

No Bridge is “A Bridge Too Far”

Highlights

- ★ Malta as an isolated country saw relations with the EU as a bridge building effort with the peoples of the European Continent, which would also secure supplies, open markets, help obtain energy and strengthen security.
- ★ EU projects that strengthen existing ties or create new ones and which bring visible change to people’s lives tend to have a greater effect on the way the Maltese perceive the European project than discussions about abstract treaty reforms and the shape of a future Europe.
- ★ Despite having been mostly spared by the economic crisis, the Maltese are worried about the possibility of a spill-over effect. Hence, they expect the EU to do more to restart the economic motor, such as the better use of EU budgetary resources and allowing governments more flexibility in pursuing reforms.

Building Bridges project

This paper is part of the Building Bridges Paper Series. The series looks at how the Member States perceive the EU and what they expect from it. It is composed of 28 contributions, one from each Member State. The publications aim to be both analytical and educational in order to be available to a wider public. All the contributions and the full volume *The European Union in The Fog* are available [here](#).



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About Building Bridges

Called "Building Bridges Between National Perspectives on the European Union", the project aims to stimulate the public debate around national experts on the relationship between their Member State and the EU and on the future of the Union. This project confronts their visions with others' from different member states, but also those of people from different horizons via workshops in Warsaw, Madrid, Paris and Brussels, which took place in 2015 gathering experts and local citizens.

The project is coordinated by the French Institute of International Relations (Ifri) with three major partners: the Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM), Real Instituto Elcano and EUROPEUM—European Institute for European Policy. The project has also benefited from the support of institutes in each Member State.

You can find all the information and publications about the project at this address: <http://www.ifri.org/en/recherche/zones-geographiques/europe/projet-building-bridges>.



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What does Malta hope to gain from EU membership?

Separated from other countries by the sea, many of them too small to be self-reliant, islands need to build connections to overcome their isolation. Physical bridges are rare, but other types of connections abound. Malta's relations with the EU represent a bridge building effort with the peoples of the European Continent which also secure supplies, open markets, supply energy through the interlinked European grids, and strengthen security by belonging to a union of democratic states which provides it with the shelter it needs. Bridges link islands to the rest of the world in both positive and negative ways: generally they serve a good purpose, the common good, but they also carry negative influences and goods which often threaten the equilibrium of a settled, stable, but not inert island community.

Malta acquired independence from the United Kingdom on 21 September 1964 and joined the British Commonwealth. It became a member of the UN in 1964 and the Council of Europe in 1965. It became a republic in 1974; UK military bases closed down on 31 March 1979; and neutrality based on non-alignment was entrenched in the Constitution in 1987 (Article 1 of the Constitution). Subsequently it joined the EU in 2004, the Schengen Agreement on 20 December 2007 and the Eurozone on 1 January 2008. It is the smallest EU Member State in territorial terms and population.

Situated 300 kilometres from North Africa, some 90 kilometres from Sicily, 900 kilometres from Port Said in Egypt and a similar distance from Gibraltar, the Maltese archipelago occupies a strategic position on the main maritime highways in the central Mediterranean. Maltese culture has been shaped and moulded by the

cross currents of influences that for millennia criss-crossed the middle sea.

Remarkably Maltese leaders set eyes on EU membership in 1962, following the UK's first application to join the European Economic Community (EEC). After independence, Malta approached the EEC in 1967 proposing the conclusion of a preferential agreement. This culminated in the 1970 Association agreement. Malta eventually applied for membership in July 1990, suspended its application between 1996 and 1998 following a change in government, relaunched it in 1998 and was admitted in 2004.

The membership campaign which preceded the 2003 referendum and general election which finally decided the issue, produced a heated debate about Malta's identity and what the people expected from membership. This intense debate split Malta into two camps and was extremely acrimonious,¹ leading one analyst to claim that Malta was a "nation-less state".²

The opposing positions on EU membership had more in common than first meets the eye. The government led by the Nationalist Party (belonging to the European People's Party in the European Parliament) favoured membership, while the Labour Party opposed it. The Labour Party first proposed an industrial free trade area then a 'deep' free trade area with the Union, which it metaphorically described as a "Switzerland in the Mediterranean".

