**Council of the
European Union**

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'I' ITEM NOTE

From:	Presidency
To:	Permanent Representatives Committee (Part 2)
Subject:	Outcome of Presidency Pilot on the use of Video Conferencing at certain Working Parties
	- Conclusion and possible next steps

1.   Introduction

In July, the Presidency launched a pilot project to test the use of videoconferencing facilities in a small number of selected working parties. The aim of the pilot was to test the technical and procedural feasibility of using videoconferencing to enable remote participation of a limited number of delegates in such meetings, to allow for input from experts in the capital or to enable participation of more than one delegate per country. The proposal for the pilot project was examined by the Coordination Committee for Communication and Information Systems on 15 May (WK3653/19) and approved by Coreper on 24 June 2019 (ST10630/19).

The objective of the pilot was not to hold working party meetings with all delegations using videoconferencing (VC), but to test the remote participation of a limited number of delegations or external speakers at each meeting. For technical reasons, and to ensure the efficient conduct of meetings, the number of participating delegations was limited to ten at any meeting. There was no obligation on any delegation to use videoconferencing so participation was voluntary.

The pilot project is linked to the more general discussion on improving the working methods of the council including a better use of digital tools.

2. Progress of the Pilot

Initially, the Presidency identified five working groups as candidates for testing videoconferencing facilities. They were selected on the basis of the subject-matter of the meetings concerned (non-legislative, and with a focus on information sharing and exchange of views) and the understanding that no interpretation would be required:

- the **Working Party on eJustice** - subgroups on videoconferencing and on ECodex;
- the **Working Party on Information**;
- the **Working Party on International Environmental Issues (WPIEI)**;
- the **Working Party on Social Questions** - attachés meeting;
- the **Coordination Committee for Communication and Information Systems (CCCIS).**

The WPIEI was subsequently excluded from the pilot on the basis that interpretation would in fact be required at the meeting.

The initial Presidency calendar had foreseen that 10 meetings would be included in the pilot, however, due to some cancellations the overall number of meetings **was reduced to 6.**

3. List of Meetings scheduled

Working Party	Date	Chair	Status	Room
Working Party on Information	2/07/2019	GSC	Cancelled due to the Special meeting of the European Council	
Working Party on Social Questions	2/07/2019	Pres	**Meeting 1 - Moved to 3rd July**	**JL 50.7**
Working Party on Information	9/09/2019	GSC	**Meeting 2**	**EB.S5**
Working Party on Information	19/09/2019	GSC	Taken on 09/09	
WP on eJustice (E-Codex)	7/10/2019	NL Delegate	**Meeting 3**	**EB.S7**
WPIEI	23/10/2019	Pres	Excluded from the pilot.	
Working Party on Information	5/11/2019	GSC	Meeting cancelled	
Working Party on eJustice (Videoconferencing experts)	13/11/2019	AT Delegate	**Meeting 4**	**EB.S3**
CCCIS	28/11/2019	GSC	**Meeting 5**	**EB.S7**
Working Party on Information	16/12/2019	GSC	**Meeting 6**	**EB.S3**

4. Number of Delegations/participants via Video Conference

Between 4 and 7 delegations have participated by video conference with 50[1] delegates using this facility.

WP on Social Questions -	**6 Delegations (11 participants)**
WP on Information -	**5 Delegations (10 participants)**
WP on eJustice (eCodex)	**4 Delegations (6 participants)**
WP on eJustice (Videoconferencing)	**3 Delegations & Eurojust (6 participants)**
WP on CCCIS	**7 Delegations (17 participants)**

5. Participants Feedback

In order to gauge user-feedback two questionnaires were created and distributed to participants, one for those participating by video conferencing and the other for those participating in the room.

To date **65 replies** have been received by those physically present in the meeting room and **23 replies** by those participating by VC.

Overall, the user feedback suggests a willingness to continue using video-conferencing at working parties with 65 out of 88 respondents (73%) in favour of its more regular use. The main reasons given were environmental and cost benefits together with convenience and reduction of time away from the office. Some respondents highlighted potential limitations on the use of video conferencing, including meetings with interpretation, more 'dynamic' content and the impact its extended use might have on networking.

