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## France and the Roma: ethnic cleansing and national identity

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A World to Win News Service. France is moving to forcibly expel its population of immigrant Roma, known pejoratively as Gypsies.

In August and early September, the police carried out raids on more than a hundred squats and improvised camps in vacant lots. They herded family after family – about a thousand people – onto buses, took them to detention centres and marched them onto chartered flights back to Romania, in most cases, or Bulgaria. Roma villages and neighbourhoods in Romania are being flooded by deportees and people who have decided to flee France on their own before the police get hold of them.

Many people consider this a return to the policies of the pro-Nazi French Vichy government during World War II. While this is taking place in peacetime and circumstances are different today, Western Europe has not seen such mass round-ups and punishment of an entire ethnic group since Nazi days.

Romanians and Bulgarians have theoretically been free to travel and live anywhere in the European Union since these countries joined it in 2007. Nevertheless, the conditions under which they were admitted allowed France to impose legal barriers, treating them differently than other EU citizens. They are not allowed to spend more than three months in France without a job, and work permits are almost always denied them.

Furthermore, the authorities are illegally deporting them en masse, with no regard for their rights or case-by-case examination. French government claims that many Roma are departing "voluntarily" in exchange for payments of 300 euros per adult and 100 euros per child are both hypocritical and racist. People are being taken to jail and told that they can accept "voluntary" deportation or end up deported anyway. They did not decide to sell their rights for a handful of euros. They are fleeing persecution in France, just as they came to France fleeing persecution in the first place.

The reaction to these deportations in Romania, Bulgaria and Slovakia reveals the awfulness of the situation for Roma in Eastern Europe even more than the bleak statistics about their unemployment (in some villages, nearly everyone), exclusion from school and short life expectancy.

In Romania, for some politicians the real scandal has been that some deportees are not Roma after all. The media has encouraged the sentiment that France's treatment of the Roma proves that they can't be integrated anywhere and that Romania is right to keep them segregated. When a man in Slovakia turned a machine gun on a whole neighbouring Roma family for having too many guests, "the reaction of the society was worse than the killings themselves. Rather than focusing on the killer, the message has been: the shooting was bad but these Roma people were bad too," a researcher of Roma origin told The New York Times (3 September 2010).

Finally some Romanian officials felt obliged to squeak about the treatment of their citizens. France threatened to impose more severe restrictions on all Romanians if they didn't shut up. After Benedict XVI urged France to "welcome legitimate human diversity", a close advisor to President Nicolas Sarkozy said that as a German the pope had no moral right to speak. When the European Parliament called on France to suspend these deportations, Sarkozy defenders pointed out, quite correctly, that other EU governments from Italy to Sweden are currently carrying out anti-Roma campaigns themselves. The overall message is that no one can tell France what to do. Seldom in recent times has French chauvinism so openly infused official discourse in every dimension.

A people never considered human

The word "Rom" has nothing to do with Romania. It is the self-designation of an ethnic and social group, the Romani people, who immigrated out of India a thousand years ago. They may have been people confined to lowly trades seeking a way out of the Hindu caste system. The word "Rom", meaning man or human being, comes from the historical Indian language Sanskrit and designates exactly what they have not been considered anywhere.

Waves of Roma immigrants moved through Persia to Anatolia and the Balkans, where in some places they were made slaves or serfs, and then throughout Western Europe and the Americas (the U.S. outlawed their entry in 1885, as did some Latin American countries). Another group went through North Africa and came to Spain, spreading out from there.

Many of the subgroups formed after centuries of residence in one or another country have been reshuffled by repeated forced exile.

Yet the worst times for them were not the medieval dark ages but the last century, not only under the Nazis, who exterminated at least hundreds of thousands of Central and Eastern European Roma during World War II, but for a hundred years throughout Europe.

Although the French government, media and much of public opinion often make no distinctions, the recent immigrant Roma – numbering an estimated 10-15,000 people – are a tiny minority of France's Romani, a name that encompasses different historically and culturally constituted subgroups speaking variants of a common language. France is believed to be home to 400,000 native-born Romani people, who first came to the area 500 years ago and have had the law and much of the population on their backs ever since.

