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The Framing of European Values and Malta's Membership in the European Union

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Abstract

European values are the main principles and beliefs which led to the establishment and development of the European Union. These European values have historical and cultural roots and were seen as essential to promote peace and prosperity in Europe after the end of the Second World War. These values, including democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, were influenced by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). The latter was adopted in 1948, and the European Convention of Human Rights, which was adopted in 1950. European values have been consistently promoted by the European Union and member states including Malta. Malta is the smallest member state of the European Union. For decades, the main political parties fought over whether Malta should join the European Union. One of the tools which the Nationalist Party used to legitimise its position for seeking membership was these European values. After Malta joined the European Union in 2004, it was the Labour Party which successfully framed the progressive European values to legitimise the need to safeguard civil liberties in the country. This paper will evaluate the framing of European values in Malta. It will analyse how these values were employed by the main political parties to legitimize their electoral programs. Using Eurobarometer surveys, the paper will also consider Maltese citizens' perceptions of European values and whether these perceptions have been shaped by the way political parties framed these values over the decades.

Introduction

The Treaty of Rome, signed in 1957 by six states, led to the foundation of the European Economic Community. One of the main goals for the creation of the European Union was to secure peace in Europe through economic interdependence. Across the decades, the European Union has achieved more than that. Today, it is made up of 27 members, and a leading institution within the international system. Throughout its evolution, the European Union has promoted a series of principles that are at the heart of its development. These include democracy, rule of law, stability, prosperity, and more recently, sustainability (Grant 2007). These became known as 'European values'. Still, the development of the European Union led to various challenges. These include growing Euroscepticism, the rise of far-right parties, the 2008 financial crisis, Brexit, and

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the Covid-19 pandemic amongst others. Throughout these crises, the European Union was called to promote a sense of unity and justify its development based on its values (Calligaro 2021; Polak and Rohs 2023).

Values play an important role in political systems. Values reflect identities, norms, ideas, and beliefs of societies. This means that these values can shape the conduct and behaviour of politicians and institutions. Foret and Calligaro (2022) argue that values emerge through social agreements. They hold a very important role in uniting countries that uphold similar visions and principles, both domestically and on the global stage (Polak and Rohs 2023; Chaibi 2022). European values are interesting in that they appear on the scene after WWII in a decisive manner. Up until WWII, most European countries did not respect such values – if not in their own country, then in their colonies (Debattista 2022). European values are framed by the European Union, political parties, and politicians to promote a particular issue or cause. Political framing refers to the way in which information or issues are presented in a particular manner to influence public opinion, shape perceptions, and advance a specific agenda within the realm of politics. It involves the strategic use of language, imagery, and narrative to frame a particular issue or topic in a way that promotes a particular viewpoint, ideology, or policy position (Brugman and Burgers 2018).

European values are an important tool that the main political parties in Malta have learned to use. Malta, an island at the center of the Mediterranean, had applied to join the European Union in July 1990. The decision to apply for membership was taken by the Nationalist administration headed by Fenech Adami. Still, the decision was opposed by the Labour Party as it believed that Malta should establish a partnership with the European Union whilst safeguarding the country's sovereignty and neutrality (MLP 2003). In fact, in 1996, the newly elected Labour administration headed by Prime Minister Sant suspended Malta's application. Still, with only a one seat majority, the Labour Party only managed to stay in power for two years. This meant that an early election was called in 1998. This led to the re-election of the Nationalist Party which re-activated Malta's application. Despite the substantial polarization within Maltese society regarding membership, an EU referendum was proposed which allowed the electorate to make the final decision on EU membership. The referendum yielded a positive result with 53.6 % of the Maltese voters opting for Malta to join the European Union (Pace 2004; Pace 2011).[2]

