STUDIA I ANALIZY

Marcin Rachwał*

The Role of Local Government Units in Building Civil Society – the *Constructing Civil Society* Educational Project (Some Remarks)

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Abstract: *Civil society is an indispensable component of a functional democratic state. The development of civil society is dependent on a number of factors, including the work of the education system. Education is the crucial space for shaping civic attitudes and acquiring competences necessary for a society that is aware of its rights and active in the public sphere. A significant majority of educational institutions is administratively supervised by local government units. The purpose of this paper is to indicate how local authorities can play a role in the shaping of civil society by performing tasks (both obligatory and additional, non-compulsory ones) related to education.*

Introduction

The phenomenon of self-government in general, and local self-government more specifically, can be seen as an expression of civil society[1]. Local

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*   ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2949-1328, PhD, habilitation, Professor of Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań at the Faculty of Political Science and Journalism. E-mail: marcin.rachwal@amu.edu.pl

1   W. Baranowska-Zając, *Instytucje społeczeństwa obywatelskiego w świetle nowelizacji samorządowych ustaw ustrojowych z 11 stycznia 2018 r.*, «Studia Prawnoustrojowe» 2019, no. 44, p. 5; L. Kieres, *Samorząd terytorialny jako instytucja społeczeństwa obywatelskiego*, «Ruch Prawniczy, Ekonomiczny i Socjologiczny» 2006, no. 2, pp. 171–190.

government units may undertake activities leading to the development of civic awareness and skills, and thus foster participatory attitudes. This produces conditions conducive to the formation of civil society, i.e., a society aware of its rights, able to pursue them, and active in the public sphere.

Academic literature contains numerous definitions of 'civil society' as well as classifications of that form of societal organisation[2]. Such variety is partly due to the interdisciplinary nature of this concept, and partly to the increased interest it has attracted among scholars in the aftermath of Poland's democratic transition. Without going into in-depth deliberations, one can, in principle, accept a definition whereby 'civil society entails citizens' active, voluntary participation in public life, either directly or indirectly, through institutions they form to protect or promote their interests and values held independently of state institutions. (…) Civil society is generally characterised by the existence of autonomous organisations and bodies that represent the will of the people, and cannot be controlled by the state or any other decision-making centre. Such organisations and bodies include political parties, trade unions, private businesses, civic movements, freelance professions, autonomous universities, independent religious organisations, as well as charitable organisations'[3]. In other words, civil society is a space where people organise themselves independently of the will of the state to pursue their own objectives.

In contrast to civil society, 'state-controlled society is composed of organisations and institutions subjugated to and used by the state to control society and pursue its own interests through it'[4]. Therefore, the sole existence of various organisations is not sufficient to put the 'civil' label on a society – this can only be done if these organisations are the expression of grassroots activity, autonomous from the state itself. In general, such a situation is observed within the legal-institutional framework of democratic states, although civil society can also function in non-democratic countries[5]. The difference is that

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[2] J. Ehrenberg, *Civil Society. The Critical History of an Idea*, New York–London 1999; *Civil Society Revisited. Lessons from Poland*, K. Jacobsson, E. Korolczuk (eds.), Berghahn, New York, Oxford 2017; *Civil Society and Democracy Promotion*, T. Beichelt, I. Hahn-Fuhr, F. Schimmelfennig, S. Worschech (eds.), Palgrave Macmillan, 2014; *Civil Society: Concepts, Challenges, Contexts. Essays in Honor of Helmut K. Anheier*, M. Hoelscher, R.A. List, A. Ruser, S. Toepler (eds.), Springer, 2022; R. Kania, M. Kazimierczuk (eds.), *Społeczeństwo obywatelskie, Historia, teoria, praktyka*, Warszawa 2021.

[3] M. Kazimierczuk, *Wolność zrzeszania się jako element społeczeństwa obywatelskiego*, «Studia Prawnoustrojowe» 2015, no. 28, p. 24.

[4] L. Morawski, *Główne problemy współczesnej filozofii prawa. Prawo w toku przemian*, Warszawa 2005, p. 324; cited for: R. Grochowski, *Demokracja a państwo prawa*, «Środkowoeuropejskie Studia Polityczne» 2008, no. 1, p. 139.

[5] See more: M. Rachwał, *Demokracja bezpośrednia w procesie kształtowania się społeczeństwa obywatelskiego w Polsce*, Warszawa 2010, pp. 44–53.

whereas in a democratic state civil society enhances and complements the role of state institutions, in non-democratic countries it acts in opposition to the state, often in an attempt to reform or democratise it.

