

FROM THEORY TO GAME : HOW
RESEARCH SHAPED THE DESIGN
OF THE FAIR SIMULATION AND
HOW EXPECTATIONS WERE MET
BY THE FIVE SIMULATION RUNS

"REPORT ON THE NEGOTIATION AND
IMPLEMENTATION GAME"

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From Theory to Game: How research shaped the design of the FAIR simulation, and how expectations were met by the five simulation game runs

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1. Summary

This report describes how IR and negotiation theory shaped the design of the FAIR negotiation simulation, and whether the dynamics the design was meant to produce appeared in five test runs. The object of evaluation is the design of the simulation, not the performance of participants.

The game, which has been developed by ICMPD researchers Bernhard Perchinig and Alexis McLean, models bilateral negotiations on return and readmission between the fictional destination state *Euronian* and its former colony *Southland*. Euronian has been the target of Southland migrants for centuries; thus, a sizeable Southland diaspora, some 3% of the Euronian population, lives there. Euronian oil companies hold drilling rights for some 40% of Southland's oil fields, and oil from Southland is a major source for Euronian's energy supply. Euronian is confronted with a growing number of non-enforceable return decisions regarding irregularly resident Southland citizens and thus has invited Southland to negotiations. Delegations negotiate in a whole-of-government format, so that ministries with different mandates and red lines must agree internally before facing the other side.

The game has been implemented in five test runs, which took place between November 2025 and April 2026 at the University of Geneva, the University of Vienna, the University for Continuing Education Krems (online), ICMPD and UNU Maastricht, with students and migration practitioners. The authors observed internal meetings and plenaries and compared their transcribed notes with the design expectations.

The design treats return negotiations as a South-North impasse (Betts 2008) under unbalanced reciprocity (Cassarino 2010) and as a suasion game (Martin 1992): Euronian seeks cooperation it cannot compel, while Southland, which controls nationality determination and readmission consent, holds the stronger BATNA on the return file. Drawing on Keohane/Nye (1977) and Schelling (1960), the scenario spreads bargaining power across policy fields: Euronian depends on Southland's oil, Southland announces a phased increase in oil royalties, and education, labour mobility, investment and reintegration offer further linkage options. From negotiation theory, the design takes the distinction between distributive and integrative bargaining, with issue linkage as the bridge between them (Raiffa et al. 2003), the first-offer anchor (Tversky/Kahneman 1974; Gunia et al. 2013), and the BATNA and ZOPA concepts (Fisher/Ury/Patton 1991). Internal briefings and alternating plenary and breakout sessions ask delegations to set and revise reservation values; a low-trust, partial exchange of information is expected. An action card, played at the end of the second plenary session, reports an unconfirmed offer by the neighbouring state Mesotomia to accept Southland nationals deported from Euronian in exchange for green-energy investment. It is designed as a BATNA shock.

Several expectations were confirmed. In all runs Euronian pressed for a binding agreement, Southland preferred non-binding memoranda of understanding (MoUs) and made cooperation



conditional on safeguards, capacity building or investment, and refused to readmit third-country nationals. No run produced a signed return agreement. Every negotiation expanded to education, reintegration, border-capacity building and energy or investment cooperation, but these issues ran parallel to the return dispute and were rarely turned into packages tied to return numbers. Delegations re-anchored between rounds, ministries bargained with each other inside each delegation, and information exchange stayed partial throughout.

Three observations diverged from expectations. The energy lever was rarely used: only at the University of Vienna did Euronía offer EUR 500 million in investment on condition that oil fees remained unchanged, while in Maastricht the royalty increase was handled as a confrontation. In almost all runs, Euronía under-anchored rather than over-anchored, which can be attributed less to the game design than to the courteous norms of educational settings and, in the ICMPD case, to the fact that participants work closely together in projects. Euronía sidelined the action card in the plenaries of all five runs and kept it internally as a reserve option; Southland delegations in Krems, Maastricht and Vienna read it as a breach of trust, and only in Krems did it visibly change the course of the talks. The card worked through trust, not as a material outside option; the recorded return figures discussed in the negotiations showed no change after it was played.

Across runs, the cause of impasse was a sequencing deadlock: Euronía wanted an agreement before any commission or working group, Southland wanted safeguards, a commission or a memorandum of understanding before committing to numbers.

These observations should not be overstated, as results might reflect conditions of implementation rather than design: Fixed and rather short session length, the one-week break in Geneva, the online format in Krems and the delegation size all might have influenced the concrete implementation. With five runs and heterogeneous participants, design effects cannot be separated from participant effects. In general, participants criticised the short duration of the game and suggested introducing longer negotiation periods and repeated meetings after a one- or two-week pause allowing internal reflection and the drafting of position papers. The participants in Krems, where the game was implemented in an online format, agreed that they would have preferred an in-person setting, as the online format did not allow coordination and exchange of arguments.



2. Introduction

This report describes how insights from negotiation theory and international relations informed the design of the FAIR negotiation simulation and assesses the extent to which the theoretical expectations underlying the design were reflected in the five simulation game runs. Rather than evaluating participants' performance, the report evaluates the simulation itself: did the institutional setting, role design, and negotiation process generate the dynamics that the theoretical framework predicted?

