
Antigypsyism, resistance and cultural memory: a critical perspective from Spain



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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 *CHACHIPEN*, an earlier CERV project, 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.

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Abstract

This report, developed within the framework of the JEKHIPE project: Joining Efforts for Knowledge, Memory and Justice, analyses antigypsyism in Spain as a long-standing structural ideology. Through a historical-critical approach, it examines the succession of laws and royal decrees since 1499, the attempt at social extermination during the Great Round-up of 1749, the cultural and administrative repression under Francoism, and the persistence of legal inequalities during the democratic transition. The study highlights both the mechanisms of persecution—from the use of prisons and galleys to school segregation—and the forms of political and cultural resistance deployed by the Romani people. Special attention is given to the associative movement since 1978 and the central role of women in the creation of Romani feminist organizations. Finally, the report addresses contemporary manifestations of antigypsyism, the ambivalence of public policies, and the tensions surrounding cultural heritage, proposing a critical and emancipatory memory as a condition for justice.

1. Introduction

The JEKHIPE project: Joining Efforts for Knowledge, Memory and Justice was born out of the urgent need to address a historical wound that runs through Europe: the secular persecution of the Romani people. For centuries, Romani people have been subjected to discriminatory laws, expulsions, stigmatisation, and violence that cannot be understood as isolated events, but rather as part of a structural system of hatred and exclusion. This report aims to restore dignity, generate knowledge, and open paths to justice by combining memory, research and political action.

In this context, the Spanish case is particularly revealing. Spain has one of the most extensive anti-Roma legislative repertoires in Europe, with more than two hundred edicts and pragmatic laws that, since 1499, have sought to regulate, prohibit, or eradicate Roma ways of life. Here, a large-scale attempt at social extermination was planned—the Great Round-up of 1749—which marked generations. Here, in the middle of the 20th century, Franco's regime imposed specific police regulations to monitor Roma and consolidated exclusionary measures such as bridge schools. And here, now in a democracy, the Roma people continue to face forms of legal and social inequality that persist to this day.

The interest in focusing this report on Spain is not limited to its particular history. The Spanish case offers a privileged window for thinking about antigypsyism as a structural ideology that articulates repressive practices, cultural discourses, and legal mechanisms. Over six centuries, Spain has been a laboratory for observation, alternating between attempts at expulsion, forced assimilation, labour exploitation and cultural erasure. This historical density makes the Spanish case an essential reference point for understanding European antigypsyism.

Today, the relevance of the Spanish context is also evident in the present. In recent years, unprecedented advances have been made: the reform of the Penal Code, which introduces for the first time the term antigypsyism as a punishable motive in hate crimes; the approval of Law 15/2022 on Equal Treatment; the adoption of the National Strategy 2021–2030; and the State Pact against Antigypsyism, endorsed by Parliament in 2023. Added to this is the declaration of 2025 as the Year of the Roma People, coinciding with the 600th anniversary of the documented arrival of the Roma on the peninsula. However, practices of school segregation, residential marginalisation and media criminalisation persist. The contrast between legislative advances and the realities of exclusion raises a central question: to what extent do gestures of recognition succeed in transforming the daily lives of the Roma people?

This report responds to three main objectives. First, to document and critically analyse the historical construction of antigypsyism in Spain, paying attention not only to legal texts, but also to specific practices of repression, gender-differentiated punishments and

attempts to erase the Roma language, trades, and culture. Second, to examine contemporary manifestations of antigypsyism, analysing housing, education, employment, health, justice, collective violence, and public discourse, as well as recent policies that seek to address it. Third, to explore the forms of resistance deployed by the Romani people, from daily survival to associative movements, political participation, cultural creation, and the leading role of Romani women.

These objectives give rise to the questions that guide the research: How has antigypsyism been constructed in Spain and what mechanisms have sustained it in each period? What forms of resistance have developed and how have they been transformed in democracy and in contemporary times? What are the expressions of structural antigypsyism today and what responses do institutions offer? How is Roma cultural heritage recognised and what tensions exist between appropriation, invisibility, and community preservation?

The structure of the report follows this logic. Chapter 2 addresses the historical construction of antigypsyism in Spain, from the legal foundations of the 15th–18th centuries to the democratic transition. Chapter 3 analyses its current manifestations and recent public policies, with special attention to criminal law, national strategy, and the parliamentary pact. Chapter 4 is devoted to Roma action and political, cultural and community resistance, from associationism and political participation to Roma feminism and cultural expressions. Finally, the report concludes with a reflection on memory, justice and future scenarios for recognition and transformation.

The memory of the Roma people has been silenced for too long. The JEKHIPE project reminds us that memory is neither neutral nor spontaneous: it is a battleground. Recognising the history of persecution and resistance of the Romani people is not only an act of retrospective justice, but a necessary condition for imagining a future in which dignity, equality and recognition cease to be unfulfilled promises and become tangible realities.

2. The historical construction of antigypsyism in Spain.

2.1. Legal and ideological foundations (15th–18th centuries)

The persecution of the Romani people in early modern Spain cannot be explained as an isolated sequence of measures, but rather as the construction of a genuine legal regime of exception that placed them under permanent suspicion for more than three centuries. From the pragmatic decree of the Catholic Monarchs in 1499 to the provision of Charles III in 1783, the monarchy promoted a legislative overproduction that generated what can be considered a unique body of persecutory legislation in Europe. Historiography has identified more than 270 regulations directed against the Roma during this period, which reveals, in the words of Antonio Gómez Alfaro, a phenomenon 'unique in the history of Spanish law' due to its 'persistence and legislative reiteration' (Gómez Alfaro, 1993, p. 25). The persecution consisted both of this torrent of regulations and the material translation of the laws into specific, differentiated, and systematic punishments.

The Pragmatic of Medina del Campo of 1499 laid the foundations for this regime. The provision forced Roma to settle in a fixed place and take up a known trade, under threat of exile, flogging and mutilation, even providing for perpetual slavery in the event of recidivism. For Manuel Martínez, this is the moment when 'the itinerant life becomes a crime and being a Roma a punishable condition' (Martínez, 2011, p. 58). From that date onwards, each monarch returned to the issue with insistence. Charles I, in 1539, toughened the penalties with galley sentences for men; Philip II, in 1566, equated them with 'vagrants and idlers'; Philip III decreed expulsion under penalty of death in 1619; Philip IV expressly prohibited the Caló language, traditional dress and mobility in 1633; and throughout the 18th century, the Bourbons multiplied measures of sedentarisation and administrative control. As Peñafiel Ramón pointed out, "never has so much legislation been enacted for so few" (2009, p. 41).

These provisions did not target specific crimes, but rather criminalised entire ways of life. The law became a tool to attack language, dress, trades, and mobility. María Helena Sánchez Ortega recalls that the pragmatic laws 'did not punish criminal behaviour, but rather identities and ways of life' (2005, p. 119). This process gave rise to what Manuel Martínez has defined as a criminal law of status: a legal framework in which the condition of being Romani, beyond any specific act, became illegal (Martínez, 2011, p. 63). The result was a state of structural illegality: even those who managed to settle down and work in recognised trades remained under threat of expulsion, flogging or slavery simply because they were Roma.

The pragmatic measures were often applied summarily, 'without trial,' in the words of Martínez (2011, p. 62), with the suspicion of a mayor or magistrate being sufficient to order punishment. The almost obsessive repetition of the same measures reveals both

the failure of assimilation and the state's willingness to maintain persecution as a constant policy. As Gómez Alfaro observed, anti-Roma legislation formed a persecutory corpus in which 'the Roma always appears as a criminal by definition' (1993, p. 28). In this sense, the law did not describe a social reality, but rather produced it: it turned Roma into a political problem that justified new pragmatic measures, in a vicious circle of criminalisation.

Among the many punishments provided for, the galleys became the central instrument of repression. From the beginning of the 16th century, Roma men were sent to row for periods of four, six or eight years, often not for crimes committed, but for repeated mobility or for not being able to prove their residence. Sánchez Ortega explained that 'the galley sentence became the automatic commutation of any lack of residence or trade' (2005, p. 124). However, it was Gómez Alfaro who showed the real scope of this measure. According to his research, in the first half of the 18th century, Roma came to represent more than six per cent of galley slaves, with peaks of 10.8 per cent between 1740 and 1748, 18.4% in 1741, and even approaching thirty per cent in 1745 after a specific levy (1993, pp. 143–145). This data reveals that the persecution was not merely symbolic: thousands of men were torn from their families and sent to row to their deaths. As Alfaro himself pointed out, 'Roma came to constitute a tenth of the total number of forced labourers' (1993, p. 147).

The punishment of galleys also responded to the specific needs of the State. The Spanish Navy suffered from a chronic shortage of rowers and, since the 16th century, Roma were used as a forced contingent to make up for this shortage. In the words of Gómez Alfaro, the Bourbons 'supplied the arsenals and ships with Roma, who were turned into slave labour' (1993, p. 342). Legal persecution was therefore utilitarian in nature: it was not only a matter of exclusion or punishment, but also of exploitation. The state turned the Roma condition into a permanent reserve of labour for the navy and arsenals. They were not punished simply for being who they were; their condition was used to sustain the military apparatus.

The brutality of this system becomes even clearer when we look at the age at which boys were sent to galleys or arsenals. During the Great Roundup of 1749, it was decreed that 'boys aged seven and above' were to be sent to the Navy's workshops and arsenals (cited in Gómez Alfaro, 1993, p. 198). The mere condition of being a Roma boy, from the age of seven, was equivalent to being considered a useful force for the State. In this sense, anti-Roma legislation represented one of the most extreme cases of criminalisation of childhood in modern Europe.

The persecution also had a marked gender dimension. From the 16th century onwards, the pragmatic laws explicitly differentiated between penalties for men and women. As Gómez Alfaro noted, 'whenever the law provides for the sending of men to the galleys,

it must be understood that for women the penalty is flogging and exile' (Escritos sobre gitanos, 2005, p. 573). This distinction, which Manuel Martínez also highlights, constitutes a legal novelty: anti-Roma legislation was the first in Spain to establish a criminal regime that systematically differentiated between the sexes (Martínez, 2011, p. 63). In this way, persecution was configured not only as a criminal law of status, but also as a criminal law of gender.

In the 16th century, women were punished mainly with public flogging and banishment. These punishments were intended to set an example: flogging was carried out in squares or markets, exposing their bodies as a collective lesson. Over time, however, the regulations changed. From the 18th century onwards, their internment in houses of mercy and spinning mills was institutionalised, spaces that Alfaro and Gómez Urdáñez have described as authentic 'female galleys' (Gómez Alfaro, 1993, pp. 233–240; Gómez Urdáñez, 2004, pp. 65–70). After the Round-up of 1749, hundreds of women were taken to the Casa de Misericordia in Zaragoza, where they were confined to their own wing, subjected to forced labour and exposed to extremely high mortality rates due to disease and unsanitary conditions. This shift from public floggings and banishments to prolonged imprisonment reveals the consolidation of a regime of persecution that also targeted women's bodies, aimed at preventing the social reproduction of the community.

The ideology of the time reinforced this differentiation. Roma women were described as witches, fortune tellers and child abductors, justifying their specific criminalisation. Juan de Quiñones' Discourse against the Roma, from 1631, was key in this regard. The memorial argued that there was no such thing as a Roma people, but rather a 'sect' of disguised Spanish criminals, describing them as "monsters" and 'cannibals' (Quiñones, 1631, cited in Cañadas, n.d., p. 212). As Araceli Cañadas has shown, this text became a 'scholarly apparatus' for legitimising violence, which was cited and reproduced for centuries (Cañadas, n.d., p. 214). In practice, the law and discourse fed into each other: the pragmatic measures reinforced the stereotypes, and the stereotypes legitimised new pragmatic measures.

The result of this intertwining was a persecutory regime that combined normative obsession with economic exploitation and gender differentiation. Legislative overproduction, although often ineffective in its own terms, generated a permanent state of emergency that criminalised Roma life. The galleys and arsenals turned thousands of men and boys into forced labour, to the point where at times they represented almost a third of the state's rowers. Women, first punished with public floggings and exile, were later confined to institutions that functioned as 'female galleys,' seeking to break the social reproduction of the group. All of this was sustained by an ideological apparatus that dehumanised the Roma and turned them into internal enemies.

The Great Round-up of 1749 cannot be understood without this legacy. It was the logical culmination of a centuries-long process in which the monarchy had tried out all the mechanisms of persecution: from the pragmatic of 1499 to mass internment in arsenals and houses of mercy, to the construction of a cultural discourse of hatred. In short, between the 15th and 18th centuries, a legal, criminal, and cultural regime was consolidated that sought to erase the Romani people from the history of Spain.

