

Country Paper: Malta

Introduction

The project *ECoSMS – Empowering Citizens of Small Member States*, involves three small countries of the European Union, Cyprus, Estonia and Malta, and has the aim of understanding if the citizens of small EU countries feel that their voice counts less in the context of the European Union.

This short paper presents the main findings of the project’s activities in the Maltese context and it is structured in three sections. The first presents the results of a survey that has been conducted throughout the whole project period, showing the opinions of the Maltese people on the European Union. The second section presents the results of face-to-face meetings with stakeholders (both organisations and individual participants), including positive and negative points on the union. The conclusion includes some recommendations from both the meetings and the survey.

1. Survey and results

According to the last Eurobarometer survey¹, people’s sense of being citizens of the Union has overall increased among all the citizens of the member states. One interesting result of the Eurobarometer survey is that the majority of the respondents are in favour of the membership to the Union and recognise that their countries are better equipped to face the future from within the EU².

The survey conducted in the framework of the project was structured in the same way for all three partners. In Malta, it was conducted as an on-line questionnaire and disseminated through different channels (mainly mailing lists and social media) and it was made available in the two official languages of the country, Maltese and English.

The overall result shows that the opinion of Maltese people on the EU is positive. The respondents don’t feel they have a diminished role in the EU, the general feeling is that people’s voice counts in the European context and that the policies generally reflect citizens’ opinions. The main problem identified in the context of decision making is that citizens cannot directly influence the process, but

¹ *Standard Eurobarometer 85 “European citizenship” Report*, available at (last opened: January 2017) <http://ec.europa.eu/COMMFrontOffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/Survey/getSurveyDetail/instruments/STANDARD/surveyKy/2130>

² *Public opinion in the European Union*, page 67, available at (last opened: January 2017) <http://ec.europa.eu/COMMFrontOffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/Survey/getSurveyDetail/instruments/STANDARD/surveyKy/2130>

always need an intermediary, thus creating problems in the identification and in trusting their advocate.

In general, the Maltese feel that the main problem affecting their representation in the European Union is the existence of socio-economic and political differences among the member states. They also recognise that there is an overall lack of transparency in the decision making process.

It is important to note that being citizens of a small member state, with a limited number of representatives in the European institutions makes it easier to get in touch with them, when compared to bigger countries. This might also influence the voter turn-out in European parliament elections, which has always been quite high³, even though it has been declining over time (the turnout was 82% after Malta's accession to the EU in 2004, while it has declined to circa 75% in 2014).

2. Face-to-face meetings

The project and preliminary results of the survey have been presented during two meetings facilitated by Kopin. The first one took place in a formal setting and involved representatives of civil society, academia and other organisations which in some cases were actively working with European institutions. The second one took place in a more informal setting, in Day Centre⁴, with senior citizens attending the morning activities.

The overall result of the meetings confirms that the Maltese have a positive opinion of the European Union. The main reason that has been mentioned is the freedom of movement in a broad sense, not only the opportunity for the citizens to travel around Europe with national documents rather than a passport, but also as the opportunities provided to people to spend time in different countries. This may include opportunities of study and/or work (Erasmus programmes, Voluntary Service, etc.). Another positive aspect mentioned was that the EU ensures that the rights of its citizens are respected in each member state, not only by providing occasions for redress, but also ensuring that the public services related to them have the same standards.

Participants recognised that it is easier for Maltese citizen to get in touch with their representatives, when compared with bigger countries, but the fact that they usually live abroad and that their agenda is often different from the one of the citizens, makes it difficult for citizens to have an impact on the decision making process. Notwithstanding this lack of trust in their individual impact, all the participants agreed that when organized in groups and acting through the right channels, European citizens can lobby for their priorities to be addressed. The problem that arises in this case is to identify the right channel and/or organizations to be used.

³ Eurostat, *Voter turnout in national and EU parliamentary elections (%)*, available at (last opened: January 2017) <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/tgm/table.do?tab=table&plugin=1&language=en&pcode=tsdgo310>

⁴ A Day Centre is an initiative of the Department for the Elderly and Community Care, with the aim of helping to prevent social isolation and the feeling of loneliness, and to reduce the social interaction difficulties which older persons tend to encounter. It also aims to motivate the elderly by encouraging them to participate in the planning of day centre activities. By enabling older persons and persons with disabilities to remain as independent and socially integrated as possible it also provides respite for their relatives and carers. (Source: <http://activeageing.gov.mt/en/Pages/Day-Centres/Day-Centres.aspx>)

The main problem that has been identified, which could also account for a drop in turnout at the MEP elections, is a lack of information on policies and decisions that could affect the citizens. This problem was mentioned in different ways by the participants, but leading to the same result of low interest in general affairs and problems related to the European Union. On one side, participants mentioned the fact that information is not easily accessible to everyone. The elderly in particular find using the internet to keep up to date with what is going on at European level challenging. Younger people identified the fact that the focus of general news is more on the national level rather than the European, thus limiting the interest of the public when it comes to European affairs. Furthermore, information is not made attractive, therefore when available, it is often too complicated for people to understand. In this case, the main problems identified are related to the language used: sometimes political news is too technical to be understood by the public, in addition to usually being provided in English, which can be an obstacle to people who are not totally confident with the language.

3. Conclusions

Although Maltese people largely feel positive towards the EU, there are still some issues to be addressed in order to spark greater interest and thus also elicit further participation in European Union affairs.

- The main issue to be addressed is the availability and quality of information as this should be available to all citizens not only in terms of channel used but also in terms of language. This will make it easier for the citizens to identify the right channel through which they will be able to influence the agenda of MEPs and eventually have a say in the policy making process.
- The decision making process should be made easier and less State oriented, providing more opportunities to organized groups of citizens to raise their voice.
- The availability of information and the opportunity to get in touch with their representatives shall have a positive impact on direct participation, but will also have a positive impact on the overall feelings towards the European Union.