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Volunteer Fire Brigade (OSP) Firefighting Sports Competitions in the Context of Key Problems of Contemporary Rural Poland

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Zawody sportowo-pożarnicze Ochotniczych Straży Pożarnych w kontekście węzłowych problemów współczesnej polskiej wsi

Streszczenie

Ochotnicze Straże Pożarne to najliczniejsza i najbardziej rozpowszechniona kategoria wiejskich organizacji pozarządowych. Ratowniczy cel działalności sprzyja podejmowaniu przez OSP inicjatyw w obszarze sportu, tzn. ukierunkowanych na podnoszenie sprawności fizycznej i umiejętności technicznych strażaków ochotników. Podstawową formą sportowej rywalizacji strażaków są zawody sportowo-pożarnicze. Stanowią one – przez wieloletnią i regularną ich organizację, zespołowy charakter, obudowanie zbiorem ścisłych reguł i rytuałów, a także fakt rywalizacji drużyn reprezentujących sąsiadujące względem siebie społeczności lokalne – społeczny i kulturowy fenomen ogniskujący problemy współczesnej polskiej wsi. Autor, opierając się na badaniach terenowych realizowanych tuż przed czasem pandemii COVID-19 oraz przeglądzie literatury, podejmuje próbę odpowiedzi na pytanie o funkcje zawodów sportowo-pożarniczych w układzie lokalnym. Zważywszy na skalę występowania OSP, a także fakt trwałego zakorzenienia tej instytucji na pol-

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skiej wsi, artykuł może stanowić głos w dyskusji nad efektywnymi sposobami promocji kultury fizycznej poza ośrodkami miejskimi.

Słowa kluczowe: sport, wieś, Ochotnicze Straże Pożarne, zawody sportowo-pożarnicze.

Abstract

Volunteer Fire Brigades (OSPs) are the most numerous and widespread category of rural non-governmental organisations in Poland. The emergency rescue focus of their activity is conducive to undertaking initiatives in the field of sports, i.e. projects aiming to improve the physical fitness and technical skills of volunteer firefighters. Firefighting sports competitions are the main form of sports rivalry among firefighters. Due to the fact of their long-time and regular organisation, team character, complying with a set of strict rules and rituals, and also the fact that this is rivalry between teams representing local communities that neighbour one another, they are a social and cultural phenomenon in which the problems of today's rural Poland come into focus. Based on field research completed just before the COVID-19 pandemic and an overview of the literature, the author sets out to identify the functions of firefighting sports competitions in local systems. Considering the scale of the OSP organisation and the fact that it is permanently rooted in rural Poland, the paper may be considered a contribution to the discussion on effective ways of promoting physical culture outside urban centres.

Keywords: sport, rural areas, Volunteer Fire Brigades, firefighting sports competitions.

Introduction

Sport in rural areas remains a niche issue in Polish sociology. This is something of a paradox, given that analyses of the development of sporting activities in rural Poland undergoing modernisation have an important place in the origins of sociology of sport as a subdiscipline of knowledge [12, 29]. Researchers have invariably focused their attention on trends whose significance stems from the historiography of physical culture and public statistics in Poland, i.e. on Rural Sports Clubs (LZS) and on football. The LZS organisation de facto developed sporting activities in rural areas and continues to be the most numerous sports institution (in terms of the number of clubs belonging to the LZS Association) outside urban areas [15]. What is more, it is perceived as being stereotypically rural and class-rooted at the same time [13]. Then, statistical research shows that football as a sports discipline attracts the greatest number of participants within all (i.e. also rural) social environments [6]. Without negating the importance of the above findings, one might ask whether in fact an athlete living in "provincial Poland", undertaking physical activity recreationally, far from large urban centres, is necessarily always an amateur footballer who is a member of an LZS-affiliated club. It is worth pointing to more forms of popular involvement in sports, other than institutionalised contests on the football pitch, which would offer analytical potential related, for example, to wider problems

of rural communities [23]. The present paper makes an attempt to move outside the focus on football, being based on a study of the activities pursued by rural Poland's most numerous nongovernmental organisation category, namely Volunteer Fire Brigades (OSP), and their typical form of sports rivalry, i.e. firefighting sports competitions [30]. The aim of the paper is to present this type of sporting event by describing the functions that it fulfils at the macro-, meso- and microsocial level. The functions thus identified will be correlated with the problems troubling rural areas in Poland. This illustrative approach is compatible with one of the strategies of sports sociology development in Poland, calling for the applicability and interdisciplinarity of research in this area [16].

