

Bolstering Migrant Political Participation through Open Circle Discussions and Advocacy Initiatives in Malta

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Abstract

This article examines the potential of advocacy campaigns and open discourse to enhance the political and democratic representation of migrants. It establishes that migrants are valuable members of their host communities who bring diversity, novel perspectives, and lived experiences that are beneficial to the country at large. With specific reference to third-country nationals (TCNs) the article also highlights the challenges faced by migrants in Malta and how these discussions and initiatives can help overcome them. It contends that Malta can reap the benefits of enhanced political stability and a diverse, inclusive society by fostering migrant political engagement and embracing migrants with dignity. It is therefore, submitted that the Maltese society should create systems where migrants can safely and securely exercise their political rights in order to encourage a sense of belonging in the country and facilitate greater social inclusion and political empowerment.

Key word: Advocacy; Open discussion; Migrant; Participation; Social inclusion

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Third Country Nationals' (TCNs') migration to Europe has increased substantially, making

it imperative to ensure their engagement in the political systems of the countries they now inhabit. Of course, one of the core principles of democracy is that all members of a democratic society are required to play an active role in the decision-making processes that define the community's direction, governance, and future (Entzinger, 1999). It is also commonly held that in order for such a democracy to function effectively, there must be some degree of consensus on policies and procedures (Wieviorka 1996; Walzer 1997); for instance, there must be a minimum of shared values among individuals and groups of that political community, such as respect for cultural disparities and respect for their identities and values.

In light of this, this article examines the challenges in encouraging migrant political participation in Malta and how open discourse and advocacy campaigns can be used to enhance their political participation. It examines the legal framework for political rights, participation in elections, and involvement in the political process. In addition, it provides an overview of the legal and socio-economic barriers faced by TCNs in Europe when attempting to participate in the political process. The article then identifies feasible strategies to promote increased political participation among TCNs, including offering sufficient opportunities for voter registration, launching campaigns to increase awareness of migrant political rights, and making effective use of already-existing civic engagement initiatives.

Since the 1990s, a number of monitoring and research institutes have concentrated on the concerns of migrant engagement in politics, mostly based on partnerships with many educational institutions that have been conducting studies in the field (Caragiuli and Stenius, 2014). The current study is similarly an initiative of a non-governmental organisation- Solidarity Overseas Service (SOS)- based in Malta. Based on interviews, a review of the literature, and the outcomes of two webinars held in Malta, this study reveals how most migrant and

refugee communities are still largely cut off from political institutions and the emerging migrant-led advocacy initiatives regarding this challenge.

Focusing on citizens of third countries, our findings indicate that cultural barriers, xenophobic sentiments, social stigma, a lack of solidarity within migrant communities, and limited language proficiency usually impede participation in politics. Furthermore, our findings establish that third-country nationals in Malta have restricted access to political communication channels and public discourse, hindering their participation in local politics. The study suggests a number of approaches that might be employed to promote migrant political representation, such as media coverage, advocacy campaigns, open discussion efforts, and active engagement in government activities.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION: THE INTERFACE OF ADVOCACY, CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Participation can take several fairly distinct forms of action and engagement, and it also varies based on the institutional setting. The concept of “political participation” refers to the range of channels through which citizens can voice their thoughts and impact national policy (Salisbury, 1975). According to Rosenstone and Hansen (1993), “political participation is action that influences the distribution of social goods and values.” Through political participation therefore, citizens can influence how elected representatives create and implement political, economic, and social policies.

Although political participation is typically associated with voting in elections, given how more people participate in politics by voting than by any other means, it similarly includes other activities such as working on political campaigns, donating money to candidates or causes, contacting public officials, petitioning, protesting, and working with other people on varied issues of interest (Kaldur, 2011). Put differently, the capacity to engage in public affairs, freedom to speak out, congregate, and form associations, as well as the opportunity to register as a candidate, run for office, and occupy public office at all levels, all contribute to political participation.

The rights of migrants to vote, form political parties, trade unions, or non-governmental organizations, and to engage in a variety of civil society activities like advocacy campaigns, public demonstrations, and other forms of social mobilization on particular policy issues, as well as consultation mechanisms for policies affecting migrants, are all part of their political participation, just like those of other citizens. By participating in public discourse, citizens can convey their needs, preferences, and interests

to the government (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, 1995). They may serve in organizations that seek to actively influence the policies made by government officials.

