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## THE CONTINUED INFLUX OF FOREIGNERS IN MALTA: LABOUR ECONOMIC IMPACTS AND PERCEPTION AMONG THE LOCAL POPULATION

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## ПРОДОЛЖАЮЩИЙСЯ ПРИТОК ИНОСТРАНЦЕВ НА МАЛЬТЕ: ЭКОНОМИЧЕСКИЕ ПОСЛЕДСТВИЯ И ВОСПРИЯТИЕ РАБОЧЕЙ СИЛЫ СРЕДИ МЕСТНОГО НАСЕЛЕНИЯ

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*Abstract.* Migration turns out to be one of the most debated topics in Europe and particularly in Malta, that it is obviously not a recent phenomenon. One cannot, however, overlook the fact that migration is stirring up the intense public debate which brings this topic under the close scrutiny of the local community. This paper examines the far-reaching economic, labour and social implications generated by the settlement of a foreign and multicultural population in Malta. In particular, the discussion identifies an exhausted domestic labour force which has led to the displacement of labour in certain low-skilled sectors, in favour of foreign workers. An analysis is also undertaken of the current public attitude towards the proliferation of foreigners in Malta, exploring the manner in which the Maltese express a negative sentiment to foreign presence in their home country. The conclusions presented throughout the paper, in terms of labour-economic impact and public perception, are heavily founded upon the latest data gathered from a diverse range of surveys conducted among the Maltese population.

*Аннотация.* Миграция оказывается одной из самых обсуждаемых тем в Европе и особенно на Мальте, что, очевидно, не является недавним явлением. Однако нельзя не учитывать тот факт, что миграция усиливает напряженные общественные дебаты, которые подталкивают эту тему к пристальному вниманию местного сообщества. В настоящем документе рассматриваются далеко идущие экономические, трудовые и социальные последствия, вызванные расселением иностранного и многокультурного населения на Мальте. В частности, в обсуждении указывается исчерпанная внутренняя рабочая сила, которая привела к перемещению труда в некоторых низкоквалифицированных секторах в пользу иностранных рабочих. Проводится также анализ нынешнего общественного отношения к распространению иностранцев на Мальте, исследуя то, как мальтийцы выражают негативное настроение иностранному присутствию в своей родной стране. Выводы, представленные на протяжении всего документа, с точки зрения трудоемкости и общественного восприятия, в значительной степени основаны на последних данных,

собранных в результате широкого круга опросов, проведенных среди мальтийского населения.

*Keywords:* Malta, International Mobility, Public Opinion, Economic Development, Foreign Labour, Migration.

*Ключевые слова:* Мальта, международная мобильность, общественное мнение, экономическое развитие, иностранная рабочая сила, миграция.

### *Introduction*

The island–state of Malta is located in the Mediterranean, 93 km south of Sicily and 288 km north of Libya. Its approximate population is 434,400 people in 2016 living on 316 km<sup>2</sup>. This strategic position between Europe and Africa has led Malta to become the centre of both emigration and immigration. The English–speaking population (besides the national Maltese language), favourable Mediterranean climate and constantly increasing demand for seasonal and skilled labour has attracted more and more foreigners to relocate to the island. The connection to the European Union in 2004, dramatically increased the migration flow to Malta [6]. Moreover, as a result of the Arab Spring in 2011, ‘boat arrivals’ to the island further increased [7]. The fact that Malta is traditionally an emigration and not an immigration country has radically changed. Nowadays, 79.9% of youths (aged 15–34) would not consider moving to another country and at the same time, Maltese have started to experience three types of immigration flows (16):

–migrants from sub-Saharan countries and actually the Middle–East due to the difficult situations in their country. Most of the asylum applications have been submitted by Libyan, Syrian, Somali and Eritrean nations in 2014

–immigrants from other EU members states in view of job opportunities

–third country nationals (TCN) from outside the EU [5].

In Malta, there is practical, no formal integration policy which is equally applicable to persons in all three streams, and the topic of migration represents a wide range of debate within the Maltese society [3]. From a historical perspective, throughout the years, several foreign enemies have attempted to conquer the island, most prominently the Ottoman Empire during the ‘The Great Siege’ of 1565. This has consequently left a ‘fear of invasion’ sentiment within the Maltese population, which has persisted amongst generations.

Today, migration has extensive effects on the Maltese economy, labour market, demography and society as well [11]. The approximate number of foreign residents in Malta was 31,000 in 2016, mostly employed full time in the hotel industry and food service sector, administrative and support services and arts, entertainment and recreation sphere (NSO, 2016a). The number of immigrants from EU member states and non-EU states is more or less the same 3,6% and 3,5% of the total population (1, 3).

