

Chapter 3

Poor Relief Policy Under Severe Local Budget Constraints: An Example of an Urban Municipality in Belgrade



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1 **Abstract** This chapter explores how poverty reduction policies can be conducted
2 by the local political authorities in the context of the lack of sufficient poor relief
3 protection under the current national policy framework in Serbia. For this purpose, we
4 consider an example of Stari Grad, an urban municipality in Belgrade that is, as such,
5 particularly characterized by limited competences and budget. Taking the 2021–2024
6 period as a reference point, we can see that the local government allocated less than
7 0.12 percent of an already small local budget to poverty reduction policy. Meanwhile,
8 the national financial social aid threshold has been put at a level below the absolute
9 poverty line for a long time, let alone the significantly higher at-risk-of-poverty
10 threshold. We explore the possibilities of allocating more funds to poor relief in Stari
11 Grad. Considering the relevant data, we conclude that relatively modest reallocation
12 of funds can literally eradicate involuntary absolute poverty from Stari Grad. At-
13 risk-of-poverty rates, however, require significant additional budgetary resources to
14 be meaningfully reduced.

15 **Keywords** Local budget · Budget constraints · Poor relief · Stari Grad · Absolute
16 poverty · At-risk-of-poverty

17 3.1 Introduction

18 Discussions on the issue of reducing and/or eradicating poverty in a wider context
19 cannot begin without emphasizing the differences between economic systems
20 regarding the concepts (models) of the welfare state they advocate, since the main
21 goal pursued by welfare states is the struggle against deprivation. Naturally, our

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M. Džunić et al. (eds.), *Advancing Urban and Local Governance in Western and Transition Europe*, Local and Urban Governance,

https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-04265-1_3

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attention will be focused on the European pattern of providing social and economic security, which differs from others (Anglo-Saxon and Asian ones), primarily by the much more active role of the state in solving the poverty issues (Gregory and Stuart 2014). Nevertheless, even within the European model of more than three decades ago, a typology of different regimes was devised, primarily according to the criteria of decommmodification and social stratification (Esping-Andersen 1990), and the later addition of new criteria (defamilisation, universalism, marketization) made it possible to identify subgroups within the category of post-socialist countries (Fenger 2007; Orosz 2019), to which Serbia also belongs, as the subject of our analysis. However, after the last major crisis, at the end of the first decade of this century, the literature on the European welfare state is increasingly dominated by the ideas of convergence between different regimes (Taylor-Gooby et al. 2017).

Although the interdependence of national and supranational (EU) development, known as the Europeanization of welfare states, implies the possibility of policy creation taking place both on a bottom-up and a top-down basis, literature review suggests the dominance of the latter, since the EU member states as well as the majority of EU accession countries (Serbia included) keep internalizing EU-wide policies and regulatory measures (Banks et al. 2005; Damro 2015; Lj and Manić 2014).¹ Furthermore, we show that the currently adopted framework at the national level fails to address some crucial poverty issues in Serbia. The most pressing appears to be the prevalence of unaddressed absolute poverty.

However, even a more pronounced influence from the supranational or national level does not eliminate the necessity to undertake welfare activities at the local level. Therefore, we decided to analyze the possible role of the lowest level of local governance. More particularly, we focus on the urban municipality of Stari Grad in Belgrade as a case study in order to review the feasibility of reversing the pattern (i.e., to change typical approach to this issue). We are, in fact, wondering whether there is any chance to cure absolute and/or relative poverty at the local level independently, creating this way (at least) partial urban resilience. As we show, in spite of great constraints both in terms of competences and budget, local political authorities have options to conduct meaningful poor relief policies in Serbia.

For clarity and focus, our study is guided by three key questions. The first of them concerns the scope of poverty in Stari Grad and Serbia, both in absolute and relative terms, that is unaddressed by current policy frameworks and practices. The second one focuses on the limits on the number of poverty-alleviation constraints faced by urban municipalities in Serbia (Stari Grad included) that can be overcome at the local level. The third one, however, reads: “what local policies are available to address poverty concerns among the populace in a just and efficient manner?”

The remainder of this chapter is constructed in the following manner. Section 3.2 explores the relevant literature on welfare state regimes, the Europeanization of social policy, and the institutional and legal context of social assistance in Serbia. Section 3.3

¹ The Europeanization of the welfare state could be linked to the so-called Brussels effect (Bradford 2020). However, if we reduce this effect only to the manifestation of the EU's global regulatory power (Hadjiyianni 2021), then the Europeanization is of a wider scale compared to the effect itself.