The FAIR simulation models bilateral negotiations on migration return and readmission between two fictional states: the European destination country *Euronía* and the Southern country of origin *Southland*, both tied by a long colonial history¹. While fictional, the scenario draws on characteristics commonly found in contemporary return negotiations. Euronía seeks increased cooperation on the return of irregular migrants, whereas Southland faces the political, economic, and administrative costs associated with readmission. To move beyond a single-issue negotiation, the scenario embeds migration within a broader bilateral relationship shaped by a shared colonial history, significant economic interdependence, and an established diaspora. This wider context creates opportunities for issue linkage across areas such as energy, development cooperation, education, labour mobility, and reintegration.

The simulation is grounded in robust empirical knowledge relating to migration and return diplomacy. The design of the simulation, including roles and scenarios, was notably informed by evidence generated in the framework of the FAiR project, which identified drivers, obstacles and practices related to intergovernmental return framework negotiation and implementation and gathering practitioner's insights across a series of EU+ and non-EU+ countries.

To capture the complexity of contemporary migration governance, negotiations are conducted in a whole-of-government format. Rather than representing a single ministry, each delegation consists of actors with different institutional mandates, priorities, and political constraints. The design therefore requires participants not only to negotiate with their counterparts but also to reconcile competing interests within their own delegation before presenting common positions.

The delegation composition in the handbook represents the full version of the game, with seven negotiating roles per side; in runs with fewer participants, some individual role sheets were dropped. The analysis below refers to the full set of role cards, since each role carries a distinct function in the design.

The simulation game was implemented in five test runs involving university students and practitioners in the field of migration management (Table 1). It is important to note that, except

¹ The game itself is property of ICMPPD and is not shared publicly. It consists of a short theoretical introduction, the game handbook outlining the relationship between Euronía and Southland and the procedural details, detailed role definitions, action cards in writing and as audio news-feed, and evaluation sheets. These products are not deliverables for the FAIR project.



for the ICMPD run, the simulation has always been implemented in the context of accredited educational and academic programs, limiting the simulation organisers' flexibility to recruit participants and set timings independently.

In preparation for the game, the participants received a handbook outlining the relationship between the virtual countries Euronion and Southland, a five-page background paper outlining the main theoretical concepts in the field of studies of return migration, and a description of the setup and timing of the negotiation sessions and a list of questions for the verbal evaluation held at the end of the meeting. In addition, each party received detailed role cards for their delegation members outlining main targets and red lines. Role cards were not shared between the two parties.

Although the composition of delegations differed across the runs, each implementation followed the same overall scenario and negotiation structure. During the test runs, Bernhard Perchinig and Alexis McLean observed both internal delegation meetings and the plenary negotiation. Their observation notes were subsequently transcribed, summarised and analysed to compare the negotiations with the theoretical expectations that informed the game's design.

Table 1 – Overview of runs

Run/Host	Programme	Date	Configuration
University of Geneva	MA in Global Studies	24 November and 1 December 2025 ²	7 negotiators + 2 notetakers per team
University of Vienna	MA Development Studies	13 December 2025	12 rotating negotiators per team
University for Continuing Education Krems	Certificate Programme Circular and Return Migration Management	23 January 2026	Online 12 rotating negotiators per team
ICMPD	ICMPD staff – Silk Routes department	26 March 2026	5 negotiators per team

² The implementation was split into two sessions to accommodate running university schedule



UNU Maastricht	Migration Law and Policymaking (MiLAP)	22 April 2026	7 negotiators + 1 rapporteur per team
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The purpose of this analysis is not to draw general conclusions about negotiation behaviour. With only five implementations involving participants with different professional backgrounds, levels of experience, and group compositions, the observations cannot distinguish reliably between effects generated by the simulation design and those resulting from participant characteristics or specific run conditions. Instead, the report examines whether the simulation consistently produced the negotiation dynamics it was designed to model and identifies where theoretical expectations were confirmed, modified, or challenged.

The following sections first explain the principal theoretical conclusions derived from international relations theory and then describe their implementation in the game setting. The observations from the five simulation runs are discussed in relation to the theoretical expectations. In the following chapter, the main conclusions from negotiation theory are discussed in a similar format. The concluding chapter discusses broader patterns across the implementations, reflects on the strengths and limitations of the simulation as a learning and analytical tool and discusses potential improvements.



3. The structural design of the role game: Takeaways from International Relations Theory

3.1 South-North Impasse

The simulation is built around the concept of return negotiations as a paradigmatic *South-North impasse* (Betts 2008; Perchinig et al. 2018). In this constellation, the political problem of irregular migration is primarily experienced by destination countries, whereas the preferred policy response – readmission – depends on the cooperation of countries of origin. As Cassarino (2010, 2014) argues, this creates a relationship of *unbalanced reciprocity*: destination countries derive immediate political benefits from return, while countries of origin bear much of the economic, administrative, and political costs (absorbing and integrating returnees, losing remittances, managing diaspora-related political pressure). In game-theoretical terms, this resembles Martin's (1992) suasion game, in which one actor seeks cooperation but cannot compel it, while the other has little intrinsic incentive to comply. Two challenges define a suasion game. First, a threat to defect in the case of non-cooperation has to be credible, but credibility is precisely what the actor with the dominant strategy of cooperation lacks: defecting would deprive him of the good he wants. The other actor sees through this and will not believe the threat. Second, tactical issue linkage depends on the power of the dissatisfied actor to either pose reliable threats or offer rewards relevant in other areas. The involvement of an international organisation can compensate for both deficits: it can increase the political cost of non-compliance by exposing it to a wider audience, and it can build the trust required for issue linkages to function.

