

Selma Muhič Dizdarevič¹

0000-0001-5620-7658

Department of Sociology, Faculty of Humanities,
Charles University, Czech Republic

Emotions, racialisation, and belonging: Roma lived experience and the case for emo- tionally reflexive policy in the Czech Republic

Abstract

This article examines the emotional dimensions of anti-Roma attitudes in the Czech Republic and argues that these dimensions matter for social policy analysis. Although the Roma are frequently positioned at the centre of welfare debates, little is known about how anti-Roma attitudes are lived emotionally by Roma themselves and what it reveals about policy design, implementation, and evaluation. Drawing on 75 semi-structured interviews conducted through a Community-Based Social Research approach, the article shows that anti-Roma attitudes generate humiliation, anxiety, fear, vigilance, and mistrust across everyday and institutional settings, while family and community ties remain key sources of resilience, dignity, and belonging. The article argues that these findings are relevant to social policy because they show that policy distributes not only resources and obligations but also recognition, stigma, insecurity, and emotional harm. It concludes that social policy analysis should treat Roma as Feeling Subjects and should evaluate policy not merely by formal inclusion goals or activation outcomes, but by its affective consequences.

Keywords: Roma, Czech Republic, welfare, emotions and social policy, antigypsyism

¹ **Corresponding author:** Selma Muhič Dizdarevič, Ibidem, Pátkova 2137/5, 18200, Prague 8, Czech Republic; email: selma.muhic@fhs.cuni.cz.

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*Understanding emotion in social policy:
from social construction to the feeling subject*

The study of emotions in public and social policy has undergone a significant transformation. Traditional sociological perspectives often relegated emotions to the individual's personal and private sphere, treating them as irrational impulses subordinate to reason and cognition. This perspective is evident in classical sociological thought, which emphasises the disciplined execution of social roles, underpinned by values and self-control, with emotions considered a disruptive force rather than a constitutive element of social life (Barbalet, 2002). However, contemporary scholarship increasingly recognises that emotions are not merely individual, self-contained experiences, but socially embedded, relational, and essential to understanding human action in political and policy contexts (Barrett, 2017; Hoggett, 2017).

This article contributes to social policy scholarship in three ways. First, it provides micro-level empirical evidence on how Roma in the Czech Republic experience anti-Roma attitudes emotionally, thereby addressing a gap in research that has often focused more on institutional discourse than on affective experience. Second, it advances debates on affective social policy and Social-Affective Citizenship by conceptualising Roma as Feeling Subjects whose emotions mediate the relationship between welfare institutions, public discourse, and political belonging. Third, it shows that policy design is not only distributive and administrative, but also recognitive and affective, with consequences for dignity, trust, and inclusion. More precisely, in this article, we ask how Roma in the Czech Republic experience the emotional consequences of anti-Roma attitudes on a daily bases and across institutional settings, and what this emotional dynamics reveals about the affective dimensions of contemporary social policy. More specifically, it examines which emotions emerge from these experiences, how Roma interpret and manage them, and how this evidence can inform a more emotionally reflexive approach to welfare governance by acknowledging rather than ignoring them and by supporting and building on the identified strengths and positive emotions.

Building upon these insights, interpretive approaches to policy analysis argue for the centrality of emotion in policy processes and outcomes. Durnová (2022) advocates for an interpretive methodology placing particular emphasis on emotions and ethnography, treating social practices as “webs of meaning” (Geertz, 1973, cited in Durnová, 2022, p. 44). This approach illuminates how emotional narratives shape policy debates and the legitimacy of actors within these debates. For example, references to emotions in policy discussions, such as fear, anger, or compassion, can determine whose knowledge is deemed credible, whose interests are prioritised, and which policy problems gain salience (Durnová, 2022, pp. 47–48). Emotions, in this sense, are not peripheral to decision-making, but are deeply embedded in value production, group behaviour, and knowledge creation (Jasper, 2011; Holland, 2007).

Hoggett (2017) emphasises the affective subject in welfare analysis and argues that emotions are integral to social life and that welfare policies must address both physical and emotional needs (Hoggett, pp. 141–144). He critiques approaches that marginalise emotion in favour of cognition, noting that powerful affects, such as anger, fear, and hope, shape solidarity, agency, and collective action (Hoggett, 2017, pp. 143–144).

Emotional needs are thus central to the design and evaluation of social policies, reinforcing the argument that welfare institutions must engage with the full spectrum of human capacities – including their moral, expressive, cognitive, and relational dimensions (Hoggett, 2017, pp. 146–148).

Barbalet similarly emphasises the embeddedness of emotion in social processes, highlighting that emotions are constitutive of social relationships and essential to understanding political behaviour (Barbalet, 1998, pp. 4–7, 33). Emotions shape collective outcomes by mediating interactions, structuring social significance, and guiding political actions. This perspective aligns with Barrett’s (2017) recognition that social realities, including stereotypes and group outcomes, are co-constructed through relational processes. In policy terms, this means that welfare, inclusion, and exclusion are experienced affectively, with profound implications for the design and implementation of social interventions.

Szarfenberg (2026) identifies a persistent gap in policy analysis: the lack of systemic frameworks capable of integrating micro-level emotional mechanisms with macro-level institutional feedback. He emphasises that understanding the well-being of welfare subjects requires attention to how emotions are shaped by policy design, implementation, and societal context. This focus on the emotional life of policy foregrounds the Feeling Subject, an individual whose capacity for recognition, care, and emotional security is central to the effectiveness of welfare institutions.

Building on these insights, we situate this article within Szarfenberg’s emerging framework of Social-Affective Citizenship (SAC), which posits the mutual constitution of institutional structures of welfare provision and the lived emotional experiences of belonging and recognition. SAC conceptualises all forms of welfare, whether formal or informal, bureaucratic, market-based, or community-based, as modes of affective governance that distribute not only material resources but also signals of worth, dignity, and inclusion. The framework proposes a four-level dynamic model: (1) the ecosystem of provision, mapped through the Social Citizenship Ecosystem Matrix that combines governance logics and formal/informal loci; (2) mechanisms of mediation, such as recognition vs. non-recognition, dignity vs. stigma, and security vs. precarity, through which policy is experienced; (3) the dimensions of affective citizenship, encompassing governance and regulation, differentiation and hierarchy, contestation and resistance, and expectation and solidarity; and (4) feedback and political action, where emotional climates shape political behaviour and, in turn, generate policy reform or retrenchment. Our contribution uses this architecture as a background map, focusing primarily on Levels 2 and 3 by documenting the emotional life of Roma as Feeling Subjects, while also tracing elements of Level 1 (the multi-layered ecosystem of Roma inclusion/exclusion) and Level 4 (the affectively charged demands of the majority population and policymakers).

