



Country study

Public narratives and attitudes towards refugees and other migrants

Denmark country profile

Anna Bailey-Morley and Claire Kumar
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Key messages

Once a liberal and open country, Denmark today has some of the most restrictive immigration policies in Europe. In particular, the country's deterrence-centred asylum policies have been heavily criticised in recent years.

Immigration has become a deeply politicised issue. Increasingly negative rhetoric adopted by politicians and the media has presented immigrants as a threat to Danish values and culture and a drain on the social welfare system.

Half of the Danish population feel immigration makes the country a better place to live, with positive attitudes remaining consistent on this indicator for two decades. However, negative attitudes are well-documented in a range of other areas.

Negative attitudes are commonly motivated by a fear of crime, with immigration perceived as a security threat. At the same time, there are significant misconceptions around crime rates among non-Western immigrants.

Anti-immigrant stances have been embraced across the political spectrum. Increasingly negative rhetoric and hostile immigration policies are a feature of both left- and right-wing parties, with Muslims and asylum seekers particularly impacted.

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About this publication

This briefing presents an overview of the key features of migration and asylum policy in Denmark, recent trends in migration patterns and public perceptions and political narratives around refugees and other migrants. It is part of a wider project supported by the IKEA Foundation aimed at informing public and private stakeholders interested in engaging with migration and displacement.

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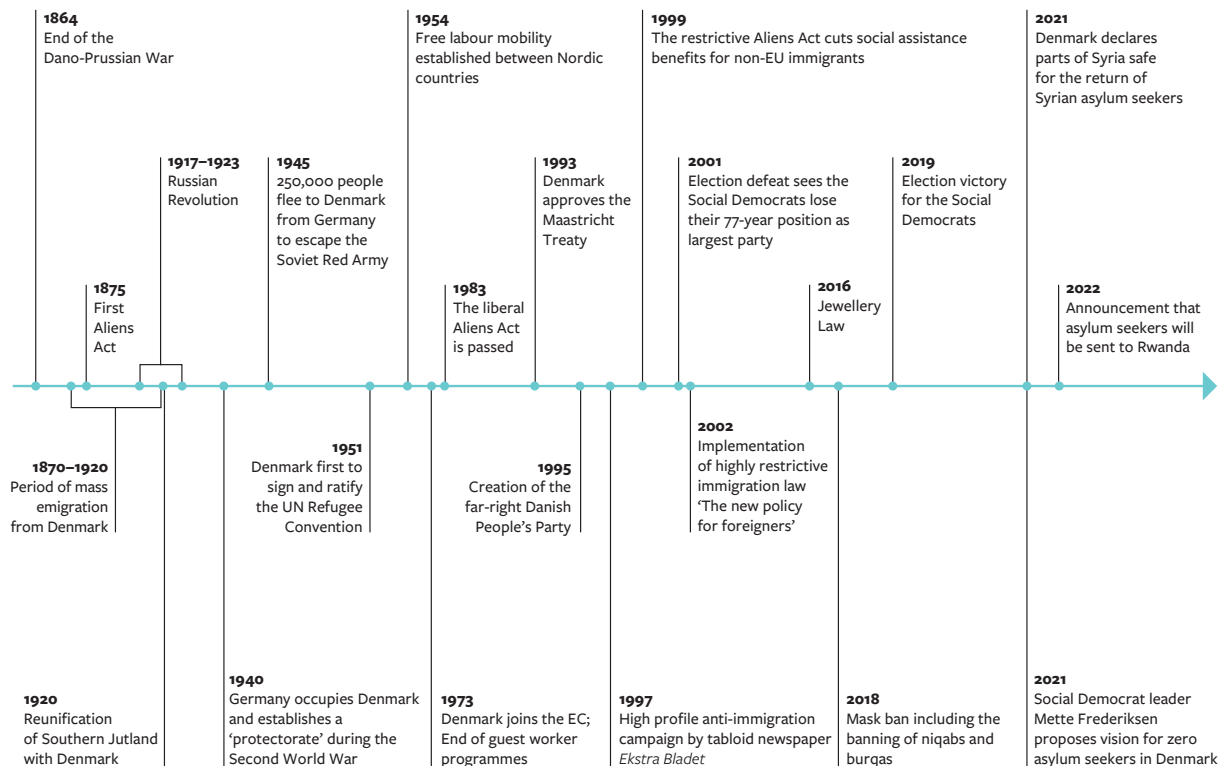
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History of migration in Denmark

After the Dano-Prussian War in 1864, almost a quarter of Danish territory was lost to Prussian rule, leading to the emigration of large numbers of Danes to the United States (Museum of Danish America, n.d.). The period 1870–1920 saw almost 300,000 Danes leaving for the US, though this emigration was lower than for neighbouring Sweden and Norway (Kalm and Lindvall, 2019; Simonsen, 2020). At around the same time, Denmark received significant numbers of economic migrants from Sweden, Germany and Poland, who were employed in the agricultural sector (Andersen, 2016; Kalm and Lindvall, 2019). The country also received small groups of refugees throughout the first half of the twentieth century, including 12,000 Jews who fled Russia for Denmark in the early 1900s and Russians fleeing the 1917 Revolution (Kalm and Lindvall, 2019).

During the Second World War Denmark was occupied by Germany, though the Danish government remained in place for three years under a protectorate arrangement. As the end of the war approached, Denmark saw an influx of 250,000 German refugees, largely women, the elderly and children, fleeing the Soviet Red Army (AFP, 2020; DW, 2022). Many of these refugees ended up in very poor conditions in Danish camps after the country was liberated from occupation (Ertel, 2005). The majority returned to Germany in the period 1946–1949 (AFP, 2020).

