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Geisler, Robert; Potracki, Michał

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Robert Geisler¹, Michał Potracki²

Social Capital and the Natural Disasters The Racibórz Case Study

Abstract

The concept of social capital has been recognized as one of the key aspects of public administration and is an essential part of local urban policy. From the point of view of the inhabitants, it conveys a sense of subjectivity, achievement, participation and co-government. Even more significant is that social capital will be characterized by a measurable impact in terms of civic engagement in local affairs. Racibórz was selected as a case study due to the city's proximity to the border. On the one hand, it is regarded as having a long tradition of self-government, self-organization, belonging to different legal and administrative systems throughout history. On the other hand, however, the city is characterized as having a marginal position in the territory and in the administrative structures of the country and the region. All these factors have, over the course of history, given rise to inhabitants' behavioral patterns and created the basic forms and structures of civil society and/or social capital. Based on qualitative and ethnographic field studies, the authors present the experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic phenomena, which is changing the structures of social capital in Racibórz by reducing/destroying it and ask the question how it can be rebuilt in the future. The aim of the article is to present one of the current challenges for urban policy in Poland: social participation, especially in the

¹ Institute of Political Science and Administration, University of Opole, Opole, Poland, e-mail: rgeisler@uni.opole.pl, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0218-980X>

² Independent researcher, e-mail: mpotracki@gmail.com, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2842-7167>

context of the concept of social capital, in the town of Racibórz at the time of the (post) COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: social capital, COVID-19 pandemic, Racibórz, non-governmental organizations

JEL Classification Codes: L30, L31

Jak odbudować kapitał społeczny w dobie (post) pandemii COVID-19? Przypadek Raciborza

Abstrakt

Pojęcie kapitału społecznego zostało uznane za jeden z kluczowych aspektów zarządzania publicznego i stanowi istotny element lokalnej polityki miejskiej. Z punktu widzenia mieszkańców stanowi o poczuciu ich podmiotowości, sprawstwa, współdecydowania i współrządzenia, ale przede wszystkim ma wymierny skutek w postaci obywatelskich praktyk zaangażowania w sprawy lokalne. Racibórz jako studium przypadku zostało wybrane ze względu na przygraniczny charakter miasta. Z jednej strony jest to zbiorowość o długiej tradycji samorządowej, samoorganizacji, przynależności do różnych porządków prawno-administracyjnych i gospodarczych w historii, a z drugiej o marginalnej pozycji w przestrzeni jak i strukturach administracyjnych kraju i regionu. Wszystkie te czynniki wykreowały w historii wzory zachowań mieszkańców w postaci oddolnych struktur społeczeństwa obywatelskiego czy kapitału społecznego. W oparciu o badania terenowe – jakościowe, etnograficzne. Autorzy przedstawiają doświadczenia pandemii COVID-19 zmieniające struktury kapitału społecznego w Raciborzu w postaci jego ograniczenia/zniszczenia, a następnie sposobów jego odbudowania. Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie jednego z aktualnych wyzwań dla polityki miejskiej w Polsce, jakim jest partycypacja społeczna, w szczególności w kontekście koncepcji kapitału społecznego, w Raciborzu w dobie (post) pandemii COVID-19.

Słowa kluczowe: kapitał społeczny, pandemia COVID-19, Racibórz, organizacje pozarządowe

Kody klasyfikacji JEL: L30, L31

In early 2020, the increased incidence of coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 became known worldwide. A yet unknown variant for coronavirus researchers and doctors triggered panic and led to political decisions on restrictions in the form of basic citizen activities or lockdowns, i.e. closures of companies, public authorities or public institutions. At different times and in different places, depending on the incidence and performance of the health system at the state level, politicians in many countries have decided to implement strict measures. Such unprecedented events have also

affected the functioning of local communities, such as urban communities, in particular self-organization or bottom-up social activities referred to in the literature as civil society or social capital.

The aim of the article is to present one of the current challenges for urban policy in Poland: social capital built by inhabitants and local authorities in Racibórz at the time of the (post) COVID-19 pandemic era. One of the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic era has been to limit or even stop public participation defined as social movements, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) activities, as well as informal common activities in the neighborhood. The community in Racibórz was well-known from building social capital and social participation activities in history. This article examines the selected issues of the concept of social capital, which has been researched for many years by many scholars from different communities and cultures, and illustrates the specific nature of citizens' commitment to the common good that results from their social ties. The specific case of the urban community – Racibórz in the Silesian Voivodeship of Poland – was chosen on the basis of the criteria of the so-called medium-sized city and, at the same time, the economically and administratively peripheral city.

