

French promise of change for Roma meets reality

Herald Tribune (New York Times)

PARIS

June 4, 2013

BY STEVEN ERLANGER

In the last three weeks alone, the French police have dismantled Roma encampments in Saint-Denis, just outside Paris, and along the river Var, west of Nice. In Lyon, 200 Roma were temporarily housed in a gymnasium when someone set fire to their squat in a disused factory in the city, an arson that killed two women and a child of 12.

The Socialist government of President François Hollande came into office a year ago promising a better deal for the Roma, an end to the shantytowns and the rehousing and integration of those displaced. But like other promises, including a return to economic growth, reality has been a recalcitrant political partner.

Having criticized the previous center-right government of Nicolas Sarkozy for being careless with individual rights

and flirting with the anti-immigrant far right, the Hollande government has done little to change policy toward the Roma. Interior Minister Manuel Valls, who has been praised for his organizational ability and his toughness, has expelled at least as many non-French Roma as his predecessor did and continues to order the police to dismantle illegal camps and shantytowns, without rehousing most of those displaced.

On Jan. 1, the rules will change again, as Romanians and Bulgarians, seven years after they entered the European Union, will finally have the same right to travel and work in member countries as other E.U. citizens. But that will hardly make them more welcome. The upcoming change has led to new fears, fanned by anti-immigrant and nationalist parties of the right and far right all over Europe, of a large influx of poor workers and criminals seeking to take jobs from citizens and benefit from more lavish

ROMA, PAGE 4

Promises on Roma meet reality

ROMA, FROM PAGE 1

social-welfare systems.

"In principle things are different in France, but in practice things are pretty much the same," said Dezideriu Gergely, executive director of the Budapest-based European Roma Rights Center. "We expected a different approach, to reduce social exclusion and economic problems, instead of taking a problem and moving it from one place to another."

Guillaume Lardanchet is the director of a Paris-based association, Hors la Rue, that works with young Roma and other foreign minors in trouble.

"Valls reproduces the same security strategy as Sarkozy," he said. "We haven't seen a concrete difference compared to the old government. This Socialist government has dismantled more camps and shantytowns than the Sarkozy one."

Robert A. Kushen, the board chairman of the European Roma Rights Center, agreed that Mr. Hollande "has really continued the policies of his predecessor." Under pressure from the European Union, France introduced "some cosmetic changes to the law, but the substance hasn't changed," he said.

"From a rights perspective," Mr. Kushen said, "the Roma are still treated as a category of people and efforts are made to expel them without looking at them as individuals" — something that would violate E.U. requirements.

Even odder, perhaps, the government is pursuing its expulsions even though the rules will change in January. Although Romania and Bulgaria joined

ties against those who travel across visa-free borders to "abuse" social-welfare systems.

Citing support for freedom of travel, the four wrote: "We are equally committed to preventing and combating the fraudulent use of the right of free movement by Union citizens or by third-country nationals abusing free movement rights in order to circumvent national immigration controls" to prevent "excessive strain on the social systems of the receiving societies." Among other measures, and without mentioning the Roma in particular, of course, they asked for a "ban on reentry" for those who have been expelled.

The politicians have also focused on petty crime, like pickpocketing and the theft of smartphones, which they associate with gangs of Roma. Recently, the staff of the Louvre Museum shut it down for a day in protest because groups of young men were harassing staff and visitors and stealing from them. (The museum is free for those under 18.) The Louvre now posts a warning on its Web site about pickpockets.

The police are happy with the policies of Mr. Valls.

"We salute the firmness of Mr. Valls in his Roma policy," said Christophe Crépin of the main police union, UNSA Police. "These are people who sell themselves, who racketeer, who construct criminal networks, and their way of life is totally incompatible with that of our modern societies." The increase in thefts against tourists, "notably around the Louvre, proves that we must persevere even if we are exasperated to see the shantytowns rebuilt after a first expulsion," he said.

The legal limbo for Romania and Bulgaria has been bad for the Roma, said Alexandre Le Clève, a former director of Hors la Rue and member of Romeurope, associations that work in six countries to improve the health and lives of Roma.

"Paradoxically their situation has worsened since the entry of Romania into the European Union," he said. "It's even more precarious for them. The Roma lost certain rights, like state medical aid, that they had as non-E.U. foreigners. At the same time, like all foreigners without proper papers, they can be expelled."

That will change Jan. 1, said Mr. Le Clève. "That will put into relief all the contradictions of this government," he said. In the United States, he said, "people talk of regularizing immigrants — not here."

At the Gare du Nord, a hub for rail and suburban rail and metro traffic that handles 190 million passengers a year, Ruset said he would prefer to go home to Romania.

"But there is no work, and here there is plenty," he said. "There you earn €15 a day, if that, and here, at least 50 to 100."

Pierre Desorgues contributed reporting.

"Paradoxically their situation has worsened since the entry of Romania into the European Union."

the European Union in 2007, special restrictions were put in place requiring their citizens to obtain work permits, and only in certain industries, within three months of visa-free entry or leave France. The Hollande government eliminated a special tax on employers for each person hired, but with France in a triple-dip recession and unemployment at record levels, jobs are scarce.

On Jan. 1, those restrictions on travel and employment are finally lifted, and Romanians and Bulgarians will have the same right to work anywhere in the European Union as other E.U. citizens. That has led to fears, here and especially in Britain, of thousands of new immigrants seeking jobs. Those fears have been fanned and perhaps exaggerated by anti-European and nationalist parties of the right and far right, Mr. Gergely said, with an impact on more-mainstream parties, too.

"This trend becomes a concern in Europe, with more parties engaging in anti-immigrant and anti-Roma rhetoric, and more-mainstream parties also," he said. "That was not true five or 10 years ago — there used to be a sharp distinction between mainstream parties and far-right parties, but now less so."

A recent joint letter to the European Council and European Commission from the interior ministers of four countries — Britain, Germany, Austria and the Netherlands — asked for new penal-

"France is terrible for us," Ruset said, looking around for the police, whom he called "super racist, hassling us all the time." Like many of France's estimated 20,000 non-citizen Roma, he said that "I would like to stay in Romania, but there is no chance to work there. France I liked well at the start, but today things are very hard."

Despite the coming change in the Schengen rules on free travel, expulsions from France are increasing. Last year, an election year, 12,841 citizens of Romania and Bulgaria, nearly all of them Roma, were deported from France, compared with 10,841 in 2011, an increase of 18.4 percent; 9,529 were deported in 2010, according to the Interior Ministry.

While the Sarkozy government provided an air ticket home and €300 for every adult and €100 for each child to induce a "voluntary" repatriation, the Hollande government called the system perverse and wasteful, since many used the money to fly back again. But Paris still provides €50 per adult and €30 for each child "to ameliorate the return," Mr. Valls has said, while emphasizing that France is instead financing "80 microprojects" in Romania "to improve living conditions there."