

Protests in the Second Year of COVID-19 – the Case of Malta

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Abstract

This study analyses protests in Malta during 2021 ($N = 94$) and compares them to those in 2020 ($N = 74$). Malta's protest dynamics are analysed within the theoretical frameworks of political opportunity structures and small-state studies, while also drawing on scholarship on protest and social movements during the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2021, the environment was the most prominent issue, followed by Daphne Caruana Galizia and COVID-scepticism, respectively. During 2021 there was a spike in protests (mostly sceptical) dealing directly with the Pandemic and its policy ramifications. The most prominent organizers of protest events were Repubblika and their affiliates, especially in relation to Daphne Caruana Galizia, and Moviment Graffiti, primarily on the environment. The demonstration was the most popular type of protest repertoire, but other repertoires were also used. Valletta was the most popular venue for protest events.

Keywords

protest – social movements – Malta – civil society – COVID-19 – small states – Protest Event Analysis

Introduction

Protests during the COVID-19 pandemic offer an opportunity to examine the intersections of public health crises, political structures, and social movements. This study employs Protest Event Analysis (PEA) to analyse protests in Malta during 2021, the second year of the pandemic. It focuses on key issues, organizers, venues, and repertoires of protest, building on a previous analysis of protests in 2020 (Briguglio, 2022).

By comparing these successive years, the study provides a sociological account of protests in relation to the constraints and opportunities of a small-state polity under pandemic conditions. Malta, a small island-state with a centralized government, a highly polarized two-party democratic system, and strong social networks, represents a unique case for studying protest dynamics.

This paper seeks to answer three research questions:

1. What were the specific features of protest events in Malta in 2021?
2. How did COVID-19 impact these protests?
3. How do Malta's protest events in 2021 compare with those in 2020?

To address these questions, the study combines a quantitative research method (Protest Event Analysis) with qualitative insights from interviews with leading activists. It critically examines the contextual and situational factors shaping these protests while reflecting on the methodological challenges of analysing protests in a small-state context.

The findings demonstrate both continuity and change in the issues, actors, and forms of mobilization. The findings reveal how small-state contexts shape protest dynamics, with tightly knit social networks, centralized power structures, and symbolic venues playing critical roles. While long-standing issues like environmental activism and justice for Daphne Caruana Galizia remained prominent, the emergence of COVID-19 scepticism illustrates the capacity of crises to introduce new forms of dissent.

Theoretical Background

This study situates Malta's protest dynamics within the broader theoretical frameworks of political opportunity structures and small-state studies, while also drawing on scholarship on protest and social movements during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Political Process Theory highlights the external conditions that enable or constrain protests, such as the openness of political institutions, types of governance, and the availability of allies within the state (McAdam 1999,

Tilly, 1986, Tarrow, 2011, Meyer 2004). Hence, a democratic polity generally offers more political opportunities for social movement activism, than, say, a totalitarian one. Despite its structural perspective, political process theory also gives due importance to cultural factors such as the interpretation and framing of protest events (Johnston, 2014).

Malta's small-state polity presents distinctive features influencing protest dynamics (Briguglio, Briguglio, Bunwaree & Slatter, 2023). The centralization of power, strong interpersonal networks, and hyperpersonalized politics (Corbett & Veenendaal, 2018) create a political landscape where social movements often interact directly with institutional actors. The tightly knit social fabric fosters strong coalitions and localized activism. For instance, Malta's environmental protests often involve collaboration between established organizations like Moviment Graffiti and local communities, demonstrating how small states can enable rapid and effective mobilization. Besides, the frequent reliance on Valletta as a protest venue reflects its symbolic significance and proximity to decision-making centres (Briguglio, 2022).

The global COVID-19 pandemic had a strong influence on the dynamics of social movement mobilization (Daphi, Flesher Fominaya, & Romanos, 2024). Governments' pandemic responses influenced not only the frequency but also the nature of protests, with grievances ranging from health policies to broader critiques of governance (Bringel & Pleyers, 2022).

By framing Malta's protests within the theoretical domains, this study contributes to understanding how small states and social movements mediate protest dynamics in times of crisis, highlighting both unique patterns and possible broader implications for social movement theory.

COVID, Politics, and Protest around the World

There were different policy responses to the pandemic around the world (Daphi, Flesher Fominaya, & Romanos, 2024). Not only in terms of health, but also in terms of employment, security, and travel, amongst others, in what can be typified as different political regimes (De Munck, 2022; Bringel, 2022). This also influenced protest – both in terms of whether it was allowed (Martin, 2021; Kriesi & Oana, 2022), but also in terms of how social movements reacted to government pandemic policies (Bringel & Pleyers, 2022).

Indeed, amid such constraints, opportunities were also created, in turn influenced by the agency of social movements. Whilst physical “offline” mass protest often remained a very important tool in their repertoire (Fominaya, 2022), other forms of action such as digital activism, resource mobilization for

community solidarity activities, and the articulation of innovative discourse were also in place (Bringel, 2022; Pleyers, 2022).

In Europe, this included discourse in relation to the pandemic itself, for example to protest government restrictions in lockdowns. At the same time, such activism was very much contingent on different national contexts (Kriesi & Oana, 2022). It was also influenced by different and often contrasting value orientations towards the pandemic. There were national, regional differences, also including, for example, customs related to usage of vaccines (Sandu, 2023). In the United States of America, physical protest remained a major form of activism, albeit with nuances and shifts, such as the emphasising of public health and economic policies (Pressman & Choi-Fitzpatrick, 2021).

Even though some social movements, including those engaged in self-help and solidarity, highlighted the perpetuation of social injustices such as sexism and racism (Bringel & Pleyers, 2022) as well as the related intersection of effected identities (Mackenzie, 2022), there were many instances of increased right-wing activism against government restrictions (Zajak, 2022), which in turn, were articulated as a defence of democracy and individual freedoms (not without a sense of political irony, with slogans such as ‘my body my choice’ – usually used by feminist pro-choice abortion activists, now being used by the Far Right). Thus, protest was framed against the ‘Corona dictatorship’ (in Germany) (Volk & Weisskircher, 2023; Hunger, Hutter & Kanol, 2023), ... to “unite for freedom” (in the UK) (Özdüzen Ianoşev & Ozgul, 2021), ... or as part of the “anti-vax” movement (in Italy) (Della Porta & Lavizzari, 2022). At the same time, there were contradictory reactions to COVID-19 even within movements themselves, for example, on what position to take and how to frame the new situation (Zajak, 2022).

