



## GEOPOLITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE NEW SCENARIO IN THE BIDDING PROCESS FOR THE HOST CITIES OF THE OLYMPIC GAMES

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### Abstract:

**Study Objective:** To analyze the new conjuncture in the process for bidding to be the host city of the Summer or Winter Olympic Games.

**Methodology/Approach:** Taking the 1990s as an initial reference point, this qualitative and exploratory research has been conducted, entailing the analysis and synthesis of data and information from secondary sources. The research extensively involves scrutinizing academic articles, books, news reports, and sources published on specialized websites.

**Originality/Relevance:** The hosting of the Games and the demands imposed by the IOC have been increasingly criticized. A rise in the number of referendums with local inhabitants of bidding cities has resulted in applications being withdrawn throughout the selection process.

**Main Results:** The results indicate that the new geopolitical scenario has significant implications for the bidding process for the Olympics. An unusual scenario ensues in the geopolitical environment of the Olympics, promoting not only changes in the profile of candidates, but also institutional changes within the IOC itself.

**Theoretical/methodological contributions:** It can provide a better understanding of the complex relationship between politics, power, and sports events. The research can help to identify key variables that impact the selection process, which can then be further investigated through quantitative studies.

**Social/Management Contribution:** The research can shed light on the impact of the selection process on society, including its economic, political, and social consequences. It can also inform the decision-making process of the IOC and other stakeholders involved.

**Keywords:** Olympic games. Geopolitics. IOC.

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## ANÁLISE GEOPOLÍTICA DO NOVO CENÁRIO NO PROCESSO DE LICITAÇÃO DAS CIDADES-SEDE DOS JOGOS OLÍMPICOS

### Resumo:

**Objetivo do estudo:** Analisar a nova conjuntura que se pronuncia no processo de licitação das cidades-sede dos Jogos Olímpicos de verão e inverno.

**Metodologia/Abordagem:** Tendo a década de 1990 como ponto de referência inicial, esta pesquisa qualitativa e exploratória foi conduzida, envolvendo a análise e síntese de dados e informações provenientes de fontes secundárias. A pesquisa abrange extensivamente a análise de artigos acadêmicos, livros, notícias e fontes publicadas em sites especializados.

**Originalidade/Relevância:** A realização das Olimpíadas e as demandas impostas pelo COI têm sido cada vez mais criticadas. O aumento do número de referendos com os habitantes locais das cidades postulantes resultou na retirada de candidaturas durante todo o processo de seleção.

**Principais Resultados:** Os resultados indicam que o novo cenário geopolítico tem implicações significativas no processo de licitação para os Jogos Olímpicos. Surge um cenário incomum no ambiente geopolítico dos Jogos, promovendo não apenas mudanças no perfil dos candidatos, mas também mudanças institucionais dentro do próprio COI.

**Contribuições Teóricas/Metodológicas:** Pode fornecer uma melhor compreensão da complexa relação entre política, poder e eventos esportivos. A pesquisa pode ajudar a identificar variáveis-chave que impactam o processo de seleção, que podem ser investigadas mais a fundo por meio de estudos quantitativos.

**Contribuição Social/Gerencial:** A pesquisa pode fornecer informações sobre o impacto do processo de licitação na sociedade, incluindo suas consequências econômicas, políticas e sociais. Também pode informar o processo de tomada de decisão do COI e de outros atores envolvidos.

**Palavras-chave:** Jogos olímpicos. Geopolítica. COI.

## ANÁLISIS GEOPOLÍTICO DEL NUEVO ESCENARIO EN EL PROCESO DE LICITACIÓN DE LAS CIUDADES SEDE DE LOS JUEGOS OLÍMPICOS

### Resumen:

**Objetivo del estudio:** Analizar la nueva situación destacada en el proceso de licitación para ser la ciudad anfitriona de los Juegos Olímpicos de verano o invierno.

**Metodología/Enfoque:** Tomando la década de 1990 como punto de referencia inicial, esta investigación cualitativa y exploratoria se ha llevado a cabo, implicando el análisis y la síntesis de datos e información proveniente de fuentes secundarias. La investigación abarca extensivamente el análisis de artículos académicos, libros, noticias y fuentes publicadas en sitios especializados.

**Originalidad/Relevancia:** La organización de los Juegos y las demandas impuestas por el COI han sido cada vez más criticadas. Un aumento en el número de referendos con los habitantes locales de las ciudades candidatas ha resultado en la retirada de solicitudes durante todo el proceso de selección.

**Resultados principales:** Los resultados indican que el nuevo escenario geopolítico tiene implicaciones significativas para el proceso de licitación para los Juegos Olímpicos. Un escenario inusual surge en el entorno geopolítico de los Juegos, promoviendo no solo cambios en el perfil de los candidatos, sino también cambios institucionales dentro del propio COI.