The main economic argument was that the Structural Funds would further fuel Malta's rate of economic development. The opposing camp derided this. Membership would give Malta unimpeded access to the internal and world markets. This could also be secured by a free trade area. Opponents of membership said that it would undermine the national

parliament's sovereignty while those in favour retorted that Malta will have a 'say' in the European institutions and in the adoption of EU laws. Concern was raised regarding the possibility of the dilution of Maltese identity by the arrival of several EU citizens to settle on the island and the loss of the status of neutrality. Those in favour of membership claimed that a massive movement of people to Malta was possible but improbable given wage differentials and that neutrality had been rendered outdated since the end of the super-power confrontation of the Cold War. More conservative Catholics feared that membership would increase the pressure for Malta to introduce divorce and abortion. These are matters of national competence reinforced in as far as abortion was concerned by a protocol attached to the Accession Treaty.³

In the contemporary debate the importance of the Structural Funds still has a positive hold on the national mind set and is likely to continue to do so until Malta becomes a net contributor to the EU budget. Other benefits of membership are often cited: Schengen and the introduction of the euro have strengthened the islanders' bonds with the rest of the EU, as has the introduction of low cost air travel since 2006. In 2014, nearly 40 per cent of arrivals to Malta were carried by low cost airlines. The Erasmus student exchange programme has also been a success story among youngsters wishing to experience study abroad. But Schengen has become controversial as a result of the recent immigration challenges.

Divorce was introduced in Malta in 2011, as were same sex partnerships - with the right of adoption of children in 2014.⁴ These changes were the result of public pressure rather than any direct, even remote, EU injunction. Euroscepticism is kept at bay by the fact that the

only two political parties in parliament are in favour of membership, following the Labour Party's policy shift in 2004 and the fact that the economy has been performing reasonably well. Sections of civil society invoke 'EU values' (applied in a broader sense) when pursuing their agendas, such as promoting LGBT rights, opposing bird hunting and trapping, as well as environmental protection.

Does European Union appear to be a clear project in Malta? If not, what are the main reasons?

The European Union is reasonably well understood in Malta. A 2013 survey, a year before the European elections showed that 62 per cent of voters knew when the election was taking place – as opposed to the 34 per cent average for the whole of the EU.⁵ But there is no clear debate in Malta about the kind of EU that should emerge, whether it should be a more federal or a looser union. A national conference was organised in 2002 on the future of Europe in the wake of the Laeken Declaration and the European Convention.⁶ But the national discussion of the positions taken by national representatives during the Convention was not very high profile. The Treaty establishing the European Constitution was debated and passed unanimously by the national parliament in 2005, as was the Lisbon Treaty in 2008 – with some reservations submitted by the Labour Party.⁷ The current debates on the future of Europe are reported in the media, but it is not a subject that easily excites opinion leaders.

A clearer picture of where the Maltese political elite approximates to can be gleaned from the 2013 general election manifestos of the three main parties (Alternattiva Demokratika - AD, Labour Party - LP and Nationalist Party - PN). Domestic issues dominated the campaign. The LP and PN, the only two parties with seats

in the national and European parliaments, pledged that they would work to ensure a stronger voice for Malta in EU decision-making. While the LP wants a stronger environmental and social EU – and conspicuously omits reference to a stronger political union – the PN pledged to work for a more united Europe which seems to indicate support for more political union, although this is not roundly stated. AD, subscribed to a narrower conception of European integration limited to the role that the EU can play in achieving environmental goals, animal rights, nuclear safety and jobs.

The 2014 European Elections could have been the ideal setting for the parties to develop their visions of European integration, but alas, once again domestic issues dominated the campaign.⁸ The PN's manifesto had little to say about the future of Europe and focused exclusively on how Maltese MEPs would try to ensure that membership would benefit Malta's national interests.⁹ AD referred to Europe as a common home, pledged to work for more transparency, accountability and democracy in the EU institutions, to oppose the adverse effects of neo-liberalism and above all to achieve a greener Europe.¹⁰ The Labour Government also connected its campaigning to domestic issues, carefully avoiding any reference to the future of the EU. While in opposition, the Prime Minister Joseph Muscat had criticised Europe's liberal underpinnings and supported a stronger social Europe. In March 2014 he appealed for Europe to be more assertive in global affairs, something which is possible only in the context of a stronger EU political union.¹¹ Malta's position on a stronger political union is also influenced by its constitutionally entrenched neutrality. The two main political parties agree on the need to amend the Constitution to bring the definition of neutrality more in line with current practice

and EU membership. But so far this discussion has led nowhere.

