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The Consolidation of Authoritarian Rule in Rural Hungary: Workfare and the Shift from Punitive Populist to Illiberal Paternalist Poverty Governance

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Abstract

This essay analyses the consolidation of authoritarian rule in Hungary by focusing attention on the ruling party's workfare programme, which has become the cornerstone of rural poverty governance. It is argued, on the basis of ethnographic research carried out by the author and the secondary literature, that workfare successfully tamed the angry politics born out of the dislocations caused by neoliberal restructuring. It consolidated post-peasant hegemonies by tying the 'deserving poor' into clientelistic relations with mayors. This 'illiberal paternalism' constitutes an alternative to neoliberal regimes of poverty governance.

HOW CAN WE ACCOUNT FOR THE CONSOLIDATION OF authoritarian rule on the European Union's eastern periphery? Most of the scholarship on illiberal statecraft has focused on the capture and instrumentalisation of key institutions to explain the stability of 'competitive authoritarian' regimes (Levitsky & Way 2010). In the case of Hungary, political scientists have focused on the dismantlement of checks and balances, the rewriting of electoral laws, controls over the media and the shrinking of civic advocacy space (Bánkuti *et al*. 2012; Tóka 2014). They have also pointed out that the EU helps sustain the regimes by providing loosely controlled development funds and through its reluctance to interfere in domestic politics (Bozóki & Hegedűs 2018; Kelemen 2020).

Another strand of research has explored the ways in which authoritarian governments have legitimised their rule through national-populist identity politics. Researchers focusing on discourse and ideology have highlighted how radical rightwing ruling parties have relied on loyal media outlets to accuse foreign 'shadow powers' of undermining

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national sovereignty (Gökarıksel & Türem 2019). They have also shown that radical rightwing politicians have fought culture wars to harness the energies of popular criticism and disenchantment with both neoliberal economic policies and a liberal human rights consensus (Kováts 2018). Neo-Gramscian scholars have, in turn, argued that such 'authoritarian populism' (Hall 1979) has permitted radical rightist incumbents to achieve successive electoral victories and to meet other strategic goals, such as uniting a heterogeneous voter base and drawing attention away from unpopular elements of their governance (Scheiring & Szombati 2020; Bodirsky 2021).

These approaches have highlighted how the capture of political institutions has tilted the electoral playing field towards authoritarian rulers, and how the instrumentalisation of crises and the polarisation of publics have allowed them to build a loyal base. However, analyses focusing on institutions and ideology do not take account of the deep-seated social reforms and transformations effected by authoritarian powerholders. They have notably failed to consider how the latter have invested in techniques of social engineering to reconfigure social relations to bring about an ordered and orderly society, and thus legitimise their rule. To make good this deficiency, an expanding strand of interdisciplinary scholarship has utilised Karl Polanyi's notion of 'countermovements' (Polanyi 2001). Both in the US and in Europe, processes of deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation within a neoliberalised global economy have restructured class relations, causing downwardly mobile groups of voters to turn against liberal elites and lend their support to rightwing populists and authoritarians (McQuarrie 2017; Tansel 2017; Kalb 2018; Scheiring 2020b). Scholars have begun to explore how rightwing authoritarians protect neoliberal accumulation regimes from popular protest and judicial scrutiny (Bruff & Tansel 2019; Fabry 2019), orchestrate a massive transfer of wealth to regime-friendly domestic capitalists (Mihályi & Szelényi 2019; Scheiring 2020a) and undermine social citizenship (Stubbs & Lendvai-Bainton 2020).

In this essay, I extend this literature by asking how rightwing authoritarians have deployed the state to effect social transformations in rural spaces with a view to countering the corrosive effects of neoliberalisation in such a way as to bring these spaces into the fold of radical rightwing hegemony. I examine the Orbán regime's effort to both tame and harness a rural countermovement born out of popular anger towards criminalised and racialised 'surplus populations' marginalised by neoliberal restructuring. The Hungarian Work Plan (HWP) is Europe's most important workfare programme.[1] Drawing on ethnographic observations in the village where the HWP was launched and the secondary literature on workfare, I offer a historical account of transformations in

[1]In terms of the programme's share of active labour market policy spending (62%) and participants (46%), the Hungarian Work Plan exceeded other workfare programmes in the EU from 2011 onwards (European Job Mobility Laboratory 2013). The scheme peaked in 2016 when 223,000 public workers were employed. By January 2019 the number had fallen to 119,000, reflecting the government's intention to push participants back onto the primary labour market in response to an increasingly acute labour shortage. In 2012 Hungary spent 0.47% of its GDP on workfare, followed by Ireland (0.28%), Bulgaria (0.15%) and France (0.14%) (Kálmán 2015).

poverty governance.[2] I argue that workfare allowed the ruling party to deliver on its pledge to 'restore order' in the countryside and provide its inhabitants (including the rural poor) with a less uncertain vision of their future. Fundamental to the programme's success was a shift in the way local mayors deployed workfare. This shift was predicated on the diminishing political dividends of punishing the poor, which led mayors to adopt an alternative social logic: clientelism.

I theorise poverty governance in contemporary Hungary as 'illiberal paternalism': a programme that combines a systemic drive to reinstate naturalised hierarchies with the selective provision of protection and care for those who conform with the state-sanctioned ideology of gainful work. The illiberal version of workfare should be distinguished from its neoliberal nemeses. Hungary's authoritarian rulers have refrained from following the path of the US and other advanced neoliberal states, which transformed welfare policy by eschewing responsibility for protecting poor populations hit by long-term unemployment (Jessop 2002; Wacquant 2009). Instead, they created a Janus-faced regime, which combines the social control of poor populations with their reintegration through clientelism. This illiberal paternalism highlights interpersonal relations—more precisely, the dependencies characteristic of patron–client relationships—as a key domain of authoritarian statecraft. It differs from 'neoliberal paternalist' modes of poverty governance, which employ directive social programmes to transform the poor into subjects who freely choose to comply with market imperatives and political authorities (Soss *et al*. 2011).

The structure of the essay is as follows. I begin by situating the birth of workfare within a Polanyian countermovement which fuelled a wave of 'punitive populism'. I then draw on ethnographic materials to show the diminishing political returns associated with punishing the poor and rely on secondary sources to argue that this explains a general shift in workfare schemes from punishment towards clientelism. The final section advances a theory of illiberal paternalism as authoritarian poverty governance.

[2]In 2011 I was able to observe the launch of the HWP at village level in the 'crisis zone' of northeast Hungary. Together with Margit Feischmidt—with whom I co-authored several articles on our research (see, for example, Feischmidt & Szombati 2017)—I conducted participant observation in the village between March and December 2011. This took the form of field visits, whose length varied between four and ten days. We visited and conducted unstructured ethnographic interviews with several dozen commoners (Romani and non-Romani inhabitants) and took part in public events such as Sunday masses, cultural commemorations and political meetings. From July 2011 we began to conduct semi-structured interviews (38 in total) with representatives of the local elite (the mayor and councillors, former mayors and councillors; winemakers and other entrepreneurs; members of the Gypsy Minority Self-government; heads of the local kindergarten, school and cultural centre; the priest; leaders of local associations) to elicit competing views on the ethnic conflict which erupted in the village in March (for details see the section entitled 'The diminishing returns of punishment' in the main text). I returned to the village in 2014 to elicit the views of the local population (commoners and the representatives of the local elite we had spoken to in 2011) on the HWP and to assess the programme's impact on the local economy, social relations and the livelihoods of the local poor. This second phase of research took place in the spring, summer and early autumn, in the run-up to and in the aftermath of the municipal elections, which were held on 12 October 2014. It took the form of participant observation and unstructured interviewing. Due to the sensitivity of this material, I will not name most of my interlocutors. In some cases I will specify their profession, but in most cases I will refrain from doing so in order to protect their identity. For the same reason, I will, in most cases, also not specify the date when the interviews were conducted.

