

## Grassroots for Europe Round Table # 23 – Tues 8<sup>th</sup> March 2022 Report

**Speaker: Alex Hall-Hall**

**Topic “Muted Britain – Why trust has broken down and how we can respond,”**

There is a clear link between our government’s failures over Brexit and its failures over covid and now Ukraine - all involving issues of trust, competence, and honesty. Even Euro-sceptics should now appreciate the reasons for the creation and our membership of the EU.

However, recent events provide an opportunity to reset, to bridge the diplomatic gap and to repair our international relations which have been badly damaged by the government’s approach towards leaving the EU. Our diplomatic service has been pounded by the government’s response to a series of events, Brexit, the pandemic and now Ukraine.

The UK has real ability to be effective on the world stage, but its diplomatic service has been battered. We have an urgent need for Foreign Ministers with real experience in the field of Foreign Affairs and who have the ability for strategic thought.

Putin is to blame for Russia’s attack on Ukraine, but the UK bears an indirect responsibility. Petty spats with the EU weakened and divided the Western Alliance and were amongst the factors which gave Putin grounds to believe that he would succeed.

The UK government was massively naïve, greedy, and complacent in its attitude to Russian oligarchs. The government foolishly believed that they could keep Putin at bay, whilst at the same time taking his money. In this, other European countries are also at fault.

Now, sheer necessity has brought about a change in the relationship between the UK and the EU as cooperation is vital to our mutual interest. The EU is also working well with the US. It remains to be seen whether these changed relationships can be sustained. It’s encouraging to see the UK and EU cooperating on Ukraine. On the other hand, Steve Baker’s support for invoking Article 16 with regard to the Northern Ireland Protocol is a generous gift to Putin which risks re-introducing friction at a time when we need to sustain that cooperation.

### Questions & Answers

**Q1. The Conservative Party has been in receipt of large sums of money from Russian connected donors. It appears that the government has become compromised. What can we do? Is there a mechanism for the removal of the government, other than a General Election?**

**A.** Hopefully, the current crisis will jolt them out of their poor performance. Sadly, the government so far seems unable to change its engrained habits of disingenuousness and deceit. Hopefully, enough people are beginning to realise this on their own. Enough back benchers are asking more difficult questions of the government, e.g., on Ukrainian refugees and Russian money in the UK. The local elections in May are an opportunity to send a signal. Hopefully, the part of the Conservative Party that has been excluded and silenced by Brexit

will find its voice. The current crisis is exposing the weaknesses and unsuitability of the current ministerial cohort and the hitherto touted successors. Hopefully, the party will realise that it must do better.

**Q2. To what extent can it be said that Putin's interference in Brexit was part of a strategy to weaken the EU?**

**A.** Putin is an opportunist, a chancer, a wrecker not a creator, so while he may not have deliberately engineered Brexit, he was able to seize upon it as a further opportunity to sow divisions. It was opportunistic and tactical. Brexit and the Leavers played into his hands. The mechanisms of misinformation and exploitation of pre-existing political and cultural divides in our societies have been also used in the US.

**Q3: How can we make the general public aware of the current situation in view of the media dominance in support of the Conservatives?**

**A:** There are signs that the current crises are starting to break through with the general public. The political consequences of the Ukraine situation mean that the UK is being forced to talk to the other EU Member States and the institutions. Russian money in UK businesses, sport and politics is now seen as a problem due to the current crisis. Public opinion and that of Conservative back benchers seems to be less hostile to Ukrainian refugees and insisting on a more positive and sympathetic welcome than that demonstrated to EU Citizens or migrants in general before or since the referendum, or that is being offered currently by the Home Office. The Ukraine crisis is accelerating awareness of a number of the consequences of Brexit (i.e., bureaucratic bottlenecks in humanitarian aid at Dover) In highlighting such issues, we need to try to avoid the *"I told you so,"* tone.

**Q4 To what extent are the UK government and the EU thinking ahead to the situation if Ukraine were to fall to Putin? How will they deal with the situation, should it lead to a direct attack on an EU or NATO member state?**

**A:** Whilst no longer in government, so unable to speak for them, I am sure that such scenarios are being currently considered and planned for within Whitehall and at NATO and the EU. There is clearly no appetite to engage in direct military action at the moment. However, there will be lots of effort being put into making sure that Putin is left in no doubt that the EU and NATO will not stand for a direct attack on a member state.

