

# Practitioner Interview with Francesco Marchi



## Francesco Marchi

Professor at Sciences Po, Director of Negotiation Expertise at ALTERNEGO, President and Founding Member of ENEA.

## Biography

Working at the intersection of negotiation practice, executive education, and academic teaching, Francesco Marchi has developed a distinctive perspective on how negotiation is prepared, transmitted, and exercised across European and international settings. At Sciences Po, where he teaches European Negotiations in a Global Context, he brings together conceptual reflection and practical analysis, with a strong emphasis on simulations,

case studies, and the institutional dynamics of the European Union.

Beyond the classroom, he serves as Director of Negotiation Expertise at ALTERNEGO in Paris and previously directed the Negotiators of Europe programme at ESSEC Business School. He has also advised and trained EU negotiating teams, including the Brexit Task Force and several European Commission directorates, while working with diplomats and public officials across more than twenty countries. He is also one of the driving forces behind the European Negotiation Education Association (ENEA) and the European Negotiation Conference, initiatives designed to create a more open and inclusive forum for exchange across disciplines, professions, and generations. This commitment reflects a broader view of negotiation not simply as an individual skill, but as a collective capability that depends on institutions, shared learning, and sustained dialogue.

In this interview, Francesco Marchi reflects on the European Negotiation Conference as a forum for dialogue across disciplines, professions, and generations, and on a broader understanding of negotiation as a collective capability shaped by curiosity, reflection, and institutional awareness.

*Interview conducted on 17 December 2025 by Jean-Jacques Subrenat, IGN Distinguished Fellow & JGN Editorial Board Member, with Frederik Nuehnen, IGN Fellow and JGN Project Lead.*

**Frederik Nuehnen:** Francesco, in your own words, describe the European Negotiation Conference (ENC) 2025 and introduce it to our readers.

**Francesco Marchi:** First, I think that the ENC 2025 was a very much needed event in which we tried to bring together experts from different academic disciplines and fields that do not necessarily talk to each other. We had people dealing with real estate negotiation, humanitarian negotiation, diplomatic negotiation, and disciplines such as sociology, social psychology, and political science.

Second, it was an event in which we wanted to facilitate the dialogue between researchers, who write brilliant peer-reviewed articles, and practitioners who are on the front line and do negotiations.

The third important element was the active inclusion of students because in academic conferences they often have a peripheral role, and we wanted to build bridges across different generations.

It was interesting to see master's students, PhD researchers, established researchers, and then emeritus professors sitting side by side in an old amphitheatre at the Sorbonne. Such diversity was an important message and a great opportunity. Our primary goal was to foster dialogue and understanding of negotiation, not only as skills, but as a capability that is needed not only for individuals, but also for organizations at large

**Jean-Jacques Subrenat:** You mentioned developing "capability" instead of "skills". What difference do you make between capability and skills in the context of negotiation?

**FM:** I think the two notions are not in contrast. You don't need to have skills or capabilities, it is the combination of the two which makes sense. In the last 30 years, we have given a lot of attention to the negotiation skills of individuals. You need to be a good negotiator, you need to be a good diplomat. And of course, this is a necessary condition, although not

sufficient, because when you are a negotiator, you need to be surrounded by an ecosystem that will allow you to perform. You need to have advisors, no doubt some sound legal expertise, you need to coordinate within your team, and you need to have a consistent leadership in the organization you work for.

In my training sessions and courses, I insist a lot on the notion of reliability in negotiation. What does it mean? For too long the attention has been on "getting to yes" at the table and getting the deal signed... and then what? Negotiation is not only at the table. It starts well before, with the diagnosis of potential challenges and the preparation. Once you've signed the deal, the work is not over because you must implement the deal. And if you want to go one step further, you should also learn by identifying what you did well and what you could improve. I have been working with many diplomats in Brussels, and many of them have precious memories, with examples and experiences that they could share with more junior colleagues. This is why I see negotiation as an organisational capability and not only an individual skill.

**FN:** Looking at the experiences of the senior negotiators you mentioned, how did you feel about the exchange between the students and the senior negotiators at the conference this year?