The three axes framework: motivation, agency, and affect

Szarfenberg’s model operationalises this emotional turn through three analytical axes: motivation (Knave–Knight), agency (Pawn–Queen), and affect (Rational Calculator–

Feeling Subject). The motivation axis captures the spectrum between self-interested actors and those driven by pro-social norms. The agency axis reflects the extent to which individuals are empowered to make their own choices or rely on professional or institutional expertise. The affective axis moves beyond cognitive assumptions to foreground individuals' emotional needs, vulnerabilities, and capacities. This tripartite framework offers a nuanced tool for analysing how policy design interacts with the lived experiences of citizens, particularly, marginalised groups such as Roma, who are often *a priori* constructed as passive, undeserving, or non-participatory within welfare systems (Soss et al., 2011).

This conceptualisation resonates with feminist ethics of care (Tronto, 1993) and recognition theory (Honneth, 1995), emphasising relationality, dignity, and interdependence as central to social policy. Trauma-informed approaches extend this framework by highlighting the need to address emotional harm and promote safety for individuals' emotions within institutional interactions (Bowen & Murshid, 2016).

Within the SAC research programme, this three-dimensional model functions as a diagnostic tool for unpacking the implicit subjectivities embedded in different configurations of the welfare ecosystem. Therefore, our empirical analysis below reads public discourse and everyday practices as attempts to impose particular combinations of these subject positions on Roma, and examines how Roma themselves accept, negotiate, or resist these affective attributions.

Social construction of target populations and policy feedback

The emotional dimension of policy is further illuminated through Schneider and Ingram's (1993) theory of the social construction of target populations. Policies embed assumptions about who is deserving or undeserving, powerful or powerless, which in turn shape emotional experiences of inclusion, exclusion, and recognition among target populations. Social policies send affective signals which influence people's sense of belonging, dignity, and agency. The integrated perspective offered by Szarfenberg situates these constructions within a feedback loop, wherein policy design, implementation, and societal reaction co-produce emotional climates that either reinforce or challenge marginalisation.

This framework is particularly relevant to contexts where competing policy logics exist, such as in the Czech Republic regarding Roma communities, where strategic, equality-focused documents coexist with discriminatory administrative practices. The discrepancy between formal policy objectives and their societal enactment produces emotional tension, highlighting the need for emotionally reflective social policy that accounts for the lived experiences of marginalised populations.

In sum, contemporary social policy analysis increasingly recognises that emotions are not peripheral but central to understanding the production, experience, and impact of welfare institutions. Barrett (2017), Hoggett (2017), Barbalet (2002), Bonvin (2008), and Szarfenberg (2026) collectively provide a conceptual toolkit for examining the relational, affective, and structural dimensions of policy.

By applying these frameworks to marginalised populations, such as Roma in the Czech Republic, researchers can illuminate the complex interplay between policy

design, institutional practice, societal recognition, and individual well-being. The emotionally aware, relational, and intersectional approach proposed here seeks to bridge the persistent analytical gap in public policy studies, offering a comprehensive lens for understanding the full spectrum of human capacities and needs within welfare systems by answering the question of what the Roma Feeling Subject experiences emotionally.

This article thus addresses the persistent lack of knowledge about the concrete emotions experienced by Roma people, both in their interactions with social welfare institutions and in their everyday lives. It responds to a critical blind spot in social policy research: the insufficient understanding of how Roma, as a racialised and systematically discriminated minority, experience anti-Roma attitudes in the course of their daily functioning within Czech society. The micro-level perspective of the Feeling Subject requires attention to the content and dynamics of emotional experience. Despite the Roma community being an extensively researched population in the Czech Republic (cf. Albert, 2017; Baršová, 2002; Cahn et al., 2002; Lupták, 2013; Nekorjak et al., 2011; Růžicka, 2010; Sirovátka, 2004; Vacková et al., 2011), there remains a conspicuous absence of approaches allowing Roma men and women to articulate – and thereby reclaim – their own emotional and experiential narratives in relation to state policy and the majority society. Some FRA (2022) studies and studies focusing on the Roma Holocaust (Polansky, 1998) or forced sterilisation of Roma women in the past (Stejskalová & Szilvási, 2016) have partially, but not holistically, included contemporary problems and explicit emotional reactions throughout the life trajectories of individual Roma in their everyday life.

We propose that learning about Roma emotions is essential to understanding how social policy is formulated and enacted in a context where the majority's perceptions of Roma are often structured by hostility, prejudice, and moral hierarchies.

At the first level, policymakers formulate and advocate for social policies that mirror and reinforce the prejudices of the majority. Trlifajová & Pospíšil (2023) demonstrate how parliamentary debates from 2014 to 2021 in the Czech Chamber of Deputies on the minimum income scheme became instrumental in constructing an ethnic hierarchy targeting Roma citizens. These policy debates do not merely reflect discriminatory sentiment but actively institutionalise it within the welfare state's architecture.

State administrators operate in a state of tension between international and national frameworks at the second level. They are simultaneously tasked with implementing anti-discrimination principles – such as those mandated by European Court of Human Rights judgments, EU directives and framework strategies, OSCE-ODIHR commitments, or international treaties monitored by the UN – and with responding to the demands of domestic political parties that often pursue exclusionary objectives. The Czech Parliament's delayed adoption of the EU Race Equality Directive exemplifies this ambivalence.² On the one hand, international human rights

² The Czech Republic was the very last of the 2004 accession countries to transpose this provision into its legislation (in 2009). The transposition was politicised as infringing sovereignty, although existing laws have already covered this ground in the Czech legal system, and the EU

commitments require that antidiscrimination provisions be integrated into public policy; on the other hand, elected politicians at the national and local levels sometimes advocate measures that directly contravene these principles, such as municipal bans preventing social welfare recipients from residing in certain areas.³ These contradictory dynamics create a mixed message for the Roma community: they are simultaneously promised protection and subjected to exclusion. The resulting institutional ambivalence also profoundly affects social workers, both in public agencies and civil society organisations, who must navigate conflicting discourses, mandates, and expectations in their everyday practice.

At the third level, we encounter the majority population, whose collective moral and political demands often centre on disciplining, punishing, and marginalising Roma. Within the theoretical framework developed in this article, the Roma are perceived through an inherently contradictory affective lens. They are depicted simultaneously as *pawns* – subjects without agency – and as *failed rational calculators*, allegedly incapable of long-term reasoning, self-control, or responsible planning. Simultaneously, they are also cast as *hyper-rational manipulators* who allegedly strategically exploit the welfare system for personal gain while contributing nothing to it, thereby threatening the moral economy of the “hardworking”, taxpaying majority. These depictions are accompanied by the recurring trope of the “overly emotional” Roma, portrayed as impulsive, irrational, and lacking self-regulation. Such affective stereotypes underscore the need to investigate how Roma themselves experience and articulate their emotional realities. This article, therefore, poses the following questions: What are the actual feelings of Roma individuals living within this web of contradictions? Are their emotional responses – as anti-Roma discourses suggest – uncontrolled impulses, or do they represent complex, affective reactions to systemic exclusion and humiliation? And what could collective knowledge on emotions mean for policies applied to Roma in the Czech Republic?

