

РОССИЯ И ВОСТОК

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MALTA — RUSSIA. ON THE DIPLOMACY OF EU'S SMALL STATES

Introduction

Many of the countries that have during the past decade joined the EU with its federal/confederal basis are small countries in Europe that have recently become independent states as a result of the dissolution of federations or decolonization, and the break up of the Soviet Union. Malta became a member of the EU in 2004, a few decades after being granted independence and becoming a sovereign nation within the British Commonwealth in 1964 and after the termination of the military base agreement with Britain and the removal of British forces from the island in 1979.

Since 1962, in Malta's political system of parliamentary democracy, the Maltese electorate has consistently voted in general elections held every five years in two dominant political parties that in effect brought about a two-party government system¹. A Labour party that ruled Malta during the Cold War period in the 1970s and 1980s, espousing socialist, Mediterranean politics and non-aligned stance, mostly perceived by the West as pro-Libyan, pro-Eastern (and anti-West); and a Nationalist party, of Christian Democrats, in power since 1987, that has been furthering Malta's European values and guiding the Island into the EU and Partnership for Peace (PfP)². There has been a certain shift in the island's external relations, military alliance, trade and collaboration from the East to the West³.

However, despite apparent changes in local politics and in the international system, the government in Malta for its dealings with country like Russia remained committed to

¹ The House of Representatives in Malta has 65 members, elected for a five-year term. The government is appointed by parliamentary representatives, exercised by delegation to an executive ministry and subject to ongoing reviews, checks and balances by the legislative parliament elected by the people.

² The PfP, a political-military programme with the declared aim of creating trust between NATO and other states in Europe and the former Soviet Union, was first proposed as an American initiative at the meeting of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) defense ministers in Germany on 20–21 October 1993, and was formally launched on 10–11 January 1994 NATO summit in Brussels.

³ The Times of Malta, various editions.

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maintaining a largely ‘friendly pragmatist’ approach. Most policy makers and practitioners in Malta agree that EU membership in 2004 brought no great geopolitical and military advantages or disadvantages for its bilateral relations with Russia, amid clear signs of the lack of success on the part of the EU to agree on a common foreign policy toward Russia, which allowed for some more leverage for the Kremlin.

Russia, an immediate neighbour of the EU, has been a major world power in modern history. The problems as well as the opportunities in the EU-Russia relations, particularly in the area of security and defence, notably for small states, are significant in IR. However, there is a striking lack of literature that specifically deals with the interaction between Malta and Russia and its implications for the CFSP. The only source of some relevant information were the non-confidential and unclassified documents, and personal communications with officials, from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Malta, the Maltese mission in Moscow and the Embassy of the Russian Federation in Malta.

The specific aim of this article is to review the bilateral relations between Malta and Russia in the context of the CFSP, by taking into consideration a number of pertinent historical, geopolitical and geo-economic realities of the political economy of a country like Malta, which determine the challenges and opportunities for the development of its external relations and foreign policy. It examines small states diplomacy in terms of IR theory, and looks at the position shaped and dominated by practitioners of Malta’s specific foreign policies, which can provide relevant and important insights.

Theoretical and Analytical Background

Malta has demonstrated its role within the international community as a viable and active partner. However, one must remember that the political economy of Malta remains highly dependent on developments beyond its own borders, as one of the small countries that ‘tend to be inherently prone to exogenous shocks over which they can exercise very little control, if any’ [1, p. 11]. Any appraisal of the determinants of foreign policy of Malta must concern itself with what is called the ‘level of analysis’ problem, which is at the heart of the debates in IR theory about agency and structure⁴.

At the state-level analysis, the political system, foreign policy and discourse in Malta have been dominated by the two major parties⁵. The ‘island’s politics has been dominated by the Nationalist and Labour parties, each of which has strongly influenced the economic and social structure of the Maltese society’ [2, p. 262]. Between these two major local political forces, in the ‘immediate pre- and post-independence period,’ as a leading local economist pointed out, there has seen a ‘hardening polarization’ [3]. An apparent polarization, throughout the past five decades, in terms of ideology and policy preferences, in foreign policy, external trade and in the role of the state (or government) in the economy [4, 5].

