



## Civic Councils for Education. Critical discourse analysis

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The aim of this article is to describe the genesis and activities of the Civic Council for Education project and to present it as an activity leading to the development and possible changes in the socialisation of Polish educational policy. The undertaken analysis concerns the reconstruction of knowledge of the society about the professional situation of teachers and their attitude towards current educational reality. The considerations were presented using critical discourse analysis.

**KEY WORDS:** Civic Council for Education, education system, democracy, activation of local communities

### Introduction

Despite the fact that since 1989 the issues of changes related to decentralisation and socialisation of the education system have been discussed in Poland, from the perspective of past years it should be stated that in practice successive political parties did not care about strengthening grassroots initiatives in this respect. As Bogusław Śliwerski notes, *over the past quarter-century, almost every ruling political party has confirmed its image as authorities turning away from citi-*

*zens, anti-solidarity, tolerating pathology in its own structures and generating it in public life.*<sup>1</sup> Since the political transformation, one of the inhibitors of Polish democracy is education because the authorities of the Ministry of National Education have done for years everything to undermine efforts made by some teachers, parents, as well as representatives of the scientific community, efforts to change the functioning and management of educational institutions. Instead of social dialogue, authoritarian actions of politicians that discourage educational institutions from participating in decision-making processes and in shaping education policy are performed. When analysing the problem of the lack of real social engagement of teachers, students, parents and other educational organisations in creating and developing the education system, attention should be paid to the need to introduce changes in this respect. According to the assumptions of the concept of Amitai Etzioni, the main source of change and progress are active communities based on the principles of cooperation and collaboration. The main component of community activity is intra-group solidarity, thanks to consistent actions aimed at solving problems, people involved in a given process not only acquire specific professional and social competencies, but also gain faith in their own strength and have a real impact on the course of events.<sup>2</sup> These assumptions can be referred to the labour strike of teachers, which in April 2019 included over 70% of educational institutions in the country, as well as to the grassroots initiative of the Civic Council for Education (NOoE), which led to discussions on the conditions of the education system and the professional status of teachers.

The aim of this article is to describe the genesis and activities of the Civic Council for Education project and to present it as an activity leading to the development and possible changes in the socialisation of Polish educational policy. The undertaken analysis concerns

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<sup>1</sup> B. Śliwerski, „Kryzys oświatowej demokracji w świetle makropolitycznych badań pedagogicznych”, *Przegląd Pedagogiczny*, 2/2016, p. 314.

<sup>2</sup> A. Etzioni, *Aktywne społeczeństwo XXI wieku*, Zakład Wydawniczy NOMOS, Warsaw, 2013, pp. 225–234.

the reconstruction of knowledge of the society about the professional situation of teachers and their attitude towards current educational reality. The considerations were presented by means of critical discourse analysis that is applicable in both the humanities and social sciences. According to Teun van Dijk, the possibility of using critical discourse analysis in research results from existing, often “urgent”, “hurting” social issues that need to be resolved. Therefore, on the basis of critical discourse analysis, it is possible to resort to various theories, descriptions, methods depending on their “suitability for the sociopolitical purpose”.<sup>3</sup> The justification for the selected method is also the approach of Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer, who believe that every fragment of social life is “discursive”, or involved in the relationship of power, arranged according to some ideology and as such may be the subject of reflection of the researcher associated with critical discourse analysis.<sup>4</sup> In the article, press releases concerning the Polish nationwide strike action conducted by teachers in 2019 and a report summarizing the NOoE activity were analysed.

### **Civic Council for Education as a form of building agreement in a conflict situation**

Education in Poland has been politically involved for years, and with the transfer of power to Law and Justice party in 2015, the policy of centralised rule in education policy has continued. Its victims are various types of institutions and professional groups, including school and teachers. Curricula, objectives and contents of teaching are subordinated to right-wing conservative ideology and the political vision of the state, and teachers feel more and more ignored and

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<sup>3</sup> T. van Dijk, “Principles of Critical Discourse Analysis”, *Discourse & Society*, 4/1993, p. 252.

