

From Neoliberal Restriction to Control of the Roma—Towards Post-Neoliberal Ethnic Welfare*

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Abstract: The article examines how neoliberal reforms can pave the way for welfare racialisation, turning a delegitimised minimum-income scheme into a tool for racial-hierarchy enforcement. We follow the development of Czech minimum-income scheme legislation from 2014 to 2021, after a series of neoliberal (workfarist) reforms reinforced the restrictive and controlling aspects of the system. The analysed period is characterised by the greater involvement of politicians representing the poorest regions of the Czech Republic and by calls for further restrictions. Analysing parliamentary debates from this period, we show that the delegitimised social system is no longer understood as a tool of social protection or even labour market inclusion; rather, it has become a tool of ethnic hierarchisation, which particularly resonates in the context of perceived socioeconomic insecurity. We propose the term ‘post-neoliberal ethnic welfare’ to describe this emerging system, which derives its legitimacy from neoliberal categories of deservingness and reduces social-protection systems into a performative tool of control over the Roma population.

Keywords: welfare, Roma, neoliberalism, race, socially excluded localities

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Introduction

In recent decades, the influence of neoliberalism on social policy has created new categories of deservingness and entitlement. The neoliberal conviction that dependence on social benefits negatively informs the behaviour of the poor has not only legitimised the retrenchment of welfare support but also propagated

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the idea that the behaviour of the poor requires state regulation and monitoring. Welfare systems are increasingly judged not from the perspective of social justice or economic efficiency but, rather, from the perspective of their allegedly harmful effects on beneficiaries and society (Jensen & Tyler, 2015). The impact of neoliberalism on the retrenchment and increased conditionality of welfare has also been described by several authors in the Czech context, particularly during so-called social reform period of 2011/2012 (Mertl, 2016; Sirovatka, 2016). These reforms led to the reduction of protective functions in the country's welfare system and the increased stigmatisation of beneficiaries.

The present text focuses on the period after the wave of changes brought by the social reform. In contrast to the previous period, when changes in the social system had been initiated mainly through the central government, the analysed period is characterised by the greater involvement of politicians and other actors representing the poorest regions of the Czech Republic. Seemingly paradoxical, their demands accelerated restrictive approaches to welfare.

This article is intended to increase our understanding of these processes by analysing the narrative of parliamentary debates on the minimum-income scheme during the 2014–2021 period. We approach these debates as an arena in which the categories of deservingness, moral values, and hierarchies in society are being performed and contested. In line with Kóczé (2020) and Powell and van Baar (2019), we explore how the logic of neoliberal reforms intersects with an imaginary of the Roma as the main beneficiaries of welfare. We show how neoliberal changes paved the way for a rapid racialisation of welfare, turning it into a (performative) tool of control over the Roma population. To describe the emerging system, we introduce the term 'post-neoliberal ethnic welfare' in the conclusion of this paper.

Neoliberal welfare and ethnic governmentality

The distinction between the deserving and undeserving poor is, to some degree, inherent to all social-protection systems; however, it is central to the neoliberal approaches to welfare. The ability to sustain oneself is treated as a civic responsibility, while 'welfare dependency', unemployment, or low wages are understood as the outcomes of individual deficiency or failure. In a narrative that ignores the structural causes of poverty and individualises the responsibility for one's well-being, the provision of social support can be treated as benevolence on the part of the state, contributing to the unequal status of its recipients (Kourachanēs, 2020). Such beliefs legitimise linking social benefits with strict work requirements and regulations on the behaviour of recipients. Despite the rhetorical emphasis on individual freedoms and the minimal state, neoliberal welfare policies strengthen illiberal and paternalistic approaches to the poor, normalising intensified labour market competition (Greer, 2016; Standing, 2014; Wright, 2016).

Social policies turn into a moral project in which the poor are inevitably seen as outsiders and problematic groups and excluded, because of their behav-

our, from the 'community of value'. To describe the experience of poor, low-income, unemployed, and precarious welfare recipients, various authors use terms such as 'sub-citizens', 'second (or third) class citizens', 'conditional citizens', or 'undeserving citizens' (Edmiston & Humpage, 2018; Morgen & Maskovsky, 2003; Seemann, 2021). The poor/unemployed/benefit recipient has become the 'other' of neoliberal policies, in opposition to whom one can construct his or her own status as a good, deserving citizen (Anderson, 2013). The more targeted and disciplinary the system of social benefits is, the more stigmatising it is for the poor to receive state support. This process decreases empathy for the least well off (Jensen & Tyler, 2015; Kumlin & Rothstein, 2005).

The impact of neoliberalism on the stigmatisation of welfare and the low status of its recipients is often intertwined with racial stereotypes. The omission of structural causes and an emphasis on individual moral responsibility, which are inherent to neoliberal reforms, render invisible both current social conditions and the historical origins of the marginalised position of ethnic, racial, or other minorities. At the same time, the outcomes, such as unemployment and low-quality housing, become more visible, criminalised, and pathologised (Powell & Van Baar, 2019). This situation contributes to the calls both for the retrenchment of social support, which is being given allegedly undeserving groups, and the increased securitisation and policing of ethnic and migrant minorities. According to Wacquant (Wacquant, 2009, 2010), policing and coercion become the main tools with which to maintain control over the 'troublemaking' racialised poor, as well as core mechanisms of neoliberal governance. Social problems are turned into security issues, while performative securitisation creates to an impression of control in the context of increasing 'objective social insecurity' (Wacquant, 2010, p. 17), impacting all strata of society. The 'vilification and humiliation' of the criminalised black (ethnic) poor is not only acceptable but can even bring immense symbolic profit. Fassin (2014) introduces the term 'petty states of exception' to describe local policies of non-respect for the rule of law within democratic regimes targeting the supposedly 'troublemaking poor'. While such policies often reflect undeniable locally experienced anxieties, the legitimacy of the repressive reactions is embedded in national and supranational discourses and practices and serves to confirm the existing (racial) social order. Powell and van Baar (2019), follow the processes of invisibilisation in the historical context further. Based on their research on the European Roma, they speak about postracial reversibility (2019, p. 95–96), a process in which the ethnic criminalisation of poverty and its consequent territorialisation and culturalisation are narrated as a problem of the preferential treatment of the Roma and the inadequate protection of the 'real victims', who are, in this case, the immediate non-Roma neighbours, who 'suffer the most' (2019, p. 102). legitimising further penalisation and corrective treatment.