**Contribuciones teóricas/metodológicas:** Puede proporcionar una mejor comprensión de la compleja relación entre política, poder y eventos deportivos. La investigación puede ayudar a identificar variables clave que afectan el proceso de selección, que luego pueden ser investigadas más a fondo a través de estudios cuantitativos.

**Contribución social/de gestión:** La investigación puede arrojar luz sobre el impacto del proceso de licitación en la sociedad, incluidas sus consecuencias económicas, políticas y sociales. También puede informar el proceso de toma de decisiones del COI y otros actores involucrados.

**Palabras clave:** Juegos Olímpicos. Geopolítica. COI.



## 1 Introduction

Since choosing Athens, Greece, as the 1896 host of the first-ever Olympic Games (OG) of the modern era, global political events have greatly influenced the decisions of the International Olympic Committee (IOC). Although the IOC supports the idea of political impartiality with regard to its deliberations<sup>1</sup>, global context – including wars, treaties, pandemics, political disputes, and social and economic aspects – dictates its institutional relations with governments, as well as its final resolutions. As pointed out by studies particularly dedicated to this subject, more than any technical aspect, potential legacy, or decision-making transparency, geopolitical factors were preponderant in the choice of host cities for multiple Olympics (Booth, 2011; Castilho & March Jr., 2019; Boniface, 2016; Goldblatt, 2016; Lenskyj, 2020). Some relevant factors, often used as institutional marketing, can be listed in this scenario, such as: political stability; economic factors, issues related to human rights and environmental policy. The choice of the host city for the Olympic Games is a complex process that involves numerous interrelated geopolitical factors that may or may not add up. While some aspects may be more relevant than others, all of them, depending on the timing of the decision, can contribute to the final deliberation. Ultimately, the choice of the host city must balance the needs and interests of the aspiring nation with those of the Olympic movement as a whole.

Success in sports has historically been seen as a valuable political opportunity to shape and enhance a country's image on the international stage, increasing its symbolic and diplomatic prestige (Booth, 2011; Houlihan, 1997; Arnaud & Riordan, 2013; Haut, Prohl, & Emrich, 2016; Krueger, 1995; Freeman, 2012; Reicher, 2013). This strategy involves leveraging the power and popularity of sports to improve a country's image and reputation in the international community. By hosting or participating in major sporting events, countries can project a positive image of themselves to the rest of the world and potentially improve their standing in the eyes of other nations. Taking advantage of the event's global visibility, countries promote a universal propaganda that includes the ability to manage large-scale projects, as well as expertise in athlete and visitor hospitality.

For example, in 1912 during the Stockholm Olympics, the British press expressed concern about the country's third-place finish in the medal table of that edition of the Games,

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<sup>1</sup> According to Rule 2, Line 10, of the "Olympic Charter": "Prohibition of all forms of political use of the Games: The IOC's role is: [...] to oppose any political or commercial abuse of sport and athletes." (IOC 2020).



claiming that such a position, considered a failure, could be seen as a possible decline of English culture (Krueger, 1995). In the following years, even more intensely, performance in international sports competitions was an important symbolic parameter of power and prestige during the Cold War (1947-1991), when countries of the capitalist Western bloc, led by the United States, vied for global geopolitical supremacy against countries of the socialist Eastern bloc, led by the Soviet Union (Hulme, 1990). Even countries without the hegemony of superpowers have aimed to host the Olympics, as was the case with Germany before World War I (Krueger, 1995; Hulme 1990) and more recently with countries in Asia and the Middle East (Allison & Monnington, 2002). The historical constancy of the ambition to host international sports competitions such as the Olympics has led to talk of a "global sporting arms race" (De Bosscher et al., 2007).

While researchers focus their analyses mainly on changes in the justifications and strategies of nations involved in these disputes (Grix & Carmichael, 2012; Bosscher et al., 2015), the results and real benefits in terms of international prestige have yet to be properly examined (Krüger, 1995). This is especially true of changes that have taken place in recent decades because, as will be seen in further detail later, recent processes of host city selection for the OG have suffered from a kind of "Olympic aversion". In this context, besides analyzing the particular circumstances of countries that withdrew their bids to be the OG host, one should also observe the motivations and consequences of this process for the IOC and for the countries elected to host these sporting events.