According to the latest available data (2014), approximately 1000 TCN were found to be illegally staying in Malta. The majority is from African countries (mostly Somalis and Libyans, Eritrean, Sudanese), secondly from Asian countries and the Middle–East (Republic of Korea, Syria, Palestine; and thirdly from Europe (Serbia, Macedonia, Russia) (6).

There are obvious signs of discomfort and fear of migration in Malta which can be chiefly linked to asylum seekers from sub-Saharan Africa according to Pisani and Gauci. The term ‘immigrant’ has been associated with the ‘illegal or irregular immigrant’ and ‘klandestini’ — which refer specifically to refugees [9].

In order to acquire a better understanding of how to respond successfully to migration issues in Malta, the article aims to discuss the direct and indirect effects that have an impact on the economy in the country, the labour market and the current public perception as well.

### *Economic and Labour Market Implications*

Malta's reputation, owing to a stable and thriving economy has expanded Malta's demand for the workforce, leading to an increased motivation for foreigners to seek job opportunities in Malta.

The International Monetary Fund released a report in 2016 affirming that the mass inflow of international labour to Malta has had a great impact upon the national economy (9). Non-Maltese workers boosted the country's growth, as confirmed by Grech, who estimated the contribution of foreign workers (from 2010 to 2014 annually) to 0.6% potential output growth in the reference period. Such inflow has contributed to the attainment of an average of 2.5% per annum at a national level (leading figure in the Euro area) [1].

The robust growth is aided by the expansion of export-oriented services, tourism, gaming and construction industries, which are considered to be the main economic drivers (9). According to the Ernst & Young Attractiveness Survey, 80% of the current foreign investors believe that these sectors are still attractive for business investment besides the other advantageous conditions such as corporate taxation (35%), stability, social climate and telecommunications infrastructure (10). The net inflows of foreign direct investment (BoP) to Malta reached the 2,438 million US\$ in 2016 (11).

The tourism sector is still growing, the net occupancy rates of bed places in hotels and similar accommodation establishments were the third highest in Europe: 80,6% during the summer season of 2017, which means a 6,2% increase compared to the previous year. The inbound tourism to Malta stood at almost 2 million in 2016, 10.2% more than in 2015. Slightly less than half of the visitors arrived by low-cost airlines and spent 7.3 nights on the islands on average (7).

Malta has been benefiting considerably from the 'first-mover advantage' in relation to the increasing demand for remote gaming services such as sports betting, online and mobile casino games and lotteries. As the first EU country to regulate this industry in 2004, Malta attracted several investors from member states (the UK, Sweden, Austria, etc.). The regulatory model is simple and effective, therefore the economic significance of the gaming industry rose. (5).

By virtue of the above-mentioned booming spheres and new financial services, the need arises for a seasonal, skilled and foreign workforce to respond to the shortages in labour supply, skills or experience in the Maltese labour market. These — mainly service and sales, professional occupations as well as managerial — positions are filled by workforce arriving from other European Union member states in hope of a higher wage and more favourable living conditions. Malta indeed offers a more sustainable remuneratory package whereby in January 2018 the minimum wage in Malta was 911 EUR/month, which represents the second group of countries (out of three) in the EU. The proportion of employees earning less than 105% of the minimum wage was 3% in 2014 (2).

The kind of jobs that demand tedious and repetitive tasks or involve hard physical activity, for example, employment in catering and building industries, have opened space for third-country nationals, in particular. The latter are willing to engage in low wage jobs and work in fields where they cannot avail from their qualifications or training background since the wage might still be higher than what is earned in their home country. Figures derived from the National Employee Skills Survey 2017, in fact, depict that foreigners are taking up both low skilled jobs and highly skilled jobs, primarily due to demand for labour which outstrips by far the supply of local labour. The decreasing unemployment statistics are further evidence of this reality and account for an exhausted domestic labour force. More precisely, in 2017 Q3, the unemployment rate was at 4% portraying a 1% decrease compared to the end of the previous year. The decrease has been primarily driven by the creation of consistent job opportunities in the service industry coupled with the rising

female labour force participation (5). As a consequence, the scarcity in the local labour force leaves employers with no choice but to employ foreign workers (13).

With the rapid economic development, inward migration and continuously growing population (annually approx. 0,71% in the reference period of 2006–2014), considerable investment needs to be done in the fields of physical infrastructure, public services and education & training which are key conditions for productivity and population welfare. Besides the increased infrastructure needs, the strong demand fuelled by continued influx of foreign workers, students and Erasmus trainees hosted by hundreds of local companies, the higher use of online accommodation services by tourists and reduced tax rate on rental income, continued to push property prices and rents upwards ([3]. This rise in the cost of living has, in turn, led to the creation of an ‘inflated property market’. This is among the latest issues Malta and its foreign workers are facing today. According to the focus group research conducted by the MEA, new tendencies show that foreign employees leave Malta after a few months of employment as they find the living costs too high, which employers cannot compensate — “compensation for labour can only be linked to productivity and value added” (15).