Methodological and terminological concerns

To address these questions, we conducted community-based research involving 75 members of Roma communities in the Czech Republic. The study employed a combination of convenience and snowball sampling over the course of one year (2024) and applied thematic analysis to examine how anti-Roma attitudes shape participants’ lived experiences. Although the research did not focus exclusively on emotional life, participants were invited to reflect on their experiences and their affective responses to them. In this article, we specifically highlight these emotional dimensions. Furthermore, the study was not designed to measure the impact of social policy on the participants’ emotions specifically, even though interactions with schools, employment offices, social benefits departments, and health facilities certainly provide

Directive only strengthened them. The law in question is the Race Equality Directive 2000/43/EC, while the legislation transposing it into Czech law is called the Antidiscrimination Act.

³ The provision of the Administrative Law regulating the ban was introduced in 2013 and abolished in 2016.

insight into the impacts of these policies on Roma. However, the article focuses on the emotions detected in the study and their implications for a broader understanding of the necessity of broadening policy design, implementation, and evaluation to encompass emotional impact.

Community-Based Research Studies (CBRS) have proven particularly valuable in projects conducted with rather than on marginalised groups, especially those with limited public voice or political influence. CBRS aligns with broader efforts to democratise social science by integrating research, education, and activism, and it serves as a methodological alternative to more hierarchical “command-and-control” paradigms (Root, 2007). In the context of the Czech Republic’s Roma communities, this approach helps to avoid what Root (2007, p. 565) calls “vampire projects” through which information is extracted from vulnerable populations without meaningful reciprocity. The reciprocity in this case resulted in meaningful output, presented in the form of a research report by RomanoNet (see below) and by the researcher at press conferences and directly to the Office of the Government. During these activities, there was a sense of shared ownership.

Methodologically, the study also contributes to the tradition of public sociology (Burawoy, 2005), more specifically organic public sociology, in that it was developed through dialogue with a community partner and sought to produce socially relevant knowledge under conditions of long-standing mistrust and asymmetrical power relations. At the same time, the analytic component of the study remained the sole responsibility of the researcher. While CBRS has limitations, including concerns over neutrality, validity, and credibility, its participatory ethos and contextual sensitivity make it particularly suitable for research within settings characterised by power asymmetries and historical mistrust.

Accordingly, this study was developed in collaboration with RomanoNet, a Roma umbrella organisation with deep roots in the community. RomanoNet participated in all project phases, from design and data collection to validation of findings, except for the researcher’s analysis. The researcher’s positionality was explicitly discussed with RomanoNet and acknowledged as integral to the research process. Following Muhammad et al. (2015), reflexivity on positionality involves examining how the researcher’s own social identity, defined by factors such as race, gender, class, and migration background, shapes power relations and interpretive frames. In this case, the researcher’s migrant (non-Roma) background placed her simultaneously as an insider (sharing specific vulnerabilities with Roma related to experiencing discrimination from Czech society in general) and an outsider (somebody not personally affected by anti-Roma attitudes). This dual position proved advantageous for navigating access to the community and building trust within it. The involvement of Roma interviewers, recruited and trained in cooperation with RomanoNet, which also provided their remuneration, was crucial in facilitating open, emotionally charged discussions with participants. These discussions would have been difficult, if not impossible, for a non-Roma researcher to initiate independently due to their outsider status. RomanoNet participated in the design of the broader research project, in facilitating access to participants, in recruiting and supporting Roma interviewers, and in validating the broader relevance of the findings. Nevertheless, it did not participate

in coding the interviews, generating coding categories, or carrying out the analysis presented in this article.

The coding process was inductive and based on the author's repeated close reading of the interview transcripts. The themes discussed in this article were not predetermined by an analytical template; rather, they emerged from the interview material itself, including the recurring presence of humiliation, fear, shame, stress, resilience, pride, and strategies of emotional adaptation in participants' accounts. The researcher aimed to generate as broad a range of codes as possible to capture the diversity of participants' experiences, while allowing codes to reach saturation when they recurred across multiple responses. For the sake of analytic consistency and confidentiality, all coding and interpretation for this article were conducted by the author alone.

Participants were recruited in collaboration with RomanoNet. Recruitment criteria were established in consultation with the researcher to ensure the following: participants did not live in socially excluded localities; they resided in various districts across the Czech Republic; gender balance should be kept as much as possible; different subcommunities within the Roma community were included,⁴ alongside LGBT+ Roma; and a range of educational levels, employment statuses, and age groups were represented. An initial core team working with the researcher compiled a list of potential participants, which was jointly approved. The core team also identified interviewers, who were instrumental in reaching out to communities and recruiting participants.

The CBRS approach also shaped the study's substantive focus. A guiding question of the study concerned seeking members of the Roma middle class for participation, an underrepresented segment of this group that is often overlooked in Czech academic research, policy discourse, and media narratives, which tend to concentrate on the most deprived Roma communities in socially excluded localities. Preliminary consultations with Roma activists (Kostić and Muhič Dizdarevič, 2024) highlighted the importance of incorporating this dimension, which informed specific sampling and question design choices in the semi-structured interviews.

The final sample reflected broad diversity across age, gender, education, and employment status, covering participants from eight of the fourteen regions of the Czech Republic.

⁴ According to available estimates (Vláda České republiky, 2014), the Roma population in the Czech Republic is composed primarily of Roma who migrated from Slovakia after the Second World War. A smaller group consists of Czech Roma who survived the Holocaust, alongside a distinct subgroup of Olach Roma who moved to the Czech lands from Romania during the 19th century. The core team at RomanoNet initially proposed recruiting participants according to their affiliation with these different subcommunities. However, this strategy was ultimately abandoned, as it would have required disproportionate effort to achieve the target sample size. Instead, the team adhered to the remaining recruitment criteria outlined above for sample formation.

