Research Brief

Latest Developments, Strategies and Recommendations to Combat Antigypsyism in Sweden

Jan Selling

2025

Coordinated by CEPS, Centre for European Policy Studies

CEPS

JEKHIPE
RECLAIMING OUR PAST, REBUILDING OUR FUTURE: NEW APPROACHES TO FIGHTING ANTIGYPSYISM

The JEKHIPE Project

The JEKHIPE project, Reclaiming our past, rebuilding our future: new approaches to fighting antigypsyism against Roma, is a CERV-funded project aimed at improving the lives of Roma by addressing systemic and institutional antigypsyism, promoting transitional justice, fostering knowledge-building and awareness, and strengthening Roma identity and participation.

It is a follow-up to an earlier CERV project called 'CHACHIPEN', officially titled Paving the way for a Truth and Reconciliation Process to address antigypsyism in Europe. Remembrance, Recognition, Justice and Trust-Building'. Concluded in 2023, CHACHIPEN introduced an innovative transitional justice-based approach to raising awareness of systemic injustice and ongoing antigypsyism in policymaking, while advocating for a comprehensive truth and reconciliation strategy.

JEKHIPE focuses on multiple levels of policy-making, including research, monitoring, advocacy, networking, alliances building, awareness raising, capacity building, and empowerment. It aims to engage with national and European institutions, academia, politicians, justice mechanisms, state authorities, civil society, and Roma communities themselves to challenge the status quo on approaching Roma issues, particularly antigypsyism, and propose mechanisms for increased accountability by national governments.

Jan Selling is the Head of the Department and Professor of Critical Romani Studies at Södertörn University Stockholm, specialized in the areas of Romani history, emancipation, and antigypsyism.

The JEKHIPE County Briefing has been coordinated by CEPS.

JEKHIPE
RECLAIMING OUR PAST, REBUILDING OUR FUTURE: NEW APPROACHES TO FIGHTING ANTIGYPSYISM

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Commission. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

Funded by the European Union

Abstract

This Country Brief analyses on any relevant policy or legal updates of direct relevance to the scope of the CHACHIPEN national report on Sweden titled "Considering the Swedish Commission Against Antigypsyism 2014-2016" (Selling, 2022). It summarizes the key findings of the original CHACHIPEN National Report, followed by the updates and latest developments in Swedish national policy, and an assessment of whether some of the issues identified by the original report have been addressed since, and an exploration of the possible ways forward regarding national policy in light of the role that EU could play in this issue.

Since the original publication of the CHACHIPEN country report on Sweden, the negative trend in Swedish policies regarding antigypsyism continues. The government still sees no necessity in upgrading the Swedish inclusion strategy to meet the standards of the EU Roma strategic framework on equality, inclusion and participation (NRIS). This Country Briefing shows that Roma stakeholders are frustrated, and that Roma's trust in society is declining. The main factors behind this trend are:

1. A change in the political climate which gives antigypsyism momentum; 2. Deficient structures for Roma participation; and 3. The rejection of Roma historical justice initiatives, such as proposals for a Truth Commission and the full inclusion of Roma in Holocaust memory. This Briefing presents three avenues for moving forward: 1. Establishing a Swedish truth commission focused on Roma policies since the recognition of national minority rights in 1999, including memory politics; 2. Earmarking European and national funding for antigypsyism research; and 3. The establishment of an EU-wide initiative to synthesise the disparate positions of the EU and the IHRA on Roma in Holocaust memory.

Contents

1. Relevant key findings of the CHACHIPEN Sweden Country Report

Sweden, once discussed internationally as an inspirational example for Truth and Reconciliation Processes (TRC) regarding Roma and policies against antigypsyism, has lost momentum since 2016 (Selling 2022). The governmental decision for a 'White Paper' on historical abuses against Roma and a temporary Commission against antigypsyism were not followed up by any comprehensive policy changes or institutional reforms. Instead, these measures prevented the establishment of a possible Truth Commission: it was argued that the state had now done enough. The Swedish 20-year-inclusion strategy of 2012 hardly discussed antigypsyism and yet, the government in 2021 assessed that no revision was needed to meet the new standards of the EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies (NRIS).

