

MALTA AND THE EU THROUGH THE MALTESE SATIRICAL LENS

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ABSTRACT

The European Union is commonly understood through its treaties and institutions, yet across its member states its meaning is just as powerfully shaped by the laughter, irony, and satirical humour that emerge in response to the experience of integration. These dynamics become particularly striking in Malta, where a fiercely bipartisan polity confronts a supranational project that begins to reconfigure the contours of its political imagination. This dissertation contends that satire, long dismissed as marginal entertainment, can in fact constitute one of Malta's revealing archives of Europeanisation. In a country where partisanship shapes identity, and political memory is intensely personal, the satirist's line becomes a lens through which hopes, anxieties, and resentments towards the EU are crystallised with a clarity that formal discourse rarely achieves.

In light of the limited scholarly engagement with Maltese political cartoons on the European Union, this research investigates how these satirical images can narrate Malta's changing relationship with the EU. Using a qualitative, historically grounded methodology that combines archival research and interpretive visual analysis, it advances two guiding research questions concerning the narrative frames through which satire positions Malta within the Union, and the ways these representations evolve across key junctures – from the accession process to subsequent policy debates.

What the analysis brings into focus is a satirical landscape that shifts between vulnerability, defiance, and ironic complicity. This shifting dynamic becomes particularly evident in pre-accession cartoons, which portray Malta as suspended between longing and apprehension, and later intensifies in representations that foreground the frictions of membership through themes in hunting, migration, and economic reforms, where supranational authority rubs sharply against local sensitivities.

This dissertation demonstrates that satire is not peripheral to political understanding, but central, operating as a parallel form of public reasoning that registers what citizens feel before it takes shape in formal political expression. By foregrounding satire as a diagnostic lens, this dissertation offers an original contribution to political communication and cultural analysis. It shows that to understand how Malta sees the European Union, one must attend not only to official declarations, but also to the jokes told in their shadow.

To

Mum & Dad,

whose sacrifices I honour, whose standards I inherited, and whose way of looking made this kind of work not only possible, but inevitable.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ECtHR – European Court of Human Rights

EU – European Union

InfoSoc Directive – Information Society Directive (2001/21/EC)

MKKP – Magyar Kétfarkú Kutya Párt (Hungarian Two-Tailed Dog Party)

PL – Partit Laburista (Labour Party)

PN – Partit Nazzjonalista (Nationalist Party)

PR – Public Relations

U.E. – Unjoni Ewropea (“European Union”)

VAT – Value Added Tax

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Alongside this, I owe a quieter but no less sincere gratitude to satire itself. For me, satire has never been just a tool of critique, but a way of making sense of contradiction, of laughing at what frustrates, and of engaging what feels unreachable. I have come to see it as a form of political care, one that mocks power, defends the fragile, and insists that absurdity must be acknowledged before it can be corrected. This dissertation is, in part, a reflection of that belief.

And to the little girl I once was, sat wide-eyed at the dinner table, laughing at political jokes I only half understood, but knowing even then that there was something powerful in the laughter, this is for you. You never let go of that curiosity. You held on through the doubt and through the moments that felt too heavy. You kept asking the hard questions, searching for meaning in the contradictions, and somehow, you found it.

1. INTRODUCTION

The European Union is not defined solely by the careful prose of treaties or the measured tone of institutional declarations. It also communicates through symbols, images, rituals, and the interpretations these invite. In Malta, these official narratives of unity and progress coexist with another. For every official treaty, celebratory press release, and diplomatic handshake that narrates Malta's European trajectory as one of steady progress and successful integration, there is a satirical cartoon, an ironic editorial, or a whispered joke in the *pjazza* (public square) or *kazin* (club). These informal expressions form a parallel archive of feeling that captures the ambivalence, disillusionment, pride, and suspicion that gather around Malta's encounters with European authority, revealing dimensions of Europeanisation that formal policy language cannot fully contain.

To understand the complex relationship between the smallest member state and the European Union, one must move beyond procedural rhetoric and attend instead to the poetics of complaint. For many citizens, the experience of membership has unfolded as a continual negotiation between aspiration and betrayal; a tension too raw for formal political discourse, yet perfectly suited to the satirist's pencil.

In contemporary Europe, political satire occupies a paradoxical position: it entertains and interrogates, with cartoonists, comedians, and digital creators translating complex governance structures and institutional tensions into accessible visual and rhetorical forms. Within this broader landscape, Malta offers a revealing vantage point as its intensely partisan political culture, tightly knit media environment, and evolving relationship with the European Union create an especially rich setting for examining how humour mediates questions of power, identity, and political belonging.

Despite the richness of Malta's satirical landscape, the relationship between political satire and the country's Europeanisation has received little sustained scholarly attention. Consequently, we know remarkably little about how Maltese cartoonists depict the European Union, how these portrayals have evolved since accession, or how humour operates as a cultural lens through which Europe is interpreted within an intensely polarised public sphere.

This dissertation addresses this gap by examining Maltese political cartoons as visual narratives that condense political arguments into symbolic form, dramatize tensions through metaphor

and exaggeration, and crystallise sentiments that might remain unspoken. In a small state where political identity saturates everyday life, cartoons particularly function not merely as entertainment, but as active participants in the negotiation of meaning around European governance (Galea Debono, 2024).

The aims and objectives of this dissertation are twofold. First, it seeks to offer sustained academic background of how Maltese satire engages with the European Union, illuminating the cultural meanings that Europeanisation acquires within an intensely partisan political landscape; and second, to advance the argument that satire functions as a diagnostic tool for understanding how small states interpret supranational authority across key political moments. These aims are captured in two guiding research questions:

- 1) Does Maltese satire portray Malta as a victim of EU overreach, as an enthusiastic member of the Union, or through alternative narrative frames?; and*
- 2) How has the portrayal of EU-related themes in Maltese satire evolved over time, and which historical or political events have shaped this evolution?*

The strength of this study rests on the systematic collection and interpretive analysis of Maltese political cartoons, undertaken through a qualitative, historically informed methodology. This approach is supported by a dissertation structure that moves from conceptual grounding to empirical investigation. It first situates satire within the broader European and Maltese traditions that give it meaning, before clarifying the methodological principles through which these visual artefacts are examined. The analytical chapters then build this foundation into sustained empirical engagement, tracing how Maltese satirical representations of the European Union shift across key political junctures and cultural moods. Through this analytical framework, the dissertation demonstrates how, in one of Europe's smallest yet most politically saturated states, satire becomes a powerful medium through which the European project is seen, contested, and continually reinterpreted.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

The utility of satire resides in its capacity to serve as a critical rhetorical intervention that reconfigures the boundaries between political rhetoric and public contestation. Through the selective deployment of irony, distortion, and strategic emphasis, satire operates as a crucial diagnostic tool, systematically illuminating the asymmetries of power and suppressed dimensions of political reality that mainstream discourse is compelled to sideline (McClennen, 2019). Its longevity, traceable from the earliest political satires to digital memes that now race across European screens, confirms its status as a parallel political vocabulary that unsettles official narratives.

In Europe today, satire occupies a uniquely complex space: the European Union has itself become a target of humour, with cartoonists exposing its contradiction and institutional opacity, even as legal and media systems struggle to accommodate dissenting wit (Godioli et al., 2022). Malta sits within this broader landscape in a particularly revealing way. Its intensely partisan political culture has long cultivated satire through carnival, caricature, and performance, yet moral conservatism, reputational risk, and party-dominated media continue to constrain its reach (Balzan, 2018). As Maltese cartoonists increasingly turn their gaze toward the European Union, supranational power is refracted through a distinctly local prism, one shaped by polarisation, historical sensitivities, and competing narratives of identity and belonging.

This chapter maps the intellectual and historical ground for understanding that shift. It traces the major theoretical debates, legal ambiguities, and cultural currents shaping satire in Europe, and situates Malta within them as a small, but telling stage where humour both survives constraint and reimagines the European project. In doing so, it lays the conceptual foundation for the analysis that follows, an exploration of how satire in Malta becomes a subtle, but potent way of grappling with Europe.

2.2 The Rhetoric of Satire

2.2.1 *Conceptualising Satire*

Discussions of satire frequently begin with attempts to pin down its definitional contours, an effort that is both necessary and fraught with complexity. While satire has long been associated

with ridicule, wit, and critique, its formal and functional elasticity makes it notoriously resistant to rigid categorisation.

Contemporary scholarship offers a range of approaches to defining satire, yet many scholars return to historical formulations to clarify its enduring characteristics. Greenberg (2018) observes that any serious account of satire must reckon with its deep-rooted association with moral critique – an association already articulated in one of the most influential early definitions by Samuel Johnson’s description of satire as a “poem in which wickedness or folly is censured”. Johnson’s eighteenth-century formulation remains foundational as it distils two elements that continue to resonate across modern theory: its classical literary lineage and its ethical impulse to expose vice and folly. While this definition is historically bounded and limited to poetic form, its underlying emphasis on satire’s corrective and critical function persists in contemporary scholarship (Greenberg, 2018). For this reason, Johnson’s account provides a valuable point of departure, anchoring satire within a tradition of moral inquiry even as later theorists expand its boundaries to encompass the diverse, multimodal practices through which satirical critique now circulates.

On this foundation, contemporary critics have expanded the parameters of satire, moving beyond its poetic origins. In this spirit, Elliot (2004) characterises satire as “protean”, and “one of the most heavily worked literary designations and one of the most imprecise”. This characterisation reflects its ability to assume varied forms and functions, without forfeiting its critical thrust. Such flexibility defies a single, universally accepted definition; instead, satire’s identity is continually reshaped in dialogue with the political, cultural, and aesthetic conditions of each era.

This conceptual openness reflects satire’s multivalent nature: it can be approached as a genre, a rhetorical mode, a tonal register, or an intellectual attitude. Caselli et al. (2020) and Declerq (2018) underscore that its critical potency derives precisely from its refusal to conform to strict formal boundaries, while preserving a recognisable oppositional force. Watson (2011) advances this perspective, defining satire as a “means for and of representation”; a formulation that emphasises its dual capacity for expressive adaptability and communicative precision. In practice, satire operates across literary, visual, and performative domains, mobilising irony, parody, wit, and exaggeration to interrogate social conventions, expose hypocrisy, and stimulate critical reflection.

Viewed in this light, satire is not merely a vehicle for mockery, but a deliberate discursive strategy grounded in critique. As Jones (1982, cited in Caselli et al. 2020, p2) observes, “the aim of satire is, indeed, often as much to instruct and reform as to entertain”, a dual imperative which, as Declerq (2018) notes, remains deeply interdependent. Understanding satire in operational rather than purely formal terms foregrounds the processes through which it unsettles certainties, exposes contradictions, and mobilises humour as a means of critical engagement. It is from this perspective that this dissertation approaches satire, recognising its enduring relevance as a form of expression capable of uniting aesthetic pleasure with moral and intellectual provocation.

2.2.2 Humour with Intent

According to Elliot (2004), what distinguishes satire from other comedic forms is its intentional deployment as a vehicle for critique. From its earliest iterations, satire has carried a reformist impulse as a directed effort to expose specific issues, processes, or states of affairs with clarity and deliberate critical intent.

Bronowski and Mazlish (1933) famously characterise satire as a “mode of challenging accepted notions by making them seem ridiculous,” locating it within a long tradition of resistance to orthodoxy. The pleasure it provokes is inseparable from its persuasive force: satire entertains precisely in order to destabilise. Laughter becomes a strategic affect, a means of opening conceptual space for doubt and reflection where argument alone might fail.

The rise of postmodernism further recalibrated this dynamic. Postmodern culture, with its distrust of grand narratives and its privileging of irony, parody, and self-referentiality (Jameson, 1991), provided fertile ground for satire’s expansion beyond fixed genre boundaries. Within this framework, “play” emerges, as McHale (1987) observes, as the root metaphor of the postmodern condition: a performative negotiation that blurs the line between author and audience, critique and entertainment. Here, satire’s humour does not dilute its political edge; it invites interpretive participation, implicating audiences in the very act of meaning-making.

Yet this playfulness is often misread. As Holbert et al. (2011) note, satire’s humorous surface is frequently mistaken for mere tonal levity, masking its rhetorical sophistication. Entertainment is not an incidental by-product but a constitutive strategy. Bates and Ferri (2010) conceptualise entertainment as a communicative encounter, an interaction between text and audience whose aim is the production of pleasure. That pleasure, rather than softening critique,

enhances its reach: it sustains attention, disarms resistance, and embeds complex commentary within affective experience.

Seen in this light, humour is not the opposite of seriousness, but its vehicle. Satire thrives by transforming amusement into intellectual provocation, a fusion of delight and disturbance that enables it to penetrate public discourse where more overt polemic might falter.

2.2.3 The Elastic Form of Satire

The power of satire rests not only in its intent but in the extraordinary elasticity of its form. Unlike other genres, satire thrives on formal instability: it bends, and reconfigures existing modes of expression to suit its critical ends. This adaptability allows it to persist as a culturally and politically resonant practice across radically different historical and communicative contexts.

A defining feature of this elasticity is satire's capacity to inhabit "mock" forms, from mock epics to mockumentaries that imitate and subvert the conventions of supposedly "serious" genres. As Greenberg (2018) observes, such appropriation is "unique ... and one of [satire's] chief identifying characteristics," signalling that generic hybridity is not mere stylistic play but a core strategy. Therefore, by co-opting familiar frameworks, satire invites recognition before undermining their authority.

Equally central is its rhetorical obliquity. Satire rarely confronts its targets head-on; rather, it speaks through irony, parody, exaggeration, and absurdity. This indirection is calculated, not evasive. As Twark (2007) notes, it enables authors to "distance themselves from and express dismay at social issues in a playful manner that prevents their critiques from appearing overly plaintive." In doing so, satire enlists its audience as active co-interpreters, requiring inference rather than passive consumption, a process that deepens critical engagement while preserving humour's disarming consequence.

Satire is also profoundly transideological. Its method is procedural rather than doctrinal, making it available for deployment across the ideological spectrum (Hendricks, 2020). This portability expands its reach as it can circulate among elite intellectuals and popular audiences alike, sustaining relevance through productive ambiguity and shifting its political valence with context.

These traits position satire as a reflexive cultural practice, one that thrives on appropriation, embraces ambiguity, and retools inherited forms for critique. Its formal agility helps explain

satire's enduring force in political life: it survives changing regimes of communication, adapts to shifting audiences, and persistently unsettles power.

To grasp how this resilience took shape, however, we must turn to its past. The vitality of European satire is inseparable from a long tradition of reinvention, a lineage in which each era bent the form to its own cultural tensions and political struggles while preserving its critical edge.

2.3 The Evolution of Political Satire in Europe

European political satire is not simply a relic of literary history; it is a living tradition of public reasoning, forged in the crucible of power and dissent. Across centuries, it has tested authority's claims, pierced political façades, and adapted to new media and audiences without surrendering its critical edge.

This long continuity links otherwise disparate historical contexts and stylistic expressions, attesting to satire's capacity to reinvent itself whenever political language shifts or cultural certainties harden. To understand its present vitality, it is necessary to trace this lineage: a European story of reinvention in which each era has bent satire's form to its own conflicts and anxieties, while preserving its subversive force.

a) Classical Origins

The story of European satire begins in antiquity, where literature first became a weapon for moral inquiry and social critique. Long before satire took on its modern political edge, Roman and Greek writers forged it as a flexible mode for exposing folly and corruption while probing the ethical life of their societies. Roman verse satire, shaped above all by Horace, Juvenal, and Persius, remains the acknowledged foundation of the tradition (Braund, 1989).

Juvenal's *Satires* famously opens with the weary declaration that "it is difficult not to write satire" (Juvenal, trans. 1958), a line born of frustration with imperial Rome's corruption and emblematic of satire's compulsion to indict public decay. His unrelenting anger and moral outrage defined the '*Juvenalian*' mode: biting, severe, and uncompromising. By contrast, Horace's more urbane, conversational irony modelled a subtler, '*Horatian*' mode, tolerant in tone, but no less invested in ethical reflection.

This Roman inheritance was not mere literary play. As Caron (2019) notes, Juvenal's exhortation to "spread your canvas wide" urged writers to undertake broad social critique

commensurate with the moral crises of their time. The satirist thus emerged as an engaged intellectual whose remit extended beyond art into public reasoning.

A parallel yet distinct lineage arose from Greek practice, especially the *Menippean* satire of Menippus of Gadara. Unlike the structured Roman verse, Menippean satire mixed prose and verse in a seriocomic register, at once playful and probing, using fantasy, allegory, and philosophical parody to test cultural pretensions and intellectual arrogance (Lee, 2025). Earlier still, Aristophanes' comic plays, such as *The Clouds*, had laid theatrical foundations for ridicule as civic critique.

Together, these traditions gave European satire its lasting DNA: formal versatility, from metered verse to mixed prose, and a normative orientation toward exposing folly and questioning power. They created not just a genre but an enduring rhetorical stance: literature as moral provocation and public reasoning (The Story of Snark, 2017).

b) *Early Modern Reception*

If classical satire forged the tools, early modern Europe refashioned them for a new age of print, vernacular literacy, and humanist moralism. The Renaissance did not merely preserve ancient models; it reanimated them, aligning satire with the intellectual ferment and social anxieties of a continent in transformation (Ugolini, 2022).

A defining emblem of this renewal is Sebastian Brant's *Das Narrenschiff* (The Ship of Fools, 1494). Written in German and accompanied by woodcut illustrations, Brant's metaphor populates a ship with "fools" to expose the vices of his age, such as corruption, clerical excess, and intellectual pretension. Its fusion of moral instruction with social ridicule proved stirring, turning the text into a pan-European phenomenon that shaped both literary and visual satire.

Das Narrenschiff travelled as it rendered into Latin and, crucially, into English by Alexander Barclay in 1509. Barclay's translation did more than extend readership; it marked a linguistic watershed. His prologue's declaration, "Therefore in this *satyre* such wyll I reprove", is widely recognised as the first recorded use of the word *satyre* in English, consolidating a genre's name rather than inventing it (Hooley, 2012; Lee, 2025).

As Hooley (2012) argues, Barclay's adoption of *satyre* anchored the English reception firmly within the Roman lineage of Horace and Juvenal, while adapting it to the moral and social preoccupations of the early modern world. In this way, the period did not simply inherit

classical satire; it translated, institutionalised, and popularised it across Europe's vernacular publics, embedding critique at the heart of a newly literate and increasingly politicised society.

c) *Enlightenment Satire*

Satire's flourishing spans many periods, but the Enlightenment era renders its enabling conditions with unusual clarity. As concentrated political and ecclesiastical authority collided with the world of print, coffeehouses, and increasingly literate citizens, Europe demanded discursive forms that could entertain, persuade, and interrogate power (Houston, 1993). Satire met this demand with versatility, adapting ancient models to pamphlets, periodicals, and the stage, and refining the art of indirect critique.

The conditions were uniquely generative. Habermas (1989) famously theorised the emergence of the "*bürgerliche Öffentlichkeit*", a public sphere sustained by rational-critical debate. Yet this sphere also required forms of cultural mediation that could smuggle moral reflection into accessible, pleasurable texts. Satire thrived here: its wit and irony softened entry while its ethical urgency exposed hypocrisy, vice, and intellectual pretension (Lee, 2025).

Within this environment, verse satire flourished. In England, Alexander Pope, John Dryden, and Samuel Johnson drew heavily on classical forms for a modern readership. Pope's *The Dunciad* embodies a Juvenalian indignation against mediocrity and cultural decline, while Dryden's *Mac Flecknoe* deploys the mock-heroic to skewer literary incompetence and political corruption (Renner, 2014; Catovic, 2021). Johnson, as both poet and critic, articulated the period's understanding of satire as morally instructive art (§ 2.2.1).

But this flourishing was not an English monopoly. Across the continent, writers mobilised satire to probe political and intellectual orthodoxy. In France, Voltaire's *Candide* wielded irony and philosophical play to dismantle religious dogma and state oppression, while Beaumarchais's *Le Mariage de Figaro* so incisively mocked aristocratic privilege that censors feared it could destabilise monarchy itself.

