

Migration and Demographic Transitions



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Outline

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Migration trends in Malta



Malta has always been a migratory nation
18th and 19th migrations were to nearby
shores, working on ships, France and North
Africa

Schuster Report 1950 – ‘a policy of large-
scale emigration’

20th migration was more outwards,
Australia, UK, Canada, US.

By mid 1970s migrants started returning,
due to significant economic growth and
development

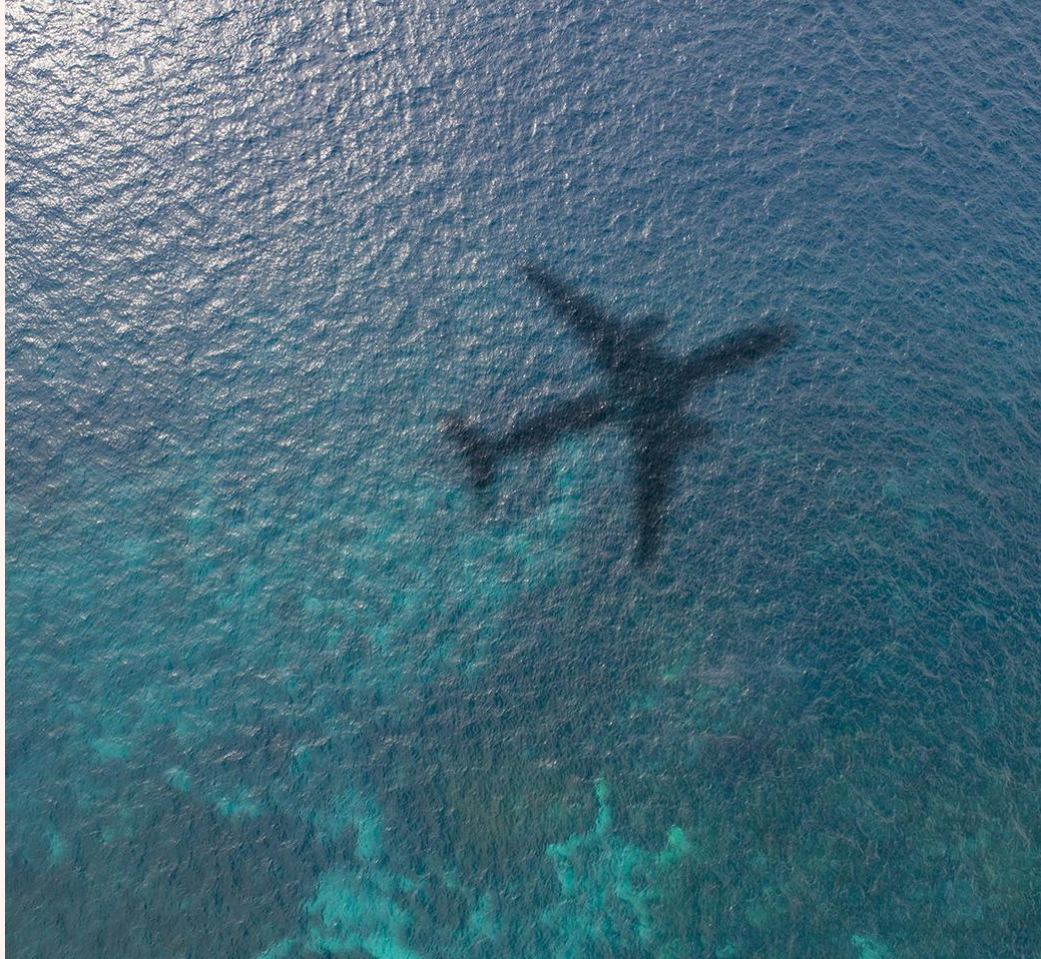
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Outward migration was again an issue after EU membership with the younger generation leaving for better opportunities. (no transition period for Malta and Cyprus)

However, this also meant inward migration was more possible

In the past two decades inward migration has significantly increased the population, from 402,668 (2004) to 421,230 (2012) to 574,250 (2024): a total 42.6% increase



Research Questions

What are the economic and social impacts of the recent increase in migrants in Malta?