At the international level-of-analysis, Malta’s central location in the middle of the Mediterranean, sixty miles south of Italy and two hundred miles north of Libya, long has defined its geo-political significance, and importance to the stability and security in the region and

⁴ The *individual*, *state* (or, society) and the *international system* are the (three) widely accepted *level of analysis*, as levels of generalization (or abstraction) frequently applied to the study of world politics. They were amended by radical scholars like Marx and Lenin to account for economic problems by focusing on the *class*, while more recent, alternative approaches have emphasized *text*.

⁵ The Times of Malta, various editions.

along the southern frontiers of the EU, particularly in recent years with the deepening of the North-South schism, the severity of political-economic upheavals and the rise of religious fundamentalism

However, Malta's location has traditionally been 'remote from the centres of European prosperity' [4, p. 467]. It 'always had a history closely [linked] with that of great powerful nations' [6, p. ix]. Malta, in international relations, as Calleja pointed out, is as an 'example par excellence' of a 'weak and penetrated state' that 'ride[s] on the coat tails of larger states,' belonging to the category of 'dependent states'.

Writers, in conventional economic analyses, with the 'Small Islands' or 'micro-states' paradigm in mind, assessed strategies of socio-economic development in Malta in terms of the internal factors inherent in this 'particular' kind of geography [7]⁶. For many analysts, the underlying theoretical framework for any assessment of Malta's foreign policy is a 'small state' approach. They explored the impact of the EU membership negotiations of Malta (and Cyprus) both on the EU itself and on the small states involved from a comparative and 'small state' perspective [8, p. 462]⁷.

In IR theory, about small states and their diplomacy, the focus is particularly on the English School, which does indeed provide considerable insight into small states, external relations and related foreign policy strategies. It shows how the foreign policy agendas and the related actions of many if not most small states push a certain broader agenda that focuses on International Law, international institutions, and the preference of diplomacy; this agenda is consistent with a development towards the 'Anarchical Society' that is at the centre of Rationalist theory, a key tradition in IR theory, as advanced among others by Hedley Bull and Martin Wight. In addition to the perspective of the discipline of IR, valuable insights into small states diplomacy can come from the practitioner's point-of-view on the conditions that determine the direction, tools and strategies available to small states.

Malta, Russia and CFSP

Diplomatic relations between independent Malta and the Soviet Union were formally established in 1967 during the Nationalist Party's rule. Before that, relations between Malta and the Russians, known for their historical interest in gaining access to the Mediterranean sea, emerged much earlier in time. The special connection between the Knights of Malta and the crown of Russia and the Russian Hospitaller tradition of St John within the Russian Empire are centuries old. As far back as 1698, Peter the Great sent a delegation to Malta under Field Marshal Sheremetev to observe the training and abilities of the Knights of Malta and their fleet.

With the Labour Party in power, between 1971 and 1987, relations between Malta and the Soviet Union were gradually strengthened through commercial ties, and the conclusion of bilateral agreements in areas relevant to this purpose like Merchant Shipping, Air Services and a number of Trade Protocols. Malta officially opened an Embassy in Moscow in 1982. With

⁶ One of the institutes based at the University of Malta is the Islands & Small States Institute, which evolved from the Islands and Small States Programme set up in 1989 at the Foundation for International Studies, Valletta. In 1993, the Programme was restructured as an Institute that promotes research and training on economic, social, cultural, ecological and geographical aspects of islands and small states, and offers postgraduate courses on islands and small states studies.

⁷ See also [9, 10].

the Labour Party in power, Malta and the Soviet Union, in 1981, concluded an agreement providing that in case of situations that 'create a threat to peace and security or the violation of international peace', the two countries will 'coordinate their positions in order to remove the threat or to establish peace.' There were reports of the infiltration by Soviet elements in the General Workers Union (GWU) of Malta, probably the cornerstone of the Soviet influence on the Island in that period. There was also the birth of a Communist party, with several left-leaning politicians that failed to gain much support⁸.

The Labour government of Malta has sought to move, to a certain degree, closer towards the USSR with the intention of creating a balance vis-à-vis other encroaching powers, and acquire Soviet support for high-priority national goals, notably in 1964 (for independence); in 1974 (within CSCE, to consolidate security in the Mediterranean); and in 1981 (to secure neutrality).

