

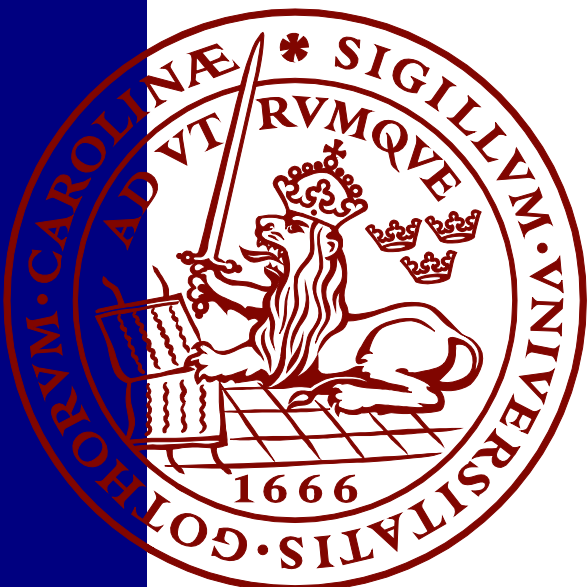
“A Place for Us”

How Maltese Activists Reclaimed Manoel Island

Cynthia Reese

Master Thesis Series in Environmental Studies and Sustainability Science,
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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of Lund University
International Master's Programme in Environmental Studies and Sustainability Science
(30hp/credits)



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Lund University Centre for
Sustainability Studies



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Submitted May 11th

Supervisor: Santiago Gorostiza, LUCSUS, Lund University

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Abstract:

Malta's construction boom has resulted an increase in urban density and a decrease in green spaces over recent years. To combat this, in 2025 the social movement Post Għalina launched a campaign to transform Manoel Island, a largely undeveloped island near Valletta, into a national park. This thesis employs a qualitative case study utilizing social movement theory to examine Post Għalina's creation, evolution, and eventual success. By employing positive framing on the benefits of green spaces and creating a broad coalition of NGOs, Post Għalina achieved Malta's second largest parliamentary petition ever, resulting in state intervention and the withdrawal of development plan. This research shows that through positive framing large coalitions can be mobilized to protect urban green spaces.

Keywords: Coalitions, Construction Boom, Framing Processes, Political Opportunity, Space Conflicts, Urban Parks

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1) Introduction

1.1) Problem Statement

The island nation of Malta has the highest population density of EU Member States. In 2021, the population was 519,562, with a density of 1,649 persons per km² and 95% of the population living in urban areas, defining Malta as an entirely urban area (Scheiber and Zucaro, 2023, p. 336). This heavy urbanization has resulted in struggles over space within the country, with an important one involving the conflict over green spaces. Across the EU, only 9% of the population reports difficulties accessing green spaces, but in the case of Malta that figure jumps to 49% (Debono J, 2023). As past research has shown, urban green spaces provide a multitude of benefits including pollution reduction, reduction of urban heat island effect, improved ecosystem services such as increased biodiversity, and improved human wellbeing as a few examples (Scheiber and Zucaro, 2023). Due to the lack of trees and other vegetation in Maltese urban areas, the Maltese urban living environment has been found to be “systematically degraded” (Scheiber, 2022, p. 149).

Over the past decade, much of this conflict over urban spaces can be traced to the Maltese construction industry, which accounted for €560.1 million towards GDP in 2021 (Central Bank of Malta, 2023). This heavy reliance on construction as an industry means that green spaces are often sidelined in favor of other developments. Such is the case with Manoel Island, an island connected by bridge to one of Malta’s most densely populated towns just north of the capital, Valletta. In 2000, the Maltese government granted the island to the company Midi PLC for development (Galea, 2026). Midi closed off public access to the island, halting the ability of local residents to visit the green spaces there (Malta Independent, 2016). Only in 2016 did activists force their way onto the island to make Midi reopen public access to the foreshore (Malta Independent, 2016). However, Midi still owned the island and planned to develop it, therefore activists continued to fight to wrestle control back into public hands. This struggle culminated in 2025 with the creation of the *Post Għalina*¹ movement with the stated goal of turning Manoel Island into a national park. The movement ultimately achieved its primary goal of having the island reclaimed as a park by launching a parliamentary petition that garnered signatures equating to 5% of the country’s population (Post Għalina, n.d.). With this success, activists returned a large green space back to a public that is sorely

¹ Translation: A Place for Us

lacking in them. Therefore, Post Għalina serves as an example on how social movements can mobilize people to create new green spaces when they are unavailable to the community.



Figure 1. Some parts of Manoel Island remain closed to this day due to safety reasons. Source: Own Photograph, 2026.

1.2) Purpose, Aim & Research Questions

This thesis investigates the creation and success of a green social movement within Malta utilizing social movement theory. Social movement theory allows for the creation of knowledge that will be empirically grounded, conceptually and theoretically innovative, and most importantly, valuable for both the scholars and the social movements involved (Arribas Lozano et al., 2024, p. 7). This leads me to my two research questions that seek to better understand the origins and successes of Post Għalina:

RQ 1: How did socioenvironmental factors within Malta influence the creation of the Post Għalina movement?

RQ 2: What elements of Post Għalina's campaign contributed to its remarkable success?

1.3) Contribution to Sustainability Science

Urban green spaces are significant pillars of urban quality of life as they promote physical activities, mental relaxation, and cleaner air among other things (Jabbar et al., 2022). Due to the positive factors associated with green spaces, they have become recognized as a primary source of a livable and sustainable city (Jabbar et al., 2022). The Eurobarometer survey's findings poses a unique research gap that can be investigated to understand why easy access to green spaces is beyond many Maltese citizens (Elmqvist et al., 2026), and how locals are attempting to address this issue.

One such example is how local social movements seek to protect and restore green spaces within the country. Post Għalina highlights the fact that “protection of urban green areas rests on an active and organized civil society rather than on legislative powers” (Ernstson et al., 2008 p.1). Social movements and similar forms of collective action are important methods for creating and providing protection for urban green areas when local governments fail to step in (Ernstson et al., 2008 p.2). Therefore, the aim of this research is to highlight how one of these movements took place within Malta to return and restore a historic green space for an urban population in need of it.

This research is guided by a transdisciplinary approach, which has been an important tool for addressing sustainability challenges (Lang et al., 2012, p. 26). Transdisciplinary research focuses on collaborating with non-academic actors to ensure that knowledge from actor groups involved in the sustainability challenge is properly represented (Lang et al., 2012). As such, this thesis aims to provide insights valuable to both academic and non-academic actors on how social movements can influence local politics to improve urban green spaces.

2) Local Context

2.1) Malta's Construction Boom

Over the past decade and a half, Malta has seen a large construction boom. This surge began in the mid 2010s when factors such as foreign investment, government incentives for development, a population boom, and an increasingly large tourism sector aligned to create a rapidly escalating real estate demand (Vassallo, 2025) (Malta Independent, 2026a). The latter two factors have been especially pronounced in driving real estate demand within the country. Malta's population has grown by 41% since 2004 (Balzan, 2026). Meanwhile, 27% of all dwellings within the country remain unoccupied or seasonally occupied (Borg, 2023). Year by year, construction continues to grow, with 2025 seeing a total of 12,325 new dwellings approved versus a total of 8,716 for 2024 (NSO Malta, 2026). In early 2026, an alliance of several influential Maltese developers announced plans to transform more land into dense projects (Shift News, 2026). The construction boom has generated a significant amount of economic activity for Malta, with residential construction being 3.7% of Maltese GDP in 2024 (Trading Economics, 2026a). In addition, the construction sector is a large employer within Malta, directly employing over 20,000 people by the end of 2025 (Trading Economics, 2026b).

But while the construction boom has resulted in significant economic growth for the Maltese Islands, the uglier side of this boom is becoming increasingly pronounced; air and noise pollution, unsafe building conditions resulting in accidents and injuries, blocked pedestrian and traffic access for prolonged periods, and the destruction of heritage and green spaces (FAA, n.d.-b) (Malta Independent, 2025b). Due to the boom, 25.9% of Malta's surface area is now covered by artificial structures which is nearly six times the European average (Debono F.G., 2025). Many Maltese are now upset with how development has destroyed the historical charm of local communities and resulted in loss of green spaces (Camilleri, 2025) (Times of Malta, 2025b) (Malta Independent, 2025b). In addition, the construction boom has resulted in a deterioration of quality of life as Maltese are subjected to limited and loss accessibility to roads, increasing levels of noise and air pollution, and uglier streetscapes that ignore local character (Times of Malta, 2025b) (Malta Independent, 2025b).



Figure 2. An image of a construction crane in Sliema, just north of Manoel Island. Source: Own Photograph, 2026.

Exacerbating this conflict over space is the fact that the wishes of Maltese developers are often considered over that of local communities. In recent years, many large-scale developments that were heavily opposed by residents were approved despite community push back (Malta Independent, 2026b). Local activists and NGOs have been highlighting how Malta's planning laws and regulations are not being enforced enough to protect local communities (Malta Chamber, 2025). Not to mention that local councils often lack the authority to address the concerns residents have over development projects (Times of Malta, 2025b). Project Green, Malta's agency in charge of creating and maintaining green spaces, has even had some of its greening projects challenged in court by developers hoping to utilize the land for other purposes (Project Green, 2025a).

This lax regulatory environment for Maltese developers has resulted in the proliferation of what the Maltese have dubbed as "cowboy developers", developers which employ questionable and dubious methods when carrying out their projects (Azzopardi, 2023). These cowboy developers have been known to claim green and open spaces for development without proper permits (Shift News, 2025) or illegally dump waste in these spaces (FAA, n.d.-b). Cowboy developers have at times ignored safety regulations, resulting in a worrying trend of building collapses over the past few years (Times

of Malta, 2025a) (Malta Chamber, 2025). These types of incidents have resulted in the Maltese population becoming increasingly unhappy with how construction is impacting their lives. Within the Maltese government's 2050 Vision document, it is reported that 70% of Maltese are dissatisfied with the state of the construction industry (Babanov et al., 2026).

2.2) Manoel Island

Manoel Island is located just north of Malta's capital of Valletta. It is connected via bridge to the town of Gżira, a densely populated town that is connected to Silema in the north, Malta's most densely populated town (NSO Malta, 2023). Manoel Island is home to several heritage sites, including Fort Manoel, a large baroque fort built in 1723 by the world-famous engineer Mondion (Midi Malta, n.d.-b). The conflict over Manoel Island itself can be traced back to the 1990s, when the government prioritized growth by transferring public land to private developers (Debono J., 2026). In 1992, the development brief was won by Midi PLC (Debono J, 2026), a company founded in 1992 with the express purpose of acquiring Manoel Island and nearby Tigné Point to develop both locations (Midi Malta, n.d.-a). Negotiations took several years to complete but the final deal was signed in 2000 and gave Midi a 99- year concession to develop the two locations (Galea, 2026). Midi then began to develop Tigné, building a large shopping complex, residences, offices, and retail outlets (Borg, 2025). In addition, Midi put funds into restoring both Fort Tigné, a smaller fort found in Tigné Point, and Fort Manoel (Midi Malta, n.d.-b). With Midi paying nearly €20 million to restore buildings on Manoel Island (Midi Malta, n.d.-b).

