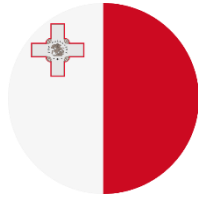


COUNTRY BRIEFING  
AUGUST 2023

# Malta

## INTRODUCTION

The [Statelessness Index](https://index.statelessness.eu) (<https://index.statelessness.eu>) is an online comparative tool that assesses European countries' law, policy, and practice on the protection of stateless people and the prevention and reduction of statelessness against international norms and good practice. The Index was developed and is maintained by the [European Network on Statelessness \(ENS\)](#),<sup>1</sup> a civil society alliance of over 180 organisations and individuals in 41 countries working to end statelessness and ensure that stateless people in Europe access their rights.

ENS worked with [aditus foundation](#)<sup>2</sup> to research and compile comparative information on statelessness in Malta. It covers five thematic areas – International and Regional Instruments, Stateless Population Data, Statelessness Determination and Status, Detention, and Prevention and Reduction – and makes a series of recommendations to the Maltese Government for reform in priority areas.

To be stateless is not to be recognised as a national by any state under the operation of its law. It is a legal anomaly that prevents more than 10 million people around the world - and more than half a million in Europe - from accessing fundamental civil, political, economic, cultural, and social rights.

## INTERNATIONAL AND REGIONAL INSTRUMENTS

Malta acceded to the 1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons in December 2019, but it did so with a number of significant reservations, and the Convention does not have direct effect. Malta is not State Party to any of the other core statelessness conventions, although it has signed but not acceded to the [European Convention on Nationality](#).

Malta is State Party to all other relevant human rights instruments, but it retains several significant reservations. Most of these do not have a substantive effect on statelessness, but reservations to the [Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women, for example](#), impact on the reproductive, family, property, and social security rights of all women in Malta, including stateless women.

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The Maltese Government should accede to the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness, the European Convention on Nationality, and the Convention on the Avoidance of Statelessness in Relation to State Succession.

The Maltese Government should withdraw its reservations to the 1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons, and other human rights treaties.

## STATELESS POPULATION DATA

There is very limited disaggregated population data on statelessness in Malta, which is compounded by the lack of a procedure for identifying

and determining statelessness in Malta. However, the Annual Demographic Review carried out by the National Statistics Office has included a 'stateless' category in its data on acquisition of Maltese nationality since 2008. Between 2008-2010, 24 stateless individuals were reported to have obtained Maltese nationality.

Malta's official census, conducted in 2011 and 2021, provided limited opportunity for respondents to self-identify as 'stateless'. The question on nationality allowed for a 'yes'/'no' answer to whether someone has Maltese nationality or 'any foreign nationality'. If both answers were 'no', there were no further questions. According to the 2021 census report, there are 171 stateless people in Malta.

The Malta Police Force and the International Protection Agency use the statistical category 'nationality not known' and record data on refused asylum-seekers who cannot be returned, but do not have a specific 'stateless' category. 'Palestinian' is included as a nationality category. In 2022, one asylum-seeker self-identified as stateless and the International Protection Agency received 32 applications from Palestinian.

The Government does not publish data on stateless people in detention and statelessness is not systematically recorded across government agencies. The last mapping study conducted by UNHCR was published in 2014, thus much of the information available is also out of date.<sup>3</sup>

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The Maltese Government should take concrete steps to improve the recording of statelessness by harmonising and defining statistical categories used by different agencies and ensuring that registration officials are trained to accurately identify and record statelessness.

The Maltese Government should also include the recording and counting of stateless individuals in national censuses.



## STATELESSNESS DETERMINATION AND STATUS

There is no mechanism to identify or determine statelessness in Malta nor any dedicated protection status for stateless people, although the Maltese government publicly committed to establishing an administrative procedure to determine statelessness. The Citizenship Act mentions applications from stateless people, but it is unclear how eligibility for such applications is determined and an application has never been processed under this route. The International Protection Agency has discretion to recommend a local form of protection – ‘Temporary Humanitarian Protection (THP)’ – usually either granted where someone has been refused asylum but obtains protection for exceptional humanitarian reasons (for example, unaccompanied minors, people who are terminally or seriously ill, family reunion). In 2018, the Specific Residence Authorisation (SRA) was launched as a form of limited regularisation for people refused asylum and considered to be ‘well-integrated’, who arrived in Malta prior to January 2016 and have not been returned.<sup>4</sup> However, this route has been closed and new applications are not being accepted. The Malta Police Force also has discretion to grant humanitarian residence permits. Statelessness may also be identified during refugee status determination procedures as part of a person’s claim for international protection, but this does not lead to a formal recognition of statelessness.

If granted THP or SRA, the person has access to various rights including a renewable residence permit (one year for THP and two years for SRA) implying protection from removal, access to healthcare, and access to the labour market; but these rights are not set in law. People granted THP/SRA may apply for nationality, which by law may be granted at the discretion of the Minister. However, as Malta considers SRA and THP-holders as migrants in an irregular situation, in practice it is highly unlikely that their applications will even be considered.

