

Polish state TV seeks to discredit president's key rival

By VANESSA GERA
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WARSAW, Poland (AP) — Polish state television faced increasing criticism Wednesday for its negative coverage of the main opposition candidate in this month's presidential election, with accusations from watchdog groups it was resorting to anti-Semitic and racist tropes.

Warsaw Mayor Rafal Trzaskowski, who is challenging right-wing populist President Andrzej Duda, was depicted by public television in a nearly seven-minute news broadcast Tuesday as someone who would serve the interests of a “powerful foreign lobby” and not of Poles if he were to win the presidency.

TVP is taxpayer funded and required to be politically neutral. But TVP and other publicly-funded media have recently been trumpeting achievements of the governing nationalist conservative party, Law and Justice, and criticizing political opponents.

Reporters Without Borders has called Poland's public media “government propaganda mouthpieces,” while many older Poles critical of the government often liken the current practice to the propaganda of the communist era.

Tuesday's segment came after the first part of an evening new broadcast dominated by positive coverage of Duda, who is seeking reelection in the vote on June 28 against nine other candidates. Trzaskowski has emerged as Duda's main opponent, with polls showing a runoff between the two will be likely required on July 12.

The program noted that Trzaskowski, who belongs to the centrist and pro-European Union Civic Platform party, had negotiated Poland's position on accepting 7,000 refugees in 2015. That decision was reversed by the anti-migrant Law and Justice party, which won power in 2015.

The broadcast showed groups of dark-skinned people in violent riots in Western cities, saying that those were the kinds of scenes that Trzaskowski's policies would bring to Poland.

Andrzej Krajewski, a member of the board of the Society of Journalists, a media watchdog, said the program marked a new low for TVP, which he said has abandoned journalist standards and was carrying out pure propaganda.

Krajewski said the broadcast sought to discredit Trzaskowski with its selective usages of details about him, like linking him to investor George Soros, who is treated as an object of hate by many nationalists worldwide. For instance, TVP's broadcast noted that Trzaskowski had once studied on a Soros scholarship, but did not say that thousands of others across central Europe -- including Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orban -- also had such scholarships.

“TVP’s unbalanced reporting on the presidential candidate Rafal Trzaskowski with distorted quotes is unfortunately yet another proof of the pro-government bias of Polish public broadcasting,” said Pavol Szalai of Reporters Without Borders.

Szalai added that it was “all the more damaging” since it comes as Poles will decide who to vote for in the election.

The program also noted that Trzaskowski had attended a meeting of the Bilderberg Group, an annual meeting of high-profile participants from business and politics. The newscaster concluded the broadcast saying: “Whose interests would Trzaskowski represent if he wins the presidency? That of Poles or of a powerful foreign lobby?”

Rafal Pankowski, the head of an association that monitors and fights racism, Never Again, said that it would be “pretty obvious to anyone who watches” the program in Poland the references to “rich groups who want to rule the world” and a “foreign lobby” could be interpreted as a code for Jews.

He also said it was extremely problematic the way TVP used footage of crowds of black people in a way that made them seem dehumanized, dangerous and aggressive.

“All of that was really fascist-like,” Pankowski said. “The global context is also interesting because when people all over the world are waking up to the dangers of racism, these are images which play on dangerous racial stereotypes.”

A TVP broadcast last week portrayed Trzaskowski, a Catholic, as anti-Christian.

The station’s programming has dovetailed with the government’s own attacks on Trzaskowski.

As mayor of Warsaw, Trzaskowski has supported LGBT rights, a position that the governing party has also seized on to depict him as a threat to the traditional family in this mostly Catholic country. Last week Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki said in parliament that Trzaskowski’s pro-LGBT position amounts to an “attack” on the family.

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