

# Governance of COVID-19

**MALTA**

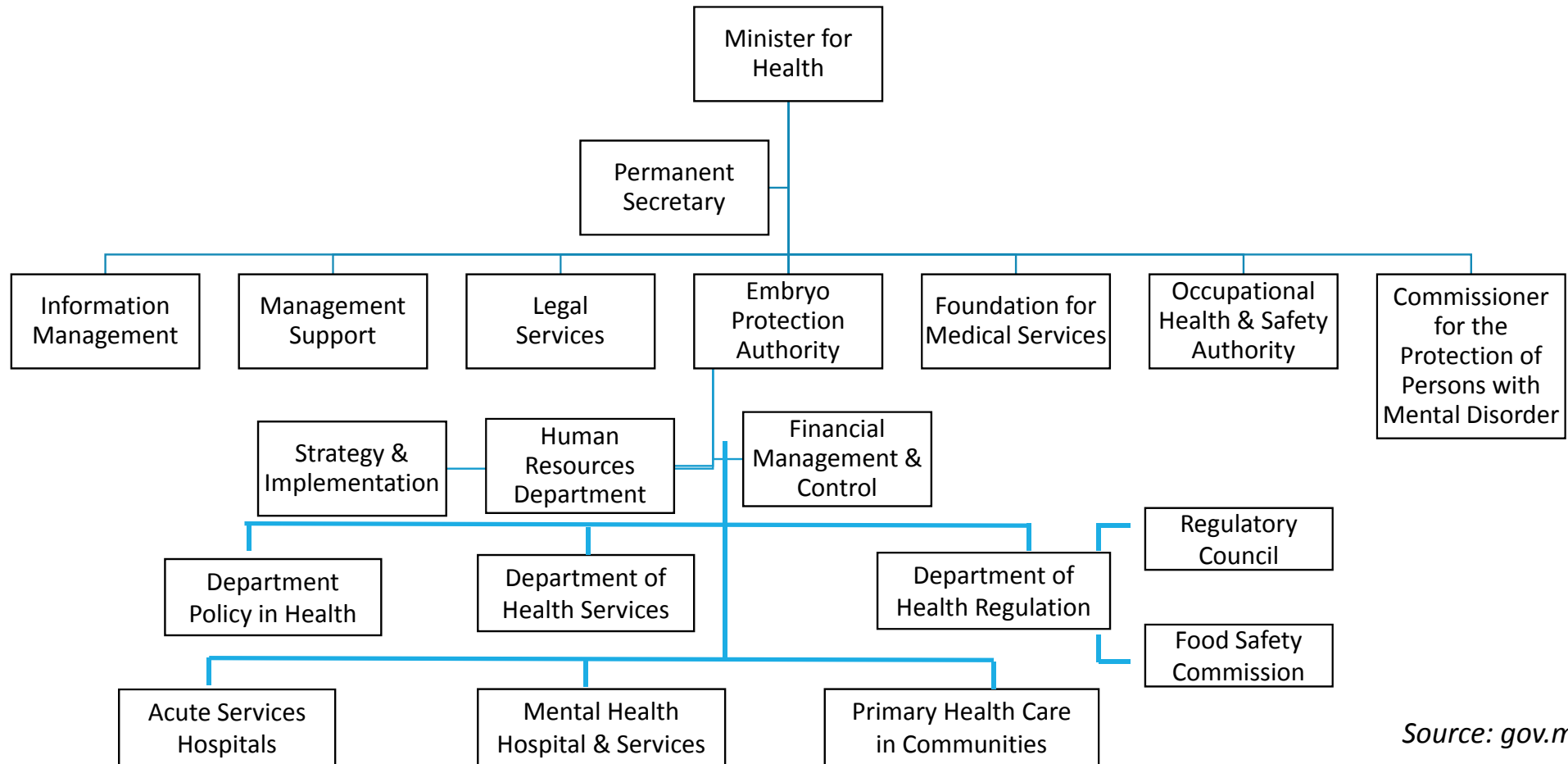


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# Malta's governance system

- Malta is a republican democracy, with a separation of powers. The legislative (Parliament), Executive (Cabinet of Ministers) and Judiciary (courts) work separately, but are interdependent.
- The President is Head of State and is nominated by Parliament for 5 years.
- The Prime Minister is Head of Government, responsible for the running of the country for a term of 5 years. The Prime Minister fulfils duties with the support of a majority of members of parliament. Parliament is composed of 67 seats.
- The political landscape is dominated by an almost perfect two-party system, where polarisation and political tribalism thrive.
- The electoral system based on the 'Single Transferable Vote' nurtures an underlying network of political patronage and clientelism.
- Maltese Public Administration is composed of ministries, departments, agencies, and other state entities. These public organisations give advice to ministers in the fields falling within their competence, and implement government decisions. Some of these have an independent role, in the form of regulatory authorities overseeing particular sectors.