63 provides a short overview of methodological aspects of the research presented in the
64 chapter. In Sect. 3.4, we present the main results of our document and secondary data
65 analysis. We first examine the state of poverty and social policy in Serbia overall,
66 and then delve into the specific case of Stari Grad—including its budget limitations
67 and the estimated impacts of potential poor relief interventions. Section 3.5 includes
68 a critical discussion of these findings, considering their practical implications for
69 local and national policy under current constraints. Finally, Sect. 3.6 concludes the
70 chapter by stressing how our key insights respond to the crucial research questions
71 and pointing to issues that should be addressed by further research.

72 3.2 Literature Review

73 Generally speaking, there are two main approaches to providing social protection—
74 poverty targeting and universal coverage. Poverty targeting is a commonly used
75 method by states to channel social assistance to groups deemed to be living in poverty
76 or extreme poverty. Universal protection is an approach that provides social security
77 cover to all people—regardless of income—throughout the lifecycle.

78 This duality is deeply embedded in the broader ideological and institutional traditions of welfare regimes (Esping-Andersen 1990; Ferrera 1996). While universalism
79 has historically been a key feature of the Nordic model, based on decommunification
80 and social citizenship, poverty targeting has been more prominent in Anglo-Saxon
81 and, increasingly, continental systems under fiscal constraints. Post-socialist states
82 like Serbia, which underwent welfare retrenchment in the 1990s and early 2000s, have
83 largely adopted targeting mechanisms in line with neoliberal policy prescriptions
84 (Deacon 2000).

85 A further distinction in the literature is made between *absolute* and *relative* poverty, with significant policy implications. Absolute poverty refers to the lack of
86 basic means for survival, while relative poverty highlights inequalities in living standards compared to societal norms (Townsend 1979; Atkinson 2019). In high-income
87 European countries, tackling relative poverty has become a central concern, especially due to its link to social exclusion and intergenerational disadvantage (Nolan
88 and Whelan 2011). Yet, in many post-socialist and Southern European states, the
89 focus remains largely on absolute poverty reduction, often guided by international
90 financial institutions' criteria (ILO 2022).

91 In recent decades, an increasing number of high-income welfare states have
92 supplemented their social policy packages with the so-called in-work benefits (Abbas
93 and Robertson 2023) as the pro-employment as well as the anti-poverty measure
94 (Marchal and Marx 2018), thus opting for a more poverty-targeting approach. Architects of this (in-work benefits or IWBs) concept expressed the assumption that *benefit dependency*
95 and a *culture of inactivity* were drivers of poverty and unemployment (Cousins 2014). That is why they reinforced a political narrative of supporting people
96 ready to work rather than those who “choose” to remain on welfare.

103 This shift is often interpreted as part of a broader transition from universalist
 104 welfare commitments toward *activation-oriented, means-tested* support structures
 105 (van Lancker and Van Mechelen 2015). Critics argue that targeting undermines solidi-
 106 arity, stigmatizes beneficiaries, and often leads to undercoverage due to complex
 107 eligibility criteria and bureaucratic hurdles (Mkandawire 2005). On the other hand,
 108 proponents claim that in fiscal environments with constrained resources, targeting
 109 ensures that support reaches those most in need, improving allocative efficiency
 110 (Coady et al. 2004).

111 The convergence of European welfare states regarding the similarity of the afore-
 112 mentioned reforms (Clasen 2020) has been attributed to frequent and comprehensive
 113 EU initiatives on this issue (European Parliament 2022). In other words, the reforms
 114 were driven by top-down networks of policy experts who dominantly focused on
 115 the expansion of the labor supply as a way to achieve growth and reduce poverty.
 116 The reforms in question, which took place mostly during the second decade of this
 117 century, led to declining share of social expenditure in GDP in the EU27, mostly
 118 due to the decrease in spending on unemployment and similar benefits (European
 119 Parliament 2022).

120 The existence of convergence, especially within the group of mature welfare states,
 121 opened up the issue of a noticeable stronger influence from the supranational level on
 122 the problems of social protection. Some researchers emphasized that it represented
 123 a *hidden welfare state policy*, which has existed since the beginning of the European
 124 Economic Community (Cornelissen and de Wispelaere 2020). Most, however, were
 125 inclined to see frequent and overarching EU initiatives on this front (such as the
 126 European Pillar of Social Rights, for example) as a hint of the Europeanization of
 127 the welfare state to the detriment of existing regimes (European Parliament 2022).

