

*European Union citizenship has a direct impact on European democracy. The founding Treaties give all EU citizens the right to vote and stand for election in local and European elections within their member state of residence. Yet relatively few EU citizens vote and even fewer present themselves as candidates. One of the few who have used both rights is **Jan-Gerd Krüger**.*

Jan-Gerd is a German citizen who grew up in Wilhelmshaven, a harbour city in Lower Saxony. In 1994, he arrived in Groningen to study saxophone. More than 30 years later, he has built a family and an academic career at the Hanze University in Groningen. Now, Jan-Gerd is running for the municipal council in Groningen as a #10 on the list of Volt.

We discussed with Jan-Gerd his personal journey, his experience with cross-border cooperation in Europe, and his message for EU citizens in Groningen and the Netherlands.

During your childhood, you lived pretty close to the border. Did you go to the Netherlands a lot, or was it something you didn't really think about?

Not really. I grew up in the region Ostfriesland, where the border was quite close. You could cross it, but it wasn't something I did frequently. I'd rather go to Hamburg or to Oldenburg. I only visited Groningen twice before I was like 20, but it felt quite foreign to me and felt like a little adventure. In the 80s, there was still some antagonism between the Netherlands and Germany. Even nowadays, they keep bringing up the 1974 Football World Championships.

And when you first came to Groningen, your study was in English as well?

Yeah, it was in English. Funny enough, the university sent me a letter stating that I would need to take a language course while the conservatory send me a letter stating the opposite. But then there was a special offer from the university to do a Dutch course for Germany, three and a half hours per day.

Was Groningen already as international as it is now?

The music department definitely was. I think there were around 20 Germans and quite a few Russians in the classical department. Gradually, the number of internationals increased even more. Now it is at about 50 percent.

Now you are active in local civil society and politics. What is your vision for the role of municipalities in Europe?

I like to think that this idea of the Europe of the regions, which emerged 20 or 25 years ago. That is something we should focus on! I believe that we need some kind of Federal States of Europe. In this set-up, the regions and the municipalities become more important. Most things that directly effect you — what is happening in your street, in your neighborhood, in your city — should be decided upon using direct democracy. The bigger problems of today should be dealt with as Europe. It doesn't make sense to do it as the Netherlands or Germany alone. You have to really have to do it together. Examples include a European army, the way we deal with asylum seekers, etc. We need to do it on a European level, otherwise it's not possible. That's what we as Volt stand for.

Isn't the idea of Europe of the Regions more applicable to the provincial elections than the municipal level ones?

No, I don't think so, because on all levels, you need to have a representation of the vision of Europe of the Regions. On a municipal level, so as Groningen as a city, we are quite secluded here in the north, since we are the only really big city in the north. Therefore, we are facing the same challenges as, for example, Aarhus in Denmark or Saint Sebastian in Spain. I think, as a city, European cooperation enables us to look for other cities who are in a similar situation. It enables us to learn from each other and cooperate in overcoming common challenges.

When in your life did you come to the realization that big problems can only be tackled effectively in a Europe of the Regions?

In the past 24 years of my working life, I've been a coordinator of international projects with different countries but also different institutions, and I've been working on a global level a lot in the past 25 years. About 15 or 20 years ago, I had the idea that — considering global developments in the United States, Global South, and in Asia — we need to organize ourselves as Europe and get our stuff together, so we don't depend on what the US or China is telling us. As Europeans, we have similar cultures, a common cultural grounding. I mean, in music, arts, culture, and history we have a lot in common. And that is why I think we have to stand together and we belong together.

I think music plays a big part in connecting people. I saw that you were, for example, also active at the Association of the European Conservatories.

Yes, I'm still active with them. I'm the chair of the working group for education and profession, where we work on shaping music education in order to get music graduates into a profession such as a teacher or as a professional musician. In the past 25 years I've been doing international projects with around 18 schools from 15 countries from Iceland to Hong Kong to Bangkok to the United States and all over Europe.

Throughout my career, I repeatedly felt the power of music as a connecting element. For example, in my first year here in Groningen we had a project on the northern German musical tradition, such as Bach. We performed some pieces in Leipzig, which is considered northern Germany. Then I did one in the Spanish tradition on Mallorca. And then I did a project on the French Romantic period that was performed in Toulouse. There were like 15 countries, 18 schools, everybody was involved, some 30 students coming along, six teachers, and I organized all of that. Being in such an international environment sparked my passion for working internationally.

What barriers — whether they might be linguistic or institutional — have you faced while organizing transnational events?