### *The Public Opinion on Immigration*

Immigration has long been perceived as a trigger of serious and far-reaching consequences for countries and their citizens worldwide. Up until 2016, immigration indeed prevailed as the leading cause for concern amongst EU citizens, trumping other serious threats such as terrorism (14).

The situation has been echoed likewise in Malta ever since, perhaps more vehemently in 2015 when immigration from non-EU countries, in particular, evoked a very negative feeling amongst 76% of the population (18). This was the highest percentage registered among all Member States. Public opinion however changed significantly in the following two years, where immigration was displaced from being the most critical issue faced by Malta. As a matter of fact, immigration came in as the second most important issue in the country, at 46% in 2016, and 33% in 2017 (17). The change in Maltese perception is perhaps more reflective of illegal immigration, owing to the fact that Malta has not been accepting any intake of irregular migrants by boat.

Regular migration, on the other hand, has become an impetus for concern amongst the Maltese population, with a steadfast increase over the past five years. As it has been evidenced in the previous section, Malta’s economy is identified as the main catalyst attracting foreigners to seek residence in Malta. Back in 2015, the influx of foreigners in Malta, which includes EU and third-country nationals, was a cause for concern, whereby, ‘a section of the population remains lukewarm or hostile to the presence of foreigners, although some make a distinction between asylum seekers and richer foreigners’ (19).

In more recent years, Malta’s multicultural society has been creating a deeper level of unease within the local community. In fact, rather than being concerned with immigration in general, Maltese root their concern specifically in respect of ‘foreigners living in Malta’, with nearly 10% of the population viewing migrants residing regularly in Malta as the actual threat (20). This new reality is the third highest concern for the Maltese population after traffic and corruption (19).

The authors believe that the grounds for concern are primarily rooted in one factor, the Maltese’s perception of long-term foreigners ‘taking over the island’, both in terms of the local labour scene and also in respect of the Maltese to foreigner population ratio. Indeed, this is also reflected in the response generated by the MSDC’s Survey in 2015. Maltese view foreigners as posing a threat in relation to employment availability, fearing the likelihood where foreigners outcompete the Maltese and will be favoured by employers when offering job opportunities. As it has been discussed earlier, this ‘fear’ however, is statistically unfounded. It is quite common, that rather than replacing the local workforce, migrants end up responding to the actual demands of the

Maltese labour market. Taking short-term views into account. 95% of Maltese employees are actually not apprehensive that they will lose their job in the near future (14).

Malta's geographic limitations also raise serious concerns amongst the local community. 17.9% of total respondents fear that Malta's small size will not be able to cater to the alarmingly increasing population. Colloquially, Maltese in fact often say that there are "too many" foreigners in Malta. The 'Trends in Malta' Survey published by the National Statistics Office in 2016, portrays the extent of population outburst, stating that a new member of society is 'more likely to be an immigrant than a new-born', owing to the fact that the number of foreigners settling in Malta during the year 2015 (12,831) was almost triple the number of births (4,325) (16).

The MSDC Survey also demonstrates that only a small percentage of students and some vocational, supervisory and technical groups value foreigners' input in cultivating Malta's culture and increasing diversity. This naturally indicates that the prevalent perception is that foreigners will eventually affect and change Maltese culture and identity. Even more so, 46% of the population cited 'different cultures' as the main obstacle for migrants to settle successfully in Malta. 56% even suggested that 'people coming to Malta should change their behaviour to be more like other Maltese citizens', and hence Maltese are quite reserved when it comes to mixing with people of different cultures [7]. Although the survey is six years old, its findings are still relevant, whereby the same collective voice is being projected by the Maltese population nowadays.

Religious extremism also emerges as a top concern, with the perceived proportion of tension between different religious groups being as follows: 27% experience a lot of tension (where the age group of 18–24 dominates), 48% some tension, 25% no tension at all. In the age group of 18–49 the highest level of tension has been seen. On the other hand, 79% feel safe when walking home in the dark (12).

In conclusion, the Maltese attitudes towards foreigners tend to be 'selective and utilitarian', whereby, foreigners are more often than not valued solely for their economic contribution, especially in property, or as 'an invisible army of labour which takes jobs that are not wanted by the Maltese' (15).

