Speech by Mayor Maxime Prévot on the occasion of the Walloon Festivities 2024

[Protocol greetings]

Dear residents of Namur,

It is my pleasure to deliver my 13th speech for the Walloon Festivities as Mayor of our beautiful city of Namur.

It is a capital meeting for a city that is no less so, to share with you, dear residents of Namur and esteemed regional, national, or international authorities, the concerns and ambitions that drive the municipal team of the third city of Wallonia and the ninth city of the Kingdom.

According to tradition, the number 13 is a good or bad omen. If you add to this the fact that we will be voting on October 13th, the stars seem to be aligning for a high-flying event, the quality of whose landing only you can decide.

Your municipal team has spared no effort during the outgoing legislative term to fulfil its responsibilities to the people of Namur.

We have acted to enhance security in Namur, improve mobility, foster conviviality, increase biodiversity, ensure cleanliness, promote creativity, and of course, strengthen solidarity.

Security, first and foremost, is undeniably on the agenda of all mayors across Europe today. Since drugs have insidiously infiltrated the streets and neighbourhoods of all major cities, from the Port of Antwerp, all my colleagues and I have been activating all possible levers to combat incivility, delinquency, and crime.

I act according to the levers at my disposal: massive recruitment of additional police officers (Namur is among the cities that have recruited the highest number of new agents in recent years), deployment of the surveillance camera network from 250 to 400 camera streams during this legislature, creation of new URBAN patrols on foot and with the canine brigade to be permanently present in the city centres of Jambes and Namur, the creation of a special police brigade to deal with the homeless and beggars, in collaboration with street social workers; investment in artificial intelligence software to detect and prosecute offences; additional investigative and research resources to deal with vice, homicide and telephone decryption; training for drug detection dogs; and the organisation of large-scale weekly police operations to arrest traffickers and other vermin.

But none of this will yield the hoped-for results if, at the same time, the justice system does not have reinforced human and technological resources, less overcrowded prisons, and the police do not receive serious and structural refinancing.

The Federal Government must meet these challenges, and the legislation should enhance the role of mayors, particularly in regulating invasive, harassing, or aggressive begging, or in cases of severe mental disorders manifested in public spaces. In the national responsibilities I undertake, I will be particularly attentive to this. The well-being of the population and the credibility of our law enforcement and justice system are at stake.

In the meantime, and to start with a little musical nod— I had promised you this year would include touches of humour that, unfortunately, did not lend themselves to last year's news—please be assured that with the Chief of Police and the Public Prosecutor, we have a clear vision of the strategy to be implemented and the tactics to be deployed!

[music: **BOURVIL / la tactique du Gendarme]**

Safety also means road safety! It is a regular concern for the residents of Namur, both in urban neighbourhoods and in village centres. For the first time, a significant investment plan of over 1.5 million euros has been deployed during this term for small-scale improvements at various locations across the territory to address citizen requests.

Having well-maintained roads is also an asset for travel comfort and user safety. Over the past six years, under the leadership of Alderman Luc Gennart and in partnership with the Region, the City has invested more than 60 million euros in road repairs to gradually and surely improve the on-ground perception.

[music : **GAINSBOURG / Le poinçonneur de Lilas**]

But we fill these holes!

Significant improvements to promote soft mobility have also been made, and others are about to start. Public transportation has been promoted sensibly and pertinently, for example in Erpent and Bouge. Specifically in Bouge, where we aim to create a new aquatic centre, at a minimum a new municipal pool for school and family use, in a part of the area currently designated for Park & Ride, benefiting from the frequent bus service to facilitate access from the city centre, particularly for schools. As for cycling, the improvements to promote its use are maximized considering the physical constraints of the city.

[music : **MONTAND / A bicyclette**]

Greater conviviality: this is undoubtedly one of the successes of the city's transformation. Certainly, some projects are ongoing and others are upcoming, notably to realise the fabulous project of pedestrianizing our entire city centre, making it more pleasant, more attractive for walks and local shopping, inclusive with free electric shuttles for people with mobility difficulties, and greener with numerous planned plantings and artworks to brighten the public space.

Everyone will recognize that the City is more lively and cultural with Sunday musical aperitifs at Place Maurice Servais, the revitalisation of Rue des Brasseurs and its

surroundings, and the Quartier des Carmes, where charming little restaurants and trendy bars are multiplying. And that's a good thing!