The main political parties in Malta, the Nationalist Party a centre-right party and member of the EPP group, and the Labour Party, a centre-left party and member of the S&D group, framed the European Union at different stages and for different reasons. Under the leadership of Fenech Adami, (1977-2004) the Nationalist Party promoted Malta's membership in the European Union with the party framing the European (and Christian) values including justice and solidarity to convince the voters that Malta and the EU shared similar values, and so, Malta's place should be in the European organisation. During the premierships of Duminku Mintoff (1971-1984) and Karmenu Mifsud Bonnici (1984-1987), the Labour Party was critical of the European Union and its failure to uphold its values. With the election of Sant as party leader in 1992, the party retained its Euroscepticism even though it pledged to establish a strong relationship with the European organisation. It was under the leadership of Joseph Muscat, who was elected at the helm of the party in 2008, that the Labour Party changed its stance towards the EU as part of its rebranding process. The new Labour leader not only called for Malta to make the most of its membership in

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2   The referendum was followed by the 2003 national election. In this election, the Nationalist Party gathered 51.79% of the votes whilst the Labour Party gathered 47.51% of the votes (Malta Electoral Commission, 2022).

the EU but also promoted his vision of a movement made up of individuals from various segments of society, united to safeguard the national interest. In order to achieve this, the party began to frame the progressive values of the EU, including equality, to legitimize its policies and transform the party into a guarantor of civil rights. (Cachia 2023).

This paper aims to evaluate the way European values were framed by Malta's main political parties. It will investigate how the major political parties utilized these values in their attempt to win votes and legitimise their agendas. Through the examination of speeches, manifestoes, and other literature published by the main political parties, this chapter will also take into consideration the perceptions of Maltese citizens regarding European values and assess whether the framing of these values by political parties has influenced these perceptions over the years.

The European Union and its values

Christian Democratic Parties played a significant role in establishing the European Coal and Steel Community. Notably, the EU founding fathers—Konrad Adenauer, Alcide De Gasperi, and Robert Schuman—believed in the imperative to create a new political order in Europe based on Christian values such as democracy, peace, and prosperity (Janik 2012; Hien and Wolkenstein 2021). The invocation of the Christian heritage to promote democracy, peace, and prosperity was influenced by several factors, including the concept of *Abedland* (Occident or the West) and the belief that culture could serve as a unifying factor in Europe especially against the rising threat of Communism in Eastern Europe. The notion of *Abedland* evolved to include the Protestant version, which posited that free trade and economic integration could be the solution for lasting peace in Europe (Weymans 2023; Hien and Wolkenstein 2021). The establishment of the European Coal and Steel Community unified both factors, as the founding fathers advocated for the economic integration of Western European countries to guarantee democracy, peace, and prosperity within the region.

As the EU developed, debates persist among scholars regarding the role of Christian Democratic Parties in shaping European values. According to Weymans (2023), for European Christian Democrats and Conservatives, the term human rights was not based on individual freedoms, but more based on the need for prosperity and economic trade and to establish a European legal order. This stance led Christian Democrat Parties and Conservatives to prioritize centrist values such as democracy, peace, rule of law, and liberty, while giving less attention to other left-leaning values like solidarity and equality. Nevertheless, the increasing popularity of socialist and progressive parties in the 1970s resulted in the invocation of liberal and progressive values at both national and EU levels (Duranti 2016). The amalgamation of these values, crucial for attracting both right-leaning and left-leaning Europeans, became a significant tool for the EU to connect with its citizens. References to these European values can be found in the Treaty of Amsterdam and the 2000 Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU. The significance of these values for the EU was underscored in the Treaty of Lisbon, which came into effect in 2009 (Sternberg 2013).

The Lisbon Treaty explicitly references European values and underscores their role as the cornerstone of the European Project:

The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail

(Lisbon Treaty 2009).

This means that the European values are made up of several principles which are universal values rather than being exclusively linked with the European Union. These values were shaped by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which was adopted in 1948, and the European Convention on Human Rights, which was established in 1950 (Plomer 2020). The European values listed in the Lisbon Treaty are based on four value categories. These are (1) socio-cultural values, which are the beliefs, customs, norms, and principles that shape the way people in a particular society or culture think, behave, and interact with each other; (2) Political values which are set of values which can include the constitution and democracy, which shape the way politicians act; (3) Economic values refer to the principles, preferences, and judgments that individuals, organizations, and societies attach to economic goods, services, resources, and activities and (4) Earth values which are becoming more important for the need to preserve the environment for future generations and fight climate change (European Parliament 2022a).

