



# **THE IMPACT OF VALLETTA 2018 ON THE EUROPEAN IDENTITY OF THE MALTESE POPULATION**

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# INTRODUCTION

In October 2012, Valletta was selected to be the 2018 European Capital of Culture (ECoC). Participation of Maltese and European citizens was considered to be an integral goal of the initiative and, to this end, the Cultural Programme that envisaged considerable community and outreach components all around the Maltese Islands. The European dimension is also a key aspect of the European Capital of Culture (ECoC) programme. ECoC programmes aim to foster cooperation between cultural operators, artists and cities from different Member States, to highlight the richness of cultural diversity in Europe and to bring the common aspects of European cultures to the fore (European Parliament, 2006). However, while the development of a European (cultural) identity is a goal of ECoC programmes, there are few studies which provide evidence of this. Consistent, accessible and comparable research and evaluation directly linked to culture is one of the requirements of hosting an ECoC (Garcia and Cox, 2013). In light of this, the present study examines the extent to which European identity in Malta may have been affected by the Valletta 2018 ECoC programme, to what extent, and among what segments of the population.

# METHODOLOGY

This study of the impact of Valletta 2018 on the European identity of the Maltese society a mixed-method approach combining quantitative and qualitative methods and covering a four year period (2015-2018).

The study tests three hypotheses:

**H1.** The impact of Valletta 2018 on the European-ness of Malta's society is conditional on the definition or dimensions of European-ness: affective dimensions are least likely to change compared to more utilitarian notions of identity;

**H2.** Participation and involvement in ECoC activities should reinforce the impact of Valletta 2018 on the European-ness of Malta's society;

**H3.** The impact of Valletta 2018 on the European-ness of Malta's society is influenced by controls and demographics.

During the first year of the study (2015), extensive desktop research was undertaken with a view to determining the baseline scenario on various definitions of European identity, cultural participation and Valletta 2018 exposure, together with data on several socio-economic descriptors of people in Malta. During the second year of the study a large-scale cross-sectional survey was undertaken, employing computer assisted telephone interviews (CATI) on individuals aged over 18 years residing in private households. The survey returned 850 responses and revealed interesting behavioural patterns in cultural attendance and participation that echo the findings of the Malta Cultural Participation Survey. A second large-scale survey will be carried out in 2018 to yield a panel of observations. Given the complexity of the notion of European Identity, research in 2017 and 2018 employs focus group methodology (while that in 2016 and 2018 employs a survey). The present report details the findings of the focus group sessions for the year 2017.

## Focus Groups

In October 2017 (year 3 of the project), focus group sessions were carried out to obtain qualitative insights into the relationship between cultural participation and European identity. Other focus groups sessions will be carried in 2018 (year 4 of the project). The participants were divided in two groups of 6-7 persons. One session was conducted in English and the other in Maltese. The sessions were organised in the following manner:

- 1) Participants were first shown the list of questions used in the survey carried out in 2016 on a representative sample of the Maltese population, and asked to provide comment. The objective was twofold: to familiarise participants with the if, how, and why of the topic of the discussion, and to obtain additional feedback on the questionnaire used for the quantitative component of the study.
- 2) A semi-structured discussion followed, which took the form of a typical focus group. The discussion revolved around the three questions at the core of the study:
  - a. Do you feel European? What does it mean to be European?
  - b. Are you involved in (informed of, actually participate, intend to participate to) Valletta ECoC?
  - c. Does Valletta as the ECoC make you feel European?

### **Composition of the group**

The group was as indicated above subdivided into two focus groups, which were composed in a way to ensure representation to the following:

- Male-female
- Old-young
- High-low exposure to ECoC
- High-low engagement in society, EU
- High-low education
- Malta-Gozo
- Church-non church
- Artist-non artist
- Valletta - non Valletta
- Married - single
- With young children – without

# FINDINGS

The sessions started by handing out the survey questions, which participants read and commented upon. This also served as an introduction to the second part of the focus group sessions.

## Focus Groups Discussions

The key concepts that emerged on the question of Europeanness and Europe were: "familiarity", "feeling more European when travelling beyond Europe", "no affinity to the concept of nationality" and "feeling Maltese did not exclude one to feeling European".

## Do you feel European?

Feeling European is linked (if in complex forms) to feeling Maltese, and the answers given reflected this connection too, showing how these two concepts live side-by-side.

There were mixed reactions to this question among participants in the English-speaking group. Some showed sentiments of feeling proud to be European or embracing the concept of "Europeanness". This type of response was given by those more exposed through travelling and working or meeting foreigners in Malta. These people also tended to feel comfortable and even proud to be Maltese.