Social capital – theoretical framework

Social participation has been recognized as one of the key aspects of local democracy and public governance and is defined as an integral part of any local urban policy (Elster 1998, Pateman 1968). Local authorities use them for the public administration of their territory and for the public policies designed at the local level. From the inhabitants' perspective, it is a sense of subjectivity, achievement, co-determination and co-government. Much more important, however, is that it has a measurable impact in terms of civic engagement in local affairs, decision-making and implementation of concrete tasks (Baerenholdt, Aarsaether 2002, Borgonovi, Andrieu 2020, Dolfisma, Dannreuther 2003, Grootaert, van Bastelaer 2002, Krishna, Shrader 1999, Lin 2001, Lowndes, Wilson 2001, Mohan, Mohan 2002, Mouritsen 2001, Nahapiet, Ghoshal, 1998, Narayan, Woolcock 2000, Nielsen 2003, Pitas, Ehmer 2020, Portes, Mooney, 2002, Skidmore 2001, Trigilia 2001, Trutkowski, Mandes 2005, Woolcock 1998). In the scientific literature, the concept of participation is closely linked to the concepts of (local) civil society and social capital. Both terms have been well described and diagnosed in the scientific literature and have been incorporated into research at national, regional or local level. This article selects the latter term for analysis because of its usefulness for medium-sized urban communities.

Social capital has been the subject of the research interests in different areas in the social sciences for decades. The main concepts were suggested by Pierre Bourdieu (1986), James Coleman (1988, 1990), Francis Fukuyama (1996, 2000) and Robert Putnam (1993, 1995). Among the many definitions proposed by different Authors, for analysis in this research project, classical approaches of Putnam and Fukuyama were selected. For Putnam, social capital is defined as a resource that includes institutions, relationships, attitudes, and values that govern the interaction between individuals for economic and social development. In other words, social capital includes features of social life such as networks, norms of reciprocity and trust, which make it easier for the actors of collective life to become active together. Although Fukuyama investigated the relationship between social capital and economic growth, for many researchers it linked the concept of social capital with the concept civil society, which forms the basis for functioning liberal and economic institutions. In this respect, civil society is an area of free associations and communities that have formed and are working against bureaucracy and centralization. It is worth mentioning that the concept of social capital was proposed in the second half of the 20th century, after which it dominated the world of social sciences at the turn of century. The last twenty years have simply been a repetition of previous definitions that have been applied to research in different parts of the world or in connection with different events such as the pandemic (Borgonovi, Andrieu 2020, Elgar, Stefaniak, Wohl 2020, Pitas and Ehmer 2020).

A common feature of different definitions of social capital concept is the statement that it is a fundamental resource, which helps to achieve objectives more efficiently and thus to improve living conditions in its various aspects (social, economic, educational, etc.). Furthermore, not only is the popularity of the term in research and analysis remarkable, but also the methodological and thematic diversity of such concept implementation.

It should be remembered that the concept of social capital has been criticized as a resource of communities or social groups or as a social process in organizations or even in larger communities. It mainly concerned the tautology of definitions, the difficulty of testing hypotheses about causality or the results of the phenomena. However, in this paper, it assumes that the phenomenon of social capital exists in particular social groups, was created among them in the historical process, could continue through years/or even ages, develop and/or decline and, most importantly, it could be the impact of external factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic era on it.

Methodology

The paper is based on the application of qualitative research methods such as: analysis of existing data (documents), reinterpretation of previous research results, participatory observation, interviews with experts (stakeholders) in Racibórz (Denzin, Lincoln 2009, Silverman 2007, 2008, Stake 2000). Desk research is the use of previously collected data by different researchers pursuing different research objectives. Case studies means that the subject of the study is *accidental*, i.e. a phenomenon that occurs in a natural context and environment. In this case, generalized conclusions are based on a thorough deep analysis of the phenomena under investigation. In the presented research project, the case study is the borderland town – Racibórz. Finally, interviews with experts and observations are techniques within the scope of qualitative research that aim to diagnose the processes, which are occurring in social reality including answering questions such as *how* and *why*? 12 individual in-depth interviews (IDIs) were conducted with local stakeholders such as city officials, NGO leaders, city councilors and entrepreneurs. Respondents were specifically selected for the interview and represent the constituencies of city councils, NGO leaders and entrepreneurs. The IDIs took place between January and February 2021 and were preceded on an observation of social and political life. The study also used the public consultation analysis – the first public event in the context of the preparation of the Urban Development Strategy for the period 2022–2030, which took place online on 16 February 2021.