With respect to Malta, this article explains how there was both continuity in respect to major protest themes, but also shifts such as a marked increase in COVID-sceptic protests. Framing was often related to individual freedoms, amid a political context of State intervention such as partial lockdowns, economic assistance, and a successful vaccination campaign.

COVID Situation in Malta

Malta, the smallest and most densely populated EU-member state, is an archipelago in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea. Within its export-based economy, the maritime and tourism sectors play key roles. In the recent years, Malta has been experiencing the highest population growth rate in the EU, and this is highly influenced by immigration (Harwood, 2023, p.89; National Statistics Office, 2021).

In an article which pointed out the impacts of a centralised political system in Malta vis-à-vis the pandemic, Harwood (2023) differentiates Malta’s COVID-19 experience into three phases, which will be elaborated upon in the findings section of this article. He also points out that Malta’s vaccination programme commenced in December 2020 and was highly centralised – indeed, by May 2021 Malta had the fastest vaccination rate, with herd immunity, in the EU. This success was noted by WHO, which also pointed out that Malta’s healthcare system was the most trusted in the EU.

In sum,

By 31 May 2021 Malta had registered 30,535 cases and 419 deaths from COVID-19 with the level of incidence at 5920 per 100,000 and a death rate of 81 per 100,000. The infection rate was comparable with most other European countries though the death rate was lower (p.89–90).

Figure 1, published by Our World in Data (Mathieu et al, 2020), presents the numbers during 2021.

Despite the challenges which Malta was facing, the country proved to be resilient in its reaction to the Pandemic. Its “sound fiscal position before 2019 allowed it to dig into its pockets when the pandemic struck in 2020” (Pace, 2022, p.122).

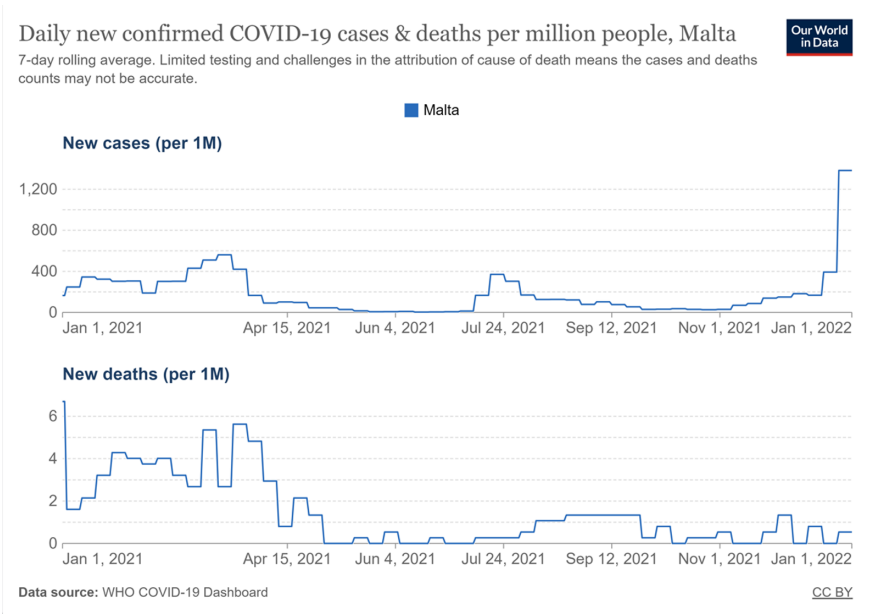


FIGURE 1 Daily new confirmed COVID-19 cases and deaths per million people, Malta (Mathieu et al, 2020)

Thus, during this period, there was considerable state assistance to industry, such as wage supplements, and “the cause of the trade disputes tended to be about procedural rather than substantive issues” (Rizzo, 2021 p.51) Indeed, Fiorini and Rizzo (2022) argue that social dialogue between the state and social partners was active during 2021:

Sparks of industrial conflict which at times seemed imminent were often diffused by the Government’s policy of incorporating social partners in decision-making processes. Industrial disputes, however, were registered between the Government and the trade unions representing front line employees, such as teachers and nurses. However, the forces that were exerted by the actors involved in these disputes did not cause any spiral fractures. The pandemic may have instilled a sense of sobriety in their mindset that made them susceptible to compromise. (p.14)

It is also important to note that despite Malta having a polarised two-party parliamentary system, and even more so when both parties experienced some forms of political turbulence, “on the topic of COVID-19 the Maltese political parties depoliticised the issue during the initial outbreak and later politicisation centred mainly on calls for more stringent containment measures as well as more generous economic assistance to support the economy, in effect calling for ‘more’ government intervention and thus not undermining the content of the Government’s actual COVID-measures.” (Harwood, 2023, p.90) It is also worth noting that civil society organisations which were highly active, such as Moviment Graffiti and Repubblika, kept rather low profiles on the COVID-19 issue. However, resentment was brewing elsewhere – as we shall see later in this article.

Malta’s Polity in 2021

In 2021, amid the COVID-19 Pandemic, Labour had been in Government since 2013, with a comfortable majority in parliament and in polls (Europe Elects, 2023) with no signs of losing its hegemonic power to the Nationalist opposition. The latter was characterised by internal turmoil which led to a change in leadership. International indicators, such as those of the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem), and Freedom House, once again confirmed Malta’s democratic characteristics, albeit with challenges and shortcomings in areas such as good governance, rule of law, and transparency. The EIU report released in 2021 considered Malta to be a ‘flawed

democracy' in 2020, together with 53 other countries, including various other EU member states, and ranking 33rd from 167 countries (2021). The V-Dem report 2021 report ranked Malta as an 'electoral democracy +', ranking 46th from 179 countries (Alizada et al., 2021). Freedom House's 2021 report, referring to 2020, considered Malta to be a 'free country', obtaining 90 points from a possible 100 (Freedom House, n.d.).

In the meantime, Malta (53%) and its government (49%) both experienced dips in public optimism at the peak of the second wave of COVID-19 during February and March 2021, just before the Government announced the introduction of various restrictions (Debono, 2021).

Later on during the year, however, optimism increased, with Eurofound reporting in September that Malta had the third-highest degree of optimism in the EU, "In Malta, 61% of people were characterised as optimists, and 22% as pessimists, while the EU 27 average is at 43% optimists and 36% pessimists" (Times of Malta, 2021d).

In October 2021, Malta Today, referring to its latest survey, reported that the Government of Malta was "judged positively by voters for its handling of the economy and ensuring people have money in their pockets", and that "it fails miserably in its fight against corruption and the environment. On migration government is judged negatively even if less harshly than corruption and the environment." (Sansone, 2021).