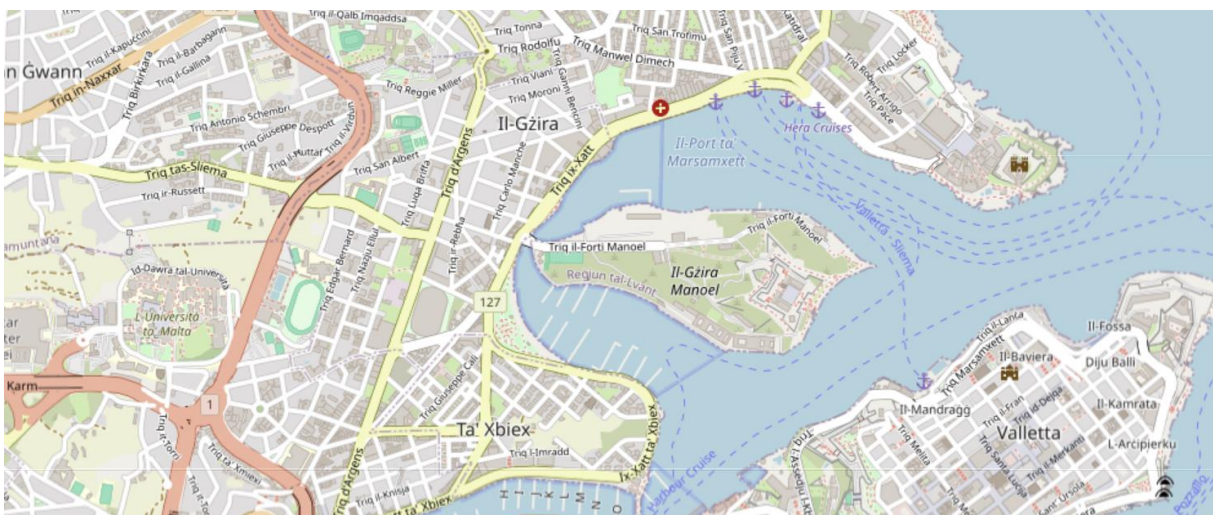


Figure 3. A map situating Manoel Island between Gżira and Valletta. Source: Open Street Maps 2026.

Midi's development plans for Manoel Island were extensive and would have radically transformed the island. Plans included a car park facility, a five-star hotel combined with a casino, an expanded yacht marina, three residential clusters comprised of 323 residential units, and a football pitch for

the local team (Property Malta, 2020) (Midi Malta, n.d.-a). Heritage sites such as the former 17th century Lazzaretto hospital would become a catering establishment and Fort Manoel would be converted into a culture and arts center containing things such as galleries, shops, restaurants and a parade ground (Property Malta, 2020). Unlike Tigné Point which saw rapid development under Midi, construction on Manoel Island was constantly delayed due to planning and financial issues (Debono J, 2026). By 2025, the only construction that had taken place on Manoel Island was several heritage restoration projects (Borg E., 2025b).

2.3) Activists Against Midi's Plans

When Midi acquired Manoel Island in 2000, it closed off public access to the island (Camilleri, 2016). It remained closed to the public until 2016 when a group of activists organized with the blessings of the local government to break down the fences to restore public access (Malta Independent, 2016). One of the most prominent NGOs that helped to reopen the foreshore was Movement Graffiti (Post Għalina, n.d.). Movement Graffiti describes itself as being “active against the oppression and exploitation of people, environment and animals; with a vision of freedom and radical democracy. It is autonomous from any economic power or political party and practices radical democracy within its structures” (Movement Graffiti, n.d.). While activists successfully restored public access to the foreshore, Midi still had ownership of the island and continued to move forward with its development plans (Malta Independent, 2016).

In addition to having its ability to limit public access challenged, another NGO; *Flimkien għal Ambjent Aħjar*² otherwise known as FAA challenged Midi's very right to ownership of Manoel Island. FAA describes itself as an organization “at the forefront of efforts to protect Malta and Gozo's cultural and natural heritage” (FAA, n.d.-a). Since its inception in 2006, FAA has challenged Midi's ownership of Manoel Island by illustrating how the development project is damaging to both the island's natural environment and its cultural heritage (Malta Independent, 2016). The FAA would put forward several proposals to the Maltese Planning Authority to have the development of the island halted, but the political establishment rarely acknowledged (Debono J., 2026).

² Translation: Together for a Better Environment



Figure 4. An image of FAA protesting environmental degradation within Malta. Image was generously provided by the interview participant from FAA (#7 n.d.).

These attempts to stop Midi resulted in a local activist organization known as *Inhobbu l-Gzira*³ forming in January 2019 to stop Midi's development of Manoel Island (Malta Independent, 2019). Their grievances focused on how Midi's development would destroy the local character of Gzira, and block views of the Valletta skyline for locals (Malta Independent, 2019). In February of that year, Inhobbu l-Gzira started a parliamentary petition to have Manoel Island transformed into a woodland park (Debono J., 2019). FAA was heavily in favor of the petition and campaigned alongside Inhobbu l-Gzira to try and generate support (Carabott, 2019). By its end in April, the petition had reached 7,500 signatures, making it the third largest Maltese parliamentary petition at the time (Jong, 2021). Despite these large numbers, parliament ignored the petition and it was never discussed (Jong, 2021).

2.4) Post Għalina and the Return of Manoel Island to the People

Despite these setbacks, in March 2025 Movement Graffiti teamed up with FAA in order to launch another petition to make Manoel Island into a national park (Post Għalina, n.d.). A press conference was held that month to launch the Post Għalina website and petition campaign where it was also announced that over 40 different Maltese NGOs (Appendix table 1) had come together to endorse the campaign (Post Għalina, n.d.). This time Post Għalina made clear they wanted to work with Midi to reacquire the park instead of punishing the company (Debono J, 2026). Initially the 2025 campaign was met with skepticism from the government, with the prime minister Robert Ablea expressing it

³ Translation: We love Gzira

would cost “hundreds of millions” of euros to buy back the island in May of 2025 (Debono J, 2026). Despite the government push back, the petition reached a total of 29,000 signatures by the end of the two-month period (Post Għalina, n.d.). This amounted to around 5% of the country’s total population (Post Għalina, n.d.).

Unlike 2019, the government could not ignore a petition this large. Several members of the ruling party announced their support of the park and that they believed the government did not “owe an obligation” to honor private sector bonds (Farrugia, 2025) (Malta Independent, 2025a). On June 3rd, Prime Minister Robert Abela requested a legal review (Debono J., 2026). During this time, Post Għalina continued its work by holding a series of stakeholder workshops with locals, NGOs, and experts in order to get their insights on what kind of park Manoel Island should be (Post Għalina, 2025b). In September, the government formally committed to turning the island into a park (Debono J., 2026). Only a few months later, in December of 2025, the government began its own consultation process under the theme of “Shape Your Space” (Project Green, 2025b). This consultation process would include two other new parks in addition to Manoel Island; the consultation gathered feedback for a park in White Rocks, followed by Fort Campbell (Parks in Malta, 2025). Finally, in March of 2026 the government announced it had reached a deal with Midi for the return of Manoel Island (Sansone, 2026). The government would compensate Midi with €43 million for the money it spent restoring Fort Manoel but not compensate for the island itself (Sansone, 2026) (Galea, 2026).



Figure 5. People signing the Post Ghalina petition. Permission to use this image was given by one of the Post Ghalina interview participants (#3 n.d.)

3) Theory

Social Science theories help to provide complex and comprehensive conceptual understandings of topics that cannot be easily explained (Reeves et al., 2008). In the past, activists from social movements have critiqued social movement theories as being unhelpful to them, and scholars have acknowledged this and responded by refining theories to make them more applicable to activists (Bevington and Dixon, 2005). This has led to what is known as a “movement-relevant approach” to social movement theory that seeks to put activist needs at its center (Arribas Lozano et al., 2024, p.7). This approach provides “useable knowledge” for activists that can be readily applicable by movements in new situations (Bevington and Dixon, 2005, p. 189). Scholars working on movement-relevant theory are encouraged to be connected to the movement they are studying in some form (Bevington and Dixon, 2005, p. 190). This incentivizes them to produce more “objective” research to provide the movement with the best information, rather than being a detached researcher, who provides little to the movement (Bevington and Dixon, 2005). Accordingly, I have designed my thesis upon commonly used social movements theory that have been employed by both researchers and activists. In doing so, I aim to bridge theory and practice in a way that fosters a dialogue between academic and nonacademic knowledge and knowledge producers (Arribas Lozano et al., 2024 p.7).

For social movement theory, three factors have been identified that shape the emergence, development, and impact of social movements, with these three factors being: 1) political opportunities, 2) mobilizing structures, and 3) framing processes (McAdam et al., 1996 p. 2). These three factors are heavily interconnected, and collectively help to provide a holistic view of a social movement. Social movements may arise from opportunities, but their fate is greatly shaped by their own actions (McAdam et al., 1996). So, in order to create a holistic answer to my two research questions that takes local context into account, I employ these three factors in conjunction with one another.

3.1) Political Opportunity Theory

The primary recognition of political opportunity theory is that activists’ possibility of advancing political goals, mobilizing supporters, and influencing decisions are context dependent (Meyer, 2004). In this way, social movements require vulnerabilities within the existing political system to advance their claims (Museum of Protest, 2025). Political opportunities can arise in four different dimensions: increased/increasing access to an existing political system, divisions within the elite, the availability of elite allies, and decreases in state repression (McAdam et al., 1996) (Sicotte and Brulle, 2017). These opportunities can also arise from cracks in existing power structures, such as when

developments threaten local health or quality of life (Sicotte and Brulle, 2017, p. 27). But it is important to note that there is no such thing as a “fixed opportunity”, instead people must interpret what is an opportunity and what to do with that opportunity (Christiansen, 2024).

While in the past political opportunity theory has focused on state actors, recent scholars have highlighted how some social movements, such as environmental justice movements, have contested not just state actors but multinational corporations and that political opportunity should be expanded to cover these organizations as well (Sicotte and Brulle, 2017). Thus, political opportunities should be seen less as signals than as environmental conditions that allow protests to emerge and resonate with the government and other actors (Meyer, 2004, p. 139). Political opportunity is important for analyzing the success of Post Ghalina and how it succeeded whereas the 2019 petition to turn Manoel Island into a park failed.

3.2) Mobilizing Structures

If political opportunity theory explains the conditions for successful collective action, then the impact of that collective action is highly dependent upon the mobilizing structures that social movements utilize to organize and press their claims (McAdam, 2017). In social movement theory, mobilizing structures are the collective methods, both formal and informal, through which people assemble and engage in collectivized action (McAdam et al., 1996). In this way, political opportunities do not necessarily result in success for social movements, the organizational methods that groups employ during the opportunity are also important determining factors in whether a movement succeeds or not (McAdam, 2017).