3.2 Complex interdependencies

Cassarino (2010) and Lixi (2017) argue that cooperation under conditions of unbalanced reciprocity can rarely be sustained through migration alone but requires incentives outside the migration sphere. Keohane and Nye's (1977) concept of complex interdependencies provides the theoretical rationale for this strategy: when states are connected through multiple policy domains, negotiations can move beyond single-issue bargaining towards package deals and reciprocal trade-offs. Linking migration to areas such as development, trade, or energy increases the scope for mutually beneficial agreements and enables both parties to frame the outcome as a "win-win" solution.

3.3 Reversed leverage



Although countries of origin are structurally weaker in return negotiations, they may possess leverage in other policy domains. Schelling (1960, 22) observed that bargaining power does not necessarily derive from overall strength but from control over resources or decisions valued by the other party. Smaller or weaker states may successfully leverage their own vulnerability, recklessness, or inability to cooperate to force concessions from much stronger powers. Because in bargaining weakness can be a source of strength (Schelling 1960, 22), the weaker player can force the stronger to pay all costs as long as the latter's dominant strategy is to continue to follow its goals.

To analyse return policies, it is thus necessary to understand the power position of each state in each different policy domain and not to assume that power relations are similar in all fields of policy making. In return negotiations, such issue-specific leverage can offset asymmetries on the migration file and create opportunities for reciprocal exchange. Rather than treating power as fixed, the simulation therefore conceptualises bargaining power as distributed across different policy domains and potentially reversible through issue linkage.

3.4 A Game of Suasion

In her path-breaking article on international relations and game theory, Martin (1992) coined the term "game of suasion" for a constellation involving two players of different power, different interests on a joint solution, and different dominant strategies. She described two possible cases: Either one actor has a dominant strategy to cooperate, which the other can exploit (variant A), or one actor has a dominant strategy to defect, while the other must cooperate to avoid an even worse outcome (variant B) (Martin 1992, 778).

In many cases of return policy making, the suasion game logic applies: The structurally weaker readmitting state is able to extract concessions from a structurally stronger deporting state because the latter has no acceptable defection option – the easiest option, regularisation of irregular migrants, is ruled out due to domestic pressure. The readmitting state's preferences mirror these arguments in reverse. Here, the tension is between national sovereignty and the developmental logic of remittances and labour mobility: Withholding cooperation is an important symbol of sovereignty communicated to the electorate, while the developmental logic of remittances demands a sustainable access to labour mobility into the labour market of the deporting state, which makes cooperation valuable (Adamson/Tsourapas 2020).

In this context a particular instance of institutional power deserves separate attention: the strategic mobilisation of diasporas in destination countries. Until well into the 1980s, most states of origin showed little institutional interest in their citizens abroad; emigration was treated as driven by social and economic mechanisms beyond governmental design (Gamlen/Cummings/Vaaler 2019, 492). Meanwhile, the macroeconomic relevance of



international remittance flows to low- and middle-income countries has surpassed Official Development Assistance and now exceeds foreign direct investment (IOM 2024). Governments of countries of origin therefore have a fiscal interest in keeping emigration channels open and remittance flows stable. Institutionalised diaspora policies, whose rise Gamlen/Cummings/Vaaler (2019) trace, may in addition give governments of countries of origin a channel to put pressure on the country of residence on issues of enforced return.

3.5 Implementation in the simulation

The simulation reproduces a suasion-game setting with a strong BATNA of the readmitting state in the migration policy field, but allows for a variety of issue linkages in other policy areas. The game setting also explicitly introduces a diaspora ministry modelled on the diaspora policy of the Philippines as a part of the Southland delegation to reflect the role of the diaspora in bilateral migration policy making, and – through the drawn action card - a neighbouring state offering to accept Southland citizens returned by Euronian in order to reflect the potential negative impact of neighbouring states pursuing their own interests on bilateral negotiations on return. In addition, the history of Southland as a former Euronian colony highlights the relevance of the symbolic dimension of return.

The initial positions of the two delegations reflect these asymmetries. Euronian has asked for the meeting and enters the negotiation as the demanding party, seeking both the readmission of its irregularly residing Southland nationals and cooperation on third-country nationals who transited through Southland (Perchinig/McLean 2026, 5). Southland, by contrast, approaches the negotiations from a defensive position. While willing to discuss broader bilateral issues, it explicitly rejects a formal readmission agreement at the outset (Perchinig/McLean 2026, 5). This design ensures that migration alone does not provide a mutually beneficial bargaining space and encourages participants to explore possible agreements through issue linkage.

The simulation offers several options for issue linkages and a move towards integrative bargaining. Both Euronian and Southland have meaningful leverage outside the migration field. Euronian companies hold extensive investments in Southland's oil industry, while Southland supplies a significant share of Euronian's oil during its transition towards renewable energy (Perchinig/McLean 2026, 5). At the same time, Southland announces a phased increase in oil royalties, creating a potential bargaining instrument that can be linked to negotiations on migration and return. The intention is to encourage participants to recognise that the structural asymmetry on the migration file cannot be overcome through return or migration policy alone – instead, participants are expected to identify the strategic value of cross-sectoral issue linkage and integrate the migration and energy files into a broader bargaining package. Successful



negotiations therefore depend not only on recognising Southland's leverage in the energy sector but also on translating it into concrete reciprocal concessions.

While the game setting is constructed as a suasion game, it offers ample options for issue linkage. This turns the default suasion game into an issue-linkage game with reversed leverage points, in particular regarding deal-making in the field of education and economic cooperation.