In the meantime, surveys showed that the Labour Party still enjoyed more support than the opposition Nationalist Party, with the closest result being reported in March (52.7% vs 45.4%) and the biggest gap being reported as 60.5% vs 38.3% in June, with the last survey reporting 59.3% vs 40.3% in November 2021. (Europe Elects, 2023).

Summing up Malta's experience during 2021, Fenech states that Malta chose "compliance over contention in the face of external pressure to put its house in order, and thus avoid long-term damage to the national reputation and to the economic well-being experienced in recent years. The coronavirus pandemic maintained its pressure on public finances, but otherwise was handled competently and a semblance of normality returned. The opposition meanwhile failed to overcome internal problems and render itself credibly electable as the 2022 elections drew near." (2022, p.317).

Research Methods

The methodology of this study builds on the framework utilized in the prior analysis of protests in Malta during 2020, wherein Protest Event Analysis was

employed (Briguglio, 2022). This study also makes use of qualitative research tools.

PEA is a widely used quantitative method for the sociological analysis of protest events, such as frequency, issues, organizers, venues, and repertoires (Hutter, 2014). In this study, PEA is applied to a dataset of protest events in Malta during 2021, thus providing the first ever sociological comparison of protest events in Malta over successive years through PEA. By juxtaposing the findings from 2021 with those of 2020, the analysis identifies continuities and shifts in the characteristics of protest events. For example, while environmental protests and issues surrounding Daphne Caruana Galizia remained prominent, 2021 saw a marked increase in COVID-19-skeptic protests. This comparative approach highlights how contextual changes, including pandemic management and political developments, influenced protest.

In this study, protests are defined as contentious actions conducted by social movement organizations (SMOs), or other actors, featuring clear demands or symbolic repertoires challenging a status quo. Eligible events include but are not limited to demonstrations, sit-ins, vigils, and symbolic actions such as art installations or contentious press conferences.

Despite offering notable advantages such as the provision of a systematic design which provides indicators of social conflict, PEA is not without its limitations. These may include media bias, underreporting, as well as the lack of systematic relation to co-variables during data collection and analysis, thus requiring reliance on secondary data for explanation (Koopmans & Statham, 1999).

Besides, I also encountered various challenges which are relative to the Maltese small-state context, where boundaries between diverse types of activities can be blurred. For example, determining whether press conferences qualified as protests required careful judgement, particularly in cases where symbolic elements (e.g., banners, public participation) were present, thus creating a protest feel. For example, during 2021 Repubblika also held formal press conferences often involving its president and, at times, other officials. An example of this can be seen at Times of Malta (2021b). While these activities deal with contentious issues, they lack the protest feel of, for example a press conference with the symbolic repertoire of a protest such as banners, the participation of an aggrieved group; and so forth.

It is also difficult to distinguish between contentious press conferences and demonstrations, for example when contentious press conferences on environmental issues, involving social movement organisations and residents, take place. When possible, I followed the organizers'/media definition of the respective events, though these were sometimes inconsistent in themselves.

Another quandary relates to events organised by political parties, local councils, constituted bodies such as trade unions, and community organisations. If they organised or participated in contentious and non-institutional action, then this would fit within my protest event typology. But, if, for example, they organised a formal press conference comprising just committee members, a meeting for members, and similar activities, these are not considered protest events. Similarly, partisan mass meetings are also not considered to be protest events, unless they clearly indicate contention on a particular issue and have the protest feel.

LGBTIQ events such as pride marches are also difficult to classify. Malta has amongst the most progressive legislation in the world in this field, and pride events are nowadays often considered to be celebrations, sometimes even involving Government protagonists. On the other hand, they do have a protest feel as they often identify themselves as being victims of homophobic practices. For my study, I included such as events as protest events, but I would recommend a specific study on this in view of the hybrid status of such activism.

A significant methodological challenge relates to protests which are not reported by the media. For example, amongst the number of protests organised by the new Freedom Movement against Government's COVID-19 policies, there was one protest which I happened to see on Facebook, but which was not covered by the media. Unlike other protest events held by this movement and which were covered by the media, I did not count this event. I also adopted this approach in 2020. Somewhere, a methodological line had to be drawn, and my comprehensive collection of data, provided as much reliable data as possible. At the same time, I acknowledge that the need for supplementary data collection methods in future research.

Which takes us to the other salient point: What qualifies as media? As the boundaries are becoming increasingly blurred, I took a pragmatic approach of considering the three English-speaking and formally independent newspapers in Malta, namely Times of Malta, The Malta Independent, and Malta Today, which have all been in print for decades (with the Times, founded in 1935, being the oldest and Malta Today, founded in 1999, being the newest), and which also have their online portals and social media presence.

The three of them also had Twitter (now X) profiles in 2021, even though the Malta Independent's is not used regularly. In the case of this newspaper, I also referred to their daily email newsletter which includes its news coverage. Other pragmatic exceptions were also made if, for example, a protest event covered by Times of Malta and Malta Today did not happen to be published on Twitter (for example: Times of Malta, 2021a), or, if I noticed protest events

covered by other established media houses in Malta, such as those belonging to political parties/major trade union/catholic church, or those which were more recently set up and are highly visible in the public sphere. This helped me be as representative and broad as possible in my coverage of protest events: Apart from my daily review of all twitter posts by the chosen newspapers, I also cross-checked with other media houses through their online portals and/or, social media pages/feeds, and/or presence in news apps. Thus, my research method minimised media bias by being as reliable and valid of media coverage as practically possible.

Other factors which I deem pertinent in the unpacking of my research design include the designation of protest event organizers; consideration of size of protests; the categorization of issues characterising the respective protest events; as well as other critical aspects, not least concerning the limitations of media coverage of protest during COVID-19.

As regard protest event organisers, it was not always easy to decipher who the organisers were, particularly when events included many organisations which supported the event. For the sake of consistency, and to have a more consistent categorization than that used in my analysis of protests the year before, I categorized such events as follows. If a protest event, has, for example, 1 or 2 organising groups and, say, 30 participant groups, the former 1–2 organisers are defined as organisers, as was the case with Moviment Graffiti's organising of various protest events in Marsaskala between August and November 2021. At the same time, it must be acknowledged that Moviment Graffiti used different repertoires and networked with different organisations and residents in the respective events. Another example of this was, for example found in Times of Malta (2021c).

