

Malta's Cultural Diplomacy

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Abstract

Cultural diplomacy is the promotion of one's culture while understanding that of others. It is more focused on building relations between communities of different countries while embracing the notion that every citizen can be the actor or recipient of cultural diplomacy. This diplomacy has been in practice in Malta for a number of centuries with a perfect example being the St John's Co-Cathedral.

Cultural diplomacy evolves with time and today, it is more focused on building cultural relations and strengthening mutual understandings rather than highlighting only the promotion of one's culture. In this regard, this paper will analyse the work done by Malta, especially during the last six years, to enhance its cultural relations such as during the CHOGM 2015, the Maltese Presidency of the Council of the European Union-2017 and Valletta - European Capital of Culture 2018. It will also serve to highlight how Malta has been instrumental in serving as a cultural hub for foreign artists to promote their work in Malta.

This paper will refer to interviews with several personalities involved in cultural diplomacy so as to provide a more in-depth analysis of the work done by the country. It will also suggest how Malta can enhance its cultural relations in a constantly changing world.

Keywords: *Malta, Identity, Cultural Diplomacy, Cultural Relations, Foreign Affairs*

Introduction

Cultural diplomacy uses culture as a means of dialogue between two or more countries. In contrast to traditional diplomacy, cultural diplomacy is more focused on building relations between people of various nationalities, thus reaching a vast array of people.

Since its independence in 1964, Malta has an active role in the international scene engaging in various bilateral relations, including numerous cultural agreements that led to the establishment of Malta's cultural diplomacy. In later years, events such as the CHOGM (2005 and 2015), the Malta's Presidency of the Council of the EU in 2017 and Valletta - European Capital of Culture in 2018, were all important platforms for Malta to promote its identity beyond its shores. Today, Malta has an important role: that of continuing the legacy of these events whilst seeking new

opportunities where to make its presence felt. While as a country, Malta is very small compared to other nations such as France and the United States of America, the island has an outpouring history and culture that strike many. Its colonial past has yielded in return historic buildings and monuments sought by tourists. It also gave the island the opportunity to use its shared history as a bridge for further diplomatic relations and economic ties. The local government also has a crucial role to play in ensuring that Malta takes advantage of these opportunities and in giving incentives and guidance to local artists to be successful internationally. In this context, one must acknowledge that Malta's resources are limited in comparison to other larger countries and thus, it is important to have a well-built strategic approach to guarantee that the country's message reaches the targeted audience. One must however be cautious not to politicise culture and to give artists the freedom to communicate without any political barriers or constraints.

The aims of this paper are to provide a detailed account of what constitutes Malta's cultural diplomacy, to assess recent cultural policies so as to identify what is being proposed by the government and to propose which measures can be improved.

Diplomacy and Culture

Diplomacy can be defined as the 'the profession, activity, or skill of managing international relations, typically by a country's representatives abroad' (Oxford Reference n.d.). Through diplomacy, countries can enhance their economic relations and strengthen their ties in other fields such as technology and culture. 'As today's world is more linked and interdependent than ever before, effective and skilful diplomacy is vital to ensure that humankind can navigate an ever-growing list of shared challenges such as climate change, pandemics, transnational terrorism and nuclear proliferation that may be our undoing if left unresolved.' Furthermore, diplomacy is not limited to states but it also embraces other actors such as international governmental and non-governmental organisations, two of which are the European Union and the United Nations (McGlinchey 2017).

Diplomacy has not been spared the effects of time. While ambassadors are still important figures for their countries, technology has enabled easier communication between them and their homeland. Moreover, nowadays, ministers or Heads of state can engage directly in communicating with other countries, in some instances even without the need of having a diplomatic representative. However, the role of the diplomatic corps remains essential as witnessed during the Covid-19 pandemic where embassies had to intervene to assist their citizens and organize repatriation.

