

**MICHAEL BRIGUGLIO**

Why Pride still matters

Twenty-two years ago, Malta's first Pride march took place in a country that had only recently begun to address LGBTIQ rights in the public sphere.

Today, Malta is widely recognised as one of the world's leading countries in this field. The contrast is striking and offers an opportunity to reflect on the significance of Pride in Maltese society.

Recent controversy surrounding comments made by newly elected PN MP Conrad Borg Manche about LGBTIQ matters, including Pride, has generated

considerable discussion. It is not the purpose of this article to interpret those remarks. Rather, I wish to consider why Pride continues to matter, even in a country that has made substantial progress in equality legislation.

Although homosexuality was decriminalised in Malta in the 1970s, the country lagged behind many European states in the field of LGBTIQ rights when it joined the European Union in 2004. One of the first reforms following EU accession was the recognition of sexual orientation as a protected ground against workplace discrimination.

The years that followed brought profound change in the field. Civil unions, marriage equality, protections against discrimination and hate crime, gender recognition legislation, and the banning of conversion practices transformed Malta's legal landscape. Such progress did not happen automatically. It resulted from the efforts of activists, civil society organisations, political leaders, policymakers, academics, and citizens who advocated for greater

equality and recognition.

Organisations such as MGRM played a pioneering role, later joined by other LGBTIQ and progressive groups and the Green Party, while support for reform gradually broadened across the political spectrum, with Labour's 2013 election victory being a key-game changer for many legislative changes.

The history of Malta Pride mirrors this wider social transformation. What began as a modest awareness-raising march in 2004 evolved into one of the Mediterranean's leading Pride celebrations. Over two decades, Pride grew in visibility, participation, and public acceptance alongside major legal and cultural reforms. Today it takes the form of a week-long programme of events in Malta and Gozo, attracting local and international participation.

From a sociological perspective, Pride forms part of a broader story of civil society and democratic participation. Social movements create spaces where previously marginalised experiences can be expressed, recog-

nised, and debated. They enable people to organise collectively, articulate concerns, and advocate for change. Malta's LGBTIQ movement is a notable example of how civil society can contribute to substantial legislative and cultural transformation through advocacy, coalition-building, dialogue, and public engagement.

Like Workers' Day celebrations, religious feasts, and commemorations organised by other civil society groups, Pride celebrates collective achievements and affirms shared identities. Where rights are absent or threatened, such events may also become sites of protest and mobilisation.

Pride also reminds us that democracy is not only about elections and institutions, important though these are. It is also about whether people can participate in public life as equals and express themselves without fear of discrimination.

At the same time, celebrating progress should not obscure ongoing challenges. Only weeks ago, a 23-year-old man was

finned by the courts for a hate-motivated assault linked to the 2023 Gozo Pride celebrations. Research likewise shows that stigma, bullying, and other negative experiences continue to affect LGBTIQ persons in Malta.

Pride itself is not beyond reflexive analysis. Legitimate questions can be raised about commercialisation, pinkwashing, and whose voices are most visible. Issues relating to class, race, disability, migration status, age, and other lived experiences also deserve attention.

Yet, precisely because Malta has made such significant progress in the field of LGBTIQ rights, Pride remains worth celebrating. It honours those who help bring about rights and recognition while encouraging us to continue building a society which strives for dignity, equality, and respect. In this sense, Pride is a celebration of democratic society itself.

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