

EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTION BRIEFING NO 27 THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTION IN MALTA, JUNE 6 2009

**Prof Roderick Pace
University of Malta
Email: roderick.pace@um.edu.mt**

Key points:

- The second European Parliament (EP) election in Malta was again won by the opposition Labour Party which took three out of the five seats allocated to Malta (possibly four if and when the Lisbon Treaty is ratified and Malta's seats in the EP increase to six).
- The Labour Party gains go against the European trend where socialist parties have as a whole lost ground. But its causes are similar to elsewhere, mainly disgruntlement with the governing party. The change of leadership of the Labour Party may have also have increased its attractiveness.
- This was the soundest defeat suffered by the Nationalist Party at the polls in the past two decades. The Nationalist Party has been in power since 1987 (barring the short stint out of government in between 1996-98).
- Turnout dropped to 78.8% from 82.39% in the 2004 EP election. This is lower still than that of the 2008 national election turnout which was 93.3%.
- Notwithstanding this decline in turnout, voter participation in Malta is still the third highest in the EU after that of Belgium and Luxembourg, where voting is mandatory.
- In this election both national and EU issues featured in the campaign with the governing Nationalist Party projecting its 'achievements' in Europe, while the Labour Party focused mostly on national issues and the adverse effects of the recession. But, on the whole, national/domestic issues were more salient.
- Far right fringe parties made some important gains riding on concerns about irregular immigration.
- The Green party, Alternattiva Demokratika, fared very badly despite its effort to try and take the still potential sixth seat and notwithstanding that green issues have gained in importance in Maltese politics.
- Voters seem to have become more discerning: they rewarded those incumbent candidates seeking re-election who had shown commitment in their EP duties and supported the new candidates perceived to be capable of doing a good job in Brussels. On the other hand, they punished incumbents whose EP work was perceived to have been below expectations.

The Labour Party once again emerged victorious in the second EP election in Malta since the island joined the EU in 2004, this time with a bigger majority. The Labour Party, under its new leader Dr Joseph Muscat (elected in June 2008), who was himself a former MEP, won three out of the five parliamentary seats allocated to Malta. A Labour candidate who was placed sixth, will also be taking up the sixth seat if and when the Treaty of Lisbon is eventually ratified. Once again, and as normally happens in most Maltese elections, this was another hotly contested one.

Voter turnout, measured as the share of registered voters who voted, was 78.81%. This is the third highest turnout in the EU after that of Luxembourg and Belgium, where voting is mandatory. However, this figure represents a decline of 3.6% on the 2004 EP election and 14.5% below the turnout in the 2008 national election.

For the EP elections, Malta's thirteen electoral districts are merged into one. The voting system is the same as that used in national and local elections, namely proportional representation (PR) based on the single transferable vote (STV). All party lists are printed on a single ballot sheet and, within each list, the candidates are listed in alphabetical order. Independents are indicated separately as such on the same ballot sheet. Voters can vote across party lines for the different candidates in the party lists.¹

Since independence from Britain in 1964, the Maltese political system has been dominated by two major parties, namely: the Nationalist Party and the Malta Labour Party. In 2008, the Malta Labour Party changed its name to the Labour Party. It is a full member of the Party of European Socialists.

Up until 2003, the Labour Party opposed Malta's EU membership. It proposed instead a Partnership Agreement with the EU, akin to the European Economic Area (EEA) agreements between the EU and the EFTA countries. But following Malta's EU accession, the Labour Party took a pragmatic stance and declared that it was accepting membership. Contesting the 2004 EP election it won three out of Malta's five seats. In 2005, Labour deputies in the Maltese House of Representatives and their Nationalist Party counterparts, voted in favour of the European Constitution, although the Labour Party subjected its vote to a few reservations. The Labour Party did the same in 2008 when the Maltese Parliament ratified the Lisbon Treaty. Initially, the Labour Party opposed Malta's entry into the European Monetary Union (EMU) claiming that this step was premature. But then, towards the end of 2006, it changed its position and supported the move. In the 2008 general election, the Labour Party was narrowly beaten at the polls by the incumbent Nationalist Party, which now commands a one seat majority in the House of Representatives.²

¹ For more details on the Maltese electoral system, see: Roderick Pace, 'The European Parliament Election in Malta, June 12 2004', *European Parties Elections and Referendums Network 2004 European Parliament Election Briefing No. 5* at <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/documents/epernep2004malta.pdf>.