2.2. The Great Round-up (1749): an attempt at extermination

The Great Round-up of 1749 constitutes the most brutal episode in the historical persecution of the Romani people in modern Spain. Planned under the reign of Ferdinand VI, with the Marquis of Ensenada as chief minister, it was conceived as a simultaneous military and administrative operation that sought to arrest and separate all the Romani people in the kingdom by sex and age. Antonio Gómez Alfaro has shown that the objective was unequivocal: to implement a plan to eliminate the group entirely, not only to disperse or punish it, but to suppress the very existence of the community through mass imprisonment (Gómez Alfaro, 1993, p. 25). The Council of Castile itself, in its order of July 1749, spoke of the need to "exterminate them once and for all" (Gómez Alfaro, 1993, pp. 25–27), using language that reveals the intention to wipe out the Romani people as such.

The operation was part of Bourbon reformism, which combined the discourse of order and utility with the desire for social homogenisation. As Gómez Alfaro points out, the Round-up was "the culmination of a secular process of criminalising the Roma way of life" (1993, p. 27). If the pragmatic measures had turned Roma into criminals by definition, the Round-up attempted to apply the final solution: to dismantle any possibility of community reproduction. To this end, the order provided for immediate separation by sex and age: adult men to the arsenals of Cartagena, Cádiz and Ferrol, women to houses of mercy or spinning mills, boys from the age of seven to arsenals and workshops as apprentices, and children under that age with their mothers in guarded depots (Gómez Alfaro, 2005, p. 202). The measure was clearly biopolitical in nature, as it fragmented the population according to its productive usefulness and gender status, weakening family ties.

The violence of separation reached particularly dramatic levels in the case of children. Various documents refer to the fact that even infants were torn from their mothers to the point that attempts were made to take the children away "before they were weaned" and transfer them to foundling homes or hospices, with the justification of raising them "Christianly" (Gómez Alfaro, 2005, p. 205). In 1751, a group of 21 Roma children between the ages of 11 and 14 were sent from Málaga to Cartagena, and in 1755 another 40 children aged just 7 or 8 were sent from Valencia to the same arsenal (Gómez Alfaro,

1993, pp. 122–124). The aim was clear: to break the generational cycle, remove the children from their community and turn them into a subordinate workforce.

The overall figures are difficult to calculate, but the most reliable estimates range between 9,000 and 12,000 people affected (Gómez Alfaro, 1993, p. 33). The scope was national: coordinated raids were carried out in Seville, Granada, Murcia, Cartagena, Cádiz, Zaragoza and Málaga, among many other cities. The magnitude of the operation makes the Raid one of the largest planned attempts at extermination of a minority in 18th-century Europe.

The execution was carried out with extreme harshness. The men were sent to the arsenals, and in Cartagena it is documented that many were housed in an old galley, while others slept in the open air, "as in the previous stage of galleys," with barely a cloak to cover themselves (Martínez, 2011, p. 451). The overcrowding was such that the quartermasters themselves described the treatment as "too cruel", describing prisoners in chains and without bedding, which led to constant hospital admissions (Martínez, 2011, pp. 451–452). In El Ferrol, the boys slept on a "platform... and blanket" (Martínez, 2011, p. 453), a minimal relief that highlights the precariousness of the situation. The situation in Cartagena and La Graña illustrates the extent to which the project was a deliberate operation of degradation.

The women were transported in equally brutal conditions. In Málaga, more than a thousand Roma women with children arrived in August 1749, and as there were no suitable facilities, accommodation was improvised in the Alcazaba, the royal prison, private houses and even a street outside the city walls that was closed for this purpose (Martínez, 2011, p. 460). Shortly afterwards, many of them were shipped to Tortosa and taken to the Casa de Misericordia in Zaragoza. There, a separate pavilion was built to lock them up, where they suffered from hunger, overcrowding and disease. In 1753, an outbreak of scabies affected more than a hundred inmates, requiring collective treatment in the infirmary (Gómez Urdáñez, 2004, p. 67). Escapes were frequent, which led to increased surveillance and their transfer to damp basements considered "safer" (Gómez Urdáñez, 2004, p. 68). The Misericordia became a veritable women's galley, where women were forced to spin and sew during exhausting days in subhuman conditions.

The miserable conditions had already been denounced in previous galley houses, where prisoners had only "a poor mattress and a blanket, and the floor for a bed, sleeping two or three together, and sometimes, because there were so many, there were not enough mattresses for everyone and they gathered on the floor wrapped in their poor rags" (Martínez, 2011, p. 292). The continuity between these punishments for women and the Misericordia de Zaragoza shows the consolidation of a repressive system specifically targeting Romani women.

Material dispossession was another central theme. Roma had their houses, animals, tools, and pantries confiscated. In Priego de Córdoba, for example, homes and livestock belonging to Roma families were publicly auctioned off (Martínez, 2011, p. 463). Although the instruction of October 1749 provided for the return of property to those who were released, in practice the town councils and magistrates delayed or blocked the restitution. In many cases, only the poorest were released, as the municipalities had nothing to return to them because they had no property (Martínez, 2011, p. 464). Thus, the Round-up also served an economic purpose: to transfer Roma wealth into the hands of local elites, consolidating exclusion through expropriation.

The repression had a specific gender dimension. In La Misericordia de Zaragoza, Roma women led riots and escape attempts, which were suppressed with stocks and imprisonment in dungeons (Gómez Urdáñez, 2004, p. 69). However, their resistance was not limited to the prison environment. Many women went to court to demand the release of their husbands or the return of their property. Gómez Alfaro reports that the authorities even prohibited Roma women from going to court to litigate, given the volume of claims filed (Gómez Alfaro, 2005, p. 210). This judicial resistance, combined with riots and escapes, shows that women were a central player in the fight against general imprisonment.

The pardon process was slow and biased. Partial releases began in 1763 and accelerated in 1765, but many remained imprisoned until 1768. The class logic was evident: the poorest were released first because there were no assets to return to them, while those who owned property saw their assets fall into the hands of third parties (Martínez, 2011, p. 464). The release did not mean an orderly return either. Many women who had been imprisoned in Zaragoza did not know where their husbands and children were, as they had been dispersed among different arsenals and depots (Gómez Alfaro, 2005, pp. 209–210). Some had rebuilt their lives during the long separation, reflecting the extent to which the Round-up had broken up family structures (Gómez Urdáñez, 2004, p. 69). Added to this was the practical difficulty of travelling hundreds of kilometres on the unsafe roads of the 18th century, which greatly complicated reunions (Martínez, 2011, pp. 463–464).

The toll was devastating. Hundreds died in the early years, victims of hunger, disease, or exhaustion. In La Misericordia de Zaragoza, outbreaks of scabies and mortality reached extremely high levels (Gómez Urdáñez, 2004, p. 67). In the arsenals, hospital records show constant admissions of Roma who were ill due to unsanitary conditions and overcrowding (Martínez, 2011, p. 452). The intention to exterminate resulted in massive deterioration of life, the destruction of families and cultural uprooting. As Gómez Alfaro recalls, the Round-up was "a failure in its assimilation objectives, but a success in the destruction of lives" (1993, p. 101).

2.3. Repressive continuities and surveillance (19th–20th centuries)

The release of the last prisoners of the Great Round-up between 1763 and 1768 did not mean the end of the persecution of the Romani people, but rather its reconfiguration. The shift at the end of the 18th and 19th centuries was articulated less in large Round-up and more in policies of forced assimilation, nominal erasure, and permanent surveillance. The Pragmatic Sanction of 1783 (Charles III) is decisive: it starts by denying specificity—it refers to "those formerly known as Roma"—and formats the mandate of assimilation by demanding that they "abandon their language, dress and manners" in order to be treated "like other vassals" (Gómez Alfaro, 2005, p. 317). The text itself defines the "price" of this supposed equality: "the abandonment of language, dress and manners, the whole edifice supported by progressive punishment according to the degree of acculturation achieved" (Gómez Alfaro, 2005, p. 317). In short, the law erases the name and punishes the signs.

This erasure is combined with a singular form of identification punishment: branding with the seal of Castile. The pragmatic mandate is to "imprint with a hot iron on the backs of those who do not abandon their dress, language or manners a small seal with the arms of Castile" (Gómez Alfaro, 2005, p. 303). The text even regulates the severity of the punishment: "I commute this punishment of branding for now and for the first offence to death... and cutting off the ears" (art. 15); and it culminates with the lethal threshold: "once the branding has been verified... in the event of a repeat offence, the death penalty shall be imposed without fail; and thus it shall be carried out only with the recognition of the seal and proof of having returned to their previous life" (art. 20) (Gómez Alfaro, 2005, p. 318). This provision converts cultural persistence (language, dress, manners) into a bodily offence and, ultimately, into a capital offence.

In terms of gender, the design did not exclude women ("in principle, Roma women were not excluded... from this type of branding"), but Council resolutions gave rise to a practice of exemption "due to the delicacy of their sex", based on cases such as that of Estremera, which "will give rise to case law favouring the general exclusion of women" from branding (Gómez Alfaro, 2005, p. 303). Repressive paternalism does not abolish punishment, but it does alter its form on the female body.

At the turn of the 19th century, even as progress was made in abolishing stigmatising marks, the Roma exception persisted: a circular in Barcelona (25 November 1807) "abolished... the mark in general" but maintained it as an exception for the Roma (Gómez Alfaro, 2005, p. 304). The mark thus became a reserved punishment that singled out and stigmatised.

The pragmatic measure was not limited to branding: it also established the grammar of assimilation. Article 10 established that those who "abandoned their language, dress and manners, taking up residence and applying themselves to a trade" would be "prosecuted and punished like other vassals" (Gómez Alfaro, 2005, p. 317). This passage crystallises the leitmotif of the period: to legally confuse the general population with cultural denial. In terms of territorial control, a regime of neighbourhood and settlement is maintained with criteria of population size and surveillance of movements inherited from 17th-century regulations (stable residence, trades, and registers), documented in compilations from that century and in subsequent case law; thus, regulation pushes towards larger centres under the control of local authorities, restricting mobility and dispersion in small villages (Los gitanos en el siglo XVII, 2006, pp. 2–6).

While the legal discourse speaks of 'equality' and 'confusion' ('like other vassals'), administrative and judicial practice continues to name and persecute the Roma subject. The documentation offers clear examples: the Council orders the enlistment of a teenager, "with the warning that he should not be named or insulted with the label of Roma, vagrant, or any other offensive term" (Gómez Alfaro, 2005, p. 305). In Girona, a family is arrested "speaking gibberish and wearing the clothes and manners formerly used by those who called themselves Roma", with minors being sent to the hospice (Gómez Alfaro, 2005, p. 305). And in Almería, a man is condemned to the seal "for having been a Roma, or new Castilian", a formula that combines the prohibition of the name with its operational persistence (Gómez Alfaro, 2005, p. 304). These three documents show the double language: erasing the name in the norm, preserving the difference in the files.

This double language is reinforced in the registers and files of the 19th century. Bernard Leblon records how, in municipal lists and police files, 'Roma' was formally replaced by 'new Castilians' or 'new countrymen' but coexisted with the common use of 'Roma' in notes and controls (Leblon, 1993, pp. 22–25, 35–40). In other words, archival technology operates by both erasing and pointing out.

In the punitive sphere, the mark survives in combination with other penalties (branding + imprisonment/labour), with a plasticity reminiscent of the logic of dangerousness in the late 19th century: for example, the Royal Court of Aragon reported in 1787 on several cases in which the "penalty of branding" had been carried out; and the Court in Catalonia also ordered that the issuance of passports to "such classes of people" be tightened (Gómez Alfaro, 2005, p. 304). The Royal Court of Seville clarified that it did not apply the mark 'only' for going to fairs and markets but did so when it was 'combined with crimes of theft', making being Roma an aggravating factor (Gómez Alfaro, 2005, p. 304). These elastic practices sustained a long-standing criminal profile: cultural identity = suspicion.

The 19th century did not dissolve this repertoire: it administered it. Control of settlements, the requirement of neighbourhood and trade, limitations on mobility through passports, and monitoring in registers of "new Castilians" as a label of forced integration were maintained (Los gitanos en el siglo XVII, 2006, pp. 2–6; Leblon, 1993, pp. 22–25, 35–40). The aim was not so much to recognise a difference as to absorb it into the abstract category of "vassal" or "citizen", punishing any persistence of language, dress, or occupation.

By the first third of the 20th century, the doctrinal garb had changed, but not the logic. The *Revista Técnica de la Guardia Civil* (1910–1933) revives old clichés in criminological language: "Roma criminality", dangerousness, vagrancy; it legitimises raids and checks at fairs and on roads (Buhigas Jiménez, 2024, p. 12). With the Vagrancy and Delinquency Act (1933), the state had an instrument that allowed it to punish individuals labelled as antisocial for being "dangerous", with Roma appearing as the preferred target of internment and displacement measures. Thus, modern criminal law did not dismantle the legacy of 1633/1783, but rather translated it into a law of dangerousness: the prohibition of the name, the mark, and the mandate to "blend in" with others persisted in the form of surveillance and profiling.

