

Istanbul: How Turkey's Cultural Capital Has Shaped Its Foreign Policy

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INTRODUCTION

This paper compares descriptions of Istanbul from the time of the 2010 European Capital of Culture (ECoC) to the 2020 Olympic Games bid to show how the city has served and influenced Turkey's evolving foreign policy priorities. In using culture as a means for political analysis, this paper is indebted to Joseph S. Nye Jr.'s concept of soft power: "the ability to obtain preferred outcomes through attraction" (2009, p. 160). It begins by asserting that Turkey presented Istanbul as a religiously diverse, European city during the 2010 ECoC in the hopes of galvanising its accession negotiations with the European Union (EU). It then describes how these efforts failed to progress Turkey's EU accession, inspiring Turkey to assertively court alliances with other, mainly Muslim, states as part of its 'global vision'. It concludes that Istanbul's bid for the 2020 Olympic Games reflects this shift in foreign policy by highlighting the city's Islamic heritage for the benefit of potential allies across Asia, Africa and the Middle East.

2010 ECoC:

SUPPORTING TURKEY-EU RELATIONS

Underpinning Istanbul's bid for the 2010 ECoC programme was, in part, Turkey's long-standing interest in becoming a member of the EU. Though Turkey joined the Council of Europe in 1949, its path to EU membership did not begin until 1987, when it first lodged its application for membership. However, it "was not until 1999 that the Union recognised it as a candidate, and negotiations began only in 2005" (Pinder & Usherwood 2008, p. 138). By the time of the 2010 ECoC programme, Turkey

had made limited progress on accession negotiations: only one of the 35 chapters required for EU membership had been resolved (European Commission 2010, p. 5).

With so much work remaining, Turkish officials used the ECoC programme to persuade Europeans that Istanbul, and by extension, Turkey, belongs within Europe. Promotional pamphlets from the time described how "in terms of culture and civilisation, Istanbul is one of the richest cities in Europe [...]. [The ECoC project] aims to take this important chance to remind everyone that the roots of European culture lie in [Istanbul], and that [Turks] are a part of that culture" (Istanbul 2010 ECoC Agency 2010a, p. 20). Even Prime Minister Erdoğan proclaimed in 2010 that "Istanbul with its history, culture, civilisation and people is a city that has its face turned toward Europe. As much as this city has internalised European culture, European culture has been shaped by Istanbul" (Istanbul 2010 ECoC Agency 2010d, p. 28). Beyond shaping Europeans' perceptions of Istanbul's past, the cultural activities were also designed to "project a new and different image of Istanbul as a modern, contemporary European cultural centre" (ECORYS 2011, p. 86). By forthrightly describing Istanbul as a European city, both the organisers and the Prime Minister hoped that visitors would see it as such.

Positioning Istanbul as a European city was one tactic Turkey hoped would accelerate its EU accession negotiations. Nuri Çolakoğlu, Chairman of the Istanbul ECoC Select Committee, even stated in a 2006 interview that "Istanbul's title as an ECOC can be useful as it will attract many people to Istanbul in 2010 and so help people to see what actually Turkey stands for. I am sure this will help ease the ten-

sions during the [EU] accession process” (Euractiv.com, 2006). Once the ECoC was underway, Prime Minister Erdoğan declared that “given that Turkey is a candidate State destined to join the European Union, Istanbul’s designation as a European Capital of Culture will further the Europe-

an political project, the European values, and the sense of European belonging” (Istanbul 2010 ECoC Agency 2010d, p. 28). Thus, both the programme organisers and politicians were clear in their objective of using Istanbul as a means of soft power to enhance their relations with the EU.

BRIDGING RELIGIOUS DIFFERENCES DURING THE 2010 ECoC PROGRAMME

One of the main objectives Turkey hoped to achieve with the 2010 ECoC was to reassure Europe that a secular Muslim country could be integrated to the EU, predominately comprised of countries with Christian heritages. Istanbul, a city where Muslims, Christians and Jews have co-existed in relative peace for thousands of years, functioned as an illustrative microcosm of Turkey’s integration into the EU. In 2006 Mr Çolakoğlu even boasted how “Is-



Catching Europe in Istanbul:

Gaïl Lefebvre, France, graphic designer - www.bookphotogail.com:

„I could have taken this picture in my neighborhood in Montreuil, a suburb of Paris. Atmosphere, a kebab shop, pedestrian style: it all seems so close and similar to the corner of the street where I come from.“

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tambul is one of those rare places where you can find a synagogue, a church and a mosque next to each other on the same street” (Euractiv.com, 2006). Prime Minister Erdoğan also expressed pride in the city for a similar reason: “The sound of prayers rising from those min-

arets never suppresses the sound of church bells. Istanbul is a capital of tolerance as much as it is of culture” (Istanbul 2010 ECoC Agency 2010d, p. 28). For Turkey, the 2010 Istanbul ECoC programme was a means of fostering Turkey-EU relations by demonstrating the religious diversity of the city, and by extension, Turkey.