Figure 1 Migration timeline, Denmark



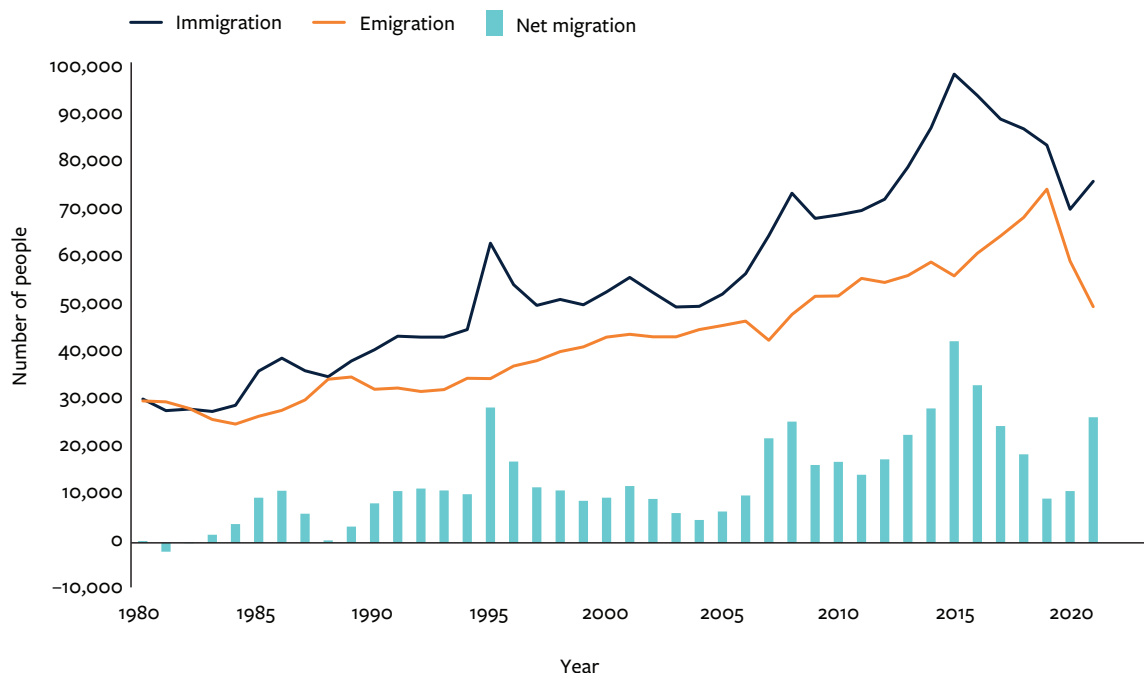
In the mid-1960s buoyant economic growth transformed the Danish labour market after substantial periods of unemployment in the 1930s and 1950s (Olgaard, 1979). The period 1960–1973 saw high growth rates and unemployment dropping to insignificant levels due to a huge expansion of the construction and manufacturing sectors and rapidly increasing public sector employment (Olgaard, 1979; Henriksen, 2006). Immigration levels increased, including through guest worker programmes which brought in workers from Yugoslavia, Turkey and Pakistan (Pedersen, 2000). However, overall immigration remained low, with net migration peaking at 12,000 in 1973, even though labour shortages were significant during this high growth period (Olgaard, 1979). The impact of the first oil price shock led to a steep increase in unemployment in Denmark and a peak in Danish migration to Sweden in 1975, with 10,000 emigrating as opposed to the usual annual number of 1,200 (Lundborg, 1991; Pedersen, 2000).

In 1973 Denmark joined the European Community (EC) largely for economic reasons as the country was heavily reliant on exports to the UK and Germany (Marc, 1972). However, there was significant scepticism towards membership, and the political cooperation that it entailed (ibid.). This has remained a feature of Denmark's tense relationship with the EU. The country has a longstanding reputation as a reluctant member, which – pre-Brexit – considered the UK a 'like-minded member state' (Sørensen, 2020: n.p.). After failing to secure public support for the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, Denmark put in place a number of reservations and opt-outs,¹ including a rejection of the euro and an opt-out related to justice and internal affairs, which means Denmark does not have to abide by EU laws on asylum standards (Dubinka-Huscha, 2020; EU Information Centre, 2022). After the creation of these reservations, 56.7% voted in favour of Denmark's ratification of the treaty the following year (Hervik, 2011).

As with many EU member countries, freedom of movement has significantly impacted the country's immigration profile. Data from the first quarter of 2022 shows that Poles and Romanians are the second and fourth most populous nationalities in Denmark when immigrants and their descendants are taken into account (Danmarks Statistik, 2022). The top non-Danish nationality is Turkish (just over 65,000), no doubt linked to the guestworker programmes of the 1960s and 1970s and subsequent inflows for family reunification purposes (ibid.). Syria is the third most populous nationality within Denmark's immigrant population (ibid.).

Immigration flows slowly, but consistently, increased over several decades (see Figure 2). From the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s immigration levels remained relatively low, but inflows became more notable from the mid-1980s. The peak observed in Figure 2 in 1995 was substantially driven by the arrival of Bosnian refugees, while the much higher levels of immigration in 2015 were due to ongoing high immigration from the EU (particularly Romania, Poland and Germany), combined with the entry of 31,000 Syrian refugees (Bendixen, 2021a). Although some years saw the arrival of quite high numbers of refugees, Denmark still received relatively few compared to many of its European neighbours (Eurostat, 2022).

1 On 1 June 2022, 67% of Danes voted in a referendum to remove the opt-out of the EU Common Security and Defence Policy, in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine (Gronholt-Pedersen and Skydsgaard, 2022).

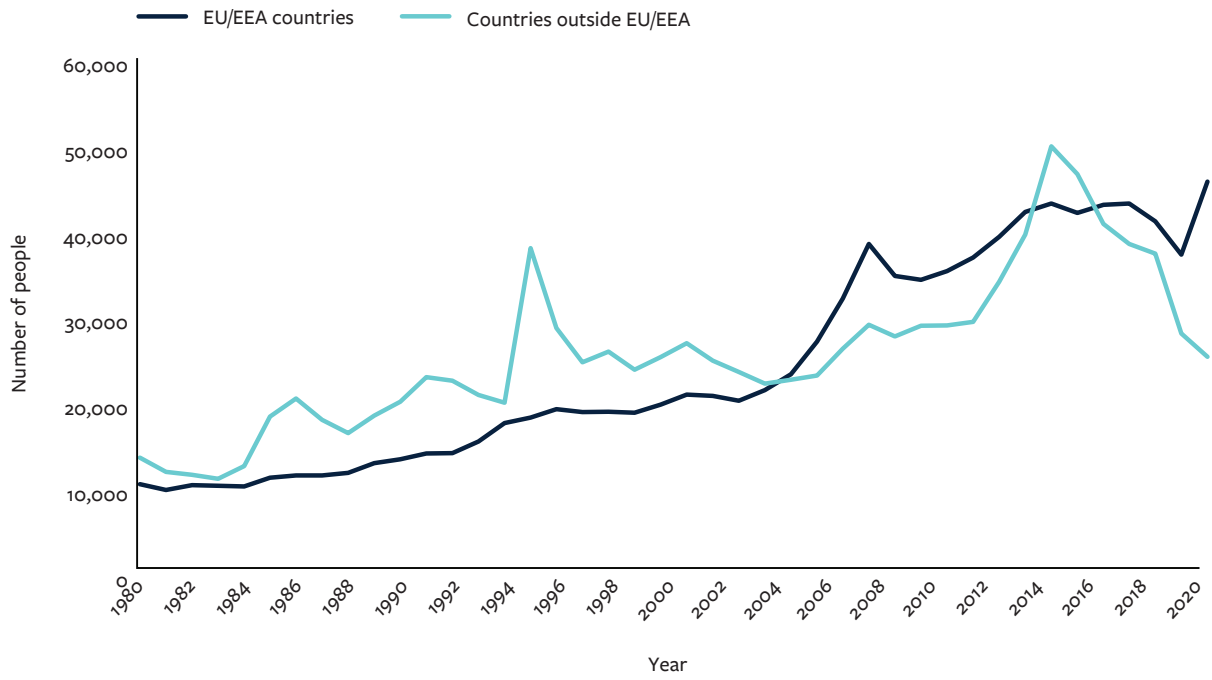
Figure 2 Recent migration trends in Denmark

