

Opening CIVEX , the resilience of our democracy, 9 September 2026, Eijsden

Ladies and gentlemen,

Welcome to Limburg.

Welcome to perhaps the perfect place for you and your agenda.

Five kilometres in one direction, almost 35 years ago, European leaders signed the Maastricht Treaty.

A treaty that laid the foundations for the European Union, our single currency and of course for the Committee of the Regions. Giving regions a voice in European democracy.

It was the optimistic era after the fall of the Berlin Wall. We believed Europe would never again know war. And that democracy would prevail forever.

Who could have imagined then that today you would, as regions, be discussing displaced Ukrainians in Europe. People who flee from a war that has already lasted longer than the Second World War.

But **five kilometres** in the other direction, there is another link to the theme on your agenda tomorrow: the commemoration of 80 years of freedom.

Because it was there, on 12 September 1944 – almost 82 years ago – that the first Allied soldiers entered our country.

And yes, we commemorated that extensively here in Limburg. For six months. Which is pretty much the time it took to liberate our entire province.

Although 'celebrating' may not be quite the right word.

It felt very different from the 75th anniversary, five years earlier.

Not only because fewer and fewer people are still alive who can tell us from personal experience what it means to live without peace, freedom and democracy.

We had experienced Covid. A war had broken out in Europe. And we saw certainties disappear.

That is why, throughout our commemorations, we kept telling the stories.

Stories of fierce fighting, relentless bombing and families living in cellars. Of men taken away for forced labour. Of tens of thousands of Limburgers forced to leave their homes. Of people who were persecuted and never returned. And of the many civilians and liberators who lost their lives fighting for our freedom.

Stories that we normally associate with places far away, but which actually happened here.

Stories that teach us how much suffering and how many lives were lost in the struggle to gain – and regain – freedom.

That is why, throughout these commemorations, my mantra was: **we must remain worthy of our freedom.**

I will later return to this.

We have deliberately invested in young people. Because we realise that generations are now growing up have parents and grandparents that did not experience the war themselves.

For example, we organised cross-border debates with young people from The Netherlands, from Belgium and Germany. One took place, quite exceptionally, at the German war cemetery in the north of our province. A place that seems to shout one message: never give democracy away again.

I attended that debate and was deeply impressed by how these young people translated a dark past into a future in which freedom and democracy must not be lost.

And because this shows that all young people need to know this history, we continue to invest in this kind of education.

Especially because research around the 2024 European elections showed that only half of European voters aged 18 to 30 trust democracy, while a significant share of young people worldwide see some appeal in authoritarian rule.

So we start early.

We encourage primary schools to adopt war memorials. Children learn the stories behind them and organise their own commemorations. They discover that the freedom in which they grow up is not a given. And what happens when hatred, discrimination and intimidation defeat our sense of humanity.

Another project enables schools to visit places of remembrance at home or abroad.

In June, I travelled with one such school group to Auschwitz.

And you see what a place like that does to young people.

They become silent. They become angry that one human being could do such things to another. And they realise that freedom and democracy also demand something from **them**.

That they must stand up for others. That everyone must be able to be themselves. But also that peer pressure can make it difficult to be the person you know you should be.

A third project gives every school in Limburg the opportunity to visit both the American and German war cemeteries in one day.

There, young people explore the stories behind the graves on both sides. They reflect on who were heroes, perpetrators or victims, on the choices people make, and on the role democracy plays in those choices.

You will visit the American cemetery yourselves later today.

A place that makes you ask: **how do we remain worthy of our freedom?**

Given everything that is happening in the world, that question has only become more urgent.

And I admit: I did not have an immediate, ready-made answer.

But then came what you might call the final straw.

Late last year, serious threats were made against the mayor, aldermen and the city council of Venlo. In response, the entire Limburg administration – from local officials to the Governor – sprung into action.

We published a full-page advertisement in which we literally **drew a line** against the normalisation of insults, abuse, intimidation and threats.

It triggered a lot of discussion.

Because on the one hand, elected representatives and public officials increasingly feel less free to do their work properly. And that undermines democracy.

But on the other hand, we must also recognise **why** people become frustrated: citizens sometimes feel unheard, see no solutions to their problems and disengage because they believe their vote makes no difference.

That is just as damaging to democracy.

Because democracy only has a future if people want to, can and continue to participate.

The treasure we have taken for granted for more than 80 years needs major maintenance.

Maintenance that requires, on the one hand, policies based on a long-term vision, focused on real improvement rather than the politics of the day and quick political profiling.

And, on the other hand, citizens who are invited to think, participate and take responsibility.

We are already making progress: at our new democracy tables, in neighbourhoods, in debates at schools – which I am always happy to join – and in our House of Democracy, which our provincial government building aims to be.

But meetings alone are not enough.

They must lead to new forms of citizen participation. To a renewed democracy in which we can decide together what kind of society we actually want to live in – while strengthening our democratic resilience.

How do we make ourselves – as governments, as societies and as individuals – resilient and courageous enough?

Those are important questions for you and for me.

I wish you wisdom today in addressing the challenges Europe face. And I wish you inspiration tomorrow: for a future in which regions and their young people can play a strong role in strengthening the resilience of our democracy.

A democracy that Europe, almost 35 years ago, believed it had secured **"forever"**, just five kilometres from here.

And one that, in three days' time, I will remember was defended 82 years ago, just five kilometres in the other direction, when the first Allied soldiers began to fall for our freedom.

The freedom that we must – and I will keep repeating this – **remain worthy of.**

Thank you.