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# Xenophobic and Homophobic Attitudes

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National report for Malta

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L-Università ta' Malta

Co-funded by the Rights,  
Equality and Citizenship (REC)  
Programme of the European Union





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October 2017

\* The term homophobia is used throughout this report as an umbrella term to include any phobia involving the LGBTIQ community, including, but not limited to, homophobia, lesbophobia, transphobia, biphobia, and sexism.





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# Executive summary

The present report summarises research carried out at the Institute of Linguistics and Language Technology of the University of Malta under the auspices of the EU co-funded C.O.N.T.A.C.T. project. Our study, which followed the common methodology of the C.O.N.T.A.C.T. consortium, focused on hate speech as a manifestation of hate crime in Malta. More specifically, through quantitative and qualitative analyses, we sought to identify the extent to which comments posted online in reaction to articles in local news portals can be found to encompass discriminatory attitudes towards two target minorities: migrants and members of the LGBTIQ community. The obtained results indicate that while both xenophobia and homophobia can be detected in some of the comments made by online users in local news portals, the former is a much more prevalent than the latter. In an attempt to further probe into the reasons for the emergence of such discriminatory discourse online, we then administered an online questionnaire and conducted focus group interviews, which provided us with some insights as to why discriminatory attitudes appear to have recently been on the rise in relation to migrants, and seem to have been correspondingly contained in the case of the LGBTIQ minority group.

## Key findings

- Hate speech is a vastly understudied phenomenon, especially in Malta.
- Xenophobia seems to be a far greater issue than homophobia locally:
  - \* Most of the reports we received on our website were linked to ethnic origin and religion.
  - \* The negative comments in reaction to media discourse about migrants were almost double in number than positive ones in our analysis.
  - \* In the administered questionnaire, there was considerably more consensus among respondents regarding the non-acceptability of insults and threats targeted at gender and sexual minorities rather than national, religious, and racial minorities.
- Malta was the sole country across the C.O.N.T.A.C.T. consortium in which positive comments in relation to LGBTIQ issues outnumbered negative ones.



- \* Our focus group interview participants suggested that people are more accepting of LGBTIQ members because they are perceived to be part of the in-group, i.e. locals.
- Some main reasons for the underreporting of hate speech incidents, as these were identified by our questionnaire respondents were:
  - \* Lack of awareness as to how such incidents can be reported
  - \* Lack of confidence in the ability of the relevant authorities to combat something that is perceived to be a common occurrence.

## Recommendations

- In order to tackle hate speech, further research on the different forms that it can take, both online and offline, is needed. A dedicated repository of records of the relevant incidents would be very useful in this respect.
- It would also be useful to assess the underlying reasons for the emergence of discriminatory attitudes and plan ahead, so that social crises or one-off events do not automatically trigger intolerance.
- Most importantly, it is crucial for the general public to develop an awareness on matters of discrimination. This can be achieved through:
  - \* dedicated far-reaching awareness-raising events
  - \* a more responsible approach to the relevant issues by the media
  - \* the establishment of an agenda that promotes inclusion and tolerance at all levels of education and the workplace.



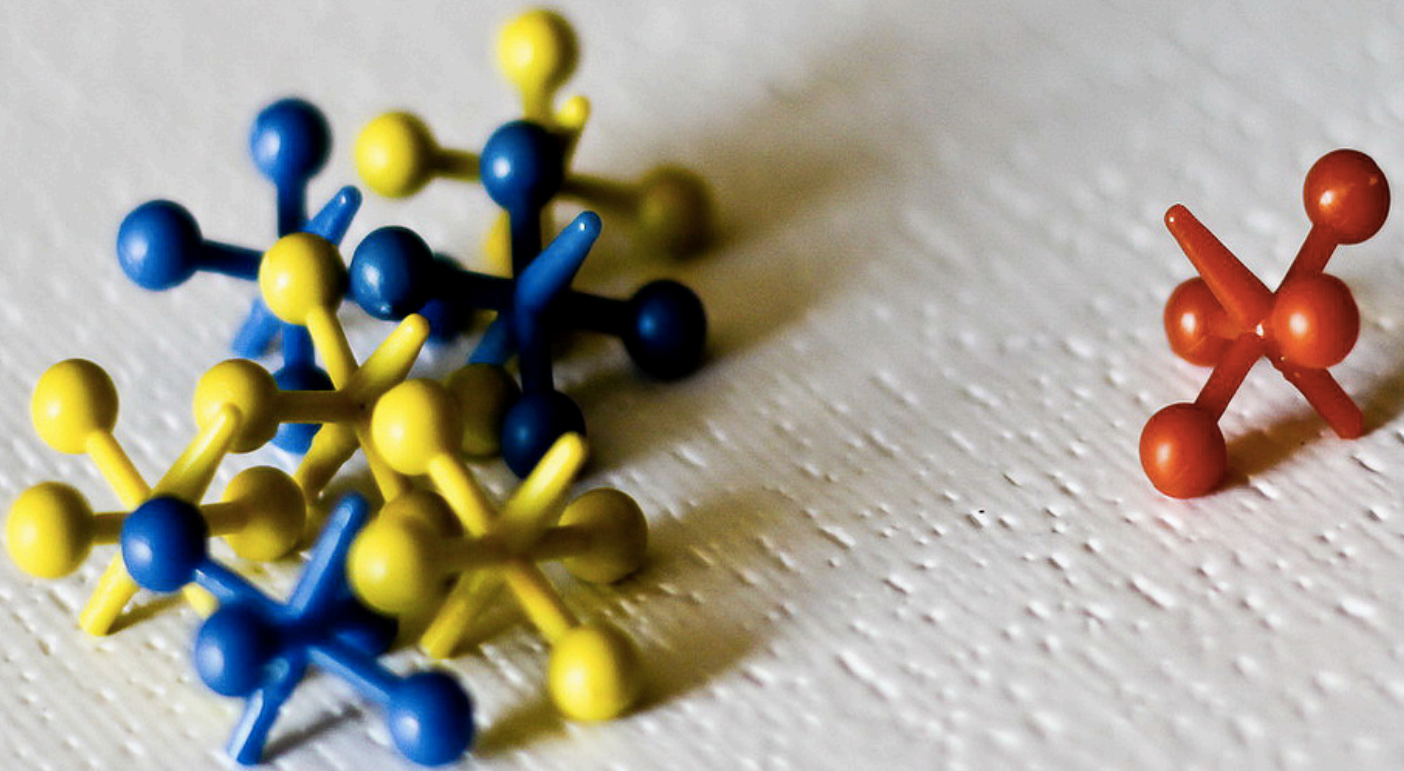


Photo by [Carlos Smith](#) [CC BY-NC-SA 2.0], via Flickr

## Chapter 1

# Background to the research

When one speaks of discrimination in its broadest sense, one refers to prejudice based on any minority identity, be it religion, nationality, race, ethnic origin, sexual orientation, gender identity, etc. This is what is commonly called a *protected characteristic* in legal terminology pertaining to hate speech and hate crime. However, regardless of whether an incident is prosecutable or not under the law, the underlying idea is that some person is discriminated against when s/he is singled out - and potentially insulted or even threatened - not because of some personal trait (like the length of his/her hair), but rather because s/he shares some identifying characteristic with other members of a particular group, be it social, national, political and so on.

As is evident in the following provisions, both the Constitution of Malta and the Maltese Criminal Code directly outlaw any form of discrimination (with the Press Act, the Broadcasting Act and the Employment and Industrial Relations Act also comprising further provisions in relation to it).



**Constitution of Malta - Article 45**

- (1) Subject to the provisions of sub-articles (4), (5) and (7) of this article, no law shall make any provision that is discriminatory either of itself or in its effect.
- (2) Subject to the provisions of sub-articles (6), (7) and (8) of this article, no person shall be treated in a discriminatory manner by any person acting by virtue of any written law or in the performance of the functions of any public office or any public authority.
- (3) In this article, the expression "discriminatory" means affording different treatment to different persons attributable wholly or mainly to their respective descriptions by race, place of origin, political opinions, colour, creed, sex, sexual orientation or gender identity whereby persons of one such description are subjected to disabilities or restrictions to which persons of another such description are not made subject or are accorded privileges or advantages which are not accorded to persons of another such description.

In our communication with them, the People for Change Foundation noted that the hate crime provisions in the Maltese criminal code have come a long way. The code includes both a specific provision against hate speech and hate motivation (including race, religion, etc.) as aggravating circumstances for all offences. However, the wording of these provisions is somewhat clumsy in that all grounds for hatred are enumerated under the term 'racial hatred'.

**Maltese Criminal Code - Article 82**

- (1) Whosoever uses any threatening, abusive or insulting words or behaviour, or displays any written or printed material which is threatening, abusive or insulting, or otherwise conducts himself in such a manner, with intent thereby to stir up violence or racial hatred against another person or group on the grounds of gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, race, colour, language, ethnic origin, religion or belief or political or other opinion or whereby such violence or racial hatred is likely, having regard to all the circumstances, to be stirred up shall, on conviction, be liable to imprisonment for a term from six to eighteen months.
- (2) For the purposes of the foregoing subarticle "violence or racial hatred" means violence or racial hatred against a person or against a group of persons in Malta defined by reference to gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, race, colour, language, national or ethnic origin, citizenship, religion or belief or political or other opinion

Even though the Maltese Criminal Code also gives mention to discrimination specifically in the form of "any threatening, abusive or insulting words", no concrete definition of what constitutes - or does not constitute, for that matter - hate speech actually exists.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the elusive nature of the notion of hate speech see: Assimakopoulos, Stavros, Fabienne H. Baider and Sharon Millar. In press. Online hate speech in the EU: A discourse-analytic perspective, Chapter 1. Berlin: Springer.





Still, what remains missing is an adequate body of judicial interpretation of the relevant legal provisions to identify their boundaries in practice. Most interpretations that have become available in the past few years are based on cases involving (sometimes alleged) manifestations of hate on the basis of racial discrimination alone. In relation to discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity, against which the legal amendments to the Constitution of Malta and Criminal Code were only put into force in 2013, it is still very early to speak of actual case studies in which homophobic hate or discrimination was prosecuted. For example, in 2012, two young lesbians were attacked in a park<sup>2</sup>, in an event that part-triggered the legislative changes that were eventually introduced<sup>3</sup>, but it was then too late for their attack to be prosecuted as a hate crime. Perhaps, the most successful case against hate speech to date is the case of Norman Lowell, Malta's resident far right, ultranationalist politician, who was convicted with inciting racial hatred in 2008 (racial hatred was already criminalised in 2008)<sup>4</sup>. Then, in 2016, two youths were also convicted for propagating hate speech and were each fined €3,000 for racist comments they posted on Facebook<sup>5</sup>.

Even so, hate speech can be very difficult to prosecute. Norman Lowell speaks from a podium; a setting that makes it easy to observe instances of hate speech to begin with. Reporting hate speech that occurs in a person's home or work place might not be as straightforward. Also, there exist no specific procedures for prosecuting and reporting hate crimes or hate speech. According to the police inspector that we spoke to, all instances of such behaviour should be reported at a police station and are recorded by the police like any other crime. It is then up to the judicial system to prosecute the crime at hand as a hate crime. And even though the judicial system clearly does not actively discriminate against minority groups, the bureaucracy involved in court proceedings makes the process of prosecuting hate speech unduly painful and time-consuming. This is possibly another factor affecting the serious concern of underreporting hate speech/crime in Malta.

Beyond the legal definitions of hate speech and discrimination, community perceptions are also quite complex, especially regarding the LGBTIQ community, as the MGRM (Malta LGBTIQ Rights Movement) pointed out in our communication with them. Before the amendments to the Constitution and Criminal Code in 2013, when the Civil Union Act was ratified, society's perception of the LGBTIQ community was ahead of legislation; there was more tolerance from society than was reflected in policy. Now, however, the converse seems to be the case; policy is quite ahead in terms of LGBTIQ rights and protections, but people need time to catch up. There has been some backlash because these legislative changes appear, from outside the LGBTIQ community, to have happened very fast. Moreover, certain events spark further backlash. For example, discussions of the Embryo Protection Act to include provisions for single women and lesbians have spurred controversy and hate speech, as has the prospect of introducing LGBTIQ books into schools. It is also apparent that some issues engender more

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2 <http://preview.tinyurl.com/yc6kna53>

3 <http://preview.tinyurl.com/y8zydvy7>

4 <http://preview.tinyurl.com/yawe33hx>

5 <http://preview.tinyurl.com/yc86hsw8>



negativity. Anything to do with children or parenting, for instance, tends to raise strong reactions, and discussion of the gender-binary (or non gender-binary) infringes on people's comfort level. At the same time, a great source of contention for the Maltese is the problem of irregular migration in the Mediterranean, with the 2016 Eurobarometer survey<sup>6</sup> enlisting immigration as the highest concern for the local population. This seems to be spurring much of the discrimination and hatred on the Maltese islands. Various publications of the People for Change Foundation make evident that irregular migrants are often categorised as one group of 'Others', regardless of their nationality, language, religion, or ethnic background.<sup>7</sup>



Against this backdrop, the 2-year C.O.N.T.A.C.T. project, which was co-funded by the Rights, Equality & Citizenship Programme of the European Commission Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers (JUST/2014/RRAC/AG) and was concluded on the 14th of October 2017, aimed at investigating and developing tools to combat hate crime, with a particular focus on hate speech, in a number of EU countries; namely, Cyprus, Denmark, Italy, Greece, Malta, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Spain and the UK. These tools included an online facility and dedicated smartphone application where members of the public could report hate incidents, as well as various media events across the consortium.

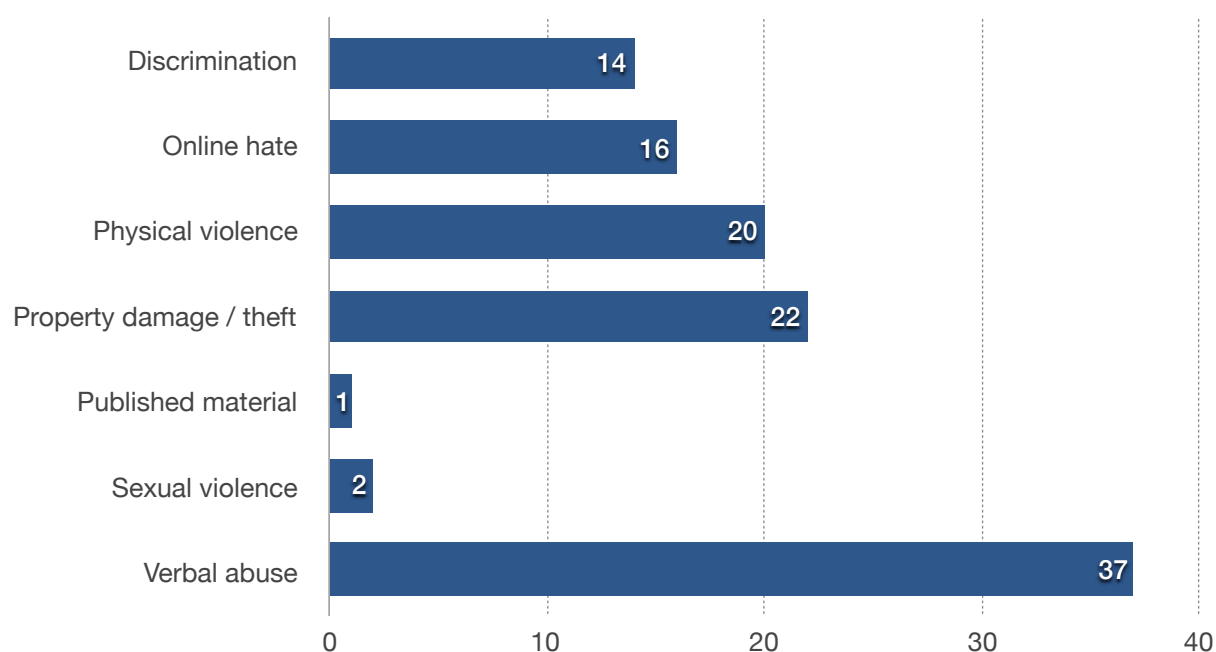
At the University of Malta, Stavros Assimakopoulos, Rebecca Vella Muskat and Albert Gatt from the Institute of Linguistics and Language Technology undertook research in the area, and then, jointly with Barbara Baschiera and Colin Calleja from the Department for Inclusion and Access to Learning of the Faculty of Education developed training material and organised a workshop with a view to sensitising the general public on the issue (for more information visit: <http://reportinghate.eu>).

