6 The Show Must Go On(line)

In Brussels, there is a saying: *Never waste a crisis*.

At the end of the 2000s, it was the sovereign debt crisis. In 2010, it was the bailout of Greece. In 2015, it was migration. In 2017, it was Brexit. In 2020, it was the coronavirus pandemic. Some Bubble insiders go as far to argue that crises have been the main driving force behind European integration over the decades.[1] Locally, the skill to use a crisis well is known as the (Jean) Monnet method.[2] What is the solution to a crisis in Brussels? Often, more Europe.

In the spring of 2020, several items were competing for the attention of the Brussels Bubble. The main tasks ahead were the negotiations of the EU Multi-annual Financial Framework for 2021–2027 and the question of enlargement, due to be discussed at the EU–Western Balkans summit planned for May. The rotating Council presidency was held by Croatia, the Union's newest member state, under the motto 'A strong Europe in a world of challenges.' On 4 December 2019, a few weeks before assuming her position as the Chair, the Croatian ambassador Irena Andrassy laid out Zagreb's presidency programme in a mid-week morning briefing at the European Policy Centre on Rue du Trône. It was a misty winter day with temperatures averaging at 6°C. In addition to improving transport, energy and digital infrastructures, Andrassy spoke about the

[1] Fifi, G. (2024). A Serious Crisis That Didn't Go to Waste? The EU, the Covid-19 Pandemic and the Role of Ambiguity in Crisis-Management. *Journal of European Public Policy*, *32*(1), 128–151.

[2] Jean Monnet (1976, p. 417) famously remarked, Europe is 'forged in crises, and will be the sum of the solutions adopted for those crises', cited in Fifi, A Serious Crisis, p. 2. On the Jean Monnet method in the context of COVID-19, see www.brusselstimes.com/34658/you-never-want-a-serious-crisis-to-go-to-waste.

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importance of education, culture and sports in strengthening Europe through more people-to-people contact.

Three months and two days later, on an overcast day at the beginning of March 2020, it was thanks to people-to-people or face-to-face contact that Andrassy's name got pushed to the top of Brussels' news feeds again. '*EU ambassador's meeting canceled* [sic] *as Croatian representative quarantined*', ran *Politico*'s headline on the afternoon of 6 March 2020. Just a few days before, Andrassy had been in a meeting with a colleague from the Council's justice and home affairs directorate who showed symptoms of, and later tested positive for, the novel coronavirus. The Croatian ambassador retreated into two weeks of isolation, and tests were administered to anyone who had been within two metres' distance of her for more than fifteen minutes. Council staff sealed off large sections of the building where the meetings had been held and embarked on a mission of deep cleaning. Nevertheless, in the space of a few days, the virus had reached the heart of the Brussels Bubble – and for the EU Institutions, medical crisis of unprecedented proportions had begun.

So how did the Brussels Bubble handle the coronavirus pandemic? In this chapter, we investigate how the sudden and brutal shift into partially or fully virtual environments in the spring of 2020 and the months and years that followed shaped how EU officials and other members of the Bubble perform their work and what they think about it. Others have written about the substantial politics linked to EU decision-making on masks and respirators, vaccine development and social distancing rules, and how the pandemic influenced, for lack of a better term, the EU's economic and political health. But while the themes we consider are set in this context, our focus here is on how COVID-19 was socially and emotionally experienced. In the context of our field research, COVID-19 offered something akin to a natural experiment: a litmus test of the possibilities and limitations of the digitalisation of global governance and 'digital diplomacy'. Much of the academic debate has approached the pandemic as an event that

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'disrupted' the established routines and practices: some observers noted that when assembled in videoconferences, negotiators experienced a 'missing sense' of togetherness and peace.[3] During times of online meetings and restrictions in face-to-face contact, others contend, many members of the global diplomatic community struggled with 'all that is lost'.[4]

Yet, there have also been more hopeful interventions. Drawing on the work of sociologists like Sherry Turkle and Karin Knorr-Cetina,[5] we have come to realise the extent to which the work of international organisations has always been partly virtual, and to recognise that digital communication channels can open new avenues for building relationships, intimacy and trust.[6] More than thirty years ago, Turkle wrote about the identity-making power of technologies and the increasing sense that we do what we do, and define who we are, neither entirely online nor entirely offline. Rather, she argues, we 'cycle through' different modes of interaction that connect what we call the 'real world' with a series of virtual worlds, which together transform and assimilate our lives into a 'tethered existence'.[7] Similarly, more than a decade before the pandemic, Knorr-Cetina wrote about the 'syntheticism' of much of modern life. Using examples from medicine and financial trading, she pointed to the fact that a large proportion of most personal and professional interactions

[3] Bramsen, I., & Hagemann, A. (2021). The Missing Sense of Peace: Diplomatic Approachment and Virtualization During the COVID-19 Lockdown. *International Affairs*, *97*(2), 539–560.

[4] Naylor, T. (2020). All That's Lost: The Hollowing of Summit Diplomacy in a Socially Distanced World. *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, *15*(4), 583–598.

[5] Turkle, S. (1995). *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*. Simon and Schuster; Cetina, K. K. (2014). Scopic Media and Global Coordination: The Mediatization of Face-to-Face Encounters. In K. Lundby (Ed.), *Mediatization of Communication* (pp. 39–62). De Gruyter Mouton; Cetina, K. K. (2009). The Synthetic Situation: Interactionism for a Global World. *Symbolic Interaction*, *32*(1), 61–87.

[6] Eggeling, K. A., & Versloot, L. (2023). Taking Trust Online: Digitalisation and the Practice of Information Sharing in Diplomatic Negotiations. *Review of International Studies*, *49*(4), 637–656.

[7] Turkle, *Life on the Screen*, pp. 10–12.

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are far from immediate, purely analogue, or, as Erving Goffman would call it, 'naked', but mediated by technical devices such as cameras or screens. Knorr-Cetina calls these kinds of encounters 'synthetic situations', the existence of which is at least partially reliant on technological mediation. In such situations, she argues, 'participants become oriented to [their] projected reality and their actions are responses to it – the system acts as a centring and mediating device through which things pass and from which they flow forward.'[8] This framing of digital media positions them as enablers and gateways of social interaction.

Writing in the *Financial Times*, a newspaper widely read and often seen lying around in the cafés and lobbies of the Brussels Bubble, the Indian writer Arundhati Roy echoed such theoretical interpretations in an article in the spring of 2020. While we do not know if our research participants had time to read her piece in the FT's *Life & Arts* section, it encapsulates how many in Brussels came to think about the pandemic over time: 'Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next.'[9]

In this chapter, we consider the stories of Martín and Sebastián, two mid-career diplomats, and of Oliver, a long-term employee at the General Secretariat of the Council, to show how the pandemic, above all else, brought a new wave of reflexivity and professional awareness to the Bubble. This awareness, we argue, came to the fore in how its denizens began using digital devices in new and deeper ways. *What*, they started asking themselves in the face of the crisis, *are we even doing here?* Beyond the role of technology in global governance practices, this speaks to theoretical debates on the role of face-to-face interaction, on how technologies affect the rules of the negotiation game and on how political work is ordered in terms of legality, access,

[8] Cetina, Scopic Media and Global Coordination, p. 42.

