

M. Maniewicz Interview
ForumEurope: Spectrum, Connectivity and COVID-19
Discussion about the ITU-BR Response to COVID-19

1. *The COVID-19 outbreak is devastating national economies and transforming workplaces around the world. How has it affected work in the ITU, in general, and specifically the work of the ITU Radiocommunication Bureau?*

M. Maniewicz:

- Today we are all living, learning and working under exceptional circumstances as a result of the COVID19 global health emergency. Before addressing the specific measures taken by the ITU, I first want to recognize that many of us are very fortunate that we have the possibility of protecting our health and that of our families by staying home and teleworking. Many lives have been lost, even more are fighting to regain their health and well-being, and millions more are dealing with the personal financial impact of the economic downturn resulting from the measures taken to combat the spread of this virus. These are difficult times and we appreciate that it will take time to both eliminate the spread of the novel coronavirus and for the economies to recover globally. My thoughts and prayers go out to those who are really suffering as a result of this crisis.
- In order to protect the health of delegates and ITU staff and to help to curb the spread of COVID-19, ITU has rolled out mandatory work teleworking, which started on March 16th. We do not as yet know how long this phase of the response will last or how it will be phased out. In this same timeframe it was decided that all ITU meetings and events would be held online, i.e. “virtually”.
- All physical meetings at ITU Headquarters in Geneva remain suspended until further notice. We are however making full use of the available technology to ensure ITU's core functions and services to members are maintained.

How have these measures affected work of the ITU Radiocommunication Bureau?

M. Maniewicz:

- In the Radiocommunication Bureau and with the support of the ITU Information Services Department we remain virtually open for key meetings and consultation with our members.
- While convening the meetings of ITU-R Study Groups, Working Parties are an important part of the work of the BR, we do a lot more. As you know, we held a very successful WRC-19 last year. The BR is working very hard to take the results of the WRC-19 and publish the 2020 version of the Radio Regulations. This work is ongoing and will be accomplished later this year, on schedule.
- On March 25, the Radiocommunication Bureau held its first-ever virtual Radio Regulations Board (RRB) meeting with simultaneous interpretation in English, French and Russian. All twelve members of the board, connecting from 12 different countries, joined the meeting virtually along with the BR Director and BR subject matter experts. This foreshortened Board meeting was held because the Board had important issues it had to address that could

not be postponed to its July meeting. In particular, the WRC-19 had adopted a decision that opened up new orbital slots for broadcasting satellites, providing developing countries with the opportunity to regain access to spectrum orbit resources thanks to a priority mechanism especially set for them. Administrations seeking to take advantage of this opportunity had submitted requests to the Board that required it to take action that could not be deferred to July. This was a very important decision-making meeting and it was held effectively and efficiently with fully remote participation by the Board members.

- On 31 March, the BR published the Final Acts of the WRC-19, which is the basis for the update of the Radio Regulations. The Final Acts were published on schedule in the timeframe that had been announced prior to the coronavirus outbreak.
- A very important function of the BR is the processing of terrestrial and satellite network filings. This work has continued apace even though the staff processing these filings are all now working from home. However, the COVID-19 outbreak has affected how we distribute the results of their work. Due to the limitations to postal delivery imposed by the Swiss authorities, the delivery of physical DVDs containing BR International Frequency Information Circular (BRIFIC) has been suspended as from the Edition No. 2917 of 31 March 2020 and until further notice. Administrations and BR IFIC subscribers can use the ISO copies of BR IFIC available on our website.