On the other hand, three participants in the English-speaking group expressed reservations about feeling European or feeling Maltese:

"I have sort of mixed feelings ... sometimes I feel that I do not belong in this [Maltese] community ... it depends on the issues ... in respect to the environment, sometimes I am not very proud. But on other issues I feel that I may belong."

Another participant also expressed frustration about environmental issues in Malta, while also stating:

"sometimes I feel neither Maltese or European ... I feel that often we say that we feel European, just to remove our North African and Mediterranean legacy."

She stated that she felt more akin with people sharing the climatic region rather than a politically-defined area. The third participant stated that she was also a bit "confused with the concept of feeling Maltese or feeling European: "I do not know what that means ... I just tend to feel 'me'". She elaborated on this topic by saying that she was unsure about the concept of "being Maltese":

"And if I don't know, on that level, then I do not even know what it means on a European level."

On the other hand, the other four participants were comfortable with feeling European and Maltese at the same time. One participant commented:

"I do feel very strongly about being European, but I think there is also a certain pride about our nationality. But I do feel a strong sense of European[ness], mainly I think because of this bond with [European] friends that I have."

Another participant stated that, "yes I do feel European, because I feel a very big sense of pride and belonging, that I am a European citizen".

Another participant referred to the experience of travelling:

“even when you travel abroad, I mean, you do find similarities [...] but I do feel pride in being Maltese, but also part of Europe”.

Similarly, another participant commented:

“I definitely feel European since I was a child ... I trained in Italy and London, so there is always this loose connection to most European countries anyway”.

The sentiment of familiarity with Europe was echoed in the Maltese-speaking group, when some expressed the notion that if they ever considered working outside of Malta, Europe would be the immediate choice. The reason was that one was aware of one’s rights as an EU citizen and that “you have less hassle” (*għandek anqas ‘hassle’*):

“there are many who have done this, people come to Malta and Maltese go abroad and so it is normal” (*hawn hafna nies li għamluha din, jiġu nies jaħdmu Malta, u Maltin marru barra. Allura hija haġa normali*).

However, the same participants who expressed these sentiments took the notion of familiarity a step further. Whereas, similar to the English-speaking group, they associated European-ness with concepts of “way of life”, “customs” and “one feels more at home” (*għax tħossok komda*), they attached the idea of Europe to the notion of safety. They expressed unease, if not outright fear, of finding themselves in unfamiliar (non-European) cultures “trid toqgħod attentu” (*one needs to be careful*) and therefore choosing to travel only in Europe. Conversely, the men in the same Maltese-speaking group did not agree with this: “for me, part of the enrichment of life is to discover new cultures”.

When participants to the Maltese-speaking group were asked specifically “what is the difference between being Maltese or European?” the reaction was similar to the participants of the English-speaking group who had felt positively inclined to feel both Maltese and European. One remarked very explicitly, “I do not see why we have to choose. I am Maltese and European in the EU.”

On the other hand there was the feeling that, “every European can feel European, but only Maltese can feel Maltese.”

Comments from some of the English-speaking group related to feeling proud to be Maltese and also proud to be part of EU, of a bigger entity. It felt good to go abroad and know that people in other EU countries were more aware about Malta now.

### **Do you feel Maltese?**

When asked specifically whether they felt Maltese, almost all participants in both groups agreed that they do, primarily, feel Maltese, “in my core I feel Maltese, and then European”. However, as indicated above, a few participants had some reservations about this. Three participants (one from the Maltese-speaking group and two from the English-speaking group) stated that sometimes they felt that they could not be associated with being Maltese and possibly felt more European than Maltese, when something that went against their values, occurred on a National level. This made them feel that they did not want to

associate themselves with being Maltese. In addition, two participants in the English-speaking group stated that day-to-day, they did not feel any affinity with the concept of nationality and even admitted their confusion with the concept of feeling Maltese or feeling European. One participant stated that she felt “‘without nation’, sometimes I am part of the world, a citizen of the world”.

On the other hand, some people in the Maltese-speaking group who had travelled beyond Europe, stated that when they encountered “non-European” characteristics of a host country, this made them more conscious of their own origins, including being European. It feels as though people need to be out of Europe in order to become conscious of their own “Europeanness”:

“I mean I went to North Africa [...] I did not feel part of it. Because I had left Europe.”

Also, when travelling beyond Europe these people tended to present themselves as coming from Europe, because it made explaining one’s provenance easier due to the fact that Malta may not be well-known outside Europe.

