

Transcript Interview Freise

PD Dr. Matthias Freise, Institute of Political Science at the University of Münster, explains possible reasons for the often criticised democratic deficit in the EU and discusses possibilities how to overcome it.

5 Talking about the European Union's democratic deficit, the big problem is that one has to clarify first what one actually understands by democracy. There is no such thing as *the* democracy, but there are many ideas about what democracy is supposed to be. Depending on one's own idea of democracy, one can come to different conclusions about whether or not there is a democratic deficit in the European Union.

10 What you can actually do is have a look at different critics claiming that there is a democratic deficit in the EU. There are two different camps: On the one hand, there are those who state that the EU does not even have the prerequisites to be a democracy. Others would say that the EU lacks important requirements for a democracy, such as a common European language, a common European media system
15 or a shared European history. That is supposed to be the reason why the basic prerequisite for a democracy is missing: One cannot discuss problems in equal measure. This is one camp. On the other hand, there is a camp of people who say that the EU is incorrectly designed – it has a political order that does not meet democratic standards.

20 Here as well are different points of criticism concerning the EU. The following are the most important ones. For example, there are critics claiming that it is a huge problem in the EU that one cannot vote the actual government out of office. One cannot vote the European Commission out of office; one cannot vote the European Council out of office – which is made up of the member states' heads of government. Since it is
25 impossible to vote the government taken as a whole out of office, many people say that it is a basic problem, for a democracy's distinctive feature usually is the fact that one can get rid of the government by means of elections.

Others claim that it is a huge problem that there is no opposition in the EU. Opposition is a crucial feature in a democracy for many people – that there is an alternative to
30 the government and that citizens are able to decide via elections whether the opposition should replace the government. However, there is no such thing in the EU, but there is a permanent grand coalition, that is impossible to figure out – that is a huge problem.

Moreover, others accuse the EU of being extremely difficult to understand, inasmuch
35 as it is basically geared to maximal consensus. That is to say that the EU is designed to always try to find a joint solution. One can favour this approach, for one can think that a democracy should allow for a consensus to be achieved. However, others say that a good democracy is characterised by the fact that there is a majority and a minority having a conflict. At the end, there is a vote and one will prevail. If this is not
40 the case, if one always tries to find a great common solution, there is something democratic missing. So you see: One can look at the EU from different perspectives. Depending on one's very own perspective, opinions concerning the question if there is a democratic deficit in the EU may vary.

Since the existence of the EU, there are deliberations how to create it more democratic
45 – even concerning its predecessor organisations. Over the years, people thought about it repeatedly: How can we transform this model in a more democratic one? The answer was to give the Commission more powers. That is to say that the European Parliament, which is actually elected by the EU citizens, should be allowed to take more

50 decisions. That was done and that is why there is a huge discussion on how to make
the Parliament even more powerful. That indeed is controversial, but it would be a
possibility. Moreover, there are endeavours within the EU to be more open, that is to
say that all EU citizens should have the opportunity to take part in the process of
political decision-making. For example, the EU could, whenever it is about to make a
55 new law – on European level they are called regulations and directives – give
everybody who wants to contribute something the opportunity to do so. You could call
the EU and say: I have interests, too, which I would like to table; you could write an
email; you could participate in surveys – they are called consultations on European
level. To be honest, this is rarely done by individuals but rather by organisations in
60 which individuals join forces. NGO's such as Green Peace or Amnesty International as
well as labour unions, for instance – all these are organisations participating in EU
surveys. People hope for a higher level of democracy from this, since more people are
surveyed.

Being a student in Secondary School, you actually do not have the opportunity to vote.
This is bound to the right to vote. In Germany, you receive this right by turning 18.
65 [In most member states one is entitled to vote at the age of 18. In Austria, however,
the voting age is 16]. There are, however, many opportunities to get involved in
Europe, besides voting.

Of course, one possibility is to lay the foundations to help shape Europe: That is
learning languages, for instance. The EU is a union of 28 – soon 27 – states, with 24
70 different languages. If you really want to engage in it, you have to be able to
communicate in different languages. Therefore, one of the first things you should do
as a student being interested in Europe is learning languages.

Moreover, there is the possibility to participate actively in organisations addressing
European issues. In Germany, for instance, [and in most of the European member
75 states] every political party has a youth wing which is also concerned with European
issues. But it does not have to be a party, of course. There are many other
organisations addressing European issues. For example, there are the Young European
Federalists. This is a big organisation advocating Europe. It can be found in every
largish town. In case you are interested: Just ring them and participate. They have a
80 huge interest in finding young people interested in Europe.

The last thing I can recommend everyone who wants to engage oneself in the EU: The
EU has great programmes allowing for European exchange. If you want to live a
European life, you have to get to know different European states. One way of doing so
is by means of the great ERASMUS-programme. The ERASMUS-programme is financed
85 by the EU and allows students in school or university, and trainees or apprentices –
unfortunately, most trainees or apprentices do not know about this – to live in another
member state of the EU for six month or even a year, for example to continue their
education. Many university students make use of the programme, but it is also meant
to be used by senior class students in school. Plus, there is the possibility to go abroad
90 when doing an apprenticeship, so you can switch educational institutions within the
EU. You can get money for this.

And this is something you can describe as the one of the EU's biggest achievements
within the last decades: The EU allows young people to get to know Europe, to learn
about how politics work in other member states, how society works in other member
95 states. If you participate in it, if you speak different languages, if you are interested
in European issues, this is a fantastic thing.