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CASE STUDY

EUPopLink Country report - Malta

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Abstract

Malta is frequently treated as an anomaly within Southern European politics due to its historically high levels of public support for European integration post-accession and the absence of electorally successful radical or populist parties. Prepared as part of the EUPopLink COST Action, this country report maps the evolution of the populism-Euroscepticism nexus within the unique political landscape of the EU's smallest member state. Characterized by a strict, highly personalistic, and clientelistic two-party duopoly between the Partit Laburista (PL) and the Partit Nazzjonalista (PN), Malta's majoritarian system has successfully confined hard Euroscepticism to the political fringes. While various minor, exclusionary radical-right and Christian-conservative actors (such as Imperium Europa and Aħwa Maltin) have consistently contested European Parliament elections on anti-immigration and anti-EU platforms, they remain extra-parliamentary and electorally marginalized. Instead, this report demonstrates that populist discourse in Malta is primarily *endogenous* - embedded within the mainstream establishment itself. Both dominant parties periodically employ "chameleonic" or "soft" populist and Eurosceptic rhetoric during crises or debates over national sovereignty, migration, and constitutional neutrality. Ultimately, the report concludes that while a robust pro-EU elite consensus continues to neutralize radical outsiders, future contestation is likely to manifest as selective, issue-based Euroscepticism driven by evolving debates over EU defense spending, tax harmonization, and social policy.

Keywords

Malta, Populism, Euroscepticism, political parties, European Parliament

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1. Introduction

On the topic of Euroscepticism, Malta, the smallest EU member state is often described as a unique case, if not an anomaly for a Southern European country (Verney, 2019). There is also a dearth of literature on populism in Malta, with the term being used inconsistently in Maltese political discourse. This report provides an overview of Malta's party political landscape and the process that led towards EU accession, considering how manifestations of populism and Euroscepticism have appeared since accession.

Malta started its EU accession application in 1990 when the *Partit Nazzjonalista* (*Nationalist Party*) (PN), a centre/centre-right Christian Democratic was in power. It joined the EU in 2004 when the the party was in government, following a referendum. Interestingly, although the 'yes' side won, it 'only' received 53.65% of the submitted votes, representing 48% of registered voters, thus indicating a strong opposition to EU membership prior to accession (Cini, 2007). The referendum result was celebrated as a victory by both sides, causing great controversy as the *Partit Laburista* (*Labour Party*) (PL), a centre-left party, then in opposition and which had proposed a partnership with the EU rather than full accession, argued that since this result did not represent an absolute majority, it showed that the popular sentiment does not support EU accession. The result was solidified with a general election held a month after the referendum, which the PN won that election by 51.79% of votes (Pace, 2004).

The Maltese outlook towards the EU is greatly informed by the position of these two political parties, which have been the only two political parties represented in the national parliament since Malta become an independent country in 1964, and in the European Parliament (EP) since the 2004 accession (Briguglio, 2009). A minor exception was the election of two *Democratic Party* (PD) candidates to the Maltese parliament in 2017. However, PD contested that election in an alliance with PN (Cachia et al., 2020). Apart from this instance, candidates outside the PN-PL duopoly have not come close to being elected in national or EP elections. However, a relatively small number of third-party and independent candidates have been elected at local council level. A factor that has been cited as a possible reason why third-parties beyond PL and PN, including populist and/or radical right parties who harbour more Eurosceptic views, have struggled to make in-roads in elections is the votes quota required in a particular voting district (of which Malta has 13) (Cachia et al., 2020; Magrin, 2018).

Despite having been the party that opposed full EU membership in the past, the PL shifted its policy immediately after the EU referendum, embracing EU accession. Indeed, the party has cited it as a reason for the economic success of the country and its introduction of LGBTIQ+ rights (Harwood, 2020). Hard Eurosceptic positions within the PL have come from individual voices, particularly those who campaigned against EU membership in the name of retaining independence and protecting the neutrality constitutional clause (Harwood, 2018). This political environment has resulted in a cross-party consensus on the benefits of EU accession.