Further to its accession to the 1954 Convention, in line with UNHCR guidance and further to its public commitment, the Maltese Government should establish in law a statelessness determination procedure and protection status, under the authority of the International Protection Agency, including the automatic granting of a residence permit, right to work, study and facilitated naturalisation. Malta should allocate sufficient resources to the Agency in order for it to operate an efficient, and fair procedure.



## DETENTION

In Malta, stateless people may be detained under different legal regimes dependent on the situation, each with its own criteria, rights and guarantees. Legal powers are provided for to detain: asylum-seekers, third country nationals denied entry at the border or in an irregular situation, and asylum-seekers pending Dublin transfers. Malta continues to detain non-nationals without any legal basis to do so and with limited opportunity for them to seek redress.<sup>5</sup>

There are some protections against arbitrary detention relevant to statelessness. On detention for removal, the law states that “*detention shall be a consequence of the removal order*” once an order has been issued.<sup>6</sup> If someone subject to a removal order applies for asylum, the order is suspended pending the outcome. However, a country of

removal does not need to be explicitly identified prior to detention, and statelessness is not considered to be a juridically relevant fact in the decision to detain.<sup>7</sup> In practice, stateless people are detained prior to the authorities initiating removal procedures.

The law explicitly provides for immigration detention to be used only as a last resort in the case of detention for removal or where unaccompanied minors and families with minor children are concerned. Elsewhere, the authorities have discretion on whether to consider less coercive measures, and alternatives are not explicitly referred to in law. There is evidence to suggest that in practice, immigration detention is used prior to all alternatives being considered.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, vulnerability assessments can be carried out on asylum-seekers (predominantly for boat arrivals), which can impact detention decisions. However, statelessness is not considered a vulnerability factor in itself.

Limited procedural safeguards are present depending on the type of detention. If denied entry to the territory, a person has very few rights and there is no maximum time limit for detention. If a person is detained for removal, there is a periodic review but limited access to legal aid to challenge detention. Detained asylum-seekers have a right to legal aid, periodic review, and information on rights and remedies.<sup>9</sup> Asylum-seekers released from detention are issued with documentation and rights under EU law, but people detained for removal and subsequently released are issued with an administrative record and their stay is tolerated, which permits access to the labour market for some people, and access to healthcare only if they can show social security contributions from the preceding three months.

The Maltese Government should take further steps to identify and protect stateless persons from arbitrary detention, by establishing a referral mechanism to a statelessness determination procedure, including statelessness as a vulnerability factor within vulnerability assessments, and refraining from detaining migrants in respect of whom a returnable country of origin has not, or cannot, be established.

The Maltese Government should embed consideration of statelessness as a juridically relevant fact in all decisions to detain.



## PREVENTION AND REDUCTION

There are some safeguards in Maltese law to prevent and reduce statelessness, but implementation is problematic and there are some gaps. There is no facilitated naturalisation for stateless people. There is a non-automatic provision in the Citizenship Act for children born stateless in Malta to acquire nationality after five years’ residence.<sup>10</sup> However, there is no information available about how to provide evidence of the person’s statelessness. The provision is generally little-known, and there are no reports of it ever having been used.

The Maltese Citizenship Act deems foundlings to be Maltese from birth. However, the wording of the provision (“*until his right to any other citizenship is established*”) leaves open the possibility of statelessness arising later in life. If the parents are identified and they are nationals of a country that gives rise to a ‘right’ to nationality for the child, the child’s Maltese nationality would cease, making them potentially stateless until they apply to acquire nationality. In adoption cases, safeguards against statelessness are provided in law and policy, so that children adopted by a Maltese national can acquire nationality. Dual nationality is permitted,

so a child adopted by foreign parents and acquiring another nationality would not automatically lose their Maltese nationality.

The Citizenship Act provides for Maltese nationality to be conferred through jus sanguinis to children born to Maltese nationals in Malta or abroad, but the Act distinguishes between children born in and out of wedlock. The acquisition of Maltese nationality by children born abroad on or after 1 August 1989 to an unmarried Maltese father and a foreign mother is dependent on the father's acknowledgement, even if pending this acknowledgement they would be stateless. Children born to a married Maltese father automatically acquire Maltese nationality. In 2011, the European Court of Human Rights found discriminatory the differential treatment of a child born abroad out of wedlock to a Maltese father and a foreign mother, who was then not able to acquire Maltese nationality.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, birth registration is not usually problematic in law, but there are credible reports of births remaining unregistered due to lack of documentation, incorrect documentation, or refusal of parents to register the child, even though there are no mandatory requirements to report people who are undocumented to the immigration authorities. There are reported cases of the authorities refusing to register births where there are inconsistencies in the parents' documentation, in particular differences between the documents issued by the International Protection Agency and those issued by their countries of origin, and where married parents are unable to provide an original and apostilled marriage certificate. [Identity Malta](#) and [Gov.mt](#) aim to promote awareness of birth registration through clear and easy-to-understand information on services for birth registration (in both English and Maltese) on their websites. However, there are no proactive campaigns on birth registration.

