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# Protests in a Small Island State during the Year of COVID-19: The Case of Malta

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## Abstract

This paper relies on protest event analysis (PEA) to study protests held in Malta during 2020 and analyses specific features of those protests, namely issues, organisations, coalitions, venues, and types of protest. The study verifies how Malta's status as a small state impacts protest, especially in terms of networks of activism and in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Findings show the environment as the most prominent issue, followed by the murder of Daphne Caruana Galizia and human rights, respectively. The most active actors were Repubblica and Occupy Justice on the Daphne Caruana Galizia issue; Movement Graffiti on the environment; and irregular migrants without organisational set-ups, who protested human rights violations. This study emphasizes the importance of considering the characteristics and opportunity structures of Malta as a small state. Such factors are not only reflected in the protest repertoire, but also in the way organisations and activists invest in social networks.

Despite certain trends regarding protest numbers, there was no correlation between COVID-19 and the number of protests. Furthermore, the main issues characterising protests were similar to those of previous years.

## Keywords

protest – social movements – Malta – civil society – activism – small states – protest event analysis – social networks

Sociologists have provided a myriad of definitions of protest and protest events. For example, Johnston (2014) refers to protest events as “command performances’ of social movements. They are the primary means of getting the attention of political elites and policymakers, and of swaying public opinion” (p.131). Opp (2009) defines protest as “joint (i.e. collective) action of individuals aimed at achieving their goal or goals by influencing decisions of a target” (p.38). Benford and Hunt (1992) adopt a dramaturgical conceptualisation of protest, referring to how it is played out before on-looking audiences, and McAdam (1996) emphasises that actions in protest events create meaning in society. Within the framework of the political process approach, Tarrow (2011) says that protests are examples of contentious politics, “when collective actors join forces in confrontation with elites, authorities, and opponents around their claims or the claims of those they claim to represent” (p.26).

In view of the variety of definitions, it is difficult to pinpoint what qualifies as a protest and protest event respectively. In this regard, Lofland (1985) reminds us that even influential analysts of protest such as William Gamson, in his seminal ‘The Strategy of Social Protest’ (1975) do not define the term, nor do they operationalise it for empirical analysis. Lofland adds that “protest is a thorny patch of bramble in which we must make our way slowly and with ever-alert caution” (p.10). He adds that even though he accepts

a tripartite conception that in some fashion sets off violence and ordinary politics from protest. The phrase “in some fashion” is key, for I am uncomfortable with the exact schemes of distinction ... I fear they conflate aspects of organizations and their resources with aspects of forms of action. We need to distinguish among organizations and actions in terms of their bargaining persuasion/polite features versus their protest or violent features (p.9).

This study focuses on physical protests—both formally-organised and spontaneous—in Malta, the smallest EU member-state.<sup>1</sup> Malta is deemed to be worthy of study because most sociological literature on social movements and politics is characterised by “gigantism” (Corbett and Veenendaal, 2018), focusing on larger countries whilst ignoring specifics of small states. Empirical research on the latter can enrich analyses in the identification of commonalities and differences with other countries of different sizes. Among the political

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<sup>1</sup> Malta has a population of around 500,000 and a land area of 316km<sup>2</sup>. It is also the most densely-populated EU-member state. Political and social scientists have observed various

characteristics of small states are strong connections between individual leaders and their constituents; a limited private sphere; a limited role of ideology and programmatic policy debate; strong political polarisation; the ubiquity of patronage; and the capacity to dominate all aspects of public life (Corbett and Veenendaal 2018). Social networks are characterised by people wearing many hats (Boissevain 1974, 1993; Sultana & Baldacchino, 1994).

The same persons are thus brought into contact repeatedly in various activities because each operates and meets the other on the basis of different roles held in the context of different role-sets. Decisions and choices are therefore influenced by the relationships which individuals establish and cultivate with others in a repertoire of diverse social settings (SULTANA AND BALDACCHINO 1994, p.16–17).

The study considers the characteristics and opportunity structures of Malta as a small island state, especially as far as networks of activism are considered. Specifically, it analyses protests during 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic was at its peak. Consequently, the study investigates the specific features of protest in Malta and how these were affected by Malta's small size and the COVID-19 pandemic. For this scope, protest data was collected using the Protest Event Analysis research method, identifying 74 protests in Malta during the year 2020. The subsequent sections of this article are organised as follows: First, the Maltese context will be discussed before moving to a discussion of protests around the world during the pandemic and an articulation of the main research questions of this study. This section will be followed by an outline of the applied methodological approach, results and corresponding discussion.

### The Maltese Polity

Malta is characterised by a resilient democratic system dominated by two parliamentary 'catch-all' political parties, the Partit Laburista (PL), which leans to the centre-left, and the Partit Nazzjonalista (PN), which leans to the centre-right, as well as a vibrant civil society (Briguglio, M. 2016b). Surveys

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commonalities of small states (including small islands), and Malta in particular, producing a corpus of social-scientific literature in the process (Baldacchino 2002; Briguglio 1995; Corbett & Veenendaal 2018).

confirm Labour's consistent lead in the polls (Europe Elects 2021), in what can be considered a hegemonic formation.

International indicators such as those produced by Freedom House, the Economist Intelligence Unit, Varieties of Democracy, and Bertelsmann Stiftung confirm Malta's democratic credentials, even though various challenges and flaws in relation to areas such as governance are highlighted (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2020; Economist Intelligence Unit 2019; Freedom House n.d.; Lührmann et al 2020; Alizada et al 2021). For example, institutions are deemed to be weak, whilst the Prime Minister of Malta was determined as having too many powers by the Venice Commission (Briguglio 2019), eventually leading to a series of reforms. Malta has a vibrant history of civil society activism, with trade unions, the Catholic Church and employers' representatives being main players alongside the major political parties (Briguglio 2016b). In more recent years, issues related to areas such as the environment, civil rights and good governance gained prominence, with the involvement of various social movement organisations and campaigns. Protest played a role in such activism. In this regard, trade unions such as the General Workers' Union<sup>2</sup> mobilized workers on work-related issues, for example during the last legislature of Nationalist administration prior to its electoral defeat in 2013. On the other hand, newer social movement organisations such as Moviment Graffiti<sup>3</sup> and Flimkien Għall-Ambjent Aħjar (FAA)<sup>4</sup> organised various small-scale protests against development projects (Briguglio 2013). A major protest in this regard, the biggest Maltese environmental demonstration in history, was organised by Front Harsien ODZ<sup>5</sup> in 2015 against the privatisation of public land for the development of an 'American University' (Briguglio 2018).

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2 Malta's largest trade union, a historical ally of PL (Briguglio 2016b).

3 A leftwing movement with environmentalist and feminist ideological orientations and an emphasis on radical democracy and freedom. Active in various protest events; has strong ties with some newspaper journalists such as MaltaToday and Times of Malta. Like Malta's Green Party, it is one of the more radical organisations on the left (Briguglio 2013).