This consensus on EU accession by the two major parties suggests that Eurosceptic and/or populist positions in Malta exist outside the mainstream and outside of parliament, be it at the national or EU levels, since Europeanisation has shaped party politics in Malta (Cachia, 2023). The next section highlights the prominent populist and/or Eurosceptic political actors at the level of a political party that has contested elections, and that has expressed, directly or indirectly, anti-EU and/or populist sentiments.

The present country report was prepared as part of the EUPopLink COST Action (Andreadis & Vasilopoulou, 2026) following the EUPopLink Theoretical Framework and guidelines (Lorimer et al., 2026)

2. Populist political actors

It could be said that there are no left-wing populist political actors in Malta at the level of political parties. Instead, for the most part, populist manifestations in Malta have been of the exclusionary kind (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013), where the object of opposition has been both specific policy areas (ex: migration or reproductive rights) as well as Malta's entire membership in the EU. The intensity and consistency of several of these populist political actors has been in the form of hard Euroscepticism (Szczerbiak & Taggart, 2008), and the nature of opposition ranges from religiously-inflected conservative opposition to anti-migrant sentiments to nativist and ethnic motivations for opposing the EU and its policies. As demonstrated below, exclusionary populism and hard Euroscepticism reinforce each other, typically around anti-migration or nationalistic sentiments, as well as a hardline Christian conservatism, whereby the EU and its policies (particularly on gender issues and reproductive rights) are seen as enemies to 'Maltese' and Christian values.

The first EP election held in Malta in 2004 saw the emergence of two political parties that espoused populist and/or Eurosceptic positions. *Alpha*, led by lawyer and broadcaster Emmy Bezzina, presented itself as working for a European, pluralistic and cosmopolitan Malta, associating itself with the values of peace and neutrality, and striving to implement

basic 'European' civil liberties such as laws on divorce, decriminalisation of abortion, laws on 'illegitimate' children and same-sex relationships. In a more populist vein, *Alpha* argued that a vote for them is a vote against the dominance of the two major political parties. The party only contested the 2004 and 2009 EP elections and the 2008 national election, obtaining between 0.04–0.31% of votes (Electoral Commission Malta).

Founded by Norman Lowell in 2000, *Imperium Europa* (IE) is an ultranationalist radical right-wing political party. IE is primarily anti-migrant and, while being a hard (rejecting) Eurosceptic with regard to the EU, appeals to a different understanding of Europe, one constructed on ethnic grounds (Harwood, 2020). The leader of IE for many years, Lowell has been a controversial figure for advocating infanticide for disabled newborns, and espousing anti-migrant anti-Semitic views.

Between 2007 and 2010, Malta saw the activity of *Azzjoni Nazzjonali* (*National Action*) (AN), a right-wing political party led by Josie Muscat, a medical doctor and former PN MP. The party ran an anti-immigration campaign and called for lower taxes. Some of the candidates active in AN went on to be active in other populist and/or Eurosceptic parties in later elections. One such candidate was Mary Gauci, AN's former vice-president, who contested the 2009 EP election as the sole candidate of *Libertas Malta.* This party was part of *Libertas.eu*, an anti-Lisbon Treaty European political party founded by Eurosceptic Declan Ganley. In that election (2009), Gauci obtained 0.12% of votes (Electoral Commission Malta).

Founded around 2013, the right-wing Christian conservative political party *Alleanza Bidla* (*Alliance for Change*) (AB) contested the 2014 and 2019 EP elections, and the 2017 national election, with their best electoral performance being their first one when they obtained 0.4% of votes (Electoral Commission Malta). AB were succeeded by ABBA, led by the same founder, Ivan Grech Mintoff, with candidates coming from the Christian right. The party strongly opposed COVID-19 restrictions, the recreational use of cannabis, and abortion (Crowcroft, 2022; Xuereb, 2023).