Even today French law classifies people who live in caravans, trailers or any other vehicle as "gens de voyage". Considered to have no legal residence, they are not allowed the identity cards that other citizens must carry and instead are issued special permits that must be stamped by the police every three months. They are also ineligible for unemployment and health insurance.

This is widely considered a form of second-class citizenship, and indeed the current laws are a modified continuation of explicitly anti-"Gypsy" laws of previous centuries. It is telling that the law distinguishes between these people and other frequent travellers, such as those who go around with itinerant fairs and circuses. The "gens de voyage" classification is difficult to change, even if one's way of life changes. French Roma say that as far as the government is concerned "gens de voyage" is a category one is born into.

Why attack the Roma now?

If persecuting "Gypsies" is as French as *tarte aux pommes*, that underlines the question of why this hysterical campaign is happening now.

France has been forcibly expelling 8,000 or more immigrant Roma a year since they first began arriving in large numbers in 2007. Until this summer this has been carried out somewhat in the shadows. What is different now is that Sarkozy has stepped up these roundups and brought them into the spotlight, vowing to clear out 300 Roma camps within three months and assigning the police weekly quotas.

A defining feature of Sarkozy's presidency has been his coupling of the words "security" and "immigration", demanding that the French decide which of the two they want. The anti-Roma onslaught is just one of the sharp edges of a much broader and longer term crusade to reconfigure French politics, economic policy and thinking. While the anti-Roma frenzy is in the service of this much broader agenda, the government has gone after

this particular people because it can, because it feels that they have few friends and are an easy target.

The broader goals can be glimpsed in the way in which the anti-Roma campaign was launched. Sarkozy chose to announce it with trumpet blasts on 30 July in Grenoble, two weeks after an incident in which youth, mostly from Arab and African families in public housing there, fought the police. They were reacting to a police killing of a suspected robber – yet another instance when the authorities demonstrated that for them ghetto youth have no rights and their lives have no value. Also in July, French Roma in another part of the country attacked a police station after police shot and killed a young passenger in a car that had allegedly tried to run a checkpoint near a Roma encampment.

In the name of emergency measures to regain "security" Sarkozy put forward draft legislation explicitly aimed at narrowing access to the privilege of French citizenship. One of the most important ideologically, although its practical impact remains to be seen, would broaden the circumstances under which naturalized immigrants can be stripped of their French nationality, effectively establishing a legal distinction between native-born French and second-class citizens. (For now, this punishment would apply only to the killing or attempted killing of a police officer, although legislators have proposed extending the range to include all sorts of minor offences.) A related proposal being discussed would make it easier to deny citizenship to the French-born children of immigrants, who now usually acquire it when they turn 18.

#### Confusion and paralysis

On 4 September there were medium-sized demonstrations in solidarity with the Roma and other immigrants in many cities throughout France, called by an exceptionally broad range of organizations, including the biggest trade union federation (GCT), the opposition political parties, many NGOs and small single-issue groups, and the main organization of French "gens de voyage". But unfortunately short-sightedness and wrong thinking has kept this movement from being an adequate response to the need. This is especially notable in a country with such a strong tradition of protests.

A main problem has been the widespread tendency, especially among the parliamentary left, to consider the roundup of the foreign Roma a trick to distract attention from the "real" issues of the day, political corruption, unemployment, cutbacks in public services and especially the raising of the retirement age that led to a strike by as many as two million workers and employees a few days after the Roma solidarity actions.

This attitude was encapsulated by parliamentary deputy Daniel Cohn-Bendit, a former famous radical, who said that Sarkozy "has taken the French for fools."

The truth is that many French people have been fools and taken in by Sarkozy. After all, they voted for him, although the "left" alternatives were no better. At the same time, many millions hate what is happening and are ashamed of their country, and yet are not raising their voices about it in the streets.

The timing of Sarkozy's speech did make it seem like a frantic bid to change the subject from the cascade of revelations about payoffs to the governing party in return for protecting the rich from taxes. People commonly contrast the criminality Sarkozy attributes to the Roma with that of the president and his inner circle. They say Sarkozy and friends are the country's worst pickpockets.

But the idea that the anti-Roma campaign is a red herring amounts to defending the petty privileges of living in a leading imperialist country, one whose wealth is swollen by the division of the world into oppressed and oppressor nations and which still profits from neo-colonial domination over hundreds of millions of people. It amounts to accepting the division of humanity into "French" and "others".