An important mobilizing structure that Post Ghalina took advantage of was coalition building. Social movement coalitions work to bridge political organizations with the looser social movement (Brooker and Meyer, 2018). Coalitions, especially broad ones, have been shown to be particularly important in improving political leverage by mobilizing larger numbers of people and enabling the employment of tactics across a broader portion of society which increases the likelihood of movement success (Gawerc, 2019). While government authorities expect opposition from certain groups, when unexpected groups join coalitions, they raise the stakes by showing that the movement is more than routine opposition and becomes much more threatening (Gawerc, 2019). A state actor-social movement coalition can be especially powerful as it enables social movements to advance policy changes from inside the government (Brooker and Meyer, 2018). Mobilizing structures are another important analytical tool for Post Ghalina because the movement was able to gather a large amount of support for its petition and understanding how this was done is key to understanding its success.

3.3) Framing Processes

While political opportunities and mobilizing structures can help to explain collective action, there is one important puzzle piece still missing, the shared meanings and definitions that social movements create for their situations (McAdam et al., 1996). Framing is the process that allows activists to “characterize situations as unjust, attribute blame, propose solutions, and try to mobilize onlookers into their struggle” (Sicotte and Brulle, 2017). In this way, the framing processes serve as a set of “action-oriented” beliefs and meanings that help to inspire and legitimize campaigns and their activities (Benford and Snow, 2000, p. 614). Framing is described by scholars as a very active and deliberate process, that is constantly evolving and being iterated upon as campaigns take place (Benford and Snow, 2000). By selecting and defining key terms and the outlines of an issue, framing can have an out-sized impact on the dynamic of a policy debate with large implications on public opinion on the issue (Boscarino, 2016, p. 281). An important aspect of Post Ghalina’s success was its ability to positively frame its campaign to the public.

When social movements create frames, they are understood as having three core framing tasks that must define a situation as problematic, but also give people a belief that a problem can be overcome through collective action (Christiansen, 2024). These three processes are known as diagnostic framing, prognostic framing, and motivational framing (Caiani, 2023). Diagnostic framing arises when social movements seek to remedy or alter a problematic situation or issue, it serves as the method of identifying the source of “causality, blame, and/or culpable agents” (Benford and Snow, 2000, p. 616). Prognostic framing on the other hand is the method for proposing a solution to said problem and outlining the strategies to carry out the solution (Benford and Snow, 2000, p. 616). Finally, motivational framing provides the rationale for engaging in collective action (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 617), by creating reasons for people to get involved and provide agency to potential actors (Christiansen, 2024). In this way, a social movement’s success depends upon how widely interpretable its framing is. The wider the appeal of a frame, the more likely it will lead to success (Caiani, 2023). The framing processes that Post Ghalina used were both deliberately constructed by activists, and important in achieving its success.

Finally, when social movements create frames, they must be mindful of both their frame’s credibility, and also the counterframing that the government and opposition organizations will create to contest the frames of the social movement (Christiansen, 2024). Counterframing is when opposing framing is created in a way to hamper the framing of a social movement, frequently forcing it to develop and elaborate its prognostic framing (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 617). This process of framing and

counterframing often become “framing contests” where the movement will have to contend with the various methods the government attempts to challenge the social movement’s framing (McAdam et al., 1996, p. 7). In addition to this, the perceived credibility of a movement’s framing will have an impact on public receptiveness to its messaging (Benford and Snow, 2000). Credibility is seen to have three influencing factors; the first is the consistency of the framing, the second, is the empirical credibility (how much the framing fits real world events), and the third is the credibility of the organizations and people that are contributing to the framing (Christiansen, 2024). These aspects of framing are also important to Post Ghalina because it had to contend with the initial rejections from the government in addition to having to overcome minor credibility issues with one of its member organizations.

4) Methodology

4.1) Research Design

The research design for this thesis is a qualitative case study, that employs a mixed-methods approach for knowledge production. Case studies allow for multiple different forms of knowledge production that properly understands the local context of the case (Priya, 2020). Knowledge was triangulated (Patton, 1999) through three methods including semi-structured interviews, qualitative observation (Ho & Limpaecher, 2022), and secondary research from local news outlets and government and NGO published information (Cheong et al., 2023). By triangulating these three research methods, I gained a deeper understanding of local context in order to answer my two research questions.

The qualitative observation was performed through fieldwork involving visits to various urban and green sites, including Manoel Island, throughout Malta. A digital camera was utilized for my field journal in order to capture site elements I found important, such as signs, local flora, and urban sprawl. The secondary research was performed through a keyword search on Maltese websites such as *Times of Malta*, *Malta Today*, *The Malta Independent*, Maltese government sites such as the Maltese National Statistic Office, the Maltese Parliament, and press releases by Project Green in addition to links sent by interview participants. Academic articles were found in databases such as Scopus, Jstor, and EBSCOHost. For my knowledge analysis, I employed a thematic analysis (Ho and Limpaecher, 2020) to identify themes that came up during the interviews and then tie those themes to knowledge gained from my qualitative observation and secondary research.

For each of the semi-structured interviews, I began with 3-5 guiding questions to start the interview with, with these guiding questions only differing slightly between each interview (Appendix 2). Afterwards, I utilized the open-ended nature of the interviews to explore further topics that the interview participants would bring up. Snowball sampling, a method where research participants introduce potential future participants (Oliver, 2006), was employed and helped me to locate several of my research participants.

4.2) Information Gathering

Fieldwork took place during the latter half of February 2026. Initial fieldwork began with exploring how climate change was impacting coastal heritage within Malta, and soon evolving to cover Manoel Island as I learned more about the topic. During this time, qualitative observation was employed by creating a field journal in the form of photographs utilizing a digital camera. Photos were taken of

Manoel Island, Fort Manoel, and surrounding urban landscapes to capture urban life and development within Malta. In this way, photography was used to do justice to the local use and conflicts over urban space that written notes cannot capture (Atkinson, 2020).



Figure 6. View of Gzira from Manoel Island taken for my field journal. Source: Own photograph 2026.



Figure 7. An abandoned building on Manoel Island from my field journal. Source: Own Photograph, 2026.



Figure 8. A sign from Midi detailing their guidelines for public access of Manoel Island taken for my field journal. Source: Own Photograph 2026.

Nine semi-structured interviews were conducted over the research period, however only seven of those interviews were used (Table 1). Three preliminary interviews took place in person within Malta, looking to explore how climate change was impacting coastal heritage within the country. One of these participants, a professor from the University of Malta, spoke about Manoel Island during the interview, and this is what led me down my current research path. Interviews 1-7 all took place over Zoom. Of the interview participants, three were from Post Għalina itself, two members from Movement Graffiti and one from the FAA. Two other interview participants were from partner NGOs that had endorsed Post Għalina. The first, *Din l-Art Helwa*⁴ describes itself as an NGO “dedicated to preserving Malta’s cultural and natural heritage” (Din l-Art Helwa, n.d.). The second was from Grow 10 Trees Malta, an NGO that seeks to encourage reforestation and the creation of green spaces

⁴ Translation: This Sweet Land

within Malta (Grow 10, n.d.). The final two interviews were with the Maltese government agency in charge of handling the public consultation for Manoel Island, Project Green.

Table 1: List of Interview Participants

Participants	Organization
Participant #0	University of Malta Professor
Participant #1	Movement Graffiti
Participant #2	Din l-Art Helwa
Participant #3	Movement Graffiti
Participant #4	Grow 10 Trees Malta
Participant #5 & 6	Project Green
Participant #7	Flimkien għal Ambjent Aħjar (FAA)

Finally, a large amount of secondary research was gathered from a wide variety of sources to cover gaps that were not covered in the primary data (Cheong et al., 2023). First, Malta's major online news outlets and government websites were used (Figure 9). Websites of the various activist organizations involved in Post Għalina were important sources for how activists and NGOs try to shape Malta (Figure 9). Lastly, business websites such as that of Midi PLC were used to examine their development plans for Manoel Island (Figure 9).

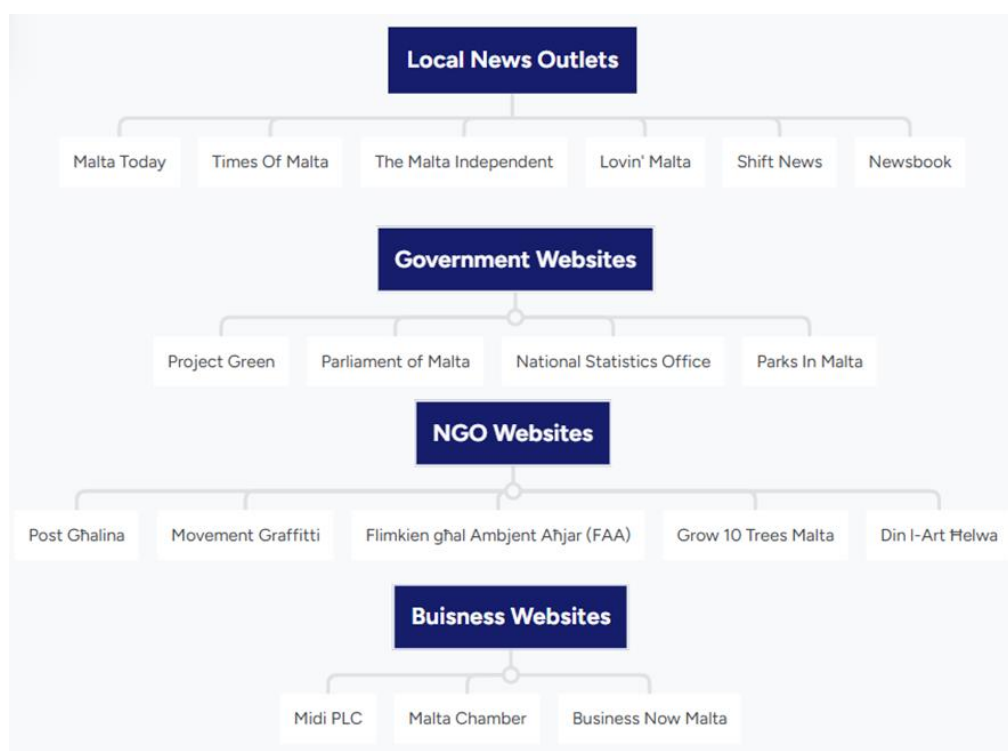


Figure 9. Visualization of secondary sources used

4.3) Data Analysis

I employed a thematic analysis to highlight the key patterns that tell the narrative (Ho & Limpaecher, 2020) surrounding Manoel Island. For my thematic analysis, I employed Braun and Clarke's six steps of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006 p.87). First, I familiarized myself with the interview transcripts through multiple readings and note taking sessions. Second, I created my initial set of codes, which can be described as “meaningful data snippets” (Ho & Limpaecher, 2020), in order to capture key patterns in the interviews utilizing the coding software Nvivo. Third I collated codes with their supporting data into potential themes (See Appendix 4 for Code Book). Fourth, I reviewed my themes in order to make sure they made both chronological and categorical sense, creating a chronological “map” of the themes. Fifth, I finalized my themes by settling upon three primary themes: Conflicts Over Space Within Malta, the Petition Campaign, and Government Adoption of Manoel Island. The sixth, and final step, is found within the Findings & Discussion sections of this paper.