4 Formed in 2006 following Malta's EU accession; committed "to protecting and campaigning for Malta and Gozo's environmental and cultural heritage for a socially inclusive and sustainable quality of life". Like Moviment Graffiti, it has been consistently active in protest events, specifically on environmental matters (Briguglio 2013).

5 A network of activists and organisations, including Moviment Graffiti, FAA, and others hailing from political party backgrounds which was instrumental in the national protest for the protection of Żonqor in 2015 (Briguglio 2018).

More recently, a wave of protests related to the murder of Daphne Caruana Galizia<sup>6</sup> took place. The Civil Society Network<sup>7</sup> organised a national protest shortly after her murder in 2017, followed by smaller protests. Eventually, the triad of erstwhile newly formed organisations Repubblica<sup>8</sup> and Occupy Justice (OJ),<sup>9</sup> together with ManuelDelia.com<sup>10</sup> took the lead in the protest wave, especially through the holding of monthly vigils. Protests escalated at the end of 2019, after new information emerged implicating Prime Minister Joseph Muscat's Chief of Staff. These protests now involved a broader civil society coalition and captured national and global news headlines, leading to various resignations, most notably that (in January 2020, though announced earlier) of the Prime Minister (Briguglio 2020). The protests between November and December 2019 featured in the Global Protest Tracker of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (2021). They were referred to as the "Mafia State Protests" within a "free" polity, with a peak size of 4,000 during a 2-month period. These protests were motivated by economic and political factors as well as corruption related to "then prime minister Joseph Muscat's influence over law enforcement and judicial systems, and corruption among political leaders" (ibid). Their reported outcome was precisely Muscat's resignation.

In the meantime, on December 4, 2019, the CIVICUS Monitor's document 'People Power Under Attack 2019' expressed concern that in relation to Europe and Central Asia

civic space is deteriorating in two countries: Malta and Serbia, which have both been downgraded.... In Malta, the killing of prominent anti-corruption investigative journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia in 2017 has created an environment that is becoming increasingly hostile to

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6 Maltese journalist murdered in 2017. Her blog was widely read and frequently made news headlines especially due to its political revelations.

7 Formed after Daphne Caruana Galizia exposed the Panama Papers in 2016 and active for the rule of law, good governance and democracy.

8 Founded in 2018, following the murder of Daphne Caruana Galizia. Aims to enhance human rights and democracy in Malta. Various prominent activists (including Manuel Delia) are associated with the pre-2013 PN administrations, the 'Simon Busuttli' leading faction of the PN opposition and with certain sections of the media, including Times of Malta.

9 A pressure group led by women following the murder of Daphne Caruana Galizia, calling for justice.

10 A founding member of Repubblica; a prominent Maltese activist frequently seen as a point of reference by international journalists covering the political situation in Malta following the murder of Daphne Caruana Galizia. Was active in prominent political roles under PN administrations before it lost power in 2013.

journalists, especially those reporting on corruption. The government has also started to harass and intimidate activists and those advocating for justice (2019).

Apart from the wave related to Caruana Galizia, protests were focused on environmental issues, thus replicating prominent activism of previous years (Bossevain and Gatt 2011; Briguglio 2016a,b). 'New' issues also emerged, for example activism related to the pro-choice stance on abortion, in a country where abortion remains illegal. It is important to note that not all of Malta was involved in protests, regardless of the impression given by both national and global media outlets. Nor was the Labour government in danger of collapse. New Year's celebrations in Valletta, which were promoted by the state just a few days after the protest cycle, reportedly drew a 70,000 strong crowd ('70,000 people attend New Year's Day celebrations in Valletta' 2020). Follow-up Daphne protests in January 2020, the month in which Muscat was due to resign, had much smaller turnouts compared to the ones in November and December. A 2020 survey commissioned by Times of Malta showed that in the previous twelve months, only six percent of the population had attended a protest, while four percent had campaigned for a cause. These figures were lower than those for helping a political party (14%) or a religious organisation (16%) (Martin 2020). Moreover, social-scientific surveys held by Eurobarometer and Maltese newspapers showed that the main concerns of the Maltese population were remarkably different than the demands of the 'Mafia State' protests. Moreover, Labour's electoral lead over the PN remained considerable even after Joseph Muscat resigned from premiership (Briguglio 2020).

### **Pandemic, Politics and Protest**

This study also analyses whether the COVID-19 pandemic impacted protest in Malta during 2020, which is the specific year under analysis in this article. It is worthy of note that the year was characterised by waves of protests of global significance, such as the Black Lives Matter movement as well the use of COVID-19 as a pretext to repress protests and civil rights. Yet not all countries were characterised by the same political opportunity structures and activism. For example, according to Freedom House (2020), since the beginning of the outbreak, the condition of democracy and human rights had grown worse in 80 countries; remained the same in 111 countries (including Malta); and improved in only one country. The Freedom House report states that "although 158 countries have had new restrictions placed on protests, Freedom House researchers

identified significant protests in at least 90 countries since the outbreak began. These demonstrations were held in 39% of free countries, 60% of partly-free countries, and 43% of not-free countries under review" (ibid).

Along similar lines, Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) presented findings under the moniker 'Autocratization Turns Viral Democracy Report 2021', during which the "year of lockdown" in 2020 superseded the "year of protest" in 2019. V-Dem states that 31% of countries have or had emergency measures without a time limit. At the same time, whilst most democracies acted responsibly during the pandemic, there were 9 major and 23 moderate violations of international norms. In autocracies, the situation was worse, with 55 countries being involved in major or moderate violations in response to the pandemic. The report states that in 2020 mass mobilisation declined to its lowest level in over a decade, yet "activists rose above adverse conditions and several movements found alternative ways of furthering their cause" (Alizada et al 2021, p.9). Within the V-Dem categorisation, Malta qualifies as an "Electoral Democracy +", which means that it could also belong to the higher category (Liberal Democracy) as opposed to the lower Electoral Autocracy and Closed Autocracy categories (ibid p.31). In this regard, Malta is within the top 20%-30% of countries, ranking 46th out of 179 countries. More specifically, it ranks 46th in the Liberal Democracy Index, 41st in the Electoral Democracy Index, 60th in the Liberal Component Index, 20th in The Egalitarian Component Index, 14th in the Participatory Component Index, and 58th in the Deliberative Component Index (pp.32-34).

Sociological analyses amid COVID-19 restrictions show that social movements adapted their activism in 2020 (Kampmark, 2020; Pleyers 2020). This came a year after "one of the most active years in terms of social movements and citizens' protests around the world" (Pleyers, 2020, p.1). Pleyers (2020, p.2) adds that in 2020, activists around the world were mainly active in five areas: "*protests* (that re-emerged in some countries despite pandemic-related risks); *defending workers' rights*; *mutual aid and solidarity*; *monitoring policymakers*; and *popular education*." In this regard, he suggests expanding attention to aspects of social movements other than protests, particularly since the main forms of expression by social movements were "less visible forms of activism" (ibid. p.14). This is not to say that Pleyers downplays the importance of protest; he considers the murder of George Floyd by a white police officer in the US as a key moment for social movements, whereby public debate was no longer monopolised by the pandemic, and a public wave of protests related to this controversy took place globally.