In the debates surrounding the future of the European project, these 'European values' are often used by both proponents and opponents of the European Union. The European Union (EU) employs these values to justify and validate its policies (Weymans 2023). In addition, the EU has often used these values to foster a 'European Identity' and establish an ideological basis that would enable it to connect with the European citizens and promote unity across its borders. Beyond these reasons, European values are a part of the acquis communautaire. This means that they have a legal dimension. The acquis Communautaire requires candidate states to respect human rights, fundamental freedoms, liberty, democracy, and the rule of law for them to be eligible for EU membership. The rule of law is considered central among these European values. It serves as a foundational requirement for the introduction and promotion of values which include democracy, freedom, and equality (Madeja 2020). One of the main problems with the promotion of these European values is the widening discrepancy that exists between the promotion of these values and the limited tools that the European institutions have, to enforce and safeguard the European project (Bengoetxea 2022). In 2022, this discrepancy was debated in the European Parliament. A resolution passed by the European Parliament called for the Council and the European Commission to provide a stronger commitment to safeguard European values. In the debate surrounding the resolution, MEPs emphasized that it is unacceptable for Hungary and Poland to not implement the multiple rulings issued by the European Court of Justice and the European Court of Human Rights. They declared that the Council and Commission must act decisively so that all EU member states respect the rules and regulations of the EU (European Parliament 2022b).

Across the decades, the EU faced various criticism over its values. Eurosceptics often frame these values to highlight the threat which the development of the European Union has for the national member states and their societies (Weymans 2023). In countries like Poland and Hungary the Eurosceptic narrative revolves around themes of sovereignty and national identity, as well as the preservation of socially conservative values and norms, often described as 'traditional' or 'Christian'. This means that European values and the development of the European Union are seen as incompatible or a threat to the values of the country (Fomina 2017). In addition, human rights organisations and activists have repeatedly criticised the EU and its member states for undermining the European values by ignoring the human rights of migrants and other minority groups (Plomer 2020).

European values are in a state of continual evolution as the European Union advances and gains

more influence. These values are multifaceted and subject to various interpretations, primarily due to the complex nature of the European Union, which has far-reaching impacts on all segments of society within and beyond its borders (Foret and Calligaro 2018). The fact that these values incorporate several rights and principles means that they are open to multiple interpretations. These interpretations might allow political parties and politicians to use them as tools during their campaigns.

Political Framing and the European Union

Political parties and politicians develop their campaigns around the needs of their electorate. They are often aided by the advancement of information technology, with surveys used to understand the mood of the electorate and identify key issues to promote in political campaigns. To shape public opinion and the political agenda, political parties and politicians usually frame several issues that are likely to gain the attention of the media and voters (Slothuus and de Vreese 2010). Chong and Druckman (2007, p. 104) define framing as the 'process by which people develop a particular conceptualization of an issue or reorient their thinking about an issue.' Political parties must decide which issues to prioritize in electoral campaigns. To make the EU issue a focal point of their political strategy, they need to assess the potential consequences of such a decision. As shown in Table 1, this assessment can be based on three strategies; Issue Emphasis, Arena Choice, and Issue Framing (Grande and Kriesi 2016)

Table 1: Political Framing	
Framing	Strategy
Issue Emphasis	Political parties possess the ability to either bring attention to or divert attention from a particular EU issue.
Arena Choice	Political parties will need to choose the European, national, or local arena to frame the issue.
Issue Framing	This concerns the way political parties use the issue as a political tool and develop the issue during the public debates and political campaigns. The approach that political parties take over the issue is usually based on the party's ideologies and principles.
	Source: Grande and Kriesi 2016

In addition to these, and to understand the way European values were framed by Malta's political parties, one needs to take into consideration four other theories surrounding political framing. These are; strategic framing, frame resonance, frame alignment theory, and cultural framing. These provide an essential guideline to understand the way political parties act within their environment and how they use an issue to try to expand their influence and win elections.

