

AN OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH ON THE RECENT MIGRATION OF ITALIANS IN MALTA

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1. INTRODUCTION

In a recent article², published online on the «*Italiani a Malta*» news portal, the Italian language in Malta was likened to an *araba fenice*, a phoenix rising from the ashes. This analogy is indeed a pertinent one in consideration of the fortunes of this language on Italy's neighbouring island, both from a historical point of view and in the current situation: for example, when Malta was taken over by the British in 1800, Italian held a prestigious role as it was the language of scholars and the elite. Anglicisation of the island was among the main goals of the colonisers, as a result of which Italian was marginalised to the advantage of English. Nevertheless, after well over one hundred years of colonisation, Italian made its way back to the island, but not for political reasons: from the late-1950s it became the main language of entertainment locally as it was readily available to all via television. This significant surge in popularity lost ground in the recent years, especially among Maltese youths, as entertainment became globalised and heavily dominated by English. Today, the extraordinary increase in the number of Italian nationals in Malta witnessed over the past decade has again rendered the language reasonably widespread locally, although the competence of Italian of Maltese nationals has not necessarily improved as a result of this. Italian in Malta is therefore indeed an *araba fenice*, defunct in some eras, alive in others. This contribution is dedicated to recent Italian migration and its linguistic and social implications in Malta, which I will delve into after a brief historical excursus.

2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND PRESENT-DAY MIGRATION

Malta's linguistic history is characterised by contact between different languages as a result of the many civilizations which set foot on the island over the course of the years. Following the Arab occupation, between 870 A.D. and 1090, closer contacts were established with neighbouring Sicily, thereby exposing the Semitic variety introduced by the Arabs – which would morph into present-day Maltese – to Italo-Romance forms. The elite classes, including members of the Church and other scholars, knew Latin and Italian and used both languages in official contexts. By 1800, the year of the commencement of British colonisation, Italian occupied an influential role in Malta especially because in the two centuries leading to this, Malta was occupied by the Knights of the Order of St. John (1530-1798) who used it as a *lingua franca*. Italian was also the language of the educated class because several teachers in local schools were Italian (mostly Sicilian) clerics, who used their language as a medium of instruction. The

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² <https://malta.italiani.it/lingua-italiana-a-malta/>.