The punitive roots of workfare

The decade that followed the change of regime in 1989 transformed the Hungarian countryside. The previous combination of collective farms and household commodity production had resulted in an unprecedented improvement of living standards. In the 1990s, the collapse of this mixed economy led to a sharp drop in income and declining living standards. This crisis was prolonged in the new century by the process of European enlargement, which exposed farmers to tough international competition. The number of self-employed entrepreneurs fell from 958,000 to 567,000 between 2000 and 2010.[3] Imre Kovách adapted the concept of 'depeasantisation' to describe the transformation of rural society (Kovách 2003). This was a composite term for three separate but interlocking processes. First, it referred to de-agrarianisation, namely the loss of agriculture's leading role in the rural economy, even though the majority of rural inhabitants continue to work as petty producers, at least for the purposes of auto-consumption. Second, it captures the decline of 'socialist entrepreneurs' (Szelenyi 1988), the majority of whom were unable to convert themselves into capitalised farmers running mid-sized farms (between 10 and 100 hectares) profitably. Third, it refers to the disappearance of the 'historic peasantry', the dominant social class until collectivisation, which in the Hungarian case lingered more than elsewhere thanks to the successful symbiosis of socialist institution and peasant household (Swain 1985).

Anthropologists who have conducted fieldwork in rural regions (Lampland 2002; Thelen 2003) have shown that depeasantisation sets in motion sharp processes of class differentiation. An embryonic elite capable of sustaining agribusinesses in the context of increasing integration into Western European markets was heavily outnumbered by households which found themselves pushed into the condition of the 'post-peasant'.[4]

Most unskilled workers formerly employed by collective farms found themselves trapped in peripheral rural regions. This was mainly because of the limited demand for unskilled labour in the new growth centres of the economy (which were dominated by technology-intensive transnational corporations) but also due to high barriers to geographic mobility. Deficiencies in the state education system ensured the reproduction of this unskilled rural population. Up until Hungary's accession to the EU in 2004, people with little education and few skills could at least find seasonal work as farmhands. The availability of such work prevented the social marginalisation of poor households. Many post-peasants sought to forge durable bonds with trusted farmhands in order to ensure that the latter would be available for work during key phases of the agricultural production process (for example, the harvest). These bonds generally took the form of clientelistic relations, which allowed farmhands to obtain favours from post-peasant patrons (such as, small loans). At the same time, patron–client ties allowed representatives of the post-peasantry to exercise social control over the rural poor, notably Roma. Only 'striving', 'hard-working' men and

[3] *Nemzeti Vidékstratégia 2012–2020* (Budapest, Vidékfejlesztési Minisztérium, p. 27).

[4] The concept of 'post-peasantry' has been elaborated in various ways (Szelenyi 1988; van der Ploeg 2018; see also Buzalka, this issue). The postsocialist period witnessed disparate efforts to revive older forms of household-based production and consumption. I will refer to petty agricultural producers, some of whom are officially recognised as 'family farmers', while others are classified as 'primary producers'.

women could aspire to client status, creating social pressure for the rural poor to conform to the ideal of the hard-working farmhand (see for example, Feischmidt 2012).

As the pressures of international competition led agribusiness ever further down the road of mechanised production, many post-peasant households gave up agricultural production altogether. The result was the massive impoverishment and social exclusion of unskilled rural labour and its increasing reliance on a decentralised welfare regime to ensure social reproduction at the most minimal level. Rural welfare regimes faced the dual task of offering minimal welfare assistance to marginalised 'surplus populations'[5] and supporting downwardly mobile segments of the petty bourgeoisie (Szalai 2005). Local redistributive conflicts pitting these two social groups against each other worsened under the impact of the global economic crisis. These tensions were particularly severe in regions experiencing an influx of unskilled workers from urban areas, where jobs had disappeared and households hit by unemployment could no longer afford to live (Virág 2009).

Rural elites responded to this process of 'rural ghettoisation' by putting in place informal mechanisms of segregation and control. In other words, they erected invisible walls which mimicked the physical walls that had sprung up in other corners of Eastern Europe to exclude the poor and the marginal (Hirt 2012). The declining economic prospects of the post-peasantry spawned dissatisfaction with the neoliberal settlement, which had restored property rights over land without creating conditions conducive to capitalised family farming. In northeast Hungary, these economic grievances did not spill over into a politicised 'post-peasant populism' (Buzalka 2008) as long as informal mechanisms kept surplus populations segregated in 'Gypsy settlements' and 'Gypsy schools'. However, after 2004, the government led by Ferenc Gyurcsány began to implement an encompassing set of emancipation policies, a precondition for EU accession. This policy regime—combining the tools of rights expansion, institutional desegregation, anti-discrimination and civic activism—took aim at precisely those informal mechanisms which had emerged to protect 'post-peasant' hegemonies. Post-peasant irritation was worsened by increasing criminality in pockets of deep poverty. Since underfinanced police forces did not have the capacity to deal with petty criminality, this in turn generated deep resentment towards left-liberal politicians perceived to be weak on crime enforcement (Szombati 2018).

This 'revolt of the provinces' (Szombati 2018) was at first confined to northeastern Hungary, where provincial mayors formulated an unprecedented demand to reallocate discretionary powers and state resources to the municipal level. In May 2008, the independent mayor of the town of Monok embarked on a national media campaign to call for new sanctions that would allow mayors to apply sanctions to individuals apparently unwilling to work. His municipality adopted a decree stipulating that only welfare claimants who signed up for community work would henceforth be entitled to benefits. Other municipalities in the region were quick to follow suit. Their initiative was followed by a petition entitled 'Municipal Initiative for the Improvement of Our Society'. Signed

[5]This term refers to citizens experiencing socio-economic exclusion in the postsocialist period. While others (see, for example, Ladányi & Szelényi 2006) have referred to this group as an underclass, I avoid this term because of its normative character.

by 18 mayors of the microregion where Monok is situated, the document articulated the need for a radical overhaul of the welfare system based on the Monok precedent. The signatories called on the government to draw up legislation that would put an end to the distribution of 'free handouts' and ensure Hungary's transformation into a 'work-based society' (see Szombati 2018, pp. 105–6).

The mayors' petition marks the breakthrough for a novel treatment of poor populations. The term 'punitive populism' derives from conceptualisations of 'penal populism' (Pratt 2007),[6] shaped by the empirical work of critical social policy scholars on the punitive turn of social policy in Europe (Wright *et al*. 2020) and the US (Soss *et al*. 2011). More distantly, this scholarship is marked by Stuart Hall's conceptualisation of authoritarian populism as a strategy of governance (Hall 1979). Punitive populism refers to a process whereby an alliance of anti-establishment actors, speaking in the name of 'hard-working ordinary people', strives to create a new consensus around the need to end the 'free lunch approach' to welfare (namely, the rights-based welfare regime). Populist actors advocate 'freeing' the national community from the burden of 'welfare scrounging', reorienting social policy towards the needs of 'deserving' citizens, and subjecting undeserving 'problem populations' to a harsh sanctions regime.