3.6 Observations and interpretations

Across all five simulation runs, the expected structural asymmetry emerged consistently. Euronion invariably opened negotiations by pressing for a binding return or readmission agreement, whereas Southland conditioned any cooperation on human rights safeguards, capacity building, investments, or other forms of reciprocity, and in particular refused to accept the return of third-country nationals. None of the five simulations produced a signed return agreement. Geneva ended without resolving the central conflict; ICMPD and Krems failed to agree on return numbers and concrete sequencing; Maastricht remained divided between a written, legally binding agreement and a Memorandum of Understanding; and the Vienna simulation concluded with no clear final agreement as time expired.

At the same time, every delegation was ready for issue linkages. Education, labour mobility, reintegration, investment, and energy cooperation entered the negotiations in every run, but in no case did this lead to a clear deal-making agreement. While the simulations therefore confirmed the expected logic of the South-North impasse, the observations do not show whether the lack of a concrete agreement was due to the short time allotted to negotiation sessions, which might be overcome in repeated negotiations, or a game setting not conducive to transactional policy-making.

Thus, the simulation consistently achieved the objective of broadening the negotiation beyond migration: every negotiation rapidly expanded to a multi-issue frame beyond migration alone. Across all five runs, delegations introduced education and scholarship programmes, reintegration support, border-capacity building, and energy or oil investment cooperation into the negotiations. Participants readily adopted a “win-win” framing, particularly during the ICMPD, Maastricht, Vienna and Geneva simulations, indicating that they recognised the need for a broader bargaining agenda.

However, this broadening of the agenda rarely evolved into fully integrative bargaining. Although participants identified numerous opportunities for mutually beneficial exchanges, these issues remained largely parallel to the central dispute over return. Potential trade-offs were discussed, but they were seldom translated into concrete bargaining packages linking concessions in one policy field to commitments in another. While agreements on cooperation



in economic investments and “soft” policy fields like education and culture emerged, disagreement over return numbers and sequencing continued to dominate the negotiations and ultimately prevented agreement.

The simulations therefore suggest that the game reliably encourages participants to recognise complex interdependence and to explore multiple negotiation dimensions. Participants broadened the conversation, but they often struggled to convert a multi-issue agenda into negotiated packages capable of overcoming the underlying structural conflict. Given the low number of runs and the strict time limits set for negotiation rounds, results might become more promising in a setting of repeated negotiations allowing several consecutive meetings.

Contrary to expectations, participants rarely exploited the leverage offered in the energy policy field, in particular the announced royalties increase. In most simulation runs, the energy issue remained peripheral despite its prominent place in the scenario. During the ICMPD simulation, oil royalties disappeared almost entirely from Euronion’s internal second debrief. In Maastricht, the announced increase in royalties was treated primarily as a confrontation rather than as a bargaining opportunity. Only the Vienna simulation integrated the energy file into the core negotiation, with Euronion offering substantial investment in exchange for maintaining existing oil fee levels.

This finding suggests that participants did not consistently recognise the strategic potential of cross-sectoral leverage. Interestingly, this pattern ran counter to what negotiation experience would lead one to expect: Migration practitioners in Maastricht largely remained focused on the migration file and did not realise the potential for issue linkage, whereas development studies students in Vienna readily connected migration and energy into a broader bargaining package. One possible explanation is that professional experience encouraged participants to frame the negotiation primarily through the lens of migration policy, whereas less specialised participants were more willing to explore issue linkages across policy domains.

Thus, the simulations only partially confirmed this theoretical expectation. While the scenario successfully embedded reversed leverage into the negotiation setting, participants frequently failed to activate it during play. This highlights an important pedagogical insight: recognising potential sources of bargaining power across policy sectors may itself be a skill that requires explicit reflection and practice.



4. The structural design of the role game: Takeaways from negotiation theory

4.1 Distributive and integrative negotiations

Negotiation theory differentiates between distributive and integrative bargaining. Although both modes frequently coexist in real-life negotiations and are not easily separable, maintaining this distinction is conceptually important, as it influences available tactics, required information, and the range of achievable outcomes.

In a distributive negotiation, parties assume that the available gain is fixed: Whatever one party gains, the other(s) lose(s). Experimental research has documented that framing and overconfidence can systematically distort demands and concessions even when underlying payoffs remain unchanged (Neale/Bazerman 1985, 34 f.). In distributive negotiation, actors focus on satisfying their own interests and seeking the best deal. Features of distributive bargaining include competition between parties, persuasive arguments, single-issue offers, and threatening comments and pressure tactics (Baarveld et al. 2015, 365).

Issue linkage is the mechanism moving a negotiation from the distributive to the integrative mode. Raiffa et al. (2003, p. 11 ff.) treat linkage effects as a basic organising question, because the presence of linkable issues determines whether parties can escape zero-sum deals. If each party cares intensely about a different issue, both gain by conceding on the issue they value less. Logrolling of this kind requires enough information about each other's priorities to identify complementary trade-offs (Raiffa et al., 2003, p. 13 ff.).

Integrative negotiation – also referred to as "value-creating" or "mutual-gains" bargaining – focuses on how parties can enlarge the joint surplus through problem-solving, information exchange about fundamental concerns and priorities, and logrolling across issues. The key insight is that most real negotiations are not purely fixed-sum: parties typically differ in how much they value the issues, creating potential trade-offs that leave both sides better off than a simple split of each issue. Features of integrative negotiation processes include a focus on underlying interests rather than positions; a common search for creative solutions; the open sharing of information; and mutual trust (Baarveld et al. 2015, 364f.).