As Test (1991) observes, satire here was "a special kind of poetry", formally disciplined yet ethically insurgent, capable of making readers laugh while compelling them to confront the moral and political contradictions of their age.

d) *Rise of Popular Satire*

The nineteenth century marked a profound transformation in the history of satire. What had thrived in pamphlets and learned circles, now spilled into the streets and newsstands of an industrialising Europe. Urban growth, mass literacy, and advances in printing transformed the public sphere, propelling satire beyond elite readerships (Maidment, n.d.). Once a refined instrument of intellectual dissent, became a mass cultural force, mobilising laughter and irony across widening social strata and intensifying political conflict in an age of upheaval.

Illustrated periodicals proved decisive. French magazines such as *La Caricature* and *Le Charivari* pioneered the marriage of sharp editorial critique with visually attractive caricature, exploiting a new printing technique to reach a broad and socially diverse audience (Brake, 1994; Geravis, 2002).

The French model rapidly inspired European counterparts. Britain's *Punch* openly aligned itself with Parisian precedent. In the German-speaking world, *Kladderadatsch* flourished amid revolutionary upheavals, while *Nebelspalter* in Switzerland and *Kikeriki* in Austria adapted the format to their own political contexts (Brake, 1994). Collectively, these outlets forged a transnational satirical sphere: nationally distinctive yet dialogic, where caricature, humorous prose, and social commentary circulated across borders.

This "golden age" of popular satire extended beyond print. Cabaret, music hall, and popular theatre became stages for subversive humour aimed at elites, clergy, and bourgeois respectability. Yet such boldness entailed risk. The infamous prosecutions of Charles Philipon and the imprisonment of Daumier underscored that satire's new visibility provoked censorship and repression (Brake, 1994; Gervais, 2002), and the satirist's public voice, once largely literary, now wielded genuine political power.

e) *Wartime Satire*

The twentieth century's descent into war forced satire to confront conditions more extreme than any it had previously faced. The violence and mobilisation of the First World War (1914-1918) shattered the nineteenth century's optimism and demanded new modes of cultural response. Satire, having recently entered mass popular culture, was compelled to recalibrate: its tone had darkened, its forms were fragmented, and its political urgency was sharpened in the face of industrialised destruction and pervasive disillusionment (Shaw, 2014).

Front-line culture offered one of the clearest adaptations. Trench journals such as *The Wipers Times*, *Aussie*, and *The Waitemate Wobbler* blended parody and cartoons to articulate the

soldier's perspective from within the war itself (Grayson; n.d.; Shaw, 2014). These improvised papers mocked military hierarchies, enemy leaders, and punctured the optimism of official propaganda, while offering a psychological refuge to those enduring the trenches. Caricature likewise thrived: British artists portrayed Wilhelm and his generals as clumsy buffoons, while German periodicals such as *Simplicissimus* recast imperial conquest as bloody and futile. Therefore, such artefacts exceeded mere state propaganda; they forged spaces of identity and subversion, sustaining morale, while preserving a critical distance from official narratives.

The interwar period (1918-1939) widened satire's reach through radio and cinema, but also revealed its vulnerability to political manipulation. Economic crisis and political extremism transformed the satirical sphere into a contested space where instability and competing visions of modernity were negotiated. Bakhtin's (1984) notions of dialogism and the carnivalesque illuminate this moment, as satire retained its capacity to invert hierarchies and unsettle official truth, yet it now coexisted with the modern state's power to censor and co-opt.

The Second World War (1939-1945) intensified these tensions. Totalitarian regimes sought to extinguish independent humour; in Nazi Germany, satire was policed and often forced into exile, yet its subversive potential endured. The BBC's German Service became a vital platform, with writers such as Robert Lucas and Bruno Adler creating radio programmes such as *Die Briefe des Gefreiten Adolf Hiernschal* and *Frau Wernicke* that combined humour with incisive political critique to pierce Nazi propaganda. Lucas described his mission as a fight "for the souls of the Germans," deploying satire to make "the unbearable bearable" (Moorehead, 2019).

Across the Allied world, satire remained vigorous in newspapers, theatre, and film, bolstering morale while prompting ethical reflection on the absurdities and horrors of war. Most famously, Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* balanced comedic brilliance with anti-fascist warning, while post-war fiction, notably Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* and Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, extended this wartime legacy, transforming absurdity into an indictment of bureaucratic violence and existential futility.

Papaeti (2014) questioned whether humour could meaningfully confront atrocity without reducing its gravity. Yet the survival of wartime satire suggest otherwise. Far from offering diversion, it emerged as a cultural weapon and moral resource, sustaining dignity and critical awareness amid propaganda, censorship, and terror.

(f) *Satire in Post-War Europe*

In the post-war years, Europe underwent a profound period of reconstruction. The continent faced not only shattered cities, but also the need to rethink sovereignty and identity after decades of nationalism and catastrophe. The creation of supranational institutions, beginning with the European Coal and Steel Community in 1951, represented an attempt to break from the cycle of rivalry by pooling sovereignty in the management of key industries. Yet this experiment in shared governance was never uncontested. It stirred hope for reconciliation, while provoking deep scepticism about the future of European unity. In this climate, satire became an important medium through which the public could probe the promises of integration, testing new forms of authority with irony and visual wit.

Early satirical reactions to the integration project reveal this ambivalent mood of hope and caution. The Schuman Plan, conceived to bind France and Germany through shared management of coal and steel, quickly attracted the attention of political cartoonists. Among the most telling is a 1950 cartoon by German artist Klaus Pielert (1950), in which Robert Schuman sits at a sewing machine, stitching the two nations together beneath the dry caption: *“Hopefully this seam will work better than the safety pins”*.



Cartoon 1. Klaus Pielert, “Hopefully this seam will work better than the safety pins” (1950).

“The cartoon depicts Robert Schuman sewing France and Germany together, with a reference to the Maginot line, a post-World War I French fortification system.”

Source: Haus der Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland

Cartoon 1 compresses the post-war sentiment into a single visual gesture: reconciliation is desirable but precarious, as the attempt to bind former enemies is intentional, yet always vulnerable to unravelling (Pielert, 1950). Such imagery underscores that the European project

was not greeted with unqualified enthusiasm, but with a guarded optimism shaped by memories of conflict and anxieties about the emergence of supranational authority.

Yet satire was far from unanimous in its treatment of the nascent European experiment. Across the Eastern Bloc, Communist media approached the Schuman Plan with suspicion, interpreting it as a mechanism for reasserting German influence under Western control. A vivid example appears in a 1950 cartoon by Louis Mittelberg, published in the East German magazine *Frischer Wind*.



Cartoon 2. Louis Mittelberg, “Schuman’s Plan for the Restoration of German Militarism” (1950).

Source: *Frischer Wind*, East German magazine.

Cartoon 2 depicts Schuman as a manipulator feeding raw materials into the head of a soldier wearing a skull-and-crossbones helmet, an unmistakable symbol of militarism and menace. The image encapsulates a dominant narrative in Communist commentary: that the Schuman Plan was not a peace initiative but a covert project for German rearmament and Western geopolitical consolidation.

In Cartoon 2, Schuman is rendered as a manipulator feeding raw materials into the head of a soldier wearing a skull-and-crossbones helmet, an emblem of militarism and menace. The image encapsulates a widespread critique that the Schuman Plan disguised the re-arming of Germany and the consolidation of Western geopolitical dominance behind the rhetoric of European unity.

Read side by side, cartoons 1 and 2 illustrate how post-war satire functioned as a sensitive register of public sentiment, capturing both the hope for reconciliation and the geopolitical unease that surrounded early European integration (Pérez Armenteros, 2023). As the decade

progressed, this ambivalent mood would be reshaped by the sharper ideological divides of the Cold War, which redefined the cultural and political space within which satire could operate and mirrored the continent's struggle over competing visions of power and belief.

In Western Europe, satire developed within emerging democratic frameworks and benefitted from expanding constitutional protections, yet remained alert to the pressures of a continent positioned between rival superpowers. Informal boundaries of self-censorship and political caution continued to temper critique (Richard Nixon Foundation, 2022), prompting artists to rely on coded language, allegory, and irony to probe authority without inviting direct confrontation.

By contrast, in Eastern Europe, satire unfolded under authoritarian regimes that enforced strict ideological conformity. Here, humour became an art of subtle dissent: creators turned to symbolism, double meanings, and layered allegory to reveal contradictions while eluding censorship. As Day (2011) observes, this did more than mirror the East–West divide; it actively contributed to shaping it, while cultivating a restrained, self-aware humour in the West.

g) Satire and the Shaping of Modern Europe

The end of the Cold War and the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 drove the previously divided satirical traditions of East and West into a newly unsettled landscape. Released from explicit censorship but still marked by the ideological residues of the twentieth century, satire found itself tasked with interpreting a Europe undergoing profound political and cultural reinvention.

This compelled humour to navigate a continent pulled simultaneously toward integration and fragmentation. Germany's reunification in 1990 offered a symbol of renewed unity, while the collapse of Yugoslavia exposed the endurance of ethnic nationalism and challenged Europe's self-conception as a guarantor of peace and stability. As Jakimovska (2020) argues, satire in this moment distilled the paradoxes of a continent reaching for unity, even as it confronted disintegration, nationalism, and the fragility of solidarity beyond formal institutions.

The shift from cooperation to deeper political and monetary union in the early 1990s marked a turning point, as milestones such as the Maastricht Treaty and the Eurozone fuelled anxieties about the EU's expanding authority and its perceived remoteness from ordinary publics.

British television programmes such as *Have I Got News for You* and France's long-running *Le Canard enchaîné* drew on irony to expose what they framed as the "bureaucracy of Brussels," amplifying popular scepticism toward the Union's expanding regulatory reach (Voltmer, 2013;

Blyth, 2013). Political cartoons thus became an important medium, repeatedly portraying EU leaders as distant technocrats, and depicting Brussels as a self-perpetuating administrative machine.

This unease found clear visual expression in the satire of the period. Cartoon 3 crystallises early concerns about democratic fragility and institutional overreach during the Maastricht debates, while Cartoon 4 captures the darker register of the subsequent Eurozone crisis, condensing fears that economic integration had begun to threaten the Union's cohesion itself.



Cartoon 3. Tomei, Cartoon on the Ratification of the Maastricht Treaty (1992).

Source: Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 26 September 1992.



Cartoon 4. Chris Madden, Euro as Broken Harp (2011).

Source: Chris Madden Cartoon Gallery.

Across these cartoons, one can trace a movement from tentative sovereignty-related anxieties to a more entrenched doubt about the EU's institutional durability; a climate of that would later fuel the populist and Eurosceptic upheavals that provided satire with increasingly volatile targets.

Out of this escalating scepticism emerged the political ruptures of the early twenty-first century, each providing satire fertile ground for sharper critique and cultural reflection. Among these, Brexit proved particularly generative. The referendum unleashed a wave of satirical production that both mirrored and shaped public discourse, with elements of the official campaigns themselves quickly lending their imagery and rhetoric to humorous reinterpretation.

British artists and comedians generated enduring caricatures such as “David Camerabbit,” capturing David Cameron’s perceived evasiveness and indecision, and refining the interplay of political theatre, institutional dysfunction, and national identity anxiety into visual and rhetoric shorthand (Weaver & Lockyer, 2018). As Weaver (2023) argues, satire and comedy here did more than mirror public unease; they played a hesitant, yet consequential role in shaping political narratives and public sentiment. Ryan (2017) similarly demonstrates that British satire’s inventive responses not only reflected collective anxieties, but also mediated the cultural processing of the referendum and its aftermath.

Alongside, the digital revolution was transforming the terrain on which satire operated. Social media platforms, online outlets, and viral meme cultures democratised satirical production, enabling polyvocal, transnational exchanges that bypassed established linguistic and institutional boundaries (Davis et al., 2018). Operating through faster communication channels, these digital forms circulated satire with a visibility and immediacy rarely achievable in earlier media. As Jones (2009) observes, this expanded communicative ecology significantly amplified satire’s cultural reach, reinforcing its role as a catalyst for political engagement and deliberative participation (Gray et al., 2009).

Yet the same openness that empowered satire also heightened its exposure and vulnerability. This tension came into sharpest relief on 7 January 2015, when gunmen attacked the Paris offices of *Charlie Hebdo*, killing twelve people and prompting a profound European reckoning of expression, secularism, and the challenges of multicultural coexistence (Reucher, 2017; Noorlander, 2015). The attack swiftly became a global symbol of the risks borne by satirists, igniting solidarity movements encapsulated in the slogan *Je Suis Charlie* and forcing renewed debate over the limits of free speech. As Bowen (2015) and Titley et al. (2017) observe, the event crystallised satire’s precarious place within pluralistic democracies: simultaneously an indispensable instrument of critique and a potential trigger for violent backlash.

Across this historical trajectory, satire proves a sensitive barometer of Europe’s shifting political and social climate, its adaptability across media, publics, and centres of power forming

the basis for its later evolution in the supranational era. Table 1 offers a synoptic consolidation of this evolution, bringing together the principal phases, representative figures, and cultural contexts discussed above.

Table 1. Summary of the Evolution of European Satire

Historical Period	Transformations in Satirical Form & Function	Illustrative Figures/ Media	Cultural-Political Context and Theoretical Significance
a) <i>Classical Origins</i>	Roman verse satire institutionalised satire as ethical critique and moral-philosophical inquiry; Menippean satire introduced hybrid prose–verse forms enabling seriocomic interrogation of intellectual arrogance.	Horace, Juvenal, Persius; Menippus; Aristophanes’ <i>The Clouds</i> .	Emergence of satire as public reasoning within Greek–Roman intellectual culture; consolidation of satire as a normative mode for exposing folly, corruption, and elite pretension.
b) <i>Early Modern Reception</i>	Vernacular print revived classical satirical structures; satire became a moral-allegorical tool accessible to expanding literate publics; early fusion of text and image (e.g. woodcuts) broadened social reach.	Sebastian Brant, <i>Das Narrenschiff</i> (1494); Alexander Barclay’s <i>Ship of Fools</i> (1509).	Growth of humanism, religious critique, and reformist intellectual movements; print capitalism enabled diffusion of classical models and institutionalised satire within emerging public spheres.
c) <i>Enlightenment Satire</i>	Satire adapted to pamphlets, journals, salons, theatre; perfected indirect critique and rational-ironic modes; intensified its role as a vehicle of philosophical and political contestation.	Dryden, Pope (<i>The Dunciad</i>), Johnson; Voltaire (<i>Candide</i>); Beaumarchais (<i>Le Mariage de Figaro</i>).	Expansion of print culture and bourgeois public sphere (Habermas); satire as a mediating form in debates on authority, rationality, and censorship.
d) <i>Rise of Popular Satire</i>	Industrial modernity expanded satire’s audience; illustrated press and caricature flourished; satire became visually saturated, mass-produced, and increasingly politicised.	<i>La Caricature</i> , <i>Le Charivari</i> , <i>Punch</i> , <i>Kladderadatsch</i> , <i>Nebelspalter</i> ; Daumier.	Urbanisation, mass literacy, and technological printing advances; intensification of censorship battles; satire became a mass vehicle for political mobilisation.

e) <i>Wartime Satire</i>	Total war darkened tone and fractured form; trench journals blended parody, gallows humour, and symbolic resistance; post-war satire exposed militarism, propaganda, and bureaucratic absurdity.	<i>The Wipers Times</i> , <i>Aussie</i> , <i>Waitemate Wobbler</i> ; British anti-Kaiser caricature; later: Chaplin, Heller, Vonnegut.	Mechanised destruction, propaganda regimes, and existential crises reshaped satire as both psychological refuge and moral indictment of state violence and authoritarianism.
f) <i>Satire in Post War Europe</i>	Satire interrogated reconstruction, early supranationalism, and the anxieties surrounding the Schuman Plan. Western cartoons expressed cautious optimism about reconciliation, while Eastern Bloc satire framed integration as Western-driven militarism. During the Cold War, satire diverged into democratic critique in the West and coded dissent in the East. By the 1990s, deeper integration (Maastricht, the Euro) made EU technocracy and sovereignty tensions central satirical targets. In the 21st century, crises, Brexit, digital meme cultures, and incidents such as <i>Charlie Hebdo</i> reshaped satire into a key arena for processing European fragmentation.	Klaus Pielert (1950 Schuman seam cartoon); Louis Mittelberg (East German anti-Schuman cartoon); Cold War dissident satire; satirical treatments of Maastricht and the Eurozone (e.g., Chris Madden); British programmes such as <i>Have I Got News for You</i> ; Brexit caricatures (e.g., Camerabbit); digital memes; <i>Charlie Hebdo</i> .	Post-war reconstruction and the ECSC introduced hope and scepticism toward unity. Cold War division produced contrasting satirical cultures. Later integration and crisis politics heightened scrutiny of EU authority, while digital media and political shocks expanded satire's role in shaping public perceptions of Europe.

2.4 Satire and the European Union

The European Union presents an unusually challenging object for visual representation. While the circle of stars offers a formal emblem, it functions as a thin symbol compared to the dense iconographies that sustain nation-states. This symbolic fragility reflects the Union's inherently plural character, shaped by divergent historical narratives and competing political memories.

As Mitchell (2004) argues in his discussion of the “pictorial turn,” images hold powerful cultural authority, yet the EU’s fragmented and often contradictory self-understanding resists condensation into any stable visual form. Official iconography, such as the flag and institutional logos, thus coexists uneasily with counter-memories that foreground colonial violence, genocide, and systemic racism. These alternative visual narratives disrupt attempts to craft a seamless European identity and keep debates over what “Europe” signifies both contested and politically charged (Mitchell, 2004; Jakimovska, 2020).

Within this unsettled visual and ideological field, satire acquires particular potency. McCarthy (1991) contends that political cartoons, though long undervalued as historical evidence, operate as incisive instruments that simplify complex questions while appealing to both reason and emotion. Through metaphor, caricature and stereotype, satire translates the EU’s dense institutional structures into vivid, graspable imagery, rendering abstract governance tangible and affectively legible. As McCarthy and Arendt (1995) further note, this capacity to condense complexity into visual form enables satire not merely to reflect public perceptions, but to shape debates about political legitimacy in ways that formal symbols alone rarely achieve.

2.4.1 The European Union in Satirical Discourse

Having established that the European Union struggles to project a stable and inclusive visual identity, it is within this symbolic ambiguity that satire acquires distinctive force. Rather than reinforcing the Union’s carefully cultivated emblems, from the twelve-star flag to idealised motifs such as the dove of peace, satirical media illuminate its fragilities and contradictions. Political cartoons, in particular, compress the EU’s complex governance structures, democratic deficit, and bureaucratic opacity into sharp, legible narratives (Wintle, 2009). Through recurring figurations such as bulls or octopuses symbolising inefficiency and overreach, or the personification of “Europe” as a naïve or imperilled young woman (Pham, 2013), satire distils diffuse anxieties into visual metaphors.

Alternative perspectives complicate this visual field. While official educational materials tend to reproduce EU iconography (Besand, 2016), artists and satirists disrupt these narratives with competing, often critical imagery. Serbian cartoonist Corax, for instance, juxtaposes a wealthy, self-assured Union with Serbia’s isolation and deprivation, countering triumphalist integration discourses with stark irony (Nadjivan, 2015). Similarly, the enduring metaphor of “Fortress Europe”, visualised through walls, fences and barricades, captures anxieties surrounding migration and securitisation, exposing the tension between proclaimed openness and practices

of exclusion (Mayrhofer, 2014). As Falk (2011) observes, the recurring motif of the overcrowded boat, despite most migrants arriving by land or air, amplifies public fears and positions “the Other” as a central foil in constructing European identity.

Therefore, satire does not merely reflect discontent; it can shape political conversation. Drawing on agenda-setting theory, which posits that media visibility affects the perceived importance of issues in public debate (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Scheufele, 1999), scholars argue that satirical interventions help foreground the Union’s structural contradictions and legitimacy crises (Kessler, 2022; Boukes, 2019). In this sense, satire functions not simply as a mirror of public sentiment, but as a mechanism that elevates institutional tensions on the political agenda (Dapp et al, 2021). This has grown sharper in the digital public sphere, where satirical content circulates rapidly, combining critique with engagement and further complicating the EU’s efforts to maintain a stable symbolic image.