### *Discussion*

The accelerated pace and scale at which migration is taking place in Europe, is certainly a reasonable cause for concern, especially amongst local communities. Malta has likewise not been immune to this sentiment of unease towards foreigners. On the contrary, public concern is evidenced more intensely within Malta, a country which for centuries was characterized solely as an emigration country.

Further to what has been discussed above, the negative attitude towards foreigners is fuelled by the dominating 'threat perception', which has instigated fear among the Maltese in terms of cultural influence and unemployment. In itself, migration is a fact of life and one of the oldest existing phenomena affecting the human race. In reality, therefore, the process of migration cannot be blocked altogether. Nevertheless, measures could be taken to ameliorate how the situation is managed. If not addressed, current public perceptions will be a strong deterrent against the effective management of migration issues. In light of this, a more proactive approach that focuses on how both the receiving country and the migrants can reap the benefits of migration is indispensable.

Should migration start to be perceived as an opportunity rather than a threat, this can lead to extending benefits for society in general. Naturally, this shift in perception will not happen overnight. However, with the adoption of the right policies, which address current negative attitudes and fears, the cycle of hostility could be broken. More specifically, to 'make a success of migration, inspired measures to need to show that migration can be managed rather than endured' [8].

Efforts aimed at improving the integration of foreigners within the local community are pivotal towards managing the migrant situation effectively. From the Maltese perspective, achieving labour integration becomes predominantly the way forward. This would result not only in creating a level playing field in terms of employment but also in tackling other barriers to integration such as language and culture differences.

The main obstacle towards achieving labour integration is the local perception that foreigners are ‘stealing’ jobs from the Maltese. As stated above, this is not a correct representation of the truth, firstly because the unemployment rate on Malta is low, and secondly because migrants often cater for the lack of specialized labour in certain industries. Moreover, recent trends in employment also portray a vicious circle. It can be argued that employers have come to realise that jobs in certain unappealing sectors like hospitality and construction are more likely to be sought after by foreigners rather than by the Maltese. Keeping in mind that foreigners are more likely to accept remuneratory packages close to the minimum wage, employers have sought to take advantage of this trend by keeping wages low deliberately. Therefore, this is indirectly forcing the Maltese to seek employment in other sectors, and possibly, had it not been for the unacceptably low wage offered, locals would be more inclined to accept jobs in such identified sectors.

Therefore, policies promoting labour integration as well as introducing the necessary reform to provide equal job opportunities to Maltese and foreigners are essential towards dispelling current misconceptions about employment. In this manner, the public may be more easily persuaded to value contribution of the migrant workforce to society in general, through the introduction of new skills in the labour market and further development of lacking sectors.

Malta’s efforts towards achieving a level of integration amongst local and foreign communities is reflected in the ‘Migrant Integration Strategy and Action Plan (21)’ published in December 2017. The Plan sets out a comprehensive framework which targets migrants who are already working, living and sending their children to school in Malta. Furthermore, besides promoting diversity and equality, the new strategy also seeks to ‘ensure that migrants in Malta have a voice, are recognised for their true value and are able to build their sense of belonging within society.’

### *Conclusion*

Malta’s accession to the EU in 2004 has certainly been a pivotal catalyst in strengthening the country’s political, economic and social spheres. Nowadays, Malta boasts a robust and thriving economy accompanied by unprecedented unemployment rates which are amongst the lowest registered within the EU.

Despite the several benefits, Malta’s EU membership has nevertheless proffered certain challenges. The rapid development and consequent internationalization have impacted the demographics of the island–state significantly. For example, concerns about the proliferating influx of foreigners in Malta have spread widely in the recent years. In fact, according to a nationwide survey, subsequent to traffic and corruption, immigration counts as the third most important issue among the Maltese people.

Our comprehensive review of the literature, different public surveys and country reports leads to the conclusion that the Maltese attitudes towards foreigners tend to be ‘selective and utilitarian’, whereby foreigners are often valued, solely, for their economic contribution. From another point of view, surveys portray that only a minority of Maltese people appreciate the intrinsic values of diversity and cultural cosmopolitanism. Religious and cultural differences pose certain unease amongst the majority of those surveyed.

Recent shifts in population called for the implementation of effective immigration and integration policies, together with the much–needed reform offering equal work opportunities to

both locals and foreigners. Both are imperative to secure stability and the proper functioning of society. More importantly, foreigners' contribution must not be viewed as short-termed. Embracing multiculturalism will propagate added value and holistic benefits to the Maltese society to remain competitive in an ever-evolving global market. Priority must hence be attributed to furthering the education, development and training of labour force, be it local or foreign, whilst also promoting investment in major infrastructure and urban projects.

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