In the context of Malta, the focus of the project on hate speech seems to be particularly relevant if one looks at the reports we have received so far through our dedicated online facility. As the following chart shows, as of October 2017, out of the 112 reports received for Malta, the largest proportion had to do with instances of verbal abuse. Now, while this is of course not meant to be taken as a general statistic applicable to the whole population residing in Malta, it is still indicative of a tendency that should not be overlooked.

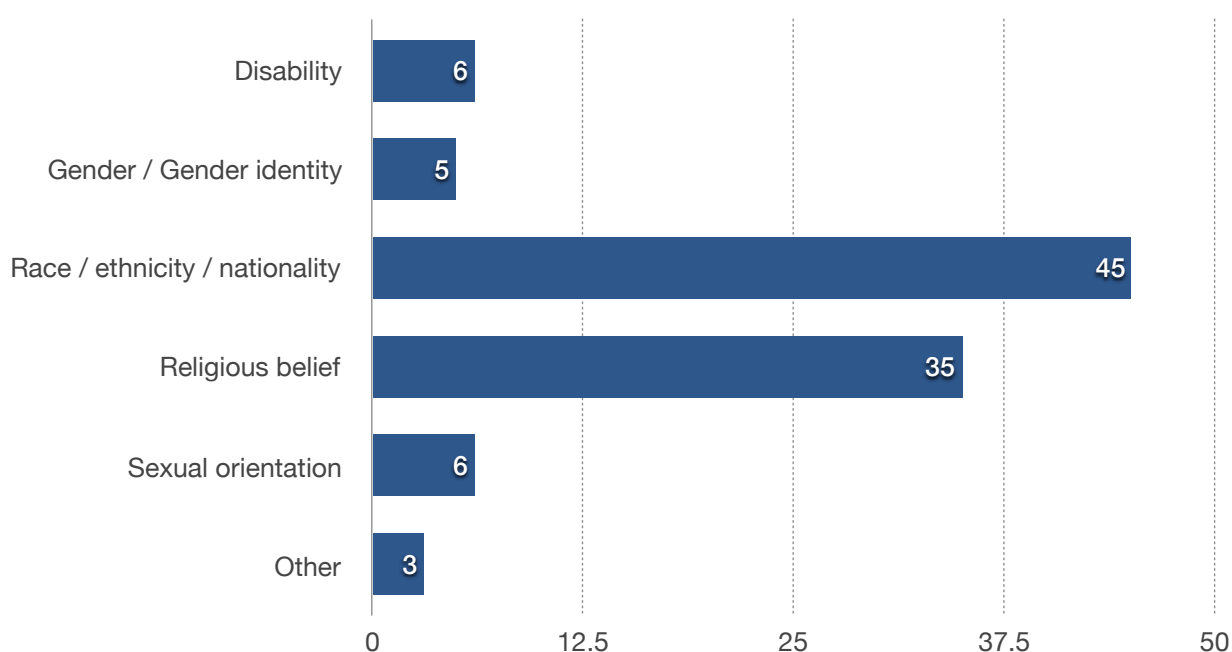
<sup>6</sup> <http://preview.tinyurl.com/ydykbzc4>

<sup>7</sup> It is worth noting here that most of the research conducted on racial and ethnic minorities has focused on the experiences of irregular migrants; very little research has looked at the lives and experiences of foreigners and expats living on the islands, as well as originally non-Maltese children who have been adopted by Maltese citizens.





Clearly, discrimination can, and often does target members of various groups, but the focus of the C.O.N.T.A.C.T. project, on which the present document reports, has been on xenophobia and homophobia. Again, this seems to be particularly prevalent in the local context, as, most of the incidents reported on our website had to do with these types of prejudice, and especially xenophobia.



Apart from this, however, there are also further reasons why it seems necessary to compartmentalise issues of xenophobia, as well as homophobia, in Malta. For one, in the past years, Malta has seen major shifts in policies and legislations pertaining to minorities. Although some of these changes, by definition, affect all minorities, others specifically relate to particular

groups. Then, it is necessary to also remember that movements and organisations supporting sexual and gender minorities exist in parallel, but often not in conjunction with movements that support the rights of ethnic and other minorities. With this in mind, it is possible to look at events that have taken place in parallel to each other, but affect each group differently.

One such event was the constitutional amendment of 2014, which broadened anti-discrimination laws to include protection from discrimination against sexual orientation and gender identity. And while the LGBTIQ community has seen major developments with regards to various rights and privileges, ethnic minorities, particularly those who are in Malta seeking asylum, still lack the adequate protection. Although Maltese policy protects all minorities from discrimination on the basis of their religion, race, nationality, sexual orientation etc., policy regarding the procedures that irregular migrants go through upon arrival has been criticised for being highly discriminatory. For example, the UNHCR had often been vocal about the once mandatory detention of irregular migrants upon arrival in Malta, and is still concerned about this matter even with the introduction of new legislation on it<sup>8</sup>.

It is also worth noting that Malta has signed and ratified a number of international conventions, including the Convention on Cybercrime, the International Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD), and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). However, according to the dedicated 2013 ECRI report<sup>9</sup>, Malta has opted not to sign Protocol No. 12 to the European Convention of Human Rights (ECHR), the Convention on the Participation of Foreigners in Public Life at Local Level, and the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families (ICRMW).

In addition, many organisations in Malta seem to have for long focused more on policy and legislation change than on targeting discrimination as such. Given the context of the Maltese islands and the fact that, for example, up until 2013 there was no protection for individuals who were discriminated against on the basis of their sexual orientation or gender identity, this is not surprising. Today, however, all the more organisations focus on combating discrimination and offering support to sexual and gender or racial minorities.

## Initiatives pre-C.O.N.T.A.C.T.

Projects engaging in issues relating to the discrimination of minority groups in Malta have seldom been directly involved with combating hate crime as such. Rather, there appears to be a preference towards projects that seek to combat discrimination by encouraging the integration

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8 <http://preview.tinyurl.com/ycr86zeq>

9 <http://preview.tinyurl.com/y94xlcje>



of minorities into mainstream Maltese society. This is likely based on the presupposition that high integration will lead to less discrimination.

That being said, in the pre-C.O.N.T.A.C.T. 2010-2015 period, there had already been some projects that attempted to directly confront the problem of hate speech and hate crime locally and which are, therefore, more or less relevant to our project. The list we will provide here, however, is not exhaustive. The Agency for the Welfare of Asylum Seekers (AWAS) has a full list of projects that are related to minority groups, integration efforts and countering hate crime (<http://preview.tinyurl.com/ydbodebp>). Since a great majority of these projects were not directed at battling hate speech and hate crime on the Maltese islands, some projects were not included in the table that follows:

Project	Project aim	Website
<b>Report Racism Malta</b> (Nov 2014-ongoing) People for Change Foundation	Development of a website for reporting hate crime.	<a href="http://www.reportracism-malta.org/">http://www.reportracism-malta.org/</a>
<b>No Hate Speech Movement</b> (2012-2014) Aġenzija żagħżagħ / Council of Europe	Development of an online blog and facebook group(s) with a view to raising awareness regarding online hate speech.	<a href="http://blog.nohatespeechmovement.org/no-hate-speech-movement-in-malta/">http://blog.nohatespeechmovement.org/no-hate-speech-movement-in-malta/</a>
<b>Pledge for Dignity and Against Racism</b> (July 2013 - ongoing) People for Change Foundation	Development of a statement against racism to be signed by MPs, members of political parties and eventually MEPs too.	<a href="http://www.pfcmalta.org/mp-pledge.html">http://www.pfcmalta.org/mp-pledge.html</a>
<b>Putting integration into perspective</b> (2011-2013) Office of the Refugee Commissioner (REFCOM) via the Mental Health Association Malta (MHA)	Study of the integration efforts of beneficiaries of international protection and identification of areas where special input is needed in the field of integration.	n/a
<b>Media InterAct Project</b> (2011 - 2012) SOS Malta, the Public Broadcasting Services Ltd, Institute of Maltese Journalists	Initiating an avenue for mainstreaming the diversity and integration of third-country nationals (TCNs) within the media.	<a href="http://sosmalta.org/mediainteract">http://sosmalta.org/mediainteract</a>
<b>Think Before You Speak</b> (December 2011) Malta LGBTQI Rights Movement (MGRM)	Reduction and prevention of the use of homophobic and transphobic language through various communication initiatives as to create a more positive environment for LGBTQ teens/youth.	<a href="http://www.maltagayrights.org/think.php">http://www.maltagayrights.org/think.php</a>
<b>Strengthening Equality Beyond Legislation</b> (Dec 2009 - Nov 2010) National Commission for the Promotion of Equality (NCPE)	Implementation of further legislation on non-discrimination through awareness raising, training, and research, as well as dissemination of information on EU and national policy and legislation.	<a href="https://ncpe.gov.mt/en/Pages/Projects_and_Specific_Initiatives/Strengthening_Equality_Beyond_Legislation.aspx">https://ncpe.gov.mt/en/Pages/Projects_and_Specific_Initiatives/Strengthening_Equality_Beyond_Legislation.aspx</a>





Turning to scientific studies that have been conducted in relation to the nature of hate crime and hate speech in Malta, our research did not yield many results, suggesting that hate speech and hate crime constitute vastly understudied areas in the local context. The main material available are reports by NGOs and other organisations, which summarise the results of various surveys that have been conducted. Still, most of these reports deal with policy pertaining primarily to the broader area of discrimination. There is little actual documentation directly related to hate crime. In fact, as a 2010 publication of the NCPE<sup>10</sup> makes clear, the underreporting of hate crime in Malta is a major cause for concern. What is more, most of the relevant research that we were able to identify pertains to discrimination targeted at racial, ethnic and religious minorities. Research into hate crimes targeted at sexual and gender minorities is even less documented. The best indications there are with regards to discrimination targeted at people who identify as members of a sexual or gender minority are the Special Eurobarometer surveys, which are conducted regularly (the last relevant one<sup>11</sup>, on gender-based violence, took place in June 2016).

It therefore becomes apparent that, at least in the Maltese context, C.O.N.T.A.C.T. launched the first large-scale study to look specifically at hate speech as a manifestation of hate crime. As we will see in the following sections, this is different from previous efforts, which have mainly focused on integration efforts being made with the ultimate hope of, indirectly, combating hate crime, as it specifically targets the underlying ideas that can lead to the manifestation of hate speech and ultimately hate crime in the local context.



Photo by Frank Vincentz [CC BY-SA 3.0], via Wikimedia Commons



Photo by aditus foundation [CC BY-NC-SA 2.0], via Flickr

<sup>10</sup> <http://preview.tinyurl.com/yc3j2fdf>

<sup>11</sup> <http://preview.tinyurl.com/hbxrx4c>





## Chapter 2

# The C.O.N.T.A.C.T. research

The research strand of the C.O.N.T.A.C.T. project involved two stages, each dealing with the production and perception of hate speech by the general public in turn. Given our aim to identify such discourse as used by the general public rather than the media, our basic source of data were comments posted in reaction to news reports in various local media portals. So, in the interest of understanding the driving forces behind the production of remarks that reveal a discriminatory attitude towards migrants or members of the LGBTIQ community, we created two balanced corpora of articles and comments related to the two minority groups, and annotated them in terms of the attitudes they reveal. Then, with a view to approximating the general public's perception of discriminatory comments as well as its understanding of the notion of hate speech we administered a questionnaire online and ran 4 follow-up focus group interviews.



Even though the common methodology used across the C.O.N.T.A.C.T. consortium, and its underlying rationale, will soon be available in the forthcoming open access publication for the project (Assimakopoulos et al. in press: Chapter 2)<sup>12</sup>, in the following sections, we will swiftly go over the steps we followed for each strand of our research, while discussing the results we obtained through it. Before we go on to it though, it is essential to point out that, while the focus of the project is hate speech, we are in no position, as linguists, to accuse particular commentators that they have committed what amounts to a crime in the eyes of the Maltese law. So, all the statistics and especially the examples provided in what follows should not be perceived as constituting hate speech in the legal sense of the term. Rather, they are emphatically meant to represent instances of discourse that encompasses a discriminatory attitude towards migrants or members of the LGBTIQ community, and which provide an idea of the axiological values that underlie this attitude and can prospectively lead locals to engage in hate speech or even hate crime, by slowly legitimising them. As Waldron (2012: 4)<sup>13</sup> puts it,

[the] sense of security in the space we all inhabit is a public good, and in a good society it is something that we all contribute to and help sustain in an instinctive and almost unnoticeable way. Hate speech undermines this public good, or it makes the task of sustaining it much more difficult than it would otherwise be. It does this not only by intimating discrimination and violence, but by reawakening living nightmares of what this society was like – or what other societies have been like – in the past. In doing so, it creates something like an environmental threat to social peace, a sort of slow-acting poison, accumulating here and there, word by word, so that eventually it becomes harder and less natural for even the good-hearted members of the society to play their part in maintaining this public good.

## Analysing online comments in the Maltese press

In order to build our corpora for analysis, we needed to identify articles pertinent to the migrant and LGBTIQ minorities that would have triggered readers to post comments underneath them. To this end, we identified particular keywords, such as *'refugee'*, *'immigration'*, *'gay'* *'homosexual'*, that are bound to be included in articles pertaining to the minorities under question. The following table shows all keywords that were used to identify articles for the Maltese dataset:

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<sup>12</sup> Assimakopoulos, Stavros, Fabienne H. Baider and Sharon Millar. In press. Online hate speech in the EU: A discourse-analytic perspective. Berlin: Springer.

<sup>13</sup> Waldron, Jeremy. 2012. The harm in hate speech. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.





