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<p>WHAT IS YOUR EXPERIENCE IN AN ENLARGED EUROPEAN UNION?</p> <p>On May 1st 2004, 10 countries joined the European Union; Malta was one of them. This tiny piece of rock that I call home saw thousands of citizens flocking to the bastions of our capital to bear witness to history being made; at the tender age of 14, I don't remember understanding much about the implications of a winning 'yes' vote but I do remember what it felt like; dreams for a better brighter future became almost palpable and the fresh feeling of hope hung in the air around us.</p> <p>To call Malta small would be an understatement – a population of around 416,000 crammed quite snugly into 316 km² - thus the possibility of being dwarfed and overwhelmed by larger nations was a recurring concern in our island's past with the two major political parties battling out the pros and cons right up until the end. The Pro-Europeans won out by just 3% more votes – a narrow victory. Almost eleven years on, I have no regrets about the outcome of the referendum.</p> <p>Joining the EU is definitely not a quick fix for a nation's underlying problems; accepting the acquis of the EU would mean implementing and enforcing new policies that may be a far cry from the acceding country's status quo. Thus candidate countries should strive to level out imbalances and reforms and confronting challenges while accepting the EU's guiding hand and discipline – a form of 'tough love'; harsh but necessary. In the long run, member states can expect to receive more than they pay out, both financially and otherwise. The impact of enlargement will enable both sides to reap the benefits.</p> <p>The concerns and fears of loss of independence and control is natural in countries debating membership. Take it from someone native to an island where gaining independence and becoming a republic became a reality only just over 50 years ago; we are no strangers to the plight of the foreign ruler coming into our nation and imposing his laws while taking from us as he pleases, thus it has always been in our nature to be prudent when it comes to matters of a higher entity. This is not the case with the EU however, rather this institution has shown to always be open and willing to be flexible and amend policies as the situation of member states necessitates, dispelling any myth of a superior European higher order seeking to stifle the little guy. Furthermore, our revered culture and traditions continue to thrive in the present day, a clear sign that our national identity was never lost but rather we were fortunate enough to gain a second, European identity.</p> <p>Since joining the EU, Malta can boast consecutive drops in unemployment rates, proper sewage treatment facilities and the tourism industry remains a key pillar on the island's foreground, enhancing its previous economic contributions. Even though we are still facing big problems with irregular immigration which have yet to be tackled, financial aid from the EU to cope with this issue has still left us better off than having to face it alone.</p>	



Moreover, EU membership gave local companies more credibility on a continental front, allowing them to expand export trade and become more competitive while raising their game. According to a national survey conducted by Ernst and Young last year, the euro currency has lent a helping hand in making Malta more attractive for foreign investors. EU citizens can expect a better quality of life while enjoying the rights to a higher level of protection from global threats and challenges. The single market has done wonders for economic growth across the continent. This is one of the factors which makes the EU so attractive to outsiders.

A factor that has hit closer to home for me has been the possibility for greater mobility within the EU, meaning that students like myself can choose to freely live, work or study within another member state, allowing for a broadening of our cultural horizons and helping to form a more open-minded mentality both in our generation Y as well as generations to come.

It's no news that further enlargement of the EU has been met with high level of ambivalence as well as opposition from both political leaders as well as the public; these would do well to remember that similar concerns had arisen just before the fifth enlargement of 2004 with fears of Eastern European workers moving in and taking jobs and newer member states lowering economic growth for older ones, when in the years since, this has certainly proven to not be the case. Enlargement will not solely benefit potential candidate countries but also current member states.

An enlarged EU would make a worthy opponent on the world stage, carrying more weight in international affairs and be able to hold its own against larger continents such as the US and Asia. Moreover, there would be a larger zone of peace, stability as well as security across our continent. As the institution has proved time and time again in the past, the whole is certainly greater than the sum of its parts.

The eurosceptics are ever present; ignoring their cries would not only be impossible but unrealistic; yes the EU has taken a few hits recently and its current position is certainly compromised, but if we are to move forward, facing the issues head on is the way to go. According to a Eurobarometer survey carried out last autumn, the Maltese were found to be the most optimistic about the future of the EU at 75%. Optimistic? Perhaps; but naïve, definitely not. Besides, from my experience, negative attitudes usually lead to negative outcomes. There are a number of objectives that still need to be reached and many daunting challenges ahead, but as the old saying goes 'United we stand, divided we fall' - and for this I choose to believe that an enlarged EU will emerge from the crisis better and stronger than ever.