

Tory MP criticised over plan to speak at event with far-right figures

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Daniel Kawczynski to attend Rome event with hard-right, anti-immigration speakers.

A Conservative MP is facing criticism for planning to speak alongside some of Europe's leading hard-right, anti-immigration figures including the Hungarian prime minister, Viktor Orbán, and a niece of Marine Le Pen.

Daniel Kawczynski, the MP for Shrewsbury and Atcham, is one of 22 speakers due to address the National Conservatism conference in Rome next week.

He will speak from the same platform as Ryszard Legutko, the Polish Law and Justice MEP who has described homophobia as a "totally fictitious problem", and Hermann Tertsch, an MEP for the Spanish anti-immigrant Vox party who argues that General Franco was not a fascist and gave Catalans a good life.

Italian far-right leaders who will attend the conference include Matteo Salvini, the leader of the League, whose hardline immigration measures included the closure of Italian ports to NGO rescue vessels and the abolition of key protections for asylum seekers.

Another is Giorgia Meloni, the leader of the "Italians first" Brothers of Italy party, who has been accompanied to political events by Rachele Mussolini, a granddaughter of the dictator Benito Mussolini.

Orbán has been Hungary's prime minister since 2010, and in 2018 he won a third consecutive term. He has been accused of promoting conspiracy theories, usually with antisemitic undertones, about the influence of George Soros, the billionaire philanthropist, in Hungary and across Europe. He has also tapped into another far-right conspiracy theory, that of the "great replacement".

Marion Maréchal, Le Pen's niece, has claimed France is becoming "the little niece of Islam". She has also marched against same sex-marriage and is being touted as a possible far-right contender in the 2022 presidential election.

Sponsors of the conference include the London-based thinktank the Bow Group, International Reagan Thatcher Society and Nazione Futura. The UK-based journalist Douglas Murray is also due to speak.

It is not clear why Kawczynski, a Polish-born Brexiter and former adviser to David Cameron on eastern Europe, has been invited. Last January his request for the Polish government to veto any extension of article 50 was rebuffed.

The MP, known for his close interest in Saudi Arabia, was widely ridiculed for tweeting that the UK received no Marshall plan aid after the second world war when in fact it received \$2.7bn. A member of Kawczynski's staff confirmed that he was planning to speak at the conference.

Questions have arisen over how Boris Johnson's government will treat far-right, populist leaders after winning an 80-strong majority in December's general election.

Tim Montgomerie, a former journalist who was hired by Downing Street as the prime minister's social justice adviser in September, said this month that the UK would forge a "special relationship" with Orbán's authoritarian government after Brexit.

Johnson was criticised two years ago for congratulating Orbán on his election victory. His own victory was greeted warmly by both Meloni and Salvini.

Responding to Kawczynski's pending attendance, Prof Rafal Pankowski, a co-founder of the anti-fascist organisation Never Again, said the Conservatives were treading a dangerous path.

“The event brings together radical conservatives, rightwing populists and neo-fascists; it is an example of growing trans-national cooperation of authoritarian forces.

“It is important to draw a clear line between democratic political leaders and the far right, but the distinction is becoming blurred as a result of actions of conservatives like Kawczynski. Through rubbing shoulders with the far right, they legitimise xenophobia, which is a growing global problem,” he said.

Margaret Hodge, the newly elected parliamentary chair of the Jewish Labour Movement, called on Johnson to prevent his MP from attending the event.

“Johnson does not miss an opportunity to criticise Labour’s antisemitism. While I have agreed with him at times on that, it would be intolerable if he did not stamp out the attendance of one his senior MPs at a conference that will promote racist views,” she said.

Andrew Gwynne, the shadow communities secretary, said: “It’s disgraceful that just days after Holocaust Memorial Day Daniel Kawczynski is planning to share a platform with antisemites, Islamophobes and homophobes. He should be immediately suspended from the Conservative party and the whip.

“However, given Boris Johnson’s own racist comments and continued pandering to the extreme far right, I won’t hold my breath for the Tories to take action against one of their MPs standing shoulder to shoulder with fascists.”

The Conservative party has been approached for comment.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jan/29/tory-mp-criticised-over-plan-to-speak-at-event-with-far-right-figures>