Historically, the concept of civil society references 'the political thought of ancient Greece, while today it refers to a pluralist, liberal-democratic society'[6]. The formation of civil society depends on a number of factors, *inter alia* a supportive legal framework, political culture, and psychological determinants behind individual behaviours. Other significant factors include the level of awareness and education among the citizenry, since formulating goals and the ability to pursue them require a certain scope of knowledge and skills.

The purpose of this article is to demonstrate the role of local government units in the shaping of civil society. In this context, it should be noted that local self-government can be seen as a school of democracy, given that the local and regional level of organisation constitutes the best opportunity for civic participation. A geographical area limited in size and number of inhabitants means that the conditions are clearly conducive to the inclusion of the general public in decision-making processes – this is particularly evident with regard to the district-level self-government.

The existence of local government units presents numerous opportunities for shaping civil society: people's direct involvement in the work of said units (and auxiliary bodies created by them)[7], electoral participation, the use of direct and semi-direct democracy mechanisms, participation in youth or senior-citizen councils. In this context, it should be emphasised that local self-government units perform a range of public service tasks[8], for instance by acting as administrative supervisory organs for educational institutions[9]. In doing so, they directly influence the functioning of the Polish education system which, in turn, is vital to the process of building a civil society. It is precisely the aspect of education that I focus on here, when considering the role of local government units. In particular, I consider an educational project entitled '*Constructing civil society*', implemented and coordinated by the Province Executive Committee of the Greater Poland (Pol. wielkopolskie) province. The administrative side of the project is managed by the Teacher Training Centre based in the city of Leszno.

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[6] A. Krasnowolski, *Społeczeństwo obywatelskie i jego instytucje*, p. 3, https://www.senat. gov.pl/gfx/senat/pl/senatopracowania/58/plik/ot-_627_internet.pdf (11.04.2023).

[7] "The commune may create auxiliary units: village councils and districts, housing estates and others"; *Ustawa z dnia 8 marca 1990 r. o samorządzie gminnym*, t.j. Dz. U. 2023, poz. 40, art. 5 ust. 1 zd. 1.

[8] *Konstytucja Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej z dnia 2 kwietnia 1997 r.*, Dz. U. 1997, Nr 78, poz. 483, art. 166.

[9] See more: *Ustawa z dnia 14 grudnia 2016 r. Prawo oświatowe*, t.j. Dz. U. 2021, poz. 1082.

The choice of education as a point of focus in the context of developing civil society is dictated by two factors. First of all, education in general, and especially citizenship education, is hugely important for this process. Secondly, beginning with the 1999 reform, Polish education system has undergone several changes which have affected its stability and may lead to crises. One example of such impact is the fact that the scope of citizenship education at the secondary education level is now being significantly curtailed. This particular change has been implemented beginning with the 2022/2023 school year, despite voices from, among other actors, the academic community which questioned the need for such far-reaching changes and called for the curriculum to be left in its previous form[10].

The primary method used throughout the research the results of which are presented in this article was critical analysis of written sources. Key research techniques included desk research and the examination of documents which outline the bases for the '*Constructing Civil Society*' project.

The first part of this paper is devoted to defining key terms and articulating basic methodological premises. Subsequently, I go on to discuss of the role of education in the shaping of civil society, focusing my thoughts on the aforementioned educational project. The final section summarizes the findings and synthetically refers to the methodological framework indicated earlier on.

The role of education in shaping civil society

Creating civil society requires a number of factors, including the presence of a strong middle class, the ability to communicate within our communities, pluralism, and a certain scope of shared values accepted by all members of the community[11]. Social capital, considered to be 'the essence of civil society, or at least of a society that is able to develop'[12], should also be added here.

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[10] See more: *Stanowisko Komitetu Nauk Politycznych Polskiej Akademii Nauk w sprawie projektu wprowadzenia do szkół przedmiotu historia i teraźniejszość*, 27.11.2021, https://knpol.pan.pl/pl/aktualnoci/aktualnosci/464-stanowisko-komitetu-nauk-politycznych-polskiej-akademii-nauk-w-sprawie-projektu-wprowadzenia-do-szk%C3%B3%C5%82-przedmiotu-historia-i-tera%C5%BAniejszo%C5%9B%C4%87 (12.05.2023); *Stanowisko Walnego Zjazdu Delegatów Polskiego Towarzystwa Nauk Politycznych postulujące przywrócenie do szkół przedmiotu wiedza o społeczeństwie*, 29.11.2022, http://ptnp.webd.pro/ptnp/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Stanowisko-WOS_WZD_WK.pdf (12.05.2023).