<sup>4</sup> After: K. Biskupska, “Analiza dyskursu i krytyczna analiza dyskursu”, [in:] *Współczesne teorie społeczne: w kręgu ujęć paradygmatycznych*, (eds.) M. Szczepański, A. Śliz, Wyd. Uniwersytetu Opolskiego, 2014, p. 377.

disgusted with their professional situation. In March 2019, as a result of disagreement on a requested rise in wages, the president of the Polish Teachers' Union, Sławomir Broniarz, said: "Teachers feel cheated. It turned out that they are a group that is not worth any investment. And they are the core of the public education system. The state should take care of its maintenance and development. Meanwhile, the Law and Justice treats education as a ball and chain. Ignoring our postulates, they prove that they are interested neither in the future of education workers, nor of the one of students and their parents".<sup>5</sup> The consequence of the anti-democratic activities of the government, including to a large extent changes introduced from 2015 by the Minister of National Education Anna Zalewska (from July 2, 2019, a member of the 9th European Parliament), was the strike action started on April 8, 2019. Its organisers were the Polish Teachers' Union and the Free Trade Union "Solidarity-Education". The strike was preceded by a referendum organized by the Polish Teachers' Union, in which teachers from approximately 20,000 schools, school complexes and kindergartens took part. 15,549 institutions (approximately 78%) voted for the strike.<sup>6</sup> The strike demands formulated by the Polish Teachers' Union included: a rise in wages of PLN 1000 for pedagogical staff, increased expenditure on education, a change in the assessment of the work and career path of teachers, dismissal of Minister Anna Zalewska. The protest action took place in the period of state examinations that is on 10–12 April (the lower-secondary school leaving exam) and 15–17 April (the primary school leaving exam), and the examinations were conducted largely thanks to the involvement of people other than teachers (parents, priests, members of local governments etc.). Because of the approaching date of the secondary school leav-

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<sup>5</sup> A. Ambroziak, *To nie będzie strajk ostrzegawczy. Nauczyciele czują się oszukani. Jeżeli nie teraz, to nigdy*, <https://oko.press/to-nie-bedzie-strajk-ostrzegawczy-nauczyciele-czuja-sie-oszukani-jezeli-nie-teraz-to-nigdy/> (access on: 08.08.2019).

<sup>6</sup> <https://polskatimes.pl/strajk-nauczycieli-2019-zawieszony-do-kiedy-czy-3004-sa-lekcje-w-szkolach-mapa-postulaty-czy-matury-sie-odbeda/ga/c1-13749626/zd/32825298>, (access on: 12.08.2019).

ing exam on April 23, the National Inter-School Strike Committee participating in the protest appealed to the striking teachers to organise meetings of teaching staff to award marks to students of the secondary school graduation class. On April 25, the president of the Polish Teachers' Union, Sławomir Broniarz announced the suspension of the strike from April 27, 2019. At the same time, he rejected the possibility of signing an agreement with the government, as well as participation in discussions based on the "Educational Round Table" proposed by Prime Minister, Mateusz Morawiecki. The representatives of the strike organisers did not take part in the debate organised on April 26, as well as in the following ones scheduled for April 30, May 10 and June 17, 2019. The described conflict situation was not finally resolved, and the strike action was suspended until September 2019.

In the opinion of Andrzej Olubiński, the type and dynamics of the dispute, as well as the level of pedagogical awareness of individuals or groups ultimately affect the type of attitude which will be shaped in a conflict situation, while conflict situations are defined by the author as those that "can shape different types of behaviour and attitudes: from anti-creative and submissive, through destructive and aggressive, up to creative and emancipatory".<sup>7</sup> Standing in opposition to the changes introduced in the education system, teachers and representatives of educational environment adopted a creative and emancipatory attitude and decided to organise discussions among themselves about the changes which are necessary to be introduced. In this way, a citizens' initiative to establish the Polish nationwide campaign called Civic Council for Education (NOoE) appeared. It was supposed to be held in the form of local, intersdisciplinary meetings taking place at a similar time in many places around the country. The councils were to focus on the current situation and condition of education, a common reflection on

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<sup>7</sup> A. Olubiński, *Aktywność i działanie jako forma edukacji do samorealizacji czy zniewolenia? W świetle założeń edukacji humanistycznej i krytyczno-emancypacyjnej*, Oficyna Wydawnicza Impuls, Cracow, 2018, p. 93.

the condition of the modern school and the needed directions of change (during meetings moderators should focus the attention on five key questions). The organisers defined the councils as direct conversations:

- taking place in public space, but possibly close to the participants' place of residence,
- regarding public matters,
- structured,
- conducted despite differences of opinion and in the search for what unites,
- performed with respect for each other,
- allowing for the participation of everyone for whom the topic is important and regardless of their formal position,
- taking place at similar time in numerous places in Poland.<sup>8</sup>

The rules that apply during meetings are simplicity of means, grassroots nature, supra-party nature, voluntary engagement, process transparency, rule clarity, predictability, format uniformity, decentralisation, concern for reliability, conclusiveness and efficiency.

