

Symbolic Processes of Social Exclusion of Roma in Slovak Public Policy Discourse¹

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ABSTRACT. The article examines discourse about causes of Roma poverty that, since 2000, developed in Slovak scholarly literature, and later transgressed into policy and popular discourse. The paper discusses the influence that a concept of culture of poverty played reinforcing negative reactions towards the poor, eventually turning largely against the Roma population in Slovakia. This discourse demonstrated itself in the most exclusionary forms in February 2004 in a period of the so-called 'Roma riots', when New Social Policy reduced welfare benefits and evoked public protests involving Roma. It also explains that the public representation of social unrest ethnicised laziness and justified exclusion of unemployed Roma from the redistribution mechanisms as undeserving poor.

Key words: CULTURE OF POVERTY, DISCOURSE, RIOTS, ROMA, SOCIAL EXCLUSION, SOCIAL POLICY.

Introduction

By focusing on one of the crucial reforms Slovakia has undergone – the reform of social policy in 2004 – I explore the way in which inherited social inequalities have been further reproduced within and through the discourse of social policy. I attempt to uncover symbolic processes of social exclusion through which particular ethnicity became essentialised, laziness ethnicised, and poverty reified in the realm of public discourse. The post-2002 election development, after Mikuláš Dzurinda formed the government for a second time (he was first the head of government in 1998–2002), has often been presented in a positive light as the country underwent a number of reforms, which were supposed to transform the whole socio-economic system. The courage of the second Dzurinda government (2002–2006) to put through the reforms has been widely appreciated abroad.

¹ This text is based on the exploration of the discourse of social policy in Slovakia that was initially developed as a M.A. thesis defended at the Nationalism Studies Programme of the Central European University in Budapest in 2006. Complete thesis entitled *Ethnicized Laziness: Roma in the Slovak Social Policy Discourse* is accessible at <http://www.ceu.hu/nation/theses/Dral.pdf>

However, a country praised for remarkable reform accomplishments – rapid economic growth and gradual increase of living standards – can simultaneously be homeland to people living in persistent poverty and long-term unemployment; of people who inhabit shanty settlements without basic infrastructure; are segregated from the outer world; have very limited access to public services and do not participate in the development of the society. I argue that the reproduction of inequalities could and, in fact, did occur along the ethnic line. While I do not challenge a number of positive achievements of the recent years, I claim that the overall progress is being achieved quickly because substantial parts of the population (mainly, the segregated Roma communities) were excluded from participating and sharing the benefits of economic growth. The striking social discrepancies raise concerns about *how* a significant segment of Slovakia's population is effectively excluded, both materially and symbolically, from the country's progress and growing affluence.

To answer this, I reconstruct the way in which a universal, group-neutral social policy adopted in a polity marked by ethnicised socio-economic inequalities reproduces and reinforces inequalities, both materially and symbolically. Arguably, many Roma can be seen as a group at the highest risk in the general context of transition. The 2004 social policy reform may have further broadened the gap between a significant portion of this minority and the rest of the society and left only minor prospects for the eradication of ethnicised inequalities in the country.

I adopt an alternative approach to the conventional policy analysis and examine the social policy from the perspective of hidden ethno-political struggles over scarce resources as they are reflected in the existing power relations. These struggles may be analysed among different domains, including the domain of public *discourse*. This approach by no means neglects the 'material' outcomes of social policy. However, as I consider the two dimensions, material and symbolic, to be complementary and equally important, I contend that social meanings, concepts, definitions, preconceptions, stereotypes and discursive practices which shape the policy in various domains – academia, politics, media and within the broad public – are crucial to the study of public policies. The primary focus of this analysis is not the social reform as such but a broader *discourse of social policy* which accompanied the reform itself. Even if the discourse was triggered by concrete decisions and was embedded in concrete measures as set out in several policy documents, my analysis is rather interested not in the contents, but in the social and symbolic environment created by the perceptions, justifications, and comments around those policy decisions.

The object to be examined further is discourse about causes of Roma poverty that, since 2000, developed in the Slovak scholarly literature, and later transgressed into policy and popular discourse. This discourse demonstrated itself in the most exclusionary forms in February 2004 during a period of what was dubbed the ‘Roma riots’. The new social policy adopted in 2004 reduced welfare benefits and introduced a requirement of participation in public works as a condition for receiving the benefits. This had a controversial effect on social security and poverty of large segments of Roma population². At the time as introducing the new policies in 2004, public protests involving Roma took place.

Before engaging directly with the discourse analysis, I would like to point out that in their assessments of the post-communist transition, scholars frequently attribute the position of losers to the Roma population. Although Roma have historically been among the poorest people in all countries of the region, the extent of the collapse of their living conditions is regarded as unprecedented (Ringold *et al* 2005). High incidence of Roma poverty is viewed as a consequence of the low level of educational attainment, lack of skills and low social capital, discriminatory practices on the labour market, poor housing and levels of health and many other factors which create a cumulative disadvantage for most Roma and potentially lead to their social exclusion (World Bank 2002: VIII). These *structural* factors are historically inherited, often embedded in the institutional arrangements and enforced by a myriad of daily interactions between Roma and non-Roma. As a result, some scholars talk about the ‘ethnicisation of poverty’ (e.g. Emigh, Fodor, Szelenyi (2001: 1-32)).³ The ethnic dimension in the poverty problem, in fact, had a particular role in evolution of the social policy, as we shall see through the way public discourse developed.

² For more about the background of the Roma situation and about policy changes and their impact in Slovakia, see: Filadelfiová, J., Gerbery, D., Škobla, D. (2007) *Report on the Living Conditions of Roma in Slovakia*. Bratislava: UNDP; Gerbery, D., Lesay, D., Škobla, D. (2007) *Kniha o chudobe. Spoločenské súvislosti a verejné politiky*. Bratislava: FES a Priatelia zeme; Bodnárová *et al* (2004) “Transformácia sociálneho systému na Slovensku, stav, výsledky, riziká narušenia sociálnej súdržnosti a modely riešenia” (Priebežná záverečná správa z výskumu). Bratislava: IVPR.

³ In fact, ‘ethnicisation of poverty’ can refer to two different phenomena: 1. a simple fact of a disproportionate ratio of poor in one ethnic group as compared to some other group; 2. a contestable assertion that poverty has some different ‘quality’ for some ethnic group which reflects its position in society. The two meanings are different but the two phenomena can co-exist in the real world: Roma may be disproportionately more poor and, at the same time, distinctly poor from the rest of the poor. If this is possible it is necessary to assess those special features, causes and consequences of Roma poverty and, if the distinctiveness is confirmed, to propose differentiated policies for the alleviation of poverty of different groups.

In the first part, by outlining theoretical framework, I explain how concepts and ideas are related to social meanings and how they influence policy. In the second part, I devote extensive attention to the debate around structural and cultural causes of poverty which developed in academia but had particular influence for public discourse and policy planning. In part three, the paper summarises the New Social Policy as implemented in Slovakia in 2004. In part four, the public representation of the protest reactions to the new reform is discussed.

Theoretical and methodological framework

Critical discourse analysis

The conception of discourse adopted here is largely inspired by the critical discourse analysis (CDA), particularly by the work of Norman Fairclough. For him, discourse functions at once as a *mode of representation* and as a *mode of action* (Fairclough 1992: 63). While the former refers to particular forms in which people act upon the world and each other, the latter points to the way people apprehend the world, actions and relations by construing and circulating meanings. These meanings may be widely shared social meanings, depending on the reliability or symbolic power of those who articulate and/or disseminate them and the responsiveness or acceptance of those who receive them. Some meanings can, in turn, inspire actions which points to the two-way dynamics in the relation between the two modes.

The study of discourse differs from the conventional policy analysis since it focuses primarily on the ‘symbolic’ implications of policy. I contend, in accord with Fischer, that policymaking is “a constant discursive struggle over the definitions of problems, the boundaries of categories used to describe them, the criteria for their classification and assessment, and the meanings of ideals that guide particular actions” (Fischer 2003: 60).

