

A LESSON OF RESPONSIBILITY

The tragedy that took place at the University of Warsaw, the murder of our colleague by a student, has no precedent – neither in the history of the University itself nor in the broader context of Polish academic life after 1989. The emotions associated with it are not only understandable but also natural. It is important to take a closer look at its implications. If only to learn the right lessons so that we can respond more effectively and efficiently in the future.

A TEST FOR THE COMMUNITY

Let us start with the issues that have received poor media coverage, but which are particularly worth highlighting. The community of the University of Warsaw demonstrated its most valuable qualities: solidarity, empathy and responsibility. It showed that it constitutes a genuine community, acting spontaneously and naturally. Students organised support groups and information stands, the dean's and rector's authorities launched immediate support actions. Security, administrative and support staff helped to secure the buildings and calm the atmosphere, psychologists and therapists volunteered their support, often going beyond their formal duties.

Already in the first hours after the incident, special psychological on-call services were set up – both on-site and remote – available to all members of the community: students, doctoral students, academic and administrative staff, security and support staff. The Psychological Help Centre immediately expanded its working hours and additional professionals volunteered to provide crisis

intervention. The University's website and social media provided specific information about the course of events and the support available.

The Faculty of Law and Administration immediately organised psychological and counselling services for both students and staff. Open meetings with faculty authorities, group discussions and individual consultations were organized. Students came forward with questions, doubts and emotions that could not have been expressed in any other form than through conversation. These were very difficult conversations. But they were indispensable for everyone.

WHAT POWERS SHOULD THE UNIVERSITY SECURITY GUARDS HAVE?

Of course, a question arises – did the University security staff respond appropriately and does the University provide them with adequate capacity to intervene in cases of threats? To answer this question, it is necessary to outline the legal and factual situation.

The current model of security services at the University has limited effectiveness in situations of sudden, extreme threat. The University Guard – which is assumed to be non-police, civilian and non-confrontational – does not use direct coercive measures. Its employees are not armed, nor do they receive training in responding to life-threatening situations – those that include contact with an attacker armed with a dangerous tool, physical aggression or hostage situations.

Such a model had its justification. Over the years, it was a conscious choice based on the values that make up the University's identity: openness, accessibility, trust, an informal atmosphere. We did not want a university that resembled an airport or a courthouse – with gates, scanners, patrols with guns at the entrance. We wanted to preserve the spirit of academic freedom, in which the physical presence of security was symbolic rather than deterring.

WE WILL NOT AVOID THE NECESSARY CHANGES

However, today this model needs to be fundamentally revised. We simply have to accept that we live in a world that is not free of violence – including spaces that were meant to constitute a refuge from it. It is not about turning universities into paramilitary units. A university must not be a place that resembles closed institutions – neither symbolically nor practically. Nevertheless, we need a new security model that is both realistic and relevant to our times and the threats we face.

This model could include better institutionalised cooperation with the police and emergency services, rather than ad hoc cooperation. It may require the implementation of modern alarm systems, which will allow to notify the relevant services immediately. It can assume physical infrastructural changes – not to make the University a closed space, but to make it more responsive.

Equally importantly, members of the academic community – including students, staff and administrators – need to receive comprehensive training on how to respond to threats. We need to move away from the assumption that ‘someone else will take care of it’. Each of us needs to know what to do.

Even the best-equipped and trained formation cannot keep us safe if we do not take care of the issue ourselves. There are appropriate emergency response procedures in place. It is necessary to disseminate them, practice them and embed them in the everyday reality of university life. Regular emergency response training, evacuation drills, emergency simulations are needed. The aim is not to create an atmosphere of anxiety, but to learn how to behave under stress. This is the norm across Europe today.

RECORDING THE EVENT – THE FACTS

One of the most disturbing and also most controversial issues surrounding the tragedy at the University of Warsaw was the recording of the event by witnesses. In the hours and days that followed, some of this material began to circulate in the public space, and the subject of videotaping – despite its complexity – was immediately inserted into a broader, often simplified narrative about ‘social desensitisation’, the ‘crowd effect’ or ‘screen culture’.

Let us move on to an issue that has been widely reported and that has appalled the public – the issue of recordings from the scene of the drama. Truth must be separated from false rumours.

It is not true, as suggested in some media reports, that the drama was recorded by ‘dozens’ of people. From the information we have, it appears that several recordings were made – some of which were made when the students, locked in a lecture theatre in the immediate vicinity of the incident, were acting on the express instructions of the class instructor, who recommended to make documentation in case evidence needed to be secured. These materials were immediately handed over to the law enforcement authorities. The persons who made them were interviewed and their recordings were included in the case file. These were actions – perhaps instinctive, perhaps intuitive – but set in the dramatic context of a real threat and confinement in a building where panic spread.

A completely different issue – and in this case there is no room for relativism – is making these recordings available on the internet. The dissemination of material documenting human harm, suffering, death – without reflection on the consequences, without respect for elementary principles of ethics – is an extremely irresponsible action, constituting a gross violation of the dignity both of those directly affected by the tragedy and of all of us, as a community, which by definition should be based on empathy and mutual respect. A lecturer is no substitute for a doctor.

Among the many questions that have arisen in the wake of this tragedy, one is among the particularly difficult and painful ones: could this have been foreseen? Could someone – a course leader, a supervisor, a lecturer – have spotted something worrying earlier and reacted in time? For the sake of fairness and responsibility, we must definitely say: No!

An academic teacher is neither a clinical psychologist nor a psychiatrist nor a therapist. He or she has neither the competence nor the formal tools to do so. If a student does not show any obvious symptoms, which was the case here, i.e. does not behave aggressively, does not direct threats, does not reveal deep emotional disturbances, then the academic staff has no grounds to intervene. And even if there are signals such as withdrawal, excessive calmness or introversion – the reaction is to suggest contacting the University's Psychological Help Centre or a specialist in another form. Would we want an academic to replace a doctor or make decisions relating to a student's health? Not only would this go beyond his or her remit, it would also unduly interfere with the personal freedoms of the students.

The strength is in the community. Together we can act more effectively, countering verbal and physical aggression, but also responding appropriately to sudden, unforeseen threats. The unprecedented tragedy that occurred at the University should be a lesson for all of us – from students and academics to lawmakers. A lesson in great responsibility.

Sławomir Żółtek – Dean of the Faculty of Law and Administration of the
University of Warsaw

Andrzej Bielecki – Vice-Dean for Student Affairs of the Faculty of Law and
Administration of the University of Warsaw