

Why I Refused to Go to Chatham House and Hear the Polish Katie Hopkins Speak

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Chatham House (officially, the Royal Institute of International Affairs) is one of the Great British Institutions.

Founded in 1920, it is frequently referred to as the world's most influential think tank and prides itself on its independence and intellectual excellence.

On its website, Chatham House states that its mission is “to help build a sustainably secure, prosperous and just world” and that its “convening power attracts world leaders and the best analysts in their respective fields from across the globe”.

However, it appeared this week that its “convening power” would be used to give a voice to hate and xenophobia.

The Belvedere Forum is an annual conference supported by the British and Polish Governments as a platform for their ministers, civil society leaders and academics. It takes its name from one of the presidential palaces in Warsaw, the historic Belvedere, where the first Forum was held in 2017.

Upon invitation from the British Embassy, I have participated in two recent editions, held in London's Lancaster House and Warsaw's Royal Castle. The venues were splendid and some of the discussions were good, both inside and particularly outside of the official programme.

As a member of the anti-racist 'Never Again' Association, I especially enjoyed a conversation on fighting racism in football with the Labour MP Rosena Allin-Khan, whose special interest in Poland is related to her own Polish-British-Pakistani background. I also got to hear speeches by figures such as Lord Pickles, the former chairman of the Conservative Party and current Minister for Post-Holocaust Issues and Sir Malcolm Rifkind, the former Foreign Secretary who serves as the British co-chairman of the Belvedere Forum.

For these reasons, I was glad to be invited to this year's annual event, on March 3 to 4, hosted and co-organised by Chatham House in London. A decade ago, I participated in an international team of researchers and practitioners working on the subject of 'extremist populism' for Chatham House, which unfortunately it never published.

But, I was taken aback when I saw the Forum's programme for this year's event as it seems that 'extremist populism' has now, incredibly, found its place in Chatham House itself.

Among the big surprises was the inclusion in the official programme of Agnieszka Kolakowska. The invitation I received on behalf of Chatham House's director even selected her name as a highlight.

Kolakowska is a columnist and a notorious anti-Muslim propagandist. The intensity of her anti-Islamic message can be compared to Katie Hopkins in the UK.

These are some passages from just one of many of her anti-Muslim articles:

“In the European war of cultures, the anti-market ideology and multicultural ideology, the ideology of ‘tolerance’ and ‘diversity’, dictating the appeasement of the claims of Muslims, are on the same side of the abyss”

“In Great Britain the local authorities in many places have prohibited the display of nativity, the public singing of Christmas carols or any Christian allusions. The word Christmas has become taboo”

“The average bishop of the Church of England does not believe in God, but in the multi-faith multiculturalism and in the struggle against American imperialism”

“The ideology of ‘anti-racism’ and ‘multiculturalism’ is, by its nature, anti-Christian and anti-Western and the appeasement of the demands of ‘rights’ for the Muslims belongs to the same sack of political correctness”

“The spectre of Eurabia, the end of civilisation... the multicultural society, ‘diverse’ and open... anti-racism, segregation, the barbarians from the East and the West – all these things are linked”

“There are three major factors, linked with each other and causally intertwined: the unprecedented number of Muslims living permanently in Western countries, the so-called ‘war of cultures’, taking place not only in Europe but also in the US, and the crisis of European identity”

“Some Muslims in the West openly say their aim is Islamisation, the others only say it in mosques and at Muslim meetings... According to a survey conducted in England in 2004, 60% of British Muslims would welcome an introduction of Sharia law in England. The others would certainly not complain”

“There is no such thing as ‘liberal Islam’, there is just one law of Islam and it includes all the spheres of life, religious and secular... for a long time the purpose of the word ‘racism’ is to attack everything which is European or Western”

“Is it not a war of civilisations? Of course it is... The words ‘diversity’ and ‘multiculturalism’ are tools of manipulation and they have always played that role”

There are many other public statements she has made and pieces she has written over the years which are identical in their tone and content.

Curiously, Kolakowska is the daughter of the late Leszek Kolakowski, a well-known Polish dissident and post-Marxist philosopher who was a fellow of All Souls College at Oxford University for almost 40 years. He was known for his love of nuance and human empathy – clearly, none of it is present in Kolakowska’s utterances.

The Belvedere Forum’s programme for the event also includes Stefan Tompson, a British-born Polish nationalist vlogger and film-maker with South African roots, who promotes the discredited conspiracy theory of anti-White genocide in South Africa on far-right YouTube channels.

On the 100th anniversary of Nelson Mandela’s birth, Tompson called the leader “an almost entirely negative figure”, the “co-founder of an armed communist group” and “a red terrorist”.

It may or may not come as a surprise that Tompson is a friend and public supporter of the far-right English Defence League (EDL) founder Stephen Yaxley-Lennon – known as ‘Tommy Robinson’ – and hosted him in his home when the latter came to Warsaw to join the infamous Independence Day march. Tompson himself is a fervent enthusiast of the annual march which brings together far-right groups from across Europe and beyond.

In the light of all this, I have decided not to take part in the Belvedere Forum this week because I believe it is simply demeaning for Chatham House to legitimise such views. It would be demeaning for me to sit in the audience.

Kolakowska’s name is listed as confirmed in a version of the programme on the Chatham House website. On the same website, another version is available, without her name. Tompson’s name is listed as confirmed in both versions.

Regardless of whether she turns up or not, I’ve made up my mind and I’m not going.

UPDATE: After being contacted by Byline Times to ask why Kolakowska was appearing at the event, Chatham House explained that the Polish panellists were identified and invited by the Polish Institute of International Affairs and that Kolakowska is no longer attending after withdrawing for personal reasons.

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<https://bylinetimes.com/2020/03/02/why-i-refuse-to-go-to-chatham-house-and-bear-the-polish-katy-hopkins-speak/>