

Governance-Corner

Governance and Policy-Making within Microstates

Malta is one of the so-called European microstates characterized of small size and population and limited natural resources. The Mediterranean island joined the European Union (EU) in 2004 and serves as a good practice example in the context of good governance and sound economic policy-making. Besides impressive economic progress and growth, less is known about the impact of EU membership on Malta's civil society and public administrations. The following contribution serves as a case to emphasize the demand for more research focusing on European small states, many of them new EU members since 2004 and after. Due to smallness, those states are able to develop and implement new policies and forms of governance to adapt to an overall fast changing global environment though not all microstates make necessarily use of this 'competitive advantage'.

The Europeanisation of Civil Society

The case of Malta

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The most recognisable and researched impact of Europeanisation is upon government structures, processes and policies. However the study of its effects on domestic civil society is still in its infancy stage. With the following contribution, initial findings of a recently finalized empirical study is presented addressing this gap in academic literature by examining to what extent interest groups in Malta, the EU's smallest member state, are being exposed and influenced by European values and style of governance. Furthermore it seeks to identify the typology of the enablers of change that are at play.

Recent trends in the literature of Europeanisation started to focus on the impact of European unification on domestic political and cultural processes of the member states and beyond (Börzel and Risse, 2003). Notwithstanding the emphasis on 'bottom-up' initiatives on policy processes, the conceptual scope of Europeanisation started to incorporate 'top-down' and 'horizontal' initiatives in favour of the European regional integration, together with an accentuation on national and sub-national structures and actors (Vink and Graziano, 2008). Europeanisation, in its contemporary meaning, involves a 360 degree approach to interpret the institutionalisation of EU polity, politics and policies across supranational, national and sub-national politics. This implies the co-existence of 'vertical' and 'horizontal' mechanisms of Europeanisation that portrays the EU as a political system with interconnected institutions, operating at multiple levels and having unique policy features (Bache, 2008; Bulmer and Radaelli, 2004; Bache and Flinders, 2004; Gualini, 2004).

The 'vertical' dimension of Europeanisation refers to hierarchical linkages and negotiations between higher and lower levels of governance, including their institutional, financial, and legislative aspects. Here, local capacity building and incentives for effectiveness of sub-national levels of government and civil society are crucial issues for improving the

quality and coherence of public policy. The 'horizontal' dimension refers to co-operation arrangements between regions or between state and non-state organisations. These agreements are increasingly common as a means by which to improve the effectiveness of public service delivery and implementation of development strategies through socialisation and collective learning (see Bulmer and Radaelli, 2004). Thus, Europeanisation refers to the effects of vertical and horizontal enablers of change on the domestic patterns of interest representation and routes of influence as a corollary of EU membership.

Like other European politicians, Maltese political elites are aware of the escalating importance of interest groups in managing public affairs within an EU context. Warrington (2010) claims that civil society in Malta offers one of the most interesting and diverse forms of citizens' engagement, deeply rooted in Catholicism and in representative democracy; yet Sant (2009: 128) laments that it 'is still considered as a vague field of analysis, lacking adequate national awareness and consistent momentum of leadership'. As interest groups provide a link between state actors and the rest of society (Bache and George, 2006), their meaningful input into the decision-making process is seen as a sign of a functioning democracy. Therefore, five principal effects of Europeanisation on civil society in Malta are selected and thoroughly investigated, namely how membership may have increased the resource base of domestic groups, changed their internal organisational structures, enhanced their participation in domestic affairs, created new institutional channels for lobbying and diversified their normative formation to start embracing a more European identity. These effects comprise elements that are experienced in Maltese terrain as well as others that form part of the Brussels' route. Van Schendelen (2005) maintains that 'managing the EU arena' and 'handling the home front' are not contrary forces but, in actual fact, they are part of the same continuum in interest representation.

Methodologically, the study adopts a deductive and inductive approach and focuses on two broad types of interest groups, namely social and humanitarian groups, and environmental groups. In contrast with trade unions and employers' associations, the selected groups are considered to have less political clout in influencing public affairs. Both groups are tagged as outsiders on the national scale, mainly because many of them are associated with reformists and radical minority leaders who may be ideologically opposed to institutionalised political systems. All registered groups under the two selected categories have been asked to answer a self completion questionnaire. Further, semi-structured interviews have been accomplished with high representatives of the two selected types of interest groups as well as think tanks, scholars, politicians and other state and non-state protagonists. Statistical computations answer the first research question, that is, to what extent is civil society in Malta being Europeanised. In other words, have the effects been marginal or significant? The second question asks for the nature of Europeanisation being

experienced, that is, whether it is of a vertical or horizontal nature.

The preliminary research findings can be summarised, as follows:

- a) Maltese civil society has experienced a significant degree of Europeanisation after less than ten years since Malta joined the EU in 2004.
- b) It is undergoing a transformation phase in its corporate set-ups, influencing and lobbying practices and organisational values due to a number of Europeanisation attributes.
- c) Yet there are still specific pockets where bold change is still not felt due to the limitations and attitudes formed by smallness and islandness. These include training incentives, Brussels' route lobbying, affiliation in Euro groups and consequential internal changes due to influences by European partners and federations.
- d) Both vertical and lateral triggers of Europeanisation are transforming the character of Maltese civil society, but the predominant stimuli are the horizontal enablers of changes, implying that the true cause of change is of a sociological origin.
- e) This is a process that is leading to a stronger European identity among domestic interest groups instigated by wider socialisation among European peers and collective learning from a wider European experience.

In a nutshell, it can be concluded that the extent of Europeanisation among social, humanitarian and environmental groups in Malta is statistically significant while the predominant change stimuli are those associated with the horizontal dimension of Europeanisation. Maltese civil society is resolute to live up to its 'European vocation' to the full, despite inbuilt coercive constraints that impose limits to European exposure. Many of its leaders, particularly those of peak interest groups and mediating bodies, talk about 'the need for Europe' to reaffirm themselves, their organisation and for all they believe in. Experience on the ground is indicating that the insular cul-

ture and behavioural attitudes of interest groups are likewise being gradually transformed through a process of normativeness and interaction among a wider network of European political communities.

Note:

The above summarized study will be published as PhD thesis titled *Europeanisation from a New Institutional Outlook: Decoding changes in Maltese and Irish interest groups*. For further information, contact Mario Thomas Vassallo, resident academic at the Department of Public Policy, University of Malta (mario.t.vassallo@um.edu.mt).

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