[11] Z. Blok, *Transformacja jako konwersja funkcji wewnątrzsystemowych na przykładzie Polski*, Poznań 2006, pp. 277–278.

[12] J. Czapiński, *Kapitał społeczny*, [in:] J. Czapiński, T. Panek (eds.), *Diagnoza społeczna 2007. Warunki i jakość życia Polaków*, Warszawa 2007, http://www.diagnoza.com/pliki/raporty/Diagnoza_raport_2007.pdf (26.04.2023), p. 257.

Social capital refers to 'such features of social organisation as trust, norms and networks, that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions'[13]. As Putnam stresses in another of his books, 'the core idea of social capital is that social networks have a value'[14]. Just as other forms of capital can increase productivity (be it individual or collective), 'social contacts affect the productivity of individuals and groups'[15].

Given how important social capital is for building civil society, one might ask: how can social capital be increased? In other words: what are the key factors that drive its development? In the context of an attempt at answering these questions, it is worth referencing 'Poland 2030', a national development strategy which openly addresses the issue:

> 'Education is the single most important, basic precondition for increasing and shaping social capital over the coming decades. Firstly, from the earliest stages of education, the curricula should include citizenship education: schooling should encourage civic participation, develop cooperation as well as the desire and ability to work towards the common good. Secondly, the education system must be geared towards fostering students' individual creativity and innovative thinking. Schools should be reformed with the view to teaching autonomy and flexibility, encouraging creativity, and promoting teamwork among students'[16].

The authors of the strategy unequivocally pointed to education as a driving factor behind the growth of social capital. They distinguished two elements – citizenship education and the education system at large – both of which are connected to formal education[17], but are different in scope, in that citizenship education is a part of the education system.

When discussing the role of citizenship education, the authors state it should be designed so as to encourage civic participation, teach cooperation and working towards common goals. These aspects are crucial for the development of both social capital and civil society. Properly designed citizenship education, aimed primarily at fostering social competences, should play a vital role in modern schooling. It should be noted that the strategy makes an analogous point also in the context of optimizing the education system at large. According to the recommendations included in 'Poland 2030', the system must

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[13] R.D. Putnam, *Demokracja w działaniu. Tradycje obywatelskie we współczesnych Włoszech*, Kraków–Warszawa 1995, p. 258.

[14] R.D. Putnam, *Samotna gra w kręgle. Upadek i odrodzenie wspólnot lokalnych w Stanach Zjednoczonych*, Warszawa 2008, p. 33.

[15] Ibidem.

[16] *Polska 2030. Wyzwania rozwojowe*, p. 367, http://kigeit.org.pl/FTP/PRCIP/Literatura/001_ PL_2030_wyzwania_rozwojowe.pdf (26.04.2023).

[17] Legal definition of formal education: *Ustawa z dnia 22 grudnia 2015 r. o Zintegrowanym Systemie Kwalifikacji*, t.j. Dz. U. 2020, poz. 226, art. 2 pkt 2.

emphasize the development of students' creativity and innovative thinking. School reforms should be designed to foster critical thinking, promote creativity and joint undertakings. Whether reforms implemented in recent years may actually bring about a system capable of delivering such learning outcomes is, however, an entirely separate matter. While this paper, given its limited scope, merely signals this question, it is surely worth a more systematic and in-depth examination.

The education system should evolve. It must be reformed with the view to providing students with knowledge, social skills and attitudes crucial for their successful functioning in today's world. Reform proposals should be the subject of broad consultations of social partners, and the conclusions from said consultations should then be incorporated into the final shape of the reform. In this context, one needs to keep in mind that education is an area which should not be subjected to frequent, hastily prepared changes, as these might lead to numerous problems for all stakeholders: administrative supervisory organs, teachers, students and parents alike. Recent years have seen several examples of reforms that have, indeed, had predictable negative consequences, for instance when two classes graduated from primary schools at the end of the 2022/2023 school year. An essentially similar situation occurred in 2019, when secondary schools were forced to simultaneously recruit two or, in some cases, even three classes: one composed of students born in 2003 who had graduated from the now-defunct junior high schools, the second made up of youngsters born in 2004 who had graduated from the newly-reconstituted eight-grade primary schools, and around a dozen of thousands of pupils born in 2005 who had entered primary schools at the age of six. The problem was discussed, *inter alia*, in numerous publications[18] and during parliamentary question sessions[19]. The education system has a key role to play in developing young people's social competences, but it can only do that by adopting and consistently implementing a model which first garners the greatest possible approval and support, both among the society and the political elite. An optimal path towards such a situation would be to exclude