Exactly because entitlements such as job security, public housing, health insurance and other social measures are eroding (although not collapsing), the question of the ideological bonds that hold together French society, the concept of the "French nation" and a struggle over values are extremely important.

A "stain on the Republic"?

A Socialist Party leader called Sarkozy's frenzied assault of the Roma "a stain on the Republic", a departure from France's republican form of government (essentially parliamentary democracy). This is wrong and covers up the real nature of the French state in all its forms since the 1789 French revolution.

Some people who consider themselves more radical compare Sarkozy's measures to those of the Petain government installed by the invading Germans after France's defeat in the opening days of WWII. Yet while the fascist Petain regime did constitute a break from the Republic, its policies were not completely different from those of the Republic before and after.

Today's repressive laws against France's "gens de voyage" are a new version of the anti-"Gypsy" laws the Republic codified in 1912. As France became a destination for political refugees in the late 1930s, these measures became harsher. The Republic passed a law authorizing officials to strip foreign-born French citizens of their nationality. It was the Republic, and not the Petain regime, that began to herd "nomads" into camps just before the outbreak of the war.

Many people in France know that one of the country's richest families, from which Sarkozy's party is accused of taking illegal campaign contributions, was a pillar of support for the Petain regime. Fewer know that the family also supported the left government led by the Socialist Party's François Mitterrand. Mitterrand symbolized the continuity between disguised capitalist dictatorship in the form of the Republic and the open dictatorship of Petain in that he worked for both sides during the war and when president maintained a close relationship with prominent former Petainists.

In a sense, you could say that the republican form of government could not have existed without the exclusion of some people in France – and of course the world, especially the Third World – from the "Republic" and its benefits (real or imaginary) and the accompanying false idea that all those considered members of the French nation share common interests and values.

As the November 2005 ghetto rebellions in France showed spectacularly, millions of people have always been excluded from this social contract and a growing number are not in a mood to tolerate it. Sarkozy is not wrong to worry about the security of the French state that enforces this consensus. A few angry youth would not represent a danger if there were not reason to fear greater social upheaval. But at the same time, many French, including a section of far from well-off workers and lower middle class, feel threatened by immigration. They even say that "they" are "taking over," not because there are suddenly so many immigrants (immigration today is much less than in the past and the percentage of immigrants much less than in some other Western countries), or because there is so much real "insecurity" (the overall crime rate is low and falling), but because of their own fears in the face of the crumbling social consensus and cohesion.

Some of the official left's criticism of Sarkozy has been driven by a similar reactionary nostalgia (though in a "leftist" and not rightist form) for France as it "used to be" before globalisation. Whether French nationality is defined by residence or by "blood" is not an unimportant matter. Sarkozy is going further in the direction of defining it as being born in France to French-born parents than any government since Pétain has dared. But these parties have let themselves become tangled up in trying to define the "French nation" and therefore who does and does not "deserve" the privileges of citizenship.

As French-born Roma point out, in what is an implicit criticism of the left even though religion is far more prevalent among them than radicalism, all Roma are persecuted, and it is wrong to distinguish between those who came before and those still coming.

In practice, in some localities where the Socialist, Communist and Green party leaders govern, they have been guilty of forcibly expelling Roma, denying their children entrance to school and in general sending in the police to enforce social exclusion. This has made it easier for Sarkozy's people to shout down the official opposition.

In contrast, many ordinary parents have waged struggles to keep their children's classmates from being deported when they turn 18 (during their last year of school), and these children's parents from being deported (sometimes when they come to pick up their children at the school gates). They raise slogans like "Every child has a right to schooling". Undocumented immigrant workers' rights groups say, "Everyone who lives here and works here has a right to be here."

There is no future in looking backward to a time a few decades ago when social benefits were slightly better and official national chauvinism less undisguised, conditions that can no longer exist in today's cut-throat capitalist world market. It's useless to struggle to rescue a social contract that has always stunted lives and numbed minds, one that

represents the opposite of the real long term and fundamental interests of masses of people in France as well as the world. What's needed is for more people to seriously think about how to bring about a world where such simple principles and even more emancipatory ones might really prevail – a world that revolution could bring into being.