Istanbul’s religious diversity was highlighted by two events prominently featured in the ECoC programme. The first was the exhibition, *Legendary Istanbul: 8,000 Years of a Capital*, held at the Sakıp Sabancı Museum. In recounting the history of the city, the exhibition employed many valuable Christian objects, like “a 14th-century book of the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, written in Arabic; a richly illustrated Armenian Bible; and a dictionary of Ottoman Turkish written in Hebrew” (Fowler, 2010). The exhibition also featured “a planetarium-like projection to show how dozens of colourful domes inside existing structures like churches and mosques

reflect the commonalities rather than the divisions among faiths" (Fowler, 2010). In the words of Güler Sabancı, one of the exhibition's sponsors, "the concept is to show the diversity of Istanbul through its domes, the domes of every religion" (Fowler, 2010). Religious diversity was also highlighted in one of the documentaries screened, *Three Days in Istanbul*, which "reveals Istanbul's codes embracing fraternity of all religious communities that have been living together in a great peace and happiness since 1453" (Istanbul 2010 ECoC Agency, 2010b). More specifically, it showed religious ceremonies performed by Muslims, Christians and Jews and highlighted the similarities between all three.

By choosing projects like these, the Turkish ECoC Select Committee was trying to demonstrate that differences between Christians and Muslims, "which at first glance [seem] plausible, [become] dissolved into a complex and puzzling pattern of cultural and religious exchanges that does not provide a reasonable platform for the border demarcation of the EU along religious lines" (Jung & Raudvere 2008, p. 14). As stated in the ex-post evaluation of Istanbul 2010, the cultural activities "contributed to the objective of redefining citizenship in the context of Turkey's hoped-for accession to the EU, through projects that emphasised values of tolerance [and] celebrated the diversity of cultures and ethnic groups present in the city" (ECORYS 2011, p. 67). In reviewing all elements of the ECoC programme, it is clear that Istanbul was used as a means of enhancing Turkey's chances of EU membership.

LOOKING BEYOND THE EU TOWARDS A 'GLOBAL VISION'

Despite the hopes pinned on the 2010 ECoC programme, it failed to galvanise Tur-

key's EU accession negotiations and instead showed that while "Turkey has become adept at transmitting messages, [...] symbolic achievements have far exceeded concrete ones" (Abramowitz & Barkey 2009, p. 126). In fact, the latest European Commission report on Turkey from October 2012 states that eight chapters remain off the table and no chapter will be provisionally closed until Turkey normalises its relations with Cyprus (European Commission 2012, p. 5).

This lack of progress has frustrated Turkish officials, who are pressing for a decision to be made ahead of Turkey's 100 year anniversary in 2023. During a visit to Germany in October 2012, Prime Minister Erdoğan was asked if Turkey would be an EU member by 2023 and replied: "They probably won't string us along that long. But if they do string us along until then the European Union will lose out, and at the very least they will lose Turkey" (Coskun, 2012). Despite this ultimatum, Mr Erdoğan made clear in February 2013 that Turkey has not abandoned its EU ambitions: "Turkey has never given up on its European Union targets. There may be some that are expecting [us] to steer away, but it is clear that we are continuing to take determined steps" (Hürriyet Daily News, 2013). With accession negotiations at a standstill, Turkey is still pursuing EU membership, but its interest is increasingly tempered by frustration.

With its EU aspirations dwindling, Turkey has begun to more actively pursue diplomatic relations with other actors across the Middle East, Africa and Asia. According to Mr Erdoğan, this 'global vision' has already yielded results: "We have institutional ties with ASEAN [Association of Southeast Asian Nations], we have an observer status at the Arab League, we are a strategic partner of the African Union, and we also have ties with the

Organization of American States. [...] Those are not alternatives to European Union. We see them as [factors] strengthening our strategic relations" (Hürriyet Daily News, 2013). Moreover, Mr Erdoğan stated in January 2013 that Turkey is pursuing membership with the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO): "If we get into the SCO, we will say good-bye to the European Union. The Shanghai Five is better -- much more powerful. Pakistan wants in. India wants in as well. If the SCO wants us, all of us will become members of this organisation" (Uslu, 2013). While he may have been grandstanding slightly, Mr Erdoğan's frustration with the EU and interest in working with more receptive international partners ahead of the 2023 centenary is clear.

Implicit in Turkey's 'global vision' is a foreign policy agenda grounded in self-determination, a stark contrast to the EU accession negotiations. In 2012, Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu wrote that henceforth "our foreign policy will be conducted autonomously. We suffer from a perception that other powers design regional politics and we only perform the roles assigned to us. We need to do away with this psychological sense of inferiority which has permeated in many segments of our society and amongst political elites" (Davutoğlu 2012, p. 4). He justified his comments by highlighting Turkey's new role in "several regional and international organizations" as well as its participation in international conferences (2012, p. 4). No longer content to wait for the EU's approval, Turkey is increasingly asserting itself on the world stage.