Diplomacy is crucial especially for island states like Malta since it gives them a platform in the international arena. As a country, Malta had several important events which enabled the country to show its diplomatic expertise, one of which

was Dr Arvid Pardo's speech at the United Nations in 1967 which led to the adoption of the 1982 Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) (Ministry for Foreign Affairs and Trade Promotion, 2017a). Another important event was the Malta Summit, a meeting between the President of the United States of America George Bush and the Soviet Union leader Michael Gorbachev in 1989, that marked the end of the Cold war (British Broadcasting Corporation [BBC] 1989). Then, in 1997 Malta hosted the second Euro-Med Conference, where the country served as a leader in the continuation of the Barcelona process launched in 1995 (MEDAC – University of Malta 2020). The Barcelona process aim was to bolster relations between Europe and South Mediterranean countries, which eventually led to the establishment of the Union for the Mediterranean in 2008 (Union for the Mediterranean [UFM] 2020). Such important events are an example that every country, irrespective of its size, can be crucial in maintaining peace and stability.

Since diplomacy is centered on relationships, it cannot be separated from all that constitutes the country where the diplomat is working, including culture, defined by Joseph Nye as a 'set of values and practices that create meaning for a society' (Nye 2004, p. 11). Culture affects how we behave, think and feel; it also influences how we perceive and interact with the world (AFS-USA n.d.). It is therefore crucial for a diplomat to understand the host country's culture so as to avoid embarrassing incidents: it is not appropriate to give a Chinese a clock or watch since it is interpreted as if the person is running out of time on earth. In certain parts of South Africa, a ceremonial sword is seen as a sign of power while in Switzerland, it is interpreted as a symbol of aggression. Similarly, knives are not given as a gift in the United Kingdom as they believe that '[it] could cut through friendship' whereas in Japan, it is a symbol of suicide. Another example of different cultural meanings are flowers: while roses generally symbolise love and appreciation, the significance of their colour varies: yellow roses in France are interpreted as a sign of infidelity whereas in Mexico, they are seen as a sign of death (BBC 2015). Dining etiquette is also culturally influenced: in Egypt, it is not customary for a person to refill one's own glass but one has to wait for others to do so (Willard 2014). Culture is thus a complex phenomenon and it is vital to understand the differences that exist among various cultures in order to build a strong inter-cultural dialogue.

Cultural Diplomacy

When diplomacy and culture become entwined, they give rise to the phenomenon of Cultural Diplomacy or the 'exchange of ideas, values, traditions and other aspects of culture or identity' through which the public and private sector or society at large reinforce relations, engage in social-cultural cooperation, promote national interests and others (Institute for Cultural Diplomacy n.d.). Scholars tend to associate cultural diplomacy with soft power. Whilst the latter has several advantages over hard power,

one of its weaknesses is that results cannot be quantified. Consequently, it could take years until a country reaps its benefits. This means that cultural diplomacy cannot be considered as one-off event but is a process of relationships that nourish over the years.

While for many this may be a new approach, cultural diplomacy has been in practice locally for a number of centuries. One such example is St John's Co-Cathedral, completed by the Knights of St John in 1577, with eight chapels pertaining to different languages, mirroring the respective countries' opulence (*A Maltese Gem of Baroque Art – Explore St John's Co Cathedral Malta* n.d.). While today this magnificent cathedral serves its original function as a religious seat, it has also become a cultural centre connecting Malta to the various countries that have formed part of the historic legacy of the Knights of St John.

Professor Vicki Ann Cremona, former Ambassador of Malta to France (2005-2009) and to Tunisia (2009-2013), comments that 'in a sense, long before the 20th century, Malta was the seat of a union of European nations through various nationalities that made up the Order of St John'. As a result of these shared histories, in 2008, during the French Presidency of the Council of the European Union, an exhibition entitled *Between the Battlesword and the Cross: Masterpieces from the Armoury* was held at the Hôtel des Invalides in France (Cremona 2008). The aim of this exhibition was to portray the historical connection that exists between France and Malta, especially since eleven Grand Masters of the Order were French, among whom Jean Parisot de Valette, the founder of Malta's capital city, Valletta. The exhibition showcased several weapons and armours of the Order of St John together with a selection of fine paintings (Gonzi 2008). On this occasion, a book was published with texts both in French and English, thus providing further insight on the Order of St John, on the items exhibited and on the link that bound the two countries.

