

# Getting Europeans Back to the Table

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The German Marshall Fund of the United States

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1 The European Union is facing a political blockage. Efforts to reform and democratize are being weakened by different clubs of member states. Germany is increasingly perceived as the reluctant leader who lacks solidarity for its European partners. At the same time, new and old conflict lines are emerging that create further distrust and frustration. Inclusive diplomacy could offer a partial response ending the disruptive political course in Europe, and might serve as a new guiding system for international relations. It provides the missing element that is needed in the 21st century: a more focused approach on people-to-people relations, good communication and spaces for genuine exchange, ensuring trust and cohesion in times of global problems and political crises.

Common forms of diplomacy mostly aim at maintaining functioning relations between nation states through international procedures or regular bilateral meetings. Nation states signing up to comply with a set of principles integrated in international law has been the ground for supranational institutions, such as the European Union, to emerge and develop. However, with recent signs of traditional diplomacy and international institutions no longer effectively working, smaller member states are losing interest in pursuing genuine political exchanges and diplomatic efforts with larger member states even though the latter are generally perceived as the most important dialogue partners in Europe. So how did we get to this point?

## WHY DO WE NEED TO BE INCLUSIVE?

Member states are currently seeing diplomatic efforts as well as institutional safety nets losing their relevance, revealed by events such as the Brexit vote, the U.S. withdrawal from the Paris climate agreement, or the fact that European citizens increasingly vote for anti-EU representatives. The democratic deficiencies in the EU's design and the lack of reform in the past decade have made it difficult to see the EU as a sufficient source of cohesion and stability and have established a self-perpetuating process. To avoid further political deadlocks in Europe that would threaten the idea behind the European project, states with economic and political weight have come to accept intergovernmental steps as a form to forge compromise. This behavior has in turn undermined the role and legitimacy of the EU which only reinforced the very same behavior. Smaller member states find themselves trapped in urging the big players to bring the EU forward while criticizing them for circumventing smaller democratic channels. This results in a growing dilemma in European politics between the need for strong drivers on one hand and the democratic illegitimacy that it brings on the other.

In the case of Germany, the country is increasingly perceived as the dominant power in Europe that is trying to push its national interests by circumventing institutional channels. While in the past, European member

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states have generally looked to Germany to take on more responsibility in leading Europe, one should question some of the ways in which the "German way" of diplomacy has influenced European politics in the last years. Unilateral action, for example in the refugee crisis, at first perceived by European partners as beneficial for the greater European good, has fueled suspicion, prejudices, and polarized discourse across Europe. Although Merkel has been praised by international observers for her morality and pragmatism in politics, there is a danger in assuming that a growing German influence will positively affect international relations.

This series of developments are shaking the composition of long-standing political allies and questioning the relevance of supranational institutions. Although Brexit might have the potential to reshuffle European issue coalitions, it remains difficult to predict whether new alliances will persist and flourish.

Politicians need to be aware of the backlash that certain leadership styles bring. The recent political decisions might be appealing in the short term but come at a risk in the long term. But how can this dilemma be overcome? And how would a more sustainable solution look like?

## HOW DOES INCLUSIVE DIPLOMACY WORK?

As we are entering a new age of diplomacy and international relations where pre-World War II prejudices and opinionated stories are dominating media reporting about the other, policymakers – predominantly but not exclusively – in the larger member states need to join forces in a new diplomatic effort. Inclusive diplomacy can help bring back legitimacy and trust in international affairs, following the below guiding principles:

*Re-start a European effort in inclusive diplomacy* – in listening more to the needs and fears of especially smaller member states in Europe and in trying to know the audience and understand the perspectives of others; by not excluding them from the relevant political discussions – those, where decisions are being taken.

*Re-build alliances with member states whose trust one cannot afford to lose* – Europe's economic situation is not going to stay as stable, and in facing international and European problems, countries need to be able to rely on solid partners in the future. By willing to invest more time and effort to find inclusive compromises and alliances for Europe, member states will be able to buy credit in the long term.

*Re-invest not only in financial and economic capital but in human capital and people-to-people relations* – that make the difference in times of distrust among European allies. Believing that economic leverage will convince partners to act in solidarity is short-sighted. Investment in people should be at the core of today's political actions, such as arranging coffee breaks or side visits rather than orchestrated meetings or allowing for more personal exchanges, not for the sake of pictures being taken or with the immediate pressure of producing a concrete outcome.

*Re-center efforts on good communication* – which lies at the heart of good diplomacy and intercultural relations. In times of shrinking democratic spaces and growing influence of social media, the skillset of politicians as translators of political decisions towards citizens and somewhat ambassadors of their countries and should be widened. Specific training should not only be an integral requirement for public officials in the Foreign Service but for all appointed statesmen and women with public appearances in the international context and at home.

