profile of Istanbul designed to underline the advantages of the city. The core of it outlined on the first side of the three volume presentation “Olympist” says:

“İstanbul: The only city where two continents meet; a cosmopolitan metropolis with a tradition of 30 centuries that served as the capital of three empires over a period of 15 centuries; uniting 26 ethnic minorities, 3 religions and 10 languages.”21

The symbol of two intertwined Olympic rings as a logo underlines the message that connecting the parts of the world is one of the most major goals of the Olympic Games and Istanbul would be a very convenient venue to do so. Not only is it situated on the European as well as the Asian continent but also in terms of its history and culture elements from both continents contribute to the ambience of the city. Over the course of many centuries Istanbul was a cultural, financial and political centre, its importance and influence reached out far wider than the borders of its own empire. In the slogan the glory of the past was connected to the notion of contemporary cosmopolitanism. The ethnic minorities, multiple religions and languages to be found in Istanbul were seen as a positive element which sought cultural exchange with the visitors of the Olympic Games. Taking a closer look at the application paper, it becomes clear that this is not just meant as a description of the actual state of affairs but that this contact would be a legacy of any Olympic Games held in Istanbul.

The sense of being an Istanbulite, which for centuries has served as a useful tool in the moral education of a populace that took great pride in its metropolis, has unfortunately been eroded in the recent past, swept away in a tempestuous period of unprecedented growth. But with the holding of the Games, this sense of being a true Istanbulite is sure to be revived, injected with renewed fervour by a new, and parallel, ideal of being a true Olympist.22

It might be true that the “unprecedented growth” is part of the reason why there is not such an extent of identification with the cosmopolitan city as there had been before. As mentioned earlier, it was mainly chain migration which accounted for the growth of the city resulting in many neighbourhoods whose inhabitants came from the same place in Turkey and thus kept their feeling of belonging.23 At the same time, the virtues of the old and bourgeois city with its cultural offerings were not the first thing that these migrants had been seeking when they tried to escape the poverty in the rural areas and came to the city.

The application sought to build a bridge between the modern cosmopolitan metropolis and the historical Istanbul, and Constantinople respectively, which used to be multicultural as a representative and important element of a multicultural empire. In the presentation, certain parts of history were glossed over, notably the city under the national regime as policies of homogenisation which did not fit with the image of a culturally multifaceted venue. Within this never ending story the loss of memories does not appear to be unwanted at all times – to ‘sacrifice’ a part of the national story seems a reasonable price to pay for the wish to become an open-minded metropolis in the 21st century. Istanbul, through its connection with the past, gains a special position in the Turkish nation state where questions of ‘Turkishness’ - what it means to be Turkish in regard of ethnic, religious and linguistic properties – are answered in a much more narrow way than membership within the multi-ethnic Ottoman Empire was defined.

There was another element in the bid which suited the ideal of the Olympic Games. Emphasis was placed on the very young population to be found in Turkey. One quarter of the population is in the age group of 5 – 14 years olds.24 Within Istanbul itself, the population was quite young and it was said to be one of the goals of the IOBC to widen the access of young people to sports facilities and motivate them to participate in sports actively.25 As the
The plans for an Olympic Park were a key part of the bid. The second problem arose in connection with the newly other main criticism levelled at their candidacy for was needed. It had to be well connected to the transport other part of the city, Ataköy, a second complex of Olympic sports venues was started to be built.

Istanbul’s lack of experience in hosting major events was the other main criticism levelled at their candidacy for 2000. In 1996 the Habitat II Conference of the United Nations was hosted in the city, showing that they were quite capable of organizing a mega-event.26 As AKSOY mentioned, the last point that the bid was merely done to gain publicity could easily be countered. The very fact that the city was trying again was the best proof for the serious intentions behind it.27

Searching for the way into the real world – Istanbul’s bid for the Games in 2008

Once again, Istanbul lost out in the first phase of the process. Again, the lack of infrastructure, especially concerning sports venues, was criticized and again a lack of experience in hosting large-scale sports organisations. A lot of plans had been made so far – now it was decided to make them a reality them in order to sustain further bids.

Some voices claimed that it was unlikely that Istanbul would be chosen to follow Athens the 2004 host city.28 Also the TNOC would have preferred to take a break. Even though the Olympic Law had decided on a financial involvement of the Greater Municipality of Istanbul, there had been no payments so far and the debts became an increasing problem. The municipality officially announced that they were not going to pay their debts. The cooperation between the bid stakeholders – the IOBC, the Greater Municipality of Istanbul and the Ministry of Youth and Sports – no longer held together.29

The second problem arose in connection with the newly built sports venues in Ataköy. As it turned out they had been built in the same manner as the gecekondus. Without any formal permission, leaving these kinds of formalities to be resolved afterwards. Now the responsible municipality refused to give the building permission subsequently which meant the venue was technically illegal – at least for some time.30 The driving force behind the desire to continue bidding was now the Ministry of Youth and Sports – in the face of all kinds of doubts and criticism the bidding and construction process was carried on and on the deadline day for application, 25th March 2000, the TNOC presented their official candidature.

Meanwhile the Olympic Stadium was destined not to remain a paper fantasy. After the failed bid for the Olympics in 2004, a construction company started its work. The Atatürk Stadium, at the heart of the Olympic project, was to be among the biggest stadiums in Europe. A source of great national pride, construction was to go ahead even without Istanbul’s nomination as an Olympic City.

This “down payment” towards the Games had shortcomings because those who were in charge forgot about the details - to play the game fairly – and found that the financing proved to be problematic. When the construction of the Stadium was ‘finished’, there was no electricity to lighten the stands, no water supply to tend the turf imported from the Netherlands, no gas for the heating and no access to public transport. As a newspaper headline observed, the story of the Olympics had become an “Olimpik komedi”.31 The municipality was not able to pay its debts for the construction and the state had to help out.