Punitive populism calls for the establishment of a clear moral and legal hierarchy between 'strivers' and 'scroungers'. It justifies the sanctioning of scroungers by reference to 'a conception of fairness that is instilled in the notion of reciprocity', where 'responsibilities and obligations counter-balance rights' (Paz-Fuchs 2008, p. 1). Advocates of punitive populism claim that disciplinary punishment is necessary to correct antisocial forms of behaviour. They thus call for a principled state to actively take up the task of rebuilding society around the foundational ideology of 'producerism', which holds that the productive forces of society—ordinary workers, petty entrepreneurs and 'national capitalists' (Scheiring 2020a)—are being held back by parasitical elements at both the top and bottom of the social stratum.

I argue that this punitive populism was part of a Polanyian countermovement in Hungary's de-agrarianised and de-industrialised heartlands, which bore the brunt of postsocialist restructuring and EU accession costs. Downwardly mobile blue-collar workers and post-peasants felt encroached upon and threatened by 'undeserving' surplus populations, perceived to be unfairly supported by the then ruling left-liberal elite (Kalb & Halmai 2011; Vígvári 2013). While this punitive populism was fuelled by these class-based resentments, two additional elements were necessary for it to achieve a powerful lasting impact. The first was the role of the mass media, which solidified anti-poor public sentiment, while simultaneously reflecting it back as the authentic voice of ordinary people (Hall *et al*. 1978). The second was the emergence of a loose network of grassroots and elite actors who sought to criminalise and racialise surplus populations.

At the centre of this network stood an energetic radical rightist 'movement party', *Jobbik* (Pirro 2019). This party devised an innovative strategy for placing the governance of marginal Romani populations at the top of the political agenda (Feischmidt & Szombati 2017). With discourses of victimisation circulating in the rightwing media, *Jobbik*

[6] See also Boda *et al*. (2015).

succeeded in legitimising the punishment of ‘Gypsy criminals’ (*cigánybűnözők*) and entrenching it as a redemptive project for healing the national community (Karácsony & Róna 2011).[7]

In January 2009, when the left-liberal coalition was still in power, the Ministry for Social Affairs and Labour, sensing the rapid shift of public opinion towards the espousal of *Jobbik*’s radical solutions, launched a new programme to place the labour of unemployed citizens in the country’s most disadvantaged microregions at the service of local communities (Vidra 2018). While communal work schemes had existed before, the 2009 initiative greatly expanded the public workforce from approximately 16,000 to over 90,000 in the programme’s first year. The new ‘Road to Work Programme’ (RTW) gave local mayors a key role in the programme’s implementation by granting them the discretionary power to select participants.[8]

The great majority of ‘public workers’ (*közmunkás*) were charged with the simplest communal tasks: tidying streets, planting trees, making small improvements to public spaces (Csoba 2010). At first glance, the new initiative was consistent with a series of ‘activation reforms’ undertaken since the early 2000s to help the long-term unemployed to re-enter the labour market. However, a closer look reveals a hybrid approach combining the previous emphases on skills and community development with a novel insistence on discipline. I argue that the RTW marked a shift from a neoliberal logic of self-responsibilisation toward a neoconservative logic of social control and norm enforcement.

Although these measures went in the direction desired by mayors, they were rapidly overtaken by the collapse of support for left-liberal parties in government and the concomitant rise in support for *Fidesz* and *Jobbik*,[9] radical rightwing parties advocating a more punitive approach to welfare. *Jobbik*’s 2010 manifesto called for a toughening of the workfare regime, proposing to make entitlement to unemployment benefits fully conditional on participation in workfare.[10] *Fidesz*’s manifesto was less explicit, merely

[7]While ethnic prejudice and discrimination targeting Roma existed before this critical event—even prior to 1989, as Haney’s (2002) study of state socialist social policy in two districts of the capital reveals—the ‘Gypsy issue’ had not been politicised in Hungary. The radical right’s key achievement was to orchestrate a moral panic around ‘Gypsy criminality’ (see Szombati 2018) and to portray the Romani community as representing an existential ‘menace’ (see Stewart 2012) to the interests and way of life of the ethnic majority.

[8]According to the text of the workfare law, mayors were empowered to recommend the persons to be employed in the scheme, and the final decision rested with the local labour office. In practice, however, the labour offices rubber-stamp mayors’ recommendations (Váradi 2016, p. 36).

[9]Two political scientists who conducted an empirical analysis of voters’ ideological self-placement on the left–right scale showed that the ‘median voter’ moved sharply to the right after 2008 (Enyedi & Benoit 2011). The scholarship is in agreement that the cause of this realignment was the Socialist Party’s (*Magyar Szocialista Párt*) delegitimisation in the eyes of its voters, and that the latter was precipitated by corruption scandals, a deteriorating economic situation and the difficult-to-swallow austerity measures imposed by the International Monetary Fund after Hungary was forced to apply for a rescue package in 2008 (Enyedi *et al*. 2014; Enyedi 2015; Kalb 2018). To this we must add the Socialist Party’s neglect of grassroots organising and network-building, which undermined the party’s embeddedness in working class communities (Szombati 2018; Scheiring 2020b).

[10]‘Radikális változás A Jobbik országgyűlési választási programja a nemzeti önrendelkezésért és a társadalmi igazságosságért’, *Jobbik*, 2010, p. 12, available at: http://docplayer.hu/158036-Radikalis-valtozas-a-jobbik-orszaggyulesi-valasztasi-programja-a-nemzeti-onrendelkezesert-es-a-tarsadalmi-igazsagossagert.html, accessed 11 January 2021.

containing a pledge to 'substitute the benefit-centred approach [of the Socialists] for a work-centred approach'.[11] In the 2010 parliamentary campaign, party leader Viktor Orbán mimicked *Jobbik* by emphasising the link between welfare dependency and criminality. As Lugosi's analysis of the two parties' social policy reveals, *Fidesz* and *Jobbik* employed similar framing strategies on social policy to compete for similar voters (Lugosi 2018, p. 225). This is corroborated by Pytlas' observation of the high congruence on policy positions between the two parties, leading to increased party competition over ownership of salient issues (Pytlas 2015, p. 138).

After winning a decisive victory in the April 2010 parliamentary elections, *Fidesz* immediately began to rewrite social policy along the lines proposed by *Jobbik*. After drastically cutting the welfare and pensions budget, the new government redefined poverty governance around a punitive disciplinary agenda that emphasised waged work and deployed state authority to cultivate market relations. It thereby followed the example of Anglophone countries in downgrading social citizenship (Peck 2001) and expanding the use of sanctions (Wright *et al*. 2020). As a hugely symbolic and consequential first step, it removed the right to social security from the constitution and enshrined the obligation to work into the new Basic Law.[12] This was the basis for a series of reforms, which started with the rewriting of the Labour Code and continued with the reduction of the period of unemployment assistance from nine to three months (the shortest in the EU) and with pension reforms that stripped approximately 100,000 citizens of their entitlements (Szikra 2014).

Some consider these reforms a continuation of neoliberalism (Lendvai-Bainton 2018), while others suggest that they be seen as a novel combination of neoliberalism and neoconservatism (Szikra 2014). The general consensus is that the Orbán government transformed a limited welfare state into a punitive workfare state (Vidra 2018), which only guarantees protection for 'deserving' citizens, while using the full force of the state's punitive apparatuses to punish 'undeserving' ones. The key argument supporting this assertion is that:

> when failing to enter the public works programme immediately upon call, one risks being excluded from the social assistance system altogether. Besides the work-test, strict behaviour tests have been imposed upon benefit claimants: as of January 2012, local governments can exclude unemployed people from social assistance and public works in case they would not keep their houses and gardens 'tidy'. (Act III/1993) (Szikra 2014, p. 7)

The Hungarian Work Plan (HWP), which replaced the RTW in 2011, contained a harsher sanctions regime than its antecedent. In July 2011, parliament adopted a new law, which stipulated that welfare claimants who fail to participate in public work or other registered employment for at least 30 days in the previous year should lose their entitlement to welfare benefits.[13] In addition, a special minimum wage was created for public workers,

[11]'Nemzeti ügyek politikája', *Fidesz*, 2010, p. 79, available at: http://www.langzsolt.hu/upl/files/nemzeti_ugyek_politikaja_8481.pdf, accessed 11 January 2021.

