

Editorial

Negotiating the European Way: Principle and Pragmatism

Negotiation is more than a transaction — it is the art of reconciling ideals with reality, especially in a Europe defined by both its scars and its aspirations. The insights from the European Negotiation Conference 2025 and the work of the authors published in this issue of our Journal, paint a picture of a discipline under pressure, where negotiation as a rules-based, inclusive process often collides with polarization, urgency, and the allure of short-term pragmatism.

At its heart, negotiation is a capability, not just a skill. As Marchi argues, the EU's strength lies in its ecosystems — teams, institutions, and a culture of self-reflection forged by history. This tradition values legitimacy as much as leverage, but it is now tested by what Nuehnen et al call the "joint-decision trap" between inclusivity and the need for swift action. The EU's consensus-driven model, once a beacon of stability, risks paralysis when under stress. Yet, abandoning these principles would undermine the very trust from which Europe derives its influence.

The moral dimension of negotiation is equally critical. O'Leary's work in humanitarian crises and Matsoso's contribution in pandemic negotiations reveal a harsh truth: failure is measured in lives, not just lost opportunities. Matsoso's approach — building trust before drafting a text, exposing divergent views through a deliberately flawed first draft — shows negotiation as a process of constructive conflict, not its avoidance. But her warning is clear: in a world where solidarity is condi-

tional, Europe must reconcile its normative ambitions (equity, transparency, inclusion) with the realities of power politics. The danger of "progressive hypocrisy" is not just reputational; it erodes the credibility that underpins the influence of democracies.

Tuinte's concept of negotiation as narrative offers a path forward. By shaping the stories of their counterparts, negotiators can turn zero-sum games into collaborative problem-solving. This is empathy in action, not manipulation. Yet, as Zaric's historical analysis shows, negotiation is also an evolving profession, moving from artisanal craft to a discipline shaped by digital tools and cross-cultural demands. Europe's challenge is to blend analytical rigor with relational agility — ensuring that technology serves, rather than replaces, human aspirations.

What, then, is the way ahead? Three priorities stand out:

Institutional Agility: Democracies must adapt their decision-making without sacrificing legitimacy. Crisis-driven governance shows that smaller coalitions and informal coordination can break deadlocks, but these must be rooted in broader consensus to avoid backlash.

Bridging Theory and Practice: The gap between academic research and real-world negotiation is a liability. Initiatives like the European Negotiation Conference are vital, but we need more — translating insights into actionable tools for policy-

makers and the public. Negotiation training should become widespread in European curricula.

Reclaiming the Narrative: In an era of misinformation, the commitment to transparency and inclusivity must be communicated as a strategic advantage, not as administrative jargon. The EU's normative framework is an asset, but only if it is fully implemented.

Ultimately, negotiation is about shaping a world where rules matter, trust is earned, and the vulnerable are protected. As Matsoso reminds us, the policies we craft today will define the world we leave to future generations. Let us ensure they inherit not just treaties, but a tradition of negotiation that is as principled as it is pragmatic.

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