² See: Roderick Pace, 'Malta's 2008 Election: A Vote for Continuity and Change', *South European Society and Politics*, Vol 13 No 3, September 2008, pp 377-390; Roderick Pace, 'Malta's Cliff Hanger Election: Epilogue or Turning Point?', *Agora without Frontiers*, Vol 13 No 4, March-April-May 2008, pp. 376-393; and Roderick Pace, 'The 2008 Maltese General Election and the European Issue', *European Parties*

The Nationalist Party has worked in favour of Malta's EU membership since the late 1970s. It was a Nationalist Party government that launched the membership application in 1990 and eventually negotiated Malta's accession. Malta joined EMU and introduced the euro on 1 January 2008 under a Nationalist government. Notwithstanding its success in integrating Malta in the EU, the Nationalist Party has manifestly failed to capitalise on this by winning a majority of seats in the EP. One of the main, though not the only, reasons which can explain this disappointing record, is that EP elections take place about a year into the government's five year term when, as the Nationalists claim, support for the governing party is usually at its lowest. Thus both in 2004 and again in 2009, the EP elections provided disgruntled voters with the opportunity of venting their anger against the government either by abstaining or by actually voting for the opposition candidates. The effects and significance of this will be analysed at greater length further on in this paper. The Nationalist Party claims that in its initial years, the government normally takes what can be described as 'unpopular' decisions which raise voter disgruntlement. But disgruntlement can also result from bad policy decisions.

The 2009 Result

The result of the 2009 EP election is summarised in **Table 1** which provides basic comparative data from the 2004 EP election and the 2008 national election. In the latter, the Nationalist Party barely secured a third consecutive term in office by gaining a miniscule, relative majority of preference votes which in raw terms amounted to no more than 1,580 votes over Labour's tally.³ Given that the Maltese Constitution requires that the party which secures a majority of preference votes also has the right to a one seat majority in the House, the Nationalist Party was able to muster a parliamentary majority and form the government for the next five years.

In the 2009 EP Election, the Labour Party surpassed the Nationalist Party by around 35,000 votes but both major parties polled fewer votes than they did in the 2008 National election, reflecting the lower turnout in this election. Alternattiva Demokratika, the Green party, polled around a quarter of the votes it had received in the 2004 EP election. This may be due to the effect that, at the time, many Labour-leaning voters who favoured Malta's membership of the EU may have voted for it and, now that the Labour Party is a fully-fledged pro-EU party, they have returned to the fold. There may be other factors at work: for example the main Alternattiva Demokratika candidate in 2004, Arnold Cassola, had played a very positive role in the campaign in favour of EU membership and a substantial part of the electorate showed its gratitude towards him for this by giving him their preferences. But Mr Cassola later abandoned Maltese politics when he was elected to the Italian Parliament (since he holds dual citizenship) within the ranks of the Prodi Coalition. Cassola returned to Malta after losing his seat in the Italian Parliament when

Elections and Referendums Election Briefing No.43 at http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/documents/epern-eb-malta2008_no_43.pdf.

³ See: 'The 2008 Maltese General Election and the European Issue'.

the country had to go to early elections following the disintegration of the governing coalition there.

Table 1: 2009 EP election results in Malta

	European Parliament Elections				General Election	
	2004	Percentage	2009	Percentage	2008	Percentage
Registered Voters	304,283	--	322,441	--	315,317	--
Votes Cast*	250,692	82.39	254,039	78.8	294,214	93.3
Invalid Votes*	4,969	1.63	5,870	1.82	3,415	1.16
Valid Votes Cast*	245,722	80.75	248,169	77	290,799	92.2
Party Performance**						
Nationalist Party	97,688	39.76	100,486	40.50	143,468	49.34
Labour Party	118,893	48.42	135,917	54.76	141,888	48.79
Alternattiva Demokratika	22,938	9.33	5,802	2.34	3,810	1.31
Imperium Ewropa	1,603	0.65	3,637	1.47	--	--
Alleanza Nazzjonali	--	--	1,595	0.64	1,461	0.5
Ind. C. Farruggia***	3,119	1.27	--	--	--	--
Others	1,391	0.6	732	0.3	172	0.059
<p>NOTE: All votes shown here indicate preference votes obtained by the parties (i.e. number "ones" obtained by their candidates). *Percentages are of registered voters. **Percentages are of valid votes cast. ***Independent Candidate (C. Farruggia) who was also the Chairman of the main Hunters and Trappers' Federation.</p>						