A review of extant literature (Calise et al. 2016; Milbrath 1977; Cotta 1979) reveals four components of political participation: the forms, intensity, selectivity and motivation of participation. One, the forms of political participation alludes to the fact that “political involvement is expressed through different types” (Raniolo 2007), given the possibility of direct and indirect participation in political life on the one hand, and participation in both conventional and unconventional forms on the other hand. Two, regarding the intensity of the political participation, researchers (Ivaldi et al. 2016; Bartiromo 2021) have concentrated on multiple ways that citizens participate actively in the political life of a given community. Undoubtedly, electoral participation (how the individual freely chooses whether or not to participate) is identified as one of the most widely used ways to measure political involvement. Fewer recent studies on this subject focus mostly on the reasons why individuals choose not to cast a ballot. Such studies (Downs 1957) contend that people abstain from voting because they believe their influence over the political system is minimal.

Three, the selectivity component of political participation seeks to create the identity of the person who actively participates in political life. Many classifications have been developed over the years, but the most well-known are those developed by Milbrath (1977) and Almond and Verba (1965). These are based on an increasingly ordered scale of political commitment, which is correlated with a consistent decline in public engagement. Four, the motivations component of participation seeks to unravel why certain individuals do not participate in political life of society. In this context, Verba et al. (1995), identified three different reasons which are: how deprivation in socioeconomic contexts relates to individual and group alienation and depoliticization processes; how numerous elements, such as the social environment of reference and the socialization processes that individuals engage in, shape their psychological sphere (attitudes and orientations); and “when individuals remain isolated from associations and organizational networks or even in the presence of political party de-structuring” (Bartiromo and Ivaldi, 2021).

Interestingly, there appears to be a nexus between political participation and advocacy in society. Advocacy is an essential component of democratic practice, as it allows citizens to hold leaders accountable and to express their opinions and interests in public policies. The world is replete with innovative advocacy and public engagement efforts that contribute to fundamental change (Clark et al. 2002). Advocacy and citizen involvement strategies are becoming more crucial for civil society organizations as

increased emphasis is placed both on public participation in decision-making at all levels and holding those in power responsible (VeneKlasen and Miller, 2002). As a matter of fact, political participation and advocacy are inextricably linked, and are mutually reinforcing. This connection is based on a shared set of values and goals and a shared understanding of how to achieve these objectives. In addition, advocacy can increase the level of political participation, as it provides citizens with an avenue to have their voices heard and to be actively engaged in the public discourse. The literature suggests a combination of disparate avenues of both civic and participatory engagement: by becoming a member of an interest group, issue-based organization, civic organization, or political party, citizens and residents engage in local and national politics. In contemporary times, organizations fostering civic engagement in favour of certain issues, or single-issue groups, have proliferated. To raise awareness of their problems, members may participate in protests and lobbying activities. They may energise their followers by posting their opinions in social media groups that offer instructions on how to become engaged.

In the context of migrants, it is established that they face numerous challenges when it comes to participating in the political sphere of their new countries. In many cases, the restriction of civic rights and lack of familiarity with the political system can hinder migrants' ability to engage in the political process. An emerging trend in the promotion of migrant political engagement is the use of migrant-led advocacy initiatives. It is therefore, possible to think of migrant-led advocacy as a brand-new type of advocacy that has grown out of the lived experiences of the people who are most impacted: migrants. These migrants may use personal experiences to enhance immigration policy for themselves and their communities (Badran and Stoker, 2019; European Migrant Advisory Board, 2019) given that "policymaking is improved when affected populations are engaged in its development" (UNDP, 2018). Migrant activism takes many forms, including the political and policy advocacy that migrant and refugee organizations work to advance in the political sphere. In related domains, such as laws on anti-Muslim hatred, racism and discrimination, asylum and migration, integration, as well as labour rights (aditus foundation, 2022), one may observe the impact of these advocacy initiatives for increased participation in the policy-making processes.