[12]According to the country's new Basic Law, the Hungarian state will 'strive'—but not guarantee—to 'provide social security to all of its citizen' (Article XIX, par. 1; author's translation).

[13]'T/3500. számú törvényjavaslat a közfoglalkoztatásról és a közfoglalkoztatáshoz kapcsolódó, valamint egyéb törvények módosításáról', enacted by parliament on 11 July 2011, available at: https://www.parlament.hu/irom39/03500/03500.pdf, accessed 21 September 2021.

set at 70% of the national minimum wage (the wages paid through the RTW had been set at the level of the then applicable minimum pension). Public workers were henceforth excluded from the protections of the Labour Code. In addition to local municipalities receiving the power to pass decrees restricting participation in the programme, they were also empowered to deduct personal debts from the wages of public workers. The combined effect of these measures has been to degrade public work, while transforming participants into the objects of social control and moral scrutiny. The underlying intention was to make workfare less attractive than selling one's labour on the market.

One could thus conclude that coercion and disciplinary punishment were built into the foundations of Hungary's workfare programme. In what follows I will revise this claim by highlighting a gradual shift from punishment towards a regime of practice whereby welfare claimants are not only objects of social control but are able to claim a degree of protection and recognition through participation in the HWP. This transformation invites us to look for possible causes and to revisit dominant conceptualisations of poverty governance.

The diminishing returns of punishment

The revamped workfare programme was unveiled to the public by a representative of the Ministry of Interior[14] in early August 2011 in Gyöngyöspata, a village in the foothills of the Mátra Hills, 100km east of Budapest. The village, which had once been an important commercial centre and enjoyed the same rights as the town of Gyöngyös, is part of a historic grape-growing and winemaking region. Up until the middle of the twentieth century, the local peasantry dominated viticultural production, but the socialist period brought significant changes to the sector. In 1975, individually owned terroirs were collectivised and united under the umbrella of a new cooperative to fulfil the demands for cheap table wine, with most exports heading to the Soviet Union. Other forms of agricultural production never played a significant role in this mountainous area. Industrial production, on the other hand, played an increasingly important role during the socialist period. There was work to be found in the electric company, the furniture factory and the slaughterhouse in nearby Gyöngyös, in newly opened regional coal mines that powered the industrial boom of the 1960s and 1970s, and in the country's largest coal-fired power plant, opened in 1969 in Visonta. The jobs available in Gyöngyös were mostly accessible to the non-Romani population. Roma—who began moving from their segregated settlement on the outskirts of Gyöngyöspata into the streets that had been vacated by poor peasants in the 1950s—were encouraged to take jobs in the mines and in Visonta. They also worked in the Goldberger textile factory and on construction projects in the capital city.

Gyöngyöspata weathered the transition to capitalism better than other villages in the northeast thanks mostly to the preservation of industrial capacities in Gyöngyös and the proximity of the capital. A handful of families managed to take advantage of the privatisation of land, specialising in the production of high-quality wine, marketed in

[14]The incoming *Fidesz* government transferred the programme's management from the Ministry for Social Affairs and Labour to the Ministry of Interior.

Gyöngyös and Budapest. By the time of my field research, about ten capitalised family businesses were active in the sector, together with a larger number of post-peasant enterprises that combined agricultural production with low-paid wage work. If the majority of local non-Roma had to cope with a loss of income, local Roma—who make up 15% of the local population—faced the complete collapse of their livelihoods. Layoffs began in the 1980s when a nearby coal mine was closed; the process accelerated in the aftermath of regime change when the Goldberger factory shut its gates in 1993 and unskilled workers were progressively laid off from Visonta. As a result, in 2011 out of the approximately 100 working-age local Romani men only three held jobs and an additional five were employed by local winemakers on a more or less regular basis. At the time of the research, all the local Romani women were unemployed. Scarce demand for unskilled labour in the post-peasant economy and dwindling welfare benefits created incentives for finding alternative means for ensuring social reproduction. My Romani informants agreed that there were three problematic families where young adults and children regularly stole small things from 'peasants', especially elderly people living on their own. The rest of the Romani community tried to live off a combination of welfare and seasonal work.[15]

Some post-peasants made an effort to incorporate local Roma in their enterprises. The effort was led by two women who played a prominent role in a local NGO, the Friends of Gyöngyöspata Circle, which had taken on the task of safeguarding local peasant traditions. One of these women, who owned a vineyard and a bed-and-breakfast, began to sell brooms made by the oldest Romani man and encouraged younger men to learn this traditional Romani skill. Although the arrangement lasted until the man's death, her efforts to revive the tradition failed. Another initiative—the promotion of microscale gardening among poor Roma, which was promoted and managed by the local doctor—also failed to take off. Both women explained the failure of these initiatives by reference to the laziness of Roma, claiming that they had become accustomed to living on welfare assistance paid from taxpayers' pockets.[16]

Post-peasant perceptions of the Roma as an alien, parasitic element in the communal body were reinforced by the Friends of Gyöngyöspata Circle, which in 2006 decided to publish a 'criminal report' detailing the misdemeanours—primarily instances of petty theft—attributed to the 'local underworld' (*helyi alvilág*).[17] Representatives of the NGO

[15]The findings on employment and criminality among the local Roma population derive from ethnographic interviews I conducted together with Margit Feischmidt in the summer of 2011 in Gyöngyöspata.

[16]These observations and opinions derive from interviews Margit Feischmidt and I conducted on 14 May 2011 (with the local doctor) and 3 October 2011 (with the winemaker and owner of the bed-and-breakfast).

[17]The report was an unofficial document comprising the testimonies of several dozen local non-Romani families who had been the alleged victims of burglary and minor misdemeanours, which were attributed to local Roma. It was compiled by Lászlóné Varga—then president of the Friends of Gyöngyöspata Circle—in 2006 and sent to the local mayor, the police chiefs of Heves county and the town of Gyöngyös, as well as the Socialist MP of the district of Gyöngyös. Due to its unofficial status, it was never made public, but excerpts were published on a far-right news portal. (These are no longer available online; for a shorter excerpt see Szombati 2018, pp. 70–1.) The report was also mentioned in one of the hearings of the *ad hoc* parliamentary committee, which the government tasked with investigating the background of the ethnic conflict that erupted in the village in March 2011 (see main text). See the transcript of the hearing held on 30 November 2011, p. 16, available at: https://www.parlament.hu/biz39/bizjkv39/I011/1111301.pdf, accessed 22 September 2021.

played a key role in framing local Roma as representing a threat to the collective project of reviving peasant traditions and the promotion of cultural (heritage) tourism.