Alleanza Nazzjonali led by a former Nationalist MP did not do very well and kept more or less the same amount of votes which it had garnered the first time it contested in the 2008 election. But the more right-wing and anti-immigrant Imperium Europa, saw its preference votes increase from 1,603 to 3,637. The other smaller parties did not do so well. The candidate of Libertas Malta, a former Azzjoni Nazzjonali candidate, managed no more than 298 votes notwithstanding the amount of finance that this new party seemed to have had access to. If the votes of all this assortment of small, right-wing, liberal and EU-sceptic⁴ parties is added together it amounts to no more than 2.2% of all the valid votes cast.

The Campaign of the Main Parties

There were two principal stances adopted by the main parties for the 2009 EP election, namely negative and positive campaigning. The mix adopted by the parties varied. Negative campaigning involves criticising the policies, actions and proposals of one's opponents, particularly their most salient ones. Positive campaigning involves the

⁴ The term 'EU-sceptic' is used because many of these parties would subscribe to a different conception of a united Europe, as a Europe of nation states or as an Empire.

projection of what actions the party intends to take and which policies it intends to follow.

In a small state such as Malta, it is more difficult to separate neatly European and domestic issues, just as much as it is difficult to draw a sharp line between domestic and European policies though the two spheres exist. The ‘Europeanisation’ of many political and economic activities is much more extensive than is the case in a larger state. To simplify the argument, policy assessments such as economic performance, immigration or environmental policy rest on two fundamental questions: (1) how successful has the government been in implementing its policies, and (2) to what extent has it been able to use EU membership or transfers from the EU budget to help it achieve them? What may be described as ‘pure’ European issues - such as the future of the EU, the CFSP/ESDP, enlargement, or the Lisbon Treaty - either did not feature at all or did so marginally and in such cases only where Malta’s interests are involved. In addition, since the Labour Party focused mostly on domestic issues while challenging Malta’s performance in the EU, the tendency to link and mix both was stronger. Nevertheless, the final outcome was that the accent was more on the domestic than on European issues.

On the positive side, the Nationalist Party argued that since this was a European election, European issues should be the main focus of the debate. This was a convenient stance by the Nationalist Party given its weaker record on national policies. Thus the Nationalist Party prioritised what it saw as its main achievements in the EU and their impact, namely the smooth and trouble-free introduction of the Euro, the attraction of substantive amounts of foreign direct investment (FDI) (See **Table 2**) which led to job creation, though unemployment started to increase in the first quarter of 2008, Malta’s ability to secure some €1,500 million in transfers from the EU structural and cohesion funds and the Nationalist Party’s consistency on Malta’s EU membership. As a positive objective for the next five years, it promised to work hard to use the opportunities provided by EU membership to generate more work and job opportunities.

Table 2: FDI to Malta, 1990-2007

	1990-2004 Annual Average	2004	2005	2006	2007
In millions of US Dollars	241	396	675	1865	595
As a percentage of gross fixed capital formation	29	--	58.7	150	69.3
Source: World Investment Report 2008, UNCTAD					

The Nationalist Party’s negative campaign focused on the Labour Party’s past history of opposition to membership and on the voting record of the Labour MEPs in the EP. The Nationalist Party also directed criticism at past and recent Eurosceptic statements made by some of the Labour candidates. One of these, Ms Sharon Ellul Bonici, had been a leading figure in the ‘No to membership’ campaign before the 2003 referendum and

election. She continued to pursue a Eurosceptic line even after the Labour Party changed course on Europe. In June 2008, the newspaper *Malta Today* reported that Ms Ellul Bonici was planning to launch a new movement in Malta – after the election of the new Labour leader – which would contest the 2009 EP election. She was also reported to have claimed that Labour was ‘totally out of the picture’ on Europe, adding that her movement was being launched in June for its significance with Denmark’s June Movement, the party launched by former MEP Jens-Peter Bonde with whom she was associated in the European Parliament. Ms Ellul Bonici was eventually accepted as a Labour candidate for the 2009 election, undertaking at the same time to work within the PES which she had also criticised in the past as being undemocratic where the EU was involved. At the time of writing the speculation is whether she will return to the Eurosceptics after failing to be elected to the EP on the Labour Party-PES ticket.