The initiators of the meetings were teachers from all over Poland, members of the JaNauczyciel and Protest! groups operating on one of the social networks. The first meeting of the team and the decision to start the NOoE was made on March 2, 2019. Then, on March 25, the website and Facebook profile of the program were created. The debates started before **the undertaken strike action (the first one took place on April 1, 2019 in the Lauder-Morasha School in Warsaw), were conducted during the strike and after its suspension (the one before last took place on June 18 in the Tadeusz Rejtan General Secondary School No. 6 in Warsaw, and the last summarising one on June 21 during 29th Malta Festival in Poznań).**

The goals set for NOoE participants are:

- explaining the intentions behind the decision about the strike and its form in direct contact with students and parents,

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<sup>8</sup> *Civic Council for Education. A preliminary summary – June 2019*, <https://www.naradaobywatelska.pl/>, (access on: 12.08.2019).

- honestly building understanding and agreement that goes beyond the environment of teachers themselves,
- going beyond the dispute of a purely wage-related nature (a strike postulate) and raising its broader (systemic) and deeper (dignity-related) nature,
- reflecting together on the kind of education and school which is expected by different environments,
- building the broadest possible constructive interest in systemic postulates concerning education,
- creating space for the civic experience of an authentic, collective conversation on public matters,
- showing that in important public matters civic and grassroots action can bring meaningful, constructive and democratically legitimised conclusions,
- strengthening the school as a place to collectively reflect on public matters.<sup>9</sup>

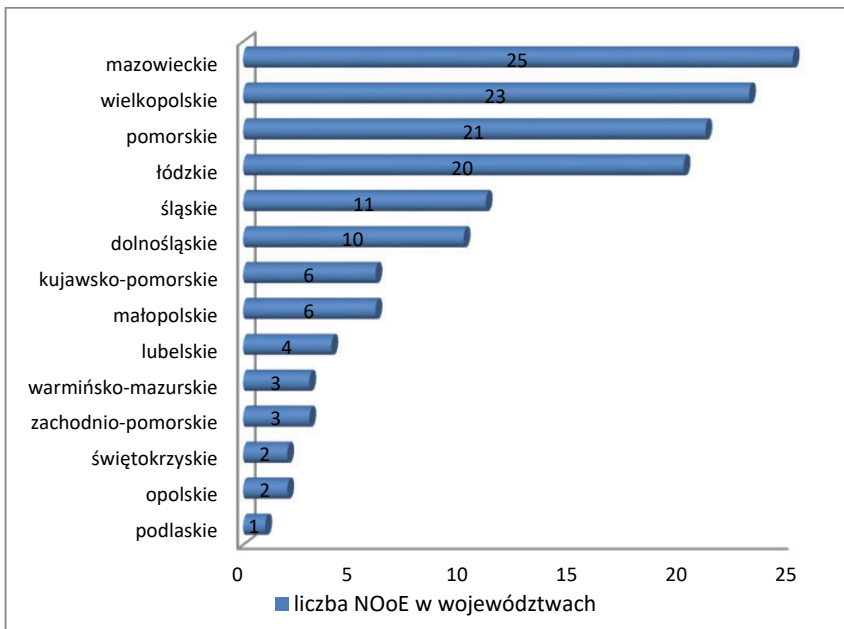
Detailed information on how to organise debates (the recommended method is *world cafe* allowing for a meaningful conversation of many people) and what topics to raise during the discussion, was posted by the organisers on the NOoE website (<https://www.naradaobywatelska.pl/>).