Domain	Keywords used to identify relevant articles
Hate speech/crime	<u>IN ENGLISH</u> : <i>discrimination, hate, hate crime, hate crimes, hate speech</i>
	<u>IN MALTESE</u> : <i>diskriminazzjoni, mibegħda, reat ta' mibegħda, reati ta' mibegħda, diskors ta' mibegħda</i>
Migration	<u>IN ENGLISH</u> : <i>asylum, asylum seeker, asylum seekers, black, blacks, immigrant, immigrants, immigration, migrant, migrants, Muslim, Muslims, push-back, pushback, race, racial, racism, refugee, refugees, shelter, xenophobia</i>
	<u>IN MALTESE</u> : <i>ażil, azil, persuna li tfittex il-kenn, persuni li jfittxu il-kenn, iswed, l-iswed, immigrant, immigranti, immigrazzjoni, migrant, migranti, Musulman, Musulmani, push-back, pushback, razza, razziali, razzizmu, refugjat, refugjat, refugjati, refugjati, kenn, ksenofobija</i>
LGBTIQ	<u>IN ENGLISH</u> : <i>civil union, gay, gays, gender identity, homophobia, homosexual, homosexuals, lesbian, lesbians, LGBT, LGBTIQ, queer, queers, sexuality, sexual orientation, trans, transgender, transgenders, transexual, transexuals</i>
	<u>IN MALTESE</u> : <i>unjoni ċivili, unjoni civili, gay, gays, identità tal-generu, identità tal-generu, omofobija, omosesswali, liżbjana, leshjana, liżbjani, leshjani, LGBT, LGBTIQ, queer, queers, sesswalità, orjentazzjoni sesswali, trans, transgender, transgenders, transesswali</i>

We then used the EMM NewsBrief platform,<sup>14</sup> which has been developed by the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission to monitor news reports across the globe, to identify articles from local media portals by doing searches on the basis of our selected keywords. We collected the titles and urls for all retrieved articles, in both English and Maltese, over two temporal periods, which were preselected across the consortium for reasons of feasibility: April - June 2015 and December 2015 - February 2016.

Once we retrieved all articles for each keyword, we selected the keywords that would be used for the population of our actual corpora on the basis of the number of articles that each keyword returned during the EMM NewsBrief search. While the rest of the consortium populated their

<sup>14</sup> <http://emm.newsbrief.eu>



corpora with content pertaining to 8 keywords on migration and 6 on LGBTIQ matters, we chose to create a more balanced corpus by using the 8 keywords with most articles for each domain. In the following table, you can see the overall number of hits of the keywords selected, which were of course the keywords with the most number of hits across the board.

Domain	Keyword	Sources in English	Sources in Maltese	Total number of hits
<b>Migrants</b>	migrant/s	2227	35	<b>2262</b>
	refugee/s	1116	241	<b>1357</b>
	immigrant/s	334	811	<b>1145</b>
	asylum (seeker/s)	424	0	<b>1100</b>
	Muslim/s	776	176	<b>952</b>
	immigration	485	403	<b>888</b>
	race	826	58	<b>884</b>
	black/s	745	111	<b>856</b>
<b>LGBTIQ</b>	gay/s	322	51	<b>373</b>
	LGBT / LGBTIQ	123	33	<b>156</b>
	homosexual/s	98	54	<b>152</b>
	sexual orientation	71	55	<b>126</b>
	gender identity	116	2	<b>118</b>
	transgender/s	70	12	<b>82</b>
	homophobia	20	53	<b>73</b>
	lesbian/s	58	5	<b>63</b>

Even from the number of hits alone, one can easily see that media discourse related to the topic of migration is far more prominent than that related to the LGBTIQ matters, with the keyword registering the highest number of hits in the LGBTIQ category returning less hits than the keyword that was last in our selected list for the Migration domain. Once the 8 keywords per topic area were selected, we went back to our list of articles and discarded all article titles that did not contain any of the selected keywords. Since the EMM Newsbrief tool does not provide any information about articles with associated comments, we used our list of the remaining article urls, and completed it by taking note of the number of comments that each one of these articles had received. In the end of this process, we had a list of all the articles with comments over the designated temporal period, along with the number of comments each article had received. At that stage, we were ready to start compiling our corpus.

Again for reasons of feasibility, we had to select a representative and balanced sample of our collected data for further analysis. As per the agreed C.O.N.T.A.C.T. methodology, we did by collecting the first 5,000 words worth of article content from different news portals and an



associated 5,000 words worth of comments content per keyword, on the basis of the number of comments received per article. Obviously, we had to further select our sample of comments per article too, so as to include comments from all the articles selected in the corpus. So, depending on the number of articles per keyword, we also harmonised our comments database, by including in it a balanced number of comments per article, starting from the oldest comments posted first. Here is some information about the two corpora eventually compiled for Malta for this stream of the C.O.N.T.A.C.T. research strand:

#### Overview of C.O.N.T.A.C.T. Migration corpus (Malta)

Article source language	Keyword	No of articles	Size of article corpus (in words)	No of comments	Size of comments corpus (in words)
English	asylum seeker/s	16	4800	147	5108
	black/s	7	5264	137	5096
	immigrant/s	7	4877	147	5064
	immigration	10	4853	130	5252
	migrant/s	11	5073	156	5257
	Muslim/s	13	5246	169	5009
	race	5	4877	141	4961
	refugee/s	9	4809	103	5273
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>78</b>	<b>39799</b>	<b>1130</b>	<b>41020</b>
Maltese	ażil & kenn	3	887	1	10
	iswed/l-iswed	0	0	0	0
	immigrant/i	19	5216	114	3125
	immigrazzjoni	11	3818	44	920
	migrant/i	0	0	0	0
	Musulman/i	12	2572	55	1629
	razza	1	354	1	12
	refuġjat/i	8	2466	25	1033
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>15313</b>	<b>240</b>	<b>6729</b>



**Overview of C.O.N.T.A.C.T. LGBTIQ corpus (Malta)**

Article source language	Keyword	No of articles	Size of article corpus (in words)	No of comments	Size of comments corpus (in words)
English	gay/s	14	5070	142	5051
	gender identity	8	4960	163	5012
	homophobia	9	5100	133	5176
	homosexual/s	9	5843	169	5120
	lesbian/s	13	5688	116	5008
	LGBT/IQ	10	5260	136	5021
	sexual orientation	7	4737	114	5268
	transgender/s	10	5615	136	5268
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>42273</b>	<b>1109</b>	<b>40924</b>
Maltese	gay/s	5	961	21	520
	identità tal-ġeneru	0	0	0	0
	omofobija	0	0	0	0
	omosesswali	5	1237	14	356
	liżbjana/i	0	0	0	0
	LGBT/IQ	0	0	0	0
	orjentazzjoni sesswali	0	0	0	0
	transgender/s	0	0	0	0
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>2198</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>876</b>

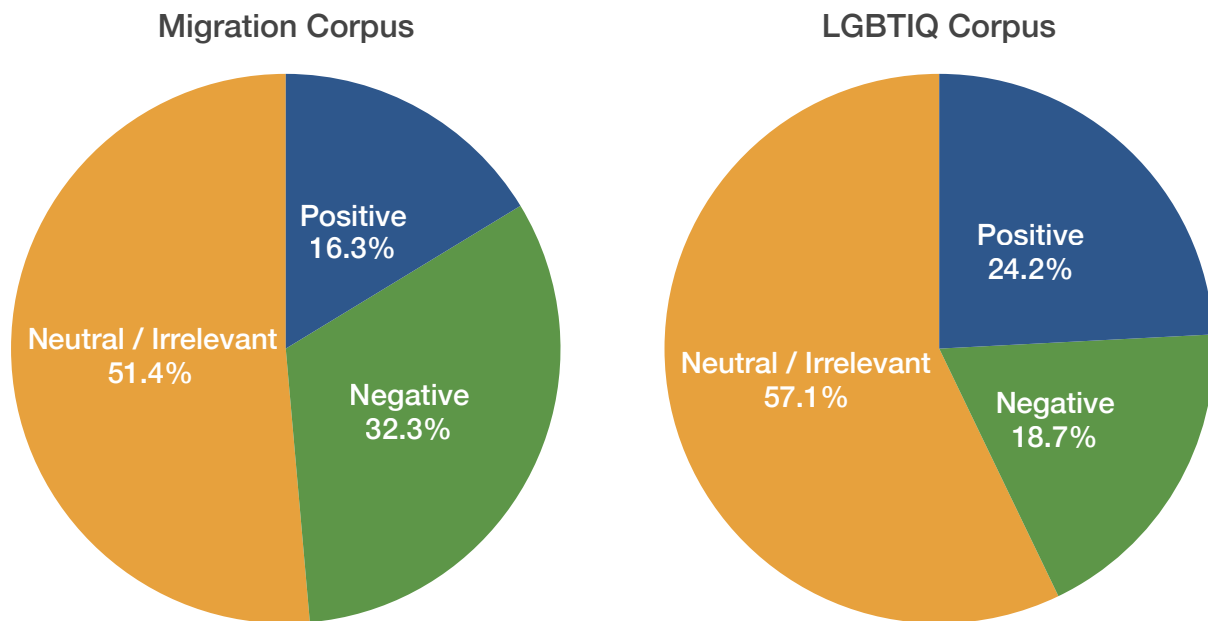
*Results of the comments analysis*

The next step of our research involved the annotation of both our articles and comments corpora in the two domains in terms of polarity<sup>15</sup>. The objective here was to identify whether

<sup>15</sup> As one can see in the tables above, our search in sources in Maltese did not yield enough articles with comments, so, even though we did also analyse articles written in Maltese and their associated comments for the purposes of our research, we will not include in the discussion that follows, as it would jeopardise the comparability of our results in the two domains.



each article/comment communicated a positive, negative or neutral stance towards the minorities under question. What is particularly important to note of course is that during this evaluation, which was undertaken by two members of our team to ensure reliability, we focused exclusively on the attitudes expressed in relation to migrants and members of the LGBTIQ community, marking any content that related to a different target, such as politicians or other commentators, as irrelevant. So, while our analysis of the articles revealed a predominantly neutral attitude towards the minorities under question, our analysis of the comments posted underneath these articles paint a rather different picture, as the pie charts below indicate:



In view of our annotation results, it is clear that while there is a presence of a negative attitude towards both minorities that we are dealing with, this attitude is far more prevalent in the case of migrants than it is in that of members of the LGBTIQ community. What is particularly interesting, however, is that the instances in which a positive attitude towards the LGBTIQ group was expressed - most of which were actually reactions to some negative comment put forth by another commentator - outnumber the corresponding negative comments. It is worth noting that Malta is the only country in the C.O.N.T.A.C.T. consortium to obtain this result, as all other national datasets revealed a more pronounced negative attitude towards both minority groups (cf. Assimakopoulos et al. in press: Section 1.4)<sup>16</sup>. Yet, the results regarding xenophobia in Malta seem particularly grave, as the negative comments are almost double in number than those that defend this particular target group. Additionally, more negative remarks about migrants, which we have not taken into account here due to our methodological constraints, were also found in the LGBTIQ corpus, which appears to suggest that in some cases xenophobia has a way of entering the picture even in seemingly irrelevant discussions.

<sup>16</sup> Assimakopoulos, Stavros, Fabienne H. Baider and Sharon Millar. In press. Online hate speech in the EU: A discourse-analytic perspective, Chapter 1. Berlin: Springer.



With this in mind, we will now turn to provide some representative examples of the most notable trends that we came across in our comments analysis.

## Trends in relation to xenophobia in Malta

To begin with, it is worth pointing out that most of the comments that revealed a xenophobic stance had to do with a particular group of migrants, that group comprising predominantly migrants of a Muslim persuasion, rather than with migration as a phenomenon on the whole. The following examples showcase this distinction, while expressing a view that generalises over the relevant population:

Othering irregular migrants
<i>...Wait another 5 years and see how <b>these Muslims</b> will change Malta...</i>
<i>...Turning a blind eye until such time as there are thousands around and the government has to raise taxes to support them, when <b>they</b> start building mosques next to <b>our</b> churches. Start positive discrimination in their favour? Start thinking before it's too late...</i>
<i>...Many epidemic diseases are brought from <b>their</b> shores such as AIDS, and the Ebola Virus ,then because of the already lack in employment opportunities you will see a rise in Violent crimes in order for them in desperation to self support...</i>
<i>...just back from Florence and the city is full of <b>them</b>, soon <b>we</b> will be having organised crimes committed <b>by these people</b>...</i>

Even within the group of Muslim migrants, most negative comments target specifically those migrants who have not been granted legal residence status in Malta, irrespective of whether they are entitled to it under refugee provisions. This group is commonly referred to as “*illegal immigrants*”<sup>17</sup> in our comments corpus, and the following examples illustrate the conception of this group as an out-group that is in complete opposition with the in-group, substantiating to some extent the processes of ‘Othering’ that, as we already mentioned in the previous chapter, have already been pointed out in research conducted by the People for Change Foundation:

17 As Dr Ahmed Bugre noted in his presentation during the University of Malta workshop on hate speech and hate crime that took place in September 2017, the phrase ‘illegal immigrants’ is strictly speaking a misnomer, since Maltese Law only refers to the notions of illegal entry and illegal stay; hence the placement of the phrase in inverted commas here.



### Muslim immigrants vs. non-muslim immigrants

*...the same cannot be said for **muslim immigrants** who **have nothing in common with the Europeans**...*

*...you must also acknowledge that there is a massive difference between lets say Turkish or Egyptians Muslims and Somali or Pakistani ones. **We're not getting the right sort of Muslims** unfortunately. ...*

*...There are cultures, and then there are other cultures, which despite us not being a pure race, we never had problems with any of them, its only now that we talk about minorities, and their integration, why now, because you know damn well that **these people don't integrate**. full stop...*

*...Do **let us distinguish between migrants and Islam**. While we should be humane to migrants let us not forget, despite what some would want us to believe, that Islam preaches death or servitude to **ANYBODY** who does not convert to Islam....*

All in all, the most common theme in the negative comments targeting migrants was the perception that they are invading Malta, posing an imminent threat for the local population; a perception that was even explicitly expressed in some of the comments we analysed:

### Metaphors of invasion

*...Beware **they are gradually taking over Malta**...*

*...**Do we really want this country being over run**, first they want to pray where they want. What next ban bacon, ban feasts....*

*...This is because there is an expectation that these groups will explode in numbers. **Bye bye Marsascala ghal Maltin. Persona non grata ser nispicaw**...*

*...we are protecting our country from **losing our culture, language and most important of all - freedom**. ..*



## Trends in relation to homophobia in Malta

Turning to the axiological values that underlie comments with a negative attitude towards members of the LGBTIQ community, the most prevalent motivation for them seems to be related to religious concerns, and more specifically the assumption that these individuals lead a life that does not conform with the Divine will:

Religious concerns
<i>...we <b>sold our souls</b> on ideologies that go against the word of god...</i>
<i>...The Bible, however, is quite clear, not just in specific passages but throughout the sacred text, that <b>same sex unions</b> are disapproved by God...</i>
<i>...that is why God left them to their filthy enjoyments and the practices with which they dishonor their own bodies since <b>they given up Divine truth</b>...</i>
<i>...Why don t the education teach the LGBTQI <b>THE NORMAL</b> way as god wants...</i>

The last comment in the examples above also shows another common conception that appears to spur negativity against the LGBTIQ community, and especially homosexuality: the idea that any deviation from heteronormative values is abnormal. In the following examples, one can see how this particular perception can give rise to comments that range from viewing homosexuality as abnormal behaviour to viewing it as a disease.