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[18] See more: K. Nowakowska, *Szkoły średnie będą pękać w szwach. Uczniowie mają nowe strategie, jak się do nich dostać*, 18.01.2023, https://serwisy.gazetaprawna.pl/edukacja/artykuly/8639893,rekrutacja-do-szkol-srednich-2023-liczba-miejsc-progi-punktowe.html (26.04.2023); P. Toborek, *Podwójny rocznik. Posłowie alarmują: będą problemy z rekrutacją do szkół*, 26.01.2023, https://www.portalsamorzadowy.pl/edukacja/podwojny-rocznik-poslowie-alarmuja-beda-problemy-z-rekrutacja-do-szkol,435979.html (26.04.2023).

[19] See more: *Interpelacja poselska nr 487 w sprawie zmian w systemie oświaty*, Sejm RP VIII kadencji; *Interpelacja poselska nr 14222 w sprawie sytuacji dzieci z roczników 2003 i 2004*, Sejm RP VIII kadencji; *Interpelacja poselska nr 36743 w sprawie przygotowania szkół ponadpodstawowych do rekrutacji na rok szkolny 2023/2024*, Sejm RP IX kadencji.

citizenship education from the scope of day-to-day political rivalry, and include a variety of stakeholders in the process of developing the system and the curriculum.

In summary, education can be defined as a *sine qua non* precondition for the development of civil society. As was stressed by Putnam, social networks do have their value, and a modern education system, designed to address the challenges of today, should reflect this reality. Cooperation, critical thinking, ability to function in a pluralist society, creativity and innovative thinking – these are some of the learning outcomes that are fully in line with the conditions necessary to build a functional civil society. Such societal model

> 'fulfils several roles: it limits the state's omnipotence, frequently complements its activity, and – through horizontal social structures and civic engagement – enhances democracy'[20].

The education system in Poland is ran by both the central government and local self-governments. It encompasses kindergartens, schools (primary, secondary, art schools), non-school education centres, lifelong education centres, vocational education centres, as well as counselling centres[21]. Such institutions can be established and ran 'by: 1) a local government unit; 2) other juridical person; 3) a natural person'[22]. Apart from running schools and other educational institutions, local government units can also take on other responsibilities regarding the education system. One example of such additional activity is an educational project entitled '*Constructing civil society*' which shall be discussed in more detail in the next part of this article.

The '*Constructing civil society*' project

The project was first implemented in 2021 and subsequently, with slight changes to its formula, re-launched for the second edition the following year. The analysis of the project's programming documents shows that the authors adopted a wide-ranging definition of citizenship education, seen as a vital element in the efforts to build civil society. The overview of the project states that creating a society

> 'that cooperates with the authorities in the implementation of a number of public service tasks requires the deepening of students' knowledge of human and citizen

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[20] I. Słodkowska, *Społeczeństwo obywatelskie na tle historycznego przełomu. Polska 1980–1989*, Warszawa 2006, pp. 50–51.

[21] *Ustawa z dnia 14 grudnia 2016 r. Prawo…*, art. 2.

[22] Ibidem, art. 8 ust. 2–3.

rights and freedoms, as well as the mechanisms of political participation. Even such a brief outline is enough to indicate how prominent citizenship education – understood as something more than a school subject taught for a handful of hours – should be in the education of our society, particularly the youth. We should adopt an interdisciplinary approach that encompasses knowledge, skills and social competences derived from academic areas such as sociology, psychology, law, political science, administration, history and political geography. It is precisely this comprehensive understanding of citizenship education that we suggest under the "*Constructing Civil Society*" project'[23].

The project's second edition, implemented in 2022, envisioned seven activities targeting the following five groups:
- primary school pupils, grades IV–VI,
- primary school pupils, grades VII–VIII,
- students of all types of secondary schools,
- primary and secondary school teachers,
- senior citizens.

As the above list suggests, the project was aimed at a broad audience, from primary school pupils to senior citizens. Activities were adjusted to match competence levels in each target group, with the common denominator being the deepening of civic competences and, thus, the fostering of civil society. Such an approach signals that the self-government of the Greater Poland Province is highly attuned to the issues of civic competences and keen to support the citizenship education for its populace.