In these terms, the present essay analyzes recent processes of choosing host cities for the Olympic Games, in a dynamic that we can call "Olympic aversion" or "resistance," that is, a growing political reluctance in democratic countries to bear the obligations dictated by the IOC. In order to illustrate the main aspects around these dynamics, we take as privileged examples the choice of host cities for the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing, and for the 2024 and 2028 Summer Olympics, respectively organized in Paris and Los Angeles. Our argument is that the growing "resistance" among citizens of democratic countries to accept that local governments apply to host the Olympics has stimulated the IOC to support the candidacy of authoritarian nations. Such a change has consequences not only for the Olympics themselves, but also for global geopolitical disputes, given the international symbolic importance of the so-called mega-events. It is noticeable that, faced with the growing resistance in democratic countries to the holding of the Olympics, the candidates of dictatorial nations remain as the only available alternatives. Such a scenario, in turn, creates diplomatic and geopolitical opportunities



for emerging dictatorial powers to enjoy sporting soft power, exploiting in every way the Olympic symbolism and international visibility so that their strategic interests of their foreign policies are realized.

## 2 Theoretical framework

In regards to the theoretical framework of this study, we will address two main themes that are related to the main objective of this study. These are: i) the use of the Olympic Games as a soft-power diplomatic strategy, and ii) the relationship between soft-power, sports, and absolutist nations.

### 2.1 Olympic Games as a diplomatic strategy of soft power

Soft power is a concept coined by Joseph Nye, an American political scientist, which aims to describe a country's ability to influence others through non-coercive means. Soft power can be exercised through a variety of channels, including cultural exports, foreign aid, and public diplomacy. An area where soft power is often displayed is in the world of sports, particularly in events like the Olympics. (Nye, 1990; 2004; 2008).

The Olympics are a global sporting event that brings together athletes from all over the world to compete in various sports. It is not just a showcase of athletic prowess, but also a platform for nations to project their image and values to the rest of the world. (Horne, 2007; 2018). For many countries, the Olympics are an opportunity to set out their soft power. Through the display of their athletic achievements, cultural heritage, and national values, countries can increase their reputation and international influence. (Nye, 2004; 2008; Castilho & Marchi Jr., 2021).

Soft power is a key factor in determining a country's ability to project its image and values through the Olympics. Countries with strong soft power can leverage their cultural exports, diplomatic initiatives, and public diplomacy to improve their global reputation. By showcasing their cultural heritage, such as music, art, and food, countries can create a positive impression in the international community. For example, South Korea used the 2018 Winter Olympics to promote its pop culture, including K-pop and Korean dramas, which contributed to a more positive perception of the country in the world. (Ayhan, 2017; Vandenberghe, 2017).

In addition, the Olympics provide a unique platform for countries to exhibit their diplomatic initiatives. By promoting international cooperation, dialogue, and understanding,



countries can project their commitment to global peace and stability. For example, the joint participation of North and South Korea in the 2018 Winter Olympics not only symbolized the end of tensions between the two countries but also conveyed a message of hope to the international community. (Zhouxiang; Hong 2018).

The Olympics also offer a platform for countries to promote public diplomacy, which involves building relationships with individuals and groups in other countries to build trust, understanding, and influence. Through sports exchanges, cultural events, and humanitarian aid, countries can create a positive image of themselves and build goodwill in the international community. For example, the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, although postponed to 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighted Japan's strength in innovation and technology and its ability to respond to global challenges.

However, soft power is not just about projecting a positive image but also promoting universal values. The Olympics, as an event that emphasizes fair play, respect, and diversity, represent an opportunity to promote these values on a global scale. By demonstrating their commitment to these values, countries can build trust and influence in the international community. For example, the 2018 Winter Olympics held in Pyeongchang, South Korea, focused on promoting peace, respect, and understanding, through initiatives such as the 'peace bank', which aimed to promote dialogue and understanding between athletes from different countries. (Ayhan, 2017; Vandenberghe, 2017).

Such appropriations of sports soft power can be instrumentalized by both countries considered democratic and those whose governments approach dictatorial regimes. Now, the symbolic use of sports, and sports mega-events, is seen as a key piece in the diplomatic machinery of nations with more closed regimes but seeking political approaches and a new global image. A recent case is the organization of the 2022 Football World Cup in Qatar. The small Arab country, one of the world's largest producers of natural gas and oil, has been betting heavily on sports for the last two decades as a geopolitical tool through three main objectives: i) the pursuit of a healthier society; ii) progress and modernization through sports; and iii) foreign policy aiming for peace/security with other Arab countries and the West. (Castilho, Gomes, & Marchi Jr, 2022). Sport, run by the Qatari State in this case, ends up overshadowing internal problems, especially regarding human rights abuses such as the criminalization of LGBTQIA+ people and the exploitation of immigrants in the construction of stadiums for the 2022 World Cup (kafala).



## 2.2 *Soft power, sport and absolutist nations*

Sport has become an important tool for countries to exert their soft power, as it allows them to showcase their cultural values, identity, and achievements on a global stage. However, in absolutist nations, where power is highly centralized and individual freedoms are restricted, the use of sport as a soft power tool can be complicated.

