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**FINDING THE RIGHT APPROACH DURING THE PANDEMIC: PLANNING PROCESS
AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE TABLETOP EXERCISE CORE 21-B**

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Introduction

One of the key functions of NATO Energy Security Centre of Excellence (NATO ENSEC COE), of all Centres of Excellence for that matter, is collective and individual training. Four in-person courses in Energy Security discipline were offered by NATO ENSEC COE Education, Training & Exercise Division (ETED) prior to the pandemic. As the pandemic progressed, two courses moved to virtual space, and two were cancelled in 2020. Another important project co-organized by NATO ENSEC COE and the European Commission Joint Research Centre (JRC) that faced difficulties due to the pandemic is Tabletop Exercise Coherent Resilience 2021 (Baltic Region Electricity Supply Resilience, CORE 21-B) – a key event examined in this article.

The main dilemma caused by the pandemic for the Education, Training & Exercise Division of NATO ENSEC COE was having events run on time by moving them to virtual platforms. This action accepted partial loss of the events' value and eliminated the further postponing of events until it would be possible to run them live as planned. Another important aspect considered was whether an event, such as Tabletop exercise, can achieve its goals if moved to virtual space. Especially when considering one of the main goals of such exercises is to enhance cooperation. These are all important dimensions that have to be considered regarding the running of events during the pandemic.

This article will cover the discovered positives and negatives of moving live events to virtual platform since the beginning of the pandemic. The article will provide an insight on future decisions concerning planning events in preparation for Tabletop Exercises such as the Initial Planning Conference (IPC) for CORE 21-B hosted online.

CORE 21-B and its structure

CORE 21-B is to address critical energy infrastructure protection of the Baltic region, and is focused on electricity supply resilience during desynchronization from the IPS/UPS power system and synchronisation with the Continental Europe power grids in 2025. The target audience of CORE 21-B includes electricity transmission operators, governmental representatives from Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Sweden, and representatives from international, NATO, and EU organizations. Initially the preliminary date was set for the event to be held in-person is May 31st – June 4th, 2021. However, due to pandemic the exercise conduct dates were pushed to September, 2021.

The event's structure is based on the guidelines of NATO Collective Training & Exercise Directive. Under the directive the exercise planning process is roughly divided into four stages. First being concept and specification development, second – planning and product development, third – operational conduct, fourth – analysis and reporting. Planning and product development structure illustrated below.

Initial Planning Conference → Main Planning Conference → Final Coordination Conference

Benefits of going virtual

Safety comes first

Virtual platform allows events to run as scheduled, in accordance with regulations imposed due to the pandemic. Looking back at 2020, the pandemic and each country's response has not been consistent. Countries individually chose measures to be implemented regarding the spread of the pandemic. Moreover, the summer of 2020 experienced restrictions lifted in many countries. This included restrictions lifted on different events and gatherings. There have been many instances when these events became hotspots of the virus, which is a critical factor to consider when planning and conducting live events. As the guidelines of the CDC indicate, it is clear that having a virtual event is the only option, which minimizes the risk of the spread of COVID-19.

The risk of COVID-19 spreading at events and gatherings increases as follows:

Lowest risk: Virtual-only activities, events, and gatherings.

More risk: Smaller outdoor and in-person gatherings in which individuals from different households remain spaced at least 6 feet apart, wear masks, do not share objects, and come from the same local area (e.g., community, town, city, or county).

Higher risk: Medium-sized in-person gatherings that are adapted to allow individuals to remain spaced at least 6 feet apart and with attendees coming from outside the local area.

Highest risk: Large in-person gatherings where it is difficult for individuals to remain spaced at least 6 feet apart and attendees travel from outside the local area.

Figure 1. Centers of Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidelines for events and gatherings (Source: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/large-events/considerations-for-events-gatherings.html>)

As CORE 21-B Tabletop Exercise is planned as an in-person event in Vilnius, Lithuania, it is important to consider the local host country's pandemic situation. Unfortunately, with the so-called second wave of the pandemic, statistically, Lithuania did not fare well, and was one of the top countries with most COVID-19 cases per population. As a result, the country was placed under a strict lockdown still in place at writing of this article with the third wave of COVID-19 hitting the European continent. As virtual space minimizes the risk of getting exposed to the virus, and as a result ensures the safety of both organizers and participants, it is an important option to consider for an event.

Virtual event – an economical choice

A virtual event requires much less budget than in-person one, which is a practical option to consider. This upside is especially highlighted in the time of the pandemic. All that would be possibly necessary for an in-person event, such as workspace, catering, travelling and accommodation expenses etc. is unnecessary when having a virtual event. It saves money and time for both the organizers and the training audience. Especially when it comes to the time needed for organizational work and physically moving from one location to another for the purpose of attending. Another key time saving feature, moving a conference to virtual space allows work to progress in accordance within scheduled timelines without having to delay or cancel. The head of ETED at NATO ENSEC COE Lt Col Videt Norng has pointed out that

due to this aspect, it is likely that the use of online conferences for some of the planning events for the Coherent Resilience Series exercises will continue even after the pandemic. Therefore, virtual events, as an economic option, are likely to stay around in the future as it benefits both the organizers and the participants.