Eventually in August 2000 – for the first time – Istanbul succeeded in getting through the first phase of the city selection process. This was regarded as a sign of an approval of the steps that had been taken so far. But the doubts concerning transportation networks and environmental problems could not be overcome. The bid committee insisted that traffic was much reduced during the summer during the summer as there is no school; the school shuttle services would even be available during any Istanbul games. Also air pollution was less in summer when the Games were due to take place. But there were those who pointed towards the uncontrolled urban growth and the risks of economic crises. At the July 2001 IOC session in Moscow, Beijing was duly chosen as the host city. Istanbul’s shortcomings saw them go out in the first round.32

Last but not least – Istanbul’s bid for the Games in 2012

The authorities of the TNOC stated that they would go on bidding until Istanbul finally succeeded. In addition, the construction works in Ataköy and in the Olympic Park were carried on. The construction of the Olympic stadium was completed. Notwithstanding certain problems, it stood as a symbol of Istanbul’s desire for the Games. Certain problems, such as the swirling winds which disrupted playing conditions in the stadium, had yet to be solved. Investment in transport was important to the city. Istanbul suffers because its transport infrastructure is insufficient to deal with the traffic within the city. This was a recurring theme of criticism during its bids for the Games. This has been developed and is still being transformed. Among the construction works are the the railway and subway tunnel under the Bosphorus called “Marmaray”, the extension of
the metro and tramway system and the third bridge over the Bosporus. The Project “7 Tunnels on 7 Hills” is due for completion by 2014, 19 tunnel ways on the European and 7 tunnel ways on the Asian side are planned.

What stands out is that most investments are made in the European part of the city, in terms of sports facilities as well as infrastructure. It is the importance of a short distance between the Olympic venues and the Atatürk Airport, the airport on the European side, that is underlined throughout the application. The mayor of Kadıköy, an important municipality district on the Asian side, referred to the theme of the Games – where the continents meet – and claimed that the distribution of investments should be made equally on both sides. Sinan ERDEM disagreed and asserted that the IOC would not accept a spatial organization of the Olympics dispersed on the European and the Asian side.

Beside the practical component of this arrangement, it can also be regarded as a symbol for a general development. The European side of the town hosts the historical centre as a tourist attraction, international agencies such as consulates and institutes, the most important business areas and the majority of cultural locations. The division of investments strengthens the area that is already the strongest instead of aiming for a more equal distribution: The Western part of Turkey is much more developed than the East, the cities that are better off than rural areas lie in the west. In Istanbul it is the European side which does better than the Asian side. In terms of international competition between cities this might lead to a better ranking of Istanbul and this again might have a positive impact on the rest of the country. But the local effect is a growing inequality: The fact that the continents meet in Istanbul does not mean that they converge. Because of the differences concerning income and employment opportunities, migration within Turkey is going on, the growth of the city has not ended yet – in 2009 Istanbul was again the city receiving the highest influx in the country.

So one of the major obstacles towards becoming the host of the Olympic Games has not yet been overcome. More time is needed in order to see a visible improvement in traffic arrangements and sports infrastructure. To date 10 new sports venues have been built, nine have been modernized.33 After the Olympics in 2012 were given to London, it was decided that Istanbul would not apply for 2016. It was reasoned that the IOC would not choose two European cities in a row – the decision to choose Rio de Janeiro for 2016 would bear this out. Instead, Turkey went after the 2016 European Football Championships but lost out to France. It is still uncertain whether Istanbul will bid for the Olympic Games in 2020 or concentrate on another bid for the European Football Championships.

However, the idea of hosting the Olympic Games in Istanbul remains. As we have seen, they have already taken considerable steps on the way to making their Olympic dreams a reality. Now all they have to do is persuade the IOC. After nearly 20 years of preparation trying to turn a dream into reality, it is Istanbul’s optimism that seems to be endless:

Tell someone that there are 400 billion stars out there and the person will believe you. Tell him that a bench has wet paint and the person has to touch it, just to make sure you are right. All I have tried to say [so] far is that the paint is wet and all I expect is that the IOC touches it.

Notes

2 ERTEN, Spatial Analysis, p. 176.
10 KEYDER & ÖNCÜ: “Globalization”, p. 408.
15 The law did not oblige Istanbul to keep on bidding until it would be elected to host the Games – this was a misperceiving sometimes found in the media. (Interview with Yalçın Aksoy, General Director of the IOC, 12.10.2010)
16 Article 9, Turkish Olympic Act.
17 Interview with Yalçın AKSOY, General Director of the IOC, 12.10.2010.
18 ERTEN, Spatial Analysis, p. 182.
19 Interview with Yalçın AKSOY, General Director of the IOC, 12.10.2010.
20 ERTEN, Spatial Analysis, p. 183.
21 Candidate File Istanbul 2004 “Olympist.”
25 Interview with Yalçın AKSOY, General Director of the IOC, 12.10.2010
26 ERTEN, Spatial Analysis, passim.
27 An additional advantage of Istanbul bidding for the Games in 2004 was the low budget that would be needed for the accomplishment of the organisation. And though it was not prominent among the official arguments, an additional disadvantage was a security problem at that time – the conflict between the state and the PKK caused fear of terrorist acts in the cities.
29 ERTEN, Spatial Analysis, passim.
After being awarded a „5-star sports complex“ in 2004, UEFA finals can take place in the Atatürk Olympiastadium. The UEFA final in 2005 was one of the highlights within the history of the stadium which is mainly used as a football arena so far.

The realization of the Olympic stadium without Istanbul being elected to host the Games shows the confidence within the approach towards the Games.

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