Racibórz – case study for analysis

Racibórz was selected as a case study based on the criteria of a medium-sized peripheral city. On the one hand, it is a community with a long tradition of self-government, self-organization, belonging to different legal and administrative regimes throughout its history, and on the other hand, it holds a marginal contemporary position in the spatial and administrative structures of the country and the region (first Opole Voivodeship, now Silesia voivodship in Poland) (Dziewulski 1967). All these factors have, over time, produced inhabitants' behavioral patterns in the form of basic structures of civil society or social capital (Geisler, Potracki 2021). The social capital concept is particularly important for the analyses, because its structure and role in a local urban policy in recent decades have been destroyed during the pandemic era, and its reconstruction should be a top priority for local authorities in the upcoming years.

Racibórz is not only a town on the cultural frontier that is changing its affiliation with the state-administrative, economic or socio-cultural systems, but it also a structure that, throughout history, has formed a community that takes care of its needs (Bahlcke 2001, Czapliński et al. 2002, Szramek 1934). Social capital has been represented since the Middle Ages as different forms of uniting people around their needs and interests. As a result, there were inhabitants' activities in certain fields (economy, culture) or cooperation in individual projects. Within the history of the town, different forms of social capital were created in the context of guild structures, such as the Catholic Church, companies or in connection with the commissioning of the railway infrastructure in the 19th century, which were transformed into the development of the city. They included, among others, the activity of inhabitants in local choirs, volunteer fireman organization, sports clubs, social activity at parish of religious organizations. The increase in the involvement of citizens in various types of associations was evidence of the creation of a relatively strong local civil society. They were guided by concrete organizational structures based on social values and norms of cooperation, reciprocity and the implementation of activities for the common good. The communist period, with the authoritarian political regime, did not completely negate forms of civic involvement and, despite the restrictions of freedom, various forms of neighborhood cooperation and activities in the areas of sport and culture have been preserved (Collin 1996, Dziewulski 1967, Głombik 2010, Geisler, Potracki 2021, Kuźniar-Niedźwiedzka, Niejowa, Woźniak 1967, Leśnik 1967, Newerla 2008).

Therefore, in the case of Racibórz, one can speak of a culture of trust and of the willingness of the inhabitants to find different associations and to work for the satisfaction of their needs. In the history of Racibórz, associations have developed and are still active in this town. The extent of the devastation that took place in 1945 and the subsequent process of population exchange in the town were not eliminated, they are inscribed in the cultural code of the town and have survived in the inner tissue. At this point, it may be the hypothesis created that the social capital may, at least to some extent, also be the result of a kind of town's *genius loci*.

Social capital before the COVID-19 pandemic

The emergence of social capital can be conditioned by external conditions, i.e. by a space in which people come together to do something. Jarosław Działek and Monika Murzyn-Kurpisz (2014: 191–217) also point out that “social capital arises where there are conditions for social interaction.” This can be a *physical* space – i.e. build-

ings, public spaces that are designed to stop and create conditions for conversation, a virtual space that can include, for example, social media groups and messengers. Finally, there is the institutional space created by the various institutions operating in a given area: cultural centers, museums, libraries, settlement clubs, parishes, non-governmental organizations, associations, etc. These three spaces can influence on each other: NGOs, libraries, parishes and other associations usually occupy a physical building or another physical space. At the same time, they are often present in virtual space, having their own websites, forming social media groups, etc. The areas of activity of the associations – in the broadest sense – can be described as *site generators* of social capital.

It should be state that the most important forms of associations, which serve to meet the needs of inhabitants, are the result of the long duration of the institutions' life. First of all, sports associations should be mentioned. For at least more than a few decades, and still during the socialism period, so called Folk Sports Teams were a space for sport activities connecting people with similar interests as well as self-organizing them in order to create space for activity. The popularity of this type of association was an expression of the needs of the inhabitants, the building of local ties by them. The origin was that specific districts owned their clubs and subsequently created their local identity through them.