The authors mentioned above have inspired multiple studies on controlling and punitive penal policies targeting the racialised and criminalised poor. The imaginary of a racialised poor 'who have violated rights and failed in their du-

ties' (Powell & Van Baar, 2019, p. 96) while also being the main recipients of social support is also a powerful cognitive structure that guides perceptions and choices in poverty governance (Soss et al., 2011). Analysing US welfare policies, Soss et al. (2011) shows how neoliberal attempts to turn recipients into 'better citizens' who will 'govern themselves in a better way' accelerate the transformation of social policies into a tool of minority governance. In Slovakia, van Baar (2012) examined the role of the allegedly neutral neoliberal discourse of so-called 'activation' promoted by international institutions in the introduction of labour market policies (public work schemes) that had turned into a tool of ethnic governance. More recently, Seemann (2021), who focused on Danish systems of social protection, demonstrated how increased and spatially targeted restrictions or conditionality within social systems can be used as a tool for the protection and promotion of 'national values' among people with non-Western migrant backgrounds.

In CEE countries, the transformation of welfare into a disciplinary tool of minority governance had been described locally, even before the main wave of neoliberal/workfarist reforms, pointing to continuities between racial stereotypes and the understanding of work as a moral value under socialism. In many CEE countries, the poverty of the Roma increased during the neoliberal reforms of the 1990s, pushing them into the position of a highly racialised underclass (Ladanyi in Kóczé, 2020). Research from Hungary and Romania from the 2000s has shown how municipalities used the payment of welfare or public works as a symbolic way of reproducing local hierarchies (Schwarcz, 2012; Thelen et al., 2011). 'National social citizenship rights are adapted by local state actors to local notions of belonging, manifesting the long-standing subordination of minority populations more blatantly than was the case under socialism' (Thelen et al., 2011, p. 524). Nearly a decade later, Kóczé (2020) observes similar patterns in multiple CEE countries at the level of national policies: the increasingly racialised and gendered character of welfare policies, especially the wave of 'activation' labour market policies during the mid-2000s and early 2010s, which were constructed based on the notion of 'welfare dependency', referring to implicit norms and the tacit assumption of deserving white and undeserving racialized, Roma poor. According to her observations, restructured neoliberal welfare re-produces these racial categories, as a core state mechanism that differentiates the 'worthy' from the 'unworthy' (Kóczé, 2020, p. 146).

Neoliberalism and the Czech support system for poor households – from central government to local players

The Czech system support for low-income households is built on two main principles: means- and income-tested social assistance (*pomoc v hmotné nouzi*), which was originally intended to serve as temporary protection, and means-tested state social support (*státní sociální podpora*), which is designed to support low-income working households and families with children. Since the 1990s, both

systems have undergone a series of changes, which reduced them to the minimum safety net, covering only small proportion of inhabitants facing economic insecurity (Saxonberg et al., 2013). In this text, we focus, analytically, on social assistance, a minimum-income scheme that ostensibly provides basic, constitutionally guaranteed social protection for all citizens. Social assistance underwent significant modification in 2007, after the new Material Distress Assistance Act (MDAA), which was drafted under a left-wing government, entered into force. The MDAA emphasised labour market efficiency and the 'activation' of benefit recipients and was closely linked to employment policies (Trlifajová & Hurrle, 2019). These premises were closely intertwined with the stigmatising notion of 'work-avoiding', morally and culturally failing welfare recipients, which was particularly pronounced in the later 2012 social reform¹ introduced by centre-right administration at the onset of the 'economic crisis' (Rakoczyová & Horáková, 2014). These reforms were based on proposals originating at the national level and followed approaches and policies that, at the time, dominated European political debates and centred around the logic of austerity and the conditionality of social support (Taylor-Gooby et al., 2017). The reforms also changed the power relationships surrounding benefit payments at the municipal level. In 2012, the responsibility for social assistance payments was transferred from municipalities to the national Labour Office, with the goal of closer coordination between benefit and employment policies. In reality, this transfer reduced municipalities' ability to influence social-benefit payments to individual clients.

During the same period, changes were also introduced to the state social-support system (the abolition of the social supplement and the reduction of child allowances), which pushed many low-income households out of this system. Only those with the lowest incomes became eligible for already-restrictive and -stigmatised social-assistance benefits (Horáková, 2013; Průša et al., 2014). Automatic indexation against inflation for all types of benefits had been revoked, and their real value was dropping. The minimum wage also stagnated between 2006 and 2013. By the end of the 2010s, 30–40% of households were in an economically insecure situation, but only a small segment of them received support through any type of social benefit (Trlifajová, 2021).

A new left-wing government that took office in 2014 placed greater emphasis on increasing the minimum wage. However, in relation to social assistance and other benefits targeted at poor and low-income households, the adopted legislative changes were characterised by further restrictions and the increased involvement of municipal actors. While, prior to 2012, nearly all significant changes were based on proposals prepared by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs

¹ In practice, the most punitive measures, such as attendance control at Post Offices or unpaid obligatory public work, taken by the 2012 reforms were later revoked or ruled unconstitutional (Sirovátka, 2016); however, punitive approaches to benefit recipients remained part of the system of social assistance (Grundělová, 2021; Mertl, 2016).

Table 1. Overview of core adopted amendments to the Material Distress Assistance Act (2014–2021) – part one

Title	Original proposal		Main adopted MP initiatives			Date sub- mitted- date adopted	Support for- against (abstain)
	Author	Proclaimed objectives	Main (adopted) measures	Affiliation	Proclaimed objectives		
(Part 1)							
252/2014 Sb.		Experience from praxis.	Standards of housing quality (as a condition of benefit payments).	ODS	Tool for municipalities to control the presence of dormitories.	Right of municipality to decide on housing assistance payments.	89-13 (64)
Housing Assistance Reduction and Municipal Consent (Municipal Consent)	MPSV (ČSSD*)	Increased benefit payments as a problem, benefit misuse. High amount paid through benefit to landlords offering low quality housing.	Stricter control of benefit payments, increased conditionality, changes in benefit calculations. Lower cap on housing assistance payment outside flats (90%).	ČSSD	Protection of seniors living in summer houses.	Possibility to pay full housing assistance to those living in recreation houses.	