# Organogram of Malta's health care system

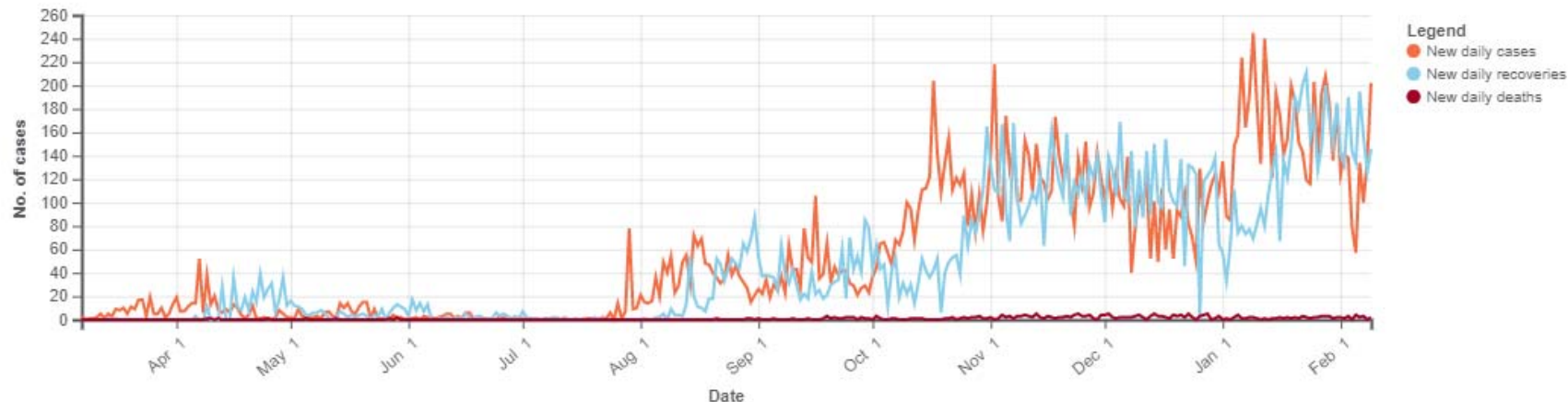


Source: gov.mt portal

# Malta governance of the health care system

- Health affairs in Malta are managed by Ministry of Health. Currently, Minister of Health is also Deputy Prime Minister.
- Health Ministry is primarily responsible for provision of Health Services, running of state hospitals, Health Services Regulations and Standards, and Occupational Health and Safety.
- Malta has a strong public healthcare system, which provides free services to all Maltese citizens and EU residents with a European Health Insurance Card (EHIC).
- A growing number of Maltese and EU citizens are taking out private insurance, despite having access to free public care.
- Local governments are not responsible for health care in Malta.

# COVID-19 pandemic statistics



- The first case of the coronavirus infection was registered on March 7<sup>th</sup> 2020.
  - The peak number of new cases during the first phase was 52 (April 2020).
- The „second wave“ of the pandemic began in late July 2021.
  - The peak number of new cases during the second phase was 245 (January 2021)
- As of February 08, 2021, 286 people have died after contracting the COVID-19 virus.
- Malta has one of the EU’s lowest COVID-19 positivity rates, according to European Centre for Disease Control & Prevention (Dec 2020). Malta was among a restricted group of European countries which kept its positivity rate – the proportion of COVID-19 swab tests that are positive – below the 4% threshold.
- As from the first days of the pandemic in March 2020, Malta adopted a proactive and systematic contact tracing to identify potential infected persons. During the 2nd phase, testing has increased and is widely available via public health services and private services, including rapid testing.

ERASMUS PLUS - 'Challenges to Democracy and Social Life'

Source: <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>

# Malta's Governance of COVID-19

- Superintendence of Public Health (SPH) within Ministry of Health is the formally responsible government agency leading efforts aimed at curbing the spread of COVID-19.
- SPH spearheaded the fight against COVID-19. Eventually the Ministry for the Economy took the lead to mitigate the economic repercussions of the pandemic by coordinating state and European aid to the private sector.
- During phase 1 of the pandemic, the Government, trade unions, employers' associations and civil society worked in harmony to control the spread of the virus.
- The first signs of friction were evident after Phase 1 was over (June 2020), when a number of social partners wanted to alleviate restrictions more rapidly, while others called for 'greater caution'. Some lamented of opacity of government's next steps.
- Despite approach rooted in evidence-based policy adopted by Ministry of Health, government action has become increasingly political after Phase 1 wherein the signals and timeframes communicated by politicians (including Prime Minister and Minister for Tourism) were in conflict with what the medical experts were sustaining.
- International cooperation on EU level is mainly related to procurement of vaccines and the financial package to help domestic industries.

