

# Winning in Europe

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**With the elections left behind, Mr. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan can afford a short break. He did well, as did his AKP in winning the Turkish general elections with a comfortable 47 percent margin. Turkish voters made it clear on July 22 that for them the future of the Turkish economy and social welfare is far more relevant than the obscure debate on secularism.**

It's the economy, stupid !!!

Voters today vote for salaries not for ideology. Turkey's opposition parties should have known better and offered the voters an economic plan. They didn't; Erdoğan did.

Having reaffirmed himself at home, Mr. Erdoğan should now reaffirm himself and his party's program in Europe. Stressing on a robust economy and a commitment to reforms could be the combination that wins over the Europeans as well. The Turkish prime minister has gained new momentum and should use it to press ahead with the Turkish EU agenda.

The first priority is to keep domestic economic reforms on track in order to sustain the high international, in particular European, investor interest in Turkey. A strong EU business lobby favoring the Turkish market is good for Turkey's EU membership bid. The second priority is reducing corruption and bringing the unofficial economy under control. One way to do it is through increased transparency. Dealing with these issues proactively will allow friends of Turkey, namely the Commission, to make a strong case for restoring pace to the Turkish-EU membership talks.

## **Erdoğan should take the initiative**

The rest is pragmatic personal engagement on behalf of Mr. Erdoğan. He should tour Europe. The prime minister has charm and charisma. He is convincing. These qualities should now be put on display in Europe. But his travel itinerary should be adjusted to include more stops in new members of Europe, where Turkey both enjoys large sympathies and has a realistic chance to win hearts and minds.

Second, Mr. Erdoğan should personally engage the new French President. Mr. Sarkozy, who is not obsessed with ideology but power. Hence he's pragmatic. If there's something concrete in it for France, Sarkozy will support Turkey.

The Turkish political elite has traditionally been obsessed with the need to engage the core of Europe. As a result, Turkey has spent an enormous amount of time and money on lobbying and public relations in countries like Germany, France, and lately Austria. The effects can hardly be noticed. In fact, the public attitude toward Turkey has turned sour in all three cases. In the short run, nothing on this front will change.

An effective and high profile political campaign in new members of the EU would however be sufficient to ensure strong political support for Turkish EU membership. There are several reasons to send Mr. Erdoğan on a tour to new Europe.

## **Personal contacts**

Taking a tour would help the prime minister forge close friendships with the leaders of the new EU member states. Particular attention should be paid to Slovenia and the Czech Republic. The two will be the first new members to take on the EU Presidency - Slovenia takes over the Presidency next January already. Second, new Europe is by default pro enlargement. How can we not be, having just recently benefited from entering the EU? The economies of new members are growing at close to 6 percent on

average allowing for greater elasticity in political support for further enlargement. Finally, new EU members don't have a big domestic Turkish presence and hence the question of Turkey's membership is a foreign policy.

In addition to engaging the prime minister of Turkey in a tour of new Europe, there is room to also bring on board mayors from progressive Turkish cities like Istanbul and İzmir, as well as the president of the Turkish chamber of commerce, chairmen of the big Turkish economic groups, and notable Turkish cultural figures.

The time to engage with Europe is now. Mr. Erdoğan will gain nothing by waiting, but he can win if he changes his approach to Europe slightly. It's a good idea to begin paying more attention to new members of Europe, and of course, to Mr. Sarkozy.

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## Sources

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