METHODOLOGY

Two webinars were organised for representatives of migrant communities in Malta and moderated by the author in collaboration with SOS Malta on October 23rd and 30th 2023. The first webinar centred around the political engagement of migrants in Malta, offering participants ample opportunity to discuss the hurdles

they encounter in obtaining political rights as well as various contexts that advocacy initiatives could assist in overcoming those obstacles. The second webinar addresses a number of ways that advocacy can be utilized to solve a range of urgent socioeconomic concerns that impact migrants in Malta and, on the other hand, encourage migrant political engagement. It also explores the ways in which advocacy strategies have been applied to uphold and protect the interests of migrants, and highlights the positive outcomes that can be achieved through the use of such strategies.

MIGRANTS, THIRD COUNTRY NATIONALS AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN EUROPE: AN OVERVIEW

Considering that migrants and their offspring represent a rising social group in civilizations across the world, their civic and political engagement is of greater significance than ever (OSCE/ODIHR, 2017). Consequently, diaspora groups, organizations, and individuals are becoming more outspoken and effective in campaigning for social, economic, and political change in their countries of origin, residency, and the international domain. Today, various groups of Third-Country Nationals (TCNs) can get involved in civic and cultural activities of host communities through participation in mainstream organisations, participation in migrant's organisations, participation in advisory platforms set up at local, regional or national levels as well as voting rights in local, regional and national elections.

In Europe, there is a growing debate around the subject of third-country nationals' voting rights. Of the 36 million foreign nationals residing in EU countries in 2020, about two-thirds (23 million) were third-country nationals (TCNs), also known as non-EU nationals (OECD, 2022). For migrants, voting in municipal or national elections and running for office are typically restricted rights (Bertelli, 2019). Protracted regularization and naturalization processes further limit opportunities for migrant populations to engage in politics and be empowered.

EU nationals residing in other EU member states are permitted to vote and run for office in local elections (Arrighi, et al 2013; Groenendijk, 2014) but the opportunities and constraints relating to electoral rights vary greatly across the states. It is explicit that the European Union has the authority to implement policies governing the voting rights of EU citizens as well as the immigration, residency, and asylum of non-EU citizens in Member States. However, the EU lacks the legal power to impose policies on the rights of third-country nationals to exercise their right to vote in Member States.

Currently, becoming a Maltese citizen is the only option for citizens of third countries to get the right to vote in Malta. This is possible through naturalization procedure, in which the minister in charge of citizenship takes the ultimate decision (Debono, 2018). While the Maltese political leadership continues to endorse cosmopolitanism as a major force behind economic development, it is difficult to ascertain whether the country is heading toward an integration paradigm where non-EU citizens might be encouraged to seamlessly integrate into Maltese society given that citizens of third countries are not allowed to vote in Maltese elections, even if they have been residents of the country for more than ten years.

As a result, there have been emerging arguments for and against granting voting rights to migrants. Protagonists build their argument on the maxim of “no taxation without representation” (Groenendijk, 2014) and increased integration, whilst antagonists raise concerns about the emergence of potential ethnic political parties, and specifically linking voting rights to citizenship only. Malta is one of 13 EU members that deny voting rights to migrants residing there. A total of 14 states out of the 27 EU members provide voting rights to different categories of migrants. Of the states that grant such rights, Estonia, Hungary, Lithuania and Slovenia do not allow foreigners to stand as candidates in local elections. Migrants’ voting rights are extended to regional elections in Denmark, Hungary, Portugal, Slovakia, and Sweden. However, in countries that allow third-country nationals electoral rights, there are typically tight conditions for becoming eligible to vote and contest in local elections. A minimum period of legal residency, a permanent residence permit, or long-term residence status are examples of such conditions.

It is evident that extending voting rights to foreigners represents a visible commitment to the integration of migrants in society and to their equal treatment. Providing enhanced political opportunities to migrants in Malta is synonymous with promoting their greater inclusion. Thus, new pathways can be provided by the appropriate authorities and other stakeholders with a view to amplifying their voices in policymaking through the implementation of varied measures such as language support, legal reform, and anti-discrimination policies. Although the EU has no legal authority to make binding rules on the voting rights of third-country nationals residing in the Member States, EU bodies may discuss the way certain political rights are structured in Member States’ national laws. As Malta’s population becomes increasingly diverse with various religions, ethnicities, and backgrounds, true democracy demands politics to be reflective of this diversity, and truly representative of Maltese society today.