Table 2: Political Framing	
Type of Framing	Strategy
Cultural Framing	Political issues and messages are embedded within cultural contexts. Cultural framing involves understanding the impact of cultures on the way people perceive, interpret, and respond to political events, policies, and discourse (Grande et al. 2016).
Frame Resonance	Politicians and political parties will have to use language and even symbols (in their attempt to win voters) that are relatable and important for individuals and society in general. Framing resonance will take place when an issue is influenced by the fundamental beliefs, values, and notions held by society (Bloemraad et al, 2016; Benford and Snow 2000).
Frame Alignment Theory	Political parties, politicians and social movements will frame an issue in a way that is aligned with society's beliefs and values. The goal is to expand their influence and increase their support (Caiani 2023).
Strategic Framing	Political Parties and politicians will frame issues in a way to convince voters or stakeholders and achieve their goal. Politicians using this strategy will highlight the problem and the solution to the problem (Rhinard, 2017).

In order for political parties and politicians to successfully frame an issue for them to reach their goals, they need to take into consideration four elements. These are resonance, credibility, salience, and audience (Caiani 2023).

Table 3: Political Framing	
Frame	Characteristic
Resonance	Effectives of the framing by building a narrative which connects with the electorate.
Credibility	Politicians and political parties will have to show that they are credible in order to gain the trust of the electorate and gain their support.
Salience	The more important an issue is for the electorate, the more it will be discussed within the political system.
Audience	The alignment of the framing with the audience's values and beliefs.
	Source Caiani 2023

As outlined in Table 3, political parties and politicians will have to make several choices on the way to frame an issue and look out for the counter-framing by other political parties. In addition, political parties will have to compete against eachother to convince voters of the saliency of the issue. This means that multiple issues are being promoted and debated by the main political parties with the aim of influencing public opinion, shaping the agenda, and influencing the decision-making process of the country (Helbling et al. 2010).

The framing of European values in Malta

The Nationalist Party spent decades promoting Malta's membership of the European Union. After George Borg Olivier gained independence for Malta, the Nationalist Party needed a new vision for the party and the country (Mifsud Bonnici 2015). This is why membership in the European Union provided an opportunity for the party to reinvent itself under the new leader, Fenech Adami, and use potential EU membership as a path to secure the future of Malta and its citizens (Cachia 2023). For the Nationalist Party, the European Union was the natural home for countries like Malta. This was reflected in a speech given by Foreign Minister De Marco in 1994 who declared:

> For Malta, Europe is not a choice but a reality. We do not choose to be European-we are European. European in history and culture, in economic structures and political organization, in security concerns and ethical values (De Marco in MFA 1996, p. 17).

As soon as the decision was taken to promote membership in the European Economic Community, the Nationalist Party needed to find a strategy to convince voters of the benefits of membership. The Nationalist Party could rely on the support of the European Union of Christian Democrats (UEDC) which enabled it to establish a strong relationship with the Christian Democratic Parties across Europe. This relationship was based on common values which included the promotion of a liberal economic agenda, the respect for the dignity of every person and the promotion of democracy and social justice (PN 1986; PN 1990). These principles would become an essential part of the Copenhagen Criteria, which the EU established in 1993. In addition to these, the party firmly believed in the concept of European Unity, which was promoted by Christian Democratic Parties across Europe. European Unity was seen as essential for peace and stability in Europe. For this reason, the party argued that Malta should form part of the European organisation to promote peace within the region (PN 1986). The traditional values of the EU would be used to align membership with the fundamental beliefs held by the Maltese and convince the electorate that membership in the European Union was the right path for Malta. In addition, the Nationalist Party consistently highlighted the role of Christian Democrats in establishing the European Union and the values that politicians from this political group had instilled on this growing organisation:

> It was to prevent another war like the two that engulfed the world that the Christian Democratic leaders laid the foundations for a united Europe, an ideal that every European Christian Democrat believes in and works for despite the obstacles and difficulties (PN 1987, p. 25).