Another space that generates social capital is the space of religious organizations. For hundreds of years, they have been not only a place of religious worship but also a meeting place for parishioners, thanks to which various actions, projects, activities in the social or cultural dimension are organized. Above all, these associations bring together senior citizens, ensuring that their free time is filled and their needs met.

Cultural institutions are another space generating various forms of social capital. They are not only forms of public institutions but are also often the origin of many ideas that turn into grassroots actions or institutions. These include musical ensembles such as orchestras, choirs, theater ensembles. Castle in Racibórz plays a key role in organizing events, bringing residents together around common projects, and above all meeting their cultural needs.

Established at the beginning of the 20th century, The Academia in Racibórz, has become a new place for generating social capital on the town map. It is not only the place for higher education but a number of educational and social initiatives aimed at shaping broadly understood civil society and civic activity. It would be point out the role of a territorial forms of capital creation in the form of neighborhood clubs. Part of the district councils, usually located in the space of housing cooperatives, are a meeting place primarily for seniors, but also for young people. They definitely generate all kinds of social contracts between people.

It is also important to remember that the parishes in Racibórz play an important role for the generation of social capital. Despite the increasing secularization of the Polish society and thus also of the community in Racibórz, the Catholic Church remains an old institution with which a large number of the town's inhabitants identify themselves. It should be noted that after pandemic era more than 15,000 people taking part in every Sunday rites, so many of them are still active during the week activities.

Finally, companies with a long tradition of creating the social fabric in the form of various institutions such as choirs, professional organizations, clubs, slowed down a big during the period of transition. Nevertheless, during the period of real socialism, it was possible to notice an increased activity of enterprises in the civic sphere. The space of the companies was used as meeting places for various kinds of employees, who had their needs and interests such a music, sports, or prosaic forms such a fishing, animal breeding, various kinds of games. The period of transition towards market oriented economy and privatization have in many cases destroyed civic engagement and forms of social capital by focusing on individualism and broadly understood consumerism, which have successfully become the main ideological determinants of human behaviour.

By analyzing the functioning of the associations operating in Raciborz, it is possible to get an idea of what the town is about, what its problems and needs are, in addition to its inhabitants' passions and interests. First of all, there are many examples of sports associations – grassroots, company and school sports clubs. Of the 69 listed associations, around 24 (i.e. 34.78%) can be attributed to sports activities. In this context, it can be noted that more than a quarter of all the official associations operating in the area of Racibórz bring together people based on their sporting interests and passions. Sports clubs play a special role in neighborhoods far from the city center, as can be seen from the number of popular sports clubs in the formerly separate villages that were attached to the town territory. There are also associations with a different field of activity: seniors, children and young people, people with disabilities, people in difficult situations, travel or history enthusiasts. There are also associations that promote local cultural life and gather their members around the interests of a district or a settlement.

The analysis of the associations activities' areas shows that they are both organizations that have been created because certain groups of the population have been convinced of the need to work together to achieve shared objectives (e.g., settlement and district associations) and those that, through their activities, address the deficiencies of state or municipal institutions in providing assistance to local authorities to compensate people in need (Caritas, Polski Czerwony Krzyż/Polish Red Cross, patient support associations). However, the largest proportion are organizations that

bring people together on the basis of their interests (sport, art, travel, etc.). These include at least 40 of the 69 associations on the above list, which indicates that the clubs are mainly looking for an offer that is interesting for them to spend their free time. Additionally, in this group of associations, some distinctions can be made – in sports associations that share in companies.

To sum up, social capital in Racibórz is clearly historical and has been formed over one hundred years, even during the period of socialism. During the transition, its forms developed and stabilized creating a relatively consistent organizational and personal structures i.e. a permanent team of active people at the local level willing and able to implement joint activities, design associations – and what is more important – effectively achieve their goals. In all this, we must not forget the competencies of people, their knowledge and the ability to unite and act together.

