

# Discrimination of Roma in Europe intensifies

**Diana Toma****18 September 2012**

Despite electoral promises made by the leaders of the political establishment in both France and Romania, the situation for around 15,000 Roma immigrants living in several hundred illegal camps in France remains highly precarious.

According to *Agerpress*, data from the French Ministry of Interior reveals that around 500 camps were disbanded and more than 9,500 Romanian and Bulgarian Roma deported in 2010. After deportation to their countries of origin, many returned, fleeing the poverty and discrimination they encountered in Romania and Bulgaria.

During the election campaign of 2012, the current French president, Francois Hollande, promised that the Roma camps would be cleared only if there were "alternative solutions". But after just a few months of presidency, Hollande's approach has proved to be the same as that of his predecessor, Nicholas Sarkozy. In the past, Sarkozy had been criticised by Hollande's Socialist Party because of his campaign against Roma camps, but now, Hollande is walking in Sarkozy's footsteps. During the summer, French authorities demolished several camps, leaving more than 2,000 people without a dwelling. One-hundred-seventy-nine Roma—including 63 children—were deported to Romania last week.

According to *mediafax*, this is the third planeload of Roma to arrive in Romania this year. The first two arrived in January and July. Every adult Roma returned to Roma receives €300, with an another €100 for each child. But after leaving the Romanian airport of Timi?oara, most of the Roma said that the money would not last long.

In Romania itself, Roma confront increasing discrimination. On June 1, the mayor of Baia Mare (Northern Romania), C&lt;lin Chereche?, a member of the Social Liberal Union (USL, alliance between the Social Democrat Party, National Liberal Party and the

Conservative Party), moved about 2,000 Roma from the edge of town into a former chemical laboratory at the Cuprom plant.

In order to prove his determination to keep his electoral promise to clear the town of around 2,000 Roma, the mayor decided to move the first families overnight. After threatening to use bulldozers to destroy their camp, he went into action. Police forced about 2,000 Roma into an open truck and shipped them—in heavy rain—to a block in the former chemical laboratory of the Phoenix plant, known as the "death factory". After 1990, the name of the factory was changed to Cuprom, and in 2006 it was closed, after being assessed as the second biggest source of pollution in Romania.

The block had not been arranged for accommodation. The walls had been hurriedly painted, and the rooms were still equipped with metal workbenches and lockers with containers filled with dangerous chemical substances, some of which were 15-25 years old. Dust from the ovens used in the laboratory hung in the air. The sinister atmosphere, resembling an extermination camp, was completed by all sorts of warning signs such as "lethal danger" or "no mixing of chemical substances" left on the windows and doors of the plant.

The moving operation lasted all day. After seeing their new living quarters, the Roma sought to leave the block but were restrained by local police. Unable to leave, they placed mattresses on the ground and went to sleep. The daily *Evenimentul zilei* reported that around midnight, the first symptoms of poisoning appeared: nausea, dizziness, headaches.

The worst affected were the children. Ambulances rushed to the former chemical laboratory and, according to officials, transported 8 children and 2 adults to the emergency department of a local hospital. Other sources from the hospital said the real total was 13 children and 1 adult, while witnesses spoke of 22

children and 2 adults.

*Evenimentul zilei* was the only newspaper to publish horrific pictures of the conditions in the laboratory where harmful substances—including sulphuric acid and acetic acid—were found.

At the beginning of May, Amnesty International arrived in Baia Mare to check with local authorities on the resettlement of the Roma families. At that time, around 60 families living in shoddily built shelters were due to be evicted.

This is not the first confrontation between the Baia Mare mayor and the Roma community living in the city. The Baia Mare city hall made headlines last year, on June 30, when it gave the green light to the building of an almost 2-metre-high wall to separate the homes of the Roma community from the rest of the town. The construction was termed “the great Gypsy wall” by *France Press* and led to protests around the world. Following complaints from Amnesty International, the National Council Against Discrimination accused the mayor of discrimination and fined him. But when recently asked if the wall will be demolished, Mayor Chereche? declared he has no intention of doing so.

Following the events of June 1, several organisations, including Active Watch, asked the USL to withdraw political support from Mayor Chereche?. Open letters were addressed to the Romanian government, to several official organisations and to the European Commission. But despite all interventions, the government and local authorities continue to treat such provocations with kid gloves, and measures for the protection of the Roma minority remain only on paper.

The USL continues to back Chereche? and no legal action has been taken against him. In fact, Chereche? was re-elected in the local elections held in June, receiving the highest poll in the country, 86 percent.

In a previous act of similar discrimination, 76 Roma families had been evicted from their homes in Cluj-Napoca (in the region of Cluj) at the end of 2010. Forty of these families were moved into run-down apartments at the periphery of the town, near the city’s waste tip and next to a chemical waste depot. According to the Civic Alliance of Roma, approximately 1,500 people, including around 500 children, lived there in 2011. The rest of the evicted families were left without housing.

While discrimination forces many Roma abroad,

discrimination is an international phenomenon. In late March, French authorities announced that a Roma camp located in Massy, near Paris, had been destroyed in a fire. One-hundred-eighty Roma lived in the camp. An investigation has been opened to establish the circumstances of the fire—the second fire registered that month in the Massy camp.

A group of 30 Roma were also ejected from Austria at the end of April after they had installed a camp under a bridge in the town of Terfens.

The attacks on Roma are part of a growing campaign of racist attacks encouraged by European governments of all political stripes. The aim of these campaigns is to create a scapegoat for growing unemployment and social misery and distract attention away from the polices of the official parties serving the interests of a tiny, rich elite. This is also the significance of the witch-hunts against immigrants in Greece at the beginning of August involving the government and police working hand in hand with the right-wing extremist party *Chrysi Avgi* (Golden Dawn).



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