Source: Danmarks Statistik, n.d.a

Asylum applications fell sharply in 2016 after Denmark temporarily suspended free movement of labour across its border with Germany (Eurostat, 2022). The combination of strict asylum policies in Denmark, harsher border control measures across Europe and the Covid-19 pandemic have since contributed to a substantial reduction in asylum applications (Danmarks Statistik, n.d.b.; Garvik and Valenta, 2021; Bendixen, 2022a). In 2022, the majority of asylum applications were made by Ukrainians, Afghans, Syrians, Eritreans and Belarusians (Bendixen, 2022b). In the first half of 2022, almost 24,000 Ukrainians entered the country (Danmarks Statistik, 2022).

Overall immigration levels almost doubled between 2000 and 2015. While 5.6% of Denmark's population was foreign-born in 2000, this had reached 10.5% by 2019, though this is considerably lower than many European countries including neighbouring Sweden (19.5%), Germany (16.1%) and Norway (15.6%) (OECD, 2022). And while Denmark's commitment to free movement within the European Economic Area (EEA) is a large contributor, it is also clear that non-EEA migration has at times been a more important factor, particularly prior to 2005 (see Figure 3).

Figure 3 Immigration by region



Source: Danmarks Statistik, n.d.a

Current Danish immigration system and approach

Denmark's immigration system has changed considerably over the past 50 years. In the 1960s labour migration was facilitated by guest worker programmes. However, the economic downturn from 1973 due to the oil crisis, and subsequent high levels of unemployment, led to a decision to halt labour immigration from outside of the European Community and Nordic countries, with new legislation in November 1973 making it more difficult to obtain work permits (Olesen et al., 2019).

While the political consensus around labour mobility restrictions was strong, at this point immigration was not a particularly contentious issue (Olesen et al., 2019). Ten years later, in 1983, Denmark enacted a new, very liberal Aliens Act, described by the Danish Refugee Council as the world's most 'people-friendly' law (Olesen et al., 2019; Simonsen, 2020: 612). It eased asylum requirements and expanded family reunification rights for those with refugee status and for foreign citizens with a permanent residence permit, including for immigrants' children, partners and parents over 60 (Simonsen, 2020).

While maintaining a commitment to attract highly skilled foreign labour and various schemes to fill labour shortages, Danish asylum approaches have changed course significantly since this legislation was passed. The country has adopted a number of deterrence-centred policies. These policies have been variously criticised by the United Nations, the European Court of Human Rights and the Swedish, Belgian and French governments (Jones, 2002; United Nations, 2016; European Commission, 2021).

A significant example is the immigration law brought in by the Liberal/Conservative coalition government in May 2002 (Jones, 2002). This abolished the 'de facto' refugee² concept established in the 1983 Aliens Act, reducing eligibility for refugee status (Gammeltoft-Hansen and Madsen, 2021). It also increased the length of residence required for a permanent residence permit, abolished reunification with parents over 60, spouses under 24 or spouses who jointly earn below a certain income and introduced language requirements for nationality (Roemer and Van der Straeten, 2006). Currently, immigrants must live in Denmark for eight years to be eligible for permanent residency; the requirements to obtain citizenship are considered among the most onerous in the world (Bendixen, 2021b; see Box 1).

2 Under earlier Danish law, 'de facto' refugees included groups that were not defined as refugees under the 1951 Refugee Convention including torture victims and those fleeing gender-related persecution and generalised violence (Gammeltoft-Hansen and Madsen, 2021).

Box 1 Overview of Danish immigration and asylum policies

Danish naturalisation policy

Immigrants must reside in Denmark continuously for nine years to qualify for citizenship, though there are exceptions which reduce this period, such as for refugees, Nordic citizens and spouses of Danish citizens (Lifein, 2022). In order to be naturalised, applicants must have no debt to certain public authorities, no criminal record, must have held a permanent residence permit for two years and must complete a citizenship test, including questions on ‘Danish values’. Applicants must show Danish language skills and have worked in full-time employment or have been self-employed for 3,5 of the previous four years (ibid.). In 2018 the average time it took for naturalisation applications to be handled was 19 months (Bendixen, 2021b).

Danish asylum policy

Those arriving in Denmark seeking asylum must contact the immigration authorities at the Danish border, at a police station, at an airport or the Reception Centre, Sandholm (Danish Refugee Council, 2022). Asylum seekers will then have their fingerprints and photo taken, and they will be issued with an ID card, with checks made to see if they have received international protection elsewhere (EDAL/Danish Refugee Council, 2018). Between 2018 and 2019 the average waiting time for processing asylum applications increased to 19 months (Rockwoolfonden, 2021). Previously, asylum seekers who were recognised as refugees automatically received a five- or seven-year permanent residency card, but now the maximum given is a two-year residency card (Bendixen, 2017).

The restrictive 2002 immigration law followed a seismic shift in Danish politics, after the 2001 election saw the Social Democrats lose their 77-year position as the country’s largest party. The new Liberal/Conservative coalition government was led by the liberal party Venstre, with the coalition relying on support from the far-right Danish People’s Party (DPP) to pass this legislation. The DPP, established in 1995, is notable for its highly nationalist and hardline anti-immigrant agenda, and used its newfound influence in government to elevate migration as a political issue, a tactic that has continued over the last two decades (Logan, 2019).

An unprecedented number of restrictive asylum policies have been implemented. Between 2015 and 2018, under the coalition government led by the Venstre party, around 70 immigration-related amendments were adopted. The Social Democrats continued this trend after coming to power in 2019. This reform period from 2015 has been termed a ‘paradigm shift’ (Tan, 2020). This refers to the fact that Denmark’s refugee policy has shifted to a focus on temporary protection status and return, as opposed to integration and permanent resettlement (ibid.).