In the case explored, the social policy discourse presents (reflects) the ways in which different actors – politicians, experts, journalists and ‘ordinary’ citizens – act upon each other; position themselves and others; articulate and disperse particular social meanings related to social issues. At the same time, the discourse, for its part, substantially inspires and contributes to the actions of relevant actors and thus actively *re-presents* (constructs) definitions and perceptions of social issues.

Discourse is at once a text, a discursive practice and a social practice (Fischer 2003: 73) with an ascending level of abstraction from texts to social practices. The three levels create concentric circles. When adopted to the discourse of social policy (1) the inner circle includes various texts (policy documents, expert analyses, news reports) which are all comprised in (2) the intermediate circle of discursive practices (e.g. of praising, blaming, stereotyping) and these are embedded in (3) the outer circle of broader social practices (non-discursive ways of inclusion/exclusion, institutional discrimination etc.). By analysing texts one can arrive at the identification and interpretation of discursive practices embedded within them and at their contributing role to broader social practices occurring in society.

On a final note, discourse as social practice inevitably relates to the existing social structure. In fact, social structure marked by inequalities between people is both a condition for, and an effect of, social and discursive practices. Thus, on the one hand, discourse is shaped and constrained by the existing structure of social relations and the unequal distribution of material and symbolic power while it is itself socially constitutive of social relations and unequal positions through discursive means. Discourse generates (1) subjects, (2) objects, and (3) concepts and constitutes the corresponding (1) social identities (subject positions); (2) social relationships (shaped by norms, conventions, institutions) and (3) systems of knowledge (Fairclough 1992: 64). When applied to social policy discourse it follows that the discourse sets up social identities (of the poor, Roma, unemployed, etc.); enacts social relationships (e.g. between Roma poor and the rest of the society); and is shaped by certain meanings, ideas, concepts, pre-conceptions and stereotypes (e.g. culture of poverty, laziness).

Analytical framework

In the interpretation of social meanings and practices in the Slovak social policy discourse I utilized sociological concepts of frame/framing, storyline, subject-positioning and hegemony.

The frame is a principle of organisation “which governs the subjective meaning we assign to social events” (Goffman 1986: 143). Framing captures how certain actions that can be described on one level are recognized as signifying something else, whose exact nature depends on the context. These actions are ‘re-keyed’ which means that the very activity is only slightly transformed or not at all, but it utterly changes the perception of this activity (Goffman 1986: 45). Frames are cognitive schemes which pre-

set perception by highlighting certain aspects and, at the same time, excluding others. As a result, it is through particular frames that various agents are able to define problems, problematise issues, state diagnoses or mobilise people. As will be discussed later, social protests in Slovakia were multiply 're-keyed' which was possible due to the refocused representation of the unfolding events.

Storyline is a "basic linguistic mechanism for creating and maintaining discursive order, or responding to a destabilising jolt to the discursive order" (Fischer 2003: 86). Storylines are typically based on the known, through which they conceptualise the unknown. Each storyline is "a generative sort of narrative" that allows actors to draw upon various categories to give meaning to specific social phenomena and narrate them in a coherent and meaningful way. Its primary function is to suggest unity in the variety of separate discursive components of a problem that otherwise have no clear or meaningful pattern of connections. Storylines are thus short-hand narrative constructions which condense large amounts of factual information intermixed with normative assumptions and value orientations (Fischer 2003: 86–88). Generative storylines of the analysed social policy discourse are categorised as cultural and structural, the former being dominant, the latter dissenting.

The very way storylines generate narratives and various issues or events are framed determine the position of various actors in the discursive field. By attributing meanings social actors assign themselves and others to different positions; they claim authority as politicians, experts, officers, locals and from these positions contribute to the discourse (Fischer 2003: 83). Finally, the concept of *hegemony* refers to the dominant ways of constructing objects (issues) and subjects (actors), the construction being a site of constant discursive struggles. Hegemony of discourse in a particular place and time is always an 'unstable equilibrium' (Gramsci 1971, cf. Fairclough 1992: 92) of existing power relations which makes discourse "not only an activity in a power struggle, but a stake in it as well" (Fischer 2003: 76).


By adopting this analytical apparatus, the research identifies and interprets the ways of framing discursive objects – social issues; positioning of discursive subjects – social actors; and utilising discursive concepts. Framing strategies reveal the way various actors construed and/or adopted social meanings, how these were further interpreted, contested, highlighted or neglected. Two broad narratives are accounted for: the dominant storyline or hegemonic narrative of 'Roma laziness' and an alternative storyline or dissenting narrative of 'structural poverty'.

Discourse of social policy – symbolic strategies of social exclusion

I claim that the discourse of the Slovak social policy reform was based on the exploitation of the ethno-cultural stereotype of ‘Roma laziness’ which was effectively re-constructed from the existing repertoire of social meanings. It functioned as an underlying idea, as a way of conceiving the problem and as a tool of positioning its subjects – the Roma. It discursively operated as *the presumption of laziness* and was present throughout the evolution of the discourse and in its various domains: its basic concepts were adopted from the existing scholarship on poverty, utilised by policy-makers during the drafting period, legislative process, policy promotion and administrative implementation well until the implementation period of the social reform and the social unrest it triggered in February 2004. During this rupture the formerly implicit presumption became explicitly articulated and effectively outplayed more complex – structural – explanations of ethnicised poverty and inequality in Slovakia. As a result, the poverty of Roma was reified through the ethnicisation of laziness and its essentialist attribution to Roma. This discourse not only reflected the social reality – it actively re-constructed it.

The whole discursive evolution can be seen as a spiral which captures the dynamic of descending complexity in the presentation and representation of Roma poverty within Slovak social policy discourse. The spiral illustrates how the presentation and representation of Roma poverty is affected by rules and constraints at various levels of institutional and discursive domains that shape, filter, narrow or broaden, prioritise or neglect the issue. The domains are interconnected and overlapping, influenced and reinforced by each other. As a result, it is very difficult to capture the resulting discourse in its complexity and ambiguity. Admitting that my focus is selective and refraining from any claims for the ‘proper’ interpretation of the whole discourse I believe that the issue of Roma poverty passed through the spiral with this stereotypical and moralizing burden of the presumption of laziness whose ‘omnipresence’ varied only between ‘being implicitly assumed’ and ‘being explicitly articulated’.

TABLE 1. Spiral of social policy discourse:



Actors	Activity	Rules/constraints	Concerns	Dilemmas
1. academia	research	paradigms, theories, conceptualisations	scientific accuracy	culture vs. structure
2. think-tanks	expertise	economic performance	efficiency, costs and benefits	growth vs. redistribution
3. state institutions	polymaking	effective governance,	social control social problems	civic vs. ethnic principle
4. government, parliament	governance legislation	political ideologies, interests, payoffs	effective governance	public support vs. unpopular policies
5. bureaucracy	implementation	administrative procedures, local realities	enforceability	expediency vs. routine
6. PR agencies	promotion	marketing rules	media and public attention	attractiveness vs. complexity
7. media	news coverage, watchdog	media routine, entertainment	criticism, public service	profit versus ethics
8. public	perception	meanings and stereotypes	welfare, security fear	vs. solidarity

NOTE: This table lists various stages through which the issue of Roma poverty passed. Each stage has its own operational logic and adds a new dimension to the consideration. Not all stages are discussed here; I focus primarily on the domains of academia, state institutions as policy-makers, and the media.

Poverty: structure versus culture debate

In the search for explanations of poverty in the domain of scholarship it is possible to distinguish two different approaches, which may be simplistically labelled as *structuralist* and *culturalist*. Structural explanations point to the broader, systemic arrangements which co-determine the status of various individuals and groups in a given society. Different positions entail varied ranges of opportunities and the corresponding variety of available life strategies and mobility paths. Structural assessment is clearly applicable to the phenomena of poverty and social exclusion in the context of transition where these risks were lower for those who were included in formal and informal social networks possessing sufficient material and/or social capital to manage the temporary hardship. Importantly, structural considerations of poverty point to the fact that unfavourable conditions or cumulative disadvantages can hardly be overcome by individual effort alone. Alleviation of poverty of the structurally disadvantaged often requires a systemic change.