This article does not delve into whether analysis should be focused on non-protest Activism; although a sound perspective, it would be sociologically

limiting to downplay the importance of protest—something which even Pleyers himself avoids when he refers to the Black Lives Matter movement. If anything, Pleyers' article shows that the analysis of protest needs to be contextualised. For example, in the United States, despite a “major crisis” caused by COVID-19, the protest repertoire was not considered to have changed drastically during the pandemic. There were, however, changes in relation to the issues prioritized (public health and economic policies dominated); the location of protests; and certain tactics (Pressman and Choi-Fitzpatrick 2020).

Across the Atlantic, a civil society report on protests within the EU concluded that various governments disproportionately restricted rights during the pandemic, for example, by failing to safeguard the right to peaceful assembly, and by curtailing access to public information and decision-making (Civil Liberties Union for Europe and Greenpeace European Unit, 2020). The only reference made to Malta in this report is through a pre-pandemic report by *civicus* (2019), which categorises Malta alongside 11 other EU member states (Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, France, Greece, Italy, Latvia, Malta, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Spain) where civic space is “narrowed.”

In Malta, the first months of 2020 were not lacking in news headlines related to protest, civil society and governance. The case of Daphne Caruana Galizia continued to demand attention (Briguglio 2020), with Prime Minister Joseph Muscat's resignation taking place. In the meantime, a new (PL) Prime Minister, Robert Abela,<sup>11</sup> was sworn in. He promised to strengthen the rule of law in the country. Under his watch, various constitutional reforms proposed by the Venice Commission were carried out, although the process had its critics (ConstitutionNet 2020a, b). Abela's rise to premiership was a baptism of fire; not only did he have to navigate the crisis surrounding the murder of Caruana Galizia (Clarke 2020; Stancati 2020), but he immediately had to contend with COVID-19 as well. The pandemic dominated headlines around the world. In Malta, the first case of COVID-19 was identified on March 6, 2020, with cases reaching 169 by the end of the month and 12,774 by the end of the year. The first COVID-related death was recorded on April 8, and the number had climbed to 219 by year end. (National Statistics Office 2021). Figure 1 elaborates.

COVID-19 had various effects on Maltese society, impacting health, the economy, and social wellbeing. One third of the Maltese population experienced negative impacts on their finances (Sansone, 2020a), but unemployment remained relatively low, standing at 4.8% in November (National Statistics

11 Abela was Muscat's legal consultant in Cabinet. He was seen as a 'continuity Prime Minister' (Oxford Analytica 2020) and was projected as being closer to Muscat than the other contender, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Health Chris Fearnle.



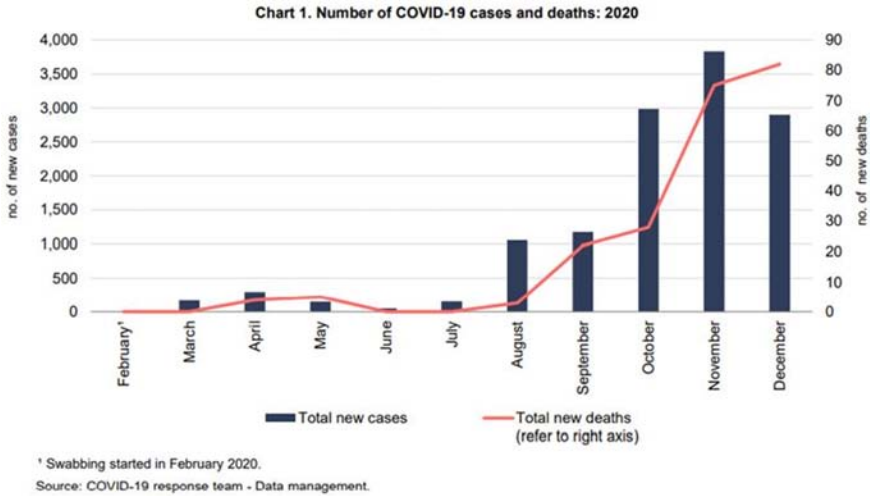


FIGURE 1 Number of COVID-19 cases and deaths: 2020 (National Statistics Office 2021)

Office 2020). Tourism—a main economic sector in Malta—was impacted negatively, as were various economic indicators (National Statistics Office 2021). Malta had experienced surpluses in recent fiscal years; at the beginning of 2020, its debt-to-GDP ratio was of just over 40% (Debono 2020a). This enabled the government to use various policy tools to make up for the impacts of the coronavirus without imposing new taxes. These tools included, wage subsidies, shopping vouchers, and tax refunds.

The Maltese public was generally supportive of the government’s measures (Debono 2020b) but did express opposition to a full lockdown (Sansone 2020b); Malta only implemented partial lockdowns and similar restrictive measures, and there was a high degree of trust in vaccines (Calleja 2020). The fact that government, opposition, Catholic church, and civil society representatives were actively supporting the vaccine policy was telling in this regard. A social-scientific survey by newspaper *MaltaToday* showed that the main concerns of the public were migration (14.2%), the state of the Opposition (13.2%) and COVID-19/Health (13.5%) during the summer of 2020 (Sansone 2020c). By the fall, COVID-19/Health (46.2%) was followed, albeit at a huge distance, by corruption (10.8%) and migration (7.2%) (Sansone 2020d).

Scholarly interpretations of the government’s response to COVID-19 depict a timely and comprehensive policy programme (Cuschieri 2020), that took into account vulnerable groups (Cuschieri and Grech 2021) and the impact on the labour market (Rizzo 2021). As shown above, Malta had one of the most generous COVID-19 bailouts in the world, and enjoyed one of the most trusted health systems in Europe (Briguglio and Moncada, 2020). Moreover, Malta’s policies

were less restrictive than those of various other countries, never exceeding a partial lockdown (Cuschieri 2021). Thus, despite considerable effects on economic sectors such as tourism, there was evidently less concern with health and economic issues, which would have fueled protests. Nevertheless, protests did take place. In the process, Labour's popularity in the polls remained constant.

### Research Methods

As stated, this study analyses protests in Malta as a small EU member state during 2020. It posited the following research questions:

1. What are the specific features of protest in Malta?
2. How does Malta's status as a small state affect protest, especially in terms of networks of activism?
3. How did COVID-19 impact protests in Malta in 2020?

