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Otto Von Bismarck allegedly said that the public ought not see how sausages and laws are made. Leaving sausages aside, our course on EU negotiations and decision-making – "the SimGame" – aimed to unveil to close one hundred students of the POL department how European laws take shape. During four intense weeks students tried to find an agreement and set into law a proposal that the European Commission issued in March 2014, dubbed "conflict minerals regulation". If adopted, this piece of law would provide a scheme to source four minerals – including gold – from importers who can show that their supply chain does not contribute to fueling conflict in certain areas at risk, like the Great Lakes region in Africa.

Our students negotiated hard the contents of the proposal, but they could not find an agreement to transform the bill into European legislation. However, this time the result was not the main goal, for the main learning benefits of the SimGame lied in the process itself. Students experienced first touch the excitement of the policy process as well as the frustration that can come with it. They felt how tiring, complex, demanding and "high maintenance" is to get a bill through. Perhaps not everybody left with a flattering opinion of how the EU works, but each had the opportunity to develop a personal and documented idea about it. This year, we introduced a few innovations to take into account the evolving reality of EU law-making.

First, we gave a prominent role to twelve non-institutional actors: journalists, industry, NGOs, personalities, and think tanks, all actors that play an increasingly influential role in Brussels. But making them enter the game required that they be provided with a platform for interaction and to weigh-in in institutional meetings, just as in real life.

Therefore – and this is the second innovation – we had to develop a platform to give stakeholders airspace. This is what Jon Worth, another professor at the College, set up with Twitcol – the Twitter of the SimGame – and individual blogs / webpages that all actors, institutional and not, had the opportunity to use. Jon's insightful reflections on his experience with the SimGame are available [on his blog](#). But Twitcol served also other purposes, intendedly or otherwise: it confronted institutional actors with external pressure and exposed their constraints when dealing with social media (e.g. what can/should a national government say about a legislative proposal that is still under discussion? Should EU officials say something at all?). It enabled natural allies to recognise each other and join forces; it quickly focused the discussion on a small number of (socially) salient topics; it reflected also in the simulation game the stark difference between the way things go and the way things are told to the public. As professors who are expected to assess performance, Twitcol also provided additional opportunities for visibility to those roles that, by design, had less.

Third, we made sure that participants had (also) an independent feedback on how their negotiation went in terms of resemblance to reality. Our own assessment could not replace feedback from the real protagonists of this on-going EU negotiation. And so, we invited a few key "conflict minerals" players to Bruges for a [final conference](#). Real negotiators listened to the outcome of the students' negotiation and commented on it. This exchange ended up being useful not only for students, who found answers to many questions, but also to the real negotiators themselves. They could see in the experience of the students a refreshing proxy of what awaited them in the final stages of the real negotiation. Even more so since, for a fortunate coincidence of events, the real trilogues started the day after the SimGame had ended. A coincidence [Politico did not miss](#) (scroll down until the second half of the page).

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This approach to the SimGame wanted to address a number of recurrent and somehow inevitable shortcomings in simulation games: how to keep everybody motivated although some roles are objectively more interesting than others? How to reflect in the exercise the importance of lobbying activity and social media? How to mark students fairly knowing that some roles naturally expose them to higher workload and more visibility? How to assess individual performances in the context of a collective exercise? How to ensure that the simulation - both on process and content - does not depart too much from reality?

Despite Twitcol, the blogs, and other public communication initiatives that students took – such as street demonstrations (!) – it remains challenging to assess performance on the basis of participation only. The core of legislative negotiation unfolds in informal settings and/or in small circles that are invisible to the public (and to instructors). Requiring all meetings to take place under the sunlight would be an unacceptable manipulation bearing no similarity with reality. But the assessment problem remains. We addressed it by requiring complementary (individual) written assignments, as similar as possible to the ones that actors involved in policy-making would be expected to develop at different stages of the process.

Before the SimGame started, we asked participants to prepare a position paper as if they were consultants hired by a client with a stake in the proposal. Towards the end of the negotiation, students prepared individual briefing for their "principals" (e.g. Martin Schultz in the case of MEPs; the Commissioner for EU Commission officials, etc.) summarising the process until then, describing the main outstanding issues and proposing a suggested course of action to steer the final negotiation towards the desired outcome. NGOs, journalists and think tanks had to come up with various forms of written output pushing their position ahead of the grand-institutional bargain. Whether students appreciated the SimGame is not for us to say. But the exercise largely exceeded our expectations as instructors in terms of commitment displayed and quality of discussions. There is always a degree of uncertainty when designing a simulation game. For instance, if it is not sufficiently well calibrated to the participants, it may fail to "pick up" and generate meaningful dynamics. In this case, students quickly dissipated this doubt. They embraced their role fully, started to familiarise with the options available in their capacity, and exploited them to their full potential. The negotiation remained tense and uncertain until the very end, when a fragile deal hammered out in trilogue failed to earn sufficient support in the EP plenary. This result was realistic, given the circumstances, although a bit bitter for many. But real politics isn't any sweeter.



Beyond the short-term outcome, we believe the learning benefits to be deep and long-lasting. No participant has seen the whole process.

Each has rather zoomed into a specific portion of it. This is inevitable also in reality: there is no overall expert in all aspects of EU negotiations. The key is therefore in cooperation and mutual trust. One key take-away of the exercise is that decision making is a collective endeavour and there is no such a thing as individual success or failure.

As a next step, we will compile all the key documents that have been prepared during the negotiation, across institutions (e.g. trilogue documents) and to the extent possible between institutional and non-institutional actors. By making this available to participants we aim to provide a comprehensive snapshot – or rather an unprecedented “x-ray scan” – of the policy process as it unfolded in these four weeks. On this basis, everyone should be able to track back what happened, when, and thanks to whom.



We were honoured and humbled to have the chance to run this course, given its standing in the College's curriculum and the fame of those who preceded us, lately Fiona Hayes-Renshaw and Christian Lequesne. For those who like to design and run simulation games, this exercise took place in an ideal setting: a sufficiently large number of students to cover all the main roles in the EU legislative process; the complementary with other courses that explained in great detail how the EU works (limiting the SimGame to the actual negotiation); a group of participants with an impressive combination of competence and dedication; and two committed assistants to help us: Umur Akansel and Brice Cristoforetti deserve special mention. Only under these privileged circumstances, we could slightly step out of our comfort zone and experiment something new.

We would like to use this opportunity to thank students for their enthusiastic and professional involvement throughout this exercise. They happened to be some sort of "guinea pigs" of this experiment. We can only reward them by taking into account their feedback on how this exercise can be improved further in the future.