

France: Sarkozy stirs up hatred against Roma

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Just before the start of the official summer holidays, the French government headed by President Nicolas Sarkozy made yet another significant move to the right. It linked the issue of domestic security with ongoing racist attacks against Roma and immigrants, thereby adopting the line followed by the extreme right-wing National Front (FN). Marine Le Pen, the FN's vice-president, reveled in the fact that the head of state had confirmed the perspective held by her party for the last 30 years.

During a speech in Grenoble on July 30, celebrating the appointment of the new superintendent of the Isère administrative district, Sarkozy set out the main tenets of the new course, which had been backed by the whole government two days before. According to this, all the camps of nomadic Roma are to be dismantled, penalties will be leveled against whole families rather than individuals, and criminalized French citizens with a migrant background will have their citizenship revoked.

As direct pretext for these moves, Sarkozy drew upon the disturbances that had broken out two weeks earlier in Villeneuve, a Grenoble suburb in the Isère district, and Saint-Aignan in central France, after police shot two young men in residential areas. The new measures, however, are completely in line with previous provocations, through which the government fanned racial tensions and boosted the repressive machinery of the state. Only last month, the National Assembly passed a law that made Islamic women wearing veils liable to draconian penalties—a gross violation of fundamental democratic principles.

Critical commentators regard the government's maneuvering primarily as a reaction to Sarkozy's political difficulties. The president is deeply mired in the Woerth-Bettencourt financial scandal and is trying to divert attention from suspicions of illegal party financing. At the same time, he is fishing in the murky waters of right-wing extremism, in an attempt to improve his prospects for the presidential election in 2012. In this respect, Sarkozy is drawing on his experience as interior minister from 2002 to 2004. Already at that time, he had branded the Roma and travellers minority as scapegoats, when he introduced the Law for Domestic Security (Loi pour la sécurité intérieure, LSI).

However, Sarkozy's new move to the right signifies more

than an attempt to improve his chances of election. In view of the devastating conditions in the suburbs and the planned austerity measures that will destroy thousands of jobs, pensions and other social services, the government is anticipating bitter social conflicts. By upgrading the apparatus of the state, it is preparing repressive measures aimed not only at Roma, Muslims and other minorities, but the working class as a whole.

Sarkozy's speech in Grenoble bristled with military rhetoric. The president announced that he would "wage war" against drug pushers and criminals. Alluding to the administrative department of the new superintendent, Eric Le Douaron, he added that, "In this department and in this city (Grenoble), no housing estate, no street, no stairwell, no row of houses will find itself beyond the rule of the Republic. This is now your task." He announced that the Department of Isère would be equipped with a large number of police cars and police officers expressly for night duty. By 2012, as many as 60,000 surveillance cameras would be installed there.

The president welcomed the prospect of parliament dealing with the introduction of harsher punishments for cases of serious violence, as soon as the holidays were over. "In particular, I want judges to be able to automatically sentence re-offenders to wearing electronic tags, years after serving their time," he said.

He went on to say that he would commit himself to upholding the integrity of French citizenship and that, "It must be possible to cancel the French citizenship of all those people of foreign descent, who wilfully inflict damage on the life of a police officer, a soldier or any other person of public authority. French citizenship is a reward, for which one must prove oneself worthy."

Sarkozy's interior minister, Brice Hortefeux (UMP—Union for a Popular Movement) also recently used the *Le Parisien* newspaper to call for the withdrawal of French citizenship for certain offences—for example, in cases of female circumcision "or other serious crimes".

Immigration Minister Eric Besson, responsible for drafting of the appropriate legislation, explained in *Le Figaro* that he wants to deny French citizenship to French-born youths, who "force their wives to wear full-face veils, refuse to shake hands with female officials, or fail to accept the principle of secularism or non-clerical government."