Each meeting should be reported via the website and with the use of an Internet form, and after its completion, the conclusions and documentation from the meeting should be submitted. Based on the submitted materials and data, in June 2019 the first report was concerning the organisation of debates and postulates submitted during their course, was published. Available data show that between April and June 141 meetings took place of an average duration of 2.5 hours. The estimated number of participants was 4400, including 38% teachers, 28% parents, 24% students. Most meetings took place in Gdańsk (16), Poznań (13), Warsaw (13) and Łódź (11). Over half of the meetings were held in schools, other places were

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<sup>9</sup> *Civic Council for Education. A preliminary summery – June 2019*, [https://www.naradaobywatelska.pl/\\_z](https://www.naradaobywatelska.pl/_z) (access on: 12/08/2019).

libraries, cultural centres, universities, kindergartens, social organisations seats, and cafes. The prepared report includes also the conclusions of the five discussed issues. In the topic *What does the school teach? What does it prepare for?* the opinions of the participants of the debates show that there is imbalance between three aspects of student development which are: knowledge, skills and attitudes.



**Figure 1.** The number of NOoEs in individual voivodeships organised in the period from April to June 2019 (<https://www.naradaobywatelska.pl/>)

Modern school is focused on knowledge at the expense of developing skills and shaping attitudes. In addition, attention was drawn to the need to modify the general education program and adapt it to the psychophysical capabilities of children and youth, change the method and scope of teaching, and orientate the learning



process towards the development of students' passions and interests, change the system of the assessment and motivation of students/teachers, introduce ecological education and global education as obligatory elements of teaching, as well as a depart from subject-oriented teaching in favour of a multidisciplinary one.

The second discussed issue concerned the following questions: *How do we teach and raise? How do we motivate to learn? What experience do we provide?*

This topic was dominated by two main elements which, in the opinion of the participants, constitute the school life. These are external examinations and the general education program. According to teachers, the reasons of the subject-oriented approach to students and education process are related to excessively extensive school bureaucracy, to the absence of verification of predispositions and competencies for the profession, and to permanent changes in the process of professional promotion. The situation could be changed by such activities as a rise in wages and raising the prestige of the teacher profession by the establishment of the Teachers' Chamber constituting a professional self-government.

In the third question concerning *a role of the school in the local community*, it was noticed that the school does not develop a sense of civic responsibility or patriotic attitude, hence the low involvement of young people in social and local life. The institution itself in the local context is perceived primarily as a place (building), which often results in negative associations of the students. The discussions highlighted the need to increase the impact of the school community on the selection of the headmaster and to develop school autonomy and self-governance, as well as the need to change the rules for financing educational tasks. Postulates of the formation of the National Council for Education, the obligatory appointment of a school board in each institution, as well as the increase in the influence of local governments on the organization of education, appeared.

Good relationships are the basis of effective cooperation and this was the subject of another issue raised during the debates. *The shape*

*of internal relationships in a triangle: teachers – students – parents* at school was analysed. Attention was paid to the problem of mutual burdening with responsibility, loading with tasks (mainly of teachers by parents and of students by teachers), lack of respect between teacher and student, and teacher and parent, lack of effective interpersonal communication (members of the school community do not talk to each other, they lack ability to honestly express needs and emotions).

The last discussed topic was *the position of teachers and expectations from this professional group*. The conclusions of the discussion are not optimistic. Teachers are not respected, and the negative, disrespectful attitude of parents towards them is often shared with students. Lack of authority translates into lack of trust, and low wage strengthens the sense of disrespect from society, which in turn demotivates and hinders relationships with students and their parents. Teachers indicate the economic compulsion to work in many schools. The hurry associated with teaching the general education program and the amount of non-teaching duties do not leave them time for individual work with the student and their own development, and the bureaucracy overloads them physically and mentally. In addition, teachers indicate the fact that more and more people who start this profession are unprepared, especially in the field of psychological and pedagogical competencies, and they complain about the lack of so-called “screening” of candidates for studies and later for work at school.

The described data were taken from the first, preliminary report prepared on the basis of data obtained from civic councils taking place from April to June 2019.<sup>10</sup> The organisers declare to develop the full version of the report and provide public access to the collected material. They want to promote the most important conclusions in the environments involved in introducing changes to the education system, including the NOoE partners and participants,

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<sup>10</sup> *Civic Council for Education. A preliminary summary – June 2019*, <https://www.naradaobywatelska.pl/>, (access on: 12.08.2019).

teachers associated in trade unions and outside them, local governments, expert communities, non-governmental organisations, and government institutions. From September, the action is to be continued and expanded to include further issues under discussion.