The policies implemented as a result of this shift have aimed at creating increasingly restrictive conditions for asylum seekers, reducing the asylum recognition rate and increasing the rates of detention for failed asylum seekers (Global Detention Project, 2022). Reforms include a new form of temporary protection introduced in 2015 whereby asylum seekers escaping general violence in their home country, not individual harm, are granted a one-year residence permit only (Tan, 2020). A 2016 amendment to the Aliens Act extended the waiting period for family reunification for refugees from one to three years, a provision that was ruled discriminatory by the European Court of Human Rights (Logan, 2019). Reforms also included the controversial ‘Jewellery Law’, which permits the seizure of assets worth over 10,000 kroner (around \$1,300) from asylum seekers (Logan, 2019). The Danish government claims that this confiscation is intended to fund the reception of arriving asylum seekers (Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor, 2022). However, UNHCR has described the law as ‘at a minimum inhumane and degrading’ (Logan, 2019: 354). Political opposition to the amendment was minor, with the main opposition party, the Social Democrats, supporting the bill (Euractiv, 2016). There is political pressure to abandon the Jewellery Law from the Red-Green Alliance, which holds 14 of the 179 seats in the Danish parliament, and it has only been implemented four times in the past six years (Udlændinge- og Integrationsudvalget, 2022).

Welfare policies for immigrants and asylum seekers have also become increasingly restrictive, with the express purpose of making Denmark ‘a less attractive destination for refugees’ (The Local, 2015; Simonsen, 2020). As far back as 1999 and 2002, social assistance benefits for immigrants were reduced in various integration policy reforms, enshrining unequal treatment of immigrants in law (Hervik, 2011; Jakobsen et al., 2019). In 2015 this approach was applied to asylum seekers, when the Aliens Act amendment brought in a 45% reduction in integration benefit for single refugees with no children (smaller cuts were made to benefits applied to refugees with children) (The Local, 2015a).

Similar motivations have affected detention conditions for asylum seekers, with the Danish Minister for Immigration, Integration and Housing, Inger Støjberg,³ declaring that the aim is to make the lives of asylum seekers and others facing deportation so intolerable that they leave Denmark voluntarily (Amit and Lindberg, 2020). The Committee on the Prevention of Torture has described two Danish detention centres as ‘unacceptable’, ‘carceral and oppressive’ (ECRE, 2020). It also expressed concern over the use of disciplinary solitary confinement, stating that the practice of placing asylum seekers naked in an observation room ‘could be considered to amount to degrading treatment’ (ibid.: n.p.).

3 Inger Støjberg was a Minister for the Venstre party but has since left and founded the Denmark Democrats, a new party which has espoused a strong anti-immigrant agenda.

This paradigm shift extends to the processing and return of asylum seekers and refugees, now a major focus of policy. In 2021, the Danish parliament passed a law permitting the externalisation of the processing of residence permits for asylum seekers and refugees to non-European countries (Amnesty International, 2021a). Denmark approached a number of governments to implement this scheme, and announced in August 2022 that the country would open an office in Kigali to process asylum seekers, who would be transported to Rwanda (Musoni, 2022). This approach has serious human rights, ethical and political implications, as have been explored in relation to the recent attempt by the UK government to transfer asylum responsibility to Rwanda (Sturridge et al., 2022).

Perhaps the most controversy was generated when, in February 2021, the Danish Immigration Services declared Damascus and the surrounding area safe for the return of Syrian asylum seekers and refugees (Amnesty International, 2021a). This decision has been widely condemned (Amnesty International, 2021b; Murray, 2021; Strzyzowska, 2022). At least 380 refugees, some of them children, have been told they will have to return to Syria, though for now the lack of diplomatic relations means no one can be deported there (Amnesty International, 2021b). Syrian refugees and asylum seekers, many of whom were well settled in society, have had their temporary protection status and permits removed and are now facing indefinite detention in Denmark (Amnesty International, 2021b; McKernan et al., 2021; Strzyzowska, 2022).

These restrictive policies contrast sharply with Denmark's response to Ukrainian refugees, who can apply for residence permits online in a process that largely mirrors the EU Temporary Protection Directive (Bendixen, 2022c). Their process is faster, and requires no personal assessments except for nationality, and they have been exempted from the 'Jewellery Law' (Hardman, 2022). This marks a clear racialised hierarchy in the treatment of refugees in Denmark, a reality that is also evident in other European countries (Aycart-Piquer and Bailey-Morley, 2022).

Integration policies have also evolved, with notable efforts to emphasise Danish values and promote 'mandatory assimilation', particularly under Denmark's controversial 'ghetto' policy (Timsit, 2018; see Box 2). More positively, Denmark has had some success reforming its labour market integration model, which has been assessed as poor in the past (The Local, 2015b; Madsen, 2016). The new 'Step Model' combines language and skills training with a greater emphasis on work experience through subsidised placements in companies (Eurofound, 2015; OECD/UNHCR, 2018). This has been successful in increasing refugee employment (for example from 38% in 2015 to 50% in 2018 for male refugees) (Bredgaard and Lind Raven, 2021). This may help tackle the persistent employment gap between immigrants and native-born residents, the highest across OECD countries (Pedersen, 2000; OECD, 2016).

Box 2 In focus: Denmark's 'Ghetto Package'

In 2017, the Danish parliament noted 'with concern that today there are areas in Denmark where the proportion of immigrants and descendants from non-Western countries is more than 50 per cent' (Henriksen et al., 2016). These areas have been designated 'Ghettos' by the Danish government. To be designated, an area must fulfil two of five criteria based on residents' connection to the labour market; share of residents with a non-Western background; crime rates; low education levels; and income (OECD, 2019).

In 2018, the government announced the 'Ghetto Package' as part of its plan to create 'one Denmark without parallel societies' (OHCHR, 2020). The plan restricts who can move into these areas, including restricting the share of those receiving benefits who can settle there. Buildings can be 'demolished in an effort to change the character of low-income, largely Muslim neighbourhoods' (ibid.: n.p.). This has resulted in minority groups receiving eviction notices (O'Brien, 2022a). It has also resulted in these areas reducing their public housing stock, leading to the sale of affordable housing to real estate investment firms (O'Brien, 2022b).

