

Interview with Leo Tindemans: Turkey and the European Union (Brussels, 24 February 2006)

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[Étienne Deschamps] What is your personal attitude to the question of Turkey today? What is your position on possible Turkish accession to the European Union?

[Leo Tindemans] Firstly, I should like to stress the need for clarity on this matter. For instance, you recall that the Netherlands and France voted against the Constitution because they did not want Turkey to enter the Community and become a Member State. Well, the Constitution had nothing to do with Turkish accession. Even now, namely, after the Constitution has been rejected, we can approve Turkey's membership of the European Union. So that is one questionable aspect – extremely so, I should say. Secondly, I find the way that Turkey has been treated scandalous. It is a country of 60 million inhabitants, with universities, an army, it is a member of NATO, etc. I know, there are what? 40 % of the population that are illiterate or whatever, but, nonetheless, it is a country... And we have been talking with them for 40 years now, and I find this scandalous. I was in the Foreign Office in 1982 when, once again, their application for accession was made and filed, around the same time as Morocco's. So we met with the Council of Foreign Ministers in Luxembourg, and Belgium held the Presidency in 1982. The first item on the agenda was: Morocco. Two minutes, and it was dealt with. 'It is not possible, it is not a European country. Next point. Turkey...' As for Turkey, until now, we have never had the courage to say 'yes' or 'no'. If we had said 'no' at the time, Turkey would have been upset, but not unduly so. 'All right, we understand, but might there not be a way of arranging a special agreement?' And so forth. And Turkey would have gone along with it since they were very pleased to be a member of the customs union, or rather of the customs community.

[Étienne Deschamps] The customs community of the Council of Europe, and founder... founder member of the Council of Europe.

[Leo Tindemans] At this meeting in Luxembourg, one member, at a given moment, said: 'It is not possible, we said so for Morocco, it is not a European country. Turkey is not a European country.' And at the very time that we met, this meeting of the Council of Europe was being held under the Turkish Presidency. Turkey held the Presidency of the Union, the other body, the Union of Europe. How can one say 'it is not Europe'? One must be consistent — yet this ambiguity... And I find it scandalous, because after that, we made up all sorts of things: ah, there are human rights; ah, there are... Well, two years later: ah, there have been improvements regarding human rights, but there is still, what? the position of women. And up till now, we have invented new handicaps, new points that have to be settled, and so on. But with a country like Turkey, this is not allowed. We should have said 'yes' or 'no' at once but we shall look at special rules, and so on. Now, the French centrists are saying 'special rules', etc. The Americans say 'right now', because it does not exist for them. But look at Iraq now: as we saw again yesterday, it is on the verge of a civil war between Sunnis and Shiites. Yet for the Americans, you hold elections, you establish a majority, you create a government and that is it. It is not true. It is not true. The ethnic problems, the religious problems — all that is a reality, often a stronger one than the legal reality. And I enormously regret this attitude, which once again is questionable, towards Turkey. I condemn it.