128 Serbia is also (at least officially) targeting poverty and sharing a top-down
 129 approach with mature welfare states, but it lacks a clear strategy (either of social
 130 protection or poverty reduction). The Serbian Law on Social Welfare was adopted in
 131 2011, supporting the country's social welfare system reform. One of the main objec-
 132 tives of the reform was: the improvement of the protection of the poorest, ensuring
 133 minimum subsistence level and a more efficient system of benefits. Nonetheless,
 134 today—13 years later, the poor and most vulnerable are still insufficiently covered by
 135 social assistance programs. The main issue, as will be made clearer later, concerns the
 136 lack of straightforward connection between the thresholds for various forms of social
 137 assistance (most particularly, financial social aid) and poverty thresholds (Službeni
 138 glasnik Republike Srbije 2011a, 2011b).

139 3.3 Methodology

140 Our chapter is structured as a sort of mixed-methods case study analysis. As indicated
 141 by Patton (2015), the use of multiple methods often proves to be the most adequate
 142 strategy to address the complexity of social processes under study. This view is
 143 echoed by Creswell (2014), who argues that mixed methodology that combines

numerical data with qualitative analysis yields a more comprehensive explanation. The employment of multiple methods may also increase the credibility of research by compensating for the shortcomings of any individual methodological approach (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie 2004).

The main approach used in our chapter concerns document analysis. In his presentation of this research technique, Bowen (2009) stressed its capacity to provide important empirical insights by gleaning meaning from a variety of primary source materials, commonly used as the major component of the case study approach. Our chapter primarily relies on official documents such as city and urban municipality statutes, budget laws, and official budget documents. Another technique we use is secondary data analysis, primarily by collecting and synthesizing information about different poverty rates (Johnston 2014). As will be shown shortly, these data will prove to be crucial for our assessment of the state of poverty in both Stari Grad and Serbia in general, as well as the direction of policy measures to be taken. Finally, our chapter includes a kind of extrapolative estimation, particularly in order to make inferences about the number of individuals suffering from poverty in Stari Grad. More concretely, we utilize a simple ratio-based extrapolation for small areas, inspired by the one advanced by Fay and Herriot (1979). Even though it may lack the reliability of direct measurements, this method may prove to be instrumental in filling the data gaps that frequently occur in a variety of research contexts.

3.4 Results

Based on the previously defined methodological framework, this section presents the state of poverty and social policy in Serbia, along with the findings of the case study of the Stari Grad municipality, focusing on budgetary capacities, the state of poverty, and local responses in the field of social protection.

3.4.1 *The State of Poverty and Social Policy in Serbia in General*

In 2022 Serbia's at-risk-of-poverty rate, which represents the share of persons with disposable income below the relative poverty line of RSD 26,509 (approximately 224 euros) a month for a single-member household, was 20%. As shown in Table 3.1, that figure represents an improvement from previous years. The at-risk-of-poverty or social exclusion rate, which is more readily measured on the EU-wide level, reached 28.1% in 2022. This measure indicates a significantly larger share of potentially poor individuals in Serbia compared to the EU average of 21.6% in the same year (Eurostat 2024).

Table 3.1 At-risk-of-poverty rate in Serbia, the latest available annual data

	2020	2021	2022
At-risk-of-poverty	21.7% (22,000 RSD)	21.2% (24,064 RSD)	20.0% (26,509 RSD)
At-risk-of-poverty or social exclusion	29.8%	28.4%	28.1%

Source Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia (2023)

Table 3.2 Absolute poverty in Serbia, the latest available annual data and projections

	2020	2021 (special programs included)	2022 (projections)	2023 (projections)	2024 (projections)
Absolute poverty (%)	6.9%	8.9%	9.2%	12.1%	11.8%
Absolute poverty headcount	446,000	607,572	627,391	824,220	803,717

Source SIPRU (n.d.) and Gassmann et al. (2023). Note Results from the latter source based on income instead of consumption that is used by the official estimates

179 The dimensions of absolute poverty in Serbia are also significant. Serbia has
 180 stubbornly high rates of absolute poverty, which, in 2020, stood at almost 7% of
 181 the overall population. This meant that almost a half million people lived under
 182 the threshold that enables them to meet their most basic needs (SIPRU n.d.). The
 183 UNICEF study projections (Gassmann et al. 2023) for the subsequent years (for
 184 which there are no official estimates) even suggest a sharp increase to around 12.1%
 185 percent in 2023, as shown in Table 3.2.

186 Most cash benefits are subject to national regulation and are financed by the
 187 national budget. Serbia's model of the welfare state shares features with the Eastern
 188 European (post-socialist) model characterized by a rigid and discriminatory labor
 189 market and lower government financial capacity to pursue generous social policies
 190 (Lj et al. 2018; Lauzadyte-Tutliene, et. al. 2018); it is not surprising that the level
 191 of social assistance in Serbia is grossly inadequate. More particularly, the type of
 192 social assistance dubbed "financial social aid," designed to target particularly poor
 193 individuals, is not determined by any poverty measure (Službeni glasnik Republike
 194 Srbije 2011b). As such, this kind of aid is particularly low² from the standpoint of any
 195 poverty threshold, let alone any average consumption metrics (Živkov et al. 2019,
 196 2020, 2023).