The rise of globalization and increased migration has led to a growing ‘migrant population’, and the efficacy

of advocacy as a way to increase political participation among this population is gaining academic interests among civil society actors and development partners. Indeed, advocacy can be a powerful tool for enabling migrant political participation and for providing greater access to services and resources. Findings indicate that advocacy initiatives can play a significant role in promoting migrant political participation. Such initiatives need to focus on engaging and empowering migrants to take part in decision-making processes, tackling legal and structural barriers, and creating an enabling environment for political participation. Also, raising public awareness on the issue can be crucial in encouraging migrants to speak out and take action. By building on existing initiatives and developing new ones, advocacy efforts can extend beyond the existing framework to reach more migrants and shape the political landscape both locally and globally

POLITICAL RIGHTS, INDIVIDUAL PARTICIPATION AND LEGAL PROVISIONS IN THE MALTESE CONTEXT

Despite increased EU support for Member States to encourage political participation of third country nationals, there is no existing European Union (EU) legislation that grants TCNs any political rights in the EU. In many EU member states, access to these rights is severely constrained and mostly based on a migrant’s residence and citizenship status (Falzon, 2022). In Malta, policy on the electoral rights of individuals is extremely controlled, and works on the assumption that persons who are entitled to vote are only Maltese who reside on the Maltese Islands. Previously, the reason for not granting voting rights to non-EU nationals in local elections, according to the former Prime Minister Joseph Muscat was that it “was not part of the Labour Party’s manifesto” (see James Debono, 2018). According to the 2020 Migrant Integration Policy Index, Malta received a score of 48 out of 100, indicating that the country’s present policies do not promote the view of migrants as neighbours, equals, and fellow citizens. It states that barriers arise for migrants in Malta while trying to reunite with their families, establish long-term residency, obtain citizenship, and engage in public life and education.

After 160 years as a British colony, Malta gained independence in 1964 and joined the EU in 2004 (Harwood 2014). Malta is a parliamentary democracy with frequent, fiercely contested elections and periodic power transitions. Since Malta’s independence, the center-left Labour Party and the center-right Nationalist Party have dominated the country’s politics. A third party, *Alternattiva Demokratika*, founded in 1992, has failed to gain more than 1.8% of the national consensus (Zammit, 2018). The parliament elects the president, who serves as head of state, for a five-

year term. In 2020, constitutional amendments received approval that mandated future presidents to have the support of two thirds of the parliament. A parliamentary majority and membership in parliament are prerequisites for the prime minister's nomination by the president.

Article 57 of the Constitution of Malta and Article 15 the General Elections Act limits the right to vote in national elections to those who are citizens of Malta, and resident in Malta for a minimum period of time prior to elections. In addition, Articles 53 and 54 of the Constitution allow only citizens of Malta to stand for general elections. Furthermore, Article 5(2) of the Local Councils Act grants local electoral rights to any EU citizen residing in Malta who is registered as a voter on the electoral register in accordance with the General Elections Act and the European Union Electoral Register.

EU Member States are permitted to determine their own minimum national voting age for European elections under existing EU law. This age is 16 in Austria, Belgium, Germany, and Malta, 17 in Greece, and 18 in the rest of the EU (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2023). A person is however, disqualified from voting if they are interdicted or incapacitated by a court, if they are under a death sentence or a sentence of imprisonment for over 12 months, or if they are convicted of any offence connected with elections. There is nothing in Maltese law or policy that allows for or anticipates the extension of voting rights to TCNs in local or national elections.

Although the Maltese constitution states that the State shall facilitate the participation of Maltese citizens who live abroad in the political, social, economic and cultural life of Malta, Maltese citizens cannot vote from embassies overseas and can only vote in the district in which they officially reside according to their identification documents. In order for a person to be considered resident in Malta, they would need to have been residing in Malta for a period of 6 months during the 18 months before being registered as a voter in the electoral register.