The author looked at the groups and organisations that make up the collective actions in question; the events that form the action repertoire; and the ideas that guide the protests, in line with Tilly's analytical framework (1978, p.8–9) within the political process approach.<sup>12</sup> Protest Event Analysis (PEA) was used to sociologically interpret the protests. Through this method, protest characteristics and frequency can be mapped across time and in terms of factors such as issues and social movement organisations (SMOs), through the collection of data from the media. Through PEA, which is closely linked to the political process approach, (Hutter 2014, p.336) “part of the data allows a mixed-methods approach; that is, a combination of quantitative analyses with the presentation of more qualitative material” (Hutter 2014, p.355). Specifically, PEA was used to quantify protest data in Malta during 2020 in terms of organisations, issues, typology, timing, venues, and networks. This helped the author understand—through reliable and valid available data—matters such as the predominant issues during the year, and how these relate to Malta's protest-sphere in general, based on available social scientific literature in the field and the author's experiences. This therefore enables mixed-methods, for example in the interpretation of organisational alliances. It helps one understand how the most prominent protest organisers networked together, and this

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12 Tilly argues that three basic dimensions guide the study of social movements: “1. The groups and organisations that make up a collective action; 2. The events that are part of the action repertoire; and 3. The ideas that unify the groups and guide their protests” (Johnston, 2014, p. 3).

was interpreted through the concepts of bridging and bonding social capital (Putnam 2000). The data gathered through PEA could also show whether there was a direct link between COVID numbers and measures and protest events during 2020.<sup>13</sup>

On the other hand, the research method employed in this study has its shortcomings. One main shortcoming relates to selection bias (Johnston 2014). It is well-known that the media may overreport violence, sensationalist action, and action related to their interests or activist/political network. The media may also underreport the opposite. For example, riots held by irregular migrants captured media attention, but the same cannot be said of other possible protest events, which could have been carried out but were less spectacular. Another shortcoming is related to the lack of emphasis on commonalities and differences in discursive framing of protests by the media. Even though this was not within the remit of this study, the utmost was done to ensure that media coverage was as broad as possible, thus enabling the identification of indicators for analysis. Furthermore, it is important to keep in mind that not all social movement organisations include protest in their respective repertoires, whilst on the other hand, not all protests are necessarily organised by such organisations (Crossley 2002).

In order to identify protests in Malta during 2020, the author verified all tweets posted by the three major independent newspapers in Malta,<sup>14</sup> namely *Times of Malta*, *Malta Independent*, and *MaltaToday*.<sup>15</sup> However, in certain instances other online media was used when it was noted that they reported on other protests, some of which were not reported by the independent newspapers or on Twitter. Hence, at times, the researcher refers to other major media outlets, such as TVM, Lovin' Malta, The Shift, Net, One, iNews, and Newsbook, which gave prominence to specific events. Additionally, a particular newspaper stopped tweeting for a period, during which data was accessed from its daily email newsletter. Even though such tweaking can affect reliability, it ultimately

13 Here it must be emphasised that protest events in Malta have never been quantified sociologically, so 2020 can be used as the base year in terms of specific quantifiable data for future comparisons.

14 Malta is a bilingual country, with Maltese and English as first languages. The main independent newspapers use the English language.

15 Malta is characterised by media pluralism in broadcast, print and online media. The two major political parties own their own television and radio stations, portals and newspapers, which are highly partisan and polarised. The Catholic Church has its own radio station and online portal, whilst the General Workers' Union has its own newspaper and online portal. All other stations, portals and newspapers are privately-owned. Usage of the social media, especially Facebook, has increased considerably, with many viewers accessing news portals through this platform (Borg 2020; Broadcasting Authority 2021).

added validity through provision of data on protests. For more information about viewership of media in Malta, one may consult the Audience Survey of Malta's Broadcasting Authority (2021).

The reasons behind the choice of Twitter for data collection were threefold. First, Twitter renders it easier and more practical to collect data, and tweets remain online, increasing reliability over other online media which are subject to constant changes. Malta's small size provided the author with the practical advantage of being able to physically check all tweets during the year on a daily basis, allowing for access to more data than would otherwise have been available through a representative sample of tweets. Second, most major media outlets in Malta use twitter, thus enhancing validity. Third, even though other media producers, particularly within the prosumer space of social media, generate their own audiences, it is important to note that mainstream media have very strong visibility on social media like Facebook and Twitter. Through the collection of mainstream media tweets, the author tried to ensure a level playing field, to the greatest extent possible, in mediation between actors and audiences. In this regard, it is important to note possible limitations in the use of Twitter for sociological research. For example, it is not as popular as Facebook. On the other hand, it is more practical to use for the collection of data in view of its focus and functions, such as the creation of lists. In sum, this data was collected from the mainstream media because they have a relatively high following, and through Twitter for practical collection purposes. All protest events in Malta during 2020 as reported by the press were identified and interpreted in both a quantitative and qualitative manner. In the case of the former, variables such as protests, issues, venues, and organisations were counted. In the case of the latter, the data was interpreted in relation to sociological concepts within the context of Malta's polity.

This study did not analyse protest which is non-physical, such as those which are exclusively digital, even though it acknowledges the value of digital activism and that the physical and the digital often intersect (Briguglio 2018; Gerbaudo and Treré 2015). In this regard, Haßler et al (2021) assert that social media may be used by protesters to mobilise and bypass traditional media and may help create longer-term thematic discourses. Social media activism may capture the attention of mainstream media. In this regard, even though content generated by protesters through social media may supplant traditional journalism, interdependence between the two develops and is likely to be more effective, as are offline actions, not to mention that activist social media platforms may have constraints in reporting, such as lack of viewership (Pearce and Rodgers 2020). Social movements have also been considered to be more dependent on media coverage when compared to other institutionalised

actors such as labour unions or employers' associations. The latter may have direct access to policymakers that makes them less dependent on media attention, or may even make it advantageous for them to avoid the media altogether (Koopmans 2004, p. 371).

Sociological studies also emphasise media interests and networks with activists. On the one hand, corporate interests and agendas of media houses need be taken into consideration when analysing coverage of protests, but on the other hand, one should also factor in the possibility of journalists supporting causes articulated by social movements. This is of particular interest in the case of Malta as a small island state, where such networks are very much in place (Briguglio 2018). There were other challenges which had to be taken into consideration in the collection and interpretation of data in relation to Malta's small size. The author's experience in the field of social movements helped him consider these particularities within the research process.<sup>16</sup> A significant challenge in this regard concerns the repertoire similarity between press conferences, demonstrations, and symbolic protests. The three types of events were analysed separately despite clear distinction between them being difficult. Malta's small size renders attendances and repertoires of such events to be similar, resulting in blurred boundaries. For this reason, it was decided to include press conferences and symbolic events if they had the protest 'feel'. In this regard, social movement organisations such as Moviment Graffiti and FAA have a tradition of organising protest press conferences, for example, by inviting residents to attend in protest of a development project. The 74 protest events during 2020 were categorised as follows: demonstrations, press conferences, symbolic protests, riots, vigils, sit-ins, and hunger strikes. Protest events were categorised in terms of their locality/venue, their organisers and respective networks, and the issues characterising the protest. Regarding the latter, protest themes were grouped into issues which acted as nodal points (Howarth and Stavrakakis 2001). For example, protests related to environmental issues were grouped together, as were protests related to corruption, governance, and justice as part of the cycle of protests following the murder of Daphne Caruana Galizia.

