



## POLITICAL INTERESTS IN SPORTS MEGA EVENTS: THE SITUATION IN TURKEY<sup>i</sup>

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### Abstract:

This study seeks to investigate whether there have been any political impacts or not on the selection process of sports mega events (SMEs) in Turkey along with examples in the world and a historical record of the host nations. The SMEs are huge organizations that have been held since the very beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in various sports branches including football, volleyball and the Olympic Games. Though the selection process of the SMEs are carried out with some certain rules and principles among which are human rights issue, democracy, transportation, security and creating a unifying force for all people in the world, not everybody is satisfied with the outcomes as it is believed that the selection process is somehow under the influence of political figures or powers. Based on the findings of this study, it is seen that Hitler used the Olympic Games and the World Cup for propaganda which caused a lot of controversy while the selection of Russia, Qatar and China for hosting various SMEs led to dissatisfaction related to the outcomes. As a result of the study, it was determined that Turkey was not exposed to any discrimination against being selected the host nation for three Olympic Games in contrast to general belief by a majority of people and that in fact Turkey was awarded to host a myriad of organizations including the Mediterranean Games, Universiade, UEFA Champions League and UEFA Europe League Final.

**Keywords:** political impact, sports mega events, the Olympic Games, Turkey, the World Cup

### Öz:

Bu çalışmanın amacı dünyadaki örnekler ve ev sahibi ülkelerinde ilişkin tarihi kayıtlarıyla birlikte Türkiye'deki mega spor etkinliklerinin (MSE) seçimi üzerine politik etkilerin var olup olmadığını araştırmaktır. MSEler, aralarında futbol, voleybol ve Olimpiyat Oyunları'nın da olduğu çeşitli spor dallarında 20. Yüzyılın en başından

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itibaren düzenlenen büyük organizasyonlardır. MSElerin seçim süreci, aralarında insan hakları hususu, demokrasi, ulaşım, güvenlik ve tüm dünyadaki insanları bir araya getirecek birleştirici güç oluşturma kavramının olduğu belirli kural ve ilkeler doğrultusunda gerçekleştirilmesine karşın seçim sürecinin politik kişi ve güçleri tarafından etki altına alındığı düşüncesinden dolayı herkes sonuçlardan memnun değildir. Bu çalışmanın bulgularına dayalı olarak, Hitler'in Olimpiyatları ve Dünya Kupası'nı tartışmalara sebep olacak şekilde propaganda aracı olarak kullandığı ve Rusya, Katar ve Çin'in çeşitli organizasyonları ev sahipliği yapmaya hak kazanmasının sonuçlara ilişkin memnuniyetsizlik oluşturduğu görülmektedir. Bu çalışmanın bir sonucu olarak, Türkiye'nin genel görüşün aksine Olimpiyat Oyunlarına ev sahipliği yapmak üzere gerçekleştirmiş olduğu üç başvuruda ayrımcılığa uğramadığı ve esasen Türkiye'nin Akdeniz Oyunları, Universiade, UEFA Şampiyonlar Ligi ve UEFA Avrupa Ligi Finalleri gibi birçok etkinliğe ev sahipliği yapmaya hak kazandığı belirlenmiştir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Politik etki, mega spor etkinlikleri, Olimpiyatlar, Türkiye, Dünya Kupası

## 1. Introduction

As of the very beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, sports mega-events (SMEs) have been held throughout the world as part of various positive characteristics of the sports itself. In fact, what makes sports positive is to bring together people from all over the world with a diversity of culture, race, region, and tradition. From this point of view, the Olympic Games, which according to Jim Benagh (n.d.) began in ancient Greece as an international sports festival, experienced a revival in 1896 after which it was staged every fourth year except during two world wars. In subsequent years, the first World Cup was held in Uruguay though only 13 nations took part in this tournament, which would then turn into a mega-event that attracted a great number of people from all over the world, and which did not include any qualification process. What is obvious is that these and other mega-events did not come short of the impact of politics at all. As described by Benagh (n.d.), the ideology of nationalism, which swept the world during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, left its mark on the Olympics and athletic nationalism was brought to a peak by Nazi Germany, which staged the 1936 Games in Berlin and used the Olympics to propagandize its cause. Besides, he also emphasized that the political overtones of the Olympics did not lessen with the fall of Nazi Germany with various effects on subsequent tournaments that were staged in different regions of the world.

