

Welkom Debate Challenges to the EU: The East-West Divide, December 7, 2019 during Maastricht Europe Days at Maastricht University Law Faculty

(Only the spoken word is valid)

Almost two years old I was,

ladies and gentlemen,

Almost two years old I was, when the Berlin Wall was built. And just thirty when it fell.

In the meantime I grew up here - here in Maastricht.

I grew up in a world

- where you picked up German as a matter of course, because the reception of their television channels was so good;
- where you spent your summer holidays on the Belgian coast;
- and where you were used to hearing just as much French – from the Walloon neighbours – as your own language at the Friday market.

In other words, I grew up in a region that saw exactly how we wanted to live, described in the Maastricht Treaty:

'borderless together with our neighbours'.

At the same time, I also grew up at the time of the Cold War; the time of the free west versus that hermetically sealed Eastern Bloc.

- **That hermetically sealed Eastern Bloc** that we got to know here through the history lessons at school about, for example, the East-German Revolt (1953); the Hungarian Uprising (1956) and the Prague Spring (1968);
- **That hermetically sealed Eastern Bloc** that we got to know through stories from those who had been there, who told us about how the people there yearned for information; yearned for contacts...;
- **That hermetically sealed Eastern Bloc** that we got to know through the media that, for example, reported on those who managed to escape; and well, of course films - such as those of Bond, James Bond – also contributed something to our image of those countries behind the Iron Curtain.

So yes, we were certainly happy for all those countries and people there, when in nineteen eighty-nine that curtain opened and that wall fell.

Now they could finally fully enjoy our 'European culture, freedom and identity' again.

'European culture, freedom and identity', the roots from which they have been cut off for so long, as Margaret Thatcher put it a year earlier in her speech on the future of Europe; and in which she referred to Warsaw, Prague and Budapest as great European cities.

Now, thirty years after the fall of that wall, we here in Western Europe are slightly surprised at how this 'European culture, freedom and identity' is doing in some parts of Eastern Europe...

... The press in Hungary, the administration of justice in Poland, the great support for a radical right-wing party in the east of Germany...

... It worries us...

It is precisely for this reason that I also would like to quote today the words of another, more contemporary, great lady in European politics: Angela Merkel.

In response to 'the different life experiences in eastern and western Germany', she recently said¹, I quote:

"We should talk more about that and try harder to understand each other."

And that's exactly what we're going to do here.

Here in Maastricht, in the birthplace of the European Union, where we like to keep the dialogue going about the best possible Europe.

A dialogue here today conducted by the Western European Netherlands and Eastern European Hungary.

A dialogue that could be stimulated by the words of the Hungarian Prime Minister Victor Orban, who nowadays says:

¹ Interview with Angela Merkel on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the fall of the Wall in Der Spiegel, Spiegel Online, 7 November 2019

"In 1990, Europe was our future.
Now we are the future of Europe."

Ladies and gentlemen,

I told you just now that I was almost **two** years old when that Wall was erected in Berlin; and that I grew up in a border region where we were already living the 'ever closer union among the peoples of Europe';

And that I was **thirty** when that wall fell; and that I was happy - with everyone - that Eastern Europe was now free again to return to its European roots;

And now that I've just turned **sixty**, I'm experiencing that we are very intensively reflecting on 75 years of freedom; a great asset brought to us by the Allies 75 years ago.

A life course – as I realise – that would have been completely different if my parents had been liberated by the Red Army at the time.

It is with this in mind that I – or rather all of us – do indeed need to try harder to understand each other. And to talk. With one another.

In order to start that dialogue, I would now like to give the floor to the Hungarian Ambassador Andràs Kocsis.