The second stream of scholarship acknowledges the importance of structural factors for the incidence of poverty but adds another – ‘cultural’ – dimension for consideration. Some authors employ such concepts as ‘culture of poverty’ or ‘dependency culture’ that indicate a certain shift in focus from the structural factors to the individual or collective responses to the structural arrangements or their changes.

The seminal, and controversial, account of Oscar Lewis on the ‘culture of poverty’ considers this phenomenon as an adaptive reaction to persistent poverty, chronic unemployment or underemployment that is levied by various value and behavioural adjustments. These adaptive patterns assist in coping with the unsaturated material and symbolic needs and can be further reproduced between generations. For Lewis, culture of poverty grows and flourishes in countries where:

- (1) economy is based on wage labour and production for profit;
- (2) high unemployment rates persist for unskilled labour;
- (3) low wages are offered for unskilled work;
- (4) state fails to provide social and economic policies for low-income population;
- (5) dominant group promotes a set of values which stresses accumulation of wealth and explains low economic status as a result of personal inadequacy or inferiority;
- (6) kinship system is bilateral rather than unilateral (Lewis 1968: 187).

It is evident, with the exception of the last characteristic, that all factors point to the systemic arrangement while the penultimate represents a sym-

bolic or discursive reflection of the given setting from the perspective of the dominant group. It is thus possible to interpret Lewis' concept as 'cultural' only in its reliance on adaptive and reproductive mechanisms, similar to conventionally conceived 'anthropological' cultures. The crucial difference lies in the fact that the culture of poverty, by its very nature, does not set any imperative for its protection or preservation as is the case of 'anthropological' cultures. To the contrary, the underlying ethos of Lewis' account serves as a memento that the culture of poverty may emerge in a variety of historical contexts, provided that the conditions listed above are fulfilled.

Such a reading of Lewis stands in a sharp contrast with other culturalist accounts that exchange the concept of 'culture of poverty' for 'dependency culture'. While both concepts gain different meanings in different contexts, they share an emphasis on the adaptive and reproductive mechanisms. However, the concept of dependency culture differs from its older counterpart by its strong emphasis on rational behaviour and intentionality, which drives the reproduction of 'dependency'. It adds economic concerns into considerations by implying that it is undesirable and morally wrong on the part of the citizens 'entrapped' in dependency to use public resources and provide nothing in return (see Mead 1986; Murray 1984).

The 'dependency culture' argument goes beyond the account of structural factors and emphasises the adaptation of the new poor to the existing welfare system, which is generally seen as too generous and failing to motivate its recipients to seek employment. In the rhetoric of the new right and in the popular discourse these people were frankly labelled as parasites and lazy. The new policies attempted to tackle the problem by cutting welfare provisions, introducing the obligation to work for benefits ('workfare'), and by increasing the control of abuse. This triggered criticism from the structuralist and human-rights standpoints. Several scholars rejected the 'dependency' argument by stressing the underlying structural causes and refused to 'blame the victims' for these problems.

The example of the western countries provides an instructive lesson that can teach us to avoid many shortcomings on the level of practical policy as well as public discourse. The social policy reform in Slovakia responded to very similar problems and adopted very similar remedies – unfortunately, with very similar mistakes. The analysis of the discourse of the Slovak social policy seems to uncover a re-run of the same story.⁴

⁴ The case of Slovak social reform seems to be similar to the free-market policies adopted by the conservative governments in the United States of America and United Kingdom during the 1980s. It is also similar because the ideology behind the reform instrumentally utilised the concepts originating from the same scholarly discourse. However, this is another topic that cannot be developed here.

Structure versus culture in the Slovak scholarship on Roma poverty

The structure versus culture dispute seems highly applicable to the post-communist environment, especially in regard to the assessment of the 'new poverty' that emerged during the transition, and specifically in relation to one category of transition's losers – the segregated Roma. Slovak academia imported several concepts from the study of poverty and adjusted them to the peculiarities of the local context. At the same time, it is not always obvious if the adoption of terminology was followed by sufficient attention to the discursive burden that some of the concepts obtained in their original contexts.

Virtually every scholarly account of Roma poverty in Slovakia discusses the conditions Roma face in the spheres of education, employment, housing, health care, political participation and human rights. Roma are seen as disadvantaged in all of them and the combination of these disadvantages is said to be conducive for falling into poverty and social exclusion in many individual cases. The causes are attributed to both the historical heritage of exclusion, discrimination and persecution as well as to the developments under transition (see Vašečka 2002).

In addition, scholars frequently point to the uneven patterns of the country's development, which reveals a sharp contrast between the country's 'centre' and periphery (Falt'an, Gajdoš, Pašiak 1995). The Roma minority is concentrated precisely in the underdeveloped regions of the country and this justified the adoption of the concept of double marginalisation. It refers to the condition of a significant portion of the Roma population who live in segregated settlements which are themselves territorially concentrated in the marginalised regions of the country. Despite the lack of data based on ethnicity, the two macro-factors indirectly reveal that the correlation between poverty and Roma ethnicity is high (Džambazovič *et al* 2004). Roma are disproportionately over-represented among the poor, relatively to their total share in the population.

Several scholars also point to the immense diversity of the Roma population itself. In particular the cultural and social gap that exists between the Roma elite and Roma poor is often highlighted (Vašečka 2001). Heterogeneity of Roma population combined with structural factors, both seen as conducive to the incidence of poverty and social exclusion of *some* Roma, is cogently summarised in the qualitative account by Radičová (2001a: 444). According to the author, the basic differentiation of the Roma population is conditioned by four factors: (1) the state of the region; (2) the type of integration or segregation; (3) the total number and concentration of Roma in a locality; (4) the ratio of majority and Romany local population. Radičová's basic claim is that "*in proportion to marginalisation degree*

of given regions of Slovakia, also the poverty degree of a certain population group, especially the Romany group, is increasing” (Radičová 2001a: 439). In other words, status of the region underlies the nature and depth of poverty existing within it.

As a result, socially integrated Roma do not inhabit segregated settlements and are less likely to be poor in absolute terms (whereas they may well be relatively poor as members of any other ethnic or social group). On the other hand, Roma who live in segregated settlements experience absolute poverty and social exclusion (Radičová 2001a: 443). What follows from this brief sketch of the previously collected research data is clear: there is a structurally determined poverty of Roma in Slovakia.

However, in the debates about poverty related to one structurally delineated category of Roma – the segregated Roma – culturalist concepts usually enter the debate. In fact, the variance between Slovak scholarly accounts on Roma poverty lies in the use, omitting or neglect of the cultural concepts. If used, they usually supplement the dominant structuralist argument, although in varying scope and intensity. There is a significant difference in the use of culture of poverty concept on the one hand and of the dependency culture on the other. Crucially, the nature and depth of poverty (absolute versus relative); the territorial patterns of residence (segregation versus integration); and discrimination (its presence or absence) are those factors which differentiate the poverty of the segregated Roma from other groups of poor in Slovakia. It thus seems plausible to think that if the culture of poverty emerges in Slovakia, it is most likely the segregated Roma who will be its potential bearers. The word ‘potential’ is important: from the analysed scholarship it is not clear if there *is* already the culture of poverty in the segregated settlements or if it is the most likely scenario if there is no external intervention to preclude it.⁵

The situation is quite different in regard to the use of the dependency culture concept. Radičová, for instance, after discussing the notion of double marginalisation, adds another term – the multiplied ‘cultural dependency’.⁶ This concept characterizes social life in closed communities with a homogenised structure, single pattern of social behaviour which is manifested by passivity, resignation and apathy. People ‘entrapped’ in dependency culture supposedly follow a single life strategy that is aimed at mere

⁵ Džambazovič and Jurásková (2002: 549–553) discuss it as a possible consequence of social exclusion that the segregated Roma face. On the other hand, qualitative field research such as Radičová’s (2001b: 102) suggests it might already be a reality.