Sport has the ability to transcend borders and connect people around the world. Major international sporting events, such as the Olympics or the World Cup, attract billions of viewers and generate intense national pride and emotions. Countries often invest heavily in their national teams and athletes to showcase their excellence and foster a positive image abroad. This investment can pay off in terms of increased tourism, foreign investment, and diplomatic leverage. (Nye, 2004; 2008, 2011; Murray, 2013; Falcous & Johnson, 2015; Grix, 2017).

Absolutist nations, such as North Korea or Saudi Arabia, have used sport to promote their political and ideological agenda. For instance, North Korea's participation in the 2018 Winter Olympics in South Korea, despite tensions between the two countries, was seen as a symbolic gesture of reconciliation. Similarly, Saudi Arabia's inclusion of female athletes in the Olympics was a step towards modernization and gender equality. (Murray, 2013; Falcous & Johnson, 2015; Grix, 2017).

However, in these nations, the use of sport as a soft power tool can also have negative consequences. Absolutist regimes often use sport to distract the population from internal problems or to legitimize their rule. For example, the Russian government's investment in sport was aimed at showcasing the country's greatness and masking economic and political difficulties. Similarly, the Qatari government's investment in sports infrastructure and events was meant to elevate the country's global status, while disregarding concerns over labor rights and democracy. (Kaynak, 2015; Grix; 2017).

Moreover, in absolutist nations, sport can be used as a means of control and oppression. For instance, the Saudi Arabian government has used sports as a way to reinforce its conservative social norms and marginalize minority groups. Women's participation in sports remains limited, and there are few opportunities for sports beyond traditional gender roles. Similarly, the North Korean government uses sport as a way to exert control over its population and to promote loyalty to the regime. Athletes are subject to rigorous training and discipline, and their success is attributed to the leadership of the country.



The use of sport as a soft power tool in absolutist nations is a complicated issue. While it can serve as a means of promoting positive social change and improving the image of the country abroad, it can also be used as a tool of oppression and control. As such, it is essential to examine the motives and practices of these nations when it comes to their investment in sports, to ensure that the use of sport serves the greater good of society rather than just the political agenda of the ruling elite.

Soft power can only be effective when it reflects the authentic values of the country, and it is perceived as such by the international community. Sports can be an effective tool to exhibit the cultural identity of a nation, but it must be done with integrity and respect for individual freedoms. Absolutist nations must understand that the world is increasingly interconnected, and their use of sports to exert power and control will not go unnoticed. As such, it is imperative for nations to embrace soft power as an effective tool to promote their interests and contribute to global peace and prosperity.

### 3 Methods

The methodology of a qualitative research is a crucial aspect of the study, as it involves the systematic collection and analysis of non-numerical data to gain an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The objective of this particular qualitative research is to analyze the new geopolitical scenario in the choice of host cities for the Olympic Games. This research aims to explore the underlying factors and dynamics that shape the selection process of host cities for the Olympic Games, with a particular focus on the impact of geopolitical factors.

Based on the assumption that the study aims to specifically analyze the contemporary changes in the bidding process of the Olympic Games, it was decided to focus on the time frame from the 1990s onwards. Furthermore, it is evident that with the end of the Cold War (1947-1991), a new geopolitical dynamism gradually emerges within sports institutions, guiding the choices of hosting mega-sporting events through new factors. It is highlighted that, even after the end of the declared conflict between the two blocs led by the United States (USA) and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), the reasons for designating hosts for sporting events remain political.

The bidding process for hosting the Olympic Games has undergone significant changes in recent years. The emergence of a new geopolitical scenario has introduced new challenges





and opportunities for cities seeking to host the games. This paper presents exploratory bibliographical research on the new geopolitical scenario in the bidding process for the 2022 Olympic Games in Beijing, 2024 in Paris, and 2028 in Los Angeles.

This exploratory bibliographical research relies on secondary sources of data. The research process involves the collection, analysis, and synthesis of information from published materials such as academic articles, books, reports, and online sources. The data collection process involved searching for relevant keywords such as ‘Olympic Games’, ‘geopolitics’, ‘bidding process’, ‘Beijing 2022’, ‘Paris 2024’, and ‘Los Angeles 2028’ in online databases such as Google Scholar, JSTOR, and Web of Science.

The inclusion criteria for selecting sources were relevance to the research question and publication in sources considered safe. Exclusion criteria were sources that did not meet the inclusion criteria or were duplicates. The data analysis process involved synthesizing the information from the selected sources and identifying themes related to the research question. This exploratory bibliographical research has provided insights into the new geopolitical scenario in the bidding process for the Olympic Games.