In short, the sequence 1633–1783–19th/20th centuries show a repressive continuity that oscillates between erasing the name (denying that they are a distinct people) and marking the body (stamp, brand, or traces in files). After the Great Round-up, the mechanism did not cease: it was recalibrated to conceal persecution under the promise of legal equality, on the impossible condition of renouncing the language, dress and trades that sustained collective life (Gómez Alfaro, 2005, pp. 303–305, 317–318; Leblon, 1993, pp. 22–25, 35–40; Los gitanos en el siglo XVII, 2006, pp. 2–6; Buhigas Jiménez, 2024, p. 12).

2.4. Francoism: cultural repression and administrative disappearance

Francoism inherited centuries of anti-Roma legislation and 19th-century police mechanisms and rearticulated them under a new language: that of social defence, National Catholicism and an obsession with national homogeneity. The dictatorship constructed a dual mechanism: on the one hand, the systematic criminalisation of real Roma; on the other, the 'folklorisation' and appropriation of their cultural symbols as part of the 'Marca España' (Spanish Brand). This duality—social repression and symbolic exaltation—defined the relationship between Francoism and the Roma people.

On a legal level, the regime relied on instruments inherited from the Republic and late liberalism. The Vagrancy Act of 1933, which had already been used against Roma, was reformed in 1954 and applied more harshly. Under the dictatorship, this law was used

to punish people without a fixed address, street vendors or itinerant day labourers, categories into which Roma were systematically placed. Later, the 1970 Law on Dangerousness and Social Rehabilitation formally replaced the LVM but maintained the same logic of criminalising "dangerousness" before crime. As Río-Ruiz points out, the LVM and the LPRS functioned as a "para-criminal" framework that allowed for the internment, eviction, and transfer of Roma families in the 1960s and 1970s (Río-Ruiz, 2020, p. 64). García Sanz agrees, describing the LPRS as a tool that prolonged ethicised control under the guise of prevention (2018, pp. 215–218).

The most explicit mechanism was the 1943 Civil Guard Regulations, which in articles 4–6 ordered officers to "scrupulously monitor Roma, checking their documents, clothing and way of life and gathering all necessary information about them" (García Sanz, 2018, p. 221). This mandate, which remained in force until its repeal in 1978 (García Sanz, 2018, p. 229), made the mere status of being a Romani person sufficient grounds for police surveillance. This was the clearest continuation of the original function of the Civil Guard in the 19th century: the control of roads, fairs, and itinerant trades. The order also translated into specific practices. In Valladolid, in 1968, the antigypsyism or 'safe conduct passes' that Roma needed to travel from one town to another were officially abolished; but in 1976, amid rumours of the presence of El Lute, the police arrested and preventively imprisoned all adult Roma from a shanty town settlement (Río-Ruiz, 2020, pp. 66–68). These episodes show how, despite cosmetic reforms, ethnic surveillance remained the norm until the end of the regime.

Francoism also deployed urban policies that contributed to spatial segregation. The rehousing of Roma families evicted from caves or shacks was not directed towards integrated housing, but towards segregated neighbourhoods on the outskirts. In Cartagena, Lo Campano and Los Mateos are paradigmatic examples: concentrated rehousing areas, without adequate facilities and heavily stigmatised, resulting from late Francoist housing policies (Viedma Guiard & Álvarez de Andrés, 2023, pp. 6–12). In these cases, urban policy was an extension of repression: families were removed from central areas and 'relocated' to spaces of exclusion.

Cultural repression operated in parallel. National Catholicism prohibited or restricted itinerant trades, nomadic practices, street vending and any cultural expression considered dissident. Roma was made invisible in official statistics: there were no categories that named them in censuses or registers, and any reference to them appeared under euphemisms such as "vagrants" or "habitual criminals." Franco's policy consisted of making them administratively invisible and hyper visible to the police (Jiménez, 2022).

The most obvious contradiction of the regime was that, while repressing real Roma life, it appropriated their cultural symbols as national symbols. Flamenco, traditionally

associated with Andalusian Roma, was elevated to "national art," becoming an emblem of tourism and foreign propaganda. As Rothea has documented, Francoism constructed the figure of the 'good Roma', domesticated and folklorised, who embodied the essence of Spanish-ness at festivals, international fairs, and official shows (Rothea, 2014, pp. 153–160). This process involved the appropriation of Roma costume, dance, and music, which became part of the repertoire of the 'Marca España' (Spanish Brand).

Rafael Buhigas has emphasised that the dictatorship exported abroad the image of the Roma woman dancing flamenco, which became a stereotype of exoticism and national vitality (Buhigas Jiménez, 2024, pp. 18–20). The paradox was evident: while real Roma families were harassed at fairs and in neighbourhoods with evictions, internments and raids, their cultural symbols and were exploited to attract tourists and reinforce the myth of an authentic and joyful Spain. Roma culture became an advertising resource, but not a subject of rights.

Franco's repression also manifested itself in gender terms. The Patronato of Protection to Women (1941–1985), the body responsible for controlling and disciplining women considered to be "wayward", included Roma women among its main targets. A letter from 1970 justified the internment of a young woman by stating that "she is a Roma and that is enough," adding that Roma women were "beings beyond redemption" (La Vanguardia, 2025). This example reflects how Francoism intersected sexism and racism, constructing Roma women as doubly dangerous and irredeemable, and reinforcing the breakdown of family ties through forced internment.

In short, Francoism did not invent antigypsyism, but it modernised it. It replaced the old pragmatic measures with laws on social danger, exile with segregated rehousing, the seal of Castile with police lists, and galleys with controlled shanty towns. Under the guise of formal equality, it erased Roma from official records, while making them a prime target for the police. At the same time, it exploited their cultural symbols—flamenco, traditional dress, dance—as a sign of national identity. Franco's Spain presented itself to the world with a Roma face, while keeping real Roma on the margins, criminalised, and excluded.

2.5. Democratic transition and legal inequality

The end of the dictatorship and the adoption of the 1978 Constitution seemed to open up a horizon of equality for all citizens. However, in the case of the Roma people, the democratic transition consolidated more continuities than ruptures. Although particularly discriminatory provisions, such as Articles 4–6 of the Civil Guard Regulations, were repealed, the structure of legal and social inequality remained virtually intact.

The first symbolic victory came in the political arena. In 1977, Juan de Dios Ramírez-Heredia became the first Romani member of parliament, elected on the UCD ticket. From his seat, he openly denounced legal discrimination, especially that contained in the 1943 Civil Guard Regulations, which ordered officers to "scrupulously monitor Romani people" simply because of their status. In 1978, he presented a non-legislative proposal demanding its repeal, pointing out that the permanence of these articles was incompatible with the new constitutional framework (Buhigas Jiménez, 2024, pp. 18–19). Parliamentary pressure soon bore fruit with the elimination of the clauses that expressly criminalised Roma (García Sanz, 2018, p. 229). The transition, therefore, removed the direct reference, but not the practices of selective surveillance.

Criminal law on dangerousness continued to operate as a direct legacy of Francoism. The 1970 Law on Dangerousness and Social Rehabilitation, successor to the Vagrancy and Delinquency Law, remained in force until 1995, and during the years of the Transition it continued to be applied to Roma considered "anti-social" (García Sanz, 2018, pp. 215–218). This legislation allowed for internment, control measures and evictions under the principle of prevention, without the need for proven criminality. The 1978 Constitution proclaimed formal equality but did not recognise Roma as a minority or offer measures to protect them from structural discrimination. In censuses, Roma continued not to appear as a recognisable category, prolonging their administrative invisibility.

Education became a central arena where formal equality clashed with practices of segregation. From the mid-1970s onwards, so-called bridge schools were promoted, designed to educate Roma children in separate classrooms with the promise of subsequent integration. In practice, these measures institutionalised exclusion and reinforced stereotypes of "backwardness" or "inability" to share classrooms with non-Roma. During the 1980s, neighbourhood resistance revealed the harshness of social antigypsyism.

The most paradigmatic case was that of the Severo Ochoa school in Leganés in January 1985, when 35 Roma children were escorted by the police in order to gain access to the school. For weeks, non-Roma families blocked the entrance, demonstrations took place, and even a bomb threat forced the school to close (Río Ruiz, 2018, pp. 181–183). Nogués Sáez has reconstructed the immediate origin in Vicálvaro (1984), where the expansion of a Roma settlement provoked a reaction from the neighbourhood: racist pamphlets circulated in the neighbourhood, signatures were collected and traffic blockades were organised in protest against the enrolment of 34 Roma children at Severo Ochoa itself (Nogués Sáez, 2010, pp. 169–173). Rafael Buhigas places this episode in a broader cycle of urban harassment, where institutions ended up supporting the non-Roma protesters instead of ensuring integration (Buhigas Jiménez, 2024, pp. 14–15). In Vicálvaro, a

perimeter ditch was even dug around the Roma settlement, a literal symbol of spatial segregation (Buhigas Jiménez, 2024, p. 15).

These episodes in the 1980s were not exceptional, but rather a continuation of the collective violence that had already erupted in the late Franco era and persisted during the Transition. As Río Ruiz has documented, there were recurrent riots in Andalusia that led to permanent expulsions: Torredelcampo in 1971, Torredonjimeno in 1984, Martos in 1986 and Mancha Real in 1991. In most cases, the Roma were expelled from their homes, their houses were set on fire, and they were prevented from returning, while the courts dismissed the cases and the police barely intervened (Río Ruiz, 2005, pp. 44–47). Anti-Roma violence was carried out with impunity, and democracy did not substantially change this pattern.

At the same time, housing policy continued to reproduce inequalities. Rehousing in peripheral industrial estates, inherited from the plans of the late Franco era, consolidated spatial segregation. In Madrid, Vicálvaro and El Pozo del Tío Raimundo became enclaves of Roma poverty, as Nogués Sáez has shown in his study on residential exclusion (2010, pp. 169–173). Roma families moved from shanty towns to peripheral blocks of flats without any improvement in their marginalised conditions.

Faced with this reality, the first forms of resistance and collective organisation emerged. In the 1980s, local and national Roma associations were created, such as the Unión Romaní (1986), which denounced school segregation and employment discrimination. There were also demonstrations in defence of equal schooling conditions, such as the protests against bridge schools in Burjassot (1986) and Campanillas (1988–1989) (Río Ruiz, 2018, p. 185). Ramírez-Heredia's presence in Parliament provided a political reference point, but the daily struggle took place mainly in neighbourhoods and schools.

In short, the Transition opened up spaces for participation and eliminated the most blatant legal remnants, such as the Civil Guard Regulations, but left the structures of inequality intact. The lack of recognition as an ethnic minority, the persistence of dangerousness laws, school segregation and urban violence reveal that Roma continued to be marginalised from citizenship. The myth of democracy as a break with the past is nuanced here: for Roma, it was more a continuation with new languages. Administrative invisibility and social repression coexisted with the symbolic appropriation of Roma culture in the national imagination, consolidating a contradiction that still weighs heavily on effective equality today.

3. Contemporary manifestations of Antigypsyism

Any analysis of antigypsyism in Spain today must start from a clear premise: we are not dealing with a mere set of prejudices or isolated incidents, but with a specific form of racism that is structural and ideological in nature. Literature has defined it as a persistent system, deeply rooted in European history, which combines institutional practices, cultural narratives, and social dynamics to keep the Romani community in a position of subordination (End, 2016; Tremlett, 2014; Cortés, 2019). Far from being a marginal expression, antigypsyism operates as an ideology of hatred: a framework that classifies Roma as an essentially problematic group and legitimises their exclusion (Matache, 2017; Rövid, 2011).

As we have argued elsewhere, antigypsyism must be understood in two interconnected dimensions: on the one hand, as a structural system that organises relations between the majority and the Roma minority through laws, policies, and institutional practices; and, on the other, as a cultural and symbolic logic that legitimises this exclusion through historical narratives of criminalisation, exoticisation or paternalism (Molina & James, forthcoming). This dual condition makes it a unique ideology: it cannot be described simply as racism, as it incorporates elements of radical othering—the construction of the Roma as an incompatible other—and historical exceptionalism, which differentiate it from other racist systems in Europe (Kóczé, 2018; End, 2016).

The European Parliament has recognised it as "a specific form of racism, deeply rooted in social structures and manifested in institutional, social and everyday life" (European Parliament, 2017, p. 3). This recognition is key because it shifts the focus from individual prejudices to the structures that produce and reproduce them. In the case of Spain, the legacy of antigypsyism spans centuries of persecutory legislation and is reflected in current policies of school and residential segregation, explaining why the Roma community continues to face disproportionate rates of poverty, segregation, and discrimination (FRA, 2022; Roma Civil Monitor, 2022).