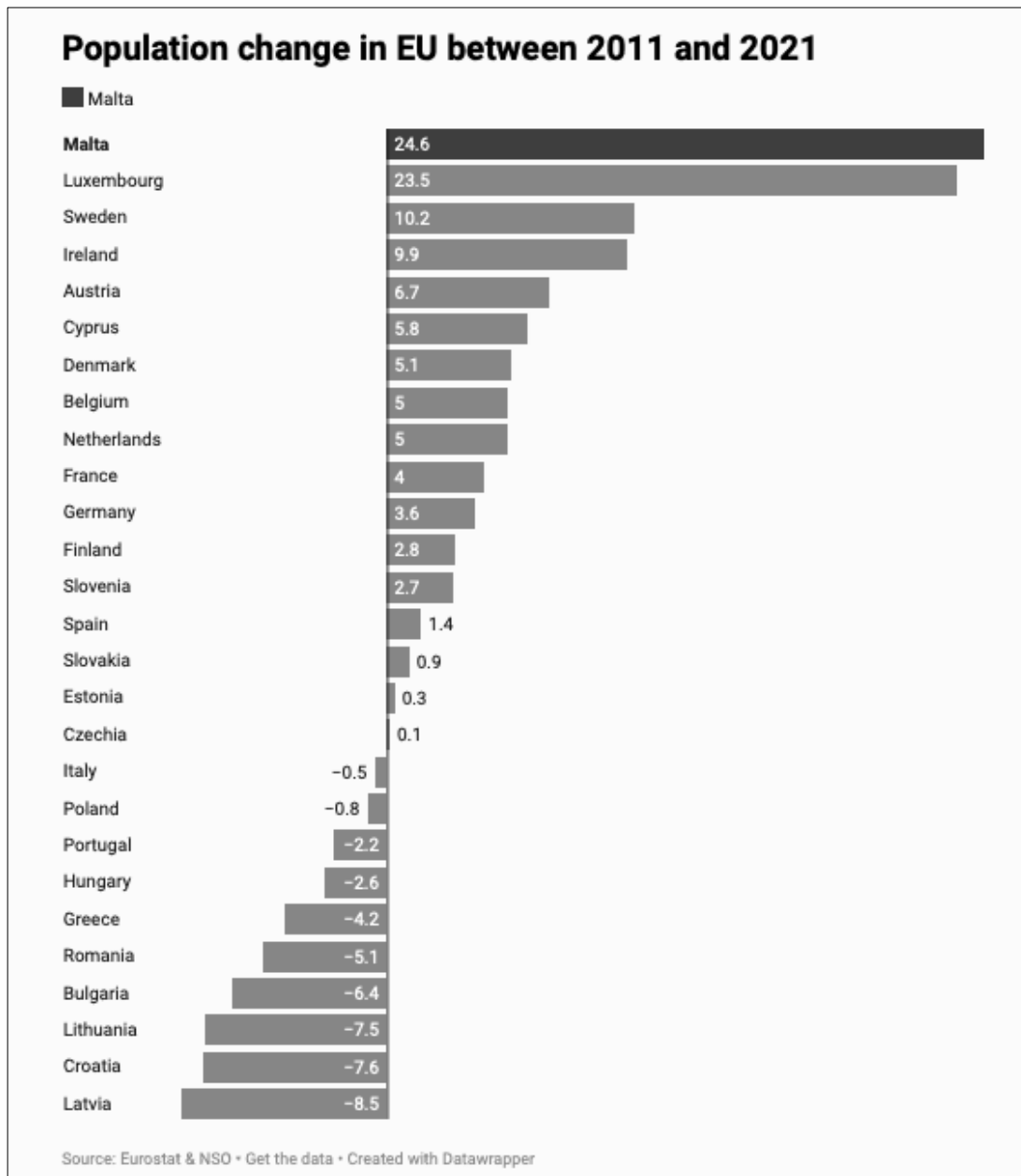
populace, on the other hand, spoke Maltese. The British colonisers, slowly but surely, introduced English onto the linguistic scene and it gradually replaced Italian as the language of education, thereby occupying the space and status that Italian had held also among the governing and upper classes. Nevertheless, even during British colonisation (1800-1964) the presence of Italians in Malta was not insignificant, and this ranged from politically motivated situations, involving the many exiles who lived in Malta during the years preceding the Unification of Italy, to others mainly related to education and trade. The political strife of the early decades of the twentieth century which led to the two World Wars strengthened Malta's loyalty to the Empire, while distancing itself from Italy.

Although Italian was side-lined in the post-War years, it then made a comeback. During the early Sixties, Italian television channels became accessible to many Maltese households via antenna. Italian became the language of films and TV series, including those produced in the UK and in the US, which the Maltese followed in their dubbed Italian version. It also became the language of songs, variety and quiz shows, sports and leisure. The popularity of Italian TV in Malta reached its peak in the Seventies, Eighties and Nineties and, as extensively documented by Caruana (2003), these TV programmes were then so popular that they incentivated language acquisition especially among Maltese youths, some of whom understood the language and spoke it quite fluently. Attitudes towards it were positive and a good section of the population was effectively trilingual, fluent in Maltese, English and Italian (Sciriha, 2001; Caruana, 2013). This augmented the cultural affinities between Malta and Italy and today these well-established ties lead to mutually beneficial economic and commercial exchanges (Caruana, 2020).

