

Swedish police collect illegal database of Roma

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23 October 2013

The Swedish police force in the southern region of Skane has a database containing the details of over 4,000 Roma, including 1,000 children. The revelation came to light in a report from daily *Dagens Nyheter* at the end of September.

The database, which is organised like a family tree, contains full names, dates of birth, ID numbers, addresses and relationships. Individuals have been added to it solely on the basis of their racial background, and the vast majority have committed no criminal offence. The personal details of a brother and sister from one family who are just two and three years old respectively appear on the database.

The police initially sought to deny the existence of the file, which is reportedly located in a folder on a computer entitled “itinerants”.

When this became impossible, an investigation was announced and the chief of police declared his “outrage”. However, officials have continued to refuse to describe the gathering of this information as racial profiling, defending its effectiveness for police officers who were investigating criminal activity.

Peter Springar, head of the serious crime investigation unit in the region of Orebro, responded angrily to the charge that the police had broken the law. Springar asserted that the register of Roma was simply “intelligence work which is done to combat crime”.

Based on an estimate by the United Nations which suggests that between 15,000 and 20,000 Roma live in Sweden, the database contains more than 20 percent of the entire Roma population. Subsequent reports have alleged that police forces from across the country had access to the information, as well as the national migration board.

Roma have suffered at the hands of Swedish authorities for decades. Among the revelations which

have come to light in the latest scandal was the fact that Stockholm city authorities maintained a “gypsy register” until 1996, with those unfortunate enough to find themselves on this list being visited by police who reported on their lifestyle and behaviour.

Between 1914 and 1954 Roma were officially forbidden from travelling to Sweden, and many during this period who were in Sweden were forcibly sterilised. During World War II, the Swedish government compiled a so-called gypsy inventory, which included details of the entire Roma population. It was produced alongside a register of the Jewish population and it was widely believed that this would have been handed over to the Nazis had they invaded. After the war, it took until 1959 before Roma were granted the right to public education and accommodation, and only in 1999 were Roma designated an official minority in the country.

The new revelations on the deliberate targeting of Roma are part of an intensification of the persecution of immigrants and ethnic minorities. Earlier this year, police in Stockholm resorted to racial profiling to target alleged undocumented workers. Police were told to stop anyone who “looked foreign” on the Stockholm underground and demand to see their papers in an attempt to increase the rate of deportations. The police’s so-called “REVA project” provoked widespread outrage, including demonstrations of several thousand in Stockholm and Malmö in March this year.

Less than two months later, the suburbs of Stockholm exploded in riots, largely provoked by brutal police operations directed against overwhelmingly immigrant neighbourhoods. Residents spoke of racist abuse from police officers and targeted stop-and-search sweeps aimed at children as young as 13.

This political atmosphere has been created and encouraged by the major parties and trade unions. Immediately after the riots, Sweden's trade union confederation called upon the government to enforce labour restrictions on foreign workers.

The four-party right-wing coalition led by Prime Minister Frederick Reinfeldt has tightened immigration regulations over recent years and is seeking to go further. In 2010, it brought new regulations in to allow immigrant families to reunite in Sweden only if the members who were already in the country had a job and somewhere to live. But according to Gunnar Axén, a member of Reinfeldt's Moderate Party who chairs the parliamentary committee on social insurance, too many families have been able to bypass this condition, with it having been enforced only 53 times out of 15,000 applications.

This followed comments from Immigration Minister Tobias Billström in February that the levels of immigration to Sweden were "unsustainable". The conservative Moderate Party had tasked Billström with looking into ways to reduce migration levels. "Today, people are coming to households where the only income is support from the municipality. Is that reasonable?" he commented to *Dagens Nyheter*.

The extreme-right Sweden Democrats released a statement welcoming Billström's "awakening" on the issue. "One thing is clear, the Sweden Democrats are influencing the debate in the right direction", the party declared. The governing coalition does not hold a parliamentary majority and has relied on the votes of the far-right Sweden Democrats to pass the majority of its legislation since the 2010 election.

Anti-immigrant chauvinism and the targeting of ethnic minorities have been deliberately promoted in order to divert attention from deepening social inequality and rising class tensions. A recent OECD study stated that Sweden had seen the fastest growth in social inequality over the past decade in all member states.

The government has launched drastic attacks on the social welfare system and a privatisation drive since coming to power in 2006. Jobless benefits were cut, employees' insurance contributions increased and conditions for welfare restricted.

Thousands of layoffs took place across all areas of the economy in the wake of the 2008-09 recession, as

unemployment rose to over 8 percent. The jobless rate is much higher in many suburbs of large cities, reaching 23 percent in the areas of Stockholm where rioting broke out in May.

Under these conditions, the revelations of state surveillance of entire groups of people must be taken as a grave warning. The riots in Stockholm earlier this year and the rising social inequality are seen by ruling circles as warning signs of future social opposition. To combat this danger, they will employ the full force of the police and intelligence agencies to gather information on political opponents and their immediate connections.

It is reasonable to assume that this process is already well underway. It was, after all, Swedish police and intelligence agencies which played a leading role in the frame-up against Wikileaks founder Julian Assange, who they continue to seek to have extradited to the country in order to send him on to the United States to face a possible death sentence.

Sweden's intelligence services have been close partners of the American NSA for some time and have implemented antidemocratic measures to enable surveillance of the entire population. In 2008, the government passed a controversial wire-tapping law, which granted domestic intelligence the power to intercept all electronic communication crossing the country's borders. Subsequent documents leaked by Wikileaks have confirmed that the US embassy took an active interest in the establishment of the legislation and that the powers have subsequently been used to supply information to the NSA.

Reports at the beginning of September revealed that Sweden's national defence radio establishment (FRA) had provided the NSA with access to telecommunications cables running under the Baltic Sea. Significantly, this could include communications whose origins are in Russia.



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