Abnormality
<i>...I just totally disagree with them <b>pretending to be normal couples</b>...</i>
<i>...Natural law makes it <b>impossible to equate a homosexual relationship to a heterosexual relationship</b>...</i>
<i>...<b>The practice of homosexuality qualifies as a "disease"</b> because by definition "disease is a disorder of the normal function of an organism"...</i>
<i>... 'gay persons' <b>Most of these people have disordered condition</b>...</i>





Finally, as the following examples show, while in the case of migrants the most common allusion was to the concept of invasion, in the case of members of the LGBTIQ community it is that of doom, which is hardly surprising given the fact that most negative comments in this corpus are triggered by religious concerns.

Metaphors of doom
<i>....Sorry to say ,but we have <b>HELL on EARTH</b>...</i>
<i>...<b>Sodom and Gomorrah</b> alive and well in Malta!...</i>
<i>...Today it's gays, then transgender, then gender fluid, then polygamy, then, then, then – <b>bridges to hell!</b>...</i>
<i>...<b>fucking degeneracy of the world</b>, I tell you. ...</i>

## Approximating the general public's perception

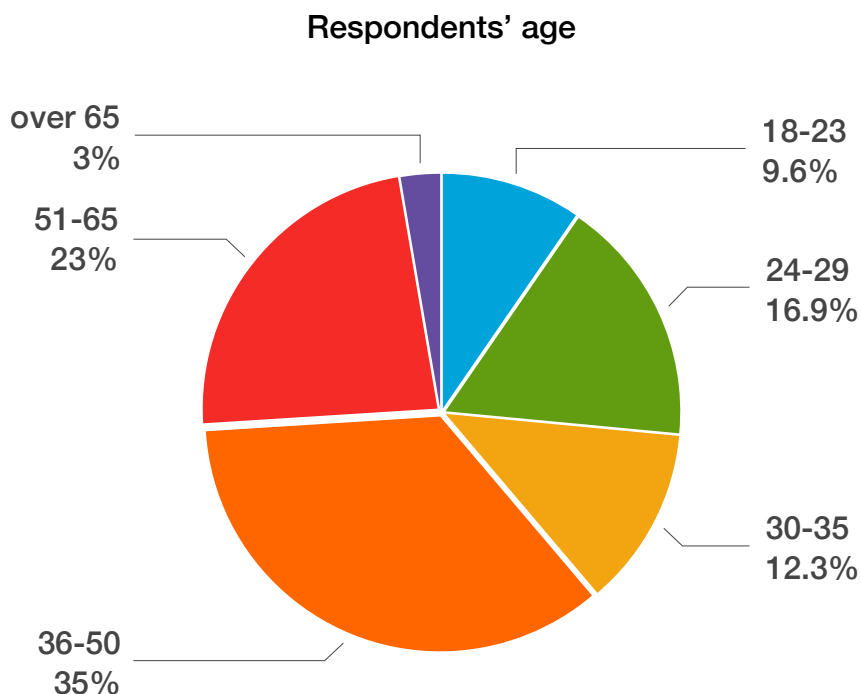
In the second part of the C.O.N.T.A.C.T. research workstream, partner countries carried out an assessment of the perceptions of the local population when it comes to actual examples of discriminatory discourse and definitions of hate speech on the basis of an online survey and follow-up interviews. In Malta, we circulated the relevant questionnaire, which was developed following the common C.O.N.T.A.C.T. methodology, on Google Forms both in English and Maltese and distributed it using multiple University of Malta mailing lists and Facebook posts. After analysing the obtained responses, we ran 4 focus group interviews with members of the general public who responded to our respective call for participants.

### *The C.O.N.T.A.C.T. questionnaire*

The number of respondents totalled 199 for the English version, and 10 for the Maltese version of the questionnaire, i.e. 209 overall. Even though the C.O.N.T.A.C.T. methodology targeted only people from 18 to 35 years of age, we collected data across all age groups. More specifically, as the following pie chart shows, the largest proportion of our respondents belonged to the over



35 age groups, but we still managed to collect 82 responses from individuals belonging to the C.O.N.T.A.C.T. particular target group:



Regarding our respondents' demographic information, 116 participants identified a female, 91 as male and 2 as non-binary and person. In terms of their nationality, 181 respondents were Maltese (or held dual citizenship that includes Malta), 23 were non-Maltese EU nationals, and 5 non-EU ones. When it comes to religion, 137 of our respondents identified as Christian, 60 stated that they do not assimilate with any religion, while 7 assimilate with another faith not listed in the options provided in the questionnaire (and, notably, none of whom are of Muslim faith). Turning to sexual orientation, 176 respondents identified as heterosexual, 22 as LGBTIQ and 4 as other. Finally, in terms of their level of education, the vast majority of our participants have reached a level of higher education, with only 6 participants having reached secondary education.

## Evaluation of comments

In the first section of the questionnaire, respondents were given six examples of online comments written in public forums in reaction to news stories pertaining to the migrant and LGBTIQ communities and were asked to indicate how acceptable they think it is for people to post such comments online. Our selection of the relevant comments from our corpus followed the consortium's guidelines and included in turn, a comment with a discriminatory statement

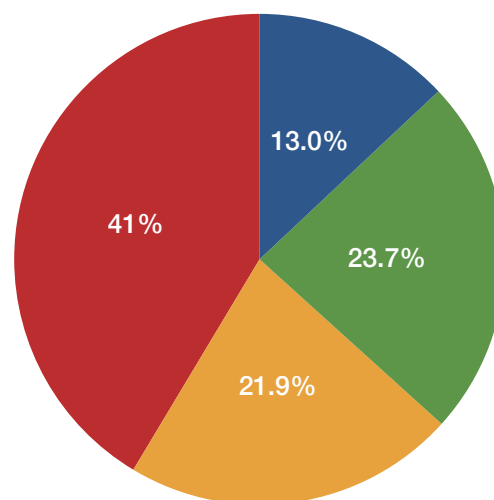


that includes an insult towards the relevant group, another one that carries a discriminatory statement without an explicit insult and, finally, a comment that, while negative in its polarity, includes some argumentation that would not necessarily qualify as discriminatory against the group under question.

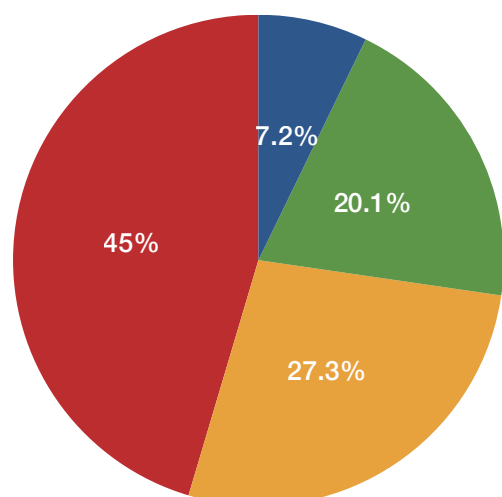
In what follows, we will present the responses obtained, starting off with the selected comments about migrants in order:

## Migration

1. *“Immigrants are not stupid. They love the freedom and rights they have over here. This is nothing but arrogance and it is what we should expect from them in the future. Maybe it’s you who’s in denial, but wake up and smell the coffee because it is starting to smell.”*



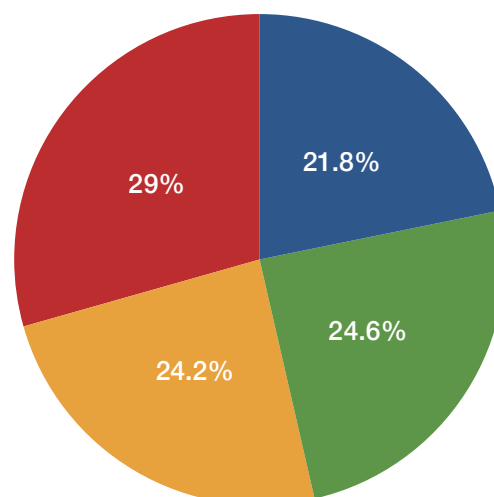
● Acceptable      ● Somewhat acceptable  
● Less acceptable      ● Not acceptable



● Acceptable      ● Somewhat acceptable  
● Less acceptable      ● Not acceptable

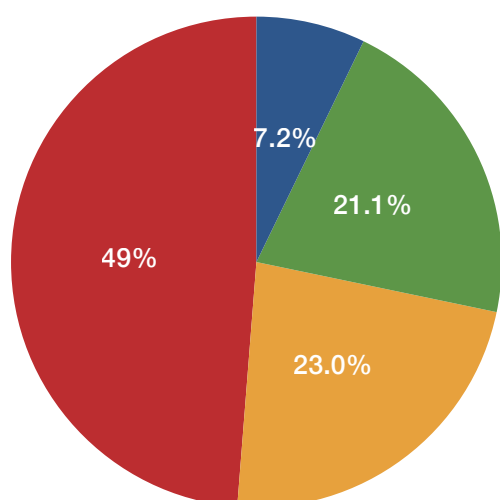
2. *“The German authorities tried to suppress this massive crime but with the number of women assaulted now at 200 and counting, it had to come out. The cat is now out of the bag and there is no way it will be bagged again. Immigration from third world countries destroys western societies.”*

3. "Multiculturalism as is being advertised by the pseudo liberals has failed BADLY. It is like putting the starter, main course and dessert in a liquidiser and eating everything together. It simply destroys the palate. European culture should be preserved in Europe; Arabian culture in Arab countries; Asian cultures in Asia, etc etc. This way all cultures can be appreciated without one culture subduing the other. We are ignoring the fact that some cultures are downright INCOMPATIBLE, and to try to impose cultural integration is asking for trouble."



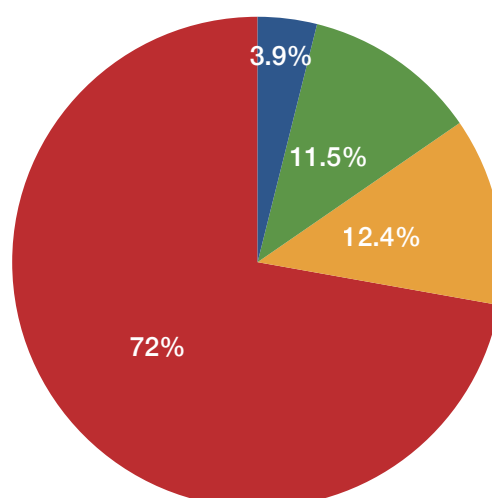
● Acceptable      ● Somewhat acceptable  
● Less acceptable      ● Not acceptable

## LGBTIQ



● Acceptable      ● Somewhat acceptable  
● Less acceptable      ● Not acceptable

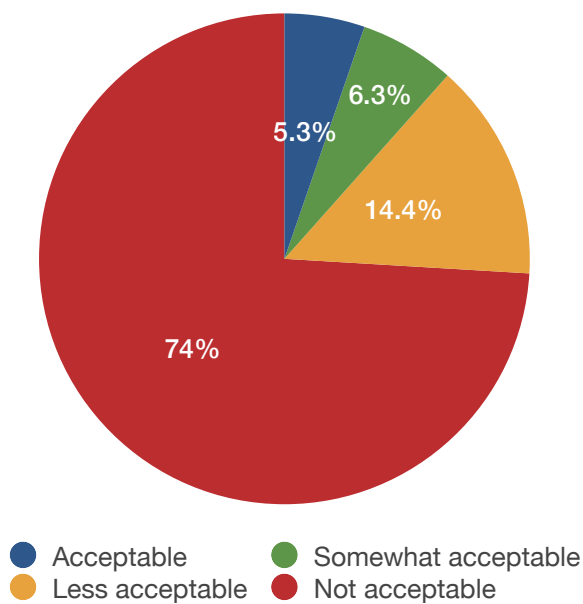
4. "The gay community has become arrogant and aggressive towards achieving a one sided political agenda, completely in their favour, at the expense of all others' human rights to live and procreate as nature intended."



● Acceptable      ● Somewhat acceptable  
● Less acceptable      ● Not acceptable

5. "These homosexuals are embarrassing us because they want the UNNATURAL be made NATURAL and they want it recognized as such."





6. "The practice of homosexuality qualifies as a "disease" because by definition "disease is a disorder of the normal function of an organism". The complicated anatomical structure and physiology of the sex organs leave no doubt that its normality consists in the fecundation of the female ovum by the male sperm and the further development of the zygote in the mother's womb to produce a new separate living human organism."

It is evident from the above pie charts that our respondents were much more accepting of the comments that showed a negative attitude against migrants than those expressing a negative attitude towards the LGBTIQ community. Interestingly, they were also comparably accepting of both comments that target the two minorities using an insult (that of being arrogant).

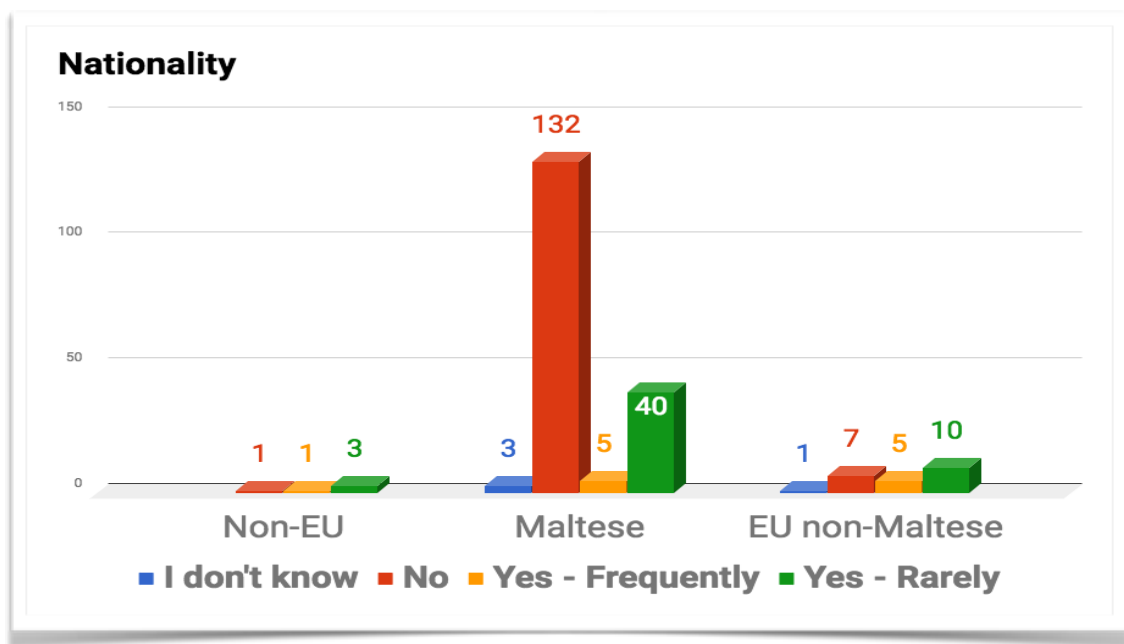
In the next section of the questionnaire, it was revealed to participants that the examples they had been shown before were written as public comments to newspaper articles. In light of this, they were asked to note whether it would have made a difference to their scores for what is acceptable, if the relevant comments had been written online in private contexts, such as in an e-mail exchange or chat or on a private facebook pages. 12 respondents stated that they do not know, 167 said that this would not have made a difference to their answers, while 30 suggested that it would have. Of this latter group, 78.8% thought that these comments would be more acceptable if posted in a private setting, with the remaining 21.2% feeling that they would be less acceptable this way.