The Labour campaign focused on belittling the Nationalist Party’s claims on EU membership by, for example, arguing that Malta was not a net beneficiary from the EU budget but a net contributor, basing its arguments on the government’s own sources. It also: criticised the government’s ‘failure to harness the EU’s resources in the service of stopping irregular immigrants from landing in Malta, as well as for mis-leading bird hunters and trappers before the 2003 referendum and election by telling them that spring hunting would continue to be permitted upon membership, when in fact this had been closed pending a decision on the issue by the European Court of Justice, which has started hearing a case against the government by the Commission. On the introduction of the Euro in 2008, the Labour Party pointed out that since by the end of that year the deficit in public spending had increased beyond the limits established by the Growth and Stability Pact, Malta had not really carried out the fundamental structural changes to ensure that in the longer-term public spending would stay within limits and not exceed 3% of GDP.

The government’s retort was that the effects of the international recession on Malta’s economy had constrained it to disregard fiscal prudence in the interests of saving jobs. Maintaining the public deficit within the 3% of GDP limit, as argued by the Opposition, would have led to higher unemployment. The Labour Party also criticised the Government on inflation which, according to Eurostat, at 4% was the highest in the euro zone.⁵

Public Opinion in Malta on EU and EP

What the Maltese public thinks about the EU and the EP was (needless to stress) also relevant in this election. The Results of the *Special Eurobarometer 303* - whose field work was carried out in October-November 2008, and which was published in April 2009 - give a fairly clear indication of this. Malta is among the three Member States where respondents consider themselves to be the best informed about the EP. The relevant

⁵ The average for the Euro-Zone was 0.6%. See ‘Euro Area Annual Inflation Stable at 0.6%’, *Eurostat Newsrelease*, 69/2009, 15 May 2009 at http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/cache/ITY_PUBLIC/2-15052009-AP/EN/2-15052009-AP-EN.PDF (Accessed 12 June 2009).

Survey figures show the top three member states in this respect as being Luxembourg (42%), Ireland (40%) and Malta (36%). Luxembourg and Malta are the two countries in which citizens were the best informed about the date of the elections. Indeed, an absolute majority of respondents in Luxembourg (56%) and Malta (55%) knew that the EP elections were to be held in 2009. This ranking follows the same pattern in the case of those who knew the exact date of the election: 36% of respondents in Luxembourg, 33% in Malta, 27% in Belgium and 19% in Greece gave the right answer (i.e. June 2009).

Malta also featured among the seven countries, where a majority (absolute or relative) of citizens were interested in the election. The relevant figures are six out of ten respondents in Ireland and the Netherlands (60%), 57% of citizens in Malta, 53% in Romania and 52% in Greece. It is also interesting that more than seven out of ten respondents in Slovakia (72%) and more than six out of ten respondents in Slovenia (67%), Luxembourg (66%), Malta (65%) and Finland (62%) declared that they had recently read or heard something about the EP. More than six out of ten respondents in Slovakia (65%) and Malta (63%) considered that the European Parliament was close to their expectations – this was the highest ranking in the survey data.

This particular Eurobarometer result is not surprising where Malta is concerned, considering the mobilization of public opinion that takes place in Malta during elections as a result of the intense bi-polar rivalry between the two main political parties. It is also borne out by Malta's high voter participation rate, though this is declining.