197 These circumstances warrant the exploration of ways to act at the local level.
 198 Given the serious constraints that local authorities face, which will be discussed
 199 shortly, any policy should be efficient in delivering its goals. The policy goals, on the
 200 other hand, should be focused on ensuring the most just outcomes. In this context,

² The exact measures of financial social aid and poverty thresholds in the observed period would be discussed in more detail in the next sections.

201 this may particularly mean giving priority to individuals who live under more severe
202 poverty.³

203 **3.4.2 *Urban Municipality of Stari Grad: Budgetary***
204 ***Constraints***

205 To explore how to conduct an efficient and just local poor relief policy in Serbia,⁴
206 we consider the case of urban municipalities, the levels of governance with the
207 narrowest competences at their disposal. We take into account Stari Grad, an urban
208 municipality covering an area of around 5 square kilometers in the center of Belgrade
209 and consisting of fewer than 45,000 inhabitants (Statistical Office of the Republic of
210 Serbia 2024).

211 Unlike local self-governments, whose status is determined by the national-level
212 laws on territorial organization and local self-government (Službeni glasnik Repub-
213 like Srbije 2007a, 2007b), urban municipalities and the framework of policies
214 they can adopt are only mentioned in relevant city statutes.⁵ As a consequence,
215 competences of urban municipalities usually present a fraction of those possessed
216 by city governments as types of local self-government and are frequently merely
217 complementary to them.⁶

218 A major source of current policy constraints placed upon urban municipalities
219 concerns the city rules on public revenue distribution. During the last four years,
220 less than 10 percent of the relevant public revenues were allocated to the urban
221 municipality budget, whereas the rest remained in the city budget. Even though ratios
222 for each revenue type amounted to less than 1:10 for the 2021–2024, there were no
223 clear trends that would hold for all of them. Thus, for example, the percentage of
224 revenue set to be collected from the personal income tax levied on Stari Grad citizens
225 that ended up in the Stari Grad treasury declined from 8.17 percent in 2021 to a mere
226 3.52 in 2024. On the other hand, the planned local communal duty revenue of the
227 Stari Grad budget rose from 4.10 percent in 2021 up to 7.27 and 6.06 percent in 2023
228 and 2024, respectively. The purported property tax revenue, however, exhibited an
229 even less predictable behavior, reaching its peak in 2023 (6.82 percent of the Stari

³ The justice principles that emphasize giving priority to the worst off were advanced by Parfit (1997).

⁴ We assume that all policy constraints exist as they existed in the period between 2021 and 2024. Surely, some conclusions from this chapter may differ if these constraints either get easier or more severe in the subsequent period.

⁵ Remarkably, not all cities in Serbia are composed of urban municipalities. The ones containing them include Belgrade, Niš, Požarevac and Užice (Pešović 2019).

⁶ Thus, for example, urban municipalities can decide on the construction permits up to a certain area, whereas it is up to the city authorities to deal with the potentially larger projects. Urban municipalities can also partly sponsor city-funded projects on their territory (Službeni list grada Beograd 2008).

Table 3.3 Basic Stari Grad budget data (in RSD currency, available data since 2021)

Year	Initially planned revenue (in RSD currency)	Initially planned expenditure (in RSD currency)	Expenditure realization (in RSD currency)
2021	329,242,283	389,033,578	505,449,640
2022	417,978,461	556,935,521	735,770,523
2023	467,165,293	563,680,493	614,748,896
2024	467,165,293	496,395,815	-

Source Službeni list grada Beograda (2020a, 2021a, 2022a, 2022b, 2023a, 2024a, 2024b)

230 Grad budget), which was followed by the second lowest point of 5.33 percent in 2024
 231 (Službeni list grada Beograda 2020b, 2021b, 2022c, 2024c).⁷

232 Regardless of such rules, total amount of the initially projected Stari Grad budget
 233 revenue and expenditure steadily increased every year until 2024, when it slowed
 234 down and even showed lower values when it comes to planned expenditure. The
 235 realization of the planned budget expenditure in 2022, however, exhibited unusually
 236 high values, largely due to atypical and initially unplanned higher-level government
 237 transfers. Available Stari Grad budget data for the most recent period are provided
 238 in Table 3.3.