There are several reasons why a discussion on firefighting sports competitions should be placed at the border of two subdisciplines, namely rural sociology and sports sociology. First of all, OSP units are an attractive object of multifaceted analyses due to the diversity of the social contexts in which they function. This is the direct effect of the huge scale of their activity: there are more than 16,000 OSPs in Poland (being present in all of the country's rural municipalities), with a total membership exceeding 670,000 people [8]. Secondly, OSPs are unprecedentedly strongly rooted in the rural environment and show institutional continuity over different periods of history (unlike the LZS organisation, which is younger and was also more susceptible to perturbations generated by changes in the political system). Thirdly and finally, within the NGO community, OSPs are characterised by an unusual multitude of functions and statutory activities. OSP units not only serve as an emergency service in local communities but also fulfil a cultural function (running brass bands, artistic troupes, history exhibition rooms, chronicles etc.), an educational one (rescue and first-aid training courses, various classes on fire brigade premises), a charity one and, as underlined above, a sports function. Studies conducted before the COVID-19 pandemic show that 34% of OSP units listed "sport, tourism, recreation and hobbies" among the main areas of their activity. Furthermore, 86% declared their participation in firefighting sports competitions held at least once a year [1]. Thus, this is not just a journalistic curiosity, but a widespread phenomenon genuinely existing in the rural space.

1. Methodology

The findings presented in the paper are based on an analysis of materials gathered for a research project originally called *Activity of Volunteer Fire Departments in the context of the transformation of social ties in the Polish countryside*. The project's research goal was to explain the mechanisms enabling OSPs to overcome organisational challenges and thus maintain the continuity of their

activity and their multifunctionality in local communities affected by trends considered dysfunctional, e.g. depopulation. The sports theme was not a separate investigative direction, but it was compatible with the project's three problem areas, illustrated by the issues of cultural disharmony, weakness of the third sector, and loosened social ties. Gathering and analysing the research materials, the author sought to find out whether and how non-rescue initiatives of OSPs helped eliminate the negative consequences of the aforementioned trends.

The fundamental, empirical part of the study assumed the form of a problem-based collective case study: four entities (OSP units of similar membership size) were analysed; they were located in different parts of Poland, selected as a targeted sample (based on the level of cultural activity and professionalisation as well as the organisation's age) in order to enable a theoretical generalisation to be made. The research procedure invoked the tradition of organisational anthropology and problem-based monographs in a rural context. The project involved the triangulation of data gathering techniques, which is a strategy typical for qualitative studies of ethnographic provenance. Due to limitations caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and thus difficulties encountered with gathering data in the regions where the selected units were active, a supplementary CAWI survey was conducted as well. A total of 582 questionnaires were returned (a representative sample for the rural municipalities in which the existence of highly active OSP units had been identified earlier).

The empirical materials thus gathered describe firefighting sports competitions from the "A group", i.e. involving male teams comprising members aged over 16, with the exception of engineers, water distribution valve operators and commanders, who have to be over 18 [17]. This detailed information is important because there are also many firefighting sports competitions for youth and female teams – these forms of OSP activity were not considered (which actually suggests an intriguing direction for further investigation). It needs underlining that the research material was gathered through participation in competitions in the years 2017-2019, i.e. before the COVID-19 pandemic (the question whether and to what extent the importance of this type of sporting event has changed in the dynamically changing reality remains open, although calendars of local events in 2022 that list OSP competitions suggest that this continues to be a lively trend). Data were gathered by means of: (a) participant observation (overt and directed, carried out from the point of view of a competition spectator); (b) journalist interviews (usually single-themed, brief, with volunteer firefighters and competition spectators), and (c) the photographic method (photos obtained at the localities or from online sources). The analytical conclusions were confronted with the literature of the subject, which is very limited in terms of a problem-based approach to the development of sporting activities among volunteer firefighters. Such themes mainly appear in texts on the history of fire-