## 4. Analysis and discussion of results

### 4.1 *New times in the Olympic Scene*

As shown in Table 1, the quantity of host city bids for the Summer and Winter Games has been decreasing over the last three decades.<sup>2</sup> In 1992 there were seven candidates for the Summer Games and six, for the Winter ones. A scenario, such as the 1992 one, where there were several host bids, gave the IOC not only a chance to pick the city it most approved of, but also more possibilities of imposing conditions. It can be said that the greater the number of bids, the greater the requirements the IOC can demand.

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<sup>2</sup> The Winter OG were officially established in 1924, taking place in the same year as the Summer OG, despite being hosted by different cities. In 1986, however, the IOC decided to change this regime, disassociating the years in which the Summer and Winter OG would be held. Thus, the Summer OG took place in 1992 (in Barcelona, Spain), while the Winter OG took place in 1994 (in Lillehammer, Norway).



**Table 1.**

*Shortlist Of Cities Bidding To Host The Olympics (1992-2032)*

Summer Olympics		Winter Olympics	
Editions	Number of bidding cities	Editions	Number of bidding cities
<b>1992</b> <i>Barcelona</i>	7 candidatures	<b>1992</b> <i>Alberville</i>	6 candidatures
<b>1996</b> <i>Atlanta</i>	6 candidatures	<b>1994</b> <i>Lillehammer</i>	4 candidatures
<b>2000</b> <i>Sidney</i>	5 candidatures	<b>1998</b> <i>Nagano</i>	5 candidatures
<b>2004</b> <i>Athens</i>	5 candidatures	<b>2002</b> <i>Salt-Lake City</i>	4 candidatures
<b>2008</b> <i>Beijing</i>	5 candidatures	<b>2006</b> <i>Turin</i>	6 candidatures
<b>2012</b> <i>London</i>	5 candidatures	<b>2010</b> <i>Vancouver</i>	4 candidatures
<b>2016</b> <i>Rio de Janeiro</i>	4 candidatures	<b>2014</b> <i>Sotchi</i>	3 candidatures
<b>2020</b> <i>Tokyo</i>	3 candidatures	<b>2018</b> <i>Pyeong Chang</i>	3 candidatures
<b>2024/2028</b> <i>Paris</i> <i>Los Angeles</i>	2 candidatures	<b>2022</b> <i>Beijing</i>	2 candidatures
<b>2032*</b> <i>Brisbane</i>	New rules (Brisbane)	<b>2026*</b> <i>Milan-Cortina</i>	2 candidatures (4 cities) Milan-Cortina Stockholm-Are

\* The bidding processes for the 2026 and 2032 OG already follow new rules and norms due to bids being withdrawn after resistance from and referendums with citizens of bidding cities.

Nonetheless, since 1992, a gradual and growing historical inflection seems to have been taking place. From then on, various cities have rejected or withdrawn bids to host the Summer or Winter Games after popular referendums were held. That happened in Budapest (Hungary), Davos (Switzerland), Krakow (Poland), Boston (United States), Rome (Italy), Oslo (Norway), Stockholm (Sweden), Krakow (Poland), Hamburg and Munich (Germany).

With perhaps more dramatic contours, such an occurrence had already taken place in the early 1970s. At that time, the city of Denver, USA, was bidding to host the 1976 Winter Games. However, even with announcements of a 300% increase in its costs, a referendum was still held to consult the population on their opinion about the relevance of hosting the event. With the majority of its citizens rejecting the idea, the city's bid was withdrawn. The IOC then tried to hold the event in Whistler, Canada, but local politicians also declined the offer.



Subsequent talks between the IOC and the U.S. Olympic Committee led to Salt Lake City being considered an alternative as, while it had bid to host those OG, it had been rejected in the initial rounds of analysis and evaluation. At that later point, though, Salt Lake City's mayor also turned down the proposal, citing lack of federal government support. Moreover, Lake Placid, USA, which was actually bidding to host the following Winter Games, which would be in 1980, was also taken into consideration as a city where it could potentially be held, but that too did not pan out. Finally, because of the impasse, the 1976 Winter Games eventually took place in Innsbruck, Austria, which had already held the event in 1964.

So, although the 1976 Winter Games ultimately came to fruition, the events that led up to it are considered important precursors of political opposition movements against the realization of these sporting tournaments.

This kind of occurrence, whereby a significant part of a city's population rejects a proposal to host the OG, has become increasingly frequent since around 2008. Trying to work around the difficulties presented by this new situation, the IOC changed some of the rules governing the bidding process and the designation of host cities. Such changes seek to make the process shorter and, consequently, less costly. They also offer greater technical and financial support to bidding cities, with nearly a billion US dollars being granted in aid if the bid is successful. Yet, so far, all this does not seem to have been enough to soften cities' resistance and opposition against hosting the OG.