# Shifting trends during COVID-19

## **Phase 1 (March – June 2020)**

- People and businesses were extra cautious.
- Work and schools turned to online mode.
- The Maltese were enticed to become domestic tourists. Government gave a 100 euro voucher to each adult over 16 years to spend in local restaurants/hotels and outlets.
- Morale was high among the locals because the rate of infections was kept under control.
- Restrictions were enforced on a national scale and not on regional basis.

## **Phase 2 (June 2020 – February 2021)**

- Conflicting sentiments started to emerge between health and economic considerations.
- No substantial resistance was registered when masks became obligatory.
- Due to pandemic fatigue, people started to lower their guard and, consequently, the rate of infections grew, BUT NOT exponentially.
- The Opposition became more critical of government action or inaction. It appointed its own 'shadow' Covid-19 Response Team.
- Industrial action, particularly in the Health and Education sectors, started to crop up.
- Local private industry, tourism in particular, almost completely dependent on government subsidies vis-à-vis wages

# COVID-19 and education

## **Phase 1 (March – June 2020)**

- All schools and University were closed. Learning transitioned online.
- All public and private schools had the IT infrastructure to go online, although a substantial number of teachers were unprepared for this change.
- School authorities used the summer months to make the necessary logistical arrangements for the next scholastic year.

## **Phase 2 (June 2020 – February 2021)**

- The decision by Government was for all schools/university to open as from October 2020.
- A staggered approach was adopted in primary/secondary schools so as not to allow all students attend on day 1.
- Schools and University never closed during phase 2.
- The Teachers' Union ordered a two day industrial strike in January 2021 when the number of infections reached an unprecedented high. Only state schools were affected by the strike.



# COVID-19 and borders

## **Phase 1 (March – June 2020)**

- On March 11, a ban on all sea and air travel (except) cargo was announced. Being an island, Malta became practically isolated.
- Quarantine was imposed on travellers returning to Malta.
- On May 1, a group of 56 migrants who had been rescued within Malta's search and rescue area were accommodated on a tourist boat: The MT Government declared that it could no longer guarantee the rescue of migrants or allow their disembarkation during the coronavirus emergency. This led to domestic and international repercussions encompassing human rights. This saga lasted 40 days.

## **Phase 2 (June 2020 – February 2021)**

- Malta International Airport reopened on July 1, 2020 and commercial flights to and from Malta resumed from that date.
- The policy of keeping irregular migrants stranded on tourist boats outside territorial waters was discontinued.
- Passengers arriving from 'amber' zone countries required to submit a negative COVID-19 test before boarding flights to Malta.
- List of amber zone countries and safe corridor countries is updated regularly by the Superintendence of Public Health.

# COVID-19 and the economy

MT Government has announced several measures as part of a financial package to help the Maltese economy during the COVID-19 outbreak, to ease pressure on business liquidity, protect jobs and help the most vulnerable during this challenging period. These measures started in Phase 1 and continued during Phase 2

- **Tax measures**

- payments deferrals, rate reduction, etc.)

- **Employment related measures**

- wage compensation, training, quarantine leave supplement, rent subsidies
- Free e-learning to the tourism workforce
- Voluntary Organisations Emergency Fund
- Additional assistance to Gozo-based enterprises (Gozo being sister island)

- **Economic Stimulus Package**

- Loans
- Moratorium on debt repayments
- Malta Development Bank 'COVID-19 Guarantee Scheme'
- Fuel price cut

- **Customs Measures**

- Electronic processing of Customs formalities

# COVID-19 and vaccination

- Malta participated in the EU joint procurement for purchasing the coronavirus vaccines and has not made any additional agreements with other countries.
- However it negotiated with certain pharmaceutical companies for additional provision and guarantee of supply.
- Initially, roll out was slow but eventually gained momentum.
- Health care workers were the first to get inoculated, followed by the elderly in residential homes and the those over 80 years but still live in the community.
- The vaccination of prominent public persons, including the President and the Superintendent of Public Health, was televised to enhance public awareness.
- Public perception among Maltese is highly in favour of vaccination. Yet a substantial segment is either sceptical or indecisive about vaccination.

# Conclusion: Lessons and prospects

- Tension between evidence-based advice and politically-charged optimism.
- Online learning and remote working have become mainstream. This has the potential to change the economic and social status quo.
- Public trust in Government has remained high.
- The small size of the country permitted the authorities to deal with the pandemic on a national scale rather than devise unsynchronised regional or local plans.
- The international tourism industry has practically evaporated; but domestic tourism is strong (especially in Gozo). Maltese economy exhibited a high degree of resilience, thanks to state aid and economic diversification.
- Most Maltese do observe the rules of public health; although law enforcement is weak.
- Good governance in Malta is still on the agenda: various constitutional, parliamentary and executive affairs were discussed and dealt with during the health crisis.
- During the pandemic, Malta was again left alone by the EU to deal with irregular migrants.