One of the most destructive occasions that occurred during the Games was the one during which 11 Israelis were killed by Palestinians in the Munich Olympics staged in 1972. Indeed, this type of political ideologies was settled in time in the minds of those who were attempting to create an effect of any type. Though political interests cannot be said to be as destructive as it was in the past, they are still evident in various processes of sports mega-events from the qualification process to the protests that occur during the Games.

This study will be followed by a literature review on the issue of the impact of political and current situations of nations that seek to hold sports mega-events and three other sections. The third section will encompass this type of impacts on sports mega-events in the world while the fourth section will touch upon the issue in Turkey in detail. Finally, the study will be completed with a conclusion.

## 2. Literature Review

Few studies have systematically investigated the possible political effects of sports mega-events though there is a large literature that debates the short-term and long-term economic impact of SME such as the Olympics (Theiner, 2017). Politics take place in a major part of the SMEs whether in a direct or indirect way in various amounts. The reason behind such a fact can be hidden in the characteristics of the sports itself. As sports tournaments attract a huge number of people from all around the world for the sake of supporting their teams or nations, they may turn into a show of strength by some figures. To illustrate, Hitler used the Olympics held in Berlin in 1936 for propaganda purposes while he also made use of the World Cup 1938 to strengthen his power in various ways. Furthermore, even today such issues are raised by some politicians with comparisons to Hitler's propaganda. For example, as reported by The Guardian (2018) news agency, "[Boris Johnson](#) has predicted Vladimir Putin will revel in the World Cup in Russia this summer in the same way that Adolf Hitler did in the Olympic Games in Berlin in 1936." Some believe that the selection of host nations was not that controversial until Russia and Qatar were selected as the host nations of World Cup in different years. Zimbalist (2015) states that until the recent selection of Russia and Qatar as hosts of the 2018 and 2022 World Cups, the selection of host nations was relatively uncontroversial, if regularly accompanied by accusations of corruption against individual FIFA members. SMEs are huge organizations, during which political purposes are sought for a wide range of interests among which are gaining recognition, affording advantages, making political gains, etc. According to Hiller (1995, 2000), winning the title of "host" in and of itself requires an often long and expensive bidding process that can align typically adverse political and economic interests with a sense of civic and/or national pride. In addition, mega-sporting events can be used as a platform for the promotion of international human rights and social justice and can serve as a tool for the international recognition of states (ESSAYS, 2018). Such thoughts are expected to trigger the impact of political pressures on those who are involved in the selection of host nations of SMEs.

## 3. Impacts in the World

SMEs are organizations in all types of sports that can be staged anywhere in the world with some certain rules and principles related to the selection process of the host nations. The selection process or post-selection can sometimes be under the influence of political figures of the would-be host nation or the winner host nation. The world has

witnessed a plethora of occasions during which such political effects were put into practice to obtain the opportunity to bring in people to their country in the capacity of the host nation.

According to Megan M. Granger (2008), *“the force of the Olympic Games as a medium of political influence in international relations is an as of “soft power”.*” As defined by Joseph Nye (1990), soft power is *“to get others to want what you want”.* As stated by Granger (2008), Nye believes that soft power relies not on the threats and coercion of hard power, but instead provides incentives for cooperation, and it relies on the power of shared ideas to make policies seem legitimate. This is what was implemented by the Republic of China before and when they were awarded the bid to host the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing. Granger (2008) states that though there were many issues ranging from pollution to shortage of water, to human right issues raised by Tibetans, Beijing was given the title as the host city for the Games. This case highlights that the Olympic Games are not freed from the political influence of countries that wish to make use of the Olympic Games to make their policies seem favourable.