The relation between Roma and non-Roma significantly deteriorated from 2006. That year, a fight broke out between Romani men and the family of the president of the local winemakers' association after Romani children deflated the tyres of the president's car. A village meeting was held after the incident at which anti-Romani emotions flared and were immediately picked up by representatives of the Friends of Gyöngyöspata Circle who called on the mayor to put an end to Romani violence. One year later, another violent incident occurred, sparked by an event remembered by local non-Roma as a 'Magyar boy' narrowly avoiding getting hit by a 'Gypsy car'. Magyar men who recognised the driver and went to the 'Gypsy settlement' to demand an explanation were beaten up by Roma. The incident was reported to the police, but the charges were quickly dropped, provoking another village meeting and a demonstration in front of the house of the leader of the Romani community. In a third incident, which took place in 2009, a teacher was assaulted by an angry grandmother after her grandson was allegedly beaten in class. In 2010, a violent confrontation between a policeman and inhabitants of the 'Gypsy settlement' celebrating their children's graduation was narrowly avoided. Finally, in December 2010, Romani children beat up the son of *Jobbik*'s local representative at the local school.[18]

The failure of efforts to integrate the surplus population into the local economy, together with the local police force's inability to check the spread of petty crime and the mayor's passivity in the face of ethnic violence, created an opportunity for intervention by external actors. The decision to launch the HWP in this particular locality was a response to an event which had taken place three months earlier. On 1 March uniformed members of an extremist, racist paramilitary organisation founded by the leaders of *Jobbik* descended on the village to conduct street patrols under the pretext that 'Gypsy criminals' were harassing the 'Magyar' population and that the police were unwilling to intervene. They stayed for 16 days. The Gyöngyöspata campaign followed the script of earlier far-right paramilitary mobilisations (see Szombati 2018, ch. 3) but in this locality the paramilitaries accomplished an unprecedented feat: the resignation of the independent mayor, ostensibly for health reasons. *Jobbik*'s leadership immediately announced that it would nominate a young local winemaker named Oszkár Juhász as the party's official candidate for the vacated position. In the run-up to the by-election of July 2011, Juhász campaigned on a 'zero-tolerance' platform. *Fidesz* did not nominate a candidate, but party officials quietly supported a more moderate independent candidate named Ferencné Matalik. At the same time, governmental officials announced that the HWP would be launched in Gyöngyöspata.[19] This clearly showed that one of the rationales for the introduction of a new workfare programme was to defuse simmering ethnic tensions in the countryside.

Jobbik's candidate ended up winning the by-election with 34% of the votes. The newly elected mayor's key pledge was to 'restore order' by rewarding 'constructive' and punishing

[18]Data derived from the first phase of research (see footnote 2); for a detailed description of the conflict and its antecedents see Szombati and Feischmidt (2012).

[19]'Gyöngyöspatán indul a minta-közmunkaprogram', *Origo*, 1 July 2011, available at: https://www.origo.hu/allas/20110701-gyongyospatan-indul-a-mintakozmunkaprogram.html, accessed 23 September 2021.

'destructive' households.[20] His main source of inspiration was the 'Érpatak model', a system of repressive measures pioneered by a far-right personality, Mihály Zoltán Orosz, who had served as the mayor of Érpatak, a village situated some 200km east of Gyöngyöspata. Since his election in 2006, the mayor of Érpatak had been touring the countryside to urge fellow mayors to harness the resources and sanctioning powers of local authorities to discipline poor populations deemed 'lazy' (*lusta*) and 'unruly' (*renitens*). Sanctions included the threat to impose fines on households or, in extreme cases, to remove children from households that persisted in 'antisocial' behaviour (see Szombati 2018, pp. 151–52).

The newly elected mayor of Gyöngyöspata drew on these precedents to create his 'complex defence net' against criminals. A law enforcement unit called the 'field patrol' was charged with the task of surveilling 'crime-prone' households. Supervisors were supplied with video cameras to monitor the work of the 40 individuals (35 of them Roma) enlisted in August to take part in the centrally financed workfare programme. Based on footage recorded by these supervisors, the local notary charged three participants with disorderly conduct and expelled them from the programme, resulting in the suspension of welfare benefits for three years. While the mayor used his new powers to discipline public workers, the Gyöngyös police force stepped up controls. Individuals, most of them Roma, were fined for minor offences such as throwing cigarette stubs on the pavement, burning leaves on days when this was not allowed, or riding bicycles without lights.[21] As a result of these punitive actions, 70 Roma applied for asylum in Canada (Feischmidt & Szombati 2017).

Relations between the mayor and the local *Fidesz* MP, László Horváth, who was also the government's appointed official in Heves county, were extremely tense after the *Jobbik* victory in the mayoral election. Rivalry between the two parties explains why the local model of poverty governance was among the most punitive in the country in the years after 2010, with both radical rightwing parties seeking to demonstrate their commitment to restoring law and order.[22] Mayors in several towns and villages in the northeast followed suit by manipulating the workfare programme and implementing a law and order agenda to punish local surplus populations (Tóth & Kádár 2011).[23]

The drive to punish was a key part of the populist wave that swept the countryside in the post-2006 period. The main drivers were the mayors of villages and towns where post-

[20]See the interview given by the mayor to a radical rightwing blog: 'Juhász Oszkár: építőkben és rombolókban gondolkodunk', *Alfahír*, 2 February 2012, available at: https://alfahir.hu/juh%C3%A1sz_oszk%C3%A1r_%C3%A9p%C3%ADt%C5%91kben_%C3%A9s_rombol%C3%B3kban_gondolkodunk-20120205, accessed 23 September 2021.

[21]The Civil Liberties Union, an influential human rights NGO based in Budapest, found that between May and November 2011, 61 out of the 86 individuals fined in Gyöngyöspata for petty offences were Roma. See, 'Gyöngyöspata per: az alapjogi bíráskodástól az alapjogok kifordításáig III.', *TASZ*, 9 May 2016, available at: https://ataszjelenti.blog.hu/2016/05/09/gyongyospata_per_az_alapjogi_biraskodastol_az_alapjogok_kiforditasaig_iii, accessed 23 September 2021.

[22]*Az alapvető jogok biztosának jelentése az AJB-3025/2012. számú ügyben* (Budapest, Office of the Commissioner of Fundamental Rights, 2012, p. 2).

[23]In 2012, Romani women from Gyöngyös, a town situated right next to Gyöngyöspata, filed a complaint to the Ombudsman for Fundamental Rights, claiming that they had been excluded from the workfare programme for wearing traditional costumes at work (*Az alapvető jogok biztosának jelentése az AJB-3025/2012. számú ügyben* (Budapest, Office of the Commissioner of Fundamental Rights, 2012, p. 2)).

peasants and workers saw Roma as representing both a burden and a threat to the local community. Especially in the de-peasantised and de-industrialised northeast, radicalised citizens, local NGOs and far-right activists all wanted to 'teach Roma a lesson', a phrase I heard over and over again during fieldwork.

When I probed public reactions to the *Jobbik* mayor's punitive measures in 2014, I found some on the 'Magyar side' who were critical. A kindergarten teacher and two schoolteachers found the measures unfair and morally repellent. The owner of a transport company and the village's largest employer, afraid that the mayor's actions would stain his reputation, decided to move his business to a nearby town. But the vast majority of my non-Romani interlocutors (around 50 persons) expressed satisfaction with the mayor's work on the grounds that petty theft had palpably fallen and local Roma had 'fallen in line' (*beálltak a sorba*). By this they meant that Roma were exhibiting pliant, more respectful behaviour as a result of the tough measures.

