

# **YOUNG PEOPLE'S TRAJECTORIES THROUGH ANTI-ISLAM(IST) AND EXTREME RIGHT MILIEUS: COUNTRY LEVEL REPORT MALTA**

**Mapping online and offline  
spaces of engagement with  
the extreme-right among  
young Maltese people**



**MAURICE SAID  
JEAN-PIERRE GAUCI  
CHRISTINE CASSAR**



## **DARE: Dialogue about Radicalisation and Equality**

### **Young people's trajectories through anti-Islam(ist) and extreme right milieus: Country level report**

#### **Malta**

#### **Mapping online and offline spaces of engagement with the extreme-right among young Maltese people**

**Maurice Said, Jean-Pierre Gauci, Christine Cassar**  
**People for Change Foundation**

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*This publication reflects only the views of the author(s); the European Commission and Research Executive Agency are not responsible for any information it contains.*



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## Executive Summary

This report explores and analyses young Maltese people's experiences of engaging with extreme-right ideas, personalities and groups, online, as well as in their everyday lived experiences offline. This report also explores the lived experiences of young people living in two localities that are the stage for frequent anti-immigrant demonstrations, racial abuse and hate crimes. These localities are often deployed in anti-immigrant and extreme-right narratives, as symbolic of the threat Others pose to other localities and their inhabitants. Given this highly charged context, how do young people living in these areas negotiate their day-to-day experiences in these localities with counter-information, available via social media platforms.

Interviews were conducted with young people affiliated with extreme-right groups, former members of such groups and young people living in areas subject to significant transformation and social upheaval. Drawing on the islands' insularity from mainland Europe, its geopolitical position between Europe and Africa, and the transformations brought about by EU membership, this report also explores how young people make sense of, and engage with, their place and individual identities in a context marked by significant change. The observations presented here reflect the ambivalence and euro-scepticism that highlighted Malta's accession to the EU and, similarly, emerge out of locally contested imaginaries of the 'Maltese nation'. Contested identities and notions of the nation, in this regard, reflect an absence of belonging and social cohesion that seemingly drive some young people to embrace nostalgic representations of national ideals, or, in extreme cases, define themselves in unified opposition to juxtaposed and 'inferior others'.

We describe respondents' relationships to their localities and how their engagement with these spaces has changed. In this regard, we identify an aspect of these changing dynamics as the restriction of individual mobility, particularly for women, who find themselves having to negotiate increasingly contested and male-dominated spaces in their everyday lives. Here, places are characterised by avoidance rather than congruence with the Other.

The interviews highlight that young people's trajectories of engagement with the extreme-right in this context, in part, result from social, political and economic marginalisation. The ingrained political partisanship, coupled with clientelistic relations between politicians and private industry and a deep distrust of mainstream media, have encouraged young people to seek out alternative sources of information and experiment with new ideas. Within this context of experimentation, young people who affiliate with the extreme-right, reject the labels they are attributed, including the term 'extreme-right', which is used here. The association of nationalist rhetoric accompanying concerns over boundaries, security and sovereignty, reflect the ongoing anxiety around questions of nationhood and identification.

## 1. Introduction

The Maltese context, in which this milieu is situated, is characterised by a highly-polarised and partisan political landscape, coupled with interconnected social and family networks. As a result, social dialogue around contentious social issues also tends to follow along partisan lines (Mitchell, 2002; Baldacchino, 2009). In such a context, the internet, and social media more broadly, provide opportunities for alternate forms of dialogue and access to unrestricted information. In recent years, the number of examples and recorded incidents of hate speech online have increased dramatically, as has the proliferation of fake news. The online presence of extreme-right groups, forums and messages has also burgeoned in recent years and, as elsewhere in Europe, has coincided with an increase, or perceived increase, in immigration, particularly from the African continent. The management, or mismanagement, of the humanitarian crisis has resulted in spatial and demographic change that has permeated into online spaces. Against this backdrop the selected milieu involves young people living in one of two localities: Birżebbuġa and Marsa. Both these localities have experienced significant transformations over the years and have been the scene for various racially-motivated incidents.

Birżebbuġa, a seaside town in the south-east of Malta, is especially popular with the local Maltese population, particularly as a result of its winding promenade dotted with restaurants and bars along the popular beach, aptly named ‘Pretty Bay’. The locality is also within close range of the busy industrial Freeport, which saw 1,757 ship calls in 2019 alone (Malta Freeport, 2020), and whose looming towers of containers and heavy machinery balance precariously at the edge of Birżebbuġa’s skyline. The contrast between the idyllic beach and the industrial backdrop hints at the wider set of tensions that characterise the social interactions and wider context in the area. Perhaps most significantly, the Ғal Far industrial estate is located between Birżebbuġa and the Safi military barracks at the southern end of the island. This area houses the Ғal Far Open Centre, otherwise known as ‘Tent village’ on account of the sprawling rows of dilapidated housing containers and rugged tents. It is one of six remaining facilities, and the largest one, for housing asylum seekers and migrants. Apart from Birżebbuġa and the free port, the Open Centre is isolated from key urban, residential and commercial parts of the island, a characteristic that has turned Birżebbuġa into a key site for socialisation and employment among asylum seekers and migrants housed at Ғal Far. This development has not always been warmly received by some locals in the area and has been the source of some friction, resulting in racially motivated tensions, violence and abuse targeted at asylum seekers and other migrants (see section 2.2 for further details).

Similarly, Marsa, a small harbour town set along the island’s industrial harbour with a population of just over 5,000 inhabitants, is the location of the Initial Reception Centre (IRC), formerly the Marsa Open Centre, which houses approximately 520 asylum seekers (JRS Malta, 2020). Due to its location in the port area and at the centre of a busy intersection of roads that link the central urban areas, including the capital Valletta, with the south-eastern region of the island, the town has also become a key source of irregular labour for asylum seekers and migrants seeking casual work, predominantly in construction and agriculture. On any given day, driving past or through the town, old and young migrant men (predominantly from the African continent) can be seen lining the busy thoroughfare in the baking heat, waiting for potential employers to pull over. Living conditions at both the IRC and Ғal Far are overcrowded and have been highlighted as deplorable. On 20 October 2019, a fire broke out at the Ғal Far Open Centre, which garnered widespread media attention and a barrage of hate speech. Commentators on social media, particularly Facebook, left messages advocating for migrants to be burnt and shot, as well as levelling accusations of ingratitude for the hospitality received. The riot had escalated following months of flaring tensions over the appalling living conditions at the centre. Against this backdrop, the milieu includes a first set of participants composed of young people between the age of 18 and 30 from either of these two localities. The aim was to identify how young people engaged within these contexts of social transformation, experience their communities and how that experience is informed or influenced

by such incidents, as well as their online engagement with information about these events. In other words, how do young people caught in the midst of potentially turbulent or contentious social environments mediate between public opinion, available information and personal experience to make sense of the social transformations taking place around them?

A second set of participants includes young people between the age of 18 and 30, who are either affiliated, or were affiliated, with extreme-right or right-wing populist groups. The selection of these two groups of participants serves to contrast young people's varying engagement with, and responses to, extreme materials and messages. Here, we ask how place and the direct experience of others affects, if at all, young people's engagement with online information related to events in their communities? By contrast, how do young people who are not from these communities and who have/had extreme-right affiliations or sympathies engage with these events differently, if at all?

Given the current political climate in Malta, the roots of which are described in further detail in Section 2 of this report, is one that reflects deep-seated factionalism driven by an 'us' *versus* 'them' rationale, reflected both in political activities and affiliations at the level of national politics (Mitchell, 2002; Attard, 2013), as well as more communal tensions between smaller groups/factions from either side of the political spectrum, such as NGOs, human rights organisations and far right groups, among others. Furthermore, the type of engagement with extreme messages, focused on within this milieu, increasingly takes place online and, in this regard, *this research probes the overlap and interactions between the online sphere and the offline social sphere*, with particular attention to the context of young people. Right-wing populist parties and the extreme-right movement in Malta have grown in popularity in recent years, achieving considerable gains in the last MEP (Member of the European Parliament) elections, with far-right candidate Norman Lowell receiving 8,000 votes or 3% of the total vote.<sup>1</sup> In selecting these two groups of participants, the objective here is also to probe what messages resonate with young people from either end of the political spectrum. Here, we ask how information obtained online influences young people's engagements with the everyday contexts surrounding them, from personal experiences of transformation or social upheaval, to local and national events.

## 2. Setting the scene

### 2.1 Historical context

The Maltese islands have had a long and varied history marked by extended periods of conquest and settlement by foreign powers, from the Phoenicians, to the Romans, Byzantines, Arabs and Normans, among others (cf. Braudel, 1995). This historical trajectory marked by conquest has contributed to the characterisation of Malta as the linguistic and cultural melting pot of the Mediterranean (Vanhove, 2007; Camilleri and Caruana, 2011). Of particular significance to the context of the current milieu, Malta became a British Crown colony in 1813 and, since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the nationalist anti-colonialist movement had been characterised by a close connection and identification with Italy. Malta was formerly a part of the Norman Kingdom of Sicily until 1194 and, from 1800 until 1813, it was a protectorate under Naples and Great Britain. This direct influence, together with Malta's geographic proximity to Italy, and the influence of Italian culture and language, have all contributed to this close identification with Italy. This identification with Italy, dubbed Italianism (*italianità*), was perceived as a counter-reaction to unwelcome anglicisation. In an article for the Times of Malta – the national English-language newspaper

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<sup>1</sup> Malta Today, 2019, Resizing Norman Lowell: Far right candidate gets 3% but leads small parties, <https://www.maltatoday.com.mt/news/europe-2019/95285/resizing-norman-lowell-far-right-candidate-gets-3-but-leads-small-parties#.X5-fZ1B7IPY>



– former Judge of the European Court of Human Rights, Giovanni Bonello (2018) writes that mid-way through British occupation ‘[t]he majority of Maltese were rejecting any coerced British influence – few cared to use the language, fewer cared for the monarch’s religion, British currency was boycotted, interaction between the Maltese and the British settlers was generally nil – indifference on both sides, verging on hostility’. This scenario led to a deepening of divisions between an ardent pro-colonial faction and an increasingly vocal pro-Italian faction, with ‘fringe extremists who believed that Malta was Italian and should form part of the Kingdom of Italy – the irredentisti’ (ibid.). This irredentist orientation has been re-awakened in recent years and adopted by the growing number of extreme-right and populist groups in Malta. Similarly, Lutterbeck (2009) notes with reference to the extremist group *Imperium Europa* (IE) that the party’s ‘basic objective is to recreate the Holy Roman Empire, led by a pan-European elite and ‘cleansed’ of all non-white and non-Aryan elements’ (ibid.: 140).

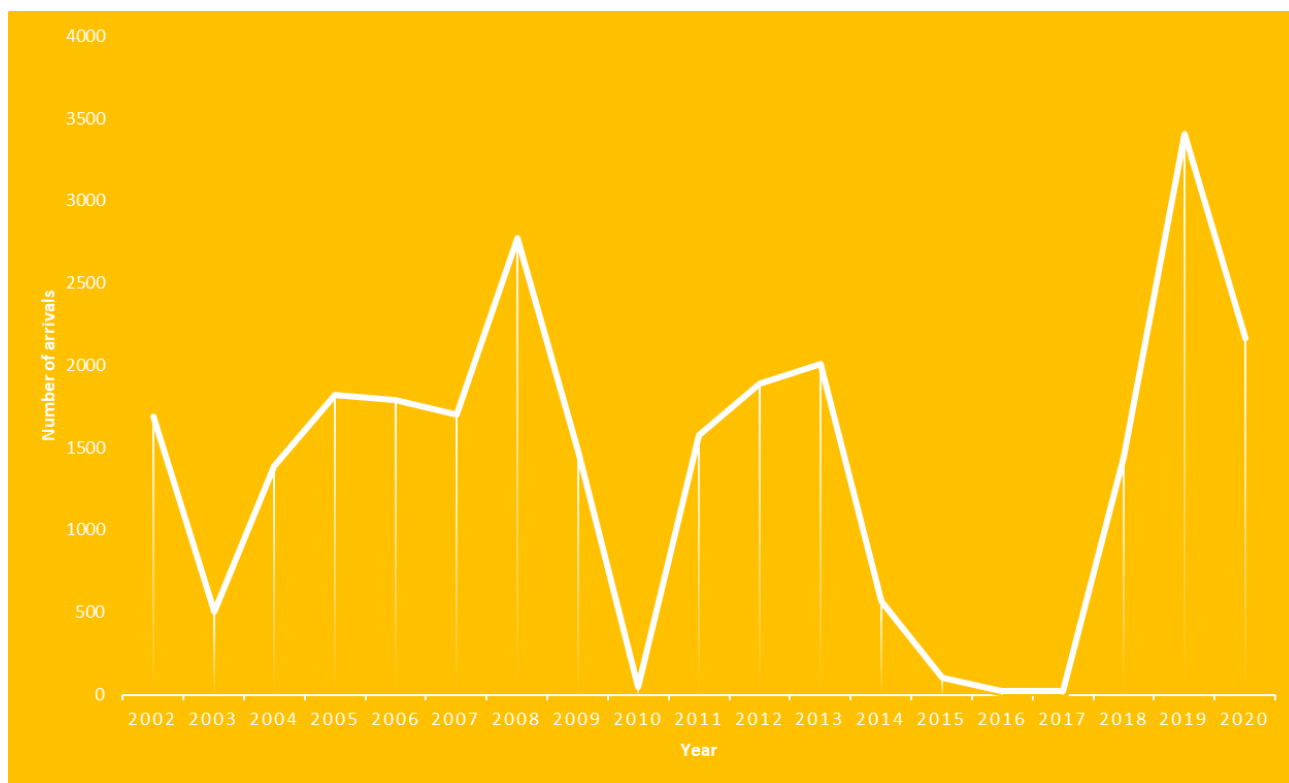
The growing opposition to British cultural influence during the colonial period culminated with the advent of Mussolini in Italy (1922-1943), attracting a significant number of city-dwelling Maltese to the local *Casa del Fascio* (‘House of Fascism’), established on the islands in the 1920s. It is worth noting that the official arm of the Maltese fascist party, rather than being pro-Italian, adopted the ‘Malta first’ slogan that was later appropriated by the Labour party (Frendo, 1986). However, this brief engagement with fascism was interrupted by World War II, when the British Empire, using the Maltese islands as a strategic naval base, was at war with Fascist Italy. The bombing of Malta by Italy during the war contributed to quelling, for a time, the pro Italian factions in Malta. This was further aided by the execution, in 1942, of Carmelo Borg Pisani, a Maltese art student who had been persuaded to spy for the Italians in preparation for the planned Axis invasion of the island (dubbed *Operation Herkules*) (Falzon and Micallef, 2008: 396). Following the end of the war and with independence from Britain in 1964, Malta experienced a turbulent political period as it sought to forge an identity as a nation that could incorporate the pro-British and pro-Italian factions of the population. However, the Maltese political landscape has remained just as fraught with tension and bitterly polarised between the Nationalist (PN) and Labour (PL) political parties. In fact, Falzon and Micallef (ibid.: 396) note that key representatives of two former, yet fairly contemporary (2005-2010), Maltese right-wing parties have drawn inspiration from neo-fascist Italian Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI). This fascist history and worldview has trickled into the contemporary context of extreme-right and populist politics in Malta, where ideological narratives embrace a pan-European identity.

## 2.2 Contemporary context

Following the political turbulence of the post-independence period, the turn of the millennium in Malta brought with it a series of events, among them becoming an EU member state in 2004, that opened up the island’s borders to even further change. From 2002 onwards, Malta experienced a surge of asylum seekers, predominantly from the African continent, departing Libya for Malta in a bid to flee war and persecution. Specifically, following pressure from the EU, Morocco and Tunisia tightened their immigration laws in 2003 and increased border security, including the use of electric fencing enclosing the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla. Additionally, increased Spanish patrols in the West Mediterranean shifted migration routes eastwards towards Malta and Italy (Baldwin-Edwards, 2006). As illustrated in Figure 1, arrivals took place in waves between 2002 and 2020, and were also greatly affected by the 2011 uprising in Libya, as well as changing policies and approaches to migration at the national and EU level. Migrants from the African continent and regions further afar, such as South Asia and the Middle-East, end up in Malta *en route* to Italy and mainland Europe, in many cases working and living in multiple countries in order to accumulate the amount of money needed for the crossing (Schmoll et al., 2011). These developments and rapid changes, in part, fostered the emergence of factions of organised extreme-right and anti-immigrant groups in Malta. In order to situate the discussions and analysis presented in the rest

of this report, this section provides an overview of the main groups and key players in Malta's extreme-right scene, as well as how and when they came about.

Figure 1: Number of arrivals of asylum seekers by year since 2002<sup>2</sup>



Among the extreme-right and populist groups in Malta, Imperium Europa (Latin for 'European Empire'), is the most prominent and longest running group. The group was set-up, and is headed, by former banker and extreme-right provocateur, Norman Lowell. As a party, Imperium Europa originally proposed the ethnic cleansing of the whole of Europe ('from Ireland to Vladivostok', on the eastern Pacific coast) in order to achieve an exclusively 'europid'-inhabited continent. Prior to 2008, this idea incorporated large swathes of other continents in what Lowell envisaged as 'two white rings encircling the globe'.

Lowell's ideology is reflective of global neo-Nazi and white supremacist beliefs: Holocaust denial, rampant anti-Semitism (Lowell has described Jewish people as 'sewer rats'), and racism (particularly aimed at 'negrids'). The party's logo features elements from Nazi Germany (1933-1945) and Maltese folklore, consisting of a black-coloured cross of the Order of St-John within a white circle and red background (see Figure 2). Lowell's most popular positions include his anti-immigration stance and palingenetic vision for the revival of a pre-Christian spirituality (dubbed as 'cosmotheism'), with Malta to be featured at the forefront of this movement on account of its Neolithic and Megalithic heritage sites.

<sup>2</sup> Source: National Office for Statistics, Police General Headquarters, Immigration section, Malta for data from 2002 – 2009. Data from 2010 to 2020: UNHCR, (2020), Malta Sea Arrivals, <https://www.unhcr.org/mt/wp-content/uploads/sites/54/2020/05/Malta-Sea-Arrivals-and-Asylum-Statistics-2019-UNHCRFactsheet-allyear.pdf> [Accessed: 02/10/2020].

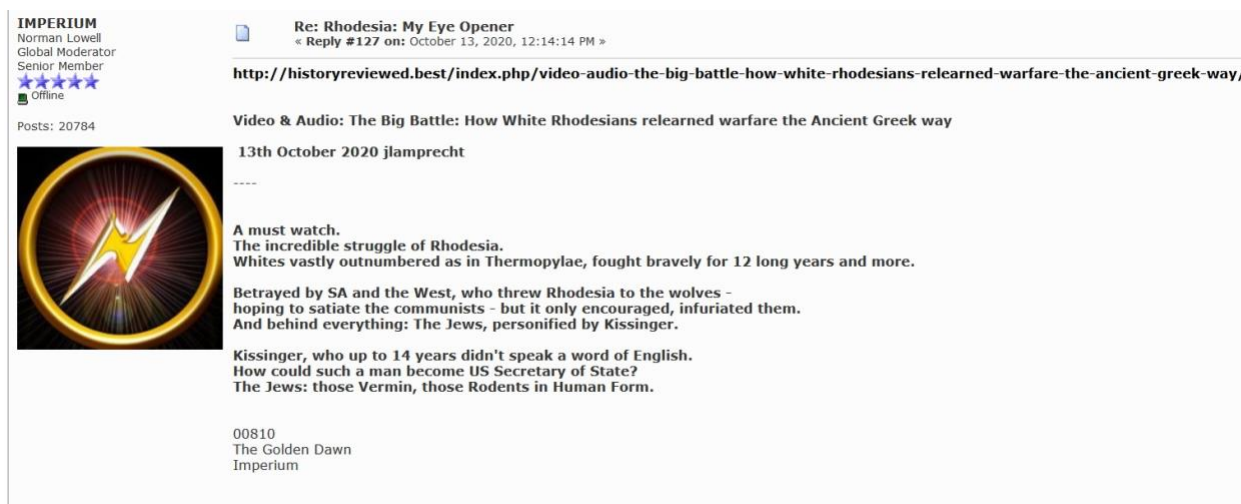


Figure 2: Imperium Europa's logo incorporating imagery from Nazi Germany and Maltese Folklore



Falzon and Micallef (2008) detail how in the 1970s, Lowell spent many months immersed in the racial politics that Rhodesia (modern day Zimbabwe), was embroiled in. It was this experience that gave shape to his white supremacist ideas, as he himself attests on numerous occasions, including on IE's online forum VivaMalta.net (Figure 3)<sup>3</sup>.

