

## **AEJ UK Secretary's Annual report for 2021**

We held a wide range of well attended meetings during 2021, covering Russia, the UK in the world, EU-UK relations, an advance view of the September German elections, a view from Lithuania, prospects for the survival and cohesion of the UK, a view of the issues to be tackled at COP-26, and an expert analysis of past, present and future of Afghanistan. Members of AEJ Ireland other. Members of AEJ Ireland other AEJ national sections took part in several of the meetings by invitation.

While we kept alert for the possibility of resuming in-person meetings, including taking a survey of members' opinions, the conditions did not at any point last year seem right to do so. We had until recently planned our AGM and first meeting of 2022 on January 26, to be returned to Herringham Hall at Regent's University, but have decided also to hold this on zoom given the continuing uncertainties and the known contagiousness of the Omicron variant of Covid. Throughout the year, however, William has kept in close contact with key personnel at Regent's and we have made participation open to University staff and students. We have an understanding that we will continue for the present to have free use of premises when they are available and we and they are interested in developing our cooperation further.

During the last year, David Barker has put an enormous amount of work into the redesign of our website, with key help from Rick Thompson and the IT expertise of Rick's son, James, a graphic designer (<http://jrtdesign.co.uk/>). The website under David has for long been an important element in our public image and communication of our activities and analysis of key issues of interest to journalists. Following the upgrade, which we expect to go live very soon, we hope that it will play an even more prominent promotional role, for example attracting journalists to our meetings and the interest of potential new members.

About 20 members and guests were able to meet in person for the first time since early 2020 for an excellent and enjoyable dinner on December 10<sup>th</sup>. With all reasonable precautions being taken, no-one appears to have caught Covid, or anything else, from the event.

## **Speakers invited during 2021**

February: Ekaterina Schulmann, Moscow-based political scientist, spoke about the challenges to the Putin regime in Russia in an election year, against the background of protests over living conditions and opposition leader Alexei Navalny's return and imprisonment.

March: Ed Balls, former leading Labour politician and TV celebrity spoke on what would be required to make a success of UK government ambitions for "global Britain" after Brexit

April: Joao Vale de Almeida, EU Ambassador to the UK spoke on his the turbulent first 15 months of his tenure of this post since the UK's departure from the EU with particularly intense controversies during the first 100 days of the new EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA)

May: From Berlin, Die Welt columnist Alan Posener offered a sceptical assessment of Angela Merkel's 16 years as chancellor before her retirement once a new governing was formed September's Bundestag elections

June: Darius Semaska, Lithuanian Ambassador for Hybrid Threats and Resilience, spoke on information wars, subversion and made a call for stronger Western solidarity against Russian threats. His warnings were borne out by later events including military threats to Ukraine, Russia's new military presence in Kazakhstan, and the offensive actions taken by Belarus with backing from Moscow.

September: Brendan Simms, Cambridge historian and director of the Centre for Geopolitics, spoke on "Will the UK break up after Brexit", arguing that this was unlikely.

October: a few days before the opening of the event, communications director of the Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment at the LSE, provided a thorough explanation of what was at stake at the COP26 meeting in Glasgow.

November: David Loyn, award winning war correspondent, adviser to the then Afghan president in 2017-18, and author of a new book on the country, gave a compelling analysis on what went wrong (and a few things that went right) in the West's 20 year intervention, and crucially argued that the West must re-engage with Afghanistan to mitigate the dire humanitarian situation there, and take account of historical lessons that ignoring Afghanistan "comes back to bite us".