Table 1. The sample according to the selected parameters

Category	Subcategory	Number
Gender	Men	25
	Women	47
	Undeclared	3
Gender total		n=75
Age	21–30	18
	41–50	11
	31–40	8
	51–60	6
	61–70	5
	18–20	4
	71+	2
Age total		n=54
Education	Primary school	18
	Secondary school	9
	University	7
	Secondary with school-leaving exam	7
	Apprenticeship	4
	Post-secondary vocational school	1
	Conservatoire	1
Education total		n=47
Work status	Employed	24
	Unemployed	10
	Retired	7
	University student	2
	Entrepreneur	2
	On maternity/parental leave	2
	Finishing high school	1
	On sick leave	1
Work status total		n=49
District	Prague	11
	Central Bohemian	9
	Liberec	8
	Moravian-Silesian	7
	Pardubice	7
	Ústí nad Labem	5
	Pilsen	5
	South Moravian	4
District total		n=56

The terminological choice for referring to anti-Roma hostility required careful consideration. The official term used by Czech, EU, and UN institutions is *antigypsyism* (Czech: *anticiganismus*). However, in Czech and several other Slavic languages, the word *Cigán* (Gypsy) carries strongly pejorative connotations, functioning as a racial slur rather than a neutral descriptor. Interviews with Roma intellectuals conducted by the researcher (Muhič, 2024) revealed a growing preference for the term *anti-Roma racism*, which better captures the structural and racialised nature of the phenomenon. In response, this study adopts the expression *anti-Roma attitudes* as a compromise, maintaining institutional relevance (i.e., avoiding the use of the term “racism”, which is not found in governmental strategies) while respecting community sensitivities. Importantly, anti-Roma attitudes in the Czech Republic operate through visual identification based on skin colour, rendering it a form of discrimination that is inescapable and embodied. The experiences of light-skinned Roma participants throughout our study, and the relative privilege this appearance sometimes confers, raise further questions about the adequacy of existing terminology (Sokolová, 2008) and support the use of anti-Roma racism as the most adequate terminology choice.

Limitations and ethical notes

The study’s CBRS design and purposive sample afford depth rather than statistical representativeness; conclusions should, therefore, be read as interpretive-analytic contributions that illuminate mechanisms and experiences, rather than as claims about prevalence in the population. The ethical imperatives of reciprocity and community partnership that guided the project remain central to any translation of the findings into academic, public, and policy fields.

In ethical terms, informed consent was obtained verbally from all participants and audio-recorded at the start of each interview. Written consent was not used, partly because of the need to avoid introducing unnecessary formality and mistrust into interviews dealing with sensitive experiences, and partly because the project was developed in a community-based setting outside a formal university-led grant structure requiring institutional ethics review. Instead, ethical safeguards were secured through anonymisation, ongoing communication with the community partner, careful handling of sensitive material, and the principle of reciprocity built into the project design. Interviews were audiorecorded and subsequently uploaded to restricted access cloud service managed by RomanoNet. A RomanoNet employee transcribed the interviews, after which the original audio files were deleted. During analysis, any data that could potentially identify participants was removed to ensure anonymity. Interviewers entered into a contract with RomanoNet that included provisions on data security and nondisclosure.

Emotional landscapes of inclusion and exclusion among Roma in the Czech Republic

1. Narratives of shame, anxiety, fear, and trauma

In the 2021 Czech census, 21,691 people identified as Roma, including 4,458 who listed Romani as their sole national identity and 17,233 who identified as Romani in combination with Czech or Moravian nationality, a clear increase from the 13,150 people who identified as Romani in the 2011 census when combined ethnicity was not allowed; however, these official figures still represent only a fraction of the Roma population, because ethnic self-identification is voluntary and many Roma avoid declaring their heritage because of historical stigmatisation, fear, and distrust of how government institutions may use the data (Ryšavý, 2022; Czech Statistical Office, 2021). The Roma are thus commonly estimated to constitute about 2% of the Czech population (approximately 200 000; OSCE, 2012). The rise in responses related to self-identification after the Czech census allowed the declaration of a combined ethnicity further indicates that self-identification is shaped by how safe, meaningful, and institutionally trusted the census context appears to respondents. More broadly, the enumeration of Roma populations across Europe remains deeply politicised, as census figures, expert estimates, and policy categories are all affected by institutional and political pressures (Kovats, 2025).

The Roma community is relevant to social policy from two primary perspectives. On the one hand, as the country's most significant minority, Roma are considered the principal target of Czech social inclusion policies, exemplified by institutions such as the Agency for Social Inclusion,⁵ which self-identifies as “an instrument of the Czech Government” and operates exclusively in socially excluded localities predominantly inhabited by Roma. On the other hand, a central trope in anti-Roma discourse posits that Roma consciously, systematically exploit social benefits (Weinerová, 2014). Despite the prominence of this issue in political debate, there remains surprisingly little knowledge regarding how Roma experience life within Czech society and how these persistent societal representations influence their emotions and emotional strategies.⁶

In this study, the Roma interviewers were trained to prompt participants about the feelings they experience in a wide range of contexts, including their childhood, schooling, employment, interactions with the courts, social benefit offices, medical institutions, housing, social media networks, public spaces, and transportation, among others. Participants were encouraged to reflect on their emotions rather than to merely recount their experiences through follow-up questions. This approach facilitates a nuanced exploration of emotional landscapes.

⁵ In an unexpected move, the new Czech government, consisting of a coalition of populist and extreme right parties, abolished the Agency and is currently planning to move the agenda of Roma inclusion/participation under the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs. The complexity of the new situation is beyond the scope of this article.

⁶ For more on who collects data on Roma communities and how in the Czech Republic, see: Rákoczyová et al., 2024.

The figurative experience of being Roma in Czech society can be conceptualised as a “toll” imposed across sectors, contexts, and life stages. Inspired by the concept of the Black tax in the United States (Kahrl, 2024), albeit in a different context regarding labour, land, and property dispossession, this framework highlights the additional social, financial, and emotional burden imposed on Roma due to their ethnic and racialised identity. Our findings reveal that Roma frequently perceive themselves as under constant surveillance by both the majority population and institutional actors. Anti-Roma attitudes permeate all domains of everyday life. Situations that members of the majority navigate based on their unique, individual circumstances often become fraught or paralyzing for Roma because their involvement in those situations is interpreted through collective stereotypes, prejudice, disparagement, or even violence. While some participants indicated they have had limited encounters with anti-Roma attitudes, or that they have just a tenuous sense of belonging to the Roma community, many participants reported living within a structural network of social relations that systematically constrains their life opportunities and negatively, profoundly affects their emotional well-being.