If on the other hand, an event has, more than 5 SMOs which are organizing in an equivalent manner, this would be a coalition. An example of this can be cited from the 2020 research, when the 'Spazji Miftuħa' coalition was formed.

Another methodological issue worth discussing relates to the size of protest events. These varied, and as already discussed, above, at times it was difficult to decide whether the event was a protest event at all. It is also worth noting that different media sometimes describe attendances in the same events in diverse ways, with terms such as 'sizeable crowd', 'small crowd', 'hundreds', 'thousands' used rather liberally. This calls for a standard counting method which can be used for future research.

Finally, sometimes even the categorization of protest events under specific issues presented challenges. As was the case with the analysis of protests in 2020, I categorized issues together within nodal points which I constructed discursively according to the issue in question. For example, the environmental

nodal point was articulated mostly in relation to issues such as development projects and construction malpractices. Similarly, the Daphne Caruana Galizia nodal point concerned protest events “which combined outrage over her murder with issues such as corruption, governance, and the rule of law.” (Briguglio, 2022, p.312).

One nodal point which was problematic to identify was that concerning animal rights. As was the case for the 2020 protests, I categorized the protest events of Birdlife Malta as environmental issues: This is in line with how the organisation identifies itself, even beyond Malta’s shores, for example in the European Green 10 ENGOS, within discursive frames of sustainability and conservation (Briguglio, Brown & Bugeja, 2014).

On the other hand, it was felt that a specific categorization, ‘Animal Rights’ had to be constructed for protest events that deal directly and exclusively with the lived experiences of animals (for example Vella (2021)). In this regard, it is pertinent to note that certain Maltese SMOs identify themselves as animal rights NGOs (The Malta Independent, 2021)

To complement the quantitative PEA, semi-structured interviews were conducted with two leading activists: André Callus of Moviment Graffiti and Robert Aquilina of Repubblika. These interviews explored their organizations’ activities, strategies, and reflections on protest dynamics in 2021. Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns and insights from these interviews, offering a deeper understanding of the organizational and contextual factors shaping protests. This method was approved by the Arts Research Ethics Committee of the University of Malta (ARTS-2021-00058). The interviews were conducted in 2022, focussing on the respective organisations’ activism in 2021.

By combining quantitative event analysis with qualitative insights and reflexivity on methodological constraints, this study offers a robust framework for understanding protest dynamics in Malta’s small-state context during the respective period of global upheaval.

Findings

Protest Events in Malta during 2021

The analysis identified 94 protest events in Malta during 2021. As in 2020, environmental issues dominated, with 30 events, followed by protests related to Daphne Caruana Galizia (25) and COVID-19 scepticism (8). While the first two themes showed continuity from 2020, the rise of pandemic-related dissent marked a notable shift. Smaller clusters of protests addressed prison reform, human rights, and localized quality-of-life concerns.

Protests were organized by a diverse array of actors, with Repubblica leading with 23 events, followed by Moviment Graffiti (15) and Occupy Justice (13). Notably, residents organized or played a key role in nine localized protests, often supported by NGOs like Flimkien Għal Ambjent Aħjar. Valletta remained the most common venue for protests (37 events), underscoring its symbolic and practical centrality in Malta’s protest culture. Demonstrations were the predominant form of protest, but symbolic actions and vigils also featured prominently.

Figure 2 shows that protests were held every month in 2021. January, with just one protest, is the outlier. Protests peaked in May and between August and December. Other months, however, were not lacking in protest activity: For example, between March and April there was a 20-day sit in organised by Moviment Graffiti against road works on agricultural land. As can be seen in Figure 1, during that period, COVID cases and deaths were relatively light in Malta, and a partial lockdown had been reintroduced from 11 March, with measures being eased in May 2021 as Malta’s vaccination programme took hold (Harwood, 2023). When protests events were most frequent, there was not a clear relationship between these and COVID frequency. In May, COVID was on the decline, and 10 protest events were organised. August was the most popular month for protests, and at the same time there was slight increase in COVID cases. October and November were characterised by 12 and 11 protest events respectively, and both respective months COVID deaths and cases were relatively low. On the other hand, June and July had only 5 and 6 protests respectively, but COVID figures were low. In January, only 1 protest was organised, and COVID figures were relatively high but not at their highest.

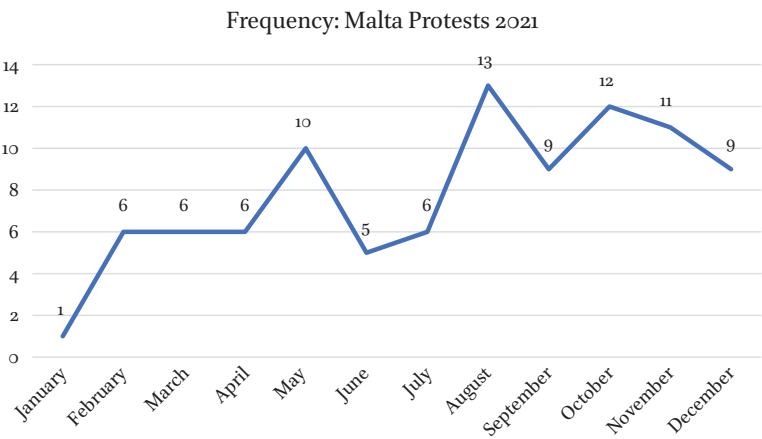


FIGURE 2 Frequency – Malta protests 2021

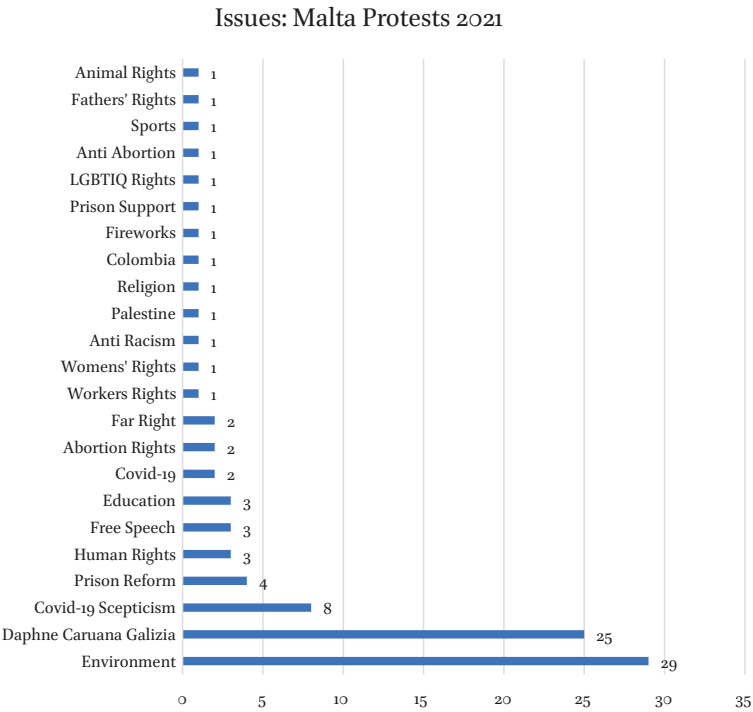


FIGURE 3 Issues – Malta protests 2021

Figure 3 shows the variety of protest issues in 2021. The respective nodal points constructed around the Environment and Daphne Caruana Galizia were the most frequent issues for protests. The newly emergent COVID-19 scepticism placed in third place.