Figure 2: A snapshot of one of Lowell's messages on the online forum VivaMalta.net, detailing the influence his experiences in Rhodesia had on him and his ideas

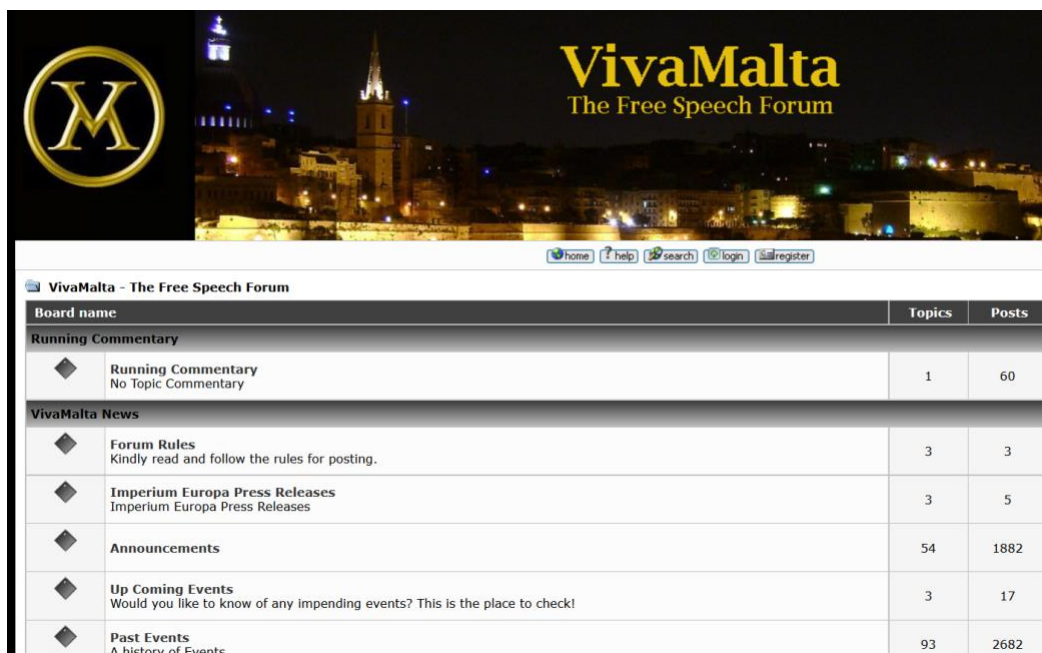


He claims that it was ultimately these experiences that allowed him to fully understand 'blacks' and their 'racial inferiority'. Imperium Europa dominated the Maltese extreme-right political scene in the first half of the 2000s, spurred on by the increase of asylum seekers fleeing the war-torn Horn of Africa, with few other extreme-right groups really flourishing during this period. However, Lowell's repeated appearances

<sup>3</sup> In the screen shot in Figure 3, the sign off makes reference to 'the Golden Dawn'. Whilst across the VivaMalta forum there are a number of references to Golden Dawn in Greece, the sign off displayed in the image appears unrelated. Norman Lowell ends many of his posts with this reference which appears to relate to the dawn of a new, golden, era – with reference to the rise of the 'White race' or a pan-European alliance. Each time the Golden Dawn sign off is used with a number preceding it. In one post there is reference to the Golden Dawn, preceded by *Krita Yuga*, the Sanskrit for 'the accomplished age' or 'Golden age'.

in Youtube videos, as a candidate in MEP elections (with increasing popularity), his coverage by local mainstream media and, perhaps most significantly, his online forum on VivaMalta.net, have all increased his public persona and local following in recent years. In particular, the forum VivaMalta.net has 770 members and is regularly visited by guests, with over 134,000 posts since being established (Figure 4).

Figure 3: The VivaMalta.net forum, moderated by Norman Lowell



Board name	Topics	Posts
<b>Running Commentary</b>		
Running Commentary No Topic Commentary	1	60
<b>VivaMalta News</b>		
Forum Rules Kindly read and follow the rules for posting.	3	3
Imperium Europa Press Releases Imperium Europa Press Releases	3	5
Announcements	54	1882
Up Coming Events Would you like to know of any impending events? This is the place to check!	3	17
Past Events A history of Events	93	2682

Between 2005 and 2010, two other extremist parties emerged onto the local scene: Alleanza Nazzjonali Repubblikana ('National Republican Alliance'), established in 2005 but disbanded in 2007; and the Azzjoni Nazzjonali (AN, 'National Action'), established in 2007 and disbanded in 2010. ANR characterised themselves as a pressure group to 'defend and promote the identity, integrity, and interests of the Maltese nation,' defined as 'Latin, European, and Roman Catholic'. ANR's ideology differed sharply from Imperium Europa's emphasis on a pre-Christian past. ANR's systematic reference to the Christian world has often been employed to convey attacks against religions other than Catholicism. In September 2006, when Pope Benedict XVI (2005-2013) pronounced his highly controversial lecture at the University of Regensburg (2006)<sup>4</sup> (in which he highlighted the 'evil and inhuman' nature of Islamic teachings), the Maltese party took the opportunity to express its 'full and unconditional solidarity' with the Pontiff's speech. Apart from religion, ANR's two main lines of attack consisted of a conservatism based on 'traditional' models of nation and family, as well as a strong anti-immigration stance. The two were clearly linked, as immigration was represented to be the main threat to the Maltese models of family and values.

Azzjoni Nazzjonali's (AN) ideology drew on an aggressive nationalist, conservative and anti-immigration agenda. At its inception, founder Josie Muscat, a prominent gynaecologist, private medical care entrepreneur and former deputy from the PN, stated: 'Malta is being invaded by people arriving in boats

<sup>4</sup> XVI, P. B. (2006). Faith, reason and the university. Vital Speeches of the Day, [http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20060912\\_university-regensburg.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060912_university-regensburg.html) [Accessed: September 25<sup>th</sup> 2020].

and people who are landing with a visa. These will overtake the country in the next 20 to 30 years, unless we do something as one third of Maltese are married to foreigners’<sup>5</sup>.

A more recently formed party, the Moviment Patrijotti Maltin (‘Maltese Patriots’ Movement’), was established on 8 April 2016. The MPM serves as the political wing of an already existing anti-immigration pressure group called the Għaqda Patrijotti Maltin. In October 2016, MPM organised a protest in Bugibba (Northern region), in response to the Malta Muslim Council’s planning application to convert a local basement-level shop into a prayer room. Party leader Henry Battistino took the opportunity to call for a national registry targeting the Muslim community in Malta, stating in the process, that their members were ‘rabbits who produce 6 or 7 children with the sole intention of taking over the island’. In January of the same year, members of the Għaqda Patrijotti Maltin made headlines with an episode soon dubbed as the ‘great pork sandwich intifada’, where the group responded to Muslims praying in the open air in the seaside town of Msida, by distributing free pork sandwiches in the same area. Apart from actions targeting Muslims, MPM’s demonstrations also include actions aimed at perceived blasphemy towards Christianity. In July 2017, Battistino and his supporters vandalised an Msida restaurant’s billboard depicting Da Vinci’s Last Supper with milkshakes, pizza and fries. However, and in line with the new party’s fierce opposition to migration, the Muslim residents of Malta remain its main target. MPM’s prolific militant activism may have been partly responsible for the adoption of a new amendment to the criminal code, expanding the scope of the crime of ‘incitement to racial hatred’ to also include ‘incitement of religious hatred’. Accordingly, those convicted of incitement to religious hatred are now liable to imprisonment for a term of 6 to 18 months. Nonetheless, MPM remain active and in February 2019 in the run-up to their MEP election bid, MPM’s campaign truck featured images of former Labour Prime Minister Dom Mintoff and former PN Prime Minister George Borg Olivier, in a dig at the contemporary leaders of these two parties. In this regard, MPM leader Henry Battistino said, Malta ‘is not the country we grew up in and is not the country that Mintoff and Borg Olivier built’.<sup>6</sup>

On 25 June, 2020, a new extreme-right political party, il-Partit Popolari (the People’s Party), registered with the Maltese electoral commission. The leader of the party, Paul Salomone, had previously been active with Azzjoni Nazzjonali (AN) and Alleanza Nazzjonali Repubblikana (ANR) and, as recently as 2019, was an active member of Norman Lowell’s Imperium Europa (IE).<sup>7</sup> In June 2006, while a sitting member of ANR’s executive council, Salomone was charged with incitement of racial hatred for a speech he made during an anti-immigration protest in Valletta on 8 June 2006.<sup>8</sup> The party’s platform lists eight priorities that reflect the party’s motto: *mill-poplu għall- poplu* (from the people for the people). This platform gives priority to putting a stop to low wages and a national economy that favours big business, whilst also seeking to curb mass migration. All three of the latter, reflect a popular narrative often touted by anti-immigrant groups where foreigners, from other EU countries as well as third-country nationals, have dominated the labour market to the detriment of local Maltese, but to the advantage of big business. In this regard, the party’s platform draws a connection between rising prices in the property and rental market with burgeoning migration from Europe and beyond. The party has gained some traction among traditionalists by

<sup>5</sup> The Malta Independent, (2007), ‘Azzjoni Nazzjonali’ Promises Malta ‘a breath of fresh air’, <https://www.independent.com.mt/articles/2007-06-10/news/azzjoni-nazzjonali-promises-malta-a-breath-of-fresh-air-174706/> [Accessed: July 20<sup>th</sup> 2020].

<sup>6</sup> Lovin Malta (2019), Forget The Brexit Bus: Take A Look At The Patrijotti Maltin’s New Campaign Truck, <https://lovinmalta.com/news/local/forget-the-brexit-bus-take-a-look-at-the-patrijotti-maltins-new-campaign-truck/> [Accessed: 02/10/2020].

<sup>7</sup> Malta Today (2020), Partit Popolari, led by former AN activist Paul Salomone, is latest far-right grouping, <https://www.maltatoday.com.mt/news/national/106019/partit-popolari-led-by-former-an-activist-paul-salomone-is-latest-far-right-grouping#.YDFACnnTVPZ> [Accessed: 12/02/2021].

<sup>8</sup> The Times of Malta (2006), Charged with inciting racial hatred, <https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/charged-with-inciting-racial-hatred.49923> [Accessed: 12/02/2021].

highlighting their commitment to a society built around the family and family values and taking a stance against abortion. The latter conforms to dominant notions of nationality within the Maltese context, where this is intimately tied in with a version of Catholic morality, patriarchy and tradition (Mitchell, 2006). Whilst aspects of the PP's political manifesto may appear to align with left populism, as noted earlier, these are driven by an anti-immigrant sentiment and rhetoric. Furthermore, the party has tapped into people's frustration with the current political climate in Malta, advocating for more referendums, freedom of speech and protection of Maltese sovereignty. The latter three points again seem to be referring specifically to immigration and recent controversies around public opposition to immigration, with particular reference to the spike in convictions and fines over hate speech. Similarly, the emphasis on holding referendums in the Maltese context is perceived to absolve those voting from the burdens of party loyalties, allowing voting to focus on an issue, rather than party affiliation (cf. Cini, 2003).

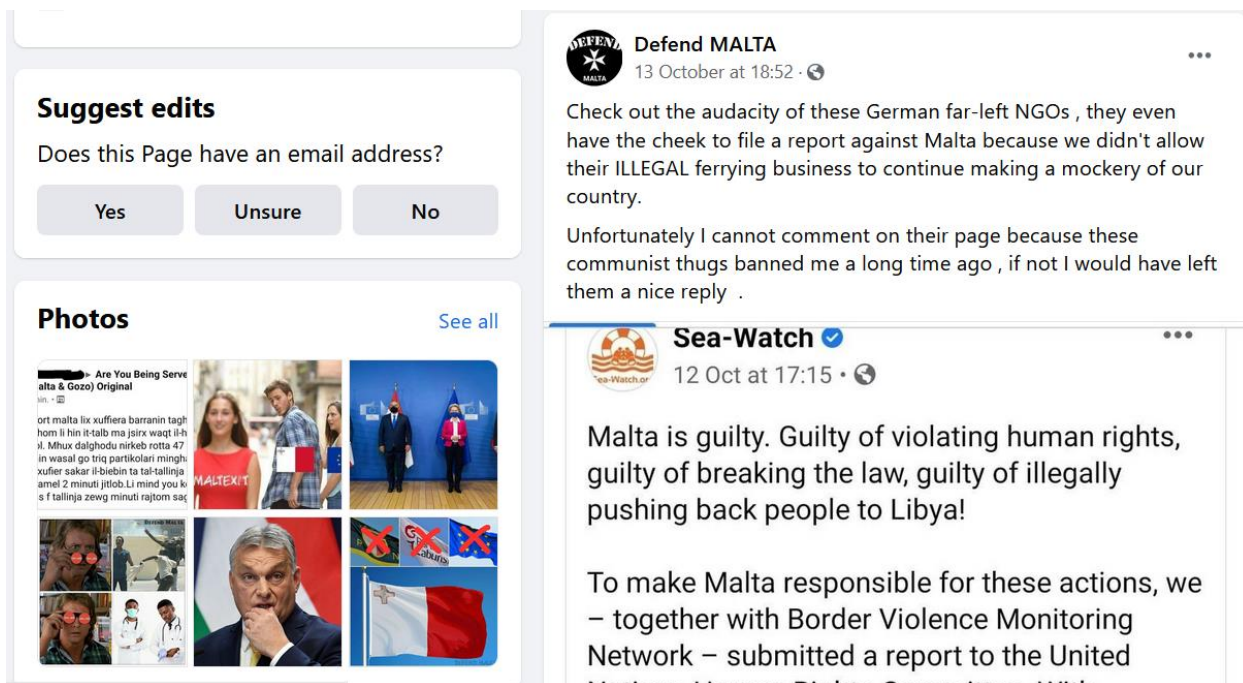
In order to situate the wider societal impacts of this burgeoning extreme-right scene, it is useful here to highlight key racially motivated events and wider societal conflicts that contextualise the tensions in the Maltese cultural landscape. On 6 April 2019, 42 year old Lassana Cisse Souleymane from the Ivory Coast, was killed in a drive-by shooting in Ħal Far. The car was being driven by two Armed Forces of Malta (AFM) soldiers, Francesco Fenech and Lorin Scicluna, in what was a racially-motivated and deliberate attack. In addition, two other African migrants were also injured in the attack. Both soldiers were charged with the murder of Lassana, as well as attempted murder of the other two migrants. It emerged that both were involved in an earlier hit and run on another African migrant, for which they were also charged. The attack was significant not only because of the brutality of the unprovoked attack, but also in terms of the public reactions it invited from both ends of the political spectrum, highlighting in the process, the level of racism and violence regularly inflicted on African migrants in Malta. The incident represented one of the most blatant, racially-motivated acts of violence on the island. Following the incident, an investigation into the online groups and websites frequented by the two soldiers, revealed a number of affiliations to extreme-right and anti-immigrant Facebook groups, such as 'Defend Malta' (Figure 5).

The proliferation of such groups on social media platforms is not a new phenomenon in the Maltese context, however the number and membership of such groups has been steadily rising over the years. Among these groups are 'Defend Malta', 'Malta taghna' (Our Malta) and 'Malta tal-Maltin' (Malta belongs to the Maltese). Much of the discussions and posts shared across these groups are anti-immigrant and have considerable online followings: Defend Malta (over 21,000 followers), Malta tal- Maltin (over 8000 followers). In this regard, riots broke out at the Ħal Far Open Centre in October 2019 when a migrant tried to enter while drunk. The incident sparked a row between the involved migrant and a security guard, which seemingly represented the breaking point, coupled with abysmal living conditions at the centre, and quickly escalated to involve 300 individuals in a full blown riot. This incident was a major topic of discussion across the cited Facebook group pages and forums and was marked by a significant degree of hate speech and racism.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Times of Malta (2019), Ħal Far riot sparked by row between migrant and security, <https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/policeman-injured-three-police-cars-set-on-fire-in-hal-far.743646> [Accessed: 20/10/2020].

Figure 4: Screen shot of Defend Malta's Facebook page, featuring one of the many posts targeting immigration



A key incident that sent shockwaves both locally and internationally, was the assassination of Maltese Journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia on 16 October 2017. While the assassination has been partly attributed to corruption in business and politics, and the links between the two, the incident itself is particularly emblematic of, and significant for, many of the themes and contexts being discussed in this report. In 2008, Daphne Caruana Galizia stepped away from a journalistic career with mainstream media outlets, although she retained her weekly column with the local English-language newspaper, the Malta Independent, to set up an online blog 'running commentary' (see Figure 6).

Figure 5: Screenshot of Daphne Caruana Galizia's first blog post in March 2008 on her blog running commentary

## Running Commentary

Daphne Caruana Galizia's Notebook

### Zero tolerance for corruption

« back to home

PUBLISHED: MARCH 2, 2008 AT 2:02AM

Share 1231 Tweet 377 in Share 0

Whenever the leader of the Labour Party is asked questions about the more embarrassing aspects of his past, he says he'll leave it to the historians to decide, because as far as he's concerned it's all water under the bridge and he has no regrets. And this when nobody has bothered to ask him yet what he thought of the Labour government's corruption and terrible moral and physical violence in the days when he was president of the Labour Party. When Sant claims that he has zero tolerance for corruption now, the first thing that comes to my mind is how accommodating he was to corruption at all levels in the mid-1980s. And those were the days when you couldn't report it to the Commissioner of Police, because not only was he a 'paraventu' for corruption in the real sense of the word, but his men were not to be trusted. Let's say that this is some kind of act of redemption on Sant's part – protesting too much now because he didn't protest enough (or at all) then.



Daphne's blog was set-up in 2008 as a way of circumventing editorial restrictions associated with working with mainstream newspapers, as well as recognising the broader appeal of the internet and the possibilities for reaching a wider audience. The blog was established to focus on local politics and the discussion of local and international socio-economic and political issues, particularly corruption between politicians and private business. Perhaps most significantly for this report, the blog also doubled as a forum for broadening dialogue on local issues, free from the restrictions of mainstream and traditional media outlets. Apart from investigative journalism into corruption, the blog also engaged in commentary on the activities and personal lives of various public and private figures in the Maltese context, drawing the ire of a significant portion of the population (mostly affiliated with the Malta Labour Party [MLP], of whom she was particularly critical), as well as the admiration of many other Maltese for her outspoken style of writing. Daphne also made frequent reference to extreme-right personalities and groups, including in her first blog post that featured an extract, cautioning people to look beyond Lowell's eccentricities, given 1,600 people had voted for him in 2008 (a significant number by Maltese election standards). In a post in 2014, 6 years later, she noted how 6,400 people had voted for Norman Lowell, a four-fold increase.<sup>10</sup> Daphne Caruana Galizia's assassination in October 2017 and the resultant investigation exposed the business and political involvement in her assassination, leading to national protests at the end of 2019 and the eventual resignation of the then Prime Minister Joseph Muscat, his chief of staff and a further two ministers.

## 2.3 Locating young people's engagement with online and offline extremist material and influences

The context of the milieu in Malta is characterised by the relatively small size of the island (27km by 14.5km or 316km<sup>2</sup>) and, as a result, the interconnectedness between different groups and individuals. This characteristic of the local context has shaped the type of extreme-right radicalisation which takes place online, which is the main focus of this report. In this regard, it is of note that Malta has recorded the second highest rate of social media engagement in Europe according to Eurostat.<sup>11</sup>

The milieu here is characterised by a country context where people of the same age group tend to pertain to multiple overlapping social groups, further complicating issues around identity concealment. This, in part explains why radicalisation activities tend to be concentrated in the online domain, where some degree of anonymity can be maintained. Shame and social stigma are also characteristics of the context, where people's affiliations can be brought into question and used, at times, in discriminatory ways to target people in terms of social standing, as well as constituting a risk to their employment and other prospects.

The noted Dutch anthropologist, Jeremy Boissevain, wrote extensively about the different factions that characterise everyday life in the Maltese village context, where people group together on the basis of political party affiliations, level of alignment with the church, membership in village band clubs and the extended family (cf. Boissevain, 1965). Similarly, Godfrey Baldacchino (2002) refers to Malta as a nationless state, lacking in a sense of national identity but endowed with a state's legal infrastructure. In this regard, Pace (2014: 143) notes that 'Policies tend to be dressed as sharp alternatives even when the divergences may not be so acute'. Both Vella (2018) and Harwood (2020) emphasise the stable partisan

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<sup>10</sup> Daphne Caruana Galizia (2014), 6,400 people voted No. 1 for Norman Lowell, <https://daphnecaruanagalizia.com/2014/05/6400-people-voted-no-1-for-norman-lowell/> [Accessed: 20/10/2020]

<sup>11</sup> See: Malta Today (2019) '79% of Maltese use social media every day', <https://www.maltatoday.com.mt/news/national/96279/79-of-maltese-use-social-media-every-day#.X3XBqe1S9PY> [Accessed: 20/09/2020].



loyalties and fierce competition that characterise Maltese national politics. On this point, Harwood (2020: 5-6) argues that the formation of the two party system in 1966 emerged along factional lines, on the one hand the pro-Italian pro-Church and pro-business conservative Nationalist party (PN) and on the other, the secular and socialist Labour party (MLP) with strong links to the British Labour party. The social divisions highlighted by the polarised political parties has similarly determined the public's response to the 2003 EU membership referendum and the 2011 referendum on divorce, where large swathes of the electorate were deeply divided on these issues along partisan lines (cf. Pace, 2014). Figure 7 below illustrates a billboard used by the anti-divorce campaign in the 2011 divorce referendum featuring an image of Christ and advocating for a no vote in the referendum. The anti-divorce camp was very closely associated with nationalist party and the church and such images are reflective of the polarising divide across political factions and the moral orientations driving such factions.

Figure 7: A billboard from the anti-divorce faction during Malta's 2011 referendum on divorce. The billboard features an image of Christ and reads "Yes to Christ, No to divorce"



The extremely polarised nature of Maltese politics has resulted in a similar polarisation around contentious social issues, such as migration, providing a further impetus for online engagement. However, these online activities have permeated into the social and offline domains in, sometimes violent expressions. This has typically been the case in localities that have experienced an influx of foreigners, particularly asylum seekers and third-country nationals, such as Marsa and Birżebbuġa. These incidents have included daily verbal abuse, side-lining and discrimination, as well as more extreme forms of physical violence. These incidents have, at times, been given legitimacy by political actors in either of the two main political parties, as well as more vociferously by the host of extreme-right groups across the island (Attard, 2013). Given the age group of participants (18-30), many would have had their formative years coincide with Malta's accession to the EU, a development that gave rise to increased numbers of foreigners in the country, as well as greater opportunities for young people to travel.

### 3. Field Research

This section provides an overview of the approach and time frame for the field research, how data was collected and the types of data collected, as well as an overview of the participant recruitment process.

Interviews took place between February 2020 and September 2020 and participants were divided across two sets. One set (9 interviewees) was composed of young people with no known affiliations to extreme-right groups but who live in areas where racial abuse and hate crimes are on the rise. The second set (6 interviewees) was composed of young people who are, or were formerly, affiliated with an extreme-right group, or who sympathise with an extreme-right ideology. Given Malta's relatively small size and its geographic position at the southern border of Europe and at the centre of the Mediterranean, the overall aim of the field research was to understand young Maltese people's engagement with extreme-right ideas and how the local context, cultural setting and everyday relationships affected their level of engagement with the extreme-right. The rationale behind using two sets of participants was to contrast responses from young people who had been radicalised with those young people who had not been radicalised and from young people living in areas that are more ethnically diverse with those who do not live in such areas.

### 3.1 Data collection

The first set of participants (see Table 1), involved young people (between the age of 18 and 30) from localities experiencing a significant increase in immigrant populations and a congruent increase in racially-motivated tensions, such as these localities becoming the site for protests organised by extreme-right groups.