This section precisely addresses these current manifestations. In the following sections, we will examine how antigypsyism is expressed today in housing, education, employment, health, justice and the public sphere, as well as in phenomena of collective violence and the differential impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. These areas do not function independently: they form a network of structural mechanisms that reinforce each other and consolidate a regime of persistent inequality. Analysing them is a necessary step towards understanding the prevalence of antigypsyism as an ideology of hate and laying the foundations for its dismantling.

3.1. Contemporary structural manifestations

Contemporary antigypsyism in Spain is not the sum of isolated incidents, but a system of domination that is reproduced over time through institutions, norms, and social practices. It is expressed in the city — through residential segregation —, in schools — with low expectations and early dropouts —, in the labour market—through ethnic filters and precariousness—in health—through a combination of poverty and institutional racism—in justice—through under-reporting and biased jurisprudence—and in the public sphere—where narratives associating Romani identity with marginality persist. The European Union itself has recognised that this is a specific and structural form of racism, deeply rooted and present in everyday life. The indicators speak for themselves: a risk of poverty well above the average, extraordinarily high rates of early school leaving and exposure to discrimination in key areas such as housing, employment, education, and health. These are not isolated failures, but rather a network that produces and legitimises inequality. (European Parliament, 2017, p. 3; FRA, 2022; Roma Civil Monitor, 2022; FSG, 2023).

Housing and residential segregation

Housing is a prime area for observing the materiality of antigypsyism. Although classic shanty towns have been reduced and there are rehousing programmes, renewed forms of segregation persist: poorly connected suburbs, concentrated social housing estates and environments with poor services. Numerous rehousing programmes have generated what neighbours and experts refer to as "vertical shanty towns": stigmatised blocks with high turnover, poor maintenance, and limited opportunities. The geography of stigma operates like a "labelling postcode": the address acts as a social and, often, ethnic marker. (Ministry of Health, 2015; Cortés, Caro & Motos, 2019, p. 47; Laparra & García, 2011, p. 82).

Direct discrimination in access to rental housing is superimposed on this structural basis. Landlords and agencies reject Roma families without always hiding it; in other cases, they use formally neutral excuses that mask their bias. The result is a cycle that restricts residential mobility, concentrates poverty, and fuels the stigmatisation of the neighbourhood. r public policy has tended to measure progress by the reduction of substandard housing, but the key lies in the quality of the environment: connectivity, social mix, services, safety, and symbolic recognition. Without these elements, segregation is reproduced even if the building materials change. (FSG, 2022, p. 37; Ministry of Equality, 2024; Cortés, Caro & Motos, 2019).

Residential segregation also has knock-on effects: it increases transport costs for employment, reduces relational capital with mixed networks and penalises educational continuity. Stigmatised neighbourhoods act as a preliminary filter in recruitment and as

a justification for segregated practices in schools, closing the circle of disadvantage. (Laparra & García, 2011; Cortés, Caro & Motos, 2019).

Education: mechanisms of segregation and dropout

Education clearly illustrates the structural logic: almost universal primary schooling, but a sharp drop in continuity as students' progress through their academic careers. The gap is not circumstantial or attributable to individual "cultural choices"; it responds to mechanisms of segregation that operate on three levels. (FSG, 2023; ISEAK & FSG, 2019; Molina, 2020).

First, inter-school segregation: concentration of Roma pupils in certain public schools, often in peripheral neighbourhoods, with fewer resources, higher teacher turnover and low expectations as the norm. This pattern is reinforced by the "white flight": non-Roma families who opt for subsidised private schools or residential/administrative mobility when they perceive a high Roma presence. (Molina, 2020; Laparra & García, 2011).

Second, intra-school segregation: the creation or over-representation of Roma pupils in programmes such as compensatory or diversification classrooms, which become devalued pathways. Under the discourse of "adaptation", learning ceilings are set and an impoverished curriculum is normalised. (Molina, 2020).

Third, intra-class segregation: differences in treatment and expectations within the classroom—assignment of less demanding tasks, benevolent assessment that does not enable real progression, tolerance of low participation. All of this sends a message that, when repeated, becomes a social learning: "your place" is not that of a trajectory comparable to the average. Segregation not only distributes students; it teaches hierarchies. (Molina & James, forthcoming).

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated pre-existing gaps: prolonged disconnection due to lack of devices or connectivity, homes unsuitable for study, and a return to face-to-face learning with accumulated learning losses. Where schools were already operating with low expectations, recovery was slower. Institutional responses—curricular materials on Romani history and culture, educational support programmes—have had positive impacts for some students, but they are insufficient without active desegregation policies: admission criteria that promote social mixing, rebalancing of resources, school transport, and partnerships with families that break the dynamic of mutual distrust. (Ministry of Health, 2021, p. 23; FRA, 2022, p. 18; FSG, 2020, p. 12; Ministry of Education, 2022; Roma Civil Monitor, 2022).

The gender dimension adds layers of inequality. Many girls take on caregiving responsibilities earlier and experience role pressures that strain educational continuity.

An intersectional approach—gender, class, ethnicity, territory—is essential to understanding why female dropout may occur earlier in certain contexts and, at the same time, why new generations of Roma women are emerging who are breaking barriers, often facing resistance both within and outside the community. (Fakali, 2021).

Employment: ethnic filters and precariousness

The labour market shows a consistent pattern: high unemployment rates, low stability, and a concentration in temporary or informal occupations. The usual explanation – "lack of qualifications" – is only part of the story. Education matters, but racism in hiring operates as a preliminary filter that invalidates comparable merits. Two mechanisms stand out. (ISEAK & FSG, 2019; CEDRE, 2022).

On the one hand, identity markers: surnames associated with the Roma community and addresses in stigmatised neighbourhoods trigger selection biases. The screening takes place before the interview, without a paper trail and with an appearance of neutrality. On the other hand, there is spatial penalisation: residential segregation, combined with poor connectivity, reduces the effective search radius, and increases the cost of integration (CEDRE, 2022; Cortés, Caro & Motos, 2019).

The consequence is forced occupational specialisation: street vending, material recovery, seasonal agricultural work, and high-turnover service jobs. Far from being a "cultural preference", these are adaptive strategies in the face of a market that closes doors. Even when formal employment is accessed, glass ceilings are palpable: underpromotion, unwanted part-time contracts and persistent stigma in relationships with customers and teams. (Del Pozo, 2006; ISEAK & FSG, 2019).

Roma women bear the burden of double discrimination. They have lower activity rates, are more likely to be in unstable jobs and find it difficult to reconcile rigid working hours with care responsibilities. The emergence of role models with higher levels of education coexists with experiences of explicit rejection in selection processes and microaggressions in the workplace. (ISEAK & FSG, 2019; Fakali, 2021).

Active community-based policies—labour mediation, contextualised training, business awareness—have proven partially effective, but they are no substitute for robust anti-discrimination policies: inspection, sanctions, positive action, and monitoring of gaps in promotion and pay. Without this, employment continues to reproduce poverty and limit related rights (housing, health, education), with intergenerational impacts. (FSG, 2020; European Commission, 2022).

Health: poverty, institutional racism and violated bodies

The health gap summarises the human cost of structural antigypsyism. Lower income and poorer housing conditions lead to poorer health: more comorbidities, earlier onset of chronic diseases and lower life expectancy. Overcrowding increases respiratory and infectious risks; chronic stress associated with precariousness and stigma deteriorates mental health; malnutrition and unsafe work multiply vulnerabilities.

The difference in life expectancy is one of the most striking indicators. Official studies estimate the gap between 8 and 15 years less for the Roma population compared to the Spanish average (Ministry of Health, 2014, p. 6). In Galicia, SERGAS itself acknowledged in 2024 that Roma people live between 8 and 10 years less than the rest of the population (Europa Press, 2024). These figures place the situation of the Roma community at levels comparable to those of countries with lower socio-economic development within Europe, showing how structural racism translates into a "biopolitics of inequality": Roma bodies pay for precariousness and exclusion with years of their lives.

Added to this material dimension is institutional racism in healthcare. The Roma population uses fewer preventive services and attends emergency departments more often, not only because of a lack of knowledge, but also because of mistrust: repeated experiences of unequal treatment, lack of understandable information, biased communication, and stereotypes during clinical contact (Ministry of Health, 2014, p. 23; ERTF, 2016, p. 29). In the field of obstetrics, testimonies from Roma women have highlighted violence and paternalism: denial of support, non-consensual medicalisation, and dehumanising comments ("you give birth like rabbits") (Agüero, 2017; El Salto, 2017).

The pandemic amplified this equation: greater exposure due to living and working conditions, worse outcomes due to comorbidities and, at the same time, discourse that stigmatised Roma neighbourhoods as "hotspots of infection" (Rodríguez, 2021; El Salto, 2020). In some municipalities, selective lockdowns were imposed on Roma areas before general measures were enacted, justifying them on the grounds of an alleged "exceptional health risk" (Amaro-Agudo, Martínez-Heredia & González-Gijón, 2021). These dynamics fit in with the racial securitisation described at the European level: in crisis contexts, the Roma population is treated as a "risk vector" (Valero et al., 2021).

Some health mediation initiatives with Roma promoters have improved adherence to preventive programmes and navigation of the system, such as in Galicia, where seven Roma women were hired as health promoters in 2024 (Europa Press, 2024). However, these remain pilot projects. The key lies in institutionalising the intercultural perspective: mandatory training on bias, quality indicators with a focus on equity, community participation in the design of mechanisms, and real accessibility (schedules, language, transport).

Justice: legal recognition without effective protection

In the judicial sphere, regulatory advances coexist with deficits in protection. Antigypsyism has been included in the law as a specific category (Law 15/2022) and since 2019 incidents have been recorded as hate crimes (Ministry of the Interior, 2019). However, underreporting persists: according to the Discrimination Survey (Ministry of Equality, 2024), three out of ten Roma reported having suffered or witnessed racism in the last year, but only 17% of cases were reported. The main reasons were the belief that "it will not help" (23.8%) and the normalisation of racism ("it is commonplace", 28.7%).

Unequal access to justice is exacerbated by a lack of resources. A large part of the community depends on legal aid, which limits their ability to choose a defence or sustain lengthy proceedings (CEDRE, 2022). This asymmetry reinforces the perception that it is not worth litigating.

At the same time, case law shows serious shortcomings. Although official reports show an increase in cases—22 incidents classified as anti-Roma in 2022, 22% more than in 2021 (Ministry of the Interior, 2023, p. 13)—the number is misleading: many are treated as disorderly conduct or threats without recognising the racist motivation. The lack of firm sentences for antigypsyism fuels impunity.

Worse still, some courts reproduce racist stereotypes. The case of the Provincial Court of León (2024) is paradigmatic: the sentence for the continued sexual abuse of a Roma minor was reduced on the grounds that early marriages are common in "Roma culture" (RTVE, 2024; El Salto, 2024). This interpretation not only leaves the victim unprotected, but also creates a parallel law that relativises violence when it affects Roma girls. The campaign #LasNiñasGitanasNiñasSon (Roma girls are girls), promoted by activists and lawyers, denounced this bias, emphasising that such rulings legitimise violence (Vargas, 2024).

These rulings reinforce the cycle of mistrust: if going to court does not guarantee protection, the community chooses not to report; and by not reporting, the institutional idea that there are "no" cases of antigypsyism is reinforced. The literature on institutional racism reminds us that it is enough to apply seemingly neutral rules from positions steeped in prejudice to generate inequality (Mbote & Jiménez-Sánchez, 2020).

Some measures seek to reverse this dynamic: Law 15/2022, the reactivation of CEDRE and the review of judicial training criteria following the controversial León ruling (El Español, 2025). However, without clear protocols or mandatory training for judges and prosecutors, regulatory advances risk remaining a dead letter. Breaking this cycle requires educational jurisprudence that recognises antigypsyism as an autonomous and punishable category, as well as resources so that victims perceive justice not as a space for revictimization, but for effective protection.

Pogroms and collective violence: ethnic punishment in democracy

Collective violence against Roma families—neighbourhood attacks, house fires, expulsions—is not a relic of the past. From time to time, it reappears as a "local conflict" following a criminal act attributed to members of the community. The pattern repeats itself: rumour or trigger, neighbourhood mobilisation, violence against property and homes, forced displacement and delayed or insufficient institutional response. The disciplinary message is clear: collective punishment for identity. (Río Ruiz, 2003; Jiménez & Sánchez, 2010).