⁶ This is a literal translation of the Slovak phrase *znásobená kultúrna závislosť*. The text obviously points to the ‘dependency culture’.

subsistence. Importantly, these features are typical for the reproduced absolute poverty and are not typical features of ethnicity. It is primarily a problem of social exclusion and only secondarily an ethnic problem (Radičová 2001a: 444–445).

Radičová's account is interesting precisely for its blend of the dominant structural argument of (Roma) poverty and a supplementary cultural argument applied to a specific group – the segregated Roma living in absolute poverty. It specifies conditions under which the dependency culture evolves and accounts for the interplay between structural conditions (exclusion from stratification pyramids and social networks, inequality of opportunities, cumulative disadvantages) and behavioural adjustments as embedded in the concept of dependency culture. It is worthwhile keeping the treatment of these two dimensions in mind as further it will be marked by significant shifts in emphases between them.

Radičová herself reformulated the argument about coping strategies of the absolutely poor and segregated Roma that “*by far, do not exhaust themselves by the strategy of social parasitism*” (Radičová 2001c: 435) and divided the strategies into passive, active/work-bound and escapist, the latter including reliance on the state provision and migration. Elsewhere the idea was formulated in a more ordinary way: “*The Roma from segregated settlements are significantly less interested in searching for work than the Roma coming from integrated localities, in some cases they are not interested at all. Their strategy rather rests on relying on social benefits and informal economic activities*” (Radičová 2001c: 436). Given the context in which it was asserted, it cannot be simplistically regarded as a clear instance of the presumption of laziness operating in the scholarly discourse. Radičová, in fact, explicitly rejected the simplified media coverage that alluded to an insincerity of the Roma in looking for jobs and pointed to their engagement in the public works (Ibid.).

However, when arguments *are* simplified and taken out of context, as happened in the later development of the social policy discourse, one can retrospectively trace the nucleus of such discursive (mis-)use precisely to the scholarship of Roma poverty. Not every Slovak scholarly account provides a detailed analysis of the structural causes of Roma poverty. In some works the *possibility* of dependency tacitly turns to *reality* and is not explicitly attributed to the segregated Roma but to *the* Roma. This shift is facilitated by the fuzziness of the term ‘culture’ which conflates two distinct notions: Roma culture in the anthropological sense and the culture of poverty/dependency culture attributed to some Roma. Regardless of the crucial difference between the two, the adoption of the very same word ‘culture’ effectively blurs the assessment of structural roots of Roma poverty

and redirects attention to the Roma culture as such, or rather to its popular image among the majority. Poverty is then seen as an integral part of Roma culture.

The conflation enables the discursive misuse of the culturalist assessment of poverty and triggers the emergence of other narratives outside the academia. These domains share a common practice of *discursive ethnicisation of poverty*, which differs from a mere recognition of *ethnicised poverty* (the fact of a disproportionately high number of Roma poor). It differs in the deployment of additional meanings, partly adopted from supposedly Roma culture. Discursive ethnicisation of poverty is done in two basic modes.

The first mode is reification of Roma poverty – it appears normal that Roma are poor. This perception is based on a simplified perception of poverty as failure and in this case it is applied collectively. The accompanying discursive practice is that of blaming the victims. The second, inter-related but different mode, is ‘essentialising’ Roma poverty – it appears as a part of the putative ‘Roma essence’ to be poor. It is thus not only their fault, but their essence. This belief is reinforced by everyday experience that many Roma indeed *are* poor. The accompanying discursive practice is that of ‘impasse argument’, which claims that the problem is basically unsolvable and several ‘reasons’ are spelled out: Roma are unchangeable, inadaptable, unmanageable, uncooperative and so forth.

I contend that both modes of the discursive ethnicisation of poverty are parasitic on the culturalist assessment of poverty. These discursive practices cannot make use of the structuralist argument as it downplays agency in the explanation of poverty. The culturalist approach, in contrast, depends to a large extent on *some* assessment of poor individuals in relation to their condition. The two modes are not limited to the popular discourse or ‘folk sociology’ but are adopted by some scholars as well.

In the article entitled “Chances and Specifics of Employing Graduates of Roma Ethnicity” Lukáč bases his argument on the assertion that: “*their cultural and social features became decisive for the first mass dismissal from employment in the beginning of the 1990s*”, which, according to him points to the fact that: “[...] for a long time (even during full formal employment before 1989) most Roma expressed low regard for education in their value orientations, which is closely connected to their value positioning of work as an activity necessary for securing life necessities. These two basic features can be regarded as an integral part of the Roma culture, which determined their past as well as present position in the society” (Lukáč 2001: 512).

The assertion both essentialises Roma ethnicity and reifies Roma poverty: the former by regarding low praise for education and work as an ‘integral part of the Roma culture’ and the latter by explaining ‘the past and present position in the society’ by these very traits.

Moreover, it is *the Roma* who are described in the article as “highly problematic” and this attribute is directly linked to their culture (or rather what author considers to be the Roma culture). The Roma are further said to be little interested in resolving their situation by, for instance, establishing small businesses or by participating in the retraining programs. According to Lukáč (2001: 514), this fact ‘may be related to their insolvency and also to the need strong activity, effort and some specific capabilities required for this kind of activity’. Roma are apparently viewed as not disposed for ‘strong activity, effort and capabilities’ required for small business. What is implied by this assertion is a clear manifestation of the presumption of laziness at work.⁷

In conclusion, the Slovak academia generally adopted and used the concepts of ‘dependency culture’, ‘welfare dependency’ and other equivalents only to supplement the dominant structural explanation of Roma poverty. However, the structural pre-determination was not always emphasised but either taken-for-granted or simply omitted. The sequence of intertextual chain may well develop in such a way that what is clearly stated in one text, may be only cited in another; in yet another only assumed and in the last entirely omitted. As a result the initial, broadly structural, argument (with only conditional use of cultural component) gradually shifts to the predominantly cultural assessment (often involving strong judgemental statements) and, almost unnoticeably, to the quasi-cultural essentialism and reification. The next stage in this development is represented by policy documents with their characteristic framing of laziness.

New Social Policy in Slovakia

The fundamental component of the Slovak social policy discourse is the social reform itself, which was officially termed as ‘New Social Policy’ (NSP). In my account I focus briefly only on some aspects of the reform, in particular the new regulation of material need, social provision as well as the implementation of the pivotal principles of the reform: motivation and activation.

⁷ See this presumption in Lukáč (2001: 514). This author does not mention that besides insolvency, there is also a lack of education, narrow social networks or low social capital which may explain why many Roma do not make use of this opportunity. If he explored the roots of this condition he could have hardly stopped in pointing simply to the lack of effort and activity.

BOX 1. Review of the main New Social Policy measures

New Social Policy was a complex reform that comprised of amendments to, or drafts of, thirty laws drafted by the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family (MLSAF) between 2002–2004.

MLSAF fundamentally revised the system so that, in the rhetoric of the Ministry, social assistance could no more be conceived as a substitute for regular income. The new regulation of material need enabled this shift and substituted the old understanding of social provision as an unconditional compensation with the conception of a conditioned temporary aid.

Two draft regulations served as a base for the NSP: amendments of the legislation on material need and on subsistence minimum.⁸ Rationale for their adoption was summarized in the Explanatory Report of the former, which noted that the ratio of people to whom social provision is granted together with ‘jointly considered individuals’ amounted to 11 percent of the country’s population whereas there were significant regional differences in the scope of the provision. Furthermore, the Report contended that the receipt of social benefits unmotivated especially those individuals “*who lack deep-rooted working habits, have generally lower standards of living and more numerous families as is common in society.*”⁹ Report’s politically correct language had an obvious addressee – the Roma – as laziness, poor living standards, and numerous families are common attributes attached to them by the majority. Legislators’ implications also corresponded to the popular belief that Roma extensively abuse the social system by refusing to work and having many children in order to be entitled for higher benefits.