Table 1: First participant set (young people living in Marsa or Birzebbuga, none of whom have affiliations to extreme-right groups)

Name (pseudonym)	Age	Country of Birth	Education	Employment	Ethnicity	Family status	Gender	Religion	Religiosity	Residential status	No. in household
Alyssa	26	Malta	Secondary	Full time	Maltese	Engaged	Female	None	Atheist	Lives with parents	3
Fiona	28	Malta	Other- but didn't graduate	Full time	Maltese	Partner	Female	None	Atheist	Lives with single parent	2
Karen	26	Malta	University of Malta/ Postgraduate	Full time	Maltese	Partner	Female	Roman Catholic	Believer but not practising	Lives with parents	3
Kristine	22	Malta	University student (current)	Part-time	Maltese	Partner	Female	Roman Catholic	Practising	Lives with parents	4
Shania	30	Malta		Unemployed	Maltese		Female				
Amanda	26	Malta	University of Malta/ postgraduate	Full time	Maltese	Partner	Female	None	Atheist	Lives with parents	3
George	30	Malta	University of Malta/ Undergraduate	Full time	Maltese		Male	Catholic	Atheist	Living with partner	3
Cikku	26	Malta	MCAST / post-secondary	Part time	Maltese	Single	Male	Roman Catholic	Agnostic	Lives with parents	4
Lara	27	Malta	University of Malta/ postgraduate	Full time	Maltese	Married	Female	Catholic	Catholic	Home with husband and children	3

Access to the second set of participants (see Table 2), all of whom had extreme-right affiliations, was negotiated over the course of three months through common acquaintances. Participants who were willing to be interviewed or, where this was not deemed possible, who were willing to arrange a meeting for an informal conversation, were identified. In the interim, whilst interviews were being organised, I regularly followed Facebook (public) profiles and social media pages belonging to prominent extreme-

right actors and groups in the local scene, including videos of speeches by such members available on YouTube, as well as posts shared through Twitter, on the VivaMalta forum and across various anti-immigrant Facebook pages, such as Defend Malta. When viewing such online material, people's responses and reactions to posts and opinions were recorded, in line with the themes covered by the DARE project and the highlighted milieu, in particular. Of the many people we reached out to, the vast majority of those affiliated with extreme-right groups insisted on face-to-face meetings, with a number declining to be interviewed but agreeing to meet and chat informally. Although six interviews were conducted for this set, between June and September, six other lengthy conversations were conducted with young people who have or had affiliations with extreme-right groups. However, in all six of these cases participants pulled out of the actual interview, owing to fear of being identified or as a result of suspicion in the overall aims and intentions of the project. Whilst attending meetings with potential participants, as well as during the face-to-face interviews, detailed notes were recorded on observations relating to use of space, participants' reactions to and interactions with others, in a bid to provide ethnographic vignettes that would further contextualise the interviews being conducted. Overwhelmingly, and surprisingly, this set of participants felt more comfortable communicating in person or via phone call, rather than online, where much of their engagement with the issues concerned took place.

Table 2: Second participant set (young people who are/were formerly affiliated with an extreme-right group or who sympathise with extreme-right ideologies)

Name (pseudonym)	Age	Country of Birth	Education	Employment	Ethnicity	Family status	Gender	Religion	Religiosity	Residential status	No. in household
Samuel	30	Malta	University of Malta/ Postgraduate	Full time	Maltese	Single	Male	None	None	Renting	1
Alex	24	Malta	Secondary	Full time	Maltese	Single	Male	None	None	With parents	4
Alfred	27	Malta	Secondary	Part time	Maltese	Single	Male	Catholic	None	With Parents	4
Jonathan	29	Malta	University of Malta	Full time	Maltese	Engaged	Male	None	None	Renting	2
Charles	32	Malta	University of Malta	Part-time	Maltese	Single	Male	None	None	Rents	1
Daniel	29	Malta	Secondary	Full-time	Maltese	Single	Male	None	None	Home with parents and sibling	4

As interviews and conversations progressed, it became apparent by way of the different responses received from each set of participants, that such a contrast between these two groups would be more revealing of the risks of online/offline radicalisation, as well as providing a basis for the comparison of young people's different life trajectories, experiences and ideological orientations. In other words, each set could represent a countermeasure to the other in identifying trajectories to radicalisation particular to the Maltese context.

All interviews (Table 3) across both sets of participants were conducted using a semi-structured and informal approach.

Table 3: Data set

	Number	Total length or brief description (as appropriate)	Average length
<b>Respondent memos</b>	15	n/a	n/a
<b>Audio interviews</b>	15	1,021 mins	85mins
<b>Field diary entries (total)</b>	6	~15,000 words, included descriptions of interview locations, conversations prior to and following interviews, biographical notes.	2,500 words
<b>Other data</b>		YouTube videos and forums related to various people and extreme-right personalities mentioned in the text. Anti-immigrant Facebook group pages	n/a

### 3.2 Access, researcher-respondent relations and positionality

As highlighted throughout this report, access to the field and participants was restricted as a result of the relatively small size of the island and the level of social interconnectedness, where people of the same age group are, in many cases, likely to have similar acquaintances, relations or frequent the same locales. Implicit to the latter, as highlighted in section 2, the Maltese political landscape is highly polarised, resulting in a context driven by an attitude of ‘guilty by association’. In other words, potential participants were sometimes wary of being associated with extreme-right or extremist groups. This is particularly problematic since such an association, in the context of this milieu, can have deleterious impacts on an individual’s employment and everyday social relationships. Additionally, given a perceived lack of political representation, many young people align with different groups around specific issues, rather than necessarily adhering to a specific ideology. As alluded to earlier, apart from the social repercussions of such an association as extreme-right or extremist, such labelling may have the inadvertent effect of becoming self-fulfilling through its application. It thus invites the question, if the objective is to understand trajectories of radicalisation across different social and group contexts, how helpful is this compartmentalisation of individuals as either extreme-right/extremist or not? Further, how flexible is the application of these concepts across different national contexts? To this end, Pasioka (2019: 4) notes that:

... such a query goes against the increasingly common observation of the mainstreaming of extreme-right ideas and how the boundaries of what is conceivable and admissible – both in terms of political discourse and decision-making – have been shifting. Within the social sciences, this observation is often translated into an attempt to understand why ‘decent’ citizens would support a radical party or vote for a racist, xenophobic option.

This observation became apparent through multiple initial attempts to contact individuals who had expressed support for views pushed forward by extreme-right or populist groups, with some showing a discernible discomfort with the assumed association. This observation also serves to contextualise the sentiments that young people express with regard to such labelling.

When organising interviews, the initial intention had been to approach members or affiliates of extreme-right and populist groups in Malta, or at least young people who expressed an interest in extremist ideologies. Planned interviews were frequently cancelled and accompanied by apologetic messages or complete silence, owing to a fear of being identified through another common acquaintance, as a result

of the island's small size. This made the potential identification of participants an issue of concern. For example, an earlier interview was conducted with Cikku, a young man living in Birżebbuġa, by another researcher. Although a pseudonym was applied, I was able to identify who he was simply from the description of his family and the locality he lived in, despite never having met the individual.

A second issue, and connected to the first, was potential participants' hesitancy in participating out of suspicion of the DARE project's overall focus. In this regard, the People for Change Foundation, who are coordinating the research in Malta, is a human rights organisation with a clear message on equality, integration and human rights. Coupled with the latter, links to the DARE project website and the terminology used, had, in some cases, dissuaded individuals from participating out of fear that their participation would be used to support an agenda other than their own. This apprehension on the part of potential interviewees was quelled through the use of a gatekeeper. This necessitated mobilising personal social networks in Malta to identify participants with whom a shared connection existed, either through a friend or family member. Given the age gap between interviewers and potential participants, former students at the University of Malta were also contacted to aid in initiating introductions and scope out potential participants. Ultimately, out of the participants in the second set, three accepted as a result of a trusted gatekeeper and the other three included individuals with whom the researcher is a close acquaintance. In other words, in the absence of a personal connection or reliable gatekeeper, young people with extreme-right affiliations were unlikely to participate. However, participants who were formerly members in an extreme-right group emphasised that they considered it important that they speak out about their experience, even though they were fearful of the repercussions should their identity be revealed.

A third issue, and again related to the first two issues, is that such potential participants were genuinely fearful of what might happen to them should anyone in their peer group find out they had participated and might label them traitors, or worse. This third issue revealed a host of additional hurdles. As a result of the shroud of suspicion around the objectives and agenda behind the research, potential participants were, in most cases unwilling to participate in an online interview and preferred to meet face-to-face. This proved especially problematic because of the restrictions on movement imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic. Apart from this, interviews had to be re-scheduled and, at other times, cancelled altogether when potential participants became paranoid about their identity being somehow revealed. In one such case involving Charles (a pseudonym), a former affiliate of Norman Lowell's Imperium Europa, a date for an interview had been agreed upon. On arriving at the meeting, Charles changed his mind and refused to participate and, instead opted for a 'chat'. Thus, access to individuals had to be negotiated over multiple weeks, both before and after an interview had taken place. In one case, Daniel (also a pseudonym) requested a copy of the recorded interview and, shortly after, got in touch to warn that he had mentioned some names in the recording and to be careful not to mention them in the report. It is important to note here that Pfc and the interviewers involved frequently work with marginalised groups, asylum seekers and victims of abuse and are therefore well-acquainted with the contexts such groups face on a daily basis in the Maltese context.

### 3.3 Ethical practice

Each participant was approached independently and provided with information about the project and the scope of the interviews and, once they expressed interest in participating, they were sent an information sheet and consent form. Given the sensitivity of the topic, verbal consent was also sought in addition to written consent. Some participants expressed concern about signing their actual name on the consent form and in these cases, they signed with an X, instead of their name. One participant, refused to participate in a formal interview for fear of being recognised, yet allowed parts of our conversation to be



used. The concerned extracts were vetted by the participant before being included in the report. All participants, apart from two, consented to being recorded. Prior to the interview, participants were reminded that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw participation at any point during the interview. They were also repeatedly informed that they could decline to answer questions that they did not feel comfortable with. Participants were further provided with a copy of the recording and were informed that they would be sent a copy of the final report for their perusal. Participants were informed prior to the interview that they would be immediately assigned a pseudonym and any reference to them would be made using that pseudonym, including during the recording itself. I provided a guarantee of concealing their identities and the anonymisation of personal details. Given the small size of the island and the relative connectivity between localities and social networks, some details pertaining to descriptions of places, people and events have been altered slightly to further mask their identities.

### 3.4 Data analysis

The agreed-upon DARE procedure for data analysis was adhered to (see Introduction to this series of reports). The final number of Level 2 nodes is 20. The final number of Level 1 nodes is 42. Only six Level 2 Nodes listed in the Skeleton Coding Tree were not used, since no data was available within those themes.

### 3.5 Socio-demographic portrait of the respondent set

This report is based on 15 interviews with 15 informants, 8 men and 7 women. The first interview was conducted in early February 2000 and the final one in early September 2020. All informants were between 19 and 35 years of age. Interviews varied in length from 50 minutes to 2 hours, amounting to a total of 1,021 minutes (see Table 1). Out of the pool of participants, nine were in full time employment, four were part-time and one was unemployed. Four participants were educated to postgraduate level, 4 at undergraduate level and the remainder had all received up to secondary education, out of which one was pursuing post-secondary education. There are no clear distinctions in class between respondents and they appear to represent a broad range of profiles, which may partly be due to the majority of them hailing from the same locality.

## 4. Key Findings

### 4.1 Contexts of extreme-right affiliation among young people in Malta

I don't know, it seems interesting, but I can't risk it, if they find out it won't be good for me. You know what it's like here. They'll call me a traitor and set me aside. [*Jispiċċaw isejhuli traditur u jwarrbuni*]<sup>12</sup>

The above quote epitomises the typical shroud of suspicion that accompanied the numerous attempts to reach out to members, affiliates and sympathisers of Malta's extreme-right and populist scene. It serves not only to contextualise the stigma surrounding such affiliations, but highlights the intimate social networks that characterise Maltese everyday life, not that this aspect would necessarily be different in other social contexts, but the relatively small size and social interconnectedness on the island can expose individuals to wider judgement and shame that permeates into other domains of a person's life, such as

<sup>12</sup> This quote is taken from a conversation with a potential participant who is a member of an extreme-right group. After initially accepting to participate he had a change of heart and withdrew his participation. He is thus not one of the people interviewed for this report.



family, employment and even social standing. By the same stroke, it is also through such intimate social networks and gatekeepers that it was possible to establish contact with individuals drawn to the politics of the extreme-right. It is thus important, in this section, to highlight the particular characteristics, beyond the contextual and historical descriptions provided in Section 2 of this report, which shape young people's everyday interactions and how these inform the nature of their engagement with radical material, people and topics.

In this regard, this section moves beyond an objective analysis of the context of the extreme-right and radicalisation, favouring instead, a subjective narrative of participants' experiences and interactions in their everyday lives, in order to understand the specific contexts characterising extreme-right radicalisation and non-radicalisation trajectories in Malta. Significant findings from the interviews point to a highly informed and engaged stratum of young people, where this engagement is in many ways concealed from the contexts of the lived (offline) everyday world. The interviews highlight a highly-restrictive social environment in terms of dialogue, where shame and anxiety around social status place limits on what young people can and will say/do in the public space, favouring online media and platforms, as a result of their anonymity and the limits on the control of information. In this regard, in a recent Eurobarometer survey it was reported that 79% of Maltese use social media platforms on a daily basis, well above the European average of 56%.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, a 2018 European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) report notes the elevated level of racist abuse and hate speech on online platforms and social media in Malta (ECRI, 2018). As noted in the introduction to this report, there is no doubt of the impact social media engagement has had on the proliferation of fake news, hate speech and extremist content.

As noted, the pool of participants interviewed for this national report includes a section of young people from the localities of Marsa and Birżebbuġa, as well as a further group of young people who are either actively involved or have been actively involved with extreme-right groups in Malta. The latter pool of participants were, with one exception, drawn from the membership of Norman Lowell's Imperium Europa (IE). Across the majority of interviews, it was clear that the overwhelming activity of the extreme-right in Malta takes place online on social media platforms and extreme-right forums. One participant, Samuel, a former active IE member, emphasised the centrality of the forum on 'VivaMalta.net' (IE's official site) in fomenting hate speech. When asked what is discussed on this medium, he noted that common themes included:

Racial holy war and hang people from lamp-posts and shoot refugees while they're still on their boats, we'll take back South Africa and re-establish Rhodesia and push them all into central Africa until they starve out and all this. Maybe some people [on the forum] don't, some individuals might not want to disclose it openly but, that some people would say it openly within the group without facing repercussions, yes definitely. Obviously, I cannot quantify it, but even if one person says it and no one does anything to stop him, it means you're either an accomplice or you're either deciding whether to stay or go. (Samuel)

The evidence of hate speech and extreme content on VivaMalta.net is clearly evidenced in publicly-accessible posts, which, at the time of writing, exceed 134,000 in number from 770 registered members and numerous views from 'guest' visitors to the forum each day. However, hate speech is not solely relegated to online forums, with numerous Facebook groups established over the years, providing a platform for hate speech mostly directed at African immigrants. In August 2013, then EU Commissioner for Home Affairs Cecilia Malmström, was subjected to a flurry of abusive comments on her Facebook page

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<sup>13</sup> Malta Today, (2019), 79% of Maltese use social media every day, <https://www.maltatoday.com.mt/news/national/96279/79%20of%20maltese%20use%20social%20media%20every%20day#.X3XBqe1S9PY> [Accessed: 20/09/2020].

after she called for the immediate and safe disembarkation of 102 migrants aboard the tanker MT Salamis off the Maltese coast.<sup>14</sup> The number and extent of abusive comments was further legitimised by similar comments being posted by prominent politicians, such as a post by Labour candidate Alfred Grima, where he said ‘it’s a shame it wasn’t you Cecilia Malmström’ under a news item of the attempted kidnapping of another Swedish politician by Somali gunmen.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, and more recently, a riot that broke out at the Hal Far ‘Tent village’ on 20 October 2019, invited a stream of violent hate speech on social media platforms (see Figure 8, below). The Times of Malta (2019) reported that at least one fifth of the comments posted, threatened violence or death, with many comments making reference to ‘machine-gunning’ immigrants or burning them alive.

Figure 8: Screenshot of violent hate speech directed at African immigrants (Times of Malta, 2019)



The examples being cited set the stage for understanding the context and extent of online extreme-right radicalisation in the Maltese social and political climate, where the frequent involvement of public figures, including mainstream politicians, either through their inaction or direct engagement with hate messages, has added a layer of legitimacy to such sentiments. This political climate, underscored by intimate relations between members of the public and elected officials, and enforced by patron-client (*klijenteliżmu*) relations between these two groups, has contributed to a sense of ‘untouchability’ for people forming part of a politician’s network. In this regard, Mitchell (2016: 49) notes, ‘*Klientelizmu* (sic) refers to the process whereby personal relationships are established between politicians or bureaucrats

<sup>14</sup> The Malta Independent, (2013), ENAR condemns Malta’s ‘hate speech’ against Malmström, NGOs, <https://www.independent.com.mt/articles/2013-08-13/news/enarcondemns-hate-speech-against-malmstrom-ngos-in-malta-2320105472> [Accessed: 21/09/2020].

<sup>15</sup> Malta Today, (2013), Labour candidate apologises for anti-Malmström rant, PN says Muscat ‘reaping what he sowed’, <https://www.maltatoday.com.mt/news/national/29329/labour-councillor-s-anti-malmstrom-rants-show-no-end-in-sight-20130823#.X3b83O1S9PY> [Accessed: 21/09/2020].

and members of the public, the basis of which is a reciprocal exchange of favours – a form of patronage’. This dynamic highlights a phenomenon particular to the extreme-right landscape in Malta where, although extreme-right groups do exist, extreme-right ideas and expressions permeate across the mainstream political spectrum. What, then, differentiates these varying groups? The seamless integration of extreme-right ideology in mainstream politics, where they presumably do not belong, may account for the non-use of radicalisation as a term and concept in the Maltese context, at least not in terms of extreme-right politics. Here, the instances where the term radicalisation is used are overwhelmingly to refer to processes of violent indoctrination that occur ‘elsewhere’ and in most cases with specific reference to Islamist groups and terrorism more broadly. Indeed, the non-use of the term in the Maltese context, coupled with the widespread infiltration of anti-immigrant sentiments and extreme-right ideas within mainstream politics points to the normalisation of actions, discourses and ideas typically associated with the extreme-right in other contexts. The following sections and sub-sections adopt the DARE project’s broader [definition of radicalisation](#): “The process by which individuals or groups come to embrace attitudes, or engage in actions, that support violence in the pursuit of extremist causes”. In this report we underline that the term ‘radicalisation’ is not one that is frequently used or understood in this sense in the Maltese context. However, the process identified in the cited definition of radicalisation is still one that is identifiable in the Maltese context. Thus, we use this definition to identify what form radicalisation, as it is understood in the DARE project, takes in the Maltese context and what alternative terminology is used to refer to similar processes. We also use the concept of radicalisation as a departure point for probing young Maltese people’s engagement with extreme-right causes, ideas and actions. Thus, we also attempt to determine what constitute the extreme-right in the Maltese context, particularly since such views are often legitimised and normalised by mainstream politicians from either of the two main political parties (PN and MLP). Can that which has been normalised continue to be considered extreme?

#### **4.1.1 The significance of place in shaping narratives of radicalisation**

As noted in the introduction to this report, the two localities that are part of its focus, Marsa and Birżebbuġa, have over the years become defined in the imaginaries of Maltese locals as places of contestation and dislocation. The concept of dislocation here draws on Harvey and Krohn Hansen’s (2018: 12) definition of it as a phenomenon that implies ‘spatial movement, but it also refers to other senses of disruption or disorientation, such as the sentiment of feeling out of place, or of losing your bearings or sense of self as things move and change around you’. In this regard, these two localities have become emblematic of this sense of dislocation, associated with the movement and transformations brought about by the increased presence of third-country nationals. This is evidenced by the organisation of a ‘solidarity walk in Marsa’ in September 2017 by Marsa residents, the stated objective of which was to protest ‘a disregard for the law by African immigrants in their town’ (see Figure 9).<sup>16</sup> The image used to advertise the post made a clear attempt to depict the event as one that was unitary, although it was noted that there was ‘a tinge of anti- African immigration sentiment about it’.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Lovin Malta, (2017), Marsa Residents To Protest African Immigrants’ ‘Lawlessness’, <https://lovinmalta.com/news/local/marsa-residents-to-protest-african-immigrants-lawlessness/> [Accessed: 20/09/2020].

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

Figure 9: The post advertising the 'solidarity walk', organised by Marsa residents



The walk was eventually boycotted by residents and the Marsa mayor, as well as mayors from neighbouring localities who were set to join, stating that the event ‘has been hijacked by “extreme right elements”’<sup>18</sup> with particular reference to the anti-immigration ‘Patriots’ party (MPM). In this regard, Henry Battistino, the leader of the group MPM, warned that the whole of Malta risks ‘becoming like Marsa, Bugibba, Msida, Hamrun and Birzebbugia’.<sup>19</sup> Some Marsa residents took to Facebook to express their support of the initiative, with one resident stating that public areas such as children’s parks, should be free from displays of drunkenness and violence, suggesting that immigrant housing should be given to low-income Maltese families instead. Another resident noted, ‘Norman Lowell was a prophet, he was very clear how we were going to end up if we kept on welcoming these people, who only care about destroying other people’s lands’.<sup>20</sup> Norman Lowell, leader of Imperium Europa also attended the event.