Anti-Roma attitudes towards those perceived as Roma manifest early in the lives of Roma during periods of heightened vulnerability and limited social experience. Romani children often fail to comprehend why non-Romani classmates, parents of their peers, teachers, or other non-Romani social actors reject, bully, or isolate them. The persistence of similar experiences across age groups is prominent, as if the traumatic dynamics of early Romani socialisation in the Czech Republic have remained constant transgenerationally. Consequently, Romani children often begin life with a disadvantage, carrying an “inner wound” that must be navigated throughout their development, and often the realisation of their Roma identity starts with a trauma. One participant (man, 40) recalled: *I realised that I was a Roma in that kindergarten... That's actually the defining moment when you realise that you are someone else. When someone tells you that you are a Gypsy, that you are black.* This kind of moment is analytically important because it shows how emotional injury is not incidental, but part of early socialisation into a racialised order. Participants indicated that their adolescence was largely defined by strategies for confronting anti-Roma attitudes and processing earlier traumatic experiences.

The presence of anti-Roma attitudes necessitates continuous vigilance on the part of the Roma, who experience heightened scrutiny across all spheres—schools, workplaces, public transport, offices, healthcare settings, and social environments—prompting persistent uncertainty. Questions such as “Will I be allowed into the bar?” or “Will someone verbally or physically attack me?” dominate Roma social interactions with non-Roma. The constant disruption of everyday life is reflected in this 47-year-old woman’s experience, *Because my sister is lighter, has lighter skin, she doesn't look much like a Roma woman, she was admitted to the disco, and I wasn't. They didn't want any club cards from her, but they wanted a club card from me. So, they didn't let me into the disco. Even though I said that she was my sister, my sister stood with me, and in the end, they threw us both out.* Service denials based on Roma identity were quite common and contributed to overall insecurity and deprivation.

The recurring theme in the research was that the missteps by Romani individuals are frequently generalised and attributed to the entire community by non-Roma through the process of collective guilt, rendering everyday engagement exhausting and emotionally taxing.

Healthcare interactions exacerbate these stressors. Participants reported concerns about receiving adequate medical attention, with some having been accused by healthcare personnel of feigning illness to avoid work. Hostility from non-Roma in waiting rooms and medical offices was common. Transgenerational trauma, including memories of the forced sterilisation of Roma women carried out from the 1970s into the 2000s (Cahn, 2015, 2019; Sadílková, 2019; Rowlands et al., 2025), further compounds emotional vulnerability. It resurfaces in family conversations, such as here:

Then I heard a story from my grandmother and grandfather about my grandfather's sister. In the past Roma women used to get their ovaries tied. That happened to my aunt. She had an abortion before and her ovaries were tied without her knowledge. She only found out about it after about 20 or 30 years, while she was trying to get pregnant and she still couldn't figure out why. She thought that after the abortion, she couldn't have children, as it sometimes happens. But then she went to the doctor, and they found out that she didn't have ovaries, that they had been taken from her without her knowledge (woman, no age declared).

The stories told about the past in the Roma family had multiple meanings: carrying on the family legacy, warning about retraumatisation related to current dangers, and building resilience.

In administrative contexts (Employment Offices and Social Services Departments), the Roma Participants reported frequently encountering mistrust and paternalism, including officials who refused to provide information, questioned their credentials, or prevented them from completing forms independently. Navigating everyday spaces necessitates careful planning to ensure safety and access, according to the participants. The surveillance is constant and reaches everywhere, and is carried out by non-Roma citizens, institutions, private companies' employees, as a 41-year-old man confirms, *In shops, parks, sports fields, hotels. They are constantly looking at me, checking if I am doing something inappropriate. If I am behaving as I should. During recreation, other guests often watch [me] to see if I am behaving as is proper and acceptable. If I am not making a mess, if I am not loud, and so on...* In retail and leisure contexts, Roma routinely experience surveillance, bag checks, or outright bans from establishments based on their appearance, illustrating the broader “social spasm” triggered by their presence. A recurring symbol of this dynamic mentioned by participants is non-Romani women's protection of their handbags in public, a gesture used to signal and enact exclusion through clutching their bags in the presence of Roma.

Roma work experiences often involve being assigned the most demanding and least valued positions, accompanied by overt discrimination, such as verbal insults or social exclusion. Interactions with law enforcement and judicial institutions exacerbate

Roma insecurity, as automatic distrust and systemic barriers impede their access to justice.

Educational settings reproduce Romani marginalisation. Roma students often receive no instruction about the history of their communities, and when Roma are addressed, they are framed as negative examples, reinforcing stereotypes of theft, laziness, and uncleanness. Apart from familial and community support, Roma children frequently lack other advocates. Even academic achievement does not guarantee equitable opportunities; as one participant noted, *Education does not guarantee a good life [in the Czech Republic] if you are Roma* (man, 40).⁷

Across life domains, Roma report needing to exert greater effort than their majority peers to counteract prejudice. These additional “costs” extend into private relationships, including friendships, romantic partnerships, and family interactions, particularly when Czech partners’ families resist acceptance of Roma individuals. Participants described ongoing stress and anticipation of discriminatory encounters, with almost every interaction presenting a potential source of anti-Roma attitudes. This chronic stress contributes to fear, anxiety, depression, insecurity, and exposure to microaggressions, including humiliation, shame, and devaluation. A 30-year-old woman remembers her initial experience of socialising, blending with shame:

I remember when I was in kindergarten, because I was fair-skinned, they didn't know I was Romani. And when my mother came to pick me up, the children in kindergarten would say things like: 'Look, she has a Gypsy mother, she's a Gypsy'. Even small children. And I was always terribly ashamed in kindergarten, when I didn't understand, I was always ashamed when my mother came, so I was afraid that maybe they would say that my mother had come, they would call me Gypsy and make fun of me.

A participant described the majority’s arrogance and humiliation as his worst experience, feeling he was perceived as an “inferior person” because of his ethnicity:

For me, the worst feeling is when they make you feel inferior. That you are not a good enough person like the other person. That you can't handle it, that you are simply inferior. Humiliation. Because it doesn't hurt physically, but psychologically, and that is worse. That the person has less self-confidence then, they are afraid. So, for me, this is the worst thing, that the person makes you feel inferior. That he is actually above you. That you are simply some kind of monkey or an animal (man, 28).

Participants said Roma families often pre-emptively prepare their children for anti-Roma threats, transmitting intergenerational trauma from their own early schooling and awareness of historical injustices, ranging from the Holocaust of the Roma and Sinti to more contemporary experiences of verbal and physical threats motivated by prejudice. Anti-Roma attitudes extend into private and digital life. Social media frequently hosts overtly anti-Roma content, sometimes targeting children, with

⁷ For more on discrimination of Roma students in the Czech education system, see: Balabánová (1995; 1999).

impunity for such content often justified as “freedom of speech”. This environment contributes to Roma social isolation and, in some cases, prompts Roma to try to assimilate. Participants reported altering their appearance (e.g., using blue contact lenses) or denying their ethnic identity to prevent discrimination (claiming to be or sometimes being advised to say they were African-American, Latino, Spanish, Italian or even Arab, which testifies to the hierarchy of identities in the Czech Republic), with some distancing themselves from the Roma community, sometimes even severing ties or not participating in community life. It is noteworthy how one participant perceived changes in societal attitudes when she used blue eye contact lenses:

I adapted to the white community, so I can get along with them now. But when I was younger, I wondered what it would be like if I were born white. If it would be better for me. And then, when I could wear makeup, I tried to wear lighter shades. And then, when I was 17 or 18, I even tried blue contact lenses, and people around me perceived me completely differently when I had those blue contacts (woman, 34).