The reform slogan ‘Working Pays Off’¹⁰ was implemented by the retrenchment of welfare to the extent that only physical survival was guaranteed by the state. The new determination of the relationship between the material need and subsistence minimum was based on a premise that the fact of being in material need depends on the income not only of the person in question but also of ‘jointly considered individuals’ (members of family or household). If the sum of their joint incomes exceeded the sum of the subsistence minimum set by the law they deemed *not* in material need and became ineligible for social provision. If the sum was lower, the considered persons were in the condition of material need but, most importantly, it “*does not necessarily mean that they are automatically eligible for social assistance*” (Nová... 2004: 8). Social provision was provided solely “*to secure fundamental life standards,*”¹¹ which is not identical to the sub-

⁸ *Zákon č.599/2003 Z.z. o pomoci v hmotnej núdzi* (Act on Assistance in Material Need No. 599/2003); *Zákon č. 601/2003 Z.z. o životnom minime* (Act on Subsistence Minimum No. 601/2003 Coll).

⁹ *Dôvodová správa k Zákonu č. 599/2003* (Explanatory Report to the Act No. 599/2003 Coll).

¹⁰ In the ministerial documents in English language, the Slovak slogan *Pracovať sa oplatí* was translated as ‘Making Work Pay’. We opt for translating it as ‘working pays off’ in this paper (editor’s remark).

¹¹ Explanatory Report, Article 10.

sistence minimum. This draft legislation passed the Parliament without substantive changes. The only remarkable modification occurred in the title of one law: the initial *Act on Alleviation of Material Need* was renamed, quite tellingly, to the *Act on Assistance in Material Need*.

The NSP also simplified the old social system by establishing only one basic social benefit and four allowances: health care, housing, security and activation. In regard to this scheme, a crucial change emerged in conditioning the eligibility for allowances by the confirmed eligibility for basic benefit. The conditionality of social provision was stipulated in several ways and, in effect, further complicated the receipt of additional financial means. The receipt of some allowances designed as compensatory mechanisms was determined in such a way that they were inaccessible for many claimants. As a result, the lowered social income could not increase and reach the subsistence minimum.¹²

The Minister Ľudovít Kaník explained the need for reforming the old social policy which, according to him, only strengthened the social safety net, which led to the “*increase of ineffective expenditure and passivity of recipients*” (Nová... 2004: 2). The cause of expensiveness and inefficiency was seen in the lack of motivation on the part of welfare recipients to do something in return for the provision of benefits. This was pronounced as if the existing legislature stipulated such reciprocal activity, which was not the case. Recipients who used the system were thus indirectly blamed for something that was not even regulated in the existing legislation.

The reformers also contended that the old system further deepened ‘dependency’ on benefits. The condition was conceptualised as a *poverty trap* and assigned a major role in creating the dependency culture that “*suppressed the natural human trait of labour activity*” (Nová... 2004: 6). NSP followed two general principles that “*each meaningful legal work is better than inactivity*” and “*employment growth is the most effective way to fight against poverty*.”¹³ In regard to the vulnerable groups, it spelled out a precept to make the long-term unemployed actively participate in resolving their hardship through the measures of the ‘Active Labour Market Policy’. The slogan adopted for the whole reform was ‘Working Pays Off.’

¹² For instance, housing allowance was provided monthly for a household except in cases when the claimant did not pay off debts caused by unpaid expenses connected to the usage of housing. It is well known, that it is just the inhabitants of segregated settlements who are often in debts for the payment of utilities. The new legislation did not help them to get rid of the debts (for instance by loans) but prevented them for claiming the benefit for the very reason of being indebted (*Nová sociálna politika* 2004: 15–17).

¹³ This is a direct quote from the promotion material of the Ministry which was published only on their website <http://www.employment.gov.sk/mpsvrsr/internet/home/page.php?id=984&lang=en>, accessed in 2004 in time of the research. However, the link is no longer available.

The recurrent emphasis on enhancing motivation (already present in the electoral and government programme documents), suggests that the incentive to work was considered as generally lacking. It was especially the long-term unemployed who were discursively positioned in this way without accounting for anything other than motivational reasons for maintaining their unemployment status. The wording of the cited documents reveal that they were inspired by Slovak scholarship in a very selective way: they did not account for uneven development of the country, lack of jobs in some regions or other structural factors leading to the high unemployment rate. The invocation of motivation and activity along with frequent remarks about pervasive abuses of the social system reveal the presumption of laziness was clearly operating within the policy discourse, although still implicitly. Gradually it became the dominant theme, primary target of the policy measures, and an explicit referential point of its accompanying discourse.

The overall philosophy of the NSP was epitomised by a new activation allowance that was considered to be the system's pivotal provision. It was granted to those individuals who became active within community services, voluntary work, participating in the retraining programs or otherwise improving their qualifications. The activation programmes were organised primarily for the long-term unemployed and 'socially dependent' citizens. Activation was designed as an instrument for regaining or maintaining working habits, which would increase employability of their participants on the labour market (*Nová...* 2004: 21). In essence, activation meant that the recipient of public benefits was obliged to take part in public works, such as cleaning up streets and other public spaces, managed by municipalities or specialised agencies. Duration of activation activities was set for a minimum of ten hours per week.

By the very nature of labour subsumed under the term 'activation works', by conditional relations to welfare provision, the state makes, at least implicitly, the recipients responsible for their unfavourable condition. As Wilson (1994: 53) put it, "it is the moral fabric of individuals, not the social and economic structure of society that is taken to be the root of the problem". Workfare thus blames the victims (Walker 1990: 74). This results in making those 'guilty' for their unfavourable condition redeem their guilt by participating in the schemes which fail to take into account the very reasons for which welfare provision is justified as "welfare is provided precisely because of the handicaps suffered by the least advantaged" (Cattacin 1999: 64-65). In other words, citizens are being denied provision because of underlying structural causes for which they are not responsible such as the change of the structure of economy in the context of transition with the subsequent change of labour demand.

Blaming the victims triggers the attribution of a whole range of mostly negative characteristics to the poor and unemployed. They are used to stigmatise them in supposing tendency to deviant or unacceptable behaviour. Ethnic minorities are one of the easiest targets. In these cases blame can take the shape of a cultural argument – negative traits or behaviours are perceived as stemming from some distinctive culture which makes its members not only responsible for being different but also effectively sanctions their difference. It thus essentialises and reifies their difference at once. Social policy can apparently be a very effective instrument for triggering such discursive punishment if a cultural group is predominantly poor, as in the case of the Roma in Slovakia.

The representation of social unrest

Media coverage of the social unrest triggered by the NSP represents the domain of social policy discourse in which the presumption of laziness was explicitly articulated. What follows is a selective illustration of some of its multiple layers in the period between 12 February to 1 March 2004.¹⁴ It demonstrates how media coverage and popular perception merged with others domains of discourse (scholarly, political) to the point when their separation does not make sense anymore. For the review of how NSP was introduced and reacted to, see Table 2.

TABLE 2. Summary of the background events regarding the social policy reform in Slovakia in 2004:

Date	Events
20–21 September 2002	Parliamentary elections after which the second government led by Mr M. Dzurinda was formed
14 November 2002	Programme Declaration of the Government approved by the Parliament
28 October 2003	The Act on Subsistence Minimum No. 601/2003 passed by the Parliament
11 November 2003	The Act on Assistance in Material Need No. 599/2003 passed by the Parliament
4 December 2003	The Act on Employment Services No. 5/2004 introducing the New Social Policy passed by the Parliament Explanatory report to the Act outlines impoverished Roma as undeserving poor

¹⁴ The whole corpus of media outputs comprised of more than 500 news items. All translations are mine.