Over the past twenty years this situation has undergone rapid developments, firstly due to the introduction of cable and satellite television and later because of the effects of the digital revolution. Local television channels increased, and so did programmes on the media in Maltese. English, as expected, is the most-commonly used language on the Internet and on social media. Italian, however, is still present on the Maltese linguistic scene today, possibly more so than it was a few years ago. This is because the number of Italians who work, study and reside in Malta is substantial. This recent migration is largely characterised by first-generation migrants, although the numbers of those residing long-term together with their children has increased too – this is evident from data regarding schooling in Malta, where today there are many more Italian migrant learners than in the past (Caruana, Pace, 2021).

The increasing presence of Italians in Malta must also be interpreted in the light of a context which is experiencing unprecedented influx of foreigners: the 2021 census (NSO, 2021) reports that Malta's population now exceeds half a million, (519,562), including 115,449 individuals of non-Maltese nationality. This means that more than one in five persons residing on the island are non-Maltese, a statistic which is by far higher than the EU average, as documented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. *Population change in the EU between 2011 and 2021*³



Migrants who set foot on the island hail from many different countries. While Italians represent the largest foreign nationality at 12% followed by British residents at just over 9% the next most widespread nationalities are Indian and Filipino⁴ both at just under 7% followed by sizeable Serbian and Bulgarian communities⁵.

Around 78,000 foreigners are employed in Malta, amounting to almost 25% of the workforce. According to the official 2021 census (NSO, 2021), Italians in Malta now

³ <https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/90-caucasian-83-roman-catholic-malta-census-statistics-released>.

⁴ Immigration from Far East countries has increased exponentially over the recent years, including the 2020-21 period characterised by the pandemic. This immigration is connected to specific sectors, including care of the elderly, food deliveries and manual labour in the construction sector.

⁵ <https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/foreign-nationals-living-malta.1014183>.

amount to almost 14,000 individuals. This is the biggest increase of a community of non-Maltese nationals since the 2011, when only 947 Italians resided in the country. The increase in numbers is confirmed by the *Anagrafe Italiana Residenti all'Estero* (AIRE): registrations stood at around 3,000 in 2016 and have risen to 8,852 in 2022, of which 3,357 (38%) are Sicilians. Furthermore, it is reliably understood that there many Italians in Malta who are not registered on AIRE. This emerges clearly also from data regarding those who are either employers or employees, presented in Figure 2 below, as the reported numbers exceed AIRE registrations:

Figure 2. *Italian nationals engaged in the work sector in Malta (JobsPlus, Malta Government)*⁶