2.4.2 Institutional Satire and Digital Engagement

Institutional engagement with satire within the European Union has evolved markedly in recent years, revealing a more innovative and self-reflexive approach to public communication. One of the most striking examples is the emergence of the Directorate-General for Memes, Satire and Sober Fun, informally known as “DG Meme”, established in 2018 as an unofficial “institutional satirical department”, designed to demystify EU politics through humour. Its anonymous Director General has characterised satire as essential for coping with the “daily madness” of EU bureaucracy, signalling a growing institutional recognition that humour can function as a communicative bridge between the Union’s governance structures and the wider public (von der Burchard, 2022).

DG Meme’s portfolio exemplifies the strategic use of self-mockery. Its interventions range from converting President von der Leyen’s organisational chart into a dartboard aimed at commissioner nominees to deploying a “BlaBlaMeter” that quantifies the verbosity of Vice-President Dombrovskis’ public statements. These gestures, while playful, are underpinned by a commitment to factual precision; as its “chief Brexit memer” Martina (2022) observes, fun is treated as “a very serious matter,” with humour carefully anchored in accurate information to avoid misinformation. In this sense, satire becomes more than light-hearted diversion: it operates as a strategic infotainment, simplifying complex governance, while maintaining informed engagement and fostering a measure of institutional trust.

The reach of DG Meme now extends beyond institutional circles. Its content circulates widely across social media platforms, shaping perceptions among EU insiders and external audiences alike, with Commission officials even deploying its memes to explain complex procedures (Holmen, 2024). Dana Manescu, the Commission's head of social media, has praised this capacity for constructive critique, while acknowledging that such humour would be impossible to reproduce through formal communication channels. President von der Leyen's endorsement, calling DG Meme "a refreshing way to engage citizens" and noting that "a little self-mockery is sometimes the best way to bring the EU closer to its people", further illustrates how satire has been mobilised to humanise the Union and temper its technocratic image (von der Burchard, 2022).

Alongside the EU's own satirical experiments, independent productions such as the French series *Parlement* and the Brussels-based *Schuman Show* have flourished, drawing on the Union's well-known institutional complexity as a rich comic resource (Zalan, 2023). Their humour relies on the disorientation created by dispersed institutions, multilingual procedures, and opaque decision-making; features that make the Union difficult to communicate, but ideal for satire (Calligaro, interview with Wax, 2025). These productions adopt a tone that is critical without being wholly antagonistic, contributing to a wider ecosystem of humour that questions and humanises the Union simultaneously (Wax, 2025).

The emerging pattern suggests that the EU increasingly treats satire as a communicative resource, leveraging humour to diffuse criticism and to recast its complex governance in a more relatable light.

2.4.3 *Satirical Political Parties*

As satire becomes embedded in digital cultures and even in the EU's own communication practices, its reach has expanded into the formal political arena. Humour has migrated beyond cultural and bureaucratic settings to become a mode of political mobilisation in its own right. This development has produced parties that treat satire not as peripheral ornamentation but as a central organising principle. As Glied and Szegedi (2024) note that these so-called "joke" parties emerged in the latter half of the twentieth century as pointed critics of established elites and as vehicles for a dissatisfied electorate, appealing especially to younger, media-literate, and politically sceptical citizens.

Despite their growing visibility, comparative scholarship on satirical parties remains strikingly underdeveloped. Their organisational forms, divergent historical origins, and operation across

vastly different party systems complicate efforts at systematic classification (Almeida, 2010; Baumgartner & Lockerbie, 2018). Ideologically, rather than aligning with the left-right axis, they tend to adopt “thin” or situational ideologies, privileging performance, irony, and targeted disruption over coherent programmatic agendas. Existing labels, whether “anti-parties,” “oppositions of the opposition,” or “movement parties” (Engler, 2020; Kitschelt, 2006; Mudde, 2004, capture aspects of their behaviour, but fall short of describing their fluid and hybrid character.

Two defining traits nonetheless distinguish this political family. The first is their protest orientation: through parody and deliberate exaggeration, these parties expose what they present as the self-interest of mainstream politics, denouncing elite collusion with economic networks and reframing conventional governance as performance or outright corruption. The second is their deployment of multi-layered humour, which operates simultaneously as entertainment and critique. By embedding pointed political commentary within accessible comedic forms, they lower the entry threshold for participation, while still requiring audiences to interpret layered cultural and political cues. As Verhulsdonk et al. (2022) and Glied & Szegedi (2024) argue, this interplay of amusement and analysis renders humour a disarming yet analytically potent too, capable of mobilising disaffected voters, unsettling party systems, and reframing the boundaries of legitimate political discourse, a dynamic that becomes especially clear when examining concrete examples of such movements.

a) *The Hungarian Two-Tailed Dog Party*

The Hungarian Two-Tailed Dog Party exemplifies how satire can move from cultural critique into formal political participation. Originating in 2006 as a street-art collective, it became a registered political party in 2015 after overcoming legal challenges that deemed its name “misleading” (Bucs, 2011; Oross et al., 2018). This transformation from subcultural activism to recognised political actor illustrates how humour can infiltrate institutional politics in contexts marked by democratic polarisation, while simultaneously responding to the way mainstream parties frame broader political structures, including the European Union.

The party gained national prominence during the 2015 migration crisis with a counter-billboard campaign that parodied the government’s anti-immigration posters through visual mimicry and iconic reversals (Nagy, 2016). These interventions positioned the MKKP as a satirical foil to mainstream narratives, including those that invoke the European Union. Although its electoral performance at national level remains limited, the party has secured municipal influence,

demonstrating that satire can convert symbolic critique into tangible political presence (Szegedi, 2022; Szegedi, 2025).

Ideologically, the MKKP embraces deliberate absurdity, promising “eternal life” or “free beer”, not as policy, but as a device to expose the emptiness of political communication (Szegedi, 2022). At the same time, it performs what scholars term *legislative satire*, tabling intentionally ludicrous motions to highlight bureaucratic excess, while still engaging with institutional procedure (Glieb & Szegedi, 2024). Its support base, largely young, reflects how humour can mobilise participation among voters alienated from conventional party politics (Inotai, 2024; Grier, 2024).

b) *Die Partei*

Germany’s *Die Partei*, founded in 2004 by the satirical magazine *Titanic*, similarly blurs the boundary between parody and institutional politics (Neu, 2018). Its campaigns rely on provocative absurdity, commandeering far-right social media groups, broadcasting deliberately shocking adverts, and displaying billboards with slogans such as “A Nazi could be hanging here, to expose the theatricality of populist rhetoric and unsettle conventional political communication (Oltermann, 2017; Knight, 2017).

Though absent from the Bundestag, *Die Partei* has held seats in the European Parliament since 2014, aided by the absence of a national electoral threshold (Bundeswahlleiterin, 2024). Sonneborn’s sardonic interventions have targeted ethical lapses among EU leaders, while Semsrott’s disillusionment with institutional opacity underscores the tension between satire’s disruptive aims and the inertia of EU governance (Europäisches Parlament, 2018; Weise & Cokelaere, 2024). More provocative tactics, such as fielding candidates under Nazi surnames in 2019, reveal the ethical limits of satirical politics, risking the trivialisation of historical trauma even as they attempt to subvert far-right narratives (AFP, 2019; Euronews, 2019).

2.4.4 *Legal Protections and Challenges*

As satire increasingly crosses the boundary between cultural expression and formal political engagement, the question of its legal protection acquires heightened significance. At the constitutional level, freedom of expression remains its principal safeguard. Article 11 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union and Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights protect artistic and political expression, expressly extending to forms of communication that may “offend, shock or disturb” (ECtHR, *Handyside v. UK*, 1976).

Building on these guarantees, the European Court of Human Rights has consistently affirmed the democratic function of satire. In *Vereinigung Bildender Künstler v. Austria* (2007), the Court underscored that even provocative artistic expression warrants protection where it contributes to public debate, thereby recognising satire as an essential, if often uncomfortable, component of pluralistic democratic discourse.

However, EU secondary legislation offers no protection for satire. Unlike parody, granted an optional exception under Article 5(3)(k) of the InfoSoc Directive, satire is neither defined nor explicitly safeguarded. The Court of Justice in *Deckmyn v. Vandersteen* (C-201/13) clarified that parody must imitate an identifiable work and pursue humorous or mocking intent. Satirical expression, which frequently targets social or political phenomena without referencing a specific underlying text, therefore falls outside this narrow doctrinal category.

Because the parody exception is optional, Member States implement it unevenly, resulting in a fragmented legal landscape. A satirical work that is lawful in one jurisdiction may be vulnerable to removal or litigation in another, a disparity exacerbated by the cross-border circulation of digital content and by automated moderation mechanisms operating under the Digital Services Act and Article 17 of the Copyright Directive.

This legal asymmetry produces what Jacques and Derclaye (2023) describe as an “artificial genre hierarchy,” privileging parody’s intertextual humour over satire’s broader critical function. In practice, the absence of clear protection enables powerful actors to deploy defamation claims or copyright threats as strategic tools to silence or deter satirical criticism.

The 2015 attack on *Charlie Hebdo* (§ 2.3.1) made visible what is at stake when satirical expression operates without robust and consistent protection. The aftermath prompted an EU-wide reckoning with the limits of free expression, foregrounding the enduring tension between the recognised right to offend and competing concerns and the potential harms of provocative satire (Oboler, 2015). Crucially, this debate highlighted the absence of a supranational legal framework capable of navigating these competing values with coherence or clarity.

Despite this, recent policy developments offer only incremental movement. The 2022 proposals for reforming EU design law introduced exceptions for “parody, caricature and pastiche” in the recast Design Directive (Art. 18) and the new Design Regulation (Art. 20). But since these exceptions apply only to imitative forms referencing an identifiable work or figure, they leave most satirical expression, particularly political or institutional critique, outside their scope.

This reveals a persistent gap: while the EU publicly affirms satire's democratic importance, it provides no systematic guidance on its protection or permissible limits. Satirists therefore remain vulnerable not only to domestic censorship, strategic litigation, and uneven copyright enforcement, but also to algorithmic suppression and shifting normative expectations about what constitutes legitimate critique.

2.5 Locating Satire within the Maltese Polity

Situated within the wider European landscape, Malta offers a particularly revealing setting for understanding how satire operates within highly charged political environments. Malta's intensely adversarial two-party system and tradition of personalised political contestation have cultivated a public sphere in which humour, caricature, and visual critique carry unusual rhetorical weight. In such a setting, satire does not merely comment on political developments; it becomes a mode of navigating power, identity, and legitimacy within a polity where partisan loyalties shape both perception and discourse.

This section therefore examines the structural and historical features of Maltese political life that frame this dynamic, providing the foundation for the subsequent analysis of how Maltese satire interprets and reshapes the island's relationship with the European Union.

2.5.1 Malta's Bipartisan State Context

Few European democracies are as shaped by partisan identity as Malta. Its political order rests on two-party duopoly dominated by the Labour Party and the Nationalist Party that has, for decades, structured not only electoral competition, but the very texture of social life. Since independence, this configuration has produced a deeply polarised and intensely partisan public sphere, in which competition is framed less as policy deliberation, than as a zero-sum contest for control of the state. As Baldacchino (2002) observes, Maltese politics is characterised by an entrenched "either-or, us-them paradigm," making neutrality or ideological ambivalence both socially rare and politically costly. Political allegiance is thus inherited, transmitted across generations, and reinforced through locality, family networks, and communal identity (Hirczy, 1995; Mitchell, 2003).

This bipartisanship operates within a political culture characterised by entrenched patronage, and clientelist exchange. Party loyalty often determines access to public goods, employment, and other state-mediated resources, consolidating the influence of political elites over everyday life (Baldacchino, 2002; Veenendaal, 2019). Elections are therefore experienced not merely as

democratic competitions, but as high-stakes contests over material security and symbolic recognition. As Falzon memorably puts it, “having your party in power is a bit like having your uncle ladle out the gruel” (as cited in Grech, 2009).

Malta’s size and tightly interwoven sociopolitical fabric intensify these dynamics, producing what Anckar and Anckar (2000) term “compressed pluralism”: overlaps between personal relationships, familial loyalties, and political affiliation that blur the boundary between the social and the political. Often presented as evidence of democratic intimacy, the celebrated proximity between citizens and politicians also facilitates informal obligations and reciprocal expectations, limiting the emergence of autonomous civic spheres. The result is a political arena in which contestation frequently assumes a personalised, even tribal, character rather than a deliberative, policy-driven one.

These structural and cultural traits profoundly shape the very conditions under which satire operates. In a system organised around patronage and polarisation, satirical critique risks partisan misinterpretation or suppression. Understanding this distinctive Maltese configuration is therefore essential for contextualising how satire is produced, circulated, and received, and, as the following sections show, how Maltese satire engages with and contests the narratives of the European Union.

2.5.2 Historical and Cultural Influences on Maltese Political Satire

Any account of Maltese political satire must situate its formal expressions within the broader historical and cultural terrain that has shaped its tone, authorised its targets, and delimited its social reach. Malta’s entrenched political factionalism, the enduring authority of the Catholic Church, and a ritualised tradition of public dissent have each conditioned both the scope and the hazards of satirical expression.

Carnival has historically served as one of Malta’s most significant platforms for satirical expression. By the 1920s and 1930s, carnival floats were deploying theatrical exaggeration and symbolic ridicule to lampoon political elites, embedding satire within a publicly sanctioned moment of humour and inversion (Bonello, 2022). These spectacles were more than festive displays: they constituted culturally permissible acts of critique, temporarily authorising irreverence toward power. Yet they also provoked discomfort among colonial authorities. In 1926, the British administration introduced a legal amendment prohibiting political satire within carnival celebrations (Dalli, 2012). Although never formally repealed, the measure

contributed to a culture of *de facto* self-censorship that persisted well into the post-independence era (Xuereb, 2012).

This tradition of containment reflects a wider cultural configuration in which satire has historically operated within tightly moral and political boundaries. For much of the twentieth century, the Catholic Church exerted profound ideological authority, shaping public discourse and narrowing the boundaries of what could be criticised. As Vassallo and Pace (2024) observe, this influence entrenched a conservative moral order in which the lampooning clerical figures or religious symbols was deemed socially illegitimate. Although processes of modernisation and secularisation have become more pronounced in recent decades, these historical sensitivities have not fully dissipated.

Efforts to re-legitimise political satire within carnival gained momentum in 2012, when then-Culture Minister de Marco called for an embrace of political critique as a core democratic practice, urging leaders and citizens alike to “learn to accept political satire” as constructive engagement (Xuereb, 2012; Times of Malta, 2022). This initiative prompted a cautious revival, though the reintroduction of political critique has remained selective and uneven.

More recently, anxieties have resurfaced regarding the erosion of satire’s critical edge. A 2025 *Malta Independent* editorial identified a drift toward safer, apolitical spectacles, attributing this to intensifying partisan media ecosystems, heightened reputational risk in a hyper-visible digital environment, and the persistent threat of defamation litigation in a small, tightly interconnected society. As Ciantar (2023) observes, Malta’s culture amplifies the potential for backlash, prompting satirists to calibrate their interventions carefully even within ostensibly liberalised spaces.

Despite these pressures, caricature remains a durable and central form within Malta’s visual political culture. Early press cartoons established a vernacular of dissent directed at colonial authorities and local elites (Cachia, 1999; Mallia, 1991), and contemporary cartoonists continue this lineage, adapting it to new political contexts and translating complex critique into culturally resonant visual forms.

2.5.3 The Cultural and Media Trajectories of Maltese Political Satire

Maltese political satire has never belonged to a single medium; it has constantly reinvented itself to survive and to bite within a highly partisan, tightly knit society. From nineteenth-century newspapers that mocked colonial authorities, to mid-century stages where comedians

delivered critique through song and farce, to the agile digital memes of the present, Maltese satire has thrived by recalibrating its voice to each new communicative terrain while constantly negotiating the risks of political and social backlash.

Its earliest durable form took root in the press. *Don Basilio*, one of the most trenchant outlets of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, wielded caricature and prose to puncture British colonial narratives and the pretensions of local elites (Cachia, 1999). *Il-Bandiera tal-Maltin* expanded this mission, exposing social hypocrisy and nationalist tensions, and blurring the line between cultural critique and populist agitation (Cachia, 1999). A generation later, the widely circulated *Il-Berqa* embedded cartoons and commentary into daily journalism, channelling working-class frustrations and shaping public opinion through vernacular humour (Cachia, 1999; Frendo, 1994).

Alongside this print tradition, a vibrant performative satire also flourished. *Teatru tas-Sajf* and cabaret-style productions transformed the stage into a venue where political critique could be smuggled past clerical oversight and censorship. Comedy, folklore, and musical parody became vehicles for dissent; as Cachia (1999) notes, these performances functioned as a “cultural safety valve,” releasing social tensions while avoiding direct confrontation with entrenched power.

Yet the arrival of broadcasting reconfigured this delicate balance. What had once flourished in the semi-protected spaces of print and theatre was suddenly exposed to the full glare of mass media. The 1991 Broadcasting Act, intended to liberalise Malta’s media landscape and end the state monopoly, ultimately entrenched a different form of control: partisan capture. Both major parties established fully fledged media empires, producing a rare case of institutionalised political parallelism in which news and commentary openly echoed party ideologies (Cutajar, 2021). Malta remains the EU’s only member state where political party ownership of national broadcasters is formally embedded in law.

This structure has profoundly shaped the fortunes of satire. Rather than serving as independent arbiters of political critique, party-controlled outlets often instrumentalise humour as partisan weaponry, collapsing the distinction between lampoon and propaganda. As Chircop in Cutajar (2021) observes, Maltese broadcasting has become a “continuous rallying call to those who are blindly loyal to their parties,” leaving limited space for critical reflection. In such a climate, satire risks being co-opted to reinforce party narratives or marginalised when it cuts too deeply.

Even so, moments of televised satire have surfaced. The comedic series *Bir-Rispett Kollu*, demonstrated both the potential and the precarity of political humour on national screens: its

sharp role-play and referential wit resonated with audiences but proved difficult to sustain amid editorial scrutiny and partisan sensitivities. *Xarabank*, Malta's long-running flagship talk show, similarly incorporated satirical skits and parodic interludes into its panel debates and audience interactions. Although embedded within partisan networks, the programme's format extended satire's reach beyond theatrical or niche spaces, underscoring its enduring popular appeal even within a tightly constrained media ecology (Vella & Debono, 2020; Sapiano, 2020).

The rise of digital media has since redrawn the landscape. Social platforms have enabled a new generation of politically attuned creators to bypass traditional gatekeepers, using memes, parody accounts, and short-form videos to lampoon political figures and institutions with unprecedented immediacy and virality. Yet this digital opening brings its own fragilities: satirists now confront defamation threats, algorithmic suppression, and coordinated online harassment (Ciantar, 2023).

The digital turn has not only transformed how satire circulates in Malta but has also sharpened its cultural fault lines. Nowhere is this more evident than in the island's bilingual environment, where language operates simultaneously as a medium of expression and a marker of identity. Maltese-language humour tends to be intimate and affectively charged, drawing on shared memory and communal belonging, while English-language satire often adopts a more cosmopolitan, outward-facing tone. This divide reflects two distinct satirical cultures that speak to different publics and political sensibilities. As Aquilina (1971) observed, Malta's colonial and ecclesiastical past long relegated Maltese to the margins of intellectual life, and traces of this hierarchy persist online: Maltese dominates culturally embedded, locally resonant satire, whereas English remains the default register for Europeanised or elite critique. Linguistic choice therefore shapes not only the tone and form of satirical expression but also its reach, interpretive frame, and capacity to influence public debate.

2.5.4 Linking Maltese Satire to Broader European Context

Political satire in Malta does not develop in isolation. While shaped by the island's partisan culture, small-state dynamics, and tightly woven media structures, it is also embedded within broader European debates about the role and limits of satirical critique. Malta's experience offers a vantage point, in which the pressures affecting satire across Europe become accentuated within a society where political networks are intimate, visibility is immediate, and repercussions are difficult to absorb.

Across the continent, satire has long been a medium through which citizens negotiate political legitimacy, articulate dissent, and expose the contradictions of power. As Godioli (2021) observes, contemporary satire increasingly tests the boundaries of free expression and public scrutiny, adapting to a fragmented political order where authority is diffuse and often distrusted. Malta exemplifies these pressures but refracts them through its own peculiarities. Its entrenched two-party system and enduring model of party-owned media create a paradoxical terrain whereas polarisation fuels a hunger for critique, yet the reputational and legal risks of dissent in such a small, highly networked society temper satire's disruptive force.