## Experiences of hate speech incidents

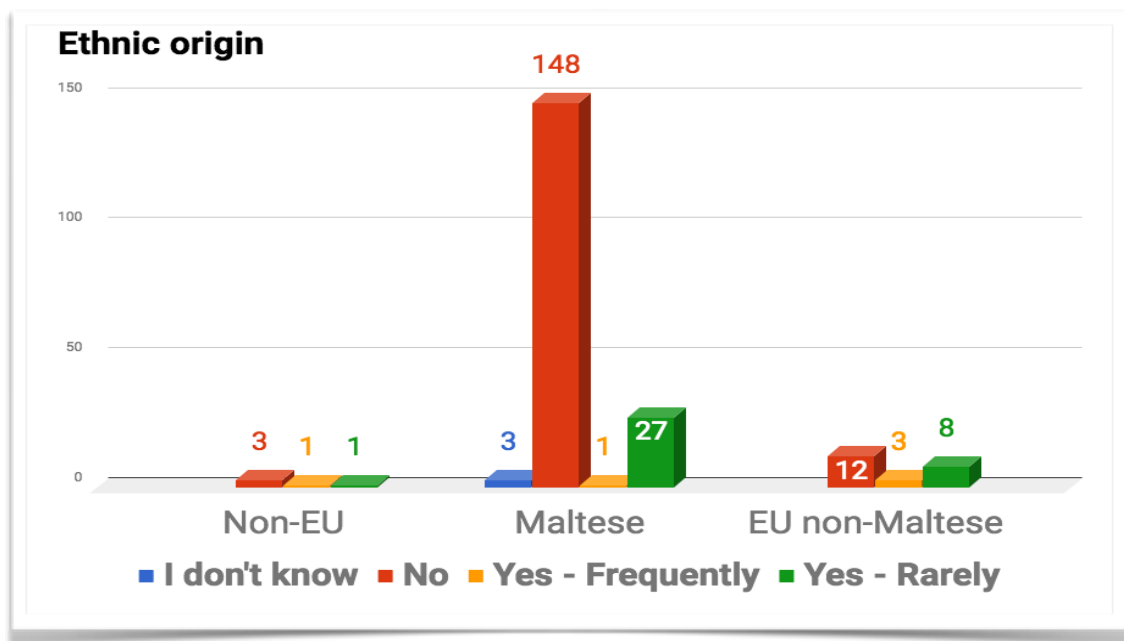
The second part of the questionnaire allowed respondents to provide information about their own experiences of hate speech, both as victims and as witnesses, while delving further into the reasons why such incidents are often underreported.

In the first section, participants were asked to indicate if they had ever been a target of insults and threats because of some protected characteristic, namely nationality, ethnic origin, religion, gender or sexual orientation. Their responses were, in turn, the following:



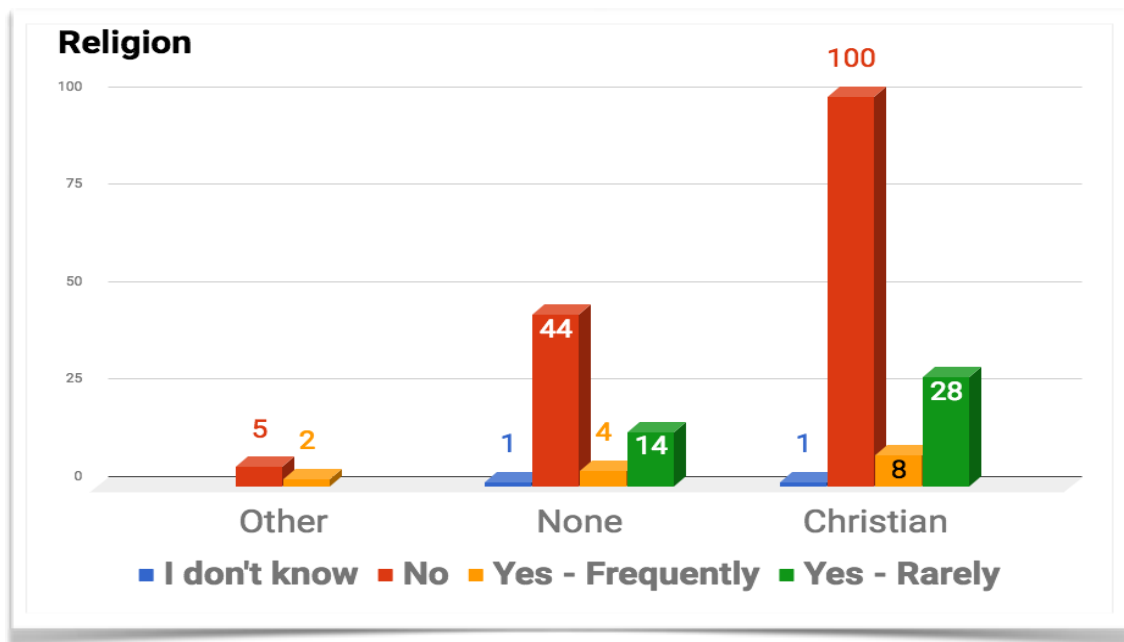


Even though the number of non-Maltese respondents is too low to give us a reliable indication, the trend seems to be for the majority of Maltese participants to not have experienced explicit discrimination on the basis of their nationality, with more non-Maltese participants having experienced it rarely. A comparable picture presents itself when it comes to ethnic origin:

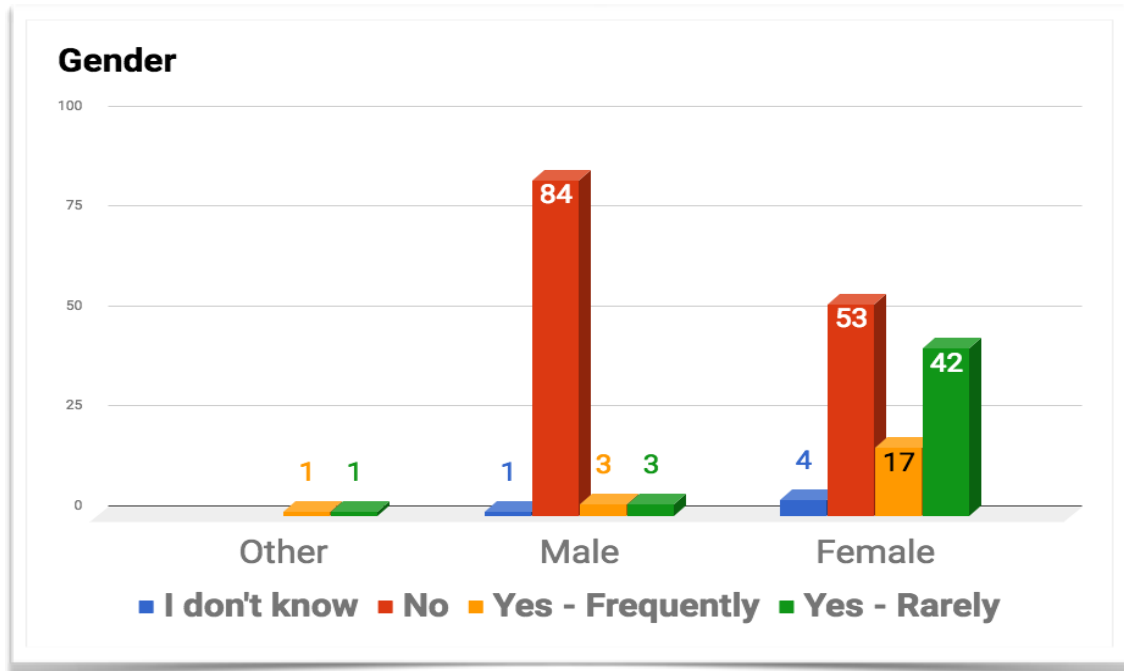


Turning to religion, the results are balanced across the Christian and atheist groups. As for participants of other faith, most reported that they have not been subjected to hate speech (note, however, that no Muslim respondents took part in the survey).



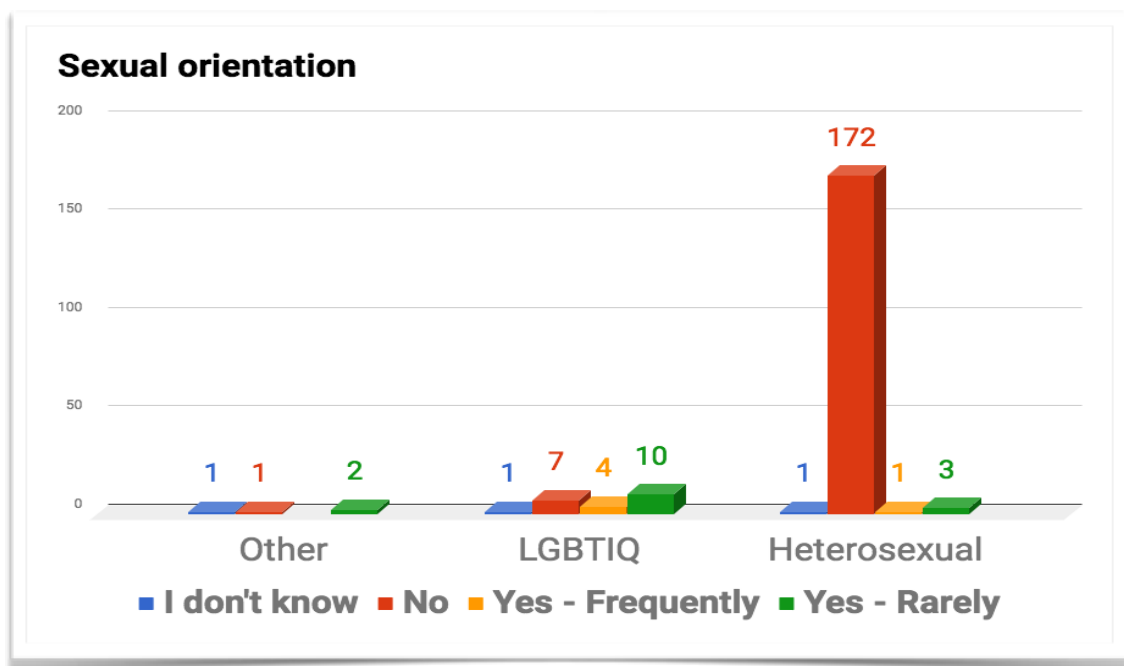


In terms of gender identity, with the exception of male respondents, threats and insults on this basis seem to be a commonplace occurrence among female and non-binary identifying respondents.



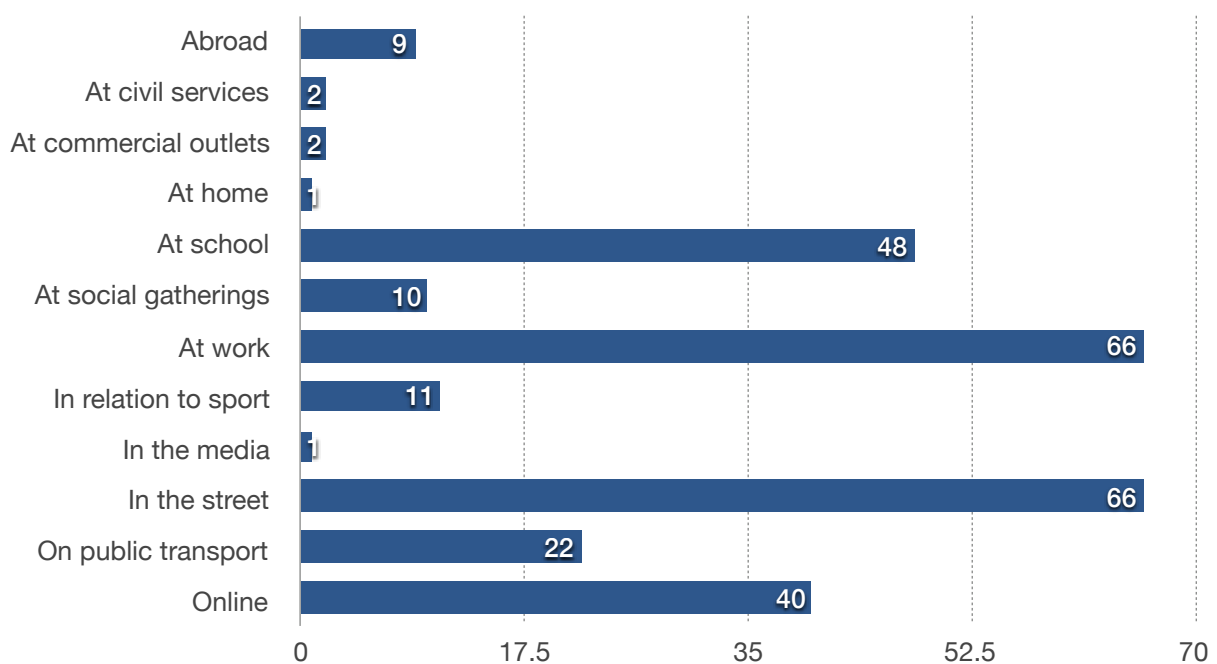
Finally, in relation to their sexual orientation, most of the respondents that identified as heterosexual in our questionnaire stated that have not been the target of insults and threats on its basis, with a more substantial proportion of the remaining respondents stating that they have frequently or rarely been the target of insults and threats on these grounds.