fighting in Poland, and also in special monographs devoted to a given OSP unit; no sociological text devoted strictly to this topic was found [11]. Relatively the best quality materials in the study were obtained in the urban-rural municipality of S. (Mazovian province), where the research tools were tested. These materials were incorporated into the project's main repository, the decisive reason being the most complete description of the local situation, its history and institutions (more difficult to obtain in the other cases due to the COVID-19 pandemic).

2. Key problems of rural Poland

Rural areas in Poland are affected by trends that might be recognised as an emanation of the globalisation process and consequences of the development path adopted after 1989. The main ones are: (a) the depopulation of peripheral rural areas; (b) back-and-forth migration in search of work and education; (c) labour market and services market deficits leading to a lower standard of living for the population; (d) diversified lifestyles (influx of new residents, de-agrarianisation of rural areas). These trends lead to issues that might be described as *key problems* (i.e. those affecting many areas of rural residents' lives and activity as well as the reality and effectiveness of rural institutions of collective life). At least three such problems may be identified. First of all, there is *cultural disharmony*, i.e. the clash of contradictory elements of social awareness: relics of the traditional peasant culture (and its institutions) and patterns typical of the modern post-industrial culture created in large conurbations or the media space [5, 27]. Rural areas do not have unified living conditions, the basic elements of the peasant system of values have undergone atrophy, one cannot speak of a group identity shared by all residents, and the COVID-19 pandemic most likely caused stronger polarisation in terms of participation in religious practices. The second trend might be described as the *weakness of the third sector*. This is manifested in dependence on public institutions (e.g. in financial or competence terms) and quite frequently a superficial character of nongovernmental organisations, which in fact pursue local government tasks and policies. Rural NGOs trying to maintain their autonomy are thus forced to compete for limited resources available in the local space, and their styles of activity are subject to increasing economisation [20]. Finally, the third key problem suggested here involves the *loosening of social ties*, the causes of this including the decreasing importance of family and neighbourhood for the fulfilment of the young generation's personal aspirations and for satisfying its representatives' needs in the professional and social sphere [7]. This problem is possible to relate to global transformations such as the weakening role of the nation state, technicisation, the growing role of

individual rights compared to duties, the pragmatism of moral attitudes and the relativisation of norms [22].

Social and cultural changes cannot but affect rural local communities. Considering the defining features of a local society cited by Marek Szczepański [25], i.e. spatial limits, long duration, relatively strong internal integration, a limited number of social actors whose daily lives involve direct relationships and who share common goals, the means to achieving those goals, and a common identity based on a symbolic universe (set of norms and values), one can identify at least two manifestations of those changes. One involves the blurring of a clear division into “one’s own” and “others” (living outside the village boundaries) and the definitive degeneration of relative autarchy (economic self-sufficiency and functional complementarity), which enabled people to satisfy their basic needs within the circle of family and neighbours (cf. [26, 10]). The other would involve the progress, with varying intensity, of disturbances in the structural cohesion that – as Arkadiusz Karwacki points out – defines the minimal number of members without which a group is unable to function and can no longer maintain group unity through frequent relations between members within the group [9].