The activity designed for the youngest target group, i.e., primary school pupils in grades IV through VI, was an art-and-photography competition. Participants were asked to take a photo or create a work of art that depicted any investment funded by the Greater Poland Province self-government. The idea was meant to give pupils an opportunity for artistic expression while also learning something about the self-government and its competences. The competition rules stated that its purpose was to popularise active participation in public life and make pupils aware of the importance of political participation for the functioning of a democratic state[24].

The second target group, i.e., primary school pupils in grades VII and VIII, was invited to a team-based citizenship education competition. However, the thematic scope of the competition went beyond the confines of the citizen-

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[23] *Budujemy społeczeństwo obywatelskie – omówienie projektu edukacyjnego*, https://www.umww.pl/artykuly/61912/pliki/20210616074349_budujemyspoeczestwoobywatelskie-skrypt.pdf (10.04.2023).

[24] *Regulamin Konkursu "Nasze – wielkopolskie. Inwestycje ułatwiające życie mieszkańców mojej gminy/miejscowości"*, https://www.umww.pl/artykuly/61912/pliki/20210616074403_regulaminkonkursugr.i.pdf (11.04.2023).

ship education subject curriculum, as it also encompassed knowledge and skills from other areas, including history, geography and Polish language. Therefore, the competition was interdisciplinary in character, as it integrated content from several different curricula. The objectives of the competition included engendering the sense of civic responsibility and respect for the state, popularising political participation, and systematizing pupils' knowledge of the genesis, evolution and contemporary understanding of civil society[25].

The competition encompassed four thematic segments corresponding to rounds that focused on the following issues[26]:
- democracy – its genesis, evolution and contemporary state;
- civil society – its genesis, importance, functions, and practical aspects in democratic and non-democratic regimes;
- human and citizen rights, freedoms and duties: their genesis, evolution and contemporary shape;
- democracy and political participation in Poland.

The rules envisioned a competition between three-strong teams. This way, participants were meant to not only deepen their knowledge, but also attain and develop competences needed for teamwork.

There were two activities addressed at secondary school students: a Conscious Citizen Contest – *#glosujedecyduje* (a loose translation into English could be: *#myvotemyvoice*), and a tournament of Oxford debates entitled 'Decentralization and the functioning of local government units in Poland'. To join the Contest, participants had to first film a short video promoting informed participation in general and local elections. As was stressed in the regulations, the purpose of the video was to 'promote the notion of active and informed electoral participation, and the knowledge about the functioning of civil society'[27]. The second activity, i.e., the series of debates, was aimed at 'developing secondary school students' ability to speak in public and argue their point'[28]. The debates were structured into a playoff-style competition[29]:

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[25] *Regulamin interdyscyplinarnego konkursu dla uczniów klas VII i VIII szkół podstawowych "Liga Przedmiotowa Wiedzy o Społeczeństwie Budujemy społeczeństwo obywatelskie"*, https://www.umww.pl/artykuly/61912/pliki/20210616074407_regulaminligaprzedmiotowa.pdf (11.04.2023).

[26] Ibidem.

[27] *Regulamin III Wielkopolskiego Konkursu Świadomego Obywatelstwa* #glosujedecyduje, http://pracownia.cdn.leszno.pl/data/files/attachments/regulamin-konkursu-glosujedecyduje-II-ed.pdf (11.04.2023).

[28] *Regulamin Konkursu Liga Debat Oksfordzkich Budujemy Społeczeństwo Obywatelskie*, http://pracownia.cdn.leszno.pl/data/files/attachments/regulamin%20konkursu%20Liga%20Debat%20Oksfordzkich%20II%20edycja.pdf (11.04.2023).

[29] Ibidem.

- eight first-round debates, with winners progressing to quarter-finals (the thesis under argument: civic budget is an effective tool for citizens' participation in the functioning of local government in Poland);
- quarter-final debates, with winners progressing to semi-finals (thesis: the 1999 introduction of counties as the second level of Poland's administrative division was a positive development);
- semi-final debates, with winners progressing to the final (thesis: decentralization of public authority ensures optimal implementation of public service tasks);
- the final debate (thesis: Province Executive Committee Chairmen should be chosen in direct elections).