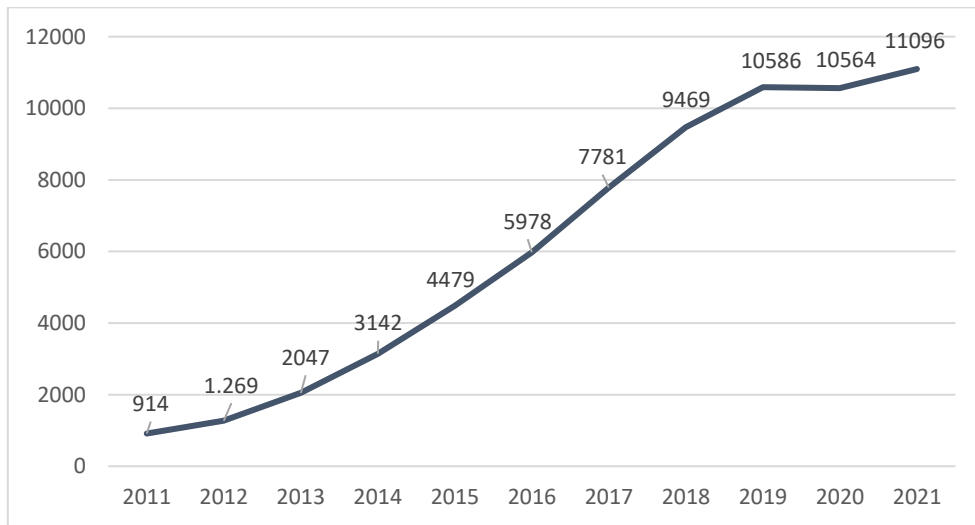


Figure 2 shows that between 2011 and 2021 Italians in gainful employment in Malta increased more than tenfold, with a short plateau between 2019-20, which coincides with the Covid-19 pandemic. Today, their presence represents a new phase of the island's contacts with Italy and with Italians, and consequently also with the Italian language. The next sections of this paper are dedicated to an overview of research carried out recently and provides a state-of-the-art of the situation while indicating avenues for future work. Focus will be mainly placed on sociolinguistic issues, schooling and inclusion, as these are the main topics that feature in recent studies.

3. RESEARCH ON ITALIAN MIGRATION IN MALTA

As documented in the yearly *Fondazione Migrantes* reports, the latest of which published in 2022 (*Fondazione Migrantes*, 2022), an increased presence of Italian nationals has been registered in several Mediterranean countries and Malta, despite its small size, is no exception. Indeed, as reported in initial research (Iorio, 2019; Caruana, 2020), when Malta is compared to much larger countries in the Mediterranean basin it is evident that migration from Italy to the island is even more significant in terms of its numbers and its impact on local society than it may be in other neighbouring contexts.

⁶ <https://jobsplus.gov.mt/resources/publication-statistics-mt-mt-en-gb/labour-market-information/foreigners-data#title1.3>.

3.1. Origin and occupation

Data retrieved from studies carried out between 2019 and 2022 clearly converge insofar as the origin of Italian nationals in Malta: more than one third are Sicilian; the other two-thirds are then distributed among other Southern, Central and Northern regions, with some geographically larger ones having greater shares, as one would expect. In Table 1 AIRE data regarding the geographical origins of Italians in Malta is provided, based on the region in which they were born:

Table 1. *Regional origin of Italians in Malta 2018-2022 (source: Rapporto Italiani nel Mondo. Elaborazione Fondazione Migrantes su dati AIRE)*

Region	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Piemonte	296	356	395	401	432
Valle d'Aosta	7	9	11	12	12
Lombardia	652	741	816	859	911
Trentino Alto Adige	49	68	74	76	77
Veneto	282	358	416	421	447
Friuli Venezia Giulia	93	114	130	134	134
Liguria	89	107	128	135	133
Emilia Romagna	245	258	285	293	305
Toscana	177	231	259	278	301
Umbria	58	72	72	80	87
Marche	90	98	107	117	113
Lazio	573	662	711	750	782
Abruzzo	80	105	110	107	128
Molise	21	30	34	38	41
Campania	301	408	482	522	578
Puglia	280	369	450	476	492
Basilicata	27	42	46	55	64
Calabria	164	212	254	277	274
Sicilia	1953	2511	2937	3170	3357
Sardegna	117	134	161	173	184
Total	5,554	6,885	7,878	8,374	8,852
Difference		+1331	+993	+496	+478

The figures in Table 1 show similar increases across different regions between 2018 and 2022, with a slightly more accentuated rise in the Southern ones, especially Sicily. The highest growth is registered between 2018 and 2019, with official figures for immigration showing a subsequent decrease, certainly affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. Despite this reduction in the number of newcomers from 2019 onwards, total AIRE registrations have increased from 5,554 in 2018 to 8,852 in 2022. This indicates that most Italians who come to Malta and register on AIRE stay on the island indefinitely or for a considerable amount of time.

Geographical proximity undoubtedly favours moving to Malta and it is often mentioned as the reason why this destination is chosen over others. In fact, the vast majority of Italians in Malta return to Italy regularly, on average two or three times a year.