Events unfolding in Gyöngyöspata had an impact on poverty governance elsewhere. Although the Ombudsman for Fundamental Rights (2012) voiced severe criticism of paramilitary action and racially biased police controls, the government initially turned a blind eye to the intimidation. Based on list experiments conducted in multi-ethnic localities with a significant poor Romani population in rural Hungary, Mares and Young (2019) found that coercive strategies are politically useful in that they signal a party's harshness towards welfare-claimants. They argue that these 'anti-poor signals' are particularly attractive in localities 'where a significant group of voters opposes the beneficiaries of anti-poverty programmes and considers them "lazy" or "undeserving"' (Mares & Young 2019, p. 450). The ruling party's disregard of intimidation toward local Roma in Gyöngyöspata can therefore be considered an instance of competitive anti-poor signalling between *Jobbik* and *Fidesz*. However, anti-poor signals were not only intended for local non-Romani ears and eyes. The government's initial refusal to heed the criticism of the Ombudsman for Fundamental Rights, human rights NGOs and the leftwing opposition sent out a warning to the rest of Hungary's several hundred thousand-strong Romani community. The message was that the rights era had ended or, in the prime minister's words, that Hungary had stepped onto the path of 'organis[ing] a work-based society [that] is not liberal in character' (Orbán 2014).

While the government created space for the actions of uncivil society, it also sought to demarcate the limits of retributive agency. When *Jobbik* sought to replicate the Gyöngyöspata strategy in a small town further east by sending in paramilitary proxies, the police took several far-right activists into custody and the Interior Minister tabled a reform of the Penal Code in order to prevent such activities.[24]

I returned to Gyöngyöspata in 2014, before the October local elections. The mayor's reputation had eroded. His promise to attract foreign investors—with the help of party leaders who had cultivated ties with (unnamed) Iranian investors—had not been kept and

[24]In April 2011 the parliamentary majority passed an amendment to the Penal Code, introducing new sanctions (up to two years of imprisonment) against those seeking to defend public order through acts of intimidation. This, together with a new governmental decree which allowed for fines to be imposed on civic guards lacking an agreement with local councils and chiefs of police, forced extremist racist groups to adopt more informal modes of organisation.

the village had lost revenue with the departure of the above-mentioned transport company. Thanks partly to *Fidesz*'s sustained effort to undermine his credibility, the mayor was embroiled in several scandals: he had sent 'destructive' households an intimidating Christmas card that pictured him in the company of armed patrols and had been overheard discussing the possibility of sparking a civil war.[25] After he falsely alleged that his political enemies had attempted to murder him,[26] citizens eventually lost patience with such behaviour. Post-peasants involved in winemaking and tourism, whose livelihoods had suffered from negative media coverage, were adamant that his tenure needed to end and four independent councillors, who refused to work with the mayor, resigned.

One of the key takeaways from this second stint of fieldwork was that the political return on punishing the poor had diminished significantly. Some of those whose livelihood was not directly affected by Gyöngyöspata's poor reputation in the national press (as a dangerous place, and as a community which had welcomed far-right paramilitaries) continued to credit *Jobbik* for 'delivering a message to the Gypsies' (as one interlocutor put it). This was especially true of inhabitants who lived near the Gypsy settlement and had been the self-identified victims of burglary. However, people who lived outside this conflict zone—the majority of the local population and of my interlocutors—longed for an end to the political quarrels and a return to 'normal life' (another phrase I heard repeated on several occasions). This stance reflected a realisation that *Jobbik* had used the village to accumulate political capital and that its politicians had not sufficiently taken into account the interests of the local population. 'Oszi'—the diminutive of Oszkár which the mayor came to be referred to—was now widely considered as *Jobbik*'s puppet: someone who received orders from the party elite instead of listening to the people who had elected him. One must also note that the head of the regional development authority (*Észak-magyarországi Regionális Fejlesztési Tanács*), József Balázs, had made clear that the community would pay a price if it chose to elect a candidate openly opposed to the government. In a private conversation, which was later leaked to the press, Balázs told Juhász: 'In this district funding will only go to those I personally vouch for. Those I do not vouch for will not receive any funds'.[27] Once it became public knowledge, the news that state development funding would not be forthcoming if the belligerent *Jobbik* mayor was re-elected played a role in dissuading wavering citizens from lending Juhász their support. At the municipal elections held in October 2014 *Fidesz* put forward its own candidate, Lászlóné Hevér Katalin, a female employee of the local municipality who was locally considered an efficient manager and a political moderate. Running on a programme focusing on the revival of the local economy and repairing relations with the government, she ended up easily beating the incumbent with 55% of the votes against Juhász's 36%.

The other key takeaway was that the harassment of public workers ceased after October 2014, with Romani interlocutors noting that public workers were treated in a more 'humane'

[25]'Hangfelvétel: polgárháborúra készül a Jobbik?', *hvg*, 19 April 2012, available at: https://hvg.hu/itthon/20120419_jobbik_hangfelvetel_polgarhaboru, accessed 29 September 2021.

[26]'Gyöngyöspatai jobbikos álmerénylet?', *Magyar Nemzet*, 27 September 2012, available at: https://magyarnemzet.hu/belfold-archivum/2012/09/gyongyospatai-jobbikos-almerenylet, accessed 29 September 2021.

[27]'Százmilliárd elköltésébe szólhat bele Balázs', *Index*, 21 July 2011, available at: https://index.hu/belfold/2011/07/21/balazs_szazmilliard_elkoltesebe_szolhat_bele/, accessed 29 September 2021.

(*emberséges*) manner than beforehand. I was struck by a major shift in the way the new mayor talked about the programme. Whereas her predecessor had talked of public work as a disciplinary tool targeting Roma, by 2014 the new official discourse shifted to framing workfare as a programme of communal development. The new community garden and animal farm, which public workers began building in 2013, had been completed by the spring of 2014, and 24 public workers had received training to run these new economic activities. The vegetables and the meat produced through the new operations were processed in the kitchen serving the local kindergarten and school, partly to demonstrate the benefits of the centrally financed programme. Although the village's former mayor (who was on good terms with the new mayor and several councillors) told me[28] that the village's new leadership was privately concerned with the lack of discipline of the public workforce, in her public interventions the new mayor emphasised how the investments were key for achieving communal development. The majority of the local non-Roma commoners I talked to agreed that the new investments benefited the village, but they laid the emphasis elsewhere. Their main rationale for supporting the programme was that it put 'idle' Romani men and women back to work.[29] The Romani public workers I talked to were also generally content with their new predicament. One woman I visited in the summer of 2014—whose husband had been fired from the programme by Juhász's superintendent in 2011 and had since seasonally worked as an informally employed farmhand in nearby vineyards—told me that without the €150 she received per month she would not be able to cook warm food every day for her husband and six children.[30] Although people looking to be employed in the HWP needed to conform to both legal requirements (such as schooling their children and arriving on time to the workplace) and moral expectations (such as demonstrating law-abiding behaviour), the dominant view among poor Romani families was that becoming a working citizen was worth the effort. Public workers were naturally also relieved to see a more moderate candidate replace Jobbik at the helm of the local municipality.

My overall takeaway from the second phase of fieldwork was that once stripped of its openly punitive dimension, the workfare programme played an instrumental role in pacifying strained ethnic relations, while also providing a material and cultural foundation for a new social consensus centred on work as the cornerstone of communal membership. While it remained highly questionable whether workfare could offer an antidote to the long-standing marginalisation of surplus populations, in the short-term it allowed for the normalisation of rural life under *Fidesz*'s cultural and political leadership—and this not only in Gyöngyöspata.

[28]Author's interview with the former mayor, Gyöngyöspata, 16 March 2014.