This example serves to contextualise Marsa and Birzebbugia’s place in the wider Maltese imaginary, as ones of contestation and uninvited transformation. This process is reflective of Appadurai’s (1991) and Gupta and Ferguson’s (1997) notion of deterritorialisation, where the ‘boundedness’ of place is constantly challenged. Suddenly, immigrant populations, police, extreme-right groups and pro-immigrant NGOs all descended onto these places, transforming them in the process and organising residents’ movements (places to avoid and no-go zones), collective memory (nostalgia for a different time and place) and relationships (pitching people as either in solidarity with or against immigrant populations). For example, this is reflected in the interview with Fiona, a 28 year-old from Marsa, where she notes that the places where she spent her youth in Marsa, such as public gardens, have become less-accessible. She says:

It used to be where you’d find kids playing outside, or teens, yes it used to be that way, but unfortunately not anymore..... When I was growing up, let’s say 11/12, at that time the open centres had just started up in Marsa, my parents used to be scared to let me go to the gardens, like ‘ah there’s a lot of black people there, hang out there, or that they sleep out

<sup>18</sup> The Malta Independent (2017), ‘Extreme right’ Marsa protest goes ahead despite mayors’ boycott, <https://www.independent.com.mt/articles/2017-09-17/local-news/Extreme-right-Marsa-protest-going-ahead-despite-mayors-boycott-6736179103> [Accessed: 20/09/2020].

<sup>19</sup> Lovin Malta, (2017), Marsa Residents To Protest African Immigrants’ ‘Lawlessness’, <https://lovinmalta.com/news/local/marsa-residents-to-protest-african-immigrants-lawlessness/> [Accessed: 20/09/2020].

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

there', which unfortunately they do, so we were always scared of these people. That's how it was in the beginning and I still believe that's how it is now, even though there's a lot of technology so kids are still stuck inside for that reason, I still believe that in Marsa people would not let their kids run around with bicycles, for example, or go to the gardens for the same reason. (Fiona)

Fiona's statement is one that reflects a constantly shrinking sense of place, where people are limited in their movements, but also limited in their opportunities to form social relationships. In this regard, when asked who she knows and meets within her locality, she responds with 'nobody, only my neighbours,' despite having lived in Marsa all her life. Furthermore, she highlights the varying unspoken restrictions in movement and access, such as Marsa residents' hesitance in going to an African-owned shop:

[t]here's a shop close by that used to sell veggies here, now I would say it's been taken over by an African guy and he sells like all sorts of things. I go there all the time. Like, if I need something quick, I just go there. And they [Marsa residents] don't go there for that reason. Which is a shame, which is a shame because they feel like especially for some reason, it's always females that they feel like they're threatened because there's usually males in that shop, you know? But I went there anytime and I have never seen any abuse. (Fiona)

In this sense, place is a narrative of the social relations between people, or the absence of such. Notions of place demarcate who belongs and who doesn't belong (Cresswell, 1992). Respondents from both Marsa and Birżebbuġa acknowledge the perceptions that exist of their localities, although across the pool of respondents there was a very clear distinction between male and female perspectives and relationships to place. For example, George, a young man from Marsa says:

I've observed that it's a lot more accepting of different cultures than the general, normal feel that you would find online in Malta. I have never heard 'go back to your country', which is very good..... Since the situation started [influx of immigrants to the area], more of the foreigners are starting to leave their houses, more than the Maltese are, so that I think the only culture change that came about has been Covid. .... Since there is a limited pool of people coming out, you start to see more, for example, there's a Filipino family just down the street and sometimes a group of Filipinos come out, for the most part it's like African, black people that are moving to and from their area in Marsa and Hamrun, so I don't think it's more of them, people are afraid of Covid at the moment. (George)

When asked what it feels like living in Marsa, he says:

I think very normal, no one is trying to bring up trouble, culturally I think, as an area, even the locals who are younger than I am have integrated well with the population that is foreign. The thing that impressed me the most is what I mentioned earlier, that there is no 'go back to your country' feel that you hear a lot over here [Malta]. I've actually seen old people smoking with foreigners, sort of joking around with each other, so I think it feels pretty normal, pretty diverse, not diverse in a bad way, people have integrated and you can feel the difference. (George)

George's emphasis that people do not approach foreign others with the phrase 'go back to your country' draws on his experiences of such comments online, as well as his experience of hearing such phrases used in other parts of Malta. He expresses surprise that this is not the case in Marsa, where similar to the example of the solidarity walk cited earlier, Marsa as a locality, is often used by outside groups and individuals as a prop in their discourses of contestation and non-belonging with regards to foreign others, despite such groups and individuals not 'belonging' themselves to Marsa.



Similarly, participants from Birżebbuġa made reference to the comments from other Maltese who were not residents in the area, where such people associated the area with a lack of security or as being '*qalb is-suwed*' ('among the blacks'). Cikku, who is 23 and from Birżebbuġa, describes the area as being very tranquil, mentioning that when he is with friends from outside the area, they request that they avoid passing close to the Ғal Far area because of its proximity to the Tent village. As noted earlier, female respondents reported a very different perception of their locality by contrast with male respondents. Shania, a young woman from Birżebbuġa, claims right at the beginning of her interview that, given the chance, she would like to move away to another locality in the south. When asked why, she replies 'because these localities remind me of Birżebbuġa, before it changed a lot, before the Freeport expanded and took over the area, before the area filled up with *klandestini*' (immigrants).<sup>21</sup> When asked what she means by *klandestini*, and whether she is specifically referring to immigrants of colour, she replies:

No, no, no I have friends who are black, who live here in Malta, and these friends are black, it has nothing to do with them being black. They can be black, purple, green, it doesn't interest me. People who come to Malta illegally, obviously they are living in Ғal Far, a few steps away, so a lot of them come to Birżebbuġa. Unfortunately, we don't know who these people are and it bothers me. (Shania)

When asked whether this view is due to a negative experience, she replies:

Yes! When I was 14/15, once I was waiting for some friends, we were going out and there was a group of *klandestini* who were walking back to Ғal Far. Many pass in front of my house and I was waiting a corner away from my home, because that's where we used to meet. They were drunk, you could see straight-away. They came over and said quite a few things and one of them kept following me. His friends turned away and kept walking and I walked away to get some distance between me and the one following. Finally, I got fed up and knocked at the door of a random house. As I was knocking at the door, he started calling out to me and his friends were waiting around the corner in the dark and they started calling out to him at that point, yet when he was following me they said nothing. Then a man came out of the house and he chased them away. In the meantime, he kept shouting in my direction 'Malta bad, Africa good' and 'my mobile number is....' – he started giving me his mobile number, as if I was going to call him. He frightened me a lot. At one point, he was so drunk, he kept on walking into the wall. If he had caught up with me, what would he have done? (Shania)

Similarly, Amanda, a young woman from Birżebbuġa highlights how her activities and excursions in the area have reduced over time and she notes that she has not really integrated with the local community. With regards to living in Birżebbuġa she says:

I think for work purposes it's not ideal, especially since most job opportunities are around Sliema,<sup>22</sup> then again I wouldn't imagine myself living further north and so I would stick to the south but probably not Birżebbuġa..... During the day in Birżebbuġa you see more of the ethnic community, Maltese people doing their shopping and stuff. It feels a bit safer, obviously. During the night, younger people tend to come out more, there's still a lot of families, especially because we have the swings and stuff and cafes. To be honest, it used to be safer before. So, if I had wanted a take-away, say 10 years ago, I wouldn't have minded walking on my own, but nowadays there tend to be a lot of young people that drink and hang around, so I wouldn't say it's not safe, but as a woman, I don't feel safe. (Amanda)

<sup>21</sup> The term *klandestini* is used to refer to immigrants, in this context, but highlighting 'illegality', 'non-belonging', 'unofficial' etc.

<sup>22</sup> An affluent coastal town in the north-central part of the island.



A significant aspect of young people's relationship to place within these two localities hinges on mobility, both physical mobility and social mobility. In this regard, as noted above, young women's movements in particular are subject to considerable scrutiny as they seek to navigate the unfamiliarity of increasingly male spaces. This is not to suggest that Maltese localities were previously free from the burdens of patriarchal control, but rather that they have become increasingly sites for masculine contestations over space. This is evidenced by the dominance of male-oriented activities within public spaces, such as drinking. As noted later, activities such as the solidarity walk in Marsa, which was hijacked by extreme-right groups, are also predominantly male-dominated and the groups involved utilise rhetoric that harkens back to a nostalgic notion of traditional Malta (Mitchell, 2004), in which the idealised woman's role is one that is restricted to the domestic space and where women have 'to be protected'. Within these contestations around public space and movement, young women are continually subjected to the male gaze that create seemingly impenetrable bounded-spaces, such as male-dominated shops (Fiona), roads (Shania) or even certain times of the day or night (Amanda). Implicit in this analysis is the oft-cited familiarity between people of the same locality who form part of a collective or community and, by contrast, immigrant others as the unknown and external to the community, as evidenced by Shania's statement of 'we don't know who these people are, and it bothers me'. In this regard, Yuval-Davis and Stoetzler (2002) draw on Armstrong's notion of symbolic 'border guards', to introduce the concept of 'boundary guards', which are used to 'identify people as members or non-members of a particular collectivity. They are closely linked to specific cultural codes of style of dress and behaviour as well as to more elaborate bodies of customs, religion, literary and artistic modes of production, and, of course, language' (Yuval-Davis and Stoetzler, 2002: 334). In this regard, boundary guards here implies the control over notions of community, and markers of identity, in an environment that is deemed to be beyond one's control. The next section draws upon young people's narratives of community and control, or lack thereof, in order to illustrate how experiences of significant transformations in their communities has influenced their views, day-to-day engagements and affiliations.

#### 4.1.2 Pathways to radicalisation – a generation of disenfranchised

On a scorching summer afternoon in early August, I waited to meet Daniel in the shade of the imposing Mosta Church's Dome. I had managed to reach out to him through a friend we had in common, who had vouched for me and, with some trepidation, Daniel had agreed to meet by the church and guide me to a garage he rented where we could speak in relative privacy. From my vantage point in the shade I was able to spot Daniel, strolling casually in a pair of flip flops and, as he caught my eye, he looked me up and down unconvinced. Having had other potential interviewees cancel at the last minute, his scrutiny and barely concealed disapproval, revived the anxiety of yet another potential cancellation. Thankfully, he motioned to me to follow and a quarter of an hour later we were sitting in a small, and clearly well used, garage. Our conversation was preceded by a series of nervous questions around guarantees for the concealment of his identity. This nervousness was now familiar territory to me. Daniel did not fit the stereotype of someone who sympathised with extreme-right politics, but the affiliation was undoubtedly there. He had, as had every other participant in this study, including those with no affiliation to extreme-right or extremist groups, lost complete faith in mainstream political parties, which he deemed to be corrupt and inept. In this regard, he said:

If I had to choose someone to represent me [politically], I would choose Norman Lowell. I've lost all faith in the bigger mainstream parties. Now that the *Partit Popolari* has taken off locally, since Norman Lowell only contests in the MEP elections, I will vote for them. (Daniel)

Almost all other participants highlighted the lack of moral leadership from either of the two major political parties. In this regard, participants from both sets, emphasised the perceived connections between politicians and private business interests, at the exclusion of local communities, contributing to a general feeling of political disenfranchisement. This lack of representation and the extremely polarising character

of Maltese national politics, appear to be a key factor in both driving extreme-right radicalisation, as well as in resisting it. Daniel's disillusionment with party politics stems from a deep dissatisfaction with the rapid way in which Malta has changed, in particular noting the stark differences between the Malta of his childhood and an over-developed and over-populated contemporary Malta. In particular he notes:

there were places around the locality where we used to camp as children, today they have been taken over by blocks of flats, the countryside that surrounded the town is gone and then we got a major supermarket and a McDonalds instead. There's more detachment from nature and an influx of foreigners. (Daniel)

Similarly, Alfred who is 27 and affiliates himself with Norman Lowell's *Imperium Europa*, bemoans the lack of opportunities (employment and education) that exist for people his age and the ever decreasing space that is available for people to use. He explains that he loves his locality (in the central part of the island), but the increased development has resulted in a transformation from what used to be a relatively green and quiet area to one dominated by the sounds of construction and choked by dust from those same activities. When asked what drew him to IE and Norman Lowell, he said:

He's the only one standing up for the issues that really matter, well him and AD.<sup>23</sup> Everything that he said would happen, happened. Don't get me wrong, I don't have anything against foreigners but, you know, Malta's too small. If we don't look out for ourselves, who will? The main parties don't care about anyone but themselves, but we are the ones who need to live here, not them. I don't want to leave but we cannot continue like this, thinking only how to fill our wallets. I consider myself an environmentalist, but when people know I like Norman too, that's it ... they stop listening. That's the main problem in Malta, no one discusses anything, from the political elites down to people like you and me. (Alfred)

Here, Alfred makes reference to the fact that Maltese politicians have irreversibly destroyed the Maltese landscape in the pursuit of their own interests, whilst simultaneously purchasing luxurious properties abroad. Similarly, Daniel views the major political parties as being self-serving and that these transformations are in part a reflection of a loss of a sense of community that is part and parcel of a self-serving approach at a state-level. In this regard he says:

Community implies others share your same interests, which nowadays is scarce. It's the era of individualism, I see everyone thinking only about themselves, there isn't that spirit of collectivity (*spirtu kollettiv*), that sense of belonging and sense of unity (Daniel).

However, longing for this spirit of collectivity draws on a sense of nostalgia, for a past that is perceived as beyond Daniel's reach now, a landscape transformed and with it the individual and collective memories of the idealised community that are kept alive through enduring childhood friendships where, as Coleman and Collins (2006: 16) note, 'persons are in effect places made mobile'. What is implied by this latter statement is, as noted in the previous sub-section, that relationships to place are essentially relationships between people, where a narrative of place identifies, in the process, who belongs and who does not. Drawing on his research into notions of community in Malta, Jon Mitchell outlines that narratives of a glorious past are often exaggerated and pitted against the uncertainties of the present. In this regard, he states '[t]he process can be characterised as nostalgia - a term originally used to describe a pathological homesickness, but more recently signifying a wistful or regretful longing for a particular place' (Mitchell, 1998: 63).

Samuel, a 30 year-old former member of Norman Lowell's *Imperium Europa*, also highlights his disenchantment with local politics whilst a member of the extreme-right group, as well as following his

<sup>23</sup> *Alternattiva Demokratika* (the Green Party)

departure from the group. However, his disenchantment is no longer quelled by nostalgia and in this regard, he says:

I was always interested in different pursuits, different types of literature and I just felt like these politicians all they were concerned about was just talking about raising or lowering petrol prices by 5 cents. These really mediocre kind of things – I still find them mediocre, but for different reasons these days. You know, just talking about these bland, silly things that don't make a difference. I was always interested in, I don't want to call it high politics, but politics of the ages of old, classical politics, politics of enlightenment, not the politics of budgets and petrol prices. I still think these things are ridiculous because no matter how much they lower prices, or whatever, workers are still, workers of all backgrounds Maltese or non-Maltese, they're still getting shafted at the end of the day.

My interest in politics and my view of politicians was of this really mediocre, unfulfilling type, we've heard it all before, been there done that, we've heard all this bullshit before. They still are today, but today my reasons for this are not because I agree with the far-right, for the opposite reason actually. Because these guys [politicians] have absolutely no idea what they're doing, bunch of careerists, opportunists, journalists becoming politicians, football managers becoming leaders of political parties, totally disconnected from the working class – these guys have no fucking clue, they cannot even understand what the people need and want, and I'm including non-Maltese people as well. (Samuel)

Samuel's reference to the political context in Malta is one of detachment, wherein politicians occupy a different realm, one that does not resonate with his views of what politics should be. It is telling here that his shift in ideology (covered in more detail in section 4.4.1) has moved from extreme right to the far left of the political spectrum, representing in either case a break with established norms of political ideology within the Maltese political landscape. This is noted throughout our conversation in his identification with the 'working class' and his assertion that whilst he has shifted to wholly the other side of extreme-right politics, this shift still encapsulates many of the same detachments from mainstream politics, albeit for different reasons. In this regard, this tallies with Žižek's (2009) analysis of disenfranchised groups, particularly young people, in contemporary neoliberal societies who find themselves 'a class deprived of elementary human rights, and therefore also exempt from duties towards society, an element within civil society which negates its universal principle, a kind of 'non-Reason inherent in Reason itself' (2009: 161). Žižek refers to this phenomenon as a 'symptom' of neoliberal globalisation, the inherent logic of which ensures individuality that never coalesces to find a unified voice in some 'rainbow coalition'. Similarly, Comaroff and Comaroff (2006: 270), also drawing on Žižek's notion of the symptom, highlight this phenomenon as the process whereby such disenfranchisement results in the establishment of a 'counternation,' engendering alternative forms and networks of communication and information exchange (social media and non-traditional media), labour (illegal, informal), spaces (online) and 'parodic patriotism' (e.g. extreme-right notions of white pan-European ethnicities).

Alex, another participant with extreme-right affiliations and sympathies, is 24 years old, well-read and erudite. Our lengthy conversation kept reverting back to the lack of representation in mainstream politics. He says:

Unfortunately, in my opinion, politics in Malta is a game of football between the blue and the red team and the Maltese – well as you know the two main parties, they've been here for over a hundred years or so they're quite strong, they're Goliaths, they're giants so you know, they know how to, in Maltese we say '*isaħħnu n - nies*' [get people riled up], especially in the last two months [before an election] and they always turn it into a party thing. Unfortunately, the Maltese people, the majority of them, they are addicts to their party. You know, if their

party won the election, they go out with horns shouting '*irbaħnilkom*', we won. It's a game of football, it's my team. Most important is that I don't let your idiots win, as long as my idiots and my team win. So we're narrow minded in politics, you know, and it's very challenging for a small party, it can be, for example, even the AD [Alternattiva Demokratika]. Why am I mentioning AD? Because the AD in a way, you can call it a mainstream party. Right now, if you had to look at the political spectrum, we have the PN and the PL, the two main parties. And the bigger problem is that from a duopoly, now we're moving into a one man show, one party. So it's even problematic, you know, because I think we're moving into a communist state. But anyway, the thing is, right now at the political spectrum, you have to look at it, you can say that you have a centre-left and another party centre-left something, like the AD if they have to describe themselves, they wouldn't definitely say they are right wingers or centre-right. So I would say they are also centre-left. So my point is, even though they are of the same ideology, or belief, and some points of the AD - I'm not exactly an adherent of the AD - but some points are fair. We have to be fair, you know, when they speak of the environment, when they speak of pollution, it's very good. I love it, it's very good. But then, you know, when they speak, maybe on the immigration issue, or maybe something else, I disagree, but let's agree to disagree. But in essence, even they found it so, so difficult to even get one man into the parliament, and we're not speaking about Norman Lowell getting elected, we're speaking about the AD, which if you look at their statute, or whatever, you would say that you know, how we look at things today, you would say, they are a moderate party, they're not an extremist party. They're not fascists or Nazi, you know, and still, the Maltese don't say, 'Listen, I'm going to try to have faith in them'. We always follow like sheep. That's the problem. (Alex)

Among participants affiliated with the extreme-right, or former affiliates, a feeling of disenfranchisement seems to result from a lack of political representation at the local level, coupled with the social marginalisation that this results in. This is evidenced by both these groups of participants' disdain for mainstream politics. Given the polarised and clientelistic character of political relations, access to state resources and employment is very much hinged on direct connections with the ruling party (Mitchell, 2002). Marginalisation from the political process in this context is thus, conducive to a loss in access to social and economic benefits.

#### 4.1.3 Pathways to radicalisation – personalities and belonging

Much of the contemporary literature dealing with radicalisation, particularly with regards to young people, focuses on how many young people are drawn to extremist groups out of a need for a sense of belonging, whether this is to the group itself, the ideology it enshrines or a particular personality within the group (Botha and Abdile, 2014; Gokhale-Turner, 1979; Pearson and Winterbotham, 2017; Schmid, 2013; Taylor and Soni, 2017). Sense of belonging was also a key factor in young Maltese people's motivations for embracing the politics of the extreme-right. Samuel, a former member of Norman Lowell's IE, describes a fractured upbringing that left him yearning for belonging, as being a key instigator in his entry into the group. In this regard, when asked about his childhood and upbringing, he replied:

There's nothing to miss, because sadly my upbringing was very difficult. It's been characterised by domestic violence as far as I can remember, since I was basically an infant, so, uhm no it wasn't a happy home. My parents split up, like I said, when we were very very young. I was around 5 at the time. Between the age of 0 and 5 there isn't that much to remember and the little I remember wasn't all that great. So, then obviously I would have, 'quality time' with the parents individually, custody court and all this, but they were always characterised by sort of problems and sadness and incompatibility with the parents, and all this sort of stuff. (Samuel)

Asked whether he thought this was a contributing factor for his decision to join Lowell's group, he replied:

Yes. This is a time as a teenager, the height of all these problems with parents, you know a lot of violence, some psychological issues thrown into the mix and whatever, were peaking. Even at school, I was always sort of detached. I was always having problems forming relationships with people. I still do, but not that much, I'm much better, comparatively speaking. So, obviously, there's always this yearning of belonging and I was already sort of fostering this dislike for people who were not Maltese, specifically, people who come from south of Malta (Samuel).