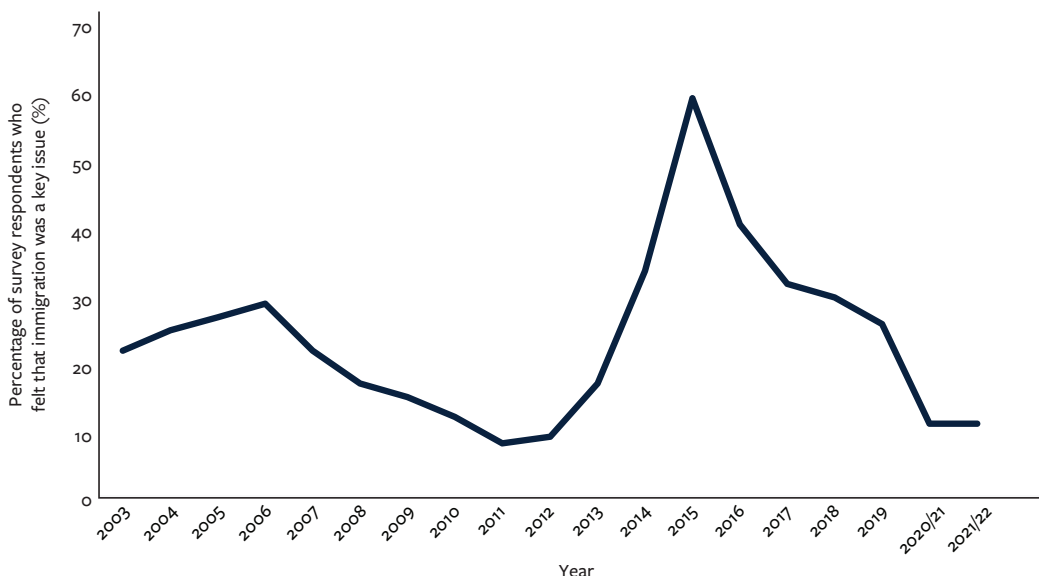
Special language tests are implemented in schools where more than 30% of the student body reside in 'Ghetto' neighbourhoods (OECD, 2019). Once children from these areas reach the age of one, they must spend 25 hours per week in childcare to learn the Danish language and 'Danish values' (Versi, 2020). This policy has been described by UN human rights experts as 'incompatible with racial equality in the enjoyment of cultural rights' (OHCHR, 2020). In 2021, Denmark agreed to remove the word 'ghetto' from government documents, replacing it with the term 'parallel society', but the content of these policies has been maintained.

Public attitudes towards refugees and other migrants: what do we know?

Denmark has traditionally been associated with values such as tolerance and equality, and attitudes to immigration were not particularly negative until the rise of far-right parties in the country (Moore, 2010; Olesen et al., 2019). During the 1960s and 1970s immigrants had largely been welcomed due to labour shortages, and until the late 1980s migrant workers had received fairly positive media coverage (Moore, 2010; Hervik, 2011). As the political climate changed, survey data shows the share of respondents reporting concerns about immigration rising from 4% in 1987 to 25% in 1998, with immigration rated a top issue of concern more than 20 years ago (Moore, 2010).

More recent surveys show the salience of immigration fluctuating significantly, though with Denmark often registering higher levels than other European countries (ODI, n.d.). The salience of immigration as a key issue of concern to the public spiked sharply in 2015, when there was a peak in the numbers of immigrants entering Denmark (see Figure 4). This included much higher numbers of refugees and asylum seekers, many of them Syrians (Eurostat, 2022). This is very similar to the situation in other European countries, with France, Italy, Germany and Sweden, for example, also witnessing a spike in the salience of immigration at the same point due to an increase (or the expectation of an increase) in refugees arriving in southern Europe (Holloway et al., 2021a; Holloway et al., 2021b; Holloway et al., 2021c; Holloway et al., 2022).

Figure 4 Salience of immigration as a key issue in Denmark



Note: This graphic shows the percentage of people answering ‘immigration’ to the question ‘What do you think are the two most important issues facing Denmark today?’ Annual data is presented, taken mainly from autumn surveys, though the Eurobarometer surveys were delayed due to Covid-19, with the autumn 2020 and 2021 surveys shifting to winter 2020–2021 and 2021–2022.

Source: Eurobarometer, n.d.

Other reasons for this spike include the 2015 Danish national elections, where immigration was considered a ‘decisive political issue’, with right-of-centre parties propagating hardline anti-immigrant rhetoric (Dinesen et al., 2020: 262). Research has shown that the salience of immigration is directly linked to the political importance placed upon it by Danish politicians (Simonsen, 2020). The killing of two people by the son of immigrants from Palestine and Jordan, who opened fire on a cultural centre and a Bat Mitzvah in Copenhagen in 2015, garnered huge media attention and had a major impact on city residents and public discourse (Smiley et al., 2017). This could also have contributed to the rise in salience in 2015.

In decline since 2015, the salience of immigration as a key issue for the public has now reached a very low level. In the most recent Eurobarometer report, from summer 2022, immigration ranked 7th for the question ‘What do you think are the two most important issues facing Denmark today?’, the lowest level in almost a decade. The top issues were rising prices/inflation/cost of living, followed by the environment and climate change (Eurobarometer, n.d.). This is a reflection of current events, but could also be driven by a perception that the topic has been ‘dealt with’ by politicians, given the high volume of very restrictive policies since 2015, not dissimilar to the post-Brexit context in the UK (Holloway et al., 2021d).

In line with other European countries, Danish citizens overestimate the immigrant population in Denmark. A survey based on research from 2017 found that people estimate the proportion of non-EU immigrants in the population at 10.5%, when in reality the figure was around 7.6%, according to Eurostat data (European Commission, 2018). This was less of a gap than recorded in other European countries such as Italy, Spain, the UK and France, which show larger differences between perception and reality in the same survey (ODI, n.d.).

A more recent survey by the Danish Knowledge Centre on Integration asked respondents how many immigrants and descendants from non-Western countries they estimated were in Denmark. This survey recorded a response of 19% compared to the actual figure of 9% (Brygger et al., 2021). The survey also found major misconceptions around how immigrants are integrating into Danish society, with almost three-quarters of respondents underestimating progress (ibid.). A majority believed crime rates among young men from non-Western backgrounds were rising dramatically (while in reality these have been falling). Survey respondents also hugely underestimated support for democracy and gender equality among non-Western immigrants (ibid.). The research found that, while voters for all Danish political parties had significant misconceptions around immigrants’ integration, ‘misunderstandings are greater the further right a voter stands politically’ (ibid.: n.p.).

Various research studies have indicated that people’s fear of crime and security concerns are key in determining attitudes towards immigration in Denmark (Smiley et al., 2017; Hercowitz-Amir and Rajjman, 2019). The political party Danish people support also heavily influences their attitudes in this area (Smiley et al., 2017). For example, those supporting right-leaning parties in Copenhagen were found to be six times more likely to want fewer immigrants and more than twice as likely to wish immigrants could not attain citizenship. Those with a higher fear of crime were twice as likely

to want fewer immigrants and 84% more likely to wish immigrants could not become citizens (ibid.). Major gaps between reality and perception also emerge in estimates of the propensity to commit crime, with voters for the DPP estimating that 30% of young male immigrants and descendants of immigrants with a non-Western background had been convicted of a felony in 2019, when in reality the proportion was 3.5% (Brygger et al., 2021).