[29]I noted that the community garden and the animal farm had been built at the foot of the 'Goat Stone', a hill that occupied a central place in the local imaginary. The cellars and holiday houses, which had been built in the 1970s, had been abandoned in the course of the 2000s. Local non-Roma accused Romani thieves of precipitating the decline of the Goat Stone area, more particularly, of using stolen roof tiles to fix the roofs of their shabby houses (see Szombati 2018, pp. 69–70). The Goat Stone thus became a symbol of the dissipation of material security after socialism and the shattering of post-peasant traditions, on the one hand, and of 'Gypsy criminality' on the other. The reappearance of the signs of gainful activity on the barren flanks of the Goat Stone some two decades after this period of decline could therefore be framed as a significant achievement.

[30]Although well below the national minimum wage, the public work wage (49,000 forints, or approximately €150) was substantially higher than what officially unemployed welfare-claimants could receive in the form of welfare benefits (22,800 forints or approximately €70).

Towards a theorisation of the new regime of rural poverty governance

Ethnographers and micro-sociologists who have conducted more recent studies of workfare in Hungary have noted mayors' growing recognition of the value of 'free' surplus labour. In Chris Hann's field site (Hann 2016), the mayor allowed a good worker to take holiday time when he was needed for some other, more urgent task as a day labourer in the private sector. Mónika Váradi notes that mayors in the northern Great Plain permitted public workers to take up seasonal work and to take care of sick kin (Váradi 2016, pp. 46–7). In her central Hungarian field site, Kovai (2016) found that participation in workfare opened a path to social mobility by helping the most productive public workers find a job in the local kindergarten or with an NGO. Asztalos Morell found that in the northeast, the workfare programme was instrumental in bringing poor families who, for one reason or another, had lost access to welfare benefits, back into the social security system (Asztalos Morell 2014, p. 17). Workfare was also used to strengthen community cohesion; for example, surplus produce from the local community garden was distributed to needy residents. In her ethnographically informed comparison of two northeastern villages, Szőke (2015) found that in one of the villages the mayor implemented the workfare programme in an inclusive manner, making an effort to employ local Roma in the council and the elderly care home. She also found that the local Roma preferred the clientelistic relationship with the mayor over 'the insecurities of an independent individualised market economy' (Szőke 2015, p. 8). Asztalos Morell (2014) has captured these inclusive aspects of the HWP by referring to 'workfare with a human face'.

The contrast between these accounts and those relating to workfare's early days—including my own observations on workfare in Gyöngyöspata—is sharp. The decentralised nature of the HWP and the lack of longitudinal studies raise the possibility that this contrast may be due to selection bias. Perhaps the later studies were conducted in localities where workfare had become more humane since its inception. Small, intimate communities have been the privileged sites of workfare scholarship, and we lack in-depth studies from larger settlements where there is reason to suppose that the Romani population has remained a target of punitive governance.[31] I argue that what we are dealing with is not a methodological artefact but a nationwide shift in poverty governance from a logic of punishment toward a logic of clientelism.

Three factors have decreased the political dividends of the punitive strategy. The first factor is the depoliticisation of poverty governance in the years 2012–2014. The government's decision to end the 'free lunch' approach to welfare clearly resonated with deep-seated concerns and quenched the popular thirst for 'punishing Gypsies'. The Orbán

[31]Miskolc, Ózd and Tiszavasvári are de-industrialised northeastern towns with a history of ethnicised social conflicts, but in-depth studies are lacking. In 2014, the *Fidesz* majority in Miskolc decided to demolish one of the city's slums in order to coerce poor Romani inhabitants into leaving the town ('Horváth Aladár: A száműzött utcák története', *RomNet*, 6 February 2019, available at: http://www.romnet.hu/jegyzetek/2019/02/06/horvath_aladar_a_szamuzott_utcak_tortenete, accessed 29 September 2021). In 2016, the *Jobbik* mayor of Tiszavasvári invited Érpatak's mayor to advise the local council on crime prevention and support its efforts to establish the 'peaceful coexistence of Magyars and Roma' ('Külső segítséget vesz igénybe a cigányok megrendszabályozására a Jobbikos polgármester', *Roma Sajtóközpont*, 15 February 2016, available at: http://romasajtokozpont.hu/kulso-segitseget-vesz-igenybe-a-ciganyok-megrendszabalyozasara-a-jobbikos-polgarmester/, accessed 29 September 2021).

government's embracing of a 'work-based society' helped to drain anti-establishment anger and the anti-poor resentment that had built up between 2004 and 2010. The countryside gradually became less focused on the issues of security and welfare that had animated the 'Gypsy issue'. This depoliticisation allowed for the emergence of new concerns, notably in relation to local development. This in turn created incentives for mayors to think in novel ways about workfare. This is consistent with the ethnographic consensus on the popularity of *Fidesz*'s welfare reforms in rural Hungary (Keller *et al*. 2016) and political scientists' emphasis on the decreasing salience of the 'Gypsy issue' and *Jobbik*'s consequent decision to break with racist extremism in a bid to appeal to more moderate sections of the electorate (Bíró-Nagy & Boros 2016).

The second factor concerns the increasing economic utility of the public workforce. In her survey of the HWP, Váradi emphasises that it 'has become the most important—one could even say unique—source of income for small localities' (Váradi 2016, p. 39). Peripheral villages had always been reliant on the resources of the central state, but after 2010 this reliance metamorphosed into a more complete dependence. The authoritarian state transferred the management of local schools to the state, reformed regional administration by reviving an intermediary district level, and severely curtailed local financial autonomy. These measures forced peripheral organs of local government to deploy the ('free') labour of public workers to perform functions which they had earlier paid for through employment and service contracts. In practice this gave mayors a powerful incentive to retain able participants in the workfare programme and to encourage them to work efficiently. Since the regulations forbid mayors from offering financial bonuses, the only way to maintain a stable and relatively efficient workforce is to create an informal system of rewards, including flexible working hours, personal favours and the bestowing of social recognition. Mayors had an interest in improving the morale and social standing of 'deserving' public workers.

The final factor concerns the political advantages of clientelism. Decentralised workfare schemes gave mayors enormous leverage over welfare claimants. Váradi notes that public workers could be threatened with exclusion from workfare if they voted the 'wrong way' (Váradi 2016, p. 44). Elsewhere, too, the poor were supportive of mayors considered more accommodating of their interests (Szőke 2015). Studies of 'welfare pressure' at the parliamentary elections of 2014 and of *Fidesz*'s unexpectedly strong results in villages at the parliamentary elections of 2018 suggest that rural mayors have pressured the local poor to support *Fidesz*.[32] Dependence on central funding gives the government an unprecedented degree of leverage over rural mayors, who in turn convey to subalterns the clear message that they would be foolish not to cast their votes for the ruling party.

These political and economic factors all point in the same direction: towards a relationship of mutual (albeit asymmetric) dependence whereby surplus populations depend on mayors to achieve a minimal level of economic security and social

[32]Mares and Young (2018) show that political parties' core supporters receiving welfare benefits (such as public workers) are particularly vulnerable to 'welfare pressure': the threat to remove access to entitlements if they vote the wrong way. Róna *et al*. (2020) point out that *Fidesz* has performed particularly well in localities where the ratio of public workers is high and even better in localities where the mayor is affiliated with the ruling party.

recognition, and mayors depend on surplus populations' labour and votes to support local development and remain in office. Workfare allows for the consolidation of patron–client relationships between mayors and welfare recipients, making unemployed citizens dependent on the goodwill of mayors by tying access to welfare benefits to public work. These relationships clearly differ from the clientelistic ties forged between post-peasants and seasonal workers. While mayors also seek to ensure that public workers do their jobs properly, their primary goal is not to retain the best workers but rather to make sure that underemployed working-age households (where adults cannot access the primary labour market) are put to work, instead of being left to loiter.