In 2015, as part of the preparations for the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) to be held in Malta during the same year, the island launched its external cultural programme. Several events were held across the Commonwealth countries such as performances by *ŻfinMalta* in India and Malaysia, recitals and a photographic exhibition in Australia to strengthen Malta's relations with these countries (Times of Malta 2015a).

Malta's Presidency of the Council of the European Union in 2017 was another important event that attracted the attention of several European countries. It was also a great opportunity for Malta to show its diplomatic prowess to the other EU Members States. During the six-month period of the presidency, Malta was not only active in continuing the work at Council level but also in promoting its identity. Whilst several activities were held in European countries such as Belgium, Germany, France, Spain, Poland, Luxembourg, Greece, Austria and the United Kingdom, others were held in Israel, Russia, Turkey, Australia, China and India (Arts Council Malta 2018).

In 2018, Valletta was chosen as the European Capital of Culture, another golden opportunity to project its image in Europe and beyond. Several events were held

in the Maltese capital and throughout the whole island giving the opportunity to foreigners to experience Malta's true identity while allowing them to participate in a number of cultural exchanges such as during the Valletta Film Festival and the Malta International Jazz Festival (Valletta 2018 Foundation 2017).

The benefit of cultural diplomacy for Malta is twofold: that of promoting its culture beyond the Maltese shores while understanding the culture of other countries. In return, foreign countries will work hard to influence and attract Maltese citizens especially youths who are eager to travel and visit the world. Everyone can be an agent of cultural diplomacy and thus, education is crucial in order to ensure that our citizens appreciate their own culture and that of other countries.

Artists and organisations

Maltese artists are important in building cultural relations, with several of them becoming successful in the international arena and two being nominated Malta's cultural ambassadors: Joseph Calleja, a widely renowned Maltese tenor, and Francis Sultana, a Gozitan interior designer living in London. Joseph Calleja has a vast repertoire and was even nominated for a Grammy award in 2011 (Recording Academy 2012). This Maltese tenor's success has in return been pivotal for the promotion of his homeland whereas Mr Sultana was instrumental for Malta's return to the Venice Biennale in 2017; he is also a member of the Malta International Contemporary Art Space (MICAS) board, a project set to open its doors in 2023 (Olson 2018).

Although some artists may not be officially promoting the Maltese identity, the fact that they are Maltese already makes them ambassadors for their country. One such example is Emma Muscat whose career took a turn when she participated in the Italian television programme *Amici* in 2018. Since then, she has never looked back and today, she is well renowned in Italy. While Emma's songs are mainly in Italian, the fact that she is Maltese, has a Maltese surname and some of her music videos are filmed in Malta, indirectly helps in the promotion of her country.

Artistic creativity can take various forms, either independently, in groups or in organisations. An important actor that is perhaps neglected by the Maltese are the band clubs that play an important role in Malta's social fabric: they are not only protagonists in training new musicians but they are also instrumental in organising the festivities of the village *festa*. According to the President of the Republic of Malta Dr George Vella, band clubs have three main roles: to provide informal education in various areas such as in organisation, in administration and in music; to instill a sense of community and to keep Maltese traditions alive, 'the same traditions that make us, the Maltese people, unique' (Vella 2021a). Furthermore, several Maltese band clubs have direct contact with other foreign band clubs and they showcase their work abroad. This is a true example of cultural relations at its best since citizens engage directly with another foreign country to exchange their cultural ideas.

Several musicians who started their career in a band club continued to improve their talents and occupied important national posts such as within the Malta Philharmonic Orchestra. One such example is Joseph Vella, a Maltese conductor and composer who passed away in 2018. Joseph Vella was not only the band master of La Stella Philharmonic Society, Rabat, Gozo and of Count Roger Band Club, Rabat, Malta, but he also gained international success throughout his career by performing in several countries such as Japan, the United States and a number of European countries (Joseph Vella n.d.).

