Simulations of political processes, of deliberation bodies and negotiating committees and of their methods and procedures, are an old analytical and didactic instrument, also applicable to town halls, parliaments, courts of justice, and others – especially to the cognitively far-away world of international relations. Designed in most cases as role plays, simulations are used, on the one hand, to evaluate complex scenarios (such as military activities), and on the other, they serve for the training of negotiators and decision-makers (for example in diplomacy) as well as in the education of students at schools, colleges and universities or in the general political education.

I. UN Simulations

The aim of UN simulations as a teaching method is to make the students familiar with the structure and function of the principal organs and committees of the world organization (→ Principal Organs, Subsidiary Organs, Treaty Bodies; → Committees, System of). The idea is to promote an understanding of international relations and their connections more thoroughly through authentically simulated multinational diplomacy and intergovernmental decision-making processes, rather than just through abstract information and analysis of problems alone. The participants are to resolve situations and conflicts actively and on their own, and to experience realistically the rules and restrictions of international negotiations “in practice”. The play elements as well as the emotional and group-dynamic processes should lead to a more intense experience and a more thorough comprehension. Intensive preparation with regard to the role of the country which one is to represent is essential to an effective simulation, just to “play” the role of the country does not suffice. It is necessary to find out a spectrum of facts about the role of this country in the context of the UN, about the problems and difficulties of the topics to be discussed in the simulated negotiations. The aim of the preparation will be to provide the depth and the multiple views on any given issue, and to avoid the typical danger of role-playing, namely to learn just the official points of view, and the positions of the state representatives, which would lead to a superficial and one-sided simulation. The motivation for such a strenuous and extensive preparation is provided by the engagement for and during the game; the first practical experiences in the play (e.g. the work with procedural questions or the informal negotiation of resolution texts between country groups) lead to deeper and diverse insights; the necessary modification of their own, and appreciation of others’ perspectives, force the students to consider carefully seemingly “obvious” positions, and to question their previous judgments and prejudices.

The United Nations, more precisely some of its principal organs, subsidiary bodies and manifold committees in the → UN System are simulated all over the world in hundreds of Model UN activities both in small groups such as school classes and in larger conferences of up to thousands of role players. In the USA there are more than hundred major UN
simulations with more than 10,000 participants, often organized by the students themselves. Some large and well-known Model UN conferences, mostly organized by universities (e.g. Harvard/HNMUN, Harvard World Model or American University in Cairo/CIMUN), try to bring national and/or international activities together.

II. National Model United Nations (NMUN) in the USA

The US-American National Model United Nations (NMUN) – www.nmun.org – is the biggest and most professional UN simulation – actually a combination of some bigger and smaller models. Founded in 1947, it continued the simulation of the League of Nations (Model League of Nations, founded in 1923). This Model UN which has since been held annually, takes place in the week before Easter in New York, and is held partially in the official rooms at UN headquarters itself. More than 3,500 students take part, coming from the USA, as well as from universities from all over the world. The National Collegiate Conference Association (NCCA), which organizes the simulation, is a non-profit, non-governmental organization. Being acknowledged by the UN as an NGO (→ NGOs), it cooperates closely with the world body. Students who took part in former years are also responsible for the organization of the Model UN.

The structure, major issues and procedures of the NMUN mirror political reality as closely as possible. For one week, from early morning until late evening, every university group represents one UN member state (or NGO), as they were assigned months before, in the different UN committees and organs. Before the sessions of the simulation begin the delegates have the opportunity to meet the representatives of the permanent mission of “their” country. There they can compare the positions they have prepared with the official policies of the country. Sometimes they have also the opportunity to be briefed by diplomats and UN officials for the work in their committees. At the end of the conference the plenary sessions of the principal UN organs, such as the General Assembly or ECOSOC, discuss and vote upon the resolutions that the committees have worked out. The competition with other universities for the prestigious awards is a principal motivator, beyond the fun at the game.

Students from different regions and cultures meet and get to know intensively the respective style of discussion and work of others. The students realize quickly that the most important points are not discussed in the formal but in the informal sessions. There, it is important to become the speaker of a group; for this it is necessary to show negotiating skills and strategic behavior and, at the same time to develop an insight into the logic of other positions. Of course, the “diplomats” have to follow the rules of diplomatic conduct and procedures.

An intense preparation of the subject matters of the role, if possible in English from the very beginning, and a resulting group identity are the precondition to “make it” in New York, and even to win an award. To represent “their” country actively and to bring in their own initiatives the players have to be familiar with the politics of this country and with the UN System itself. All this can only be achieved through well-rehearsed and efficient team work. The NMUN is no “playground” for “would-be diplomats”, but a hard training programme that develops analytical and social skills which are adequate to the challenges of modern diplomacy today and that prepares the students for work in international affairs.

III. UN Simulations in Germany

In Germany, UN simulations at school and universities are used as a learning method. An annual German Model UN (GerMUN) and various other nationwide model conferences (e.g. HamMUN) are now, more than 60 years after the foundation of the UN, well established. Networking associations like Deutsche Model United Nations (DMUN) and Junges UNO-Netzwerk