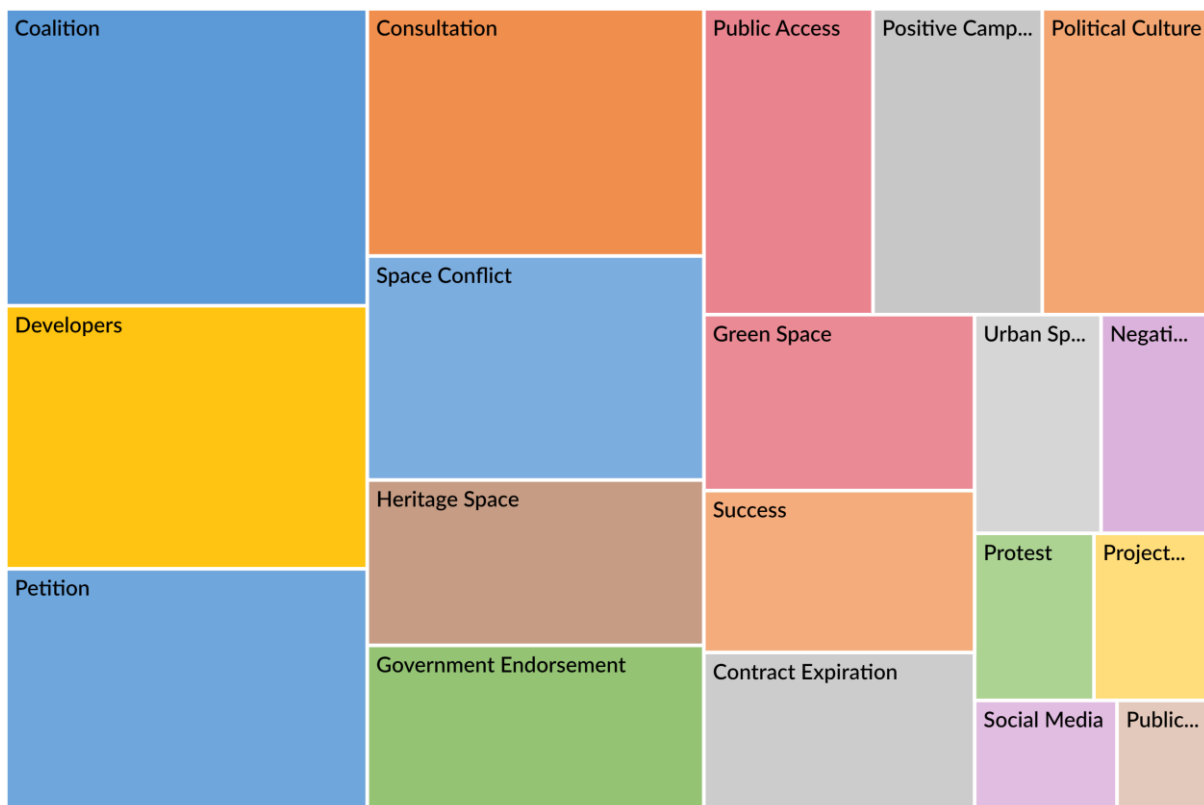


Figure 10. A visualization of the most common codes from my coding process. Larger boxes equate to the code appearing more frequently.

4.4) Ethical Considerations

The research used for this project adheres to ethical guidelines as set out by the Swedish Research Council (Swedish Research Council, 2024). Participants were given a consent form that outlined how their data would be handled, how the interview would be conducted, and stated their right to withdraw their information from the study at any time (Appendix 3). All personal data was made anonymous for the research to ensure privacy and all personal data was stored securely and confidentially. In addition, all images utilized were either from the author's own work, used with permission from the author, or used under a creative commons license.

4.5) Positionality & Reflexivity

Positioning myself as a green activist and a researcher, I have sought to employ a democratic approach to my research, which means avoiding jargon and technical language, when possible, in order to make research more comprehensible by those without a specialized background (Arribas Lozano et al., 2024) (Lakhan, 2024). I chose to do this due to past experiences of frustration with how academic research can be inaccessible to the public through either financial or esoteric language barriers. With this approach, I reduce the power dynamics that can serve as barriers to a wider audience accessing academic research (Arribas Lozano et al., 2024) (Lakhan, 2024). This aligns with my view that sustainability science should be accessible to as wide an audience as possible.

To be reflective in one's research, a researcher must examine how a researcher's presence in the field impacts their understanding while also considering their biographical baggage and viewpoints (Atkinson, 2020, p. 11). Being that I was a foreigner within Malta, this may have impacted my research compared to someone with more local ties. When I was there, I approached my fieldwork with a curious and open mind, being mindful of not allowing prior biases to influence my work. Despite this, my background as a foreign student may have influenced the responses I received compared with a researcher with more local ties.

4.6) Methodological Limitations

Both a source of excitement and challenge to the research was the ongoing nature of the case. Due to the ongoing government negotiations with Midi and the public consultation, there were certain ambiguities that arose that I could not answer due to the limited window for research. For example, on Monday, March 16th, the government announced it had reached a deal with Midi to acquire Manoel Island. This date is where I chose to limit the temporal scope of my research, even though I would prefer to research Manoel Island to its full realization as a national park.

More time (and resources) for fieldwork would have allowed for a deeper ethnographic approach, such as visiting the offices of NGOs and activist gatherings in order to garner a deeper understanding of the workings of Post Għalina. In addition, potential interviews with Midi and local politicians would have provided a more nuanced understanding of the events surrounding Manoel Island. In addition, my inability to speak Maltese means that my insights are more limited compared to a researcher who could have conversed in the local language. Due to limited time for fieldwork and secondary research, it must be highlighted that my findings do not serve as an all-encompassing report on Manoel Island and Post Għalina.

5.0) Findings: How the Manoel Island Campaign Unfolded

The following sections detail the primary findings of the interviews, along with supporting information from secondary literature to answer the first RQ. The study period goes from 2000-2026 (Figure 11). The sections are divided based upon three primary themes on the conflict over Manoel Island that emerged during the coding process: Conflict Over Space Within Malta, The Petition Campaign, and finally Government Adoption of Manoel Island.

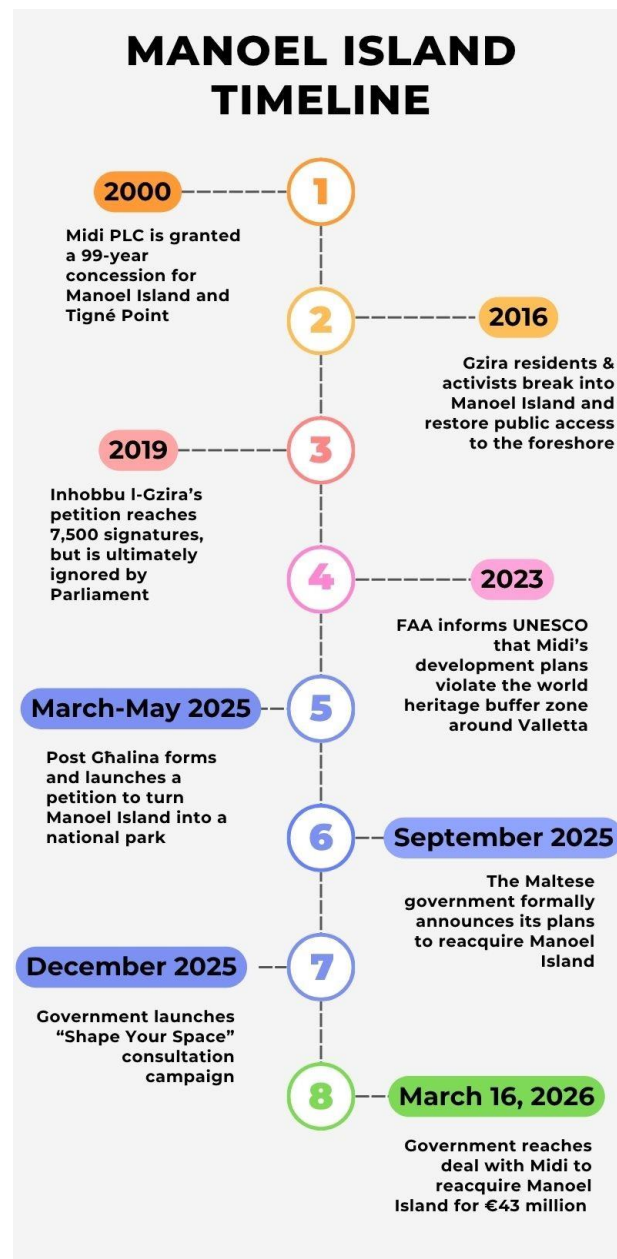


Figure 11. A timeline of the events taking place over Manoel Island that is covered in this thesis.

5.1) “Relentless Construction”; Conflict Over Space Within Malta

And that's one of the main reasons why there's so much construction, why that article that you just mentioned, it's just taken over, construction has taken over. People are fed up of construction everywhere, and there are so many other issues than, the dust, the noise, the dirt, the it's just and [sic] other issues. And like I said you could have whole [sic] a nice streetscape two-story building suddenly you went up with this pencil block in the middle of them [sic] rising up five stories you know which looks horrific. I have a number of photos of this sort of thing and this is the sort of development we are opposing. (Participant #2)

Interviews and secondary Maltese sources paint a picture of great irritation with the construction industry. There is growing consensus that the construction industry is harming the quality of life throughout the country. One participant (#3) is quoted as saying: “I would say the vast majority of Maltese people, even the ones that have money coming in from construction, are probably annoyed with what's happening.” While another stated: “yes, most people are fed up with the construction and the noise of the overdevelopment and the overpopulation as well” (#4). Participants stated that in the past the issues stemming from the construction boom were more tolerable because it was important for the Maltese economy, being an important source of jobs and income (#3). But as years went on, and huge developments took over larger and larger shares of the country, residents began to be less forgiving with developers and more critical of how they were shaping and impacting local spaces. The out-sized impact that developers have on the Maltese economy has led to them acquiring a large amount of influence within both major Maltese political parties (#7), the Labor and Nationalist parties. Which has made it difficult to take political action against these developers.