The Nationalist Party decision to seek membership in the EEC became a priority with the election of Eddie Fenech Adami in 1977. In 1979, the party passed a resolution which called for membership within the European Economic Community. The resolution outlined how;

> The longer Malta takes to declare its intention to join, the greater difficulties for full membership will be. Malta not only forms part of Europe geographically, historically and culturally, but 'shares with the European Community, the ideals of peace, freedom, social progress, and the constant improvement to living standards provided for in the Treaty of Rome' (Nationalist Party, in Fenech Adami 2014, p. 294).

The statement reveals the strategy that the Nationalist Party planned to employ from 1979 to Malta's referendum on EU membership in 2003, with values at the core of this strategy (Mitchell 2003). In 1981, this proposal was included in the party's manifesto for the national election. It outlined how the Nationalist Party aimed to create the right conditions for Malta to join this organization and play its part in promoting peace and economic stability within the region (PN 1981).3 Peace was particularly important, given the geo-political environment in Europe, with the Cold War dividing the region into two. Promoting peace, and thereby highlighting the common values between the EU and Malta, was essential to present an alternative vision to Mintoff's push for neutrality and non-alignment. While Prime Minister Mintoff and his successor Mifsud Bonnici believed that the European Union posed a threat to the demilitarization of the Mediterranean, the Nationalist Party argued that peace and stability within the Mediterranean could only be achieved through the European Union.

The Nationalist Party and its leader Eddie Fenech Adami believed that the European Economic Community would not only strengthen Malta's European and Mediterranean identities, but also Malta's Christian heritage (Fenech Adami 2014). For the Nationalist Party, Christianity played an essential role in shaping the behaviour of its politicians, guiding them in the effective use of 'power' for the benefit of its citizens. This meant that the values of the Roman Catholic Church had a significant influence on the way the party framed European values. Until the 2004 EU accession, the party consistently drew on the traditional principles of the Roman Catholic Church, which included respect for human dignity, the rule of law, human rights, solidarity, and justice (PN 1986; Gonzi 2013).

During its electoral campaigns, the party promoted the tenets of Catholic Social Teaching, drawing inspiration from the works of Pope Leo XIII and Pope St. John XXIII. These principles emphasized the promotion of peace, subsidiarity, and solidarity. These values are often associated with both the Roman Catholic Church and the European Economic Community (EEC) (PN 1987). This alignment was particularly significant considering the influential role of the Roman Catholic Church in Maltese society. The Nationalist Party sought to align its membership with Maltese

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3   In the 1981 national election, the Nationalist Party secured 114,132 votes, constituting 50.9% of the popular vote. In contrast, the Labour Party obtained 109,990 votes, equivalent to 49.07% of the total votes. Because of winning 3 more seats than the Nationalist Party, the Labour Party retained the right to govern the country (Schiavone, 2003). This outcome sparked a political crisis, leading to various confrontations between the two main political parties. During this period, the Nationalist Party criticized the Labour administration for allegedly disregarding the principles of the rule of law and democracy in its pursuit of remaining in power. The Nationalist Party utilized EU institutions to exert pressure on the Labour administration, urging the respect of these values by the Maltese government.

values, aiming to reassure citizens that Malta's values would be retained if it were to join the EEC. This alignment was also important during the 2003 referendum and national election, when the Labour Party warned that the European Union would enforce the introduction of divorce and gay marriage in Malta. To neutralise the narrative being promoted by the Labour Party, the Nationalist Party utilized universal values of hope, solidarity, and trust based on Catholic Social Teaching and Christian Democracy to emphasize that the European Union comprised a range of values and would not impose these rights on Malta (PN 1981; In-Nazzjon 2003).

The Christian heritage of the European Union led the Nationalist Party to support the attempt by Italy to include a reference to the Christian roots of Europe within the Constitutional Treaty (Black 2004). While the party believed in secularization, it also acknowledged that Christian roots are part of the European heritage. The party also believed that the acknowledgement of the Christian roots would not undermine the diversity of traditions, values, and norms that exist within the European area (De Marco 2004).

