

The APPG for Foreign Affairs

Roundtable on Belarus

MEETING: 27th May 2021

Chair

Imran Ahmad Khan MP (Chairman)

Panellists:

Valery Tsepkalov, former Belarusian Presidential Candidate

Veronika Tsepkalov, Belarusian political activist and wife of Valery

Michael Murphy, COO at Lake Research Partners and former director of the National Democratic Institute's Belarus Program

Attendees:

Tony Lloyd MP - Chair of APPG for Belarus

Bob Seely MP - Officer of the APPG for Foreign Affairs

David Johnston MP - Officer of the APPG for Foreign Affairs

Catherine West MP - Member of the APPG for Foreign Affairs and responsible for Belarus in her Shadow Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office role

Thomas Borwick - Founding Director of College Green Group

Jason MacKenzie, Director of Strategic Development at College Green Group

Dr Vitali Shklyarov - Belarusian political activist and consultant

Daniel Hamilton - Managing Director, FTI Consulting

David Maddox - Political Editor, The Sunday Express

Marco Giangenelli - Defence & Diplomatic Editor, The Sunday Express

Lord Balfe - Conservative Peer

Rachel Hopkins MP

Meeting starts.

The Chairman called the meeting to order and welcomed everyone.

The Chairman introduced the three guests Valery and Verokina Tsepkało, and Michael Padraic Murphy.

Before inviting questions, the Chairman provided background of his relationship with Valery. He highlighted that they had known each other for 35 years and met in the wake of the Chernobyl disaster. The Chairman stated that his family travelled to the site of the disaster with the aim of helping the children affected, and subsequently met Valery. Following this, the Chairman noted how whenever Valery was travelling, he would often use the family home in Yorkshire to stay at. Both became friends with Valery even securing employment for the Chairman in Minsk in the mid-2000s.

Following this brief introduction, the Chairman asked the first question of the roundtable:

Question: What is your take on what is currently happening in Belarus?

Valery Tsepkało: Thanked the Chairman for his invitation and reaffirmed his friendship with him. He noted that what is happening now in the wake of the 2020 presidential election Belarus is a reaction of the people to what was a blatantly rigged election in which their votes were stolen. Valery stated that the sentiment was already brewing following his, and two other popular candidates' obstruction from entering the race. He highlighted that one of these candidates was not even a serious candidate but rather a housewife. He stated that the Belarussian public were so angry at incompetent rule and the state of society that they decided to vote for anyone but Lukashenko, prompting their votes to be voided. Valery highlighted that those who publicly expressed a dissenting opinion on either issue would be sent to prison. He proceeded to state that since the election, 12 citizens had been murdered and 1,000 people beaten and tortured by the Lukashenko regime. According to his figures, 25,000 people have been imprisoned since August 2020 - the largest amount in Belarus since 1945. Valery opined that the regime should face criminal prosecution. He highlighted the grounding of the Ryanair flight carrying blogger Roman Protasevich as an example of the regime essentially conducting terrorist attacks. Valery concluded by saying he had to leave Belarus, but considered his voice amplified and more effective when outside the regime.

Valery proceeded to introduce his wife, Veronika.

Verokina Tsepkało: Thanked the Chairman for his time and explained that since leaving Belarus she had been involved in the creation of the Belarus Womens'

Foundation. She had collected the testimonies of dozens of women who had been subjected to political persecution and torture by the Lukashenko regime since 2020. Veronika explained that once she had collected enough evidence of the regime terrorising its own population, she sent it to the International Criminal Court (ICC) for the general prosecutors to begin pressing charges on Lukashenko and his regime. She expressed confidence that the UK was a vital ally in their push for conviction through its subscription to the ICC's Roman Statute. Veronika stated that currently, women across Belarus are being forced into committing suicide rather than endure the human rights abuses the Lukashenko regime is capable of. She expressed the need to be more aggressive against Lukashenko, and stressed that he is prepared to kill everyone in his country to maintain his grip on power. She reasserted that the UK, along with other European countries and the USA must provide the Belarus public with the moral support to fight back.

The Chairman then introduced Michael Padraic Murphy, and proceeded to ask him for his opinion.

