

Conflict erupts between EU and France over Roma expulsions

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The French government's policy of mass expulsions of Roma has led to a sharp conflict between Brussels and Paris.

In a press conference on Tuesday afternoon, EU commissioner for Justice, Fundamental Rights and Citizenship Viviane Reding accused the French government of "discrimination on the basis of ethnic origin or race" and of calling into question "the common values and laws of our European Union". She described the French policy as a "disgrace".

The statement by Reding, a Christian Democrat from Luxembourg, was unusual both in its tone and its content. She accused two French ministers, Eric Besson (immigration) and Pierre Lellouche (European affairs), of having lied to her and implicitly compared the actions of the French government with those of the fascists during the Second World War.

"I personally have been appalled by a situation which gave the impression that people are being removed from a Member State of the European Union just because they belong to a certain ethnic minority", she said. "This is a situation I had thought Europe would not have to witness again after the Second World War."

Later she stressed: "Let me be very clear: Discrimination on the basis of ethnic origin or race has no place in Europe. It is incompatible with the values on which the European Union is founded. National authorities who discriminate ethnic groups in the application of EU law are also violating the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, which all Member States, including France, have signed up to."

It was her personal conviction, Reding concluded, "that the Commission will have no choice but to initiate infringement action against France".

The European Commission is an unlikely candidate to stand as a defender of human rights and national minorities in Europe. Its record on immigration and

human rights issues is miserable. Thousands of refugees die every year in the attempt to cross the European borders as a result of the EU's Fortress Europe policy. Italy has carried out mass deportations of Roma for years, and Hungarian and Czech governments have tolerated pogroms against this persecuted minority without much opposition from the EU. In fact, the harsh austerity measures dictated by the EU share the main responsibility for the massive growth of poverty, which makes life for Roma unbearable in Romania and other eastern European countries.

With her attack on the French government, Reding reacts to the fact that European politics' general turn to the right, the deliberate fomenting of nationalism and xenophobia by governments and major bourgeois parties, is undermining and breaking up the European Union itself.

The impact of the world economic crisis has aggravated social tensions all over Europe. The middle classes, the traditional pillar of bourgeois democracy, are disintegrating. Right-wing governments—Sarkozy in France, Merkel in Germany, Berlusconi in Italy—are in deep crisis and at all-time lows in their popularity ratings. In reaction, as in the 1930s, sections of the media and of the political establishment are stirring up nationalism, racism and Islamophobia as a means to mobilise the most backward layers of society against the working class. The success of Geert Wilders in Holland and the hype around Thilo Sarrazin in Germany are cases in point.

In France, President Sarkozy himself has taken the initiative to stir up Islamophobia and anti-Roma racism. The 2004 law banning the Islamic headscarf in schools, the recent law banning the burqa, and the mass deportations of Roma, which have been compared to the practices of the pro-Nazi Vichy regime, all serve this purpose. Sarkozy, who has repeatedly furthered his political career by law-and-order campaigns and racist

outbursts, is deeply embroiled in corruption scandals. Confronted with mass opposition against his austerity measures from the working class, he is fighting for his political survival.

Viviane Reding speaks for those sections of the European bourgeoisie who fear that the deliberate fuelling of racial and ethnic tensions is too risky a strategy that will finally blow the European Union itself apart. Much of her statement concentrated on this question. While denouncing the racist foundation of Sarkozy's policies, she was even more upset by the undermining of the authority of the EU commission by the French government.

"The role of the Commission as guardian of the Treaties is made extremely difficult", she complained, "if we can no longer have confidence in the assurances given by two ministers in a formal meeting with two Commissioners and with around 15 senior officials on the table from both sides." This was not "a minor offence", but "a disgrace".

Reding also took issue with statements made by Pierre Lellouche, the French secretary of state for European affairs, that the French people, and not the European Commission, were the guardians of the European Treaties. "The Commission's role as guardian of the Treaties is one of the foundations of the European Union—a Union which is held together not by force, but by respect of the rule of law agreed upon by all Member States, including France", she said.

Reding's boisterous press conference was not only directed towards Paris but also towards sections of the European Commission itself and its president, José Manuel Barroso. On September 6, Barroso met with French President Nicolas Sarkozy in Paris and agreed to bury an EU report on the Roma expulsions. The report was prepared by Reding and two other commissioners, László Andor (employment, social affairs and inclusion) and Cecilia Malmström (home affairs). It was discussed by the full Commission on September 1.

But five days later, Barroso and Sarkozy agreed that, according to Agence France Presse, "it was not at all in the interests of both sides to create a controversy on this question." They also came to an understanding that "the legal and political analysis which the Commission is preparing on the Roma issue is an internal document which will not be published."

Three days later, the Greens proposed a resolution to the European Parliament requesting that European Union member states should "suspend immediately all expulsions of Roma". It was supported by the Socialist,

Liberal and Communist Party groups and passed by 337 to 245 votes.

Then a circular sent by French Interior Minister Brice Hortefeux to the police surfaced. It specifically directed the police to target Roma and evict them from unauthorised camps, exposing as lies Besson's and Lellouche's claims that the Roma were not being singled out for discrimination.

This encouraged Reding to go on the offensive and fire her broadside against the French government—which, like herself, is affiliated to the European People's Party. She insisted that she was not satisfied by a new version of Hortefeux's circular, eliminating the references to a specific ethnic group: "It is important that not only the words change, but also the behaviour of the French authorities."

Reding announced that the Commission will decide on infringement action against France within the next two weeks. She made clear that she is personally convinced that such action is inevitable. "My patience is wearing thin: enough is enough", she proclaimed.

The conflict between the European Commission and the French government indicates how far European politics has moved to the right. The open promotion of racism by the highest echelons of the French government is a threat not only to the Roma, who were made a central target of the Nazi Holocaust, but to the European working class as a whole. No confidence can be placed in the European Commission—an instrument of the European financial and political elite—to defend human rights against this onslaught. This can only be done by an independent movement of the European working class based on an international socialist programme.



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