239 In line with relevant laws and budgetary rules,⁸ Stari Grad authorities spent a
 240 tiny portion of the figures in Table 3.3 on social policy. Even though budget mostly
 241 focused on other social groups, particularly pensioners, the fraction of social policy
 242 budget has been directly allocated to individuals living in poverty (Službeni list
 243 grada Beograda 2020a, 2021a, 2022a, 2022b, 2023a, 2024a, 2024b). Our next section
 244 discusses poverty reduction policies conducted in Stari Grad in more detail.

245 **3.4.3 The State of Poverty in Stari Grad**

246 To assess any kind of poor relief policy, we should first inspect the state of poverty
 247 in Stari Grad. This Belgrade urban municipality is exceptional for being the territory
 248 whose citizens possess the highest average income in Serbia. This is illustrated by
 249 the fact that, during the observed period, average net nominal wage of Stari Grad
 250 citizens rose from 103,838 RSD in May 2021 to almost 187,000 RSD in May 2024.
 251 On the other hand, in the same period, average figures for Serbia ranged from 89,720
 252 RSD in May 2021 to 100,170 RSD in May 2024. These numbers suggest that not

⁷ Budgetary constraints urban municipalities face may, to a certain extent, be alleviated by additional sources of funding, including donations and various forms of blended finance (Ostojić et al. 2024). Due to various complexities associated with them, we leave these sources aside from the current discussion.

⁸ Budgetary framework in Serbia is determined by the Law on Budgetary System (Službeni glasnik Republike Srbije 2009), along with relevant rules introduced by the Ministry of Finance (Ministarstvo finansija Republike Srbije 2021; 2023).

253 only have Stari Grad citizens possessed higher than average net nominal wage, but
254 also that the discrepancy between them and an average citizen of Serbia significantly
255 rose from 15.7 to more than 86 percent higher nominal wage (Republički zavod za
256 statistiku Republike Srbije 2021b; 2024a).

257 However, scant available data indicate that, even in Stari Grad, some people live in
258 poverty. The data we take as our reference point include the information on financial
259 social aid administered on the national level. According to the latest estimates from
260 2023, 101 citizens of Stari Grad received this kind of aid (Statistical Office of the
261 Republic of Serbia 2024). Taking into account the national rules on financial social
262 aid from the given year, this included heads of the family who received 11,445 RSD or
263 less on a monthly basis (Službeni glasnik Republike Srbije 2023).⁹ Whether someone
264 will receive this kind of poor relief depends on whether their total income surpasses
265 the biannually updated threshold which equaled the aforementioned amount at the
266 end of 2023. People who ended up below the given threshold for three months before
267 application have the right to receive a differential between their income amount and
268 the given threshold number (Službeni glasnik Republike Srbije 2011b).

269 Unfortunately, the available data on financial social aid recipients can only indicate
270 the minimum number of individuals who should be addressed by poverty-alleviation
271 policy. This implication follows from the fact that the financial social aid threshold
272 has been placed below the absolute poverty threshold in Serbia during the observed
273 period, let alone any income amount that may be sufficient to place a person above
274 the relative poverty risk threshold. Yet, we are currently left to resort to the specified
275 minimum number reference point due to serious lack of data on poverty on a municip-
276 al level. This difficulty only adds up to the already discussed constraints in terms
277 of competences and budget.

278 What are the particular problems that exist in measuring poverty in Stari Grad
279 and other localities? As for absolute poverty levels, as we have already mentioned,
280 the Government of Serbia ceased to publish data on this variable since 2020. The
281 last year of measurement, however, showed that the absolute poverty line in Serbia
282 amounted to 12,695 RSD (SIPRU n.d.). Strikingly, this value is higher than the
283 financial social aid threshold from 2023, let alone the one from the end of 2020 that
284 equaled 8,626 RSD (Službeni glasnik Republike Srbije 2020). These data suggest
285 that the number of people in absolute poverty is most likely bigger than the number
286 of financial social aid recipients in Stari Grad.

287 The Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction Unit of the Government of Serbia
288 defined the absolute poverty line as the measurement that took place in 2006 to esti-
289 mate monthly financial resources sufficient to secure food and other goods (including
290 clothing, footwear, housing, health care, etc.) that are necessary to satisfy the most
291 basic needs and has been adjusted for the each following year according to the infla-
292 tion rate (SIPRU n.d.). Considering inflationary movements during the past several
293 years, we can estimate that the absolute poverty line in 2024 may stand at around

⁹ Financial social aid threshold number is twice lower for the second family member and 30 percent of the main one in the case of children (Službeni glasnik Republike Srbije 2011b).