Easier to login rather than fly in

Having mentioned the time and expenses needed for attending a live event, due to the mentioned aspects, virtual events additionally ensure higher participation. As mentioned before, having a virtual event saves time for both the organizer and the attendee, which in some cases might be the reason why people choose not to participate – the simple lack of time. The online platform can increase accessibility by removing or decreasing barriers typically associated with in-person conferences, including geographical distance, time commitments, and financial costs.¹ Virtual conference indeed requires less preparation time and financial efforts for both the host and the participant. Therefore, higher participation can be expected. In return, it may increase the quality of the event as it allows subject matter experts to provide lectures from remote locations. This gives opportunities for the organizers to obtain instructors with tight travel schedules.

Minimizing travelling needed for participants in order to reach the event, additionally results in less CO₂ emission, which is another crucial aspect to consider. The research published by *Nature* on ways to decarbonize conference travel has shown what a huge impact on the CO₂ emissions international in-person event can have. Just to grasp the situation better, the authors illustrate that “...one return flight between Hong Kong and San Francisco releases more CO₂ than does the average British person’s activities over an entire year, or than those of ten people living in Ghana.”² Considering current awareness and concerns of carbon footprint, a virtual event can prevent a more significant amount of CO₂ emissions than most people are aware of. Considering the global trend of climate change, a prevention of such drastic amount of CO₂ emissions for travelling should be one of the most important if not the most important aspect to consider when evaluating the options.

Challenges of going online

Technology

Depending on the level of participation of the event and its format, it can potentially place a huge technical load on IT personnel. Moving events such as Tabletop exercise to virtual space can be overly complicated and demanding considering its structure. One of the key parts of the Tabletop exercise is discussion-based exercise/syndicate work. In practice, during the exercise each syndicate is separated, which means that moved to the virtual space it would require additional IT personnel for each syndicate in order to smoothly run the technical side of things. Another related downside – technical problems. They can arise from the participants’ side in a shape of a bad connection, delay of information etc., which results in a loss of information, and

¹Power, H., Broadfoot, M., Burke, A., Donaldson, P., Hart, R., Mollison, K., . . . Young, S. (2020). Lessons Learned from Running a Conference in the Time of COVID-19 and the Silver Linings of Shifting to Online. *Oceanography*, 33(3), 21-25. doi:10.2307/26962478. (23)

² Klower, M., Hopkins, D., Allen, M., Higham, J. (2020) An analysis of ways to decarbonize conference travel after COVID-19. *Nature* 583, 356-359. doi:10.1038/d41586-020-02057-2 (357)

difficulties in following and fully participating in discussion. From organizers' side the same technical problems can cause delay of events, interruptions of presentations, discussions etc., which as a result can upset the attendees and interrupt the overall flow of an event. When having a live event, technical difficulties can be solved by taking other approaches, it does not limit the interaction or shut down the discussion. "A broken projector means the presenter does without his or her PowerPoint; a broken virtual reality device will mean ... no conference at all."³ If technical difficulties appear during a virtual event, most critically from the organizer's side, as a result the whole event can be interrupted. Technical problems can additionally cause misunderstanding. Not hearing, not understanding what is being said due to bad connections can seriously impair participant experience. As technical difficulties cannot always be controlled or predicted, it is important to evaluate the risks before making the decision to move an event online.

A week point: virtual networking

The loss of human contact and networking is a serious drawback of virtual events. It is more difficult to grab the attention of attendees in an online space. The interaction is limited and there are plenty of distractions on the side of the participants. It is difficult to keep the attention for a long span of time when trying to interact virtually, since cognitive loads associated with online interaction are much greater than those of an in-person conference setting.⁴ All these mentioned psychological aspects are serious drawbacks to virtual events, which in turn leads to less active participation and discussion. The face-to-face experience still feels richer, more immersive, and more participatory.⁵ As some of NATO ENSEC COE Education, Training & Exercise Division courses have been moved to virtual space, LCDR Ozgur Dundar had a chance to experience running virtual syndicates. LCDR Dundar could not stress enough how the syndicate discussion was much less effective and beneficial online, compared to an in-person experience. This points to the key drawback of hosting an event such as Tabletop exercise virtually. As a result of limited interaction and discussion, participants experience significant contact and networking loss. Networking to increase cooperation and mutual understanding in practice is one of the primary goals of such exercises, including the CORE 21-B. It becomes clear that some events if transferred to virtual space lose too much of their value.