When Russia was selected as the host nation for the Winter Games and the World Cup in 2014 and 2018 respectively with high levels of controversy, the political impact of the host nations became more evident as to the selection process of SMEs. According to Uwe Halbach (2014), Sochi 2014 confronted the world with the hitherto largely neglected *“Circassian question”.* He further notes that although the Olympic city and its North Caucasian neighbourhood had been the Circassians’ historical homeland until 1864, the host nation neglected to include them in the planning of the Games (ibid). Based on these facts, it can be arguably said that Russia’s last two decades of internationally political and financial power after Vladimir Putin came to the throne, which would not be a wrong expression, and thus the relevant power was open to use for more advantages that could be gained. It is no surprise that this country which is bombarded with questions related to human rights, feminists and many other figures and movements was titled as the host nation of the two biggest SMEs in the world.

The decision to give the hosting title to Qatar, a tiny Middle East country, was highly controversial at the time and is still being debated on some platforms. As was stated by the-then FIFA president Sepp Blatter, *“it may well be that we made a mistake at the time”.* According to Vince Siu (2013), FIFA does not conform to the standards that are laid down by it when considering the issue of awarding the small Middle Eastern country a World Cup bid as the host nation. He further notes,

*“The World Cup and foreign labour abuse in host countries” sounds exactly like the kind of problem that should never have been inflicted on FIFA in the first place, such is the emphasis given to the separation of football from politics and anything of the sort. Sadly, this was always going to be tough. Especially with, in Blatter’s words, football being “a global unifying force for the good, a force that offers to be inclusive in every which way and a force that has written anti-discrimination on its banner under my presidency.” Especially with FIFA’s goal to bring the World Cup to places that haven’t hosted it*

*before—South Africa, Brazil, Russia and now Qatar (representing the Middle East); the likes of Australia and China are surely not far behind.” (2013)*

It seems that this controversy will not come to an end as political figures are not eager to stand clear of interference in such big organizations bearing in mind that SMEs are huge income channels as well as a symbol of international power and recognition.

#### **4. The Situation in Turkey**

Turkey is a highly special country with its diversified regions, communities and traditions across the country. However, what makes this country special is something that should be considered in relation to sports. As of the very beginning of the independence day of Turkish Republic, Turks have been a huge fan of all types of sports and are known to be a sports country, notably a football country. The founder of Turkey, Atatürk said *“I like the sportsman who is intelligent, agile as well as morally upright”*, indicating that sportsmanship should be adopted by the whole community as it reflects the spirit of them. Nothing has changed up to now for this big country when it comes to love for sports, notably football. However, nothing has changed in terms of political conflicts as well as human right issues in this country. Thus, acquisitions are not easily made. The first time when Turkey applied to host a SME was the year 2000 (Uzkesici, 2018). At that time, Turkey submitted her first bid for organizing the Olympic Games, which is regarded the biggest SME in the world. However, she was the loser for that bid as well as for the other two subsequent two bids (Uzkesici, 2018).

In Turkey, it is believed by a majority of people that being the loser party is not solely an outcome of the selection processes that are conducted under rules and principles laid down. On the contrary, there is a belief that as Turkey is a Muslim country and geopolitically surrounded by Middle Eastern countries, where wars are still going on, and that some countries or figures attempt to halt the success and development of Turkey in any type of organizations. In fact, they are right to think that their country deserves to host a SME as approximately 25 new stadiums have been built over the last decade in accordance with standards of UEFA, FIFA and other sports foundations. Besides, Turkey is a touristic country where sports-based visitors are able to enjoy their time by being engaged in a great number of activities at times before or after the sports activities included in the organizations being hosted by the country. Finally, Turks are of the opinion that İstanbul is one of the most beautiful cities in the world and should be honoured with an Olympic Game organization.