TABLE 2 (continued)

Date	Events
1 February 2004	The Act on Employment Services came in force
8 February 2004	The first protest meeting in the village Pavlovce nad Uhom (Michalovce district)
10 February 2004	The massive protest of Roma in the district town of Trebišov
12 February 2004	The first incidence of a shop robbery in the town of Levoča (beginning of media monitoring for the purposes of this research)
14 February 2004	The first media coverage of the robbery in the town of Levoča
18 February 2004	The first report about the robbery of the shop appears on TV end of February 2004 Further public meetings, shop robberies and police arrests take place in the towns of Prešov, Trebišov, Levoča, Spišská Nová Ves and several small villages
24 February 2004	Extraordinary session of the Government takes place and decides to immediately deploy military troops to prevent social unrest in Eastern Slovakia. Military troops removed gradually, final date of removal was not announced
24 March 2004	Government approves the document <i>Implementation of Measures to Deepen the Positive Effects of the Change of the Material Need Benefit System on Certain Groups of Citizens</i> . The document modifies the New Social Policy without changing its core measures
17 June 2006	Parliamentary elections after which centre-left wins majority and new government led by Mr. R. Fico is formed
1 January 2008	Activation programmes still in place; the reforms of activation measures in consideration

How riots became news

The events following the launch of the social reform in February 2004 were initially perceived as small-scale, scattered and insignificant protests with few people in eastern Slovakia. Thus they did not make it to the headlines of the 'national' media, appearing at most in the regional press. Similarly, the first robbery was reported in the evening news of TV Markíza only retrospectively, four days after it happened.¹⁵

¹⁵ Evening News, TV *Markíza*, 18 02 2004.

The protesting citizens were initially 'invisible' in the public. However, once the protests dispersed, negativity combined with spectacle. The criminal nature of some of the reported actions and, perhaps most importantly, the involvement of the visible 'others' made the unrest a dominant theme for the weeks that followed. What became known as the 'Roma riots' was monitored on the front pages for two full weeks across all Slovak media, reflected in international press and noticed by international organisations¹⁶. However, the riots first needed to become 'Roma' to gain such attention.

How riots became 'Roma riots'

It is undisputable that after the launch of the reform local citizens engaged in peaceful public protests in a number of municipalities. These individuals expressed their discontent with the NSP that harshly affected their living condition and, in their view, did not provide them with sufficient opportunities to compensate the cuts of social income. This social motif was explicitly declared from the very start. Nonetheless, the protests were soon re-keyed and generalised as 'Roma unrest' instead of 'social unrest'. The nature of actions did not change much but perceptions changed dramatically.

The temporal co-occurrence of the protests in some municipalities and of robberies in others¹⁷ were soon discursively linked and, in effect, compromised the demands of the protesters by the criminal deeds of the rioters. The Roma ethnicity again served as a linkage – both protesters and rioters were put into a single category of Roma. This justified the conflation of different individuals, claims and actions under one ethnic label.

Despite the fact that most of the protests were peaceful, the definition of the events as 'Roma riots', 'Roma unrest' or 'Roma robberies' was adopted and reproduced in the media. In the course of a few days the labelling became more expressive: "Roma mob hysteria"; "Roma raids"; "Roma looting"; even "Roma war".¹⁸ For instance, the daily *Nový Čas* published the following banner headlines in four consecutive days:

¹⁶ The impact of the Slovak social policy reform was a matter of interest not only for Slovakia, but also raised concerns abroad with the expectation that the reform may cause large scale emigration. For instance, on 5 March 2004, the Department of Asylum and Migration Policy of the Ministry of Interior of the Czech Republic commissioned the IOM to prepare an early warning report on Roma migration tendencies to the Czech Republic. See the IOM Prague office report No.: OAM- 175-2/2004 available at <http://www.iom.cz/rubrik.php?headline=8&publikace=7>

¹⁷ The time line and the detailed descriptive account of reactions to the reform, of protests, robberies, and military deployment is provided by Tkáčová (2005: 175–185). However, this author is also an example of labelling the entire reaction as the 'Roma unrest' (rómske nepokoje).

¹⁸ In the sequence: TV *Markíza* on 18 02 2004; *Radio Twist* and TV *Joj* on 21 02 2004 and Daily *Nový Čas* on 25 02 2004.

“Nothing Will Stop the Roma Anymore!”;
“They’re Already Plundering Central Slovakia!”;
“The Roma War: Eastern Slovakia Threatened”;
*“The Revolting Roma Stopped by Weapons”.*¹⁹

These headlines published in the daily with the highest circulation in the country played on the sentiments of threat. They deliberately portrayed ‘them’ (*the Roma in general, not protesting Roma or simply protesters*) as threatening ‘us’. They also suggested that Roma, while looting, move westwards and therefore threaten the entire country. Eventually, the daily ‘appealed’ its readership it had itself mobilised by reporting on the police repression. In the given context, the headlines did not only portray the protesters stereotypically but also generalised the image to the whole Roma population with a simultaneous consecration of the use of force against them.

Importantly, the shifts in framing were publicly reaffirmed by authorities. On a press briefing on 24 February which followed the extraordinary session of the Government (which decided to deploy the military in eastern Slovakia) the Minister of Interior denied accusations about the initial underestimation of the problem by saying: “There is no reason to speculate whether the situation is serious or not-so-serious. Well, we all see, that *the Roma problem* has now gained new features and that something occurred which has never taken place before: *the Roma unrest*.”²⁰ The Minister thus excused the initial inaction of the authorities by adding the Roma ethnic marker to the description of the events. He did not explain their seriousness by pointing to the intensity of violence or the scope of damage, he only pointed to its ‘Roma’ nature. On the direct inquiry of a journalist: “*You stated yesterday that it has not been yet a social unrest. Is it already a social unrest today?*” the Minister responded briefly: “*It is the Roma unrest*.”²¹

The answer of the Minister explicitly differentiated the ‘social’ and the ‘Roma’ and coined the authoritative apprehension of the problem. The Minister did not have to explain what he meant by defining the situation in this way; his utterance was still meaningful and convincing as it hinged upon a tacit assumption that everybody knows what kind of problem the Roma pose.

How Roma became rioters

Journalist: “*Mr Minister, are you not worried that the change of the system of social benefits will increase crime rates?*”

¹⁹ Daily *Nový Čas*, 23–6 02 2004.

²⁰ Daily News, *TV TA3*, 24 02 2004.

²¹ *Ibid.*

Minister of Labour: *“The first hit will not be very pleasant, especially for the Roma community, that must be admitted. However, it was more than time to cut the vicious circle when the whole, enormous group of citizens, an ever-increasing group of citizens favoured the system in which entire families did not work since a young age, did not have deep-rooted work habits and in this way more and more generations were growing up. That is a system of total addiction, dependency culture on state assistance and loss of natural habits.”*²²

*“Minister of Social Affairs L’udovít Kaník says that the changes of social system ‘are not ethnically driven’ and only divides people on active and passive.”*²³

These apparently contradicting statements uttered by the same Minister underline the most contentious aspects of the social policy discourse – the implicit/explicit targeting of the policy as well as the attribution of laziness to *the Roma*. As discussed before, the Slovak scholarship provided a theoretical framework and spelled out the specific target group for which activation seemed necessary. When the riots occurred various experts voiced their notion of ‘dependency culture’ or ‘culture of poverty’ in the media, although the emphasis considerably shifted: it was not anymore presented as a probability but as matter of fact.

