

**Roma Question:
Reflecting the Internal Debate within the European Union**

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Abstract

The European Union in contemporary international relations is presumed as a regional organization dedicated for promotion of human rights, rule and law and governance. The EU has an image of a normative international power but contrary to it several issues in past raises serious questions on its liberal political, social and organizational structures. Roma population is the single largest ethnic minority in Europe but lately faced several problems. The decision of the French government to deport Roma settlers from its territory led to intense debate on human right issues in the EU. This article focuses on the debate and how it is linked with overall international impression of the EU.

Key words: Roma Crisis, Human Rights, European Image

Introduction

French President Nicolas Sarkozy gets involved in another controversy when in August, 2010 his government announced that Roma immigrants will be deported from France. According to President Sarkozy, “the problems created by the behaviour of certain travellers and Roma,” whose nomadic lifestyles lead to “no assimilation into communities” they live near. The problem began when in the July group of Roma had clashed with Police in the Southern city of Grenoble and Central town of Saint Aignan. Taking cognizance of the incident, government of France announced that it will deport Roma population from the country. More than 51 camps of Roma settlers are disbanded in France and by the end of this year 300 more camps will be disbanded.

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As per the government decree, Roma who agree to leave have each received 300 euros, an additional 100 euros for each child and a free flight to their homeland. The action of French government is criticised by the European Union (EU) institutions, human right groups and by several EU member states. The French government defended its action claiming that these camps are sources of illegal trafficking, of profoundly shocking living standards, of exploitation of children for begging, of prostitution and crime. Although there are no available official figures but according to some independent studies around 300,000 to 500,000 Roma are in France that is around 0.64% of its total population.

Who are Roma?

Not known generally, interestingly Roma have their roots in India. Since the Roma have no written history, their origin remains in the dark for a long time. Towards the late 18th century, linguistic studies put some light on their land of origin. Traditionally semi-nomadic, Roma, also known as Romani and Gypsies, have been divided into tribes and clans each with its own traditions, beliefs and practices- determined by where they settled and their occupation. It is now generally accepted by scholars that Romani people of Europe are descended from groups which left India around 1,000 years ago and began arriving on the territory of today's European Union in or around the 14th century. The history of Roma in Europe-and the Romani identity itself is to a great extent bound up with ideas around migration, "nomadism", diaspora and exile. Nevertheless, the great majority of the Roma on Europe is sedentary, and the Romani language – notwithstanding its close links to modern Hindi, Urdu and Punjabi- appears to have taken its present form in Byzantine and Greece and the Ottoman Empire¹.

The population of Roma in Europe varies between six to fifteen millions which are around 1-2 % to the total population. Roma population are found everywhere from Finland to Greece and from Ireland to Russia, but they have no homeland and considered as immigrants. Roma population is mainly concentrated in Central Eastern Europe mostly in Romania, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Hungary and former Yugoslavia.

Roma Issue: Before and After the Collapse of Soviet Union

Many human right analysts are of the view that with the demise of communism the problem of the Roma community aggravated. The social security clause under the socialist regime explicitly

helped Roma to avail some basic rights. The nomadic character of this largest ethnic community kept them aloof from the mainstream, but steps are undertaken by the socialist governments of East Europe to force Roma to settle in major cities. This was purposely pushed to ensure that Roma community should adopt a “decent communist” way of life. There is a reason for this, as most of the Roma are resident in former communist countries, no matter if the Roma were travelling or had settled down as craftsmen with a permanent settlement, got job during the time of extensive industrialization as there was demand for unskilled labour. Consequently, many Roma were moved to industrial areas and employed in the construction of industrial sites, civil engineering work as well as in production itself, especially in heavy industry. The Roma were transferred from the informal sector to the government controlled economy and proletarianised². With the fall of Berlin wall, the socialist system was replaced by market economy and “free lunches” was abandoned. In the new competitive system with lack of education and professional skill it became difficult for Roma to get a suitable job. Moreover, lack of access to credit and unclear property ownership also hampers prospects for doing some small business.