Common Social Capital Building – Non-governmental organizations and local authorities

The period of 30 years after the political transition has shaped a new type of relationship between the NGO's and local authorities. The activities of local authorities were institutionalized, and the legal order of local administration was formed, thanks to which their relationship with NGO's was based on strictly defined legal principles based on values of cooperation. The program of cooperation between local authorities and NGO's is an example of building social capital by creating space for actions. Thanks to the programs launched, the inhabitants have the opportunity to clarify their needs and goals, and thanks to the institutional forms of NGO's, they are able to shape forms of social capital.

The authorities of the town Racibórz cooperates with the associations within the framework of the activities of the town administration. There is a clear need to implement tasks for different inhabitants' groups that NGO's can successfully and effectively carry out. In turn, their financial support from the authorities allows the implementation of the statutory objectives. According to the analysis of documents, in 2019, the cooperation between local authority and NGO's was of a financial and non-financial nature.

With regard to the financial cooperation, it should be noted that in 2019 the municipality allocated a budget of PLN 3,144,378 for this kind of cooperation. Of this amount, PLN 2,596,570 was used to support the performance of public tasks, a further PLN 465,000 was distributed under multi-annual contracts, the continuation of which fell in 2019, and the remaining PLN 82,808 was distributed on the basis

of an out-of-competitive. It should be noted that the total amount allocated to Racibórz in 2019 for cooperation with non-governmental organizations was 1.33% of the town budget expenditure that year. These funds enabled 97 public projects to be supported. In 2019, the number of organizations willing to cooperate with the town to perform public functions through competitions and out-of-competitive procedures was 62, while the final number of organizations with which such cooperation was initiated was 56. However, the dominant share of this activity belongs to the sports associations, which is also reflected in the level of their financing, where the authority allocated PLN 695,000 for the performance of public functions in the field of physical culture and tourism, which accounted for 22.

The cooperation between the municipality and the associations could be defined as stable. The number of public works funded by the town between 2016 and 2019 fluctuated by about 100 each year. At the same time, there is an upward trend in the financing of this cooperation. The final allocation in the municipal budget in 2019 was PLN 512,578 higher than the amount earmarked for this purpose in 2016. The number of organizations expressing an interest in working with the town's authority in the performance of public tasks is similarly high. In the following years, approximately 60 organizations registered to join the cooperation. It should also be noted that this cooperation is often repeated (especially in the field of public tasks in the fields of culture, physical culture and tourism). For example, 10 of the 13 organizations that received funding for cultural activities from the city in 2018 also received such funding in 2019. Similarly, 19 of the 23 organizations that received financial support from the public budget in 2018 for their work in the area of body culture and tourism also received support for their work in 2019 (Reports of Racibórz Authority Activities).

To conclude, the same patterns and mechanisms are noticeable, and Racibórz has created a permanent group of associations involved in projects financed by local governments. It should be borne in mind that this means more or less a permanent group of people – residents of the town with competence and willingness to be active – who applied for financial resources to carry out their statutory tasks, and then carried them out. From the point of view of local authorities, this allows for continuous implementation of individual tasks and meetings the needs of the community. On the other hand, however, as research results show, the opinions of officials are often critical of the billing and handling of the formal side projects, which shows shortcomings in the management of NGO's and the need to make them more professional.

Re-building social capital

Based on qualitative and ethnographic field studies, the authors present the experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic era, which change the structure of social capital in Racibórz by reducing/destroying it. The next question is how it can be rebuilt? A whole series of prohibitions and orders issued in connection with the epidemic could not remain indifferent to the social and club life in Raciborz. This is clear from the statements of experts. For example, one of them, representing local politics, said: “We have a certain amount of time right now because there is a pandemic. And I think any kind of citizen engagement is a little limited due to limitations and fear of a possible infection”.

Another speaker spoke in a very similar tone: “I think that answer could be shared, so to speak, by such a pandemic barrier. Because this activity has come to a standstill at the level of spring last year. And she’s so weak so far. In many cases, zero. There is total sleep in these NGOs. Now the question is whether... Suppose the pandemic ends in the autumn of this year, and will these people be more willing to participate? Because they’re going to have such a need that there wasn’t this opportunity to be active for a few months. Will they, as we know, continue to regard this as such a deal that they don’t want to go back, don’t know how to get along in all this, etc.”. “We have a certain amount of time right now because there is a pandemic. And I think any kind of citizen engagement is a little limited due to limitations and fear of a possible infection”.

