Malta took the helm of the European Union (EU) at a time when Europe was buckling under the weight of a refugee crisis, experiencing a slow economic recovery in the face of austerity, facing rising populism, witnessing a weakening of the transatlantic alliance, and nervously attesting political fragmentation. These combined factors have placed significant pressure on the structures of the EU; and policymakers in the West may be finding themselves unable to cope with unfolding events. Yet, the overarching message of the book is that, despite the intrinsic limitations of being a small state, Malta “managed the Presidency with robustness, meeting many of its targets, brokering compromise amongst the member states and in negotiations with the European Parliament, as well as utilising its limited human and financial resources to their maximum capacity” (p. 6).

Malta’s EU Presidency is edited by three stalwarts of the Institute of European Studies at the University of Malta: Mark Harwood, Stefano Moncada and Roderick Pace. It is a timely and succinct overview of the priorities set and actions taken during the Maltese EU Presidency over the course of the first half of 2017. The chapters are very short, and if readers are seeking a blow by blow account of every decision and action taken by the Presidency, then this is not the book to consult. What this book offers, however, is a thoughtfully curated selection of brief, yet insightful, analytic essays contending with the major priorities of the Maltese Presidency. The selection of these specific issues highlights the cultural and historical factors integral to determining national security priorities. At the same time, the book consistently places these in the context of wider geopolitical concerns.

Despite having limited human capital and financial resources in comparison with larger counterparts in the EU, Malta’s successful navigation of the Presidency was (at least in part) attributable to the high competence, energy and dedication of the ‘human factor’ of the Maltese Presidency (p. 101). Shorter chains of decision-making and heightened personalism are small state qualities which make coordination fast and flexible. Policymakers and political leadership took on the challenge with a clear understanding of how the EU operates and were able to identify key objectives and allocate the necessary resources; multi-functionalism was demonstrated as an asset of Malta’s diplomatic corps, as opposed to the situation in many large states where the right hand may not know what the left hand is doing.

Each book chapter tackles one of Malta’s priorities for the Presidency and assesses actions taken, processes of deliberation, consultation and negotiation, and overall performance in each area. The breadth of subjects and issues outlined demonstrates the magnitude of the task that lay ahead when Malta assumed the Presidency; yet, in its annual Presidential assessment, Politico concluded in its June 2017 issue that “the EU’s smallest country has won praise for its diplomatic prowess”.

This is good news and a testament to the efforts of the Maltese diplomatic corps. It flies in the face of the misconception that materially weaker nations cannot provide leadership in the pursuit of political objectives. Indeed, the study of international security has long been rooted in individualist and materialist understandings of the world: actors hold fixed interests, and structure constrains their behaviour, as determined by geography, technology and instruments of power. Yet, the proliferation of multilateral institutions may have inhibited the traditional,
neorealist comparative advantage enjoyed by big powers, and altered our understanding of the international order. There are normative and psychological constraints on the use of military power as an instrument of national power; instead, a different power currency – status and reputation – allows states to exert greater influence than their population or resource capacity would suggest. This book positions Malta as a prime case study of this notion in practice.

Status does not exist in isolation, however: it is relational and dependent on the recognition of external players. Unlike material capability, it is not fixed and able to be enhanced or lost by engagement with the international society. Although changes to the Lisbon Treaty have reduced its political influence, leaving international responsibilities largely in the hands of the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and the European Council, the EU Presidency is not just a ‘technical’ exercise with low stakes, Harwood argues that failure to deliver may “undermine the country’s reputation amongst its peers” (p. 2).

Malta’s diplomatic success, however, has been overshadowed by domestic tragedy that has cast a dark shadow on Malta’s priorities further afield. The book mentions “a surprise national election on 3 June 2017” (p. 3) during the last month of the Presidency, but refrains from any mention of the circumstances that led to this chain of events: allegations of systemic corruption that plagued the Maltese government, largely stemming from the pen of journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia. All eyes were on Malta when, four months after the Presidency drew to a close, Mrs Caruana Galizia was assassinated by a car bomb. This has led to an international outcry across the European Union, in favour of free speech, justice and the rule of law.

On 21 October, 2017, the New York Times claimed that the “[b]rutal killing of journalist [Caruana Galizia] exposes ‘something darker’ in Malta”. By 11 September, 2018, the headlines of Bloomberg Businessweek read “Why the EU is furious with Malta”. And, on 23 April, 2018, The Guardian had lamented of Prime Minister Joseph Muscat – touted as a potential successor to Donald Tusk – that his “hopes of securing high office in Europe appear to be in tatters”, despite an inquiry ruling that his family had no links to an alleged company in Panama.

If status is a power currency for small states in the international system, Malta must take serious steps to shore up its reputational assets. As argued by various authors in this book, Malta is pursuing a ‘smart state’ strategy of serving as an honest broker in the Mediterranean. Therefore, it must strive to restore credibility to this foreign policy. A strategy founded on trust and honesty abroad will falter if, locally, there is a lack of faith in the justice system whilst the masterminds behind the assassination remain at large. Malta must leverage its booming economy and demonstrate its renewed commitment to upholding the values of good governance enshrined in the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights; otherwise, it could find that its diplomatic and negotiating success during the EU Presidency will continue to be undermined and overshadowed by the darker events of 2017.

*Hillary Briffa*
*Kings College London, UK*
*hillary.briffa@kcl.ac.uk*