Since 2008, Malta has participated fully in the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) and also joined the European Defence Agency.¹² During the Libyan crisis it played a central role in evacuating civilians from the troubled country, refused to countenance any role in NATO's military campaign but pledged to participate in the EU's border management assistance mission EUBAM, and other initiatives in Libya to restore stability to the country.

Which degree of integration seems adequate to the position and ambitions of Malta both politically and economically?

While the larger EU Member States guard their autonomy because it allows them a freer hand in world affairs, smaller Member States also seek to safeguard their identity, particularly those that have recently emerged from external domination. The taxonomy of a Union that best fits Malta's interests would be one that provides Malta with a seat in the decision-making process, ensures its security, helps it overcome the main challenges it faces, can work to bring about long-lasting peace in the Mediterranean region and will not interfere in its affairs or try to limit its autonomy unduly. Only an effective Union, capable of taking decisions swiftly in situations that lead to danger, can contribute to the island's security. Malta leans towards a stronger social union. It values solidarity and has done this in practice when committing its share to the bailout funds for Greece and in the recent decision to relocate migrants from Italy, Greece and Hungary.

As for the Maltese public, in the last Eurobarometer survey, the Maltese answer to the question "which of the following is the most positive result of the EU?" was as

follows: first the maintenance of peace among the Member States, then the free movement of people, goods, and services, the introduction of the Euro, the level of social welfare and health care achieved and the student exchange programme ERASMUS. Behind these came economic, political and diplomatic power and lastly the Common Agricultural Policy.¹³ In the survey held a year earlier the answers to the same questions were similar.¹⁴ Eurobarometer surveys also show that the Maltese are primarily preoccupied with immigration, inflation and terrorism. But the surveys also show that the majority of them believe that the EU holds the solution to these problems. In addition, the Maltese have more trust in the EU institutions than they do in their national government, political parties or parliament.

The analysis shows that the 'bridges' built in the past, linking the peoples of Europe in a peaceful, collective endeavour through the 'four freedoms', the Euro and the Erasmus exchange programme have not gone unnoticed by the Maltese. It is also significant that the more practical and functional aspects of European integration have had a more profound effect on the Maltese - perhaps because these aspects helped them increase their connections with the rest of the EU. Treaty reform and the future of Europe blue prints, the production of which never seems to relax, have been more ephemeral. Hence a careful selection of EU projects that strengthen existing ties or create new ones and which bring visible change to people's lives, tend to have a greater effect on the way they perceive the European project than discussions about abstract treaty reforms and the shape of a future Europe.

Malta's situation is unique in the sense that its economy has been buoyant since it joined the EU and unemployment is low. Hence the euro

is not associated with economic failure. The 'four freedoms' and Schengen provide the islanders with more freedom to travel, to market their goods and services and to import what their restricted size and resources could never produce - though not wholly uncritically.

So how do these concerns and issues find expression in the official positions taken by Malta in the EU? Ministerial statements made in the Maltese Parliament provide a rich source of information in this respect.¹⁵ A clearer picture emerges from them of the kind of EU Malta wants. I have selected the following issues to illustrate the point: immigration, the Greek Bailout and the European Neighbourhood Policy. I have left "Brexit" out because it is still unravelling, except to highlight that in June 2015 Prime Minister Cameron sounded out his Maltese counterpart Joseph Muscat on the possibility of EU treaty changes. But Muscat made it clear that he would not accept treaty reforms by "stealth". Prime Minister Muscat was reported to have also insisted that there should be no changes on taxation and benefits unless there is agreement on treaty amendments.¹⁶