Maltese identity in the fashion industry

The fashion industry is another important element in culture, with some describing clothes as 'the social skin' since they define us both as individuals and as a society (Burns 2002). While the Maltese clothing and fashion industry is limited, with the majority of products being imported, in recent years we have seen an increase in Maltese designers interested in experimenting with the Maltese identity in the fashion industry. One duo who is a pioneer in this sector is Charles and Ron, whose fashion and exhibitions are successful not only locally but also in big cities such as New York and Los Angeles. These designers select aspects from Maltese culture and turn them into fashionable clothes and bags, some of them worn by several famous artists such as Ally Brooke, Kelly Rowland and Jessie J (Charles and Ron n.d.). Another artist who gained fame both locally and internationally is Luke Azzopardi, who was awarded the 'Premio Cultura e Moda 2016' by *L'Istituto Italiano di Cultura* (Luke Azzopardi – a). He provides a fresh look on the Maltese fashion industry with some of his designs even featuring Malta's historical aspects. One of his projects includes scarfs designed in collaboration with MUŽA whilst another project was a collection for the Three Palaces Festival (Luke Azzopardi – b,c). Luke's studio has also been curating a collection of Maltese Victorian and Edwardian jewellery from the Frank Zampa's archives. Frank Zampa was established as an Italian-Maltese family run jewellery since the early 19th century and Azzopardi's aim is to transform these jewelleries into contemporary designs to be worn nowadays (Luke Azzopardi – d).

By time, other artists became even more interested in tapping into this niche, especially in the jewellery sector, limited until recently to the Maltese cross or the traditional eye found on the Maltese *luzzu*. Recently, brands like 'Mvintage' have been a catalyst in bringing a fresh look to what is defined as Maltese: their collections such as '*Maduma*', '*Habbata*', '*Ta' Pinu*' and '*Munita*', all embrace the Maltese identity in elegant jewellery that can be worn by women throughout the day and on various occasions (Mvintage n.d.). Another brand that is also exploiting the benefits of the Maltese characteristics is Carisma. Similar to Mvintage, Carisma creates jewelry that showcases Malta's iconic features but it also manufactures

bags, belts and scarves inspired by the Maltese identity (Carisma n.d.). Both local brands have been so successful that they have expanded their collection to the male sector.

In the cultural diplomacy arena, the success of these brands is of great importance for Malta because they make the islands' identity easily recognisable and accessible to foreigners in an elegant and fashionable manner.

The Maltese Language in Music

When music is accompanied by lyrics, this also impacts a nation's branding and can help in promoting a language. Countries like Italy, Spain and places in Latin American succeed in using their charming beat to entice a vast audience and give a platform to their language to travel across the globe. Their songs are constantly on the international top charts even though many do not understand the language. As John Blacking (1987) writes, 'the growing popularity of non-European music in Europe and America and of 'Western' music in the Third World, suggest[s] that the cultural barriers are somewhat illusory, externally imposed, and concerned more with verbal rationalizations and explanations of music and its associations with specific events, [rather] than with the music itself'. Up to a few years ago, songs in Maltese were either limited or unpopular amongst the population with several Maltese artists resorting to the English language since they believed that this was the passport to success. However, groups like 'The Travellers', one of the most successful modern groups in Malta, took a great leap of faith and eventually proved this theory wrong. When listening to their songs in Maltese, one can easily enjoy the use of the language together with the freshness of their music. Other Maltese groups who choose to compose their songs in Maltese are *Sterjotipi*, *Brikkuni*, *Brodu*, *Kapitlu Tlettax*, *Skald* and 'Bernie and Pod'.

The success of these bands is of huge importance to Malta's identity since it continues to add to Malta's cultural heritage while promoting the language even among foreigners. Music in Maltese can truly act as one of the cornerstones of Malta's cultural diplomacy because if we, Maltese, do not promote our language, already limited only to the island and to the Maltese diaspora, who else will?

The Maltese Film Industry

Malta is known for attracting film producers such as those of *Gladiator* (2000), *The Count of Monte Cristo* (2002), *Munich* (2005), *World War Z* (2013), *Assassin's Creed* (2016) and others (Malta Film Commission). Such productions, together with other television series, have increased the island's exposure throughout the world, especially amongst those involved in this domain. Moreover, Maltese film

producers have become interested more than ever to venture into this lucrative sector, sometimes also with feature films in Maltese.