The practice of revoking citizenship harks back to the Vichy

regime that ruled France during the Nazi occupation. At the time, naturalised French people of the Jewish faith were the main targets: people like the painter Marc Chagall and the family of cabaret singer Serge Gainsbourg. Since then, it has been possible only on very rare occasions to revoke French citizenship. According to the immigration minister, there were only five such cases prior to 2006, on charges such as treason or terrorism.

Sarkozy's speech also promoted the principle of penalising the whole family of someone who commits a crime. He said that, "The issue of parental responsibility is clearly evident", and he threatened to punish parents, who allow their children to miss school, by cutting their child allowance payments.

The UMP delegate, Eric Ciotti, is preparing a new law that threatens fathers or mothers with up to 2 years imprisonment and a €30,000 fine, if they allow their underage, previously-convicted children to overstep the strict conditions and restrictions. Such methods are reminder of the "Sippenhaft" tactics of the National Socialists, whereby punishment for the deeds of a presumed perpetrator was made to be borne by his or her whole family.

Children are to increasingly face incarceration in prisons or boot camps. To accomplish this, the government intends to redraft a law from 1945, relating to young offenders. According to Sarkozy, the 1945 legislation can "no longer be applied to today's minors". Ordinance Number 45-174 from 1945—which for a long time stressed the priority of parental rights over repressive tendencies of the state—had already been significantly toughened in 2002 with the establishment of correctional centres for young offenders.

Sarkozy announced in Grenoble that "about 20 facilities" would be opened after the holidays, which would "provide appropriately intensified supervision" that he described as "educational rehabilitation". He warned that "the behaviour of certain young people, who inhibit the learning of others, should not be tolerated".

Sarkozy aimed one particular part of his speech at Roma, travelling people and immigrants, whose values and way of life were for him undesirable. He demagogically presented them as one of the main causes of the country's economic and social problems, and threatened to withdraw their welfare benefits and expel them from their camps.

"We'll examine the rights and welfare entitlements, currently available to foreigners living in suspiciously irregular circumstances. . . . The general rule is clear: illegals must be directed back to their own countries", said Sarkozy. He had already asked the interior minister "to put an end to unauthorized gypsy settlements. These are lawless zones not to be tolerated in France."

Sarkozy promised that the government would tear down all camps already declared illegal by the end of September. Where no such court ruling as yet applied, it would be instituted as soon as possible. Within three months, half of all Roma

settlements are to disappear.

The French government thus plays its part in once again making scapegoats of Europe's Roma population, who suffered so greatly under the Nazi persecution during the second world war.

According to the *Le Monde* newspaper, over 400,000 travelling people are registered in France. In 1990, some 95 percent of them were French citizens and only about a third followed a nomadic life. Roma from eastern Europe nowadays constitute a small minority of 15,000 to 20,000 people. Many from Romania, Bulgaria and other central European countries have come in the wake of the EU (European Union) project of eastern European enlargement.

Le Monde reported that more than 10,000 Roma had been expelled from France in 2009—8,000 of them to Romania—although they actually have the right as EU citizens to move freely within the whole of Europe.

Le Monde noted that, "Roma—some 90 percent of whom are settled—are still considered as undesirables in Europe, and are either corralled in shantytowns or deported. Last year, every fourth gypsy was either attacked, threatened or harassed."

Nicolas Sarkozy's attacks on Roma and immigrant families are part of a calculated policy of "divide and rule," aiming to stir up a racist atmosphere. He wants to kindle primitive prejudices in order to shift the costs of the economic crisis onto the shoulders of the working class. He is simultaneously laying the foundations for a police state, a move that he justifies to the public as the "fight for domestic security".

In doing so, Sarkozy is able to rely on the fact that neither the opposition parties nor the trade unions will threaten his course with any serious resistance. The law against the burqa, forbidding the wearing of whole body veils in public, was recently passed in parliament with only one dissenting vote—that of a UMP delegate. The whole of the so-called "opposition" either abstained or voted for the ban.



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