On the technical use of video conferencing at the meetings, feedback was also generally positive with most respondents reporting that they could see and hear participants quite clearly. Nevertheless, 30% indicated that the use of video conferencing has an impact on the flow of the meeting.

The responses are provided in **Annex 1**

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[1] excluding WPI on 16th December

6. Key findings of the pilot

Technical

1. Technically the system has worked quite well although the GSC does not have control over the Member States systems which it connects with (i.e. there is no centrally managed system). This can cause problems with labelling of the screens and also impacts the presentation of PowerPoint slides from the remote sites.

2. Connections when established have generally been well sustained. Picture and sound quality have in the main also been very good.

3. The use of presentations has had mixed results. At the SQWP meeting, the participants could not see the presentation clearly due to the screen configuration. Presentations at both the WPI and eCodex worked fine but there were significant issues with the showing of presentations by those participating remotely at the eJustice (video conferencing) meeting.

4. The fact that dialling operations are made outside the room (via a centralised system in the Telecom Service), created a lack of visible support. As such, there has been a need for direct communication via telephone between the operator and meeting room attendants when connection issues have arisen.

Procedural and legal issues

1. Significant preparatory work is required in terms of testing, setting, coordination and working with Chairpersons. This involves a number of GSC officials and Presidency staff and is very time consuming.

2. With the exception of the first meeting, the Chairs have explained the modalities of the meeting for VC participants. Several Chairs also verified the names of VC participants at the start of each meeting. This is an additional obligation on the Chair, yet unavoidable (refer also to point 5 below).

3. The level of participation by those using VC connection has varied between working parties. At the SQWP the VC participants did not make any interventions and only one participant intervened at the first WPI, whereas presentations were provided by video conferencing participants at both of the eJustice meetings and CCCIS. Overall when participants using VC intervened, communication was clear and on a par with inputs from the floor at most of the meetings. This was particularly evident at the eJustice meeting on 12th November when there was extensive interaction between the VC participants and those in the room. This all flowed seamlessly.

4. Only Member States' officials in the capitals can control the participation of those participating at meetings by video conference in remote sites. For the GSC or for the delegates in the meeting room, there remains no way of definitively knowing who is actually present in remote sites. For this reason, after the first meeting, changes were made to the request template and cover note to request names of all participants placing responsibility on each Member State to manage its own participants. Consideration will have to be given to the development of specific guidelines

concerning VC-meeting rooms in Member States (controlled access, no VC-premises in public areas etc.) if the service is to be offered in the future.

5. Mechanism to allow VC participants to request the floor needs to be made more operative   At present, the Chair must verbally offer the floor to VC participants after each agenda point to allow for their participation which can affect the flow of the meeting.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of the pilot project and having regard to

- the overall positive feedback from the participants regarding technical and procedural aspects of video conferencing and the result of the questionnaires showing that delegates are largely in favour of the use of video conferencing under the conditions foreseen by Coreper in the note ST10630/19, while mentioning the limits of VC in respect to dynamics of the meeting and contacts between delegates

- the positive environmental impacts, savings related to travel expenses and time, smoother information sharing and improved use of expertise from the capitals that the increased use of video conferencing can enable;

- the need to comply with the Council's Rules of Procedure, including confidentiality issues, and the need to check the names of the persons present in remote sites;

- the fact that there is no VC foreseen with interpretation as this is not technically feasible;

- the fact that working methods of the preparatory bodies should contribute to an efficient and comprehensive approach and proper preparation, decision-making and follow up of all files and that the use of videoconferencing could contribute towards achieving these ends;

- the different technical infrastructures of the Member States and the need to evolve a system which operates effectively with these different systems;

- the ongoing work within the Council to improve the protection of information, including the existing information and communication systems;

- the fact that the pilot project only extended to 6 Working Party meetings which makes it premature to draw definitive findings.

The Finnish Presidency proposes the following way forward and encourages the GSC and future Presidencies

- to continue the videoconferencing pilot project for the selected WP meetings and to extend, where appropriate, the pilot project to other working groups meetings, provided they meet the criteria set out in Paragraph 2 of this note, with the same limits on the number of participants, and prior information is provided to Antici;
- to further improve the possibilities to use videoconferencing by strengthening both technical and procedural capabilities and prerequisites on the basis of the pilot project, also from the preparedness point of view;
- at appropriate intervals report to Coreper on developments regarding the videoconferencing;
- to promote proactively the use of other digital tools in the work of Council's preparatory bodies.

