

LANGUAGE: A METAPHOR FOR ENLARGEMENT?



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Reflecting on the history of EU enlargement, Konrad Adenauer's observation about the Union's magnetic appeal remains relevant. Despite ongoing criticism and numerous challenges, the EU has weathered multiple crises, maintained cohesion and continued to expand. The euro, often criticised for being part of a suboptimal currency area, survived both the Great Recession and the financial crisis. Although Brexit was a significant blow, the EU managed the disruption effectively. The Union also demonstrated solidarity during the COVID-19 pandemic and now stands united against aggression that threatens to return Europe to the instability of 1939, when war was wrongly accepted as a legitimate political instrument.

Europe brings to mind the mosaic floor of a Roman domus near my home – not necessarily the finest surviving example of this art, first developed by the ancient Greeks and later embraced by the Romans, but evocative nonetheless. Like that mosaic, Europe is composed of many distinct pieces: sovereign states shaped from neighbouring regions, speaking 24 official national languages and countless regional tongues and dialects. Yet, from these diverse fragments, a coherent image emerges – an intricate whole formed by the careful joining of many parts.

And what binds these parts together? As Umberto Eco insightfully remarked in 1993, 'Europe's true common language is translation'.

The story of the Maltese language in the EU serves as a powerful metaphor for the broader dynamics of European enlargement. When Malta joined the Union in 2004, Maltese gained official language status – an achievement that symbolised both recognition and responsibility. This brought increased visibility, cultural prestige and new professional opportunities, yet also revealed challenges such as a shortage of qualified linguists and the urgent need to expand technical vocabulary. Much like the enlargement process itself, the integration of Maltese into the EU institutions was not a linear path of fulfilled expectations, but a dynamic journey marked by adaptation, compromise and evolving needs. Just as each new Member State must navigate the balance between national identity and collective European goals, so too must its language find its place within a multilingual and ever-changing Union. The Maltese experience highlights that while the EU provides a framework for inclusion, the real work of integration –and innovation – often begins at home.

Each enlargement introduced new features

Historically, each phase of EU enlargement has introduced both challenges and opportunities. The first expansion helped to end the western European cleavage between the European Free Trade Association and the community and also opened new channels with developing nations in the British Commonwealth. The second supported democratic consolidation in Mediterranean Europe and also strengthened ties with Latin America and the Mediterranean basin. The third brought in key European Free Trade Association countries, enriching the Union with their traditions of environmental stewardship, peacebuilding and social welfare. The 2003 ‘big bang’ enlargement removed one of Europe’s deepest divisions, accelerating the political and economic transformation of countries once under foreign rule. The next phase aims to reintegrate the Balkans into the European fold and reinforce the Union’s eastern borders – an effort that will require a

reimagining of relationships with neighbouring states, a task that remains complex and uncertain.

A state shaped by its history and insularity

Malta occupies a unique position at the heart of the Mediterranean, located on the Union's southernmost frontier. Its history is deeply marked by centuries of foreign rule, yet a series of pivotal developments enabled the island to transcend its role as a mere strategic outpost for greater powers. Malta ultimately secured its independence, achieved full sovereignty and in 2004, joined the European Union.

The surrounding sea has long played multiple roles in Malta's history – serving as a lifeline for trade and sustenance, a protective shield and a gateway for foreign incursions. Yet, Malta's insularity often proved to be a strength, nurturing a distinctive way of life and a cultural identity shaped by a rich tapestry of external influences.

This legacy is perhaps most vividly expressed in the Maltese language – the EU's only Semitic tongue – an intricate fusion of Arabic roots and European elements introduced through centuries of conquest, settlement and commerce.

Successive periods of colonial rule brought considerable hardship to the Maltese people, yet they also created a stark divide between the ruling foreign elites – who communicated in European languages – and the broader Maltese population, which remained rooted in its native tongue. Ironically, this linguistic separation played a crucial role in preserving the Maltese language, which might not have survived the very pressures imposed by foreign rule.

Malta's EU membership: a positive experience

Malta's accession to the EU in 2004 was driven by hopes of greater connectivity, access to the single market and enhanced

security. These expectations were largely met, with the country experiencing steady economic growth between 2003 and 2024, especially after adopting the euro in 2008. Key sectors like tourism, financial services and digital industries flourished, contributing to low unemployment and rapidly rising incomes. Malta also showed great resilience during both the 2008 financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Initial concerns that EU membership would erode Malta's national identity have largely proven unfounded. The Maltese language has remained the primary means of communication, and traditional cultural expressions – such as the vibrant summer festas – have not only withstood the test of time, but flourished, gaining new life through the interest of visiting tourists. However, the country now faces a different set of challenges. Driven by rapid economic growth and labour shortages, Malta has experienced a dramatic demographic shift: the foreign population rose from 5.5 % in 2012 to 29.4 % by the end of 2024. This transformation has placed significant pressure on infrastructure, housing and public services, highlighting the complex and ever-evolving nature of integration within a small EU Member State.

Much of Malta's growth came from sectors outside direct EU regulation – such as tourism, construction and consumer spending – this model is under increasing scrutiny. The tourism boom, supported by the EU's Open Skies agreement, has brought both economic benefits and environmental pressures, keeping in mind that the Mediterranean region is already facing water stress and climate vulnerability.

