

without borders



## 20 Years of EU Membership

Author: **James Moffett**



**A photo taken during the Institute for European Studies' conference *20 Years of EU Membership: Taking Stock, Moving Forward*, held at the UM Valletta Campus on 2 May 2024**  
*Photo by James Moffett*

**D**ivisive and polarising as the lead-up to 1 May 2004 might have been, this date marks a significant turning point in Malta's history: its introduction — along with nine other countries — as the newest Member State of the European Union. This year, celebrating the 20th anniversary of this landmark moment, **THINK** met with Prof. Mark Harwood, Director of the Institute for European Studies at UM, to discuss the island's journey since then and where it is headed.

'It was always about having economic and physical security. Being in a bigger group can help small countries weather globalisation, because [as a union] they can negotiate with the bigger countries, like the US and China.' For Harwood, the biggest benefit of being part of the EU is the expertise of other countries, which can aid a small island state like Malta. Whether it is climate change, overseas development, or human rights in the Mediterranean, 'we get to participate in a collective action.' Other benefits include the adoption of the Euro, which has become a much more stable, international currency.

However, EU membership is not without its challenges. One of the key dilemmas lies in the balance between sovereignty and collective decision-making. As Harwood points out, Malta, traditionally aligning more towards pro-Palestinian sentiments, often finds itself at odds with other Member States, such as Germany, which staunchly support Israel. This dynamic highlights the delicate dance of being part of a collective while also maintaining individual stances on global issues.

Reflecting on the historical context, Harwood highlights how larger EU Member States, such as France and Germany, have reaped significant economic benefits, particularly in the case of Germany's post-World War II rehabilitation and subsequent economic prowess. 'However, not all benefits are distributed equally among Member States.' The adoption of

the single currency, for instance, has allowed countries like Germany to leverage a weaker Euro to boost exports, a luxury not equally enjoyed by all. 'The Euro is not as strong as the Deutsche Mark would have been. So Germany actually gets to manufacture and sell more because it is tied to a currency which isn't as strong as its old Deutsche Mark used to be.'

Within this geopolitical landscape, small nations like Malta are able to participate in a wider system, one which is often much better informed. 'The negative side is that the bigger system is often looking to protect the interests of large Member States.'

Looking ahead with cautious optimism tempered by scepticism, Harwood acknowledges growing dissatisfaction within Malta regarding mainstream political parties and predicts a potential rise in radical voting patterns in European Parliament elections. 'We tend to get people going out and voting because they see the EU as a problem or as part of the problem.' This trend might lead to increased Euroscepticism and a more contentious political landscape within the country.

As Malta commemorates two decades of EU membership, it stands at a crossroads, grappling with both the opportunities and challenges that come with integration into the European framework. The journey ahead promises to be complex, requiring careful navigation and proactive engagement to ensure Malta's interests and values are upheld within the broader European context. **T**

*The Institute for European Studies recently held a conference on Malta's 20 years of EU Membership, one of a series of events being organised by the Institute throughout 2024 to commemorate this anniversary. The Institute also published a paper series marking this anniversary, copies of which can be found on OAR.*