Table 1. Overview of core adopted amendments to the Material Distress Assistance Act (2014–2021) – part two

Title	Original proposal		Main adopted MP initiatives			Date submitted–date adopted	Support for/against (abstain)
	Author	Proclaimed objectives	Main (adopted) measures	Affiliation	Proclaimed objectives		
367/2016 Sb.	Group of senators	Enhancing the 'motivation' for employment	Renewal of 'public service', semi-obligatory work for benefit recipients.				
Renewal of Public Service (Public Service)	(ODS, Severočeský, KSČM)	Fight against welfare dependency, social exclusion	Reduction of benefits after 6 months of receiving them, increase conditional public service / labour market activity, small bonus for more hours of public service.	ANO, ČSSD, TOP 09	Detail on benefit payment conditions (exclusion of voluntary work), exceptions (health), contributions to municipalities organizing public service, etc.	2014–2016	129-13 (16)

Table 1. Overview of core adopted amendments to the Material Distress Assistance Act (2014–2021) – part three

Title	Original proposal		Main adopted MP initiatives		Date submitted–date adopted	Support for/against (abstain)		
	Author	Proclaimed objectives	Main (adopted) measures	Affiliation			Proclaimed objectives	Main measures
(Part 2)								
098/2017 Sb.	MPSV	Administrative problems with the implementation of 'municipal consent'.	Consultation with municipalities in the process of benefit payments	ODS	Award municipalities the right to prevent the spatial concentration of benefit recipients.	Municipalities can declare 'areas with an increased incidence of socially undesirable phenomena' (bezdotkatkové zóny), in which new housing assistance benefits are not paid.	2016–2017	127-0 (58)
No Housing Assistance Zones	(ČSSD)	Support municipalities, prevent the migration of the 'social weakest' organized by landlords.	Lower cap on housing assistance payment outside flats (80%)		Fight against business with poverty	Further technical limits on housing assistance payments.		

Table 1. Overview of core adopted amendments to the Material Distress Assistance Act (2014–2021) – part four

Title	Original proposal			Main adopted MP initiatives			Date sub- mitted- date adopted	Support for- against (abstain)
	Author	Proclaimed objectives	Main (adopted) measures	Affiliation	Proclaimed objectives	Main measures		
					Benefit recipient should not be seen buying alcohol and cigarettes. Prevent benefit misuse	People who have been receiving benefits for over 6 months receive up to 65% of the benefits in vouchers.		
				ANO				
				SPD	Problem of non-payment of services to house caretakers or partnership of house-owners.	Possibility to send housing benefit directly, without the consent of recipient.		

Table 1. Overview of core adopted amendments to the Material Distress Assistance Act (2014–2021) – part five

Title	Original proposal		Main adopted MP initiatives		Date submitted–date adopted	Support for/against (abstain)
	Author	Proclaimed objectives	Main (adopted) measures	Affiliation		
327/2021 Sb. Three Offences and Enough	Group of MPs (ODS)	Protection of people who are living in the neighbourhood of 'excluded or complicated' localities. Support municipalities, provide them with a tool.	Possibility to seize fines from social assistance payments for repeated offences against public order, civic coexistence, low school attendance.	ODS	Technical detail—type of fines, offences, evidence, sharing of information.	112-23 (15)

Notes: The titles are based on the name under which an amendment became known in the public debate (abbreviated titles used in this text are in brackets) Proclaimed objectives are based on the explanations of the proposition's authors provided during the debates or in the accompanying materials.

MP initiatives are not elaborated in cases where they introduced minor changes or technical details.

*ČSSD 'Czech Social Democratic Party' – centre left, in opposition 2007–2014, head of government between 2014 and 2017, member of government 2018–2021.

and no MP-initiated proposals for amendments (*pozměňovací návrhy*) were added to them, this practice changed considerably around 2013/2014. The central government no longer initiated the changes. The ministry² presented the two major reforms (2014 and 2016) as directly reflecting the demands of municipalities. Other adopted amendments were initiated by various groups of deputies, which had not been the case for even a single proposal in the previous period. These deputies were also active in debates around draft legislation, which they modified according to their own initiatives, introducing significant changes to some of the government's original proposals. The authors of these amendments often presented themselves as representatives of poor regions characterised by the presence of 'socially excluded localities'. Many of them had experience with municipal policies in these regions. Their affiliation with political parties varied from centre-right (liberal-conservative parties, ODS³, TOP09⁴) and populist centre (ANO⁵) to far right (Úsvit/SPD⁶, Severočeši⁷), communist (KSČM⁸), and Christian democratic (KDU-ČSL⁹). The table below provides an overview of the amendments introduced between 2014 and 2021.

Local context—anti-Roma protests and demand for control over the Roma

The researched period is characterised by local ethnic conflicts that drew national media and political attention to deindustrialising regions situated on the economic periphery of the Czech Republic. These regions have experienced a significant deterioration of labour availability and quality, a decline in infrastructure quality, and the outflow of more educated groups of citizens in recent decades. Moreover, due to the prevalent dependence on employment in industry, the regions were

² Under a minister from the ČSSD, 'Czech Social Democratic Party' – centre left, in opposition 2007–2014, head of government between 2014 and 2017, member of government 2018–2021.

³ ODS – 'Civic Democratic Party', head of government between 2006 and 2013, in opposition 2014–2021.

⁴ TOP 09 – 'Tradition Responsibility Prosperity', established 2009, member of government 2010–2013, in opposition 2014–2021.

⁵ ANO – 'Action of Dissatisfied Citizens', established 2012, member of government 2014–2017, head of government between 2017 and 2021.

⁶ SPD – 'Freedom and Direct Democracy', constituted after split from similarly oriented party Úsvit ('Dawn of Direct Democracy') in opposition in the whole analysed period.

⁷ Severočeši – 'North Bohemians', a regional party, represented only by one person in the Senate of the Czech Republic.

⁸ KSČM – 'Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia', in opposition in the whole analysed period.

⁹ KDU-ČSL – 'Christian and Democratic Union – Czechoslovak People's Party', member of government 2007–2009, 2013–2017, in opposition 2017–2021.

severely affected by the 2008 economic crisis. Starting in the 1990s, many poor Roma were pushed out of economic centres and into these regions due to vacant housing capacity. The situation of the most vulnerable groups has thus shifted from a national (state) issue to a local (neighbourhood) problem for municipalities with limited capacities and will to address it. By the mid-2000s, these spatial concentrations of Roma, whether they consisted of individual houses or entire neighbourhoods, had come to be referred to as 'socially excluded localities' and became targets of specific-state policies (Hurrle et al., 2016). The presence of the Roma in these localities was understood as a symbol for overall decay, the deterioration of the living conditions and other processes that were often beyond the control of municipal policies (Trlifajová, 2021).