How are different actors reacting to this surge in migrants?



Methodology

Published secondary data

Official documents and speeches: discourse analysis

Interviews with stakeholders: qualitative analysis



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Types of migrants

Illegal migrants mainly by boat through North Africa

Economic migrants

Temporary migrants (digital nomads)

Investment-based citizenship (debateable concerns)
(generated 1.4 b since 2015)



The Maltese Islands

Archipelago of three inhabited islands

316 km² total size of islands

8th most densely populated country in the world

Few resources

Economy diversified but mainly based on services sector (93.3%),

limited manufacturing (6.5%) and negligible farming and fishing sectors (0.2%)

Services include, tourism, (3.6 million in 2024 from 1 million in 1992), financial, i-gaming, aircraft maintenance.

Population changes over the past years

	Year	Maltese (1.61%)	Foreign (656.44%)
	2012	398,898	22,332 (5.3% of pop)
	2025	405,312	168,928 (29.4% of pop)

Why?

Economic growth

Economic growth has been phenomenal in the past years

Employers needed workers, open doors policy

Low unemployment and long-term low fertility rate

Registered unemployment just over 1000 persons while vacancies in Q2 2025 were over 9,000

Fertility rate 1.06 in 2023 (below 2.1 since 1989)

Unregulated recruitment agencies

A legislative vacuum until 2024

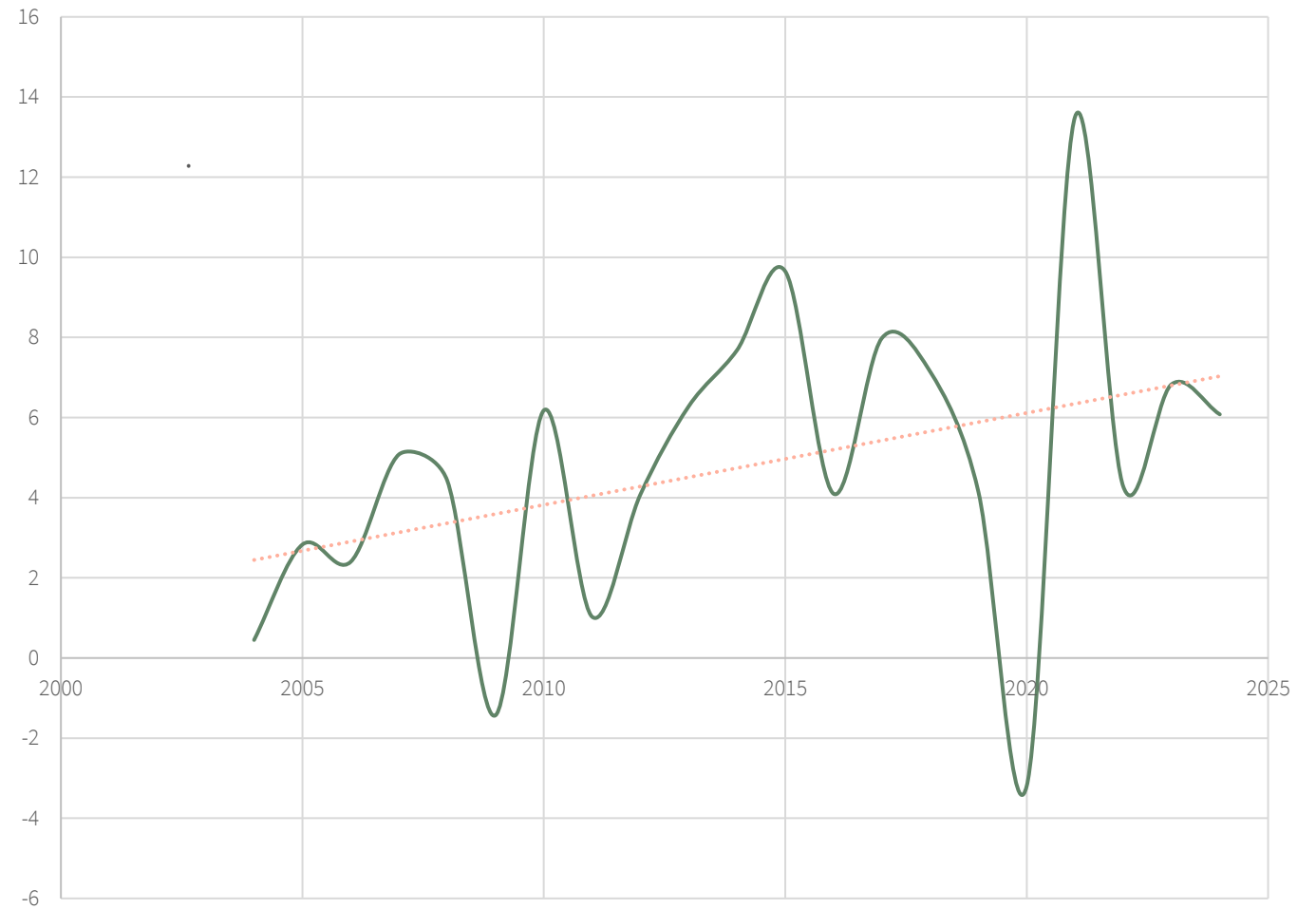
Since 2024, a licence is needed, but enforcement of regulations remains slow and poor