They keep close contact with friends and relatives both through these visits and by keeping in touch via phone calls, social media etc. The favourable climate is also mentioned consistently as the reason for which Malta is chosen as a destination, with many Italians - especially Sicilians - often stating that they feel “at home”, despite being “away from home” (Caruana, 2020; 2022 & forthcoming).

Although age-range varies greatly, most Italians who migrated since 2016 are within the 31-40-year-old age bracket, followed by those between the ages of 18-30. This shows that they are at a relatively early stage of their working life. In this respect, Licata (2018b: 2019) defined Malta as an ideal destination for the «*neo-mobilità giovanile italiana*» (recent migration of Italian youths), referring to those who face uncertainty in relation to work prospects. In fact, several Italians explain that they migrate to exploit work-related opportunities as their employment in Malta guarantees more long-term security, generally accompanied by better salaries (Caruana, 2022 & forthcoming).

Most studies, including Caruana (forthcoming) for which data was collected in 2019, indicate that Italians settle on the island for a long period of time. Nevertheless, recently there are some signs that uncertainty may be on the increase. For example, in a small-scale study carried out by Caruana (2022), he reports of a sense of precariousness also related to the recent shift of migration patterns in Malta: besides the huge increase in numbers, reported in Section 2, recent migration from the Far East, especially from India, the Philippines and Nepal, is changing the job market. It is reliably understood, though further research is necessary in this respect, that this has also led to the displacement of Italians in some sectors, including the construction industry which today contributes significantly to Malta’s economy.

While initial data, including Iorio’s (2019:2014) findings, based on 2016 data from the local Employment & Training Corporation (ETC), indicated that many Italians found tourism-related jobs (including work in the hospitality sector and in the restaurant industry), more recent data from the same entity reveal an increase in employment related to the entertainment industry and to sectors of property construction and development. This is in line with recent developments in Malta’s work sector – the island is home to several e-gaming companies, which employ individuals of different nationalities, whereas Malta’s growing urban sprawl has led to an increase in the need for workers in the construction sector, most of whom are foreign.

Notwithstanding these developments, Premazzi’s (2018) observations by virtue of which she classifies Italian migrants into two broad categories still holds today: these include, on the one hand, those who come to Malta by choice, generally in order to improve their professional opportunities of which they would have had already experience and, on the other, those for whom Malta represents the first experience of migration and who are generally younger and less qualified.

There have also been some developments in relation as to whether Italians move to Malta temporarily, i.e., for mobility purposes as opposed to the long-term, with the latter involving one’s partner and/or family. Although further investigation is necessary, there are clues that short-term mobility is becoming even more common. There is, in fact, a widespread understanding that the number of Italians in Malta is significantly higher than that reported in official figures and that one of the reasons for this is that many of these come to Malta for a short span of time. These include those who move to the island as a ‘trial’ period abroad, often their first experience away from home, and who then return home or move to other destinations after a few months.

3.2. Linguistic issues

Linguistic issues have been explored in most of the research carried out and consistent trends emerge: Italians, like many other foreigners, are attracted by the Anglophone context as this offers several advantages and better one's prospects for the future, also in terms of employability in other countries. Many strive to learn English while in Malta, or to improve their competence of this language. In the vast majority of cases they do so informally, through regular encounters with Maltese and other foreigners, although some attend courses in this language. Figures of the local Lifelong Learning Centre for the scholastic year 2022-23 indicate that 127 Italians are following a course in English as a foreign language⁷. This is less than the number reported for 2019, when 250 Italians were following this course. Overall, these are extremely low when one considers how many Italians presently reside in Malta, and they are even lower than those registered for classes of Maltese: only 53 are currently taking them, a further drop from the number - 164 - reported in 2019 (Caruana, Pace, 2020).