These episodes are part of a longer genealogy that associates "defence of the people" with the expulsion of Roma. What is new today is its articulation with digital environments: audio recordings and messages in local chains calling for lynching or pointing out addresses. When the institutional response is not immediate and forceful—public condemnation, protection of victims, investigation, and classification as a collective hate crime—impunity reinforces the possibility of repetition. (Andalusian Protocol against Antigypsyism, 2024).

Pogroms represent the extreme end of a continuum: from stigmatising jokes and headlines to attacks and displacement. They remind us that the democratic legal framework is not enough if there are no effective guarantees on the ground and if political and media discourse fuels the climate that legitimises them. (Cârstocea, 2020).

Media, political and digital discourse

The public sphere continues to be a vector for the reproduction of stereotypes. Although openly racist language has become less acceptable, systematic associations between Roma identity and criminality, dependency or disorder persist. Sensationalist television formats exploit narratives of marginality which, under the guise of 'realism', reinforce images of insurmountable difference. (ECRI, 2018, p. 9; Fakali, 2021).

At the political level, the discourse of the far right—and sometimes of local actors—resorts to the classic repertoire: "subsidies," "lack of integration," "failure to comply with rules." This framework legitimises demands for greater police control in Roma neighbourhoods and the adoption of measures which, due to their selectivity, end up being discriminatory even though they are presented as "neutral". (State Council of the Roma People, 2022).

The digital environment amplifies all of this: groups and publications that incite expulsion, rumours that spread rapidly, and campaigns of stigmatisation. At the same time, counter-narratives are emerging from Roma organisations and allies who

challenge the narrative—they highlight achievements, denounce bias, and debunk rumours. The effectiveness of these initiatives increases when they combine communication, legal support, and institutional alliances. (FSG, 2022, p. 55; European Commission, 2022).

COVID-19: multiplier and mirror

The pandemic acted as an amplifier of inequalities and as a "stress test" for the system. Economically, it paralysed subsistence activities (street vending, markets, fairs, material recovery) and left many households without income, with delayed or difficult access to aid due to formal requirements. In education, the digital divide temporarily excluded thousands of students from the learning process, with the greatest impact where segregation already existed. In terms of health, biological vulnerability and access barriers were compounded by stigma: rumours and narratives that portrayed Roma neighbourhoods as hotspots for infection and justified selective lockdowns. (FSG, 2020; Ministry of Health, 2021; Amaro-Agudo, Martínez-Heredia & González-Gijón, 2021).

In the media, coverage often reproduced the idea of "non-compliance" and "poor hygiene", ignoring the material conditions that prevented strict compliance with the measures. At the institutional level, disproportionate control measures were observed in stigmatised areas. The experience confirmed the central thesis of this chapter: in the face of a crisis, antigypsyism mechanisms are reactivated and legitimised under the guise of "security" or "public health" (Rodríguez, 2021; Valero et al., 2021).

The community response, however, provided lessons learned: neighbourhood support networks, social and health mediation, and the articulation of collective demands. Where administrations involved Roma actors in the design of measures, communication, adherence, and results improved. (El Salto, 2020; Europa Press, 2024).

Analytical conclusion: from formal recognition to substantive equality

The overview of housing, education, employment, health, justice, collective violence, public discourse, and the pandemic leads to an unequivocal conclusion: antigypsyism in today's Spain is structural and systemic. It operates through mutually reinforcing mechanisms: residential segregation reduces educational and employment opportunities; discrimination in employment limits access to housing and social rights; unequal treatment in health care deepens vulnerabilities; judicial practice, when it minimises the racist dimension, consolidates the impunity; public discourse legitimises prejudices that are reflected in selective policies; and episodes of collective violence sanction ethnic belonging as a risk.

The thread that connects them is collective responsibility: Roma people are blamed for their situation — "they don't value school," "they don't want to work," "they don't take care of themselves," "they don't comply" — shifting the focus away from the structures that produce inequality. This narrative naturalises exclusion and deactivates the public obligation to combat it. (Mbote & Jiménez-Sánchez, 2020).

There have been important regulatory and programmatic advances—legal recognition of antigypsyism, regional protocols, educational and employment support programmes, health mediation experiences—but their impact will remain limited if they are not transformed into operational changes on a large scale and with high standards:

- Residential and school desegregation: social mixing plans, school transport and mobility, rebalancing of resources, rehabilitation with neighbourhood participation, and admission criteria that prevent the concentration of vulnerability. (Government of Spain, 2021; Andalusian Protocol against Antigypsyism, 2024).
- Anti-discrimination labour policy: effective inspection and sanctions, positive action, monitoring of gaps and internal promotion, and explicit recognition of markers of indirect discrimination (surnames, addresses). (European Commission, 2022; CEDRE, 2022).
- Health with a focus on equity: mandatory training on bias, quality indicators with protected ethnic variables and stable community participation mechanisms; consolidation of health mediation. (ERTF, 2016; Europa Press, 2024).
- Guaranteed justice: protocols to identify and classify antigypsyism, training for legal practitioners, specialised units and the production of case law that sets standards. (Law 15/2022; Ministry of the Interior, 2019).
- Responsible public sphere: commitment by the media and administrations to combat sensationalism, support for counter-narrative campaigns and rapid response to hoaxes and hate speech; early intervention in response to calls for violence, including in digital environments. (ECRI, 2018; European Commission, 2022; FSG, 2022).

Only then will legal recognition cease to be a symbolic label and begin to function as an interpretative category that guides concrete decisions. The aim is not to "integrate" the Roma community into structures that continue to reproduce inequality, but to transform those structures so that equality is substantive and not merely formal.

This diagnosis sets the stage for section 3.2, which is devoted to the legal and political framework: there we will assess the consistency between the commitments of the State and European institutions and the policies actually implemented, identifying the turning points needed to deactivate the system of antigypsyism described in this chapter.

3.2. Recent regulatory and political advances: from the Zero Law to the Pact against Antigypsyism

Recent years have seen a change of cycle in the way the Spanish state deals with antigypsyism. After centuries of institutional invisibility, this racism has been named a structural problem for the first time, and specific legal and political instruments have been designed to combat it. Three milestones mark this process: the approval of the Zero Law, the adoption of the National Strategy 2021–2030, and the creation of the State Pact against Antigypsyism.

The Comprehensive Law for Equal Treatment and Non-Discrimination (Law 15/2022, of 12 July) responded to the need to bring the Spanish framework into line with European regulations, expressly prohibiting any form of discrimination and establishing an independent supervisory authority. However, what was truly historic was the simultaneous approval of Organic Law 6/2022, which reformed the Criminal Code to include the term antigypsyism as a punishable motive in hate crimes. With this, Articles 22.4 and 510 of the Criminal Code explicitly recognise for the first time that hatred against Roma is a specific and punishable form of racism. The measure was approved with broad consensus and symbolised, in the words of Beatriz Carrillo, that "antigypsyism will no longer go unpunished in this country" (Congress of Deputies, 2023b, p. 15). Sara Giménez added that naming antigypsyism in criminal law meant recognising "a history of hatred that has spanned centuries" (Congress of Deputies, 2023b, p. 7). This was not just a technical adjustment, but a political gesture of reparation that broke with decades of institutional omission.

Shortly before, in November 2021, the Government had approved the National Strategy for Equality, Inclusion and Participation of the Roma People 2021–2030, in compliance with the European framework. Its development was participatory: for a week, thematic round tables were organised with entities from across the country —Unión Romaní, Presencia Gitana, FAGIC, FAKALI, KAMIRA, Fundación Secretariado Gitano, among others— which contributed proposals on education, employment, health, housing, culture, gender and the fight against antigypsyism. The final document articulates three pillars—social inclusion, equal treatment and participation—and sets goals such as halving the discrimination perceived by the Roma population by 2030. The novelty was the explicit recognition that without eradicating structural antigypsyism, there will be no real inclusion. The Strategy, however, was received with caution: organisations denounced the absence of a specific budget and the lack of robust evaluation mechanisms, which opened up the possibility of repeating the experience of previous plans that remained on paper (Fundación Secretariado Gitano, 2023).

The most ambitious step came with the creation, in May 2021, of a parliamentary subcommittee for a State Pact against Antigypsyism and for Roma Inclusion. Between

February and June 2022, six sessions of hearings were held, attended by representatives of the Roma associative movement, academics and institutional authorities. It was an unprecedented moment of institutional listening. Pedro Aguilera, from FAGIC, denounced the persistence of school segregation and called for an urgent plan to combat educational failure among Roma (Congress of Deputies, 2022a). María del Carmen Filigrana, from FAKALI, stressed the need to create a High Commissioner for the Roma People and warned that "without a budget, recognition remains on paper" (Congress of Deputies, 2022b). Juan de Dios Ramírez-Heredia called for the solemn repeal of anti-Roma royal decrees as an act of remembrance and symbolic reparation (Congress of Deputies, 2022a).

The final report, approved in February 2023 and endorsed by the plenary session in March, included these demands in a total of 158 measures. These included: the symbolic repeal of historical anti-Roma legislation; the creation of a Memory Commission; an educational plan against school segregation; the institutionalisation of the intersectional gender perspective; the figure of a High Commissioner for the Roma People; transparency in the management of European funds; and the creation of a Permanent Monitoring Commission. For the first time, Parliament recognised antigypsyism as a specific form of racism and committed, at least on paper, to combating it in a structural manner (Congress of Deputies, 2023a).

However, the pact also revealed its limitations. The Khetane Platform (2023) denounced the absence of a binding budget, pointing out that without resources, "the pact is nothing more than a catalogue of good intentions". The Fundación Secretariado Gitano (2023) criticised the lack of deadlines and compliance indicators, which leaves implementation in the hands of the political will of the moment. Furthermore, the ambiguity regarding the 2021–2030 National Strategy raised questions: which measures belong to the pact and which are part of the strategy? How will the two be coordinated? These criticisms reflect the tension between symbolic progress—the unprecedented visibility of antigypsyism in parliament—and the material debt that remains outstanding.

In short, the cycle between 2021 and 2023 represented a genuine symbolic revolution: antigypsyism was included in the Criminal Code, in a national strategy and in a pact endorsed by Parliament. But the challenge remains to move from formal recognition to actual implementation. As Sara Giménez pointed out, "recognition is a first step, but the Romani people cannot live on recognition alone" (Congress of Deputies, 2023b, p. 7). The true measure of success will not be the passing of laws or agreements, but the ability to translate them into concrete changes in classrooms, in the labour market, in health services and in the daily life of Roma communities.

3.3. The Year of the Roma People (2025): between institutional visibility and social criticism

The Spanish government's declaration of 2025 as the Year of the Roma People was presented as a gesture of high symbolic and historical value. On 7 January, the Council of Ministers approved an institutional declaration linking the anniversary to the 600th anniversary of the documented presence of the Roma people in Spain. The official text conceived it as an opportunity to highlight historical injustices, recognise cultural contributions and reaffirm the democratic commitment to equality and diversity (Ministry of Social Rights, 2025a). The narrative was based on the safe conduct granted in 1425 by Alfonso V of Aragon to Juan and Tomás de Egipto Menor, considered the first documented trace of the Roma presence on the peninsula.

The main manifestation of this declaration was channelled through an official portal of the Ministry of Social Rights, which offers three basic elements: (a) the institutional declaration, (b) an information sheet on the history of the Roma people in Spain, and (c) a calendar of activities (d) that brings together national, regional, and local events (Ministry of Social Rights, 2025b). The historical fact sheet presents an informative summary of the history of the Romani people in the country, highlighting episodes of persecution and resistance alongside cultural contributions.

The calendar of activities was presented as the backbone of the commemoration, but its design has significant limitations. As can be seen from a review, the list is not a specific programme created for the 600th anniversary, but rather a heterogeneous collection of events. It combines some ad hoc initiatives, such as conferences or exhibitions linked to the anniversary, with a considerable number of events that are held annually and are unrelated to the anniversary, such as local fairs, cultural galas or international days (e.g. International Roma Day, 8 April). This strategy, although it increases visibility, dilutes the distinctive character of the commemoration, and makes it difficult to measure what outputs actually derive from the 600th anniversary. Criticism of the calendar, therefore, arises from an analytical review of the official outputs, which reveals the absence of clear criteria for distinguishing between what is new and what is routine.

The commemoration also featured the direct participation of the monarchy, which gave the event the highest institutional status. In April, King Felipe VI presided over a solemn ceremony at the Zarzuela Palace alongside representatives of Roma organisations, where he highlighted the "decisive contribution of the Roma people to Spanish culture" and the need to combat racism. Shortly afterwards, in a speech broadcast on Radio Exterior de España, the monarch again referred to the 600th anniversary as a moment of shared memory and reinforcement of democratic coexistence (RTVE, 2025).