Jonathan who is 29, from the harbour area of Malta and was also a former IE affiliate, describes a similar context of detachment during his upbringing. However, contrary to Samuel he describes his home situation as an altogether nurturing environment, yet being isolated at school and finding it difficult to form attachments. In this regard, he says:

As I said, my home situation growing up was good, very good, but you know, both my parents worked. My mother was part-time and my father full-time, so I didn't see them very often. They work very hard, but we always struggled with money. No, that's not true, now I can say that we were an average family, in terms of income, you know, but then I didn't think so. My parents worked hard to send me to a private school, thinking they were giving me a better education, but everyone in my class was from very wealthy families and I didn't have very many friends. People would make fun of me because my clothes weren't *tad-ditta* [branded] and I couldn't afford certain things, so I always felt shame. Later, when I went to Junior College [high school] the crowd was more mixed, but it was still difficult to make friends. (Jonathan)

Asked what drove him to join IE, he replied:

At the end of the first year I had made a few friends and one of them was into Lowell, this was when he was contesting the elections in 2008. He had made quite a few public appearances and videos and, you know he was funny, eccentric – he was very different from everyone else running, with his cane, he seemed... down to earth you know. I don't know, thinking about it now, I don't know if I really took him seriously, but then I wanted to ... share this with this friend. It became our thing and then, then I started getting into what he was saying. (Jonathan)

Jonathan went on to describe his engagements on the IE forum VivaMalta.net, where he notes 'being able to say certain things so openly and to receive that, sort of, collective approval was very, very liberating'. He notes that in particular receiving *kudos* from Norman Lowell himself, who is a frequent and ardent commentator on the forum, was particularly significant in drawing him in further into the group and its activities. In this way, high-status individuals with an online presence are usually assigned the title of 'influencers', by which is implied that they are able to determine personal decisions and lifestyles through interpretative frameworks, such as what counts as prestige in an online environment (Caughey, 1986; Bacon-Smith, 1992). Such influencers tend to have broad appeal, charisma and an established following or online presence. In this way, a sense of belonging is often enabled with the aid of key influencers, or individuals with strong personalities and charisma (cf. Rivas-de-Roca et al., 2020), such as Norman Lowell, the leader of IE, being a good example of the Maltese context. As noted in Section 2.2 of this report, since his emergence as a European parliamentary candidate in 2004, Norman Lowell has become well-known for delivering fiery anti-immigrant speeches and regularly posts videos of his speeches to YouTube. His oratory style disposes of any form of political correctness and his rhetoric breaks with the local norm for political speeches, yet it is this which many young people, including participants, find both amusing and endearing. Among both active and former members of IE, Lowell's charisma and personality was cited as



a key driver in radicalising young people, especially much younger members. Apart from a need for a sense of belonging, Samuel, for example, cites Lowell's character as addressing many of the needs and roles that were absent in his own childhood. In this regard, when asked about how he became a member of IE, he says:

To be honest, I'm going to be frank with you, I'm not trying to cover up. In general, I can't recall how it happened because it was a long time ago, I cannot recall how the meeting was set up. I honestly cannot recall. I do recall that it happened at Santa Lucija café which is in Attard. But yes, anyway this encounter [with Lowell] happened and, being as he still is, there was a joke here and there to amuse people and, again being a teenager, you get easily drawn into this flattery and humour and whatever, but you know beneath that there is a very sinister ideology, which is not coming to the forefront, especially if you want to recruit people. If you want to recruit young people into the organisation, that's not the way to do it. You do it with flattery, with cracking jokes and all this and you know, that's how it started. Then I started going onto these forums, these message boards that they still have, where they talk about their topics of interest. They used to write 'at this certain day of the year/month, whatever, we are going to be having a dinner with the chosen few at this restaurant, at this place. I went once and it went downhill from there really. (Samuel)

Whilst both Samuel and Jonathan highlight Lowell's personality and perceived charisma as a key factor in attracting them to the group and politics of the extreme-right, for others, Lowell's draw, inclusive of his ideology, rests on the fact that his ideas are 'demonised' and lambasted in popular public discourse and mainstream media. For young people who feel marginalised and see themselves as falling outside the norm, such ideas and personalities that also fall outside the norm (i.e. radical) hold an understandable allure. When I ask Daniel what it is, that he finds appealing about Norman Lowell, he responds:

A lot of things he's said over the years have come to fruition – integration hasn't worked, in the sense that Hal Far is overflowing with immigrants. We are failing. .... Things that he talks about around a sense of unity appeal to me. Europe [the EU] is trying to break up nations, the way I see it, challenging our sovereignty. I have nothing against the EU, don't misunderstand me, I feel European, but that's what they're trying to do. (Daniel)

Later in the conversation, Daniel returns to this point and elaborates further:

There's the issue of sovereignty - that sovereign countries exist within the EU and we cannot be servile to the EU. If there's going to be a connection, there has to be a connection founded on blood, on ethnicity, a common union, not a union solely on the basis of the economy. The economy should be there to serve us, not the other way around. (Daniel)

This sentiment was shared by Alex, another participant with extreme-right affiliations and sympathies. Alex's employment and hobbies revolve around sport, a theme that dominates throughout our conversation. Alex emphasises that sports, particularly team sports, provide a sense of unity and belonging that is otherwise seriously lacking in the contemporary context of Malta. Alex speaks nostalgically of his childhood, drawing a contrast between the unity and belonging of that period by contrast with contemporary Malta, which in his view is also driven by individualism. In particular, he highlights a missing sense of 'camaraderie, that sense of belonging, being together, working as a team'. I asked him, in this regard, what he understands by community, to which he responded:

It's very simple to describe it for myself. First of all, I like the way you said community not society, because I feel it is something which is more close-knit, which is more organic and an individual can feel more rooted and have that sense of belonging we mentioned earlier.

Nowadays in society, everyone is living on his own... So to be a nation, or a club, call it whatever you like, you have to organise, you have to go out and be part of that. And a community, in a nutshell, is like a nation. What's a nation? An extension of one's family, that's how we in the past came to be. We had a family and from a family we moved onto a clan or a tribe, then we became a culture, a civilisation, and all these people have certain points where they are similar to each other. (Alex)

Both Daniel's and Alex's notion of the nation reveal much in common with past scholarly debates around the definition of the term, in that there is broad consensus that imaginaries of nations and with them, of national cultures and identities, hinge on the creation and maintenance of a sense of belonging and unity. In this regard, Benedict Anderson (1993) suggests that all nations are 'imagined communities' because of the impossibility of everyone within that community knowing one another, even within small nations like Malta, 'yet in the minds of each live the images of their communion' (ibid., 1993: 20). Similarly, Renan's (1990: 19) contention of the:

nation [as] a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things, which in truth are but one, constitute this soul or spiritual principle. One lies in the past, one in the present. One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present-day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form.

The latter echoes both Daniel and Alex's focus on nostalgic elements of the past to construct their notions of the imagined nation. These ideas are important here since they help identify narratives of belonging or, at the very least, utopias of belonging that may reveal trajectories of radicalisation. This is in keeping with the DARE project's definition of trajectories here, as 'individual pathways shaped by structural, group and individual factors that may lead individuals towards extremist attitudes and behaviours but also to non-radicalisation and de-radicalisation'. Drawing on this definition, the decline in social cohesion and sense of belonging highlighted by both Alex and Daniel, reflect a sense of alienation that has been noted in the context of young people within other extreme-right groups, for example the EDL in the UK (cf. Pilkington, 2016: 7).

The absence of a sense of community leads those marginalised and alienated to craft out new spaces of interaction. Daniel's garage is reminiscent of the typical hang-outs common in Maltese experiences of youth in the early 2000s, an independent space shielded from the prying eyes of family, neighbours and society *writ large*. The space is adorned with music posters, a half consumed bottle of vodka, cigarette butts, an unfinished chess game and a worn out mattress on a wobbly bed. It is a space he shares with close friends he has known since childhood, adorned with paraphernalia that speak to their various interests. It is significant that this was also the selected location for the interview, a safe place where he could talk with ease and, as we settled down, Daniel was visibly more relaxed. The location is important. As noted in the introduction to this report and the description of the milieu, the relatively small size of the island and the social interconnectedness provoke a constant awareness of one's actions, what one says and the wider implications these may have on one's work relations and day-to-day relationships. This was also apparent in my interviews with Samuel and Alfred, where on the few occasions someone passed within earshot, this would be followed by a pause and a scrutinising glare. At one point during our interview, Alfred whispered over to me, 'Pay attention, I think this guy knows me' (*'Moħħok hemm, ghax nahseb jafni'*). This is particularly significant within the context of the DARE project in terms of the implications for fostering dialogue and, as is illustrated and discussed later in this section, this is also one reason why social media platforms, such as Facebook, become the locus of (young) people's discussions. As with the garage, they are spaces free from social controls, where young people are able to shape their identities and give voice to their opinions without suffering the repercussions.

In a conversation with Charles, a former sympathiser and affiliate of Norman Lowell's *Imperium Europa*, who refused to be interviewed for fear of being identified<sup>24</sup>, he highlighted what initially drew him to the group:

It started-off as something amusing. A childhood friend of mine was fascinated with Lowell and started attending some of his gatherings, then he invited me to go along with him. At the time, there were a lot of videos of IE and Lowell and he seemed harmless and eccentric. But then, you go there [meeting] and it's very communal and you feel like a part of something. There was a lot of criticism of Lowell in the papers and people saying that he and his followers were crazy, then I met them and everyone was nice and I became distrustful of the newspapers. People listened to one another at the gatherings and I found I agreed with a lot of the points. Not everyone who likes Lowell is an extremist. (Charles)

Whilst Charles has distanced himself from involvement in the group, he has maintained his friendships with various affiliates and sympathisers, citing an aversion to Lowell's tone and approach, yet still cherishing the sense of brotherhood that comes with, as he put it, being 'collectively stigmatised. It's like with your family, you may disagree and argue with them at times, but in the end you understand one another'. Indeed, Charles claims that despite moving away from the ideological aspects of the group, the experience has also made him more cautious of mainstream media. Of similar significance, and in parallel with both Daniel and Alex's narratives, Charles specifically highlights the brotherhood and sense of community that he feels in being part of this group. The reference to feeling a sense of togetherness from being collectively stigmatised, is reflective of contemporary definitions and discourses of kinship. In particular, Marshall Sahlins (2011) defines kinship as a 'mutuality of being', where kinship is an expression of a similar view and experience of the world, an affinity to others that stems from shared joys, suffering and life-worlds, where people are 'intrinsic to one another's existence' (2011: 2). This intrinsic aspect is also a feature of identity-construction when individuals move away from the politics and affiliations of the extreme-right, where, as in the case with Samuel, extreme-right personalities and ideologies are used as a yardstick for constructing an identity in opposition to them.

Charles' reference to a sense of belonging through collective stigmatisation, fits in well with the notion of an experience of kinship through shared suffering. It further hints at experiences of inequality and alienation by others, a sentiment echoed by Jonathan, Daniel, Alfred, Alex and Samuel, and explored further in Section 4.4 of this report. Across the majority of participants, childhood experiences and social memory, appear to be key factors in narrating extreme-right views, radicalisation and non-radicalisation trajectories. Jon Mitchell (1997), writing about religious belief and tradition in Valletta and Malta more broadly, notes that 'social memory is the process through which interpretations of the collective past are framed. But in framing collective interpretations of the past, social memory also actively creates the experience of commonality' (1997: 80). In his book, *Ambivalent Europeans* (2002: 45), Mitchell argues that 'social and historical memory contribute to the experience and identity of those living in the city' [Valletta] and in Malta more broadly. He makes the distinction between collective memory as an aggregate of memories derived from lived experience and social memory, as including first-hand accounts of events, people and places, minus the experience of them. Historical memory represents the scripted and official account of an event, time or place which, Mitchell (2002: 41-45) warns, is often altered or embellished to suit a particular narrative or imaginary.

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<sup>24</sup> Whilst 'Charles' refused to be interviewed, he did allow for, and vetted, the use of parts of our conversation.

## 4.2 Media engagement and spaces of debate in online and offline domains

Participants in this study, whether affiliated with the extreme-right or not, mostly expressed a deep-seated suspicion or revulsion to local mainstream media outlets, particularly those associated with the two main political parties. As noted in Section 2 of this report, Maltese politics is characterised by a tug of war between the two main, and highly polarised, political parties: the centre-right Partit Nazzjonalista (PN), or Nationalist Party; and the centre-left Partit Laburista (PL), or Labour Party (cf. Boissevain, 1968; Mitchell, 2002; Abela 2006; Baldacchino, 2009).

Across the majority of participants, criticism of mainstream media abounded, with some participants highlighting their scepticism about the veracity of locally reported news in particular. For example, Amanda, a 26 year old from Birżebbuġa, noted that whilst she read through numerous online newspapers, ‘for politics I like to go through all the local ones and try to figure out which part of them is the truth’, she returned to this point quite vociferously towards the end of the interview, emphasising her lack of trust in mainstream media, which she associates to a large extent with the main political parties, stressing that people need to verify their sources of information since local mainstream media will never present the full picture. In this regard, she states:

The media [mainstream] only shows a limited perspective of who people are and where they come from. But, if you meet them in person, talk to them see what you have in common, I think then you will be more accepting of the group that that person comes from. (Amanda)

With reference to the media coverage of key events such as the Marsa riots and the murder of Lassana Cisse, Amanda expresses shock at both events taking place in the context of Malta and how they have been covered in both traditional and online media. In this regard, Amanda does not subscribe to extreme-right ideology and, in fact, expresses a deep aversion to local extreme-right and populist groups. At the mention of MPM (Moviment Patrijotti Maltin) and IE (Imperium Europa), she exclaims in horror:

Oh my God, oh my God, they are like a cancer of society! They are instigating hate in a society which very much needs to unite at the moment. We have too many internal problems to be divided about things that don’t matter, like race. (Amanda)

When asked, given her aversion to such groups, why other people her age might follow or subscribe to such groups, she highlights critical events like the riots at Marsa. In addition, she states that in their coverage on both mainstream and online media, such events are often distorted by the same mainstream media outlets that are critical of extreme-right groups, yet ironically the way they report such events garners further support for such groups. Asked where such groups might draw most support from, Amanda said:

Mostly on social media, sometimes it’s shocking to see, like you would see someone who you thought was quite an open-minded, educated person kind of affiliating themselves with such groups. (Amanda)

Conversations centring on the media and where participants accessed their information were, perhaps inevitably, accompanied by a similarly harsh critique of the two major political parties on the island. Shania, who lives in Birżebbuġa, comments that she gets her information about current events from various online sources, including mainstream news outlets and social media platforms, although she highlights that she receives the bulk of her information about key events as links shared by friends through WhatsApp and Facebook. When asked whether she reads local newspapers on a regular basis, she notes:

There was a time when I used to go on the Times and read the news every day, but you see so many comments beneath each story, and I used to get frustrated with the nonsense people spew, particularly the political partisanship in this country. That really bothers me,

just because someone is affiliated with a particular party, it does not mean everyone in that party shares the same views and maybe I disagree with that party's stance. (Shania)

Similar criticism pointed, in particular, to the fact that both parties owned their own television stations, radio stations and newspapers. In this regard, Daniel said 'in addition to political party media dominating the news outlets, it's the same with the mainstream newspapers, they all have their own political agenda. But, thank God, the internet is a tool which, up till now, they still haven't managed to control'. As our conversation turned to the internet and social media, Daniel became visibly more animated. He said:

When it comes to social media I use everything, but mostly Facebook, because you know, that's where the real battle of ideas is taking place. That's the platform where ideas and news are really discussed with least restrictions. (Daniel)

Much of Daniel's narrative throughout our conversation and, particularly in relation to social media and information, centres on control, or rather, the subversion of control. In this regard, Daniel's descriptions of the changes taking place in his locality, the lack of political representation and access to information, all provide a discourse of a loss of control over key aspects of his everyday life. His garage can also be interpreted as an extension of this narrative, a space of his own in which he is free from others' intrusions. Similarly, Alfred notes:

Facebook and YouTube are the pillars for social dialogue everywhere because they cannot be controlled. I used to comment regularly on the Times and Malta Today, because, you know that's why the comments section is there, or should be there, but then they deleted my comments or never uploaded them, even in the media you need to know someone to have a voice. At least on Facebook I can speak and no one will stop me, they try, but it's more difficult. (Alfred)

Coupled with this freedom to say whatever you want, the fact that identities can be concealed across Internet forums, sites and on social media platforms has further heightened its appeal, particularly among those whose voices are often side-lined. These spaces have also come to characterise what has been popularly referred to as the post-truth era, where conspiracy theories and unverified source information abound. In this regard, Alyssa voices her disdain for social media, recognising that such platforms have been used by anti-immigrant individuals and groups to spread disinformation. This is in stark contrast to participants from the second set with extreme-right affiliations, all of whom extolled the importance of social media as a source of both uncontrolled access to information and an avenue by which they believe their voices can be heard. This distinction also serves to highlight social media's perceived role in broadening engagement with extreme-right ideologies and personalities. In this regard, Alyssa says:

Again with the fires<sup>25</sup> [Hal Far riots],<sup>26</sup> when they took a picture of the fires before the news caught it, they shared this picture of the fires in Hal Far on social media. They started saying 'these immigrants are ungrateful', 'we should kick them out', 'go back to your country', all that stuff. They generate this hate and they spread it around with their friends, so yeah, I think social media created this hate around this protest. Then when you hear, the next day from the immigrants, why they did it, they still continue to accuse them of being ungrateful because they started a fire. (Alyssa)

<sup>25</sup> Immigrants living at the centre burnt five cars and a container housing an administration facility in protest at living conditions they were subjected to.

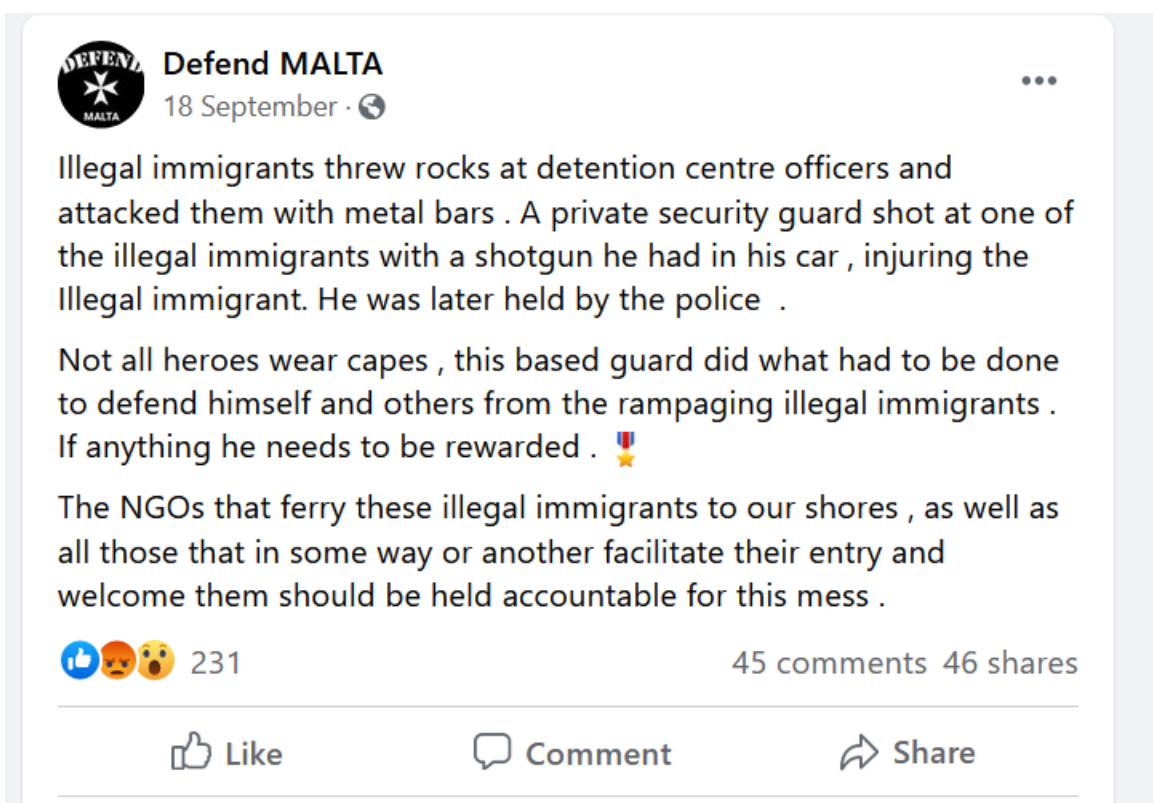
<sup>26</sup> Times of Malta, 2019, Hal Far riot sparked by row between migrant and security, <https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/policeman-injured-three-police-cars-set-on-fire-in-hal-far.743646> [Accessed 20/10/2020].



This type of information emerges out of and reinforces individuals' expectations, allowing young people to draw on narratives that shape their vision of the world rather than vice versa (Harsin, 2018). Psychologists refer to this phenomenon as 'confirmation bias', where people are more likely to believe information and agree with opinions that confirm what they believe, rather than challenging their views (Mair, 2017: 3).

Recent technological developments that have increased the availability of information, and its ease of access, have also facilitated publication of both amateur and authoritative information side by side, blurring the boundaries between truth and fiction. For example, Figure 10 below illustrates a post from popular anti-immigrant Facebook page 'Defend Malta' that refers to a riot on 18 September 2020 in which one migrant attempted to escape the Safi detention centre and was shot at by a private security guard.

Figure 10: A post from popular Facebook group 'Defend Malta'



The interviews informing this research report, reveal the degree to which young people increasingly rely on social media as their main source of information and news, a trend that implies they are predominantly exposed to information that is shared by people within their social circles, who are more likely to express similar views. This social insularity has been referred to as the 'Facebook bubble'. Jonathan Mair (2017), writing about the era of post-truth, notes that global publics increasingly adopt a relativist approach to information, where each piece of information or version of events, are subjective narratives referred to as opinions or other people's truth. Such ideas are reinforced through specific terminology and imagery, such as the over-use of 'illegal' in connection with immigrants, as illustrated in Figure 10. Significantly, Mair (2017: 4) goes on to state that '[t]his relativism is associated with a demotic anti-elitism that casts doubt on information from formerly authoritative sources on the ground that they serve the interests of power and not the truth'.

On a similar note, Roberto González (2017) highlights how the environment of scepticism, coupled with easy infiltration of online social networks, has allowed for media firms and political consultancies, such as Cambridge Analytica, to legitimise specific narratives by tailoring available information to the individuals' specific online profiles and allowing for their organic reproduction in their online networks. In this regard, a 2020 Eurobarometer survey on fake news noted that 85% of respondents in Malta reported coming across fake news and only 30% said they trusted the media.<sup>27</sup> González further comments that companies and firms such as Cambridge Analytica, 'might be seen as mechanisms for delivering individually tailored messages and symbols that 'present a picture of the world which is so emotionally compelling that it is beyond debate'(Kertzer, 1987: 101 as cited in González, 2017: 9).