FINDINGS FROM OPEN CIRCLE DISCUSSIONS ON POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND ADVOCACY

The legitimacy of democratic political systems depends on the participation of all social groups, including migrants, in the political decision-making process. However, migrants in many countries find themselves exposed to a wide range of challenges, including legal, social, and political challenges. Despite this, many of these migrants may not know how to access the resources they need to take part in the political process, including the right to vote and the right to hold public office. Due to forced migration from their native countries, migrants often lack the means to fully engage in the political system of the country they now call home. This exclusion has adverse

effects throughout the political landscape, limiting migrant's civic and economic well-being and diminishing the overall quality of political representation. The existing socio-economic inequalities, their limited access to education, and their lack of familiarity with the political system, could all prevent TCNs from engaging fully in the political process.

The Open Circle Discussions address critical issues affecting this diverse group and to identify strategies for meaningful change. This conversation delves into advocacy for migrant-related issues in Malta as migrant organisations and public officials share their experiences and concerns while discussing how to advocate for laws, policies, and practices that protect the rights of all migrant communities, including refugees, asylum seekers, economic migrants, and European nationals living in Malta. The study finds that greater levels of political participation can lead to an increase in community involvement, as well as an improved sense of self-worth and greater belonging in the host society. The following are some of the issues raised by migrants who participated in open circle discussions:

Lack of Social Integration: Participants identified lack of social integration as a barrier to political participation. Migrants' lack of understanding of the language is a manifestation of this social barrier. In the words of one migrant: "*Migrants are not socially integrated, much less politically.*" This shows that social integration must be the first step in political participation. Language remained a contentious issue, with one participant concluding, "*You don't impose your language.*" This participant thought that forcing migrants to learn the Maltese language was an awful idea. In this regard, the person proposed using soft power. Migrants, including naturalized foreigners, suffer greatly from a lack of social integration. Despite being a Maltese citizen by naturalisation, "they see you as a foreigner." Furthermore, a migrant who was originally from Sudan and has been in Malta for a minimum of 7 years submitted that:

I guess the system is not willing to welcome migrants on board in decision making. Clearly, we don't have that mapping of integration no matter how long you've been there. You can be 10, 15 years, you have no idea what this integration means.

This migrant not only identified the problem but also proposed remedies by urging migrants to band together. Another participant opined that if unity is achieved, gradual change is possible, "*and then typically one step at a time. It's not about fixing everything at once.*"

Hostility of Maltese Politics: A participant who has lived in Malta for over 20 years and witnessed different elections averred that "*the political structure here is built on rage and hostility among themselves... I've observed this in various elections here in Malta*". This has consequences for migrants who desire to be involved in politics. Most migrants who have not been socially accepted and have witnessed the 'anger and animosity'

generated by politics among Maltese may regard this as a discouragement to participate in politics.

Lack of Representation: There is a lack of representation in the economy, governance, and politics. A participant reflects on the absence of representation, arguing that “*political involvement is very difficult because, first and foremost, migrants must have representation.*” According to the participant, this lack of representation is one of the reasons why initiatives aimed at migrants fail. To him “*Most people here have no idea what migration is. They have never been migrants*”. The implication of this is that policy makers legislate on issues about which they lack first-hand knowledge. He then observes that “*people are still coming in their numbers*”, implying that despite all policies, prospective migrants continue to attempt the dangerous journey to Europe.

African migrants are underrepresented economically: According to the discussants, Malta is the only country where black migrants are not found in good/decent employment. As a result, migrants are more worried with making ends meet, and they do not have time to engage in politics. Some participants affirmed that the institutionalized difficulties in fully participating in the mainstream economy is a deterrent to migrants engaging in political activity: “*and you know, I think the system or the policymakers or the authorities are happy with that because we are not in a position to challenge existing policy.*” Migrants “*struggle with daily life...*” which often times precludes them from political engagement.

Lack of unity among migrants: Malta’s migrant community, which accounts for 22 percent of the entire population, explains why the country has evolved into a real multicultural society. The open discussions however, identified a lack of unity and structured leadership within the migrant community. This dichotomy impedes collective attempts at addressing common concerns and advocate for change effectively. Despite having comparable concerns, migrants find it challenging to forge solid coalitions and unions because of their diverse origins. To this end, migrants are percolated along national identities, eroding the strengths that solidarity and collaboration offer people advocating against obnoxious policies. In the opinion of one migrant:

And you know if there is unity, I think we can push a little bit forward and therefore, if we have good leaders, especially the people who have acquired citizenship in the Community, then we can begin to have a sense of belonging.