### **Involvement with Valletta 2018**

Only one person in the Maltese-speaking group already knows she will be involved as a participant in Valletta 2018, taking part in the reading sessions that form part of the ECoC programme. On the other hand, two people in the English-speaking group were engaged in some activity. One had just published a book and would also be organising an exhibition. Another was anticipating assisting an organisation with a number of activities. The latter also stated that her school had received information about dance opportunities for students, but on the other hand the school calendars were very full, so it was difficult, for students to participate.

In terms of participating as audiences or attendees to events, there were participants who had already identified one or two events in next year’s programme. This was mainly because some events were already established (like Notte Bianca) or they knew people associated with a particular project, that is, they knew by word of mouth. Three participants were aware of and had visited the website of Valletta 2018 and one had downloaded the programme. Others were not aware that the programme was already online or that events pegged to Valletta 2018 were taking place in 2017. On the other hand, there was a general awareness that numerous events were planned and the attitude of almost all participants was that they would hear or look up particular events as the time drew near. In fact the general feeling was that it was now a bit too early to decide what activities to attend and how much they would participate even as attendees. One person in the English-speaking group, in emphasising a preference for spontaneity, drew parallels to the Fringe Festival (Edinburgh) by stating “I’ve been to the Fringe Festival. I didn’t plan anything.”

On the other hand, one participant in the same group stated that the advertisements or coverage on television was becoming a bit too intrusive. Conversely, another stated that advertisements on the internet were “not in your face.” In the Maltese-speaking group, one person stated that the crowds would keep him away, together with the problems of transport or parking. Indeed, there was agreement within this group that most events in Malta are well-organised, but the organisation did not take into consideration the logistics of dealing with massive attendance.

### **The impact of Valletta 2018, including on European-ness**

The discourse fell on the question of legacy and on feeling European.

There was an across the board discussion in both groups on the legacy that Valletta 2018 would leave on Malta. One participant in the English-speaking group insisted that more attention should be given to this issue. It was important to go beyond the organisation of events. For instance, he stated that although many artists were being given the space and opportunity to exhibit their art for the first time on a national platform, authorities should also consider taking steps to set up an institution to assist artists beyond 2018. Perhaps because the focus groups took place in a public library, one participant in the Maltese-speaking group noted that, "Valletta, as a European City (sic) of Culture does not have a proper public library".

This statement suggests that one of the many buildings in Valletta could be refurbished into a public library that would serve the community beyond 2018. This prompted other participants in this group to talk about buildings and their restoration currently taking place in Valletta. If this restoration were to continue, this could be one of the legacies of Valletta 2018.

The other impact of Valletta 2018 was commercial and social. In both groups, it was noted that many catering businesses had cropped up in anticipation of 2018 and that the general climate for business was clearly good. Another participant in the Maltese-speaking group stated that the value of property was going up for owners. However, as one of the participants in the English-speaking group commented, there was a dark side to this. The gentrification of Valletta was having a less than positive impact on people who eventually would be unable to afford higher rent.

The general consensus within the Maltese-speaking group was that Malta would enjoy a better reputation as a country on a European level, "we will be taken much more seriously now", as long as things are executed well. Most participants in this group shared a common confidence that Valletta would rise to the occasion.

When asked whether having Valletta as a ECoC would make people feel more European, one participant stated that this is a "one million dollar question". Another participant stated that it would make people feel proud to be Maltese and European:

"we never thought about ourselves as Europeans. In the sense that as the others said, we are Maltese, who ... are proud that at least this little island will be known for something done at a certain level."

Another person stated that the fact that Valletta was chosen to be an ECoC, made him feel "proud to be Maltese, recognised by Europe". There was also the idea that having your capital city declared ECoC was proof that Malta was European:

"when I think about Valletta 2018, increasingly, I think that it makes me feel that, listen, we are really European, not just Maltese."

There were concerns among the Maltese-speaking group that once the ECoC programme ended in 2018 things would come to an end. There was consensus that activities should continue on a yearly basis, beyond 2018, even to establish Malta as a global cultural attraction.

When asked whether it made any difference if instead of the “European Capital of Culture, it was simply the Valletta Capital of Culture”? The Maltese-speaking group felt that this was an added feather on one’s cap to have the word “European”. While one participant pointed out that there was the feeling of being part of a European community, since this happened every year, so that Valletta was now part of the legacy of European cities of culture. Another person in the same group stated that without the word, “European”, the bond between Malta and Europe itself would diminish. It will still be there, but it wouldn’t be that strong”.

The response within the English-speaking group was that having the word “European” would make the organisers more accountable and “an obligation to deliver”. There was also a comment that having “European” in the title would make people take the issue more seriously. On the other hand, another participant in the same group voiced her concerns about funds being used simply to showcase a programme of events, and again questioned the social and economic impact on poverty in Valletta.