To achieve this end, workfare was inscribed within a broader reform of social policy marked by the elimination of universal benefits and the near total eradication of active labour market policies (Szikra 2014). Workfare has serious limitations as a social policy instrument. Critics have pointed out that the wage is insufficient to lift households out of poverty, even when combined with informal seasonal labour (Farkas *et al*. 2014). Even when the scheme peaked in 2016, the number of poor households exceeded the number of workfare positions. Workfare does not offer instruments to rehabilitate the sick, the psychologically frail or the socially isolated. It does not equip the unemployed with the skills necessary to enter the primary labour market (Vida & Vidra 2015). Above all, those denied access to workfare by the mayor find themselves in a situation of extreme marginality.

As a regime of poverty governance, workfare relies on the key distinction between the deserving and undeserving poor. In this, it is in line with the broader logic of *Fidesz*'s policy agenda, which enacted 'fundamental differentiations in terms of access to social citizenship between those seen as "deserving" of support and those who are not' (Stubbs & Lendvai-Bainton 2020, p. 1) in a range of domains including family, tax and education policy. Mayors have the right to exclude claimants they deem undeserving or otherwise unworthy, thereby sending signals to both the poor and the non-poor.

The poor are made to understand that the key to their access to social income (in the form of a substandard wage) and welfare (public health care, sick leave, pension) is the performance of work under conditions set by local elites. As a result, the HWP tends to 'become embedded into previously existing relations of power and dependency' (Váradi 2016, p. 44). Although workfare reinforces social hierarchies and relations of domination, welfare claimants prefer the current regime to the previous one, primarily because it offers a stable income. To this we must add that workfare has gone some way towards reintegrating previously marginalised surplus populations deemed deserving by powerholders into the local social fabric. Recent survey research shows that the rural poor are the strongest base of support for the ruling party (Róna *et al*. 2020).

At the same time, workfare reassures the non-poor that socially sanctioned norms and historically ingrained ethnic hierarchies are being upheld. As first noted by Herbert Gans, the power to name the undeserving 'supplies moral and political legitimacy to the institutions and social structures that include the deserving and exclude the undeserving' (Gans 1994, p. 274). The HWP has shored up post-peasant hegemonies by allowing for the re-establishment of social control over 'problem populations'. It achieved this by replacing informal patron–client relationships, which had been established between post-peasants and unskilled workers after 1989

but were eroded by processes of de-agrarianisation and de-industrialisation, which picked up pace after Hungary's accession to the EU. Post-peasants and workers residing in the countryside see workfare as contributing to the re-establishment of order and security. The HWP has thus played an important role in legitimising *Fidesz*'s rule and its social project of pacifying the countryside.

The social policy of the Orbán regime is commonly inscribed within a broader authoritarian neoliberal trend in which the 'underserving' are dispossessed (Stubbs & Lendvai-Bainton 2020, p. 4). This assessment must be nuanced. Hungary's authoritarian rulers have stripped the poor of their social rights, but at the same time they have redrawn the boundaries of deservingness in such a way as to preserve a degree of material protection and symbolic recognition for those willing to accept the obligations prescribed by local and national powerholders.

I therefore propose 'illiberal paternalism' as a way to capture the transformations effected by the HWP. The term 'illiberal' highlights radical rightwing powerholders' commitment to reinstating naturalised hierarchies (structured by ethnicity, race, class, gender, religion, family status and sexuality). It also alludes to their systematic drive to dismantle social rights. The term 'paternalism' denotes the selective provision of protection and care for those who conform to the stipulations of the producerist ideology (centred on work as the foundation of individual merit and social membership) which draws upon 'both the pre-industrial ethic of the smallholding peasantry, when work was an end in itself, and the ethics of socialist industrialisation, when work was enshrined in the ideology of the state' (Hann 2018, p. 249). Paternalism draws attention to the fact that illiberal statecraft is not confined to institutions and ideology but depends critically on interpersonal relations—more precisely, the imposed intimacies of patron–client relationships.

My conceptualisation of paternalism differs from ideology-centred approaches such as that of Enyedi, who developed the concept of 'paternalistic populism' to denote the *Fidesz* government's ambition to educate and discipline the citizenry by putting in place policy regimes which evaluate individuals against communitarian moral standards (Enyedi 2016). Citing ideas promoted by *Fidesz*'s key ideologue, Gyula Tellér (who has forcefully argued that the community needs to reward individuals proportionately to their performance), Enyedi argues that the emphasis placed on citizens' duties and the symbolic downgrading of those who do not work serve to legitimise the systematic redistribution of resources from the lower to the upper classes. This approach to paternalism dovetails with my conceptualisation of punitive populism but differs from the emphasis I place on the reconfiguration of relations between welfare claimants and local mayors, and my insistence that this new clientelism should be seen as the micro-foundation of illiberal rule in depressed rural areas.

The HWP has partially decommodified labour by offering the rural poor a reprieve from market pressures. This differs from neoliberal models applied in the US and UK, which have undercut the decommodifying function by compelling the poor into accepting the worst jobs at the lowest wages (Soss *et al*. 2011, p. 7). Similar processes are doubtless to be found in urban contexts in Hungary. But at least as far as the countryside is concerned, the Hungarian state does not seek to 'make the poor available to the market on terms set by the market' (Soss *et al*. 2009, p. 7). Also, while the illiberal model of poverty governance converges with the neoliberal one on

the foundational value of paternalism—the assumption that work is an indispensable starting point for a well-ordered life and the conviction that the disorders that have arisen from the poor's lack of discipline must be met by a strong state—it does not seek to mould the rural poor into good citizens through techniques of governmentality which teach them how to self-govern but by inserting them into patron–client relationships with local 'father figures' who have the authority to supervise and direct their behaviour. It is a costly model, necessitating significant state funds, but its symbolic and political dividends are evident.

Conclusion

This essay has presented a historically and ethnographically informed account of the transformative changes in poverty governance set in motion by *Fidesz* after it took power for the second time in 2010. It offers a correction to the familiar narrative according to which the neoliberal rollback of the welfare state produces insecurity and disorder which, in turn, 'necessitates the grandeur of the penal state' (Wacquant 2009, p. 19). The trajectory I laid out above starts with neoliberal restructuring in the 1990s, which generated a 'punitive populist' backlash targeting racialised and criminalised surplus populations and eventually led to systematic dispossession of social rights and enforcement of an obligation to work. This, however, in classic Polanyian vein, is not the end of the story. Punitive populism has been quietly superseded by a new regime of poverty governance, which fosters the building of clientelistic ties between mayors and welfare claimants. Due to the decentralised nature of the HWP, local workfare schemes vary widely, reflecting and reinforcing local hierarchies and communal needs. The evidence presented reveals a common thread running through multifaceted local schemes: the offer of certain advantages—the 'luxury' of combining low-paid communal work and family life, the guarantee of (minimal) security, and a modicum of social recognition—in exchange for the public performance of deference, participation in communal work and political loyalty.

I have argued that workfare has successfully tamed the angry politics born out of the dislocations caused by neoliberal restructuring and consolidated post-peasant hegemonies by tying the 'deserving poor' into clientelistic relations with mayors. The essay advances theoretical discussions of authoritarianism by showing how authoritarian powerholders, at least in rural areas, offer an alternative to neoliberal regimes of poverty governance. The concept of 'illiberal paternalism' captures how the regime has inscribed the selective provision of protection and care within the limits of producerist ideology and local notions of deservingness. It also highlights how, by mixing familialism and political clientelism, the ruling party has managed to legitimise its rule and transform abject rural spaces into its political heartland.

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