

# 20 YEARS OF EU MEMBERSHIP

## AUGMENTING MALTA'S INTERNATIONAL ROLE

2024 is a milestone year for Malta on the international stage. We celebrate 20 years of EU membership, as well as 60 years as an independent state. It is also a year when we are simultaneously holding a non-permanent seat at the UN Security Council and the Chair of the OSCE. As this magazine celebrates, we are participating in European wide elections for our Members of the European Parliament, which institution most directly represents EU citizens and epitomises the democratic principles that we so staunchly champion.

In his defence of the Nationalist Government's decision to pursue accession to the European Union, then-Prime Minister Eddie Fenech Adami would maintain that this was "a natural and logical next step."

He would argue that Malta's history and its political, economic and cultural traditions were interwoven with those of Europe, and that it shared the same aspirations to cultivate stability and prosperity. Malta also advocated the role that it could play in enhancing the Mediterranean dimension of European cooperation and external relations.

The decision to join the EU was not one that was taken lightly, but over the course of several years. It reflected the political vision of a small state coming of age, and a direction that would ultimately be built on the political debates and public engagement that emerged from the decade that preceded accession.

Supporters thought about this as an opportunity for Malta to benefit from political and economic integration and shelter. Whilst certain vulnerabilities have been mitigated, other expectations and benefits still require progress.

Malta has always seen Europe as a natural home, yet its position and historical relations in the Mediterranean provide a particular geopolitical outlook.

Successive Maltese governments have constructively engaged within European foreign policy debates and efforts to come to common positions, while maintaining a critical approach that keeps the country's interests at the forefront.

As it did during negotiations, Malta continues to reassert that foreign and security policy decisions should respect the "constitutional requirements" of Member States.

Foreign policy seeks to preserve national interests within an evolving international community. Countries rely on their capabilities and resources to maximise their influence and craft relations and external conditions that best suit those interests.

As a small state, Malta's capabilities and resources are limited. However, within the private and public sector, it has consistently shown the ability to maximise its human resources and external relations to enhance its output and contribution.

In this respect, EU membership has been a tool that brings Malta to the decision-making table amongst its European counterparts. It also serves as a platform to play an augmented role within wider international and multilateral fora.

Malta's foreign policy over the past two decades has been continuous with the values and objectives that defined Malta's external outlook and priorities prior to this.

It is a normative based foreign policy that prioritises multilateralism, regionalism, and since the 1980s, maintains a policy of neutrality that is based on principle as well as pragmatism.

Malta utilises its humanitarian policies to complement the sharper security and defence efforts of its fellow members, whilst also utilising other bilateral and multilateral relations to pursue national, transnational and collective interests. Its role during the Libya Crisis in 2011, and its reaction to Russia's war against Ukraine, as well as its performance within the UN Security Council and the OSCE this year are testament to this.

This is not to say that challenges do not persist. The international geopolitical order and political and economic interests have been profoundly impacted by developments over recent years such as Covid-19, Russia's war against Ukraine and the escalating tensions in the Middle East.



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These have led to reflection on the broader assumptions we have made about the distribution of international political and economic order, the need to adjust diplomatic relations and security frameworks, as well as address the economic fallout on citizens and the private sector.

Malta has also faced international scrutiny brought on by domestic factors, including in relation to its financial services and rule of law.

Such challenges reconfirm the increasing value of European Union membership as a political and economic home where Malta may address concerns collectively and constructively, and contribute to the character of European integration and maintenance of regional stability.