One film that has made a name for Malta is *Simshar*, released in 2014. A fictional film inspired by true events about a fishing boat accident, it was submitted as Malta's first entry for the 87th Academy Awards for the Best International Feature Film and won several international awards, one of which being the best dramatic film at the Edmonton Awards in Canada (Times of Malta 2015b). Another film in Maltese featuring once again the fisheries sector is *Luzzu*, released in 2021, narrating the fictitious story of a struggling fisherman. The film gained numerous awards, one of which was the Sundance Film festival's Special Jury Award (2021) bestowed to the main actor, Jesmark Scicluna, a fisherman from Siġġiewi. Moreover, the film was chosen as Malta's entry in the 94th Academy Award for the Best International Feature film (Times of Malta 2021), thus marking a significant progress for Malta in this sector since in a span of few years, two films were presented at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Science.

There are several other Maltese productions that have been screened in other countries. Such productions continue to help in promoting Malta and its artists across the globe. Moreover, the fact that some of these productions were in Maltese, continues to help in making the language accessible to a larger audience beyond Maltese shores.

Maltese Diaspora

The Maltese diaspora is another important pillar in Malta's cultural diplomacy since thousands of Maltese live abroad in countries like Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, New Zealand and the United States. Moreover, since 2004 when Malta became a full member of the European Union, a good number of Maltese travelled to Belgium and Luxembourg in order to work in the various European institutions (National Cultural Policy 2011).

Mr Toni Attard, former director of strategy at Arts Council Malta from 2014 till 2017,¹ commented that when one talks about the Maltese diaspora, one has to differentiate between the Maltese community and the artists within that community. He believes that whereas with the Maltese communities, it is best to use cultural relations rather than cultural diplomacy, with regards to artists, it is important to find ways how to connect with them especially since they know the community and have contacts with whom they can then open up conversations (T Attard 2018, pers. comm. 27 March).

Hon. Dr Owen Bonnici, former minister for Culture, comments that the Maltese diaspora plays a crucial role in helping Malta 'speak louder on the international scene'.

¹ As from 2018, Toni Attard started working as director of Culture Venture, an enterprise founded by himself.

While, according to him, sometimes the first generation continues to think that Malta has remained fixed in time, he believes that the second and third generation can provide a great opportunity for Malta's cultural diplomacy (O Bonnici 2018, pers. comm. 10 May).

On the other hand, Prof. Cremona mentions the need of an independent cultural diplomacy policy. She notes that in France, there are a number of Maltese descendants who migrated from Algeria and Tunisia following the revolutions in the late 1950s. Prof. Cremona remarked that third generation Maltese onwards were no longer feeling any link with the islands because they have amalgamated with the French society. She believes that in 2004, when Malta became a full member of the European Union, the island should have used this opportunity to organise cultural productions such as concerts and exhibitions, to help them retrieve their identity. These cultural ties are important especially when one notes that amongst these people, there are businessmen and companies that can give rise to economic relationships (V Cremona 2018, pers. comm. 21 March).

The two National Cultural Policies of 2011 and 2021 state that the Maltese diaspora plays a significant role in promoting our Maltese culture. It is thus essential that we continue engaging in a constant dialogue with the Maltese living abroad, getting in touch with their needs and making them feel closer to their homeland. One good initiative was the establishment of the Council for Maltese Living Abroad that works to promote and safeguard the interest of Maltese citizens living in foreign countries. Established by Act XX of 2011 and following the recommendations of the Emigration convention held in 2010 (Ministry for Foreign Affairs and Trade Promotion 2018), the Council, chaired by the Minister for Foreign and European Affairs, is currently composed of 14 Maltese members living in several countries and two members living in Malta (Ministry for Foreign and European Affairs, n.d.). As of 2014, the Council also presents an annual report of the items discussed.

