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POLAND: Secret instructions order religious surveillance

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

A month after secret instructions to collect information about religious minorities issued by a police officer in Gdansk were revealed, Baptists, Adventists, Pentecostals and others named in the instructions remain unconvinced by police claims that they have nothing to fear. "These instructions are absolutely unacceptable, like something from the communist part of our history," Baptist Union president Andrzej Seweryn told Forum 18 News Service. "They are against the law and the constitution." The Adventists have called for the instructions to be withdrawn. However, Marta Frykowska of the Gdansk police press office dismissed such concerns. "There has been a misunderstanding," she told Forum 18. "These instructions are geared only towards illegal sects." Yet she refused to pass on to Forum 18 the texts of the "internal" instructions.

A month after secret instructions to collect information about religious minorities issued by a police officer in the northern city of Gdansk were revealed, Baptists, Adventists, Pentecostals and others named in the instructions remain unconvinced by police claims that they have nothing to fear. "These instructions are absolutely unacceptable, like something from the communist part of our history," Andrzej Seweryn, president of the Baptist Union, told Forum 18 News Service from the capital Warsaw on 15 May. "They are against the law and the constitution and against our status as a legal union." The Adventists have officially complained about the instructions. However, Marta Frykowska of the Gdansk police press office dismissed such concerns. "There has been a misunderstanding," she told Forum 18 on 15 May. "These instructions are geared only towards illegal sects." Yet she refused to pass on to Forum 18 the texts of the "internal" instructions.

Last February, Witold Murczkiewicz, chief of the crime prevention department of the police of the Pomorskie voivodship (the region which includes Gdansk), instructed local police chiefs to draw up a list of religious minority organisations in their district, with data on their members broken down by age and sex. Named in the instruction were several Christian churches - among them Baptists, Pentecostals and Adventists - and other religious organisations, such as Jehovah's Witnesses. In addition to legally recognised denominations, therapeutic and non-conventional medicine groups, as well as clairvoyants and fortune tellers were mentioned. The instruction indicated that the police monitoring is to be undertaken in cooperation with organisations and institutions involved in similar activities.

In the wake of these instructions, two Pentecostal facilities in the region - a church and a retreat centre - were visited by police, Tomasz Ropiejko, pastor of a Pentecostal church in Gdansk, told Forum 18 on 15 May. He said that at the retreat centre the police spoke to the wife of the manager, who was himself absent at the time. "They asked questions about what went on at the centre, what events were planned and whether a youth event was planned for this year as was held last year," he reported. "The manager's wife answered some of the questions. The manager later went to see the police. He was puzzled. He never had anything in writing."

Murczkiewicz's instructions were first revealed in the 11-17 April edition of the weekly magazine "Fakty i Mity" (Facts and Myths). "It was only after the article appeared that we connected the two," Ropiejko declared.

Frykowska admitted that Murczkiewicz issued the first instruction on 20 February listing "churches and religious movements operating officially". "This was done so that police chiefs in individual districts had full knowledge of which religious groups in their district were operating legally in order to distinguish them from various religious groups operating illegally (sects)."

She said that because of "doubts" over the "interpretation" of this instruction, Murczkiewicz issued a second on 28 February "to make sure everyone understood what was meant". She said this instruction made clear that religious groups listed as operating legally were not subject to "investigative activity". She stressed that the police are not interested in anyone's "worldview". "We are only interested in crimes," she told Forum 18.

Frykowska declined to say what information had been collected about religious communities or what the police would do with the information, describing these as "operational matters".

On 9 April, on learning of the instructions, the Adventists sent an open protest to Interior Minister Krzysztof Janik, requesting an explanation as to the extent of the investigation and asking what role the national police headquarters in Warsaw (which is under the authority of the interior ministry) had played. They asked whether the Gdansk police are also planning to establish files for a

"Catholic religious group" and requested the police action in Pomorskie voivodship be terminated at once. The interior ministry passed the letter to the national police headquarters.

Frykowska told Forum 18 that the national police headquarters had passed the Adventists' complaint to the police in Gdansk with a request to "clarify" the situation. She said Murczkiewicz had also spoken to an Adventist representative and "clarified all doubts". She said the press office of the Gdansk police would be writing soon to the editor of the Adventists' website to correct "imprecise information" – which she did not specify – that it had published about the instruction.

Although the Adventists are the only religious group to have protested so far on a national level, there have been local complaints. Pastor Robert Miksa of the First Baptist Church in Gdansk reported that at the end of April local Baptists protested to the public prosecutor, declaring that the instructions were against the law and insisting he should therefore take action. They also sent the complaint to the ombudsman in Warsaw. "So far we have had no reply," he told Forum 18 from Gdansk on 15 May.

Miksa reported that a police officer in civilian clothes had visited the church by arrangement earlier in the week. "She was from the department that prevents crime among young people," he reported. ""She was not happy having to visit us, took some information and then said that was enough." However, he said he had learnt that a month earlier a police officer in civilian clothes who attended a service had asked a lot of questions afterwards. "He admitted in the end that he was a policeman. I don't know if this was a private initiative or an official visit."

Miksa said the Baptists remain puzzled as to who is behind the instruction. "If it is inspired by the Catholic Church – which is dominant here – I would be very worried. If it is just an initiative of the police, I am not so worried. They won't do much with the information." He pointed out that a new police chief has recently taken over in Gdansk. He speculated that political parties "that want to stop the existence of non-Catholic Churches in Poland" might have influenced the police. "But that is pure speculation."

Andrzej Sicinski, secretary of the Adventist Union in Warsaw, says the instructions must be cancelled, adding that the Adventists are not satisfied with the interior ministry's failure to tackle the problem. "This should be dealt with on a national level," he insisted to Forum 18 on 15 May. "It is not right to pass the buck back to Gdansk." Seweryn agreed that the instructions must be withdrawn. "We hope Interior Minister Janik will do this."

Warsaw-based Pentecostal Pastor Edward Czajko told Forum 18 on 15 May that when Pentecostal leaders convene on 22 May, they will discuss how to respond to the instructions. Similarly, Seweryn said that at the executive board meeting of the Baptist Union next week, an "official view" on the instructions will be drawn up. He stressed that the Adventists, the Methodists and the Pentecostals have the "same opinion" on their unacceptability.

Sicinski said that while the Adventists in the Gdansk area do not appear to have been investigated in the wake of the February instructions, he had learnt "informally" from contacts in the police that they had "secretly" gathered information on Adventist churches in the Warsaw area.

It remains unclear whether other regional police authorities have issued similar instructions. Slawomir Cisowski, spokesman for the national police headquarters in Warsaw, said he had not heard about the Gdansk instructions, nor had he heard of similar instructions elsewhere. "The police are only interested in criminal matters, crime prevention and security," he told Forum 18 from Warsaw on 15 May. He stressed that he regarded black magic, for example, as very different from religion.

Cisowski declined to say why the police headquarters had taken no action about the Gdansk instruction, saying responsibility for local police matters lies with each region. "There is autonomy at the regional level."

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