Naturally, the state authorities did not question whether the Roma in Slovakia did in fact live in the culture of poverty. To the contrary, the reformers utilised the argument in their public defence of the adopted measures. However, they did so very selectively and pointed to the need to end the unacceptable situation of dependency by cutting welfare and through this motivating the unemployed to find jobs. The provision of social assistance to those who were not capable of escaping the supposed dependency on their own was thus narrowed to the restrictive policy. Drawing precisely on the culture of poverty concept, the Minister of Labour rejected any responsibility for the unrest that followed the launch of the reform: *“Responsibility for the situation rests in the decade-long habit of living on benefits. Such a situation is simply unacceptable (unbearable).”*²⁴

²² News, TV *T43*, 18 02 2004. Interestingly, the notion of dependency is translated to Slovak as addiction (*‘závislosť’*) rather than dependency (*‘odkázanosť’*). This semantic shift is relevant as one can be ‘addicted’ to social benefits in the same way as to drugs or alcohol. The negative connotation is less apparent in the case of ‘dependency’ as it rather implies a need for assistance.

²³ The Slovak word *podfarbené*, translated here as ‘driven’, literally means ‘coloured’. *“Ministerstvo práce: My Rómom nerobíme zle”* (The Ministry of Labour: We do not do bad to the Roma), Daily *Sme*, 20 02 2004.

²⁴ News, TV *Markíza*, 21 02 2004.

The initial, more or less, structurally based argument about dependency as a habitual response to the social-structural conditions slipped down to the discursive practice of linking some cultural traits, attributed to *the* Roma in general, with their social situation. The practice thus both essentialised the putative Roma nature and reified their poverty. Given the strength and pervasiveness of such assertions, the dissenting opinions could have been articulated only defensively. The critics were forced to prove the opposite if they wanted to challenge the presumption of laziness. The dispute was carved in this way and it did not really matter anymore if the supposed laziness was caused by structural or cultural factors.

Laziness versus lack of jobs (alternative discourse)

If the government decided that the provision of welfare would be conditioned by work, it would be reasonable to expect that it would simultaneously ensure its availability. However, the public works set up by the NSP were inherently limited by the demand on the part of the municipalities or other institutions and their ability to pay the labour. Besides the disputes about the Roma (un)willingness to work the discourse of social policy thus had another dimension – a race in approving or disapproving the availability of jobs.

The two ‘camps’ referred to two different things. The Minister claimed that there is an enormous amount of work in the messy environment of the Roma settlements. He talked about *work* to be done. On the other hand, the NGO representative referred to *jobs* that were not created and are generally unavailable in the regions where the segregated Roma live. The notions *work* and *job* do have two equivalents in the Slovak language – *práca* and *zamestnanie* – but both are commonly expressed by the word *práca*. Therefore if one talks about plenty of ‘*práca*’ in the settlements one does not talk about the available jobs but the work to be done.²⁵

The ‘laziness versus lack of jobs dispute’ comprised several other layers, which cannot be discussed here in more detail. Suffice to say that one layer of dissenting voices emphasised discrimination in the labour market as a major factor voiced by many Roma. Another layer emphasised structural

²⁵ “*It is absolute nonsense that there is not enough work. Anybody who has ever been in a Roma camp knows that there is a lot of work and if they only cleaned it up, removed all trash, there is a lot of work even for twice as many people*”. “*Mimoriadne rokovanie vlády o rómskom rabovaní nebude*” (Minister of Labour, Extraordinary cabinet session about the Roma robberies will not be held), *Národná obroda*, 23 02 2004.

causes of high unemployment of Roma as discussed by scholars and illustrated by the situation in concrete localities. The state authorities competed with the alleged lack of jobs by providing counter-examples and by appealing to local representatives to be more active in creating job opportunities.

Social problem becoming a security concern

The call of an extraordinary session of the Government further added to the urgency of the problem, symbolically acknowledging it from the highest levels. At the session the government adopted only one decision – the deployment of the military in the regions where rioting occurred. The main objective was officially announced as securing or re-establishing public order and protecting public and private property. The whole issue thus became effectively re-keyed – from the social issue to the security problem whilst its ethnicised nature remained. The troops, including special forces, were moved to suppress the ‘Roma riots’.

The Prime Minister provided his first official statement regarding the events in which he denounced rioting as unjustifiable by any reasons. He maintained that the riots were not triggered by the social reforms but organised by ‘criminal elements’. According to him, the government did not underestimate the situation and did not cross the bearable threshold of social reform. Most interestingly, he supported the official stance of the Ministry of Labour: *“For thirty years there has not been enough courage to deeply think about the question why those who do not work and only speculate how to abuse social welfare earn more than those who work. Perhaps, for this reason such a moment had to come.”*²⁶ The presumption of laziness thus was confirmed from the highest executive official of the country, despite the fact that it was based on a false claim that the Roma have been living in 30-year long dependency. In total, the analysis of the media coverage suggests that the analysed events were first effectively re-keyed from a social issue to an ethnic problem (‘Roma riots’) and later to the security issue. The Roma were positioned as undeserving poor who do not want to work and are essentially lazy. This delineation of the discursive battlefield was a much simplified and ethnicised version of the scholarly ‘culture versus structure’ debate.

The analysis of representation of social unrest also uncovers that the Roma were being reported, judged, and commented, but rarely had any

²⁶ Ibid.

significant voice in the policy debate. This leads me to some final considerations on the symbolic power of the academics, policy-makers and the media on one hand and of the marginalised Roma on the other. As illustrated throughout the text the presumption of laziness operated in such a way that it affected the apprehension and perception of objects (poverty), subjects (Roma) and concepts (dependency) which discursively (re-)constructed the 'nature' of Roma and positioned them all as undeserving poor. Bourdieu's conceptualisation of symbolic power and symbolic violence appears to be informative here as it conceives the symbolic power as a power to recognise and denote things in certain ways by those who possess symbolic resources. This power is, needless to say, distributed unequally. According to Bourdieu symbolic power is "a power of constructing reality" (Bourdieu 1991: 166) based on the possession of symbolic capital. "*Symbolic capital is a credit; it is the power granted to those who have obtained sufficient recognition to be in a position to impose recognition*" (Bourdieu 1994: 137–138). Symbolic power is the power to construct reality and is a scarce resource 'possessed' or rather exercised only by the few. Not everybody is able to define reality, only some individuals and institutions have this capacity. The identified hegemony of the laziness storyline in the discourse of social policy does not directly reveal who concretely possess this capacity, but it clearly indicates who does not – the marginalised Roma.

Conclusions and policy implications

The dominant storyline of the social policy discourse operated in the broader context of the discourse of transition. It played on the dominant *leitmotif* of societal change and the inevitability of reforms. The New Social Policy problematised the position of citizens and the role of the state in such a way that the state was seen as too costly and detrimental for economic growth and therefore the restriction of redistribution and the activation of citizens were perceived as necessary. 'Motivation' and 'activity' established the mode of apprehending and judging discursive objects and subjects.

The discursive objects of both the dominant and alternative storylines were social issues of unemployment, poverty and social exclusion, particularly in relation to the country's Roma. When applied to subjects, the dominant storyline, unlike the alternative one, positioned them within the victim-blaming concept of 'dependency culture', which pointed to the unacceptable addiction of Roma on welfare provision. Through this framing of the social problem, derived and simplified from scholarship on poverty, the 'dependency culture' informed policymaking. One of the main subjects of

the NSP – the long-term unemployed, poor and socially excluded Roma – were positioned as individuals who deviate from normatively prescribed principles which emphasised activity and sanctioned the *“lack [of] deep-rooted working habits, generally lower standard of living and more numerous families as is common in society.”*²⁷ As policy objects became matters of the state’s withdrawal, the subjects were positioned as people who do not deserve positive state intervention unless they activated themselves.

What the dominant storyline downplayed were the multiple structural disadvantages the ‘dependent’ individuals face and which significantly hamper their activation and motivation. This was the major point of criticism from the alternative storyline. However, due to the dominance of the dependency framing, the alternative argument of structural disadvantage was in the defence. The exploration of the Slovak social policy discourse showed that even if the hegemony of the presumption of laziness was partly contested, for instance in some media, they did not reverse the reframing of the structurally disadvantaged position of Roma to the ethno-culturally attributed laziness which then ‘explained’ their poverty. As a result, the concept of dependency culture in the scholarship, the activation measures in the social policy and the stereotype of Roma laziness in the prevalent media reflection and popular perception had the same point of reference, although it was articulated in different ways, within different contexts and with a varying degree of complexity.