## **The NOoE social activity as a source of planned change and development of education**

Interpretation of the NOoE activities as a source of change and development of education will be made on the basis of modern concepts of organisation and principles of functioning of local communities. Based on the quantity, nature and dynamics of contradictions and conflicts occurring in various areas of life, as well as the attitude to such social processes and phenomena, it is possible to judge the quality and level of democracy in a given education system.<sup>11</sup> Events that have been taking place in the Polish education system for a long time have clearly shown that participation is a sham game of the authority with citizens, which involves representatives of social environments in artificial organisational forms, so that they do not have any impact on its decisions. That is why the NOoE project is an important social initiative that has appeared in the arena of educational policy. The action can be considered in the category of civic experience of an authentic, collective conversation, which shows that in important public matters, civic and grassroots initiatives can bring constructive results. A. Etzoni in his theory proves that active communities are the main source of change, development and social progress. Being active means awareness of having control over own behaviour, but also the external environment, and activation and application of the natural potential and commitment of the community to satisfy both their own and general needs and interests allows for the change of the reality. According to the au-

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<sup>11</sup> A. Olubiński, *Aktywność i działanie jako forma edukacji do samorealizacji czy zniewolenia? W świetle założeń edukacji humanistycznej i krytyczno-emancypacyjnej*, Oficyna Wydawnicza Impuls, Cracow, 2018, p. 94.

thor, activity resulting from awareness, knowledge, goals and methods of their implementation means strong motivation and involvement of social groups in the processes of change, as well as in the search and overcoming barriers that inhibit development.<sup>12</sup> Based on the Etzoni's theory, it is possible to analyse actions taken by teachers, students, parents and other representatives of education-related communities, which resulted in previous meetings within the framework of the NOoE. The initiative related to the establishment of the initiative and activities undertaken by the NOoE have shown the importance of mobilising resources and motivating members of a given community, as well as using forces present in the community. According to Marek S. Szczepański and Weronika Ślęzak-Tazbir, local communities are the main subject and animator of the process of change called local or endogenous development because this type of development uses the internal potential of the community.<sup>13</sup> It is assumed that the necessary condition for such development is the participation (engagement) of individuals and communities. According to Andrzej Niesporek and Kazimiera Wódz, the local community is territorially, but also socially, a specific "place" for the development of various forms of individual activity.<sup>14</sup> In many of its definitions, there are three permanent elements: territory, social interactions and mental bond.

As it has already been mentioned, in order to organise the local community and introduce changes, it is necessary to use the local resources and energy of its members, therefore the establishment of the NOoE and forms of its activities can be considered as organising the local community referred to as *comprehensive community initiatives* (CCI). It combines the simultaneous operation of many entities

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<sup>12</sup> A. Etzoni, *Aktywne społeczeństwo XXI wieku*, Zakład Wydawniczy NOMOS, Warsaw, 2013, pp. 20–27.

<sup>13</sup> M.S. Szczepański, W. Ślęzak-Tazbir, „Region i społeczność lokalna w perspektywie socjologicznej”, *Górnśląskie Studia Socjologiczne*, Seria Nowa 1, 2010, p. 17.

<sup>14</sup> A. Niesporek, K. Wódz, „Grupy zmarginalizowane, przedsiębiorczość społeczna, praca socjalna – strategie rozwoju społeczności lokalnych”, [in:] *W stronę aktywnej polityki społecznej*, (eds.) T. Kaźmierczak, M. Rymsha, Wyd. Instytut Spraw Publicznych, Warsaw, 2003, p. 123.

both within the local community and external ones to comprehensively solve social problems. The desired changes have a wide range, covering all sectors of the community life – a social, educational, economic, and cultural one, and focus on strengthening members of the community as well as organisations and institutions. One of the main goals of the CCI is to shape new forms of social participation and build social capital. These activities are aimed at involving members of the local community to actively participate in introducing changes after prior determination of needs and problems and formulation of ideas and projects to solve them. It is important to build relationships between community members, as well as to introduce new, participation-oriented community governance rules.