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16 The author was active in Maltese civil society and politics over a 25-year period from 1994 to 2019. He was a co-founder of Moviment Graffiti and had a leading role in successful campaigns and national protests organised by Front Against the Golf Course, Front Harsien ODZ, Civil Society Network as well as Malta's 'Yes' movement in the divorce referendum. He was local councillor for 15 years, chaired the non-parliamentary Green Party for four years and contested the European elections with the PN.

### Analysis of Protests in Malta during 2020

Table 1 provides a monthly chronology of the COVID-19 situation in Malta, accompanied by the number of protest events held in each corresponding month. The former is sourced by the National Statistics Office (2021), Malta's online portal of the National television station, (Carter 2020) and the online portal of an independent newspaper (Debono 2020a). The latter relates to the protest events identified by this research study and is subsequently elaborated upon through a tranche of findings relating to the characteristics of protest events. It highlights and engages with the issues, organisations, venues, repertoire, and frequency of protests. For example, Figure 2 provides the number of protests held during the year in graph format.

Figure 2 shows a gradual decline of protests from January, before the Pandemic, to April, the first month after the first case was documented in Malta. When there were no new COVID-19 cases, and the country was opening up after partial lockdown, there was an escalation of protests (19), which save for October (11) was unmatched in frequency in every other month. However, there was no clear correlation between COVID-19 cases/deaths and number of protests: In October, when both cases and deaths were increasing and restrictive measures were introduced, protests increased too, rising from four to 11 between September and October. Thus, even though no comparison can be made with previous years, PEA enabled the comparison of protest figures within 2020, with Malta not recording any registered cases before March. Further utilisation of PEA can provide comparative research in subsequent years. Figure 3 identifies the issues characterising the protest events in question.

PEA enabled the identification of the variety of protest issues in 2020 despite the overarching theme of the pandemic. The nodal points around environment (20) and Daphne Caruana Galizia (19) were the most frequent issues for protests. These were closely followed by human rights (15), which were followed by a significant gap to the next group of issues. Interestingly, there was only one COVID-sceptic protest in 2020, and there were three other protests directly related to COVID, which will be explained shortly. The environment nodal point was in relation to issues such as development projects and construction malpractices. The Daphne Caruana Galizia nodal point had to do with protests which combined outrage over her murder with issues such as corruption, governance, and the rule of law. As mentioned earlier, these were spearheaded by Repubblica, Occupy Justice, and ManuelDelia.com. On the other hand, the nodal point for human rights had to do primarily with protests by migrants in detention centres and open centres.

TABLE 1 COVID-19 chronology and number of protests in Malta

Month	COVID situation	Number of protests in Malta
January	COVID unfolds in Wuhan, China and dominates the international scene.	8
February	COVID develops at an alarming rate, especially in Europe.	7
March	1st COVID-19 case. Partial lockdown: closure of schools, churches, airport, restaurants, and shops. Construction keeps going. Government aids enterprise and workers, including giving wage supplement. 169 new cases by end of month	4
April	52 registered cases in 1 day. By end of month, cases decrease and recoveries increase. 1st COVID-19 death.	2
May	Restrictive measures on bars, restaurants, discos and mass activities are relaxed.	3
June	Government announces EUR 900m recovery plan. No new cases reported.	19
July	Three active cases by mid- July, followed by 'an explosion of new cases' after two-day party in a hotel.	2
August	All mass activities banned. 'Deadly second wave' starts. At one point 72 new cases are recorded, health authorities are prepared.	3
September	By September, less than twenty people had died. Schools re-open 'in an orderly fashion'.	4
October	Number of infections keeps rising and the wearing of face masks becomes mandatory. Bars and clubs ordered to close; restaurants open with restrictions.	11
November	More than 100 deaths by mid-November. In one day, 208 new cases are registered. Number of new cases detected peaked (3,831).	6
December	During Autumn, Malta registered 100 new cases a day, but situation stabilises by mid- December, meaning that Malta, so far, had avoided a third wave. Ambitious national vaccination strategy is announced and starts in last week of the month. Highest number of deaths recorded (82), and by end of month, number of new cases reached 12,774; deaths reached 219.	5

### FREQUENCY: MALTA PROTESTS 2020

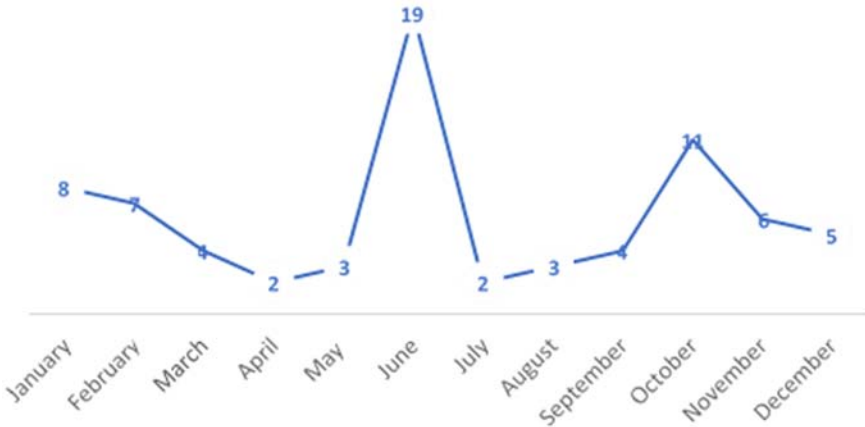


FIGURE 2 Frequency—Malta protests 2020

### Issues: Malta Protests 2020

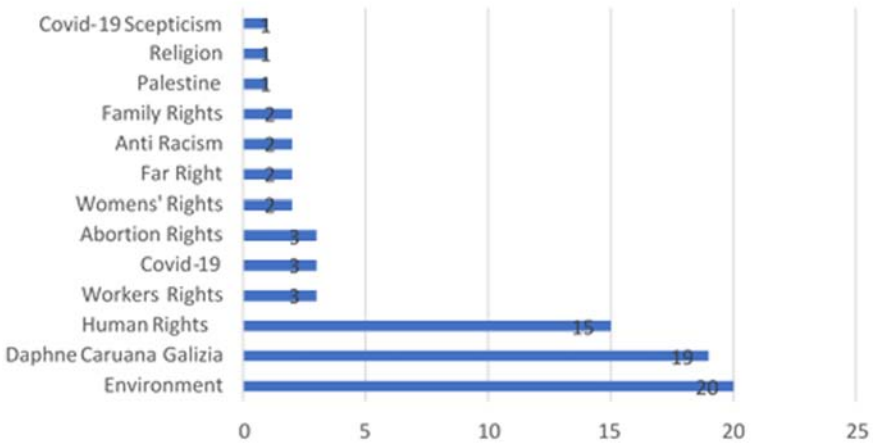


FIGURE 3 Issues—Malta protests 2020

One other issue that emerged during 2019/20 was that of abortion, which, to date, is illegal in Malta. This issue gained considerable media attention, with two opposing voices on the matter. In this regard, one notes an uneven situation: Even though Malta is the only EU member state which prohibits all types of abortion, it is a world leader in pro-LGBTIQ legislation (ILGA Europe 2021). Unevenness can also be found in other Southern European countries, albeit in different ways, within the realm of women’s rights and gender identity (Santos