CORE 21-B IPC: lessons learned

One of the key planning events for Coherent Resilience 2021 Baltics (CORE 2021-B) was co-held by NATO ENSEC COE and JRC from the 15th through the 16th of December, 2020. As the second wave of pandemic caused wide spread lockdowns in many European countries, the

³ Munro, K., McLure, M., Antell, K., & Strothmann, M. (2014). Is the Face-to-Face Conference Still Essential? *Reference & User Services Quarterly*, 54(2), 37-40. Retrieved January 26, 2021, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/refuserserq.54.2.37> (39)

⁴ Power, H., Broadfoot, M., Burke, A., Donaldson, P., Hart, R., Mollison, K., . . . Young, S. (2020). Lessons Learned from Running a Conference in the Time of COVID-19 and the Silver Linings of Shifting to Online. *Oceanography*, 33(3), 21-25. doi:10.2307/26962478. (21)

⁵ Munro, K., McLure, M., Antell, K., & Strothmann, M. (2014). Is the Face-to-Face Conference Still Essential? *Reference & User Services Quarterly*, 54(2), 37-40. Retrieved January 26, 2021, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/refuserserq.54.2.37> (38)

decision was made to move the Initial Planning Conference to a virtual platform. The MS Teams platform was chosen for the event. The IPC was a huge success in terms of the number of the attendees. The event attracted over 70 representatives from more than 10 countries, different institutions and international organizations. As the event was moved to a virtual space, the organizers' received more applications than expected as many expressed their interest in participating. During the event itself, there were no major problems such as technical issues mentioned. The discussion was sufficiently active, with several participants dominating, and the organizers' managed to achieve key goals set for the IPC. However, the difficulty to keep the attention of the participants for a long-time span, while trying to lead an active discussion, was especially felt at the end of the first day. The number of participants dropped towards the end of the day, and discussion proved difficult to stimulate, therefore some of the more important topics for discussion were left for the next day to be discussed. Nevertheless, the bigger part of representatives expressed their opinions, ideas, and as mentioned before, the key goals of the IPC were successfully achieved.

Key takeaways: perspective of the project lead

Dr. Vytis Kopustinskas, a co-organizer of the CORE 21-B and Tabletop exercise Coherent Resilience 2019 (CORE 19), representing JRC, has agreed to share some of his insights on the topic. Dr. Kopustinskas evaluated that the CORE 21-B IPC was successful, and underlined that from a technical point of view there are some important upsides for holding such event as the IPC online. It had significantly more participants than the IPC that was held for CORE 19, as having the event online saved time, and there were no associated costs, which in turn motivated more people to join. Virtual IPC held for CORE 21-B, as mentioned before, attracted over 70 representatives, whereas, in-person IPC held for CORE 19 – 15 participants. Nevertheless, Dr. Kopustinskas highlighted the importance of live interaction in such events, and how it is less effective in virtual space. He noted how especially difficult it is to develop a contact with someone who you meet online for the first time. If it is a person that you already have met before it is somehow easier. However, if it is a group of people that do not know each other, the discussion turns out being too formal. As a result of strictly formal talk, the most important subjects get left behind – the sensitive ones.

When talking about the future of virtual events, specifically the planning of the Tabletop exercise, as a final remark Dr. Kopustinskas said that it would be indeed possible to keep virtual events in practice even after the pandemic, on the condition that only a part of the planning events is completed online. He especially emphasized the need for participants to meet and know each other beforehand to ensure effective discussion online, and prevent the exaggerated formality that comes with meeting for the first time in a virtual space.

Concluding remarks: a way forward

When considering the goals to be achieved for planning events of CORE 21-B and the Tabletop Exercise itself, this article has illustrated how the decision should be made individually per event due to major positives and serious negatives for both options. Events which are mostly focused on collaboration, enhancing cooperation, discussion and networking would be difficult to execute and fulfil in a virtual space. In the end every organizer should evaluate the type of the event, its participants, goals and risks, and make the choice individually. Nonetheless, with

rapidly developing technology and human improvement in adapting, there is much potential for the issues to be solved in the future.

Going forward, as the IPC was successfully executed online, it is likely that the practice will be kept for some of the future planning and product development events of the Coherent Resilience Series exercises. As the IPC was conducted successfully, the organizers of the CORE 21-B were considering different options for the Main Planning Conference, Final Coordination Conference and the Tabletop Exercise itself. As the Main Planning Conference requires comparably much more interaction and discussion than the IPC, the organizers chose a mixed option of having some participants physically and the others connected online. Whereas, it is difficult to imagine having the TTX itself not fully in-person. As a result, new postponed dates for the exercise were discussed to allow the event run in-person in autumn, 2021.

With the start of vaccinations across the Europe, the situation is projected to drastically improve in the near future. Luckily, as CORE 21-B is in preparation for desynchronization from UPS/IPS and synchronization with CEN in 2025, the risk of losing the momentum does not apply if postponed for a few months. The exercise proves to be significantly relevant and needed even if postponed.

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