Such procedure favours the formation and development of human capital (individual abilities to cope with various life situations), social capital (various forms of local social life and civil society) and local capital (institutional infrastructure).<sup>15</sup>

When analysing the nature and direction of activities undertaken by the NOoE, it is worth mentioning the importance of social capital, defined by Francis Fukuyama as “as a set of informal values and ethical norms common for members of a given group and enabling them to cooperate effectively”.<sup>16</sup> According to the author, a high level of social capital is associated with the functioning of a healthy civil state and it facilitates:

- establishing cooperation thanks to the belief that people can count on reciprocity in the future,
- collective solving of local problems,
- use of material (things, money) and intangible resources (information, contacts, participation in power, prestige) available to friends.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> *W stronę aktywnej polityki społecznej*, ed. T. Kaźmierczak, M. Rymsza, Wyd. Instytut Spraw Publicznych, Warsaw, 2003, pp. 127–129.

<sup>16</sup> F. Fukuyama, „Kapitał społeczny”, [in:] *Kultura ma znaczenie*, (eds.) L.E. Harrison, S.P. Huntington, Zysk i S-ka, Cracow, 2003, p. 169.

<sup>17</sup> F. Fukuyama, „Kapitał społeczny”, [in:] *Kultura ma znaczenie*, (eds.) L.E. Harrison, S.P. Huntington, Zysk i S-ka, Cracow, 2003, p. 170.

In addition, a high level of social capital translates into a greater number of undertaken activities, and repetitive behaviours begin to function as norms of conduct or patterns set out for this community, which in turn can promote progress and development. A norm may determine that fact that members of a given community start to unite to counteract emerging problems and pathology.

## Conclusion

The process of the development and stimulation of local communities usually leads to mutually supportive initiatives and activities, and as a consequence to genuine participation in making decisions important for development. Social participation and citizen involvement is an important indicator of democracy. Community actions such as the NOoE referring to dialogue, aimed at resolving disputes and conflicts, related to the implementation of common goals, needs and values have causative power. Therefore, the initiative of civic councils as a grassroots action may in the future lead to a weakening of centralism and statism in education management, freeing of education from politics and ideologization, or broadening of the autonomy of institutions. Bearing in mind the long-term crisis of Polish education, the emergence of local movements and initiatives such as the NOoE is of particular importance. This is a direct response to the resourcelessness of the central state administration in solving social problems. The transformation of territorial communities into empowered local communities is, according to many experts, one of the ways leading to the reconstruction of civil society. Among the strategies for organising and stimulating social groups, meetings under the NOoE project are an important step towards building new relationships and creating the foundations for a partnership for participatory democracy. This is the beginning of the road, but the effects can lead to new quality. Undoubtedly, the NOoE initiative brings together people who share a common goal, and the actions they undertake trigger the development poten-

tial, mobilise to undertake prosocial behaviour and strengthen the position of school as a place of debate important for the local community. The activity of teachers to achieve the goals and fulfil the needs of their professional environment is associated with the development of self-confidence, and the struggle for change brings benefits to the whole environment. Based on the analysis of the activities of the NOoE today, the benefits include: building an agreement that goes beyond the teacher community, making society aware of the broader (systemic) and deeper (dignity-related) nature of the wage dispute, indicating what education and which schools are expected by different environments (not only by the teacher community), and raising consciousness that the norm is a situation, when "a teacher is an artisan, an artist who performs their role responsibly and is not a cog in the machine of a centrally controlled system".<sup>18</sup> Without the actions such as the NOoE, the crisis of the Polish education system will deepen, because the more standardisation and centralisation in education, the less chance for human development, democracy and civil society.

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<sup>18</sup> B. Śliwerski, „Pedagogika (w) demokracji”, *Rocznik Pedagogiczny*, vol. 37, 2014, p. 27.

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## Number of NOoEs in individual voivodeships

Masovian Voivodeship

Greater Poland Voivodeship

Pomeranian Voivodeship

Łódź Voivodeship

Silesian Voivodeship

Lower Silesian Voivodeship

Kuyavian-Pomeranian Voivodeship

Lesser Poland Voivodeship

Lublin Voivodeship

Warmian-Masurian Voivodeship

West Pomeranian Voivodeship

Świętokrzyskie Voivodeship

Opole Voivodeship

Podlaskie Voivodeship