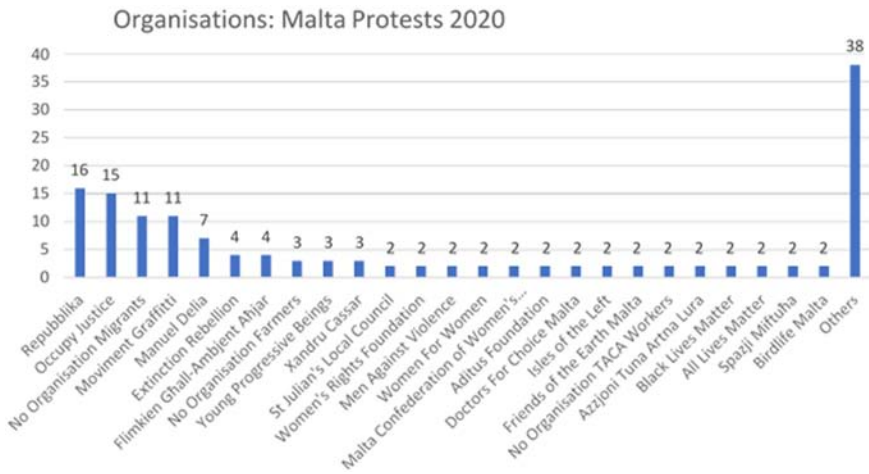


FIGURE 4 Organisations—Malta protests 2020

and Pieri 2020). On the other hand, some issues were ‘off stage’, achieving either minimal or no coverage. For example, the Christmas vigils held in various localities about parental alienation and organised by Happy Parenting<sup>17</sup> were only covered by TVM, the national state broadcaster.

PEA showed that organisers of protests were varied, though some were clearly more active than others. It is also pertinent to note that a considerably high number of protests were organised by migrants without any organisational backing. Other players in the list included a variety of Environmental NGOs (ENGOs) ranging from FAA to Extinction Rebellion.<sup>18</sup> There also were older ENGOs, most notably Birdlife.<sup>19</sup> A new environmental coalition—Spazji Miftuħa<sup>20</sup>—was also active in the field. The flourishing of pro-choice organisations could also be observed. These included Young Progressive Beings,<sup>21</sup> the Women’s Rights Foundation<sup>22</sup> and Doctors for Choice.<sup>23</sup> Malta also had its own articulation of the global phenomenon of Black Lives Matter, and its corresponding adversary in the field, All Lives Matter (Magri 2020).

17 A community-based organisation focusing on familial issues.  
 18 A small organisation representing the mother organisation in Malta.  
 19 Birdlife Malta represents its mother organisation in Malta and is one of Malta’s largest and oldest environmental NGOs. It adopts a conservationist stance.  
 20 A coalition formed in 2020, comprising 60 NGOs, set up to defend public open spaces.  
 21 A small youth organisation focusing on issues such as reproductive justice.  
 22 A voluntary organisation active in the empowerment and education of women concerning their legal rights.  
 23 An organisation of medics who advocate for comprehensive sexual and reproductive healthcare that is safe, equitable and accessible. It is a global partner of Global Doctors for Choice.

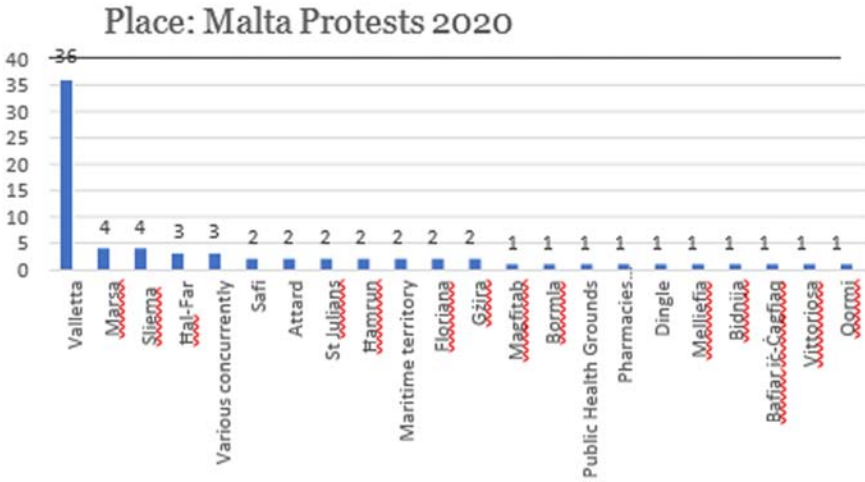


FIGURE 5 Place—Malta protests 2020

The above follows Malta’s rich diversity of social movements and civil society organisations within a comprehensive two-party political system, ranging from the more traditional trade unions and the Catholic church to a wide range of social movement organisations and campaigns, such as Malta’s referenda on EU accession (2003); divorce (2011); and bird hunting (2015) (Briguglio 2015, 2016b).

Figure 5 shows that Malta’s capital city, Valletta, was (49%) the most popular choice of location for protest. Valletta was deemed the most practical, even for symbolic reasons, because it hosts both Parliament and the Prime Minister’s Office. Malta’s small size facilitated access. In this regard, one PL Member of Parliament lamented that civil society protests were “hurting business in the capital” (Micallef 2020) and urged organisers to hold them elsewhere. At the same time, not everyone had the opportunity to organise protests in the capital city. Irregular migrants in detention or open centres held their protests on site. This even extended to Malta’s considerably large maritime territory, where irregular migrants were being detained on boats for some time. Other venues in the list included areas characterised by environmental controversy, as well as highly visible points around Malta.

The demonstration was the most popular type of protest in 2020 (29), followed by press conferences (13) and symbolic protests (13). In this regard, it is once again important to consider Malta’s small size, and, consequently, to note that, as discussed earlier, these protest types are often blurred. This is illustrated when a social movement with considerable media networks holds a press conference against a development project which is attended both by