**FM:** Students were extremely happy because they could put faces, examples, and stories on what they have been studying. Being in direct contact with more senior people helped them understand that what they have been studying or experimenting through simulations and games corresponds to real challenges professional negotiators have been exposed to. It's a powerful reality check. This type of connection is another important element of what I do in my teaching because you need to connect concepts with practical illustrations and concrete examples. In addition to that, we wanted to provide students with networking op-

portunities. And even an experienced negotiator may be interested in meeting a young, brilliant, and very active student whom you could involve in one of their projects.

**JJS:** I'd like to ask you a quite fundamental question. Is there a fundamental difference between negotiation in general and European negotiation? Besides the cultural differences, are there any differences and what would they be?

**FM:** This is the \$100 million question. I think it is difficult to answer, because this difficulty is itself a characteristic of what is European. My inability to give you a clear definition of what European negotiation is – in my view – one of its main characteristics. The distinctive thread of a European negotiation approach is the ability to question ourselves, to be curious, and to include doubt as a driving element of our line of thought.

The second distinct feature of the European approach is its roots in history, philosophy, and humanism. Many principles of negotiation were written during the Renaissance and even before. For example, Barthélemy de Felice, in 1778, in his "Encyclopaedia," wrote about the challenges and dilemmas between the use of negotiation and power. Or think of Machiavelli's "The Prince". This is the European take on negotiation: modesty, curiosity, humanism, and a multidisciplinary approach.

For example, you cannot understand any negotiation if you do not have a sound historical understanding of the context. We can heavily learn from past negotiations – from the Greeks and the Romans, through the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, up to contemporary conflicts. History prepares us for new challenges and current negotiations. I tell my students that you cannot understand European negotiation or international negotiation without looking at the shape of the political systems. I encourage them to explore what we can learn from com-

parative politics, because negotiating in a presidential system is not the same as negotiating in a consensual parliamentary system.

**JJS:** The challenge of negotiation is to get to some sort of agreement with people who, by definition, are of a different nature or have different views. Nowadays, as members of the European Union, I think the rule of law is a particularly important aspect. What are the specific challenges for European negotiators, trained to prioritize the rule of law, when negotiating with counterparts whose legal and normative frameworks do not rest on the same foundations, and how can those challenges be managed in practice?

**FM:** The answer to this question requires a clear understanding of what are the limits and the perimeter of what is negotiable or not. Without that clear notion, it is highly challenging to deal with tough players. How can you deal with tough players when you have the objective of respecting the rule of law? You need to be internally coordinated. If you need to put pressure on players because your aim is to respect the rule of law or to take decisions that are aligned with these principles, it is essential to be aware that you may have to pay the price of retaliation, and you need to accept the related costs. And what we see today in several cases that we pretend to defend, and negotiate while having the rule of law in mind; but we do not accept the costs, and we are not sufficiently coordinated, at least at the EU level. A key challenge is that the European Union is not necessarily perceived as a consistent negotiator by external players.

**JJS:** What distinguishes negotiations over tangible, corporate interests that lend themselves to transactional deal-making from negotiations grounded in fundamental principles and values, and how can or should negotiators respond to the growing dominance of transactional approaches in political contexts?

**FM:** I think there is a fundamental difference between negotiations over tangible, transactional interests and negotiations grounded in principles and values. In commercial negotiation, the deal is largely self-contained. The agreement stays between the parties, and its legitimacy does not depend on external audiences. No one is watching closely, and the main question is whether the deal works economically for those involved.

In political and diplomatic negotiation, this is never the case. The first key difference is what I would call the external sellability of the agreement. You always negotiate under the gaze of parliaments, public opinion, the media, and organized interests. A deal is not only about what you agree on at the table, but about whether you can justify it outside the room.

Second, interests themselves are much more ambiguous. When you negotiate on behalf of a company, interests are usually clearer and more homogeneous. When you negotiate on behalf of a polity, you represent a composite actor—ministries, political coalitions, institutions, and constituencies. Interests are multiple, sometimes contradictory, and constantly evolving.

Third, values and symbols play a central role. Political negotiations are not only about material gains, but about meaning, status, and recognition. Avoiding loss of face becomes crucial. As one diplomat once told me in Brussels, under the unanimity rule you sometimes have to speak to Malta as you would speak to Germany. Formally, their voices carry the same weight. But symbolically, both small and large states face a high cost of humiliation: small states because they are vulnerable, large states because failure is highly visible. This symbolic dimension is largely absent from transactional deal-making.