However, a closer look at this speech reveals significant gaps. In his speech entitled "The history of the Roma in Spain is largely unknown", Felipe VI opened with words in Caló —

"fetén" as a greeting and "camelarme" as a linguistic nod — and evoked the figure of Juan de Egipto Menor to symbolically link to the documented origins of the Roma people (RTVE, 2025). He acknowledged contemporary discrimination, alluding to the "rejection, discrimination and negative stereotypes" that Roma still suffer, and mentioned in general terms a "history of persecution and resistance" (RTVE, 2025).

However, after this initial gesture, the speech shifted to abstract acknowledgements: the "social, cultural and linguistic footprint" of the Romani people and the need to make progress in housing, education, and employment. He did not mention specific historical episodes such as the Great Round-up of 1749, nor did he acknowledge the Crown's responsibility in enacting pragmatic measures and prohibitions that sustained the persecution. Nor did he offer an institutional apology. It should also be noted that the King was named patron of the Year of the Romani People, which reinforces the paradox: the institution historically involved in repression now occupies the position of symbolic guarantor without assuming responsibility or redressing grievances. Even in the linguistic sphere, he celebrated the Roma contribution to the Spanish language, but failed to mention the historical prohibition of Caló as an example of cultural violence exercised by those in power. The result is a discourse that conveys goodwill and cultural recognition but avoids institutional self-criticism and shies away from commitments to reparation.

The gap between the institutional narrative and the expectations of civil society has been widely highlighted in public debate. In *El Salto*, Ismael Cortés (2025) argues that the 600th anniversary should serve not only to commemorate the documented arrival of the Roma on the peninsula, but also to address the "blind spots" of Spanish democracy: school segregation, shanty towns and residential exclusion, gaps in health and employment, and underreporting of hate crimes. For Cortés, the anniversary risks becoming an empty gesture if it does not translate into public policies equipped with resources, indicators, and evaluation mechanisms capable of transforming structural Antigypsyism.

Also in *El Salto*, Luis Moreno Campos (2025) interprets the commemoration as a symptom of the continuity of six centuries of denial of the other. According to his reading, the official narrative emphasises cultural recognition while overlooking the systematic nature of historical persecution. His article warns against the danger of whitewashing centuries of repression through a commemoration devoid of material measures and insists on the need for a decolonial approach that places Romani memory at the centre as a tool for political transformation.

In an even more critical tone, the collective column published in *Pikara Magazine* (2025), signed by a group of Roma activists, academics, and leaders, denounces the fact that the institutional declaration was adopted without a real participatory process or a specific

budget allocation. The text argues that the anniversary has been trapped in a celebratory framework dominated by institutions, with no space for Roma voices. With bitter irony, it asks whether it might not rather be "the year of the payas and payos", alluding to how the state's prominence can displace those who should be the central subject of the commemoration. From a feminist and decolonial perspective, the article asserts that any commemoration without historical reparation and structural measures lacks legitimacy.

The balance that emerges from the combination of official outputs, institutional interventions and social criticism is ambivalent. On the one hand, the declaration and associated events have generated an unprecedented level of media and political visibility for the Roma people. The King's speech and media coverage have placed the 600th anniversary prominently on the public agenda.

On the other hand, the absence of a state plan with clear objectives, indicators and a separate budget drastically limits the scope of the commemoration. The dilution of the calendar into an amalgam of new and recurring events detracts from the specificity of the anniversary and makes it difficult to evaluate. Furthermore, the lack of Roma participation in the governance of the process weakens the legitimacy of the commemoration, reinforcing the perception that it is an anniversary designed from above.

In short, the Year of the Roma People 2025 has served to open up a space for memory and symbolic recognition, but without a solid-state roadmap, a separate budget and mechanisms for participation and evaluation, it runs the risk of becoming a commemorative mirage. As critics argue, the challenge is to ensure that the 600th anniversary does not end in a celebratory narrative, but rather serves as a starting point for an agenda of historical justice and structural policies that address persistent inequalities and accumulated debts to the Romani people.

4. Romani action: political, cultural and community resistance

4.1. From silencing to mobilisation: the Roma Associative Movement (1970s–2000s)

Francoism left behind a prolonged political silence surrounding the Romani people. For four decades, there were no legally recognised Romani associations, no visible leaders in the public sphere, and no possibility of articulating collective demands. The regime erased Romani people from official statistics, making them legally invisible, while reinforcing their hypervisibility by the police through regulations and surveillance files. As Nicolás Jiménez summarises, "the Franco dictatorship consolidated a model of administrative invisibility and police hypervisibility" (Jiménez, 2022, p. 145). Within this framework, the Romani community was caught in a antigypsyism trap between the denial of its existence as a minority and its stigmatisation as an object of control.

The democratic transition opened a crack in this silence. The arrival of Juan de Dios Ramírez-Heredia in Congress in 1977 as the first Roma MP represented a landmark moment. His election on the UCD lists had enormous symbolic value: it showed that Roma people could represent themselves in institutions. But it was not just a symbolic gesture. From his seat, Ramírez-Heredia denounced the validity of articles 4–6 of the 1943 Civil Guard Regulations, which required officers to "scrupulously monitor Roma, checking their documents, clothing, and way of life and gathering all necessary information" (García Sanz, 2018, p. 221). In 1978, he promoted a non-binding motion that succeeded in eliminating these articles. As he himself recalls: "We could not accept that democracy should be inaugurated while maintaining articles that criminalised us simply because we were Roma" (Cañete Quesada, 2020, p. 12). This parliamentary victory was, in Jiménez's words, a "founding act of the associative movement" (Jiménez, 2022, p. 146), because it showed that the Romani voice could have a direct impact on state policy.

A parallel episode, less well known but equally decisive, was the first legal demonstration by the Romani people in Spain, held in Madrid on 6 June 1978. Organised by the Romani Development Association, it brought together hundreds of street vendors to protest municipal restrictions on street vending and denounce discrimination. The press described it as a historic event: "the first time that the Romani people publicly exercised their right to demonstrate in a democracy" (El País, 1978). RTVE would revisit this memory in 1992 and 2009, presenting it as the "first Romani strike" (RTVE, 2009). However, this episode has not been integrated into academic historiography, revealing the extent to which the Roma political memory of the Transition remains under-documented. The absence of studies on this protest contrasts with its enormous symbolic value, as it marked the entry of the Roma people into the democratic repertoire of collective mobilisation.

From the late 1970s onwards, local associations emerged in different cities. In Madrid, Presencia Gitana established itself as a pioneering space that linked cultural activism and academic production, thanks to figures such as Antonio Gómez Alfaro. In Zaragoza, the Asociación de Promoción Gitana (Roma Promotion Association), led by Pilar Clavería, promoted literacy and training programmes especially aimed at women. As Esparcia Ortega points out, "literacy and training activities for Roma women were the seed of an autonomous women's movement" (2009, p. 45). These experiences showed that associations were not only emerging as interlocutors with the state, but also as instruments of internal empowerment.

The qualitative leap came in the 1980s. The Unión Romaní, founded in 1986, was the first state-level Roma organisation in democracy. According to Ramírez-Heredia, "the Unión Romaní was born with the desire to be the national voice of the Roma people in Spain and Europe" (Cañete Quesada, 2020, p. 17). Its objective was twofold: to articulate the collective at the national level and to become an interlocutor with the state and European institutions in the context of Spain's entry into the European Economic Community. In 1991, the creation of the Federation of Roma Associations of Catalonia (FAGIC) extended this model to the regional level, federating local associations and adopting a more combative profile. "The FAGIC was a commitment to federate local associations and to turn the fight against discrimination into a collective front" (Jiménez, 2022, p. 147).

However, associationism was not without its tensions. As Ana Mirga warns, "state funding facilitated the creation of associations, but at the same time limited their political autonomy" (2018, p. 96). Many associations were created in connection with welfare programmes run by local councils or religious organisations, which guaranteed resources but imposed frameworks for action defined from outside. As Sarah Werner Boada shows, this "Spanish model of inclusion" turned associations into managers of social projects, reinforcing dependencies rather than dismantling them (2021, pp. 210–215). This paradox defined much of the movement: democracy opened up spaces for association, but under conditions of structural inequality.

Associationism was also a response to everyday discrimination. The 1980s were marked by neighbourhood boycotts of the schooling of Romani children, as in Leganés and Vicálvaro. Pedro Aguilera recalls it this way: the transition was experienced "with enthusiasm, because spaces were opening up, but also with frustration, because changes were slow and social hostility persisted" (RomArchive, 2019). In his words, "many associations emerged in direct response to racist attacks in schools and neighbourhoods" (RomArchive, 2019). Collective organisation was, therefore, a form of defence against exclusion.

The role of Romani women proved crucial. Pilar Clavería's career in Zaragoza is an early example of female leadership. In the 1990s, associations led exclusively by women

emerged, such as Romí in Granada (1990) and Kamira in Córdoba (1999), which focused on girls' education, health, and the fight against structural violence. "These associations focused on girls' education, women's health and the fight against structural violence" (Werner Boada, 2021, pp. 180–185). As Mirga points out, Spanish Romani feminism "does not arise from academic theories, but from the concrete experience of women who face the double oppression of being Romani and women" (2018, p. 102).

The creation of FAKALI (Federation of Roma Women's Associations) in the late 1990s and its consolidation in the 2000s marked a qualitative leap: for the first time, Roma women organised themselves as a collective actor with a national presence. As Mirga summarises, these organisations were created to demand "dignity, recognition and memory" (2018, p. 105). Roma feminism transformed the associative movement, broadening its agenda and disputing political space both within and outside the community.

In terms of repertoires of action, Jiménez distinguishes between more institutionalised associations and others that are more militant: "there was tension between those who prioritised dialogue with the authorities and those who conceived the struggle as a confrontation with everyday racism" (Jiménez, 2022, p. 150). Among the latter, experiences of labour and urban protest stand out. The aforementioned 1978 demonstration in Madrid paved the way. Years later, RTVE documented another mobilisation of street vendors, remembered as "the first Roma strike" (RTVE, 2009). Although academic historiography has not yet incorporated these episodes, their relevance is undeniable: they showed Roma exercising their right to protest and appropriating a repertoire that had previously been forbidden to them.

The movement also spread to Europe in the late 1990s. Spain participated in transnational networks of Roma associations, sharing experiences with organisations in Romania, Hungary, and Bulgaria. This European dimension conferred legitimacy, but as Werner Boada warns, "it reinforced a welfare model that, although it raised visibility, reproduced stigmas" (2021, p. 212). European inclusion brought resources and partial recognition, but it also consolidated limitations.

In summary, between 1970 and 2000, the Romani people in Spain underwent a radical transformation: from forced silence under Franco to collective mobilisation in democracy. 's first legal demonstration in 1978, Ramírez-Heredia's presence in parliament, the creation of local associations such as Presencia Gitana, the founding of the Unión Romaní and the FAGIC, and the emergence of Romani feminism through Romí, Kamira and FAKALI marked a turning point. As Mirga summarises, the goal was clear: "dignity, recognition and memory" (2018, p. 105).

The Romani associative movement was born with limitations—economic dependence, lack of legal recognition as a minority, persistent racism—but it paved an irreversible

path. The shift from silence to mobilisation marked a point of no return in the contemporary history of the Romani people in Spain.

4.2. Institutional political participation: from Ramírez-Heredia to plural representation

The entry of Juan de Dios Ramírez-Heredia into Congress in 1977 marked the beginning of a new era for the Roma people in Spain. His election was not only a symbolic milestone: from his seat, he denounced the validity of articles of the 1943 Civil Guard Regulations that ordered the "scrupulous" surveillance of Roma and succeeded in having them repealed in 1978 (García Sanz, 2018). That inaugural gesture showed that political representation could translate into concrete legislative changes and that Spanish democracy could not be consolidated while it maintained rules that criminalised Roma for their mere existence. As he himself emphasised years later, it was a "founding act" for the Roma political movement (Cañete Quesada, 2020; Jiménez, 2022). Ramírez-Heredia's subsequent career, which saw him serve as a Member of the European Parliament between 1986 and 1999, placed a Romani person in the European Parliament for the first time, bringing the voice of the Romani people to a transnational forum.

Forty years later, history reached a climax. After the 2019 elections, the Congress of Deputies had four Roma representatives simultaneously: Sara Giménez (Ciudadanos, Madrid), Beatriz Carrillo (PSOE, Seville), Ismael Cortés (En Comú Podem, Tarragona) and Juan José Cortés (PP, Huelva). Never before had Roma representation been so visible or so ideologically diverse. This plurality was crucial: it allowed the Roma issue to be introduced into different parliamentary groups and placed debates on the agenda on the Equal Treatment Act, the recognition of antigypsyism as a specific form of racism, and the need for historical memory and reparation policies (Fundación Secretariado Gitano, 2019). For the first time, the Roma people ceased to be merely the subject of debate and became active political actors within the Chamber.