[9] Roy, A. (2020). The Pandemic Is a Portal. *The Financial Times*. www.ft.com/content/10d8f5e8-74eb-11ea-95fe-fcd274e920ca, assessed 14 January 2025.

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hierarchy and protocol. While the ways in which EU diplomats coped with the COVID-19 crisis ground these theoretical ideas in concrete examples of how meetings were scheduled or who could be in what room and why, the pandemic also triggered a deeper form of reflexivity. The search for immediate meaning surfaced as a nearly universal human response to the pandemic: read Roy's article in full and you will find a longing for 'normalcy' mixed with questions about whether the way we lived before the pandemic was desirable to begin with. COVID-19 also highlighted dynamics of the Brussels Bubble that otherwise went unnoticed in the humdrum of back-to-back meetings, press conferences, lunch appointments, coffee dates, evening receptions, newspaper alerts, Twitter notifications, text messages and constantly buzzing mobile phones. In often frustrating and even painful ways, the pandemic exposed who is considered 'essential' in Brussels and who is not, who has the power to bend or even break the rules and who does not and who is considered important enough to meet face-to-face while everyone else is exiled to the world of the screen. To explore these more delicate and emotional experiences, we moreover share the stories of Louise, the interpreter we met at the customs meeting in Chapter 3; Alfred, a seconded diplomat; and Martín, who is carving out moments of joy and hope.

Taken together, these stories from the field cast fresh light on long-standing debates in global governance and EU studies on the role of institutions, procedure and formality, alongside considerations of social status, hierarchy and virtuosity of practice.[10] COVID-19 measures worked, as Roy put it, 'like a chemical experiment that suddenly illuminated different things.' Approached in this way, COVID-19 was

[10] Pouliot, V. (2016). *International Pecking Orders: The Politics and Practice of Multilateral Diplomacy*. Cambridge University Press; Cornut, J. (2018). Diplomacy, Agency, and the Logic of Improvisation and Virtuosity in Practice. *European Journal of International Relations*, *24*(3), 712–736; Börzel, T. A. (2008). EU Governance – Verhandlungen im Schatten von Hierarchie und Wettbewerb. In I. Tömmel (Ed.), *Die Europäische Union: Governance und Policy-Making, PVS Sonderheft 40* (pp. 61–91). VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.

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an event that nobody had planned but everyone was forced to reckon with. In the early weeks, practitioners' improvisational skills were tested: over time, as case numbers ebbed and flowed, everyone started to find their feet. And yet COVID-19 marks a tipping point in our research: a contrast agent, a portal or, as the field itself describes it, a big wave that rolled over Brussels, disrupted it and allowed it to emerge anew.

MARTÍN AND SEBASTIÁN

January 2020

It is a cold, misty Thursday afternoon in late January. The Spanish PERMREP is a narrow, sand-coloured building nestled in a row of diplomatic offices on Boulevard de Regent, a short walk from Place Schuman. We sit in Martín's office, where three chairs are arranged in a triangle. Martín talks about the preparatory work he does for negotiations in COREPER I, and his colleague Sebastián explains how the Representation uses social media. They are eager to hear whether we have met with either Mertens or Anticis.[11]

> 'Depending on if you speak to one or the other', Martin says, 'Brussels will look very different.'
>
> 'If I have to explain the difference between COREPER II and COREPER I to my friends back home,' Sebastian jokes, 'I say that COREPER I is the one where people actually work, and COREPER II is the one where nothing works.'

Martín considers this for a moment. His job, he says, consists of being a lubricant. 'I have a coordination role, and I'm most successful in my role when no one realises I'm there. If one day I disappear, everyone will start having problems and then people will say, "wait, where is the coordinator guy?" So my job is trying to avoid that.' He pauses and

[11] Named after the former Belgian diplomat Vincent Mertens de Wilmars (1953–) and the former Italian diplomat Paolo Massimo Antici (1924–2003), the 'Mertens' and 'Antici' are the official – and unofficial – designation for the diplomats working right under the EU Ambassadors and Deputy Ambassadors.

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looks up. 'Did I answer your question?' He did, but we want more detail. To speak to Martín and Sebastián, we ask them what it would take to do their job for a day.[12]

'So, in a practical way,' Martín answers,

> it looks like this: You arrive at the office in the morning. You have two hundred emails, fifteen phone calls, three meetings to organise, two ministers coming tomorrow, one delegation coming the next day. The press people want something from you, and you have to fix a lot of problems that you didn't even know existed. This is what you are. You're a fixer in the system.

He takes a deep breath.

> And let's say it is Wednesday. Then you have to go to the COREPER meeting and there will be three points on the agenda. Each point is a debate about a proposal of a regulation that has 160 pages or more. And then there's a debate about maybe five specific points, let's say the five problematic points, which are quite technical but are also linked directly to the everyday life of European people.

Martín pauses, takes a deep breath, and continues:

> After the meeting, the journalists come in. We have fifty-five Spanish journalists here in Brussels and they'll contact you with questions multiple times a day. They'll call. Email. Text. And we need them to explain Europe to the people. We can't do that ourselves. We'll also share things, post things on Twitter and so on, but we can't explain all of the EU online. The journalists help us with that. And with the translation back home.

Throughout the conversation, Martín and Sebastián repeatedly emphasise that their work unfolds in unexpected ways, both over the

[12] The methodology, including interview methods, are explained in 'A Note on Researching and Writing This Book'.

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course of a single day and in the longer term. Nevertheless, there are basic rhythms and rules. 'Brussels,' Sebastián says firmly,

> is a Bubble. It's a planet. Its own way of life. And the rules of this planet . . . don't follow the rules of the rest, Planet Earth. I didn't invent the rules, but here they are. Things like what meeting to attend when, and which platform to use to post about it, there are rules for all these things. They're the rules of this planet.

Martín and Sebastián are immersed in the world of the Brussels Bubble, including its digital dimensions. For them, there is no distinction between what happens in person and what happens online. During our conversation, Sebastián keeps his phone in his palm the entire time, always ready to check its screen. This meeting is an example of what Karin Knorr-Cetina would call a 'synthetic situation'. Even though we are physically together and facing one other, the presence of Sebastián's smartphone extends our 'naked' interactions.

MARTÍN

March 2020

A few weeks later, late one sunny Friday morning in March 2020, 'Planet Brussels' is on lockdown – and our field work has gone remote. 'Wait!' Martín says, his voice distorted by the speakers of an old iPhone. 'Wait, you're horizontal!' His hand reaches out and his image starts spinning on our screen. 'Okay,' he says. 'Now you're vertical.' His face relaxes and he smiles at the camera. Martín is in his office, alone. 'Things are a bit strange', he tells us. There are confinement measures and social distancing, but you can still go to work in Brussels. Things are much worse in Spain. 'But you! Shoot!' he says, 'What would you like to talk about?'