Oxford debates can and should be an indispensable part of the education process. By being exposed to and debating different points of view, and examining an issue through the prism of diverse values, we perfect our social and civic competences. Democratic society implies pluralism, diversity, the right to support various political parties or candidates. Diversity of opinions and attitudes is

> 'something natural in democracy, which is why we must be continuously engaged in dialogue and seek solutions that can connect, rather that divide our society'[30].

Therefore, the education system should prepare young people to live in such a society by fostering openness and respect for the dignity of each individual. The ability to discuss and argue different points – which is the exact skill that Oxford debates develop – should be a vital component included in the education process.

> 'An Oxford debate is, first and foremost, an exercise in oratory and arguing a point, its other purpose being to create a space conducive to presenting and discussing various arguments. Debates are inspiring lessons in public speaking and teach precision in the use language. (…) Their great advantage is the fact they teach analytical thinking and encourage one to empathize with the situation of one's opponent. (…) They hold educational value, which is why it is imperative that we do everything in our powers to popularise and develop them'[31].

Another target group of the project were primary and secondary school teachers, for whom two activities were designed. The first one was a competition for the best citizenship education lesson script, with the focus on the work

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[30] *Nasi politycy nie chcą się dzielić władzą z obywatelami*, https://instytutsprawobywatelskich.pl/nasi-politycy-nie-chca-sie-dzielic-wladza-z-obywatelami/ (15.04.2023).

[31] N. Lubik-Reczek, *Debaty oksfordzkie jako narzędzie wspierania edukacji*, [in:] M. Rachwał (ed.), *Uwarunkowania i mechanizmy partycypacji politycznej*, Poznań 2017, pp. 120–121.

of the Greater Poland Province self-government units[32]. The second came in the form of training webinars, with participation being recognised as a component of compulsory professional development. Webinars encompassed the following topics:

- elections as a conventional form of political participation,
- determinants and effects of electoral participation,
- dimensions of a contemporary civil society.

The last target group, i.e., senior citizens, were invited to take part in a competition that encompassed subjects covered by three webinars. After attending the webinars, participants were tasked with answering a series of questions through a form[33].

In summary, the initiative implemented by the Executive Committee of the Greater Poland Province sought to address primary and secondary school students, as well as the teaching staff of these educational institutions. Hence, the project prioritised individuals involved in the education system, although one should not overlook the activities envisioned for senior citizens. Each edition of the project ended with a final gala, where an invited guest delivered a lecture on a relevant subject. In 2022, the lecture was devoted to '*Forms of citizens' participation in the functioning of local government units*'.

Conclusions

Local government units in Poland are responsible for implementing a number of tasks, including those related to the education system. This is how local authorities can influence education – an aspect that is particularly crucial for the process of building civil society. The institution of school itself opens up some pathways for participation (for instance in the form of student councils), but the role of education is far greater than just that. It is through education that the youth should acquire competences necessary to create a functional civil society. In this respect, we need to be mindful of the need to prepare young people for living in today's world, characterised by complexity, diversity, and the presence of multiple opinions and attitudes. This is why it is absolutely

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[32] *Regulamin Konkursu dla Nauczycieli Budujemy Społeczeństwo Obywatelskie*, http://pracownia.cdn.leszno.pl/data/files/attachments/Regulamin%20konkursu%20dla%20nauczycieli%20II%20edycja.pdf (15.04.2023).

[33] *Regulamin Konkursu dla Seniorów Budujemy Społeczeństwo Obywatelskie*, http://pracownia.cdn.leszno.pl/data/files/attachments/Regulamin%20konkursu%20dla%20senior%C3%B3w%20%20II%20edycjaa.pdf (15.04.2023).

vital to develop the ability to debate, and foster respect for people espousing different values.

As was mentioned previously, local government has an impact on the work of the education system, but the central government also enjoys a certain degree of competences in this respect. It is at the central level where a number of key decisions are made that create the framework for the Polish schools to operate in. One example of that is the issue of curricula and the changes which have significantly hindered schools' ability to deliver citizenship education at the secondary education level. Citizenship education as a school subject played a key role in the effort to shape civil society.

Local government units may undertake additional activities to pursue tasks deemed as priorities. The '*Constructing civil society*' educational project is a case in point. The authorities of the Greater Poland Province implemented a series of initiatives aimed at engaging the population and fostering civil society. In times when citizenship education as part of the formal education system is in crisis, such undertakings are particularly important and much needed. Through them, local self-government can fill the gaps in areas which are not addressed sufficiently by other public authorities.

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