When it comes to political framing, political parties must be careful on how their competitors respond to the framing. In this case, the Labour Party especially under the leadership of Karmenu Mifsud Bonnici (1984-1992), was critical of the attempt by the Nationalist Party to use the traditional values of the European Union and religion as a means of promoting membership. Mifsud Bonnici declared that the Vatican was not a member of the European Union and Christianity had no influence in the creation and running of the European Economic Community (Cachia 2023). On this issue, reference must be made to Mitchell's argument (2012) that the Nationalist Party was promoting the traditional values of the EU when the latter was taking a secular humanist approach focusing on its values and rights of its citizens. The Labour Party would utilise the 'liberal' and 'progressive' elements of these European values as a political tool after the election of Joseph Muscat as its leader in 2008.

As outlined in Table 4 and 5, whilst the Nationalist Party framed these values to promote EU membership, it did not mean that framing of the EU values was enough to convince voters on the benefits of EU membership. This means that whilst framing the European values helped the Nationalist Party to sell its vision, it had to provide evidence on the positive impact of membership to win over the electorate during the 2003 referendum and subsequent election.

Table 4: Political Framing by the Nationalist Party (1)	
Framing	Strategy
Issue Emphasis	Nationalist Party framed the European values to promote membership in the European Union
Arena Choice	The Nationalist Party framed the European values within the national political system as it competed against the Labour Party in the national elections.
Issue Framing	The Nationalist Party framed the traditional values including democracy, social justice and rule of law and the Christian Heritage to align membership with the beliefs of the Maltese.

Political framing cannot be successful if political parties and politicians are not credible in what they are saying or at least that the path they are proposing is the right one for the country. As shown in table 6, the Nationalist Party managed to develop a narrative on European values and use it as part of its tools to convince voters on the need to join the European Union. Still, after membership, the party did not take into consideration the fact that as Malta's society evolved, so would its needs. This is something, which the Labour Party tried to tackle after the election of Joseph Muscat as party leader in 2008.

Table 5: Political Framing by the Nationalist Party (2)	
Type of Framing	Strategy
Cultural Framing	It was important for the Nationalist Party to outline the role of Christianity to highlight the cultural links and common beliefs between Malta and the EU. In addition, values were also used to highlight the fact, that by joining the EU, Malta would reaffirm its European Identity.
Frame Resonance	Beyond the European values it was important for the Nationalist Party to use symbols of the EU including the European flag to convince voters that the issue was not a partisan one and it was important for them to vote in favour of EU membership to secure the future of the country.
Frame Alignment Theory	It was important for the Nationalist Party to use values, which were deemed to be important for the Maltese citizens. These included democracy, solidarity, and social justice.
Strategic Framing	Framing the European values was the first step to align their vision of making Malta a member of the EU with the values and beliefs of the Maltese people. The next step was to provide the right conditions to make membership a reality, which they did in 2003.

The Labour Party headed by Joseph Muscat underwent several changes. These included the shift of the party from Euroscepticism to Europeanism. In addition, the party started to frame European Values in its pursuit of a progressive agenda. The first opportunity for the Labour Party to frame the EU values to legitimise its position was the divorce referendum. During the campaign, the Nationalist Party declared its intention to uphold the Catholic principles advocated by the founding fathers of the EU (Gonzi 2013). Consequently, a majority of party members opposed the introduction of divorce. In contrast, the Labour Party, in collaboration with other groups, including Malta's Green Party (*Alternattiva Demokratika*-AD), championed the liberal values of the European Union, emphasizing the importance of safeguarding minority rights, under the motto 'United in Diversity.' Their aim

was to persuade voters of the necessity of granting people the right to divorce. The pro-divorce groups underscored the importance of Maltese citizens enjoying the same rights as their European counterparts (Times of Malta 2011). The electorate ultimately voted in favour of introducing divorce in Malta.4 This outcome signalled an early indication that the progressive reforms advocated by Muscat were resonating with the public and contributing to increased support for the party.