One particular item of interest is the voting rights for Maltese living abroad and the type of processes that could be set up in order to have representation in the national parliament and in the European Union without affecting the current existent mechanisms (Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2015). Another proposal discussed was that of keeping the Council informed of the activities held in Malta in order to be able to promote them amongst the Maltese diaspora (Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2016). It also explored the possibility of setting up a radio station broadcasting from Malta to the Maltese diaspora. However, this proposal was deemed unpractical and a suggestion was made to encourage existent radios to give more space to programmes dedicated to these communities beyond the Maltese shores (Ministry for Foreign Affairs and Trade Promotion 2017b). The Council also proposed subtitles in English to be included in Maltese news broadcasted in Australia on SBS TV once a week to help reach a wider range of people, especially given that the knowledge of the Maltese language is nowadays limited. While this suggestion was minuted by the Public Broadcasting Services (PBS), in 2020 the PBS announced that a decision

on this item will be taken at the opportune time (Ministry for Foreign and European Affairs 2020).

Another issue discussed is how Maltese of the second or any subsequent generation can get to know some basic information about Malta before applying for Maltese citizenship, in line with the Maltese Citizenship Act of 2007 (Community Malta Agency n.d.). It was however clarified that this cannot be obligatory and needs to be done on a voluntary basis (Ministry for Foreign Affairs and Trade Promotion 2017b). The Council also discussed the need for the Maltese diaspora to be informed of the latest changes in the Maltese language.

The National Cultural Policy 2021 has called for better synergies between the Ministries responsible for Foreign Affairs, Culture and Education ‘to rescue the Maltese language from a sure natural death among the diaspora communities’ to encourage third and fourth generations, together with non-Maltese, to learn the Maltese language. The policy also recommends the teaching of Maltese cultural aspects and the creation of artistic and cultural projects that connect more the Maltese living abroad with Malta and its citizens (National Cultural Policy 2021).

These suggestions indicate that this Council has been instrumental in providing the Maltese government with concrete proposals that reflect the needs of the Maltese diaspora. Furthermore, it is encouraging to note that the recently published National Cultural Policy 2021 takes into consideration the urgent need to promote the Maltese language amongst this Maltese community. It is important that the Maltese government continues to invest in the Maltese living abroad since it is only through them that the Maltese culture and the Maltese language can be kept alive across the globe.

Cultural Relations

Another aspect of cultural diplomacy, described by Maurits Berger (2008) as a method that focuses on ‘understanding the other by looking at the variety of ways that the other expresses itself [in]’, is the acceptance and understanding of other cultures to create meaningful interactions. In view of this, Malta has numerous activities that empower foreign artists to exhibit their work in Malta in order to strengthen its cultural ties with different countries.

In 2021, the President of the Republic of Malta launched ‘The Presidency Culture Symposia Series’, a series of meetings to explain and understand better the cultural bonds that exist between Malta and other countries. The first symposium was held on 7 May 2021 entitled ‘Malta and France: Shared Histories, New Visions’, attended by the President of the Republic of Malta, the Minister for Foreign and European Affairs Evarist Bartolo, the French Secretary of State for European Affairs, Clément Beaune, the Ambassador of the French Republic to Malta, Brigitte Curmi, the Ambassador of Malta to France, Carmelo Inguanez and other distinguished guests

(Department of Information – Office of the President 2021a). In this symposium, the aspect of shared histories was highlighted since the presence of the French in Malta dates back several centuries, particularly to the period of the Knights of St John. On the other hand, a considerable group of Maltese descendants are now present in France where they have moved as a result of the wars of independence in Algeria and Tunisia (Department of Information – Office of the President 2021b). The aim of these symposia is to explain and explore Malta's cultural ties with important actors and to foster 'dialogue and cultural exchanges between peer experts and researchers in both countries and beyond' (Department of Information – Office of the President 2021a). The other symposia scheduled will focus on other countries and organisations, especially those that occupied the island, those that provided good economic opportunities, others where the Maltese diaspora found refuge and those countries whose citizens found refuge in Malta (Vella 2021b).

Being open to other cultures also means the ability to act as a cultural hub for various foreign artists interested in displaying their creativity in the country. One such example are arts residencies that give accommodation and space to foreign artists to showcase their work. The Blitz organisation founded in 2013 is one such independent non-profit contemporary art space aiming to reach artists beyond Maltese shores. In 2015, the Blitz launched its residency programme and received around 200 applicants from cities like London, Wroclaw, Athens, Berlin, Paris, Kuwait and Istanbul (Blitz n.d.).