This is in line with another consistent result of research: as expected, interest in Maltese is considerably less than that for English, and competence in this language is generally limited to lexical items of Italo-Romance origin and to a handful of commonly used words and phrases. Thus, although Maltese is spoken very widely on the island and it is essential for socialisation with locals, it is not considered particularly important by Italians as it is not deemed useful beyond the local context and because locally they can communicate effectively by using their own L1 and English. In fact, whereas many Italians residing in Malta report that their level of English has improved, very few state that they can understand Maltese and even fewer express their interest towards this language or any motivation to learn it. The same applies to their children, many of whom develop good competences in English but who are less proficient in Maltese, although this depends on the school they attend⁸.

Practically all research carried out confirms that Italians have many opportunities to use their own language, both among other Italians and with Maltese. While the maintenance of one's heritage language represents one of the main challenges for migrants, this seems to be less problematic for Italians in Malta. Italian is spoken reasonably widely in Malta, and Maltese lexicon itself is replete with Italianisms (Brincat, 2011: 401-415)⁹. Most Italians also state that they often speak to the Maltese in Italian, and they speak of this in favourable terms as they underline that Malta is one of the few countries outside Italy where many understand and speak their language.

Undoubtedly, the geographical proximity between Malta and Italy, the presence of Italian media locally and the large number of Italians on the island create opportunities for Italians to keep contact with their L1 and to use it.

⁷ Provided by the Directorate for Research, Lifelong Learning and Employability, Ministry for Education, Malta.

⁸ The educational sector is one of the settings in which the relationship between Maltese and English presents features of diglossia, as good competence of the latter can lead to better achievement. Schooling in Malta is divided into three tiers, and public and Catholic-church schools are free of charge, whereas independent (private) schools are fee-paying. Although both English and Maltese are media of instruction, their use varies in the different sectors: for example, Maltese is very widespread in public schools but somewhat less so in some church schools. Conversely, English is the dominant language of instruction in independent schools.

⁹ Italian is the foreign language which around 60% of students opt for in secondary schools. It is therefore the most popular foreign language in local schools.

3.3. *Schooling*

Surprisingly enough, studies carried out in Malta on Italian migrant learners are among the few contributions which tackle the recent inclusion of Italian nationals in foreign educational institutions¹⁰. For migrants, learning the language/s of the context in which they are immersed represents an important step for better inclusion (Bauloz *et al.*, 2019). Competence of the language/s of instruction is fundamental both for scholastic attainment and socialisation. In this respect, the Maltese context can present several challenges, because two languages of instruction are used, namely Maltese and English, and because they vary considerably both according to their functions and to the context in which they are employed (e.g., school sector, subject being taught etc.), as recently reported by Panzavecchia and Little (2020). Code-switching and mixing between Maltese and English, both in teacher-talk and during interactions between students, can present additional challenges.

Italians represent the largest community of foreign learners in Maltese schools. Research suggests that both achievement and socialisation of Italian learners is conditioned by their competence of English as this is the medium through which they interact, and which enables them to follow lessons. Although most Italian students are placed in mainstream classes, some of them are referred by schools to receive ‘induction’ support. This normally occurs when learners, irrespective of their age, have very limited competence of both English and Maltese and are therefore placed in an ‘induction hub’, sometimes prior to mainstreaming. The induction programme lasts for a whole scholastic year, but learners who join from February onwards may be required to stay on during the following scholastic year too. Information retrieved from the local Migrant Learners’ Unit (MLU) indicates that very few Italian learners repeat the induction programme, and that they generally attain the required competence in English and/or Maltese once they follow it for a full scholastic year, also having been immersed in the local context.

Some difficulties that Italian children face in local schools are outlined in the research: Caruana (2020) mentions cases where Italian learners do not involve themselves actively in lessons and that linguistic difficulties in both English and Maltese affect their attainment in other subjects. Caruana and Baschiera (2020) interviewed Learning Support Educators in kindergartens, primary and secondary sectors of the Maltese educational system and suggest that while inclusion occurs quite effectively when learners are young, several problems are encountered when they join classes in secondary school, with bullying and segregation highlighted as being the most serious of these. Cases of bullying, for example, are reported by five of the eight secondary-school Italian students interviewed by Palazzo (2020: 65-66).