Although theoretically distinguishable, integrative and distributive approaches are inseparable in practice. As Lax and Sebenius (1986, 29 ff.) argue, at some point in the process, the value created must be divided, and any claim to the increased value by one party means there will be less for the others. Actors thus have to handle two opposing motives: cooperating to create value and competing to claim value. According to Lax and Sebenius, actors must learn – in part from each other – what is jointly possible and desirable, while simultaneously advancing their individual interests (Baarveld et al. 2015, 365).



4.2 Opening a negotiation: The anchoring mechanism

The initiation of the negotiation process is a critical structural aspect. Opening a negotiation enables parties to establish the context, define objectives, and formulate initial demands and offers. Furthermore, in the absence of pre-agreed time frames, the party initiating the negotiation can influence the agenda by prioritising topics of particular concern and deferring those considered important by the counterpart.

The first offer can shape the entire bargaining trajectory as a potent anchor, largely because negotiation partners often fail to adjust sufficiently away from the initial reference point. This “anchoring bias” (Tversky and Kahneman 1974, 1128) operates through two pathways: Insufficient adjustment, in which parties adjust numerically from the anchor but do not move far enough; and selective accessibility, in which the focus is on information consistent with the anchor value (Gunia et al. 2013, 1548).

In multi-issue negotiations with significant integrative potential, the first offer's influence on integrative and compatible issues is substantially weaker, as these are resolved through information exchange rather than anchoring. Timing, too, is relevant: late first offers have been shown to facilitate more creative integrative agreements than early first offers, suggesting that moving first is not the same as moving immediately (Sinaceur et al. 2013, 814, cited in Gunia et al. 2013, 1549). Ambitious first offers carry a risk, however: in experiments, extreme anchors increased the likelihood of impasse, particularly when the recipient held a powerful position (Schweinsberg et al. 2012). An overly aggressive opening (over-anchoring) can thus lead the other side to break off rather than to concede.

4.3 BATNA, ZOPA, and issue linkage

Further to the distinction between distributive and integrative negotiation dynamics and the move from the former to the latter, the best alternative to a negotiated agreement (BATNA) and the zone of possible agreement (ZOPA) are core elements of negotiation theory.

The BATNA is the course of action a party will pursue if the negotiation fails. It sets the reservation value below which no agreement should be accepted and is a source of bargaining power (Fisher et al., 1991, p. 97 ff.). The ZOPA is the range between the parties' reservation values. What shapes negotiator behaviour is not only the objective value of an alternative but its mental availability: even uncertain or imagined alternatives raise ambitions and reservation values (Boothby et al., 2023, p. 302).

Having an alternative deal is one of the greatest sources of power in a negotiation, allowing more challenging goals, higher reservation prices, and more advantageous first offers (Boothby et al. 2023, 302). In some cases, having no BATNA, rather than a weak BATNA, can enable



negotiators to reach better deals because they do not focus on a low anchor (Schaerer et al. 2015, 170ff.). Even just imagining an attractive alternative can help one negotiate a better deal (Schaerer et al. 2018, 96ff.). In essence, it would appear that under certain conditions, having no BATNA, an uncertain BATNA, or even an imagined BATNA can create beneficial psychological conditions for negotiation (Boothby et al. 2023, 302).

In return negotiations, alternatives are unevenly distributed. The origin state's leverage rests on its monopoly over nationality determination and readmission consent. The destination state has no full substitute for cooperation, and the weaker party draws bargaining power from this dependence (Schelling, 1960).

According to Raiffa et al. (2003, 4f.), negotiation dynamics depend heavily on the level of trust between the parties. In highly collaborative settings involving trusted partners or close friends, negotiators can employ a “Full Open Truthful Exchange” (FOTE). Under FOTE, both parties practice absolute transparency by fully disclosing their true interests, underlying priorities, and bottom lines from the outset (Raiffa et al. 2003, 191). This unrestricted flow of information maximises joint gains and fosters integrative solutions, though it exposes negotiators to severe exploitation if trust is misplaced. Conversely, in standard business contexts where such deep trust is absent, a “Partial Open Truthful Exchange” (POTE) is advised. In a POTE environment, negotiators remain fundamentally honest; they do not deceive or lie, but they share information selectively and incrementally in order to protect their reservation price, which represents the overall minimum value threshold across all negotiated issues. This strategic caution shields negotiators from exploitation while still enabling them to explore common ground safely and develop agreements that create mutual value through step-by-step disclosure (Raiffa et al. 2003, 6 ff.).

4.4 Implementation in the simulation

The construction of the game reflects the tension between distributive and integrative negotiation setting. While Euronía's main interest in the field of migration policy is the return of irregularly resident Southland citizens and third-country nationals who travelled from Southland to Euronía, Southland is reluctant to accept return without compensatory measures and clearly declines the return of third-country nationals. Despite this constellation, which is conducive to distributive negotiations, the whole-of-government setting and the deeply rooted historical and economic linkages between the two countries, in particular also in the energy sector, open room for integrative bargaining and issue linkages.

The negotiation setting itself allows Euronía to open the first round of negotiations. Euronía is thereby placed in the structural position of the anchor-setter described by Tversky/Kahneman (1974) and operationalised in negotiation research by Gunia et al. (2013). The rotating-opener



protocol in the handbook (Perchinig/McLean 2026), however, hands the opening of the second round to Southland and alternates thereafter, dispersing the first-mover advantage across the simulation rather than concentrating it in a single anchor. For Euronion as the demanding party, the design therefore carries a risk of over-anchoring: an extreme opening demand on return could lead Southland to leave the table rather than to make concessions.