A weekend staple is the weekly market, now relocated, thanks to Alderwoman Stéphanie Scailquin, by the water, giving it a Provençal market feel when the weather permits.

[music : **Henri DES / Au marché**]

Yes, you've guessed it, in Namur, a combination of sporting challenge and cultural ambition results in Fort Bayard! Alderwoman Charlotte Bazelaire, full of energy and with a talent for human connections, goes above and beyond to be everywhere across the territory, standing alongside community groups, uncovering great opportunities, and providing resources so that our villages and athletes can thrive. In this Olympic year, our Namur athletes also distinguished themselves - I'm particularly thinking of Eliott Crestan and Nafissatou Thiam - and SMAC was rightfully and prominently celebrated.

2030 will offer another intersection between sport and culture. It is the year when we hope to host the Cyclocross World Championship and also be the European Capital of Culture. Two major projects for our territorial, civic, tourist, and economic dynamics, which will make Namur the most coveted capital in Europe.

We hope that these projects will come to a successful conclusion. In any case, we have submitted serious, enthusiastic, and co-developed proposals with local stakeholders. Whatever the outcome, the hard work of those involved should be recognised! I'm thinking especially of Laura Latour and Thomas Lesire.

Speaking of conviviality during the Wallonia Festivities is like asking a Molon if they want a shot of péket. Alderwoman Anne Barzin acts as the great guardian of the Temple of festivities throughout the year.

[music : **FUGAIN / C'est la fête**]

They offer the city joyful breathers between more serious projects, such as the heritage renovation of the Stade des Jeux and the Théâtre de Verdure, which has just begun. An exceptional project for an equally exceptional heritage site. This will be one of the largest restoration projects of the last 20 years, a testament to your municipal team's commitment to history, while also fully integrating Namur into the world of artificial intelligence and the digital revolution. UNESCO recognised this by labelling us as one of the most innovative cities in the world in media arts, while the KIKK Festival is set to have another highly anticipated edition soon.

Speaking of history and culture, subjects I hold dear and have the pleasure of overseeing within the College, how can we not be amazed by two recent successes: our new municipal library, La Célestine, and the archaeological museum. These are two gems that give a future to our past, offering themselves as community spaces to our knowledge-hungry and serenity-seeking population. Let's also not forget the Halle Al'Chair, whose recent renovation has restored its charm and grandeur, making it an open historical site for tourists.

We have many municipal buildings, and we make sure to take care of them. But with 400 buildings, maintenance is a constant and demanding task, both in human resources and budgets. But as the saying goes:

[music: **ANNIE CORDY / Quand le bâtiment va**]

Alderman Tanguy Auspert must have inspired Annie Cordy in her dreams… Because soon the imposing but also necessary renovation of the entire City Hall will begin, a building designed nearly 50 years ago that is now an energy leakage. Acting as a model in terms of energy transition remains, of course, a guiding principle for your municipal team. While the issue is global, this does not exempt municipalities from demonstrating local initiative. Several of our buildings, especially our municipal schools, are undergoing major renovations—Wépion, Boninne, and Bouge, for example. Upgrading our existing schools rather than creating new ones has been the common-sense approach followed by the College.

[music : **VERITY / Viv'la rentrée**]

Alderwoman Christine Halut also ensures that, beyond the brick-and-mortar aspect, our schools fully enter the digital age, having recently introduced a proposal to the municipal council to continue the digitization of our classrooms. The partnership with the CPAS also allows us to offer healthy meals to our young children, prepared with local products, at an affordable price.

In our schools, we strive to foster excellence adapted to each student, developing innovative teaching methods and stimulating school management plans. Education is reclaiming its rightful place, not just schooling. We promote respect for authority, particularly the teacher, fight against bullying, and raise awareness of the importance of inclusion and respect for the environment. Because yes, this is clearly an ongoing battle: the one that seeks to prevent uncivil behaviours, such as littering in the streets or countryside and other disgusting illegal dumping.

[music : **CHRISTOPHE MAE / C'est ma terre**]

This is all part of the work done by Alderwoman Charlotte Deborsu and her teams. Reducing waste, raising awareness of proper behavior, collecting trash every day the sun rises, and tracking down offenders, especially through the recently acquired mobile cameras used to identify those responsible for illegal dumping. Several hundred fines have already been issued as a result.

The challenges of inclusion and transition are being addressed daily across our territory.

