Europe College lecture 1: Brexit – the results of the UK's democratic deficit?
On Tuesday November 13, Europe Direct the Hague and the Institute of Political Science at Leiden University (in the framework of NORTIA Jean Monnet Network on Research & Teaching in EU Foreign Affairs) organised the first lecture in the lecture series Europe College.

With our three speakers **Jon Worth** (EU-blogger and communication consultant), **Andreas Zenthöfer** (Head of Political Reporting and Policy Analysis at the Representation of the European Commission in the Netherlands) and **Heidi Maurer** (lecturer in EU politics and European Foreign Policy at the University of Oxford), we discussed the lack of democratic legitimacy in Britain, and the consequences Brexit has for the EU and its member states on the global stage.

Just before the lecture started the news about a Brexit-deal was announced in the media, making the topic of this evening's lecture even more relevant.

The Bridge in Newport
Jon starts off with a metaphorical story. In the post-industrial town Newport, Jon went together with his parents to the Transporter Bridge for the first time after the Brexit referendum. This bridge reopened in June 2011, after another reconstruction, funded with EU money. Next to the bridge, there is also a visitors centre which features exhibits on the history of the bridge. At the visitors centre, Jon's mother asked a gentleman working there, how he voted in the Brexit referendum. He replied that he voted in favour of Brexit. "So, you work in the visitors centre, funded by the EU, and you vote to leave the EU?"

Ironically, is it not? However, this story illustrates the fundamental problems regarding British democracy and Brexit, according to Jon.

Political dysfunctionality
He continues that the problem is that of political dysfunctionality. Jon explains, Newport is not only an industrial wasteland, but also a political one. The Labour Party always wins there, because it is a former industrial town. And because of that, a party organisation is not being build there. So there is no local political organisation, nobody that is actually on the ground to talk with locals. In addition, in the majority of the electoral constituencies there is not a proper electoral battle where the people have real influence. So, when you then organise a referendum, where every single vote *does* count, the citizens in these regions do not have anybody to talk to, in this case about Brexit.

This political dysfunctionality then led to a majority vote in the Brexit referendum to leave the EU. It was a rebellious reaction against the government in London. That is because citizens from the poorer regions (9 out 10 of the poorest regions of Europe are in the UK)
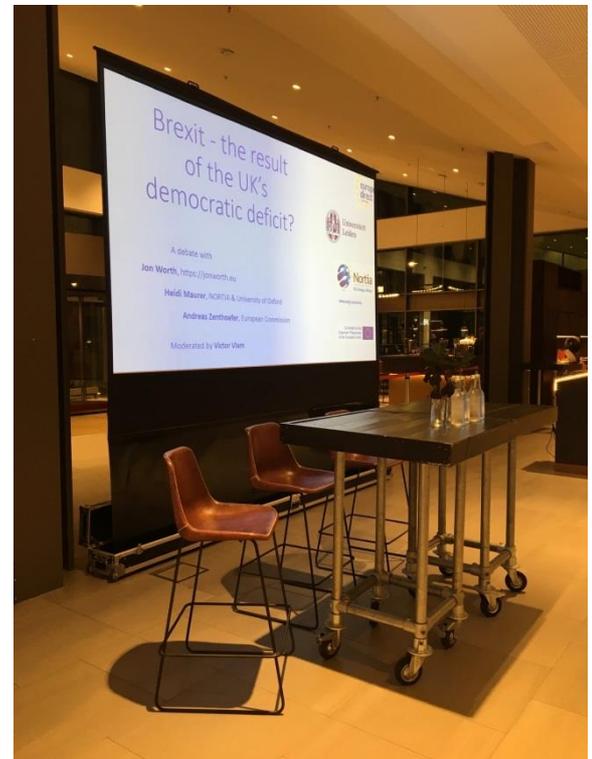
feel that they have been economically neglected by the government, for example Newport. So, they expressed their anger in the Brexit referendum by voting the opposite from what the government wants.

"So where do the liberal democrats stand in de democratic deficit of the UK?" asks somebody from the audience. Jon answers that they are there, but they have lost much of their credibility and hence their voters, because the party broke most of their promises. So many switched to the Labour party instead. Also, the party is rather poorly led according to Jon. "They are struggling to get a good hearing at the moment and therefore not able to profit from the situation."