Figure 4 shows that Repubblica (23) was the most active organisation, and its networked allies in Occupy Justice and ManuelDelia.com placed second and fourth, respectively. Moviment Graffiti, which frequently networked with other SMOs and residents placed third. These four organizers were far more active than the rest, with the notable exception of residents, who headed 9 localized protests. Sometimes they were supported by SMOs such as Moviment Graffiti and Flimkien Għal Ambjent Ahjar.

As regards place of protest, Valletta (37), like 2020, was once again the most popular choice, outnumbering by far all other localities and venues, many of which had to do with localised protest events. This can be seen in Figure 5.

Figure 6 shows that the demonstration was the most popular type of protest in 2021, outnumbering all the other types of protest events, even if symbolic protests, vigils, and press conferences respectively had quite high numbers.

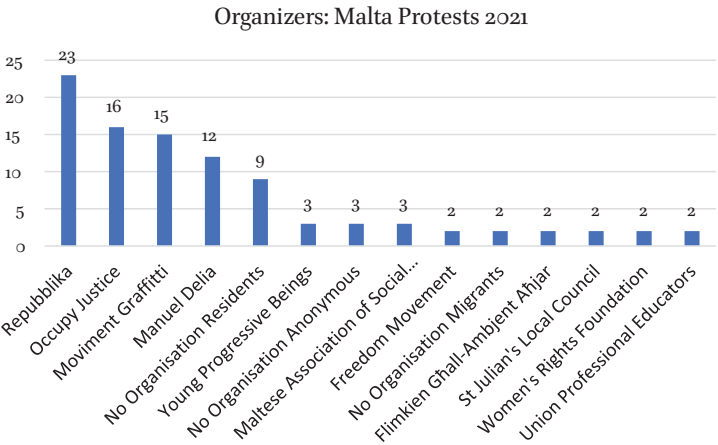


FIGURE 4 Organizers – Malta protests 2021

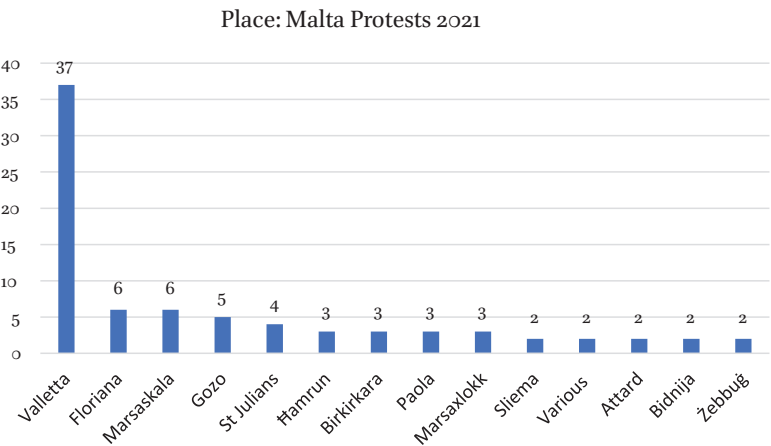


FIGURE 5 Place – Malta protests 2021

Comparison of Protest Events in 2020 and 2021

Frequency and Temporal Patterns

The transition from 2020 to 2021 revealed both continuity and change in protest dynamics. Given that the study identified 94 protest events in Malta in 2021, this represented a 27% growth in protest activity compared to 2020, when 74 protest events were identified. This increase highlights a higher frequency of mobilizations, despite the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Table 1 gives further details.

Figure 7 shows that as regard timing of protest events, there is no significant comparison between the two years, but October had a high frequency in both

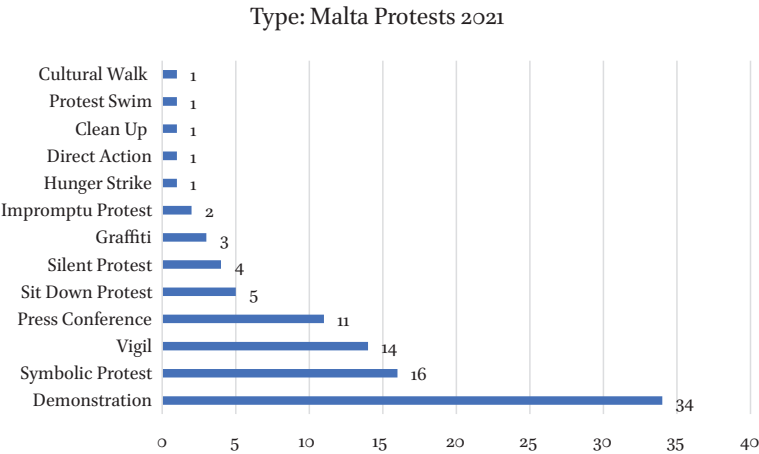


FIGURE 6 Type – Malta protests 2021

TABLE 1 Percentage change: Malta Protest 2020, 2021

Month	2020	2021	% Change
January	8	1	-88%
February	7	6	-14%
March	4	6	50%
April	2	6	200%
May	3	10	233%
June	19	5	-74%
July	2	6	200%
August	3	13	333%
September	4	9	125%
October	11	12	9%
November	6	11	83%
December	5	9	80%
Total	74	94	27%

cases. It is however interesting to note that whilst there was a steep increase in COVID rates in Malta during October 2020, there were low COVID rates in October 2021. It is also important to contextualize these events in relation to Government policy related to the pandemic. Harwood (2023) states that Malta experienced 3 phases in this regard:

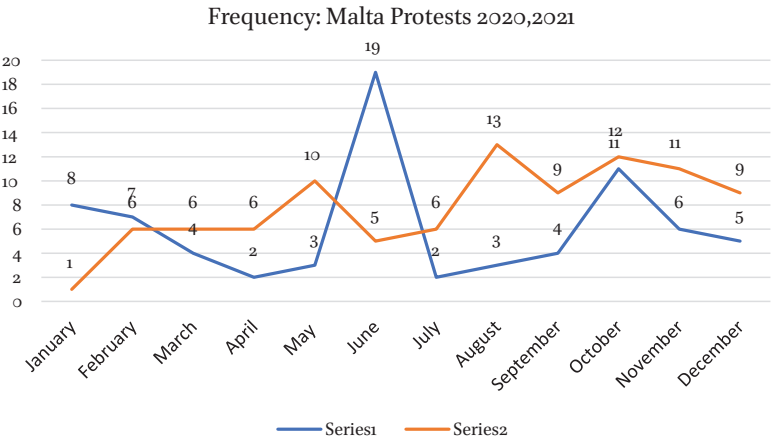


FIGURE 7 Frequency – Malta protests 2021
Series 1: 2020; Series 2: 2021

The first, lasting until June 2020 saw the enforcement of a partial lockdown but with a low infection and death rate, this initial phase was relatively ‘light’ compared to the experience of neighbouring countries like Italy. By July 2020 restrictions were lifted and tourism resumed, leading to a steady increase in cases. In this second phase, lasting until March 2021, the country saw repeated spikes in daily infection rates which led to some of the partial lockdown measures being re-imposed in August and October. The third phase followed a dramatic spike in cases in March 2021 with a partial lockdown being reintroduced from 11 March with measures being eased in May 2021 as Malta’s vaccination programme took hold. (pp.89–90)

Protest Themes: Variability and Trends

As shown in Figure 8, environmental issues remained the most prominent theme in both years, with the number of related protests rising from 20 in 2020 to 29 in 2021 (a 45% increase). Protests linked to Daphne Caruana Galizia also increased (from 19 to 25, a 32% increase). However, protests on human rights issues declined significantly (from 15 to 3, an 80% decrease), also amid a context of Government change in policy, wherein it kept newly arrived irregular migrants out at sea in 2020, though it retained other established detention practices in 2021. COVID-19-skeptic protests surged, from 1 to 8, between the two years, amid the rise of an anti-vax movement. Protests to prison reform increased from nil to 4, amid controversies surround the new style of leadership in Malta’s correctional facilities.

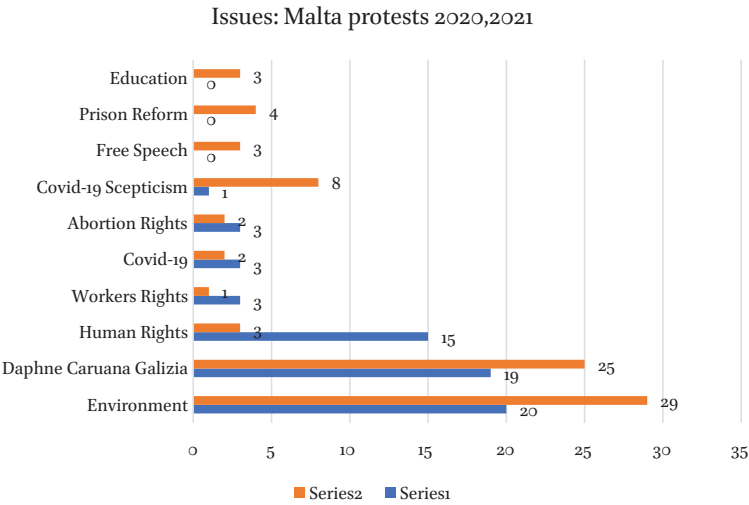


FIGURE 8 Issues – Malta protests 2020, 2021
Series 1: 2020; Series 2: 2021
Note: At least 4 events in a particular year

Organizational Dynamics

The dominance of key organizations remained consistent between 2020 and 2021, as shown in Figure 9. Repubblika was the most active organizer both years and a 44% increase in events, followed by Occupy Justice (7% increase) and Moviment Graffiti (36% increase). Occupy Justice frequently networked with Repubblika and Manuel Delia, whilst Moviment Graffiti frequently networked with other SMOs and residents. Resident-led protests emerged as a significant new category, with nine events in 2021, compared to zero in 2020. On the other hand, there was a notable decrease (82%) in events organized by migrants. Indeed, in 2020, the most prominent number of protests without organizations heading them had to do with grievances of irregular migrants kept in detention.

Place of Protest

Valletta remained Malta’s epicentre of protest, with 36 protest events in 2020 and 37 in 2021. Marsaskala witnessed an increase in protest from 0 to 6 – in line with the contention surrounding the Yacht Marina proposal.

Repertoire

The range of protest types expanded in 2021. The demonstration remained the most popular type of protest, increasing by 17% over the two years, and outnumbering all the other types of protest events, even if symbolic protests,

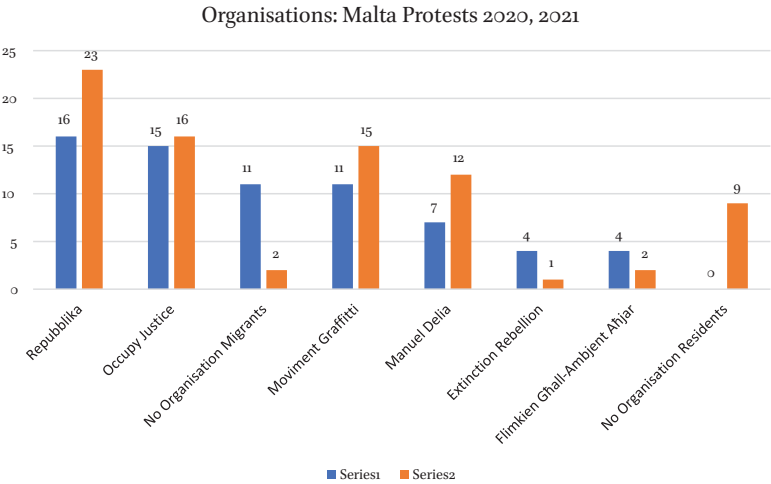


FIGURE 9 Organisations – Malta protests 2020, 2021
Series 1: 2020; Series 2: 2021
Note: Organisations with at least 4 protests in one year.