The pandemic also severely curtailed the activities of the settlement clubs. The associations, which belong to one of the housing cooperatives in Racibórz, are a meeting place for older people and a place where activities for children are organized. As part of the activities of the settlement clubs for seniors, choirs are conducted, where older people can gather during rehearsals and sing together over coffee and cake. The club management also organizes excursions for them. Children can take part in art classes and, during the winter and summer holidays, activities such as “Winter in the City” or “Summer in the City” are organized for them, offering various excursions, swimming pools, sports activities, etc.

“We have settlement clubs here, and that’s easy... There was always summer in the city and winter in the city for children. That was the most important point. And afternoon classes for kids, like art. They are weekly and have been carried out for years. The dance class, too. There are also senior clubs for the elderly, where they meet. The choir is... I don’t know whether to say, “building block” and “Itaka” or not.

B: Two separate ones?

A4: Yes, yes. I mean, the same gentleman leads, but they're separated. And it's such an afternoon activity most of the time.

B: And it's especially like that for older people?

Yes. We have this art class for the kids. here they were so far. Now it is coronavirus, so there is no”.

During the interview, the above-mentioned expert expressed uncertainty about the future functioning of the settlement clubs and uncertainty. At the same time, he pointed out that activities in the clubs are planned for the year 2021: “Now this potential is hard to talk about in our time. I am not going to say anything here either, because I really am. It's hard to say, right now, in this situation, it's very hard to say anything, because... And when it comes to an end sometimes, then... We don't know what it's going to be like... Right now, there's such a course. We have plans, as always, for the whole year. We have summer action on the agenda, we have seniors' trips on the agenda. Well, monthly meetings, we have a choir on schedule. Everything that worked, we have planned for next year”.

It should also be mentioned here that not only the clubs, but also the University of the Third Age, which offers courses for seniors, had to stop their activities due to a pandemic: “The University of the Third Age is also very well equipped. It also has this structure. There I spoke to them several times. They have their seat. Right now, everything's been hanging up like this for the past year. But all the time, it worked”.

The pandemic also affected on a religious participation. The restrictions imposed by the central government have severely restricted the ability of believers to participate in religious practices. This situation led to a natural decline in the number of people participating in religious practices, as he stressed in his commentary, and pointed out that before the epidemic people were much more willing to participate in religious practices: “I believe that we are at such a turning point today. Times that really show what this religious life will look like. I'm sure the pandemic has devastated the churches. And very strongly. This can also be seen at every trade fair. Well, there are limitations, also usually a lot more people cannot be. Let's see what it looks like when the pandemic is over. I can safely say that the churches were full two years ago during the holidays. And it was so crowded that people were just standing next to each other, not sitting, but standing next to each other...”.

The statements of the interlocutors quoted above clearly testify that in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic the association life of the residents of Racibórz is *frozen*. Although it is difficult to assess which sectors of society are more affected and which are less affected, the epidemic's particularly devastating impact on the activity of older people must be highlighted. Most of the platforms available in the city that allow them to meet and participate in social life have been suspended or

severely restricted. Particular reference is made here to the cessation of the activity of the settlement associations, the University of the Third Age or to restrictions in the life of the community. These three rooms can be described as important for the social activity of many residents of Racibórz in their senior years. Of course, everyone was affected by the restrictions. Young people and children also had to reduce their activities, as their opportunities to meet were limited. Instead of schooling, they had to switch to *distance learning*, which also had negative consequences, as one interlocutor pointed out: “Because school isn’t good enough to get a student to prepare for it. (...) Now it’s even worse. And now it’s online at all. It’s going to be a hole...”

In 2020, there were no major entertainment events in the town – not only the “Raciborzanin/Racibórz Inhabitant/sounds proud” festival mentioned by one of the interviewees, but also other annual events such as Easter Market, Racibórz Days, Intro Festival or the “Young Memorial.” Captain Andrzej Kaczyn and Andrzej Malinowski in memory of two firemen – Andrzej Kaczyna and Andrzej Malinowski – who died in the firefighting at the smithy of Racibórz in August 1992. Observations have shown that the celebrations on public holidays, such as the National Day of the Third of May and the National Independence Day, also took place on a very limited scale, and their main focus was the Holy Mass in the Church of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, respecting the number of participants. In December 2020, a Christmas market took place on the market square, but it also had a more modest wording. It was limited to a few food and Christmas decorations businesses where private entrepreneurs did business. Among other attractions that were organized at that time, it is worth mentioning that a mobile ice rink was built on the market square. In this edition of the fair, however, other attractions such as the ball tent with cinema and the concerts that have accompanied the event for several years have been abandoned.