Attitudes are particularly hostile and negative in relation to Muslim immigrants, and fear of Muslim immigration has increased particularly post-9/11 (Smiley et al., 2017). Denmark ranks jointly alongside the Netherlands and the UK as the most restrictive country in Western Europe when the population is asked whether more Muslims should be allowed to enter the country; 46% of Danes think that no more, or only a few, Muslims should be allowed to emigrate to Denmark (Simonsen, 2020). These attitudes can be explained by the particularly targeted, negative political and media rhetoric around Islam and its compatibility with Danish cultural values (discussed in the next section).

The Danes also stand out for their beliefs around cultural superiority. A study comparing findings from survey data for 11 Western European countries⁴ found Denmark scores particularly negatively, with 61% of Danish respondents saying they believe some cultures are better than others, the highest score recorded and far above the 11-country average of 45% (McGinnity et al., 2018).

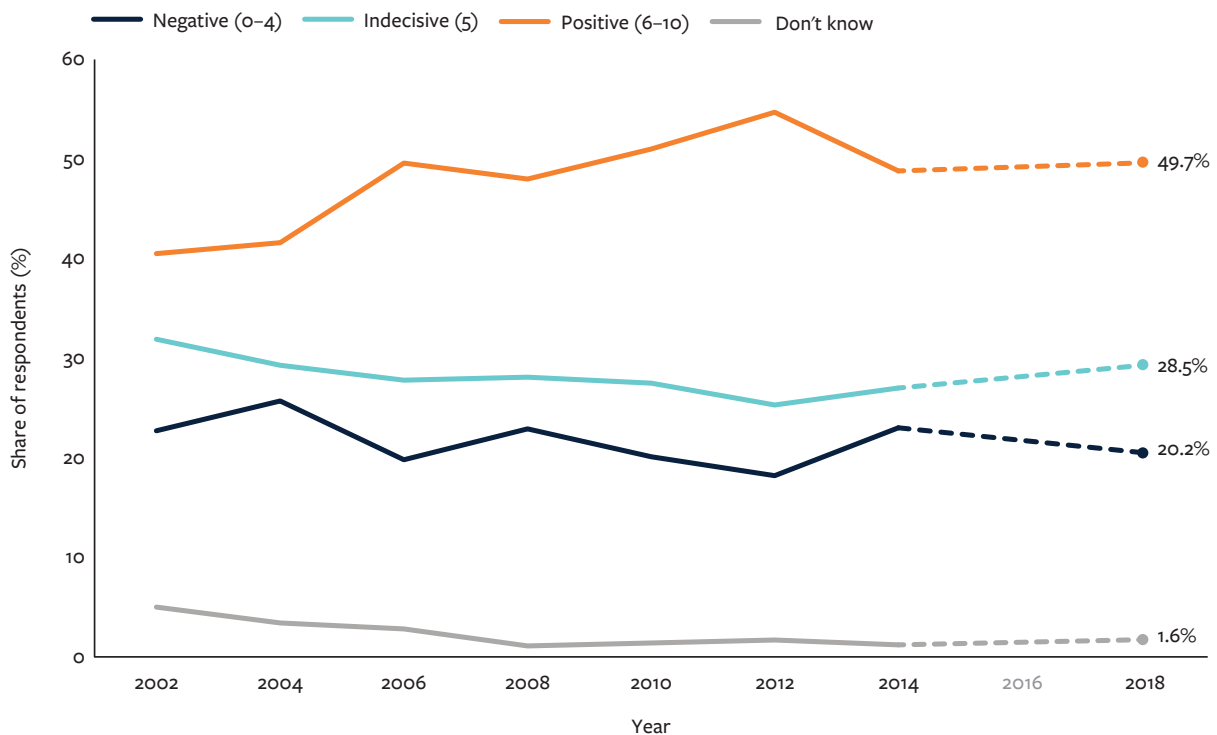
Research specifically looking at public attitudes towards refugees finds fairly neutral attitudes, as well as some quite specific concerns. Ipsos research from 2016, covering 12 European countries, found that a slim majority (55%) of Danes felt a great deal or a fair amount of sympathy for refugees (Ipsos, 2016). There is little concern in Denmark that refugees will take jobs and, compared to the other countries surveyed, little concern that refugees create pressure on public services such as education, health and housing. As with other immigrants, the Danish public demonstrate a comparatively high fear that refugees will commit crime. Respondents were much more concerned about this than in countries such as the UK, France, Ireland, Spain and Portugal (ibid.). Another study looking at attitudes towards asylum seekers has similar findings. Negative attitudes were found to be motivated by perceptions that asylum claims are not legitimate, and because asylum seekers are viewed as a threat (Hercowitz-Amir and Rajman, 2019). Researchers find that the threat posed is less a socio-economic concern, and is related more to security. However, it is also clear that, while a clear majority favour a controlled approach to managing the border, once asylum seekers are in the country, most do not want their rights to be denied (ibid.).

4 The countries included in this study were Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and the UK.

While misconceptions appear common, and negative attitudes in a range of areas have been documented, evidence of positive attitudes can also be found. When asked whether immigration makes Denmark a worse or a better place to live, 50% responded positively in the most recent European Social Survey in 2018, as opposed to 20% who held negative attitudes (see Figure 5). Over the last two decades attitudes have, overall, remained consistently more positive than negative, with positive attitudes generally increasing.

The positive trend in this indicator is more established in Denmark than in Germany, Spain or the UK, where positive responses only became dominant around 2008, 2010 and 2016 respectively (Holloway et al., 2021c; Holloway et al., 2021d; Kumar and Faures, 2021). In this regard, public opinion trends about the impact of immigration in Denmark appear more in line with those in Sweden, despite a legacy of much less anti-immigration rhetoric there (see Holloway et al., 2021b). While this positive finding is interesting, it co-exists with perceptions of cultural superiority and strong associations between increasing crime rates and the presence of migrants and refugees.

Figure 5 Attitudes towards immigration: does immigration make Denmark a worse or a better place to live?



Note: This data has been extracted from the European Social Survey. The survey scores respondents from 0–10 and records ‘don’t know’ answers. We have classified survey respondents who scored 0–4 in their answers to the question ‘Does immigration make Denmark a worse or better place to live?’ as holding ‘negative’ views, those scoring 5 as ‘undecided’ and those scoring 6–10 as holding ‘positive’ views. Data from 2016 is missing as Denmark did not participate in this wave of the ESS. Denmark’s data from wave 10 of the European Social Survey (conducted in 2020) had not been published at the time of this publication.