Daniel's reference to Facebook as the 'real battleground of ideas' is reflective of competing world views that come into contact over social media in ways that would not be possible in day-to-day social contexts in Malta. As the interview with Daniel turned to the topic of Lassana Cisse's murder by two AFM soldiers in Hal Far, here again, the discussion turns to the media:

[With reference to the murder] – it was a stupid affair, but what happened is the Labour party tried to take advantage politically and blamed Norman's ideas, but one of the soldiers already had a number of court cases pending, so he should never have been allowed in the army. You can't just blame someone because his words awaken certain feelings. Someone sensible, someone really sensible who gets that Lowell isn't going to do something like that, understands that the real battle is taking place at a higher level. (Daniel)

Daniel is asked about Norman Lowell's YouTube videos and the controversial topics and tone used in them, to which he responds:

Again, the media takes them out of context, especially his comments on the disabled<sup>28</sup>. Whereas, there are many instances where he says donate only to Inspire because they are a local and reliable charity. When the media demonises and rubbishes you, it follows you. You could be at the grocery store and you hear people say 'Lowell kills people with disabilities' ('*Lowell joqtol il-handicaps (sic.)*')<sup>29</sup>. That's the grocery store mentality. (Daniel)

Within the Maltese context, it seems that young people from either end of the political spectrum are weary of, what is perceived as, the polarised and polarising mainstream media landscape. While it would be unfair and inaccurate to cast all Maltese mainstream media in the same light, it is clear that young people within these contexts draw a connection between the polarised political landscape and a similarly divided media landscape. Similarly, Alex notes:

To be honest, maybe because I'm still young, I get my news from the alternative media. I very much use the internet, unlike radio and television where you turn them on and they tell you whatever they want. I like to do my own research online, I like to be a free thinker and I like to be as fair as possible. For example, with Covid, you listen to the Americans and to Fauci, but you should maybe look at an Italian doctor, who's maybe posting on YouTube. Maybe he's not very renowned, maybe he doesn't have the world media behind him, but you should listen and then see what makes more sense. (Alex)

<sup>27</sup> Eurobarometer, 2020, Flash Eurobarometer 464: Fake News and Disinformation Online, [https://data.europa.eu/euodp/en/data/dataset/S2183\\_464\\_ENG](https://data.europa.eu/euodp/en/data/dataset/S2183_464_ENG) [Accessed 16/10/2020].

<sup>28</sup> The Times of Malta (2019), Norman Lowell reported to police for comments on disabled children <https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/norman-lowell-reported-to-the-police-for-hate-speech.709561> [Accessed: 28/08/2020].

<sup>29</sup> Norman Lowell, in an appearance on local television, said that 'mentally defective babies should be aborted or granted a benign mercy killing'.

As with other participants, talk of the media quickly turns to a critique of the political context in Malta:

Unfortunately here in Malta, the media is a bit too buttoned up so to speak, in the sense that we have a duopoly, not just in politics, but also in the media. Why? Because we have two main parties that have been established for over a hundred years, they have their own tv stations, their own radio stations and it's unbelievable, it's 24/7 bombarding us with their own propaganda. (Alex)

For Alex, Daniel and Charles, their ire at the mainstream media seems to stem from the compartmentalisation of their identities with terminologies and labels with which they do not identify and this failing is extended to their interpretation of the world around them. This is particularly evident in Charles' case where, even though he no longer identifies with an extreme-right ideology or political grouping, he still associates with many of its members. Here, such labels are interpreted as boundaries that separate the perceived conviviality of the group dynamic within these groups and the lack of such a dynamic in the rest of society that keeps them at arm's length (Pasiaka, 2019). In other words, how can he replace one community with another when the other alternative does not exist for him. Similarly, both Daniel and Alex acknowledge that they fall within the right wing political category, but reject the implications such labels carry with them, rather preferring terms such as 'patriot', 'traditionalist' or even 'environmentalist'. In a passionate delivery, Alex explains:

First of all, every father, every mother loves their own children. As I told you, the nation is the extension of the family, so if you love your own people, your own ethnicity, your own culture, you would be following along nature's path. I think it's something positive, it doesn't mean – if a father or a mother love their own child more than they love their neighbour's child – it's not something which is unfair or discriminatory, you know, like a lot of the mainstream media tries to portray patriots, trying to demean them, especially if they're on the right side of the political spectrum. They try to portray them as Nazis, as skinheads, when in fact it's not true.

The people who control the [mainstream] media have an agenda, a cultural, political agenda where they don't want to debate with these kind of people fairly. In my opinion it's such a shame because if we sit down and discuss, we'll realise how much closer we are in fact. It's very important that we sit down and discuss ideas.

I'm very much against violence, if you're on the right or on the left, let's sit down and discuss. Who uses censorship? I believe the ones who use censorship are people who are afraid of the ideas, which shouldn't be the case, let's be open-minded and accept diversity of thought. (Alex)

The above description provided by Alex highlights a significant contradiction around the politics of online ideological 'battles'. Alex, Alfred and Daniel take issue with the use of labels such as 'Nazi', 'extreme-right' and 'extremist', as being detached from the lived reality of their everyday social contexts. However, at various junctures throughout my conversations with them, their notions of the nation are framed around a nostalgic return to a 'traditional' past that upholds moral values and worldviews, seemingly dislocated from a contemporary Maltese cultural context. Starrett and Dalsheim (2019) highlight this pattern in populist narratives advocating for a return to a stable and familiar past. Typically, such narratives draw distinctions between different eras and use terms that denote difference to emphasise the distance that exists between them and Others. In this regard, they note that '[t]his distancing is one way we draw lines between those we consider part of our own time and those from whom we withhold that privilege' (ibid., 2019: 10). Here they argue that this temporal dissonance between different ideological groups is reflected in the use of terms that draw on historical events, processes or individuals, such as 'Nazi' and eugenics to

highlight their positioning in the past and consequent incompatibility with ‘modern progress’. In this regard, Starrett and Dalsheim (2019: 11) draw on Walter Benjamin, stating:

Benjamin called on us to abandon the concept of history that allows us to think about a final victory over oppression. In the real present, we are ‘still’ fighting the spectral other of the racist, the misogynist, the fascist, the slaveholder, the Nazi. We are ‘still’ – yet, always and somehow apparently motionless, in the sense of not actually moving forward – fighting the battle to make the present and the future different things from the past, to deny elements of our cultural inheritance coevalness with our present, and to certify that they form no part of our future.

In this regard, a common factor among participants with current or former affiliations to the extreme-right is, as noted in earlier sections, a deteriorating sense of community brought about by a polarised political environment, demographic change, environmental degradation and limited opportunities for social mobility. Participants affiliated with the extreme-right group IE, noted that such terms are used to silence them and de-legitimise their arguments, what Charles referred to as ‘collective stigmatisation’. These participants, including former affiliates of the extreme-right, view mainstream media as being embedded in local partisan politics and playing a key role in stifling dialogue, rather than encouraging it. The next section takes a closer look at young people’s approach to dialogue, particularly with regards to contentious local issues, such as immigration and ideology.

#### 4.2.1 Young people’s approaches to dialogue

Across the pool of interviewees, participants were very vocal in their views about dialogue and what is accepted dialogue, particularly when it involves individuals or groups whom they consider to be their ideological opposites. It is clear that among the majority of interviewees, social media platforms were the preferred sources of information because of the possibilities for interaction with a wide audience and the limited restrictions on information and moderation of comments. In this regard, Alex notes:

Some people do comment on Facebook and at times, for example, on newspaper websites. What do they do? For example, attack a certain – they always have a political agenda – they attack a certain individual, a character assassination. What do they do? They disable comments, they don’t even let you reply. So, they speak about democracy, you know, two weights, two measures, at times. (Alex)

Asked if he is referring to a specific person, he says:

To Norman [Lowell] it’s happened so many times, he says whatever he says, in a way it’s his right to express himself. At times I don’t agree with how his application is, not with the argument, because he can be right in the argument, but the way he says it maybe I don’t fully agree. I think Voltaire said it way back, ‘I don’t agree with you, but I will fully defend your right to say whatever you want’, and that is true libertarianism, or old school liberalism, you know. Not like today, tyranny with a smile, where they try to silence you and censor you. Like I told you before, if we have a divergence, let’s agree to disagree, but let’s sit down and have a chat. (Alex)

This sentiment is shared by Alfred, Daniel and Charles who all claim that mainstream media, and those aligned with the left, use labels to limit dialogue and delegitimise their arguments at the outset. Contemporary scholarship has highlighted the dangers with this form of exclusion, particularly among young people, which contributes to the formation of ideological echo chambers (Phillips and Yi, 2018). In a comparative study of Alt-Right and Left-wing group discourses in the aftermath of the 2017 Charlottesville tragedy, involving clashes between these two ideologically-opposed sides, Phillips and Yi (2018) reflect on an emerging form of ‘authoritarian Left’ that increasingly seeks to limit the Alt-right’s voice. They note:

Further excluding this movement from the public forum will not eliminate it but will constrict dialogue and increase the Manichean polarization. Groups will retreat into intellectual ghettos, where they cannot even recall their prior, more moderate views, and where they compete for the 'victim' label (the Alt-Right highlighting Kathryn Steinle, killed by an undocumented immigrant, and the Left, Heather Heyer, killed by a Charlottesville far-Right protestor) (Phillips and Yi, 2018: 228).

As noted earlier, Alfred highlights that as soon as he mentions that he is affiliated with Norman Lowell, people generally tend to discount his arguments or disassociate themselves from him completely, despite sharing common views on many other topics, such as the environment and conservation. The social stigma surrounding particular views and groups is evidenced in Alex's statement that, 'of course, I have my close group of friends, which overall they have similar beliefs and we do discuss, you know certain themes: current affairs, politics, history and philosophy in that sphere' (Alex), where he suggests that the unwillingness of others to engage in dialogue has restricted him to dialogue within his social network. Whilst interviewees who are affiliated with extreme-right groups and political views bemoan the perceived hypocrisy of preaching democratic principles, whilst stifling dialogue, former affiliates of such groups take a directly opposing view. In this regard, Jonathan notes:

If you go on VivaMalta there's no tolerance for opposing views, people say they want freedom of speech and, you know, that their rights are being denied, when they comment on public, uhm... boards, or, I mean, Facebook, but then those same people go on VivaMalta and say the exact opposite. They'll deny they're the same people commenting, but I know who they are... it's bullshit, they know what they're doing and that's why they're dangerous. (Jonathan)

Similarly, Samuel expanding on the apparent novelty of such forums to young people, states:

Now, it is merely just passing the baton from people who are my age to the new, keeping the flame alive, there is no novelty now, the rhetoric, the poison has been spewed and I really don't think this is going to be resolved any time soon. At least not with this whole 'it's dialogue' – it doesn't work because we've seen what happens when you give a platform to these people. (Samuel)

In both Jonathan and Samuel's case, their vociferous objection to providing a platform for engagement with extreme-right views, is in many ways reflective of a sense of having been taken advantage of by what they consider to be blatant hypocrisy on the part of former group members. In addition, the anonymity afforded on the VivaMalta forum, allows individuals to say things they would not normally be allowed to say (Suler, 2004). The latter is reflected in George's statement about the consequences of expressing opinions on social media in the Maltese context,

I have posted sometimes, but what I posted is not really significant, not enough to put me in danger. I think you run the risk if people know who you are and they can trace you. So like, if you're completely hateful, and someone at least knows who you are from your face that puts you in a very vulnerable position. (George)

The security provided by anonymity is a factor that is particularly significant in the Maltese context given the intimate and interconnected networks of social relations, wherein political affiliations can severely impact day-to-day relationships. In this regard, Baldacchino (2009: 150) argues, 'the partisan political mobilisation of both state and civil society effectively erodes 'unifying elements' or transforms them (at least perceptively) to partisan appropriation and symbolic use,' a partisan political affiliation that transcends family and locality (Mitchell, 2002). This polarised environment of political discourse, or the absence of such, seems to be reflected in young people's approach to contentious issues, such as



nationality, immigration and identity (cf. Baldacchino 2009; Harwood, 2018). Malmqvist (2019: 210), in a study on manipulation and constructions of empathy in Swedish online far-right discourse, brings attention to the tendency among far-right groups in Sweden, to identify themselves as victims in a bid to manipulate 'the moral-emotional sensibilities of Swedes'. Figure 11, below, illustrates a similar context to that noted in Sweden, from the Maltese context, where the anti-immigrant Facebook group 'Defend Malta' accuses the media of focusing on sob stories in relation to immigrants, and in the process, invert the focus of victimhood on themselves and the Maltese, as being under threat of all forms of violence.

Figure 11: A post on the anti-immigrant Facebook page 'Defend Malta' portraying Muslims praying in Msida as a threat



By contrast, interviewees from Marsa and Birzebbuga were seemingly informed by their experiences and engagements with immigrant Others in their localities. Participants from these localities who had travelled or lived abroad for a period, presented a more open and accepting view of immigrant groups in their localities. They cite the opportunities for interaction with people from across the world as a key factor in influencing their approach to dialogue and different points of view. For example, Alyssa notes:

African people know like French and Arabic, Arabic is close to our language. And there are places where they were under the Italian government. So they know a bit of Italian as well. Some people interact. Like the shopkeeper near the church has a lot of different customers, including immigrants. So when they talk to him, they understand perfectly what they want, if they want water, whatever, they understand. When I used to go to the gym. I used to interact a lot with immigrants from all over the place: Gambia, Somalia, Syria as well. We interacted, we chatted about anything basically, food and exercise, their family and their work - super friendly people. At the gym, there were a lot of different people: Italians, Maltese, again, and most African people. We interact with them a lot because we're like family. You see them like four or five times a week. (Alyssa)

Similarly, Fiona notes that the influx of immigrant families into her neighbourhood in Marsa has been met with mixed reactions, racial abuse on the part of a few individuals, as well as friendly relations with others. As with George and Cikku, Fiona notes that locals who have interacted with immigrants in the area seem to have good relations with them. Fiona identifies travel and the experience of difference as helping people adapt to change. In this regard, she notes:

But I do believe that people who are travelled and people who see life in a different way like I do, they do adapt to different things around them. And you know, they [immigrants] wouldn't affect you. But then again, a lot of people who haven't gone travelling or have always lived here, for example, they cannot adapt to that change. And that's why they ended up, you know, being abusive, unfortunately, to others around them, which is very sad. (Fiona)

Whilst interviewees have overwhelmingly voiced their distaste for the polarised character of Maltese politics, as well as considerable distrust of mainstream media, social discourse within this context also seems to be equally divisive. Opportunities for engagement with other cultural contexts, as well as day-to-day interactions with migrant communities seem to be key factors in facilitating dialogue among and between young people. Whilst this section has focused on engagements between young people online and the ways in which these impact, or impacted by, their offline experiences, the next section focuses on the engagement with concepts and space of Others.

### 4.3 Situating 'Others': conceptual and spatial boundaries

The context of this milieu, as has been emphasised throughout this report, involves people and places in flux and, where marginalised Others congregate, a similar structural marginalisation (Walsh, 2016) of place may also follow. In other words, significant demographic change shapes social spaces and the relationships within them. For example, a number of participants highlighted how Maltese perceptions of their localities have changed following the influx of foreign Others, most notably black Others, where negative stereotypes of immigrants and asylum seekers were/are used in association with the locality as a whole. One interviewee, Fiona, highlighted how people from other localities referred to Marsa as Baghdad and Beirut, in a bid to evoke that the area is chaotic and backward, as well as other people exclaiming 'among the blacks' (*'qalb is-suwed'*) upon hearing she lives in Marsa. Similarly, Karen, a young woman from Birżebbuġa, expresses irritation at the stereotypes associated with the area where other Maltese assume that locals are loud and uncouth. She claims that upon hearing where she is from, people from the North say 'eh that place close to the immigrants' (*'eh vicin fejn hemm l-immigranti'*). Similarly, in her ethnographic work in Marsa, Attard (2013: 60) notes '[a]ll of the African immigrants in the area were mostly referred to as "*is-suwed*" (the blacks) or occasionally as "*l-immigranti*" (the immigrants), the two terms adopted synonymously. They mostly socialized amongst their own, and frequented the places where other immigrants were'.

This form of labelling of both places and Others is a key part of identity crafting, through defining who and what is different. In other words, through the process of defining who we are not, i.e. 'Others', we define, and reveal, who we are (Hall, 1997). Drawing on more contemporary literature, this process can be viewed as an exercise in self-exoticisation, where the Self is defined in juxtaposition to a perceived and inferior Other (Theodossopoulos and Kapferer, 2017; Said, 2017). Notably, this type of exchange occurs more frequently within contexts characterised by latent inequalities or factional divisions. As noted elsewhere in the literature, among marginalised white working-class communities, racial hatred, particularly toward asylum seekers and refugees, is legitimised through narratives of injustice and inequality (Wade, 2008; Pilkington, 2016). Here, such communities and individuals view the state as doling out 'undeserved' preferential treatment to immigrants over themselves. This can be clearly seen in the example cited earlier in section 4.1.2, where one attendee at the Marsa solidarity walk noted that immigrant housing should be given to Maltese families instead. The latter can be applied to the Maltese context where, congruent with the increase of immigrant Others in their localities is a decline in state aid and attention. Writing about the ways in which people relate to and narrate place, Keith Basso (1996: 110) notes,

Deliberately and otherwise, people are forever presenting each other with culturally mediated images of where and how they dwell. In large ways and small, they are forever

performing acts that reproduce and express their own sense of place – and also, inextricably, their own understandings of who and what they are.

Interviews with young Maltese people emphasised, in some cases, the predominance of derogatory terms that have coloured their perceptions of ‘Others’, specifically referring to the ways in which other Maltese spoke about foreigners, rather than the way they referred to foreigners. Overwhelmingly, participants related how initial or persistent perceptions of immigrants, particularly black immigrants, were coupled with descriptors such as: smelly, dirty and scary (cf. Attard, 2013). These descriptors were also used for localities with large immigrant populations. Such perceptions seem to be aided by the regular hurling of racial slurs in localities with a predominant immigrant community such as Marsa and Birżebbuġa, as noted by participants. The constant use of dehumanising images and language results in normalising the perception of inferior or non-human foreign Others (cf. Fanon, 1963; Bleiker et. al., 2013). For example, in March 2014, 14 asylum seekers who were arraigned for escaping one of the detention centres in Malta, were paraded in handcuffs down the busy central thoroughfare in Valletta.<sup>30</sup> Such actions cement associations of criminality with immigrants, images and narratives that are exploited by extreme-right groups for propaganda purposes. This attitude also extends to localities and, as some participants noted, the advent of such changes resulted in the localities’ marginalisation by the state and people from other parts of the island.

As noted earlier in this report, a key factor behind the selection of the highlighted milieu relates to the significant transformations taking place within the local contexts being covered. In particular, the significant demographic changes that have seen an infiltration of foreign ‘Others’, most notably black Africans. In this regard, Fiona, a 28 year old from Marsa notes:

Considering that when I was younger for example, .... to see someone in Malta that’s black or Asian, they [would] have to be tourists visiting, you know? So, as a child I don’t remember different people than me or like .... going to school with other kids that were not Maltese. I think for certain people that big change in one town in Marsa, or like Birżebbuġa, that big change did cause a lot of racial abuse because people were not used to that change. (Fiona)

Fiona reflects on growing up in Marsa, highlighting the lack of necessities and the decline in available shops, such as pharmacies, the lack of a stationery shop or a café for socialisation, noting in particular that if she wanted to meet a friend for a coffee she would have to go to the neighbouring locality. This, she claims, all began with the establishment of the Marsa Open Centre. However, Fiona also reflects on how she sympathises with African immigrants and asylum seekers in Marsa and says of them:

even if they just want a better life and they’re doing anything that they can to risk it, it’s not easy to move your family and risk all of that, for them to come for a better life, why not? If you can offer them that life, why not? (Fiona)

Whilst, according to participants, Marsa has undergone significant change for the worse, since the establishment of the Open Centre, Fiona does not attribute fault to African migrants, rather it is the local authorities and government that have failed the locality. She highlights some improvements in relations between locals and the immigrant population in Marsa over the past year, as being due to a change in the local council. The latter contrasts with Daniel’s account, where he views the introduction of new and modern supermarkets and establishments as epitomising the ruin of his locality and this intrusion goes hand in hand with an influx in ‘*barranin*’ (foreigners, lit. outsiders). Mainstream political parties do not represent his interests and, he argues, have failed in tackling immigration and environmental degradation,

<sup>30</sup> The Times of Malta (2014). Anger over humiliation of immigrant prisoners.

<https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/Anger-over-humiliation-of-immigrant-prisoners.509695> [Accessed 09 June 2020].

as well as in erasing key sites of socialisation, such as the football ground and surrounding countryside, which are also key links to memories of his childhood. Fiona, on the other hand, highlights the need for better integration in Marsa. The decline in local businesses in Marsa is reflective of the stigma that hangs over the locality. In this regard, Fiona opines that some local residents cannot adapt to the changes and says, ‘a lot of people who haven’t travelled, who are stuck here, they cannot adapt to that change and that’s why they end up being abusive to others around them’. Here, African immigrants are classed as undesirables (Agier, 2011) and, by default Marsa residents too, through their treatment by the state.

A number of interviewees from both Marsa and Birżebbuġa, have commented on witnessing racial abuse in their localities, particularly on public transport. Perhaps the most common complaints in this regard were of verbal abuse targeted at black immigrants on buses, as well as bus drivers refusing to stop for immigrants. Such behaviour, serves to highlight undesirable groups, demarcating the boundaries between ‘us and them’ at each juncture. Both the Hal Far Tent village and the Marsa IRC are located at the fringes of both localities. In the case of Hal Far, the location of the centre is at the southern most extreme of the island, detached from residential areas, bus routes and pushed out of sight (cf. Agier, 2011). One participant, Karen, notes that ‘when such large numbers of immigrants arrive, you forget about the individual’ (Karen). Her comment highlights both their visibility within the context of a larger ‘crisis’ and the almost daily abuse launched at them, as well as their invisibility in terms of their contribution to Maltese society. Hans Lucht (2011) similarly documents the daily plight of West African immigrants living on the periphery of Napoli. He highlights how little control they have over their daily routines, where even time runs differently for them. A bus journey that would take less than 30 minutes for an Italian, translates into a journey of over two hours, as bus after bus passes them by without stopping. This control by others over their daily routines is a form of boundary setting, a separation of ‘us and them’. Here, as in the Maltese contexts, Lucht highlights their invisibility, where Immigrants are rendered non-existent, despite the fact that during the 2008 financial crisis it was the city of Napoli’s dependence on immigrant informal labour that allowed them to cushion the blow of the financial crisis to the city’s economy.