294 16,965 RSD per month.¹⁰ Such a high increase compared to the end of 2020 is owed
 295 to the 2021–2023 inflation surge that had an especially strong impact on Serbia. As
 296 a result, the monthly margin between financial social aid threshold and the absolute
 297 poverty line increased from 4,069 RSD to 5,520 RSD.

298 As for the relative poverty risk, data from Table 3.1 suggest that 22,000 RSD per
 299 month for a single-member household at the end of 2020 rose up to 26,509 RSD per
 300 month at the end of 2022, which is the year with the latest available data (Statistical
 301 Office of the Republic of Serbia 2023). It is fairly obvious that the margin between
 302 relative poverty risk line and financial social aid threshold is much larger than the
 303 one involving the absolute poverty line, thus presenting a much greater difficulty to
 304 local policymakers.

305 3.4.4 Local Poverty Reduction Policy in Stari Grad

306 As goals of absolute and relative poverty risk reduction both point to measurable
 307 monthly income levels that may need to be attained, a self-evident policy direction
 308 is to explore ways to provide assistance that may help poor individuals reach either
 309 absolute poverty or relative poverty threshold. Starting from the absolute poverty
 310 measures, we find out that providing an additional amount of 5,520 RSD per month
 311 for each of 101 financial social aid recipients in Stari Grad to bridge the gap between
 312 the financial social aid threshold of the family head and the absolute poverty line
 313 would cost around 6,690,240 RSD annually in 2024. If we take into account that
 314 the application of 11,445 threshold depends on an individual's status inside their
 315 family, budget expenses may be substantially higher if we opt to raise everyone's
 316 monthly income to the level above the individual absolute poverty line of 16,965
 317 RSD. Depending on what is more attainable from legal and practical perspectives,
 318 cash provisions for every month may occur on a monthly basis or may be provided
 319 once per year for twelve months. In some cases, they may even be accomplished as
 320 in-kind transfers.¹¹

321 Further complications arise if we take into account people whose monthly income
 322 stands somewhere between the 11,445 RSD financial social aid threshold and 16,965
 323 RSD absolute poverty line, as well as those whose true monthly income stands at the
 324 level of below 11,445 RSD but who are somehow omitted from the current social
 325 security system. The outcome for people from both of these groups is that they may
 326 not be eligible to receive financial social aid even though their income stands below
 327 the absolute poverty line. Lacking the full publicly available data on these individuals

¹⁰ More precisely, this measurement is based on the inflation rate at year-ends, which means that the last estimate was made according to the inflation rate from December 2023 (Republički zavod za statistiku Republike Srbije 2021a; 2022; 2023).

¹¹ The article 11 of the relevant social security act does not recognize government poverty reduction provisions as determinants of the financial social aid recipient status (Službeni glasnik Republike Srbije 2011a), thus providing room for cash assistance. In some cases, however, it may be better to provide in-kind provisions.

328 makes it very hard to estimate expenses needed for them to reach the absolute poverty
329 line. Using statistical measures to estimate their prevalence is complicated by the fact
330 that wage distribution in Serbia (and, consequently, income distribution, since wages
331 present the main source of income for the majority of citizens) does not follow normal
332 distribution.¹²

333 How should we, in the face of such challenges, approximate the level of financial
334 resources needed to bridge the gap between the absolute poverty line and lower
335 incomes of some of Stari Grad citizens? Lacking the concrete data and procedures to
336 obtain some reliable estimates, we opt to extrapolate based on the ratio between the
337 number of individuals below the absolute poverty line and the number of financial
338 social aid recipients across the country. The latest estimates of the former can be found
339 in the already mentioned UNICEF study (Gassmann et al. 2023, p. 32) and indicate
340 that 824,220 people in Serbia lived in absolute poverty at the end of 2023. On the
341 other hand, data on the financial social aid provided by the national statistical office
342 point to 167,060 individual aid recipients in 2023 (Republički zavod za statistiku
343 Republike Srbije 2024b). These numbers suggest that the ratio between the number
344 of individuals below the absolute poverty line and the number of financial social aid
345 recipients stands at around 4.93:1.

346 Applying the obtained ratio to extrapolate to the urban municipal level would
347 provide us with an estimate of 498 individuals below the absolute poverty line in
348 Stari Grad. It may be harder to get an adequate extrapolation of required budget
349 expenses to bridge the gap as the differential between the absolute poverty line and
350 each individual's income remains unknown. We can, however, multiply the already
351 calculated expenses for 101 financial social aid recipients with 4.93 to approximate
352 the expenses required to cover every Stari Grad citizen below the absolute poverty
353 line. This calculation assumes that, on average, each Stari Grad citizen living in abso-
354 lute poverty would require around 5,520 RSD per month to reach the income level
355 above the absolute poverty line. Under this assumption, the total absolute poverty
356 reduction expenses would lie at around 32,982,883 RSD annually.