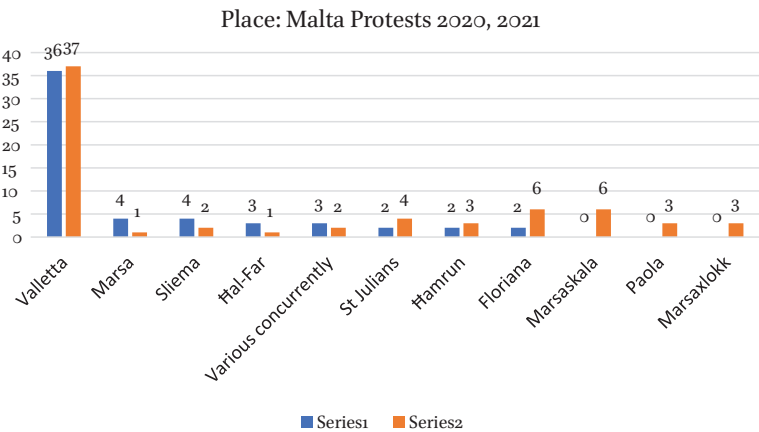


FIGURE 10 Place: Malta protests 2020, 2021
Series 1: 2020; Series 2: 2021
Note: Places with at least 3 protests in a particular year

vigils (mostly related to Daphne Caruana Galizia), and press conferences respectively had quite high numbers. There were no riots in 2021, unlike 2020 when 7 riots were held, mostly in connection with human rights grievances of irregular migrants.

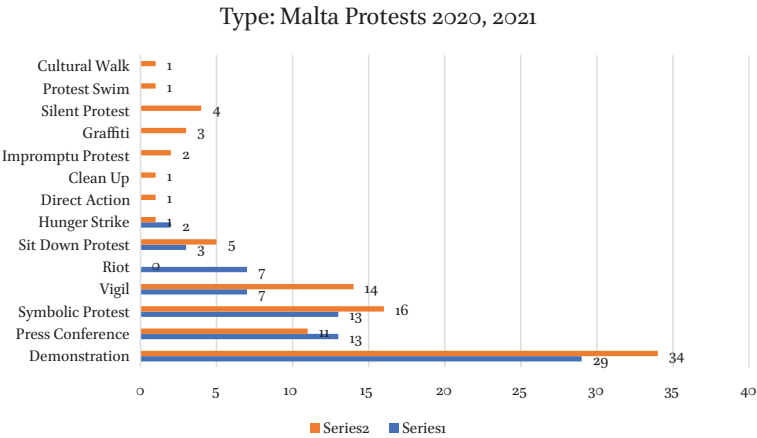


FIGURE 11 Type – Malta protests 2020, 2021
Series 1: 2020; Series 2: 2021

Qualitative Insights

Interviews with leaders of key SMOs revealed nuanced organizational strategies. Moviment Graffiti emphasized grassroots engagement and networking, while maintaining a conflictual stance toward the state. Repubblika highlighted its dual approach of direct action and institutional engagement. Both organizations underscored the importance of public mobilization and coalition-building, reflecting the dynamics of small-state protest culture.

Andre’ Callus, a leading activist of Moviment Graffiti, highlighted the prominence of environmental mobilization during 2021. In particular, he highlighted the Dingli event referred to earlier ‘which symbolized much more’, the Marsaskala Marina issue (Visanich, 2022), where he emphasised the work together with local communities, other organisations, and fishers, and the Balluta campaign to protect the bay from development of a yacht marina.

Callus also emphasized Moviment Graffiti’s action on migration and its anti-racist work with other communities, as well as the organisational aspect of women’s rights initiatives. In all instances, Callus highlighted the organisation’s working groups on various initiatives as well as its networking with other social movement organisations and communities on various issues, including networks, for example on environmental and migration which the organisations has been part of for a very long time.

As regards relations with other civil society organisations, Callus highlighted in general these are positive, and that even though conflict may take place at

times, Graffitti tries to keep away from clashes with other organisations, not only because there may be different approaches and ideas, but even because with the two-party dominance and its restrictive impacts on civil society, it doesn't make sense to have division among civil society organisations. When asked on Moviment Graffitti's relationship with political parties, Callus said that even though there may be communication and collaboration with persons from the two major parties, the organisation does not involve political parties directly in its events, and that spokespersons in protests and press conferences who happen to be in political parties are not speaking on the respective parties' behalf.

Moviment Graffitti's view of the state is based on a conflictual approach, where change is carried out when it has no option but to succumb to social pressures. Callus added that in Malta the state is not far away from the people, and thus would have to respond to public pressure.

In this regard, Callus highlighted what he perceived to be the main impacts of Moviment Graffitti during the year, which most prominently include the organisational aspects related to working on issues, how they network with people and other groups, and contribute from an organisational aspect. Hence, in his words, "protests are not just the protest event, but the fact that there is an organisational set-up behind it, and this is what brings change". Hence, people are ready to organise themselves and to address protest events. Callus also referred to specific substantive impacts on environmental issues such as those mentioned above, including partial victories.

Robert Aquilina, President of Repubblika also highlighted various events as being the most important during the year. The most important one, in his view, was related to the Malta's newly appointed Police Commissioner. He had just been appointed after controversial changes in the post in the most recent years, but after a few weeks Repubblika felt that he had not done anything on urgent cases. Another important campaign highlighted by Aquilina related to the funding of NGOs, which Repubblika organised with other voluntary organisations – other than its usual allies, for example band club representatives – in relation to what was being seen as restrictive proposals in the related legislation. Aquilina also stated that when Repubblika gives hope to people (which, in turn, he identified as a major impact of the organisation), through its actions, including small-scale ones, they are more ready to 'to walk behind you' and to talk to you.

He also mentioned Repubblika's message that it is ready to discuss with institutions, especially to good-willed persons within them. Here, the state is viewed more in terms relations of trust and reciprocity. Positive relations with Magistrates, Judges and the Standards Commissioner were also highlighted.

An exception referred to by Aquilina related to the 3-day sit-in in front of the Police Commissioner's Headquarters, which was not subject to the usual organisational working-relation with the Police, for example on the logistics of protests. Aquilina, however, also highlighted the disappointment of his organisation regarding Police investigations, despite 'trying to collaborate with them'.

Like Andre Callus of Moviment Graffiti, Aquilina highlighted the importance of networking and cooperation with other organisations – the climax of which was during the 2019 protests (Briguglio, 2020; Vassallo, Cachina & Debattista 2023) which mobilized and connected people, apart from impacting their emotions. Hence, the theatrical impact of the protest repertoire is important (Cremona, 2022).