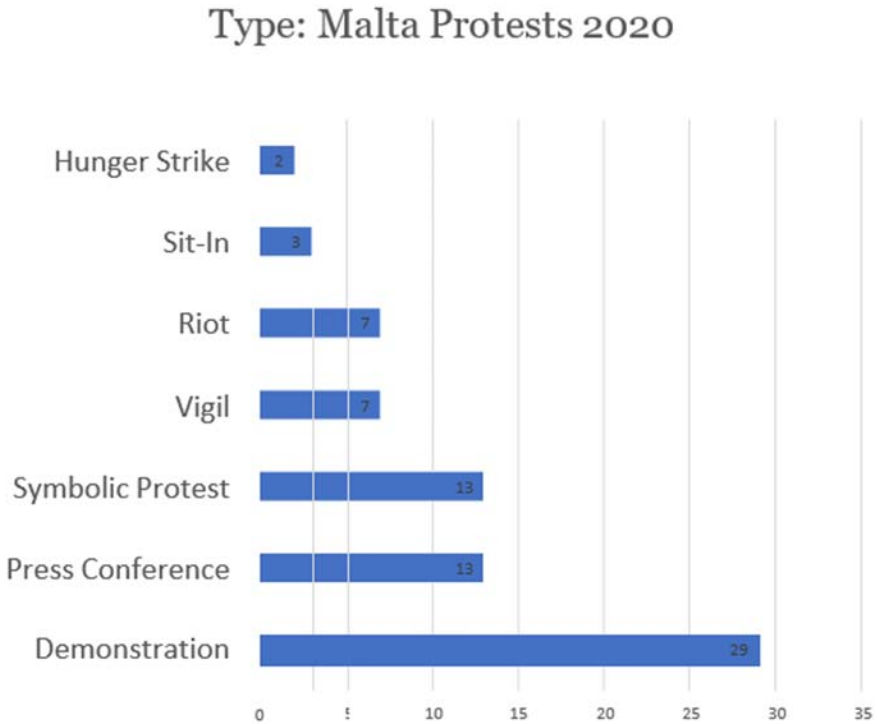


FIGURE 6 Type—Malta protests 2020

residents and activists. Thus, sociological analysis of protest in small states must be considered when examining the repertoire similarity between different types of protest. At the same time, this analysis could be challenged in terms of reliability because one's demonstration could be someone else's press conference. Sometimes, media coverage itself provides different labels and emphases, for example, on the number of participants. Hence, even though PEA enabled the counting of different protest events, the definition of these events was subject to further interpretation. Networks of participation played an important role in protests. Various Maltese SMOs include members who wear many hats. As mentioned earlier in this study, such hats could refer to one's membership in other organisations as well as to party-political affiliation and media- role (Briguglio 2013, 2018). Another observation is that the large numbers during demonstrations related to Daphne Caruana Galizia at the end of 2019 dwindled by the beginning of 2020, prior to the pandemic, and even before but especially after Muscat eventually resigned. Hence, even though some demonstrations focused on this theme attracted hundreds, generally numbers were much smaller.

## Repubblica, Occupy Justice, and Daphne

Findings discussed in this section deal with protests by Repubblica and Occupy Justice, which are closely networked and which were the main protagonist SMOs in protests related to Daphne Caruana Galizia,<sup>24</sup> together with ManuelDelia.com. PEA confirms this, with 11 events involving the first two organisations, 7 also involving ManuelDelia.com, 5 and 3 respective events solely organised by each individual organisation and only 1 event organised with another organisation, Moviment Graffiti. This is an example of bonding social capital<sup>25</sup> (Putnam 2000). Here it is pertinent to emphasise that both Repubblica and OJ were formed following the murder of Caruana Galizia, with the former focusing on substantive policy apart from protest, whilst the latter, a women's organisation, focused on the dramatisation of this issue through symbolic protests. This resembles a 'radical flank' relationship (Freeman 1975). It is interesting to note that Valletta featured prominently in protests held by Repubblica and OJ. Various demonstrations were held in front of parliament, but the organisations also held monthly vigils in front of Malta's Courts of Justice and near a memorial shrine erected in memory of Caruana Galizia. For a while, the vigils were stopped due to the pandemic. In a vigil held on June 16, one of the speakers was Bernard Grech, who replaced Adrian Delia as PN and Opposition leader later that year after a bitter factional campaign within the party that led to a new leadership election. Another vigil held on June 22 was addressed by Mark Anthony Sammut, who had earlier resigned from the post of President of PN's general council under Delia's leadership, only to be re-instated to the post in 2021 under Grech's leadership. Here, one can note the "mutual dependencies and overlaps between parties and interest groups or movements" (Goldstone, cited in Muldoon and Rye 2020, p.3). It is also not surprising that the protests related to Daphne Caruana Galizia were resource-rich in terms of repertoire, which included the use of street billboards, banners, and demonstration equipment. In this regard, "the definition of grievances will expand to meet the funds and support personnel available" (Zald and McCarthy 2017, p. 379).

24 All of Occupy Justice's protests concerned Daphne Caruana Galizia. Likewise, 14 out of 16 protests by Repubblica were on this issue.

25 The Repubblica-OJ-ManuelDelia.com network attracted various organisations to demonstrations held during the end of 2019 (Briguglio 2020). In 2020, this coalition.

### Networked Graffiti

This section deals with Moviment Graffiti, which, likewise, was a main protagonist during protests in Malta in 2020, with its own networking strategies, repertoire, and issues. Figure 7 shows a clear difference between this organisation and the Repubblica/ Occupy Justice/ManuelDelia.com network. Indeed, there is a much broader network of alliances involving Moviment Graffiti. In Moviment Graffiti’s case, all protests save for two were organised with a broad range of other organisations, exemplifying the notion of bridging social capital (Putnam 2000). At the same time, however, it is important to note that most organisations in question had similar ideological orientations to Moviment Graffiti (e.g. environmentalist, feminist). Even was less evident, save for the presence of Moviment Graffiti in one demonstration during the beginning of the year. though Valletta was the most popular venue for protests by Graffiti, at times other venues were chosen as well in relation to specific environmental issues, which characterised seven out of 11 protests in question. In one particular protest, Moviment Graffiti celebrated a year of a relatively large environmental protest in 2019 with 134 proposals to reform Malta’s construction sector.

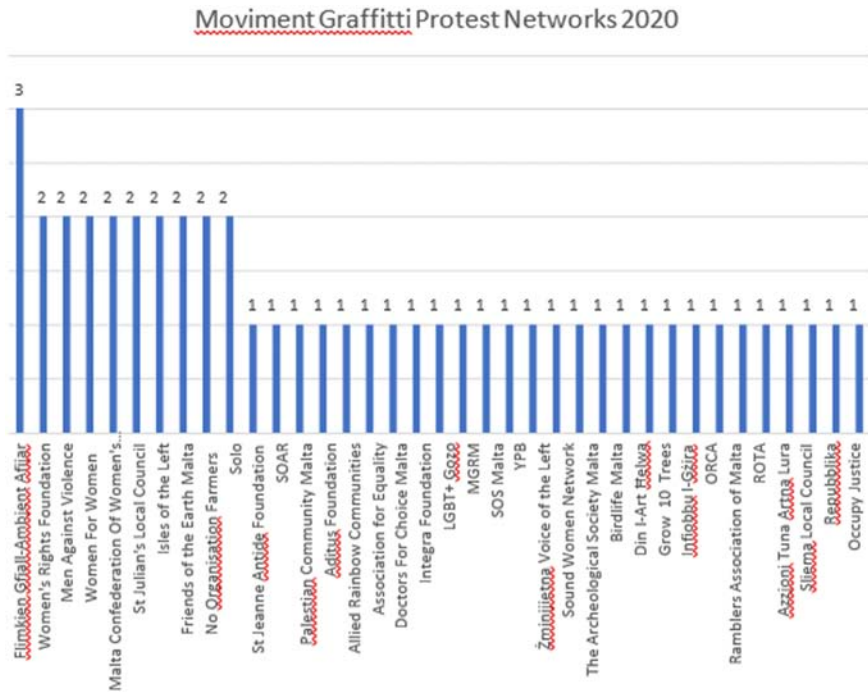


FIGURE 7 Moviment Graffiti—protest networks 2020

In turn, the document was endorsed by 21 other groups (Moviment Graffiti 2020). Moviment Graffiti activists also participated in other protests, most notably those of the 'Spazji Miftuħa' coalition for open spaces, comprising 60 NGOs, but also to a protest in solidarity with migrants, which was organised by Xandru Cassar.<sup>26</sup>