Before the Bologna reform, doing educational programs in Europe was a barrier. Following the reform in 2002, the education program was restructured into a bachelor-master structure. That helped a lot. Once again, organizing education on the European level helped a lot. But some barriers remain: there are still differences and difficulties in acknowledgement of grades. An eight in the Netherlands is something different in Germany. Another problem is the recognition of University credits. That is why you need international structures who are able to deal with these differences.

Coming back to the Europe of the Regions, is there a concrete project in Groningen where you would say, whether it could be the province or the city, where you would say that really goes in the direction of how I imagine the provinces or the municipalities playing a role?

Personally I'm involved in the music festivals and I think those represent Europe of the Regions very well. We have international, regional, and local artists who combine their music in one, coherent festival. There were festivals like Swingin' Groningen or Jazz te Gast or maybe also Rockit, that's more international actually. So that's something.

Another example is the Wunderlinie. How on earth can we get it together that you go from Groningen to Hamburg in one train? Building cross-border infrastructure is

still so difficult in Europe! Sometimes, the problems are big, like a missing rail link and sometimes quite small, like the height of the platform. It would really be something if we got a train network in Europe which connects all the big cities effortlessly. Imagine travelling from Groningen to Paris or Berlin without a big fuss.

You mentioned Swingin' Groningen and I assume you are probably still also active somewhat in civil society in Ostfriesland? Would you say that the cross-border element is very present in civil society on either side of the border?

That's where we also get musicians from. So in the past 20 years, 25 years, many graduates from the university and conservatoire have gone on to work in music schools locally and abroad in Germany. Networks matter a lot. When you have an idea, you think about who could contribute, and then connect the right people to create something stronger, and more distinctive together.

Would you then say that the cross-border element is very present?

Yes, definitely. For me, borders don't exist. I hate it when I go to Germany now and see the constant border controls. While I am having my car searched by three police agents, I wonder how many people did they actually catch in these two years since border checks have started while inconveniencing so many travellers. It's incredible.

Why did you decide to candidate yourself?

I think that if you are on the sideline and you think you can do it better, step up and do it better. I've been talking a lot about international collaboration. I am putting my money where my mouth is. I am stepping up for what I stand for, and openly saying what my vision for the future is. I'm hoping to be elected. I'm 10th on the list, so it might be hard to get on the council, but I am on the list.

What would you say are barriers for internationals when it comes to the election?

I think information is one big thing. A lot of these students probably don't know that there are municipality elections on the 18th of March. A lot of international students probably think that they cannot vote in them because they are foreigners. So we really have to try to get them on board and inform them about it, especially in such a young city. I think we can gain a lot in informing people better.

As you say, turnout among internationals is less than average. Is it even worth it to invest a lot of energy into trying to mobilize them? Do their votes make a big difference?

I don't know if it would make a difference. However, if you do not focus on them or not inform them, then they could feel left behind and they are not included. If we really want to be an inclusive society, then we need to get them on board.

What barriers are there for internationals when it comes to being politically active and putting yourself on the light?

I think the language. For me, coming from the north of Germany, Dutch is not the most difficult language to learn. I did learn it in four weeks, three and a half hours a day, I had a language course at the university, everything was great. That helped a lot. Throughout the years, I have seen that the students who are keen on learning the language have a much better chance of getting jobs afterwards and getting into society than the ones who do not. Learning the language is a big thing. Of course, if you're only here for two years for a master's program, you probably will not be able to learn the language in a way that is really helpful. But if you really want to stay for longer, you should invest some time into learning the language. Then you are also able to take part in the political system.

Would you say that generally barriers to participation in civil society as a non-Dutch youth citizen have lowered or changed in any way since you moved to the Netherlands?

I think it became easier. When I first came here, everybody started speaking German or English when I tried to speak Dutch. Nowadays they are more accepting of foreigners trying to speak Dutch, and trying to learn it. However, if there are meetings and only one or two people do not speak Dutch, people often tend to fall back into Dutch. This creates a lot of side conversations that makes it harder for non-Dutch citizens to participate. That is probably the case everywhere, also in Germany.

What can you as a non-Dutch citizen offer that is different to other candidates?

I think I can offer an international perspective. I experienced Groningen as a welcoming city, and I would like to keep it that way. I've been welcomed, but I've also been an outsider. You could really look at the whole picture, see what is happening there, and how things are done. If you observe well and learn, then you may be able to give some input from your perspective. This perspective may be a bit more unbiased.

I believe it can contribute to the project. If you have somebody from the outside or you're doing an international collaboration, it will always help your project. It will

always give an extra dimension to it. So I think it's also politically important to listen to outside voices as well.

Do you have a message for EU voters in Groningen or in the Netherlands in general?

Inform yourself, get your paperwork, and go voting. Most importantly, we are in the lucky position that we are living in a democratic country. In Western Europe, most countries are democratically organized. Make use of that right. If in doubt, choose Volt.