The Roma presence has also spread to other institutional levels. In Catalonia, economist Susana Martínez Heredia (PSC) became the first Roma member of the Parliament in 2024, an event celebrated as a historic advance by the associative movement and documented in the Parliament's own institutional file (Instituto de Cultura Gitana, 2024). In Andalusia, activist Sandra Heredia Fernández serves as a councillor in the Seville City Council, defending proposals on housing, memory, and the fight against discrimination (Plataforma Khetane, 2021). In the Madrid Assembly, Samuel Escudero León took a seat with the Más Madrid group, strengthening the institutional Roma presence at the regional level (Instituto de Cultura Gitana, 2021). At the municipal level, other notable councillors include Rocío Heredia Carmona in La Línea de la Concepción (Cádiz), who set

a precedent in her town, and María Hernández Pérez in León, who has brought her experience as a feminist activist to the local institution.

Why is it important to have Roma people in politics?

Roma participation in politics matters because it transforms the agenda. First, it allows historical demands to be converted into legal reforms, as Ramírez-Heredia showed in 1978 and as Giménez and Carrillo have continued to do with initiatives on equality and memory. Secondly, it guarantees a mechanism for institutional pressure and oversight: with Roma MPs in different parties, anti-Roma sentiment ceases to be invisible and becomes a subject of debate, supervision and control. And thirdly, it has a symbolic and educational effect: the visibility of Roma people in public office – from Congress to local councils – breaks centuries of exclusion and provides role models for new generations. In the words of Nicolás Jiménez, Roma political representation "is not an end in itself, but a means of placing issues on the public agenda that would remain marginalised without the Roma voice" (2022, p. 149).

The cycle that began in 2019 was undoubtedly an unprecedented milestone. However, after the 2023 elections, Congress was once again left without a single Roma MP. This setback highlights how fragile institutional representation remains and how dependent it is on electoral circumstances. Meanwhile, representation in local councils and regional parliaments is showing an upward trend, albeit insufficient. The paradox is clear: the Romani people have shown that they can reach the highest institutions of the state, but this achievement is not yet secure over time. The challenge remains to build stable, cross-cutting, and lasting political representation capable of sustaining the rights, memory and demands of the Romani people on the democratic agenda.

4.3. Roma contributions to Spain: from invisibility to self-creation

The contributions of the Romani people to the culture, economy and social life of Spain have been fundamental, although systematically denied, stigmatised, or appropriated by the dominant discourse. Reconstructing this history means recognising that the Romani presence has not been marginal, but rather constitutive of cultural, commercial, and artistic practices that form part of the common heritage. This section addresses three central dimensions: language, trade and fairs, and artistic expressions, with special attention to flamenco and contemporary creation.

Language and persecution: from the prohibition of Caló to its revitalisation

Caló, a mixed variety that combines Romani vocabulary and Castilian structure, was historically the subject of persecution. Various pragmatic measures prohibited it and reduced it to the status of "criminal jargon", denying its character as a language in its own right and using it as an instrument of criminalisation (Gamella, Fernández & Adiego, 2015). This linguistic denial is part of the broader framework of anti-Roma legal provisions which, from the 16th century until well into the 20th century, sought to control, fragment, and assimilate the Roma population (Periáñez-Bolaño, 2020).

Despite this repression, Caló survived as an intimate and familiar language, transmitted orally in many homes through expressions, verbal turns of phrase and everyday vocabulary. As documented by Gamella et al. (2015, p. 92), although knowledge is fragmentary and uneven, it constitutes a linguistic memory that is resistant to oblivion. Currently, revitalisation projects are being developed by universities (such as the Autonomous University of Madrid), Romani associations and foundations such as Punjab, which seek to compile vocabulary, promote its teaching, and restore legitimacy to the language (Gamella et al., 2012). The rescue of Caló is not only a cultural effort, but also a political act of reparation and dignification.

Trade and fairs: from marginalisation to cultural centrality

Historically, the exclusion of Roma from guilds through royal decrees pushed them towards itinerant trades such as cattle dealing, street vending and craftsmanship (Mena Cabezas, 2006). Although often described as marginal activities, these were in fact fundamental economic practices that sustained local markets and shaped forms of organisation based on trust and reciprocity.

A paradigmatic case is the Seville Fair, whose origins lie in the buying and selling of livestock. The so-called pena del sello, which punished unlicensed trade, was suspended at fairs, allowing Roma to find a space for integration there (Carmona, 2019). After the transactions, families would prolong the day with music and dancing, laying the foundations for the festive character that has characterised the fair to this day. According to the Unión del Pueblo Romani (2017), the April Fair is "a living symbol of Roma culture, of romipen".

The Roma contribution is even visible in aesthetics: the flamenco dress comes from the clothing worn by Roma women at livestock fairs, later transformed into a national icon and made official in 1929 on the occasion of the Ibero-American Exhibition in Seville (Seville City Council, 2023). Various popular and informative chronicles emphasise that it was Roma women who established this style of dress, which was later reappropriated by mainstream society (Tu Guía de Sevilla, 2024; El Flamenco en Sevilla, 2024).

This prominence is not limited to Seville. Historical chronicles record the importance of the Romani people at fairs such as Zafrá and the 'Feria Chica' in Mérida, also known as the 'fair of the Romani people' (Carmona, 2019, pp. 39–41). These sources show that the fair, rather than being a simple market, was a space where Roma forged economic and cultural relationships that are still alive today in street vending, a direct descendant of those practices (Fundación Secretariado Gitano, 2007).

Art, flamenco and literature: from appropriation to a voice of their own

Roma art has been the subject of external representation and cultural appropriation. From Cervantes' *La gitanilla* to the 19th-century costumbrista paintings, through to Francoist cinema, the Roma figure was presented as exotic or marginal (Borja & Borja, 2019). At the same time, some authors recognised their symbolic density. Federico García Lorca, in his *Romancero gitano* (1928), turned the Roma into a poetic metaphor for freedom and tragedy, albeit from a mythical perspective (García Lorca, 2002).

Flamenco is the most influential and yet most denied cultural contribution. Roma families passed down fundamental styles such as soleá, tangos and bulería for generations, but their authorship has been erased under the label of "universal Andalusian art" (Periáñez-Bolaño, 2020). During the Franco regime, flamenco was instrumentalised as part of the "Spain brand" and exploited for tourism, while the discrimination suffered by its performers was rendered invisible. Something similar happened with the Roma costume, appropriated as a national icon after its Roma origins in fairground environments (Mena Cabezas, 2006).

However, flamenco has also been a space for protest. The lyrics conveyed persecution, poverty and resistance, becoming a collective oral memory. Among the contemporary singers who have made their voices an instrument of protest, Camarón de la Isla and Juan Peña "El Lebrijano" stand out. Camarón, in his song *Soy Gitano* (1989), turned ethnic belonging into a public affirmation in the face of stigma, bringing to the general public lyrics that proudly proclaimed Romani identity (Gamboa & Núñez, 2003). For his part, El Lebrijano took this dimension to a historical level with the album *Persecución* (1976), conceived together with the poet Félix Grande, in which he alternates recitations and songs to narrate the royal decrees, legal repression and historical suffering of the Romani people (Grande & Peña, 1976).

Alongside these repertoires of protest, other performers such as La Niña de los Peines, Antonio Mairena, Manzanita and the duo Lole and Manuel developed a more lyrical and traditional flamenco, addressing love, family sorrows, spirituality and everyday life, showing that Roma singing not only narrated persecution, but also the richness of everyday experience.

Today we are witnessing an explosion of contemporary Roma creators who narrate from their own voice. The writer Noelia Cortés, with *La higuera de las gitanas* (The Roma Women's Fig Tree), reflects on antigypsyism, literature and Romani feminism (Cortés, 2021). In cinema, Pilar Távora has recovered the memory of the Great Round-up of 1749, and her work has been studied as an example of cinema of Roma resistance (Moya Jorge, 2022). Documentary filmmaker Carmen Fernández Molina focuses her work on the voices of Romani women (*Carmen, sin miedo a la libertad*, 2023), while in the visual arts, Lita Cabellut has achieved international recognition by placing Romani identity at the centre of her artistic production (El País, 2022).

These contributions demonstrate that the Romani people have been and continue to be protagonists of Spanish culture. From being the object of external representation, Romani people have become subjects who narrate, create, and redefine their own history.

4.4. Invisible figures

The history of the Romani people in Spain cannot be understood solely in terms of victimisation or marginalisation, but also in terms of the multiple forms of resistance they deployed in the face of annihilation projects, authoritarian regimes and cultural narratives that sought to silence them. However, these forms of resistance have been systematically rendered invisible in the official memory, which has privileged narratives in which Romani people barely appear as political or cultural subjects. This section recovers three paradigmatic examples. First, the Roma women of the Great Round-up of 1749, who not only endured captivity, but also confronted what can be considered the first European extermination project, resisting with escapes, pleas and bureaucratic disobedience that forced the Bourbon power to react against them. Secondly, Helios Gómez and Mariano Rodríguez Vázquez, "Marianet", whose careers in communism and anarcho-syndicalism placed them at the forefront of the anti-fascist struggle in the Civil War and under Franco's dictatorship, although official memory has silenced them. Finally, the play *Camelamos Naquerar* (1976), created by José Heredia Maya and Mario Maya, opened up an unprecedented cultural and political space in the midst of the Transition for Roma to "break their silence" and denounce centuries of persecution. Making these figures visible means challenging the dominant narrative and recognising that, in the face of exclusion and violence, the Romani people have produced individuals and expressions that should occupy a central place in democratic memory and in the history of resistance in Spain.

4.4.1. Roma women during the Great Round-up (1749): guardians of life, strategies for freedom

The Great Round-up of 1749 was not only a plan for mass internment, but also a project of social annihilation aimed at dismantling Roma community life through the forced separation of men, women and children. Adult males were sent to arsenals and prisons, such as La Carraca in Cádiz or Cartagena, while women and children under the age of seven were confined to houses of mercy, factories, and fortresses (Martínez, 2018). As Gómez Alfaro (1993) pointed out, it was a veritable "general prison for Roma", an unprecedented measure in modern Europe.

The castle of Dénia became one of the main places of confinement for Roma women and their children in the former Kingdom of Valencia. Archival research by Martínez (2021) has made it possible to recover the names of some of these women: María Reyes, Isabel Borja, Antonia Montoya and Catalina Vargas, who remained imprisoned with their children in extremely precarious conditions. A Royal Order of 28 November 1749 ordered their partial release and transfer to other prisons in Gandía, Oliva and Valencia (pp. 103–107).

But the story of these Roma women is not limited to suffering. From the beginning of the process, they deployed active strategies of resistance: they fled from places of confinement, sustained their children's lives amid hunger and disease, and persistently appealed to magistrates, courts, and chancelleries to request the release of their husbands. This constant pressure led the Council of Castile to issue an instruction expressly prohibiting Roma women from interceding in their relatives' lawsuits (Martínez, 2018, pp. 33–36). The ban was not part of the original plan, but rather a reaction to their own insistence: the Bourbon authorities implicitly recognised them as troublesome political agents capable of overwhelming the repressive system.

As Martínez (2018) describes, the Round-up was "a tragic journey of desolation, misery, hunger, disease and death, but also of hope manifested by their rebellion" (p. 26). This rebellion took the form of pleas, memorials and indirect negotiations through scribes or clergymen, which helped pave the way for the general pardon of 1765, promoted by figures such as the Duke of Caylús.

These women should be remembered as the invisible driving forces behind the resistance against antigypsyism. Their struggle to keep their families together, their ability to organise in extreme conditions and their stubbornness in the face of injustice also make them early feminist role models. Recognising María Reyes, Isabel Borja, Antonia Montoya and Catalina Vargas in the genealogy of feminism in Spain means expanding a history that has privileged the voices of the enlightened and bourgeois elites, leaving in the shadows women who, from fortresses and prisons, defended the freedom of their children and their people.

4.4.2. Fighters against the dictatorship: Helios Gómez and Marianet

The memory of the Civil War and Franco's dictatorship has prioritised certain narratives, relegating those who did not fit into the official frameworks of commemoration to invisibility. In this context, the figure of the Roma Ceferino Giménez Maya, beatified in 1997 by John Paul II, has become the main Roma reference point for that period. As Demetrio Gómez (2013) has pointed out, it is problematic that "this reactionary reference is the only one that is popularly used to refer to Roma in that bitter period" (p. 13), eclipsing other actors linked to the anti-fascist resistance.