[music : **DANIEL BALAVOINE / Quand on arrive en ville**]

And yes, when you arrive in the city, you also see people in distress, people struggling with addictions. Our city will never fail in its commitment to mobilize and show generosity towards those in situations of marginalization. We have upheld our promise to be at the forefront of solidarity.

The necessary and ever-increasing resources have been allocated to the CPAS and all social services, including the associative sector, for which the City now even covers

security costs to protect volunteers offering food parcels, meals, showers, etc., from rising violence. CPAS President Philippe Noël knows that the policies he leads give meaning to public action and also to the lives of so many families. Safe and affordable housing remains a challenge, particularly for single mothers and fathers.

Revitalizing life means, of course, caring for the health of the population, especially the most vulnerable, but also, as a logical consequence, caring for the quality of our environment.

Under the leadership of Alderwoman Charlotte Mouget, our city has designated 30% of its municipal forests as total biological reserves, where Walloon legislation typically only requires 3% for municipalities. Another sign of your municipal team's commitment to environmental issues: we are the first city in Wallonia to adopt a comprehensive resilience and adaptability plan for our territory in response to climate change, and over the past six years, 10,000 new trees have been planted, including several in the city centre.

[music : **Yannick NOAH / Aux arbres citoyens**]

10,000 trees, as I mentioned. A figure that might sometimes put into perspective certain debates about a few clusters of trees in the upper part of the city...

We close this term with a sense of satisfaction, having navigated it calmly, boldly, and courageously, through the unprecedented crises of Covid, the welcoming and housing of Ukrainian refugees, and the floods that struck our villages and certain neighbourhoods, causing significant water damage. The challenge seemed impossible, and that's why we took it on, thanks to the great commitment of your elected officials, but even more so, thanks to the strength of your administration and its many dedicated employees who deserve your applause!

Dear residents of Namur and dear guests,

This Walloon Festivities speech is always a balancing act—between, on the one hand, the expectations of the Namur population to hear about the projects, achievements, and prospects of the municipality, and on the other, the aspirations of the panel of high authorities to share broader political messages delivered by the mayor of the capital of our region.

So you will not be surprised if, after the local considerations I have just shared with you, we now take a step back to zoom out on the broader picture.

A picture that calls for clarity.

The European industry is in decline. The automotive sector, once again struggling, as seen with Audi Brussels, is yet another symptom. The fierce competition from China and the United States, the end of access to affordable energy from Russia, the rise of cybercrime, and increased migration flows are all sources of challenges and vulnerabilities for the European continent.

The climate is still being mistreated. Precarity is on the rise, and correspondingly, security has become the top concern for many citizens. Out of fear of losing gains, out of fear of

losing privileges, out of fear of living worse tomorrow, out of fear of the other, or simply out of fear of change.

Acts of rejection are multiplying, giving way to rampant antisemitism, the refusal of too many migrants, the denunciation of prevailing "wokeism," the stigmatisation of sexual differences, and the questioning of human rights.

The European Commission is worried about Belgium's budgetary drift. Economic players are too. No one wants us to experience the same drama as Greece did a few years ago. Do not think this is hyperbole; if we are not careful and refuse to take bold and responsible action, the path could be similar.

Public finances are in fact in agony, at all levels of power combined. Citizens do not always seem to be aware of it, but the coming years will put politicians to the test, calling upon their real sense of responsibility, so that structural recovery measures are taken, with justice and accuracy, to once again offer bright tomorrows.

Some pessimists will talk of austerity, seeking to capitalise on fears. But there is no question of austerity. Just truth. Just responsibility. Just sincerity.

New governments have been formed or aspire to be. I'm obviously in no position - or perhaps too well-positioned - to say how urgent it is for our country to reconnect with men and women of courage. And there are potential candidates in most parties. The challenges we must overcome together are not about parties or coalitions. **It is a question of state of mind. It is a question of mind State.**

Because yes, it is also our duty. It is our duty to chart a course for recovery, but also one of enthusiasm, combativeness and success, far removed from any resignation or populism. A policy that dares to invest. In its human capital, in its environmental capital, in its creative capital. In its future, quite simply.

Optimism! We need a lot of it because it is the first step towards well-being.