Source: European Social Survey, n.d.

Divisions in Danish society over attitudes towards immigration are also apparent. An urban–rural divide is clear from research undertaken in 2019 regarding the allocation of refugees to different municipalities (Dustmann et al., 2016). This research takes advantage of a policy that allocated refugees proportionally according to pre-existing population size across Denmark’s 275 municipalities. As such, refugee allocation is not associated with municipalities’ preferences, refugees’ characteristics or background, or linked in any way to past electoral outcomes. This allowed researchers to isolate the causal impacts of refugee allocation on voting when looking at electoral cycles across a 13-year period.

This research found a significant shift in the share of votes for anti-immigration parties when the refugee share of the municipal population increased in rural areas between electoral cycles. A one percentage point increase in the share of refugees led to a 1.34 percentage point increase in the vote share for anti-immigration parties in parliamentary elections, and a 2.43 percentage point increase in municipal elections. This is significant considering that the overall vote share of these parties in parliamentary elections is 7.6% (and 5.58% in municipal elections), representing an increase of 17.6% for anti-immigration parties in parliamentary elections (and a 43.5% increase in municipal elections) (Dustmann et al., 2016). Researchers found that increases in the share of refugees in rural areas particularly benefit far-right parties, though centre-right parties also gain, while left-wing parties lose vote share. The opposite trend is visible in urban areas, where an increase in the refugee population results in a decrease of the vote share for anti-immigrant parties (ibid.).

There is also a clear division between different generations in their attitudes towards immigration. Research undertaken in 2019 found that young people in Denmark thought Danish rules on citizenship were far too strict (Brochmann et al., 2019). Older generations in Denmark perceive immigration as a threat to a much greater degree than younger generations (Dinesen et al., 2020). There are also divisions along employment and educational lines, with those who have attained secondary education more likely to hold positive attitudes towards immigration than those with less schooling, and those employed in white-collar professions more likely to hold positive views than those who are self-employed or working blue-collar jobs (ibid.). The far-right anti-immigrant DPP’s electoral base has typically been made up of a lower share of young people and is made up largely of blue-collar workers and those with short formal education, mirroring what would be expected in light of these attitudinal studies (Kosiara-Pedersen, 2020). These findings regarding education, age and employment and their interaction with attitudes towards immigration are consistent with findings across various European countries (Hainmüller and Hiscox, 2007).

Negative narratives: left and right

In Denmark the issue of immigration has become deeply politicised. This is not a recent development; far-right, anti-immigrant rhetoric was a feature as far back as the 1970s, when immigrants were already being framed as a drain on the welfare system (Moore, 2010). This accelerated in the 1980s with increasing numbers of refugees, including from Iraq, Iran, Palestine and Sri Lanka (Simonsen, 2020). In the mid-1980s the Progress Party adopted an anti-immigrant platform – alongside its headline anti-tax agenda – in the context of high refugee numbers and against a backdrop of increasing unemployment (Dustmann et al., 2019). Other actors, such as Søren Krarup, a radical right-wing priest, amplified this rhetoric. Krarup opposed the collection of donations for the Danish Refugee Council, described refugees entering Denmark as an ‘invasion’ and started a Committee against the Refugee Act of 1983⁵ (Hervik, 2011: 25). Rhetoric during this period was strongly nationalist in sentiment, generally focusing on Danish borders, values and identity, and anti-Islamic in nature (ibid.). Radical right-wing activity grew and eventually led to a split in the Progress Party and the foundation of the DPP in 1995. By 2015 the DPP was the second largest party in parliament (Dustmann et al., 2019).

The DPP have consistently taken a hardline anti-immigrant stance and quickly became popular with the working class and in rural areas (Dustmann et al., 2019). In 1997, together with the tabloid newspaper *Ekstra Bladet*, it launched a campaign against ‘the foreigners’ and against a multi-ethnic society, marking a major escalation in hostile rhetoric (Hervik, 2011). Immigrants, including second-generation immigrants with Danish citizenship, were portrayed as ‘the other’, emphasising cultural threats and differences and abuses of the welfare system (ibid.). The Somali community, which had rapidly grown in the early 1990s, was singled out for particular attention and labelled too different to integrate into Danish society (ibid.; Danmarks Statistik, 2022). After the campaign, which was specifically designed to stoke public concern, the mass media followed up with numerous reports around the increasing fear of immigrants among Danes (Hervik, 2011).

DPP influence over political narratives grew after the 2001 election which saw the party gain significant influence in Parliament for the first time. At this point there was already deep politicisation of immigration by Danish politicians and the news media, and a public and political rhetoric of ‘us/them’ became entrenched over the next decade (Hervik, 2011). Since then, the DPP has remained an important far-right force in Denmark. However, the party is currently in the throes of an internal crisis, having lost vote share to the Social Democrats and facing competition from two new parties, Denmark Democrats and the ‘New Conservatives’ (Nye Borgerlige), which have similar profiles and strong anti-immigrant agendas (Panagiotopoulos, 2017; Benakis, 2022). The November 2022 elections saw the DPP lose heavily, while the Denmark Democrats won 8% of the vote (Henley, 2022).

5 This is a translation of the name commonly used for the committee, which was formed to advocate against the liberal Aliens Act legislation in 1983.

In particular, Muslims have been stigmatised and subject to strongly hostile rhetoric. Since 2001, Muslims in Denmark have been portrayed as a threat to gender equality, democracy and freedom of speech, with Islam presented as fundamentally incompatible with Danish values (Hervik, 2011; Rytter, 2018). This emphasis on Danish values is particularly embedded and carefully chosen – as opposed to ‘nationalism’ – to couch negative political rhetoric in more positive terms (Hervik, 2022).

A number of high-profile events have contributed to the stigmatisation of Muslims. The publication in a Danish newspaper in 2005 of the Muhammad cartoons (BBC, 2006; Hervik, 2011) sparked highly polarised debates in the Danish media – and global outrage and protests amongst Muslim communities. After the Copenhagen shootings, politicians from across the political spectrum focused heavily on the unsuccessful integration of Muslim immigrants into Danish society, with far-right parties presenting Muslims as a radical threat and the full glare of media attention exacerbating the negative stereotyping of Muslim immigrants (Jørndrup, 2016; Smiley et al., 2018). It has been observed that the close association between Islam and terrorism in the media has paved the way for xenophobia to become more legitimate and justifiable in Danish society (Hervik, 2015).

While in recent years their anti-immigration rhetoric has seen an increase in the vote share for right-wing parties across Europe (Mishra, 2021; Davis and Deole, 2017), the experience in Denmark is unique given the response of left-wing parties. Parties that have traditionally maintained a more positive narrative surrounding immigration have themselves propagated strong anti-immigration rhetoric and enacted extremely restrictive immigration policies.