This leads to a core dilemma specific to political negotiation, especially in Europe:

the tension between ambition and inclusivity. Do we aim for highly ambitious outcomes that are fragile and hard to ratify, or for more inclusive, stable agreements that may be less ambitious but politically sustainable? This trade-off simply does not exist in the same way in transactional negotiations.

Time horizons also differ profoundly. Commercial negotiations often privilege short-term efficiency. Political negotiations are embedded in long-term institutional and legal trajectories, where today's compromise shapes tomorrow's constraints.

So how should negotiators respond to the growing dominance of transactional approaches in political contexts? My view is that importing transactional logic into value-based negotiation is dangerous. It creates internal incoherence and undermines credibility. However, this does not mean refusing pragmatism. It means being explicit about what is negotiable and what is not, and accepting that defending principles has a cost.

From practice, I would add one final point. Even when actors appear to be divided by irreconcilable values, the disagreement often lies as much in the interpretation of facts as in principles themselves. Drawing on work in humanitarian negotiation, one effective strategy is to identify what other colleagues would call an "island of agreement": shared facts and minimal legal or normative standards. This does not resolve value conflicts, but it creates a stable foothold to keep negotiation alive without collapsing everything into pure transaction.

**FN:** I would like to pick up on this. You talked about the qualities of European negotiation from history to questioning ourselves, the plurality of ideas that you have to deal with. you also note the polarization and the inconsistency of the European Union and international relations. What motivated you to reinstate the ENC? What gaps did you see?

**FM:** There was the academic landscape in which we all knew each other, but there are many small groups mushrooming across Europe, and still too little effort to really bring together the European family. It was not a revolutionary idea, but our aim was to create a forum that was truly based on inclusiveness and openness. We wanted to create a platform, a small hub, that could facilitate cross-fertilization. At ENEA and the ENC, we do not intend to substitute for or compete with other major conferences, we are here to facilitate exchanges. How many times have we said: We should do this, we should gather somewhere, back in Paris again? I have heard these comments so many times from colleagues and friends who wanted to meet again. So, we said: Let's make it happen. Let's create the opportunity. It is really that simple. The ENC managed to capture and bring together an interest, a need that was already there. People wanted a European forum where we could meet and exchange ideas. And we were able to respond to that need.

**FN:** Speaking about the potential of actually letting all these European actors meet with each other. What connections did you noticed that were established during the ENC?

**FM:** We saw the gradual emergence of a snowball effect, which was not limited to Europe, as we had participants from South Africa, Argentina, and the United States. This was fully consistent with the ambition of the project: to build solid relationships, to develop concrete projects, and to give people the opportunity to work together.

And this did happen after the ENC in July, as many participants began inviting each other to different initiatives. Today we have many people from our conference and our association who will participate in the 'Artificial Intelligence Negotiation Forum' in January 2026. This is precisely what we wanted to create: a space that facilitates trust between scholars and

practitioners. And we could see this has already worked. Today, the ENEA has more than 30 members of more than 20 nationalities. We haven't launched any major PR campaign or a formal call to action. These were simply colleagues and friends who told us "We want to join the adventure" because they felt that something was connecting them. In a sense, our role has been to connect an energy that was already there and to make visible the plurality. We acted as a catalyst.

**FN:** I would like to come back to the consistency you mentioned. How do you plan to institutionalise these connections that were built and keep the connections consistent with the association?

**FM:** My plan may surprise you. We do not have a fixed, top-down plan but this is a deliberate choice, not a lack of direction. Our strategy is to listen very carefully to what people want to do and where they want to invest their energy. We are engaging in intensive talks with people and identifying what is actually needed. On that basis, we will adapt, as our role is not necessarily to innovate for the sake of innovation, but to create and protect spaces where meaningful connections can happen.

One principle is particularly important to us: subsidiarity. This is something we strongly believe in within the ENEA board. We do not want to be only a Paris-based association, nor a geographically narrow one. We want to be European in spirit, but global in outreach. And we firmly believe that initiatives should emerge from the members themselves. People should be able to organize, to take ownership, and to build locally while remaining connected to a wider community.