*Re-create breathing spaces for politicians* – the European Union should see the need to invest resources in dialogue fora that create an atmosphere where politicians have the breathing space to speak their mind and have a genuine exchange about their concerns and ideas.

*Re-consider looking beyond politicians* – now more than ever before, the promotion of cultural exchanges and citizen convening can make a difference in bringing nations together. Diplomacy should not stop at politicians but involve a broader set of people and voices that exceed the established bubble of policymaking.

In offering new elements to the current protocol of international relations, inclusive diplomacy can help rebuild trust in supranational institutions and renewed ground for bilateral relations to trigger much needed reforms and new political solutions. Informal and trusting political exchanges, such as the Mercator European Dialogue, which gather policymakers away from Brussels and removed from the every-day political life, can help provide first hubs to build new cooperation in times of distrust and a network of relations that sustains beyond crisis.



## JOINING FORCES IN THE MERCATOR EUROPEAN DIALOGUE

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Stiftung Mercator is a private and independent foundation. Through its work it strives for a society characterized by openness to the world, solidarity and equal opportunities. In this context it concentrates on strengthening Europe; increasing the educational success of disadvantaged children and young people, especially those of migrant origin; driving forward climate change mitigation and promoting science and the humanities. Stiftung

Mercator symbolizes the connection between academic expertise and practical project experience. One of Germany's leading foundations, it is active both nationally and internationally. Stiftung Mercator feels a strong sense of loyalty to the Ruhr region, the home of the founding family and the foundation's headquarters.



The King Baudouin Foundation's mission is to contribute to a better society. The Foundation is an actor for change and innovation, serving the public interest and increasing social cohesion in Belgium and Europe. We seek to maximize our impact by strengthening the capacity of organizations and individuals. We also stimulate effective philanthropy by individuals and corporations. The Foundation's key values are integrity, transparency, pluralism, independence, respect for diversity, and promoting solidarity.

The Foundation's current areas of activity are poverty and social justice, philanthropy, health, civic engagement, developing talents, democracy, European integration, heritage and development cooperation.

The King Baudouin Foundation is a public benefit foundation. The Foundation was set up in 1976 on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of King Baudouin's reign.

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The German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF) strengthens transatlantic cooperation on regional, national, and global challenges and opportunities in the spirit of the Marshall Plan. GMF contributes research and analysis and convenes leaders on transatlantic issues relevant to policymakers. GMF offers rising leaders opportunities to develop their skills and networks through transatlantic exchange, and supports civil society in the Balkans and Black Sea regions by fostering democratic initiatives, rule of law, and regional cooperation.

Founded in 1972 as a non-partisan, non-profit organization through a gift from Germany as a permanent memorial to Marshall Plan assistance, GMF maintains a strong presence on both sides of the Atlantic. In addition to its headquarters in Washington, DC, GMF has offices in Berlin, Paris, Brussels, Belgrade, Ankara, Bucharest, and Warsaw. GMF also has smaller representations in Bratislava, Turin, and Stockholm.



The Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) was founded on 11 October 1965 on the initiative of Altiero Spinielli. The Institute's main objective is to promote an understanding of the problems of international politics through studies, research, meetings and publications, with the aim of increasing the opportunities of all countries to move in the direction of supranational organization, democratic freedom and social justice (IAI Bylaws, Article 1). Its main research areas include: EU Institutions

and Politics, the EU's Global Role, Turkey and the Neighborhood, International Political Economy, Mediterranean and Middle East, Transatlantic Relations, Security and Defence, Italian Foreign Policy, Energy. A non-profit organization, the IAI is funded by individual and corporate members, public and private organizations, major international foundations, and by a standing grant from the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

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The Barcelona Centre for International Affairs (CIDOB) is an independent and plural think tank based in Barcelona, dedicated to the study, research and analysis of international affairs. Created in 1973 as an International Documentation Centre of Barcelona, it is a private foundation since 1979.

CIDOB promotes global governance and good practices – based on local, national and European democratic government – to ensure

that people possess the basic elements to live their lives free from fear and in liberty, by facilitating a dialogue that includes all diversities and which actively defends human rights and gender equality. CIDOB is a dynamic community of analytics that works to produce and offer to all political actors – from individual citizens to international organizations – information and ideas to formulate and promote policies for a more secure, free and fair world for everyone.

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ELIAMEP's mission is to provide a forum for public debate on issues of European integration and international relations to conduct scientific research that contributes to a better informed and documented knowledge of the European and international environment.

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