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The Maltese Government should amend the law to ensure that all children born on its territory who would otherwise be stateless acquire nationality at birth, regardless of the status of the parents.

The Maltese Government should implement the 2011 European Court of Human Rights ruling to remove any discriminatory limitations in the acquisition of nationality based on the parents' marital status or other status, and remove practical barriers to birth registration by amending the law and implementing national campaigns and promotion activities on birth registration.

## SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

The Maltese Government should:

- Accede to the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness
- Consider acceding to the European Convention on Nationality and the Convention on the Avoidance of Statelessness in Relation to State Succession
- Remove reservations to the 1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women
- Improve the recording of statelessness by harmonising and defining statistical categories used by different agencies, counting stateless individuals in the national census, and ensuring that registration officials are trained to accurately identify and record statelessness
- Engage with UNHCR and NGOs in order to establish and publish protocols on how to extract relevant data from the 2021 housing and population census and other national registers.
- Further to its accession to the 1954 Convention, in line with UNHCR guidance and further to its public commitment, establish in law a statelessness determination procedure and protection status, under the authority of the International Protection Agency, including the automatic granting of a residence permit, right to work, study and facilitated naturalisation
- Take further steps to protect stateless persons from arbitrary detention by establishing a referral mechanism to a statelessness determination procedure, including statelessness as a vulnerability factor within vulnerability assessments, and refraining from detaining migrants in respect of whom a returnable country of origin has not, or cannot, be established.
- Include statelessness as a juridically relevant fact in all decisions to detain.
- Consider amending the law to ensure that all children born on its territory who would otherwise be stateless acquire nationality at birth, regardless of the status of the parents.
- Address discrimination in the acquisition of nationality and practical barriers to birth registration by amending the law, in line with the 2011 European Court of Human Rights judgment, and implementing national campaigns and promotion activities on birth registration.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> [www.statelessness.eu](http://www.statelessness.eu)

<sup>2</sup> Lead Country Researcher for the Statelessness Index in Malta is ENS Member, aditus foundation (Neil Falzon): <https://aditus.org.mt/>

<sup>3</sup> UNHCR, Mapping Statelessness in Malta, August 2014, available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/546dae5d4.html>

<sup>4</sup> The policy and an information note may be found here:

<https://homeaffairs.gov.mt/en/media/Policies-Documents/Pages/Specific-Residence-Authorisation-2018.aspx>.

<sup>5</sup> Council of Europe, 'Council of Europe's anti-torture Committee calls on Malta to improve the Treatment of detained Migrants' (2021): <https://www.coe.int/en/web/cpt/-/council-of-europe-s-anti-torture-committee-calls-on-malta-to-improve-the-treatment-of-detained-migrants>; OHCHR, 'Shocking' Cycle of Violence for Migrants Departing Libya to Seek Safety in Europe' (2020): <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2020/10/shocking-cycle-violence-migrants-departing-libya-seek-safety-europe?LangID=E&NewsID=26337>.

<sup>6</sup> Subsidiary Legislation 217.12, Common Standards and Procedures for Returning Illegally Staying Third-Country Nationals Regulations, 2011, available at: <http://www.justiceservices.gov.mt/DownloadDocument.aspx?app=lom&itemid=11637&l=1>.

<sup>7</sup> Times of Malta, 'Malians released after controversial three-month detention' (14 February 2017):

<https://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/20170214/local/malians-to-be-released-after-controversial-three-month-detention.639627>

<sup>8</sup> aditus foundation & Jesuit Refugee Service: Asylum Information Database, Country Report, Malta, 2016 update, available at:

<http://www.asylumineurope.org/reports/country/malta/general>

<sup>9</sup> Returns Regulations, Regulation 11(12) and (13), available at:

<http://www.justiceservices.gov.mt/DownloadDocument.aspx?app=lom&itemid=11637&l=1>

<sup>10</sup> Citizenship Act, Chapter 188 Section 10(6) & (7), available at:

<http://www.justiceservices.gov.mt/DownloadDocument.aspx?app=lom&itemid=8702&l=1>

<sup>11</sup> European Court of Human Rights, *Genovese v. Malta*, 53124/09, 11 October 2011, available at: <http://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng?i=001-10678>

## CONTACT

**Dr. Neil Falzon**

Director, aditus foundation

[neilfalzon@aditus.org.mt](mailto:neilfalzon@aditus.org.mt)

**Nina Murray**

Head of Policy & Research, European Network on Statelessness

[nina.murray@statelessness.eu](mailto:nina.murray@statelessness.eu)



**aditus**  
accessing rights



European  
Network on  
Statelessness

London, United Kingdom

Media: +44 7522 525673

[info@statelessness.eu](mailto:info@statelessness.eu)

[www.statelessness.eu](http://www.statelessness.eu)



European  
Network on  
Statelessness