3. Transformation of local communities and selected problems in volunteer fire brigades (OSPs)

The trends outlined above directly imply organisational challenges for OSPs. These include a deficit of resources necessary for regular cultural (less often – emergency and rescue) activity, which is impossible to fill (e.g. based on membership fees, firefighters working free of charge, or income from rental of premises). The funds needed to renovate fire stations or organise events of a cultural nature, and also to purchase costly personal and specialist equipment, thus need to be sought outside the local community, mainly from public sources whose actual custodians (or key middlemen) occupy a privileged position in relation to the firefighters (relations of power). In this context, it is no wonder that municipality governments, i.e. the institution that is constitutive of local relations in Poland, are considered the main partners of volunteer fire brigades: 98% of OSP units maintain relations with the local municipality office [1]. Nor is it surprising to see the expansion of a system of centrally controlled aid: funds prescribed by government administration bodies constitute a tool in political rivalry for the firefighter voter. Another problematic situation occurs when the number of active volunteer firefighters drops (e.g. as a result of young people’s migration to cities) and the local community, due to its negligible demographic potential or the presence of other institutions of collective life that absorb young people’s enthusiasm, cannot supply new firefighters (who were originally drawn

in through relationships among family, neighbours and friends). Before the pandemic the problem of a shortage of people prepared to get engaged in OSP activity affected as much as 47% of units surveyed by the Klon/Jawor Association; this was largely due to the generational change [1]. Of course, the spectrum of repercussions of general social trends for the organisational condition of OSPs can be extended (e.g. to include the pressure of professionalisation or the tabloidisation of some of the activities pursued by volunteer firefighters), but, for the sake of clarity, the present text only considers the aforementioned two, which, in the author's opinion, are of primary importance for the future of OSPs in Poland.

4. Functions of firefighting sports competitions in the local system

Indicating the functions of firefighting sports competitions that serve to eliminate the problems outlined above in a meso-social aspect requires the use of the notion of the *l o c a l s y s t e m*. It has a wider denotation than the local community: overstepping its framework, it encompasses the social and territorial plane as well as elements like financial-technical and institutional circumstances. In this, the local system is part of an even wider system: on the aforementioned planes, it is connected by vertical relations to systems of a higher order, and also by horizontal relations to systems at the same level [19]. Rural residents' systems of values and lifestyles also manifest themselves in local systems, and, as it is worth emphasising in the context of the present discussion, social inequalities and the "social content of exercised power" are directly revealed in them [14].

OSP firefighting sports competitions are a reflection of the systemic nature of local systems: (1) firefighter teams from different villages compete, but at the same time are subject to the control of a local government institution (the competitions are usually held at the central sports facility – the municipality's sports field); (2) the competitions cover the area of a whole municipality – attracting members of many local communities, since all the OSP units may take part; (3) the competing rivals are people who know one another (at least by sight) but do not belong to the same local community; (4) competition winners gain the opportunity to compete at the county/*powiat* level, thus becoming representatives of the local system in the supralocal space; (5) the competitions bring together, in one time and place, various institutions and social actors active in a given system (during the field study, the presence of community life leaders and local government representatives was observed, medical support was provided by local doctors or nurses, security was ensured by police officers from the nearest station, reports were prepared by journalists from local media, and

local entrepreneurs and clergymen were present), which is conducive to revealing power relations and building social capital.

Identity function

As regards the problem of cultural disharmony, firefighting sports competitions should be considered as a tool for building and upholding the collective identity of volunteer firefighters in general as well as local firefighters living in the same village. In the former case, the ritualistic aspect of such a competition is especially important; the competitions have their own universal order set down in the rules of the Association of Volunteer Fire Brigades of the Republic of Poland (Związek OSP RP), but also in the unwritten OSP tradition. In this sense, judging by the literature of the subject and reports posted in social media, for example, the competitions are surprisingly similar despite taking place in different sociocultural contexts (in the regions of Mazovia or Western Pomerania, Silesia or Lesser Poland, etc.). The exposition of firefighter symbols in the public space (the association cross, helmets, axes, logos with St. Florian), the sound of the red fire engine sirens (the vehicles being spruced up for the competition), equipment placement in specific positions, a drill display, the commands issued, the ritual "bath" of the victorious team's leader in the firefighting water tank after the competition, the ceremony for presenting prizes to the winners, in which local authorities take part – all these are common elements of the competitions under analysis, the message thus being recognisable to volunteer firefighters from all over Poland. In a situation of progressive heteronomy of rural communities, diversification of local cultures, introduction of new and remodelling of existing cultural practices (e.g. with the appearance of new rural resident categories), firefighting sports competitions appear as a manifestation of a surprisingly lasting element of rural Poland's life based on the firefighting ethos. Every year, thousands of these competitions demonstrate faithfulness to the principles of group effort, integrity, sacrifice, physical and technical fitness [3]. The competitions observed by the author were characterised by universal approval of obeying the rules of rivalry, though this was sometimes accompanied by disputes over the interpretation of regulations (verbal conflicts with competition judges from the State Fire Brigade were not uncommon, e.g. over acknowledging the correct performance of given elements of a competition). Considering that participation in firefighting sports competitions is a more frequent occurrence than going out on rescue operations for many OSP units, one might risk saying that being a volunteer firefighter means taking part (actively or passively) in sports rivalry.