This unfolds against a gradual cultural shift toward what Vella (2024) terms an “anti-politics culture”: a climate in which voters remain highly mobilised at election time, yet increasingly sceptical of partisan loyalty, experimenting with abstention, issue-based activism, and non-institutional forms of participation. Digital satire both reflects and accelerates this transition. Memes, parody accounts, and viral skits furnish citizens with new tools to contest and reframe political debate outside traditional party channels.

At the same time, Maltese satire is becoming increasingly Europeanised. As the following chapters illustrate, satirical texts increasingly invoke EU institutions and supranational actors not as distant abstractions, but as forces structuring domestic politics and everyday governance. This shift echoes wider continental trends in which satire oscillates between ironic cosmopolitanism and pointed Euroscepticism, expressing a growing ambivalence toward the European project (Anckar & Anckar, 2000).

In this sense, Malta occupies a dual intersection: its satire remains rooted in an intensely local partisan culture while simultaneously engaging with transnational debates on authority, integration, and democratic accountability. Recognising this dual positioning is crucial for understanding how Maltese satirists mediate the evolving relationship between citizens, the state, and the European Union, a relationship that shapes the analytical chapters that follow.

2.6 Conclusion

The literature reviewed in this chapter demonstrates that satire is not a peripheral cultural practice within Europe's political imagination, but a resilient interpretative mode that continually adapts to new media environments and shifting historical conditions.

Within Europe, satire's significance has grown alongside the expansion of supranational governance: as the European Union has accumulated authority and symbolic presence, satire

has become one of the few expressive forms capable of rendering its diffuse institutions legible, emotionally resonant, and publicly contestable. At the same time, the review demonstrates that satire's position within the EU is marked by contradiction. These tensions complicate its role, but also heighten its analytical value, revealing how humour becomes a site where democratic expectations, institutional opacity, and cultural anxieties are negotiated.

Within this wider landscape, Malta occupies a uniquely instructive position. Its small-state dynamics, entrenched partisanship, and tightly coupled media-party ecosystem create a political environment in which satire is both necessary and fraught. As the review has shown, Maltese satire is deeply shaped by historical traditions of censorship and moral conservatism, yet also by vibrant vernacular forms that have long served as vehicles for dissent. EU membership has widened the thematic and symbolic horizons available to Maltese satire, drawing European institutions, regulatory pressures, and integration debates into its representational repertoire.

What emerges from this chapter is therefore a clear conceptual and historical foundation for the empirical work that follows. By integrating insights from rhetorical theory, visual culture, legal analysis, and Maltese political history, the literature review demonstrates that political cartoons are not merely illustrative artefacts but interpretive frameworks through which citizens make meaning of Europe. The next chapters build on this foundation to examine how Maltese satirical cartoons actively construct, reimagine, and contest "Europe" across key political moments. In doing so, the dissertation positions Malta not as an idiosyncratic outlier, but as a site where the broader tensions and ambiguities of European integration are rendered with particular clarity and emotional depth.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

Studying satire methodologically is a task that resists simplicity. Satire thrives on irony, exaggeration, and contradiction; it destabilises the categories through which politics is usually studied and refuses to conform to fixed analytical boundaries. As Godioli (2020) notes, this instability is precisely what grants satire its political force, but it also renders its systematic study uniquely challenging.

This dissertation approaches satire as both a cultural artefact and a political practice. While satire can take many forms, the empirical focus of this study is specifically on political cartoons, understood as concentrated visual texts that crystallise and dramatize political meaning (Forceville, 2024). Accordingly, the methodology attends to both their textual-visual construction and the historical contexts and interpretive communities that shape their reception.

The approach is qualitative and interpretive. It draws on systematic observation to identify recurring narrative patterns, close visual–textual readings to examine satirical technique, and historical contextualisation to locate Maltese cartoons within key phases of Europeanisation. Together, these components allow the study to capture satire’s multiple functions, its ability to critique, symbolise, distort, and reveal, while tracing how these functions shift over time (HogoNext, 2024).

In adopting this framework, the research aligns with qualitative traditions that treat meaning-making as inseparable from power, culture, and social imagination (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Flick, 2014). What is at stake is not merely how satire is produced, but how it intervenes in political life and articulates shifting conceptions of national identity within a small state navigating the demands of supranational governance. Through this lens, the methodology seeks to illuminate the interpretive labour that satire performs, and the political work it accomplishes, in mediating Malta’s evolving relationship with the European Union.

3.2 Research Design

Following Babbie’s (2014) understanding of social research as a process of exploration, description, and explanation, this dissertation employs a qualitative interpretive design to examine how political cartoons function as sites of meaning-making within Malta’s evolving

public sphere. Satire is understood not as a detached aesthetic exercise, but as a form of public commentary shaped by, and capable of shaping, the political and historical contexts from which it emerges.

The research design proceeds in three stages. First, political cartoons are treated as visual-textual artefacts and subjected to close reading, examining symbolism, metaphor, framing, and rhetorical techniques. Second, these readings are contextualised within their specific political moments, such as membership negotiations, referenda, regulatory clashes, or crises, to illuminate how humour responds to, refracts, or contests contemporary debates. Third, the cartoons are analysed comparatively to identify broader patterns and narrative trajectories across time. This step enables the study to move beyond individual images and toward an integrated account of how satire mediates Malta's relationship with the European Union.

Description is not merely preliminary in this process; it is analytically necessary, as attending closely to what a cartoon depicts is the foundation for understanding what it means. This is particularly suited to Malta's partisan context, where political life is tightly woven into social identity and where European integration has been repeatedly constructed as a high-stakes national choice. Therefore, treating satirical works as situated interventions allows the research to capture how humour engages these dynamics, rather than isolating cartoons as discrete jokes or detached illustrations.

3.2.1 Case Selection: Malta as an Analytical Site

As outlined in §2.5, Malta's political and media environment provides a distinctive context for examining satire. Its entrenched two-party system shapes how dissent circulates, while a legacy of moral conservatism and legal ambiguity has historically constrained open critique. These dynamics create an environment in which satire must continually negotiate risk, recognition, and reception.

Within this methodological framework, the selection of Malta is not incidental but analytically purposeful. Key developments in European governance have repeatedly converged with foundational questions of Maltese identity and sovereignty, propelling EU-related issues into the centre of political argument. In this context, Europeanisation emerges as a recurrent point of contestation and emotional investment, shaping both elite rhetoric and public sentiment.

Framed in this way, Malta functions not merely as a convenient site, but as an analytically revealing case: a state in which the tensions between engrained partisanship and supranational

governance become particularly visible, and where satire provides a subtle, yet significant register through which these democratic negotiations can be observed and interpreted.

3.3 Research Questions

The research questions guiding this dissertation arise directly from the patterns observed in Malta's satirical engagements with the European Union. Rather than treating cartoons as isolated artefacts, the study approaches them as narrative interventions that position Malta within broader political and historical trajectories. To capture these dynamics, the analysis is organised around two core questions:

1) *Does Maltese satire portray Malta as a victim of EU overreach, as an enthusiastic member of the EU, or through other narratives?*

This first question establishes the conceptual foundation for the analysis by examining how satire constructs Malta's political identity within the European project. Debates on membership have long been framed through a language of vulnerability, in which concerns over sovereignty, cultural erosion, and external interference cast the Union as a dominant actor capable of constraining national autonomy. Within both the surrounding discourse and the visual logic of the cartoon itself, *victimhood* signals deep-seated anxieties that supranational governance may diminish Malta's agency. Conversely, *overreach* implies a posture of strategic assertion, wherein Malta is not merely subject to EU authority but actively navigates, tests, or stretches the limits of European rules. The question also allows space for alternative narrative positions; satirical portrayals that resist this binary and instead depict Malta as strategic, ambivalent, or opportunistic.

By interrogating how satire negotiates these imaginaries, the analysis identifies which identities become publicly thinkable, permissible, or laughable within Maltese political culture.

2) *How has the portrayal of EU-related themes in Maltese satire evolved over time, and what historical or political events have shaped this evolution?*

This second question extends the analysis, recognising that Maltese satire has never developed in a static or neutral political environment. The years leading up to accession, the early phase of membership, and later periods characterised by regulatory disputes and pressures, each constitute distinct political moments that structure how Europe is imagined and narrated. Analysing satire across these junctures enables the study to trace changes in tone, emphasis,

and symbolic repertoire, revealing how representations of the EU adapt as Malta's relationship with the Union becomes more embedded, contested, and politically salient.

In tracing this evolution, the analysis shows how changing political contexts reshape the ways Europe can be represented, interpreted, and satirised over time.

3.4 Research Methodology

To address the research questions, this dissertation employs a qualitative, historically informed methodology centred on the systematic identification and interpretive analysis of Maltese political cartoons. Combining archival retrieval, purposive sampling, and close visual-textual interpretation, the approach enables an examination of how cartoons narrate Malta's relationship with the Union and how these representations shift across political, cultural, and regulatory contexts. This framework reflects the understanding that satire operates simultaneously as a cultural artefact and a mode of political communication, requiring methods attentive to how visual meaning is produced, circulated, and anchored in specific historical moments.

3.4.1 Archival Strategy and Data Collection

The empirical corpus for this study was assembled through a mixed archival approach, drawing on both physical and digital sources. A substantial portion of the cartoons were identified through on-site archival research at the National Library of Malta, and political party-affiliated archives, where historical issues of key Maltese newspapers, including *KullHadd*, *It-Torċa*, *Il-Mument*, *In-Nazzjon*, *The Times of Malta*, *Malta Independent*, and *MaltaToday*, were examined. This physical consultation was crucial for capturing early and mid-2000s material, much of which is not digitised, received little scholarly attention, and is accessible only through bound volumes and print editions.

Digital repositories and online newspaper archives were used to supplement this material, particularly for cartoons published in the 2010s, where online publication is more widespread. Relevant books and published compilations of Maltese political cartoons were also consulted to identify artists, trace stylistic developments, and contextualise individual works within their historical settings. Taken together, these physical, digital, and bibliographic sources provided the chronological continuity and breadth necessary for assembling a corpus that reflects the full diversity of Malta's political orientations, artistic traditions, and media ecosystems.

3.4.2 Sampling Logic

Adopting a purposive and thematic sampling methodology, consistent with qualitative research protocols (Patton, 2015), this research employed the European Union as the primary organising framework for selecting sources. During the archival process, a substantial number of Maltese political cartoons were identified across newspapers and digital platforms. However, the corpus was deliberately refined to a final set of twenty cartoons in order to retain analytical clarity and ensure a coherent alignment with the research questions.

The first and principal criterion for inclusion was explicit engagement with EU-related themes; whether through direct representation of European institutions and political actors, or through symbolic framings that commented on Europeanisation more broadly. This criterion ensured that each selected cartoon speaks directly to the EU–Malta connection at the heart of this dissertation.

Secondly, the sampling process privileged cartoons that had demonstrable public circulation within Malta’s political sphere. Only pieces published in nationally recognised newspapers or widely accessed online media were retained. This ensured that the dataset reflects satire that actively participated in shaping public debate and contributed to collective imaginaries of Europe.

Thirdly, the selected cartoons were curated to represent key transitional moments in Malta’s evolving relationship with the EU such as pre-referendum uncertainty, early membership adjustment, regulatory conflict, and later phases characterised by both consolidation and ambivalence. Capturing these junctures enables the analysis to trace narrative and tonal shifts across time, including transitions between vulnerability, resistance, assertiveness, and pragmatic integration.

By attending to irony, caricature, metaphor, visual shorthand, and narrative framing, this sampling logic provides a dataset that is not only thematically coherent, but also analytically rich. The final selection emerged from an extensive preliminary review of satirical material across newspapers, printed collections, and digital platforms, ensuring that the analysis drew from the full spectrum of cartoons produced during the key periods under study. From this broader body of material, the corpus was refined to a final set of twenty, with each cartoon offering a focused entry point into Malta’s satirical negotiation of its European identity and selected from a substantially larger pool to best serve the study’s analytical aims.

3.4.3 Analytical Framework

Once collected, the cartoons were subjected to a close visual–textual analysis attentive to the interplay of symbolism, metaphor, composition, and narrative framing. Particular emphasis was placed on how humour, irony, exaggeration, and distortion functioned as rhetorical strategies, not merely aesthetic devices, but as techniques that articulate political positions and encode ideological critique. Central to this analysis was the identification of Malta’s narrative positioning within each cartoon, whether the island appeared as a victim of external imposition, an enthusiastic European participant, or a sceptical observer.

These interpretations were grounded in the contextual specificities of Maltese and European politics. Understanding references to the hunting referendum, economic cycles, and migration crises, was essential for decoding the political stakes that each cartoon condensed. The partisan orientation of the newspaper or cartoonist was treated as an analytically significant variable, recognising that Malta’s media landscape often shapes, amplifies, or constrains satirical intent.

To avoid treating each cartoon as an isolated artefact, the analysis adopted a comparative temporal approach. Cross-comparison across distinct political moments allowed the study to trace shifts in narrative tone, imagery, and argumentative logic. This ensured that the evolution of satire was captured not only at the level of individual cartoons but also across the broader trajectory of Malta’s Europeanisation.

Finally, each cartoon was read alongside broader contextual materials. Integrating these sources enabled a holistic interpretation of how satire responded to or resisted unfolding political events, and how it contributed to the cultural negotiation of Malta’s relationship with the European Union.

3.5 Limitations

As with any academic study, this dissertation is shaped by certain methodological and practical constraints that must be acknowledged in order to situate its scope and clarify the interpretative reach of its findings.

A first limitation concerns the availability and organisation of primary material. Maltese satire is dispersed across unevenly archived sources, such as newspapers with inconsistent cataloguing practices, and digital or broadcast content that has not been systematically preserved. Although considerable effort was devoted to physical library consultations and to manually reviewing newspaper and printed collections, the absence of centralised, well-indexed repositories inevitably introduces gaps. Certain satirical interventions, particularly

older pieces, items from low-circulation outlets, or short-lived publications, may remain undiscovered or inaccessible. This creates a potential visibility bias, privileging material that survived through broader circulation or more robust documentation.

A second limitation concerns the retrospective nature of the analysis. Satire is fundamentally time-sensitive: it is created in response to unfolding events, and its tone, symbolism, and rhetorical force are shaped by the political atmosphere in which it is first received. Interpreting these cartoons years later inevitably risks flattening their original urgency or reframing them through contemporary understandings of Europe and Maltese politics. This challenge extends not only to textual meaning but also to the visual symbols embedded in the cartoons, whose connotations may shift over time or lose resonance for later audiences.

Moreover, while the sampling strategy focused on EU-related content, it is important to acknowledge that Maltese political satire often directs its critique primarily toward the governing party rather than supranational institutions. As a result, some cartoons engage the EU only indirectly or situate it within domestic power struggles. This pattern is further accentuated by a noticeable decline in EU-themed cartoons after 2017, coinciding with the digitalisation of Maltese newspapers, many of which reduced or eliminated regular cartoon features; an industry shift that has narrowed both the frequency and visibility of satirical engagement with the European Union. Although this does not undermine their analytical value, it reflects precisely how Europeanisation is mediated through local partisan dynamics and shapes the scope of the interpretations presented here.

Practical considerations also shaped the study. The word-limit and time constraints of a master's dissertation necessarily restrict the volume of material that can be examined in depth. The analysis therefore privileges cartoons of greater cultural resonance and clearer European relevance, rather than attempting exhaustive coverage of all satirical output. This selective focus is intentional, allowing for a more precise and analytical exploration of the themes most pertinent to the research questions.

A further limitation concerns the limited scholarly engagement with Maltese political satire in relation to European integration. This means that the analysis had to rely predominantly on primary materials and interpretive frameworks drawn from broader satirical and Europeanisation studies. While this reduces opportunities for direct comparative benchmarking, it also necessitated a carefully constructed analytical approach, ensuring that the study developed a coherent interpretive framework suited to the empirical material at hand.

These constraints do not diminish the study's substantive contribution; rather, they clarify its interpretive scope to provide a historically grounded and rhetorically nuanced account of how Maltese satire engages with Europe, not a comprehensive archive or a definitive measure of public reception.

3.6 Conclusion

This chapter has established the methodological architecture that guides the dissertation. By outlining the rationale for a qualitative, historically grounded, and interpretive approach, it has clarified how the study utilises political cartoons as meaningful data rather than as isolated comic artefacts. The combined use of archival collection, purposive sampling, and close visual-textual interpretation provides a coherent framework through which the selected material can be analysed systematically and in relation to wider political developments.

The following chapter applies this framework to the satirical corpus itself, tracing how Maltese cartoons construct Europe across different political moments and assessing what these portrayals reveal about the evolving relationship between Malta, its partisan culture, and the European Union.

4. ANALYSIS

4.1 Introduction

Satire often understands politics before politics understands itself, acting as an early register of tensions and shifts that later surface in formal political discourse (Davis, 2017). In Malta, humour has played an attentive role in observing Europeanisation, foregrounding what EU membership enables, unsettles, and reshapes. Accordingly, this chapter examines political cartoons as interpretive artefacts and visual discourse that transform complex political anxieties into images the public immediately recognises (Godioli, 2020). Within this analytical frame, it further investigates how Maltese satire narrates Malta's place within the European Union and how these portrayals have evolved over time, particularly in response to key political developments and shifting public moods.

To trace this evolution, the chapter adopts a combined chronological–thematic approach. It begins with the pre-referendum period, when satire was intensely partisan and reflected the deep ideological divide between Malta's major political parties over the question of EU membership. It then considers the early years of accession, showing how satire shifted from an instrument of partisan persuasion to a medium through which Malta's new European reality was interpreted, contested, and normalised.

The analysis subsequently turns to three domains through which Malta–EU relations are most clearly articulated in satire. Hunting illustrates the tension between local cultural practices and supranational environmental authority. Economic satire tracks the movement from pre-accession apprehension to post-accession narratives of prosperity and political performance. Migration, finally, exposes Malta's frontline condition and the bipartisan instrumentalization of “Europe” to legitimise increasingly restrictive regimes.

Together, these themes reveal that Maltese satire is not merely commentary but a form of political reasoning in its own right. Through caricature, irony, and exaggeration, cartoons perform politics: they shape how Europe is emotionally processed, how Maltese identity is publicly articulated, and how power is negotiated at the margins of a supranational order.

4.2 Satire and the EU Debate: Before and Beyond the Referendum

In Malta, the European Union was never simply a policy matter; it was a question of national direction, identity, and political allegiance. As the government called the 2003 referendum for

the voters to decide on the matter, campaigning seeped into every corner of public life: homes were divided, friendships strained, and party colours hardened into markers of national destiny. Satire thrived in this climate. Through a single image or punchline, cartoonists captured the anxieties beneath political slogans, crystallizing the pride, fear, and curiosity of a nation grappling with the choice between a structured partnership and continental integration.

Initiating a decade of ideological contestation (Rizzo, 1998), Malta's formal submission of its application to join the European Union in July 1990 swiftly became the defining fault line of domestic politics. This divide was further entrenched by the Labour government's suspension of accession negotiations in 1996, a move rooted in divergent conceptions of Malta's long-term trajectory.

For Labour, EU membership risked diluting national sovereignty and constraining the state's policy autonomy, whereas the Nationalist Party framed accession as essential for economic and institutional progress (Schembri Orland & Galea, 2024). The suspension thus crystallised deeper anxieties surrounding the preservation of national autonomy and the integrity of state control. When the Nationalists returned to government in 1998 and reactivated the accession bid, the EU question not only resurfaced but intensified, reigniting political conflict and reshaping the parameters of national debate (Pace, 2009; Carammia & Pace, 2015).

By the early 2000s, the EU question had moved beyond policy disagreement and become embedded in Malta's broader political identity. Party affiliation increasingly shaped how citizens interpreted the very idea of Europe: for the Nationalist Party and its supporters, Europe signified modernisation and alignment with Western institutional norms; for Labour's base, it evoked concerns about external interference and the erosion of Malta's own developmental path (Pace, 2009).