One of the most rewarding things to observe is the community taking shape. On our website, we have a map where small points keep appearing. Today, the network spans from Georgia to Cape Town to Norway. This creates very concrete possibilities. If you are an ENEA

member and you are planning a trip, you can directly reach out to someone working on negotiation in that region. If I have students interested in going to Georgia, we now have a trusted contact there. This kind of infrastructure simply did not exist in the field of negotiation before. It may seem modest, but it is potentially very impactful. Instead of broadcasting emails to dozens of people to reach one person, you can connect directly. This type of light, non-intrusive platform is precisely what allows trust, loyalty, and long-term relationships to emerge. And this is where cross-fertilization and spill overs actually may happen.

**FN:** Understanding the necessity of organisation and of building networks, what is your advice, especially for early career academics and practitioners, how could they fit into this association? How can they profit from your work?

**FM:** We would like to start providing training for students and early-career professionals with the help of the experts and practitioners of our association. We would like to develop shared virtual libraries and put in circulation everything that is culturally important for negotiators.

Personally, I understand negotiation as a public good. Negotiation is not only about diplomacy, and it is not only about commerce. It concerns urban planning, conflict resolution, and more generally collective decision-making. In that sense, negotiation is an act of civilization. And this is where we want to focus our efforts: diffusing a culture of negotiation as a shared instrument, as a public good. One concrete direction is to work toward the introduction of negotiation courses more systematically into university curricula. There are already inspiring examples of initiatives aimed at teaching negotiation and conflict resolution to primary school children, with remarkable results. We also know that similar initiatives exist in France and elsewhere. What

is missing is not energy or ideas, but connection. And this is precisely where we see our role: identifying these experiences, linking them together, and helping them scale through shared learning.

**FN:** From your experience with your students, what are the most important skills and capabilities that you consider the younger generation should have in order to tackle the problems they will have to solve?

**FM:** Something that was needed 1,000 years ago, and that will still be needed 100 years from now, is curiosity and the ability to listen. I think this is absolutely fundamental. It can help us reduce conflict and, in a way, help us protect our world. Asking questions, being curious, and never taking things for granted are essential. And this will become even more important with the development of artificial intelligence, because sometimes we tend to believe that asking one question to ChatGPT is enough to understand — or even to rule — the world.

This also raises a leadership issue. We often have very high-level people in leadership positions. But the real question is not only what questions they ask, but how many questions they ask their colleagues, and whether they actively seek out views that diverge from their own.

The higher you go in a hierarchy, the more people tend to please you. And this significantly increases the risk of mistakes, accidents, and poor decisions. From my perspective, this is where what I call *humilitas sapientiae* becomes essential: intellectual humility. Being humble is not a weakness. On the contrary, it is what allows negotiators and leaders to avoid one of the most dangerous traps of all—overconfidence. And overconfidence, in negotiation, is quite simply a recipe for disaster.

**FN:** If you think back on your private and professional life, what was one of the most memorable moments where you

noticed that your curiosity brought you forward?

**FM:** I think that one of the founding moments of my career happened when I was still a student. It was a truly life-changing experience that I had in Burgundy, in Cluny, in 2001. I took part in a summer university in which we discussed and elaborated a European Constitution at a time when discussions about the European Constitution were taking place at the EU's institutional level. We were nearly 80 students coming from across the European Union, including participants from Turkey, Cyprus, and Eastern European countries such as Hungary and Bulgaria. And it was there that I experienced my very first negotiation workshop. It was a real game-changer. We were asked to discuss what Europe could look like in the future together with people who were not even members of the European Union — at least not yet. It was an extraordinary experience, because it was the first time I saw people seriously questioning assumptions instead of defending fixed positions.

I remember one particular moment very clearly. There was an international evening in which everyone was invited to bring typical food. Greek students, Cypriot students from both communities, and Turkish students decided to organize a Mediterranean party together. It was striking. You could see that the younger generation was already capable of projecting itself twenty years into the future. For me, it was a small but powerful seed of hope, and it deeply shaped my curiosity and my attention to negotiation.

I am still in contact with people who attended Cluny at that time, some of whom have gone on to teach there. And it is very likely that Cluny will be one of the places where we will organize a future ENEA event, precisely to reconnect that founding moment of 2001, with where we stand twenty-five years later.