Active between 2016 and 2020, *Moviment Patrijotti Maltin* (*Maltese Patriots Movement*) (MPM), a right-wing populist and anti-Islam political party contested the 2017 national election and the 2019 EP election, obtaining between 0.3 and 0.4% of votes in both elections (Electoral Commission Malta).

Partit Popolari (*People's Party*) (PP), founded in 2020 and led by Paul Salomone, contested the 2022 general election, obtaining 0.52% of votes (Electoral Commission Malta). The party did not contest the 2024 EP election. PP is considered to be right-wing/far-right and populist, although the party claims that its policies are similar to those of the PN until the 2000s (Malta Today, 2023). The party is anti-migration, Eurosceptic and conservative, opposes gender affirming care and considers LGBTIQ+ inclusive discourse as an indoctrination of children. It also opposes abortion (TVM News, 2022) and protested COVID-19 policies such as lockdowns and vaccination certificates (Vella, 2022). The party advocates for more direct forms of democracy and increased citizen participation such as the use of referenda for issues such as abortion, EU membership and the autonomy of Gozo. In 2025, inspired by *Fratelli d'Italia*, the party changed its name to *Aħwa Maltin* (Maltese Brotherhood).

Other forms of political expression that can be considered as populist also come from the *ADPD – The Green Party* (a political party founded in 2020 by a merger of *Alternattiva Demokratika* and *Partit Demokratiku*) and civil society organisations such as *Repubblika* and *Moviment Graffitti.* Some of their arguments have affinities with (left) populism in their characterisation of an elite who have hijacked power, transforming politics into an activity that serves the interest of the few (the political class, businesses, construction developers) over the people. However, of these, only ADPD has contested elections, and none of these groups use Eurosceptic discourse except to criticise the EU's border policies and neoliberal tendencies.

According to the *Timbro Authoritarian Populism Index* (March 2024), Malta ranks moderately low on populism; no populist or radical party is currently in government or in parliament, and populist parties have no EP representation. Studies suggest media consumption in Malta tends to reinforce partisan divides and echo-chamber effects, which bolster populist and radical messaging. Public discourse has also been described as increasingly polarized, conditions that enable populist framing (Vassallo & Cachia, 2017). Crises and scandals provided conditions where populist forces can thrive, such as a 2015 corruption scandal concerning a public-private partnership and the 2017 assassination of the journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia, sparked mass protests that decried the hijacking of power by elites and the establishment.

3. Positions on 'Europe' and the populism-euroscepticism nexus

While remnants of Eurosceptic discourse persisted until the 2003 accession referendum, the PL shifted its discourse and policy once Malta joined the EU, with then-PL leader underlining that PL had now accepted Malta's EU membership and

that it would be harmful to rescind it (Verney, 2011). This does not mean, however, that elements of Euroscepticism have completely subsided. In the first EP election, the PL turned down Sharon Ellul-Bonici's request to be a PL candidate even though she had in the past supported the PL campaign against EU membership. The reasons given for this refusal were her Eurosceptic links such as her activity in European organisations like No2EU. Ellul-Bonici went on to be the founding Secretary-General of the European Alliance for Freedom, a pan-European Eurosceptic party founded in 2010, led by former UKIP MEP Godfrey Bloom. Ellul-Bonici did not contest any subsequent elections.

Expressing similar Eurosceptic discourse due to the migration issue was Mary Gauci, former vice-president of AN who contested the 2009 EP election as *Libertas Malta*, emphasising the issues of subsidiarity and illegal migration, as well as being strongly against the Lisbon Treaty. Around the same time, AN was also espousing anti-immigration rhetoric and criticising the EU for its failure to share Malta's 'burden'.

Other invocations of Europe include those made by *Imperium Europa*, based on ethnic and ultra-nationalistic grounds. IE's discourse is one of uniting Europe in order to 'save the white race'. Former IE leader Lowell continually critiques EU policies, such as those on migration, for creating irreversible damage to the country, as well as economic policies that favour rich corporations at the expense of the people. On the other hand, the party also calls for the dissolution of the European Green Deal as it views such restrictions as harming the EU by negatively impacting its competitiveness globally.