The CHACHIPEN Country Report on Sweden argued that a leading cause behind this lost momentum is a dysfunctional system for Roma policy involvement, which tends to follow the principle 'decide first, inform later'. The Report also observed that the Roma civil society lacks political organization and that proposals to solve this by establishing a GONGO, i.e. a state-organized and -financed agency governed by Roma, was rejected by the government and by Roma advisors. The Report noted a complete lack of proposals for strengthening academic knowledge production on antigypsyism. Finally, it recognized increasing demands for the inclusion of Roma in the notion of the Holocaust, contrary to Swedish official policy following the definitions of the IHRA. The Report suggested that the exclusion of Roma may have negative implications for the allocation of research funding and on initiatives combatting antigypsyism.

2. Updates and latest developments in Swedish national policy

In October 2022, a centre-right government was established in formalised collaboration with the xenophobic party The Sweden Democrats. This shift from a Social Democratic government both mirrors and affects public opinion. During the election campaign of 2022 antigypsyist sentiments gained momentum. Media reports on 'Romani kris' established the generalized image of Roma as practicing patriarchal in-group oppression in the name of honour and shame (Lännerholm & Hansson, 2022; Löwenmark, 2022). This was then instrumentalised by centre-right parties, who unfoundedly associated Roma with suburban gang violence (Blom & Darvik, 2022).

While the subject of Roma and antigypsyism was by no means on the top of the election agenda, the effects of this type of discourse on Roma are considerable given that reactivated negative stereotypes tend to put Roma in a defensive position, and even cause many to seek anonymity (cf Mulinari et al., 2024; Selling, 2024). A strong indication that Roma trust in authorities is declining is the fact that the propensity to report antigypsy hate crimes has decreased significantly since 2021. (Länsstyrelsen, 2023).

2.1. Assessment of whether issues identified by the original CHACHIPEN Report have been addressed

An 'action programme' against different forms of racism was implemented in 2021 (Swedish Government, 2021). However, the allocated resources were meagre, and the outcome has been assessed as insufficient by the Swedish agency for public management. The main conclusion is that the policy lacks clear goals and indicators and appears fragmented into separate projects in different state agencies without coordination (Statskontoret 2023). The present government has announced the launch of a new version of the action plan (Government, 2024).

The current government has confirmed the assessment of the previous government that no revision of the Swedish inclusion strategy of 2012 is needed to meet the demands of the new EU NRIS (Government, 2024). However, as the Swedish strategy lacks analysis of antigypsyism, the 'concerned efforts against antigypsyism' proposed by the Swedish Commission Against Antiziganism remain largely ignored (SOU, 2016:44).

According to three Roma representatives with experience from the governmental Roma Advisory Board (Interviews 2,4,5) the problems of ineffective and symbolic consultation with Roma remain. The Board consists of 20 persons selected by the government among nominees from Roma civil society and should secure the legal rights of Roma to participate in Roma policymaking as stated in Swedish minority

legislation. The government claims that 'Development work is always underway with [...] various forms of consultation' (Government, 2024). However, the Roma representatives remain unconvinced and have described the system as 'not transparent' and as a kind of 'window dressing' that rewards 'yes-voters'. Another problem raised is that Roma experts may choose not to get publicly involved so as not to risk being exposed to antigypsyism. Even though these interviewees differ widely in their positions on Roma policies, they agree that the system is not meaningful whether to completely withdraw from the advisory boards is repeatedly discussed.

