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# Erdogan in Brussels as Turkey's EU ambitions face decisive year

By Ian Traynor in Brussels, Robert Tait in Istanbul  
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Turkey's prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, arrived in Brussels last night for the first time in four years, with the aim of resuscitating his country's flagging efforts to join the European Union.

Diplomats and senior officials in Brussels believe that this year is likely to be decisive for Ankara's EU ambitions.

Erdogan's first visit to the EU headquarters since membership negotiations began in 2005 could signal a shift in his government's European policies, following two years of power struggles at home and a souring of relations with the EU. The prime minister has appointed a close aide, Egemen Bagis, to take charge of the European negotiations and has established a government department for EU talks.

"Better late than never," said Cengiz Aktar, an analyst at an Istanbul university. "After four years of negotiations, the prime minister has done the right thing by appointing a sole minister to run EU affairs in this country."

The EU is split over the merits of admitting Turkey, with France and Germany among those hostile, and Erdogan needs to demonstrate his credentials with decisive reforms at home. After radical reforms at the start of the decade he is seen to have halted or reversed course, and stability has been rocked by threats of a military coup, assassinations, prosecutions of liberals, writers and journalists, and persecution of the Kurdish minority. Erdogan is also thought to have been stonewalling on pledges aimed at ending the division of Cyprus, an EU member. Recent reports on Turkey's progress towards the EU from the European commission, the European parliament, and the International Crisis Group have been highly critical.

He could be helped, however, by the balance of power in the EU commission, which is pro-enlargement and pro-Turkey. The presidency, now held by the Czechs, strongly favours expanding the EU and hopes to advance talks with Ankara.

"Turkey will be an honourable member of the EU European Union and not the sick man of Europe," Turkey's new EU envoy, Bagis, said last week.

The Swedes, who are due to take up the EU presidency in July, and the Czechs, face an uphill struggle, since public opinion in both Turkey and Europe has soured over the former's membership.

While Erdogan's visit will try to regain momentum, the energy crisis triggered by the collapse in Russian gas supplies to the continent will also feature prominently in the negotiations. With the EU pinning its hopes for a more diverse, secure energy supply via the Caspian basin, Turkey is the key for the transit of oil and gas. Europe's proposed Nabucco pipeline, to take Caspian gas to Austria while bypassing Russia, is mainly located in Turkey.

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