Spazju Kreattiv is another artistic hub, founded by the government entity Fondazzjoni Kreattività in 2000, and situated in Valletta within the St James Cavalier, a fort that dates back to the sixteenth century. *Spazju Kreattiv* serves as a creative hub for artists while offering various facilities exhibition spaces and possibilities: a cinema, a theatre in the round, an artist in residence programme and also run a number of festivals (*Spazju Kreattiv* n.d.). Whilst it is open to both locals and foreign artists, *Spazju Kreattiv*'s programme gives foreign artists a good platform to exhibit their work especially by hosting foreign film productions.

Another creative hub is the Valletta Design Cluster, a newly established cultural space that opened its doors in 2021. It is a project of the Valletta Cultural Agency and part of the legacy of the Valletta 2018 European Capital of Culture, aimed at creating a space for artistic creativity both for Maltese and foreign artists. Close to the Valletta Design Cluster, one can find two town houses that form part of this project and that can accommodate up to 11 persons. These accommodations can be utilised both as residences for foreign artists and also for other artists involved in the activities run by the Valletta Design Cluster. This place is equipped with the latest cutting technology in woodwork, metalwork, electronics and textiles in order to facilitate the artists' work together with a kitchen with a traditional Maltese oven to allow them to experience the traditional way of cooking. It also has fifteen studios, a place for co-working and a conference room. This project includes a roof garden which is another open space that can be utilised both by the artists involved in the

design cluster and also by the public at large. The Valletta Design Cluster project was instrumental to the regeneration of the old abattoir built in the 17th century and saved it from a total state of disrepair (Valletta Cultural Agency n.d.).

Several other activities organised by Malta give a platform to foreign artists such as the Valletta Film Festival, The Malta International Fireworks Festival and The Malta International Organ Festival. One new event was the Malta India Film Festival, held between the 14th and 16th December 2018, where a selection of Indian movies were shown at *Spazju Kreattiv*, St James Cavalier Valletta (Spazju Kreattiv 2018). Unfortunately, the local cinema is rather limited to either Hollywood or other western European studios, thus leaving several other foreign productions unnoticed. This festival gave the Maltese audience the opportunity to view Bollywood's blockbusters such as *Raazi*, *Sanju* and *Thugs of Hindostan* that was partly shot in Malta. In return, the festival displayed also six Maltese productions: *Kannizzati*, *Marbut*, *Hemm Dar il-Qala*, *Id-Destin*, *The Boat* and *Toxicity* that were simultaneously shown in India, thus enabling Maltese artists to access such a prestigious market (Times of Malta 2018).

Besides art residencies, there are various other platforms where foreign artists can exhibit their work in Malta, one such example being the cultural centres of their respective countries. Italy, China and Russia have their cultural centres in Malta that help in the promotion of their culture with the Italian and Chinese cultural centres being probably the two most active ones, organising activities all year round. France has the *Alliance Française de Malte-Méditerranée* that works to promote the French language and culture in Malta. The Alliance acts both as a linguistic centre and as a cultural one, organising cultural activities such as wine tasting, the annual launch of the Beaujolais wine in November and the French Film Days (Alliance Française n.d.). Another organisation is the German-Maltese circle and like the other institutions, it organises several activities such as film shows, exhibitions, lectures, concerts and others, with the aim of bringing closer the German culture to the Maltese shores. This organisation is also the only recognised centre by the Goethe Institute in Germany to hold all Goethe's examinations (German-Maltese Circle n.d.).

Furthermore, in 2021 EUNIC Malta or the European Union National Institutes for Culture that brings together a network of European cultural centres and organisations to 'bring to life European cultural collaboration in more than 100 countries worldwide with a network of 132 clusters' was launched (EUNIC n.d.). Malta's cluster currently incorporates the following partners: Arts Council Malta, the Embassy of Austria, the Italian Cultural Institute, the British Council in Malta, the Embassy of Spain, *Alliance Française de Malte-Méditerranée*, the Embassy of France, the Embassy of Poland and the Embassy of Hungary. In return, Malta is active in a number of clusters in various cities: New York, Warsaw, Brussels, Vienna, Rome, Netherlands and Tunisia (Arts Council Malta 2021).