From the 1990s, but especially from the 2000s, we have noticed a gradual increase in the candidacies of developing countries, especially those from the BRICS group (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), concerning the Summer Olympic Games and the FIFA World Cup. The economic growth of these countries, combined with the soft power involved in hosting a mega event, are factors that justify and legitimize the public expenditures associated with the organization and construction of the necessary infrastructure. In this aspect, public opinion ends up buying the idea of excessive spending, given that the soft power would compensate in the medium and long term. (Grix & Lee, 2013).

#### *4.2 The Beijing, Paris, and Los Angeles Games*

For the 2022 Winter Games, six cities submitted host bids: Oslo (Norway), Stockholm (Sweden), Krakow (Poland), Lviv (Ukraine), Beijing (China), and Amalty (Kazakhstan). The number was twice as high as the one initially recorded for the hosting of its previous edition



(IOC, 2013). This increase in bids gave rise to optimism within the IOC, which in fact celebrated the episode. The IOC president, Thomas Bach, emphasized that "these cities and their supporters clearly understand the benefits that hosting the Games can have and the long-lasting legacy that a Games can bring to a region." According to his assessment, "many cities that did not go on to win the right to host the Games have also noted benefits as a result of their bids." (IOC, 2013). Presently, with due regard to the preceding statement made by the IOC president, Thomas Bach, there is a growing belief that competing for the privilege of hosting a mega sports event can yield considerable soft power benefits for the participating countries. By engaging in the competition, a nation embarks on cultivating its brand image, strategically emphasizing the economic and political advantages inherent in the bidding process.

Nevertheless, a few months later, four of the six bidding cities had already withdrawn their candidatures to host the event. Lviv justified that its withdrawal was due to Ukraine being invaded by Russia, which annexed Crimea to its territory. Stockholm declared its withdrawal from the process just 64 days after submitting its bid as the majority of the city council announced it was against holding the event. Krakow, likewise, withdrew its bid after a referendum revealed that almost 70% of local citizens were against the proposal. Yet Oslo's bid withdrawal was the most significant one.

Oslo city council held a referendum on the issue which revealed that 55% of voters supported the city's bid. Over time, however, this support waned to a mere 24%. An investigative report by the Norwegian newspaper *Aftenposten*, which produced a dossier of over 7,000 pages, exposed the array of extravagant demands the IOC was requesting from the local organizing committee and from the government. Among the demands was an extraordinary meeting with the King of Norway before the opening ceremony of the Olympics, followed by a cocktail reception at the Royal Palace or some other equally luxurious venue, and the local organizing committee would be responsible for the pertaining cost. Also requested was reception, on the runway of Oslo's International Airport, welcoming the IOC president. In addition, the airport and the roads would need to have exclusive routes for IOC members. Hotels where IOC members would be staying would have to receive them with smiles and welcome greetings from the manager and from the head of the local organization, besides having to provide varied menus. Finally, also necessary were air-conditioned rooms set at precise and well-determined temperatures with controlled food that would be replaced periodically (Hansen, 2012; Rugsveen, 2013).



In a country with a political culture that celebrates fairness, the information disclosed by the *Aftenposten* dossier, showing the IOC leaders' almost obsession with distinction, caused a commotion. Politicians in Norway soon announced that they were opposed to Oslo's candidature. Even politicians from the Norwegian Conservative Party, who were at the head of the process, decided to withdraw support for their city's bid. A proposal to reduce the cost of hosting the OG by nearly \$500 million – from \$2.37 billion to \$1.9 billion – was not enough to assuage resistance so, in the end, the city's bid was officially withdrawn.

In addition, Oslo's representatives severely criticized the IOC in public. Eirik Bergesen, for example, a former Norwegian diplomat, wrote that their bid withdrawal symbolized that "Norway said no to being the IOC's trophy wife," (Reid, 2022a). That edition of the Games, he went on to predict, would be fatally welcomed by a regime analogous to the IOC's one, i.e., a dictatorship, making implicit references to the inflexibility of IOC norms and impositions regarding host cities, which left little room for negotiation and dialogue.

Consequently, at the time of the election for the 2022 Winter Games host, only two candidates were left: Beijing and Amalty. As the Norwegian diplomat predicted, the circumstance meant the IOC would have to choose a city located in a nation ruled by an authoritarian regime and surrounded by international objections concerning the defense of human rights. Indeed, without options, the IOC eventually chose Beijing, soon judged by scholars of the subject as "the best option among the worst" (Reid, 2022a).