With regard to MPM, their Euroscepticism is interlocked with anti-migration and Islamophobic sentiments. The party made the headlines in 2016 for protesting against Muslims praying publicly (Diacono, 2016a). The party has also called for funds allocated by the EU to faciliate irregular migrants should instead be used to help Maltese people struggling with poverty and illiteracy. MPM's proposals included a referendum with regard to integration as well as the end of Malta's membership in the Schengen area (Diacono, 2016b). The party mobilised Eurosceptic and populist discourse when accusing the EU of using the Maltese political parties to work against the interest of Maltese workers, calling for a renegotiation of Malta's relation to the EU. (Diacono, 2017).

The rhetoric of AC – eventually succeeded by ABBA – is both populist and eurosceptic. The party claims to represent those people who are fed up with mainstream politics. They claim that the two dominant Maltese parties have similarly sidelined Christian values in favour of European ones. Adopting a Christian right-wing discourse, he also claims to want to do politics to "fight liberalist laws like embryo freezing, and child indoctrination at school," presenting AB as being "against the EU because it believes it encroaches on Malta's sovereignty" (Grech Mintoff, 2015). Grech Mintoff has also entertained the idea of holding a referendum for Malta to leave the EU. His arguments against lockdown and vaccination policies during the pandemic were dismissed, who in turn described the Prime Minister, as well as the Leader of the Opposition, as being populist for saying that they are pro-life while also promising to make the morning after pill available for free (Galea, 2022). More recently, he has argued against EU pressures that threaten the Maltese neutrality clause. For the same reason, he has also objected to flying the Ukrainian flag from the facade of the European Parliament and Commission building in Valletta as a sign of solidarity with Ukraine (TVM News, 2023). In late 2024, a few months after resigning from ABBA, Grech Mintoff argued that European institutions, namely the European Parliament, the Commission and the Council of Europe are pressuring Malta to repeal measures that ban or restrict abortion.

The PP (now known as *Aħwa Maltin*) present a similar political vision of social conservatism, anti-migration and Euroscepticism, adopting 'Family, Nation, Liberty' as its slogan. Their party leader was previously a member of an organisation involved in anti-migration rallies, and a former member of IE who was charged and later acquitted for inciting racial hatred during a speech (Vella, 2020). The PP claims to oppose illegal immigration in all its forms and opposes the abuse of asylum rights. They also argue that Maltese citizenship should only be extended to individuals by direct descendance, while fully supporting the army and the forces of law and order. The party leader called for Malta to renegotiate its EU membership so that areas of security, defence and citizenship remain a local competence. He also accused the two main parties of lacking the political will to implement these changes in the Maltese people's interest. Another PP candidate in 2022 made the headlines for hitting out at former EU Commissioner Helena Dalli, claiming that 'Brussels' is imposing abortion rights on Malta in the same way that the EU imposed COVID-19 vaccines (Vella, 2022). While celebrating Independence day in 2022, the party claimed that Malta's sovereignty is being called into question due to the servile attitude of Maltese governments which has resulted in EU accession meaning that the majority of Malta's laws are being imposed externally by the EU.

4. Responses to euroscepticism and consequences

Malta's majoritarian electoral system and its strict two-party dominance create a unique political environment. As Cini (2002) notes, "the Maltese political system is marked by a culture of adversarialism and strong party identification,"

which "discourages the emergence of alternative political voices" (Cini, 2002, p. 5). This entrenched system means that populist discourse is internalized within the mainstream rather than externalized through outsider movements. In other words, populism in Malta has institutional expression, but non-radical content. According to Roderick Pace (2012), Maltese politics are characterized by "consensual support for European integration and parliamentary democracy," which limits the space for anti-system populism (Pace, 2012, p. 92). Nonetheless, this has not prevented both PL and PN from adopting populist strategies to mobilize voters.

