

EU commissioner: Booting Roma out of France is no solution

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BRUSSELS - Repatriating Roma from France is no solution to help one of Europe's most discriminated and disenfranchised minorities, EU employment commissioner Laszlo Andor told this website on Tuesday (4 September).

Andor. Cycle of poverty and stigma are among the factors that condemn Roma to the marges of society in the EU (Photo: ec.europa.eu)

The [European] commission stood up three years ago against the discriminating practice of French authorities and we also said that it is not a solution and it can in fact be counterproductive to repatriate Roma people in France," said Andor.

France expelled around 2,000 Roma in August alone. It now plans on easing working restrictions on Roma from Bulgaria and Romania where unemployment is high.

Andor noted that some French local governments are also using EU funds to help create establishments "reasonably suitable for housing Roma people" and help them integrate into the labour market and get their children into schools.

The Budapest-based European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC) claim the establishments or "insertion villages" only further segregate and strengthen existing stereotypes.

The villages were initiated by the French state in 2007 with the aim, according to the French government, to provide a more sanitary and safer alternative to current Roma "ghettos."

The idea obtained support on Monday by EU justice and home affairs minister Viviane Reding, who encouraged France's Minister of Interior Manuel Valls to move ahead on his previously announced plans to create more "insertion villages."

The EU, for its part, has dedicated around €47,000 in structural funds since 2007 to assist the French authorities in their construction.

Reding also told Valls she expected France to respect and apply EU rules on free movement in response to the deportation of Roma in recent months by French authorities.

France's Prime Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault now wants Roma placed on the agenda of the upcoming EU summit at the end of October.

In preparation for the summit, Reding suggested that all 27 national Roma contact points first meet on either the first or second of October. The contact points are national officials tasked with implementing member states' strategies on how to help ease Roma problems.

She proposed France work with member states with proven track records in Roma integration. The ensuing exchange and recommendations, she noted, could then be discussed with member states next summer. No work, no bank accounts

Meanwhile, policy efforts promoting Roma inclusion have for the most part centered around employment, education, housing, health and anti-discrimination programmes.

The EU is now looking into helping Roma get access to micro-loans and basic bank accounts, according to The World Bank.

Around 87 percent of EU households have basic bank accounts. The figure drops considerably among Roma households. In Bulgaria, only 4 percent of Roma households have bank accounts. The percentage increases to 6 in Romania, according to survey conducted last year by the World Bank.

The survey also revealed, for instance, that less than 5 percent of Roma households have savings accounts in Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia and Romania.

"The Roma face broad financial exclusions. Roma women face greater exclusion in the labour markets," said Joost de Laat, a senior economist at The World Bank. Lack of initial start-up capital makes it excessively difficult to launch any business.

Of those who do own businesses, up to 82 percent relied on their personal or family savings to start.

"Roma want to work but many lack finance and this is a key obstacle," said de Laat. Of those who do obtain bank loans, most are spent on food or improving homes.

His findings also reveal that most Roma are not self-employed and those with jobs, for the most part, have no formal contracts.

(EUObserver)