

6. France

6.1 Definition of a minority in France

“Minority” is not a French word. Indeed, the very French notion of republic (“liberty, equality, fraternity”) is made to believe so strongly that minorities do not exist that the law does not mention their existence, both for migrants and for refugees. In France, one may be a citizen, with full rights and obligations, and have its specificities recognized, but not a “member of a minority”. This assertion has strong roots in all integration policies (from school to social security), and turns almost impossible to get a definition for “minority”. Minorities exist out of France, people from these groups may come to France, as migrants, refugees, travellers, but as long as they intend to stay in France they quickly discover that the republican values are not made of minorities.

But minorities may be accepted for cultural matters – Paris is for many French artists the absolute capital for “world music”, often understood as the music of minorities. It is quite good to be a minority musician.

France foreign policy may insist a lot to draw attention on ethnic minorities’ rights in their countries of origin, and be actually generous to offer asylum to the people belonging to these minorities. But the status of “minority” seem to be vanished after crossing the boarder.

6.2 The national institutional framework and its responsibilities

Several public institutions deal with migrants and refugees – none of them specifically with minorities. Foreign Affairs Ministry, through OFPRA, is responsible for refugees and asylum seekers. Social Affairs Ministry is responsible for many aspects of the life of migrants. And different local levels have a responsibility for police matters, especially important for migrants (36,000 municipalities, 95 “departments”, 22 regions, in Metropolitan France, and specific public bodies in overseas territories).

6.3 French Organisations supporting Minorities

Private organizations, NGOs, religious groups, and human rights associations are giving large support to migrants and refugees. If the public administration and the republican philosophy often don’t understand the word “minority”, these organizations, on the other side, are usually aware that minorities represent specific questions, specific needs, specific answers.

The SSAE (Service Social d’Aide aux Emigrants – Social Service for Support to Migrants) represents the associations within the OFPRA (public body for refugees) council. The French government officially gave a mission to SSAE to “organize and ensure social insertion for foreign people living in France”. This mission is understood within the framework of official policies, therefore not for minorities.

Especially interesting meetings also have been hold with Médecins du Monde (Doctors of the World), a NGO well known for emergency humanitarian assistance, that work in France with people suffering hard social exclusion – minorities, because not recognized as such, may be considered the core business of exclusion.

A number of migrant groups (many of them not formally organized in legal association) act as support organization for the people coming from a specific country, a specific region, ... or a specific minority.

6.4 Perceptions and expectations among the minority groups

All people interviewed belong to gipsy communities, illegal migrants in Paris' suburbs, coming from Romania and former Yugoslavia.

They understand they do not exist. The negation began in the country of origin and continues in France. Housing and employment are mentioned as the most crucial questions addressed.

They feel discrimination they suffer in France is linked to their illegal status, not to the ethnic origin. One may comment that gypsies suffered such discrimination in France for centuries, and their illegal condition may be linked to their ethnic origin.

They do not wish to return to their countries, but understand they may be forced to manage a forced repatriation – in that case, they consider it would be a temporary return, time to organize a new illegal trip to France.

6.5 Perceptions and expectations among the officials and NGOs

A high rank official at OFPRA, in charge of drafting refugees' policies, had serious problem to understand the questions about voluntary returns and minorities. After reading the full law of 1952, and the recent one of August 2004, he went to a conclusion that not a single line of the very long official documents refers minority or return. Only "*éloignement*" is quoted. "*Éloignement*" is usually translated as "deportation". In good French, the word comes from "*loin*" (far away), and represents the action of putting something or someone far away from its present location.

It is interesting to mention that the law is especially complete and therefore it must not be understood as a forgotten point, but really a republican idea that minority does not exist. Just to give an idea of the level of detail, the law mentions what to do if a asylum seekers arrives in the French Antarctic Territory (that is, to speak clearly, the scientific base in Antarctica). We were not able to know if a single asylum seeker really challenged the penguins.

Situation is very different at local authority level. An official at Saint Denis municipality (where most of minority group member were interviewed) would appreciate the possibility of having local rules that match the national law, giving the possibility to acknowledge the existence of minority in order to ease the social policies of the town. Once more, cultural approach is stressed as a positive way (the gypsies in the barracks are the one who sing and play in Kusturica movies – Kusturica is a hero for French movie lovers).

NGOs have a pragmatic approach and fight to get basic rights – to health, education, and housing – granted to exclude people. If these people are members of minorities, it would be fine to have specific rights.

Médecins du Monde and the Fédération Internationale des Droits de l'Homme had a common evaluation mission in Romania, in 2003, to analyse the conditions of return. Some of the conclusions are especially severe:

"Deportation of Romanian Roms in their country is hypocrite"

"French Government has a heavy responsibility"

6.6 Recommendations and Conclusions drawn from the findings

PSEau, a NGO with a small program for return of migrants from Africa, remarks that a successful return is made by a migrant who was well integrated in France.

The "no-minority" official, "republican", point of view is often presented as an answer against the dangers of UK style communitarian approach of migrants' integration with the risks of ghettos and racial violence. The idea is basically shared by many NGOs, and finds its roots in French revolution mythology. Mythologies are hard to change.

Probably the French revolution would not feel betrayed if the interest in including cultural and ethnic questions in local development processes in the countries of origin was able to match a similar interest for the specific identity of some of 5 millions migrants in France.