On the other hand, the selection process is carried out considering some important rules and principles such as human rights, democracy, transportation, and security. Turkey applies to bid for the Olympic Games to host in İstanbul, a city which is known for its traffic congestion, which can be considered as a disadvantage by the committee that makes the final decision for the winner of the host nation. Besides, Turkey is surrounded by Middle Eastern countries leading to beliefs that security is in danger at high levels. Some also believe that Turkey is notorious related to human right

issues, especially when it comes to woman rights. And finally, rivals of İstanbul for the bid were highly developed and well-organized nations, among which were Greece and Japan considering the application period.

And what is more, though it is believed that Turkey was dismissed from being awarded to the bid for hosting the Olympic Games, it is observed that there are a number of SMEs that have been awarded to Turkey over the last decade. Among these are UEFA Champions League and UEFA Europe League Finals in İstanbul in 2005 and 2009, respectively, the 1971 Mediterranean Games in İzmir and the 2013 Mediterranean Games in Mersin, the 2005 Summer Universiade in İzmir and the 2011 Winter Universiade in Erzurum. Besides, İstanbul was awarded to host UEFA Champions League in 2020.

## **5. Methodology**

### **5.1 Method**

In this study, the inferential statistics method was used to collect and interpret the data based on graphics and tables including quantitative information related to the host cities and countries of the MGEs. As Turkey was taken as basis in this study, information related to Turkey's cities that hosted or was awarded to host the World Cup, the European Cup, Universiade, the Mediterranean Games, and the Olympic Games as well as a list of host cities and countries, one each from North America, South America, Europe, Africa, and Asia where every country is eligible to be selected as the host city or country, will be included in tables and interpreted. There is a limitation of year regarding hosting starting from the year 2020 up to now. The historical data of the relevant five MGEs will be used to find out whether Turkey was subjected to any political bias, impact or injustice as to hosting these events.

### **5.2 Data Collection Tool**

The data collection tool used in this study is the historical record related to the hosting cities and countries of the abovementioned MGEs in the list of countries including Turkey. To collect data, these historical records were obtained from the internet.

### **5.3 Data Analysis**

The data of the study will be analysed in terms of statistics and further interpretation related to the hosting cities and countries in the list including Turkey. The data will be interpreted to determine whether Turkey was the subject of any political impact in any of the given organizations with special attention on those Turkey advanced to the level during which the final two countries competed.

## 6. Analysis and Results

**Table 1:** Statistics related to the hosting cities/countries of the World Cup

Year	Country	Host
2002	Turkey	<b>No</b>
	United States	No
	Brazil	No
	France	No
	South Africa	No
	Japan	Yes
2006	Turkey	<b>No</b>
	United States	No
	Brazil	No
	France	No
	South Africa	No
	Japan	No
2010	Turkey	<b>No</b>
	United States	No
	Brazil	No
	France	No
	South Africa	Yes
	Japan	No
2014	Turkey	<b>No</b>
	United States	No
	Brazil	Yes
	France	No
	South Africa	No
	Japan	No
2018	Turkey	<b>No</b>
	United States	No
	Brazil	No
	France	No
	South Africa	No
	Japan	No
2022	Turkey	<b>No</b>
	United States	No
	Brazil	No
	France	No
	South Africa	No
	Japan	No

**Table 2:** Statistics related to the hosting cities/countries of the European Cup

Year	Country	Host
2002	Turkey	<b>No</b>
	United States	No
	Brazil	No
	France	No
	South Africa	No
	Japan	Yes

2006	Turkey	<b>No</b>
	United States	No
	Brazil	No
	France	No
	South Africa	No
	Japan	No
2010	Turkey	<b>No</b>
	United States	No
	Brazil	No
	France	No
	South Africa	Yes
	Japan	No
2014	Turkey	<b>No</b>
	United States	No
	Brazil	Yes
	France	No
	South Africa	No
	Japan	No
2018	Turkey	<b>No</b>
	United States	No
	Brazil	No
	France	No
	South Africa	No
	Japan	No
2022	Turkey	<b>No</b>
	United States	No
	Brazil	No
	France	No
	South Africa	No
	Japan	No