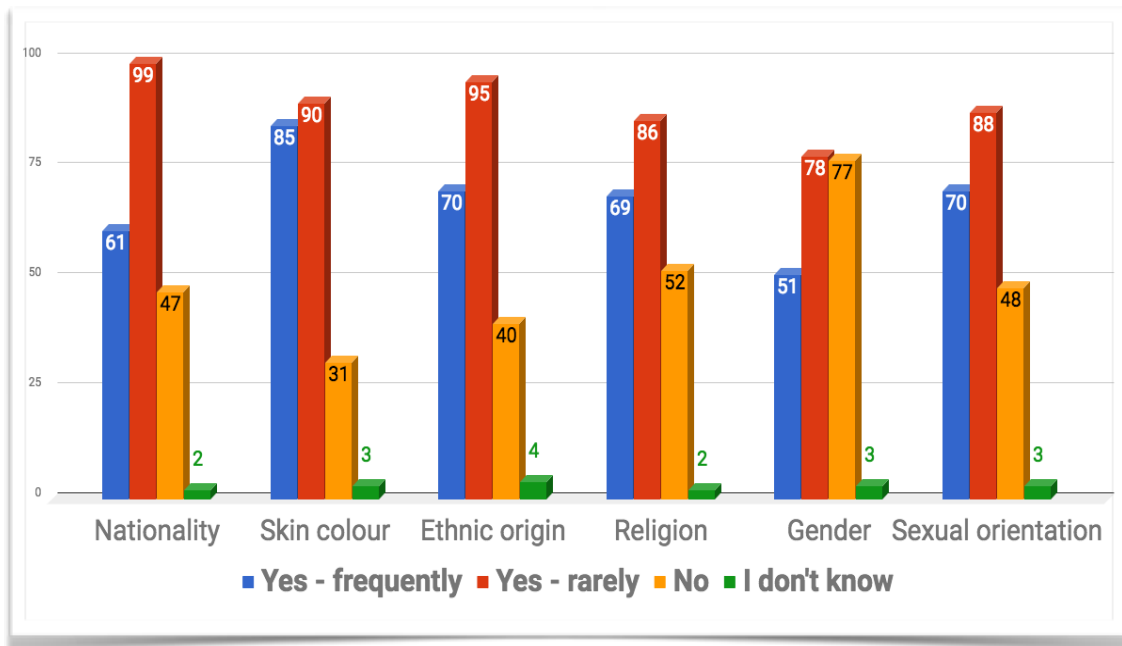
A few of our respondents also identified further grounds on which they have experienced insults and threats, these being disability, language preference, mental health issues, personal life style and social class. Notably, three Maltese respondents also noted that they have been insulted on the basis of their nationality abroad.

When asked about the various settings in which they have felt as targets of insults and threats because of one of the aforementioned protected characteristics, our respondents singled out the street and work settings as the most prominent ones, at 23.6% each, followed by the school (17.1%), online (14.3%), and public transport settings (7.9%). Such insults and threats also seem to emerge relatively often in relation to sport, at social gatherings and when travelling abroad.

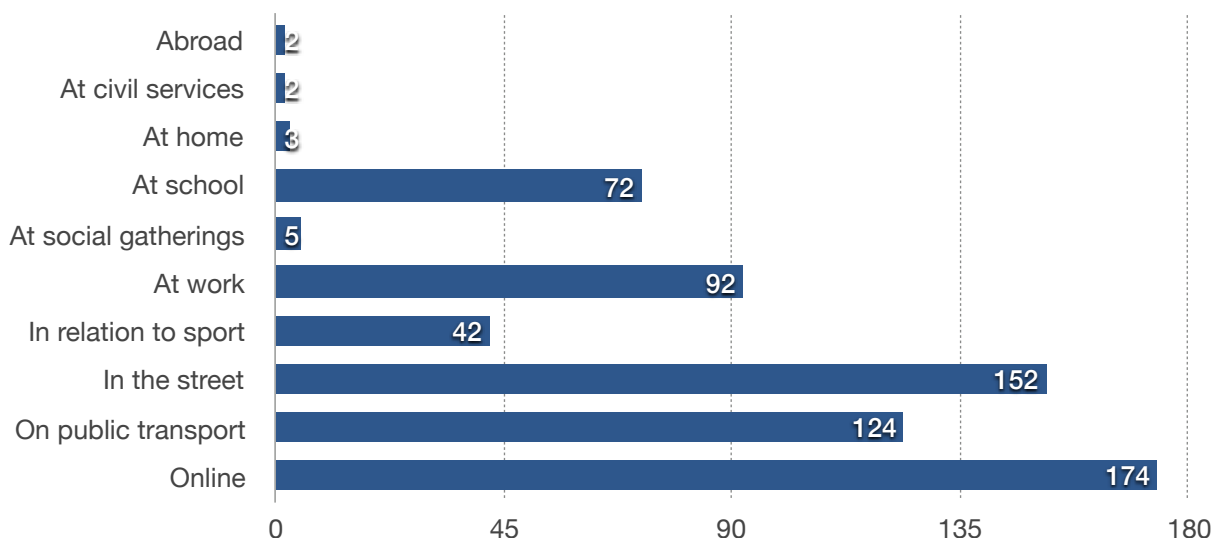




Turning to the question of witnessing insults and threats targeting others on the basis of some protected characteristic, the number of respondents who reported that they have indeed witnessed such events was higher than those who haven't across all conditions. Here, the most common bases for such incidents, alongside the percentage of participants who have witnessed such events, seem to be in descending order skin colour (83.7%), ethnic origin (78.9%), nationality (76.6%), sexual orientation (75.6%), religion (74.2%) and gender (61.7%). Again, these responses seem to corroborate our finding that xenophobia is more widespread than homophobia in the local context:



Moving on to the settings in which the questionnaire participants reported to have witnessed incidents in which individuals were targets of such insults and threats, 83.3% of our respondents noted that they have witnessed such incidents online, 72.7% in the street and 59.3% on public transport. The next most common settings in which such incidents have been witnessed by our respondents were at work, at school and in relation to sport.

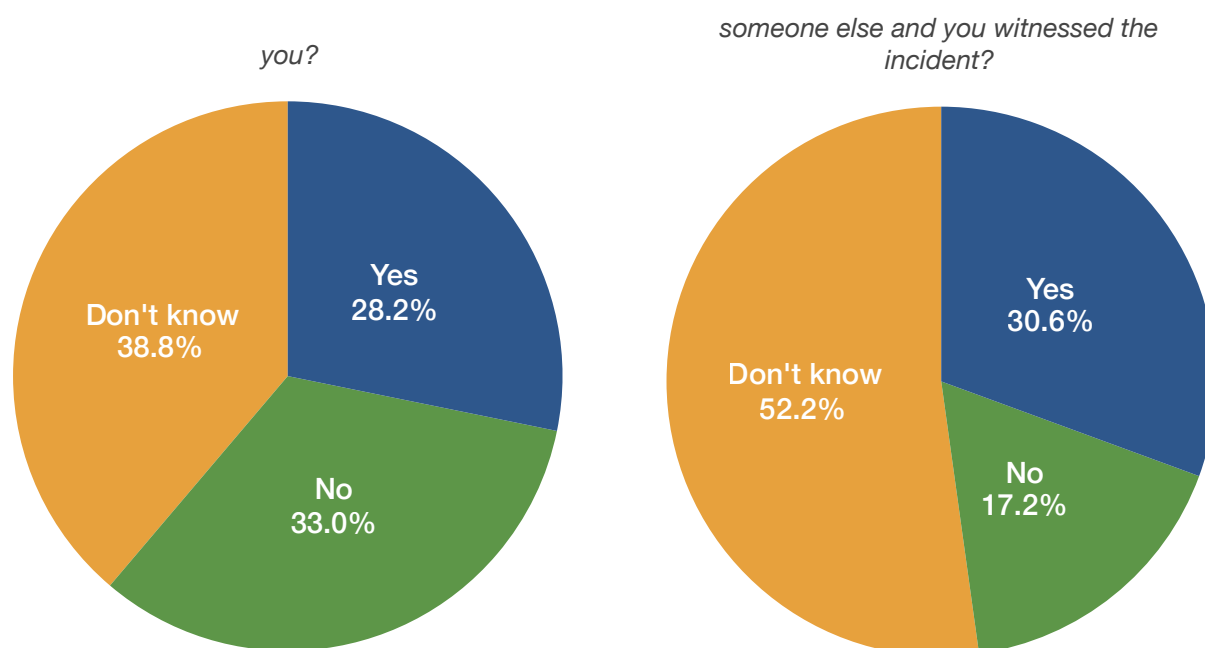


The aforementioned percentages are quite high and clearly suggest that hate speech is indeed a cause for concern in the local context, especially when it comes to the experience that local internet users have on social media and websites. This was also a conclusion that was reached in our training sessions with members of staff and students at the University of Malta, during which it was made evident that not a lot of local residents are aware of the legal provisions on hate speech on the Maltese islands. The next section of the questionnaire was designed to provide some indication as to why the general public might feel that hate speech and discriminatory discourse in general are not actively combatted locally.

## Reporting hate speech incidents

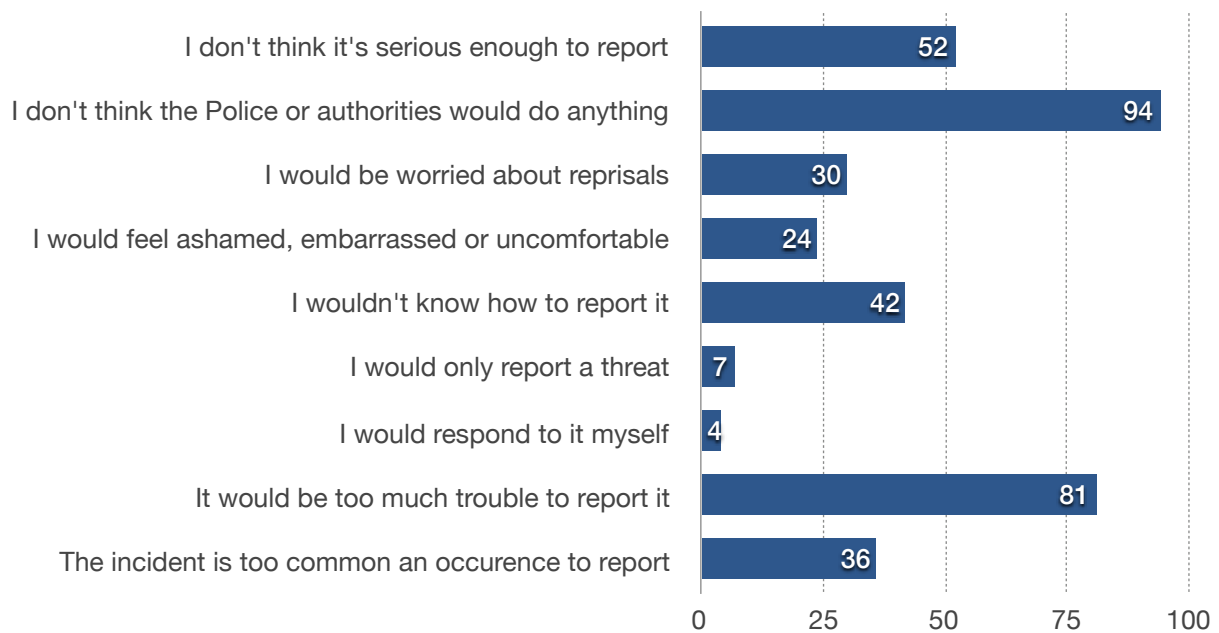
In the penultimate part of the questionnaire, we sought to ascertain whether or not people generally report hate speech when they encounter it and identify the reasons why they may not opt to do so.

*Would you report insults or threats on the basis of nationality, skin colour, ethnicity, religion, gender or sexual orientation, if these were directed to*

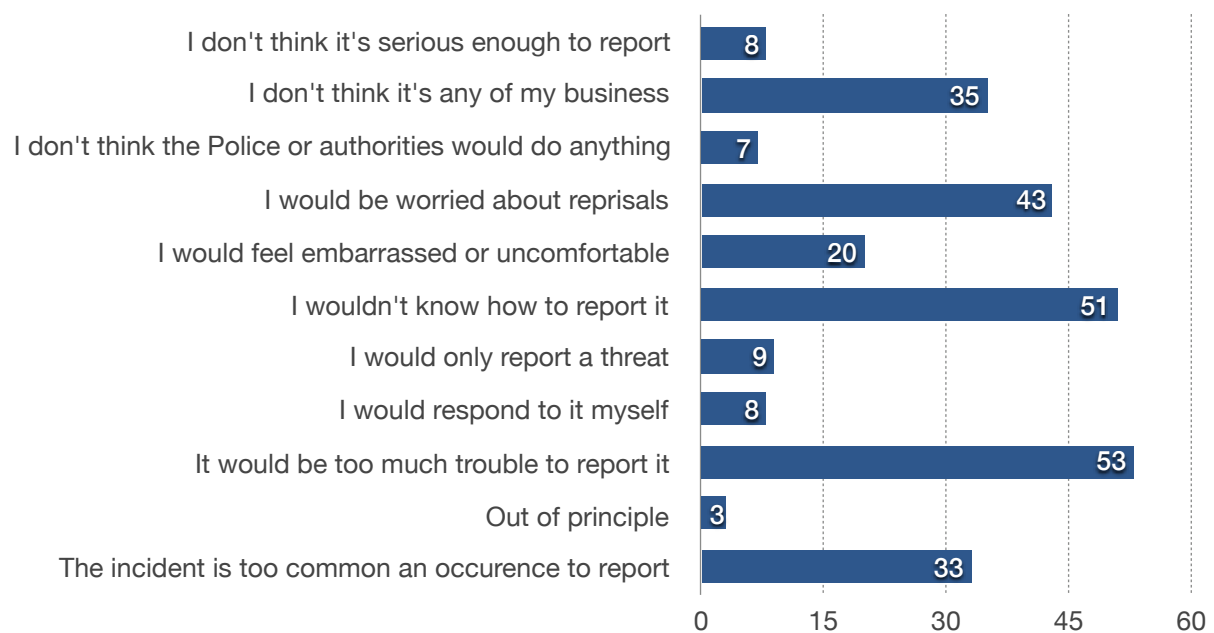


As can be seen in the pie charts above, marginally more people would be more willing to report a hate speech incident that they would have witnessed, and many more would be unwilling to report such an incident directed personally at them. Turning to the reasons why they would not opt to report hate speech in each context, we can see in the relevant chart below that out of the 150 respondents who expressed their unwillingness or non-committal to reporting hate incidents directed at them, the highest proportion provided as a reason their lack of confidence in the relevant authorities' ability to do something about the incident (62.7%) and the amount of hassle that reporting a hate speech incident takes (54%).





Finally, out of the 145 respondents who were either unsure about reporting such incidents that they may witness or unwilling to do so, 36.6% said that it would be too much trouble to report an incident, while 35.2% admitted to not knowing how exactly to report it. Then, 29.7% of our respondents expressed their concern about potential reprisals stemming from such a report and 22.8% thought that such incidents are not worth reporting because they are too common in everyday life and an equal percentage suggested that they would not report hate speech incidents targeting others as it would not be any of their business.



What these results suggest on the whole, however, is that, despite personal reasons and preferences, there is quite a widespread apprehension regarding the hassle that the process of reporting (and potentially prosecuting) incidents of hate speech involves, as well as an equally



widespread lack of confidence that the relevant authorities will do anything to vindicate the victims of such a verbal attack.