Immigration has long raised concern in Malta. Most of its positions adopted in the EU are based on the idea of collective responsibility and the expectation that the EU should do more to help Malta, particularly in situations of sudden influxes of immigrants which outstrip the country's resources to handle them.¹⁷

In regard to the European Neighbourhood policy, following the 2015 Riga Eastern Partnership summit, Prime Minister Muscat said that Malta favours a common EU approach vis-à-vis the EU's neighbours with some flexibility to take into account the differing needs of the countries involved. Malta favours the resolution of the conflicts in Georgia and Ukraine within internationally recognised borders, as well as the

conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh on the basis of the relevant UN resolutions.¹⁸

In the Mediterranean region, Malta wants a negotiated political settlement of the conflicts in Syria and Libya. It has opposed the lifting of the embargo on arms sales to Syria.¹⁹ In regard to Libya, Malta has constantly urged the EU to prioritise efforts to find a solution to the Libyan conflict, under UN guidance, which would eventually lead to UN deployments to disarm the militias and re-establish the rule of Law. Malta regards Libya as a failed state.²⁰

The saga of the Greek financial and economic problems features in several ministerial statements. The Maltese parliament has been regularly informed on the evolving issue. Malta has also provided its share of the bailout funds for Greece, but makes two important points: (a) that the EU must show flexibility towards Greece as regards its repayment conditions and (b) Malta will accept no 'haircuts' or reduction of Greece's debts.²¹

What emerges from this brief exposé is that Malta believes the EU should take on a greater role in its neighbourhood. At the same time, it wants this to happen within established norms, by means of the peaceful resolution of conflicts on the basis of dialogue and the rule of law, with a strong role for the UN. In the EU, Malta has honoured its obligations of solidarity towards other Member States, as exemplified by the Greek Crisis, but wants the EU to be more forthcoming on other issues such as immigration which has again become the dominant theme. It further expects repayment from Greece of its loans which fits in the framework of the 'rule of law'. As is the case with most small Member States, there is a tendency for Malta to perceive the EU as a supplement for its own lack of power and influence – it thus wants the EU to do more both

in the Neighbourhood policy and in the resolution of internal challenges such as immigration or the financial crisis.

How could we strengthen the idea of belonging to a common European public sphere among Maltese citizens?

The public sphere today is hardly distinguishable from the private one, while a European Public sphere per se is struggling to emerge despite the many issues of broad European interest such as the financial crisis and immigration that have raised a lot of debate. Hence it is difficult to see how the public sphere could indeed steer EU policy when the connection between the institutions and a still-to-materialise European 'demos' does not exist. Many of the political debates that address burning EU issues remain national and somewhat cut off from each other. Civil society can play a role in bringing issues to the national and European sphere but for this to happen it requires resources which are often difficult to attain. A greater use of the Internet and modern means of communication could help address some of the challenges that the creation of a European public sphere poses. A European 'agora' could be created in which citizens participate in the discussion on important European themes in a virtual space. Such arrangements can strengthen the bridges between decision-makers and the citizens. This is already emerging autonomously with little EU encouragement.

Which policies deem essential to conduct at the EU level in order to better legitimise the European project?

It is clear that Malta continues to invest a lot of trust in the EU to confront difficult situations arising both within and outside the EU. This requires effectiveness and rapid action on the

part of the EU. EU “foot dragging” over the collective handling of immigration and asylum policies, which has lasted more than a decade, has nearly exhausted public patience.

The EU also needs to devote resources to the stabilisation of the neighbourhood and the neighbours of its neighbours. There is a need for a long-term commitment to the external policies with long-term consequences, not least in terms of development.

Regarding internal EU policies, what concerns people most is economic stability, which leads to the creation of jobs and a broad

sense of well-being – ultimately the reduction of poverty. The Maltese have been spared the worse ravages of the economic crisis, but are worried by the possibility of a spill-over effect. Hence they expect the EU to do more to restart the economic motor, including through better use of EU budgetary resources and allowing governments more flexibility in pursuing reforms. Economic success is what ultimately persuades Europeans of the worthiness of the European project. Hence, ‘blue prints’ of a better structured Union, whether federal or confederal or just a multi-level polity, are useful at a certain level of discussion, but are unlikely to engage ordinary citizens.

Endnotes

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