

Gozo and the EU:

Negotiations on regional policy

Under the EU's regional policy, different regions are given a specific classification which then helps them qualify for different categories of assistance depending on their needs, especially their economic needs. As an entire country, Malta and Gozo are likely to qualify under the classification known as "Objective One" which attracts the highest level of assistance. Therefore, the argument can be put forward that, whichever way, both Malta and Gozo will be in "Objective One".

But it would be wrong to stop there. The fact that Malta and Gozo are still below a certain level of economic development when compared to EU levels does not make them the same. They are still different. And they should still be treated so. In particular, there are issues that are specific to Gozo but not necessarily an issue for Malta. For instance, passenger transport is a daily concern for Gozitans who need to travel to work using a ferry. Not the same for Maltese residents. Equally, transport of goods is another problem where Gozitans face higher transport costs to buy their needs, from basic necessities to luxury goods. Again, not the same for Malta.

The same may be said with respect to agriculture, tourism, export of manufactured goods, small enterprises and a host of other issues. There are a number of issues which merit consideration because they affect Gozo in a different manner than they do the Maltese. And the point is that these issues need to be tackled both at a national level as well as in the context of EU negotiations, whenever the need to distinguish between Malta and Gozo comes up. The message must be transmitted to the EU that in negotiating with Malta, the EU may well be negotiating with the smallest candidate country but it is still negotiating with a country that is not homogeneous in all matters. Gozo is a case in point.

To be sure, the EU is beginning to recognise the specific concerns of islands such as Gozo and is beginning to develop ideas, perhaps soon a policy, on what are known as "island regions", being islands that do not host a capital city of a member state. Clearly, Gozo automatically qualifies to be considered as one such "island region" and this should help it benefit from a greater focus on the issues that are of specific concern to "island

regions". The EU is finding that "island regions" share a number of problems and concerns that need serious and specific attention..." (Extract from the editorial that appeared in *Crossroads* of December.

As part of the negotiating process, the Maltese Government has commissioned a report on the special needs for the island of Gozo. The report is to be ready in the first quarter of 2002. The aim of the report is to identify the economic, social and cultural constraints of Gozo and how these can be addressed throughout the accession negotiations with the EU.

In its negotiating position on regional policy the Maltese Government has already provided the EU with information on how Gozo will be administered after accession. In particular, Malta submitted a request to be considered as divided into three regions for the purposes of the EU's regional policy: Malta Majjistral, Malta Xlokk and Gozo (including the island of Comino). The 68 local councils are classified at lower levels.

The Maltese Government also wrote that Gozo has always had its own administrative structure within the public service. Its elective structures were removed in 1973 and reintroduced in a different format under the Local Councils Act. In 1987, Gozo received greater autonomy through the introduction of a separate Ministry responsible for co-ordinating the functions of Government as well as promoting the economic, social and cultural development of the Island. The Ministry administers funds provided for projects.

After EU accession the Ministry for Gozo will be responsible for the day-to-day management of funds allocated to Gozo and the implementation of programmes and projects affecting Gozo. The full text of Malta's negotiating position on regional policy can be accessed from the Internet at mic.org.mt/MALTA-EU/position_papers/chap_21.htm Photocopies are also available from MIC (telephone 2590 9192).

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