5.1.1 Maltese Political Culture Contributing to Developer Overreach

Participants stated that party loyalty is very strong within Malta. Until recently, voters have primarily stuck within the political parties that their families voted for. This party loyalty also stretches to politicians themselves, who are heavily pressured to toe the party line and not deviate from official messaging (#7). And because “construction doesn't know any parties” (#3) both parties see large financial contributions to their political campaigns (#3 & 7), this results in both major parties having adopted pro-construction stances. In addition, Maltese NGOs are dependent upon local funding within Malta, and many of these sponsors have ties within the construction industry and local government (#7) thereby limiting how outspoken these organizations can be against development projects. Despite the 70% dissatisfaction with the construction industry within the country (Babnov

et al., 2025), many property owners have made lots of money selling land to developers (#2 & 3). This means Maltese property owners have financial incentives to not go against the construction industry, even if it is contributing to a reduction in quality of life for them (#3 & 4).

This results in large unpopular projects receiving government approval and local regulations going unenforced on developers even when they violate them (#4). Recently, more lax planning reforms that make it harder to appeal development projects have been proposed by the government, and these reforms are heavily favored by developers (#3 & 4). Despite how unpopular these regulations are with the local population, the government is attempting to implement them anyway (Malta Independent, 2025b). This combination of political factors means that contesting unpopular development projects within Malta is very much an uphill battle.

5.1.2) Lost Heritage, Green, and Coastal Spaces

Within Malta, car infrastructure takes up a disproportionate amount of space due to heavy car reliance within the country (Attard, 2020). Participants have stated that due to Malta's dense population, heavy car reliance, and inflexible road network, green spaces within most parts of the urban center of the island are either small or nonexistent (#1, 4, 5 & 6). While Valletta and Florina do have multiple public gardens, these spaces can still be rather distant for the residents living within the heavily populated towns of Gzira and Silema (#4). These small green spaces tend to be lacking in space for recreational activities like exercise or picnics and thus serve more an aesthetic function than a practical function (#4). These small parks are also quite lacking in local biodiversity, being described by one participant as "quite sterile environments with concrete pots and benches, and not because benches aren't necessarily a bad thing, but it looks [sic], you don't get the wild" (#4).



Figure 12. Local flora has a rare urban refuge on Manoel Island. Source: Own Photograph, 2026.

The dense road network that is constantly filled with traffic means that it can be difficult for residents to access these spaces even on weekends (#1). For residents of Gzira specifically, they had nowhere within their community to go swimming between the years of 2000-2016 due to Midi closing off Manoel Island even though the entire town is located along the water (#1, 3, & 7). One contemporary news article quoted an activist who said: “Prior to a government concession granted to MIDI, people were able to use Manoel Island unhindered, and many have memories associated with this place, as one of the few open spaces in a congested and heavily built-up area” (Malta Independent, 2016). Exacerbating this was Midi’s development plans for Manoel Island, these plans would have entailed the destruction of the entire promenade along with the historic bridge in order to build a large pylon motorway bridge and roundabout (#7).

Malta is also densely populated with tangible cultural heritage sites. For example, Valletta has one of the highest concentrations of historical monuments in the world (UNESCO, n.d.). Manoel Island itself is filled with numerous cultural heritage structures (#0 & 2), including Fort Manoel, a one of a kind fortress: “considered the absolute template for the perfect Baroque fort” (#4). And while Midi did invest €20 million into restoring the fort, its plans also included demolition of many other heritage structures around the fort (#7). To make matters worse, the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA)

that Midi had made for Manoel Island had been found to be fraudulent by the FAA (#7). The FAA had found that the heritage architect that did the heritage EIA had a blatant conflict of interest with the development project even though he had signed the EIA stating that he did not have one (#7). After going through eight different appeal court cases, the FAA was able to get the EIA invalidated (#7).

Midi was also found to have been in violation of developing too close to a UNESCO world heritage site by the FAA. Because the city of Valletta is a UNESCO world heritage site, it is required to have a buffer zone of at least 500 meters that regulates the erection of tall buildings (#7). However, as the participant from the FAA noted, Valletta has failed to ratify its buffer zone even though it was required to do so back in 2008 (#7). If Midi had gone through with its development plans, it would have technically been in violation of UNESCO regulations, and in 2023 FAA lobbied to make sure that UNESCO knew this was happening and to have the Maltese government ratify the buffer zone to halt the development (#7). However, the buffer zone remains un-validated at the time of this writing (Balzan, 2025).

5.1.3) 2016: Restoring Public Access to the Manoel Island Foreshore

After not having access to their shore for years, the local council of Gzira became emboldened against Midi and began advocating to have access restored to the public (1 & 3). Going against the ruling Labor Party that the mayor was a part of, he declared that he was a Gzira resident first and a Labor member second (#3). By this point, Gzira's promenade had become increasingly congested by traffic and commercial stands that were making it difficult for local residents to enjoy being by the sea (Times of Malta, 2019). Despite wanting to reopen the foreshore, entering Manoel Island was of "dubious legality" and therefore the mayor and local council could not open the island themselves, this is when Movement Graffiti began to get involved (#1). After the local council started agitating to restore public access, Movement Graffiti began holding talks over whether or not they should intervene. Some of the younger activists were reluctant, as one interview participant who was there at the time recalled:

Growing up, I never went there. I mean, I had no connection whatsoever. And in fact, when someone from the organization said, hey, you know, what about we try to open Manoel Island? I remember saying, I think this is a bad idea. But I mean, thankfully, better people, better informed people won out. (#1)

Participants from both Movement Graffiti and the FAA stated that those who had been most vocal about restoring access were older residents who had some form of connection to the place (#1, 3, 4, & 6). While some activists had memories of going to Manoel Island when they were younger, others

possessed memories of the political controversy of the government giving away Manoel Island in the year 2000 (#1). On September 10th (Camilleri, 2016), with the support of the local council, residents, and other NGOs, Movement Graffiti cut through the fence that Midi had placed around Manoel Island and began letting people in (#1).



Figure 13. The northern foreshore of Manoel Island. Source: Own Photograph, 2026.

Midi responded by calling the police and attempted to block access afterwards (#1 & 3). Movement Graffiti continued to reopen the island after each attempt to close it off again (#1). At one point, activists from Movement Graffiti used kayaks and canoes to cross the bay and occupy the island (#1). After several months of back and forth, Midi eventually relented and opened the island to the public once more (#1 & 3). After the island was reopened, Gzira and other nearby residents not only had a place where they could swim, but also a large green space where people could run and bike without fear of getting injured by traffic (#4). Locals began to rebuild connections with the island and reacquire a sense of appreciation for accessible green spaces (#1 & 4). But most importantly, it served as a point of inspiration for future activism as one member of Movement Graffiti put it (#3): “And then, because of that, I think, had it not been 2016, then there would have been no collective imagination of what the island could be.”



Figure 14. Stray cats on Manoel Island are taken care of by local volunteers. An example of locals forming connections to the island. Source: Own photograph, 2026.

5.2) “Groundbreaking for Maltese Civil Society”; The Petition Campaign

And I, I think we can conclude by saying that this campaign was a groundbreaker for civil society in Malta because I'll never forget an American has told me years ago that when he first arrived in Malta, one thing that struck him was that civil society, where is civil society? Civil society was virtually nowhere to be seen because our government of every government [sic] of every type had always, always repressed civil society. (Participant #7)

In the years after 2016, members of Movement Graffiti were considering their odds of success to go even further and attempt to pressure the government to take back Manoel Island, but usually when it came up in conversation it was not considered “the right time” (#1). Meanwhile FAA had been continuing its legal battles against Midi and their possession of Manoel Island (#7) and had supported the 2019 petition to turn the island into a park (Carabott, 2019). Because FAA was so legally involved against Midi, they had studied the lease agreement Midi had with the government and saw an opportunity. Within the contract it was stipulated that Midi had to have developed 80% of the

concession by March 31st, 2026 or the land would revert to the government (#1 & 7). At the start of 2025, Midi was nowhere near achieving this number due to financial constraints (#7). This was the opportunity both organizations had been looking for (#1, 3, & 7). Since Midi had to negotiate with the government no matter what, the two organizations saw this as their chance to make Midi give up the concession (#1, 3, & 7).

5.2.1) “Not like a Graffiti Campaign”: Hopeful Messaging for Manoel Island

When activists were preparing the petition campaign to turn Manoel Island into a park in March of 2025, members from Movement Graffiti wanted the campaign to be different than how they would normally run a campaign (#1 & 3). Instead of employing its usual confrontational strategy, Graffiti wanted to do a positive national campaign that could bring people together (#1 & 3). Participants shared how Graffiti took very deliberate choices with its messaging, seeking to highlight “aspirational”, “hopeful”, and “nurturing” messaging about leaving a better legacy for the children of Malta (#1). They also wanted to frame the campaign as an opportunity for the government, in both an assertive and positive manner, as Graffiti knew that asking the government to take back the land and turn it into a park was a huge ask and they “did not want to do it too timidly” (#1). Public benefit was another focus of the campaign messaging (#3). Graffiti felt like this messaging strategy would resonate with the Maltese public because they are exhausted by the trend in Maltese politics where political messaging had a more negative bent (#1).

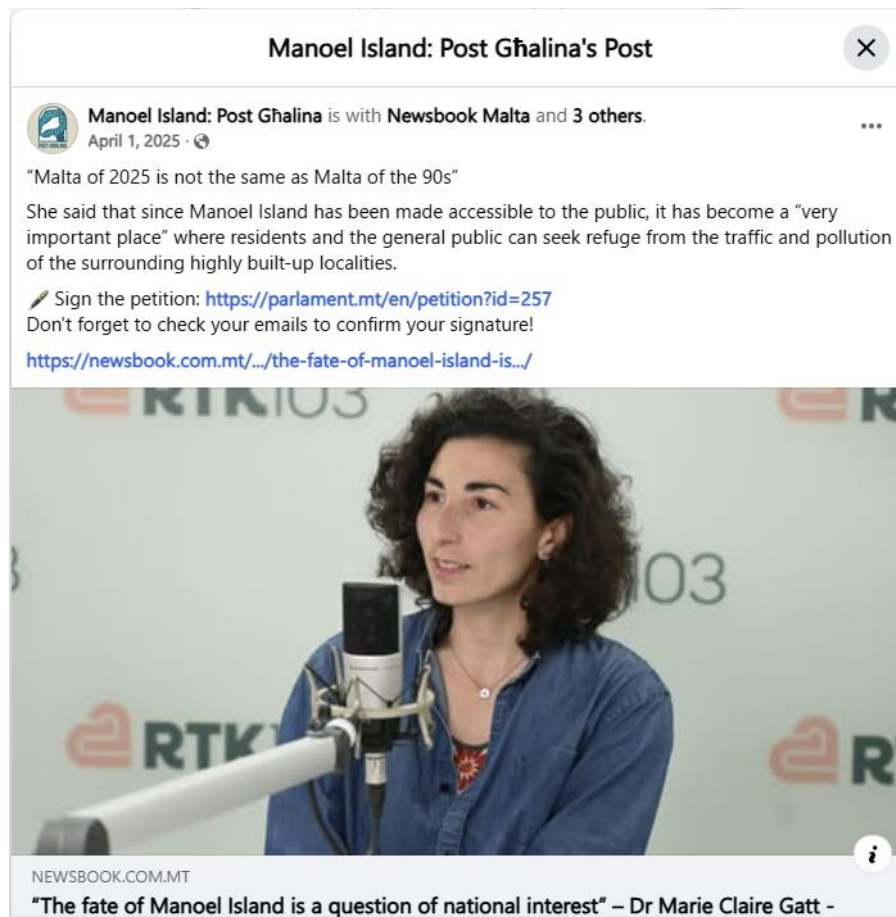


Figure 15. Facebook Post for the Post Għalina Campaign. Source: Post Għalina, 2025.