Ukraine have made it clear they would like more support, by way of arms and aeroplanes, as well as assistance with refugees and humanitarian aid. The US has just sent out another five thousand soldiers to one of the Visegrad countries, adding to NATO troop deployments already in the region. But the boundaries between a Russia Ukraine conflict and WW3 start to become more blurred the more military assistance is given.

Putin's reaction to such creeping intervention is unknown. Putin has miscalculated badly with his invasion. The Ukrainians have declared they intend to defend defiantly and are

suffering alone for us all now. The west has a difficult policy decision to make if Russia does take over. Currently a no-fly zone being implemented has risks of escalation. To what extent could any resistance movement be supported or armed, without risking a further escalation and WW3.

#### **Q5. What might post Putin Russia look like?**

**A:** The problem is the level of control that Putin has established over all institutions and decision making, meaning there is no credible opposition. It is difficult to foresee his departure peacefully right now. Putin's control means that his removal could create a vacuum in political decision making, that will be chaotic, disorganised, and uncontrolled. Engaging the Russian people in their future **is** important. A package of aid would likely be necessary too. There are some non-Kremlin politicians, journalists, and NGOs, with whom it would be possible to engage. Navalny could become a significant figure, and alternative government, though his political tendencies are also nationalist.

#### **Q6. Could Navalny be a safe pair of hands if he were to become the focus of the internal opposition?**

**A:** Navalny does have nationalist sentiments but has been a powerful and courageous figurehead for opposition. He opposes the Ukraine war, but it is hard to know to what extent he could be considered a fully-fledged opponent of all Putin's policies. He could be the spearhead for an alternative government and has some credibility and legitimacy. There are not any great options out there. We will have to work with what we have got.

#### **Q7. We heard at the last meeting how the five steps towards autocracy are currently being undertaken in the UK. If this is happening in the UK how can we stop it before it goes too far?**

**A:** Many of the symptoms are there. It's erosion of checks and balances, misuse of resources, misinformation, as well as the current raft of government legislation aimed, e.g., at circumscribing the powers of the judiciary, the press, or the right of protest, and giving it greater powers over our electoral machinery. It's ironic that it is the unelected House of Lords which is currently providing the biggest check on government overreach. We never think this could happen in the UK. The government keeps getting away with it. How did the Met Police mishandle PartyGate? What happened to Sue Gray? The Russia Report?

PartyGate did cut through, even to people who do not follow politics and especially for people who lost a lot over Covid19. We have to expose that the fundamental character flaws that allowed Brexit are the same ones which underpinned the behaviour that led to flouting the lockdown rules. We have to highlight this and appeal to the more moderate wing of the Conservative Party that was not behind a hard Brexit.

There are still some fundamentally decent individuals within the party. We have to get through to them. There are signs that increasing numbers of backbenchers and conservative

voters are unhappy with this government's performance. For example, the responses to ministerial pronouncements on Twitter are hardly supportive; but extremely critical. This suggests to me that even many of those who once backed this government are turning against it.

**Q8. Regarding the refugee question. Only fifty visas have been granted so far. In Berlin, Germany, the story is different. Thirty thousand refugees arriving in one day. Three trains a day arriving. Local medical services already treating Ukrainian refugees. How can we change the UK government's approach?**

**A:** Public pressure will be key. One commentator online asked, *"would the same result have been achieved if all soldiers had to be checked before evacuating Dunkirk?"* We should turn the Churchillian rhetoric back on them. The poll tax demonstrations were significant in turning over Margaret Thatcher. There may be a call for further public demonstrations and protests to increase the pressure on government. We need to use current examples of heartlessness and incompetence to expose the government's failings. It is not about Brexit, anymore, but who we are as a country.

**Q9. Oxford has just ended its twinning arrangements with a Russian city. Is that a good idea?**

**A:** It's tempting to want to break all ties in order to register our disgust for Russia's invasion of Ukraine. But this is Putin's war, and many ordinary Russians oppose it. We should keep links open to them, in the hope that one day, when this is over, we can start to rebuild connections with Russia. It's also important to maintain people to people contacts so that they can hear information from us, rather than having to depend for their news only on heavily censored Russian outlets.