357 Total budget expenses estimate may be biased downward if people living in abso-
358 lute poverty in Stari Grad include a large enough group of individuals receiving less
359 than 11,445 RSD in 2023 who are excluded from the current social security system.
360 The estimate of total expenses may, however, be biased upward if, among estimated
361 498 absolutely poor Stari Grad citizens, there is a prevalence of individuals who
362 received between 11,445 and 16,965 RSD on a monthly basis in 2023. If we take
363 into account that, in all likelihood, some eligible poor individuals may not apply for
364 additional aid regardless of how informed they are, the figure of 32,982, 883 RSD
365 may stand as a reasonable maximal approximation of the required funds from the
366 practical budget planning perspective.

367 Whether we opt for the more ambitious absolute poverty reduction annual budget
368 of around 32,982,883 RSD or the less ambitious one amounting to circa 6,690,240
369 RSD, we would have to significantly alter the size of the present budget of Stari

¹² This is evident from the inequality between median and mean wages in Serbia and its localities (Republički zavod za statistiku Republike Srbije 2021b; 2024a).

Table 3.4 Stari Grad budget directly aimed at people living in poverty

Year	Absolute value (in RSD currency)	% of total budget (in %)
2021	399,000	0.095
2022	468,032	0.069
2023	624,952	0.118

Source Authors' calculations and Službeni list grada Beograda (2022b, 2023a, 2024b)

³⁷⁰ Grad allocated directly to transfers for people living under material deprivation.¹³
³⁷¹ Table 3.4 lists how much has been spent on poor relief in the Stari Grad budget, both
³⁷² in absolute and relative terms:

³⁷³ As it can be seen, around 0.1 percent of annual Stari Grad budget has been spent on
³⁷⁴ poverty reduction in every year between 2021 and 2023. Yet, it remains unclear how
³⁷⁵ exactly these funds benefitted people living in absolute poverty, or those possessing
³⁷⁶ a relative poverty risk. On the other hand, if we substitute our proposed figures for
³⁷⁷ the ones in Table 3.4 that occurred in 2023, we will get the absolute value spent in the
³⁷⁸ range between 6,690,240 and 32,982,883 RSD, which translates into 1.27 to 6–25
³⁷⁹ percent of the total budget.

³⁸⁰ 3.5 Discussion

³⁸¹ The question now remains how attainable are the increases of local poor relief
³⁸² spending. That at least some of the figures from the aforementioned range are attain-
³⁸³ able is evident from the example of Savski Venac, another urban municipality located
³⁸⁴ in the center of Belgrade. Interestingly, the government of Savski Venac spent around
³⁸⁵ 2.31% of its total budget on social aid in 2022. This figure was followed by the 1.537
³⁸⁶ percent spending on the same purpose in 2023. There is no reason why a similar frac-
³⁸⁷ tion of total budget may not be spent on poverty reduction in Stari Grad, especially
³⁸⁸ if we take into account the similarity of the budget sizes of these two municipalities
³⁸⁹ (Službeni list grada Beograda 2023b, 2024d). The main question that remains is how
³⁹⁰ to collect sufficient resources to cover the planned rise in expenses.

³⁹¹ Assuming that the rules on public revenue distribution between the city of
³⁹² Belgrade and its urban municipalities remain constant, the switch to a higher poverty
³⁹³ reduction budget would likely need to be gradual. How fast the higher budget targets
³⁹⁴ may be reached may depend on several factors. One of them concerns the expected
³⁹⁵ rise of public revenue as a consequence of mere GDP growth, the evidence of which
³⁹⁶ is present in figures from Table 3.3 to a certain degree. This factor may have a stronger
³⁹⁷ effect if a higher percentage of budget revenue growth is allocated to poverty reduc-
³⁹⁸ tion compared to some other purposes. More likely, some budget programs from

¹³ These comprise resources spent on the program activity dubbed “One-time and other kinds of aid,” as well as the one meant for refugees and internally displaced people, the groups assumed to mainly include poor individuals (Službeni list grada Beograda 2022b; 2023a; 2024b).

399 other areas may need to experience cuts. The Stari Grad budget shows some potentially
400 good candidates for such reallocation. The best example is the program activity
401 dubbed “The realization of public interest in the area of public information.” In 2023,
402 the government of Stari Grad spent 36,761,142 RSD on this program activity, more
403 than our higher estimated amount required for absolute poverty reduction (Službeni
404 list grada Beograda 2024b). Available data suggest that these funds were used to
405 print a sort of magazines, the price and purpose of which may need to be further
406 assessed (Službeni list grada Beograda 2023a). Similar moves may be made in other
407 urban municipalities in Serbia to increase local social policy budgets.