Firefighting sports competitions also consolidate local identity. During the contests, the aspirations of a given local community's members are transferred

onto the firefighters from the local OSP unit. The spectators root for “their own” – and “their own” represent a specific village whose good result of its OSP in the contest will enable it to manifest its distinctness and autonomy in the local system, to underline its assets (the residents’ resourcefulness and fitness) while helping eliminate any actual or imaginary faults (e.g. a small population, a stereotypical image of the residents).

However, local collectives do not meld into a single entity through these competitions as social situations engaging representatives of various local systems. In fact, differences between villages reveal themselves and are upheld. This is the effect of the aforementioned strong local rooting, but also the inter-generational character of membership in volunteer fire brigades. In this context, one might mention frequent reminiscing about past contests (including those in which now deceased OSP members – relatives of current contestants – took part) during the competitions observed in the study.

The cohesion of the OSP units themselves is a different matter. By defining the local firefighter “I” on the basis of a series of competitions, units that are diverse in terms of the social traits of their members undergo consolidation. Narrative references invoking past successes and firefighters who played a major role in the preparations and the progress of competitions consolidate the group. Stories and anecdotes from past times supplement the physical marks of a given unit’s identity (i.e. the coat of arms, the firefighting chronicle, photographs and other mementoes). The firefighter reminiscences observed during the study were characterised by nostalgia – the myth of the “golden age” of the OSP unit in a given village was connected with longing for a time when “more firefighters were involved”, they were physically fitter, they were leaders in the area (e.g. through community activity) and the pride of their village at the same time.

Stratifying function

The problem of limited resources in the local community is linked to organisational difficulties with preparing firefighters for the competitions. The fact is that participation in the annual contests remains voluntary, and just mobilising the group for the occasion might be considered (especially in the case of the smallest villages) an indication of substantial organisational effort. OSP units’ participation in (or, rather, absence from) events observed as part of the study was affected by: (1) an incomplete team line-up (especially when the vacancies were posts involving a lot of responsibility for the final result, e.g. engineer or control firefighter); (2) conflicts within a firefighter group (involving internal issues in the unit, including the activity of the management, or issues not related to sports); (3) hostility among firefighters in the municipal structures of the Association of Volunteer Fire Brigades or a conflict with the local government (over

the level of support involving public funds and/or equipment). This last factor is closely linked with the prestige-related significance of these competitions for the entire local system: they are not only an annual firefighter festivity, but in fact also the only opportunity for formalised rivalry between institutions representing different villages. Echoes of this rivalry also reach residents with no interest in sports and no ties at all to the volunteer fire brigades. The unique moment of collective focus created by a municipal firefighting sports competition means that the fact of a unit's absence from a given contest might be treated as a form of symbolic manifestation of disapproval of the given social situation and the organisers (i.e. the municipal authorities). That is exactly why it is the ambition of local government officials to draw in the greatest possible number of participants – active and passive – and to perform the most generous honouring and rewarding of the winners in public (with cups, cash prizes or new equipment). However, firefighters are not simply voters as in the local system under consideration, they were a kind of “activist group” supporting the mayor during the local government election campaign. From the mayor's perspective, holding the firefighter competition was a measure aimed at mobilising his supporters.

