

Interview with Catherine Lalumière: Turkey and the European Union (Paris, 17 May 2006)

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[Étienne Deschamps] Among a number of other issues, one point which is currently the focus of attention for many citizens regarding the future of our continent, the future of the European Union in terms of enlargement — we were talking earlier about possible border limits — I am referring, of course, to the debate about Turkey's possible accession to the European Union. You have given your views several times on this issue, not hiding your overall commitment to Turkey's accession to the European Union. What arguments would you use to convince those who are opposed to such a view?

[Catherine Lalumière] It is true that it is an important issue, because the Turkish issue leads us to the issue of the borders, if not of Europe, at the very least of the European Union, which is not the same thing. The European Union is an organisation, and its borders do not necessarily coincide with the borders of Europe, at all events not of geographical Europe, that is something else entirely. Now, with regard to the Turkish issue ... you say that I am in favour of accession. I would put it slightly differently. I believe that I am 100 % in favour of very good relations with Turkey. Turkey, because of its geographical position, its history, its strategic role, its economic clout, etc., is, for us, a very, very important partner.

So, under no circumstances would I support a solution that separates us from Turkey or, all the more, distances Turkey or turns it into an enemy. Absolutely not. That is what seems important to me. So, accession? With regard to accession, I must say that the ground has been prepared for a long time. It must not be forgotten that, as far as the Europeanness of Turkey is concerned, the answer has been 'Yes' since 1949! It was in August 1949 that Turkey was admitted to the Council of Europe, a Council of Europe which required it to be a European country. So, at that time, it was said: 'It's a European country, no problem.' 1949!

And it was in 1963, when there was talk of an Association Agreement between Turkey and the Community, 1963, that it was implied that this Association Agreement was the precursor to possible accession to the Community. So we have a long history. Now, we must be consistent. If the problem of Europeanness was settled in 1949, if accession to the Community was being discussed as early as 1963, it is a little difficult to back-pedal now, saying: 'We've suddenly realised that you are not European.' 'Oh really? Very well. But, in that case, what were you doing in 1949?'

That is why, given this past, it is extremely difficult to say now that accession was not the best solution. If we were starting from scratch, we could say that a comprehensive, extensive, well-balanced partnership with Turkey would be the best solution. However, ground has already been covered. With things as they currently stand, if we say to Turkey: 'You know, we were wrong. Accession is, frankly, not the solution,' they are not going to take us seriously and, even worse, it might be seen as a humiliation. Quite frankly, that is not the aim.

That is why I say that, yes, I am in favour of accession. I am, above all, in favour of respecting Turkey and also of respecting the words which have committed us to Turkey. That being the case, if we work towards accession, it must nonetheless involve Turkey's compliance with the fundamental principles in force in the European Union and, in particular, respect for human rights. On that issue, everyone, including the Turks, say that progress has to be made. If ever there was a moment for them to make this progress, it is now. They have already made progress, and they need to continue.

Of a secondary nature, but nevertheless with an influence on the situation, is the problem of Northern Cyprus. The situation needs to quieten down, and the demands made by Northern Cyprus and by Mr Denktash need to be seen in proportion. This also implies the need for an appropriate policy from Turkey. There are painful memories of Armenia, there are various issues, but, essentially, it is respect for human rights by the Turkish authorities, by the Turkish regime, that is at the heart of any accession. That is absolutely clear.

If these conditions are met, and it is not a third-rate accession, I think that, overall, it would be a very good

thing for the European Union. Because the dimensions of the issue do need to be recognised. At economic level, Turkey is a very large market, and we need that market. It also has a workforce ... now, people will say: 'It's worse than the Polish plumber, they will take all the jobs.' However, we need people who accept the fact that Turkish workers are very good workers. The reconstruction of Germany would not have happened if it were not for Turkish workers.

The problem needs to be considered as a whole. At economic level, with regard to consumption but also with regard to production, Turkey brings us a great deal. I shall not dwell on Turkey's intellectual and scientific contribution — Turkey is at a very high level in these areas and can make a significant contribution. People will say: 'They are competing with us.' But they compete with us from outside the Union as well. So it is better for them to be inside and subject to the same rules and constraints as us. They will be less of a fierce competitor than if they remain outside.

Those are the economic and social considerations. In terms of social policy, it is in our interest that they accede to the Union; to a greater or lesser degree, the salaries in Turkey will have to increase, social protection will have to increase, and this will mean that the competition which they already represent for us will be less fierce, because their businesses will be subject to the same rules as our businesses. So, overall, at economic and social level, there is no doubt that it is in our interest for Turkey to be in the European Union rather than outside the European Union.

With regard to geostrategy and security, in the most practical sense of the word, military security, we are in great need of Turkey. This has always been the case. The Bosphorus and the Dardanelles are at the border of Europe, a slightly artificial border as the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles are not very wide and with a small boat it is possible to cross from one bank to another, it is very close. Anyway, on the other side there are countries which are not very reassuring: Iraq, Afghanistan, Iran, Syria ... all of Central Asia. Turkey, located on the south-eastern side of the European Union, is a very, very important stronghold.

For purely selfish reasons, it is in our interest to have them with us rather than against us. If we keep on humiliating Turkey, they may very well say to us: 'Listen, that's enough now, we shall look for allies on the other side.' The issue is all the more complex because of the religious question. People will say: 'Heavens above, allowing a Muslim country to join us, in Europe ... Christian Europe ...' Yes, we have a Judaeo-Christian tradition, that's true, it's indisputable, but we have never all been the same. There has always been a religious pluralism within the club.

In the future, it is not at all in our interest to give the impression that we are a Christian club, full stop, because it is clear that the rise of fundamentalisms, on all sides, threatens to create situations of conflict, violent, armed conflicts. So it is precisely in our interest to display openly that the European Union is not reserved for people who follow such or such a Christian tradition; incidentally, there are people who do not believe in anything, so these people would watch the bullets pass by, if I might put it like that, and would not be at ease in a European Union which entered into a war of religion with the Arab-Muslim world.

So there are many, many reasons to say: be careful, Turkey is not a partner which we can just leave to one side, because, 'No, really ... no, I don't like it, I don't know these people, I don't understand them, they're different.' They are different, they will remain different, and that's all there is to it. They are partners whom we need. As I said, if, 40 years ago, we had begun with the intention of forming a partnership with Turkey, yes, that could be a solution. However, now it is a highly sensitive area, and we must be very, very careful to treat the Turkish people with the respect that they deserve and that we need. In any case, that is my belief.