We talk about January, and how much life has changed since our last meeting. Martín nods along as we speak, and when there is a lull in the conversation, he clears his throat and says 'Tsunami'. We wait. 'The coronavirus crisis is like a huge Tsunami,' he elaborates. 'At the

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moment, it's still like it hasn't hit you yet, you're waiting for the water to come back in and still think that it is all an exaggeration. And then, bam! It'll hit you, and once that happens you'll see that you were ill-prepared and that all your measures were insufficient. It's a huge challenge for us.' He pauses, 'without warning and without preparation we had to shift almost entirely to digital'. Martín moves a hand through his hair. Most of his conversations have moved to WhatsApp, email and videoconference, he tells us. 'If I had a lot of money', he smiles, 'I would really invest in Cisco or Webex or something like that right now, maybe Skype for Business, or Microsoft Teams, or any other of these applications. We didn't really believe it before, but now they're going to grow so much. It all seems funny kind of, not very serious.' Now, almost all of the information Martín is working with is stored in the cloud and transmitted as text through digital networks rather than shared in face-to-face meetings or over a meal. What else? Over the last couple of days, he participated in 'a boom' of videoconferences. Yesterday, the Ministers of Agriculture. Today, the Ministers of Interior. Tomorrow, the Ministers of Health. Martín describes these meetings as having a good and a bad side, and as generally chaotic. 'The worst thing about all of this', he says, 'is that you lose the human touch ... When you are negotiating and suddenly get blocked in one point, normally in the meetings you'd stop and go to the corridor and make a lot of personal exchanges. You talk and so on. And all of that you can't do now.' Martín pauses. 'Actually, Angela Merkel made some statements about it. Yesterday. Because there was a videoconference among the Heads of State for the very first time in the history of the EU. So, these are the good sides, that even though no one can travel, the Heads of State can still meet.' Martín starts a monologue. He looks energised and in high spirits. Behind him, the same bookcases and the same office walls. The same sand-coloured building on the same tree-lined street. Around the corner, the Rue de la Loi leading up to Place Schuman.

In a few days, a *Politico* reporter will capture the eerie emptiness of the European Quarter in the early lockdown days in a photo

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spread. 'Coronavirus pops Brussels Bubble,' the headline reads.[13] The EXKi café on the corner of Avenue de Corthenbergh is closed. The flags outside the European Commission flap in the wind. The spring sun shines on empty, silent streets.

Meanwhile, ensconced indoors are Martín and most of his colleagues, talking back and forth to each other on the screen.

OLIVER

October 2021

Oliver has worked in the Council Secretariat for more than twenty-five years. His public employment timeline lists the many jobs he has held: EU treaty negotiator, head of the press office, deputy director (twice) and head of a new department since 2018. When he orders 'a black coffee no nothing please' at the Schuman EXKi café, the server asks him to show his COVID-19 passport. The cafés in Brussels are open again – but only to those with proof of vaccination.

Oliver asks about our project. We tell him: digitalisation, global governance, the role of digital devices in the work of the European Union, and now, the crisis of the pandemic. He jots down some notes (*phone, VTC, meetings, digital services, diplomacy, confidentiality)* and, working his way through the list, explains the distinction between public (general deliberation) and confidential meetings (COREPER, working groups, heads of states) and what he calls 'sensitive information' ('things related to foreign policy, EU law making, relations to third parties, and strategic questions like defence'). Phones, he says, sometimes interfere with this distinction as they are considered to be potential security risks, either because they encourage tapping or leaking, or because they could be manipulated with malware to enable outsiders to listen in on closed-door meetings.

Oliver's reflections illustrate the theoretical idea that technologies do not have a predefined effect on the social situations in which

[13] www.Politico.eu/article/coronavirus-pops-brussels-bubble-lockdown-belgium/, assessed15 January 2026.

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they are used but are actively and locally negotiated pieces of equipment. He talks about pre-pandemic, about phone-less meetings that have partly been reversed given the need for compliance with COVID-19 rules of limited contact and social distancing. If meetings in COREPER were 1+2 or even 1+4 in the past (the Ambassador, 1, and two or four aides, +2 or +4), the pandemic has transformed many of them into 1+1 or even 1+0 meetings, depending on infection numbers, the importance of the conversation and the size of the meeting room. 'We'll probably never go back to the 1+4 rule,' Oliver says. 'That's always been too many people in the room. And now we have the chance to drop this option for good.'

On the subject of teleworking, he says: 'This was already robust before the pandemic and people used to do it from time to time. For example, with consultants or outside technical experts who advise us on questions like which cloud infrastructure system we should be using and why. But then again, the system used to be a lot more primitive.' With the previous videoconference system, it was only possible to do one call at a time with a maximum of thirty-three participants. But within one month of the pandemic, the system had switched to a new European supplier, Chaud. Chaud, says Oliver, is 'kind of secure, but not *really* secure,' which is why it is not used for any confidential meetings or to discuss sensitive information. 'But this is what we could come up with then, and we scaled it up very quickly,' he smiles. 'Now there's much higher capacity, and we can now have thirty videoconference meetings in parallel, and there are no restrictions really on how many people can join them. I think it's a really high number, something in the hundreds.' What is really new, according to Oliver, is that videoconference meetings are now also used internally among the members of the working groups, ministers and heads of state. 'There are a lot of changed rules to these meetings,' he continues. 'Of course, they're all informal meetings now. For a meeting to be formal in the Council it has to be physical. It says so in the Treaties. We also made this new document now,' he says, 'with new rules. I can send that to you.'

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The making of the new handbook, coupled with Oliver's reflections about the impact of the pandemic, shows that the conduct of EU policy-making, and perhaps indeed global governance more generally, exists in a complex matrix of rules of engagement. While many of these rules are politically or legally formalised ('in the Treaties'), others are not, which means that policy-makers, diplomats, and civil servants like Oliver must actively negotiate their meaning and expression. The increasing reliance on and presence of digital tools during the COVID-19 crisis brought many of these implicit negotiations to the fore, underscoring the pandemic's role as a contrast agent that forced formerly tacit assumptions into visibility.

Next, Oliver moves on to the 'heroic' role played by COREPER at the height of the pandemic. 'They became the body that was taking delegated decisions for all the of the EU on behalf of the Council,' he says.

> A lot could happen in the videoconferences and many big decisions were taken during the early time. The Budget, for example. But then, what you see on the screen of a negotiation is only part of what's going on. What you'll see on the screen is a statement by the Commission, and then how that goes back to the Presidency of the meeting, and how the word then goes to some of the delegates.

Oliver pauses. 'But what you don't see is all that's happening on the margins, who's talking to whom bilaterally, who's looking annoyed, who's not paying attention at all, who's looking like they want to say something.' The pandemic, Oliver concludes, reminded everyone in the Brussels Bubble just how important these marginal spaces are. 'This is why,' he tells us, 'all the hard negotiations were either sent up or sent down to the COREPER.'

Later that day, Oliver emails over the document he mentioned, a handbook titled *VADEMECUM: Covid-19-related Working Modalities*. Clean and professional, it was published on 1 July 2020,

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at the beginning of the German presidency of the Council. It explains how to hold physical meetings in observance of the Belgian COVID-19 regulations, and elaborates on maximum room size, 1–5 m social distancing and the 'n+n rules' that Oliver mentioned. Further safety measures include a maximum of two people per elevator; the regular cleaning of door handles, tables, microphones, earphones and buttons; the importance of keeping all Antici and Mertens constantly in the loop 'due to increased need for horizontal coordination'; and how to organise a videoconference in observance with Belgian health and EU legal measures. Concerning the latter, no official documents can be submitted to the videoconference, and no formal decisions can be taken. Videoconferences cannot be used to bypass the transparency obligations of the treaties, and the use of videoconferencing does not alter the role of each institution. When a meeting moves online, it loses its formal status and has to be called informal, even if it is attended by ministers or heads of state. Mixed or hybrid meetings are not permitted, and participants of the same level (e.g., ministers) should all either be physically present, or all connected remotely for reasons of access, fairness, and equality. 'Experience shows,' the document states, 'that it is far more difficult to conduct negotiations and to draft documents through [VTC formats,] which are less interactive, and more time is required to address topics,' adding that confidentiality is also 'easier to ensure in a physical meeting.' The main aim of adapting Council working processes is to establish the safety of all involved and to maintain the institution's essential functions. To service the needs of participants (also in pandemic times), the document concludes that take-away food and beverages will be available in the caféterias and coffee points installed outside the meeting rooms.

