

The Maltese: among the most worried and stressed in the world – report

‘There’s a sense of impending doom, that Malta is becoming less livable,’ says UoM professor

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Experts think the country’s increasing population and urbanisation and construction sites are fuelling worry and stress. Photo: Chris Sant Fournier

The Maltese are the fourth biggest worriers in the world, according to recently released polling data.

Almost two-thirds (63%) of the Maltese reported feelings of worry, while more than half (55%) reported feeling stressed, according to the Global Emotions 2024 report from polling company Gallup.

Only Afghanistan, Israel and Guinea reported higher levels of worry than Malta, while just nine countries out of the 142 surveyed reported feeling more stressed.

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But with the European Commission describing Malta’s economy as robust and growing and US-based monitor Freedom House scoring the country highly for civil liberties and political rights, why are we so worried?

“There’s a sense of impending doom,” said anthropologist and University of Malta associate professor David Zammit.

“There’s a sense Malta is becoming less livable, and that partisan politics are taking us towards a mafia state and increased environmental degradation,” he said.

Describing the country as “overcrowded”, Zammit said the increased population had placed “tremendous strain” on Malta’s infrastructure, which, when combined with a more materialistic culture, was making people feel more stressed.

'More consumerist, more capitalist...'

“We’ve definitely become more consumerist, more capitalist... We’re overcrowded, highly competitive and the space we inhabit is becoming more and more hostile,” he said, describing the country as being in “mimetic conflict”.

Mimetic theory is the idea that people’s desires are influenced socially and decided collectively; simply put, we want what we want because others want them.

Emphasising the importance of the environment, Zammit said environmental constraints had led to some residents being forced to “live next to building sites for years”.

A survey in June last year found 72% of respondents said they were concerned about the state of the environment, with other concerns including traffic (87%), cost of living (83%), construction (80%) and corruption (71%).

“There’s a sense that partisan politics are taking us towards a mafia state and increased environmental degradation

Meanwhile, a separate study the same year found the biggest issue on young people’s minds in Gozo was the environment, with those surveyed wanting more environmental protection and green spaces and less construction.

Weighing in on the Gallup findings, economist Marie Briguglio said the country’s results came despite a strong performance in the UN Human Development Index (HDI).

Malta scored “very high” and above France and Spain in the index which combines life expectancy, education levels and GDP per capita to assess and rank countries, according to the most up-to-date data available at the HDI website.

'We urgently need to examine and address this disparity'

“We urgently need to examine and address this disparity which has worsened over recent years,” said Briguglio.

“Judging by Malta’s performance on other global indicators this may be linked to urbanisation, noise, population density, accidents at work and even perceptions of corruption”, she said.

“These impact the way governance at large is perceived and that in turn affects most areas of life. Well-being is not just about the nation doing well materially on average. It’s about how people feel day to day.”

Despite the high levels of worry and stress in the country, Malta scored well in other indicators in the Gallup survey, with just over one in five saying they felt angry.

Respondents were asked if they had felt certain emotions “during a lot of the day” before the poll to gauge levels of stress, worry and other emotions.

Around 1,000 respondents in 142 countries were surveyed last year by phone or in person.



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