Michael Padraic Murphy: Thanked the Chairman for allowing him to speak and expressed his sympathies for the Belarussian people, his admiration for Valery and Veronika, and his pride in the bloggers, activists, and journalists seeking truth and change. He highlighted that he had been working in Belarus for the National Democratic Institute (NDI) between 2010 and 2020 and noted what he perceived to be the cause of the uprisings in Belarus.

Michael stressed that there had been more public participation. Following the 2010 presidential election in Belarus, a more participatory ecosystem developed which turned more citizens into activists. The easing of political pressure by the regime created the breathing space in which discourse and dissent were allowed to grow - providing they didn't exceed any 'red lines'. Michael stated that both online and offline citizens were becoming more engaged and this was threatening the Lukashenko regime's grip on power. This resulted in a severe clampdown on these new freedoms between 2014 and 2016. Michael suggested that the authorities did not intend for such discourse and dissent to develop, and that it was a by-product of the regime's firm control over society. Michael outlined three important changes which arose following the increased restrictions:

- 1) Decentralised action increased: Self-organising, fairs, concerts, community work increased and was organised by both 'hipsters' and pragmatists. Both groups were broad in participation and made good use of the Internet and online tools such as crowdfunding, petitions, and social media. He specifically mentioned blogs as a means to have made activism more possible and discourse more available.

- 2) The 'new media': The rise of blogs and social media in Belarus created an arena for dissent to grow within. It also offered a significant route for citizens to attend rallies or donate to crowdfunding platforms.
- 3) Instead of activists directing their attacks on Lukashenko, they directed them at the problems being faced by the Belarussian people. By separating politics from the problems they were facing, they managed to advance on a new strategy of generating dissent. Bloggers were particularly instrumental in this. This strategy aimed at trust-building and increasing participation and engagement across Belarus.

Michael believed that these three recreated a public participation ecosystem which helped break down the regime's control of information and expanded sympathy for the people of Belarus. This was exhibited in 2020 by the public response to Decree 3 or the 'Social Parasite' Decree in which bloggers, citizens, and activists all united against Lukashenko and protested across the country. Michael suggested that this struck real fear into the regime which initiated a severe clampdown on blogging. Michael stressed the importance of maintaining this three-pronged approach or 'troika' moving forward. This must be done whilst the authorities are trying to dismantle it and drive participation down. Michael finally highlighted that the cancellation of the 2021 local elections marked another way the regime was attempting to suppress the public voice and suppress participation. Michael highlighted the need for countries and organisations across the world to play their part in strengthening the 'troika' and strengthening opportunities for participation across Belarus.

The Chairman then asked what response the UK and other Western nations should take when it comes to the grounding of the Ryanair flight carrying Roman Pratasevich.

Valery: Social media was so instrumental in the uprising between 2010 and 2020. The invention of a smartphone was crucial, as now, everyone is a source of mass media. In 2010, the regime was able to manipulate information streams to show activists as aggressors and try to turn public opinion against them. Now the regime is not able to do this. We currently have a regime that is not organic or native and they recognise that social media is problematic for them. We also have a more public society in Belarus. However, we still need to fight for those within the regime. Even those officials within the regime's institutions are longing for change. The crowdfunder we launched across the EU seeks to financially support and reward those who have the courage to oppose Lukashenko.

The Chairman highlighted that Valery's bank accounts had been frozen and seized by Lukashenko's regime. He also highlighted that the opposition's accounts had also been frozen.

Valery Tsepkalo: Agreed with the assessment and stated that the regime are trying to take everything Valery and Veronika have.

One attendee to the roundtable asked Veronika whether the testimonies she collected from imprisoned Belarussian women were being made public. They also asked what was required to bring about change ultimately, and how can the UK help.

Veronika replied saying that the ICC is currently in possession of the testimonies and that many women would not want their identities released. She mentioned sending a letter to the British Prime Minister asking for support in her organisation's goals. She repeated that she would like to share information if the ICC permits, but that it would be sensitive and will have to be selective.

Valery followed up by mentioning that there is plenty of information on the website (<https://belaruswomen.org/en/>).