The same approach would be taken by the Labour Party for the introduction of civil unions in Malta. After his election as leader of the Labour Party, Muscat began to promote his liberal and progressive agenda. He promoted the idea of a 'movement' to be made up of people with different ideologies but willing to work together for the national interest. This progressive movement had to safeguard the rights of minority groups which were seen as a reflection of the progressive rights promoted by socialist groups and the European Union through its values (Engerer 2013; Muscat 2022).

The decision to use the EU values to promote the legalisation of civil unions placed the Nationalist Party in difficulty. The Labour Party managed to attract various human rights organisations including the Malta Gay Rights Movement (MGRM) and Drachma (representing the LGBT Catholics) by working with them to promote progressive values. The Labour Party defended this progressive agenda with the party leader Muscat declaring that the Maltese should not be afraid of change and that all citizens in Malta should have the same rights and opportunities (Engerer 2013). Muscat also declared that the Civil Union Act reflected the liberal values of the European Union and they should be embraced by the Maltese society (Micallef and Sansone 2014). One of the most contentious points between the main political parties is the fact that the Civil Union Legislation Act granted the same rights to same-sex couples, including the right to adopt. This caused internal disagreements within the Nationalist Party, which criticized the decision to amalgamate the two legislations. Despite agreeing to ban gay conversion therapy, the party-in-opposition opted to abstain rather than allowing a free vote. This decision drew various criticisms against the party for seemingly turning its back on the needs of society. Civil unions were introduced in Malta on 14 April 2014, just a few weeks before the 2014 European Elections (Harwood 2015).

The legalization of civil unions helped portray the Labour Party as a movement composed of progressives who aimed to grant the same rights to the Maltese as their European counterparts. The development of civil liberties in Malta in reflection of the European values would continue with the legalisation of same-sex marriage in 2017. This time, most of the Nationalist Party MPs voted for the legislation. However, it was the Labour Party which had managed to frame European values and the introduction of civil liberties to highlight how it was the guarantor of social justice and civil liberties in the country (Cachia 2023).

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4   The referendum took place on 28 May 2011. 122,547, or 52.67%, voted for the introduction of divorce. On the other hand, 107,971, or 46.44%, of voters, opposed it (Malta Electoral Commission, 2022).

Table 6: Political Framing by the Labour Party (1)	
Framing	Strategy
Issue Emphasis	The Liberal elements of the European Union used by the Labour Party as a means of rebranding the party and defend its decision to protect minority rights.
Arena Choice	The Labour Party framed European Values (particularly human rights, equality, human dignity, and the rights of persons belonging to minorities) in both the European and national elections.
Issue Framing	The liberal (or progressive) values of the EU were framed to convince voters that it was important to introduce the required LGBTIQ rights so that the Maltese could enjoy the same rights as their European counterparts.

As shown in Tables 6 and 7, the Labour Party not only used European values as part of its rebranding, which included a new logo and emblem, but also as a way of promoting its progressive agenda. The notion that the Maltese should enjoy the same rights as their European counterparts would be heavily promoted during the hunting referendum which took place in 2015. During the campaign, the hunting lobby strategy was based on the notion that the Maltese should enjoy the same rights as European hunters. They often referred to themselves as a 'minority' which were fighting to safeguard the country's identity and heritage (Dalli 2015). Before and after the hunting referendum, the Labour Party had pledged to defend the interests of hunters (Debono 2015).[5] This is an example of how values are often based on multiple interpretations and could be framed in such a way to promote a cause or an agenda.

Table 7 : Political Framing by the Labour Party (2)	
Type of Framing	Strategy
Cultural Framing	European values were used to promote the movement created by the Labour leader Joseph Muscat. This movement had a progressive agenda which was reflected in the legislations introduced to safeguard civil liberties in Malta.
Frame Resonance	The Labour Party believed that society continued to develop with EU membership. This meant that the EU flag was used by the Labour Party to highlight its pro-EU approach. EU values were promoted to legitimize the progressive agenda of the party and convince voters that it was the only party which could safeguard their rights and interests.