The fragmentation of Swedish policies is particularly evident regarding Roma and antigypsyism. For instance, the inclusion strategy largely ignores antigypsyism, and Roma linguistic rights are rarely discussed in relation to antigypsyism. Since the fulfilment Roma's right to their language is not significantly progressing, the Swedish National Audit Office has initiated an audit (Riksrevisionen 2024). Several authorities, including the public agency Living History Forum, which has a special responsibility for knowledge dissemination on racism, highlight the importance of research on Roma history and antigypsyism, but without providing concrete proposals for strengthening research infrastructure (FFLH 2024).The CHACHIPEN Report identified a number of issues related specifically to Holocaust memory and antigypsyism research. The Swedish National Historical Museums (NHM) was commissioned to develop a proposal for the establishment of the Swedish Holocaust Museum, which has now been implemented. The instruction was to follow the IHRA understanding of the Holocaust. Yet, the proposal of the NHM includes the following critical discussion: 'The Holocaust definition excludes Roma. There are opinions among some that this definition should include all groups. At the same time, there is a view among others that the Holocaust definition should be kept specific and stringent in the sense of the genocide of Europe's Jews. More genocides are included in the events within the Holocaust, including the Roma genocide'. (SHM, 2021)

In its proposal, the Museum also highlights Roma in various ways and thus the importance of Holocaust memory for Roma, e.g.: 'Knowledge about how antisemitism and antigypsyism played a role in the development leading up to the Holocaust is therefore important. The activities should show how society is still affected by the Holocaust. The experiences of the survivors are a matter for all people in society'.

Representatives of Roma civil society have long argued for including Roma in the concept of the Holocaust, which also would mean adapting the denomination of 2 August as Roma Holocaust Remembrance Day, instead of the Swedish version 'genocide of Roma during the Holocaust'. Based on this goal, municipally-run Roma organizations in Malmö, the Roma Council and Roma Information and Knowledge

Centre (RIKC) arranged a conference in December 2024 entitled 'The Holocaust of Roma'. The city of Malmö has, in accordance with these demands, chosen to include Roma in the notion Holocaust, which is a clear deviation from national politics (Interview, 3). The interviewees agree that full recognition of Roma as victims of the Holocaust is essential also for the recognition of Roma rights today and for combatting of antigypsyism at all levels in society (Interviews 1-5). The position of the Swedish government however still follows the IHRA and the government further chooses not to comment on the discrepancy vis-a-vis EU terminology (Government 2024).

The appropriation letter to the Swedish Research Council (SRC) for the financial year 2022, instructed that research funding should be directed towards 'The Holocaust and antisemitism and the vulnerability of other groups in connection with the Holocaust, including Roma and antigypsyism' (Government, 2021). However, the adjunct SRC calls mentioned neither Roma nor antigypsyism, and research with this focus was largely unsupported by the investment of SEK 40 million (Vetenskapsrådet, 2023). The government chooses not to comment on this non-fulfilment but refers to the Swedish Research Council (Government, 2024). Research on antigypsyism has previously been concentrated at Södertörn University but today consists only of a Professorship in Critical Romani Studies.

3. Exploration of possible ways forward

There is widespread frustration among Roma representatives with long experience of working against antigypsyism. Notably, political shifts through national elections have not been decisive for lost momentum. Potential ways forward can be identified across 3 main areas:

3.1. Roma participation

As the dysfunctional system for Roma involvement is a central cause driving the failure Swedish strategies, new options must be discussed. Interviewees hint at different possible directions. A coordinated national Roma political organization is not yet in sight and in this sense, Roma civil society remains fragmented. Thus, the utopian vision of one interviewee seems overly optimistic: 'to cancel all organized cooperation with the state and instead put pressure on the government and the EU through a new type of organized activism' (Interview 5). Another option, to empower Roma civil society through the creation of a GONGO, was already turned down several times by the state, which referred to a lack of consensus among Roma.

One possible solution to this deadlock could be a Truth and Reconciliation (TRC) Commission, focused on this problem alongside more general aims on how to break the continuity of antigypsyist structures and mentalities. The option for a Swedish Roma TRC was intensely discussed in the years 2013-2014 and then turned down; there was disagreement among Roma, but the main reason was that the government instead opted for a 'White Paper' and a temporary Commission against antigypsyism. These measures were by no means equal to a TRC (see Carballo-Mesa et al., 2023), yet interviewees largely assessed the question as politically dead, given that the state might claim it has already done enough. The situation has evolved however, potentially prompting fresh consideration: first, TRC's were established for two other Swedish national minorities, the Sami and the Tornedalers; and second, the ongoing failure of Swedish policies on inclusion and antigypsyism is a good argument in favour of something new.