It was during the time of Nationalist administration, following the victory in the general elections of 1987, when Malta, possibly due to its strategic location, where East meets West and North connects with South (at least from a European perspective), along with a long history of domination by foreign powers, was symbolically chosen for the US-Russia Summit in December 1989. On board the Soviet cruise ship Maxim Gorky, in Marsaxlokk Harbour, Bush and Gorbachev had their meetings, just a few weeks after the fall of the Berlin Wall. This was undoubtedly one of the principal highlights of the Island's standing on the world stage.

The Nationalist government, following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, extended official recognition to the Russian Federation as an independent and sovereign state in December 1991. Before that, in November 1990, a Russian Cultural Centre was inaugurated in Valletta. Exchange of high-level bilateral visits by government officials continued, notably the visit of Malta's Prime Minister to St. Petersburg in May 2003 to participate in the EU-Russia Summit. In April 2007, Foreign Minister Michael Frendo met his Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov at the margins of the General Affairs & External Relations Council (GAERC) meeting in Luxembourg, where they discussed among other things how to improve cooperation on a number of bilateral issues.

In June 2008, Alexander Grushko, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs responsible for European Affairs, visited Malta for talks with the Nationalist government on bilateral and international topics. During the meeting with Tonio Borg, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs, Grushko referred to EU-Russia relations, stating that Russia wanted to build a strong partnership with the EU and wanted to further develop relations with it, even in the context of the new EU-Russia agreement. Tonio Borg, in the first visit by a Maltese Foreign Minister to Russia in the last 20 years, discussed with Sergey Lavrov in Moscow in November 2009 the most salient bilateral issues as both sides expressed a clear willingness to work together to strengthen ties and enhance relations. The Maltese Consulate in Moscow was officially inaugurated as part of this official visit⁹.

In Malta, a country dependent of tourism, tourist arrivals from Russia in 2008 reached 23,412, an increase of almost 7,000 since 2005. In a country that promotes itself as a centre for teaching English language to foreigners, an increasing number of Russians are coming to take English language courses in various levels in Malta's International Language Schools. Currently, there are 307 companies registered in Malta under Russian ownership, and exports

⁸ The Times of Malta, various editions.

⁹ The Malta Independent and The Times of Malta, various editions.

to the Russian market amount to EUR 2 millions a year, with pharmaceutical and plastic related products as major exports¹⁰.

Malta, under the Nationalist government, joined the PfP in April 1995, but the Labour party withdrew it in October 1996, before the Nationalists decided to reactivate the membership in March 2008, which was accepted by NATO at the summit in Bucharest on April 3, 2008¹¹. After joining the EU in 2004, within the framework of the CFSP, which deals with a specific part of the EU's external relations, mainly security and defence diplomacy and actions, Malta, like every Member State, is an equal party to all policy initiatives and activities, as a fully qualified and functional part of the whole the EU, which acts as a unified bloc. However, the decision-making mechanisms and the relevant institutional settings of CFSP have certainly become influenced by the expansion of the EU, which created wide-ranging implications for common foreign policy on security issues. Small states in the EU, as a result of its enlargement, are today in the majority (and the number of small states has dramatically increased following the end of communism in central and Eastern Europe, and the collapse of the Soviet Union). With active abstentionism, and prominence of national perspectives, interests and requirements, CFSP, till now, has had little success in creating a common approach to foreign and security policy¹².

For the government in Malta further development of the CFSP, with all its different elements, remains a priority but when it comes to the formulation and implementation of a common policy, many Maltese politicians and policy makers are aware that the government must often take into consideration the opinions and positions of all other Member States, and be prepared for compromises. Considering Malta's limited political-economic resources and military capacities, as well as all the fields of activity involved in European integration and coordination, it is understandable that the country cannot contribute to, and participate in, all of the CFSP themes on an equal level. Malta's overall declared priorities, which have been spelled out in the Government's EU policy guidelines, remain mostly limited to the increasing of the EU's effectiveness in reducing security risks in the world; the enhancing of security in the immediate neighbourhood of the EU; and the promotion of social development based upon a market economy, economic growth, good governance and democratic principles.

Local state managers seem aware that regardless of Malta's membership of the EU, in case of any conflict, both in the European Continent as well as in the Mediterranean Region, as history has shown, Malta would still get involved, in one way or another. Even if Malta could still not take part in any military operations in a perceived conflict that European Powers would be taking part in, it would still benefit from taking part in the decision-making regarding that same conflict; act as a mediator and a peace broker between the EU and a third country, and have the protection of a strong defence structure.