According to the special Eurobarometer survey, the economy did not feature high in the Maltese people's concerns. This can perhaps be explained by the fact that, at the time when the field work was carried out, the negative effects of the international recession were not being strongly felt. The survey showed that Malta and Slovenia, were the only countries which had joined the EU since 2004, which did not mention economic growth as the theme on which they wanted the spring 2009 electoral campaign to concentrate. Immigration was singled out as the main priority in Malta, where 67% of respondents put it at the top of their list of themes for the 2009 campaign. This is consistent with other Eurobarometer surveys and explains why the anti-immigrant party, *Imperium Europa*, did relatively well. The need 'To develop the economy and boost growth in the EU' was the most frequently mentioned *desired objective* in Ireland (26%) and Lithuania (23%). Respondents in the United Kingdom, Finland (12% for both countries) and Malta (11%) were the least likely to want this objective to be pursued. There seems to be near-universal support for a harmonised social welfare system in the EU Member States. This theme obtained the highest score in 22 Member States. Only Ireland, Malta, the Netherlands, Finland and Sweden placed another element at the top of the list. The most frequently mentioned element in Malta was a European ID card (32%).

Malta scored very low on perceptions regarding the EU's objective of maintaining peace and stability and on human rights as a value to be defended by the EP. Malta also scored low on citizens' identification of the need of solidarity between the member states. While the development of a security and defence policy was the main priority in eight Member States, it was mentioned by only 19% of respondents in Malta and 23% in the United

Kingdom and Slovenia. European tax harmonisation was supported by a majority of respondents in the EU but in Malta (39%) and Spain (46%), fewer than half of respondents were in favour of the idea.

National Opinion Polls

TABLE 3 - Malta – OPINION POLLS PRIOR TO THE EP ELECTION						
	Labour Party	Nationalist Party	Alternattiva Demokratika	Azzjoni Nazzjonali	Others	Not Voting
<i>Malta Today</i>						
03 May 2008	52.5	39.7	5.4	2.4	--	--
31 May 2009	51.7	42.4	4.1	0.9	0.9	--
<i>The Sunday Times of Malta</i>						
31 May 2009	44.7	35	0.3	--	0.7	19.2
<i>Predict*</i> Burson-Marsteller Brussels	50	38	6.4	4.9	--	--
Actual Election Result % of valid votes cast	54.76	40.5	2.34	0.64	1.8	
% of Registered Voters)	42.2	31.2	1.8	0.5	3.1	21.2
*Note: Commissioned by Burson-Marsteller Brussels and analysis carried out by Simon Hix, Michael Marsh and Nick Vivyan.						

National public opinion polls carried out by two of Malta's leading newspapers, namely *The Sunday Times of Malta* and *Malta Today*, both showed that the Nationalist Party was going to be beaten in the election by the Labour Party. Indeed, as the data in **Table 3** shows, the final result was not very far from what the public opinion polls were predicting. These same polls were also correct in their predictions about which candidates were the most popular amongst the electorate and the relevant data is reproduced in **Table 4**. The Nationalist Party's (European Peoples' Party) Simon Busuttil again headed the list when he obtained 68,782 preference votes which amounted to just less than 28% of all the valid votes cast. This meant that he was elected in the first count since the quota required to fill an EP seat was 41,362. By contrast, the other candidates were elected in the 28th and 29th count after inheriting the required preferences. In the 2004 election, Dr Busuttil (a graduate of the University of Sussex) had also scored a success when he obtained 58,899 votes and was also elected in the first count (the quota then was 40,954).

Thus, in 2009 Dr Busutill managed to increase his tally by 9,883 compared to the 2004 EP election, notwithstanding that the Nationalist Party performed worse in this poll. In all probability, the Nationalist Party's performance would have been worse had Dr Busutill not contested the election.

TABLE 4 – CANDIDATE VOTES AND PRE-POLL RANKINGS

Name of Candidate	Malta Today Rankings (percentage of votes to be cast) 31 May 2009	Preference Votes actually Obtained (Ranking)
Busutill Simon (Nationalist Party - EPP)	23.7	68,782 (1) Elected
Scicluna Edward (Labour Party -PES)	7.2	24,574 (3) Elected
Grech Louis (Labour Party - PES)	5.3	27,753 (2) Elected
Mizzi Marlene (Labour Party - PES)	4.3	17,724 (5)
Cassola Arnold (Alternattiva Demokratika -Greens)	3.0	5,235 (8)
Cuschieri Joseph (Labour Party -PES)	2.2	19,672 (4) Elected**
Attard Montalto John (Labour Party- PES)	2.0	12,880 (6) Elected
Casa David (PN-EPP)	Less than 2	6,539 (7) Elected

**Observer status in the European Parliament but will take the sixth seat if Lisbon Treaty is ratified.

Indeed, it can be argued that Dr Busutill's performance meant that many voters have not lost hope on the Nationalist Party and they believed that a new face could turn its fortunes around and deliver what the current bunch of leaders had been unable to deliver. This has worked positively in the case of the Labour Party following the replacement of their leader Dr Alfred Sant who lost three general elections and the EU membership referendum and won only one election.