**Table 3:** Statistics related to the hosting cities/countries of Universiade

Year	Country	Host
2002	Turkey	<b>No</b>
	United States	No
	Brazil	No
	France	No
	South Africa	No
	Japan	Yes
2006	Turkey	<b>No</b>
	United States	No
	Brazil	No
	France	No
	South Africa	No
	Japan	No
2010	Turkey	<b>No</b>
	United States	No
	Brazil	No
	France	No
	South Africa	Yes



	Japan	No	
2014	Turkey	<b>No</b>	
	United States	No	
	Brazil	Yes	
	France	No	
	South Africa	No	
	Japan	No	
		Turkey	<b>No</b>
2018	United States	No	
	Brazil	No	
	France	No	
	South Africa	No	
	Japan	No	
		Turkey	<b>No</b>
	2022	United States	No
Brazil		No	
France		No	
South Africa		No	
Japan		No	
		Turkey	<b>No</b>
		United States	No

**Table 4:** Statistics related to the hosting cities/countries of the Mediterranean Games

Year	Country	Host	
2002	Turkey	<b>No</b>	
	United States	No	
	Brazil	No	
	France	No	
	South Africa	No	
	Japan	Yes	
		Turkey	<b>No</b>
2006	United States	No	
	Brazil	No	
	France	No	
	South Africa	No	
	Japan	No	
		Turkey	<b>No</b>
	2010	United States	No
Brazil		No	
France		No	
South Africa		Yes	
Japan		No	
		Turkey	<b>No</b>
2014		United States	No
	Brazil	Yes	
	France	No	
	South Africa	No	
	Japan	No	
		Turkey	<b>No</b>
	2018	United States	No
Brazil		No	
France		No	
		Turkey	<b>No</b>

	South Africa	No
	Japan	No
2022	Turkey	<b>No</b>
	United States	No
	Brazil	No
	France	No
	South Africa	No
	Japan	No

**Table 5:** Statistics related to the hosting cities/countries of the Olympic Games

Year	Country	Host
2002	Turkey	<b>No</b>
	United States	No
	Brazil	No
	France	No
	South Africa	No
	Japan	Yes
	2006	Turkey
United States		No
Brazil		No
France		No
South Africa		No
Japan		No
2010		Turkey
	United States	No
	Brazil	No
	France	No
	South Africa	Yes
	Japan	No
	2014	Turkey
United States		No
Brazil		Yes
France		No
South Africa		No
Japan		No
2018		Turkey
	United States	No
	Brazil	No
	France	No
	South Africa	No
	Japan	No
	2022	Turkey
United States		No
Brazil		No
France		No
South Africa		No
Japan		No

## 7. Conclusion

Hosting SMEs are organizations is in great demand by a great number of countries as they open new doors to international recognition, power, economic gains and many other advantages. Though it is also known that they may turn into disappointment due to high amount of economic costs arising from preparation processes, they are sought to show that the host nation has the capacity to welcome people from all over the world with a sense of pride.

This study focused on the political impacts in SMEs in relation to Turkey and some other specific host nations in different regions of the world. It is observed that while there are not evident political impacts of Turkish government or any other figures against the selection of Turkey as the host nation, the selection of some host nations such as Russia and Qatar in the 2000s, and the use of the Olympic Games and World Cup under the governance of Hitler in the past were highly controversial.

In addition, while the Olympic Games committee is expected to abide by some rules and principles based on security, human rights, democracy and being a unifying force for the whole world, it is seen that the selection of countries including China, Brazil, Russia and Qatar for hosting SMEs is not something that was carried out in this direction. Finally, whereas Turkey was not awarded to host three Olympic Games in about 20 years, it should not be thought that the decision was made solely based on political reasons as the rivals were from highly developed and well-organized countries that could properly organize relevant SMEs in their cities.

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