From 2011 to 2014, at the peak of the economic crisis, anti-Roma demonstrations took place in many towns in these regions. Framing the situation in terms of reverse racism (Powell & van Baar, 2019), the protesters identified Roma as the cause of often complex problems in the region (Trlifajová, 2021). In the discourse of the protest, a key distinction was made between 'decent/normal citizens', 'decent Czechs,' and 'old residents' and 'gypsies', 'inadaptables', 'idlers', 'brown Czechs', and 'immigrants', who are responsible for perceived decay (Hejnal, 2012; Kluknavská & Zagibová, 2013). Though protestors were often unemployed themselves, the idea of Roma as undeserving recipients of welfare benefits resonated strongly with them (Janebová & Valová, 2016). The polarising anti-Roma rhetoric, which was initially used by far-right actors during the protests, was taken up by local politicians, local non-Roma residents, and the media—and sometimes even by the Roma themselves (Křížková, 2013; Trlifajová et al., 2015). Demonstrations and the media coverage of such at the local and national levels reinforced historically anchored stereotypes about Roma, including their 'unwillingness to work', 'inadaptability', and 'abuse of benefits'.

In this period, the spatial concentration of poor Roma was associated with a 'business with poverty' (*obchod s chudobou*). This notion appears in the Czech public discourse in the late 2000s, gradually becoming synonymous with the provision of precarious housing for people receiving welfare benefits (Kupka et al., 2021). Business with poverty has been associated with 'parasitism' on the social system and 'abuse' by disadvantaged groups via landlords acting for their own enrichment. The narrative follows the logic of racial reversibility (Powell & van Baar, 2019). It is centred on 'victims' who need to be defended against the negative effects of the business: 'old residents'; 'decent citizens' and 'concerned, uninvolved observers of the localities' into which (Roma) welfare recipients are allegedly moving. Other groups, such as the recipients of welfare benefits, are portrayed much more ambivalently (Kupka et al., 2021).

Anti-Roma protests have highlighted the perceived link between the social benefits system and the spatial concentration of Roma. This way of thinking was also reflected in the government's programme statement pledging to 'prevent business with poverty, which consists of renting out overpriced accommodation

covered by social housing benefits' (Vláda České republiky, 2014, p. 37). Such arguments have paved the way for amendments to the MDAA.

Locally, anti-Roma protests were often followed by the intensification of existing municipal anti-Roma policies (Trlifajová, 2021). Several Czech towns, especially post-industrial municipalities with a higher proportion of Roma inhabitants, introduced these policies under the 'zero tolerance' banner in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Zero tolerance drew on security policies introduced in the United States and other countries in the 1990s and the following decades. However, the Czech version of zero tolerance differed from their models in the close cooperation of the security apparatus and the social services sector and attempts to use social benefit payments as a tool of control over the Roma (Pospíšil & Trlifajová, 2023; Trlifajová, 2021). Many of the measures had a performative character intended to demonstrate a city's ability to control the movement and behaviour of the Roma. These policies, as well as narratives legitimizing them, strongly resonated in the legislative proposals of the period under examination.

Methodology

In examining the interplay between neoliberal policies and the above-described local, racist discourses, we consider the parliamentary debates regarding the amendments to the MDAA for the 2014–2021 period (Table 1 above). Our analysis focussed only on successful amendments to the MDAA (i.e., those proposals that were adopted into legislation). Each amendment was read and debated three times in parliament. In the case of the No Housing Assistance Zones Amendment, the second and third readings were repeated. The transcripts of these debates were retrieved from the website of the Chamber of Deputies of the Parliament of the Czech Republic.

Here, the parliamentary debates are approached as an arena in which a policy narrative is being performed and contested. The creation of a narrative is a constitutive part of the policy process (Lowdnes, 2016) in which recent problems are addressed through storytelling, describing a particular version of the past whereby the causes and character of contemporary problems can be defined, in addition to an imagination of the future. These narratives activate cognitive and moral resources to delineate the right things to do. Narratives may be employed strategically to strengthen collective identity or unreflectively as a practice of collective boundaries (Polletta, 2006). The debates in the Parliament of the Czech Republic are public, streamed, video recorded, and transcribed, so they are an arena of performativity. As such, they might not tell us everything about the policy process or power actors that shaped the content of the legislation, nor do they reflect the (counter)narrative of those who are underrepresented in the policy process. They also do not represent all potential framings and actors present in the public

space. However, they represent an ultimate public space in which discourse on and modes of legitimation for public policies are performed and contested.

Analysing policy narratives about social benefits can thus help us to understand the struggle to delimit the boundaries of membership and normative values in a society. While formal membership is crucial, modern states often portray themselves as communities of value, which are composed of people who share common ideals and exemplary patterns of behaviour, creating both the basis for the protection of those perceived as deserving, as well as the demand for the control, discipline, or expulsion of groups that represent a threat (Anderson, 2013). 'Failed citizens' not only fail to live up to the ideals of the society. They also, allegedly, threaten social stability and the order of society and endanger its moral values. It is not only the transgression of norms and rules but also fear and the image of common threat that allow the introduction of regimes of control and discipline. According to Anderson (2013), such measures are especially attractive to those with legal citizenship, who feel that they are at risk of failure/non-belonging. To prove their own status in society, they feel that they must dissociate themselves from those 'failed' citizens who are excluded from the community of value. In an attempt to prove their own deservingness, they are keen to support the discursive distinctions between themselves and failed citizens and noncitizens, as well as restrictive measures against the latter two groups.

These processes are particularly pronounced in the approach to social rights. In reading the parliamentary debates, we have thus searched for the ways in which problems and their causes are described, proposed changes are legitimised, and the categories of deservingness and threats to society are used in this process. We first identified the main narratives employed by those who proposed and supported the legislative changes. We focussed particularly on phrases and terms that were used repeatedly. In this way, we identified several analytical categories of the legitimisation and explanation of the proposals and two main categories of deservingness. For each category, we identified several keywords, such as 'normal' or 'decent' for the deserving category. Consequently, we coded both the segments identified in the first reading and the segments identified through keywords using Atlas.ti software. This helped us to verify the identified narratives and their frequency and to further examine the context in which they are used. We used the same method to search for narratives identified as unrepresented in the first reading, such as economic efficiency or a rights-based approach, to verify their occurrence. Particular attention was paid to counternarratives—the ways in which opposition to the proposed changes was framed. We coded and analysed these in separate analytical categories. The findings are an outcome of these analyses and are clustered into thematic groups. Unless mentioned otherwise, the quotations used in the following text have been selected because they represent a narrative that was repeatedly presented in the debates.