FAA and Movement Graffiti even extended this positive messaging to Midi. Both organizations had meetings with Midi to inform them of the campaign and ask how they could avoid alienating Midi in their campaign messaging, which participants from Movement Graffiti noted was something they normally wouldn't do (#1 & 3). Midi made it clear that they needed to develop the land in order to pay back their shareholders, but participants remarked that during the meetings, Midi did not appear very enthusiastic about developing the land (#1). Midi had a €50 million bond payment due soon, and this was pressuring them to find a way to make a profit out of Manoel Island (#1 & 7). However, FAA saw this as a chance to highlight how Midi could attempt to negotiate compensation from the government to help repay its debts it had incurred restoring Fort Manoel (#7). From a legal standpoint, the government was entitled to confiscate the concession from Midi without any form of compensation (#7).

5.2.2) Broad Support From NGOs and the Public

Before the petition campaign was publicly launched, a Manoel Island working group was put together consisting of members from FAA, Movement Graffiti, and other outside volunteers to handle and manage the campaign (#1 & 7). One of its first goals was looking for people outside of

politics to endorse the campaign and give it legitimacy (#1). While the initial search for media personalities was not very successful, what was successful was the large coalition of NGOs that came together to endorse the campaign (#1 & 7). While in the past Maltese NGOs have had limited collaboration with each other (#0 & 7), the petition campaign represented a very large coalition, with over 40 different NGOs (Appendix 1) endorsing the petition campaign before it was publicly launched (#1). These NGOs represented a very diverse mix of groups from across Maltese society. As traditional heritage and green groups joined together with organizations such as the Chamber of Architects and the Maltese Catholic Church's Environmental Commission (#1).

Though a large amount of organizations gave their endorsement to the petition campaign, the majority of them played more passive roles by promoting the campaign in their social media and public communications (#2, 3, 4, & 7). However, Movement Graffiti and FAA both stated that they had excellent coordination with each other and would work together around the clock to gather as many signatures as possible (1, 3, & 7). As the participant from FAA (#7) put it: "And I have to emphasize and I want you to, I'd like you to really highlight this, that the success was due to the excellent, excellent synergy between different groups." The campaign was also able to recruit a number of outside volunteers. One participant from Movement Graffiti (#1) recalled how outside volunteers brought their own enthusiasm to the campaign:

I remember there was this girl I had never met before. She was from India. She'd only been in Malta like a couple of years. And she was so like interested in helping out, you know, it was like far [sic] being very forward, very proactive with it. It was really gratifying to see.

When the petition campaign was launched, the working group learned that it needed to gain legitimacy in a "staggered approach" (#1). As the petition reached various signature thresholds, this allowed more people to step up and endorse the campaign. For example, after 10,000 signatures people such as influencers and others considered outside politics were much more likely to publicly endorse the campaign (#1). As momentum picked up, even politicians within the ruling Labor Party began to endorse the campaign, including Alfred Sant, the former prime minister who had signed the deal giving away Manoel Island in 2000, which he described as the largest mistake of his career (#1 & 7) (Sant, 2025). In addition to Sant, several other members of the Labor Party, including the Secretary General of the party, came out in support of the petition (#7) (Malta Independent, 2025a).

5.2.3) Save Manoel Island Becomes the 2nd Largest Petition in Maltese History

After an intense campaign that lasted two months, the petition to turn Manoel Island into a national park became the second largest petition in Maltese history (#1). Reaching a total of 29,000 signatures, equivalent to 5% of Malta's population (Post Għalina, n.d.). A participant from Movement Graffiti noted how remarkable this feat was because the largest petition in Maltese history had reached 47,000 signatures and had been about stopping illegal migration (Parlimant Ta'Malta, 2020). A topic which had been in the national discourse for a long time (#1). In comparison the Manoel Island petition reached similar levels without previously having been on the national agenda:

Whereas we were able to put Manoel Island at comparable level, something which was also on the national agenda, something which suddenly became also like, you know, getting 10s of thousands of signatures overnight, practically, purely because out of sheer force of the campaign, because it was not previously on the national agenda. (#1)

While the 2019 petition by Inhobbu l-Gzira was a sizable amount by Maltese standards, it still ended up not even moving forward in parliamentary committee and was forgotten about (#1). However, the sheer number of signatures in 2025 in comparison was a number the government could not ignore. As several participants noted, 5% of the country's population is a sizable amount of voters, and this popular support could be translated into votes in the next election (#1 & 7). This is in addition to the several important members of the Labor Party who endorsed the petition (#7). In the end, the issue never had a chance to go to committee (#1), because in September, only four months after the petition had ended, the government announced its formal plans to reacquire the island (Debono J, 2026).

5.3) "Shape Your Space"; Government Adoption of Manoel Island

And not only did they do that, but then when they saw just how popular Manoel Island was, they said, oh, White Rocks, also a national park now. Fort Cambell, also a national park now. So they started adding on more parks ultimately, which was unexpected but a really good like kind of snowball effect of the campaign like that's really cool we were making jokes you know it's like the it's [sic] bargain bin you know three parks for the price of one. (#1)

After the September announcement, the government began to negotiate the return of Manoel Island (#1). But in a surprise twist, the government also announced that it was turning two other heritage

sites, White Rocks and Fort Campbell, into national parks along with Manoel Island (#1 & 4). A participant from Movement Graffiti attributed this to the success of the campaign, in their view the government saw a chance to leave a green legacy by creating these different national parks (#1). It is important to note that while there was some local push to have White Rocks and Fort Campbell to be better maintained, no one expected to see them be made into national parks (#1).

5.3.1) Government Consultation & Project Green

With the quality of life degrading within Malta due to the construction boom, many Maltese saw the national parks initiative as a way to reverse this trend to improve local health, both physical and mental (#1, 5, & 6). These concerns with quality of life within the country is what originally led to the creation of Project Green, a Maltese government agency focused on creating and maintaining green spaces, in 2022 (# 5 & 6). For the national parks, the government decided to undertake a consultation process that would begin in December 2025 in order to provide the Maltese with national parks that they could be proud of, and Project Green was the agency put in charge of this process (# 5 & 6). The consultation process, advertised as “Shape Your Space”, initially sought to obtain feedback on White Rocks and Fort Campbell (#5 & 6). This is because the government did not yet own Manoel Island and was still negotiating with Midi, so they wanted to focus on the locations they already possessed (5 & 6).

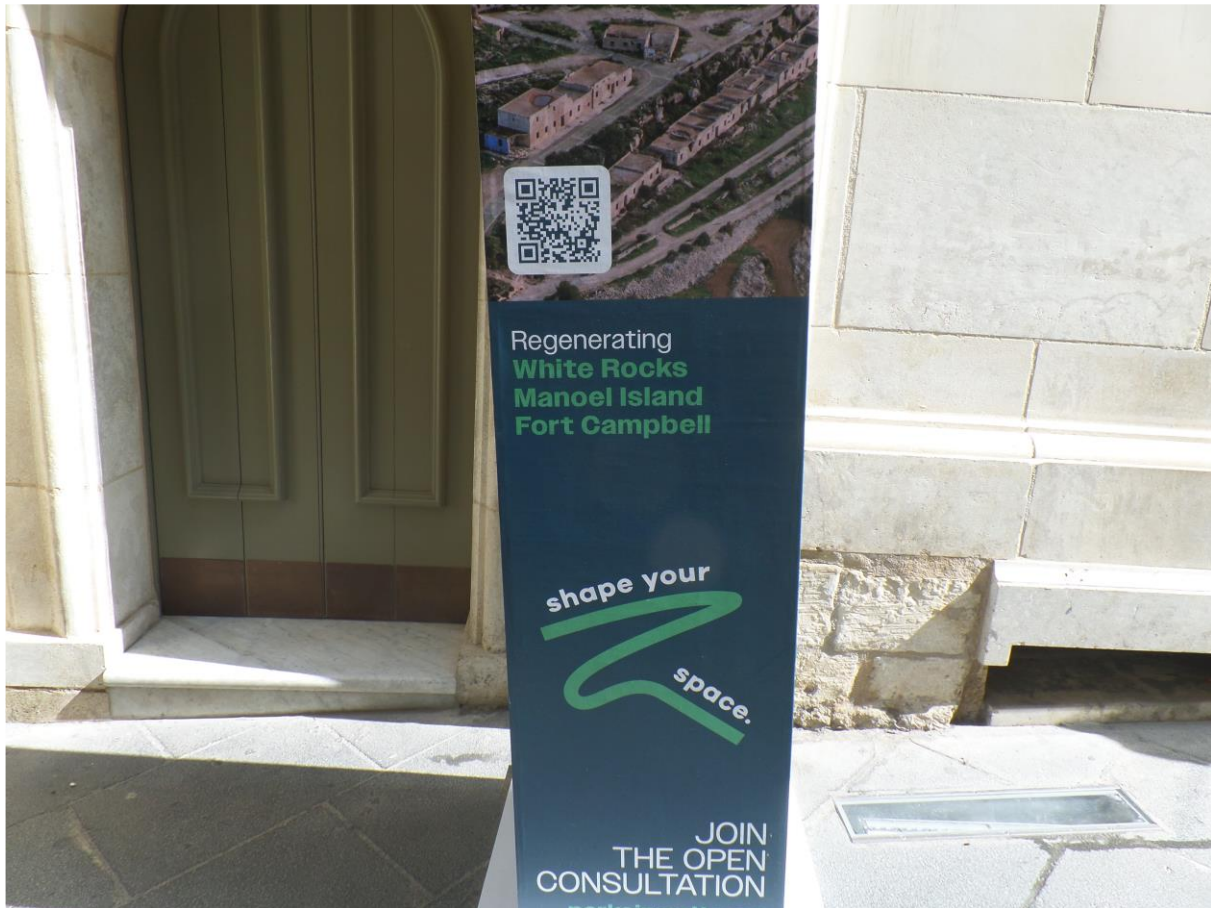


Figure 16. An example of the “Shape Your Space” campaign advertising that the government has placed all around Malta. Source: Own Photograph 2026.