More than five years later, members of the Bubble will again use a food reference to reflect on some of the long-term lessons learned from the pandemic. In a political climate now dominated by transatlantic tensions during the second presidency of Donald Trump, the ongoing war in Ukraine and accumulating instances of hybrid threats

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through misinformation, drones and cyber-attacks,[14] the *Politico Brussels Playbook* of 26 September 2025 restates the importance of meeting face-to-face to foster trust and goodwill around Place Schuman. Under the heading *The great journalist seduction*, the morning newsletter reports on the EU Council communications team inviting 'the Brussels press pack this morning for a *rentrée petit-déjeuner*'.[15] 'Remember that thing called human contact?', the email reads, but 'the Council breakfast [... comes] with one condition: in-person attendance only. After Covid-19 and the rise of Interactio – the platform that lets you lob questions at the midday briefing from your kitchen – spontaneity has waned, so institutions are going old-school. Croissants optional (but highly encouraged)'.[16] This example shows that although virtual communication in 2020 and 2021 opened doors that would otherwise have remained closed, the EU institutions have since readjusted their interaction policies – in this case, much to the joy of Brussels-based journalists.

The same holds true of meetings organised by and in the Council of the EU. We contact Oliver again in the autumn of 2025 to ask about the continuation or rollback of pandemic rules. 'There was a really strong push to fully move back to in-person meetings,'[17] he tells us over the phone from Greece. Face-to-face meetings, he says, are key to both delegates' socialisation and to socialisation in the EU. 'The goal is to make the delegates feel that they are the Council, they are the EU.' For this, Oliver says, opportunities to talk informally on the sidelines of a meeting and foster personal relationships are indispensable. Since the pandemic, the rules for meeting formats have been

[14] *Politico*, www.Politico.eu/article/donald-trump-destroy-european-union-brussels/, accessed 7 March 2025; EuroNews, www.euronews.com/next/2025/09/21/what-do-we-know-about-the-cyberattacks-that-hit-europes-airports, accessed 26 September 2025.

[15] *Rentrée*, French for 're-entry', is the term the franco-phone Brussels Bubble, and everyone in France, uses to refer to the re-entering of the workplace and school after the summer holiday.

[16] *Politico*, www.Politico.eu/newsletter/brussels-playbook/israel-on-the-docks-as-workers-of-the-med-unite/, accessed 26 September 2025.

[17] Fieldnotes, 26 September 2025.

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refined. Rule number one: No hybrid meetings. Either everyone is online, or everyone is in person, with the exception of guest speakers. 'When Zelensky spontaneously wants to speak to the Heads of State,' Oliver says, 'then he can join the meeting via a videoconference link. But the delegates aren't allowed to do that, and must be there in person.' Rule number two: internally, videoconferences are still being used, but only for information-sharing meetings such as briefings, some technical preparatory meetings, urgent discussions or meetings that are clearly going to be very short – which means 'there's no need to fly everyone in'. Rule number three: all meetings that have a negotiation element are held in Brussels and in person. As before, this is to make the meeting more effective, but also to address security concerns, since it is impossible to know how many people might be listening in on a virtual conference. 'You can speak more freely,' Oliver smiles, 'if you know that you're not being spied on by multiple people from different ministries.'

International governmental organisations are complex beasts, and the legal regulations and social rules that govern them have been formed over years and decades, sometimes even longer. The EU institutions are no exception. The Union's current constitution is set out in the Treaty of Lisbon, a 238-page legal document that was signed in the Portuguese capital in December 2007 and that entered into force in 2009.[18] The first thing the pandemic has laid bare is the strength and reach of this legal framework and the vulnerability of the social conventions and habits that make it happen in practice every single day. This makes the events of spring 2020 and the months (and years) that followed a serendipitous, if tragic, test case for observing how digitalisation intersects with established practices of governance.

Much has been written about this particular nexus, and the literature on international relations and diplomacy has matured

[18] 'Treaty of Lisbon', 17 December 2007, C 306/1, Official Journal of the European Union, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:12007L/TXT, accessed 23 September 2024.

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enormously as a result. Through studies on virtual summitry, online peace negotiations, diplomats' use of social media during times of crisis or the aesthetics of videoconferences, we have learned, for example, that diplomats find ways to cope with a lost sense of togetherness by increasing the quantity of emails and text messages they exchange. Meanwhile Elsa Hedling, in her long-term study of diplomats based in the European External Action Service (EEAS) in the years before, during and after the pandemic, found that diplomats developed situated strategies of routinisation, prioritisation and risk-taking in line with the increased 'digital stress' of their work. 'The rapid advancement of digitalisation', Hedling argues, 'necessitates autonomy and discretion to manage demand, prioritize tasks and fend off digital overload.'[19] EEAS diplomats, she argues, develop particular coping strategies to preserve their professionalism. At the same time, the situated decisions of those on the 'front-line' of global governance may in the long term widen the gap between government instructions and the real-world practice of diplomacy. What Hedling's research shows is that digitalisation is much more than an add-on to the EU's political and diplomatic work: it is an active ingredient in shaping professional norms and routines and how they develop over time. In addition to such reflexive changes, the experience of the pandemic has established that social media has become a key source and constituent element of diplomatic communication, that negotiation outcomes are directly linked to the technological affordances of computer software and that the visual and performative symbols of 'offline' diplomacy are reproduced online to an astonishing degree.[20]

[19] Hedling, E. (2025). Coping with Digitalization in Diplomacy: Autonomy and Discretion at the Digital Frontlines. *European Journal of International Relations*, Online First, 1–23.