Such a Roma TRC would presuppose a constructive present- and forward-looking approach. A reasonable chronological focus would be the period since the recognition of Roma as national minority (1999 up to the present) and include dimensions such as memory politics and historical justice. The EU would be a necessary partner, both financially and in terms of expertise (Carballo-Mesa, A, et.al (2023).

3.2. Academic knowledge production

Earmarked EU and national funding and networks for antigypsyism research seem necessary. As shown in this Country Briefing, there is potential to identify common interests between scholarship and Roma civil society. As one interviewee representing a Roma organization states: 'we specifically need research on the socio-psychological dimension of centuries-old stereotypes and the projections, which again and again makes the Roma the problem instead of antigypsyism and other structural problems in society' (Interview 3).

In combination with an international conference on antigypsyism, history, and memory at Södertörn University in December 2024, a national academic network will be established between several Swedish universities. The long-term goal is a Swedish centre for antigypsyism research. The German equivalent at Heidelberg University is a model and collaboration partner. One unique aspect of this Swedish initiative is to integrate antigypsyism research with the wider field of Critical Romani Studies, which is supported by collaboration with the Roma program at the CEU Vienna and the European Roma Institute for Arts and Culture in Berlin (ERIAC). Thus, a national Swedish academic network connects to European scientific nodes. Interestingly, a proposal for such a permanent research centre had previously been discussed by Roma representatives as an alternative to a temporary truth commission (Interview 4).

3.3. Holocaust recognition

There is a discrepancy between the EU and the Swedish terminologies, with the latter excluding Roma from the notion of the Holocaust. The Swedish official position follows the IHRA, which claims to represent scientific knowledge. However, 'the Holocaust' (in Swedish, 'Förintelsen') is not a scientific or legal notion in the sense of the term genocide, but a notion instrumental for memory and history politics. The political decision of the IHRA blurs the fact that there are different scientific positions on the relationship between the Jewish and the Romani genocides committed by the Nazis (cf Joskowicz 2023). The IHRA position has, in the Swedish case, had an evident impact on the allocation of funding, which disadvantages research on Roma and antigypsyism. Since the Swedish Roma civil society has demanded the inclusion of Roma in the notion, it is at odds both with the Swedish government and the IHRA, which has a negative effect on trust.

The Malmö decision to accept the preferred terminology of the Roma in this matter was the result of many years of discussions within the Roma organizations as well as with politicians and civil servants of the city. The achievement was mainly due to existing organizational structures of Roma civil society, which are lacking at the

national level (Interview 3). One of the interviewees stresses that 'the recognition of the Romani part of the Holocaust on the same terms as the Jewish part of the Holocaust is important. It is also important to cooperate with and try to understand victims of the Holocaust other than those defined as "we"' (Interview 4). To expand on that perspective, a truly universalist understanding of the Holocaust would also require dialogue including collective memories that are neither Jewish nor Romani. As another interviewee puts it: 'It is about the majority society's recognition of guilt and shame. Some kind of redress that Roma must receive in order for us to get Roma to trust society. As long as the errors are not acknowledged, we are doomed to repeat them in one form or another' (Interview 3).

4. References

Blom, J., Hannah, R. & Darvik, A. (2022), 'Förbjud romani kris och andra parallella rättssystem' [Ban the Romani kris and other parallel legal systems], *Göteborgs-Posten*, 5 August, https://shorturl.at/4irRb.

