



Multilateralism = Maltalateralism:

Interview with His Excellency Ambassador Xuereb



His Excellency Ambassador Vanni Xuereb

Dr. Vanni Xuereb, an expert in EU affairs, led the reactivation of MEUSAC and served as Malta's Ambassador to Spain and Germany. He was honored with the Chevalier de l'Ordre National du Mérite and is a visiting lecturer at the University of Malta.

Himmel: Mr Xuereb, thank you for inviting us to your embassy, located right next to the Tiergarten here in Berlin. But before getting to the diplomacy later, I would like to address your personal background of diplomacy. Why did you choose diplomacy?

Xuereb: First, let me also start by thanking you for this, also, invitation to me. I mean, we as the small countries don't get so many opportunities (laughter) because our opinion doesn't always make the headlines, unlike larger countries. Diplomacy was something that always interested me from my university days. I studied law at the University of Malta, I was very active in student politics. I was seeking to engage on the European and international level. Furthermore, I remember that we negotiated the accession of our student union Malta to what is today the European Students Union, what was then ESIB. I was one of the pioneers there.

Himmel: What time was that?

Xuereb: I'm talking here of the 1980s, so quite a while ago. The Berlin Wall was still up and Germany was still divided, we still had the Soviet Union around. Very different times. That was also reflected in international student politics at the time because there were two rival European student organisations. In fact, ESIB was initially WESIB, West European Students Information Bureau, countering what was then ISBUN, which was seen to be very much under the influence of the student organisations in the former communist countries.

Himmel: So, also a Cold War between the student organisations?

Xuereb: Yes. (laughter)

Himmel: Was that the beginning to mediate between certain political agendas be-

tween different positions - one could say, being in the diplomacy?

Xuereb: It's a lot of negotiation and a lot of give and take, compromise, and of course a lot of that happens not out in the open during the plenary, but sometimes in the bars and in the individual hotel rooms or hostel rooms. That's where you get an initiation.

Himmel: To give a measurement for our German students: Malta is as big compared to Bremen.

Xuereb: Exactly. Geographically and population wise.

Himmel: Coming back to your studies: Have you had a specialisation in law, which was also pursuing more into this world of diplomacy?

Xuereb: Yes. By the time I had to decide what to write my dissertation about, Malta had started contemplating joining the then European Communities, now European Union. I wrote my doctoral dissertation in Malta on the external relations of the European Union, taken from a Mediterranean perspective. Foreign policy in the EU was not yet developed so much. The way the European Communities handled the external relations was in terms of trade, which was already a very strong instrument. Trade was already one of the exclusive competencies of the European Community.

Himmel: Being a diplomat is to serve contacts, to serve communication between people and nations, and therefore also speaking these languages. You speak four languages?

Xuereb: I speak my mother tongue Maltese and English, which is also an official language in Malta. Then I speak Italian. I speak French, I can speak some Spanish.

Himmel: Did you have to actively learn

them, or was it just an ongoing way for the preparation?

Xuereb: In my case, it happened in a kind of natural way. My first four languages were taught at school. With Italian much easier for us. We have strong cultural ties with Italy. Plus, at the time when I was growing up, we had access to Italian TV.

Himmel: Could you still recommend an Italian sitcom from that time?

Xuereb: I remember a very good one with Raimondo Vianello and Sandra Mondaini. It's an incredible comedy between these two very good comedians in Italy.

In the Italian sitcom Casa Vianello, Raimondo Vianello and Sandra Mondaini played themselves. It was aired between 1988 till 2005. How this influenced world politics is another secret of diplomacy yet to discover.

Himmel: Coming to Malta and its diplomacy: Malta has a history of going as far back as the Phoenicians, Byzantines, Arabs, British. Did this influence Malta's diplomacy?

Xuereb: The island's geographical location in the centre of the Mediterranean. That made it a place of strategic importance. For many powers that were seeking to dominate the Mediterranean, Malta gave them access. Maybe the finest example of this was during the Second World War, where, surrounded to the north by Italy and to the south by the Axis powers in North Africa, Malta was the only allied location. Winston Churchill referred to Malta as the unsinkable aircraft carrier. Nowadays, we talk about it being a bridge between Africa and Europe.

Himmel: But an unsinkable bridge.

Xuereb: We only became responsible for our own foreign affairs in 1964. Malta became independent of the British Empire. On the 21st of September 1964. This was when we really had to start trying to exercise our newly gained status as an independent country bilaterally with other countries and also multilaterally, especially within multilateral organisations such as the United Nations and the Council of Europe.

Himmel: What were the challenges and opportunities in regard to reaching out and starting foreign relations and foreign affairs as of then?

Xuereb: Our Foreign Office started with just a few people. I think it was only after 1981, that we actually had a person appointed as Minister of Foreign Affairs, who was not the Prime Minister – before that it was a personal union. We immediately started establishing bilateral relations, diplomatic relations. We applied to join the United Nations, we applied to join the Council of Europe, we immediately started negotiating an Association Agreement with the European Communities which was signed in 1970s, so just a few years after independence. Although we started small, things picked up. We started opening embassies in other countries, starting with the most obvious ones such as London and Rome, of course we opened in Bonn, we opened in Paris.

Himmel: I could sense this pioneer spirit starting from scratch, right?

Xuereb: Yes, but I think we also had a vision.

Himmel: What was that?

Xuereb: Our vision was to prove that, as small, independent country, we could also

contribute on the international stage. That we were not insignificant, just to be ignored because we are so small. Immediately after independence, for instance, in the United Nations, we came up with an initiative that eventually led to UNCLOS, the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. Our then Permanent Representative to the United Nations made a famous speech at the General Assembly stating that the sea is the common heritage of mankind. That eventually led to UNCLOS, which was, I believe, signed in 1973.

