

The Social Butterfly Effect: how did the Brussels professionals manage to get through the pandemic?

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We mention it every month, so we won't bore you now with a recap of how Covid has impacted our lives over the last year. Everything closed. We couldn't see anyone we didn't live with, without a dreaded Z**m call. We all took up weird hobbies and everyone became obsessed with sourdough starters and kombucha scobys. It was a *strange time*.

However, we can only begin to imagine how strange it must have been for the expert Brussels negotiator. Imagine their sense of loss and dread when they learned that social meet-ups were considered a threat to your health. How did they grow to accept a world in which mixing with strangers was frowned upon? Rumour has it, one or two heartbroken souls were even seen roaming around the Place du Luxembourg on a Thursday night, dreaming of the day they could again enjoy a cool beer on a crowded square, listening to the sounds of *subsidiarity, internal market* and *impact assessment* ...

Thankfully, a negotiator's work is never done and despite all the closures and the shift to the

unfamiliar online world, there were still connections to make and meetings to host. Social connections and networking is a big part of conducting negotiations in Brussels. With this in mind, it is worth considering what was the impact of Covid on the social aspect of working in Brussels? Is there still a reliance on the social element to secure a deal in the EU quarters or has Covid marked the death of the socialisation process in Brussels?

A core activity of the negotiation team is supporting those involved in the EU negotiation sphere. In order to effectively answer some of the questions posed above, we decided to do some investigative research on the matter. The aim was to confirm (or deny) if our own takeaways from the last 12 months was matched by the experience of those on the ground. Here are some of the main takeaways on how Covid has impacted networking in Brussels.

Easier access, weaker connection

Well, for starters there were mixed reports as to the impact of restrictions on networking. Some professionals said that they found it easier to meet people online. The multitude of online webinars, meet-ups and other Zoom events have, for some, provided great opportunities to connect with others in the field. Some have even reported that those lucrative contacts, whose tightly packed schedules made them hard to reach in the past, are now much more accessible. As we are all permanently located at our home office and travel time (and the ever-occurring delays) are no longer a logistical consideration, scheduling a meeting has become much more efficient. This has a knock-on effect on people's availability and their willingness to meet.

This openness and accessibility seems to be common feature. People are more open to connecting and chatting in the online realm. However, these connections do not always translate into real-world encounters, as several

of our contacts noted. The ever-changing Covid situation could be partly responsible here. Many of us haven't risked hugging our loved ones for over 12 months, let alone meeting a work connection in person ... over coffee ... face-to-face – madness! The feeling of 'bleh' (otherwise known as languishing) may also explain why the increased openness and willingness to connect has not translated to anything more concrete.

Looking thematically at our expert responses, it is clear that a change for some does not mean a change for all. The shift to the virtual negotiation table was obligatory for many, but not for every dossier. Some sensitive topics have continued to be discussed in a face-to-face setting throughout the pandemic. During the first wave and the ensuing lockdown it bred, less than 15% of scheduled meetings took place. Those who did still manage to attend physical meetings were mostly in the COREPER I and COREPER II camps. While these groups do enjoy substantial support teams, there is only so much a limited group of people can cover. The time and energy usually dedicated to a few topics was now responsible for as much as they could cram in. Coupled with the initial security concerns regarding the online platforms in use, it's easy to see why priority was given to some agenda items over others. In issues like health and economic matters, the security risk was much higher than in other topics at that time.

This is interesting to note because it illustrates how the nature of the issue could completely alter your intended strategy. Equally, it forces us to consider how things would develop if a Covid-esque situation were to continue. For example, it may mean that you could only meet with one or two key players face to face. The rest of the stakeholders would have to be approached online. What are the implications of this?

Another interesting outcome of the pandemic on the profession is how the different topics on the agenda were *approached*. Some were given centre stage, and with good reason. Issues such as health care, R&D and recovery funds have

been highly topical these past few months. The nature of the highly pressured situation of a pandemic means that only a certain number of issues can be addressed.

Making the 'permanent' part of Perm Reps worth it

The distribution of influence among Member States seems to have also restructured during the successive lockdowns of the last year. Around the negotiating table, all Member States are equal. However, theory doesn't always translate into reality. When some national representatives are travelling the breadth of the union to attend a meeting as others could arrive at the Justus Lipsius Building via bicycle, the theory starts to weaken. So, as cross-border travel was prohibited for all Member States, national administrations turned to their people on the ground in Brussels to represent them – permanently. As all Member States were now equally reliant on their Permanent Representatives to conduct their Brussels-based affairs, the balance of power shifted. Those on the geographical periphery were no longer disadvantaged by long journeys, which traditionally bookended long negotiations.

Looking again at the increased importance of COREPER during the first lockdown, we can clearly see how the Perm Reps became *the* contact point between national administrations and the EU sphere – more so than usual. They were the only people fortuitous enough to enjoy face-to-face meetings. They could continue to negotiate in an environment they were most familiar and comfortable with. All the while, government officials and heads of state were severely limited in their options and had to adapt. When you really consider this aspect, it speaks volumes. Will this trend continue? Logistically speaking it would be easier to conduct affairs like this in the future. Do national diplomats need to spend the time, energy and resources in travelling to Brussels for meetings that could be conducted by the Perm Reps? As

with many changes in our lives as a result of Covid, it is something to ponder.

Finally, there was consensus among our willing respondents (and among the negotiation team members themselves) that the big takeaway from the pandemic is that it has normalised work video calls. Beyond the fact we now all have that one spot in the house with the perfect video background, it is much more commonly accepted to conduct meetings online rather than face-to-face. Before, this was not the case. The recognition of teleworking as a feasible practice has the potential to truly transform the industry. Firstly, by slashing travel emissions it would help the profession to become more sustainable. Secondly, it makes the whole process more efficient. Arranging a meeting or a quick brainstorm no longer requires the heavy logistics of the past. This seems to suggest that a 'hybrid' practice may be continued for some topics.

But will the teleworking practice continue?

When the dust settles, will teleworking still be a common practice?

There was equal consensus that if this were to truly become the 'new normal', a lot would be missing too. The daily office interactions with our colleagues is something many of us have missed while working from home. It is more than missing the mindless chatter at the coffee machine. Being able to bounce ideas off each other and collaborate is harder to facilitate when you have to go through the motions of calling

someone. Unless a real, concerted effort is maintained it can be difficult to truly bond with your team and stakeholders in the same manner while working remotely. That's not to say it's impossible, but it is a challenge. These points, coupled with the fact that many people struggled to maintain a work-life balance while working from home may prevent the sector from continuing with this shift.

Regardless of which direction is taken, it is clear that the expert Brussels negotiator has learned a lot over the last year. Although we have all had to adapt to a new way of working, for a profession that relies so heavily on socialising and personal interactions this was a complete 180-degree transformation. As for how this will shape the industry in the future, it is hard to say. The negotiation team is nonetheless of the firm belief that we will all stand shoulder-to-shoulder in the Place du Luxembourg soon, enjoying a cold beer to the sounds of *Green deal, qualified majority, delegating acts, Sofagate, THE Conference*

Read blog one, two, three (part 1), and (part 2), and four of the series 'Possible impacts of the current pandemic on international negotiation processes' by the Negotiation Team.

Do you have questions? Contact the Negotiation Team negotiationteam@eipa.eu.

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