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5   The 'Yes' movement, which campaigned in favour of hunting in spring, emerged victorious, winning 50.4% of the vote, a mere 2220 vote advantage over the 'No' movement which received 49.06% of the votes (Malta Electoral Commission, 2022).

Frame Alignment Theory	European values including human rights, equality and social justice used to legitimise the decision to introduce various civil rights.
Strategic Framing	European values were used to convince voters that the Maltese should enjoy the same rights as their European counterparts.

The framing of European values by the Labour Party were part of a series of reforms and political strategies which the party used to rebrand itself, built a party around the persona of their leader Joseph Muscat and project themselves as a progressive movement which would protect the interests of all Maltese. Whilst the framing of European values might not have necessarily led voters to vote for one party or another, it certainly helped the Labour Party to gain more credibility and convince voters on the need to prioritise minority rights to care for all segments of Malta's society. So, by using European values and the rationale behind them, that is to protect democracy, rule of law and the rights of European citizens amongst others, the party strengthened the narrative and political rhetoric that these reforms were needed to give the Maltese the same rights as other EU citizens, and by doing so, make Malta 'one of the best countries in Europe'.

European values and Malta's society

This paper sheds light on how the primary political parties in Malta, specifically the Nationalist Party and the Labour Party, strategically framed European values at different periods to appeal to the Maltese electorate by addressing their demands. The Nationalist Party utilised European values including solidarity, democracy, peace, and the rule of law as part of its strategy to secure Malta's European Union membership. Conversely, the Labour Party utilised values such as individual freedoms, equality, and human rights to address minority rights in Malta and position the country as a leader in civil rights.

Table 8: What are values which best represent the EU									
	Rule of Law	Respect for Human Life	Human Rights	Democracy	Tolerance	Solidarity	Equality	Peace	Individual Freedoms
2004	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
2005	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
2006	29	21	32	41	10	20	16	35	11
2007	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
2008	33	18	34	42	7	17	11	24	11
2009	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
2010	31	17	30	41	18	21	12	28	19
2011	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
2012	32	18	33	36	8	20	10	36	19
2013	19	21	41	29	11	13	21	31	22

2014	19	30	42	36	8	15	15	33	20
2015	14	22	39	38	11	19	22	37	17
2016	22	21	37	34	16	19	14	32	13
2017	28	22	31	39	16	12	21	35	15
2018	34	19	26	33	18	18	13	33	16
2019	33	15	36	39	13	21	20	32	12
2020	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
2021	31	9	37	37	22	28	19	19	13
2022	29	27	36	41	8	16	12	23	24
	Source: Eurobarometer (2023)								

Table 8 provides an overview of the values which the Maltese voters believe that best represent the European Union. The data shows how from EU membership onwards, some values remain consistently linked to the European Union including rule of law, democracy, and human rights. This could be due to the awareness raised over these values by the Nationalist Party. Others, including human rights and equality became more associated with the EU as society evolved and as the Labour Party raised more awareness on them. The fact that 'individual freedoms' is becoming more important highlights how certain issues such as reproductive rights are likely to become a priority. In the near future, the rising importance of individual freedoms might pressure the main political parties to address the citizen's demands though their manifestoes.

Table 8 is of particular interest because it highlights the significance of certain values, such as the rule of law, respect for human life, democracy, and tolerance. These values have been a source of controversy within Malta's political system in recent years (Cachia 2024). The assassination of Daphne Caruana Galizia and the murder of Lassana Cisse are two events which led to a debate on the state of these values in Malta and whether political parties have selectively promoted some values while disregarding others (Warrington 2022; Aquilina 2022; Pace 2022). These events underscore how certain 'freedoms' and values can be easily threatened, especially when they are taken for granted by society.

This raises the question of whether values can be imposed on a society by the EU or political parties, or if awareness should be raised about their importance. This is particularly relevant as the European Union continually seeks ways to strengthen its connections with its citizens. Hence, Malta's 20th anniversary of EU membership should prompt reflection on these values and their role in Malta's, and the EU's development. They should also be central to a broader discussion on the significance of EU membership for Malta and its citizens.

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