

Joint Statement: Why Chatham House must do better in vetting speakers

Faith Matters
March 3, 2020



Faith Matters and the 'Never Again' Association are concerned that a failure to vet speakers with anti-Muslim, xenophobic and other bigoted views undermines the importance of the Polish-British Belvedere Forum, which is being hosted at Chatham House today and tomorrow.

The event, which brings together dignitaries, civil society leaders, academics, business, media, and diaspora voices, covers topics like of dual Polish-British identity, climate change, and Polish-British relations in a post-Brexit world.

A speaker listed at tomorrow afternoon's breakout session is Stefan Tompson, who has hosted the far-right extremist Tommy Robinson at his house when he visited Poland, and in an interview with wPolityce, spoke of "Muslim rapists" and the alleged negative consequences of multiculturalism in parts of the UK.

Stefan Tompson has made several appearances on the far-right online TV station in Poland, Wrealu24, including spreading conspiracy theories of so-called "white genocide" in South Africa.

He also referred to Nelson Mandela as a "red terrorist" and an "an almost entirely negative figure".

Another speaker, Agnieszka Kolakowska, dubbed the "Polish Katie Hopkins" was invited at the behest of the Polish Institute of International Affairs, had pulled out of speaking due to personal reasons after Byline Times contacted them, highlighting the above views. This was only exposed thanks to the efforts of Professor Rafal Pankowski of Never Again, who has now withdrawn from the event, despite having participated at previous forums.

Such individuals do not represent the views of the vast majority in attendance, but by affording such individuals a platform serves to undermine the credibility and importance of such events.

We, therefore, call on Chatham House to restructure the vetting process for external speakers during events to avoid such errors again.

Rafal Pankowski, of Never Again, said: "Freedom of debate is important, and a plurality of voices is fruitful in any discussion, but it should not function as a tool to legitimise those who vilify minority groups like Muslims, or sully the legacies of those who worked to dismantle apartheid in South Africa."

Iman Atta, Director of Faith Matters, said: "When inviting such people to key events, it is really important that we do not legitimise individuals who have made extremely divisive comments previously about minority groups such as Muslim communities. We expect some due diligence work to have been undertaken beforehand."

Notes:

- Faith Matters is an NGO committed to building pluralism, community cohesion, and educating and empowering communities to resist all forms of extremism.

- Rafal Pankowski is a Professor of Sociology at the Collegium Civitas University in Warsaw and a co-founder of the 'Never Again' Association, which is an independent anti-racism organisation in Poland.

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