

# VISIT UNDER EU PRESIDENCY

## MALTA - A JEWEL OF AN ISLAND

On 3 and 4 April, our Association made a study trip to Malta - a two-day immersion in the long and rich history of a country that harbours great ambitions for Europe. In broad brushstrokes, the history of Malta may be traced back from the Phoenicians and St Paul, through the Battle of Lepanto in 1571, which saw the defeat of the Ottomans and was the first awakening of a European identity rooted in Christianity, the reign of the Knights of St John until 1798, the rivalry between the major Catholic powers, and the brief period of Bonapartist reform resulting in French occupation until the Congress of Vienna, to British rule and eventual independence. Malta is a product of and key witness to centuries of conflict in the Mediterranean and Europe as a whole. Owing to its strategic position in the heart of the Mediterranean, over the centuries Malta has played a role out of all proportion to its size and population. It has been independent since 1964, became part of the EU in 2004, and joined the eurozone in 2008. Malta takes great pride in itself. Its capital is an open-air museum of our civilisation, in which the palaces, known as 'auberges', built by Grand Masters from the leading Catholic powers, vie to outdo each other for splendour. These ancient buildings now provide official residences for the country's President, Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, the past rubbing shoulders with the present. Renzo Piano has magnificently redesigned the entrance to the old town and built a new Parliament, the stone structure of which ties

it in with Malta's past, while the Chamber, which is very modern in design, looks forward to the future. The Parliament, which was previously housed in the President's Palace, wished to assert its independence of the executive by having its own building. The Speaker of the Parliament and the chair of its Committee for Foreign and European Affairs welcomed us to the building for a guided tour and discussions on European issues. Our Maltese friends' commitment to the European project was clearly apparent during our delegation's talks with the President of the Republic, the Labour Prime Minister and the Speaker of the Parliament. Our politically diverse group asked questions and offered suggestions at a time when Europe appears unsure of itself and needs at all costs to rediscover its energy and sense of direction. Malta is comfortable on the European stage, supported by its rich history and its ability to act as a facilitator and host international conferences. The Prime Minister supports the idea of a multi-speed Europe. The old taboo against some Member States moving forward faster than the others has finally been broken. He reiterated the priorities of the Maltese Presidency, based on those established by the Presidential Trio (the Netherlands, Slovenia, Malta) in 2016: migration policy, gender equality, development of the Digital Single Market, combatting terrorism, maritime governance and a specific approach for the Western Mediterranean. The Maltese authorities repeated

their willingness to help find a solution to the chaos in Libya and reiterated their support for democracy in Turkey. Our delegation endorsed this approach. We were also welcomed to the naval base by Maltese army officers. They spoke to us about the armed forces and their duties, including in the fight against terrorism. We were taken out on a launch to view Malta from the sea, giving us a taste of what the Knights must have felt on approaching this magnificent island. Malta will be a European Capital of Culture in 2018. I see the island as an obvious choice, given its beauty, architectural splendour and artistic treasures of all kinds. St John's Cathedral, with its rich baroque interior, honed and perfected over the centuries by the Grand Masters and the Catholic Church, and Caravaggio's masterpiece, the Beheading of St. John the Baptist, with its exceptionally fine use of chiaroscuro, are particularly magnificent. Our discussions with our hosts centred around the future, culture, politics and the importance of European solidarity. The discussions were led with skill and authority by our friend Enrique Barón Crespo.

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## HIGH-LEVEL MEETINGS IN MALTA

We initiated our institutional visit at the highest level. The President of the Republic, Mrs. Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca, received us at the San Anton Palace in Attard, the official residence of the President since the office was created in 1974.

In her welcoming address, President Coleiro Preca was clearly speaking from her heart! Making many references to Malta's history especially to how positive the accession of Malta to the EU in 2004 has been. She expressed her conviction that in these difficult times, Europeans must spend the time needed to build a society which stands up against hatred, social injustice, greed, exploitation, and discrimination. She highlighted the great role that former MEPs can play in it.

She also referred to the aging of the European population as a source for concern that requires individuals and society to change their behaviour in response to changing conditions and policy to help adapt to demographic shifts.

The President of our Association, Enrique Barón, thanked her for her warm welcome and hospitality and briefly explained the role and programmes of our Association. In his speech he made many references to the history of Malta and its strong ties with Europe. He specially

mentioned the XV century when Malta became part of the powerful Spanish Empire and the Spanish King granted Malta to the knights of St John in 1530.

Enrique Barón Crespo underlined the important role played by Malta in relation to immigration.

Before departing we could make a brief visit into different rooms of the palace, among them the one that houses the portraits of the Great Masters of the Order of St. John. The palace, built in the early 17th century, was used as a residence by subsequent Grand Masters, being enlarged a number of times in the process. Later it was the headquarters of the rebel National Assembly during the uprising of 1798-1888 and then became a residence for the Civil Commissioners, Governors and Governors-General of Malta.

The next meeting was with the Prime Minister, Dr Joseph Muscat, a former colleague in the European Parliament, who was accompanied by the Minister for Finance, Prof. Edward Scicluna, also a Former MEP which we had the pleasure of having dinner with.

The meeting took place in the Auberge de Castille, one of the finest buildings of Malta that now houses the Office of the Prime Minister. It was originally an auberge in Valletta built, in the 1570s, to house knights of the Order of Saint John from the langue of Castile, Leon and Portugal. The present building dates back to the 1740s, when it was completely rebuilt in the Baroque style.

An informal dialogue was opened immediately among attendees as introductions were unnecessary.

It turned out to be a relaxed and extremely interesting meeting, like a gathering of old friends now holding a great responsibility. The delegation's members contributed to this informal dialogue by making comments and asking questions.

We talked long about the priorities of the Maltese Presidency of the Council such as migration, security, single market, social inclusion, neighbourhood policy and marine-time policy. Issues like unemployment and protection of workers, tourism and sustainability, ICTs and the recent EU commitment on HPC and Big Data as pioneering technologies and practices that are revolutionizing computational research in the entire public and private sector were discussed.

A fruitful meeting united again this great network of MEPs. Much is said about networking and in a positive sense, but sometimes we forget that the Former MEPs form an interesting and wide network that our association contributes to reinforce. We could see the crucial role that Malta is playing in the EU migration crisis when, next morning, we visited EASO, the European Asylum Support Office, which main mission is to support those states subject to pressure on their asylum and reception systems, to implement and develop the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) by fostering greater cooperation with and between Member States on the basis of the CEAS values of equity and fairness.

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