One participant posited that the lack of unity among migrants in Malta is an advantage to the authorities because it advances their agenda. In his words:

The system is interested in the divisiveness that we have in our community, because it benefits the authorities. Therefore, political participation doesn’t truly interest them, regardless of how loud we shout or what we do. Thus, I believe we need to focus on our unity. We all share one problem as a community, but how can we come together to confront and resolve it as a

group? Reaching out through a campaign, the media, or the legal system is simple once we have an unwavering unity.

Participants advocated for the formation of unions or associations, such as a “Malta Immigrant Union,” to boost their collective strength and advocacy ability. Another participant described how the absence of leadership among the migrants affected him personally when he was arrested, incarcerated, and pressured into confessing guilt, and how no one from his immediate Sudanese community came to visit him while he was in detention for three months. In general, the audience drew attention to how essential it is for Malta’s migrant groups to organize themselves and be collectively represented. They also pointed out the challenges that African refugees, in particular, had to overcome in order to access legal assistance and representation, as well as the consequences of these obstacles on their well-being. These experiences and concerns reinforce the importance of ensuring that migrant communities are heard and supported.

Use of force against Advocates: Migrants who had previously engaged in advocacy through the publication of articles revealed their personal experiences. A former student who wrote on the representation of migrants described how he received backlash when the essay was published. In addition, he was intimidated and racially assaulted. Because of the article, the migrant was warned he would never be able to find work in Malta. Another migrant claimed he and a group were routinely publishing articles in the *Times of Malta* at a time and were arrested and instructed to modify what they had written. “*They tried to manipulate what we wrote,*” implying that the authorities attempted to censor their publications.

Lack of documentation and bureaucratic bottlenecks: One of the main barriers that migrants identified as having an impact on every facet of their lives in Malta is a lack of documentation. A migrant related a personal account in which his child, who came top in his class, was given a scholarship to the United Kingdom but was unable to travel. The boy’s lack of the proper documentation required to travel abroad prevented him from leaving Malta. This occurrence, according to the plainly distraught father, is likely to dampen his child’s enthusiasm for education. He pondered about how he would convince his child to return to school. Another speaker who is originally from Sudan captured it thus:

we face a lot of problems. The first problem is the documentation. Considering that, as I often stress, documentation is crucial. You do not have a life if you are without documentation, in Malta or any other country in Europe, for that matter. Documentation is very important.

Another participant, who has been in Malta since 2019, depicted the daily deprivation he experiences due to a lack of documentation particularly in relation to obtaining a Maltese Residence ID card. He claims that this renders him invisible:

So I don't have any identification for myself. Nobody knows me. If I go to the gym, I won't register. They ask me, do you have ID? I say no. If I want to go club to enjoy my life, they ask me, do you have ID? I say no. They tell me, no, you cannot enter. I can't travel, I can't go anywhere. Four years, Malta becomes like my room. So every day I go from work to school and home. Even if I have money, I can't buy car, I can't get driver's license. So it's a problem really.

When attempting to obtain documents, migrants often run into bureaucratic roadblocks, which makes the process difficult and time-consuming, something that many find depressing. A participant discloses how hard it is to get formal documentation and legal status in Malta, even after living there for a while. They emphasize how the rights and social engagement of refugees are impacted by their inability to get these documents. This shows how much life in a foreign country depends on having proper documents. It is challenging for migrants to have complete lives without papers. They are so tightly restricted that conversing with them about the situation makes one feel their helplessness. The migrant community is evidently frustrated by the major delays and obstacles in obtaining the appropriate documents. The uncertainty surrounding their status frequently exacerbates this frustration.

Perceived Confinement and Mental Health Impact: Given their incapacitation to leave the country and not being able to fully integrate into society, some migrants refer to Malta as an "open jail." Their mental health suffers as a result of this perception, which increases stress and anxiety as well as feelings of hopelessness and desperation.

Limited Access to Authorities: It became apparent from the open circle dialogue that migrants had limited access to those in positions of power and often found it challenging to effectively convey their concerns. This has culminated in feelings of abandonment and exclusion.

