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France Goes Head-to-Head with Arizona for “Toughest on Immigration” Title ^[1]

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Though the presence of Roma (more commonly known as “Gypsies”) is nothing new in Western Europe, French President Nicolas Sarkozy began an unprecedented immigration crackdown campaign on Roma in France this past summer.

In July, Sarkozy announced plans to dismantle 300 illegal Roma camps in his country, expel any Roma with a criminal record, and encourage the majority to leave “voluntarily” in return for a 300-euro stipend. Those who do not leave voluntarily will face forced removal without compensation within one month if they do not comply with France’s regulations. Though Roma are EU citizens and can legally travel within the EU, it is illegal to stay in France for more than three months without a work permit or proof of financial livelihood.

During the month of August, France expelled more than 1,000 Roma, most of whom were returned to Romania and Bulgaria. One thousand may not seem like a lot to the United States, who deported over 387,000 undocumented immigrants in 2009. However, given that there are only about 15,000 Roma in France and that 8,000 have already been expelled since the beginning of the year, Sarkozy’s crackdown seems extreme and unwarranted.

This certainly isn’t the first attempt by a European country to rid itself of Roma, who the French president claims are sources of “trafficking, exploitation of children and prostitution.” What makes Sarkozy’s attempt so contentious is not only the overtly public nature of his efforts, but also his claims that the “invasion” of people from the East is linked to France’s increased crime rate.[!]

Not surprisingly, the term “invasion” has been used on this side of the Atlantic to describe the flow of Hispanics to the U.S. through Mexico. Recently, this term has been heard in Arizona, the now notorious southwestern state that essentially legalized racial profiling by signing Senate Bill 1070 into law last April.ⁱⁱ Though a federal judge temporarily blocked controversial parts of SB1070 from going into effect in July, unfortunate similarities remain between France and Arizona when it comes to immigration. Analyzing these parallels and their effects on public diplomacy could serve as a warning for states or countries considering similar policies.

Without question, immigrants have been an intrinsic part of the culture in both Arizona and France, for better or worse, for the past several decades. Anti-immigrant sentiment has reared its head before, but the fact that both have implemented such unprecedented anti-immigrant policies within the past six months begs the question: Why now?

In both cases, immigrants are being blamed (or pegged the scapegoat) for increases in crime. In Arizona, talk of uncontrollable border violence floods the debate, while government data

supports the conclusion that border areas are among the safest regions in the country. In France, the Interior Ministry claims that “Gypsy criminality in the country has grown 138% in the last year”ⁱⁱⁱ while others have trouble finding official data to support these statements. Of course, troubling economic times across the globe do not alleviate politicians or voters’ need for someone to blame.

The scapegoating, however, is but a small piece of the larger puzzle – motivation for political gain. In the face of economic hardship, it appears elected officials are using immigration as a political platform to look tough or stringent, and thus garner support from constituents. Arizona Governor Jan Brewer, who has yet to be elected to that office, experienced a significant increase in voter approval after signing SB1070 into law just seven months before her first run for governor. President Sarkozy, who is up for reelection in 2012, has recently seen his personal approval ratings at an all-time low.

Despite the extreme nature of these policies, other states in the U.S. (i.e. Colorado, Oklahoma, South Carolina) and other countries in the EU (i.e. Italy, Germany, the Netherlands) have shown signs of following this immigration-crackdown trend. Economic repercussions should be enough to divert these actors from pursuing similar policies; Arizona has already lost millions in state revenue as a result of SB1070-centered boycotts, and Romanian non-governmental organizations are calling for a boycott of French goods. More so than economic consequences, however, the implications for public diplomacy in such policies are far greater and in the long run, more powerful in the battle for hearts and minds.

Regardless of stance on immigration policy, it is troubling that an inherently human rights issue is being touted as a political football in our global society. Immigration should not surface only when politicians need something to bolster their campaign image. To implement policies like Arizona and France have, against vulnerable populations, will not only tarnish a country or state’s image, but may discredit its reputation in the nations whose citizens support and contribute to its growth. Such is an example of another bad policy that even great public diplomacy cannot fix.*

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i. <http://en.rian.ru/analysis/20100831/160410758.html>

ii.

For more on this topic, visit:

http://uscpublicdiplomacy.org/index.php/newswire/cpdblog_detail/arizonas_new_immigration_law_how

iii. <http://en.rian.ru/analysis/20100831/160410758.html>

*At the time of this article on September 14th, EU Justice Commissioner Viviane Reding publicly stated that the EU might take legal action against France for its expulsion of Roma.