

AEJ UK Secretary's Report for 2022

In 2022 the UK Section's membership numbers were slightly down from 40 in 2021 to 38. Efforts to encourage more younger members are continuing. Our agreement on closer cooperation with Regent's University has brought more regular attendance by student classes as well as some teaching staff at our lunchtime meetings. The availability of meeting rooms for our events depends in part on the schedule of the university's academic year, but we benefit much from fruitful contacts with the Liberal Arts Faculty for inviting high-profile speakers and having active student engagement with our usual symposium-style events.

AEJ members were invited to a lecture organised by Regent's University and the British Association of Turkish Area Studies (BATAS) with Professor Ersin Kalaycioglu of Sabanci University, Istanbul, on politics and elections in contemporary Turkey. We have also arranged the first actual joint AEJ-Regent's meeting: the special Lecture event with Chris Patten on October 4, 2023 (see Chairman's Report).

The re-design of our website led by David Barker with technical help from Rick Thompson's son James was completed and the new user-friendly and updated website was launched in January.

As the year started we still needed to hold meetings on Zoom. Our first meeting on January 26 was with the chief executive of the Refugee Council, Enver Solomon, focusing on the highly contentious issue of asylum seekers crossing the Channel. He pointed out that this is a small part of a huge global humanitarian issue, with countries from Greece to Bangladesh under much greater pressure than the UK. He criticised the Nationality and Borders Bill, then going through Parliament (and subsequently enacted on April 28th) and put forward alternative ideas for Britain to respond while meeting its obligations under the Geneva Convention – such as by co-operating with France to set up legal routes for asylum seekers to apply in France for asylum in Britain; and allowing asylum seekers to work.

The second meeting on February 28 was also on Zoom, enabling us to have as speaker the French political scientist, Vincent Martigny, who gave our members and other invited journalists a panorama of French politics in the run-up to the then forthcoming presidential and parliamentary elections.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24 led us to focus closely on the geo-political issues and policy response and global repercussions, especially for Europe.

The first in-person meeting since 2020 was held on March 28 with Keir Giles, head of research at the Conflict Studies Research Centre and author of the 2019 book, "Moscow Rules: What Drives Russia to Confront the West", which warned of the intentions of the Putin regime. He said the absorption of Ukraine would remain a long term goal despite likely setbacks and huge costs in terms of loss of life and human suffering.

The second speaker on May 11 was Ed Arnold, a former soldier and specialist from his PhD onwards on European security, now working at the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) who argued that the changes to NATO and the EU's approach to security were much the biggest since the end of the cold war and would be long lasting, although the remarkable degree of unity thus far achieved would be fragile.

The third speaker on July 4 was Timothy Ash, a specialist on economic strategy and sanctions who argued in favour of sanctions as a policy tool. He said the array of new sanctions on Russia are likely to be more effective in the long term than the lesser measures imposed in 2014. The likely effectiveness of the sanctions in his view is enhanced by their wide ranging nature, including the freezing of \$400bn of central bank and other foreign assets, and non-compulsory sanctions by companies who have felt under moral pressure to act.

Our fourth speaker on September 27 was leading human rights barrister Aarif Abraham, who is part of a group working on setting up a Special Tribunal for crimes of aggression to bring Russia's President Putin and other leaders to justice in co-operation with Ukraine. He set out the complex legal background and followed up with reasoned responses to probing questions about the legitimacy and practicality of the proposal. At the meeting we welcomed 12 academics visiting from the University of Podgorica in Montenegro who made a substantial contribution to the discussion.

Our guest speaker on October 17 was the head of the Palestinian mission to the UK, Husam Zomlot. He argued that while the West was right to act in support of Ukraine's resistance to the illegal Russian invasion, its failure to support Palestinian statehood or impose effective sanctions on Israel for its illegal de facto annexation of parts of the West Bank showed double standards. He warned of the danger that the frequent Israeli military incursions and intense frustrations among the Palestinians would lead to a new conflagration in the region.

Our last meeting of the year on November 23, was with Thomas de Waal, senior fellow of Carnegie Europe specialising in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus, entitled "Russia's Disintegrating Neighbourhood". He argued that the invasion of Ukraine had contributed to a real loss of Russia's influence over other neighbours, and the decline in Moscow as a regional economic and cultural pole of attraction. Within Russia, he pointed to an important generational cleavage in society, between an older generation dependent for its information on the state-controlled traditional media, and a younger generation able to access the Internet, which the state could not fully control.

Our first meeting in 2023, to follow our AGM on February 3, will be with Professor David Heymann of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, who will assess the patchy record of global cooperation on the Covid 19 pandemic and ask what policy lessons should be learnt for the future.

In 2023 we anticipate that our meetings topics will focus on the great post-Brexit challenges facing the UK in economic, social and foreign policy, as well as the unpredictable course of events in and around Ukraine, and wider issues affecting the UK and its relations with the rest of Europe.

Charles Jenkins
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