Participants related how they had written to people in authority for years without receiving a response. "We have been sending e-mails, for god-knows-when without any response." However, the migrants had previously devised another method of approaching those in authority, especially individuals they believe can influence the government. One such group contacted was the Chamber of Commerce.

We understand, by just sending one email, we got an answer from the Chamber of Commerce. So they have a huge influence when it comes to the policy makers, and they promised us to reach out to the policy makers...I believe we can influence the government to pay more attention to us if we are vocal enough about our problems.

Failure of Previous Advocacy Means: Participants noted that various advocacy methods previously employed have not yielded the desired results, prompting the need to explore new strategies and approaches.

Strategic Advocacy: The Open Circle Discussion emphasised the need for strategic advocacy efforts to address the concerns of the migrant community effectively. Such efforts should be well-organized and coordinated.

SOCIAL MEDIA REACTIONS AND EVIDENCE OF LOCAL HOSTILITY TOWARDS MIGRANT POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Some of the fears expressed by the migrants/participants during the open circle discussions find corroboration and validation in the responses of people to the online public announcement (podcast) by SOS Malta on its Facebook page, which received an unprecedented number of over nine thousand viewers. The following are some of the comments:

| No. | Comments |
|-----|--|
| 1 | You can revert your diplomacy towards the corrupt African ministers who are absorbing so much money from China and leasing it to the latter without sharing the benefits amongst their "African brothers". These are the same hypocrites who would prevent any form of financial aid to reach its appropriate beneficiary...Sub-contracting Africans to Malta and labelling us as racists is a short run virtue signalling fix since the solution lies in taking back your homeland from those who stole it, claimed it and call themselves your African brothers. Therein lies your real adversary. In addition, we do not owe you any retribution because throughout our history we have never enslaved any people from Africa. God bless! |
| 2 | If you are interested in politics, go back to your country, Maltese have their traditional politics different from Europe and America. |
| 3 | These people are colonisers and acting as a fifth columnist to complicate our politics for the benefit of imperialist overlords. Nothing good will come out of this. |
| 4 | Some theorise NGOs are part of the apparatus used to keep us subdued and our political process splintered and subverted |
| 5 | Go to your country and do what you like there, you have a lot to arrange for your government, help your brother to overcome ignorance and poverty; do not interfere in Maltese affairs. |
| 6 | How to take over someone else's nation the submissive way! |
| 7 | Your days of invading our homeland are numbered!! The revival of the Europeans is a reality and nothing can stop the Ultra Nationalist Take-over of Brussels Parliament! |
| 8 | We don't need any discussions. You should thank GOD and the Maltese people for our hospitality. |
| 9 | Why don't you go and participate in your own country to make it better to live in. |
| 10 | How did you come to Malta? Did you come on a boat? |
| 11 | How about you advocate back home? |
| 12 | You think your country is like a paradise to live in (absolutely not) |
| 13 | We need to discuss your repatriation |

Source: Compiled by the author



The SOS online public announcement on Open Circle Discussion

The commenters to the online public announcement by SOS Malta, mostly identified as Maltese, expressed vitriol at the notion of the proposed event- migrant political participation. Among other remarks, the facilitator (in the podcast), who is a third-country national, was advised to conduct such a workshop in his country. These all buttress the fears and experiences of hostility which the participants later shared during the open circle discussion.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is imperative to acknowledge the significant influence that non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have in advancing the political engagement of migrants. The extent to which NGOs can effectively assist migrants in attaining political participation is obviously influenced by a variety of factors. These include legal barriers, cultural considerations, regional politics, governmental support, economic conditions, socio-political history, the strategies used to engage migrants and the presence of a political projection of the NGOs. Granting political rights to non-EU migrants, increasing awareness of political participation, encouraging community building, advocating for migrant rights, addressing common challenges, supporting leadership, and fostering broader impact are some of the ways in which migrant communities in Malta can participate more fully in

the political processes of the country. Drawing on the two open circle discussions, we explore the benefits of creating a more inclusive and equitable political system and how they can result in a more responsive government.

Grant political rights to non-EU migrants: The lack of political rights for non-EU migrants in Malta is a significant barrier to political participation. Granting political rights to non-EU migrants would enable them to participate in the country's political processes.

Increase awareness of political participation: There is a need to increase awareness of political participation among migrant communities in Malta. This can be achieved through community-building activities, such as establishing networks, creating WhatsApp groups, and advocacy for migrant rights.

