SPEECH FOR THE 85TH IVR GENERAL ASSEMBLY – LYON, 2026

Distinguished guests,
Dear members,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Before I begin my address to the General Assembly (the highest body of our association) I would first like to take a moment to reflect on the passing of one of our honorary members, Mr. Bruno Wehrli, who passed away on 25 March at the age of 99.

Bruno Wehrli became an honorary member of IVR because of his extraordinary contribution to the field of General Average. For decades, he served as a dedicated member of the IVR General Average Commission. Through his exceptional expertise and unwavering commitment, he played a defining role in many important developments within General Average, including the revision of the IVR Rhine Rules.

With the passing of Bruno Wehrli, IVR and the inland navigation community have lost not only a remarkable expert, but also a valued friend of our association.

I kindly ask you all to observe a brief moment of silence in his memory.

[Moment of silence]

Thank you.

Good afternoon, and a very warm welcome to all of you on board the *Hermes* for the 85th General Assembly of our association.

It is a pleasure and an honour to gather here today in the beautiful city of Lyon as we navigate through a period of global uncertainty and rapid transformation.

The name of this vessel is particularly fitting. In ancient Greek mythology, Hermes was the protector of trade, travellers, and connections between cities. In many ways, inland navigation has fulfilled exactly that role for centuries: connecting economies, cultures, industries, and people across Europe. Inland shipping has long been one of the silent but essential foundations of European prosperity.

And as we now stand on the brink of celebrating the 150th anniversary of IVR next year (and this time truly for real) it is also a moment to reflect.

It is often said that *to understand the future, we must first understand the past.*

Over the past months, together with a professional historian, we have immersed ourselves in the rich history of our association. And the deeper we looked into that history, the clearer one message became: our sector has never stood still.

Time and again, inland navigation has faced major transitions, technological revolutions, economic crises, wars, political uncertainty, and changing market demands. And every single time, the sector adapted, innovated, and moved forward.

Allow me to share one fascinating example.

In the very first IVR vessel register, published in 1879, 2365 vessels were recorded, including 224 steam-powered ships.

Nearly half a century later, in 1926 (exactly 100 years ago), the twentieth edition of the register included 13105 Rhine vessels: 10,801 so called “Aken”, 1753 steamships, and 551 motor vessels.

What is remarkable is that approximately 82 percent of the fleet at that time could effectively be described as “zero-emission”. These are percentages that today’s ministries of transport, the European Commission, and the CCNR could only dream of.

Why do I mention this?

Because discussions about sustainability and transition sometimes create resistance or uncertainty. Yet history shows us that our sector has already undergone enormous transformations before. The inland navigation industry has repeatedly proven its resilience, its pragmatism, and its ability to innovate.

And that is perhaps exactly what this year’s congress theme is about: “Connected Across Boundaries: The Next Wave of Innovation.”

Because innovation does not happen in isolation. It happens when countries cooperate, when organisations share knowledge, when generations work together, and when sectors remain open to change.

That resilience is equally important today.

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Global geopolitical developments continue to have direct and immediate consequences for our industry. Trade routes are shifting, economic confidence is under pressure, and logistics chains are becoming increasingly fragile.

We are already seeing the effects around us, including the closure of several industrial plants at the Maasvlakte, the increasing oilprices, developments that inevitably impact inland shipping as well.

In times like these, the strength of IVR lies in unity.

By sharing knowledge, strengthening cooperation, and aligning our efforts, we reinforce the position of inland navigation as a modern, reliable, and future-oriented sector.

And that also requires us to continuously reflect on ourselves as an organisation.

This year's congress has therefore been organised differently from previous editions. Just as the propulsion systems of inland vessels evolve over time, organisations must also ask themselves whether their structures and formats still match the needs of today.

We have seen changing participation patterns, including a decline in the number of accompanying partners and lower attendance during Friday morning sessions at previous General Assemblies.

That prompted us to rethink the format and to focus even more on creating high-quality networking opportunities with stronger participation and greater interaction.

And judging by the excellent turnout, the support of our sponsors, the inspiring speakers, the beautiful venues, and even the wonderful weather here in Lyon, I believe we are well on our way to a successful congress.

Tomorrow evening's dinner location perhaps symbolises this spirit best. We will gather at BeauCoco, a restaurant located in a former railway station. A small but meaningful link to the concept of modal shift.

Although current figures show that the modal shift ambitions have not yet achieved the desired results, we continue to believe strongly in the important role inland shipping must play in Europe's sustainable transport future.

IVR itself also continues to grow and evolve.

In 2026, we are proud to welcome ten new members from various European countries. This increasing diversity strengthens both our network and our collective voice.

At the same time, we also see consolidation in the market through mergers and acquisitions. In some cases, three individual members have become one single membership after consolidation. That is why we need your help as ambassadors of IVR.

Please continue to share the value and importance of our association within your own networks, and encourage companies and organisations to become members. The stronger and broader our membership base is, the greater our collective influence and relevance will be. But maybe there are also members joining us today who would like to play an even more active role within our association as a new committee member or member of the Board of Management.

In a few months, we will say goodbye to our colleague Ellie Switzar at the IVR secretariat as she will enjoin her well-deserved retirement. We are therefore currently looking for a new colleague to join the team. Based on our positive experiences in the past (including the fact that current IVR staff members also joined through our network), I would kindly ask everyone to consider whether they might know a suitable candidate within their own network.

Our collaboration with international institutions continues to be a cornerstone of our work.

We are honoured today by the presence and speech of the new Secretary General of the CCNR, an organisation with which IVR shares deep historical roots.

When IVR was re-established in 1947 after the Second World War, it was the Central Commission for the Navigation of the Rhine (already in existence since 1815 and based in Strasbourg) that supported and protected the renewed association, which initially consisted of Dutch, French, Swiss, and Belgian organisations.

Today, that spirit of international cooperation remains just as important.

We continue to advocate for the ratification and implementation of key international conventions such as CMNI and CLNI.

I am pleased to share that countries including Poland and Austria have informed the IVR Secretariat that they are working towards ratification of the CMNI convention later this year. We also understand that France intends to ratify the CLNI convention during the second half of this year.

Legal certainty is especially important in uncertain times.

At the IVR Secretariat, we also closely monitor new regulations and examine where we can actively support the sector in their practical implementation.

One concrete example is the new wheelhouse inspection system we launched earlier this year under ES-TRIN 2025/1.

As of 1 January 2026, elevating and retractable wheelhouses must be inspected at least annually by a competent expert.

Together with affiliated experts, inspectors, and wheelhouse manufacturers, IVR has developed a harmonised inspection framework to ensure consistent quality and safety standards throughout the sector.

I am proud to say that more than 90 certificates have already been issued.

This demonstrates once again that IVR is not only a historical organisation, but also a practical and forward-looking partner for the industry.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Of course, major challenges remain ahead of us.

Climate change, economic uncertainty, digital transformation, and labour shortages all require our continuous attention and collective effort.

But when I look at the history of our sector (and when I look around this room today) I remain optimistic.

Because inland navigation has always moved forward.

And IVR will continue to move forward together with its members, its committees, its Executive Committee, its Board of Management, its Advisory Council, and all the professionals who dedicate themselves every day to this remarkable sector.

In previous years, the General Assembly marked the closing moment of our congress. This year, however, there is still much more to come.

And that makes me especially happy, because it gives us more time to connect, exchange ideas, strengthen friendships, and shape the future of our industry together. I look forward to speaking with many of you over the coming days.

Thank you very much for your attention.