### Weapons of the Weak

This section deals with protests related to irregular migration and its ramifications. Interestingly, protests held by precarious groups were largely spontaneous and did not have organisational set-ups such as those of SMOs. On the other hand, protests both in favour and against such groups were organised by SMOs. PEA revealed some differences between protests held by irregular migrants and protests held by SMOs which were discussed in preceding sections. Indeed, irregular migrants organised their protests on their own steam, without any organisational structure and often in a dramatic manner: 7 protests were riots, 3 were demonstrations and 1 was a hunger strike. All of these protests dealt with human rights and issues such as migrants' detention.

According to the United Nations' Human Rights Office, migrants have been held in shocking conditions (UN Slams Shocking Conditions, 2020) in detention centres and open centres in Safi, Marsa, and Ħal-Far. Valletta was not used for protests, because despite Malta's small size, protesters lacked social capital, and in some cases, free access to the city itself. Unlike other protests, some of these protests were followed by arrests and in some cases, imprisonment. In addition, two protests were held at sea aboard cruise boats which were rented by the Government of Malta to detain irregular migrants crossing at sea during the beginning of the pandemic. After dramatic protests on board, this practice was stopped. Despite lacking in social capital and networks, migrants' protests were covered widely by the press,<sup>27</sup> presumably because of their sensationalism, the public support, opposition of notable activists in Malta, and the fact that migration has been a prominent concern for the Maltese in various surveys, including Eurobarometer since 2013 (Debono 2020c). These protests are symptomatic of "weapons of the weak" (Scott 1985) and "emotional displays" (Goodwin, Jasper and Polletta 2001), where alienation, anger and disruption feature prominently.

26 A young activist passionate about social justice and the environment who captured media attention through his activism.

27 Some protests were only given coverage by NET, which is owned by the PN.

### COVID-19 Protests

This section deals with physical protests directly related to COVID-19, which were hardly prominent in Malta. In fact, there was only one COVID-sceptic protest, organised by Natural Health Community and Human Health Alliance.<sup>28</sup> As discussed earlier in this article, Malta's low rate of COVID-scepticism and high trust in health authorities could help explain this phenomenon. Malta also had milder restrictions compared to other countries. It is interesting to note the COVID sceptics (including anti-vaxxers) were given considerable coverage by *Lovin' Malta*,<sup>29</sup> which also gave considerable space to pro-Choice, and paradoxically, Far Right and Anti-Racist protesters. Other protests directly related to COVID-19 included a *Repubblika* protest, during which empty chairs were set out in front of the Office of the Prime Minister to commemorate the victims of COVID-19, and two protest events which were organised by the Malta Association of Medics,<sup>30</sup> Malta Association of Public Health Medicine,<sup>31</sup> and the Chamber of Pharmacists<sup>32</sup>

### Discussion

This concluding section provides concise answers to each research question and puts forward related observations and recommendations for further research in the field. As it relates to the 74 public protests documented in Malta in 2020, this study asked

1. What are the specific features of protest in Malta?
2. How does Malta's status as a small state affect protest, especially in terms of networks of activism?
3. How did COVID-19 impact on protests in Malta in 2020?

Regarding question (1), this study shows that the environment was the most prominent issue, followed by protests related to Daphne Caruana Galizia and human rights. Moreover, there were a variety of other issues (including emerging ones) in areas such as women's rights and family rights. COVID-19 did

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28 The Human Health Alliance claims "to inform and educate the public in general about matters concerning their physical and mental well-being; and help them decide about making healthy lifestyle choices to improve their quality of life".

29 An online media platform which is especially popular with youth and which often has sensationalist stories and titles.

30 A professional association for doctors, affiliated to the World Medical Association.

31 A professional voluntary organisation which teaches, promotes and practices public health.

32 The professional association of pharmacists.

not feature prominently, even though there was one notable COVID-sceptic protest. There was a wide range of organisations, but the most active were *Repubblika* and *Occupy Justice* on the *Daphne Caruana Galizia* issue; *Moviment Graffiti*, primarily on the environment, and irregular migrants, who protested human rights violations without organisational backing.

Valletta was clearly the epicentre of protests. With respect to other venues, irregular migrants held protests in their respective detention/open centres and out at sea. There was also a variety of repertoires, with the demonstration being the most popular. However, boundaries between protest types in Malta are often blurred in view of relatively small attendances. Some demonstrations did attract a few hundred supporters, however, and some protests, most notably by irregular migrants, were more militant. There was no clear trend regarding timing of protests. Initially, there was a gradual decline of protests from January, before the pandemic, to April, in the first month of the pandemic. When COVID-19 cases in Malta went down to zero, there was an escalation of protests, which save for October was unmatched in frequency in every other month. However, there was no clear correlation between COVID-19 cases/deaths and number of protests; in October, when both cases and deaths were increasing, protests in Malta increased too.

Regarding question (2), this study emphasises the importance of the characteristics and opportunity structures of Malta as a small state. Such factors are not only reflected in the protest repertoire discussed above, but also in the way SMOs invest in social networks in their own ways. Some SMOS are more media-networked than others, and in some instances, even some journalists are involved in their respective repertoires of contention, as the public sphere is characterised by plural roles and multiple hats among activists, journalists, and politicians. It is not surprising that activism related to *Daphne Caruana Galizia*, organised by *Repubblika* and its allies, as well as activism on the environment, particularly if organised by *Moviment Graffiti*, were given prominent coverage by media houses. Some local protest actions by *Extinction Rebellion* and *Fridays for Future* regarding climate change were not given media coverage, though they were posted on Facebook by their organisers. On the other hand, irregular migrants resorted to weapons of the weak to capture media attention, even though some organisations, including *Moviment Graffiti*, have consistently supported their plights.

Regarding question (3), the impact of COVID-19 was not considerable. Despite certain trends regarding protest numbers, there was no correlation between the COVID-19 context and number of protests. Furthermore, the main issues characterising protest were similar to those of previous years. The type



of COVID measures in Malta and the disposition of Maltese people towards the health sector and vaccination played an important role. On the other hand, irregular migrants experienced precarious situations, sometimes related to COVID-19 and their detention experiences, and this could partly explain the relatively high number of human rights protests in their case.

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