

Report of Activities of AEJ UK in 2023

Charles Jenkins, Secretary AEJ UK

We hosted seven meetings for our members and other journalists in cooperation with Regent's University London. Written reports and audio of all meetings can be found on www.aej-uk.org.

The first was with leading epidemiologist Professor David Heymann, who has long experience working in Africa, China and elsewhere for the WHO on infectious diseases. He spoke about the lessons to be learnt from the Covid Pandemic in terms of reducing the risk of another pandemic and how to manage it with less severe social consequences.

Our meeting in March was with economist, former government advisor and columnist Simon French, on the prospects for the British economy. While detailing the damage caused by Brexit, as well as the pandemic and the impact of the Ukraine war, he argued that "the pessimism had been overdone".

Our speaker in April was Anand Menon, director of Britain in a Changing Europe. After years of poor UK-EU relations he saw some hope of better things ahead thanks to the Windsor Agreement which largely resolved the damaging dispute between the UK government and the EU over trade relations between Northern Ireland and both Britain and the EU.

In June we heard from political scientist Jaroslava Barbieri from Birmingham University, who sought to counter the Kremlin's narrative claiming that Ukraine had never had an independent national identity separate from Russia. She argued that the West must keep up its solid commitment to a Ukrainian victory on the battlefield.

In September military strategist and adviser Dr Andreas Krieg explained the development and substantial role that Russia's Wagner Group had developed since 1999 in the Middle East and Africa. He thought that it would remain a significant but somewhat weakened force following the likely loss of operational autonomy as a result of the rebellion and subsequent death of its former leader Yevgeny Prigozhin.

Our largest meeting of the year on 4 October with Chris Patten was a long prepared initiative of our AEJ member, Peter Norman, and a successful joint project with Regent's University. He spoke on Hong Kong, China and the World Order, drawing on his experience as the last British governor of Hong Kong from 1993-97, to argue that democratic countries should engage with but stand up to Xi Jing Ping's increasingly autocratic policies at home and abroad, "not decoupling but de-risking".

Finally on November 14, former Middle East minister Alastair Burt, who now works closely with a number of NGOs and conflict resolution groups engaged in the Middle East, spoke on how to ensure the present Gaza conflict is "the last great tragedy for Israel and Palestine". This he said requires a comprehensive agreement covering the West Bank, Gaza and Jerusalem providing security and justice for both Israel and Palestine.

On 2 May the section marked World Press Freedom Day by co-organising a well-attended meeting in the House of Lords together with the Centre for Freedom of the Media at the University of Sheffield and the UN Association. Four prominent speakers -- frontline journalist and AEJ member Amberin Zaman; leading human rights lawyers Kingsley Abbott and Karuna Nundy (online from the main event in New York); and Maria Ordzhonikidze of the Justice for Journalists Foundation -- put forward concrete recommendations for international actions to counter the repression of independent journalism, in line with the UN's chosen 2023 Press Freedom Day theme of *Freedom of expression as a driver of all fundamental rights*.

In March 2023 the UK chairman William Horsley organised a fund-raising drive to show solidarity with the hundreds of Ukrainian journalists who are reporting on the war under extreme conditions and at very high risk. Members of the British Section contributed over 1,500 euros to an AEJ UK Fund for the Safety of Ukrainian Journalists. The fund was sent via RSF's Press Freedom Centre in Ukraine for protective

equipment and support to ensure the continued operations of Ukrainian media under constant bombardment from the invading Russian army.

We have been very pleased to welcome as new members Charles Ritterband of Neue Züricher Zeitung, Ingrid Feuerstein of Les Echos and in a new younger member category, Vyacheslav Stupak.

Looking to the coming year, we have already arranged meetings with Ciaran Martin, the former head of the UK Cybersecurity Agency on February 21st; and on April 17 Helen Thompson, professor of political economy at the University of Cambridge and New Statesman columnist, will speak on the EU's political prospects in a new age of uncertainty. Other meetings on Ukraine, forthcoming UK and US elections and media freedom are under discussion.