Paul Taggart (2000) conceptualizes populism as a "chameleonic ideology" that lacks fixed content but rather attaches itself to various political movements depending on context. He defines populism as having "a heartland, a sense of a pure people, and the opposition to a corrupt elite" (p. 2). One of the hallmarks of populism is its "episodic" and "non-institutionalized" nature (p. 102). In Malta, however, a populist element is embedded in institutionalized parties rather than erupting through anti-party or outsider movements. The absence of a significant populist challenger from outside the duopoly, such as a radical right or left-wing populist party, makes Malta's case unique within European populist studies.

Due to Malta's small size and dense networks between citizens and politicians, politics tend to be highly personalized and clientelist (Veenendaal, 2019). Voters tend to regularly rely on individual MPs to assist with personal issues, creating fertile ground for populist appeals rooted in responsiveness rather than ideology. Joseph Muscat's PL built a political movement that blurred class lines, offering a populist narrative of inclusion, economic progress, and modernization while centralizing power in the executive. Simultaneously, the PN, particularly after its post-2013 electoral defeats, adopted moral populism centered on anti-corruption and rule of law, attempting to position itself as the ethical guardian of the republic; a phenomenon Taggart would classify as a "reactive populism" (Taggart, 2000, p. 98).

Malta illustrates how populism can permeate mainstream politics, particularly in small-state democracies with polarized political identities. Both PL and PN have invoked populist themes, alternatively constructing and defending "heartlands," invoking moral narratives, and opposing perceived elites – though always within the bounds of institutionalized party politics. For example, when it comes to migration, PL does occasionally employ a discourse that expresses populist sentiments, sometimes even articulating this dissatisfaction in soft Eurosceptic terms. For example, in 2013, a few months after coming to power, Prime Minister Joseph Muscat had caused controversy when he said that the governm.

ent does not exclude the possibility of pushbacks of migrants at sea, also threatening to use the veto to impact EU business (Dalli, 2013).

As Taggart (2000) notes, populism is "an inherent part of democratic politics," and in Malta, it is not the enemy of the system but a feature of its internal competition. Cini (2002) observes that, "in Malta, Europeanization has not displaced local political traditions, but coexists with them – sometimes uncomfortably" (p. 18). Thus, one may say that populism in Malta is not revolutionary; it is systemic and tendentially normalized. Malta's experience demonstrates that populism can be embedded in dominant parties and institutions, rather than representing a rupture from the political norm.

The process of Europeanization has resulted in a cross-party PL-PN consensus on EU membership, which functions to eliminate hard Euroscepticism from mainstream Maltese political discourse. This consensus was explicitly articulated in the aftermath of Brexit when, in 2016, then Prime Minister Joseph Muscat as well as then Leader of the Opposition Simon Busuttil (himself an MEP between 2004 and 2013) expressed their disappointment at the result of the Brexit referendum. Muscat quashed any aspirations for Malta entertaining the possibility of holding a referendum on EU membership, arguing that talk of leaving the EU would be populist (Dalli, 2016a). With that said, in 2016, Muscat made some critical remarks that can be considered as soft Euroscepticism. He argued that, while Europe was "a stupendous project," like the UK "Malta too is not keen on a one-size-fits-all Europe either," and that the EU has to face up its internal problems, saying that "now is the time for more reflection, not more Europe" (Dalli, 2016a). He maintained that the EU cannot be a superstate that decides from Brussels on what happens in Malta, promising the people of Malta that he will stay strong on Malta's red lines with the EU (Dalli, 2016a).

Then Leader of the Opposition Simon Busuttil echoed Muscat's views, arguing that it is in the best interest of Malta to remain an EU member, and that the Brexit vote was a result of populist politics. He suggested that any discontent with the EU by the Maltese must be addressed to avoid the possibility of what he called irresponsible politicians influencing voters. Busuttil, however, also argued that Brexit revealed the EU's shortcomings, particularly its approach to migration, which resulted in discontent that was capitalised from by populist and xenophobic politicians. (Mizzi, 2016).