The simulation's agenda prohibits single-issue distributive negotiation. Return and reintegration can be linked to oil royalties, visas, scholarships or regular labour migration visas, opening a wide range of options for integrative negotiation. The whole-of-government setting offers several options for linking migration to unrelated policy fields, which supports a move towards integrative bargaining. It also requires coordination between members from different ministries and interest organisations, each bound by red lines agreed with their minister. Given this structural setting, the development of FOTE negotiations is highly unlikely; both within and between delegations, a POTE strategy will prevail. Relational turning points and the development of trust through repeated meetings may nonetheless shift the play towards more open exchange and integrative gains (Druckman 2001).

By design, Southland holds the stronger BATNA in the field of return, as it has to agree to any individual return. Euronion thus has to create value through linkages to other issues, while Southland can be expected to further instrumentalise Euronion's energy dependency to increase pressure on Euronion if necessary. To offset this imbalance, the action card was introduced. It aims to strengthen Euronion's perceived alternative and to put Southland's energy lever under pressure by threatening to divert Euronian investments from Southland to its neighbour Mesotomia. The BATNA is operationalised at four points in the game.

1. The no-agreement status quo sets each delegation's initial BATNA. Without an agreement, Euronion cannot enforce returns without Southland's nationality determination and readmission consent. Southland keeps the status quo on return and, through its oil fees and the prospect of Euronian energy investment, holds a reverse lever outside the migration file.
2. The internal briefing before the first negotiation round asks delegations, in the handbook's words, to "identify key red lines and possible concessions". The red lines serve as working proxies for the delegations' reservation values. Each subsequent breakout session asks delegations to revise their strategy in light of what the other side has shown and to update their estimate of the ZOPA. To institutionalise this revising and re-anchoring, the game alternates plenary (30 min) and breakout (20 min) sessions.
3. The action card, a document reporting leaked but unconfirmed information that the neighbouring state of Mesotomia has offered Euronion to accept Southland citizens deported from Euronion in exchange for green energy investments by Euronion, which is introduced during play, functions as a BATNA shock. The offer gives Euronion an outside option on which it cannot rely as a full substitute, but which it can invoke. For Southland, the offer does not



credibly reduce the cost of its non-cooperation in the return field, but it weakens its reverse leverage in the energy file: it threatens to redirect Euronian investment to Mesotomia if no agreement on return is reached.

4. The setting expects a low-trust start and gives delegations no reason to shift from a POTE to a FOTE negotiation process; delegations are therefore expected to reveal their priorities only stepwise. The action card is played out at the end of the second negotiation session in order to introduce a BATNA shock forcing delegations to reconsider negotiation strategies.

4.5 Observations and interpretations

4.5.1 Integrative moves and trust

Delegations identified candidate trade-offs, e.g. education and visas against return, investment against an oil-fee standstill, or reintegration against readmission. But the move from distributive to integrative bargaining did not secure an agreement: negotiations stayed distributive on the number of returns, and the potential trade-offs were not linked concretely to return figures.

The partial, low-trust regime was confirmed throughout, with Southland mostly keeping its suspicious position, e.g. by repeatedly demanding data on irregular presence before committing. As expected, most runs stayed in partial exchange. The closest approach to convergence was Maastricht's fourth round, where both sides noted that they spoke the same language on many aspects and that the remaining gap concerned only sequencing. This can be understood as a movement towards a shared understanding which might increase trust.

In all runs, the negotiations were held in a POTE setting – the game setting does not foresee any reasons why one of the delegations should move to a FOTE-position; on the contrary, the action card introduces a BATNA shock that may further reduce the willingness to disclose information.

4.5.2 Bargaining, anchoring and re-anchoring

While theoretical reflections highlight the risk of over-anchoring, in practice the Euronian delegation repeatedly under-anchored. In Geneva, Euronian opened without a clear, detailed offer or demand and asked Southland to state its wishes; at the University of Vienna it invited Southland to present its position first; the ICMPD first plenary began with no formal opening at all. The Geneva team then diagnosed its own first round as too soft and resolved to formulate stronger demands. Where anchors were set sharply, they took the form of Euronian's short



deadlines at Maastricht (twenty days and seven days for document exchange and verification), which, contrary to expectations, did not lead Southland to leave the table but only to protests against the short period of time. The rights-based counter-anchor appeared consistently on the Southland side, but rather as a steady normative claim than as a clear set of demands or red lines. In general, delegations were negotiating in an overly friendly and courteous atmosphere, and participants were reluctant to confront their peers. The under-anchoring can mainly be explained by the setting: at the universities by the courteous behaviour and respect for other opinions that characterise educational settings, at ICMPD by the fact that participants work closely together in projects.

Re-anchoring during internal team meetings worked as expected. Teams used the briefing and breakout slots to revise positions between rounds: in Geneva (two sessions with a one-week break) through the exchange of objective papers and red-line lists, in Krems through successive internal recalculations of numbers, and in Maastricht through a stepwise adjustment of deadlines and visa offers.

Every Euronian and every Southland internal meeting showed ministries with distinct red lines bargaining with each other before facing the other side. In Euronian, the Ministry of the Interior demanded hard policies on return, while the Ministry of Education offered student visas but warned about overstay. In Southland, the Ministry of Development demanded investment, while the Ministry of the Interior favoured a Memorandum of Understanding over a binding return agreement and, supported by the Ministry of the Diaspora, opposed high return figures. At the ICMPD session, an explicit good-cop and bad-cop division between Foreign Affairs and the Interior emerged.