Facilitation of entry

Became faster and less bureaucratic

A pool of workers readily available

Economic growth 2004 – 2024



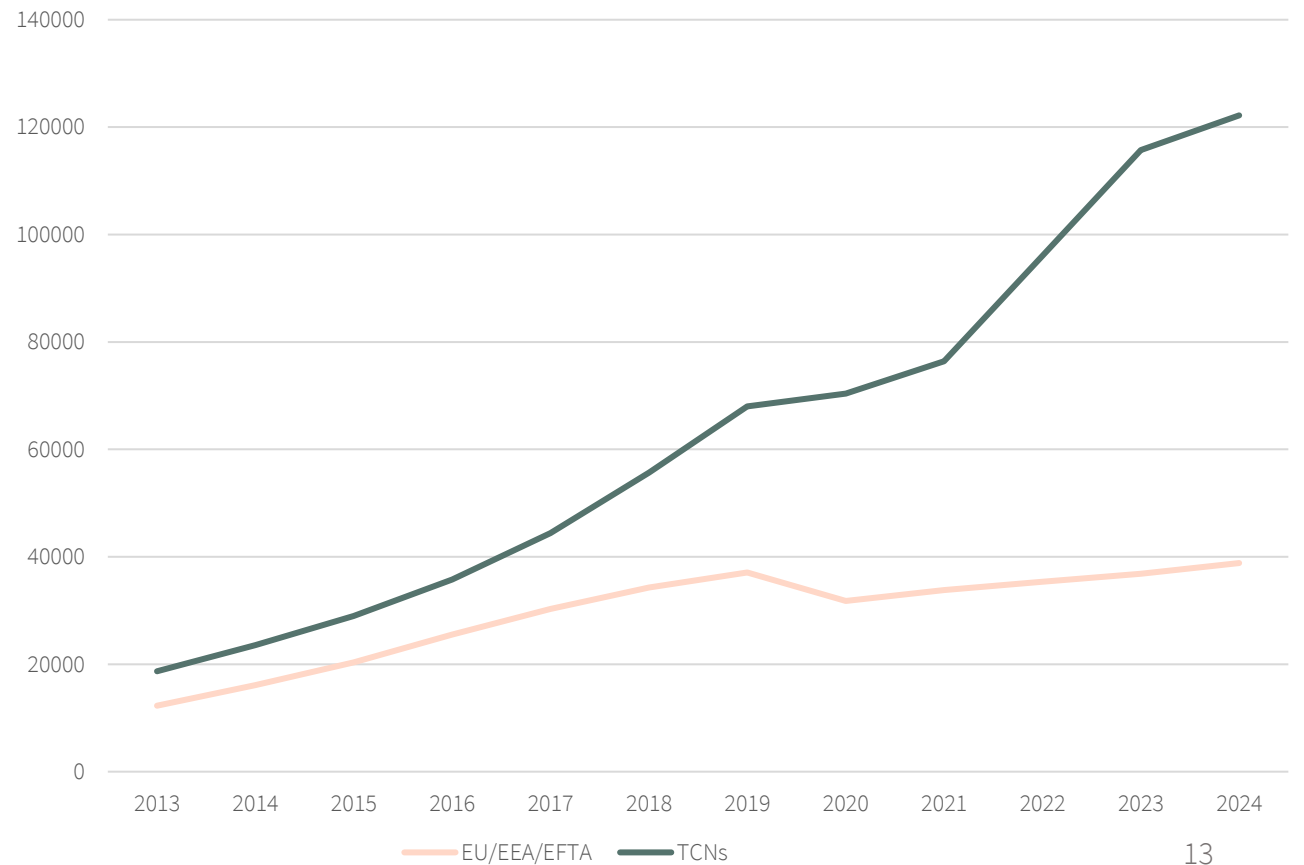


The need

- Foreign workers account for 41% of the labour market
- Without them many sectors would suffer, particularly the tourism industry, care sector, construction, but also professional areas.
- Low fertility rate (of which one third are also non-Maltese mothers) means that we need migrants not only for now but for future growth...as things stand
- In the last ten years, there were 10,000 less Maltese people who could replace retiring workers



Foreign workers



The negative aspects



Construction/real estate activities – 13% of GDP.

Environmental abuse – fields and houses turned into high rise blocks of flats

Rent – Unaffordable housing for locals

Traffic congestion –wasted time - productivity

Strain on infrastructure (water, electricity, sewage)

Strain on economic goods - health and education (hospitals and schools)

Language

Increase in racism

Unequal working conditions for migrants

Quantity over quality has taken over policies, decisions, and affected the well-being of individuals

So now mental health issues are being discussed like never before, ideas of overpopulation and overtourism

Positive elements



Multiculturalism (food, restaurants, supermarkets, feasts)

Filling in the need, particularly in jobs the locals are unlikely to fill in, tourism and care industries, but also waste, drivers, salespersons, construction, highly skilled professionals

Increase in NGOs working with migrants to ensure legal protection and fair treatment

Reactions

Government

In reaction to people's negative perceptions, government is now talking about stemming migration, allowing in only those truly needed. New migration policy from 1 August 2025

Employers

Cannot envisage slowing migration if the country wants to continue to grow and businesses to expand operations. Simultaneously they want support to invest in innovative technology which needs less people