Carballo-Mesa, A, et.al (2023). *Paving the way for Truth and Reconciliation Process to address antigypsyism in Europe. Remembrance, Recognition, Justice and Trust-Building*. Brussels: CEPS. https://antigypsyism.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Truth-and-Reconciliation-Process-to-Address-Antigypsyism-in-Europe.pdf

FFLH (2024), 'Forum för levande historia. Statens arbete inom ramen för den nationella planen mot rasism, liknande former av fientlighet och hatbrott, 2023. Redovisning av uppdrag att samordna och följa upp den nationella planen' [The state's work within the framework of the national plan against racism, similar forms of hostility and hate crime, 2023. Report on assignments to coordinate and follow up the national plan] (Ku2022/01857, Ku2022/01893).

Government office (2021), 'Regleringsbrev för budgetåret 2021 avseende Vetenskapsrådet' [Appropriation letter for the financial year 2021 regarding the Swedish Research Council], U2021/02276.

Government office (2024), 'Survey response to author', 13 September.

Joskowicz, Ari (2023), *Roma, Jews and the Holocaust*, Princeton University Press.

Länsstyrelsen i Stockholm (2023), 'Romsk inkludering. Årsrapport 2023' [Roma inclusion. Annual report 2023].

Löwenmark, S. (2022), 'Sveriges Radio måste sparka ut aktivisterna' [Swedish Radio must kick out the activists], *Expressen*, 12 August, https://shorturl.at/4G7ER/.

Mulinari, Paula, Lindkvist, Sandy & Halilovic, Mujo (2024), 'Lycklig är den som har en öppen väg framför sig. En rapport om förutsättningar och hinder för romskt liv i Malmö' [Happy is the one who has an open road ahead of him. A report on conditions and obstacles for Roma life in Malmö], Malmö: RIKC, https://shorturl.at/1xioP.

Riksrevisionen. Diarienummer: 2024/0428, 'Beslut om att inleda granskning av statens främjande av de nationella minoritetsspråken' [Decision to launch a review of the state's promotion of national minority languages].

Selling, J. (2022), Considering the Swedish Commission against Antiziganism 2014-2016: experiences, lessons learned and recommendations, CHACHIPEN National Research Report: CHACHIPEN_-D2_2_CHACHIPEN-National-Research-Report-onSweden_final_formated_MODIF.pdf (antigypsyism.eu)

Selling, Jan (2024), 'Varför accepteras antiziganism mer än annan rasism? Om ett tappat momentum och strukturella lösningar' [Why is antigypsyism more accepted than other forms of racism? On a loss of momentum and structural solutions] in Krifors, Karin, H. Sältenberg, D. Mulinari, (editor), A. Neergaard, Antirasismer och antirasister – Realistiska utopier, spännningar och vardagserfarenheter i Sverige [Anti-Racisms and Anti-Racists – Realistic Utopias, Tensions and Everyday Experiences in Sweden].

SHM, Statens historiska museer (2021), 'Förslag till inrättande av Sveriges museum om Förintelsen vid Statens historiska museer' [Proposal for the establishment of the Swedish Holocaust Museum at the National Historical Museums] Diarienr: 151-312-2021.

SOU 2016:44. SOU 2016:44 (2016), 'Kraftsamling mot antiziganism. Slutbetänkande från Kommissionen mot antiziganism' [Concerned efforts against antigypsyism. Final report from the Commission against anti-Gypsyism], Government office.

Statskontoret (2023), 'Ett samlat grepp. Analys av den nationella planen mot rasism, liknande former av fientlighet och hatbrott' [An overall approach. Analysis of the national plan against racism, similar forms of hostility and hate crimes], 2023:12.

Vetenskapsrådet (2023), 'Funding decisions for research into the Holocaust, victims of the Holocaust and anti-Semitism', Vr.se.

5. Annex

Interviews List

Interviewee 1. Roma representative, 1 August 2024.
Interviewee 2. Roma NGO representative, 23 August 2024
Interviewee 3. Roma NGO representative, 23 August 2024
Interviewee 4. Roma representative, 26 August 2024
Interviewee 5. Roma NGO representative, 16 September 2024
Interviewee 6. Secretary of the Ministry of Culture, 13 September 2024.

JEKHIPE

Reclaiming Our Past, Rebuilding Our Future:
New Approaches to Fighting Antigypsyism