There are two important aspects I will briefly discuss in connection to the analysed discourse: the dilemma of group-neutral versus group-specific policy-making and implications of ethnicised poverty for citizenship in the social environment marked by inequalities and the resulting unevenness of power relations and economic redistribution.

Implications for policy-making

The fundamental dilemma of policy-making in the context of diverse societies evolves around the choice between universal and differentiated policies for different groups. Interestingly, in relation to Roma poverty, both the Slovak scholarship and social policy rejected ethnic targeting. In other words, the phenomenon was conceived not as an ethnic but a social problem. However, where the scholarship called for adopting differentiated measures to tackle some specificities of the problem in relation to

²⁷ *Dôvodová správa k Zákonu č. 599/2003* (Explanatory Report to the Act No. 599/2003).

some groups, the policymakers applied social policy to all groups of poor without reflecting the peculiar problem of social exclusion faced by some of them. They justified it by preferring civic or universalist approach and thus conflated the peculiarity of poverty of the segregated Roma (explained not by ethnicity but by segregation which is ethnic only in the sense that many Roma and not members of other ethnic groups inhabit segregated settlements and are socially excluded) with the ethnic approach to social policy.

As a result, the only differentiation established by the policy – the specification of the category of the ‘disadvantaged job seekers’ – proved insufficient in tackling the problem of long-term unemployment and social exclusion of the segregated Roma. The advancement of their situation is not possible only by activation measures, even if these modestly increased the incentives for employing the ‘disadvantaged job seekers’. What is needed is a comprehensive policy of social inclusion that would take into account problems that are characteristic only for some groups, such as the unavailability of jobs resulting from the discrimination in the labour market. The social policy which restricts social income and introduces the entitlement conditioned by work should take these problems into account as otherwise cuts of benefits cannot be compensated. Therefore, the Slovak social policy certainly *was* differentiated but it was not differentiated *enough* to assist in such situations.

It is crucial to emphasise that in order to target the segregated Roma they need not be distinguished according to ethnicity. This, of course, would stigmatise recipients and possibly render similar outcomes to the discursive ethnicisation of poverty, which facilitated the merging of all Roma, including those who are integrated and employed, into one category of lazy people. In this case the division between the absolutely and relatively poor citizens (regardless of their ethnicity), which should have been differentiated in policy, eventually turned into a symbolic split between Roma and non-Roma which transcended the domain of social policy and reinforced unfavourable interethnic relations between the two groups.

What is needed is neither the adoption of ethnic-neutral (‘civic’) policies that do not target the specificities of the segregated Roma, nor the adoption of ethnic-specific policies which would target *the* Roma as an ethnic group. Instead of the explicitly articulated group-specificity and insensitive group-neutrality (which is never neutral in its impacts) we should adopt group-*sensitive* policies. These would be based on the ‘civic’ principle but would simultaneously take into account the specificities of different groups in regard to poverty and social exclusion in the segregated settlements.

Implications for citizenship

With regard to the issues of citizenship, persistent and reproduced poverty is certainly detrimental to social cohesion and political participation. Poverty is not only a lack of material resources but encompasses social exclusion, lack of access to social services and various psychological dimensions of being poor. Poverty and social exclusion are multidimensional phenomena linked to many other spheres of social life and thus should be targeted with similarly multidimensional policies of inclusion. Their implementation should not be outweighed by restrictive measures without sufficient compensations and, at the same time, should not be viewed only through the lens of fiscal constraints and the imperative of economic growth.

Rapid growth coupled with the restriction of social welfare was characteristic for the Slovak success story but the costs and benefits seem to be very unevenly distributed along the centre/periphery as well as the Roma/non-Roma divide. If one can identify clear group-specific outcomes, as was the case with the restricted welfare, it is more than relevant to ask what such policies indicate about the power relations between various groups within in a single country. I contend that the identified symbolic implications of the reform are indicative of the mode of inclusion and exclusion from both material and symbolic resources in relation to different segments of the Slovak population, particularly the groups of Roma and non-Roma citizens. I tried to show how the inherited inequalities were further reproduced through the discourse and how analysis of specific policies may uncover hidden ethno-political struggles stemming from socio-economic and symbolic inequalities.

In regard to interethnic relations, the provided evidence suggests, at least on the symbolic level, that the very same structural disadvantages that characterised the relations between the Roma and non-Roma in the past centuries, including the communist period, are being reproduced to a great extent also nowadays. This happens despite the fact that the Roma are not forcefully assimilated anymore and have an opportunity to represent their interests in the public domain. However, these opportunities did not materialise in the emergence of a strong and responsive political representation of the Roma, which could more likely prevent the adoption of policies that may have negative impact on the situation of this community. The continual fragmentation of the Roma representation and general unresponsiveness of 'majority' parties leaves the Roma politically voiceless and unable to effectively demand the adoption of group sensitive policies. As a result, the apparent recognition cannot prevent the unevenness of redistribution.

The reform drive of the ruling coalition in Slovakia problematised the scope of redistribution and focused on its restriction. However, in the same time when social assistance was halved, the basic unconditional benefit fell below the defined subsistence minimum, and the government facing social unrest refused to subsidise the creation of jobs for the long-term unemployed and socially excluded, the very same government increased the inflow of foreign direct investments by providing million-crown subsidies for newly created jobs. The rationale was to increase employment and economic growth, however, the inflow of the capital was unevenly distributed both inter-regionally and inter-ethnically.²⁸

If one of the main goals of the reform was to save financial resources by cutting social assistance, knowing which group of citizens it was mostly providing, and if another policy decision was to subsidise qualified job positions whose potential employees were least likely to come from this group of citizens, the overall policy was not at all about the restriction of the excessive redistribution but simply about its redirection. The very fact that poverty in Slovakia is to a large extent ethnicised and characteristic particularly for one ethnic minority gives salience to the conclusion that the overall progress of the majority was achieved at the expense of the marginalised minority.

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²⁸ In regard to the regional distribution, most of the new investments flew to the western part of the country. Each newly created job in the Kia/Hyundai plant was subsidised by 2 902 thousand Slovak crowns (USD 96 thousand; 3 400 jobs); in Hankook by 3 647 thousand Slovak crowns (USD 121 thousand; 1508 jobs). Ministry of Finance of the Slovak Republic (internal document).

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Simboliniai socialinės romų atskirties procesai Slovakijos viešosios politikos diskurse

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SANTRAUKA. Straipsnyje analizuojamas romų skurdo priešasčių diskursas, kuris nuo 2000 m. plėtojosi Slovakijos akademinėje literatūroje ir vėliau išsiplėtė į politikos ir viešąjį diskursą. Jame aptariama įtaka, kurią skurdo kultūros sąvoka padarė stiprindama neigiamą požiūrį į skurstančiuosius, Slovakijoje – daugiausia romus. Šis diskursas įgijo labiausiai atskirtį stiprinantį pavidalą 2004 m. vasarį vadinamųjų romų maištų laikotarpiu, kai Naujoji socialinė politika sumažino socialines išmokas ir sukėlė visuomenės protestus, kuriuose dalyvavo ir romų. Taip pat nagrinėjama, kaip viešas socialinių neramumų pristatymas susiejo tinginystę su tam tikra tautybe ir buvo panaudotas pateisinant bedarbių romų, kaip nenusipelnančių paramos skurdžių, atskyrimą nuo perskirstymo mechanizmų.

Pagrindiniai žodžiai: SKURDO KULTŪRA, DISKURSAS, RIAUŠĖS, ROMAI, SOCIALINĖ ATSKIRTIS, SOCIALINĖ POLITIKA.