[20] The existing literature is extensive and growing. See, in particular, Hedling, E. & Bremberg, N. (2021). Practice Approaches to the Digital Transformations of Diplomacy. *International Studies Review*, *23*(4), 1595–1618; Eggeling, K. A. (2023). *Digital Diplomacy*. Oxford Research Encyclopedias in International Studies, pp. 1–22; Bjola, C. & Manor, I. (2024). *The Oxford Handbook of Digital Diplomacy*. Oxford University Press; Duncombe, C. (2017). Twitter and Transformative Diplomacy: Social Media and Iran–US Relations. *International Affairs*, *93*(3),

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This speaks directly to two shifts in perception that the experiences of Martín, Sebastián and Oliver during COVID-19 have brought to the fore. The first is the realisation of just how much the frameworks and conditions in which EU's political and diplomatic work are conducted have an impact on its outcomes. The second is the acknowledgement of the extent to which these conditions are framed in terms of the existing social hierarchies and in formal versus informal ways of working. These shifts, which are important for international affairs in general, manifested directly in the EU's response to the coronavirus crisis. By pushing practitioners to (re) define, for example, what a meeting is, who has access to it, how to conduct it and what technologies may be present and used to support negotiation work, the pandemic pushed questions of affordance, decorum and procedure out of the theory books and into the practice of everyday decision-making. It also exposed the fragility in the ways of interaction that had been taken for granted. Martín stressed to us that his job was to oil the wheels of the system and to stay invisible. For him and many others, the pandemic marked the moment when the hidden machinery of the Brussels Bubble became exposed, and its practitioners were no longer fulfilling the unwritten parts of their job descriptions in the margins of

545–562; Manor, I. (2019). *The Digitalization of Public Diplomacy*. Palgrave Macmillan; Jones, A., & Clark, J. (2019). Performance, Emotions, and Diplomacy in the United Nations Assemblage in New York. *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*, *109*(4), 1262–1278; Cornut, J., Manor, I., & Blumenthal, C. (2022). WhatsApp with Diplomatic Practices in Geneva? Diplomats, Digital Technologies, and Adaptation in Practice. *International Studies Review*, *24*(4), 1–21; Danielson, A., & Hedling, E. (2022). Visual Diplomacy in Virtual Summitry: Status Signalling during the Coronavirus Crisis. *Review of International Studies*, *48*(2), 243–261; Kaneva, N., Dolea, A., & Manor, I. (2023). Public Diplomacy and Nation Branding in the Wake of the Russia–Ukraine War. *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, *19*(3), 185–189; Adler-Nissen, R., & Drieschova, A. (2019). Track-Change Diplomacy: Technology, Affordances, and the Practice of International Negotiations. *International Studies Quarterly*, *63*(3), 531–545; Eggeling, K. A., & Adler-Nissen, R. (2021). The Synthetic Situation in Diplomacy: Scopic Media and the Digital Mediation of Estrangement. *Global Studies Quarterly*, *1*(2), 1–14.

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formalised interactions. While Martín struggled to express this in words, the Council's *VADEMECUM* COVID-19 handbook set it down in black and white.

The central tactic the EU institutions used to deal with the loss of control over established meeting and interaction rituals was to dissolve the boundary between formal and informal. By October 2021, Oliver had already acclimatised to the pandemic's 'new normal' so he took it as a given that 'of course' all videoconferences were informal. The word 'informal' juxtaposed with 'meeting' might conjure images of a relaxed get-together with no clear procedures or rules, where people can drop in and out as they please. But this is not what 'informal' means in the context of an EU Council videoconference. These are highly curated and adhere to the same rules concerning access, speaking times, speaking orders and preapproved agenda items as face-to-face meetings. The big difference is that no 'formal' – that is, legally binding – decisions can be taken in this format, which is why agenda items are either moved through written procedure or, delegated 'down' to the COREPER.

Such 'coping mechanisms' demonstrate that the format of a meeting is directly related to its legal status, and that the mode of interaction is a constitutive part of diplomatic practice, rather than simply a background condition. Furthermore, it shows an unprecedented power shift in the EU policy-making during the pandemic: one that catapulted its diplomatic actors that we write about here deep into the nerve centre of the Brussels Bubble.

On 24 June 2021, *Politico* published an article on the 'engine room' of EU diplomacy during the first fourteen months of the pandemic.[21] The concept of the engine room is often used in academic analyses as a metaphor for high-level political and diplomatic meetings.

[21] www.politico.eu/article/eu-ambassadors-coreper-power-center/, accessed 25 October 2025.

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Unambiguously titled *How Ambassadors took over the EU*, the article argued that while the virus had 'paralysed' much of European politics, it had simultaneously accorded COREPER ambassadors considerably more power. The reason was two-fold. Firstly, direct lines of communication had to be established between the ambassadors and the heads of state or government back in the member states, thereby largely bypassing the ministries. Secondly, the crisis enabled COREPER members to continue with face-to-face meetings while virtually everyone else, including leaders, ministers and lawmakers, was forced online. While some may not have been happy about this power shift – in particular, national ministers and the otherwise highly influential bureaucrats surrounding them – the article cited high-profile sources to underscore just how vital COREPER was in keeping the EU running during COVID-19. The Portuguese ambassador Nino Brito, emerging from the regular COREPER Wednesday meeting as the +1 of the Portuguese prime minister António Costa (who would later become president of the EU Council) declared the COREPER meeting to be the 'engine room' of EU politics and thanked the senior diplomats for welcoming him into 'Europe's real power center'.

Using the same terminology as Oliver, *Politico*'s article also gives an example of the dynamic of sending a file 'down' to COREPER. After hours of argument in a video summit in March 2021, it reports, 'EU leaders took the extraordinary decision to publicly ask COREPER – not health ministers or the European Commission – to figure out how to divvy up an extra load of 10 million coronavirus vaccines.' Sure enough, the first page of the official Council communication SN 18/21 published in Brussels, on 25 March 2021, begins: 'We invite the Committee of Permanent Representatives to address the issue of the speed of deliveries of vaccines when allocating the 10 million BioNTech-Pfizer accelerated doses in the second quarter of 2021 in a spirit of solidarity.'[22]

[22] EU Council Conclusions, www.consilium.europa.eu/media/48976/250321-vtc-euco-statement-en.pdf, accessed 26 September 2025.

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Having argued strongly in favour of keeping their usual Wednesday meeting, the COREPER ambassadors were the only top EU officials who continued to meet in person throughout the entire pandemic. 'While other political power players were reduced to video calls', *Politico* writes, 'the ambassadors were able to do what they always do, and what's much easier to do in person – cut deals by flattering, trading, cajoling, threatening and – even perhaps occasionally – lying.' Although this does not sound particularly 'formal,' thanks to its continuous face-to-face status, the COREPER group was in fact the most 'formal,' and hence the most powerful, EU body during the critical era of the COVID-19 crisis. While neither we nor journalists had direct insight into what happened in the negotiation of SN 18/21, COREPER succeeded in this and many other Council-assigned tasks, and forged a myriad compromises including, most notably, one on vaccine distribution.

The shifts in designation as to what counts as an (in)formal meeting and the improvised practice of files 'moving down' to COREPER show how the Brussels Bubble adapted its interactions to virtual and hybrid conditions and how these conditions directly relate to core questions of power, access and representation. Theoretically, it shows that digital technologies intersect with the practice of global governance in fundamental ways and that these intersections are actively considered and shaped by the practitioners themselves. It also provides two basic but important insights. Firstly, the way that negotiations are conducted in the EU is essential to what they can achieve: form, in other words, shapes content. Secondly, even though digital devices are becoming more important, and even though they became, for a time, the most important tools in much of the Bubble's work, it is unlikely that the Brussels apparatus will ever go entirely digital. Face-to-face interactions remain key, both for legal and social reasons. In the second part of this chapter, we will zoom in on the latter dynamic and consider how the increased reliance on digital technologies – and, in some cases, the complete move online – has impacted the emotional registers of those living and working in the Bubble.

