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Charity without propaganda

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A few days after last December's Istrina event, The Malta Independent's editorial (December 30, 2025) stated unequivocally: "Take politicians out of L-Istrina".

The Editor argued that L-Istrina has long symbolised the prominence of politicians during the fundraiser risks shown. The editorial added that while elected officials should support their extensive on-screen presence undermines the event. It concluded that:

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Now that the charity season has ended, I would like to add my thoughts to this discussion.

As I see it, charity should not be a stage for political propaganda. If politicians wish to give, they can do so quietly (as some already do), without blowing trumpets. The same principle should apply to other protagonists in the public sphere, including large developers and state entities whose resources ultimately come from taxpayers.

When public officials or publicly funded bodies appear centre stage at charity events, the line between solidarity and self-promotion becomes blurred. This risks undermining the very spirit of giving. Charity should be about responding to need, not image-building, reputation laundering, or electoral campaigning. This type of visibility carries power and influence and should not be exercised through spectacles of benevolence.

At the same time, I do not agree with calls to abolish charity events altogether. Fundraising initiatives, telethons included, are common practice internationally and are often organised by civil society actors such as NGOs. They can mobilise solidarity, raise awareness, and provide immediate relief where governments, systems, and governance fall short. To dismiss them outright would be unrealistic and unfair to the many volunteers and organisations who act in good faith and foster a sense of community and belonging through such civic action.

However, this does not mean we should ignore the deeply problematic aspects of how charity is sometimes practised. Public appeals for money - particularly when vulnerable individuals are placed before cameras or required to appeal directly to powerful figures - can be dehumanising. They risk turning suffering into spectacle and reinforcing unequal power relations between donors and recipients. No one should have to narrate their pain publicly to access basic support. If anything, these personal and often urgent needs should be framed as social rights which, as far as possible, are mainstreamed within Malta's welfare state through social policy.

There is also a darker side to charity that deserves more scrutiny. A question I cannot help asking is whether large donations at such events are always given in good faith. This should be viewed within the broader context of limited transparency in political funding.

When large sums of money are donated, particularly by powerful political and economic actors, it is important to verify where this money is coming from and whether it is properly audited. I am quite sure that many contributors act honestly and transparently; however, dubious practices can also occur. It is therefore legitimate to ask whether donations are sometimes used, consciously or otherwise, to deflect attention from harmful practices, regulatory breaches, or social and environmental damage.

Transparency and accountability should apply to charity just as much as to public finance. Ultimately, charity should unite us, not serve propaganda purposes or normalise human suffering. We can value generosity while insisting on dignity, and we can welcome solidarity while demanding accountability.

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