2020 OLYMPIC GAMES: SUPPORTING TURKEY'S 'GLOBAL VISION'

As Turkey fulfils its 'global vision', the 2020 Olympic Games represent a fresh op-

portunity to fashion Istanbul's rich culture into an effective soft power tool. For example, the 2020 Olympic Games bid book states that one of Turkey's Games-related objectives is to enhance "Turkey's position in the world" by "repositioning [...] Turkey's image and reputation, with benefits for trade and society" (Istanbul 2020 Bid Committee 2013, p. 23). This objective is also shared by politicians: when meeting with the IOC in February 2013, Istanbul's Mayor, Kadir Topbaş, said that "Istanbul 2020 is the first sports bid in Turkish history to have been officially launched by the Prime Minister, and it has been identified as a strategic national priority" (Mackay, 2013). Even Mr Erdoğan himself has commented that Turkey's aim in hosting the Olympic Games is to "connect its cities with the world" as "Turkey is looking at the world 360 degrees, not only with its economic strength but also with its soft power" (Hürriyet Daily News, 2013). While the 2010 ECoC programme failed to progress Turkey-EU relations, the Olympic Games represent an opportunity for Turkey to show its strengths to the world and advance its 'global vision'.

One way in which Turkey aspires to connect with other countries during the 2020 Olympic Games is through Istanbul's Islamic heritage. While specific examples of this are provided below, it is necessary to first explain that many of the countries in which feature in Turkey's 'global vision' are Muslim. For example, the SCO's member states include Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. With these potentially new partners, Turkey's Muslim population is a commonality, not a point of departure, as with the EU. In fact, when speaking about joining the SCO, Mr Erdoğan even said: "The Shanghai Five is better and more powerful [than the EU], and we have common values with them." (Uslu,

2013). While 'values' is a broad term, the Prime Minister may have been referencing, in part, the shared religious values of the region. As Turkey deepens ties with the SCO and other organisations, Islam provides an important commonality.

In lobbying the IOC to select Istanbul for the 2020 Games, Turkish officials have cleverly aligned themselves with other Muslim countries by implying that a victory for Istanbul would be a victory for the global Muslim community. While in London for the 2012 Olympic Games, Mr Erdoğan complained that "no country with a majority of Muslim population has ever hosted the Olympics. [...] People will ask 'Why? What is missing [in these countries]?' " (Hürriyet Daily News, 2012). Similarly, the Istanbul Olympic Games bid book specifically points out that Istanbul would be the "first games in a secular Muslim society" (Istanbul 2020 Bid Committee 2013, p. 17). Implicit in these observations is that the International Olympic Committee (IOC) should select Istanbul not only as a gesture to the Muslim world, but also to honour one of the Fundamental Principles of Olympism, as set out in the Olympic Charter: "Any form of discrimination with regard to a country or a person on grounds of race, religion, politics, gender or otherwise is incompatible with belonging to the Olympic Movement" (International Olympic Committee, 2011). By highlighting its Muslim citizens to the IOC, rather than camouflaging them in the name of 'religious diversity' as with the 2010 ECoC programme, Turkey is aligning itself with the world's Muslim nations. In doing so, it is laying the groundwork for multilateral partnerships beyond the EU.

Finally, while Turkey went to great lengths during the 2010 ECoC programme to demonstrate Istanbul's religious diversity for the benefit of European audiences, Islam is the

only religion mentioned in the Istanbul 2020 Olympic Games bid book. While Istanbul is a multifaceted city, the fact remains that it supports over 3,000 mosques and less than 100 churches and synagogues (Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality, 2008). More broadly, 99.8 per cent of Turkish citizens identify as Muslim (CIA, 2013). The 2020 Olympic Games bid book mentions Istanbul's Muslim culture six times, but doesn't discuss the city's Christian or Jewish communities. For example, the bid book describes how in Istanbul "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" (Istanbul 2020 Bid Committee 2013, p. 25). Though a small detail, it nevertheless presents an interesting point of comparison from the political agenda of 2010 to Turkey's current 'global vision'.

CONCLUSION

Turkey's evolving foreign policy agenda is clearly reflected in comparing depictions of Istanbul during 2010 ECoC programme to the 2020 Olympic Games bid. In 2010 Turkish authorities made every effort to present the city as multi-religious to quell European fears that a Muslim Turkey could not be integrated into the residually Christian EU. However, their efforts were in vain: in 2013 EU accessions negotiations remain frozen and are likely to stay that way unless there are unexpected changes in Turkish-Cypriot relations. Frustrated by what it perceives to be discrimination, Turkey has adopted a 'global vision', a foreign policy agenda that prioritises deepened ties with other Muslim nations and self-determination.

As a result, the Turkish organisers of the 2020 Olympic Games bid have presented Istanbul as representative of the Muslim world, a reversal from earlier efforts to present the city as a microcosm of European religious plurality. Whether Turkey wins the Olympic Games bid and is then able to use the opportunity to further its foreign policy ambitions remains to be seen. Regardless of the bid outcome, it is clear that Istanbul has played a supporting role in shaping Turkey's foreign policy and is likely to continue to be deployed as a soft power tool.

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