

European Leaders Disavow Criticism of France's Roma Deportations

By [Alex Lantier](#)

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In the run-up to yesterday's European Union (EU) summit in Brussels, European officials and heads of state disavowed criticisms of French President Nicolas Sarkozy's mass deportation of Roma by European Justice Commissioner Viviane Reding.

France has already deported over 8,000 Roma to Romania. While the summit endorsed a free trade deal with South Korea and temporarily waived tariffs on Pakistani goods, coverage of the meeting largely focused on the Roma issue.

On Tuesday, Reding denounced Sarkozy's policy as "discrimination on the basis of ethnic origin or race". She implicitly compared it to fascist ethnic cleansing policies, such as Vichy France's policy of deporting the Roma during the Nazi Occupation, adding, "This is a situation I had thought Europe would not have to witness again after the Second World War".

Whatever the political calculations that prompted it, including a desire to obscure the prevalence of similar xenophobic policies by other member states and the EU authorities themselves, Reding's statement articulated concerns shared by millions of people.

There is immense political and historic significance in France's reversion to targeting ethnic minorities, and the policy is broadly opposed by working people. That France has a policy of targeted ethnic cleansing is not a question of interpretation, but a fact established by state documents.

Reding was responding to a leaked directive from Interior Minister Brice Hortefeux to France's police chiefs. The directive has been widely circulated, and is posted on Le Figaro's website. (See: <http://www.lefigaro.fr/assets/pdf/circulaire-hortefeux.pdf>).

It begins, "The President of the Republic fixed precise objectives on July 28 for the evacuation of illicit camps: 300 camps or illicit implantations must be evacuated in 3 months, in priority those of the Roma".

Such damning documentary evidence makes all the more significant the closing of ranks by European leaders against Reding's criticisms, and Reding's own subsequent disavowal of them.

The European Commission began to retract its criticisms only hours after Reding made her statement. On Wednesday, European Commission President José Manuel Barroso claimed there had been a "misunderstanding" of Reding's remark. After a meeting with Austrian

President Heinz Fischer, he said, “Reding had not wanted to establish a parallel between what happened during World War II and the current period”.

On Wednesday, Reding said she “regretted interpretations that distract attention from the problem”. She added that she had “in no way wanted to establish a parallel between World War II and the actions of the French government today”.

At the summit yesterday, Sarkozy gave a speech announcing that he would continue with the deportations. “We will continue to dismantle the illegal camps, whoever is there”, he said.

He indicated that he had received the support of other European governments, declaring that “the totality of the heads of state and government said it was profoundly shocking that one would speak in this way, with historical references that were deeply hurtful to all of our compatriots”.

Sarkozy’s initial response Wednesday was even more provocative, proposing to deport the Roma to Luxembourg, Reding’s home country. According to Senator Bernard Sido of the ruling conservative UMP (Union for a Popular Movement), Sarkozy said, “France has nothing to be ashamed of on this matter, but if Luxembourg wants to take the Roma, there would be no problem”.

France’s junior minister for European Affairs, Pierre Lellouche, said that Reding’s comments were “not the way to address a great state, one of the founders of Europe”. In a radio interview, he said that “comparison of France of 2010 with the France of the Vichy regime is totally unacceptable”.

Other European governments also disavowed Reding’s remarks. German Chancellor Angela Merkel said, “Ms. Reding’s tone, and above all the historic comparison, was very inappropriate”.

German government spokesman Steffen Seibert said that while “discrimination towards ethnic minorities” was not allowed, declarations like Reding’s were “often more useful if they have a measured tone”.

The most vigorous defence of Sarkozy came from Italian Premier Silvio Berlusconi, who gave Le Figaro a full-page interview titled “I Support Nicolas Sarkozy in Europe, in the G8 and in the G20”. He said, “Mrs. Reding ought to have raised the subject privately with French leaders before making public statements as she did”.

Berlusconi added that Italy’s long coastlines made “clandestine immigration” a particular threat, and he wanted to join with France in pushing for draconian anti-immigrant measures in Europe. He explained: “We hope that Franco-Italian convergence will help shake up Europe and deal with the problem through common policies”.

Berlusconi held out the prospect for a broader Franco-Italian partnership. He said that nuclear energy, in which France has expertise, could “reduce our production costs by 30 percent”. He added that “good relations between France and Italy made possible the adoption of the European bailout” for Greece. These issues were discussed at this April’s Franco-Italian summit in Paris. (See [“Franco-Italian summit makes strategic deals, calls for bailout of Greece”](#))

Berlusconi closed by expressing his support for Israel and for Franco-Italian cooperation in pushing for broad sanctions against Iran's alleged nuclear weapons program.

Claims by leading politicians that there are no parallels with the Nazi-Vichy era are patently dishonest and false. They reflect concern in the European ruling class that the obvious parallels between the two eras will provoke opposition to its current right-wing policies. They also fear the unearthing of the rotten basis of post-war European capitalism—in particular, the unresolved historical issues surrounded the Western European bourgeoisie's collaboration with the Nazis.

Sarkozy's ethnically-targeted deportations and incitement of anti-Muslim hatreds, amid the greatest economic crisis since the 1930s, inevitably recalls fascist scapegoating of foreigners and Jews for social and economic problems in the 1920s and 1930s. This ultimately led to the mass murder of Jews, Roma and millions of others.

The French president's recent attempt to silence opposition to his ban of the burqa by threatening naturalised citizens with loss of citizenship—a policy not used since Vichy—evoked mass hostility and public statements from prominent politicians and others noting the parallel with the 1940s. Patrick Weil of the National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS) told French TV channel TF1 that passing laws allowing the removal of citizenship was "the nuclear option". He explained: "Historically, it's a measure mainly used in wartime. Since World War II, the issue of citizenship has been treated with a lot of caution".

This issue was discussed in the media. On July 31, France's daily of record, *Le Monde*, cited criticism of Sarkozy's plans for removal of citizenship and explained: "In France, the Vichy regime created, on July 22, 1940, a commission to review the 50,000 naturalisations performed since 1927. Some 15,000 people, of whom 40 percent were Jewish, lost their citizenship in the name of 'rectifying the errors of the past'".

While it refuses to allow discussion of the Nazi collaborationist period, the French political establishment is concerned that this issue is re-emerging, and at times seems obsessed with it. French media recently reported that Labour Minister Eric Woerth responded to Catherine Coutelle, a National Assembly deputy who criticised his pension-cutting bill, by denouncing her as a "collaborationist".

Woerth is at the centre of a campaign finance scandal in which he allegedly took massive payoffs from billionaire Liliane Bettencourt as UMP treasurer to fund Sarkozy's 2007 presidential campaign. Bettencourt's fortune as owner of cosmetics giant L'Oréal escaped confiscation after World War II, though her family's support for fascism in the 1930s and 1940s—like that of much of the French ruling class at the time—are a matter of public record.

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Articles by: **Alex Lantier**

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