Participants explicitly described how these experiences shaped their life trajectories, often limiting their achievements and imposing psychological burdens. While some identified adaptive outcomes, these were responses to discrimination, not freely chosen: individuals had to “armour themselves”, cultivate resilience, and navigate extraordinary obstacles. Notably, one participant described the necessity of “putting on a mask” while engaging with the majority of society. This mask functions as a protective adaptation in both work and daily life; although this participant wished to remove the mask, social pressures rendered its use unavoidable, resulting in dissonance with this person’s self-conception and identity. In his words:

It affected me so much that I actually had to put on a mask, that I had to behave in a certain way in front of Czech children. And I had to endure stupid jokes, remarks when they said the word Roma wrong, they said ‘Gypsies’. I had to grit my teeth, actually survive it somehow, you just had to manage it. So, I put on a mask, and basically, what I did was make fun of myself so that they couldn’t make fun of me. And when I’m making fun of myself, it’s not so funny anymore. I always wear a mask when I’m in the white community. I can’t get rid of it, I always have it. I have that mask and quite often I can’t switch it back. I can’t throw away that mask. I wear it so often. I wear it to work every day... (man, 28).

Support primarily comes from family and community networks rather than institutional actors such as social workers or psychologists. Roma and pro-Roma non-governmental organisations provide some aid to Roma, but participants reported inefficiencies, delays, and limited accessibility of their services. Criticisms included organisational opacity, slow responsiveness, and insufficient alignment with the everyday needs of ordinary Roma.

Viewed through the Social Citizenship Ecosystem Matrix, these narratives show Roma moving across multiple cells of the welfare ecosystem. Encounters with employment offices, social benefits departments, and courts belong primarily to the

formal bureaucratic sphere, where Roma report intense experiences of surveillance, mistrust, and humiliation. Experiences in shops, leisure spaces, and segments of the labour market illustrate the formal and informal market spheres, where Roma face a combination of consumer exclusion, precarious work, and affective discipline through fear. By contrast, family networks, Roma community gatherings, and mutualaid practices exemplify the informal community sphere, where obligations of reciprocity and care generate emotional resources of pride, dignity, and safety that partially counterbalance institutional harms. Mapping these experiences across the ecosystem cells makes visible how formal retrenchment and stigma in one part of the welfare system increase dependency on informal moral economies in another, thereby deepening the emotional toll of citizenship for Roma.

2. Narratives of resilience, pride, and solidarity

Despite the persistent pressures of anti-Roma attitudes, Roma communities demonstrate remarkable strength, creativity, and determination in managing the social and emotional burdens imposed by everyday discrimination, exclusion, and attacks. While some participants expressed resignation – believing one must adapt to the majority’s prejudice and that: *If one wants to live in the Czech Republic, one must accept anti-Roma attitudes* (woman, 35) – such views were relatively rare. Far more frequently, participants articulated pride, defiance, and an enduring commitment to overcoming obstacles, motivated not only by personal aspiration but also by a sense of responsibility toward their children and the wider Roma community.

Although institutional and majority-society support for Roma remains limited, participants highlighted moments of solidarity from individual members of the majority population. Non-Roma teachers, colleagues, and friends were occasionally described as figures who recognised the potential of Roma individuals, offered encouragement, and provided protection against open hostility. While such gestures were exceptional, they carried profound emotional significance. Still, the family and the broader Roma community emerged as the central pillars of emotional and social resilience. Families were described as transmitting pride in Roma identity and culture, sources of joy, beauty, and belonging, which counterbalanced external rejection. Some participants emphasised the Roma tradition in which elders age within the community rather than in institutional care, identifying it as a symbol of dignity and continuity. Family and community networks thus represent forms of Roma social capital, where shared gatherings and mutual support help individuals cope with traumatic experiences and sustain psychological well-being. These gatherings often follow incidents of anti-Roma aggression, functioning as both recovery spaces and reaffirmations of Roma collective identity. A 41-year-old participant describes experience in the following manner:

When manifestations of antigypsyism appear in my life or in the lives of those closest to me, we deal with it together as the immediate family, or possibly with the extended family. But more or less as a certain form, as a support group, where by simply sharing

those experiences, we help each other to actually experience that experience in a healthy way and to analyse it in some way, to use it in some way for our own growth.

Children were also repeatedly mentioned as a key source of motivation and hope for transformation, and their education and confidence viewed as collective investments in the future.

Several participants emphasised the importance of active Roma participation in political and public life. They argued Roma should occupy decision-making positions to advocate for their communities and influence structural change. Some highlighted the importance of developing Roma entrepreneurship to challenge stereotypes and show Roma are also capable providers of services and goods. Such initiatives were not merely described as survival strategies, but rather as deliberate efforts toward empowerment, self-determination, and recognition.

The Roma community's strength was also evident in its cultural and symbolic contributions to social coexistence. Participants frequently stressed the fact that Roma culture, especially music, carries a universal message of equality and transcends ethnic boundaries. In this sense, Roma identity was not only a marker of difference, but also a conduit for values of tolerance and humanity which extend beyond the Roma community itself. This was particularly stressed by a 51-year-old woman, who said, *I think I can very quickly assess a threat, a risk, and I can quickly assess the people around me. At the same time, I also have great compassion for people who are going through various similar things, I have a deep understanding for it...*

Participants also expressed solidarity with the anti-racist segment of Czech society, recognising that these allies often face exclusion and hostility from the majority. Some contrasted the Czech context with foreign examples of more inclusive, multicultural environments. One participant described the feeling of belonging while abroad: *When I entered the main street in Berlin, I thought to myself that I was at home here, because in such a society a Roma person blends in* (man, 28).

Although scepticism was also present, one participant admitted that she had abandoned attempts to collaborate with the majority, focusing solely on intra-community development, while another concluded that a non-racist society was "science fiction"; many participants expressed cautious optimism. They identified positive developments such as the increasing presence of Roma teaching assistants in schools and the growing public awareness of Roma issues.

Some participants proposed that adult Roma should visit Roma children in the schools to share their experiences of overcoming discrimination, thus offering encouragement and showing Roma children that they are not alone in their struggles. Such acts of testimony were seen as both educational and transformative, bridging intergenerational experience with future aspirations.