Locals

It has become too congested, our streets, our environment, too much has changed too fast. We cannot continue in this manner, particularly in areas where high rise buildings have ruined the town ambience, talk of overpopulation, overtourism, noise, traffic and chaotic way of life.

Migrants

We are here to work to send money back to our families. We just want to be treated with dignity and not be told 'go back home'



Analysis

Change in tone

Government – quality over quantity

Society

Locals feel they are visitors in their own country, particularly because of the language issue, even if they know that these workers are needed for everyday jobs

Migrants feel as outsiders and are more likely to mingle with their own nationals

Fake tolerance?

Change in policies

Licencing of agencies

Skills cards for whoever wants to work in tourism

The Economy

Net migration remains at a steady 10,000 per year pace.

Hiring needs continue as the economy grows

Integration policies are in place but difficult to actuate.

Migrants are needed but not necessarily accepted.





Demographic transition

- Happening for different reasons
- low birth rate
- growing economy
- lack of human resources
- sudden growth in foreign population
- growth in children born to non-Maltese mothers
- less persons speaking Maltese

A demographic transition happened seventy years ago, when almost half the population emigrated, and the country recovered with returned migration in mid-1970s.

The economy will reach equilibrium in the coming years through a slow-down in supply and a restructuring of the economy, which requires less demand.



Conclusion

Topic remains a prickly one

Multiculturalism is tolerated, not necessarily accepted

Tolerance based on economic and social interdependence

Need for real integration to succeed, considering the situation is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future, due to non-replacement of local employees going into retirement



Thank you
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