

France - New Normal on the Issue of Migrants: Incoherence

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PARIS — Which politician, President Nicolas Sarkozy, or Jean-Marie Le Pen, the voice of rightist extremism here for more than a generation, said the following about the role of immigrants, particularly Muslims, in their country's future?

Newcomers must avoid "self-designated victimization."

"The success of the integration process is hindered by the disproportionate number of nonnatives involved in criminality and troublemaking, by burqas, by men who refuse to shake hands with women."

And, "The street is mine, too. I don't want to walk away if they're standing in my path."

Answer: Neither Frenchman. The remarks were from Liliane Ploumen, chairwoman of the Dutch Labor Party, the Netherlands' largest leftist political grouping, as she struggled last year to bring the party closer to Election Day relevance in one of Europe's traditionally most tolerant societies.

A second question: Which French-speaking country will vote Nov. 28 on whether to make constitutional law out of a proposition that would expel foreign residents convicted of crimes that range from violent acts to misusing social aid?

The answer: Switzerland is set to stage a national referendum with two choices, their principal difference being whether the loss of a residence permit depends on the length of the sentence or the nature of the crime.

But it's principally Mr. Sarkozy who has run into a blast of criticism in France and abroad for advocating — after the French police were fired on in an immigrant neighborhood — that individuals with citizenship acquired less than 10 years earlier be stripped of it for killing police officers.

Michel Rocard, a former Socialist prime minister, said the measure smelled of Nazism and the French Vichy occupation government during World War II. Members of the Geneva-based U.N. Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination accused France of xenophobia. The editor of the hard-left French weekly *Marianne* acknowledged that the French president was not a "Petainist, xenophobe, racist or fascist," then, all the same, wrote, "Nicolas Sarkozy is a hoodlum."

Reality lies beyond this kind of spitting and clawing. And it suggests that in countries at the heart of the European continent's democratic traditions, there's a new notion of normalcy.

After years of these societies passively or haphazardly accommodating immigrants from Islamic countries and black Africa, a reversed core notion now insists that the newcomers' behavior must accommodate the majority's.

The politics surrounding the change can run from shrill to populist. But as a position paper issued under Ms. Ploumen's leadership asserted, governments and politicians had too long failed to accept

the feelings of “loss and estrangement” faced by national societies in the face of immigrant communities that disregard or mock their laws and customs.

There is little political upside now in plain ignoring a video clip like a current one described in the French press as “Shoot the Cops” by the rapper Abdul X.

In the event, the Dutch Labor Party, watering down Ms. Ploumen’s approach, lost in elections this year and fell out of government. Labor’s role in national leadership is in the process of being replaced by a minority coalition of Liberals and Christian Democrats dependent on the tacit support of the anti-immigrant Freedom Party of Geert Wilders.

For his backing, Mr. Wilders wants substance in return. He won’t get all of it, but his list includes: closure of Islamic schools, a prohibition on the building of new mosques, a head scarf tax, a halt to immigration from Islamic countries, no state support payments to immigrants until after 10 years of residence, so-called “assimilation” contracts requiring immigrants’ compliance under pain of expulsion, and the classification of illegal immigrants as criminals.

By this Dutch standard, the fierceness of the criticism of Mr. Sarkozy’s plan takes on a comic aspect.

In Switzerland, the November constitutional referendum on the expulsion of foreigners convicted of certain crimes follows a vote last year that banned new minarets from mosques. Both calls to Swiss direct democracy have come on motions from the populist People’s Party.

This time, Swiss Socialists, Christian Democrats and Radicals have backed a largely similar but competing proposition, also calling for the expulsion of foreign criminals. It includes convicted welfare cheats but carries potentially graduated penalties.

This is clearly mainstream politics catching up with a major evolution in public opinion.

How deep is the trend?

After Mr. Sarkozy said he wanted a law to strip cop-killers of immigrant origin of their citizenship, and his interior minister, Brice Hortefeux, came out for similar measures to punish polygamy and clitoral excision — a step denounced by the left as targeting a segment of the Islamic community — *Le Figaro*, the president’s main media supporter, published a poll showing between 70 and 80 percent support for the two measures.

On Saturday, *Marianne* pushed back, with its own poll suggesting more of an even split in French attitudes.

But its impact was unlikely to give Mr. Sarkozy cause to think he’d made a horrible political mistake.

The fact is, it’s hard to know whether Mr. Sarkozy really intends to press his revocation of citizenship idea to the level of law.

Le Figaro, which has a sure ear for the occasional Sarkozyian nuance, plausibly described some aides as saying his call was an essentially symbolic gesture meant to sharpen differences with the Socialist Party before the 2012 presidential elections.

Among the president’s skills is his great comfort in living with contradictions. Over time, in dealing with the issues of immigration and national identity, Mr. Sarkozy has called for both affirmative action and zero tolerance in policing — before abandoning the first and doing little, in the face of police union opposition, that would palpably establish the second.

In a way, this points to the essence (and an explanation) of Europe's distress in relation to its Muslim immigrants. [1]

Places like France, the Netherlands and Switzerland have never gone through the systematic confidence-building and psychological investment in its newcomers that affirmative action would signify.

At the same time, out of comfort and a habit of buying off trouble, they have also taken a pass on a confrontation with immigrants over their nations' requirements for integration — and their civilizations' demands for respect — that a consistent policy of zero tolerance in law enforcement could demonstrate.

As far as a new normal goes, this incoherence hardly seems a formula for creating calm or more manageable diversity.

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P.S.

* Published: August 16, 2010. The New York Times:

http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/17/world/europe/17iht-politicus.html?ref=nicolas_sarkozy

Footnotes

[1] Note from ESSF: the Roma who are the ones most recently targeted by Sarkozy are Christians.