4.5.3 BATNA and ZOPA

In all sessions the Euronian delegation was quite aware that Southland had a stronger BATNA in the return field, and thus was eager to develop suggestions for cooperation in the field of education and economic cooperation to convince Southland to cooperate on return. Thus a large amount of time was used in all meetings to discuss student exchange or investment strategies, which also served as a means to circumvent the critical questions on return and produce a positive negotiation climate. In general, these areas offered more possibilities to find a zone of agreement than the return issue.

The reversed leverage element, Euronian's energy dependency and Southland's threat to raise royalties, was used mainly in Maastricht and Vienna. In Maastricht, it was Southland that first presented Euronian investment as a way to create jobs and support the green-energy transition, then announced that oil fees would increase in 14 days. Euronian, which had decided internally not to raise the oil issue unless Southland did, replied that it would not accept being threatened



by tariffs. At the University of Vienna Euronía offered to invest EUR 500 million in Southland's infrastructure, on condition that oil fees remained at their current level. Southland accepted the status quo on oil fees in principle but stressed that it needed investment to generate revenue.

4.5.4 The action card as BATNA shock

In all five runs, Euronía sidelined the BATNA shock intended by the introduction of the action card in the negotiation sessions, while internally its leverage was recognised. In Geneva, the delegation stated that it did not want to focus on the action card, and the session continued in a cooperative tone. At ICMPD, both sides decided not to overreact to rumours or television news and did not allow the card to dominate the negotiation.

The internal discussions in Krems, Maastricht and at the University of Vienna highlighted the reasons for this restraint: the news might be fake (Krems), and using it openly would damage trust (Krems, Maastricht, University of Vienna) and make the negotiation appear coercive (University of Vienna). The same discussions treated the offer as a reserve option. In Krems, the Ministry of the Interior proposed keeping it as a backdrop or threat if no agreement were reached. In Maastricht, the delegation concluded that the card strengthened Euronía's position but should not become the focus. At the University of Vienna, economic actors and the border police read it as pressure on Southland, since investment in Mesotomia would leave less money for Southland. In the plenaries, Euronía denied knowledge of the offer or played down its importance and instead proposed to return to substantive issues.

The Southland delegations reacted differently. In Krems, Maastricht and at the University of Vienna, the action card was perceived as a massive breach of trust. In Krems, the Southland delegation invoked sovereignty, good faith and trust and rejected any transfer of its citizens to another country without its knowledge. In Maastricht and Vienna, the Southland delegation asked whether the news was fake, a pressure strategy or evidence that Euronía was no longer reliable. Only in Krems did the shock visibly change the course of the negotiation; the observer notes that it damaged the momentum and made the session less productive. Euronía used the offer explicitly only once, in the final round at the University of Vienna, stating that it had other cooperation options; Southland is then described as increasingly frustrated.

The handling of the BATNA shock fits the finding that the mental availability of an alternative shapes negotiator behaviour (Boothby et al., 2023, p. 302). Euronía kept the option in reserve rather than enacting it and weighed its leverage against the cost to trust. Whether the option raised Euronía's reservation values cannot be determined from the protocols: the return figures they record show no jump after the card was played.





5. Conclusion

5.1 Contextual aspects

In order not to overstate the results, it should be highlighted that several observations are better attributed to the run conditions, not to the design. First, the uniform absence of a signed agreement is partly produced by fixed session length; in several runs the game ended because time ran out rather than because a reasoned impasse had been reached. This is largely aligned on participant feedback, which predominantly showed support for longer negotiation runs. Second, the Geneva setting, with two meetings one week apart, allowed the delegations to develop much more elaborate strategies and procedures than in the other cases, with written position papers, internal objective frameworks and explicit reservation values. Third, the online format in Krems was regarded as only allowing limited coordination and lacking spontaneous communication within the delegations, thus the strong action-card trust damage in this run may well be explained by the online format, which was regarded as problematic by most participants. Fourth, group size tracked role diffusion: the largest delegations, at the University of Vienna and on the Southland side at Krems, showed the least role clarity, while the small, tightly observed Euronion team at ICMPD coordinated most closely. In addition, the role of the delegation lead was interpreted very differently: While in Vienna, delegation leads disproportionately consumed the negotiation time, delegation leads in Geneva and Maastricht rather acted as moderators orchestrating the statements of the other delegation members. Finally, the protocols record the gender composition for three of the five runs: roughly ninety percent female at the University of Vienna, near parity at Krems and a sixty-to-forty split of women to men at Maastricht. Nevertheless, there are no signs that gender composition influenced negotiation behaviour, which is consistent with meta-analytic evidence that gender differences in negotiation outcomes are small and depend strongly on context (Mazei et al. 2015).

5.2 Common patterns

Five regularities recurred across the runs and can be treated as characteristic of the setting. The first is the universal non-closure of the return file: no run produced a signed return agreement, and the migration file never settled on its own terms. The second is the sequencing deadlock, which is how the suasion structure was operationalised in practice. Euronion insisted on an agreement before any commission or working group, Southland insisted on safeguards, a commission or a memorandum before committing to numbers, and this ordering dispute, rather than the substance of the linked files, was the proximate cause of impasse in every run. The third is the unanimous Southland refusal to readmit third-country nationals, the single most



stable substantive position across all five cases, which delegations also used tactically, as at Maastricht, where Euronica raised it as a token it expected to be rejected. The fourth is the demanding party's tendency to under-anchor, opening with goodwill statements or inviting the counterpart to state its position first, against the over-anchoring risk the design anticipated. The fifth is the channel through which the action card worked: in every run its effect ran through trust and good faith rather than through a material outside option, indicating that the card's cost to trust outweighed its value as leverage, with the magnitude of the trust effect varying by setting.