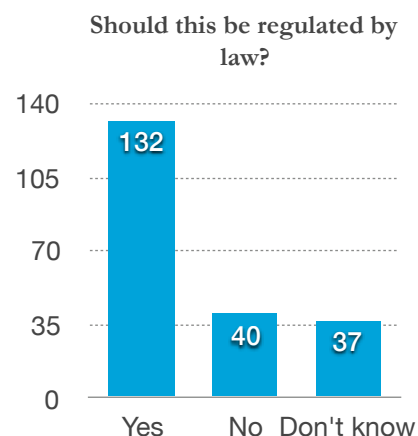
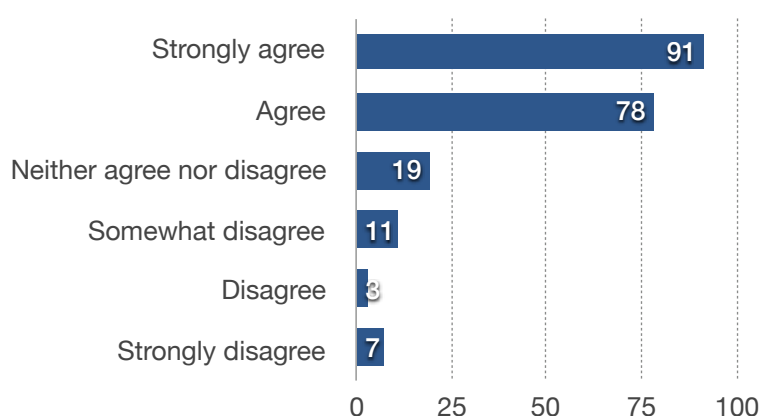
## Definitions of hate speech

In the last part of the questionnaire, we sought to investigate the way in which the general public perceives the notion of hate speech, a concept that as many as 93.8% of our respondents indicated are familiar with. However, since hate speech can be defined in various different ways, we asked participants to indicate the extent to which they agree or not with such different definitions. These definitions varied in their content and were ordered in terms of severity, with the first one equating hate speech with plain discriminatory remarks, the second including insults, the third threats and the fourth and final one incitement to violence. At the same time, respondents were asked whether they thought that there should be a law regulating hate speech on the basis of each definition.

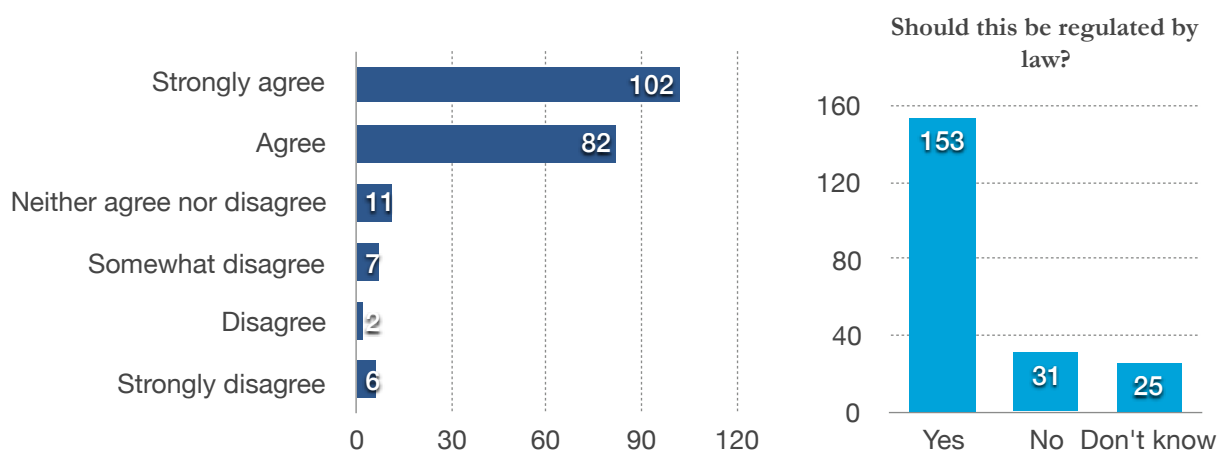


As the following results indicate, the general public seems to be sensitised as regards hate speech, with the majority agreeing that in all its possible conceptions - from discriminatory remarks to incitement to violence - it should be regulated by law. Quite expectedly also, the closer a definition of hate speech gets to the “incitement to violence” criterion, the more universally acceptable it seems to be.

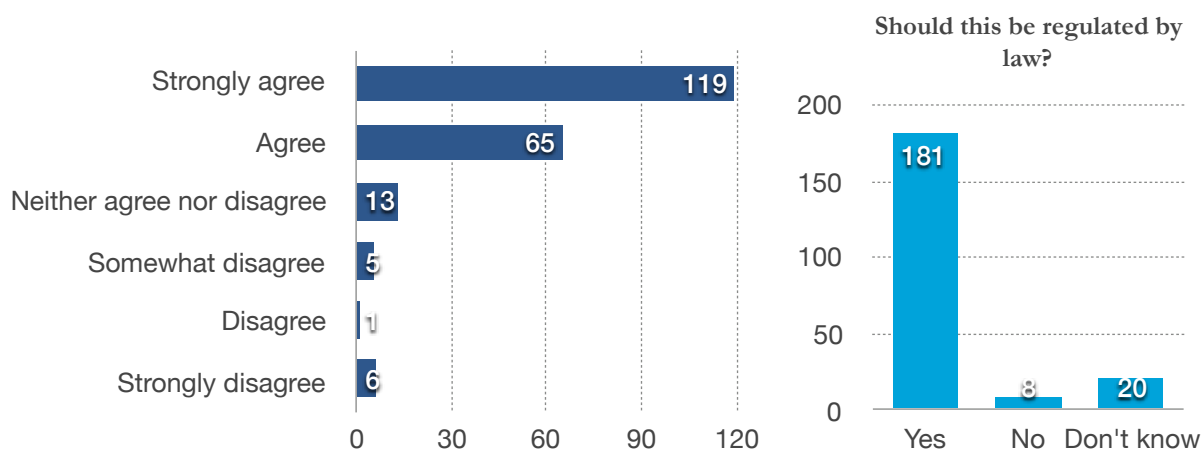
*‘Hate speech means making prejudiced remarks about people because of their race or nationality or ethnic origins or religion or gender or sexual orientation’*



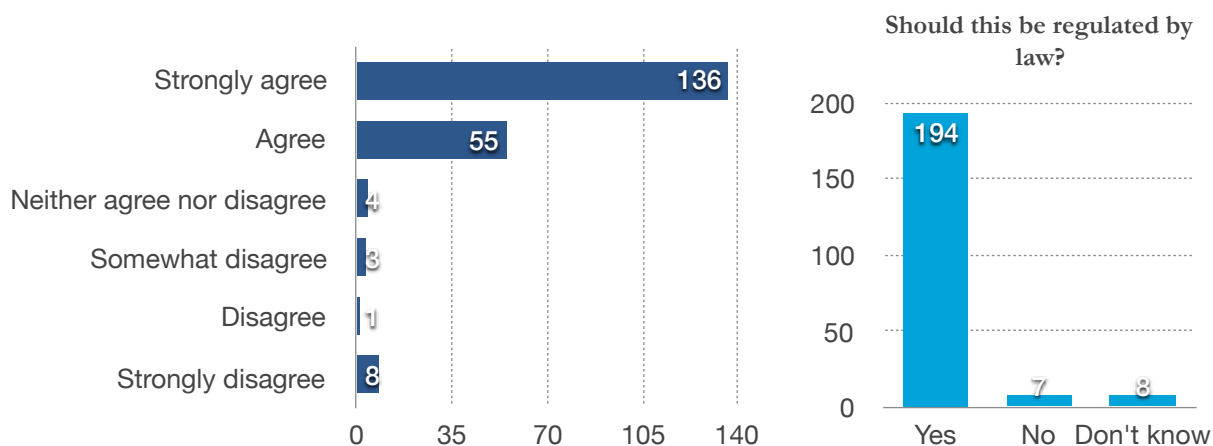
*'Hate speech means insulting someone because of their race or nationality or ethnic origin or religion or gender or sexual orientation'*



*'Hate speech means threatening someone because of their race or nationality or ethnic origin or religion or gender or sexual orientation.'*



*'Hate speech means encouraging other people to be violent towards or show hatred towards people because of their race or nationality or ethnicity or religion or gender or sexual orientation.'*



All in all, the results of this questionnaire provide some empirical data about the perception that internet users in Malta have of the hate speech phenomenon. The data resulted from this survey provide small-scale evidence about how the respondents perceive discrimination on racial, religious, sexual orientation and gender identity grounds, as well as what they think about the need to develop norms and tools to tackle such discrimination. More specifically, there appears to be more consensus among respondents in terms of acceptability with regards to insults and threats targeted at sexual minorities rather than national, religious, and racial minorities and more respondents have witnessed discrimination than have been a target of it. Regarding the regulation of hate speech, hate speech being a notion that is well known among our participants, the more extreme forms of violence and threat render more consensus among respondents with regards to legal ramifications.

### *The C.O.N.T.A.C.T. focus group interviews*

The final part of the C.O.N.T.A.C.T. research strand involved a series of semi-structured interviews that were meant to help us gain a deeper understanding of the results obtained through our questionnaire. For this part, we conducted 4 focus group interviews with 21 participants, 11 female and 10 male, in total. Most participants were under 35 years of age, with 5 of them being older, and the groups comprised 13 Maltese, 6 EU and 2 non-EU nationals. Finally in terms of their occupation, 10 interviewees were students, 4 were academics, 2 were employed in administrative positions, 2 more were artists, while the remaining 3 were a marketing consultant, a computer programmer and a taxi driver respectively.

### Comments evaluations

During all focus group interviews, there appeared to be broad consensus amongst the participants as to why the comments used in the questionnaire received the acceptability ratings that they did. In this vein, there were a number of themes that came to light during the interviews, the most pertinent of them being the distinction between xenophobia and homophobia in the Maltese context, and issues relating to integration and multiculturalism.

The conclusion that xenophobia is a far greater issue than homophobia in Malta is certainly not new; it came out both in the comment data that we analysed, as well as in the questionnaire, where participants were less quick to label a xenophobic comment as unacceptable than they were a homophobic one. The focus group interview provided an opportunity to confirm this and to ask our interviewees' opinions as to why this might be. As expected, participants confirmed that, in their experience, homophobia has become less of an issue in recent years and, as they pointed out, there are a number of reasons why this might be.



Firstly, with regards to LGBTIQ rights and legislation, Malta has taken large steps forward in recent years to the point where Malta is now one of the leading countries when it comes to acceptance of sexual and gender minorities. As our interviewees noted, this legislation change occurred after a long and strong campaign by the Maltese LGBTIQ community, which not only exposed legislators and the general public to LGBTIQ issues and needs, but also gave the community widespread exposure. As one participant characteristically pointed out, *“nowadays because of the acceptance culture developing, we need to accept minority groups. Gay and homosexuality was at the forefront of that movement, has always been at the forefront of that movement”* (Interviewee 20, Focus Group 4). Beyond the recent exposure that the LGBTIQ community has received, participants also pointed out that it is becoming increasingly common to be directly related to a person of LGBTI or Q identity through friendship or family. Therefore, while LGBTIQ persons might indeed form part of their own minority group, they are still ultimately part of the ‘in-group’ of Maltese citizens. So, while, in the minds of some Maltese, LGBTIQ people are still ‘one of us’, migrants are not and will never be:

*“Because you know before people used to be very conservative so basically... because my grandmother, I think that she was kind of conservative but now that in her family her grandson or granddaughters are themselves homosexual she accepts it more openly you know, even if she has a little bit of a problem, but you know, now she's open to listen, she's open to, you know, she's more open to the idea and to the idea of accepting this, you know because it's involves Maltese you know it doesn't involve somebody else living, you know I mean another person coming to the country, or another nationality you know. So that's the reason why maybe they are more accept... how do you say?”*

(Interviewee 9, Focus Group 2)

Another point picked up by our participants had to do with the widespread conflation of migrants with Muslim individuals as a reason for the expression of discriminatory opinions:

*“... this is a very sensitive issue I think. Um, even for people who are, have no problems with Muslims per se, but then, when you start seeing your, I guess, people feel nervous when they see their neighbourhood being transformed um, you know, with the appearance of a mosque for instance, um, they feel uncomfortable with that. So, less people would be inclined to say, you know, that, less people would be inclined to defend immigrants who are calling for these changes.”*

(Interviewee 1, Focus Group 1)

According to our interviewees, part of the fear of migrants is that they will take jobs that, otherwise, would go to Maltese people and would, therefore, have a negative impact on the economy and life in general. While migrants are seen as a threat to the stability of the country, LGBTIQ persons do not pose the same threat and do not have a direct impact on one's life. Although one might not agree with their lifestyle, it appears to have little effect on one's everyday existence. This is not the same for migrants, who are seen as a true threat to the Maltese way of life and stability:

*“I think most people in Malta, I mean with immigration, they see immigrants like ‘ah they're taking what's ours’ so that's why it effects. Like you said I*





*mean homophobia's just a mind-set 'I don't accept you' or 'I accept you' and it doesn't really affect me in general. I mean some people are uncomfortable by it, I don't know why, but I mean it's, they're not taking something away from them."*

(Interviewee 6, Focus Group 2)

Finally, it was also pointed out that this is not a product of Maltese mentality alone. Mainstream political discourse plays a role and reinforces the sort of xenophobic discourse used to speak about ethnic, racial, and religious minorities, and in particular African, Arab, and Muslim migrants. Moreover, the mainstream media further reinforces a general positive stance toward the LGBTIQ community. Hence, the negative discourse towards migrants may be normalised for society, making them less likely to rate it as unacceptable:

*"But the mainstream political discourse on the subject of multiculturalism and immigration actually reinforces racism."*

(Interviewee 15, Focus Group 3)

When discussing African, Arab, and Muslim migrants as opposed to migrants from Western and Northern Europe, the issue of assimilation and integration came out more prominently. Participants pointed out that while African, Arab, and Muslim migrants face a lot of discrimination and even hate, migrants from Western and Northern Europe do not generally face the same intolerance. In their view, it was because of this that the participants of the questionnaire might have been less likely to rate Islamophobic or racist comments as negative.

The negative stance toward the minorities mentioned above, is likely due to the fact that they do not assimilate as well into Maltese society. While Western and Northern Europeans seem to 'blend in', African, Arab, and Muslim migrants stand out both physically and culturally. Thus it became apparent that what the Maltese expects is not for one to simply integrate into society, but to fully assimilate:

*"but because it's easier for them to assimilate, not to integrate. We expect them assimilate, not integrate."*

(Interviewee 3, Focus Group 1)

In fact the common perception seems to be that Western and Northern European migrants have a very similar culture to that of the Maltese:

*"because they're the same, I think because, maybe in terms of culture, there's a lot more similarity between a Maltese and a European".*

(Interviewee 1, Focus Group 1)

To further reiterate this distinction between the LGBTIQ community and migrants as minority groups as a justification of the increasing discrimination toward migrants, the discussion of multiculturalism was inevitable. Multiculturalism is a hot issue that has been widely debated in recent years. Some argue that multiculturalism and acceptance of various cultures can contribute to a society where diversity is not only respected, but also embraced, and people of different backgrounds can come together to live in a colourful society of various languages, practices,





religions, and even cuisines. On the other hand, others argue that multiculturalism is not possible and creates animosity and distress to those living within such a society. During our interview sessions, we made no attempt to enter into a debate of such notions, so we can only look at the comments that our focus group participants spontaneously passed regarding multiculturalism with a view to understanding how these perceptions might have contributed to the acceptability ratings that the questionnaire yielded.