Himmel: You talked now about a lot of opportunities which were set, but what were difficulties? I could sense that not everybody had heard of Malta by 1980.

Xuereb: Noteven by today. (laughter) Today, more people know about Malta because we are part of the European Union. Additionally, we participated in all the other institutions and that is in fact a good example of how we exert quite diplomacy. Why? Because we also have a right of veto should we want to exercise it – but we don't. Because we believe in dialogue, and we believe in consensus building. We have to negotiate and find an agreement and compromise as necessary to find an agreement that is in the interest of all.

Himmel: What about the other neighbouring countries in the South, meaning Libya, Egypt and Tunisia?

Xuereb: Two countries where we concentrate most of our efforts are Libya and Tunisia,

our closest neighbours. The others are of equal importance. After the independence we have always fostered very close ties with Libya. After the fall of Gaddafi we tried to deal with the situation in Libya as it was: Basically, no stable government, but rival governments in the different parts of the country. Our policy is as much as possible, we speak to everyone. Of course, there could be times where we will be very careful and prudent who to speak to and how to speak. But we would normally try to reach out or be ready to listen too. Sometimes we approach, other times we are approached. This is something what we are doing particularly this year, as we are chairing the Organisation for Security and Cooperation

in Europe, the OSCE. Incidentally, we were asked to do so because there were objections to Estonia, which was the country that was intended to chair the OSCE. But there were objections, particularly by the

Russian Federation, which refused Estonia's chair, however, agreed, as a compromise, on Malta. Why? Because we are part of the EU, but we are not a NATO country. We are a neutral country. That seemed acceptable to them. I could see how he was conscious of all the difficult situations and tensions in different parts of Europe. He met with leaders from Serbia and Kosovo, with leaders from Azerbaijan and Armenia. He was very keen and again, the message was: "Listen, we have no ulterior motives." And this is perhaps what makes us credible. We have no claims and no ambitions to dominate the world. (laughter)

When people speak to us, they know that they can speak to us in confidence

Himmel: That would be a little bit too ambitious (laughter). But Britain's domination also started from an island.

Xuereb: And became Great Britain. (laughter)

Himmel: You spoke about three points which I want to consulate further. First, you mentioned the diplomatic ties between Libya. Could you draw an image of what is possible when exchanging diplomatic ties? What projects were you engaging in?

Xuereb: One concrete example is the question of the migration issue. We try to work with the Libyan Coast Guard to ensure that, as much as possible, vessels with migrants which are about to fall apart when they leave the coast, do not leave the coast not to endanger the people's lives.

Himmel: So, with your diplomacy, you were able to facilitate the hands-on administrative work.

Xuereb: And we try to be "a voice for Libya" within the European institutions. One of the things we try to do is to see that Libya is free of foreign interference. Other countries are present somehow in Libya trying to exert their influence. Maybe this is one area where Europe needs to be.

Himmel: Interesting, that brings me to the second point: Our EPIS Report is called "silent diplomacy", thus not meaning the diplomacy in the great halls of conferences, but rather in background talks or in communication which is not visible, which might be good or bad, or which has advantages or disadvantages. How positions Malta in that sense of silent diplomacy?

Xuereb: I think we are good at that, because we are not a country that likes to stump its feet. I think we can be most effective

in bringing people together and trying to bridge distances between various positions and helping to discover or to reach some common ground that could serve as the basis of agreement in difficult situations. When people speak to us, they know that they can speak to us in confidence. We will not betray them. We will not backstab them.

Himmel: Would you therefore think that it would be more helpful if Malta speaks face to face to one party and then to the other, or brings two parties together on one table?

Xuereb: It could work both ways. Let me mention Azerbaijan. We did, in Munich, speak individually to the leaders present. Soon after, German Federal Foreign Minister Baerbock brought the two foreign ministers together. That's a good example of both approaches which are complementary.

Himmel: Getting on the last point: neutrality. Per constitution Malta is a neutral country thus not siding in conflicts. Is that an opportunity?

Xuereb: Our neutrality is a military neutrality, not a political one. The constitution states that Malta is a neutral state actively promoting peace and dialogue between peoples. It's an active neutrality, at the service of peace. It's not an ostrich putting its head in the sand kind of approach, let others fight their wars. For instance, we immediately condemned Russia's aggression in Ukraine. We hosted one of the conferences that President Zelensky hosted on his peace plan recently. Neutrality means that we do not form part of the military alliance, although I also have to say that we have a strong and close relationship with NATO, which is consistent with our constitutional neutrality. We know what happened in Sweden and Finland with their neutrality. Although I do not see Malta going that way, at least not in the next few years.

Himmel: That being said: What would you say is the diplomatic way of Malta in the next decade?

In 28. October 2023 Malta hosted the meeting of National Security Advisors and Foreign Policy Advisors on the Formula for Peace. Numerous nations and organizations discussed five key security aspects: nuclear and radiation, food, energy, release of prisoners and deportees, restoration of the territorial integrity of Ukraine and the world order.

Xuereb: Definitely, Malta remains committed to pursue its objectives, its commitment to the European Union. We truly believe in multilateralism.

Himmel: Multilateralism or Maltalateralism?

Xuereb: Multilateralism. (laughter) In a rule-based order, we believe in the importance of international organisations, hence our commitment this year and last year, where we are serving as non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, for instance, at the first UN Security Council resolution calling for a ceasefire in Gaza. For us, international fora are important fora where you can bring together different actors, even countries that don't see each other face-to-face.

Himmel: Thank you very much Mr. Xuereb for your time and your insights.

Xuereb: Thank you as well.

