

U.S. broadcaster claims intimidation by Poland

By Vanessa Gera - Associated Press, November 25, 2018

WARSAW, Poland — A U.S.-owned broadcaster said it was the target of attempted intimidation by Polish authorities, describing how security agents appeared at the home of a cameraman who went undercover to film neo-Nazis and told him he must appear for questioning on suspicion of propagating fascism.

The Washington Times

TVN, owned by Discovery, broadcast undercover footage in January that showed members of a Polish neo-Nazi group celebrating Adolf Hitler's birthday in a forest in 2017.

It said that on Friday evening, agents with Poland's Internal Security Agency visited the home of the cameraman who had gone undercover, Piotr Wacowski, and gave him the summons to appear in the investigation.

TVN said Saturday that its journalists have "acted in accordance with all standards of investigative journalism" and that it considers the state action "an attempt to intimidate journalists."

The move against Wacowski comes amid rising concerns about the state of media freedom in Poland, where the populist ruling party has turned tax-funded public media into a propaganda tool and is looking for a way to limit foreign ownership of media companies. TVN has been critical of the government and is seen as particularly vulnerable.

The ruling party, Law and Justice, has faced international condemnation for a string of moves seen as un-democratic - from a Holocaust speech law passed this year seen as an attack on freedom of speech and academic inquiry, to attempts to take control of the courts.

The party has also been making conciliatory moves toward extremist rightwing groups. On the Nov. 11 Independence Day holiday, top officials marched in Warsaw with far-right groups. Government officials have also publicly attacked independent monitors of xenophobia who have noted a rise of hate speech over the past year.

Rafal Pankowski, the head of the Never Again association, which monitors extremism, expressed his concerns about the investigation into the reporter.

"It's an example of a breakdown in democratic standards. On November 11, the highest level officials marched together with rightwing extremists in Warsaw, now state institutions harass a journalist involved in exposing the problem of rightwing extremism," Pankowski told The Associated Press on Sunday. "It's a clear case of shooting the messenger and really worrying."

TVN was bought for \$2 billion by the U.S. company Scripps Networks Interactive, making it the largest U.S. investment ever in Poland. Scripps has since been bought by Discovery, Inc., which is based in Silver Spring, Maryland.

Last year, Poland's media regulator slapped TVN with a fine of nearly 1.5 million zlotys (\$395,000 at today's exchange rate) for what it alleged to be biased coverage of anti-government protests, a move some saw as an attack on media freedom. The regulator called it a "warning" to commercial TV stations, though in the end the fine was rescinded.

The U.S. Ambassador to Poland, Georgette Mosbacher, warned Polish authorities last week that any attempt to restrict media freedom would harm the U.S.-Polish relationship.

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