All in all, there appeared to be a tendency to defend opinions that are taken to be protecting the Maltese culture. Multiculturalism might not be negative by virtue of what it stands for; what makes it particularly negative is its ability to push the Maltese culture as the dominant and visible culture of the island aside. As one participant put it, while giving their opinion about the low acceptability rating received by one of the comments, *“in the other one he's attacking directly the people rather than just analysing the situation from a 'I want to protect my culture' point of view”* (Interviewee 20, Focus Group 4). As this comment suggests, it may be considered less acceptable to directly attack a person on the basis of a minority identity, but if one is trying to defend and protect one's culture, it is more acceptable to use such rhetoric.

Another participant pointed out that, although the LGBTIQ community might be somewhat disjointed within itself, in the sense of having lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgender, people, and queer people all forming part of a unified group, the community might not in fact be so diverse within itself, in that members of the LGBTIQ are all working toward gaining legal and societal recognition of their sex, gender, sexual orientation and gender expression rights in some way or another. This is not to simplify the struggle of the LGBTIQ community by disregarding the work that they do for having safe spaces, better medical care etc., but rather to exemplify that, at least in the view of non-LGBTIQ persons, they have more in common with each other than they have that divides them. In addition, as already pointed out above they are again perceived, as a community, to have more in common with other Maltese people than say a black person from Sudan, or a Muslim person from Syria. Hence, as one participant pointed out that *“in spite of the fact that the LGBTIQ..., where there's these subdivisions within, but it is much more... it's not so diverse. The issues that arise out of multiculturalism affect all areas of life cause there's culture, there's religion, there's...”* (Interviewee 13, Focus Group 3).

Honing in on the LGBTIQ community, although, as discussed above, possibly due to recent legislation and awareness-raising activities, the general public is less willing to accept homophobic discourse, there still exists some homophobia in Malta, and participants of the focus group helped ascertain why this might be. It was noted during the interviews that people might be less inclined to mark a comment as discriminatory or hateful if that comment somehow involves the church. In other words, if the comment is inline with the church's doctrine, the comment must be right, or at the very least, make sense:

*“Perhaps as well, the last one, the third one is more acceptable to people because it's, the context is less religious. The other two are religious stories, the first one about the church's commission, and the second one about um, the Dominican order, but the third one is about legislation, so it may be that um people find it more acceptable...”*

(Interviewee 4, Focus Group 1)



What this suggests is that people are less willing to accept discrimination against LGBTIQ persons on the basis of legislative freedoms than they are on the basis of religious argumentation.

Moving away from axiological values and turning to the linguistic aspects of discriminatory discourse, participants of the focus groups pointed out that the strength of the language used in the comments could have had a bearing on whether or not they were deemed acceptable by the participants of the questionnaire. It appears that the stronger the language used, the more likely participants were to rate the comment as unacceptable:

*“As well it is the language that is used, like the first one 'destroys' it's a very strong word to use. Where as the third one doesn't seem to have... well... I guess he presented a more balanced argument, when he said: 'this way all cultures can be appreciated without one culture subduing the other.' He gave a more balanced argument I guess”.*

(Interviewee 17, Focus Group 4)

This observation was not limited to the xenophobic data, but applied across the board. Another participant pointed out that the use of the word ‘*disease*’ in one of the homophobic comments made the expression less acceptable:

*“exactly... And they are using the word disease.”*

(Interviewee 16, Focus Group 4)

Following from above, our interviewees also suggested that more direct insults and discrimination are easier to rate as unacceptable, while more indirect ones are couched in a way that makes the explicit negativity difficult to assess:

*“For me the first one is very direct ‘immigration from the third world destroys our count...I mean Western societies’ I mean, basically it's hateful, you know, people are just like making statements without any evidence or anything to back up their belief...” Another participants stated, “Ehe, I think same thing. I think it's all in the language and how they're written. Emm one of them just... it doesn't point... the last one specifically it's not pointing fingers it's more like beating around the bush, so it's not directed emm... against anyone per se.. emm... I think that that's why it's more acceptable, so like people don't really see what the person is saying.”*

(Interviewee 9, Focus Group 2)

Finally, a major factor that contributed to comments being rated as hateful or discriminatory was the presence of violence:

*“The first one [which mentions assault] is more violent, No?...”*

(Interviewee 16, Focus Group 4)

There seemed to be agreement amongst the focus group participants that the comments that mention violence were undisputedly hate speech. As one participant affirmed, “express whatever



you think you want to express unless you're inciting people to violence or explicitly inciting people to violence or hatred right. Um, and I don't think these three comments are explicit in that sense. So, to my mind, you have a right to say whatever you like, you know, within those parameters even if, I'm insulted about what you say. Um so, you know, freedom of speech also means freedom to insult, for better or worse. That's how I see it" (Interviewee 15, Focus Group 3).

## Definitions of hate speech and hate speech laws

This brings us neatly to the question of freedom of speech, which is a widely debated issue when it comes to discussing hate speech laws. Participants were asked to draw a line between the sort of discourse and comments that should be prosecutable and the type of rhetoric that, although discriminatory in nature, should be allowed in the principles of free speech. One participant who took part in both the questionnaire and the focus group explains:

*"this was my dilemma when I answered the questionnaire. Because, when you're asking whether something is acceptable or not right, it's not obvious to me what that really means. Is it, whether we should allow people to express these opinions or whether the opinions themselves are acceptable, cause those are two different questions."*

(Interviewee 15, Focus Group 3)

The same participant made a distinction between speech that is permissible in the sense that it should not be forbidden by law, and speech that is not acceptable in that it should not be tolerated by society. Therefore a comment can be permissible: *"allowable, I'd say yeah, these are allowable"*, while at the same time it should not be condoned by society: *"acceptable by me, no. They're you know, based on irrational ideas about cultures um which I don't accept for one minute"* (Interviewee 15, Focus Group 3). Similar arguments were made by other interviewees too:

*"I agree as well. I don't agree with the opinion, but I agree that it's an acceptable opinion to have. I think that if this person has this opinion he should be able to express it in a sense."*

(Interviewee 3, Focus Group 1)

Overall, participants agreed that it is important for society that people have the opportunity to voice any concerns they might have despite the fact that those concerns might offend some people:

*"yes, I agree with that as well. That, you know, um, if one has reservations about multiculturalism and if he or she thinks it's not working..., you know, that person should be given freedom to express that reservation."*

(Interviewee 1, Focus Group 1)



## Experiences with hate speech

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The majority of the interview participants were Maltese nationals and as such noted that they have seldom faced discrimination. There were however some experiences of discrimination from participants that formed part of minorities; hence, a number of themes, linked to experiences of hate and discrimination in Malta, came to light during the focus group interviews.

There has been a notable rise in racism and homophobia in recent years. This was observed in the answers of not only the Maltese interviewees, but also those of members of a minority group. One participant who is originally from a non-EU country stated:

*“because the first time actually I came here it was in 2009 for my studies and people were very accepting at that moment. I think that I was kind of, that's the reason that I actually fell in love with Malta, cause I felt welcomed here and when I came back four years ago um, I actually saw, I noticed a difference here you know. People were more... less welcoming and um, there's as well the idea of um you know the skin colour because... you are different, you look different so basically you can, actually I can actually see the difference between when they look at me or, some people I mean, and when I actually speak and I, you can actually clearly see hear my French accent and they're like there's something that change in the way they behave”*

(Interviewee 9, Focus Group 2)

Another participant noted:

*“when I was in Edinburgh in the 90s people used to ask me... They'd often ask 'is there racism in Malta?' and I would say 'well not really, but we are very homogeneous and we're not tried and tested. Let's wait until a situation like we have now tried and tested.' And I have definitely witnessed... I live in St. Pauls Bay and there is an... it's an area where you can rent for relatively cheap and there is... people will not sit next to a black guy on a bus. For example, if there's nowhere else to sit, they might just stand. So there's these kind of... this kind of behaviour is there now, but...”*

(Interviewee 13, Focus Group 3)

This highlights the perception that even when racial minorities are not faced directly with hate speech or hate crimes, they still face discrimination and exclusion on a daily basis. Another participant also attributed this rise in racism and the presence of homophobia to the fact that racial minorities are quite new in Malta and LGBTQI ones are now becoming more visible:

*“it's um... I think the reason is that until recently, you know, say 20 years ago, um, the country was quite racially homogeneous. People did not really talk about sexual difference much, so it would be difficult for somebody to be... It would be less likely that somebody's gonna be the target of insults.”*

(Interviewee 15, Focus Group 3)



All in all, racism appeared to be the most common type of hate/discrimination witnessed by participants:

*“Yeah, I mean I was out with a friend and there would suddenly be comments sort of about they were black and people being quite rude to her and stuff about, and things like that.”*

(Interviewee 2, Focus Group 1)

Participants generally agreed that the reason that racism is the most common form of discrimination is that, unlike sexual orientation, race is something that one cannot hide:

*“but, I think skin colour you can never hide isn't it”*

(Interviewee 12, Focus Group 3)

Moreover, racism is something that happens in the open and people appear not to hide their racist sentiment:

*“yeah, I do remember my landlord telling me not to leave my window open in Msida because of all the blacks there and I was just like ‘what?’”*

(Interviewee 2, Focus Group 1)

Moreover, racism and anti-migrant sentiment are often conflated. As mentioned earlier, there tends to be widespread discrimination against migrants from sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East. As Africans and Arab Middle Easterns are often visibly different from Maltese - racially, ethnically, as well as culturally through clothes and, sometimes, religious practices - these various types of discrimination often go hand-in-hand.

*“There is a lot of anti-immigrant sentiment around, I think, but then there is, does seem to be everywhere in Europe at the moment...”*

(Interviewee 4, Focus Group 1)

Other participants also pointed out that racism is not limited to any particular generation, but can be seen across the board:

*“it is worrying ah. I've met university students who are rabidly, you know, far right I like to call it and you think that these students in their 20s would know better, would be a lot more progressive, but...”*

(Interviewee 4, Focus Group 1)

The realisation that young people can also be racist was generally surprising for a number of participants:



*“and, coming from the older population, you, not expect it, but you tolerate it more, but for example, I had a lecture a couple of months ago where a student said that, mmm, we were renting to some Arabs and now we have cockroaches in the flat and we will never rent to Arabs again. And you don't exp... to see this from a university student that's you know 26 years old, it's surprising.”*

(Interviewee 4, Focus Group 1)

Finally, participants of the focus group interviews were also told that a number of the questionnaire participants reported that they had experienced discrimination on the basis of their gender or gender identity. There was again broad consensus among interviewees that there exists a state of sexism and patriarchy in Malta, which is discrete and often goes unnoticed, but that forms part of one's daily experience nonetheless: *“and there's a subtle misogyny”* (Interviewee 1, Focus Group 1). Another participant elucidated:

*“I think it depends on which group you are referring to because for example gender, I think there's a state of like, not hidden, but not really talked about patriarchy that we're not really addressing”.*

(Interviewee 3, Focus Group 1)

Similarly, a third participant noted that *“women generally are more often the target”* (Interviewee 15, Focus Group 3). Another participant explained that this subtle sexism is no ingrained into society that it often goes unchallenged. This contrasts with the use of homophobic discourse, as discussed above, which is generally less acceptable:

*“I think as he said, like we assume that with sexist comments, like, people will generally accept it and be ok with it, um, so I guess we have this like preconceived notion in our minds that if we say something that is sexist like there will be nobody else that jumps in and kind of argues against. Whereas with sexist... whereas with homophobic comments, um, we're more kind of um, scared to say something”.*

(Interviewee 17, Focus Group 4)



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## Chapter 3

# Conclusion

By way of conclusion, we will summarise the main findings of the research undertaken locally under the auspices of the C.O.N.T.A.C.T. project, as these have arisen from our discussion in this report, while providing certain suggestions about angles of the issue that could benefit from improvement.

The central finding of the present research has been that xenophobia appears to be a far greater issue than homophobia in the Maltese context. Even within the domain of discourse about migrants, however, there is a particular subset of the relevant population that seems to be the main target of discriminatory attitudes; a group that is characterised by its Muslim faith and an Arab or African ethnic origin. What is particularly notable, in view of our analysis of online comments as well as the discussions that arose during the focus group interviews, is that there is also a widespread tendency to confound religion with ethnicity, with instances of both Christians being categorised as Muslims because of their skin colour and Muslims being categorised as Arab/African by virtue of their faith alone. This local prevalence of xenophobia in comparison





to homophobia can also be discerned in the existence of far more discriminatory comments pertaining to migrants than members of the LGBTIQ community in our sample analysis, as well as in the tendency of our survey participants to find xenophobic remarks more acceptable than homophobic remarks that are commonly marked as completely unacceptable. This latter point can even be seen in the following comment that was left in the questionnaire by one of our respondents: “The proliferation of immigrants and their culture is generating fear as well as inconveniences in some areas in Malta and reprisals are sometimes understandable.” Finally, if the incidents reported on the C.O.N.T.A.C.T. website and are any indication, they too show that there is far more discrimination against individuals on the basis of their ethnic origin or religion than on that of their gender identity and sexual orientation.

Turning to the quite prominent positive attitude towards members of the LGBTIQ community, as we have seen, this has been attributed by our focus group interview participants to the inclusion of the relevant group in the Maltese in-group. Still, the role that recent legislation on LGBTIQ rights has played in this vein could also be a contributing factor; after all, Malta was the only country in the C.O.N.T.A.C.T. consortium where the positive stance towards the LGBTIQ minority was higher than the negative one in the online comments analysis, when it also ranks first in legal and policy human rights of LGBTI people in Europe.<sup>18</sup>

When it comes to the prosecution of hate speech, however, things could be improved. As the majority of our survey participants asserted, the most common reason that deters them from reporting hate speech is the presumption that it would be too much trouble to do so, coupled with the belief that the relevant authorities would not deal with the issue in an effective manner with a matter that is so commonplace. As another one of our questionnaire respondents put it in a comment: “When I did report once, regarding racism, on public transport, the bus company said, ‘*We’ll look into it*’ and that’s all. In the realm of schools, there aren’t any structures that make reporting easy. I would not go to a Head of School, for example, as some are themselves racist.” While we of course do not necessarily agree with this opinion, we do feel, as researchers, that it would be very useful, if law enforcement authorities kept records of the relevant incidents, as this would help build a more robust body of knowledge on the issue in Malta.

Clearly, however, the biggest responsibility for combatting hate speech lies with those who have a direct effect on public perception. On the one hand, it seems particularly crucial to understand the underlying reasons for the emergence of such speech and develop policies (and in some cases even attitudes) that will alleviate sources of apprehension in the general public. On the other, it is also essential that the general public develops an awareness on matters of discrimination, be it through wider-reaching awareness-raising events - perhaps with the collaboration of the media, or the establishment of an agenda that promotes inclusion and tolerance at all levels of education and later on in the workplace.

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<sup>18</sup> <http://preview.tinyurl.com/ybvtk5rk>