As these competing visions intensified, many turned to familiar forms of everyday political communication, including satire (Balzan, 2018). Satire had condensed the often technical language of accession into visual metaphors that made it understandable to the public: whether depicting Malta as a pawn in a larger geopolitical game, as a "*nationless state*" (Baldacchino, in Times of Malta, 2002) negotiating its identity through external alignments, or as a country pulled between opposing visions of progress and preservation. In this sense, satire did more than reinterpret political argument: it offered a form of cultural translation, decoding how an external accession process became internalised and emotionally charged within Malta's public sphere.

4.2.1 Before the Referendum Campaign (1996-2002)

In the initial phase of Malta's accession process, the meaning of Europe was neither consolidated nor widely understood. Although the Nationalist government aimed for Malta to secure EU membership by 1995, a target that ultimately proved unattainable, the alternation between a sceptical Labour administration and a pro-accession Nationalist government produced a climate of policy fluidity in which future membership remained a hypothesis rather than a certainty (Pace, 2004). Consequently, early cartoons did not articulate definitive policy positions; instead, they visualised the prevailing uncertainty surrounding Malta's preparedness and interrogated the coherence of Maltese identity at a moment when the implications of EU membership were still fundamentally unresolved.

a) "*A Weight We Could Do Without!*"



Cartoon 5. Maurice Tanti Burlò, "A Weight We Could Do Without!" (1996).

"Signatories of the Maastricht Treaty (signed in '92), which replaced the EC, to meet in Turin, Italy. Malta is weighed down by MLP opposition and the unreadiness of Cyprus."

Source: *The Sunday Times*, 17 March 1996.

Reproduced in Maurice Tanti Burlò, *Blame It on Ed*, p. 29

In 1996, Malta's EU application was suspended by the newly elected Labour government, and satire responded by highlighting the weight of domestic resistance and the strategic uncertainty that followed.

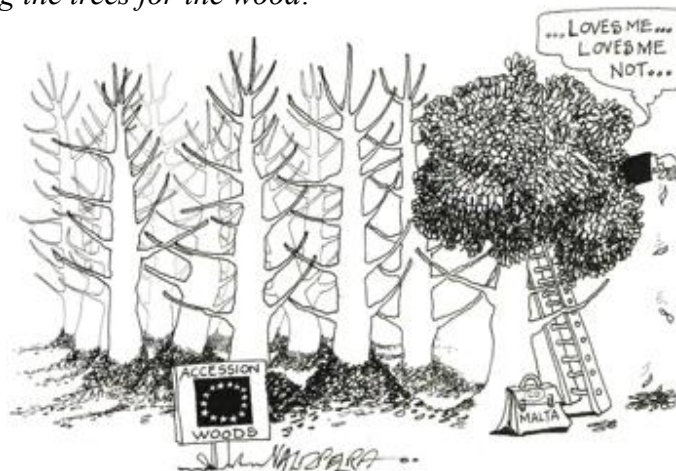
In particular, Cartoon 5 depicts Malta reaching upward toward a European star while being held down by a weighted block marked "MLP/Cyprus". The visual metaphor situates Malta's progress as physically and politically constrained by the Labour ("MLP") government's

decision, transforming the suspension into a moment where EU membership, previously imagined as within reach, suddenly appeared distant and jeopardised.

The reference to Cyprus works primarily as a comparative device: it positions Malta at risk of joining a group of “difficult” or slower-moving applicants, signalling fears that hesitation would damage momentum. Yet the emotional thrust of the cartoon lies less in geopolitical comparison than in its portrayal of small-state precarity, where Malta appears too small, too burdened by internal disagreement, to reach a goal imagined as just within sight. The cartoon therefore conveys not only Malta’s internal paralysis but also the broader volatility of the period, a vulnerability highlighted by the fact that the government which suspended the application remained in power for only two more years before collapsing (Rizzo, 1998).

In this sense, the cartoon reveals a crucial emerging narrative in early satire: Europe is portrayed as a horizon of modernisation and opportunity, but one that Maltese politics could approach only if it projected unity and institutional stability. Satire, thus, provided a way to register these tensions visually, translating abstract political anxieties into forms that pre-dated the stark binaries of the referendum campaign.

b) “*Missing the trees for the wood!*”



Cartoon 6. Maurice Tanti Burlò, “Missing the Trees for the Wood!” (1998).

“Malta tries to overcome EU accession conditions.”

Source: *The Times*, 8 November 1998.

Reproduced in Maurice Tanti Burlò, *Blame It on Ed*, p.45.

Following the Nationalist Party’s return to government in 1998 and the reactivation of Malta’s application for EU membership, satire began to interrogate not only the renewed political commitment to Europe, but also the sense of institutional reset that the election produced. With the PN framing accession as a national project to be ultimately decided by referendum, the

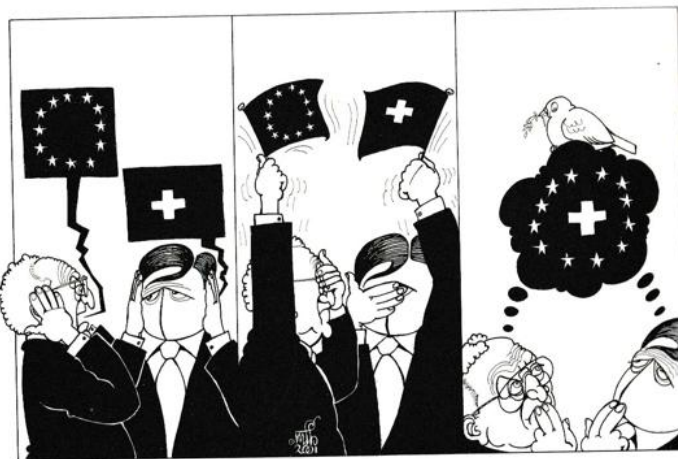
political system appeared to regain direction and purpose (Pace, 2004), yet satire exposed how this renewed hope coexisted with deep uncertainties about Malta's capacity to meet that promise.

In Cartoon 6, a figure stands before a dense forest clutching a suitcase labelled "CD," signalling that the EU path was once again under Nationalist stewardship and framed as a journey aligned with European Christian Democratic politics. Yet the figure appears hesitant, plucking petals while wondering "*loves me, loves me not*", a visualisation of Malta's insecurity regarding whether Europe truly wanted it, and on what conditions. Having missed the 1995 accession window, Malta now faced stricter expectations: it would have to adopt the *acquis* in full, and there was reluctance among some European actors to offer Malta another opportunity (Rizzo, 1998; Pace, 2004). The cartoon thus captures not only domestic uncertainty, but the precariousness of Malta's standing within the accession process itself.

The caption, "*missing the trees for the wood*", deliberately inverts the familiar idiom. Whereas "*missing the wood for the trees*" conveys an excessive focus on detail, as here the reversal implies that even though the broad objective of EU accession was now visible, the practical implications, being the "trees", remained obscure. Therefore, negotiations had reintroduced accession conditions. As a result, membership was imagined as a national aspiration without a clear sense of the changes it would demand.

In illuminating this, cartoon reflects a formative stage in Malta's Europeanisation: one defined less by confrontation than by uncertainty, renewed hope, and a cautious, speculative anticipation of what EU membership might entail.

c) "*Monkey Business!*"



Cartoon 7. Maurice Tanti Burlò, “Monkey Business!” (2001).

“The “hear no EU, see no EU, speak no EU” parallel on Adami’s and Sant’s stance on Europe.”

Source: *The Times*, 9 July 2001.

Reproduced in Maurice Tanti Burlò, *Blame It on Ed*, p. 80.

By the turn of the millennium, accession negotiations were intensifying, and the political focus shifted from the question of if Malta should join the EU to *how* and on *what* specific terms. In this heightened atmosphere, satire increasingly targeted the ideological packaging utilized by political leaders to sway the electorate.

In Cartoon 7, then Prime Minister Eddie Fenech Adami and Opposition Leader Alfred Sant appear in a three-panel sequence that subverts the familiar “see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil” trope.

As the two principal architects of the national debate on EU membership, Adami clutching the EU flag to signal his commitment to accession, and Sant holding the Swiss cross as a direct visual reference to his alternative vision of heightened autonomy, their pairing immediately evokes the defining political confrontation of the period. The sequence shows each covering his senses, suggesting a selective disregard for the complexities embedded in their respective proposals.

The triptych format performs a condensed narrative arc: (a) ideological posturing, (b) symbolic confrontation, and (c) public confusion (DeSousa & Medhurst, 1982). This is made visible in the final panel, where both figures imagine a hybrid emblem of a Swiss cross surrounded by EU stars, while a dove hovers above. This dove is not incidental: it evokes the politics of neutrality embedded in the Maltese Constitution, a principle often mobilised in debates over whether EU membership would dilute Malta’s hard-won security identity. The imagined hybrid also reflects the uncertainty surrounding the two competing national projects: EU membership and Sant’s early “*Switzerland in the Mediterranean*” vision, an idea that few Maltese fully understood and which would later be recast as the Partnership proposal before the referendum.

In this way, satire not only visualised political ambiguity but also exposed how poorly understood these competing national projects were. Rather than aligning with either camp, the satire operates outside partisan boundaries, turning both proposals into objects of scrutiny. The cartoon thus becomes a space where Malta’s prospective European identities could be explored and exaggerated, revealing the emotional tensions underlying the debate.

4.2.2 The EU Referendum Campaign (2003)

The closer Malta edged towards the referendum, the more intensely the struggle for public conviction invaded everyday life. The campaign expanded across media formats, from political billboards to pop songs, and satire followed suit, entering mainstream circulation and aligning with partisan messaging. Most notably, the pro-EU anthem “*Nghidu IVA*” enlisted prominent Maltese artists in a communal call for accession, while the Labour-backed “*Partnership*” juxtaposed techno beats with the promise of a special relationship outside full membership (Ciantar, 2023; Vassallo, 2023).

On the Labour side, humour became a vehicle for caution, a means of questioning not Europe itself, but the haste with which membership was being pursued. Archival evidence indicates that Labour-aligned satirical pieces begin to appear only once 2003 commenced, suggesting a relatively late but calculated entry into the visual rhetoric of the campaign. When they did emerge, these cartoons replaced optimism with irony, framing accession not as destiny but as delusion, and signalling that by early 2003 the referendum debate had already shifted decisively into the terrain of emotional persuasion.

a) “*Segwu l-istilel u ma tiżbaljawx żgur!*”



Cartoon 8. Kaktus, “*Segwu l-istilel u ma tiżbaljawx żgur!*” (2003).

Source: *KullHadd*, 5 January 2003, p. 48.

In Cartoon 8, Kaktus reimagines Malta’s European trajectory through the biblical imagery of the Epiphany. Then–Prime Minister Eddie Fenech Adami is shown leading a caravan of camels toward a constellation of EU stars, under the caption “*Segwu l-istilel u ma tiżbaljawx żgur!*” (“Follow the stars and you won’t make mistakes”). The religious timing of publication, coinciding with Epiphany Sunday, reinforces the cartoon’s irony: while the biblical Magi

followed a guiding star to enlightenment, here the “European star” leads Malta’s leader toward the edge of a cliff.

The symbolism is multilayered. On one level, it parodies the messianic tone of the Nationalist Party’s campaign, which frequently framed EU accession as a civilisational step rooted in Europe’s Christian heritage; a heritage the PN repeatedly claimed would be safeguarded, rather than threatened, by membership (Deloy, 2003). This biblical register is deepened by the camel-riding figures: slow, obedient, and heavily burdened, they evoke a people being guided in faith toward a promised horizon rather than empowered through informed political judgment. At the same time, the cliff edge literalises Labour’s central critique of the period, namely that the “Yes” campaign’s optimism obscuring the risks of integration, from economic dependency to the erosion of neutrality.

At a deeper level, the cartoon reframes the language of direction and destiny that dominated the referendum discourse whereas “following the stars” becomes an ironic warning against political idealism; a suggestion that Malta’s leadership, in its eagerness to claim European modernity, might be mistaking celestial symbolism for concrete strategy. The image thus encapsulates Labour’s satirical approach at this stage of the campaign: sceptical, cautionary, and moralistic, presenting the rush toward Europe not as progress but as peril disguised as revelation.

b) “Propoganda”



Cartoon 9. Kaktus, “Propoganda” (2003).

Source: *KullHadd*, 12 January 2003, p. 48.

In Cartoon 9, Kaktus deploys post-holiday imagery to satirise the Nationalist Party’s communication strategy in the final weeks before the referendum. Then–Prime Minister Eddie

Fenech Adami is shown clutching a magnifying lens labelled “*Propaganda*” through which he enlarges a small parcel marked “*UE*” (EU), while exclaiming “*Imbagħad jghidu li gibna pakkett ċkejken!*” (“And then they say we brought back a small package!”).

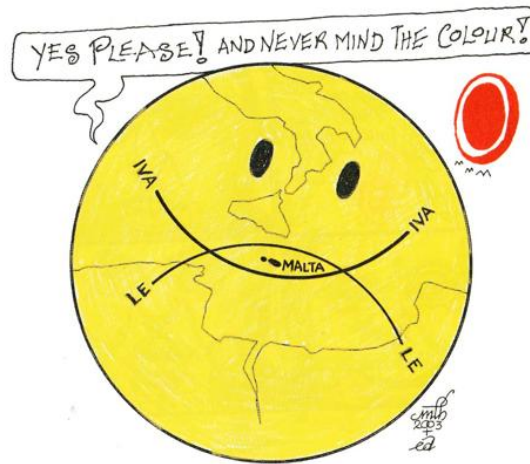
The choice of the word *pakkett* is deliberate: it had become a recurring phrase in political discourse at the time. Sant repeatedly argued that the referendum had been framed around the government’s negotiated “package,” rather than offering a genuine choice between Nationalist-led membership and Labour’s Partnership proposal (Sant in Zammit, 2024). Within this context, *pakkett* functioned as a technical term and as a symbolic shorthand for a process he insisted was stacked against the under-resourced Partnership campaign. Set against a Christmas backdrop, the rows of “presents” evoke generosity and festive reward, yet here the gift-giving ritual is reimagined as an exercise in embellishment and strategic overstatement.

The magnifying lens literalises the accusation that government communication was inflating the perceived benefits of membership, turning modest achievements in accession negotiations into grand national triumphs. The wrapping of “UE” as a present also echoes the period’s debate on EU funding: a central Labour argument was that Malta would receive limited structural assistance, especially given the presence of nine other applicant states competing for the same resources. The “package” is thus presented here as something deliberately polished and oversold to the electorate.

Humour operates through satirical inversion (Gustafsson, 2025). What should symbolise clarity, the lens, becomes an instrument of distortion, and what should represent abundance, the presents, becomes evidence of fabrication. Too, the festive setting heightens the irony: Fenech Adami is cast not as a statesman but as a salesman, amplifying the illusion to sustain enthusiasm in an electorate increasingly fatigued by persuasion.

Together, Cartoon 8 and Cartoon 9 illustrate how Labour-aligned satire in early 2003 shifted from general Euroscepticism to targeted critique of campaign mechanics. Rather than disputing the idea of Europe, these cartoons questioned the performative optimism and communication tactics that framed it, portraying the “Yes” campaign as a spectacle sustained by emotional appeal rather than balanced reasoning.

c) “Yes Please! And Never Mind The Colour!”



Cartoon 10. Maurice Tanti Burlò, “Yes Please! And Never Mind the Colour!” (2003).

“The ‘Smiley’ cartoon was suggested by the originator of the concept of lateral thinking, Prof. Edward de Bono, in reference to the Yes and No votes in the EU referendum.”

Source: *The Times of Malta*, 24 February 2003.

Reproduced in Maurice Tanti Burlò, *Blame It on Ed!*, p. 102.

As the campaign entered its decisive weeks, satire no longer functioned solely as critique but emerged as a vehicle for persuasion within a deeply polarised media environment. Published shortly before the referendum, Cartoon 10 quickly became a representative image of the campaign’s final weeks, with its immediately legible visual language reimagining EU membership as an act of uncomplicated inclusion.

At the centre of the anthropomorphised, smiling globe sits “Malta,” visually absorbed into a wider world that appears to welcome it with warmth and ease. The curved trajectory labelled *IVA* (yes) forms a distinct upward smile, while the opposing *LE* (no) line mirrors a downward frown, a simple yet powerful framing of optimism versus pessimism. The visual coding further reinforces the broader rhetoric of the campaign: *IVA* is associated with an outward-looking connection to Europe, while *LE* is aligned with a more cautious, Mediterranean-oriented vision that sought to safeguard existing geopolitical links.

The speech bubble, “*YES PLEASE! AND NEVER MIND THE COLOUR!*”, trivialises anxieties surrounding cultural, political, or partisan identity, suggesting that concerns over sovereignty or neutrality should not obstruct progress. This framing encapsulates the aspirational narrative of the time: that Malta’s European future lay not in resistance but in confident participation.

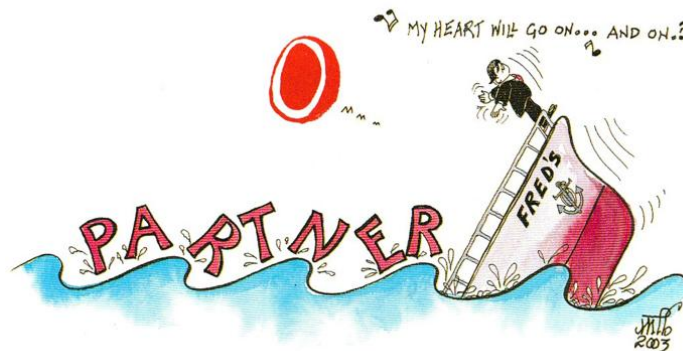
By positioning humour as a medium of optimism, the cartoon illustrates how satire, once a tool for ambivalence and critique, became embedded in a wider discourse of encouragement. This reflected a national mood that, in the weeks leading up to the referendum, oscillated between apprehension and anticipation, revealing how laughter itself became part of the persuasive strategy surrounding Malta's choice (Gatt, 2020).

4.2.3 Interpreting EU Membership (2003-2004)

As the ballots were counted and Malta's "Yes" became official, satire entered a new phase, one less preoccupied with persuasion and more engaged in interpretation. The heated tone of the referendum campaign gave way to a quieter, though no less charged, atmosphere of adjustment, as Malta prepared to transform its electoral decision into political, administrative, and cultural belonging within the European Union (Cini, 2004).

The aftermath of the March 2003 referendum and the celebrations surrounding accession were suffused with imagery of triumph and arrival. Notably, a finding from the archival research carried is that Labour-aligned satire retreated almost entirely from the debate in the immediate aftermath of defeat, while independent and Nationalist-leaning publications continued to visualise Malta's entry as both a political success and a moment of national self-reinvention. This shift marks the beginning of a new satirical language, one that sought to make sense of Europe not as aspiration or threat, but as a lived reality in which Malta now had to locate itself.

a) "PROLAPSE"



Cartoon 11. Maurice Tanti Burlò, "PROLAPSE" (2003)

"Poking fun at Fred's PR Column. The result of the EU referendum is a clear 53.6 per cent for membership despite Fred's directive to the party faithful to vote NO, to invalidate their vote, or stay at home."

Source: *The Times of Malta*, 10 March 2003.

Reproduced in Maurice Tanti Burlò, *Blame It on Ed!*, p. 104.

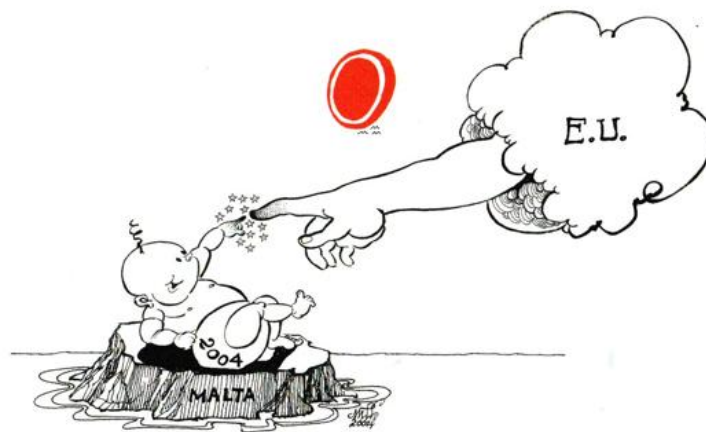
The announcement of the referendum result on March 9, 2003, a 53.6 per cent "Yes" majority

in favour of EU membership (Electoral Commission Malta, 2025), marked not only a decisive political outcome but also a symbolic shift in the tone of satire. Capturing this very transition from intense campaign fervour to more reflective commentary, Cartoon 11 was one of the earliest pieces to appear following the result.