Advocate for migrant rights: Advocacy for migrant rights is essential to ensure that the voices of migrant communities are heard in the political processes of the country. Collective voice and representation, policy influence, and overcoming challenges in political participation are some of the ways in which migrant communities can advocate for their rights.

Address common challenges: The systemic and policy challenges faced by migrant communities in Malta affect all migrants and require a collective response. Addressing these challenges will enable migrant communities to participate fully in the country's political processes.

Foster broader impact: The impact of collective action on different migrant groups and the interconnectedness of migrant challenges highlight the need for migrant communities to work together to overcome these challenges. Fostering a broader impact can help to strengthen migrant communities in Malta and enable them to participate more fully in the political processes of the country.

Streamline Documentation Processes: It is imperative to address the frustrating documentation processes to ease the burden on migrants. Authorities should work to simplify these procedures, ensure transparency, and provide clear guidelines for documentation.

Mental Health Support: Recognizing the significant impact on mental health, mental health support services should be accessible to migrants. Culturally sensitive services can help mitigate the negative effects of perceived confinement.

Foster Unity and Leadership: The role of leaders and activists is essential in advocating for migrant rights and overcoming the challenges faced by migrant communities. Supporting leaders and activists and providing them with the necessary resources and training can help to strengthen migrant communities in Malta. The migrant community should actively work on fostering unity and identifying leadership figures who can represent their interests effectively. Local organizations (NGOs/Civil Society) can play a crucial role in this regard. Migrants need a united

front in the struggle against unfavourable policies. Unity will give strength to advocacy and amplify their voice. For this, there is the need to establish networks either physically or through social media interaction.

Engage in Strategic Advocacy: Advocacy efforts should be more strategic and well-coordinated. This includes collaborating with local and international organizations, using data and evidence to support claims, and exploring various advocacy channels, such as media, public demonstrations, and strategic communication with policymakers.

Enhance Access to Authorities: To facilitate dialogue between migrants and authorities, efforts should be made to improve access to those in power. Establishing open channels for communication, regular meetings, and involving migrant representatives in policy discussions can be beneficial.

Awareness and Education: Create awareness campaigns to educate both the local population and migrants about their rights and obligations. Fostering empathy and understanding is key to building a more inclusive society.

CONCLUSION

This article establishes that the two Open Circle Discussions provided valuable perspectives into the challenges faced by Malta's migrant and minority communities and increased public awareness of significant issues. The themes that emerged from the conversation highlight the importance of community building, advocacy, and the interconnected challenges faced by migrant communities in the country. This article interrogates the potential of advocacy initiatives for promoting migrant political participation and affirms that migrant participation in decision-making processes is essential to ensure justice and equitable access to resources. It is proposed that the difficulty in promoting migrants' political engagement can be addressed by fostering more candid conversations between migrants and the mainstream society, expanding migrants' access to civic education, and supporting public advocacy initiatives. These strategies aim to establish concrete measures that will support an increasingly inclusive society.

The article also identifies a range of possibilities for increasing the participation of third country nationals (TCNs) in politics. It suggests that policy makers should take a proactive approach to support the right of TCNs to vote, by introducing a more inclusive and accessible process; increasing awareness of their right to participate; and providing them with the necessary resources to do so. Moreover, policy makers should be aware of the potential for discrimination against TCNs by reviewing current legislation and introducing clear penalties against any

discrimination found. It is suggested that by fostering engagement and interaction, a more inclusive atmosphere for TCNs could assist bridge the gap between them and the broader Maltese population, as well as foster understanding of their responsibilities and rights.

The study concludes that, in order to increase migrant communities' political participation and foster a culture of inclusion, understanding, and trust, meaningful discourse and advocacy initiatives must be promoted. However, in order to draw concrete inferences about the relationships between policies and outcomes in host countries, current and future advocacy initiatives, using an intersectional approach, must concurrently take into account a broad spectrum of policies, individual level characteristics, and contextual factors, all of which impact any particular integration outcome. Lastly, further studies should continually probe into how constant open discourse and advocacy initiatives can help facilitate dialogue between migrants and decision-makers and ultimately lead to increased political participation among migrants.

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