Across responses, the conviction prevailed that anti-Roma attitudes must be confronted directly, not endured, and that their structural foundations must be recognised and dismantled. Racism was thus conceptualised not as an aggregate of individual prejudices, but as a systemic mechanism of exclusion that can only be changed through collective resistance and societal transformation. A 46-year-old woman expresses the attitude of necessity to fight against racism one's whole life when she says:

They [Roma] must not give in. They must not give in and they must fight. Unfortunately, it is for life, but unfortunately, they must fight. If they can, let them fight. I repeat what I said: just don't give in, fight together against it. Show the good things. Yes, don't give in, fight. Just go after your dream. Even if someone – those people, those white people, those gadje – discourages you, they must not give up. I simply have the ability; I will pursue my own. I have the right to it; I will pursue my own. We will not let anyone discourage us either. I say that Gypsies are smart, they just have to want more (woman, 46).

When asked what kind of society they wished to live in, Roma participants repeatedly articulated a single, consistent aspiration: equality. Equality before the law, and in access to education, employment, and housing. Equality that rejects collective guilt, stereotypes, and prejudice, the very elements rendering Roma lives more exhausting, frustrating, and at times, dangerous in the Czech Republic. Especially remembering the 90s in the aftermath of the Velvet Revolution, when attacks on Roma began, sometimes ending in racially motivated murders, elicited fear in some participants.⁸ However, the pursuit of equality encapsulates the Roma community's vision of belonging and their refusal to be defined solely by trauma, but rather to be defined by pride, and the resilience to endure and transform not only themselves but also the Czech majority. To connect these two sections, we present our findings in the table below.

Table 2. Key emotional patterns across institutional domains

Institutional domain	Dominant emotional pattern	The main mechanism described in the interviews	Coping mechanism/ Positive emotions
Childhood and schooling	Shame, fear, early trauma	Racial naming, bullying, exclusion, and the early realisation of being treated as an Other	Family support, hiding identity, masking, self-deprecating humour, academic overachievement
Public space and leisure	Hyper-vigilance, anxiety, humiliation	Surveillance, bag checks, denial of entry, and constant anticipation of hostile treatment	Group solidarity, avoidance of specific places, vigilance and preplanning, emotional support from peers
Employment	Stress, insecurity, lowered self-worth	Precarious work, devaluation of labour, and discriminatory treatment in hiring and the workplace	Masking (identity performance), entrepreneurship, resiliencebuilding (armouring), family/ community support

⁸ For an overview of racially motivated violence in the Czech Republic after 1989, see online media Romea's article from 2007. Available at: <https://romea.cz/cz/domaci/rasove-motivovane-nasiliv-cr-po-roce-1989>.

Healthcare	Fear, mistrust, vulnerability, retraumatisation	Accusations of malingering, hostile treatment, and concern about adequate care	Intrafamily storytelling (processing trauma), avoidance of certain providers, reliance on community knowledge
Social benefits and welfare offices	Paternalism, frustration, humiliation	Mistrust, refusal to provide information, and lack of autonomy in administrative encounters	Behaving in a way that does not attract suspicion, selfadvocacy, mutual aid within the family
Justice and policing	Insecurity, distrust, anticipation of unfairness	Automatic suspicion, weak access to protection, and fear of unequal treatment	Community support, resignation (selective withdrawal), documentation of incidents
Digital and media environments	Stress, anger, isolation	Exposure to anti-Roma content, public humiliation, and normalisation of hostility	Avoidance/withdrawal from online spaces, fighting for the Roma cause, solidarity with antiracist allies
Family and intimate life	Stress, protection, solidarity	Managing discrimination in friendships, partnerships, and family relations	Mutual support as a “support group”, transmission of pride in Roma identity and culture, collective processing of trauma after antiRoma incidents, hope invested in children’s education, and confidence as collective investments, intergenerational storytelling (warning, resilience, legacy)
Roma community and kin networks	Pride, support, resilience	Collective coping, shared interpretation of discrimination, and mutual aid	Shared gatherings as recovery space, reaffirmation of collective identity and pride, mutual aid and reciprocity (social capital), political engagement, Roma entrepreneurship, cultural expression, elder care within the community

Discussion: connecting micro-level affect to policy

The empirical material establishes three linked claims that are consequential for policy scholarship and practice. Read through the lens of SocialAffective Citizenship, these three claims can be understood as mapping the four levels of the SAC framework.

The first claim – that affect matters analytically and politically – corresponds to SAC's postulate of emotional mediation, according to which the emotional impact of welfare encounters is the primary causal link between institutional design and citizen response. The interviews reveal that emotional states – such as humiliation, fear, pride, and solidarity – are not merely subjective reactions but are deeply embedded in institutional interactions and public discourse. The Feeling Subject is not only an abstract category – it is an empirically accessible phenomenon shaped by schooling, bureaucratic encounters, labour markets and public rhetoric. Policies produce affective climates, those climates in turn shape political demands and individual capacities. Hence, any policy evaluation that ignores emotion risks misdiagnosing both causes and remedies.

The second claim – on affective incoherence – captures a form of policy incoherence in BRC terms, where Roma are addressed as rational calculators, pawns, or overly emotional subjects in different parts of the ecosystem, generating pervasive affective dissonance and eroding trust. Strategic documents and international commitments that formally endorse inclusion coexist with parliamentary rhetoric, municipal ordinances and administrative practices that stigmatise Roma. This bipolar messaging – simultaneously promising protection and enabling exclusion – creates emotional ambivalence and erodes trust in state institutions. The result is a fragile policy environment in which formal rights are present on paper but attenuated in lived practice.

The third claim – on the complexity and misrecognition of Roma emotional agency – speaks to the dimensions of affective citizenship, highlighting that Roma mobilise anger, pride, and solidarity to contest their positioning within racialised hierarchies and to articulate alternative expectations of care from the state and the wider society. Dominant public discourse constructs Roma as either irrationally emotional or cynically manipulative; empirical evidence shows neither caricature is adequate. Roma feelings are responsive to structural exclusion and moral denigration; their strategies – masking, political engagement, entrepreneurship, and cultural assertion – are forms of emotional and political labour that deserve recognition rather than dismissal.

Together, these findings show that Roma are not merely objects of policy but social-affective citizens whose emotions participate in the feedback loops that stabilise or destabilise the current welfare regime.

Conclusion – towards an emotionally reflexive social policy for Roma in the Czech Republic

This article has sought to fill a persistent lacuna in social policy scholarship by supplying micro-level empirical evidence about the affective life of Roma subjects in

the Czech Republic and by setting those data in dialogue with recent conceptual work on emotion, recognition, and policy design (Barrett, 2017; Bonvin, 2008; Hoggett, 2017; Szarfenberg, 2026). Two central conclusions follow from the evidence and argument presented.