Challenges to the democratic system
The second short lecture is given by Andreas Zenthöfer and he focusses on the importance of democracy in the EU talking from his own personal experience.[1]

According to Zenthöfer there is an overarching challenge to the democratic system we have in different European countries and also in the EU. Namely, that the democratic system does not match the current societies anymore. Over the years, societies have changed but the democratic system we still have in place has not changed with it. Therefore, there is gap between the current societies and the democratic system. This, then, results in that people feel underrepresented, that they do not have any influence or a voice.

Adapting to changes
According to Zenthöfer, we therefore need to adapt the democratic system to the changes in our societies. Take for example the economy. Due to globalisation, trade across borders are more frequent than before and hence, the economic structures of countries are more and more interconnected with each other. However, the democratic system has not been adapted to this change, but it is crucial that it does so, argues Zenthöfer. The same goes for technological, cultural and other changes in the society.

What does this mean?
"We need a European democracy and national democracies that more strongly defend the values that we have, and stand up to our economic interests, and we need an institutional setting that also fits that," says Zenthöfer. And, he continuous, there is a lot that we already can change in the EU's democratic system without having to establish a new treaty.

One way to improve the democratic aspect of the EU-institutions, is to introduce transnational voting lists for the elections of the European Parliament (EP). Hereby, you are able to vote for all the candidates in the EP from all the member states instead of only the ones from your member state. This would give you a direct say on a larger political entity. And people would get the feeling that they can influence things on a larger scale. Also, establishing specific and more EU media would make the EU more democratic legitimate, because media has an important role when it comes to the democratic aspect, says Zenthöfer. Currently, we are stuck in our national media landscape too much.

A critical question comes from the audience. We do not have a common idea what democracy is in Europe and we need a new idea about democracy. However, the Brexit discussion has had no influence on the democratic aspect in Europe. What is Zenthöfer's point of view on this from the stance of the European Commission.
"It was a moment of reflection: Where are we going? What do we want to be?" Says Zenthöfer. Because these are such fundamental questions, it is not for the European Commission to decide. That is why they published the White Paper on the Future of Europe with a number of scenario's how Europe can continue. This serves as a starting point for citizens to discuss about how we want to move forward. Citizens and the more democratic European institutions, should therefore decide this. However, we do not have an answer yet. Jon adds it is a pity that we have not learned from Brexit when it comes to combat the democratic deficit in Europe.

Europe of 1993
The last lecture of the evening is from professor Heidi Maurer and she contributes to the lecture by adding three points.

First of all, the EU has changed a lot since it was established in 1993 with the Treaty of Maastricht. But Maurer argues that people focus too much on that specific year and not the 25 years thereafter. Moreover, the focus lies on "an ever closer Union" but in the end the argument is that the EU has only been established for economic reasons with some political implications. However, Maurer argues that there is much more to the EU than the economy and politics. For instance, nobody goes back to the discussion in 2000-2005 on the EU-citizen: the discussion on how to bring Europe to the citizens by having public dialogues and discussions about the EU. This debate has resurfaced in the last two years, but we pretend that this is a new phase, while it is not, says Maurer.

The idea of cooperation
In the Brexit discussion, Maurer finds the idea of cooperation particularly interesting.
She sees that there is this idea that for the EU to work properly, all the member states must have the same interest. But that is not true, says Maurer. Instead, you come together and find a solution that is in the interest of everyone. Sometimes one country profits a bit more

than the other, another time it is the other way around. But you do not need to have the exact same interest in order to cooperate with each other.

Also the idea of taking back control, reclaiming a country's sovereignty becomes very clear in the Brexit discussion, mentions Maurer. Several politicians argue that they are taking back control and that the people, from that country will have a say again. But that is not the same thing argues Maurer. It is good that people get more influence, but that is not the same thing as taking back control and claiming national sovereignty. A lot of issues, for example climate change, do not stop at the border of a country. We need to cooperate in order to deal with such problems instead of thinking in boxes. This is evident within Europe but also outside of Europe.

Europe's role in the world
Lastly, Maurer addresses the tunnel vision both the UK and Europe have. The discussions are mostly about Brexit in the UK the last two years. And the same goes for the EU. It seems that the focus is only on Brexit and on figuring out the future relation between the UK and the EU27. However, according to Maurer, the focus should be less Eurocentric and more on how to solve problems together on a global level.

Maurer also addresses the consequences of Brexit on the global stage. "We should not underestimate what the Brexit does to the credibility of Europe," says Maurer. Much more reflection is needed on how we mitigate the negative effects on Brexit, for the UK as well as for the EU.