The externalisation of immigrant communities in Malta across multiple aspects of everyday life, from domicile to skin colour, language accessibility, norms, customs, space, among others has further reinforced extreme-right narratives around integration. This is further evidenced by a conference speech in 2011, by then Home Affairs Minister Carmelo Mifsud Bonnici, where he stated:

This is a reception, open centre intended to act as a temporary solution, not a permanent one. Permanence reduces mobility, the faith to integrate, settle and become part of a different society, be it in Europe, the United States or elsewhere (Times of Malta, 2011).<sup>31</sup>

The statement by the minister clearly highlights the temporary status of asylum seekers and their non-belonging, whilst simultaneously emphasising the need for asylum seekers to settle elsewhere. The reference to immigrants as *immigranti* or *klandestini*, is a further indication of their transitory status and non-belonging. Similarly, participants highlighted the ways in which meanings attached to public spaces change to incorporate new boundaries. For example, Fiona describes an environment of fear and uncertainty in Marsa, driven by the unknown black ‘Other’ where, as noted in Section 4.1, growing up in Marsa implied that children were limited in their use of spaces and their opportunities for socialisation. Fiona notes how parents would caution children to avoid places associated with ‘black people’, contributing to ingrained associations of fear with the sight of Africans. Such statements and imagery transform these spaces into no-go zones and are aimed, whether consciously or unconsciously, at maintaining or enforcing distance. These sentiments are echoed by other participants from the area. Karen, also from Marsa, notes a decline in the sense of community that is in large part due to a lack of a

<sup>31</sup> The Times of Malta (2011) Marsa Open Centre must not become miniature alternative society for immigrants - minister <https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/migration.372226> [Accessed: 27/08/2020].

sense of security. She states, 'The Marsa I know no longer exists' (*'Il-Marsa li naf jien m'ghadiex'*). Thus, fear of black immigrant Others' presumed behaviour and attitudes serve to depopulate spaces of their sociality, giving shape to right-wing and extremist discourses of non-integration and racial profiling.

#### 4.4 Ideology, terminology and trajectories of radicalisation

Radicalisation has been broadly represented as a counter-reaction to established norms. What constitutes the 'norm' is predominantly context specific and dependent on an array of social, economic and political factors, as well as individuals' personal life trajectories (cf. Sedgwick, 2010). This notion of radicalisation differs somewhat from the definition adopted by the DARE project, where it is defined as '[t]he process by which individuals or groups come to embrace attitudes, or engage in actions, that support violence in the pursuit of extremist causes'. The term radicalisation has been fraught with contention since its inception, adopting new meanings and forms, such as 'self-radicalisation' or 'flash radicalisation' (Coolsaet, 2019). In the context of Malta, the concept does not hold much currency and, where reference is made to it, it is usually associated with Islamist movements and terrorism more broadly. Typically, it would seem that when the term is used in a Maltese context, it is to refer to contexts outside of Malta.

Contemporary definitions of radicalisation recognise the fluidity of the term and its application to either end of the political ideological spectrum, whilst identifying it as a counter-reaction to the established 'norm'. The relevance of this within the Maltese context, as also noted across participant interviews, is that whilst young local Maltese may not always be familiar with the term, for those who are, an association of radicalisation with terrorism or violent extremism seems to resonate. One participant, Isabelle, described 'radical' as applying to 'situations or someone that is really extreme in what they believe and they end up changing everyone's opinion, or brainwashing them with their opinion'. She then went on to cite Norman Lowell and MPM as examples of radical people and groups. However, Fiona uses Lowell as an example of an extremist too, citing the difference in definition to radical as being the intention to carry out abuse against others, whether verbal or physical. Here, she cites Norman Lowell's pronouncement that immigrants should be burned and the disabled executed, as examples of extremism. When asked what she understands by radicalisation, however, Isabelle paused awkwardly before asking, 'I'm sorry, what do you mean? Aren't radicalisation and radical the same thing?' Another two participants, George from Marsa and Kristine from Birżebbuġa, define radicalisation as a rapid change that is forced upon a group or 'the masses'.

Kristine elaborates further on her understanding of the terms 'radical' and 'extremist', embedding them within a discussion of religion. Whilst she believes that religion plays an important social role in providing society with a moral compass, she holds that religion should be completely dissociated from politics. She further hints that her notions of radical and extremist are driven by an over-zealous religious ideology. She stated that 'culture adapts according to religion and some religious movements are a bit ..... radical or extremist, and I don't believe in extremes'. With reference to MPM, she states 'their beliefs are all wrong, radical, and it's not about being a patriot, it's about racism'. Similarly, she makes reference to Imperium Europa as more extreme than MPM, because of their rhetoric about white supremacy and ideology, as she puts it, 'similar to Hitler's'. She adds, 'to have people with these same ideologies in this day and age is quite worrying'. Kristine uses the terms radical and extremist interchangeably, interpreting them as inherently negative blanket terms for people and contexts that lie at the other end of the political spectrum to her own, identifying herself as a socialist in the process, presumably to drive the point home.

By contrast, whilst Daniel also understands radical and extreme to be somewhat similar, his more personal engagements with these concepts have clearly provoked him to reflect further on their application. In this regard, Daniel defines radical as someone who 'changes their ideas or a person who chooses a path outside of what is considered the norm', identifying radicalisation as having the same meaning but being



associated specifically to indoctrination by others and to a religious context, citing Islamist fundamentalists, terrorists and jihad as examples of what he means. Following this definition, Daniel paused, then added:

Norman Lowell is described as radical but I think he is more eccentric, but that is the terminology *they* use, whereas a lot of things he is saying are common sense. Now I know I am oriented towards the right, however I support Graffiti's<sup>32</sup> environmental approach. I support and was very supportive of their 'Harsien ODZ'<sup>33</sup> – so I am not going to be shy to say so – for me it's more about issues. They call someone like me extreme-right, but they're just labels. (Daniel)

Throughout our conversation, Daniel clearly indicates that he does not concur with the labels used to describe people who share his view of the world, which he considers an attempt to compartmentalise and dismiss what he views as legitimate concerns. Similarly, Alex challenges what he views as the 'uninformed' ideas around labels such as radical. In this regard, he states:

Radical, I think comes from the Italian '*dalle radici*', at the roots, so a lot of people – their perspective is that being radical is not good but it depends. Being radical, you are rooted, you know what you want. I don't think it is connected to violence or right-wing groups. It means being straight to the point, maybe not politically correct in the way you explain yourself. (Alex)

He goes on to explain that radicalisation:

is a process. For example, you can have a youth, a Muslim, where he is integrating in the 90s and listening to Nirvana and all our music and then they grow and they get to a certain age, maybe 15 or 16 and they have certain leadership, certain idealists – because you know Islam is a very strong masculine religion – and they start being attracted to that and start becoming more close that and you see cases all over the world, where suddenly something changes. (Alex)

On extremism, Alex identifies the term as being used to denigrate and silence others with views that are different from their own. He notes:

They [the media] try to portray people, at times quite unfairly. Sometimes you can have someone, like a lawyer who is civilised, I'm not going to mention names, but you have people who before formed part of the inner circle of the core group in the two main parties and they go all out, they're straight to the point and they are labelled as radical. They say 'listen that's the situation' even though their party is saying the opposite.

[refers to Dr Frank Portelli]<sup>34</sup> – He's the only one who mentioned the immigration issue. At least he said it how it is, he wasn't following the party line, in a way he was proposing a traditional revolution. You expect him to be traditional at his age, but you can be sure that he will give you conservative values, he's a gentleman (Alex).

<sup>32</sup> Moviment Graffiti, a left leaning activist and pressure group, predominantly focused on issues related to over-development and inequality.

<sup>33</sup> A movement and series of protests opposing development of public land in Outside Development Zones (ODZ)

<sup>34</sup> A local doctor who contested the PN leadership race in 2017. He ran on a platform of curbing immigration and opposing abortion.

([https://www.maltatoday.com.mt/news/national/79396/pn\\_gives\\_frank\\_portelli\\_the\\_thumbs\\_down\\_for\\_xenophobic\\_homophobic\\_rants#.X09KzYtS9PY](https://www.maltatoday.com.mt/news/national/79396/pn_gives_frank_portelli_the_thumbs_down_for_xenophobic_homophobic_rants#.X09KzYtS9PY))

As noted above, whilst Alex views the term radical as also having positive connotations, he is conscious of the way the term has been used popularly and in mainstream media and this is evidenced by his using the terms radical and extremism interchangeably. Similarly, Samuel says:

When we say radical, because obviously radical has a negative connotation to it, when using radical, there's always like this element of guillotines and molotovs and whatever, but, in reality when we say radical you're going to the *roots* of the issue. That's why we when we say radical feminism, we mean feminism going straight to the root of patriarchy and toxic masculinity. Moderate feminism skirts around these issues, still sort of excludes trans women, modern feminism, excludes sex workers. Radical feminism goes all the way to the grassroots level. This is what I think when I say radical, going all the way to the source, the source of the issue and the people who experience these issues. (Samuel)

Asked whether he sees a difference between the terms radical, radicalisation and radicalism, Samuel responds with:

Yes, obviously..... to understand radicalism you have to radicalise yourself, you cannot appreciate certain arguments if you're going to be a moderate or a liberal, you have to radicalise yourself, you have to say things which make people feel uncomfortable. That is an unfortunate side-effect, but it is necessary. Obviously you talk about white privilege and whatever, either people dismiss it because they have not reached that level of consciousness. So they dismiss it because it obviously it upsets their bourgeois suburban lifestyle and obviously, these certain ideas will upset all that because they don't want to get off their high horse or get out of the ivory tower.

.... And then obviously, there's radicalisation which I mentioned, of other minorities or the groups or the subgroups and so on, who become radical because they experience a heightened level of oppression again, which I will never will never experience by virtue of my nationality or my skin colour or whatever. So in short, radicalisation occurs, there's when you go through things. You don't just read the book and sort of wear the red beret, you know like the Mao Zedong cap, because it's cool and trendy. (Samuel)

In this regard, it would seem that the general discourse among young people, when it comes to these terms and concepts, is used to indicate others that are outside the norm. They thus use these terms in ways that either identify themselves as being different from others, or to highlight their own perceived moral superiority. Perhaps more importantly, and as noted at the beginning of this section, the variability in the uses and understanding of such terms are more reflective of their non-use in everyday contexts. The notable exceptions seem to be among members or former members of extreme-right groups, where their opposition to the use of such labelling may have contributed to wider engagement with the ideological frameworks of such terms.

#### 4.4.1 Ideology

Across the interviews with both sets of participants, ideology was also at times, a controversial term. Some interviewees interpreted ideology as being fixed ideas that can be lumped within the same category as words such as extreme and radical, i.e. having a generally negative connotation. In their multi-level regression analysis involving a sample of 16,935 individuals across 15 countries in Europe, Mierina and Korojeva (2015) investigated the factors commonly associated with extreme-right movements. In this regard they note:

The results show that ethnic nationalism, along with financial problems and economic insecurity (resource stress and perceived competition) are some of the most important factors behind xenophobia, welfare chauvinism and exclusionism, and they are at least partly

responsible for the comparatively high prevalence of anti-migrant sentiments in East-Central Europe (ibid.: 184).

These factors certainly seem to resonate with participants' explanations regarding the factors that have influenced them to adopt extreme-right views. However, Mieriņa and Koroļeva also note that individuals who have a low interest in politics are also more commonly drawn to extreme-right groups, which does not seem to support the observations in the Maltese context. Rather, it would seem that membership in the extreme-right in this context is driven by a reaction to perceived inequality at an economic level, in terms of employment opportunities and wage equality, and at a political level, in terms of a lack of representation emerging from a feeling of being alienated, or socially disenfranchised. Within this context, ideology is driven by 'traditional values'. In my conversation with Alex he rejected the idea of ideology, saying that he has no affiliations with any, then went on to claim:

I call myself a traditionalist in a way. I still believe in the traditional way, traditional values. For example, one page I can think of is of a British lady, #tradwife, meaning it's promoting a traditional wife. This lady doesn't look at her role as being oppressed, like maybe a set of our society that the media is promoting. I believe that a woman has two roles, to give birth and nurture, whilst the man is to protect and provide. So going along the traditional path a lot of people mention equality.

I don't believe in equality, I believe in inequality in the sense that inequality is the basis of life. Between a man and a woman there is equality in human dignity and equality of opportunity and I believe in meritocracy – if a woman is better than a man at a job, she should be the one employed. (Alex)

This view can be classified as forming part of Alex's ideological approach. In this regard, Garnett (2018: 107) notes 'that commentators on ideology have placed excessive emphasis on economic ideas in the past, and that issues such as law and order and personal morality have always given a more reliable indication of ideological commitment'. Here, Daniel expresses a similar view citing his appreciation for the policies of right-wing Hungarian leader, Victor Orban. Specifically he says:

I like Victor Orban, I like that he's conservative, that he places importance on the family and the model he is using – where he shifted the role of the housewife and endowed it with value, material value, for the work she does. It's the way forward and with the influx of foreigners, this problem will surface. Because this role had no material value, there are a number of families [in Malta] where the woman of the household is not happy, she should at least qualify for a pension, because the family is the spinal cord of the nation. (Daniel)

With both Alex and Daniel the focus on the role of the housewife (see Section 4.4.2 for a broader discussion of this) and other seemingly 'traditional values' are seen, at all levels, as being counter to the toxic context of modernity, characterised by individualism. Here, both identify immigration, in terms of both Europeans and non-Europeans, as choking out possibilities for young Maltese to thrive. Both highlight the lack of employment opportunities for young people, the increased competition in this regard from the introduction of cheaper labour, the consequent reduction in quality of life and disintegration of the traditional family and its associated values. Here, Pasioka (2019: 5) notes that the traditionalist approach among right-wing leaning groups and individuals can be translated as a narrative of victimhood at the hands of neoliberalism. In this regard, she notes '[i]t is a story of once well-off and open societies, which, as a result of either economic decline or unrealized growth, return to integralist agendas, finding rescue in nationalistic thinking and community-oriented practices'. This notion of community-oriented is a significant recurring point across the majority of interviews which, as noted earlier in this section, is used as a rhetorical tool for either embracing or rejecting extreme-right ideology. On the one hand, it is employed by the majority of participants as a way of highlighting the fluidity of notions of community, as

being defined by people rather than geography. Many individuals from the first set of participants note that travel broadens the mind in this respect, and allows them to view themselves as part of a wider European or global community. Whereas, with Daniel and Alex, both of whom have not travelled and express no intention of leaving the island or their localities, community is embedded and fixed. In both cases, they refer to immigrants as ‘guests’ and themselves as ‘hosts’, indicating that others are here temporarily and do not belong. This is evident in both their excitement at the recent launch of the *Partit Popolari* (PP) who they express an intention to vote for. Alex describes the group:

They are a party which is conservative and traditionalist. They value the family unit, they look at the past when there was more safety on our streets, when we used to boast about leaving the front door unlocked. On immigration they want to control it, they want control over our door, they don’t believe in an open-door policy. (Alex)

In his description of the party, Alex again makes reference to host *versus* guests approach to immigration, assimilating the whole of Malta to a home, the ‘door’ of the country being akin to the home entrance and the ability to control a situation that, according to him, has gone beyond control. This for him, as well as other participants who expressed concern about immigration, is also a question of equality for Maltese. With other participants, this translates to a failing by the government. For example, whilst Kristine, George and Amanda all expressed sympathy with immigrants they also expressed their dissatisfaction with the way the government has handled the situation and, particularly with regards to the EU, the absence of ‘burden sharing’, a term used in each case. It is clear from these interviews that whilst respondents express sympathy for immigrants, there is a sense that this may, at times, be geared towards meeting perceived expectations of the interviewers, whilst later expressing concerns in this regard. This is evidenced, for example, when George is asked what his views are on immigration and Malta, to which he responded ‘I don’t really have a problem with it. At least not unless, um, well, um, as long as someone is not going to..... how can I word this without sounding like a bad person?’ Given the polarised political landscape in Malta, such an approach would not be uncommon especially around polarising issues, where the stance tends to be ‘you’re either with us or against us’. The latter also reflects the highly polarising nature of political party affiliation, membership in a locality/community and kinship more broadly, where an individual either belongs or doesn’t (cf. Pace, 2014 for a description of how such divergences were revealed in the run-up to the 2003 EU referendum). Interviewees in the second set of respondents (those with extreme-right affiliations) bemoaned the contemporary trend toward individualism and advocated greater unity, or a greater “sense of collectivity”. Daniel’s nostalgic longing for a sense of community, or spirit of collectivity, is however very clear in who that collectivity includes and who it does not. He says,

There are people [foreigners] who have been here for years and feel ‘at home’ but I don’t think it’s that easy for others to integrate, both because we don’t make it easy for them to integrate, as well as the current situation doesn’t make it easier for them to integrate.

When asked what he means by “we don’t make it easy for them”, he responded with,

Nowadays, Maltese are no longer *curious* about *the foreigner*. Before, you’d see an African guy and you’d say, ‘Look an African, let me go touch him’. Nowadays, it’s a different story altogether (Daniel).

Daniel seems to view outsiders as a short-lived novelty, a point he returns to later in the interview by describing an idealised scenario where foreign visitors remain just that, visitors, who do not settle or establish roots. His reference to ‘we don’t make it easy for them’ implies that the Maltese don’t make it easy for foreigners to integrate because they do not want them to integrate. This is also reflected in Daniel’s assertion that ‘culture, customs, traditions and language’ are what make the Maltese who they are. Whilst these aspects are commonly used as identity markers in other cultural contexts, they also constitute particular forms of knowledge and abilities that facilitate access to a group/community and, by

default, also limit access in the process. This is particularly relevant in the context of Malta, given the small size, the difficulties in accessing language education (for foreign nationals) and the limited global reach of prominent Maltese customs and traditions, making them virtually unheard of beyond the island's borders. The insularity encouraged by such a traditionalist outlook, favoured by Alex, Daniel and Alfred, may explain why there is also little engagement with, or mention of, European ideologies and movements of the extreme right. In other words, none of the young people interviewed appeared to draw any inspiration from other extreme-right movements further afar, rather the extreme-right in the Maltese context also seems to exist as an island, resisting integration with more established groups and ideologies. Whilst there is not enough available information to draw definite conclusions, the tendency among young Maltese people with extreme-right views to describe themselves using labels such as environmentalist indicates, by contrast with right wing tendencies in mainland Europe to reject climate and environmental issues, is further evidence of the traditionalist character of the extreme-right in the Maltese context.

This focus on favouring a traditionalist approach is not uncommon in the Maltese context. Jon Mitchell's (2002) book *Ambivalent Europeans*, approaches modernity, nostalgia and identity in the context of Malta against the backdrop of a looming European Union membership bid. His research focuses on the area of *L-Arcipierku* in the capital city, Valletta, which he highlights as being a bastion in upholding what are widely perceived to be traditional Maltese values. In this regard, his study highlights the tensions between tradition and modernity and, he notes:

The family is seen as the bulwark of traditional Maltese life, and the main point of comparison between Malta and Europe. European countries with high rates of divorce and separation are seen as morally bankrupt, and potentially polluting. Recent moves to introduce divorce in Malta have caused concern, and rising separation rates are seen as a sign of impending social disaster (ibid.: 131).

The traditionalist approach, highlighted by participants with extreme-right views or affiliations, is viewed by both participants, and in scholarly work, as being diametrically opposed to greater individualisation associated with modernisation. Writing around the time of Malta's accession to the EU, Anthony Abela (2004: 81) also notes that typically traditional values in Malta denote more bonding and affective relations between, greater group cohesion and an emphasis on community and, by default, community solidarity, whereas 'individualization favours global solidarity'.



Figure 12: The Partit Popolari's raison D'etre taken from their Facebook page (Part 1)

The end of liberalism.  
Today we are living in a country, proud to be called liberal, in a country where the minorities were given the authority to rule over the country and impose the degeneration of our fathers' culture, the destruction of our religious beliefs and have undressed us of our true identity; adding of course to that is the forced integration and multiculturalism which in Europe has proved nothing but a failed concept leading to fear, theft, rape, crimes, human trafficking and instability. Today the Maltese citizen is living in fear. Certain areas in Malta have become "No Go Areas", while our once proud tourist villages have been transformed into ghettos.  
Decent people are doing the best to overcome this liberal mentality, but at the moment, what was once known as bad is now being proclaimed as the new good. We all know the true message and agenda that the Friday program aired on our national TV station was able to convey. It shall take decades to repair the damage done to our father' culture and the Malta we once knew.  
But now there is a hope of light. As we all may know, the liberals, apart from thinking that they world owes them, they lead only a life, based on sex, drugs, crime, fanaticism, protests and alcohol. These liberals do not get married, they do not have children, so, in a few years' time, they will eventually disappear. But in return, married couples who still uphold our fathers' culture, still considered as the traditional families are having children and making sure that these children are being raised upholding morals and values.

Figure 13: The Partit Popolari's raison D'etre taken from their Facebook page (Part 2)

Today the percentage of the floating voters is increasing by the day, the number of honest people who have had enough, is increasing. This country is slowly by sure, starting to turn away from liberalism and readopting the original values with which we were raised. Yes there is hope, there is a beacon of light which is shining bright and slowly melting away the concept of liberalism and the failed concept of multiculturalism.  
Paul Salomone



As noted in Figures 12 and 13 above, this distinction between traditionalism and the multiculturalism associated with Europe, is clearly defined in the *Partit Popolari's* Facebook manifesto. Here, so-called

European ‘liberalism’ is identified as morally bankrupt and juxtaposed against an ‘original’ Maltese set of values and identity, rooted in family values and religion. Liberals are here identified as being individualistic and lacking roots since ‘they do not get married, they do not have children’. In this regard, Samuel notes that there is nothing new in this ‘type of rhetoric’ and emphatically emphasises that this rhetoric needs to be stopped in its tracks. Prior to our interview, whilst having a coffee, in a particularly heated narrative he said ‘You think they [extreme-right groups] don’t know how to manipulate public opinion? They’re experts, that’s why they should never be given a platform’. During the interview, he expanded further on this point and said:

Because this ties into the whole concept of centrists and liberal politics. When I say liberal, I’m talking about liberal in the centrist way, not the way liberal is incorrectly used to describe the left-wing. It is this liberal perspective where one believes that you can give a platform to these far-right groups and believing that nothing is going to come of it, ‘so everyone has a right to free-speech, just let them have their say’ (laughs). This is what happened in the 1920s in Germany. Look what happened when we gave them a platform, the NSDAP in the 20s in Germany, look what happened. All of a sudden, 15 years later you got a fucking World War on your hands, mixed with a race war in a way, you know with a racial undertone to it. (Samuel)

Samuel recognises that he previously shared such views and has now shifted to the other side of the political spectrum. Similarly, Jonathan notes that his entry to university and the opportunity to read widely, as well as to engage with a range of different social groups, gradually resulted in him shifting his views more to the left. He says:

I began to mix more frequently with other people on campus and to read more, I won’t mention my degree because, you know, but I had more possibilities to make my own choices, because before, the friends I had were not the ones I would have chosen.... I know that sounds bad. (Jonathan)

Asked about where he would place himself ideologically, he replied ‘on the left definitely, even far-left I’d say, I know it’s the total opposite of where I was before’. Jonathan, as with Samuel, seems to suggest that he is conscious of the significant change in his ideological stance as a possible counter-reaction to his former extreme-right affiliation. This ideological distance could also serve a more functional role in publicly rejecting their former views and disassociating themselves as much as possible from their former ties.