The poverty rate amongst Roma is highest in Europe and according to figures of World Bank (for three most populated countries of Roma) the per capita poverty rate in Bulgaria is 37.2%, for Hungary is 26.3% and for Romania is 43.1%. If the poverty rate is calculated on Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) more disgusting figure will emerge and considering \$ 4.30 per person, per day as PPP by international poverty line, the rate of poverty for the Roma will increase substantially. In the PPP terms the rate of poverty for Bulgaria is 80.1 %, for Hungary is 40.3 %, and for Romania is 68.8 %. Illiteracy rate between Roma are high and there are disturbing figures which points that even in near future there is more despair than hope. Roma have primary education or less, while most non-Roma in Bulgaria, Romania and Hungary has some secondary education, post-secondary, or university education, less than 1% of Roma in all countries continued past secondary education. Disparities in enrolments between Roma and non-Roma suggest that the gaps in education attainment will persist into the next generation. In Bulgaria, the enrolment rate for Roma is 33% lower to that of non-Roma, for Romania the figure is 20%, for Hungary there is some positive change and the rate is just 2%. The same is the condition in health care and Roma in Europe even do not have proper health care facilities³.

Safeguards for Immigrants and Nationalities in Europe

Not only the International laws, covenant and treaties but the EU itself has stringent framework to ensure the right of immigrants. To mention some important ones are, Article 12 of Treaty of Establishing European Community (TEC), which is very specific on protection of minority rights, and it states that ‘within the scope of application of this Treaty, and without prejudice to any special provisions contained therein, any discrimination on grounds of nationality shall be prohibited’. Similarly, Europeans Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) Article 14 is clear on enjoyment of rights and freedom without any discrimination. Several directives and recommendations of the European Commissions (EC) from time to time also talks for the safety and justice of Roma.

Despite numerous important safeguards there is not much of progress in the condition of Roma and it is reflected in the position paper on human rights of Roma presented by European Commissioner for Human Rights. According to the paper, “there is a shameful lack of implementation concerning the human rights of Roma. The issue has been put on the agenda of all major international organizations and national governments in Europe, for example through national action plans, but without much impact. The Roma population- whether citizens, displaced persons or migrants- is worse off than any other group in Europe when it comes to education, health, employment, housing and political participation. Roma continues to suffer from widespread discrimination and anti-Gypsyism, which feed the cycle of their disadvantage, exclusion, segregation and marginalisation⁴’. This expose that contrary to claims, the EU human right violations in Europe is as common as in any other part of the world. The positive aspect is that European Commission is acknowledging this fact.

EU as Normative Power

Roma community in Europe are subjected to exploitation and violation of human rights is but evident. This does not match with the image of the EU, which has different projection in international relations. There are scholars who are of the view that the EU has an image of normative power rather than being a regional organization with strategic ambition. The EU was established with the aim of bringing peace in Europe by creating economic interdependence amongst the European countries. The notion of Europe as a “civilian Power” was theorized in 1972 by Francois Duchene, and it refers broadly to the use of non-military, primarily economic means by the EU in exercising its international role. More recently, the notion of the EU as a

“normative power” emerged. The idea of normative power draws the attention of analysts because it captures the main characteristics of the EU’s international action⁵.

On several occasions the EU as an organisation acted only on making mediation and resolving humanitarian crisis. Even in the case of Balkan crisis which was the conflict in the heart of Europe, there was no strategic move from the EU and finally North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) intervened in the region. European Union/ Europeans have made efforts to deal with the situation in Balkan but they failed to handle it. When the problem began in erstwhile Yugoslavia, EU sent three foreign ministers to resolve the conflict. The Troika, representing the past present and next members of the Presidency of the European Council of Ministers, entered the Balkan with the confidence that this is the hour of Europe. However, the effort did not bring about the desired results. The objective to keep the Americans out of European crisis failed miserably. Once again during the time of Iraq war-II, the EU failed to evolve a consensus amongst the member countries with three major European countries France, Germany and the United Kingdom had divergent viewpoints. Briefly, the image of the EU, being a normative and soft power is more acceptable.