According to the Project Green participants, they focused on obtaining as much public feedback as possible, “be it students, adults, or the elderly” (# 5 & 6). The government has tried to make clear that their intention is to listen to everyone and be intentional in their consultation process (Parks in Malta, 2025) (# 5 & 6). Since Shape Your Space was launched, Project Green has held a large number of stakeholder workshops to get input on the three parks (Government of Malta, 2026) (# 5 & 6). This includes visits to primary schools across the country to work with students on creating the kind of parks that they would like to see (# 5 & 6).

5.3.2) Envisioning What Manoel Island Could Be

To make sure that local voices are heard over other competing interests on Manoel Island, the Post Għalina campaign decided to “preempt” the government by holding their own consultation workshops (#3). The goal of these workshops was to engage the public in creating a vision for the park that can keep the government accountable throughout the consultation process (#3). A vision document was finalized with five core values that were created with local residents and NGOs for the park (#3 & 4). These five values are: Free and Safe Access for All, Integration of Wellbeing and Health,

Preserve and Share Cultural Memory, and Respect for Ecological Systems (Post Għalina Vision Document, 2025). During the consultation process, activists with Post Għalina have been encouraging residents to participate and submit the vision document to the government in order to keep up pressure and prevent competing interests from setting their own agendas for the park.

Despite initial success, activists interviewed made it clear that there is still a long way to go to make Manoel Island into a park that fits their vision. As one participant put it: “now the next steps are going to be the hardest in my opinion” (#3). Several NGOs affiliated with Post Għalina stated that they are keeping a close eye on the government to make sure that it holds up its end of the bargain (# 2, 3, 4, & 7). Already, struggles over who gets to use the park space for what reason are taking place in Manoel Island. The Gzira’s local football club has been found to be illegally building padel courts on the island without permission (#3 & 4) (Malta Independent, 2026b). This is in addition to the fact Fort Manoel is not fully restored, meaning that the heritage organizations involved in Post Għalina are keeping a close eye on the restoration process to make sure no more heritage is damaged or lost (#2 & 7).

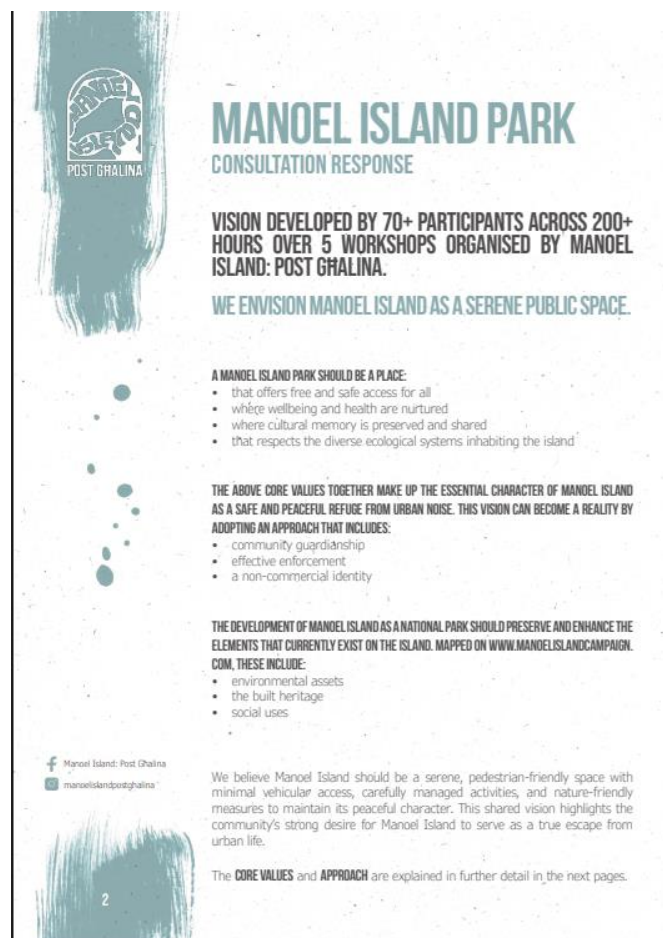


Figure 17. A page from the Post Għalina vision document highlighting the values and approaches that they wanted implemented in the park. Source: Post Għalina, 2025a.

6.0) Discussion

This next section is dedicated to analyzing the Post Għalina campaign to answer RQ2 through my theoretical framework:

What elements of Post Għalina's campaign contributed to its remarkable success?

6.1) 2025 The Political Opportunity

When examining the factors that led to Post Għalina's successful petition in 2025, it is important to compare this with the conditions surrounding the first petition attempt to have Manoel Island transformed into a national park. The first petition in 2019 was able to garner 7,500 signatures (Parlimant Ta'Malta, 2019). This is sizable by Maltese standards, however it failed to have enough political momentum to convince the government to act. What was different in 2025 that was not true in 2019? The political opportunity that created the environmental condition for Post Għalina was in fact the contract expiration that was due for Midi's ownership of Manoel Island. Activists from both Movement Graffiti and FAA identified that Midi's contract was set to expire in March 2026 because they were legally required to have developed 80% of their concession by said date or lose ownership over it (#1, 2, 4 & 7). Midi's failure to live up to its contract created an elite rupture that gave activists a window to exploit (Sicotte and Brulle, 2017).

Therefore, compared to 2019, activists within Post Għalina found a political context that could be used to mobilize and advance their claim (Meyer, 2004). In an activist's own words: "So that legal clause, that clause in the contract was crucial to the campaign. It was the foundational element, so to speak" (#1). Not only did the contract's expiration serve to weaken Midi's legal ownership of Manoel Island, it also served as a stronger justification to mobilize support and frame the movement as capable of success. In the past, Midi and the government had described their agreement as an: "iron clad contract" and members of the public believed this (#7). People tend to mobilize only when they see a cause as winnable (McAdam et al., 1996), which explains why in 2019 the Maltese people were not as willing to support the petition as they saw Midi's legal ownership of the island as something that could not be easily overcome (#7).

6.2) Mobilizing a Coalition

Emergent collective action requires people to shift their world view and act in accordance with a new view to facilitate change (McAdam, 2017). This can be an incredibly difficult process even for experienced organizers (McAdam, 2017). Therefore, the cultural context surrounding a grievance has

an impact on how likely people are to mobilize around a grievance (Meyer, 2004). Post Għalina was able to mobilize larger and larger amounts of people to support its petition through a process activists described as “staggered legitimacy”, by this they mean seeking further endorsements as the petition attracted larger and larger numbers of signatures (#1). Post Għalina began with seeking the endorsements of various Maltese NGOs, resulting in its total of 40 endorsements it launched the campaign with. These endorsements from a broad collection of NGOs meant it had legitimacy from various sectors of Maltese society. Starting at more green minded NGOs like the Malta Ranger Unit and Grow 10 Trees Malta, to more conservative heritage organizations like Din l-Art Ħelwa, mental health NGOs like the Richmond Foundation, and even the Environmental Commission of the Maltese Catholic Church (Post Għalina, 2025). This large number of endorsement organizations meant that Post Għalina commenced its campaign in a way that could grant it increased media attention and enhanced public visibility (Gawerc, 2019). This coalition of NGOs also meant that Post Għalina had enhanced political leverage and a large pool of initial people to draw signatures from, compared with the 2019 campaign which did not have these endorsements (Gawerc, 2019).

With the initial coalition of NGOs, activists continued their staggered legitimacy approach through a media campaign. Post Għalina used advertisements, social media, and public spokespersons to get the message out to the public (#1). Once the petition reached 5,000 signatures, politicians began to come out in support of the campaign (#1). These figures included the former PM Alfred Sant and the highly respected ex-minister Evarist Bartolo (E. Borg, 2025). Their support meant that Maltese people who had stronger ties to the Labor Party were now much more comfortable supporting the campaign (#7). Initially, campaigners also wanted to get local celebrities and influencers to endorse the campaign, but these types of people were reluctant to do this until the petition reached around 10,000 signatures (#1). Once it had mobilized this level of broad support, reservations in supporting the campaign were no longer a concern and this allowed the campaign to snowball to the size that it did. This is in comparison to the 2019 petition, which was much more local and did not seek to bring in so many outside actors.

6.3) Framing a Brighter Future For Manoel Island

When planning on how they wanted to communicate the campaign to the public, Post Għalina settled on a positive campaign that would focus on highlighting the benefits of Manoel Island in a way that would excite and mobilize people. Activists wanted to avoid negativity as they felt it would demoralize people and be a poor representation of what they were trying to create (#1). Post Għalina choice of tactics served to structure the policy debate in a way that would excite and

energize people (Boscarino, 2016), instead of coming off as another grievance based political campaign.

Post Għalina's diagnostic framing centered around how people were tired of luxury condos being built everywhere, that the unending construction is reducing quality of life and that the Maltese people want more than luxury real-estate for their cities (Griffin, 2025). (#1 & 3). This framing clearly resonates with a large portion of the Maltese population. Within Malta's Vision 2050 document, public dissatisfaction with construction is at 70% (Babnov et al., 2025), showcasing that a large majority of the population wants to see something done to curb the construction boom so it does not continue getting out of hand. It is also important to note that while diagnostic framing focuses on problem identification (Caiani, 2023), Post Għalina did not frame Midei in any sort of antagonistic way. In fact, activists met with Midei before the campaign was launched in order to have a dialogue and ensure the campaign did not hurt Midei's interests beyond Manoel Island (#1).

The prognostic framing for Post Għalina centers on how a successful petition, and later consultation process, acts to pressure the government into turning Manoel Island into a national park. As an example, the Manoel Island Vision Document created by Post Għalina after the petition campaign with the help of public consultation workshops showcases the solutions that Post Għalina envisions for the island; that of a park that fosters community and wellness and respects ecological systems and cultural memory (Post Għalina, 2025b). Finally, the motivational framing was Post Għalina's most important core framing task. It is what allowed the petition campaign to resonate with such a large portion of Malta's population. Activists described framing the campaign as an inspirational, hopeful national project that could serve as a legacy for Malta's children (#1 & 3). One activist wrote an article about how as a child, he would play on Manoel Island, with it serving as a refuge for him and how he'd like to see that again (#4). Some members of one of Post Għalina's partner NGOs even suggested that Manoel Island could be used by the government for their Vision 2050 document, showcasing a national project everyone from across the political spectrum can get behind (#2).

6.3.1) Counter Framing & Credibility

Throughout the petition period, Post Għalina had to contend with the counter framing that the government created in order to try and limit the movement. The government attempted to frame Midei's project as something that was important to the Maltese economy, but also to the credibility of the government. For example, in reaction to the petition's completion, prime minister Abela described withdrawing the government's agreement with Midei as "momentary populist act" (Debono J, 2026). In addition, Abela stated that while the petition had 29,000 signatures on one hand, there

was also 5,000 Maltese shareholders invested in Midi on the other hand that the government had to take into account (Malta Independent, 2025a). As a third example, activists were told that if the government were seen as canceling investment agreements, then international investors would stop investing into Malta and go elsewhere (#7). But despite this counter framing coming from the government, Post Għalina and its supporters were able to overcome this “framing contest” (Benford and Snow, 2000, p. 626) with their own framing. For example, when activists were told that taking back Manoel Island would harm future investments, activists countered by saying that Midi failed to uphold its contract, and that if it was allowed to do this, it would send a signal to other investors that they could “do whatever they like” (#7). In addition, a lot of the government’s own framing was countered by members of the Labor Party who came out in disagreement with the government’s contract with Midi. With labor MP Zammit Lewis stating that it was not the government’s obligation to honor private sector bonds (Malta Independent, 2025a), and the former PM Alfred Sant stating that the government had looked the other way on several points with the original contract with Midi (Sant, 2025).

