



# Reforming the urban public transport bus system in Malta: Approach and acceptance

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## ABSTRACT

The islands of Malta have joined the European Union in 2004 and have for the past decade suffered a decline in the patronage of its public transport service. Offered under a monopoly by an Association of individual owner drivers, the public transport service has not changed dramatically since its start in the early 1900s. Instead, an organic growth alongside the main routes linking new areas to the public transport network and a declining level of service pushed even more the local population to switch to private mobility. This has classified the islands amongst the countries in the world with the highest levels of motorisation. In 2008, following a general election and a general strike held by the public transport operators over the Government's intentions to remove monopolies, the new Minister for Transport published his intentions to reform public transport from its roots. This reform included the removal of the monopolies protecting the incumbents as well as developing a new network of services which cater more effectively to the public's travelling demands. This paper deals with the public transport reform and through direct observation details the processes involved in the regulation of public transport as well as the design of the new public transport network. The paper concludes with the critical factors which led to implementation of the reform and how this is applicable to cities worldwide.

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## 1. Introduction

The islands of Malta lie 100 km south of the island of Sicily in the Mediterranean Sea. They are the southern most tip of the European Union since accession in 2004 and have adopted the Euro in 2008. The islands have a total area of 318 km<sup>2</sup> of which 27% is built up mostly in a continuous urban agglomeration (National Statistics Office, 2009), and consist of the main island of Malta with a population of just over 365,000, and Gozo and Comino with a population of 29,829 (National Statistics Office, 2008a). The population density is one of the highest in the world and the space is limited, creating pressures on the use of land and the development of infrastructure for the increasing private mobility. In addition to the resident population Malta also experiences over one million tourists a year, particularly during the summer (National Statistics Office, 2008b). The economy is very much dependent on tourism even though in recent years the islands have attracted specific industries, such as international pharmaceutical companies, as well as the development of the first Smart City after the successful Smart City Dubai (Smart City Malta, 2007).

This paper reports on the relatively recent Government intentions to radically reform public transport provision in the islands in order to encourage modal shift. It also describes the early stages of reform with the aim of establishing the success factors which lead to Government gaining public support for such a reform. All this at a time when car dependence is high, emissions from transport are under scrutiny in view of climate change targets and public transport is under pressure to

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provide a sustainable alternative to private mobility. At the pre-implementation stage (the reform was implemented in July 2011) this paper aims at analysing the policy process and providing recommendations for other cities looking at bus services as sustainable modes of urban transport.

Islands as case studies are considered interesting to the wider audience since they could function as ‘small-scale spatial laboratories’ for rather more complex politics of larger countries (Enoch and Warren, 2008; King, 1993). The case study of Malta is particularly interesting since it shares many of the challenges of cities around the world facing problems of increasing motorisation, declining public transport systems and subsequent needs to reform public transport. This paper complements the body of literature published on public transport systems (see for example Costa, 1996; Lesley, 1989), operational regimes and reforms (see for example van de Velde et al., 2008; van de Velde and Pruijboom, 2005; Ongkittikul and Geerlings, 2006; White, 1995; Hensher and Stanley, 2008; Walters and Cloete, 2008), and policy (see for example Roschlau, 1989; Gwilliams, 2008).

The objectives of the paper are to (1) identify the factors which lead to the reform, (2) describe the approaches adopted in the development of the new public transport system, and (3) identify the critical factors to obtain political and public support to put into effect a reform. Section 2 will discuss the background to Malta’s transport system, with particular attention to the development of public transport and the factors that lead to the reform. Section 3 reviews the Government policy and academic literature in this area whilst Section 4 looks at the approaches adopted in the development of the new public transport system. Section 5 identifies the critical implementation factors and Section 6 concludes the research by identifying how lessons learnt in Malta can be applied to other cities.

The research is based on literature related to the regulatory reforms, policy and organisation of bus services as well as archival data related to the development of public transport services in Malta. The research uses also direct observations of the process of policy development for the new public transport network and the public participation process in view of the implementation of the new public transport system in Malta. The author sat as advisor to the Ministry for Infrastructure, Transport and Communications and was part of the team responsible for the public transport reform in Malta between 2008 and 2009. Burgess (1984) identifies advantages associated with being an ‘insider’ and therefore having a ‘natural’ interaction with the people involved.

## 2. Background

Malta’s public transport system is serviced primarily by buses. There is very little public transport occurring by sea despite Malta’s favourable geography and weather. Since their introduction in the early 1900s the buses were successful at linking the various villages and towns around the main island. They were so successful that they led to the decline of both the railway and the tramway which were fixed systems offering very little flexibility in the provision of public transport. Both the tramway and the railway were constructed by the British but following closure in the early 30s, most infrastructure was removed (Lanfranco, 1999).

Bus services on the other hand developed organically and at a fast pace over the years in a radial fashion across the main island of Malta with all buses leaving the terminal at Valletta to eventually return there. Gozo as well experienced a similar growth with the public transport emanating from the capital Victoria out to the villages. This paper however focuses on the transport network of the main island of Malta. Today’s system is a remnant of that adopted when buses were first introduced in the mid 20s. Valletta, being the capital city is still a major destination both in terms of employment and shopping, however a considerable number of trips use the Valletta terminal to interchange. Fig. 1 shows the current bus network in the main island of Malta. Since Valletta is on a peninsula all traffic is channelled to one of three roads leading to the city exacerbating the impacts of traffic and congestion, closer to the city.

Over 3700 daily trips operate with a relatively good geographic coverage however there are key operational issues that over the years have led to a decline in the quality of public transport services offered to locals as well as tourists. Some of these customer-oriented issues were identified by Childs and Sutton (2008) and include:

- reliable service operation but timetable departure time adherence can be poor, with early departures a particular issue;
- lack of intermediate timing points on routes meaning that intermediate passengers often have to wait considerable time on the stop;
- a unsustainable high number of supervisors, inspectors and bus inspectors which do not reflect in the operating standards;
- variable quality and standard of vehicle fleet with maintenance, cleanliness, customer care and driving standards being very variable;
- poor use of some 140 modern low floor buses purchased with government grants (25% utilisation) and no guarantee of a low floor accessible bus on particular corridors due to the rostering system whereby buses and drivers are shifted on a daily and route basis;
- information is not of high quality making current and even more new users uncertain of the services on offer;
- a fare system based on two zones with little difference in pricing making the longer journeys financially unsustainable even with substantial loadings;
- the ‘tourist’ pre-purchased multi-trip ticket represent very poor value; and
- the ad hoc irregular headways represent very bad practice in public transport bus operations (Childs and Sutton, 2008).

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