

Opening remarks by Mayor Alain Krijnen

CIVEX Conference, European Committee of the Regions

Van Oys Maastricht Retreat, Eijsden-Margraten,

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Madam Chair, honourable delegates,

Thank you for the invitation to address your committee here today; I consider it a great honour.

A warm welcome to the southernmost tip of the Netherlands, to our beautiful province of Limburg. And welcome to this splendid location, Van Oys.

The name Van Oys Maastricht Retreat may cause some confusion. To anyone who thought they had arrived in the municipality of Maastricht today, I, as mayor of the municipality of Eijsden-Margraten, must gently correct you. You are in Oost-Maarland, in the municipality of Eijsden-Margraten.

But the beautiful city of Maastricht is close by. And for a European gathering such as yours, that is by no means an unimportant neighbour. It was there, in 1992, that the treaty was signed which shaped the European Union and laid the foundation for our monetary union and the euro.

You find yourselves, then, in a region where modern Europe took shape.

On the map of the Netherlands, we here in the south of Limburg lie right at the bottom. Seen from Amsterdam, we are perhaps periphery. Eccentric, even. But lay the map of Europe on the table and the perspective changes at once. Brussels suddenly lies close by. Luxembourg too. Paris and the German Rhineland are our neighbours in a larger European house.

What seems, from a national perspective, to be the edge, is, seen from a European perspective, surprisingly central.

You notice that here every day. People live in one country and work in another. They speak Dutch, Limburgish, French, German, but increasingly also English, this because of the intensive cooperation between governments, businesses and scientists in the context of the possible arrival of the Einstein Telescope to this European region. They cross a border to work, to study, to visit family, to shop, or to sit down together at the table.

We have absorbed something of all those worlds into ourselves.

Europe is not an abstract concept here. Europe is daily practice.

That is why it particularly delights me that the CIVEX Commission of the European Committee of the Regions is meeting right here.

I would like to extend a special word of thanks to our regional minister Elianne Demollin-Schneiders, who took the initiative to hold this meeting here. She knows, better than most, how much European issues are ultimately also regional and local issues.

Your presence here also fits with something we in Eijsden-Margraten take very seriously: hospitality.

To me, hospitality is more than a form of courtesy. Hospitality is a way of looking at the world. Whoever opens their door to another shows interest in that person's story. In their language, culture and history.

Curiosity about one another is perhaps one of the most underrated conditions for a peaceful society.

And that brings me to the common theme of your conference days: freedom.

Yesterday you visited the American cemetery in Margraten. I need hardly explain to you what significance that place holds for our community.

On 12 September 1944, American soldiers entered our country near our small village of Mesch. Mesch became the first liberated village in the Netherlands.

Exactly eighty years later, in 2024, we had the privilege of beginning the national commemoration of 80 years of freedom there, together with our King and Queen, veterans and representatives of all the countries that fought for our freedom at the time.

An impressive day.

A few kilometres further on lies the American cemetery of Margraten. There rest 8,301 American soldiers. On the Walls of the Missing are inscribed a further 1,722 names.

Anyone who walks there sees more than white crosses and Stars of David.

That cemetery is like a scar in our landscape.

A scar tells us that there was once a wound. It reminds us of what was lost. At the same time, a scar becomes part of who you are. You carry it with you. You care for it. You never forget how it came to be.

That is how we look upon the cemetery.

It is a serene place that fills us with humility. And above all with gratitude. Gratitude for the freedom and security in which generations of Europeans have been able to grow up since the Second World War.

For me, as a mayor, that remembrance also carries an obligation.

A moral obligation.

The men and women who lie buried there died for values that we nowadays easily capture in grand words: freedom, equality, democracy and the rule of law.

Those words, however, only acquire meaning when we act upon them.

As a mayor, I regard it as my responsibility to use my mandate to that end. To uphold those values, to protect them, and to pass them on.

Now, of all times.

For our freedom is under threat, our democratic order and the rule of law are being put to the test. On the edge of our continent, a terrible war has been raging in Ukraine for more than four years. At home, institutions we long took for granted are under pressure. Societies are experiencing uncertainty and tension. Migration, too, confronts European countries with major social and administrative questions and calls for European solidarity and responsibility.

That touches the very heart of the work for which you are gathered here.

Europe has a long tradition of thinking about freedom and power. From the Magna Carta to Montesquieu and his separation of powers. From humanism and Judeo-Christian thought to the European cooperation shaped by people such as Robert Schuman.

From different countries, languages and traditions, a shared understanding gradually emerged: power requires a counterbalance, freedom requires protection, and democracy requires engaged citizens.

Those achievements are precious because they are vulnerable.

The Netherlands, too, has a reputation to uphold in this respect. The Hague is the international city of peace and justice, home to the International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Court. Institutions that give expression to a conviction greater than any single country: that the rule of law ought to be stronger than the use of power.

That conviction calls once again, in this day and age, for our attention and our commitment.

In this, I believe strongly in the power of connection.

We experience that here every day. Eijsden-Margraten lies in a border region where Dutch, Belgian, German and Luxembourg influences meet one another.

This year we formally sealed our twinning with the Luxembourg municipality of Clervaux. A friendship between two municipalities connected, among other things, by their history, their shared memory of war and liberation, and their conviction that cooperation begins with people.

That, for me, is the Europe of the regions.

Europe originates in Brussels and Strasbourg, in treaties, institutions and conference halls. But Europe ultimately lives in towns, villages and communities. In schools and universities. In associations. At kitchen tables. In businesses that deliver goods and services across borders every day. Among young people who go abroad to study. Among people who try to speak each other's language, get to know each other's history, and sometimes discover that a culture can also be understood very well by sharing a meal together.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Freedom is never solely an inheritance.

It is also a task.

The generations before us built institutions that made peace, justice and cooperation possible. Our responsibility is to ensure that those institutions remain vital. That citizens can trust in them. That young generations understand why they exist. And that, when our system is tested, we find the strength to act together.

For it is precisely when the world becomes more turbulent that the importance of connection grows.

You are gathered here for that very purpose.

I hope that the surroundings in which you do so inspire you. A region on the edge of the Netherlands and, at the same time, at the heart of Europe. A region that knows what freedom has cost, that carries the scars of that in its landscape, and that at the same time fully enjoys what that freedom has brought us.

Friendship. Exchange. Difference. Curiosity. And the opportunity to meet one another again and again.

I wish you an inspiring conference, full of good conversations, new insights, and above all the wisdom to keep our shared values alive.