Findings

The first part of the analysis concentrates on the main narratives used to legitimise the analysed amendments (see Table 1 for an overview) in the parliamentary debates. In the last subsection, we also examine the counternarratives.

Local knowledge and practical experience

As described above, the significant legislative changes in the analysed period were not typically driven by the national government. This was mirrored in the construction of knowledge in the debates dealing with the proposals. The analysed parliamentary debates were characterized by a lack of references to professional policy knowledge. The proponents of the legislative changes, as well as those involved in the debates, legitimised their opinions based on local experience. Members of Parliament often referred to their previous political experience at the municipal level, visits to the municipalities, and consultations with their representatives. Expert policy knowledge, international experience, and data-based analyses were rarely mentioned. The arguments of opponents of legislation, meanwhile, were dismissed because these opponents did not have sufficient personal experience with the localities. The possession of relevant knowledge and local experience were particularly ascribed to municipalities characterised by a spatial concentration of Roma. In most cases, the Roma are not mentioned directly. Instead, neighbourhoods where they live were in the debates referred to as ‘ghettos (of inadaptables)’, ‘(excluded/risky) localities’, and containing a high ‘concentration of (‘those’) people’. Municipalities with higher proportion of poor Roma are often located in a post-industrial or deindustrialised part of the Czech Republic, where a high level of general unemployment impacts a large portion of the population. However, the relevance of local expertise is constructed predominantly not based on experience with poverty but, rather, on the spatial concentration of Roma.

The exclusivity of local experience among political representatives from the municipalities with these ‘localities’ becomes more pronounced in the debates surrounding the Three Offences and Enough Amendment (2019–2021). The inability to understand the situation and, thus, have opinions that were relevant to the debate was explicitly framed in terms of the different experiences of the centre and the periphery, ascribing a certain naiveté to the economic centre:

In Prague 7 [one of the municipalities of Prague], you may have a few dozen homeless people, some drug addicts, but other than that [...], *you are living in paradise*. We who are from northern Bohemia, from Karlovy Vary, Ústí nad Labem, northern Moravia, *we have hundreds, thousands of these people*. [...] who don’t complete anything that they are supposed to, who do not work, *who only receive benefits and laugh at decent people*. (Kohoutek, ANO, Three Offences and Enough, 2021)

Personal-experience-based, often emotional, argumentation was employed by the majority of parliamentarians, whereas arguments concerning a lack of data-based evidence made by the amendments' critics did not produce any reaction.

Socially excluded localities as a core problem

The legitimacy ascribed to 'practical,' 'local' experience was closely linked to the definition of the problem. Despite coming from the country's poorest regions, the amendments' proponents did not consider poverty, unemployment, or social exclusion a problem *per se*—the problem was the existence or growth of socially excluded localities inhabited by the 'inadaptable'. The existence of these localities is described as interconnected with the social benefit system.

The enormous social benefits that the state pays to those entrepreneurs—they are a paradise for the clientelist octopus running ghettos for the inadaptable [...]. They buy houses for a penny, accommodate the inadaptable in them, and collect a generous state subsidy. (Havlová, SPD, Municipal Consent, 2014)

This understanding, as illustrated in the quote above, was prominent in the debates surrounding the Municipal Consent and No Housing Assistance Zones Amendments (2014–2017), which focussed on the housing benefit within social assistance (housing assistance/*doplatek na bydlení*). The discussants linked the existence of 'localities' to an under-regulated, 'overgenerous' benefit system that contributes to the expansion of business with poverty. While several Members of Parliament acknowledged there may be complex structural and historical processes affecting the formation of the 'localities', they still pushed for a restrictive approach to social benefits as a universal solution:

Certain things have happened throughout history; [...] these houses were offered to be transferred to the municipalities sometime in the 90s. [...] municipality did not strive to acquire the buildings, but it is hard to blame anyone for that today or to punish the municipality for it [...]. The solution must be found elsewhere. And the state must ensure that the construction of social assistance benefits [...] will prevent the formation of localities. (Vilímeč, ODS 2017, No Housing Assistance Zones, 2017)

In the later debates around the Three Offences and Enough Amendment (2019–2021), the link between welfare and business with poverty became less pronounced. Socially excluded localities are now described primarily as a problem of inhabitants profiting from an overgenerous welfare system. Compared to previous debates, the reasoning has become more openly racist, though it still contains concealed reference to Roma as 'inadaptables' or 'those people':

The inadaptables have adapted to this kind humanistic approach [...] that the money belonging to those who go to work is being handed out to those who do not go to work. And they are terribly content with this situation, so the numbers are growing. (Foldyna, ex-ČSSD/SPD, Three Offences and Enough, 2021)

The proponents of the new legislation further emphasised the inability of the municipalities to address these growing problems:

The most terrible feeling for me, as a former mayor, *is the feeling of helplessness, of not knowing how to deal with the situation*. And I guarantee you, not for myself but for everyone else I spoke to today, that everyone in those localities is doing the best they can, but when they run out of tools, *any measure ceases to be effective*. (Kalátová, ANO, Three Offences and Enough, 2021)

Protecting deserving citizens

Throughout these debates, the existence of 'localities' is primarily framed as a problem from the perspective of those 'proper citizens' who live within the neighbourhoods there. These are the 'real victims' (Powell & van Baar, 2019), as they are, according to the descriptions offered, facing increased insecurity and criminality and a decline in housing prices and overall quality of life. Specific examples often refer to small neighbourhood conflicts, such as late-night noise, which considerably worsen quality of life but often are not even minor offenses according to the law. Neighbours in these 'localities' are often described as 'citizens'¹⁰, thus emphasizing their (moral) right to be protected and make claims. Citizenship is constructed not as a legal category but as a moral category.