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LOUISE

April 2020

Louise makes time for a quick call with us between a Zoom meeting and baking waffles for a birthday party. Like the majority of EU staff, she has been told to work from home for the last couple of weeks. She calls via FaceTime at five o'clock. It is a cloudy day in Brussels, with temperatures reaching a high of 12°C. The city has been on lockdown for four weeks, maybe five. Time has become blurred. January and February were crazy months: Louise spent a lot of time on missions with the Croatian presidency and was in Strasbourg with the group of the twenty-seven European Commissioners known as The College. But from the beginning of March, she was asked to attend fewer and fewer meetings, and now the only ones she goes to in person are COREPER's and Press Briefings. Louise, who has built her career in Brussels over the last decade, is employed by DG SCIC, the European Commission's Directorate General for Interpretation.

'The ambassadors are insisting on meeting in person,' Louise says.

> It's funny to see. Some of them are wearing masks and some aren't. Other than that, you have the same set-up. The ambassadors, the Presidency, the legal service, the general secretariat on the one side, and the Commission on the other side. What's different is that you only have one person sitting behind the ambassador now. Probably their attaché. Whoever's in charge of the file. The meetings are also shorter. Maybe an hour, an hour and a half. But they meet two or three times every week now. They insisted. Especially the German Ambassador. When the Heads of State had their first videoconference Council, the Ambassadors couldn't listen in and they were really upset about it. They're normally in the room with the Leaders. They were really upset and so they insisted to keep meeting,
>
> They're basically the ones running the whole thing. They're the ones who know what's being said at this level. So they insisted on having

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> their meetings because that's how decisions are taken now. . . . You can read this in *Politico*, too. The leaders are saying the same thing – that it's a lot harder to find a compromise when you're meeting over Zoom or whatever the platform is they're using.[23]

After a moment of reflection, Louise wants to clarify that it is not Zoom that is used, but an in-house service. Indeed, emails from the administration have been circulating telling all staff members not to use Zoom because it is not considered safe.

'They have all these reflexes in the meeting room', Louise continues.

> In the meeting yesterday, they extended their arms to shake hands and then stopped, thinking oh my God what are we doing here? And then, awkwardly, they waved at each other from a two-meter distance. And then one of the Ambassadors, he looked at a document that someone placed on the table next to him and pulled it closer – not by using his hands but the tip of a pen. The whole thing's absurd.

'But the worst thing is', Louise says looking more sombrely into the camera now,

> that not only are some of the things they do absurd, but that we are there to witness it all. The interpreters are all really upset. We're considered essential personnel, so we have to go to the meetings but then some of us are saying, what's the point? The whole thing's in English anyway. Everybody understands English. So why – her voice breaks – why should we risk our lives for decorum?

The question hangs in the virtual space between us.

'But I think this is our job', Louise concludes. 'We're told to go somewhere, so it's our job to go. But some refuse to go to work. Some complain that the booths aren't being cleaned well enough. Then

[23] Fieldnotes, 16 April 2020.

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we're told to clean the booths ourselves. When you enter, there are wipes and hydro-alcoholic gels and they give us all kinds of detergents.' Meanwhile, the European Commission has decided to make teleworking the norm for everybody who is not considered essential until the beginning of May. Nobody in Brussels knows yet how long the lockdown is going to last. Just before the internet connection breaks down and cuts us off, Louise says: 'I think you just do your work as your employer tells you.'

ALFRED

September 2021

Alfred, wearing a neon yellow helmet, arrives outside of the EXKi café on Place de Luxembourg at five minutes past noon. We are going for lunch to an Italian place that has tables in the courtyard and lasagne on the menu. Alfred is one of those EU diplomats who starts talking the moment he sees you. His biggest frustration these days, he tells us, is just how terrible people are at being online.

'Digital skills are quickly becoming the most important professional skills a diplomat can have,' he says. 'We used to look primarily at how well people write and summarise reports and all of that. But going forward, we'll also look at how they organise and handle technological tools.' There are many ways in which you can chair or moderate a virtual meeting, or, say, use the media or give a presentation online. These, says Alfred, 'are going to be the essential skills of the future'. He gives some examples form his work in various Council working groups.

> During the pandemic, I was sitting at home, and I missed my colleagues. So, I started to take the initiative. I asked some of them, mainly the ones in our like-minded group, if we should have more meetings. And then I set them up and started moderating them. We did this a few times and then they all started looking to me, asking what we should do next, where should we go from here, what do you think?

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Alfred represents Denmark. Though a small EU member state, it is one in which digital education has long been prioritised. Because of this, the pandemic gave him the opportunity to increase his influence over his colleagues and punch above his member state's political weight. 'We use virtual meetings as a sort of pre-meeting now,' he explains. 'We'll probably keep them forever,' he says, citing their positive contributions to coalition-building and informal information-sharing. 'But the meetings can also be tiring,' he says. 'People speak bad English and all of that. And they're the worst, when they're run by someone who speaks bad English and who doesn't know how to run a virtual meeting!'

But there can also be more substantial problems, which Alfred sees as falling into two categories. The first is when the topic is confidential or somehow politically touchy, like budget negotiations. The second is when the topic is politically opaque.

> Like the thing they're talking about now in the Commission – the Conference on the Future of Europe. I just met with some people regarding this and no one actually knows what it is. And there are lots of meetings all the time, but it is not super-clear what we're supposed to do, and then its hard to have a virtual meeting.

So much for content. Moments later, Alfred returns to the subject of form, which he illustrates with the following story.

It was the winter of 2020, just before Christmas. A few days before the holidays, he received an email announcing that one of his working groups was going to hold a meeting just after Christmas. Attached was a 1,400-page document, written in the EU's most technical jargon, which would form the basis of the discussions to follow. Alfred did his utmost to read through the material, which consisted of a technical explanation of hiring practices linked to the future agenda. And then – the meeting. For four hours, Alfred and his twenty-six colleagues watched as a Commission colleague clicked them through the presentation in his bad English.

'Death by PowerPoint', Alfred groans. The tragedy was that although the slides were good – great, even – the speaker's command

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of English and the audio quality of the online meeting were both so shaky that Alfred had no way of following the proceedings – and given that he could not see any of his colleagues, no way of gauging whether they could either. 'I think in the end they didn't want us to read the document,' he says with annoyance. 'That's why they sent it so close before, and put this person in charge of presenting it . . . It's kind of the European spirit that you have a long and technical presentation, fair enough,' Alfred concludes. But in this case, it was unprofessional and if you asked him, it bore the whiff of 'being undemocratic'.

Alfred's story adds a new dimension to the kind of crisis COVID-19 presented to the Brussels Bubble. On the one hand, Alfred is personally frustrated over the unrealistic expectations prompted by and through digital formats. On the other hand – and this is a common reaction, he says – he feels shocked and frustrated by how unskilled some of his colleagues are at working online or in a hybrid fashion. In the academic literature on diplomatic studies, classic conceptions of 'competence' as a key marker of professional standing are being extended by discussions of 'digital skills', professional learning and 'digital adoption'.[24] What Alfred is presenting, when he speaks about missing his colleagues and reaching out to see if they want to meet online, is what the academic literature has since dubbed an approach of 'trial and error' in which practicing diplomats improvise new ways of interacting and communicating.[25] And in his private reflections about what it means to be a diplomat, what he intuitively calls his increased status among his colleagues is what the literature now frames as ways in which shifting hierarchical systems are often split along lines of gender and age.[26]

[24] Bjola, C., & Manor, I. (2022). The Rise of Hybrid Diplomacy: From Digital Adaptation to Digital Adoption. *International Affairs*, *98*(2), 471–491.