As regards the impact of protests, Aquilina stated that even if you are in a minority, as was the case during the 2019 protests, you can still make considerable pressure, as was the case through the Daphne protest wave, after which Prime Minister Joseph Muscat resigned.

Unlike Graffiti, Aquilina showed that Repubblika is open to relations with political parties: he referred to the meetings and dialogue with the Nationalist Party opposition and to the support they receive both from this party and from the Greens (ADPD), whose members often attend their activities. "We have a proper relationship, where no-one controls the other, but there is proper dialogue." Aquilina added that he would like to see such dialogue with Labour. Aquilina also emphasised the networking with officials in institutions who, for example, contact them and give them information. Indeed, Repubblika highlights the need to speak to good-willed people within the institutions.

Going back to 2021, Aquilina referred to the impact of COVID on Repubblika's activism, which resulted in protests which were smaller and often not pre-announced.

Discussion

The findings underscore the unique interplay between continuity and adaptation in Malta's protest landscape during 2021. Environmental issues and the campaign for justice for Daphne Caruana Galizia remained central, reflecting the deep-rooted nature of these grievances and the reaction to government policy in both instances.

As was the case in other countries, but also in relation to specific policies in Malta, the pandemic reshaped the protest environment, for example by

creating new opportunities for dissent. The rise of COVID-19 scepticism often framed pandemic measures as threats to personal freedoms. The pandemic was this a major overdetermining factor amid other peculiarities of Malta's polity.

Malta's small-state characteristics – such as centralized governance, dense social networks, and hyperpersonalized politics – influenced the nature of protest events. For instance, the prominence of Valletta as a protest venue reflects both its logistical convenience and its symbolic role as the seat of power. Similarly, the significant role of grassroots organizations and resident-led protests highlights how localized grievances can gain prominence within small, tightly knit communities. This, in addition to the fact that a considerable number of activists wear many hats, both within social movements, but also beyond, for example in the media sphere and/or in party politics. The prominence of SMOs like Moviment Graffiti and Repubblika reflects their ability to navigate these challenges.

Thus, political process theory (McAdam 1999, Tilly, 1986, Tarrow, 2011, Meyer 2004, Johnston 2014) can help situate Malta's protests during 2020 and 2021 in relation to political opportunities within a democratic polity with a stable government, amidst a sudden health crisis. In addition, other sociological theories can provide additional understanding about aspects such as mobilization, framing, and culture. For example, the considerable networking capabilities, organizational capabilities, and resources of SMOs such as Repubblika, Occupy Justice, and Moviment Graffiti can be explained through Resource Mobilization Theory (McCarthy & Zald, 1977).

The way how issues such as COVID-19 and the murder of Daphne Caruana Galizia were articulated in relation to Government policy and individual freedoms can be explained in terms of framing theory (Snow & Benford, 1988). In the case of the former, the 'individual freedom' frame was very much in synch with protests discourses around the world on pandemic governance. In the case of the latter, the cultural resonance of memory, its ramifications on justice, as well as the vigil repertoire can be explained through cultural social movement theory (Jasper, 1997). Besides, New Social Movement theory (Touraine, 1981) can help understand the post-materialist and identity-based activism related to various protests, for example on localised issues.

Thus, this study not only captures the structural and contextual factors shaping protests but also delves into the agency of protest organizers and participants. This falls within the orbit of the contentious politics approach (McAdam, Tarrow, & Tilly, 2001), which attempts to reconcile the political process approach with other approaches such as those mentioned above. On the other hand, this theoretical conceptualization can be criticised for

lacking empirical rigour and cognitive/rational choice aspects (Opp, 2009) as well as for trying to capture and explain too much detail through universalist theorization (Edwards, 2014).

Conclusion

This study highlights the evolving dynamics of protest in Malta during 2021, demonstrating both continuity and change in the issues, actors, and forms of mobilization. The findings reveal how small-state contexts shape protest dynamics, with tightly knit social networks, centralized power structures, and symbolic venues like Valletta playing critical roles. By situating Malta's protests within broader theoretical frameworks, this study also contributes to understanding how protest dynamics are situated in small state polities.

In reply to the three research questions of this study, it can be said that

1. In 2021, the environment was the most prominent issue, followed by Daphne Caruana Galizia and COVID-scepticism, respectively. The most prominent organizers of protest events were Repubblika and their affiliates, especially in relation to Daphne Caruana Galizia, and Moviment Graffiti, primarily on the environment. A wave of protest organised by residents was also quite prominent. The demonstration was the most popular type of protest repertoire, but other repertoires were also used, and sometimes boundaries between such repertoires were blurred. Valletta was the most popular venue for protest events.
2. Protest events increased by 27% between 2020 (N = 74) and 2021 (N = 94) Despite the crisis situation, Malta had a relatively and comparatively smooth transition, and the key issues characterising most protest events were like those of previous years. However, in 2021 there was a marked increased number of protests dealing directly with the Pandemic, and some had high attendances. The protests directly related to COVID-19 were mostly of a sceptical nature. Some other protest events dealt directly with the COVID-19 situation, but were focused on certain policies, rather than with ideological interpretations of the pandemic itself.
3. There were both similarities and differences between the two years under analysis. On the one hand there was continuity, in that the most prominent issues were identical, but the next most prominent varied respectively (human rights issues in 2020, and COVID scepticism in 2021). The most prominent organizers were identical in the two years, but again, there was a notable difference in terms of the next most prominent, though they concerned respective grievance in the effected people's

everyday lives (treatment of irregular migrants in 2020, quality of life or residents in 2021). Valletta remained the epicentre of protest, despite localised and site-specific protests in both years. The demonstration was the most prominent type of protest event, and in some instances, had large attendances, including COVID-sceptic ones. The longer-term impacts of this issue on social movement activism must be seen. In both years, there also were sustained campaigns as well as more experimental repertoires. Once again, both the protest events themselves, and this time around, even the interpretation of such by protagonists of main organisations, confirm the importance of networking within Malta's political opportunity structures as a small island state. This could be seen in protest events organised by different actors, such as Social Movement Organisations and residents, and being characterised by considerable media coverage. Networking is thus woven at different (and often intersecting) spaces, such as within the social, organisational, political, and mediatic.

This analysis also underscores the importance of methodological reflexivity, particularly in addressing the challenges of media bias and the blurred boundaries between formal and informal political activities in small states. Future research could build on this work by incorporating alternative data sources, such as social media analysis or participant observation, to provide a more comprehensive picture of protest dynamics in Malta and similar contexts.

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