Survey Results

(i) Survey 1 - Participants physically present - 65 respondents

How would you rate the visual quality of the video conference?

		Answers	Ratio
I could see all participants clearly		48	73.85%
I could see some participants clearly		12	18.46%
I found it difficult to see anyone		4	6.15%
I could see participants on occasion but not for the whole meeting		1	1.54%
No Answer		1	1.54%

How did you find the audio quality of the video conference?

		Answers	Ratio
I was able to hear all the participants		52	80%
I could hear some participants but not others		1	1.54%
I found it difficult to hear the speakers		2	3.08%
I could hear some parts of interventions but not all		1	1.54%
No Answer		10	15.38%

Was it clear to you throughout the meeting which delegation was speaking?

		Answers	Ratio
Yes		57	87.69%
No		3	4.62%
No Answer		5	7.69%

Do you consider that the use of video conferencing affected the flow of the meeting?

		Answers	Ratio
Yes		20	30.77%
No		43	66.15%
No Answer		2	3.08%

Would you like to see video-conferencing being used more regularly at Working Party meetings?

		Answers	Ratio
Yes		42	64.62%
No		6	9.23%
No Answer		17	26.15%

(ii) Survey 2 - Participants using video conferencing - 23 responses

How easy was it to establish the initial connection with the GSC?

		Answers	Ratio
Very easy		13	56.52%
Relatively easy		7	30.43%
Initial difficulty		3	13.04%
Difficult/not possible		0	0%
No Answer		0	0%

How would you rate the visual quality of the video conference?

		Answers	Ratio
I could see all participants clearly		19	82.61%
I could see some participants clearly		4	17.39%
I found it difficult to see anyone		0	0%
I could see participants on occasion but not for the whole meeting		1	4.35%
No Answer		0	0%

How did you find the audio quality of the video conference?

		Answers	Ratio
I was able to hear all the participants		21	91.3%
I could hear some participants but not others		1	4.35%
I found it difficult to hear the speakers		0	0%
I could hear some parts of interventions but not all		1	4.35%
No Answer		0	0%

Was it clear to you throughout the meeting which delegation was speaking?

		Answers	Ratio
Yes		19	82.61%
No		4	17.39%
No Answer		0	0%

Did you experience any drop in signal (lagging) during the meeting?

		Answers	Ratio
No		14	60.87%
Yes - frequently		0	0%
Yes - occasionally		3	13.04%
Yes - once or twice		6	26.09%
No Answer		0	0%

Did you request the floor at any stage during the meeting?

		Answers	Ratio
Yes		4	17.39%
No		19	82.61%
No Answer		0	0%

Do you consider that the use of video conferencing affected the flow of the meeting?

		Answers	Ratio
Yes		6	26.09%
No		17	73.91%
No Answer		0	0%

Do you think that participating by video conference affected the impact of your participation at the meeting?

		Answers	Ratio
Yes	▬	8	34.78%
Answer 2	▬▬	13	56.52%
No Answer	▪	2	8.7%

Would you like to see video-conferencing being used more regularly at Working Party meetings?

		Answers	Ratio
Yes	▬▬▬	23	100%
No		0	0%
No Answer		0	0%

(iii) Summary of comments received:

Positives

- better for the environment[2]

- easier for participants[1]

- improves participation and allows more extensive participation by expert teams

- convenient for participants

- reduces costs for Member States

- reduces time away from the office (spent travelling to Brussels)

- emergency meetings/those taking place at short notice could use VC

- could be used for 'special' meetings, one per semester with an extended audience and special agenda

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[2] several responses to this effect

Negatives

- may not work if meetings are very 'dynamic';

- informal contacts between delegates could be hampered;

- difficult to see how it could work with 27/28 Member States using it simultaneously;

- interpretation needs to be maintained at meetings;

- some issues around individual remote speakers (audio on 9 September) and use of PowerPoint presentations (at meeting on 12 November).

Room for improvement

- need a system for signalling requests for the floor;

- need better coordination and technical support;

- need for compulsory testing of VC connections before each meeting;

- need better instructions for Chairs.