An analysis of the final protocols from competitions in the municipality of S. over the past decade reveals the existence of a local hegemonic leader of firefighting sports. In the last ten years, the OSP unit from the village of O. (spatially peripheral in the local system, but having a strong identity fortified by other institutions of community life, i.e. the school or the parish) was the most regularly appearing leader of the general classifications: according to information obtained in the study, it won 14 times in a row (sic!). Interestingly, the O. firefighters' high level of technical training was not reflected in their presence in the Polish National Emergency and Fire System (requiring high professionalisation and full readiness to take part in emergency rescue missions), as opposed to firefighters from the same municipality's villages of B. and S. (functioning in the aforementioned national system for many years). Nevertheless, in the competition participants' opinion the rivalry between the above-mentioned teams was seen as being particularly intense, generating the biggest emotions – also observed during the field study – and the greatest number of remarks on the work of the competition judges, who were career firefighters from the State Fire Service (PSP) county headquarters (spectators and contestants openly accused the judges of not being meticulous about judging the technical aspects of a spectacular competition event colloquially known as “the combat”). Judging by the responses observed right after the event, a decidedly less ambitious and more fun-oriented approach to the competition rivalry was shown by firefighters representing OSP units from the villages of I. and W., which usually ended the competition near the bottom of the list (their failure was thus not painful enough to disrupt the group's cohesion). Declarations made by firefighters from the other

units observed during the competition indicate that for them, the aim of taking part in the contest was to win a place on the podium or, alternatively, to beat the teams from B. and S. However, beating the hegemonic leader was only considered realistic in the relay race, i.e. a typical fitness event and much less of a technical one.

The above findings have led the author to the conclusion that at the meso-social level, success in these competitions not only increases prestige but also helps to gain additional advantages in the local power play, e.g. regarding the replacement or purchase of equipment (including the most coveted fire engine). Firefighting sports competitions thus fulfil a stratifying function: they position OSP units in local hierarchies of self-organisation (the winners are firefighters capable of putting together a good team), training (the winners are firefighters who train regularly), but also access to municipal resources (winning may bring a given OSP unit financial gain), which translates into subsequent real-term possibilities of influencing the social environment [21].

Integrating function

The loosening of social ties in the rural environment has a negative impact not only on the efficiency of civic institutions but also on residents' ability to undertake local initiatives for the common good, crisis control (at the level of the system's resilience), and cooperation in a general sense. In other words, we are witnessing the weakening of rural areas' social capital (in its cohesion as well as its bridging aspect). Counteracting the loosening of social ties may take the form of intensive contacts between people and groups, resulting in increasing mutual trust, building interpersonal relations, exchanging information, etc. As open and egalitarian events marked by the collective, ludic and physical character of participation, which means they fulfil a significant integrating function, firefighting sports competitions are an instrument of increasing the social capital of people and institutions.

The firefighting sports competition case studies have shown that the contests' positive integrating effects were felt by the volunteer firefighters themselves as well as the people watching their rivalry – family and friends, neighbours, but also random spectators. The integration of an OSP unit already occurred during preparation for the competition. Statements obtained from firefighters indicate that the very fact of joint training in the afternoons (from a few days to a fortnight before the competition) enabled them to renew their acquaintance with fellow unit members, especially those who devote most of their days to jobs or studying outside their place of residence, or those completely engrossed in their family life who do not get involved in the unit's activities on a daily basis. Preparing for a firefighting sports competition enables volunteer

firefighters to gather together in person, hold longer-than-usual conversations, exchange observations and discuss topics not necessarily connected with OSP activities. The crowning element of such “training with a fire pump” is driving a fire engine to the competition and – regardless of the place secured in the contest – the joint celebration of the team’s efforts and the final position in the classification, back at the team’s home fire station. It is particularly in small communities, which have few opportunities to spend free time together as a community, that the integrating value of firefighting sports competitions and their often quite grand summary celebrations can be fully noticed and appreciated.