#### 4.4.2 Economy and inequality

Participants from both sets were asked about the key concerns they had in thinking about the future. Across the sections of this report, financial concerns and inequality have been repeatedly highlighted by young people from both sets of participants as key concerns. Respondents affiliated with the extreme-right (second set of participants) frame their concerns in terms of inequalities and through the idiom of victimhood. For the second set of respondents, inequality was framed as a lived experience and themselves, as the victims of unequal treatment, which, they claim, overwhelmingly benefits immigrants. In this regard, Alex opines:

The rent prices in Malta are a bit too high. Why? Because Malta is over-populated and there are now a lot of people from the gaming industry, for example, who yes come legally. My problem with immigration is not per se illegal [immigration], I think the problem is legal [immigration]. I’m all for unity between Europeans but you have to think of your country.

Then there are also a lot of illegal immigrants. To be honest, even the ones that come legally from places like India and Pakistan. Even though they come here legally, or companies bring

them here, because that's what the plutocrats want, they are all in for cheap labour. At times, they'll [plutocrats] point fingers at people who mention these things and either call them racists....

They're [politicians] making their pockets bigger and bigger, but our wages are staying where they are, stagnated. And *these* people, with all due respect, they work 12 hours or so and if they get paid 5 euros, 3 goes back to the company. Why do they come here to live in these conditions? Work is a right for Maltese, for a citizen, so look what's happening to us. If you ask for a raise, they'll say you can leave, if you don't like it. This is why employers are so in favour of diversity. (Alex)

Alex elaborated on this point at some length, detailing the ways in which immigration, cheap labour and unfair competition were destroying the fabric of society, particularly the family, stating that in order to compete, people had to forego their quality of life, adding 'I don't want to work more than 8 hours a day because I want to go home and be with my family, I want to read, I want to know, I want to learn, I don't want to be a *Homo Economicus*, I don't want to live just to work'. Young people's radicalisation has been identified as largely an issue of belonging (Awan, 2006; Miller-Idriss, 2009; Arnot and Swartz, 2012), where access to employment in itself is identified as a state of belonging, of social contribution, that identifies, in the process, who has a right to belong and who does not. This is epitomised by the association of the right to work with citizenship and, by default with the nation. This, in part explains some of the difficulties associated with asylum seekers' difficulties in finding legal employment and turning to the informal labour market, legitimising the perception of them as non-citizens.

By contrast with Alex, Samuel notes:

The problem is this anger [at immigrants], this antagonism always comes from a competition of resources. You know, 'I'm here today, now, some third country national game, and is competing for my crumbs.' And you already know what I'm trying to say when I use these particular terms. Because the issue is, it's not because this guy is coming to compete, it's because this guy is coming to compete with your crumbs. So it is not this guy that's the problem. It's going back to the liberal capitalist democracy that is the issue. It is the economic model, which is inherently created, designed to create inequality. So you know, this person is not your enemy, these persons are your typical run of the mill, pro-business politicians on both sides. You know, in fact I call them MLPN, because literally it's one tribe with two clans in them, you know, the same pro-business money, money, money, let's sky-rocket that GDP, regardless of the social costs, because, you know the wheel of the economy keeps turning (*ir-rota tal-Ekonomija ddur*). We don't care if this creates homelessness, we don't care if this causes antagonism within the working class. So yes apart from housing, which is a specific issue, the economic model is shite. It's complete shite. This is why I don't vote in the EU or general elections at all, because unless I see some sort of proper socialist – I'm not talking about the brand of Ho Chi Minh, this I know is not going to appeal to a large crowd – but unless there is some sort of real socialist party that feels the pulse of the workers, that takes into consideration issues at an intersectional level and designs a model which is not inherently designed to foster hate and division, then these sort of things are likely to continue. (Samuel)

Whilst there are overarching ideological differences between Alex and Samuel's analysis of the economy, they both reflect a disillusionment with the economic-political model, in Alex's case this ire is directed at foreign immigrants, as Samuel puts it 'competing over their crumbs'. Samuel, on his part refuses to acknowledge either political party by refusing to vote. As noted in earlier sections (Section 4.1.1 and 4.1.2), numerous scholars (Mitchell, 2004; Baldacchino, 2009; Veenendaal, 2019) have made reference to

clientilism and patronage in the Maltese political and business context. Coupled with the highly polarised political environment (Baldacchino, 2009), and its impact on people's everyday decisions, work and social relations, benefits and opportunities for social mobility are distributed along party and faction lines.

#### 4.4.3 Gender and the home

As noted throughout the findings section, gender relations, gender roles and gendered experiences permeate across the varying domains that characterise the experience and engagement with the extreme-right in Malta. In Section 4.1.2, it was noted that men and women have very different perceptions of, and relationships with, the localities they live in. These gendered experiences hinge primarily on security and movement. Almost all female respondents from either Marsa or Birżebbuġa noted the increased sense of insecurity and the reduced freedom in their daily movements, as a result of a heightened male presence in their localities. For example, Shania, with specific reference to immigrant men notes:

I had never been in this kind of situation, look at what rubbish we have living among us. Now, it could be that there are a thousand good ones and five that are bad, but those are the ones I met. What they did in their countries to have to escape, I don't know, no one knows (Shania).

Shania's reference to not knowing is particularly telling here. This aspect of 'knowing others' in your community was frequently cited by Alex, Samuel and Alfred who all purported to support a traditionalist view. Similarly, Mitchell (2002), in his work in Valletta, describes how people collectively draw on memories of communality where women of different households would engage in work together and one informant relates how 'particularly in the summer – men and children would sleep outside on the streets, in the cooler outside air, and how the doors in L-Arcipierku were habitually kept unlocked. This was a common memory. There was no need to close up the house, because there was no threat of burglary' (ibid.: 133-134). Upholding this traditionalist view of gender roles and community, Alex says:

However, we do believe that a man and a woman have different roles, that they are different physically, biologically, emotionally. They are different, we should embrace that, it's like a synergy, yin and yang, solar and lunar, since time immemorial, they complement each other. We should embrace masculinity as well as femininity. We look at women as the bearer of the race. For example, I would never agree to sending women to the frontline in war, because they have different roles and the woman, like the children, should be defended. We should very much respect our women. If a woman wants to go and work, by all means, but I wouldn't want her to work because she has to, because of economic reasons. For example, if a man works a job 8 to 9 hours a day and they still have economic problems. If I'm married, I want to be the provider, it's in our nature. I think the man needs more to have a career, at least I think it's more important for a man to have a career than a woman. (Alex)

I was brought up in a household, in a family, with a father who I used to see come from his work and even from his part-time [work], at times. He doesn't go to bed and switch on the T.V., he comes in sees the dishes and washes them. He puts a load in the washing machine. Even with my mum, even though she had children and after that she didn't work, she was taking care of the household, like a traditional wife. (Alex)

Whilst Alex makes reference to the differences between men and women as a justification for differential treatment, he espouses a notion of meritocracy in access to a career between men and women, whilst also emphasising men's need for a career and to be the main 'provider'. Other interviewees, such as Lara who is from Birżebbuġa, cited a career and access to education as liberating them and other women from financial dependency on men, in opposition to being provided for. In this regard, when asked whether women's status in Malta has improved in recent years, she says:

We've improved [in Malta]. In 1992, women were given rights to property in the event of separation, because before that they weren't even entitled to a fork if the marriage broke down, even when a woman was in the right because the man would always win. Women have their own identities, women also have their own way of doing things. I studied, I graduated twice, so as a result, shouldn't I be entitled to my own identity, my own opinion? Do I have to follow men? I'm also economically independent, so I'm the type of person who buys things and goes out with my own salary, I do anything. I totally agree with this.

Yes, we have improved a lot, maybe we need more female representation in parliament. That might help in spurring on more rights for women. At the same time, I am not in favour of positive democracy and positive discrimination. I believe the sexes are equal and everyone should advance on the basis of meritocracy. I have no right to get a job over a man, when we are equally qualified, simply by virtue of being a woman, or vice versa. Everyone should be evaluated according to their merits. (Lara)

Alex's (and Daniel's) views on the role of women seem to centre on control over their daily lives and, in particular, their homes. Alex's perception of women's role as one of nurture and linked to domesticity (see Section 4.4.1), in accordance with Daniel's exaltation of the role of the housewife, outline a connection between domesticity and the home with women's roles, both of which are protected and maintained, thus dependent on, men. Effectively, the home is a controlled environment where relations and conviviality are shielded from the unpredictability of the outside. By contrast, Lara emphasises the importance of work and access to education as a way of becoming both financially independent and independently-minded. Her repeated emphasis on a woman's right to have an identity of her own and her own opinions is revealing of the patriarchy that dominates the Maltese context (cf. Mitchell, 2002). On this note, Shania says:

There have been people who, I'm not referring to my work place here, for example I remember there was one man just down the road and I told him, 'I've enrolled at MCAST'.<sup>35</sup> He asked, 'What are you going to study?' and I said, a technician. He turned and said, 'Someone like you, wouldn't you be better off as a hairdresser?' (Shania)

Shania went on to note that when she actually started her course, out of a class of 32 only 2 were women. Shania's example illustrates the extent to which traditional gender roles, or at least, perceptions of such roles, are still pervasive.

#### 4.4.4 Shifting away from the extreme-right

I just sort of drifted away from that scene, the more people I met at University and the more I increased my social circle, the less I wanted to be a part of Lowell's group. Then, I realised how insecure they all were, that's why they get so pissed off when you stop agreeing with them, because they need people to feel safe, and so did I. (Jonathan)

Samuel and Jonathan, both former members of the far-right group *Imperium Europa*, both shifted to the far-left of the political spectrum after leaving the group. Jonathan explains his trajectory away from the group as being contingent with his social network increasing in size and feeling a sense of belonging. Jonathan explains that although activities with IE are framed as being group oriented, members are very self-obsessed and are looking for 'an audience for their anger' (Jonathan). The latter conforms with Samuel's account of his years with the same group, where the bulk of his activity was focused on participation in the online forum, an essentially solitary affair that takes on the appearance of social engagement. Asked about what prompted him to move away from the group and the accompanying ideology, Samuel says:

<sup>35</sup> The Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST)



Funnily enough I met – I’m going to give you the bare details out of necessity – what happened was there was a time where I met this person from – I know the country but I’m just going to mention the continent – from Africa, and we had this collegial relationship for some time. At the time, when it happened, I was already mellowing down, this was at the other end of this journey so I was already moving towards a centre-right approach. I was a bit taken aback because I had never spoken to a black person before in my life. So it was you know, because it was a collegial relationship, I didn’t have much choice in the matter, and then I remember this person offered *me* to go and have drinks with him and I said OK. I wasn’t like ‘Yeah, OK!’, I was quite sober in my answer, but I said OK. And you know, after repeatedly working together and having drinks, I started to realise that this person is like everybody else and then obviously I started to feel this internal conflict within me, I was like ‘What the fuck am I doing man? What is this crap?’ When I say crap, not this guy, this five years of crap which I filled my head with. I said ‘What the fuck have I been doing?’ Life’s too short, hating and all this stuff and this guy changed my mind - I didn’t tell him I was involved in this stuff - just by his kindness. What’s the expression? Kill them with kindness? This is what this guy did with me inadvertently, because he didn’t know any of this about me. That’s how it started. One person managed to change my views and then I started to educate myself on systemic racism, institutional racism and intersectionality.

Like I said, one thing led to another, reading up on systemic racism. Obviously these things didn’t happen within a span of months, this happened in an arc throughout the years, because then politically I started to shift from far-right to centre-right, then I was what you would call liberal in the centrist sense and then obviously as you start to read up on things and you start to read radical authors and radical literature, from centre to centre-left and now I identify as Marxist-Leninist, obviously not the Stalinist DPRK-type, but you know authoritarian communism, minus the Gulags. (Samuel)

As with Jonathan, Samuel highlights the importance of opportunities for dialogue in his shift away from the extreme-right. Similarly, Amanda and Fiona have highlighted how living abroad, as well as daily interactions with foreign Others, in their view are more likely to make people adaptable to change and difference. George notes, with surprise, that there are close and friendly relations between immigrant and local communities in Marsa, which he says, contrasts with the perception he comes away with from social media.

## 5. Conclusions

This report began by highlighting young people in Malta’s increased engagement with extreme-right messages, groups and personalities online, against the backdrop of a turbulent and divided local political context. Given Malta’s colonial history and socio-geographic position vis-a-vis North Africa and Europe, this political context is particularly significant here. In this regard, the island’s history has been characterised by control by different colonial powers, shifting alliances and as a site for highly contested ideological confrontations (Mitchell, 2002). The oft-cited ‘melting-pot of the Mediterranean’ moniker attributed to the islands by both locals and foreign state representatives, is indicative of the islands’ geopolitical advantages, as well as the contestations this invites. Common across the first set of participants – young people living in the localities of Marsa and Birzebbuga – as well as among the second set of participants – affiliates and former-affiliates of extreme-right groups – is a view of the Internet and social media platforms as artifices for social mobility and social dialogue, in a context where these are perceived to be limited. The island’s physical detachment from mainland Europe, and the insularity this contributes to, has resulted in a congruent increase in engagement with the wider world through the

Internet and across various social media platforms. At the same time, these medium are also effective at maintaining distance and control over engagements with others. There are obvious differences in which each set of participants engage with the wider world through online platforms and social media. Overwhelmingly, respondents from the first group of participants expressed distaste for social media platforms such as Facebook and viewed the Internet as providing access to news and views from around the world. By contrast, respondents from the second set of participants also viewed online platforms and social media as useful resources in connecting with views from across the globe, in particular connecting with viewpoints and ideas that allow them to exercise some control over their own lives, such as having access to alternative information or connecting with people who similarly challenge accepted norms. Narratives collected from extreme-right affiliates and former affiliates indicate, across the board, a lack of a sense of belonging as a key factor in influencing their engagement with extreme-right politics, whether this is at a community level through nostalgic referrals to a familiar past, or at a supra-national level in envisioning membership of a pan-European or pan-White network. As noted in earlier sections, such notions of a pan-European alliance are used within the Maltese context as indicators of who is unwelcome as part of this alliance, i.e. black others, rather than being an expression of a desired union or a far-reaching sense of belonging.

This sense of belonging can also be conceived as a sense of being, as social media platforms increasingly form part of young people's individualisation (Knuttila, 2011), as well as being perceived as a 'battleground for ideas' (Daniel) and a medium for imagining the nation (Anderson, 1983). However, the tendency for online networks to reflect offline networks and relationships, can reduce the opportunities for engaging with alternative viewpoints. Numerous scholars have commented on the Euro-scepticism marking the run-up to Malta's bid for EU membership (Mitchell, 2002; Baldacchino, 2009; Pace, 2011; Harwood, 2017) in which national identity has been identified as a key contention both prior to, and following, Malta's membership to the EU. In particular, Baldacchino (2009: 150) highlights the immense difficulties that the Maltese encounter in imagining themselves as a nation, a quest for identity that 'remains stifled by a bi-communal partisanship that sees each of the two main political parties take on the characteristics of an ethnies, a moral community, extending the locus of empathy, trust and identification with others as if in an extended family'. Other scholars (Boissevain, 1968; Cini, 2002; Abela, 2005) dealing with the Maltese context, have highlighted this divide from the perspective of factionalism where, drawing on Bailey's (1977: 22) definition, factionalism is 'the splitting apart of a whole which *all concerned claim should be united*'. In other words, the imaginary, 'nation', that should unite Maltese as a whole, is divided along partisan lines in what Abela (2006: 19) has dubbed a 'two-nation party-political divide within one social nation', or as Samuel noted 'one tribe, with two clans'.

Relationships to place, and young people's perceptions of place, in terms of a sense of belonging, community and the nation *writ large*, are significant themes across this group of participants, particularly in response to ever-decreasing spaces of interaction in young people's everyday lives. As Godfrey Baldacchino (2012: 109), the doyen of island studies, notes 'island societies may be wonderful places to live in, *but only as long as one conforms to the dominant culture*. Should one deviate from expected and established practices, the threat of ostracism is immense'. The latter seems to be a significant contributor to the allure of online spaces as platforms of engagement for young people, free from the scrutiny of the wider society. Anonymity, here, allows young people to assume new identities and experiment with different ideas and messages, in the establishment of personhood (cf. Candea, 2010). This is further evidenced by Jonathan's irritation at members on VivaMalta for expressing extremist views on the forum under an anonymous identity, whilst claiming an opposite point of view in public forums and on comment boards. This contradictory presentation of the self is in many ways reflective of the dual social roles that young people act out in negotiating their public and private identities, as well as being reflective of the polarised character of social and political dialogue in this context. On a connected note, contemporary scholarship (Gray, 2009; Marwick and Boyd, 2010) has highlighted social media's role in expanding

dialogue and freedom of expression, from citizen journalism to varying forms of dissent movements. In this way the unbounded domains of the internet and social media platforms, serve as tools in resisting and subverting mainstream discourses.

Focusing on the 'symbolisation' of community in Malta, Jon Mitchell (1998:82) argues, with reference to Cohen's *The Symbolic Construction of community* (1985), that:

[t]he power of symbolisation is that it masks internal contradictions or incoherencies within the community, presenting a public face of communal unity. The symbolic construction of community, then, presents bounded homogeneous unity in the face of - and because of - the fragmentation of social reality.

The latter point also tallies, to some extent, with Baldacchino's (2012) argument that islands' small size can be deceiving in their 'alluring attractiveness'. His argument draws on a critique of the literature around small island states that suggests such states' people have a friendlier disposition, are more communal, less violent and present all the conditions that are favourably conducive to a functioning democracy. He notes, in this regard, that such an image conceals the undemocratic practices occurring within such contexts where people are less likely to raise opposition out of the knowledge, among residents, that they must get along in one way or another. He concludes here, '[p]erhaps it is precisely because they promote a strong sense of fellowship and community that small island residents tolerate 'big man' politics and non-democratic practices' (ibid.: 115). This awareness of others' views and the repercussions of their actions was evident among many participants, particularly those with former affiliations to the extreme-right. This is further evidenced by Samuel's assertion that he would like to be more involved in left-leaning activism, but is conscious that, given the small size and social interconnectedness on the island, his background and former activities would be used to publicly shame or discredit him. As noted throughout this national report, the widespread hesitancy to participate in this research among many would-be participants, was a result of a fear of being identified, affiliated with a label, or of being associated with a topic that is locally controversial and that touches on themes, such as immigration, that have been the source for heated public debate.

The non-use of the terms radicalisation and radicalism, signal their other-worldliness among young Maltese people. Among participants who claimed familiarity with these terms, most associated them with Islamist or terrorist movements, or activities and individuals located elsewhere. Similarly, for participants extremism was generally seen to have a connotation with violence. Participants affiliated with the political right resented the use of terms such as extreme, far-right and Nazi with reference to their views and did not identify with such terms, using descriptions such as traditionalist, patriot and environmentalist to describe themselves, instead. The use of these particular terms aligns with other participants' concerns of over-development, clientelism and a lack of political representation. This is particularly significant in terms of understanding young people's trajectories in embracing extreme views. Harvey and Krohn Hansen's (2018: 18) definition of dislocation (section 4.1.1), of losing one's 'bearings or sense of self' fits well here, in describing a context that has been shaped by significant spatial transformation and social upheaval.

## 6. References

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## 7. Appendices

### Appendix 7.1: Socio-demographic data of respondents

Name (pseudonym)	Age	Country of Birth	Education	Employment	Ethnicity	Family status	Gender	Religion	Religiosity	Residential status	No. in household
Samuel	30	Malta	University of Malta/ Postgraduate	Full time	Maltese	Single	Male	None	None	Renting	1
Alex	24	Malta	Secondary	Full time	Maltese	Single	Male	None	None	With parents	4
Alfred	27	Malta	Secondary	Part time	Maltese	Single	Male	Catholic	None	With Parents	4
Jonathan	29	Malta	University of Malta	Full time	Maltese	Engaged	Male	None	None	Renting	2
Alyssa	26	Malta	Secondary	Full time	Maltese	Engaged	Female	None	Atheist	Lives with parents	3
Fiona	28	Malta	Other- but didn't graduate	Full time	Maltese	Partner	Female	None	Atheist	Lives with single parent	2
Karen	26	Malta	University of Malta/ Postgraduate	Full time	Maltese	Partner	Female	Roman Catholic	Believer but not practising	Lives with parents	3
Kristine	22	Malta	University student (current)	Part-time	Maltese	Partner	Female	Roman Catholic	Practising	Lives with parents	4
Shania	30	Malta		Unemployed	Maltese		Female				
Amanda	26	Malta	University of Malta/ postgraduate	Full time	Maltese	Partner	Female	None	Atheist	Lives with parents	3

George	30	Malta	University of Malta/ Undergraduate	Full time	Maltese		Male	Catholic	Atheist	Living with partner	3
Cikku	26	Malta	MCAST / post-secondary	Part time	Maltese	Single	Male	Roman Catholic	Agnostic	Lives with parents	4
Charles	32	Malta	University of Malta	Part-time	Maltese	Single	Male	None	None	Rents	1
Lara	27	Malta	University of Malta/ postgraduate	Full time	Maltese	Married	Female	Catholic	Catholic	Home with husband and children	3
Daniel	29	Malta	Secondary	Full-time	Maltese	Single	Male	None	None	Home with parents and sibling	4