408 It is clear that achieving an annual budget of 6,690,240 RSD for absolute poverty
409 reduction would not take very long.¹⁴ The higher target would, surely, require more
410 time as it may depend more on the effect of real GDP growth.¹⁵ It is, nonetheless,
411 safe to conclude that, even under the constraints governments of urban municipal-
412 ities currently face, meaningful absolute poverty reduction policy can be imple-
413 mented. Yet, bridging the gap between the relative poverty risk and financial social
414 aid threshold seems to be much less practical given the constraints. It may, thus, take
415 around 90,022,464 RSD annually to help 498 Stari Grad citizens living in absolute
416 poverty reach the relative poverty risk threshold. This amounts to a little bit above
417 17 percent of the total budget spent in 2023. Surely, the number of individuals under
418 relative poverty risk is significantly larger than those living in absolute poverty, so
419 the required budget would likely be much higher. As striving for such a large poverty
420 reduction budget may severely impact the quality of other services provided by the
421 urban municipality,¹⁶ and since people living in absolute poverty should be prior-
422 itized under priority principles of justice, we do not find it sufficiently justified to
423 pursue that goal.

424 3.6 Conclusion

425 The primary goal of our chapter was to evaluate the prospects of local poverty reduc-
426 tion policy under significant constraints imposed by the national legal framework.
427 To do so, we attempted to respond to three guiding research questions. Regarding
428 the first one, we found that the national social policy system in Serbia, characterized
429 by the top-down poverty-targeting approach, does not directly tie social assistance
430 to any kind of poverty measure. As a consequence, many individuals are left with

¹⁴ If sufficient reallocation sources could be found among different budget programs, it may be achieved much quicker than otherwise.

¹⁵ This growth, primarily measured on a national level, is, however, determined by a whole host of other factors, such as investment, education, government expenditure and corruption (Kelić et al. 2024).

¹⁶ Such an impact may, of course, be subdued by an increase in certain taxes or other sorts of public revenue instruments. This move may even have positive effects on various economic variables, such as investment (Kelić 2024). We, however, leave this option aside as our focus remains on conditions characterized by legal and budgetary constraints.

431 incomes below the absolute poverty line, let alone the one concerning the relative
 432 poverty risk. To make things worse, current local policy practices in Stari Grad do not
 433 do much to alleviate these hardships. These circumstances propelled us to investigate
 434 whether local political authorities can act in an efficient and just manner to alleviate
 435 poor material conditions of some of their citizens. By considering the case of the
 436 urban municipality of Stari Grad, we found out that attainable budget increases may
 437 be made to tackle individuals living below the absolute poverty threshold. Instead of
 438 current expenditure of around 0.1 percent of the local budget on poverty reduction,
 439 relatively modest budget reallocation may be done to ensure that poverty reduction
 440 expenditure reaches 1.3 to 6.2 percent of total budget, potentially leading to the erad-
 441 ication of absolute poverty in Stari Grad. These findings provided a response to our
 442 third research question.

443 Even though many obstacles that we found in response to our second research
 444 question can be overcome by increased local spending, there are severe limitations
 445 that can hardly be surpassed by the budgets and competences of local authorities. The
 446 main one concerns the capacity for significant reduction of the number of individuals
 447 below the at-risk-of-poverty threshold. Any meaningful policy aimed at this direction
 448 would severely limit the ability of the local government to finance other policies. It
 449 is also important to note that urban municipalities in Serbia, as the lowest level
 450 of governance, are primarily concentrated in urban areas that are characterized by
 451 the lower prevalence of poverty. Even though local self-governance units, a higher
 452 level of local governance, possess much wider competences and larger budgets than
 453 urban municipalities (Službeni glasnik Republike Srbije 2007a, 2007b), it remains
 454 to be seen whether they can sufficiently tackle poverty, especially in generally poorer
 455 areas of Serbia. Further research should elucidate the level of variation among both
 456 urban municipalities and local self-governance units in absolute and relative poverty
 457 addressing capability, as well as the sources of their differences. It may also be
 458 worthwhile to explore whether some other policy measures, less direct than the
 459 one discussed in this chapter, can induce significantly positive effects on poverty
 460 eradication. Despite a variety of possible courses of action, it seems highly likely
 461 that the most comprehensive and effective poverty reduction policies will require
 462 devoted activity from the national level.

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