In it, Alfred Sant is shown aboard a sinking ship labelled “Fred’s,” its hull spelling out the disintegrating word *Partnership*. The image parodies Sant’s alternative vision for Malta’s relationship with the European Union, a “Partnership” model that promised economic cooperation without political integration. By referendum day, that narrative had already foundered under the weight of strategic ambiguity and voter fatigue, further reflecting how the concept itself had never been clearly understood by much of the electorate and was rarely perceived as a viable alternative to full membership (Hudson, 2019).

The ship’s descent into the waves is accompanied by the ironic refrain “*My heart will go on... and on?*”, a pointed reference to the *Titanic* and to the perceived obstinacy of Sant’s stance even in defeat. The humour is biting but controlled: not triumphalist, but a visual obituary for a campaign undone by its own contradictions and swiftly overtaken by the momentum of Malta’s European turn.

b) “*Happy N-eu Year! With apologies to you know who!*”



Cartoon 12. Maurice Tanti Burlò, “Happy N-EU Year! With apologies to you know who!” (2004)

Source: *The Times of Malta*, 1 January, 2004.

Reproduced in Maurice Tanti Burlò, *Blame It on Ed!*, p. 116.

By the dawn of 2004, Malta’s long negotiation between aspiration and uncertainty had reached its culmination. The referendum was now history, and the nation stood on the threshold of EU accession.

In Cartoon 12, published on 1 January 2004, the EU is personified as a divine hand extending toward a newborn child labelled “2004,” lying on the island of Malta. The image, a playful parody of Michelangelo’s *Creation of Adam*, reframes Malta’s entry into the Union as an act of symbolic creation, the birth of a new European identity, and subtly evokes the sense of hope and renewed possibility that accompanied the country’s transition into membership.

The cartoon’s title fuses humour and optimism: “*N-EU Year*” celebrates both the passing of time and the dawn of a new political order. The visual composition, in which the EU’s hand reaches from the heavens to touch Malta’s infant form, conveys not subordination but connection, a moment of initiation rather than domination. By representing the EU as benevolent and life-giving, the cartoon captures the post-referendum atmosphere of renewal, contrasting sharply with the anxiety and satire of the pre-accession years.

c) “*Għall-ġid tal-Maltin kollha*”



Cartoon 13. Mument. “Għall-ġid tal-Maltin kollha” (2004).

Source: *Mument*, 2 May, 2004, p.36.

Published the day after Malta’s formal accession to the European Union, Cartoon 13 quickly achieved widespread visibility, establishing itself as a prominent visual marker of the island’s European moment. Appearing in *Il-Mument*, a Nationalist Party-aligned newspaper, the cartoon reflects the triumphalism characteristic of outlets that had championed the “Yes” campaign.

Drawing on Eugène Delacroix’s “*Liberty Leading the People*” (1830), the cartoon reimagines that revolutionary composition in a Maltese and European context. At its centre is an allegorical

female figure, Malta personified, stepping forward confidently while holding the Maltese and EU flags. Her form not only echoes Delacroix's Marianne but also subtly recalls familiar Maltese visual traditions, from the Independence Monument in Floriana, to the female statues carried in local *festa* processions, both of which similarly embody national pride and collective aspiration. Behind her, a symbolic crowd, uniting under the shared purpose of European belonging.

The title, "*Għall-gid tal-Maltin kollha*" ("For the good of all Maltese"), reinforces this sentiment of reconciliation and inclusiveness, signalling a deliberate departure from the rhetoric that had characterised the referendum campaign. Therefore, through the merging of national and European emblems, the cartoon presents EU membership as an act of fulfilment rather than surrender, and as a harmonisation of sovereignty and solidarity.

At one level, the tone is overtly celebratory, a visual affirmation of victory and belonging. Yet the exaggerated heroism of the central figure also borders on self-parody, capturing the early post-accession idealism that saw Malta's entry into the EU as a near-messianic rebirth. The humour lies in this tension between grandeur and sincerity, a hallmark of post-referendum satire that blurred the boundary between commemoration and persuasion.

4.3 Visualising Policy Tensions in Malta's EU Membership

Malta's formal accession to the European Union in 2004 had recalibrated the terms of political satire. As national aspiration gave way to membership, the targets and tone of satirical commentary transformed instantly. Maltese humour abandoned the debate over whether to join Europe, instead focusing on *how* Europe was being experienced in practice, specifically, the friction between EU directives and national life.

The satirical landscape that emerged was complex, developing neither along a simple arc of enthusiasm or resistance, nor did partisan positions shift in a straightforward manner. Instead, Maltese satire reveals a more uneven evolution shaped by alternating governments, changing public sentiment, and the lived realities of membership (Pace, 2009).

The strategic contradiction inherent in the Labour Party's relationship with the EU is evident in the evolution of this rhetoric. While in the early 2000s the party relied heavily on satire to warn that Europe would undermine Maltese traditions, weaken the economy, or dilute national sovereignty, its stance pragmatically adjusted once it returned to power. Labour quickly

embraced EU structures while simultaneously adopting more defensive or instrumental rhetoric in specific domains.

To understand this, the analysis turns to three policy areas where debates about EU membership became especially visible in satirical form: hunting, the economy, and migration. These themes were selected not for their total representativeness, but for their high analytical value to expose distinct dimensions of Malta's Europeanisation. Viewed together, these strands show how Maltese satire alternately frames the nation as vulnerable, empowered, or ambivalently situated within the Union.

4.3.1 The Role of Hunting in Satirical Cartoons

Across both the pre- and post-accession periods, hunting functioned as a key area in which Maltese anxieties about Europe were negotiated. Long tied to rural identity and local tradition, it became a cultural focal point through which the anticipated and unfolding consequences of EU membership were politically constructed.

Tension was sharpened during accession negotiations when the EU's Birds Directive (Directive 2009/147/EC) mandated the regulation of long-standing Maltese trapping practices. As Briguglio (2015) observes, the issue was framed by some as "a test of EU tolerance for local customs," fuelling rural anxieties that Europe would neither understand nor respect established Maltese ways of life.

Labour-aligned satire weaponised this as an emotional trigger, warning that membership would eliminate long-standing traditions, depicting the nation as the potential victim of a distant, culturally insensitive Europe, framing hunting as a marker of sovereignty (Zammit Lupi, 2017).

After accession, as the practical realities of membership began to surface and specific policy areas rose to prominence, the tone shifted toward commenting on Malta's adjustment to EU environmental scrutiny. By the time a referendum on spring hunting was held in 2015 (ultimately resulting in the retention of the practice), and as enforcement controversies intensified, cartoons reframed the matter less as an existential threat to national identity and more as an ongoing bureaucratic and political burden.

Satire targeted both European officials and Maltese politicians, depicting a cycle of blame-shifting, administrative fatigue, and a national struggle to reconcile tradition with external oversight, all of which became visually apparent in the satirical output.

a) “BOOM!”



Cartoon 14. Maurice Tanti Burlò, “BOOM!” (1993).

“Hinting that hunters will shoot at anything, even at our chances at joining the EU!”

Source: *The Times of Malta*, 7 June, 1993.

Reproduced in Maurice Tanti Burlò, *Blame It on Ed!*, p. 18.

In Cartoon 14, a hunter stands on a cliff’s edge, firing his shotgun into the night sky. The blast forms the word “BOOM!” among the twelve stars of the European flag, visually suggesting that the target of his aim is not merely game, but the very symbol of Europe itself. The caption, “*Hinting that hunters will shoot at anything, even at our chances of joining the EU!*”, underscores the self-destructive irony: an act of aggression that harms national prospects rather than preserves tradition.

Published a decade before Malta’s referendum, the cartoon captures the anxieties surrounding the country’s European trajectory. It uses the figure of the hunter, an emblem of rural Maltese masculinity and independence, to critique an instinctive resistance to change. By shooting at the EU stars, the hunter embodies the paradox of nationalist defiance: in defending one’s perceived way of life, one risks undermining the very opportunities that could secure it. The cartoon also gestures toward a political concern where organised hunting communities, long openly hostile to EU membership, were seen as sufficiently mobilised to influence public sentiment, raising fears that their opposition could tip the balance toward Euroscepticism.

The visual metaphor is simple yet layered. The cliff-edge positioning conveys precariousness, suggesting that Malta's stance toward Europe was as unstable as the ground beneath its feet. The darkness in the scene contrasts sharply with the illuminated EU stars, positioning Europe as a distant, almost unreachable horizon. The imagery also hints at a domestic reality: the hunting sector remained largely unregulated, with major political parties hesitant to confront it directly, a reluctance that further reinforced the sense of uncertainty depicted in the cartoon (Montebello, 2023).

Through this interplay, it reframes the hunting motif as a commentary on cultural insecurity, the fear that modernisation entails loss, but also the folly of confusing caution with regression.

b) *Untitled ("R.I.P. – Tifkira tal-Kaċċa u l-Insib f'Malta")*



Cartoon 15. Kaktus, Untitled (2003).

Source: *KullHadd*, 9 February 2003, p. 48.

Set in a cemetery, Cartoon 15 depicts a lone figure holding a lantern, surrounded by tombstones inscribed with engravings mourning the loss of Maltese traditions and livelihoods. One gravestone reads “*R.I.P. Tifkira tal-Kaċċa u l-Insib f'Malta*” (“In memory of hunting and bird trapping in Malta”), while others lament the end of work “for the Maltese” and “the memory of when Malta was ours.”

Published just weeks before the EU accession referendum, the cartoon's timing was strategic. The Labour Party, facing the likelihood of defeat, sought to mobilise cultural nostalgia and apprehension about foreign interference. By invoking imagery of burial and remembrance, the

piece equates EU membership with the literal death of Maltese identity, transforming policy debate into a moral and emotional drama of survival.

It also draws upon wider fears the party sought to amplify at the time, such as concerns over what accession would mean for the Maltese economy, and Sant's insistence that Malta was not yet ready to compete. This operates as deliberate persuasion: it weaponised humour through melancholy, offering a darkly comic warning that joining Europe would condemn cherished practices, such as hunting, to the grave (Bernard, 2018).

Through its heavy symbolism and timing, the cartoon captures a moment when satire functioned not as commentary but as campaign strategy, offering Labour a final opportunity to remind voters of what EU membership might cost them, framing accession not simply as a political choice, but as a potential forfeiture of cultural practices and national heritage.

c) *"Its-Spring – Again!"*



Cartoon 16. Maurice Tanti Burlò, "It's spring – again!" (2004).

Source: *The Times of Malta*, 2 April, 2012.

In Cartoon 16, a Maltese hunter aims his shotgun at the rear of a figure labelled "E.U.," who bends down to hold open a net, a literal and symbolic inversion of power. The hunter, seated behind a traditional dry-stone wall and dressed in camouflage, embodies Malta's rural identity and defiance, while the EU, depicted comically and undignifiedly, becomes the object of ridicule and retribution.

The caption *"It's spring – again!"* directly references the spring hunting season, which, despite EU restrictions under the Birds Directive, Malta continued to defend through successive derogations. The humour plays on frustration, every spring reigniting the same conflict between Brussels' regulations and Malta's insistence on cultural exception.

Here, we can see that satire has evolved from fear to mockery. The EU is no longer an intimidating external authority but a recurring nuisance, something that can be laughed at, even targeted.

d) “*A risky and unnecessary gamble*”



Cartoon 17. Mark Scicluna, “A risky and unnecessary gamble” (2014).

“It is as though the present administration wants to reassure its European counterparts that it intends to take its wildlife commitments seriously, while at the same time taking liberties with European legislation to achieve the opposite objective”

Source: *MaltaToday*, 21 October, 2014.

In Cartoon 17, a suited official, representing the European Commission, hands a pile of documents titled “*EC Warning Against Malta Over Trapping*” to a visibly confused “Karm” (a clear reference to Karmenu Vella, Malta’s then EU Commissioner for Environment), remarking: “*Here’s the first order of the day, Karm... a hot pile of bird shit for you to deal with.*” To the left, an aide hammers a new nameplate reading “Vella” over that of his predecessor “Potočnik,” signalling the bureaucratic continuity of Malta’s environmental controversies.

Published in the lead-up to the 2015 spring hunting referendum, the cartoon encapsulates a distinctly post-accession tone of bureaucratic absurdity. Whereas earlier satire depicted the EU as a domineering force and Malta as defensive or defiant, this image situates both within a comically dysfunctional system. The timing is particularly significant, appearing shortly after Prime Minister Joseph Muscat publicly insisted that Maltese hunters should be “treated like their European counterparts” (Muscat on *Affari Tagħna*, 2013); a declaration that intensified the sense of political entanglement and regulatory friction animating the scene.

The yellow stars in the background anchor the scene within the European institutional sphere, reinforcing the shift from national confrontation to bureaucratic entanglement. Rather than a moral indictment, the humour lies in the trivialisation of responsibility where EU warnings and environmental breaches are treated less as ethical dilemmas, than as paperwork to be inherited. Further implying that both sides had grown fatigued by the cyclical disputes surrounding Malta's bird-trapping derogations, the metaphor, "bird shit," collapses complex environmental infringement proceedings into a mundane administrative burden,.

Such satirical shift was marked by a transition from anxiety and resistance to irony and exhaustion. By 2014, the laughter no longer masked a fear of European overreach but rather a recognition of the routine of a small state's recurring dance with regulation, compliance, and creative defiance. This cartoon thus distils the core of the hunting narrative, revealing how Malta's relationship with the EU, once contested and emotional, had by this point settled into a weary, yet cynical coexistence.

4.3.2 The Role of the Economy in Satirical Cartoons

If satire surrounding hunting revealed how cultural anxieties shaped Malta's early relationship with Europe, economic satire illuminated another dimension of the same national unease. As debates shifted from identity to material consequence, cartoons began to scrutinise what EU membership would mean for Malta's economy, sovereignty, and capacity to compete. In the pre-accession years, satire became a battleground for these competing visions: Labour weaponised humour to amplify fears of economic loss and external control, while pro-EU outlets used satire to portray Europe as a guarantor of stability, investment, and long-term opportunity (Pace, 2009).

After accession, however, the tone shifted. As EU funds began to reshape Malta's infrastructure and development trajectory, cartoonists captured a growing sense of confidence, frequently portraying Europe as a dependable source of investment and modernization (European Commission, n.d.; Gatt, 2020). By the time Labour returned to power in 2013, the narrative had inverted entirely: the same party that had once warned of economic collapse now invoked EU funding as evidence of governmental competence, policy success, and national progress. Yet prosperity brought its own satirical vulnerabilities. From the mid-2010s onward, humour increasingly targeted the performative aspect of economic success, with cartoons exposing how Malta's economic story became staged as much as lived.

Through this evolution, economic satire traces a broader narrative of Malta's Europeanisation: not a linear progression from scepticism to support, but a continual staging of European belonging in which the EU is alternately feared, embraced, and strategically displayed when politically expedient.

a) “Referendum ... before the colour runs out!”



Cartoon 18. Maurice Tanti Burlò, “Referendum ... before the colour runs out!” (1998).

Source: *The Times of Malta*, 17 May, 1998.

Reproduced in Maurice Tanti Burlò, *Blame It on Ed!*, p. 39.

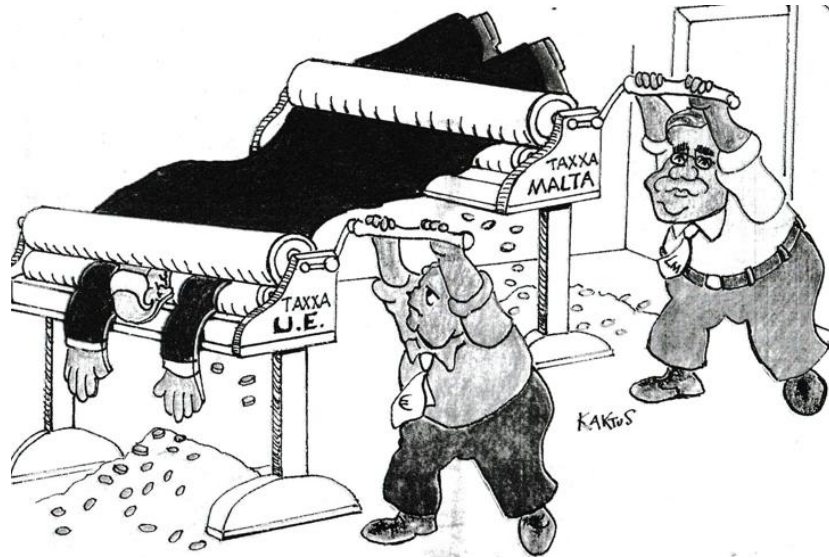
Emerging in 1998, a politically tense moment marked by Sant's Labour government suspending Malta's EU membership bid, Cartoon 18 captures the early economic anxieties that framed Malta's relationship with the European project. A solemn Sant is shown perched atop a fading rainbow that bridges Malta to a pot of gold labelled “European Union.” As the colours drip away, so too does the promise of prosperity.

The rainbow metaphor evokes the pre-accession rhetoric of hope and renewal, the belief that EU membership would unlock financial stability and modernisation. Yet, the cartoon's tone is ambivalent. Sant's act of cutting through the rainbow implies a deliberate interruption of Malta's path to economic opportunity, a visual critique of his government's decision to “pause” the accession process. It also gestures, albeit indirectly, to the way pro-EU actors relied on funding prospects and financial incentives to frame membership as Malta's most viable route to economic security.

By framing EU membership in explicitly fiscal imagery, a pot of money awaiting those who cross the arc, the cartoon situates economic aspiration at the centre of Malta's European debate.

Long before accession became reality, satire was already equating Europe with material gain, foreshadowing how the politics of EU funds would come to dominate Malta's public imagination in the years ahead.

b) *Untitled ("Taxxa U.E.")*



Cartoon 19. Kaktus, Untitled (2003).

Source: *KullHadd*, 21 February 2003, p. 48.

Adding to the atmosphere of mounting economic anxiety in the final months before the 2003 EU referendum, Cartoon 19 crystallises the Labour Party's central argument against accession: that EU membership would impose an intolerable financial burden on ordinary Maltese citizens. Published at a politically charged moment, just weeks before the vote, the cartoon participates in Labour's broader strategy of framing the EU not as an engine of prosperity, but as a looming source of exploitation and loss of control.

The cartoon depicts a suited man, clearly representing the Maltese taxpayer, trapped beneath two enormous mechanical presses labelled "TAXXA MALTA" and "TAXXA U.E.", each operated by bullish figures. As the machines squeeze him from both sides, coins spill out, visually dramatizing the idea of fiscal extraction. Through this heavy-handed but effective metaphor, the cartoon reduces complex questions of taxation, monetary integration, and economic policy to a stark, bodily experience of pressure and suffocation. It also echoes earlier political warnings, most notably Sant's 1996 claims that VAT and heightened European competition would overwhelm Maltese consumers and small businesses, as later recalled in his interview with Calleja (2024); thereby reinforcing why financial support and funding prospects became central to how pro-EU actors later framed the benefits of membership.

Unlike Nationalist-leaning images that celebrated EU funds as an opportunity for growth, this cartoon casts the EU as an additional, and foreign, source of economic hardship. The message is clear: accession would not replace Malta's existing burdens but would double them.

Satirically, the cartoon deploys exaggerated bodily suffering to evoke urgency, but politically it functions as propaganda: a tactical attempt to sway undecided voters through humour that masks alarmism. It illustrates how pre-referendum Labour-aligned satire, positioned Malta as the potential victim of EU overreach, projecting fears of economic loss and external domination. In this sense, it offers a precise snapshot of one side of the debate, revealing how partisan satire sought to shape public perception through emotionally charged, economically focused arguments.

c) *Untitled ("Malta EU2017")*



Cartoon 20. Pepito Cartoons, Untitled (2017).