This is most notable with the Social Democrats. In response to public criticism from the DPP, the party took a more right-wing approach to immigration and asylum from 1997, bringing in a new, more hardline Interior Minister. The huge electoral loss suffered by the party in the 2001 parliamentary elections, which centred strongly on immigration, then dramatically pushed their narrative and policies on immigration rightwards (Olesen et al., 2019). This was in response to the belief that the DPP were taking votes from their working-class electoral base (Simonsen, 2020). The party presented this change not as an opportunistic shift in core political values, but as in keeping with long-held values of protecting the Danish welfare system, which the party argues is being drained by immigration (ibid.).

Danish politicians on both the left and right of the political spectrum now propagate a narrative which presents immigrants as a threat to Danish culture, who must be controlled and carefully monitored. This is evident in discussions within the Danish parliament around the concern that ‘true Danes’ are becoming a minority in some areas (O’Brien, 2022a). The discriminatory ‘ghetto’ law aimed at cultural integration and the mandatory handshake for the granting of citizenship introduced in 2018 by the Conservative government – a crude measure aimed at denying citizenship to Muslims who do not want to shake hands with the opposite sex on religious grounds – were policies borne out of this political landscape. This threat narrative around immigration is also clear in Denmark’s labour market integration and social policies, which are designed on the premise that immigrants need strong incentives to work and generally pose a threat to the Danish welfare system (Bjerre et al., 2021).

In recent years, the more negative narratives from the Social Democrat party have filtered directly into more hardline policy stances, including backing the government's Jewellery Law in 2016 and a ban on niqabs and burqas in 2018 as an opposition party (Euractiv, 2016; Olesen et al., 2019; Orange, 2019). This shift took place alongside the accession of Mette Frederiksen to the leadership of the Social Democrats (Olesen et al., 2019). In 2018, the Social Democrats launched a new immigration policy in the lead-up to the 2019 parliamentary elections called 'Fair and realistic. An immigration policy that unites Denmark' (ibid.). This described 'unacceptable' 'parallel societies' in Denmark 'where foreigners and their descendants live, isolated from the Danish community and with values that are not Danish', invoking clearly the 'us/them' dichotomy that has so polarised policy and debate in the country (O'Leary, 2018: n.p.). This strategy helped the party win the 2019 election and reduced the DPP's share of parliamentary seats, now that their anti-immigration identity has been more widely taken up. This success has continued with the most recent elections in 2022 seeing the Social Democrats register their best results in 20 years (Henley, 2022).

While anti-immigrant narratives are pervasive, some have sought to challenge negative rhetoric and restrictive policies. In the mid-2000s, particularly in response to the Muhammad cartoon controversy, there was strong criticism from a notable group of retired ambassadors, as well as other professional groups including doctors and writers (Hervik, 2011). In 2021, 1,000 representatives of the Danish Church spoke out against the government's decision to declare Damascus and surrounding areas safe for returns (Ebbesen, 2021). In a letter to the Danish government and parliament, they evoked the Holocaust, saying: 'There was a fear that Denmark should be overrun by Jewish refugees and that they were too "foreign in nature" compared to Danes. Most were sent back because they were not politically persecuted. We now know how they fared' (ibid.: n.p.). This emotive comparison is an example of the strong narrative the Danish Church seeks to convey in opposition to this aspect of immigration policy and the lack of morality that they feel underpins it. The Mayors of Kerteminde and Ishøj have also spoken out against the mandatory handshake at citizenship ceremonies (Henley, 2018). Civil society groups including Refugees Welcome are also very active. They offer legal support and practical assistance to asylum seekers and refugees, as well as advocating for policy reforms (Refugees Welcome Denmark, n.d.).

Efforts such as these appear to have had little impact on political narratives and policies. Since the Social Democrats returned to power in 2019, they have not deviated from the negative narratives of the past two decades; rather, they have actively embraced many of the previous right-wing government's policies (Orange, 2019). In government, the Social Democrats proposed the highly controversial law externalising the processing of asylum seekers to third countries. The measure passed by 70 votes to 24, emphasising the large consensus among Danish political parties on immigration (Pace, 2021). In 2021, the Social Democrats announced their vision for 'zero asylum seekers' in Denmark, in an even more pronounced swing to the right than the previous government (MacGregor, 2021).

Conclusion

Immigration was once welcomed in Denmark as necessary to fill labour gaps, with the country seen as a model for its liberal and pragmatic immigration policy. However, it is now a deeply politicised issue, with anti-immigrant stances largely embraced across the political spectrum and by the news media. While negative narratives stretch back to the 1970s and 1980s, Danish policy and political rhetoric took a particularly drastic turn at the end of the twentieth century with the establishment of the anti-immigration far-right DPP. Right-wing parties have successfully constructed a narrative portraying immigrants as a threat to Danish culture and values and as a drain on Denmark's welfare system – a narrative that has also been adopted by left-wing parties over the past 20 years.

In line with this increasingly polarised and negative rhetoric, Denmark's immigration policy has become much more restrictive, prompting strong criticism from the UN and human rights groups, particularly for its impact on asylum seekers and refugees. The more recent paradigm shift, emphasising temporary status has severely weakened the protection afforded to refugees. Although unique to Denmark so far, this model may inspire similar reforms in other European countries. These more restrictive and increasingly hostile immigration policies are underpinned by nationalist narratives from both the left and the right.

The public, by contrast, hold more mixed views. In particular, crime and safety fears are intimately bound up with negative attitudes towards immigration in the country. Since 2015, the theme does not appear to be as prominent a topic of public concern, though it is specifically this period that has witnessed a flurry of restrictive (and strongly criticised) laws and policies. There appears to be a disconnect between these laws and policies and public attitudes, given some attitudinal data shows a consistent majority who believe that immigration makes Denmark a better place to live. However, the picture is complex and negative attitudes towards certain types of immigrants – largely non-Western and Muslim, as well as refugees – are prominent. Negative political rhetoric has stoked fear and a cultural war of values with messages amplified by a largely right-wing media.

The increasing alignment between left- and right-wing political parties in Denmark and the politicisation of immigration have left the large numbers of Danes who hold more positive attitudes towards immigration, particularly urban residents and young people, without political representation on this issue. Those feeling unrepresented by the central government can work together with the churches, local leaders and Danish NGOs that provide some opposition to restrictive government policies and promote a more positive narrative surrounding migrants, refugees and asylum seekers. However, there is certainly much work to be done to restore a more tolerant and inclusive approach that could harness the multiple benefits of immigration and promote a more cohesive society.

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