Two further patterns were weaker but consistent. The energy and oil lever was under-used relative to its design weight, except in the University of Vienna endgame. In all runs, the stable candidates for a zone of agreement – education and scholarships, reintegration support, border-capacity building and energy investment – appeared together with the stable deal-breakers – numbers, sequencing, third-country nationals and forced versus voluntary return.

The five runs answer the question raised in the introduction in two parts. The structural core of the design worked as intended. In every run the suasion constellation produced an impasse on return, the agenda expanded beyond migration, and ministries had to settle their differences inside the delegation before facing the other side. The process mechanisms taken from negotiation theory worked less reliably: the energy lever was activated in one run, the demanding party set its first anchor too softly rather than too hard, and the action card affected trust rather than the delegations' reservation values.

For the theoretical framework, the location of the impasse is the most informative result. Except for the return of third-country nationals, which was consistently a no-go for Southland, the delegations did not fail over the substance of the linked files but over sequencing: Euronica wanted a commitment on return before any institutional follow-up, Southland wanted institutional guarantees before any figures. Southland's repeated preference for a memorandum of understanding over a binding agreement corresponds to the informalisation of readmission cooperation that Cassarino (2007, 190) describes for the Euro-Mediterranean area. The runs thus suggest that issue linkage in the sense of Keohane/Nye (1977) is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for agreement. Linkage identifies what can be exchanged; without a procedure that orders concessions in time and makes them verifiable, it did not produce a package in any of the five runs.

Two further results qualify the design assumptions. Reversed leverage exists in the scenario but has to be recognised before it can be used. The only package built on the energy file came from development studies students at the University of Vienna, not from the migration practitioners in Maastricht. Recognising bargaining power across policy sectors therefore appears to be a skill in its own right rather than a by-product of expertise in migration policy. The action card showed that an outside option of uncertain credibility works less as leverage than as a risk to



the relationship when both sides expect to keep negotiating. Euronion kept the option in reserve, which fits the finding that the mental availability of an alternative shapes negotiator behaviour (Boothby et al. 2023, 302), but the return figures recorded in the protocols did not rise after the card was played.

5.3 Suggestions for improvement

For the further use of the simulation, the observations suggest four adjustments. First, the internal briefing after the first round could ask each delegation which dependencies of the other side it has identified, so that cross-sectoral leverage becomes an explicit object of reflection instead of an expected discovery. Second, where the schedule allows, the Geneva format of two sessions with a break in between should be preferred: it was the only run in which delegations produced written position papers and explicit reservation values, and a second session would also show whether repeated meetings produce the relational turning points that single sessions did not. Third, facilitators could place the order of commitments on the agenda as a topic in its own right, so that participants practise designing stepwise agreements instead of stalling over the first step. Fourth, a common observation template and one observer per delegation throughout all sessions would make the internal reasoning of both sides comparable across runs. The participants' own suggestions in the final oral evaluations point in the same direction: they criticised the short duration of the game and asked for longer negotiation periods and repeated meetings after a one- or two-week pause for internal reflection and the drafting of position papers; participants in Krems would have preferred an in-person format. Finally, in almost all runs, participants requested the organisation of bilateral talks between individual negotiators on a purely sectoral basis. This request was declined because of the limitations imposed by settings and the pre-set time frame. Where conditions exist, implementing restricted negotiating “corridors” and testing their influence on possibilities of issue linkage, or in terms of trust building between delegations (POTE) would nevertheless be particularly informative.

These conclusions rest on five runs with participants of different backgrounds, in formats that varied in length, mode and group size. They cannot establish that a single design feature caused a particular outcome. Testing such effects would require further runs with standardised observation and with single design elements varied deliberately, for instance by playing the action card in some runs and withholding it in others.

5.4 Outlook

Summing up, the five simulation game runs both showed effects most likely attributable to the game setting and effects strongly influenced by the composition and background of the delegations.



Within these limits, the runs show that the same scenario leaves room for different trajectories: the announced increase in oil royalties led to a confrontation in Maastricht and to an investment-for-royalties package at the University of Vienna. While a deeper empirical analysis separating game-setting effects from participant effects would require a larger number of runs with standardised observation, these five runs already show that, although no run produced an agreement, negotiations took different directions, ranging from stalemate to steps towards partial agreements on linked issues such as education and investment, but not on return. This points to the role of participants' agency, character and negotiation experience in a role-game setting and suggests that role games are useful training tools for negotiation settings, which also are considerably influenced by the personality of the negotiators.



6. Declaration of AI Usage

Anthropic's Claude Opus 4.6, 4.7, 4.8 and 5 were used for literature research, summarising and structuring of the observation protocols and reformulations of paragraphs. AI usage followed the "Living guidelines on the responsible use of generative AI in research", developed by the European Research Area Forum and published by the European Commission (European Commission 2024) (https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/news/all-research-and-innovation-news/guidelines-responsible-use-generative-ai-research-developed-european-research-area-forum-2024-03-20_en).

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