Source: *Pepito Cartoons*, in *Malta Independent*, 1 January, 2017.

Where earlier cartoons distilled Labour's pre-accession anxieties, Cartoon 20 belongs to a radically different political landscape. Here, the EU-Malta relationship is reframed not through confrontation, but through choreography, subtly invoking the familiar motif of "dancing to the EU's tune".

A small, childlike Maltese figure dressed in red, a pointed reference to the Labour Party, dances with a towering woman whose blue gown with yellow stars unmistakably represents the European Union. The backdrop "Malta EU 2017" situates the scene during Malta's rotating presidency of the Council of the EU, a moment that not only coincided with unprecedented economic expansion, but also symbolised Malta's unexpected arrival at the centre of European decision-making.

The choreography conveys a historical reversal: the party that once warned of subordination now performed a confident, high-spirited Europeanism, leading the agenda of a Union it had long approached with caution. That this presidency unfolded in the shadow of Brexit only heightened its symbolic resonance, positioning Malta simultaneously as participant, mediator, and custodian within a project undergoing profound redefinition (Harwood, et al., 2018).

What the humour exposes, however, is not simply Labour's ideological turn but the broader political economy that underpinned it. By 2017, the EU had become central to Malta's growth model, supplying structural funds, regulatory legitimacy, and global visibility (KPMG, 2017; Harwood et al., 2018). The cartoon captures this shift in material conditions: the EU figure, poised and guiding, embodies the structural power and financial frameworks that facilitated Malta's post-crisis boom, while the Maltese dancer mirrors a government performing enthusiasm for a system on which its economic success had increasingly come to depend.

The height difference and leading posture underscore an enduring power asymmetry. Despite Malta's ceremonial leadership during the presidency, Europe continues to "set the pace" in economic governance. The stage-like setting evokes spectacle more than substance, suggesting that Malta's presidency and, by extension, its economic success story, is partly performative, reliant on choreography rather than autonomy (Politico, 2017). The lighting reinforces this dynamic: the beams illuminate the backdrop and the Presidency logo rather than the dancers themselves, subtly implying that the spotlight falls on the event and the European project, not on Malta's agency within it. Malta appears present but not fully visible, participating in a spectacle whose centre of gravity ultimately lies elsewhere.

It is within this dynamic that the cartoon's deeper significance becomes visible: by depicting a once-Euro-sceptic Labour Party now dancing comfortably in Europe's embrace, the image crystallises a profound narrative reversal. Here, the EU is no longer a threat, but a partner, with prosperity presented as both shared and strategically showcased. This transition underscores how economic narratives became a central vehicle through which Malta normalised, legitimised, and ultimately celebrated its place within the Union.

4.3.3 The Role of Migration in Satirical Cartoons

Migration introduces a satirical trajectory that is neither linear nor easily politicised. Unlike other themes explored in this chapter, migration satire charts a field of fears, solidarities, and geopolitical pressures that intensified as Malta confronted its role at the frontline of Mediterranean movements.

Before accession, the dominant anxiety was not irregular migration or asylum, but the implications of free movement within the EU. Satire from this period echoed political rhetoric that imagined membership as a cultural threat, portraying a future in which Malta risked being overwhelmed by an influx of other Europeans.

After accession, however, this imagined scenario was eclipsed by a far more immediate reality. As Malta became a frontline state, satire pivoted toward the pressures of irregular migration, EU burden-sharing, and the perceived absence of solidarity from Brussels (Mainwaring & Stierl, 2025). In this phase, cartoons increasingly depicted Malta as exposed and overextended, revealing a shift in which sceptical narratives once associated with Labour began to surface within Nationalist discourse as well.

By the mid-2010s, migration satire recalibrated once again. The focus moved beyond vulnerability toward a critique of selective openness: while vulnerable migrants were framed as burdens to be managed, wealthy investors were welcomed as desirable entrants to the European space. Satire thus highlighted Malta's growing agency and opportunism, suggesting that the island was not merely acted upon by EU migration politics but was also strategically shaping them.

Taken together, these depictions show how migration satire became a key medium for probing questions of identity, belonging, and power; issues central to understanding Malta's negotiation of its place within the EU.

a) *"Doubts Very Much Like Fred's!"*



Cartoon 21. Maurice Tanti Burlò, "Doubts Very Much Like Fred's!" (1993).

Source: *The Sunday Times*, 22, August, 1993.

Reproduced in Maurice Tanti Burlò, *Blame It on Ed!*, p. 24.

Cartoon 21 distils early Maltese anxieties about EU membership into a scene that is both humorous and quietly mocking. A father stands with his son on a cliff labelled “Malta,” offering what begins as a familiar reassurance about inheritance, only for the sentence to unravel into an absurdly long list of Europeans who will supposedly also lay claim to the island. The cliff-edge setting reinforces a further subtext: the fear that Malta, perched on its own geopolitical periphery, might be unable to preserve its isolation once exposed to continental free movement.

The excess of this enumeration is central to the satire. By piling nation upon nation, the cartoon exaggerates and exposes the logical collapse of the Labour Party’s argument at the time: that EU membership would leave Malta “overrun” by other Europeans, eroding national identity and undermining territorial control (Pace, 2009).

The irony embedded in the father’s speech sharpens the cartoon’s critique: what begins as a paternal assurance about inheritance collapses into a declaration of fragmented sovereignty. Therefore, rather than offering comfort, the father reproduces a narrative of loss, echoing the same anxieties Alfred Sant promoted in the lead-up to accession.

The cartoon makes this target explicit through the caption, “*Doubts very much like Fred’s,*” leaving no ambiguity about its satirical aim, and Sant’s Euroscepticism is not engaged as a serious policy position but deflated through exaggeration, portrayed as a spiralling, almost absurd vision of Malta being overrun by every European nationality. In this way, the cartoon exposes the emotional logic of pre-accession Euroscepticism, not grounded in economic or institutional analysis, but in inflated anxieties about national erosion.

b) *Untitled (“Fortress Europe”)*



Cartoon 22. Pepito Cartoons, Untitled (2015).

Source: *Pepito Cartoons*, in *Malta Independent*, 6 September, 2015.

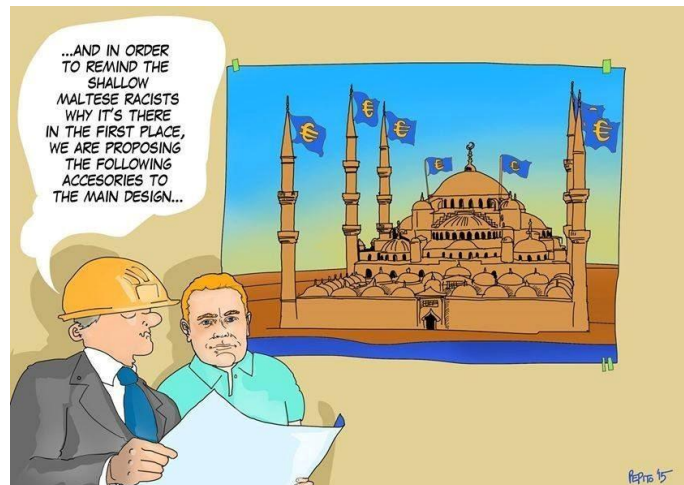
Published during the aftermath of Alan Kurdi's death in 2015, Cartoon 22 uses one of the most searing images of the migration crisis to expose the moral dissonance at the heart of European politics. The composition itself is theatrical: a dead child lies on a blood-red shoreline while, above him, a row of silhouetted EU leaders discuss cheese, languages, and the euro. Their bodies merge into a single dark mass, forming a literal human barricade, a fortress like configuration that visually evokes the academic notion of *Fortress Europe*. In doing so, the cartoon illustrates how Maltese satire evolved in response to the changing realities of migration: no longer concerned with abstract fears of free movement, it now confronted the brutal consequences of policy divergence, competing national interests, and the abandonment of vulnerable people at Europe's borders.

The satire functions on two levels. First, it skewers the EU's bureaucratic detachment: the leaders' trivial discussions stand in grotesque contrast to the humanitarian catastrophe unfolding beneath. Their physical height, elevated above the scene, reinforces a political hierarchy in which human tragedy remains distant, abstract, and administratively inconvenient.

But because this cartoon is Maltese, the satire does not stop at Brussels as the fortress silhouette does not only represent EU indifference, but also mirrors Maltese political behaviour. By 2015, Malta, governed by a Labour Party that had once warned against foreigners "taking over", found itself adopting similarly selective empathy. The government publicly emphasised humanitarian values while simultaneously restricting arrivals, outsourcing responsibility to Italy, and relying on deterrence narratives that echoed broader European discourse (Pusterla & Pusterla, 2017).

Meanwhile, the Nationalist Party, which had championed EU accession in 2003, increasingly weaponised migration in domestic politics, reframing it as evidence of Labour's failure to manage Malta's place within the Union (Mainwaring & Stierl, 2025). PN rhetoric shifted toward warning that Malta was absorbing too many foreign workers and shouldering disproportionate pressures, arguments that implicitly questioned the very European solidarity the party had once celebrated. Labour, conversely, adopted a more pragmatic, Brussels-aligned stance, presenting migration management as a technical and administrative challenge rather than an existential threat.

c) *Untitled* (“Mosque”)



Cartoon 23. Pepito Cartoons, *Untitled* (2015).

Source: *Pepito Cartoons*, in *Malta Independent*, 27 December, 2015.

Cartoon 23 delivers a layered satirical critique of Malta’s migration and cultural anxieties at a moment when public discourse was becoming increasingly polarised. By depicting a mosque decorated with EU flags, the image exaggerates fears of cultural transformation associated with immigration, particularly Muslim migration, even though these fears were often grounded more in prejudice than demographic reality (Balzan, 2024).

The proposed “*accessories*,” intended to “*remind the shallow Maltese racists why it’s there*,” expose the cartoon’s central irony: anxieties about change are projected outward onto the EU even though such developments are far more often the result of Malta’s own domestic decisions or wider global dynamics. Too, the inclusion of Joseph Muscat listening attentively to the architect further roots the image in the political climate of 2015, a moment when Labour enthusiastically embraced EU membership and economic openness while simultaneously facing a rising tide of nationalist unease (The Independent, 2015).

In this context, the mosque becomes a metaphor for the tension between an increasingly cosmopolitan, EU-integrated Malta and segments of the population fearful of cultural dilution. Decorating its towers with EU flags satirically amplifies this contrast, mocking the political reflex to attribute any demographic or cultural shift to Brussels rather than to local agency. At the same time, the image hints at contradictions within the EU itself: an institution that urges openness while remaining internally divided, unable to deliver solidarity or reach durable

agreement on migration. The satire therefore exposes not only Maltese anxieties, but also the structural incoherence shaping Europe's broader migration regime.

What emerges is a critique of Maltese political communication itself: in the migration domain, EU symbolism is not invoked to articulate principled alignment or resistance, but often to obscure responsibility.

d) *"That's Our Business"*



Cartoon 24. Mikiel Galea, *"That's Our Business"* (2016).

Source: *MaltaToday*, 20 November, 2016.

As the final image considered in this chapter, Cartoon 20 offers a critical visual commentary on Malta's post-accession migration politics. Two political figures, one in blue, the other in red, use oversized brooms to sweep away migrants, while a billboard behind them advertises EU passports for wealthy investors. This juxtaposition immediately establishes a stark hierarchy of mobility: exclusion for the vulnerable, seamless entry for the affluent. The scene also gestures toward an uncomfortable political convergence. Despite their historic rivalry, both major parties adopted migration approaches grounded in nationalist protectionism, revealing how, by the late 2010s, Maltese politics had merged around a restrictive consensus.

The visual symbolism of the brooms adds an additional layer of political nuance. The blue broom, emblazoned with the EU flag, is wielded by the PN (blue) figure; the red broom, decorated with the Maltese cross, by the PL (red) figure. These cues encapsulate the strategies the two parties adopted after accession with the PN sweeping under a European banner, evoking

its long-standing habit of framing migration as an EU responsibility and positioning Malta as a frontline victim of inadequate burden-sharing. Labour, by contrast, sweeps under the sign of national sovereignty, reflecting its post-2013 emphasis on control, order, and domestic management (Pace, 2018). Yet despite the rhetorical differences, the gesture is identical: both parties remove unwanted migrants from public view

What ultimately emerges from this is a distilled view of the contradictions that animate Malta's migration politics, exposing a dual hypocrisy. At the Maltese level, it highlights how both major parties simultaneously depended on foreign labour and celebrated investor citizenship, while rhetorically distancing themselves from responsibility for asylum seekers. At the European level, it reveals how principles such as solidarity and free movement were invoked selectively, often more as political instruments than as binding commitments (Mainwaring & Stierl, 2025).

Within the broader argument of this dissertation, the cartoon is particularly significant because it captures the ambiguity of Malta's self-positioning inside the EU's migration framework. Satire thus becomes a crucial site for exposing this flexibility, showing not only how Malta negotiates its place within the Union, but also how Maltese political actors use the EU symbolically, defensively, and opportunistically.

4.4 Interpreting Malta's Satirical Engagement with the EU

This analysis has thus far traced Maltese satire across the decades of Europeanisation, understood as the set of political, cultural, and symbolic processes through which Malta has interpreted, negotiated, and continually recalibrated its relationship with the European Union. These trajectories span from pre-accession anxieties and referendum polarisation, through the tentative optimism of early membership, to the more ambivalent and issue-specific frictions characteristic of the mature membership years. What now remains is to step back from individual cartoons and ask what this vast body of material, taken together, reveals about Malta's relationship with the European Union.

This section therefore moves from illustration to interpretation by treating the cartoons not simply as isolated jokes, but as an archive through which Malta has imagined, contested, and recalibrated its place within Europe. Through this, the primary research questions of the dissertation are brought into sharp focus and can be addressed with analytical precision.

4.4.1 Does Maltese satire portray Malta as a victim of EU overreach, as an enthusiastic member of the EU, or through other narratives?

The first research question driving this section is centred on how Maltese satire constructs the nation's identity within the European Union. The satirical corpus analysed in this study demonstrates conclusively that Maltese satire does not commit itself to a single, stable representation of Malta's relationship with the European Union. Instead, it mobilises a set of recurring narrative frames - specifically, victimhood, enthusiasm, and strategic ambivalence - that gain or lose prominence according to political conjuncture, partisan interests, and the policy fields being contested.

These representations do not unfold randomly; they reflect a patterned evolution that mirrors Malta's shifting national mood from the pre-accession years to the present. Satire, in this sense, becomes a diagnostic tool: a cultural register through which anxieties, aspirations, and strategic recalibrations are given visual and rhetorical form.

a) *Malta as a Victim of EU Overreach*

The victimhood narrative emerges most clearly in the pre-accession and early membership period, particularly within Labour-aligned satire, where the EU is cast as an external force threatening Maltese autonomy. This pattern appears early in the "falling stars" cartoon (Cartoon 8), where a caravan follows a celestial EU star off a cliff. The image functions as a symbolic warning that uncritical enthusiasm would lead Malta to ruin. A similar logic structures Cartoon 9, in which Fenech Adami enlarges a minuscule "EU gift" through a lens labelled *propaganda*. Here, the EU is framed as a project sustained by rhetorical inflation, suggesting that the Nationalist narrative of European abundance rests on discursive manipulation rather than material benefit.

Cultural insecurity becomes even more pronounced in Cartoon 15, which depicts a gravestone inscribed "*Tifkira tal-Kaċċa u l-Insib f'Malta*" ("In memory of hunting and bird trapping in Malta"). This visual burial of hunting traditions crystallises fears that EU environmental governance would extinguish emblematic markers of Maltese identity. Economic precarity is articulated with equal force in Cartoon 19, where the taxpayer is literally being compressed, collapsing complex debates on fiscal alignment, regulatory compliance, and monetary integration into a stark corporeal metaphor of extraction, reinforcing the perception that membership would produce cumulative and intolerable burdens.

What is analytically significant is the endurance of this interpretive frame. Cartoon 21, although mocking Sant's earlier Euroscepticism, relies on the recognisability of the victim trope itself. Its humour presupposes a political culture in which narratives of threat, overwhelm, and loss

have become deeply sedimented. Thus, even as partisan positions shifted, the imagery of a vulnerable Malta besieged by European forces remained a stable and potent satirical resource.

b) Malta as Enthusiastic European Member

In sharp contrast to the victimhood frame, Nationalist-aligned and independent satire frequently constructed an imaginary of Malta as an emerging European subject. During the referendum campaign, Cartoon 10 renders Malta as a smiling globe folding itself seamlessly into Europe. The upward-curving *IVA* trajectory translates integration to a movement of progress, reproducing the Nationalist discourse that equated EU membership with modernity and socio-economic uplift. Satire here does not destabilise the pro-EU narrative but amplifies its central premise: that Europe represents the natural horizon of Maltese development.

This aspirational register intensifies with accession. In 2004, the Delacroix-inspired Cartoon 13 depicts a personified Malta striding forward with Maltese and EU flags raised high. Published the day after accession, the visual grammar sacralises EU membership as a moment of national rebirth, positioning Europe as the culmination of Malta's democratic trajectory and a source of symbolic legitimacy.

By the 2010s, this narrative of enthusiasm becomes politically transversal. Cartoon 20 portrays Labour, once the architect of Malta's Eurosceptic anxieties, dancing with an elegant EU figure in a scene of choreographed harmony. The red suit makes the reversal unmistakable: the former opponent now performs European belonging with theatrical confidence. In this configuration, satire redraws Malta not as a constrained actor but as an assertive participant actively embracing, and even stylising, its place within the European project.

c) Malta as Strategic, Ambivalent, and Opportunistic

A third narrative emerges most clearly in the post-accession period, one that unsettles the binary between enthusiasm and victimhood. In this frame, Malta is no longer portrayed as oppressed nor euphoric, but as a strategic actor exercising agency within, and sometimes against, EU structures. Satire here foregrounds pragmatism, ambivalence, and selective alignment, reflecting the increasingly transactional nature of Malta's European engagement.

This is present in Cartoon 17, where the burden of EU environmental compliance falls down a chain of Maltese officials. The humour exposes not European domination but Maltese bureaucratic evasiveness and the performative character of "following the rules." The EU

appears less as an oppressive force and more as a system Malta learns to navigate, negotiate, or circumvent.

In migration satire, this strategic ambivalence becomes even more pronounced. Cartoon 22 indicts not only Brussels but also Malta's complicity in a wider politics of deterrence: the island is neither the victim of pre-accession rhetoric nor the triumphant European of 2004, but a morally entangled participant in a system that differentiates between lives worth saving and lives administratively managed. Satire here functions as mirror rather than shield.

This reaches its clearest articulation in Cartoon 24. PN and PL politicians, distinguished by colour, sweep away irregular migrants while a glowing billboard advertises EU passports for wealthy investors. The juxtaposition exposes a hierarchy of mobility and a shared nationalist protectionism that transcends party lines. Europe becomes alternately shield, scapegoat, and prop, invoked when useful, and bypassed entirely when economic opportunity beckons.

Taken together, these cartoons demonstrate that Maltese satire articulates three durable narrative identities: victimhood, associated with periods of partisan contestation; enthusiastic Europeanism, aligned with moments of national affirmation; and strategic ambivalence, characteristic of Malta's posture as a confident EU member adept at navigating contentious policy domains. These frames do not simply succeed one another; they coexist, re-emerge, and recalibrate in response to crises, opportunities, and political expediency. Their interplay sets the conceptual groundwork for addressing the dissertation's second research question on how these portrayals transform over time.

4.4.2 *How has the portrayal of EU-related themes in Maltese satire evolved over time, and what historical or political events have shaped this evolution?*

A longitudinal analysis of the cartoons examined in this dissertation demonstrates that Maltese satire constructs Europe through a dynamic and historically contingent visual language. Rather than tracing a linear shift from Euroscepticism to enthusiasm, the satirical portrayal of the EU evolves in response to pivotal political ruptures, regulatory confrontations, and broader socio-economic and migratory developments.