Palazzo (2020) provides a narration of her own personal experience, starting from when, as a 12-year-old, she arrived in Malta with her family – her mother is Maltese – after having spent her childhood in Sicily. Palazzo (2020: 2-6), who has since graduated as a teacher of Italian, explains that the struggles she faced were often the consequence of linguistic difficulties. At the time when she started attending school in Malta, in 2008, she was one of the very few Italian students on the island and she felt more included, especially by her peers once she gained proficiency in both Maltese and English. In her research Palazzo (2020) explains that the inclusion of Italian learners has improved today, although it is not easy for many of them to attain good levels of proficiency in both languages.

¹⁰ Some studies have been carried out in Germany (for example, Caloi, Torregrossa, 2021) but not much more research has seemingly been done elsewhere.

Some findings, including those of Palazzo (2020), indicate that a few learners exhibit symptoms of language attrition, mainly as a consequence of not using Italian at school. Nevertheless, they retain strong ties with their homeland, expressing pride for their cultural heritage, which is generally associated with the town, province or region where they were born, rather than with Italy as a whole.

A significant increase is also registered in the number of Italian students attending the University of Malta, where almost all courses are mainly held in English. In 2021 there were 121 full-time students registered, including 62 at undergraduate level and 59 completing post-graduate studies. By way of comparison, in 2017 these totalled to just 39 (25 undergraduate and 14 post-graduate students). In addition to this, Erasmus and other similar exchange programmes are popular and, yet again, Italians choose to study in Malta because English is used as a medium of instruction. Conversely, over the past years, the number of Maltese tertiary students who study in Italy has declined – this is because many do not feel competent enough to follow courses in Italian in their area of specialisation and opt for destinations where these are held in English. Students of Italian nationality also currently pursue their studies at two other local tertiary institutions: 90 full-time and 17 part-time Italian students at the Malta College of Arts Science & Technology (MCAST) and 12 students at the Institute of Tourism Studies (ITS).

3.4. *Inclusion*

Research suggests that Italians in Malta socialise mainly with co-nationals as well as with co-regionals: this is especially the case of Sicilians, as their numbers are significantly larger than that of Italians from other areas and because some Sicilian communities have taken root in specific areas in the island, thereby rendering it easy for them to meet regularly.

Caruana (forthcoming), who investigated issues regarding the inclusion of Italians in Maltese society comprehensively, reports that while satisfaction is registered in relation to job opportunities and prospects, reactions are less positive when involvement in Maltese society is concerned. This is also determined by the lack in inclination to learn Maltese as communicative needs are largely served by English and by Italian itself even when interacting with locals, as reported earlier. Furthermore, not many Italians express interest in Maltese lifestyle and traditions and many of them, including those in younger age brackets, prefer socialising with foreigners of different nationalities who work locally. This is especially the case of those engaged in the e-gaming industry, which is heavily characterised by the presence of young adults (18-30-year-old age bracket) who hail from all over Europe. It must be said, in this respect, that personal and social networks of the Maltese, often based on family ties, are often close-knit and are not readily open to the inclusion of outsiders.

Another consistent point that emerges from research is that Italians remain strongly bound, even in terms of their identity, to their country and/or region of origin. As stated above, this is also the case of Italian children attending Maltese schools. Cases in which one's citizenship was changed, or in which Maltese citizenship was added to the Italian one, are few. This includes children born in Malta of Italian parents, or of parents with mixed nationality¹¹.

¹¹ Maltese citizenship at birth is only granted if at least one parent is a Maltese citizen or was born in Malta. Citizenship by naturalisation may occur after meeting minimum residence requirements, usually of five years.