One of them was Helios Gómez (1905–1956), a painter, poet, and communist activist. His graphic work—particularly his posters from the 1930s—became an instrument of mobilisation in defence of the Republic. After the defeat, he suffered several periods of imprisonment and, during a stay in Barcelona's Modelo prison, he painted the Roma Chapel (1950–1952): a series of murals combining religious iconography with elements of Roma culture. Hidden under layers of paint since 1998, the Generalitat de Catalunya announced its restoration in 2025 and declared it part of the heritage of Roma memory and the anti-Franco struggle, emphasising that it "restores the dignity of those who were silenced by Francoism" (Generalitat de Catalunya, 2025). As Pérez Flores (2015) recalls, Gómez's work combines "art, commitment and militancy" (p. 214), making it a unique testimony to cultural anti-fascism.

Another overlooked figure is Mariano Rodríguez Vázquez, "Marianet" (1908–1939). A bricklayer from a humble background, he was introduced to libertarian ideas while in prison and went on to become a prominent member of the CNT, eventually being elected secretary general between 1936 and 1939. During July 1936, he participated in the creation of the Central Committee of Anti-Fascist Militias in Catalonia, the body that coordinated the immediate response to the military coup. As Demetrio Gómez (2013) recalls, "it was at this point that 'Marianet' entered the scene with full force" (p. 15). His leadership was characterised by the search for a balance between the continuity of the social revolution and the need to win the war against fascism, in a context marked by internal tensions and strategic dilemmas within anarcho-syndicalism.

In the words of Manuel Martínez (2021), Marianet was literally "a Roma at the head of the CNT" (p. 111), and he played a key role in preserving the organisation's archives, ensuring their transfer into exile in 1939 to prevent their destruction by Franco's regime. He died that same year in tragic circumstances, drowned in France, which cut short a political career marked by war, exile and repression.

The figures of Helios Gómez and Marianet allow us to understand that the anti-fascist resistance in Spain was more diverse than official memory has conveyed. Recognising

them does not imply constructing a closed narrative of identity, but rather broadening the horizon of democratic history and integrating voices and trajectories that, although silenced, form an inseparable part of the struggle against fascism.

4.4.3. Camelamos Naquerar (1976): when the Roma broke their silence

The premiere of *Camelamos Naquerar* in Granada in February 1976, just a few months after Franco's death, was an unprecedented cultural and political event in the contemporary history of Spain. Written by José Heredia Maya —poet, playwright and the first Roma to hold a university chair in Spain— and directed and choreographed by Mario Maya, the work was conceived as a flamenco show that transcended the artistic to become a collective manifesto in the midst of the Transition.

The uniqueness of *Camelamos Naquerar* lay in its ability to unite aesthetics and political memory. On stage, flamenco songs and dances were intertwined with dramatic readings of royal decrees and anti-Roma legal provisions, delivered with the intonation of authoritarian speeches. Among the texts chosen were orders from Philip IV commanding "the hunting of Roma by iron and fire", Bourbon pragmatics legitimising their lifelong slavery, and Francoist provisions from 1942 demanding "scrupulous surveillance of Roma, checking their particular characteristics and ascertaining the purpose of their travels" (Guijarro, 1976, pp. 28–29). In this way, the performance highlighted the historical continuity of antigypsyism: from the laws of the 16th and 18th centuries to the police regulations in force under the dictatorship.

The cast was entirely Romani: alongside Heredia and Mario Maya were Concha Vargas, Antonio Cuevas "El Piki", Paco Cortés, Pedro Escalona and Gómez de Jerez, among others. Critics at the time highlighted the expressive power of the production, noting that it was "a purely antigypsyism ic show unlike any other in living memory, a radically concise expression of what that suffering, that marginalisation, that persecution is" (Guijarro, 1976, p. 28). In contrast to the domesticated folklore and exoticism with which Roma had traditionally been represented, *Camelamos* restored flamenco to its roots as a "painful complaint against oppression" (Guijarro, 1976, p. 28).

The title itself—*Camelamos Naquerar*, "we want to speak" in Caló—summarised the political dimension of the project. As Fernando Guijarro wrote in his review, with this work "the Roma broke out speaking with their purest words" (1976, p. 29). In a country transitioning from dictatorship to democracy under pacts of silence about many acts of violence, the Roma claimed their right to narrate the persecution they had suffered in the first person.

The impact was immediate: the play filled theatres in Granada, Madrid and Zaragoza and was received as a major cultural event. However, despite its success, *Camelamos*

Naquerar could not be published in written form or be released by a publisher at that time, reflecting both the limitations of the political framework of the Transition and the marginal place that the Romani voice still occupied in the official cultural sphere. It was not until decades later that the University of Granada published Heredia Maya's complete works (2008), integrating them into the literary and historical archive of the Transition.

In short, *Camelamos Naquerar* was the first play created by Roma that explicitly denounced the historical persecution of the Roma people, and it did so shortly after the dictator's death, on a university stage that had become a space for memory and resistance. Its legacy remains fundamental: it opened the door to new generations of Roma artists and intellectuals, consolidating culture as an instrument of resistance and justice.

5. Conclusions

The historical and contemporary overview presented in this report confirms that antigypsyism in Spain has not been a series of isolated episodes, but rather a long-standing structural ideology. From the Pragmatic Decree of 1499 to the practices of school segregation in democracy, the mechanisms of persecution have operated under a logic of continuity: criminalising Romani ways of life, restricting mobility and trades, erasing language and culture, and producing a regime of permanent inequality. The Great Round-up of 1749 is the most extreme example of this project of social extermination, but it is not the only one: Franco's antigypsyism (social reorganisation), with its police regulations and segregated rehousing policies, prolonged repression under new guises. Even democracy, despite eliminating explicitly discriminatory provisions, maintained structures of exclusion that reveal the persistence of institutional racism.

Analysis of contemporary manifestations shows that this legacy remains in force. Residential segregation, school concentration, job insecurity, the health gap and under-reporting to the justice system are not simply deficits in public policy, but expressions of a structural framework that places the Romani people on the margins of citizenship. The COVID-19 pandemic acted as a catalyst for these inequalities and as a mirror of structural racism which, in times of crisis, reappears with force under the guise of security or public health discourse.

The report also confirms that the Roma people have not only been the object of repression, but also active subjects of resistance. From the women who interceded in court during the Great Round-up to the mobilisation of associations during the Transition, through to Roma feminism, parliamentary participation and cultural expressions—from protest flamenco to contemporary literature and cinema—the community has deployed strategies of survival, confrontation and creation that form an inseparable part of Spanish democratic history. This resistance belies the narrative of passivity and forces us to recognise Romani agency as a driver of social and cultural change.

Recent advances—the inclusion of the term antigypsyism in the Penal Code, Law 15/2022, the National Strategy 2021–2030 and the State Pact against Antigypsyism—mark a turning point. For the first time, the Spanish state officially recognises this racism as a specific category and makes commitments to combat it. The commemoration of the 600th anniversary of the arrival of the Roma people in Spain has reinforced this visibility. However, these advances coexist with notable limitations: lack of budget, absence of compliance indicators, weak evaluation mechanisms and a gap between symbolic recognition and real transformation in neighbourhoods, schools, hospitals and courts.

Four main conclusions can be drawn from this diagnosis:

- Historical continuity of antigypsyism: the persecution of the Roma people cannot be understood as an anomaly or mistake of the past, but as an integral part of the modern state and Spanish democracy, which have sustained mechanisms of exclusion for six centuries.
- Roma resistance and creativity: in the face of every project of assimilation or extermination, the Roma community has deployed various forms of resistance, from political action and associationism to cultural production. Recognising these trajectories is essential to challenging the narrative that reduces the Roma people to objects of victimisation.
- Insufficient recognition without effective individual rights: although the law prohibits antigypsyism, judicial practice reveals serious shortcomings. Underreporting, the lack of final judgements and the reproduction of stereotypes in court rulings show that the guarantee of the defence and enjoyment of individual rights of Roma people remains unsecured. The right to equality and effective judicial protection remains an unfulfilled promise.
- Collective rights and recognition as a national minority: the recognition of the Roma people cannot be limited to the cultural or symbolic sphere. It requires stable mechanisms of political representation, effective protection of Roma cultural heritage and real participation in the design of public policies. Without these collective rights, memory runs the risk of being instrumentalised and inclusion of remaining limited to the management of inequalities. Added to this is a fundamental deficit: unlike other peoples in Europe, Roma in Spain are not recognised as a national minority, which limits legal protection, guaranteed representation, and the full exercise of their collective rights. This institutional invisibility perpetuates structural inequality and constitutes one of the main remaining democratic deficits.

The immediate challenge is to transform recognition into substantive equality. This involves implementing residential and school desegregation plans, ensuring effective judicial protocols against antigypsyism, consolidating mechanisms for Roma participation in decision-making, recognising the Roma people as a national minority, and protecting their cultural heritage as an integral part of shared history.

The JEKHIPE project reminds us that memory is neither neutral nor spontaneous: it is a field of dispute. Accepting Roma memory in all its complexity—persecution, resistance, and contribution—is a necessary condition for advancing toward a democracy that fulfils

its promise of equality and justice. Only when the individual rights of Roma people and the collective rights of the Roma community—including their recognition as a national minority—are fully respected can we speak of real reparation and a shared future based on dignity, recognition, and freedom.

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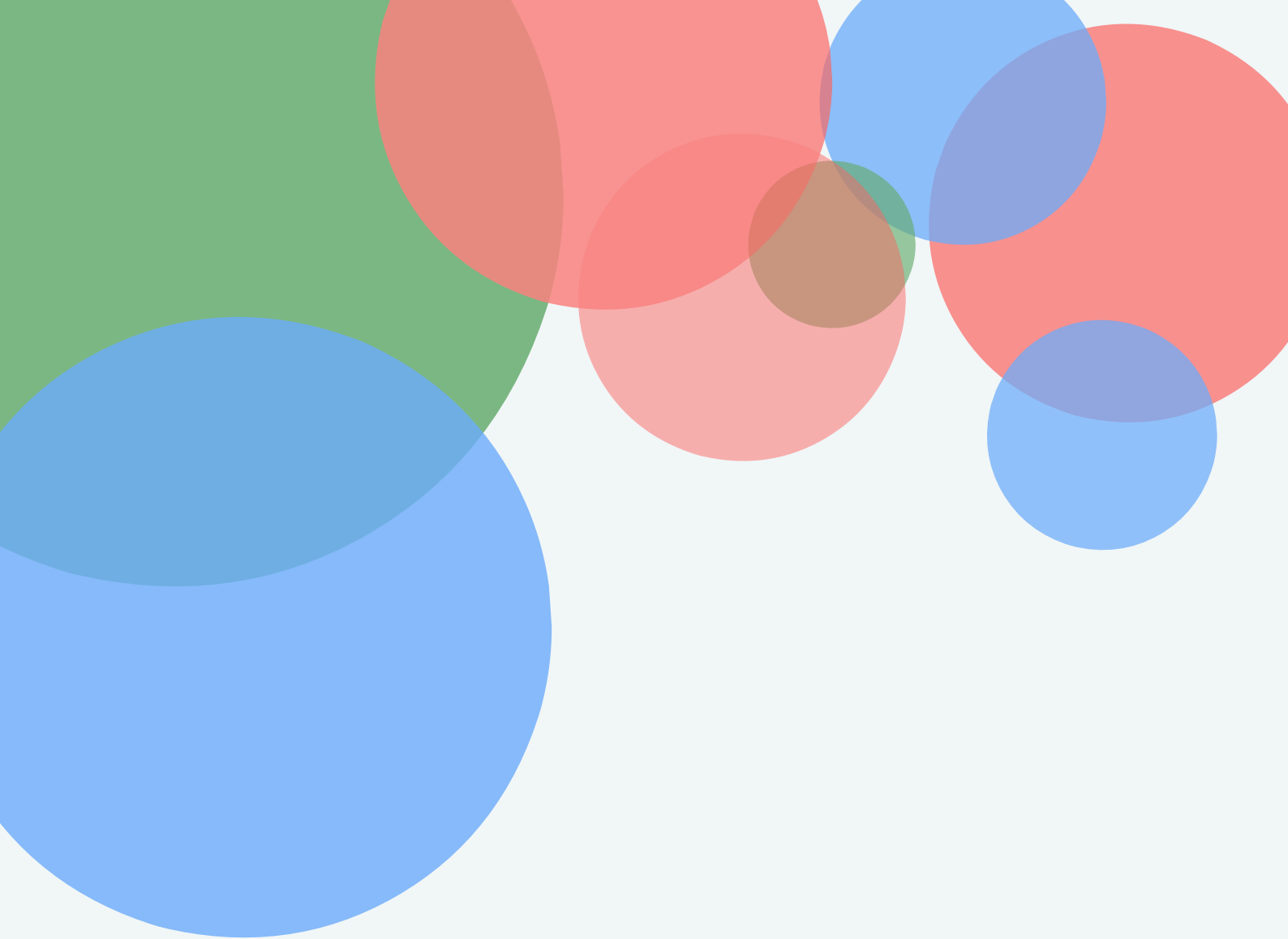
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