[music : **Dany BOON** / Je vais bien tout va bien, je suis gai tout me plait]

And it is this optimistic Wallonia that I want to talk to you about. This courageous, enterprising, ambitious, and valiant Wallonia. This warm and virtuous Wallonia, which takes care of our children, our parents, our single-parent families, both the vulnerable and the strong. A winning Wallonia that is open to the world and to other regions.

From the land to the slag heaps, from agriculture to culture, from the city to the countryside, it is a Wallonia rich in its diversity and dynamic to which we all want to contribute, the Walloons, with our sense of collective responsibility and the strength of our talents: whether we are athletes, poets, engineers, entrepreneurs and workers, teachers and nurses, labourers and police officers, firefighters and farmers… For the time has come to take our destiny into our own hands, to assume our responsibility to successfully transition our region, whether it be climatic, economic, or social, with the help of everyone and without leaving anyone behind.

Together, we will achieve a Wallonia where the health and well-being of everyone are a priority, where fundamental rights are guaranteed, where the environment is preserved,

where climate ambition is pursued, where work is inspiring and valued, where quality education is assured, where entrepreneurs are supported, where job seekers renew their talents, and, above all, where shortages of teachers, healthcare personnel, and law enforcement are addressed.

It is a confident and positive Walloon society that we will build together.

Together, in a stable and strengthened Belgian State, in a federalism of loyal cooperation. The time of competition between the federated entities and the federal government must end: it impoverishes our territory and its population. Our budget deficit (17 billion euros today, which could peak at 40 billion euros by 2029) and our debt (nearly 600 billion euros) are proof of this.

Institutional competition means each one doing the same thing on their own, at twice the cost. Institutional cooperation means each one doing what is most effective, at the right price, and for the benefit of all.

We must have the optimistic courage to change. Our budgetary responsibility calls for it.

And in Namur, this optimism is contagious. It is supported by the powerful network of citizens involved in local, associative, or professional life; a social, economic, or cultural life. A life nourished by what the world does best and offers most beautifully, thanks to the international relationships maintained by the Walloon capital with many cities abroad.

Dear distinguished guests. It is always a great honour to be able to count you among us this Saturday morning to celebrate our Wallonia and the many bonds of affection that we share. By your presence, you are reminding us that in this age of globalisation, it is more relevant and useful to work to strengthen links and territories rather than to set them against each other. That what we are experiencing in Ukraine, Israel and the Palestinian territories cannot be the inevitable fate of humanity. That our shared values should help to reduce conflict rather than fuel it. That city diplomacy can sometimes work miracles where state diplomacy is struggling. Working on confluences will always be more promising than working on difluences. This is the vision we have developed as part of our bid to become the European Capital of Culture in 2030. We hope that we can count on your support for this challenge, and that a number of cities in your countries will be able to sponsor our city. Victory is only beautiful when it is collective.

Dear friends,

Victory is only beautiful when it is collective. These are the words with which I have just concluded my brief intervention in English.

In almost exactly one month, you will be called to vote for the renewal of the municipal and provincial councils. Many candidates from all backgrounds, and I have no doubt, of great quality, are running for your votes to earn your trust. They contribute to the collective game of elective democracy. Encourage them and do not forget to exercise this right to vote, a right that billions of people on this planet would dream of exercising freely.

You will not be surprised if I tell you that this team is proud of its record and aware of the challenges ahead. If I tell you that each party aspires to gain your trust in order to have the

honour of participating in the direct management of our beautiful city, as a municipal councillor, alderman, or mayor.

As for me, I still have as much energy and enthusiasm to dedicate to this beautiful city and its villages. I obviously hope to earn your overwhelming trust to continue my work. Our work.

The uncertain federal context we are experiencing, with negotiations still ongoing, does not exempt me from my national responsibilities. After His Majesty the King entrusted me with a mediation mission to give every chance for the resumption of negotiations aimed at quickly forming a federal government, I cannot avoid this challenge.

I have been fulfilling these national responsibilities for several years now, and they have never been at the expense of Namur. Quite the opposite, in fact! Namur has rather benefited from the times when individuals held ministerial positions.

No one yet knows what tomorrow will bring, and to be honest, neither do I. But what is certain is that my commitment to Namur will remain unwavering. For nothing is more rewarding than being your mayor!

While we await the outcome of October 13 for our local democracy, let us celebrate Walloon democracy with dignity during these festive days! Because the celebration is…

[music : **La Compagnie Créole / C'est bon pour le moral**]

Happy Walloon Festivities to everyone!