[25] Bjola, C., & Coplen, M. (2022). Virtual Venues and International Negotiations: Lessons from the COVID-19 Pandemic. *International Negotiation*, *28*(1), 69–93.

[26] Donovan, O. (2025). Gendering Zoom Diplomacy: Women's Participation in Digital Diplomacy. *International Studies Perspectives*, *26*(2), 238–256; Danielson & Hedling, Visual Diplomacy in Virtual Summitry, pp. 243–226; Adler-Nissen, R., & Eggeling, K. A. (2022). Blended Diplomacy: The Entanglement and Contestation of

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For a brief moment in March 2020, it indeed looked like the coronavirus might 'pop' the Brussels Bubble. The cancellation of the COREPER meeting on 6 March that triggered this headline in *Politico* – 'Coronavirus pops Brussels bubble'[27] – was central in this regard because in the months that followed, it was almost exclusively the COREPER ambassadors and their sherpas who had permission to continue meeting in person. The hierarchy of meeting rules that emerged in Brussels in the spring of 2020 and remained a fixture for the next eighteen to twenty-four months favoured the diplomatic core of the Bubble and disadvantaged senior political leaders and heads of state along with lower-ranking diplomatic and institutional support staff. While European politicians could not convene in Brussels due to travel restrictions, lower-level staff were either exiled to cyberspace or, depending on their '(non)essential' status, asked to be physically present at their workplace.

These dynamics are captured in the stories of Louise and Alfred. While Louise asks why interpreters should risk their lives for the sake of 'decorum', Alred bemoans bad online moderation and 'death by PowerPoint'. Though strikingly at odds with one another, both their assessments centre on the role of language and communication, and both find it wanting. Louise deems it ultimately unnecessary to be present in the closed-door rooms of COREPER where everybody speaks English and the presence of the interpreters seems more 'decorative' than vital, while Alfred feels lonely behind his screen and longs for face-to-face meetings in his technical working group, especially when colleagues with poor English are chairing. Louise is a staff interpreter for key meetings, and Alfred a diplomat working for a peripheral working group, so their professional situations are clearly different, but the conditions of the pandemic expose otherwise hidden

Digital Technologies in Everyday Diplomatic Practice. *European Journal of International Relations*, *28*(3), 640–666.

[27] www.politico.eu/article/coronavirus-pops-brussels-bubble-lockdown-belgium/, last accessed 29 October 2025.

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assumptions about the standing of each in the EU hierarchy. According to Brussels rules, Louise is considered essential and must show up physically, while Alfred is considered non-essential and remains stuck online. And while they judge their situations in very different ways, both accept the conditions they are presented with, given their position in the Brussels pecking order. This was true for the entire diplomatic staff of the Bubble during the first waves of the pandemic, with the exception of the higher-level diplomats who actively lobbied for – and secured – alignment between their professional ideals and their working conditions.

Yet despite the bumpy start, two months after the first lockdown, the political and diplomatic engine of the Bubble appeared to have assimilated the pandemic and 'adapted to the fashion of the time'.[28] '*Coronamertens*', Martín texts one morning in late May 2020, followed by a link to a post on Twitter/X. In a COVID version of the classic diplomatic family photo, the image shows the Mertens diplomats, all in face masks, standing a metre and a half apart in neat rows in the atrium of the Europa. Half an hour previously, a similar image, taken at a slightly more elevated angle, was posted by the Chair of the COREPER I, the then Croatian deputy ambassador Goran Štefanić, with the caption '*In case someone was looking for people who didn't stop working & physically meeting during #COVID19 crisis in order to keep the EU machinery working for the benefit of COREPER I sectors and EU citizens.*'[29] Later, more such images will appear on the 'Newsroom' website of the EU Council, though only the ones of the ambassadors, not of the Mertens diplomats. COREPER II produced a similar image the week before, which can be found on its website but was never posted on Twitter. 'That photo was actually a joke', Martín texts us. 'Every Presidency makes a family photo of ambassadors and mertens,

[28] As put by a Mertens diplomat on Twitter, Fieldnotes, 15 May 2020.
[29] https://x.com/GoranStefanic/status/1260973636657258496, accessed 27 September 2024.

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without masks, and then we decided to make, as a joke, one with masks ... which of course had more success [sic].'[30]

The stories about COREPER meeting and taking alternative family photos illuminate two additional dynamics often discussed in the theoretical literature on the practices of global governance. The first is the use of humour and playfulness as a coping mechanism. The second, as previously mentioned, is the development of new practices and skills as the conditions of diplomatic work change. 'Playing' with the conditions of the pandemic confirms the dynamic explored in Chapter 2, about how actors in the Brussels Bubble love/hate the digital. What is unique here are the observations of the more or less 'live changes' to working practices that the pandemic triggers. Alfred identifies 'skilling up' as an important feature of the pandemic, arguing that running an online meeting, moderating virtual events and learning how to use different technological tools are now becoming essential diplomatic skills. This stands in stark contrast to the pre-2020 era when many of his colleagues saw laptops, mobile phones and social media as distractions and categorised them as peripheral or unnecessary features of diplomatic work. In one of the first interviews we conducted for the project that eventually became this book, a former ambassador from a Benelux state asked us if we wouldn't prefer to spend our time discussing something other than computers and phones, as he did not consider the topic to be of any great interest.[31] Before the pandemic, the Brussels Bubble considered 'being online' to be part of the job. But in 2020 and 2021, it essentially *became* the job. With the pandemic, the role of digital technologies and devices was turned upside down both by the exogenous shock of the spreading virus – the tsunami, as Martín called it – and by a shared, internal process of reflecting on and rediscovering the essence of the diplomatic profession and the dynamics that define life in the Brussels Bubble.

Never waste a crisis. How did the Bubble experience the coronavirus crisis and how did it capitalise on it? What did the pandemic

[30] Fieldnotes, 15 May 2002. [31] Fieldnotes, 20 November 2018.

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reveal about the possibilities and limitations of EU governance and 'digital diplomacy', and how did those who stayed in Brussels deal with the radical changes to their working lives?

On 26 March 2020, twenty days after the Croatian Ambassador Andrassy was quarantined and COREPER II was first cancelled, the former European Commission president Jean Claude Juncker was interviewed on German television about what the cancellation of in-person summits meant for the 'compromise machine' that is Europe.[32] Filming himself on his smartphone camera, he told German TV audiences: 'As the president ... it is very important to be able to read the faces of members. I need to see who's looking unhappy, who's smiling, who's looking at whom. All of this is part of the choreography of the meeting ... and this is not possible via videoconference.'[33] Every EU meeting is also a performance, the television commentator says, over a montage of heads of state patting one another's backs and eating dinner together, and of delegates sleeping with their heads on meeting room tables. The news clip finishes with an interview with Alexander Stubb, president of Finland, and its former prime minister, who says that every European Council meeting is like a big therapy session that begins when the doors are closed and the heads of state are alone with the interpreters. Only then do they discuss the domestic, most difficult and political issues, which is the purpose of the Council's work and of the meeting itself. This, Stubb concludes, is simply not possible in a videoconference. The pandemic, he asserts, transformed 'two days of close combat' into 'four hours of remote duelling'. Has Europe, outside observers ask, become a lame duck in pandemic times?