The COVID-19 pandemic era could be called a “Game Changer,” a groundbreaking event that is changing the whole social reality. However, there is no doubt that, in the area of social capital, it has led to the *frozen* of the activities of many existing associations in Racibórz, which have helped to improve the quality of life of the inhabitants and the activities of the inhabitants themselves involved in these associations.

Analysis and discussion

The discussion of the research results should begin with a historical examination of the forms of social capital that the community has produced over its history. Sporting establishments (clubs), cultural establishments (choirs), religious establishments (churches), activities in the neighborhoods, including volunteer fire brigades,

formerly craft trains – these were examples of how the town inhabitants have united and created associations for centuries. As in Putnam's analysis, it can be said that inhabitants have, from generation to generation, passed down patterns of social engagement that were the result of their interests but have real effects in the form of networks of cooperation and social mobilization for important processes (such as railway construction in the 19th century). Social capital, based on trust, was an important resource for the community. Despite the significant population change in the 1940 s, the institutions of social capital survived or were newly created. The transition period in 1990 s revealed new possibilities of associations, which were used by the inhabitants and institutionalized in the form of local politics. An important role in the creation of social capital was played by the so-called generators, i.e. spaces that enable social contacts, build up social networks, and provide a broad communication space in which the behavioral patterns of the inhabitants flow.

Studies show that the period of the COVID-19 pandemic has frozen the social life. It stopped the inhabitants' activity, but did not fully trigger it because there was a virtual space for use. Most of the activity shifted to them, especially in the area of discourse. The pandemic has severely restricted activity in so-called closed spaces, such as cultural houses, and in certain parts of society, such as older people and children. The post-pandemic period shows the reactivation of association activity, the use of opportunities for social mobilization and activity in the broadest sense. For example, the environmental conditions associated with the *return* to normalcy have enabled active citizenship based on patterns of trust or commitment in the broadest sense to public concerns.

In relation to the time of the pandemic, it is useful to clarify the following questions: a) In the post-pandemic period (from 2022 onwards), are the patterns of the cohesive behavior of the inhabitants in the individual spaces and their generators reproduced? (b) what will the role of local authorities in the budgeting of NGOs and other activities be, i.e. the extent to which the activities of formal associations are forced; c) in the context of civilizational and moral changes such as consumer behavior, demographic change, will social mobilization be at the same level that it was in the pre-pandemic period, or it will decline due to general trends.

Conclusion

Racibórz, as an example of the medium-sized and geographically peripheral town, is a good example of research into social processes and phenomena such as social capital in the era of the COVID-19 pandemic era. It is not affected by the process-

es of metropolisation, which means that the relatively small number of inhabitants, political and economic elites, can indicate the existence of social ties and social networks among inhabitants.

Moreover, the use of such a case study for research is due to the fact that, for centuries, as a town on the cultural and state frontier, it has shaped the structures of social capital that have been reproduced over generations. The crisis point of urban history in the form of population exchange in the 1940 s of the 20th century did not decline the structures of social capital, but rebuilt them in the second half of the 20th century. The characteristics highlighted by the theoreticians, such as trust, norms of reciprocity, social networks, social mobilization, collective resources, are reflected in the nature of the associations. The time of the COVID-19 pandemic meant a standstill, but not an elimination, of the structures of social capital. The post-pandemic period is an example that citizens are becoming active again, facilitated by institutional generators. Local leaders and local authorities with financial or programmatic support and the inhabitants themselves with their needs and interests will certainly play an important role in restoring social capital in the future.

Author Contributions

Robert Geisler prepared the theoretical part of the paper, Michał Potracki conducted empirical research, Robert Geisler and Michał Potracki jointly developed the methodological framework and developed the research results. Robert Geisler did the final editing of the text. Both authors approved the article for publication.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that the study was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationship that could be interpreted as a potential conflict of interest.

Ethics Statement

The approval of the ethics committee at our university was not required for this study.

Research Data Availability Statement

The original data presented in the study are publicly available. These data can be found in the Bulletin of Public Information of the Town Hall of Racibórz (BIP 2022).

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