The place where a competition takes place – within the local system – may also be treated as a substitute for a local stage shaping public behaviours. The lack of anonymity of the people there (direct acquaintance with the volunteer firefighters from neighbouring villages) and the required rules of behaviour recognised by all the “locals” facilitate integration and enable the competition spectators and participants to feel confident and comfortable on such a stage [24]. In terms of a cultural event, these competitions may be interpreted as a neo-tribal form of consuming seldom organised (once a year) attractive entertainment. In this sense, the competitions are a form of “people communing with people” events, socio-centrally oriented, preventing the atomisation of local communities in rural Poland and obviously affirming the fun aspect [2]. Additional attractions set up near the playing field, such as bouncy castles, beer gardens (which open after the competition!) and ice cream or candyfloss stands, definitely facilitate intergenerational and family integration.

Conclusions

The analysis presented here is based on case studies and does not allow us to determine whether sporting activity is a daily element of their service for all volunteer firefighters. Intuition suggests that this might mainly be the case for relatively young firefighters, with a lot of free time on their hands or wanting to develop their firefighting skills. Nevertheless, an overview of the literature as well as the empirical material gathered in this project appear to confirm that the widespread and main demonstration of such an activity is the OSP firefighting sports competitions held every year at the municipality level. Moreover, these competitions fulfil important functions in a macrosocial sense (being an element of the firefighting movement’s identity and a consequence of its ethos), in a meso-social sense (as a kind of unofficial contest for OSP units’ social position and resources in the local system) as well as a microsocial sense – they integrate and strengthen the social ties of firefighter families and a given OSP unit [4]. The data thus confirm the extraordinary poly-functionality of volunteer fire brigades

and their significant impact on rural communities – an impact that until recently has always been ignored in public policies involving the civic sector, which was most likely the effect of the volunteer fire brigades being perceived as a “different” form of nongovernmental organisation, in the sense of being traditional (many researchers assuming this to mean less civic and less useful for building social capital) [8].

The discussion offered in the present paper does not exhaust the issue. The author would like to point to two problems worth considering in future studies on OSP sports. One is related to firefighters’ perception of new forms of sports rivalry – “disciplines” promoted top-down, sometimes with substantial support from private sponsors. They include events like firefighter logging and sawing contests signed with the logo of one of the biggest manufacturers of petrol-powered saws (basic equipment at many fire stations these days). A question worth asking is whether the strongly traditional firefighting sports competitions might be replaced (or lose importance) following the generational change at OSPs and the progressive professionalisation of firefighting units. The other intriguing research direction involves the correlation between success in these competitions and an OSP unit’s active involvement in emergency rescue operations. Despite their occasional character, do firefighting sports events contribute to lasting improvement in firefighters’ skill levels and their increased readiness to take part in firefighting operations? Or, is the cause-and-effect relationship perhaps reversed? The answer – possible to find through statistical analyses based on data gathered by the State Fire Service – would place the topic of sports in the volunteer fire service within the scope of the increasingly popular studies on serious games, i.e. tools of effective training, for acquiring new skills and simulating their use in various situations, including emergency rescue operations [28]. In times of global upheavals caused by the pandemic and armed conflicts, this aspect seems especially important from the point of view of internal security.

Sports in rural Poland have more than one face. Moreover, both rural residents’ attitude to sporting activities and the actual institutions that popularise sports will probably undergo further diversification. This process might be accelerated by the progressive heteronomy of the social structure (e.g. due to the sources and value of the rural population’s incomes) as well as the availability of advanced infrastructure (opportunities to pursue more demanding sports disciplines). It is hard to say whether firefighting sports competitions will retain their importance for rural communities in the longer term, and maintain the function of stabilising the activity of OSP units that is attributed to them, or whether they will become a niche activity and be subjected to a kind of “folklorisation” as one of many events that people follow in summer. This uncertainty about tomorrow and the ambiguity of current diagnoses means that the phe-

nomenon presented in this paper, as well as its social context, is still attractive as a subject of study and needs ambitious research projects within the field of studies on sports and physical culture.

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