3.5. *Future prospects*

It is likely that the findings regarding Italians in Malta reported in this paper will continue to be relevant for future studies. Currently, there are no clear indications that show that patterns will change significantly, and it is possible that the number of Italians in Malta will continue to increase in the foreseeable future, although the figures reported in Section 3.1 indicate that they are not as high as they were until 2019. Nevertheless, several Italians have now been in Malta for many years and not many plan to repatriate. Others, who see Malta as a short-term destination, may move to other countries, as is the case with mobility.

Since Italian migration in Malta in large numbers is a relatively recent phenomenon it is quite likely that in the coming years there will be an increase in second generation migrants. Some children are born in Malta of Italian parents and others have moved to the island when they were very young. Evidence of this is found in figures regarding those who attend kindergarten and primary schools: currently around 70% of Italian learners are, in fact, in these educational sectors. These will present new avenues for research even in terms of the formation of their identity. In this respect, further investigation is also required with those who hold both Maltese and Italian citizenship as, to date, this has only been considered limitedly (Caruana, 2022).

Finally, from an employment perspective it will be interesting to explore how the migration shifts being witnessed in Malta, as mentioned in the initial paragraphs of this contribution, will affect Italians who work on the island and whether this could also be the cause of any changes.

5. CONCLUSION

Italians have always had an important presence in Malta. After all, Italy is one of Malta's foremost economic partners and today there are many companies that operate on the island which are fully or partially run by Italian nationals. Commercial exchanges with Italy represent up to 40% of the national total and they are higher than those from Germany, Spain and France added together. These economic relationships, together with historical events, geographical proximity and linguistic considerations render the island quite an attractive destination to Italians, despite its obvious limitations due to its small size.

The recent influx of Italians, however, is extraordinary insofar as numbers are concerned – it therefore deserves ongoing investigation and needs to be placed within the current socio-political context, in which Malta's economic situation is providing opportunities which, for some, are better than those found in Italy. Employment prospects are, in fact, the main reason for Italians' relocation to Malta and job satisfaction is one of the prime factors which determines whether this move becomes permanent or is transitory.

Overall, many miss the Italian lifestyle and are very proud of their culture and heritage. These include young children as these do not conceal their *italianità*, even in cases where they have lived most of their life in Malta. Many speak Italian at home with their parents and they maintain ties with relatives and friends in Italy, whom they visit regularly. Very few Italians in Malta speak of their homeland negatively, although many express remorse at not being able to find job satisfaction in their own country.

Engagement within an Anglophone community, including both Maltese and nationals of many other countries, broadens and improves the linguistic repertoire of Italians and

this is viewed as having long-term benefits, especially for younger migrants. While opportunities to use and learn English are therefore described in overwhelmingly positive terms, Maltese is largely ignored. Even Italians who have been in Malta for many years do not feel the need to learn Maltese, and they feel discouraged by the typological distance between this language and their own, despite the many Italianisms in Maltese. They are not motivated to learn it because for them it has virtually no use internationally. Linguistic barriers are sometimes overcome by using Italian itself, as many Maltese are familiar with this language.

The inclusion of Italian learners in an educational system which is different from theirs and in which there is a constant interplay between two languages – Maltese and English – with different functions (Panzavecchia, Little, 2020), may lead to difficulties, as documented in Baschiera, Caruana (2020). These are generally of an academic nature, but problems regarding socialisation are reported too. Inclusion issues are not limited to learners in the educational sector, but extend to other spheres of Maltese society. Most adults speak of limited socialisation with Maltese nationals and with other foreigners as they interact mainly with Italians, including their co-regionals.

Future prospects in relation to Italian migration in Malta undoubtedly also depend on whether Malta's economy will be able to sustain its recent growth. While this has been relatively consistent, the island's overpopulation and urbanisation are starting to take their toll. Although currently most Italians who have settled on the island do not intend to repatriate and speak about their experience in Malta in positive terms, some express feelings of unease and precariousness. There are some signs that this is especially the case of those pertaining to lower socio-economic groups, but this too is an area which requires further investigation.

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