From the very beginning, this Winter Games edition took on quite controversial features. The event was the subject of intense criticism because of the human rights abuses against the Uyghur ethnic group, a local Muslim population of Turkmen origin. According to international organizations, the treatment of the Uyghurs on Chinese territory should be seen as a "genocide and a crime against humanity" (Human Rights Watch, 2022, n.p.). According to Sophie Richardson, China director at *Human Rights Watch*, "in designating China as the 2022 [Winter] Olympic Games host, the IOC made a serious mistake relative to human rights" (Human Rights Watch 2022). Also criticized was China's political and diplomatic arbitrariness with respect to Hong Kong. It is worth noting that greater exposure of the country also entails the dissemination of inappropriate and contested behaviors. For example, regarding the 2022 World Cup, several international organizations have been criticizing the use of slave labor in stadium construction, as well as local anti-homosexual laws. A principle of "soft-disempowerment" is observed, as reported in the studies by Brannagan & Giulianotti (2014).



Electing Beijing to host those Winter Games took on even greater symbolism as it happened just days after Boston had withdrawn its bid to host the 2024 Summer Games. Lauded by the influential *No Boston Olympics* movement, the process for choosing the 2024 Summer OG host can be seen as another relevant tipping point in the recent history of the event's organization because, until then, rejection movements of this nature had basically been restricted to the Winter Games, barely reaching the Summer Games (Dempsey & Zimbalist, 2017).

Initially, there were six cities bidding to host the 2024 Summer Games: Boston, Hamburg, Rome, Budapest, Paris, and Los Angeles. Over time, however, only two cities maintained their bids: Paris and Los Angeles. The situation was deemed so surprising and worrying that the IOC decided to alter the way hosts were chosen. Instead of conducting two separate elections for the 2024 and 2028 editions, as would have been the case up to then, the IOC opted for what became known as "double-attribution" (Le Monde, 2017). This meant the selection of hosts for two events in a single process. The picking of the host for the following edition, in this instance, that of 2028, was anticipated. It took place at the same time as the election for hosting the 2024 edition. On the one hand, Paris was chosen to host the 2024 edition, while Los Angeles, on the other hand, was chosen to host the 2028 edition – despite the latter having in fact bid to host the 2024 event.

The IOC president declared that the motivation for altering the host city election procedures was to try to "retain two excellent candidacies" (Le Monde, 2017). However, in practice, the decision was interpreted as signaling a fear of no bids being submitted for the 2028 Olympics. According to Bourbillères & Koebel (2020, p. 2-3), "the 'double-attribution' should be analyzed as a decline in the interest of cities in hosting the OG and, at the same time, it represents an unprecedented policy change at the heart of the IOC". From then on, the growing number of referendums in cities considering the submission of bids became an evident concern of the IOC's (Lenskyj, 2020).

#### *4.3 Financial crisis and a new power balance*

The IOC leaders' concerns with host bids and with the withdrawals of such bids were not unfounded. In fact, the balance in power relations between the IOC and host cities, with the IOC always having had an advantageous position, seems to have been altered by these events. An important reason for this change is the ever-higher costs resulting from the IOC's demands



on host cities. Politicians and local populations have been increasingly questioning the possible economic benefits of hosting an Olympic event. Moreover, climate changes associated with persistent economic crises seem to increase the social, environmental, and political costs of organizing such a financially demanding event (Reid, 2022a; 2022b). As stated by Flyvbjerg et al. (2020, p. 240), "the problem is that, fundamentally, people are not necessarily interested in hosting the Games."

Between 1992 and 2014, seven different cities hosted the Winter Games. Of these, four suffered financial losses in the organization of their events. Besides that, those seven OG went over their initial budget by more than 125% on average. According to Matheson & Baade (2021), the mean cost of organizing the five Winter Games between 1998 and 2014 was US\$ 18.95 billion (based on the 2021 quotations), with variations that can exceed by 25% the given figures. A recent study on OG budget problems stated that "the cost of the Olympics is comparable to the costs of 'major disasters', such as pandemics, earthquakes, tsunamis, wars, and armed conflicts" (Flyvbjerg, Budzier, & Lunn 2020, p. 13).

The idea the IOC itself put forward, with *The Olympic Games Knowledge Management Programme*, which began at the 2000 Sydney Olympics, that new candidatures would "learn" from previous organizations' mistakes, has been harshly criticized. According to the evaluation of Flyvbjerg et al. (2020, p. 17), for example, "The [*Olympic Games Knowledge Management*] programme should be seen as a failure".

As an alternative, scholars have identified six immediate measures so as to try to circumvent and economically safeguard future Olympic hosts (Flyvbjerg, Budzier, & Lunn, 2020; Lauermaann, 2022). As shown in Table 2, these measures can be summarized as: emphasizing the risks involved in hosting OG, establishing more honest and realistic budget forecasts, transferring part of the costs of organizing competitions to the IOC, shortening the event's preparation cycle, evaluating the possibility of using temporary sports infrastructure, as well as considering not hosting the OG if analyses indicate its unfeasibility.