At the popular level, Malta shows above average levels of satisfaction with EU membership post-accession (Verney, 2011; Carammia & Pace, 2015; Harwood, 2018). *Eurobarometer* surveys show that 68% of the Maltese in 2018

(Eurobarometer 90.1)and 65% in 2022 have a positive outlook towards the EU. When the Maltese public's belief that the EU is heading in the right direction plummeted in more recent years, becoming closer to the EU average (Borg, 2023), Maltese MEPs coming from the PL (more than PN) MEPs pointed towards more systemic issues in the EU as possible reasons (Magri, 2023).

In 2024, Prime Minister Robert Abela resisted calls to enshrine Malta's EU membership in the constitution after calls to do so to avoid the risk of the country ending up "hostage of some party that rides some populist wave" (Cacciottolo, 2024). Abela insisted that EU membership gives Malta lots of advantages and few, if any, disadvantages, such that to debate about leaving the EU would be an "act of insanity" and something that he "cannot imagine" (Ellul, 2024), with the then Leader of the Opposition Bernard Grech noting with satisfaction that a general consensus now exists on EU membership among the Maltese.

5. Concluding notes

Populism in Malta presents a distinctive case in the European context. Unlike the rise of radical right or left populist parties elsewhere in Europe, elements of populism in Malta are endogenous, embedded within the two dominant political parties, the *Partit Laburista* (PL) and the *Partit Nazzjonalista* (PN), and shaped by a bipolar political culture, a tendentially clientelist state and a centralized political system. Populism in Malta manifests less through standalone radical parties and more through populist strategies occasionally exercised by the two dominant parties in parliament, within a highly personalized political landscape. These dynamics are amplified during crises, propelled by clientelistic norms, media-driven polarization and occasional references to 'elites' and 'the establishment' by politicians, including government politicians.

Interestingly, while Malta's electoral landscape was dominated by PN and PL since independence, Eurosceptic and/or right-wing populist parties started to emerge in the first EP election the country held in 2004, and they have been a staple in the ballot since then. However, none of them have yet elected any candidate.

Crises and events that have fuelled populist and Eurosceptic sentiments elsewhere in Europe have been less effective in Malta. As highlighted by Verney (2019), Euroscepticism in Malta was not exacerbated by the government's response to the financial crisis since "in Malta, alone of all the South European countries, the government declined to adopt an austerity policy" (p. 176), nor did the country experience a rise in unemployment. Beyond macroeconomic performance, the limited political impact of the financial crisis can also be attributed to comparatively high levels of trust in national institutions and a broad elite consensus between PL and PN on safeguarding Malta's economic stability and EU membership, which reduced the space for anti-system or anti-EU mobilization.

Similarly, the COVID-19 pandemic did not present an opportunity for Eurosceptic and populist political actors. This outcome was reinforced by a moment of bipartisan alignment between government and opposition on core public health measures, as well as visible coordination with EU-level initiatives, which helped frame the crisis response as technocratic and collective rather than politically divisive.

The war in Ukraine and the EU's discourse on the Israel-Palestine conflict have, however, created discussions in Malta on the purpose of contributing to EU defence spending as well as the possible endangering of the neutrality clause in Malta's constitution. These debates have largely taken place within the boundaries of mainstream party politics, with disagreements expressed primarily by individual politicians or factions rather than by organized parliamentary challengers or electorally relevant outsider parties. While non-mainstream actors have voiced more confrontational positions, these have remained peripheral to formal decision-making and have not translated into sustained electoral momentum. Moreover, it is argued that the Maltese government is more concerned with, for example opposing EU tax harmonisation rather than employing Eurosceptic rhetoric on migration, even if it does call for 'burden sharing' (Harwood, 2021). However, with Malta on its way to becoming a net contributor to the EU (Harwood, 2018), as well as non-mainstream political actors becoming increasingly vocal on issues of gender and sexuality, there is a possibility for Euroscepticism and populist political discourse to become more widespread. Future contestation may therefore emerge less as a wholesale rejection of EU membership and more as selective, issue-based Euroscepticism articulated around sovereignty, neutrality, and social and cultural policy, particularly if elite consensus weakens or trust in institutions declines.

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