Another attendee stated that the public policy options the UK has to help Belarus is limited. They perceived that any sanctions would be automatically 'priced into' the Belarus economy as the regime is aware that these are a common tool being used against them. They asked what exact things could the UK do to profoundly impact the regime aside from sanctions which may be received with a 'shrug of the shoulders' by the Lukashenko regime..

Valery responded by agreeing that sanctions would be a good route to take. Specifically sanctions on Lukashenko's personal finances in the form of the 'Reserve Fund of the President'. Through this multi-million dollar account, Lukashenko pays for protection, residences, and the salaries of his security detail. If sanctions are placed on this, the Belarus National Bank would have to inform the regulators where they have accounts (Deutsche Bank, CitiGroup) so that their account can be frozen. Valery expressed scepticism in this actually happening as it is a state run bank and therefore predictably supportive of Lukashenko. What would happen here though, is that these large multinational banks would be forced to freeze the corresponding accounts if they are in defiance of local regulations. From this, any state run corporations would have to transfer to private banks creating the conditions under which the Lukashenko regime would collapse - there could be no money going towards the budget and Lukashenko would be stripped of his security and his residences.

Michael followed on from Valery by expressing his desire to respond to the last two questions. He agreed that sanctions would be appropriate, but stressed the need to do

more. He stated that Lukashenko is finding the uncontrollable growth of discord increasingly alarming. Through supporting such discord can change be achieved. In terms of long-term change Michael expressed both pessimism and optimism. Optimism in the capabilities of the public and their desire to fight for change, but pessimism that this may have come too late. He highlighted that when Lukashenko steps down, there will be a struggle for power with perhaps even Russians wanting to install someone.

An attendee asked Valery whether Lukashenko's recent statement about a hybrid war sounded like it was written in the Kremlin and by Russia. They asked whether Lukashenko has any room for manoeuvre towards or against Russia.

Valery responded by saying that this is how Lukashenko has stayed in power. Lukashenko tried to be both pro-Russia and pro-West but has lied consecutively. If Lukashenko is to move away from Russia, he must release political prisoners and have free and fair elections. However, Lukashenko will not go further towards Russia, as they won't want this. Russia has their own vision and their focus is on who will replace Lukashenko. Valery noted that he would be happy if the Russians could get rid of Lukashenko as he is the main problem.

The same attendee responded by stating that any successor to Lukashenko would still have to rely on rigged elections as Russia would want to maintain their influence over Belarus.

Valery agrees that the situation is a serious one and understands that anyone who would succeed Lukashenko would want to maintain close ties with Russia as they are too dependent on them in terms of trade. A new leader must strike a balance between East and West and explore the benefits of each. Ultimately, Valery doesn't believe this is too much of a dilemma. Lukashenko tries to convince people that he is pro-Russia whilst portraying activists and bloggers as pro-West. This is dangerous. Valery stated that he did not embark on this campaign for geopolitical reasons, rather to install free and fair elections - we need to know what the Belarussian people think! Valery highlighted that currently nobody knows anything about whether the Belarussian public want to move towards or against Russia. Only democracy and open discussion can help achieve this.

The Chair finished by asking about Russian involvement in the hijacking of the Ryanair flight. In terms of Putin and his relation with Lukashenko, he found it hard to believe that it happened without Kremlin consent. He finished by asking how the West should behave to Russia's influence over Belarus.

Valery stated that the Nordstream 2 project is an early lever that could be used by the West in order to talk to Putin about Belarus. Ultimately, all the Lukashenko regime cares about is the flow of money and gas they have as they need it for their own budget. If the Nordstream project were to be a precondition, it would be a powerful message. Valery stated that if Russia directly started influencing Lukashenko, his regime would crumble. Even negotiations between the West and Russia over Belarus would make a huge difference on the Lukashenko regime's grip on power as he would be unable to move anywhere after that.

The Chairman thanked Valery, Veronika, and Michael for their time and noted that the APPG intends to organise regular roundtables in the future, encouraging attendees to subscribe to the APPG's newsletter on the website.

Meeting ends.