**Table 2.**

*New Guidelines Suggested For Hosting The Olympics*

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- i) Both the potential host and the IOC itself must understand the actual risks involved in hosting the OG;
  - ii) larger and more realistic cost contingencies must be established;
  - iii) the IOC should step forward to bear part of the costs, at least 10% of the final costs;
  - iv) the 7-year delivery phase should be shortened in order to mitigate the risks related to organization and overspending;
  - v) semi-permanent sports venues should be considered or, alternatively, the granting of two editions of the Games to the same host city so as to enable greater use of the permanent ones;
  - vi) having as basis prior studies and analyses regarding the OG feasibility, potential hosts should consider walking away from the event.
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**Source:** Adapted from Flyvbjerg, Budzier, & Lunn (2020)

The high price of preparing for the OG has served and should continue to serve, in the coming years, as a discouragement against the submission of host bids on behalf of cities in democratic countries. As has been well demonstrated in recent studies (Baade & Matheson, 2016; Bourbillères & Koebel, 2019; Castilho & March Jr., 2021; Larneby, 2021), going extremely over the initial budget to host the OG may have detrimental financial and political implications for host cities once the event is over.

## 5 Conclusion

In an unprecedented way, the process for selecting the host city of the 2024 Summer OG had similar problems to the previous process for selecting the host city of the Winter OG. Becoming the host of the Summer Games appears to have ceased giving rise to fierce and increasingly expensive disputes between the various great cities that vied to hold the event. Recently this dynamic seems to have given way to one in which governments and citizens of cities previously interested in taking part in the history of the OG hesitate and even reject hosting this sporting megaevent. In this context, there is an emerging perception that the rationale behind relying on soft power might be diminishing in significance when confronted with the tangible public expenditure of the nation engaged in organizing a mega sports event. Local citizens, who are the ones most directly affected by the consequences of inadequate planning and frequent financial mismanagement in these circumstances, harbor a growing skepticism towards the explanations provided by event organizers and the actual outcomes once the event concludes.





This transformation has a chain of institutional consequences for the IOC, for the image of the Olympics, as well as for diplomacy and for international geopolitics, which has historically been structured around the organization of such events. The expanding of the "Olympic rejection" among citizens of several cities in democratic countries, ever more unwilling to bear the excessive costs of organizational and infrastructural requirements implied in the current OG model, has reduced the IOC's range of options. Consequently, the IOC finds no alternative but to elect cities from countries whose governments have been internationally criticized in relation to human rights violations and to weaknesses in the functioning of their democratic systems. That, in turn, results in the IOC and the OG themselves being more strongly associated with human rights violations. Such correlation can damage the event's image, with the risk of compromising even its profitability, as henceforth sponsors may also eventually reassess linking their brands to sports competitions held under such circumstances.

Already deployed by the IOC, another alternative to prevent a non-democratic country from hosting the Olympics is to select a host city without making use of the bidding process. The choice of Brisbane, Australia, for the 2032 OG, for example, eschewed the usual lengthy and costly process whereby cities submit bids and compete by undergoing evaluations and elections in order to become the event's host. In this case, the IOC practically invited Brisbane to host the event. If, on the one hand, this new dynamic ensures the event is held in a democratic country with the required infrastructure; on the other hand, it also muddles even further the IOC's own mechanisms of transparency and democratic governance, which were already the subject of criticism beforehand (Simson & Jennings, 1992.) In this new dynamic, the IOC ignores its own norms in a vertical top-down decision-making process, far removed from the rites that characterize democratic systems. Although the IOC had already been previously criticized for making decisions of this nature, at least there had always been concerns about preserving a certain appearance of transparency and democratic spirit. Paradoxically this way the IOC would doubtlessly sacrifice its own democratic governance in order to avoid associating the image of the Olympics with non-democratic countries.

The spreading of this "Olympic rejection" movement has potential consequences for diplomacy and international geopolitics too for there is a growing unavailability of host city bids from democratic countries. As a result, there is an increase in the chances of a country with an authoritarian government realizing its ambitions of becoming the OG host. Such nations are willing to bear the hosting costs, while lacking the same possibilities of popular opposition to this, given that their citizens' civil and political rights are curtailed. These countries try to



strengthen their external policies through the symbolic and diplomatic exploitation of the image and prestige that the event still retains. In other words, the Olympic rejection in democratic countries creates a window of political opportunity for the diplomacy of non-democratic countries that can, thus, expand their field of influence by exploiting the prestige and the sporting symbols of the Olympics.

Future research in this area could focus on the comparative analysis of the bidding process for the Olympic Games in different geopolitical contexts. Additionally, future studies could explore the role of international organizations such as the International Olympic Committee in shaping the bidding process and addressing geopolitical issues.



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