The Crucial Issues

What, in the end, may have played an important role in this election outcome was a massive increase in electricity and water tariffs which came into effect in October 2008. Just prior to the EP election the minister responsible for energy admitted that these new rates should have been introduced in January 2009, further re-inforcing perceptions that he did not know what he was doing. Malta's external dependence on energy resources and fossil fuels was partly to blame for these high tariffs. The other problem was that the effort to change to cleaner sources using the abundantly available wind and sun had only just started, i.e. a few decades late. For many years, since the first oil shock of the early 1970s, Malta was shielded from higher energy prices by special contractual relations with Libya. When the world price of oil declined there was no longer the need to continue with this arrangement. But when the world price of petroleum started increasing rapidly again after more than a decade in which it was low, the Maltese economy and households found themselves unable to mitigate the worse impact by switching to cheaper and cleaner resources quickly.

One of the reasons behind this sorry state of affairs in the energy sector is the fact that up to EU membership all energy resources including gas, electricity and petroleum products were in the hands of a state monopoly, *EneMalta*, which for this reason did not have any incentive either to run its operations efficiently or to offer consumers alternative sources

of energy. Malta is now hurriedly implementing measures to encourage households and firms to switch to cleaner alternatives, make buildings more energy efficient and establish wind farms on land and on sea. The opposition Labour Party opposed some of the sites where the government was proposing to establish the wind farms. These efforts were also needed to help Malta to reduce green house gas emissions to the agreed levels.

The other main issue which affected voters' preferences was the Malta Environmental Protection Agency, MEPA. Disgruntlement with the way this agency operated reached such a high pitch in the run up to the 2008 election that the prime minister made an electoral promise that he would take responsibility for reforming the agency if returned to power. The reform of MEPA has not taken off and there is a widespread public perception that corruption is rife in the agency. Matters deteriorated further during the 2009 election campaign when the opposition media revealed that the President of the Nationalist Party had been granted permission to re-construct and enlarge a farmhouse in an area designated outside a development zone within the rapidly contracting Maltese countryside. At the time of writing, protests were being planned against this development. Many Nationalist Party stalwarts, including a sitting MP in the House of Representatives and a Nationalist Mayor posing as green politicians, have sought permission for or abetted in such controversial schemes. The opposition, as might be expected, raised an outcry and took political advantage from such situations.

Price inflation, as well as the widening deficit in public spending, was another major worry. As explained earlier in this paper, Malta has the highest inflation rate in the Euro-zone. Price collusion by importers is a widespread phenomenon in such a small economy. Price increases of the magnitude experienced by Maltese consumers in recent months cannot be explained in any other way given that the bulk of Maltese imports of consumer goods are denominated in euros (no exchange costs or effects on prices) and come from low inflation EU member states. One explanation for this upward pressure on inflation is that after retailers pledged to maintain price stability in 2008 in view of the introduction of the euro, they started increasing prices again in the second half of the year. European Commission forecasts show that inflation will now start declining.

The issue of the public deficit is also interesting because the government blamed this on the effects of the international recession. According to the Commission's assessment, after declining in the period 2005-2007, the general government deficit increased to 4.7% of GDP in 2008, largely because of a one-off expenditure related to an early retirement scheme for dockyard workers and lower tax receipts. The deficit is forecast to drop to 3.25% of GDP in 2010 and public debt is expected to reach 69% of GDP that year from 62% in 2007.⁶ The public did not link the deficit with either the effect of the international recession or the one-off payment to the dockyard workers in order to clear the way to the privatization of the yards.