As indicated above, another point that emerged within the English-speaking group was that artists and artisans, who previously would not have been able to expose their work, will now be given that opportunity. There was a desire that the ‘true’ Maltese identity would come to be accepted on a European level and that certain traditions that are no longer popular would be revived, ideally through exposure during the coming year.

Towards the end of the session with the Maltese-speaking group, there was an intriguing reaction in relation to the other ECoC 2018, Leeuwarden. There was some disenchantment at the news that another city would be an ECoC in 2018. Most were deeply surprised, and asked why there were not more references to this in the Valletta 2018 promotion or programme. Some participants even questioned whether this would go against the spirit of collaboration between the EU states. Some argued that there should have been more references to the ‘other capital’, and combined activities could have been planned,

“How can we go to represent Europe, if there are no attempts made to interact with the other city? [...] Even though there are borders between countries and a sea that separates us, but at the end of the day there is a connection”.

Other comments also reflected that people are not sufficiently aware that the ECoC is a yearly occurrence and that this is not an exclusive recognition for Valletta.

And yet, there was no question that having Valletta 2018 would have a positive impact on whether people would feel more European.

# CONCLUSIONS & WAY FORWARD

The focus group sessions provided a more in-depth insight as to feelings relating to being Maltese, being European and how these concepts live side-by-side. It revealed that questions of nationality or belonging were complex issues.

There was consensus within the Maltese-speaking group that European culture has already greatly influenced Maltese culture, which in turn has maintained its own distinctive characteristics. Although people did not seem fully informed about the Valletta 2018 programme, the general feeling was that the information would be there when they need it, and that participation will follow.

Valletta 2018 was perceived to be a good thing. Participants shared the feeling that the Maltese will end up being proud of the event, and thus of being Maltese and forming part of the EU. On the other hand, there was some scepticism as to what will happen beyond 2018, and what will be the legacy of Valletta 2018. Although there were some concerns that few events will survive the programme, both groups expressed the hope that some positive effects of the ECoC, such as the continual restoration of Valletta buildings, will prevail and that structures will be set to enable the cultural community to expand beyond what it is today.

A key finding of the focus groups is that Maltese and European identities do not seem to compete with each other. Quite the opposite, the identification with Europe is likely to be a companion to a strong Maltese identity. There is no evidence of a trade-off between national and European identities, identities at different levels rather seem to reinforce each other. This emerged from discussions in both focus groups, and interestingly it was also a key finding of the quantitative study carried out in 2016.

While the qualitative study was not meant to measure identity, clearly little or no voice against European identification was heard in either group. For some respondents, this may have been a result of some kind of willingness to satisfy the perceived expectations of other focus group participants and the interviewers, rather than fully disclosing their own preferences. Future qualitative and quantitative rounds of this study will look further into this.

Asked about the likely impact of Valletta 2018 on the European identity of themselves and of the society at large, focus group participants understandably responded that this is something that can only be assessed ex post. However, there was consensus in the groups that a successful programme will reinforce the feeling of pride for being 'Maltese in Europe'. There was also generalised agreement on the positive impact on business, commerce and value of property. In contrast, some concerns were raised on the capacity to exploit the legacy of the event and make the benefits permanent.

In general, the study confirmed that identity is perceived as a complex notion. Participants are willing and able to discuss their identities, but they find it more complicated to define what identity actually is. Identity is better grasped than understood, which confirms the importance of complementing quantitative studies with insights from in-depth, qualitative discussions. While the former can provide robust evidence and permit systematic comparison, the latter complements them with essential context and texture.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

The studies presented throughout the report allow us trace some of the cultural and social impacts of Valletta 2018 through an understanding of the development of the Valletta 2018 Cultural Programme itself, subsequently viewed through the lens of cultural participation and institutional trust.

With the launch of the Cultural Programme at the end of 2017, the full breadth of the programme was publicly revealed for the first time. The increased emphasis on the programme's international dimension – a point highlighted within previous iterations of this research – was ever more prominent, as was the ongoing focus on various other strands of activity, including community, visual arts, and children.

Participation within various forms of cultural activities has been relatively stable over the past years, although knowledge of the European Capital of Culture title has experienced a significant increase. Likewise, appreciation of Valletta, its cultural offer and the changes taking place within the city has remained high and increased further over the past 12 months.

The theme of cultural vibrancy is also to be viewed through the perspective of other issues, aside from participation to cultural activities. Foremost amongst these is the concept of identity and belonging, particularly within the context of a European-wide project such as the European Capital of Culture title. The study presented within this report explores these concepts in great detail, eliciting complex reactions to the ways in which people view attachment and interpret their own identities.