In general terms, Malta, in its relations with the Russian Federation, could be well described — in line with Leonard & Popescu categorisation, in their article for ECFR in November 2007, entitled 'A Power Audit of EU-Russia Relations' — as a 'Friendly Pragmatist'. It maintains a close relationship with Russia and tends to put its business interests above political goals; though a small state that is rarely capable of setting the EU agenda, mostly

¹⁰ National Accounts of the Maltese Islands, various years.

¹¹ The Labour party won the elections in 1996 and Malta's application to join the EU was 'frozen' in 1997. In 1998, following a vote of no-confidence in parliament, the Labour Prime Minister called for early elections, which brought the Nationalist party back in power.

¹² The Malta Independent and The Times of Malta, various editions.

following the mainstream policy largely shaped by powerful member states like Germany and France, Malta has shown reluctance to confront Russia on politically sensitive issues; while not really an active promoter of Russian interests within the EU system, it tends to oppose actions which it fears might irritate Moscow, and focuses on advancing pragmatic, national business interests, as it seeks to take advantage of the opportunities offered by Russia's economic growth, and attract a growing number of Russian tourists and language students.

It seems that the thrust and nature of Maltese diplomacy in the conduct of international relations clearly put a higher premium on persuasion and consensus building than on power play, which is a common characteristic of small states. Malta's international status is significantly shaped by the Constitution of Malta's detailed definition of three elements: it is a neutral state; adheres to policy of non-alignment; and refuses to participate in any military alliance. The text of the relevant articles of the Constitution is an exact reproduction of *Article 1* of the Treaty of Neutrality signed with Italy in 1980. Italy, a member of NATO, not only guarantees the island's neutrality but also its overall security.

Following more recent transformations in world politics, and the changing of the source and form of potential threats to the security of Malta and Europe in a post-Cold War world order, the scope, meaning and interpretation of 'Neutrality' (and Non-Alignment) have undoubtedly acquired new dimensions. For Malta, some argue, it might be problematic in the military sense to remain neutral unless, like other neutral states such as Switzerland and Sweden, develop a strong defense capacity, but that is undoubtedly difficult given its internal political history and limited human resources, economic and financial capabilities.

Moreover, a known reality for the power elite of Malta is the island's geo-economic vulnerability. Malta covers just over 300 sq km (120 sq mi) in land area with nearly 420 thousands inhabitants, making it one of the world's smallest and most densely populated countries. It has no natural resources. Malta, in a broad context, must maintain a high degree of interdependence within the international economy to prosper or, some would argue, to survive [11]. It is evident that the fundamental guidelines of Malta's diplomacy and foreign policy are also shaped by the keen interest in international trade and by the requirements of the dependence within the global division of labour on other countries to produce most of the goods and services needed to sustain the welfare of the Maltese population.

Concluding Notes

For Malta, there were changes in the national level of analysis, from what has been described as pro-East to what has been identified as pro-West, while becoming a member of the EU. The strategic location of Malta in an international system undergoing remarkable transformations, including the collapse of the USSR, the rise of international terrorism and the emergence of new security issues and political discourses, brought about a series of debates on the neutrality of the island.

However, the dominant political forces in Malta since independence showed no intention of making any attempt to bring about any significant change in the country's relations with a powerful country like Russia. The government in Malta, under the Labour Party and the Nationalist Party, has sought to adopt a pragmatist position in its relations with the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation, largely focussing on securing its national, political and economic interests. Moreover, there is little doubt that the government could witness that the EU still

needs to show more unity around a common approach to Russia, one that reflects the EU's long-term strategic interests as a prominent political-economic bloc.

In any analyses of the relations between Malta and Russia (and the impact on CFSP), a review of IR theory, and practitioners' opinion and attitude, demonstrate how significant are interrelated historical, geo-political and geo-economic realities. What matters, it seems, as the source of explanation for Malta's relations with Russia, a powerful country to which the EU is still far from having a cohesive-collective policy, are considerations found in 'traditional' geopolitics, and in the interest in safeguarding a certain form of neutrality, while maintaining the international interdependence of the Maltese economy.

The dynamics of bilateral relations between Malta and Russia in the context of the CFSP, as a case study, appears to lend support to the argument that the underlying theoretical framework for any assessment of Malta's foreign policy is a 'Small State' approach. It is a reminder of the primacy in international relations of forces of 'continuity' relevant to those of 'change.'

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