2. *The ITU-R Study Groups and Working Parties normally hold in-person meetings. We see that the BR is announcing that these meetings are going to be held as remote participation or “virtual” meetings. Please tell us about this move to virtual meetings, will they be as effective as the in-person meetings and how long will ITU-R meetings be held as virtual.*

M. Maniewicz:

- The ITU-R has provided for remote participation in its otherwise “in-person” meetings for a few years now. Early on it became clear that combatting the COVID-19 outbreak would require ITU-R meetings to be either postponed or held as virtual meetings. What is clear is that we are in uncertain times and no one can predict how long it will be before we are back to a pre-COVID-19 situation. So, of course, we have decided to move our meetings online.
- What many are not aware, ITU has been a pioneer of Multilingual Interactive Remote Participation (MIRP) which allows Member States to participate in ITU meetings remotely with interpretation in the six official languages. The platform allows for up to 300 remote participants to participate interactively using any of the six ITU official languages. The screen shows captioning (in English), the main conference screen (normally the document under discussion), and the image of the speaker which gives the experience of being in a single virtual meeting room. Delegates can raise their virtual hand to request the floor. There is also a chat function which allows delegates to make their comments or questions directly to the Chairman, or to coordinate between themselves using the private chat option. An additional 2000 users may also connect to the platform as observers (i.e. they cannot take the floor).
- Of course, only some ITU meetings are held in the six official UN languages. The meetings of ITU-R Working Parties, which is where the bulk of the technical work is done, are held only in English. For those meetings, we have more flexibility in the platforms that we use those

meetings.

- For remote participation without interpretation, other commercial tools are also being used such as Skype for Business, GoToMeeting, etc. (with PSTN dial available); and Microsoft Teams.
- We also have the benefit of learning from the experiences of the other ITU bureaus. So, we will be continually learning and optimizing the way in which we hold our virtual meetings. After all, even when we're back to hosting in-person meetings in the ITU headquarters and in other venues, we will continue to provide for remote participation in those meetings. So, this is a capability we will continue to enhance as time goes on.

3. *Our seminar participants are particularly interested in understanding whether the COVID-19 outbreak will result in a delay of the 2023 World Radiocommunication Conference. What can you tell us about the preparatory process for the WRC-23 and if we should expect a future delay in the conference?*

M. Maniewicz:

- With respect the preparations for the WRC-23, it is very fortunate that we are at only the beginning of this study period and the ITU-R Study Groups and their Working Parties are now organizing their work programs and initiating their studies. These early meetings don't entail the finalization or approval of recommendations or reports. Even if the move to virtual meetings slows their progress in this initial phase, we strongly believe that these meetings will be soon be as productive as meetings that had been held in-person previously.
- As you may be aware, the ITU holds four major conferences, each of which occurs on a four-year cycle. They are: WRCs (of course), the World Telecommunication Standardization Assembly, the World Telecommunication Development Conference, and the ITU Plenipotentiary Conference. The ITU regularized these conferences on a four-year cycle because it was more efficient and cost-effective to support them with a centralized conference support organization.
- One of the main reasons why we decided to move to fully remote participation or "virtual" meetings is that it will enable us to hold the WRC-23 in the fourth quarter of 2023, on schedule. We are fully committed to keeping the work toward the WRC-23 on track and holding the meeting on schedule.
- We expect the 2020 ITU Council meeting, which is schedule to be held in June, to adopt a new Resolution that will set the exact place, date and agenda of the WRC-23. They will make this decision with the full confidence that the dates set for this conference can and will be met.

4. *Thank you very much for taking the time from your busy schedule to chat with us about the work of the ITU Radiocommunication Bureau and Sector in response to the COVID-19 outbreak. Do you have any final messages for our seminar participants?*

- Thank you for this opportunity and for taking time away from your program to talk about the work of the BR and the ITU-R in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

- Working in radiocommunications has always required global consideration and global cooperation because radio waves don't respect borders. These are very difficult times that challenge us to bring our best selves forward – to continue all the measures that will bring this outbreak to an end and at the same time to remain positive and continue working toward a better future for all of us.
- My main message today is to reassure you that the BR is working diligently, today from our respective homes, and eventually from back in our offices, to support the Member States and all of our members in our global preparation for the WRC-23.
- Toward that end, we encourage all the regional groups to begin your activities in earnest, via virtual meetings and other electronic means. We look forward to welcoming people back to the ITU at some point in the future. In the meantime, stay safe and well. We will get to the end of this crisis. Life will go on.