It is indeed a *problem that is troubling the citizens* [...]. The people living there are rightly critical [...] there is a high crime rate, and the prices of the surrounding real estate are deteriorating. This must be said. The citizens are afraid to leave their children unattended. The place is in public disorder. *We have a chance to help them*. (ODS, Stanjura, Municipal Consent, 2014)

Repeatedly, the speeches emphasised the unfairness of state policies towards people outside the 'localities', referring to an inability to protect them:

They are being disturbed at night, their belongings get lost, and *they feel like they cannot get justice*; [...] The worst thing this state can do is allow people to feel *like there*

¹⁰ The term 'citizens' was sometimes used with an ironic subtone to refer to the Roma/inhabitants of the localities. Similarly, note the ironic use 'our citizens' or 'co-citizens' to refer to the Roma.

are those who go to work and try hard, pay for their garbage and everything that comes with living in a city or a town, and then there is a second group of people who live with the feeling that they have no commitments, they don't have to do anything, and it is normal, and it is tolerated. (Bartošek, KDU, Three Offences and Enough, 2021)

The right to protection is constructed based on adherence to the values of the community and contribution to the community (Anderson, 2013). As the quotation above demonstrates, deservingness was often based on employment ('going to work') and, thus, proper behaviour ('getting up in the morning'). While speakers occasionally admitted that some groups of the poor should have access to social protection (the elderly, single mothers, and young working families with children), those who are actually receiving social benefits were constructed within a strong dichotomy and contrasted with 'proper'/'normal'/'decent' citizens. In some cases, the distinction becomes explicitly racist:

*Something really should be done about this because you don't realize what *we're igniting here in terms of hatred between white and black people* if I must put it this way. And this is where racism originates. (Rutová, ANO, No Housing Assistance Zones, 2016)*

The 'undeserving' benefit recipients and the inhabitants of the 'localities' were often treated as overlapping categories. The threat they represented was most vividly and emotionally illustrated in the most recent debates on the Three Offences and Enough amendment:

Those people are laughing in your face, [...] they are laughing at the officials, the police; they are simply not afraid of anyone here any longer, and they are doing whatever they please. [...] Until you touch their money, the benefits, those people are going to do what they want! That is the reality! (Aulická, KSČM, Three Offences and Enough)

The proponents of the amendments also emphasised the need to publicly demonstrate support for those labelled 'decent':

What about the rest of the decent people who live in those neighbourhoods? They have the right to have peace. They have the right to sleep in peace. They have the right not to have their shoes stolen all the time. They have the right to ride a decent bus [...] The law is about them; it gives the problematic people some sort of a stop sign! (Fialová, ANO, Three Offences and Enough)

The perspective of welfare recipients was nearly absent from the debates, with the exception of one critic during the Three Offences and Enough debate in 2021, and even then, the experience was framed as that of a single mother; thus, one could expect her to be perceived as deserving of support. The perspective of the Roma inhabitants of the 'localities' was never represented. Their social situation and its cause were rendered invisible.

Despite most of the debates on the Three Offences and Enough Amendment having taken place during the COVID-19 pandemic, its social impacts and the potential role of social assistance as a tool of protection were hardly mentioned.

The benefit system as a tool of control

The framing of socially excluded localities and the behaviour of their inhabitants as (a) an outcome of a poorly constructed social benefit system and (b) a threat to municipalities and their deserving inhabitants contributed to the argument that greater control over socially excluded localities could be achieved through the introduction of new restrictions on the benefit system. Many of these measures were balancing on the verge of constitutionality—the right of a municipality to prohibit housing benefit payments on its territory was, for example, ruled unconstitutional 4 years after its introduction, and some legal experts expect a similar decision on the newly introduced right of a municipality to seize social benefits from those who owe fines.

In the debates surrounding the amendments aimed at housing benefits (Municipal Consent and No Housing Assistance Zones), most participants agreed that those who are financially profiting are, primarily, not the benefit recipients themselves but private landlords. The propositions aimed to limit their 'business' by limiting housing benefits so that tenants, particularly in low-quality housing, could pay less for rent or ultimately stop receiving support altogether, consequently depriving private landlords of the main income source.

There had been some debate as to which types of housing should be affected by these restrictions. However, the central debates on housing benefits were not about housing conditions but, rather, the demand on the part of municipalities to have 'adequate rights' to make decisions about the residences of its inhabitants:

The essence [...] is the right of a municipality [...] to identify the localities within its territory where further concentration of people with housing assistance could mean significant social impacts on the municipality's territory and, eventually, to recommend the maximum number of persons to whom housing assistance should be provided in that locality. (Vilímec, ODS, No Housing Assistance Zones, 2016)

The right of municipalities to make decisions about benefit payments was portrayed as a tool of control over their potential misuse:

It is indeed the mayor who has the best knowledge of the situation [...]. It should be in the mayor's interest to ensure that benefits are not abused in his/her town and that there are no problems in excluded areas. (Havlová, Úsvit, Municipal Consent, 2014)

The Three offences and Enough Amendment was aimed at ensuring direct, performative control over the behaviour of welfare recipients through the introduc-

tion of the right to seize social benefits from those who owe fines (see Table 1). These measures were presented as a tool used to boost the repressive power of the municipality:

We need to give mayors, towns, municipalities some tools to finally do something about it. We can't just keep waiting for something, shielding ourselves with human rights. And, in fact, the municipal police who are coming in are literally being ostracized, ridiculed because they have no tools to do anything. (Juchelka, ANO, Three Offences and Enough, 2021)

Several supporters of the measure presented it as response to allegedly overgenerous social benefits and ineffective, costly social work. The call for repressive measures was accompanied by an appeal for the suspension of various welfare tools, and it was more pronounced on the populist far right:

If we keep giving them more and more subsidies, we will not educate them. We need to find restrictive measures to force them to comply. I do not see any other way. And I repeat, if we keep spoiling them, that is the road to hell. (Holík, SPD, Three Offences and Enough, 2021)

Others presented the repression of welfare recipients as a measure to make existing tools, including social work, efficient. However, there was a consensus that restrictions are the only way to discipline 'those people' and teach them to engage in proper behaviour.

Prevention is good, I agree [...] we are talking about a group of people where prevention has completely failed. And if prevention doesn't work, then restriction must come [...]. And I'm pleading on behalf of the Ústí region. Let's approve this bill. Let's pass it. (Fialová, ANO, Three Offences and Enough, 2021)

During the long hours spent on it, the debate on the Three Offences and Enough Amendment became more heated and emotional. The proponents of the amendment openly warned of an imminent ethnic conflict between the Roma, who are the supposed beneficiaries of existing generous policies, and the majority society, which is threatened by welfare recipients' behaviour:

The other group of people are totally outraged. So, who's creating the tension in this society? We are. The Roma don't come here to vote on the laws. We do it, like a bunch of thickheads. We're giving away working people's money to those who don't work! (Foldyna, ex-ČSSD/SPD, Three Offences and Enough, 2021)

Two years after the introduction of the No Housing Assistance Zones Amendment in 2017, 'zones' where it was not possible to receive Housing Assistance (see

Table 1) were introduced in a hundred municipalities—in some cases, across entire municipal territories (Zieglerová, 2019). By 2021, however, these had been ruled unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court. It is expected that, once the issue reaches the Constitutional Court, a similar decision will outlaw the right of municipalities to seize social benefits to pay fines, though no such case has been presented as of this writing.