First, microdata matter: emotional experience is not an epiphenomenal phenomenon. The 75 semi-structured interviews conducted under Community-Based Research Design supply rich, grounded evidence that anti-Roma attitudes are experienced by Roma as an enduring, systemic “toll” – a cumulative social, financial, and emotional burden that shapes their trajectories from childhood onwards. Participants report pervasive surveillance, routine microaggressions, retraumatising institutional encounters (in healthcare, employment, education, and policing), and everyday strategies of concealment or modification (the “mask”) which register as clear psychosocial harms. These findings corroborate the theoretical claim that policies and social constructions co-produce affective climates (Schneider & Ingram, 1993) and underscore the analytical point repeatedly emphasised by interpretive and affective scholars: emotions are constitutive of political life and policy outcomes, not merely consequences of them (Durnová, 2022; Barbalet, 2002; Hoggett, 2017). In practical terms, detailed qualitative evidence about feelings – not only shame, fear, and humiliation, but also pride and solidarity – provides essential diagnostic information to policy designers seeking to address exclusion. Without this micro-level knowledge, interventions risk treating Roma solely as “targets” of technical measures (surveys, benefit formulas), while overlooking the relational and recognitive dimensions that determine whether policies will compound harms or contain them (Honneth, 1995; Tronto, 1993). Consequently, social policy should be evaluated not only by formal inclusion goals or activation outcomes, but also by its affective consequences for Roma as Feeling Subjects.

Second, humanisation and an emotionally integrative model of social policy are both normative aims and practicable design criteria. The interviews reveal that Roma are variously constructed in public discourse and policy as pawns, failed calculators, cynical exploiters, or overly emotional “Others” – mutually contradictory constructions which sustain exclusion, taken together. Rehumanisation of Roma, a necessary attempt considering prevalence of anti-Roma attitudes in Czech majority, therefore, requires the threefold reorientation of social policy: (1) to recognise Roma as Feeling Subjects who have ordinary emotional needs for dignity, safety, and recognition (Hoggett, 2017); (2) to design institutional mechanisms providing containment of harms and relational safety (trauma-informed practice; Bowen & Murshid, 2016); and (3) to align assumptions about Roma agency and motivation in policy with practices which empower Roma co-definition and co-implementation (the capability-friendly approach outlined by Bonvin, 2008). This article proposes that an emotionally integrative model must be explicitly intersectional (Soss et al., 2011; Szarfenberg, 2026): it should recognise that affective stigmas are racialised and emotional harms are mediated by factors such as class, skin tone, and region.

We propose scaling the present micro-data approach: the CBRS produced valuable nuance (including attention to Roma middle-class experiences); comparable qualitative work with Roma should be extended geographically and longitudinally to examine

how affective states evolve and how interventions change emotional climates. (Root, 2007; Burawoy, 2004; Muhammad et al., 2015.) We also propose developing mixed-methods evaluations that explicitly measure emotional outcomes (recognition, perceived dignity, fear, and humiliation) alongside conventional economic indicators; these should become outcome metrics for welfare policy changes. This is especially significant because Roma marginalisation is not confined to the Czech Republic; rather, it forms part of a broader pattern of exclusion visible across the Visegrad 4 countries in Central Europe. In Hungary, Roma have been described as rendered “invisible” in social, family, and workfare policy discourses, where structural inequality is displaced into individualised and moralised framings of need and responsibility (Vidra & Virágh, 2025). In Slovakia, research on school segregation shows how institutional separation continues to shape Roma children’s educational trajectories and future aspirations, demonstrating the persistence of exclusion across generations (Messing, 2017). At the same time, Kusá (2002, p. 152) demonstrates how international publicity about Slovak Roma poverty leads to attempts to conceal it from public view. In Poland, scholarship on Roma marginalisation similarly documents enduring social exclusion and discrimination, including disadvantages in housing, employment, and access to services (Faracik et al., 2012). Taken together, these cases indicate that the emotional and institutional dynamics identified in this article are not unique to the Czech Republic but reflect a broader regional pattern of Roma exclusion, strengthening the case for emotionally reflexive social policy.

From a SocialAffective Citizenship perspective, the model of emotionally integrative social policy outlined here can be understood as an attempt to reconfigure the Czech welfare state’s emotional constitution. By recognising Roma as Feeling Subjects within a multi-layered ecosystem of formal and informal provision, and by foregrounding the mechanisms of recognition, dignity, and security that mediate their encounters with institutions, we show how Roma citizenship is currently organised around affective regimes of suspicion, stigma, and precarity. At the same time, the narratives of pride, solidarity, and hope demonstrate the presence of alternative affective logics rooted in informal community networks and horizontal forms of care. An emotionally integrative policy is therefore not only about adjusting benefits or programmes; it is about transforming the affective signals that welfare institutions send, aligning them with expectations of recognition and shared ownership of society, and thereby moving towards a Roma-inclusive SAC regime.

Closing reflections: why emotion-sensitive policy?

An emotionally reflexive social policy would not supplant material redistribution but would complement and amplify it. Policies that provide incomes while sustaining reputational denigration, institutional suspicion, or affective abandonment will fail to secure the social inclusion they promise. By foregrounding the voices, feelings, and strategies of Romani people, this article supplies the micro-evidence necessary to move from schematic policy typologies to person-centred, emotionally literate practice. Such a shift is both an ethical imperative, recognising Roma citizens as full subjects of

dignity, and an instrumental necessity, because affective climates shape whether policy commitments become lived realities (Szarfenberg, 2026; Schneider & Ingram, 1993). If Czech social policy aspires to inclusion and participation (as per Strategy of Roma equality, inclusion and participation 2021–2030⁹), it must take feelings seriously: to humanise the Roma subject, to repair relational harms, and to design institutions which hold society together, contain harms, and recognise common ownership of society. In addition, the case of Roma, as a marginalised community, demonstrates how neglecting the consequences of policies in the emotional realm further pushes said policies for all citizens towards what has been called real capitalism (Lupták, 2013, p. 8) in the Czech Republic, following the policies up to the 1989 revolution called real socialism. This concept refers to what Wacquant defined as neoliberalism, understood as “market conforming state crafting” (Wacquant, 2012, p. 71). Thus, demonstrating the roles emotions play in the case of Roma could serve as a starting point for redefining or achieving a deeper understanding of the contemporary welfare state’s role.

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⁹ Available in Czech at: https://vlada.gov.cz/cz/ppov/zalezitosti-romske-komunity/aktuality/strategie-rovnosti--zacineni-a-participace-romu-strategie-romske-integrace-2021_2030-188413/.

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