Looking to the future, Malta – like every other state – faces the critical challenge of transitioning towards a more sustainable, knowledge-driven economy. Strategic investment in renewable energy and innovation could not only address pressing environmental concerns, but also secure long-term economic resilience. Yet, progress in adopting renewables remains slow, and Malta's future, much like that of other nations, is increasingly tied to the global community's ability to combat climate change. In this context, EU membership plays a pivotal role – providing access to funding, expertise and

policy frameworks that support Malta's green transformation. Moreover, the EU acts as a powerful force in global climate negotiations, a role far beyond the reach of a small state like Malta on its own, allowing it to contribute meaningfully to global solutions through collective European action.

Broader societal transformations

EU membership has brought meaningful – though often understated – improvements to life in Malta. The adoption of new laws and standards in areas such as environmental protection, consumer rights, public health and workplace safety has contributed to a higher overall quality of life. However, the benefits of these reforms have been uneven, with inconsistent enforcement limiting their full impact. Strengthening the rule of law remains one of Malta's most pressing challenges. Equally important is the need to address long-standing issues in transport and urban mobility, which continue to affect daily life and economic efficiency.

Maltese society has become more open and dynamic. Civil society and the media – especially non-governmental organisations – have grown more vocal, enhancing democratic accountability and transparency. While not without their flaws, these shifts mark real progress. **Democracy remains like a sketch waiting for its final brushstrokes.**

For small states like Malta, EU membership and the adoption of the *acquis communautaire* can be a powerful driver of reform – a process known as 'Europeanisation'. Yet, lasting change depends on domestic commitment and the willingness to modernise outdated systems.

The EU's institutional framework can help safeguard the voice and identity of small states, but only if supported by robust domestic policies. The story of the Maltese language within the EU illustrates this balance. As the Union's only official Semitic language, Maltese has made initial gains, symbolising how small nations can profit while contributing meaningfully to Europe's collective identity, but longer-term challenges still persist.

Yet, this cultural vitality is not guaranteed. Without continued investment in language, education and cultural preservation, even long-standing traditions remain vulnerable.

Language in Malta's EU membership debate

Language played a central role in Malta's EU membership debate, which spanned over a decade – from the initial application in 1990 to the referendum in 2003. While opinions were voiced in both Maltese, the national language, and English, the second official language, the bulk of public discourse – in the media, on the streets, in shops and workplaces – took place in Maltese. Translation, whether precise or flawed, had a significant influence on shaping public understanding and ultimately the outcome of the referendum. It helped ensure that voters were able to make informed decisions in a linguistically accessible environment.

Maltese has developed into a distinct and autonomous language over the centuries, by absorbing vocabulary and concepts from the languages of European powers that ruled the islands, as well as from immigrant communities. The rise of mass media and the internet in the 1990s further influenced its evolution, as it did with many other national languages. Historically, Malta's insularity provided a buffer that allowed the language to develop independently. However, today it must contend with stronger linguistic and cultural currents from the EU and beyond.

During the EU accession negotiations, Malta insisted that Maltese be recognised as an official EU language – a move seen as essential to preserving national identity. The Maltese people would likely have rejected any agreement that did not include this recognition. As a result, Maltese was formally included in the Accession Treaty, which mandated the translation into Maltese of all EU legislation for publication in a dedicated edition of the Official Journal.

Although translation efforts began late and were initially hampered by a shortage of qualified personnel – a common challenge for small states – the inclusion of Maltese as an official EU language brought substantial benefits. As noted by my colleague Mark Harwood, one major advantage was the allocation of EU resources to support Maltese translation services. This not only elevated the status of the language, but also required it to expand and adapt by incorporating EU terminology related to law, treaties and policy – further enriching its vocabulary and functional scope. However, national demographic shifts present existential threats that require urgent attention.

Language: A metaphor for enlargement

The evolution of the Maltese language within the EU mirrors the broader journey of integration experienced by new Member States. Its designation as one of the EU's 24 official languages brought not only symbolic recognition, but also practical demands – spurring the creation of new roles in both translation and interpretation, and prompting institutions like the University of Malta to respond with specialised training programmes. These shifts, supported by EU language policy and digital tools, have helped bolster Maltese against the threat of digital marginalisation – a challenge faced by many lesser-spoken European languages. In this way, the trajectory of Maltese reflects the dual nature of EU enlargement: a process that offers visibility and opportunity, while also requiring swift adaptation and national initiative.

Yet challenges persist. Limited demand for Maltese translations in EU institutions and a shortage of qualified professionals have led to repeated extensions of a derogation on its use in the European Parliament. Domestically, while the 2005 Maltese Language Act reinforced its legal status, legal recognition alone is not enough. In a bilingual society where English dominates both public administration and the private sector, Maltese risks marginalisation – especially as younger generations show declining interest in Maltese (as well as foreign languages) and

Malta's increasingly diverse population leans towards English as a common tongue for all.

This linguistic journey mirrors the broader dynamics of EU enlargement: symbolic gains often accompanied by complex, evolving realities. It highlights the fact that integration is not a one-time achievement but a continuous process demanding adaptability, sustained investment and long-term vision. It must be observed and nurtured with care. The European Union itself is a living, evolving polity, constantly being reshaped by both anticipated developments and unforeseen challenges. As Heraclitus of Ephesus wisely noted, 'you cannot step into the same river twice'. Likewise, the EU is never static, and its transformation affects all Member States. Any advantage a new Member State secures upon joining should be viewed as potentially temporary in nature, reinforcing the need for strategic foresight over short-term political gains.

In many Member States, political decisions are made in short bursts, while societal development unfolds over decades. Malta's experience – whether in economic growth, cultural preservation or language policy – demonstrates the value of sustained planning in maximising the benefits of EU membership. The story of the Maltese language reminds us that progress is not linear. It must be nurtured, protected and reimagined in the face of change.