Roma Crisis and The EU’s International Image

Except for a conflict in Balkan, European continent did not face any severe humanitarian problem after the end of the Second World War. In this when the Roma crisis erupted in France, which has the potential of proliferation as Italian government also made few statements on the line of deporting Roma migrants, the EU institutions had taken the issue with utmost seriousness. European Parliament on 10th September 2010, adopted a resolution criticising the French government for deporting Roma. Adding to the condemnations Viviane Reding the European Commissioner for Justice said, “I am personally convinced the commission will have no choice but to initiate infringement action against France. I have been appalled by a situation which gave the impression that people are being removed from a member state just because they belong to a certain ethnic minority. This is a situation I had thought Europe would not have to witness again after the Second World War⁶”. Denunciation of the French action on Roma community became severe after media exposed a government memo in which there was clear instruction for targeting Roma. As per the leaked memo, “three hundred camps or illegal settlements must be evacuated within three months; Roma camps are a priority” the memo further reads, “It is down

to the perfect [state representative] in each department to begin a systematic dismantling of the illegal camps, particularly those of Roma⁷". Evident enough that France has properly taken a decision on Roma deportation and in this case it falls under the category of violating the international human right laws and also the EU laws which guarantee the safeguard for nationalities.

There are controversies in past, one regarding the ban on Burqa for Muslim women and now the Roma issue generate a different impression of the organization, known as the promoter of human rights and human values. The continent where cooperation, human development, human rights and freedom of individuals are some of the most cherished values comes under constant scanner for some or other wrong reasons. The emergences of right wing political formations in few countries have added fuel to the fire and if this continues, than Europe is going to be at the loser's side. In the contemporary international relations, the EU has established certain reputation which will be affected by chauvinist positions like in the case of France taking on Roma. There are several defence forwarded by Paris relating it with internal security, illegal immigration etc, but none been rational enough. More the France will try to cover its position; more will be its rift with EU institutions. The largest ethnic minority of Europe cannot be overlooked and some concrete decisions have to be taken in the present situation. Roma problem has potential of gripping the entire Europe and this is a prevalent political agenda for the anti-immigrant lobbies, which have support base in almost every European country. The poor and deprived Roma community is not in the position to match with other EU citizens in job market, and thus, require support. On the contrary, if Roma will be pushed towards further isolation, advancement in their condition will become herculean task. This is a very sensitive issue for the EU and lot depends on how the member states, particularly France and EU institutions deal with not only the apparent situation but it have to envisage a future policy for bringing Roma into the mainstream.

Conclusion

Controversy or no controversy, Roma issue is important for Europe and it needs proper solution in way to ensure that living standard of everyone should improve. Poverty stricken community in any country has its own set of problems and it gives birth to incurable troubles. The EU is praised all over for its understanding between the member states, for cooperation and a mature

response to at this juncture will authenticate the normative power image of EU. In the post Lisbon Treaty scenario, EU's intervention in the world politics will be transformation but its role as a soft and normative power will not change much. Thus, it is crucial for the EU to resolve the Roma crisis firstly in France and subsequently in other countries in best interest of the people.

NOTES

¹ Claude Cahn & Elspeth Guild (2008), Recent Migration of Roma in Europe, [Online: web] Accessed on 10 September 2010, URL: http://www.coe.int/t/commissioner/Activities/themes/RomaMigration_2009_en.pdf

² Peter Thelen (ed) , *Roma in Europe From Social Exclusion to Active Participation*, (Skopje: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Publication, 2005)

³ Dena Ringgold, Mitchell. A. Orenstein & Erika Wilkens , *Roma in an Expanding Europe: Breaking the Poverty Cycle*, (Washington: World Bank Publication, 2005)

⁴ Commissioner for Human Rights (2010), Position Paper from Commissioner of Human Rights, [online: Web] Accessed on 13 September 2010, URL: <https://wcd.coe.int/ViewDoc.jsp?id=1631909>

⁵ Francesca Longo , “Justice and Home Affairs as a New Tool of European Union Foreign Policy” in Federiga Bindi (ed), *The Foreign Policy of the European Union Assessing Europe's Role in the world*, (Washington: The Brooking Institution, 2010).

⁶ Ian Traynor (2010), “Roma Deportation from France a Disgrace, says EU” *Guardian* [Online: web] Accessed on 15 September 2010, URL: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/sep/14/roma-deportations-france-eu-disgrace>

⁷ Kim willsher (2010), “France Deportation of Roma Shown to Illegal in Leaked Memo, Says critics”, *Guardian* [Online: web] Accessed on 15 September 2010, URL: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/sep/14/roma-deportations-france-eu-disgrace>