When it comes to credibility, it was the third factor, credibility of organization (Christiansen, 2024), that Post Għalina had to contend with. Specifically, Movement Graffiti’s association with being pro-abortion caused some trouble during the early days of the petition campaign. One activist recalled how “people were like, oh no, I would never sign anything, sign anything that you're doing because you're in favor of killing babies, killing unborn babies” (#3). However, this was not a widespread issue. The fact that FAA, which has maintained a non-party neutrality throughout its lifetime (#7), along with other NGOs that gave their endorsement including the Catholic Church’s own Environmental Commission, was associated with the campaign helped to alleviate the issues of Movement Graffiti’s political stances on the campaign itself (#3). In addition, Movement Graffiti’s insistence on running a campaign differently than they have in the past also helped. By being less combative and confrontational than Movement Graffiti normally is, Post Għalina was able to achieve and maintain a credibility with wide popular support.

7.0) Conclusion

This thesis worked to highlight how social movements can create “A Place for Us” in the face of political and economic forces that have been degrading local quality of life. The findings show that despite the economic benefits that the construction boom has brought to Malta, the local population is becoming increasingly fed-up with its practices and desires change. This desire for change is what Post Għalina was able to harness to achieve its remarkable success. The analysis shows how proper exploitation of a political opportunity, like a legal loophole, can result in genuine change, and that through positive framing, large coalitions can be mobilized in order to create and protect urban green spaces. Despite the fact that other social movements will have difficulty replicating Post Għalina’s exact political opportunity, studying their mobilizing structures and framing processes could serve as guidance in the creation of future campaigns that leverage positivity and public good in order to create greener cities.

But beyond these insights, stories such as the struggle for Manoel Island should be highlighted and analyzed not only for their intellectual insights on finding political opportunities, creating mobilizing structures, and framing processes, but also for their inspirational message: that we can succeed in building just transitions through determination, careful planning, and a bit of luck. The success of Post Għalina showcases the impacts social movements can have on our contemporary world, showing victories to inspire and potentially model further action elsewhere.

There is ample potential for further research on Manoel Island and green spaces within Malta and beyond. With its unique situation of being a small, but densely populated car-dependent country, the struggles over providing accessible green spaces to the urban Maltese population look like they will not end anytime soon. Comparative studies utilizing urban political ecology, or similar approaches could serve to examine how struggles for urban green space within Malta compare to the differences and similarities with other European states and beyond. This is not to mention that the struggle for Manoel Island is far from over. Within the coming years, examining how the government carries out its promise to turn Manoel Island into a national park should prove to be a promising research topic. White Rocks and Fort Campbell could also offer interesting research avenues on their own transformations into national parks. Finally, Malta’s unique attribute of being densely populated with cultural heritage that is often intertwined with natural heritage could provide interesting insights on how connections to heritage can interact with the green spaces that they inhabit and inspire connections and the actions of locals.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Post Għalina Partner NGOs

Organization	Description
The Grow 10 Trees Project	NGO to help encourage citizens to grow and care for 10 trees along with supporting greening project
Dance Beyond Borders	NGO merging art and activism to address social justice issues within local communities
Rota	NGO working to promote cycling within Malta
Kamra tal-Periti	Maltese Chamber of Architects
Kunsill Nazzjonali Zgħazagħ	National Youth Council of Malta
DIN L-ART HELWA	NGO working to preserve Malta's natural and cultural heritage
Kopin	NGO that supports marginalized communities within Malta in a sustainable way
Malta Rock Climbing Club	Club dedicated to the sport of rock climbing
Inizjamed	NGO committed to the active expression of culture and art and promotion of Mediterranean cultures
Birdlife Malta	Oldest environmental organization within Malta dedicated to protecting wild birds and their habitats
Nature Trust Malta	Environmental NGO partnered with World Wildlife Fund
Earth Systems Association (ESA)	Student organization at the University of Malta for those studying earth systems

Azzjoni Tuna Artna Lura	An environmental group founded by residents of Cottonera
ACT	NGO working to empower individuals and communities to implement sustainable progress
Ramblers' Association of Malta	NGO involved in the protection of the Maltese countryside and people's right to enjoy it
Friends of Earth Malta	NGO that campaigns on pressing environmental and social issues within Malta
Inhobbu l-Gzira	Citizens of Gzira who are opposed to Midi's development of Manoel Island
Chewing Productions	Network of young artists tackling contemporary issues through theater and community events
Right 2 Smile	NGO which brings together responsible volunteering with sustainable community projects around the globe
Wied ta' Rmiedi Rewilding Project	A river rewilding project in Attard, Malta
Malta Gay Rights Movement	NGO that tackles LGBTQ+ issues within the country
Gegwigija	Pop-up events on ecology, queerness, and decolonization
Kollettiv	Organization that seeks to create new spaces for activism to improve Maltese social realities
7R	Diving instruction organization
Marsakala Residents Network	NGO for residents of Marsakala
Residenti Beltin	Residents of Beltin fighting against privatization within their local community

Sliema Residents Association	Residents of Sliema working to improve their community
Gabriel Caruana Foundation	NGO promoting contemporary arts, crafts and culture
ClimbMT	NGO that brings people who are interested in different climbing sports together
Malta Ranger Unit	NGO empowering citizens to protect the environment
Richmond Foundation	NGO offering services for those with mental health issues
Pen Malta	Group of writers, journalists, activists, and artists
Kreattivisti	Student organization fighting for educational rights and to create a stronger community
Zminijietna Voice of the Left	Maltese leftist movement and organization
Young Progressive Beings	Youth feminist organization that looks to mobilize youth on intersectional feminist issues
Green House	NGO working to protect Maltese biodiversity
Wirt Ghawdex	NGO safeguarding the natural and cultural heritage of Malta
University of Malta Biodiversity and Ecology Research Group	Multidisciplinary team working to advance the field of ecological sciences
Ghawdix	NGO striving to promote environmental and social responsibility in Malta
Environmental Commission of the Archdiocese of Malta	Environmental commission for the Catholic Church of Malta

Dawra Madwarna	Volunteer organization of professionals from various fields working together to promote green spaces
Wirt iż-Żejtun	Heritage NGO created by people from Zetun
Betapsi	Student organization for psychology students

Appendix 2: Interview Questions

Sample Interview Questions

- 1) Do you mind sharing about yourself your organization is connected to the Manoel Island Campaign?
- 2) How does your organization fit into the campaign?
- 3) What kind of park would your organization like to see on Manoel Island?

Appendix 3: Interview Consent Form Example

Interview Consent Form

Research project title: Cynthia Reese's Master Thesis

Research investigator: Cynthia Reese

Research Participants name:

The interview will take 30-60 minutes. I do not anticipate that there are any risks associated with your participation, but you have the right to stop the interview or withdraw from the research at any time.

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed as part of the above research project. Ethical procedures for academic research undertaken from Swedish institutions require that interviewees explicitly agree to being interviewed and how the information contained in their interview will be used. This consent form is necessary for us to ensure that you understand the purpose of your involvement and that you agree to the conditions of your participation. Would you therefore read the accompanying information sheet and then sign this form to certify that you approve the following:

- The interview will be recorded and a transcript will be produced
- You will be sent the transcript if desired and given the opportunity to correct any factual errors
- The transcript of the interview will be analyzed by Cynthia Reese as research investigator
- Access to the interview transcript will be limited to Cynthia Reese and academic colleagues and researchers with whom she might collaborate as part of the research process
- Any summary interview content, or direct quotations from the interview, that are made

available through academic publication or other academic outlets will be anonymized so that you cannot be identified, and care will be taken to ensure that other information in the interview that could identify yourself is not revealed; the only demographic information that will be utilized is occupation (i.e. archeologist, student, etc.)

- The actual recording will be kept on a local hard drive and then deleted after the end of the project

- Any variation of the conditions above will only occur with your further explicit approval

By signing this form I agree that:

1. I am voluntarily taking part in this project. I understand that I don't have to take part, and I can stop the interview at any time;
2. The transcribed interview or extracts from it may be used as described above;
3. I have read the information sheet;
4. I don't expect to receive any benefit or payment for my participation;
5. I can request a copy of the transcript of my interview and may make edits I feel necessary to ensure the effectiveness of any agreement made about confidentiality;
6. I have been able to ask any questions I might have, and I understand that I am free to contact the researcher with any questions I may have in the future.

Printed Name

Participants Signature & Date

Researchers Signature & Date

Contact Information

If you have any further questions or concerns about this study, please contact:

Cynthia Reese

Tel: +46 76 895 32 33

E-mail: cyrenn.reese@gmail.com

You can also contact Cynthia Reese's supervisor:

Santiago Gorostiza

E-mail: santiago.gorostiza@lucsus.lu.se

Appendix 4: Codebook

Name	Description
Coalition	How the coalition was put together
Collaboration	How Post Għalina organizations collaborated with each other
FAA	Information about FAA
Movement Graffiti	Information about Movement Graffiti
NGO	Information on endorsement NGOs
Consultation	How the consultation process took place
Contract Expiration	Midi's contract expiration with the government
Developers	Information about Maltese developers
Construction	Information about the construction boom
Cowboy Developers	Information about cowboy developers
Enforcement	How the government is failing to enforce building regulations
Government Endorsement	How the government is transforming Manoel Island into a national park
Competing Interests	How different groups are attempting to influence what kind of park Manoel Island is made into

Name	Description
Credit	How the government is taking credit for the national parks
Green Space	Information on green spaces within Malta
Recreational	Information on how green spaces are used in Malta
Heritage Space	Information on cultural heritage spaces
Negative Press	The negative framing against the campaign
Petition	Information on the petition campaign process
Political Culture	Information on Maltese political culture
Positive Campaign	How the campaign framed itself
Project Green	Information on Project Green
Protest	How protests manifested over Manoel Island
Public Access	How public access to green spaces is hindered
2016	How activists reopened the foreshore in 2016
Personal Connection	How activists with connections to Manoel Island wanted to reopen it
Public Support	How the public supported the campaign

Name	Description
Social Media	How the petition was advertised on social media
Space Conflict	How conflicts over space would manifest
Contract Violations	How Midi violated its contracts (such as the EIA)
Success	What success looked like for the petition campaign
Urban Sprawl	Information on urban sprawl