Understanding this evolution therefore requires situating satire within the major chronological junctures of Malta's Europeanisation, each of which reoriented how Europe could be imagined, contested, or embraced.

a) The Pre-Referendum Phase (1996–2003)

Satire in the late 1990s and early 2000s is characterised by defensive, fear-based illustrations, particularly within Labour-aligned publications. During this period, cartoons functioned as a vehicle for expressing existential anxieties, rather than straightforward policy critique. Visual commentaries like Cartoons 8, 9, and 19, depict Malta at the threshold of a potentially destructive supranational order. Therefore, the EU is not merely a political project but an imagined force capable of eroding traditions, overwhelming sovereignty, and displacing long-standing socio-economic practices.

These tones were not produced in isolation. Key political ruptures, including the suspension of Malta's application in 1996, the Nationalist reactivation of Malta's application in 1998, and the intensifying build-up to the 2003 referendum, amplified public uncertainty and rendered questions of identity acutely salient. As Pace (2002; 2025) observes, small-state insecurity tends to crystallise at accession moments, when the asymmetry between national autonomy and supranational authority is most visible. Maltese satire reflects this dynamic with remarkable clarity.

Thus, this first phase is defined by a survivalist visual grammar: metaphors of falling, drowning, deception, and loss articulate a national imaginary preoccupied with cultural precarity and the fear of being subsumed by a larger European project.

b) The Referendum & Accession Moment (2003–2004)

Reflecting the intensity of a campaign fought as much through imagery and emotion as through policy, the months surrounding the EU Referendum constitute a decisive point in Malta's satirical landscape. During this period, satire becomes sharper, more polarised, and symbolically saturated. Cartoon 10 exemplifies this transformation: it distils the referendum into a two-fold of optimism versus decline, visually encoding the stakes of the moment and the competing ideological futures on offer. In this phase, both the pro-EU and anti-EU camps mobilised humour not merely for commentary but as an explicit instrument of persuasion, signalling the centrality of satire within the information ecosystem of the campaign.

Immediately after the referendum, however, the tone shifts in perceptible ways. This is reflected in cartoons such as Cartoon 11, which project how the emotional economy of satire moves from anticipation to assessment as Europe ceases to function as a hypothetical horizon and instead becomes an imminent political reality. The imagery turns reflective, even commemorative, as cartoonists reinterpret the referendum outcome and reposition Malta within a new European trajectory.

What emerges in this phase is an insight into the temporal responsiveness of satire. Satire recalibrates to political outcomes, absorbing shocks and retooling its symbolism to mirror collective sentiments. In doing so, it becomes part of the narrative infrastructure through which Malta interprets and stabilises political transitions, echoing Carter's (2025) argument that satire operates as a cultural practice enabling societies to make sense of political change.

c) *The Post-Accession Adjustment (2005–2013)*

The years following accession produce a third, more ambivalent phase. With the existential question of *whether* Malta should join now settled, satire turns to the more intricate question of *how* Malta belongs. The register shifts accordingly: ideological polarisation gives way to depictions of procedural complexity, administrative strain, and the friction of everyday Europeanisation.

During this period, the celebratory rhetoric disintegrates, replaced by visual commentary that foregrounds the practical realities of membership: proliferating paperwork, infringement warnings, fiscal oversight, and protracted conflicts over hunting and trapping. The mounting pressures of irregular migration on a frontline state further sharpen this tone. Europe is thus neither saviour nor antagonist, but an architecture through which Malta must continually manoeuvre. Cartoon 17 exemplifies this evolution, reframing environmental governance not as domination but as a shared condition of administrative exhaustion.

By the early 2010s, the partisan landscape shifts once more. Eurosceptical caution is no longer the preserve of Labour; the Nationalist Party redeploys migration as a domestically weaponised critique of both Brussels and Labour's management of arrivals. Satire captures this realignment with precision, portraying both major parties invoking, reframing, or displacing "Europe" in line with their strategies.

What crystallises in this phase is a more mature satirical vocabulary; one that abandons the binaries of fear and joy, and instead adopts an evaluative tone. Satire thus becomes an analytical instrument, illuminating the negotiations, frictions, and recalibrations that defined Malta's first decade inside the Union.

d) *The Era of Consolidation and Contradiction (2013–Present)*

With Labour's return to government in 2013 and unprecedented economic expansion, a fourth and final phase is marked by a dramatic inversion of earlier narratives. The party that once framed Europe as a threat to Malta's prosperity now appears fully at ease within the European

project. Satire captures this reversal with striking clarity: in Cartoon 21, Labour is shown dancing confidently with an elegant EU figure, a visual shorthand for the ease with which former Eurosceptics recast themselves as champions of European modernity.

Yet this newfound confidence coexists with deepening contradictions, most visibly in the domain of migration. The Mediterranean crisis shifts the satirical focus from cultural anxiety to systemic failure. Cartoons such as Cartoon 18 no longer depict Malta as merely at the mercy of Brussels, but as implicated in a broader European regime marked by deterrence, selective empathy, and the externalisation of responsibility.

Others, including Cartoon 23, expose a growing domestic tendency to deflect xenophobia onto “Europe,” allowing Maltese politicians to attribute demographic unease to the Union, rather than to national choices. This duality reaches its clearest expression in Cartoon 24, where the sweeping away of vulnerable migrants is juxtaposed with the enthusiastic welcome extended to wealthy purchasers of EU citizenship; an indictment of a migration regime that privileges economic value over human need.

This phase thus reveals the culmination of Malta’s satirical evolution: Europe becomes not an external protagonist but a reflective surface through which Maltese political contradictions, shifting allegiances, and strategic performances are rendered visible. Satire here operates not simply as critique but as a tool, mapping the tensions between Malta’s celebrated European success story and the unease that accompanies it.

Taken together, the trajectory traced across these phases demonstrates that Maltese satire is profoundly in agreement to political timings. It mediates the psychological experience of Europeanisation by translating policies, crises, and reversals into symbolic narratives that circulate within the public sphere, and narratives that illuminate not only Malta’s relationship with Europe, but the shifting terrain of Maltese politics itself.

4.5 Conclusion

Ultimately, the analysis affirms that Maltese satire does far more than decorate political debate; it provides a parallel narrative of Europeanisation attuned to the contradictions, vulnerabilities, and aspirations that official discourse frequently conceals. What emerges most clearly is that satire has functioned not merely as commentary but, to borrow Bloom and Bloom’s (1979) influential formulation, as a “*diagnostic instrument*”: a medium capable of registering and interpreting the emotional pulse of Maltese society at key moments of political transition.

These cartoons express the shifting moods of an entire political culture into visual arguments that speak with uncommon clarity. It is here, in this interplay between humour and power, that the deeper story of Maltese integration unfolds: not as a linear trajectory, but as a dynamic, emotionally charged, and persistently contested process.

5. CONCLUSION

The core insight emerging from this dissertation is the disconnect between the European Union's polished narrative of interrogation and the far more uneven, emotionally charged experience of Malta's citizens. The standard narratives of Europeanisation frequently fail to register the complex, emotional volatility that characterise small-state engagement with supranational governance. By using the lens of Maltese satire, this dissertation assembles a body of visual and rhetorical evidence that compels a rethink how small states negotiate their place within the European project. What ultimately appears is neither a stable, nor a clear-cut rejection of "Europe", but a fluid, adaptive and multidirectional representation that captures the shifting ways Maltese society interprets, challenges, and reimagines the European Union.

5.1 Main Findings

Perhaps the most immediate and striking insight to emerge from this study is the extent to which Malta's satirical output is shaped by its uniquely institutionalised system of media parallelism, as outlined in § 2.5.1 and § 2.5.3. To ground these findings in the material analysed, Table 2 reproduced the synoptic overview of the political cartoons examined in Chapter 4. The table summarises each cartoon's visual composition and analytical significance, providing a consolidated reference point for the themes, motifs and narrative patterns that structure the discussion that follows.

Table 2. Summary of Satirical Cartoons Analysed in Chapter 4

Cartoon	Visual Composition	Significance
<i>Before the Referendum Campaign (1996-2002)</i>		
Cartoon 5. Maurice Tanti Burlò, <i>"A Weight We Could Do Without!"</i> (1996).	Malta is shown reaching toward the EU star while being restrained by a heavy political weight symbolising the 1996 suspension of accession. Political indecision becomes a literal burden preventing progress.	Illustrates how domestic political volatility impeded early Europeanisation by framing EU alignment as a desirable trajectory obstructed by partisan conflict, emphasising Malta's internal rather than external obstacles.
Cartoon 6. Maurice Tanti Burlò, <i>"Missing</i>	A hesitant Maltese figure faces a dense "European forest," plucking petals in uncertainty about EU acceptance. The scene conveys hesitancy despite renewed momentum.	Reveals a climate of insecurity and ambiguity surrounding accession by capturing the emotional dimension of Malta's early approach to Europe,

<i>the Trees for the Wood!</i> ” (1998).		highlighting the tension between aspiration and apprehension.
Cartoon 7. Maurice Tanti Burlò, “ <i>Monkey Business!</i> ” (2001).	Fenech Adami and Sant appear in a three-panel sequence echoing the “see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil” motif, each covering a different sense while holding symbols of their opposing EU visions.	Highlights how both leaders selectively ignored aspects of the accession debate, exposing the mutual incomprehension shaping the pre-referendum political landscape.

<i>The EU Referendum Campaign (2003)</i>		
Cartoon 8. Kaktus, “ <i>Segwu l-istilel u ma tiżbaljawx żgur!</i> ” (2003).	A cliff edge signalling Labour’s critique of blind optimism.	Shows how political messaging framed Europe in civilisational and moral terms, reinterpreting the referendum as a struggle between competing visions of guidance, authority, and national direction.
Cartoon 9. Kaktus, “ <i>Propoganda</i> ” (2003).	The EU “package” grows dramatically through a propaganda lens, highlighting the inflation of benefits attributed to membership.	Examines the constructed nature of political persuasion during the referendum, foregrounding the mediated, strategic amplification of Europe’s appeal.
Cartoon 10. Maurice Tanti Burlò, “ <i>Yes Please! And Never Mind the Colour!</i> ” (2003).	A smiling globe incorporates Malta within an upward-curving IVA line, contrasted with a downward LE line indicating refusal.	Highlights how the referendum was framed through a simple visual contrast between openness and decline, reducing complex choices into intuitive emotional cues.

<i>Interpreting EU Membership (2003-2004)</i>		
Cartoon 11. Maurice Tanti Burlò, “ <i>PROLAPSE</i> ” (2003)	Alfred Sant stands on a sinking ship labelled “Fred’s,” with the word <i>Partnership</i> breaking apart across the hull.	Illustrates the collapse of the Partnership proposal following the referendum, signalling a decisive shift away from alternative models of engagement with Europe.
Cartoon 12. Maurice Tanti Burlò, “ <i>Happy N-EU Year! With apologies to you</i> ”	A divine hand reaches toward Malta in a parody of the Creation of Adam, framing accession as rebirth and renewal.	Reflects early post-accession optimism and positions Europe as a transformative force within Maltese political imagination.

<i>know who!”</i> (2004)		
Cartoon 13. Mument. “ <i>Għall- għid tal-Maltin kollha</i> ” (2004).	A Delacroix-inspired allegory merges Maltese and European symbols, casting accession as collective emancipation and forward movement.	Conveys the celebratory, idealised rhetoric surrounding Malta’s formal entry into the EU by blending symbols that expresses a seamless integration of national and European identities.

<i>The Role of Hunting in Satirical Cartoons</i>		
Cartoon 14. Maurice Tanti Burlò, “ <i>BOOM!</i> ” (1993).	A hunter fires his shotgun into the night sky, with the blast forming the word “BOOM!” among the stars of the European flag.	Highlights the self-defeating nature of early resistance to Europe, using the hunting motif to suggest how instinctive opposition risked undermining Malta’s prospects of EU membership.
Cartoon 15. Kaktus, “ <i>Tifkira tal-Kaċċa u l- Insib f’Malta</i> ” (2003).	Frames EU environmental regulation as the burial of hunting traditions, using funerary symbolism to articulate loss.	Demonstrates how cultural practices became focal points of tension in the early years of membership, by underscoring anxieties about the erosion of local customs under supranational regulation.
Cartoon 16. Maurice Tanti Burlò, “ <i>It’s spring – again!</i> ” (2004).	Depicts hunters resuming activity despite EU restrictions, suggesting continuity of practice and resistance.	Highlights the persistence of local defiance and the negotiation between traditional behaviour and supranational rules.
Cartoon 17. Mark Scicluna, “ <i>A risky and unnecessary gamble</i> ” (2014).	Spring hunting derogations appear as a game of chance with high stakes, reflecting the precariousness of Malta’s position.	Shows how Malta’s attempts to navigate EU constraints carried reputational and legal by portraying regulatory ambiguity as a dangerous strategy.

<i>The Role of the Economy in Satirical Cartoons</i>		
Cartoon 18. Maurice Tanti Burlò, “ <i>Referendum ...</i> ”	A fading rainbow path toward an EU “pot of gold” expresses the idea of economic opportunity slipping away.	Captures the view that Malta’s early withdrawal from accession negotiations would result in missed economic potential.

<i>before the colour runs out!” (1998).</i>		
Cartoon 19. Kaktus, “ <i>Taxxa E.U.</i> ” (2003).	A Maltese taxpayer is crushed between domestic and EU taxes, visualising a narrative of financial suffocation.	Represents the economic fears mobilised during the referendum, communicating concern about dual burdens associated with membership.
Cartoon 20. Pepito Cartoons, “ <i>Malta EU2017</i> ” (2017).	A small Maltese figure enthusiastically dances with an elegant EU partner, representing a confident performance of Europeanism during the 2017 Presidency.	Depicts a shift from early scepticism to assured participation in European political life by capturing a phase where Malta sought to present itself as aligned, capable, and outward-looking.

<i>The Role of Migration in Satirical Cartoons</i>		
Cartoon 21. Maurice Tanti Burlò, “ <i>Doubts Very Much Like Fred’s!</i> ” (1993).	A father and son stand on a cliff marked “Malta” as the father lists an increasingly exaggerated sequence of nationalities who would supposedly inherit the island.	Exposes the inflation of pre-accession fears by exaggerating claims that EU membership would overwhelm Malta, highlighting how sovereignty concerns were framed through disproportionate cultural anxieties.
Cartoon 22. Pepito Cartoons, “ <i>Fortress Europe</i> ” (2015).	EU leaders are shown physically elevated above Alan Kurdi’s body, distracted by trivial matters.	A stark portrayal of European indifference during the migration crisis by juxtaposing humanitarian catastrophe with bureaucratic detachment to condemn policy failure.
Cartoon 23. Pepito Cartoons, “ <i>Mosque</i> ” (2015).	Presents a mosque embellished with EU flags while Maltese anxieties are voiced in exaggerated form.	Illustrates how concerns about cultural change are projected onto Europe by exposing the distortion of EU influence through fear narratives.
Cartoon 24. Mikiel Galea, “ <i>That’s Our Business</i> ” (2016).	Contrasts the rejection of vulnerable migrants with the embrace of wealthy investors under the citizenship-by-investment scheme.	Highlights selective openness within Maltese and wider European migration regimes, with the juxtaposition foregrounding the tensions between economic

		opportunism and humanitarian responsibility.
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As the table makes clear, humour in Malta is consistently drawn into partisan purposes rather than allowed to operate as an autonomous form of cultural dissent. This pattern first becomes visible in the pre-accession years, when the Labour Party drew on humour to intensify public unease about EU membership, framing integration as a potential threat to Malta's sovereignty. A similar dynamic re-emerges after 2013, when the Nationalist Party began to mobilise satirical narratives to express growing concerns about Brussels' influence and to reposition itself within Malta's evolving European story. Viewed together, these moments reveal how satire in Malta is continually pulled into the gravitational field of party politics, with meanings calibrated to the shifting ideological needs of each side. As a result, Maltese satire – unlike many European counterparts – rarely stands apart from partisan struggle; it circulates within an ecosystem that determines who can be mocked, how critique is delivered, and which narratives are permitted to take hold.

It also demonstrates that Maltese satire does not stabilise around a single narrative of Europeanisation. Rather, it moves fluidly across three principal representational modes – victimhood, enthusiasm, and strategic ambivalence – each activated by distinct historical and political pressures. This multidirectionality directly answers the first research question, *“Does Maltese satire portray Malta as a victim of EU overreach, as an enthusiastic member of the Union, or through alternative narrative frames?”* by showing that Maltese satire is neither consistently Eurosceptic nor reliably Europhile. Instead, it continues a shifting, adaptive discourse that reflects the changing imperatives of domestic politics, the evolving self-image of the Maltese state, and the intensity of public feeling at specific moments of crisis or opportunities.

The second research question, *“How has the portrayal of EU-related themes in Maltese satire evolved over time, and which historical or political events have shaped this evolution?”* is illuminated through the distinct temporal arcs that emerge across the satirical corpus. Prior to 2003, The pre-2003 Maltese cartoons are shaped not by a single emotional register but by competing satirical narratives: while one strand foregrounds existential anxiety about the implications of supranational membership, the other presents accession as an aspirational project and a safeguard of national progress. The referendum and accession years intensify this duality, producing emotionally heightened satire that seeks either to mobilise pride and

European belonging or to amplify fears around identity, sovereignty, and economic vulnerability.

In the post-accession period, satire shifts toward more bureaucratic and issue-specific critique, reflecting Malta's growing familiarity with EU regulatory structures. Yet the tone remains far from uniform: some cartoons lampoon the Union's procedural burdens, while others use EU norms as a standard against which to criticise domestic governance. From 2013 onwards, these divergences sharpen further as satire captures both Malta's pragmatic accommodation to EU structures and its moments of cynicism, revealing how "Europe" is strategically instrumentalised by both major parties to shape public sentiment.

Across these phases, satire consistently performs a mediating function, translating the abstractions of European governance into culturally resonant symbols through which Maltese audiences make sense of their political world. Whether through the smiling globe of the referendum campaign, the sinking "Partnership" ship, the grave of Maltese hunting traditions, the EU-flagged mosque, or the imagery of sweeping away migrants while selling passports, satire renders visible the tensions that define Malta's European experience: sovereignty versus interdependence, tradition versus modernity, and national pride versus supranational belonging.

What emerges, ultimately, is that satire is not peripheral to Maltese political life, but constitutive of it. It is through humour that shifts between hopefulness, accusation, irony, and sharp critique, Maltese cartoons reveal the multiple ways in which "Europe" has been imagined, resisted, embraced, and continually reinterpreted by forming an indispensable archive for understanding Malta's European story, not as a coherent linear arc but as a mosaic of evolving sentiments, contested meanings, and shifting visions of what integration entails.

5.2 Future Directions and Recommendations

The findings of this dissertation are not an endpoint, but a foundation for a broader, critically needed field of inquiry. Political cartoons represent only a single strand of a much wider satirical ecosystem, which encompasses carnival floats, theatrical parody, television sketches, satirical columns, and the fast-moving world of digital memes. By focusing on just one dimension of satire's multidirectional and constructive role in Malta's engagement with the European Union, this study reveals a significant gap within existing scholarship. It is therefore the hope of this research that this rich area of study continues to expand, so that the full complexity of satire's political work in small-state settings can be more fully understood.

Beyond the implications for further research, this dissertation also identifies several considerations that warrant the attention of policymakers and EU institutions. Satire operates as a primary register of public sentiment, and its output should be treated not simply as opinion, but as an early-warning system that reveals where public trust is fracturing or where institutional communication has failed to resonate. Therefore, to respond meaningfully, policy communication must move beyond technocratic language and engage with the emotional landscapes that satire distils such as fears of cultural loss, anxieties surrounding sovereignty, and perceptions of marginalisation or overreach.

Too, the legal environment in which satire operates across the European Union underscores the need for clearer, supranational safeguards where policymakers should work toward establishing more coherent guidelines for the protection of satirical expression as a fundamental component of democratic critique. Greater legal clarity would not only reduce the vulnerability of local artists, particularly in small, tightly interconnected media systems such as Malta's, but also strengthen the broader democratic function of humour as a space for dissent, interrogation, and public reflection.

The dissertation has positioned Maltese satire as an archive for understanding the complex, often contradictory of a small state negotiating its place in the European Union. Rather than closing the conversation, this research underscores how much remains to be explored, inviting continued attention to humour's unique capacity to reminding us that in every joke, every caricature, and every irony, a deeper political truth is always waiting to be read.

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