During this campaign the public vented many other grievances such as: the bad state of the roads despite the outlays in the last few years from EU funds and the last Italo-

⁶ See: European Commission Directorate-General for Economic and Financial Affairs, Economic Forecast Spring 2009, *EUROPEAN ECONOMY 3/2009*, pp86-87

Maltese financial protocol, long delays in obtaining prescribed medicines from pharmacies under the national health scheme, and lack of progress on irregular immigration.

Indeed, the issue of irregular immigration had already risen to the top of the Maltese political agenda before the onset of the current recession. Malta lies on the Central Mediterranean route across which thousands of immigrants are transported by organized crime organizations from the coasts of Libya. Libya claims it does not have the means to supervise its long land borders (4,348 km) to stop irregular immigrants from entering the country from sub-Saharan Africa, nor to control its extensive coastline (1,770 km) to stop them from trying to reach Europe. Malta claims that its population density, the highest in the EU, and small territorial size make it difficult for it to absorb the irregular immigrants who arrive on the island. Malta keeps all irregular immigrants, including those seeking international protection in detention camps. Last October, Malta accepted the new EU Immigration and Asylum Pact and on its basis it pressed the other member states to suspend the Dublin II regulation and agree on a burden sharing mechanism whereby irregular immigrants in Malta could be dispersed among the rest of the member states. Malta also wanted more resources for the *Nautilus* operation in the central Mediterranean and an agreement with Libya to ensure its co-operation in stopping this illegal human trade. The Labour Party opposed the government for accepting the EU Immigration Pact and criticised it in the face of Italian pressure, which sought to force Malta to take on immigrants rescued in Malta's Search and Rescue Area (SAR) which, at 250,000 km², is the size of the United Kingdom. Malta insists that rescued immigrants must be landed at the nearest port of call to the rescue point.

The issue of irregular immigration was at the top of the political debate and perceived as the foremost security challenge. The government argued that it was doing its utmost and that its approach was succeeding in the EU. The opposition countered that it has failed to convince the other member states to come to Malta's rescue. The Maltese public expected an 'EU solution' to the problem. The main drawback in this whole affair is that Malta has to persuade 26 other member states to agree on a policy outcome which is consonant with its interests and this is a long and difficult process. In the early 1990s, in the face of the war in the Balkans, Germany had also tried to put into place a legally binding 'burden-sharing' mechanism to help it cope with the refugees coming from that sub-region, but its efforts failed. On balance, the Maltese government seems to be succeeding in persuading the people that its policy is best largely because what the Labour Party has been proposing – that Malta ignore international conventions or that it should link the issue with other unrelated issues in the EU and block progress on them – have been shown to be more dangerous for Malta's interests.

Conclusion

The election to the EP in Malta was fought, won and lost mostly on the prevailing public sentiment and attitudes vis-à-vis the ruling Nationalist Party. This mood, in turn, reflected national issues and circumstances. European issues hardly made their mark although

there was some debate on individual MEP performance. When Europe entered the picture it was due to the fact that the public saw a link between a particular cause of concern (e.g. immigration) and a European solution. On other issues such as hunting, the Labour Party took care to criticise the Nationalists for failing to provide the necessary safeguards, while pledging to abide by any decision taken by the European Court of Justice. The main issues which affected voters were the increase in energy and water rates as well as immigration.

The way Europe is debated in Malta raises a number of interesting issues which are related to Malta's smallness. Malta has already ratified the Lisbon Treaty and introduced the euro. So, in effect, there is no longer any debate on the 'big' European issues. Enlargement and the CFSP/ESDP are not on the agenda yet, nor is the economy. But immigration is and the reason for this is that while this may not be very important for most member states' publics, it is crucial, for the reasons expressed in this paper, for Malta. The Maltese people attach importance to it because it is intertwined with their own security perspectives. They also expect the EU to do a lot to help Malta, because Malta is small and relatively weak to withstand this challenge on its own. In brief, what can be considered as an issue of lesser importance by the other EU member states, assumes more relevance in the eyes of the public of a small state.

On Maltese elections in general, the 2009 EP election may prove to have been a watershed for the two main political parties in terms of their fortunes in the next general election due in four years time. The decline in voter participation is interesting and one has to see whether this is reversed in future elections or whether it progresses. The differences in voter participation between the EP and general elections are also relevant: have Maltese elections begun to follow the long-established trends in the other member states? This is worth following up in the future.

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