

## Fifty Years of European Union

Professor Stefan Fritsch, native of Salzburg, Austria, and a former Fulbright Scholar to BGSU's political science department spoke at the February 2 Great Decisions Series sponsored by the Wood County Committee on Aging and the BG Branch of AAUW. Currently a visiting scholar in the department, Dr. Fritsch presented an overview of the European Union at 50 and posed the question, "is it finished business or a work in progress?" Fritsch began with an historical overview of the reasons for interest in European unity after WW II including a desire to forge a reconciliation between France and Germany, to "tame the German devil" and "pre-empt any possible acts of German revenge," to serve as an anti-Communist bloc, and to move Europe's economy away from U.S. dependence. Progress toward a multi-nation European consensus regarding the economy, foreign policy and judicial matters represented a radical departure from years of supra-nationalism, but war-weary Europeans had little interest in continuing in that vein. According to Fritsch, a move toward unity introduced "a new way of thinking about what it meant to be a European."

Dr. Fritsch noted that the founding and current members of the E.U. are not interested in building their own major military presence on their soil favoring instead "civilian power" based on building consensus among all member nations, now numbering 27. It is worth noting that these efforts at unity have resulted in the "longest period of undisturbed peace among European states in their history" and their biggest economic boom. The European Community, now known as the Common Market, established in the late 1950's as a first step created free trade among the original six member countries, a time characterized as "years of economic miracle" when trade increased 50%. Free trade among EU member nations still has an enormous positive impact on its current 27 member states because they represent 500 million consumers. According to Professor Fritsch, it is this access to so many consumers that continues to draw interest in joining, particularly among the post-Communist Eastern European countries and Turkey. Even long-term members have observed that while "Brussels dominates their lives, they still want to profit from the Common Market."

So what are the challenges facing the EU after 50 years? Fritsch asserted that reaching consensus on

issues related to foreign policy and judicial practice are the biggest. One example he shared was the break among EU members over participation in the U.S.- led war in Iraq when France refused to participate while other EU members did. Fritsch noted that foreign policy decision-making among EU member nations is a long process because "nation states negotiate as long as it takes to reach a consensus" based on the belief that "diplomacy and a lot of talking is a better way of coping with policy issues." When policy is taken up in the democratically elected EU Parliament, a weighted voting system is used so that smaller nations are advantaged. Professor Fritsch noted that his U.S. students are "always amazed that big countries would give up power to small countries!"

Despite its many successes and obvious strengths, the EU shows less enthusiasm at this time for expanding its membership. The admission of Turkey to the Union is certainly viewed by some as "a problem" based on questions about its "cultural compatibility" and size. Eastern European nations are admitted only if they can guarantee a "functioning democracy, no border conflicts, no severe internal divisions and a functioning market economy assuring the right to private property and unrestricted free trade." The protracted EU process of translating each law and regulation into 23 official languages to preserve national identity is cumbersome although one can argue that this allows "unity in diversity" to work. And despite differences in approach (military vrs. diplomacy) to achieving policy goals, Fritsch maintains that "both the U.S. and the E.U. are committed to the spread of democracy and establishment of a market economy."

--Diane Regan  
Ohio President-Elect