Work ethic continuities

As mentioned above, work ethic was emphasised in the parliamentary debates as central to the character of those deserving protection. Conversely, people portrayed as undesirable were characterised as those who ‘do not lead normal lives’ and who ‘do not work’. However, as described above, most of the amendments presented in the parliament since 2012 were not aimed at facilitating participation in the labour market but, rather, at controlling population movement and behaviour portrayed as having a negative impact on neighbourhoods.

Only one amendment was targeted at employment: the reintroduction of public service (2014). Proponents on this amendment from a centre-right political party emphasised the maintenance of ‘labour habits’ (*pracovní návyky*) and motivation to work. There was a consensus regarding the importance of maintaining ‘labour habits’, a continuity within workfarist reforms from 2006–2012. However, for many of the Members of Parliament involved, the debate was constructed around the notion of the undeserving unemployed (the Roma) and the deserving workers. Public service was presented as not only a tool for labour-market inclusion but also a performative act:

We will support this so that our fellow citizens, who haven’t worked for a long time, don’t lose their work habits, and *the majority of society, who work on a daily basis, will see the state’s endeavour to bring those citizens back into the workforce and ensure that they do not live at the expense of others.* (Vystrčil, ODS, Public Service, 2014)

A controversy in the parliamentary debates arose regarding the amount of money granted for public service. Eventually, the more repressive/punitive version prevailed. Calls for higher rewards for public service within the benefit system were, by the majority of parliamentarians, perceived as support for those who do not deserve it. This stance was often most pronounced among those who presented themselves as representatives of the disadvantaged regions. One of the Members of Parliament described the situation as follows:

Novák family [...] have three kids, they do not work even though they are fit for work, and they are receiving benefits [...], which earns them approximately CZK 21,500. At present, they do not have to work; they do not have to participate in public service; they do

not have to pay their debts, because the benefits they are receiving from the state are not subject to seizure. They do not have to pay health insurance [...] [they] devote their time to dishonest activities—thefts or frequent parties late at night [...].

The second family [...] lives on the earnings of both adult parents who have two children [...]. Their net income is CZK 25,200. [...] They have to get up in the morning, and therefore [...], there is no room for daily celebrations, dishonest activities [...]. They have to pay their debts, as their wages are subject to possible seizure. The parents are definitely good role models for their children. They show that it is normal to work and to take responsibility for their own life and the life of the whole family [...].

The difference in income between the two families is about CZK 4,000. With the other advantages of a family living on benefits [...], such as school supplies, school trips, etc., this difference is further reduced. (Pastuchová, ANO, Public Service, 2014)

Again, in line with a neoliberal understanding of deservingness, the quote demonstrates an understanding of employment as a foundation of ‘proper’ behaviour. The speech also points to the problem of low wages, the difficult situation of indebted workers facing wage seizures, and a lack of social support for low-wage working households—a reality impacting a large portion of the population in many poor regions of the Czech Republic (Trlifajová, 2021). However, the answers presented in Parliament to these problems are not proposals for adequate wages or debt relief but, rather, lowering the income of those on social benefits.

Counternarrative

While the amendments introduced in 2014 did not produce many debates, the debates surrounding an ‘increased incidence of socially undesirable phenomena’ (2016–2017) and, especially, the Three Offences and Enough amendment (2019–2021) were heated. Opposition to the proposals came primarily from centre-liberal parties¹¹. Their argumentation was, in many respects, embedded in neoliberal discourse, emphasising individualised support, approaching welfare as a minimal safety net targeted toward helping the poorest (*‘I don’t think anyone here wants them to just be dying on the streets’*¹²), and maintaining a focus on social exclusion as a core problem.

One of the main arguments against the proposed restriction on housing benefit payments warned that the proposals did not provide any protection for those who would lose access to housing benefits or would have their benefit payments limited:

¹¹ Piráti (Czech Pirate Party), centrist liberal party, and liberal wing of KDU-ČSL.

¹² Čížinský, liberal wing of KDU, Three Offences and Enough, 2021.

The consequence [...] will be that a significant number of people will lose their housing because, once the business with poverty stops paying, many people will stop doing it. [...] we need to move quickly and *start planning and mapping out where we are going to put these people so that they don't end up on the street.* (Gabal, KDU, Municipal Consent, 2015)

Some of those who opposed the Three Offences and Enough legislation argued from a similar position, claiming that the proposal ignores the potential negative impact on the situation for benefit recipients and that the law deprives people of a minimum income:

I am also aware of the catastrophic situation in the excluded localities [...] this law will worsen the situation rather than improve it, although I understand the reasons [...]. *The idea that these people will not meet their basic life needs for a certain period of time is an illusion [...] there are risks, such as higher criminality in those localities.* (Ferjenčík, Pirates, Three Offences and Enough, 2021)

Some opponents emphasised the lack of a cost-benefit analysis, particularly the fact that the proposal does not consider long-term costs, attempting to criticise it from the perspective of financial ineffectiveness. Others argued that the measures would not be effective, as they replicate existing sanctions. None of the above-mentioned arguments, however, were treated as relevant and addressed by the proponents of the legislation.

The narrative of those opposing the restrictive measures mostly replicated the stereotypical description of excluded localities and presented the behaviour of their inhabitants/welfare recipients as the core problem. Proposed alternative solutions targeted alleged individual causes; individual social work and complex support were presented as the main solutions. In line with neoliberal understanding, they often stressed the importance of social inclusion through employment:

This law will not solve it, and neither will further tightening. What will solve it is better enforcement of what is valid and what makes sense, *just getting able-bodied people to work.* (Richterová 2021, Pirates, Three Offences and Enough, 2021)

There were only rare exceptions—attempts to shift the narrative from excluded localities and failing benefit recipients. In the debate on public service, only one Social Democrat Member of Parliament emphasised the structural context of the low-wage labour market (*It's not the high welfare we should blame. It's the low wages.*¹³), and he was unsuccessful in doing so. However, such a perspective was absent from other Parliamentary debates. Similarly, a social-rights perspective, as an alternative to a neoliberal focus on minimum protection for the poorest

¹³ Kailová, ČSSD, Public Service, 2014.

people, was mostly missing. It was present in a written position offered by the public defender of rights, but it was explicitly mentioned only by one Member of Parliament:

Please don't vote for this act [...] because of some theoretical minority that you have been presenting here as bad; [this is] why *we cannot support legislation that could be applied to all [citizens] in other areas, negatively affecting the rights of inhabitants.* (Dolínek, ČSSD, Three Offences and Enough, 2021)

Based on our analysis, it is not possible to assess whether the above-described framings were used instrumentally or reflect the personal beliefs or the attitudes of those representing them. Nonetheless, the findings reveal the prevalence of neoliberal framing in Parliamentary discourse.