The members of the Brussels Bubble certainly did not think so at the time. Take Štefanić's Twitter post, Oliver's insistence on the resilience of COREPER or Martín's belief that all his best work is invisible. '*Check the council media info now! They are recording us! To show that Europe goes on!*', he texts us one Wednesday afternoon

[32] Fieldnotes 26 March 2020. [33] Ibid. – author translation from German.

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at the end of April 2020. '*Oh Jesus i did not realize they filmed me! Creasy trousers and my hair looks horrible*'. A few minutes later, he adds: '*Smiley face Smiley face.*' We reply with a smiley emoji and ask: '*So it's very authentic*‽ *Showing you're working hard*'. '*You're right!*' he texts back. '*In Europe, we're working. We're always on. Always working.*'

In the days and weeks of the texts, phone calls, videoconferences and socially distanced in-person meetings described in this chapter, the members of the Brussels Bubble did indeed work hard. They helped bring home 600,000 EU citizens who were stranded in other countries, approved a new €750 billion multi-year budget that came to be called 'NextGeneration EU', negotiated and passed over 1,350 individual measures to mitigate the pandemic crisis and administered almost 400 state aid decisions to provide a lifeline to European companies.[34] Even in times of crisis, the show must go on. Partly, it went on in the offices and meeting rooms around Place Schuman. Partly, it went on in cyberspace. At the height of the pandemic, life in the Brussels Bubble became less based on what Goffman calls 'naked interaction' and more dominated by what Knorr-Cetina calls 'synthetic situations'. While phones and laptops had long been part of the interactional infrastructure of the Brussels Bubble, the pandemic transformed them from helpful if little-considered background tools into the vital players in social life. In 2009, Knorr-Cetina described how synthetic situations require their participants to direct their attention not just at one another but at the surfaces of the devices with which they conduct their interactions. Seen positively, this additional layer of monitoring can lead to a state of immersion. Seen negatively, it can lead to a state of exhaustion. Both states are described in Brussels stories from this time. The use of social media, for example, still allows diplomats like Martín to feel connected to his colleagues and immersed in the tasks of his working group. At the

[34] https://op.europa.eu/webpub/com/general-report-2020/en/, accessed 27 September 2024.

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same time, long online meetings leave Alfred frustrated and listless. Heightened reflexivity was one of the major experiences associated with the pandemic's 'tethered existence' and 'syntheticism'. Another change was in the value attached to in-person meetings – who was permitted or expected to meet face-to-face, and what that revealed about social and professional hierarchies. For those considered 'essential' in the Brussels Bubble, such as the COREPER ambassadors or interpreters like Louise, the digital worlds remained in the background since meetings and interactions primarily happened face-to-face. While for those considered more marginal by professional standards, living in the 'screen world' became the temporary status quo.

As Arundhati Roy wrote, the pandemic could be a 'portal' to something new. But in the Brussels Bubble, 2020 was also a year of closures. It was the year the UK formally left the European Union, and the year when the beloved Café Vergnano on Place Schuman closed its doors. The UK wanted to 'take back control' of its borders, money and laws[35]; the café was one of 427 businesses that went bankrupt as a result of the first lockdown in three Brussels districts inside the European Quarter.[36]

'We will be your friend, your ally, your supporter and indeed – never let it be forgotten – your number one market', British prime minister Boris Johnson said in a televised farewell speech to Brussels on Christmas Eve.[37]

'Thank you, my "dearest clients" for your smiles, your anger [and] your stories that have become mine', Giuseppe, the owner of the

[35] British Government, EU Exit, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5bfe7d6c40f0b65b14fc6631/28_November_EU_Exit__Taking_back_control_of_our_borders__money_and_laws_while_protecting_our_economy__security_and_Union__1_.pdf, accessed 27 September 2024.

[36] *Politico*, www.Politico.eu/article/brussels-coronavirus-eu-quarter-future/, accessed 27 September 2024.

[37] www.gov.uk/government/speeches/prime-ministers-statement-on-eu-negotiations-24-december-2020, accessed 27 September 2024.

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much beloved Vergnano, wrote on a piece of paper he taped onto the window of the café.[38]

Echoing Guiseppe's tone, EU leaders urged citizens to be optimistic and look forward, not backward. One of them was Commission president Ursula von der Leyen, who closed the year with an opening: 'The future belongs to Europe', she argued in the General Report on the activities of the European Union published annually in accordance with Article 249(2) of the Treaty of Lisbon. In other words, in line with Monnet and many other legendary European crisis managers, she was arguing for 'More Europe!'

To close the chapter, we fast-forward to the autumn of 2025, when references to COVID-19 still linger in the running commentary of the Bubble. 'The main thing we learned from this time', Oliver tells us over the phone, 'is that if we have to move online, we can'.[39] For the Council Secretariat, the pandemic was primarily a logistical challenge. Effective crisis management in the moment backed up by long-term reflections and strategies on 'how best to meet' allowed the institution to ride out the crisis and in the process, improve working methods and conditions. One of Oliver's long-term colleagues in Brussels recalls that only weeks before the first lockdown in February 2020, they had published a strategy about the design and administration of online meetings. 'Back then', he tells us, 'everyone told me and my team 'dream on – this is never gonna happen!'".[40] Little did they know that within a few short months, they would be thanking the digital foresight team for planning virtual meeting formats.

During COVID, Oliver maintains, 'the mental hurdle' of meeting in non-conventional formats was crossed, and indeed, this part of the EU decision-making process has since become more elastic. As he predicted in 2021, conducting virtual pre-meetings has become the norm. 'Where previously a physical meeting would have been held',

[38] Cited in *Politico*, www.Politico.eu/article/brussels-coronavirus-eu-quarter-future/, accessed 27 September 2024.
[39] Fieldnotes 2 October 2025. [40] Ibid.

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Oliver explains, 'now it's become common practice to hold an online meeting instead if the agenda is short, the main point is briefing, preparation or information sharing, or if the meeting must be ad hoc.' However, every time more sensitive issues are on the table or a file needs to be actively negotiated, 'the meeting will be in person.'[41] This shows that while new working methods have become institutionalised, one lasting legacy of the pandemic is the link between professional hierarchies, the contents of an interaction and the formats they use. Essential staff and essential topics are done face-to-face, with digital devices in the background. This applies across the board of professionals working in and around Place Schuman, from interpreters to diplomats, civil servants and journalists. Activities deemed more in support of the core tasks and 'socialisation' of the Brussels Bubble, on the other hand, often happen in online formats where technology presents the foreground of the interaction. Although these local practices have survived the coronavirus crisis, the rise of new technologies like artificial intelligence and the increasing (geo)politicisation of digital services confronts the Brussels Bubble with new fundamental questions. 'When ChatGPT was launched in November 2023', Oliver's colleague tells us in the autumn of 2025, 'we directed all of our attention to questions of generative AI. At the moment', he says, 'we are working on a pilot project for an in-house large language model. If we don't provide this to the delegates coming to Brussels, they'll turn elsewhere and our role as the main meeting space for European decision-makers will be at risk'.[42] With the pandemic getting smaller in the rearview mirror, future crises about whether and how the Bubble's show will go on(line) lie just around the corner.

[41] Fieldnotes, 26 September 2025. [42] Fieldnotes, 2 October 2025.

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