Pandemic

The cultural sector was heavily impacted by the Covid-19 Pandemic with activities being either cancelled or postponed. The pandemic was a huge blow, especially in the organisation of cultural events that form an integral part of cultural diplomacy.

In this regard, Malta had to re-think its policies and despite the various difficulties encountered, Malta still managed to gain publicity while continuing to promote its culture in a virtual format, thanks to the Internet and to various television channels that broadcasted features on the Maltese islands. One such programme was entitled 'Wonders of Malta' aired on BBC World News, consisting of two programmes giving an overview of the history of Malta (BBC World News 2021). The French channel 'TV5Monde' also aired a similar programme 'Destination francophonie - Destination Malte' that gave a brief overview of the history of Malta (TV5Monde 2021). On the other hand, 'Españoles en el mundo' aired on the Spanish TV station RTVE, showed members of the Spanish diaspora living in Malta outlining the cultural identity of Malta: its history, places to visit, food and entertainment. Apart from a few historical inaccuracies, this programme embodies the essence of cultural relations, where Spanish people share with others their detailed knowledge of Malta's culture. The 2021 edition of this programme also made use of songs sung by Maltese artists either in Maltese or in English (RTVE 2021), bringing the viewer even closer to the island despite travel restrictions.

Way forward

The National Cultural Policy 2021, published for public consultation during the first months of the said year, continues to build on the previous cultural policy and strategies while identifying eight priorities as its foundation, amongst which that of 'Advancing International Cultural Relations'. The policy has several positive outcomes such as the creation of a joint work plan between the Ministry responsible for Culture and that of Foreign Affairs that take into account the 'EU strategic approach to international cultural relations.' It also calls for Arts Council Malta to employ an internationalisation strategy in order to set up representative offices abroad with the aim of reinforcing Malta's participation within the EUNIC clusters. The policy advocates for a stronger Cultural Diplomacy Fund in order to help Malta's embassies abroad create cultural policies and for a funding mechanism to contribute to the implementation of bilateral and multilateral agreements. Another positive measure is the mobility of artists in 'Malta, to and from, Southern Europe and Northern Africa as a two-way mobility priority, through showcasing, co-production and artist residencies'. The policy also comments on the role of the Maltese diaspora in Malta's cultural development through co-production and language learning (National Cultural Policy 2021).

Whilst all these positive measures continue to build on other cultural policies and strategies, there is always room for improvement. One suggestion is to take the proposals mentioned in the new cultural policy and create a separate cultural diplomacy policy that will help in giving the required attention to this area. This will also contribute to a more strategic approach while working to consolidate all the activities held by Maltese artists abroad. Such a policy should help create a holistic approach and give better guidance to artists on how and where they can exhibit their art. This will still allow artists to choose independently with whom to establish cultural relations while at the same time providing guidance to those who would like to find out more about the most adequate cultural hubs for their art.

Being a small island state, Malta cannot afford to carry out cultural diplomacy simultaneously across the globe, especially given the lack of funding compared to other bigger countries, so it is vital to embrace a more strategic approach such as that of the use of themes. This thematic approach will surely be beneficial to Malta to publicise a particular area such as architecture or fashion for a definite period of time. Malta also needs to invest heavily in its citizens: it cannot have a successful cultural diplomacy if Maltese citizens themselves do not appreciate it. This can be achieved by ensuring that the necessary importance to history, languages and to other artistic subjects is given in schools. Furthermore, as a country Malta needs to continue to work on its cultural identity irrespective of any political and commercial rivalry. It is only in this way that Malta can have an identity that unites its citizens and strengthens its nation branding.

Diplomacy cannot live without culture and thus, cultural diplomacy is the natural way forward in promoting a country and in establishing ties across the world. As a neutral country, Malta depends on soft power more than any other country and cultural diplomacy is crucial for it to extend its clout beyond its shores.

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