Conclusion

In this article, we analysed the development of Czech minimum-income-scheme legislation during the 2014–2021 period, after a wave of workfarist 'activation' reforms were introduced in the mid-2000s across East Central Europe. We have explored how the neoliberal logic of these reforms intersected with and amplified the racialised hierarchies present in society (Kóczé, 2020; Powell & van Baar, 2019). Based on our findings, we believe that we have observed the formulation of a new regime, one that is embedded in the narrative of neoliberal reforms but has different proclaimed goals, measures, and primary agents. We term it '*post-neoliberal ethnic welfare*'.

In Czechia, this regime is shaped by actors from municipalities characterised by spatial concentrations of Roma (so-called socially excluded localities), which are often situated in poor, deindustrialised regions of the country, with a large proportion of the population facing economic insecurity. Benefit recipients and the inhabitants of these 'localities' are often treated as overlapping categories in the analysed Parliamentary debates. These localities are seen as a public threat and a result of a broken and overgenerous social benefits system. The proponents of the new legislation emphasised the inability of the state to protect the 'deserving' working people, who are portrayed as members of the ethnic majority that live in the areas surrounding the 'localities' and are forced to tolerate the unacceptable behaviour of the Roma inhabitants.

These debates reflect strong feelings of losing control and powerlessness in a deregulated, deindustrialised environment. They are also characterised by a dichotomy between the image of the social-benefit-recipient Roma inhabitants of a locality, who are portrayed as a threat, and their neighbours who are member of the ethnic Czech majority who are described as 'decent', 'normal' citizens. (The Roma did not have any voice in the analysed debates.) The ethnic Czech neigh-

bours are 'real victims' in the sense of Powells and van Baar's (2019) postracial reversibility, blaming the Roma for not only their situation but also the overall decay of their neighbourhoods. The 'decent' inhabitants are discursively characterised by employment and, thus, proper behaviour – in this sense, the debates apply neoliberal categories of deservingness, in which employment is presented as a core feature of full citizenship (Anderson, 2013).

Despite the centrality of work in this narrative, the newly introduced measures did not primarily aim at labour-market inclusion or economic efficiency (austerity) but at strengthening municipal power over local populations by awarding municipalities the right to make decisions on the residence areas for benefit recipients, with the possibility of limiting housing-benefit payments, and providing them tools with which to control the behaviour of welfare recipients (the right to seize fines for minor offences from benefits). Policies that enable local actors to discipline, punish (via deprivation of social benefits), and ultimately remove Roma from the municipality have previously been possible only as a temporary, local 'state of exceptions' (Fassin, 2014). Now, they are entering the core of national policies. What we observe is an attempt on the part of municipal actors to transform the national social system into disciplinary and performative power on the part of local authorities over racialised populations.

Post-neoliberal ethnic welfare is embedded in a cognitive structure that links welfare recipients with the image of a minority, in this case the Roma, as the primary and 'unworthy' recipients of support (Kocze, 2020; Soss et al., 2001). Post-racial reversibility, the dominant logic of these policies, results from the long-term invisibilisation of the historical and structural factors that shape the position of minorities (Powell & van Baar, 2019; Wacquant, 2009). In this sense, our research fits into the literature on the criminalisation and vilification of the racialised poor and the consequent expansion of punitive and panoptic logic as a political strategy for maintaining the impression of state sovereignty (Wacquant, 2009, 2010). However, in our case, this logic does not primarily translate into strengthening the penal role of the state nor into welfare retrenchment or the imposition of workfarist discipline. Social benefits are presented—at least discursively—as the central tool of control over the troublemaking poor. In this process, the emphasis of the measures shifts from workfare to control over the presence (movement) and behaviour of the racialised poor in public spaces. The confirmation of racial social order and performance of control at the municipal level become more important than the push towards employment.

All these processes build on neoliberal reforms, and the neoliberal discourse on deservingness remains present within them. However, this discourse serves primarily as a vehicle for the legitimisation of racial divisions. Here, we confirm Kocze's (2020) observation regarding seemingly colourblind neoliberal categories of deservingness that can be used to legitimise ethnic hierarchies. The fact that the distinction between the undeserving poor and decent citizens particularly resonates in the post-industrial periphery, with a high proportion of

people facing economic insecurity, fits into Anderson's (2013) observation about the need for confirmation of membership in the 'community of value' between those who feel that they are at risk of failure/non-belonging. Because neoliberal framing portrays the poor, the unemployed, and benefit recipients as failed or second-class citizens, the assignment of such a status to the Roma, portraying them transgressing against norms and being responsible for the perceived decay, provides an impression of control and confirms the status of the non-Roma poor as members of the community of value.

The focus on 'localities' as a core social problem was often replicated even by those who opposed the adoption of restrictive measures. The critique was embedded in the neoliberal narrative, highlighting the role of targeted welfare as an incentive for individual improvement and labour-market inclusion.

By narrowing the debate on welfare to the problem of 'localities' and their Roma inhabitants, the neoliberal ethnic welfare regime delegitimises the already diminished social system. It furthers demands for restrictions on social benefits while depriving poor people of a voice in this debate. Its narrative antagonises various groups of people that are impacted by the same process of precarisation and privatisation ('objective social insecurity' in Wacquant's terms). As 1) social protection is no longer understood as a tool of social protection for the general population but, rather, as one that can help to enforce racial order and 2) the racialised poor person/benefit recipient becomes the 'other' of post-neoliberal social policies, in opposition to whom the non-Roma poor person can construct their status as a good, deserving citizen, it becomes impossible to address the structural context of the low-wage labour market and widespread economic insecurity affecting a larger proportion of inhabitants.

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